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The Date of the Chandi Murals in the Hanuman Dhoka Palace: Where History and Faith Meet [1]

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I

Setting the Stage

The paintings under investigation come from Mohan Chowk in the Hanuman Dhoka palace, and they are neither dated nor signed. Additionally, there are no literary, historical and oral accounts giving information about their existence. In the absence of this information, how does an art historian find out when they were painted and by whom? In this paper, I go one step further like a criminal investigator as to why they were painted.

In a criminal investigation, the following factors are taken into account: time and location of the crime, modus operandi, type of weapon used, motive and the identity of the perpetrator. Although an art historian is not a criminal investigator, he does set out to gather three sets of information to aid his investigation of the work of art in question, namely 1) the subject matter, 2) the style in which the work is executed, and 3) the place where the work is found. Because the Mohan Chowk paintings are comparable with the works of the 19th century, we can confidently place them in that era, although it would be good to narrow them down to a specific year. They are mural paintings, and we know exactly where they are located. But we do not know their patron and their purpose. These are the challenges to which I will propose my solutions here.

The Palace Under Attack



Fig. 1

A palace stands on the right hand corner of a sprawling landscape (fig.1, right side). It is fortified with high walls, built to thwart enemy attacks. Nevertheless, the enemy soldiers manage to gain access to the palace from the south side and mount a fierce attack. The Kolavidhvamsin soldiers, brandishing swords, gain control of the palace unopposed, even though they are inferior in numbers and strength to those of the kingdom they are attacking.[2]

A man is seen fleeing from the palace, riding on a horse. This is King Suratha, the ruler of the kingdom, who has chosen to flee rather than fight the Kolavidhvamsins, for reasons I will explain later. This is the scene from a wall painting in Mohan Chowk of the Hanuman Dhoka Palace in

Kathmandu, Nepal. The paintings are executed on the walls of a room where Rajendra Bir Bikram Shah, king of Nepal, may have spent his last days. I will come to this later. But first, information on the location of the paintings is in order.

II

Mohan Chowk

Mohan Chowk is a small courtyard tucked away within the Hanuman Dhoka palace complex, the seat of the Malla Kings for a long time. After the Mallas, who were deposed by the Gorkha King Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1769, the palace complex was used by the Shahs for ceremonial purposes. In one of the rooms of Mohan Chowk the murals from the *Chandi* are painted. The Chowk also contains one major stone sculpture from about the 8th century of the Lichchavi era of the boy Krishna killing a cobra, called Kaliyadamana.[3] So even today the courtyard is considered sacred, and it is therefore kept hidden from public view.[4]

III

Devi Mahatmya

The last room on the second floor of Mohan Chowk is painted with scenes from the *Devi Mahatmya*, popularly known as *Chandi* in Nepal. The antechamber, through which one must enter the room where the *Devi Mahatmya* murals are painted, contains an additional number of paintings of the major Hindu gods Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha and Krishna. Because we are interested in connecting the *Chandi* murals to King Rajendra Bikram Shah, I will leave the individual paintings for later, although they might have been painted during his time.

The *Chandi* murals are especially important because they tell the story in a narrative fashion. The subject matter of the Mohan Chowk paintings is the *Devi Mahatmya*, a section taken from the *Skanda Purana* that narrates the exploits of Goddess Durga and her glorification in the form of *Shakti*. Given the subject matter of the theme, a narrative style here is not only suitable but required to tell the story in a flowing manner. The story culminates in a mighty battle between the Goddess and the demon Mahishasura.

It is an epic story that is depicted in the paintings, one that incorporates stories within stories:

According to the frame story which begins the *Devi Mahatmya*, King Suratha was overthrown by his own ministers who colluded with his enemies. Under the pretext of going hunting, the king entered a dense forest to hide. Quite by accident, however, there in the forest he entered the ashram of Sage Medha, where a man named Samadhi, a Vaisya by caste, was already sitting (fig. 2, left side).



