



Buddhism of *Nepalmandala*: Scope and Challenges in Modern Context

Manik Ratna Shakya, PhD.
Deen, Faculty of Buddhist Studies
Lumbini Buddhist University, Nepal
manik.shakya@lbu.edu.np

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Abstract

Background: Buddhism of Nepalmandala is also known as Newar Buddhism. This Buddhism has carried a long history of Nepal; it can demonstrate Nepalese art and architecture, and it has been followed by the indigenous people of Nepal for a long time. The sacred Buddhist monuments of this Buddhism, such as Swayambhu and Bauddha Stupa are listed in the world heritage. This Buddhism is preserving the ancient tradition of Nalanda and Bikramsila University which were world-renowned Buddhist universities in the world in the ancient period around 7-9 centuries.

Objective: This paper is meant to highlight the historicity and essential features of Buddhism of Nepalmandala as well as its challenges at present situation. Besides, in this paper, an attempt is made to address the cause of major challenges and its solution.

Methodology: Library-based research methodology has been used in this paper which involves historical and textual analysis to examine the historical tradition of Buddhism of Nepal Mandala.

Result: As recorded in history, renowned Buddhist masters of Buddhism of Nepalmandala named Silamanju, Kalyanmitra had established Buddhist lineage in Tibet. They had played an essential role in propagating Buddhist philosophy, logic, doctrine, contemplation etc in Tobet. Till now, there are 300 Buddhist monasteries of the Buddhism only in the Kathmandu valley, kingdom of Nepal. However, due to the different types of obstacles, this Buddhism is facing various types of challenges at present.

Conclusion: Most of the Buddhist monasteries are in critical condition because of the influence of modern construction. The number of followers and practitioners of this Buddhism is being minimized and the young generation are being far from the education of this Buddhism because of the influence of modernity.

Keywords: Buddhism, Nepalmandala, Buddhist Culture, Scope

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Introduction

Nepāl is a sacred land on the lap of the Himalayan range. It is located in between of two countries: China and India. Kathmandu valley is the kingdom of Nepal. The Valley, once was a huge lake in the ancient time, is surrounded by the mountains. According to the Buddhist Text, *Svayambhu Purāna*, when the place was lake, self created light manifested on huge lotus flower which was blossoming on the lake, Later, a gigantic *Caitya* called *Svayambhu* was constructed by covering self created light using jewel stones¹. The inhabitants of the valley have been practicing Buddhism on the basis of the Philosophy of the *Svayambhu Caitya*. The Buddhism based on *Svayambhu Caitya* is being continued from generation to generation. Great Scholar named Hemrāj Śākya has said that the Buddhism based on *Svayambhu Caitya* is the Traditional Buddhism of Nepāl.² This Buddhism contained Philosophy of Five Transcendental Buddhas of *Svayambhu Caitya*.³

Foreign scholars seem to have given term 'Newār Buddhism' to the Buddhism of Nepalmandala. Because, the traditional Buddhism has been followed by *Newār* Communities since ancient period and that Buddhism is reflected by *Newār* culture.

Historically, Brian Hodgson, a pioneer naturalist and ethnologist worked in Nepal as a British Resident around 1830 A.D., seems to have used the term 'Newār Buddhism' to the traditional Buddhism which were prevailing in the Kathmandu valley at that time.⁴ Later, other scholars such as David Gellner, Michel Allen, Merry Slusser, Oldfiel, and Neils Gutcho have used the term wildly.

Significance of Buddhism of Nepalmandala

Buddhism of Nepalmandala is existing based on *Svayambhu Caitya*. Because of *Caitya*'s architectural as well as philosophical significances and historicity, the UNESCO has listed in the world heritage. Therefore, this *Caitya* now became not only national heritage of Nepal but also a world heritage. Similarly, Buddha Stupa is also one of the essential monument of Traditional Buddhism. This is the gigantic buddhis monument of Nepal which seems to have been constructed in four century. This is also listed in world heritage. Based on these evidences, it can be said that traditional Buddhism is also recognized by UNESCO.

