

NOTES ON CHUSYA-BAHĀL IN KATHMANDU

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Less well known but equally as important as the free-standing *mandir* or pagoda temple of Nepal is the *bahāl* or *vihāra* monastery with open courtyard. This type of structure, made of brick, wood, tile, and stone, usually two storeys high, shows relatively plain walls to public streets around it but opens from within upon four enclosing walls of great beauty. The *vihāra* of Chusya-bahāl in Kāthmandu¹ is among the oldest and best preserved Buddhist monastery buildings in Nepal, dated by inscription to Nepal Samvat 783 (1662 A. D.) and the reign of Pratāpa Malla.² It shows some restoration and additions of later times, but on the whole it remains very traditional and remarkably well preserved, especially in its carved wood.

Like any *bahāl*, this structure presents the particularly Nepalese variation upon the *catuśāla* plan of ancient India. It is structurally stable and relatively simple of trabeated construction and it combines living and worship spaces absolutely. Part of a city that grows by multiplication of the domestic or sacred courtyard, the modular *catuśāla*, Chusya-bahāl stands apart only by the excellence of its carved detail.

The ritual focus of the open courtyard is a miniature *śikhara temple* of *pañcāyātana* plan with nearby votive *caitya* forms at the center of the court and the shrine room that is opened by a small but heavily carved doorway located opposite the porched entryway. The porch opens to the outside through the main entrance on the north side of the building, guarded at the street by large stone lions. Private access to the apartments of the building is available through ordinary doors on the east and west sides. A small plot behind the structure is under cultivation.

From within the courtyard or from behind the *bahāl*, ridges of up-ended tiles may be seen to demarcate the section of the sloping roof that covers the shrine proper and this section is topped by a small plaster *caitya* with an attached parasol of metal, but all inward walls and windows or balconies are carved with religious story. The same is true of the roof-supporting struts and the *torāṇa* over the street entrance. The complex and abundant woodwork preserves the best of the Newāri ethnic traditions for which Nepalese architecture and the Malla period³ are known. Fortunately for the researcher,

¹ The *bahāl* is located a short walk from King's Way and behind the National Theatre.

² For the foundation date of the complex as a whole as well as its important *torāṇa* carving over the shrine door, the author is indebted to Dr. Mary Slusser.

³ The Malla Period of the 13th–18th centuries saw the rivalry of separate kingdoms or city-states within Kathmandu Valley in art as well as politics. The adornment of Chusya-bahāl may be compared to that of Chaturvarṇa Mahāvihāra in Bhadgaon and Rudravarṇa Mahāvihāra in Pāṭan. The style is Newāri.

the carvings have not been whitewashed, “preserved” with black asphaltum coating, or polychromed with enamel paints, as with so many neighboring structures. The original painted natural pigments have faded away almost entirely and the wood grain and color may be seen.

The *vihāra* form of Chusya–bahāl is typical of the monastic structures that animate the sacred geography of the valley.⁴ It is a hollow square open to the sky with brick–paved court, screened verandahs for storage around its interior walls, many small windows punctuating the surface of the inner walls of both floors and the upper level of the outer walls, a balcony over the inner portal of the entry door, and open platforms on either side of the wide entry for storage and the playing of sacred music. It is typical also in having ribbon–like horizontal boundaries of wood that reveal the basic frame of the building, a frame that is filled with brick. Most prominent of these repeated horizontal divisions is the heavy cornice of wood and projecting bricks that juts out at the level of the second storey floor to brace the lower ends of wooden struts that support the overhanging roof. Together with the adjacent repeated rectangles of beam ends that project as part of floor supports from inside the building, the supporting surface lines of the cornice impart graphic clarity to the surfaces of the wall. Deep carving captures shadow so that the wooden wall elements, none of which are carved to a depth greater than two inches, seem both expressively sculptural and very precise of detail. None of the wooden divisions are given the likeness of meandering snakes, *nāga* forms, as in the horizontal beams of the palace at Gorkha and elsewhere,⁵ but they still flow easily across the slight projections of five or six inches that softly section the outer and inner walls in the pattern of the roof tiles over the shrine.

