

THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIHARA CULTURE IN NEPAL

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Introduction

The study of *vihara* culture necessitates an understanding of the features, significance and development of Buddhism in Nepal. However, first the term "*vihara* culture" needs to be defined. In Newar Buddhist tradition, the *vihara* plays a significant ritualistic and religious role in society. It is a holy complex where religion and religious practices become overt and it is publicly demonstrated through a host of activities, both internal – performed inside the sacred shrine regularly on a calendar basis – and external – performed in the complex regularly or occasionally with wider participation of the Buddhists of the *vihara* localities. Such activities range from regular worship to mass celebrations and performances. The *vihara*, with its sacred and secular complexes, deities and objects, priests and devotees, remains the main focus of all activities. The optimum objective of the activities is to solemnly demonstrate union with the Buddhahood or Enlightenment. In the present context, the term "*vihara* culture" is used to denote the life cycle of the members of the *vihara* observed through the various activities where gods and people, the donors and the receivers, performers and participants meet together under the umbrella of the sacred complex. The three cities of Patan, Kathmandu and Bhaktapur contain a large number of Buddhist *vihara* known as "*baha*" in Newari. The existence of numerous *vihara* in the Kathmandu valley, more particularly in Patan city, suggests that *vihara* culture is very old and has remained popular in Nepal. The people of Nepal, especially the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, are sentimentally attached to the *vihara*, because the *baha* is the centre of their religious and cultural life and the focus of their social organization and relations. In order to understand the status of Buddhist religion, culture, rites and rituals of Nepal, a cursory look at *vihara* culture is therefore imperative.

Origin and Antiquity of *Vihara*

Originally, a *vihara* was a place of adoration and religious learning for the Buddhists. It also served as residence of the learned Buddhist monks. In Buddhist literature, the terms *arama* and *vihara* were used to denote a dwelling place of monks. In beginning, a *kuti* (a small cottage) of the Buddha was called *arama*. So at that time *venuvana* of *Rajgriha* was called as *arama*. A residential complex constructed by Anathapindaka in Sravasti was named a Jetavana *vihara*. It was donated to the Buddha and his *sangha* by Anathapindaka. This indicates that in the beginning Lord Buddha and his disciples started to live in *arama* and *vihara*. Slowly these words used in the form of a group of residence was *sangharama* for the *Bhikshu-samuha*. Actually *viharas* were constructed after the establishment of a *sangha*. In one of the *patras* (vessel) of the Gupta period there is mention of an *Arogya Vihara Bhikshu Sanghasya* (Upadhyaya 1972: 97-8). In India after fifth century, most of the *viharas* were constructed on plain land, this is proved by the archaeological survey of the layout of Taxila, Saranath, Nalanda and Vikramasila Mahavihara of India.

In Nepal, the *vihara* is a Newar Buddhist institution or monastery, popularly known as *baha* or *bahal*, where *bhikshu sangha* live by performing different type of rites and rituals. It is a place of religious bliss. Other types of religious complexes known as *bahi* or *bahil*, which is again a modification of the Sanskrit term *bahiri* meaning 'outside', were also built outside the town limits. In ancient inscriptions, we find reference to this institution as *bahiri* (Regmi 1966: 96-7). The Chronicle calls these *viharas* '*nirvanik vanaprastha*'. It has often been said that the *vanaprastha viharas* were called *bahi* that is, outside because the *vanaprastha bhikshu* resided not in cities but in forests. The placement of the existing *bahi* of the three cities of the valley shows clearly that all the *bahi* are nearly either at the very edge of the city or beyond it. Actually, they are indeed outside, not so much in the physical sense of outside the city, but in the sense of 'outside' the pale of the tantric Vajracharya culture of the *bahas*.

