

NEPAL

(Continued)

Two Months in Nepal

January-March 1898

Note book to sojourn

- Sylvain Levi

Tuesday 25th January - Another lucky day. Mangal var, Mangal-ka-din I took care to draw my escort's attention to it; Tuesday (mangal var); it is a day of good luck (mangal) and it is certain that if I jested in saying it they took it very seriously. Their superstition goes together with their native simplicity. Now that I have done my Nepalese suit, I have my 'letters patent' of Hindu conversion. I cannot struggle against a feeling of affection to see them all. Pundit, mukhya, sepoy and even my humble coolie, explore the walls shake the stones interrogate the inhabitants, stir them up for the hunt extol to them my Brahmanic science (Oh, the brahmavarcas, I know now what it means) and their faces joyously brightening when the fatidicalvry escapes my lips: "this is antiquity", and then questions are asked on the date on the antiquity on the bygone king on the value of the letters, and the good king Vikramaditya serves as a starting point to this chronology.

Yesterday another exploration through Patan of which I had only seen the splendours or at least the picturesque charms. What a reverse to the medal. The sack of the town by

the Gurkhas which is a century old now seems to have been an event of yesterday; broken down houses temples in ruins roads where the pavements disappear under heap of filth, stupedied and anxious faces everywhere with the stink of putrefaction in the air. My first visit goes to the Zimpi Tandu, one of the four great stupas erected on the corners of the town and attributed to Acoka. Tradition cannot be far from wrong. On a basement of circular bricks of about a metre in height there rises a cupola of bricks covered over with earth and turf, without any adornments. On the summit there rises a kind of scaffolding made of wood which supports the symbolic parasol on feast days. Nothing more. The diametre is about 12 metres. All round here like everywhere one sees small stone or stucco caityas surmounted as usual with the bell turret of pointed roof and decorated with four Bodhisattvas. There is no vihara erected around this stupa; the vihara of Zimpi Tandu is built on the other side of the road; the stupa thus commands a beautiful view of the banks of the Bagmati and of the mountains. Picturesque Patan is standing against

the southern border of the valley and the long white mass of the Himalaya closes the horizon to the North whilst Kathmandu in the middle of the valley catches a glimpse of the glaciers through the passes of the first mountains. In spite of the name of Acoka in spite of the evidence of his ancient constructions, the stupa has no antique inscription. The most ancient stone dates from the reign of Civa Simha 734 (1614) and nothing can be derived from these ignorant beings, forlon degenerates of a dying religion. The Pundit of the place is brought to me. He literally knows nothing has read nothing and I predict to him;-it is his vyakarana-that he will fall in hell. Have they in their fully allowed their antiquities to get lost? Do they conceal them by a sentiment of blind (unreasonable) jealousy? The problem requires solving. The inscription of Civa Simha, in Nevar gives the name of Sthula-Caitya to the caitya and the Pundit tell me that it stands for the Sanscrit name of Zimpi Tandu. And in his courtyard where the soil covers and conceals undoubtedly epigraphical treasures, inhabitants of the neighbouring vihara, in rags, spread to dry in the sun a rank grass the smell of which would make one swoon and that serves for their food. Who is it who has said: Tell me what you eat and I shall tell you what you are.

Quite close to the North is a temple of Ganeca where stelas give the dates of 772, 789, 829, 930, but without any royal name. We move along to the neighbouring vihara the Alokū-Vihara; there we find one of those washing places that abound at Kathmandu and Patan; a fairly deep ditch where water pipes of brick-work divert the waters of neighbouring sources into it. Justice must be given to the Nevars. I have seen some of them who wash themselves at least once in their lives. Men, women and children all clothed in very small wools rub and twist their hair and my

presence scarcely perturbs them. I met my first snake here. In front of me a pretty little reptile of about a metre and a half in length springs out; its forked tongue darts out neatly and it amuses itself in the mossy fountain. A woman leans her bare back against the wall on which the snake is climbing, I think it necessary to shout out in my simplicity: "Samp, A snake". No notice paid, I failed in the attempt as far as man can remember these snakes have harmed nobody and the place is seething with them. I was thankful for the advice. A large statue of Cakyamuni in the classical pose the legs crossed, presides over the bathing-place. On a very small stupa I read the date 535 (1415). Through the deserted and unclean streets we overtake another small stupa, of bricks and stucco. 2m 50cm high, attributed to Acoka. Nothing but modern stelas.

