

Philosophical Understandings of the World, Human Life, and Society in Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism: A Comparative Study in the Nepalese Context

Chakra Bahadur Karki¹, Neel Kumar Chetri²

Abstract

This study explores the philosophical conceptions of the world, human life, and society in Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism, focusing on their interpretations and social expressions within Nepal. Drawing on canonical sources such as the Majjhima Nikaya, particularly the Balapaṇḍita Sutta, the research examines how moral causality is linked to social hierarchy—where sinful individuals are said to be reborn as Chaṇḍalas (outcastes), while the virtuous are reborn among higher castes. While such views are grounded in karmic ethics rather than birth-based essentialism, their social implications resonate within Nepal's complex caste system. Theravada philosophy emphasizes impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anatta), viewing time as cyclical and human life as a precious chance for liberation through ethical conduct and meditation. Vajrayana, by contrast, conceptualizes reality as empty (sunyata) and interdependent, offering transformative practices—including mantras, mandalas, and deity yoga—through which enlightenment can be achieved in a single lifetime. Time and worldly existence are seen as illusory yet useful for spiritual realization. This comparative study analyzes how both traditions interpret reality, time, karma, and social ethics. It investigates how these philosophical frameworks manifest in Nepal—where Theravada revivalist movements promote rationalist reform and egalitarianism, while Newar Vajrayana traditions integrate ritual, caste identity, and community life. Through textual analysis and contextual interpretation, the research highlights both convergence and divergence in their approaches, showing how Buddhist worldviews continue to shape moral values, social system, and spiritual aspirations in contemporary Nepal.

Key words: Buddhism, Theraveda, Vajrayana, reality, society, Newar, caste and class

1. PhD Scholar, CDSO T.U.

2. Researcher, CNAS T.U

Introduction

The question of how Buddhism conceptualizes the world (*loka*), human life (*manussajivita*), and society (*samaja*) lies at the heart of its philosophical inquiry. In the Nepalese context, both Theravada and Vajrayana traditions have coexisted across different historical periods, offering diverse ontological and ethical frameworks. Theravada Buddhism, preserved in the Pali Canon, emphasizes renunciation, ethical conduct, and meditative insight grounded in the principles of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anatta*) (Gombrich, 2009). By contrast, Vajrayana Buddhism, rooted in tantric scriptures such as the *Hevajra Tantra* and the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, affirms the possibility of spiritual transformation through symbolic ritual, deity visualization, and the realization of emptiness (*sunyata*) and non-duality (Snellgrove, 1987).

Texts like the *Balapaṇḍita Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikaya* (MN 129) suggest that karmic actions determine rebirth into various social categories—such as *Chāṇḍala* (outcaste) or *Brahmaṇa* (higher caste)—framing caste not as an intrinsic attribute, but as a moral outcome (Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 1995). Meanwhile, Vajrayana tantric texts reimagine worldly life as a field of sacred transformation, where even desire, death, and social system become vehicles for liberation (Davidson, 2002).

Extensive scholarship exists on these traditions. For example, Gellner (1992, 2001) and Lewis (1984, 2015) have examined Newar Vajrayana Buddhism, especially its ritual structures, caste formations, and community identity. Bechert and Gombrich have explored the textual foundations and philosophical aspects of Theravada, though mainly in the South and Southeast Asian context (Bechert, 1973; Gombrich, 2009). The Theravada revival in Nepal, particularly during the early 20th century, has been studied for its reformist ethos and resistance to Hindu orthodoxy (Jones, 1976).

Historically, Tucci (1956) and Slusser (1982) have documented Nepal's Buddhist heritage through inscriptions, art, and architecture. *Vaṃsavalis*, or Nepalese chronicles, provide insight into dynastic ideologies, religious patronage, and historiographical perspectives (Petech, 1958). However, such works often emphasize ritual and political history, giving only limited attention to philosophical doctrines.

Despite the rich body of work, there remains a noticeable gap in comparative research that systematically analyzes philosophical conceptions of the world, life, and

society in Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism using primary sources—Pali texts, tantric scriptures, epigraphic inscriptions, and Vamsavalis—within the historical context of Nepal. Specifically, the differing ontologies, ethics, and social models presented in texts like the Majjhima Nikaya and Hevajra Tantra have yet to be examined side-by-side in relation to Nepal’s intellectual and religious history.

