

On the History and the Present State of Vedic Tradition in Nepal

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Already the earliest written evidence from the *Nepālamaṇḍala*, i.e. the inscriptions of the Lichavi kings, show the co-existence of the various sects and forms of both Buddhism and Hinduism. Both forms of Aryan belief were followed by the populace and honoured by the kings.¹ Vedic traditions, too, occasionally are mentioned along with Hindu and Buddhist religious practices. The Vedic religion, which preceded both Buddhism and medieval Hinduism, had already in Lichavi time largely been superseded by Pauranic and Tantric elements, yet this oldest form of Aryan worship and learning has come down to the present age and was prominently displayed in some of the rites performed at the coronation ceremony of H.M. the King. It is this tradition which will be traced through Nepalese history in the following pages.

As it is well known, the oldest Veda text, the Ṛgveda, was composed in the land of the seven streams (East Afghanistan, North Pakistan, N. W. India), i. e. in the country reaching from the rivers of Kabul and Indus up to the Beas and Sarasvatī (Ghaggar). It is only a younger Ṛgvedic stanza that mentions the Gaṅgā for the first time. In the later Vedic period, however, the Aryans conquered the Gangetic plains, and by the time of redaction of the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa, even Brahmins deemed the marshy country of *Videha* (North Bihar, Terai) suitable for settlement.²

From the same period apparently date the earliest strata of the Kapilavastu excavations (red ochre, Northern black polished wares), and the kingdom of the famous Janaka of *Videha*³ actually will have included some parts of the Nepalese Terai, too. These then would be the

¹ See Dhanabajra Bajracharya. *Pūrṇimā* 14, p. 106-116 and in his extremely knowledgeable book "*Lichavi kāla kā abhilekh*", Kathmandu VS 2030, passim.

² In the legend of the settlement of King Videgha Māthava in *Videha*, by following the god Agni who had been burning in front of his march from the Panjab (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1,4,1, 10-18)

³ Prominently figuring in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and *Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*.

earliest literary references and material remains of Vedic culture in Nepal.⁴ Yet the evidence from other late Vedic texts is not equally favourable for the hilly tracts of the Kingdom; The law book of Manu⁵ speaks of the

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17

[Printing mistakes have been corrected, endnotes set as footnotes, and diacritical mark are added for convenience sake].

⁴ Some more material, especially from early Buddhist sources and from Lichavi inscriptions, has been published by Nayaraj Panta, *Pūrṇimā* 2, p. 1 sqq.

⁵ Manu X 22 and 44, also mentioning the *Malla, Nichavi (Lichavi)*.

unorthodox nature of the *Khaśa* tribe -- at that time⁶ probably due to the only partial reception of the strict Brahmanical rites and regulations by this tribe, which until medieval times occupied the Himalayan belt between Kashmir and Jumla⁷ and seems to have been the ancestor, of the modern Khas people. In this context, it might be recalled that even nowadays the Garhwalis and the Matwali Chetris of West Nepal do not in all respects adhere strictly to the Brahmanical norms, although there is a growing trend to introduce more and more of that tradition.⁸ As for the Nepal Valley, early literary sources (*Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa*, Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*)⁹ barely mention more than its name and therefore are of no consequence in this context. The earliest detailed references to the religious situation in the Kathmandu Valley therefore are the Lichavi inscriptions.

Lichavi Period

Already¹⁰ one of the oldest inscriptions, the famous Changu Narayan inscription of Mānadeva (*Samvat* 386 = 464 AD)¹¹ mentions Brahmins (*vipra*, *dvija*) as recipients of gifts, and other early Lichavi inscriptions even speak of Brahmins as the leaders of Villages (Thankot, Balambu, etc.). This would vouch for a considerable number

⁶ Ca. the second century BC to the second century AD; the commonly accepted date for the redaction of the *Manusmṛti* (see Bühler, *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XXV).

⁷ See Stein, transl. of the *Rājataranṅiṇī* (I 317) p. 47 and cf. index, Vol. II, p. 519: the valleys in the South and East of the Pīr Pantsāl Range (forming the southern rim of the Kashmir Valley): cf. Grierson, *Ling. Survey of India*, Vol. IX Pt. IV p. 2-8, with many references to Sanskrit literature.

⁸ See for instance, G. D. Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas*, Oxford/Bombay 1963 p. 399 sqq. 143 sqq.

⁹ *Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa* 56, 1, 10 (along with *Kāmarūpa* = Assam): Kautilya 2.11,100 (cloth from Nepal). Other literary sources (*Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*) etc. are of too uncertain date. Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* (ca. 150 BC) unfortunately does not contain a reference.

¹⁰ Some of the following data are also published by N. R. Panta, *Pūrṇimā* 2, p. 1 sq.

