

NOTES ON THE URĀY AND THE MODERNIZATION OF NEWAR BUDDHISM

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Introduction

For centuries, the Urāy (Nep. Udās) merchants have been among the most influential Newar Buddhist lay groups and a significant community among the Kathmandu Valley's cultural elite. This article discusses the prominent sociocultural aspects of this distinctive Buddhist merchant caste of Kathmandu and considers the modernization of Newar Buddhism with reference to them. I am pleased to contribute to a special volume in memory of Nepal's great scholar Dhanavajra Vajracarya, whose ground breaking work will continue to inform generations of future scholars who wish to understand Nepal's rich historical legacy.

Buddhist Identity as Social Marker

Modern Urāy explain their name as a derivative of *upāsaka*, a Sanskrit term meaning "devout layman" and see their group's Buddhist identity expressed in other areas: they eschew the "Five Professions" prohibited in the Buddhist texts (trade in weapons, animals, meat, wine, poison) and uphold the ethos of non-violence in personal relations and ritual preferences. In addition to not eating beef and pork, Urāy also abstain from chicken eggs and meat, marking a restriction based upon a Buddhist story (Lewis 1984:204).

Pan-Newar "caste logic" generally recognizes "Urāy" as *vaiśyas* who rank as a high Buddhist caste just below the Śākyas and Vajrācāryas (Furer-Haimendorf 1975). Urāy social customs have been thoroughly aligned with the Indic *dharmaśāstras*, although with a reworking usually well-adapted to Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine (Lewis 1994).

Urāy patronage to the Newar *saṃgha* of householder Bare (Vajrācāryas and Śākyas) and their devotion to celestial *bodhisattvas* and tantric traditions have marked their adherence to Mahāyāna Buddhism. Each family has a Vajrācārya priest from one of the city's eighteen main *vihāras*; the family *guruju*'s traditional role is to preside over all the family's life-

cycle rituals and to impart simple religious teachings, including every person's first initiation in meditation (*nikhan*). Local patronage has been such that there has always been an elite group of Vajrācāryas: some have mastered Sanskrit and become learned interpreters of Buddhist literature, while others have become adepts of *vajrayāna* practice who have passed down tantric initiations (*dikṣā*) within the Vajrācārya-Śākya and Urāy communities (Gellner 1992).

The wealthiest and most pious Urāy have donated the funds to maintain the Svayambhū *stūpa* complex and other centers of local devotional practice, such as Jana Bāhā, Bijeśvarī, and Si Gha: Bāhā. As discussed below, Urāy trade relations with Tibet also sustained Tibetan Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley (Lewis and Jamspal 1988; Lewis 1989, Lewis 1993).

It is still commonly written in scholarship and popular literary sources about Nepal that religion in the Kathmandu Valley is a jumble of Buddhism inextricable from Hinduism. "Syncretism" may be an apt term to describe the beliefs and practices of some communities of farmers and other castes, but a typical Urāy, Śākya, or Vajrācārya would wax indignant at the suggestion that these faiths were interchangeable. For them, being Buddhist, not Hindu, has deep meaning, both as the basis of personal spiritual practice and in the deeply-felt sentiments of group identity.

Urāy Subcastes

There are numerous Urāy subgroups and their names suggest origins as artisan and mercantile specialists, as most refer to craftsman identities: Siṃkaḥmi (colloquial 'Śthāpit') carpenters, Kamsakār ('Kasāḥ') metal workers, Tāmrakār 'Tamoṭ' or 'Tamaḥ') bell metal workers, Silpakār ('Lwahākaḥmi' stone masons, Sikrikār ('Āwā') tilers, Rājkarṇikār ('Marikaḥmi') confectioners, and Sindūrakār powder sellers. Only the Baniyā ('Merchants') and Tulādhar ('Scale Holders') lack names indicative of specific occupational origins. The Kathmandu Baniyā traditional occupation is herbalist.

Group Origins

Although Urāy caste origins cannot be discerned from known historical records, it is clear that group history is multistranded. The multiplicity of separate clan deities (*digu dyah*) and the dispersal of different family tantric deities (*āgā dyah*) suggest that Urāy origins and avenues of assimilation varied. Some Urāy lineages probably date back to Śākya or Vajrācārya males who did not undergo Buddhist initiations (and so fell one status level), and there were doubtless also children of mixed marriages

between Vajrācārya or Śākya men with women of lower caste groups. The Rājkarṇikār and Tāmraḱār subcastes have been incorporated from lineages in Patan where these groups are not distinctively Buddhist. Another likely avenue of assimilation was through admitting the children of Urāy second marriages with Tibetan wives when Urāy “diaspora traders” lived in Tibet.

