PREVALENCE OF BUDDHISM CULTURE IN HIMALAYAN REGION

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ABSTRACT

Buddhist monks have become increasingly visible in environmental movements in the last few decades, including in Arunachal Pradesh, India, my fieldwork site. Monks in environmental protests have contributed to the popular representation of Buddhism as ecological. A review of existing literature suggests that what we are looking at is a re-interpretation of Buddhist traditional philosophy by modern environmentally conscious people and contemporary Buddhists. I argue that as anthropologists, we have to note that while Buddhism can help mobilize lay activism, local practices about the environment do not often overlap with Buddhist doctrine. I illustrate this through the example of the ban on yak meat in Arunachal Pradesh, which is linked to wider Hindu nationalist politics in India. Environmental activities in the Buddhist Himalayas cannot be understood simply through the lens of Buddhism and one has to adopt a more pluralistic approach that is accommodating of customs that do not fit within an imagined “environmental identity”. I propose Himalayan environmentalism as an alternative to Buddhist environmentalism, not to disregard the role of Buddhist belief but to show how Himalayan environmentalism goes beyond Buddhism in scope. Second, my intention is not to propose a uniform model for the Himalaya, but to point to the processes at work between culture, politics, and ecology, and to the role of power in fashioning environmental identities. I support my argument with empirical data from my own fieldwork and those of scholars working in other parts of the Himalaya.

Keywords: - Buddhist, Regions, Himalayan, Recent, National.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, Buddhism in the Himalayan regions has been an object of much scholarly attention and some major studies. Yet the study as by contrast at a much earlier stage of development, compared to other discipline. The main reason is the difficulties of an access to most of people in the Himalayan regions. In this paper, I concentrate here, however, on outlining
some historical traces for the growth of Buddhism in Himalayan regions and the contribution of some outstanding Buddhist masters from India and Nepal.

II. BUDDHIST MISSIONARY IN THE HIMALAYAN REGIONS DURING BUDDHA'S PERIOD

The earliest reference of Buddha's missionary activity can be seen in a statement made by Buddha to his sixty disciples after his enlightenment. The Buddha's enthusiastic zeal and infinite compassion for suffering humanity is evident from the following extracts from the Mahavagga.

"Go, ye, now, O Bhikshus, and wander for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion, for the world for the good, for the gain and for the welfare of gods and men. Let not two of you go the same way."

It is obvious that sixty disciples moved to the different directions. But we are not certain if some of them reached Himalayan regions too. Although we have no archaeological and epigraphical data for the Buddha's visit in the Himalayan regions, the reference can be met in Divyavadana, in which Buddha is supposed to have visited Manasarovar/Anataptadaha where the Buddha delivered some of his discourses on the past lives of Sariputra and Maudagalyana.

Textual sources provide affirmation that Buddhism was introduced in Nepal Valley during Buddha's period. The MulasarvastivadaVinayaSamgraha compiled by Jinamitra and translated by I-sting in 700 A.D. mentions an episode relating to the transport of wool a group or Bhikkhus en route toward Nepal (Ni-po-lo) at the time the Buddha was residing at Shravasti.

III. EPISODE OF GAUTAMA BUDDHA'S VISIT TO THE KATHMANDU VALLEY

There are three important sources in which the visit of Buddha Shakyamuni in the Nepal Valley is related. One important source is the SwayambhuPurana text published by Sri Hari Prasad Sastri, another one is the History of Nepal by MunshiShewShunkar Singh and Pandit Sri Gunananda edited by Daniel Wright (1877. Calcutta) 3. GoshringVyakarana sutra.

In Swayambhupurana text Lord Shakyamuni appears on Gopuchchara Hill with 500 disciples along with his chief disciples such as SariputraMaudgalyana, Mahakashyapa and Ananda. Lord Buddha came to Swayambhu area from Sravasti in his late seventies. He met a lady called chunda to whom he ordained in Swayambhu Hill. Shakyamuni Buddha declared that he came to pay homage to Swayambhu "the self born one" seven times in seven different births. Then he moved to western Hill and gave the discourse on the origin of Swayambhu at the request of Maitreya Bodhisattva. Similar events are described in the local Vamasavalis too.In Mahavamsa, too, it is stated that Lord Buddha went thrice to Sri Lanka. In his first visit to Sri Lanka, Lord Buddha had his meal at Anotapta (Manasarovar Lake). In his !ight to Sri Lankan Buddha had offerings of meal at Uttarakuru and had his meal at Manasarovar and reached in Sri Lanka at the month of
Poush Purnima. If we accept this as true, then there is no harm and misgivings in accepting that Lord Buddha descended in the Kathmandu Valley since it was en route to Sri Lanka from Manasarovar Lake.

IV. RECENT TRENDS IN HIMALAYAN BUDDHISMS

Despite decades of funding by international donors, there has been a total failure to control the rising population in the region. As a result, there is not enough arable land to produce the food needed to feed everyone. Responding to this reality, many young people now engage in a form of circular migration, staying away most of the year to pursue cash income jobs in Kathmandu, India, the Gulf states, or in the West. Many villages today across the Buddhist mid-hills and highlands are populated for most of the year only by new mothers, elders, and their grandchildren. This is changing the nature of rural life across the region, but has also opened new possibilities for the Tibeto-Burmese people, who now can earn more money abroad than their ancestors could imagine. Indeed, a formidable new influence is the remittances being sent home from Himalayan Buddhists working abroad; some of this wealth is being used to fund rituals and for the patronage of temples back in the home region.

