

# THE PROFANE NAMES OF THE SACRED HILLOCKS

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In analysing and interpreting the non-Sanskrit words encountered in the Sanskrit inscriptions of ancient Nepal (A.D. 464-879), four interrelated hypotheses have provided the main conceptual framework in my work (Malla, 1981; Malla, 1983a: and Malla, 1983b):

- a. the non-Sanskrit words in the running text of Sanskrit inscriptions provide valuable evidence for prehistoric tribal-Hindu ethnic contacts;
- b. mostly, these words belong to the Tibeto-Burman languages, basically, to proto-Newari from which the presentday Newari has developed;
- c. in the course of the Hindu political-cultural domination by the Licchavis (A.D. 464-879), the Thakurīs (A.D. 880-1200), and the Mallas (A.D. 1201-1769), the tribals were Hinduised or Sanskritised; and
- d. in the process, different species of tribal toponyms were Sanskritised, including the name of the country itself.

In the present paper we present some more evidence in support of our hypotheses. We look at the names of the hillocks, this time. The hillocks, like the water-sources, the rivers, and their confluences, are susceptible to veneration as sacred cult objects. The sanctification of the hillocks and mountains is a form of the veneration of high places. Mountains have been considered a seat of gods in most religious mythologies of the world. Mount Tabor in Palestine, Mount Fuji in Japan, Wu Tai Shan—the five-peaked mountain in China, Mount Kailash in South Asia, Chomolungma-Mother Goddess of the Valley, and Mount Olympus in Greece are each held in reverence in myth and religion of the land. Some of them enjoy a regular pilgrim traffic to, around, and up the mountain, especially to the summit. The mountain-cult often leads to the construction of religious structures,

either on mountains themselves as elevated sanctuaries, or on their foot, slopes, or in the immediate neighbourhood. The four most revered Vaiṣṇava shrines of the Nepal Valley are all situated on the hillocks or on their foot. The most celebrated Buddhist shrine—Svayambhū—too is situated on a hillock. Because of such high religious-cultural potency of hillocks and mountains, their names are equally susceptible to linguistic and cultural annexation by organised and formal religions.

Most names of the hillocks in and around the Valley may have been just graphic or descriptive in origin, with little or no implications in terms of religious semantics. As evidence for this hypothesis we submit a list of 16 toponyms (in Appendix A)-- all found in ancient Sanskrit inscriptions of the Nepal Valley and its environs, dated between A.D. 506-705. These toponyms have some common formal features. For example, *co*, *gum*, *gum-co*, or *rhi-co* as the common morphemic finals in the nominal compounds. A Sanskrit-Newari lexicon, *Amarakośa* dated NS 501/A.D. 1381, defines the Sanskrit word *kūta/śikhara* (peak) as *gum-co*. Some Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal have comparable cognates, e.g. Kaike has *chwang*, Khaling has *cong*, and Jirel has *cu-cog*. For hill or mountain, modern Colloquial Tibetan has *ri*. All these data indicate that the 16 ancient toponyms are actually names of the hillocks--forested or otherwise. Secondly, they are all nominal compounds of Tibeto-Burman roots/stems. Thirdly, they represent early forms of Newari. In support of these contentions, we submit a list of hillock names in modern Newari which clearly retain the roots/stems *co*, *gum*, or *gum-co*.

Caṅgu, Icaṅgu, Sāmhagum, Jāmāco (Nāgārjun). Phūco, Theco,  
Holco, Chilañco, (pāhāno), Miguco, Nātalāco, Palākhaco (Palāñcok)

Our hypothesis that most non-Sanskritic toponyms in ancient inscriptions of Nepal are Tibeto-Burman and proto-Newari seems to have disturbed some historians of Nepal. For example, Regmi has recently written:

Whether the son-Sanskritic names are of the Mongolian (*sic*) family of languages or they belonged to a different family? What is the standard by which to judge their character? The mere fact of familiarity and identity both in the positive and negative sense is not enough. One must judge them by the structural pattern and meaning of the linguistic form concerned. But here none of the words we have

mentioned show characteristics of Mongolid strain by structure or meaning.

