

## A GLIMPSE ON BIHARS AND BAHAIS IN LALITPUR TOWN

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### Abstract

*This paper deals with the distribution Bihars and Bahais of Patan area of Lalitpur district. Bihars and Bahis are the places where Buddhist monks and nuns stay live and carry out different activities like praying, meditation, leering and studying. Available evidences prove that the Bihars and Bahis in Kathmandu valley were even during the lifetime of Shakyamuni Gautam Buddha. There are three types of Buddhist Bihars namely General Bihar, Madhyamik Bihar and Mahabihar. Altogether there are 167 Bihars of different period in Lalitpur town. Most of them have now been remained only in name and their condition is not good. Except few, all Bahis have been badly damaged in the absence of the regular care and maintenance. The situation might be more critical and worse if nothing is worked out to reconcile the problems.*

Key words: Bahis, Bihars, Buddhism, Mahayan, Sangha, Thervada, Vajrayan, Bajracharyabhisek, monks, nuns, Chuda-Karma.

### Introduction

The terms Bihars and Bahis are closely associated with the Buddhism. Bihars and Bahis are the places where Buddhist monks and nuns stay and carry out different activities like the praying, the meditation, the leering and studying, the teaching and so on so forth. Prior to the emergence of Bihars and Bahis, Buddhist monks and nuns are said to be accommodated in the caves and natural forest areas. The word 'Bihar' is derived from the word *Biharati* which means to live. Another meaning of this Bihar is the walking for pleasure. Generally, the word Bahi denotes the same meaning like Bihar indicating the smaller in size in comparison to the Bihar. However, there are distinct differences between a Bihar and Bahi as: i) Bahis are supposed to be the earliest places than Bihars, ii) Bahis are usually built far away from the residential area, whereas Bihars are made amidst the residential area, and iii) Bahis are built over a raised plinth. On the roof top of the shrine room, a lantern like structure marks the Bahi. Bihars do not usually possess the lantern like structure above the roof top. Bihars do have the quadrangle courtyard usually paved by the stones or bricks. Bihars consist of residence of families.

The main objective of this paper is to explore the spatial location of those Bihars and Bahis of Lalitpur town. The author of this is one of the members of Bihars of Lalitpur town. Many traditional, cultural, historical and ritual activities of these Bihars and Bahis are known to him. In fact, those things are difficult to know for the individuals outside of Bajracharya community. The paper attempts to deal with few historical, socio-cultural, ritual and other

special characteristics of Bihars and Bahis of the whole Kathmandu valley. Discussions have been made on the changes, advantages and constraints regarding the Bihars and Bahis in the present context. The present paper does not concern with the Bihars of Thervad; the Bihars and Bahis which have been linked to Newar Buddhism i.e. Mahayan and Vajrayan doctrine are being entertained in this paper.

### Materials and Methods

Present study has chosen Lalitpur town as the study area since it was a town dominated by the Buddhist followers from the very beginning and still it does possess nearly 30 percent Buddhist population. Besides, it holds a number of Buddhist Bihars, Bahis, Stupas, Chaityas along with the Thervada Bihars compared to those in Kathmandu and Bhaktapur town. The next fact is that the highest concentration of Bihars and Bahis is found in Lalitpur town.

Lalitpur town is one of the principalities of Kathmandu valley, situated in the south east of Kathmandu at a distance of about 5 kilometers. The town extends from 27° 39' to 27° 41' north and 85° 18' to 85° 21' east covering an area of 15.46 square kilometers. Altitude ranges from 1280 to 1330 m above sea level. The town located on the left bank of the Bagmati River is built in a flat upland overlooking the floodplain of the Bagmati in the north. The original shape of the town was more or less round and according to the popular local interpretation; it resembled the Sudarshan Chakra (the revolving wheel of Lord Vishnu). Now, it has been greatly modified due to recent change in the limit of the town.

Numbers of legends are established in Lalitpur town. According to Daniel Wright, Lalitpur town is older than Kathmandu. It was built during the rule of Raja Bir Dev. At that time, it was called as Yellowdesi and Lalitpatan. Evidence has shown that it was built in 289 A.D. The names that have been in practice include Patan, Yupagram, Yala and Lalitpatan. It is said that Lalitpur town was just a group of hamlets and only towards the end of seventh century; Lalitpur town was enlarged and consolidated in a compact town.

This descriptive cum analytical study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data/information was collected through focus group discussion (FGD) and key informants' interview with extensive field observation. Secondary information was acquired reviewing relevant literature.

