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A HISTORY OF THE PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENT IN NEPAL

Bal Krishna Sharma

1. Nepal: A Land of Diversity

1.1 The Land of the Highest Mountain

Nepal, often called the “Land of Mount Everest,” and the land “Nearer to Heaven,” is an independent state,¹ a country of twenty two million people, and is also known as the Himalayan Kingdom.² The country is situated between two great neighbors: China in the north and India in the south, east and west. Comparatively Nepal is a small country with an area of 147,181 square kilometers. The length of the country from east to west is about 885 km, and the width of the country is non-uniform, approximately being 193 km north to south. Along the northern frontier stand many of the highest peaks of the Himalayan range, such as Everest (29,028 feet), and Dhaulagiri (26,790 feet). Out of the ten highest mountains in the world, seven are in Nepal. Because of these highest peaks, hills, valleys and wild life forests, Nepal has been one of the most beautiful sites for tourism.

1.2 The People

The population of Nepal shows both Indo-Aryan and Mongoloid strains. Their blending, long history, culture and civilization have shaped the character of the population.³ The different races of Mongoloid are

¹ Walter Hugh John Wilkinson, “Nepal,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: Macmillan, 1963), vol. 16, p. 220.

² Bal Kumar K. C., “Physiography of Nepal,” in *Nepal Perspectives on Continuity and Change*, ed. by Kamal P. Malla (Kirtipur: CNAS, 1989), pp. 1-2

³ Vidya Bir Singh Kansakar, “Population of Nepal,” in *Nepal Perspectives on Continuity and Change*, pp. 28-30.

also of mixed origin. To the extreme north, where higher mountains and the valleys are to be found, dwell the people of Tibetan origin, who are known as the Bhotes. Of the Mongoloid origin, the Gurungs and the Magars are to be found mostly in the western part of the country. The Murmis, Tamangs and Newars occupy the central parts and the Kirantis, Limus, and Lepchas are found mainly in the eastern part of the country. Of the Aryan origin, Brahmans and Kshatrias are scattered in different hill regions.⁴

1.3 Political, Social and Economic Situation in Nepal

1.3.1 Political Situation

Since Nepal is a Hindu country, it has been practicing a constitutional monarchical system since 1990. Prior to that, the king was the absolute monarch for many years, and he banned a multiparty democratic system. During the revolution in the 1990s, the ban on the multiparty system was relaxed. People had a very high expectation of democracy with a belief that their situation would be magically changed. So far people have not had many of their expectation fulfilled. Citizens have affiliations with various existing parties and some of the extreme groups have taken the way of violence. The political situation in Nepal is very unstable and the government is not able to provide security to its citizens. Many are living in fear and anxiety. The present political situation also highlights the fact that there is no political courtesy among the political parties. It seems they are there to pull down and fight one another. The political situation of the nation is a threat to the norms of democracy. People feel that the principle of democracy is good, but those who are given the responsibility to implement the democratic principles are not mature people. They have self-interest rather than the national interest. Such situations may exist in other nations, but for Nepal's infant democracy this is unfortunate.

1.3.2 Social Situation

Nepal has two major traditions, therefore, cultural practices are essentially of a Hindu or Buddhist derivation. These find expression in their numerous rites and rituals, beliefs, social values, festivals, art and architecture. From the beginning of the cultural history of Nepal, there has been a "give and take" tradition which has contributed towards the mutual contribution of the people in cultural formation. There is a

⁴ Wilkinson, "Nepal," p. 222.

consciousness of one's caste or ethnic identity. Religious ideas have played a very important role in shaping the social norms of society. People of different castes and ethnic groups live together side by side, but there is a social tension mounting between these groups in various parts of the country. Society always has been dynamic; therefore some social influences from other cultures are being incorporated into the Nepalese social structure.

1.3.3 Economic situation

Nepal has been declared one of the poorest countries in the world. Annual per capita income is about US\$200. It is a land-locked and predominantly agricultural country. Major crops grown are paddy, maize, wheat, barley, millet, sugarcane, jute, oilseed, tobacco, potato, etc. Agricultural development comes at the top of the list for the economic development of the nation but the importance of an industrial economy to the development of the national economy cannot be minimized. About twenty-three organized industries are functioning in Nepal. But variations in international demand, shortage of raw materials, and agricultural failures due to the monsoon are some of the major reasons for the unsteady growth of industrial products in Nepal.

