

BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE IN NEPAL

An authentic historical evidence for the existence of an Asokan (may be even pre-Asokan) *stupa* is provided by the edict of Asoka engraved on his Niglihawa Pillar found in the Nepal Tarai, which records the existence of the Konakamuni Stupa and its enlargement by Asoka to twice the original size. Though this *stupa* has not yet been identified, it could not presumably be different in appearance and proportions from such early Indian *stupa* as the Great Stupa at Sanchi, the nucleus of which is also attributed to Asoka. The Piprahawa Stupa on the Indo-Nepal border, which on the basis of its inscription is Asokan, if not pre-Asokan in date, is known to measure 116 ft. in diam. and more than 21 ft. high with a battered top and thus compares favourably with the Great Stupa at Sanchi which is well-preserved measuring 120 ft. in diam. and 54 ft. high. It is well-known that the Piprahawa Stupa yielded an inscribed casket containing the body relics of Lord Buddha. Two brick *stupas* have been recently excavated at Tilaurakot representing the site of Kapilvastu in Nepal Tarai. The larger *stupa*, measuring 52 ft. in diam. and 7 ft. high, with projections in the four cardinal directions, is of Mauryan date with a pre-Mauryan nucleus, while the smaller one, measuring 26 ft. in diam. and 3 ft. high, belongs to the Sunga period. Tradition attributes five *stupas* at Patan in the Kathmandu Valley to Asoka, and, like the Stupas at Sanchi and Piprahawa two of these are also hemispherical in form characterised by a large diameter and low height which is an index of antiquity. There is also a tradition that a daughter of Asoka named Charumati married a local prince and led a retired life in a monastery built by her at Deopatan, which is designated after her as Charumati-vihara popularly called Chabel, having a complex of a Buddhist *stupa* and monastery. The veracity of these traditions, however, can only be confirmed by scientific excavations, which are yet to be undertaken.

The holiest *stupa* in the Valley, known as the Svayambhunath (diam. about 60 ft., ht. about 30 ft.) which is situated on an isolated hill and is considered ageless according to pious belief, is also hemispherical in form with a flat truncated top, resting on a low circular plinth, and essentially resembles the early Indian *stupas* in form and appearance. The find of two early Lichchhavi inscriptions attests the antiquity of the site and the Stupa itself appears to have been referred to as.....*bhu-chaitya-bha*.....in a mutilated inscription of Amsuvarman (c. A.D. 603-20) found at a place called Gokarna in the Valley. A doubtless record of the Stupa's existence, however, occurs in a Buddhist manuscript of the 11th century which illustrate conventional *stupa*, unlike the one at the site, and labels it as *Nepale Svayambhu*

Chaitrah. The (oft-renovated) metal-plated portion surmounting the dome (*anda*) comprises of (1) square *harmika* painted with the eye-motif on all the four faces, (2) a series of 13 tapering circular rings representing the thirteen heavens with a *torana* (tympanum) at the base carved with figures of the Dhyani Buddhas, (3) *amalaka*, (4) *chhatra*, and (5) *gajura* or bell-finial. The *Gopala-vamsavali* attributes its authorship to king Vrishadeva, great-grandfather of Manadeva, who is described as *Sugata-sasana-pakshapati* in the Pasupati Inscription of King Jayadeva II. In a late Sanskrit manuscript text called *Devamala*, preserved in Nepal, it is stated that king Vrishadeva converted a Siva temple into a Buddhist *chaitya*. Be that as it may, there is every probability that the Svayambhu was built during the early Licchavi period as a simple *chaitya* of pristine Hinayana form with a *harmika* and *chhatravali* and was subsequently embellished with shrine-projections and developed crowning members under the impact first of Mahayana and then of Vajrayana and Tantrayana. At present there are nine shrine projections enshrining images of the five Dhyani Buddhas and four Taras which must have been introduced after the tenth century under the influence of Vajrayana, while the cult of Adibuddha with which Svayambhu is popularly identified is a still later development. The compound of the Svayambhu Stupa is cluttered with votive *chaityas*, images and shrines which were put up in different ages, beginning with the Licchavi period. Among the shrines the most notable is the pagoda-shaped temple enshrining an image of Hariti, worshipped as Ajima, which is a late replacement of an original image, regarded by one scholar to be as old as *circa* 2nd century A.D. belonging to the Gandhara art of the Kushana period.¹

While most of the monumental *stupas* of the Valley are practically smaller replicas of the Svayambhunatha with minor variations, the Bodhnath or the Khasti Chaitya which vies in holiness with the Svayambhu, is larger in size and has a different plan and design. It stands on three rectangular terraces, each with re-entrant angles, which are embellished with turrets. A flight of steps on the south leads to the top terrace which supports the large hemispherical dome (*anda*), round which are arranged niches with Buddhist deities. The crowning members above the *anda* are similar to, though larger than those of the Svayambhu, with this difference that the representation of the thiteen heavens here is pyramidal. Further, the shrine-projections, enshrining the five Dhyani Buddhas are shifted here from the *anda* proper to the lower most terrace. In its essential plrn and design this *stupa* resembles those of Paharpur in Bangladesh and Borbodur in Java, both belonging to *circa* 8th century and anticipated by the Stupas-shrine at Lauriya Nandangarh in North, Bihar, dating from the early centuries of the Christian era.