Regarding the origin of the *vihara* in Nepal, scholars hold different opinions. According to Vaidya, *vihara* or monasteries must have come into existence in the Kathmandu Valley long time ago (Vaidya 1986: 1). On the basis of chronicles, he further asserts that the Kathmandu Valley became fit for human habitation after Manjushree drained the water from the Valley. Manjushree was then enthroned King Dharmakara and the large number of the followers of the king began to reside in the valley as celibate monks. These

viharas were supposed to have been built for the residence of these celibate monks. According to Korn (1976: 26), the origin of the *vihara* building is still obscure. But he is of the opinion that the basic plan for the layout of the *vihara* is more than two thousand years old. He cites an example for rock monasteries at *Ajanta* and *Ellora* of South Western India. At that time *viharas* were constructed by cutting rocks in the hills and mountains in the difficult parts of India. Nepalese *vihara*, however, took a different form. According to Buddhist sources, Gautam Buddha and his followers were staying in *Nyagodharma Vihara* during the visit to Kapilavastu. It is said that in the first year of his enlightenment, Buddha, accompanied by twenty thousand monks, paid a visit to his native place and stayed in this *vihara*.

Hiuen Tsang, a Chinese traveller of the seventh century, mentioned that he saw the ruins of about 1000 *viharas* in *Kapilvastu* (Watters 1973:1). This indicates that the construction of the *vihara* was very popular in those days. Among the specific *viharas* mentioned by Hiuen Tsang are a *vihara* built over the site of the sleeping hall of Queen *Mayadevi* and a *Sangharama* built near the *Ramagrama Stupa* (Beal 1973:1). The excavation of *Kapilvastu* has revealed some important *viharas* that existed during the Buddha's time. Further, he made a note that in Nepal "the *Sangharama* and *Deva* temples are closely joined and there are about 200 priests who study both the Great and Little Vehicle. (Beal 1969:95-6).

Indeed *vihara* had existed from the time of the Buddha. These *viharas* must have been the dwelling places of the monks and the nuns in those days. Therefore, in the remote past, it was in the monasteries where the Buddha's doctrine was preached, discussions held, and new scripts written. Later, the monasteries grew into great universities as the important centres of learning (Locke 1980:64). *Nalanda*, *Vikramasila* and *Taxila* were some of eminent universities of ancient India. Some Buddhist *viharas* originated and flourished at a time when the *Theravada* school was prominent. These *viharas* were built on the pattern of rural dwelling houses. With the evolution of Mahayana Buddhism, Mahayana *viharas* appeared slightly different in construction from the *Theravada* ones. Korn notes that the basic structure did not change in the whole course of two thousand years history (Korn 1976:26).

Development of Buddhist Viharas in Nepal

The Kirata and the Lichchhavi periods are the most significant periods of ancient Nepal. The later chronicles mention that in the Kirata period the Buddha is said to have visited the Kathmandu Valley with his disciples and

lived in place called Puchhagara Chaitya. In order to preach his teachings and provide accommodation for monks and nuns, they assembled at a serene place and formed a community (*sangha*). Housed in monasteries or *vihara*, the monks and nuns devoted themselves to study and practice the teaching of Lord Buddha. In these monasteries a large number of monks and nuns lived and studied. That this community of monks and nuns in the monasteries was known as a *sangha* from Buddha's time is evidenced by different Buddhist Jataka and Avadana literatures. The evidence and records available from the excavations in Kapilavastu and Lumbini indicate the existence of such *viharas* in Buddha's time.

According to chronicles, Charumati Vihara of Chavahil was constructed by Charumati, the daughter of Ashoka. (Wright 1972:111) Although this fact has not been historically proved, *Chavahil* had been an attraction for the Chinese and other Buddhist monks for several centuries. According to Korn, some of the oldest *viharas* dating back to the first century A.D. are Vikramsila Vihara (*Than-vihara* of Thamel), Visharukhya Vihara, Chakra Vihara, Hemvarna Vihara and Bhyu Bahal.

Vihara Culture in the Lichchhavi Period

So far as the *vihara* culture is concerned, the Lichchhavi period is significant in Nepal's history. Lichchhavi rulers enthusiastically helped the *sangha* or *viharas* to function effectively. This fact is proved by the mention of Buddhist *viharas* in the inscriptions of several Lichchhavi rulers. Among them the earliest reference to the *vihara* is in Amsuvarama's Hadigaon inscription in which the name of five most important Buddhist *viharas* of that period that is Manadeva Vihara, Gumvihara, Srirajvihara, Kharjurikavihara and Madyamvihara, are mentioned (Bajracharya 2030 B.S.: 323-4).

