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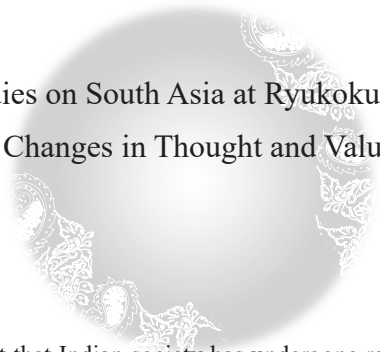
RINDAS Series of Working Papers 31

Textual Education of Women: Theravada and *Anagārikās* in Contemporary Nepal

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Integrated Area Studies on South Asia at Ryukoku University (RINDAS): Fundamental Changes in Thought and Values in South Asia



In many studies, it has been pointed out that Indian society has undergone radical changes since the 1990s. This is seen in the political sphere in the spread and the deepening of democracy. In terms of the economy, changes are remarkable in the development of the market economy, improvements in living conditions and widening of economic gaps, which is one of the negative impacts of such economic growth. Societally, this has been expressed through the appearance and rise of various social movements. Culturally and religiously, it has been expressed through a parallel rise in assertion of identities by diverse communities. These changes can be seen as the results of embryonic fundamental changes in thought and values of people in India and South Asia.

The unified theme of this project is “Fundamental Changes in Thought and Values in South Asia.” One perspective being used to approach this theme is genealogical research along the long timeline of philosophy and thought in South Asian societies, using Ryukoku University’s extensive accumulation of research. Another is analysis of fundamental changes in values based on fieldwork research of actual conditions. These perspectives are combined in comprehensive research, with the aim of identifying the sources of changes in the foundations of contemporary Indian and South Asian societies, and the driving power behind them. Special attention is paid to the rise of the Dalits, other lower strata people, and religious minorities, a phenomenon that represents dynamic changes in contemporary Indian and South Asian societies. The project examines the background and theory behind this, with relation to the history of philosophy and thought, and investigates and analyzes changes in peoples’ living conditions, consciousness, and sense of values, based on fieldwork research.

The "South Asian Area Studies" Project (FY 2016 to 2021) is being operated and conducted by expanding upon the National Institutes for the Humanities’ “Contemporary India Area Studies” Project (Phase 1: FY 2010 to 2014, Phase 2: FY 2015). Ryukoku University is one of six institutions working together, conducting joint networked research. It is joined by Kyoto University (the central research hub), the National Museum of Ethnology (the secondary research hub), the University of Tokyo, Hiroshima University, and the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

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Sakura Kudo

[Abstract]

This paper considers how the actions of *anagārikās* or female Buddhist renunciants in Nepal influence the local people's literacy and lifecycle rituals.

Literacy education of women through reading and writing is closely related to how female ascetics or *anagārikās* (homeless-ness) acquire textual education by reading Buddhist texts in nunneries. *Anagārikās* of Theravada Buddhism in Nepal encourage women's literacy and also emphasize personal moral growth through such literature.

Theravada was introduced into Nepal in the modern times. The Buddhist monastic tradition collapsed in Nepal when the married clergy was gradually embraced by society during the 11th to 12th centuries. During the 20th century resurgence of the modern Buddhism, celibate and monastic forms of practice were reintroduced via India and Sri Lanka. Although this modernized form of Buddhism is known as Theravada in Nepal, it may not completely ascribe to the traditional view of the term. The years approaching 1990 bore witness to a turning point. Nepalese Theravada grew significantly alongside a democratic agenda promoting Buddhism's symbolism of equality for ethnic cultures and languages, and thereby, freedom of religion as well. Since the first Theravada nunnery was built in Kathmandu in 1964, its

monastics have been teaching courses on *pariyatti sikkhā* (education about Tipiṭaka) not only for nuns, but also lay women of the Newar society.

Introduction

I . Aim and Background

This paper considers how the actions of *anagārikās* in Nepal influence the local people's literacy and lifecycle rituals. Two aims of this paper are firstly, to consider the characteristics of Theravada in the South Asian context, and then, to examine the practices by *anagārikās* in terms of the textual education through letters, in contemporary Nepal. In this paper, I will clarify Theravada in the context of a modern Buddhist movement. In particular, I will focus on Theravada as a tool to oppose the current social order as well as the diversity of Buddhism within the country, and its characteristic as “community.” This paper introduces the practices by *anagārikās* in Buddhist contexts, and to reflect on gender dynamics in the modern Buddhist movement. Then, I would like to consider what kind of influence the teaching practice, i.e. literacy education and textual education, has had on the local practice.

A. Modern Buddhist Movement and Theravada

Theravada in Nepal is influenced by the modern Buddhist movement that had its origins in India and Sri Lanka. In particular, efforts of people such as Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933), Lakshmi Narasu (1861–1934), and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), have both directly and indirectly influenced the movement. The writings and talks of those philosophers and activists have a common thread in that they regard Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion, and emphasize rationality and science. The exact genealogy of the term of Theravada, which focuses on the master-to-disciple relationship, cannot always be applied to the common usage of “Theravada” within Nepal. In that respect, Theravada in Nepal needs to

be distinguished from the traditional view of the term Theravada. This leads to another question: why must it be Theravada?

Within the background of the movement is the resurgence of idealized Buddhism during the 19th century in the West. The 19th century was a period in which contrasting opinions were expressed about whether or not Buddhism in Asia should be regarded as corrupted and destroyed. Scholars trained as Protestant liberal theologians applied prominent Christian interpretations and narratives to their reading of Buddhist history and texts. Just as they viewed Catholic rituals and theology as corrupt late additions, these protestant theologies also assumed that Mahayana was a “fallen” and corrupted form of Buddhism, pushing the focus to Theravada and Pali scriptures, which they assumed were closer to the period of the Buddha. Thus, the modern Buddhist movement, especially during the latter half of the 19th century, was largely inclined toward Theravada. The attitude of deploring Buddhism, which disappeared in the latter half of that century, was in line with the narrative of “Christian abolition” after the death of Jesus by Protestant Liberal Theologians. As a consequence of the development of this theory of fallen/corrupted Buddhism, and the assumption that Mahayana Buddhism represented the fallen form, the focus shifted to Theravada, which relies on Pali scriptures that are close to the era of the Buddha (Shimoda 2010:40-41). Thus, the modern Buddhist movement in the 19th century appeared to be largely inclined to Theravada.