Buddhism of Nepalmandala is associated with Mahayan and Vajrayana Buddhism. The great masters of Buddhism i.e. Padmasambhava, Atisa Dipenkarshreegyan went to Tibet via Kathmandu Valley. They had practiced at different places of the valley. Besides, Vagiswarkirti, also known as Phamthinpa, studied from Nalanda University and established Chakrasambara Tradition in Nepal. Silmanju, called Bhalpo Silmanju in Tibet, resident of Kathmandu valley, disseminated Buddhism in Tibet. Many Indian Buddhist scholars entered in this Buddhism around 13 century after the Nalanda and Bikramsila University collapsed. Thus, it has influence of Nalanda Tradition. Besides, This Buddhism represents entire Buddhist art and architecture of Nepal.

Followers of Buddhism of Nepalmandala

The followers of Buddhism of Nepalmandala of can be classified into two groups as follows:

- 1 Min Bahadurśākya and ShantaharshVajracharya, *SvayambhuPuran*, Lalitpur: NagarjunInstitute of Exact Methods, 2001.P. 16.
- 2 Hemraj Shakya, *Shree Svambhu Mahachaitya*, Kathmandu: Svayambhu Vikash Mandal, 2004, p. 6-7.
- 3 Bajraraj Shakya, "Nepal Mandalaya Bauddha Sanskritiya Visheshata" *Nepal Mandalaya Bauddha Sanskriti Sammelana 1119*, conference Volume, Lalitpur: Lotus Research Center,1999, p. 30.
- 4 Surendra Man Vajracharya, Monasticism in Buddhism of Nepal Mandala: Continuity and Changes, A Ph. D. Dissertation submitted to Tribhuva University, 2013, p. 25.

Monastic Class

Śākya: śākyas are the chief followers of Buddhism of Nepalmandala. They are the clan of Shakyamuni Buddha. According to the history, Shakya dynasty ruled in Kapilvastu around 26 hundred years ago. They were massacred by king virudhaka then they came to Kathmandu valley.

The term śākya can be found in the inscription of the eight century. They have been following this Buddhism as household Buddhist monk. Buddhist ordination and initiations should be taken by Śākya according to system of Buddhism of Nepalmandala and they perform daily ritual in Buddhist monasteries.

Vajrācārya

They have to take ordination and initiation of *Ācāryāviśeka*, then they are recognized as Buddhist priest. They are the leading figure of *Newār* Buddhism and give religious teaching and perform religious rituals as well as rites. Historically, the tradition of the *Ācārya* or the lineage of *Vajrācārya* goes back to the ancient Buddhist siddhas. Other historical sources show that the fifth Licchavi king BaskaraVarma authorised the Buddhist householder *Ācārya* to conduct the daily worship and other ceremonies.⁵

Lay Followers

There are different groups of caste following Buddhism of Nepalmandala as lay follower. The lay followers are categorized based on their occupation. They are as follows:

Sthāpit (Architecture), Silantha(clothes weaver for deities), Shikharākāra(Pinnacle constructor) , Kansākāra: (Bronze utensil maker), śilākāra (stone worker), Tulādhāra (Business experts), Vajrakarmi (plastering worker) , Madhikarmi (sweet bread makers), Sāyami (oil mker), Māli (nursery worker), Dangol (brick works), Rañjītkār Coloring worker on clothes, Nakarmi (Iron Smith), Jośī (Astrologer) , Kumha (Potter), Nau (Barber), Jogi (Trumpet player), Tamrākār(copper smith) etc. are chief followers of Buddhism of Nepalmandala

The lay followers had been playing vital role for the preservation and promotion of Buddhism of Nepalmandala. Due to the kind co operation, co-existence, financial and moral support of different groups, the Buddhism of Nepalmandala is existing in the Kathmandu Valley from ancient time to present age.

