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# Life and the Spiritual Practice of Senior Citizens in Kalpabaas of Devghat, Chitwan

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### Abstract

*As the years increase, senior citizens' needs and desires drive from normal to spiritual lifestyles. The Kalpabaas system is one of the systems found for spiritual practice, basically for senior citizens. The term Kalpabaas is a new term to the researcher, which denotes the meaning of the period of Brahma, the god of creation. It is believed that anyone who lives in a Kalpabaas following the prescribed rules and regulations can obtain the Punya of a Kalpa, which means a day of Brahma. Exploring the system and the life of Kalpabaas and the spiritual practice of senior citizens are the objectives of this research. Thirteen participants, who have been living in Devghat, being Kalpabaasi, for more than a decade, were purposively selected from Devghat Chitwan, and they were in-depth interviewed until the saturation of the data. Grounded theory is adopted as the theoretical standpoint. Perception of Kalpabaas, the requirement to be a Kalpabaasi, spiritual knowledge of the devotees, everyday life activities, Satasanga, participating in the spiritual ceremonies, and so on activities were found performed in Kalpabaas. A simple lifestyle, negligence in modernity, less desire, a higher level of understanding of the religious and spiritual lesson, a focus on the divine power, poor health, and a weak body but brightness in the face were found features of Kalpabaasi..*

**Key Words:** Kalpabaas, kalpabaasi, spiritual practice, senior citizens, lifestyle

### Background

This article deals with the concept of the Kalpabaas system (senior citizens residing in sacred places, at the banks of rivers, or in caves or holy places as ascetics) and the spiritual practice of senior citizens living in the Kalpabaas of Devghat, Chitwan. It attempts to explore the perception towards Kalpabaas, its spiritual importance, and the life of senior citizens living in this system. It also analyzes the present conditions of the Kalpabaas system in Nepal, focusing on the life and spiritual practices of the senior citizens. Kalpabaas is evaluated as a typical Nepalese spiritual practice system to attain salvation after death. In this system the senior citizens, who can be addressed as

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Kalpabaasi (devotees), adopt the simple religious lifestyle leave the household assets, and settle down in a riverside shrine area or mountain in search of peace and wisdom, hoping to achieve salvation after the life. Meanwhile, this article analysed the various Hindu mythological texts, such as the Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, Brahman, and Sukta, and so on, to explore the origin and the historical development of the Kalpabaas system in the context of Nepal. Fifteen participants, who have been living for more than a decade in Devghat and surrounding shrine areas as Kalpabaasi, were interviewed. The daily activities, social relations, participation in the special ritual practices, and their experiences are analysed. They were found satisfied and happy in the routine-based lifestyle in Kalpabaas. They found it to spend a simple lifestyle with their colleagues and the spiritual leaders called Guru Jee. The participants constructed a specific spiritual environment and set up relationships with other fellows through Satsanga, a discussion related to exploring the meaning of Brahma, the soul, the meaning of the Vedas, the Upanishads, and so on. These spiritual environments boost the energy in their lifestyle as well as spiritual practice support to minimise the anxiety of past life and lead to adopting a simple lifestyle with meaningful spiritual practice.

While visiting the places for worship, such as Devghat, Pashupati Nath, Muktinath, Swargadwari, and so on, various senior citizens are found with different outlooks: putting *Tika on their foreheads*, wearing orange-coloured dresses, wearing garlands of *Rudrakshya* and the steam of *the Tulasi* plant, and so on. They abandoned their houses and shifted to Kalpabaas areas permanently. They live either alone or with couples following spiritual practices. What attraction pulls them to this place, and how do they practice a spiritual lifestyle in Kalpabaas? These are the queries that hit the mind of the researcher. For the purpose of consulting the Vedas, there is a mantra in the Shukla Yajur Veda (26/15) that points out the location of divine wisdom and knowledge formation: '*Üpawhore Girinam Sangamesu Nadinam Dhiya Bipro Ajayeta.*' Riverbanks, caves, and the flat terrain area of the top hill of mountains are considered the appropriate places for the emergence and the development of wisdom and knowledge for human civilisation (Geeta Press, 2060 BS).