The outer doorway and the shrine door of Chusya–bahāl, like all supportive parts of the wooden frame, show an accordion–like compression of many “constructed” parts into an essentially non–functional but visually impressive totality. The incredible multiplication of miniature columns and lintels that make up any doorframe, window casing, or balcony is the result of letter–perfect reproduction of the complex parts of the structural *maṇḍala* that is a cosmic map of heaven and earth. The luxury of carved wood is in fact necessary in order to capture the essential detail of the three dimensional heavenly shrine, walled with crystal and roofed with gold, as it is brought down to earth in human scale. The materials and methods of the Nepalese builder artist are prosaic but the essential parts are all there; the temple is a model of perfection

4 The multiplicity of pagoda, *śikhara*, and *bahāl* monuments that establish the sacred geography of the cities and towns may be studied in the fine maps in His Majesty’s Government of Nepal, *The Physical Development Plan for the Kathmandu Valley*, Kathmandu, 1969.

5 The *śilpa Prakāśa* of Rāmachandra Kaulācāra (Leiden, 1966) interprets the use of *nāga* forms in architecture in part as a protection against lightning.

that awaits final assembly. Precise descriptions of the perfect *maṇḍala* shrine are taken from Tantric literature and translated into wood, tile, and brick with no loss of mystical meaning. Especially in the metal and wooden borders of the roof all of the preciousness (ropes of pearls, garlands of flowers, celestial bells) of the “necklace of the gods” in the *maṇḍala* is retained.⁶

Any number of details taken from Chusya-bahāl would serve to illustrate the very special skill of the Newārī artisan in wood,⁷ but the two *torāṇa* door coverings are perhaps most useful to this brief analysis. The *torāṇa* appears as roof over each of four porches that open to the cardinal directions in classic painted *maṇḍala* patterns while in *mandir* or bahāl it appears as tympanum forms of wood or metal that are mounted over the shrine door or doors, leaning forward slightly from the wall so as to be clearly seen from below. The *torāṇa* is the single most elaborate carving or metalwork on any shrine, being most complex in both form and meaning. At Chusya bahāl one is impressed by both quantity and quality.

The *torāṇa* over the inner shrine at this bahāl is approximately four feet wide and three feet tall, being constructed of six horizontally placed boards. Its carved elements project up to three inches from the background plane and there are pierced openings in around three centrally placed figures of Tantric guardians of the faith, possibly including the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. Attendants bearing fly whisks stand as free-standing forms on either side of the work. The composition of the *torāṇa* is symmetrical yet sinuous of movement as it rests solidly on its supportive base of twenty-seven miniature lintels. It is typical in its semicircular section but also in its use of a central Garuḍa guardian with *nāga* attendants at the top, *makara* water monsters facing out at the lower corners, multiple attendant deities of *āvaraṇa devatā* in separate haloes, lotiform base border, and wish-fulfilling vine.⁸ The *torāṇa* is dated by inscription to N. S. 776 (1675 A. D.) This strongly three-dimensional work has provided a bold central element to the complex design of the shrine of Buddha for for three hundred years, but it is dominated aesthetically by its undated counterpart that occupies a less prestigious placement over the outer entry.

⁶ Part of the total complex of “ornament” that includes poetry, music, and the visual arts, these elements belong to the *alamkara* (Sanskrit.)

⁷ Special note should be made of the extravagant balcony of the porch with its border of delicate pendants and eave boards portraying Buddha receiving homage from Śiva, Brahma, and Viṣṇu (S. B. Deo, “Glimpses of Nepal woodwork,” *The Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, N. S. Vol. III, 1968–69, plate XXXVI–4), of the dramatic strut carvings of Bhairava and other fierce guardians as well as gods, and of the remarkable screen carvings including that of “biconvex mesh” pattern (*Ibid.*, plate XXXIV–6).

⁸ Among *torāṇas* in Kathmandu Valley examined in detail as part of major doorway