Chief Features of Buddhism of Nepalmandala

Buddhism of Nepalmandala has carried out a long history of Nepāl. In course of time, the Buddhism has been changed with the infection of local environment, culture, custom and tradition. Then, the Buddhism became a blossomed flower of distinctive characteristics, which can be traced out as follows:

Mixed Practices of *Mahāsānghika* and *Sarvāstivāda*

The exiting four days monkhood tradition in traditional Buddhism is locally known as ‘Bare Chuyegu’. It is also called Pravajyasambar. The term ‘*Pravajyā*’ was used by Buddha first to give ordination to Yasa Kumar in Buddhist history. The term ‘*Pravajyā*’ is mostly applied in the śrāvakayān. Again, after consecration of Pravajya, the boys are given begging bowl and a staff (silāku), which has an effigy of the Buddha (or of a Stupa) at the top. It is also mentioned that the novice holding begging bowl and a staff is the influence of Sarvāstivāda.⁶ Chinese Pilgrim XuanXang mentioned in his travel accounts that the number of Hinayanī Buddhist monks were there. Some scholar illustrated that the four

5 Naresh Man Bajracharya, *Buddhism in Nepal*, Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 1998, p.17.

6 Gellner, f.n. 21.

days monkhood practice in traditional Buddhism seems to have been made impact of *Mahāsāṅghika*.⁷ An inscription of 8 century has also stated a presence of Bhikshunī Saṃgha belonging to the *Mahāsāṅghika* sect. Likewise, the *Sāṅkhu* inscription of Amśuvarmā period (606-621 A.D.) also mentions about the Mahāsāṅghika Bhikshunī Saṃgha. Historically, existence of celibate monks can be found during the seventh century.. The above mentioned practices and historical accounts suggests that there are practice of *Mahāsāṅghika* and Sarvāstivāda.

Moral Practice

Moral practice is one of the key factors in Buddhism. According to Buddhism, Moral practice is main gate to be eligible for Samadhi or contemplation. It is also said that Saṃgha, followers of Buddhism, should be fulfilled with Moral Practice. It is observed in *traditional* Buddhism through *Vrata* (Moral Practicing Observance). Among the various *Vratas* existing in *Newār* Buddhism, *Upośadha Vrata* is prominent one. *Pośadha Vrata* is the central purpose of the *Guṇakaraṇḍavyuha*; it is governed by *Karuṇamaya*, *Amoghapāśa* *Lokeśvara*.

Various *Caityas* and Their worship

Newār Buddhist people have sacred values of building a *Caitya* according to the Buddhist scriptures of Nepāl. Most of the lay Buddhists worship *Caityas* in the memory of demised people as their memento. Because of their strong devotion towards *Caitya*, numerous *Caityas* can be seen in the valley.

In the context of Nepāl, there was the practice of making simple clay models of *Caitya* in the beginning, but with the passage of time, developed into more complicated and artistic styles which became a distinct art of Nepāl.⁸ This progressive change in the *Caitya* style can be easily seen from the simple styles of the Lichhavi period and the still more decorative and complicated design of the Malla period.⁹

Various types of *Caitya* are found in Kathmandu valley. In the *Dighanikaya Sutra*, *Caityas* are classified into four groupssuch as (1) *sāririk Caitya*¹⁰ or (2) *Paribhoga Caitya*¹¹. (3) *Dharma Caitya*¹²(4) *Udeshya Caitya*¹³. In the context of Kathmandu valley, historically, emperor Ashok is said to have constructed four Ashokan Stupas in Lalitpur City. Likewise, Gigantic Stupas, listed in world heritage, such as *Svayambhu*, *Bauddha* are worshipped in special occasion.¹⁴ These are huge *Caityas* of Kathmandu Valley. According to the records preserved in Lotus Research Center, there are more than 4200 *Chitaya*; big and small, in the Kathmandu Valley.

