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Nepal, Past and Present

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Some Remarks on Caste in the Theravāda Saṅgha of Nepal

Jens-Uwe Hartmann

At the end of the twenties and the beginning of the thirties of this century, some Buddhist Newars met in India with followers of a rather different form of Buddhism, which at that time was completely unknown in Nepal. This was the tradition of Theravāda Buddhism, as it calls itself, or of Southern Buddhism as it is often named because it prevails in the Southern countries of the Buddhist world, *e.g.* in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma. Today it is impossible to reconstruct the first encounter of those Newars with Theravāda Buddhists and the reasons for their resulting involvement. Coming from the background of a rather rigid form of Buddhism they were, as happens so often, probably searching for an imagined true religion behind the forms handed down by tradition, thereby experimenting with several possible alternatives.

In this context, it should be mentioned that three out of the six or seven men who were to become the figures most important for establishing the Theravāda movement in Nepal had been followers of Tibetan Buddhism prior to their involvement with Theravāda, and some of them had even received the lower ordination within the Tibetan tradition. One of them is still alive; he is now the Saṅghamahānayaḥ in Nepal, *i.e.* the head monk of the congregation of Theravāda monks in the country¹. It is quite interesting to note that Tibetan Buddhism evidently could not serve as a stimulus for religious revival, although it offered a living monastic tradition and a living doctrinal tradition which, moreover, shows several close affinities to Newar Buddhism. Perhaps it was felt to be too close to their own tradition to offer any real alternative for those religious seekers.

In any case, contact with the Tibetan tradition remained a passing phenomenon. Quite contrary to that, the meeting with Theravāda monks in India had a lasting effect, and it became the starting point of a Buddhist reform movement in Nepal². In India, it was above all a Burmese monk residing at Kuśinagar, the pilgrimage site of the historical Buddha's demise, who proved to be most influential among the new followers from Nepal. This monk belonged to a reform movement characterized by modernistic, demytholo-

gized modes of thought, and it was this form of Theravāda which was then imported to Nepal³.

Theravāda does not hesitate to consider itself the only keeper of the original and pure teaching of the Buddha, devoid of all later additions, interpolations, falsifications and distortions. This conception of itself is also shared by the modernistic trends among the Theravāda followers. The claim to originality and exclusiveness, which in this form is lacking in the Tibetan tradition, surely attracted the Newars in their attempt to rediscover the original teaching of the Buddha.

Moreover, the modernistic movement offered a workable set of claims and arguments which could easily be made use of to show how distorted and backward a tradition the existing Newar Buddhism really was. To name just three: on the religious level, it could be claimed that the Buddha had taught a way to salvation starting with personal ethics; traditional Newar Buddhism, however, was satisfied with rituals only (it is of no concern here, whether such a claim is true or not). On the social level, it could be claimed that the Buddha had never admitted caste as a decisive factor⁴; Newar Buddhism, on the contrary, was deeply rooted in the caste system. And on a secular level, it was maintained that the Buddha's teaching was in full agreement with modern science, whereas Newar Buddhism was full of superstitions⁵.

Thus, those first Newars came back to Nepal well-armed with knowledge and arguments, and they quickly succeeded in attracting others. Another important factor for the success of the new movement was doubtlessly the connexion with awakening Newar nationalism, especially with the Newari language movement; this has aptly been described by David Gellner in his article on Newar identity⁶. At times suppressed by the Rana regime, the new movement nevertheless survived all vicissitudes and started to prosper even before the final overthrow of the Ranas. From its very beginning it was monks, correctly ordained according to Buddhist tradition, who introduced and propagated the new movement, and until today the slowly but steadily growing order of monks has proved essential for its prospering.

«Theravāda Buddhists have always regarded monks as both the preservers of their tradition and its principal examples. Monks are the spiritual élite. Questions surrounding membership of this élite are therefore of the greatest importance». This was written in connexion with the order of monks in Sri Lanka⁷, but it equally holds true for all the other Theravāda traditions and, it should be added, for all the other Buddhist traditions as well which still preserve an order of celibate monks.