¹¹ for the dates, see Dh. B. Bajracharya. *Lich. Kāla kā Abh.* p. 18; cf. also Śaṅkar Mān Rājbaṃsi, *Lichavi Sambat ko niṣkarṣa*, Kathmandu VS 2030.

of them, settled in the Nepal Valley at that time.¹² It is, however, conceivable that they came to the Valley together with the Lichavis, were attached to the royal court as priests, and also functioned as *purohitas* of *kṣatriya* families. This development would be analogous to the introduction of Hinduism in other parts of the subcontinent, as well as in South-East Asia,¹³ where the Brahmins always have been attached to the court as royal priests until today: They hold this position at the court of Thailand, and did so until recently in Cambodia. Court brahmins always were required even in these Buddhist countries to perform rituals like the coronation etc.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that in Nepal, too, the earliest record of a Vedic ceremony presupposes them in exactly this function: The Haḍigaon inscription¹⁴ of Aṃśuvarman contains a description of a coronation ceremony with a detailed account of the money spent on this occasion for various purposes (*Samvat* 30 = 606 AD). This inscription is also important as one of the earliest non-literary and detailed descriptions of the persons taking part in this ceremony, and thus helps to bridge the gap between the elaborate Vedic of the *Rājasūya* sacrifice and the *rājyābhiṣeka* descriptions in the Epics, in dramas and medieval handbooks. It seems quite clear that, already at this comparatively early period, Pauranic elements had been added to the old Vedic coronation ceremony, which had been superseded because of its unpracticability (see below).¹⁵

The actual study of Vedic texts during the Lichavi period is attested indirectly by the mentioning of the *Śruti* next to *Dharmaśāstra* in Mānadeva's inscription at Kel Tole and by the frequently occurring *karaṇapūjā* which is performed to honour Vaiśampāyana, the

¹² See also Hsuen Tsang's description, reprinted in Regmi, *Ancient Nepal*, Calcutta 1960, p. 134: "The number of Brahmins cannot be said exactly" ... "Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples touch each other".

¹³ See : G. Coedes, *The Indianised States of South East Asia*, Kuala Lumpur/Singapore 1968, p. 21 sqq.; H. G. Quaritch-Wales, *Siamese States Ceremonies*, London 1931, p. 54 sqq., H. Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravada-Buddhismus*. Berlin/Frankfurt, Vol. II p. 242 sqq., and *passim*.

¹⁴ Dh.B. Bajracharya, *op. cit.* No 72; Gnoli, No. 75.

¹⁵ The ritual lasted for more than a year and required strict observances like fasting, sleeping on the ground, etc. for the *yajamāna*, i. e. the king.

(supposed) author or redactor of the Yajurveda (e. g. Vasantadeva's Khapuche inscription of S. 452 = 531 AD).¹⁶ The same inscription also contains the names of the Brahmins Viprasena, Veda Bhaṭṭa, Dhruvasena, and Vṛdhisena, and attaches the title of *yājñika* (performer of Vedic rituals) to the first two persons. The *trayī* (the three holy Vedas) and the Veda in general are

¹⁶ Dh.B. Bajracharya, No. 28, with his note (cf. also note p. 63 on *karanna pūjā*).

also mentioned in the Satyanarayan inscription¹⁷ of Haḍigaon (of ca. S. 462 = 540 AD), where the names of the post-Vedic *dharmasāstras* of Manu, Yama, Brhaspati and Uśanas also occur.

The most important piece of evidence, however, will be the mentioning of a *Taittirī-śākhā goṣṭhī* in the Narayanchowk (perhaps ca. 850 AD).¹⁸ A Guṭhi for the *Taittirīya* branch of the *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda* comes as quite a surprise in a Nepalese context, because all other known medieval sources only name the *Śukla Yajurveda*.¹⁹ The occurrence of this *Śākhā* which all through the middle ages has been popular and wide-spread only in South India (where, according to a proverb "even the house cats know the Yajurveda"), could point to a survival in the extreme North of the sub-continent of this old Vedic school: It had originated from the *doāb* of the Yamunā and Gaṅgā in the middle of the Vedic period, and was then transplanted to the countries South of the Vindhya, while all areas North of them were 'overrun' by the *Mādhyandiniya Śākhā* of the *Śukla Yajurveda*, which superseded the other old *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda* schools there: the *Kathas* nowadays remain only in Kashmir Valley and the *Maitrayaṇīyas* very feebly in some areas of Gujarat and North Maharashtra.

The said inscription, therefore, is quite important for a general history of Vedic schools and Vedic traditions and could help to explain some peculiarities of Malla time Veda manuscripts, mentioned below.

"Thakuri" and Early Malla Period

After the comparatively many documents available from the Lichavi period, there is a long gap in our knowledge regarding the actual conditions in the Valley. A few inscriptions and some colophons of very old palm leaf manuscripts shed some light on this period, but

¹⁷ Dh.B. Bajracharya No. 35, Gnoli No. 1; see Dh.B. Bajracharya's commentary on it, p. 162 sqq.

¹⁸ See *Pūrṇimā* 16 p. 360-64, Bajracharya No. 149 = Gnoli No. 83, at Naxal, no date; acc. to Bajracharya from the time of Jayadeva II, i. e. ca. 850 AD: cf. the note on p. 140.

