History of Patan and the Emergence and Development of Monastic Courtyards

Patan is known by three equally common names: Patan, Lalitapur and Yala. Patan (Pāṭan) represents a simplification of Laitapaṭṭana, and since the 17th century has been used mainly by outsiders and even by Nevārī speaking people of Bhaktapur - *paṭṭana* being a suffix interchangeable with - *nagara* or - *pura* to denote a city. Lalit(a)pur (or Lalita- - kramā) is a more formal name, which surfaced first in 10th-century manuscripts. The 14th-century *Gopālarājavaṃśāvalī* chroncile refers to Maṇigvala, which denotes the center of the city with its palace comprising an urban agglomeration, the nature of which remains obscure. Common among local Nevārī speakers is the name Yala.

Several chronicles account for the origin of places, buildings and water sources in the form of narratives to provide meaning to sites and rituals.

Little is known about the process in which a couple of hamlets or even small villages merged to form a larger entity to become the city.[1] Some 105 fragments of *caityas*, Buddhist votive structures of the Licchavi era, dating to the 7th to 9th centuries most clearly demonstrate the existence of a larger Buddhist community. An early 7th-century inscription lists monasteries of which four most probably were located within what at present covers Patan.

Architectural fragments of such structures (Ukubāhā), of temples (Tvāyabāhā) and community houses (in Bhelāchẽ and Tyāgaḥ) have been radiocarbon dated to the 9th century.[2] In all probability, the present urban fabric with a cruciform plan formed by two major streets as the primary order must have emerged long before the 9th century. The four *caitya*-mounds provided orientation points within that order from very early times.

The urban fabric is based on more than a thousand courtyards (Nev. *cuka*, Nep. *cok*). Of these, 146 lay claims to a certain monastic character, since they incorporate a Buddhist shrine (*kvāpāchẽ*) for the guardian deity. The main monastic courtyards (*mūbāhā*) measure from 13 x 13.5 m (Kvābāhā) to 55 x 77.5 m (Tabāhā), covering almost half a hectare. The courtyards of the many branch and lineage monasteries (*kacābāhā*) however, cover hardly more than 50 square meters. Newar Buddhism is often called "Buddhism without monks": The householders, initiated priests (Vajrācārya) and the lower-raking Śākya own plots facing the courtyards. Only in rare cases such as Ukubāhā, Kvābāhā or Nakabahī is the original collective ownership of a monastery preserved.

Placing Newar Buddhism in the historical context, Alexander von Rospatt stated that it is a tradition native to the Kathmandu Valley.[3] Early on that valley was drawn into the fold of South Asian religion and civilization and has, in this sense, virtually always been part of the subcontinent. Buddhism in the valley has a history of at least eighteen hundred years and in this respect Newar Buddhism is the oldest tradition to have persisted without interruption until the present.

