

Twelve Lokeśvara Images at Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra, Patan, Nepal

KABIR SHAKYA

Lumbini Buddhist University, Lumbini Research Centre, Lumbini, Nepal

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 - **Corresponding Author:** Kabir Shakya
 - **Email:** kabirshakya@lbu.edu.np
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Abstract

The Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra, commonly known as the Golden Temple, is one of the most significant monastic complexes in Patan, Nepal. Among its rich artistic and religious heritage, the twelve Lokeśvara images stand out as unique embodiments of Newar Buddhist iconography. This article explores the iconographical features of these twelve Lokeśvaras, focusing on their stylistic, symbolic, and ritualistic significance. By examining the artistic elements, inscriptions, and associated legends, this study situates these representations within the broader context of Newar Buddhist art and practice. The findings highlight the integration of Tantric Buddhist ideals with local artistic traditions, offering insights into the religious and cultural landscape of medieval Nepal. This research contributes to the understanding of the role of Lokeśvara in the devotional practices of the Newar community and underscores the importance of preserving such heritage sites for future generations.

Keywords: *Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra, Patan, Lokeśvara, Newar Buddhist Art, Iconography, Nepalese Heritage, Religious Symbolism*

Introduction

Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra, commonly known as the Golden Temple, is a revered Buddhist monastery located in Lalitpur (Patan), Nepal. It is one of the most significant vihara of the Newar Buddhist tradition (Chettri and Raimaji 374). The temple is believed to have been founded or reconstructed in the reign of King Bhaskar Varma

around 11 century (Shakya Min, *Hiranyavarṇa* 17). The vihara has since been a center of religious, cultural, and artistic significance in the Kathmandu Valley.

The monastery is famous for its golden façade, which gives it the name “Golden Temple.” The tiered pagoda-style structure is adorned with intricate bronze and gilded metalwork. The entrance is guarded by two large stone lions, symbolizing protection. Inside, the main shrine houses a highly venerated statue of Shakyamuni Buddha. The inner sanctum is accessible only to the temple priests. The courtyard is surrounded by finely crafted statues, prayer wheels, and detailed wood and metal carvings depicting Buddhist deities and stories.

The vihara follows the Newar Buddhist tradition, where Buddhist priests known as Bajracharyas oversee rituals. It serves as an important center for Buddhist worship, prayers, and daily rituals. Many Buddhist rituals and ceremonies are performed here like for example recitation of Prajyaparamita scripture, ritual for various deities in the temple, festivals like Samyak mahadana and Dipankha Yatra (Shakya C. 43). The monastery also houses rare Buddhist scriptures and relics, preserving Nepal’s Buddhist heritage. The temple complex also includes a shrine dedicated to Arya Tara a sacred ritual takes place every morning and evening where the head priest who is a small boy below the age of eleven lights a butter lamp and offers prayers. It has been a significant pilgrimage site for both Mahāyāna and Vajrayana Buddhists.

Among its numerous artistic and religious treasures, the twelve images of Lokeśvara hold a distinctive place in the iconographic and ritual landscape of the monastery. These representations reflect the rich synthesis of Mahāyāna and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions within the Newar Buddhist milieu, showcasing both continuity and evolution in artistic expression and religious practice.

The twelve Lokeśvara images at Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra are integral to the spiritual life of the monastic community and the broader Newar Buddhist society. Each depiction embodies unique iconographic attributes, symbolizing different aspects of compassion, wisdom, and enlightened activity. Through detailed analysis of their stylistic features, inscriptions, and associated legends, this study explores the ways in which these images have been venerated, interpreted, and incorporated into ritual practice over centuries. The research highlights the local artistic traditions of Newar Buddhist art.

Statement of the Problem

The twelve Lokeśvara images at Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra, Patan, represent a significant yet understudied aspect of Newar Buddhist art and iconography. Despite their prominence in the religious and cultural life of the Newar Buddhist community, these images have not received comprehensive scholarly attention regarding their stylistic variations, symbolic meanings, and ritualistic roles. Existing studies on Newar Buddhist iconography often focus on broader themes without a detailed examination of specific artistic representations. Therefore, this research seeks to bridge this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of these twelve Lokeśvaras, contextualizing their significance within medieval Nepalese religious traditions, and highlighting their role in the local Buddhist practice.

