

Taller than Thou!
Bhimsen Thapa speaks his heart out from Dharahara

Today, Kathmandu's architecture is little more than a glorification of the petty grocery shutters and a renaissance of the least meaningful and the most bankrupt of the cultural, intellectual and military periods of Nepalese history. Yet, ours was a society that stood tall, even while taking the worst beating from alien cultures and while our national pride and identity were pushed to the rock bottom. Except in our period, architecture in Nepal has always been an expression of sentiments held fondly by the society and it was never a thoughtless march to nowhere as we are sadly on. We have lost ourselves so much in the underwear mercantilism that even the shadow of Dharahara is little more than a disturbance to the sightscreen of the weak-end Cricketers at Tundikhel. Only one and half century ago, a short time for a culture that has gone through almost ten times longer period of respected standing, this shadow of Dharahara had loomed so menacingly large in Tundikhel, that even a Briton, from the likes of whose slap Nepal was reeling under shame, had been visually pressed to carry in his mind the imprint of the silenced but residual prowess of Bhimsen Thapa and his people. Back home, he was to recollect in his memoirs, *Sketches From Nepal*, that it was not only "astonishing" to the "natives", it had even forced him to call Dharahara with a portent byname. Its architecture had obviously astonished him rather than the natives and had even silently challenged his patriotism to draw out the phrase "Bhim Sen's folly"! This characterization of the Dharahara, which, at that time, must have looked doubly adamant with the emergency steel bandages that had had been applied to the long cracks cut through it by the massive earthquake of 1833 and as it awaited its queue for reconstruction, must indeed be seen as true tribute to the monument. For even in such a condition, Dharahara was telling its story, unaware that Bhimsen Thapa had gone. It was living its role of the monument; buildings are so named only because it is a momento of time and thoughts and because it perpetuates them in the minds of people associated with the event. Although the Sugauli Treaty is still a matter decried in some political speech-making, Dharahara, which said it all and continues cry it out, lies silently except, perhaps, when it catches a fleeting glance of the occasional infantryman atop the green truck of Simhanad Gana returning from a tour of duty in the borderland forests. At that moment and for that nationalist, Dharahara replays its monumental act as "Bhimsen's Dharohara"! Oldfield's "Bhimsen's Folly" is, then, relegated as an impotent phrase in a quick sell tourism literature and nothing more.

[Illustrate: Picture of Oldfield's Sketch of Dharahara]

Architecture should not be, at the very least, artless; they must be artful, must tell stories, carry feelings and deposit it in the minds of the onlooker. When this story draws the onlooker into a theatrical replay of thoughts, the building would have earned the meritorious place as a monument.

When the slave turned Emperor, Qutb-ud-din Aibak, wished to show the authority of Islam, he demolished over thirty Hindu temples and used them as readymade building materials to erect the tower, Kutb Minar. Its purpose was to cast “the shadow of God over the East and the West”, at least so he has inscribed. When Yusif raised the Giralda to even greater heights, the shadow might have extended over the Atlantic, but its purpose was to display religious ardor as well as to guide the ships in as a lighthouse of magnificence. But what both of them were doing was use architecture to firmly put across their own imperial might with a convenient ruse, the name of Allah! When Queen Lalit Tripura Sundari understood the nationalist in Bhimsen Thapa, she wished to make it public and Dharahara was built in 1826 to honor the Nepalese foray into East India Company territory. The impenetrable fort of Bhimsen Thapa, Nepal, had remained unbroken despite the Sugauli Treaty; symbolically portrayed by the battlements around it. A new Nepali word '*dharahara*' was born simply because the tall tower carried 'hara', the Siva in his *linga* form, atop it.

Moments of crisis or glory presented by a contrasting present and the immediate past have demanded creation of monuments as reminders. Historical monuments are expressions of such junctures in history. When the state orders such a creation, it would have felt a need to explicitly bring the crisis or glory out at the common man as a landmark. National monuments, such as Dharahara, are exercises at self-reassertion, self-aggrandisement and self-celebration, all at the same time.

Celebration of the ruler alone however cannot be taken as the celebration of the nation - for a monument to be truly national, it must not fail to bring the ruled also in the celebration.

A true monument brings a memory of a past into focus and provides a set for a psychic theatre, where the viewer is 'the actor' and 'the acted upon' at the same time. Both intellectual cognition and direct sensuous perception will come into play. Architectural loudness of a monument capitalizes on sensuous perception and also aims to overwhelm the cognitive aspects.

The need to take pride in the past is often generated by absence of elements of identity and pride in the present. This is particularly accentuated when the issue in focus is nationalism. In such a situation, rulers or designers of monuments look into the past in time and space for elements representing glory. Since the days of international contacts and communication, countries and rulers have borrowed ideas from more powerful nations near and far, for their monuments. Subjective judgment of the rulers and the reality of their power dominate the process of choice.

The gates, a restatement of the triumphal arches of the Romans, and the tower, the secularized version of the Muslim Imam's platform for calling the followers to prayers, have been two most commonly borrowed forms for national monuments worldwide. Aibak's Kutub Minar, Lalit Tripura Sundari's Dharahara and the America's Washington Memorial are monuments of a similar class. For Nepal of Bhimsen Thapa's time, with a little taste of militarism and no history of military monumentalism at hand, Nepal seems to have opted for the tower. Height and power, gate and arrival / return etc. are obvious psychic cognates.