Inscriptions from the Licchavi (c. 400–750 CE) and Malla (c. 1200–1768 CE) periods provide material evidence of the coexistence, patronage, and institutional articulation of both traditions (Slusser, 1982; Regmi, 1965). Similarly, Vamsavalis, though often stylized and mythologized, express a distinct Buddhist cosmology, reflecting moral and political order framed by karmic and royal legitimacy (Petech, 1958).

This study aims to investigate and compare how Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions conceptualize the world, human life, and society, with particular attention to their doctrinal foundations. It further seeks to analyze key Pali and tantric texts within the framework of Nepal’s historical and religious context. Additionally, the study examines how these philosophical worldviews are articulated, legitimized, and reflected in historical inscriptions and Vamsavali (chronicle) narratives. It tends to explore three research questions: - What are the core philosophical views on the nature of the world, human life, and society in Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhist texts? In what ways are these views expressed or legitimized through historical inscriptions and Vamsavalis in Nepal? In addition, how do the textual and historical sources illustrate the coexistence and differentiation of these traditions across Nepalese history?

This study seeks to a major gap in Buddhist studies by linking metaphysical doctrines with social and historical contexts, contributing to a deeper understanding of Nepal’s religious-philosophical heritage.

Materials and Methodology

This study employs a textual-philosophical and historical-analytical approach, grounded in the comparative analysis of Nepalese Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions. Four primary source categories inform this research:- Pali canonical texts, notably the Majjhima Nikaya, including the Balapaṇḍita Sutta (MN 129), which associates karmic actions with social outcomes—rebirth as a Brahmaṇa or Chaṇḍala—thereby encoding moral causality into social stratification (Naṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995). Tantric scriptures, such as the Hevajra Tantra and Guhyasamaja Tantra, which re-conceptualize

worldly life as ritually transformable and offer esoteric models of ethical and cosmological order (Snellgrove, 1987; Davidson, 2002).

Epigraphic records from the Licchavi and Malla periods, which demonstrate the doctrinal and institutional coexistence of these traditions and their endorsement by political authority (Regmi, 1965; Slusser, 1982). *Vaṃsavalis* (chronicles), including the Buddhist *Vamshavali*, and Gopalraj *Vaṃsavali*, which mythologize dynastic legitimacy and religious cosmology, often reflecting Buddhist ethical ideals in the structuring of kingship and caste (Petech, 1958).

The analytical lens is provided by *Vaiśeṣika* philosophy, particularly the *Vaiśeṣika Sutra* of Kaṇāda. Its core metaphysical categories—*dravya* (substance), *guṇa* (quality), *karma* (action), *sāmānya* (generality), *viśeṣa* (particularity), and *samavaya* (inherence)—enable a systematic comparison of how reality, action, and ethical identity are framed in both traditions (Matilal, 1977; Chatterjee & Datta, 1984).

The category of *dravya* helps explain how Buddhist texts conceptualize the basis of human and social existence—whether as impermanent aggregates in Theravada or symbolic manifestations in Vajrayana—while *guṇa* and *karma* illuminate how moral, ritual, and social qualities and actions contribute to hierarchical differentiation through karmic causality.

The principle of contradiction allows for the identification of doctrinal tensions: for instance, the Theravadin denial of inherent self (*anatta*) appears to contradict its ethical justification of hierarchical rebirth, while Vajrayana's notion of inherent buddha-nature coexists with elaborate ritual hierarchies and empowerments.

Viewed through this *Vaiśeṣika* lens, particularly via *dravya* and *viruddha*, it becomes evident that Buddhist philosophical frameworks—though not explicitly caste-based—tend to legitimize social hierarchy through metaphysical and moral rationalization. In Theravada, hierarchy is morally constructed through *karma*, where social status results from past ethical conduct. In Vajrayana, ritual initiations, tantric lineages, and symbolic distinctions create hierarchies grounded in spiritual authority. These structures are embedded not only in the texts but are reinforced historically through inscriptions and *Vaṃsavalis*, where rulers and elites are portrayed as morally and cosmically superior.