International Pilgrimage Sites

Buddhism of *Nepalmandala* contains the great pilgrimages site of *Svayambhu Mahācaitya* and *Bauddha Caitya* and the Red *Lokesvara* of *Bungamati*, *Lalitapur*. The date of construction of *Svayambhu*

7 Ibid.

8 Karunakar Vaidya, *Buddhist Tradition and Culture of Kathmandu Valley*, Kathmandu: SajhaPrakashan, 1986, p.77.

9 Ibid

10 *Caitya* monuments containing some sacred objects belonging to the Buddha.

11 Monuments which contain same articles used by the Buddha.

12 *Caitya* monuments with some sacred religious manuscripts stored inside

13 *Chaityas* which are built with some objectives other than the preceding three purposes.

14 Vaidya, f.n. 45, p. 79

and Bauddha dates back to at least 500 A.D.¹⁵ and Red Lokesvara to 800 A.D.¹⁶ Within the Nepālese landscape, these great pilgrimage sites include much of *Newār* mythologies and practical religion.

***Sukhāvati* Tradition**

Buddhism of Nepalmandala is entirely influenced by Mahāyān and Vajrayān Buddhism. The aim of the followers of this Buddhism is not only to achieve *Samyakasambhodi* but also to be born in *Sukhāvati* Heaven, the land of Amitābha Buddha. Therefore, the followers of this Buddhism wish their rebirth in *Sukhāvati* Heaven. When any person passed away, the followers of this Buddhism express: “*Sukhāvati bhūvanaye bāsa lāyemā.*” This means, may he be reborn in *Sukhāvati* Heaven.

Sanskrit Manuscript Based

It is said that Buddhist Doctrine were written in Sanskrit language in the council of Emperor Kanikṣka. After that, many Buddhist manuscripts seem to have been written Sanskrit language. In the context of Nepāl, Sanskrit language was once the official languages in Liccavi period. Almost all inscriptions and testimonies were inscribed in Sanskrit Language in the period. Therefore, the Sanskrit manuscript might have obtained space in Nepāl. Referring to the Sanskrit manuscripts, Dr. Suniti Kumar Catterji writes, "One great service of the people of Nepāl, particularly highly civilized *Newārs*, was the preservation of all the manuscripts of *Mahāyāna* Buddhist literature in Sanskrit.¹⁷ Most of the texts used in the Buddhism of Nepalmandala are written in Sanskrit language which were kept in national archive of Nepal.

Scopes

Svayambhu, Bauddha and Red *Lokesvara* of *Bungamati* have been taken as International Pilgrimage Sites since long. Because, they are recorded not only in the Traditional Buddhism but also in Chinese, Tibetan and Indian sources.¹⁸ Sylvian Levi believed that *Svayambhu* is recorded in a fragment preserved from the account of Wang Hiuen-tse.¹⁹ William states that these sites are identified in illustrations found in 11th century manuscripts.²⁰ Tibetan pilgrimage guides and biographies similarly identify these two sites. Rospatt has mentioned that wealthy Tibetans and Indians were involved in late 12th century for restoration of *Svayambhu*. Hem Raj śākya explains: this is the pilgrimage sites and holy sites for Tibetans and Bhutanies contributed for its renovation. Lama Zhva-dmar-pa offered golden Torans for each shrine of *Caitya* in 1630 CE and offered a golden bell.²¹ Lama Thilendrahna repairs the old bell at *Svayambhu* in 1792 CE.²² Furthermore, the fifteenth renovation of *Svayambhu Caitya* was undertaken by Tibetan Nyigmā Meditation center from America in 2010.

Similarly, the great stupa of Baudha is the principal center for Tibetan Buddhist and it has been a major destination of pilgrims for the entire Indian sub continent, south east and East Asia.²³ In the 14th century, a Tibetan renowned sage named Tongtang Gyelpo visited Bauddha. Since 16 century, successors of Śākya Zampo were appointed as the Tibetan government's residents at Bauddha and they

15 Shakya, f.n.18.

16 Locke, f.n. 13.

17 Min Bahadur Śākya, *Newār Buddhism : problem and Possibilities*, Lalitpur : Nagarjun Institute of Exat method.2006, p. 1

18 Vaidya, f.n. 45.

19 Will Tuladhar, *Remaking Buddhism for Medieval Nepal*, Canada: Routledge, 2006, p.161.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid, p. 160.

