

VIR KHAMBA OF WESTERN NEPAL

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In this article an attempt has been made to sketch out the history, art and architecture of the memorial stone-pillars named *Vir Khamba* of Western Nepal. They are numerous and are scattered all over the hilly region of Western Nepal. These *Vir Khambas* were erected by various persons and the early states in the name of the national heroes who contributed to the nation and society as a whole. However, some of the memorial pillars indicate the state boundary. *Vir Khambas* are mainly concentrated in the hill track, temple premises and on the open ground. In this context, Baitadi, Bajhang, Doti, Dadeldhura, Achham, Jumla and Dailekh districts of Western Nepal are rich in possessing the memorial pillars or *Vir Khambas*. As the history of the region shows the place had gained popularity at the time of the Khasa in the early medieval period of Nepal.

Vir Khamba plays a very important role in the study of the art and architecture of Western Nepal, especially in defining the socio-political perspective of the region. Tucci and Yogi Naraharinath have collected some pictures and inscriptions of the various *Khambas* of Western Nepal. However, they have not given proper focus on them, (even in the correct reading of inscriptions and recording). Many pillars have been erected in proper places despite the fact that local people knowingly or unknowingly have done damages and disturbances to the pillars and presently some of them are eligible in reading also due to the long effect of climate.

Historical Prelude

To look at the historical development of Western Nepal, one finds that the regions of Kumaun and Garhawal were under the *Khasa* domination in the medieval period. In the glorious period of the *Khasa* dynasty the territory was expanded up to Guge in north and in south down to the plains of terai of Nepal. *Khasa* kings were named '*Khasiya*' in Gopal Vamsavali (Vajracharya and Malla 1985;34). *Khasa* Kings had marched over with their troops to the Kathmandu Valley repeatedly, and subjugated the King of the Valley temporarily. The genealogy of *Khasa* Kings is given in the

Dullu pillar inscription dated Saka 1279 (1357 A.D.) of Prithivi Malla, a popular ruler of the then state.

However, the pillar inscription of Prithvi Malla narrates the name of Naga Malla, as the first ruler or the founder of *Khasa* dynasty, Krachalla, the fourth in the generation of Naga Malla, is found in the inscription of Kumaun Baleswora. According to this inscription Krachalla conquered Kumaun in Saka 1145 (1223 A.D.), and placed the inscription there. (Atkinson 1974; 516). After Krachalla his son Asoka Challa ascended the throne. In the inscription of Bodha Gaya, Asoka Challa is said to have ruled over the '*Sapadalaksha*' (all over the hilly region of Western Nepal). From many historical sources it can be learnt that Asoka Challa expanded his territory to Gandak in the east and Guge in the north while in the west to Garwal and south the plain of terai (Vajracharya 2028;40). His successor Jitari Malla even marched over the Kathmandu Valley with his Khasa soldiers three times. Likewise, Punya Malla, Aditya Malla and Ripu Malla also had invaded the Kathmandu Valley from time to time in the heyday of their political stability. (Vajracharya and Malla 1985; 96, 102). At that time 'Khasa' soldier looted and set fire on the villages. Contrary to this, they also worshipped the deities of the Valley.

Prithivi Malla and his time is perhaps the apex of its economic, social and political stability. After the two generations, at the time of Abhaya Malla, many principalities began to raise their heads as sovereign rulers in the hilly region of Western Nepal. (Adhikary 1988;86). Likewise, in the later half of the fourteenth century Jumla, Doti and Kumaun emerged as separate states. Niraya Pal of Doti appeared as a sovereign ruler in 1352 A.D. Later Naga Malla came into the power of Doti including the whole Karnali region (Subedi, 1993:120). From the fourteenth century onwards many principalities came into existence and that ultimately caused the rise of Baisi States of Western Nepal.

