

Dhunge Dhara : A Case Study of the Three Cities of Kathmandu Valley

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Hiti - Dhunge Dhara, made of stone, is a channelised spout of water serving as tap with a shrine attached. It is nicely placed in a symmetrical manner and made to appear from a vertical wall.

In Nepal, Hiti exists since at least last 15th centuries. Dr. N. R. Banerjee is of the opinion that the tradition of course, must be even older and the Lichhavis may have simply systematized and given an artistic shape to the existing forms. However, its morphology as exists from the Lichhavi period remains the same but its name has changed with the passage of time.

In the early Lichhavi period, the Dhunge Dhara was called 'Kirti'. Kirti means merit. Those who build a Dhara, as a custom, receives merit as the drinking water is one of the most essential goods in human life. The Dhunge Dhara of Hadigaon built by Bharavi, the grandson of King Mandeva, in S. S. 472 (550 A. D.) is its example. In the late Lichhavi period it was called 'Pranali' and from the

Malla period (13th-18th century) onwards, besides Pranali, it is popularly called 'Hiti.'

It is estimated that over 95 per cent of the Dhunge Dhara are concentrated in the Kathmandu Valley. According to the survey conducted by the Kathmandu Town Development Project in 1982, there are 117 Dhunge Dharas in the Kathmandu Municipal Area. And according to the personal communication with Hem Raj Shakya, a native scholar of repute of Nepalese Culture, there are 40 such Dharas in Patan within the so-called four Asokan Stupa of Patan and about 80 per cent of them are still functioning. In Bhaktapur Town Area there are 103 Dhunge Dharas (unpublished M. A. thesis by Rajya Shrestha, submitted to the Tribhuvan University in 1984). More than two third of existing Dharas were constructed during the medieval period.

The main sources of Dhunge Dhara are Rajkulos, i. e. channels built by the Malla kings in the medieval period, and underground

water. Rajkulos start from the foothills and fed water to spouts located in various parts of Urban area of Bhaktapur and Lalitpur, Rajkulo of Bhaktapur was constructed by King Jitmitra Malla in 1678 A. D. and levied rules and regulations for its maintenance and functions. All the important Dharas of above towns have connections with the Kulo. These Rajkulos still exist. There are other Dhunge Dharas which have their own independent source of water. These Dharas tap underground water and its depth of basin are determined by the level of underground water table.

Nepalese people are the God-faring people and hence, offering of water to God is considered as the great meritorious act. That is why King, community and commoner in the past were keenly associated in constructing such Dharas in the Valley. However, the construction of Dhara alone was not end in itself. They wanted to see its continuity. So they created Guthi or allotted land to upkeep the Dharas constructed by them. There are several examples in this regard. Keeping in view of its maintenance certain rules and regulations have been laid down. For example in 'Alko Hiti', Patan, people have to put off their shoes when he/she goes to the Dhara. Use of soap is not allowed there and women during menstruation period and low caste people are prohibited to use this Dhara.

Dhunge Dharas are mostly made of stone, but the Dharas inside the Royal Palaces of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur of the medieval period are of gold gilted ones which are built by Royal patronages. Outside Royal Palaces also there are few such gold gilted public Dharas noted being Sundhara of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur. And

ward no. 17, at Dhalko in Kathmandu, there are three Dharas peculiar to others. Its water conduits are made of wood. Such type of Dharas are found nowhere else other than this place.

Dhunge Dharas available in the Kathmandu Valley are of different shape and size, but mostly they are square or rectangular in shape. Among the Dhunge Dharas, Sundhara of Kathmandu is the largest one. This is not only the largest but also one of the best example of its kind constructed during the Shah period.

An inscription found at Hadigaon dated S. S. 472 (550 A. D.) mentioning about Dhunge Dhara is so far the earliest available record in the valley. But the oldest existing Dhunge Dhara is Manga hiti of Patan dated S. S. 492 (570 A. D.) which was built by Bharavi. The latest being the magnificent and majestic looking Sundhara of Dharahara, Kathmandu which was built by the Queen Lalit Tripura Sundari Devi in 1828 A. D.

The Dhunge Dharas of three old palaces of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur are the most exquisitely and intricately designed Dharas of Nepal. They are in fact the masterpieces of its kind from the view point of its craftsmanship, e. g. the Tushahiti built by King Siddhi Narsing Malla of Patan consists of richly decorated 72 stone sculptures and the Mohan Kali Dhunge Dhara of Hanuman Dhoka Palace built by King Pratap Malla in 1652 A. D. has 40 images of different Gods and Goddesses.

A large majority of Dharas have one to three conduits or spouts. There are instance of having four and five spouts as well. Nine, twelve, twenty two and hundred and eight

spouted Dharas are rare having single instances of each, which are popularly known as Godavari Naudhara, Balaju Bayisi Dhara and Muktinath Yak-saya-Atha Dhara. Muktinath is outside the Kathmandu Valley.

