

The Politics of Buddhism in Nepal [preprint]

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Was the Buddha Nepali?

Nepal, as Nepalis never tire of reminding the world and each other, was where the Buddha was born. But did Nepal exist 2500 years ago? Does the fact that the Buddha was born in what is today Nepal mean that the modern nation-state Nepal can claim special ownership of his memory, when the other three significant events in the Buddha's life—attainment of enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, first sermon at Sarnath, and entry into full nirvana at Kushinagar—all took place in what is now India? Even the very act of asking these questions will irritate some of my Nepali friends, for whom the two most fundamental facts about their country are that it is home to the world's highest mountain and that it claims the birthplace of the Buddha.

Mt Everest has to be shared with China—that is not debated—but most attempts on the summit now start from the Nepali side and it is Nepali Sherpas who are the world-recognized experts on getting there. By default, most people think of Everest as being in Nepal, and Nepalis are unlikely to contradict them. On the other hand, the Buddha's birthplace—Nepalis firmly believe—is theirs and theirs alone. However, the issue has become particularly sensitive in recent years as claims have surfaced in India that in fact the Buddha's home town, Kapilvastu, is to be found on the Indian side of the border. Indians sometimes claim, in all innocence and ignorance, that the Buddha was born in India. There are still attributions in Western museums of the Buddha or Buddhist statuary to India, when it should be labelled as Nepal or Nepali. And this too, and understandably, attracts the ire of Nepalis.

Lumbini, where the Buddha was born—as definitively established by Emperor Asoka's pillar dated 249 BCE giving tax privileges to the village—is indeed not far from the border with India (nowhere in the Nepalese Tarai is far from India). Kapilvastu, his home town, is even closer. It seems now fairly conclusively established, thanks to UNESCO-funded archaeological investigations led by Professor Robin Coningham of Durham University (Coningham 2014), that Kapilvastu is to be identified with Tilaurakot, in Nepal. The settlements of Ganwaria and Piprahawa, on the other side of the border in India, and still claimed to be Kapilvastu by some, were an outlying part of ancient Kapilvastu, where, some hundreds of years after the time of the Buddha, there was a Buddhist monastery. Still, it cannot be denied that there are Buddhist sites on the Indian side of the border, that part of ancient Kapilvastu lies in what is the modern state of India, and that the Uttar Pradesh tourist board has an obvious interest in increasing Buddhist pilgrimage from wealthy countries such as Japan and South Korea to 'their' sites.

The campaign to have the world recognize and acknowledge that the Buddha was born in Nepal has captured the imagination of many ordinary Nepalis (Dennis forthcoming). There are T shirts, websites, slogans on buses, books and pamphlets, campaign meetings, and even a pop song by Dhiraj Rai, all pushing the message (Rai 2013). Predictably, Rai's song also indexes the conquest of Everest by Hillary and Tenzing Sherpa; with somewhat more dissonance—at least for those primed to see the Buddha as the world's foremost 'ambassador of peace'—it also includes the lines 'Gurkha was born in Nepal', to a backdrop of a fearsome-looking Gurkha soldier drawing his khukri and going

into battle. In another attempt to globalize the message there was a talk show, designed to get an entry in the Guinness Book of Records, hosted by Ravi Lamichhane on Nepal's Channel 24 in April 2013, in which guests talked for 62 hours non-stop on the theme of the Buddha being born in Nepal (BBC 2013). There have been demonstrations in several Nepali towns, led by monks and nuns, chanting 'The Buddha was born in Nepal'. Finally, in 2016, Ramit Dhungana produced a whole feature film, 'Buddha Born in Nepal', in which a Nepali student in the USA discovers that people there believe the Buddha was born in India and returns to his home country to start a political campaign on the issue.

