

Nepali Culture and Society: A Historical Perspective

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Introduction

Wedged between India to the south and Tibet (now the autonomous region of the People's Republic of China) to the north, the Kingdom of Nepal has enjoyed an independent political existence from the very earliest times. The boundaries of modern Nepal fixed in the 18th century A.D. touch on Sikkim in the east and Kumaon in the west, roughly enclosing a territory of five hundred miles in length. Its breadth, however, does not exceed one hundred and fifty miles, which occurs only at a few points, making Nepal a tiny rectangular country in the central Himalayas of South Asia. This small strip of territory contains an amazing contrast in landscape and topography, ranging from the flat alluvial plain of the Indo-Gangetic basin, in the south, in its Tarai, to the high-altitude mountains covered with perpetual snow, in the north, in which some of the world's tallest peaks including Mt. Everest are located. Nepal's ethnic diversity is equally rich; multiple languages and a wealth of cultures thrive within its borders. There are at least forty different sizeable language and cultural groups. The predominant group among them is the Nepali-speaking Hindus. These various languages of Nepal fall broadly into two main language families, the Indo-Aryan and the Tibeto-Burman, with one or two small languages betraying their Munda origin. This linguistic cacophony is matched by Nepal's cultural pluralism which has existed dovetailing each other for hundreds of years.

Physical Isolation of Nepal and its Bearing on Culture

The physical features of Nepal have been decisive in shaping its culture. The many disparate cultures and languages are themselves a product of diverse and difficult terrain. The fastness of the mountains had cut off its people from the outside world, and left them to enjoy a state of undisturbed peace throughout most of Nepal's history. Its isolation protected it from the violent transition of history sweeping north India periodically. This insulation helped Nepal to engender a unique quality of preservation in its cultural heritage. Many old and lost traditions have been preserved in Nepal until today. The French Indologist of repute, Sylvain Lévi, who produced the monumental work, Le Népal, around the turn of the century, has recorded in an article (Lévi, 1925) that one can still meet the authentic image of India that is past, in Nepal. Percy Brown (1912: 127), a British author of the authoritative work on the Indian Architecture supports Lévi in the following words: "Nepal illustrates, as approximately as time and ordinary

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circumstances permit, the state of India before Islam had imprinted its indelible mark on almost every aspect of its life. The manners and customs of people, their religion, arts and industries, the towns and the country, are practically the same as they were ten centuries ago. Nepal ... presents an ideal picture of the Middle Ages - Middle Ages of the East."

The cultural practices of Nepal are essentially of the Hindu and Buddhist derivation finding expressions in the numerous rites and rituals, beliefs, social values, festivals, art and architecture of the land. These are all historical accretions of different ages, of different sources of origin, which make a fantastic spectacle to an onlooker.

The Nepali Buddhism probably survived owing to Nepal's physical isolation from the Indian land mass. The revitalization of Hinduism in the later periods, and the weakening of the monastic character of Buddhism in the following centuries after its inception, had uprooted the religion out of India. The final coup de grâce to Buddhism was rendered by the hordes of Muslim invaders pouring down from central Asia into north India in the 13th century A.D., Nepal's remoteness and difficult access made it a safe haven, so that Buddhism continued to live and be practised here without the threat of any external violence. Buddhism in Nepal, however, underwent a process of internal change in its central philosophy, doctrine and rituals as a result of which it acquired a totally different character from its older monastic form in the subsequent periods. Snellgrove (1957: 91) makes an observation of this fact in the following words: "... Nepal has preserved the most precious traces of what Buddhist India once was. The pagoda type temple, which was already characteristic of India of Yuan-Chwang's times, but has now long since been replaced by other styles, was still being built in Nepal in the 17th century. Iconographic traditions continue even today and can be traced back, directly to old Pala art of Bengal ... It is well-known that Buddhist scholars fleeing India from the Muslim invasions sought refuge in Nepal, Kashmir and Tibet.

Another distinctive trait of Nepalese culture is its power of synthesis and assimilation. It has blended and harmonised even the most opposing philosophies and dogmas reaching its territorial shores. Buddhism and Hinduism have been fused in Nepal quite often, thereby obscuring their sectarian distinctiveness. There are scores of religious rites and festivals which at the popular level of practice by illiterate masses are devoid of any sectarian character. Divinities like Ganesa, Bhairava, Kumari, Saraswati, Vajrayogini, Mahakala, Ajima (Harati) are some of the divinities worshipped as much by the Buddhists as by the Hindus. In the same way, there are many popular festivals in which the devout Hindu and Buddhist communities equally fervently participate. One such festival is the chariot-dragging festival of Matsyendranath, who is understood and venerated by his different followers differently, but who, in actuality, is the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara Padmapani. It is very curious to see depicted the many iconographic features of the Hindu god, Siva, in the representation of this Buddhist divinity in Nepal. Although Matsyendranath's is unmistakably a Buddhist cult- its acknowledged priest

being the Buddhist Vajracaryas- the Hindu King of the country goes to pay him obeisance recognising in him Gorakhnath's preceptor Matsyendra-nath.

Location as a Cultural Factor

Perched high in the Himalayas, Nepal extends along a terrain that divides the Indian sub-continent from the roof of the world, the Tibetan plateau. The short and easy route to cross the high Himalayas had been provided by the Kuti and the Kyrong passes to the north-east and north-west of the Kathmandu Valley through which communication between India, Tibet and even China had been maintained regularly in the ancient days. The only other route to go to Tibet from India was via Kashmir farther west. These routes were used as much by the traders as by the cultural entrepreneurs until 1904 A.D., when the British Government of India opened an alternative route via Sikkim. Tibet got its alphabet, its religion and its early religious preachers and gurus from India or Nepal, first around the 7th century A.D. Nepal, therefore, had played a vital role in transmitting Indian culture to Tibet through its territory continuously for many centuries. Indian Buddhist scholars and yogis of great eminence came to Nepal, and many of them crossed over to Tibet afterwards. Taranath, the Tibetan historian, who visited India in the 17th century A.D., mentions the great Yogacara philosopher Vasubandhu of the 4th century A.D. to have visited Nepal and died there. Snellgrove mentions Naropa, Darika, Ratnaraksita, Milarepa, etc., several of whom came to visit Nepal, before going on to Tibet. Of special significance is the name of Naropa who taught Marpa and, who, in turn, transferred his knowledge to Milarepa, the founder teacher of Ka-gyu-pa sect of Lamaistic Buddhism in Tibet. Similarly, Atisa of Vikramasila Monastery had gone to Western Tibet after an extended visit to the Nepal Valley first.