Thus, the study integrates textual exegesis, epigraphic-historical contextualization, and

classical Indian metaphysical reasoning to reveal how Theravada and Vajrayana traditions philosophically construct and historically sustain models of social differentiation in Nepal.

Results

This study reveals that both Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions, as interpreted and practiced in Nepal, construct distinctive yet overlapping philosophical frameworks for understanding the world, human life, and society, rooted in shared doctrines of impermanence, non-self, and karma, but diverging in application and metaphysical nuance.

From the Theravada perspective, the Pali Canon, especially texts like the *Cuḷakammavibhanga Sutta*, *Balpaṇḍita Sutta* of *Majjhima Nikaya*, and *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, presents a realist and analytical ontology where human identity is conditioned and non-essential. Social hierarchies, such as caste, are explained as outcomes of karmic action rather than fixed ontological realities, with liberation (*nibbana*) being accessible to all regardless of birth, though requiring gradual ethical and meditative development. The analysis of Pali texts in light of *Vaiśeṣika* concepts—particularly *dravya*, *guṇa*, and *karma*—shows that Buddhist thought appropriates causal categories to morally explain social outcomes while simultaneously critiquing inherent social stratification. Thus, Theravada legitimizes social hierarchy as karmically conditioned but emphasizes its non-ultimate nature.

In contrast, Vajrayana Buddhism, especially as preserved in Nepalese Newar tantric traditions and texts like the *Hevajra Tantra* and *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, reframes the same doctrines within a non-dualistic and symbolic framework. Karma here is not only descriptive but also malleable; it can be ritually and experientially transformed through tantric practices, enabling rapid spiritual advancement. By applying the *Vaiśeṣika* notion of contradiction (*virodhavas*) and *dravya* to Vajrayana thought, the study shows how socially marginalized elements (e.g., lower castes, female deities, transgressive behaviors) are revalorized as powerful sources of liberation. The doctrine of *tathagatagarbha* universalizes potential enlightenment, subverting rigid social boundaries by sacralizing all forms of life.

Analysis of Nepalese inscriptions (particularly from the Licchavi and Malla periods) and *Vaṃsavalis* supports these textual findings. Inscriptions record royal patronage of both traditions and depict Buddhism as a legitimating force for moral kingship, caste organization, and social order. However, tantric iconography and ritual records also point

to the inclusivity and adaptability of Vajrayana system, where social roles are ritualized rather than fixed.

In sum, the research demonstrates that Buddhist philosophy in Nepal employs both conservative and transformative strategies regarding social hierarchy. Using the Vaisesika categories as analytical tools, the study concludes that while Theravada tends to ethically explain social differentiation, Vajrayana seeks to symbolically transcend it, making both traditions integral to the diverse moral and philosophical landscape of Nepalese Buddhism.

Discussion

Buddhist philosophy offers a nuanced view of ontology and karma, shaping both ethical conduct and social structures. The Theravada Pali Canon explains social inequalities through karma, emphasizing ethical behavior over birth. In contrast, Vajrayana Buddhism, particularly in Newar Vajrayana of the Kathmandu Valley, integrates Mahayana philosophy, tantric ritual, and local culture to promote a transformative vision of emptiness and universal liberation (Gellner, 1992). This tradition remains the only surviving pre-modern urban Buddhist system in South Asia, with a rich ritual and philosophical heritage.

Buddhist Ontology and Karma in the Pali Texts

Buddhist ontology—bhava (being) and the nature of existence—rests upon the concepts of impermanence (anicca), non-self (anatta), and suffering (dukkha). These principles guide the understanding of both the individual and the collective. Karma (kamma in Pali), as intentional action, creates the causal links that shape not just personal destiny but also social system and conditions. In this framework, society is not merely a collection of individuals but a dynamic manifestation of collective kamma.

The Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59) declares that form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness (pañcakkhandha) are not self. This view implies that neither the individuals nor the societal institutions possess fixed essences. Social roles, status, or identity are conventional designations (pannatti) without ultimate reality (paramattha). This text particularly says, “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.” (SN 22.59). Thus, from an ontological standpoint, society is a compound of conditions, subject to constant arising and cessation (uppada and vaya), not a permanent entity.

