
Hodgson and the Hanuman Dhoka

MICHAEL HUTT

Brian Houghton Hodgson lived and worked at the British Residency in Kathmandu from 1820 to 1843, and served as British Resident in Nepal for the last ten of these years.¹ He died in 1894, and some 25 years after his death Perceval Landon wrote:

Some time ago my attention was arrested by the remark of Mr. Cecil Bendall who, writing in 1886, while Hodgson was still alive, referred to him as ‘the greatest, and least thanked of all our English Residents’. It is difficult to dispute either adjective. Hodgson was indeed more than the greatest of English Residents. He was the founder of all our real knowledge of Buddhism. He was the only man whose infinite variety of scholarship and interest could, unaided, have written the true history of Nepal.²

Landon’s effusive comments have been echoed by many others since Hodgson’s death. Hodgson wrote over 190 papers on ethnology, zoology, ornithology, geography, language, religion and history that are still quoted today, and was an inveterate collector of manuscripts and miscellaneous curios. But, although he commissioned many drawings of the temples and palaces of the Kathmandu Valley, he rarely if ever mentioned buildings in his published papers. In fact, architecture is one of the very few aspects of Himalayan culture on which Hodgson did not publish. This is puzzling, because the medieval Newar architecture of the Kathmandu valley is highly distinctive, and Hodgson was by nature a polymath.³

The buildings of old Kathmandu were the backdrop to all of Hodgson’s scholarly endeavours, not to mention the political machinations in which he engaged at the behest of his superiors, and latterly to their chagrin. And during Hodgson’s time in Kathmandu the old palace squares of the three cities of the Valley must still have retained much of their medieval splendour. This splendour has since been somewhat compromised – first by renovations commissioned by Rana prime ministers between 1846 and 1951, next by a major earthquake in 1934, and finally by the universal tyranny of the motor car and the use of concrete, with many a change in between. Here I shall focus my attention on the old palace area of central Kathmandu, known as “Hanuman Dhoka” after the palace, or

¹ This article is based on the Hodgson Memorial Lecture, delivered at the Anniversary General Meeting of the Royal Asiatic Society in London on 12 May, 1994. ² Perceval Landon, *Nepal* (London, 1928), I, p. 85.

³ Nor is the architecture of the Valley mentioned or described in the many letters from which Hunter quotes in his hagiographic biography. (Sir William Wilson Hunter, *Life of Brian Houghton Hodgson*. London, 1896.)

as the “Darbar Square”.⁴ The Valley’s three cities (Kathmandu, Lalitpur (Patan) and Bhaktapur (Bhatgaon, Bhadgaon)) were for a period of almost two hundred years the capitals of separate statelets, and each therefore has a palace and associated temples. Kathmandu’s palace square is the most changed of the three, mainly because the city was made the national capital after the Shah kings’ unification of Nepal in the late eighteenth century. However, it is a place of great interest and importance. It is here that the Shah kings are crowned, and the palace forms the focal point of many national rituals and festivals. It is interesting to think that Hodgson himself paid visits to the Hanuman Dhoka while the palace was still the residence of the Shah kings.⁵

It is generally accepted that Kathmandu has existed since the Licchavi period, that is since the third or fourth century. The first Licchavi king to leave any lasting traces of his reign was Manadeva (464–506), and by the time he came to power the town was expanding northward from the present site of the Hanuman Dhoka. During the early medieval period there was a palace at the centre of the city, and the settlement was divided into upper and lower halves and probably surrounded by walls with gated entrances.⁶ The palace square, extending from Maru Tol in the south to Makhan Tol in the north, stood at its neutral ritual centre.⁷ A Chinese envoy, Wang Hsüan-t’sé, visited the court in the mid-seventh century, and reported the existence of a three-storey palace with an upper floor that could accommodate ten thousand men. His account makes much of the Licchavi king Narendradeva’s wealth, which was derived from Kathmandu’s location on what was then an important trans-Himalayan trade route. An inscription in the name of the seventh-century ruler Amshuvarman suggests that an older palace was renovated on this site during his reign, and Gautamavajra Vajracarya has suggested that the palaces mentioned in fifth–eighth-century inscriptions, whose locations remain unknown, may both have stood within a large complex here.⁸

