



Raj Guruju of Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvihāra: His Role in Buddhist Community of Kathmandu

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Abstract

Background: *Sikhamu Baha, Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvihāra*, is one of the prominent Buddhist monasteries of Kantipur with a history backed around 7th century CE. It is situated in a small, enclosed courtyard adjoining the *Kumari Baha* and just off of the Durbar Square. The importance of this *baha* is the fact that one of its members is the '*Raj Guru*', or *Raj Gubhaju*. This post is hereditary and is always held by a *Vajrācārya* of one of the lineages of *Sikhamu Baha*.

Objective: The objective of this article are to understand the different activities performed by *Rajguru* in the past and present, to highlight the facts regarding *Raj Guruju*, its history as well as his role in the buddhist community of Kathmandu and to showcase the linkage between *Kumari and Raj Guruju*.

Methodology: The study follows descriptive research methodology and interviews are conducted to meet the research objective.

Result: The findings of this study is that the *Raj Guruju* has been playing an eminent role in creating a balance in Buddhist community, working for benefit of *Vajrācārya* s of Kathmandu, fulfilling his duty as royal priest and also addressing the contemporary issues arose along with time.

Conclusion: *Raj Guruju* is a hereditary post held by *Vajrācārya* of "*Yuta kaval*" of *Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvihāra*. *Raj Guruju* being still a prominent and influential post amongst the *Bajracharya* of Kathmandu. He is the guardian of *Bajracharyas* in Kathmandu. He plays an eminent role in creating a balance in Buddhist community, working for benefit of *Bajracharyas* of Kathmandu. Along with the role towards *Bajracharya* community as a whole, *Raj Guruju* has special linkage with *Kumari* and *Kumari* chhen and thus has to follow his duties and specific roles in *Kumari Chhen* as well.

Keywords: *Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvihāra; Raj guruju, Lalmohar; Kumari, Mul-cakreswar; Raj Gubhaju*

Paper Type: Research Paper

Introduction

The dwelling place of Saṅgha members is called a vihara (Monastery) where they dedicate their life in the practice and propagation of the Dharma. There are two words used for the Newar Buddhist institutions of the Valley: baha (or bahal) and bahi (or bahil). The term baha is a corruption of the Sanskrit term vihara, the standard term for a Buddhist monastery.¹ It generally consists of a large Buddha image, a rectangular courtyard for assembly and display of Buddhist articles on occasions, long rooms for Dharma teaching or preaching on the ground floor and rooms for further extensive practice of Dharma, storeroom etc. in the first floor. Buddhist masters and Acharyas mostly dwell surrounding the monastery. Saṅgha means a group of practitioners of the Dharma, members of which follow a set of prescribed rules and regulations, synonymously known also as Vinaya or practimoksa.²

In Kathmandu, there are three sets of Buddhist institutions: the eighteen bahas of the Acarya Guthi plus their branches, ten purely Sakya main bahas plus their branches, and sixteen bahis. These eighteen principal monasteries and other monasteries were distributed in four regions from north to south and each region has one separate greater Saṅgha called Pui Ācā GU. The regions are called Pui. All the eighteen monasteries are associated with national umbrella Saṅgha, De Ācā GU.³ The four Pui are Thatu Pui, Dathu Pui, Lāyaku Pui and Kwathu Pui or Kvane Pui. Lāyaku Pui, Durbar square portion, equivalent to Kāsthmandap Mahānagar. The region has only one main mahavihara i.e. Sikhombaha or Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvīhāra.

Sikhamu Baha is situated in a small, enclosed courtyard adjoining the Kumari Baha and just off of the Darbar Square. Sikhamu Baha has three functioning branches, one defunct branch and the Kumari Baha which has ritual connections to Sikhamu Baha.⁴ Līlāvajra was the founder of Sikhamu-bāhā of Lāyaku Pui. Sikhamu Bāhā, the only principal monastery of Lāyaku Pui comprises more than 600 saṅgha members. The importance of this baha is the fact that one of its members is the 'Raj Guru', or Raj Gubhaju or Raj Guruju. Raj Guruju is a hereditary post held by Vajrācārya of "Yuta kaval" of Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvīhāra. As of now, the eldest son of Yuta kaval's Bhajusi Bajracharya's family lineage is officially appointed as Raj Guruju as mentioned in the lalmohar given by Pratap Singh Shah.