The principle of *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination), explained in texts like the *Mahanidāna Sutta* (DN 15), asserts that everything arises in dependence upon conditions. This applies to social phenomena as well. For example, conflict arises from craving and clinging, which are conditioned by ignorance (*avijjā*). This *Sutta* asserts that “With ignorance as condition, volitional formations arise; with volitional formations, consciousness...” (DN 15). This interconnectedness implies that social problems are karmically conditioned and not random or divinely ordained. Karma is the determining factor in Buddhist philosophy. However, it is not fate but an intentional action (*cetana*), as stated in the *Anguttara Nikāya*: - “It is volition, monks, that I call karma; for having willed, one acts by body, speech, and mind.” (*Anguttara Nikāya* 6.63).

Though karma is individual, collective experiences—like being born in a particular country or community—can be the result of shared karmic patterns (*sammuti kamma*). The *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta* (DN 26) and *Agganna Sutta* (DN 27) illustrate how moral degeneration leads to social decline and suffering. The *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta* outlines a karmic theory of social justice: when rulers do not uphold *dhamma*, moral decay follows, leading to poverty, theft, and violence. This decline is not punished by a god, but unfolds naturally via the moral law of cause and effect. The *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta* states “When the kings do not care for the poor, then poverty spreads, and with poverty come stealing, with stealing comes violence...” (DN 26). This reinforces the view that good governance and ethical conduct are karmic necessities for a healthy society.

The *Agganna Sutta* (DN 27) offers a powerful doctrinal counter to Vaishnava theories of *varna*, particularly the belief that caste is divinely ordained. Rather than accepting caste as immutable or sacred, the Buddha presents a historical and functionalist explanation of social stratification. According to this *sutta*, human society originated through gradual social differentiation, not divine will, and the four *varnas* emerged out of functional necessity rather than metaphysical superiority. Thus, the Buddha’s position is not merely sociological but profoundly ethical, rejecting the notion that spiritual worth or moral legitimacy can be inherited through birth (Walshe, 1995).

This radical egalitarianism is further reinforced in the *Vasala Sutta* (SN 1.7), where the Buddha asserts: “Not by birth is one a Brahmin, not by birth is one an outcaste; by deeds is one a Brahmin, by deeds is one an outcaste.” This direct refutation of caste-based essentialism strikes at the heart of Brahmanical orthodoxy and introduces a karmic basis for moral evaluation—it is action (*karma*), not heredity, that determines ethical

and spiritual value (Bodhi, 2000). In this light, the Buddha not only critiques caste as a social institution but offers an alternative moral epistemology, where ethical conduct, not lineage, defines human worth.

The Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta (MN 135) strengthens this argument by providing detailed explanations of how karmic causality influences social outcomes, including birth in different castes. The sutta explicitly links unethical actions in past lives—such as killing, theft, or deceit—with rebirth in lower castes such as the chandala, a group regarded as ritually impure in Brahmanical ideology. As the Buddha explains:

“Here, student, some woman or man is a killer of living beings... Due to this karma... they are reborn in the chandala caste, the lowest class among people” (MN 135; Bodhi, 1995).

Importantly, this should not be misunderstood as moral justification of caste, but rather a didactic device. The Buddha uses the prevailing categories of his time to explain how moral choices—not bloodline—lead to one's social situation. As Gombrich (2009) notes, the Buddha appropriated existing terminology to subvert and reframe it within a karmic framework. The emphasis is not on legitimizing caste, but on asserting the universal potential for liberation (nibbana) through ethical cultivation (sila), meditation (samadhi), and wisdom (panna), regardless of one's birth.

Critically, these suttas also resist any deterministic interpretation of karma. Unlike fatalistic views that tie people forever to the results of past actions, Buddhist doctrine emphasizes the transformative power of present ethical conduct. Even a person born into a despised caste like the chandala can attain arahantship if they follow the path of virtue and wisdom (Harvey, 2013). This is a significant departure from Brahmanical and Vaishnavite hierarchies, where liberation (moksha) was often seen as inaccessible to lower castes or women.

Therefore, the Buddha's karmic model serves as both a critique and a reformulation: while it accepts that moral consequences manifest in this and future lives, it rejects essentialist and birth-based inequalities. This approach reflects a moral cosmology where agency, responsibility, and ethical discipline—rather than social birth—become the basis for spiritual advancement.