Objectives

The main objectives of this paper is to analyze the iconographical features of the twelve Lokeśvara images at Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra, including their stylistic characteristics and inscriptions.

Literature Review

Several studies have explored Newar Buddhist art, its iconography, and its religious significance. Min Bahadur Shakya's *Hiranyavarana Mahavihara* provides a history and culture of the vihara and talks about different deities of the Vihara. Chandra B. Shakya works on Buddhist iconography have contributed to understanding Avalokiteśvara's representations. The studies by Prof. Dr. Ranjana Bajracharya have examined the tradition of Avalokiteśvara in Mahayana and Vajrayana tradition. Research by Benoytosh Bhattacharyya and Alice Getty has also delved into Iconography of Buddhist deities, but there is limited scholarship focusing on the detailed artistic analysis of these particular twelve Lokeśvara images at Hiranyavarṇa Mahavihara. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this research gap by providing a dedicated analysis of these twelve images and their unique artistic and religious characteristics.

Methodology

This research employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining art historical analysis, field observation, and textual study. On-site examination of the twelve Lokeśvara images at Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra, documenting their stylistic details,

materials, and inscriptions.

This methodological framework ensures a comprehensive understanding of the twelve Lokeśvara images by integrating visual, textual, and ethnographic perspectives, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on Newar Buddhist art and iconography.

Discussion and Analysis

The Central Temple

The central temple of Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra houses the Ratna Chaitya also known as Swoyambhu caitya, a sacred structure symbolizing Adi Buddha and the essence of clear light (Shakya Min Hiranyavarṇa 25). It is considered the oldest and most venerated monument in the complex and is believed to be a replica of the Swoyambhu Stupa in Kathmandu (Bajracharya H. 24). The stupa serves as the lineage deity (deudyo) for the Mahāvihāra's members, who regularly worship and offer devotion there.

Designed in a square-shaped pagoda style, the temple features four sloping roofs adorned with decorative eaves and is topped by a seven-tiered parasol supported by serpent figures extending in all directions. The roof corners are decorated with statues depicting mythical half-woman, half-bird figures. Sculpted metal birds and engraved plates representing the four Four Heavenly Kings, further embellish the structure. Statues of Sharduls, powerful mythical animal, guard the temple's corners, while Lokeśvara faces are intricately carved at the ends of the roof purlins.

A wooden corridor encircles the temple, providing space for priests and attendants to perform rituals. Along the outward-facing walls of this corridor, twelve Lokeśvara statues represent the twelve months of the year. The temple has four ornately carved entrances, with the main one on the west, facing Shakyamuni Buddha. In front of this entrance, a raised platform is occupied by an attendant who assists in rituals, facilitating offerings between priests and devotees.

On the northern side, a traditional stone water tap and drainage outlet, guarded by two lions and two serpents, is used during special ceremonies where the stupa and deities are cleansed with milk and holy water. Devotees avoid touching this area to preserve its sanctity.

The temple's entrance is guarded by two lion statues flanking the stairway, while life-sized stone statues of a praying couple stand at the base, with the right-

side statue covered in brass sheets. A large vajra is mounted on a stone pedestal in front of the temple, and devotees express reverence by touching it with their forehead before entering. The temple complex is further adorned with oil lamps, hanging bells, parasols, flags, and statues of different deities, enhancing both its spiritual significance and artistic beauty. Bottom of Form

Lokeśvara in Buddhism

Lokeśvara, meaning “Lord of the World,” is a revered title for Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion in Mahāyāna Buddhism. His name, derived from Sanskrit (Loka = world, Ísvara = lord), signifies his universal role as a protector and guide, vowing to delay his own enlightenment until all beings achieve liberation (Shakya Min. Iconography of 108 2). His worship is widespread in Nepal, Tibet, Cambodia, and Southeast Asia, where he is also known as Chenrezig (Tibet), Guanyin (China), and Kannon (Japan).

Traditionally, Lokeśvara is depicted as a red and white complexioned figure with two arms, holding a lotus (Padma) in his left hand and performing the Varada Mudrā (gesture of granting boons) with his right. He belongs to Amitābha’s lotus family (Padma-kula). His imagery plays a vital role in meditation (dhyāna), with numerous representations across cultures. Newar Buddhists in Nepal venerate 108 forms of Lokeśvara (Shakya Min. Iconography of 108 M.16).