Raj Guruju is an eminent figure in Buddhist community of Kathmandu. Raj Guruju is a key person responsible for the addressing the issues within Bajracharya community of Kathmandu. However, there are not many studies done about Raj Guruju. Thus, I have choose this topic to highlight about the facts and roles of Raj Guruju who is a sangha member of Sikhamu Baha.

Objectives

The objectives of this research paper is to understand the role of Raj Guruju of Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvīhāra. In the Buddhist community of Kathmandu. The research paper highlights the different activities performed by Raj Guruju in past and present. The paper shows the linkage between Kumari and Raj Guruju. This paper focuses on the interpretation of the history of Raj Guruju along with roles and duties of Raj Guruju during the course of time.

Literature Review

The information on the subject matter is scattered in different texts, journals, research articles etc. the Literature that has been reviewed for this study comprises books, e-books, dissertations and so on. The literatures reviewed are mentioned below:

- 1 John K. Locke, Buddhist Monasteries of Kathmandu Valley, -a survey of the Bāhās and Bahis of the Kathmandu Valley, (Kathmandu: Sahayogi Press Pvt. Ltd., 1985), P. 531.
- 2 Surendra Man Bajracharya, *Monasticism in Buddhism of Nepal-Mandala: continuity and changes*, Diss. 2018, P.9
- 3 Bajracharya, *Op. cit.*, f.n. 3, p. 320
- 4 Locke, *Op. cit.* (f.n. 1). P. 263

Michael Allen. *The Cult of Kumari: Virgin worship in Nepal* (1975): This book is written by Michael Allen. This book is about the kumari cult that highlights the major features of the kumari cult. The book mentions the Kumaris of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhadgaon. The book has the mention of Rāj Guruju of Sikhamu bāhā and his association with Royal Kumari. There is not much detail about the relation of Rāj Guruju and Kumari.

John Kerr Locke. *Buddhist monasteries of Nepal: a survey of the Bāhās and Bahīs of the Kathmandu Valley* (1985): The writer of this book is John K. Locke. This book deals on Buddhist monasteries, daily rituals, annual festivals organized in the bāhās and branch bāhās. This book contains details about the architecture of Sikhamu bāhā, its saṅgha and the description about the Rāj Guruju.

Dr. Surendra Man Vajrācārya. *Monasticism in Buddhism of Nepal-Maṇḍala: continuity and changes* (2018): A research work by Dr. Surendra Man Vajrācārya as an unpublished dissertation was written in 2018. This work has highlighted the monasticism in Nepalmaṇḍala. There is mention of Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvihāra and Rāj-Guruju and paciha, hamu-Guruju of Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvihāra in his work.

Methodology

This study investigates the role of Raj Guruju of Śrīkhaṇḍa *Tarumūla Mahāvihāra*. By means of a descriptive research methodology. Qualitative research design is adopted. The survey research is applied as a descriptive type of research design. The information is collected by using both the primary and secondary method of data collection. For primary data, Interview and observation techniques are used. In depth interviews with concerned persons and Buddhist Scholars are conducted and for observation, field visits have been done. Secondary data is retrieved from books, articles, journals, reports, thesis and online sites. Among the published sources, newspapers, articles, books, chronicles and the internet had been consulted. Beside this, published books from abroad related to this research had also been another source.