Thus, the intermediary position of Nepal had definite bearings on its cultural activity throughout history. The overall effect has been imbibing an amalgam of Tibetan and Indian cultural aspects in its life-style. An example of the extensive mix of the two cultures is provided by the Newar, residents of the Kathmandu Valley, the true seat of ancient Nepal. In complement to the primary Indian influence in their cultural expressions such as their ethnic make-up, their language, paintings, sculptures, temples, their rituals, dance and festivals, there is also an element of Tibetan influence, manifest in all of them.

The traditional 'entrepôt' trade carried out between Tibet and India via Nepali territory, by Nepali traders as well as Kashmiri Muslims residing in Nepal from the 15th century itself, is a well-known fact of history, and a predictable outcome of Nepal's physical location. The Urya castes of the Buddhist Newars are recognised among the prominent class of merchants trading in Lhasa. Nepal's monopoly of trade in Lhasa in the mediaeval period is witnessed by the fact that coins for circulation in Tibet were minted from silver duly received from the Tibetan

government (Walsh, 1908). The route leading from India to Tibet via Nepal was replaced only in 1904 A.D. with the opening-up of a new route through the Chumbi Valley in Sikkim, after Younghusband's mission to Tibet was undertaken.

Whereas the cultural exchanges of Nepal with India have been mainly one-sided, Nepal having drawn mostly upon Indian sources, its relations with Tibet have been more on a reciprocal basis. In the early period of this relationship, Nepal has given profusely to Tibet in the enrichment of its art and religion. Along with India, Nepal, too, had acted and been a spiritual preceptor to Tibet. This relationship continued down to the period of Dharmasvamin, the Tibetan monk-scholar, who spent some years learning in the monasteries of Svayambhu and Dharmadhatu, and also visited Magadh and Tirhut during Ca. 1226-1234 A.D. (Roerich, 1959). Earlier to this, we have also evidence from the travel of Drok-mi, who was an important personage in the establishment of Sa-kya-pa sect in Tibet in the 11th century A.D., for gathering knowledge in his doctrine in Nepal and India (Snellgrove, 1957). Before the hordes of attacking Muslims came to Bihar and Bengal in 1204 A.D. and raged the Buddhist monastic centres to the ground there, Nepali monasteries had maintained strong links with many of these Indian Buddhist centres. When Buddhist scholars from Magadha fled the Muslim invasion to seek refuge in Nepal (some are also said to have fled to Tibet), the Nepali monasteries at that time are said to have hummed with a great deal of erudite activity of these Buddhist scholars. According to Taranath, 'Ratnarakshita was one of the last pundits to seek refuge in Nepal', after the destruction of Odantapuri and Vikramasila monasteries in Magadha by the Muslims (Snellgrove, 1957) had taken place.

The first relations of Nepal with Tibet start taking place in the reign of Srong-tsan-sgam-po, the first king to lay foundations of a dynastic rule and introduce Buddhism in Tibet. Legends invented around the 10th century A.D. speak of his marrying the Nepali princess, Bhrikuti, who is believed to have brought with her objects connected with the Buddhist religion in her nuptial gifts. Irrespective of the historicity of this legend, one point which it scores nicely is the honour and esteem with which Tibet had been looking upon Nepal in the matter of its religion in those days. Bhrikuti has thus been permanently consecrated in the sacred memory of the Tibetans, since she has been identified as one of the Taras (green Tara) by the people in that country.

Another illuminating episode in Nepal-Tibet relationship derives from the life of an young Nepali artist, A-ni-ko (This spelling of the artist's name is Chinese, because our knowledge about him derives solely from the Chinese sources, which is in the form of a funerary stone erected over his grave, and lying near the village of Hsian-Shan, in the district of Yuan-P'ing, west of Beijing.), who was invited to build a monastery of the Sa-kya-pa order in Tibet by its abbot in ca. 1263 A.D. A-ni-ko's work in Tibet must have been of a remarkable order, because he was commended from there to the imperial courts of Kublai Khan in Beijing, where he is said to have risen to even greater heights of his artistic achievements (Petech, 1958). His was by no means a lone instance of

Nepali artists, particularly in the field of bronze-casting, going to work in Tibet on commission... It had become a common practice for Tibetans to call in Nepali artists to work for them until very late times.

This trend of exchange was reversed, however, in the later Malla period. Nepali artists, who returned after a long period of stay in Tibet, were probably imbued in some of the more typical art styles native to Tibet, especially in bronze-casting and thangka paintings. Therefore new styles start showing up in a remarkable degree in the art of Nepal from then on. As the Indian source had dried up by this time, the artistic and spiritual sustenance of Nepali art had to come from Tibet, at least in refurbishing its Buddhist Tantric-Vajrayana cults.

Time-Space Equation of Culture

Having discussed some of the broad features characterising the Nepali culture and its conditioning, it should be interesting to see it further in the light of a time-space equation. The political history of Nepal before the middle of the 18th century had consisted of a string of petty states and principalities scattered all through its hills, from east to west, each one of them having a king of its own. Historians may be right in thinking that the present political entity of Nepal is a creation of the process of unification started by Prithvinarayan Shah of Gorkha in the 18th century. But, surprisingly, a centripetal force seems to have always been at work in Nepal from a long time before that event, with its centre located in the Kathmandu Valley. This was the place which had been the seat of the kingdom of ancient Nepal and it is the history of this place which seems to have set in motion the course of events, as it were, happening in Nepal's distant and outlying regions. The extent of this centripetal force exerted by Nepal roughly covered the space corresponding to Nepal's present boundaries and, sometimes, even exceeded it. Thus in the course of Nepal's history of two thousand years, it seems to have been the focus of activity in the entire region and had been a land which was able to exert an irresistible attraction on these people to come and merge themselves in it. In the following lines, we will try to illustrate some of the events underlying this pull factor and, along with it, explain the verticality and horizontality of Nepal's historical-cultural development, that is, relate its chronology to its extent in space.

