

Cultural

treasures of nepal



with special focus on Kathmandu Valley



NEPAL
TOURISM
YEAR
2011
NATURALLY NEPAL
MADE IN NEPAL



Demon dancers, Indra Jatra

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Gyanin Rai (Page 43 top left)



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HISTORY & CULTURE





History & Culture

The discovery of a life-size statue of King Jaya Verma in 1992 at Maligaon in Kathmandu, with an inscription dated 185, is the earliest recorded evidence about Nepal's history.

The discovery of a life-size statue of King Jaya Verma in 1992 at Maligaon in Kathmandu, with an inscription dated 185, is the earliest recorded evidence about Nepal's history. Before the conquest of the Nepal (Kathmandu) Valley by Gorkha's King Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1769, Nepal Mandal, or Kathmandu Valley, was known as 'Nepal' to the outside world. According to recorded history, which dates back to the early Christian era, Nepal has been ruled by the Lichchhavi, Thakuri, Malla and Shah dynasties. The Lichchhavis ruled the country from the beginning of the 1st to the 9th century. The Lichchhavis were followed by the Thakuris, who ruled the country from the 9th to the 14th century. However, the architectural excellence of the Kathmandu Valley reached its zenith during the later Malla Period from the fourteenth century to the eighteenth century. The UNESCO heritage monuments that are scattered throughout the Kathmandu valley are the ingenuity of this period.

■ A typical Nepali courtyard



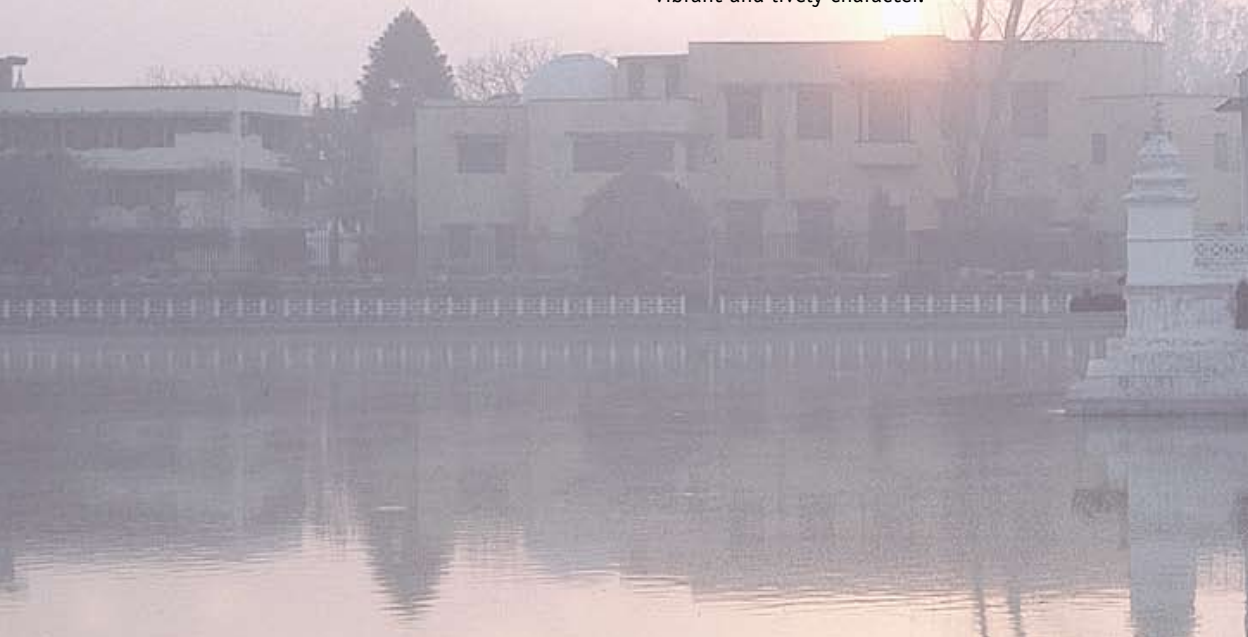
It was during the Malla period that Newari culture and architecture reached their pinnacle, and is known as the era of "renaissance". Malla rule came to an end when the Kathmandu Valley was conquered by the Gorkha King, Prithvi Narayan Shah, in 1769, and the Shah dynasty was established. But in 1846, taking advantage of a weak king embroiled in intense palace intrigues, Jung Bahadur Rana seized absolute power through a brutal court massacre and started the Rana oligarchy. The Ranas de facto ruled the country as their fiefdom until they were ousted from power by a

popular revolt in 1951, and democracy was established in the country.

What we identify as Nepalese culture today germinated and developed in the Kathmandu Valley at the beginning of the 1st century or probably even earlier. But it was only after the country opened to the outside world with the advent of democracy in 1951 that the world was able to see the grandeur and opulence of Nepalese culture. No doubt, the different ruling dynasties patronised it, but in essence, it has been a people's culture - a culture nurtured by the people through the ages. No cultural event takes place in Nepal without the people's mass participation. One can see the spectrum of a vibrant cultural rainbow in the multitude of

festivals and rituals that are celebrated almost every other day in some part or the other of the country. In the capital city of Kathmandu, the Newars who make up the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley and are best known for their artistic creativity and skilled craftsmanship, culture has held a paramount position in their everyday lives.

Cultural tolerance has been the quintessence of Nepalese way of life. Nepal remains one of the most peaceful multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural countries in the world. The ethnic unity and religious harmony maintained by the Nepalese against such diversity are truly remarkable and have been acknowledged internationally. Undeniably, this plurality of cultures is what has given Nepalese society its vibrant and lively character.





ETHNIC GROUPS & CONCENTRATION





Ethnic Groups & Concentration

Nepal's population represents more than a hundred ethnic groups. Each Nepalese ethnic group carries its own identity and cultural heritage.

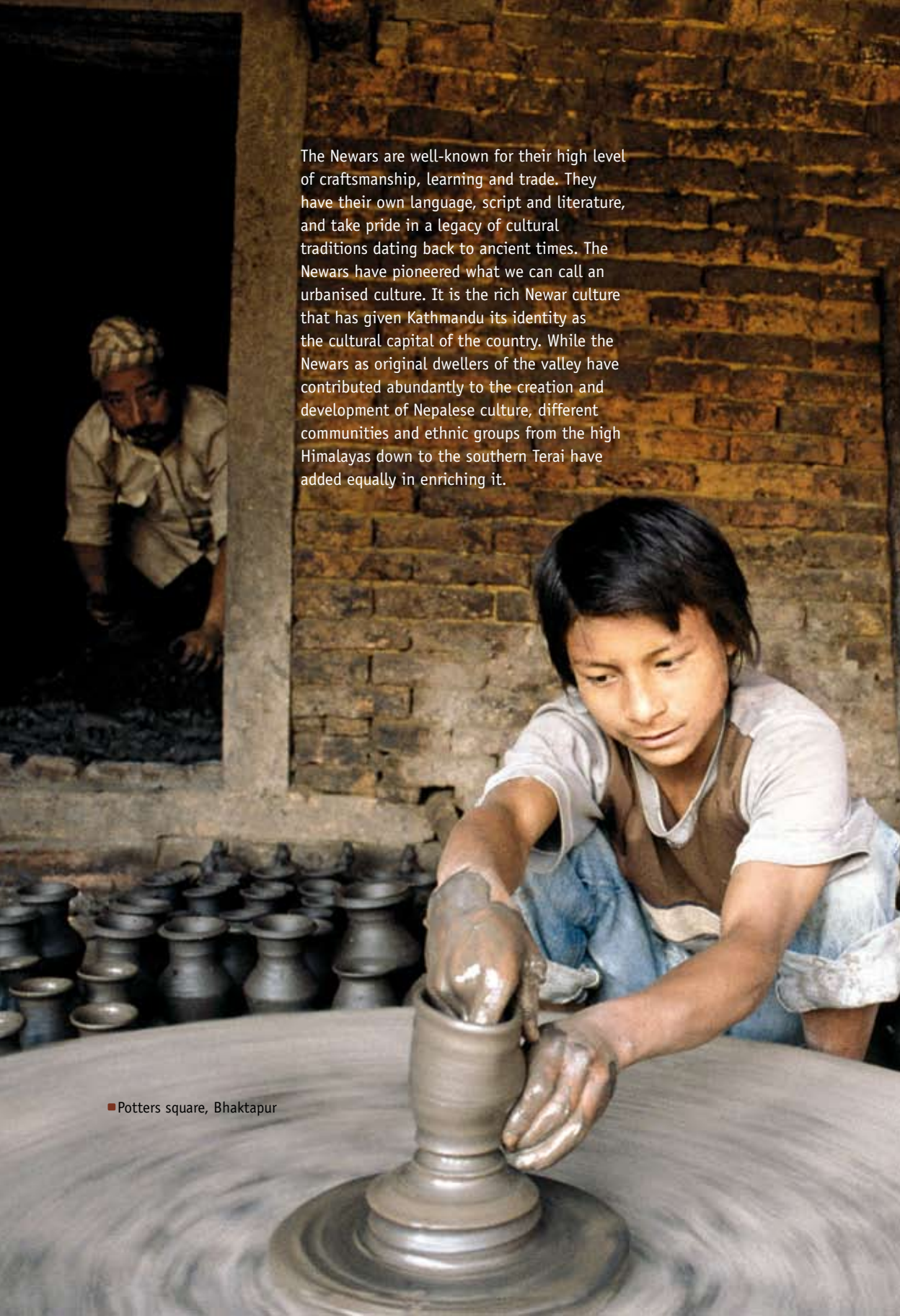
■ Festive gathering



Nepal, with a population of more than 25.8 million people, is a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic country. Broadly speaking, there are four distinct cultural groups in Nepal, geographically represented by the people in the high Himalayas, the mid-hills, the Kathmandu Valley and the southern plains or the Terai region. These ethno-cultural groups maintain their unique life style, language, customs and rituals, food habits (cuisine), dresses, jewellery or ornaments.