In order to investigate one of the pillars of the Theravāda movement in Nepal, it is therefore instructive to see who is admitted to the order of monks, in other words, to look at the background of its clerics and, above all, at the castes to which they belong. Ideally, such an investigation should include the lay followers as well, in order to get an overall picture of the social background of the whole movement and, of no less importance, to compare the proportion of castes among clerics and lay followers. There is, however, a rather pronounced contrast in the religious practice of the ordained members

of the Buddhist Sangha, on the one hand, and the lay followers on the other, and this contrast often impedes the classification of a person as a lay follower.

While the monks and nuns follow Theravāda Buddhism and nothing but Theravāda, and while they are more or less outspoken in their disregard of traditional Newar Buddhism, we found it impossible to set up similarly unequivocal criteria for a definition of a lay follower. Most of those who profess themselves to be Theravāda lay Buddhists, in reality do the one without leaving the other, *i.e.* they follow both traditions in varying degrees.

This can be partly explained in terms of social bondage: the cleric, at least in theory, has completely abandoned the wordly life and thereby severed all social bonds; he is free to follow whatever religious practice he deems appropriate and to uncompromisingly reject all others. His lay supporter, on the other hand, is bound by all kinds of social ties to his fellow Newars, of whom the majority are followers of traditional Buddhism; therefore, these ties often include social as well as religious obligations.

Beyond that, it is a general characteristic of Theravāda Buddhism that Theravāda itself does not offer any facilities for the satisfaction of thisworldly concerns of its lay followers⁸. The monks should engage only in practices which eventually lead to their own spiritual salvation. In all the Theravāda countries, lay followers therefore have to turn somewhere else to provide for thisworldly needs, and in Nepal they find the necessary requirements in traditional Buddhism.

To give an example: in a small Theravāda temple at the northern outskirts of Kathmandu we had occasion to witness a *dāna* ceremony, a donation to members of the Theravāda order. A group of lay supporters, nearly all of them middle-aged and elderly women, had gathered to participate. Very close by, a small Vasundharā shrine is situated, which is normally locked, but on that occasion was opened. Before or after the Theravāda ceremony, most of the women unfailingly went to this Vasundharā shrine for worship. Theravāda clerics, however, would not even dream of going there; they would, rather, do everything to avoid the stigma of «following the superstitious ways of traditional Buddhism». For many of the lay followers, there is no question of stigma involved, and most of them would probably see no need to decide between the two religious systems. It is therefore difficult to find a distinguishing characteristic which could help to mark off Theravāda laity from the other Buddhist Newars⁹.

Without him explicitly saying so, similar difficulties were obviously faced by Ramesh Chandra Tewari, the only one, until now, who has studied the caste background of Theravāda Buddhists in Nepal¹⁰. He introduced those Newar castes from which most of the Theravāda followers come and gave some figures for the clerics, but none for the lay people. According to him, at the time of his study in 1982 there were about 60 bhikkhus, *i.e.* fully ordained monks, living in Nepal¹¹. 38.4 % of them belonged to the Śākya caste, 22.7 % to the Maharjan (Jyāpu) group, 14 % to the Udās (Tulādhār *et al.*) group, 7 % to the Vajrācāryas and equally 7 % to the Śreṣṭhas. Besides that, he mentioned monks from the Mānandhars, Naus and Kumās. Somehow,

his figures appear to be slightly unbalanced : he gave the total strength of the order of monks as «about 60» and those of nuns as «about 65» and then proceeded to calculate precise percentages (in the case of the Maharjan group, for instance, this would result in thirteen and a half monks). He confined himself to simply presenting the figures mentioned above, without drawing further conclusions from them.

