

out door patient care, transport ambulance service where long distances are great and journey difficult.

8. A counselling programme may be introduced to advise the aged employees how to adjust themselves in their changed circumstances.
9. NGOs should be engaged by every means when they wish to help eradicate problems of ageing in Nepal.
10. Social security plans must immediately be done.

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## Religion, Society And State In Nepal

*Dipak Raj Pant*

### State of the Religion

Nepalese society is made up of a variety of small, comprehensive units. Some of these units are "natural" (1), in the sense that these are composed of members related among themselves by organic ties, i. e. common descendance, kinship, marriage, common territoriality etc. Family (Nep. *Parivara*), clan or closest kinship group (Nep. *Khandan, Khalak, Gharana*), caste (Nep. *Thari*) and, to some extent, ethnos (Nep. *Jati*) reflect the natural grouping in Nepal. Among the additional factors for social grouping religion is perhaps the most important one.

The religiousity of a group is determined, in the first place, by a characteristic subjective (individual or collective) experience of the mystery (the "unknown" or the "holy"). It is a basic datum which can not be properly explained in rational terms and it is certainly not reducible to the influences of any external (historical or environmental) factors. In the second

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*The author is a previous associate professor (on contract), Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu.*

place, a group's tradition (*Sanskrit* and Nep. *Parampara*), more or less constantly, shapes the religious attitude and behaviour of its members.

From the viewpoint of *form*, religious tradition is a *Continuum* of belief, knowledge, practices and skills of a group which is called *Parampara* by the Hindus, Buddhists and Jainas (2). It undergoes changes and developments due to the influences of external (historical and environmental) factors and of the human actors. It is determined by the psycho-social character (*ethos*) of the ethnic or social unit, too. From the viewpoint of *content*, religious tradition is the treasure containing the original intuitions (religious experience) and their theoretical (*weltanschauung*, doctrines, ethics . .) as well as practical (*cultus*) expressions.

Hinduism, Buddhism and many ethnic traditions (Nep. *Loka-parampara*) are so complexly interwoven in the central Himalayan region that any intellectual inquiry relying only upon the classical study or upon petty ethnography is bound to mislead; or, at most, it may offer only a partial and fragmented picture of the reality. Empirical study of the cultic practices of smaller social units (e. g. family, clan, caste group, ethnos, community-settlement or *Basti* etc.) should not be neglected while focussing on the over all religious tradition. The ground reality in Nepal (and elsewhere in and around the Himalayan region) demands a new, interdisciplinary approach to the study of religion. I would insist on the combination of classical scholarship with anthropological investigations.

A common Nepalese *home religiousus* lives a pluricultural religious life. Each family has its exclusive cult shared by all the members known as *Kula Devata* (deity of the lineage). Some caste groups (e. g. *Kami*) have their own specific cult along with that of lineage which is supposed to be the tutelary and guiding deity (e. g. *Vishvakarma* of the *Kami* or blacksmiths). Each compact territory, where diverse communities have settled, has its own local cult shared by all the families, caste groups, individuals and

ethnoses despite their differences in other cults and even in their racial or ethnic belonging. Each ethnic group has its own tradition and major cults of tutelary deities, ancestors, primordial preceptors etc. (3). Most interesting of all, it is very common to find individual persons being specifically devoted to a particular deity or superhuman entity of his/her choice. Alongside the cults of family, caste, locality (*Basti*), ethnos and classical pantheon, one chooses a god or goddess or a superhuman entity or even a group of such entities for his/her private and intimate worship. Such cults are called *Ishta Devata* ('friend god') (4).

The exclusive cults of smaller units (family, caste, ethnos, locality) help to maintain cohesion, identity and the "little" traditions within the broad frame of the Himalayan sub-civilization. The cults of locality or community-settlements (*Basti*) provide the meeting ground for the peoples of diverse ethnolinguistic origins, different families and caste groups. The intimate cults of individual persons facilitate mystico-contemplative realization of the singles. The contemporaneity of all these cults is the unique feature of the religious culture of Nepalese people. The larger Hindu (in some areas, Buddhist) identity is not an exclusive and substantial reality of a certain group or of a certain majority in the Nepalese context. Especially, the Hindu identity is that broad frame of reference which links all the indigenous cults and insulates the whole, but it does neither completely unite nor create a common or unique 'type'.

