Chapter 1

From Darkness to Light

Antiquity through the Malla Golden Age

Ever immersed in the study of Vedas *and* Sastras
Ever engaged in fire oblations
Ever devoted to the worship of gods and goddesses
I, now enter the playhouse

—Bhupatindra Malla[1]

Nepal's theatre springs from a deep engagement with society. Today, as in ancient times, essential classical and native legends constitute the stories behind much of Nepal's theatre. Spiritually motivated ceremony offers the basis of some of the most theatrical of Nepal's performed culture. Such mythic and ritualistic foundations become springboards for creativity that free Nepali artists to express in their unique ways that which is quintessentially Nepal.

Sandwiched between its much larger and more powerful neighbours, China to the north and India to the south, east, and west, Nepal has long been a meeting ground for the peoples of central and Himalayan Asia who speak Tibeto-Burmese languages and the Aryan peoples of the southern plains who speak Indo-European languages. These disparate cultures have influenced all spheres of Nepali life, just as Nepal has conveyed its culture across the Himalayas. A history of invasions, warfare, conquest, and despotism has combined with rugged, isolating geography, to make Nepal home to peoples of widely varying ethnicity, language, and religious belief and artistic practice.

[1] Bhupatindra Malla, *Paruramopakhyana-nataka* (1713), translated by Ramawatar Yadav as *A Fascimile Edition of a Maithili Play* (Kathmandu: B. P. Koirala India–Nepal Foundation, 2011), 257.

The Himalayan region that is now Nepal may have been inhabited for hundreds of thousands of years, as evidenced by Puranic stories and Paleolithic artifacts (Ram Nivas Pande, 1997: 118; Shiva Raj Shrestha, 2001: 5). Paleolithic tools unearthed in the Kathmandu Valley near Budhanilkantha attest to human presence there 300,000 to 40,000 years BP ('before present') (Shiva Raj Shrestha, 2001: 5). Weapons found give evidence of Neolithic groups dwelling there at least 9, 000 years ago (Corvinus, 2007). Little remains to suggest the artistic and religious expression of these Stone Age residents, although the oldest religion of the Kathmandu Valley seems to be related to pre-Aryan animistic, solar, and lunar cults (Regmi, 1960: 11; Shaha, 1992: 30). Ancient and early medieval history of Nepal is impossible to pin down with guaranteed certainty, even with the advent of written records, because sources tend to be literary rather than historical works primarily. Various chroniclers use different names for rulers and overlap dynasties, making absolute timelines impossible to ascertain, even for scholars of historical materials.

Of ancient nomads and settlers, the Gopalis are credited with having been the first 'politically organized' rulers of the Kathmandu Valley (Tiwari, 1996: 25), or what was previously known as 'Nepal Valley'. Today's ethnic Gopalis declare that their ancestors came with Lord Krishna from Dwarikapur in India, were also known as Gwala or Gwar, meaning herdsmen, in Nepal, and that eight successive Gopali kings ruled the area. Some sources suggest that the original Gopalis were actually descendants of the buffalo-herders (*mahisapalavamsa*)—the Ahir or Abhir—who came from the south. Others surmise that the Ahir defeated the final Gopali king and ruled the area briefly before being defeated by the first Kirata king (Diwas, *Gopali*, 2009b: 27–30).

As history was communicated orally and embellished by storytellers, the truths about origins and successions, as well as artistic expression, are lost in the fog of time. While descendants of the original Gopalis continue to enact mythical stories and legends in song, dialogue, and dance, it is difficult to know the actual sources of present-day folk and religious performances, since they are so deeply influenced by the cultures of subsequent Nepal Valley inhabitants. Gopalis, for example, perform *Jhinhihri Pyakha,* or the twelve-year dance drama, in the valley village of Kunchhal (Diwas, *Gopali*, 2009b: 139). While elements of this dramatic dance presentation could have originated in ancient times, some aspects of it exhibit certain characteristics in common with the performed rituals of later dynasties, suggesting that it is only a few hundred years old.