On the side, towards the West, there lies another ditch but abandoned, where stagnates a brackish & repulsive pool of water. A stela rises from it and allows one to perceive ancient letters we build a foot-bridge on the mephitic slime and work the brush. The crowd gathers at this unusual sight and the public voice tells me of the arrival of a Pundit; he pandita and the dialogue begins before an attentive and curious audience. Here again a poor specimen of a Pundit: He says he has no practice in Sanscrit, he rather makes use of the "Bhasa". And do you believe Mr. Pundit-ji that Sanscrit is commonly spoken in France. Impossible to convey to him the kind of curiosity that had urged me to come from so far into Nepal to gather bits of manuscripts and inscriptions. He concludes. "Tatha svadece Svagunaprakaco bhavisyati". It is the "ut declamatio fias" translated in Sanscrit. And to think that after all he may be in the right. I will reply to him with Manu: "Jadaval loka acaret" "one must live in the world like a beast". In following the

road to Sangal tol, I see on my way a stone used as a water pipe, but now serving no purpose, bearing traces of ancient inscriptions. And I reach Mahabuddha-Vihara where lives the uncle of my Pundit Bhivanananda. The poor fellow is ailing with rhuematism which prevent him from walking and guiding me. The temple of Mahabudda-Virara shows off among the pagodas and the caityas being of pure Hindu style, crowned with a small vimana profusely sculptured and fairly recalls the temple of Mahabodhi Vihara. It deserves a particular attention, unfortunately it is pressed so closely between the houses of the vihara that it scarcely allows of a passage two metres wide; It is impossible to survey it at a glance. The poor Bhuvavanda shivers with fever, it would be better to return. I end the day visiting the neighbouring vihara : Unko Vihara (Rudra varna-vihara) to the south of the Mahabodhi, a beautiful vihara two courtyards in depth clean, well kept looked after, with pillars, caityas and ordinary chapels, but nothing but recent stelas.

This morning I return to Harigaon. In spite of the truly impressive complaisance of my assistants, vihars and temples disclose nothing and I begin to lose hope when on reaching the rustic staircase which leads to the pillar in the tank, I discover a stela buried, but just peeping above a platform that carries a ruined and abandoned temple. I distinguish the traces of ancient letters. My Mukhya - and one could speak ill of the Nepalese Government-proves the soil with his large knife, the knife that all Nepalese carry at the waist; the sepoy Cri Ram Singh who looks tenderly after the Mleecha (barbarian), no, the Sahib Pundit as they say, removes the stones, enlarges the hole; the Pundit washes the stone and an inscription of Amcuvarman sees light again in a very good state of preservation: Samvat 32. At the other corner

another stone almost buried only shows its head. The coolie digs and digs and it is a new inscription of Amcuvarman, Samvat 30. I wish to take a photograph; the mukhya goes and fetches or rather goes to request in the name of the law, strings, bamboos; we have the heavy stela outside its hole, bring it to the light and the operation completed - India must not lose her rights-with the same ceremonial and pomp we take back the stone to its hole where it will have to await a new resurrection. But God alone knows what kind of pujas they will now receive after the explanations given to the crowd of villagers, explanations expounded and amplified by the mukhya.

After breakfast new audience of Pustakalaya (Library). All those who can speak Sanscrit come to view the strange animal and if this impatience is flattering it is wrong to interrupt the reading of the manuscripts. These honest people confined in their Castra are especially surprised at the variety of our lectures. I have had the pleasure of revealing to them the name and work of Bergaigne and the revelation of these Vedic knowledges filled them with admiration.