Since 1959, the Nepalese government, responding to considerable developmental aid from the Chinese government, has refused to admit the exiled Dalai Lama. In recent years, subject to additional pressure, it has turned back refugees at the border and restricted granting asylum to refugees who make it to the capital. The entire region’s status quo of Tibetan refugee haven, and diaspora, may soon be overturned.

Today, Buddhists from the Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman groups originating across the Himalayan region are now found existing among Newar and Theravāda adherents amidst the Kathmandu Valley’s remarkable religious pluralism. This valley is also famous as a major center for Hinduism in the modern world, with its medieval temples as well as centers devoted to global gurus such as Sai Baba (1926–2011) and Rajneesh (Chandra Mohan Jain, 1931–1990), who enjoy considerable support. There are also neo-Hindu groups such as the Brahma Kumaris who have centers in the capital. Christian missionaries are now free to proselytize, and churches have spread from the valley to hundreds of small villages.

In addition, there are Sikh temples and Muslim mosques built by their resident trader communities; if one pays attention, one can find centers for the Baha’i, and a half-dozen Japanese “new religions.” Indeed, Nepal’s capital today is one of the most diverse religious locations in the world.

Himalayan Buddhists have absorbed a diversity of outside influences from their earliest history; in the future, Buddhism’s adherents will doubtless continue to shape their own lives with reference to both the venerable traditions of their ancestors and new ideas that will make their way into their mountain vistas.
V. GOING BEYOND THE BUDDHIST FRAMING OF HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN RELATIONS

The entangled discourses around the yak ban, environmentalism and Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh stem from a politics of cultural identity that is gradually spreading in the Buddhist Himalaya, where previously peripheral Himalayan border communities are now asserting their Tibetan Buddhist identity. They are mobilizing in support of campaigns that have as their main objective the preservation and promotion of Buddhist cultural heritage in the Indian Himalaya, such as the movements to get official recognition for the Tibetan Buddhist script and for the Tibetan medicine system in India, which is an important part of the Buddhist Himalayan heritage.

This form of cultural politics, led primarily by Buddhist religious leaders as well as some lay activists, has emerged among India’s borderland Buddhists as a response towards their perceived regional marginalization, and as a counter-politics to carve out a distinct space for themselves within the larger Indian national identity. Paradoxically, these movements to reinvent Buddhism in India have gained momentum over the years with the support of the Indian state, for whom having loyal Buddhist subjects in these Himalayan borderlands serves the cause of national security. Buddhist environmentalism, in the context of the Indian Himalaya, is tied up with this form of cultural politics, with the survival and adaption of Buddhism in the modern world, and also, as I have shown, with the politics of Hindu nationalism.

But as anthropologists, what we should note is not a decontextualized religion coming to the rescue of environment. We should not accept without question the projection of a set of Buddhist beliefs onto local environmental practices. I must stress again that my intention is not to dismiss the mobilization of Buddhism for environmental causes. I do find a lot of value in the participation of Buddhist monks in environmental struggles, and agree with anthropologist Susan Darlington’s suggestion that “by focusing one’s intention on fulfilling the Buddhist teaching of interconnectivity rather than just making merit, monks and laymen have been able to make a real environmental impact”. It is true that the environmental awareness spread by Buddhist religious leaders have had a real impact. What I am concerned with is the use of an essentialised religious identity to anchor these environmental struggles. It is important not to see religion or singular notions of culture as encompassing local practices and to understand that local practices are also part of a local ecology, in which life, livelihood, and environment are intertwined.

VI. CONCLUSION

The preceding series of discussion are the general outline of Buddhist expansion in the Himalayan regions. Due to the lack of time, the detail researches and actual survey of the monasteries in these Himalaya regions could not be done. Much awaits a more detailed investigation.

From the available data, we have a vague indication about the true picture of Buddhist population distribution. Many erudite scholars have raised the question on the methodology or census data
collection concerning Buddhist or Hindu or concerning the recognition or identification of Buddhist or other ethnic groups. It is regrettable to say that Buddhist population according to 1991 census data is only about nearly 7% only whereas in actuality it is not. It seems that the Kathmandu Valley and the entire Himalayan regions are the centers and habitats of Buddhist followers. But Buddhism was introduced into these places in different ways. The Kathmandu Valley has its nearest access to its sources in India whereas Himalaya regions with Tibet. In Himalaya regions, the role has been played by various non Brahmanic ethnic groups such as Magar, Gurung, Sherpa, Limbus and Rais (Kiranti) whereas in the Kathmandu Valley, the Newars played an important and crucial role in the expansion of Buddhism. Whether these Himalayan People were previously Buddhist or not, is a separate topic of research in itself, yet we can be sure that the inhabitants of these Himalayan districts, being closely connected with the people of Tibet in business transaction and social habit, they must have been influenced by the development of Buddhism in Tibet.

REFERENCES-


