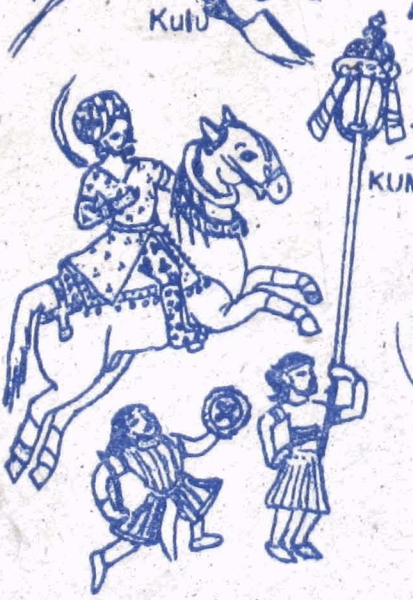


Giuseppe Ricci



JOURNEY TO
MUSTANG

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JOURNEY TO MUSTANG

1952

GIUSEPPE TUCCI

Translated from the Italian by

Diana Fussell

RATNA PUSTAK BHANDAR

KATHMANDU NEPAL

1977

Giuseppe Tucci:

TRA GIUNGLA E PAGODE

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To my faithful travelling companions

My wife FRANCESCA BONARDI and M.Doc. C. GUTTUSO

and my devoted friend

KAISHER BAHADUR

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST ENGLISH TRANSLATION

This book was published many years ago; I hope that the reader will keep that in mind. I refer in it to many discoveries: inscriptions and manuscripts, rubbings and photos. All of them are deposited at the IsMEO (Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente) in Rome, to which I donated my library. I should add that in 1954 I went back to Nepal up to Jumla, where I discovered some inscriptions containing the genealogies of the Malla rulers of Western Tibet and Western Nepal. These inscriptions were then edited by Professor Gnoli. The results of that very important expedition are narrated in a small book, *Nepal: Alla Scoperta dei Malla*, Bari, 1969, (*Nepal. The Discovery of the Malla*, London, 1962). The scientific results are dealt with in the following books:

- Giuseppe Tucci: *Preliminary Report on two Scientific Expeditions in Nepal*, Rome, 1956.
- Raniero Gnoli: *Nepalese Inscriptions in Gupta Characters* (Part I: Text, Part II: Plates), Rome, 1956.
- Luciano Petech: *Medieval History of Nepal (c. 750-1480)*, Rome, 1958.

Naturally many things have changed from that time, as all over the world, but the facts discovered remain. Some things have also changed in my life: first of all my years have increased, Signorina Bonardi of 1952 has become my wife, and Doctor Guttuso is now an important staff-member of the World Health Organization.

I cannot conclude this short preface without expressing my most grateful thanks to H.K. Kulöy for the interest he took in having my book translated into English and to Madame Diana Fussell who rendered my Italian text in the most agreeable and at the same time literal translation.

P R E F A C E

(1953)

I had been to Nepal several times before, in the tracks of the Italian missionaries (almost all of them, as it happened, from Le Marche, my own province) who penetrated there in the 18th Century. They spent fifty years preaching there, and built a little church which must have stood near the site of the present palace of the Prime Minister's spiritual adviser. The accounts they wrote of their travels, which throw light on Nepalese affairs for almost the whole of the eighteenth century, have been published in seven volumes by the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO), in cooperation with the Italian National Library, under the editorship of Professor Petech.

So this was not my first visit to Nepal. The other times I had buried myself in the libraries, dragging ancient manuscripts out of their dusty sleep—manuscripts of great importance for the history of Indian thought, particularly Buddhism. I had not been far from the valley, for even those very few people the Maharaja permitted to enter his territory were forbidden to go into the interior.

These trips to Nepal had been almost incidental to the eight explorations of Tibet, but during those very explorations the importance of Nepal as the link between Tibet and India became more and more apparent. The profusion of art in Tibetan monasteries took its original impetus from the Nepalese schools. The nightmares and visions of Tibetan initiates' chapels took shape and form in the shuddering visions of Nepalese esoteric communities. Then, through the gaps and valleys which eat into and actually overcome the barrier of the Himalayas, came the Buddhist diaspora, making the link between India and the Transhimalayan region. Along with Buddhism, Indian thought flooded into Central Asia, spreading out towards China, and Nepal both channelled and transformed it. So there was a need to shed light on this region, to trace the trends and variations of its art, put its chronology in order, in fact to reconstruct the history not only of the capital and other important towns, as Lévi, the French orientalist, had done at the end of last century, but of the whole country, especially the western part, where dozens of governments had succeeded each other in a still unknown series of complicated events. What existed in those areas? Had culture been born there or come in from outside? It was to seek the answers to these questions that I made my most recent journey. Nowadays more money is being spent than ever before, very often on things which I am unable to see the use of—perhaps I am not perceptive enough. And yet it has never been more difficult to find money for projects which strike me as being most deserving, not because they are pet projects of mine or because I am taking part in them, but because they maintain our cultural and spiritual presence and cooperation in countries which are being brought closer and closer to us by the

course of history. When I realised that with all the money I had, with advances on my journal, newspaper articles and possible lectures in India or elsewhere, I would still not be able to put together even a fifth of the finance needed, and that my proposals were all collapsing one after the other, I did what I had done once before, for the expedition to Lhasa, and turned to the Hon. Andreotti. He was convinced that the enterprise would be a useful one, and made it possible for the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East to back it and for me to carry it out. Thanks are due to him, not only from the Institute and from myself personally, but also from all those who, like me, hope that Italy will take a more lively interest in these undertakings, which seem to be getting scarcer all the time.

The Navy, which had assigned medical personnel to take part in four of my Transhimalayan expeditions, was prepared to continue this practice, which links it proudly with the history of Italian exploration, and assigned Lieutenant (now Medical Captain) Concetto Guttuso to accompany me, equipping him with a generous quantity of medical supplies and scientific apparatus for research. Guttuso was a first-rate companion, and made a great contribution to the success of the expedition, unselfishly serving the sick who clung to the hope of our arrival with the desperation of those who feel that death is near. In return, he must have the satisfaction of knowing that he brought many people back to life in those make-shift surgeries on the outskirts of our camps, where a terrible parade of suffering and pitiful humanity assembled each day.

He was responsible for black and white photographic documentation, and Signorina Francesca Bonardi was assigned the task of colour photography. In addition to this, Signorina Bonardi was in charge of food supply and logistics. Both of them proved to have wonderful stamina, and eased the undeniable hardships and dangers of our journey by the conscientious way they carried out their duties.

The Moretti Company, which had kindly provided comforts for all my many Himalayan expeditions, supplied the camping gear and the tents, which passed the harsh tests of weather and use with flying colours, and were much admired by the local people who always came to watch the tents being put up—full of questions and comments, finding it hard to understand how they could be so light and easy to use. We are also very grateful to the Pirelli Company: their feather mattresses really were like feathers, and our tired bodies welcomed their comfort after a hard day's march. The Ferrania Company provided us with 18,000 metres of colour film for movies and still photographs. The political situation which developed in Nepal shortly after I arrived in India made it impossible for a movie cameraman to take part in the expedition. Thinking that Guttuso would be able to fill in for him, and expecting that the film would soon arrive, I obtained a movie camera in India, with the kind help of the Indian Government (Film Office) and my friend Bhavani. However, because of the most deplorable bureaucratic delays, or other hitches, the film did not reach Delhi until January 4th, when the expedition was already over. So the documentary film that might have been made of the difficulties of our journey, that might have brought its events back to life, even for those people who did not take part—that film was never made. We must be content with the still colour photographs, for which Ferrania film was also used.

No words can adequately express my gratitude to the Nepalese authorities, from His Majesty the King, Tribhuvan Shah, to the humblest civil servant. The then Prime Minister M. P. Koirala granted my permit; Khadgaman Singh, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, confirmed it; the Nepalese

Ambassador in Delhi, Vijay Sham Sher, tried to cut short the delays in my departure; General Kaiser Sham Sher and Guruji Hemraj Sharma opened the treasures of their manuscript collections for me, and the Minister of Public Instruction, Sharada Sham Sher, did the same with the treasures of the public libraries; the Provincial Governors, Puran Singh of Pokhara, Raja Tarak Bahadur Shah of Palpa, Pama Gosvara Sher Bahadur of Butwal, Dirgha Bahadur Malla, the Boro Hakim of Baglung, Shankar Man Sher Chan of Mustang, and particularly Sham Sher Chan of Tukuche, received me and gave me friendly—almost brotherly—assistance. And it was the same with all the Nepalese: nearly every village did its best to leave us with a lasting memory of the few hours or days we spent there.

But above all I must mention with special gratitude the name of Major Kaisher Bahadur. I had made his acquaintance on one of my earlier visits to Nepal, and then in 1948 I met him again in Lhasa where he was the Nepalese Ambassador to Tibet, and his friendship and sympathy often helped to relieve my loneliness in that city on the roof of the world. In Kathmandu he overwhelmed me with his kind and generous help, and entered into the search for historical documents and inscriptions with youthful enthusiasm. There are probably few people who can match his knowledge of the most secret and hidden traces of his country's history, or his ability to find them and to find the people who are storehouses of information and traditions. A large part of the success of my research is undoubtedly due to his skilled and devoted guidance—devoted not only to me, but above all to his country. For this I count him among the best of my friends, for as they say in India: "A true friend is one who unhesitatingly gives us what we wish, as the hands do for the body, or the eye-lashes for the eye."

In Kathmandu I was delighted to find a dear acquaintance from Lhasa, Dr. Aufschnaiter. I had unfortunately not seen a great deal of him in Lhasa, because he was living at a considerable distance from the city, working at the electric power station being constructed for the Tibetan government. But in Kathmandu I often had occasion to meet him, and I benefited from his unparalleled knowledge of Tibet and Nepal. His learning is like a precious jewel, concealed behind the modesty of a truly wise man.

This book is not intended to be anything more than a short account of my journey. I have deliberately avoided going into technical matters which could not be given full and definitive treatment in a book like this. An enormous quantity of material was collected. Inscriptions, chronicles, and photographs of dated works of art are documents which speak for themselves, but they will be even further illuminated by reference to the huge collection of Tibetan sources I have in my library. The work has already begun; we made an immediate attack on the inscriptions, because I want to have the first volume of them ready for the press within the coming year. This volume will contain the text and translation and commentary on the oldest epigraphs, the Gupta inscriptions which date from the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries, and which have a bearing on Indian history as well.

Meanwhile we have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity of referring some of the most controversial points to one of India's major authorities on epigraphs, Dr. Chakravarti, ex-Director of the Archeological Survey of India and Government Epigraphist. The Institute for the Middle and Far East had invited Dr. Chakravarti to lecture on recent archeological disco-

veries in India, and I had some very profitable consultations with him, during which he freely shared the insights of his long experience.

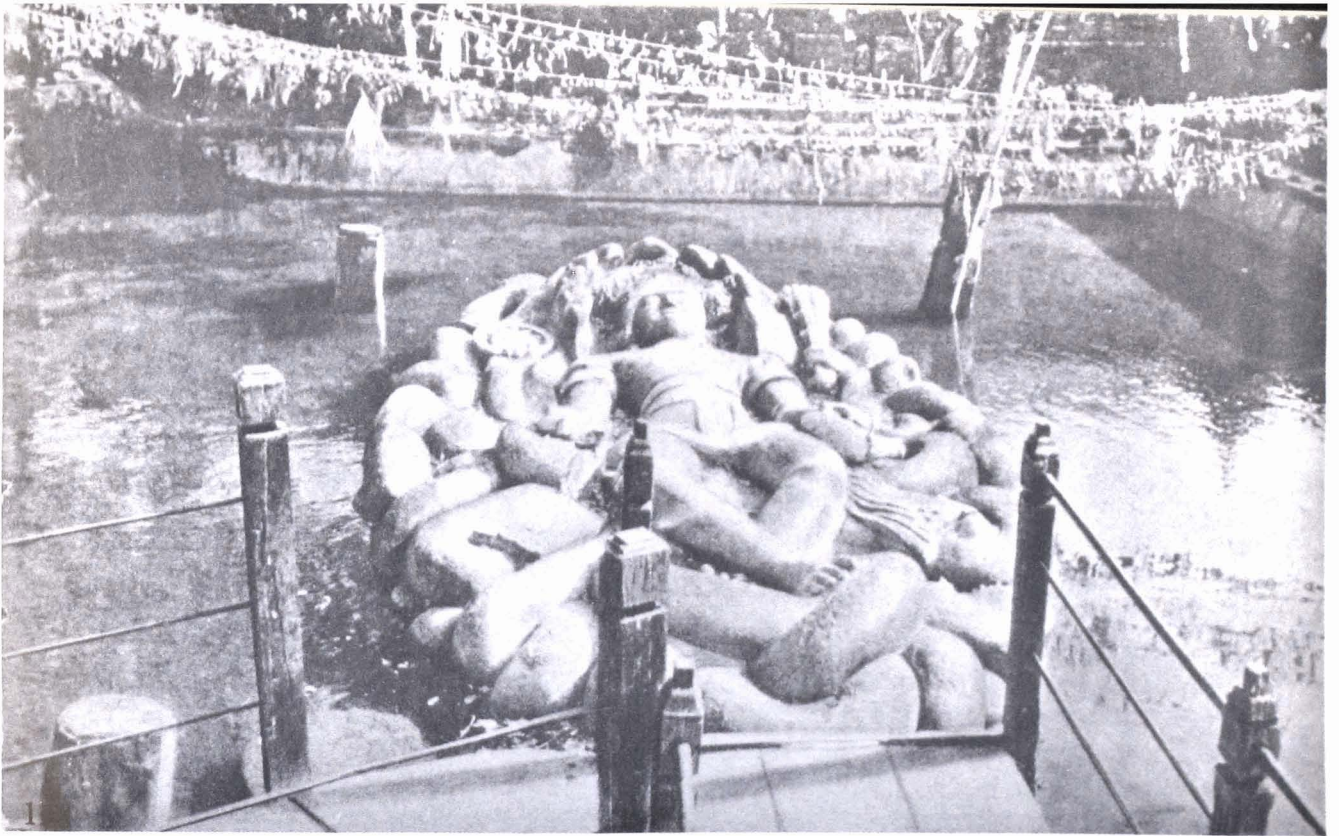
The Malla inscriptions, in Sanskrit and Newari, will be next, and then the most important of the chronicles. And the work will proceed more swiftly if the Nepalese Government, with the same generous understanding it has shown up to now, can send us a co-worker—a Nepalese scholar with a thorough knowledge of Newari, a little-known language in Europe.

The artistic documentation will be studied in cooperation with Professor Bussagli.

The journey was therefore not complete in itself; it was the first stage in a piece of work which will go on for many years. We shall be inviting Nepalese and Indians to take part in it too, for nothing could be less scientific than a jealous attempt to claim a monopoly on material one has discovered.

I should like to conclude these introductory notes by expressing a hope of mine. Even in the thick of the journey, in the most remote and difficult places, I never saw myself as a lonely pilgrim in a foreign land, but imagined that I had with me all the Italians who still possess the restless spirit of adventure—the spirit which keeps on driving us forward in the footsteps of Dante's Ulysses, in the almost desperate desire to know new peoples and share their experiences. And today, when distances have shrunk until the far distance seems quite close, when swift and sure vibrations let us know about everything that happens elsewhere, when the world itself seems so small that we dream of conquering the planets in search of new space barriers, no corner of the world is really strange to us. Nations are tending to group together in greater units, and history is no longer the story of this people or that, but the story of human beings seen from many angles and told in narratives which all repeat the same hopes and the same defeats—the diary of a journey without end and, perhaps, without purpose.

Archeological expeditions, voyages of discovery, and other similar explorations, undertaken over a greater area and with greater commitment, ought to carry on the ancient tradition of passionate and selfless humanism forming a bridge between East and West, and gradually destroy the illusion that the sun shines only on Europe, and that people there are privileged creatures in whom imagination is combined with the refinements of logic, and the fires of mystic ecstasy are banked by a carefree eagerness for life, in a perfect and almost god-like equilibrium. In this punctilious period we live in, when the intellect seems intent on exposing, defining and exacerbating the natural inevitable differences between opinions and people, it is more important than ever to support these enterprises. They bring prestige to the country which carries them out, and at the same time do homage to the culture of other races, rediscovering everywhere, in the calm embrace of culture, the same human race, which so often hates when it should have compassion. Anywhere and everywhere, as we are warned by an Indian philosopher, the same question echoes, without finding an answer: "If I had the riches to satisfy my heart's desire, what then? If I planted my foot on my enemy's neck, what then? If I could heap luxuries and honours on all my friends, what then? If I could live for a thousand years, what then?"



1
Before the creation of the world, Vishnu rests in the cosmic waters, stretched out upon the serpent Sesha



2
General Kaiser Sham Sher



8

The poet Kulamani Devikota stands in the street reciting a poem
in honour of the author

Buffalo sacrifice at Gorkha



CHAPTER I

FOURTH VISIT TO NEPAL

So there I was—in Nepal for the fourth time. Until a few years ago no one had been able to go outside the valley surrounding the capital—not even the Nepalese. Nepal seemed to come to an end within that green plain, through which ran the slow gleam of the Bagmati and its tributaries. Beyond it was a mystery. Even now it is not exactly easy to get a visa. They don't want too many foreigners, and perhaps they are not entirely wrong. But the stringent restrictions there used to be are more relaxed now.

All countries, especially little-known ones, are rather like people: they need an introduction. So I hope the reader will not object to a glance at the various places and their history, and the ethnic background of the people, before launching into an account of the journey and the things we saw and met and discovered. These notes will be brief, just as much as is needed to introduce a country where the past still lives—I would even say where the past is still present—in the monuments, in the customs, even in certain institutions and ways of thinking. And perhaps the contrast between the dormant traces of the past and the new ideas, which are starting to cause such a disturbance and to stir up wishes or desires which were unknown yesterday, is what makes Nepal even more picturesque; the place where two worlds meet and coexist. Nature alone makes it one of the most fascinating countries in Asia: a confusion of mountains and hills almost as if the Himalayas, in an attempt to reach the heavens, had crumbled back down to earth. Nepal is confined by two belts; ice to the North, and the deadly tropical jungles of the Terai to the South. Swollen rivers flow freely through its deep valleys, fed by the snows and the rains, until finally they end their long and tortuous journey and spill into the Ganges. And like the Ganges, they too are sacred, for gods inhabit the peaks from which they come. Dozens of races of human beings have made their way through the forests, and the sacrifice of past generations has imbued the blood of their descendants with an immunity, or at least a precarious resistance, to the illnesses they practically inhale with the air they breathe.

According to a very rough census, there are seven million people, scattered over an area almost half the size of Italy, following the greatest variety of customs and traditions, and speaking about thirty different languages and dialects.

It is possible to distinguish a number of main cultures and currents in this country. One

might be called the rice culture: the most extreme Western branch of the peoples scattered in the sub-Himalayan valleys, where there is plenty of water. The most important of these peoples are the Newars. The other main stream—a nomadic culture, originally based on barley and pasture—moved downwards from the Himalayan passes, until it was halted by the climate: these are the peoples of high Nepal, the Bhutias, who have never come down from the hills, and who still distrust the humid, wilting heat at the bottom of the gorges. Between these two groups are the Gurungs, who settled in the upper reaches of the “Seven Gandakis”, and, lower down and further towards the South, the industrious and tenacious Magars, who established themselves on fortified hilltops, especially at first, and cultivated the terraced slopes, keeping their distance from the evil mists of the plains. Little by little as they changed their locality, they modified their customs, and became more like the Newars. But this does not complete the composite picture of the peoples who live in Nepal, for there are also the Limbus, the Rais, the Sunvars, the Murmis, the Tharus, the Kirats. Each group predominates in one part of the country—the Newars in the major valleys, for example, the Bhutias in the mountains on the Tibetan border, the Tharus in the Terai—but all of them are inclined to move, migrate, flow, and subtly mix with each other.

Indo-European migrations from the Indian plains percolated onto these basic strata: Brahmins and warriors (kṣatriya) who, in some parts of the interior, have preserved the pure racial type, so that their build and facial features remind one of the Kashmiris; rigid religious scruples prevented their adulteration by marriage with other races. These migrations culminated, at an unknown date in the Gurkha diaspora, which according to tradition started in Rajputana, in flight from the Muslim invasion. The orthodox Hinduism practiced by the Gurkhas was not enough to restrain or overcome the temptation to form unions with the local women, leaving mongoloid traces in many of their descendants. The languages spoken by most of these peoples (Newars, Gurungs, Magars, Limbus, Kirats, Murmis) belong to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan group. Three races stand out above the others as the makers of Nepal's history: the Kiratas, who were the first to rule the country, the Newars, who were its masters until the 18th century, and the Gurkhas who conquered and unified the country.

The variety of peoples is increased still further by the infinite overlapping of clans or castes whose purity is protected by very strict regulations either obliging or forbidding their members to marry within the group. Unions which break the rules, if many of them occur, give rise to new castes, such as the Jaisi Gurkhas, who are the product of marriages between Brahmins and widows of their own caste, or the Jaisi Newars, born of marriages between Brahmins and Newar women. The former caste comes third in the order of precedence because according to the ancient Hindu code the marriage of widows is considered shameful, so therefore the Jaisi must give way to Brahmins, who are at the top of the social scale, and also to the kṣatriya, the warrior caste who form the aristocracy, maintain the Gurkha bureaucracy, and in fact rule the country. But in these parts everything is classified and fine distinctions are drawn, and the Gurkhas themselves are divided into two basic groups: the Thakurs and the Khas (Chettris), the latter born of warriors and local women, and of Brahmins who have committed the same violation of the matrimonial laws.

Thus the Hindu ethical and social code, which was introduced into Nepal with the spread of Hinduism, found a place for everything, and by incorporating the indigenous society within its framework, provided recognition and justification for the constantly developing state of affairs.

This allowed the continued mingling of Aryan blood with the Tibeto-Burman blood of the original peoples.

As they unified the country, the Gurkhas spread their language from end to end of it. The other languages did not really disappear, but in common usage they gave way to Gurkhali or Nepali, which has similar roots and grammar to Hindi, and the great advantage of being simpler and easier. This is why Gurkhali became the lingua franca as far as the Tibetan border, while the other languages persisted within individual ethnic groups. They are all still living languages. The Ranas did all they could to suppress Newari, but it is reviving; it is called Nepala to distinguish it from Nepali (Nepālī) or Gurkhali, and it is now thriving, in reaction to the persecutions of the past. Poets and writers are injecting it with new vigour, and now that the bonds of traditional themes have been broken, the language is adapting itself to the new freedoms which are bringing both its content and form up to date.

The Gurung language is fairly close to Tibetan. In contrast to Newari, but like all the other dialects spoken in Nepal, it has no written literature. However, it is the language of one of the largest and most warlike groups, and although all Gurungs speak Gurkhali, their own language has triumphantly survived.

Nepal is thus one of the most diverse and complex countries in Asia; full of colour, but full of suffering too. Behind the bright clothing and the bustling gaiety of the bazaars lurks the anguished foreboding of nature's treacherous anger—one observes this in every form and symbol. Beneath the smiling splendour of gilded cupolas lies the sombre reddish bulk of windowless, impenetrable chapels whose doorways frame but do not expose a mystery.

At first sight it seemed that nothing had changed since the last time I was here, except that I used to arrive in Kathmandu by way of hot and tiring tracks over two passes, and this time I came in by plane. On earlier visits I had travelled by train to Raxaul station, one of the terminals of the Indian railway lines aimed at Nepal for strategic reasons, all of them near the outlets of the valleys and trade routes leading into the heart of the forbidden land. At Raxaul, one took a little narrow-gauge train which puffed and panted its way to Amlekhganj, and from there one went a few hours by car to a point below the passes; then on foot or horseback or in a sedan-chair up steep, twisting, narrow, slippery paths, breaking the journey at two places—Sisagari (1900 m.) and Chandragiri (2500 m.). Then there was the precipitous descent to Thankot, from which point another car belonging to the Maharaja bore one in triumph to Kathmandu.

These days one can travel from Patna to Kathmandu in forty-five minutes, flying high above the fertile Bihar plain furrowed by the Ganges and the two-fold Gandaki. By the time this diary is published they will have finished the heavy-traffic road opening up the Nepalese valley to vehicles, which will facilitate trade and the new economic policy which the Government is expected to promote in the near future.

This time, then, we came through the skies to Kathmandu.

The pagodas which used to dominate the valley undisturbed are now darkened by the passing shadow of the "new heavenly carriages", noisier than those used by the ancient gods for their voyages. The gods have given way to men who gaze down indifferently on the roofs of gods the holy buildings.

CHAPTER II

THE PAST

Nepal acted as a bridge between India and Central Asia. It makes its first appearance in history with the rise of Buddhism in the middle of the Terai, which forms a belt across the southern part of the country. The religion's founder was born on the borders, in a village which became part of Nepal in 1856, and it is unlikely that the Buddha himself, or Ashoka, the great Mauryan emperor who was converted to Buddhism, ever set foot in Nepal. However, there is no doubt that the first rays of culture penetrated from India at a very early stage.

According to a late tradition, which should not however be dismissed as a complete fantasy the Kirata were the first to give a political unity to the tribes which divided the territory amongst them. The Kirata capital was perhaps at Gokarna in the north of the valley, around an easily defended hill which bears the traces of many ruins. They were superseded by an Indian dynasty with an Aryanised language—the Licchavi from the north of the present Bihar, on the fringes of Nepal. (Some scholars hold that the Licchavi were of Mongoloid origin and should therefore be considered Indo-Mongoloid rather than Indian.) Certain customs followed by these peoples remind one of Tibetan practices.

Real history of the Nepalese starts with the coming of the Licchavi, ca. 400-750 A.D., but there are no trustworthy documents or reliable sources concerning their origins. A few fixed points can be found in family chronicles which were written very late but which do preserve ancient traditions. As far as the beginnings are concerned, they make no distinction between the human and the divine, and tell of an unreal world suspended between heaven and earth, where the gods have human characteristics, and the men have at times a godly grandeur and power. However, the expert reader finds very interesting information and clues in them.

Although the Licchavi from the South established their supremacy over Nepal, their domain did not coincide with the area of the present kingdom. For a long time Nepal was confined to the Bagmati valley, where both its civilisation and its principal cities sprang up. All around (apart from a few scattered islands like Palpa, and later, further to the North, Jumla with its many links to Tibet) there was a sea of independent races, shut in between the Himalayas and India, primitive and resistant to the rays of culture. So right from the most ancient times Nepal seems

to have been divided into groups and small local principalities. From time to time a strong hand managed to get them under control, but they were unruly by nature, and quick to shake off the reins as soon as the central government showed signs of weakness.

The earliest documents, inscriptions and coins date from the fifth century. The tolerant Licchavi protected all religions, Buddhism and Hinduism too, and constructed temples for the various sects. Manadeva restored the great temple of Changu Narayan.

In the seventh century A.D. the Licchavi, while nominally still in power, relinquished authority to the Thakuri. The founder of that dynasty, Amsuvarman, perhaps involuntarily, initiated the age-long relationship between Nepal and Tibet. The King of Tibet had united that country of the snows under his unbending rule, and then successfully opposed China's attempt to win ascendancy in Central Asia and subjugated Nepal. Then he married one of Amsuvarman's daughters, who became the apostle of Buddhism on the other side of the Himalayas. At least, this is the story told in the Tibetan chronicles. They may exaggerate to some extent, but there is no doubt that just at this time, through the convergence of currents from China and Nepal, the word of Buddha and the first glimmerings of civilised life reached Tibet. Anyway, from that time the bonds between Nepal and Tibet became closer. India was witnessing the shattering of the Gupta empire and groaning under the Muslim incursions, and as the great Buddhist universities were emptied, laid waste or burned by the invaders, the Brahmin or Buddhist teachers fled towards Nepal to escape the dreadful raids. Nepal was closed into itself, protected by the belt of the Terai and defended by the fiercely independent mountain tribes, but it formed the link between India and Tibet. In the seventh century Nepalese troops had already given assistance to a Chinese general who went into the heart of India to avenge an insult paid by an Indian King to one of the Celestial Empire's ambassadors. Later, after a brief interlude which started with the ninth century downfall of the Tibetan Empire, Buddhist fervour rekindled the missionaries' apostolic zeal, and Nepal became the major channel, although certainly not the only one, through which Buddhist dogma, thought and art flowed into the country beyond the Himalaya. Artistic rather than speculative, active rather than contemplative, the Newars, who at that time formed the ruling class, had been educated in the Indian schools of art, and had accepted the liturgical exaltations of the sects of initiates. Now, in their turn, they became the teachers of Tibet. All the Tibetan monasteries were beautified by Nepalese works of art; the greatest thinkers and ascetics of the country of the snows travelled to Nepal or through it to learn Sanskrit, visit the Buddhist holy places, and study with the most famous teachers of Buddhism. The abbots of Tibetan monasteries entrusted the transcription of the most important works of Buddhist dogmatic theology to Nepalese scribes; the treasures of the temples of Nalanda, of Vikrampur and Odantapuri, statues and manuscripts, were carried by fleeing monks over the rugged tracks of Nepal to grace the chapels which rich Tibetan patrons built with such prodigality on the desolate plains of their country.

But Nepal did not just passively accept the Indian gospel: the mongoloid qualities of its races imparted a particular character to the inspirations which came from India. Nepalese art, which according to a probable tradition was born in the shadow of the Bengalese schools, distinguished itself from those schools by its baroque exuberance and meticulous attention to details—often concentrating on these to the extent of obscuring the principal themes. But this produced the architectural miracles of temples unparalleled by any in India.

Always tolerant, never exclusive, quick to gather in ancient mythologies and give them new forms, Buddhism adapted as it installed itself in Nepal. Neither Buddhism nor Hinduism shrank from the goddesses and the gods of the tribes scattered in the jungle, but reinterpreted them as symbols of the invisible and omnipresent divine might, which under a thousands aspects and a thousand names gives life to all things and reabsorbs all things.

With the fall of the Tibetan dynasty Nepal became independent again—we are still speaking of the Kathmandu valley—but it could not achieve political unity. In the twelfth century the Thakuris relinquished power to the Mallas from Western Nepal, but the country remained shattered into feudal fragments, weakening its structure and its stamina.

Foreigners tried to take advantage of this: in 1097 an Indian prince, Karnata, and in the fourteenth century Nanyadeva from Tirhut, upper Bihar, attempted to rule Nepal, but failed, because it was impossible to handle such a diverse and hostile world. There was not only political disunity, but also the religious dualism of Hinduism and Buddhism, both of which were equally inclined to give orthodox clothing to the crude and primitive beliefs still flourishing in the remote valleys.

The political skill of Yakṣa Malla and the prudent administration of Sthiti Malla were not enough to demolish feudal resistance. In the eighteenth century, when the Italian Capuchins penetrated into Nepal, three dangerously jealous dynasties, all of them descended from sons of Yakṣa Malla, were disputing for power. The first was based at Kathmandu, the second at Bhatgaon, and the third at Patan. The warring families provided an easy mark for Prithvi Narayan Shah, who was able to conquer Nepal from the fortress of Gorkha, where his forebears had established a little principality in the mountain jungles when they fled from Rajputana to escape the Muslims. Local chronicles make much of the figure of Dravya Shah, son of the King of Lamjung, who is said to have conquered Gorkha in 1559. He is said to be a descendant of the Rajput princes who fled from Chitor when it was attacked and destroyed by Alā-ud dīn. In this way the Gurkha chiefs traced their origin back to the clear and well-deserved glory of India's warrior princes, the Rajput military aristocracy whose heroic deeds wiped out the myth of a faint-hearted India wanting nothing but transports of mysticisms. This flattering genealogy is mentioned in the Rajput chronicles too, but for the sake of prestige it has been embroidered more lavishly than history would probably justify, since it would appear that over the years a good deal of local blood was mixed in with the Aryan. At any rate, Prithvi Narayan Shah was indeed a descendant of Dravya Shah. He was proud of his origins, and determined to escape from the confines of the petty Gorkha feuds, and he attacked Nepal.

The three kingdoms of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhatgaon fell in 1768–69. They asked for help from the East India Company, which on its part was eager to establish a commercial relationship with this mysterious country. However, the contingent of troops sent by the British was decimated by illness in the Terai, and had to beat a hasty retreat.

The death of Prithvi Narayan did not interrupt the conquest of the western regions, which was completed by his successors. Thus, in the space of a few years, the twenty-four confederated states of the Seven Gandakis and the twenty-two of the Kali fell under the new chiefs. Their easy victory increased their desire for more conquests. Soon it was the turn of the Indian province of Kumaon, then the eastern provinces were subdued, and in 1789 the Gurkhas even conquered Sikkim.

The riches of the Tibetan monasteries were an irresistible attraction for the fearless and fortunate Gurkhas. So in 1790 we find them attempting to invade Tibet, but this enterprise was too hazardous. By this time Tibet had passed under the control of China and its shrewd and powerful ruler K'ien lun. After early successes which carried the Nepalese troops into the heart of the Central Tibetan provinces, the Celestial Empire intervened, partly to avenge the intolerable insult the Nepalese had paid to one of its ambassadors by receiving him without the customary respect. Nepal got the worst of it.

