



Chilanco of Kirtipur: A Unique Secret Site Gopal Prasad Sigdel

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Abstract

This study aims to elucidate the importance of Jagatpal Mahavihar and Chilanco Caitya picturizing their historical and socio-religious dimensions. Then the paper explores ritual, cultural, artistic and archeological features and endeavoring to introduce the secrete sites among the local, national and global communities. The study employs qualitative approach, sequentially analyzing historical artifacts and religious practices to construct its holistic profile. The research grasps the secondary resources such as historical text, archeological reports, journal articles, Newar Buddhist heritages and local religious rites along with regular and traditional practices of Buddhist devotees in the shrines. Three key informants and interviews were conducted and analyzed correlating its attributes, historical developments, spiritual functions and assessing its uniqueness within local and global contents. This paper presents the strength of Chilanco living heritage and sacred sites but lesser known introducing its key uniqueness tantalizing subaltern perspective for further research.

Keywords: Chilanco Caitya, Jagatpal Mahavihar, secret site, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, archeology

1. Introduction

Nepal has the glorious history of socio-cultural and archeological features. It has the highest peak of the earth (Mt. Everest) along with (Lumbini) the birthplace of most towering personality of the humankind, Gautam Buddha, including many tangible/intangible heritages and sacred Buddhist sites (Government of Nepal [GoN], 2020). Kathmandu valley is renowned as the religious hub of Nepal, where there are many temples, Viharas\Stupas\Caityas\Gumbas and even masjid indicating its rich cultural and spiritual diversities. Among them Chilanco Caitya and Jagatpal Mahavihara are an ancient and majestic Buddhist holy shrines, but not properly distinguished, that lie in the historical town Kirtipur. The white stupa Chilanco mainly concerns within the Newar Buddhism and animates the living cultural hub of Newar community. So that there are operated daily, monthly and yearly rituals, ceremonies and major festivals like Kartika Purnima, Bishakha Purnima (Buddha Jayanti) and Gulna etc. by the community within the magnificent and civilized manners (Bajracharya, personal communication, December 5, 2025).

Kirtipur, among historic cities of Kathmandu valley, is a center hub of Buddhist resident, with Buddhist archaeological structures and monuments. It is 7 km south-west of Kathmandu valley that expands approximately 1.6 km east-west and about 600 meters north-



south. There are many shrines, socio-cultural and historical sites in Kirtipur. On the highest complex of the west hill of Kirtipur there lies Uma-Maheshwor temple. Jagatpal Mahavihara and Chilanco Caitya are situated in the east direction of the town. While Bagh Bhairav temple is situated between these two religious places, which icon lower slope of the city (Bajracharya, 2008\09, p.8).

Jagatpal Mahavira, among 18 major Baha (Vihara\monastery) and 185 sub-Baha-Bahi in Patan area, is a major Baha. The term 'Baha:' is a corruption of Sanskrit literal word 'Vihara', the standard term for Buddhist monastery where the Buddhist monks and nuns reside (Luck, 2023, p. 178). It is also called Jagatpal Mahavihara by the local of Kirtipur and Kyapu-Baha by outsiders including Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur. This Buddhist shrine is the center of the Mahayana and Vajrayana rule of Buddhism (Bajracharya, personal communication, December 5, 2025). There is a Chilanco Caitya (Stupa) on the yard of Jagatpal Mahavihara to the north direction. This is the large Stupa on the top of a hill consisting of four smaller other stupas around it. At the southern edge of the Caitya, the shrine of the Kwapa-Dya and Agam with a long stone stairway, which is marked by two guard lions. To the east, two pairs of *Pati* (traditional rest houses), provide a glimpse into the lives of the pilgrimage who once sought solace in this hallowed place. Meanwhile, to the southern side, the sleeping quarters of a watchman tell tales of vigilant guardianship through the passage of time (Bajracharya, personal speech, December 5, 2025).