Nepali Vajrayana

Central to Vajrayana philosophy is the concept of śūnyata (emptiness), inherited

from Madhyamaka thought. All phenomena are seen as empty of inherent existence, but in Vajrayana, this emptiness is not merely a negation—it is dynamically unified with clarity and awareness, the luminous mind (prabhasvara citta). The Hevajra Tantra says, “All dharmas are devoid of own-being (svabhāva); they are like illusions or magical creations.” (Snellgrove, 1959). In the Newar Buddhist tradition, this philosophy is ritually enacted through deity yoga, where the practitioner visualizes themselves as a deity (devata) to recognize the non-duality of form and emptiness (Gellner, 1992). Moreover, the idea of tathagatagarbha (Buddha-nature) holds that all beings have the inherent potential for Buddhahood. In the Vajrayana rituals such as the abhisheka (initiation) and carya dance, this is not just a metaphysical idea but a lived experience enacted through sacred performance (Lewis, 2000).

Vajrayasna in Nepal emphasizes the tantric path, which employs mantra, mudra, mandala, visualization, and initiation (abhisheka). These practices are understood as skillful means (upaya) that transform ordinary perception into enlightened awareness. The Cakrasaṃvara Tantra says, “Through the yoga of mantra and deity, one realizes the body as the mandala of the Buddha.” (Gray, 2007). In Newar Buddhism, the most prominent deity is Cakrasaṃvara, whose mandala is central to public rituals such as the Vajrayogini festivals and saptavsra mandala pujas performed in courtyard shrines (bahas). These rituals are aimed not just at personal liberation but also at generating communal merit and cosmic harmony (Gellner, 1992). Vajrayana also maintains the ancient practice of caryaiiti—esoteric dance-songs composed by tantric masters like Saraha and Luipa—performed during rituals to embody non-dual wisdom and compassion (Templeman, 2002).

One of the most distinctive features of Vajrayana is its non-dual view of reality, where saṃsara (cyclic existence) and nirvaṇa (liberation) are understood as not two separate realities, but different perceptions of the same truth. The Cittavisuddhiprakaraṇa states, “When the mind is purified, saṃsara itself is nirvaṇa.” (Tuladhar-Douglas, 2005). This view is ritually expressed through transgressive symbolism, where elements normally considered impure (such as wrathful deities, cremation grounds, and sexual union) are reinterpreted as expressions of the sacred nature of reality when viewed through enlightened awareness (Davidson, 2002).

Newar Vajrayana is distinct in that it integrates monastic and lay practices into a hereditary system. The Vajracaryas, a caste of tantric priests, perform rituals, initiations, and maintain the transmission of sacred knowledge. While the bhikṣu monasticism of other Theravada or Tibetan traditions is largely absent, the householder tradition of Vajrācaryas

preserves tantric continuity through family lineages (Gellner, 1992). Ritual knowledge is passed from father to son, and major life-cycle rituals—from birth to death—are conducted through Vajrayana rites. This institutional model allowed Newar Vajrayana to survive the rise of Vaishnava dharmasutra tradition in Kathmandu valley during the Malla period making Nepal one of the last living centers of Vajrayana Buddhism (Lewis, 2000).

The feminine principle plays a vital role in Nepali Vajrayana. Goddesses such as Vajrayogini, Tara and Prajnaparamita symbolize wisdom (prajna), which unites with method (upaya) in tantric union to generate enlightenment. In rituals and iconography, dakinis are revered not only as protectors and consorts but also as embodiments of gnosis. Vajrayogini temples in Sankhu, Pharping, and Patan are important centers of pilgrimage and tantric practice, especially among women practitioners and yogic adepts (Simmer-Brown, 2001). Scholars increasingly recognize the importance of this tradition for understanding classical tantra in its living form (Davidson, 2002; Gellner, 1992). Its integration of society, ritual, and philosophy offers valuable insights into how Buddhist thought manifests in lived community.