This was the background when the British renewed their attempts to establish a commercial relationship with Nepal. The opportunity was actually provided by the Gurkhas themselves, who turned to Lord Cornwallis for help when they saw how badly the war was going. The British offered to act as mediators and designated Kirkpatrick to act as peacemaker, but neither the Chinese nor the Nepalese trusted the foreigners, and they took good care to come to an understanding and conclude a peace on their own, before Kirkpatrick's mission could be carried out. An agreement was signed at Sugauli in 1792 by which Nepal recognised the sovereignty of China and promised to pay a tribute every five years. So a military adventure led to the reestablishment of the relationship with China, which had started in the seventh century and then been interrupted for hundreds of years by the political development of Tibet. The relationship had been renewed during the Mongol dynasty, which had made Tibet a province subject to its control, and was now to assume great importance, because after the struggles between the sects and the Zungari invasions, China had intervened and assumed sovereignty over Tibet, which gave it a common frontier with Nepal. After their ill-fated Tibetan enterprise, the easy conquest of the petty sub-Himalayan states persuaded Nepal to turn her attention towards India. Over a period of nearly twenty years Nepal swallowed up more than two hundred villages, and ignored British requests for their restitution. Finally war broke out; in fact it was declared by the Nepalese themselves and lasted two years, from 1814 to 1816. The Gurkhas put up a determined and heroic fight, but in the end they were forced to succumb to the superior numbers of the British, and to their deadly artillery. There was a substantial loss of territory. Nepal had to restore Kumaon, Garhwal, Sikkim and the Terai to India, and as well as that, accept the placement of a British Resident in the capital. For a while Nepal was tossed between China and Britain. In 1854 it invaded Tibet again, but after two years, in 1856, had to sign a peace treaty under which Nepal not only had to pay an annual tribute of ten thousand rupees to the Celestial Empire, but also pledged faithful obedience to the Emperor of China. Also, Nepal would have to take part in the defence of Tibet if it was attacked by other powers. However, on balance Nepal did not lose a great deal. It returned the territories of Kuti and Kirong which it had appropriated in 1852, and paid an annual tribute, but it managed to make substantial profits out of trade with China and Tibet. Nepal was allowed to send representatives to Lhasa, Gyantse, Tashillumpo, Kuti and Kirong, and obtained valuable trading monopolies. Its merchants had free access to Tibet where they worked at lucrative occupations like that of silversmiths. Until the fall of the Celestial Empire, the tribute sent to China was abundantly repaid by gifts given in exchange at the Chinese court, and the mission which rendered the tribute made a good profit during its stay in Imperial territory. The one remaining thorn was that of the insecure and poorly defined frontiers, and it must be admitted that this situation was entirely to Nepal's disadvantage, since it now had two potential menaces looming over it from the north. The Mustang road was open to invaders, and another easy pass led

into the heart of Nepal from the rich valleys of Kirong, north of the Himalaya.

On the other hand, relationships with Britain grew steadily better after the 1814–16 war. The British had admired the bravery of the Nepalese and recognised the importance of having a friendly warrior state tucked in between India and China. Wanting to make an act of generosity to wipe out unpleasant memories of the war, they had restored some Terai villages to Nepal right from 1816, the year peace was concluded. Apart from one brief cloud in the sky of Anglo-Nepalese friendship in 1834, the British had no further cause for complaint about the Gurkhas' loyalty. During the first Indian war of independence, the Gurkhas offered assistance to the British when the great rebellion unexpectedly broke out in 1857, and it was then that the Terai, which they had lost by the 1816 treaty of Sugauli, was returned to them, in recognition of their generous offer and their help. Then during the war of 1904 between Tibet and India, when the British troops escorting Colonel Younghusband's mission arrived in Lhasa, Maharaja Chandra Sham Sher did his best to ease the situation and made an important contribution to the final agreement. Nepal actually suffered considerable losses through this, because until then Nepal had held a monopoly on trade between Tibet and India, but once the trade route was definitely open between Lhasa and India, through Gyantze and the Chumbi valleys, traffic diverted onto this shorter and easier caravan route.

More severe trials were approaching. The World War broke out and the Gurkhas fought heroically beside the British on all fronts. The Maharaja was made a general in the army, and the friendship between Britain and Nepal grew even closer. Its sincerity was again put to the test in the last war, and the Gurkhas once again did honour to their military tradition.

But the development of Nepal's foreign relations should not make us forget its domestic affairs. Much had changed since Prithvi Narayan conquered Nepal. In 1867 the Kings who were his descendants (and who bore the magnificent title of Maharajadhiraja) were divested of authority, and all power was concentrated in the hands of the Prime Minister, the Maharaja. It was Jang Bahadur Rana who secured this pre-eminent position for the maharajas. They all belonged to the Rana family and although there were nominal elections every year, transfer of power was actually hereditary.

The line of succession was unusual. The office passed from older brother to younger, and then when he died to the eldest son of the eldest brother and so on. The rule of the Ranas was a feudal despotism: they accumulated great wealth, most of which was deposited abroad. They saw progress as a threat to their own security.

The whole life of Nepal was concentrated in Kathmandu and the towns nearby, but it was an isolated and restricted life. Reforms were not even spoken of—the only one worth mentioning was the abolition of slavery in 1924. The government was only interested in showy projects which would either impress the few visitors who were allowed to enter the forbidden land, or bring prestige to the Ranas themselves. In the interior there was no sign of roads or medical clinics; at the most there might be a few bridges. The poor rural areas were cruelly neglected, and so isolated that even the people who lived in the valley could not go into the countryside without a special permit.

But even so, one should not assume that everything the Ranas did was evil. No government is entirely bad; the Ranas built barracks, a weapons factory, two hospitals and some schools—all in the valley, of course, where the major towns were Kathmandu, Bhatgaon and Patan. And above all, they sprinkled the valley with superb palaces for themselves and their sons and nephews. These massive structures, stranded in the greenness of immense open spaces, stood out brightly against the grey mass of the poor quarters, which huddled together like flocks of frightened sheep.

CHAPTER III

THE PRESENT

Arriving in a new country is like meeting a new person—it always causes some anxiety. However strong the attraction of new things may be, even the most experienced traveller feels a sort of alarm or diffidence when the customs and familiarities are not the ones he is used to.

As soon as we arrive we are taken to the number one Guest House between Kathmandu and Patan. It is spacious, elegant and well equipped. We are welcomed by a throng of officials, for even the kitchen boys are civil servants: the *namberdar*, who is responsible for running the house, the cooks, two or three house-boys, the sweeper, the guards and watchmen and the gardener. Their duties are allocated strangely: the cook comes in the morning to take the orders and do the accounts, then disappears, and his assistant does the cooking. The house-boy confines himself to supervising the work done by his helper, a lively, talkative little boy who does everything with an air of pride which attracts everyone's attention and respect. But I have scarcely started to settle in when the round of visits begins. Some visits are courtesy calls; some are to make the acquaintance of the men who now control Nepalese affairs, almost all of them recently appointed; other visits are to establish how and when we will leave for the interior. I put myself in the hands of Moniram, an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who has looked after me on previous visits, and take his advice as to the people I ought to meet. Etiquette is a serious matter in the East. The new men, who have risen to the top through revolutionary movements or political changes, appear to be simple and unassuming, but they are very sensitive: an inadvertent oversight can easily be interpreted as deliberate rudeness or lack of respect.

The situation has changed completely since my last visit. The Nepal of today is no longer the way it used to be—sluggish and fearful in the custody of the mistrustful Prime Ministers. The Ranas are no longer in power. India's independence movements and her achievement of independence in 1947 were inevitably contagious and led to the establishment of the Nepali Congress.

So as to have a rallying point, Congress allied itself with the King, restored his lost authority, and made him the symbol of promised freedom. Before the Ranas could take appropriate steps, the King took refuge in the Indian Embassy. This was the 11th of November, 1950.

Riots broke out. Congress assembled a corps of volunteers who took Birganj and quickly lost it again. The Ranas had pinned their hopes on the army; it stood firm, as did the administra-

tive structure. After pillaging and burning and the usual delights of revolution, the inevitable compromise was reached. Few of the newcomers to politics had the ability and the administrative experience and the steady hand needed to deal with the situation. The Ranas were forced to promote the convocation of a Constituent Assembly and accept the suggestion of a provisional Cabinet composed partly of Congress representatives, particularly the two Koirala brothers who had led the movement, and partly of Rana Generals.

Compromises are always defective, and neither side was satisfied. The Ranas believed they had lost too much; Congress thought it had gained too little. A riot broke out, and the life of Congress Minister M.P. Koirala was in danger. But he held firm. The Gurkhadal party, accused of fomenting the revolt, was declared illegal, and the guard of Rana Prime Minister Mohan Sham Sher was disbanded. The King became a national hero, took command of the army, and issued a proclamation calling for order and harmony; the few turbulent Rana generals were sent into exile.

The Rana Prime Minister realised that he could hold out no longer, and abdicated, but members of his family remained. The post of Prime Minister was taken by the elder of the two Koirala brothers, while the younger retained leadership of the Congress. A diarchy was established; events were to prove it unstable, like all diarchies. The more determined and active members of Congress were dissatisfied with the way things were going and led another revolt. This leftist revolt, which broke out in January 1952, was conducted by K. I. Singh and Regmi, who demanded a people's government representing all parties, and freedom from Indian influence. Backed strongly by the Liberation Army, they succeeded in occupying the city and the airport on the 23rd of June. But the next day Government troops regained the upper hand, and the Communist party was declared illegal.

M. P. Koirala's Cabinet continued for eleven months, but there were disagreements between the two Koirala brothers. The younger brother maintained that things should be speeded up, and criticised the repression of the revolt. Things came to a head. The King had no choice but to rule alone with the assistance of five counsellors, almost all from the old regime, the most important being General Kaiser Sham Sher, the former commandant in chief, and Mahavira Sham Sher, the owner of Himalayan Airways. Meanwhile it was announced that Constituent Assembly elections would be held in 1954, and Indian experts were invited to Nepal to prepare the electoral machinery and set it in motion. It may seem strange to us that this could happen in a country where schools were rare, roads were few, and the people had never known what was happening in the next village. But the Orient is always surprising; elections seemed difficult in India too, but even countries where democracy is centuries old had to admire the way they were run.

In the meantime, communism is gaining ground among some young people. Since it was declared illegal on the 23rd of January, 1952, it has taken on new disguises. One of its leaders, K. I. Singh, who directed the revolt mentioned above, has made a miraculous escape from prison and found asylum in Tibet where he is said to be forming an Army of Liberation and using trusted emissaries to organise the extremist movements in Nepal. This is not impossible, as there are thousands of Nepalese living in Tibet, almost all of them Newars, who went there to look for work or in flight from the poverty and persecutions of the rule of the Ranas.

What are the factors favouring the spread of communism in Nepal? In my opinion they are of two kinds: one kind might be called negative and the other positive. In the first category

must be counted the very factor which would seem to militate against the coming of Communism: orthodoxy, a religion which clings obstinately to outmoded and untenable beliefs.

The whole heritage of crude and primitive beliefs is backward and inert, and it cannot last much longer. But a religion is a delicate structure; if one stone is removed the whole edifice crumbles. India provides a cautionary example: Communism spread there in the very areas where the Brahmins were most rigid and arrogant. Widely separated levels of culture tend to approach each other by leaps, not small steps.

A positive reason for the spread of Communism must be the extreme poverty of the people, who live in the saddest state of neglect. The new government faces an immense task. Everything needs to be done: building roads and hospitals, building bridges, utilising the country's considerable resources. There will have to be a campaign against the malaria and black fever which infest the towns and the rural areas: it is estimated that over four million of the population of seven million suffer from these diseases. A five-year plan is already being carried out, with the help of loans from India. But starting from scratch is difficult. It will take a long time and a great deal of patience. The most important thing is to bring about a gradual change in the people's way of thinking, to make them aware of new needs, without creating gaps which cannot be filled.

Meanwhile, the 1792 treaty of friendship between Nepal and China is still in force, as is the 1856 treaty between Nepal and Tibet, in which the two parties, Nepal and Tibet, declare: "We shall continue to render homage to the Emperor of China as we have done until now."

Some are encouraged by the recent news from Tibet, which has certainly been reassuring so far. I have talked to many of the Tibetans who are following the time-honoured custom of coming down from Tibet towards the fall of winter for trade or pilgrimages, and they have assured me that the Chinese are not interfering in domestic affairs; the Dalai Lama governs in Lhasa assisted by his Cabinet, which has mostly the same members as before. There is Chinese supervision, but it is not burdensome. The abbot of Tashilumpo, who is called the Tashilama, was educated in China and is a favourite of the Chinese. He has returned to Tibet and taken possession of his own monastery, and provides a constant threat and warning in case the Dalai Lama should think of doing anything rash.

For the time being the Chinese are only bothering about roads, bridges and airports, but their main attention is concentrated on the Indian rather than the Nepalese frontier. A watch is kept on the Lhasa-Kalimpong road and restrictions are laid down on both sides. Tibetans going down to India to sell wool have to have passports in Tibetan, English and Chinese, and these are rigorously inspected by the Chinese and the Indians. Reports seem to indicate the presence of a large garrison of Chinese soldiers at Taklakot near Manasarovar, where the roads from Simla and Almora meet. These reports are probably exaggerated, though, for the place could not support a sudden large migration. The Sinkiang roads are not yet completed. Tibet, particularly in those regions, is practically a desert, although it could produce barley with the help of irrigation.

However, the vigilance on both sides is definitely jeopardising the routes between India and Tibet, because these unaccustomed inspections are contrary to the Tibetans' independent temperament. So it is generally felt that this traffic will decline and perhaps die out as soon as the Chinese have finished the trade route between Tibet and China, and that Tibet's trade will be permanently assimilated by China.

In the meantime the situation could be to Nepal's advantage, and in fact there has been a marked revival of traffic on the Karnali and Gandaki roads and over the Kirong and Kuti passes.

Nepal applied for membership in the U.N. as long ago as 1949, but nothing has come of it yet. The stubborn mistrust of foreigners is starting to give way to a spirit of receptiveness and co-operation. American Jesuits have opened a public school at Godavari. But Godavari is about ten kilometers from Kathmandu, so only people with cars, or people with enough money to allow their sons to board there, can make use of the school. Obviously the Jesuits are concentrating on the education of the future ruling class. There are F.A.O. and Point Four officials living in Kathmandu. Permits for study trips or explorations and for the ascent of the highest peaks of the Himalayas are granted more liberally than in the past. However, American enterprises are regarded with some suspicion by the Chinese, who feel they are not undertaken for purely scientific reasons; this is why Dillon Ripley's mission provoked unfavourable comment in the Chinese press.

The Nepalese army is small but strong; there are not many more than 40,000 regular soldiers but their numbers can be swelled to 200,000. The soldiers are nearly all veterans, and all of them have been excellently trained, in India during the British era and now in Malacca where they form the backbone of the police detachments.

But India is opposed to the Nepalis' continued enrolment in the British army, and wants to make use of their known and valued effectiveness by drawing them into its own gurkha detachments.

There are already pleasing signs of co-operation and trust between India and Nepal, and it is to be hoped that this will develop smoothly and confidently. It is in India's interests to have on its northern border a friendly country which is strong, true to its own military tradition, prepared to make sacrifices for its own land and liberty, and deliberately getting on with the reforms which are most urgently needed. And conversely, India's friendship and co-operation could be very valuable to Nepal during this period when it is making a courageous and gallant attempt to wipe out the traces of the fierce feudalism which has been retarding its progress for so long. Nepal is now trying to improve conditions for its people, to make their lives more peaceful and prosperous, and to free their minds gently from untenable superstitions and primitive beliefs. Finally, Nepal hopes to utilise its enormous resources for its own benefit and the benefit of its neighbours in a spirit of friendly understanding, which would bind the Nepalese and Indian peoples together through their common ideals and interests, while respecting each country's traditions and each country's independence.

Meanwhile, the women still carry brass trays of offerings to the images every morning, and when the men pass the temples they do homage to the gods by ringing the bell hanging from the roof or beside the doors; the brahmins still receive the bows of the lower classes with indifference, conscious of their own inborn nobility, even though they may be less prosperous, less powerful and poorer than those who honour them. But the tumultuous, Bacchanalian religious processions are interspersed with political demonstrations. The Ranas' ostentatious gala appearances are finished forever; their pearl-covered helmets ringing with emerald pendants are seen no more. The colour is still there but the pomp is less extreme.

CHAPTER IV

VISITS IN KATHMANDU

My first visit is to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who has signed our permits. This position is no longer held by M.P. Koirala, who resigned for the reasons mentioned above, but by Khadgaman Singh. He is lean and emaciated, and his pale face bears the marks of his long imprisonment under the Ranas. He wears a Gandhian cap and cotton clothes and has obviously felt the attraction of the Mahatma and his ideas. Then of course I meet with the Minister of Education, Sharada Sham Sher, and ask his permission to photograph or copy inscriptions and manuscripts. I wish to do everything correctly. Finally I call on the King, Tribhuvan Vikram Shah.

The Royal Palace is more modest than the ones the Ranas built for themselves. It is as huge as the Rana palaces, but still gives a less ostentatious impression; everything is very simple here now anyway. I remember my visits to three Ranas during previous voyages, especially my visit to the old Chandra Sham Sher in that colossal palace of his, the Singha Darbar. Now that the last Rana has abdicated, that palace has been requisitioned for Government offices. You passed through hall after hall, every one of them as big as a parade ground, glittering with marble and crystal and showy furniture which made anyone with good taste feel quite seasick, and everywhere there were civilians and military in uniform. Soldiers sprang to attention and clicked their heels as the visitor went past, and voices were hushed, as if in a hospital waiting room. Then the Maharaja himself, in ceremonial dress, as solemn as a god on the altar.

Even the most cordial conversation was almost always constrained by a kind of chilliness. It was ceremonious, controlled and attentive, and never relaxed, so that when you came out you heaved a sigh of relief and felt like turning back and making faces, to cast off that cloak of etiquette.

Intelligence is the only quality I have ever respected. All the other virtues and qualities leave me indifferent, and sometimes even annoy me, especially if I have to pay formal respect to them for the sake of politeness without really believing in them. I often look at these gentlemen who find themselves on this throne or that seat of command, through accident of birth or other chance, and wonder what would happen if they could read the minds of the people they are treating so distantly, with such irritating courtesy. More than once, at the climax of some empty discourse, I have found myself indulging in irreverent fantasies—for example imagining that the chair legs suddenly broke and the dignified gentleman sitting there tumbled down with his legs in the air. And then, because of

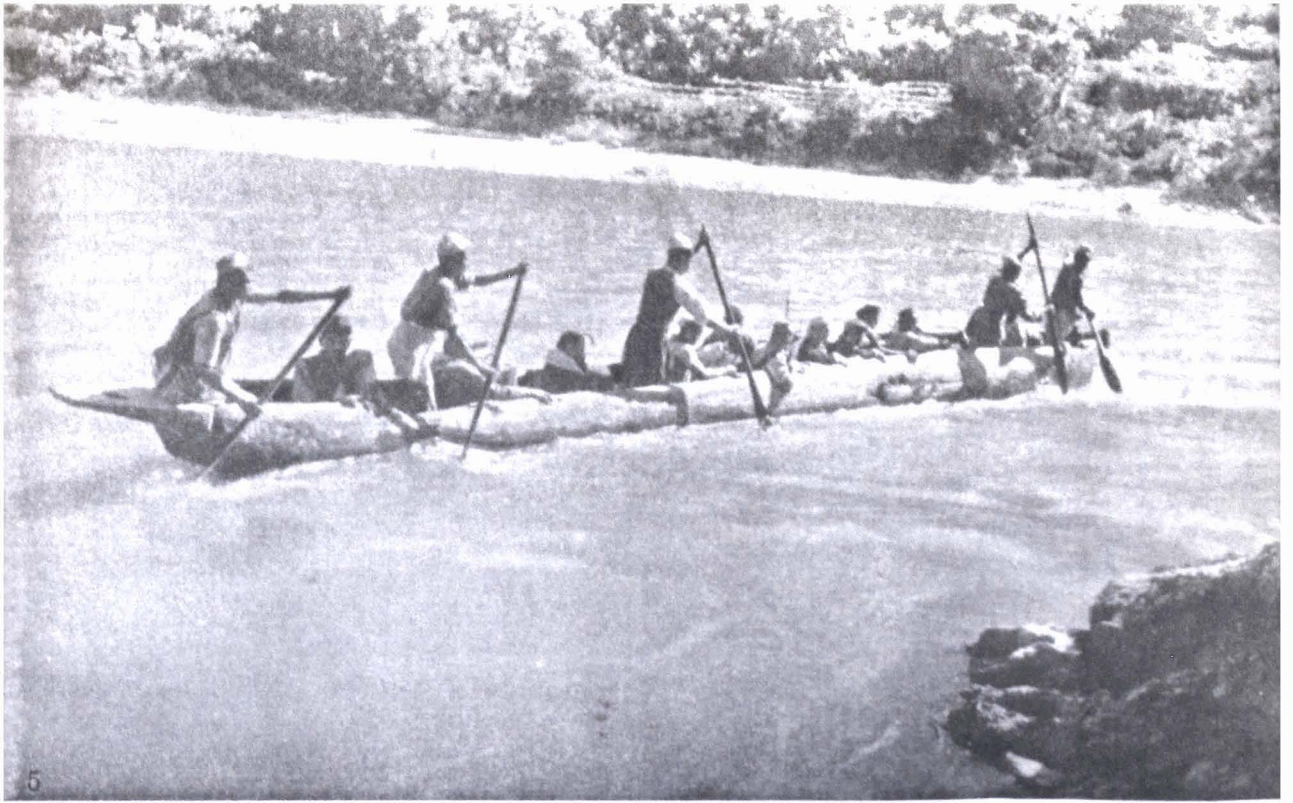
this mischievous picture, I have had to force myself not to burst out laughing. But it is nothing like this with Tribhuvan.

The royal guard is small, and one goes straight in, without formality; the King receives visitors in a simple unostentatious drawing-room. He speaks simply, almost shyly, and is courteous without being haughty. He is pale, young—not much over forty—but he has grown-up children; he married young. A lock of hair falls from under his cap, which on his good-natured face looks appealingly casual and innocent. We talk about Nepal, about Italy, about my journey. I give him a memento of my visit, as a token of my gratitude for the way his Government has looked after me and encouraged my researches. It is a silver vase, a kind of centrepiece for a table, a fine example of Italian craftsmanship which can hold its own even in this country where silver is worked with such rare skill. I have filled it with flowers picked in the Guest House garden to embellish the glittering vessel with the gay colours of his own country. I take my leave and set off for home, but the car has barely started to move when the man escorting me stops the vehicle and dashes back towards the royal palace. I feel uneasy when I see him running like that and I call him back and ask him where on earth he is going at such a speed. As if it were the most natural thing in the world he replies that he is going to ask the King for the vase back, and leave him with the flowers. I break into a cold sweat at the thought that he could have got out of sight before I could call him back.

Then I call on General Kaiser Sham Sher, who used to be Commander-in-Chief and Nepalese ambassador to London. He is a most cultured man with a prodigious memory, a Latin wit, and a lively interest in the history of his country. He was the one who started the excavations at Rummundeï where the Buddha was born. When you go into his palace you feel lost among shelves of precious books, examples of the best Nepalese craftsmanship selected with great taste, and tiger skins with preserved heads, which bring a shudder from the jungle into this cloister-like silence. On one wall, three large portraits of the orientalist who explored the treasures of Nepalese libraries keep watch over that store of knowledge, like the images of Lokapala in the entrance of Tibetan temples: Haraprasada Shastri, Sylvain Levi, and the author of these notes. I have never possessed a portrait; I hate posed portraits. In my own house there is not a single one of myself or of any of my family. Rows of family portraits strike me as a funereal sight; even the living people seem, in their stillness, to be anxious to take their place with those who have passed away. It upsets me to come across myself here like this without warning. I know what would happen to that picture if this were my house.

On the first floor, iron cabinets protect the precious harvest of manuscripts which General Kaiser has gleaned with such intelligent and loving care: Sanskrit, Buddhist and Hindu manuscripts on theology and philosophy, astrology and law, medicine and apologetics, almost all on palm leaves, and many of them are more than a thousand years old. It is an enormous collection, perhaps scarcely surpassed by the one belonging to the Guruji Hemraj Sharma, the Ranas' chaplain, or by the State's Darbar Library. General Kaiser, with a cultured man's generosity, gives me his library catalogue so that I can examine it and even photograph the works that seem useful for my present research. This work keeps my colleagues busy for three days.

The Nepalese take life gently. There are not many people in the bazaar before eleven o'clock; offices open at ten or eleven o'clock and close at four or five. Not that the Nepalese are



Crossing the Gandaki at Raught

Tharus help caravans across the Darandi





Medical examination



At Argan Poa a temple shows that a city is nearby

lazy. They get up early, but their lives have a different rhythm, regulated by their religious ceremonies, their prayers, and their meals, the first at about nine o'clock and the second at six or seven o'clock. Then on Saturdays all activity ceases. It is not really a holiday, but a day of abstention from work, abstention from everything, because Saturday is a bad, unlucky day, so it is wise to avoid business or travel, and to do nothing and think of nothing but the gods. Sunday is an ordinary day, but because of the proximity of India, where Sunday is a holiday, there is a certain laxity in people's work. There is always plenty of time, anyway. There are many, many religious festivals; something every week in honour of one god or another. There are very many gods, and they are all so easily offended that basically it is quite understandable that the Nepalese should be unwilling to insult any of them, and that they have festivals for them all. But this is no comfort to the foreigner who has carefully calculated his time and yet, without meaning to, always trips up on that calendar and finds himself forced into inactivity just when he most needs to hurry.

Some of these festivals are more important than others. On big feast-days gay and noisy processions stream through the streets and the whole valley pours into town for the occasion. As it happens, we are there for two of the main festivals in the Nepalese calendar: the festivals of Matsyendranath and Indra. The people are carried away by overwhelming religious fervour, their extreme animation might almost be in deliberate contrast to the monotony of everyday life. Matsyendra is a historical figure, although little or nothing definite can be disentangled from the thick embroidery of fantasy and legend surrounding his life. He was a magician, an outstanding yogi, and performed many miracles. Both Buddhists and Shivaists lay claim to him, but when you see his priests with their unkempt locks and full reddish robes you think of the Gomchen, the ascetics of Kargyupa, the Tibetan school.

During the festival they carry the wonder-worker's image from its own temple in a Patan square in a tabernacle raised upon a gigantic carriage, on which they build an enormous tower out of branches and posts. It is followed by another smaller carriage bearing the disciple's picture. When the festival is nearly over, the structure sets out again towards the temple, when an even bigger crowd: the devotees pulling it along, shouting and shrieking until it seems the skies will fall, the temple servants carrying the saint's gold mask and other relics, and excitement turning to frenzy till the people are quite out of their minds. The structure advances inexorably before the delirium, tearing up everything in its path—telephone wires, electric wires—nobody cares, because everything is focused on Matsyendranath and whatever happens, he will provide. Then the image and the precious relics are put to sleep in the cavernous silence of the temple, and nothing more is heard of them for another year.

There is not so much frantic excitement for the festival of Indra. There is the same sort of mobile tower, even more gigantic, and the crowd is the same, but they take their places on the temple steps and there are no perilous encounters with the contraption in the narrow streets. It is the loveliest sight to see the groups of women sitting on the steps in a blaze of colours and flashing ornaments which turn the Kathmandu square into a superb theatrical scene under the shadow of the temples which send their darts of gold into the sky.

CHAPTER V

FROM KATHMANDU TO GORKHA

Camps 1-9

September 15-24

Getting the expedition together is more difficult than expected, particularly since the best porters have been hired by the Swiss who are making an attempt on Everest. However, with the help of Major Kaisher Bahadur and Moniram, everything gradually sorts itself out, and we have twenty-eight men at our disposal.

Our general staff consists of the Nepalese army captain Yuba, whose job is to escort us until we get back here again, Narayan the cook, and Chandra—he will be serving us at the table, but when we were in Kathmandu his speciality was folding the table napkins into beautiful shapes, a new one every day. I have never seen anyone more expert at this art.

Dividing up the baggage is the most tiresome business. One box is half a kilo heavier than another and this is enough to set off a sudden outburst of quarrelling and shouting. Nobody is willing to load up with it, harsh words fly about and it gets left on the ground. The head porter, who is called the *naik*, is not very energetic; the captain who is supposed to accompany me does not arrive until the last moment. By the grace of God the caravan sets off at eleven o'clock, escorted by the cook and Chandra. I have to stay behind to make the final calls. It seems that some areas are not safe, so I borrow two Colts from the Ministry of Defence, and to avoid carrying all the money with me I deposit it in the State Treasury in exchange for cheques which I can draw on if necessary through the Provincial Governors. Because of all this it is half past two by the time we three Italians and Captain Yuba manage to leave Kathmandu. The sky is already overcast; white clouds are crushing up against the wall of the Himalayas, and the wind has fallen silent, as it always does when rain is coming. We go two or three kilometers by car as far as a group of houses where the road becomes impossible even for the acrobatic vehicles they have here. This is where our pilgrimage begins. I expect the journey to take at least three months: three months far away from the world, three months without news from home. This is the first experiences for my companions and I see they are a bit uneasy and hesitant. But I am happy. I am nomadic by nature, and I do not enjoy so-called civilised life. I adapt to it because I have no choice—you might say it is my *karma*—but when I get away from it I am as happy as a boy skipping school. I feel more comfortable

in the countryside among trees and mountains. A house has always struck me as a sort of prison where you find every kind of boredom and irritation and unhappiness. But now the driver breaks the train of our thoughts: he hangs great garlands of sweet-smelling white flowers around our necks and wishes us bon voyage. I respond with *namaste*, and then at last we are alone on the tracks of Nepal.

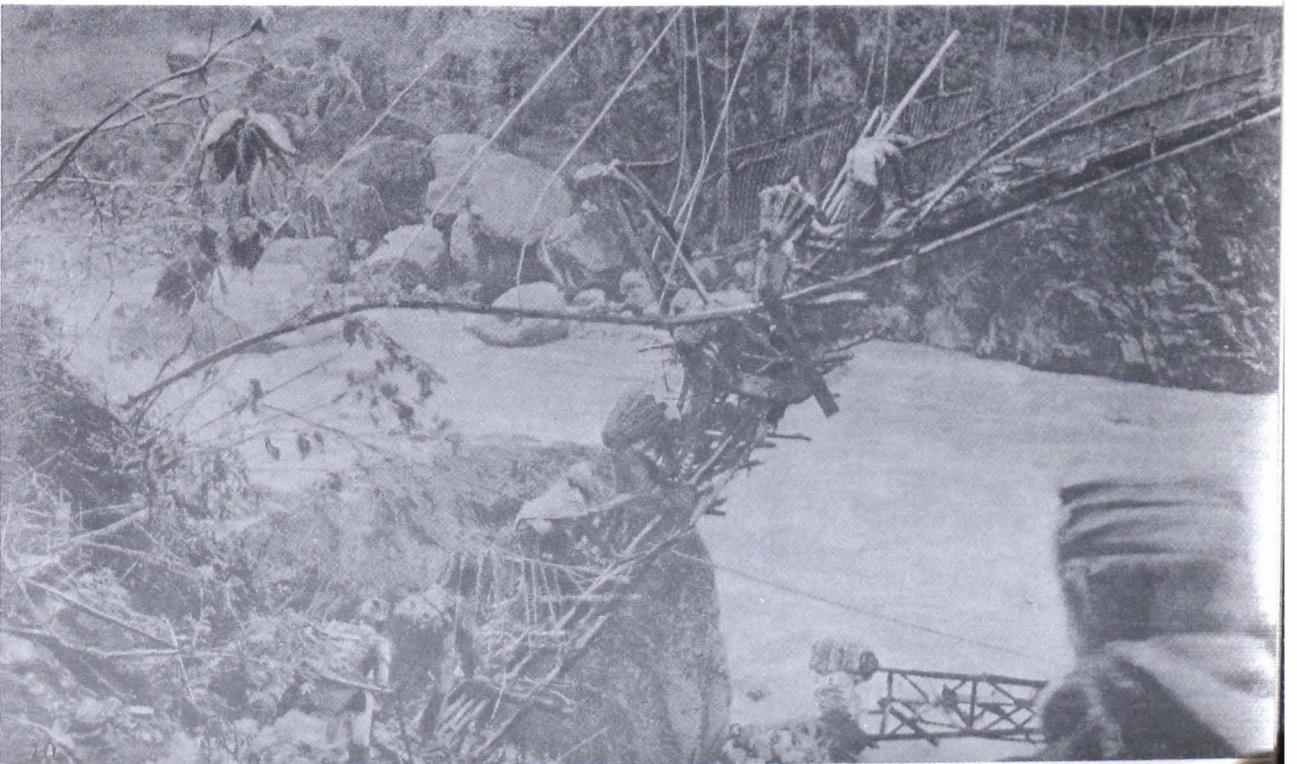
After the Vishnumati the path often comes to a halt on the banks of rivers and streams and we have to ford them. My companions, Miss Francesca Bonardi, now my wife, and Doctor Guttuso, are new to this sort of adventure, and they are hesitant at first; they cannot bring themselves to get into the water with their shoes on. Guttuso delivers a lecture on the dangers of hookworm which can easily get from the water into your bloodstream through a scratch or cut. But when they see me already on the other side, urging them to hurry up if they want to get there before dark, they pluck up their courage and stride resolutely into the river. They have passed the Rubicon; after this they are not worried about fording streams. At the head of the valley the winding track starts to scale the encircling hills. It is muddy and steep, and slippery.