According to Bajracharya (2025), the literal meaning of "Chilanco" is the misconception word of Chiram/Chil or Chiranjivi (immortal). It is also called Cho (Danda) Baha which means Vihara (Vihara on the mound). According to him, 'Chilandyah' (Chiranjeevi Deity), indicating that Chilanco Vihara and Chaitya are the 'Chiranjivi' (immortal) located on the hill (Danda) or the immortal god live on the mound. It is claimed that 'Chilam' can be the name of a square or a 'Danda'. The Danda also has a mound (Chwa: Takura) on it. It can be assumed that the word Chilanchva is derived from the four hills of Kathmandu Valley, namely Jamachva, Phulanchva, Siphuchva, Dhyanachva. Chilanco Caitya may have been called Chilanchva Caitya (Bajracharya, 1123 N.S.).

As Gutschow (1997, p. 26) said that there is a belief that the merit attained by the erecting of Caitya meant liberating (Durgatimoccana) the deceased and other departed soul of the family from the evil form of existence. Despite the historical and religious significance of Jagatpal Mahavihar\ Chilanco Caitya, scholarly documentation remains limited, with most studied focusing on Kathmandu valley's Buddhist architecture rather than site-specific analysis. There is a lack of detailed exploration of its historical, spiritual, religious, archaeological importance within Kirtipur (Bajracharya, personal communication, 2025). This paper aims to explore the historical and archaeological significance of Jagatpal Mahavihara and Chilanco Caitya of Kirtipur. It further tries to mirror the spiritual norms and values of the Buddhist archaeological and cultural richness exposing its secret, and unique symbols related to the shrines that help to pave way for the expansion of Buddhist spirituality and tourism in Nepal.

1.1 Significance of Study

This research contributes to the documentation and promotion of an understudied Buddhist heritage site. By integrating historical, archaeological, artistic, and ethnographic perspectives, it provides a comprehensive profile of Chilanco Caitya and Jagatpal Mahavihara. The study highlights the role of Newar Buddhist practice and its potential as a destination for cultural richness and spiritual satisfaction which could aid local sustainable development. It also invites further academic inquiry and global attention to Nepal's lesser-known sacred landscapes from the perspective of subaltern study.

1.2 Delimitations of the Study

This study focuses specifically on Chilanco Caitya and Jagatpal Mahavihara in Kirtipur. It relies primarily on secondary sources, including historical texts, archaeological reports, journal articles, and personal interviews from local informants were conducted. While it addresses ritual practices and community participation, it does not provide a complete ethnography of all associated festivals or a comparative analysis with other similar sites in the Kathmandu Valley. The research is limited by the availability of published and archival materials on the site, and findings are interpreted within the context of Newar Buddhism and local historical narratives.

2. Methodology

This study was about Chilanco Caitya (stupa) and Jagatpal Mahavihara (monastery) qualitative desk-based research from secondary sources. The published books, booklets, newspapers and magazines have been studied related to Chilanco Caitya and Jagatpal Mahavihara. The inscriptions and archives were studied that are available around Chilanco Caity and Vihara. Three key informant interviews and informal communication were conducted with local experts, scholars and Bajracharya priests of the shrine to gain information. Field visiting and observation also helped to find out live reality of the shrines. This study focuses on Chilanco Caitya (Stupa) and its other small stupas surrounding it in four directions. The research tried to embody the meaning of the main Tathagata Buddha (Vairocana) and other four Amoghasa, Amitabha, Ratnasambhava and Aksobhya Buddhas and their relationship each other, respectively. The major purpose of the study was to fossilize archaeologies, cultures, rituals and histories of Chilanco Mahavihara and Caitya with its importance in the modern society as far as possible with an aim of expanding Buddhist spirituality and tourism development in Nepal.

2.1 Historical Background

The white Stupa, known as Chilanco Caitya, is considered one of the oldest monuments of Nepal Mandala and was renovated by Jagatpal Varma in 1504 AD (Gotschow, 1997, p. 32). It is believed that the Stupa has been established by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. Local folklore claims that the standing stone's pillar in front of the main entrance is an Asoka pillar and surrounding ring of the Caitya were built with *Teliya* bricks, which is believed the oldest one material of Nepal. However, its exact age cannot be confirmed without detailed archeological excavation and carbon testing (Sammohan, 2020). Though considerable additions and alterations continued in the subsequent centuries, with several of them in the 1668-73 period (Bajracharya, 2021).