Though we focus primarily on the inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley as the centre of what became Nepal, there were many other confederations

within today's national borders, and numerous principalities and chiefdoms to the east, west, and south. One of the early dynasties near Nepal's present-day southern border with India was the Sakya clan, centred in Kapilavastu. Their most renowned scion was Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 563–483 BCE), a prince who rejected the world to search for the meaning of existence and became known as the Buddha, giving the world Nepal's most notable human contribution.

Recorded history in Nepal Valley begins with the Mongoloid Kiratas who migrated from the east some time during the fifth or sixth centuries BCE (Shaha, 1992: 8). Kirata kings overthrew the Gopalis and the Ahir and ruled the area for over a thousand years, developing Patan, the oldest of the Valley's surviving cities, in the second century CE. There were between 26 and 32 Kirata kings, and one of them ruled when Siddhartha Gautama Buddha lived and travelled the area; another Kirata ruler, King Yellung/Yalambar, is mentioned in the *Mahabharata* (approximately fourth century BCE); still another Kirata king dominated the Valley when the great Buddhist Mauryan emperor Ashoka and his daughter Charumati visited Buddha's birthplace in Lumbini, Nepal, in the third century BCE (Amatya, 1991: 195). Charumati established what is believed to be the oldest extant Buddhist *stupa* in Nepal Valley at Chabahil. The Kiratas worshipped nature, ancestors, and 'the phallic symbols (*linga*) as representing their paternal ancestry' (Tiwari, 1996: 26), yet were accepting of Buddhism, which flourished in the region during their reign, leading to a 'good ethnic and religious mix and set the process of Hindu-Buddhist religious ethnic harmony into motion and this was later to become the most important cultural feature of the valley society' (Tiwari, 1996: 32).

From generation to generation, the Kiratas passed on their mysterious and antique traditions. Possibly emanating from ancient predecessors, their oral legends as well as songs and dances communicated convictions about origins, existence, and bridges to the divine. At auspicious times of the year and in accordance with their agrarian lifestyle, the Kiratas' present-day descendants—the Rais and the Limbus—perform worship and belief systems that may have come to them from the most ancient of their ancestors (Diwas, *Rai*, 2009a: 144).

By the third century CE, Indo-Aryan Licchavis had conquered the last Kirata king and pushed his people to areas east of Nepal Valley. The Sanskrit-using Licchavis had entered the valley from northern India sometime earlier, perhaps between the fourth and second centuries BCE. The ornately carved ancient temples of the Licchavis no longer remain, yet extant sculptures, coins, and inscriptions testify to Licchavi aesthetics during the fifth century CE (Pradhan, 1996: 49). Historical chronicles attest to the Licchavi tolerance of Buddhism, as is evidenced in their reconstruction of the dome of Swayambhunath, another

of the most ancient Buddhist stupas in Nepal Valley. The Licchavis also ushered in formal Hinduism and the *caste* system, which endure in Nepal to this day. The oldest Hindu temple in Nepal, Changunarayan, bears Nepal's oldest surviving inscription, which memorializes Manadeva I (ca. 464–505 CE) of the Licchavi dynasty (Shaha, 1992: 12). In such relics we see evidence of Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Buddhism, and veneration of royalty. We also find images of goddesses erected by the Licchavis by 505 CE, such as the Palanchok Bhagavati, 55 kilometres northeast of present-day Kathmandu.

The Licchavis were succeeded by the Thakuri dynasty, which lasted from approximately 600 to 1200 CE (Shaha, 1992: 39). Thakuri rulers claim descent from Rajputs fleeing the Muslim invasions of Rajasthan. They settled in the hills and valleys just outside of Nepal Valley, especially around Nuwakot. Thakuris further developed Nepal Valley, although their energies were primarily focused on keeping at bay lesser warrior dynasties such as the Palas and Tirhutiyas from the south and the early Mallas from the west.