In this research, I would like to temporarily define Nepal's Theravada as a “community with loose bonds” that shares fragmentary keywords of the modern Buddhism, such as philosophy, rationality, and scientific temper. It does not exactly represent the master-to-disciple relationship, or the vertical connection that leads to a single genealogy. Rather, it can be said that it is a community of horizontal connections that share a number of fundamental critical notions regarding society, institutions, political movements, ethics, etc. while attempting to deconstruct the existing order.

According to Akio Tanabe, Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in India was a "heterodox" thought movement against "orthodoxy" (Tanabe 2018:264), specifically the caste system suggested by the *Brahmin's Code of Conduct*, which was responsible for structuring the social order. Conversion is seen as an act as it represents the deconstruction of the current order by the heterodox inquiring for a "nature of religion"¹. However, there is no specific need for this "nature of religion" to be restricted to Buddhism. It can be *tantra*, *bhakti*, or even Ambedcarism. Tanabe points out that the main actions or actions over Buddhism to the existing ordered structure are also instructive in the study of Nepal's Theravada. Gauri Viswanathan, an Indian female scholar who studied with Orientalist advocate Edward Said, sheds more light on Tanabe's theory. She uses the phrase "development of a moral community" in her analysis of Ambedkar. The moral demands of his conversion to Buddhism became moral law, as opposed to political devices such as people's representation and suffrage. By converting this into a political right, we built a framework called "objection." According to her, a single agent, as a Dalit, overcame victimization through individual striving, but with communal acceptance and awareness that a new agency has been formed for the entire community. For the above reasons, I would like to distinguish Nepal's Theravada from the traditional Presbyterian lineage, while interpreting it as community which develops the agency among modernist Buddhists.

B. Gender and Education

Nepal had a Hindu tyranny overseen by the Rana family from 1846 to 1951. During this time, general education, travel to foreign countries, and religious freedom were severely restricted. Education levels tended to be higher for men of higher castes and lower for women. A woman who came to India in 1950 and became an *anagārikā* of Theravada by entering Myanmar's academic schools described the social situation at that time as follows:

¹ Tanabe explains the "nature of religion" here that a sensibility and commitment to the actual 'reality' which support the practice aiming its meaning and value, and also an intentionality to reconstruct the relationship between oneself and others (Tanabe 2018:261).

It was too hard. Under the Rana regime, no one was permitted to enter Nepal from abroad or to go abroad.... Adults did not have to think of educating girls. If a girl knew even seven letters [stressed with fingers], she was told that she would become a *bokṣī* (magician) or a prostitute.*

There were several reasons for not educating women, including that they were meant to take care of their home. Families needed to pay a large amount of dowry for their daughters at the time of marriage because no money was spent on their education.

Immediately after the fall of Rana's tyranny in 1951, the literacy rate of the whole of Nepal was less than 2%, and it is reported that the enrollment rate for the primary education level was only about 1% (Nagaoka 2018:60). In 1961, during King Mahendra's era, the All Round National Education Committee was formed under the Panchayat system, which marked a major turning point in the education system. Women began to receive primary education, and the system of co-education began around 1963. In a village near Kathmandu, the literacy rate of women was around 10% in 1970, but had increased to 52% by 1995 (for men, the rate increased from 40% to 80% [Ishii 2005:193]). According to the 2011 census, the literacy rate in urban Newar was 80.07% (87.94% for men, 72.72% for women [Dahal 2014:15-16]). Today, 90% of young people are literate. In addition, school education is provided only in English at urban private schools.

It was difficult for women whose literacy rate was lower than men to read Buddhist texts and gain knowledge. Yet another problem was that women were not recognized as formal Buddhists because of not only their low literacy rate but also caste-related reasons and hereditary customs. Since the 1950s, publishing techniques have improved, and more people have been learning about Buddhism from such publications. It is also behind the improvement in the literacy rate. What once used to be hereditary inherited knowledge of men has now become accessible to many as a result of these publications. What this means is that people

* Translation, meaning in parentheses, collection in 2018 by author.

who could not choose Buddhism because of their lineage or customary reasons—in other words, people who were not hereditary Buddhists (caste) and women—were able to learn Buddhism by themselves. Furthermore, in Theravada, publication was directly related to gaining merit, so a great many publications were printed.

C. Textual Education and Literacy Education

In this paper, the significance of focusing on *anagārikās* in Nepal is that it deals with the interface of textual education that emphasizes education through text in the context of the changes in the literacy education of women. In Theravada nunneries, reading practices primarily refer to literacy education of women. Moreover, in Nepali language, the verb *paḍhne* means that to study, and to read as well, that no clear distinction is understood between those meanings.²

The texts mentioned here refer to Buddhist scriptures and text. The phrase “textual education” here means a method of education that involves reading and writing to acquire knowledge about Buddhism, and is distinguished from verbal education imparted by a master to a disciple in the genealogical way. Today, reading is recognized as a basic training method for the practice of austerities as a Buddhist. In Nepal, textual education that involves reading books is a basic training method for *sāmaṇeras* (male novice) and *anagārikās*. Additionally, for lay people, there are some classes to learn *pariyatti*, learning the knowledge of Tripitaka, which are offered every week at the Theravada Vihār (monastery). As a result, reading practice in textual education can be said to be the foundation for learning Buddhist teachings and acquiring knowledge.

On the other hand, literacy education has been promoted as a major component of development policy. Literacy, according to UNESCO's definition of 1958, is the ability to

² In local Newari language, *bhwane* refers to study. People usually use *ākhā* [letter; script] *bwane* meaning to study colloquially rather than using *bhwane* alone.

“read and write with understanding a short simple statement on his/her everyday life.” Yet, in development discourses in developing countries, literacy has been directly linked to national power, and since the 1980s in particular, it has been recognized as a major goal in human development (Nagaoka 2018:31-35). Thus, in literacy education, reading is different from conventional literacy, which passively adopted Western modern “knowledge.” Moreover, since the 80s, learners have started seeking meaning from various social, cultural, and social contexts. In politics and other fields, learning is regarded as an act that one practices by being rooted in the social situation. In short, literacy education is not merely an act of learning words, but a practice that enables the participation of individuals in social, economic, cultural, religious, or political situations.