Sanskrit Buddhist texts such as the *Arya-Guṇakaranda-vyūha* and *Karanda-vyūha* Saddharma Pundarika describe the qualities and numbers of Lokeśvara (Bajracharya R. 3). The *Sādhana-mālā* outlines thirty-one meditation techniques (sādhana) for visualizing his various forms. Scholar B. Bhattacharyya identified fifteen principal forms, most featuring Amitābha’s image on their crowns. Among his many manifestations are Sadākṣarī Lokeśvara, Padmapāṇi Lokeśvara, Amoghapāśa Lokeśvara, Anandadi Lokeśvara, and Hariharivāhana Lokeśvara.

Lokeśvara remains one of Mahāyāna Buddhism’s most significant bodhisattvas, embodying boundless compassion and wisdom. His worship spans diverse cultures, and his numerous forms reflect his unwavering dedication to guiding all beings toward enlightenment and liberation from suffering.

Iconographical Features of the Twelve Lokeśvara Images at Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra

The Central temple houses twelve Lokeśvara images at Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra showcase an extraordinary blend of artistic mastery and religious symbolism, embodying the depth of the Newar Buddhist tradition. Each figure is distinct, characterized by variations in mudrās (hand gestures), āsanās (postures), attributes, and adornments (Shakya). These differences within the broader Lokeśvara iconography suggest a conscious effort by Newar artisans to imbue each image with unique spiritual and ritual significance. A closer analysis of these sculptures reveals intricate craftsmanship, especially in their ornamentation and inscriptions. Some of the statues bear donor inscriptions, offering valuable insights into the patrons who commissioned them.

The temple houses twelve Lokeśvara idols, arranged with four figures on each of its eastern, northern, and southern facades. These deities correspond to the twelve months of the Nepalese lunar calendar, with each one being venerated on the first day of its respective month. In the idols of twelve Lokeśvaras the name and Nepali month is inscribed which are as follows, Hari Hari Haribahana Lokeśvara for the month of Baisakh, Trailokya Bashakar Lokeśvara for Jestha, Rakta Lokeśvara for Ashadh, Nilakantha Lokeśvara for Shrawan, Mayajala Lokeśvara for Bhadra, Karandavyuha Lokeśvara for Ashwin, Khadchheri Lokeśvara for Kartik, Mallokeshor Lokeśvara for Mangsir, Halahala Lokeśvara for Push, Khasparna Lokeśvara for Magh, Simhanada Lokeśvara for Fagun, and Padmanritya Lokeśvara for Chaitra (Shakya).

Each Lokeśvara is crafted from metal and stands upon an ornately designed lotus pedestal. The elaborate arch surrounding the deity is adorned with floral and ornamental motifs, characteristic of Newar art. The figures wear crowns and are framed by decorative halos extending from head to foot. The thrones on which they stand feature two lions resting on rectangular lotus bases, with floral embellishments adorning the space between them. Flanking the lions, two elaborately designed pillars support a torana which is embellished with water sprouts on either side. At the center of the torana, Kshephu a mystical animal is depicted devouring a serpent, while above it, a finely crafted metal umbrella is positioned. The statues range in height from approximately 7.5 to 9 inches, from their feet to the tips of their crowns. Each pedestal is inscribed with the corresponding Lokeśvara's name in the Prachalit Newari script. However, there are no surviving records indicating the exact date of their installation. Based on their artistic style, scholars estimate that these statues were created between

the 17th and 18th centuries.

The twelve Lokeśvara images at Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra represent a significant yet understudied aspect of Newar Buddhist art. A thorough examination of these images not only contributes to the existing body of research but also emphasizes the need to preserve this invaluable artistic and spiritual heritage.

The idols of Sadakshari Lokeśvara, Karandvyuh Lokeśvara, Mayajala Lokeśvara and Neelkantha Lokeśvara are placed on the east facade of this temple. As mentioned above, these Lokeśvaras have thrones with two lion, a torana and single lotus seats.

The Iconographic characters and postures of these four Lokeśvaras are as follows,

Shadkshari Lokeśvara (picture 1): Shadkshari means six letters. This Lokeśvara's name is due to the six-letter mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum" of Lokeśvara. This Lokeśvara, worshipped in the month of Kartik, is of white color. Its idol is usually found seated in Vajrāsana. Generally this Lokeśvara has one face and four hands with angali mudra and carries a louts and rosary (Bhattacharya 125).

