

Buddhism in Nepal State of the Art, 1995

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In Nepal, besides the birth place of Lord Buddha, several sites are considered sacred to the Buddhists, especially in the valley of Kathmandu and in the high valleys of the Himalayan range.

Culturally and historically, Nepal refers to the valley of Kathmandu, located South of the Himalaya. The valley, round in shape is drained by small streams gathering in the sacred river Bagmati.

Tradition connects the early history of the valley with the Indian Emperor Ashoka, who spread Buddhism and one can assume that Buddhists established themselves around the time of the Christian era. Stupas still existing mark the oldest settlements and the city of Patan can be considered one of the oldest Buddhist cities (Snellgrove 1957).

Since 1959, and a consequence of the political events which happened in China, one has witnessed a tremendous development of Mahayana (Tibetan) Buddhism in the valley of Kathmandu.

We would like to analyse briefly this development.

The valley of Kathmandu has been for centuries the major link between India and Central Asia, a trade route along which not only goods but also ideas transited (Lewis 1989).

In 1959 only one important Mahayana monastery was located on the top of Swayambhu hill. The history of this monastery is closely linked with Tibet and Buthan. Two smaller monasteries were located in Bodnath/ Baudha, the temple known as “temple of the Chine Lama”, and a monastery built by a Mongolian lama of the gelug-pa order, Sog-po Rinpoche. A few ermitages were located in Pharping to the South of the valley.

The political turmoil which happened in Tibet in March 195, the flight of the Daai Lama, head of the Tibetan religious community and his arrival in India gave a new impulse to the buddhist activities in Nepal. Several of the most learned and influential lamas took refuge in Nepal, India and Bhutan. Thousands of laymen, most of them living in the southern part of Tibet (central provinces of U and Tsang) settled temporarily in the valley, south of the Himalayan divide. These refugees quickly adapted themselves to new living conditions, preserving their traditional way of life and religious practices.

The period of 1960 to 1970 was a period of adaptation to new environment, but from 1970 onwards the Tibetan community expanded its activities in crafts such as weaving, carpet making...In the field of education the priority was given to the Tibetan language, a key element of the preservation of the culture.

Six major concentrations of economic and cultural importance have developed in the past thirty years in the valley of Kathmandu: around the shrines of Bodnath and Swayambhu, close to the city of Patan, in Kathmandu, Pharping and Namobuddha.

Bodnath was a small settlement built around the historical stupa, mostly inhabited by Tamangs and a few Newars skilled in metal craft. Visited mostly during the winter season by pilgrims from Tibet and the Himalayan kingdom, Bodnath is one of the four major pilgrimages in the Buddhist world.

Bodnath has become a city of its own with an estimate population of over 10000 inhabitants, most of them Tibetans (former refugees) and people from the northern districts of Nepal who have permanently settled in the valley (districts of Khumbu, Manang, Mustang, Dolpo).

The relics of Dujom Rimpoche a learned lama and teacher of the Nyingma-pa sect, enshrined in a temple, adds to the sanctity of the site.

Today one counts more than twenty monasteries, temples and residences of lamas. Bodnath has become an important centre of religious activities, attracting religious preachers from neighbouring countries.

The hill and shrine of Swayambhu, "Self-existent Lord", located to the west of the river Vishnumati, was, in the Sixties, separated from the city of Kathmandu by rice fields; it is now

incorporated in the urban grid and surrounded by religious building or houses of a Tibetan community. The monasteries built in the Seventies are expanded and new constructions added. For example the monastery of Pelgyeling of the gelup-pa sect, on the eastern side of the hill has an additional school and an important guesthouse cum mediation centre.

Part of the economical live of the Tibetan community is concentrated in the city of Kathmandu in the sectors of Thamel, Chetrapati and Jyata. The Tibetan traders and religious leaders are closely associated with Newar Buddhists who, in the past, have been actively trading with Tibet and Central Asia and have been the patrons of newar Buddhist traditions (Jest 1991).

