

NEPAL

(Continued)

Two Months in Nepal

January-March 1898

Note book to sojourn

- Sylvain Levi

The resultant of the forces is exactly represented by the distracted movements of the pendulum when a clock is violently pulled towards one; oscillation to right and left and violent projection forward and backward. Beside the instructions are to go to sleep or at least to be motionless. The least jerk would break the equilibrium of the load and the effort of the bearers; one feels by degrees, and very soon, hurt all over.

At one o'clock halt at Hardia the last British factory on the road. The owner, M.F...., advised by Colonel Wylie, awaits me for breakfast and dinner. He lives there, all alone, at one league from Nepal at two from the Terai, exploiting indigo, a gun always loaded keeps him company everywhere—a warning to the indigenous and dangerous beasts. My host is delighted as visits are rare on the road to Kathmandu and he attempts to retain me by the best and worst of reasons. I visit his factory. The year had been disastrous: famine of indigo as well as of grains and the competition of synthetic indigo has brought down the prices.

Here again (No need to close one's eyes), it is Germany that triumphs. The indigo buyers of Calcutta are German and they came from October to January to regulate the prices and then return to their country.

But Wylie has well cautioned me to avoid the least delay. At 5 o'clock I ask to dine; then I proceed on my journey. The cortege forms again. Night falls; the expedition has swelled by a mousalji, a lighter who brandishes a long torch constantly so rayed over with oil. The precaution is not superfluous; the road bad enough as it gets worse, cut up by bogs and quagmires in which the palanquin lightly touches the surface of water. At Raksaul we leave behind British territory and Nepal commences with Gahawa. Orders have been despatched everywhere; nowhere I am stopped. In passing the guard-houses my bearers fling the magical word "Sarkar", and that is enough. Sarkar means the Government and everything connected to it and all white men and even the servants of the white men. And everywhere the long band of white

dust between the very flat fields, they also all of white dust and all this whiteness begins to light up, dazzling under the rays of the tardy moon. Cold settles down the damp and penetrating cold of the Tarai that freezes the bones before the skin. I bury myself deep in my rezais and renounce the allurements of the lunar countryside. I close my doors and only half open them now and again in order to observe the road. The incessant movement of load, cadenced by the painting of the bearers in which appears to man a long slavery of toils with now and again heart-stirring syllables like our "dodo, baby do"; it is: "sleep babu, sleep babu". Unfortunate people who work so hard and who again lull their oppressors to sleep with their cadenced songs.

Here we are in the jungle, the dreadful jungle, strangely mysterious under this moonshine which illuminates the outskirts without penetrating the deep shadows. At midnight the cold is so intense that my coolies stop. They light up fires on the road and voluptuously roast themselves. I profit by this halt to shake myself up. To the right and the left two elephants tied to the trees keep noisily all night chewing twigs—supernatural silhouettes surrounded by a moving envelope of torn leaves. We are among the Tharus the enigmatic Tharus. Behind a straw enclosure which symbolizes the wall of private life, a woman sings an endless melody and accompanies herself with a tambourine. At midnight, with such a cold, what is she doing? An adoration an incantation? How to find out? Enclosed in their retreat that nobody can transgress, these Thakurs do not engage themselves in the neighbouring factories. They live among themselves hide even the secret of their language, address themselves to strangers in Hindustani, suddenly without anything betraying it, without a rise in the ground without a stray rock, without a

pebble in this white dust, we are at foot of the Himalays. It is Bhichakoh, my first stage. It is 3.30 a. m.

Kathmandu, 13th January 1898, 8 p. m.