(Regmi, 1983:265)

This categorically negative conclusion of the noted historian of Nepal is worth analysing for several reasons. In the first place, Regmi doesn't seem to be aware of the distinction between the two English words *Mongolian* (i.e., of Mongolia, a country in Central Asia) and *Mongoloid* (an anthropological abstraction, a racial type). Secondly, he is sadly confused between Mongolian-Mongolid (race) and Tibeto-Burman (language-family). Thirdly, he talks about "Mongoloid strain" in structure or meaning, or about *the* structural pattern and meaning of *the* linguistic form concerned without identifying either in anyone of the nearly 250 non-Sanskrit words found in ancient inscriptions of Nepal. Finally, it was Regmi himself who, in a paper entitled "The Antiquity of the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley"-published in 1948 in the *Journal of the Bihar Research Society* Vol. XXXIV: pp. 49-59, wrote the following:

We have definite linguistic and archaeological proofs for the existence of (the Newars) as early as the fifth century A.D. by a reference to the Newari names in the inscriptions, which are maintained intact up till today. The various names like *gum-vihāra*, etc., are pure Newari derivatives. The language of inscriptions being Sanskrit, it may be inferred that Newari was thrown into background as up till now it is.

Why the vintage Regmi suffered a volte-face so late in the day is something that need not detain us for the moment.

## II

The second part of the paper is focussed on the Hindu-Buddhist annexation or transformation of the tribal Tibeto-Burman/Newari names of the two most sacred hillocks of the Valley. The most sacred Buddhist monument-site of the valley is located on the hillock of Svayambhū, (west) as it is so-called today. The hillock of Caṅgu in the east is the most holy Vaiṣṇava monument-site in the Valley. In an inscription located in the site, dated NS 492/A.D. 1372 the hillock of Svayambhū is called *sā-mha-sikhara* (cowbody-hillock). Tibetan sources call this monument *siṅg-kun*. *Sā-mha-guṃ* is also attested in the Sanskrit text of the famous 14th-century Nepalese chronicle--the *Gopālarāja-vamśāvalī* (folio 26b:line 2). The loaded Sanskrit

name *padmācala-śikhara* occurs in an inscription dated NS 533/A.D. 1513, to be followed by *Gosriṅga* and *Gopuccha* in other texts. The process of the transformation of the Tibeto-Burman *Sā-mha-guṃ* (a hillock resembling a reclining body of the cow) into *Padmācala*, *Gosriṅga*, and *Gopuccha* is explained in a Buddhist text. In *Svayambhū Purāṇa*-- a version dated NS 778/A.D. 1758 (folio 2b: lines 1-3, verses 49-52) the following explanation is offered:

O Jinaśrī, Listen. There is a mountain called *Gopuccha*, situated in Nepal, along the northern Himalaya. With the passing of each aeon, the name of the mountain also underwent changes. In the Satya Yuga, it was called *Padmagiri*. In the Tretā Yuga, it was named *Vajrakūṭa*. In the Dvāpara Yuga, it was known as *Gosriṅga*. In the present Kali Yuga, it is called *Gopuccha*. The inhabitants of Nepal have their own name for it, and they call it *Sā-mha-guṃ*.

Clearly, the religious conception of the sequence of four ages has provided a handy framework to hold and justify each of the Sour names, assigning by implication the non-Sanskrit name to the most inferior of the four ages, i.e., the Iron Age. In the Śrī-Lankan *Māhāvamā*, too, the island is said to have four different names in four ages. This extract from the Buddhist text is a most powerful piece of evidence to show how the profane or mundance tribal toponyms are annexed and sanctified by the ideologues of organised and formal religions.

In many ways, the Buddhist text offers a far better explanation for the name of its monument-site than the Vaiṣṇava commentary on the hillock name *caṅgu(m)*. In the *Gopālarāja-vamśāvalī*, there is a curiously belaboured passage--doubtlessly an interpolation--which seeks to interpret the Vaiṣṇava hillock-name:

Śrī Viṣṇutīrthanārāyaṇa, founded initially by King Viṣṇugupta with the desire to conquer enemy's lands, is called *Ye-Caṅguṃ* (*Ye* = south). Then *Caṅguṃ Nārāyaṇa* was founded because there was famine. Then there was affluence. This is called *Yo-Caṅguṃ* (*Yo* = west). The Viṣṇunābha was founded to produce wealth (gold). There was a shower of gold among those who founded it. This is called *Yañ-Caṅguṃ* (*Yañ* = North). Then Śrī *Caṅguṃ Nārāyaṇa* was founded by those longing for offspring. This is *Wañ-Caṅguṃ* (*Wañ* = East). These four are called *Caṅguṃ*.

The *Gopālarāja-vamśāvalī* folio 30b: lines 1-3

The chronicler gropes for a culturally convincing explanation for the hillock-name, but clearly fails to do so. In Mānadeva I's Cāngu Inscription, dated Śaka 386/A.D. 464, the hillock is called *dolādri* (Skt. *dola* = a swing, hammock; *adri* = hillock, a swinging hillock, a hillock which looks like a hammock, or an unstable hillock). Vajrācārya (1973:19) has offered a convincing interpretation of the Newari name for the hillock where he wrote, "In Newari the name *cāngum* means a hillock which looks like a swing." Here again Regmi writes a gloss of the word in which the second sentence contradicts the first one:

How the name *Chāngu* came to be applied is not known. It is obviously a translation of *Dolādri*, on which Nārāyaṇa takes his abode. The *Dolā*, i.e., swinging is an act of Viṣṇu in the rainy season for a seasonal frolic.

