

# The Medieval Settlements

## With Special Reference to Balambu and Bungamati

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### 1. Background

The geographical studies on Nepalese settlements are limited. Despite its certain limitations, Kawakita's study<sup>1</sup> represents the cross-section of settlements of central Nepal in which two major settlements, viz. agricultural and commercial, each comprising different patterns of settlement, are identified. Among these two major groups, agricultural settlement is supposed to be basic and earlier in origin while the commercial settlement is said to have been segregated itself from the earlier.

Similarly, two main processes are identified as regards to the morphological evolution of settlements into urban areas.<sup>2</sup> One is the transformation of traditional medieval city into the modern ones. The example being Kathmandu Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, etc. The second process concerns particularly with the expansion and population concentration of certain rural settlements giving rise to urban agglomerations. The examples are Pokhara,

Hetauda, and the major settlements of Tarai region. Some of the main attributing factors for the growth process of medieval settlements are its rich soil and geographical location as the entrepot trade centres. The growth of rural centres into urban agglomeration, on the other hand, is attributed to various development undertakings e.g. in the field of transport, industry, etc.<sup>3</sup> Since majority of major settlements of Nepal Tarai are located close to the Indian railheads it may not be controversial to assume that the expansion of Tarai settlements are the results of increasing opportunities there provided and expanded in the beginning by the development of transport system in the southern border areas with India during the British period.

The scope of the present study is, however, limited to outline some of the important features of spatial and socio-economic aspects of medieval settlement with its special reference to Balambu and Bungamati two separate compact settlements located each at a distance

1. J. Kawakita, *Ethno-Geographical Observation on the Nepal Himalaya in Peoples of Nepal Himalaya*, Vol. III (Ed) H. Kihara, Kyoto, 1957

2. *Nepali National Report for Human Environment*, National Planning Commission, HMG, Kathmandu, 1971 p. 6

3. op. cit

of 5 miles west and south of Kathmandu respectively<sup>4</sup> (Fig.1.)

## 2. The Medieval Settlements

Founded between 13th to 18th century, the medieval settlements are said to be internally organised social units where the communities are occupied with the whole round of life for fulfilling the goals of economic performance and social control. But the community life is said to have a relative difference as some settlements enjoy certain amenities which others lack. These amenities are expressed in terms of such facilities as the drinking water, ponds and water tanks, public buildings, public platform, etc.etc.<sup>5</sup> Such a relative difference in the community life reflected by some aggregate features of amenities, perhaps, differentiate the medieval cities from its hub of settlement clusters.

One proxy indicator for such differentiation could be the nomenclature of settlements. For example, the term 'Pur' in Sanskrit designates 'city' and this term usually comes as a suffix to the place name. Related to this observation, it is interesting to note the five major settlements with over 5,000 population of the Kathmandu Valley. They are

Kantipur (Kathmandu) 1961 population: 121,019), Lalit-pur (Patan, 47,713), Bhakta-pur (Bhadgaon, 33,877), Madhya-pur (Thimi, 9,719) and Kirti-pur (5,764).

Balambu and Bungamati are also known as Bhasti-pur and Amara-pur but these settlements are of relatively small size (respective population 1965: 1,469 and 2,968).

### A. Spatial Aspect of Medieval Settlement:

In its spatial aspect, one interesting point to be noted is the geographical location of settlements. Almost all the medieval settlements are found to be located in the elevated plain which command the low lying agricultural land.<sup>6</sup> But the principal reason for such a locational choice for certain settlements seems to be political<sup>7</sup> whereas to the majority of settlements it may still be the economic consideration since the economy of practically all settlements were founded on the efficient use of their agricultural lands.

Irrespective to the location and size, the settlement patterns are rather compact which are often fortified with the provision of network of walls and gateways.<sup>8</sup> In Balambu there are

4. The author surveyed Balambu in 1965 and submitted a report: Village Survey (Applied Geography) Balambu Puldol & Thapagaon to the Dept. of Geogra., T. U. whereas Bungamati is surveyed by the author in 1968. from the Dept. of Geogr. T. U. The author's published contribution on this village is: A Cultural Geography of Bungamati Village, in Nepal Review, Voice of Nepal (P. Ltd.) Kath., 1969. Vol. II No. 1 pp. 35-42. The observations and data used here are largely drawn from these reports.

5. Personal communication with Mr. Daman Raj Tuladhar.

6. See also: Land-use map of Kathmandu-Patan by P.P. Karan attached in the back cover page of the Himalayan Review, Kathmandu, 1973-74.