### **Bihar, Bahi and Buddhism in Kathmandu Valley**

The application of Buddhism is very old in Nepal. There is a supposition that the Buddhism was started from Swayambhu in Nepal. Therefore, Swayambhu was regarded as universal ideal of Buddhism. Regarding Bihar and Bahi, it is found that an inscription in Handigaun there is information about a Bihar named as Gun Bihar, which is said to be in existence in Kirant period. Gun Bihar is regarded as the oldest Bihar of Nepal. As is known, the entry of Shakya Muni Gautam Buddha in Nepal took place during the Kirant period. It is said that there is no authentic record of the construction of Bihars and Bahis in Kathmandu valley.

According to the great historical book namely *Mul Sarwastiwad Binaya Sutra*, there were Bihars and Bahis in Kathmandu valley during the life time of Shakya Muni Gautam Buddha. The present Chabahil is to be considered as the Bihar built by Charumati, the daughter of the great Indian king Asoka. Available facts have proved that most of those Bihars and Bahis of Kathmandu valley were erected during the Lichhavi and Malla period. The spatial coverage of these Bihars and Bahis is also noticed in the various parts of Nepal namely Lumbini, Kapilvastu, Surkhet and Banepa.

Historical evidences have proved that during Lichhavi period there were existed many Bihars and Bahis along with the Sangha of monks and nuns. There was a good deal of organizational system in those Bihars and Bahis. Nearly, same condition prevailed in medieval period in Kathmandu valley. From the very beginning, Kathmandu valley holds quite a large number of Bihars and Bahis. With the passage of time, many Bihars and Bahis of Kathmandu valley have been dwindled away in the absence of maintenance and repairing. A number

of Bihars and Bahis went out of record of which nothing is available at present.

A list of Bihars and Bahis has made available by a famous Buddhist research writer Hem Raj Shakya from Lalitpur, during the Fourth World Buddhist Conference which took place at Kathmandu on the auspicious anniversary of Lord Buddha of 2500<sup>th</sup> year. The booklet which he produced has mentioned only about Kathmandu valley, in which stated that 120 Bihars in Kathmandu, 167 Bihars in Lalitpur and 24 Bihars in Bhaktapur along with the correct names and local names. Hem Raj Shakya had estimated the number of Bihars could exceed five hundred. A research work carried out by I. K. Bajracharya has pointed out the number of Bihars in Kathmandu valley is 450 along with the 49 Theravada Bihars.

According to the available Buddhist literature, there are three types of Buddhist Bihars: General Bihar, Madhamak Bihar and Maha Bihar. General Bihar is a branch Bihar. Upasak and Upasika (Buddhist followers) do live there. Some such Bihars do perform Chudakarma performances. The monks who do get Chudakarma are called Chailak monk. The monks who discard the household life and follow celibacy taking the deep study of Buddhism live in Madhyamak Bihar. It's another name is Bahi Bihar. Maha Bihar is the Bihar where the monks carry out meditation. It is often known as Mul Bihar.

The history of Buddhist society has taken a sharp turn in Nepal when the monks and nuns have abandoned the lifelong celibacy and begun the household life. The Bihars and Bahis took a totally new way in its appearance with the changes in the way of life of those monks and nuns. The days of monk life have been reduced to four days which is known as Chuda-Karma at present. Later on, they are enrolled in household monks. In the days ahead, the children of Bajracharya community are only allowed to perform Bajracharyabhisek. A kind of groupism has come in existence among these Buddhist household monks. In a way, a stepwise character has developed in these Bihars which can be seen in the present context as well.

### **Socio-cultural and Ritual Characteristics of Buddhism**

At present, Bihars and Bahis have been accommodated by only Shakya and Bajracharya community. Many changes have taken place in its original appearance. The castes other than Bajracharya have also been found in the courtyard of these Bihars. But, no intimate relation is found of them with the Bihars.

In all Bihars and Bahis, the functions take place in an organized way with the particular regulations

and laws. For this, there is a *guthi* through which all the activities have been managed in a transparent way of which they all are acquainted to share their own participation at when and how. Because of this unique exposition of about the socio-cultural and ritual performances a smooth continuity has been taking place in its own way without any disturbances. No doubt, some unwanted and unexpected activities have been experienced in these communities regarding the socio-cultural performances, nearly from the three decades onwards, because of the changing scenario of the surroundings.

In each Bihar and Bahi, there is a Sangha being made from the participation of the family members. This Sangha does possess its own duties, rights and responsibilities. Each family of the Bihars and Bahis do have the very close and dependent relation with the Sangha. Each family member especially the male members are being authentically recorded in written form from the very childhood by the Sangha. In a way the performances of each and every family in terms of socio-cultural and ritual activities have utterly remained in the grip of these Sangha.

A sort of management does exist in each Bihar and Bahi to carry out the functions of the community. Day to day functions, monthly functions, special ceremony, festivals, rituals, death-management and many other functions do take place in these Bihars and Bahis. All these functions run through the Sangha in which the managerial task remains with the senior-most family member along with the other helping hands.