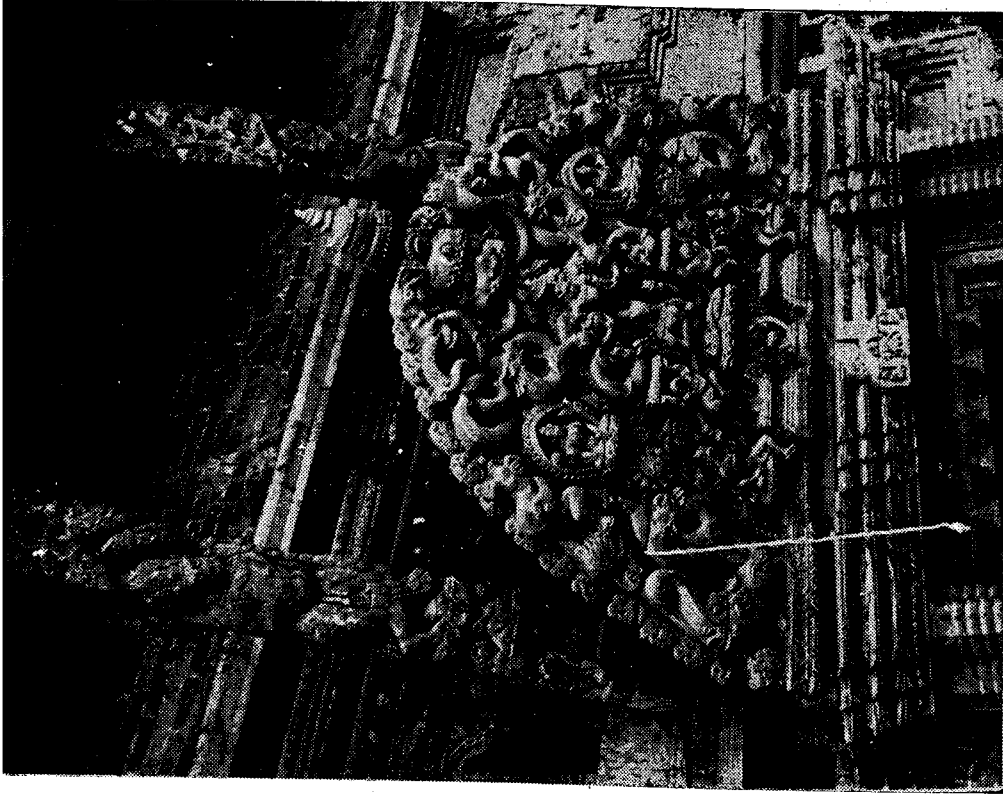
The street *torāṇa* of the monastery is of like size and construction to that of the carving within. But it surges with a different, more active life because of its more baroque curvilinear pattern and its greater expansion of *prāṇā*-filled body volumes. Amid convulsive, twisting symmetry the calm central figure of *Tārā*, goddess of wisdom and mercy, captures sublime repose. Even the grimacing visage of the monstrous *chimidra* (a creature with arms that is related to the *Kirttimukha* of India) at the top of the arch seems poised, thus eternal. Circles are repeated throughout, not only in the halo niches of attendant deities but in frontal lotus blooms and serpentine loops of *nāgas* and dragons. The carving is deep but rarely pierced so that shadow remains part of the sculpted surface. Smooth, rounded volumes are contrasted by sharp, flattened shapes in borders of petals and flames for an overall impact of tendril-like, organic growth. The parasol that honors the scene provides the only vertical point in the composition, like a pin holding down a writhing life form. The movement is exhausting and exciting, far too orderly to be explosive. At the entrance of Chusya-bahāl the Newārī artist⁹ is both theatrical and disciplined while his quietly feminine central figure, *Tārā* with lotus and rosary, draws the devotee toward the ultimate peace that dwells within.

complexes at 29 shrines—10 Buddhist and 19 Hindu—the frequency of the *Kirttimukha* and other motifs is as follows:

<i>Kirttimukha</i> :	5	Buddhist,	7	Hindu
<i>Nāgas</i> :	8	Buddhist,	17	Hindu
Parasol:	9	Buddhist,	16	Hindu
Floral Decoration:	10	Buddhist,	15	Hindu
<i>Makaras</i> :	7	Buddhist,	18	Hindu
<i>Kinnaras</i> :	1	Buddhist,	1	Hindu
<i>Garuḍa</i> :	3	Buddhist,	12	Hindu
Large central figure	10	Buddhist,	19	Hindu

While the sample is too small to be decisive in determining the frequency of motifs in general, it is apparent that there is no symbol within the complex of forms modelled upon *torāṇa* which may be called exclusively Buddhist or exclusively Hindu. Only one element of the *torāṇa*, the large central deity, with or without attendants, occurs on all examples. Its identity varies with the dedication of the temple.