— Decidedly one arrives at everything even at Kathmandu; time is only required. But I take up again my account where I left it, at Bhichakoh. Then, at Bhichakoh it is the mountain that suddenly discloses itself like a change of spectacle; the pass crosses already lofty hills on the outline of the mountains and that descend in abrupt slopes covered with forests. The ground vanishes under pebbles and rocks fallen down from the sides or come down with the torrents during the rainy season, which is dreadful here. The path or rather the itinerary, for there is no trace of a path left, crosses a vast stretch of water, river or tank, I ignore it; night robs me of distant aspects. The pass narrows strangles itself between imposing slopes, dripping with dew; between the vast circus of stones that rise in successive stages, the path ascends steeply on a soil slippery with damp sand; solitary cottages cling here and there to the slope of the mountains, meagre shelter of twigs in which the shepherds warm themselves close to large fires. On this lane which crumbles to dust under foot, move procession of chariots pulled by bulls; nearly all of them carry 'tins' of kerosine. Decidedly I shall be able to get some light in Kathmandu. Day downs so white that it mingles with the shine of the the Moon, but it grows quickly and penetrates triumphantly in the thickets that stopped the Moon.

I step on the ground to relieve my bearers. After passing the few huts of Chiriya, the valley opens and the road, large, easy and sandy as desired, appears like a park avenue shaded with giant trees with heights

of between 1500 to 2000 metres in the distance. We cross a bridge thrown over a pretty deep-tones and limpid torrent which my bearers call the Kori. The bridge is only a light wooden foot-bridge; the bulls ford the torrent. We reach the Dharmasala of Hetauda where another sepoy relieves the one who had accompanied us from Bhichakoh. The coolies soon light up a straw fire; the straw is frozen with dew and we move again onwards. The path now crosses the Rapti and follows the middle of an enormous valley which the wooded heights seem to close in without an outlet. All along to the right and left, changing the path into a great road are the Hetaura shops of grain liquor, hookahs, cloth mercery and pottery merchants. The Hindu banyan has disappeared. It's all finished with India. The men are now mountaineers, small, thick-set, snub-nosed, with thick well separated lips disclosing large yellow teeth. Their hair is black and almost closely cut, the face flat large and with protruding cheek-bones, a little hirsute beard on the chin with a fairly good moustache coarse and drooping at the corner of the lips. The women are smaller yet yellower again the arms and legs massiver the bust splendidly opulent the head uncovered, the ebony black hair shining with oil, carefully smoothed, falling in long plaits or raised in a twist on the top of the head, strangely Japanese looking and yet so close to the Mayadevi, to the Sita and to the Damayanti.

We come out of the circus by the defile through which the Rapti flows and the path follows the course of the torrent, clinging to the mountain sides—these are well mountains now-embracing all their sinousities. A halt on the banks of the Samri crossed again by the pretty foot-bridge; we separate on a flat surface and all along the stream, proceed with a summary toilet; I hurry on with my breakfast and at 10 a. m. again we resume the

journey. The torrent reduced to its minimum yet thunders and makes a pretty noise at the bottom of the ravine. We have climbed already; Bhichakoh is only at a height of 990 feet; 330 metres; the bridge of the Samri is 1600 feet high, more than 500 metres. Hamlets are built on the edge of the road, hidden among the rocks on all flat surface; when the slopes lengthen, villages throng together all smiling surrounded by cultivations, and that climb higher and higher still, towards the 2000 metres (6500ft.). And always the torrent that growls and foams and breaks against the lofty rocks that have fallen down. The Sun is high up now it penetrates into the ravines. On the divine, the incomparable glow, prettier still than on the dry and dusty plains, in this atmosphere so pure in which a thin vapour floats shading off the roughness of the outlines without robbing the horizon of its distinctness, illuminated deep in its shadows by the resplendence of the most beautiful azure-skies. I found here again under different forms the intoxicating joys of colour which the Red Sea had made me feel once.

The path ends at Bhimpedi (3660 ft., 1200 metres) in a cul-de-sac; heights around descend everywhere perpendicularly. Good-bye the palanquins; I settle them all—Kahars (palanquin bearers) coolies and sepoy with gratification and I place myself in the hands of Nepalese. The Kahars, coolies and a sepoy came from Kathmandu with a dandi for me and less commodious for the use of Francesco. My dandi, a dandi of great luxury is very exactly a canoe; at the prow and at the stern poles are passed through; two men in front and two in the rear and for the rest let us believe (or reckon) with the laws of stable equilibrium; my francesco has an ordinary jolly boat and again a cloth one, in the manner of a hammock or shroud with the same system of suspension. Here the people are Hindus.