The ancient historical land of Nepal had been constituted mainly by the present day Kathmandu Valley. It is here that Nepal's history and culture have undergone a continuous and uninterrupted development for more than two millennia. Nepal was able during this time to produce a civilization having a distinctive personality of its own, expressed through its diverse art forms such as its sculptures, paintings, wood-work and its architecture. The fame of this land has been recorded in many ancient writings and literature of this region. Its physical isolation for centuries, which cut it off from the plains of Northern India, earned it the name of a land of mystery--a Shangrila -- in the parlance of its outside visitors. The land has been glorified with all possible

exaggeration, its sacredness being made comparable to any other holy centre in India, in works of local composition in Sanskrit of the 14th-15th century A.D., such as the Nepala Mahatmya, Pashupati Purana and Swayambhu Purana, as well as in some other local chronicles. These various works render, among other things, accounts from the genesis of the Nepal Valley from the earliest times when it was a lake of water with no human settlement in it, to the manner in which the water of the lake had been drained off through the Chovar gorge at the south-west of the Valley by the prowess of either Manjusri Bodhisattva, who came for this purpose from Mahachina, or by Krishna, depending upon the religious affiliation of these works, Buddhist or Hindu. Before all that could take place, a lotus had bloomed in the lake, heralding the appearance at the spot of Adi Buddha (the Primordial Buddha). This place in the Valley nowadays is indicated by the Swayambhu Stupa atop a hill. The Valley's history consisting of its kings, its numerous deities and its people only followed these incidents and made the place fit for habitation. The Valley's main river Bagmati, as well as its tributary streams, takes its origin in the surrounding hills to its north, and the entire water of the place drains out from its only outlet at Chovar gorge. According to the local chronicles, all the mortal Buddhas preceding Shakyamuni came to pay obeisance to the Adi Buddha to this place. Buddha Shakyamuni is also credited with visiting the Valley in the reign of the Kirati king, Jitadesti. The same sources also talk of the visit to the Valley by King Ashoka of Magadha, Buddhism's greatest ever propagator, with great flourish, and credit him with building the five stupas in Patan, and giving one of his princesses, Charumati, in marriage to a local prince during the reign of another Kirati king, Sthunko.

The above is all a legendary account, of course, which can be known only from the authority of the chronicles. Notwithstanding the historical truth of these accounts, one thing which it is clearly able to show, is the fact that a Nepal-centric view among the people of that time had already dawned to a remarkable extent. The data for the early series of the chronicles is believed to be 14th century A.D. The attraction held by Nepal to its surrounding regions which the chronicles seem to suggest, is also borne from other historical facts. All these incidents serve to show how Nepal's relations with its surrounding regions had been like that of a centre with its periphery.

At the time when the Nepal Valley was supposedly being ruled by the Kirati dynasty, two regions in the present day Nepal Tarai, one in Janakpur, and the other in Kapilvastu, along with their adjoining territories in India, provide us with the first beacon of history. One throws light on the kingdom of Mithila with its capital at Videha. The fame of this kingdom had reached its peak at the time of the reign of the philosopher king, Janak, whose daughter, Sita Janaki, was married to Ram of Ayodhya, as narrated in the Ramayana. Although all these personages connected with Mithila cannot be historically attested for, the Buddhist literary works tell us about Videha being part of the Vrijji confederacy, of which Licchavis were also a member. In the Licchavi inscriptions of Nepal later, there is reference to a word Vrijjkarathyanivasi, meaning the resident of Vrijjkarathya, which probably indicated a place within the Nepal Valley, where people from Vrijji origin in India had come and settled (Dhanavajra, 1973).

The Lumbini-Kapilvastu region in the central Tarai is another historically important area, connected with the Buddha. Lumbini is the site marking the Lumbini garden of the Buddhist literary works, where Buddha, 'the light of Asia,' was born in 563 B.C. according to the Cantonese reckoning of this event. There is a pillar at this site erected by Ashoka in the twentieth year of his reign (Ca. 249 B.C.) with an inscription saying that it was here at this Lumbini village that, Shakyamuni, or the 'lion of the Shakyas', was born. Some kilometers west of Lumbini, at a spot called Tilaurakot and near the modern town of Kapilvastu, is a site of extensive ruins believed to be the remains of the ancient city of Kapilvastu, and where Gautama is said to have spent the first twenty-nine years of his life in a princely luxury. Adjacent to the Sakya country were the states of some of the prominent ancient Indian clans of Northern India, such as the Koliyas, the Mallas and the Licchavis, who lived close to the borders of Nepal in the times of Buddha (Law, 1943). Although Buddha's visit to Nepal Valley remains preserved only in the assertion of chronicles, whose historical truth may not yet be confirmed, a large number of people from these smaller states and connected with the life of the Buddha seem to have fled to Nepal in the wake of the rise of the imperial powers in India, which one may regard as historically true (Dhanavajra, 1973). Events happening as far away as some of these regions in northern India would bring people, living in these small republican states and following the path of the Buddha in their religion, gravitating towards the ancient land of Nepal. It was not probably mere coincidence of the tradition of Buddhism has been a continuous one in Nepal until today. Notwithstanding the fact that Buddhism in Nepal has gone through some drastic changes from its original monastic character (Allen, 1973), it will still have the credit of preserving itself, while it completely disappeared from the rest of the Indian sub-continent. The story of Buddhism may also underscore the idea of Nepal's spatial unity with some of the regions of early Buddhism.

