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SIKHARA, GONPA, AND MANDIR: SACRED STRUCTURES OF THE HIMALAYA

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While the kingdom of Nepal has never been an Asian crossroads and while adjectives like "sequestered" and "hidden" may to some degree be appropriately applied to this Himalayan land, it is by reference to two foreign models that design of the country's major monument of art—the Napalese pagoda (*mandir*) may be explained. The same emmigrant stock that were racially wed to produce the Indo—Mongoloid Newari tribe that dominates Napalese culture may be approached for their architectural creations that are possible inspirations for the Napalese building. From India comes the *śikhara* temple and from Tibet the monastery *gonpa*.

One need not look to the Indian border of Nepal's southern Terai to encounter examples of *śikhara* architecture in abundance, for the valley of Kathmandu holds many solidly constructed shrines in stone and brick that are near replicas of their Indian prototypes. Mahabuddha temple in Patan is a consciously preserved memory in *terracotta* of the great shrine of the same name in India while Patan's temple of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, even with the addition of its unusual balconies and circumambulatory passages, remains the essentially closed and dark tower of the Indian plain. Its sacred inner enclosure, the *garbha griha* (womb house), is small and sombre—hardly even spatial—so that the worshipper depends upon the exterior of the building as his general focus of worship and for the visual lesson that he is to learn. Thus multiple images of Buddha cover the outside of Mahabouddha temple in reverential clarity while scenes from classical Hindu literature are wrapped in low relief around the walls of

the Rādhā-Kṛṣna shrine. The *śikhara* is a very solid kind of wedding cake upon which iconographical story and decorative detail are dripped as meaningful frosting. In comparison to the carved exterior, the dim, even slightly repellant interior space provides so little visual interest that the visitor is unlikely to notice even the elaborate lantern ceiling of repeated squares or octagons within the hollow superstructure of the *śikhara*. Only on the Hindu Island of Bali does the use of wood, bamboo, and thatch allow for the creation of a light and airy *śikhara* construction. In India and Nepal the feeling evoked is of density. Like the earliest of *śikharas* Durgā Mandir at Aihole, the Shore temple of Mahabalipuram - any Napalese *śihhara* is meant to be the tower of Mt Meru, the cosmic axis It is a sturdy, steady pole that can withstand the legendary strain of sterring the great sea of milk as the universe is brought into existence. The temple form is also the particular equivalant of Tibet's Mt. Kailasa —dewlling place of Śiva, perfect mountain, navel of the world, island in the great lake Manas.

Because of its stroug exterior impact and the seeming withdrawal of its interior space, the *śikhara* is perhaps better considered as sculpture than architecture. Supported by the simple gravitational thrust of its own weight, the monument activates space by pushing it rather than enclosing it. In a vaguely megalithic way it is a marker built for the ages yet it is a dynamic, changing building as well, for in its crowning pinnacle that usually takes the form of a circular sun-disc (*amalaka*) is the implied movement of a universe ceaselessly revolving in constant change. The *śikhara* is a gyroscope ; it is the perfect pendulum. Yet its surface teems with the illusion of shadowed, breathing life in the form crowed, intertwined, and activated sculptures, so-called "lovers upon the walls," that nearly step out of their matrix of stone Even the floorplan of the shrine, geomatric and holy in its orientation to the four cardinal directions, is ultimatly derived from the *vāstupuruṣha maṇḍala*, of the ideal human figure. This human reference and the porosity of carved surfaces lighten the *śikhara*, most most massive and most Indian of Himalayan monuments.