Further, in the inscription we also come across the names of a few other *viharas* existing during the Lichchhavi period. They are Adhayaruchi Vihara, Vartakayan Gupta Vihara and Chaturbhattansan Vihara. These *viharas* are referred in the Yagabahal inscription of Lichchhavi King Narendra Deva. Sri Shivadeva Vihara is also another important *vihar* mentioned in the Vajradhar inscription of Narendra Deva (Bajracharya 2030. B.S.:499)

During this period, the *viharas* were organized under the guidance and management of the Buddhist *sangha*. We find the mention of Arya Bhikshu Sangha in the inscription of King Narendra Deva (Bajracharya 2030 B.S.:499). One of the Lichchhavi inscriptions mentions about Chaturdisa Arya Bhikshu Sangha (bhikshu sangha of the four directions). This indicates

that the *sanghas* had a predominant status in the society and played a significant role in construction work as well as the maintenance of the *viharas*. *Vamsavalis* also contain references to the *viharas* of Lichchhavi period. According to the Gopalraj vamsavali, King Vrishadeva, the great grandfather of Mandeva I, founded the Singu –Vihara – Chaitya – Bhattarika. Further, Sriraj – Vihara was also constructed by King Dharmadeva, father of Mandeva I (Bajracharya 2030 B.S.:173). The existence of many *viharas* indicates that the *vihara* culture was very much developed during the period. However, most of all the existing *viharas* of Kathmandu are of *Mahayana* origin. This is because during the early Lichchhavi period, when *vihara* architecture developed in Nepal, *Mahayana* had become a predominant sect in Buddhism.

***Vihara* Culture in the Medieval period**

Vihara architecture in Nepal was designed from the very early period to maintain several activities that promoted *vihara* culture. The *viharas* were centres of religion, education and cultural activities in the medieval period. The earliest phase of the medieval period of Nepal's history is known as the Thakuri period. This period was marked with the revival and growth of cultural activities in the Kathmandu Valley. Buddhism and Buddhist culture flourished, providing a new dimension to both the material and spiritual life of the people of Nepal. Although Gumvihara of Sankhu, Swayambhu Vihara and Thamvihara of Kathmandu, Rudravarna Mahavihara of Patan and some other *viharas* are of Lichchhavi origin, they must have been renovated several times in later period. Chhusyabahal, Musyabahal, Padma Chakra Mahavihara, Dharmachakra Mahavihara, are some of the eminent *viharas* of the medieval age. The list of more than forty *viharas* is given by Regmi (Regmi 2028 B.S.:173). Additionally we know of hundreds of *viharas* from that period, most of the ancient foundations which still exist today were founded in that period, and the whole of *vihara* culture as we know it today developed in that period – the married *Sangha*, the rising importance of vajrayana and its place of Vajracharyas, the round of tantric ritual, the first examples of Buddhist texts etc. It is in the Thakuri period that we have the greatest flowering of Buddhism in the valley and for the *vihara* culture as it exists today the Thakuri period is certainly decisive. During this period, *viharas* continued to play an important role in educating people and preaching Buddhism. The monks and nuns who resided in them also used to educate the youths and masses who came to hear them. In order to study Nepalese Buddhism,

Buddhist art and architecture, many scholars from India, China and Tibet visited Nepal and stayed in various Nepalese monasteries.

