

ON RE-READING *LE-NEPAL*: WHAT WE SOCIAL SCIENTISTS
OWE TO SYLVAIN LEVI*

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It is almost a matter of decency to include Sylvain Lévi's *Le Népal* in the bibliography of any modern work on Nepal's history and religion. However, this pioneering book is unfortunately more often quoted than really read. Only thus can we explain why Lévi's theoretical contribution has so far not received the attention it deserves ¹⁾. I shall try here to summarize some of Lévi's conclusions as discussed on pp. 1-33, 193-392 in vol. I and pp. 1-305 in vol. II of his book. It is not my purpose to criticize Lévi's individual research results, some of which are now outdated. For reasons of space I must also refrain from extensive quotations. This is regrettable because Lévi's style remains throughout vivid; and his warmth and humour, especially manifest in his diary of two months in Nepal (vol. II, pp. 306-408), ²⁾ bear evidence to a truly humanistic commitment which we hardly find in other accounts on "old Nepal", such as Hodgson's or Oldfield's.

* I wish to thank A.W. Macdonald who kindly corrected my English.

- 1) A few years ago, Riccardi (1975) published an abundantly annotated English translation of the first part of chapter II, vol. II, pp. 61-114, of *Le Népal*, along with an introductory note on Lévi's life and work.
- 2) In his introduction, Lévi (I, 39) apologizes for the fact that, as a philologist and European, he had necessarily more to do with learned men and leaders than with the common people during his stay in Nepal. The access to the latter also proved difficult due to the formidable barriers of caste.

Lévi is generally considered as an indologist. In reality, he saw himself as an historian. Although a philologist by training and acquainted with an amazing number of languages (cf. Renou 1936: 57), the documents of the past were, for him, not ends in themselves, but sources of information to be decoded with the suspicion of the historian. As Renou (1936: 8-9) aptly states, Lévi developed a particular sensitivity for meanings hidden "beneath the words" (*un sens profond des réalités sous les mots*). In fact, Lévi extended his quest for meaning into the realms of what we now call ideology, ethno-theory and contextual analysis. As is already manifest in his first substantial publication, a book on the Indian theatre in 1890 (Lévi 1963), he kept a close watch on the social functions of his sources. What fascinated him was the intricate relationship between the author and the public, rather than the mere literary value of a source, the process which produced a source, rather than the product, the source itself.

Lévi undertook his first journey to Nepal (and India) in 1897, and his *Le Népal* came out in the years 1905-08. This was the time when British research on society and social history of India had already detached itself from indology and was to a considerable extent conducted by colonial administrators. However great their merits as ethnographers may be ³⁾, the theoretical contributions of such authors as Crooke, Risley, Hunter and many others are today nothing but waste paper ⁴⁾.

3) Who is nowadays able and willing to provide us with such manuals on castes, folklore and popular religion as did Crooke and others, whom we still gratefully quote?

4) Crooke 1894, 1897, Risley 1915.

The origin and spread of the caste organization were then viewed in a speculative or evolutionistic perspective which led to bold and sometimes even amusing conjectures⁵⁾. These analyses were ahistoric, and if they conceded any specificity to India, it was by stressing her alleged stagnation and inertia⁶⁾.

Sylvain Lévi's approach was in sharp contrast to these tendencies. It was not the beginnings of Indian civilization he was interested in, but rather its history as a process to be reconstructed on the firm basis of documentary and chronological evidence. It was not the origin, in the deductive sense, but the essence, the genius of India (*le génie indien*) he wanted to grasp in all its manifestations. His inaugural lecture in 1890 (cf. Renou 1936: 10-11) already signified a programmatic breaking away from evolutionism, on the one hand, and from a one-sided concentration of research on the Vedas⁷⁾, on the other. Implicitly, Lévi challenged the view according to which everything India has brought forth since the end of the Vedic period is nothing but decay. He claimed that to understand India is to understand her history. Our final objective must be to connect Indian history with the main streams of universal history. Lévi's most important and, at that time, quite new proposal was that developments

5) Some authors even used their training in the Humanities and resorted to such classical mythologems as the "rape of the Sabines", cf. Risley 1915: 247 f.