Gunakama Deva Thakuri (949–994 CE) established the city of Kirtipur as the capital of Nepal Valley. At its centre, a large wooden house was built out of a single tree and called Kasthamandapa (from *Kasstha mandapa* or 'wooden shelter' in Sanskrit). Eventually, the capital took its name from this house, shifting from Kantipur to Kathmandu (Kasthamandapa was destroyed in the 2015 earthquake). Gunakama Deva also initiated the Indra Jatra (*Yenya*) festival, which was based on the *indramaha*, an ancient Indic royal ritual mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, and the *indradhavja* (the feast of Indra), an ancient Indian festival closely related to theatrical performance, 'in which the king himself appeared on stage' (Toffin, 1992: 80). The month in which the Indra Jatra takes place,

> Badra is symbolically a period of contestation and license in the Kathmandu Valley. The demons who have apparently dethroned the gods dance in the streets (*lakhe pyakha*) and threaten the universe. The people gather in certain parts of the city and improvise cosmic scenes, *khyalah*, which target a political or religious personality, a rich merchant or a well-known person. Viewed in this light, we may wonder if the raising of Indra's banner does not express the strength and authority of the king over disrupting forces. The demons disappear and criticisms cease at the end of the festival. (Toffin, 1992: 81–82)

Now the largest religious street festival in Nepal, the Indra Jatra maintains many of the characteristics established by Gunakama Deva in the tenth century CE. Masked dancers still portray deities and demons, and an enormous ceremonial pole is still raised and paraded through the streets to propitiate Indra and to protect Kathmandu.

Subsequent Thakuri rulers, such as Shivadeva III (1099–1126), constructed wells, canals, and bathing tanks. Shivadeva may also have established the great Buddhist Boudhanath *stupa*, and gilt in gold the roof of the great Hindu temple Pashupatinath (Shaha, 1992: 43). Throughout this period, indigenous seasonal festivals and religious rituals were highly theatrical, though we know few specifics about them.

The Mallas

The Mallas succeeded the Thakuris in 1200 CE and ruled central Nepal for more than 500 years. The Mallas had arrived from the area around Gorakhpur, India, during the first and second centuries CE and initially settled in the basins of the Gandaki and the Karnali rivers, west of Nepal Valley. The Hindu Malla kings generated great wealth by improving agricultural techniques and increasing trade. They constructed or embellished most of the extant ancient architecture of note in Nepal Valley, including the numerous multi-roofed, pagoda-style Hindu temples, known as *mandir*, of which Pashupatinath and Nyatopola are the most important. They repaired and augmented Buddhist *stupa*s in the Valley, the most significant being Boudhanath and Swyambunath.

There were many autonomous principalities within the Valley and the surrounding foothills, and the independent kings vied with one another to construct the most artistic temples and cultivate enduring works of art. To this end, the Mallas nurtured the artistic skills of the Valley's Newar people so that woodcarving, metalwork, and sculpture of stone and terracotta flourished during their time. Nepali artists were even sent to Tibet and China to paint elaborate temple frescoes and to teach metal casting and *repoussé* there. Arniko (1244–1306) was the chief artist among 80 Nepalis sent to work on the Sakya monastery in Tibet. Their style became the dominant influence on medieval Tibetan art (Shaha, 1992: 48).