7. D. B., Bajracharya, Defence System of the Malla Period and Popular Duty to it, in Nepal Digest, Vol. I, No. 6, April-May 1972, Kathmandu, p. 23

8. Ibid. pp. 23-27. See Also: C. B. Shrestha & V. M. Malla, 'Urban Centres of the Kathmandu Valley,' in The Himalayan Review, Kathmandu, 1969-70, 21st IGV Nepal Tour Supplement pp. 33-39.

three gateways—one each at east, north and south directions. hendranath.<sup>9</sup>

The main road radiates from the centre and the whole settlement is divided into broad rectangles which are further sub-divided into blocks (Fig. 2). The main street is either brick or stoneslab paved. The pavement of stoneslab seems to be of later introduction. In Balambu, it was only in the early 50s that the main street is paved with such slabs measuring 5 feet wide.

Houses are generally three-storied and are built with bricks and tile roofing. Depending on the economic conditions of the community or other factors there are special public buildings dedicated to the local deity like the 'chapa' attached to Hayagriv Bhairav temple in Bungamati. Other public buildings in the form of 'Pati-Pauwa' (inns) are to be found practically in all medieval settlements where the people could gather for social, religious or recreational purposes. In certain settlements, particularly of large size settlements, there are elevated platforms (Daboo) at specific points where the socio-religious performances are held. In many settlements one could find the ponds and water tanks either left open or encircled by walls. Similarly, there are either dug out wells or water-spouts connected to canal for drinking water purposes. One very interesting feature characterising the medieval outlook of settlements is their association with certain deity. For example, Balambu is dedicated to Mahalaxmi and Bungamati to Mach-

Newars are the original inhabitants of the medieval settlements but concentration of specific caste-group by settlement e.g. Maharjans in Balambu or some fair indication of caste-wise clustering within the settlement like Vajracharya in Machhendra Bahal, Sakya and Tuladhar in ward No.2, Maharjan and Mali in ward Nos. 1,4 & 6 of Bungamati, are discernible. However, these settlements differ radically both in spatial and social term from the specific caste-group settlements to be found in Parbate settlement.<sup>10</sup> like Thapagaon of Puldol area.

Looking at the single ethnic composition (Newar) and the practice of polytheism (Buddhism & Hinduism) of Medieval Settlements, it is more comparable with the single ethnic group and the practice of Mahayana and Shinto in Japan.<sup>11</sup>

#### *B. Socio-Economic Aspect of Medieval Settlement:*

The medieval settlements with continuous rows of single housing units are basically the agricultural settlements. Generally, two types of agriculture are practiced by the communities, viz. Ghar Bari and Khet Bari. The Ghar Bari, in a way, is kitchen garden attached with the individual residential units where the individual family grow their vegetable requirements. On the other hand, the cereal

9. See also: The Physical Development Plan for the Kathmandu Valley, HMG/N, Kathmandu, 1969. P. 53.

10. Derived this term from 'Parbate' (Nep: People living in higher altitude).

11. Y. Masai, The Contemporary Japanese Townscape in Japanese cities- A Geographical Approach, The Association of Japanese Geographers, Tokyo, 1970 p. 105.

grains are grown in the Khet Bari which are often detached from the residential units. Since animal husbandry and cultivation are clearly related and as these two occupations are not mutually exclusive, almost all community members keep some livestock. Therefore, it can be said that the economy of the medieval community is founded on what the farm and livestock produce. To meet other requirements of life, barter is the most prevalent system of the time. Even to the present date, oilseeds with mustard oil, potatoes and millets with earthen pots, spoilt and unutilized metal pieces with utensils are bartered occasionally both in Balambu and Bungamati.

Since money plays a minimal part in the community, the socio-economic status of the people is determined in terms of right over land. Those who are rich in the community show their economic prosperity through the land grants to the social organisations, various dieties and organising big feasts occasionally which is known popularly as 'Dey Bhoj'.<sup>12</sup> The Machhendranath and Bhairav of Bungamati is said to possess some 1200 ropanis of land from such land grants. Similarly, the Mahalaxmi of Balambu accounts some 145 ropanis of such land. Some of the important implications associated with such offering of land to the social organisations and deities are that the services will be performed so long as the land is to be held and the members of the community will be motivated to attach in the society.

