

# Revitalization of I Baha Bahi: Past and Present Condition

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## Abstract

The majority of Bahas still existing in Kathmandu Valley today, have either been extensively modified into residential buildings or have become unrecognizable. I Baha Bahi founded in 1427, is one of the oldest monasteries and extant examples of traditional architecture to be found in Kathmandu Valley. In 1978, The Nippon Institute of Technology of Japan selected the I Baha Bahi for restoration project. The restoration project was conducted by the Nippon Institute of technology in collaboration with the Department of Archaeology, Government of Nepal. The revitalization was done by employing local craftsmen and locally-based techniques wherever possible and by maintaining the architectural value and features of the monastery with the intention that it should be used as a place where people can live and carry out everyday activities after restoration.

In this study, the restoration process along with the current condition of the restored historical monastery has been studied and investigated in terms of physical condition and socio-cultural significance. The purpose of this article is to focus on the architectural and anthropological aspects of the I Baha Bahi. It provides basic knowledge of the revitalization and maintenance of historical monuments. The research focuses on lessons to be learned from this example of architectural revitalization of I Baha Bahi.

## Keywords

Traditional architecture, Revitalization, Peristyle system, Architectural Intervention, Buddhist Monastery, Baha Bahi

## 1. Introduction

Nepal is the one and only country in the world where people worship thirty-three million deities in the form of gods and goddesses. There are numerous Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries mostly in Kathmandu Valley.

The three cities of Patan, Kathmandu and Bhaktapur contain a large number of Buddhist viharas known as “baha” in Newari. The existence of numerous viharas in the Kathmandu valley, more particularly in Patan city, suggests that vihara culture is very old and has remained popular in Nepal [1].

New or renovated Bahas and Bahis are built very differently from old ones using modern materials, technology as well as form in the valley. The Baha and Bahi architecture have indigenous style and technology with respect to geography, culture and climatology. It has great aesthetic value and is famous for its exotic architecture in the world. So, it should be conserved in a proper way using traditional building form, materials and technology with respect to out geography, culture and traditions [2].

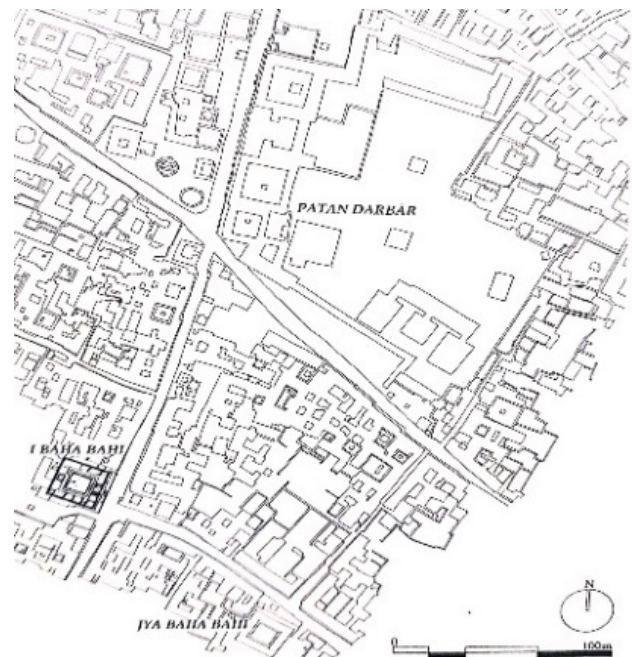


Figure 1: Location of I Baha Bahi [4]

I Baha Bahi is one of the oldest, most aesthetically attractive and historically significant Buddhist monasteries. Located between Tangal and Haugal, it gloriously lies just 300 meters southwest from Patan Durbar Square, Lalitpur.

### 1.1 Historical background of I Baha Bahi

I Baha Bahi is one of the most well-known Bahis in Patan. Its formal Sanskrit name is Rajashree Mahavihara which literally gives the meaning of “the great and majestic monastery of the monarch”. It is also known as Simha Varna Mahavihara. Commonly known as I Ba Bai in the Newari tongue [3].

