

SAVING FAITH

by DESMOND DOIG

Three golden kings

Among the many Nepali kings of old, three are remembered not so much because of how they reigned or what they achieved, so much as by the very personal monuments they left behind—three golden likenesses of themselves. They kneel in the Durbar Squares of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur, atop high stone pedestals with lotus capitals for their thrones. All are attired in the finery of court dress obviously inspired by Mughal fashion: turbaned, plumed, bejewelled, belted and armed with swords, daggers and shields. All are in attitudes of devotion. Two are shaded by the hoods of rearing serpents; one by a royal parasol.

If the same master created all three, as it would seem, then he lived and worked as long as Michelangelo.

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Certainly he could have seen all the three kings, and beginning work on the first statue as a very young man have completed his ultimate masterpiece in his late sixties or early seventies. It was unusual for a master craftsman to be employed in all the three cities. And so when Pratap Malla of Kathmandu, who reigned from 1641 to 1674 decided to be immortalised in gilded metal, it is possible the sculptor went on to portray King Yoganandra Malla of Patan who occupied the throne of Patan from 1865 to 1705. Finally, he would have been summoned by the

flamboyant King Bhupatindra Malla of Bhaktapur who ruled from 1697 to 1729. By then, he was a master of mature excellence who created in his likeness of the king his greatest masterpiece.

This, of course, is conjecture. Even though there were artistic exchanges between the three cities so often at loggerheads if not embroiled in open warfare, it is unlikely that a single sculptor would in fact have created the three statues, since patrons jealously guarded their master craftsmen and kings were no exception. There are the inevitable tales that have kings so delighted by the work they commissioned they had the artist either killed or maimed to avoid their masterpiece being surpassed. As inevitable are the stories that have artists knowing they would lose their eyes or hands stalling for time usually by saying their work wasn't complete until they had made sure of their escape.

So I blatantly romanticise. A young Newari Benvenuto Cellini comes to the notice of the king of Kathmandu, known as a great poet and lover of art. He commissions a metal likeness of himself and his sons, and as it is done the king whispers orders for the artist's despatch, and the young man escapes across the river to Patan. There he does a similar life size portrait of the king by royal command and when the time comes for his life or limbs to be endangered, he flees to the distant city of Bhaktapur. There, as an old man with all the skills of his years, he sculpts a serene likeness of the king. And there, perhaps his glorious creativity ended.

But tradition has it he played on and on for time assuring a fastidious king that his work was not quite complete until he was too old to beat and gild metal any longer. Alas, that his name does not survive with his masterpieces.

Even to this day, several lanes of Patan echo to the tap-tap-tap of metal workers creating anything from pots and pans to images of gods and goddesses. So it must have been in the past, and many could have been the masters who took their wares and their skills to the other capital cities of Kathmandu and Bhaktapur, just as the famous woodcarvers of Bhaktapur laboured in Patan and Kathmandu.

Of the three golden kings, there is no doubt that Bhaktapur's Bhupatindra Malla is the most classic. If I were permitted to choose a single masterpiece from all of Kathmandu valley's amazing treasure, without hesitation I would ask for the statue of the Bhaktapur king. He sits so lifelike, his hands gently touching in the attitude of namaskar, his shirt sleeves minutely creased, his forehead marked with vermilion, and turquoise rings still upon his fingers that it should surprise no modern beholder if he rose slowly and mounted a waiting elephant. The golden likeness matches the man, for his life was as rich as the metal he was immortalised in.

It is said that when he was a young boy he was sent by his scheming stepmother to the forests about Bhaktapur with paid assassins. So earnestly did the handsome prince plead for his life that the assassins left him with a family of Tibetan craftsmen and, dispatching a goat to bloody their knives, returned to the



palace. The young prince grew strong and well versed in the arts of his foster people. And he gained sufficient popularity to lead an army on the palace, kill his usurping stepmother and her lover, and ascend the throne in triumph.

Once crowned king, he lost no time in lavishing his love of the arts upon his city. Several of Bhaktapur's most memorable monuments arose at his command. It is said he often took

an active part in their building. Strangely, none of the succeeding Malla kings were moved to perpetuate themselves in lifelike gold. Perhaps there was already a heavy strain on their gilded purses. Or had the ultimate master cast the ultimate golden king? ♦

Excerpted with permission from *In the Kingdom of the Gods*, Harper Collins, 1994.



King Bhupatindra Malla's gilded statue silhouetted against the evening sky.