Another important sector of Nepalese economy has been tourism, especially since 1970. In spite of all efforts to improve the economic condition, there have been no substantial changes which the people can see.

1.4 Traditional Religions in Nepal

Nepal is a Hindu state and multiracial and is a multilingual country. Religion has played a vital force in the people's thoughts and actions as it has done in most Asian countries. In the northern part of Nepal there are people who follow either various sects of Tibetan Buddhism, or Bon-Po, a magical pre-Buddhist religion which became later, a part of Lamaistic Buddhism. Buddhism in the Nepal valley is more Indic in its derivation which about half the population of the Newars follow, the others being Hindus. In the middle hills and along the Tarai, Hindus live in greater concentration which has made Nepal a predominantly Hindu country today. In addition, tribal groups follow an animistic type of religion and many people consider them Hindus. They are permitted to enter into the temple of Pasupatinath, which Christians and Muslims are forbidden to do. The constitution declares that the king has to be Hindu but it does not prohibit Nepalese from practicing other religions. Conversion from one

religion to another is prohibited. Such prohibition is the result of the perceived connection between missionary activity and colonialism and has been enforced to preserve Nepal as a Hindu state.

1.5 Christianity in Nepal

The earliest Christian contact with the land of Nepal took place in 1662 A.D., when the Italian Capuchin priests passed through Nepal en route to Tibet. After the return of these visitors to Europe, they encouraged the people to go to India, Nepal, and Tibet to evangelize them. So, in 1703, the Capuchin fathers were assigned by the Roman Catholic Church to evangelize in North India, Nepal, and Tibet. They made their base at Patna in India and several came to work in the Kathmandu Valley, the city-states of Newars, from 1707 to 1769. However, when the Gorkha king Prithvinarayan Shah conquered Nepal, he expelled the priests and the group of Newar Christians, accusing them of being agents of European colonial power.

From then until 1951, a firm Nepalese policy excluded all foreigners and Christians. Such policy was made on two main considerations: Independence from foreign power must be maintained, and the Hindu kingdom must be kept undefiled and the Hindu structure of society kept intact. Hence, foreign religions must be excluded. So the nation of Nepal was completely closed for almost two hundred years for any Christian missions. But the missionary work continued among the Nepalese who were living outside of Nepal. For two hundred years many missionary agencies and individuals thus stood praying and knocking at the door of Nepal.

Before the door of Nepal was finally opened for foreigners to enter, the missionary work started in the Indian borders. In Rupaiah, India, mission work started as early as 1921 and the Nepalese going to India and coming back to Nepal were preached to and evangelized right on the border. Nautanwa was another important center in the border area to evangelize Nepalese people. From this place thousands of Nepalese passed each year between India and Nepal. Through the work of these border-based missionaries, within a short period of time a few people became Christians and dedicated their lives to the Lord. After sixteen years of continuous work on the Nautanwa border, they formed a band that is known as the Nepali Evangelistic Band. At the beginning they concentrated their work among the Nepalese in India.

Another important achievement was the translation of the Bible into the Nepali language by the Serampore Trio. The first Nepali New

Testament was published in 1821, and is the first printed book in Nepali literature. The full Bible in Nepali was published in 1914, and the Revised Bible was published in 1977, and New Revised Version was published in 1998.

Though, Nepal was not open for the gospel, much was happening in the border areas. The missionaries and new converts living in the Nautanwa area formed a Gorkha Mission, which undertook to preach and sell scriptural literature at the border points. Some went to Nepal to live and work and witness, but they were immediately expelled from the country. Several attempts were made by several people to enter the country of Nepal and share the gospel. Many of those people were arrested and finally expelled from the country. This situation continued until 1951. Though democracy was declared and foreign investments were sought, the new governmental attitude towards Christianity was similar to the previous government. The revolution of 1951 opened the door of this nation. Foreign agencies were welcomed to assist in the national development. Therefore, in 1951 Christian missions were permitted to enter the land under certain conditions. The conditions were:

- They were to serve the people in such useful ways as should further the cause of nation-building;
- They were to follow the rules of the department to which they were connected; they were to travel, and
- Live only as their visas allowed; but they were not to propagate their religion or convert the people.⁵

Catholic Jesuit missions entered Nepal in 1951 and boarding schools were opened. Other mission agencies also started to come to Nepal. The largest mission organization is the United Mission to Nepal (UMN) which was formed in 1954. It is a co-operative effort of many missionary societies, spanning all continents, many denominations and interdenominational mission bodies. The mission has concentrated on various programs and projects, which contribute to the development of the nation as a whole. The emphasis of UMN has been on health, education, vocational training and agriculture development. There are other mission agencies including International Nepal Fellowship, Evangelical Alliance Mission, and Seventh Day Adventist Mission that are mainly concentrating on medical services.

⁵ Donald E. Hoke, *The Church in Asia* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), p. 464.

Along with this brief history of mission agencies, it is appropriate to discuss the growth of the church itself in Nepal. After 1951, small congregations were established in various parts of Nepal. Some of the earliest congregations were established in Pokhara, Nepalganj, and Kathmandu. In the fifties and sixties only a handful of Christians were found in Nepal. During the seventies the churches started to grow in various parts of Nepal. Christians were not allowed to preach and conversion to Christianity was prohibited. The Nepalese law stated that conversion to Christianity meant one-year imprisonment for the convert, three-year imprisonment for the preacher, and six-year imprisonment for the one who baptizes. After the 1960s till the 90s such laws were in effect and many Christians were imprisoned because of their faith. The church experienced severe persecution during the 80s.

In 1990, there was an agitation against the existing rule, wherein the king was absolute monarch. Then the king declared democracy and the multiparty system was restored. The king was willing to remain a constitutional monarch. The church experienced some freedom after 1990, but the attitude of the government toward Christians remains the same. In some places there are still arrests. Christians have been imprisoned. The government does not acknowledge a Christian presence, and does not register Christian churches and organizations.

In spite of all these pressures, the church in Nepal is growing. There are small and large congregations all over the country. The church faces a great challenge to witness to the people and also to disciple its converts and develop quality leadership. Developing ministerial courtesy among the new churches and denominations is another challenge the Nepali church faces. There is a genuine concern among some of the leadership that in order to establish God's kingdom in Nepal we need to work together. Our united effort will convey a better message than our single effort. This does not mean we need to be uniform in everything we do. We need to have the unity of the Spirit. Our main motive should be to establish the kingdom of God.

2. Pentecostal Movement in Nepal

2.1 The Beginning

As stated earlier, the history of Christianity in Nepal is very recent. The gospel only came to the nation in 1951. But prior to that, Pentecostal missionaries were active in some of the Nepal-India borders. Rupaidiah,

a border town with Nepalganj about 600 kilometers away from Kathmandu the capital city of Nepal, was one of the earliest missions centers. Some of the American Assembly of God missionaries were working in and around Rupaiah. They also had a children's home, which exists today. There was a church in Nanpara, a few kilometers away from Rupaiah.

Barnabas Rai with his wife came to Rupaiah from Darjeeling⁶ in 1936 and stayed and worked with the missionaries there. He was assigned to preach the gospel among the Nepalese who were going to India and coming back to Nepal. In this humble beginning, God rewarded the work of these pioneers. Several people became Christians. Barnabas Rai emphasized the Pentecostal experience from the beginning of his ministry. Without much detailed teaching, people received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, with speaking in tongues. Barnabas Rai did not have much education but he had the experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Then Rai and his family moved to Nepalganj in Nepal in 1951, after the democracy was declared. Johnsingh Pun, Laxman Thapa, and Dalbirsingh were some of the early converts through Barnabas Rai and Rupaiah Assemblies of God (AG) Mission. Some of these converts were sent to North India Bible Institute, Hardoi. This institution has also helped to promote the Pentecostal movements in Nepal. Similar movements were found in Pokhara and some other places in Nepal.