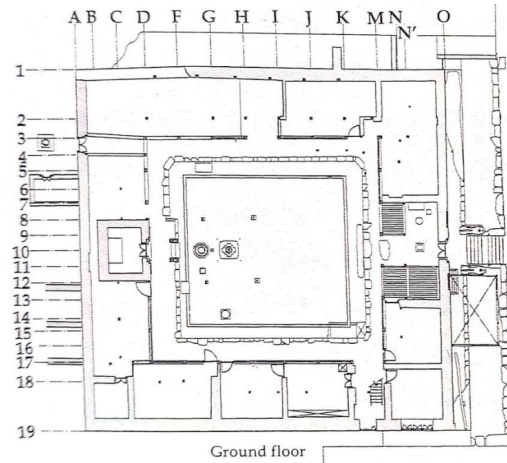


**Figure 2:** Inscriptions on wood and stone inside I Baha Bahi

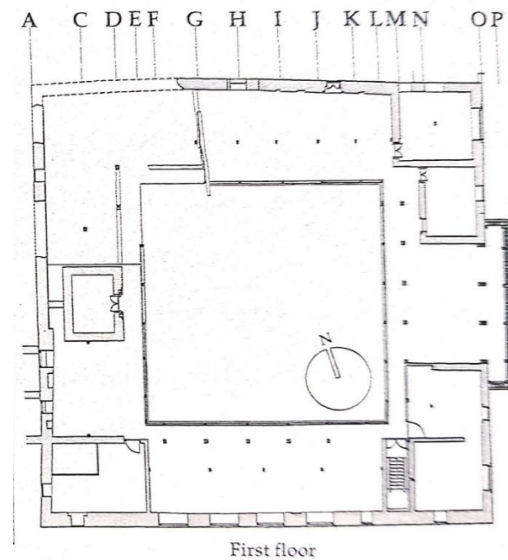
According to the stone inscription shown in figure 2, which was established on the occasion of the last restoration, situated just beside the door to the shrine room, this Bahi was constructed during the reign of Shree Jaya Jyoti Malla Dev, the King of Patan, in N.S. 547, B.S. 1484 by the five Pradhan Mahapatras.

### 1.2 Design of I Baha Bahi

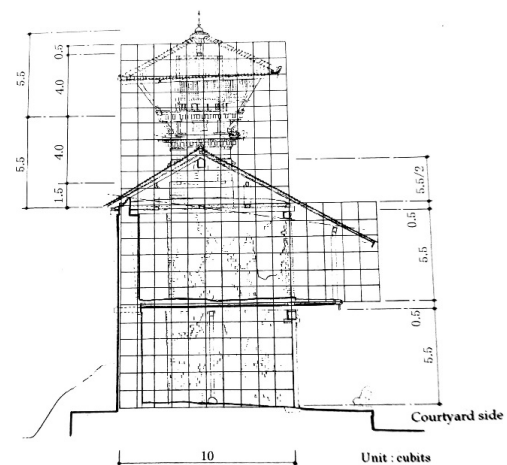
I Baha Bahi is an excellent exemplification of good design. It is a two-storied structure comprising a square courtyard between four wings in peristyle system and fine architectural techniques which uses well-regulated design technology based on a clear and definitive modular system for horizontal and vertical sections. A particularly strong part is the well understood visual axis through the main entrance to the eastern street which is more significant in terms of religious and tourism aspect.



**Figure 3:** Ground Floor Plan of I Baha Bahi [4]



**Figure 4:** First Floor Plan of I Baha Bahi [4]



**Figure 5:** Design Dimensions, Vertical Section, West wing shown in cubits [4]



### 1.3 Priority for revitalization

Several Buddhists monasteries in Nepal existed in a fragile state and almost all were in dilapidated condition. Many were close to a state where they couldn't be restored or repaired by any means, thus they were in dire need of some form of intervention. Among them, I Baha Bahi was deemed worthiest for revitalization considering its glorious historical background which had been documented in various locations in the form of inscriptions on stone, wood and copper that served as positive proof of its historical and architectural significance.