6) For a critical review of the British historical writings of that time cf. Philips 1961. On the history of the study of caste cf. Cohn 1968. A synopsis of contemporaneous theories on the origin of castes is given in Risley 1915: 259-277.

7) As a disciple of Abel Bergaigne, Lévi even denied the historical authenticity of the Vedas and did not believe in the existence of a Vedic culture or society, cf. Renou 1936: 2-3, 17-18 and Riccardi 1975: 6.

in India itself cannot be analysed adequately without examining the causes and effects of the enormous expansion of Indian culture in other parts of Asia. For this purpose, we must evaluate all relevant sources stemming from this area of expansion, be they in Tibetan, Chinese or Greek, etc. As we shall see, it was his search for India's history that took Lévi to Nepal.

II

Lévi considers Nepal, and the Kathmandu Valley in particular, to be a model country which, on a small scale, reproduces the expansion of Indian culture and society. He states that "*le Népal c'est l'Inde qui se fait*", that is, Nepal is India in the making. In other words, Nepal's mediaeval and modern history repeats the genesis of India, just as in a "laboratory" (I, 28). Lévi perceives "the order and the plan hidden under the muddled mass of events" (*l'ordre et le plan dissimulés sous la masse confuse des événements*, I, 2) in the process by which the Kathmandu Valley "came to be populated, organized and policed" and by which "cults, languages and institutions slowly changed" (*une vallée perdue s'est peuplée d'habitants, s'est organisée, s'est poliee, comment les cultes, les langues et les institutions s'y sont lentement transformés*, I, 2). He maintains that, just as in other parts of Asia, in Nepal, too, it is Buddhism that first contributed to "civilizing" a multitude of tribal and regional cultures, the final cultural "annexation" (*annexion*, I, 28) of which was then achieved by Hinduism (Brahmanism).

Lévi was among the first (cf. note 14) to analyse consistently the spread of Hinduism and caste organization in terms of social mobility. Hinduization is for him not simply the result of a conversion; it is not only a cultural change, but also a social

change. He points out the ideological functions (as we would now call them) of Hinduism and holds that the integration of tribal groups into caste organization has always been the work of the Brahmins, and, to a lesser extent, of itinerant ascetics. The Brahmins are patient realists and tacticians of great flexibility (I, 30, 32, 361). As agents of cultural export, they make themselves available to legitimize the power of local rulers (who are more often than not adventurers and parvenus) by providing them with forged genealogies which derive their dynasties from the prodigious figures of Hindu mythology⁸⁾. As a reward for their services, the rulers bestow upon the Brahmins certain privileges, assign them revenues and propagate the caste organization among their subjects. As a first step towards a "castification" (my term), the population is divided into various occupational groups, and the criteria for their hierarchical ranking are furnished by the Brahmins. Lévi does not mean by this a mere voluntaristic enterprise of cunning Brahmins. Rather, the Brahmins are -- as I would formulate it -- bearers of a socio-cultural dynamism which is inherent in their caste-specific ideology and "mobilizable" under certain historical conditions.

Lévi stressed the different ideological potentials of Buddhism and Hinduism and was, to my knowledge, the first to apply them systematically to a specific historical context, thus anticipating Max Weber's studies published some 15 years later. Lévi maintained that, due to its ethical radicalism and universalism, early Buddhism could not pervade all spheres of Indian society

8) Max Weber, who elaborates on the same phenomenon, quotes the *Epigraphia Indica* as a source, cf. Weber 1972: 10.

(cf. also below). The reverse is true of Hinduism. Hinduism has never been tolerant or intolerant. Rather, it possesses a (dialectical) capability of embracing contradictions (*embrasser les contradictions* I, 32 f.) which enables it to "subdue", "make malleable", "frame" and "organize" a "barbarian multitude" (*subjuguier, assouplir, encadrer, organiser une multitude barbare*, I, 28). Contrary to the Buddhist monk, the Brahmin's (social) person is intimately linked with his institutions: the two constitute "one body" (*sa personne fait corps avec ses institutions*, I, 30), as Lévi put it.