Thursday 27. January - Today, Cri Pancami; winter is ended. A salvo of artillery (nothing takes place here without gun powder the changes of ministries as well as those of the seasons follow the same programme). A salvo of artillery at 10 a. m. announced to us the beginning of Spring. Vasanta will be welcomed it has besides managed for a sensational entry, an unexpected event. Yesterday we had precisely the most sullen day I had seen in India the Sun has not appeared for a moment and the thick mass of clouds descended and descended on the valley like a faked ceiling whilst the breeze generously scattered whirl winds of dust. And what a breeze, my hands deeply buried in

my pockets were numbed and I was obliged to give up the idea of photographing, through want of light and stability. The thermometer did not rise above 8. I vainly scoured Patan under this biting breeze, I found nothing that was even worth noting down. And the evening was so cold that I buried myself in bed. My poor bed I have had the curiosity to measure its depth: 7 centimetres by forcing the number; lashes of cloth intersecting on a frame-work of wood, a rezai on top, and to cover myself with, my covering of the journey and another rezai. Fifteen days to-day that I remain here. What a strange pleasure it is this dreadful seclusion and this icy cold when India offers everywhere a comfortable hospitality with her paradisaical temperature. But since I am here, I am glad of having sent here. India is too vast to be viewed at a glance and too closed to open her gates at the first strokes of hammer. The European can only live with Europeans and consequently apart from the natives. A justifiable anxiety of hygiene has everywhere established the dwelling of the sahibs far from the indigenous swarmings. To attempt a personal research in a few months, would be to lose one's time. The Anglo-Indian officials are alone able to carry out a useful task, they have official quality, they are feared and their favour is sought after, they have the long practice of the country and of the language. To search for manuscripts behind Fuhrer is to spend one's time on a lottery ticket. Nepal fortunately contrasts to these disadvantages; the stretch of the country is closely limited too closely even, because beyond the valley the rest of the country is exactly known as the North Pole. Hodgson and Wright have undoubtedly drained the manuscripts; Bhagvanlal and Bendall have gathered the inscriptions; but behind Hodgson and Wright, it is still permitted to search and glean. Of all the Tripitaka, how many texts there still remain

to be discovered? Further as a Frenchman, I feel a bit suspicious; the Gurkhas can at their worst only lend France with very distant schemes on Nepal. Lastly it is the last region still belonging to India where Buddhism still lives and already very near from dying out or rather from blending with Hinduism, as it has done elsewhere. From the point of view of Buddhistic archaeology, the valley is a complete Museum—from the stupas of Acoka to Hindu temples and the Tibetan caityas. In short particularly interested by my researches in relations of India with the Chinese world, I am here at the true cross-way of these two worlds: Nepal is vassal of China and sends her a periodical tribute; a Lama dwells here and a Nepalese resident at Lhasa. The communications between India and China are here a palpable fact, evident and material; the Chinese stampings mingle in the processions to the chromolithographics of Europe.

The goodwill of the authorities however unexpected it may appear maintains and even increases itself. The commander-in-chief Deb Sham Sher, Maharaj provisionally, sent word to me yesterday that he had given the order to serve me the "Pioneer" daily, one of the best newspaper in India, and I received this morning a basket of oranges and citrons. The proverbial parsimony of the Gurkhas makes the present precious. Deb Sham Sher has also expressed the desire to see my stampings and to have my explanations. Archaeological curiosity. It is wrong to know them. He requested me to take a stamping and to explain if possible an inscription on the wall of the Durbar and which has, it appears so far resisted the efforts of learned men. I have asked him for a precise indication but it certainly concerns the geographical inscription that the good pedant Pratapa Malla has traced on the wall of the

Darbar and in which the French word 'Hiver' (winter) goes by the side of Tibetan and Arabic. 'It is so he sent word to me that the people of this place affirm that the inscription denotes a hidden treasure.' Teneo lupum. Thus it is that Khadga Sham Sher the brother has thrown down the great stupa of Kapilvastu in order to hunt out the large sum. And they take leave of me with the hope that all this epigraphical, treasure will end in treasures of resonant money. Impossible to make them understand our curiosity. The two essential factors of our researches; religion and history have no equivalent in Sanscrit. Yesterday morning the Jemader brought me a Yogi from Hardwar, on his journey for a pilgrimage, knowing Sanscrit well, knowing well his Yoga and cursing the false yogis, professionals of mendicity. Again he was one of those who asked me the fundamental question so often heard. To your knowledge which religion is the best. Old task of disparaging the belief of others and exalting one's own. I have him my perpetual reply: Sarvatra Satam acarah saduh dustanam dustah. Everywhere honest people behave well and the wicked, badly. "He has very naturally asked me if there were Yogis in France; he was convinced (he is still undoubtedly) that there are Yogis in Germany.