In the traditional society the usual way of payment is in grains. In Balambu, the barber, 'Kushle' (player of musical instruments during various ritual works) and smiths are paid

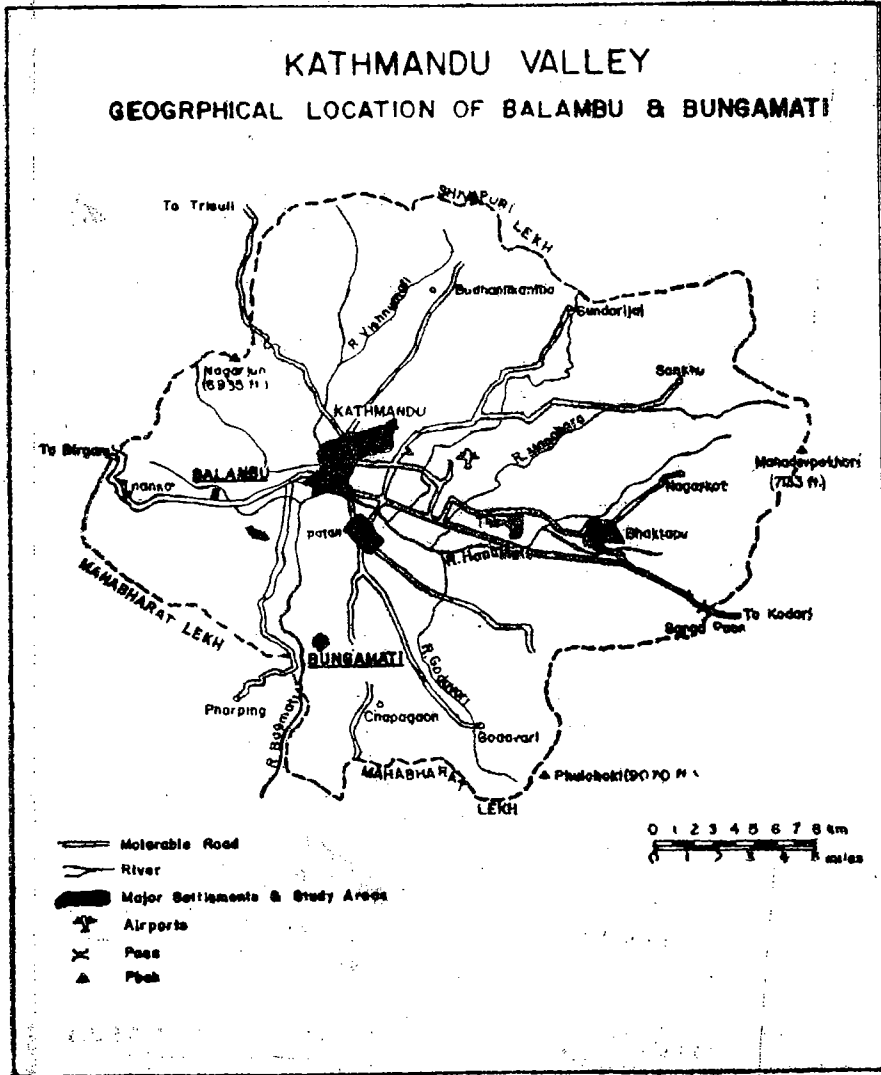
in grain. The quantity of grain payment to the barber depends on the number of males in a family while to the blacksmith it depends on the number of plows owned by the family. The system is called 'Jajamani' and when a servicing caste refer to his client as his 'jajman' (i.e. grain paying family), he implies, first, that the relationship between them is an enduring one and, secondly, that his client is wealthy enough to pay annually in grain. Like the land grants to dieties and social organisations, it is also said to exist the payment in land to the servicing caste which is considered as of great prestige.