Nepal's population represents more than a hundred ethnic groups. Each Nepalese ethnic group carries its own identity and cultural heritage. Most of the ethnic groups have their own spoken language and script. Their food, dress, ornaments, beliefs, customs, habits and manners differ from one another. Their festivities, myths and legends, music and songs are also different. They practise different faiths. Though Hindus are in the majority, Buddhism is practised by an equal number of people. The other faiths are Islam and Christianity.

Majority of the Nepalese Hindus such as the Brahmins, Chhetris and Thakuris are of Indo-Aryan origin. Other ethnic groups such as the Sherpas, Thakalis, Dolpalis and Mustangis, inhabiting northern Nepal, and the Newars, Tamangs, Rais, Limbus, Sunuwars, Magars and Gurungs of the mid-hills and valleys have Tibeto-Mongoloid origin. Majority of Tibeto-Mongoloids follow Buddhism. There is also a third indigenous ethnic group. It is made up of the Tharus, Chepangs, Rautes, Danwars, Dhimals, Majhis, Darais, Sattars and Bodes who have their own distinct set of cultural and religious beliefs.

A young potter with dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt and a brown apron, is focused on shaping a clay vessel on a pottery wheel. His hands are covered in wet clay. In the background, an older man with a beard and a turban is visible, working in a dark area. The setting is a pottery workshop with a brick wall and many finished clay pots in the background.

The Newars are well-known for their high level of craftsmanship, learning and trade. They have their own language, script and literature, and take pride in a legacy of cultural traditions dating back to ancient times. The Newars have pioneered what we can call an urbanised culture. It is the rich Newar culture that has given Kathmandu its identity as the cultural capital of the country. While the Newars as original dwellers of the valley have contributed abundantly to the creation and development of Nepalese culture, different communities and ethnic groups from the high Himalayas down to the southern Terai have added equally in enriching it.

■ Potters square, Bhaktapur



Traditionally, the Brahmins perform religious rites and rituals in the society and they are scattered throughout the country. Unlike the Brahmins, the Chhetris and Thakuris have been traditionally portrayed as the warrior class and political administrators. By virtue of their predominant status and position in the country's power hierarchy, they once owned large tracts of land. Their language Nepali is the lingua franca of the country.

Numerous ethnic groups inhabit the mid-hills of the country. We find the Magars and Gurungs in the west, Tamangs and Newars in the central mid-hills, and Rais, Sunuvars and Limbus in the east of the country. These ethnic groups, except for the Newars, are known as the martial (fighter) race. These ethnic groups comprise the elite fighting force in the country's armed forces. No wonder, the Nepalese youths serving in the British

■ Paddy plantation



and Indian armies are mostly sourced from these ethnic groups. They also engage in farming.

In the Himalayan region far north live the Sherpa, Dolpo-pa, Baragaonli, Manangi and Lopa ethnic groups. Among them, the Sherpas have earned for themselves a reputation in the world as skilled mountaineers at high altitude. The largest Sherpa settlement lies in Solu Khumbu at the foothills of Mt. Sagarmatha (Everest). These ethnic groups of the Himalayan north earn their living working as porters and guides for mountaineering expeditions, as farmers and as yak and sheep herders. They share linguistic and cultural affinity with the Tibetans in the north. They are also generally referred to as 'Bhote'.

The Terai plains in the south bordering India have dense settlements of the indigenous Tharus, Darais, Khumals, Danuwars, Dhimals, Rajbamsis, Sattars and Majhis. Most of them have their own dialect. The Tharus are the indigenous inhabitants of the Terai and are spread all over the region from east to west. Majority of the people dwelling in eastern and mid-Terai speak Maithili and Bhojpuri, while Avadhi is widely spoken in western Terai. Due to the proximity and easy access, they share cultural affinity and matrimonial relations with the neighbouring states of India.



RELIGIONS & CUSTOMS





Religions, Customs and Religious Symbols

Hinduism is the main religion of the Nepalese people. The trinity of Hinduism - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva - and the pantheon of numerous other Hindu gods and goddesses are devotedly worshipped in Nepal.

Nepal is a secular country. However, Hinduism is the main religion of the Nepalese people. The trinity of Hinduism - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva - and the pantheon of numerous other Hindu gods and goddesses are devotedly worshipped in Nepal. The female consorts of these gods are equally venerated here as the manifestation of 'Shakti' (power or cosmic energy). The goddesses are worshipped in different forms, such as Nav Durgas (nine Durgas), Asta Matrikas (eight mother goddesses) and Sapta Matrikas (seven mother goddesses).

Buddhism is an equally important religion in Nepal. Mahayana Buddhism and Vajrayana Buddhism - a combination of Hindu and Buddhist religious faiths influenced by Tantric cult - have been followed particularly in the Kathmandu Valley since medieval times. In the high Himalayan region, Tibetan Buddhism, or Lamaism, and other forms of Nature worship are also practised by the people.

Siddhartha Gautama, later known to the world as Lord Buddha, was born in Lumbini in mid-southwestern Nepal in 6th century B.C. There are more than two dozen sites around this area which are closely related to the life of the Buddha and Buddhism. In the course of history, Buddhism as a religion spread and became popular in the high mountain regions, mid-hills and in the Kathmandu Valley. Buddhism has profoundly influenced the Nepalese way of life, culture, arts and architecture.

Customs

The Nepalese way of life is regulated by religion through the performance of various rites and rituals, seeking God's grace for the well-being of the family, prosperity and moksha (salvation) for the self. Religious custom guides every step of a Nepalese from birth to death and beyond. Every important event in the life of a person from cradle to pyre is marked by performing certain religious rites and functions. These rituals may generally differ from community to community. A new-born child undergoes Chhaithi Nwaran, the naming ceremony (6th day of birth), and Annaprasan, the rice-feeding ceremony (5th or 6th month of

■ Buddha Purnima, Boudha Nath





birth depending on whether the baby is a girl or boy). Then we have the 'coming of age' ceremony (gufa rakhney for Newar girls at pre-puberty stage or gifting of Guneu-cholo - a set of adult female dresses. For the boys, there is the Bratabandha or Upanayana ceremony, performed before he reaches teenage when his head is shaved and given the ceremonial loin-cloth and sacred thread to wear. Thereafter, obviously, the most important event is marriage, which contains very elaborate rituals that go on for more than a day. On the death of a person, there are very solemn rites to be performed by the family.

Religious Symbols

Nepalese art is highly influenced by symbolism. The use and development of symbols in Nepalese art emerged during the medieval period when Vajrayana and Tantricism flourished in the valley. Symbols have deep rooted meaning. Above the hemispherical white dome of the Swayambhu Maha Chaitya, on each of the four sides of the square, facing the four directions, are a pair of half-closed gentle eyes and a nose depicted as a question mark. Learned scholars have interpreted the semi-closed eyes as the all-seeing eyes of the Buddha looking in all the four directions so that no one can hide any wrong doing from Him. And the nose in the form of a question mark symbolises Dharma, or Virtue, as the one path which leads all people to Sukhaavati, or the Ocean of Happiness.

Both Hinduism and Buddhism take recourse to symbolic animals and birds to represent their deities. For example, the Garuda (mythical bird) represents

Lord Vishnu while the rat is the carrier (baahan) of Lord Ganesh. Erotic carvings portraying the male and female in various sexual postures are a common sight in a number of Hindu temples and Buddhist vihars, or monasteries. Such erotic display in the temples and monasteries is very intriguing, but it is symbolic and carries much meaning, which only those knowledgeable in Tantricism can truthfully interpret. The Hindu gods and goddesses are known by their respective attributes, or divine weapons - again symbols with deep spiritual meaning. Among the Hindu trinity, Brahma the Creator has four heads looking in four directions to show that he sees in all directions, and hence is all-knowing. He carries a kalash - a water vessel - in one hand, which is a symbol of the Earth. The other trinity, Vishnu, holds a conch, a discus, a mace and a lotus in his four hands. The conch is the symbol of the mind and cohesive tendency; the discus signifies primeval knowledge and the notion of individual existence; the mace is the sign of causal power of illusion from which the universe arises and the tendency towards dispersion and liberation; while the lotus is the symbol of the five elements denoting the origin of existence. The third trinity, Shiva, or Maheshwar or Mahadev, has three gleaming eyes representing the sun, moon and fire. These three sources of light illuminate the earth, space and sky. It is with these three eyes that Shiva sees the past, present and future.

Similarly, Mahayana Buddhism has numerous symbols. The Vajra, or thunderbolt, symbolises the inseparable unity of wisdom and skillful means. It destroys all kinds of ignorance and is itself indestructible. Swastika,



or fylfot, a kind of mystical cross, is an ancient auspicious symbol common to the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religions. It is a symbol of good fortune. In Buddhism, it is regarded as one of the 65 divine marks (lakshan) of a great-soul (mahapurusha). The swastika symbol is found on the imprint of the Buddha's foot. It also appears on the chest or lotus throne of some Buddha images. Hindus and Buddhists alike believe and have great faith in the eight auspicious symbols: they are the (a) Srivatsa, or endless knot or chain, (b) Dhvaj, or the victory banner, (c) Kalash, or the vase containing the nectar of immortality, (d) Chamar, or fan which drives away diseases, (e) Matsya, or a pair of golden fish, symbolising the unity of wisdom and compassion, (f) Chhatra, or the precious parasol that symbolises royalty and which protects one from evil influences, (g) Sankha, or conch, that symbolises awareness and (h) Padma, or the lotus, that symbolises purity of the body. It is believed that if the Sankha (conch) is blown with skill, the vibrant resonance can drive away evil spirits and destroy harmful germs and microbes.