The Sangha has a very powerful responsibility. The family members who discard the rules and regulations of the Bihars and Bahis no longer remain in their community and Sangha remains aloof from them. In each and every year, all male family members who have been entertained by Chuda-Karma performance do gather in their communities to observe Sangha feast in which wide conversation does take place among these family members and do share the realities one with another. In this way, Bihars and Bahis do stand the paramount position in terms of Newar Buddhist Society. Bajracharya and Shakya communities are the leading ones to carry out the liveliness of these Bihars and Bahis.

### **Bihars and Bahis in Lalitpur Town**

There are one hundred and sixty seven Bihars in Lalitpur town. Majority of them have now been remained only in name and nothing. According to the historical facts there were 15 Bihars and 15 Bahis as the major Bihars and Bahis in the early period. During Malla period the extension of Lalitpur did include Chovar and Kirtipur as well. Another Bihar

named as Shree Vatchha Maha Bihar built up by Malla rulers has also been added in the list. The total number of Bihars has reached 18 which are still remained. As a major Bahis, there are 24 Bahis including Kirtipur, Bungamati and Ba Bahis.

Among these the Bihars and Bahis which happen to be in the present Lalitpur town are 16 Bihars and 21 Bahis. These Bihars and Bahis do have the name in both Sanskrit and Newari language. The Bihars located within the Lalitpur town are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Sanskrit and Newari names of Bihars of Lalitpur town**

Sanskrit	Newari
Jestha Barna Maha Bihar	Tanga Bahal
Hiranya Barna Maha Bihar	Kwa Bahal
Dharma Kirti Maha Bihar	Tabahal
Ratnakar Maha Bihar	Hakha Bahal
Yasodhar Maha Bihar	Bubahal
Data Nam Maha Bihar	Daubahal
Guna Laxmi Maha Bihar	Dhumbahal
Chakra Barna Maha Bihar	Chuk Bahal
Bajra Kirti Maha Bihar	Wan Bahal
Jyoti Barna Maha Bihar	Jyo Bahal
Baisya Barna Maha Bihar	Guji Bahal
Mayur Barna Maha Bihar	Bhinchhe Bahal
Rudra Barna Maha Bihar	Uku Bahal
Jaya Manohar Maha Bihar	Subahal
Baladhar Gyupta Maha Bihar	Yachhu Bahal
Shree Batchha Maha Bihar	Sibahal

Bihars are not similar with one another in a number of terms e.g. area, Sangha members, art and architecture, branch Bihars and others. Among these, Yashodhar Maha Bihar possesses the largest area (5 Ropanies) and Chakra Barna Maha Bihar holds smallest area (3 Ana 2 Paisa). Hiranya Barna Maha Bihar commands the largest number of Sangha members (more than 5,000) and Jyoti Barna Maha Bihar consists only 22 Sangha members. The Bihars which have only Bajracharya Sangha include Guna Laxmi Maha Bihar, Chakra Barna Maha Bihar, Dharma Kirti Maha Bihar, Dat Nam Maha Bihar and Ratnakar Maha Bihar. Four Bihars namely Yasodhar Barna Maha Bihar, Bajrakirti Maha Bihar, Mayur Barna Maha Bihar and Hiranya Barna Maha Bihar have both Shakya and Bajracharya in their Sangha. Remaining seven Bihars have supported only Shakya community. Most of these Bihars have branch Bihars.

There is variation in number of branches by Bihars. Rudra Barna Mahavir has earned 33 branch Bihars, Hiranya Barna Maha Bihar has 25 branch Bihars and Yasodhar Maha Bihar has 15 branch Bihars. Besides, three Bihars namely Hiranya Barna Maha

Bihar, Rudra Barna Maha Bihar and Ratnakar Maha Bihar do hold the exact outlook of Bihar as such being bounded by the total complex of own buildings whereas others have been surrounded by the residential houses of the Sangha members and others. The Bahis located within the Lalitpur town is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Sanskrit and Newari names of Bahis of Lalitpur town**

Sanskrit	Newari
Yampi Maha Bihar	Ibahil
Lalit Barna Maha Bihar	Konti Bahil
Napi Chandra Maha Bihar	Duntu Bahil
Gopi Chandra Maha Bihar	Pintu Bahil
Askchheswar Maha Bihar	Upper Pucho Bahil
Raskchheswar Maha Bihar	Lower Pucho Bahil
Lokakirti Maha Bihar	Nabahil
Mani Mandap Maha Bihar	Dhapagal Bahil
Saptapur Maha Bihar	Chink Bahil
Jestha Barna Maha Bihar	Jyaba Bahil
Raja Shree Maha Bihar	Ibaha Bahil
Lokkirti Maha Bihar	Kinu Bahil
Chandra Surya Maha Bihar	Nhyanka Bahil
Kamuk Nam Maha Bihar	Larger Khwaya Bahil
Kamuk Nam Maha Bihar	Smaller Khwaya Bahil
Gustal Maha Bihar	Main Guita Bahil
Pratham Shree Maha Bihar	Larger Guita Bahil
Basucha Shil Maha Bihar	Smaller Guita Bahil
Iti Raj Maha Bihar	Ilaya Bahil
Jaya Shree Maha Bihar	Uba Bahil
Sthabir Patra Maha Bihar	Thapa Bahil