Kirti Khamba vis-a-vis Vir Khamba

Mainly there are two types of *Khambhas* or *Sthambha* in Western hilly region - *Kirti Khamba* and *Vir Khamba*. Although they both seem to have similar meaning but when we study their cultural significance they deserve separate meaning and have separate function as well. *Kirti Khambas* were indeed established by the then Kings and chieftains. They bear some inscriptions and very often have the small images or a religious symbol. For instance, Dullu *Kirti Khamba* of Prithivi Malla bears a long inscription with the symbol of a Buddhist Chaitya on top. On the other hand, *Vir Khambas* also possess the admiration of brave soldiers and their deeds. There are many *Vir Khambas*, that have been scattered all over the Western hilly

region. Some are placed in a free standing position, while some are being placed in groups. Some *Vir Khambas* are decorated with various designs while few of them are plain. However, they both have the good masonry in carving. *Kirti Khambas* in structure are mostly in flattish, perpendicular size. *Kirti Khamba* of Prithivi Malla, pillars of north side of Dullu Bazar, pillars of Dumrakot and Daulapari, Michigaon of Jumla are notable in this context. These pillars have inscription on both sides. In many cases, however, the inscription is illegible because of the poor selection of the stone. Albeit, these pillars have the designs either of sun or Buddhist prayer wheel on the top and square stupa design in a pyrimidical shape at bottom. The remarkable *Kirti Khamba* erected by Prithivi Malla in Saka 1279, is 2.76 X 0.50 X 0.8 meter in size, made of quality stone. Another *Khamba* of Padukasthan being erected by Sawanya Karkyani, is a huge stone with the image of Buddha in *dhyana mudra* in its small niche. It has an inscription on upper part of the image. The size of this pillar is 1.90 × 0.46 × 0.46 meter and has hard and smooth surface. Both flattish *Kirti Khambas* of Dumrakot have inscription, however, is now quite illegible except their carving in the corner. (Figure No.1). Jumla Michigaon pillar exhibits the similarities with Dumrakot pillar mainly in the lower part of 'chaitya' symbol.

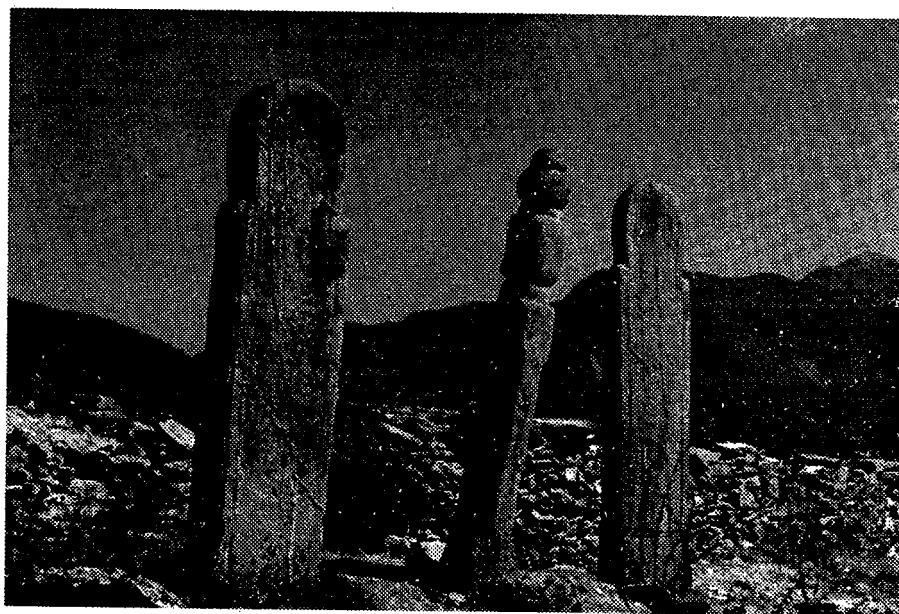


Figure No. 1

Classification of Vir Khamba

As said, *Vir Khambas* were typically the commemorative pillars established by the Government or by individuals . These were erected mainly in the

temple premises, while few of them were being installed on the open ground or might be seen on the historical sites. It was only the intention of the person to install the pillar on the temple premises that they could be able to achieve religious merit easily. Dullu and Bajhang in this context are important to have many such pillars. On the temple premises of Khaparmandu, Bajhang, there are 12 pillars in different size and design. Likewise, in Sata Khamba, and Dullu Kot there are seven pillars separately, installed in a group around the historical sites. Apart from this, some *Vir khambas* mark the territory of the then state as these have been installed in the village end (Kharakwal 1993;203). The single pillar of Chaukhtiya and double pillars of Pata Dewal of Bajhang no doubt recall the boundary of former Bajhang State. Therefore, they are categorized in a state ownership of the territory rather than the personal. These pillars have no inscription and figure except that some of them bear the symbol of lotus flower and sun on upper, while on the lower there is a plain surface. Two pillars newly recovered from Bhandari gaon of Achham are quite interesting in this context. These pillars are placed in the village, on which both of them bear the figures of sitting Buddha with his disciple on right in the small niche. The lower level of the pillars is decorated with the serpent figures, wherein, both serpents are carved vertically facing each (Figure No.2). And there is no writing here so far. The Char Khamba of Dailekha Bazar also demonstrated the territorial boundary of the then state in an equal destination.

