

# Pragmatic Buddhism in Secular Nepal: With Special Reference to the Tamang Community

DAN SINGH KARKI<sup>1</sup> & SHURENDRA GHIMIRE<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shreekot Multiple Campus, Baitadi

<sup>2</sup> Birendra Multiple Campus, Bharatpur

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Revised 7 April, 2025 • **Corresponding Author:** Shurendra Ghimire  
• **Email:** ghimireshurendra@gmail.com

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## Abstract

*This article highlights the pragmatic nature of Buddhism on the basis of an empirical study and supporting literature. An ethnographic study was carried out to examine the effectiveness of the pragmatic nature of Buddhism where its practitioners hesitate to celebrate, and rather convert to other religions. The Tamang people, the Indigenous caste of Nepal, which is traditionally allied with Tibetan Buddhism, are now converting to Christianity because of economic, socio-cultural, and psychological causes, and advocates of Buddhism are attempting to prevent this conversion. In this context, a field was selected to observe the interface between Buddhism and Christianity in the Tamang community. Field study suggests that Lama have reinterpreted and redefined the norms, values, and standards of Buddhism that includes celebrating rituals at Gumba instead of at home; in group/communal instead of in individual; offering only sttavic foods in feast; and minimum and equal rate of Dakshina to lama priest (no discrimination between rich and poor yajamana) named it 'Nepal Non-violence Buddhism World Peace Cycle Association'; and community leaders of Tamang Buddhism have organized the members and constructed Gumba for institutionalization of the new sect. Nearly, 25% of households of the Tamang community of the studied are now organized into the new sect. Such cultural assimilation of Tamang Buddhism is an example of the pragmatic nature of Buddhism- i.e., developing ideas for social reform and cultivating morality.*

**Keywords:** Emergence of Sect, Non-violence Buddhism, Religious Conversion, Secularism, Tamang Buddhism

## **Introduction**

There are sociological and psychological perspectives on the origin of religion in an archaic culture that claims social product and by-product respectively. Like other places of the globe, the prehistoric inhabitants of present sovereign Nepal were Tribal, and text-based and philosophically interpreted religion was regarded as having entered there by the migrants and victorious Lichchhavi (Regmi 66). Around AD 500, people in Kathmandu (Nepal) Valley were the practitioners of Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Buddhist sects harmoniously. In the Malla period around the 16th and 17th centuries, Islam and Christianity entered Kathmandu valley. Muslims were restricted from practicing inside their community and banned from corrupting any uninherited people, but Christians were expansion missionaries rather than migrated practitioners, and they were also restricted. During the Shah's reign, Nepal became a Hindu Kingdom, and other religions were not so much entertained, however, Buddhism was recognized as culture, customs, and rituals. During the Panchayati System, Monarchy highlighted Hinduism and shadowed Buddhism and other religions in the name of a single ruler, language, religion, and attire. Sapkota in his thesis opines that Christianity is an especial attraction for poor and low caste people (Sapkota 74) was banned, suppressed, and secret, despite the establishment of numerous missionary hospitals and schools (79). After the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, Christianity was expressed and celebrated by organizing the believers, constructing churches, and following rituals. The restated parliament in 2006, Jestha 4, declared the nation as secular which made it comfortable to Christianity for further celebration and expansion, and to the Muslim for practicing religion in further expressive ways by constructing mosques, madras, and graveyards in public places. Moreover, Indigenous Buddhists migrated to Islam, and converted Christians are getting government budget and support for constructing buildings and celebrating their religious activities.

With the implementation of the interim constitution, in 2008, religious conversion became easier. Christian missionaries are strategically expanding their religion by converting and organizing Dalits, poor and indigenous people (Tamang, Gurung, and Thapa 66). Missionaries are targeting the Dalits who are suppressed by the Hindu system and Indigenous Tamang Buddhists who are suffering from poverty. Tamang people who are indigenous Buddhists (Hall; Lama) are converting to Christianity (Samuels). Trends of the population- e.g., the Buddhist population in 2001 was 10.74% declined to Buddhist 9% in 2011, and downfall to Buddhist 8.21% in 2021, on the other, Christian in 2001 was 0.45%, raised 1.4% in 2011 (National Statistical