Fig. 2

Samadhi and King Suratha were in similar situations. Samadhi was disowned by his family even though he was kind to them and provided lavishly for them. Immediately the king and the Vaisya Samadhi became friends and took their problems to Sage Medha, who then narrated the greatness of the Goddess Durga—how she was invoked by the gods following their humiliating defeat and how they subsequently gained their power back by the Goddess' grace. The Rishi's purport in narrating the story of *Devi Mahatmya* to these men who have lost their fortunes seems to have been to instill in them the greatness of the Goddess. Faith in her will bring back their happiness. So in essence, she is the goddess to be invoked in times of difficulties.

In his narration, the Rishi paints a picture of the cosmic struggle for power between the gods and the demons, each representing as the diametrically opposing force.



Fig. 3

In the beginning, before the creation, there was nothing but water. Everything was covered with water. An ocean in the cosmos stood still. In the middle of this vast ocean slept God Vishnu on the bed of Naga Ananta, the endless serpent. From Vishnu's navel a lotus stalk rose and on top of it Brahma sat absorbed in meditation.

Two demons—Madhu and Kaitabha—appeared from nowhere and attacked Brahma.[5] Intent on bringing the god down from the lotus seat (fig. 3) they shook the lotus stalk. Brahma was taken by fright. Brahma's prayers finally woke Vishnu, who fought with the demons for five thousand years until they were killed.[6]

The Rishi further recounted the story of the appearance of an exceptionally powerful demon, Mahisasura, who could take the form of either man or buffalo and who had received a boon from

Brahma that no man could kill him. He attacked the heavens, and managed to defeat the army of the gods led by Lord Indra.



Fig. 5

The defeated and humiliated gods, led by Brahma and Indra, go to Vishnu and Shiva for help (fig. 4). When Vishnu and Shiva hear their plight, they instruct the gods to invoke the Goddess residing within them.[Z] In the following scene (fig. 5), all the gods gather in heaven to invoke the Goddess to manifest herself. The Goddess is not separate from the gods. She is their energy. As energy, she resides in them. To make her manifest, the gods form a giant circle and project their *shaktis* in the center. The gods' energies appear in the form of laser beams and gather in the center. These million points of light coagulate into a ball of fire from which emerges a beautiful young goddess in all her majesty with 10 arms, carrying a different weapon in each of her hands. She rides on a fierce lion that roars like thunder.



Fig. 4

When she appeared before them, the gods were awestruck and overjoyed. They stood praising and saluting her with their hands folded (fig. 6). This is the birth of the Goddess, even though she was already to this point existing in an unmanifested form.

“Now that you have invoked me to appear, how can I help you?” the Goddess asked the gods.

When she heard the sad plight of the gods, she went into action to defeat Mahisasura, the buffalo demon. A fierce battle then ensued between the armies of Mahisasura and the Goddess Durga (fig. 7). As the Goddess killed the armies of Mahisasura, a river of blood flowed. Finally, the buffalo demon Mahishasura is slayed by the Goddess (Fig. 8).



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

After narrating the story of the Goddess, Rishi Medha instructed the king and the merchant to worship *Mahamaya*, the great Goddess of compassion and delusion. Under the guidance of the sage, the two men did *puja* of the Goddess, and their luck returned. Messengers from the household of King Suratha and of merchant Samadhi came to invite them back with the full honor and privileges they deserved. Both of them received what they had lost: The king got his kingdom and the merchant got his property and family.

This sudden U-turn in these men's lives was seen as a result of the grace of the Goddess *Mahamaya*. At the end of the *Devi Mahatmya* text Suratha and Samadhi returned home and lived happily ever after. The story has a fairytale tone to it, and the story's happy ending seems to have appealed to a great many Goddess worshippers. And because Nepal is a home to the Goddess, the *Devi Mahatmya* has remained there to be immensely popular.

Why mention this story here? As I will demonstrate, this story has a direct connection to the person who lived in the room where the scenes of the *Devi Mahatmya* are painted. I argue that it was Rajendra Bir Bikram Shah who lived in the Mohan Chowk portion of the Hanuman Dhoka Palace, and consequently it was he who commissioned the murals of the *Chandi* to be painted there.

