



Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 14

Number 1 *Himalayan Research Bulletin* no. 1 & 2

Article 5

1994

Dhanavajra Vajracarya (1932-1994): A Tribute

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Recommended Citation

Sharma, Prayag Raj and Malla, Kamal P. (1994) "Dhanavajra Vajracarya (1932-1994): A Tribute," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 14: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol14/iss1/5>

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Dhanavajra Vajracarya (1932-1994)
photograph by Nirmal Tuladhar

Dhanavajra Vajracarya (1932-1994): A Tribute

Dhanavajra Vajracarya was born on March 28, 1932 at his Masangalli house in Kathmandu as the last of the five sons to Tirtha Kumari and Durgavajra Vajracarya who was an Ayurvedic physician by profession. In 1948, at the age of 16, he was sent to a private school run by Pundit Nayaraj Pant, a Sanskrit scholar trained in Siddhanta Jyotisa and a self-taught historian of Nepal. Housed in the same locality, normally in this school young pupils came to study "some Sanskrit, some Mathematics and some Astrology," but not history. They began to take keen and vigorous interest in history only because of the Guru's enthusiasm.

Dhanavajra spent years in this school learning Sanskrit, reciting such texts as *Amarakosa*, *Kaumudi*, *Raghuvamsa* and, of course, Kautalya's *Arthashastra*. In the meantime, he picked up his main interest and principal tool of research in history, that is, his skills in epigraphy. In 1952, a group of young, like-minded and crusading students from the same school launched a campaign of rectifying factual errors in the popular textbooks of history. Through the publication and dissemination of more than 50 brief little pamphlets they exposed the factual errors in the works of the late Principal Bhairava Bahadur Pradhan, Surya Vikram Gyawali, Bali Chandra Sharma, and Dilli Raman Regmi. Dhanavajra was the member-secretary of this association known as the *Itihasa Samsodhanmandala* during 1961-71. He remained active in the association during 1953-1971. It was quite common in those days to see young Dhanavajra selling those pamphlets from the footpaths and pavements in New Road and Tundikhel, calling the attention of the seemingly disinterested passers-by in energetic voice, reciting the points of errors or challenging the established names to come for a *sastrartha* (scholarly colloquium).

Almost as a consummation of this phase of his career, *Itihasa-samsodhanako Pramanaprameya*, Part I--a consolidated volume of these pamphlets--was edited by Dhanavajra and others in 1962 with a historical summary of their findings in a decade of academic crusade against established reputations. Although much of their polemical, and at times inflammatory, writing of this decade was focused on destroying reputations than in building their own through sustained piece of effort, Dhanavajra and his colleagues had contributed to the historiography of Nepal by drawing attention to the significance of epigraphical and documentary evidence.

During this time when Dhanavajra was busy as an activist-rectifier of mistakes in popular history textbooks, he also edited and published a number of significant works of historical interest in collaboration with his colleagues. The prominent works of this period include editing of *Jayaratnakara*, a Sanskrit play by Saktivallabha Aryal (1957), *Abhilekha-Samgraha*, (1961-62), *Gallima Phyankieko Kasingara* (1961) *Triratna-Saundarya-Gatha* (1963) by Pundit Sundarananda Shaky, *Aitihaska-patra-samgraha* Part I (1957) and Part II (1964). In 1964 he helped found the historical quarterly journal of the Samsodhana-mandala, *Purnima* which is still in publication.

Like several of its original 21 members, Dhanavajra gradually dissociated himself from the activities of the Samsodhana-mandala, and he finally quit it in 1971. In the same year he joined Tribhuvan University Service as a member of the Research Cell in the newly established Nepala Adhyana Samsthana. This cell was in fact the nucleus of what was to be the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies which was founded in 1972 under the dispensation of the National Education System Plan. Because of his maturity and experience in research he was to be the mainstay of the Institute's research programmes in ancient and medieval history of Nepal. In this role, he was instrumental in conceiving, executing and successfully completing several projects and in bringing out their results in published form, including *Sri Baburam Acharya ra Vahanka Kriti* (1973).