Office 4), and elevated 1.76% in 2021 (National Statistical Bureau). This demography also suggests that nonindigenous Buddhism is suffering from the encroachment of missionary Christianity. Despite historical recognition of Buddhism as a cultural tradition, Christian missionary efforts have increasingly targeted marginalized groups such as Dalits and poor indigenous peoples, including Tamangs, leading to a steady decline in the Buddhist population and a rise in Christian converts. In response, Tamang Buddhists have developed a new sect that emphasizes non-violence and abstention to safeguard their religious identity against external criticism and conversion as they claimed that Indigenous Tamang Buddhists have their historical responsibility to preserve and promote Buddha dharma, as a way, they have practiced a new sect of Buddhism that does not allow killing animals and drinking alcohol. The new sect protects Buddhism from criticism by foreign religions (Ghimire 90). That research had indicated about the redefining and emergence of new sects in indigenous religions as a strategy of preservation and promotion, and now this study is about the empirical study on effectiveness of the new-sect of Buddhism with specific focus to Buddhist preservation strategies and the local impact of Christian expansion, specially, confining on how Tamang communities navigate the pressures of religious change and assert cultural and spiritual continuity within a secular and pluralistic Nepal.

This study has indicated that Nepal's shift to secularism has legally enabled religious freedom; it has also intensified the tension between missionary Christianity and indigenous religious preservation, particularly within Tamang Buddhist communities.

This empirical study on the one hand, and the aforementioned quantitative trend and historical process on the other suggests a conflicting interface between the two opposing forces of Buddhist preservation and Christian conversion. Therefore, a study was designed to observe the phenomenon in a community. That study on the one hand explored the impact of the secularization policy of the nation on a community level and the effectiveness of Buddhist strategy in this particular context.

Literature related to religious conversion in general and among the Tamang People in the special case of Nepal was reviewed and findings have been organized into different themes below.

## **Historical and Cultural Background of Buddhism**

Buddhism originated as the teaching of Kshatriya prince Siddhartha Gautama, who was born and raised in the Vedic cultural milieu. Dissatisfied with the Shakta

practices and the philosophical justifications behind ritualistic traditions, he proposed alternative religious doctrines, which later evolved into Buddhism (Thanissaro Bhikkhu pp. 47-86). Historically, Buddhism itself has been a religion of conversion and assimilation, adapting to various cultural contexts such as Sinhala Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Newar Buddhism, American Buddhism, and Chan Buddhism. Buddhism, therefore, was originated as a social reform movement (Bailey and Mabbett 39-55). It became a campaign of cultivating people through cultural assimilation- e.g., Emperor Asoka sent his son Mahinda to Sri Lanka to spread Buddhism (Geiger x), Sage Atisa went to Tibet in the eleventh century (Singh 15-19), and recently the tradition was observed in Nepal (Ghimire, “Pedagogy” 116 ; Ghimire, “Secularity” 90). In Nepal, from the 18th century onward, five major religious traditions coexisted: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and indigenous traditions (e.g., Prakrit, Kirat, Bon). Except for indigenous religions, all these traditions had written texts and structured doctrines. The introduction of secularism in Nepal allowed individuals and communities to freely choose and practice their religions. The secular policy further facilitated religious competition for identity formation and community expansion (Ghimire, “Secularity” 89). This freedom led to an increase in religious conversion, including a notable shift among the Tamang people from Buddhism to Christianity. Multiple factors influence religious conversion, including economic hardship, social inclusion, and religious equality. Some factors that influence religious identity, conversion, and competition that were identified by different studies are organized below.

## **Economic Factors Driving Religious Conversion**

Several studies indicate that economic pressures play a key role in religious conversion. In Hindu communities in India, religious ceremonies are often expensive, creating financial distress for lower-income groups (Osella and Osella Chap 4). Fuller highlights that Brahminic rituals involve costly offerings, temple donations, and community feasts, reinforcing social hierarchies and excluding marginalized groups. These economic barriers lead individuals toward religions that emphasize financial inclusivity, such as Christianity. Viswanathan found that lower-caste Hindus in colonial India converted to Christianity and Islam due to financial struggles, as these religions provided egalitarian social structures and access to education and economic resources (Viswanathan 224). A study by Singh and Kim in Nepal similarly revealed that economic hardships among marginalized Tamang and Dalit communities were major factors driving conversion to Christianity (Singh and Kim 540). Many converts

cited financial relief, social support, and the elimination of costly religious practices as incentives for conversion. For the Tamang community, Buddhism traditionally involves large-scale religious ceremonies, including donations to monks and temples. Stirr found that Christian groups often target economically vulnerable Buddhist communities, offering emotional and material incentives for conversion. Many converts cited economic security and a sense of belonging as reasons for adopting Christianity (Stirr). Gellner observed that lower-income Tamangs struggle with the financial burden of sponsoring monastic events (1601). Meanwhile, Sharma found that many Tamangs converted to Christianity because it provided dignity without the financial strain of traditional Buddhist practices (Sharma 113).