Vajrayana Buddhism that is far from being esoteric in isolation, it is embedded in everyday life and communal rituals, maintaining a tradition where enlightenment is possible within society, body, and time. Through this lens, Nepal becomes not just a geographic space but also a living mandala of tantric wisdom. In Nepal, Theravada and Vajrayana coexist, each shaping the cultural, ritual, and philosophical landscape in distinct ways. Together, they offer two paths of transformation—one through ethical renunciation and gradual purification, the other through esoteric engagement and rapid realization. Both contribute to a holistic Buddhist vision of society, where liberation is not isolated from social context but deeply entwined with how humans live, relate, and construct meaning. Their coexistence in Nepal demonstrates the plurality and adaptability of Buddhist thought, capable of addressing both the individual's inner liberation and the communal quest for harmony and justice.

Buddhist influences in history

Buddhism, though often receiving less formal state patronage than Vaishnavite Hinduism, has played a foundational role in shaping the cultural, architectural, and spiritual identity of the Kathmandu Valley. The region served as a critical space of religious coexistence and synthesis, where Buddhist and Hindu traditions flourished in parallel. Epigraphic records and historical chronicles (vaṃśāvalīs) document the persistent

presence of Buddhist institutions, rituals, and iconography within a broader context of Hindu statecraft (Regmi, 1983; Vajracharya, 1973).

During the Licchavi period (ca. 1st–8th century CE), the earliest available inscriptions in Nepal, often composed in Sanskrit and Gupta Brahmi script, provide critical evidence of religious plurality. While the royal patronage favored Vaishnavism and Shaivism, inscriptions also record land donations to Buddhist monastic institutions (vihāras) and references to Buddhist clergy. The inscription of King Mānadeva I (c. 464 CE) at Changu Narayan, although primarily Brahmanical in nature, situates Buddhist elements within a shared religious framework (Regmi, 1983). The Thapathali inscription of Amshuvarman (c. 605 CE) further attests to this pluralism, recording endowments to both Brahmins and Buddhist monasteries, thus reflecting a pragmatic and inclusive approach to religious governance (Vajracharya, 1973).

King Narendra Deva (reigned c. 643–679 CE), one of the most illustrious rulers of the late Licchavi period, is renowned for his substantial contributions to the promotion and revival of Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley. Historical chronicles and inscriptions suggest that his reign marked a period of enhanced Buddhist influence, particularly under the auspices of Mahāyāna and early Vajrayāna traditions (Regmi, 1983; Slusser, 1982). According to Tibetan sources, notably the *Deb ther sngon po* (Blue Annals), Narendra Deva maintained strong religious and political ties with Tibet, facilitated through the intermediary Śāntarakṣita and the Nepalese Buddhist monk Śāntarakṣita's disciples (Tucci, 1956). These connections were crucial in transmitting esoteric Buddhist practices from India to Tibet via Nepal, establishing Nepal as a significant conduit in the diffusion of Vajrayāna Buddhism.

Narendra Deva's alliance with the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo further enhanced the Kathmandu Valley's stature as a center for Buddhist learning and pilgrimage. This political alliance, which included military collaboration to reinstate Narendra Deva to the throne with Tibetan support, resulted in intensified cultural and religious exchange between the two regions (Petech, 1958). The establishment and restoration of vihāras during his reign, as evidenced by inscriptions and later chronicles, underscores his active patronage of Buddhist institutions (Vajracharya, 1973). Moreover, some traditions attribute the renovation of the great stupa of Boudhanath to this period, either by Narendra Deva himself or under his patronage, indicating royal engagement with major Buddhist monuments (Bernier, 1970). His reign illustrates how Buddhist rulers in the Kathmandu Valley utilized religion both as a diplomatic tool and a means of reinforcing their moral legitimacy (Gellner, 1992).

Mahayana influences became increasingly evident in art and iconography from this period. Licchavi-era sculptures depicting Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara suggest Mahayana Buddhist devotionism was embedded in elite and popular religious practices (Slusser, 1982). Stupas such as Swayambhunath and Boudhanath trace their foundations to the Licchavi period. Although these monuments were later expanded, their original structures reflect the strength of Buddhist architectural patronage (Bernier, 1970). Inscriptions carved into stone sculptures, often bearing the names of lay donors, indicate that both elites and commoners participated in Buddhist merit-making activities.