To the foreigner who never doubted that the Buddha was born in Nepal, it can all be a bit perplexing. To make sense of it, one must remember the overall geo-strategic situation of South Asia, dominated as it is by a single regional hegemon. Nepal-India relations are often fraught and always overshadowed by India's 'big brotherly' attitude, as exemplified, most Nepalis believe, in the blockade of October–December 2015, as well as in the experiences of condescension and discrimination that ordinary Nepalis frequently experience when travelling to or working in India. Many Nepalis harbour deeply felt fears for the continued independence of their country, especially in the light of the absorption of Sikkim into the Indian Union in 1975.

A key fact underlying the closeness of the two countries is that the border between India and Nepal is 'open', in other words, that there is free movement of people (but not goods) across it (Gellner 2013). Most people in the Tarai live their lives for most of the time as if the border did not exist: they routinely shop, go to school and hospital, work, and marry over the border. Even Nepalis who live in the hills frequently travel to India for education, to go to hospitals, or to work. There are many Nepalis who have lived in India for generations; but even if we consider only those who are temporary migrants, there are many millions of Nepalis in India at any one time. The international boundary does not, therefore, mark a sharp cultural or linguistic frontier. In the light of these continuities (and given that 'India' as a designation historically applied to the whole of what is now called South Asia or the Indian subcontinent), the confusion of outsiders over what is India and what is Nepal is perhaps somewhat more understandable. At the same time, there is often, on the part of foreigners who know even less about Nepal, an opposite and incompatible confusion that identifies Nepal with the Tibetan plateau and imagines it as consisting of nothing but high-mountain monasteries, yaks, and butter tea.

The international politics of Buddhism do not stop at the borders of South Asia. The struggle for control of the 'soft power' that Buddhism represents implicates Sri Lanka, Thailand, China, South Korea, and Japan. Within China there is competition between Taiwan and the PRC; as well as between those Tibetan Buddhist leaders who work closely with the government of the PRC and those, like the Dalai Lama, who do not. Participants in movements such as that to have female Buddhist ascetics ordained as full nuns (*bhikkhuni*), and not just as 'ten precept mothers' (*dasa sil mata, anagarika*), find themselves caught up in these competitive and conflicting currents (LeVine & Gellner 2005: Ch. 7).

Who are Nepal's Buddhists?

Nepal has another reason for wanting to claim the Buddha: it has a sizeable Buddhist minority, 9% or nearly 2.4 million people according to the 2011 census. (This fell from 10.7% and in absolute terms by 46,421 people from the 2001 census, for reasons which may have to do with emigration, as well

as with some former Buddhists reassigning themselves to the newly introduced categories ‘Bon’ and ‘nature worshipper’.)

Buddhism died out in India between the 11th and 13th centuries CE, surviving only in Sri Lanka and to the east of India in Burma. North India had been a powerhouse of Buddhism in the late first millennium. There were so many monasteries that the very name of the Indian state of Bihar means ‘monastery’. It was to these great seats of learning that the famous Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, Faxian (Fa Hsien), Xuan Zang (Hsüan Tsang), and Yijing (I Tsing) came in order to see the land of the Buddha’s origin and to study the Buddhist scriptures. The Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism that was developed there was exported to Tibet, China, Mongolia, Japan, and Korea. In all these places the scriptures were translated—one of the most amazing feats of sustained intellectual transfer in the history of the premodern world—either into Chinese or into Tibetan.

In the Kathmandu Valley, high up in the Himalayan foothills, South Asian Buddhism survived and was neither destroyed by Islamic invaders (though they came once in 1349) nor absorbed by Hinduism. In the famous words of Sylvain Lévi, ‘Nepal is India in the making’ (1905 I: 29). He meant by this that the Kathmandu Valley was a kind of time machine: one could (at least in Lévi’s day, and until the whole Kathmandu Valley was covered in tarmac and concrete) see something of the way in which Hinduism and Buddhism co-existed in north India before the Islamic invasions. Among the Newars, the traditional inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, a sizeable minority are strongly Buddhist and many others have a partial link to it (Gellner 1992).