Pantheon, mythology and indigenous historiography consist, for Lévi, of sets of symbols and taxonomies which "translate" (*traduire*, I, 362, 366) or reflect a given social reality. What is more, they can be instrumentalized to effect changes of this reality. Images, names, etc. may serve to constitute new identities by connecting certain meanings with other meanings through a series of equations. The result is a renaming (*nouveau baptême*, I, 357) and -- cognitively speaking -- a reorganization (*recension, réorganisation*, I, 26, 131) of facts; Lévi even uses the modern-sounding word "transformation" (I, 33, 258, 361) in this context. It is with such methods of adaptative exegesis and myth-construction that the Brahmins were in a position to integrate the "divine plebs" (*plèbe divine*, I, 31, 357), i.e., the autochthonous and tribal deities, into the Hindu pantheon, or to disorganize the Buddhist pantheon by "approaching" its gods to Shivaite ones (*désorganiser, rapprocher*, I, 357).

How, then, does the specific case of Nepal exemplify these conclusions? Lévi stressed that, just as in other parts of Asia, in Nepal, too, it is Buddhism that first contributed to "civilizing" a multitude of tribal societies, the final cultural "annexation" (*annexion*, I, 28, 31) of which was then achieved

by Brahmanism. Brahmanical influence reached its first climax under the reign of Jayasthiti Malla, who organized the inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley into castes. It fully unfurled itself under the Gorkhali, who conquered the country by the end of the 18th century. The Gorkhali are proud adherents of an orthodox Hinduism⁹⁾ -- all the more orthodox as they have to hide their "impure descent" (I, 18 ff., 258-266). Their forefathers were offspring of mixed marriages between Brahmin and Rajput men, who had immigrated from India, and women of an indigenous tribe. Both the tribe and the offspring of such intermarriages were called Khas, and it was now incumbent upon the Brahmins to assure them a suitable status. This they did by declaring the Khas to be descendants of the Indian Khaśa, a group already mentioned in the Code of Manu as belonging to the *kṣatriya varṇa*. Through the association Khas-Khaśa-Kṣatriya the Brahmins succeeded in creating a category to which their own children from Khas wives could be admitted. For Lévi, this is just one example of how the Brahmins resuscitated names and persons of classical Indian literature in order to define the status of a new group within the hierarchy (*définir leur situation sociale au regard de la hiérarchie*, I, 260) and to provide it with a new, prestigious identity. In the same way, the legend of the Thakuri caste's hailing from the Rajputs of Chitorgarh was invented to conceal their real descent from Magar mothers (I, 258-267).

9) Lévi derives this orthodoxy from the psychology of proselytes. By contrast, Hodgson (1880: 236 ff.), whose ethnographic material is widely used by Lévi, imputes this orthodoxy to the mentality of refugees driven out of India by the Muslim invaders. Cf. also my study of the Muluki Ain of 1854 (Höfer 1979: chapters XIII and XIV).

As to the Magar, Lévi found that only some of them were promoted to *kṣatriya*, namely those who had given up eating cow's meat. Once the Brahmins felt that they had sufficiently strengthened their own position, they denied the recognition as *kṣatriya* to the rest of the Magar tribe. Nevertheless, even these Magar were still striving for a higher status. This manifested itself in an increasing alienation between their local groups which embarked, each with a different intensity, on Hinduizing their customs; some of these groups had already abandoned their own dialect in favour of Nepali (I, 276-278).

The Magar story is, as Lévi stresses, not without parallels in India. There, too, Hinduism and its social organization have been expanding, so to speak, concentrically and in phases. Each phase of adding one more group or territory to the Land of the Aryans (*Āryavarta*) was in fact followed by a period of consolidation during which the newly-integrated entity was strongly demarcated from the outside world inhabited by the Mleccha (I, 30 f.).

Lévi devoted particular attention to the symbiosis of Buddhism and Hinduism in the Kathmandu Valley (I, 224 ff., 316-391). He observed that the advance of Hinduism to the detriment of Buddhism was an extremely subtle process of step-by-step assimilation, rather than the consequence of violent intervention. Hinduism "embraces" Buddhism instead of supplanting it. It is precisely by its integration into Hinduism that the original identity and social relevance of Buddhism are gradually changed. Buddhism is even prepared to borrow from Hinduism in order to maintain itself, nominally at least. In Lévi's apt formulation: "Buddhism lets itself glide into Hinduism for fear of being expelled from it" (*se laisse glisser dans l'hindouisme par crainte d'être rejeté*, I, 320). Both material interest and imitation account for the fact that the Buddhist monks start claiming the

Brahmins' privileges and emerge as a caste of priests (I, 27, 32, 226)¹⁰. Although still Buddhists from the mere confessional viewpoint, they adopt a social organization which contradicts the teaching of the Buddha.