The most striking feature expressed by those figures, in view of Newar society, is doubtlessly the fact that different castes appear at all. The disregard for caste as a barrier to entrance into the Buddhist order is in perfect agreement with the Buddha's teaching, but in this respect traditional Newar Buddhism, with its connexion of caste and religious function, has moved far away from this teaching. Therefore, it is truly remarkable that an organization like the order of monks could be firmly implanted into Newar society without either loosing its high status or being forced to reserve membership for high-caste Newars only.

It should be noted that the first Theravāda monks in Nepal belonged to three castes only, namely to the Śākyaas, to the Tulādhars (two of them) and to the Śreṣṭhas (one). It was among the Śākyaas, one of the two Buddhist groups *per se*, where the reform movement gained its first foothold. Both the two Tulādhars were former Lhasa traders, again demonstrating the temporary connexion with Tibet which was mentioned above. The movement did not, however, originate among the Vajrācāryas, the priests of traditional Buddhism, and it took some time until the first Vajrācārya joined the Theravāda order. The number of the first monks is very small and therefore one should better refrain from using terms like caste mobility, but it seems worth noting that those first monks did not belong to the highest Buddhist group within the Newar community.

During our visits in Nepal between 1986 and 1989 we could draw up a list of altogether 201 members of the Theravāda order¹². Even this list is probably not complete, the main difficulty lying in the fact that a considerable number of younger clerics have been sent abroad for studies at Buddhist schools and universities in the different Theravāda countries and are therefore not easy to trace. It is complete enough, however, to reveal certain tendencies within the Theravāda movement in Nepal.

The 201 members of the order are split up rather evenly into three groups : there are 59 Bhikkhus, *i.e.* fully ordained monks, 72 Sāmaṇeras, *i.e.* novices who have been granted the lower ordination only, and 70 Anāgārikās, *i.e.* a kind of Buddhist nun. If we compare the caste proportions among the Bhikkhus with the figures given by Tewari, we find them largely in agreement (cf. the table). According to our list, 39 % of the monks are of Śākya origin as against 38.4 % in Tewari's survey. Around 14 % come from a Maharjan background, but according to Tewari the figure is 22.7 %. On the Tulādhar *et al.* both lists agree, giving 14 %, and they similarly agree on the Vajrācāryas and on the Śreṣṭhas with a share of about 7-8 % each. Nearly half of the monks belong to the Vajrācārya and Śākya group, while the second half of the Sangha is made up of members from a number of different castes,

among them the Tulādhār, etc. and the Maharjan as the largest groups, but still significantly smaller than the Śākya/Vajrācārya proportion. Thus, the caste distribution within the order of Theravāda monks seems to some extent to reflect a degree of active participation similar to the one represented by the caste hierarchy in Buddhist Newar society.

Distribution of castes among the Theravāda clerics

	Tewari 1983		Our list ¹³		
	Bhikkhu (monk) ca. 60	Anāgārikā (nun) ca. 65	Bhikkhu (monk) 59	Sāmaṇera (novice) 72	Anāgārikā (nun) 70
Vajrācārya	7%	7.1%	8.4%	1.4%	11.5%
Śākya	38.4%	42.6%	39.0%	27.8%	35.7%
Tulādhār <i>et al.</i>	14%	14.2%	13.6%		11.5%
Śreṣṭha	7%	7.1%	8.4%	9.7%	11.5%
Mānandhar	?	10.6%	3.4%	5.5%	7.1%
Maharjan	22.7%	12.6%	13.6%	31.9%	15.7%
Nāpit	?	?		1.4%	1.4%
Khaḍgī	?	?		2.8%	
other Newar castes	?	?	6.8%	8.3%	2.8%
Brāhmaṇa	?	?	3.4%		1.4%
Sherpa	?	?		4.2%	
Tamang	?	?	3.4%	7.0%	1.4%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

The only surprising difference between our figures for the castes of the monks and Tewari's survey lies in the percentage of the Maharjan group, for which Tewari gives nearly 23 % against our 14 %. There might simply be a mistake at the bottom of it; if not, it has to be suspected that Tewari includes not only Bhikkhus in his list, but also Sāmaṇeras, whom he does not otherwise mention.