Double effect of this distant sojourn (but is not nature a game of apparent contradictions): Jingoism (chauvinism) awakens at the same time when there develops a deep feeling of human solidarity. To see the other fractions of humanity at play, one perceives the appropriate role that is set a side for the motherland.

Today is a holiday. The town is made internal by the beating of drums, its processions, its music and its chorus that move along from temple to temple. The Cri pancami is the

Saravasti-puja, the festival of the nib and ink-stand. This morning under the direction and escort of my very faithful mukhya (Achates was the prototype), I make a pilgrimage to Balaji to the north of Kathmandu at the foot of Nagarjun. Crowds gather to worship the statue of Jalacayana. Narayan floats on water, stretched on Cesa who raise its heads. Colossal statue in the middle of a tank of quite modern workmanship the real Jalacayana is at Budha Nilkanth, 5 miles from Kathmandu. No temple is here erected to the god but a small Nepalese temple built in Chinese style is consecrated to Durga. The daily he-goat has just been sacrificed to him and the head has fallen in the basket, whilst the body still quivers in the hands of the sacrificer. The crowd soon presses on all sides, women especially and it is a continuous tinkling of bells; each visitor announces his journey to the goddess. The site is revivifying, shades by tall trees. Limpid streams supply water to number of tanks where the piety of the faithful feeds legions of carps and pour out from about twenty gargoyles on the lovers of devout douches. The Tibetans, with their thick woolen boots or leathern boots and their bewildered faces, burst out laughing at this spectacle; they are evidently astonished at the cleanliness of the Nevars. How everything is relative. The scale of altitude marks here the degrees of human filthiness.

In the afternoon in my own way I made a puja to Sarasvati. I have prepared a complete transcription of one of the stelas of Amcumarman and written a Sanscrit letter to Pundit Kula mana of Patan to urge him on in the search of manuscripts.

Sunday 30th January- Afternoon of rest. Pundit has even done so the whole day. It is the astami (the 8th) and further there is an uposadha (fasting) today in honour of

Avalokitevara. I returned to Patan on Friday to see the respectable Kula mana whom my letter seems to have impressed. Very moved, the good Pundit and then I greeted him Pundit fashion with a real anjali. And he swore to me on his great Buddhas that he would do his utmost. I gave him the list of all the works classified by Nanjio and known by Chinese translations; I ask him at first to find me the Sutra-lamkara of Acvaghosa, which according to the Chinese version interests both literature and history. He has not the text but he knows its title. Then I ask for the Abhidharmakoca of Vasubandhu which I have laboriously restituted in part according to the Chinese version and the Sanscrit commentary of Yocomitra; then the whole literature of Abhidharma : Janana-prasthana; Prajnaptipada etc. . . . only one of these texts, and I am a happy man or at least a happy traveller. In leaving Kula mana. I proceeded once again to the Mahabodhi Bihar, as I wished to take a photograph of it. The temple was unique in its kind in

Nepal, but it is so closely surrounded by its square of houses that I took a risk with my camera on the broken roof of a hut in ruins whence I was able to snap a characteristic feature - the details of one of the four small vimans erected on the roof of the sanctuary at the four corners of the great vimana the structure of which they reproduce. At Mitravanda's house I found a Sabhararagini an antholigy in the style of the Subhasitavali or rather again of the Subhasitaratnaabhandagara because the verses are set in it without the author's name. This is a large collection (67 leaves) composed by Jagnanathamicra, Yugacaranranda vatsare (1654 A. D.). The manuscript is the work of Amrtananda. I had no time to see the whole thing but shall return to it at some other time. I do not expect to find new and important works in the household that provides its Pundits to the Residence (namely quite an ordinary translator told to translate in Hindustani, documents in Nevar that are addressed to the Residence).

(To be continued)