22 Ibid, p. 263.

23 Saphya Amatya, *Monument Conservation in Nepal*, Kathmandu: Vajra Book Shop, 2007,P.181.

undertook successive renovations to the fabric of the stupa.²⁴ From these all accounts, it is obvious that *Swayambhu*, *Bauddha* and *Red Lokeśvara* have been International sacred pilgrimage sites since long. At present, these monuments can be further developed as international pilgrimage center.

Challenges

In the 21 century, many foreign scholar have researched on the Buddhism. *Michen Allein* has cited that *Traditional Buddhism of Nepal is the Buddhism without monks, it is of Buddhist Ācāryas. Will Doglous's opinion is against of the manner; he strongly commented, "Saying Buddhism without monks is mistake on several calculation"*. He further writes in this issues: "*Śākya and Vajrācārya* undergo monastic initiation thus they can be said as monks".²⁵ David Gellner writes, Buddhism of *Nepalmandala* is of *Householder Buddhist Monks*. He further says: "*Newār* Buddhism is short for the traditional *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* Buddhism practiced by the *Newārs*; if the *Newār* Buddhists had not been preserving Nepalese culture through Buddhist practice, Nepalese culture would have disappeared from the revolution of history long ago."²⁶ Despite being facing various arguments of people, this Buddhism is surviving without monks. Therefore, this Buddhism nowadays being a unknown Buddhism in the world.

The lay followers have been changing their professions due to influence of modern profession. There was a lineage of profession, the profession was transfer generation to generation that's why they had intensive knowledge of skill but now those skill is being disappeared. When *swayambhu* renovation was undertaken in 2010, the difficult situation was created to search experts in the traditional works of stone, brick, wood etc.

Thousands of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts are preserved in the archive but modern Eurocentric education is influencing in Nepal. New generation does not interest to study Sanskrit language and they donot want to get Buddhist teaching, furthermore government didnot give preference to the Buddhist education even Nepal is the birth place of Buddha.

Traditional Buddhist monasteries concerned with the renowned arts are being disappeared due to the influenced of modern construction. Modern technology is followed by the people and construction of traditional artistic monument became expensive. Thus, people are rejecting to preserve traditional Buddhist art.

Conclusion

Buddhism of *Nepalmandala* has carried out a long history of Nepal from the period of Buddha. It is demonstrating Nepalese art and architecture. The most remarkable character of this Buddhism is that it has preserved the lost traditions of Indian Buddhism to this day. Nowadays, Buddhism of *Nepalmandala* is interpreted in Narrow Sense. It is taken as a Buddhism of *Newār's* only or Buddhism of a limited *Newār* Caste or Buddhism of an ethnic group. In facts, it is Buddhism of *Nepalmandala*.

Due to the modern technology, traditional art and architecture are facing problems and those arts are being disappeared. Similarly, focusing on modern education, the traditional moral and spiritual education of Buddhism is being underestimated. In the modern society, people donot want to follow the Buddhism in traditional way, thus the traditional ritual and practice system is loosing its originality. Besides, lay followers and loosing their expertise in their occupation. In addition, the huge amount of Sanskrit literature written in ancient scripts are being a matter of archive. Furthermore, the Buddhist

²⁴ Ibid, 182.

²⁵ Will Tuladhar Douglas, *Remaking Buddhism for Medieval Nepal*, Canada: Routledge, 2006, p. 119,123.

²⁶ David N. Gellner, *Monk, Householder and Tantric Priest*, Delhi: Manas Saikia for foundation Books , 1993, pp. 218-225.

art and architecture, which are also known as National Heritage of Nepal, are in critical condition due to lack of preservation and negligence of modern society; they are scattered here and there. Therefore, attention should be given towards those monuments.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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