Dhanavajra entered the field of history mainly through his mastery of epigraphy. He read the Licchavi and Kutala scripts, not to speak of other species of medieval Newari scripts, with ease and competence that few men in Nepal could match. Although he may have lacked a broader and comparative historical perspective of modern critical scholarship, his traditional erudition glowed with his knowledge of Sanskrit and enviable grasp of the archaic and classical Newari that was used in medieval writings such as palm leaf inscriptions, and *thyasaphus*, that is, contemporary historical diaries and journals kept by different individuals. He often used to say in personal conversation with his colleagues that some of his insights have been drawn from his acute intuitions. He did mere impassioned work in the Licchavi period and the times of King Prithyinarayan Shah. He was often so absorbed in his subject that he got never tired of talking on the subject of history, and even in casual conversations, he was full of historical anecdotes and analogies. He firmly believed in Nepal's tradition of religious syncretism and mutual respect between Buddhism and Hinduism.

Dhanavajra's most important work to come out of the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies is the *Licchavikalaka Abhilekha* (1973). It is a collection of the then known inscriptions from ancient Nepal, transliterated in devanagari script, edited with Nepali translation of the Sanskrit inscriptions and detailed historical commentary, inscription by inscription. Today this single work makes Dhanavajra known to a wide national and international audience. No other work has become such an indispensable reference work for students and specialists alike. Most of his other works and publications sponsored by the Institute (later Centre) of Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) have also been works on history through epigraphy, i.e., inscriptions and documents discovered in the course of carrying out explorations in different parts of the country, particularly in and outside the Kathmandu Valley. These include works on Tistung-Chitlang (1972), Gorkha (1972), Dolakha (1974), and Nuwakot (1975). He was one of the key researchers in the IDRC-funded Mustang Project (1983-84) to which he contributed a historical portion. One of his more explicatory works of history has been on the Pancali system of polity (1978) whose beginnings he traces to the Licchavi Period (ca. A.D. 464-879), but which, according to him, continued down the ages. He has also compiled and commented upon the inscriptions and documents of the Shah period (1980). In many of these works he has been assisted by his junior associates at the Centre whom he helped to train in the process. One of the ambitious projects which he conceived and tried to carry out with the support of the then Executive-Director(s) of the Centre was the National History Project in five volumes. Although a greater part of writing of this national history has by now been completed, it has not yet seen the light of publication.

Close on the footsteps of his mentors Baburam Acharya, Yogi Narahari Nath, Naya Raj Pant, and Surya Vikram Gewali, Dhanavajra was undoubtedly the foremost of his generation -- a perceptive, consistent, dedicated and productive historian. He firmly believed in the written sources and political chronology as the infallible bedrock of historiography. This was his strength as well as weakness, as it were. Among the written sources he was most at home with inscriptions--his first love, and literary sources--particularly Sanskrit classics such as Kautalya's *Arthashastra*. He was so firm and consistent in his outlook that several of his views which he cherished as a young crusader in 1952 were vigorously advocated until 1993. (For example, during the "Mandala Festival" in 1993 he gave a paper on the meaning of *Nepalmandala*, quoting Kautalya extensively to argue that the ancient State of Nepal was "almost as big as modern Nepal"). He rarely, if ever, deviated from his source materials. By upbringing and training he took the written word as an authority on its own.

Dhanavajra was almost like an oracle for most of us in the university campus. He was consulted and sought by the young and old alike to discuss various tangled issues of ancient, medieval or modern Nepalese history. Almost in a complete reversal of his youthful crusading role, in his more mellow years he never offended anyone with discouraging or critical opinion. More often than not, he offered constructive suggestions to his colleagues and younger scholars in his field. As an editor of *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* he was often embarrassed to have to reject or ask anyone to revise a paper offered for publication.

In his later years Dhanavajra was very receptive of criticism of his work, and he never reacted to adverse opinions of his work. He gladly accepted unmotivated criticisms whenever one can convince him.