2.2 Historical Developments of the Movement

It may be appropriate to say that the Pentecostal movement came to Nepal along with the gospel presentation. Therefore, it was full gospel preaching from the beginning. Within my knowledge, Nepal has never experienced the mass-movement conversion. The conversion has always been made with individual decision. Many people in their conversions have experienced healing or deliverance from evil forces. People have experienced changed lives. Nepal is experiencing one of the fastest seasons of church growth in the world. Almost all churches are evangelical in their beliefs and presentation.

⁶ Darjeeling is in the Indian State of West Bengal, and a hill station where majority of the people are Nepalese. Barnabas Rai came to western part of Nepal from Darjeeling which is near the eastern border of Nepal. Rai was a Nepali speaker.

As stated earlier, yjr Pentecostal movement entered Nepal in 1951 when the nation was opened to the outside world. Barnabas Rai moved to Nepal and a fellowship started in Nepalganj. The Lal Bahadur Shrestha family became Christian in 1954. There were other converts in the Nepalganj area. All these new converts were exposed to Pentecostal teaching. The gospel reached to Gumi in 1960, a remote village, very far away from Nepalganj. Nara Bahadur Gharti and Shiva Bahadur Gharti were some of the early converts. Through Rupaiah and Nepalganj churches the gospel reached several places around Nepalganj. In the 60s and 70s there were few Pentecostal churches in the Nepalganj areas, but these churches always gave emphasis to the work of the Holy Spirit. Some of the early church leaders had very close fellowship with AG of North India and some of the leaders of AG North India, like P. C. Samuel, have contributed to the Pentecostal movements in western Nepal.

The AG work started in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, in 1974 with the arrival of some of the missionaries commissioned by the Division of Foreign Missions of the AG, USA. Jim Roan, Dudley Henderson, and Miss Mary⁷ were some of the early AG missionaries from USA. The above missionaries and others like Ezekiel Joshua (India), and Geoff Walvin (UK) are some of the pioneers of the AG and Pentecostal work in Kathmandu valley. Through their ministries many people came to Christ and dedicated their lives for the ministry. Emphasis was placed on evangelism, church planting, and discipleship. Short-term Bible classes were started and emphasis was given to the word of God and the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit. People were prayed for the baptism of the Holy Spirit and they were filled.

AG churches in Kathmandu valley started to organize annual revival camps during the Hindu festival, Dasain, and they became greatly beneficial to the believers. The first time, such a camp was conducted in Nagarkot in 1980, many people experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Fred and Margaret Swards from Singapore were the speakers for the first camp and they emphasized the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Revival camps were conducted in the following years in many parts of Nepal. These were the years of severe persecution in Nepal. Christians were persecuted politically and socially. But the emphasis on prayer, baptism of the Holy Spirit and discipleship helped the believers to trust in Christ with full commitment.

⁷ Her true name is withheld as requested by her.

The youth camp also came into existence through felt need. This revival camp was targeted mainly for young people. In such camps the young people experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Deliverance, speaking in tongues, and being slain in the Spirit were some of the main features of these youth revival camps. Many received God's call to the ministry. This AG youth camp was held for the first time in Rupaiah, near the Nepalganj border in India. Then as the churches grew, revival camps were held in various parts of Nepal, and youth were challenged to be filled with the Spirit and live a life worthy of his calling.

The leadership of the Nepalese AG has fully co-operated with the move of the Holy Spirit. The present leadership is always grateful to the pioneers of this ministry in Nepal. The Pentecostal experience is being emphasized in all the churches, and the power of the Holy Spirit is considered to be the source of ministry. Church members experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit and are encouraged to seek the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In these churches place is given for prophecy, as well as a time for praising God in Spirit, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues.

In Bible schools and training centers, courses are offered on Pentecostalism, especially studies on the Holy Spirit and his works. The gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit are taught. The students are encouraged to exercise the gifts of the Spirit in their lives.

Apart from the Assembly of God, there are many other groups who consider themselves to be Pentecostal or Charismatic. Agape Fellowship is a Charismatic church with many churches in its fellowship. Much emphasis is given to the baptism and fullness of the Holy Spirit. There are other independent churches, many are Pentecostal or Charismatic in their beliefs and expressions. Other churches that do not profess to be either Pentecostal or Charismatic are not against Pentecostal/Charismatic beliefs and movements. These churches participate in the Pentecostal/Charismatic meetings. The believers of such churches are not against Pentecostal/Charismatic movements, in fact they like them, but they are not well informed about the movements.

