

Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal

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Introduction

The two principal religions Buddhism and Hinduism coexist in Nepal, and in visible form this idea is conveyed unmistakably by many syncretic images like those of Harihara, Lakshmi-Narayana etc. In fact the two religions have merged into one another, emphasizing the basic character of older and parental faith, viz., Hinduism, commonly called the Brahmanical religion among academic circles. This arose out of the innate spirit of tolerance of one another's point of view that permeates the life of the Nepalese folks. It is, therefore, easy to understand the practice of animal sacrifices and the ceremony of *Sraddha* performed by the Buddhists living promiscuously in the midst of the Hindus. It is also to be noted with interest that the language of the Buddhist texts like *Prajnaparamita* and *Sadhanamala* is Sanskrit and not Pali as is the case with the earlier Buddhist literature. The Buddhist society is divided into several castes like the community of the Hindus. The infusion of Tantricism brought in the practice of animal sacrifices in the Buddhist fold, bringing it still nearer to Hinduism. It also introduced a sense of equality among its followers and brought about some relaxation of restrictions in the field of morals as well as the dismissal of untouchability.

It was the cult of Vajrayana that marked a synthesis between the two sister cults of Saiva and Buddhist deities. The equation of the deities is writ large across the entire range of the royal charters, decrees and agreements issued throughout the wide expanse of history.

A copper plate agreement of Pratapa Malla and Srinivasa Malla announcing eternal friendship between them invokes a diverse ensemble of deities comprising Taleju, Guhyesvari, Pasupatinatha, Karunamaya, Machchhendranatha and Harisiddhi, respectively, encompassing the gods of Buddhists and Hindus alike. Similarly an agreement between Yogendra Malla and Jitmitra Malla invokes Pasupati, Guhyesvari, Karunamaya, Garuda-Narayana of Changu-Narayana, Vajrayogini and Harisiddhi, respectively. The coins of Yoga Narendra Malla bear the names of Karunamaya and Lokanatha, respectively, both representing Machchhendranath. The coins bear Buddhist and Hindu deities also. The name of Lokanatha, a Buddhist deity occurs on the coins of Yogendra Malla, Vishnu Malla and Teja Narsimha Malla of Lalitpur. 'Karunamaya' occurs on the coins of some of the rulers. The coins of Jaya Prakasha Malla of Kathmandu bear representations of Pasupatinatha, Guhyesari, Taleju and Kamari.

In this context it may be stated pointedly that Lokanatha and Vajrayogini, though belonging primarily to the Buddhist pantheon, are worshipped by the Saivites as well.

Though *stupas* and *chatiyas* are primarily worshipped by Buddhist, they receive, the reverence of the Hindus also, as the embodiment of godhead as represented by Buddha.

2. Synthesis of Brahmanical and Buddhist Deities

The figure of *Mahankal* in Kathmandu is

an emanation of Akshobhya as indicated the imposition of his figure in miniature on the forehead. Bodhisatwa Lokeshvara under the name of Machchhendranatha and Taleju as a manifestation of Siva-Durga and Buddha Tara combined are the popular deities of the folks.

Hanuman, the great devotee of Rama, is also included into the fold of Vajrayana and it is a common experience to see Hanuman ensconced on an elevated seat in both *Viharas* and Hindu temples. The Malla rulers adopted the figure of Hanuman for their banner and had his figure installed at the entrances to the royal palaces at Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur respectively, giving rise in later times to the name of Hanuman Dhoka, as in the case of the old palace at Kathmandu.

Bhairava represents, after all, one of the many aspects of Siva and receives homage from Hindus and Buddhists alike. He is called *Matapode* in common parlance. The figure is marked by a *mundamala* (garland of human skulls), and of course the snake that goes with Siva.

Bhimasena, a hero from the pages of the Mahabharata, has been defied by the Newar traders, who worship him in the expectation that they could bestow prosperity upon them in their profession of commerce and trade. The attributes of Siva are applied to him in the *stotras* (verses) of Pratapa Malla, who calls him *Siva-rupa*.