All nine Urāy groups today constitute a single marriage circle defined by participation in common ritual and commensal activities. Within this circle is internal stratification: lineages with surnames Tulādhar, Baniyā, Kaṃsakār, and Tāmraḱār are ranked highest in contemporary Kathmandu. The special prestige of Tulādhar lineages is shown by the growing practice of other Urāy subgroups now abandoning their older designations and giving “Tulādhar” as their family surname. Some modern Tulādhar have suggested that there were two original Urāy core groups: families with trading ties to Tibet and those still known by the name “Baniyā”.

The Urāy and Tibetan Relations

Over the last millennium, cultural relations between Nepal and Tibet have waxed and waned, with Newar artisans and religious teachers conveying Indo-Buddhist culture northward in the earlier period. In recent centuries, transplanted Tibetan lamas and monasteries have affected Nepal’s religious culture. The Urāy, especially the Lhasa traders, have been prominent in this relationship both as patrons and Buddhist practitioners.

Tibetan records on the Kathmandu Valley in the Malla era illumine the unique evolution of the Urāy as a separate caste only in Kathmandu, the Newar city most dominated by Tibetan traders (Lewis and Jamsal 1988; Lewis 1989). Malla Kathmandu *deśa*’s complex relationship between Newar Kings, diaspora merchants, and Tibetan lamas developed in a synergistic manner: Urāy merchants firmly established the Kathmandu Valley as a frontier center of Tibetan monasticism; directly and indirectly, the Nepalese state profited significantly from the success of Kathmandu merchant families trading in Tibet (Regmi 1971; Bista 1978). Nepal’s rulers had many reasons to support resident Tibetan lamas and their Newar allies to insure a sound trade relationship with the Tibetan state. This alliance broke down in the later Rana period, and it was Urāy devotion to a charismatic Tibetan *lama* in the early 1920s that caused debilitating fissures within the Kathmandu Buddhist communities (Rosser 1966).

Devotional Music

The Urāy still preserve the oldest devotional music played by Newar Buddhists: the Guṃlā, Dhāḥ, and Pāñca Tāl *bājās*. These groups orchestrate group drumming accompanied by cymbal-playing, woodwinds, horns, and

singing at festivals. All of the *bājās* are still performed by the separate Urāy subgroups acting alone and not all groups have sustained each. These musical groups clearly had their genesis in the common interest to effectively worship the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and gods. Up to the present, a *bājā*'s ability to play well is valued as a positive reflection on the sub-community's reputation.

In the later Rana period, when the *bhajan* style of Hindu devotional music was imported from India, Urāy also began to play the instruments of this genre (tabla, sitar, harmonium, violin) and compose a myriad songs in Newari to Buddhist and Hindu divinities. Local neighborhood *bhajans* still orchestrate singing every night, and these groups draw members from most locally-residing castes. It is this cultural performance that has captured the imagination of modern merchants: Urāy poets and composers have transposed a bhakti Hindu medium in Indic languages to create a popular hybrid Newari expression of Buddhist devotionalism. Some of Nepal's finest musicians on the violin, sitar and harmonium have come from the Urāy Buddhist *bhajans*.

Samyak and Kumār Pyākhā

All the great Newar religious festivals reflect the Valley's socio-political history, and two of these in Kathmandu, Samyak and Kumār Pyākhā, are marked by prominent Urāy participation and are important expressions of the merchant-royal palace relationship.

The Samyak festival of Kathmandu, the largest of the city's Buddhist celebrations, is held every twelve years. It assembles a microcosm of Newar civilization—from king to peasant laborers, artisans to priests, officiants of almost every Newar Buddhist temple. Each group has a defined role that coordinates a mass ritual donation to images of Dipankara Buddha, other Buddhist deities, and to the Valley's Newar *saṃgha*.

The Kathmandu Samyak festival expresses the nature of the relationship that once existed between the Malla kings and Newar Buddhist community. On the first evening of Samyak, all the images from private homes and public temples are brought to the old Hanuman Dhoka Palace, where they receive offerings from the royal family and the general public. Next day, all process to a field at the southeast of Svayambhū hill. Seated in a roofed observation platform (which in 1980 and 1993 was surmounted by a *stūpa*), the king then observes while the assembled deities and the *saṃgha* receive special offerings. In Samyak, the polity's group relations can be discerned: the first day sees all Buddhas and bodhisattvas from town and periphery gather outside the old palace, thus defining and blessing it as a legitimate and sacred center; on day two, the king then attends as royla witness who

observes image-bearing merchants, and others make a mass *dāna* offering that in theory includes every member of every Newar *saṃgha*. Most Urāy lineages join certain Śākya *saṃghas* in a common *guthi* that organizes and finances these proceedings (Tuladhar 1980).