In this context, analysing the knowledge production areas in the past found some specific areas, such as the Egyptian civilisation, which developed along the banks of the Nile River and its tributaries, and the Mesopotamian civilisation, which emerged between the areas of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro civilisations originated on the banks of the Indus River; the Aryans cultivated their civilisation on the banks of the Ganges and its tributaries, and so on. Examples approved that rivers are the sources of creation, knowledge formation, as well as discoveries of human civilisation (Sharma, 2043 BS). In the context of Nepal, the mountainous areas like Khaptad, *Swargadwaari*, *Shivapuri*, *Kaalinchowk*, *Halesi*, *Paathivharaa*, and so on are places of Nepal that are the centres of power and knowledge generated from ancient times

(Yogi, 2013 BS). For this reason, in Kumar Sambhavam, one of the greatest creations of the greatest scholars of Sanskrit literature, Kaalidaas addressed the Himalayas as the backbone of the earth and also the sources of peace, resources, and knowledge of human lives (Sharma, 1935). So, these literatures link the interconnectedness between rivers, mountains, and human civilisation. Perhaps the *Kalpabaas* system of Nepal can be analysed as a product of interconnectedness among these aspects.

### **Objectives of the Study**

Senior citizens of Nepal are found influenced by the spiritual thoughts. They also prefer to live in sacred places, making small huts with thatched roofs called *kutis*, or the provided residential setting of the *aashrams* after leaving their previous houses. Sacred places, confluence of the rivers, and shrine areas are the best destinations for *Kalpabaasi* senior citizens. 'To explore the system and the life of *Kalpabaas* and the spiritual practice of senior citizens are the objectives of this research.

### **Methodology**

Exploring the life and spiritual practices of senior citizens in *Kalpabaas* is still an unexplored matter in social science research. For this purpose, grounded theory is found supportive for the study. Grounded theory is primarily a method of data analysis with profound implications for collecting data that have largely remained unaddressed (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012, p. 347). In this theoretical assumption, the data are collected by interviewing participants through open-ended questions, participant observation, and study of artefacts and texts. Thus, grounded theory creates meanings from data (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Since the research on *Kalpabaas* is a new field to social science researchers. The grounded theory is useful for collecting data and exploring the elderly understanding of *Kalpabaas*.

Furthermore, this research initially explored the conceptual understanding of spiritualism and the concept of *Kalpabaas* among the respondents. First, I questioned them about their perception towards *Kalpabaas*, daily activities, and spiritual practices. Respondents were selected on the basis of purposive sampling. I selected Devghat, Chitwan, as a place for the fieldwork. Regarding the nature of the data, primary and secondary data were collected. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews. The researcher created a familiar environment with the participants and collected data asking about their favourite incidents, interests, achievements, and experiences. The conversation was recorded only for the data analysis process, preserving their confidentiality.

### **Findings**

As people grow older, senior citizens are found to have multiple desires and needs