1. Pratapaditya Pal, "Buddhist Art in Licchavi Nepal",
Marg, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, June 1974.

The Bodhnath contains not less than 108 sculptures of which the majority are of Tibetan character. Forty-seven images are represented in the *yab-yum* and at least ten depict the Siddhas of Tibet including Mil-ras-pa Mar-pa Naro-pa and Guru Padm sambhava all wearing the peculiar Tibetan costume. Bodhnath also contains purely Indian gods of the Vajrayana, such as Shadakshari Lokesvara, Vak, Hevuka and Yamantaka. Attributed by the *Vamsavali* to king Sivadeva (c. A.D. 588-613) this *stupa* is obviously later than the Svayambhu which is also attested by its mixed pantheon largely pertaining to the developed phase of Tantrayana.

While discussing Buddhist art in Nepal we have indicated the immense popularity of *chaitya*-worship in the land, which is really a relic of the Hinayana stage when Buddha was worshipped symbolically. Initially representing the *parinirvana* of the Master the *stupa* or the *chaitya* became the symbol *par excellence* of the Master himself. Originally the *chaitya* was a simple structure unadorned by human figures but in course of time under the impact of Mahayana it began to be embellished with niched figures of the Buddha. In due course, with the proliferation of the Buddhist pantheon under the influence of Vajrayana, the figures of Dhyani Buddhas and the Bodhiattvas and even their Saktis found a place on the various tiers of the *chaityas*. In Nepal we have countless *chaityas* of all the three types, of a size varying usually between 2 and half to 8 feet, encountered in the streets and lanes, in and around the Buddhist shrines and in the numerous courtyards of the Bahals, now inhabited by Buddhist householders. These *chaityas* are either votive, i.e. put up as an act of piety, or funerary or commemorative and the practice of erecting them is still in vogue.

The earliest of these, dating from the Lichchhavi times, are smaller in size and usually bereft of human figures and have a distinctive form and design with a well-shaped hemispherical dome (*anda*) and are made of a high quality sandstone which takes a smooth polish. Invariably the dome has an aperture at the top to receive the crowning members which are lost and are now replaced by a very late monolithic piece of different variety of stone showing the design of the *harmika* crowned by the usual 13 rings often carved with *toranas* at the base. With this common denominator, the Lichchhavi *chaityas* have many varieties and types. The smaller or the simpler *chaityas* stand on a square plinth (*medhi*) of one or two receding tiers with a projection in the middle for accommodating a niche design on all the four faces. The *medhis* are thus *triratha* on plan and rest on one or more plain substructures of similar design. The niches are shallow and empty and are framed by pilasters or *patra-latas* (scrolls) crowned by a *kirttimukha*. Sometimes the decoration is extended to the flanks of the niches or to the middle portion of the substructure which are embellished with scrolls, *kinnara*,

kalahansa or lion or even *chaitya* designs so typical of the Gupta-Vakataka and early Chalukyan arts of India of 5th to 7th centuries A.D. The depiction of lions at the corners with two bodies and a common head also follows the characteristic Indian pattern as seen on the Gupta temple at Sanchi and Tigawa. The *chaitya*-motif used as a decorative design shows a replica of the simplest *chaitya* with a hemispherical dome resting on one or two circular *medhis* and surmounted by a *harmika* and a finial of three to five receding stages, crowned by an *amalaka* often accompanied by a *vijapuraka* and embellished with fluttering banners and garlands.

On more ornate examples of the actual *chaityas*, the number of *medhis* is increased to three or four and rarely even five tiers and there is a multiplication of the niche design, normally to three on each face. Even with multiple tiers of *medhis*, the basic form of the majority of the *chaityas* continue to be square of the *triratha* or cruciform pattern with a niche-projection in the middle. It is only in highly ornate examples, such as those encountered in the Chabel complex, that we find the lower tiers of *medhis* square and the upper tier circular or twelve-sided, embellished with a string of the familiar ornamental designs sometimes adding a garland of *chaitya*-window motif on the uppermost tier. But the surmounting dome or *anda* is invariably a plain hemisphere devoid of any ornamentation.