In Jawalakhel, a suburb of the city of Patan, a refugee camp was established in 1961, it developed into a craft centre and it is at present an important commercial settlement with school and dispensary.

Pharping is located to the south of the valley and has been the place of meditation of the famous scholar Nagarjuna. Several caves shelter ermits and five meditation centres have been built recently.

Namo Buddha, well known from an episode of a former life of Buddha, has become a centre for meditation (this site marks the place where Sakyamuni, in a previous life as a young prince gave his body as food to a starving tigress, so that her cubs should not die).

The visible expression of the Buddhist faith is the number of monasteries and temples which have been built in the past twenty years with the financial preparation of the Tibetan community and some Western donors.

The religious activities of the Tibetan community in Nepal are also an important factor of the revival of Buddhism in Tibet.

After the political change in Tibet in May 1980, Tibetan lamas were authorized to visit their homeland and monasteries.

In 1985 it was even possible to encourage and give financial support to the local inhabitants who started rebuilding or rehabilitating the temples and shrines destroyed during the Cultural Revolution or neglected during the previous twenty years.

Kyentse Dilgo Rinpoche, a Master of the ningma-pa sect, went back to his original monastery near Dergue, in the eastern province of Khams and blessed the newly reconstructed shrines.

Trarug Rinpoche, of the Sakya Ngor sect, not only supported the reconstruction of the monastery of which he was the head lama, located in Khams, from Kathmandu, a group of skilled painters to decorate the renovated buildings.

The monks of the monastery of Pelgyeling, of the gelupg-pa sect in Swayambhu financed the renovation of their “mother monastery” in Tibet (a meditation cave of the famous Saint Milarepa) near Nyalam on the Kathmandu-Lhasa road.

These are only a few examples of the Buddhist activities in Central Asia.

Several other activities contribute to the preservation and promotion of the cultural heritage of Tibet. Sacred Buddhist texts are published with the most up-to-date technical means in Tibetan. Translations of scriptures and commentaries are printed in western languages. The teaching of religious painting, religious dances, *cham*, and traditional medicine are among activities which have been developing rapidly in the course of the past decade. Tibetan painters, living in Nepal are even active in Taiwan, decorating Buddhists shrines.

The exposure of the western world, the interest of the West in the Tibetan form of Buddhism, and as a consequence a financial support which is far from negligible, has generated a unique dynamism in the Tibetan religious and lay community.

These developments of Buddhism in the valley of Kathmandu have also an effect on the populations of the high valleys Nepal.

The populations of Tibetan language and culture, living on the southern slopes of the main Himalayan range are known as *Bhotya*, a Nepalese term meaning inhabitant of Tibet/Bhot, though they are citizens of Nepal. The anthropological features of the populations, their behavior and techniques are much the same as those of the Tibetans. Moreover their economy is largely dependent upon the trade with the Chinese autonomous region of Tibet. Consequently, these Nepalese citizens, members of a Hindu kingdom, are culturally linked to their northern neighbours and are Buddhists. Religious life, exclusively Buddhist, developed along traditions of Mahayana Buddhism, receiving teaching of the Sakya-pa, Drug-pa and

Nyingma-pa sects. Variations between sects or schools have been conditioned by politics or struggle for power more than differences in doctrine (Jest 1981).

The Kathmandu valley, called Nepal by the northern populations is the site of the most important pilgrimage for the Buddhist Nepalese. The valley is one of the four most important pilgrimages for all Buddhists, to be visited during the year of the Bird in the Tibetan cycle. It has become in the recent years a centre of excellence for religious studies and performing arts.

The temples and monasteries are representations of the spiritual body of Buddha (just as images represented his physical body and books his speech). The Himalayan populations have elaborated an architecture that is deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy and at the same time extraordinarily integrated in the natural environment.

More than twenty monasteries and temples, four monastic colleges giving higher religious education, retreat centres meditation centres have been built in the past years. It certainly shows the vitality of a religion and a way of life.

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