While the Indian *śikhara* temple of Hindu and, rarely, Buddhist ori-

entation is weighty and solid, with its visual impact belonging almost entirely to the exterior, the Tibetan *gonpa* or Buddhist monastery temple appears comparatively light and open with an interior impact of colour, light, and intricate carved form that stuns the visitor. The *gonpa* may be erected in physical isolation, like the 16th century temple of Pemayangtse in Sikkim, but the devotee who approaches is welcomed by a building that opens to him, leading him inside through a porched vestibule and processional doorway to a very large space An essential practical difference between the *gonpa* of Tibet and the high Himalaya and the *śikhara* of India and Nepal is that the *gonpa*, like of Thyangboche in Nepal or Rumtek in Sikkim, is used for communal worship while the *śikhara* is frequented mainly by the individual devotee. To the very large building capable of holding crowds of worshippers is brought the uniquely Tibetan taste for filling the religious environment at one, two, three levels or more with paintings and sculptures that are an almost literal rendering of Tantric Buddhism's million-deity pantheon. The task of the traditional monastery painter like Kumjung Kapa Kalden Sherpa, is to cover every square inch of wall-space with crowds of paintings that are definition of *horror vacui*. Only the medieval temples of South India with their *gopura* towers of massed sculptures nearly equal the overwhelming multiplication and, perhaps, artistic overstatement of the *gonpa* interior. In the microcosm of all existence that explodes upon the walls of the monastery shrine the individual man's role is very small indeed.

The visitor to a *gonpa* proceeds from a vividly and abundantly painted entry proch through an opening guarded by evil-destroying protectors into a high ceilinged prayer hall where he prays prostrate or standing The main hall space is punctuated by low tables used by monks and by tapered wooden columns of the post-and-lintel structural system that supports the multistoreyed building. Many small windows of clear or coloured glass, their painted frames on the outside of the building repeating the line of the thickeing walls and the tapered shape of the columns, emit soft light into the shrine in addition to that of butter lamps that normally burn as offerings. These may be found

on the tiered alter that usually occupies the rear center of the hall. Above them, semi-shadowed ceiling beams painted red, blue, and green reveal in their complex grid pattern the regularity of multiplied, modular squares that are basic to the monastery plan. Often painted among them is a more significant module or seed, in the form of a *manddla* diagram. This pattern is map of the universe, beginning and end, *yin yang* ever-changing yet constant equivelent of the *śikhara's* cosmic axis. Both *gonpa* and *śikhara* have their origin in the unchanging perfection of geometry yet neither is a pyramid

Fully satisfying the definition of architecture in terms of the enclosure of space, the *gonpa* contains large communal areas, small private ones, and secret rooms of dark powers that are honored only by the initiated. Among the private places are rooms for prayer, meditation and living but the building as a whole is cosmically divided into symb lic levels of heavenly and earthly existence and progress toward enlightenment, so that all realms of the worldly and devine *mandala* are captured and preserved in the way of Dante. Many kinds of activities are pursued inside the *gonpa* at any one time for it is a complex space naturally grown from the total environment of buildings that makes up the monastery as a whole. Its monumentality clearly does not grow from simplicity of function and its floor plan may be expanded in somewhat irregular ways but the *gonpa* is unified and intriguing. While there is elegant restraint in the application of painted colour, carved wood, and often brilliant roofing to the exterior of the building the aesthetic attraction of the *gonpa* is above all its dramatically polychrome inner space.

Much less known than either of the monuments is the Napalese pagoda temple, to which the broad term- *mandir* may be applied. It is neither *śikhara* nor *gonpa*. Rather, it is a remarkably local monument that belongs to Nepal as much in its design as in the brick, tile, and wood of which it is built. Post-and-lintel construction provides the framework of this shrine that favours Hinduism and Buddhism almost equally but the angled thrusts of tile-or metel—covered roofs and supportive strut beams give the structure a uniquely Nepalese form. City skylines glitter as metalwork, wood-

Siva Mandir
Kathmandu, Nepal.

carving, and even inlaid stones are brought in abundance to the bodies of the pagodas and the surface and silhouette of the structures, whether they are freestanding or built into Buddhist monastery (*vihara*) complexes, is entirely Himalayan in the sharp reduction of ascending roof sizes and in the meaning and method of sacred ornamentation. The pagod's double-wall construction, wherein the inner core of each storey projects upward telescope-fashion to form the outer walls of the next higher level, is found nowhere else. Less unique in plan, the building reveals perfect square within square as to the four cardinal directions ; it captures equilibrium both within and without. Kipling's dreams still belong only to Kathmandu and to the architectural monument that is undeniably Nepal, yet that most native of buildings nonetheless reveals two distant heritages.