At Dharmathali, a Gupta inscription halts us briefly. Buddhist stupas stand close to Shivaist symbols as if in witness to the brotherly coexistence of the two religions. At Jitpur the path is blocked by a police check-point and we have to show our passes. I fail to see the use of these checks: a good mountaineer could find a thousand ways to keep away from the formal tracks and slip off through the wooded areas, which are growing thicker the further we go. The sky has grown dark, and swollen clouds have engulfed the little patches of blue which have been piercing them from time to time, releasing rich streams of golden light. Then it starts to rain really heavily. The air is wet and cold, and night is falling. We walk more quickly and without realizing it we get further than we need to from the Captain and the porter who is supposed to be showing us the way. The track vanishes into the dark of the night and the tangles of the forest, runs between high banks, and suddenly it is no longer a path but a stream. Are we on the right track, or have we lost our way? We shout for the Captain, but there is no reply. The darkness conjures up frightening pictures... harmless rustlings seem to be warning us of danger... a phosphorescent insect looks like the eye of an animal lying in wait for us. Then a light shines from the depths of the forest: it must be the Captain. We call again: silence. Then, when he is only a few metres away from us, good old Yuba replies. He has been wiser than us, and equipped himself with a torch, but until now we have not realised that he is almost deaf! The rain gets heavier, and we are walking along in the water. No sign of the porters or the camp. None talks; the tramp of our feet on the muddy track contrasts with the oppressive silence around us. It feels as if we are in nothingness, in a complete void outside time. We go on like this until nine o'clock, then suddenly dim red lights wink in the darkness. Two men squatting sleepily in a straw hut beside the track give us the welcome news that we are at Kakani (2100 metres). We find accommodation in the resthouse which the British residents built for their week-ends. It is bleak and neglected now, and the shutters will not close. The porters, who have arrived before us, are stretched out side by side on the verandah like corpses on a battlefield. Two of them talk all night, others are snoring like the Devil, and one coughs despairingly until dawn comes. So it is a noisy and sleepless night. But this is the last house. After tomorrow we shall be living in tents, the porters will sleep in the villages, and things will be more peaceful.



9
The Governor of Pokhara with members of the expedition.
Standing: Chief of Police, Capt. Yuba, Chandra and Narayan

The broken bridge at Tatopani





Fording the Tinau khola

The sacred hearth in a Thakali house



We get up at dawn, still feeling waterlogged, but when we go outside we are greeted by one of the most glorious sights I have ever seen: there before us is the whole chain of the Himalaya, glistening in silent beauty under the first light of day. A few flakes of cloud hang in the sky like silver ghosts that have left it too late to flee with the night. The Likhu khola glitters away below us in the valley, and immense forests, impenetrably green, plunge down to it on both sides.

With good porters the march from Kakani to Nawakot can be done in one day, but they would need to be Sherpas or Bhutias or Magars or Gurungs. Mine are mostly Newars, townspeople—they are used to this work, but they have nothing like the stamina of the mountain tribes. I became more and more aware that many of them will not be able to stand up to the work that lies ahead of them. Nearly all of them look as if they suffer from malaria, and sooner or later they are bound to be overcome by relapses.

It is headlong descent from Kakani to Tikuri bazaar: not a track but the capricious path of a stream, which makes unexpected leaps downwards and has a clay surface so wet and smooth from the rain that it is impossible to stay upright. We meet trains of porters making their way slowly upwards; their dark sweating bodies look like bronze statues which have been set in motion by magic.

They are carrying hampers of poultry on their backs: it will soon be Dussera, the feast of Durgā, and supplies for the occasion are being taken from the country to the city. We come to the bridge over the Likhu (called Sūryamati in Sanskrit) which joins the Tadi khola and then, below Nuwakot, the Trisuli. This name is kept because the three rivers form the shape of a trident (triśūla), the symbol and the weapon of Shiva, the supreme protector of Nepal.

It is the porters' first encounter with the tents. They are tired, and they work slowly and grudgingly; it takes them over an hour to set up camp. Unfortunately, apart from one or two who were quicker and more willing than the others, they never did learn how to handle the tents. Every day, the whole time they were with us, we had to give them instructions again right from the first step, and usually help them too. I was used to Kashmiri, Sherpa, or Tibetan porters, who are far more capable, and for the first few days I could not help flying into a rage. But in the end I resigned myself to the situation: adaptation is the best way to deal with unavoidable difficulties. In any case, I have not come up here to change the people's way of life. Their gloomy faces are weighed down by a primordial sadness. The Tibetans treat work as an enjoyable game, but these people see it as their fate.

Once over the bridge the track disappears. It turns up again on the embankments of the rice-fields, often broken by the force of the water; then it climbs up to Nuwakot (Nayakot) on yellow clay under a burning sun. Signorina Bonardi is suffering from heatstroke, and I plod along between spasms of a sudden stomach upset. We drag ourselves wearily up the unending hill and reach Nuwakot after midday.

We have to camp on the drill ground, because there is a spring nearby, but we do not get a moment's peace. The whole village crowds round us, peering into the tents, watching our every movement, listening to every word. They do not leave us until after dark. Nuwakot used to be an important place. It was under the rule of a local dynasty, and was taken and retaken a number of

times during the campaign of Prithvi Narayan, who made it his headquarters before his final triumphant conquest of the valley. The ancient Thakur palace still stands right on the summit of the hill. It has wonderfully carved windows, like the palaces in Kathmandu and Patan, and large carved corbels support the projecting roof. My attention is particularly attracted by some representations of Lokapāla, the guardians of the four cardinal points, which seem to be of Chinese inspiration. Portrayals of copulation and eroticism support the sloping roof. You can find motifs like these all over Nepal, but they cannot be called a special characteristic of Nepalese art: there are plenty of them in India too, and you find them in the friezes which run round the temples in such abundance. The most interesting I saw were at Khajuraho. At Varanasi (Bānaras), the cunning guides like leading the way to the Nepalese temple which is full of them. Then when the perplexed tourists ask how such a holy place can have such erotic decorations, the Brahmins, who can always explain any miracle or oddity, assure them that the innocent function of these figures is to act as lightning conductors. The goddess of lightning is a virgin and would be too shy to come near these pictures, which are so out of keeping with her modesty. Anyway there is really nothing to be amazed about. Even in the West there are many erotic carvings on medieval church doorways, and special studies have been made of them.

On two strips of wood running through the centre of the palace there are carvings of columns of soldiers carrying guns on their shoulders, so the building as it is today cannot be called very old. It was probably restored by Prithvi Narayan, after the fiercely defended Nuwakot finally fell under his power.

In front of a little temple of Narayan, the Garuḍa, with its human body and eagle's head, prays eternally to the benign god who traditionally rides it. There are many inscriptions. A temple of Bhāvanī stands at the end of the town, but its doors are implacably closed and its secrets are hidden from us. Bhāvanī is one of the countless manifestations of the same goddess—Durgā, Kālī, Cāmuṇḍā, the wife of Shiva—and symbolises the tremendous power which brings things to life and consumes them, the inevitable rhythm of the cosmic process of becoming, the Great Mother from whose womb everything is born, and into whom everything returns. She has a thousand names and a thousand forms. Every village worships her local manifestation as patron and protectress, propitiated but feared, generous but implacable, often without features, formless, a stone: the first intuition of the life force, the primeval universal archetype of Earth, of Mother, and of Life, which the speculation and theosophy of India exalt in the concept of the all-creating, all-destroying Energy. Rāmakrishna, desiring yet fearing her presence, invoked her: "I shall never call you Mother again. O Mother, you have sent me infinite suffering. I had a house and family; you have made me a beggar. What worse fate could you send me, O long-haired one? I go begging scraps of food from door to door. Does the child not go on living, even if the mother dies? I call "Mother, Mother", but you are always deaf and blind."

But the goddess was not far away: she was always in his heart and in the hearts of all the faithful. "The goddess is in my heart; she is dancing there forever. I meditate on the thoughts that flicker across my mind, but I never forget Her name. Though my eyes may be closed I see Her in my heart, garlanded with skulls."

You do not simply go down to Trishuli bazar—you plunge headlong. Guttuso is limping

and in pain from an inflammation of the joints. The damp oppressive heat stagnates in the deep valley. Trishuli bazar is an important market: there is a bit of everything, from fruit to cigarettes, from electric torches to umbrellas. In the streets, Tibetans coming down from the border for the first time linger curiously in front of the stalls and shops. The proximity of India and the lavish fertility of tropical soil produce wonders they have never seen before, and they are as wide-eyed as astonished children. Everyone has to pass through Trishuli bazar, and it is like a sampler of all the races of Nepal.

The two banks of the Trishuli are connected by a narrow, unsteady hanging bridge made of rotten boards; the muddy river foams and eddies below. A herd of buffalos is fording the river. A long rope is tied to their horns and the other end of it is held on the opposite bank. Then the frightened and unwilling animals are thrown in by force and the whirlpools engulf them. They vanish, flounder about, and get swept away. Then their heads appear above the waves; on the downstream side of the bridge where the banks are less difficult the rope is pulled in and they are led slowly to safety. Their massive bulk emerges gradually, and they plod clumsily to the shore. Of course sometimes the rope breaks and then the buffalo is seen no more.

There is another check-point at Trishuli. With the Captain's help the barely literate policeman figures out the text of our permits, and takes note of them in a register. Then he kindly escorts us to the temple of Virabhairava, one of the many Bhairavas. These terrible emanations of Shiva, along with their coadjutors, have the task of putting evil spirits to flight; in fact they are often represented in the act of trampling on the terrified manifestations of evil. The name itself means "the terrible one", and Bhairava is not a god to be trifled with. The place is especially sacred because the image is *svayambhu*, miraculously created—a divine work which has descended from heaven. In reality it is a great boulder of black rock. All over India too, certain stones and trees are believed to be mysteriously sacred; they are the first and simplest archetypes of the temple, and in the villages they take the place of temples to this day, persisting unchanged through the turning of the centuries.

We set up camp about four kilometers from Trishuli bazar, on a deserted plateau. It has been a short march, but the bazaar is an overwhelming attraction for the porters; there they renew old friendships, recount the little adventures of their wandering life, get drunk on *rakshi*, a kind of rice beer, and play cards. They eat almost nothing: their only food is *chiura*, rice soaked in water, dried, and then ground or, rather, crushed. This is done with a tool consisting of a big wooden mallet on the end of a long board fixed between two perpendicular supports in such a way that the mallet falls by its own weight. A woman places her foot on the other end of the board and works it rhythmically up and down, so that the hammer rises and falls, grinding the handfuls of rice placed there by another woman who squats on the ground in front of the mallet. As it goes up and down she quickly throws the grain in and takes it out, and the two women synchronise their movements and timing so well, and work so quickly and skilfully, that the tool appears to be driven mechanically. And their hands never get crushed. The rhythm is quite unconscious; long practice has made it a habit of the hands and feet. Rich or poor, the Nepalese eat meat only on feast days. Meat for them means buffalo or mutton or chicken; the cow, as in India, is sacred.

Meanwhile, I am pleased to find that my expectations have been accurate. The information I gathered in the capital was far from promising: in fact it seemed that once outside the valley we

would not be able to obtain anything we needed. However, on thinking it over, I took the attitude that while the mountain districts where I was going might be terra incognita to everyone in the capital, they were still inhabited by the hard-working peasants who had populated the whole Himalayan region from Almora to Bhutan in the space of a few decades, until now they make up eighty per cent of the population in Sikkim and two thirds in Bhutan. And as these peoples are not vegetarians, as in many parts of India, I was sure that along the way I would be able to get supplies of chickens and eggs as well as vegetables, rice and fruit. So there was no need for large quantities of canned food. This is not just housewives' chatter: one has to worry about these things when it is a matter of providing for a long expedition on a small budget. The saving was considerable because each load, weighing a maximum of 25 kilograms, cost between fifty and eighty thousand lire* a month for transport alone. It was risky, of course. If I had been wrong we would have had to turn back and would certainly have suffered severe hardship, but as I have said, right from the first day's march I had the pleasure of noting that I had not been mistaken.

It is a ghastly march to Bharang Bharung. Every day we become more and more aware that travelling in Nepal is not easy. God only knows when mechanised transport will be seen here in the interior. At the moment cars go no further than Kathmandu or a small radius around it, and they perform miraculous balancing-tricks as they leap over the paving of the narrow winding alleys. They are brought in by air or carried in on men's shoulders, a march of a good many days, and after a very short time, because of the unskilful drivers and the pebbly streets, they start puffing and stumbling and refusing to move, like worn-out old implements. And even horses are rare, so rare that up to now we have not seen even one.

Travel is certainly not easy even in other parts of Asia. In Tibet, for example, the altitude, the big differences between day and night temperatures, and the passes which bar the way nearly every day, call for an extraordinary physical effort. But in Nepal there are no roads and few bridges—and you should really make your will before setting foot on the ones there are. You climb and descend the whole time: from the depths of the valley to the summit, from the summit to the valley, two or three times a day.

The rainy season comes late here, and it is now at its height. Water falls from the skies, gushes back from the earth, oozes from the trees, engulfs the tracks. We wallow in the rice-fields; I can still smell their horrible wet rottenness and hear the squelch of our feet in the obscenely slimy expanse. It feels like walking in a lake, not on land, and this impression is reinforced by the fishermen standing in the fields, their shining bare brown limbs in contrast with the green of the rice-fields. As protection from the sun they wear wide straw hats as big as umbrellas, pointed in the centre like Chinese peasants' hats. They stand perfectly still, gazing at their fish-hooks, not even turning round as we pass.

It is impossible to do a long day's march in these conditions, but one can quite easily keep up an average of 25 or 30 kilometers a day, according to that approximate measure they call the kos. In theory, one kos is supposed to equal two miles, but I am sure it cannot be less than five kilometers, perhaps even a bit more. It can only be an approximation anyway; they have such a

* i. e. N. Rs. 300-500 (1977)

poor sense of distance and time that you cannot rely on local information. I have learned by experience to avoid disappointments by never asking how much further on a place is. They give the most unexpected answers: they never say two or three miles, but rather "five cigarettes", that is, the time it takes to smoke five cigarettes. In other places like Assam, where they do not smoke so much, but do eat sugar-cane, they say you can chew one, two or three sugar-canes between point A and point B. But it is like this in many places, in India too. I was once travelling by car between Ajmer and Chitor. The road had been eaten away by the rains, and I was feeling rather anxious, since dusk was approaching, so I asked some peasants how much further it was to the next town. They replied that the train ticket cost eleven annas !

We skirt along the bank of the Gauri river, then ford it and once more we are drowning in the rice-fields: rice-fields everywhere, behind us, ahead of us, above us. Rain is the great cultivator in these parts. The embankments of the fields rising in terraces to the very tops of the mountains are patched together any old way, and once the seed has been sown everything is in the hands of God. Man leaves as much as possible to Nature, neither helping her nor protecting himself from her. He lives like any other creature, plant or animal, which the whim of Life may cast into the river of time, accepts his mortal state and bows meekly to the particular fate that his karma has shaped for him, giving a precise form to its stimulus. Individual life is not a gift from God, it is a matter of chance, a mere happening in the development of the universe which is moved by a necessary and inevitable impetus and eternally strives and changes. No explanation can ever justify the awful contradiction of death, the transitory nature of the individual in time, the futile freedom of the mind, which is monarch of past and future, near and far, but powerless, trapped in the feebleness of the body which even at birth bears the mark of decay and death. No one can emerge from this awful contradiction without transcending the human person, like the teachers of the East, renouncing the hopeless hope of personal survival, and considering the individual life as a wave briefly stirred up by the play of the wind on the sea's surface. Once the attachment to self leaves us, life is no longer the ephemeral span of time which runs, for one person only between the cradle and the grave, but the cosmic never-ending life of all creatures and things and worlds that ever were or will be. Then death loses its terror and its true meaning can be seen, as a necessary instant in a process through which things unendingly develop and change.

If when we die we have courageously sacrificed our piteous illusion and replaced it with the life of the universe, the tremendous game which creates and destroys in order to continue—then death shall be no more.

"One day", recounts Chuang-tze, "Tze-u fell sick. Tze-se went to visit him and he welcomed him, saying: 'Truly it is great, the creative energy that has bent me like this. My back is humped and twisted, my insides are all out of place, my chin is buried in my navel, my shoulders are higher than my head, my vertebrae are pulling up towards the sky, my yin and yang are all mixed up, but my spirit is not troubled.' He moved painfully, dragging himself to a well to look at his reflection in the water, and exclaimed: 'Alas! How the creative force has twisted me!' 'Do you mind?' Tze-se asked. 'Why should I mind? If the creative force should want my left shoulder to become a cock in a future metamorphosis, then I will greet the sunrise each morning in accordance with my new state. If my right shoulder becomes an arrow, I will strike

down game. If the creative force should want to turn my buttocks into a cart and my vital spirits into horses, I will draw a carriage at full speed. Every being receives life at the proper time, and loses it in accordance with a law of destiny. Anyone remaining within the time allotted to him is immune from feelings of joy or sadness. The ancients referred to the succession of life and death as binding and loosing. And it is a general law for all beings, that once bound they cannot be loosed without help, because someone is holding them. So why should I bemoan my fate ? ”

As we come up onto the watershed at Samri we are greeted by a breath of wind. It is vigorous and sweet-sounding, but provides only a brief respite; the track drops right down to the suspension bridge at Bharang Bharung. The daylight is already fading in the pallid say. Guttuso's leg is still troubling him, but he puts up with it with admirable patience.

We cross the river by the hanging bridge, and immediately start climbing again under a mournful sky. The clouds press together, grey and sulky. The monsoon is following us and water drips from the air. Leeches appear on every side, and curve quickly to take greedy and confident aim at their prey—you find them everywhere. They annoy my companions, who loathe the filthy creatures, but I teach them how to get rid of them: just put a little salt on their suckers and they drop off straight away. But the ground is swarming with them. They get into everything, even inside the tent: when I wake up I find my chest smeared with blood—one particularly crafty leech has come in out of the cold and drunk his fill. Guttuso's ailment shows no sign of getting better. If it goes on like this we shall have to call a halt. Descents are particularly painful for him and he hks to go by leaps, putting his weight on his good leg.

We meet a sorcerer on the track down to the Ankhu (Campavati). He stops, asks what is wrong with our friend, and offers to help. I have great faith in science, but I also believe that our nature is influenced by many more powers than we are inclined to imagine. It is not easy to persuade a doctor to accept treatment from a magician. However, as our medicines seem to have failed, there is no harm in trying the experiment—in any case it is an ideal opportunity to see how these healers work. The treatment consists of using *mantras*—reciting formulas to invoke the presence of a god and using his intervention to get rid of the evil snare laid by some demon. In other words, the treatment takes place on the psychological level. Instead of illness and medicine we have two opposing powers in combat—demons and gods. In India, too, smallpox is caused by Sitala, and cholera by Mariamma. It is a matter of identifying the demon and finding the formulas which have power over him, and the secret lies in pronouncing them in such a way that the sounds rouse the health-giving powers, and inspire and stimulate them. At regular intervals the magician stops his recitation and blows three times on Guttuso's leg; then he digs out of his pocket one of those curved pieces of metal that are nailed to the soles of shoes. The patient watches nervously, fearing some sort of improvised surgical procedure, as the sorcerer gently scrapes the skin of the afflicted part and then with another puff of breath and another formula throws the piece of metal onto the track. And evil will befall anyone rash enough to pick it up. We call a halt near the bridge over the Campavati at Chisapani.

It is raining: a lazy, arrogant, inexorable rain. Everything seems turned to water. The forests get more and more dismal, dark and evil-smelling. Everything drips, oozes, overflows. The

porters get more and more sullen and cantankerous: some of them have raided the kitchen equipment and they are protecting themselves from the rain by wearing our saucepans on their heads like hats. They stop in every village, and they stop at every refreshment place. Along the tracks around here there are a lot of what might be called inns: huts with wide verandas in front to shelter passers-by. Hot tea and milk are always ready, cigarettes and bananas and sometimes lemons are displayed on the ground, and there is always *rakshi* (liquor). It is a simple way of making a living without working too hard. In one of these refreshment places on the pass, a man was lying wrapped in a blanket chattering with fever, his wares nearby—a few boxes of matches, a few packets of cigarettes, a ket, his little pile of nutmeg, some sticks of cinammon—resigned without a struggle to whatever fate might send, customers or death.

We reach Arughat in the late afternoon. It is hard to find a camping place: everything is wet, and the tents are sodden. Everywhere we look there are people with goitres: goitres of every shape and size, pendulous ones, double ones. The sick gather round us in the usual numbers and with their usual persistence. Guttuso examines, takes notes, gives treatment. There is not even a consulting room. Man is alone in this capricious and contradictory environment whose vigorous impulses are multiplied and aggravated in the dampness and break out in an extravagance of creation which indifferently dispenses life and death. As a mark of their original warlike and aggressive nature, these simple and stoical men carry the ubiquitous *khukri* stuck into their belts—a very sharp curved knife which can sharpen a pencil or lop off a buffalo's head with a single stroke. And yet many of them have been to India or Europe; quite a few have been to Italy and address us in our own language. One of them came to see us in Pokhara, almost naked but decorously wrapped up in a green greatcoat, and speaking fluent Italian. I must say I found these encounters rather painful. I felt sorry for these people who had set eyes on a world so different from their own for just long enough to let them make comparisons and to extinguish their blissful ignorance. Now they have fallen back into these forests, and as they bear their burdens panting up the slopes in the heat of the sun they will think of the fortunes of war, of the wonderful things they have seen, of some casual love affair in the excitement of peace. A dream which has gone forever. But I was sad on my own account too. I felt humiliated by my membership in a world which has not been able to teach these people anything but the art of war and has taken them to other lands to kill and be killed, which has not felt ashamed of this slave-trade and above all has not understood the disgrace of its well-composed falsehoods which construct gaudy facades of fine words to hide the arrogance of politics and the selfish interests of its own power. Under cover of this deception it has snatched these simple souls from their uncomplicated life, thrown them unawares into the whirlwind of other people's hatreds, and then, after a rapid succession of events, abandoned them again amidst the malaria and black fever of the sub-Himalayan valleys. This is all the West has been able to show a people who have had this to say about war:

“When many people are gathered together with the intention of killing, whether in war, on a hunting expedition, or for robbery, if one of them kills, are the others guilty of murder? Yes, they are all as guilty as the killer, because they were all pursuing a common goal: they have all incited to murder, if not with their voices, then at least by the fact that they have come together for the purpose of killing. But if a person has been forced to join in, is he guilty

too ? Certainly, in case he has made the vow: 'Even to save my life, I will never kill a living thing'.

(Vasubandhu in the *Abhidharmakoṣa*).

The first part of the track from Arughat to Gorkha runs along the bank of a river which plunges violently downwards. I shall never forget that march. In the rainy season the track disappears under the water, and there is nothing else for it but to cross and recross the river—seventy-two times. In fact this is what this stage of the journey is called: the seventy-two fords. It has been raining steadily for two days and there is no hope of a break in the weather. Heavy clouds lower overhead, and the weather is so desperately bad that the porters would do anything rather than leave the sheltered spots where they are roosting. But we are already behind schedule. I put my foot down and use a mixture of threats and pleading to get them moving. I buy some old sacks in the bazaar to help them keep the rain off, and at ten o'clock, under the heaviest possible downpour, we set off. We cross a bridge, clamber up a long and greasy slope, stopping every hundred paces to get rid of leeches, and then we are in a narrow valley scoured by the swollen and turbid river. It is the only track, and we do justice to its name by plunging into those swirling waters seventy-two times. It is already dark by the time we arrive, soaking wet, at our destination. Then we take shelter by the fire in a hospitable peasant's hut, our eyes streaming from the smoke, and wait patiently for our porters who arrive three hours later, even grumpier than usual, and worn out with cold and exhaustion.

At last we are within sight of Gorkha, the hallowed city: hallowed for the Gurkhas for two reasons. First, because it is the birthplace of Prithivi Narayan, who took possession of Nepal for his own race and eliminated or subdued the many kings who divided these regions between them; he was born in Gorkha and set off from here on his victorious adventures. Second, Gorkha is hallowed because a cave at the top of the mountain is where Gorakṣa lived and meditated. The Gurkhas placed themselves under the protection of this ascetic and miracle-worker, and took their name from him.

The weather starts to improve; the ever-approaching Himalayan peaks tear through the clouds which hang in tatters like a beggar's clothes. The Machapuchare (the Fish-tail) stands like a sentinel over the mass of mountains winking and glittering boundlessly behind it. A short, easy march in peaceful countryside which often reminds us of our own Italian hills. The huge mass of the temple of Kālī suddenly comes into sight as we round a bend, but near the flight of steps leading to it there is a colossal sculpture in reddish stone, representing Hanuman, the faithful monkey who accompanied Rāma on the conquest of Lanka to rescue his wife Sitā from the ten-headed demon who had kidnapped her.

Kālī and Rāma: two different streams of religion. In one the worship focusses on sacrifices, even human sacrifices in earlier times; in the other cult bloody sacrifices are frowned on and condemned. But in Hinduism there is no longer (and only rarely and exceptionally has there ever been) a clear and sharp distinction between the various sects. All roads lead to God, for as the *Song of the Blessed One* says: "Whatever form of worship a devout person may desire, that faith has My support. A person attached to a form of such a faith seeks to pay homage to it and to entreat what he desires from it, as I have determined. People of little understanding obtain limited



The abbot of Marpha

Nomads from East at Ghaling





Fording the Gandaki near Kagbeni



The entrance of the grotto of Samar



Shrine dedicated to a demon guarding the village.

benefits. Those who sacrifice to the gods go to the gods, those who are devoted to Me enter into Me." (VII, 21, 23).

Hanuman's monkey-headed statue glitters demoniacally in the sun, brandishing his carmine-covered axe in his right hand. It gives its name to the hill, which is called Hanuman banjang. A big crowd has gathered; it is the climax of the festival of Durga, the main festival of the Indian religious calendar. The goats and buffalos donated for the sacrifices which are soon to take place lie unsuspectingly in the sun on a piece of open ground near the temple. There is nowhere to set up camp, and we have to go down to the village far below and pitch our tents on the parade ground. There is no peace even here.

The 26th of September is the *daśamī*, the tenth day of the new moon and the end of the festival, which reaches a pitch of telluric frenzies.

The village is dominated from above by the temple of Kālī in a wing of the palace from which Prithvi Narayan set off on this conquest of Nepal. Perched on the summit of the hill, and commanding an immense panorama, the massive structure is the dark red colour of clotted blood. The walls, solid as the bastions of a fortress, are pitted by a few square windows framed by heavy borders of carved wood, as if they scorned the light. The broad overhang of the roof is supported by beams decorated on their underside by restless figures dancing, playing musical instruments, making threatening gestures. Prithvi Narayan's throne (*gaddi*) is preserved inside the building.

The temple is closed; they open it only on the eighth day of each fortnight.

Over the years, jagged crevices and fissures have appeared in the walls, like scars on an old soldier's face. The King's palace and the goddess's temple are one and the same, for Prithvi Narayan led his troops to victory under the banner and the protection of that ruthless, rapacious deity. Kālī wanted blood, and the warrior kept his promise to satisfy her deadly thirst.

The climb up to the temple is never-ending, steep and hot, with the sun reflecting off the rocks. A colourful crowd has come in from the nearby villages, and they gather in the courtyard, swarm over the branching paths inside, and then follow behind the symbol of the goddess, shouting and singing psalms as arquebus shots resound through the valley to signal their pauses. The receptacle of the divinity is carried to a shady pipal tree on a peak about a kilometer away so that the goddess can marry the god who lives there. Once the nuptials are over the procession returns to the temple, guided by the head priest, resplendent in his yellow and red silk robes.

Of course there is no image. Ancient ideas survive in this cult. The goddess symbolises the power of growth, which bursts forth in the tangled forests and nourishes the life of man through the gift of the harvest. In the beginning her power was brought down among human beings not in a statue but on nine leaves (barley, rice, wheat, and so on). Her descent takes place by stages: her first temporary abode is in a *bilva* tree (*Aegle marmelos*), and the hidden deity is transferred from here to the nine leaves, with a twig of *bilva* in the centre. The eight leaves arranged around it represent the eight Mothers. They also are goddesses, capricious givers of life and its sequel, death. Iconographical representation developed later, but has never completely replaced the ancient rite. In Bengal, the goddess is depicted with eight or ten arms, mounted on a lion, in the act of killing Mahisasura, the demon with a buffalo's body, i.e. death, since in India death is represented in the form of a buffalo. The image, which is usually made of clay, becomes the temporary dwelling-place of

the deity which the priests bring down to it. A particle of her inexhaustible fullness is attracted by the power of the ceremony and trapped in the statue, and that breath, which guarantees her presence in the world of mortals, will be closed in there until the end of the ritual. Then, on the last day, other liturgies will bring about its release (*visarjana*). The sacred communion is over; the holy particle is reunited with the goddess; and the faithful weep and sing as the statue, now just a lifeless lump, is thrown into the pond or river to dissolve. But even in Bengal the nine leaves are an essential part of the ritual. According to ancient tradition the statue cannot come to life without their help in bringing about the manifestation of the deity. In Nepal the ceremony is carried out in accordance with the original rites. The goddess takes no form; she is in the nine leaves. It is still not felt necessary for that tremendous all-pervading life-giving force to be represented anthropomorphically.

The festival is a thanksgiving after the rice harvest, and a prayer or entreaty that the earth will not withhold its gift of fertility after the Winter rest. Like all rustic ceremonies this festival has retained the wildness and the horrors of ancient orgies and sacrifices. Primordial crudity still persists in the ruthless slaughter which is an essential part of the ritual, to restore strength to the wearied blood.

The solemn procession passes before us. Under a canopy the nine leaves are held by a young woman dressed in costly vestments and richly adorned with jewels. At regular intervals temple attendants fire off an enthusiastic salute with ancient arquebuses, for safety's sake standing a little way off and using a long cord to operate the trigger. Trumpets blare, people shout, babies howl: the exultant crowd is invoking the awful presence.

The throng increases as gaily dressed people hurry in over long distances from neighbouring villages. But a hidden shudder runs underneath the rejoicing and shouting. Thousands of goats are sacrificed over these days, but the main offering, the solemn sacrifice which brings the festival to its climax, is a buffalo. The poor animal is tied to a post in the courtyard, standing motionless in the sun as if resigned to its imminent death. Its neck is garlanded with flowers, its head, daubed red with carmine, fixed in sorrowing immobility. The temple servants pass by again and again, carrying their sharpened axes on their shoulders, and the courtyard stones are dark with the blood of slaughtered animals. Night falls with the sudden transition from light to dark one finds in countries near the Equator. The people take their places and prepare to spend the night in the holy enclosure over which the divine presence breathes, invisible but real. I return to camp. The trees and mountains, motionless and detached, stand out against the clear night sky; the rhythm of the temple drum comes down to the valley through the silence, mournfully marking the passing of time.

The sound is never-ending, beating like some evil omen in the vastness of the night. Scraps of prayers and hymns reach us on sudden gusts of wind: the faithful singing tirelessly in honour of the goddess. Then, towards dawn, the drum-beats become more rapid, the rhythms faster. The moment is at hand. As the first tremor of dawn runs through the sky, an explosion of shouts and drum-beats announces that it is all over. Then, briefly, silence. Death, even the death of an animal, is always awesome. Life, confronted by its own limits, is struck dumb. The priest has beheaded the victim with a single stroke, and its blood flows on the ground, giving strength and consolation to the goddess, the custodian of life. Kali eagerly drinks the blood, and the offering renews her spent powers. At the same moment hundreds of buffalo heads fall in hundreds of other villages:

the blood-price for future harvests. Throughout Nepal, near every group of houses, the doleful passage of sacrifice is marked by the two posts driven into the ground to hold the animal still.

As if to distract their minds, men women and children play on swings throughout this festival. This is the only amusement which relieves the monotony of their dreary lives, and then it is only for a few days—the few days of the festival. Then the swings are taken down and no more is seen of them until the following year.

The women will go on working in the fields, the porters will go on travelling over the dangerous tracks. They file off together, one behind the other, along the narrow paths which rise from the rice-fields to scale the rocks, bent, like Dante's damned, under their heavy loads, silent as if through fear of a curse or sorrow for their sins.

The Gurkhas inherited an ancient tradition and made it their own. In a cave where Goraknath is said to have lived among tridents and other Shivaist symbols, I discover a large inscription from the Gupta period. It must date from the seventh century; the characters are so worn that there is no point in making a rubbing. We try to photograph it, but without much hope. A little way away, right on the hilltop, stands the temple of Shiva. In the middle of a small open space there is a four-sided column—the *linga*—at the top of which are four carved faces of the god. The priests attached to the temple (*pujari*) are spurred into action by the generous donation which is always necessary to melt their silent mistrust, and they bustle about showing me all the hidden corners. But apart from the inscription and the *linga* I find nothing of artistic or archaeological interest. These *pujari* belong to the Gorakṣa sect (Gorakṣapanth) which is also called "*Kanphat*", "the ones with pierced ears", because of the large holes in their ear-lobes, from which hang big hoops of bone.