Rajendra Bir Bikram Shah



Fig. 9

King Rajendra Bir Bikram Shah (fig. 9) was born in the Hanuman Dhoka Palace and was crowned as king in 1816 at the age of three after his father Girvan Yuddha Bikram Deva Shah died. Because he was a child king, his mother, Lalit Tripura Sundari, served as his regent and ruled Nepal until her death in 1832. Upon the passing of his mother, Bhimsen Thapa, his prime-minister, became regent. As regent, Bhimsen Thapa kept the young king in utter isolation, allowing very little freedom of movement. In all likelihood, the king was a prisoner in his own palace. When the young king came of age, however, he took the power from the prime-minister and ruled the kingdom without any outside intervention. Exercising his authoritative power, the king removed Bhimsen Thapa from the post of prime-minister. Shortly thereafter the youngest son of Rajendra's elder queen died. This gave the king the opportunity to take his revenge on Bhimsen Thapa for all the restrictions that the latter had imposed on him; the king had Bhimsen Thapa arrested on the charge of poisoning the prince.

After a number of palace intrigues that led to the bloody Kot Massacre of 1846, the general who was involved in the Massacre took the power into his own hands and became the prime-minister. This person was Jung Bahadur Rana. After usurping power, Jung Bahadur Rana quickly sent the king and his wife, Lakshmidivi, into exile in Varanasi, India. But the king did not stop attempting to regain his rightful throne. When Jung Bahadur learned of Rajendra's plans, he acted quickly. He forced the king to abdicate in favor of his son Surendra Bir Bikram Shah. When the king refused to comply with Jung Bahadur's demands, Jung Bahadur sent a special battalion of his trusted army to arrest him. The captured king was brought to Bhaktapur in 1847, and was placed there where he remained under house arrest. Does this sound familiar? If we compare the life of King Rajendra Bikram with that of King Suratha in the *Devi Mahatmya*, we find striking parallels in the situations and circumstances.

V

The King Returns

This is where the story and details get even more interesting. First, the king was banished to Varanasi by his own prime-minister as was King Suratha in the *Devi Mahatmya* story. Second, the king was brought back to his kingdom by the special forces of his country. The difference is that King Suratha returned with full honor, whereas King Rajendra returned as a prisoner.

History books mention that the king was arrested by the special forces of Jung Bahadur Rana and was brought to Kathmandu. The king is said to have been placed under house arrest in the Bhaktapur Palace.[8] Historians are silent with regard to the last days of the king. Did he perish there or was he moved to another location? This is an important question, and the Mohan Chowk murals seem to shed light on it. According to my theory, as demonstrated below, King Rajendra Bikram, after a brief stay in the Bhaktapur Palace, was brought to the Hanuman Dhoka Palace and placed in one of the rooms of Mohan Chowk until the latter's death. And these paintings, in my opinion, were executed under the guidance of the deposed king who desperately wanted to get his kingdom back with the help of the Goddess Durga.

In the eyes of Jung Bahadur Rana, Rajendra Bir Bikram became a threat because of his growing desire to take the throne back. So Jung Bahadur, a shrewd prime minister and general, would have done everything in his power to keep the king under his control—both under his watchful eyes and within the reach of his hands. Because the royal throne of Nepal rested in Basantpur, it was considered the major hub of activities during this time. And thus Bhaktapur, located some 12 miles away from Basantpur, might have been seen as distant and out of reach. As a result of these considerations, Jung Bahadur might have thought it necessary to keep the ambitious king within his grasp. What better place would there be than Basantpur?

Although historians are silent about Rajendra Bikram's last days,[9] it is my theory that the king was moved to Hanuman Dhoka from Bhaktapur to be close to Jung Bahadur Rana just prior to Jung Bhadur's official visit to England and France in 1850. He would not have left an ambitious king unattended for a year while he was traveling in Europe. Jung Bahadur must have feared the possibility of palace intrigues, coup, revolt and hostile takeover during his absence, especially in light of the Kot Massacre. So Jung Bahadur must have taken all the necessary measures to keep Rajendra Bikram under his iron grip as he was preparing for his visit abroad. In all probability, Rajendra Bikram was covertly moved to the Hanuman Dhoka Palace for safe keeping between 1847 and 1849.