Most varied traditions have been combined in the formation of Nepalese religious culture which is unique and perhaps one of the rarest examples of ethno-religious pluralism. Majority of the people observe a complex, syncretic and highly localized religiosity rather than a 'religion' in the conventional sense. The magico-religious tradition of the Nepalese majority, rural householders with agro-pastoral occupation, has been also called "popular Hinduism". Magical and shamanic elements of many ethnic traditions (provenient from Tibeto-Burmese ethnolinguistic origins and, in some details, akin to those of central

and northern Asian people) have been blended with the classical Hindu/Buddhist (i. e. Indo-Aryan) traditions.

Local natural environment has played dual role in the religious history of Nepal. First, it has relatively isolated Nepal from the rest of Indian subcontinent and thus spared the alteration in its spiritual and intellectual climate, unlike in India, due to alien subjugation and pressures. Second, it has helped in binding different magico-religious elements and shaping the over all character of the ethnoses living within the Himalayan environment.

A distinct organic spirituality reflected through the cosmobiological symbolism (animals, plants, rivers, mountains, etc.) is to be found commonly among all ethnoses and groups despite many differences. Except the Muslims, a few Christians and *Theravadi* Buddhists, all socio-religious groups in Nepal (the Hindus, *Mahayani* and *Vajrayani* Buddhists, and all ethnic traditional groups) have cosmo-biological symbolism referring constantly to the natural elements characteristic of the Himalayan area. These "indigeneous" groups share many symbols and refer to the same elements found in the local physical environment. It is obvious that a long process of adaptation (amongst the cultures in the common environment, and between the single cultures and the environment) has been traversed by these groups.

There are also groups and traditions which have not developed within the local eco-system. These have not undergone the long process of adaptation within a specific and distinct natural environment like that of Himalaya. Therefore, these groups maintain a more or less clearly visible separation from all the "indigeneous" groups and traditions. Such extra-indigeneous traditions do not possess equally vigorous cosmobiological symbolism referring to the natural elements found in the local physical environment. Their symbolism is more of an ethico-personalistic type (5). They refer to celestial, non-immanent and non-figurative reality without any link to the local

environment. The Muslims (2.7% of the population, originally immigrants from the Indian plains), the Christians (around 30,000, immigrants, expatriates and a few neo-converts of which the majority belonging to several Protestant churches), and the *Theravadi* Buddhists (exact figure unknown, recently introduced in Nepal) are the extra-indigeneous groups in Nepal; it is also noteworthy that almost all of them are concentrated in the urban areas.

According to the official sources, Hinduism (obviously, including most of the ethnic traditions of the Himalayan midlands and plains) is practiced by the majority (89.5%). Buddhism (5.3%), Islam (2.7%), Jainism (0.1%) and others (2.4%) are also said to be the religious traditions practiced by the Nepalese populace (6). These data are seriously questioned by many as not only too inaccurate but also tendentious. Many ethnoses, Buddhists and the Jains share the popular Hindu cults (e. g. *Siva*, *Vishnu*, *Sakti*, *Ganesh*, *Bhajrab* etc.). It is being objected that the cultic commonness has led to the inclusion of many socio-religious groups within the category "Hindu" while actually not being "Hindu" strictly (7).

#### Religion of the State

Nepal has been big or small, compact or fragmented, in different historical periods (8). The last unification process, undertaken by the *Gorkhali* King Prithvi Narayan in mid-18th century, was the decisive one. It brought together many different ethnoses and territories never accomplished by any other central power in the Himalayas before. The *Gorkhali* unification was a politico-military annexation of a number of peoples and lands along the central mountains, valleys and hills of the Himalayan region. It was a forceful defensive insulation of a multi-ethnic area aimed to avert the subjugation by the then alien "high" powers (i. e. India-based Muslims and British).