¹⁹ In its sub-branch of the *Mādhyandiniya* recension, except for the one *Kāṇva* manuscript mentioned below. Possibly, the *Taitt. Goṣṭhī* was singled out in the inscription, because even at that time, *Vājasaneyins* were the core of the Brahmanical population in the Valley. This, however, cannot be proved because of lack of evidence.

little published so far help reconstruct the religious history of the time. It is, however, clear that Brahmins and that means, the bearers of Vedic traditions, continued to live in the Valley and that they frequently remained *purohitas* of the kings.²⁰ Thus, king Guṇakāmadeva (955-995 AD. acc. to D. R. Regmi) ordered a *Koṭihoma* ceremony²¹ to be carried out, which, of course, had to be performed by his Brahmin priests according to (mostly) Vedic ritual. The coronation ceremony²² (*puṣyābhiṣeka*) is first mentioned for King Rudradeva (N. Samvat 237 = 1117 AD.) in the so-called *Kaiser Vaṃṣavalī*,²³ and from then onward quite frequently both in this and in the well-known *Gopālavamśavalī*. For king Abhayamalla's reign, it also mentions the performance of such Vedic rituals as the *Lakṣahoma* and the *Pākaśrāddha* (1216-1255 AD).

From this same period date the oldest preserved Vedic manuscripts of the whole sub-continent, now kept at the National Archives of Nepal. They substantiate the account of the inscriptions and of the occasional occurrence of Brahmins' names in the colophons of non-Vedic mss.: There is an *Upākarmavidhi* dated NS 180 = 1060 AD (Ms. No. 1-1473 ca), which contains regulations for some ceremonies connected with learning the Veda by rote. A *Vivāhakarmasamuccaya* of NS 233 = 1113 AD contains rules for the marriage ceremony (Ms. I 933 kha); a *Daśakarmapaddhati* of NS 296 = 1176 AD those for the ten 'sacraments' to be performed during a person's life (Ms. I 1536); a *Sandhyavidhi* of NS 401 = 1281 AD those for the Vedic twilight rites (Ms. I 1320 nga). A study of these manuscripts,

²⁰ Whatever their religious outlook had been. A manuscript colophon of AD 1184, for instance, mentions a *śaivarājaguru* (see Regmi, *Medieval Nepal*, I, p. 192)

²¹ See *Gopālavamśavalī* fol. 23a.

²² On this ceremony, see now: Mahesh Raj Pant, *Pūrṇimā* 33, p. 13-27 (English translation to appear in Nepal Research Center Journal. No. I).

²³ See M. R. Pant, loc. cit. p. 16.

(as well as of the rest of the 24.000 or so mss. of the National Archives), which have been stored there and partly even described since nearly 70 years now, but which have hardly been studied, (not to speak of editions and translations), would shed considerable light on the customs and the society of the period under review here.

Although the times do not seem to have been easy ones, the old Brahmanical population seems to have continued to reside in the Valley. Thus a manuscript of the *Śivadharmaśāstra* (Asiatic Soc. of Bengal, No. 4077) mentions a certain Ratnasimha as living in the *Taittiriyasala* at Kathmandu, NS. 156 = 1036 AD. This *śālā* could well have belonged to the *Taittirīśākhā* Guthi mentioned above. Yet there also is some evidence for a continued immigration of Brahmins from other parts of the sub-continent: A Brahmin immigrant from Gujarat²⁴ is attested for NS 316 = 1216 AD. We do not know of the Vedic school of this pandit, if he was a *śrotriya* at all. Coming from Gujarat, however, he should have belonged to the *Maitrayaṇīya* school of the *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda*.

Except for the occurrence of the name of the *Taittirīyas*, there has been no clear evidence so far regarding the *śākhā(s)* to which the Nepalese Brahmins of the time belonged. There is, however, an old *Kāṇvāyana Śrāddhavidhi* (Nat. Arch. I 1320 gha).

This ritual handbook belongs to the rare *Kāṇva* school of the *Śukla Yajurveda*, otherwise found scattered only here and there in India (Nagpur, Orissa, Tamilnadu). Again, during the last part of the period described here, there was a considerable influx from Mithila, mostly caused by the Muslim conquest of Tirhut in 1324 AD. The Brahmins fleeing to Nepal brought with them such mss. as the *Pārvaṇaśrāddha*²⁵ (Lakṣmaṇa Samvat 171 = ca. 1290 AD), or the *Vājasaneyinām Vivāhapaddhati*²⁶ (La. S. 414 = ca. 1533 AD), the very title of which shows that this text belongs to the *Vājasaneyi Śākhā* of the *Śukla Yajurveda*. Both mss. are in Maithili script. A glimpse of the state of affairs in West Nepal is given by the Khasa king Jitārimalla's

²⁴ Regmi, op. cit. p. 640.

²⁵ Ms. No. I 772 *nga* in Bengali character.