But the fact remains that monumentalism can only be designed in, if the viewer is so disposed as to be excited by the issue being celebrated. When the viewer's cognates and the ruler's cognates differ, either on the issue in celebration or the element used to represent the celebration, monuments lose their monumental appeal and become physical artifacts of distraction. Thus monuments must be able to attract or arrest attention, but that quality alone would not be sufficient to make a monument of a building. Monuments must be able to excite the viewer into being a part of it at once- monumentalism is a feeling aroused in the man, the viewer.

Bhimsen Thapa's stewardship of Nepal lasted a most eventful 30 years of Nepal's militarism. With grand design, Nepal had marched out to expand the territory and at the height of this glory, he built his residence, the Baug Durbar or a garden palace in 1805 AD. But his early success were most tragically set back by the British ending in the humiliation of the 1815 Treaty of Sugauli. However, he was quickly able to get it behind in the court of Regent

Queen Lalitripurasundari, on whose permission, in 1826, Mukhtiar Bhimsen Thapa had the Dharahara erected. At home, his Simhanad Gan had provided him sufficient power to be explicit about his rightful pride in standing tall against the British. Amid such scenes the idea of Dharahara was born and the architectural concept of the monument reflect these crisis.

Mukhtiar Bhimsen Thapa had met the British squarely and Sugauli treaty had been forced on him. He also knew that the Mughals with a glorier past had met a worse end from the same foe. This contradiction, not with standing, his source for peer reference still came from the Mughals. Just as his palace and its setting, the ornamental garden, were based on Mughal architecture, Dharahara, soaring to a height of 250 feet, higher than the Kutb minar, seems to have drawn its design inspiration also from the minaretttes of Taj Mahal. Just a few years before, his private temple, Bhimbhakeswara had borrowed the dome from the same source.

The Muslim influence in Nepalese architecture may also be related to the arrival of the muslim craftsmen in Nepal earlier at the time of king Mahendra Malla. Trifoil and multifoil arches and 'bajra' plaster seem have entered into Nepalese architectural vocabulary then. Particularly after Bhimsen Thapa, the temple architecture seem to have got strongly influenced by the dome.

It must have been intended to symbolize his personal power and the power of his army, the loyal Simhanad Gan. For the man on the street and the army, however, it lived to symbolise the courage of Nepal to stand up to the might of the British Empire. An anti-theses of Nepalese architecture had come to symbolize the power of the statesman and courage of the state. For the following century, Dharahara and its environ provided the backdrop for monumental architecture.

For the Ranas and their prop the army, Dharahara provided the rallying point and reference. When Chandra Sumsher built his palace Singha Durbar, it formed the counterpole in his axial composition. The statue of Jung Bahadur Rana was put in the same street later.

Rana self-aggrandisement was however reflected through borrowed British colonial architectural expression.

When King Mahendra was visiting the Pragati exhibition with Pandit Nehru in Sano-Tundikhel, in 1958, both the Dharahara and the Khari-ko-bot (actually a ficus tree) were at hand silently telling their stories. And the idea of the gate, *the democracy memorial*, was born. King Mahendra ordered the construction of the gate at site marked by the intersection of the Dharahara - Singha durbar axis and the right angular memory line emanating from the *Khari-ko-bot*, the 'army pavilion' at that time. Both the site and the nature of the memorial, 'a gate to house the five' were specified by the king himself.

It would appear that the designer was more or less involved as a structural engineer only. The curvilinear roof outline and its thinness not only fail very badly to relate to the gateways in which Nepal could take rightful pride such as the Golden Gate of Bhaktapur but also, through its colours, reinforces the fragility of the composition. The archway, in total, is a composition in submission.

All the monuments above have an inward looking purpose. Dharahara tried to resurrect Nepal's honour at least in the eyes of the Nepalese following the Anglo-Nepal war and the Sugauli treaty. Singha Durbar reflected Chandra Sumsher's need to offer proof of his power through borrowed British architectural style, which had come to be synonymous with colonialism at time time. This left little doubt that the Ranas saw power in the British.

For a country, which had such a great tradition of architectural innovation and individuality, the Rana palaces display the shameful inferiority ridden state of mind of the rulers and they found little to inspire themselves from within. The friendly Malla palaces, so considerate of their people as even to tuck away the main entrance in shadows of access ways, could not be inspiring to the purpose of Ranas at all. In search of monumentalism, they ended up making a replica foreign country within their compounds. The monumentalism of their palaces played on achieving awe-ness and very effectively, reduced the common man to a non-entity. It must however be said that looking beyond the borders for inspiration have been a preferred

approach to national monuments, particularly as rulers are subject to peer influence at times of crisis or soul searching. Whether it be Emperor Ashok, who looked to Persia for inspiration to his monuments that were required to last a millenium, or be it Pratap Malla, who looked to 'paradesh bhasas' to show learned status in literary persuits, both are displaying the same human failings that the glitter of the far away is better than the gold at easy reach. Ashokan pride and nationalism required that the inspiration be creatively recast to posterity as its own. Only the Ranas did not see a need for such a recast!

Sahid gate is able to get some appeal of monumentality by its siting. For persons unaware of this historicity of the site, the monument may be seen as a meek element sitting in a roundabout. Neither through design nor through finish, it has any monumental quality - even the scale of the five heros of democracy in Nepal makes them bereft of their might.

As the gate itself was designed as accessible in the drawing board but ended up being a traffic roundabout, the loss of scale of the bust of martyrs may be explained. But the scale of the gate structure itself is unable to prepare ground for emotional theatre. Even the punitive equestrian statue of Jung Bahadur Rana is able to achieve that much. May be the failure of the design already signaled the impending fall of martyrs couple of years ahead of time.