The Lichchhavi *chaityas*, hitherto discussed, obviously pertain to the pristine Hinayana form and are obviously earlier than those embellished with figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas under the influence of Mahayana. While dealing with the Buddhist Art in Nepal we have already discussed the figurative type of Lichchhavi *chaityas* and seen how the four-faced *chaitya* from Dhvaka Baha containing four identical figures of Buddha in the top niches and those of padmapani, Vajrapani, Buddha and probably Maitreya (Buddha) in the lower niches are stylistically and palaeographically assignable to the 7th century and are followed by similar but more developed figurative *chaityas* from Gana Baha, Patan, and Thamel, Kathmandu, attributable respectively to the 8th and 9th centuries. These indeed are typical of the later Lichchhavi *chaityas* and are followed by the early and late Malla *chaityas* and *stupas*, loaded with flamboyant vegetal and geometrical decoration in the rococo style and embellished with figures of Dhyanī Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Taras and sometimes with anthropomorphised forms of such devotional objects and concepts as music, dance and ritual equipments, under the impact of Vajrayana and Tantrayana.

The Buddhist monastery in Nepal, as in India, is modelled after the domestic household on plan and is a quadrangular structure with an open courtyard in the middle and a group of buildings on all the four sides, of two or more storeys. Invariably the shrine faces the entrance

and the buildings on the remaining three sides are used as library, community hall, kitchen, refectory and storage room. Normally the living rooms are on the upper floors and the storage rooms are on the ground floor. The monasteries are tile-roofed structures made of brick with liberal use of timber for roofs and ceilings, doors and windows, pillars and architraves and brackets and struts. Some of the monasteries in Nepal Valley show doors and windows with beautifully carved tympanums and contain pillar and architraves and more particularly struts and brackets, embellished with elaborate figures and relief carving. The finest and oldest surviving wood-carvings are seen on the Salabhanjika struts of the Rudravarna-mahavihara, Patan, stylistically datable from circa 13th century. The door-tympanums of the Chushe Bahal and the Mushe Bahal at Kathmandu adorned with Buddhist deities in a setting of elaborate *Kala-makara* and dragon designs crowned by *kirttimukhas*, assignable to circa 15th century, are notable for their artistic execution. The former monastery also contains struts carved with labelled anthropomorphic figures of *nakshatras* (constellations).

The Lichchhavi inscriptions mention a large number of *viharas* to which liberal donations were made by kings and commoners. Some of them appear to have been royal foundations such as Sri-Manavihara which was evidently founded by king Manadeva. Sri-Rajavihara appears to have been founded by king Dharmadeva, father of Manadeva (5th cent.) and was probably augmented by Amsuvarman (early 7th cent.) who is known to have patronized both Hindu and Buddhist shrines and establishments. Sri-Sivadevavihara was evidently founded by king Sivadeva and was later called the Hiranyavarna-mahavihara after it was renovated and gilt by king Rudradeva. The last is one of the best maintained *viharas* with a gorgeous pagoda-shaped shrine of three metal-plated receding roofs with excellent metal figures and carvings some of them dating back to circa 11th century.

The Kathmandu Valley and particularly its twin cities, viz. Kathmandu and Patan, teem with Buddhist shrines and monasteries which are inhabited by householders ever since king Yakshamalla forced the Buddhist monk by a royal decree to take to married life and to accept the Hindu caste system. The Buddhist shrines and temples of the pagoda as well as the *sikhara* type stand pell-mell, rubbing shoulders with the Hindu shrines. While historically the origin of some of them may date back to the Lichchhavi times, often as a part of the Lichchhavi *viharas* mentioned above, they have undergone wholesale and repeated renovations and none of them is earlier than the 13th century and only a handful may antedate the 16th century. Among the pagoda-shaped temples noteworthy are the temple of Machhendranath in Kathmandu and Patan and that of Hariti or Ajima at Swaysmbhunatha, besides the central temple of Lokeshvara at the Hiranyavarna-mahavihara discussed above. Among

the sikhare-shaped temples the most remarkable is the Mahabodhi at Patan, built of Telia (polished) bricks by one Abhayaraja during the 14th century. Modelled after the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya, the complex comprises a *pachayatana* temple standing on a lofty ornate platform with a principal *sikhara* surrounded by four subsidiary ones. While the main temple enshrines an image of seated Buddha, there is a subsidiary shrine dedicated to Mayadevi. Both the temples are lavishly decorated with rows on rows of terracotta figures of Buddha and decorative reliefs of considerable artistic merit.