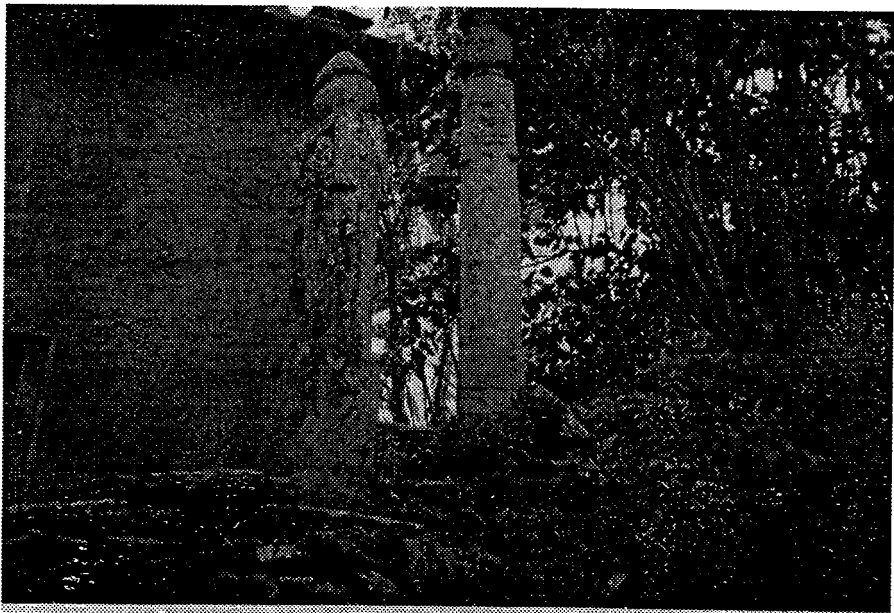


Figure No. 2

Table 1
VIR KHAMBA

Hero's Commemoration	Territorial Demarcation
Group	Free Standing
With Inscription, Date	Without Inscription, Date
With Figure	Without Figure

Pillars of Dadeldhura and Baitadi

The free standing pillar of Ajamera, Dadeldhura perhaps is the most artistically decorative pillar of the region (See figure no.3). Therefore, it needs some description here of its own artistic design. The design of the pillar can be divided vertically into four levels. The first upper level surmounted with the pinnacle in tapering style and having *amalaka* in its trunk. The lower second level is in square shape that is having four artistic faces, full of four different images of their respective forms. Its eastern face is decorated with the figure of horse rider and nearby a woman in *anjali* posture. While on its western side, there is the figure of a men sitting in a *padmasana* flanked by a woman, is no doubt the figure of Dhyani Buddha. Likewise, the northern part of the pillar has the image of Sun god in standing and holding sunflowers on his both hands equally in a proportional order. The southern is also facing with the image of horse rider, however, the horse is in the action of galloping contrary with those of the eastern one. The third level of the pillar is also decorated with different figures in each four cardinal points viz - the eastern has the coverage with pairs of dove, whereas the beak of the doves faces each other, the western side has the figure of lion in the action of attacking the deer, while the northern contained the figure of a pair of doves with some small creature on their both beaks and likewise, the south face bears the figure of two deers. Vertically the fourth or the last level of the pillars' shaft is in octagonal with serpent design. It is more or less similar to the pillars of Bhandari Gaon of Achham. On either side of this pillar there is one line inscription dated Saka

1309 (A.D.1387). Thus, Ajayamer pillar possesses the higher character of arts. In Baitadi district there is also a single pillar standing freely in the temple premises of Dehimandu. It bears the small inscription and date of Saka 1309 (Figure No. 4). The front side of this pillar is decorated with the armoured figure riding on horse and holding the sword in his right and cradle of the horse in left hand. The figure of Dehimandu is not artistically important relatively to the figure of Ajayamer pillar. The horse rider has held sword on left and the cradle of the horse on right. It is basically different from that of the Dehimandu, however, both were commenced at the same time.