The benedictions traced in red lead on the wall of houses and in the shops are adorations to Ganeca, Krishna and Sarasvati. I learn— for two days I have only spoken Hindustani — that Bhimpedi owes its name to Bhima. The temple of the village ordinary square shut out with walls, adorned the temple of Bhimasena, Bhimpedi has quite a small chapel with a certainly ancient statue of Laksmi Narayan. The god and goddess hold each other amorously and Garuda is at their feet. I partake of a summary meal in an empty shop and fully enclosed—happy presage with the plank of cases in which is despatched from America (New-York. N. S.) the precious and economical kerosine oil.

Besides half of Bhimpedi is built with these planks. The bearers who from now replace the bull-chariots do not care to carry a useless load. From here to Sisagarhim a tough (stiff) climb on a rough and flinty road, constantly running perpendicularly. In two miles or three stiff kilometers, one climbs from 3660 feet to 5875 from 1200 to 1900 meters and under a warm Sun of 35 (centigrade) without any appearance of shade. My bearers will not tire themselves. I do the journey on foot. Francesco, who undergoes the trail of the mountain, lies doleful in his hammock, crying out fever. And all along this rough climbing street—porters succeed one another groups of between forty and fifty men painfully drag canalization pipes destined for Kathmandu; if this is the only road towards Kathmandu as the Nepalese feign to make believe, they can sleep in rest. One climbs under the canons of the fort of Sisagarhi which dominates the valley of Bhimpedi and commands the pass. In the precincts (enceinte) of the fort, a small bungalow had been erected for the use of the resident; the affair is very primitive besides; for bed a plank; in fact for other pieces of furniture a table and two

chairs. On the express request of Colonel Wylie, the bungalow is open for me; the Gurkha sentinel presents arms to me; the officers with jewelled badges fall in line and I take possession of my room, my cage or my prison cell. Colonel Wylie has well recommended me to remain in the bungalow; he has done so himself; the least curiosity, the least out of the way behaviour, will brand you as a spy.

It is 4.30 p. m., the Sun sets deep down the valley, disappears behind the heights; clouds and light mists also descend on the summits and stretch out towards the branches. The forest climbs to the very pinnacle; against the bungalow a plantain (banana) tree spreads its ample and delicate foliage. Night arrives, scintillating with stars, but coldish. This morning at 7 o'clock my thermometre records 30 (centigrade) and I get numbness of the fingers while gathering flowers. Another night reduced to its simplest expression. This morning, I wake up when day has already dawned. Hasty breakfast each one takes his load and blowing on my reddened fingers, I climb at a gallop the pass of Sasagarhi : 6500 ft., 2500 metre. O, unforgettable spectacle and all so sudden. In front of me, the flank descends vertically in the foliage; ahead scorched slopes (slopes that face the south scorched and parched by the Sun are here without verdure); far below again the large and sullen torrent and what a view of the horizon; an enormous line of frozen summits. A precipitous descent covered at a gallop takes us to the bank of the torrent, the Panoni; the path follows the bed of the torrent turning and twisting (or meandering) round every rock-wall; the cultures climb the slopes and the hamlets are pretty houses of one, two or even three stories with curved roofs and the frames of doors and windows of sculptured wood. I can see specimens that would do honour to any museum, lost here in these mountain recesses.

Towards 10 o'clock, the path leaves the torrent, ascends in a steep climb alongside the Chandragiri and ends in the cul-de-sac of Chitlong at 6125 ft., 2000 metres. Halt at the dharmasala. A caravan of Tibetans, Tibetans from Tibet pass on their way to Calcutta, living and speaking tableau of these continuous penetrations that history does not record. They would be hardly recognisable among the Gurkhas without their felt hats shaped like a cone all round with short and upturned brims; the women are almost identical to those of this place features deportment opulence of flesh hair head-gear, adornments but the complexion is of a deeper yellow, clearer, less tanned. Reached Chitlong at 11:30 a.m. We remain there only an hour and onwards again towards the pass of Chandragiri 1600 ft., 500 metres to climb on a perpendicular slope, but through the forest. At 2 p.m. we reach the summit; 7700 ft, more and 2500 metres with 350 in the Sun and a lovely verdant forest. The whole valley of Nepal lies at my feet, Kathmandu, Patan, Bhatgaon occupy the East; everywhere at the further end and on the slopes villages and cultivations and East to West above the encircling mountains, a continuous line, uninterrupted, without a branch of white peaks snows or ices that entirely close the horizon. Here they are quite close, three or four valleys to cross and beyond on the other side, Tibet, a piece of China.