We stay an extra day in Gorkha, because twelve of our porters have a fever—from over-indulging themselves, perhaps, or the illness may have been brought on by the exertions of the journey. There is not much to see in the village apart from a temple of Shiva, in front of which there is a kneeling statue of the ox Nandin, the awful god's servant and steed. The nearby temple of Vishnu is more recent. Three inscriptions are all I manage to glean from my archaeological ramble in the village of Gorkha.

The camp has become a medical clinic. The people have heard of Guttuso's dedication and skill, and they flock to him for help: the inquistitive, the incurable, the dying who have come to hear the sad verdict. The relatives are undaunted by the doctor's opinion when I translate it for them, and calmly tell the sick one of his inevitable fate, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. But even the sufferer is not disturbed by the news; no anxiety shows on his pain-worn and withered face. It is as if a magician has come. There are deaf people wanting their hearing back (and this miracle is often performed, by clearing out plugs of wax), and blind people wanting their sight, and consumptives, and people with typhus. Their doctors come too, the *kaviraj*. There are two of them in Gorkha, and both of them speak Sanskrit well. The older of the two speaks it excellently; he has studied in Benares and his Sanskrit is elaborate and fluent. He chats about all sorts of things, from philosophy to medicine. He assures me he can cure malaria too, with extracts and decoctions of various vines—basak, kulahuka and khirahita (*sida cordifolia*). The other, younger one asks Guttuso for advice and medicine because for three months one of his wives "has not been blooming" (*puṣpavati na sanjātā*).

Even up here cracks are beginning to show in the ancient way of life. Its custodians are starting to have doubts; many fallacies are being discredited by scientific evidence. But there is still arrogance, and the Brahmins are full of it. Like the impoverished descendants of a once-rich family, they cannot take in such a change of image, they cannot adapt, they shut themselves up in the ivory tower of their own conceit and do not realise that the time is approaching when nobody will care any more whether or not they were born from Brahma's head while others came from the belly or the feet.

As evening comes on, calm descends, and even the plants, stilled as the wind drops, seem to be gravely admiring the warm serenity of the sunset. Little by little night quenches the fire of the last light burning on the far-off wooded hills, and then there is only the moon and the silence. Then the most charming singing begins to waft in from the village: a melody with a trace of sadness, accompanied by the soft notes of an accordion. It is like an invitation, and I go towards it. Guttuso comes with me. The people are sitting in the entrance of a house, singing the *Bhāvanīstotra*, the hymn to Bhāvanī which a doubtful tradition attributes to Shankara, one of the greatest Indian thinkers. I sit down amongst them and feel so moved by the sweet melody that almost unconsciously I start to beat out the rhythms along with them. Bhavani, the Great Mother, the ungraspable force which brings life and death to all things, who feeds like a mother and kills like an ambushing robber, through her own inexhaustible power, playing eternally with this vain and futile world.

(1) I have no father, no mother, no friends, grandchildren, sons, daughters, none. I have no servants, no master, no wife. I have no knowledge nor wealth. You are my only help, only you, O Bhāvanī.

(2) I have fallen into the boundless ocean of life, terrified by the great suffering in store for me, full of desires and greed, stupid, caught forever in the snare of the sad rotation of births and deaths. You are my only help, only you, O Bhāvanī.

(3) I know not the virtue of charity, nor of meditation. I know nothing of the holy scriptures, of hymns or invocations. I know no rites nor liturgies. You are my only help, only you, O Bhāvanī.

(4) I know not the meaning of merit, and I know nothing of pilgrimages, nor of deliverance, nor of control of the mind. I do not know what devotion nor strict vows might be. You are my only help, only you, O Bhāvanī.

(5) I have done evil things, I have consorted with evil companions, I am an evil servant. I have not respected the family customs. I have stored up nothing but sins. My beliefs and words have always been evil. You are my only help, only you, O Bhāvanī.

(6) I know no god, not Brahma, nor Vishnu, nor Shiva, nor Indra, nor the Sun nor the Moon. I know no other god but you, who are my refuge. You are my only help, only you, O Bhāvanī.



Nepalese women's ornaments. Top right, the K'yun



Annapurna from the north.

The abbot of Charang in his chapel



(7) In disputes, when I am overthrown, in the hour of glory or in exile, in water, in fire, in the mountains and among my enemies, in the loneliness of the forest, protect me always, O my refuge. You are my only help, only you, O Bhāvanī.

(8) I am alone, poor, subject to age and illness, always worn down and afflicted, prostrate, plunged in grief, finished for ever. You are my only help, only you, O Bhāvanī.”

CHAPTER VI

FROM GORKHA TO POKHARA

Camps 10-15

September 27 - October 3

The track from Gorkha to Pokhara winds up and downhill the whole time. Right after Gorkha we plunge down into the valley, engulfed in a jungle stinking of decay. Then suddenly our way is barred by the broad and turbulent Darandi (Dharmavati) in full flood. No sign of a bridge: we must try to ford it, but it is a risky business against this strong current. We look for the shallowest place, to make our crossing safer. One of the porters, the youngest and most energetic, makes several attempts, but he is driven back every time. Maybe we can all try together, holding hands to make a chain, as I have often done in Tibet. We are still talking this over when we are overtaken by Tarus from nearby villages—these people make their living by river crossings. Each one of us, including the porters, gets between two of them, with his arms round their necks; they prop us up from each side, with their hands clasped behind our backs, and one by one we give ourselves up to the powerful chest-high current. These tribes live in the water and by the water: they are so in harmony with the rivers that they seem to be able to see where they are putting their feet under the tumbling waves. They dart and leap about as if they are in their natural element; if they are caught by the current they are up again right away, swimming and walking at the same time. But two of our porters, the oldest ones, are nearly swept away along with their loads; the only one to get across by himself is Narayan. We see him skipping over the waves, his right hand holding his umbrella up high to keep it dry—but then he belongs to this caste too.

We set up camp at Koplant, almost at the top of the pass, in a tropical landscape. Flocks of squawking parrots dart about; monkeys, chattering and inquisitive, leap from branch to branch. On a hilltop some little boys are swinging quite unconcernedly on a swing hanging over a cliff from the branch of a tree. Every village has a swing nearby. They are all different sizes: some are wheel-shaped (*ruti ping*), others hang from a frame (*linge ping*). Not far away stands the post (*yūpa*) used for tying up the victims of traditional sacrifices. The villages are getting more frequent. They are small—just a few houses—but there are a lot of them.

Once outside the capital it seems as if the people are unable to get away from the land and gather together in towns. Even the places they call towns—Pokhara, Palpa, Butwal—are more like

big bazaars or rural provisioning centres. The villages are strung out along the tracks, slowly overcoming jungle and rock as they mount the hills where they lie and watch over the sloping green fields.

The houses, made of earth, are covered with a reddish plaster which makes them look deceptively like the brick mansions of the towns. At the front they have an open veranda where the people live and die in the open air. They are more noticeable at night than in the daytime, dotting the empty darkness with the tremulous glimmer of their lanterns.

Man lives close to nature, and not only in the physical sense. It is like a continuation of the primordial state of unity, when men neither opposed nor interpreted nature, but accepted it as it was, unprotestingly taking part in its delights and its terrors. There are no temples or pagodas, no images of the gods or complicated rituals; a tree and a stone are the symbol and the abode of the gods. And the gods themselves are capricious and inconstant, like forces of nature. Chaos and impulse have not yet given way to the intellect and the will. Indian philosophy has conquered the valley and accounts for the disconcerting extravagances of Nepalese art, but it has not yet reached these areas to transform ancient myth and primordial wonder into symbols. Shiva—or rather the parallel and related entities which Hinduism assimilated into the figure of Shiva—was born in the labyrinth of this jungle and in the shadow of these mountains. He still retains his ambiguous nature: god of life and god of death, god without mercy, as merciless as this existence which drags us into the light and then deprives us of it, indiscriminately.

Life is suffering; it is more than suffering. It is a nightmare, a plot, not only because of the threat of death which lies in ambush on every side, but because there is no happiness, perhaps only pain and anguish under the burning sun, in the waters which nourish and destroy, in the forests where life runs wild until it suffocates and chokes itself.

Going through these valleys is like going back to the beginnings. You have an ill-defined feeling of wariness, a feeling that someone is watching or following you, or that there is a trap or some danger, and it is nothing to do with the snakes slithering across the path or the animals lurking in the forests or the mists. It is something more than that: an absolute and cosmic fear.

Our second camp is at Raisar, scattered over a high and windy plain. We are approaching the Machapuchare, and its cleft peak can be seen above the hills rising towards it, which take on an unearthly misty purple tint at sunset. We have met many Muslims along the way; this is a Muslim island wedged into the heart of the Himalayas, possibly a Hindu community converted by force at the time of the short-lived invasions, or survivors of migrations from India. They are industrious and active—many have become small traders and there are swarms of them in all the markets.

The track widens out and runs between cactus hedges. Sleeping larvae are rolled in the transparent maze of the delicate webs spun there by the industrious insects which proliferate in the warm humidity. They look like festive ornaments hung beside the path in honour of important visitors or religious processions. Behind them the green burden of flowering banana trees and papayas sways in the sun. Every now and again the paths are blocked by wooden fences or low stone walls so that walking along them is a matter of constant—sometimes uncomfortable—gymnastics. This is how they prevent their flocks from grazing on land belonging to other villages; each fence marks a boundary.

The path is marked by pairs of pipal trees (*ficus indica*) or of pipal and shami (*prosopis spicigera*) which have wide stone bases to protect the sacred trees and to provide a comfortable place for traders to rest in the shade. So the low wall of the base is usually the right height for the

porters to rest their loads on, lifting the weight off their shoulders without actually taking the load right off. They lean against the support with their feet on the ground. Pipal and shami are much revered. At the dawn of civilisation, fire was first made by rubbing together two pieces of wood—one of pippala and the other of shami—and this wonder imbued the two trees with an enduring holiness. And anyone who plants them or protects them in the way described above makes much merit both for his piety to the gods and for his charity towards human beings, so it is not unusual to find a permanent record of the benefactor in inscriptions carved in the stone of these shady resting places.

We pause before starting the descent, so as not to get too far ahead of the porters. We are sitting on the ground in the shade of a pipal, using the binoculars to explore the places and peaks ahead of us, when a young boy comes up slowly and squats down near us. He obviously very much wants to start a conversation and look through the things too. We read his thoughts and hold the field-glasses out to him. As he is running his eyes over the mountains which he has seen all his life, but which now seem so huge and close, another boy comes up. He is scantily dressed, his forehead is disfigured by three parallel stripes of sandalwood paste, and a pigtail dangles from the top of his shaven head. Our friend abandons the view, leaps to his feet, then bows and reverently touches the newcomer's feet with both hands. And this sign of respect is accepted calmly, absent-mindedly, as if it were an obligation or duty. The newcomer is a Brahmin, whose expressionless face is in striking contrast to the peasant's open features. He plants himself bolt upright, looking at the boy and at us. He is dying to try the gadget and see what it is for, but the dignity of his caste checks him and holds him back. He stays still for a while, torn between the two opposing feelings, but curiosity wins in the end and he takes the binoculars out of the other boy's hand, begins to look, and goes on looking. Then they begin to pass them back and forth, pointing out places and villages. The caste gap has been closed.

On the way down we go into a region where there is a black fever epidemic; on every veranda there are pale and feverish sufferers wrapped in filthy rags. If the government does not take immediate steps the whole district will soon be depopulated. Even the babies are suffering from it and their swollen stomachs bulge above their skinny legs. In the meantime the magician is their only source of help. A gaunt and hollow-eyed young woman kneels outside a hovel in front of a man who is muttering formulas of exorcism, at the same time striking her on the head with a bundle of twigs. She is being treated. The magician kindly allows Guttuso to examine the patient, but there is nothing more to be done.

Meanwhile groups of singing pilgrims are passing by on their way back from a nearby shrine. The girls' heads are all aglitter, their shining raven hair topped with great gold hoops, and with glistening flowers twined into the knot of hair behind their necks. Their foreheads are marked with flour paste and carmine and grains of rice as a sign of the divine grace printed there by the priest after the morning rites.

There is nothing special about Tarughat bazaar—the usual fabrics, salt, tea, cigarettes. In a shop the flies swarm back and forth between the fruit scattered on the ground and the hideous tropical ulcer eating into the shopkeeper's rotting flesh.

The rice-fields spread out—once more we are swimming, not walking—and as if that were not enough it starts to rain again. A young woman, her face marked by illness and pain, stands waiting for us on the porch of a hut beside the track. She does not speak, but points tiredly, disconsolately,

to a naked baby lying on a heap of rags. The skin stretched over his spindly bones looks like a dark varnish; you would have taken him for a mummy, had it not been for the slight movement which shook him every so often. I forget now what illness it was, but the child was at the point of death. In another corner the grandmother lay dying. There was no man there; perhaps he was already dead.

We get to Kuncha after dark; the porters arrive tired out in the middle of the night. We set up the tents under a *pippala* tree and eat about eleven o'clock. Tents, beds, bedding—everything is soaking. Someone comes for Guttuso; a woman is dying.

Before Kuncha there was a path pointing northwards to Lamjung where fugitives from Chitor, Dravya Shah's ancestors, so tradition goes, carved out a tiny state in the mountains. Prithvi Narayan, the conqueror from Gorkha who united the whole of Nepal under his austere rule, is said to be descended from him.

A perpendicular stone slab rising from the ground near our camp appears to be a menhir: it would be the first prehistoric monument to be discovered in Nepal. We are continually crossing rivers. We have crossed three in three days—the Chepa, the Kudi, and now the Madi (Matsyagati) which we cross by a suspension bridge at Sisaghat. Everywhere and always there are rice-fields and water, and that terrible stench of rotteness and decay is in the air. The people's dreary faces are marked by disease. The water even stays with us on the ascent to Deolali, as it falls onto the path from the terraced fields rising on both sides of it. At Deolali one can breathe again and our spirits rise as we feel the mountain breeze. We are about to stop for lunch in the shade of a leafy shami tree when the village head asks us to move. This is a sacred tree, and nearby is the stone where sacrifices are made, anointed with butter and red with carmine. Since we are not of the Hindu faith we are unclean, and we should not contaminate the holy place. The gods live in the minds of believers, and the devotion which collects around a symbol over the ages is the only remaining vestige of generations of the faithful who have risen from nothingness and returned to nothingness. This devotion is invisible but the chosen spirits are always aware of it. It impregnates the revered symbol, caresses it, and gives it special significance, making it different from all other things like it, which are in comparison mute or dead. Ramakrishna acknowledged this when he said one should kneel where others have prayed, for in a place where others have prayed one finds the presence of God.

There is no need for temples—just the tree and the stone. With the juxtaposition and overlapping of religions that one finds in Nepal, pockets devoted to Shiva, that terrible god whose power creates all and destroys all, alternate with more serene islands attached to Visnu, where there is no slaughter or sacrifice. You recognise them by the simple little shrine, if the word can even be used for a kind of square altar in the middle of the road or in front of a house, where the *tulsi* plant—the basil, sacred to the benevolent god—grows among a pattern of flowers.

Last night the relatives of the sick woman at Kuncha came to ask for a catheter which Guttuso had used the other day to bring her some relief—they came about fifty kilometers on foot to get it. Tonight they bring it back; the woman is dead.

Finally, after five fords and more of the interminable ricefields which spread over the plain as far as the surrounding belt of hills, we arrive at Pokhara. We are out of the thick of the jungle. Half-way, at Argaon Poa, we once again see a temple built in the traditional Nepalese style. It is dedicated to Bhimsen. It is not very old and I find no inscriptions, but it indicates that we are out of

the rural area and are getting close to a town.

Pokhara is on the western side of a broad and fertile valley which used to be more intensively cultivated than it is today; we come across more and more signs of abandoned fields. Pokhara owes its name to the lakes gleaming on the plain: Pivatal, Begnastal and Rupatal. It is said to be the largest town after Kathmandu, but it is not really a town at all, it is an enormous bazaar winding along one endless street. It supplies the whole of the vast surrounding district, and is a very important junction as it is the meeting-place of the road to Marabhot and the pass of the same name which leads into Tibet, the Kali Gandaki road and the Tansing (Palpa) road. Because of its position it is bound to see a great expansion, particularly once the defences of Nepal are reorganised.

It is a provincial capital, with a Governor, a court of justice and a detachment of soldiers. As soon as we arrive we set up camp between the public school (pathaśālā), a little temple to Visṇu and a retreat where young Brahmins are instructed in the holy scriptures. So it is not an ideal spot, but it is the best there is. The river Seti (Śvetā Gandakī) plunges by almost vertically beneath us. We are now close to the Machapuchare and it stands right in front of us, sullen in its inviolate majesty, two tremendous pyramids which suddenly spread apart, giving the mountain its name—"fish-tails". We try to make out the path ahead of us among the gorges.

After a wash, we pay a courtesy call on the Governor, Puran Singh, the one who led the rebels against the Ranas' army and took Bhiringanj. He is a military man with a brisk manner and quick black eyes sparkling in a square-jawed face. He was aide to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, who is hailed by the Indians, especially in Bengal, as one of the major authors of their independence, and who was killed in a plane crash in Burma while he was commander of the Indian troops fighting beside the Japanese against the English. He is very surprised to hear that I was a friend of the great Bengalese patriot, and his welcome becomes warmer. He introduces us to his wife, a vivacious lady who makes a great fuss of Signorina Bonardi. Neither woman understands the other's language, but they get on very well together.

Puran Singh has risen from the ranks of the people. He is well aware of the difficulties facing the new Nepalese government. In his opinion the greatest obstacles are apathetic orthodoxy and timorous mistrust of anything foreign and new. He is a great admirer of Mao Tse Tung, a not unusual attitude also in India, where the new China's progress is followed with sympathetic interest. This sympathy does not, of course, cancel out their concern about the 3,500-kilometer frontier between the two countries and about Chinese acts of revenge which sometimes affect Indian interests and Indian sensitivities, but the fact remains that India admires the efforts her sister nation is making to build an independent way of life and free herself from the economic, political and social limitations which have hampered her development. Asia is united in this new consciousness of itself and in the clear and determined desire to rid itself forever of every sort of foreign domination or interference. This does not mean that Asia is refusing to cooperate with the West. Asia does not want to turn inwards on itself, so long as the West does not force it to by clinging to prejudices and interests of its own which ought to be quickly and sincerely abandoned. Asia has now come into history with the riches of its spiritual tradition, the liveliness of its talent, the abundance of its wealth, and the West must recognize and adapt itself to the new and irreversible situation.

This Asian unity, which results from deep spiritual affinities and which is strengthened by

the errors of the West, binds the nations of the East together to such an extent that when an injury is done to one of them the others are offended too, and any differences they may have between them are relegated to second place.

The Governor's palace at Pokhara is a small and dilapidated fort; the few pieces of furniture are lost in the bare and empty rooms. This simplicity, which looks like downright poverty, is in keeping with the character of Puran Singh, who is no lover of useless objects. He himself recounts that when he came back from prison he reproached his wife because she had used some savings to buy some modest pieces of jewellery. In short, he lives in the frugal style which is one of the most prized virtues of many Indian statesmen. Nothing could be plainer than the halls of the Rasthrapati Bhavan in Delhi, which the British built with such imperial magnificence and which is now the home of the President of the Republic, Rajendra Prasad; nothing could be less ostentatious than those open-air meetings of Congress, with the Ministers and leaders sitting cross-legged on the ground; nothing could be more frugal than the meals served in Pandit Nehru's garden, yet no one is more open and friendly than he is. He seems to be without pride, almost unaware of those powers of intellect and humanity which make him, in my opinion, the foremost of all living statesmen, the most understanding and the most concerned with moral questions. And in Nepal too, the leaders who came up with the revolution have not changed their old way of life. Even the King avoids the ostentatious luxury the Indian princes loved to surround themselves with, and this is the best way to stay close to the people and the best protection against the arrogance which is not rare in this petty world of ours, where politics too often becomes a way of making a profit, rather than a matter of self-denial for the common good. In India, and in other countries reached by his influence, Gandhi still stands as an example: a man who always travelled third class and lived in the purest poverty.

Our porters are exhausted; some of them can go no further. The one with elephantiasis has another attack of the illness, and is running a temperature of 40°C, another man is delirious with bronchial pneumonia, and a third is at the point of death from typhus. It is harvest time, so everyone is busy in the fields and it is hard to find replacement porters. It is only through the Governor's intervention that we are able to scrape together about ten men, and then a medical check-up shows that only five of them are fit enough to stand up to the hardships ahead of us. Almost all of them have had malaria, and their livers and spleens are enlarged.

The temples scattered through the bazaar, constructed in the usual Nepalese pagoda style, are not old and provide further proof that the cultural and artistic life of the country was all developed and refined in the Bagmati valley, and only half-spent waves of it reached here much later on. We are at the edge of a culture which has penetrated a much more primitive background. Pokhara was part of those twenty-four states cramped together around the basin of the Seven Gandakis, governed by local dynasties, and lacking the verve and creativity of the true Nepal. The main temple is dedicated to Vindhyaśinī, "the lady of Vindhya", the chain of mountains crossing the Deccan. Vindhyaśinī later merged with Durga, but southern origins are still evident in the name. This is what one finds in Nepal: the introduction and gradual spread of cults and divinities and schools which prevail in the south, and which serve to demonstrate a spiritual bond between the two remote regions. This is due to the restless migration of the sadhu, ascetics, pilgrims whose faith impelled them towards the Himalayan peaks in pursuit of the more luminously clear epiphany of the gods in these mountains. At the same time, this bond was animated by the adventures of some Karnata

warrior families who left their home and founded small principalities in north-east India, Bihar and West Bengal, right up to the gateways of Nepal (Simraon). In this way Ambā, Bhāvanī, worshipped at Tulajāpur in Hyderabad, became the patron goddess of the Maithila dynasty which Harisimha founded at Simraon in 1325. The Newars constructed a great temple to her as Talejumā in Kathmandu, where the Malla kings also took her as their own patron. The Indian Olympus had the weight of a long and well-defined tradition behind its myths, and was suffused with the attractions of a subtle theosophy which could explain all things and accommodate all things. Once it had entered these valleys it became supreme over the aboriginal religions, not repudiating them but wisely declaring that the terrible powers of the local religion were reflections or glimpses of the same supreme being. And so the peoples of Nepal found that they were Hindu without experiencing the shock of denying their old religion, and Hinduisim added to the multiple values of its own symbols.

As I had expected, the temple of Vindhyavāsini is recent, I think a hundred years old at the most, but it has become very well known. For this reason a shelter for pilgrims and ascetics has been built nearby in a peaceful orchard. A sadhu sits motionless in the shade of a tree, his eyes half-closed, journeying through the spaces of the spirit. Ajboy is looking after the temple and the daily rituals. A number of families take it in turn to be responsible for the place and the worship, and to benefit from the small donations of the faithful, like members of a cooperative sharing the burdens and profits of the business they hold in common.

The people living in Pokhara are mostly Newars, but Gurungs and Magars come in from the surrounding hills. Some of the traders are Thakalis, natives of Mustang, who speak Tibetan too and keep up frequent business contacts with Tibetan merchants.

The camp has become a medical clinic: we have an average of about fifty patients a day. Guttuso devotes himself to the sufferers in every way, but unfortunately our supply of medicines is limited and we have to use them sparingly, as we do not know what may await us on the next stage of our journey towards the Himalayas. Our experience so far has not been encouraging. Signorina Bonardi acts as nurse, and I act as interpreter. An asthma sufferer, who comes each day for the usual injection, is improving visibly, but he is not content with what science can do, and wants to be protected by divine intervention as well. A sadhu sits under a tree at the edge of the camp. His expression is sweet and lively, he is naked apart from a brief cloth held up by a string tied round his hips to conceal what ought not to be seen, and his head and body are sprinkled with ash. He spends the night in the same cross-legged position, motionless under the pippala tree, indifferent to the heat and the cold and the rain. Our men call him the *mahatma* and give him rice and fruit, glad to have this venerable guardian to watch over them and the fortunes of the camp. In the evening, when the sun goes down, the sadhu chants holy psalms in Sanskrit or Hindi, praising in turn many gods of the Indian Olympus. The river runs by below us, night falls, and with it a subtle emanation of mystic sweetness. The asthmatic just treated by Guttuso runs to the sadhu, bows, repeatedly gives him a few coins, and asks him to recite the appropriate prayers. The sadhu places his hands on his head, scatters some flowers on a crumpled greasy little book he always carries with him, and mutters the relevant formulas. The sick man now doubly protected, by medicine and by the gods, feels he is on the road to health. Another talkative sadhu comes poking inquisitively about the camp. He is a fine-looking old man, lean, active, fine-featured, a Brahmin by birth (but the sadhus, once they renounce the world, belong to no caste—they are outside and above all conventions and stand-

ards). This one has been to Muktiñath and he tells us that along the way some thieves stole his clothes and left him shivering in the cold, but he laughs about it as if it were an enjoyable joke they had played on him, just about the funniest thing in the world.

“He who is always the same with friend and with enemy, when he is honoured and when he is humiliated, in cold and in heat, in joy and in sorrow, free from all attachments, putting the same value on praise and blame, silent, content with whatever happens to him, without a home, resolute of mind, devoted to me, this man is dear to me.

(*Bhagavadgītā*, XII, 18–19).”

He has been everywhere, from Afghanistan to the banks of the Syrdarya, from Burma to Singapore, and all over India of course. He is one of those itinerant sadhus, always on the move like never-resting migratory birds, the missionaries of Indian culture in the most remote and difficult regions, and the makers of that spiritual unity which links all souls from the Himalaya to Sri Lanka and beyond. This is what the Buddhist apostles must have been like. Full of holy fervour, they carried the Buddha’s message from one end of Asia to the other, from Iran to Central Asia, from China to Java, willing to undergo every kind of hardship and danger, homeless because the earth is their home and the sky their roof, filled with that inner joy and serenity which dispels all sadness and all human conflict.

CHAPTER VII
FROM POKHARA TO TATOPANI

Camps 16-20

October 9-13

The expedition, notably refreshed, leaves Pokhara and heads for Tatopani in the Kali Gandaki valley. The Pokhara porters are young and sturdy and, above all, cheerful. Those other sad, sickly, unsmiling faces became tedious in the long run, involuntarily communicating a secret sorrow, anguish almost, which weighed on the spirit like dampness in the air.

The path starts to climb immediately. As usual, it is a relentless series of ascents and descents, but at least the rice-fields have disappeared and we can walk on solid ground. We are going along the crest of a chain of hills which dominate the Pokhara valley and its lakes. Smaller hills fall away on either side, massed together like frightened, sheep until they collide with the sombre wall of the Himalaya to the north. We are now in a very different cultural region: there are many ruined castles on the peaks overlooking our path, their walls constructed of irregular stones placed one on top of the other without the use of lime or earth to fill the spaces between them. Sarang Kot, then Kaski Kot, then Purana Kaski Kot. Barley and wheat alternate with the rice which is still cultivated on terraces perched audaciously one above the other. The houses are no longer rectangular, but mostly shaped like a routunda or apse. The climate is drier, and the track is buffeted by the wind; the trees are more widely spaced, short and knobby, bearing the marks of their grim battles against the gale. The people are mostly Bhamans and Chettris, of the brahmin and warrior castes. Little square structures like pens on the highest peaks are temples dedicated to the goddess Kali or her various manifestations, the feared and propitiated protectors of the little communities below. At irregular intervals along the path, which is in some places wide enough to be called a road, there are big boulders with the distance in Kos from one place to another written on them, usually in Persian characters. We are in what used to be the Kingdom of the Shahs until Prithvi Narayan, who according to the chronicles was descended from the same stock, brought it to an end. They were a war-like people who brought with them traditions of good military architecture, and liked to settle on hilltops, avoiding the plains. It is said to have been one of Bhupal's descendants, escaped from the Chitor massacre, who founded the principality of Kaski kot. At Palpa I chanced to discover some chapters from an epic poem in which a court poet celebrated the fierce struggle by which Prithvi

Narayan conquered this fort.

We reach Kaski kot at dusk. The violent wind practically uproots our tents, and for the first time we suffer from a water shortage: one muddy stinking pond is the only source of supply for the village, and it is used by both people and buffalos. Nearly all the local people suffer from scabies and itches. We drink nothing that night, apart from a few sips of tea left in our flasks. We are not welcomed very warmly, either. They will not let us camp in a sheltered space a few hundred metres from the village because it is near a temple to Kālī and the goddess does not like to be disturbed. All three of us spend a sleepless night; it feels as if our tents will be swept away at any moment. An owl has settled in a tree and snorts until daybreak—nothing chases him away, not even throwing stones at him. And Guttuso's mirror gets broken.

The Modi Bazaar road winds along the watershed among the remains of ancient houses. Remarkable ruins of castles (or temples?) can be seen on the hills above Naudanda. A number of evenly spaced upright monoliths near the track look like the pillars of a large ruined edifice. The track divides shortly beyond Naudanda. One branch goes to Baglung and the other, which we take, goes on to Tatopani. There are more ruins at Dhanekunda, showing that these almost deserted places were once prosperous and densely peopled. Along the track there are large deep water-tanks, their sides protected by walls and with steps to go down to the water-level, but now they are crumbling in the sun. In the centre there still stands a wooden column where they used to attach a metallic trident, the arms and symbol of Siva, during the festival of that omnipotent god (the Māhaśivarātri) which takes place on the fourteenth day of the month of Magha (January–February). Then the war came, and afterwards the villages were not resurrected. Once Prithvi Narayan had unified Nepal and brought these areas under his control, there was no more reason to live up on these windy waterless hilltops. The people had lost their independence but gained security, and they came down to the valleys.

Suddenly the track plunges down through the forest to the Modi river. We camp about a kilometre from the bazaar almost on the banks of the river, which sounds like a train thundering by. At evening roll-call a porter is found to be missing with a box of medical supplies; he has drunk three rupees worth of rakshi (three rupees is a fortune for these people) and has been left behind on the track, more dead than alive. Tomorrow morning we will send some of the others to meet him and bring him to the camp.

There is a long and very steep climb to Ulleri, a little Magar village on this side of the pass of the same name which looks down on the Kali Gandaki valley. It is dark when the porters straggle in one by one. The ones from Kathmandu are puffed out; the new men are far superior, apart from one or two who drink too much. At Ulleri the cook really goes too far and makes me lose my patience. Shortly after we left Pokhara I noticed that we were being accompanied by a woman: she was young, plump, not pretty, and when I looked at her, trying to make out who she was and what she was doing, she bashfully covered her face. They told me she was the wife of one of our porters, and had come to meet her husband at Pokhara to travel on pilgrimage with him as far as Muktinath, but I was not entirely convinced, as he was the oldest and most catarrhal porter we had, and there was too great a difference in their ages. However, nobody wanted to discuss it, including Celestino (our nickname for the leader who had got himself new celestial blue clothes in Pokhara). Finally,

under pressure, Celestino talked. The woman was our cook Narayan's wife, and not the old man's. Narayan had another wife and children in Kathmandu, but he had fallen in love with this girl in Pokhara and brought this second mate along with him, deferring marriage until their return, with the full consent of her parents. This action on his part was most unsuitable and awkward, and a serious breach of discipline, since I had been kept in the dark about the whole thing. I called Narayan and instructed him to send the girl straight back to her parents, but he just laughed rudely and even began stirring up the Kathmandu porters who unanimously told me that if the girl was not allowed to come with her husband, they would refuse to go any further and would turn back, along with the rebellious couple. There was no time to lose. I summoned Narayan again and in front of everyone I reminded him of his responsibilities. My manner and expression were so forceful that the girl left the next morning and Narayan and all the porters, much subdued, went back to their work.

At this time the sadhu revealed his true colours, too. What a saint he turned out to be ! He had taken us all in with his saintly airs, but he was a real first-class scoundrel. He turned truculent, ate like a wolf, and smoked all the time, extorting cigarettes from the porters or begging them from whoever he met on the track. His drinking was a disgrace and his loin-cloth was tied more and more loosely. We sent him packing and the expedition proceeded on its secular way without benefit of saints.

After Ulleri the track climbs its way to the pass through a thick jungle; there are huge shady trees on each side a dense tangle of vegetation completely covers the ground. The lianas leap boldly from this mass of green to climb the trunks of trees and hang down again, and clumps of orchids wave from the branches. Around us the whole jungle quivers with vibrations, rustles, cries of birds and shrieks of monkeys. At Ghorapani, about half a kilometre before the pass, a few houses belonging to shepherds and foresters bask in the sun and the first Tibetan dogs snarl at us as we pass through the cold mountain landscape.

It is raining as we go down to Tatopani. The valley is gradually getting narrower making the light dimmer. The air is sluggish and wintry and we squeeze our way along the narrow slippery track between files of pilgrims hurrying to reach Muktinath before winter sets in. It is like a migration: whole families—women, men, old people, babies—walking quickly in single file, silent and unsmiling, their minds fixed devotedly on the holy place. We meet porters coming up from the valley with loads of salt they have got in exchange for rice at Dana and Tukuiche—mineral salt which the Tibetan merchants bring in with horses from the deserts of Western Tibet.

Suddenly and unexpectedly the path is broken by the river. The rocks are powerless to stem the fury of the tumult of waves breaking over them. The flood has swept away the bridge which crossed the narrow passage until a few weeks ago, so we have to entrust ourselves to the surviving stumps which have been shored up and joined together with bamboo and ropes until the next inevitable catastrophe occurs.

