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THE PAGODA'S ICONOGRAPHY (I) PAGODA EAST

The Pagoda is rich in iconography where every square centimetre of the Pagoda's detailed craftsmanship is not only aesthetically pleasing, but also communicates to us a vital story in the Hindu, Buddhist and Nepalese context. Whilst not communicating the religions in an alphabet text manner, the Pagoda's icons are an eye-catching and evocative code for stories within Hinduism, Buddhism, and Nepal - reminding us that the Pagoda's construction echoes back to a time in Nepal's history when most of the population – as in medieval Europe - was illiterate.

Let us now examine the Pagoda's essential themes one by one.

Firstly, the portal above the central door and central arch.

This is the most symbolically important place for recognizing the context of the Pagoda. At the central semi-ovular tablet above the central door and central arch is a figure of the Buddha in meditation, in 'touching the earth' position. This is known as 'bhumisparsa' in Sanskrit, and is possibly the most famous and well recognized meditation positions of the Buddha, where, just prior to his enlightenment, he was assailed by evil spirits, and in response, touched the earth with his right hand, calling upon the 'Mother Earth Goddess', who sent the evil spirits away.

Also, as a recognizable symbol of religion, in the sense that Christianity is recognized by the Cross, the Buddha in meditation is also instantly recognizable as representing Buddhism, so this important symbolic icon above the central door and central arch communicates that it is a Buddhist place of worship.

Directly below the icon of the Buddha in meditation, we have a square tablet, which contains the sacred Sanskrit writing for the Hindu call to prayer – and the Hindu conception of the Universe - 'om'. Represented by three curves, a semi-circle, and a dot – this iconic phoenetic and picture-language symbol – is also, similar to the Cross of Christianity, and the Buddha of Buddhism – a symbol of a great religion, in this case, of Hinduism. When Hindus start their prayer chants, they start by giving honour to the great almighty – oneness – 'om' – who, in the Hindu conception of the Universe, is a singular

immense entity - the creator and creation. There is no demarcation between the creator and creation as in Christianity. The Sanskrit 'om' also predates the Latin root for 'one' or, 'entirety', as it is used in Latin as 'omni' – or 'all'. Omnipotent – 'all powerful', and Omniscient 'all knowing' are examples in the English language how Latin roots are used – and also gives us further information as to how Sanskrit, a language that predates Latin, has also influenced Latin and also English. When you can understand how the Latin prefix 'omni' is used in English, I think one can begin to understand the entirety of the conception of 'om' in the Hindu context as a complete indivisible entirety.

So, above the central door and central arch, we have these two very important visual icons, representing the two predominant religions expressed in the Pagoda's architecture, Hinduism and Buddhism.

Now let us explore further the other icons in this central semi-ovular tablet.

Directly above the Buddha we have a tiger-like figurehead from which cloud particles and snake tails emerge. This is 'Cheppu' – the Hindu Protector of the Universe. The story goes that Cheppu's parents wished for a son that had all the necessary virtues of greatness, and at Cheppu's conception their wish was granted. However, as Cheppu peeked out at the Universe, he realized that the bad times would come when the Universe would be destroyed, hence, he decided to only 'poke out his head' so he could observe the Universe, and not come into it. So, Cheppu became the Protector of the Universe, observing whilst not being in the Universe, and, being a fellow creature of the mythological Hindu bird-beast, the Garuda, in hunting down and eating the evil serpents, known as the 'Nagas'.

The cloud particles that emanate from Cheppu's mouth give breath to the Universe, and, the snake tails represent his victory over the evil serpent 'Nagas.'

To the right and left of the tablet, we also find the 'Makaras', who are mythical water dragon beasts, who bring good luck to the Pagoda, ensuring safety for the Pagoda from storm and rain.

These are the essential features of the central ovular tablet.

To the left and right are two further tablets, encasing two sets of dragons. Dragons are a common symbol throughout Asia for spiritual might and power, as well as divinely communicated wisdom.

And, below each of these two tablets, we find two square tablets, with what appears to be a celtic knot. These are mandalas, which teach us regarding the nature of harmony in the Universe. The mandala, a shape which constantly changes, yet constantly re-unites with itself, teaches us that left, or right, eventually all of life's journey re-unites with itself, and results in harmony.

And, further to the left and right, we find two suns, one sun with a semi-crescent moon at its base, and the other, a sun only. These are the state emblems of Nepal, referring to the Royal Family of the Kingdom of Nepal and the Upper House of the Nepalese Parliament. These two emblems also are found on the State Flag of Nepal. So, these emblems teach us concerning the origins of the Pagoda itself.

Furthermore, at the top of each panel of the Pagoda's first level, we find two garudas in

resplendent pose, facing each other. Garudas, as mentioned earlier, are auspicious mythological beasts, who protect the Universe from the evil serpent Nagas. The Garudas are also significant in that they are the Guardians of Mt Meru, the Mountain at the centre of the Universe.

And, at each first level corner of the Pagoda we find four further guardians, beaked and fanged tiger/lions, which are placed to scare away intruders and evil spirits.