In the past, the monastery used to house several idols of gods and goddesses that were displayed to the public once a year on a specific day. Unfortunately, a number of those statues disappeared as a result of lack of security at the Bahi's boundaries which were broken and unable to protect the items. Hence, the Bahi was in utmost need for repair and restoration.



**Figure 6:** General Meeting of the Community [4]

Another reason for selecting I Baha Bahi as the subject of the restoration project was its value as a functional architectural structure that is still being made full use of by worshippers and locals who frequent the building and its courtyard for rituals and religious ceremonies such as weddings, Bratabandhas, Bhimratharohans, Suryadarshans, Belbibahs, rice feeding and pujas, etc. Furthermore, I Baha Bahi had also been serving as a communal gathering space and the government primary and secondary school for the local community.

The Bahi has become a functional space for the community nowadays as cultural functions such as anniversaries, seminars, exhibitions, traditional musical programs (Neku Baja, Nau baja etc.) and

general meetings besides religious events are also organized at the complex (Karmacharya et al., 1999). At present, the monastery houses Sugat Bouddha Mahavidyalaya which is managed by the Nepalese Buddhist Council.



**Figure 7:** Sugat Bouddha Mahavidhyalaya inside I Baha Bahi

Reasons such as these supported the belief that the restoration of I Baha Bahi would aid the improvement of general living environment of the locals and the neighborhood.

In addition to the on-going social and religious aspects of its use, the location of I Baha Bahi had also been a major factor which lead to its selection for the restoration project. I Baha Bahi is situated in such a way that it is distinctly visible from the street to its east which is embedded with Buddhist monasteries such as Jya Baha Bahi, U Baha Bahi and Mahabouddha Temple which is popularly known as the temple of a thousand Buddha idols. The fact that almost all religious processions of Patan including the Rato Machhindranath jatra, Gaijatra of Patan, Krishna jatra, Bhimsen jatra and many more also pass through this street combined with the Bahi's central location, just a short distance down the heart of the city, Patan Durbar Square, present the Bahi with a high visibility-high profile factor which results on it becoming a natural focus of attention.

Looking at all these factors, the researchers from Nippon Institute of Technology of Japan selected the I Baha Bahi for the restoration project, which was carried out with a vision of welfare and a positive influence on the neighborhoods, locals as well as visitors.

## 2. Methodology

This article is mainly written to address the value and importance of the historical I Baha Bahi of Patan. The current condition of the restored historical monastery

has been studied and investigated in terms of its physical condition and socio-cultural significance. Related documents and records on the history, establishment and the revitalization project were collected through various sources. Using qualitative methodology, this study investigates the restoration project carried out in 1995 by the Nippon Institute of Technology and analyses the present condition of the Bahi. The informations were collected through observation, key informant surveys, site visit and the literature review including the report prepared by the Nippon Institute of Technology (The Buddhist Monasteries of Nepal). All the informations were analyzed and discussed for the conclusion.

### 3. Study of Restoration Work Done in 1995

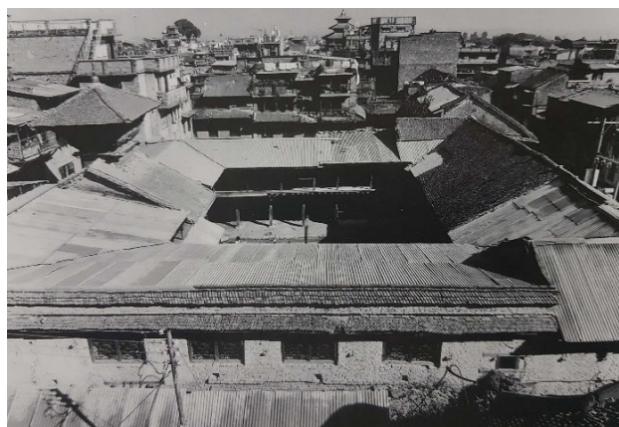
The restoration was carried out by the Nippon Institute of Technology in collaboration with the Department of Archaeology, Government of Nepal during 1990 to 1995. During the construction phase of restoration every effort was made to employ local craftsmen, locally-based techniques and traditional materials such as clay and timber was used wherever possible to maintain the original architectural character and features of the monastery with the intention that it should serve as a place where people could live and pursue their everyday lives once the restoration was complete [4].



