An authentic historical evidence for the existence of an Asokan (may be even pre-Asokan) stupa is provided by the edict of Asoka engraved on his Nigligha Pillar found in the Nepal Tarai, which records the existence of the Konakamuni Stupa and its enlargement by Asoka to twice the original size. Though this stupa has not yet been identified, it could not presumably be different in appearance and proportions from such early Indian stupa as the Great Stupa at Sanchi, the nucleus of which is also attributed to Asoka. The Piprahawa Stupa on the Indo-Nepal border, which on the basis of its inscription is Asokan, if not pre-Asokan in date, is known to measure 116 ft. in diam. and more than 21 ft. high with a battered top and thus compares favourably with the Great Stupa at Sanchi which is well-preserved measuring 120 ft. in diam. and 54 ft. high. It is well-known that the Piprahawa Stupa yielded an incribed casket containing the body relics of Lord Buddha. Two brick stupas have been recently excavated at Tilaurakot representing the site of Kapilvastu in Nepal Tarai. The larger stupa, measuring 52 ft. in diam. and 7 ft. high, with projections in the four cardinal directions, is of Mauryan date with a pre-Mauryan nucleus, while the smaller one, measuring 26 ft. in diam. and 3 ft. high, belongs to the Sunga period. Tradition attributes five stupas at Patan in the Kathmandu Valley to Asoka, and, like the Stupas at Sanchi and Piprahawa two of these are also hemispherical in form characterised by a large diameter and low height which is an index of antiquity. There is also a tradition that a daughter of Asoka named Charumati married a local prince and led a retired life in a monastery built by her at Deopatan, which is designated after her as Charumati-vihara popularly called Chabel, having a complex of a Buddhist stupa and monastery. The veracity of these traditions, however, can only be confirmed by scientific excavations, which are yet to be undertaken.

The holiest stupa in the Valley, known as the Swayambhunath (diam. about 60 ft., ht. about 30 ft.) which is situated on an isolate hill and is considered ageless according to pious belief, is also hemispherical in form with a flat truncated top, resting on a low circular plinth, and essentially resembles the early Indian stupas in form and appearance. The find of two early Lichchhavi inscriptions attests the antiquity of the site and the Stupa itself appears to have been referred to as..........bhu-chaitya-bha.........in a mutilated inscription of Amsuvarman (c. A.D. 603-20) found at a place called Gokarna in the Valley. A doubtless record of the Stupa's existence, however, occurs in a Buddhist manuscript of the 11th century which illustrate conventional stupa, unlike the one at the site, and labels it as Nepale Swayambhu.
Chaitrah. The (oft-renovated) metal-plated portion surmounting the dome (anda) comprises of (1) square harmika painted with the eye-motif on all the four faces, (2) a series of 13 tapering circular rings representing the thirteen heavens with a torana (tympanum) at the base carved with figures of the Dhyani Buddhas, (3) amalaka, (4) chhatra, and (5) gajura or bell-finial. The Gopala-vasamavali attributes its authorship to king Vrishadeva, great-grandfather of Manadeva, who is described as Sugata-sasana-pakshapatii in the Pasupati Inscription of King Jayadeva II. In a late Sanskrit manuscript text called Devamala, preserved in Nepal, it is stated that king Vrishadeva converted a Siva temple into a Buddhist chaitya. Be that as it may, there is every probability that the Svayambhu was built during the early Lichchhavi period as a simple chaitya of pristive Hinayana form with a harmika and chhatravali and was subsequently embellished with shrine-projections and developed crowning members under the impact first of Mahayana and then of Vajrayana and Tantrayana. At present there are nine shrine projections enshrining images of the five Dhyani Buddhas and four Taras which must have been introduced after the tenth century under the influence of Vajrayana, while the cult of Adibuddha with which Svayambhu is popularly identified is a still later development. The compound of the Svayambhu Stupa is cluttered with votive chaityas, images and shrines which were put up in different ages, beginning with the Lichchhavi period. Among the shrines the most notable is the pagoda-shaped temple enshrining an image of Hariti, worshipped as Ajima, which is a late replacement of an original image, regarded by one scholar to be as old as circa 2nd century A.D. belonging to the Gandhara art of the Kushana period.