From here on, we turn back to consider the history of the Nepal Valley once again. The Licchavi period is the earliest historically known period of ancient Nepal. Inscriptions of this period, all in Sanskrit language and Licchavi (Gupta) script, are available between the middle of the fifth century A.D. and the second quarter of the eighth century A.D. It is in the records of this time that we get to know about people from the various Indian states, including some of the prominent groups such as the Licchavis, coming to live in Nepal permanently. The penetration of the Indo-Aryan culture in Nepal may have started happening since a much earlier period, but the extent to which it took place was probably smaller in comparison to the indicization of Nepali culture later in the Licchavi period. The result of this extensive indicization is reflected in the fields of Nepali art, architecture, religion, society, politics, its tradition of learning and sciences, etc. There were suitable modifications made at the time of or in course of absorbing and assimilating them no doubt, as these were necessitated by reasons of having to adapt them to local conditions and/or to the genius of its makers. The element of distinctiveness and personality of Nepali culture and civilization in all these spheres derives from this very fact. The mix that we see characterising the modern Newari

Newari social and religious traditions, arts and crafts, made with elements between the Indo-Aryan and the Tibeto-Burman cultural streams, is amply illustrative of this fact.

In the 11th century A.D., a certain Nanyadeva of the Karnatak dynasty founded a kingdom in Tirhut with its capital at Simraungarh, at the foot-hills immediately to the south of Nepal. This kingdom lay extending to both sides of the Indo-Nepalese borders in the Champaran and Purnea districts of northern Bihar, as well as in territories along Nepal's eastern Tarai. A succession of kings ruled this kingdom for about a century and a half, beginning with Nanyadeva's reign in Ca. 1090 A.D. Its last important king, Harisimhadeva, fled the invading army of Ghiyas-ud-din Tughlaq of Delhi, and took to the hills in the north. Harisimhadeva himself did not live long after his escape, and died on the way. The rest of the members of his family succeed, however, in entering Nepal and occupying an important place in the court of Nepal. Harisimhadeva's lineage is ultimately linked by marriage with the descendants of the ruling Mallas in course of time (Petech, 1958). This social liaison is given so much value by the Malla kings of Nepal flourishing subsequently that they began proudly donning the title of the Karnatakavamsi, which meant of the lineage of Karnataka, in front of their names ever since then. The Maithili influence in the court of Nepal in the later Malla period is another facet of this contact with Tirhut felt widely in the spheres of its language, literature, religion and social values. The tutelary deity of the Malla kings, Taleju, whose shrines are to be invariably found located within the palace precincts of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur, is believed to have been brought there from Tirhut by the family of Harisimhadeva. Brahmans from Mithila who were brought to work in the temples of Nepal should also generally date from this time. The kingdom of Tirhut made many attempts to physically run down Nepal during the years of its hey day, but the absorption of these two areas and their cultures into a single political entity was, however, destined to happen in a different manner much later.

The Licchavi period is followed by the so-called Thakuri period (Ca. 750-1200 A.D.), and again by the Malla period (Ca. 1201-1768 A.D.), in the history of Nepal based in the Kathmandu Valley. During all this time, the artistic activities in Nepal, for which it is so well-known, had continued in an unabated manner. In the Malla period, it is true, the fluency of the art of the earlier periods, bestowing an individuality and originality on each of its creation especially in the fields of sculptural arts, was missing, but, nevertheless, we do come across a whole new range of Nepali art-forms made in new mediums, such as bronze, painting and woodworks in abundance at this time. The pleasant show of volume, supported by a graceful proportion and a naturalistic modelling, endowing a spontaneity of outline on the figures of the art of the earlier period, gives way now to a more stylised form. There is more rigidity than creative originality to see in the works produced at this time, but it is at this time, however, that the more distinctive regional features of the Nepali art forms and cultural practices begin to emerge.

The Malla rule came to an end through the military conquest of Prithvinarayan Shah of Gorkha, a small principality of the Chaubisi region to the west of Kathmandu Valley, in 1768-69 A.D. It was a state lying outside the political pale of ancient Nepal. It was also different in its ethnic, linguistic and cultural make-up from that of the Valley, although, the latter too, like the former, was indic in its cultural derivation. The conquest of Nepal by Gorkha amounts to a substitution of one culture at the centre by another. The culture of the Nepal Valley, which had so long been the sovereign national culture of Nepal to all its residents until the time of the Gorkha conquest, was changed into an ethnic culture of the Newars, now reduced to a minority. Although this is true enough and may look like a subordination of one community by another, it is also equally true that the new regime was not always intolerant and showed not the slightest hesitation in not only patronising but owning up many of the achievements made in the artistic field of the Newars as part of its cherished national heritage. Neither the Newar art and architecture, nor the large pantheon of their religion, was rejected by the new rulers as alien to their own traditions.

The hills of Nepal were dotted with a myriad of petty states and principalities during the 16th-18th century period, before Prithvinarayan Shah began to conquer them all one by one, consolidate them into a single political entity, and to call it by the name picked from one of its vanquished territories. Such was the sheer prestige and attraction held by the ancient name of Nepal and its rich history that an altogether differently originated ethnic regime, which was also its conqueror, allowed itself to merge with it. The petty principalities in Nepal's hills at that time were grouped in the two main geographical clusters, called the Baisi, i.e. twenty-two, and the Chaubisi, i.e. twenty-four, whose territorial locations broadly corresponded to the Karnali and Gandaki regions of Nepal, respectively. Gorkha was a principality that was situated within the Chaubisi cluster and lay in the hills immediately adjoining Nepal.

All these states in the Baisi and the Chaubisi clusters are believed to have been formed out of the remains of a single prosperous kingdom in the Karnali Basin in western Nepal's hills during the 12th-14th century period, which was ruled from its twin capitals at modern Sinja and Dullu, near Jumla and Dailekh respectively (Sharma, 1972). This big kingdom has been called the Khasa kingdom in its epigraphical records by its rulers. But some historians have also designated it as the kingdom of the Western Mallas. The ethnic composition, culture and language of all these states of the hills were shared in common, and their earliest historical roots are traceable to the Khasa kingdom of Western Nepal, above. The strongest expression of a common bond between all these descendant states of the Khasa kingdom had been their language indeed, called the Khasakura.

