



Research Note

The Tangible and Intangible Art Heritages of Chitlang

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Abstract

This paper explores the tangible and intangible art heritages of Chitlang, also known as Chitrapur is an ancient historical route. Before the 18th and early 19th centuries, this was the only route thriving with life. In those days, it used to be a roadway that would never sleep. Today it remains isolated and discarded despite being rich in both tangible and intangible historicity that goes back to the Dwāpara-yuga (Mahabharata period). There are innumerable relics and the inhabitants who claims to be the descendants of the Gopala dynasty of Nepal. There are few books available on Chitlang written by local scholars, but they lack focus on art heritages. This article attempts to throw some light on the tangible heritages and the intangible tales associated with Chitlang/Chitrapur. The methodology is qualitative in nature and based on historicity of Chitlang.

Keywords : art heritages, Chitlang, intangible, tangible

Ashoka Stupa, Chitlang (Photo: Author)

Introduction

Chitlang lies in the Makawanpur district of Nepal to the south of Kathmandu district. The district is surrounded by Kathmandu and Dhading districts to the north, the Chitwan district to the west, Lalitpur, Kavre, and Sindhuli districts to the east, and Bara, Parsa, and Rautahat districts to the south. The district encompasses 2418 sq. km. of hill and plain. There are five rivers and forty-one streams. The rivers are the Rapti, the Bagmati, the Manahari, the Lothar and the Bakaiya

A few books written on Chitlang are available but they lack focus on heritages. This paper attempts to throw light on the tangible heritages and tales associated with these heritage and seeks to make further research. The methodology is qualitative in nature and based on a historical approach.

Geographical Setting

Chitlang, also known as Chitrapur lies to the southwest of the capital city of

Kathmandu. It lies in the mid-hills known as the Mahabharata range. Chitlang is surrounded in the north by the Municipalites of Dhunibesi and Chandragiri. To the south and east is the Indrasarovar Municipality and to the west is Bajrabarahi Municipality. It lies in Bagmati Province (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chitlang>).

This paper is entirely based on interviews with the scholars and the local elderly people. There are no books on Chitlang but one written by Santa Lal Newa in Nepali. Hence, this article contents no reference.

Historicity

If only these ancient trails, water spouts, dilapidated rest-houses and ancient temples can tell us the tales of the past they would say, “What was yesterday, may not be there tomorrow; and what is today may not last forever.” These deserted trails tell us of its glorious days when this was the only route to India to Nepal and vice versa for travel, trade and



A village scene, Chitlang



The Sata Dahara, Chitlang (Photo: Dewendra Pandey)

pilgrimage. The local scholars reveal of important personalities who took this route. However, there exist controversies related to the dates mentioned.

Chitlang would tell the tales of numerous kings and princes who crossed through this historical route amidst great fanfare in their palanquins in the past. Travellers, traders, artisans, scholars and saints would take a break here for some rest before they would head for their respective destination.

Mauryan Emperor Ashoka and his daughter Charumati had come via this route in the 3rd century BCE. In the 7th century Chinese travellers like Huien Tsang known in China as Xuanzang and Fa Hein had travelled along this route to attend the Buddhist council. After King Prithivi Narayan Shah had usurped the three kingdoms, King Ranjeet Malla

of Bhaktapur took this very route to Banaras. King Rana Bahadur Shah who abdicated his throne made his way to Banaras along this route. King Rajendra Bikram Shah with his junior queen Rajya Laxmi Devi had also taken this route to Banaras after he was ousted by Jung Bahadur Rana. The Ranas and their hunting parties would take this route before camping at Thoree and Chitwan. During Rana Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana's regime, notable refugees who had failed the Indian Mutiny entered the Kathmandu valley via this route.

The deposed Malla royalties are said to have fled to Chitlang after Prithvi Narayan Shah had conquered the Kathmandu valley. There remains a small shrine located at the route where they prayed to their ancestral deities before leaving the Kathmandu valley. An entrance to a cave that leads to a stone



The lonely isolated route with relics on its way

spout can be seen. A round stone believed to be a cannonball lies near the royal shrine, now known as *Taleju Mandir*. Recently, archaeological exploration and excavation have been carried out with the help of the Department of Archaeology in this location.