The Malla period (ca. 1200–1769 CE) marked a significant transformation in Nepalese Buddhism. With the increasing influence of Vajrayāna and esoteric tantric practices, Buddhism became more localized, syncretic, and ritually elaborate. The Kathmandu Valley, particularly among the Newar communities, witnessed the development of a unique tradition—Newar Buddhism—that combined Mahayana and Vajrayana doctrines with caste-based social structure and richly symbolic ritual systems (Gellner, 1992; LeVine and Gellner, 2005).

Malla-era *vaṃśāvalī*s frequently document royal patronage to both Hindu and Buddhist shrines. King Yaksha Malla (r. 1428–1482) is credited with restoring the stupa at Swayambhunath and initiating other Buddhist projects (Hasrat, 1970). The *Gopālarājavaṃśāvalī* describes Malla kings partaking in the *Samyak Mahādāna*, a major Newar Buddhist festival venerating *Dīpaṅkara Buddha*, thus affirming the continued significance of Buddhist rituals in the royal domain (Petech, 1984). In this period, the roles of *Vajrācāryas* and *Śākya*s became central to religious life, performing rituals such as the *Pañcadāna*, *Vajrasattva pūjās*, and elaborate funerary ceremonies (LeVine and Gellner, 2005).

Buddhist art flourished under Malla rule, as evidenced in *paubhā* paintings, bronze sculpture, and stone carvings. The increased representation of deities such as *Tārā*, *Vajrayoginī*, and other tantric figures reflected the integration of Vajrayāna visual culture into the religious and artistic milieu. Temples like *Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra* (Golden Temple) in Patan exemplify the synthesis of Buddhist iconography and Newar craftsmanship. Some Malla rulers, such as Siddhi Narsingh Malla of Patan, even composed hymns that praise both Hindu and Buddhist deities, reflecting religious syncretism at the highest level of governance (Slusser, 1982).

Religious syncretism was the norm throughout these historical epochs. Shared sacred spaces, joint festivals, and overlapping ritual practices demonstrate a ritual

inclusivity and pragmatic pluralism. Buddhist deities like Avalokiteshvara were often worshipped alongside Hindu gods in communal events, signifying the deeply interwoven nature of Nepalese religious identity. The Kathmandu Valley's pluralistic ethos allowed Buddhist traditions—notably Mahayana and Vajrayana—to thrive despite shifting political tides and limited formal patronage.

Conclusion

The philosophical discourses of Theravāda and Vajrayāna Buddhism in Nepal reveal complex ontological, ethical, and social frameworks that have shaped religious identity, social organization, and ritual life across centuries. Drawing from Pāli canonical texts such as the Majjhima Nikāya, Theravāda presents a worldview rooted in impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and not-self (*anattā*), emphasizing individual moral purification through karma and ethical conduct (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995). The doctrine reinforces karmic causality as a determinant of social status, with texts suggesting that immoral behavior leads to low rebirths, such as that of a *caṇḍāla*, while virtuous conduct leads to higher births (Balapaṇḍita Sutta, MN 129).

In contrast, Vajrayāna, while grounded in Mahāyāna's vision of emptiness (*sūnyatā*) and bodhisattva compassion, integrates esoteric rituals and sacred symbolism to transcend conventional dichotomies. Through the tantric lens, ritual transformation and sacred outlook enable practitioners to reframe suffering and social difference as paths to awakening (Snellgrove, 1987). The unique Newar Buddhist tradition exemplifies this synthesis, merging Vajrayāna practice with caste-based lay systems and ritual orthodoxy (Gellner, 1992).

Using Vaiśeṣika categories—*dravya* (substance), *guṇa* (quality), and *karma* (motion/action)—this study analyzes how Buddhist philosophical systems classify and legitimize social realities. Contradictions between ethical equality and birth-based hierarchy are mediated through karmic reasoning, which tends to naturalize social stratification while upholding spiritual egalitarianism (Matilal, 1977). Historical inscriptions from the Licchavi and Malla periods further reflect a syncretic religious order where Buddhist and Hindu institutions coexisted, often sharing patronage and ritual spaces (Slusser, 1982; Regmi, 1983; Petech, 1984).

Ultimately, the coexistence of Theravāda and Vajrayāna in Nepal, as expressed through texts, rituals, and historical records, illustrates a pluralistic yet hierarchical spiritual landscape. This study contributes to filling a scholarly gap by linking Buddhist

philosophical thought with historical materiality and socio-religious structures in Nepal's pre-modern context.