CHAPTER VIII
TOWARDS THE TIBETAN BORDER

Camps 20-23

October 14-19

Tatopani means "hot water" and owes its name to a sulphurous spring which oozes out of the ground on the riverbank near the village, spreading over the stones like a film of deep blue glass. The few houses are strung out under the overhang of harsh grey rocks. The place is a true pass, marking a natural boundary. All of a sudden we are at the foot of the great Dhaulagiri and Annapurna ranges, through which we must find our way. We are still among Magars and Gurungs, but the Thakalis come down here from Tukuche: they are trilingual, speaking Tibetan and Nepali as well as their own dialect, and represent the link between Nepal and Tibet. The men come to the camp muffled up like conspirators in Tukuche and Mustang blankets made of strips of wool sewn together—red and white and deep blue. We are only a few kilometres in a straight line from the glaciers, and the fields are like gardens. There golden tangerines, and pomelos as big as melons, dangle in the breeze.

It is a short march to Dana, but we have to go slowly because some of the porters are sick: one has a very high fever and faints on the track. Because the porters are in such a bad way and the season is so far advanced, I reluctantly decide to cut our journey short. I had intended to go as far as the Tibetan border and return through Charkabhot and Jumla, but the first snows could come at any moment and close the passes. With a party like ours it would be madness to set out on such a risky path right on the threshold of winter. At Dana there is a minor official whose job is to collect the salt-tax, but he also has judiciary powers. While I am talking to him a soldier brings a Tibetan monk in. I take him for a pilgrim and ask him where he comes from and which monastery he belongs to, but I have misread the situation—he is under arrest. He was caught stealing at Tukuche and sent under close escort to Dana to await trial. They say that after Dana the tracks are unsafe and frequented by robbers. We are completely unarmed, since I have just recently discovered that the calibre of the two pistols lent to me by the Nepalese government on the eve of our departure is different from the calibre of the bullets. The only thing available in Dana is a shotgun, a useless affair all in pieces and minus its screws. So all we can do is trust to fate and particularly to our presence of mind. I have met robbers before in Western Tibet, and managed to get out of the situation without recourse

to firearms. We leave non-essential baggage at Dana, and the men who are ill or weak, and on the morning of the 16th we set off again with a light convoy and the porters who are still healthy and energetic.

It is a long march to Lete, and the path is unreliable and difficult and often broken by landslides. It follows the course of the Gandaki, which finds its way through huge piles of boulders. When it cannot uproot or sweep away the obstacles in its path, it plunges into the gaps and slips underground, only to reappear suddenly, even more furious than before. Then, strangely the path gradually improves. It is no longer a track worn by use, going wherever nature offers least resistance; it has been looked after. In some places it has been cut out of the rock and you can even see the marks of pick-axes and dynamite. Later we find out that merit for this is due to a Tukuche family of merchants who hold the monopoly of trade with Tibet.

Our way is barred by five torrents which cut deeply into the side of the mountain, and it is already dark when we get to Lete. Up here there are no more Nepalese-style houses; the architecture and building materials are different. They are made of stones placed one on top of the other, and the flat roofs are covered with wood and dry grass. We are already seeing the first signs of Tibet, except that this grey stone lacks the gaiety of the brightly coloured Tibetan houses. The windows and doors are still in imitation of the Nepalese styles, but the furthest ripple of Newar workmanship dies out here. Obviously we are at a spot where one culture finishes and another begins. The sky is cleft by the buttresses of Dhaulagiri on the left and Annapurna on the right, and yesterday it was not rain that fell, but snow, the first snow on the mountains surrounding the valley.

It is only a few hours from Lete to Tukuche, the capital of the Thakali district. There is a gradual transition to a new landscape. The forests become scantier, conifers dot the gentle slopes, and the river lingers in the broad valleys, placid and innocent, resting as if to save its energy for the next race. The sky is no longer dull and melancholy, but shines, with a deep clear intense blue, casting blue veils over the mountains. Green-veined gold starts to gleam in the rocks. The lonely glaciers flash above us, basking in the sunlight. And then for a change man regains his dominion over animals, and the porters are replaced by horses, mules and yaks. At Lete I engage a train of Tukuche mules which have carried salt to Ghasa (which is pronounced Gansa here) and are now on their way back without loads. The people are Thakalis but they speak Tibetan, they wear heavy Tibetan coats and hats, they walk with the Tibetan slouch, and, above all, they smile like Tibetans. Everything is different. The tinkle of the mules' bells and the men's cheerful chatter break the weary silence of the day's march. The stuffiness of the narrow humid valleys gives way to cool and frisky breezes. One more bend in the track and our surroundings change so suddenly that I feel as if some benevolent lama has transported me magically into the vast and luminous plains of Western Tibet. I love those plains, spread out from horizon to horizon as if to make peace between the tumult of mountains warring all around them.

The village of Nadzung (Larjung on the map) greets us with the gaiety of its white houses, with bands of red under their flat roofs. White pennants printed with prayers flutter from poles fixed in the ground, and as in Tibet, low walls run alongside the path, topped by slabs of stone carved with inscriptions and representations of the Buddha. At the end of the valley the steep rock is riddled by dozens of caves. Up on the ridge, the runins of a temple are outlined against the sky, the red plaster which distinguishes sacred buildings from houses still clinging to the mutilated walls.

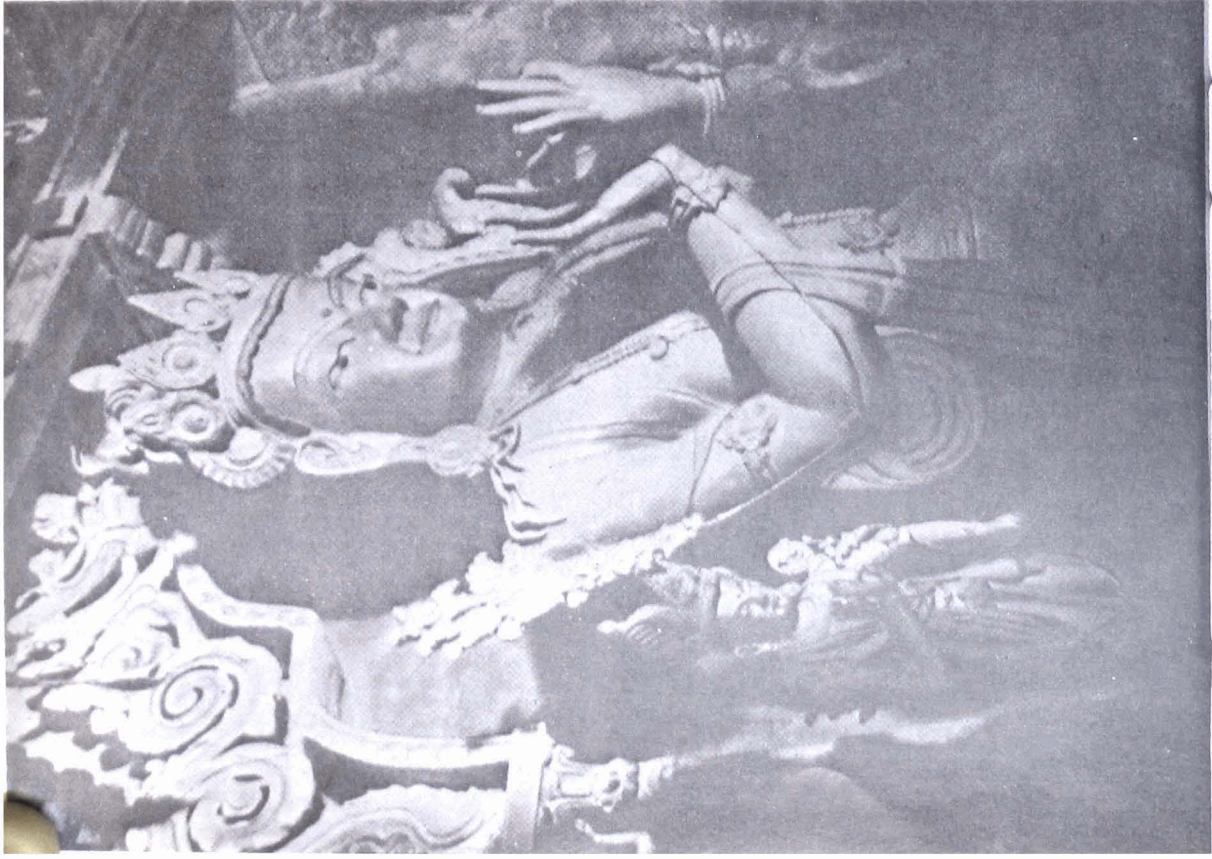


21

Customs post between Nepal and Tibet

Easy passes separate Nepal from Tibet





The statue of Champa at Mustang



The so-called statue of Garigivo in the grotto of Samar

We immediately make the difficult climb to the caves, but our exploration reveals nothing. There is no trace of painting in this deserted hermitage where forgotten communities of anchorities once took refuge to meditate in their inaccessible solitude.

We are truly at a frontier, ethnic, religious and linguistic. This is the place reached by the furthest impulse of Lamaism which has flowed back from the north and still holds out against the slow, gentle, implacable spread of Hinduism. As usual in areas where two cultures meet, the two religions overlap, and the people, fearful of the mysterious presence of occult forces, prefer for safety's sake to include the gods of both faiths in their prayers. However, Buddhism is definitely the predominant religion, indeed I would say it is gaining strength; the temples are new, and there is a small newly-bUILT monastery in which they have ceremoniously deposited a complete copy of the holy scriptures (bKa'agyur) acquired in Tibet.

Tukuche (which the people pronounce as Tugcha), a little over an hour's walk from Nadzung, is the capital of the Thakali district, and a very important commercial centre. It is controlled by one family, the Sher Chans, one of whom holds the office of subha or representative of the Nepalese government. But the family's authority comes not so much from this official position as from the prestige of centuries and from economic power. Its members or representatives travel from one end of Nepal to the other; they have agents at Baglung and Butwal and at Nautanwa, the terminal of the Indian railway on the southern frontier of Nepal. Their headquarters is in Kathmandu. They hold a monopoly of cigarettes and textiles; at Tukuche and further north in Mustang they control and direct trade with Tibet; they import wool, salt, horses and turquoise, and send rice, fabrics, cigarettes and European manufactured goods to Tibet. So Tukuche is a big trade centre, the houses are full of goods, and trading is all wholesale.

The Sher Chan family have plenty of initiative: they take special care of the tracks, they have founded and maintain at their own expense a school in which young volunteers take it in turns to act as teachers, and they have given their own children a first-rate education; one of them speaks English, and the other is studying in Banaras. They are Hindus now, with a special devotion to Visnu, but a Lamaist shrine, one of the oldest in the place, stands in the centre of their house, indicating that their conversion is quite recent. Their contacts with Nepal, their lengthy residence in Kathmandu, their business connections with the capital and with India, have slowly brought about changes in their religion, but the family was originally Buddhist—in fact the term "Lamaist", which is inaccurate in itself, is actually appropriate in this region. The transition from one religion to the other is not difficult, anyway. The Bramans are very strict about precepts with social value which give firm support to the solidarity of the community, protecting it from corruption or contamination, but as we have often noted they are very tolerant in religious matters. This liberal attitude of theirs is supported by the theory that manifestations of divinity are constantly being renewed: the gods are symbols of a cosmic consciousness which has neither name nor form, but which is made comprehensible for us by means of these symbols. Divine presences can manifest themselves to human beings in an endless variety of forms whenever they are needed to call forth Good or suppress Evil, and this happens especially in the case of Visnu, whose task it is to prevent sinister powers from subverting the cosmic order. When it is necessary to reestablish equilibrium, he emanates projections of his essence which imbue human beings with new faith.

“When justice declines and injustice prevails, then I became incarnate. From age to age I manifest myself to protect the good, annihilate the wicked, and reestablish justice.”

(Bhagavadgītā IV, 7).

Thus, according to the Bramans, the Buddha was one of the manifestations of Visnu. By opening its doors to Buddhism like this, Hinduism in fact transformed and absorbed the other religion, and this is how the gradual conversion of many Buddhist communities to the Hindu schools came about.

This same process took place in the Sher Chan family, but even Lamaism was not their original religion—it was accepted when religious influences from Tibet penetrated this region. Before the missionary period the Thakalis' religion must have been very much like Bon, which preceded Buddhism in Tibet.

A deep study of the Thakalis' religious beliefs would demonstrate the imprecision of whatever denominational labels might be given to them. We would see that the former Lamaist still survives within every Hindu, but that the Lamaist in turn reserves a not unworthy place in the depths of his soul for Hinduism. In every soul we would see the two religions, not in conflict but coexisting by mutual consent and happily sustaining each other. And surely, if we looked deeper still, we should find that the secret fire of the original primitive beliefs is still burning, and that it springs into new life when a man feels most alone, sad, and afraid, when, in silent anguish, he perceives the omens of ill fortune. In particular we would find that this ancient heritage still persists in domestic worship and funeral rites. My visit to the palace of the subha confirmed these ideas. Even today, the *sanctum sanctorum* in every house is the fireplace almost in the centre of the kitchen, protected by a low wall. Only Thakalis are allowed to see it, and only family members are allowed to cross the line marking out the inviolable area, but they make an exception for us. Vases with barely for the spirits of the dead are arranged on the surrounding wall; a tall brass lamp shines in a corner. It is a grave sin to defile the fireplace, to drop anything there which might contaminate its holy purity. All these beliefs take us right back to the Bon religion practised by the Tibetans before they were converted to Buddhism, but the same beliefs are widespread among the Tibetans of today. At any rate, the dominance of Hinduism has not reached the point where it is felt necessary to build a Hindu temple. At Tukuche there are only Lamaist chapels (lha k'añ). Strictly speaking they are not *gompas*, as the monasteries are called, because there are no monastic communities there, but only custodians (cogner), almost all of them lay brothers from the Karmapa sect, whose principal monastery is at Tshurpu, west-northwest of Lhasa. The lama who looks after the main temple, outside the town, is a native of Tukuche. He has studied medicine in Lhasa, at the famous Chogpori monastery, but the proximity of Nepal and India has led him to a curious syncretism of the art of herbal medicine learned in Nepal and the European-style allopathic medicine. He dispenses blessed pills, magic formulae and spells, but he uses European medicines as well, including penicillin, and is quite prepared to give injections to any sufferer with the courage to submit to them.

I find nothing of importance in the interior chapel in the Sher Chan's old house, except for a copy of the Kangyur (bKa' agyur) in gold lettering on large sheets of blue paper, and the manuscript of a liturgical work with some notes on the history of the region. I am not able to acquire it,

so I get members of the party to photograph the pages that interest me.

A third small temple, the oldest of all, stands in the heart of the town. They call it "the queen's temple", but I still do not really know what event or person it commemorates. My attention is attracted by a number of paintings on wood, representing the *arhats* whose task it is to keep the tradition of the law alive, Padmasambhava who may have been the first to introduce Buddhism into Tibet, Milaraspa the famous poet and ascetic of the country of the snows, and finally the cycle of the Scitro (*Zi k' ro*). These are very important divinities, some dreadful and some peaceful, which appear to the conscious principle of the dead (his spiritual inner being) in the period between departure and rebirth and determine a man's destiny. They are described in a famous book which is recited by the bedside of a dying person to instruct him on the dangers he will meet as soon as he has breathed his last, and on how to avoid them.¹

High up on the walls of the same temple are paintings of the Kargyupa sect (*bKa' rgyud pa*) dressed in their customary raw cotton robes. Over their shoulders they carry scarves which they use to hold their limbs in the difficult and uncomfortable positions prescribed by certain schools of Yoga. For example, the "fish position" recommended by Matsyendra, the wonder-worker who is so popular in Nepal, is certainly not comfortable: you place your right foot as high as possible on your left thigh with the sole turned upwards, then you pass your right hand behind your shoulders to take hold of the big toe, then you put your left foot on your right thigh and grasp it with your left hand, after passing that hand behind your shoulders too. Or another called the "turtle position": the right foot is placed on the left thigh and the left foot on the right thigh, then the hands are passed between the thigh and the knee and crossed behind the neck, pressing the head down. Yoga followers particularly recommend the former position to cure lack of appetite.

These paintings are important as the only example, as far as I know, of local art untouched by Nepalese influences. It is difficult to date them, but I do not think they can be earlier than the seventeenth century.

Tukuche is constantly battered by an icy wind which blows in violent squalls from about eleven in the morning until dusk. The air is getting colder and colder, and the porters are at the end of their endurance. We have no news about the ones we left at Dana, but Guttuso is rather pessimistic about their chances. There are now only nine left of the twenty-eight men who left Kathmandu with us. One by one the others have been left behind along the track and replaced by new recruits. We are to learn later on that three of them are dead. I have no choice but to pay off the survivors and proceed to Mustang with mules and horses.

The last traces of Nepal disappear at Marpha; we are truly in Tibet. The village is dominated by two russet-coloured monasteries standing in the centre. Here one can really talk of monasteries, as there are a great number of monks, all from the Karmapa sect. A young lama who has studied in Tibet carries us off to the monastery, introduces us to the abbot and his wife—monks of the red sect are allowed to marry—gathers all the brothers and seminarists together, and with the agreement of his superior improvises a religious ceremony to ensure that the gods will watch over the fortunes of our journey. The ceremony takes place in two stages: first we all squat on the gro-

¹ The book, which I have translated into Italian, is *The Tibetan Book of the Dead (Il libro tibetano dei morti*, Bocca, Milan, 1949.)

und on the terrace overlooking the temple and sip tea (Tibetan tea with butter, salt and soda) which, following the custom of Tibetan pilgrims, I have presented to the community as soon as I arrived, along with a liberal offering of money. After this there is the *sciabden*, the actual religious service, in which we all take part. My companions watch the monks out of the corner of their eyes, each one seated at his own low table, little more than a hand's breadth above the ground, intent on reciting the litanies in nasal chorus. They hold themselves in readiness to copy their movements, as if they themselves were initiates in the same mysteries, but the liturgy is too complicated for a novice. All goes well up to the point of throwing grains of barley into the air at the climax of the ceremony, but it is much more difficult for those without long experience to interweave the fingers in various ways to make the "seals" (mudra), the complicated hand positions which go with certain formulae and impart infallible efficacy to them. Without the right gestures the prayer, like a letter without a stamp, will certainly be lost and will not reach the gods. The monks are pleasantly surprised to find that they can talk to me in their own language. and doubtful as to the sex of Signorina Bonardi, as they are confused by the combination of her feminine appearance with short hair, trousers, and absence of jewellery. Noisily, between bursts of high-spirited laughter, they recount the history of the monastery and show us its treasures. The temple was destroyed during the wars between China and Tibet but was restored to a better condition. The post of abbot is hereditary (bla miai' rgyud) and passes from father to son. Gleaming with gold, the image of Opame ('Od dpag med) the God of eternal light stands out from the dimness of the central chapel between two bodhisattvas, one to the right and the other to the left. On the walls are frescoes of the protectors of the four cardinal points, who fiercely defend the holiness of the place.

When we go back to camp the whole village trails behind us, as people do when the jugglers come to our own little mountain villages. They repeat snatches of our conversation with perfect accents. The hermitage (ri k'rod) keeps watch on the rock overhanging the houses. This is where the monks retreat for several months in the year for religious exercises, or rather they used to, as I think that now, with all these wives of theirs, they are not so interested in asceticism.



Cave-dwellers' village carved out of the rock

The effigy of a dead person being cast into the river





CHAPTER IX

MUSTANG

Camps 24–28

October 20–24

Although the Himalaya appear to form an impenetrable barrier between the two worlds, in fact eighteen passes open a way through that turmoil of ice, bringing Tibet and Nepal so close together that the former almost merges into the latter, slowly overflowing into it, but stopping abruptly as soon as the terrain slides down to too low an altitude and the winds start to be warmed by the torrid breeze blowing from the south. At that point the invasion ceased and the Tibetans came to a halt. But this intermediate zone which has slipped stealthily over the border is calm and icy cold, and they still feel comfortable and are dominant here. I had known that I would be going close to Tibet, in fact one of the main aims of my journey was to explore the meeting-place of the two cultures, Nepalese and Tibetan, but I had not expected to find myself in a strip of territory where everything was Tibetan every step of the way, from the landscape to the language, from the people to the monasteries. After Marpha we begin to leave Dhaulagiri (8,130 m.) and Annapurna behind us. We had seen them two months earlier just after leaving Kathmandu—as a fleeting, unexpected apparition of unreachable pillars piercing the sky one stormy dawn. Little by little as we advanced we slipped between them and they towered to the right and left of us, their glaciers flowing down like lava towards the tangled and impenetrable confusion of the forests below. Then with each tiring day's march we left them a little further behind, and now we see them no more.

The 20th of October is Guttuso's birthday. We break our march and cheerfully drink his health in tea and *rakshi*, tucked in under a rock in an unsuccessful attempt to keep out of the wet. The wind hurls itself against us—that cold and violent wind which starts at midday punctually as if by the clock. It is behind us now, but the walk back will be very tough, with the wind assaulting us head on. The monastery of Cuzudenga (sKu gzugs sde lña) appears on the right hand side of the track in the shelter of a hill. We take a short cut, leaving the path which goes up and down hill along the left bank of the Gandaki, and go through the valley, skipping and stumbling on the gravelly bed of the river which suddenly cuts across our path, calm but deep. We ford it, and then all of a

sudden we see the fields of Kagbeni ahead of us. In the crisp air they seem only a step or two away, but the more we walk the further away they seem, like certain dream images which the motionless body tries vainly to reach. We get there halfway through the afternoon. At Kagbeni the river that comes down from Muktinath plunges into the Gandāki. Like all river junctions, the place is essentially sacred. The captain, who is very religious, and Chandra go down the bank and fill bottles with water drawn from the place where the two rivers mingle, and seal the bottles carefully. They will take them home reverently, and save them for the ritual cake ceremony (piṇḍa) which is offered once a year for their ancestors' souls. The Tukuhe porters are a different type from the ones we have left behind: when we get to the end of a day's march we find the camp tidy, the fire lit, and the tea hot. However, they always seem to select the most exposed and windswept spots.

At Kagbeni a king (rgyal po) used to reign from the turreted castle, which is now crumbling in ruins. The dynasty has died out, but according to a number of leading local figures, a branch of the family moved to Jumla. Right on the outskirts of the village, on a short promontory of land, stands the gompa, which is looked after by a young custodian (cogner). The war passed by here too. Most of the monasteries were pillaged but not destroyed—the hand of sacrilege, made bold by greed for gold, was restrained by fear. On the walls the light from the lanterns makes the pictures dance, gesture threateningly, join together. Blackened by smoke and age, they seem in that faint light to move like shadows in the night, all the more mysterious for their blurred shapes and outlines. Many of the frescoes, which probably date from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, have been preserved; the image of Śākyamuni towers up in the centre, flanked by the upright, adoring figures of his chief disciples Śaradvatiputra and Maugdālyāyana. Among the hundreds of bronze statues piled up in confusion on the altar, as if in a secondhand shop, I discover a splendid image of Vajrasattva from the best period of Nepalese art, and two statues of Padmapani and Maitreya seem to be of the same very fine workmanship.

The monastery belongs to the Sakyapa (Sa skya pa) sect, as in fact one could tell even from the outside, by the evenly spaced grey stripes on the bright red of the walls.

The people here are just as poor as in the mountains of Nepal, perhaps poorer, since in spite of man's hard work, the miserable soil and the altitude attempt to deny him even the deprived and wretched barley which grows on the pitiless stones. But their poverty does not wipe out the people's smiles and their natural cheerfulness; they seem to take on the openness of their surroundings. We no longer see the gold jewellery the Nepalese women are so fond of; the ornaments here are all silver, often of very poor quality. The two ends of the bracelets are shaped like dragons' heads, the earrings dangle on chains, their shawls are fastened at the neck with clasps I have seen only in these areas, between Kagbeni and Ghiling, and which show the transformation of old religious symbols into ornamental motifs. There is a motif of two peacocks one in front of the other in which perhaps Hinduism and Buddhism have combined to modify the primitive figure of the K'yuñ, the holy bonpo eagle, which has not been willing to disappear entirely but still remains with outspread wings and threatening eyes in certain earrings I have seen on old women here.

The timid reserve which often makes the Nepalese appear bashful and almost wary, gives way here to a good-natured welcome and cheerful curiosity. Monastery doors are not grimly closed, and lamps burn on the altars, revealing all secrets.

From Kagbeni the track continues to the north, passing through the little village of Tage (some pronounce it Taye). In a small Sakyapa temple right at the entrance of the village there are some sixteenth or seventeenth century frescoes depicting the cycle of the Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa. The people seem to be primitive and tough. They are not used to seeing foreigners and shut themselves into their houses, peering fearfully at us from the narrow windows. Some of the braver ones get up on the terraces and show their heads from time to time, and then duck back quickly as if we were monsters, not human beings. But they are not frightened for long. Little by little their natural Tibetan friendliness wins out, and the whole village gathers round us when we get ready to go. The hills all around are bristling with ruins.

Then we go down the gentle slope to Tsug, which is situated in a broad valley scored through the middle by a stony river bed. Clusters of houses go up the surrounding slopes, leading towards the monasteries which have taken refuge and hidden higher up. On the right bank of the Gandaki long rows of chortens slope up towards a big gumpa which stands alone, dominating the valley under the watchful gaze of the supreme peaks. Broken castle walls lie all around, as white as time-worn bones. Clustered close together on the sheer rock walls are the mouths of inaccessible caves; I wonder what they can have been for. There are too many of them for hermitages and Tsug was probably full of monasteries, but it is unlikely that there would have been enough communities to populate the very numerous caves we see all around us. Perhaps this was the original village before the spread of Buddhism and increasing security persuaded the people to come down to the valley. This theory merits consideration, for in Western Tibet, which is not far away now, until quite recently people lived in cave-villages: even the capital of Guge in Western Tibet was a town of caves and caverns. However, according to the local traditional stories which I collected the caves were dug out during the China-Nepal war as hiding-places for the people fleeing from the troops. But wars break out suddenly and do not allow time for preparing large numbers of rock shelters like these. Some of them are real underground houses with several adjacent intercommunicating rooms. They may have been used during the war, but everything indicates that they were there before it broke out. At any rate our exploration of one of them is quite unproductive—we find no objects and no trace of decoration.

We are going dreamily into a lunar landscape. It is completely cut off from Nepal and India: the rocks take on unreal colours and shapes, and glitter with strange lights like pallid images in a dream. Now we leave the Gandaki valley and climb the flanks of the mountain, following a difficult and winding path; in places where the earth and rock do not provide a foothold, little bridges have been suspended over the void.

In the light of the setting sun, after a ten-hour march, we reach Samar (called Samargaon on the map), a few houses perched on a slope enclosed by two mountain spurs, surrounded by ruins of temples and castles. The blood-red rock suddenly glows like a ruby in the last flicker of sunlight, and the temperature drops at least two degrees. The little temple is modern; the old monasteries were completely destroyed, perhaps because their position made them natural fortresses. Like all religions, when it was a matter of defending its own interests Buddhism could find justification for war with that subtle casuistry which theologians the world over have at their shrewd disposal. The captious doctors showed how passages from the scriptures could legitimize the harsh and unavoidable necessity of fighting and even killing, naturally for the salvation of sinners, so that they would not be stained by fearful and inexpiable guilt. They were undisturbed by the fact that these were

late writings, and that the Buddha had taught total pacificism.

“When the Bodhisattva knows another’s evil intention and cannot dissuade him, knowing that this will cause him to descend to a more painful mode of existence, he decides to kill him. This means that he will meet an unhappy fate, but even so he chooses to save the sinner. In fact, the killing causes him limited and transitory suffering, but prepares him for beatitude in the future. Like a doctor he summons up his courage and kills him. Doing this is nothing to reproach himself with—it enables him to make much merit and eventually to reach supreme illumination.”

(Commentary on the Mahāyānasangraha,

In time of danger, religious communities defend themselves.

In spite of its piety, Tibet has always been inclined to make war. In fact its best soldiers have been the monks, who, given the opportunity, transformed themselves into warriors and ruthlessly defended the monasteries which were all, like fortresses, planted on the peaks of the mountains. If Tibet became weak, this was actually caused by too much fighting, clan against clan, region against region, sect against sect. Seeing the danger of tearing themselves to pieces by these internal struggles which neither side could win, they went so far as to request foreign intervention. With peace came the start of slavery, and with the advent of slavery the military spirit was extinguished.

Two tracks lead from Samar to Ghiling. We take the shorter and more difficult way because it leads us to a famous cave. The Tibetans call it the Rangbyung chorten (rañ abyuñ mc’od rten). “the chorten that built itself” or appeared by a miracle. The cavern owes its name to a big round natural pillar which stands in the middle of it, almost as if it supported the weight of the vault. There are many carvings in the original rock of the walls: a succession of unidentifiable personages. According to tradition one noble old figure represents Atisha, the Indian teacher who was summoned by the King of Tibet in the eleventh century and who became the architect of the rebirth and renewal of Buddhism in the country of the snows. But carvings of Padmasambhava predominate: thus the two sects which disputed for spiritual power, the red sect which was supposed to have been founded by Padmasambhava and the yellow sect which traces its origins through Tsonkhapa to Atisha, coexist in the dimness of the cavern. However, the cave was quite clearly a sacred place before the coming of Buddhism. On the inner side of the central monolith, steps lead up to a bigger platform which appears to be an altar. In a number of man-made holes I found charcoal and juniper twigs. Juniper is a magical plant used from Kafiristan to Mongolia, and juniper smoke disperses evil powers, and this is why Buddhism also makes use of it in certain rites of exorcism and popular liturgies which it calls sang (bsaṅs); one can never take too many precautions against the forces of evil which are always alert and aggressive. Anyway, pilgrims come from every direction to the famous cavern, and clay models of gods, particularly Padmasambhava, are piled up in every corner as mementoes of pious visits.

The path slips between the dunes and creeps into narrow passages and ghostly labyrinths, going down to Ghiling which is scattered over vast fields of barley in the pitiless icy wind. Herds of yak are grazing gently. The Tibetan nomads, who have made the endless trek down from the Chinese border, look like bandits with their swords tucked into their belts, their long unkempt hair, and their heavy wool and leather garments. Unsubmissive and restless, they are free masters of the

vast silences on the roof of the world. They are the only people I envy: they are unfettered, serene in their inborn essential simplicity, ignorant of illusory architectures which time wears down and blows away like dust before the wind. As they wander through those immense spaces they seem to be suspended between heaven and earth.

Two gompas stand guard over the village; both belong to the Ngor-pa sect, which takes its name from the monastery of Ngor in central Tibet (Tsang) where its founder Kungasangpo (Kun dga' bzañ po) lived. The construction of the two monasteries also dates back to him. This is history, not legend, documented by the foundation certificate written by the lama himself on a silk scroll which the custodian proudly unrolls for me. Shaggy and wild, he looks more like a robber than a monk. Frescoes of the thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa and the seven Buddhas look down from the walls, all alike, as if petrified in icy abstraction. They probably date from the construction of the temple. The certificate of foundation is of great historical interest, so I ask the lama to make me a copy of it, requesting him to make as few mistakes as possible. These monks are not educated people; they have been given brief instruction in some Tibetan monastery, but their knowledge does not go beyond the liturgical texts which they recite in the daily office. So they can read quite well, but they do not understand the subtle implications of the theological and doctrinal works. When a rich person is ill or the harvest is threatened by drought and they are commissioned to read texts which have the magical power of putting demons to flight and restoring things to normal, in the temple or the sick person's house, they chant whole volumes from their huge collections but they understand little or nothing of them. The reading has intrinsic value: it is the sound that counts, not the sense. The "sound" is the symbol of the "Voice, the Words" of the Buddha. So these lamas' knowledge of grammar and theology is very scanty. On the other hand, writing correct Tibetan is a very difficult and complicated business, for in few other languages is there such a great difference between spelling and pronunciation.

The second little temple up high on the rocks is the *Gonkhang* (mGon k'añ), the chapel in whose mysterious shades live the gods which protect the monastery and the community. They are fierce-looking deities, aggressive and quick to anger, since it is their task to struggle with evil spirits. It is wise to keep away from them—even the custodian is wary of opening the cases where the images are kept.

The track from Ghiling to Charang (Tsarang) goes through places which used to be much more heavily populated than they are today. The principal ruins are at Kami (Kehami on the map), but others are scattered everywhere: castles, houses and temples; the only things to escape destruction were innocuous chortens and prayer-walls. As in Tibet, war dealt the people a grievous blow from which they were not strong enough to recover. The surviving religious buildings bear witness to the prosperity of former times, but that has gone forever, and the local nobility has been wiped out or impoverished. No new works have been undertaken, and none of the buildings have been restored. But the inhabitants' religious spirit does not seem to have been weakened at all; they are too far from the commotion of ideas which disturbs the world, and their ancient faith has not yet been shaken or shadowed by doubt.