## **Religious Inferiority and Psychological Factors**

Kakar introduced the concept of “religious inferiority,” where individuals unable to afford religious participation experience feelings of inadequacy and exclusion (Kakar 119-50). This psychological burden drives individuals toward religions that offer a more welcoming and egalitarian environment. Chakrabarty argues that “conversion is not only driven by economic benefits but also by the need to reclaim dignity when marginalized within traditional religious frameworks” (3).

## **Buddhist Response to Conversion Trends**

As Christianity gains traction among Nepal’s indigenous and marginalized communities, Buddhist groups have responded with strategic interventions. Since Nepal became a secular state in 2008, government funds have been allocated to religious activities, intensifying religious competition. Christian churches have gained followers through humanitarian aid, free crematory rituals, and reduced-cost religious practices, which Buddhist activists criticize as unethical proselytization. Buddhist institutions have attempted to counteract this trend by reinforcing community engagement, social welfare programs, and conservation of Dharma and Vinaya.

## **Emergence of New Religious Movements**

The rise of new religious sects, including New Buddhism and evangelical Christianity, reflects broader socioeconomic and psychological trends. Stark and Bainbridge argue that religious movements flourish when traditional social structures fail to address contemporary needs (Stark and Bainbridge). Similarly, Weber and Ralph highlight the role of charismatic leadership in the formation of new religious movements (Weber 46; Ralph 80). Modern communication technologies have also

facilitated the spread of new religious movements. Campbell and Tsuria highlighted a mode of religious conversion other than face-to-face interaction (16). For them, the internet allows religious leaders to reach global audiences, bypassing traditional institutions and accelerating religious change.

## **A Complex Web of Conversion Factors**

The conversion of Tamang people from Buddhism to Christianity in Nepal is not solely a matter of spiritual transformation but also a response to economic, psychological, and social dynamics. The economic burden of Buddhist rituals, lack of material support from Buddhist institutions, and social inclusivity offered by Christian groups have contributed to this shift. Understanding these factors requires a holistic approach that considers the interplay of historical, economic, psychological, and cultural elements in religious transformation. Here, people in certain communities are struggling with different sociocultural, economic, and psychological problems, and as an endeavor to escape, attempt religious conversion, which in Nepal previously was illegal and now is regarded as unethical. In this context, a field has been constructed to observe the strategy of Buddhism, the pragmatic religion, inheres the nature of coping with the problems in the community.

## **Literature and Field Interface**

Some empirical studies and general observation suggest that the people who used to practice indigenous Buddhism are converting to Christianity. Building Gumbas and Churches, celebrating rituals, and indoctrinating the religious faith and culture have been more vivid and concrete. Meanwhile, the government accepted such religious schools by allocating budgets, introducing secular courses, and certifying the graduates. We selected Kalika Municipality Chitwan as an information-rich case for an ethnographic study. Where 16% of the population is Tamang, 11% of the population speaks Tamang as their mother tongue, 19% of the population is Buddhist, and 12% is Christian (National Statistics Office “Kalika”). Over this decade, 43 Churches and 18 Gumbas have been constructed under the territory of the municipality (field Observation). It indicates that the people are demonstrating their religiosity intensely.

We observed the community where different religions- Hinduism, traditional Buddhism, Christianity, and New Buddhism are in Practice. As ethnographers, we observed the rituals performed by the people who followed these later three religions and took qualitative interviews with the members of the different sects. Then, we tried to find out the factors affecting converting Tamang people to Christianity and

some of the Tamang people affiliating to new Buddhism. Religious practices are rituals, social functions- obligation and expression, and psychological activities that represent religious beliefs, practices, and affiliations. Factors affecting religious conversion and strategies effective in preventing conversion and social reforms are an interpretively constructive reality and this knowledge is claimed by the researcher as the construction of their ethnographic experiences which is subjective, tentative, and contextual. The ethnographers acknowledged the importance of respect for cultural diversity and the ethical responsibility to represent participants' views faithfully, held a commitment to cultural sensitivity, and recognized the Tamang people's agency in their religious choices. When exploring the factors behind religious conversion, we have accounted for the potential power dynamics between the researcher and participants along with respecting the participants' views and avoiding judgment while understanding their religious practices and conversions.

The study was carried out in the line of qualitative ethnographic design, which is particularly suited for exploring the lived experiences of individuals within specific cultural and religious contexts. It employed participant observation- i.e., engaged in direct observation of the rituals performed by followers of traditional Buddhism, Christianity, and New Buddhism. This approach allowed us to gain an in-depth understanding of the practices, beliefs, and social dynamics that inform religious life in the Tamang community. We conducted qualitative Interviews by stressing unsolicited information. The Interviewees were community members across different religious sects and provided insights into their personal beliefs, religious conversion experiences, and motivations. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their views in their own words, while also giving the researcher the flexibility to probe deeper into key themes.