²⁶ Ms. No. I 1634 *nga* in Maithili script.

inscription said to be of the Śaka years 1015, 1016, 1018, assigning some *birta* land to Brahmins.²⁷

The later Malla Period

The data for a historical account of the Vedic traditions in Nepal considerably increase with the advent of the Maithila Brahmins referred to above: The Vedic manuscripts from the 14th and 15th century are quite important as they differ somewhat in nature from the earliest ones described in the last paragraph. There is a *Puruṣasūkta* ms.²⁸ of NS 444 = 1324 AD, and there are other *Samhitā* mss., too: A *Vājasaneyi-Samhitā*²⁹ of Śaka 1350 = 1428 AD, another one of 1429 AD, both of which were copied at Bhaktapur in Newari script. More important yet is a *Vājasaneyi-Samhitā Padapāṭha* and *Kramapāṭha* ms., also in Newari script, of the Śaka year 1324 = 1402 AD. and another *Vājasaneyi-Samhitā* ms. in Devanagari script (no date) belonging of A. Sharma. These two mss., which possibly are the oldest ones of this *Samhitā* extant anywhere, are of special importance³⁰ because of the way they mark the Vedic accents (*svara*): it seems that in Nepal of the 15th century, the old way of Veda recitation as described by the great grammarian Pāṇini (ca. 500 BC.) was still extant, while it had died out in this form

²⁷ See Regmi, op. cit. Vol. I p. 723.

²⁸ Ms. No. I 1206 *gha*.

²⁹ Mss. nos. I 736 ca and I 784 *gha*.

³⁰ See: author, *Vishvabandu Commemoration Volume*, p. 483-501 Hoshiarpur 1974.

in most parts of India: Some survivals can be deduced for the time only in Kashmir, and some areas of Gujarat/North Maharashtra. Today, this type of recitation survives only with some families in Kerala.

It would, therefore, seem that the older way of Vedic recitation, which dates back even to Indo-European times (i. e. pronouncing the *udatta*, and not the *svarita* as the syllable with the highest tone), persisted only in the very corners of sub-continent, and the said Nepalese mss. are the oldest testimony of it in a written form. There are a few later *Vājasaneyi-Samhitā* mss. exhibiting these features, and there also is a Ṛgveda ms.³¹ of perhaps equal age as that of A. Sharma referred to above.

The medieval Vedic transmission and the actual recital of the texts therefore seems to have been very conservative and faithful in Nepal.

On the other hand, there was a considerable influence of the North Indian traditions, coming with the Maithili Brahmins referred to above. It is them who are said to have assisted king Jayasthiti Malla in "introducing" the caste system into the Valley: Kīrtinātha Upādhyāya Kānyakubja, Raghunātha Jhā Maithilī, Śrīnātha Bhaṭṭa, Mahinātha Bhaṭṭa, Rāmanātha Bhaṭṭa, -- typical names from the plains. King Jyotirmalla, too, in NS. 530 = 1410 AD settled some Brahmin families from Bengal at Patan, the descendants of whom still appear with their Bengali names (Bhaṭṭācārya, Cakravartī, Ray, Ojhā) in an inscription of 1675 AD.³²

Notices above Vedic rituals as performed during the Malla period are quite numerous. First of all, there are the coronation ceremonies (*puṣyābhiṣeka*, *pattābhiṣeka*). They were sometimes accompanied by the very elaborate and costly *Koṭihoma* sacrifice:³³ King Siddhinarasiṃha Malla of Patan in NS 757 = 1637 AD performed a *Koṭyāhuti* "of Rājasūya style"³⁴ which would mean a coronation ceremony much more elaborate than the medieval *puṣyābhiṣeka* or *rājyābhiṣeka*. A *Koṭyāhuti* was also performed by king Uchhravasīṃha Malla in NS 689 = 1569 AD by king Śrīnivāsa Malla in NS 793 = 1673 AD, by Queen Ṛddhilakṣmī of

³¹ Ms. I 1372, still written with *prṣṭhamātrā* signs.

³² Regmi, op. cit. Vol. IV no. 77 = *Abhilekha Saṅgraha* no. II, p. II.

³³ Regmi, op. cit. Vol. II p. 726 sq.

³⁴ Regmi, op. cit. Vol. II p. 273.

Kathmandu in NS 814 = 1694 AD and king Raṇajita Malla of Bhaktapur (reigned 1722-69 AD). These *Koṭyāhutis* are of special importance here, as they always have to be accompanied by *Vedapārāyaṇa*, the recitation of all the four Vedas. The ritual, too, includes quite a number of Vedic rites, but has also been supplemented Pauranik and Tantrik elements.