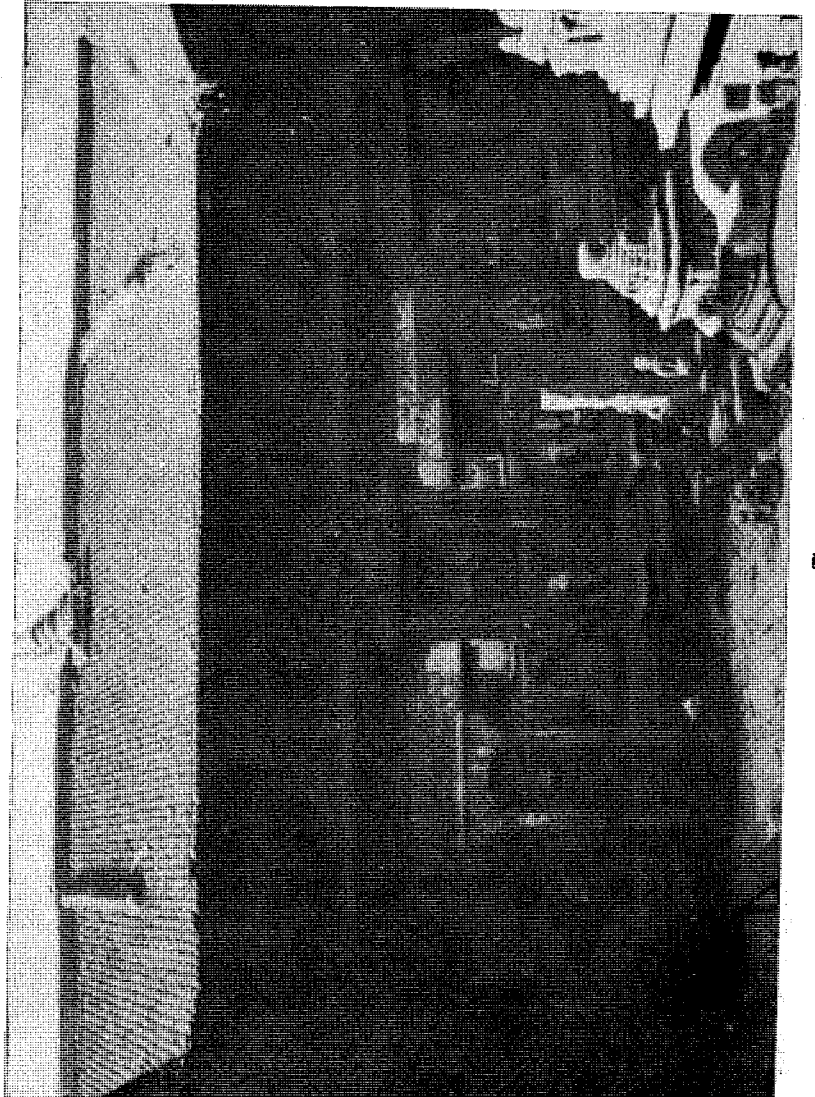
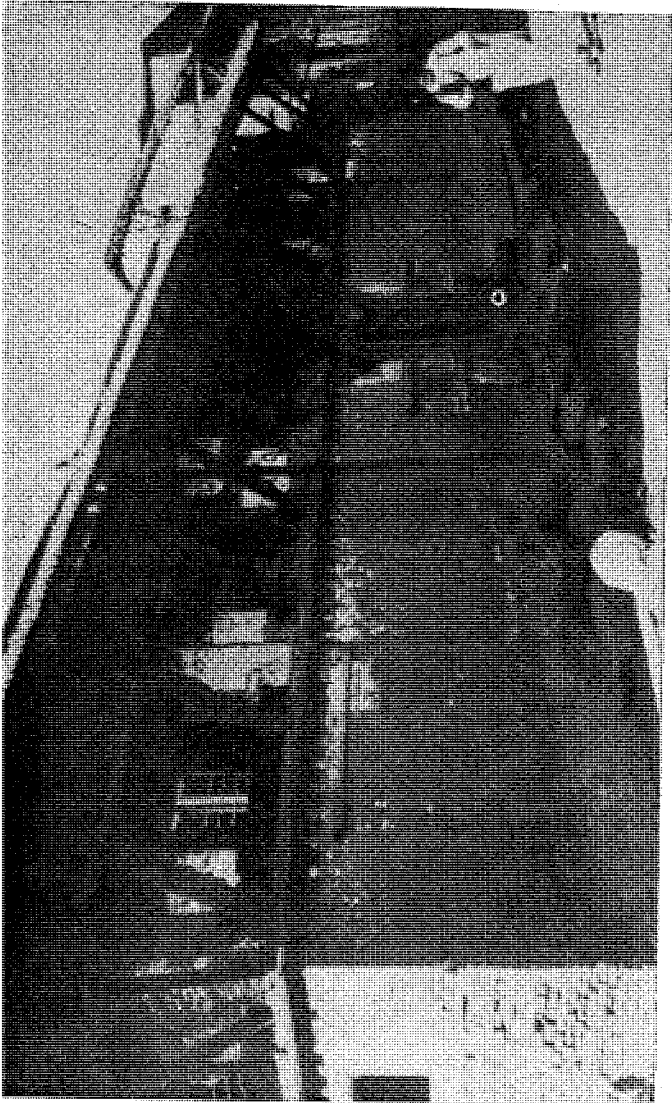
⁹ Within the caste of *Chitrakāra* four classes of artists are recognized in Nepal: the *sthapati* or architect, the *sūtragrāhin* as disciple or son of the *sthapati*, the *takaṣaka* who cuts and carves or models large pieces and detail in wood or clay, and the *vardhakīn* who puts together and paints that which is made by the *takaṣaka*.

