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Afterword: The Architecture in Nepal

by [Pratapaditya Pal](#)

This article was recently published in print as the afterword to the publication, in facsimile, of the author's dissertation submitted for the degree of D. Phil. (Arts) of the University of Calcutta in MCMLXII (1962). The facsimile version of Dr. Pal's PhD dissertation, with an introduction by Niels Gutschow and Erich Theophile, was published by The Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, Patan, Nepal in 2024.

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(click on the small image for full screen image with captions.)

“Their houses are constructed of wood. The walls of those are sculptured and painted.”

— The History of Tang Dynasty[[1](#)]

“... as I approached the Patan Durbar Square, my eyes were dazzled for a while... the buildings are a remarkable mélange of bricks, wood, stone, gold, bronze and paint, unmatched and complementing one another— what a sight for one’s eyes. Thousands of words and hundreds of photographs cannot convey the beauty of this vision. They are incapable of capturing the color of this work of art and its splendor.”

— Desirée Sylvain Levi[[2](#)]

I

The brief quotation from the History of the Tang Dynasty above was based on the observations left by Wang Xuance [Wade-Giles: Wang Hsuan-tse] who twice visited Nepal as the emissary of the Tang emperor of China during the reign of the Licchavi monarch Narendradeva (ca. 645-685) in Nepal. He further described

the impressive tall tower of several stories with metal makara fountains, a feature no visitor to the Dārbar Squares in Patan or Bhatgaon can miss admiring. [3]

The longer ecstatic passage expresses the sentiments of a more recent visitor, this time from the West. Desiée Sylvain Levi (1867-1943) was the wife of the French savant and scholar Sylvain Levi (1863-1935). She accompanied him to Nepal in 1921-1922 and wrote a charming account of her visit which was published in 1925 in French.[4] Desirée Levi is more effusive than the Chinese ambassador, but his writings are the earliest written evidence of the distinctive architecture of the Kathmandu Valley and creations of Newar architects which had already matured during the Licchavi period by the 7th century.

Euphoric as Levi's description is, I must admit that I too was equally enchanted when I first visited Nepal as a tourist in the autumn of 1957, a visit which may have inspired me the following year to choose the architecture of Nepal as the subject for my dissertation for my doctorate degree of the Calcutta University. I reproduce here an aquarelle of the Patan Darbār Square by the French polymath Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931) from his *Civilizations de L'Inde* (1887) to demonstrate that Madame Levi was not exaggerating.[5]



Fig. 1. Patan Darbār Square

A few years later, while researching for my thesis at Cambridge University (1962-1965) on Nepali sculpture and painting, I discovered from the eminent Newari epigraphist and scholar Dhanavajra Vajrācārya's writings that as early as the 5th century Buddhist monastic buildings in Nepal were adorned with murals of jātika stories, as was the case in contemporary India, Sri Lanka, Central Asia and China.[6] Alas, no such early murals survive today in Nepal but legendary claim is made for the introduction of stupas as early as the 3rd century BCE.

However, that some smaller or miniature stūpas are certainly as old as the Licchavi period is now clearly established.

II

In August 1965 after my oral examination for my PhD degree at Cambridge University, the external examiner and well-known Dutch scholar Dr. Johanna van Lohuizen-de Leeuw (1919-1983) congratulated me and said outright that she would like to recommend to E.J. Brill, the well-known Dutch publishers of *Orientalia*, to publish the thesis.[7] I was of course flattered and delighted, but responded that I first wanted to publish my previous dissertation on the Architecture in Nepal. Without hesitation, she said, “why not”, and offered to recommend that as well to Brill. This was like manna from heaven as the English saying goes, or, as we say, in Bengali, *megh nā chaitei jal* (rains appeared before I wished for the clouds).

However, it is one thing to write a thesis and another to convert it into a book. After returning to India, I sought only a Reader’s position in the Calcutta University (where a number of them were available), but I waited and heard nothing. An alternative opportunity came my way from the ancient and holy city of Benares but not from university. With American funding, Dr. Pramode Chandra of the Chicago University was starting a research institute for art history known then as the American Academy of Benares on the model of the American Academy of Rome. He invited me to join as Sr. Research Associate and I did so in late December of 1965. It was a great experience to help Pramode set up the library and photo archives of the Academy and visit sites and museums unseen before.

