outdoor patient counters, transport ambulance service when 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 encouraged by every means when they wish to help eradicate problems of ageing in Nepal.

10. Social security planning must immediately be done.

 References


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 descendence, kinship, marriage, common territoriality etc. Family (Nep. Parivara), clan or closest kinship group (Nep. Khadan, Khelak, 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 religiosity 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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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 intertwined 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, ethnic, 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 pluricletic religious life. Each family has its exclusive cult shared by all the members known as Kula Davata (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 tutelar 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 tutelar 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), ethnic 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 Ishita Devata ("friend god") (4).

The exclusive cults of smaller units (family, caste, ethn, 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-settlement (Basti) provide the meeting ground for the peoples of diverse ethnonomological 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 religicisity 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-Burmesen ethno-linguistic origins and, in some details, akin to those of central
and northern Asian people) have been blended with the classi-
cal 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 altera-
tion 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 ethnos 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 ethnos 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 cosmobiological symbolism referring
costantly to the natural elements characteristic of the Himala-
yan area. These “indigenous” groups share many symbols and
refer to the same elements found in the local physical environ-
ment. 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 under-
gone 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 “indigenous” groups and traditions. Such extra-
indigenous traditions do not possess equally vigorous cosmobi-
ological 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-imma-
nent 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-indigenous 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 mid-
lands 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
population (6). These data are seriously questioned by many as
not only too inaccurate but also tendentious. Many ethnoses,
Buddhists and the Jainas share the popular Hindu cults (e.g.
Siva, Vishnu, Sakti, Ganesh, Bhairab 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 Gorkhari 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 Gorkhari unification was a
polito-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 Gorkhari conquerors were not people of a single
ethnic/caste group but the Gorkhari elites, i.e. Brahmins and
Kshatriyas (Nep. Bahun-Chhetri), were a distinctly Indo-Aryan
ethnos and orthodox Hindus. So were most of the conque-
red 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 "Hindulization" or "Sanskriti-
zation". The Hindu factor did not dictate internal politico-mili-
tary process but it played the central role in mobilizing all
Nepalise indigenous groups against the waves of Muslim and
Western conquests which have done so much to alter the spiri-
tual 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 deve-
lop 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 sys-
tem of ethno-social organisms. Present-day Nepalese nation-
state is a formalized political version of that system. The pro-
cess 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 heterogenous 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 organiza-
tions, some neo-Buddhist groups based in the urban areas and the
far left political circles.

According to the constitutional provision, Hindu festivi-
ties 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 cult, 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 Buddhists 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 poli-
tical analysts defend the Hindu state. For the rest, who can say
what would have been the inter-ethnic and inter-communal sit-
uation 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 . ff, for the "Natural" grouping.

(2) 'Tradition' in the Nepalese context is derived from the Sans-
krit original term Parampara which means "uninterrupted
series", "due arrangement in succession".

(3) The cult of Garkade Baba among the Magars (a group in mid-
western and western hills of Nepal, belonging to the
Tibeto-Burmeselinguistic family), the cult of Buddha Suhha among the Kiratis (a larger ethnic group inhabiting eastern hills, belonging to the Tibeto-Burmeselinguistic 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 Ishita 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., that 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 II I, a detailed discussion on the cosmo-biological and ethico-personalistic symbolisms has been attempted.


(7) Most of the traditional Nepalese refer to Buddhism as Baudha marga (“Buddha’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 equilibriums. 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 Licchvi (200 A.D. – 800 A.D.) were stretched well beyond the valley of Kathmandu and Bagmati river basin.

(9) The term Gorkhari (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 to the campaign, were known as Gorkhali. They were Bahan-Chhetri (orthodox Hindus and Indo-Aryan ethnics); Gurung, Maghar, Chaule, Gharti etc. (Tibeto-Burmeselinguistic groups loosely connected with the Hindu archipelago); and, Sarki (cobbler), Damai (tailors) and Kami (blacksmiths) – all of these occupational castes are Indo-Aryan ethnics practicing Hinduism.


(11) See, R. Burghart, The Formation of the Conceptual 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 Mahendra (father of the present monarch) in 1962. That move served two political purposes: first, a tect 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 humili­
ated 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

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