Referring again to the palace where he was born, the king might have made a formal request to Jung Bahadur to decorate the room

in which he was living with the images of Hindu gods and goddesses. The motivation for his desire to do so is clear; he wanted to be in the presence of the Goddess, the granter of power and success. If Rajendra was unable to get back his power by military might, then he could at least resort to divine intervention. Of course Jung Bahadur had no clue as to what Rajendra Bikram was up to. And how could Jung Bahadur say no to such a humble and righteous request for religious images right before his overseas travels? Religious sentiments in Nepal at this time must have been high given the large number of donations and patronage which were recorded as being given at this time to temples and religious organizations. With the approval of Jung Bahadur, without whose authorization nothing could be done, the work must have begun as soon as the king took residence in Mohan Chowk.

Why was the mural of the *Devi Mahatmya* painted and not that of any other stories—religious or otherwise? While Rajendra Bikram and his wife were exiled in Varanasi, India—the center of Hinduism—he had time to devote himself to the study of sacred texts. Although we do not know exactly what he did or what texts he may have read, we can speculate with confidence that he must have spent a significant portion of his time in devotion to the gods, especially the Goddess. We know of a number of donations he made to the temple of Guhesvari, one of the major seats of the Goddess in Kathmandu. That he was a devotee of the Goddess was by no means a secret.[10]

The stories contained in the text must have resonated with Rajendra because of his parallel circumstances with the mythical king Suratha in the *Devi Mahatmya*. After hearing the story of King Suratha in the *Devi Mahatmya*, King Rajendra may have very well identified himself with the legendary king. As King Suratha was able to regain his kingdom back by the grace of the Goddess, Rajendra may have likely believed that the Goddess would bestow upon him a similar grace.

So what better way to honor the Goddess than by bringing the stories of the *Devi Mahatmya* alive in his *puja kotha* (home shrine), where he could perform his daily worship in front of the images of the Goddess Durga? Getting a daily *Darshan* of the Goddess was empowering for the king. Seeing the image of the Goddess is called *darshan*. Speaking from a practical point of view, this is a two-way street. Not only does the devotee see the image of the Goddess, the Goddess sees the devotee. Between these exchanges of glances, something important happens—transformation of some sort. The devotee might gain extraordinary power or insight from the *darshan*. [11]

After finishing the painting, the king might have called a priest to perform the *Avahana* ceremony where the goddess is invoked to descend on the image of her. This makes the image active and potent. The king then would have worshipped the image every morning as instructed in the text of the *Devi Mahatmya*, keeping in mind how King Suratha regained his kingdom by the grace of the Goddess after losing it to his enemies.

A deliberate choice to paint the stories from the *Devi Mahatmya* in a room in the Mohan Chowk at a time when the king had lost all his powers gives me every reason to believe that the murals were commissioned around 1855 by the deposed King Rajendra Bir Bikram Shah. Whereas King Suratha in the *Devi Mahatmya* got his kingdom back, King Rajendra Bikram died in 1881 without regaining his throne, despite possibly commissioning the work.**

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Footnotes

1. I express my sincere thanks to Ian Alsop, asianart.com's editor, for his editorial help to bring this article to its present form. I also am indebted to my senior graduate students at Claremont School of Theology where I am an adjunct professor. It so happens that I am teaching a course called "Visions of the Divine Feminine: Goddess Traditions in South Asia," using the *Devi Mahatmya* as a primary text. Because the students have read it they are able to see many forms, metaphors, symbols and issues in the story which a native like me take for granted. Their insights have helped form my views about the goddess. For this opportunity I thank my entire class of eleven students. I especially thank Jamie Mills, Michael Reading and Sinnamon Wolfe for their many contributions to the class and to this article.

