

Cemetery vs. Crematory: the Struggle of Nepali Christians on Disposal of the Dead

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Introduction

'Disposal of the dead', which is practiced in various forms in primitive as well as in post-modern societies, is one of the characteristics that distinguish human beings from other beings. This vital practice has been a matter of debate among the Christians of Nepal since the commencement of the Christian Church in the country. Yet no single collective attempt has been made to address the issue, although informal and individual discussions among the Church leadership cadres have apparently taken place. Thus the question of whether the Christians in Nepal should bury or burn their dead remains unanswered.

The aim of this paper is to look critically at the existing method of disposal of the dead within the Nepali Christian Community and to delineate some practical considerations, which might be helpful in tackling the prevailing situation on the issue. First, a brief description of pre-conversion modes of disposal of the dead in Nepal will be offered; second, the importation and imposition of Christian method of disposal of the dead and its effects on individuals, church and community will be analysed; third, an attempt will be made to critique the Christian way of disposing the dead from historical and theological perspectives. Finally, some practical recommendations will be drawn from the discussion.

Pre-Conversion Practices

Nepal is a homeland of many ethnic, tribal, religious and linguistic groups each of them having distinct customs and practices so it is in order to think of multiple modes of disposing the dead. Further, as van Gennep rightly observed, variations on funeral rites depend on the age, sex, wealth and social status of the deceased.ⁱ Burning and burial are the two normal modes of disposing the dead prior to people's conversion to Christianity.

Hindus normally cremate their dead near the bank of the sacred rivers. Although theological reasons for cremation are unclear, it seems that it is associated with their understanding of fire and sacrifice. According to Hindu belief, fire is considered to

be an agent of regeneration and rebirth.ⁱⁱ In addition, during the late Vedic period, there developed a tendency to regard cremation as one's final sacrifice, in which the body of the deceased is offered in fire.ⁱⁱⁱ However, these concepts seem to be alien to the ordinary Hindus. Part of the reasons might be the Sanskrit language, which is the medium for conducting rituals and is understood by few.

Likewise, the Tamangs, though they belong to Tibetan Buddhism sect, strongly recommend cremation but on the top of the hills. Lamas are the protagonists of the Tamang funerals. The tendency of making use of funerals as occasions to advertise one's property, power and position seems to be a more dominant phenomenon within the Tamang community. The numbers of Lamas and funeral flags in the procession reflect the social and economic status of the deceased or of his family. In this case, both funeral processions as well as final purification rituals become a mosaic of co-operation, compulsion and competition among the Tamangs.

However, burial is also not an uncommon practice among Hindus. For example, infants, unmarried girls, and those who die of small pox, are buried. It could be because they are not regarded as possessing a human soul and this perception is not peculiar to Hindus.^{iv} Besides these practices, Hindus sometimes immerse the corpse into a sacred river.

Burial is the most common practice among some of the ethnic groups such as Lepcha, Limbu and Rai in East Nepal. Each group has its own ancestral burial place and rituals are conducted by the tribal priests.

Other ethnic groups, such as Magar and Gurung, are comfortable with either burial or burning. For instance, Magars of Banyan Hill bury their dead as cremation is very rare, as the required wood and vegetable oil are expensive. Sometimes they carry their dead to the stream or river, where it usually is just released in the water. It is sometimes harmful for the community as well as for the cattle. The presence of lineage members, a real son, or if not then a lineage son, a Brahman, married daughters and their husbands in a funeral is a mandatory as each one of them share responsibilities.^v

Similarly Gurungs of Ghaisu (West Nepal) also prefer burial because they think that burning is expensive. The latter is preferred by the rich and prestigious Gurungs as it provides them an occasion to exhibit their economic status. For Gurungs, a funeral is not just a religious act. Rather it has social and economic implications. The sons

in-law (husbands of the daughters of the deceased) are responsible for carrying the corpse to the cemetery. The clans of the deceased bring a bundle of firewood, beer mash, rice, money etc. which put less economic burden on the family of the deceased.^{vi}

Whatever ways the funerals might be performed, depending on one's ethnic, religious, tribal backgrounds, or even geographical regions, it has never been a matter of debate in the Nepali society. Contributing factors towards this end might be the designated place, priests and policy for funerals within the different groups of people.