Lévi observed that Nepalese manuscripts of both Hindu and Buddhist provenance recommend the same holy places to the devotees, but that they associate these places with different legends of origin and different deities (I, 326 ff.). This parallelism is also characteristic of contemporary practice in Nepal: what is, say, Mahākāla for the Hindus is Padmapāṇi for the Buddhists (I, 319). In the *Nepālamāhātmya*, a pilgrims' guide of the 13th century, the Buddha is, moreover, apostrophized as an incarnation (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu, and Pārvatī, Śiva's wife, declares: "to worship the Buddha is to worship Śiva" (I, 318, 375). In Lévi's view, these equations reflected the contemporaneous state of affairs and show that the Brahmins still respected Buddhism as a powerful tradition with a great number of adherents.

The deities Paśupatināth and Macchendranāth provide another example (I, 347-366, cf. also I, 11 f.). Originally, both were autochthonous or "primitive" gods responsible for fertility and agriculture. The proto-Paśupatināth was the Lord of the Cattle and the proto-Macchendranāth brought the monsoon rains. Later, when the Kathmandu Valley was drawn into the orbit of Indian culture, Buddhism and Hinduism adopted both gods and made them into kinds of national tutelary deities. The "pagan"

10) In a recent paper, S. Lienhard (1978) attempts to classify the effects of the interference of the two religious systems in the Kathmandu Valley. For a convincing analysis of the social background of present-day Buddhist priesthood among the Newar cf. Greenwold 1974.

Lord of the Cattle came to be associated with Śiva, and his sanctuary, the Pasupatināth temple, emerged as the "headquarters" (I, 357) of Brahmin missionary work in Nepal. Even here, the Brahmins did not fail to try integrating Buddhism into the cult of Paśupati, and as a result the *lingam* of Śiva is still covered once a year with a mask (periwig) of the Buddha.

As to Macchendranāth, the same process of "transidentification" (my term) is more complex. Lévi compared two legends of the deity Gorakhnāth and discovered that in the first legend, Macchendra is the chief protagonist and is identified with the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara of the Buddhists, who is venerated by Gorakhnāth. In the second legend, it is the other way round: Gorakhnāth occupies the central position whereas Macchendranāth appears as a subordinate or marginal figure. For Lévi, the two variants marked two different stages of the onward march of Hinduism represented, in this case, by the Kānpḥāṭā ascetics, devotees of Gorakhnāth. The first stage implied some concessions in that the propagandists of Hinduism tried to "come to terms" (*pactiser*) with Buddhism (I, 317 f., 327 f.). Macchendranāth, who was previously "Buddhised" by the Newar, could keep his identity with Avalokiteśvara, but obtains, at the same time, a name of Hindu provenience, namely Macchendranāth. This overture was followed by a second stage in which an attempt was made to "appropriate" (*s'approprier*) Newar Buddhism. Lévi found the relationship between Gorakhnāth and Macchendranāth in the two legends all the more significant as both divinities are still closely connected with the state-cult and the present ruling dynasty ¹¹⁾.

11) Gorakhnāth's sanctuary is at Gorkhā from where the present dynasty originates, and the Macchendra festival is traditionally attended by the King.