Jagatpal Mahavihara, a sprawling monastery located south edges of Chilanco stupa that truly captivates the imagination. Jagatpal monastery was renovated in 1515 A.D. during the regime of Jagatpal Varma (Luck, 2023, pp. 179-80). Historical records suggest that Jagatpal Varma, then *Pradhan Mahapatra* of Patan, engaged to renovate and construct several religious sites in Kirtipur (Local people, personal communication, December 5, 2025). The monastery is older than others that is why the Samyak ceremony held at Patan in every 5 years has been given the most priority respecting as second honored place among 18 Bahas of Patan area, according to the chronicle used by Daniel Wright, who wrote the History of Nepal hundred years ago.

2.2 Architectural and Artistic Features

Traditional Buddhist temples are designed to inspire inner and outer peace (Gellner, 2004, p. 140). As one of the largest and most significant Chilanco Caitya in the Kathmandu valleys, it picturizes a perfect sense of peace and eternity. It not only represents the physical

landscape but the spiritual living repository of faith of Newari culture portraying the rich archeological marvel. The main stupa is about 9.0-10.5 high on a quadrangular base (Luck, 2023, p.182). The Monumental type of the Chilanco Caitya (stupa) looks like the Swayambhu Maha Caitya eyes painted with harmika and brass rings (Gotschow, 1997, pp 32-33).

It has five Buddhas or five Tathagatas who are the most widespread and basic form of divine iconography found on all five sides. There are small Caityas cardinal association and their vehicles are widely known in Newar Buddhists culture but the five Buddhas do not appear as human shaped. All aspects of the universe can be classified in pentadic fashion. They are, in sense, cosmic principles. The five Buddhas are Amonghasi (unfailing success) into north, Amitabha (boundless light) into west, Ratnasambhava (jewel-born) into south, Akshobhya (fearless) into east and Vairocana (The sun) in center, respectively. In the Buddhist stupas including the Chilanco stupa these mentioned above forms have been found within four other small stupas faced in four directions. Vairocana is situated in the center is the sublimated dimension plays the vital role to purify perceptions, consciousness, feelings and volitions one to one. The fifth Buddha is often thought to reside of the Caitya. The sixth Buddha Vajrasatva (adamantine beings) that is the summation of other five Buddha in Newari Buddhism (Bajracharya, personal communication, December 5, 2025). The Stupa follows classical form symbolizing the enlightened mind of the Buddha. Its massive hemispherical dome or Agam represents the world while the squire mirrored the stage of enlightenment adorning with the all-seeing eyes of the Buddha peeping with compassion and wisdom in the four directions. Like by there are four Buddhas has kept in four poles with four colored clothe that indicate the four Araya-Taras green, white, blue and red respectively (Bajracharya, personal communication, December 5, 2025). In the Buddhist stupas including the Chilanco Caitya (Stupa) above mentioned forms have been found within four other small Stupas faced into different four directions. The tathagatas are identifiable by their gestures (mudra) and their colors; they are assigned to cardinal directions (Gutschow, 1997, p. 33). The most common mudra represented in Caitya includes:

- Bhumisparsa Mudra (earth touching): the Earth as witness to enlightenment.
- Dhyan Mudra(meditation): deep meditation and compassion
- Varada mudra (gift giving:) charity and generosity,
- Abhay mudra(fearlessness): protection and courage
- Dharmachakra Mudra (turning the wheel of dharma): teaching and spreading wisdom.

According to Santina (1997, p. 237) in the Vajrayana, the five aggregates appear as the five celestials Buddhas in the form of Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, and Akshobhya relating to purification, feelings, perception, volition and consciousness respectively.