In Kumār Pyākhā, the royal cult to Durgā-Taleju, provides another locus of the Palace-Urāy alliance. The Urāy again take a leading position among Kathmandu's Buddhist laymen: two groups provide male dancers of Kumār and Daitya during Mohini (Nep. Dasain) in service of the Kathmandu ruler's offerings to the goddess, who is regarded as protectress of the state. This is another simulacrum of the chief exchange relationships in Nepal's traditional polity: by taking on these roles, the Urāy express their alliance with the king and symbolically focus their religious power, derived from Vajrayāna Buddhism, toward the preservation of the state; in return, the King acknowledges the Buddhists' high standing in society and the pragmatic power of their religious tradition. The special interdependence between Kathmandu royalty and Newar bazaar merchants is still expressed in the yearly continuance of these festivals.

Modern Theravāda Buddhism

In the recent cultural history of Nepal, the Urāy have been particularly influential in the transplantation of another form of Buddhism: Theravāda monasticism from Sri Lanka, Burma, and meditation centers of India. Urāy patrons have been leaders in building Theravāda institutions, and a number of prominent monks have come from their families. The Theravadin movement has been successful at attracting the Urāy middle class, especially women, who desire more freedom in their activities. For the many Newars attracted to it, the modernist Theravada makes intellectual understanding and meditation instruction central to its practice of Buddhism. The doctrinal emphasis against caste and class discrimination has also resonated with the democratic changes that have swept Nepal.

Modernity and Buddhist Tradition

The nature of religious change among the Urāy gives an important case study reading of the wider changes affecting modern Newar society. The Urāy occupy a spectrum of influential positions in modern Nepal. Some of the largest import-export companies, food retailers, and construction firms are their enterprises. Families that have long benefited from wealth and access to education have members who now occupy the highest echelons of power in politics, government service, international development, and education.

Within the old city markets, the rapid rate of contemporary social change in the Kathmandu Valley is clearly discernible, as many of the institutions and traditions that existed in the isolated city-states of the Malla era have slowly devolved in the modern period. Many *guthis* have disappeared, many festival observances have declined, much sacred art has been sold off or stolen, and many *vihāras* and temples have fallen into disrepair.

Over the past century, at least the loss of support from the laity has also led to a decline in doctrinal, meditative, and ritual competency among Vajrācāryas. Cycles of negative reciprocity have produced a downward spiral of lost patronage, status, spiritual capabilities. This process has gone on for well into a fourth generation in many instances. The Newar *saṃgha*, tied solely to a system of group leadership based upon simple age seniority, has attempted no reforms or innovations to arrest its own decline.

The cuts in patronage to the Newar *saṃgha* have been made both by the Newar laity, particularly the Urāy, and through diminishing government support. For example, many Urāy still give the same stipend to the family priest as they gave twenty years ago; similarly, the royal *dāna* made at the modern Samyak festivals, formerly the greatest festival of giving to the Buddhist community, is now minimal. Beyond coordinating internationally-funded restorations of Svayambhū and of buildings in the Malla palace complexes in Bhaktapur and Patan, and outside of official tourist brochure rhetoric and diplomatic window dressing, the governments of modern Nepal have invested little to sustain the cultural vitality of Newar Buddhism.

“Religious Field” as Basis of Inquiry

The increasing pluralism among Buddhist groups supported by the Urāy argues for adopting the notion of “religious field” to analyze modern religious change. For Newar Buddhists, Tibetan *lamas* Theravādin *bhikṣus* have added to have vitality of Buddhism in their country and, in part, they have shifted their patronage away from the Vajrācāryas to them. One measure of the latter’s success is that *Vipassana* meditation popularised by S.N. Goenka is now a practice widely known and done in Urāy families. My research has clearly indicated that for Urāy of all sorts, Buddhism has remained a meaningful source of world view and identity.