All the evidence supports the idea that palaces were built in the centre of Kathmandu in a past more distant than the surviving buildings suggest. The oldest building currently extant is the eleventh or twelfth-century Kasthamandapa in Maru Tol at the south end of the square, from which the city takes its name.⁹ A constant process of demolition, renovation and replacement has been going on for many centuries and most of the present buildings were commissioned between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. There are, however, a few Licchavi remains. On a plinth beside the main thoroughfare in Makhan

⁴ The most detailed description of the Hanuman Dhoka, Gautamavajra Vajracarya’s *Hanuman Dhokaka Rajadarbar* (Kirtipur, BS 2033 (1976/7)) is currently available only in Nepali, but some of the information it contains appears in Mary Shepherd Slusser’s *Nepal Mandala. A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley* (Princeton, 1982). For descriptions of the palace squares of each of the three cities of the Kathmandu Valley, see Michael Hutt, with David N. Gellner, Axel Michaels, Greta Rana and Govinda Tandan, *Nepal. A Guide to the Art and Architecture of the Kathmandu Valley* (Gartmore, 1994).

⁵ The Shah kings left the Hanuman Dhoka for a neo-classical extravaganza at Narayan Hiti, on the northern edge of the old city, during the reign of Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah at the end of the nineteenth century. This has since been replaced by a modern palace complex.

⁶ Chandra B. Shrestha, Prem K. Khatry, Bharat Sharma and Hamid Ansari, *The Historic Cities of Asia. Kathmandu* (Kathmandu, 1986), pp. 31, 35.

⁷ A *tol* (in Nepali) or *tvah* (in Newari) is a block or quarter in an urban settlement.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 9, 11–12.

⁹ Sanskrit *kāṣṭha*, “wood” > Nepali *kāṣṭh*; Sanskrit *maṇḍapa*, “pavilion, shelter” > Newari *maḍu*. In modern Nepali, the capital is known as *kāṣṭhmāḍu*.

Tol there is a stone image of Vishnu's vehicle (*vāhana*), the man-bird Garuda, that dates from the sixth century, and embedded in the pavement on the south side of the temple of Indrapur is another Garuda, which was decapitated by vandals or art-thieves a few years ago. Excavations for building work in the area have on several occasions unearthed inscriptions and building fragments from the Licchavi period. In and around the palace there are other Licchavi-period sculptures that were reputedly brought in from other parts of the city by the seventeenth-century king Pratap Malla. In a closed section of the palace, for instance, there is a superb, probably sixth-century sculpture of the boy Krishna subduing the demon Kaliya, known as *Kaliyadamana*, which Pratapaditya Pal has described in detail.¹⁰

Today the Hanuman Dhoka palace complex and its temple-filled precincts together occupy an area of almost ten acres. The palace consists of ten quadrangles (*chok*) of various sizes, enclosed by two- or three-storey buildings from which there rise towers, pavilions and temples. Only two of these courtyards, the Nasal and Basantpur *choks*, are open to the public. On the west side of the palace there stand approximately 24 temples and shrines in a variety of shapes and forms – the Newar-style multi-tiered “pagoda” temple predominates, but there are also examples of other forms. It is said that the palace complex was once much larger, and consisted of 35 quadrangles 150 years ago.¹¹ One must treat such traditions with caution (a similar tradition has it that the palace at Bhaktapur, which now consists of only four *choks*, once comprised 99). But in Kathmandu this local tradition certainly contains some measure of truth. A building on the east side of the palace complex that was demolished in 1967 contained mural paintings in the Rajasthani style, and was once a part of the palace.¹² The wide open square of Basantpur on the east side probably also once contained palace buildings – one source mentions it as the site of a now disappeared “Hati Chok”, or “elephant quadrangle”.¹³ Oldfield, the British Residency's surgeon, described Basantpur in the 1870s as a “council-chamber” and also mentioned a “long modern darbar or public reception room”.¹⁴ The destruction of some of the palace buildings can probably be attributed to the earthquake that shook the valley in 1934. A photograph of a corner of Darbar Square taken in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake and published in Royal Nepal Airline's inflight magazine in 1993 shows some ornate but badly damaged buildings in Basantpur square that no longer exist. After the earthquake, the government demolished many buildings to create what is now commonly known as “New Road”, an untypically straight street which leads to Basantpur from the Tundikhel parade-ground, a mile or so to the east. So it can safely be surmised that the Hanuman Dhoka palace that Hodgson knew was larger than it is now. Oldfield wrote in the 1870s that the palace at Kathmandu was the most extensive in Nepal, and had “from forty to fifty different courts of various sizes, each having a separate name”. Since the Gorkha conquest a hundred years earlier, according to Oldfield, the palace had been “enlarged in every direction, and kept in thorough repair”.¹⁵

¹⁰ Pratapaditya Pal, *Vaiṣṇava Iconology in Nepal* (Calcutta, [1970], 1985), pp. 88–90.