Like Pancha varna is another artistic feature which means five colors and directions. All colors symbolize the following meaning

- Blue-East: calmness and protection (Akshobhya).
- Red-West: love, compassion, removal of desire (Amitabha).
- Yellow-South: generosity, wealth, abundance (Ratnasmbhava).
- Green-North: success, action, fearlessness (Amoghasiddhi)
- White-Center: purity, wisdom, enlightenment (Vairocana)

Jagatpal Mhahavihar\ Chilanco Caity, having its unique features, are a secret heritage site. At the south edges of the complex delves the shrine of Kwapa-Dya and Agam of the Baha situated its sacred halls and experience the profound tranquility that permeates its ancient walls. The meanings of Kwapa-Dya and Agam are daily worshipping for own clans or ancestors (Bajracharya, personal communication, December 5, 2025). According to him, the north faced

monastery has three storeyed structures with 60 ft in length, 22 ft in wide, and 32 ft in height. Within the complex, there is a house of a Guthi for Bajracharyas which is known as Agam-Chhen, the inner sanctum or sacred room maintained by the Buddhist Tantric. The three storied complex has built bricks and ground floor has plastered with whitewashed. There are three flanking three faced and eight armed figures in the center may be Maha-Akshobhya. All the figures are dressed in long following garments as fashion of Rajput prices (Luck, 2023). Above the monastery is usual five-fold window hanging with two small windows. The top story has an overhanging balcony and adapted for living quarters and the roofing of Vihara with tiles. The vihara has two sections, one front section is related to archeological and structural station, whereas the behind section is related to daily preaching and meditation hall and rest room for devotees.

The entrance of the monastery is guarded by two large statues of lions dated N.S. 837 and 839. Just beyond them there is a shrine of Mahakal. Standing the doorway the images of Sariputta and Maudagalyana have been reposed welcoming devotees to visit Tathagat. There is a north faced statue of Buddha in the Baha. There are other small Caityas around the monastery, which is situated on the top of the area. The four transient Buddhas, stone figures painted by gaudy enamel. Arts are set into the four-cardinal point, and their consorts are placed between them. The Buddha located on the east Aksobhya is enclosed in a sort of the shrine marking by two small lions. Like by, to the left of the shrine are the figures of Buddhas (Aksobhya) Dharma (Prajnaparamita) and the sangha (Avalokiteswor) also painted with gaudy enamel (Luck, 2023, p.179).

2.3 Jagatpal Mahavihara: Ritual Life within the Chilanco Complex

The Jagatpal Mahavihara is in the Chilanco complex, reflecting the living center of Newa Buddhist tradition. With 120 members from 70 Bajracharya families conduct the Viharas activities (Bajracharya, personal communication, December 5, 2025). According to him, all the members of the sangha served as Dya-Pala (a regular worshipping systems) turn by turn per month, along with annual festival including Gula festival, Shree Panchami, Buddha Jayanti celebrate in grandeur manner (Bajracharya, personal communication, December 5, 2025). The conducting body of sangha consists of the elders and plus another is called Balin Thayapa and they do all work in Balin. Then there are retired ceremonial elders at that time (Luck, 2023, p. 181). The full moon of Jestha Month (May\June), the full moon of Ashwin month, Acharya Gu (Acharya Guthi), Sana Gu (death rites) etc. are other major daily, monthly and yearly festivals of the shrine (Bajracharya, 2000, p. 9). Chuda Karma, a traditional Newar ritual in which the first haircut of child is in the name of Avalokitesvor. Similarly, Bajracharya's families operate Bratabanda (sacred ceremony) for boys when they become 10 years and for girls Bael Vibhaha (traditional marriage system within *Aegle marmelos* tree), respectively. There are five other Kwa-Cha Bahas (sub-Bahas-Bahi) of Jagatpal monastery. All the ritual and religious activities like Chuda function (Karma) operate themselves cooperating with Jagatpal Mahavihara (Bajracharya, 2008, p. 32).