While in Benares I had the good fortune to meet the eminent art historian, Vasudev Sharan Agrawala (1904 - 1966) which resulted in an invitation to write a book on an aspect of the arts of Nepal.[8] Another great good fortune was to meet the legendary Rai Krishnadas (1892-1980), the founder of the famous museum of Benares Hindu University known as Bharat Kala Bhavan whose core collection was formed by him. That too was a great source of learning and, moreover, he requested me to catalogue all the objects from Himalayan cultures in the museum’s substantial collection which I undertook gratis and with pleasure.[9] For a Hindu, Benares is considered to be the most sacred place to visit before one’s death but for me it proved to be the most auspicious at the beginning of my career.

That brief pilgrimage to the holy city brought me offers of three positions. The first was to take up a teaching position in Leiden University in Holland and the second from America as the “Keeper of Indian Art” at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which naturally proved to be the easier and more attractive choice because of the long occupation by Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) of that position. After I agreed to join, I did receive an offer from the Hindu University of Benares to succeed Dr. V.S. Agrawala who had retired a few months earlier. However, it was too late as I had already accepted the Boston job.

As these projects kept me occupied while learning to be a curator with no prior curatorial or museum experience, I struggled to acquaint myself with my new situation. Thus, it took me more than a decade to convert the Cambridge thesis into two volumes for Brill. By 1973, I had managed to publish the first volume

about the sculpture of Nepal (1974) and the second volume on painting by 1978. I knew by then that with obligations of museum collections, exhibitions, and publications, it would be impossible to revise the Calcutta thesis on architecture into a book.

My last visit to Nepal was in 1976 by which time I had moved from Boston and joined the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to start a new department of Indian, Himalayan, and Southeast Asian art where I remained until 1995 to retire at the age of 60.

Imagine my surprise when around my 88th birthday in 2023 I received a letter from my friends and esteemed colleagues Niels Gutschow (who was already the preeminent authority on the architecture of Nepal) and Erich Theophile informing me that the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust wished to publish a limited facsimile edition of my Nepal architecture dissertation. It would not be for sale, but for distribution to institutions of the history of architecture and academic libraries. This is the second time in my life that manna fell from heaven, and I cannot find words suitable to express my gratitude. Coming from two of the most devoted friends of Nepal's architectural heritage, this largesse is a great honor and favor indeed.

I also thank them for the wonderful essay they have contributed about the early European literature on the architectural history of the Kathmandu Valley which in fact is a subject that I should have covered in my dissertation. My excuse is my own limitations with the literature in European languages that were not available then at Calcutta (now Kolkata). My apologies also for my amateurish photography and lack of training in line drawings and measurements. As far as I know, no scientific drawings or adequate archaeological or technical surveys of the country's architecture were available then either in Nepal or India, or elsewhere. Of course, now we are fortunate to have heroic work done by Niels Gutschow in his several authoritative publications.

It is also Gutschow's idea that, as a pioneer in the subject, I write this new afterword on my experience with Calcutta University and my teachers there. I have already discussed some of this to some extent above and here is the rest of the saga. As to why I had taken up the study of the architectural history of Nepal in the first place, in retrospect I guess there were several reasons.

III

One was that both at school as a boarder at St. Joseph's College (1949-1951) at Northpoint in Darjeeling I had several close friends who were from Nepal and Tibet. Later by happenstance as an undergraduate in St. Stephen's College in Delhi (1952-1956) I befriended other Nepali students who were relatives of my school friends. Almost all the Nepali boys belonged to the Rana families of Nepal. One of these friends—Raj Kesar Simha of St. Stephen's invited me to visit Nepal in 1956 after completing our degree. I took up the invitation in the autumn of 1957.

Raj Kesar and Bharat Kesar Simha were the two sons of General Simha. The older Bharat went into the army but, after completing his B.A. Degree in St. Stephen's, Raj was already working with the Royal Nepal Airlines when I went to

Nepal for the first time.