2.3 The Impact of the Movement

As stated above, the Pentecostal movement entered Nepal when the door was opened to the gospel. This movement has allowed the church to remain energetic and give emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit and on the study of God's word. Christians are reminded that we need to be equipped by the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the word of God in order to

be witnesses for Christ. The work of the Lord cannot be done with our own strength, but with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Nepal is a land of many spirits. We encounter spiritual warfare all the time. We see possession and manifestation of demonic power everywhere. Such manifestations take place even in the church services when new people come for salvation. Many people have experienced deliverance from evil forces. Sometimes possessed people are directed to the Pentecostal churches for their deliverance. Even the Hindus/Buddhists bring such people for deliverance.

Pentecostal churches emphasize prayer and fasting. People are encouraged to pray for the nations, for the salvation of unbelievers, for the Christian community, for revival, and others. Focus on prayer and fasting builds up the believers and encourages them to trust God for the answer to their prayers. The young church of Nepal needs to continue in its zeal for the Lord and be a witness in the community. When the people are changed by the power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit, they make the difference in their society.

Pentecostal churches are also involved in social work to some extent. Though they stress the spiritual aspect of a person more than the physical, they by no means neglect the physical aspect. Believers have been encouraged to meet the over all needs of a person.

People need to learn God's word. There is no substitute for the scripture. The Pentecostal churches in Nepal can have greater impact if they give more attention to the word of God and balance it with spiritual gifts. The nation of Nepal is yet to see a revival with God's greatest intervention. The church needs to prepare itself for this moment. Church leaders and believers need to cleanse themselves for this moment. Then the church will have a greater impact upon the nation.

3. Reflection

The Pentecostal movement entered the nation of Nepal when Nepal's door was opened for the gospel. The movement started in various parts of the nation, and contributed positively in the areas of evangelism, discipleship, and church planting in Nepal. Pentecostal/Charismatic churches have evangelistic activities where they share the good news to the people who have not heard the gospel. Believers are encouraged to share their testimonies and the good news about Christ with their family members, relatives, and neighbors. This has contributed positively towards the growth of the church. Local

churches take the initiative to evangelize their village or town. Leaders and believers are encouraged to pray for people for salvation, healing, and deliverance. Many have experienced salvation from their sins, healing in their bodies, and deliverance from the power of evil forces.

Pentecostal churches stress the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Believers are encouraged to seek the in-filling and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Revival meetings are conducted in the churches to help believers grow spiritually and they are encouraged to give time in prayer and reading or listening to God's word, as well as to exercise the spiritual gifts that are given to them by the Lord.

It has been commented on from time to time that the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement is very emotional in its expressions. They say that people are not motivated to do a deep study of God's word and they are more interested in the gifts than in the fruit of the Spirit. Spirit-filled believers need to pay a very keen attention to some of these comments made by both Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals. The Bible always demands a balanced view of life. There is no doubt of the genuineness of Pentecostal/Charismatic movements, which have crossed all nations and denominations. People are experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives and ministry. But the Pentecostal/Charismatic believers need to find balance between the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit. Emphasis also must be given to the formation of Christian character. The church is responsible to build up the people in the image of Christ, while encouraging the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The need of the Nepali church today is to develop a balance between the deeper study of God's word and spiritual manifestations of God's power. Therefore, the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches need to give more attention to a deeper study of God's word and help the Christians to cultivate fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

They also need to give attention to developing leadership. Sometimes leaders are too short sighted and they do not plan well for the future. If this divine movement is to continue, mature leaders with greater commitment have to be developed. The people who have Pentecostal experience need to profess their experience and help others to have this experience.

Finally, the church in Nepal is experiencing tremendous growth. Pentecostal/Charismatic groups have an awesome responsibility to lead the church in the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. They need to set an example in faith and deeds. The nation of Nepal needs to experience the power of the Holy Spirit and the church needs to give right place to God in its life.