The Newars, or literally, Nepali people ('a colloquial or Prakrit variant of Sanskritized or classical *Nepala*'; Malla, 1982: 2), are attributed with being the 'indigenous' people of Nepal Valley. It is difficult to ascribe an alternative specific geographical origin to Newars, since various scholars locate them migrating to the Valley from north of the Himalayas, while others trace them from southern India. Newars proudly claim descent from the Sakyas, among whom the historical Gautama Buddha was born. Still others suggest that the 'beginning of Newar civilization is estimated to be around the sixth century BCE when the Kiratas, Kolliyas, Salmaliyas Sakyas, Lichhavis, and Shresthis combined' (Bista quoting Surav, 1967: 18). The Newar language, Newari, is

Tibeto-Burman in origin, but utilizes many Sanskrit terms and concepts (Regmi, 1960: 38–39). Sanskrit had been the dominant language of the previous dynasties, but the Mallas also adopted and utilized both the Tibeto-Burman Newari and the Indo-Aryan Maithili languages, sometimes allowing these languages to intersect, overlap, and merge. For example, the Sanskrit word *terai* actually means 'foothill', but in Nepal has come to mean the entire region of low-lying plains and lands along Nepal's southern border with India. The Nepali word *madhesh* more clearly describes this, yet has come to mean the ethnic peoples who inhabit that area.

As a crossroads between China, Tibet, and India, Nepal was a melting pot of various religious influences. As such, the religion of the Newars has both Hindu and Buddhist attributes, is *tantric* in its manifestations, and even displays connections to pre-Buddhist Bon animism. Most of the Malla kings honoured both the Buddhist and Hindu sections of their populace, sponsoring elaborate religious activities for the education and entertainment of their subjects. Religious processions, costumed liturgical dances, and history, mystery, morality, and miracle plays were frequently presented. Religious spectacle offered a major pastime for the entire community, and royals invited commoners to see these dances and dramas at the *dabali*—raised platforms constructed within the walled compounds of their palaces to serve as open-air theatres. Such *dabali*s are still found throughout the Valley, attesting to the predominance of community performance (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Patan Durbar Chok (royal square) *dabali* (raised performance platform) facing the windows of a Malla palace built in the 17th century, 2012.

Source: Author.

While plays from India were often presented in classical Sanskrit or the more vernacular Prakrit, these languages were unintelligible to many in Nepal, spurring the demand for more colloquial drama. Malla kings had close relationships with kingdoms near their Gorakhpur homeland. Along with kings in Assam and Bengal, Malla kings were influenced by the rich cultural traditions of Mithila, whose capital was Janakpur (now within the borders of Nepal). When independent kingdoms in these areas declined or were overrun, academics and poets from Mithila took refuge in central Nepal; 'considerable numbers of fugitives, among them scholars of repute, left Bihar and Bengal and found a new home in or around Kathmandu' (Yadav quoting Lienhard, 2011: 5). Through their 'superb scholarship and mellifluous poetry' (Choudhary, 1976: 79), as well as matrimonial alliances, these Maithili speakers significantly influenced the literature of Nepal, and Maithili became the court language and the 'medium of culture and instruction of the elites' (Choudhary, 1976: 81). This prompted a 'golden age' of dramatic literature in Nepal:

> A cultural flowering, fostered by contemporary Malla kings of the Nepal Valley, came about under the influence of the immigrants and visitors, reaching its acme in the late Malla period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (Brinkhaus quoted in Yadav, 2011: 4)

Sanskrit poet and Maithili lyricist Jyotirishwar Thakur (1290–1350) wrote the earliest extant drama in Nepal to use the Maithili language. Most famous for his encyclopedic work, *Varna Ratnakara*, in his two-act drama, *Dhurtasamagamanataka* (The Meeting of the Knaves, 1320), the songs are in Maithili, while upper-class characters speak in Sanskrit, and lower-class characters speak in Prakrit (Jha 2003: 179). This comedy revolves around the contest between a religious mendicant and his disciple over a lovely courtesan, whom the Brahmin arbitrator keeps for himself (Majumdar, 1960: 471).

Perhaps the most influential of the Malla rulers was Jayasthiti Malla (r. 1382–1395) who conquered the Valley and brought it under his centralized power. He also expanded the borders of Nepal beyond what are its national boundaries today. A devout Hindu, Jayasthiti Malla, enforced a strict Hindu code of law and furthered his agenda of Hindu orthodoxy by sponsoring the writing and presentation of plays with plots taken from stories in the great Indic epic *Ramayana* and written in the Maithili language. Sanskrit plays gave way to Maithili plays in the court of Jayasthiti Malla.