Finally, a very big thank you is due to a man who set me on the path of studying Nepal's art history. That man is Dr. Pratapaditya Pal. When I received a Fulbright grant in 1971 to study art history in the U.S., I was in contact with him in California. It was he who advised me to study Nepal's ancient tradition of mural painting. So during my hunt for mural paintings of the Kathmandu Valley I was led by the late Chandra Man Maskey to discover the Mohan Chowk Chandi mural.

2. *Devi Mahatmya*: 1.5. For English translation of the text see Thomas B. Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and A Study of Its Interpretation*. Albany: SUNY, 1991, p. 32.

3. Slusser, Mary Shepherd, *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley, Vol. 1*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982, pp. 194, 249, 259-361.

4. After Hanuman Dhoka palace stopped serving as residence for Nepal's rulers, the Mohan Chowk has been closed. Although the Hanuman Dhoka palace, as a museum, is open to the tourists today, no one is allowed to step into the Mohan Chowk courtyard. It has always remained private and hence a sacred ground for centuries. The room that contains these mural paintings has been locked with a huge padlock called *Bhote Talcha*. After many months of letter writing and meetings with the authorities, I received permission from the then King Birendra Bikram Shah in 1971 to photograph the murals. The doors were flung open for the first time since the earthquake of 1934, and I had the first glimpse of the room since that time. I was shocked to see the amount of dust and cobwebs that covered the rooms. It was a *deja vu* of an Indiana Jones movie. It took a couple of days for a crew of four to remove the dust and cobwebs before I could begin photographing. I am the first person to have gained access to the Chandi murals, and I consider myself fortunate. So no other person to the best of my knowledge has photographs of the Mohan Chowk Chandi murals in the Hanuman Dhoka palace.

5. According to the *Devi Mahatmya* text, the demons arose from the dirt in Vishnu's ears. See *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi Mahatmya and a Study of Its Interpretation* by Thomas B. Coburn. Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1991, p. 36, 1.50.

6. My version of the story is a summarization of the *Devi Mahatmya*; it is by no means a line by line translation of the text. Just as the artist has used a certain freedom of expression to illustrate the story, I have taken the liberty to paraphrase the text for narrative effect.

7. [You are] the cause of all the worlds; although possessed of the three qualities (*gunas*), by faults you are not known; [you are] unfathomable even by Hari, Hara, and other gods.

[You are] the resort of all, [you are] this entire world that is composed of parts, for you are the supreme, original, untransformed Prakriti.

Devi Mahatmya: 4.6.

See *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and a Study of Its Interpretation* by Thomas B. Coburn. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 48.

8. Whelpton, John. *A History of Nepal*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 247.

9. Although some believe that the king died in Bhaktapur palace where he was initially deposited after his arrest, evidence provided by the Mohan Chowk mural indicates otherwise.

10. The fact that Goddess Taleju, a form of Durga, is a tutelary deity of Nepal (Nepal Rastra and hence *Rastradevi*), Goddess Durga suggests that she must have played an important role in the life of King Rajendra. That he was a devotee of Durga is made clear by the donations of a bronze lion statue and a Simhadhvaja he made to the temple of Goddess Guheshvari, followed by a royal order that brought the fourteen *Kusles* and *Damais* to play Gujarati and Panchabaja music at the temple. Another piece of interesting information, albeit not directly related to Rajendra, is that a sword of Guheshvari was bestowed upon a legendary king of Kathmandu. This sword was later given to King Jayaprakasha Malla, and with the help of this sword he was able to regain his throne after having lived in exile for twelve years. See "Goddess of the Secret" by Axel Michaels in collaboration with Nutan Sharma, *Wild Goddesses in India and Nepal* edited by Axel Michaels, et al. Berlin: Peter Lang, 1996, p. 328, 329, 339, 340. This is not merely a perception but living proof that with the grace of the Goddess Durga one could regain a lost kingdom, or a throne in Rajendra's case.

11. For a discussion of this concept see *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* by Diana L. Eck. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

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