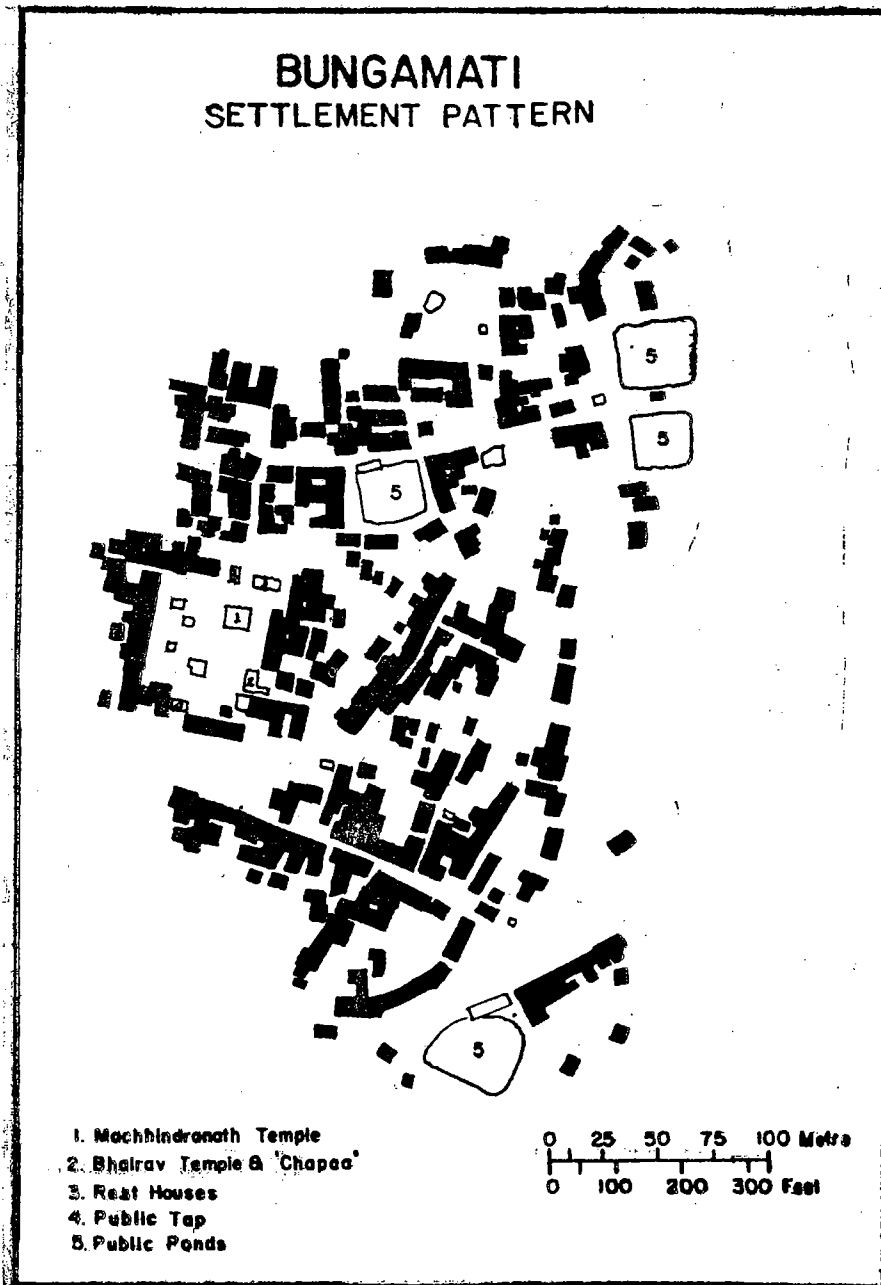
In the medieval community, extended family system forms the basic unit of society. Although they are separated, the family members are called on during various occasions for co-operation as well as for feasts. On the other hand, the unity between diverse members of the community are reflected in a mutual reciprocal system like 'Bolay' (literally, let's shoulder together) where the labour are exchanged under the obligation of kinship, friendship and neighbourhood for agriculture during transplanting and harvesting seasons; and in the institutionalised system like 'Manka Khala' (literally, common group) where the community members, representing from almost every family in the village make collective efforts e. g. in the construction of canals, ponds, water tanks, and in its repair, maintenance, etc.

In the medieval period when each caste is associated with a practice of particular occupation, the strong social cohesion and continuity in the community is further exemplified by the inclusion of such a functionally evolved caste. The caste structure of Balambu is composed of Maharjan (farmer) Shrestha

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12. In this feast, at least one member from each of the family in the village is invited.





(Trade & Craftsmen) Nakarmi (Blacksmith) Kushle (Tailor) Tandukar (Painter) Khadgi (Butcher) Manandhar (Oil presser) Baniya and Napit (Barber). Like in many other medieval settlements, the social segregation of people according to traditional caste is also found. As for example, in Bungamati the main courtyard of Machhendra Bahal is being occupied by the so-called higher castes leaving its periphery to the lower. The profile of

caste strata from peripheral Jawllakhel to Machhendra Bahal gives a fair indication of Poda, Kassin, Mali, Maharjan, Tuladhar, Sakya and Vajracharya.

An understanding of our settlements is basic to an understanding of our culture and of special value to professionals in settlement planning.