There are many spiritual symbols in Nepalese culture used in different rites and rituals. Shree Yantra is one such very popular symbol. The Yantra is a mystical, systematic, geometrical (triangular) diagram depicting, in a synthetic form, the basic energies of the natural world which are represented by the deities. It represents the Universal Goddess. It symbolises the union of Shiva with Shakti (or Parvati). It is the main Yantra of Tulaja Bhavani and the Living Goddess Kumari. Each deity has its own Yantra (design) in which it dwells during the ritual use of the Yantra.

Yantras are frequently used by Saktas. Shatakona, or the six-pointed star, is composed of two triangles inverted and juxtaposed against one another. The triangle is an important yantra of manifold meanings. An upward-pointing triangle symbolises Agni, or fire, and the linga, or phallus, hence, also the male principle of the cosmos, as well as Shiva and Shaivism. A downward-pointing triangle symbolises the yoni, or vagina, and the female principle of the cosmos, hence also Shakti, (also Vishnu in the female form as Mohini) and Vaishnavism. Therefore, it also symbolises the synchronisation between Shaivism and Vaishnavism.

In Buddhism, a triangle pointing upwards symbolises the Tri-ratna, or three jewels - Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. In Nepal, Shatakona also represents Saraswati, the goddess of learning. Every Buddhist shrine, temple, stupa and monument has Mani prayer wheels. On the prayer wheels, 'Om Mani Padme Hum', the mantra of Chenrezig, the Protector, is embossed, etched or painted on the outside. A Mani wheel, or a prayer wheel, can be big or small, free standing or in a row with many others along the walls. Its literary meaning is 'Hail to the Jewel (or Buddha) in the Lotus'. There are numerous other symbols in Nepalese art. One of the most common is the tika, or red mark, on the forehead as a symbol of good luck, devotion to the deities and blessing of the seniors and elderly persons. It has special meaning to the womenfolk. For them, it signifies a happy married life. Hindu widows refrain from putting on a red tika, wearing red bangles and putting on red saris.

HOLY SITES & PILGRIMAGE





Holy Sites and Pilgrimage Destinations

To the Hindus, the most famous and most venerated is the temple of Lord Pashupatinath, situated on the banks of the holy river Bagmati in Kathmandu. It is among the most revered shrines for Hindus all over the world.

Pashupatinath Temple

Nepal has numerous pilgrimage sites, sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists. To the Hindus, the most famous and most venerated is the temple of Lord Pashupatinath, situated on the banks of the holy river Bagmati in Kathmandu. It is among the most revered shrines for Hindus all over the world. The main temple, which stands in the middle of a courtyard, is two-tiered, built upon a square plinth, and is 23.6 metres high. The four large gates of the temple are silver and gilt-plated and richly carved with images of deities. The two copper roofs are supported by numerous struts adorned with beautifully carved images of various Hindu gods and goddesses. The sacro sanctum, or the main idol of “Mukhalingam”, is one metre high and has faces carved in four directions. The original temple is said to have been built at the beginning of the Christian era. It is said to have undergone several reconstructions over the ages to what stands today.

■ Pashupati Temple by night



Changu Narayan Temple

The site of the Changu Narayan is revered as sacred location dating back to the Lichchhavi period and is believed to be one of the valley's earliest settlement site. It is situated on a small hillock northwest of Bhaktapur. Revered by both Hindus and Buddhists, Changu Narayan has been among the most venerated sites for worshippers of Lord Vishnu since early times, and hence it is a very important pilgrimage site for the Vaishnavas. The main pagoda- style temple is located at the centre of a large courtyard, which is surrounded by rest houses

known as Chaughera Sattal. In addition to the main two-storey temple, the Changu Narayan monument zone includes several smaller shrines, including the temple of Chhinna Mastaa, the headless goddess. The site is renowned for the masterpieces in stone and metal sculpture dating back to different periods of history. Examples of such masterpieces in stone sculptures are the Vishwarup of Lord Vishnu circa 8th century, Vishnu Vikranta or Lord Vishnu's form circa 8th century, and the fearful figure of Narasimha Avatar, or half lion-half human figure of Lord Vishnu, which dates back to the 9th century.

■ Changu Narayan Temple







Swayambhu Maha Chaitya

Kathmandu Valley has also some very important and highly venerated Buddhist sites. As one enters the valley, the first sight to catch the visitor's eye is the hemispherical white dome (stupa) of the Swayambhu Maha Chaitya perched majestically atop a hill on the western fringe of the Kathmandu Valley. The stupa symbolises the body of the Buddha, which is nothing other than the cosmos itself. The Swayambhu Maha Chaitya with the semi-closed eyes of the Buddha overlooking the valley from all four directions is the most prominent monument and landmark of the valley. The historical origins of this great stupa are obscure, but it is believed to have been built during the Lichchhavi period. The main stupa is a huge white dome in the form of a flattened hemisphere. Around the circular base - the garva (womb) - are installed the five celestial Buddhas with their respective female counterparts. In the vicinity are numerous monuments. These include the twin Shikhara-style temples of Pratappur and Anantapur built by King Pratap Malla; Basupur, with the image of Goddess Basundhara, the bestower of prosperity; Vayupur, the god of wind; and the artistic golden temple of the Goddess Ajima or Harati, the protector of children.

The Swayambhu Maha Chaitya is a veritable treasure house of valuable artefacts of bronze and stone images and miniature chaityas. On the western side of the stupa in front of the Harati temple, there is a stone pillar on top of which are some very striking bronze statues. On the eastern side, atop a Mandala, there is a massive Vajra, or thunderbolt. This golden Vajra, known

as dorje in Tibetan, is the symbol of Vajrayana Buddhism. In the vicinity of the great stupa there are Tibetan, Bhutanese and Nepalese viharas and gumbas, as well as a museum where numerous religious manuscripts and bronze and stone images of both Buddhist and Hindu deities are on display. Indeed, the entire site is a unique open-air museum, unparalleled elsewhere in the world.

Boudhanath Stupa

The great Stupa of Boudhanath is the principal centre of Tibetan Buddhist worship in the Kathmandu Valley. It has long been a major destination for pilgrims from the Himalayas, Tibet and southeast and east Asia. It is one of the largest and most magnificent Buddhist monuments in the world. Lichchhavi King Manadeva I (reign 464-505 A.D.) is credited to have built this great stupa.

Lumbini

There cannot be a more revered pilgrimage site for Buddhists than Lumbini, the birth place of Shakyamuni Buddha. Buddha, the prince of peace and non-violence, was born at Lumbini in 623 B.C. For centuries, pilgrims travelling from afar revered the spot at the Lumbini garden where Gautama Buddha was born, building stupas, monasteries and other types of monuments. The most notable and important is the stone pillar erected by Emperor Ashoka Maurya in the 3rd century B.C., which authenticates the exact spot where Queen Maya Devi gave birth to the blessed one. Today, the site is being developed as a major international pilgrimage destination with the assistance of



nations with Buddhist populations. Lumbini has been listed in the World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Janaki Temple

To the Hindus, Janakpur, the birthplace of Janaki or Sita, the consort of Rama, is an important religious pilgrimage site. In ancient times, Janakpur was the capital city of the Kingdom of Mithila and the centre of Maithili culture. The magnificent Janaki Mandir was built by the Queen of Tikamgarh (India), Maharani Brishabhhanu Kunwari Devi in 1811 A.D. as a mark of devotion to Janaki (Sita). The marriage anniversary of Lord Rama and Sita is solemnised in Janakpur every year on Vivah Panchami day which falls in December. This is one of the biggest festivals of this region attended by hundreds and thousands of devotees from Nepal and India. The birthday of Sita, known as Sita Jayanti, is also celebrated in a grand manner every year in the month of April-May. For the Janakpurites, Sita is their 'daughter'. Near Janakpur town is a place known as Dhanusha Dham, which is connected with the great Hindu epic Ramayana. According to the epic, one of the three pieces of the Great Bow that Lord Rama broke to win Sita's hand in marriage fell on this site - in present day Dhanusha Dham.

Muktinath

Muktinath is a very popular pilgrimage site in Nepal. Situated at an altitude of 13,000 feet above sea level in Mustang district, the site is also known among the Hindus as Mukti Chhetra, or the 'abode of salvation'. There is a small pagoda-style temple of Lord Vishnu which

is worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists. The Buddhists worship the deity as one of the Bodhisattvas. There are 108 sacred water spouts flowing with icy cold water where devotees take a quick bath. Nearby is the temple of Jwala Mai, or the Goddess of Flame, with the phenomenal underground blue flame.

Other Pilgrimage Sites

Other prominent pilgrimage sites are the Balmiki Ashram in Chitwan district where according to the epic Ramayana, a pregnant Sita, after being banished by Lord Rama, took refuge and gave birth to her two sons, Lava and Kush. Baraha Kshetra, situated near Dharan in east Nepal, is said to be the place where Lord Vishnu in the incarnation of Barah (boar) fought and annihilated the demon Hiranakshya and saved the Earth. Devghat, near Narayanghat in Chitwan district, stands at the holy confluence of three mighty rivers, Trisuli, Gandaki and Seti. Swarga Dwari, which literally means 'Gateway to Heaven', situated in Pyuthan district, is the place from where the Pandavas of the Mahabharata proceeded to Heaven. Gosainkund, the icy cold lake situated at an altitude of 14,000 feet in Rasuwa district, is for the Hindus the sacred watery place where Lord Shiva rested to soothe himself after having consumed the fiery Kalkoot poison that emanated from the Samudra Manthan (churning of the celestial ocean). Gadhi Mai is the shrine located in the woods in Bara district, and is renowned for the mela (fair) where the largest animal sacrifice in the region takes place over a period of a month. Other prominent pilgrimage sites are Halesi Mahadev in Khotang, Mai Pokhari in Ilam and Pathibhara Devi in Taplejung to name a few.