Regarding the design of conduit or spout most of them have Makara i. e. crocodile. It is the carrier or vehicle of Ganga, the Goddess of water. As such, the mouth of conduit in general, represents the head of crocodile. One peculiar design of this art is found in Narayan Hiti Dhara. Its trunk, against the general rule of front curling, it is in reversed position. There is a legend about the reversal of trunk of the Narayan Hiti Makaras. Viswadev, father of Mandev was a pious King. During his reign, water from the spouts of Narayan Hiti stopped flowing. So he consulted an astrologer to make it reflow of the water from the Hitis. The astrologer advised the king that if you sacrifice a person who is flawless and endowed with perfect virtues then only it restarts its flowing. He came to know that such persons were no other than his own son and himself. He did not disclosed it to his son, but instead, he commanded his son, fourth days from now in the early hour of morning you would find a person lying by the side of Hiti with a piece of white cloth covering from head to toe, cut him into two pieces at one stroke. Mandev obeyed his father's command and Hiti started normal functioning. But, when he started washing his sword, instead of water, blood flowed out from the Hiti. He got puzzled and found that the man he sacrificed was no other than his own father. So the Hiti could not bear to see a patricide, and turned its trunk

reverse.

Generally spouts have crocodile head called Makara, and from its mouth flows out water. But in some Dharas there are the heads of cow, goat, elephant, tiger and cock as well from whose mouth, as in makara, come out water.

In most of the Dhunge Dharas stands Bhagirath underneath supporting the conduit either in standing or squatting position with blowing conch shell. According to the Hindu mythology, Bhagirath is the man responsible of bringing down the Ganga, from heaven to the earth with great meditation.

Dhunge Dhara has its own importance because it performs several function. Some of the important functions are as follows:

Prior to the late 17th century, before the introduction of piped water in 1896 the Dhara was the very important source of drinking water in the Kathmandu Valley. It still holds its importance but not to that extent as it was before. It supplements water-supply in the lean period before the onset monsoon.

It provides the place for public bathing. Even in the present time a large number of people take their bath in the Dharas. Its water is cool in summer and warm in winter.

Large number of people in general and the Dhobis, the washermen in particular, exploit the advantage of Dharas for using it for laundry purpose.

It provides place for religious functions. Festivals occur in Balaju in the month of Chaitra purnima; in Matatirtha, in Baisakh (Aunsi initial moon) and every twelve year

in Godavari Naudhara.

Water of some of the Dharas have religious significance. For example, the water of the right side of the Manga hiti of Patan is used for daily ritual worship of the Krishna temple whereas the water of left side of the same Dhara is used for reviving Hiranyakasyap, the victim of the Narshing Avtar in the Kartik Nach which enacts at the Patan Durbar Square every year in the month of Kartik. In Bhaktapur also there is still practice of offering the water of Sundhara to the Goddess Taleju.

It is considered that some of the Dharas have medicinal value. It is believed that it has the capacity to heat the disease such as gouts, sinosity and skin ailments.

Dhunge Dhara is not only the source of water but also the shrine as well. It contains most of the important images of Hindu and Buddhist pantheons symbolizing its holiness.

People have the faith that by taking bath in Dhara, one gets religious merit equal to visiting all the great important holy places (Tirtha) of Buddhist and Hindu religions.

The native people of Kathmandu, are quite aware of the water quality of such Dharas and wells. These were, in the past, only the sources of drinking water for the local populace. They tried to maintain its quality, by cleaning Dharas including wells every year on Sithi Nakha in the month of Jestha (May) just before the onset of monsoon. This practice still persists in the valley.

In general, the maintenance of these

Dharas has been continuously taken in Lichhavi, Malla and Shah periods. A large scale of restoration of Dharas took place in 1959-60. Beside this, Bhaktapur Development Project has undertaken the restoration of 19 Dharas at Bhaktapur. The Monument Maintenance Office at Bhaktapur, which has taken the follow-up programme after Bhaktapur Development Project, has also cleaned 5 Dharas.

Similarly, the Social Service National Coordination Committee (SSNCC) has also executed the restoration of Narayanhiti Dhara at Kathmandu and 108 Dharas of Muktinath in Mustang, under the principle laid down by the Department of Archaeology.

Last year in June 1989, the Nepal Heritage Society had conducted study on the Hiti of the south eastern part of Patan and proposed recommendation for restoration and rehabilitation of 12 hitis located in the above part of city. Recommended Hitis are Sundhara, Thapa hiti, Tusha hiti, Tangal hiti, Bhandarkhal hiti, Kanibahal hiti, Sinchi hiti, Sukuma hiti, Lagankhel hiti, Naricha hiti I, Naricha hiti II and Saugal hiti.

During the course of history several Dharas were lost into oblivion, many of the existing Dharas are in bad condition due to the lack of maintenance and proper care.