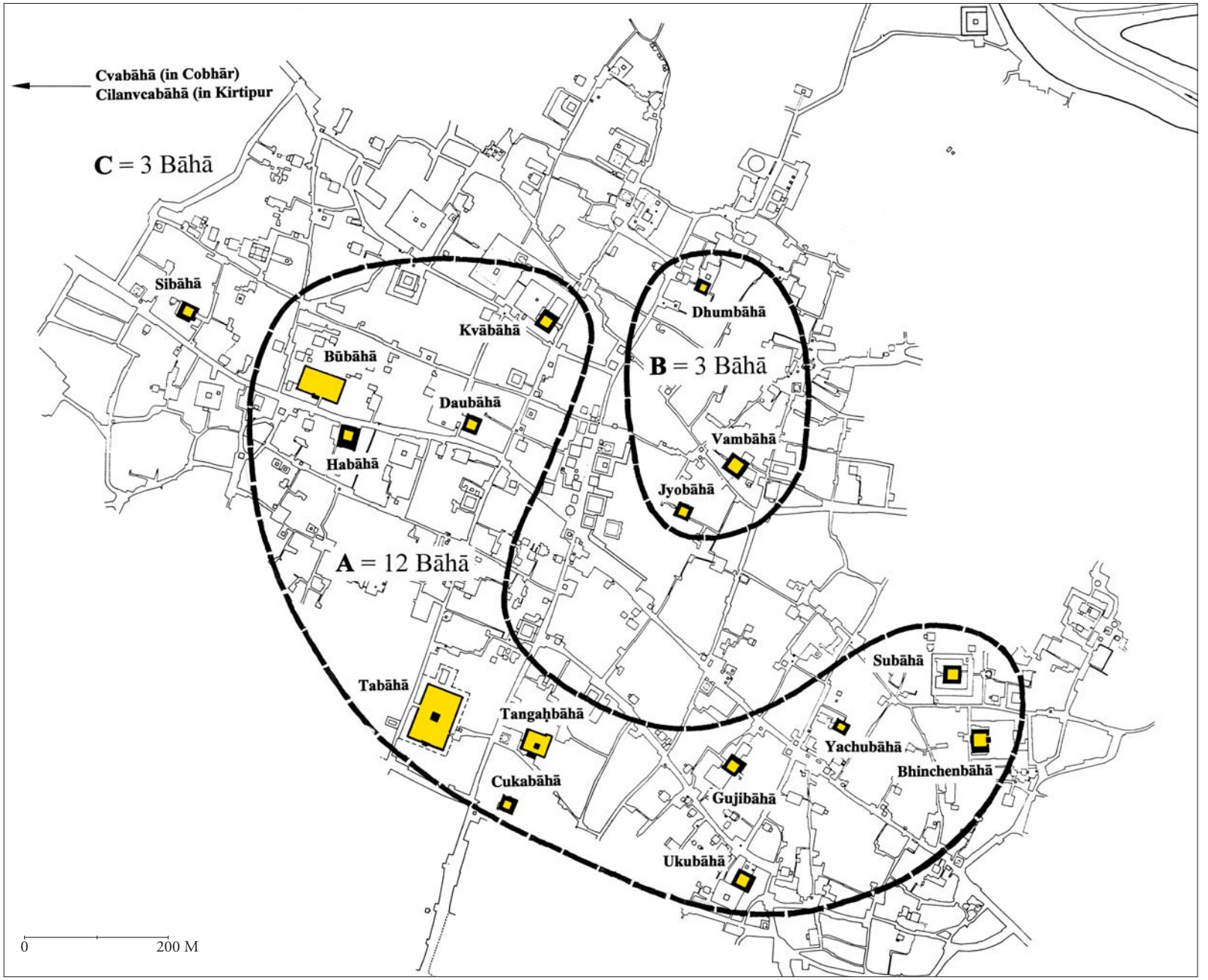
The anthropologist David Gellner insisted that Newar Buddhism cannot exist without monks, "and that Śākyas and Vajrācāryas of the Kathmandu Valley are monks, albeit married householder monks."[4] Every Śākya and Vajrācārya is a member of a monastic community (*saṅgha*) and this membership provides him with the right and duty to take turns as guardian (*dyaḥpāla*) of the principal exoteric deity of the monastery, housed in the tutelary shrine (*kvāpāchẽ*). Once they are married, they "periodically reassert," as Rospatt argues, "their identities as quasi-monks in the context of purificatory rituals."

The "coexistence" or "tension" between celibate and non-celibate monastic traditions resulted in a differentiation between two types of monasteries, both being termed *vihāra* in Sanskrit, but distinguished in Nevārī as *bāhā* or *bahī*.

Of the *bahī* type of monastery 25 are located in Patan. By 1985 seven of the *bahī* type monasteries were already defunct.

Referring to the *bāhā* type, the historic core of Patan has 15 main monasteries (*mūbāhā*), nine branch, and 114 lineage monasteries.

Opposite
Location of the eighteen main monasteries (*mūbāhā*) which enjoy the right to perform monastic initiation for the sons of the *saṅgha*'s members. The group includes twelve "original" monasteries which are said to have existed prior to the regulations set up by King Siddhinarasiṃha Malla in the 1620s (see A in the map). Three newly founded monasteries, located almost in a cluster in the northeastern quarters of the city, were added (see B), Vābāhā, Jyobāhā and Dhumbāhā, making altogether fifteen. Later, two more monasteries in Cobhār and Kīrtipur owned the right to initiate as they belonged to the territory of the kiongdom of Patan. Finally, one more newly founded monastery, Sibāhā, located near the northwestern end of the city joined the group.