While most of the monumental stupas of the Valley are practically smaller replicas of the Svayambhunatha with minor variations, the Bodhnath or the Khasti Chaitya which vies in holiness with the Svayambhu, is larger in size and has a different plan and design. It stands on three rectangular terraces, each with re-entrant angles, which are embellished with turrets. A flight of steps on the south leads to the top terrace which supports the large hemispherical dome (anda), round which are arranged niches with Buddhist deities. The crowning members above the anda are similar to, though larger than those of the Svayambhu, with this difference that the representation of the thirteen heavens here is pyramidal. Further, the shrine-projections, enshrining the five Dhyani Buddhas are shifted here from the anda proper to the lowermost terrace. In its essential plan and design this stupa resembles those of Paharpur in Bangladesh and Borobodur in Java, both belonging to circa 8th century and anticipated by the Stupas-shrine at Lauriya Nandangarh in North, Bihar, dating from the early centuries of the Christian era.


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The Bodhnath contains not less than 108 sculptures of which the majority are of Tibetan character. Forty-seven images are represented in the yab-yum and at least ten depict the Siddhis of Tibet including Milras-pa Mar-pa Naro-pa and Guru Padma sambhava all wearing the peculiar Tibetan costume. Bodhnath also contains purely Indian gods of the Vajrayana, such as Shadakshari Lokesvara, Vaik, He uka and Yamaaka. Attributed by the Vamsavali to king Siva deya (c. A.D. 588-613) this stupa is obviously later than the Swayambhu which is also attested by its mixed pantheon largely pertaining to the developed phase of Tantrayana.

While discussing Buddhist art in Nepal we have indicated the immense popularity of chaitya-worship in the land, which is really a relic of the Hinayana stage when Buddha was worshipped symbolically. Initially representing the parinirvana of the Master the stupa or the chaitya became the symbol par excellence of the Master himself. Originally the chaitya was a simple structure unadorned by human figures but in course of time under the impact of Mahayana it began to be embellished with niched figures of the Buddha. In due course, with the profusion of the Buddha pantheon under the influence of Vajrayana, the figures of Dhyani Buddhas and the Bodhi attvas and even their Saktis found a place on the various tiers of the chaityas. In Nepal we have countless chaityas of all the three types, of a size varying usually between 2 and half to 8 feet, encountered in the streets and lanes, in and around the Buddhist shrines and in the numerous courtyards of the Bahals, now inhabited by Buddhist householders. These chaityas are either votive, i.e. put up as an act of piety, or funerary or commemorative and the practice of erecting them is still in vogue.

The earliest of these, dating from the Lichchhavi times, are smaller in size and usually bereft of human figures and have a distinctive form and design with a well-shaped hemispherical dome (anda) and are made of a high quality sandstone which takes a smooth polish. Invariably the dome has an aperture at the top to receive the crowning members which are lost and are now replaced by a very late monolithic piece of different variety of stone showing the design of the harmika crowned by the usual 13 rings often carved with toranas at the base. With this common denominator, the Lichchhavi chaityas have many varieties and types. The smaller or the simpler chaityas stand on a square plinth (medhi) of one or two receding tiers with a projection in the middle for accommodating a niche design on all the four faces. The medhis are thus triratha on plan and rest on one or more plain substructures of similar design. The niches are shallow and empty and are framed by pilasters or patra-latas (scrolls) crowned by a kirttimukha. Sometimes the decoration is extended to the flanks of the niches or to the middle portion of the substructure which are embellished with scrolls, kinnara,
kalahamsa or lion or even chaitya designs so typical of the Gupta-Vakataka and early Chalukyan arts of India of 5th to 7th centuries A.D. The depiction of lions at the corners with two bodies and a common head also follows the characteristic Indian pattern as seen on the Gupta temple at Sanchi and Tigawa. The chaitya-motif used as a decorative design shows a replica of the simplest chaitya with a hemispherical dome resting on one or two circular medhis and surmounted by a harmika and a finial of three to five receding stages, crowned by an amalaka often accompanied by a vijapuraka and embellished with fluttering banners and garlands.

On more ornate examples of the actual chaityas, the number of medhis is increased to three or four and rarely even five tiers and there is a multiplication of the niche design, normally to three on each face. Even with multiple tiers of medhis, the basic form of the majority of the chaityas continue to be square of the triratha or cruciform pattern with a niche-projection in the middle. It is only in highly ornate examples, such as those encountered in the Chabel complex, that we find the lower tiers of medhis square and the upper tier circular or twelve-sided, embellished with a string of the familiar ornamental designs sometimes adding a garland of chaitya-window motif on the uppermost tier. But the surmounting dome or anda is invariably a plain hemisphere devoid of any ornamentation.