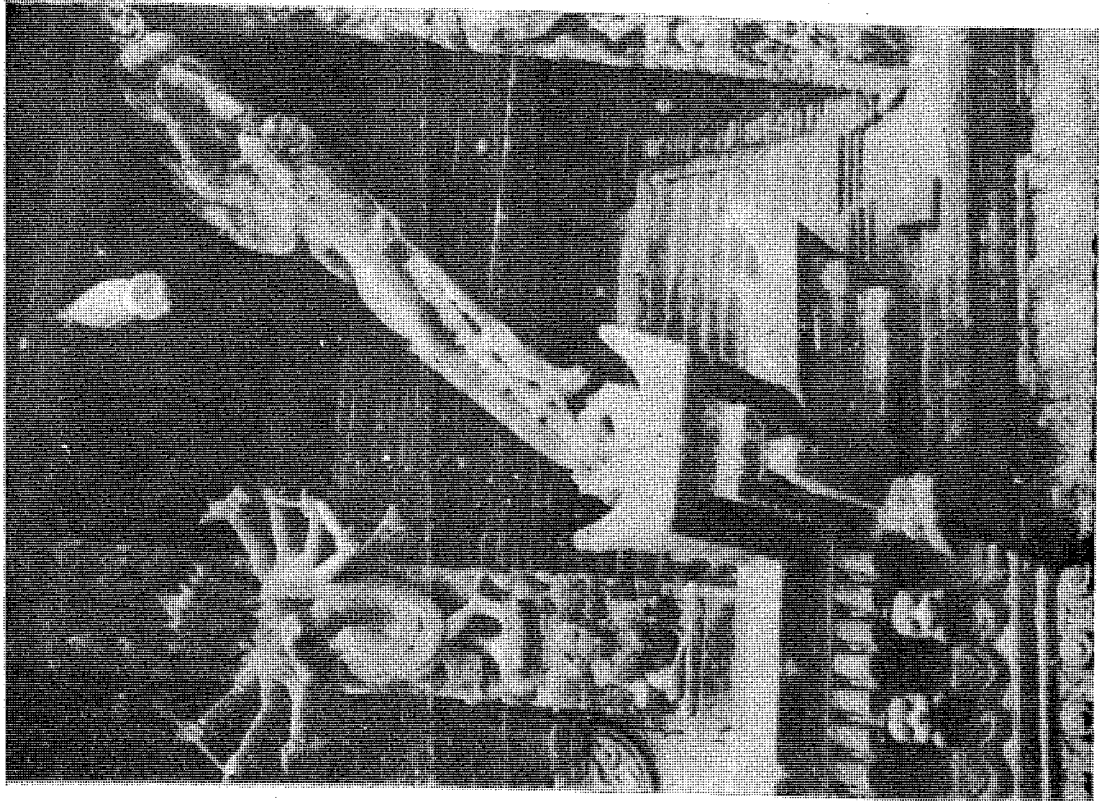


1. Above left: Exterior of Chusya-Bahāl in Kathmandu

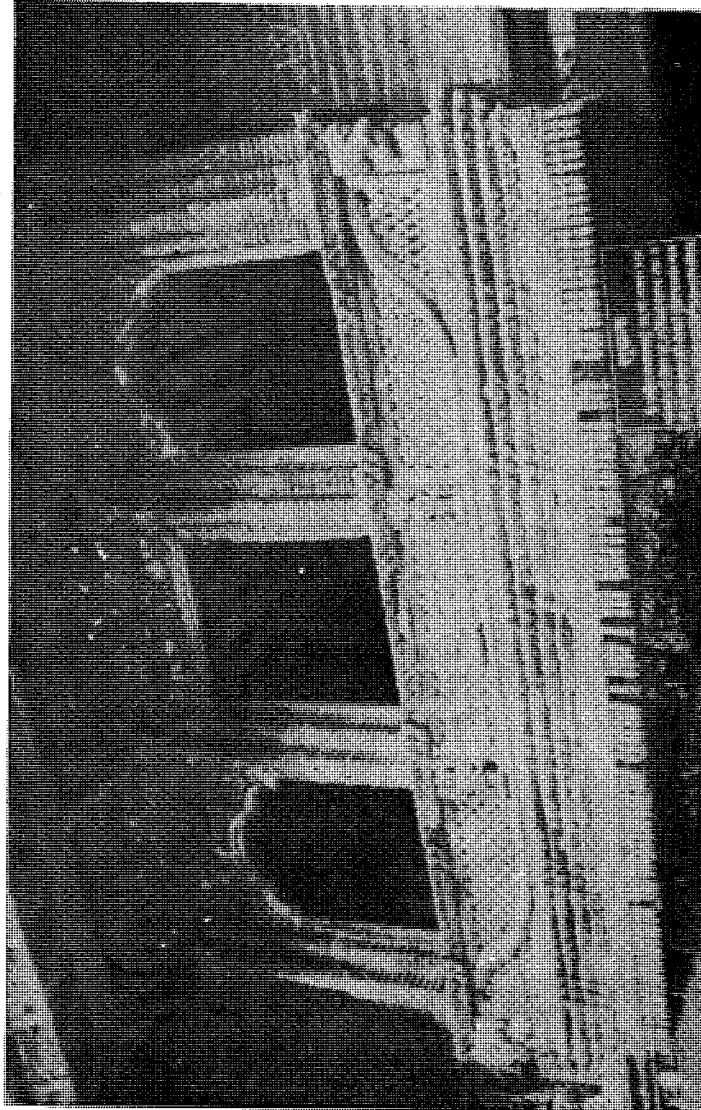