The practice of reading texts makes it possible to not only incorporate and assimilate information from different societies, but also disseminate one's thoughts and serve as a critic. In the case of *anagārikās*, who are introduced in this paper, there was an appeal for the improvement in the status of female Buddhists through the addition of a new interpretation for “re-reading” the Canon or the collection of Buddhist scriptures. In addition, the practice has made it possible to criticize education that has conventionally not been accessible to women from the Buddhist context. From this point of view, the relationship between textual education and literacy education can be a way of showing the independent development of an individual through reading practice.

II. Buddhism in Nepal

A. Nepal and the Buddhist Population

Nepal is located along the border between India and China. It has historically been interacting with other nations, which have influenced Nepal politically, socially, and economically. This small country has a population of about 26.49 million (Nepal Census 2011), of which nearly 40% is concentrated in the capital city of Kathmandu. The main

industries are tourism and service industries, while the foremost occupation of the people is agriculture (30%). It is a multi-ethnic country, with 123 languages spoken as a first language (as of 2011), while Nepali is the official language.

Nepal abolished the monarchy in 2008 and switched to a Federal Democratic Republic, but until then Nepal had been a kingdom with Hinduism as the national religion. The abolition of the monarchy was a consequence of the civil war between the government and the Maoist communist party, which lasted from 1996 to 2006.

Nepal's census appears to have numerical mistakes, and statistics have been “used as a means of identity politics” (Ishii 2017:96). Table 1 shows the number of adherents and percentages related to religious identity in Nepal. It came to be known later that the Hindu government had misrepresented the figures in 1971 to 1981, which prompted criticism from ethnic groups and resulted in the Janajati (ethnic) movement. Also, it was found that the understanding of *dharma*, religion, differed among people in the country. Nepal's first national census was conducted in 1952 (denoted as “1953/54”) after the fall of the Rana regime. Surveyors dispatched to various places report how it was difficult for people to understand the definition of *dharma*, such as Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism, and that the local people did not realize that the term could have different connotations. Also, because of the historical background, being a Hindu was considered to be an advantage in social situations, so Buddhists were often referred to as Hindus. People from religions other than monotheistic Islam and Christianity were more flexible in terms of blending different forms of faith and indigenous gods. Table 2 shows the number of Buddhists in different ethnic groups. The Tamangs have about 1.34 million Buddhists (87% of the ethnic population), Magar about 340,000 (18%), Gurung 320,000 (62%), Newar 140,000 (10%), Sherpa 110,000 (98%), and mountain tribes 13,000 (98%).

Although Buddhists account for 10% of the total Newar population (1,320,000), they mostly identify themselves with Newar Vajrayana Buddhism that is based on the Newar caste

system, with the *Gubajus* (Vajracharya as surname [priest]) and *Bares* (Sakya [gold smith]) placed at the top of the hierarchy. Their roles are family priests, and get caste rewards *jajiman* for their religious services. Thus, other seek the service of these castes when performing ritualistic ceremonies and funerals. The *Urays* (trader) and *Saymis* (oil presser), who had historically traded with Tibet, are still actually intimate with Tibetan Buddhism, and the *Jyapus* (famer) are observed in relatively large numbers in Theravada while continuing their caste-related tradition. The problem here is that Newar Buddhism is associated with a caste system and has hereditary privileges, so one cannot be a formal Buddhist by personal will. Therefore, the social situation offers no choice but to profess faith in traditions other than Newar Buddhism.

Table 1 : Transition of Religious Population in Nepal

Religion	1953 / 54		1961		1971		1981		1991		2001		2011	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
Hinduism	7,318,392	88.9%	8,254,403	87.7%	10,330,009	89.4%	13,445,787	89.5%	15,996,953	86.5%	18,330,121	80.6%	21,551,492	81.3%
Buddhism	707,104	8.6%	807,991	9.3%	866,411	7.5%	799,081	5.3%	1,439,142	7.8%	2,442,520	10.7%	2,396,099	9.0%
Islam	208,899	2.5%	280,597	3.0%	351,186	3.0%	399,197	2.7%	653,218	3.5%	954,023	4.2%	162,370	4.4%
Kiranti									318,389	1.7%	818,106	3.6%	807,169	3.0%
Christianity			458				3,891	<.1%	31,280	0.2%	101,976	0.5%	375,699	1.4%
Jainism			831		2,541		9,430	0.1%	7,561	<.1%	4,108	<.1%	3,214	<.1%
Others	684								26,416	0.1%	86,095	0.4%	136,880	
Unstated			5,716	0.1%	5,836	0.1%	365,445	2.4%	18,138	0.1%			61,581	0.2%
合計	8,235,079	100	9,349,996	100	11,555,983	100	15,022,831	100	18,491,097	100	22,736,934	100	25,494,504	100

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal

Table 2: Buddhist Population for Ethnic Groups

Ethnic / caste group	2001			2011		
	Number of ethnic group	Buddhist		Number of ethnic groups	Buddhist	
		number	%		number	%
1. Tamang	1,282,304	1,157,461	90.2%	1,539,830	1,344,139	87.2%
2. Magar	1,622,421	397,036	24.4%	1,887,733	340,608	18.0%
3. Gurung	543,571	375,252	69.0%	522,641	327,813	62.7%
4. Newar	1,242,232	190,629	15.3%	1,321,933	141,982	10.7%
5. Sherpa	154,622	143,528	92.8%	112,946	111,068	98.3%
6. Bhote	19,621	11,655	59.4%	13,397	13,173	98.3%
7. Chantel	9,814	6,301	64.2%	11,810	0	0.0%
8. Jirel	5,316	4,625	87.7%	5,774	0	0.0%
9. Lepcha	3,660	3,250	88.7%	3,445	0	0.0%
10. Yohlmo	579	570	98.4%	10,752	9,819	91.3%
11. Ghale				22,881	11,451	50.0%
合計	4,884,140	2,290,307	46.8%	5,453,142	2,300,053	42.1%

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal

B. Narratives for Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Theravada

There are three main categories of Buddhism in Nepal: Mahayana (Mahāyāna), Vajrayana (Vajrayāna), and Theravada (Theravāda). The basic doctrines of Buddhism remain common to all forms, even while they have their unique characteristics in social narratives. Of course, the divisions do not explain the genealogy of Buddhism per se.³

Mahayana generally reminds people of Tibetan Buddhists. This may include “Lamaism,” whose ritual priest is a Lama (Np. lama), who is a secondary monk involved in Tibetan Buddhism. Those who are believed to belong to ethnic groups such as Gurung, Thakali, and Tamang and use Tibetan-Burmese languages are said to belong to the Nyingma School in Tibetan Buddhism. However, in some mountain regions such as Yohmo in central Nepal, Lamaism is followed, with Lamas as ritual priests. Strictly speaking, Lamaism and Bon may have to be distinguished from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but Mahayana is said to have a broad meaning encompassing those traditions.