I am afraid I do not remember the first name of General Simha. He was not a Rana but if I remember correctly his wife and Raj's mother was the daughter of Kiran Shumshere Rana, who was I think a younger son of Prime Minister Juddha Shumshere Rana. Through Simha, I met the famous Kaisar Shumshere and went to the Kaisar Mahal accompanied by Bharat's wife. I was then allowed to return to the old man's library, and he complained to me that Tucci had visited the library in 1930s and had borrowed some valuable manuscripts but had never returned them and requested me to retrieve them for him. Obviously, I could do nothing.

The old general Simha's mansion was the last house where the Balaju road from New Road ends along the escarpment from where one had a clear view of Svayambhūnāth.

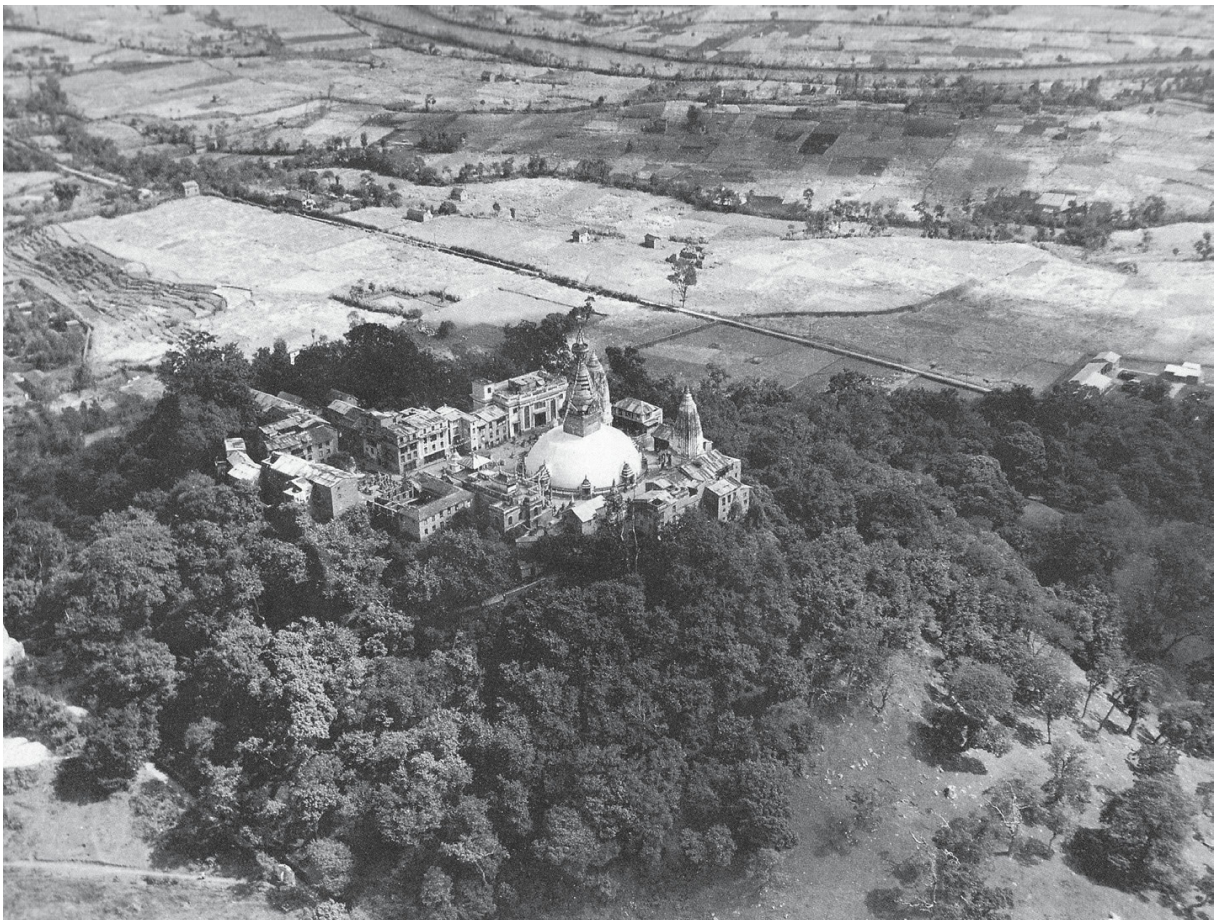


Fig. 2. View of Svayambhūnāth from the southwest, (photograph by Ganesh Man Chitrakar, c. 1960.