After Jayasthiti Malla's death, the Valley splintered into the three major kingdoms of Kathmandu, Badgaun (now Bhaktapur), and Patan, and the region

split into many lesser and far-flung kingdoms. The ensuing years saw warring kings attempting to subdue and conquer the three significant cities and the many principalities outside the Valley, such as Tanahu, Gorkha, Lamjung, Dolakha, Pharping, Nuakot, Banepa, and others.

Amara Malla, king of Kathmandu from 1529 to 1560, was a religious man. He is said to have 'patronized the dance of the goddess Harisiddhi and also revived other religious dances such as Mana Maiju, Haricoka Devi, Pacali Bhairava, Navadurga, Bhadrakali, Kankesvari, and Harisiddhi' (Shaha, 1992: 72). Clearly, Amara Malla found the expression of religion through theatrical means compelling or useful. During his reign, the play *Vishva Malla* (1533) was written in the Maithili language.

Jagajjyotir Malla, king of Badgaun from 1614 to 1637, is reputed to have been a great patron of music, poetry, drama, and dance, employing many Maithili poets and performing artists at his court and authoring at least three and possibly as many as seven plays (Yadav, 2011: 7) in the Maithili language. His *Muditakuvalayasva* (1628) presents a history of the Malla kings, while *Hara Gaurivivaha* (Wedding of Lord Shiva and Gauri, 1629) and *Kunjaviharinataka* (Drama of Lord Krishna, date unknown) dramatize the lives of Shiva, and of Krishna, his consort Radha, and his followers—the Gopis or cow-herding maidens. According to Sylvain Levi, scholar of Indian theatre, at least two of these dramas 'approach the standard of the plays of Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti in their wealth of melody and imagery' (quoted in Shaha, 1992: 92). Especially of note is the picturesque dialogue between Krishna and the Gopis that describes nature and the seasons. Further, Jagajjyotir wrote 88 chapters of commentary (Malla, 1982: 66) about the *Natyasastra*, the great Sanskrit treatise on theatre, titled *Sangita Chandra*, in which he discusses staging conventions, the repetitive nature of dialogue, and the connection between religion and performance. This treatise seems to have 'inaugurated an authentic period of creativity in poetry, prose, and drama' (Malla, 1982: 40). Jagajjyotir does not appear to have been significantly influenced by the Christian missionary Father Grebal, the first European to arrive in the Valley. It would be over 200 years before the first European woman was to enter Nepal.

Jagajjyotir Malla's grandson, Jagatprakasa Malla, who reigned in Badgaun from 1643 to 1672, wrote 'the first full-length mono-lingual Newari drama', *Muladevasasidevopakhyana*, in 1662 (Malla, 1982: 40–41). Also attributed to him are the Maithili dramas *Ushaharana* (Kidnapping of Usha), *Naliyanataka* (Drama of Naliya), *Parijataharana* (Stealing Parijat), *Prabhapatiharana* (Kidnapping of Prabhapati, 1656), *Madancharita* (Life of Madan), and

Malayagandhininataka (Drama of Malayagandhini), with specific dates of composition being mostly unknown. Writing primarily in a refined Maithili prose, one of his verse sections in *Malayagandhininataka* praises King Shrinivasa Malla, his contemporary, in Patan:

> You are eulogized in all four corners of the world, O King,
> There is none like you in all the three worlds,
> You are as pure as the water of the Ganges, and the garland of pearls that decorates an elephant's neck
> You are like Cupid himself presiding over the sixty-four phases of the moon.
> Your moonlike handsome face is so comforting
>
> (Choudhary, 1976: 83)