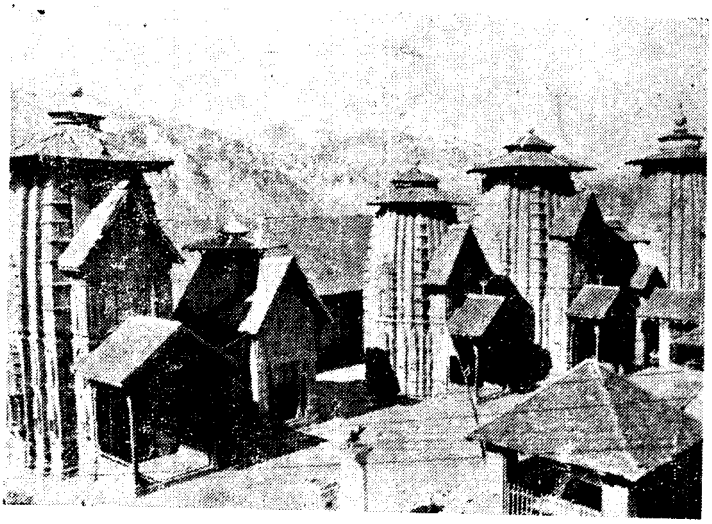
Like the *śikhara*, the Nepalese *mandir* is solidly constructed, with sturdy brick walls raised upon a stepped base of brick or stone. It is a column, a marker, a tower—home of self-existent and eternal deities. Inner space is minimal, sometimes almost absent, with the interiors of all storeys above the ground floor nearly always entirely non-functional. The *garbha griha* as innermost square is a very confined space which, as at Nyatapo'a Mandir in Bhaktapur, may even be kept closed to worshippers. Especially when shallowly excavated to better honor earth mothers like Kankeśvari, goddess of fire, the inner room may be damp, cold, and singularly uninviting, even when compared to that of the *śikha*·a. Its central image or sacred symbol is revealed only rarely through the small, carefully guarded doorway of the shrine, a doorway which the devotee is usually allowed only to approach, not enter Yet the pagoda is like the *śikhara* in being potentially alive as it is activated by the divine presence within its womb. It, too, is a cosmic axis poised at the center of a whirling universe.

The universe, in the form of the immense pantheon of late Hinduism or late Buddhism, is very concretely represented as it is carved and painted around the outside of of the pagoda to give it the same decorative and instructional exterior impact that characterizes the *śikhara*. Yet the Nepalese treatment of the outside of the building, with massed inconography added to the essential

body rather than carved out of it, is so such flamboyant detail, such brilliant colour, such complex story as it bursts from the temple's surface in the form of roof struts, wooden cornices, *toraṇa* door coverings, window frames, and roof banners that the fully ornamented pagoda may be linked to a *gonpa* turned inside out. In the snowstorm complexity of visual form that covers a classic pagoda like Cāṇgu Nārāyaṇa Mandir, established in the 4th century A D and rebuilt in the 16 th century, is found a great Nepalese tradition of Trantric art that rivals the colour and super abundant story that wait inside the *gonpa*. The western observor is shaken by a visual tradition that seems beyond comprehension, beyond belief, beyond aesthetic judment. The Tantric drama of the shadow box becomes theatre-in-the round.

To hold the complexity of pagoda structure, ornament, and iconography together as a unified whole there is, again, the *maṇḍala*. From its appearance in India at least as early as the Aryan invasions that brought down the Indus Valley Civilization before 1000 B.C., the sacred geometric form, circle, square, triangle – which become the *maṇḍala* diagram has inspired the design of sacred architecture. In Nepal today and presumably since the early growth of Tantrism in the Himalaya, with its emphasis upon the *maṇḍala* as visual aid to meditation, the diagram is inseparable from temple design It is wall painting, floor or foundation plan, carved border detail, and ceiling covering. As discussed by Peter Pott, Giuseppe Tucci—even Peter, Paul, and Mary the *maṇḍala* is reconized as an all-important abstract focus of meditation and sacred symbol of origins It is broadly recognized to capture and freeze the mouniain tower, revolving universe, and circle of f'ame that surrounds the world and all existence, but the artistic significance of the *maṇḍala* remains partly unexplored. Of particular importance is the potential three-dimensional projection that is inherent in every *maṇḍala* diagram, a projection that may be built according to specific directions found in classical Tantric literature like the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*. This construction takes the form of a miniature temple. Cāṇgu Nārāyaṇa Mandir rests atop a perfect mountain form which one climbs to enter a courtyard reminiscent of the *caturśala* of India's

A Hindu Sikhara
in Patan, Nepal.



