

Historical and Cultural Significance of Bhaktapur Durbar Square

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Kathmandu valley, located in the lap of the Himalayas, is the birthplace of Nepali culture and civilization. Since ancient times, this valley was the main center of Nepal religiously, culturally, politically and economically. The valley consists of Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur which are considered to be the main cities. These cities are historically and culturally famous since ancient days till today. Among these three ancient cities, the cultural significance of Bhaktapur is even more specific because Bhaktapur is world famous for its intangible and tangible cultural and archaeological heritages. The main attraction of Bhaktapur is Bhaktapur Durbar Square. This Durbar Square has been important not only historically but also religiously and culturally. Many artefacts established here and popular cultural traditions confirm this fact. In the beginning, the rulers named Deva, then the Mallas who came to participate in the government along with the Devas. After the decline of the Devas, the all-powerful Malla kings lived in this Durbar Square. Although from the outside this Durbar Square looks like a political

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CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES, Vol. 32, No. 2 (April-June), 2023
Peer Reviewed, Indexed & Refereed International Research Journal

and administrative center of the past, but in fact, a deeper study shows that this area was established as a kind of micro religious world or the original place of Newar cultural activities which is confirmed by the temples and idols of many gods and goddesses established here, their worship, recitations, cultural activities. Also, in terms of medieval advanced art, culture, language, literature, music, education, etc., this Durbar area has a great place. The presented article is focused on this subject matter.

[**Keywords** : Aananddev, Kumari, layeku, Swarnadwar, Taleju, Tripura, Uthanimam]

1. Background

The center of state administration is called the Rajdhani (Capital), while the place where the king resides as the head of the state is called the Durbar Square (palace area). Durbar square is called "Layaku" by the local Newars people. This word Layaku is a corrupted form of the Sanskrit word Rajkula. During the Lichhavi period pure Sanskrit language was prevalent, which is known from the inscriptions of the Lichhavi period. But when it came to the pre-medieval period, the impure Sanskrit language spread. As a result, the original Sanskrit words were corrupted and localized. In this process the Sanskrit word Rajkula also became Layaku after being localized. Layaku means - the residence of the king, the royal palace or the place where the head of state lives. This justified the fact that Sanskrit word Rajkula was localized by Newari community as Layaku. Security sensitivity was also given special attention when establishing Layaku. In the pre-medieval political situation, where the attacks and invasions were happening frequently, security had to be given special importance, so it was usually established in the center of the capital city. Also, the place was the residence of the head of the administration, Layaku or court area was not only in Bhaktapur but also in other ancient settlements like Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Thimi, Sankhu, Banepa, Panauti, Kirtipur, etc., where Mahapatra, Kazi, Dware etc. lived as local feudal lords. However, the historical significance, cultural dignity and high political position of Bhaktapur's Layaku (Durbar area) cannot be found anywhere else. This is because in the history of Nepal, Bhaktapur had the opportunity to develop as the capital of the whole Nepal Mandala for more than three hundred years. At that time, the king of Bhaktapur was called a powerful ruler of Nepal who looked after the entire administration of the state, who used to rule on the throne of Bhaktapur by assuming

various titles such as Nepaleshwar, Nepal Mandaleshwar, Maharajadhiraja Parameshwara (Kayastha, 2018 : 165). When Bhaktapur was the capital of a vast state, Kathmandu and Lalitpur were also under Bhaktapur. At that time, the king of Bhaktapur used to oversee everything from the administration of those places.

2. Methodology

Both primary and secondary sources have been used to make the study authentic and reliable. Among the primary sources are the on-site study of various Durbars (palaces), temples and idols of the goddesses, historical gates, stage, stone bell, inn(rest house), stone streams, well etc., located in this Durbar area. Direct observations as well as interviews with related people and published texts, books, and writing articles were considered under the auxiliary sources. Analytical, descriptive and comparative methods have been used to study the resources obtained in this way.

3. Significance of Historical Aspect

Regarding how Bhaktapur became the capital of Nepal Mandala, the political situation at that time should be taken into consideration. In which it is seen that internal conflicts and external attacks are happening together, so it is necessary to move the country's capital to a safe place from a strategic and geographical point of view. Therefore, it is understood that King Anandadeva of the mid of 12th century established the capital at Bhaktapur, which was located on a highlands and was surrounded by Hanumante and Khasang Khusung river and was also established as a major commercial center, and built the Tripura Rajdarbar in the middle of the city (Vajracharya and Malla, 1985 : 25). Earlier, it can be assumed that the main center of the state administration was probably towards Kantipur because the Mangriha palace and Kailashkuta buildings of the Lichchavi period seem to have been built in that direction (Acharya, 2003 : 186 & 189). In this way, it seems that the administrative center of the whole country was moved to Bhaktapur with special attention to security sensitivity. In fact, compared to Bhaktapur, the terrains of Kantipur and Lalitpur are not hilly which makes it easier for the enemy to attack the terrain. As an example, we can take the case of Gorkha king Prithvi Narayan Shah attacking the valley in the late 1820. At that time, the Gorkhali army easily won Kantipur and Lalitpur by nominal fighting only, while Bhaktapur and