In addition, there are Buddhists among many minority populations, principally the Tamangs, but also many Gurungs, and the Thakalis of Thak Khola, as well as the many people of Tibetan language and culture along Nepal’s northern fringes, including the famous Sherpas. Most are adherents of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism (Holmberg 1989; Mumford 1989).

In the 1930s some Newars started a reform movement ‘to reintroduce true Buddhism to Nepal’. By this they meant the practice of celibacy and the teaching of basic Buddhist teachings to the laity in a more explicit and didactic form than existed in the highly ritualized teachings of traditional Newar Buddhism (LeVine & Gellner 2005). They became Theravada monks and nuns and travelled to Burma in order to study and returned to reintroduce a new way of practising their old tradition. This new Theravada movement has reached out and started to make converts among Magars and Tharus, who now, for reasons of ethnic assertion, wish to disassociate themselves from Hinduism and the domination of Bahuns and Chhetris (Letizia 2012).

The Politics of Buddhism within Nepal

Given the international importance of Lumbini as one of Nepal’s four UNESCO-recognized World Heritage Sites (the others being the ancient cities of the Kathmandu Valley, Sagarmatha National Park, and Chitwan National Park), and the resources that have and are expected to flow into Nepal as a consequence, it is not surprising that the question of who represents Buddhism in Nepal is not a simple or uncontested one. Add to this the fact that Nepali Buddhists are divided between (1) Newar Buddhists, who have a sense of cultural entitlement but no large-scale, learned monastic establishments, (2) the new Theravada movement, which is still young and, now that it is past the first flush of enthusiasm, relatively lacking in charismatic leaders, and (3) Tibetan Buddhists who are also divided by sect and ethnicity, and more focused on global networks than they are on Nepali politics, which on the whole they tend to try to avoid.

All political parties in Nepal are keen to cultivate religious leaders in the hope of winning the votes of their followers. They therefore accept invitations to be 'chief guests' at important Buddhist events and speak in favour of the Buddha as a messenger of peace and the relevance of his teachings to the present day. Some monks have been nominated to Parliament by political parties, e.g. Bhikkhu Ashwaghosh for the UML and Bhikkhu Ananda and Lharkyal Lama by the Maoists.

There are internationally renowned Buddhist sacred sites attracting pilgrims and visitors from around the world: at Lumbini and other ancient sacred places nearby (Kapilvastu, Ramagrama, and so on), and within and around the Kathmandu Valley (Swayambhu, Baudha, Namobuddha), not to mention the many Tibetan Buddhist gompas in the north of the country. There have been initiatives on the side of the Nepali state that make use of Buddhism, such as King Birendra's initiative in the 1980s to have Nepal recognized as a Zone of Peace. More recently, after many years of campaigning by Buddhists, the government has established a Buddhist University in Lumbini and it has begun to hold Master's courses. From time to time the government sponsors international conferences in Lumbini in an attempt to shore up Buddhist support. The most famous Buddhist conference, held in Kathmandu and attended by Ambedkar among others, was in 1956, the 2500th year since the Buddha's *parinirvana* according to the most widely accepted chronology.

Early moves to unite all the Buddhists of Nepal in order to lobby the government for recognition focused on the Dharmodaya Sabha, founded by Bhikkhu Amritananda and others in exile in India in November 1944. These days it still exists, but is not as active, nor as unifying, as it once aspired to be. Nor have any of the other Buddhist organizations, such as the YMBA, managed to step up and take on the role of national voice for all Buddhists.

Many Janajati activists wish to make use of Buddhism as a theme, and the Buddha as a symbol, around which to unify those opposed to the domination of Hindus in Nepal. But demographics and history do not make this an easy proposition. In fact, many diaspora Nepalis, especially Gurungs, would prefer, if they were allowed it, to have a dual religious identity: 'Hindu and Buddhist' (Gellner & Hausner 2013).