Siddhinarasimha Malla, king of neighbouring Patan (ca.1618–1661), was a talented Maithili poet and dramatist of at least eight plays (Yadav, 2011: 7) who initiated the *Kartika* around 1640 CE to venerate Krishna and Vishnu. This week-long ritual dance drama (*Katti-pyakha*) depicts events from the *Harivamsa*, perhaps the latest part of the *Mahabharata*, or a *Purana* in its own right. Central to the Newar population, it is still performed every autumn in the Patan Durbar Square as a living tradition harking back nearly 400 years. Named for the month in which it is performed, Kartik (mid-October to mid-November), the *Kartik nach* (or *nak*) is performed immediately after the end of the brutal monsoon season, reaching its climax two nights before the full moon.

The *Kartik nach* performance takes place on the elevated platform of the ancient *dabali* in such a way that the king could watch from his 'golden' window while thousands of mostly Newar Nepalis crush together surrounding the *dabali* below to see the action.[2] Those gathered then stand through eight evenings and many hours of symbolic and stately dancing by mostly masked players, as well as some clowning around by comic characters. The evening performances begin at dark. Mustard oil torches placed at the four corners of the *dabali* light the stage, while a single torch flames at its center. Drummers and other musicians sit facing one another on the stage. The only scenery is a hollow pillar made of cloth and wood from which the heroic avatar shall emerge.

The *Puranic* story depicted in this highly theatrical dance drama focuses on a five-year old prince, Prahlada, whose unshakable devotion to Vishnu brings about the death of the demon, Hiranyakashipu, who is Prahlada's father. As

[2] This information comes from author's personal observation of the event and locally conducted interviews, 2011.

midnight approaches on the final night, the crowd becomes agitated and excited. At the point in the long evening when Vishnu's avatar, the heroic half-man, half-lion Narasimha, finally reaches the stage, the crowd roars and pushes towards the *dabali*. The waiting audience members already know the story: that the demon thinks he is invincible, as he had previously won a boon from the gods that he would not be killed by a man or an animal, that he would not be killed inside or outside, that he would not be killed on the earth or in the sky, in the night or in the day, by the living or the non-living. In his arrogance, and operating under the belief that no one can retaliate despite his vile actions, the demon king tries to murder his own son in his defiance of the boy's devotion to Vishnu.

For the chilling scene depicting the cosmic battle between good and evil, Vishnu manifests himself as the half-man, half-lion Narasimha, so that he is neither man nor animal and can thus fulfill the conditions of the boon. At the play's climax, Narasimha picks up the demon and carries him aloft to the gates of the palace, so that he is neither inside nor outside; Narasimha puts the demon on his lap, so that he is neither on earth nor in the sky; and at the stroke of midnight, so that it is neither day nor night, as the crowd roars with frenzied excitement, the nails of the man-lion dig into the chest of the demon and rip out his heart, killing him spectacularly. Neither the living nor the non-living kills him, because the nails of a body cannot be classified as either. Some versions state that Hiranyakashipu cannot be killed by hand or by a weapon, and nails being neither, they serve the purpose. In addition to being about the power of devotion to Vishnu, this drama reminds those watching that Vishnu is all-present, all-knowing, and all-powerful, and that no matter how clever we may think we are, God is always smarter.

This play is performed in the Durbar Square in front of the royal palace of Patan, the nerve centre and spatial core of the old city, as it has been for more than 375 years. The Newar belief is that anyone who performs or listens to this *leela* (play-story) of the Narasimha and his destruction of the evil king and his gang, and also hears the story of the meritorious Prahlada, will reach the abode of the Lord. Being part of the crowd during these long evenings of dance and drama, especially during the final fierce battle, is a thrilling experience of the power of performance to act out and express common cultural beliefs in ways that unite a particular contemporary group of people with the memories and legacies of their past.

Siddhinarasimha Malla had commissioned this religious dance drama from his tutor and court performance manager, or *natyacharya* (scholar of