If one compares our figures for the monks with those for the novices, some striking differences are found. First of all, out of the 72 Sāmaṇeras, only 28 % come from the Śākya caste against 39 % of the Bhikkhus, and there is only one Vajrācārya among the novices. In other words, the proportion of Śākyas and Vajrācāryas comes to a little more than half of that among the monks. The Maharjan, on the contrary, have considerably gained ground : nearly one third of the novices against 14 % of the monks comes from a Maharjan background. At present, no members of the Udās group are found among the novices, while they amount to 14 % of the monks. Śreṣṭhas still hold a share of about 10 %, which is nearly equal to that among the monks. We find a considerable increase in the number of non-Newars : three novices are of Sherpa and five of Tamang origin, altogether 11 %, whereas only two Bhikkhus are born Tamangs. Finally it should be added that three novices come from low Newar castes such as Nāpit (barber) and Khaḍgī (butcher).

How are these differences in the social backgrounds of monks and novices to be explained? First of all, there is a prescription valid in all Buddhist traditions that nobody younger than twenty years can receive the higher ordination to become a fully ordained monk¹⁴. There is no such rule, however, for novices. Therefore, most of the novices are young boys between ten and twenty years of age who have received their novice ordination more or less recently. The monks, on the other hand, have, for the greater part, been ordained for many years, and there are quite a few who have received their higher ordination forty or fifty years ago. Thus, the social difference between the monks and the novices can also be expressed as a temporary difference, and as such it becomes indicative of a development.

Evidently, the wish to become a member of the order is shifting in two directions, namely, from the Śākya/Vajrācārya group to the Maharjan and from Newars to non-Newars. Since nobody, at least in theory, can be prevented from entrance into the Buddhist order on account of caste or origin, this shift probably reflects a growing readiness among middle rank Newar castes to participate in religious life, which in traditional Buddhism has been the exclusive domain of the Śākya/Vajrācārya group. Another reason is certainly the question of education. Many of the novices have been and are still sent abroad for study, mostly on the basis of sponsorships from the country or institution to where they go. Formerly this system offered a chance for parents to have their children acquire status and education not available in Nepal, although with a comparatively high risk of failure, since a certain number of novices leave the order before completing their studies. Due to the improved education facilities in Nepal, nowadays it is often families with difficult economic situations who gladly hand over a child to the religious order. Moreover, for political reasons, two of the three countries where Nepalese novices usually go for studies, namely Burma and Sri Lanka, have lost much of their former attraction. Several attempts by the order to establish its own training centre in Nepal for the novices, with a regular school curriculum and Buddhist education side by side, have failed so far, which has not helped to encourage better-off parents.

As mentioned above, the differences between the caste distribution among the monks and the novices also point to the new tendency of the Buddhist revival movement to cross the border of the Newar society, to which it has been confined until recently, and to start spreading among non-Newar peoples. This tendency is reflected by the language discussion among the Theravāda followers. One fraction is in favour of the use of Nepali in order to become understood by the majority of people in Nepal. Others advocate the exclusive use of Newari as a medium language, thus wishing to preserve the Theravāda movement as a purely Newar phenomenon. It seems, however, that the idea of restriction is not really compatible with the goals and attitudes of Buddhist modernism as represented by the Theravāda movement, and one of the indications of the propagation among non-Newars is the ordination of a few Sherpa and Tamang novices.

There is still another, though perhaps not very decisive, factor for the caste differences between the monks and novices. The Akhil Nepāl Bhikkhu

Mahāsaṅgh, *i.e.* the congregation of all the Theravāda monks of Nepal, has set up a special rule stating that everybody aspiring for the higher ordination must have the permission of a committee of five senior monks¹⁵. Some of the older novices have been refused this permission for one reason or another. Although caste should be no hindrance, as said before, in a few instances it is indirectly admitted that there has been a connexion between the refusal of the committee and the low caste status of the applicant. Officially, however, the monks take some pains to offer an explanation for the refusal which does not focus primarily on the caste problem. According to our observations, the higher ordination is the only point where the underlying caste system still becomes visible within the order.