This isolated village today remains as the home-place of elderly people and children; however, some efforts are being made promote homestay for both native and non-native trekkers in the local level.

Sāta Dhāra (Seven Stone Spouts)

The Sāta Dhāra (the seven stone spouts) is the most beautiful site in Chitlang. A

peaceful environment with the gurgling of the flowing water delight any visitor. Small rest houses and temples are located around the *Sāta Dhāra*.

The myth related to this spot dates back to the epic period. It is believed that this spot, as a part of the garden was built by the *Asura* king Banasura for his daughter Usha. Another legend says, the *sapta rishis* (the seven saints) of the epic age would come here at dawn to bathe before their daily rituals. The Sāta Dhāra is named after the *sapta rishis* (Pradhan, personal communication, 2022).

Kārtik Nāch and other festivities are held in this very location of the *Sāta Dhāra*.

After the great earthquake on April 25, 2015, these water spouts became arid. Surprisingly, since 2021, these water spouts began to function again (Newa 2070: 53).

Ashok Stupa/Chaitya

Ashoka Stupa is known as one of the oldest stupas in Chitlang. The stupa is situated in the Majhagaun village. The stupa is believed to be established in 273 BCE by the Maurya Emperor Ashoka. After adapting the Buddhism, he ordered construction of a large number of stupas at different parts in the Indian sub-continent. The history states that he had visited Nepal along with his daughter Charumati with a purpose to visit Lumbini, the birth place of Siddhartha Gautam during the reign of Sthunko the fourteenth Kirati king. While passing through the village, Ashoka established the stupa also known as *chiva dyo* in the Newar language (Newa 2070: 23). Some believe that it was not established by Ashoka but by her daughter Charumati in commemoration of her father.

Guruju Dhārā

Guruju Dhārā is another significant historical site. The stone spout, as its name suggests, is said to have been established by *Guruju*, a Newar priest. According to legend, the stone spout was built to quench the thirst of the travellers in 1760 CE. Meanwhile, the same Newar priest built another water conduit at Satungal. It is said that *Maha Kavi Laxmi Prasad Devkota* wrote his famous poem titled “*Yātri*” while staying at a



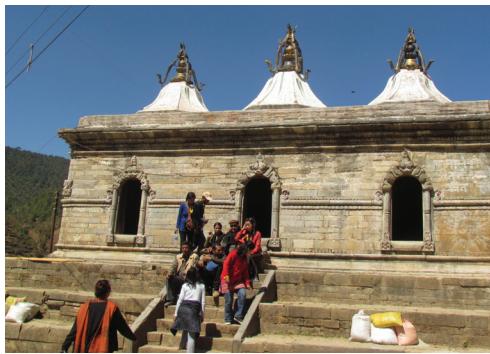
Guruju Dhārā, Chitlang (Photo: Dewendra Pandey)
rest house near the *Guruju Dhārā*.

Swachhanda Bhairav

Swachhanda Bhairav is one of the important religious sites in Chitlang. It is situated at Ward 4. It lies on the outskirts of the village situated at the Kuku kholā (brook) besides a crematory. The long flight of steps leads up to the main temple in the open premises. Earlier, a stone used to be venerated as Bhairav but later the stone was replaced with a full sculpture of Bhairav. Right above the sculpture, there is a stone *torana* (tympanum) of *chepu* (a mythical creature). A distinct *jātrā* (festivity) is celebrated at the temple premises by the Newar community.

The lonely isolated route

This isolated route of today was once used to be thrived with life like a bus park that never sleeps. At that time, it



Tripureshwara Shivalaya, Chitlang

was the only route leading out of the Kathmandu valley to India. This route had its heydays, and today it remains forlorn and deserted. On the route, one can see innumerable relics, water conduits, and resting places. After the devastating earthquake of 2015, many of such relics were knocked down and the old houses were collapsed. At present, the locals are carrying out renovation works.

