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 Nigilashya Pillar found in the Nepal Tarai, which records the existence of the Kusakamuni 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 stupas as the Great Stupa at Sanchi, the nucleus of which is also attributed to Asoka. The Piprahwa 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 25 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 44 ft. high. It is well known that the Piprahwa Stupa yielded an incised casket containing the body relics of Lord Buddha.

Two brick stupas have been recently excavated at Tilankot representing the site of Kapilavastu in Nepal Tarai. The larger stupa, measuring 53 ft. in diam. and 7 ft. high, with projections in the four cardinal directions, is of Mauryan date with a pre-Maurya nucleus, while the smaller one, measuring 26 ft. in diam. and 5 ft. high, belongs to the Sunga period. Tradition attributes five stupas at Fatu in the Kathmandu Valley to Asoka, and, like the stupas at Sanchi and Piprahwa two of these are also hemispherical in form characterized by a large diameter and low height which is an index of antiquity. There is also a tradition that a daughter of Asoka named Chramati married a local prince and led a retired life in a monastery built by her at Deopatan, which is designated after her as Chramati-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 Swayambhunath (diam. about 60 ft., ht. about 30 ft.) which is situated on a isolated hill and is considered ageless according to pious belief, is also hemispherial in form with a flat truncated top, resting on a low circular plinth, and essentially resembles the early Indian stupa in form and appearance. The find of two early Lichchhavii inscriptions attests the antiquity of the site and the Stupa itself appears to have been referred to in a mutilated inscription of Amogavaran (c. A.D. 600-10) found at a place called Gu-karna in the Valley. A doubtless record of the Stupa's existence, however, occurs in a Buddhist manuscript of the 11th century which tells that conventional stupas, unlike the one at the site, and labors it as Nepali Swayambhu
The (reconstructed) metal-plated portion surmounting the dome (anda) comprises of (1) square hamsa 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 (symposium) at the base carved with figures of the Bhutan Buddha, (3) amulets, (4) dharmas, and (5) gopuras or bell-facade. The Gopala-samvara attributes its authorship to king Vrihaspada, great-grandfather of Mandavasa, who is described as Rudra-nama-patashika in the Patoshri Inscription of King Jayadeva II. In a late Sanskrit manuscript text called Dvarakda, preserved in Nepal, it is stated that king Vrishdeva converted a Siva temple into a Buddhist chaitya. Be that as it may, there is every possibility that the Svayambhunath was built during the early Licchhavi period as a simple chaitya of primitive Hinayana form with a hamsa and dharmas, and was subsequently embellished with shrine-projections and developed crowning members under the impact first of Mahayan and then of Vajrayana and Tantrayana. At present there are nine shrine-projections enhancing images of the five Bhutan Buddhas and four Tantras which must have been introduced after the tenth century under the influence of Vajrayana, while the cult of Adibuddha with which Svayambhunath is popularly identified is a still later development. The compound of the Svayambhunath Stupa is cluttered with votive chaityas, images and shrines which were put up in different ages, beginning with the Licchhavi period. Among the shrines, the most notable is the pagoda-shaped temple enshrining an image of Hayagriva, worshipped as Ajima, which is a late replacement of an original image regarded by one scholar to be of the 2nd century A.D. belonging to the Gandharan art of the Kushana period. 1

While most of the monumental stupas of the Valley are practically smaller replicas of the Svayambhunath with minor variations, the Bodhnath in the Kathiak Chakri, which stands in holiness with the Svayambhunath, 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 Svayambhunath, with this difference that the representation of the thirteen heavens here is pyramidal. Further, the shrine-projections, enhancing the five Bhutan Buddhas are shifted here from the anda proper to the lowermost terrace. In its essential plan and design this stupa resembles those of Paharpur in Bangladesh and Borobudur in Java, both belonging to the 9th century and anticipated by the Stupas-shrine at Lauriya Nandangarh in North, Bihar, dating from the early centuries of the Christian era.