Post-Conversion Practice

Christianity was first introduced to Nepal by the Jesuits during the early part of the 18th century. But, in 1769 the Jesuits along with the Nepali converts were coerced to leave the country largely on political suspicion. The following two centuries Nepal remained in complete isolation from the other parts of the world.

Nepal opened its door to the rest of the world in 1950 when the 104 year long authoritarian Rana Regime was dethroned by the people's movement.^{vii} This political change, once again, paved the way for Christianity. This time Christianity was carried into Nepal mainly by the 'Diaspora Nepali' who had embraced Christianity in Darjeeling, India.

Along with the Christian faith came the new interpretation of death. A newly imported method of managing the dead (Christian Burial) was imposed on the new converts irrespective of their socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds, largely by the native missionaries. Certain salient consequences of such Christian practice can be observed on individuals, community and the church.

On the individual level, relationship among the relatives is divorced and their social responsibilities are dismissed. For example, in Gurung and Tamang communities, sons-in-law carry the corpse to the crematory and daughters of the deceased bring food for the mourners. These practices are totally discarded by the Church. Though these practices seem to bring physical and economic burden on them, they feel isolated from and rejected by their own relatives who profess and preach, 'love your neighbour as yourself.' The co-operation among the clan members, which used to lessen the economic burden of the family of the deceased as they contribute wood, rice, beer mash and money for the funeral, has been crippled.

However Christianity, with the new understanding of death and simple funeral rites, liberated its converts from the anxieties of their uncertainties caused by past *karma*.^{viii} Moreover, the heavy financial burden of the death rituals and after-death ceremonies has been removed.

In community level, the so-called 'Christian Burial' has caused conflicts between the church and the community. To some extent, the government restrictions towards Christian activities have contributed to such communal conflicts. Constitutionally, Nepal is the 'Hindu Kingdom' where the presence of Christians is not officially recognised although the National Census 2001 includes the percentage of Christians in its statistics.^{ix} This gives no reason to provide a place for the Christians to bury their dead. In addition, the efforts to form an ecumenical body, which along with other social and national issues would plead and pressurise the government to designate the place for cemeteries, have failed time and again.

The only alternative for the church is to purchase private land which would be either near by a village or a field where villagers go for their daily work. Naturally, most people, if not all, not only fear death but also the cemeteries or crematories. The community constantly lives and works in fear. In some cases, bodies have been taken out from the grave and put back in the church. One of the leaders of Friends Evangelical Mission narrates his bitter experience as follows:

Three years back in rainy season, a Christian Darjee (untouchable) family lost an elderly mother and she was buried beside Trisuli River, Bethrawati, Nuwakot, where Hindu Brahmins also used to cremate their dead ones. After two days of burial, the Hindu fanatic neighbours compelled the Christian Darjee family to dig up back the corpse and cremate in heavy rain despite of half rotten corpse. The family was threatened and humiliated, and later discouraged so much that they were even backslidden for a year or two. Still, they have decided that if any Christian die, they will cremate rather face this kind of horrible Hindu fanatics. They do not have their separate cemetery they have to take alongside Hindu site to cremate in Trisuli River. It is a sad story in its own context on Christian part (Norbu Tamang).

In the name of lightening the economic burden on individual converts, the Church herself has become economically vulnerable. Buying a piece of land is very expensive, especially in the cities. Most Churches have their services in rented halls. Besides this, pastors and other full-timers have to be looked after. The church members, particularly elder ones, are worried about a place for burial. There are two

options. The first is to collect ‘free will’ offering which is sometimes ‘forced’ offering. The second is to beg for money to bury the believers.

A Critique of the ‘Christian Burial’

What motivated the Nepali Christians to cling on the Christian way of funeral regardless of these unhealthy outcomes? Lindell reports three arguments by Church leaders:

- 1) burial is God-given, scriptural and Christian tradition;
- 2) the body should be placed intact into the grave to await resurrection; and
- 3) cremation is a part of Hinduism so Christians should not follow Hindu practices.^x

Now, these arguments have to be analysed from theological as well as historical perspectives.