After crossing two passes—we are already higher than 4,000 metres—we go down to Charang. The houses are clustered round the tottering walls of the castle and the austere bulk of the monas-

tery. The monastery is still intact, but today the abbot roams idly through its bleak and precarious halls, assisted in his religious duties by two or three extremely ignorant monks. He cannot contain his curiosity when he espies our arrival from up high on his rock, and he comes down to the camp to take us back to the monastery. This is Sakyapa too. Sixteenth century (?) frescoes on the walls represent the thousand Buddhas of the Bhadrakalpa and the five supreme Buddhas, symbol of the first entry of the cosmic consciousness into the illusory play of images which we call the world. Priceless Tibetan and Nepalese tankas,¹ better than in any museum, hang from the pillars which encircle the antique ceiling. They dangle there, torn and dusty, with the fabric surrounding them hanging in shreds. They are there because they are sacred objects and it is a sin to touch them or throw them away, and there they will stay until finally, when they are completely rotten and ragged, they will be gathered reverently up, deposited in some chorten, and left there to decompose. From the half light on the altar emerges the disembodied smile of Champa (Byams pa), Maitreya, the future Buddha, now meditating in the heavens, but ready to come down to earth and re-establish goodness and the law if human iniquity should go beyond the limits of divine tolerance.

“Then, brothers, the men heard that people who stole what did not belong to them were put to death. When they heard this they thought; ‘So we shall keep our swords sharp and ready, and we shall kill the people who cry theft when we take things that are not given to us; we shall finish them off, we shall cut off their heads.’ And they sharpened their swords and came to sack the villages and the towns and the cities and to rob people on the road.

“And they killed the people they robbed, cutting off their heads.

“In this way, brothers, since the riches were not given to the poor, poverty increased, greater poverty caused more theft, the spread of theft caused more violence, through the increase of violence killing became an everyday occurrence, because there were so many killings the life of these creatures was shortened and their beauty was extinguished, and so men lived for only a hundred years.

“And the time will come, O my brothers, when the descendants of those human beings will have a life-span of ten years. When men have this life-span, five-year-old boys will be of marriageable age. Among these men Six tastes will disappear: *ghee*, butter, oil, sesame, sugar and salt.) These men will think that grains of *kudrusa*² are the best kind of food.

“Just as rice and curry is the best kind of food now, it will be *kudrusa* for them. Among these men the ten rules of moral conduct will disappear and the ten immoral ways of conduct will flourish—there will not even be a word for morality, much less anyone who practises it. Among these men, O my brothers, honour and praise will be given to those who have no filial piety

¹ Thankas are paintings of divinities on canvas or silk, which are hung in the chapels or rolled up and stored.

² Rye, or a similar plants

or religion and who show no respect for the leader of the community, just as today honour and praise are given to those who show filial piety and who respect the leader of the community . . . and there will be promiscuity in this world, as between goats or sheep, poultry or pigs, dogs or jackals. Among these men, O my brothers, biting enmity will be the rule, biting malevolence, biting animosity, fevered thoughts of murder, in mother against son, son against mother, father against son, son against father, brother against brothers. Their thoughts will be like those a hunter has about wild animals.

“Among these men, O my brothers, there will be the time of the sword lasting seven days, during which they will watch each other like wild beasts; sharp swords will appear ready in their hands and they will think ‘This is a wild beast . . .’ and kill each other with their swords. And then some of these creatures will think: Let us stop this killing, let us take refuge in the jungle, or in hollow trees or on the little islands in the rivers or on the mountain cliffs, and let us live only on roots and the fruits of the jungle.

“And they will do this for seven days. And at the end of those seven days they will come forth from their hiding places and islands and cliffs and embrace and console each other and say ‘How good it is that you are still alive, how beautiful to see you still alive . . .’

“And then these creatures will think: Now because we have fallen into such evil ways we have lost our families. Now let us do good. Let us kill no more. We can choose to do this good thing. And they will cease their killing and persevere in this path.”

(Dighanikāya, XXVI)

Thus their ways will gradually be improved, and when their life-span has grown through goodness, Maitreya will come down among human beings and preach the holy doctrine which will bring all those who have ears to hear on to the path of wisdom.

Charang was once a gallery of art. In every corner, in every room, on all the altars, there are Nepalese, Tibetan and Indian statues, which were carried as talismans or spiritual protection by Buddhist teachers in flight from the Muslim invasions. In the abbot's house you pass from one chapel to another. Dozens of tankas are thrown higgeldy-piggeldy into a hamper with fowls nesting in them and soiling them. I untangle some and my heart weeps to see the miserable fate of these works of art. As I make a brief catalogue of the most important statues and paintings, I notice that the abbot is taking a great interest in Guttuso's watch and my boots, and I take him aside and try a little bartering. We reach an agreement, and I am thus able to recuse a few relics. I would probably have got more too, if it had not been for his wife who was constantly at his elbow, grumbling, haughty and forbidding, supervising him, spying on him, following him like his own shadow. And he must have been very frightened of her: exorcism can get rid of evil spirits, but has no power against women.

After a short march of a little less than four hours we are in Mustang, the capital of the furthestmost province. From the top of a pass we look down on the whole broad valley which slopes gently down towards the East, sprinkled with houses and little villages and dotted with the red of the monasteries. A few willow trees show pale green on the yellow fields of fading stubble. Barley

still grows well at 4,000 metres, and along with yaks and sheep supports the life of the people. All around, gilded mountains arch up to support an incredibly blue sky; to the right the icy peaks roll away as far as the eye can see, glittering with the cold brilliance of precious stones; to the north the chain is lower and easy passes cross the gentle undulations between Tibet and Nepal. It is one of those sights of such perfect loveliness that the eyes alone cannot take everything in; details evaporate or become confused and then, unexpectedly, a faculty of interior vision rises from one's depths to receive, amazed, that immensity which enchants and attracts like an infinity of light.

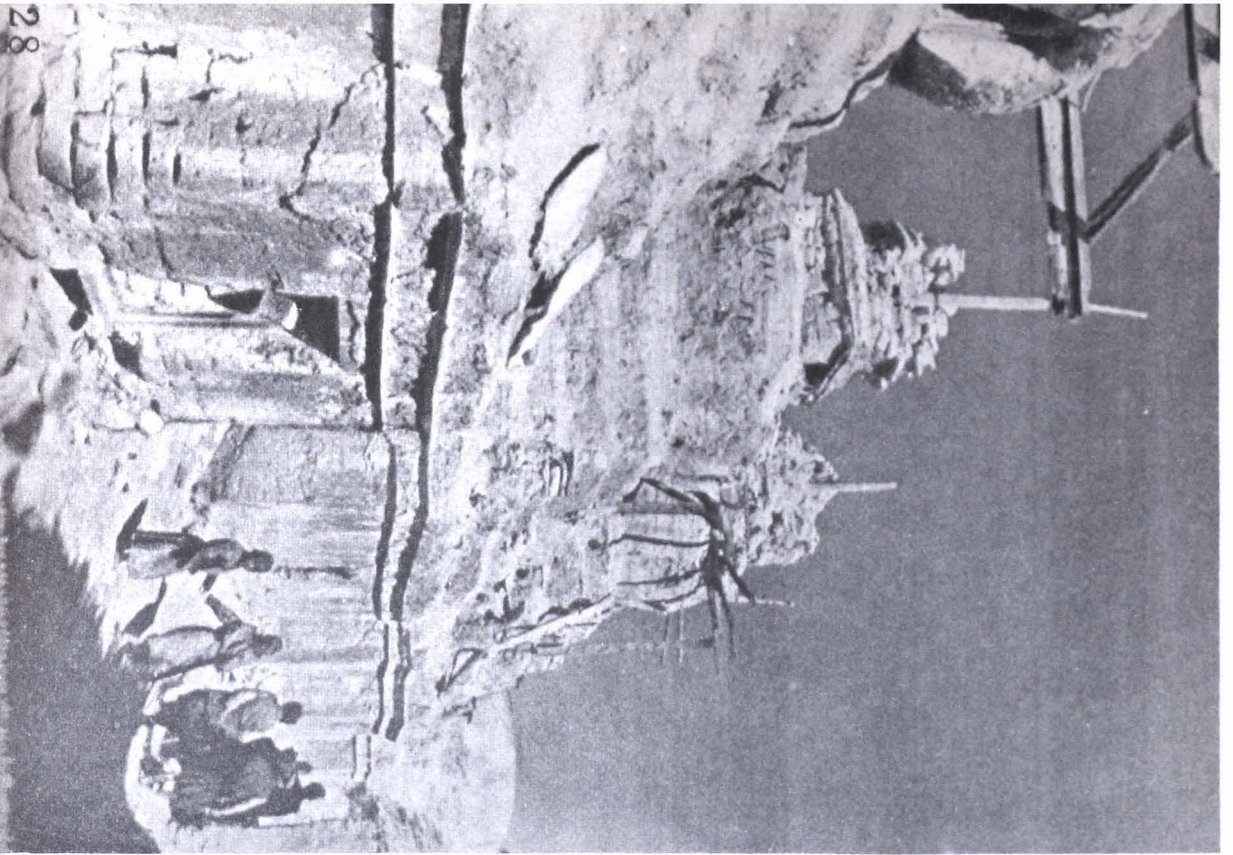
As we stand there silently gazing, a man on horseback appears on the pass and comes towards us. He wears one of those leather-lined hats with big earflaps which the Tibetans use as protection from the winds, and is wrapped up in a long shabby fur coat. A long sword is tucked into the left side of his belt, its silver scabbard set with a mass of large turquoises and corals, and on his right side hangs a pistol in a holster. In this very crisp air and transparent light he appears to be without substance, and he stands out like an apparition against that background of sky and mountains like the quintessential symbol of the liberty of a whole wandering people. These wide and lonely spaces make individual personality disappear. The narrow, wooded, humid valleys of Nepal give one a feeling of being ambushed: man, because of his nature, feels at the mercy of the capricious and terrible gods, and moves in the midst of invisible powers which can do with him what they will. But here in the annihilating immensity of space it is easy to understand how the Tibetans have accepted and kept to the metaphysic of the Great Vehicle which reduces man and objects to shadows seen in a dream. What is man on these plains which disappear beyond the horizon, in this cosmic solitude, in this vastness, where even the mountains seem like little hills?

Mustang is shaken by furious winds plunging down from the glaciers. It is guarded by towers and encircled by walls with only a single gate which is closed at nightfall, and equipped like a fortress to defend itself from the sporadic raids of robbers who sweep over the now wide and easy tracks from Western Tibet. We pitch our tents outside the city, and from dusk to dawn an armed Tibetan stands guard to protect us and our possessions. He arrives at sunset, enveloped in a blanket, and spends the night in the cold starlight. Water inside the tents turns to ice.

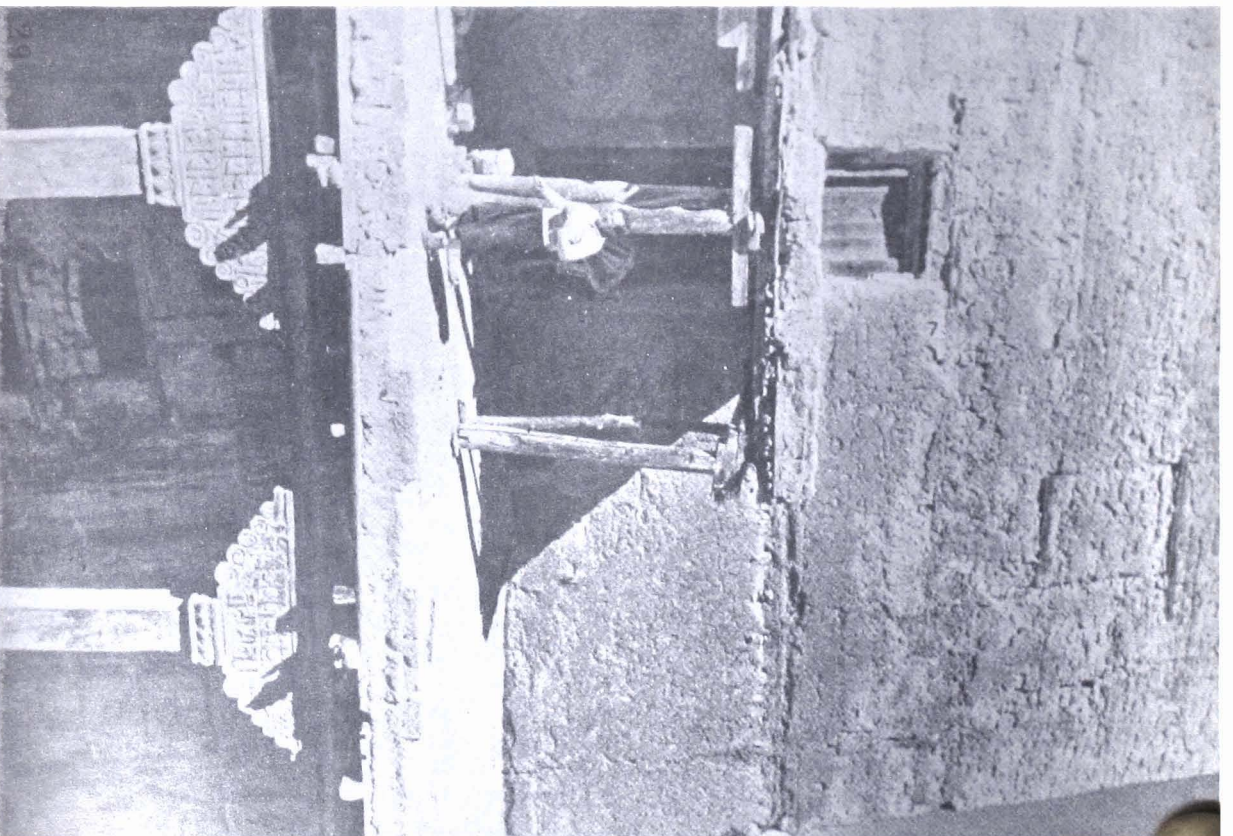
Flocks of pilgrims are camping on the other side of the town. They are on their way to Nepal or India to visit the holy places: Kathmandu, Rummindei where the Buddha was born, Bodhgaya where he attained illumination, Varanasi where he preached, Kusinagara where he died. Some of them are like walking bundles of rags: their lives consist of passive acceptance of whatever chance may bring, the nomadic instinct which makes the Tibetans so restless feeding the inner fire of their faith. Vultures fix their eyes hungrily on the carcasses of dead animals.

A party of three pilgrims has arrived at the same time as us. They have been wandering about Tibet for three years and now they intend to go to India. There are two monks and a woman. One of the men has Addison's disease and is just a skeleton stubbornly refusing to die; his leathery skin clings to his shrunken bones. But his companions have not abandoned him; they carry him on their shoulders coiled up in a hamper, and ask for alms for him too, tirelessly and patiently.

These paths, used over the centuries by pilgrims and apostles, robbers and invaders, are starting to be regarded with mistrust. Politicians turn their suspicious attention on even these lonely tracks, fearing that people of less pious intentions may slip in along with the pilgrims. The passes are still open—there are no checks, and passports are not required. But the old freedoms will not



The city of Mustang is surrounded by the ruins of *chortens* .



The temple of Champa at Mustang .



30. The exorcist



Itinerant lamas

last much longer, and it is quite likely that sentry posts will soon close the valleys—so generously opened by the Himalaya. Always and everywhere, man is more hostile than nature.

The houses of Mustang are packed closely together with winding alleys running between them. In spite of its apparent squalor the city is rich, full of merchants like almost all border towns. Caravans come down here from the roof of the world to conduct business. In one house they are so intent on counting money that they do not even notice our presence. In another house someone is ill, or there is some other trouble—I can tell by the regular thumping of a drum, rapid strokes with precise pauses. I follow their echo and come to a street corner where a monk sits sheltered from the wind, with his face turned towards the sun, in front of a tree-trunk which he is using as a table. He is squatting there all wrapped up in a filthy tattered robe; his face is thin and his hair short and shaggy. He is using a curved stick to strike the great round drum standing on his left; on the little table are many yellowish cones made of flour kneaded with butter and decorated with rings of butter. The monk watches our movements curiously. He allows himself to be photographed without stirring, but his deep nasal voice continues the monotonous murmuring of prayers. Obviously someone is ill or in fear of misfortune. Some evil spirit is setting a trap for his well-being, but he has taken the wise and timely step of protecting or defending himself by calling on the assistance of the exorcist. Who could resist the force of the formulas revealed by sages to help the devout against the anger of malignant powers?

The castle within Mustang subsided two years ago and now the king has gone to live an hour's walk away in the domain of Tenhar. All over Tibet it is the tradition to offer symbolic gifts to a visitor as soon as he arrives: eggs, even if rotten ones, vegetables, a leg of mutton. But there is no move from the King of Mustang and so, to give him a lesson, I take the initiative and send some porters with the presents I have brought for him. In the end he understands and becomes very agitated, urgently pressing me to visit him in his palace. Naturally I refuse—all I wanted was for him to understand what I meant: that kings ought to be the first to demonstrate the politeness, courtesy and good manners which are some of the most attractive qualities of the Tibetans.

All around, ruins merge with the rocks on the hill-tops; their form and colour are the same. The city was too close to the frontier to be able to neglect its own defense, but the damage done by war has been all the more devastating for this reason. There is nothing left of Namgyal, a fortified monastery to the west of Mustang, but a few chapels which are miraculously still standing: the *Gonkhang* with a few traces of paintings, the *Dukhang* (adus k'añ) the monk's assembly hall with frescoes representing the five supreme Buddhas, and a gilded bronze chorten, a little temple which has inside it a group of terracotta images of the lamas of the Sakyapa sect—they look like an assembly which has been turned to stone, with their frozen movements and surprised expressions. Finally there is the *Serkhang* (gSer k'añ), a storehouse of statues saved from the ruins. Namgyal, encircled by an overhanging turreted spur, was one of the key positions in the valley's defence, which is why it was so ruthlessly destroyed.

The predominant sect in Mustang, apart from rare penetrations by the "Ancients", Nyingmapa (rÑiñ ma pa) and the Kagyudpa (bKa' rgyud pa), is the Sakyapa sect. So it is not unlikely

that the wave of Lamism which flowed back from Tibet actually started with the missionary work of this school. But this is not the place to go into technical details; these events will soon be clarified by the immense quantity of material collected during the expedition; biographies of monks, inscriptions and guides to monasteries.

The great temple of *Thugchen* (T'ugs rje c'en po) is on the verge of collapsing. In the entrance hall one is threatened by the unconvincing scowls of the baroque statues of the four Lokapala, the protectors of the four cardinal points, which are installed in every temple to protect it from evil spirits. There are four of them, one for each of the cardinal points of the compass, and each one is responsible for the part entrusted to his care.

Sākyamuni meditates in the cell, surrounded by Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhiśattva who in his mercy and charity went down into the inferno to redeem the damned, and who is always ready to come to the aid of anyone who appeals to him in true faith, Vaiśravaṇa the god of wealth, and the inevitable Padmasambhava. The frescoes running round the walls are excellently done and of a good period; beneath them, in letters of gold, a long inscription explains their meaning and commemorates the king, and the nobles who provided the illustrious work at their own expense, and the names of the artists. A willing and intelligent lama sets to work to make me an accurate copy of them.

The other temple is dedicated to *Chamba*, Maitreya. It used to be two storeys high, but the upper storey is completely ruined and ominous cracks are splitting the walls of the big lower chapel too. To the left of the entrance there are frescoes from the same period and by the same artists as those in the preceding temple, portraying Dorje Sempa (rdo rje sems dpa'), Metabarba (melta abar ba), the *mandala* of Dorje Sempa and to the right Tigten Gompa (ajig rten mgon po). The paintings are so blackened, in some parts erased by the water dripping from the ceiling, that it is not possible to take photographs of them. So these two notable monuments of the best period of Mustang are also fated to disappear. It is very lucky that I arrived in time to collect the memories of them which still remain.

This Buddhist region has never been unified politically. Mustang, which the local people and the Tibetans call Lo Mantang (Klo sman t'añ), always gravitated towards Tibet and was attached to it in the fourteenth century, but it remained autonomous under a dynasty which still continues, although it is without effective power. The King of Mustang is in effect an official of the Nepalese government to which he is responsible for his domain, but it seems to me that the *subhas* of Tukuhe have more authority than he does now. Annexation by Nepal came about when the Gurkhas had completed the subjugation of the petty states scattered along the Gandaki and then, along with Mustang, came the fall of the dynasties reigning over these little pockets in the Himalaya: Zarkot, Kagbeni, Tsug. These events are very hazy but I hope to be able to clarify them with the aid of documents discovered.

At Mustang, our youngest and most helpful porter, whom we called Giovannineo, became ill. He was the only one willing to come this far with us. He carried the cameras and the flasks of tea and was never far away from us. We thought it was cold, or fatigue, but it was really a first attack of filariasis. He will probably end his days begging on some Kathmandu street, his joints swollen by the vile disease.

CHAPTER X

FROM THE TIBETAN BORDER TO THE INDIAN BORDER

Camps 29-65

October 28 - December 7

We set off back again on the 28th of October, having reached the northernmost part of Nepal. The clearest of lights streams down on the stony plain of Western Tibet which lies just beyond the passes: we are a few day's march from the Kailash mountain. I think nostalgically of the journey I made there in 1933 and 1935, and of the strange encounters and hypnotic silences of that solitude.

We travel back along the same route as far as Tsug, where the huge ruins we have seen on the outward journey persuade me to call a halt. All the time we have been in Lamaist territory we have found many of the signs set up to exorcise evil influences. They are called *zor* (or *mdos*) and consist of a central frame in the shape of a cross, on the arms of which threads in five colours are crossed and recrossed: the white ones are for the gods, and the other colours for the *tse*n (*btsan*), the evil powers, which lie in wait everywhere, innately wicked, always ready to do harm. They send illnesses and epidemics, ruin harvests, and cause all the calamities from which men suffer the world over. The exorcists call the feared entities into the magical projection of the world represented by the *zor*, where they can keep them forcibly under their own or the gods' control, or disperse them with the attraction of offerings. We found one of these *zor* right at the entrance to our camp. Probably there had been some misfortune in the village and it was suspected that our presence might have caused it by upsetting the balance of the powers.

A monastery of the Nyingmapa (the ancients' sect) towers up on the right bank of the Gandaki opposite Tsug but further downstream. It is one of the most important in the district. To reach it we have to cross the Gandaki on two unsteady beams thrown over the water, and then edge around the vertical walls of the mountain, which are honeycombed with caves. The *gumpa* is looked after by a lama who has the reputation of being a very skilled doctor but, after a long and suspicious silence, it is not he but an old nun who opens the door to us. With her is a seminarian about nine or ten years old who has a ready tongue, knows every detail of every corner of the monastery, and discourses confidently about the images. The old woman follows silently in the vain hope

of dispelling the gloom with her lantern's dim light.

Four figures of Tamdin (rTa mgrin) grin maliciously in the entrance hall. Their menacing faces, red, green, yellow and blue, have muzzles like horses, wreaths of skulls encircle their heads, and pointed teeth show in their curved mouths. The wheel of life is a symbolic representation of the cycle of rebirths; a composition divided into twelve panels portrays the twelve main events in the Buddha's life. Inside, in the centre of the cell, there is a big seated image of Maitreya, framed by a halo of wood carved in relief. It is clear that Tibetan artists have worked here. Nepal is only represented by some tankas and a few statues. Divinities of the most secret esoteric cycles—Guhya-samāja, Dākinī, Hayagrīva—loom up in the shadows, their many heads jutting forward, and their arms brandishing their deadly weapons.

A necropolis of statues sleeps in the lama's private apartment—gilded ones, wooden and plaster

As we are going back to camp, we see a lama coming towards us on horseback. He is propping up an effigy stuffed with a green plant which looks like juniper and dressed in a red tunic. A white mask with human features drawn on it covers its face; a five-pointed wooden crown encircles its head, each one of the five triangular wooden points bearing an inlaid figure of one of the five supreme Buddhas; silver ornaments hang round its neck. He is following a boy who carries offerings and burned juniper twigs on a sort of plate. A lama walks beside the horseman singing psalms and sounding the small sorcerers' drum (damaru). Another is leading the horse, holding in one hand a white scarf which is tied to the animals's neck. When they reach the riverbank they remove the effigy's clothes and its ornaments and crown, and throw the remains into the river along with the juniper and the offerings. It is the first time I have seen a ceremony like this, and it confirms my opinions of the survival of bonpo rites, which have not been wiped out by the advance of Buddhism in these districts. Clearly the two rites, Buddhist and bonpo, have been superimposed on one another: the person whose straw effigy has been cast into the river is someone who died yesterday and who has been cut into pieces and exposed to the animals on the mountain. This is an aboriginal custom which the Buddhists have not been able to wipe out for the practical reason that there is no firewood in Tibet for wasting on the dead.

Tibetan customs were brought in by Lamaism, but there it met with other usages prescribing that corpses should be thrown into the river, as some bonpo sects did in ancient Tibet also. Thus the white scarf, which is still used in the funeral rites of some bonpo tribes on the Chinese border, stands for the cord which served as a bridge between earth and heaven in the original Shamanism, and which was reascended by the dead. The old beliefs have not been completely abandoned. As a compromise, an effigy is cast into the river instead of the dead person himself.

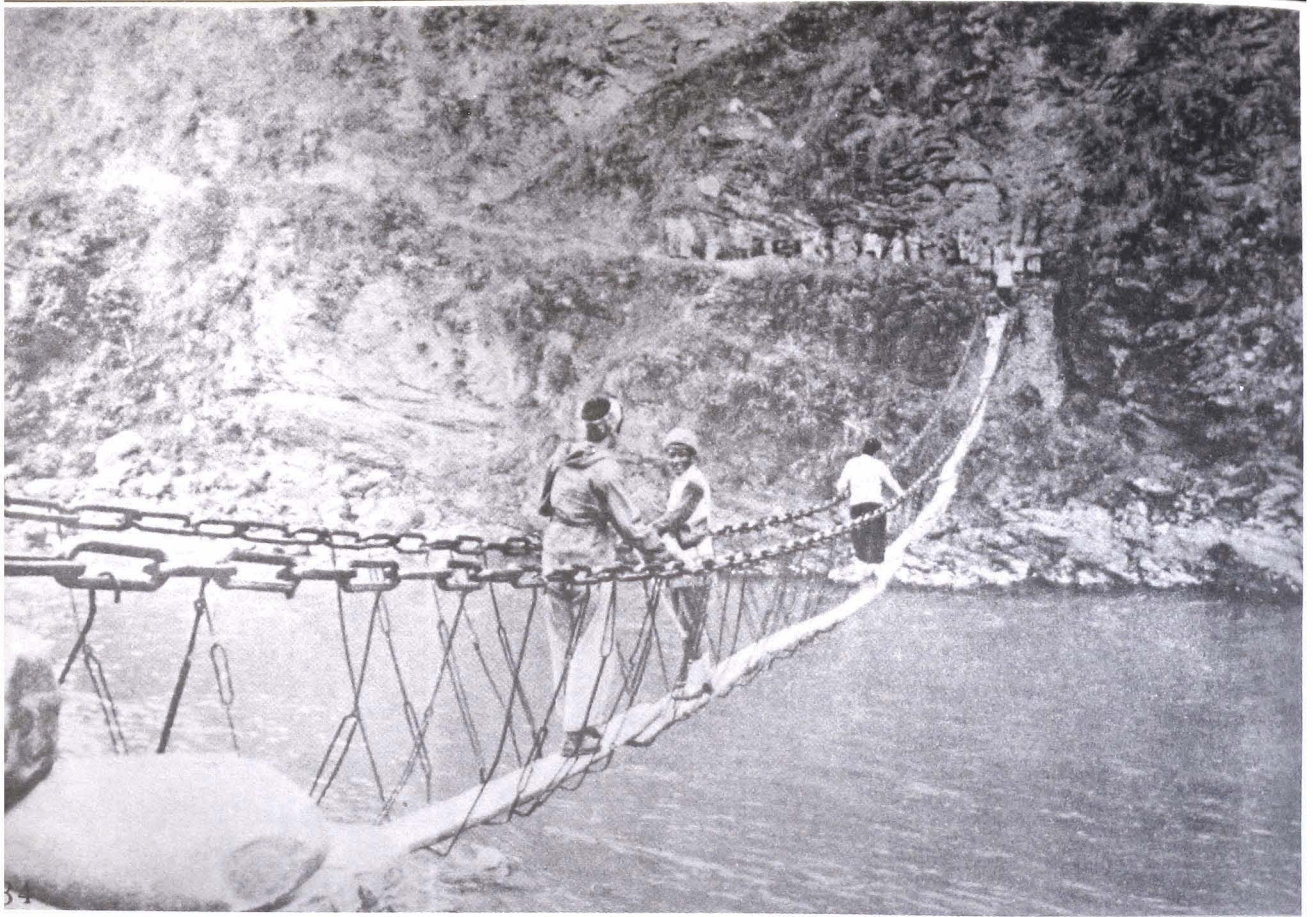
At sunset, when we have already taken shelter in our tents from the violent wind, we hear the sound of approaching steps and voices. We put our heads out and there in front of us we see the big man who appeared like a mirage on the pass before Mustang. But he is different now; his sword and his angry frown have gone. He stands there pale and humbled, with blood pouring from his nose, clotted on his moustache and on the tufts of grass which have been stuffed into his nostrils to arrest the flow. He is supported by a servant and a lama, who is in fact that very skilled doctor, the lama of Tsug. A persistent haemorrhage, which has been going on for three days, has brought him into this miserable state. The lama openly admits that his treatments and exorcisms have not



The abbot of Kargyupa monastery near Muktinath

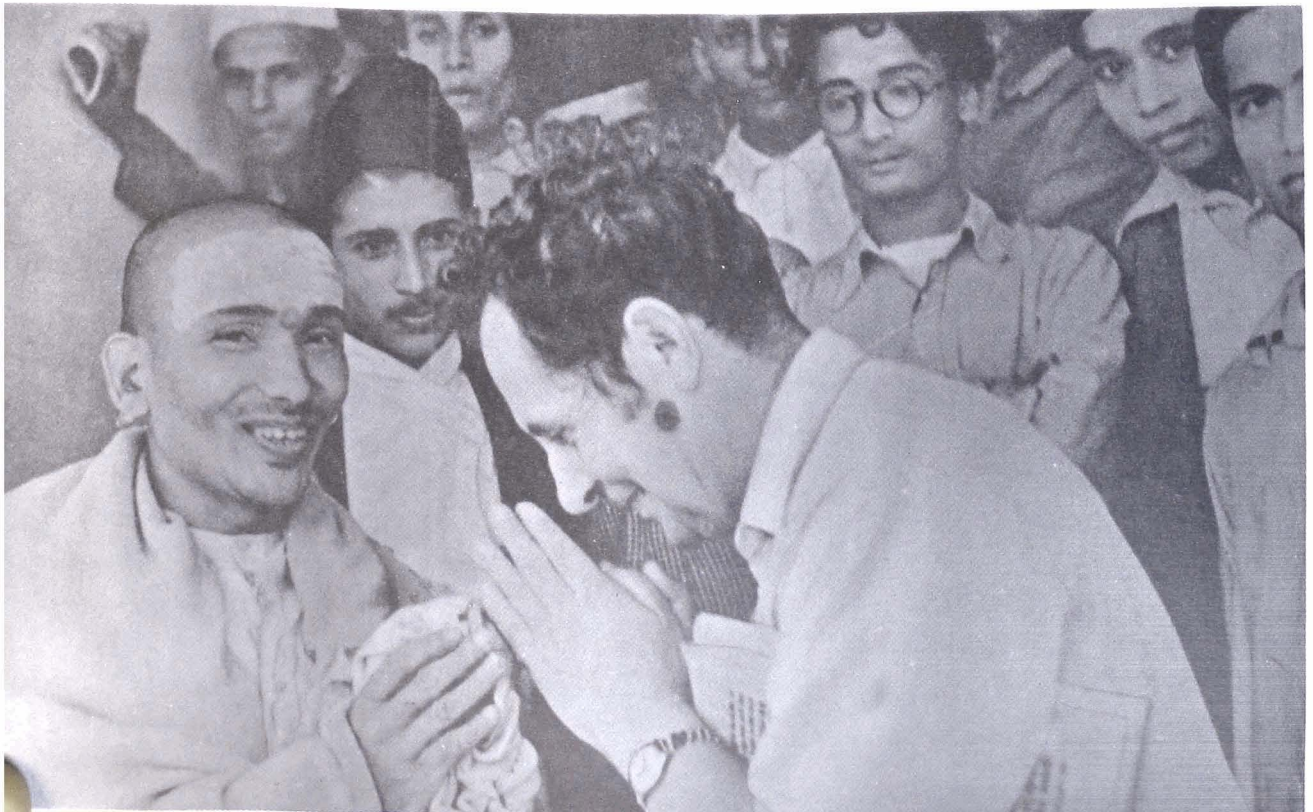


Muktinath



The suspension bridge over the Mayangdi khola

Meetings with the country's most celebrated scholars



worked, and implores Guttuso to do some thing. It is a serious case. We have him taken back to the house where he is staying and Guttuso immediately sets to work with tampons and injections. At the sight of the needle this giant of a man trembles like a baby and nearly faints. He is frantic with terror that he may be about to die, and every now and again asks me bewilderedly: *scimeyon*, will I die ? He does not die, and rides back with us to Tukucho, where his flocks are, coming to see us every day to be examined and reassured. Before we leave he invites us to his house, takes us into the huge courtyard, where hundreds of heavy-fleeced sheep are massed together, bleating deafeningly, and asks us to take the finest one. We do not accept, of course, but we are touched by his kind thought. This is the first time a patient has shown such warm gratitude. Guttuso has treated hundreds of people but not one has ever so much as said thank you. Once they have been examined and got their medicine and the treatment has brought the desired result, they disappear without a word. Anyway the word *dhanyabad*, which corresponds to our "thank-you", has only recently come into Indian languages. If one believes in Karma, every act of goodness is destined by fate to bring its own return. So it is not the person who receives a favour who should be grateful, but the person who does the favour, because the person who has given him the chance to do it has given him the opportunity to improve his own destiny by sowing seeds of goodness which will inevitably bear fruit for him.