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 Milras-pa, Marpo Norbu and Guru Padmasambhava, all wearing the peculiar Tibetan costume. Bodhnath also contains purely Indian gods of the Vajrayana, such as Vajradhara, Lokeshvara, Vak, Hevaka and Yamantaka. Attributed to the Pandungra to King Shodden (c. A.D. 88-91), this stupa is obviously later than the Swayambhunath 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 Maha Nikaya. Originally the chaitya was a simple structure undecorated by human figures, but in course of time under the impact of Mahayana it began to be embellished with adorned 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 Bodhisattvas and even their Saktis found a place on the various tiers of the chaitya. 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 khadas, 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 Lichhavi times, are smaller in size and usually bereft of human figures and have a distinctive form and design with a well-shaped hemispherical dome (udaka) 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 three rings often carved with teemis at the base. With this common denominator, the Lichchhavi chaityas have many varieties and types. The smaller or the simpler chaitya stand on a square plinth (sandal) of one or two receding tiers with a projection in the middle for accommodating a niche design on all the four faces. The nathus are thus trinatha 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 pattas-lata (scrolls) crowned by a kirtimukha. 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,
kulahams or lion or even chauya design so typical of the Gupta-Vakataka and early Chalukyan arts of India of 6th to 8th centuries A.D. A 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 Yagava. The chauya-motif used as a decorative design shows a replica of the simplest chauya with a hemispherical dome resting on one or two circular medhas and surrounded by a simha and a frond of three to five receding stages, crowned by an ophidian often accompanied by a japamala and embellished with fluttering banners and garlands.

On more ornate examples of the actual chaitya, the number of medhas 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 medhas, the basic form of the majority of the chaitya continue to be square of the mintha or cruciform pattern with niche projection in the middle. It is only in highly ornate examples, such as those encountered in the Chalukya complex, that we find the lower tiers of medhas square and the upper tier circular or twelve-sided, embellished with a string of the familiar ornamental designs sometimes adding a garland of chauya-window motif on the uppermost tier, but the surrounding dome or anda is invariably a plain hemispherical devoid of any ornamentation.

The Lichchhavi chaitya, 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 figure ive type of Lichchhavi chaitya and seen how the four-faced chaitya from Dhawka Kha containing four identical figures of Buddhas in the top niches and those of polahapani, Vajrapani, Buddha, and probably Maitreya (Buddha) in the lower niches are stylistically and palaeographically attributable to the 7th century and are followed by similar but more developed figurative chaitya from Guna Bhaga, Patan, and Thamel, Kathmandu, attributable respectively to the 8th and 9th centuries. These indeed are typical of the later Lichchhavi chaitya and are followed by the early and late Malla chaitya and maha, loaded with fleshyvast vegetal and geometrical decoration in the recco style and embellished with figures of Dhyani Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Tara and sometimes with anthropomorphized forms of such devotional objects and concepts as music, dance and ritual equipment, under the impact of Vajrayana and Tantrayana.

The Buddhist monastery in Nepal, assim 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 stories. 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 Salabanjika struts of the Rudavarna-mahavihara, Patan, stylistically datable from circa 13th century. The door-tympanums of the Chauhe Bahal and the Maha Bahal at Kathmandu allowed with Buddhist deities in a setting of elaborate Kalo-mahat and dragon designs crowned by krmamathas, 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-Matavihara which was evidently founded by king Manadeva. Sri-Rajavihara appears to have been founded by king Dharmadeva, father of Manadeva (7th cent.) and was probably augmented by Amowarman (early 9th cent.) who is known to have patronised both Hindu and Buddhist shrines and establishments. Sri-Sivadevavihara was evidently founded by king Sivadeva and was later called the Hiranyavarna-mahavihara alter it was renovated and gilt by king Rudadeva. The last one is one of the best maintained vihara 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 whose 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 vihara type stand pull-mell, rubbing shoulders with the Hindu shrines. While historically the origins 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 Machhindranath in Kathmandu and Patan and that of Hariti/Ajima at Swyambhunath, besides the central temple of Lokesvara at the Hiranyavarna-mahavihara discussed above. Among

50
the sikhar-shaped temples the most remarkable is the Mahabodhi at Patan, built of Teli (gold-buff) bricks by Vira Abhayagiri during the 14th century. Modelled after the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya, the complex comprises a pathalaghatana temple standing on a lofty circular platform with a principal sikha surmounted by four subsidiary ones. While the main temple enshrines an image of seated Buddha, there is a subsidiary shrine dedicated to Manadevi. Both the temples are lavishly decorated with rows of terracotta figures of Buddha and decorative reliefs of considerable artistic merit.