MIN BAIRACHARYA

BOOK REVIEW

by MARK TURIN

Banjas along the Barkhor

Nepal's master storyteller, Kesar Lall, has brought out a new collection of tales, but these ones are anything but folk. *The Newar Merchants in Lhasa* is a tribute to the traders of the Kathmandu Valley who braved bandits, snow drifts, ice falls and stubborn mules to discover for themselves both the mercantile potential and spiritual dimension of Tibet's mysterious capital.

The compilation is comprised of seven first-hand accounts, varying in detail and length, from men who made the journey to Lhasa and wrote about it. Aside from one, which is adapted from an original in English, all the contributions were previously published in Newari, and it is a tribute to Lall as compiler and translator that he has managed to convey the very different individual styles of the authors. It is often said that the best translations are the ones in which the translator's voice is mute and where the reader would never have guessed that the text has been translated. Lall achieves this, and it is no small task, given that he was faced with rendering cultural, culinary and religious terms into English from the four languages of Nepali, Newari, Sanskrit and Tibetan.

The intermingling of trade and religion is a common thread which weaves through each of the seven accounts, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the first, and longest, story in the book. Entitled *In the Footsteps of A Lama*, it charts the fortunes of Mahapragya who gained notoriety for being one of the five Buddhist monks arrested in Kathmandu in 1924 and later expelled from the country for refusing to renounce his religious convictions. His voyage takes him through Kyirong, Gyantse, Lhasa, Champaling, Samye and Shigatse, and the reader is left

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with the feeling that he left no stone unturned and no village unvisited. His eye for descriptive detail together with frequent passages of direct speech make his story a particularly interesting historical document on travelling in Tibet in the late 1920s.

Dharmaloka Mahasthvir's account, *A Pilgrim in Tibet*, is a touch more anthropological and he makes some thought-provoking, if rather open-ended, comments, such as "travelling can be quite instructive" (page 50). He notes that until the construction of the Kalimpong-Tibet road, Tibetans were reliant on Nepal for their southern trade. Once the road was up and running, Tibetans made their way to places as far afield as Calcutta and began trading themselves. According to Mahasthvir, this meant that "they lost their respect for the Nepalese" (page 50). His conclusion that "religion was rooted deeply in Tibet because the learned lamas made great efforts to explain the texts clearly" will ring true with many practising Buddhists to this day.

A Merchant's Letter to his Wife, by Chittadhar 'Hridaya', is an excerpt from his longer novel *Mimmanah Pau* written in Newari. This short account has a more personal flavour, particularly his poignant description of leaving his wife ("your tears had stained my white socks", page 65) and being reunited with his father in Lhasa.

An excerpt from the autobiography of Nchuchhe Bahadur Bajracharya is included, under the title of *A Tibetan Odyssey*, and it

makes for good reading. More than the other accounts, it reads easily and has a distinctly light touch. His description of an accident with a mule after a toilet stop could be called comic, were it not for the serious nature of the incident. The episode was clearly memorable enough to warrant the purchase of a horse: "my intense dislike and total distrust of the mule are already well known to all readers" (page 106). The section of his account entitled *A Tibetan Home* is full of interested cultural observations and demonstrates his keen eye for social documentation. It is comforting to know that the famed Newar business acumen and associated cockiness was alive and well as much 50 years ago as it is now:

"A few Newar businessmen suggested that I join them in their occupation. They told me that they preferred Newars to Tibetans. The latter, in their opinion, were not quite suitable for the purpose." (page 96).

The final three accounts, by Harshamuni Shakya, Manikratna Kansakar and Kuldharna Ratna Kansakar are pleasant travel vignettes but too short for the reader to be drawn into the world of the narrator. The reviewer would have preferred one longer piece, with more descriptive insight, in the place of these three cursory outlines.

Tibet, as we know, is all the rage. Everyone is bleating the word, it is the veritable chorus of the sheep. More intriguing is that the mythical aura surrounding Lhasa has long entranced Newars south of the border, and is not limited to Westerners disenchanted with the capitalist way. In the *Preface*, Kesar Lall confesses that he too "was fascinated and duly impressed by the lore and legends of Tibet", and his magnificent collection shows us why. ♦

The Newar Merchants in Lhasa, by Kesar Lall. 2001. Travel Series, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu. iv + 126 pages. 16 black & white plates. ISBN 99933-0-187-6. Rs 150.