For about fifty years, from the time of Jitarimalla, one of its kings in the last quarter of the 13th century A.D., the Khasa kingdom organised successive forays against Nepal, during which time its kings

either plundered the riches of the Valley or offered pilgrimage and worship at the celebrated shrines there. This fact furnishes yet another proof of the ever-present centripetal law of force operating between these two regions in Nepal's mediaeval history. Although the Khasa foryas did not bring them any immediate political reward of Nepal's annexation by them, they ultimately paved the way for that. The people of this kingdom began constantly migrating eastwards in the hills of Nepal beginning from this time on their own individual enterpreneurship of a search for new and better lands for tending agriculture and animal-raising. The push eastwards by these people may have been given further impetus by lateral additions of new arrivals from India from time to time as they came to settle and assimilate themselves into an already prevailing social and political order of the hills later. This process of a big population shift from west to east could not have remained unaccompanied by its attendant political consequences, which becomes manifest in the emergence of the various Baisi and Chaubisi states all over the hills, populated by these people. Gorkha alone, among these states, rose to be the most powerful of all, and succeeded in giving realisation to the long cherished dream of the people of Nepal's hills of politically merging themselves into the ancient stream of Nepal's history.

Thus, the two main streams contributing to the culture of Nepal are those provided by the Newar culture of the Kathmandu Valley and that of the culture of the Khasas based in Nepal's western hills, flowing, as it were, from two separate directions and converging at one point of time in 1768 A.D. One of these streams had consisted of a people endowed with a rich artistic sense, and the other had a people whose attainments lay in martial traditions. The analogy of the Athenians and the Spartans in the Classical period of the Greek history may perhaps be the most appropriate one to give here. If one stream gave this new political entity name of a sufficient prestige and antiquity, the other gave it its lingua franca (Sharma, 1973), that has proved the Nepali language an effective tool for preserving modern Nepal's continued national integration.

Religion

As in other countries of Asia, religion plays a vital role in sustaining the culture of Nepal. It helps to explain every single action and behaviour of its people in their daily lives, because there is no aspect that religion does not affect in the lives of the Nepali people. It has been a prime motivator for people among both the literate and non-literate groups, as well as among followers of higher and smaller religious traditions of Nepal.

To many smaller socio-ethnic groups of Nepal, who neither follow Hinduism nor Buddhism, their religion is a form of animism. Such a religion implies having faith in the existence of a host of spirits. They have their own specialists to conduct and propagate this religion. These men know and are adept in using oracular methods in dealing with and controlling these spirits. The shamans, as these specialists are

called, are known by various names among the different ethnic and cultural groups, and the names by which their spirit-gods would be known are also differently called by them. Nevertheless, there is a broad similarity in the basic approach among such religions. It is not our purpose to deal with them in greater detail here. After making a passing reference to them, we therefore return to see at some length the two prominent classical religions, Hinduism and Buddhism of Nepal, below.

Hinduism today enjoys the status of being the state religion of Nepal. Its constitution says that only a follower of the Hindu religion of the Aryan race, in the lineage of the present ruling family, can become the king of Nepal. Nepal's laws also make cow a sacred and a protected animal. Further, followers of this religion are in a great majority in Nepal. Buddhists are estimated to be about ten percent of Nepal's 15 million population, and Muslims, about three percent. There is also a smaller percentage of the followers of minor religious groups, but if these are local animistic religions, the Hindu majority of Nepal does not seem to regard them as being non-Hindu, in a characteristically all-comprehending religious ethos of Hinduism. This fact lends a basic note to understanding Nepal's Hinduism.

There are three main ethnic groups among the followers of Nepal's Hinduism: the Nepali-speaking Hindus of the hill origin, the Hindus of the Tarai in the Maithili, Bhojpuri and Awadhi-speaking groups and, lastly, the Newars of Kathmandu Valley origin. Aside of some customary practices specific to these groups, there is otherwise a complete agreement in their broader dogmas and doctrines. These have been sustained by a rich literature relating to the epics, puranas, dharmasastras, and diverse other cults and practices, the main body of which was written and produced in India. Nepali Hinduism has constantly revived and re-invigorated itself from religious movements and activities in India, practically in all ages. The doctrinal support to various such religious movements there was provided by written works, or by writing new interpretations and commentaries on such works.

Hinduism must have started penetrating the Himalayas right from the time of writing the epics. It is difficult to say which of the two religions, Hinduism or Buddhism, came to influence Nepal first. Most local chronicles give the impression that Buddhism is the older of the two religions in Nepal. However, when written records open in the middle of the 5th century A.D., both religions appear to have been already popular. The two prominent theistic cults of Hinduism, Vaishnavism and Shaivism, and deities belonging to their pantheon, are widely referred to in the Licchavi records. The shrine of Pashupatinath is the preeminent Shaiva centre proclaiming the long popularity of Shiva cult in Nepal. Its prestige today far transcends the limits of this cult alone, so that it is an all too important deity in the national life of the Nepali people.

There were Brahmans well-versed in the Vedic method of worship and sacrifices in the Licchavi period. The picture one draws of the Brahmanical religion of Nepal at that time does not seem to have been much different from what it was during the Gupta rule in India. During the post-Licchavi period and in the times until the rise of Jayasthitimalla (Ca. 1382-95 A.D.), some of the tenets and practices of Hindu religion had obviously been weakened by certain attending circumstances, of which we cannot get any clear idea at present. The elaborate social reforms undertaken by Jayasthitimalla seem to have been a result of the step taken in countering this very situation, and in placing Nepali Hinduism, especially in the field of caste reorganisation, once again on its keel, in order that it may gain a comparable status with other Hindu societies of the time in the region. Not surprisingly, he was helped in this task by Brahmans obtained from outside. The new set of Brahman priests consisting of the Rajopadhyayas and the earlier mentioned Maithili Brahmans, who gave service to the Newar Hindus, was obviously added about this time of Jayasthitimalla's social reorganisation. The social situation of Nepal before the reorganisation seems to have been marked by a state of flux and the Brahman's caste was probably not so clearly delineated from the rest of the other upper castes. Orthodox Brahmanism of the earlier periods had probably tended to weaken owing to the assimilative nature of Nepali culture eager to set its own norms. The basis of such a thinking comes from the fact that some of the Hindu high-caste Newars, who are not reckoned among the Brahman castes today, are still continuing to bear surnames similar to those of the Brahmans, and perform some of their priestly roles in the religious rites of the many temples of the Valley. These castes are those of the Joshi, Acharya, Karmacharya, Gurvacharya, etc. Brahmans have usually held their unchallenged monopoly in the fields of astrology and medicine as well. That is what the Joshis and the Vaidyas among the Newar high castes still seem to be doing. It is possible that before Jayasthitimalla imported fresh groups of Brahmans, their role in Nepal had been fulfilled by the Licchavi Brahman's descendants, whose purity, from reasons of inter-marriages and other lapses, may have been considered diluted later on.