Dhanavajra's essays on the Licchavi administration and polity, the Powerful Ramavardhans, the Doyas, the Kirata influence on Licchavi Period, the Licchavi settlements, the Age of the Mahapatras, the Malla Period Defence System, the Khasa Kingdom of the Karnali Region, the Inscriptions of the Early Years of Nepal Samvut, the Historical Significance of Nepala-samvat, and Sivadeva--a Famous Medieval King of Nepal, are indispensable readings for aspiring scholars and specialists of ancient and medieval history of Nepal.. More than anything else, his work on ancient and medieval Nepal, particularly early medieval Nepal, had laid a sound foundation for political chronology.

At CNAS Dhanavajra completed a small project in 1980-81 on the transliteration, translation and interpretation of the most important medieval chronicle of Nepal, the *Gopalarajavamsvali*. This was the text which the late Historian-Laureate of Nepal, Kharidar Baburam Acharya, "read for twelve years and understood very little". Its authoritative editing was the "foremost desideratum in the field of medieval Nepalese history and linguistics" because in the words of Luciano Petech "the text is of interest of first magnitude both for history and linguistics." Dhanavajra had devoted more than a decade to the deciphering and interpretation of this famous but little understood text. Reading it aloud every morning as one recites *Candi* or *Gita* or *Namasamgiti* he laboured on this complex text for years. The handwritten report of this project was dumped on the floor in his cubicle tucked under a pile of papers covered by dust-laden jute carpet at CNAS before it was spotted by Malla in January 1984. Realising its value he contacted the Nepal Research Centre and got it published by Franz Steiner Verlag as a facsimile edition consisting of the plates, devanagari transliteration and Nepali translation by Dhanavajra, and an Introduction, an English translation and a glossary of Newari words by Malla. Although some reviewers (Theodore Riccardi, Mahesh Raj Pant and Gyan Mani Nepal, among others,) have attacked this edition for "bad execution", "faulty transliteration, and translation" Dhanavajra's efforts have laid a solid foundation for further textual and analytical work on this all-important text.

Dhanavajra was one of the few Nepalese recipients of the prestigious International Grant by the Toyoto Foundation, Japan. In 1986 he got a grant to compile, edit and translate about 1500 medieval inscriptions from Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur dated since the beginnings of Nepal Samvat to A.D.1769. He and his team, consisting of Mrs. Rukmini Onta and Mr. Tek Bahadur Shrestha, had collected the rubbings, transcribed them and in part translated several hundreds of these inscriptions into Nepali; before Dhanavajra's health began to decline and fail. This was one project which he had asked many to undertake from the early days of the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, and which he had taken to his heart. One of his last wishes and deep concerns has been the completion of this project which he hoped to complete and print with plates in a four-volume edition

At the time of his death Dhanavajra held the position of Reader at the Centre. He was decorated with Gorkha Daksinabahu Class IV and Trisaktipatta Class IV by His Majesty the King of Nepal. He was also awarded the literary award Madan Puraskar in 1973 for his work on Licchavi inscriptions. He was a founder-editor of the journal, *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, which he continued to edit since 1973.

Dhanavajra actively participated in the compilation and deliberations of a comprehensive dictionary of the Classical Newari. He was among the founder members of the Nepalabhasa Dictionary Committee (founded in 1980). He left it in 1984. He was also an active member of the Board of Trustees of the Asha Archives, a public library housing about 8000 Nepalese manuscripts and palm leaves. For more than forty years he published almost entirely in Nepali, and like the man his style was clear, without being dry, harsh, or pompous--unambiguous and unhindered with academic pretensions or trappings of any kind. It is only a fitting tribute to him to say that much of what we know today about our past is a shaft of gentle light coming from the workshop of this simple and dedicated man. Survived by his wife, three sons and a daughter, when he passed away in Bir Hospital, Kathmandu, while undergoing dialysis on Monday July 4, we have lost a no small part of ourselves.

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