King Pratapa Malla built a temple to house an image of *Vasuki* in the form of Narayana or Vishnu. *Vasuki* as the snake provides with enormous coils a seat for Vishnu. The separate worship of the snake god is performed on the occasion of *Naga-Panchami* in the month of Sravana during the rains, because it is the time when snakes issue forth from their holes. The worship is performed as a propitiatory act, both by Hindus and Buddhists alike. It is

significant to note that '*Ashi*' in the language of the Vedas means cold or rain. Later on the term undergoes a change in significance and comes to mean a snake in classical Sanskrit. It is in the nature of a transferred epithet, for snakes issue forth during the rains which pour from the clouds, but the association between water and snake is unmistakably implied in this transformation of the meaning. It is well known that several species of snakes live in water.

Buddha came to be regarded as an incarnation of *Vishnu* as early as the 6th or 7th century, as also Krishna, who was recognized as such in the *Amarakosha*, a work of the 5th century, wherein he was described as the son of Vasudeva. It was the *Bhagavata Purana* highlighting the Krishna cult that first recognized Buddha as an incarnation, and the subject was emphasized by the poet *Jayadeva* in his *Gita Govindam* several centuries later. But the ravages of time have not changed the belief or the equation, which fact accounts for the commonness of many elements of Buddhism and Hinduism.

The ideal of a steady-minded person (*स्थितप्रज्ञ*) is common to both, as emphasized in the *Gita* and the *Dhammapada*, respectively, to the extent of remarkable identity of phraseology in these two works.

Perhaps one of the oldest cults that prevail in one form or another in the subcontinent is that of the *Mother Goddess*. It can be traced back to the days of the Indus Valley civilization. She is said to be representing various aspects of the mind such as anger, greed, envy, arrogance, eavesdropping, chimera and fault-finding. The cult of the Mother Goddess in the form of *Azima* or grandmother was universally in vogue in Nepal and accepted by all and sundry. There is no gainsaying that female deities in Buddhism reflect and represent the aspects of the *Matrikas* of the Brahmanical religion, and their role

in Buddhism is of considerable importance. It was keeping with this principle and practice that King Pratapa Malla addressed *Vajrayogini Ambika* (mother or *Parvati*), and *Ugratara Nilasarasvati* and *Ekajata* as representatives of *Bhagavati* herself. There again is an instance of the imperceptibly unmistakable blending of the two faiths, which can be held as divergently convergent. This spirit underlies and emphasizes the equation of *Tulaja* with the *Bhavani* of the Brahmanical faith and *Ugratara* of the Buddhist conception.

It is curious to observe that the goddess *Sitala*, presiding over the ailment of small-pox, also called *Azima*, of whom there is a shrine at premises of the *Svayambhu stupa* is receiving the worshipful veneration of Buddhists under the name of *Hariti*. This may be the result of an adaptation or wholesale adoption as is seen in some instances of the adoption of the *Siva linga* itself as the representative of the Buddha, in the mountainous regions, though the instance of a deliberate adoption as well as adaptation is seen in the practice of worshipping the image of *Pasupati* at Deo Patan as Buddha himself once a year. To retrace our steps, *Sitala* is considered as inauspicious, riding on a donkey and being associated with a broomstick, a winnowing fan and pitchers. The thin veil which may separate the two deities are waved away by the adoptive and tolerant spirit of the adherents of both the sects.

The cult of *Kumari* is observed in Nepal, especially in Kathmandu and Lalitpur, by both Buddhists and Hindus alike. The practice of worshipping a living goddess—usually a young girl—marked by auspicious signs and of noble upbringing and nature, and chosen with care, is even now in vogue among the Hindus, especially of the Bengalis, who on occasions of the Durga Puja attribute the qualities of Goddess Durga to her and worship her in living form. Within living memory, the worship of his own virgin-consort, Sarada Devi, by Shri Ram Krishna Paramahansa of Dakshinesvara (Cal-

cutta), barely a hundred years ago, as the goddess Durga herself, is a remarkable instance of this practice.