In this world it is necessary to be grateful only to those who give offence or do us harm, because as Śāntideva says (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*, chapter VI), if I can bear his blows and insults with patience and forgiveness, the more he thinks he harms me the more he benefits me, because he is opening the path of liberation for me, or helping me along it:

47. "Moved only by the force of my past actions, the creatures which have been able to harm me (because of this conduct of theirs) will plunge into the infernos, so it is they who are offended by me."

48. "Because of them, my sins dwindle, if I patiently endure that evil which they can bring me in various ways, but because of me they plunge into the long suffering of the infernos."

49. "I only do evil to them, while they are my benefactors, so why do you think the very opposite and grow angry, O cruel soul ?"

98. "Praise and eulogies are obstacles to the serenity of my spirit and to the sense of dismay which (one should feel at the prospect of the round of births and deaths); they breed envy of the virtuous and resentment of (others') prosperity."

102. "Nor should I be angry with them for putting obstacles in the way of my merits, for there is no way to equal that of patience, and are they not providing me with the opportunity to use it ?".

106. "In this world it is easy to find beggars, but it is difficult to find people who want to do me harm, for if I harm no one, no one can harm me."

108. "Therefore, this fruit of patience, which he and I have cultivated, must first be offered

to him, because he was the main reason for the patience.”

110. “It is said that the enemy should not be honoured, since it was his intention to do evil, but how could I give proof of my patience in other situations, for example towards the doctor who is trying to do me good ?”

From Kagbeni the track goes off to Muktinath, one of the most sacred pilgrimage places in Nepal. We have often seen that the religions do not compete with each other in this country, but live in harmony in the same place, which is consecrated by long tradition or otherwise imbued with an aura of holiness. Hinduism has slowly but surely crept into this stronghold of Buddhism, placing Vishnu's image near the Buddha in a sunny hollow in the lap of the mountain of Muktinath, where, at about four thousand metres, springs of boiling water and flickers of methane leap from the ground. These marvels have inspired devotion. Columns of Tibetan, Indian and Nepalese pilgrims hurry towards the place singing psalms and upon all weighs the shadow of death as in the mind of Michelangelo: “Death—they say—walks beside us, death sits beside us, death goes with us on long journeys and comes back home with us.” But these miserable human beings, these troops of half-naked ascetics, covered with ash, their hair unkempt, are guardians of thousands-year-old wisdom and of a subtle art which finds unexpected passages from the threshold of the body to the threshold of the soul, and which defines a refined technique which helps us, while still living, to reach the other level, that level where the “I” is extinguished in an impersonal, unmoving brightness, without purpose and without colour. But truth is only there, and here all is vanity. “They say that men who believe they find joy in this existence are deluding themselves like babies who think they are sucking their mother's milk when they are really sucking their own thumbs.” Paradise is open to all, and if one dies along the way, so much the better; suffering is finished for ever and there is no more need to run the risk of restrating the painful round of birth and death.

The Hindus came after the Tibetans, who had named the miraculous spring chumi (c'u mig) “the fountain”, but it is quite likely that even they were preceded by aboriginal cults.

Holy places never have any beginning. They have been holy from the time they were discovered, strangely alive because of the invisible presence breathing through them or showing itself in the special attractiveness of the place or in the health-giving water or in various miraculous or unusual features. Man is amazed or fearful as he feels the vibrations of invisible powers in the air, and religions, feebly following behind like all human institutions, gradually assign various names and different symbols to delineate the mystery. It is not only Buddhists and Visnuists who come together at Muktinath. There are also the Bonpo, who were perhaps the first to discover the holiness of the place, perhaps the first to give form to the religious institutions of the aboriginals.

The hot springs and miraculous flickerings spurt forth at the end of the valley, where it starts to grow steeper as it assails the rocky mountain ridge. A path cuts the flank of the gorge to the quick, and plods along as far as the Mona pass where it is swallowed up in the bright silence of the first snow. The Muktinath valley is very fertile. Much of it is covered with villages (Khyimbu, Chonkor, Purang, Puza, etc.) which used to be subject to the main centre of Zarkot and its kings. The old well-being was never reestablished after the wars, but its fertile and well watered fields, its commercially active inhabitants, and its sheltered situation assured it of the comfortable prosperity which shows itself in the many large and well appointed houses. The castle has been destroyed, of

course, but the gompa (Dsar c'os sde), which belongs to the Ngor sect, is extremely interesting. The thirty-five Buddhas invoked during the ceremony of the confession of sins languish on the blackened temple frescoes; the Buddha reveals unattainable doctrines to the arhats gathered around him.

The statue in the cell represents Śākyamuni, accompanied by the usual disciples, and golden reflections quiver from the superb statue of the Buddha of Medicine (sMan bla) nearby.

Every moderately prosperous family has in its own house a chapel with images of the gods it is particularly devoted to and books of liturgy and prayers or lives of the saints. They may be richly adorned or bare, but I know there are no exceptions to this, because when the word went around that I was piously offering alms for the chiome (mc'od me), the usual offering for a lighted lamp, every single family head in the village escorted me solicitously into his own little temple. They seemed to have built them on purpose !

Most of the chapels in Zarkot have been enriched by the remains of gompas which have been destroyed—there is no other way to explain how they come to contain not only Nepalese statues from the best period, but even excellent examples of the Nalanda school, which were brought up here by Indian pilgrims and miraculously saved from the troubles of the time. Some scorched and half melted bronzes bear permanent marks of their sad adventure. When you go into the houses and courtyards you realise that a fine tradition of craftsmanship has developed and been maintained over the centuries in these districts. This dignified and tasteful way of working with wood has never been overpowered by the Nepalese or the Tibetan manner—it has freely imitated the motifs of both, but the sum of its own work is impressed with a completely individual and local character.

Muktinath is an island on its own between Nepal and Mustang, which is completely Tibetan.

The temples of Muktinath are an hour's easy walk from Zarkot. The path takes a more winding route because it skirts the holy territory, always keeping it on the right. There are many chapels and temples but they are all poor and of little artistic interest and, above all, they are not antique. Worship here took place in the open air. It is sufficient to mention the main ones: Marmelakhang (Mar me lha k'añ), the chapel of the lights, whose guardian divinity is Padmasambhava; Mevar (Me abar), "the flame", where flames spurt out of the ground and an unadorned image of Avalokitesvara peers at the genuflections of the devout. Ragged old nuns tend the holy fire. Finally there is the Gompasarma (dGon pa gsar ma), "the new temple", with statues of Avalokiteśvara and Śākyamuni, and to one side the small modern temple of Vishnu which consecrates Hinduism's final possession of the place. The Tibetan gompas are under the control of a family belonging to the sect of the "Ancients"; the lamas pass the office, the income and the name from father to son. This lama, who is called Champa Rabgye, (Byams pa rab rgyas), goes ahead of us to act as guide, and as he talks he nonchalantly pockets my offerings for the votive lamp. He is tall and thick-set with the imposing appearance of a warrior—I can more easily imagine him wielding a sword than reciting prayers. He wears his hair long and plaited on his head in the manner of the ascetics, and is enveloped in a reddish woollen robe. But he is quite learned and talks easily.

The miraculous spring spurts out of the rock near the temple of Vishnu; they have channelled it in a big pipe with 108 openings at regular intervals, through which the water gushes with a cheerful noise. This is the high point of the journey for our men. They have come with us without feeling

involved or interested, quite unable to understand what strange reasons might be driving us on this uncomfortable venture—except for Muktinath. Muktinath has been at the forefront of their thoughts. The divine grace permeating this place wipes out sins; man purifies himself in this immense temple which the earth has raised up towards heaven, and comes closer to the eternal powers. It is late and cold, but they take off their clothes and file after the captain under the freezing water which gushes from the hundred and eight outlets.

The Kargyud-pa sect, which resembles the ancients', has a monastery downstream under the care of a hermit (gomchen) who is renowned for being a very skilled exorcist. He is big as a bull, with a short neck, his head buried under a mass of hair (most of it false, to give him the *physique du rôle*), and a flushed, pock-marked face, he would seem to indulge in copious draughts of *rakshi* rather than in ascetic exercises. He complains of stomach pains, insists on being examined by Gut-tuso, and stretches out on the ground, baring his enormous belly without embarrassment. He has cirrhosis of the liver, but he roars with laughter when he is advised to drink more moderately. The other great fat friars join in, and even we start to laugh at this burst of hilarity, although he will not live more than a few months.

The little bonpo temple is called Sanglin (bSam gliñ). It is set apart, a modest chapel in a house in the countryside, among goats, cattle and children. The custodian is a hereditary priest, and he tells me its story. It was founded by a lama from eastern Tibet, and is often visited by bonpo pilgrims who come specially from those remote regions. But this Bon is so mixed with Buddhism that you do not perceive it unless you rummage among the books and in particular pay careful attention to the pictures hanging from the arch of the doorway to keep evil influences away. The ubiquitous swastika turned towards the left is the clearest and most indubitable symbol.

The weather has become threatening. A solid mass of desolate grey clouds covers the peaks and the horizon to the north, and the first snow-storms strike Mustang, coming as far as the turn of the valley we left yesterday. The captain looks alarmedly at that dense blackness cutting through the sky and says with a sigh of relief: "We're just in time, we would all have been dead by now." The mountain frightens him and he is depressed by the cold. Ever since we got to Tukuhe and the freezing wind struck us he has practically had to be dragged out of his tent in the mornings. He gets braver in the evening and comes all muffled up to say good night and get his orders, and especially to sip a glass of *rakshi*, a temptation he finds it hard to resist, in spite of his protestations of frugal living.

On the way back to Tukuhe we turn off to the left to visit the gompa of Kuzudenga (sKu gzugs sde lna) which is supposed to have been founded fourteen generations ago by a very holy lama who was venerated as an incarnation of the great wonderworker, Padmasambhava. In fact Padmasambhava himself is supposed to have been here, and as proof we are shown marks on the rock which are supposed to be his foot-prints.

More or less all over Tibet, the magician's route is marked like this by his foot-prints on stone, on the earth, on the rocks, as if the power of his magic could melt the hardest of materials; and if one believes the legends there would seem to be no place he did not go, however remote or difficult, as if he was drawn into perpetual wandering by his burning desire to exert his powers on the ancient gods of Tibet.

Tibetan influence, religious, cultural and (until the eighteenth century) political, came right as far as this. One cannot speak of local art in Mustang or in the neighbouring districts as far as Tukuche; the art, as it is seen in temple architecture and frescoes, is quite simply Tibetan. On the altars, alongside statues brought from India by pilgrims and refugees, there are masses of images produced by the craftsmen who traditionally flourished in the shadow of the principal monasteries of Tibet. The huge paintings displayed on the chapel walls are identical to the grave and threatening evocations decorating the temples on the other side of the Himalayas, especially those of the Sakya sect, which dominated this area and was the first to spread Lamaism there. The history of the monasteries investigated is almost all contained in the biographies of the principal Sakyapa masters which I collected during my earlier travels in Tibet and long stay in Sakya monastery. But the ancients take an important place beside the Sakyapa. The Nyingmapa (rñiñ ma pa) composed a new edition of the biography (*gterma*) of Padmasambhava, who they recognise as their master and guide and who is for them the symbol of the spiritual conquest of Buddhism, and they managed to include in it local traditions which are of great interest since they show that before Buddhism, Dhaulagiri, the sacred, venerated mountain, predominated over all the deities under the name of Mule, as supreme guardian of the whole region.

By chance, a copy of this biography came into my hands at Kagbeni one morning when we were just about to leave. It is a fine manuscript on good paper, written carefully and accurately, and probably meant for some monastery or rich gentleman. When they brought it to me I did not haggle over the price, as it is perhaps the only surviving document about the ancient happenings in the upper Gandaki Valley.

Kuzudenga dominates the valley of Marpha, and seems more like a fortress for defence than a place for meditation. There are no monks here either—just a single custodian, exorcist and trader, who takes much more jealous care of a box containing supposed relics of the lama than he does of the priceless statues thrown down everywhere amongst great heaps of scraps and rags. In the frescoes on the walls of the main chapel one can still see Demcog (bDe mc'og), Tamdin (rTa mgrin), Padmasambhava. The most beautiful statues of the Nalanda school are lying in a corner like so much old iron.

We travel quickly on the return as far as Tatopani, stopping for one day at Tukuche, where we very regretfully have to give up our horses and take on a new train of porters. But these are mountain people, strong as pack animals and always in a good mood; they happily take turns with the heaviest loads, day in and day out. One of them is a lama, and another is a Tibetan from Kham on the Chinese border, who has come down here to make his fortune. And he is not the only one I have met in Mustang, where they flock in search of work, or rather business. They go in for small trading, adapt themselves to any kind of job, work as porters, then with the money they have saved they buy one or two little donkeys. They start on a modest scale, but little by little they grow more prosperous.

One of them comes to sell us two puppies, the size of a pair of chickens. They are of the thick-coated apsu breed, very intelligent and affectionate. They and their mother have been all tumbled about among the sheep, and they are nothing but skin and bone. So two new members join the caravan: Damema (the female) and Rinchen (the male).

The bridge at Tatopani is in an even worse state than it was before, but the Gandaki is fal-

ling, and the horses will be able to ford it when the Tibetan merchants bring them down in a few days time to sell them at Palpa and Butwal markets.

It is three days from Tatopani to Baglung, over a track scratching along the overhanging walls high above the Gandaki, on the uncertain and fragile support of stakes driven into the rock. It is here that Guttuso nearly falls into the void when a joist suddenly subsides. The narrow path goes through Dharkhola and Rakkhu and Beni. The first day, just as we start to climb, we hear a voice on our right like someone calling for help. We go further, and then we see an almost completely naked man in the bushes, waving his arms and coming towards us through the thick grass. A cow follows slowly after, and beyond them among the stumps and bushes there is a straw-roofed hut. The man, who does not seem quite sane, is invoking the name of Narayan (or Vishnu). His fine head of black hair glistens in the sun, and his whole body looks like burnished metal. The porters say he is a sadhu, a most devoted follower of the Narayan whose name he is continually proclaiming with such zeal and intensity. I offer him a rupee and in his gratitude he calls even more loudly on his god until the whole valley echoes; then he twists and dances and weeps. They say he loves Vishnu so powerfully that the god often comes down into his devotee and inflames him. I think to myself that the hermit has chosen his place well, near the road where pilgrims and pious caravans of the credulous go by, and I look almost enviously at the hermit's serene self-possession, at the fruit-trees and the well-fed little heifers. After all, it is worth the trouble of making all that uproar if you can then spend the rest of the day without worry or work, dreaming and contemplating the heavens.

At Rakkhu once again we see the first traces of an ancient Hindu diaspora: a statue of Nandi, Shiva's sacred bull and a pillar with carvings of the sun and the serpent, obviously of Southern origin, confirm that currents from the South have penetrated into a region where the cults do not generally use icons. From here on Hinduisim reigns unchallenged with its sects, its symbols and its terrors. At Galesver (Ganesvara), before Beni, we start to see troops of Sadhus sheltering under the trees which shade the temples and hermitages. These restless forerunners of the pilgrims are gathering from the whole district for the forthcoming feast of the ekādaśī (November 15).

At Beni we cross the Mayangdi Kholā (Mangalā), a tributary of the Gandaki, by an extremely long bridge suspended over the turbid waters which leap furiously over the rocks beneath us. As soon as you set foot on it, the immense contraption starts to sway from side to side, and the further you go out onto the disconnected bits of wood the faster it swings. And the people stand on the banks watching to see how things turn out.

Baglung is a cheerful town, mostly inhabited by Newars, built in a broad valley which is densely peopled and cultivated. Fortunately the rice harvest is over and the fields are dry. Groves of mango and fruit trees (particularly mandarins and pomelos) stand out against the yellow of the fields, pale with stubble, parched and wrinkled and cracked. We are greeted by a troop of urchins who give the first announcement of our arrival; then the whole village forms a queue behind us, following us like shadows, stopping when we stop, made curious by our own curiosity. The festive welcome gives us pleasant memories of this little town where the Governor (Boro Hakim) was also particularly friendly and courteous—as the Nepalese authorities always are, anyway. His name is Dirgha Bahadur and he belongs to the Malla family, which used to own the whole of this western

region. He is interested in my research and presents me with a copy of the chronicles of his lineage which will enrich the already remarkable harvest of historical documents we have collected. The prosperous bazaar even boasts an infirmary, but the modest little Hindu and Buddhist shrines in the centre are of no special interest. The most famous shrine in this area is the temple of *Bhagavati*; we come across it on our first day's march towards Palpa, in the middle of a wood of widely-spaced trees which cast their leafy shade on a broad plateau as smooth and neat as the park of a nobleman's villa. By special permission of the *pujari*, who naturally expects a generous offering in exchange for the unusual favour, we are admitted to the interior of the temple. We take off our shoes and enter the narrow cell, avoiding the blood-stains on the pavement in front of the building, where the sacrifices are made each day at dawn. On the altar, one beside the other are three rough stones consecrated by the presence of three manifestations of the awful goddess, *Mahākālī* in the centre and *Mahālakṣmī* and *Mahasarasvatī* on either side. Behind them is a *linga*, the symbol of *Śhiva* and his inexhaustible potency.

Humbly and contritely I pay my respects by depositing hard cash on the altar, and I am just about to leave when the *pujari* detains me and pours holy water into my cupped hand to show me the goddess's gratitude and give me the sign of her grace. I pretend to taste it, and then sprinkle it on my head, as one is obliged to do. Then he gives me flower petals to scatter on my hair, and finally smears my forehead with a paste of flour, butter, grains of rice and the sacred carmine. And so I set off once more for Palibas, Bersa and Sheti, bearing visible signs of devotion which make the Captain and his underlings very proud. We leave the *Kali Gandaki* and cut across the mountains. The *Gandaki* twists its winding way towards the West, then turns back in a triangle; we save ourselves a lot of walking, but miss the chance of going through *Riri*, one of the holy cities of Nepal. But basically these places of pilgrimage are all much the same, and my information does not lead me to expect to find ancient monuments there.

On the 20th we cross the *Andhikhola* and reach *Ranighat*. A lazy drizzle spreads a fine curtain over the earth—the final rearguard of the monsoon, which comes late at this altitude. From time to time the sun shows itself, drawing slow mists up from the overflowing rivers. The tents are soaked, as if we had dipped them in the water. The villages between intervals of jungle are growing more frequent. At the junction of the rivers which flow down from the celestial peaks little communities of *sadhus* and freakish hermits lifelessly await the coming of the pilgrims.

We make a precipitous descent to meet the *Kali Gandaki* again, now more swollen and violent than before. No sign of a bridge; one is ferried across in a canoe hollowed out of the trunk of a huge tree, with which the boatmen fight the rapids until they reach the other side. I heave a sigh of relief when I set foot on dry land after that turmoil—nothing is more unpleasant than passively awaiting one's fate. While we were waiting our talkative travelling companions had got up their courage by telling the most amusing stories, for example about the week before—and other times—when the boat capsized and the whole party was swept away by the current.

But the greatest event of this stage of the journey is that on the night of the 20th, at *Ranighat*, "the Queen's landing-place", we do not use our tents for the first time in two months. We sleep in a house—not just a house but a villa, in fact a palace which was built, with the *Ranas'* usual extravagance, for a Nepalese princess, *Teji Kumari*, the wife of *Khadga Sham Sher*. He was the comman-

der-in-chief, but he grew greedy for more power and rebelled against the Maharaja Bir Sham Sher. After a brief spell of imprisonment, Bir pardoned him and made him Governor of Palpa. But here he began to plan new treason. His wife could not bear this dangerous game and took refuge on the holy shores to forget the troubling delusions of the world.

Close by this superb dwelling the temple of Shiva, to whom the princess was very devoted, reflected in the waters where her ashes were scattered. It is impossible to imagine a finer building or a better site. It is right on the bend of the Gandaki, which carves out a deep curve as it comes down in full flow from the north, to be driven back violently by the rock, boiling as if in rage at the banks' rejection. The villa looks outover the water and gathers in all its freshness. But it is abandoned now. The ceilings are falling in, the structure is collapsing, the shutters have been removed, and if the Governor does not step in soon, even if only to turn it into an old people's home or a hospital, very soon *nothing* but the skeleton of this superb palace will be left.

After three or four hours of steep but enjoyable climbing among woods and fields, we arrive at Tansen (Tensing). It used to be called Palpa but that name now refers to the district and not its capital. It used to be a prosperous and independent state, and gave shelter to the famous Indian missionary Atisa who determined in his old age to cross the Himalayas to spread the Buddha's message in the country of the snows. This discredits the tradition according to which it was founded by Ratna Simha, the successor of Samara Simha, who was vanquished and taken prisoner by Alaud-Din in the conquest of Chittor. At some stage the local dynasties were probably replaced by a new family boasting Rajput origins.

Palpa was sometimes hostile to the Nepalese dynasty, and retained its independence until 1804, when its last king, Prithvipala, together with his retinue was killed in Kathmandu where he had been invited on a pretext of Bhim Sen Thapa's. So Palpa and its kings paid with their lives for the treachery which Mahadatta, Prithvi's father, had plotted with Bahadur Singh, Prithvi Narayan's son, against the twenty-four princes of the Seven Gandakis and the twenty-two kingdoms of the Kali basin.

Tansen is one of Nepal's major towns; its houses and suburbs, with their gardens and orchards, extend over a large area on the southern slopes of a hill which runs gently and pleasantly down to the valley. It looks like a new city, for contrary to my expectations I could discover no building, holy or otherwise, which dated back earlier than the eighteenth century. The Governor's palace, built of red brick in the usual Nepalese style with wide overhanging roof and richly framed windows, was constructed at the end of the eighteenth century. The temple of Bhagavati is new, and the one dedicated to Narayan dates from the eighteenth century. Both of these stand in the shelter of a wood where even in the daytime squawking bats as big as turkeys, unblinded by the sunlight, make sudden flights and fight for places on the branches from which they hang by their wings. Even the Buddhist chapels are new and unadorned. So if history did not definitely tell us otherwise, we would say Tansen was a new town. But local traditions and ruins indicate two places as the old Palpa: the summit of the hill where Srinagar, the fortified city, used to be, and the level area on the slopes of the same hill. Huge ruins crop up on the clay soil amidst a jumble of fragments and bricks, some of them looking like the foundations of stupas. Governor Raja Tarak Bhadur Shah has jurisdiction over all the western provinces. He belongs to an ancient feudal family related to the Ranas and has the com-

posure and polished courtesy of a well-born person.

Communist propaganda from India and the Terai reaches as far as this; there are messages in Nepali and English on the walls of the houses, praising peace and requesting outsiders not to meddle in local affairs, but this sort of propaganda is watched over by the Governor, who is said to be very stern and decisive, and it stops at the suburbs, suddenly finding its way in the countryside barred by the obstacle of religion.

In Palpa one realises how close India is. In the well-stocked bazaar you can buy radios, cameras and medicines, and there is even a hospital. There used to be a cinema too, but it was closed by order of the authorities, who did not approve of the films shown there, suspecting them of spreading unorthodox ideas.

The number of sick people we were seeing had made us realise there must be a hospital nearby—some were plodding wearily up the hill, some, feverish and exhausted, were lying beside the track to get their breath back, hoping not to be too late, some more serious cases, curled up in baskets, were being carried on a relative's back. One richer person was being taken to India; a bear in the jungle had clawed his face horribly and it had turned all swollen and shiny.

I find old acquaintances in Palpa too. The very day after we arrived I was poking about from shop to shop in the bazaar when a little man of about fifty stopped me and asked if I recognised him. I was taken by surprise and uncertain, and started ransacking my brain for a picture that would help refresh my memory. But I have unfortunately a very bad memory for people; after a short time they fade from my mind and there is no way to revive them. It is quite the reverse with landscapes, which are preserved forever in my mind's eye with the same vivid lines and colours and light and shade as when I first saw them. My memory is a memory for places and ideas, thoughts and images. There is no room in it for people. But this man comes to my assistance: we met one lovely clear evening in Western Tibet, on the banks of the Manasarovar. He had come with his mother on a pilgrimage to the holy lake in the Gandaki valley from which I was now returning, but as soon as she caught sight of that still blue mirror of water, her journey and her life came to an end in the same moment. They immediately burned her on the funeral pyre and her ashes were cast into the lake. Now I remembered it perfectly: I remembered the red glow and the silent travelling companions around the fire, as the silence of the heavens weighed down upon us.

Another friend who never left me for a moment was a young poet called Kulamani Devkota, who was teaching Sanskrit in the local school. He became my shadow, came looking for me at all hours with an ingenuous lack of consideration for the time of day, which would be discourtesy in us but for them is a sign of the warmest friendship. We talked together in Sanskrit for hours at a time, and I sometimes felt so stunned by this that words and phrases went on buzzing in my head afterwards, and popped out unexpectedly when I was talking with my companions around the table in the evening—not in Italian but in Sanskrit. The morning we left he wanted to give me a solemn and memorable farewell. We were threading our way through the bazaar with the porters filing along behind us when he emerged from an alley, all dressed in white because he was in mourning, and made me sit down on the step of a shop. When I was seated he stood in the gently sloping street and, accompanying the recitation with fantastic gestures, he declaimed a poem he had written in my honour the night before, and the whole town stood around us and watched.

It is an easy two day's march from Palpa to Butwal, by a track which gets steeper and more

rugged as it goes. The Ranas made sure that the tracks near the borders were maintained in the most primitive possible state of neglect, thinking that this would keep the country more secure and impenetrable. We are rash enough to cross the Tinau Khola by the bridge which leaps boldly across it. It looks fairly well patched together, and it is only when we are in the middle of this rambling ramshackle contraption, which creaks and moans and sags at every step, that we understand why the caravans avoid it and prefer to ford the swirling waters of the swollen river. We shall take care not to repeat this dangerous adventure when we return along this track.

Butwal is not a town but a bazaar. It supplies the whole of the Gandaki basin as far as the Tibetan border, and Tibet as well, through the Tukuche and Mustang merchants. Fabrics, spices, tools and medicines go to supply the little bazaars in the interior and the scantily-stocked stalls along the caravan routes, spreading and branching off thousands of times into the heart of the impenetrable country, carried on men's backs, often exchanged for rice, the only fortune of the humble people who flock down here: Bhamans and Chettris and Magars and Gurungs. The salt at Butwal comes from India and supplies all the districts as far as Palpa and Pokhara. Supplies for north of these provinces come from Tibet, as we have seen.

At Butwal we see motor vehicles once again. It is hard to understand how these trucks keep going, but anyway they do go everywhere, bouncing through the rice-fields, passing over the countryside with a gnashing of disconnected old ironware and a gasping of motors which seem about to expire at any moment but always manage to get their breath back again.

At the Butwal bridge, amid much hilarity, we say goodbye to our Tukuche porters. We climb onto a truck with the Captain, the cook Chandra, a labourer, the two dogs and all the baggage, and plunge noisily into the jungle, to emerge an hour and a half later at Bhairava, right on Nepal's border with India, and a few kilometres from Nautanwa, the final junction of the Indian railway. Bhairava is right in the Tarai, a new town, arisen for commercial reasons as bridge-head of Butwal, seat of a Governor, open door to all political infiltrations and a favourite spot for their incubation. K.I. Singh, the leader of the Nepalese Communist movement, started his activities in the Tarai, and some groups support the idea of splitting the Tarai off from Nepal and returning it to India. The idyllic if sulky serenity of the interior is finished; many new ideas reach here while still half-formed, perhaps even hazy and confused, and here they contend and conflict. The Governor, Pama Goswara Sher Bahadur Shah Thakur is very young—only twenty-six. He also is from an aristocratic family. We camp on the edge of the ricefields outside the town. To the south the plain meets the sky; to the north, beyond the hills of Butwal, which already seem a long way off disappearing into a motionless blue mist, the peaks we left behind us a few weeks ago shine unattainably. I have come down here because a tradition which there is no reason to doubt has it that the Buddha's birth in about 550 B.C. took place in Rummidei in the Bhairava district. We go there on an elephant which the Governor has kindly placed at our disposal. The great calm animal takes five hours to go thirty kilometres, using his trunk to harvest any tufts of rice which come within reach. We perch as best we can on his broad back, balancing ourselves against the continuous jerks and swayings, and we arrive so numb that we choose to go on foot, as we usually do, for the return journey.

It is almost dusk when we get there. Two small hills topped by turrets stand out in the brilliant clarity of the air, and all around the darkening mango trees seem to be summoning the shadows of the night. Devout Chinese pilgrims who made pious visits here from the sixth to the eighth

century found temples and monasteries and lively activity. The monks showed them the miraculous places where the saint of the Śākya first saw the light and where the miracles attending his incarnation took place. They guided the pilgrims to the pool where the Śākya used to take their daily bath and, almost on its banks, the tree of Ashoka near which Yashodhara gave life to the wonderful boy.

“Once the queen was taken by an irresistible desire, and with the king’s permission she went into the park of Lumbini, accompanied by her women. As she stood leaning on a branch which hung low under its burden of flowers, the Bodhisattva suddenly burst forth from her womb and was born.”

“The constellation of Pusya was favourable when a son was born from the side of the queen, who had been sanctified by the rituals, for the salvation of the world, without causing her any suffering or illness.”

(From the *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghōṣa.)

And they used to show the place where two dragons washed his delicate body with hot and cold water, and nearby, a stupa of King Ashoka’s and the four other stupas where the most sublime gods came down from heaven to do honour to him, and further on the column erected by the same king, split down the middle by a thunderbolt hurled by a demon. But there is nothing there now. The ruins run underground, wrinkling the surface of the fields.

On this melancholy plain there is only a small white modern temple. An old sculpture inside it representing the miraculous birth of Siddhartha indifferently accepts the formal offering of a Brahman, who makes it twice daily with the listlessness of long habit. The Muslim invaders, in their iconoclastic frenzy, chiselled the image out so that now only the plan of the figure remains. The sun is setting in the sky, and the earth seems to become even more silent between the death of day and the onset of night. Serenity streams down from the sky and floats suspended in the motionless air, filtering from inanimate objects into the spirit. This is the birthplace of the prophet from whom such a great part of humanity has sought the light to lead them from suffering to blessedness. Over the centuries the master has redeemed men from subjection to the gods or supervision by them, which prevent the serene contemplation of things, and has given men back the courage of solitude in the face of suffering and death. He has extinguished men’s false hopes, but conquered their fears.

Only the column of Ashoka keeps watch over the boundless countryside, with the brief inscription: “The King, friend of the gods, he of the kindly countenance, came here in person twenty years after his coronation and rendered homage, because this was the birthplace of the Buddha, the saint of the Śākya.”

Stone by stone, brick by brick, all the works erected in his honour have crumbled, but from India to Japan his word lives vigorously on, that most insubstantial of things with which the Masters build the incorporeal edifice of faith and fervour between earth and heaven, as intangible and omnipresent as light, eternally renewing the miracle of his manifestation.

I would have liked to return from Bhairava to Kathmandu through the Tarai. It would be the most favourable season because the miasmas of the *aul*, which rage there for eight months of the year, subside during the winter. However, I submit to the Governor’s advice, particularly because

we have very few weapons and it would be rash to venture into that jungle where people are few and ferocious beasts are many. So there is nothing for it but to go back to Pokhara and take the plane to Kathmandu. During the fine season after the rains have finished, Himalayan Air Ways run an irregular service between Pokhara and the capital, using the deserted plain around the city as an unofficial landing field.

In two days we get to Douadhi below Palpa where I am able to make a careful examination of the vast ruins.

On the 3rd of December we go up to Malanga. We are forced to camp here because there is nowhere to stop for a long way after this. But on this day we touch not a drop of water, either for washing or drinking, because at Malanga the government has built a leprosarium right beside the track. Anyone found to be suffering from the terrible disease is shut in here, so that he does not escape. This does not mean you do not meet lepers in Nepal—we have met quite a few along the track, lion-faced and bearing the dreadful marks of the infection—but Kathmandu is different from the remote and unsupervised regions where we have been travelling. They send as many as they can to this hateful place, where a whole village of lepers has grown up. They live at fearfully close quarters, young and old, men and women, with their disfigured faces, their truncated limbs, and their flushed skin, and they marry and have children. As we are discussing the sadness of the place a couple with a baby in arms come towards the camp. He was sent from Kathmandu to be interned in the leprosarium, but on the way he met a girl. They liked each other, married, and she followed him here. Their child is a poor little wretch, covered in scabes and mucus, coughing and feverish. They have come to beg help for this innocent victim of their impulse and their misfortune, born in the leprosarium and probably doomed to die there.

After Malanga, the track crosses the Gandaki for the last time at Bhumra, rejoins the Andhikola, runs beside it as far as the Baglung Bandipur crossroad and then goes uphill to Nuwakot where the old Thakur palace has been converted into a prison.

But still the place is very important. According to tradition it was at Nuwakot (Nayakot), that a little principality was founded by Miccha (whose father was Bhupal son of Mammath) after he escaped the Chittor massacre and came down again from Riri where his father had taken refuge. If one ignores the arbitrary chronology, there is still the tradition of an independent dynasty boasting somewhat distant connections with the Rajputs, and there is no reason to be unduly sceptical on this point.