Introduction to Raj Guruju

A Mul-cakreswar in Newar monasticism is equivalent to Sanghamahanayak, the supreme Sangha head of Buddhist sangha in current Theravada tradition. Thus, the monastics are first classed as Bhikṣus and Acarya (Pali Acariyo) among them are Sthavira, Pancasthavira, Mulasthavira/Cakresvar, Mula-cakresvar, De-thayepa (Mu thayepa) etc. Besides, Aajus, cakreswars and Mul-cakreswar, there is a provision of Raj-Guruju and other assisting monastic personnels like Paciha, Maa-Gubhaju, and Hamu Guruju in Kantipur. Raj Guruju who is also called Laya-Guruju means royal Buddhist master appointed by the king in the past.⁵

Presence of Raj-Guruju is compulsory during the making of Mul-cakreswars in Kathmandu. He is also authorized to take up the role of De Thayepa or Mul-cakreswar in absence of the latter. In this sense, he is like vice-president if Mul-cakreswar is to be assumed as president. It is his responsibility to oversee registration of Vajrācāryas of eighteen principal monasteries of Kantipur, to arrange seating of elders according to seniority, to look after the arrangement of annual gathering of Aac GU, to fix its turn holder, to conduct the activities as discussed and finalized by the council. Invitation to a religious performance which needs the presence of elders is often channeled through LayaGuruju. Thus, his role also resembles that of a general secretary of an organization.

The order of LayaGuruju seems prevalent in Kathmandu at least from the period before 1430 AD (Yaksamalla's time). Paciha, Ma-Gubhaju, and Hamu Guruju are the assisting personnel serving

5 Bajracharya, *Op. cit.*, f.n. 2, pp 348-349

the monastics through LayaGuruju. Paciha, derived from the word Pacimhica meaning fund keeper acts as accountant cum store keeper for the LayaGuruju when the religious events like De Aca Gu have to be arranged. He is also treated as an extra priest participating along with LayaGuruju and others in the religious activities. Ma-Gubhaju (perhaps derived from MahaGuruju) maintains the monastic activity records, to call and bring the needed person at the site for the needful. It is the duty of Hamu-Guruju to relay the messages and to make delivery of invitation cards to the right persons. His role seems significant when there was no invitation card distribution system as printing press was yet to be introduced, and invitees had to be informed personally. The order of LayaGuruju and his associates resembles the administrative secretariat.

At present the role of Raj-Guruju and paciha, hamu-Guruju falls under the prerogative of Vajrācāryas of Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvīhāra. There are lineages of Vajrācārya families from this monastery at present rendering such services. Rāj Guruju is a hereditary post held by Vajrācāryas of “Yuta kaval” of Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvīhāra. The eldest son of Yuta kaval’s Bhajusi Vajrācārya’s family lineage is officially appointed as Raj Guruju as mentioned in the lalmohar given by Pratap Singh Shah.

History of Raj Guruju

In Nepalese history, though there were many non-buddhist rulers ruling Nepalmandala, those kings did have faith in Buddhism and showed due respect towards Buddhism. As a result in order to conduct various Buddhist events and rituals, the rulers then gave the title of “Raj Guruju” to Vajrācārya priests and thus gave a strong position to vajrayani Buddhist tradition in the nation. The role of “Raj Guruju” is being performed by Vajrācārya of “Yuta kaval” of Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvīhāra. This post is hereditary and is always held by a Vajrācārya of one of the lineages of Sikhamu Baha.

This is an official post, similar to that of the present Raj Guru (who is always a 'Parvate' Brahman). It was a very important post in the time of the Malla kings and perhaps before their time, but evidently declined in importance in the late Malla period and has become little more than a historical relic since the coming of the kings of Gorkha. The post existed in Kathmandu and this Kathmandu Raj Guru seems to have performed many of the functions of the present royal guru. The origin of this post of Raj Guru is obscure. However, it is clear that it goes back at least to the early Malla period.⁶

The present Raj Guruju Manjushree Ratna Vajrācārya has stated that even though the period of time regarding the start of this tradition is unknown but the last Malla king Jaya Prakash Malla’s inscription and different Shah Kings like Pratap Singh, Ranabahadur, Rajendra Bikram Shah etc. have given lal mohars. A lal mohar states “राजगुरुजु या अधिकार परापूर्व कालीनसे सिखंमूबाहायापिनीगु खः शुकीयात परम्पराकथं निरन्तरता विया बौद्ध धर्मया ज्या न्ह्याका च्छै”⁷ which means that Raj Guruju’s rights have been reserved by people of Sikhamu Baha from ancient time, continue this as a tradition and keep up the work of Buddhism. A lal mohar was given by King Pratap Singh Shah to Bhajusi Bajracharya in 1833 B.S. states that the rights of Raj Guruju and panchabuddha was given to Sikhamugu baha from before so keep this on.