In Nepal the practice of the worship of *Kumari* in living form, including the annual celebration of a processional festival (*Kumari Jatra*) was introduced by Jaya Prakasha Malla, and it continues to this day as a well entrenched institution in the festive life of the Nepalese. It is to be noted that in this annual autumnal festival the chariots of *Ganesa* and *Bhairava* respectively, proceed that of *Kumari* herself. The selection of the living goddess is, however, confined to the families of Buddhist priests and both Hindus and Buddhists pay homage to her as to any other deity.

The case of *Ganesa* is another instance in point. *Ganesa*'s function is primarily as a destroyer of evils and obstacles, and bestower of success and in this role he has been adopted by the Buddhists, from their Brahminical brethren. His figure is placed at the entrance of monasteries and temples. He is variously depicted with two, four, six, eighteen, or twenty hands, with an increasing number of attributes emphasizing the rising scale of the mighty epitomised in the diversity of forms in which the deity presents himself before us. He is fully incorporated in the *Vajrayana* pantheon, conveyed by the *Sadhanamala*, and the cult is known to have travelled as far apart as China, with specimens in the intermediate region of Tibet. To cite only one instance out of many, the sixteen-handed figure of *Ganesa* in a shrine to the south-west corner of Ranipokhari, opposite the north-west corner of Ratna Park (Kathmandu), accompanied by his spouse *Siddhi* (success personified) is very distinctive. He is also the guardian of the Bodhisattva *Kumari* and *Mahankal* alike in Nepal and Tibet.

Yet another instance of syncretic synthesis is provided by recumbent figure of *Budhanilakantha* (*Anantasayana Vishnu*) in a village to the north-east of Kathmandu. He is respected

also as Nilakantha Lokeshvara by the Buddhists. The name Nilkantha is an attribute of Siva, arising out of his swallowing of the *Halahala* poison churned out of the ocean. This deity has, therefore, aspects of Vishnu, Siva and Lokeshvara, claiming homage and reverence from the worshippers of the respective folds.

Similary Gorakhnatha is associated together with Machchendranatha with Lokeshvara in Lalitpur. Gorakhantha also participates in the *Bisket Jatra* of Bhadgaon and of *Vajrayogini* in Sankhu. The images of *Lokeshvara*, *Tara*, *Pancha Buddhas*, *Prajna Paramita*, Emanations of Sakyamuni as well as the trinity gods are placed in the niche of many monasteries. It may be mentioned in passing that Bhadgaon was slightly less influenced by Buddhism than Kathmandu or Lalitpur.

3. Uniform System of rituals and festivals

Cutting across the barriers of sects and castes the Hindus and Buddhists of Nepal have almost a uniform system of rituals and rites. Both perform *yajna*, being the most important of the rituals, as no ceremony is considered complete without it. *Charu*, a mixture of grains of barely, rice, sesame, all soaked in ghee, is put into the fire at the

completion of the construction of a *Stupa* or a temple. Ceremonial sacrifices of goats buffaloes, pigs, and fowls are also performed by both groups of people as part of *Pancha-bali*.

4. Conclusion

The Buddhists and Hindus cross each other in religion and society, with no strife, but in perfect accord, and with a sense of reverence for the respective deities of each, often worshipping deities in common as amply indicated above.

The spirit of oneness and unity prevalent among them has been strengthened by the common participation in the various national festivals, welding the diverse sects and peoples into a united people and nation as in Japan. Again, as in Japan, where the Buddhists have adopted and incorporated salient aspects of Shintoism, their ancient religion, in their lives, the Buddhists of Nepal are not distinguishable from their Hindu brethren, as they have adopted vital aspects of the traditional and parental faith with filial affection and piety. In fact, it will only be an under-statement to conclude that Hindus and Buddhists live together in the country as a lamp of light arising from a wick soaked in oil and illuminate their motherland with the common light of their souls.