Other Vedic rites attested include such *yajñas* as that one described in the Taumadi Tole inscription³⁵ of Bhaktapur, NS 530 = 1410 AD, or the Vyāghra Bhairava consecration accompanied by Vedic recitation in NS 663 = 1515 AD. As Patan is one of the oldest capitals of the Valley, the court Brahmins there have been performing an *Agnihotra* ritual down through the centuries. This is one of the simplest, but also the oldest Vedic rites, originally meant to insure the rising of the sun every morning. It is therefore performed everyday before (or at) sunrise and also at sunset, as a means to secure the proper keeping of the holy fires overnight. The Kaiser Library has got a manuscript of NS 533 = 1434 AD describing this and some other Vedic rituals like *agnyādhāna*, *paveṣṭi*, *dārsapaurṇamāseṣṭi*, *anvārambhaṇeṣṭi*, *kāmeṣṭi*, *śunasīreṣṭi*, *mitravindeṣṭi*. This is one of the few Nepalese hand-

³⁵ Regmi, op. cit. Vol. III, inscription No. XLV.

books of the complicated Vedic *Śrauta* rituals surviving from the middle ages. Otherwise, such *Śrauta* handbooks are hardly to be found in the valley, and if so, they had been imported from Banaras in the last centuries. (Handbooks of the more common house rituals --*Gr̥hya* ceremonies,-- however, are quite numerous). Nevertheless, Vedic *Śrauta* rites have come down even to the present time, though on a limited scale (see below).

Special mention should be made of the Bhaktapur King Bhūpatindra Malla (1696-1722 AD), who ascended the throne at the early age of 21. He seems to have been an extraordinary man in many respects: He was not only a poet, instigated great activity in repairing old temples and the palace, and built many new ones like the famous Nyatapola and the Malatichok, but he also performed many rituals,³⁶ as can be seen from the accounts preserved in the National Archives, and he had innumerable manuscripts copied.³⁷ One list of his library alone comprises hundreds of books. Among them there is a very interesting ms. of the first book of the *Atharvaveda*³⁸ (*Padapāṭha* of the *Śaunaka* recension, NS 812 = AD 1692), written a few years before his ascension to the throne, on his order. This is not only one of the very few Atharvaveda mss. from Malla times but it also employs a very unusual way of marking the Vedic accents, unknown from any other Veda ms. either from Nepal or India. Another Atharvaveda ms. from his time,³⁹ however, has got the usual accent marks. In his reign a few Ṛgveda mss. also were copied and are in the National Archives now.

Although there is dearth of mss. of the Brāhmaṇa and the Upaniṣad of the Vājasaneyi school in Malla time Nepal, a few copies of these texts (i. e. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*) have come down from Bhūpatindra's time. There are numerous *Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā* mss., as in the centuries before, but a few of them have got quite a curious numbering of mantras -- a fact perhaps pointing to *Kāṇva Śākhā* origin. In this regard, the occasional immigration from various parts of India should not be left out of

³⁶ Cf. *Pūrṇimā* No. 9, p. 23-29.

³⁷ Cf. Regmi, op. cit. Vol. II p. 243.

³⁸ Ms. No. I 801.

³⁹ Ms. No. I 711.

consideration. There is the case of Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa,⁴⁰ a Brahmin from the Coḷa country, already attested in NS 591 = 1471 AD and of another Brahmin Nārāyaṇa,⁴¹ the spiritual advisor of King Śivasimha of Kathmandu (1578-1620 AD). This Brahmin had come from the banks of the river Kāverī in Tamilnadu. Again, another Brahmin from South India, whose home was somewhere on the Godāvarī river, was minister of the Patan King in the late 17th century.⁴² Furthermore, the Paśupati Temple priests since centuries have been coming from the North Karnataka town of Gokarna. All these Brahmins might have brought with them traditions and manuscripts unusual to the tradition of the Valley.⁴³

One fact which strikes any observer of medieval Veda tradition of Nepal very much is the seemingly absolute non-occurrence of *Sāmaveda* manuscripts.⁴⁴ *Sāmavedic* singing was necessary for such elaborate *Śrauta* rituals as the *Soma* (*Agniṣṭoma*) rites, and *Sāmaveda* Brahmins also have to take part even in the modern form of the coronation ritual, or in any *Lakṣahoma*. The absence of *Sāmaveda* evidence is striking even more as Mithila had a firm tradition of *Sāmaveda* in the middle ages, and as even in the Valley itself, a few late *Gṛhya* manuals in Newari script⁴⁵ are preserved, which claim to belong to the *Sāmaveda*. All of them, however, had been written only in this or in the last century.

⁴⁰ D.R. Regmi. op. cit. Vol. III inscription No. 72.

⁴¹ Regmi, op. cit. Vol. IV inscription No. 30

⁴² Regmi, op. cit. Vol. I p. 685.

⁴³ There are a number of old palm leaf manuscripts in South Indian scripts in the National Archives, going uncatalogued.

⁴⁴ I have now found one in the list of king Bhūpatindra Malla, referred to above.

⁴⁵ Ms. No. I 1696/568, apparently confiscated in Rana time from a Bhaktapur *Rajopadhyaya*.

Nevertheless, the absence of *Sāmaveda* texts is echoed by the modern scarcity of *Sāmaveda* singers in the Valley (see below). It must not be forgotten that *Sāmavedic* singing is a very intricate art, requiring years of study and training--and if there was no real need for such skill, it easily could fall into disuse and neglect.