Vajrayana is generally identified with Newar Buddhism, rather than Tibetan Buddhism. Both Newar Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism share the Vajrayana tradition, but the Newars especially tend to distinguish the latter from Vajrayana by differentiating between non-Newar Buddhism and Newar Buddhism. When it is stressed that there is no disconnect between the two forms of Buddhism with the same tradition, and that historically both have had an interactive and intimate relationship, Mahayana is explained. This kind of Mahayana-Theravada confrontational axis became remarkable around the 1930s (LeVine & Gellner 2008:11-12).

Theravada is more complicated. Researchers point out that the compositional narratives of Theravada and Mahayana are an interruption to Buddhist studies (LeVine & Gellner

³ In terms of genealogical Buddhism, it is not necessary to distinguish between Mahayana and Vajrayana. However, in general conversation, “Vajrayana is Mahayana, but in Tibetan Buddhism (Mahayana), there is no animal sacrifice, so it is different from Newar Buddhism (Vajrayana).” While accepting the basic interpretation of Vajrayana as Mahayana, it is also possible to distinguish the former from the latter at the narrative level. For this reason, a clear boundary for the group is not drawn from the beginning, and it is used to distinguish the parties in the conversation.

2008:12-15). However, when Theravada is explained, Mahayana and Vajrayana are recognized as being on the opposite side, when they are judged mainly in terms of the concept of leaving home, asceticism, and *ahimsa* or “non-violence.” According to Theravada, having a wife, following secret practices for union with the gods, and allowing eating and drinking are characteristics of Mahayana and Vajrayana. However, as described in more detail later, the development of Theravada in Nepal is strongly connected to the people from Newar. As a result, when the people of Newar try to explain their Buddhism from a traditional view, they could find it difficult to talk about their own culture as Vajrayana. At the same time, the description of Theravada, which was revived with the support of many Newars, divides the people.

Buddhism in the Newar society represents a movement for the revival of Buddhism in the society, while striking a balance between Vajrayana and Theravada. On the other hand, Theravada's existing believers believe in following the precepts such as the Five Precepts without leaving their homes or abandoning existing customs.

C. Buddhist Tradition and Women

Among the 7th century inscriptions discovered in Cha Bahi in Nepal, there are records of offerings from nuns, which indicate their desire to be “reborn as a boy by through virtuous acts.” This indicates that nuns were socially accepted during that time. However, since the 11th century, the *bhikkhuni sangha* (female monastic community) has virtually disappeared and the rate of married monks has increased.

Buddhism in Nepal was strongly patrilineal. Buddhist knowledge was limited to men born to Buddhists or in Buddhist castes, while women generally supported their duties as spouses. So, it was rare for women to participate in Buddhism independently until the modern times. In addition, with the disappearance of the *bhikkhuni* tradition, female ascetics are

currently limited to groups like the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism, and *anagārikā* of Theravada.

Anagārika (an- [non-] + agārika [having house]) refers to homelessness, which is equivalent to withdrawal from secular society, and the feminine form *agārikā* means housewife, so etymologically, *anagārikā* would be a woman who has renounced her home. Here I simply refer to it as “homelessness.” Although the *bhikkhuni* tradition has disappeared, in Nepal's Theravada, female ascetics pass through three stages: temporary ascetics (Np. *ṛiṣiṇī*) or laywomen who receive the Eight Precepts; those who have shaved heads and receive the Ten Precepts are identified with the respectful title *gurumā* (female master); and the fully ordained female ascetics. Among them, the second and third are clearly distinguished in nunneries, but the *bhikkhu sangha* (male monastic community) in the country does not acknowledge the third. Therefore, female ascetics in the latter second and third categories are officially called *anagārikā* by male ascetics.

III. The Two Dimensions of Theravada

A. Democratization Reform and Bhikkhus

Theravada of Nepal consists mainly of two dimensions. One is the *bhikkhu* and layman-centered trend. While based on asceticism, it is closely related to the modern Buddhism movement in that it is a dynamic method of confronting society and the State in South Asian countries by strengthening and refining thought and encouraging it to go beyond the existing social order or religious framework. If we look at its historical background, we can see that the movement was triggered by the meeting between Jagat Man Vaidya (1902-1963), a high caste Newar, and Anagarika Dharmapala at the Maha Bodhi Society in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in India. This led him to later lead the Buddhist revival movement in Nepal. After the 1930s, the dissident movement challenging the Hindu regime gained momentum, with *bhikkhus*, exiles, and laymen being the prime participants. In particular, it was linked to the movement that

emphasized Buddhism as an ethnic endemic community, and also the literary movement of Newar, whose native language is Newar.

The other dimension is the trend that has been centered on nuns since the 1960s. Most significantly, there have been significant changes in the society since Dhammawati (Dhammawati [1934-]), who was born in a high caste Newari family, returned from Myanmar after 14 years of austerity and established Nepal's first nunnery in Kathmandu. The Bhikkhuni Sangha Movement and Sakyadhita, treat more detail on later section, grew all over the world in the 80s, which appealed to females since every Buddhist woman was entitled to full ordination. The movements called for a connection among female Buddhists not only within Nepal, but also worldwide. Female Theravadins encourage such international connections.