Figure No. 3



Figure No. 4

Pillars of Bajhang

There are twelve pillars in the premises of Khaparmandu Temple, Bajhang. The size and design of these pillars are diverse. More than seven pillars have *amalakasila*, surmounted therein, being inserted the pillars' upper level. The upper part of the pillars are decorated in a pears shape and square in lower. One pillar has the inscription that reads '*Aichan Thapa Ko Kirti Khamba*' that clearly mentions the commemoration of a demised soldier named Aichan Thapa. All pillars are in different size around of 0.73 to 1.75 meters in height, indicate that these were installed by various persons in their respective time (Figure No. 5). The perpendicular pillars are mostly decorated in the design with three lines of moulding equally carved out in their neck. Only a single pillar has the figure of horse rider on upper, while the lower is less artistic in design.



Figure No. 5

Likewise, there are five pillars scattered on a plain ground near Sutari Gaon, Bajhang (Figure No. 6). Among them the highest pillar is 160 X 60 X 16 in size. All these pillars are in perpendicular, despite some of them are not in their original position. Most of them have pears shape on top with square on lower shaft. One pillar has the inscription but only few words can be read out '*... Ko Vir Stamva*'; while, others are not clear. No other remarkable style is to be seen except the usual design in carving of the stone. The upper part of these pillars are in pear shape with engraving in rough manner.



Figure No. 6

Pillars of Dullu

In Dullu and Dailekh area there are almost three sites where the pillars are standing in groups. Seven pillars of Sata Khamba, seven pillars of Dullu Kot and four pillars of Paduka are important in this context. In Pusha Gaon area there are seven pillars, local people therefore, named it as Sat Khamba where all the pillars are standing in a single row. Previously, all seven pillars were scattered on desolate condition for a long time and it was Yogi Narahari Nath who made an effort to place them in a proper order (Figure No.7). The seven pillars have inscription with date. Two pillars bear Saka 1256, and three have 1251, 1264, 1265, while the remaining two are not clear . Although the letters are worn out they all seemingly narrate the word- *VirKhamba, Vijaya Sthamba* in the end of the line. It indicated that these are the commemorative pillars that were established by their family members. They are in different size around 1.90 to 1.0 meter in height. These pillars have various decorative designs on both sides. The facade of the pillar with petals amid of two geometrical designs is artistically significant. One pillar (the middle one) has the design of triangular shape with line of zigzag on lower portion of the pillars' shaft.

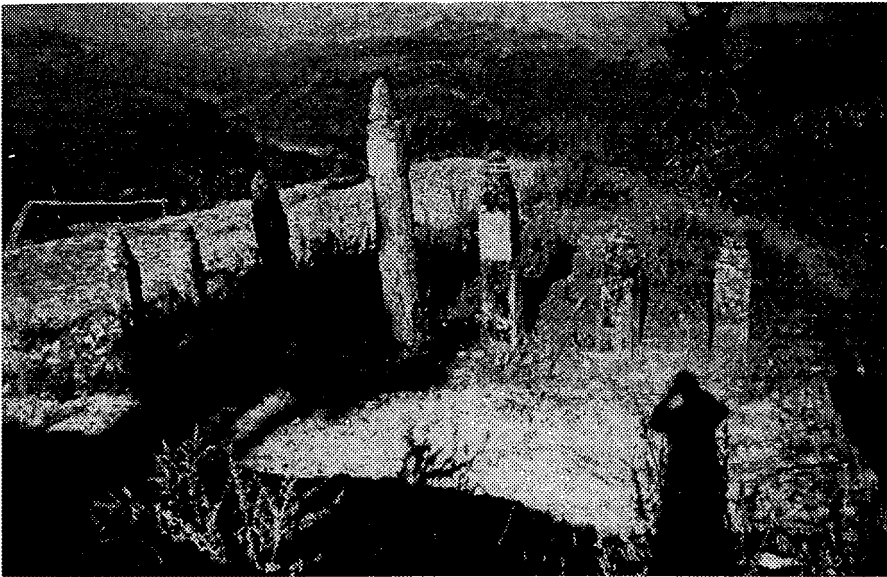


Figure No. 7

In Dullu Paduka, four pillars have been placed in four cardinal points of the Paduka stone. They are having inscriptions and figures, however, the figures of these pillars are stylistically insignificant. All figures on pillars carry out the armourer dress and they all handle the swords in their right hands. The three figures are standing without the figure of horse except one

