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Nepal

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Nepal

Abstract

Nepal is a democratic republic located along the southern region of the Himalayan range, bordering India to the south, west, and east and the Tibetan autonomous region of China to the north. Though a small country in geographic terms (approximately 54,362 square miles [1 mile = 1.6093 kilometers]), its population of approximately 29.5 million people is a complex and heterogeneous mix of both Indo-European and Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups and castes, each with distinct languages and religious and cultural traditions. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Hinduism, Hindu Nationalism, India, Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, Tibet, Vajrayana, Syncetism, China

Disciplines

Asian Studies | Buddhist Studies | Hindu Studies

NEPAL

Nepal is a democratic republic located along the southern region of the Himalayan range, bordering India to the south, west, and east and the Tibetan autonomous region of China to the north. Though a small country in geographic terms (approximately 54,362 square miles [1 mile = 1.6093 kilometers]), its population of approximately 29.5 million people is a complex and heterogeneous mix of both Indo-European and Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups and castes, each with distinct languages and religious and cultural traditions. It has the highest percentage of Hindus in its population than any other nation in the world, including India.

In the late 18th century, the Gorkha king Prithvi Narayan Shah consolidated the territories of what is today Nepal, and his descendants ruled Nepal as a Hindu kingdom throughout most of the country's history. Following a 10-year Maoist insurgency and decades of off and on protests and grassroots movements for democracy by political parties and marginalized ethnic and religious groups, in May 2008, Nepal was declared a federal constitutional republic, and Nepalis elected their first president in the newly secular state. Nepal's contemporary religious landscape is highly diverse, and regional and ethnic variations are found within each religious tradition. Through an increase in international travel and migration alongside the growing movements of social and political reform of recent decades, Nepal's religious traditions have begun to be shaped by global religious movements as Nepalis become increasingly involved in transnational religious networks.

Hindus constitute approximately 80% of Nepal's population, Buddhists 11%, Muslims 4.2%, and Sikhs, Christians, and others the remaining 5%. Nepal's Hindus are predominantly *Shaivites* and

Shaktas, practicing rituals and rites similar to, but distinct from, those in contemporary India. For example, in Nepal, animal sacrifice is still a common practice, and major Hindu holidays such as *Dashain—Dussera* in India—are uniquely Nepali in practice and narrative. Hinduism in Nepal shares features with *Vajrayana* (Tantric) Buddhism, and there are syncretic forms of both Hinduism and Buddhism unique to Nepal, particularly prevalent in the Kathmandu Valley. Buddhism in a distinctively Tantric form has been practiced by the Kathmandu Valley's indigenous Newar residents since the medieval period, and throughout the northern regions of Nepal, various forms of Tibetan Buddhism are practiced. Islamic and Christian traditions have also been present in Nepal since the late medieval period, the former arriving through trade routes and migration from Kashmir and the terai (the Gangetic lowland plains in the southern region of Nepal) and the latter through European missionaries.

Religion in Nepal has historically been, and continues to be, highly local in orientation. Today, however, Nepalis of various religious traditions increasingly participate in translocal, global religious movements. With the rise of Hindu nationalism in India and the weakening of Hindu royal power in Nepal, Hindu nationalist groups formed in Nepal in the 1990s and since then continue to agitate, sometimes violently, for a Hindu national identity and the suppression of religious freedoms for minorities. Participation in aspects of global Hinduism is further evidenced by the immense popularity, among urban Nepalis in particular, of Baba Ramdev, an Indian guru who is leading a massive revival of interest in Hatha yoga. Among Nepali Buddhists, a movement of Theravada Buddhism has been growing since the mid-20th century, when it was introduced from Sri Lanka and Burma as a reform alternative to the highly ritualized Tantric Buddhism practiced by the Newars. Among Nepal's Muslim population today, many are involved in transnational Islamic reform and revival movements and increasingly seek Islamic study opportunities in Gulf countries or other parts of South Asia.

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See also China; Hindu Nationalism; Hinduism; India; Mahayana Buddhism; Shaivism; Syncretism; Theravada Buddhism; Tibet; Vajrayana, Tibetan

Further Readings

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