The Urāy attitude to their “venerable old traditions” moves paradoxically in two opposing directions. Although the Vajrācāryas have in most cases lost the ability to inspire spiritual respect among the Urāy, and as Newar Buddhist culture is no longer solely dominated by *vajrayāna* Buddhism, many Urāy have viewed this development with considerable indifference. As good lay Buddhists, they seek *punya* and proficient, spiritually-endowed ritualists; few Vajrācāryas can today claim such special status. The Urāy

also increasingly seek to have Buddhist doctrine connect with their experience of the modern world, and few Vajrācāryas are capable of articulating such a position based upon Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna philosophy.

In business and so in the religious life, a merchant should not make bad investments or act without careful analytical understanding; to do so is to harvest an inferior return on one's *dāna*. Thus, as the major Newar patron group and the former pillars of local Mahāyāna traditions, modern Urāy have continually cut back upon their material support to the Vajrācārya *saṃgha* and their institutions, as many have also withdrawn their engagement with Mahāyāna philosophy. The Urāy's diminished *dāna*, the decline of Newar "gurujuṣ" as learned and spiritual "gurus", the near end of royal patronage, and the little state protection afforded to the Newar *vihāra*'s former land endowments have all contributed to this decline.

That Newar Buddhism survives at all in 1995 is due to a stubborn conservatism based upon the community's positive attitude to its cultural past. Respecting the elders' attachment to past practices still compels most Urāy families to resist final abandonment of the long-established customs that require the family Vajrācārya's ritual performances. This conservation ethos has also been buttressed by numerous modern books and periodicals written by Buddhist intellectuals—Vajrācāryas, Śākyas, Urāy, and others—who have in varying ways argued for the value of Newar culture.

In fact, there has been considerable vitality shown in the textual domain of older Mahāyāna culture over the past 15 years. Some patrons and intellectuals not drawn into the Tibetan or Theravadin orbits have even been supporters of the recent surge of newly-published Newari translations of Mahāyāna *sūtras*, of a school in Kathmandu set up by Badri Bajrācārya to train young Vajrācāryas, and of organizations dedicated to the continuation of Newari literature and script study. Thus, these attempts at revival indicate that a considerable commitment to the older culture remains. Urāy also express a widespread view that their old traditions' have worth and that their indigenous Buddhism remains at the center of their identity vis-à-vis other Newars and other Nepalis.

Religion, Breakdown, and Change in Modern Nepal

In the past, the Urāy were a key group that maintained the indigenous Newar Buddhist traditions. In many ways they held the culture together through their patronage and leadership. Formerly, the characteristic way to spend excess wealth was through the conspicuous patronage traditions. Nowadays, there are many new ways to spend this wealth, especially on luxuries imported from the world outside Nepal: automobiles, motorcycles, stereos, cameras, video players, satellite televisions, and other household

furnishings. Religious institutions now get a much diminished percentage of the rich class's largess, and some of the richer Urāy have also been the first to adopt new innovations and "drop out" of the normal agenda of the traditional lifestyle. This group's increasingly individualized, more private lifestyle signals the wider societal pattern: less time and resources will further diminish the older cultural traditions that they Urāy as an elite class once championed.

The future of any religion cannot be divorced from its larger socio-political context. Thus, Newars in Kathmandu must contend directly with the nation's failure to develop its rural economy, urban infrastructure, and educational systems. Migration from the hills and industrial pollution within the Valley have recently accelerated the rapid deterioration of Kathmandu's urban ecology. The precipitous decline in city water supply, air quality, sanitation, and public transportation are problems faced by all living in Kathmandu. Further, the call for identification with the new programs of the political parties in many instances conflicts with the older norm of loyalty to Newar Buddhist culture. (Prominent examples include Marxist atheism versus Buddhist devotion or the communist ideal of a classless society versus the predominant high-caste leadership of these parties.) It is still unclear how the young will identify with their "venerable traditions", given their country's stagnation, the appeals of new political movements, and the attraction of global mass media in terms of it siphoning off of surplus time and excess wealth.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of Buddhism and throughout its subsequent Asian history, merchants have played a decisive role in sustaining the faith as patrons, exponents, and community leaders. As the leading Urāy subcaste's name suggests, the Tilādharas "hold the scales" that regulate commercial transactions in Kathmandu's major markets. Today, as the Vajrācārya *saṃgha* competes for Buddhist standing with the *lamas* and *bhikṣus*, and as all religious institutions compete for the community's support against the lure of TV, multi-party politics, and the crises in Kathmandu's urban environment, the Urāy merchants must likewise weigh their needs, reassess their contributions, and determine the future of Buddhist tradition in Kathmandu.

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