2. Below left: Courtyard area with inner shrine.

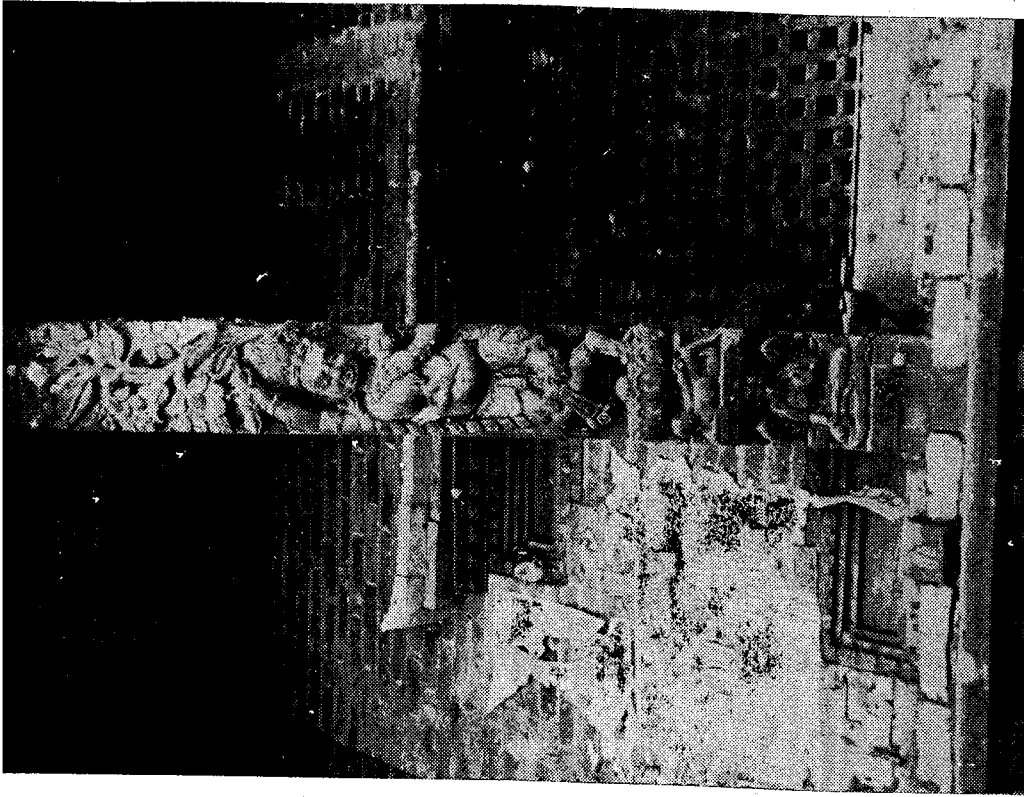
3. Above: *Toraṇa* of the street entrance to Chusya-Bahāl.