He was a devout Hindu and every evening we would gather in his room overlooking green rice fields and receive the daily blessings of dusk—a ritual with which I was not accustomed to in my own house. We would all get *tilak* marks on our foreheads with sandalwood paste and a little bit of *prasād* in flickering lamp light.

Curiously, the general always turned towards the famous Buddhist shrine visible through the large window and would murmur “Jai Shimbhu!” twice in benediction. It was obvious to me that he did not distinguish between Śiva and Svayambhū. It was my first introduction to the amity between the Hindus and Buddhists that I would then encounter in Nepal in their religiosity and shared art

and architectural expressions. I thought of the coexistence of the two faiths in similar fashion in ancient India once upon a time.

IV

However, here I must recall another experience while in Delhi that may have played a subconscious role in my choice of working on the history of architecture — though it may sound farfetched. In the autumn of 1954, a roommate of mine at St. Stephen's, who was a year senior, one Friday at lunch in the college refectory casually asked me if I would like to visit his hometown Chandigarh in Punjab for the weekend. I was a little surprised as Chandigarh was still an unfinished project involving Le Corbusier and I did not know that it was yet habitable. He then informed me that in fact the world-famous architect was already there that week and that his father was the Punjab government's liaison with him for the project. My friend's name was Moni Verma (who alas is no more having passed away prematurely).

Needless to say, I accepted the invitation and off we went by train on a short journey. The next day after breakfast, Moni and I accompanied his father in a government limousine, picked up Le Corbusier from the government guesthouse and spent the entire morning visiting the high court and a couple of other buildings and drove through the unfinished city until lunchtime. Not only did we listen mostly to the conversations of the two adults, but I still vividly remember conversing with the great man and asking silly questions which he patiently answered. Since that memorable visit to Chandigarh, I have always wondered if it had not been the spark that later ignited my interest in the history of architecture rather than sculpture or painting, which are more popular subjects.

In my Jesuit school in Darjeeling, the subjects I enjoyed most were mathematics, scriptures (mostly the bible) and history.[10] In Delhi at St. Stephen's I had the good fortune to take classes with two inspiring teachers of the Indian history of the Islamic rulers and European History.[11] However, the teacher who nudged me the most towards the history of Ancient India, without which I would not have become interested in Nepal, was the historian R.S. Sharma who taught not at my own college, but in the rival Hindu College located across the street. His lectures introduced me to a subject about which I knew very little as my missionary schools only taught the history of the European encounter with the country.

This curiosity to learn more about the ancient history of the nation led me to join the University of Calcutta, as it offered an M.A. course called Ancient Indian History and Culture. It consisted of studying eight subjects of which four were compulsory—inevitably political history—but four others were elective: Social History, Epigraphy and Numismatics, Religions, Anthropology and Fine Arts and Archaeology. I initially opted for Anthropology but was told that that specialization was not available that year and so I selected Fine Arts and Archaeology. This included not only the history of ancient arts and architecture of the subcontinent but also of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Needless to say, the arts of neighboring Nepal and Tibet were not included in the north. Nor did we get around to study Kashmir or the hills and valleys of the Indian Himalayas, for that matter either.

The most interesting feature of the course was that one day a week classes

were held at the Indian Museum in the sculpture galleries with the objects themselves. There were no lectures where we were shown slides. In those days, the visuals were black-and-white or color illustrations in books. Needless to say, this was not the best way to learn art history but that is how we were taught. Even Stella Kramrisch (1896-1993) who was a professor in the department between the early 1920s until the early 1950s taught some of my teachers in the same manner.