Santrakshita, a famous Indian logician of the eighth century came to Nepal in A.D. 743 and stayed for six years. His Vigyananavada theory might have become popular among the Nepalese Buddhist scholars of this time, Padmasambhava, a professor of Yogachara school of Tantric Buddhism at the Nalanda Mahavihara visited Nepal in A.D. 743 (Sankalia 1934:119). In Nepal he practiced Tantric Sadhanas. He was very impressed by the Nepalese festivals and rituals. He stayed in Nepal for four years, and in A.D. 747 he left for Tibet. Komalasila was a great buddhist philosopher of India. He was the disciple of Santarakshita at Nalanda. During his visit in Nepal in A.D. 762 he was warmly received by the Nepalese Buddhist. He visited all the famous Buddhist centres of the Valley, especially the Swayambhu Chaitya and Buddhanath. In this way they all visited Nepal where they preached and worked for the expansion of Nepalese Buddhism. Some Buddhist monks of Tibet also visited Nepal for the cause of Nepalese Buddhism (A.D. 978-1026). They are Brogmi, Stang Lo-gzon, Mar-pa Dopa, Rwa lotsa-barDo-rjegrags, Gos se-btsum. The Chinese Buddhist priests also visited Nepal. Kiyé with a mission of the Chinese Buddhist priests came to Nepal.

All these accounts show that from the ancient period Nepal was visited by many Buddhist philosophers as well as priests. Their visits and activities tied India, Nepal and Tibet in one strong knot of Buddhism. During the period in question, one can also see the gradual changes which occurred in the Buddhist society in Nepal. The *vajrayana* became the most dominating sect which injected mantras, charms and rituals to the basic and purely intellectual tenets of Buddhism. It destroyed the sanctity of monastic settlement including the lives of monks and nuns. The celibate monks disappeared entirely, changing into the communities of married *bare* (Shakya). This development gave Newar Buddhist of Nepal its special character (Regmi 2028 B.S.:119). In the *vihara*, nowadays, high caste Buddhist Newars such as Shakyas and Vajracharyas are initiated as Buddhist monks for some days. This initiation ceremony is called *Barechhuyegu*. Besides this, they have also many rites and rituals, festivals and ceremonies which have bound the community together. It is true that there were monasteries with celibate monks at one time and there are now only monasteries with *sanghas* of married or householder *Bhikshhus*. These *viharas* served as centres for the socio-religious affairs of the entire Buddhist community (Slusser 1982:288).

Characteristic Differences Between *Baha* and *Bahi*

Although both *baha* and *bahi* bear the formal names of Mahavihara these two terms possess some distinctive features that needs to be discussed.

In ancient period, the *bahis* were found as peaceful place for the Buddhist. Originally, the *bahis* were designed as places for training, preaching, copying religious manuscripts and providing shelter and boarding to visiting monks. Later on, when Buddhism developed the cult of *Vajrayana*, the residential monks began to lead married and domestic life. Then new *bahals* were constructed as establishments for communities of married monks. The references to *baha* can be seen in many Lichchhavi inscriptions.

Generally *bahis* are built up outside the settlement areas so that the members of *Bhikshu Sangha* can pursue their daily duties in peace and tranquility, for examples, *Puchho - Bahi*, *Chabahi*, and *Kindol Bahi* are located outside the main urban settlements. In ancient India too monasteries were built on mountains or outside the urban settlements. It is indicated that the famous Mauryan King Ashoka dug some caves in rocks for the monks. In Nepal, the *bahas* were constructed in the middle of the city or inside the city areas. One can see that almost all were constructed in the midst of principal settlements.

Architecturally, however, *baha* and *bahi* differ slightly from each other. Generally the *bahi* architecture is simpler than the *baha* one. The *bahis* are built up over a raised plinth or a platform about street level, for example, *Yampi-Bahi* of Patan with a higher plinth displays a typical *bahi* architecture. Further, on the rooftop of the shrine, a small temple-like structure or a hanging lantern-like structure is built. This typical structure of a *bahi* can be seen in the *Saptapur Mahabahi* at Lalitpur. The architectural style of the *baha* is more beautiful, lavish and elaborate than that of *bahi*. The architecture of Rudravarna Mahavihara and Hiranyavarna Mahavihara of Patan can be taken as examples. Here it would be relevant to mention that the *baha* became home of the tantric ritualistic activities of the vajracharya. On the other hand the *bahis* as the relics of an earlier, less-tantric Buddhist tradition, maintained more simplistic architectural form (Locke 1985:187).