The Shah Period

The conquest of the Kathmandu Valley by King Pṛthvīnārāyaṇa in 1768/69 AD brought a considerable number of *Kumaī* Brahmins into the Valley. They soon largely superseded the old *Rājopādhyāya* families in their functions as royal priests and spiritual advisors. The *Kumaī* Brahmins, too, are *Kānyakubjas* and followers of the *Mādhyandina śākhā* of the *Śukla Yajurveda*, i. e. they are *Vājasaneyins*. There are, however, also a few *Sāmavedins* among them, who do not nowadays seem to know the art of *Sāmaveda* singing. Only one or two Brahmins in the Valley are known to master a few *sāmans*, and none of them seems to know the whole *Sāmaveda* by heart or can sing all *sāmans* required in *Śrauta* rites.

Due to this new influx of Brahmanical population, one can now count at least 5 separate groups of Brahmins in the Valley :

1. *The Rājopādhyāyas*, who speak Newari language and have been the *purohitas* and *gurus* of the Malla kings. Their ranks have again and again been filled by immigrants from India, who nevertheless quickly integrated into the Newar society. The *Rājopādhyāyas* keep a still strong tradition of Vedic and Tantric rituals alive, a fact exemplified for instance at the recent *Lakṣahoma*, performed with contributions of the whole town of Bhaktapur.

2. *The Pūrbīya* Brahmins from Bengal, who immigrated to the Nepal Valley in the middle ages and now speak Nepali language. It is this group from which the *Rājgurus* and *Purohitas* came, up to Rana times (i. e. the Aryal viz. the Paudyal family).

3 *The Tirhute* Brahmins (Jhā, Miśra, etc.) who also came to the Valley in the late Malla period and during the Shah period. They speak Newari but always retained matrimonial and other relations with the Terai.

4. The *Kumaī* Brahmins from Central and West Nepal, who originally came from Kumaun (to which area many of them had emigrated in the middle ages due to the Muslim conquest of the plains). Most of the *Kumaīs* came to the Kathmandu Valley proper only after the Gorkha conquest. One subgroup among them is the *Doteli* Brahmins from West Nepal.⁴⁶

5. The Paśupati priests from Gokarna, N. Karnataka, who still recruit from that area. They are called *Bhaṭṭas* and are said to have come to Nepal only after the ousting of the Nambudiri priests (from Kerala) by king Jagajjaya Malla (ca. 1730 AD).

Except for the Gokarna Brahmins, who are followers of the *Taittirīya Śākhā* of the *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda*, and for the few sections of the *Kumaī* belonging to the *Sāmaveda*, all these groups are *Kānyakubjas*, i. e. they claim to descend from the area of Kanauj, and are followers of the White Yajurveda (*Mādhyandina Śākhā* of the *Vājasaneyins*).

Under the Shah dynasty, too, Vedic traditions were encouraged. There is, for example, a manual of the coronation rituals by King Drabya Shah. A special *Agnihotra* priest was appointed, who had to perform this old Vedic rite twice daily. His descendant claims that his family has been perfor-

⁴⁶ There are only a few of them in the Valley. These have given up their W. Nepali dialect and speak standard Nepali now. Though coming from W. Nepal, too, they did not intermarry with the *Kumaī*. Another subgroup among the *Kumaī* is the *Kānchu Kumaī* from Kumaun proper.

ming this ritual since some two hundred years.

During the Rana times, too, many *yajñas* are said to have been performed, and this is borne out by such news reports in the old volumes of the Gorkhapatra, like that of a *Koṭyāhuti* held by the Prime Minister in V. S. 1973.⁴⁷ The Ranas also performed *Rājyābhiṣekas* when beginning their tenure of office as Prime Ministers. These are described in the Gorkhapatra as having been performed "according to *Śruti*, *Smṛti*, *Gr̥hyasūtra*, *Purāṇa* and *Tantra* injunctions".⁴⁸

King Mahendra performed such big *yajñas* as the *Koṭyāhuti* of V.S. 2016 and the *Rudrayāgas* of 2018 and 2022. One of the last bigger Vedic ceremonies was the *Lakṣāhuti* performed this spring in Hanuman Dhoka palace, because of the appearance of a comet.

The last centuries have brought quite an impressive influx of North Indian manuscripts (presumably mostly from Banaras) of Vedic texts and rituals, as witnessed in the collections of the former Bir Library and the Rājguru Hemrāj Collection (both in the National Archives now). It is, however, difficult to say how far this import of Vedic mss. coincided with a revival of Vedic rituals, especially *Śrauta* rites, which are quite well represented in the said collection.

The Present Situation

Nowadays the learning by heart of the four Vedas is dying out very fast. Among all the Brahmins' groups enumerated above, only the *Yajurveda* (*Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā*) is still learnt to some extent. The other *Śruti* texts of this *Śākhā* (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, not to speak of the *Śrautasūtra*) are no longer learnt. Apart from the very few persons knowing some *Sāmans* and from others who can recite a few *Rgveda sūktas*, all the other *Veda Saṃhitās* (*Rgveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *Atharvaveda*) are no longer being learnt by rote. Worse, the little that is still learnt by young boys undergoing the *Upanayana* ceremony ('*bratabandha*'), is forgotten quickly, and even among the more conservative groups, this period of study is shortened year by year: The *Rājopādhyāya* boys, who even a few years ago still had to

⁴⁷ See Gorkhapatra of Jyeṣṭha 10, VS. 1973. A costly *tulādāna* ceremony was held as late as Mārga 7, VS 1966.