Buddhism presents a more interesting case in the study of the religion of Nepal. In the first place, it managed to survive in Nepal, even though it became extinct from the rest of the Indian sub-continent. In the form it has survived in Nepal today has been called by some as a gross distortion of its original monastic character and as all but its absorption into Hinduism (Snellgrove, 1957). Although this may be a highly lamentable aspect of Nepali Buddhism from the viewpoint of a puritanic religionist, such a development of the religion cannot be said to be wholly without its significance to an anthropologist. From the earliest known historical time in the Licchavi period, Buddhism in Nepal has been Mahayanistic in its philosophic doctrines and its theistic practices. The ultimate aim of the practitioner of this creed is to attain Buddhahood, but, unlike the follower of the other branch of Buddhism, the Hinanayana, his purpose is not to seek to liberate only himself from suffering in life, but to work tirelessly until all the creatures and sentient beings of the world are liberated. The philosophic basis of

this religion was provided by the Madhyamika philosophy of sunyata, which postulates that the entire phenomenon of the visible world and its idea in ultimate truth, is nonexistent. In the subsequent centuries, Mahayana transforms itself into the Vajrayana order, which is a still later form of its development. The outer symbolism of this creed is represented mainly by a Vajra, i.e., a thunderbolt, embodying the philosophy of sunyata. Its most authoritative exponent is regarded to be Indrabhuti in his work Jñanasiddhi, in which he has reinterpreted the idea of the 'void' or sunyata, and which he says is not wholly a nonexistent concept, but which upon realisation or after gaining enlightenment by a practitioner, changes into an experience of eternal consciousness. To think and to practise in this way of sunyata is to follow in the 'adamantine path' or 'adamantine vehicle'. The two most important treatises for the Vajrayana religion are the Guhyasamaja and the Manjusrimulakalpa, which lay down the principal basis of this religion. In the former, we are told about the phenomenal world which is an emanation of the original Tathagata (Adi Buddha or Primordial Buddha). The five Dhyani Buddhas, whose place in the Vajrayana religion of Nepal is of the highest meaning and significance, are also emanated divinities from this original Tathagata. The whole range of the Vajrayana pantheon, in its turn, is a multiplication of and emanations from the five Dhyani Buddhas. The Dhyani Buddhas are universally accepted in all the Buddhist shrines of Nepal. In fact, the older earthen tumulus of the stupa held sacred for reasons of its containing the ashes of the Buddha, succeeds in getting transformed into an iconic and cult representation in its own right, so that it is now depicted with a pair of eyes and a nasal marking like in a human face, such being the form to represent the transcendental Buddha. The concept of the Five Dhyani Buddhas is believed to have been completed around the 8th century A.D., although the Amitayus Sutra, a work of the 1st century itself, refers in it to one of their members, Amitabha, (Bhattacharya, 1958).

The final phase of the development of Buddhism in Nepal was dominated by a set of new religious works called the tantras. In their basic philosophic moorings, the tantras do not depart from the earlier Buddhist Sutra works, but they lay a good emphasis on ritual practices for the purpose of attaining Buddhahood, which they seem to consider possible to achieve in this very life. For attaining this objective, new ritual techniques are enjoined upon, such as the recitation of the mantras (syllables loaded with mystical and magical power), display of mudras (hand gestures), drawing and use of mandalas (ritual diagrams) in worship and meditation. Such diagrams are supposed to be a linear representation of the cosmic order, and deities are arranged along it assigning them various spaces in this cosmogony. Each of these diagrams makes depiction by proclaiming its own set or family, and there is a separate treatise of tantra to explain each such set. Various tantric treatises have thus been composed focussing around one or the other principal deity attended upon by their subsidiary members, the conceptual unity to which is provided by the belief that all deities are in ultimate derivation the manifestation of the same underlying Buddhahood.

The conduct of this religion became a more private and esoteric affair practised in a seclusion between the new aspirants eager to become initiates in this path and their preceptors (acharyas). Leaving aside its conceptual part, which enjoins, among other things, worship by meditating on the form of the deity to be so worshipped, some of the outward ingredients used in the tantric mode of worship consist of animal flesh, fish, liquor and use even of sexual acts. The act of sex was obviously done, in a symbolic and ritual context probably in imitation of the act of sexual embrace of Heruka and his Shakti (consort). This posture of depicting the Buddhist Mahayana-Vajrayana deities is popular with other deities as well and can be frequently seen depicted in the thangkas and bronzes. The philosophy behind such a depiction of sexual posture was, according to Bhattacharya (Bhattacharya, 1958), to convey the idea of sunyata or to facilitate the realisation of the ultimate truth which is said to be nothing but consist of an all pervading emptiness. This is the concept of salvation according to the followers of the Mahayana-Vajrayana Buddhism. The bold use of some of these symbolic sexual acts in their rituals has made tantrism a religion of dubious value in the eyes of some people, but there is no doubt that it was a potent religious force at the time it flourished.

When Tantrism was in a period of its high ascendancy in Nepal sometime in the mediaeval period, Hinduism itself could not remain unaffected by its outlook. Its influence has been felt highest in the different sects of Shaivism. The popularity of the cult of the Matrika goddesses in the Malla period may not itself have been due to a tantric influence, but the methods of worship used in many shrines dedicated to these goddesses were not free from such an influence. One of the most significant contributions made by Tantrism to the religious practices of Nepal lies in its ability to blur the sectarian distinctiveness of the various Buddhist and Hindu gods. This fact is veritably described to be Nepal's most publicized spirit of religious syncretism.

