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Transformation of Courtyards in the Historic Core of Kathmandu: Typologies, Functions, and Socio-Economic Shifts

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Abstract – Courtyards have been at the heart of Kathmandu's spatial, social and spiritual life. This paper examines how these traditional spaces- once integral to the collective identity, religious practice, and urban ecology are changing under the forces of modernization, migration and economic transformation. Based on the case studies of three historic bahals: ItumBahal, Shree Gha Bahal and TeBahal the research examines changes in typology, function and meaning. Using participants observation, semi-structured interviews, and site documentation, the research illustrates how some courtyards remain strong communal and religious spaces, while others are being degraded or commercialized. The research identifies the need for reconciliation between heritage conservation and evolving urban conditions.

Keywords- Courtyard, Guthi system, Bahal, Spatial morphology, Urban densification, Commercialization

I. Introduction

In the rich history of Kathmandu, courtyards or *bahals* and *bahas* have acted as junction of daily life, ritual and social harmony [1]. Rooted in Newar Buddhist architecture and communal structures, they were designed as multifunctional site for religious activities, festival, social interactions and environmental ventilation [2]. However, rapid urbanization, demographic shifts and economic changes have begun to disrupt this role [3].

Bahals follow a clear hierarchy based on scale, function, and who uses them [5]. At the top are public bahals, used for festivals, rituals, and gatherings, shared by the entire community. These are open and accessible, often with temples or shrines at the center. Next are semi-private bahals, shared by extended families or a cluster of houses. These spaces support daily social life, chatting, drying grains, or

kids playing and form the heart of neighbourhood bonding. At the most private level are internal house bahals (lachi), enclosed within individual homes. These are intimate, used for cooking, family rituals, or personal moments. This layered system from public to private reflects how space, privacy, and social interaction were carefully balanced in Newari settlements [6].

This paper examines how the typologies, functional role and socio-cultural meaning of traditional courtyard have changes over time. Based on the three case studies, the paper examines the physical and intangible dimension of changes. Through quality fieldwork and engagement with local residents and users, the paper aims to identify to understand how these spaces are adapting or struggling to retain their importance in Kathmandu.

II. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach combining *participant observation*, *semi-structured interviews* and *site documentation* to understand the development of courtyards throughout Kathmandu's history.

Participant Observation: Time was spent on the three sites, observing the daily usage patterns, users and activity associated with time without disturbing the natural flow. This action helped to document the courtyard's function as living place, socially, spiritually and spatially.

Semi-structured Interviews: Interview with the locals, caretakers and users provided insights on the use of space, festive practices and concerns. The open-ended interview allowed interviewee to provide personal insights and cultural significance of the space.

Site Selection and Mapping: Shree Gha, ItumBahal and TeBahal were chosen based on their contrasting typology.

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All were documented by sketches, photos and basic layout analysis, focusing on spatial form, access, religious elements and recent changes.

III. STUDY

A. *Typology and Spatial Morphology of Courtyards*

Courtyards are layered in purpose, sacred at the center, communal in the middle, and personal towards the periphery. The Newari courtyard structure showcases religious life, societal hierarchies, and urban development. [6]

Itumbahal is a historic monastic courtyard falling under Vaidya (medicinal) traditions. It used to be a vibrant bihar and community school but now functions as a museum space containing preserved chaityas of considerable ritual importance. Though modern developments like shop conversions and parking have emerged, sacred zones such as the Aaga chhen and medicinal Buddha continue to flourish.

Monastic Shree Gha consists of an expansive stupa along with an active monastery. As it intertwines its spiritual, educational, and residential functions, it has gradually adapted to tourism while preserving its core identity.

Tebahal (Sankata) is more of an urban temple based around courtyards centered on the Sankata shrine. Housing Sankata deity worship alongside weekly rituals and major 12-barsemela festivals places it at the heart of expression and architectural evolution into commercial medical zones took place. Despite this guthis still retain strong control over ritualistic practices balancing conservation efforts with municipal governance.

Functional Evolution and Use Patterns

Traditionally, courtyards were multifunctional spaces used for hosting social gatherings, domestic chores, religious rites, and decision-making processes and by women during the day for daily chores and activities. Over time, courtyards have changed with shifting socio-economic conditions. [4]

Itumbahal has experienced the greatest change. Once an area used for play, herbal trade, and rituals, it is now mostly a parking space and museum. Traditional medicine shops have been replaced with residential shops; modern construction removed the traditional skyline enhancing the area through their new buildings.

Commercial development has spurred outside Shree Gha's borders while its inner courtyard is still active as a center of education and spirituality with monastery, Bihar and schools.