They are Yaka-Baha (Jiwandharma vihara) that lies at Lwan Dega Tole, Khusi Baha (Maha kirti vihara) that lies at Kirtipur Khusi Tole, Cwe-Baha (Harsakirti Vihara) at Singha Duval Tole, Kwe-Baha (Karnataka vihara) at Tajaph Tole and Chithu-Baha (Padhmakirti) lies at Chithu Tole Kirtipur respectively. Among these Kwa-Cha Vihara Chithu-Baha is one of the autonomous small Baha related to 21 Shakya's Families of Kirtipur. To conduct ritual activities, Chithu-Baha does not require permission and cooperation with Jagatpal Mahavihara (Luck, 2023, p. 180)

3. Discussion and Findings

A few books and booklets have been published about Cilanco Caitya and Maha Vihar. Some materials about the sites have been tried to mention here. The Nepalese Caitya 1500 years of Buddhist architecture in Kathmandu valley written by Niels Gutschow is one of the important collections about the Caityas of valley including Chilanco. The writer has presented even a little bit about the Chilanco Maha Caitya. The other important book is Buddhist monasteries of Nepal written by Johan k. Lucke. The writer has elaborated about the Baha-Bahi or Vihar (monasteries) of Nepal. As per the writer, it has given somehow priority for Jagatpal Vihar\Chilanco Caity embodying its religious, cultural, historical, archeological and ritual importance. Sukra Sagar Shrestha is a pioneer writer and local researcher. He has researched the historical, ritual, spiritual along with cultural background of Chilanco Caitya and Jagatpal Mahavira. He and his companions Mehdred Shokoohy, Natalie H. Shokoohy and Sukra Sagar Shrestha have published 'Street Shrine of Kirtipur Nepal as long as the sun and the moon' in 2014. This book is important to know about the written inscriptional history of the shrines that lie in Kirtipur.

Sukra Sagar Shrestha's others written materials are the cultural and archeological history of Kirtipur that valorize these shrines and their importance. Also, he has highlighted local history, culture, architecture and locality to make scientific, prosperous and civilized society. Others news, daily, monthly and yearly newspapers and magazines have also published about Jagatpal Mahavihara and Chilanco Caitya.

In the Buddhist stupas including the Chilanco stupa these above-mentioned forms have been found within four other small stupas faced in four directions. Vairocana is situated in the center, sublimated dimension plays the vital role to purify perceptions, consciousness, feelings and volitions one to one. The people of the present world have been conceiving greed, attachment, anger, corruption, hostility and violence. Buddhist stupas and monasteries with its archeological structures have been teaching the Buddha's educations tangibly\intangibly. But we are unknown about this wholesomeness following the so-called modern civilization and unwholesome social media. To stop such ruthless, iron hearted, rustic and violence oriented our society and to make peace harmony and happiness, we should follow the Buddhist principles as per days regular visiting these Viharas and Stupas. In Jagatpal Mahavihara and Caitya meditation and daily\weekly ritual peace worshiping have also been released. But most people in our society do not take part interestingly beyond going sightseeing. So that we should intensify Buddhist philosophy to grasp peace, prosperity and wholesome society. The main curiosity for the world about Buddhism is about four principles, they are:

- "The Three Jewels of Consciousness- "Sila, Pragya, Samadhi",
- "The Four Noble Truths",
- "Eightfold Path",
- "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence –Pancha Sheel (five precepts)".

Buddhist teachings are explored in reference to their sociological theory applications. Mindfulness practices that are endemic to Buddhism are explored as tools for sociologists to consider as reflection, develop sociological insights, and pursue social justice (Schipper, 2012, p. 203). That is why, Buddhist monuments and shrines are not superstitions but scientific, cosmological, physiological and psychological notions that encompass all the sublimities. We should study the Buddhist philosophy deeply not from the eyes of traditional religion but knowing as biology, zoology, cosmology, sociology, psychology, ecology and physiology etc. So that we can know the real roots of our life and the universe that was found out by Shakyamuni Gautam Buddha before 2500 years ago. Travel in Buddhism has not only been associated with quest for spiritual potency but also with gaining of knowledge (Sen, 2014). Metaphor of travel Buddhism is the travel to the Sakyamuni Buddha's principles of the four-

novel truth, eight-fold path and five precepts that carry the person from restless world to peace and happiness.