In the course of this development, Buddhism in Nepal has come to lose both its monastic character as well as its community of saffron-clad celibate monks among its practitioners (Allen, 1973), like in the days of the yore. The monks are replaced now by a set of people specialised in conducting and officiating in rituals, called the Vajracharyas. These people act more like priests than monks practising all kinds of vows and austerities, lead a life of marriedhood, and occupy the monasteries now turned into their private residential quarters. The society of these priests today is a closed one in which not everybody desirous of learning the ways of the creed could hope to find entry. The Vajracharyas today are out and out a caste group, occupying their highest position among Newar Buddhist caste groups, paralleling the Brahmins among the Hindus. Their rituals are many and diverse, and these rituals are explained and supported on their own Buddhistic texts. But, notwithstanding this, these texts, at every step, seem to emulate and be devised upon Brahmanical ritual practices. Some of their most common rites such as the kalasa puja, mandala puja and homa puja (Locke, 1975) seem to be ultimately modelled on the quite familiar Brahmanical methods of similar rituals.

Society

We have already hinted at the nature of the ethnic diversity and cultural plurality of Nepal at the beginning of this paper. The habitats of these various groups of people are found distributed everywhere, from the Tarai to the hills. But, whereas each one of these groups is, even now, by and large, seen confined within its own traditional area of settlement, the Hindu ethnic group of the hills alone, which is also the predominant group of Nepal, both numerically and politically, owing to its instinctive mobility in the hills in search of new lands for farming and cattle-raising, is seen settled everywhere, throughout Nepal.

Some of the ethnic groups living in the Tarai, whose population ranges from a few thousand among the smaller groups to several hundred thousand among the larger ones, are the Meche, Satar, Rajbansi, Dhimal, Bodo, in the east, and the Dangar, in the central Tarai. But the largest ethnic group of the Tarai is the Tharu settled from east to the west. Despite this fact, the most commonly acknowledged home of the Tharu in Nepal is the Dang Valley in the west of Nepal. The middle hills of Nepal, which is its most densely populated region, presents a still larger array of these smaller ethnic groups living in it. The groups living in this region, too, are distributed in the various ecological and altitudinal zones, such as the river basins, lower sub-tropical hills and the higher sub-temperate hills, in which the hill topography of Nepal finds itself divided. The groups living in the warm, low altitude valley-bottoms are the poorer and economically more backward peoples such as the Raji, the Majhi, the Bote, the Kumal, the Danuwar, the Darai, etc. In a little higher altitudes, but still lying along the lower range of the middle hills, are the Raute (a semi-nomadic vanishing tribe), the famous Magar tribe, the Chepang, the Thani and the Hayu. Paralleling them, along the upper reaches of the middle hills, are the more well-known and populous ethnic groups of Nepal, such as the Gurung, the Tamang, the Rai and the Limbu. Besides them, there are also some other groups, such as the Kham Magar, the Sunuwar and the Lepcha, living in these hills. The zone close to the high Himalayas, along the Himalayan south face and in the trans-Himalayan Valleys, live the Bhote (Tibetan) populations of many regional and dialectical groups, the Sherpas, the Thakalis and the Manangis being the most well-known among them (Bista, 1972).

For a country of Nepal's size, its ethnic diversity is not only extremely rich, but what has been called its tribal population is also quite large. It is roughly estimated to be 22 to 25 percent of Nepal's total population. This ratio is certainly much larger than the estimated 7 percent tribal population in India. Thus, one may hope that the juxtaposition of the Hindu caste groups with groups, whose social organisation betrays little of the concept of a caste hierarchy, presents a unique chance of studying the social consequences of this interaction in Nepal.

This interaction, which came in the wake of the first contact between these two groups of cultures following the penetration of the Hindus into the Himalayan terrain, discussed above, took place on an intimate note and continued over a long time in history. It obligated the Hindus, as political rulers of the land, to redefine some of the bases of social relationship in order to accommodate the diverse ethnic groups within their fold, which they would probably not have done in a more homogeneous cultural setting elsewhere. Their cultural practices, instead of being the customary practices of people confined within themselves, were duly recognised by the state by proclaiming their validity in the Legal Code. The Hindu-tribal social relationship prevalent in Nepal strikes a far deeper note of intimacy than anywhere else.

The first Legal Code (Muluki Ain) of Nepal was compiled and promulgated by the first Rana Prime Minister, Jung Bahadur, in 1854 A.D. But long before this compilation, many of the codified laws had existed as operational laws in the social and religious life of the people of Nepal, sanctioned by its tradition, kings and its rulers. When the Hindus came to the Himalayas, they came with their predetermined ideas regarding their social and religious values. But what was to happen of the people who were living there from a much earlier time and whose lands they came to seize, in terms of giving them a social position in their social order? The matter was further complicated, because these indigenous people did not share in many of the values of the Hindus and conducted their life-style adhering to their own customary practices. Their number was so large, and there certainly were among them people of social and political prestige, irrespective of what cultures they adhered to, who could not be ignored or overlooked. Therefore, the Hindus had here some problem of fitting their pre-existing model of a social or caste hierarchy in the dense ethnic milieu of Nepal, which recognised very little of such notion at least in a ritual purity-pollution sense. In the case of India, viewing it from the situation today, the high-caste groups like to call themselves as savarna and keep themselves quite aloof and refrain from interacting with the tribal groups except for their economic exploitation. But, in Nepal, all ethnic groups, whether big or small, have been accorded a place within the Hindus' all-encompassing single social order, with each group getting a well-defined ranking in it. The classical four-fold varna division itself was not changed for adjusting these groups, since the Hindus reserved the higher categories for themselves and adjusted all the other groups in the lowest but clean category of this model. What is however remarkable in doing this is that the Hindus showed no unwillingness whatsoever to interact with them despite some of their cultural practices and food habits being distinctly antithetical to them (Hindus). Despite their being placed in the shudra rank, it did not prevent the cord-wearing castes from taking wives from among their women (the ethnic groups') in a socially acceptable manner and according a higher social status than the mother's caste to the progeny thus born. The social adjustment for the offspring out of such wedlocks would be made by promoting him to the caste of his father and granting him the cord. Only when the father was a cord-wearing Brahmin would the progeny of this inter-caste marriage be adjusted

within the castes of the Chhetris. This practice makes the tribe-caste relationship of Nepal appear less as a dichotomy and more as a continuum (Sharma, 1978). Such a socialisation process of some of these ethnic groups in Hindu society had been taking place even before the times of Prithvinarayan Shah. The Magar and the Gurung were the most preferred ethnic groups for recruitment in the army of Gorkha and, therefore, for this reason, their social prestige was deemed better than that of the other ethnic groups, and perhaps regarded as closest to the Hindu warrior's caste.