HISTORY, MYTHS & LEGENDS





History, Myths and Legends

There are Hindu and Buddhist legends behind the origin of the Kathmandu Valley. According to the former, for long this valley was a huge pristine lake. Lord Krishna of the Mahabharata age came here and sliced the lowest part of the southern hills with his divine discus (Sudarshan Chakra) allowing the water to flow out, making the valley possible for human settlement.

■ Mystical Mythical Swayambhu Chaitya

Nepal is steeped in numerous legends, myths and folklore that are entwined with different facets of Nepalese life. Every temple, shrine or sacred place throughout the country has some myth or legend to tell us. No wonder, Nepal is called the 'Land of the Gods'.

Kathmandu Valley

The Buddhist version gives credit for the origin of the valley to Sage Manjushri who came from China to worship at Swayambhu. He struck a deep cleft in the southern hills with his divine scimitar and drained off the water, making the valley habitable for human settlement. As if to corroborate the legend, the logo of Kathmandu Metropolitan City depicts the divine sword of Sage Manjushri.

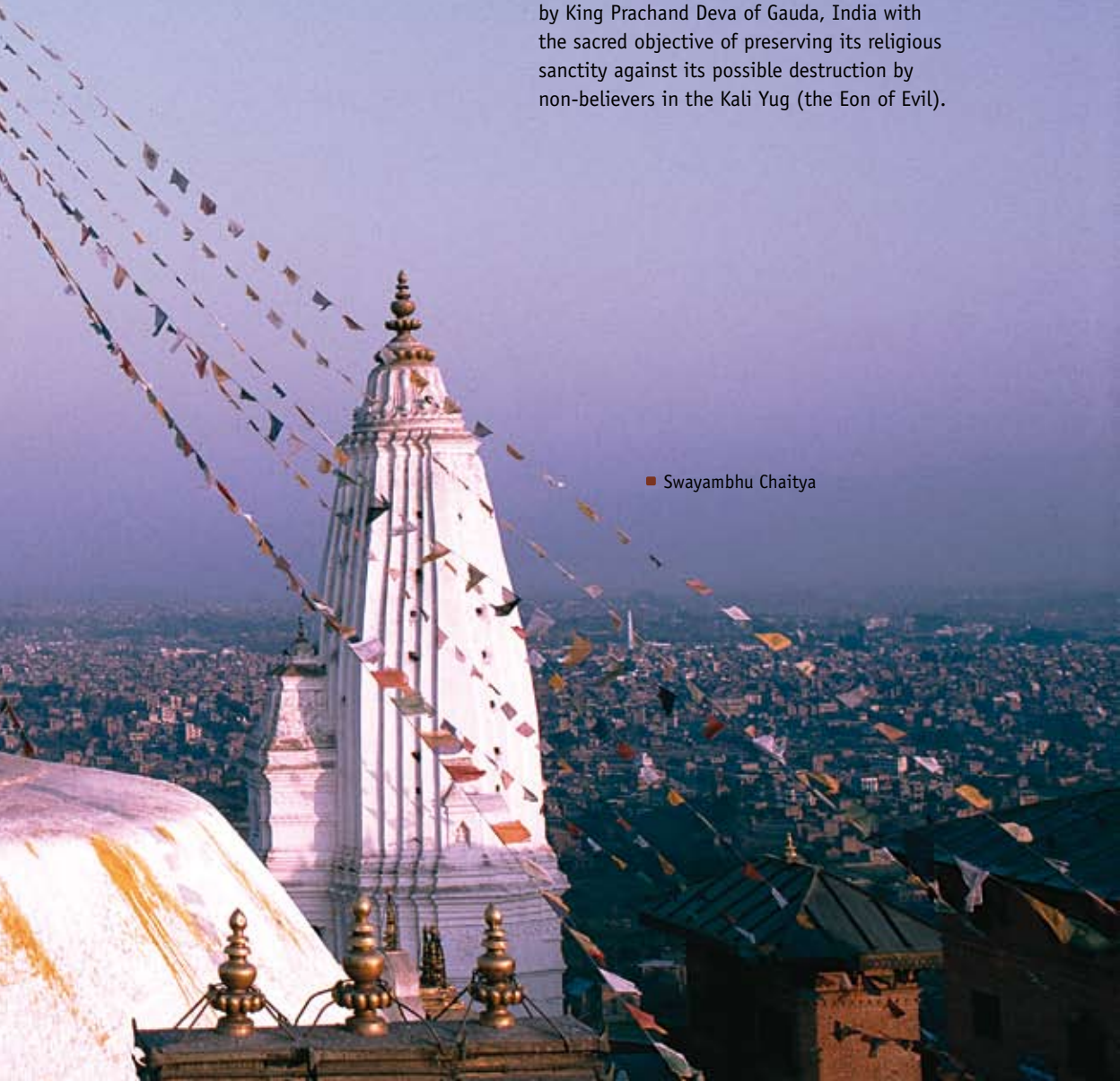
There are Hindu and Buddhist legends behind the origin of the Kathmandu Valley. According to the former, for long this valley was a huge pristine lake. Lord Krishna of the Mahabharata age came here and sliced the lowest part of the southern hills with his divine discus (Sudarshan Chakra) allowing the water to flow out, making the valley possible for human settlement. The cowherds (Gopals) who accompanied him settled here and were the first inhabitants of the valley.



Swayambhu Maha Chaitya

On the origin of Swayambhu Maha Chaitya, popular legend narrates how the valley was once a huge lake - a lake of idyllic beauty surrounded by green pristine forests. This lake was known as Naag Hrad, or the Abode of the Serpent God. In this lake, Bipasvi Buddha came to take a holy dip. He then cast some lotus seeds into the lake, which eventually bloomed into a thousand-petal lotus over which appeared a brilliant radiant flame, the beacon (Jyoti) that self-originated, which is the Swayambhu Jyoti-rupa (the beacon). The great eternal beacon was enshrined in this chaitya by King Prachand Deva of Gauda, India with the sacred objective of preserving its religious sanctity against its possible destruction by non-believers in the Kali Yug (the Eon of Evil).

■ Swayambhu Chaitya





Boudhanath Stupa

The legend behind the great Stupa of Boudhanath has it that it was built by a poultry farmer - a woman - Shamvara. After receiving permission from the king to build a stupa, Shamvara began its construction with the help of her four sons, an elephant and a donkey. Foundations were laid, and walls were built up to the third level. It was at this time that the people of the valley resented the idea of a poor poultry farmer - and a woman at that - building such a stupa and shaming them by her illustrious work.

They questioned, if a poor woman could build such a stupa, then what is to be expected from the king, the nobles and the wealthy. Jealous of the woman, they petitioned the king to halt the construction work. But the king was not to oblige them. He told them that the poor poultry woman-farmer had gone through great hardships to build this stupa, which he considered a marvel. As he had already given her permission to build the stupa, he being the king, would not take back his word. The construction work thus continued for four years, and the pinnacle was nearing complete.

But at this point, the poor woman, sensing that her end was nearing, called her four sons and servant and told them to complete this great stupa. She said, "My divine project is the place of adulation for both earthly and superhuman beings. Place the imperishable remains of the Tathagatas (mortal Buddhas) within this stupa and consecrate it with great honour and reverence. I desire that my wish be fulfilled by which the great purpose of all the Buddhas of

the past, present and future will be realised. And you, my sons, will also fulfill the purpose of this life and the next by obeying my wishes." With these words, the woman died and attained Buddhahood (salvation). Her sons completed the construction of the great stupa, which is now the famous Boudhanath.

A Hindu legend on its origin states that the great stupa was built by King Manadeva I in 5th century A.D. to absolve himself from the sin of patricide.

Nyatapola and Bhairav Temple, Bhaktapur

According to popular legend, King Bhupatindra Malla built a three-storeyed temple of Bhairav to protect the city of Bhaktapur from evil spirits. But Bhairav, because of his boisterous nature, proved troublesome, and the king was advised by his astrologers that only the installation of a Tantric goddess who was more powerful than Bhairav could curb his unruly behaviour. The king then built the five-storeyed temple and installed therein the most powerful goddess, Siddhi Laxmi, to subdue Bhairav. This magnificent temple later became famous as the Nyatapola (meaning five-storeyed in the local dialect), and is today the landmark of Bhaktapur city.

Kumari, the Living Goddess

The myths and legends surrounding the Kumari, the Living Goddess of Kathmandu, is fascinating. Historical records show that the worship of Kumari as a living goddess has been prevalent since at least the 10th century. But popular folklore relating to the Kumari as the incarnation



of Taleju Bhavani, the patron deity of the royals, and the king conversing and playing dice with her are linked to certain kings who ruled Kathmandu, like Trailokya Malla (16th century) and the last Malla ruler of Kathmandu, Jaya Prakash Malla (18th century). According to the legend, it so happened that one night while playing dice with Goddess Taleju, or Kumari, the king was aroused by her celestial beauty and was overcome with lust. The Kumari, a goddess as she was, at once visualised the amorous thoughts in the king's mind. Showing her utter displeasure, she declared that she would henceforth never come to him and disappeared. The king was filled with profound remorse and begged for forgiveness. The Goddess later relented and said that she would enter the body of a virgin girl, a Kumari, which the king was to worship.

Another version of the legend has it that the king and Kumari used to play dice every night on condition that no mortal would see them doing so. Accordingly, the king had strictly instructed the queen and his daughter not to enter or peek into the certain room while he was inside. But curiosity got the better of the women, and they peeped inside. The angry Goddess then disappeared. The king repented and prayed for the Goddess' forgiveness. Goddess Kumari then came in his dream and told the king that she would henceforth not come in person. Instead the king was to worship a Shakya virgin girl who would possess her divine power. Since then, a Shakya virgin girl is worshipped as the Kumari, and once a year during the month of September, the Living Goddess is taken around the old quarters of Kathmandu in her chariot during the Indra Jatra festival.