(Regmi, 1983:3)

However, later on in the same book, Regmi hastens to make a confessional remark. The last sentence, in particular, reminds us of *Nepāla Māhātmya* (II:3)

The present name Cāngu is still obscure in meaning and all that we have said is just a guess work. I have found that my view agrees with that of Dhanavajra in interpreting the meaning of *Chāngu*. One meaning offered is that there was a forest of *Champaka* trees which the Newaris call *Chaṅsiṅ* (sic).

(Regmi, 1983, Addendum)

### III

A less colourful transformation of the tribal hillock names is exemplified by a classic in modern scientific cartography. In the most reliable maps of the Nepal Valley, all hillock-names have been "Nepalized"-- annexed to Nepali forms, so that all Tibeto-Burman *co*-s (hillock) have been conveniently converted into somewhat absurd Indo-Aryan *cok* (Skt. *catuṣka* = a square, a courtyard) See Appendix B. A hillock known as *theñco* in A.D. 506-633 (TB *theñ* = lower *co* = peak) has been converted into *Thānkot* (*thān* = a place, after Skt. *sthāna*) *koṭ* = guardroom, a police station, a military courtyard) after the rise of the Gorkhali military power in the 18th-19th century. Compared with such prosaic transformations of toponyms, the reincarnation of *sā-mha-gum* as *svayambhū* or as *padmācala* (lotus-hill) is nothing if not a metaphysical conceit.

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**APPENDIX A**

theñ-co	Śaka	428/AD	506	Thānkot
hārā-guṃ		430/	508	Sitāpailā
ardha-co		479	557	Pharping
Khā-rhi-co				
brem-guṃ-co				
mo-guṃ-co				
mim-di-co				
guṃ-vihāra		32	608	Hārigāon (Probably sā-mha-guṃ vihāra)
cho-guṃ			?	Icaṅguṃ
pa-hañ-co				
nhā-guṃ		55	631	Balambū
pā-guṃ	M.S.	62	641	Sunākoṭhī
khā-re-vāl-gañ-co		103	679	Pātan
go-mi-bhū-dhañ-co				
dan-dan-guṃ		129	705	Balambū

**APPENDIX B**

The "Nepalized Names" of the Hillocks

Dahacok  
 Jānacok  
 Khālcok  
 Dālcincok  
 Ghumarcok  
 Halcok  
 Kiwācok  
 Nālcincok  
 Pākhācok  
 Pulcok  
 Sāngācok  
 Tālcincok  
 Tancok  
 Tāsincok

Source: *The Kathmandu Valley Maps*. Munich: Association for Alpine Research.



## APPENDIX C

## Sanskritisation of the Place-names of the Valley

Lalitapattana	Yala	Bhaktapur	Khopa
Kāṣṭhamandapa	Ña	Padmakāṣṭhapurī	Kirtipur (Gunde)
Champapuri	Wā-de	Śivapurī	Bulhu
Svarnachatrapurī	Lubhu	Amarapurī	Buṅga
Śikharapurī	Phārpīng	Ḍundupattana	Theco
Śaṅkharapurī	Pāṅgā	Vatyapurī	Lohākokhā
Vanagiri	Pūco	Satyapurī	Satungal
Hastinapurī	Kisipiri	Bhadrapurī	Syābajigā
Candrajyoti	Sāṅkhu	Gosringapurī	Sāṅgā
Matsyanārāyanapurī	Naukvātha	Jitpurī	Khonā
Jyesthapurī/ Harisiddhi	Jalha	Hārigaon	Narha
Devapattan	Gola	Suprabhāpurī	Thakvā
Bandepurī	Bhonta	Punyavatū	Palanti/Panti
Vandanapurī	Badegā	Ratnapurī	Lele/Lembati
Hanumatpurī	Pula	Dolāgiri	Caṅgu
Narendrapurī	Okhata	Śaṅkharapurī	Saṅko
Pāṇḍupurī	Pamḍu	Chandanagiri	Cilañco
Jayapur	Nakadesa	Dharmapur	Bode
Madhyapur	Thimi	Varunapur	Katuñje

Source: *Himavatkhanda* (Varanasi: Yogapracārini, V.S. 2013) Appendix: Old Names, p. 151.