One of the other critical points would be the meals: all the monks and novices, however, will eat together on any occasion, and questions of rank among each other are never decided by descent, but only by the ordination age, *i.e.* by the span of time which has passed since reception of the higher ordination. Quite different, of course, are the relations between monks and lay people, which in many ways are still influenced by questions of caste. To give just one example: it is well known that the monks in Burma and in Thailand daily go for an alms round. Lay supporters will be waiting for them and fill freshly cooked dishes in their begging bowls – dishes which the monks have to eat before noon time. In Nepal, many attempts have been undertaken by single monks to follow this example, but without lasting success; the lay people are simply not willing to offer cooked dishes¹⁶. At the end of most public ceremonies it is usual to make an offering to the participating monks. In imitation of the alms rice will be offered, even filled into the begging bowl, if the monk has brought it along, but this rice will never be cooked, and instead of cooked vegetables some small coins are added.

Finally, a few remarks on the nuns should be added. The designation «nun» is, strictly speaking, not appropriate, because they are not real nuns in the Buddhist sense of the word. The ordination tradition of nuns in Theravāda Buddhism is commonly accepted to have died out more than 1,500 years ago. From that time onwards, there have no longer been any Bhikkhunīs, *i.e.* fully ordained nuns. Since their self-interpretation – they call themselves «nuns» in English language publications – and their life style can best be expressed in English by the word «nun», this term is employed here. The Nepalese Anāgārikās, or «Homeless Ones», as they are called in their own terminology, correspond rather to the Buddhist female ascetics of other Theravāda countries¹⁷. The designation Anāgārikā is an extension of the term for Buddhist lay male ascetics, which was accepted into usage in Ceylon in the 19th century; the use of a female equivalent seems to be restricted to Nepal.

There is no minimum age prescribed to become an Anāgārikā, but the number of young nuns is far less than that of the novices. Therefore, the caste structure of the nuns' community rather closely resembles that of the monks and, as yet, offers no hints at future developments. There is also a high share of Śākya women among the nuns, namely 36 % (monks 39 %), and the Śākya/Vajrācārya group together equally holds a share of 47 % (monks 47 %). 16 % of the nuns are of Maharjan origin (Bhikkhus 14 %),

11 % are Udās (Bhikkhus 14 %), 11 % are Śreṣṭhas compared to 8 % of the monks. Only one nun comes from another ethnic group, namely, from the Tamangs.

These Anāgārikās have attained to a degree of significance that is fully unprecedented in the other Theravāda countries. In number, they excel the monks (70 against 59), and there are a few nuns whose fame and influence are comparable to that of the leading monks. It should be stressed that the formation of the Anāgārikā community is not a recent phenomenon, and therefore its origination cannot be explained by the impact of Western ideas of women's liberation or similar concepts. On the contrary, there have been nuns from the very beginning of the reform movement. One of the reasons for becoming a nun is surely the fact that her status is connected with high prestige and, at the same time, offers an alternative to life in the joint family which is often considered by girls as a frightful threat. This, at least, is the impression one gains from a number of interviews. Another factor is probably to be seen in the exclusion of women from priest-like functions in traditional Newar Buddhism, where only male Śākya and Vajrācāryas can fulfill the role of religious specialists. A circumstance contributing to the influence of the nuns is the fact that most of the active lay followers are women.

Nonetheless, it appears difficult at the moment to satisfactorily account for the high share of female clerics within Nepalese Theravāda Buddhism and for their influence among men and women alike, because one or the other of the adduced factors is also present in other Theravāda countries, but without producing an even remotely similar result. This remarkable situation should, therefore, offer a rewarding subject for further research, and this not only because women studies is in vogue these days.