Bisket Jatra

Bisket Jatra is a gala festival held annually in Bhaktapur on Nepalese New Year's Day (Bikram Sambat). There is a popular folklore about the origin of this festival. It relates to the time of the reign of Lichchhavi King Shiva Deva. A Tantrik by the name of Shekhar Acharya was said to possess the extraordinary power of transforming himself into animals and reptiles. Once, his over-curious wife, Nararupa, wanted to see him change into a serpent. After much pestering by the wife, he finally gave in to her demand. But before doing so, he warned her not to be scared by what she was likely to see and to throw some grains of rice on him that would return him to his human form. He then changed himself into a huge python. But when Nararupa saw the gigantic serpent, she was terrified. She lost her nerve, and instead of throwing the rice at her husband-in-serpent form, she put the rice in her own mouth, which turned her also into a python.

It so happened that in the whole kingdom, none other than the king knew the mantra (chanting of sacred words) that could resuscitate them from the serpent to human form. Therefore, expecting to draw the attention of the king to help them return to human form, the husband and wife pythons would stand and gaze towards the palace every day in the hope that the king would notice and resuscitate them to human form. Time went by, but to no avail. Finally, the frustrated python couple committed suicide at a place called Chuping Ghat (a river bank).

This tragic end of Shekhar Acharya and his wife brought famine to the country. Not knowing

what had come to pass, the alarmed king summoned the Tantrik Shekhar Acharya to court for advice to help quell the famine, but he was nowhere to be found. Ultimately, it was discovered that the Tantrik and his wife had committed suicide in the form of serpents. The king and the people were

highly dismayed. Since then, every year, in memory of the Tantrik and his wife, two long cloth banners, representing and symbolising the serpent couple, are hung from a wooden pole, called the lingo, to commemorate their tragic death.

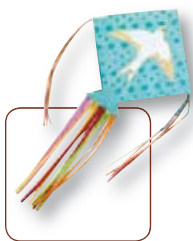




■ Bisket Jatra

FESTIVALS & CELEBRATIONS





Festivals and Celebrations

Nepalese celebrate festivals with great enthusiasm and élan. It is said that hardly a day passes in Nepal without a festival being celebrated somewhere.

■ Dashain Festival swing



The official calendar adopted by the Nepalese is the Bikram Sambat (B.S.). The Bikram Sambat New Year begins with the month of Baisakh (mid-April). For all religious festivals and auspicious personal events and rituals, Nepalese make use of the lunar calendar. Religion plays a very vital role in all festivals in Nepal, whether Hindu or Buddhist. One can see a blend of these two religions in most of the Nepalese festivals. Nepalese celebrate festivals with great enthusiasm and élan. It is said that hardly a day passes in Nepal without a festival being celebrated somewhere.

Certain festivals are celebrated nationwide, while others are of a local nature, observed within a certain region or community. Based on this, Nepalese festivals can be broadly classified into three categories: those that are celebrated nationwide, regionally or locally, and by the community. Major festivals like Bada Dasain, or Durga Puja, Tihar, or Laxmi Puja, Buddha Jayanti, or the birth anniversary of Lord Buddha, Shiva Ratri, or the birthday of Lord Shiva, Janai Purnima, Ram Navami and Krishna Janmashthami are celebrated throughout the country.

Some prominent festivals that are celebrated with great fanfare are the Indra Jatra of Kathmandu,

Rato Machhindranath Rath Yatra of Patan, Bisket and Bhairav Rath Yatra of Bhaktapur, Ghoda Jatra of Kathmandu, Maghe Sankranti, or the first day of the month of Magh, Chandeshwari Jatra of Banepa, Palanchowk Bhagwati Jatra of Palanchowk, Bhagwati Jatra of Palpa, Gosain

Kunda Mela at Gosain Kunda in Rasuwa district and Haleshi Mahadev Mela of Khotang.

Similarly, other noteworthy local festivals are the Gatha-Muga, or Ghanta Karna, in Kathmandu, chariot pulling festival of the Kumari in Kathmandu, Bajra Barahi Jatra of Tistung in



Makwanpur, Janaki Vivaha, or Vivaha Panchami, in Dhanusha, Triveni Mela at Udayapur, Baraha Chhetra Mela in Sunsari, Mai-Pokhari Mela in Ilam, Bhimsen Jatra in Dolakha and Indreshwar Mela in Panauti. Festivals such as Chhath, Fagu and Holi (festival of colours) are celebrated regionally.

Nepalese festivals are generally woven around the monsoon-driven agricultural cycle, and with rice being the most important staple crop, many of these festivities are observed after the plantation and harvesting of paddy. Every festival involves the worshipping of the concerned deities and then sitting for a feast thereafter. A legend or folklore is behind every festival in Nepal.



■ Indra Jatra

UNESCO HERITAGE SITES





UNESCO Heritage Sites

The Kathmandu Valley is a treasure trove of Nepalese culture, and an important side of that culture is its architectural heritage which is represented in the numerous monuments included and preserved within the seven monument zones in the Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site.

■ Nyatapola



Nepal's rich mosaic of cultural heritages could be likened to a precious diamond having numerous facets. The Kathmandu Valley is a treasure trove of Nepalese culture, and an important side of that culture is its architectural heritage which is represented in the numerous monuments included and preserved within the seven monument zones in the Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site. The valley is replete with marvelous creations in various shapes and forms of art and architecture, extending even to a small stone or a bronze statue. The fine woodcarvings in the temples and houses are well-known throughout the world. The exquisite temples, monasteries, stupas or Chaityas, shrines, palaces, monuments and every other architectural wonder of the valley are glorious cultural treasures of Nepal as well as a heritage of the whole of mankind. Nepalese architectural heritage is represented in the unique design of built structures like the pagoda and Shikhara-style temples, shrines, monasteries, palaces, individual homes, stupas or Chaityas (Buddhist hemispherical structures that do not contain the mortal remains of Buddhas or other holy persons), Sattals (wayside rest house), Patris (public rest house), Pauvas (one or two-storey public rest house), Dhunge Dharas or stone waterspouts, Dabalas or open platforms, Ghats or river banks, ponds, pillar statues, minarets or towers, forts and so on.

UNESCO has included seven monument sites of the Kathmandu Valley in the World Cultural Heritage list. Of the seven sites, three are centred around the ancient medieval palaces of the valley, namely the Hanuman Dhoka Durbar (palace) in Kathmandu, Patan Durbar in Patan (Lalitpur) and Bhaktapur Durbar in Bhaktapur. These palace complexes were the residences of the Malla kings. The other world heritage sites are the Swayambhu Maha Chaitya, Boudhanath Stupa, the temple complex of Lord Pashupatinath in Kathmandu and the Changu Narayan Temple in Bhaktapur.



■ Kathmandu Durbar Square





Kathmandu Durbar Square

Kathmandu Durbar Square in Kathmandu is the most extensive of the three royal palace squares, not only in size but also in scale of its open space and structures. It contains 60 important monuments, of which the majority date from the 17th and 18th centuries. King Mahendra Malla of the 16th century, Pratap Malla of the 17th century and Prithvi Narayan Shah of the 18th century added to the architectural splendour of this Durbar square. King Mahendra Malla (1560-74 A.D) constructed numerous temples inside the palace complex and in its vicinity. Prominent among them are the temple of Mahendreshwar Mahadev, the Jagannath Temple and the grand Taleju Bhavani Temple. The magnificent Taleju Temple was built in 1563. One of the tallest and largest temples in the country, towering more than 40 metres, it is built atop a plinth of brick platform. Nearby, the Jagannath Temple, built in the 16th century, is known for the fascinating erotic carvings of human sexual union on the wooden struts. The Hanuman Dhoka Durbar monument zone encompasses marvelous edifices built by King Pratap Malla (1641-74 A.D). These include the Krishna Temple, Kabindrapur, Indrapur Temple, Panchamukhi Hanuman Temple of Nasal Chowk, and a stone pillar with his statue atop facing the Degu Taleju Temple. King Pratap Malla had erected a stone statue of Hanuman, the bravest of the brave monkey-god in the epic Ramayana, in front of his palace to drive away

evil spirits and be victorious in wars. This palace later came to be known as the Hanuman Dhoka Durbar, or the palace guarded by God Hanuman. After the conquest of the valley by King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha in 1769, he expanded the palace. Two very impressive architectural structures, the nine-storeyed Basantapur and Vilas Mandir, were built during his reign. All the four towers of this palace are considered remarkable pieces of Nepalese architecture. This palace square is surrounded by many important monuments, such as the resident temple of the Living Goddess Kumari; the Kashtha Mandap, or Maru Sattal, which is the largest open rest house and a landmark of Kathmandu from which the city derives its name; Simha Sattal; and the Maju Dewal which is the tallest temple in the periphery. Anyone who visits this palace complex cannot but be overwhelmed by its grandeur and the architectural heritage which it represents.

Patan Durbar Square

If the Hanuman Dhoka Durbar Square has a unique combination of Malla and Shah period architecture, Patan Durbar Square, on the other hand, reflects singular Malla architecture. In comparison to the Hanuman Dhoka Durbar Square, it is smaller in size, but it comprises a number of unique architectural styles. Manga Hiti, the sunken stone water spout, and the magnificent Krishna Temple, a Shikhara-style temple built of stone, are but a few examples of its opulence. More than 30 monuments,



each a masterpiece, are clustered in a small area measuring roughly 160 by 70 metres. An additional 30 monuments are located in the immediate vicinity. Professor emeritus Dr. Eduard F. Sekler of Harvard University has compared the Durbar Square of Patan to San Marco Square of Venice. The renowned French orientalist M. Sylvain Levi describes the Patan Durbar Square as “a marvel beyond the power of words to tell”.

