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.

Contributions to Nepalese Studies, Vol. 22, No. 2 (July 1995), 141–151
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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 Buddhists monks. In Buddhists 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 Raj griha 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 Kapilavastu (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 Kapilavastu 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 Puchagara 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 (bhiskshu 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.

_Santraksita_, 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 Buddhhanath. 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-rje-grags, Gos se-btsun. The Chinese Buddhist priests also visited Nepal. Ki-ye 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. Mahabuddha 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.

References


__________ 2028 V.S. *Nepalko Dharmik Itihas* (In Nepali), Kathmandu: Royal Nepal Academy