V

Although we did not use slides in classes, we did make trips each year of my two-year M.A. course to two sites which were memorable. The first was in the year 1956-57 to the site of Vishnupur in the Bankura district of West Bengal to see the wonderful but mostly late brick temples of the Malla Dynasty of the 16th-17th centuries. I was so impressed that I even published two articles on the art and architecture of Vishnupur in a popular journal.

In 1958, the entire class went to Bhuvaneshwar, Puri, and Konarak by train for a tour of the great Odissan styles of Hindu temple architecture which I must admit were inspiring. I can still vividly recall the magnificent ruins of Konarak, and the soaring Liṅgarāja and the precious Rājarāṇī temples at Bhuvaneshwar, a veritable forest of temples, and of course, the famous Jagannāth Temple at Puri. This is the shrine that is the site of the celebrated annual Vaiṣṇava chariot festival that has given the English language the new word—juggernaut. We of course did not witness the Puri chariot festival, but that year in Nepal I learnt of the similar chariot festival of Matsyendranāth in the Valley, a complex saint-cum-Lokeśvara deity revered by both Hindus and Buddhists. Such chariot festivals of the Buddhist were also noted by Chinese pilgrims to India as early as the 7th century.

The temple of Jagannāth at Puri also preserves another custom that I discovered later in Nepal. The principal images of the main deities there are made of wood and apparently are replaced every twelve years. The Newar artisans as well love to carve their images, especially of Buddhist deities, from timber, a tradition going back to the Licchavi period has now been clearly established in many publications.

Finally, of course, there are the large stūpas of Nepal in situ and still actively used unlike the archaeological ruins in India. Visiting the so-called Aśokan stūpas of Patan and the grand and active Svayambhūnāth on top of a hill as well as that of Bodhnāth on the valley floor, crowded with devout Tibetan pilgrims were revelations. These two impressive sites are awesome, especially with their gigantic and mesmeric eyes staring down from the base of the tall tower--like finial above the huge domes. Not until I visited the great early stūpas of Sri Lanka and the monumental Borobudur in Java in January of 1969, did I savour the same rasa (aesthetic thrill), as I did in 1957 Kathmandu Valley.



Fig. 3. The so-called Aśokan Stūpa, east of Patan (photograph: N. Gutschow, November 30, 1971).



Fig. 4. Bodhnāth, view of the stepped spire of the stūpa and the eyes of the Buddha on the supporting *harmikā* (photograph: Binod Karki, Source: Chintamani Boudhamaha Stupa: The Boudha Stupa Renovation 2016, p.192.).

Visiting the Indian Museum for classes for my M.A. course was most enjoyable as we saw some of the earliest sculptures of the Maurya/Shunga Period (3rd to 1st BCE) and especially the remnants of the first stone structure of the Buddhist stūpa at Bharhut. In fact, one entire gateway with the richly sculptured columns and railings can be intimately viewed in the museum. It was at the Bharhut gallery that I learned for the first time how the Buddhists took the lead, likely following the reign of Aśoka, to transform earlier wood and brick structures into lithic architecture. Transferring thereafter from wood to stone for their religious structures was a major technological advancement, as is clear from the remains of Bharhut and in situ at Sanchi in Central India.

VI

Experiencing living Buddhist architecture as a tourist, while wandering around the towns and monuments of the Kathmandu Valley in 1957, was therefore of seminal importance for me. Those casual first visit impressions remained with me until the autumn of 1958 when after my M.A. examination I was told that I had topped in the final exams and was awarded the Khaira Research fellowship to work towards a doctorate degree under the renowned educationist Professor Nihar Ranjan Ray (1903-1981) who was then the Bagishwari Professor of Indian Art. I had taken his classes for two years and enjoyed them, but I was not sure if I wanted to get into an academic career. However, the scholarship was associated with his chair with a stipend of Rs. 200/- per month which was a big temptation. So, I went for it, even though I would have preferred to work under another supervisor.