The *Gorkhali* conquerors were not people of a single ethnic/caste group but the *Gorkhali* elites, i. e. *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas* (Nep. *Bahun-Chhetri*), were a distinctly Indo-Aryan

ethnos and orthodox Hindus (9). So were most of the conquered rulers of all those reigns in the Himalayas, including the Malla kings of Kathmandu valley. The *Gorkhali* campaign had nothing to do with the so called "Hinduization" or "Sanskritization". The Hindu factor did not dictate internal politico-military process but it played the central role in mobilizing all Nepalese indigeneous groups against the waves of Muslim and Western conquests which have done so much to alter the spiritual and intellectual climate of the Indian subcontinent. Due to the *Gorkhali* politico-military shrewdness, favoured by its geographical position, Nepal has been the only country of what one might call "South Asia left to herself, to preserve and develop the tendencies inherent in the region, its cultures and religions..."(10).

Numerous ethnic traditions lived together, interacted and underwent changes following their contacts with the others and having been insulated by the Hindu regimes. What has been existing in Nepal could be called a multilateral interactive system of ethno-social organisms. Present-day Nepalese nation-state is a formalized political version of that system. The process of formalization was initiated even before the *Gorkhali* conquest, by the earlier Hindu regimes. The *Gorkhali* unification fortified that. Gradually, effective centralization of power and subsequent projection of a distinct nationhood started to take place by the end of last century and proceeded throughout this century. It has been always accompanied by the Hindu identity of the regime which left each ethno-religious group to undergo its own course freely. The projection of Hindu nation-state has also been a result of the historical compulsion of self-legitimacy by a small power (Nepal) *vis-a-vis* neighbouring big powers (British India and then the Republic of India); and, by a central regime *vis-a-vis* its own heterogeneous subjects (11).

After the recent political change, the new constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal has re-affirmed its Hindu character; Nepalese state is declared to be a Hindu state (12). Unlike in

the past, many raised their voices in opposition to the Hindu state. Among the dissenting voices, the most prominent were the newly organized and self-styled ethno-political organizations, some neo-Buddhist groups based in the urban areas and the far left political circles.

According to the constitutional provision, Hindu festivities are national, Hindu sacred places (also the Buddhist ones) are national patrimony and the Hindu culture is to be promoted and safeguarded by the state. The religious minorities are free to profess and practice their own cults, but propagation of their faith and conversion of the others is strictly prohibited (13). This provision does not make any difference to the majority Hindu and Budhists who do not practice propagation and conversion of the others; but it is bound to antagonize the Muslim and christian minorities for whom propagation and conversion are doctrinally sanctioned and pious acts. The ultra-democrats and the far leftists of Nepal consider this to be a limitation imposed upon the fundamental human rights, or a clean chit to the feudal residues. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the people and political analysts defend the Hindu state. For the rest, who can say what would have been the inter-ethnic and inter-communal situation in Nepal today if the strictly monotheistic and exclusivist Islam or Christianity or rigidly ethical Theravada Buddhism were to be the dominant force instead of the all-inclusive, permissive, shapeless and centreless Hinduism?

#### Note and References :

- (1) See J. wach, *Sociology of Religion*, Univ. of Chicago, 1971 (12th). pp. 54 . . f f, for the "Natual" grouping.
- (2) 'Tradition' in the Nepalese context is derived from the Sanskrit original term *Parampara* which means "uninterrupted series", 'due arrangement in succession'.
- (3) The cult of *Garpake Baba* among the *Magars* (a group in mid-western and western hills of Nepal, belonging to the

Tibeto-Burmese linguistic family), the cult of *Budha Subba* among the *Kiratis* (a larger ethnic group inhabiting eastern hills, belonging to the Tibeto-Burmese linguistic family) are two widely known examples. Even the people of other ethnic/caste venerate these patron deities if they happen to live in the same area.