associated with old age. Physical, cultural, religious, and spiritual needs are found as the basic needs of the senior citizens (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2011). Physical needs include food, shelter, clothes, love, and so on, whereas cultural needs include material and non-material elements and religious demands various offering rites and rituals performed in old age. Spiritual needs are specific in the sense that they demand a special environment that is available only in spiritual centres like Kalpabaas. The first issue of the study is 'What is Kalpabaas' according to the perception of the senior citizens? Before exploring the perception of the senior citizens, let's observe the definitions of Kalpabaas found in the literature. The etymological meaning of the Sanskrit term Kalpabaas is formed by the combination of two words, Kalpa and Baas. Kalpa means period or length of time, and Baas means living in a particular place (Sharma, 2043 BS). Srimada Bhaagwat Mahapurans (12/4/2), a Hindu mythology, states that Kalpa means a single day of Brahma, a creator god, which is estimated as the years of four hundred thirty-two million in the earth (Geeta Press, 2057 BS). A person who resides in a sacred place, especially in the confluence of Kaali and Trishuli as a Kalpabaasi observing the procedures mentioned in the religious text to get peace and salvation can earn the 'Punya,' religious merits of the whole day of Brahma. Brihat Nepali Sabdakosh (2018), an enlarged Nepalese dictionary defined the term Kalpabaas—the sacred residing on the banks of the river, strictly following the rules and procedures mentioned in the religious text to gain the Punya of a day of Brahma. Pauraanik Kosh (1986); the legendary dictionary explains the meanings of Kalpabaas as mentioned in Brahma Purans that the person who resides between the periods of Paush Sukla Ekadashi (approximately the second week of January) and Maagha Sukla Ekaadashi (approximately the second week of February) at the confluence of two sacred rivers, Ganga and Yamuna, located at Prayagraj in India, observing the prescribed rituals to earn the Punya of a Kalpa, is called Kalpabaas (Sharma, 2043). This definition shows that it is a process of abiding far from the house to gain Punya of a Kalpa within a short period. Though the clear date and time are not found in any texts of Hindu mythology when and who started the system of Kalpabaas, the first participant claimed that it had already started before the time of monarch Bharat (Jadbharat), who was the king of all South Asia, and after his retirement, he came to the bank of Kali Gandaki, near Galeswar in Myagdi district, and settled down there as a Kalpabaasi. Similarly, the fourth participant added that Rishi Baalmiki, the pioneer lyrical poet of Sanskrit, lived in Tribeni, a southern bank of Kaali Gandaki, as a dweller of Kalpabaas wrote the epic Ramayan. Therefore, this system has a long history of practice for the spiritual satisfaction of senior citizens. Another query of this research is how long this practice goes on or the duration of the time the person has to live as Kalpabaasi. People may find diversity in the practice system of Kalpabaas in Nepal and India. The second participant explained that in Prayagraj in India, the system of Kalpabaas is practiced temporarily as

a process of living in a month called Maagha (from the second week of January to the second week of February) being an ascetic or devotee and strictly having to perform a daily routine of taking a holy bath in the confluence of the Ganges, offering rituals, Pancha Yagya (five different worships to god, cows, holy fire, humans, and ancestors), and so on according to their spiritual practice system. In Nepal, Kalpabaas represents the process of adopting a spiritual lifestyle and living in sacred places until death. However, the duration of living in Kalpabaas was found to be diverse (living one month to a life-long period) according to the choice of the person. The third participant argued that Kalpabaas is considered a sacred place for generating knowledge, penance, peace, and salvation after life. The fifth participant further explains the Kalpabaas which is a free place for four Ashrams (four stages of human life). Brahmachari (age until twenty-five), Grihastha (between the ages of twenty-five and fifty), Baanprastha (age below seventy-five), and Sanyaas (above the age of seventy-five). The seventh participant added that there are four Varnas (Brahmin, Kshetri, Baisya, and Sudra), and all gender groups are allowed to live in Kalpabaas for the aim of Mokshya (salvation). There is not found any caste-based discrimination in Kalpabaas. Everyone can have the choice to select a guru (spiritual teacher) and practice according to the instructions provided by the guru. The sixth participant told us that there was a couple from the Iron Smith family who lived there for around fifteen years. After their death, no one was found living as Kalpabaasi from a Dalit background in Devghat, Chitwan.

There are two ways of getting salvation. One is as *Upanishad* summarised as a theme that, “*Rite Gyanaana Mukti*”; without knowledge of *Brahma* (ultimate soul), salvation is not possible (Bhattarai, 2065 BS). The eleventh participant explained that there are various ways of getting salvation; some are mentioned in *Srimad Bhagwat Mahapurana* (12/3/52) that “*Kalau Tad Hari Kirtanaad*,” which means in *Kaliyuga* (the present era), chanting the *Kirtan* (singing the name of lord Krishna) is the way of achieving salvation after the life. However, Nepalese senior citizens have a great faith that *Kalpabaas* is a place for older adults to learn and practice the new ascetic way of life as the mythical character described in *Srimad Bhaagwat*; ‘*Jadbharata*’ spent his/her life and attained the ‘Mokshya,’ salvation at the end of the life.

