

Religious Competition and Political Change in Nepal

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As Nepal lies between Indian and Tibetan culture, the religious culture of Nepal comprises of three major components: a clear Tibetan component in the Himalayas, a rather modern Indian component in the plains, and a tribal animistic shamanistic component in the mid-hills well mingled with the mediaeval Indian or Tibetan component. Finally the syncretic component in the Kathmandu Valley could be regarded as the fourth; here Mahayana Buddhism harmonises with the archaic as well as mediaeval forms of Hinduism. In fact, Nepalese religious culture is characterised by an ongoing mutual interaction of Hinduism, Buddhism, animism and shamanism. Such an interaction is diversely affected by an introduction of a new component or shift in the state policy caused by political change. Here I elaborate this phenomenon briefly, with a focus on Hindu-Buddhist relation.

In History

The political history of Nepal is generally divided into four periods: the pre-historic Kirata period, the Licchavi period (from about the beginning of the common era to 879), the following Transitional period which continued till A.D. 1200, then the Malla period which ended in 1769, when the first King of the present dynasty, Prithvi Narayan Shah united the numerous petty kingdoms in the hills into one nation and conquered the Newars in the Kathmandu Valley.

The Licchavi kings, who believed more in devotional Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava religions on top of Vedic ritualistic ideology, seem to have pushed gently for the process of Sanskritisation and prompted the indigenous people to adopt high religions, both Hinduism and Buddhism. Ancient Indian Buddhism, being a tradition grown and flourished in its soil and an integral part of the religious culture of the Indian society, was patronised by these Hindu kings who built *stūpas*, provided land grants and even shared certain revenues. What is more, Mānadeva I, a fifth century king who personally believed in Vaiṣṇavism but generously donated a major *vihāra* named after him, makes in his royal inscriptions loudly a point of his grandfather Vṛṣadeva's favour for Buddhism. As the chronicles state, Vṛṣadeva founded the Svayambhū Stūpa, and another Licchavi king, Śivadeva II, in the end of the seventh century (694–705 A.D.) became a Buddhist monk.

The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-tsang has noted that there were both Hindus and Buddhist in Nepal. The temples of the Hindu gods and the Buddhist monasteries existed side by side and there was a total of about 2,000 monks who studied both the Mahayana and Hinayana. During the same period, obscure Hindu sects like Pāsupatas and Kāpālikas flourished in Nepal. All this shows that the Licchavi kings were not orthodox but very much liberal. However, it is my opinion that there must have been some competition in the society between Hinduism and Buddhism even during this period to induct the tribal population, and different fractions of the composite ruling elite must have favoured one without showing dislike to the other. The Ābhira Guptas, who first emerged as *de facto* rulers but ascended to the throne for several decades, had imposed a more orthodox Brahmanical ideology on the indigenous population. But the rule of these half-Brahmin kings ended when Licchavi king Narendradeva claimed back the throne with the military help of the Tibetan Buddhist king. It is likely that the restored king favoured Buddhism:

he granted large tracts of land to Buddhist *vihāras* and authorized them to collect the taxes and to function as civil authorities, within their territory. He also canceled many arrangements made by the Ābhira Guptas but there is no evidence that he disliked Hinduism.

Probably the Licchavi authority collapsed in the transitional period (c. 879 to 1200) and a succession of indigenous powers emerged (Slusser, 41–51). Since very few historical records of this period have survived, we are compelled to surmise from circumstance. Tantric elements already present during the Licchavi time, swept over both Hinduism and Buddhism during this period. Vajrayana came into full bloom in the Buddhist sphere, whereas Śaktism-dominated Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism came to the centre of the Hindu sphere creating further scope for devotional sects. Most probably this was the time when the Khasa Brahmins and Chetris from various parts of India began to arrive in Nepal hills. The orthodox Brahmanical Mithila and Benares in Bihar and North India began to influence Nepalese culture substantially, and Buddhist population began to adopt more of the Hindu hierarchical system of social values.

Beyond the Kathmandu Valley, a sizeable kingdom of the Khasa Mallas, made up of large portions of West Nepal and West Tibet, emerged in the 12th century and existed till the end of the 15th century. At some time during or before the 12th century Aryan-speaking tribes moved in from North-western India, taking control of the Karnali basin of West Nepal and beyond. As they could not rule the vast area of their kingdom for a very long time, they gradually disintegrated and disappeared. The Khasas as an ethnic group continued to dominate the society, even after the kingdom disappeared. It is remarkable that the Khasa people are now Hindu whereas the Khasa Malla kings were earnest Buddhists. It is highly probable that the *śaiva kanphaṭṭā yogīs* played a role to bring the common people to the Hindu sphere.

