

Of Road Widening, Helpless Trees and Stones From the Past!¹

Thirty full grown Eucalyptus trees lining a street about Shital Nivas come in the way of road widening and we gave them death sentence even as it was not the trees which had moved but the road that was widened. Twenty have been felled and ten are in the books. The decision makers among us prefer speed in wide roads flanked by siren wailing police escorts to a shaded tree-lined narrow street. Roads are for cars, of course.

A public pit water conduit of Bhatbhateni, possibly marking one of the twelve gateways to the ancient capital city of Maneswor and already dissected deep to house the neighborhood sewage pipe of modernizing Kathmandu unto Tukucha, is marked as a dangerous hole as wide as a traffic lane in the Road Department engineer's map and waits to be filled up and black topped, so that police escorts can wail flying past it at ease and save time from on the street to work desks of the development weary.

A stone sits forlorn with vehicular traffic turning past it from all sides, like a stone peg on asphalted street, as if without business to be there. But it is there and sits in the street in front of Tungal Ganesh as rightfully as does the three tiered temple of Naxal Bhagabati further down the street. Both have become stumbling blocks for the same road widening program, like the tree and the conduit pit. I was told by a member of the *Upabhokta Samiti* of the Bhagabati Temple Reconstruction that the temple's lowest roof should be raised to make clearance for trucks' right of way under it. Passage of trucks has priority over a pilgrim's *pradakshinapath* even around a temple deep from the past, such is our present day fervor of development.

But every place has a past, cultural memories only giving them depths of short or long pasts. This is simply because 'place' is a culture-sensitive term and one's act in space, although bound in the present time must always be informed by the past and also anticipate a future. Every present of a place has thus got to be in a constant and silent dialogue with the past of that place. Often, the issue that is taken up may go beyond the place and its immediate characters but the purpose is always to negotiate its present usage and its possible futures. Sometimes also the immediate character is oblivious to the utterances of the sentinels of the past. Of course, it may be no fault of anyone at all as the very cry is silent and simple ears do not hear silence - only mindfulness will enable one to hear such silence. But when the mindful ones hear it and make issue, the dialogue is no longer silent and voice is given to the silence, the utterances belong to an ancient public stone peg, conduit and image or a simple old tree in a public place and deserve to be everybody's business.

For Hadigaun, a Kirat town expanded into a capital by the Licchavi in first century AD, much time has passed since its first settlers erected the symbolic post, in wood, at its highest spot. If you visit Krishna Mandir square, it is not just the Krishna Mandir of the Haripura fame of pre-Malla era, now totally engulfed in the trunk of a not-less-than-one hundred and fifty year-old Pipal tree through which it would impress its history and

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holiness on you, but equally strong and even more ancient assertion may be made by a grey stone face of Bhairav that is housed in a small pyramidal stand in the middle of the street crossing there. So much of pure *thon*(rice beer) has been poured onto this Bhairav's mouth by his own command over such a long cyclic time that his sandstone lips and lower jaws have been washed away. This spirited stone image has such a powerful sense of belonging to the place, even owning it, that it has stood its ground against all the bustle of traffic and muscle of the road builders of the recent years. In the nineteen sixties, when the progress makers enabled lorries loaded with Dhobikhola sand to drive through Hadigaun, a nearby Vishnu had to give way and His temple was relocated to the side. But not this Bhairav, it was too powerful in the minds of the local gentry to be moved about. Bhuteswor Bhairav- Bhairav of the Bhuta, the past and the dead – is here to stay!

From Andipringga to Andigrama to Handigaun, from Maneswora to Haripura to Narah, ruling houses have risen and fallen in and around it. Handigaun's street crossings played host to its history by accepting many stones, temples and other markers and marks from each past era on the place and retaining them all the time. Unlike the Bhairav of Krishnamandir, sadly, many stones of Handigaon are not doing well in our present time. The Bhairav gazes south stoically towards the Dabali square, where the powerful automobile had forced many of the 'obstructions' out of the scene as it made its way. Several way-side public *pati* have been pulled down and the *Khat* garage of Tunaldevi cut and pasted into a nearby building. Some lesser gods have moved to the sides. A huge pillar of stone literally standing in the middle of the street then was pulled out and laid to rest on the Dabali horizontally. Today the presence of this pillar is hardly realized as it presents itself more like a raised edge of the Dabali. Flanked by the two early seventh century inscriptions, the pillar from the past has been a seat for the last fifty years. There is no reason now to speculate why at all the ancients had put up such stone pegs standing in thoroughfares and near places of state. Another huge long piece of stone, the stone with fish eyes, *Minbhairav*, has been lying face down at Nyalmalohn square, a short walk westwards. This long fish like witness to the festivities of Handigaun has been asphalted over for four years now and his huge eyes sealed for ever! Who is to bother that this image was the guardian of the causeway entrance to Handigaun and has important role to play and story to relate in the *jatra* of Tunaldevi? Why not you and me? It should be fitting for any member of a civilized society to remember the past, particularly when an intervention is made in historical public space and give voice to the silent dialogue with those who were there before us.

With a rather sharply jagged top, the short but stout tilted stone in the middle of the street crossing at Tangal has appeared like a broken *linga* to many an ardent early morning worshipper and the result of vermilion smeared look has apparently saved it from the Road Department's scrapper also so far. Its physical presence, and not any sort of superstitious reverence, seems to have made many a driver dodge it from a distance or screech to attention. But this 'stone peg' was not a *Sivalinga* to begin with and not even located in the middle of the road. Not that its absolute location has changed, it has been there in this very place for a long time, a long time indeed, for it may be as much as sixteen centuries ago that it was first installed. Successive widening of roads and changing position of boundary wall as open spaces are appropriated for public institutions

and private compounds through smart political acumen of our public land managers, have gradually made it 'move' to the center. The stone used to stand on the side of the street as if to provide a center point reference for the buses taking a turn in Tangal Ganesh, as the Ganesh marking the place Tangal, is popularly called.