**Figure 8:** Facade, East wing before restoration [4]

During the initial phase (1990 – 1993), the restoration was carried out on sections of the East and North wings of the building. Sections which required repairing were dismantled, refurbished and reconstructed whereas sections that were completely missing were rebuilt. During this phase, technical assistance was extended to the Department of Archaeology by the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, and the cost of restoration was covered jointly

by the Government of Nepal and Nippon Institute of Technology. During the second phase (1993 – 1995), the restoration work was carried out on the south west wing of the building, and repairs were made mainly to wooden components that had aged and become weak. The cost of restoration for the second phase was covered solely by the Nippon Institute of Technology. Restoration work was completed on December, 1995 [4].



**Figure 9:** Birds eye view before restoration [4]

### 3.1 Key Informant Survey

Only two key informant persons were selected for the survey, the first being Mr. Hira Kaji Maharjan and second, Mr. Daan Ratna Shakya. According to Mr. Hira Kaji Maharjan, who worked as an interpreter for the Japanese team at the time of restoration in 2047 BS, the team carried the project out with commendable patience while respecting and showing consideration to the confidentiality and culture of the people. The privacy of Aagan Dyo, which had to be kept out of the view of general public, was maintained throughout the duration of the restoration project.

The team had also brought along with them, a kind of chemical to be mixed in the mortar composition which could prevent vegetation growth to a great extent. This chemical is responsible for the long-lasting integrity of the Bahi's brick masonry.

To preserve the authenticity of the existing woodwork in the Bahi which were in deteriorated and structurally damaged condition, the outermost layers of 1cm thickness were meticulously cut out and joined to new sturdy timber. Interview with locals revealed that the Japanese team were extremely careful while dismantling or removing an original component of the building. Each component such as plinth stones, wooden members, roof components, bricks, etc.



regardless of size, were individually marked, photographed and documented before being cautiously removed and stored to be incorporated into the restored structure later.



**Figure 10:** Interview with Mr. Hira Kaji Maharjan



**Figure 11:** Interview with Mr. Daan Ratna Shakya

Special adhesives brought from Japan, were used in the joint of woodwork and timber components. For the mortar, soil which was free from organic matter and vegetation was obtained from rural areas abundant in fresh mud. The main shrine of the monastery houses the Kwapadyo, which is said to have been stolen in the past according to the currently eldest pujari of the Bahi, Mr. Daan Ratna Shakya. Thus, a replacement for the original idol has been set up in its place. The shrine is worshipped twice every day in the morning and evening.

#### 4. Site Study and Observation

I Baha Bahi is an excellent example of 15th century Newari Architecture which has aided the tourism industry and community development to a great extent. History suggests that several Buddhist monasteries have had a positive impact on the cultural,

economic and social well-being of the Nepalese community. Among them, I Baha Bahi is an establishment possessing great value, notability and prestige in terms of its superior architecture, prominent location and the evident influence it has had on the society in the past, present and undoubtedly in the future as well.

Regarding the architecture and layout of the monastery, the main entrance to the complex showcases two large dark stone statues of a lion and a lioness that pose as guards of the Bahi. As soon as one enters the complex, they are welcomed by an area comprising seating platforms and a statue of the esteemed Hindu deity, Lord Hanuman, to the left and Mahankal to the right, which creates an environment of spirituality and wellness in and around the area. The presence of the statue of a Hindu deity in a Buddhist monastery boasts of the strong bond and acceptance between the two major religious beliefs of the Newari community.

Further into the complex, the visitor is greeted with a large and spacious open-air courtyard which is surrounded by semi-open corridors lined with peristyle wooden columns in the ground floor on a plinth of around 2 feet of height. At the center of the courtyard, a single votive chaitya along with a Dharmadhatu can be observed.