The Lichchhavi chaityas, hitherto discussed, obviously pertain to the pristine Hinayana form and are obviously earlier than those embellished with figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas under the influence of Mahayana. While dealing with the Buddhist Art in Nepal we have already discussed the figurative type of Lichchhavi chaityas and seen how the four-faced chaitya from Dhvaka Baha containing four identical figures of Buddha in the top niches and those of padmapani, Vajrapani, Buddha and probably Maitreya (Buddha) in the lower niches are stylistically and palaeographically assignable to the 7th century and are followed by similar but more developed figurative chaityas from Gana Baha, Patan, and Thamel, Kathmandu, attributable respectively to the 8th and 9th centuries. These indeed are typical of the later Lichchhavi chaityas and are followed by the early and late Malla chaityas and stupas, loaded with flamboyant vegetal and geometrical decoration in the rococo style and embellished with figures of Dhyani Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Taras and sometimes with anthropomorphised forms of such devotional objects and concepts as music, dance and ritual equipments, under the impact of Vajrayana and Tantrayana.

The Buddhist monastery in Nepal, asin India, is modelled after the domestic household on plan and is a quadrangular structure with an open courtyard in the middle and a group of buildings on all the four sides, of two or more storeys. Invariably the shrine faces the entrance
and the buildings on the remaining three sides are used as library, community hall, kitchen, refectory and storage room. Normally the living rooms are on the upper floors and the storage rooms are on the ground floor. The monasteries are tile-roofed structures made of brick with liberal use of timber for roofs and ceilings, doors and windows, pillars and architraves and brackets and struts. Some of the monasteries in Nepal Valley show doors and windows with beautifully carved tympanums and contain pillar and architraves and more particularly struts and brackets, embellished with elaborate figures and relief carving. The finest and oldest surviving wood-carvings are seen on the Salabhanjika struts of the Rudravarna-mahavihara, Patan, stylistically datable from circa 13th century. The door-tympanums of the Chushe Bahal and the Mushi Bahal at Kathmandu adorned with Buddhist deities in a setting of elaborate Kala-makara and dragon designs crowned by kirttimukhas, assignable to circa 15th century, are notable for their artistic execution. The former monastery also contains struts carved with labelled anthropomorphic figures of nakshatras (constellations).

The Lichchhavi inscriptions mention a large number of viharas to which liberal donations were made by kings and commoners. Some of them appear to have been royal foundations such as Sri-Manavihara which was evidently founded by king Manadeva. Sri-Rajavihara appears to have been founded by king Dharmadeva, father of Manadeva (5th cent.) and was probably augmented by Amsuvarman (early 7th cent.) who is known to have patronized both Hindu and Buddhist shrines and establishments. Sri-Sivadevavihara was evidently founded by king Sivadeva and was later called the Hiranyavarna-mahavihara after it was renovated and gilt by king Rudradeva. The last is one of the best maintained viharas with a gorgeous pagoda-shaped shrine of three metal-plated receding roofs with excellent metal figures and carvings some of them dating back to circa 11th century.

The Kathmandu Valley and particularly its twin cities, viz. Kathmandu and Patan, teem with Buddhist shrines and monasteries which are inhabited by householders ever since king Yakshamalla forced the Buddhist monk by a royal decree to take to married life and to accept the Hindu caste system. The Buddhist shrines and temples of the pagoda as well as the sikhara type stand poll-mell, rubbing shoulders with the Hindu shrines. While historically the origin of some of them may date back to the Lichchhavi times, often as a part of the Lichchhavi viharas mentioned above, they have undergone wholesale and repeated renovations and none of them is earlier than the 15th century and only a handful may antedate the 16th century. Among the pagoda-shaped temples noteworthy are the temple of Machhindranath in Kathmandu and Patan and that of Haritior Ajima at Swayambunatha, besides the central temple of Lokesvara at the Hiranyavarna-mahavihara discussed above. Among
the sikhare-shaped temples the most remarkable is the Mahabodh at Patan, built of Telia (polished) bricks by one Abhayaraja during the 14th century. Modelled after the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya, the complex comprises a pahchayatana temple standing on a lofty ornate platform with a principal sikhara surrounded by four subsidiary ones. While the main temple enshrines an image of seated Buddha, there is a subsidiary shrine dedicated to Mayadevi. Both the temples are lavishly decorated with rows on rows of terracotta figures of Buddha and decorative reliefs of considerable artistic merit.