Among my M.A. courses at the university, I particularly enjoyed the Indian architecture classes taught by Professor Sarasi Kumar Saraswati (1906 - 1980). He had a vast knowledge of the architectural texts, known in Sanskrit as the *vāstuśāstra*, with which he demonstrated how they were used in designing and building the great temples of Odissa, Khajuraho in Central India and in the Dravida countries of South India. Later when I began work in Nepal, he patiently devoted hours of his precious time at the library of the Asiatic Society in Kolkata teaching me the old scripts of North India and Nepal in order to read manuscripts.[12]

In any event, I received almost no help from my supervisor who was an extremely busy functionary of the university as well as a member of the upper chamber of the Indian parliament. Fortunately, Prof. Saraswati came to my rescue generously instructing me how to begin my research. We were told not to thank anyone in the preface to the thesis, and so here I correct my omission recalling my enormous debt to Professor Saraswati and all my university teachers.

In fact, four of my teachers at the University were direct students of the legendary Stella Kramrisch (1896-1993) whom I have written about elsewhere. [13] Apart from Ray and Saraswati, they included Professor Deva Prasad Ghosh (1902- 1992) and Dr. Kalyan Kumar Ganguly (1926-1997). At some point in the first year of my research I thought of writing to Kramrisch in Philadelphia for an opportunity to work with her for my doctorate in the architecture of Nepal. After all, she was the only one among the university faculty who had written not only the first major article on the history of painting in that country, but also the monumental two- volume work titled *The Hindu Temple* (1946), though it did not include the temples of Nepal.

I was surprised when she wrote back and said that in fact she was coming to Calcutta in the autumn of 1959 and would be happy to meet with me. This was the first time she was returning to the city which was her home for three decades of her life. She did arrive and we did meet both in Kolkata and in Nepal but as I have written elsewhere the encounter was less than congenial and I dropped the idea of going to Philadelphia.[14] However, in 1967, when I joined the Boston Museum, not only did we become better acquainted, but in due course, she used to tease me as her “grandstudent,” which I found rather touching.

Curiously, in the four years or so between 1958 and 1962 when I left for Cambridge University, in all of my visits to Nepal, I never met a single Nepali academic or scholar except Lain Singh Bangdel (1919-2002) a couple of times on my first visit in 1957 when he was a member of the Royal Academy of Arts, and later once more perhaps during Kramrisch’s visit. We did speak about old sculpture, but I do not recall if we exchanged any ideas about architecture.



Fig. 5. Caṅgu Nārāyaṇa, main elevation facing west (photograph: Stanisław Klimek, August 30, 2008).

VII

It is my duty now to belatedly thank all of my school and undergraduate Rana friends, a few of whom sometimes accompanied me on my visits to the temples and *bāhās*. Both Raj and particularly his older sibling Bharat's wife, an avid photographer was of great help in meeting and conversing with the artists and artisans in the Newar communities, especially in Patan. I do remember encountering a few collectors and especially owners of metal stores in the bazaars where I saw an enormous amount of metalworks, including images consigned by householders for sale by their weight. Many objects I am sure were melted down and recycled for other purposes. This of course was an old habit in India for ages; not only would they include family heirlooms, including old images that were either effaced by use, or had to be sold for economic necessity. The same is particularly true of jewelry in both India and Nepal but these would be consigned with jewelers rather than brass or copper merchants.

In any event, I cannot remember all of their names today but thank all my Nepali friends profusely and belatedly for their unstinting generosity. It is also a great pleasure, apart from Niels and Erich mentioned above, to thank my diligent assistant Caroline Friedman for her cheerful and cooperative assistance and technological skills in preparing the manuscript. I am also indebted to my spouse

Chitralekha for bearing with me for over half a century without which I could have accomplished little.

Finally, I can think of no better and more amusing way of closing this epilogue on my long romance with the history and culture of Nepal than by quoting an imaginative dialogue between Sherlock Holmes and Watson about the architectural wealth and beauty of Nepal penned not by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but by Ted Riccardi (1937-2020), the distinguished professor of languages, including Sanskrit and Newari, of Columbia University, N.Y.