The numbers of monks and nuns, which were very small in the 1930s and 1940s, have since increased, totaling 44 monks and 37 nuns during the Buddhist movement of the mid-1970s, and rising to 59 monks, 72 *samaneras* (male novice), and 70 nuns by the end of the 1980s. In 2001, there were an estimated 78 monks, 94 *samaneras*, and 118 nuns (LeVine & Gellner 2008:12-13).⁴

1 . Buddhism as a Tool for Democratization and Challenging Hinduism

The Nepali society witnessed a major change in 1950, when the Hinduism-centered Rana regime finally ended. In 1951, King Tribhuvan, who had been exiled, returned and had his leadership restored. The Constitution of 1962, announced after the restoration of the monarchy, abolished the party system and aimed at a monarchy based on the Panchayat system with the king at the top. A Hindu State was declared. Immediately following the reign of King Birendra (1945-2001), the anti-government, anti-panchayat climate began to intensify (Saeki

⁴ According to a calendar book published by the Buddha Jayanti Celebration Committee (2019), the number of Theravada monasteries (*Bauddha Vihār*) is 57 in the Kathmandu basin and 85 throughout Nepal. In comparison, according to the book published in 2012, there were 54 in the basin and 82 in Nepal as a whole, meaning three new monasteries have been established over the past seven years.

2003:655). After a lot of political turmoil, a committee was established in May 1990 to explore constitutional monarchy and multiparty democratic politics. A draft constitution was finally submitted at the end of May. The draft protected sovereignty, multiparty parliamentary politics, basic human rights, and constitutional monarchy. In November of the same year, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990 was promulgated.

Under the 1990 Constitution, the people were guaranteed freedom of religion, and religious discrimination was prohibited. On the other hand, the 1959 Constitution, the 1962 Constitution, and the 1990 Constitution had defined religion as that which “has been inherited from the eternal past” (Np. *sanātandekhi caliāeko*). The meaning of the word *sanātan* implies “eternal religion or law” (Np. *sanātan-dharma*) proposed by Hindu reformers in 19th century India. As a result, various political activities and conflicts have arisen over *sanātan*, and even today, much debate is being held over secularism (Np. *dharmanirapekṣa*).

Democratization and the promulgation of the Constitution in 1990 evolved into a movement around the identity of different groups. Like the Janajati movement (ethnic movement) that focused on ethnic culture and rights, various ethnic groups encouraged active religious progress. Among them was a movement against Hinduism that was characterized by refusal to observe a specific festival or offer animal sacrifice. In Western Nepal, in the late 1990s, the Magar had already started a movement to boycott the Dasain Festival, a celebration of the Hindu goddess Durga (Fujikura 2015:211). Also, in 1998, the Nepal Magar Association (NMA) put forward “the Declaration of Buddhist Faith,” and called on 1.62 million Magars to convert to Buddhism (Minami 2007:448-450, Minami 2008:33).⁵ In this way, the promulgation of the 1990 Constitution affected the subsequent Janajati movement in Nepal, and the civil war with the Maoists (Communist Party Maoist). Even in the Newar society in Kathmandu, there was an effort to stop animal sacrifice during Dasain and some ancestral worship rituals. A

⁵ The aim is “(1) to be independent religiously and also not to support Bahuns financially, and (2) to assert intellectual freedom from Bahunism (*Bahunbad*)” (Minami 2007:450). Minami’s argument is about significantly drawing the transformation beyond Buddhism by two symbolic items: Tika (a Hindu suspicious vermilion mark on forehead), and Kata (Buddhist meaning prosperity, respect, and security).

Theravadin monk in Lalitpur, who is from the Newar peasant caste, describes what happened in 1990:

At that time, families used to kill animals during the Dasain Festival; they were killing and sacrificing chickens and slaughtering goats. But now they have stopped everything. Even in the houses of cattlemen (meaning Hindus), they stopped killing and began breaking coconuts as offerings.... Also during Dewāli (worship to the kinship god) also, worshipers used to slaughter animals. My older uncle avoids slaughtering (Nw. *sī kanye*) and giving *bali* (sacrifice) because it is related to Hinduism. And he celebrates Dewāli in his own way, buying the meat instead of killing.*

The narrative shows that coconuts were used as an alternative to animal sacrifice. In the Newar society, there was support for a ban on slaughter, although in worship by kin, there was a need for blood and meat sacrifice (Skt. *bali*⁶). As a result, the monk's uncle began to buy fresh meat and dedicate it, indicating that the Newars were still resistant to the idea of not performing formal rituals or foregoing customary acts in rituals.

2. Conflict over Buddhism in the Newar Society

For those who tried to challenge Hinduism, the ideal way of Buddhism was to ensure *ahimsa* and ascetic principles. In the Newar society, this was a problem because of the presence of *bali* in customary rituals and Newar Buddhism. Under the Rana regime, religions other than Hinduism were subject to repression. On the other hand, being a Hindu often offered a social advantage. In 1923, eight Newars who renounced under a Tibetan practitioner called Yangze (Kiechen) were expelled from the country. This gave rise to what was called “the Tibetan

* Translation, meaning in parentheses, collection in 2018 by author.

⁶ The *bali* offering in Newar Buddhism is the act of offering animal sacrifice to gods for success. In addition to the higher gods such as Indra and Agni, it is also offered to the dead spirit (*bhūta*), demon (*preta*), *yogini*, *dakini*, etc. The contents of the offering include boiled rice and bean mixture, yogurt, raw buffalo meat, garlic, and also alcohol. For details, Shinobu Yamaguchi (2005) *Study of Nepalese Tantric Rituals* (『ネパール密教儀礼の研究』), Sankibobusshorin.

impurity” wherein Newars who mingled with Tibetan monks and ate meals with them were commanded by the Brahmins to receive a cleansing ritual. In 1926, the union (Nw. *guṭhi*) of Vajracharya, the priest class of Newar Buddhism, decided not to receive rice offerings from a merchant of the Uday caste who often went to Tibet as a trader. Among the Newar Buddhists, there were acts to strengthen the sense of caste values based on the purported “uncleanliness” concept and devotion to the Hindu regime (Tanaka & Yoshizaki 1998:31).