REFERENCES

- Bechert, H. (1973). *Buddhist revival in East and West*. Vikas Publishing.
- Bernier, R. M. (1970). *Himalayan architecture*. New Delhi: Sagar Publications.
- Bodhi, B. (Trans.). (2000). *The connected discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (2 vols.)*. Wisdom Publications.
- Bodhi, B. (Trans.). (2012). *The numerical discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Wisdom Publications.
- Bodhi, B. (Trans.). (2015). *The Suttanipāta: An ancient collection of the Buddha's discourses together with its commentaries*. Wisdom Publications.
- Chatterjee, S. C., & Datta, D. M. (1984). *An introduction to Indian philosophy*. University of Calcutta.
- Davidson, R. M. (2002). *Indian esoteric Buddhism: A social history of the Tantric movement*. Columbia University Press.
- Gellner, D. N. (1992). *Monk, householder, and Tantric priest: Newar Buddhism and its hierarchy of ritual*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gellner, D. N. (2001). *The anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism: Weberian themes*. Oxford University Press.
- Gombrich, R. F. (1988). *Theravāda Buddhism: A social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo*. Routledge.
- Gombrich, R. (2009). *What the Buddha thought*. Equinox.
- Gray, D. B. (2007). *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: The discourse of Śrī Heruka. A study and annotated translation*. Columbia University Press.
- Harvey, P. (2013). *An introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices (2nd ed.)*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hasrat, B. J. (1970). *History of Nepal: As told by its own and contemporary chroniclers*. Varanasi: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay.
- Jones, J. J. (Trans.). (1976). *The Mahāvastu (Vol. III)*. Pali Text Society.
- Keown, D. (2005). *Buddhist ethics: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- LeVine, S., & Gellner, D. N. (2005). *Rebuilding Buddhism: The Theravāda movement in twentieth-century Nepal*. Harvard University Press.

- Lewis, T. T. (1984). Popular Buddhist texts from Nepal: Accounts of ceremonies. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 11(2), 1–22.
- Lewis, T. T. (2000). Newar-Tantric Buddhism: Three case studies. In D. S. Lopez Jr. (Ed.), *Buddhism in practice* (pp. 305–318). Princeton University Press.
- Matilal, B. K. (1977). Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika. In K. H. Potter (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Indian philosophies* (Vol. 1). Princeton University Press.
- Naṇamoli, B., & Bodhi, B. (Trans.). (1995). *The middle length discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Wisdom Publications.
- Petech, L. (1958). *Mediaeval history of Nepal (c. 750–1480)*. Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.
- Petech, L. (1984). *Medieval history of Nepal*. Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.
- Regmi, D. R. (1965). *Medieval Nepal* (Vol. 1). Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay.
- Regmi, D. R. (1983). *Inscriptions of ancient Nepal* (Vol. 1). Abhinav Publications.
- Simmer-Brown, J. (2001). *Dakini's warm breath: The feminine principle in Tibetan Buddhism*. Shambhala Publications.
- Slusser, M. S. (1982). *Nepal Mandala: A cultural study of the Kathmandu Valley* (Vols. I–II). Princeton University Press.
- Snellgrove, D. L. (1959). *The Hevajra Tantra: A critical study*. Oxford University Press.
- Snellgrove, D. L. (1987). *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan successors*. Shambhala Publications.
- Templeman, D. (2002). Songs of realization: Caryāgīti and Tantric performance. In M. Kapstein & T. J. Hopkins (Eds.), *Tantric traditions in transmission and translation*. Oxford University Press.
- Trainor, K. (2004). *Buddhism: The illustrated guide*. Oxford University Press.
- Tucci, G. (1956). *Preliminary report on two scientific expeditions in Nepal*. Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.
- Tuladhar-Douglas, W. (2005). *Remaking Buddhism for medieval Nepal: The fifteenth-century reformation of Newar Buddhism*. Routledge.
- Vajracharya, D. (1973). *Licchavikalīn abhilekha* [Inscriptions of the Licchavi period]. Nepal Antiquity Society.
- Walshe, M. (Trans.). (1995). *The long discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*. Wisdom Publications.