The successive Malla period (c. 1201–1769) witnessed a change in the socio-political scenario after the emergence of Khasa power and the arrival of Turks in the sub-continent. During this period, the Nepal valley had to face repeated violent raids of the Khasa Mallas and Muslim invaders. To the other, the Karṇāta royal house of Mithilā in the south, which had marital relation with Nepalese royal house, collapsed in 1324 A.D. after Muslim invasion, and the kingdom was distributed among petty kingdoms. Pursuing their relations with Nepalese royalties, the Mithilā royalties and dignitaries, fleeing Muslim invasions, entered and settled in Nepal. Soon Jayasthiti Malla, a Prince from such a family, was chosen to marry the female heir to the Nepalese throne and become the king. This prince reorganised the caste system along more orthodox lines and accelerated the process of Hinduism among the Newars (Slusser, 52–76). As many Nepali Buddhist say now, Jayasthiti Malla was the king who wielded pressure on the Buddhist community, and forced them to conform to the social model of standard Hinduism. This contention is found in the later chronicles, but there is no mention of it in the most reliable Nepalese Chronicle, the *Gopālarājavaṃśāvalī*, which was compiled in the last part of his reign.

As mentioned in the beginning, the first King of the present dynasty, Prithvi Narayan Shah, who originally ruled a small kingdom of Gorkha, united the numerous petty kingdoms in the hills into one nation and created modern Nepal after conquering the Newars in the Kathmandu Valley in 1769. Though the Shah Kings, who are ethnically and linguistically connected with the Khasas, belong to a Hindu ethnic group, they have adopted more and more Newar values and institutions after the unification. Prithvi Narayan Shah patronised Newar religious institutions including Buddhist ones. After the Gorkha conquest, he financed and demonstrated his whole-souled allegiance by participating in Newar royal festivals like the Indra Jātrā, Macchindranath Jātrā and Pacalī Bhairava Jātrā. The tradition to crown the royal deity at the Hindu Pashupati

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temple once a year as the Buddha continued and the king continued to get blessings from the living goddess Kumārī, who comes from a Buddhist family. Vajrācāryas of Kathmandu continued to conduct the Bhairava Jātrā at Nuwākot, a festival very much connected, on the symbolic level, with Nepalese kingship. His immediate successors followed him in good faith, but when the real power passed to the de facto Rānā rulers for a century, even though the tradition remained unbroken Buddhism was sometimes officially discriminated against. After the fall of Rānās, the state, curious in highlighting the country's identity as the land of Buddha for economic and political reasons, became liberal towards traditional and new forms of Buddhism. When the Panchayat system, a sort of guided democracy, was adopted in 1962, the state favoured such Hindu groups who wanted to see Buddhism, along with other Indian religions, as part of Hinduism, 'for the sake of national unity'. Over the centuries Nepal has provided a haven for people from north and south, and preserved the ancient Hindu and Buddhist traditions already disappeared from other parts of the subcontinent. It is because of the spirit of harmony and coexistence that diversity persisted in Nepal despite centuries of continued Hindu mode of governance. Another remarkable fact is that the Hindu state always regarded Buddhism as part of Hinduism. Even Orthodox Hindu texts accept Buddhism this way, however, they interpret it as something created by the god for the outcaste. Some Buddhist groups in modern days find this approach dominating and see it as a tool to make Buddhism subservient to Hinduism, but one should not forget that these texts apply the same approach to the unorthodox Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava schools. When the Hindu kings of Nepal promoted Buddhism in Nepal and beyond the borders, they were apparently not promoting an opponent religion. They were promoting what they believed as a particular mode of Hinduism devised for a particular group of recipients. On the Buddhist side this approach must have yielded advantages rather than disadvantages in the past, but it is equally true that such an approach must have exerted some pressure on them. As Slusser says, "Buddhists [in Nepal] have sometimes been pressured, but scarcely persecuted; Buddhist monuments have been destroyed by nothing less benign than time and neglect. The Kathmandu Valley is thus not only an immense museum of Buddhist antiquity, but it is a unique oasis of surviving Mahayanist Buddhist doctrines, cultural practices and colorful festivals." (Slusser, 270)

In Nepal, two forms of Buddhism have traditionally been practiced: 1) Tibetan Buddhism, found in the ethnically Tibetan enclaves strung out along the north of the country and among some other ethnic groups of Tibetan such as origin the Tamangs, Gurungs, and Thakalis; and 2) Newar Buddhism of the Newar people of the Kathmandu Valley. The Newar Buddhism is embedded in a dominant Hindu society confined with in a very small area, the three small cities of the Kathmandu Valley, where it was very much a part of its Hindu surroundings. A priestly class made of Śākyas and Vajrācāryas which is comparable to Hindu Brahmins, form the monastic community. All of them are married, and entrance into the community is limited to the legitimate sons of these initiated Śākyas and Vajrācāryas. In addition, priesthood is preserved only for Vajrācāryas, Śākyas are not allowed to perform as priests.