¹¹ Vajracarya, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹² Slusser (*op. cit.*, pp. 197–8) provides a brief description of this much-lamented building.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹⁴ Hector Ambrose Oldfield, *Sketches from Nepal*, second Indian reprint (publisher and place not stated), 1981, p. 105.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.



Fig. 1. The main entrance to the Hanuman Dhoka palace complex. The image to the left of the door is that of Hanuman, who remains cloaked in red all the year round and is daubed with vermillion paste each year.

It is likely that the palace was known by its present name in Hodgson's day, after the large statue of Rama's acolyte and most faithful devotee, the monkey-god Hanuman, that stands on a 10-foot column outside the entrance. This was installed in 1672 by Pratap Malla, the most famous of the "bewildering number of kings"¹⁶ who ruled the three valley kingdoms. It is not known by what name the palace was known before this date – British sources always call it the "Durbar", a term borrowed from the Mughals which denoted both the buildings and the political power they housed.¹⁷ In medieval Nepal, the

¹⁶ Slusser, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹⁷ Vajracarya (*op. cit.*, pp. 15–16) argues that during the Malla period the palace was known as the *gunapo* palace, but is unable to establish the meaning or etymology of the word *gunapo*. Slusser (*op. cit.*, p. 189) suggests that it might have some connection with the name of the tenth-century king Gunakamadeva.



Fig. 2. A general view of the western side of the palace complex, as seen from the plinth of Maju Dega, a Shiva temple in the palace square. The pagodas are, from left to right, the temples of Taleju, Degutale and Bhagavati. To the left of the picture is the Navadurga or Shiva-Parvati temple.

distinction between “house” and “palace” was perhaps less clear than in Europe at the same time. Originally, palace buildings were simply grander versions of the traditional Newar house. Over time, the palaces developed into extensive complexes, incorporating facilities and features their more humble counterparts lacked.

Although a temple-filled square stands adjacent to each of the Valley’s palace complexes, none of the palaces has a “grand approach” such as the garden or driveway that is typical of palaces in a European context. Indeed, the main entrance is often in an obscure corner, as is the case at the Hanuman Dhoka, or there may be more than one entrance, with several doors from the outside leading to different quadrangles, as is the case at the palace of Lalitpur nearby. There may have been some fortifications around the palaces, as is suggested by the existence of gateways or remnants of gateways to the palace squares, particularly at Bhaktapur, but in general this appears to have been minimal. The Malla palaces, which grew from humble origins into huge rambling complexes, appear to have been an integral part of life in the old Newar towns.

The existence of not one but three prosperous kingdoms, each ruled by a Malla king, in the small valley of Nepal during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is one of the more remarkable features of this region’s history. The later Malla kings were Newars, and their reigns saw a flowering of literature in Newari, their Tibeto-Burman mother-



Fig. 3. Looking north from the interior of the Nasal Chok, with the temples of Taleju (l) and Panchamukhi Hanuman (r) in the background.

tongue.¹⁸ The Malla dynasty first appears in the historical record in A.D. 1200, ending the obscure period of over three centuries that followed the eclipse of the Licchavis. The most important of the early Malla kings, if the chronicles are to be believed, was Jayasthiti or Sthiti Malla, during whose reign, it is claimed, the orthodox Hindu character of the kingdom – at this stage still a unified polity – was established. In 1395, the throne was inherited jointly by Sthiti Malla's three sons. By 1408, two of them had died and one ruled alone until 1428, when his son, Yaksha Malla, succeeded him and ruled from Bhaktapur until 1482. Contrary to popular belief, Yaksha Malla did not divide the kingdom between his sons. After his death, six sons and a nephew ruled jointly, but some began to carve out

¹⁸ The status of the term “Newar” as an ethnonym has been the subject of scholarly debate for many years, and it appears not to have been used during the first few centuries of the Malla period. (Slusser (*op. cit.*, p. 9) states that the first use of the word occurs in an inscription from 1654.)