The study focuses on how the Buddhist leaders identified the factors influencing religious deforming and conversion, particularly the Tamang people, and their strategy of reforming and retaining the followers with transformation. This involves exploring social, cultural, economic, and historical factors that shape religious identity and conversion processes. The data collected through interviews and observations was analyzed thematically. Patterns and themes emerged regarding the motivations for conversion, the role of community and social networks, the influence of external factors such as missionaries or media, and individuals' navigation of their religious identities were identified. This study is rooted in interpretivism and constructivism, with a focus on understanding the subjective meanings and lived experiences of the



Tamang people. The research design reflects a qualitative ethnographic approach, allowing you to explore religious practices and conversions in a comprehensive and culturally sensitive manner. Through in-depth observation and interviews, your research seeks to uncover the dynamic factors that influence the religious affiliations of the Tamang people.

## **Analysis and Findings**

There are three themes generated from information analysis. As the nature of qualitative data analysis, findings were interpretively extracted and organized in the following subheadings.

### **Buddhism vs Christianity:**

The government of Nepal, with the declaration of a secular country in 2008 allocated a budget for religious activity and identity in demand. Meanwhile, Churches began to organize people of tribal castes by offering feasts and small amounts of logistics, preaching five abstains including reducing the cost of traditional rituals as well as free crematory rituals, etc. Buddhist activists criticized these Christian activities labeling them as religious conversion (which is illegal) by claiming that the indigenous people of Himalayan origin in Nepal are naturally Buddhist. Encountering these activities in the communities around us, and reviewing empirical studies and theories of secularity, we navigated the causes of conversion to Christianity, and the strategy of Buddhists for preventing the conversion. An ethnographic study of the Tamang community, where some people were converted to Christianity, some practice traditional Buddhist rituals, and some practice revised rituals, was carried out. The field was located in the Kalika and Ratnanagar municipalities of the Chitwan district.

Tamang community, the largest indigenous group in Nepal, is regarded as a follower of Tibetan Buddhism, which was an assimilation of Mahayana Buddhism and Bon. This finding and the reviewed literature suggest that Tamang celebrates many rituals, but with the rise of capitalism and consumerism, their rituals became extravagant for the rich and, do-or-die for the poor. To escape from this situation, an individual or a whole community of the Tamang, began converting to Christianity, in 1990. Tamang leaders/Lamas who advocate Buddhism held this division as a crisis. Initially, they established an institution/Guthi in each community (territory), and later some of them developed it into the 'Nepal Non-violence Buddhism World Peace Cycle Association'. This sect of Buddhism encourages celebrating/ performing the



rituals in communal (group) form if possible and in the venue of Gumba instead of the individual's home. As the sect banned- alcohol, tobacco, and non-vegetarian foods, the cost of feasts was reduced. Similarly, the group rituals reduced the costs by sharing the feast, worship materials, and remuneration for the Lamas. This strategy is now expanding in other communities on the one hand, and resisting the conversion, on the other.

We observed the lower plain area of Kalika Municipality and found the emergence of Gumbas and Churches as presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
**Emergence of Gumba and Church**

S.N.	Year	Churches	Gumba	Households
1	2008	2	0	
2	2009	2	1	
3	2010	1	0	
4	2011	1	0	
5	2012	2	0	
6	2013	2	1	
7	2014	1	2	
8	2015	2	0	
9	2016	1	0	
10	2017	2	1 (ward no 1)	102
11	2018	1	0	
12	2019	3	0	
13	2020	3	0	
14	2021	1	1 (Ward 4)	59
15	2022	2	1	
16	2023	1	1	
	Total	27	8	

Source: Filed observation during 2081 Kartik

Table 1 suggests that despite the indigenous and larger population of Buddhists, religious institutions of Buddhism are fewer than those of Christians. Among the eight Gumbas, only two of them were reformed (non-violence), and over 600 households of the Tamang community, only 200 are organized into the new sect of Buddhism- ‘Nepal Non-violence Buddhism World Peace Cycle Association’.

Reformed Buddhism was introduced in Chitwan district through Laurighol Gumba (5 km away from the ethnographic site). The Gumba was equipped with a committee of 40 households to demonstrate the specialty of reformed Buddhism, recommend others, and finally prevent converting, social reform, and feeling of ownership and pride to the Tamang community.