Harmonious coexistence of Hindus and Buddhists has been one of the defining characteristics of Nepalese history. But a controversial claim is found made in the late chronicles compiled after the Gorkhali conquest, that Śaṅkarācārya came to Nepal, defeated the Buddhists who had transformed the Hindu temple of Pashupati into the garbage, burnt their manuscripts, killed many of them and forced the monks and nuns to marry. There is no contemporary evidence for a visit by Śaṅkarācārya to Nepal from either Indian or Nepalese sources. There is no evidence in the Licchavi inscription or in the earliest chronicle, the *Gopālarājavamaśāvalī*, of such a visit and religious turmoil

resulting in destruction of the Buddhist tradition. This myth of Śaṅkarācārya is actually a localised version of an account of his imaginary victory over various sects found in his late and historically faulty biographies. It is my opinion that this myth of Śaṅkarācārya's victory over Nepali Buddhists and rescue of the Pashupati temple was first invented by the 17th century *sanyāsin* priests of the Pashupati temple to substantiate their claim of the temple, but this myth provided an easy justification for the reflective members of the Buddhist community to explain the divergence they find between their way of life and the Buddhist discipline.

One should not regard the marriage of monks as something out of the ordinary and resulted from a sudden change. There is a Hindu counterpart of this phenomenon. There are nearly 200,000 Dashnami Sanyasis in Nepal alone, who are descendants of onetime monks. Just like the monasteries, there are Hindu maṭhas inhabited by Sanyasi families in the Kathmandu Valley. Examples of the marriage of Buddhist monks are found not only in Nepal but also in Japan and quite early. It is logical to imagine gradual disappearance of celibate monks in Nepal or even in India. It is probable that after the collapse of Buddhist centers in India, descendants of the married monks were assimilated in the Hindu community. The state in Nepal was quite liberal compared to the state in India. It created a distinct caste system or hierarchy for the Buddhist community and thus preserved Buddhist society. The Buddhist community survived in Nepal because the monks became a caste and their sons, ordained and hailed as bhikṣus, were there to inherit the monasteries and keep up the tradition.

In present time

Nepal has been a Hindu kingdom from the time of its modern creation in 1769, but since the political change of 1990, the legal-religious identity of the nation as 'the only Hindu nation of the world' has become a matter of debate. Various ethnic groups involved in identity politics are now demanding to constitutionally redefine Nepal as a secular state. This is also influencing the traditional Hindu Buddhist relation. The Buddhists, led by a group of Theravada monks and Kathmandu Valley Newars, have joined hands with them and are officially promoting state secularism. In modern times there is a growing tendency to mark Buddhism off as clearly distinct from Hinduism; it is sometimes clearly anti-Hindu though not as aggressively as in India and Sri Lanka. Unlike Mahayana tradition, Neo-Buddhism is against any type of reconciliation with Hinduism. Buddhism has not traditionally been an oppositional identity in the Nepalese context, but now it is clear that at least a section of the Buddhist community is struggling for a distinct identity. They appear further unhappy with the policy of the state to see Buddhism with Hindu eyes but still attached to the idea of the Hindu King as the head of nation, who continues to patronise and take part in their ceremonies with enthusiasm. Two special ceremonies of *samyakpūjā* to honour the present king Gyanendra Shah (as *bodhisattva*) after his accession to the throne in 2001 speak of this mentality.

Some thirty years ago Slusser said, "Buddhism has been slowly declining since about the twelfth century. Today, the process has picked up speed, and Buddhism is rapidly disappearing." (Slusser, 270) But now Buddhism is reviving statistically in the Newar community, thanks to Theravada Buddhism. A large section of the Jyapus, the farmer class among the Newars which makes up some 45% of the total Newar population, whose religious status is always ambiguous, is slowly switching to Theravada Buddhism, even though they continue to worship the same deities with the same rituals.