Indeed, Patan Durbar is the most spectacular example of Nepalese architecture in an urban context. Right in the middle of the hustling downtown Mangal Bazaar stands the famous palace of the Malla kings known as Maningal Rajprasad, or the palace of Maningal, probably built during the Lichchhavi period (beginning of the 1st century to 9th century). Among the latter kings of Patan, Siddhi Narasimha Malla (1618-61), Sri Niwas Malla (1661-85) and Yog Narendra Malla (1685-1706) added to the grandeur of the palace complex.

Among its numerous courtyards, the recently renovated Keshav Narayan Chowk has been converted into a bronze artefact museum. The main entrance of this courtyard and the windows on the second floor with the figure of God Avalokeshwar in the middle are gilded. A highly impressive and exquisite monument is the stone temple of Lord Krishna, situated in an imposing location in the Durbar Square complex. King Siddhi Narasimha Malla built this temple in 1636. It features 21 gilded pinnacles - the

highest number ever built in the valley. Another unique feature of this temple is the bas-relief carvings on the walls and ceilings, depicting major scenes from the great Hindu epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The Krishna Temple of Patan Durbar Square is undoubtedly one of the finest stone structures in the Kathmandu Valley and is, thus, of considerable national importance.

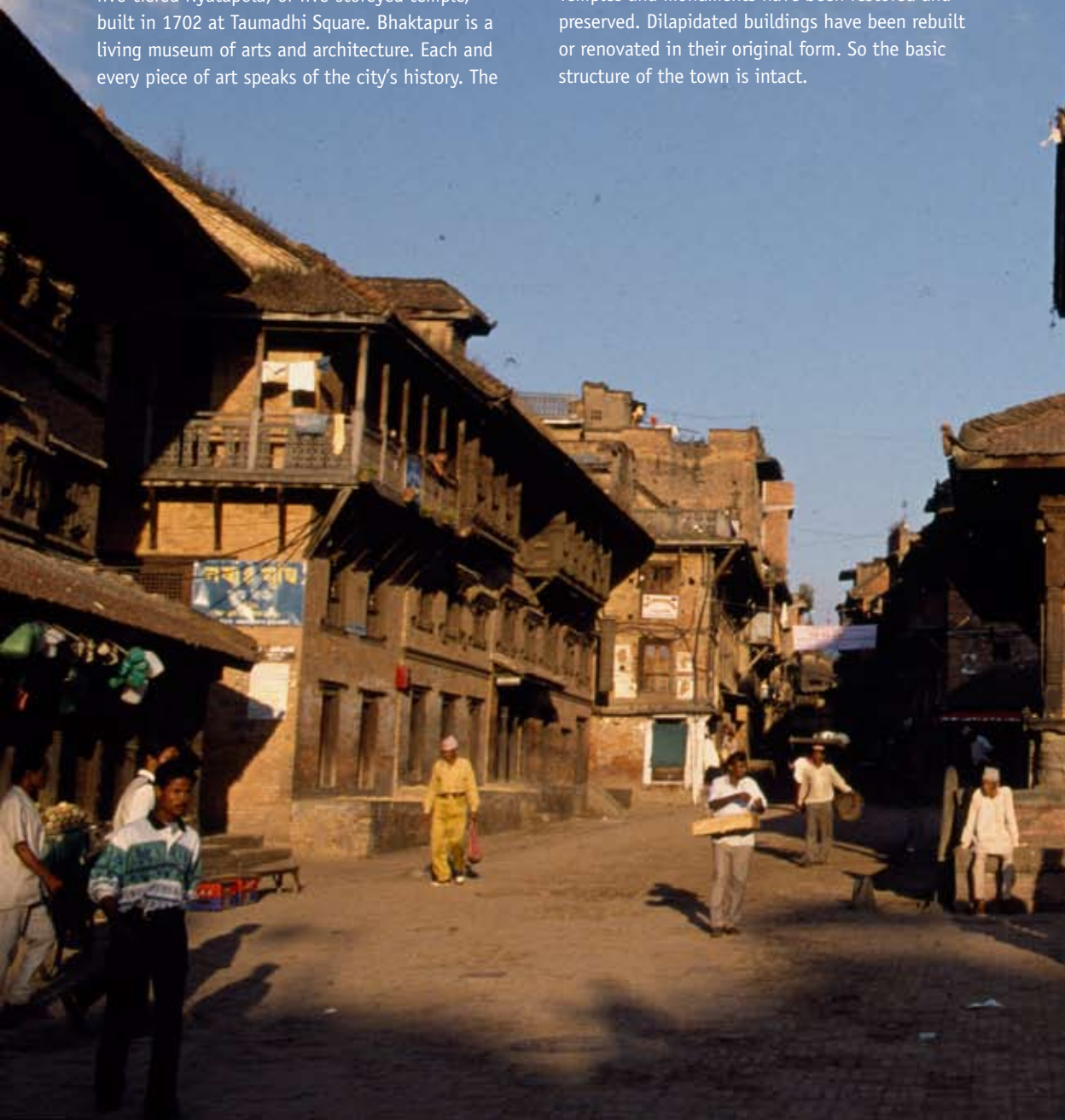
Other important temples of the Durbar Square are the Char Narayan Temple constructed in 1565 by King Purandhar Singh, the Bishwa Nath Temple constructed by King Sri Niwas Malla in 1626 and the large rectangular three-storeyed Bhimsen Temple constructed in the 16th century. There is also the octagonal Shikhara-style Krishna Temple known as Chyasilin Dewal.

Patan Durbar Square, located in the middle of the city, has assimilated the vibrant atmosphere of a crowded bazaar. Outside the Patan Durbar Square, there are numerous other important monuments, such as the Maha Bouddha terra-cotta Shikhara temple constructed at the beginning of the 17th century, Hiranya Varna Mahavihara, or the Golden Temple, built in the early 15th century and the five-storeyed Kumbheshwar Mahadev Temple built at the beginning of the Malla period - it is one of the only two surviving five-storeyed temples in the country, the other being the Nyatapola Temple in Bhaktapur.

Bhaktapur Durbar Square

Among the three Durbar Squares, the Bhaktapur Durbar Square is by far the most elegant with its large open space facing south. The Golden Gate and the Palace of 55 Carved Windows have added splendour to this palace square which consists of buildings dating from the 13th century to the 18th century. Bhaktapur's landmark is the world famous five-tiered Nyatapola, or five-storeyed temple, built in 1702 at Taumadhi Square. Bhaktapur is a living museum of arts and architecture. Each and every piece of art speaks of the city's history. The

monuments and sculptures reflect centuries-old craftsmanship. The city has suffered much from earthquakes, especially those of 1808, 1833 and 1934. These earthquakes caused extensive damage to its ancient buildings. Yet, despite the destruction, the external appearance of the city does not seem to have changed much. Temples and monuments have been restored and preserved. Dilapidated buildings have been rebuilt or renovated in their original form. So the basic structure of the town is intact.





■ Dattatreya Temple



In the 1970s, the pioneering Bhaktapur Development Project, with financial and technical assistance from the German government, restored considerable portions of the city's lost heritage and improved its physical infrastructure.

The main attraction of the Bhaktapur Durbar Square is the famous Golden Gate or Swarna Dwar, built by King Ranjit Malla in 1753. British historian Perceval Landon praised it as 'the most exquisitely designed and finished piece of gilded metalwork in all Asia'. The gate is the main entrance to the palace. The Palace of 55 Windows, built by King Yaksha Malla in 1427 and renovated by King Bhupatindra Malla, is famous for its intricately carved wood works. There are many courtyards inside the palace, but they are closed to the public. The visitor has to be satisfied with the diversity of monuments around the palace complex.

Upon entering the gate to the Bhaktapur Durbar Square, there are two temples to the right. One is the two-storeyed Krishna Temple, with roof struts depicting the 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu. The second is a terracotta Shikhara temple dedicated to Goddess Durga or Bhagawati. The life-size statue of King Bhupatindra Malla with folded palms atop a stone pillar in front of the National Art Gallery is another remarkable piece of sculpture. The last Malla ruler of Bhaktapur, King Ranjit Malla, erected this statue in 1753 as a tribute to Bhupatindra Malla, who enriched the cultural heritage of Bhaktapur. The Big Bell, installed

here by King Ranjit Malla in 1737, is used while worshipping Goddess Tulaja Bhavani. Behind this, there is a beautiful stone Shikhara-style temple with nine pinnacles dedicated to Goddess Batsala built in 1672 by King Jagat Prakash Malla. Next to the Batsala temple is the two-storeyed pagoda-style temple of Yaksheswara Mahadev built by King Yaksha Malla in the 15th century.

Taumadhi Square that houses the Nyatapola Temple is one of the three main squares included in the world heritage site of Bhaktapur. This square is dominated by two of Bhaktapur's grandest temples. The Nyatapola, or five-storeyed temple of Goddess Siddhi Laxmi, the patron deity of King Bhupatindra Malla, is by far the most imposing. Its five-step base gives it a towering height, which makes it the tallest temple in the country. This grand temple, a masterpiece of Nepalese architecture, was built by King Bhupatindra Malla in 1702. The columns around the temple sanctum and door frame have exquisite carvings. The impressive woodwork includes 108 supporting roof struts, which depict the diverse forms of the goddess Bhagawati, or Mahismardini, and other associate deities. In the southeast corner of this courtyard stands a massive three-storeyed rectangular temple of Bhairav, also known as Kashi Bishwanath. The original temple is believed to have been constructed in 1001 during the reign of King Nirvaya Deva.

Tachapal, or Dattatraya Square, is one of the three main squares of Bhaktapur. The Dattatraya



Temple stands in the east of the square. It was built by King Yaksha Malla and his son Biswa Malla in the 15th century. The god Dattatraya represents the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar or Shiva. Surrounding the Dattatraya Square are several Hindu Maths or monasteries, of which the most important is the Pujari Math. The Pujari Math is especially known for the rich 18th century woodcarvings that grace its doors and windows. Particularly well-known is the famed intricately carved 'Peacock Window' facing the lane on the east side of the building. It is supposedly the finest specimen of woodcarving. In fact, the ancient city of Bhaktapur is home to some of the rarest and probably the finest examples of Nepalese woodcarving art and architecture.