“No other people on earth, Watson, has produced such intricate beauty in so small a space as the Valley of Kathmandu. One trenchant observer has described it best as a kind of coral reef, built up laboriously over the centuries by unrecorded artisans. As a human achievement, it ranks with the creations of Persia and Italy.” “Good Lord, Holmes, and no one even knows of its existence...”[15]

“Not quite Watson,” I would chime in. “As early as the 7th century the Chinese had remarked on this extraordinary architecture of the beautiful Valley and for centuries the Tibetans have greatly admired the Newar artisans and their superior craftsmanship.”[16]

Pratapaditya Pal
Los Angeles
Thanksgiving 2023

Endnotes

1. As quoted in Pal 1974: *The Arts of Nepal Vol. 1, Sculpture*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 6-7. The ambassador particularly noted the seven storied tower of the royal palace and the impressive metalwork that embellished it. The name used here is the Pin-yin version of the Wade-Giles method in the sources of my days. See also Chatterjee 1967.

2. As translated in Pal 2022 from De 2000 which is the Bengali translation of Desirée Sylvain Levi's 1925 book *Dans L'Inde (de Ceylan et Népal)*, 1925: Paris: F. Rider *et cie*).

3. See note 1 above.

4. See note 2. It should be mentioned that the first English translation of Desirée Sylvain Levi's travel account by Rob Aft still awaiting publication was available to me as I wrote this postscript.

5. Reprinted from Bazain 2021.

6. See Pal 1978: *The Arts of Nepal Vol. 2, Paintings*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2-3.

7. See Pal 1974: *The Arts of Nepal Vol. 1, Sculpture*. Leiden: E.J. Brill for Dr. Lohuizen's preface.

8. This resulted in a joint authorship with Dr. D.C. Bhattacharya, a former student

of mine at the Calcutta University and then a research scholar: Pal, Pratapaditya and Dipak C. Bhattacharya, *The Astral Divinities of Nepal*, 1969. Varanasi: Prithivi Prakashan.

9. I began the project while at Benares but alas could not complete it as I left shortly for Boston.

10. I should note while all my Nepali friends only spoke Nepali and not Newari, I never learned the language but later at the university did learn the old script as noted below. However, for three years I did take lessons in the Tibetan language with Lobsang Lhalungpa who taught Tibetan at school. Much later while organizing the first Tibetan exhibition for the Asia Society in New York in the late 1960s, did I realize that he was also a famous scholar and wrote a very popular biography in English of the great Tibetan saint and teacher Milarepa.

11. They were: Muhammad Amin and E.R. Kapadia. The former was the lecturer on Islamic history and the latter in European history. I am grateful to my college classmate Moni Malhoutra of New Delhi for providing me with their first names. We also called them Amin Saheb and Kapadia Saheb following the form of address for Europeans in the British period.

12. In my thesis I do include an excerpt from the original Sanskrit text, the *Kriyasamgrahapañjikā* of Kuladatta by collating two manuscripts in The Asiatic Society of Calcutta, one of which was copied in Nepal in N.S. 373/1253 CE in the reign of Abhayamalla. It is an important text for stūpas. I am happy to see from a recent publication of KVPT sent to me by Niels Gutschow that in 2018, Alexander von Rospatt had published a book about it and that Kuladatta authored the book in the 11th or 12th century in Nepal where his father Samghadatta had migrated from Kashmir. However, no stupas similar to those seen in Nepal, whether large or small, have survived in Kashmir. See Basukula, Gutschow and Sharma 2022: 40 and 205 endnote 28, for the full reference to von Rospatt's publication.

13. See Pal 2015: 44-47.

14. Pal 2011.

15. As quoted in Pal 2004: 9.

16. As a postscript I would like to say that since then, apart from the two British scholars Arthur L. Basham and F.R. Allchin, who were external examiners of my Calcutta thesis, only Niels Gutschow and Erich Theophile have read this thesis; thanks to them it will be more widely available to scholars and others interested in Nepali culture. No one else, not even Dr. Lohuizen or Dr. Mary Slusser, nor any of my close colleagues, ever asked to read it, though I had two copies in my possession. In 1995, while I was a Getty scholar I donated one copy to the Getty Institute Special Collections available to visiting readers. An internet search at the University of Calcutta website for Ph.D. students of Ancient Indian History and Culture department revealed neither my name nor my thesis listed. What an irony, I thought; so, even more kudos to the KVPT for making the thesis available to a wider readership.

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