4. Above left: Devotional images facing the inner shrine of Chusya-Bahāl
5. Below left: Domestic balcony within the courtyard.
6. Above: Deity and *kumsala* struts over the inner shrine.

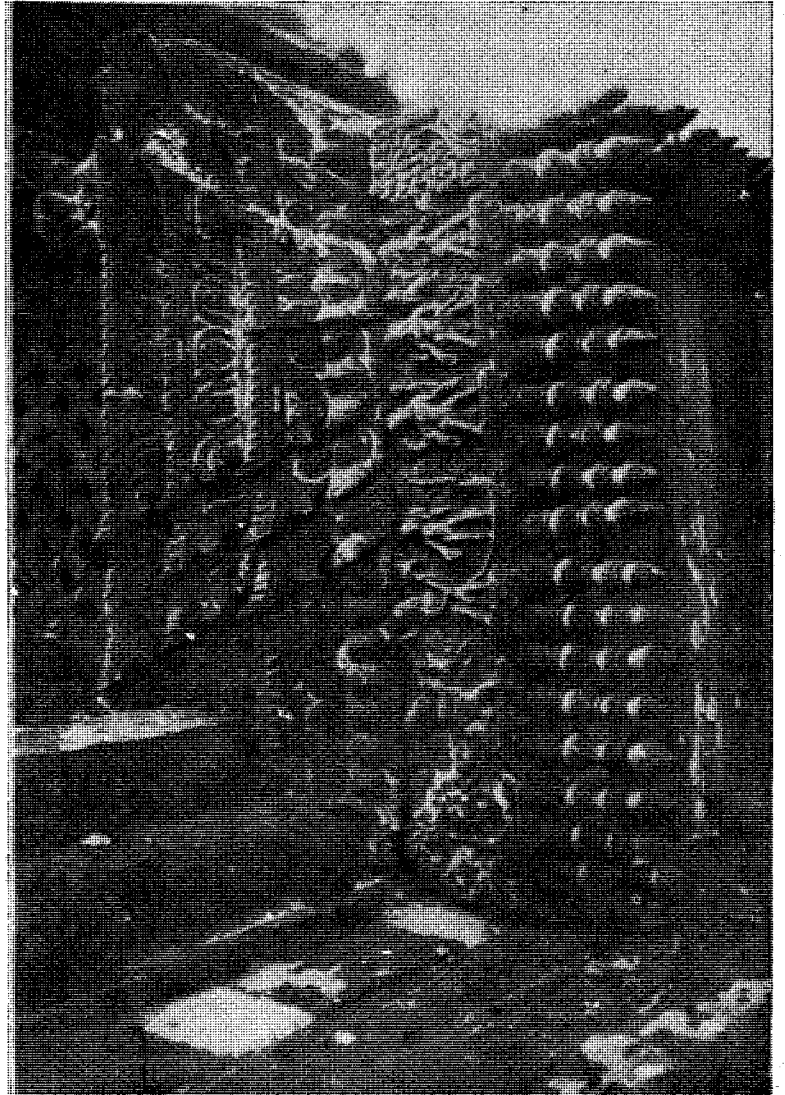
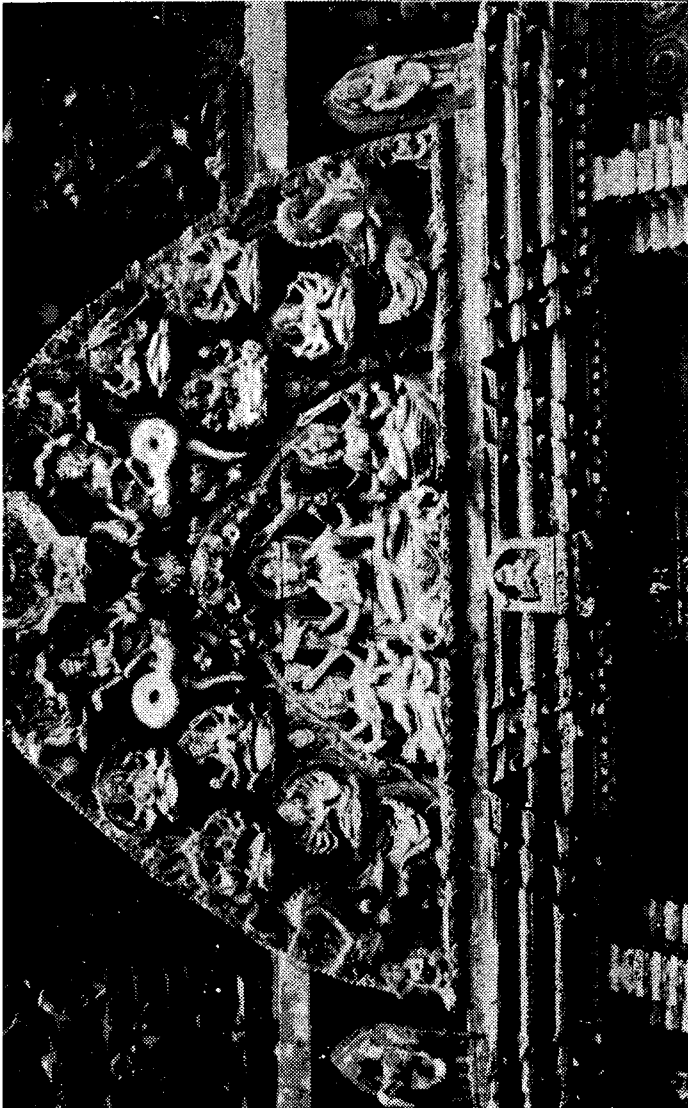