In a Buddhist journal issued in 1988, an article was published calling on Vajracharyas of Newar Buddhist to stop the practice of offering *bali*. The reason is that the Five Precepts must be observed even in the *tantras* on *Kālacakra* and *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa*, whether in Mahayana or Vajrayana, and slaughtering was considered to be a violation of the Precepts (A.B. 1988, 16[3]:5). On the other hand, it has been pointed out that *balipūjā* (ritual involving *bali*) is a feature of Newar Buddhism that evolved from Mahayana Buddhism. Newar Buddhists questioned their tradition, which was targeted as Buddhist studies evolved and gave rise to unique connotations for terms like householder, marriage, meat eating, and alcohol drinking. This created a conflict in terms of its own cultural foundation.

The Theravada activists at the time criticized Buddhist repression in Nepal and lamented the Hindu dominance in society. However, from the perspective of Buddhist scholars, Theravada's advance was regarded somewhat negatively. Tanaka and Yoshizaki noted: “The introduction of the Theravada Buddhism played a major role in the reform of the Newar society, but from another perspective, it is the only one in the world that has maintained the tradition of Indian Mahayana Buddhism, denying that it has weakened the characteristics of Newar Buddhism” (Tanaka & Yoshizaki 1998:36). Rather, the problem is that of “major Hinduism vs. minor Buddhism, and that of the existing Newar Buddhism vs. the emerging Theravada” (Shima 1994:238).

B. Background and Women on Asceticism

Among women, only widows withdrawing the secular life lived in monasteries before the 1960s. However, after the return of Dhammawati from Myanmar in 1964, the nun's order was gradually reinstated, and unmarried women often became nuns. With the establishment of the nun's order, the position of female ascetics has been subdivided. Table 3 compares men and women's stages and orders. Under the system, married women and women under the age of 20 could not become an *anagārikā*. Also, women who became nuns under the Theravada tradition could receive their learning in Nepal. However, women would have to go to Fo Guang Shan Temple in Taiwan or its branch temple in California to be fully ordained.

The motivation to renounce home for austerities was strongly related to marriage. The motives of Dhammawati, who left home in 1950, were apparently related to a strong desire to escape the suffering caused by marriage and childcare. In other cases, a woman from a peasant caste who became a nun in 1983 said that she had left home because she was unwilling to marry. What we can understand from these incidents is that becoming a nun was one way to completely reject the way of marriage.

However, in terms of education, the situation was different between Dhammawati, who became a nun in the 50s, and the nuns who were ordained after the 80s. During Dhammawati's time, women did not receive education, and it was difficult to openly study Buddhism because of the social background. By leaving the country, she had an opportunity to learn Buddhism, while escaping the possibility of marriage. Also, at that time, there was no opportunity to learn Buddhism in Nepali. Dhammawati, who studied at a nun's school in Myanmar, gained Buddhist knowledge by reading texts written in Burmese. On the other hand, it became possible for others to learn Buddhism in Nepali language written in Devanagari after the educational reforms. Also, women could choose to become nuns from a range of options that included getting married, remaining single, pursuing higher education, or studying abroad or migrating.

Table 3 : Theravadin Orders for Asceticism

	Prosedure	Requirement	Stage / Position	Visible representation
f e m a l e	ṛṣiṇī prabrajyā (the ceremony of a contemporary ascetic)	The Eight Precepts (including the Five Precepts) Under age 20, Both married and unmarried ※ if it is provided for a mass group, the age under 13 is not allowed.	Under the age 20, and also unmarried : novice (Pal. Sāmaṇeri), ascetic (Np. Ṛṣiṇī) Over the age 20, and married : ascetic (Np. ṛṣiṇī) ※ Formally a temporary ascetic	marron plain cloth (Np. ṛṣiṇī dress) , heads not shaved
	prabrajit (Joining to monastics)	The Ten Precepts (including the Five, the Eight Precepts) **unmarried	anagārikā (Pal. anagārikā) Form of address: dharma name + gurumā (a title for female master in Newari)	a pink colored robe (same like Thilasin in Myammer robes), head shaved
	upasampadā (Earning the full ordination)	The full ordination *Dharmagupta 348 rules unmarried	anagārikā (Pal. anagārikā) Form of address: dharma name + gurumā, and occasionally, Bhikkuni (Np. Bhikṣuṇī) + dharma name	a pink colored robe, or a orcher colored robe (which like Sri Lanka's), head shaved

*Differ from the Pali Vinaya (310 rules)

**Those who unmarried and receive the Ten Precepts can not be the gurumā stage, but laywoman (upāsikā)

	Prosedure	Requirement	Stage / Position	Visible representation
m a l e	Sāmaṇera pabbajjā (Pal.; Np. Śrāmaṇera prabrajyā) ※after 1970's	The Eight Precepts? (including the Five Precepts) no restrictons whether unmarried, and married	samanera (Pal. sāmaṇera) ***temporary ascetic	marron plain cloth or yellow plain cloth, head shaved
	Sāmaṇera pabbajjā (Pal.; Np. Śrāmaṇera prabrajyā)	The Ten Precepts (including the Five, the Eight Precepts) unmarried ※also possible under the age 15	samanera (Pal. sāmaṇera)	marron plain cloth or yellow plain cloth, head shaved
	upasampadā	The full Ordination Pali Vinaya (227 rules) unmarried ※over the age 20	monk form of address : bhikkhu (Np. bhikṣu) + dharma name	yellow or orcher colored monk's robe (Np. civar) , head shaved

***Modeled on the temporary ascetics in Myanmar and Thailand

C. The Bodh Gaya Conference on Buddhist Women, and the Bhikkhuni Sangha Movement

1. Full Ordination of *Anagārikā*

The feminist movement in Western countries influenced women and their thinking in Nepal as well. The first International Conference on Buddhist Women was held in Bodh Gaya, India, in February 1978, when Sakyadhita (Pal. *Sākyadhitā* [daughters of the Buddha]), an international association for Buddhist women, was established. His Holiness Dalai Lama XIV delivered the keynote speech at the conference, saying, “All Buddhist women should not only learn Dharma but also receive the full ordination.” The Bhikkhuni Sangha revival movement began with this opportunity.