Lumbini

Outside the Kathmandu Valley, Lumbini, the birthplace of Lord Buddha, has been enlisted in the World Cultural Heritage site. Siddhartha Gautama, who later attained enlightenment as the Buddha, was born in Lumbini in the spring of 623 B.C. An inscription on a stone pillar erected by Maurya Emperor Ashoka in 249 B.C. authenticates that the Buddha was born at this spot. Recent archaeological excavations have discovered the "marker stone" at the basement of the Maya Devi Temple, believed to have been laid there by Emperor Ashoka to denote the exact sacred spot where the Buddha first put his foot on earth. This has further enhanced the importance and sanctity of the site. The stupas built during different periods dating from 3rd

century B.C. to 15th century A.D., the Maya Devi Temple and Pushkarni Pond where the baby Siddhartha was given his first bath after birth are some ancient edifices of Lumbini.

A Master Plan for the development of Lumbini was initiated in 1978 as per the design of world-renowned architect Professor Tange of Japan. The Master Plan segregates the Lumbini area into four main components: the Sacred Garden which includes the Maya Devi Temple and the Ashokan pillar; the monastic zone; the cultural centre; and the Lumbini village. Since the early 1980s, many countries with significant Buddhist populations have contributed in its infrastructural development. Monasteries reflecting the architecture of the individual countries have been constructed in the monastic zone. But much still remains to be done to give final shape to the Master Plan.

As the birthplace of Lord Buddha, Lumbini is one of the holiest places of one of the world's greatest religions. It has remained a hallowed Buddhist pilgrimage spot since very early times. Lumbini has been designated as the "Fountain of World Peace and the Holiest Pilgrimage Centre of Buddhists and peace-loving people of the world". The site remains a place of pilgrimage for both Buddhists and Hindus alike from all over the world.

Besides the existing World Heritage sites in Nepal, there are many other natural and historical monuments and sites in the country which merit inclusion in the World Heritage list.

ART & ARCHITECTURE





Art, Architecture, Sculpture and Painting

Nepal's ethnic diversity, religious and cultural beliefs, festivities, gods and goddesses in their many manifestations, demons, myths, legends, folklore and myriad spiritual and supernatural elements have been the subject of profound interest to visitors. Its cultural mosaic is enriched by folk art and artistic creations, which are reflected in its music, musical instruments, paintings (thangkas), masks and curio items of cultural significance and numerous other objects d'art.

■ Sculptor at work in Patan



The seven UNESCO monuments of the Kathmandu valley comprising of three historical palaces known as – Kathmandu Durbar Square, Patan Durbar Square and Bhaktapur Durbar Square-- two Buddhist stupas- Syambhunath and Boudanath and two Hindu temples Pashupatinath and Changu Narayan, were revered as sacred for hundred of years and there has been a series of contributions and renovations in the form of constructions of temples, stupas and palaces over the centuries made by different rulers and Kings.

The pagodas are multi-tiered monuments tapering towards the top with intricate wood carving in the forms of doors, pillars, windows and struts. These ubiquitous wooden historical structures are supplemented by bronze works and stone sculptures together forming the squares and palaces with profuse representation of images of gods, goddesses, demons, beasts, mythical figures, kings and the ordinary human beings engaged in their day-to-day activities.

The Lichchavi period is known as the classical period of Nepalese history because it was during this period that art and architecture began to take shape. Trade and crafts flourished under them, and they built magnificent temples, palaces and monuments. However, it was only under the later Malla period and the early Shah period from the 14th to the 18th centuries the valley's fabulous cities with their exquisite pagoda, shikhara and stupa architecture, ornate palaces and artistic temples came to take shape in the form that we see it today.



The present day neo-classical buildings were also built only during the second half of the 19th century (Rana Regime) with Nepal's first contact with the western countries.

Nepal's ethnic diversity, religious and cultural beliefs, festivities, gods and goddesses in their many manifestations, demons, myths, legends, folklore and myriad spiritual and supernatural elements have been the subject of profound interest to visitors. Its cultural mosaic is enriched by folk art and artistic creations, which are reflected in its music, musical instruments, paintings (thangkas), masks and curio items of cultural significance and numerous other objects d'art.

Harmonious inter-relationship and tolerance between Hinduism and Buddhism and the mutual respect and acceptance of each other have created a congenial environment for the development of art and culture. Early visitors to the country described the valley as the abode of the gods and goddesses where there were more temples than houses and more gods and goddesses than people. Writings by 7th century Chinese travellers reported well-built towns and settlements with magnificent palaces and temples. Its narrow streets with roofed brick houses in a row on both sides, paved squares, open platforms or stages, stone water spouts and a landscape punctuated by temples, stupas, monasteries and numerous other religious and cultural monuments added to its aesthetic beauty. An inventory prepared in 1975 stated that more than 80 per cent of all historical monuments in the country were to be found in the Kathmandu Valley. In the valley alone, there were more than a thousand splendid monuments. This was what Brown Morton III, Chairman of

the United States National Committee for the International Council of Monuments and Sites, had to say in 1979: "The Kathmandu Valley is perhaps the most beautiful place in the world. Hidden deep in the folds of the Himalayan mountains between India and Tibet, this exotic centre of an exotic country is nearly a perfect synthesis of natural and man-made beauty."

The natural splendour of the valley, its history and cultural opulence have attracted visitors, pilgrims, traders and scholars who dared to venture into the mountains and inhospitable terrain in search of the elusive Shangri-la. What makes Kathmandu Valley unique is the amalgamation of its magnificent natural environment with a living civilisation reflected in its towns, monuments, festivities, highly stylised pageants, ritualistic customs, religious traditions and vibrant culture.

Thangka (Pauva) Art

The art of painting in Nepal is as old as the carvings on stone and metal, and it is variously expressed in the murals, manuscripts, Gathas (wooden covers of manuscripts), and on cloth and paper. As in other forms of Nepalese art, religion has played a dominant role in painting, too. Thangkas, also known as Pauvas, are traditional paintings depicting religious themes and deities. It is prepared on a piece of fine cotton or silk cloth which is coated with a mixture of glue, chalk and indigo and finally varnished with the white of a duck's egg mixed with water. The Pauva paintings have generally been painted by traditional ethnic castes like the Chitrakars, Shakyas, Vajracharyas and Tibetan Lamas.



Mithila Art

These days, Maithili art or painting is also gaining popularity among the tourists. Basically, Maithili art is a folk painting dominated by religious themes. Janakpur in central-south Nepal is the centre of this school of art. The people of Mithila, generally womenfolk, paint the walls of their houses with pictures of different flowers and objects of socio-religious themes in bright colours. The women of Mithila have cultivated this ceremonial art of drawing and painting on the mud walls of their houses, the floors of their thresholds and courtyards. Sita, the princess of Mithila and consort of Rama of the epic Ramayana, has been the perennial source of inspiration to the women of Mithila in this ancient craft of painting. Today, they are experimenting with their ancient art on paper as a form of prayer. The art of Mithila is heavily influenced by Tantric cults as in the Pauvas and, therefore, their paintings are full of Tantric symbols like the Mandala in Tibetan art.

Museums

Nepal Museum, the first and pioneer museum of Nepal, opened to the general public on February 12, 1939. Located at Chhauni on the western outskirts of Kathmandu, it later became popular as the National Museum. It has three sections - history, art gallery and Buddhist art gallery - housed in three separate buildings. In the art gallery, there are numerous sculptures of historical and artistic importance in stone, bronze and wood. The earliest dated stone statue of King Jaya Verma, circa 185 A.D., is on display here. The National Numismatic Museum is housed on the top floor of the history section. The National Museum is open six days a week except Tuesdays and public holidays.

The historical old Malla palaces of the valley have also been converted into museums. The Hanuman Dhoka Palace houses the biographical museums of the Shah Kings - Tribhuvan, Mahendra and Birendra. The Patan Museum, with its rich collection of Nepalese bronze sculptures, has been established in the residential palace compound of the Keshav Narayan Chowk of Patan Durbar. This Patan Museum was restored to its earlier glory with the technical and financial assistance of the Austrian government. It is considered to be one of the best museums in south Asia. The National Art Gallery at Bhaktapur was set up in the famous 55 Window Palace of Bhaktapur Durbar in 1961. In this gallery, thangka paintings, or traditional Nepalese paintings, dating from the 13th and 14th centuries are preserved and on display. In Bhaktapur, we have two smaller museums at Dattatraya Square. The Pujari Math Museum contains woodcarvings while the Chikanfa Math Museum has bronze metal artefacts and utensils used for religious rites and household purposes. Other museums in the valley are the Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Swayambhu Bikas Mandal at Swayambhu. The latter holds a collection of Buddhist artefacts in stone. The Nepal National Ethnographic Museum housed in the Tourism Service Centre building at Bhrikuti Mandap, Kathmandu displays life size dioramas depicting the life and culture of different races and ethnic communities of Nepal.

Outside the Kathmandu Valley, there are regional museums at Pokhara, Surkhet, Dhankuta and Kapilvastu. Except for the one at Kapilvastu, the other museums are mainly ethnological museums depicting local culture. Among them, the prominent ones are the International Mountain Museum at Pokhara, the Tharu Cultural Museum

at Thakurdwara in Bardiya National Park and The Mustang Eco-Museum at Jomsom in Mustang. These days, private collectors have also been encouraged to stage exhibitions to display their collections of different types of traditional arts and handicraft items.