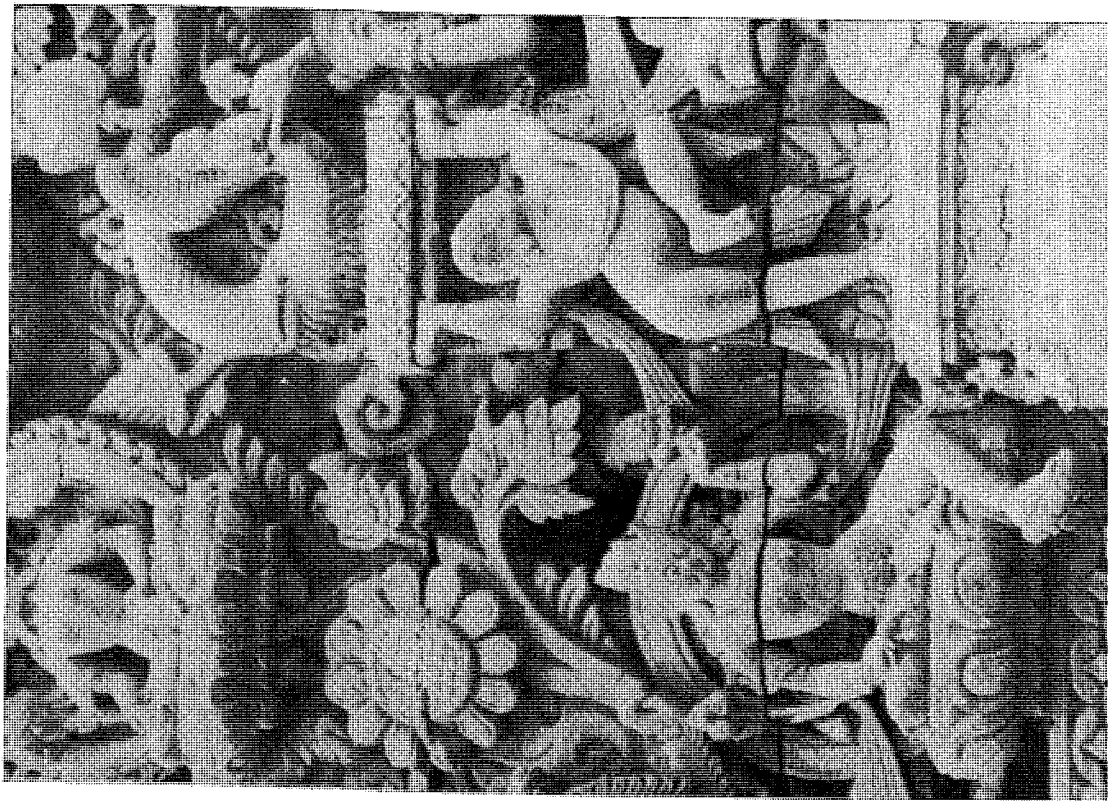


7. Above left: *Toraṇa* over the inner shrine door, dated N. S. 796 (A. D. 1675).

8. Below left: Detail of domestic balcony showing Buddha, attendants, and Hindu deities.

9. Above: Guardian figure strut on the outer entrance wall of Chusya-Bahāl.





10. Above left: The great entry *torana*.
11. Below left: Detail of the entry *torana*.
12. Above: Detail of the entry *torana*.