### **Marginalization of Low-Income People in Buddhist Practices**

Religious rituals and celebrations are deeply embedded in societal structures often serve as markers of identity, social cohesion, and cultural heritage. However, these practices can also highlight socioeconomic disparities, influencing individuals’ perceptions of belonging and self-worth. In many cases, the financial burden of participating in extravagant religious festivities can create a sense of marginalization among economically disadvantaged groups, sometimes prompting them to convert to religions that offer more inclusive or materially supportive communities. Empirical studies across different societies illustrate this phenomenon. Religious festivals and rituals often require significant financial investment, particularly in societies where grand celebrations signify social status. Studies have shown that religious events such as Hindu weddings, Buddhist ceremonies, and Christian festivities can become displays of wealth, reinforcing class distinctions.

In many Buddhist communities, religious participation and social prestige are linked to one’s ability to sponsor festivals, provide offerings, and organize communal feasts. Low-income families who cannot afford these expenses often experience social exclusion and feel that they do not fully belong in their religious community.

Tamang people are traditionally Buddhists since they celebrate different rituals- child’s naming, *chheur* (*bratbandha*), *gunyucholi*, wedding, cremation, and *Ghewa* (*kriya* and *shradha*). These ceremonies are compulsory and spending in the ceremonies is a sign of prosperity and pride-inferiority and embarrassment, on the other. Converting to Christianity is a way of escaping from such unessential expenditures. Moreover, some poor members of the Church get little support from the Church.

To prevent traditional Buddhism following Tamang people from such economic, social, and psychological deprivation Buddhist leaders (Lama and community leaders) developed a new strategy. The Lama interpreted the doctrine and redefined the practices, and the community leaders organized the households as members of the sect and lobbied for constructing a Gumba and practicing the new way of ritual activities. These activities include cost reduction by performing all the ceremonies in Gumba not at home, and if possible doing in groups and sharing the costs by all the members of the organizers. Offering only *Satvik Bhojana* (Buddhism is originally *Satvik*) that is banning non-vegetarian and alcoholic foods. Instead of bargaining the amount of *Dakshina* by Lama Priests or declaring by *Yajamana* as a matter of pride and superiority, the Gumba has made a fixed rate for all the ceremonies. Whether the *Yajamana* is rich or poor they donate equal amounts and do not feel the superior-inferior complexity. If a rich person wants to donate something in the name of the deceased relatives, a donation to the Gumba is welcome

Cost reduction has prevented (to some extent) converting. Indigenous Buddhism in the Tamang Community in Nepal is an assimilation of Tibetan Buddhism- A timely refining & the lama led to fight against the consumerism and presumptuous by redefining and reorganizing the Dharma. As Buddha fought against ritualism and advocated for mind-training (through Vinaya for the beginners), the Lama, of these days has redefined the lifestyles in celebrating rituals From Buddha to now- society/ community tends to make religion (rituals) a complex, ritualistic, extravagant and social reformers work for reducing by redefining. Buddhist Pragmatism is all about a campaign/duty to loosen the shackles of marginalized/oppressed people peacefully and meanwhile mind cultivating- against discrimination and antagonism.

## Conclusion

Emergence and establishment of a new sect of assimilated Buddhism; 'Nepal Non-violence Buddhism World Peace Cycle Association' an example of pragmatic Buddhism, is function in the community. Cultural assimilation the virtue Buddhism and its nature of propagation and a way of penetrating into society and changing their rituals as social reform has been observed in the Tamang community. A historical review of the milieu of the Gangetic plateau of around 600 BC suggests the emergence of Buddhism as a social reform movement, and crystallization and expansion as a religion, and continuation of the same tradition is justified by the expansion and assimilation of this new sect of Buddhism. As the Indian scholasticism movement caused to sublimation of Buddhist thoughts, the secularity policy in Nepal pressurized

the purification of the ritual practices and redefining of the Buddhist ideal. As the emergence of science in Europe has labeled religion as superstition, but people in the advanced society are still religiously bound and affiliated, and engaged in reforming, redefining, and thus reemergence of new religion. Therefore, in an advanced society, the emergence of new religion seems a coping strategy under the specific circumstances of socioeconomic context.

Society from the beginning possesses a tension between establishing many costly rituals on the one hand and reducing the rituals, on the other. Buddha criticized extravagant rituals in the name of collecting merit but encouraged mind-training as self-purification. This practice expanded to half of the Asian region- e.g. luxurious emperors and merchants practiced lay life. The inherent tendency of Buddhism is revisited in this ethnographic study- e.g., struggling in a consumerist society.

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