The descent into Nepal would be impracticable without a staircase it has been found necessary, from top to bottom on a height of 700 metres, to build rough steps. Francesco, the unfortunate Francesco himself must alight. The valley of Thankot is reached and 14 kilometres of even road lead to Kathmandu. I jump into my dandi and my bearers carry me at a run. I cross the Bisnumati and disdaining the road for the resident that turns

round the town, I cross through the bazar, the bearers shouting, elbowing, pushing and overthrowing in the narrow streets. At 4.15 p.m. I reach the bungalow.

Friday 14th January— today compulsory meditation. All I saw of Kathmandu were the four walls of the garden surrounding the bungalow. The person executed by persuasion was already known; I am the prisoner by inducement. This morning, towards 9 o'clock, Captain Sahib Bhairab Bahadur sends a havildar to ask me at what time I would be able to receive him. Captain Sahib is by right of heritage, as were his father and grand-father, the regular messenger between the Residence and the Darbar. I propose to him 10 o'clock he arrives at 11 a.m. Morning lost awaiting him.

Charming manners, almost impressive of a galant soldier. Well, now everything at your disposal. Do you want? Do not stand upon ceremony. And what more? And I repeat to him what he knows already from my first for a pass, then from Colonel Wylie, then again from the letter which Colonel Wylie gave me for him and which I addressed to him as soon as I arrived my intention, my schemes the haste which I have to begin. "But certainly, I request you to consider me as a friend. A pony? You will have it. And also two sepoy to guide and help you (the pretty disguise the police assumes here). And I shall proceed to interview the temporary Maharaj so as to arrange for an interview between him and you. You are tired with the journey, it is so arduous of course not—O yes rest is essential rest for to-day; to-morrow I shall arrange everything." To-morrow the eternal to-morrow of the East. A word to the wise is sufficient. I only have to reign myself and to walk up and down in my little house and garden.

Fortunately I have a companion in captivity, Babu S. Mitra who represents alone at this moment the whole personal of the Residence a Bengali, corpulent, chubby, hairy and bearded, member of the Sadharan Brahma Somaj, bachelor, freed from the prejudices of caste, educated in English, fed with "quotations from Shakespere and who by delegation represents here my Providence in the name of the Wyles. He has by order and also by personal friendship, managed my house quite tastefully, small dining room, bureau-hall-room; a writing desk with everything needed for writing; sleeping room; a cloth stretched on four wooden legs-the beds in its simplest form; bathing compartment. It is again Mitra who sends me the vegetables and the preserves of the Residence which Madam Wylie has placed at my disposal. It appears that only mountains do not meet; I have come to doubt even this exception. In this semi-capacity at 4700 feet of altitude, in the heart of valley enclosed

by the Himalaya, isolated between India and China sole representative of Europe, I meet an acquaintance. Mitra knows me, knows that I am versed in Sanscrit, that I am married that I have at least a son, and what else does he not know ? What so much glory and renown. Only this : Mitra has been for six or seven years the agent of Pratap Chandra Roy; whilst this honest man was travelling great task of moral rejuvenation and proposed as an ideal to the new generations the old Sanscrit epopee of the Maha-Bharata, Mitra wrote the letters signed by Pratap; he has written to me as to many others and he has naturally read the replies. He would willingly spend the day chatting. Very curious of the West, that he dreams to visit, keen observer well informed on Nepal where he has dwelt for five or six years; he had made in the garb of a pilgrim the journey of Muktinath. that I will not be able to do; my complexion is too fair.

(To be Continued)