- (4) An *Ishta Devata* is "handpicked" by an individual at any moment of his/her life under the influence of others or following his/her own "special" experience (dreams, events, visions, etc.). The cult may coincide with the family or group cults, but usually it is a separate and parallel cult. It is not contraposed to any other cult, i.e. of the family, group or locality. An individual may "choose" a cult of an ethnic group or locality other than his/her own.
- (5) In my *"IL mondo della maschera : saggio antropologico Sul Simbolismo magico-religioso della maschera"*, ECDP-HeLiopolis, 1988, part III, a detailed discussion on the cosmo-biological and ethico-personalistic symbolisms has been attempted,
- (6) Central Bureau of Statistics, *Population Monograph*, HMG, Kathmandu, 1987 (according to the census 1981).
- (7) Most of the traditional Nepalese refer to Buddhism as *Bauddha marga* ("Bauddha's way"), as one among many other "ways" such as *Saiva Marga* (Sivaite "Way"), *Vaishnava Marga* (following Vishnu) and so on. Nobody in the past conceived the religious tradition in terms of "religion", "Hinduism", "Buddhism", "Jainism", "ethnic" etc. Only the foreigners, subsequently, the native moderns (the "educated" ones) have started to use such terms and categories in the last few decades. This certainly has an adverse impact upon the socio-religious equilibrium. The protest by neo-Buddhist and ethno-political organizations, in the recent period, against the Hindu state is closely linked with the insertion and permanence of such "new" social terms and categories.
- (8) The kingdoms of *Kirati* (900 B. C. - 200 A. D.) and of *Licchivi* (200 A. D. - 800 A. D.) were stretched well beyond the

valley of Kathmandu and Bagmati river basin.

- (9) The term *Gorkhali* (meaning "those of Gorkha") originally denoted only the inhabitants of Gorkha, a small hill reign in the central Nepal from where the Nepalese unification campaign was launched. Later all the peoples of central midlands, who contributed in the campaign, were known as *Gorkhali*. They were *Bahun-Chhetri* (orthodox Hindus and Indo-Aryan ethnos); *Gurung*, *Maghar*, *Ghale*, *Gharti* etc. (Tibeto-Burmese ethno-linguistic groups loosely connected with the Hindu archipelago); and, *Sarki* (cobblers), *Damai* (tailors) and *Kami* (blacksmiths) - all of these occupational castes are Indo-Aryan ethnos practicing Hinduism.
- (10) B. Kolver, *Some Examples of Syncretism in Nepal*, paper for the seminar "German Research in Nepal: Results and problems", Kathmandu, March 12-15, 1990.
- (11) See, R. Burghart, *The Formation of the Concepts of Nation-State in Nepal*, in: JOURNAL OF ASIAN STUDIES, vol. XLIV, no. 1, 1984, pp. 191-125, for detailed discussion. Majority of the citizens of the Republic of India are Hindu whose support to any regime in Nepal is crucial. The Hindu elites of India have always cherished the Hindu state in Nepal since India is a secular and "free-for-all" country while Nepal is the only Hindu country in the world.
- (12) Despite a long debate among the protagonists of the recently and successfully organized popular revolt against the absolute monarchy, at the end, almost all agreed to maintain the Hindu state. The Hindu state was declared by late King Mehendra (father of the present monarch) in 1962. That move served two political purposes: first, a tacit legitimacy was obtained from the India rulers who were not very happy with the late king for his abrupt dissolution of the parliamentary multi-party system; second, the quiet and conservative people of Nepal were appeased by recognizing explicitly their religious tradition even at the political levels. Through the traditionalist move, the then king secured

political vantage. The new democratic leadership, which humiliated the monarchy recently (Spring 1990), however, continued with Hindu state while curbing almost all the political powers of the king. See, *Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 2047*, 1990, part I, art. 4: 1.

(13) *Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 2047*, I :19 : 1.

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