The Raj Gubhajas hold hereditary positions that date back to the Malla period when they carried the authority of the King to settle disputes amongst the Newar Buddhists and to carry out a number of ritual duties. Even today such disputes, mostly over rights to clients, are commonly heard by the 18 baha heads in a large meeting room on the top floor of Kumari Chen, The Sikhamu Raj Gubhaju is the senior most member of an agnatic lineage that currently has about 74 male members, most of whom reside at Rajkirtimahavihara in Maru tol.⁸

6 Ibid, P. 260

7 Yajya Man Pati Bajracharya, Rajguruju Ratnapani Bajracharya, (Kathmandu: Rajguruju Publication N.S. 1136)

8 Allen, Michael. "The cult of Kumari: Virgin worship in Nepal." (1975). P. 9

Roles of Raj Guruju

During the composition of book “Buddhist Monasteries of Kathmandu Valley, -a survey of the Bahas and Bahis of the Kathmandu Valley” author John K Locke (1985) had interviewed the then Raj Guruju, Pushpa Ratna Bajracharya. During the interview the following points were mentioned by the incumbent pointing out the roles of Raj Guruju:

It is his duty to select the girl who will function as the Royal *Kumari* or living goddess.

- a. It is his duty to act as *dya-pala* in *Kumari Baha*
- b. He is the head of a group of ten Vajrācārya s known as the *dasa-digacarya* ('the masters of the ten directions'). The group consists of the Raj Guru, his assistant (*upadhyaya*) and the eight senior-most *thakalis* of the *acarya guthis* of each of the eighteen *bahas* which make up the *Acarya Guthi* of Kathmandu.
- c. In the time of the Malla Kings, the Raj Guru acted as the main astrologer and *pandit* for the entire country.
- d. Until very recent times he functioned as the chief administrator and *watchdog* for the *Acarya Guthi* in its function as a union of priests.
- e. In the days of the Malla kings the fame and the authority of the Raj Guru extended all the way to Lhasa.
- f. Whenever the *Svayambhu Mahicaitya* had to be repainted it was the duty of the Raj Guru to perform a *puja* before the work began.
- g. The Raj Guru, and he alone (or his delegated proxy) is allowed to perform *puja* in the two *sikhara* temples to the sides of the *Svayambhu Mahacaitya*, i.e. *Pratapapura* and *Agnipura*.
- h. The Raj Guru is also the head of another group of five Vajrācārya s known as the *Panca Buddha*, 'the Five Buddhas', whose function it is to assist at certain rituals representing the five transcendent Buddhas. At the present time their only function seems to be to take part in the annual *Kumari Jatra*.
- i. Many of the Buddhist images in the *bahas* were originally made of clay. From time to time these images had to be repaired and repainted. Before this work could begin the image had to be de-consecrated, i.e. the spirit of the deity had to be removed. It was the Raj Guru's duty and his sole right to perform this ritual and to reconsecrate the image.
- j. If any Vajrācārya encroached on the territory of another Vajrācārya by performing rituals for another man's client or taking money from another man's client, the offended party could make a complaint to the Raj Guru. The Raj Guru would hear the case and if the complaint.
- k. If any quarrel arose among the members of any of the eighteen *bahas* of the *Acarya Guthi*, or if someone had damaged one of the *bahas* it was the duty of the Raj Guru to summon the concerned parties and settle the matter, inflicting a fine of thirty two *paisa* on the offender.
- l. The Raj Guru must be invited to any function held or ritual performed, by the local *Acarya Guthi* of any of the eighteen *bahas*.