⁴⁸ See Gorkhapatra, Mārga 24, VS 1989.

learn Veda texts for some four weeks now do so only for four days. Other groups hardly learn the *Gāyatrī mantra* by heart and try out a few *sūktas* or *yajuṣ* during the actual *upanayana*. There is a *Pāṭhaśālā* at Deopatan near Paśupatinath Temple,⁴⁹ the Veda-Vedāᅅga-Vidyālaya. This school has a very wide scope of lectures but in fact mainly teaches the well-known *Śukla Yajurveda-Saᅅhitā* (along with the common *Gᅇhya* rituals, some Tantra, Grammar, Classical Sanskrit literature, etc.).

The situation of Vedic tradition looks somewhat better when surveying the actual performance of rituals. The more common *Gᅇhya* rites like *upanayana (bratabandha)*, marriage, etc. are, of course, still being performed at each such function, but they rather seem to have become an occasion of show and display of wealth during the last years, and the actual ceremony has become almost devoid of meaning, and is frequently unknown in its import to the participants, although some handbooks of such rites have been published recently, supplying even a Nepali translation of the old Vedic Sanskrit prayers and offering *yajuṣ*. The ceremonies therefore are quite often shortened beyond recognition on request of the *yajamānas*, and the priests have to rattle through their *mantras*, skipping whole pages of their handbooks.

(contd. on page 35)

⁴⁹ See: rules and regulations in: *Dharmadarśana* (a journal of the Guᅇhī Sansthān), Vol. 2, Pt. 4, Kathmandu, Māgh/Caitra 2032 VS, p. 37. -- Recently, a Veda school was also opened at Jhapa, see: *Rising Nepal* of 22. 7. 1976

(contd. from page 24)

Only very few dedicated people indeed still perform the solemn and elaborate Vedic *śrautra* rites. There is the *Pūrbe* Brahmin, mentioned above, who every morning and evening, at twilight, offers the *Agnihotra* oblations into the three holy fires symbolising the Earth, the Sun and the Moon. The Newar *Rājopādhyāyas*, too, have among them one priest who traditionally has to keep the *Agnihotra* fires burning, and who daily performs the *Agnihotra* twice. This *Agnihotra*, however, has been influenced much by *Pauranik* and *Tantrik* elements. In the last few years, two more Brahmins have undertaken to perform this simple but impressive Vedic ritual.

The same men also perform the New Moon and Full Moon sacrifices in the *Śrautra* way, by using the three holy fires (*Dārśapaurṇamāsa* rites). The *Rājopādhyāyas* say that they still retain a form of the ancient Vedic *Soma* sacrifice, which according to them has to be performed in the month of *Śrāvaṇa*. This rather elaborate ritual, for which the help of numerous priests of all the four Vedas is necessary, is otherwise unheard of in Nepal and Northern India (with the possible exception of Banaras). It nowadays is only being performed every spring in a few villages of Andhra and Kerala. All the other elaborate Vedic *Śrautra* rituals are virtually extinct both in Nepal and in India, except for a few "revivals" in Poona, and, last year in Kerala, the *Agnicayana* with foreign Sanskritists' financial aid and participation.

The recent *Lakṣahoma* of the Bhaktapur *Rājopādhyāyas* is something like an exception, having been performed with voluntary contributions of the whole population. Yet this ritual is not a truly Vedic one, and more of a Pauranik development, with the inclusion of quite a number of even Tantric rites.

There is, however, another remarkable exception from this somewhat bleak picture of contemporary Vedic tradition: The *Rājyābhiṣeka*, the coronation ceremonies. Nepal, now being the only Hindu state in the world, still keeps this age-old tradition alive in all its minute details, as could be witnessed last year during the coronation of H.M. King Birendra. The contemporary *Rājyābhiṣeka*, however, is, as indicated above, an abbreviation of the elaborate and time consuming Vedic *Rājasūya* ritual. This lasted for more than one year, and required

the king to be an *āhitāgni*, i. e. some one who as a *yajamāna* himself had kindled the three holy fires and who had performed the various Vedic *Śrauta* rituals like *Somayāga agniṣṭoma* etc.). Because of the many restrictions and observances imposed on a *yajamāna* performing these rites (including fasting, sleeping on the ground, speaking according to certain rules, avoiding certain words, being present on the offering ground for many days and nights on and off, etc.), the *Rājasūya* had been shortened considerably already in the early middle ages and now covers only a few days -- these being the culmination period of the former *Rājasūya*. Furthermore, the *Rājyābhiṣeka* has also been influenced and enlarged considerably by *Paurānik* and *Tantrik* elements. Thus, the *mahāsnāna*, i. e. the ritual besmearing of the king with various kinds of earth clearly is a medieval addition. On the other hand, such Vedic practices as the one to announce the newly crowned king to the populace by exclaiming in Sanskrit "This, o people, is your king " seems to have been dropped, as also the symbolic raid by the king on a horse-drawn chariot, meant to conquer from his enemies a herd of cows: a

symbolic act well fitted into the Vedic scheme of thought and politics. Similarly, the riding through town on horseback has long been replaced by a state procession on elephant. Nevertheless, the coronation ritual is mainly a Vedic ritual even nowadays.