The founder of the Sakyadhita and also the organizer of the Conference was the American nun Karma Lekshe Tsomo. She became a nun at a Tibetan Buddhist temple in Dharamshala in 1977 and received full ordination in 1982 in Taiwan. The second organizer was Ayya Khema, a German-born Jewish American who observes the Ten Precepts. She founded the Parappuduwa Meditation Center in Sri Lanka. A few years before the Bodh Gaya Conference, she received full ordination in a Chinese temple. The third was Professor Chatsumarn Kabilsigh, the daughter of Volamai Kabilsigh, the Thai commander of the Ten Precepts (*maechi*). She was ordained in Taiwan in 1972 and was the only *bhikkhuni* for 17 years (LeVine & Gellner 2008:179-180). It is very interesting that the organizers had received their full ordination in Chinese or Taiwanese Buddhism.

Dhammawati, who participated in the Bodh Gaya Conference, became a *bhikkhuni* in 1988, along with three disciples, at the branch temple of Fo Guang Shan in California, where she was ordained under the Dharmagupta tradition (法藏部 四分律). At another Buddhist conference in Los Angeles, California, in early 1994, she cited the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* and argued that the position of women is not equal to that of men, and that female nuns

would not be *bhikkhuni*, but *anagārikā*. After that, she established the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Nepal in 1994, overcoming opposition from some nuns and monks.

2. “Rereading the Canon” by Buddhist women

The feminist movement spread to western countries in the 1960s, and later spread to nuns in Asia as demonstrated by the Bhikkhuni Sangha movement, though it was led by Western nuns. As part of the movement, there was a growing trend of reinterpretation or rereading of Buddhist texts and stories by nuns and female scholars on Buddhism. The activity ranged from asking the meaning of *vinaya* to denying the involvement of male monks in its interpretation.

Kawahashi, a scholar of Buddhist feminism, analyzes such movements as “Rereading the Canon” (Kawahashi 2012, Tanaka & Kawahashi 2007). The tradition derives from the feminist theology of Judaism and Christianity, as can be seen in the use of the term “Canon,” which has biblical origins and means the “word of God.” According to Kawahashi, this rereading action in Buddhism is a characteristic method of reformists. This position emphasizes rebuilding Buddhism from the standpoint of gender equality. A separate revolutionist position denies that Buddhism is a religion that suppresses women (Tanaka & Kawahashi 2007:249).

The main agenda of reformists' emphasis on rereading is, first, the re-interpretation of the writings of the Buddha's step-mother Mahaprajapati Gotami, and second, the critique of the Eight Chief Rules (Pal. *aṭṭha garudhamma*). Kawahashi introduces the activities of Taiwanese nun Shi Zhao Hui (釈昭慧) in the context of the Buddhist feminist movement in Asia. The main claims are that the Eight Chief Rules were reread by males after the Buddha's death, and that Mahaprajapati Gotami, a brave and revolutionary woman in Buddhist history, desired to take up ascetic practices like men (Kawahashi 2012:151).

3 . Possibility of Women Becoming Clergy

The practice of rereading Buddhist texts has been established to fundamentally assert the status of female Buddhists. In the international setting, there has been a high level of reinterpretation of scriptures written in Pali or Chinese among groups of people that do not accept *bhikkhuni*. In Nepal, on the other hand, the practice of interpretation is carried out using familiar Buddhist texts. In the 1930s, during Dhammawati's childhood, women's schooling was not accepted in the Newar society. Dhammawati said, "In Nepal, parents put *gyu* (clarified butter; ghee in Hindi) on rice for boys to make them strong, but not for us girls. Also, they did not provide education to girls." In addition, women could not act as priests like the Vajracharya, who are in charge of Newar Buddhism.

Dhammawati criticized this implicitly. *Prauddh Bouddha Kakṣā ra Lakṣmī* (*The Great Buddha's Trajectory and Wealth*, published in 2008), written to commemorate her 70th birthday, reveals her thoughts about the possibility of a woman becoming a clergywoman based on the Jataka. It states:

The door to *Nirvana* (Np. mokṣa) is open not only to men, but also women. [That door is open to] only those with forbearance. If there are people who don't need *dharma* for women ... it's unwise to say that this is a woman and this is a man and place emphasis upon only one shoulder [a phrase referring to preference to a particular gender] *na so sabbesu thānesu paṇḍito hoti puriso itthīpi paṇḍito hoti tatthatatthavicakkhaṇāti*. This does not mean that "men alone will become wise *paṇḍits* [wise], in some places, women are also wise." In short, if you read this well, and if you will be wise (Np. buddhimānī), women can also be wise (Np. vidwān) and become a *pandit*. Parents must give their daughters and sons good education....*

Dhammawati cites from the Jataka tale, "The Life Story of the Prodigal Surasā (Surasā-Jātaka)," to explain the wisdom of women. I would like to relate this point to Dhammawati's

* (Bhikṣṇī Dammawati 2008) Translation and meanings in parentheses by author.

interpretation that women can be a *paṇḍit*, meaning a scholar; a wise person; and also, a priest (Brahman). According to PTS's translation, it states that “wisdom at times is not confined to men. A woman can shew wisdom now and then”⁷ However, there is no mention of the possibility of being a *paṇḍit* there. If she needed to explain that women are wise, she would put 'or' not 'and.' Thus, Dhammawati shows that women are not only as smart as men in the Jataka, but also have the abilities to be a clergy member through the practice of “rereading.”

4. Impact on Local People

A. Pariyatti Education

When I spoke with local people about Theravada Vihārs, there were some who said, “I studied Japanese in the Vihār when I was young.” The Theravada Vihārs provided the opportunity to study languages such as English, Nepali, Japanese, and Chinese. At the beginning of the 1930s, they began to teach Pali texts in Devanagari at a monastery in Nepal. For many elder people, the Theravada Monastery is recognized as a place to read books and learn words. Also, *pariyatti* education⁸, which began in the mid 1960s, had a great influence on people’s reading and writing habits. It was also started in a Theravada nunnery in 1964. *Pariyatti* education takes place almost every Saturday. Along with nuns, students learn using published picture books, study the Buddhist *Tripitaka* or sacred texts, and appear for an exam regularly. The most knowledgeable person is recognized as a “*kovid* [person of great attainments]”. Of those, *anagārikā* can be granted permission to be fully ordained if they learn enough.