This stone of Tangal Ganesh has been a place marker for as long as I can remember. In the nineteesixties, this is how far the siren red Arathoon bus came from Ratnapark and made its turn. Tangal was a desolate place then and road to Hadigaun much less trod. The linking of Tangal to Ratnapark by the bus route then speaks more of the development gains the leaders of Hadigaun of that time had the power to affect rather than the passenger volume. I remember going to Tangal bus stop to fetch and give company to my mother on her walk back after her weekly satsanga pilgrimage to bhajan and prabachan place of Bhagavatkazi Kuwar. The stone post used to give me company while I waited for the bus. Today with all the pedestrians and traffic jamming about Tangal and Bhatbhateni, this scene is indeed difficult to imagine. The high chassis Arathoon bus is now replaced by Number 26, but the turn is of the same arc, only the marker has moved to the center and has also become shorter through years of hits and scrapes of fenders. In the Lichchhavi period, possibly before the Lichchhavi palace of Managriha was built in the late fifth century AD, this peg of stone, *stamvitasila*, marked the entry to the gateways of Madhyamarajakula, the central palace of the Verma period of Lichchhavi Nepal. Inscriptions talk of many such standing pegs of stone about Handigaun and at least one of them, the one of Hadigaun Dabali, we have uprooted and laid to rest. In their heydays, they must have provided parking anchor to many an elephant or chariot of the visitors to the capital or the palace! With the Ganesh itself in threat, what could be expected for the stone next to it? Will we ever wonder why the Sriteen Bir Sumsher left it alone?

It was almost six months since a concerned Bhatbhatenite called me to tell that I should go and inspect the Dhungedhara on the road there before it is gone. He had seen workmen skinning the side walls of the pit there and thought the road extension works will have this heritage pit conduit filled and erased out for ever. As it is, last winter the conduit had gone dry and the only source of water for many around the area that had appeared perennial was not to be, its grassland watershed sealed in grey concrete of development. As a person interested in history and ready to consign such memories to written records, I was a hope for the caller. Anyone, interested in saving it as an entity for posterity truly should have called the Roads Department or Archaeology Department for action, but our caller knew how futile such a course of action would be.

Elsewhere in the world, with global warming and its serious fallouts, things are coming around to check up with ancient wisdom. Of the *panchatatwa*(five basic elements), the earth and heat were *mithuna*(couples) and lived together! The sun and the earth have moved to the center stage again, like in Vedic days. The Vedic learning had been that from Brahma arose the sky, in sky is the air expressed, in air is the heat realized, heat presents the water and from water arises the earth. And where does Brahma get expressed? It was known from the knowledge of the knower. It was also learnt then that clouds form in air, from clouds comes the rain, in rain the plants grow and from plants are animals nourished – simple truths liable to be forgotten really. The interaction of air,

heat and water that formed clouds and rain was understood as central to the development of plant life, on which animal life depended wholly for its nourishment! An interactive relationship between the animate and the inanimate world formed the crux of Nature system. Today, talking nature, ecology and sustainability and linking it to your professional sphere of work has assumed growing significance as the climate change threatens the very survival of western civilization and its followers in globalization. Green is the byword, a word too simple to be a jargon. So we were gathered at Istanbul to talk about Green city in Ecocity World Summit 2009, just about the time Copenhagen Summit on Climate Change was warming up for Obama's visit! I was quite surprised to learn there that in Istanbul, there were two thousand six hundred and fifty trees, older than 300 years, as listed heritage - and this despite the legendary historicity of Turkey with its built culture going as far back as 8000 years. In Kathmandu city, some of our oldest planted trees are to be found in and about palaces created by the Rana - the clump in Jungbahadur's Thapathali and Ranodip's Narayanhiti may be the oldest there is; outside the town the forested hillocks of Mehpi, Svayambhu and Pashupati and the *bhandarkhal* of the Malla palaces may have older stock of trees. The Thapathali clump of Salla (Pine) trees on the Kumari hillock offers its beauty to many who line up daily to await their turn at the crossing on the Thapathali bridge. We have just laid waste some of our old Masala (Eucalyptus) trees along the Maharajgunj Baluatar road and the lesser Dhupi (Juniper) trees outside Nepal Rashtra Bank await their turn. This is road widening a la urban development Kathmandu, while we cry and crib about climate change and dispatch outsize delegation with prime minister at the head to bargain for spoils of climate change and carbon credit and carbon trading. What we forget is that saving a full grown tree could give us more benefit than any guilt money put into our begging bowls by the culprits of global warming.

Poor societies like us need to make active moves towards reversing global warming through pursuing and developing lifestyles opposed to the western/global lifestyle. Trees on earth and moisture in ground will give us greater gains in managing carbon and ecological and ecozoic continuity. Letting the trees do their carbon fixing while providing home to birds, letting the rivers and water bodies populate with fish, frog and snakes, while we relearn to live with other life forms, *chal* or *achal* or *charachar* is a better recipe for development aimed against global warming than attending Copenhagen and supporting reckless road widening for the automobile, which has all but decimated the western civilization and ours too!

If we listened to the silence of the stone peg, the temple, the trees and the stone conduit in the pit along the road from Shitalniwas to Simhadurbar, we may build a brighter path to the future of Kathmandu, Nepal and the World at large. Anyone for the preservation of the trees and spirited stones from the past?