Cvabāhā (in Cobhār)
Cilanvcabāhā (in Kirtipur
C = 3 Bāhā
Sibāhā
Kvābāhā
Būbāhā
Daubāhā
Habāhā
Dhumbāhā
B = 3 Bāhā
Vambāhā
Jyobāhā
A = 12 Bāhā
Tabāhā
Tangaḥbāhā
Cukabāhā
Subāhā
Yachubāhā
Bhinchenbāhā
Gujibāhā
Ukubāhā
0
200 M


Bhelāchẽ
Cikãbahī
Śaṅkhabāhā
Cyāsaḥ
Honabaha
Cibhaḥnani
Vālakhu
VÃBÃHÃ
Khapĩchẽ
Lakhidanbāhā
Vãbāhā Dunenani
Jyobāhā
Bhandarkhāl
0
50 M

Regarding Vābāhā, for 1596 the renewal of the roof is mentioned in an inscription (no. 1) and for 1634 (no. 2) the offering of a tympanum, installed above the doorway. This happened at the time of King Siddhinarasiṃha Malla at the middle of the 17th century and testifies to the existence of a monastic community. However, the king "added" Vābāhā to the twelve principal *bāhās* and "arranged rules," as an early 19th-century chronicle tells us.[5] The chronicle tells us that one monastery "had no members of the *saṅgha* left" and that since some "of the monasteries had become empty, he let some other people be ordained and settled them into these monasteries." Beyond this scant information which aggrandizes the leading role of the king in reorganizing the Buddhist institutions, little is known about 16th century Buddhism, the continuity of the monastic communities, and the reason that the monasteries "became empty."

It seems quite possible that Vābāhā as well as Jyobāhā and Dhaubāhā – all three located in the northeastern sector of the city – were revived or even resettled. Vābāhā was probably resettled by a lineage originating from Sankhu, as the present occupants readily recall.

Vābāhā has a couple of branch monasteries, with the status of some of these remaining obscure. The eastern neighboring courtyard, named Dunenani or Dunebāhā, has an esoteric shrine (*āgāchẽ*), housing the ancestral deity (*kūladevatā*) of the Śākya, whose lineage was established by Jagatamuni Śākya in 1829. Until the early 1990s all houses around the spacious courtyard were inhabited by Śākya, who also acted as caretakers of the tutelary deity of Vābāhā. A small courtyard west of Vābāhā, named Lakhidanbāhā, belongs to a family of Āvaḥ – the community of brick makers. In his inventory of monasteries in the early 1980s, John Locke lists three more lineage monasteries, namely Cibhaḥnani, Honabāhā, and Śaṅkhabāhā. In 2021 the two *guthīars*, Barmhu Āvaḥ of Cibhaḥnani objected to any connection with Vābāhā and the remaining two, allegedly founded by Kumaḥ (Prājapati), the community of potters, have been abandoned.

Vābāhā
The monastic courtyard in 1971, view from the north.
Photograph by Mary Slusser, 1971.

Opposite
Patan
Detail of the northeastern quarter, locating Vābāhā and its branch monasteries (*kacabāhā*), Vābāhā Dunenani (1), Lakhidanbāhā (2) Cibhaḥnani (3), Honabāhā (4) and Śaṅkhabāhā (5).

Patan
The eastern mound (*thudvā*) at Imādvā.
Pencil drawing by the painter Rajman Singh from Patan, ca 1844; inscribed by Henry Ambrose Hodgson, first in pencil, then in ink: "The Téta thúdo Chaitya of Pátan (Built in Treta yuga, says tradition that is, old out of record)."
From the center rises the central shaft (*yaḥsī*) beside a large tree. The circumambulatory path is intact, the retaining wall and the niches housing the Tathāgatas are crumbling.
Courtesy: Royal Asiatic Society, London, 022.022.