Tripurēśvara Śivālaya

Tripurēśvara Śivālaya is situated at Ward 2 of Majh Pauva, a village mostly inhabited by the Newars and Tamangs. The temple is made of stone in the *gumbaz* architecture style. It is unique in its own way as it has three *gajuras* (pinnacles) with three doors. The main deity is Śiva. The śivalinga in the north is named Jagadiśvara, the center one is called Jungabhāteśvara. In the south is Bhakteśvara. The Śiva images are placed in the same order as mentioned above. The temple consists of some other sculptures such as Nārayana, Ganeśha, Mahākāla, Durgā, etc. The sculptures of



Goplai Gaon, Chitlang

Bhairav, Nārayana, Durgā, and Ganeśha were stolen in January 2021. The gold-gilded pinnacles have four serpents on each pinnacle. It remained in wrecked condition for many years and was reconstructed in the year 2021.

Shri Teen and Shri Panch Durbar

Two similar-looking double-storied buildings remain at ward 2 which were constructed by Shree Teen Maharaja Chandra Shumsher during his regime. Each one of these buildings were constructed for *Shree Panch Maharaja* (the King) and *Shree Teen Maharaja* (the Prime Minister) as the rest houses for them and the royal family members.

In the past, Chitlang was the only route for travelling to the Terai region from Kathmandu. Hence, whenever the royalties visited Terai for the purpose of hunting, they used to stay in these *Durbars* enroute to Terai and vice versa. At present, the front building serves as the school and the latter serves as the staff quarters.

Bhimśena Mandir

Bhimśena Mandir is located on the main route. Since it was a trade route in the earlier times, Bhimśena was regarded as the god of the traders. Even to this day, nearly all the shopkeepers have the image of Bhimśena in their shops and venerate it daily praying for prosperous business. Back then, this temple was believed to be built for the sake of protection of the traders. All those who crossed this route, would pay their homage to Bhimśena (Basynet, personal communication, 2022).

Gopāli Gaon

Gopāli Gaon is an ancient settlement. Its inhabitants claim themselves as the progeny of Lord Krṣṇa. As per the legend, during the *Dwāpara yuga*, the lord drained the water of the Kathmandu valley and he first settled the valley. According to legendary accounts, the early rulers of Nepal were the *Gopālavāṇśi* (*Gopal Bansha*) or ‘cowherd dynasty’, who presumably ruled for about five centuries (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_history_of_Nepal#). The *Gopālis* claim to be the descendants of *Gopālavāṇśi*, the first rulers of the valley.

Chitlang has innumerable ponds and other minor art heritages yet to be researched. The above-researched materials fulfill the research objectives by bringing to light tangible art heritages of that area.

Intangible beliefs associated with Chitlang

There are many intangible beliefs associated with Chitlang or Chitrapur which go back to the *Mahābhārata* period.

Legend I: Chitrapur was the earlier name of Chittlang. Thankot was known as Soritpur back

then. Some scholars say, it is Thankot, while Indian scholars say it is in Assam. Soritpur was the capital of the *Asura* king Banasura. His daughter Usha was very beautiful. She had a talented friend named Chitralekha. She had magical powers and gifted with the art of drawing.

King Banasura built a palace with fountains, bath and lovely water spouts for his daughter Usha, also known as Ushagaiyaki at Golvar area of Chitlang. (Present day Sāta Dhāra).

It was here, she enjoyed companion of her dearest friend Chitralekha. The local myth suggests that it was from her name that this region was known as Chitrapur and later it came to be known as Chitlang. Even today the Balamis of Chitlang perform songs and dances based on Shree Krishna, Banasura and Kansa based on the epic of *Mahābhārata* for three whole days during the month of September/October.

It is mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* that one night Usha dreamt of a handsome prince and fell in love with him. She told her friend Chitralekha about her dream. She described the prince seen in the dream. Chitralekha made his sketch for her. He happened to be the grandson Anirudhha of Lord Krishna. As Chitralekha possessed magical powers, she was able to bring the sleeping Aniruddha to meet Usha, and they fell in love. Consequently, there was a great war between Banasura and Krishna. Eventually, Usha was married to Aniruddha. The Sāta Dhāra is believed

to be the remains of the bath belonging to princess Usha.

Legend 2: An interview was conducted with a 71-year-old Santa Lal Newa, the author of some books on Chitlang in the Newar language. He is regarded as an authority on the history of Chitlang. He is of the view that the ancient name of Chitlang is Chitrapur and it was renamed *Chaityalan*, meaning *chaitya* (monument) and *lan* (path) in Newar language. Whether the chaitya was established by emperor Ashoka or her daughter Charumati, many years after, the name was misquoted as Chitlang. Some elderly locals assert that Chitlang being in close proximity to Patan, it got its name from *Chi* (meaning short) and *lan* (path). The term *Chilan* is still used in Newar verses. However, the first name of Chitlang was Ek Chakri Nagar.