in the posture of horse riding (See figure no. 8). One remarkable difference is that the men are clad here with warrior tunic that covers the neck down to the knee of their body. All four pillars have short inscriptions which read *Vir Sthamba* of Tate, Sibai Rawat, Yade Gathya and Bishu respectively. And they are 1.15, 1.60, 1.20, 1.27 meter high from ground level. These pillars are with pear shape on top with spire crown. Apart from this, two big pillars are erected on the premises of Bhairab temple. One has the figure of *Dhyani Buddha* with the inscriptions of the time of Asoka Challa. Likewise, another perpendicular pillar is also placed in the same place. The shaft of this pillar is octagonal and square respectably. Thus, *Vir Khamba* of Paduka plays a very important role, as these carry a distinct art motives. In Dullu Kot there are seven pillars standing in different size and design. Among them the highest one is 1.60 meter and the smallest is 0.66 meter, visualized their different size. All pillars have common design in round shape on top and square at bottom.



Figure No. 8

Paikela (War heroes)

Basically the whole Western region has legends and tradition of admiration for the war heroes, who fought for the protection and safeguarding of the nation. In the Chaita songs of Doti, the *paikela* is being narrated as the brave person who has been said:

Let the God worshipped by scented grass

Thank you Paikela, you made my pride high' (Pantha 2032:152)

In course of the war time *paikela* had played a very important role. They had contributed to expand the territory of Western Nepal. Therefore, due respect was paid for them and certain amount of money and land was donated to them as well. While they lost their lives in battle field they were still to be in a respective status in society as well as in state politics. *Paikela*, those figures having seen in horse rider, are mostly of higher rank and those who do not acquire the higher rank are respected by installing the common pillars after their life.

The warrior class came from Thapa, Khadga and Mahata caste groups. Since Khadga surname entitled to those who holds the Khadga (sword) especially in war time, is said to belong to Thapa clan (Adhikary 1988:72). But still it is a problem whether Thapa belonged to the class of Magar or Chhetriyas. However, they had acquired a higher rank in the state affairs of Western Nepal. In Kumauni dialect 'Paik', the corrupt form of the word 'Paikala', also denote the brave person or the soldier (Pandey 1990:699). In this context, Western region of Nepal had made a tradition of honoring the war heroes.

Art

Vir Khamba art is impressive in design as it is decorated in various art motives. The memorial pillars' features represent sculptural as well as architectural values. They are therefore, important in the study of the socio-political history of Western Nepal. As elucidated earlier the *Vir Khambas* are different in size and design. Mainly *Vir Khambas* are decorated with the floral design, geometrical design and criss-cross on the top if not lower part of the pillars. Even the simple pillars have been executed in octagonal, square or roundish fashion. Some pillars are surmounted by the apple shape either round or pointed on the above. Likewise, others have the design of *amalakasila* on top. Very few pillars have the beads design in the place of *amalakasila*. Beneath the *amalakasila*, these mostly have been filled with inscription or figure of the horse riders in different style. In the figures of horse rider mostly they are decorated with armoured dresses holding sword in right or left hand. The horse is shown in a galloping action, while some of them represent in a simple manner. The pillar of Ajamera is full of artistic design with the figures of Sun god and sitting Buddha, inclusively, the design of animals and birds in a single pillar. Artistically, moreover, the pillars of Ajayamer is quite eminent in an admixture of animal and human figure in a single pillar. The figures of animals such as deer, tiger, horse and doves are designated in fascinating order.