Kirtipur had to be fought in a big way (Shrestha, 2001 : 35). From the commercial point of view as well, in the ancient times Bhaktapur was the main trade route passing through Sindhuli in the Nepal valley to Madhes. Therefore, by the time of King Ananddev, it had emerged as a prosperous trading city. Therefore, because of its economics characteristics, Ananddev also considered Bhaktapur to be his capital.

After making Bhaktapur the capital, King Anandadev made it a more strategic fortress city. He built a royal palace called Tripura in the center of the capital and made the city famous. This palace was built in the Granthkuta style with three squares, with seven arches, which was maintained until much later. In this way, it was very difficult to keep the capital in an ordinary city under the conditions of attack and counterattack, so he made Bhaktapur, which is situated on a hill, as a fortress and established the capital (Nepal, 1997 : 81). Because the state would have been more convenient in such a city to counter attack the invaders before they could enter the original settlement of the city. Therefore, it is understood that because of these suitable characteristics, Anandadev established his capital in Bhaktapur and built the royal court of Tripura in the middle of the city.

Another thing, during the Lichhavi period there was a predominance of purely Vedic religion, philosophy and literature. But when it came to the pre-medieval period, Tantramantra-dominant ideology became prevalent. As a result, various forms of gods and goddesses emerged from Tantric literature and their rituals came into vogue (Vajracharya, 1968 : 2). These Tantric Goddesses were believed to protect the country, public welfare, national prosperity, good health and agricultural harvest. King Ananddev also paid special attention to this while building the capital and royal palace here.

When Bhaktapur was settled as the capital city, King Ananddev ordered the establishment of Tantric gods and goddesses around the city to provide security as well as state power (Shrestha, 1993 : 80). This can be confirmed even today on the basis of Astamatrika, Dasmahavidya, Bhairav, Ganesha, Tripurasundari, Navadurga etc. established in various places of the city. In the genealogy mentioned by Daniel Wright, a well-known English scholar, Navadurga appeared to him in a dream and according to Navadurga's instructions; he settled the city by replacing the Gana of Ashtamatrika

around the city (Wright, 1972 : 163). In the Bhasha Vanshawali (a genealogy), it is mentioned that he installed Bhairavanath in the middle of the city and built it as Bhaktapur, and invoking Annapurna Devi from Kashi, he built this city on an auspicious occasion (Lamsal, 1966 : 20). Even today, Ashta Matrika, Navadurga and Bhairav are famous as gods who protect the country, increase agricultural crops and protect them from calamities. Therefore, due to frequent external attacks and internal rebellions, the former capital and royal palace became unsafe from the point of view of war, so it is understood that the capital along with the royal palace was settled in Bhaktapur after paying attention to the geographical security.

Since, Bhaktapur was established as the main administrative center of the country in that time; it seems that its high political importance has been maintained. Although it was established as the capital of whole Nepal Mandala, but that position was not maintained till later. Because of the mutual discord and quarrels of the Malla rulers, Bhaktapur was limited as a separate state until the latter half of the Middle Ages. Therefore, its overall political history can be studied here in two parts:

1. As the capital of the larger Nepal Mandal.
2. Separate or small Bhaktapur as the capital of the state.

However, it continued to exist as the capital of an independent state for about 622 years from 1147 to 1769 or until the conquest of Bhaktapur by the Gorkhali forces.

Thus, during its long history, Bhaktapur Durbar kshyetra (square), which is the main administrative center of Bhaktapur state, has achieved unprecedented progress in the fields of religion, art, culture, language, literature, music, customs etc. on the one hand, and on the other hand, it has witnessed many political upheavals and accidents. As in the Lichchavi period, the system of monarchy was followed by father to son, but from the beginning of the Middle Ages, the tradition of two person ruling jointly started to run, but due to this joint rule system of equal rights, due to the unstable political environment such as internal strife, division, animosity and conspiracies among the rulers, the politics took a different turn. As a result of which two dynasties clearly came into existence : Deva and Malla. In this way, just like the two dynasties, the palace also became two, Tripura and Euthunimum. A strange tradition was born at that time when both dynasties-equally entitled to the throne, sat on the

throne, i.e., a strange rule was made that persons from these two dynasties alternated on the throne. This means if a person from one clan became the king then from a person from another clan will declared the crown prince (Vajracharya, 1975 : 70). This led to power struggles. In that situation, Durbar Square had to face the challenge of Khasa Malla power of Karnali province of western Nepal and Doya power of Tirhut Region of southern Nepal. After the fall of the Simraungarh kingdom, it gave shelter to Karnat dynasty royal family and it also gave its prestige to Taleju Bhawani, who was brought by them. Later, even the Malla kings became worshipers of Taleju.

