

# Buddhism in Nepal, Darkness and Light



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

## **Buddhism in Nepal, Darkness and Light**

When the British took over Ceylon and Burma they used at first robust but gradually more subtle means to weaken the traditional religions; Hinduism but more so Buddhism, believing that the Anglicization of the subject peoples would make them more amiable to British rule. While it is only right that there was resentment about this at that time and subsequently too, knowing something about the suppression of Buddhism in other countries can help give a better perspective of this chapter of history. Strong countries have been bullying weaker ones since there have been countries, this did not begin with what is now called ‘the colonial period’ and it has by no means stopped even now.

In the early 18th century Nepal had not yet come into being, the country we now know by that name was a cluster of small kingdoms and principalities. As the century proceeded the king of the small state of Gurkha, Prithvri Narayan Shah (1779-1875), embarked on a series of ferociously fought campaigns which resulted in the conquest of all the territory now making up modern Nepal. The richest jewel that fell into his hands was what was called the Kathmandu Mandala, the three small confederated kingdoms in the Kathmandu valley – Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Patan. The people who lived there were Newaris who had their own distinctive language and culture, and they were Hindu and Buddhist by religion. Unfortunately for the Newaris, Prithvri Narayan Shah’s occupiers were orthodox Hindus and from the beginning of their rule they suppressed Buddhism and the Newari language, mainly because most Buddhist literature was in that language. At the beginning this persecution was just irksome but as Gurkha rule tightened its grip it became harsher. In 1846 the Rana family took over the government which marked the beginning of an era of darkness for Buddhists and their religion, and which was to last up until

1951. Temples were confiscated or had Hindu gods forcibly installed in them, some Buddhist festivals were banned, and it became illegal even to have books in Newari language. The campaign to eliminate Newari intensified in 1906 when documents in that language were no longer admissible in court and anyone found with Buddhist books could be whipped and/or imprisoned. One could even be fined if heard speaking Newari in the street.

In 1909 a Buddhist named Nisthananda Bajracharya secretly published a Buddhist sutra in Kathmandu, the first book ever to be printed in Nepal using movable type, and five years later he published the Lalitavistara, an ancient work on the life of the Buddha. In 1925 he moved to India and came into contact with Theravada Buddhism for the first time and was deeply impressed by it. Traditional Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley was, at least to an outsider, hardly distinguishable from Hinduism; it was sharply divided along caste lines, the monks had centuries before given up celibacy and were married, and much of the religion was little more than the performance of rituals that the priests were paid to perform.

In Calcutta Nisthananda Bajracharya founded the magazine Buddhism and the Nepalese Language (Buddha Dharma wa Nepal Bhasa) in which he first used the name Nepal Bhasa which later became the official name for Newari. Copies of the magazine were read by Nepalese visiting India and smuggled into Nepal by them. This started a surge of interest in a different type of Buddhism.

A new stage in the persecution began in the early 20th century when Theravada Buddhism was finally introduced into Nepal. In 1920 Jagatman Vaidya went to India, studies Theravada Buddhism at the Mahabodhi Society in Sarnath, after which he became a monk and returned quietly to Nepal. He began teaching Buddhism in private homes and quickly attracted supporters and converts. As a result of this five young men went to India and also ordained in Sarnath and after their studies returned to Nepal where they attracted even more attention from local

Buddhists, but when they went on alms round in Kathmandu's streets they were immediately arrested. One of the monks, Bhikkhu Mahapragya, had converted to Buddhism from Hinduism, something that particularly angered the authorities, and he was imprisoned and tortured.

After several years of harassment which did not seem to stop the spread of Theravada, the five monks were all expelled from the country. Some went to Burma, Tibet or Darjeeling in India. But a thirst for the Dhamma meant that more men were going to India to



The monks expelled in 1926

ordain and then live secretly in Kathmandu or in the small villages nearby. What helped them survive was that the persecution was uneven – sometimes severe, sometimes not, they laid low during the hard times and re-emerged when the heat was off.



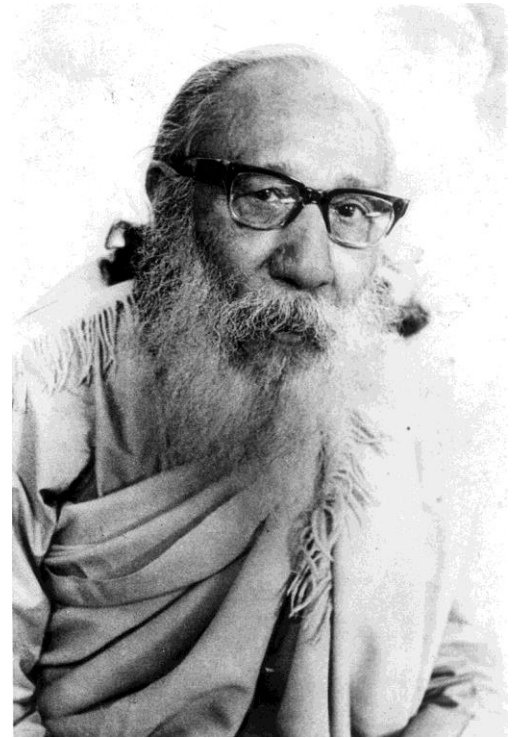
Yogbar Singh Kanskar

One of the heroes of this period was the poet and social reformer Yogbir Singh Kansakar (1885-1942). After a stint in prison for speaking out against caste he left for India where he was influenced by the so-called Bengal Revival. On his return to Nepal he began writing poetry, including some with Buddhist themes, and soon poets and writers were having regular gatherings at his shop (his family were cloth merchants). In 1929 he and a group of like-minded Newaris plucked up the courage to petition the Prime Minister for permission to establish a small library of books in Newari. Kansakar