Notes

1. Cf. R.B. Vandya, *Sanghanayaka Ven. Pragnananda Mahasthabir (A Concise Biography)*, Kathmandu, 1978; R.B. Bandya, *Samgha Mahānāyaka Bhadanta Prajñānanda Mahāsthavira yā jīvanī*, Patan, 1986.

2. For details see Heinz Bechert, Jens-Uwe Hartmann, «Observations on the Reform of Buddhism in Nepal», *Journal of the Nepal Research Centre* 8 (1988), p. 1-30.

3. For a description of the so-called Buddhist Modernism, cf. H. Bechert, «Buddhistic Modernism: Its Emergence, Impact and New Trends», *Business and Economic Review (Special Issue on International Buddhist Forum)* 14 (1990), p. 93-104.

4. For a recent contribution on the Buddha's attitude towards the caste system see Y. Krishan, «Buddhism and the Caste System», *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9.1 (1986), p. 71-83; some of his conclusions, however, are rather questionable. Cf. also Richard Fick, *Die soziale Gliederung im nordöstlichen Indien zu Buddha's Zeit*, Kiel, 1897.

5. For the term used in this context, cf. David N. Gellner, «Monkhood and Priesthood in Newar Buddhism», *Puruṣārtha* 12 (1989), note 34.

6. «Language, Caste, Religion and Territory. Newar identity ancient and modern», *European Journal of Sociology* 27 (1986), p. 128 ff.

7. Richard Gombrich, «Temporary Ordination in Sri Lanka», *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7.2 (1984), p. 41.

8. Cf. D. Gellner, *Monkhood and Priesthood* (see n 5), p. 165 f.

9. Traditionally, there are two acts which characterize a lay follower : taking the triple refuge (*tisaraṇagamana*) and observing the five ethical precepts (*pañcasīla*). In Nepal, the respective formulas are known to and recited by most of the participants of every Theravāda ceremony. This does not mean, however, that every participant would consider himself a Theravāda lay follower.

10. «Socio-Cultural Aspects of Theravāda Buddhism in Nepal», *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 6.2, (1983), p. 67-93.

11. *Op. cit.*, n 5.

12. Thanks are due to John K. Locke, S.J., Kathmandu, who is presently engaged in a similar project on Theravāda Buddhism in Nepal. He kindly consented to compare our data with his own, which enabled us to add some names we had missed and to correct a few of the caste references.

The list also includes clerics who passed away or left the order between 1986 and 1989. It does not include, however, monks who are Nepalese by birth, but not accepted as members of the Akhil Nepāl Bhikkhu Mahāsaṅgh. Also omitted are persons who received any of the forms of temporary ordination.

13. Data collected between March 1986 and March 1989; for further details cf. n 12.

14. Cf. *The Vinaya Piṭaka*, ed. H. Oldenberg, Vol. I, London, 1929, p. 77f., and *The Book of the Discipline*, transl. I. B. Horner, Vol. IV, London, 1951, p. 96-98.

15. Cf. Bechert/Hartmann (as n° 2), p. 22.

16. For general information on questions of caste and food, but without reference to the Theravāda clerics, cf. Per Löwdin, *Food, Ritual and Society Among the Newars*, Uppsala, 1985 (Uppsala Research Reports in Cultural Anthropology 4), especially p. 27ff.

17. For Burma see Hiroko Kawanami, «The Religious Standing of Burmese Buddhist Nuns (*thilā-shin*) : The Ten Precepts and Religious Respect Words», *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 13.1 (1990), p. 17-39, and especially note 2 for the problem of referring to these women as nuns. For Sri Lanka see Lowell W. Bloss, «The Female Renunciants of Sri Lanka : The *Dasasilamattawa*», *JIABS* 10.1 (1987), p. 7-31, and Elizabeth Nissan, «Recovering Practice : Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka», *South Asia Research* 4.1 (1984), p. 32-49.