Firstly, the argument that burial is God-given, Scriptural and Christian tradition has neither theological nor historical grounds. Burial is equally as human act as cremation. Rituals whether concerning death or other are man made. The Biblical record ‘from earth to earth’ (Genesis 3:19) should not be taken as a God-given method of disposing the dead. Rather it should be understood as the reality of the mortality of human body. The Bible also nowhere explicitly either commends burial or condemns burning. Some people quote 2Kings 3:27 and Amos 2:1 as a proof for God’s disapproval of cremation. The historical context of these texts reveals that in the former incident the king was condemned for sacrificing his son, not for burning body, and in the latter the Moabites were judged for their violence against the people of Edom, not because they practiced cremation.^{xi}

Additionally, it has to be admitted that burial is not something that the Christians invented. Burial is a Jewish tradition. Geoffrey Rowell argued that Christians borrowed the practice of burial as the canonised mode of disposal of the dead from Judaism.^{xii}

Secondly, the question of whether cremation renders impossible the resurrection of the body, as the Nepali Christians think, is problematic per se. For it is inconsistent with Jesus’ view of resurrection. According to Jesus, resurrection is not confined to Christians (John 5:29). Further, it contradicts the doctrine of salvation by faith. Burial does not guarantee one’s resurrection; rather it is one’s faith in him.

Additionally, will the body remain until the time of resurrection in the tomb; or what will happen if the cemetery is reused or taken away in the landslides; or what will happen to the Christians devoured by wild animals, which is possible in Nepal? Finally, it raises a serious question about the faith and resurrection of many martyrs, who were burned to death.^{xiii} Billy Graham candidly states, “Cremation cannot prevent a sovereign God from calling forth the dead at the end of time.”^{xiv}

Thirdly, cremation is not necessarily an exclusively Hindu practice. Neither burial is solely practiced by the Christians. During 1960s almost 50% of the Christians in New Zealand cremate their dead.^{xv} One study, carried out in 2002, shows that in the United States of America (USA) cremation rate is 25%, and 40% Americans are likely to go for cremation.^{xvi} Among the American Presbyterians 40% of members and 53% of pastors prefer cremation.^{xvii} It is not to argue that the Nepali Christians should follow whatever the overseas Christians practice. However, denying any practice merely because of its association with other religions would not be productive either. As discussed earlier, burial is common among the people of other religions too. For thousands of years, both burial as well as burning have been prevalent modes of managing the dead.^{xviii}

The above discussion discloses no theological and historical basis for burial or against cremation. If burial can be Christian, so can cremation.

Conclusion

Considering the pluralistic socio-religious context of the Nepali society; no theological and historical grounds for the Christian burial; and glaring anomie caused by Christian burial, the following recommendations could be drawn:

- The socio-cultural and ethnic background of the deceased should be considered before the funeral is performed for the rituals vary according to one’s background. The consensus of the family members and relatives would be sought.
- Where burial is traditional such as in Rai, Limbu and Lepcha communities and does not create problems of cost or use of land needed for living, there are no grounds why it should not be carried on.

- Where cremation is more demanding, cheaper, easier, and comforting for the members, relatives and community, Nepali Christians should gladly and courageously adopt this method.

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ⁱ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 146.

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- iii Patrick Olivelle, "Hindu Rites," *Encyclopaedia of Religion*.
- iv Van Gennepe, 160.
- v John T. Hitchcock, *The Magars of Banyan Hill* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winton, 1996), 54.
- vi Donald A. Messerschmidt, *The Gurungs of Nepal: Conflict and Change in a Village Society* (Warmister: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1976), 95.
- vii Sudhindra Sharma, 'The Hindu State and the State of Hinduism', eds. Kanak Mani Dixit and Shastri Ramachandaran, *State of Nepal* (Lalitpur: Himal Books, 2002), 33.
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- xiv George, "Cremation Confusion: Is It Scriptural for a Christian to Be Cremated?" 66.
- xv S.C. Read's response to Jonathan Lindell's questions concerning cremation, 16 July, 1965.
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