Some significant Janajati groups have no significant link to Buddhist tradition and do not seem interested in acquiring a relationship to Buddhism: the Rais and Limbus of east Nepal are the prime cases here. Two other large groups, the Tharus and the Magars, as noted, have primarily political reasons for becoming Buddhist. Though some ordinary Tharus and Magars are willing to follow their activist leaders and make the switch to Buddhism, the majority are still comfortable with a Hindu identity, even if they are not about to campaign politically for it. Some other Janajati activists wish to pursue an identity as 'nature worshippers' (*prakritivad*), others as animists (*jivavada*), and yet others as 'Bon' (the name for the old pre-Buddhist religion in Tibet). In addition many Janajati people have converted to Christianity and some even to Islam. What all Janajati activists are agreed on—in defiance of the actual practice of many Janajatis themselves—is that Janajatis are not (or should not be) Hindus. The denial of Hinduism is a political move, inspired by the wish to contest Brahmin leadership and the disproportionate Brahmin domination of Establishment positions.

Within one important Janajati group, the Gurungs (or Tamu as they call themselves), the battle over Buddhism is a mirror image of its position in the country as a whole. While Janajati activists seek to define themselves as 'not Hindu', by whatever means they can, there is an important section of the Gurung population that seeks to define itself as 'not Buddhist', in order to contest the former dominance of certain clans who are more likely to claim a Buddhist identity. They seek instead to define themselves as followers of the Bon religion. They claim that Buddhism, just like Hinduism, is a foreign import to Gurung society. Their organizational vehicle is the Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh or Tamu

Religious and Cultural Organization, and their leader, Paju Yarjung Kromchain Tamu, has devoted his life to preserving, propagating, and writing down the shamanic chants.

One big success of the Janajati movement is that Nepal is no longer a Hindu Kingdom. Of course, politically and militarily that success was achieved by the Maoists. But the fall of the monarchy, and the downfall of the Hindu ideology that was seen at that time to be intimately connected with it, was also due to the stubbornness and lack of political skill of the last monarch. At any rate, Buddhists and Janajatis are foremost among those who favour a secular and republican state and their preferences have won out, even though there is now a sense of regret among many who are uncomfortable with the term used to translate 'secularism' into Nepali, *dharma-nirapeksata* (lit. indifference/non-association as to religion) (Gellner et al. 2016).

There is yet another wrinkle to competition over ownership of the Buddha in Nepal, due to the location of the Buddha's birthplace in the Tarai. Over the last year the resistance of Madheshis, the inhabitants of the southern plains, to the 2015 Constitution has been drawn out and intense. Many have died because of it. It has not escaped Madheshi activists that the most ancient sites associated with the Buddha are not in the hills or Kathmandu, where the majority of Nepal's Buddhists live, but in the Tarai. The Tharus have long claimed the Buddha as one of their own. In 1988 a leading Tharu, Ramananda Prasad Singh, who had been Attorney General, published a pamphlet called *The Real History of the Tharus*, in which he argued that the Buddha had been a Tharu and that the Tharus are the descendants of the Buddha's Shakya ethnic group (Krauskopff 2003). C.K. Raut, the controversial Madheshi activist who advocates for an independent Tarai-Madhesh, has sought to claim the epithet in his video 'Black Buddhas of Nepal', which argues that the Tarai has been an internal colony of Nepal's hill elite (Raut 2014).

In short, what Buddhism means, and who has the right to speak for it, represent it, and claim its international prestige, are far from being straightforward questions. With no history of government recognition, no single unified Sangha (as in Myanmar or Thailand), with multiple communities and traditions, and the competing pulls of different outside links, it is not surprising that Nepal's Buddhists comprise a series of networks, jostling for position, building institutions in parallel, sometimes coming together, but often working at cross purposes, united only in a shared veneration for the symbol of the Buddha himself.

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