and all the others were arrested, fined, all the books they had collected for their library were confiscated and they were carefully watched for the next few months. Two years later he and 11 others were arrested again but this time he was also flogged and imprisoned for “spreading unorthodox religion”, i.e. Theravada. His poetry was only published and freely circulated in Nepal in 1951, an event he never lived to see.

Another hero of this period was Chittadar Hridaya (1906-1982). As a young man he had written several collections of poetry, but they were all published in Calcutta and only a few copies were successfully smuggled into Nepal. In 1941 he was arrested and sentenced to six years in prison and while there, under the most difficult circumstances, wrote what is now considered the greatest literary work of modern Nepal, *Sugata Saurabha*, a life of the Buddha in 19 cantos. Aesthetically pleasing and doctrinally sound, the book has introduced many Nepalese to the early form of Buddhism.



Chittadahr Haridaya

Imprisoned with Hridaya was the artist Chandra Man Singh Maskey who, when *Sugata Saurabha* was published in Calcutta in 1949, did a series of beautiful paintings to illustrate it.

In 1944 the only eight monks in the whole country were rounded up and brought before the fearsome prime minister Juddha Shamsheer Rana who demanded they sign a pledge that they would stop their activities. When they refused, he ordered them out of the country. Meanwhile, news of these problems filtered into Ceylon through the Mahabodhi Society in India and came to the notice of Venerable

Narada of Vajirarama in Bambalapitiya. As a result, he undertook the long difficult journey (there were no roads in Nepal at that time) to Kathmandu where managed to get an audience with the PM. He told the PM that the Buddha, whose religion was practiced as far away as Japan, was born in Nepal and that he should be proud of that, and that the monks were in no way endangering his administration. Apparently Ven. Narada was eloquent enough that he convinced the PM to lift the ban on the expelled monks so that they were allowed to return to their country.

With the overthrow of the Rana regime in 1951 an era of freedom for both Theravada and Newari began until King Mahendra abolished parliament in 1960 and problems started again. Newari could no longer be broadcast on the radio and bookshops which sold literature in the language were harassed. In fact, low level harassment, or perhaps better, ‘disadvantaging’, of Theravada continued right up to the 1980s. Despite the years of sometimes severe persecution Theravada Buddhism initially grew because of a coterie of brave and dedicated monks and lay devotees who were prepared to risk much for the Dhamma. Their story is a little-known but an inspiring one. Theravada continues to grow in Nepal but so far it has little presence outside the Kathmandu Valley. Today there are around 60 Theravada temples and other institutions in the Valley. Newari (officially Nepal Bhasa) is spoken by 3.20% of Nepalese and is one of 129 recognized languages in the country.

In his article ‘Have we let Dhamma Down?’ (The Island, 11/5/2020), Dr. Kemachandra wrote, “The Buddha categorically expounded that he only teaches dukkha and dukkha only.” This is not just the writer’s own opinion, he is paraphrasing something the Buddha actually said, and he is quite right to make this point. Nonetheless, a reading of the Tipitaka will show that the Buddha taught a wide variety of things, for example Right Speech, Right Livelihood, Right Action, etc. In Bhikkhu Bodhi’s recent and excellent book, ‘The Buddha’s Teaching on Social and Communal Harmony,’ he presents all the suttas the Buddha taught pertaining to

these important subjects, and there are many of them. Several years ago I published my book ‘Like Milk and Water Mixed, Buddhist Reflections on Love’, using all the teachings the Buddha gave on conjugal relationship, friendship, romantic sentiment, kindness to animals, parental love, etc. Scanning the Tipitaka to see what the Buddha had to say about medical ethics, healing, patient care, medicine and maintaining general good health, will yield a surprising amount of important and practical material. This is not to say that Dr. Kemachandra is wrong, but only that he may have been a bit too emphatic or focused on one aspect of the Dhamma, albeit a most fundamental and important one. My understanding is that the Buddha taught two goals – (1) a primary goal and (2) secondary goals. The primary goal of Buddhism is the attainment of Nirvana and of course this is intimately connected with the concept of dukkha. He taught a range of secondary goals too – to be a loving parent, a responsible citizen, an honest businessman, a dedicated teacher or doctor, etc. To get to the top floor you have to start at the ground floor and work your way up – as long as you don’t lose sight of the penthouse and the wonderful view it offers from up there. Thus, we can say that the Buddha’s vision of the spiritual life is a holistic one, taking into account diverse needs, abilities and aspirations. I think that was his genius.