In a *baha*, *gajurs* or pinnacles are attached on the top of the roof. The roof is wide, and the space under it is usually unused. Though Shakyamuni Buddha or one of the celestial Buddhas may be the *kwapadyo* or main deity of the *baha*, in most of the *bahas* the main deity is Akshobhya Buddha while most of *bahis* have Maitreya Bodhisattwa. On the ground floor of a *bahi* and a *baha*, there stands the main shrine which is always guarded by two lions,

elephants or griffins. This shrine is closed except for a latticed window. On the second floor of the *Baha* is a room called *agam*, where the *Tantric* deities of the *sangha* are kept and worshipped. The lower storey in both *baha* and *bahi* is in the form of an open *varanda*, and the upper storey is divided into residential room in a *baha* while it is a colonnaded room in a *bahi*. The upper storey of a *baha* provides the residence room for the monks during the days when these monasteries housed communities of celibate monks. The *bahis* have open exhibition halls where they exhibit *Dipankara* images in the month of *Gunla*. From the study of *baha* and *bahi* in all the three cities of Kathmandu Valley, one comes to know that *baha* are larger in shape and more in number than *bahi* because the *baha* could be built by the devotees while no new *bahi* can be constructed.

One cannot ignore that both the term *baha* and *bahi* have been derived from *vihara* and bear the formal names of "mahavihara". For example, Thanbahi is also called Vikramshila Mahavihara, while in *Bhuakha Bahi*, a *baha* is known as Henakar Mahavihara. Structurally, both *baha* and *bahi* have courtyards, each enclosed by a two-storied rectangular structure. The lower storey in both the *baha* and *bahi* is in the form of an open *varanda*. In both *baha* and *bahi* a *dharmadhatu mandal* is installed in front of the main deity. Both *baha* and *bahi* are built of brick and wood.

Propagation of Buddhism through the Viharas

From the very ancient period, Nepal was famous for its Buddhist *vihara*. These *viharas* were humming with intellectual activities of the Nepalese and foreign Buddhists and were the centres for the propagation of Buddhist religion and culture. The monks of the *vihara* possessed tremendous knowledge of religious texts. Later on, these monasteries played a significant role in the field of Tantric Buddhism. Mahabauddha *Vihara* or Ubaha of Patan, had been the traditional centre of tantric Buddhist rituals. *Guhyapuja* or the secret Buddhist practices are occasionally performed at the Mahabaudha *Vihara* of Patan.

Activities of the Viharas

Vihara is the main centre for the development of the religious texts and manuscripts. Numerous Buddhist texts were written or copied there. *Pancharaksha* and *Ashtasaharika pajnaparmita* were the popular texts written and edited in the *viharas*. Other important Buddhist texts include *Namasangiti*, *Ganadvyuha*, *Karandevyuha* and *Kangur* (Ram 1978:150). Most of the

Tibetan and Sanskrit manuscripts were also copied here. All big *viharas* were inhabited by great scholars and famous priests of the time who created a good collection of books. Therefore, the Nepalese *vihara* became the storehouse of Buddhist literature. Buddhist *vihara* such as Charumati Vihara, Rundravarna Mahavihara, and Hiranyavarna Mahavihar played the significant role in this regard. Because of their fame, they were visited by foreign scholars from time to time.

Conclusion

The study of a large number of extent *viharas* such as Rudravarna Mahavihara, Hiranyavarna Mahavihara and others, *viharas* in the principal cities of the Kathmandu Valley and references to innumerable *viharas* in the Lichchhavi and the Malla inscriptions bring to light the unique features of the Nepalese *viharas*. These *viharas* have their own peculiar characters which are intensely religious and supremely symbolic. Their quiet location provided the residing monks and scholars opportunity and inspiration to create bulks of Buddhist literature which not only educated the natives but also attracted foreign visitors. Translation of original Sanskrit and Newari into Tibetan took place in various *viharas* of Nepal. On the other hand *viharas* also assumed the role of cultural and ritual centres where growth rites and many communal-clans and family rituals were performed under the leadership of the resident monks. It should be mentioned here that the *vihara* became embodiment of Buddhist religion and culture in Nepal. The "*vihara* culture" therefore, should be understood in the context of Buddhist culture sustained by the *vihara*, the centre of learning and ritual performances.

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