III

Some similarities in Lévi's and Max Weber's argumentations are striking. For both, the Brahmins are the most important agents of "castification", and both maintain that it is their specific ideology which made them a caste of hereditary priests and provided them with the capability of successfully allying themselves with kings and feudal lords (cf. Lévi I, 29 ff., Weber 1972: 123 ff., 130 ff., 147 ff.). This ideology could produce a whole range of status criteria for the hierarchically ranked castes. Lévi emphasizes the flexibility of "Hindu thought" (*pensée hindoue*, I, 3), Weber its "ethical pluralism" which makes that even a caste of criminals may have its own dharma (Weber 1972: 24 ff., 142 ff.). For Lévi, it is the "magical formalism", for Weber, the capability of "rationalization" that favoured the emergence of the Brahmins as a caste and enabled them to integrate alien groups and traditions. Weber speaks of a successful "accomodation" to the religious interests of laity, Lévi places more emphasis on "transformation", i. e., the strategy of what we may call transidentification. Though in different formulations, Lévi and Weber also converge in imputing the defeat of Buddhism in India to its inherent inadequacy to produce sufficient inner-worldly relevance ¹²⁾, leaving thus the old-established caste organization intact, to mention just one of the consequences (cf. Weber 1972: 231 ff., 245 ff., 251 ff.; Lévi I, 4 f., 30, 33, i. a.).

12) Weber refers to Oldenberg and Rhys Davids as his main sources on Buddhist ethics. For a critical review of Weber's theses cf., i. a., Bechert 1966: 21 f., 30 ff., 115 ff.

Lévi was not a sociologist, and his theoretical concepts were never formulated explicitly. What clearly emerges from many pages of *Le Népal* is Lévi's idea of man who, as a socially acting person, is at the same time a product and producer of ideologies. Lévi also appears to be close to Weber in positing that man is not exclusively guided by "naked interests", but also by the internal dialectics of a system of ideas, their *innere Konsequenz*, as Weber (1972: 251) puts it. Just as Weber, Lévi is predominantly interested in the process through which, under specific historical conditions, a doctrine comes to be the way of life of a whole group of men.

This is not the place to criticize the deficiencies of Lévi's and Weber's analyses. Suffice it to mention that Lévi somewhat over-emphasized the Brahmins' rôle and wholly neglected the lower layers of the caste hierarchy, i. e., the pariahs and those whom Weber calls "guest peoples" (*Gastvölker*, cf. Weber 1972: 11 ff.). Lévi restricted himself to that to which he had -- in contrast to Weber -- direct access: to the written sources, and admirably demonstrated that the steady advance of Hinduism has always been a "long march through words" 13).

Lévi also anticipated many of the themes that have only occupied a prominent position in anthropological discussion on India since the 1950s. I refer to Srinivas' (1952) "Sans-

13) I am paraphrasing the slogan of the German leftist students' movement, the "long march through the institutions of capitalist society".

critization"¹⁴⁾, Marriott's (1955) "universalization" and "parochialization", Sinha's (1962) "Rajputization"¹⁵⁾ or Orans' (1965) "rank concession syndrome", to mention just a few. The fact that none of these authors quotes Lévi is, in my opinion, typical of the synchronistic and mono-disciplinary orientation of most of us anthropologists. It is only recently that we have started to get rid of Durkheimian mysticism which lies at the root of this orientation and which has prevented us for so long from closer cooperation with historians and philologists. And as the example of *Le Népal* shows, we still have a lot to learn from each other.

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- 14) To my knowledge, Lyall (1882: 102-112) was the first to formulate a sort of proto-theory of Sanscritization. Lyall criticizes Max Mueller's contention that Brahmanism has never been a proselytizing religion and is dying. He points out the very particular way Brahmanism is propagating itself among the lower castes and tribal groups, namely by declaring local gods to be incarnations of Hindu deities and by offering "what are held to be the respectable high-bred manners and prejudices (...) and gods of a more refined and aristocratic stamp, as well as more powerful" (Lyall 1882: 112). Lyall sees two main agents of propaganda: (a) the Brahmins who avail themselves as domestic priests, and (b) the ascetics acting by virtue of their "emotional power" (charisma). The result is, in his own formulation, a "social change", an "upward transition" (mobility) in that people "alter their modes of life" and "adopt the religion of castes immediately above them in the social scale" (Lyall 1882: 102-103). Neither Lévi nor Srinivas quote Lyall.
- 15) It is curious to see that Sinha's "Rajputization" concept is based on the case of the Bhumij which Risley, more than half a century earlier and with almost all the essential details, also recorded, but rather passingly and without recognizing its model character (Risley 1915: 156 f.). The incident amply illustrates the theoretical orientation of Risley's time.

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