The next issue of this research is to explore the lifestyle of senior citizens living in *Kalpabaas*. The aforementioned information suggests the researchers identify *Kalpabaasi* with their works, dress, and location. According to the twelfth participant, the *Brahma Puran* points out some duties and responsibilities that the person has to follow to be a *Kalpabaasi*. First, they have to abandon the house and belongings. Second, they have to adapt to any one cult being a disciple. Next, the person has to get up very early in the morning, take a holy bath, perform *Japa* and *Pancha Yagya*, offer *puja* to the god, recite holy texts, and take a meal once a day. They have to wear a white or yellow dress, put *Tika* or holy ash on the forehead, live in a hermitage, celebrate

various religious festivals, and stay on a fast on particular occasions; these are the fundamental duties of the *Kalpabaasi*.

The second participant explained the importance of the rivers. He said that the rivers that originated from the Himalayas are considered the sacred rivers of the world. The banks of the Indus, Ganges, Yamuna, Mahakali, Karnali, Gandaki, Koshi, Brahmaputra, and Irrawaddy with their tributaries provide an appropriate environment to generate culture, civilisation, wisdom, and so on. Among these holy rivers, *Kaali Gandaki*, also called *Krishna Gandaki*, is historically the most sacred and famous river of this subcontinent. *Bhaagwat Purans* (5/7/10 Kali) has described this river as the most pious river, which purifies the land, flora, fauna, and the world.

The fourth participant added that *Kaali Gandaki* has a unique feature that it bears, *Shaalgram*, a stone-erected circle inside that contains gold and worship as an incarnation of lord *Bishnu*. It can be found in small and large sizes in black colour along the banks throughout the *Kali Gandaki*. It originates from *Daamodar Kunda*, a small, icy lake in the Himalayas, and passes hundreds of religiously and culturally important places in Nepal, like *Kaagbeni*, *Galeswar*, *Modibeni*, *Rudrabeni*, *Ridi*, *Ramdi*, *Kelaadidham*, *Devghat*, *Tribeni*, and so on, religious and cultural centres, as well as the headquarters of various districts along the banks of *Kali Gandaki*.

The first participant again stated that *Baraah Puran* focuses on the four places on the banks of *Kaali Gandaki*—*Muktinath*, *Ridi*, *Devghat*, and *Tribeni*—as the centre place for devotees, whereas *Himbata Khanda* (2013 BS) mentions hundreds of sacred places where many *Rishies* (great devotees) achieved *Mokshya*, salvation, since history. This might be a reason for older adults to go to *Kalpabaas* after their retirement.

## Discussion

The participants are purposively selected from various sects of *Sanatan Dharma*. There are four sects found in *Vaishnav Sampradaya*; among them, the *Ramanandi* (devotees and followers of *Ramanandacharya* and devoted to god Ram), *Sri Vaishnav* (followers of *Ramanujacharya* and devoted to god Vishnu), and *Nimbarka* (devotees and followers of *Nimbarkacharya* and devoted to god Krishna) are found in the *Devghat* area. Besides them, the largest population is found in *Shaivism* (followers of *Shankaracharya* and his *Adwait* philosophy and devoted to Lord Shiva). The *Sanyashi* also belong to *Shaivism* sects. The participants of all of these *Sampradaya* (sects) are living together and practising spiritual processes according to their Guru's (spiritual teachers) instructions in the study area. The first concern of this article is who are *Kalpabaasi*. Spiritual practice is one of the essential features of the devotees. Religion and spirituality seem to be similar but have distinctive characteristics. Religion is a set of beliefs, traditions, rituals, and practice systems, but spirituality is the connection or link with divine power or ineffable presence. Two people may have the same religion, but their spirituality varies between them (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2011).