Jayasthiti Malla was the founder ruler who systematically started the rule of the Malla dynasty in Nepal. But irony seems to be that Jayasthiti Malla himself was not a Malla. He was brought to Bhaktapur from outside according to the Dolaji marriage custom to marry the then Mallavanshi crown princess Rajalladevi. His name before the marriage was Sthiti dev. He was the youngest son of king Puradityasinh. Puradityasinh Dronavar belonged to Brahmin lineage. His kingdom was in Saptari region of present day Nepal (Das, 2017 : 175). After marrying Princess Rajalladevi, while accumulating his power, he deposed the then reigning king Jayarjundev and started the sole rule of the Malla dynasty. Similarly, due to the mutual conflict between the sons of King Yakshya Malla, Kantipur (present Kathmandu) and Lalitpur became independent states from Bhaktapur. And in the 1760s, when the Gorkhali forces were conquering all around, Kantipur and Lalitpur were also captured, and the Malla kings of there came to Bhaktapur as refugees. At that time, there was a prison in front of Bhaktapur Durbar area called Ipachhe where criminals were kept. In this process, the criminals imprisoned in Ipachhe were moved to a house called Hitilivi, the Ipachhe was cleaned and arrangements were made for King Jayaprakash Malla of Kantipur to live there. King Tejnarasingh Malla of Lalitpur was kept in the house of a nearby Rajopadhyaye Brahmin. Thus, from the beginning to the end, this palace area provided shelter to anyone who came for shelter, even if it was his arch enemy.

Even till the last moment for their independent existence and identity, the Malla king and his people of Bhaktapur fought against invader Gorkhali army. Even after capturing the entire city of Bhaktapur, the Gorkhali army found it very difficult to conquer the Bhaktapur Durbar square. They had to fight hard for two days to

control it. After not being able to easily enter this palace, which is a medieval fortress, the Gorkhali army attacked from the roof and advanced.

4. Significance of Cultural Aspect

It has already been mentioned above that Bhaktapur Durbar area was not only developed as a political and administrative center but also famous as the main place of religious and cultural activities in many historical periods. As the original abode of Taleju Bhavani, the deity of the Malla kings, was/is present within this court area. Taleju Temple has been an important place in Newar cultural life. For this reason, almost all festivals and traditional celebrations in Bhaktapur are also held in Taleju with Tantric rituals (Shrestha, 1991 : 1). The locals have been observing the festival even today, following the same method and tradition followed by Taleju. Apart from Taleju Bhavani, powerful deities such as Maneshwari, Sweshtadevata, Vakuli, Dumajudevi, Kumari etc. are also established here. Firstly, the Taleju Mulchok inside the palace is considered to be the main base of the medieval Shaktatantra. Secondly, the Bhairavanath Temple located near the palace area is also a major cultural heritage site. This Bhairavnatha is a powerful deity of Shaivism, Buddhism and Shaktism. He is considered to be the embodiment of Kashi Vishwanath and also is considered to be the protector of the city and a symbol of progress and prosperity. This Bhairav has a respected place in the local folk life of Bhaktapur.

Similarly, residents of Bhaktapur who believed in religion used to go to India for pilgrimage every year. This tradition continues even today. But for those who cannot go to India for pilgrimage, the temples of Badrinath, Kedarnath, Jagannath, Gopinath, Rameshwar have been established here so that they can easily fulfill their wishes by worshipping the gods and goddesses of India and perform Shraaddha in the memory of their forefathers (Sharma, 2000 : 41). Similarly, Yakshyeshwar Mahadev Temple, a replica of Pashupati-nath in Devpatan and temples of Mata Vatsala Devi, who protects from the fear of evil spirits such as ghosts and vampires where established. In addition, many other culturally important monasteries, statues of gods and goddesses, squares, pujakothe (worship room), rituals and beautiful artworks with religious background are found in each and every architecture, including famous Golden Gate. These give the feeling that this palace area is not only a major

administrative center where the then head of state lived, but also a subtle form of religious world. Thus, it is found to have an important place not only in historical perspective but also religiously and culturally.