Fig. 4. At close quarters, much of the charm of the older buildings lies in the detailed ornamental carving of their wooden elements. Here a wooden wallband, one of several that encircle the courtyard of Basantpur Chok at various levels, ends in the figure of a Naga, or holy serpent, where it abuts against the elaborate doorframe of the main entrance to the chok.

morsels of the kingdom for themselves and, through a complex pattern of conquest, secession and succession between 1484 and about 1619, the three separate Malla city-states of Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur emerged.

Though all these kings were descendants of Sthiti Malla, relations between them were often very bad. There were regular feuds and quarrels, and on several occasions the city-states forged alliances with rulers outside the Valley to skirmish with their neighbours. This contained the seeds of their downfall, but they nonetheless managed to settle their differences on important ceremonial occasions, and a more positive aspect of the rivalry was the way in which each ruler vied with the others to create the most spectacular palace square. Once the unitary Malla kingdom had broken up, the newly-independent kings of Lalitpur and Kathmandu set about establishing separate and competing centres of ritual and political power. Ratna Malla, the first king of independent Kathmandu, obviously took over an established palace. It is not known whether he extended this palace, beyond establishing a temple to Taleju, the Mallas' lineage deity, who had been brought to Bhaktapur by the refugee entourage of the king of Tirhut in 1326. The rivalry between the Malla kings was sometimes ludicrously intense. Pratap Malla raided Bhaktapur on a number of occasions and captured many items – for example, several pairs of stone guardian lions. Legend has it that the king of Bhaktapur, Bhupatindra Malla, was so

pleased with a new stone image of the goddess Durga that he had the sculptor's right hand cut off to ensure that he would not produce a sculpture of similar quality for a rival king. The tale has several sequels, and one wonders whether the sculptor escaped with any limbs at all. Pratap Malla earned a certain infamy when he raided Lalitpur while the king and priests of that city were consecrating a new Krishna temple in the palace square. He atoned for this misdeed by building his own Krishna temple – but his atonement was somewhat qualified, since the images established in this temple, an unusual octagonal structure, were clearly meant to resemble Pratap Malla himself, flanked by his queens.

In 1744, the army of Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha began its campaign against the Valley kingdoms, which, unsurprisingly, failed to unite and were eventually vanquished in 1768 and 1769. Jayaprakash Malla (r. 1735–68) was the last Malla king to rule Kathmandu. Much of his reign was taken up with repelling attackers and quelling rebellious nobles. In order to pay his troops to defend Kathmandu from the advancing Gorkhali army, Jayaprakash had to resort to stripping golden finials from a number of temples and, during the last desperate hours, to opening up the underground vaults in the Bhandarkhal, his treasury garden. Nevertheless, he found the time and resources to establish the exquisite Kumari Baha, the residence of Kathmandu's so-called "living goddess", in 1756, and to embellish and restore a number of other temples and shrines. Though the cult of the Kumari must date from long before his reign, Jayaprakash Malla seems to have been the first ruler to invest it with the high ceremonial status it now enjoys.

As a hillsman, Prithvi Narayan Shah despised the Valley people "who drink water from wells" and he described the three towns as "a cold stone".¹⁹ But his palace remained the Hanuman Dhoka until his death in 1775. The main concern of the Shah kings of newly united Nepal was to maintain and expand the kingdom, not to beautify it. They simply "moved into the Malla house, taking over their cities, palaces and temples and creating no new forms".²⁰ Nevertheless, Prithvi Narayan preached a kind of cultural and economic self-sufficiency to his people. The Shahs' dependence on Newar styles of architecture continued well into the nineteenth century, though there also developed a liking for Mughal forms.

Meanwhile, the Gorkhalis' campaign continued. In 1814 they clashed with the army of the British East India Company in the southern foothills and a series of battles ended in 1816 with the Treaty of Sagauli, which deprived Nepal of much newly conquered land. Though Prithvi Narayan Shah had expelled Capuchin missionaries and was deeply suspicious of foreign influences, his successors were forced by this treaty to accept the establishment of a British Residency in Kathmandu – hence the later presence of Hodgson.