The functions of Bahis are systematic but vary by Bahis. The Bahis having Sangha perform same activities as in Bihars. The largest Saptapur Bihar has 156 Sangha members whereas, the smallest one i.e. Jestha Barna Bihar has only one member. Now seven Bahis have no Sangha members. Some Bahis has own branch while in Saptapur Bihar there are 4 branch Bihars. Lokakirti Bahi possesses only Bajacharya Sangha and remaining are captured by Shakya community.

The condition of Bahis is not well. Except few, all Bahis have been badly damaged in the absence of the regular care and maintenance. Furthermore, there are some Bihars in Lalitpur town which do not happen in any group but these Bihars have been performing the similar activities like in Bihars and Bahis through Sangha as usual. The number of these Bihars is eight. The names are listed in Table 3.

**Table 3: Additional Bihars of Lalitpur town**

Name in Sanskrit	Name in Newari
Layan Chaitya Bimba Maha Bihar	Henu Bahal
Yonkuli Maha Bihar	Yoku Bahal
Chakrawarti Maha Bihar	Khwakha Nabahal
Gawarma Pinth Maha Bihar	Mubahal
Shree Watsa Maha Bihar	Atha Bahal
Subarna Maha Bihar	Ikha Chhen Bahal
Chaitya Barna Maha Bihar	Michchhu Bahal
Dwarik Bihar	Dwarika Bahal

The existence of Bihars and Bahis in Lalitpur town has witnessed a great prolonged period to come at the present condition by crossing a number of ruling periods. The location of these Bihars and Bahis was certainly controlled by the then environment of Lalitpur town. Therefore, a good deal of understanding of the present spatial distribution of Bihars and Bahis in Lalitpur town could provide the probable true situation of that time and the existing relationship at the present moment with the changing spatial landscape of Lalitpur town.

### Constraints for Development

The major constraints that have been noticed that of Bihars and Bahis at the present moment are presented below:

- The details Bihars and Bahis are not available to the desired extent and many of them have just remained in names.
- Mostly Bahis have been badly damaged and are out of Sangha in the absence of Sangha members.
- The title Bihar is being used in all types of Bihars and Bahis. It makes very confusion to detect in true sense.
- Often the names of Bihars and Bahis are found in repetition.
- Bahis seem very weak and getting vanishing due to the very limited Sangha members.
- Rapid changes in urban structure have narrowed down the originality of Bihars and Bahis.
- Migration of Sangha members has become a grave problem to maintain the condition as usual in those Bihars and Bahis which do have negligible Sangha members.
- Continued decline in income in one hand and soaring inflation on the other has narrowing down to run the usual functions in these Bihars and Bahis.

- Increasing in-migrants have been obstructing many identities of these Bihars and Bahis.
- Changing scenario in and around the town has directly and indirectly changing the thoughts and behaviors on the new generation Sangha members by bringing far away from their traditional way of life.
- The practice of inter-caste marriage has also derailed many Sangha members to come back because Sangha rules and regulations do not permit to remain in the activities of Bihars and Bahis.

## Conclusion

The Bihars and Bahis of Lalitpur town being run following the path of Mahayan Buddhism have still maintained its existence as such in its original form even crossing a prolonged period which is hardly possible to believe in the normal way. No doubt, there are many shortcomings, confusions, dilemmas regarding these Bihars and Bahis but they are the parts of history of Nepal in which Nepal should possess a feeling of dignity, pride and prestige. The

occupancy of these Bihars and Bahis dates back to the early period and construction of additional Bihars and Bahis have not taken place after the Malla period. The study of spatial location of these Bihars and Bahis in fact depicts the ways of then urban structure, the condition of socio-culture, history and ritual, the situation of then society, the position of the economic reality and many more.

The practice of Mahayan Buddhism was very powerful in the earlier period still the practice has been taking place in full swing within the previous locations. No addition of more Bihars and Bahis point out the expansion has been weakened to a great extent. Due to lack of regular care and maintenance, the existing ones have been vanishing and many with no traces. All this says that in the days ahead, the situation may be more critical and worse if nothing is worked out to reconcile the problems. An institution Buddha Bihar Sangha Lalitpur is established in 2032 B.S. with a view of developing, conserving and disseminating the importance of Bihars and Bahis in order to promote Buddha Dharma and culture in Lalitpur town. The role of this institution should be crucial along this line.