Due to strong ties of guthi and community associations in these areas, the site is better balanced conserved and maintained allowing for improved protection.

Tebahal is heavily commercialized on the surface with electronics shops, godowns, and private clinics filling the surrounding spaces but its spiritual function remains deeply intact. The guthi placed here remains the most dynamic and strongest as he continues to control major religious activities around the temple space management as well. The everyday communal use of the courtyard shrunk and but ritualistic activities are largely maintained.

C. *Religious and Socio-Cultural Significance*

Courtyards in Kathmandu's historic center are not merely physical spaces; they are deeply embedded in the religious and socio-cultural existence of the city. They regularly host neighborhood-level festivals (jstras) and ritual performances. [6]

Itumbahal still holds cultural richness with 13 chaityas, annual visits from the Kumari, and important shrines. The museum and Aaga chhen, run by the same guthi, keep religious practices alive.

Shree Gha is spiritually and socially active, with daily rituals, school use, and a maintained stupa. The surrounding residential use supports its layered functions.

Tebahal, despite being more commercially dense, stands out as the most religiously significant. The Sankata deity draws citywide devotion, especially during Indra Jatra and the 12-year festival. The guthi here is deeply embedded in both ritual life and temple maintenance, making it the strongest and most active among all three.

IV. Results

The analysis of Itumbahal, Shree Gha Bahal, and Tebahal showcases important changes concerning its religious role, community use, economy and physical conditions.

Religious Significance:

Tebahal (Sankata) is the most religiously reverent site possessing guthi dominion, weekly worship services, and important dates such as the 12 year Sankata Mela. Shree Gha is still frequently remembered and serves for daily worship as well as for various monastery activities. Itumbahal is spiritually important but has faced a decline in rituals performed although Gunlaa Bajan and Kumari visitation continue to take place.

b. *Tebahal (Sankata)*

Tebahal holds the strongest religious significance, with active rituals and large-scale events like the 12-year Sankata Mela. Its guthi is the most powerful. Despite this, the surrounding courtyard has been overtaken by shops and clinics, and tall buildings now dominate the area. Still, its spiritual function remains firmly protected.

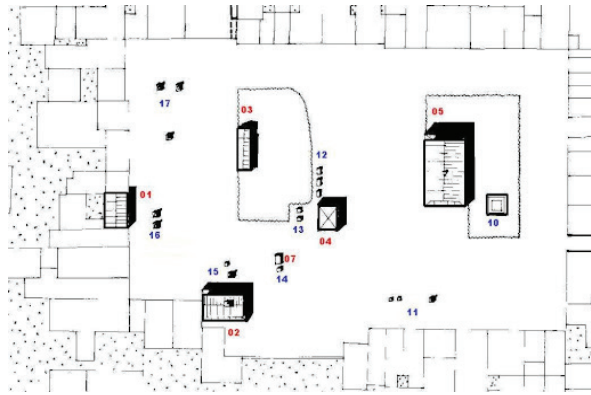


Fig. 3 Plan of Tebahal

VI. Conclusion

The studies of ItumBahal, Shree Gha Bahal, and TeBahal capture how the traditional courtyard systems of Kathmandu, once integral centers of religious, social, and architectural life, are being reconfigured through multi-dimensional processes. The courtyard as typological and symbolic space has been transformed from the homogeneous socio-religious core to either a dis-integrated relic, a hybrid cultural enclave, or an actively preserved node of heritage.

While their architectural fabric remains partially intact, their initial socio-economic foundation and operation has undergone significant transformation due to:

- Urban densification and commercialization
- Erosion of traditional support systems like the guthi
- Reduced intergenerational participation in rituals and communal life
- Tourism, real estate, and changing patterns of land use pressures

VII. Recommendation

1. *Integrated Conservation Planning*

Adopt an integrated strategy that unites physical conservation with ritual revival and community stewardship. Restoration efforts need to include provisions for cultural programming

and outreach education to make local involvement more appealing.

2. *Revival and Reform of the Guthi System*

Re-establishment to the degree of full revival may be out of the question, but modified neo-guthi models augmented by legal support can help preserve traditional roles and distribute funding more effectively.

3. *Heritage Zoning and Incentivization*

Implement zoning regulations to deter inappropriate integrated development within heritage courtyards and give tax or infrastructural incentives to residents who maintain the cultural integrity of these places.

4. *Documentation and Digital Archiving*

Digitally document and preserve courtyard plans, oral customs, and ritual calendars in order to preserve intangible heritage and make it accessible to future generations, researchers, and planners.

5. *Participatory Urbanisation*

Promote youth-initiated and local NGO initiatives towards re-activation of the courtyard spaces by local events, festivals, and myths to re-affirm emotional attachment.

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