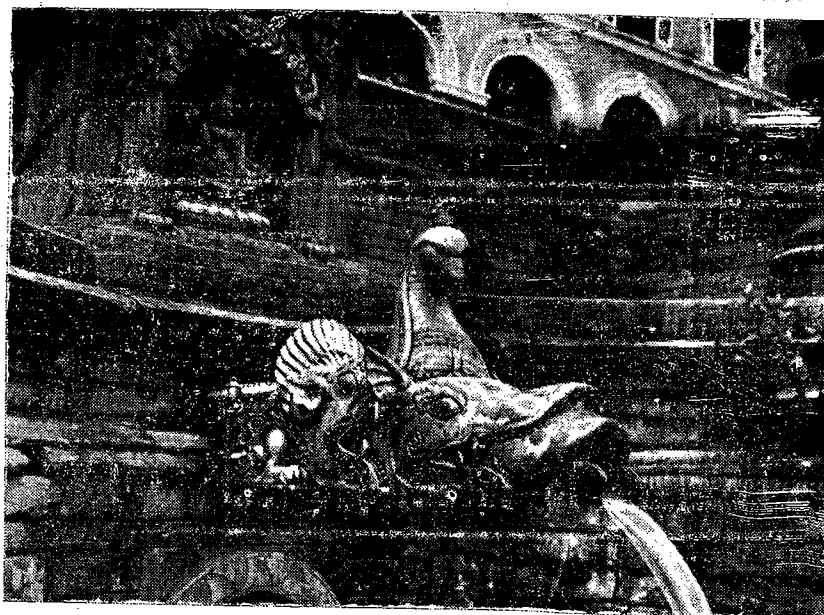
While constructing sub-way at Bhotahiti a Dhara having four water conduits was discovered. One of these conduits was facing East, one in west, while two remaining were facing North. The conduit facing East has inscription dated samvat 44 (596 A. D.), constructed by Bibhuvarma during the rule of King Amsuvarma. The rest three spouts are of Malla period. For its safety, these spouts have

been shifted to the National Museum.

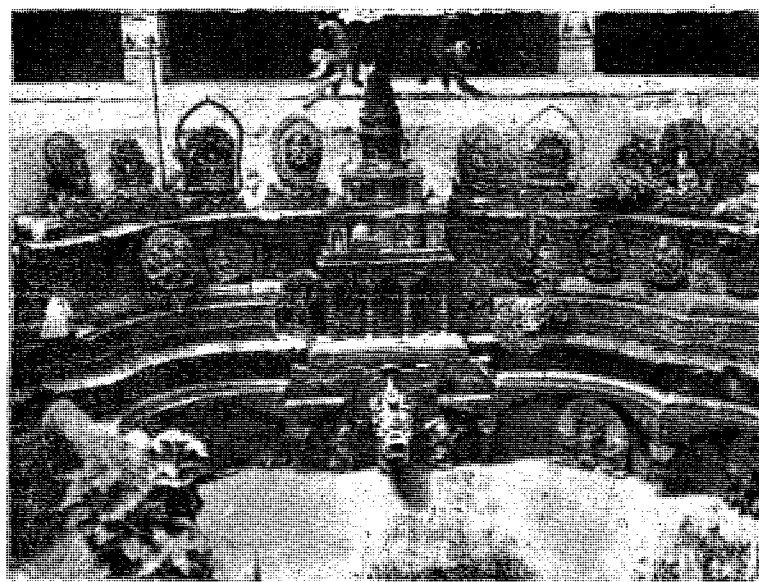
In the year 1989 the Department of Archaeology in collaboration with ISMEO of Italy had conducted excavation at Handigaon and discovered a stone conduit dated samvat 174 (726 A. D.) constructed by Priya Varman during the late Lichhavi Period.

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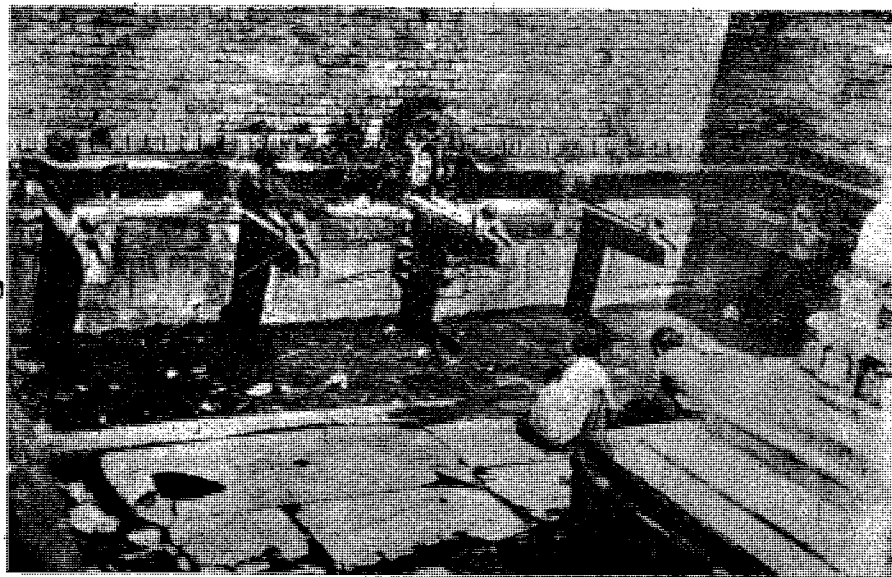
Sundhara, Kathmandu



Hanuman Dhoka Mohankali Chowk



Muktinath 108 Dhara



Five Spouted Dhara at Kumveswor