Here in this temple the Shadkshari Lokeśvara depicted standing in the lotus petal. His first two hand are in namaskar mudrā and other two holds a rosary with his left hand and a lotus in the right hand.

Karandavyuha Lokeśvara (picture 2): This Lokeśvara is worshipped in the month of Ashwin. Generally this Lokeśvara has one face and four hands. His right hand holds a rosary, one right hand along with the left hand holds keeps it in Sarvarajendra mudras at the chest level. Other left hand holds a lotus. A gem is placed on the lotus. White is the color of this Lokeśvara (Shakya Min, Iconography of 108 69).

Here in this temple the idol of Karandavyuha Lokeśvara holds a hook and a noose with one pair of hands, while the other pair holds a bow and arrow.

Mayajaal Lokeśvara (picture 3): This Lokeśvara is worshipped in the month of Bhadra. The name says "he that passes through the net of illusion". He has five faces, three eyes on each face, and 12 hands. Out of the five faces, the main one is blue black, the two faces on the right are white and red, and the two faces on the left are yellow and green. Of the twelve hands, the right six hands hold the damaru, the khatwang, the goad, the noose, the vajra and the arrow, while the left six hands hold the raised

index finger, the kapala, the red lotus, the gem, the discus and the bow, wears a bone ornaments and garland of heads and standing in the pratyalida position (Bhattacharya 139).

Here in this temple the idol is standing straight with five head which has a third eye also. It has twelve hands each holding the attributes which is not clear but it can be figure out as explained in the Sadhanamala.

Neelkantha Lokeśvara (picture 4): Neelkantha Lokeśvara is worshipped in the month of *Shravan*. This Lokeśvara is yellow and his throat is blue. He wears a garland of two snakes and seats on the antelope skin on a red lotus. Out of his two hands, his right hand is raised up and holds a skull with gems, while his left hand is placed in the dhyana mudrā, in meditation (Shakya Min, Iconography of 108 90).

Here in this temple the idol of Neelkantha Lokeśvara is holding the vessel with both hands in the Dhyana mudrā.

On the south side of the temple the following Lokeśvara are placed.

Rakta Lokeśvara (picture 5): This Lokeśvara is worshipped in the month of Ashadha. It is called Rakta Lokeśvara because of its red color. The iconography of this Lokeśvara describes as one headed and four-handed. He attributes are lasso, goad, bow and arrow (Getty 66).

Here in this temple the statue of Rakta Lokeśvara standing with three faces and six hands is placed. The left hands hold a goad, a noose and a bow and right hand holds an arrow, a lotus flower and in the Varasa mudra.

Trailokya Banshakar Lokeśvara (picture 6): This Lokeśvara is worshipped in the month of Jestha. This Lokeśvara is three-eyed, red-skinned and has two hands. He wears a crown of matted hair, and carries in his two hands the noose and the goad stamped with the Vajra (Shakya Min, Iconography of 108 87).

Here in this temple the Lokeśvara is standing and his right hand is attached to the chest and holds the goad the hand is in varada mudra and with his left hand down and holding the sacrificial noose.

Hari Hari Vahan Lokeśvara (picture 7): This Lokeśvara is worshipped in the month of Baisakh. This Lokeśvara is in white color. He has six hands, seated on the shoulders of Vishnu who is on top of Garuda and the Garuda is seated on top of lion. The lion, the Garuda and the god Vishnu all have 'Hari' as their synonym and

because the vehicle of Lokeshwar is composed of three haris, he is known as Hari Hari Hari Vahan Lokeshwar. With his right hand he holds a rosary and other two hands are in the witness and bodhyanga gesture (Shakya Min, *The Iconography of Nepalese* 34).

Here in this temple the idol of Hari Hari Vahan Lokeśvara is also made as described above.

Padmanritya Lokeśvara (picture 8): This Lokeśvara is worshipped in the month of Chaitra. Padmanritya is usually shown in dancing position. This Lokeśvara is wears a garlanded of snakes. His color is red. He has different form with two, eight and eighteen hands with one head. In the form of one head and two hand he carries a lotus with the left hand which is raised in the act of embracing and the right hand shows the sucimudra in the act of dancing. In the form of one head and eighteen hands he carries the double lotus in all his eighteen hands and is surrounded by a host of Yoginis (Shakya Min, *Iconography of* 108 84).