The initial policy of patronising local Newar culture was set out plainly by Prithvi Narayan Shah, but it fell into abeyance during the nineteenth century. In 1846, Jang Bahadur Kunwar seized power and founded the Rana regime. Four years later he visited London and Paris and was impressed by the palaces and government buildings he saw in those cities. As a consequence, he and the rulers who came after him refashioned many of the Hanuman Dhoka's buildings in a European style and much of the palace's original

¹⁹ Slusser, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

character was lost. These changes occurred after Hodgson had left Nepal, retiring first to Darjeeling and then returning to England in 1858.

It is difficult to ascertain from the published sources how often Hodgson himself actually set foot in the Hanuman Dhoka. Communications between the “Darbar” and the British Residency were more usually effected by means of messengers and emissaries called “munshis”. The most regular messenger was the Darbar’s head munshi, a post held between 1830 and 1846 by a Newar named Lakshmi Das.²¹ Because the posting of a British Resident to Kathmandu was one of the stipulations of the Treaty of Sagauli, which represented a humiliation for the ruling élite, the Resident’s presence was bitterly resented by the Nepalese court at first. In Hunter’s words, “No sooner was a resident accepted than the Queen-Regent and the Prime Minister began to try to isolate him as effectually as if he were non-existent. At first, indeed, a force of Nepalese soldiers was planted between the Residency and the capital to prevent any communication, and it was given out in the city that any one so offending shall be punished.”²² In 1818 the first British Resident, Gardner, reported, “my intercourse with the court is confined to the mere courtesies and attentions incidental to my public situation here”, while in 1832 Maddock, Hodgson’s predecessor, mentioned that contacts were limited to two public visits by the Resident to the Maharaja at the festivals of Holi and Dasain, and two public visits by the Prime Minister to the Residency.²³ The Nepalese often treated the Resident’s emissaries with an attitude that British authors enthusiastically characterised as “insolent” or “impudent”. According to one report from the Residency, “... when Mr. Maddock sent the Residency Munshi on a message of courtesy to the Raja, the Munshi was refused admission to the Prince’s presence.... He was kept in a remote part of the palace, and required to give his message to some people of no condition.”²⁴ Until 1837, the Nepalese court was dominated by the Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Bhimsen Thapa, and Hodgson was convinced that Bhimsen deliberately prevented him from communicating directly with the king. After Bhimsen’s fall from power, it appears that the Resident met the king in person more frequently. There are various references in Hunter’s biography to the Resident’s visits to the palace. Shortly after the “marriage of the heir-apparent simultaneously to two ladies”, for instance, Hodgson was summoned to a “private interview with the Senior Queen and the Raja”²⁵ and in June 1840 he and the “gentlemen of the Residency” were detained overnight in the palace. Hodgson recorded that he had been called “to the Darbar ostensibly for a mere formal visit”²⁶ which suggests that this was not out of the ordinary.

Why then did this polymath Hodgson, in all his voluminous writings, and during the 23 years he spent in Nepal, never describe in any detail the extraordinary built environment of the Kathmandu valley towns? I really cannot say for sure, but in lieu of a conclusion I offer two small observations. It is well known, and Hodgson himself made no secret of the fact, that he cohabited with a “native” (probably Kashmiri) woman, who

²¹ John Whelpton, *Kings, Soldiers and Priests. Nepalese Politics 1830–1857* (New Delhi, 1991), p. 41.

²² Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 102. ²³ Ramakant, *Indo-Nepalese Relations* (New Delhi etc., 1968), p. 80.

²⁴ Hunter (*op. cit.*, p. 183) quoting *Secret Consultations* No. 24, of 5 March 1833. ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

bore him children. This suggests a measure of sympathy with and understanding of the local culture that would not have been well regarded by the superiors of an officer of his standing during the latter years of empire. Hodgson also clearly loved Nepal, and in a letter written shortly after his departure in 1843, displayed at the Royal Asiatic Society on his centenary, he expressed the belief that he had earned the “gratitude of a nation”. It could be that the architectural backdrop of those 23 years in Nepal simply became a commonplace, a picturesque background to be drawn but not analysed, rather like the great mountains that frame the valley where Hodgson spent his prime.