In Chilanco stupa and Vihara, waste management does not have Proper. And Street dogs pester and terror the visitors with barking and biting. The lack of budget, the shrines do not have maintained. The oldest structures and inscriptions \archives have been decaying and dilapidated. The government of local, province and central do not have given interest in renovating the shrine. There are not having advertisement about the important Buddhist shrines and Buddha's valuable education for civilized, peace and happy society. We knew through some inscriptions and genres that the Mahavihara\Caitya had been renovated by King Jagatpal Varma of Patan Lalitpur in 1515 A.D. But we are unknown completely about the archeology, physiology, psychology, cosmology and theology encompassed of there. Traditional and rituals ceremonies have been decreasing. The historical inscriptions, archaeologies and monuments\structures are going to be destroyed. Moreover, due to name of modernization and bourgeois educational system archeologists, theologists and linguist specialists about Buddhist philosophy do not have produced in Nepal. Because of ignorance about the important of Buddhist philosophy, so-called modern people are reluctant to preserve the shrines. The elder people who know about the Chilanco Caitya\Jagatpal Mahavihara (stupa/monastery) and its values are getting less day to day. Most of inscriptions and genres have been written on Sanskrit and Nepal Bhasa script but new generations does not have knowledge about that. So, the new generations must be trained or taught about that language to find out the importance of traditional and religious cultures. The rich visual arts of Vajrayana reach their culmination in the sacred Mandala, a representation of the universe used as an aid for meditation (Yogi, 1998, p. 38). But we lack knowledge of our ancients' architectural monuments and heritage sites that are waiting for us to provide positive, practical, shortsighted meaningful education. Monasteries were concurrently playing the role of cultic, economical (including the practice of usury) welfare and educational centers (Tikhonove, 2017, pp. 518-519).

4. Conclusion

Budhhism encompasses three major traditions: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana, each entails the architectural and ritual landscape of Nepal. Chilanco Caitya is one of the Vajrayana based Caitya. Jagatpal Varma renovated the Caitya in 16th century. Exploring the surroundings of Chilanco Stupa shows the religious culture that reflects spiritual symbolism and cultural continuity. The stupa's origins are shrouded in speculation, as historical evidence remains elusive. Envisioned as a square in plan, the stupa's architectural magnificence leaves a lasting impression. Ascending terraces and resplendent whitewashed dome sit majestically atop the structure, radiating an aura of serenity and spirituality that enrich its historical depth. The feature of the shrine reflects peace and serenity for depression and stress of this materialistic world.

In the Vajrayana monastery and stupa, Buddhist monks and Bajracharyas engage weekly meditation with speech and recitation of the four-novel truth, five aggregates contextual principles (the five precepts) and eight-fold path per week. This Buddhist monastery and its activities not only bridge the richest culture but also intensify the economic, welfare and good educational and good governance centers. The economic condition of Jagatpal Mahavira is miserable. Even though the members of sangha and local youth group of Kirtipur manage by conducting Daily, Monthly and Annual ritual and religious ceremonies and functions. The other economic source of the Chilanco Caitya and Vihara is the donations of the sangha members and compensations etc.

Chilanco Caitya of Kirtipur remains a hidden secrete site that urgently demands maintenance and renovation. Unveiling the mysteries of ancient history, the Chilanco stupa stands proudly as a testament to the rich and unique heritage of Kirtipur, Nepal. This stupa

captures visitors with its timeless charm and architectural grandeur. While its exact age remains a tantalizing secret, the allure of Chilanco Stupa beckons travelers from the world of immerse themselves in its profound aura. Let the Chilanco Stupa awaken our senses and leave an indelible mark on our soul. Overall, this paper highlights the cultural and historical background of Chilanco Caitya (stupa) and Jagatpal Mahavihara (monastery) presentation of its archeological and spiritual ornaments. But still, there are many researchable issues like dilapidated shrines. Although the sites have historical magnificence and archeological richness, but do not have the assessment in the far sided world and distinguished circles. It highlights the necessity for scholarly engagement and stakeholders to preserve the secret side as far as possible. Moreover, this paper also demands to innervate the Buddhist heritages like Chilanco shrine from theoretical lens of subaltern studies.

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