Locke (1985) has mentioned that many of these functions were no longer current during the time

of his interview with the then incumbent Raj Guruju. He further stated that Raj Guru still had some importance among the Buddhist community of Kathmandu and a few official functions such as his duties regarding the Royal Kumari. Furthermore, he still had the right to perform certain rituals in the Agam Chen of the Malla Kings at Hanuman Dhoka and on the death of a king of the present dynasty he had to go to Hanuman Dhoka for the ritual reception of the people who come to pay their respects at the time of a death in the royal family.

In addition to this he must keep himself ready to respond to any request which might come from the palace for his services. Because of this, if there should be a death in the family of the Raj Guru, he or one of his initiated male relatives must abstain from taking any part in the death rituals. Such participation would make him impure for the period of mourning and hence unable to perform any pujas. In such a case it is permissible to send any male member of his family to act as proxy. Whenever the eighteen elders of the Acarya Guthi meet or are called to take part in some official function the Raj Guru must also be summoned and he takes his place second to the Thakali of the entire Acarya Guthi.⁹

During the interview with the incumbent Raj Guruju, the following points were derived as some new additions to the points above. These are the roles and duties which have been carried out by Raj Guruju in current context:

The Acarya Guthi is the nationwide organization of Bajracharyas. It is the duty of Raj Guruju to implement the suggestion of the chakreshwors of 18 mahavihara to manage the de acarya guthi well. It is also the duty of raj Guruju to solve the problems of Bajracharyas who are members of De acarya guthi.

It is duty of Raj Guruju to provide priest “Guruju” to the Buddhist “Jajaman” who come from outside Kathmandu.

Another important role played by Raj Guruju is to act as main priest of Kumari Chen’s secret “Aagam ghar” and do Nitya Parba Puja there.

Raj Guruju is liable for doing nitya puja of panchabuddha which is instated in the Kumari chhen.

Raj Guruju plays the role of “Mulacarya” during the annual puja and 12 years wise repainting and reconsecration of the image of Bhimsen of Kantipur.

Raj Guruju plays the role of “mulacarya” during the renovation of Svayambhu Mahicaitya

When the head of the nation dies, then Raj Guruju must fulfill the vajrayani ritual called “Bicha Phayegu” and also recite and make others recite Durgatiparisodhan dharani patha.

Similarly, if there is death of any member of Bajracharya family in Kantipur, the family of deceased may invite Raj gurju and other 18 chakreshors for *Dana*. In such event, raj Guruju shows his presence, accepts *Dana* and recites durgatiparisodhan patha, pancharakshya patha etc.

When the post of “De thyapa” or mulchakreshwor is vacant, then in such case it is the duty of Raj Guruju to reinstate the new De Thyapa by giving his mulchakreshoravisekha.

If any donor wishes to feed a feast “Sangha bhoje” or want to donate “sangha *Dana*” to “Chhenkhachi” i.e. one from a house and “bahalachi” i.e. one from the baha, then in such case the invitation must be sent through raj Guruju. Raj Guruju sends the invitation via Maha Guruju who is like an assistant to Raj Guruju. In such celebration, Raj Guruju, maha Guruju and chakreshwor of 18 mahavihara are invited. In the absence of Mulchakreshwor, all the responsibilities are to be fulfilled by Raj Guruju. So, the based on the hierarchy, the post of Raj Guruju is second after Mulchakreshwor.

⁹ Locke, *Op. cit.* (f.n. 1). P. 263

Raj Guruju and Kumari

Sikhamu Baha is closely linked to the goddess in its role as provider of four of the Pancha Buddha. The Pancha Buddha are five Buddhist priests of Vajrācārya caste who officiate during the annual Kumari jatra and have various other ceremonial duties in connection with the goddess.¹⁰

It is this Gubhaju who is most especially important in connection with Kumari, for in addition to the performance of both daily and special pujas in her agama, he plays a prominent part in the selection and installation of new Kumaris. He also personally selects as the three additional Pancha Buddhas whichever of his baha's members he regards as suitable. One of these three also acts as his assistant (*upadhya*) in performing puja at Kumari chen.¹¹ The agam inside kumari Chhen is a secret agam where only Raj Guruju, maha Guruju, karmacharya priest and kumari can enter. Inside the secret agam, the vajrayani rituals related to kumari are performed under the supervision of raj Guruju.