While studying the historical events, even after the political division of the Kathmandu valley, Bhaktapur remained as the capital of a powerful separate state. Another thing that should be noted in this context is that Taleju Bhavani is also found to be duly established in most places in ancient Newar settlements. It has come to be known from a study that Taleju Bhavani was taken and established in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, China (Naghabhani, 1985 : 6-7). Because Taleju Bhavani was the patriarch god of the Malla kings, it is assumed that Taleju was established as far as the influence of the Malla rulers spread. Taleju temples were built in almost all Newar settlements however the actual Taleju's residence was believed to be Bhaktapur, which is believed to have been brought from Simrangadh (Kayastha, 2018 : 35). Therefore, even after being separated from Bhaktapur, the Malla kings of other states used to send prayers to their favorite goddess Bhaktapur Taleju on special occasions (Vajracharya, 1986 : 76). Sometimes the Malla kings of those kingdoms themselves used to come to Bhaktapur to visit Taleju. From this it is known that the other Malla kingdoms were politically independent, but culturally they had a deep connection with Bhaktapur.

Taleju Bhavani was brought to Bhaktapur in the early 14th century during the reign of Rudra Malla, the then powerful ruler of the Nepal valley, which was later established by King Pran Malla by building a temple (Vajracharya, 1986 : 7). Even today, the Mulchowk (main square) inside the Bhaktapur Durbar (palace) where the Taleju temple is located looks grand and more attractive than other squares. During the Malla period, all state-level meetings including the coronation of kings, the swearing-in of Chautara and the appointment of others nobles, ceremonies used to take place in this Taleju Mulchowk. Dashain festival was celebrated in this Chowk. Taleju Bhavani was their clan deity and since Taleju's residence was Mulchowk, the Malla kings used to sit in Mulchowk and announce festivals, procession and government orders to the people. King Jayasthiti Malla had implemented social status and caste system of Newar people with Taleju Bhavani as a witness as this Mulchowk (main square) (Munankarmi, 1991-92 : 16). Almost all the Malla kings of Bhaktapur seem to have done the work of decorating Taleju

Mulchowk with many works of art showing respect to their clan goddess Taleju Bhavani. It is understood that the famous Golden Gate built during the reign of the last Malla king Ranjit Malla was dedicated to Taleju Bhavani. The golden statue of King Bhupatindra Malla on the tall pillar in front of the Golden Gate is also in a state of praising Taleju Bhavani.

Apart from these mentioned things, this palace area had also achieved great progress in the fields of language, literature, music, art etc. at that time. In addition to Sanskrit, the local Newars had their own Newari language with their own script. In which language many important texts of various genres were written. Such as the oldest and most authentic genealogy of Nepal is the Gopalraj genealogy, which was written in this Durbar area. Similarly, Bhairavanand drama, Hargauri drama etc. were written and staged. Malla kings used to compose plays themselves. They used to act themselves. Such plays were staged in Nasalchowk of the palace. and in the Dabali (pavilion). For this, Dabalis were built in the main squares of the city, where plays, farces and dances were organized (Vaidya, 1993 : 210). Numerous songs, ghajals, bhajans, poems were also written. These works were written in local Newari language and Maithili language besides Sanskrit. Hindu Religious texts like Ramayan, Mahabharat, Purans and also texts on Tantra, Astrology, Astronomy, Ayurveda etc. were also written. From this, it can be seen that this Durbar square (palace area) paid due attention to the development of knowledge and science in addition to language and literature at that time.

Thus, apart from political and administrative, it is seen that this Durbar square (palace area) was an important place in religious and cultural point of view at that time.

5. Conclusion

Thus, it seems that the history of Bhaktapur Durbar square is glorious as it is full of many ups and downs events. It has a high place in terms of advanced art, culture, language, literature, music, education etc. The Malla kings themselves were scholars. It was mentioned above that scholars and academic knowledge were highly valued in the Malla court. This tradition continued till later. As Sanskrit scholars, Hindu religious leaders, Tantriks, Maithili scholars and even the Capuchin priests who came to preach Christianity were

given proper accommodation here. Those who studied Shad Darshan (7 philosophy) were made dwellings, fire pits, wells, kitchens and water-tap (Regmi, 1968 : 82-5). At that time, 14 types of learning such as Vedas, Vedangas, Dharmashastras, Puranas, Mimansa, logic etc. were preached here. Tripura Vidyapith had established schools for the promotion of Tantric learning at that time (Joshi, 1979-80 : 5-6). In this way, during the Malla period, Bhaktapur achieved all-round progress in the religious and cultural field. From this, it is clear that at one time in history, this palace area had great political and administrative importance, as well as religious and cultural significance. The fact that it was an important place comes to be known. In fact, the various historical monuments and cultural heritages that are important from the archeological point of view show that this place was not only an administrative center but also famous for a center for religious faith or a sacred place of local Newar people.

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