Conclusion

As Vedic tradition is at the roots of this and many other facets of Nepalese culture, one feels that something should be done for its preservation in modern times and for future generations. Even if regarded outside the religious context and meaning, both Vedic recitation and ritual can be viewed as some kind of a rather complicated art, and they should be preserved as such. The general public will more and more lose interest in these 'outdated' ceremonies, and in consequence, less and less young boys will be found to be willing to undertake the hard task of learning by heart the texts and sequences of a rite, not to speak of learning by rote a whole *Veda Samhitā* or *Brāhmaṇa*: "There is no money in it". Once the line of tradition, now ranging back some three thousand years, has been cut, however, a re-introduction will be very difficult, and it will not be a genuine Nepali tradition then. Some kind of help therefore should be given to insure this ancient tradition.

This could be done in a way similar to the one adopted for the preservation of the old arts and customs of Japan, which in any case seems the only modern country where the most ancient traditions of ritual, music, theatre, poetry, painting, etc. are being kept up until today, and in fact are part of everyday life.

In the last decades, however, some arts and crafts of Japan also have been endangered. In these cases, the Government will declare the only few masters of a certain art or craft still alive "Living National Treasures" and will pay them a monthly pension -- under the condition, however, that they agree to teach their art to some young students willing to learn it. In this way, many an old tradition ranging from music to carpentry; and falconry has been preserved for the future.

In a similar way some of the endangered traditions of Nepal could be protected and preserved for future generations. The loss of the nation's past and the mindless taking over of the 'ideals' and the

'modern' or 'fashionable' ways of living of other nations, as can be noticed every day by the young generation's tastes and off-curriculum occupations, will destroy the traces of much of the still living heritage of Nepal. When these young people will recognise their mistakes in one or two decades time, it will be too late in many cases: the last persons still knowing some old traditions will be dead by then. Only a well-balanced combination of tradition and modern influences can insure true development in both the material and spiritual fields. It is therefore high time now that something concrete should be done about these endangered arts (and not merely by passing a resolution, forming a committee or by giving speeches), whether it may concern Buddhist *carya* dances, traditional (i. e. non-tourist taste) painting, casting of figures or wood carving, or the ancient Vedic traditions sketched in the above paragraphs .

To return to this tradition: Vedic texts and rituals always have been transmitted orally, by learning them by heart, from teacher to pupil, in an unbroken line of tradition starting with the *Rgveda* time itself (as alluded to in the text). This has been done

with such fidelity and accuracy that, for instance, a Vedic *mantra* heard in Nepal will have exactly the same wording and even the same intonation (with the musical accents long lost in everyday speech) in Kashmir or Gujarat or Kerala. No word or accent has been changed for a period of at least 3000 years. This is quite remarkable, especially when compared to the religious or literary traditions of other cultures. The Veda has got a better tradition than any classical text of Greco-Roman antiquity or, for that matter, the holy texts of the Christian or Jewish religion, which nearly date back as far as some Vedic texts. Actually, there is no text known anywhere in the world which has got that kind of faithful tradition as the Ṛgveda or other Vedic texts have got, being transmitted by word of mouth until recently. It would be extremely sad if by the neglect of this generation this unique tradition would die out in the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal.

One way to support it would be the one referred to above. The Deopatan Pāṭhaśālā, for instance, could provide well-versed teachers of all the *four* Vedas and the *Sūtras* (even if they would have to be brought from Southern India), who could teach some interested students the holy texts and more prominent Vedic rituals. Students, of course, will also have to be encouraged nowadays, as they will feel that such study will not earn them their daily bread, and some provision should be made to insure their future, perhaps on a similar line again to that usual in Japan: The more important national sanctuaries are, together with the income of the priests, being paid for by the Government or the Imperial Household Agency, and even the Emperor is known to perform quite a number of ancient Shinto rites in the year.

Similarly, an effort should be made in Nepal to re-introduce such old Hindu customs as the study of those Vedas and Vedic rites which have disappeared from Nepal. Such an experiment actually had been carried out successfully by the Mahārāja of Darbhanga in Bihar some decades ago: Sāmavedic study has been re-introduced from South India by inviting a few well-versed *Sāmavedins* to teach there: There will, of course, always be only very few young boys who will be willing to undertake the hard training necessary for success but this will suffice to insure the survival of the tradition. It would only be appropriate, I feel, if Nepal would undertake a similar (or better, a more far-reaching) effort to preserve the Vedic traditions, which form the very roots of her Hindu culture.