One Newari woman talked about her grandmother, who had become involved in the Theravada nunnery around the 1970s, and began to study and learn literacy only at the age of 60. The consequence of her grandmother learning at the nunnery was that she grew up in an

⁷ Cowell, E. B. ed., 1957, *The Jātaka*, Voll.III, No. 419, London: Pali Text Society

⁸ The etymological meaning of *pariyatti* is the 'accomplishment of the Scripture' in Pali, which means to the locals the gradual curriculum to study Buddhism and its knowledge. *Pariyatti* education in this paper is equivalent to *Buddha pariyatti śikṣā* in Nepali.

environment that exposed her to equality in schooling for men and women. Her grandmother was told, “think things through for yourself whether you study or marry.” Reading and writing practice through *pariyatti* education permeated into the community before the education system was generalized. In addition, it can be said that it was a ground-breaking concept at the time as it brought men and women to one place for learning. Also, her grandmother used to say that Dhammawati “got people with gold accessories to pick up the trash from and clean up the residential quarters (where the nunnery was located).” Caste-related differences were still strong at the time. People who had gold accessories, mainly merchants and their wives, and those from high castes were from the higher economic strata of society. It was a surprise for them to be asked to perform a low caste sweeper's job of picking up trash. Dhammawati set an example by doing the work herself. Before the education system was established, education was limited to people of high castes, and the act of studying (reading is same word in Nepali) was beyond access to many people. Dhammawati was also from a high caste, but she taught people to learn on their own without relying too much on caste or customary values. It can be said that through *pariyatti* education, Dhammawati as an *anagārikā* influenced the community not only in terms of literacy education prior to the adoption of the formal education system, but also on the moral aspects of what people should do and how they should think.

B. Ṛṣiṇī Pravrajyā (Becoming a Novice) for Newar Girls

Dhammawati started the *ṛṣiṇī pravrajyā* in 1966 at Dharmakīrti Vihār in Kathmandu. It was held once a year for 12 days until 2000. Later, it was gradually reduced to 7 days, 5 days, 3 days, and since the Nepal Earthquake of April 25, 2015, it has taken the form of 1 night and 2 days.

The etymological origin of *ṛṣi(ṇī) pravrajyā* is *isi-pabbajjā* in Pali, which means “leaving the house to become an anchorite.” It also means entering the life of a non-Buddhist and withdrawing from secular society, which is *samaṇera*. *Samaṇera* originally means the

stage of a “candidate” who has yet to receive full ordination. However, in many Theravadin countries, even women who have observed the Ten Precepts and lived ascetic lives are not treated as *samaṇeri* (feminine form of *samaṇera*). The “Daśasīl mātā” in Sri Lanka, “maechi” in Thailand, and “thīrashin” in Myanmar, and those who follow the Eight Precepts on the day of the *uposatha* (Skt. *upavasatha*) are regarded as *anagārikās*. They are distinguished from *bhikkhuni* who receive the full ordination.

In Nepal's *ṛṣiṇī pravrajyā*, it is described that observing the Eight Precepts is the most important aspect. The ceremony mainly involves the act of reading a certain textbook. The textbooks describe the Three Jewels, the Five Precepts, the Eight Precepts, and the phrases for pleading for *ṛṣiṇī*, and other stories. The main agenda is to conduct lessons on moral education (Np. *naitik sikṣā*), learn them in reading, and allow girls to preach on what one should and should not say or do. However, in practice, they keep up only the Five Precepts. Also, in recent years, instead of the traditional first menstrual ritual of Newar, which is performed while girls are confined in a dark room for 12 days akin to a cave, an increasing number of people are performing ceremonies at the Theravada nunnery.

The average number of participants between 2014 and 2017 was 692 and the highest was 808. The ceremonies are performed 30 to 46 times a year, and there are many participants in the *Magh* and *Fhalgun* months of the Nepali calendar (February to March). In addition, participation by people of high caste Shrestha and lower butcher caste Khadgi is especially high.

The *ṛṣiṇī pravrajyā* is still conducted as an option, but in contrast to traditional ceremonies, the main part characteristically involves “reading a book.” The act of reading a book is considered to be different from traditional rituals, and girls who choose a traditional path speak about it passively. It is equated to studying and possibly reminds one of a school. Such reading is not regarded as their 'tradition', although, it does not mean that they think schooling is unnecessary. It is interesting to see how the children who participate in the ceremony gladly

say that “we cannot be taught such things at school.” Participants are satisfied with the new experience at the nunnery, which is similar to schooling but different from the reading or studying done at school. Also, girls are told to read the book to their families. This captures the significance of the ceremony. That is, families of participants in the ceremony are made aware of the spiritual aspect that cannot be fostered by formal schooling.



Fig 1: Girls' reading a text in *ṛṣiṇī pravrajyā* ceremony (photo by author)

IV. Conclusions

In this paper, I considered Theravada in Nepal as the modern Buddhist movement, and introduced the perspective that the renewed interest in the Buddhist texts in Pali is the reason why it must be considered to be the Theravada form of Buddhism. The characteristics of Nepal's Theravada are different from the traditional view of Theravada as the community incorporates fragmented keywords proposed by various philosophers and activists, but regards *dharma*, religion as a philosophy and emphasizes rationality. Also, this form of Buddhism is more than just a political tool for broader social order; it affects other areas of society, especially Hinduism. It became clear from the case of the Newar that it created conflicts within the existing Newar Buddhism and prompted a resurgence of reorganization. Finally, from the

case of *anagārikās*, it was found that reading is a very important practice with respect to women's education. For Dhammawati, the act of reading the written texts paved the way for joining the Buddhist society through the presentation of new interpretations and criticism of prevalent norms. Literacy education since the 80s has enabled individuals to participate in social, economic, cultural, religious, or political activities, not just learning letters. As a place of learning, the Theravada monasteries permeated into the community before the broader educational reforms could be implemented in the country, and developed agency within the community to be promoting moral practices among people. At present, *pariyatti* education encourages the practice of reading and the following ceremony. The *ṛṣiṇī pravrajyā* ceremony is on rise in recent years as an optional alternative to the traditional ritual for Newar girls. The reading practice during the ceremony can be regarded as a passive replacement for an existing 'tradition', which is not overtly spiritual, and different from an ideal per se, however the spiritual aspects not seen in formal schooling came to be recognized by people themselves.

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