According to the Vamsavalis it was Jayaprakasa, the last of the Malla Kings of Kathmandu, who instituted the royal worship of Kumari. Though some element of doubt must remain as to whether some of his predecessors may also have done likewise, it is certain that it was Jayaprakasa who first built her an official residence near the palace and also began the annual chariot festival.¹²

The official residence for Kumari was built by taking the property of Sikhamu baha and compensating it in form of another piece of land which is now currently known as Jama Baha located in Jamal. So, though the structure was taken for Kumari's residential purpose, the baha house still consisted of agam and gods of Sikhamu baha there. Raj Guruju, being the chief priest was responsible for conducting puja in the agam of Kumari Chen as well as worship of Kumari in Vajrayani method.

For the selection of new kumari, there is committee of five people i.e. Raj Guruju, Karmacarya priest of Taleju, caretaker of Kumari chhen, Joshi and a representative from Guthi Sansthan. Raj Guruju being the part of this committee is liable for selection of right child for the vacant post of Kumari. The major duty of Raj Guruju is to insure that the nominated girl children do belong only from specific 6 out of the 18 Mahavihara of Kathmandu where there is sanyukta Shakya sangha or from ten purely Shakya main bahas. No other Shakya girl child except from these 16 bahas is eligible to become kumari. Along with this, Raj Guruju has to look upon many other factors like the vihara of mother, lineage etc. and reconfirm the information as a part of kumari selection process.

After the selection of Kumari, the daily nitya puja is done by Karmacarya priest whereas Raj Guruju performs puja with Kumari on every month's Krishna Paksha Dasami, during Indra Jatra, Dashain, Kumari chhen busala, pancha Buddha busala, sakimila punhi etc. when incidences related to kumara takes place like sickness of kumari, menstruation during the reign etc. then in such situation, the decisions regarding what is to be by Raj Guruju.

Conclusion

Raj Guruju is a hereditary post held by Vajrācārya of "Yuta kaval" of Śrīkhaṇḍa Tarumūla Mahāvihāra. So, the based on the hierarchy, the post of Raj Guruju is second after Mulchakreshwor who is the head of Bajracharyas in Kathmandu. The time frame regarding the starting of this tradition is not known but clear evidences point out its advent from at least early Malla period. Then, Raj Guruju was a royal designation designated by royal authorities. This post was very influential as Raj Guru acted as the main astrologer and pandit for the entire country during Malla period. Being a royal priest, all the

10 Allen, *Op. cit.* (f.n. 6). P. 9

11 Ibid

12 Ibid, P. 8

vajrayani rituals in the royal family as well as in nation was done under the supervision of Raj Guruju. With the beginning of Shah Dynasty, the roles of Raj Guruju narrowed down a bit as Shah Kings were more inclined towards non Buddhist rituals. However, the Buddhist rituals which were performed since Malla period were continued. Nowadays, the scenario has changed and so has the thought and lifestyle of people. There is no monarch in the nation so there is no need of fulfilling statutory duty towards monarch by Raj Guruju but the nation rituals which have been performed since ancient times still have been performed. With the modernization, many new issues have emerged in Bajracharya community like inter caste marriage, inter caste pravajya, women pravajya, outer caste pravajya etc. Raj Guruju being still a prominent and influential post amongst the Bajracharya of Kathmandu is reliable for addressing these issues and also acting as guardian of Bajracharyas in Kathmandu. Raj Guruju has been playing an eminent role in creating a balance in Buddhist community, working for benefit of bajracharyas of Kathmandu and fulfilling his duty as royal priest. Along with the role towards Bajracharya community as a whole, Raj Guruju has special linkage with *Kumari* and *Kumari* chhen and thus has to follow his duties and specific roles in Kumari Chhen as well.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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