The first floor of the monastery has been planned in a similar manner to the ground floor where the peristyle corridors surround the courtyard from all directions. From the spacious lobby on the first floor, the activities taking place at the courtyard can be observed. For this particular function, railings of height 1'-6" have been provided, sloped at an angle of 60 degrees, so that the audience can observe the event while sitting down on the floor. A large verandah which faces the street, can be seen right above the main entrance of the monastery, from where the Jatras, festivals and processions taking place in the street below can be observed. Another noteworthy element in the design of the complex includes the turret built in pagoda style above the main shrine, which lies in direct visual axis to the main entrance at the center of the façade. At the east wing of the complex, a different exit door can be observed which might have been placed near the staircase to serve as an emergency exit or a service entry. Another door can be seen at the west which was possibly the entrance for the Pujaris (Shakyas).

## 5. Analysis, Discussion and Findings

I Baha Bahi Buddhist monastery is an example of architectural refinement where the intricacy of its dimension design is even to be found reflected in the particulars of the wood carvings. It can be assumed from the fact that a king was present at the ceremony to mark the foundation of the I Baha Bahi, that this structure was in some way connected to the ruling Malla Royal Family. Such a conjecture is supported by the fact that the Sanskrit name for the structure, Rajashree Mahavihar, means “Great and August monastery dignified by the King”.



**Figure 12:** Rajashree Mahavihar

The fact that the dimensions based on the ‘hat’, which was discerned as the unit of measurement used in construction of the old royal buildings of Nepal, were also to be found used in a similar manner here and there in various places in the foundations of I Baha Bahi, permits conjecture that this was due to the historical background or lineage associated with the foundation of the building [4].



**Figure 13:** Deteriorating Condition of Wooden Components

Although the Japanese team had done an impeccable job of restoring the Bahi complex, the monastery is observed to be in a deteriorating condition at present due to negligence of the government and the community regarding the maintenance of the monument. The revitalization project carried out by the Nippon Institute of Technology has withstood the challenge of weathering and age in many aspects including the structural stability of the building and absence of vegetation on the tiled roof. The building remained unaffected by the major earthquake of 2015, which had damaged multiple monuments in and around the Kathmandu valley. There has been no major degradation in the aesthetic and structural components of the monastery since the year of the restoration to the present. However, a few components such as the wooden Jhallar hanging below the balcony projections and railings of the inclined balcony are observed to be partially or completely damaged or have fallen off entirely and gone missing due to neglect. The Japanese had restored and used genuine components rescued from the original ruins of the monastery and incorporated them into the new revitalized building.



**Figure 14:** Birds eye view after restoration [4]



**Figure 15:** Facade, East wing after restoration [4]

The plinth stones and tiles of the courtyard weren't



replaced during the project and thus they are observed to be in a more deteriorated state in comparison to any other components of the complex at present. The pinnacle of the chaitya on the courtyard also seems to be in a dilapidated condition due to weathering and age. Before the restoration, the Bahi did not have any restrooms. Separate male and female toilets were also added to the building during the restoration. At present, the monastery has been out of use for the most part except for the Sugat Bouddha University classes at the north-eastern part of the building and the single-family residence housing the caretakers of the Bahi at the northern part. Besides the occasional committee meetings and infrequent social affairs of the community, the Bahi seems to be abandoned and largely overlooked by the public.



**Figure 16:** Present Situation of Courtyard and Chaitya

The regular use and maintenance of such a historical monument is vastly necessary to ensure its longevity and significance in the community. Museums could be set up in order to attract visitors which can generate revenue of maintenance and social activities. More socio-cultural and religious activities can be encouraged and regular exhibitions can be set up to promote the area. The history of the Bahi's establishment and the restoration project needs to be well-documented and displayed graphically in order to capture the attention of visitors. Through these measures, the durability and value of this archetypal monument can be restored and rejuvenated which could in turn act as a stimulus for the revitalization of many other abandoned monasteries of the valley.

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