Legend 3: According to Santa Lal Newa, the ancient Chitrapur has five *purs* or towns: Chitrapur, Chuddapur, Kolapur, Hastinapur and Champapur.

Chitrapur includes Nayapauwa, Mulpani, Bichari Thok and the surrounding village of Maji Gaqn. Chuddapur includes all the areas of Tupikhel, Tupimath, Kuchabu, Pode Gaon, Tiptar Chakabu, Kakhubirta, Tyahwan and Kuselechour Kolapur includes all areas of Kapu gaon, Sirupata, Sosindole and the areas of Bembu Math. Hastinapur includes all areas of Karato (Kanlato) and Bisinkhel where the Newars live. Champapur includes the jungle area of Champapur Mahadeva, Naula Gaon, Taukhel, Gopali or Gwala village and Balami vilage of Aundole.

Legend 4: To the west of Chitrapur lies the area of Mrigashthali on the Milacho Parvat where Bakasura resided. It is said that he devoured all the cattle of the villagers and even the local people. Hence, the locals resolved to send him one person every day for his meal from amongst them.

According to the myth, the *Pancha Pāndavas* (protagonists of the *Mahābhārata*) escaped the *Lakshyāgriha* (inferno) and while roaming along the *Mahābhārata* ranges, they arrived at Chitrapur. They took shelter in a house where one of the family members was bound to be sent as a meal for Bakasura on that night. The mighty Bhima opted to go and he killed Bakasura. There is a huge boulder that is believed to be the head of Bakasura. An event, in commemoration of the slaying of Bakasura by Bhima continues to be held even today with music and dance performances in the month of *Kartik* (October).

Legend 5: Chitlang lies along the foothills of the Siwālik of the *Mahābharata* ranges. Bhimpedi is another adjoining route. The name is believed to be dedicated to Bhīma, one of the Pāndava brothers. The Nepali word phedi means the base of a hill. According to local beliefs, during their fourteen-year-exile, Bhīma and his brothers had taken refuge in the jungle at this place. Hence the place was called Bhimpedi.

Performing culture of Chitlang

In the context of folk culture in Chitlang,

Bārabarsé Nāch and *Bārabarsé Bajrabārāhi Nāch* are mention worthy. *Bārabarsé Nāch* narrates the story of King Kam Singh and Chandra Singh. *Bārabarsé Bajrabārāhi Nāch* is a dance performed with the participation of all the local people including the *Gopalis* of Purano Tistung. This dance is based on the story of King Satal Singh. In these dance performance, we can see a fusion of the Newar and Nepali languages. This melodramatic song is performed once every twelve-years. On the occasion of the *Gāijātrā* festival, a folk dance called *Gunlā Pyākha* is popular around Kunchhal, Papung, Toukhel, etc. Similarly, a dance called *Twāka Nāch* is performed on the occasion of the *Kārtik Purnimā* on the full-moon-day in the month of Kārtik (around October-November) in *Toukhel*. Various of folk musical instruments, such as *khin*, *jhyāli*, *tā*, *bāgu*, *pongā*, *bansuri*, *dhā*, *muhāli*, etc. are played in the Gopali community are. In Chitlang, various types of mask dances of historical importance are taken out by the Newar communities in different villages. These festivals are deep-rooted as the background stories date back to centuries ago. The dances are performed at a specific date on the specific courtyards. Some of the dances with historical importance are: *Bārabarsé Nāch*, *Hile Nāch*, *Bir Dhoj* (onec in twelve years), *Satyabān-Savitri* (onec in twelve years), *Kārtik Nāch*, *Nāga-Nāgin Nāch*, *Twākachā Mahādev Nāch*, etc. The dances are performed with backgroud vocals and music.

In conclusion, Chitlang/Chitrapur is a

historical place with abundant of tangible and intangible art heritages. This paper is a humble attempt to throw some light on the tangible and intangible heritages of Chitlang/Chitrapur. There remains a more scope of research in this respect.

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