Chronology

To view the various pillars of Western Nepal, it is equally important that the Kingdom had played a very important role in political affairs during the second half of the twelfth century. The dated pillars so far we know is of Saka 1213, which was recorded by Yogi Narahari Nath from *Satatala Khamba* of Dullu, the earliest one. Likewise, *Sata Khamba* of Dullu bears the date Saka 1251, 1256, 1264 and 1265 respectively, while Jwala Guthi pillars have Saka 1235. Likewise, Baitadi and Dadeldhura pillars have Saka 1309, and Sinja Khola pillars have 1378 and 1444, are perhaps of later period. Four pillars of Paduka and twelve pillars of Khaparmandu have no date, however, Paduka pillars have the warrior figures with short inscriptions. The earlier pillars might have been placed by the time of Asoka Challa, a great conqueror, who was said as a crest jewel king of *Sapadalalsha* mountain in Bodha Gaya inscription (Adhikary 1988;41). In Sata tala pillars dated saka 1213, 1222 and Navisthana pillar of 1235 can be confirmed around the time of King Asoka Challa and Aditya Malla. During the time of Asoka Challa and his march over the territorial expansion, a great war took place and of many soldiers lost their lives. Likewise, the second phase was assigned to the time of Punya Malla and Prithivi Malla where the date of Saka 1256, 1264, 1265 represent the period of demised soldier in different time and incident. After Prithivi Malla there arose many principalities in Western Nepal. Naga Malla established a sovereign state in Doti, Dadeldhura and Baitadi in 1387 A.D. In course of making free state many brave soldiers might have lost their lives. As a result, in Saka 1309 (1387 A.D.) a tributary was made in memorable pillar of their life sacrifices. The pillars of Sinja Khola of Saka 1397 (1475 A.D) and 1444 (1522 A.D.) confirmed the dispute raised over Jumla where there might have occurred a great war in the later phase of historical accounts. Memorial stone recorded from Champawat, Kumaun bears the date Saka 1293 (1371 A.D.) is perhaps later than the pillars found in Dullu area (Kharakwal 1993;208). This makes one believe that Western Nepal has a distinct tradition in erecting the memorial pillars regarding to those of historically as well as culturally important.

Thus, it can be concluded that Western Nepal has developed a distinct tradition of paying tribute to the war heroes by placing the pillars in different places. The pillars are often filled with art motives, and skill of stone masonry ultimately exhibited the silent expression of their aesthetics. The figure of riding horse on the pillars also visualizes the role of cavalry of the then state. In this sense, they marked a distinct socio-political status of the Kingdom of fourteenth century in the Western hilly region of Nepal.

Table 2
Vir Khambas of Western Hilly Region

S.No.	Site	District	Num. of Stones	Location
1.	Dehimandu	Baitadi	1	Temple premises
2.	Ajayamera	Dadeldhura	1	Temple premises
3.	Asigram	Dadeldhura	1	Temple premises
4.	Ugratara	Dadeldhura	1	Temple premises
5.	Dumrakot	Bajhang	3	Ancient route
6.	Sutarigaoun	Bajhang	5	Temple premises
7.	Khaparmadu	Bajhang	14	Temple premises
8.	Bhanjangkot	Bajhang	2	Village boundary
9.	Bhandarigaon	Achham	2	Village boundary
10.	Jaygarh	Achham	1	Village boundary
11.	Silgarhi	Doti	1	Village boundary
12.	Padukasthan	Dailekh	6	Temple premises
13.	Dulu	Dailekh	11	Market Area
14.	Satakhamba	Dailekh	7	Open ground
15.	Dailekh Bazar	Dailekh	4	Market area
16.	Michi Gaon	Jumla	1	Road side
17.	Chaugan Chaur	Surkhet	1	Open ground
18.	Deulapani	Jumla	1	Road side (Tucci, 1956: 40)
19.	Kalikot	Kalikot	1	Road side (Tucci, 1956: 44)
20.	Litakot	Jumla	11	Road side (Tucci, 1956: 39)
21.	Dullu	Surkhet	1	Road side (Tucci, 1956: 39)
22.	Phusa Gaon	Dailekh	2	Cultivated ground (Yogi 2013:479)
23.	Jwalaguthi	Dailekh	2	Cultivated ground (Yogi,2013:221)
24.	Satatala	Dailekh	5	Open ground (Yogi,2013:222)
25.	Seridhuska	Jumla	17	Village Road (Joshi,2028:130)
26.	Bhattabada	Jumla	8	Open cultivated ground (Joshi,2028:130)

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