In recent years, a few more ethnic groups discontent with Hindu domination are switching over themselves to Buddhism, and this much is clear that the ethnic

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communities and the dominated lower caste Hindus will move closer to this or that form of Buddhism if not to Christianity. They find the Hindu social structure and values more rigid than the Buddhist values as such. As a result, the percentage of Hindu population is gradually declining and Buddhist population is increasing after 1981. Hindu population decreased by 2.99% in the eighties and further by 5.89% in the nineties, whereas Buddhist population increased by almost 100% and 70% in the same period. Likewise, the Kirat religion, some form of animistic tradition has been included since the 1991 census and the followers of the Kirat religion have increased 157% over the period of one decade, between 1991 and 2001. It should be here remembered that the Buddhist and Kirat religious groups are increasingly involved in the ethnic identity politics in Nepal after 1990.

In the past, challenges from the missionary religions were not significant in Nepal. Some attempts were made by Christian missions during the late Malla period to propagate Christianity with the approval of the state, but they were not received by the people. Now the situation has changed, and the number of Christians and Muslims is constantly increasing over the last fifty years. Only 2.54% of the total population of Nepal was recorded as Muslim in 1954 which has increased to 4.20% in 2001. Christianity is getting more popular in Nepal after the political change of 1990. The Christian population, which was counted only 458 in the 1961 census, has reached at 101,976 in 2001. Between 1991 and 2001, the population of Nepalese Christians has increased by more than 226%. Not only the lower Hindu caste groups such as Sarki, Damai and Kami but also some ethnic groups now find Christianity more agreeable and attractive. For example, Tamangs follow Buddhism and Chepangs are originally animist, but a considerable fraction of their population is gradually converting it into Christianity as they find more attraction in Christianity than their respective religion. To the other, there is a growing tendency among Hindus as well as Buddhists to go for new forms of their religion. For example, the followers of Sai Baba and Osho Rajnish are growing in Hindu urban communities and Vipasyana and Theravada Buddhism have already secured a significant place in society. This has posed a threat to archaic forms of both religions preserved only in Nepal. In addition, Indian Hindu Nationalist force is extending its influence and introducing modern elements of religious politics in Nepalese society, which can adversely affect traditional Hindu Buddhist relation in Nepal.

After 1950 with the coming of democracy, new political isms and ideas are posing to impress the Nepalese society. Religious and cultural issues have been brought to the centre stage of politics. Rapid political changes and new political philosophies have impacts also on socio-cultural sphere. The cutting of the economic basis of traditional religio-cultural institutions has severely affected them. Furthermore, since more than a decade, Nepal is in a crisis and has got another identity as the land of Maoist insurgency, a conflict zone; and violence has come to the surface of Nepalese society.

The Maoists want to break traditional chains in order to “develop a culture of rebelling against feudal traditions and revolutionizing social relations by training the masses in the spirit of sacrifice and devotion to the party”. As the supremo of Nepalese Maoist Party Prachanda says, “In the era of imperialism and proletarian revolution, without sacrifice, without bloodshed, we cannot seize power, and we cannot transform the whole society on a new basis. Therefore there is the question of sacrifice, of shedding blood. People want to be martyrs. The people feel that to be martyrs is to be respected. When one of the comrades is martyred we vigorously make it a question of pride and historical importance. We encourage, for our cultural revolution, this kind of sacrifice, and we glorify this kind of sacrifice.”

He further says, “There are many kinds of culture here. Some are tribal cultures, more primitive cultures, upper caste cultures – there are all different types of cultures. And we cannot make one plan for all of these. For the whole Himalayan region, we should make a complete plan – looking at the cultural problems, traditional chains, and different kinds of tribal problems that are there. And in the mountainous region, in the Western Region there are not so many temples. But when you go to Kathmandu there are so many temples. Therefore we have to make a conscious effort for every region, for every nationality.”

The Maoists thus define their new culture with soteriological terms like sacrifice, devotion, identity, recognition, liberation and consciousness, but no doubt, they put violence and struggle in the centre of their philosophy. Some month ago, the rebels signed an agreement with the parliamentarian parties opposing the King’s direct rule showing their interest in multiparty democracy, and helped the parties to organize effective mass protests against the king. As a result, the parliament has been reinstated, and the government and the rebels have agreed to return to the negotiating table with a common agenda of elections for a constitutional assembly which will draft a new constitution. This development has transformed the tripolar struggle into a bipolar one. In whatever direction this struggle leads Nepal, this much is clear that there will be more influence of politics, in particular of left-inclined modernism.

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