Sikhara Temples
in Chamba, Himachal Pradesh.

ancient past. Both the *śikhara* and *gonpa* may be similarly enclosed but the *mandir* of Nepal is perhaps the most literal structural rendering of the *maṇḍala* as temple. The symbolic map of the *māṇḍala's* many borders, colours, and representational forms is undoubtedly the source of many heretofore puzzling de ails of pagoda design and the structural *maṇḍala* may be seen as a kind of topographic map of the painted diagram that is so much more than a geometric symbol of perfection. Many questions remain, as that of the effect of a *maṇḍala's* dedication to a particular deity upon the structural form of a temple built for that deity, and the precise meaning of colour symbolism in pagoda painting, but essential to any consideration of Himalayan architecture is the broad significance of the *maṇḍala*. It is this design that inseparably links together three Himalayan temple forms of cosmic reference—*śikhra*, *gonpa*, and *mandir*.

The *mandir* reflects a broad heritage indeed, not only in Nepal but in its many other Himalayan expressions as well. As might be expected, the interrelationship of architectural form that is apparent in the broad consideration of India, Tibet and Nepal is more obvious within the Himalayan region itself. From Assam in the east to the Punjab and Kashmir in the west a more narrowly defined harmony exists in terms of design emphasis upon verticality, multiplication of storeys and roofs, and construction and ornamentation with wood. Assamese temple design is the region's most unusual because it favors bulbous *śikhara* forms that enclose far more space than do their classic Indian prototypes, and the great mosques of Kashmir open up the minimal shrine space to the massed followers of a faith foreign to the rest of the Himalaya, yet a surprising unity of temple forms is found as one moves from Patan to Mandi to Almora to Chatrarhi to Manali. The abundance of fine timber like deodar and the frequencey of heavy snows in the mountains are not enough to explain the dominance of steeply pitched roofs on buildings of wooden framework that are found so widely there. The regional aesthetic taste that is nurtured reveals a long-established east-west interchange across the Himalaya that justifies examining the area as a cultural unit. Preference for local style is strong enough to bring pitched roofs of stone to Kashmiri

temples like the Śiva shrine at Pandrenthan (1135 A.D.) and to force brick into the patterns of wood as in an abandoned three-tiered shrine in Maharajganj, Nepal. Trans-Himalayan movements of pilgrimage, trade, and invasion as evidenced by the exchange of venerable art traditions are at least as significant as north-south movements that are more often discussed by scholars, perhaps because they support theories that connect East Asian pagoda architecture, like Buddhist philosophy, to an unbroken chain of borrowings that has its link in India in the *stūpa* of Buddhism. The chain is, in fact, not unbroken, for the *mandir* of the Himalaya is not a colossal *harmika* and *yaṣṭi* (stupa superestructure) but a quite separate interpretation of the structural *maṇḍala*.

Sequestered though it may have seemed, even the Valley of Kathmandu with its longitudinal boundaries of rugged river valleys was in constant contact with other kingdoms to the east and west, many of which were conquered by the Gurkha armies of Pṛthvī Nārāyāṇa Śāh in the late 18th century. The palace of Nawakot, the shrines of Gorkha, the temple of Muktinath near the Tibetan border, even the *stūpa* tower of Miaoying in China are examples of Newari tribal design as it spread from its valley home. The adoption of pagoda style may be visually awkward, as in India's Chamba district, where stone *śikhara* towers wear wooden roofs and balconies like incongruous hats; structural methods may be misunderstood, as at Kulu's temple of Sandhya Devī at Jagatsukh where dressed stone is used as mere filler in a wooden framework; local expressions may be iconographicalley startling as in the mounting of animal horns on the facade of Manali's Dhungri shrine or the substitution of geometric tracery for otherwise essential anthropomorphic story on surface of the 14th century mosque of Shah Hamdan in Srinagar. Yet each local style shows concern for rich texture, intense colour, and precious ornament in support of the structural and tactile qualities of wood. Together these elements complete and make perfect the structural expression of the South Asian *maṇḍala* and further define the architectural traditions that belong distinctly to the Himalaya.

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