Spiritual practice denotes a search for the soul, lives, Brahma, the universe, wisdom, truth, and so on. The fifth participant had a different outlook, and he explained that in search of God, he came to Devghat and changed himself to a *Kalpabaasi*. However, the concern of this research is who are *Kalpabaasi* and how the senior citizens perceive *Kalpabaas*. The first participant explained that the person who leaves home and settles down in religious places is *Baanprasthi*, *Brahmachari*, or *Sanyasi* and has to completely adopt the life of spiritual practice. The third participant has the opinion that everyone who wants to adopt the life of a *Sanyasi* or *Baanprasthi* can be respected as the *Kaasi*. Similarly, the sixth participant argued that everyone who may be from all ethnic groups and from Dalit can be accepted as a *Kalpabaasi* if they follow the lifestyle and rules and regulations prescribed by their *Sampradaya*. She presented an example of Sabari (a mythical character mentioned in the Ramayana who was from the Dalit caste and a female senior citizen) who used to provide free service to needy people, remembering her as an incarnation of the lord Krishna.

The fourth participant, above the age of ninety-four years, a widower, critically explained that to be a *Kalpabaasi*, anyone must separate with his wife or from his husband. Living together, whether at the age of seventy, they desire the pleasure of sex or any kind of such activities that damage the life and meaning of *Kalpabaasi*. He explained that *Kalpabbasi* is a kind of hard task that needs to struggle with various kinds of desires, expectations for material objects, pleasure, the exercise of power, position, etc. However, the participants from the Radhe Radhe group and those living with couples have the opinion that everyone who is dedicated to the service for Krishna and Radha and follows the complete rules prescribed by the Guru or spiritual teacher can easily transform their life being *Kalpabaasi*.

Similarly, the sixth participant argued that leaving the household and migrating to spiritual places around the shrine, such as Pashupati Nath at Kathmandu, Janaki Temple in Janakpur, Swargadwari in Pyuthan, Sangameswar Pashupati Nath at Devghat, and so on, with the desire of earning property wearing the dress of *Similarly, the* does not represent the *Kalpabaasi*. They have to first make a *Guru Dikshya* (special mantras provided on special occasions by the Guru to the disciple) and practice as suggested by the Guru, the spiritual leader; they will be a member of *Kalpabaasi*. A lady participant shared her past experience that at the age of sixteen her husband died, and she was cursed as the woman with the bad omen; her uncle brought this place to serve the cows and old women living in *Kalpabaas*. It was hard, but she received support from Guruji and Sanyasi women. She learnt to recite the Geeta, Ramayan, and Bhagwat, various Sanskrit *Slokas*, and now she also understands the meaning and feels happy. Another participant explained that *Aashrams* are a kind of school for Vedanta students. During the field visit the researcher also participated in scholars' debates and learnt various facts of life explained in the texts.

Thus, Kalpabaas, in the context of Nepal, is a place for learning spiritual lessons and practical ways of life for peace, happiness, and cooperation among the senior citizens living in Devghat, Chitwan.

## Conclusion

The needs and desires of the individuals change in old age. They are found more respectful towards religious practice, spiritual lifestyle, meditation, and so on. They also change their outlook, dress up, and change their food habits according to the structural setting of the phenomena. *Kalpabaas* is one of the best spiritual practice systems designed for senior citizens. There are various practice systems found within *Kalpabaas* according to the *Sampradaya* (school of sect). Four sects are from *Baishnav* and one sect is from *Shaivism*. The beginning of this system was founded during the *Satya Yuga* (the origin of the human being) by King Jad Bharat in the bank of Kali Gandaki.

Although, in India, *Kalpabaas* is a practice system of one month-long residing in the bank of Prayagraj in the month of *Magh* following the prescribed rules of the *Kalpabaas*. In the context of Nepal, it is a lifelong spiritual practice system in search of spiritual power and the exploration of the ultimate soul or Brahma. A simple lifestyle, negligence in modernity, less desire, a higher level of understanding of the religious and spiritual lesson, a focus on the divine power, poor health, and a weak body but brightness in the face were found during the field visit. Since it is an unexplored issue of senior citizens, it contains enough messages to earn satisfaction in their later life as well as spend a peaceful life at the end of life.

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