At Lumbini, the birthplace of Lord Buddha, there is the all important archaeological remains of the Maya Devi Temple, especially the alcove remains which date from 3rd century B.C. The archaeological ruins of monasteries date from 3rd century B.C to 5th century A.D. Numerous artefact items were discovered while excavating the Lumbini area, such as silver coins, child's toy and a ram made of clay on wheels which was probably used during early period. The Buddhist International Research Library at Lumbini has a rich collection of Buddhist texts.

Nepal's museums have rich collections of archaeological, historical and artistic importance. Besides the archaeological objects dating from the time of Lord Buddha unearthed at Lumbini, Tilaurakot and other places in west Nepal, pre-historic archaeological objects discovered in the Mustang caves belong to 8th century B.C. Stone statues, inscriptions, coins and many other archaeological objects have been discovered in the Kathmandu Valley which dates from the 1st century. As Nepalese are icon (idol) worshipers, a vast treasure of cultural wealth in the form of stone, wood and metal sculptures and religious paintings remain in private possession with private collectors.

Traditional Handicrafts

Nepalese handicrafts have been popular since long. The mention of the woolen blanket in the 'Kautilya Artha Sastra' of Chanakya Bishnu Gupta (Kautilya) which dates back to 4th century B.C. proves this fact. Nepalese bronze artefacts have

been treasured by the Tibetans since the time of the Lichchhavis (3rd and 4th century A.D.). During the medieval period, Nepalese handicrafts were very popular in China and India. Sculptured ornaments and religious idols and statuettes in gold, silver, bronze, brass, stone and wood and embossed with semi-precious stones were highly sought-after merchandise in China and India. Chinese travellers appreciated the skill and craftsmanship of the Nepalese artisans, especially their weaving, spinning, wood carving and metal work. The contribution of the master craftsman, Arniko, who enriched Nepalese handicrafts and popularised them throughout Tibet, China and other countries of the Far East was immense. Nepalese handicrafts are deeply rooted in the socio-religious and cultural lives of the people. They can be divided into two main categories: articles of daily use and artefacts/articles of aesthetic value and religious significance. These range from artefacts linked to ritualistic cults during the worship of deities to objects used in daily life, like pots and hairpins to hookahs (hubble-bubble), beads, shawls and skirts. Ethnic craftsmen have demonstrated their distinct characteristics in the design, modelling and production process of the artefacts. The ethnic utilitarian handicrafts constitute a long range of articles, like khal-lohara (pestle and mortar), amkhora (water pot), anti (wine jar), sukunda (oil lamp), karuwa (water jar), thaal (plate), kachaura (saucer), kasaudi (cooking pot), chulesi (vegetable cutter), gagri (water pitcher), khukuri (gorkha knife) and dhakki (basket).

Nepal's handicraft industry of today is almost totally dependent on tourism





and export. The habit of using handicrafts is, however, gradually increasing among the local people, too. Projects for the restoration of temples and monuments launched by both government and non-government agencies with international cooperation have helped revive and sustain handicraft production and trade, such as brick and tile manufacturing, woodcarving, metal and bronze casting, stone carving and so on. In fact, handicrafts are the true mirror of Nepalese cultural and artistic heritage and reflect the glorious art traditions of the past. The fine craftsmanship of Nepalese artisans has not only attracted foreign visitors, but has also enhanced the country's image abroad. It is thus one of the country's most important industries having a wide international market. The skill has been handed down from father to son and from one generation to another. Nepalese handicrafts, particularly bronze figures, wooden artwork, pashmina shawls and thangka paintings have been very popular gift items among the tourists. Bronze artefacts like the sukunda, or traditional Nepalese oil lamp, prayer wheels, metal bells and traditional dolls are some of the highly popular souvenir gift items coveted by the tourists.





■ Mani Rimdu Festival



Masks

Mask dances having religious significance are popular with the masses in the country. Masks are used for different religious purposes, and some gods, particularly Bhairav, is worshipped in mask form. In the Kathmandu Valley, traditional masks are made by the Chitrakars. The mask also represents the culture, religious tradition and

belief of the society or community. Ritualistic dances performed with grotesque masks and ornate costumes accompanied by traditional music reflect beauty and grace as well as a pride in tradition. In religious dances, masks are used for two purposes: firstly, for the dancer to receive divine power psychologically and secondly, to sweep away the onlookers psychologically from reality to the other



world. All mask dances observed in Nepal have some legend behind them. Wooden masks are popular in the northern parts of the country, and they are made by the Lamas. The Tamangs living in the periphery of the valley are famous for their skill in manufacturing wooden masks. Masks are also very popular among the tourists as souvenirs.

OTHER SPECIALITIES





Other Specialities

The ethnic dresses and ornaments of Nepal represent a myriad collection of rich cultural diversity. Dresses and ornaments differ significantly with climate and regions - as in the high mountains and the lowlands of the Terai, as well as in the eastern, central and western regions where different ethnic groups dwell.

■ Chhetri women from Far west



Costumes And Ornaments

Nepalese costumes and ornaments are unique and varied in their own ways. Ethnic groups and indigenous people have their own typical attire for men and women. The ethnic dresses and ornaments of Nepal represent a myriad collection of rich cultural diversity. Dresses and ornaments differ significantly with climate and regions - as in the high mountains and the lowlands of the Terai, as well as in the eastern, central and western regions where different ethnic groups dwell. Normally, Nepalese men wear a long shirt, or daura, and trouser, or suruwal, while womenfolk wear blouse, or cholo, and sari. This female attire exudes grace and beauty. Nepalese women invariably wear some ornaments on their ears, nose or neck. Gold and silver ornaments are worn by Nepalese women according to their economic status. Most married Nepalese women prefer to wear a long necklace of red beads called potey with or without gold decoration on their necks and put red sindoor on their heads in between the central partition of the hair. Married women wear glass bangles generally of red colour on their wrists. Potey (bead-necklace), red/green bangles and sindoor are the typical signs of a married woman. Hindu tradition forbids widows of this luxury.



Nepalese Cuisine

Cooked rice (bhat) or a thick paste of maize or millet powder called dhedo, with some dal, or lentil soup, and vegetable curry and hot pickle form the daily staple Nepalese cuisine. People in the Terai eat roti, a round pancake-like bread made of wheat flour, with curry and pickles. During feasts, people make preparations of meat, varieties of curries and sweets. Nepalese cuisine is usually spicy and hot. Momo, a small round wheat ball stuffed with meat, is the most popular snack among the natives and foreigners. It is eaten along with some hot and sour pickle. Momo and chhoyela, or small pieces of meat steamed or barbecued and mixed with a hot paste of garlic and other spices, are gaining popularity among foreigners. Food dishes of Nepal have their own unique taste and typical flavour and are a gourmet's delight. Nepalese normally eat food with the hand while seated cross-legged on the floor, usually upon a thick flat wooden board, though this practice has largely given way to the dining table and chair in the urban areas.

Musical Instruments

Music is an integral part of Nepalese festivities. The sound of many-toned drums, blasting trumpets and clashing cymbals accompany the celebration of festivities. There are numerous indigenous musical instruments, some very unique to Nepal. Some of these instruments are popular throughout the country, while some are played only locally or on specific occasions. The Sarangi, or a small chordophone which is played by running a bow over the strings, is made and played by the Gandharvas or Gaine s, who are the traditional folk singers of western Nepal. Air or wind blown instruments (aerophones) come in various shapes, sizes and sound. The flute is a popular instrument played with the mouth. The Sahanai or Panchey Baja produces a very moving

sound and is played during weddings. The Karnal is another air blown instrument that produces a piercing powerful sound. The Narasingha, Ponga and Muhali are other types of instruments which are played during religious and social functions.

Among the membranophones, the Damphu is a double-sided disk shaped drum, topped with leather and with a long wooden handle. It is played by striking the leather face with the fingers and palm. The Dhol or Dholak is a double-headed drum widely used in the Terai region of Nepal during public fairs and festivals. Dhimey is a double-headed cylindrical drum with a big wooden body. Its right side is beaten with a light winded cane and the left with the hand of the player. It is widely used by the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley. The Mridanga is a double-headed drum with a heavy wooden body. It produces a gentle and pleasant sound. The Maadal is the most popular drum. Made of leather with a wooden body, it largely accompanies folk music and dances in the hills.

Meditation

The practice of meditation (dhyana) is deep rooted in the Nepalese society as it is held sacred by both the Hindu and Buddhist faiths. Meditation is very prevalent in Buddhism and is practised with great devotion. Meditation is a part of yoga. It blends the mind and body, giving way to spiritual solace. Seated in a typical lotus position (Padmasana), practitioners of meditation close their eyes and chant sacred words (mantra) like 'Om' synchronising them with their breathing. Meditation is believed to bring tranquil harmony to the mind.

All Nepalese households have idols of deities at home. The devotees worship the gods every morning and evening. Folding their palms and closing their eyes, they pray and meditate for the good health and prosperity of the family and ultimate salvation (mokshya) of the self after death.

Faith Healers

In the hilly villages of Nepal, one often encounters the shamans. Typically attired in white long robes (jama) and small round bells (ghangla) tied around their waist, and head bedecked with feathers, these shamans, or jhankris as they are called, are a unique facet of Nepalese rural life in the hills. The shamans believe in animism and animal sacrifice. In Nepalese villages, they perform the work of healers and forecasters of the future. They participate in Hindu or Buddhist community festivals and celebrations, though they do not consider themselves to be devotees of either religion. They centre on their own religious practices of territorial deities and life-cycle rituals.

They harbour beliefs in supernatural beings such as ghosts, spirits and demons. They play the Dhyangro, a type of hand-held drum which is beaten with a special type of ring-shaped stick. They claim having the power to drive away evil spirits tormenting people. They thus function as faith healers, driving away evil spirits and curing the sick. The faith healers say they are possessed by some supernatural force or the powerful Ban Devi, or forest goddess. They also maintain having the ability to perform miracles. The jhankris make a pilgrimage to Gosain Kunda on Janai Purnima day in the month of August.



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