From the top of the hill the chain of the Himalaya stretches out in serried ranks as far as the eye can see, as if to send us a last shining greeting, until the mountains lose themselves in the sky. One can see traces of walls and fortresses on the smooth hard chalk, but the destruction of wars, the fragility of the materials, the rains and the floods quickly wipe out or bury the remains, making archaeological investigation in Nepal very difficult.

On December 7th we are in Pokhara, but the joy of returning is shadowed by grief. Rinchen, the apsu puppy which has followed us faithfully from Tukucho, is killed and eaten by a panther during the night. The wild beast had first fumbled at my tent and then jumped on the puppy and carried it away when it foolishly ventured out of shelter. Damema had a lucky escape, because when we heard Rinchen's desperate squeals we all rushed out of our tents, too late to save Rinchen but in time

to prevent Damema from suffering the same fate. Rinchen had a bad *karma*: everything always happened to him. So his brief incarnation came to a tragic end, perhaps in order that a better destiny could start for him. In the morning we are told, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, that the mountains around Pokhara are full of panthers and leopards which come right down into the towns and carry off dogs, big ones too, from under their owners' eyes. There are even tigers which take cows and buffalos. But when they saw us setting up our tents nobody had said anything about it.

On the 9th of December, in the space of two hours, a Himalayan Air Ways plane (an old American troop carrier) carries us over those same tracks through the rice-fields which had taken us fifteen days of struggle in the heat to cover.

CHAPTER XI

STATUES AND PAGODAS

It should have been restful to be back in Kathmandu after four months of constant travel. But it was a matter of running from temple to temple, from library to library, in a whirl of photography, trying to document the trends and events in Nepalese art. The sculptures are still living, necessary parts of an architectonic synthesis which takes them in, distributes them in planes, and brings them together in coherent and harmonious groups, not like the inert and silent fragments yawning with boredom in chilly museum rooms. All the vicissitudes of Nepalese history are depicted in the images which peer down at the passer-by in every street, from every alley and corner, smiling or threatening, inviting or repelling. Our photographic tour started in the morning and became a race with time. We pursued the figures along the walls of temples and palaces, across roof-beams, into courtyards; we saw more and more of them everywhere we went, springing up all over the place like jungle plants. The images themselves reinforce this impression—their strangeness, the intricate entwinement of hands and heads, like the ardour of a primordial world unconfined by the sedate restraint of the intellect. The Newari artists abhorred an empty space: they covered every inch with friezes, arabesques, embroideries, figures and phantoms. It was a flowing, baroque art, rotund and blown up, prolix and solemn, smoothly undulating and curving, inclined to indecent representations using copulating as a symbol of the esoteric implications of Indian theosophy. And indeed this country is inundated with Indian influences, while its Tibetan affinities encourage a mixture of styles. You sense glimmerings of Tibet in the art, and you are aware of remote echoes from China. The various influences poured out into this land coexist in a variety which does not produce discord, but offers the most amazing glimpses of other worlds.

From morning to night we wandered dazedly through these galleries of wonders and terrors, marvels and portents. There are two, three, five-storey temples with gilded bronze roofs curved up at the corners, one above the other, tapering as they rise. Images of kings pray eternally with joined hands on the tops of the pillars planted in front of half-closed doors. The riches and the devotion of centuries have come together, as if in homage or timeless hope, in these sanctuaries where man does not pray, but trembles.

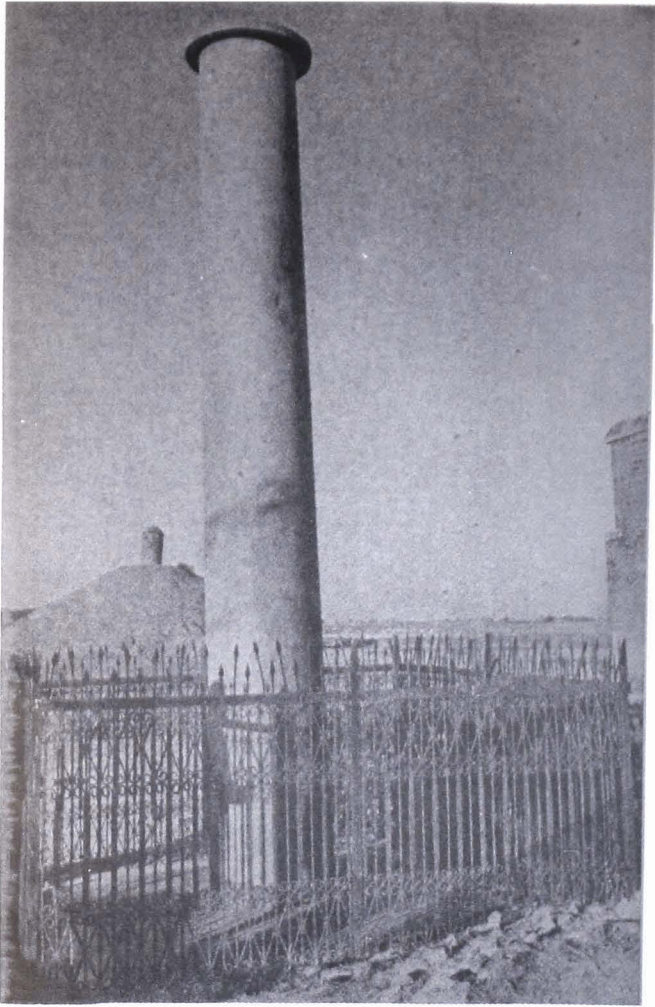
Of course I cannot take the reader with me through all the temples or *vihara* (as the Buddhist monasteries are called, using a name which no longer corresponds to the thing designated). It would be pointlessly boring, because of the necessarily repetitious descriptions, or else it would be difficult to find the right words to define the character and originality of the best buildings whose surprising and fantastic architecture rises above the tangle of streets and alleys.

The palaces are closed in, almost all of them of a heavy and massive solemnity, large and bulky, as if to take hold of the earth and plant the sign of ownership on it. But some of these temples, like the Bhavani temple at Bhadgaon, rise up with airy lightness. A base serves as a spring-board for the leap towards the heavens: the five gilded roofs one above the other gradually taper off and finish in a slender golden spire. In the boldness of its lines it seems to express the thinning out and vanishing of material things—little by little the weight of the body dissolves and the spirit, its covering burned away, rises and loses itself in space.

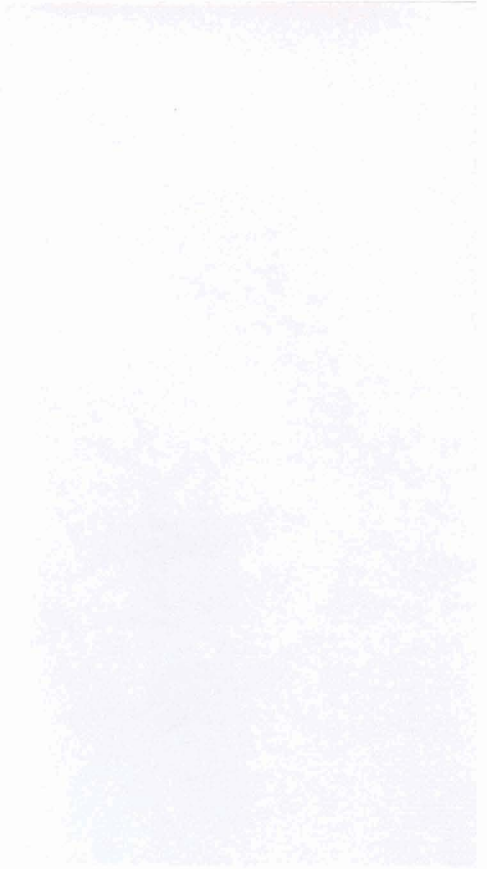
These temples are in many ways similar to the Chinese pagodas, and in fact there has been a good deal of discussion about whether the Nepalese imitated the Chinese, or whether it might have been the other way about. It seems clear to me that this design originates from the Himalayan house. In the rural areas, even in the most remote places, houses are constructed according to an architectural plan which has been handed down unchanged through the centuries, because man's dwelling place is protected by a magic aura and only gradually changed over a long period of time. The house almost always has two (sometimes three) roofs one above the other, each one smaller than the one beneath it. The temple, in its turn, is the house of God, supreme sovereign protecting the land and community; as such it takes its inspiration from the house of man but is naturally nobler and more lofty. In the course of time, ideas and motifs from other countries, especially China, many have been superimposed on this basic design, but it seems to me that its origin is to be found in the simple Himalayan house one sees everywhere in the shadow of the great mountains.

The Bagmati impartially receives the ashes of the dead, Buddhist and Hindu alike, and winds lazily through the city and suburbs, while keeping them at a certain distance. Just as in India, where the houses are hardly ever built right on the river-banks, it is not confined by embankments and houses. The waters flowing from the far-off mountain-tops carry with them the sanctity of those holy peaks, and the banks are reserved for the bath of purification or for the dead who are burned there. On the banks near Pasupati temple big slabs of stone go down to the holy waters: even the Kings, when their last hour was approaching, were laid down on that marble so that they could breathe their last with the current of the river lapping their feet.

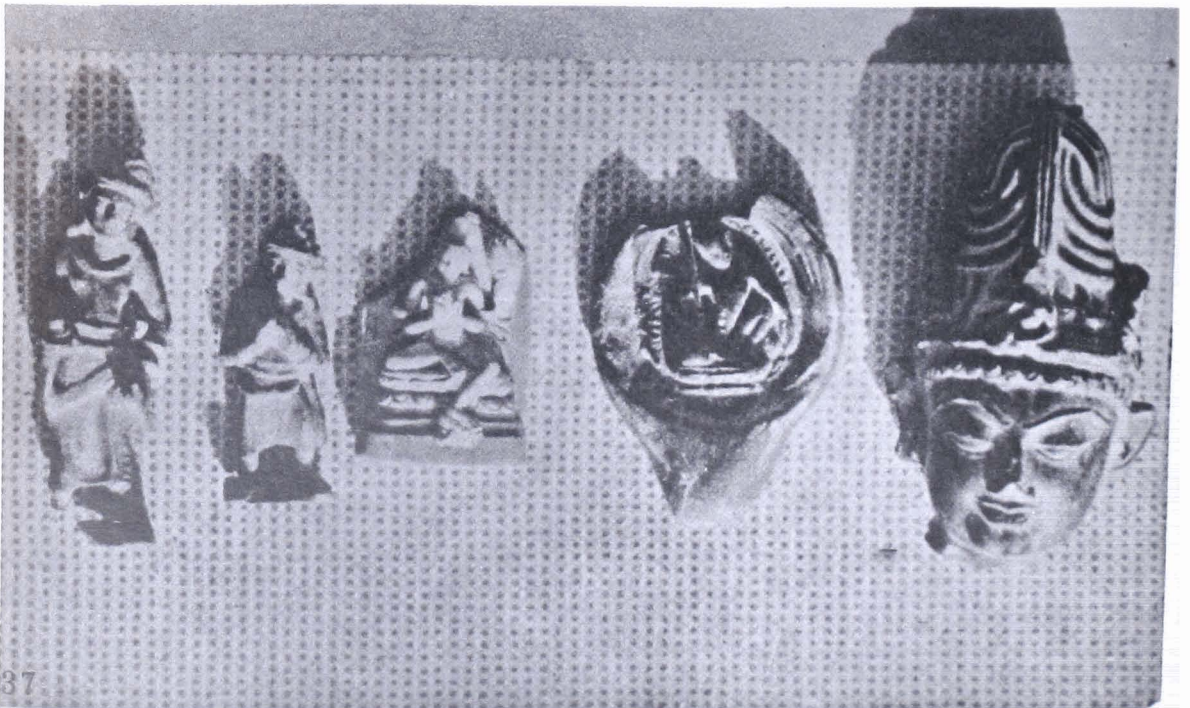
All around there are masses of chapels and shrines, constructed by generations of the faithful whose time on earth has left only this anonymous souvenir of their piety and fear. They are scattered along the banks, up the hill opposite, alongside the shallow steps, as if gathered in the shade of the principal temple which protects them with the sparkling of its cupolas. When outsiders approach, the shutters of the gigantic door are closed, so that the inner places where the symbol of Shiva is guarded will not be violated by profane contacts. And outside the tinkling of small bells can be heard, and the voices of the faithful bringing offerings of flowers on brightly gleaming brass trays. In the inviolable enclosure, Pasupati keeps watch over the people and the town, Pasupati "the lord of the flock", that is of the man attached to the world, still feeling the enticement and charm of the flesh and the passions, and reluctant to allow himself to be led by the light which shines deep

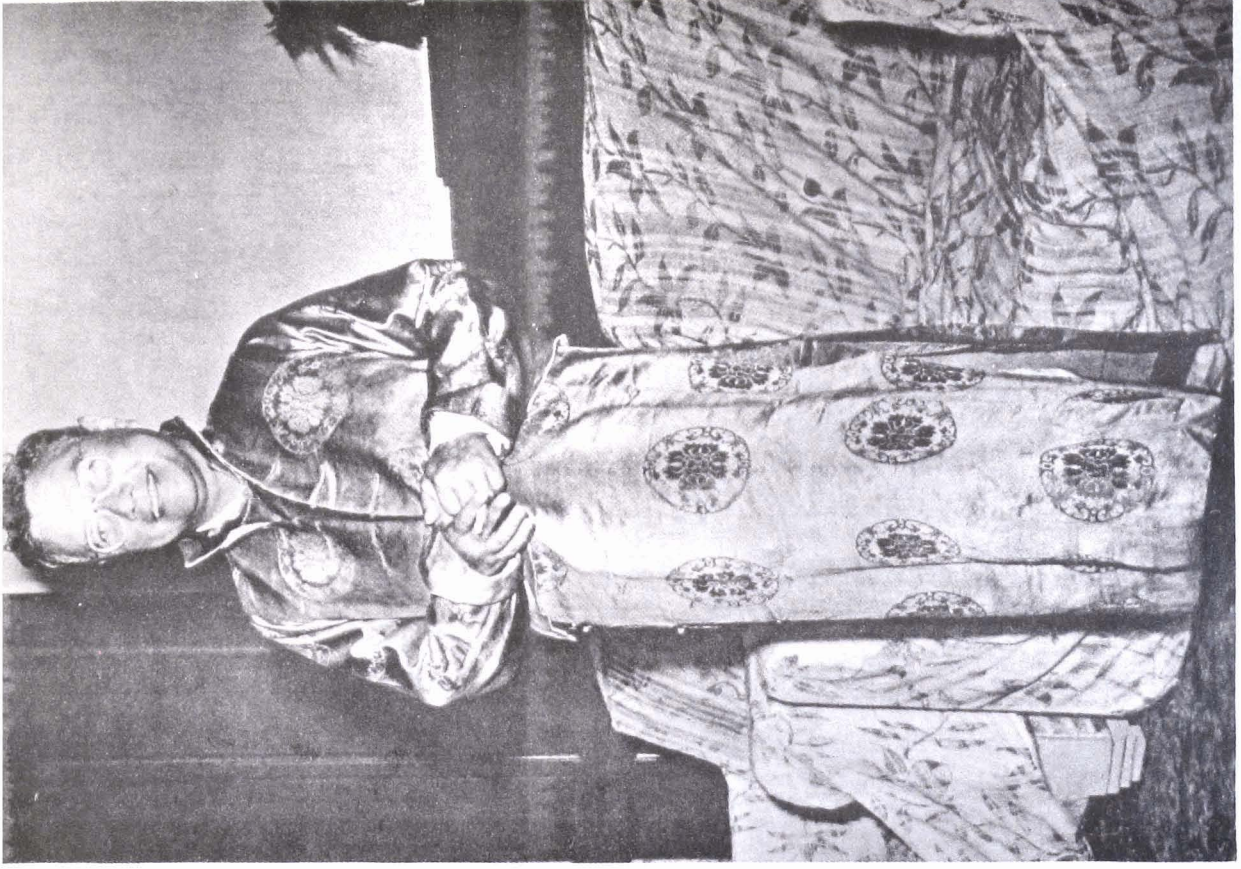


The column of Ashoka at Rummindei



Terracotta discovered at Rummindei





Major Kaisher Bahadur



This sculpture in the temple at Rummindei, representing the birth of Buddha, was defiled by the iconoclasts.

inside him like a distant gleam of divine splendour. The crowd circulating around the chapels murmurs canticles praising Shiva and expanding the response to his invocation : *om namah śivāya*, "om praise be to Shiva", and they are humbled and exalted by the majesty of the god.

"(1) The ascetics meditate continually on the syllable *om* which satisfies all desires and offers freedom. Let praise be given to Omkāra (—the letter *om*, as symbol of Shiva).

(2) Prophets bow (namanti) before him, gods and heavenly nymphs bow before him, men (nara) bow before him, the supreme God. Praise be given to Nakāra (to the letter *na*).

(3) They bow before Mahādeva, the Mahātma, who is the object of the great meditation, the supreme goal, the one who washes away the gratest of sins. Praise be given to Makāra (to the letter *ma*).

(4) His anger appeased, they bow before Shiva, the lord of the world, supreme benefactor, the only eternal peace. Praise be given to Śikāra (to the letter *śi*).

(5) They bow before the god who uses the bull (Nandin) as his steed (vahana) and the serpent Vāsūki as his bracelet; he keeps his coadjutor on his left hand. Praise be given to Vākāra (to the letter *vā*).

(6) This god is everywhere (yatra yatra), he is in everything, he is Maheśvara; he is the master of all the gods. Praise be given to Yakāra (to the letter *ya*).

The Hindu temples rise up in the middle of the squares, overbearing, imposing, dominating. Buddhist temples slip unnoticed into the marketplaces; they are churches, monasteries, retreats, all in one, they are open to all. Pilgrims pray, sleep and eat in the arcades running around the inside of the courtyards; they are not afraid of god, they like to stay close to him in a trusting and care-free intimacy. The main Buddhist sanctuaries are outside the town in the open air: Svayambhunath and Bodhnath, enormous shrines whose secrets no one has yet explored.

Svayambhunath is constructed on the top of a hill standing alone in the middle of the valley and protected on every side by the eyes painted on the four walls of the white turret which surmounts it. The expression of these eyes is not severe, but open and sincere; not solemn with mystery, but shrewd and compassionate. They gaze on men to encourage and stimulate them, and above all to give them faith in their own powers. Hundreds of steps go up the slope to the top between files of meditating Buddhas; monkeys spring from the depths of the trees and frisk about at the side. They come up close to you like impertinent beggars, chattering cheekily. At the top, thirteen gilded wheels symbolically represent the thirteen heavens. Man is alone, like this temple in the midst of the green fields. His battleground is on earth, but the end of his sufferings lies in the infinite brightness of the cloudless sky. He works his weary way upwards, like the pilgrims on his interminable flight of steps leading from the valley to the summit. With every step he takes the horizon becomes wider and his goal comes closer, under the gaze of those eyes which never lose him from their sight.

The square is all a dazzle of light. The sun rebounds from the gold to blaze back from the

many-coloured clothes of the visitors, or caress the dying flowers at the feet of the images. All around an irregular and random forest of statues and stupas which seem to have grown out of the soil carry the devotion of the faithful on through the centuries. The shrine of the smallpox Goddess has requested and been granted the Buddha's hospitality. The universality of Buddhism is shown in the friendly and cheerful coexistence of pilgrims from every part of Asia: Nepalis, Indians, Tibetans, Mongols, Chinese. Some are placating the terrible goddess, some are walking around the Buddhist monument, some are praying quietly, and some are contemplating the invisible God displayed in the glory of the sky.

But in Nepal religion is too massive and formal to be able to withstand the impact of the new ideas pressing in from every side without some cracks developing, too tied to the past to survive intact with all its scruples and exaltations. The reforming spirit of Gandhi, which has imbued Hinduism with a moral punctilio for the unknown future, has not yet crossed the belt of the Terai.

After the works of art we turn to the inscriptions and manuscripts: manuscripts on palm leaves, ten or twelve centuries old, which look as if they have just come from the hands of the copyist. When you see them like this, so clear and fresh, you can see the point of the Guruji—we would say the high priest—who proposed to have the most important European works transcribed onto palm leaves to preserve them for posterity on longer-lasting material than ephemeral paper. There are thousands of these manuscripts, hidden in the impenetrable depths of private libraries, secret as a magic fortress, inalienable as the family's greatest riches. This is why it often happens that when the father dies, a manuscript is cut into as many equal pieces as there are heirs, or sometimes rather than see it fall into impious hands they cast it into the holy waters of the Bagmati.

Anyhow, in spite of these scruples and obstacles, my companions photographed more than eight thousand pages of manuscripts, far-off voices telling a story which is often mysterious, but which gradually takes shape as it emerges from these pages written in at least three languages: Sanskrit, Newari and Nepali. They corroborate the evidence of the inscriptions, also in three languages, unearthed with the cooperation of willing friends and by courtesy of the Government. We have a truly exceptional harvest of inscriptions, but the credit is not mine: above all it goes to my friend Kaisher Bahadur who threw himself into the researches and hunted out all kinds of documents; he had such a nose for them that hardly a day passed without his discovering something new.

Altogether we copied about three hundred and fifty inscriptions of which about two hundred are unpublished as yet. Of these about fifty belong to the earliest period of Nepalese history and the characters show they are Gupta inscriptions. Almost all the inscriptions commemorate gifts of kings, and even if they celebrated wars or victories they were always placed in the shadow of the temples, under the protection of the gods; they are so steeped in the holy atmosphere that for the Nepalese they are not documents but symbols which partake of an invisible numinous presence. They are half-buried in the earth, covered with soil and mud, and we have to bring them to light and get the rubbish off them under suspicious eyes and amidst grumbling and hostility which is not always pacified even by the presence of Government officials. What one is able to collect in places like this depends on the psychological shrewdness guiding one's words and deeds, suggesting strategies and modulating one's behaviour, little by little breaking down the screen of mistrust and suspicion which prevents the people from understanding.

Once in the temple of Vajrayogini things started off very badly. Along with Major Kaisher Bahadur we were looking for the head of a bronze statue which, according to tradition, had been worshipped in the primitive temple. In the end, after making many requests, we set out for the final temple on the hill-top. It was a Saturday and many people had gone to render homage to the gods; then, their spiritual affairs in order, they had started drinking *rakshi*, and perhaps a lot of them had drunk more than they should have. No one took any notice of us; we wandered about everywhere and went into a place a little way apart from the rest, where some worshippers and priests were sitting on the ground talking earnestly amongst themselves. We went past them into an adjoining room, and there we saw the enormous gilded bronze head we were looking for. It did not look as old as I had expected, but anyway we had to get photographs of it. Just as Guttuso was adjusting his camera and setting up his tripod, the people came in threateningly from next door and a dispute began. They refused to listen to reason. There was to be no photograph. The Major disclosed his status and told them he had Government authorisation, but it was no use. They would not give in, in fact they became more and more excited as they hurled abuse at us. At this point some young men came into the temple to give them a hand. They had been drinking too much, which made them over-enthusiastic, and they were so worked up that one of them seized hold of an axe. I thought it advisable to quieten things down and go home—by this time the row had lasted long enough for Guttuso to illuminate and photograph the image.

So one should not judge the material by quantity alone; one has to take into account the daily vigils, meetings, waiting and anguish—yes, anguish; for the worst thing that can happen to an explorer is to discover a document and see it within his reach, and not be able to preserve it for study through a photograph, a tracing or a copy. Luckily I have very seldom experienced this kind of misfortune.

The chronicles and inscriptions and all the documents collected during our journey make it easier to perform the task I have set myself: first of all to fix a Tibetan chronology—this is still very doubtful, with scholars disagreeing on the most important points. Then to clarify the events in Nepal's history, and this does not mean just the events in the capital and the nearby towns. These were indubitably the centre of Nepalese culture, but it is also true that all around a story was unfolding which we know today only through the ripples caused outside the small radius of the events themselves. These events concerned the little states which gravitated towards the Nepalese valley, became part of the group of the sub-Himalayan states, and had many similarities in their development and problems. The twenty-four states of the Seven Gandakis and the twenty-two states of the Kali are little more than shadowy names. Their historical reality, their adaptations, the contrast between their primitive beliefs and the Hinduism or Buddhism which slowly reached them—all these are obscure but very important problems. In this autochthonic ethnic belt in the foothills of the Himalayas, where so many races meet, Indian culture gradually became weaker, or rather as it spread it was forced to reach compromises with the preexisting world. This is where India touches Tibetan culture: we are on the border between two worlds.

I do not say the material we collected will be able to solve all the problems there are, but I hope they will help us to study many of them with better judgment. The rest will have to be done by whoever comes after us.

I must confess that my impression of Nepalese education is not as disheartened as the one Sylvain Lévi formed in his day. That was many years ago, of course, and since then education has spread more or less all over the world, even if the wider spread has often been at the expense of its solidity and depth.

There are more schools in the capital, but they are still rare in the interior where the few schools operating are mostly dependent on private initiative, on the support of the local people, and on the goodwill of the teachers. Still, the college in Kathmandu is packed with students, many of whom later go on to take degrees in Banaras and Calcutta.

Writers and poets are flourishing. Some, rather famous, are writing novels, plays and poetry in Newari and Gurkhali with an enthusiasm indicating an unexpected revival of the intellectual life, as if at the termination of the regime of the distrustful Ranas, fearful of every move that might disturb their tranquil torpor, the long-repressed energies have blossomed forth with sudden confidence. And it is not only the ones who were persecuted, who were for so long lonely companions in prison and in suffering, who are pouring out songs of their joy in life regained, or telling the secrets of their spirit, but also the old aristocrats, whose humane sensibility welcomes all the voices and reflects all the sadness and the melancholy of the Nepalese people. First among these is Balakrishna Sama, shut away in his lovely graceful hermitage which reminds me of Rabindranath Tagore's house at Shantiniketan. On the walls are displayed Nepalese works of art, chosen with great skill and taste, pictures he has painted himself, and books. In his poems man has taken the place of gods, the man who suffers the sufferings of others and tries to redeem himself, in a loving embrace, from all the poisonous hatreds which religious or social prejudices instil in his heart. The bloody patricidal strife in India which set Hindu and Muslim against each other, forgetting they were comrades, sons of the same earth and united by the same destiny in the same suffering, inspired him to write "Faith", which is considered to be one of his best poems and which ends on the deeply sorrowful note:

When they were young, they were happy to lose,
 Now they are old they are ready to die for victory.
 Those of one faith
 attack the houses of others
 they sack them
 burn them
 and run away.
 In the name of religion
 In that same place
 human blood
 rains down
 The vultures are the only winners.
 Thus the faithful prepare
 for yet another battle in this fearful world
 which opens wide its doors to changes. .

Sanskrit culture is still alive: even in the towns of the interior—Gorkha, Pokhara, Palpa—I

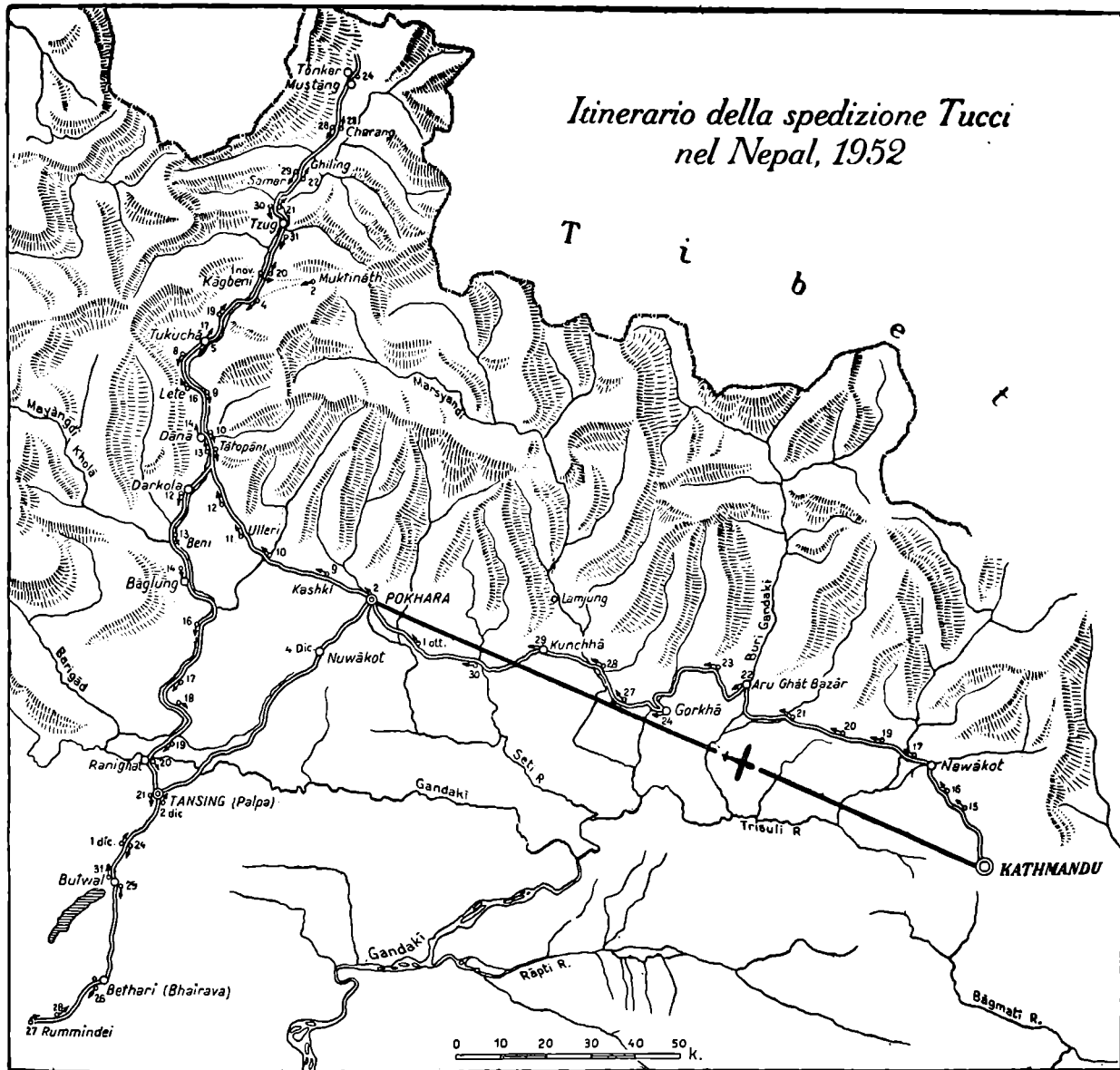
had the opportunity of talking to scholars educated in Banaras who spoke correct Sanskrit. And in Kathmandu too, although there may not be many pandits, the strain has not yet died out. I was even sometimes their unfortunate victim, because, suspecting that I might be bluffing, they used to come at the most unlikely hours, knocking at the door at six in the morning before I was even up, and jerking me from the numbness of sleep into the thick of a discourse which might touch on a thousand topics, from Sanskrit studies in Europe to philosophical problems, in one of the most complex and elusive languages there are. I do not deny that all this was a wonderful experience for me, but there have been occasions when I would just have liked to dream or peacefully enjoy the sunshine, when I have cursed the importunate visitor and his Sanskrit. But how can one be angry with people like this, so simple and good, and so touched that anyone has come so far to study their culture? And they do not understand what gives us this curiosity. Perhaps I do not understand it myself, but people like Chuang-tze, who have had the chance to see things from remote and detached heights, would call it a game, for life must be a game, if it is not to be a miserable burden or an anguished yearning for unattainable shadows. So this, then, is the game I play, until the slight wave of my existence, stirred up briefly by chance on the ocean of life, disappears again into its never-ending wells to give way to other fleeting ripples: my small and harmless game, while others amuse themselves with more demanding and dangerous pastimes.

Anyway, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the Sanskrit tradition still continues in Nepal. The outstanding figure is of course the Rajguru Hemraj Sharma, who used to be the Ranas' chaplain and chief counsellor, and who has now retired from politics and turned to his books and his devotions. Sanskrit comes to him as easily as his mother tongue, with such a florid style, such originality of imagery, such elegance of phrasing, such elaborately constructed sentences and such a rich vocabulary that his words flow on like a river in flood, and he is well aware of this, listening to himself and playing with what he is saying like a juggler, with unexpected and dazzling flights of skill. When the pandits called on me at the library for my daily test, we used to put on a public performance for students on their way home from school and passers-by who were attracted by the excitement and came in to see what was going on. And although they could not understand they would sit on the ground and watch, while the brilliant sky glittered unregarded above us.

And so the time for our departure draws near, and my heart is torn between the desire to get back to work and regret at leaving this land whose melancholy beauty has sometimes saddened and sometimes enthralled me, but above all where I have felt completely at home, because of the people's friendly hospitality. I already know that once I have thrown myself back into the extravagant activity of the West I will often miss the serenity of far-off friends, the idyllic calm of the silent villages where I have pitched my tent, and the welcome of the Government people who have supported and protected me in every way. And I know too that from time to time the memory of our adventures will be darkened by the shadow of the three porters, whose names I do not know and never did know, who followed me into the snares of the journey for the sake of their meagre wages and never returned to their families again.

*Itinerario della spedizione Tucci
nel Nepal, 1952*

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ITINERARY OF THE TUCCI EXPEDITION TO NEPAL, 1952.

Bibliotheca
Himalayica