Here in this temple Padmanrita Lokeśvara is also standing with one head, two legs which is in dancing posture with right leg bending. He is shown with 18 hands with lotus in every hands and in the dancing posture with one of the left hand raised near to the chest holding the lotus and one of the left hand in downward to the knees holding the lotus.

On the temple's north facade, the idols of Simhananda Lokeśvara, Khasparna Lokeśvara, Halahala Lokeśvara, and Mallokeshwor Lokeśvara can be found.

Shimhanada Lokeśvara (picture 9): He is worshipped in the month of Fagun. The meaning of the word Shimhanada is “voice of lion”. The deity has one face and two hands, holding a skull, a trident, and a sword. His complexion is white. He is also invoked to cure leprosy (Getty 57).

Here in this temple the Lokeśvara is standing on a pillar at the northwest corner of the Ratnachaitya, similarly holds a trident in his right hand and a sword resting on a lotus in his left hand.

Khasarpan Lokeśvara (picture 10): He is worshipped in the month of Magh, this Lokeśvara has a white complexion with one face, and two arms. He is described in the number of Sadhana in the book *Sadhanamala* His right hand is extended downward in a blessing gesture while his left hand reaching down to his thigh, holds a lotus flower (Bhattacharya 128).

Here in this temple the idol of Khasarpan Lokeśvara is shown as explained above.

Halahal Lokeśvara (picture 11): This Lokeśvara is worshipped in the month of Pusha. Halahal Lokeśvara typically has three faces—white in the center, blue on the right, and red on the left. His six arms hold various objects: the right hands display the Varada Mudrās, an Akshaya Mala, and an arrow, while the left hands hold a bow, a lotus flower, and a Shakti in the left leg and right leg is stretched out (Getty 66).

Here in this temple, the statue of Halahal Lokeśvara has one face and six hands. His right hands hold a rosary, a bow, and a lotus, while his left hands hold a book, an arrow, and an unidentified object.

Mallokeśvara (picture 12): The Mallokeśvara is worshipped in the month of Mangsir, however according to Min Bahadur Shakya in his book the Iconography of 108 Lokeśvara, the Lokeśvara which is worshipped in this month is also known Lokanatha Lokeśvara. This Lokeśvara is depicted with one face and two hands. He is traditionally portrayed in a seated posture, with his right hand in the Varada Mudrās and his left hand holding a lotus flower (Shakya Min, Iconography of 108 71).

Here in this temple, the statue of Mallokeśvara stands maintaining the same features—one face, two hands, a pindapatra in his right hand, and a lotus flower in his left which is downwards towards to his knees.

Conclusion

The twelve Lokeśvara images from Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra constitute one of the most important aspects of Newar Buddhist art. Their marked wealth of iconography, incorporation of tantric ideals, and ritualistic significance make them a remarkable addition to the medieval Nepalese religious culture. By the examination of these images in detail, this study fills a gap in contemporary scholarship and shines a shining light on the need for their preservation as invaluable artistic and religious heritage. Future research could compare them with similar representations with other countries for a better view of the evolution of Lokeśvara iconography and its cultural impact.

Preserving these images is crucial for maintaining Nepal's artistic and religious legacy. Insights gathered from their study bring to light not only the significance of interdisciplinary research but also intertwining factors of understanding the training of art, religion, and culture in the region. These Lokeśvaras remain central to the spiritual

life of Newar Buddhists as they evolve, instilling the heritage of compassion and devotion in Buddhist art.

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Annex Photos

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Picture 1: **Shadkshari Lokeśvara**



Picture 2: **Karandavyuha Lokeśvara**



Picture 3: **Mayajaal Lokeśvara**



Picture 4: **Neelkantha Lokeśvara**



Picture 5: **Rakta Lokeśvara** Picture



Picture 6: **Trailokya Banshakar Lokeśvara**



Picture 7: **Hari Hari Vahan Lokeśvara**



Picture 8: **Padmanritya Lokeśvara**



Picture 9: **Singhanad Lokeśvara**



Picture 10: **Khasarpan Lokeśvara**



Picture 11: **Halahal Lokeśvara**



Picture 12: **Mallokeśvara**