The assimilation of the ethnic groups in the manner outlined above did not jeopardise the basic social structure of the Hindus. The accepted notion of a vertical order in caste rankings remained intact much as everywhere else. Save the groups of Muslims and the Christians (Europeans), who were regarded as outsiders totally to the Hindu society, (Gaborieau, 1972) the Hindu law-makers comprehended all other groups of Nepal, however divergent, within their social order. This social universe of theirs was called the 'four varnas and thirty-six castes' (char varna chhattis jat). The multiplicity of these castes was vertically arranged grouping them in five categories. The highest category in it was that of the cord-wearing (tagadhari) castes, at the head of which were the Brahmins. The next category consisted of the unenslaveable liquor-drinking castes (namasinya matawali jat), in which were subsumed the more prominent of the ethnic groups. Below them came the enslaveable liquor-drinking castes (masinya matawali jat), which included all the other less prominent and economically backward ethnic groups. The two other categories coming at the bottom of the vertical ladder are made up of the low unclean Hindu castes, with whom social intercourse of any sort is prohibited, but those relating to sharing of water, food, and having sexual contacts with their women by members of the upper three categories, are an absolute taboo (Höfer, 1979). These two categories of people are those from whom water may not be accepted (by upper castes), but whose bodily touch will not require any ritual purification (pani na chalne chhoi chito halnu na parne) and those whose water may not be accepted and with whom any bodily touch would require having a ritual purification (pani na chalne chhoi chito halnu parne), in other words, the untouchable castes. Most service castes of Nepal from whom the high castes demand all sorts of ritual and economic services in their daily lives are found concentrated in these two lowest categories.

The above is mainly the history and culture of the people of Nepal Valley, who, after their absorption into a new political entity in 1768-69 A.D., became reduced to a distinct ethnic group called the Newars. Their integration into the vertical social order of the Legal Code of 1854 A.D. was done by taking into cognition just one of the traits of their cultural life, while ignoring the others. The use of liquor in the ritual life of the Newar even among their high-castes has been made the basis for lumping them in the social category of the liquor-drinking ethnic groups. Except perhaps this one similarity, there is otherwise nothing in common in the cultural life-style of the various ethnic groups and the Newars. The Newar society is far from being an egalita-

rain society, nor is it a society having no notion of a caste hierarchy in it. On the contrary, it is riddled with all sorts of divisions within its social organisation. In fact, the earliest documented caste organisation of Nepal comes from Kathmandu Valley at the time of Jayasthiti-malla in the late 14th century A.D. Notwithstanding, however, the position of law as stated in the Muluki Ain, the Newars are accorded a better social prestige at the actual inter-personal levels of relationship by the hill Hindus, as far as their higher castes are concerned.

The social outlook discussed above is largely a Hindu perspective of Nepal's hills endorsed by their Muluki Ain, i.e. the Legal Code. In a state where the Hindu monarchical system has been so predominant in its history, the perspective that members of the various ethnic groups had of the total Nepali society, on the one hand, and of themselves and their position in it, on the other, is not easy to guess. These people would certainly see many significant variations prevailing in their own society in many respects from that of the Hindus. Their society, does not, for instance, have the notion of any ranking or a ritually high-low concept to distinguish their own people. But, when on occasions, they needed to relate themselves with people outside their groups, the notion of a hierarchy could not possibly be ignored even by them. They could not, for example, ignore to acknowledge the unquestioned superiority of the Brahman's caste, because his high social status was proclaimed and protected by the state in its law throughout their territory. They would similarly probably not treat the untouchable service castes of the Hindus any differently from that meted out to them by the latter. Except at such times, at other times, they would perhaps remain occupied with their own community affairs, behave much as independent and autonomous groups, and participate in their cultural lives freely and without fear of obstruction from the side of the law.

Thus, as a result of contact made by the immigrant Hindus from the south and the west with diverse Tibeto-Burman-speaking ethnic groups of the Nepal Himalayas, a series of social acculturations seems to have been produced in the cultures of these groups. As part of this process, the Hindu orthodoxy seems to have relaxed some of its rules relating to inter-marriage of Hindu high-castes with women of the ethnic groups, allowed widow remarriage more easily, and made easy rules of divorce for women even among the high castes except for the Brahmans. Similarly, acculturation process seems to have drawn the ethnic groups living outside the cultural pale of Hinduism towards the Hindu folds in large numbers in terms of their language, dress, belief, and other mannerisms in their daily lives. Such a process has been variously termed as Sanskritization, Hinduization or even Nepalisation. In the larger context of nation-building, Sanskritization may have made some very useful contributions in forging the people of Nepal's diverse cultures together. Some of the castes like the Chhetris' is no doubt a result of this unique synthesis. The role of Sanskritization in Nepal has been explained by Rishikesh Shah (Sharma, 1974), which seems to me to sum up the true merit of this process. He says: "It (Sanskritization) harmonised behaviour and value patterns to the point of making rationalised

interaction between various groups possible (in the past). It might also be pointed out here that although some of the aspects of Sanskritization may be altogether at variance with the modernist outlook, the experience and knowledge of the working of the Sanskritization process may be profitably applied to the task of modernization ... Sanskritization was at one time seen as essentially elevating and civilising. So, too, is modernisation." (pp. 74).

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