



Vaishnava pilgrimage sites in Nepal

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Abstract

In Hindu community, the group that considers Lord Vishnu as a foremost deity is called Vaishnava sect. Since the earliest times of Vedic civilization, faith and devotion for Lord Vishnu had existed. This tradition has been going on continuously. Vaishnavism had gained popularity in Nepal before the beginning of Christ. Some of the places had already become famous as Vaishnava pilgrimage sites. Saptakoshi and Koka River's Varaha, Muktikshetra, Rurukshetra, and Janakpurdham are well known Vaishnava pilgrimage sites of Nepal. Bathing in the rivers of these religious places, worshipping in the name of gods and giving Tarpan (to offer holy water in the name of deceased parents and ancestors), etc. are considered to be virtuous deeds. In ancient times, there were Vaishnava pilgrimage sites at various places. In those pilgrimage sites, including Vishnu, idols of other gods and goddesses were also found. This demonstrates the existing religious tolerance in the country. Nepal's pilgrimage sites have become famous not only because of their cultural heritage but also due to the religious festivals held in the local areas. Pilgrims from all over the country come to Vaishnava pilgrimage sites on auspicious days like Vaikuntha Chaturdashi, Maghe Sakranti, Kartik Purnima, Janai Purnima, Ram Navami, etc.

Key Words: Vaishnavism, Varahakshetra, Muktikshetra, Rurukshetra, Janakpurdham, pilgrimage, cultural heritage

Introduction

Vaishnavism is one of the major sects of Hinduism. The worshipful deity of this sect is Lord Vishnu and his incarnations. The Vedic literature has considered Lord Vishnu to be omnipresent and omnipotent. The Rig Veda describes Lord Vishnu as the god of heaven and calls him 'Urugaya' and 'Urukrama' (Banerjee, 1985: 385). Similarly, in Brahmanical literature, this deity is described as a universally accepted form of earth, space, and heaven. According to the Puranas, Lord Vishnu is the creator, nurturer, and destroyer of the world and he is the combined great form of Lord Brahma, Shiva, and all the deities (Khanal, 2052: 99). That is why Vaishnavism has been gaining great importance in Hindu society. The origin of this religion in Nepal is associated with Lord Krishna. In accordance with the Hindu literature, he is the eighth among the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. In ancient times, the then Nepal (Kathmandu) valley got turned into a lake by Mahendra Daman, son of the demon Vanasur, where snakes could live. After that, the lake became Nagdaha. In such a situation, Lord Krishna came from Dwarika. He used his weapon 'Chakra' (wheel) to cut the hill in the south and send all the water out of



Nagdaha. After this event, this place gradually turned into a habitable land (Sharma, 1977: 10/68-69). Thus, it seems that Nepal had been acquainted with the Vaishnava religion since the time of Mahabharata. The places outside Nepal Valley like Kaligandaki, Saptakoshi, Kokavarah, Mithila have also been developing as Vaishnava pilgrimage site before Christ. Mithila region of Nepal was also the center of this religion at that time. Similarly, the name of Kokavarah comes forth, while discussing Vaishnava pilgrimage site of that time. This context has been raised in Mahabharata and Varaha Purana (Khanal, 2052: 117) & (Jalaan, 1977: 201).

In Nepal Valley, the idols of Vaishnavism were found since the Lichhavi period only. However, the styles of these statues are similar to the sculpture that existed earlier than B.C of India. An ancient idol of Gajalaxmi erected at Chyasalhiti in Lalitpur can be taken as an example. Artist Lain Singh Bangdel considers it to be the first century B.C. Similarly, the study of various idols of Vishnu established at Pashupati, Hadigaun, Rashtriya Nachghar, Patan Kasai Tol shows that Vaishnavism gained popularity in Nepal in the first century (Bangdel, 2039: 111-114). King Haridatta Varma of the ancient period established four statues named Changu, Ichangu, Bishankhu, and Sheshnarayan at the four peaks of the Nepal Valley (Vajracharya & Malla, 1985: 28). He also installed the statue of a lion in Ichangu Narayan Temple (Regmi, 2019: 106).

The history of Vaishnavism, based on inscriptions, has come to light since the time of King Mandev I only. The description of his heartfelt admiration for Lord Chagunarayan can be known from his inscription established in the Changunarayana temple premises. Similarly, he had erected statues of Vishnu Vikrant at Tilganga and Lazimpat in Kathmandu in the year 389 Shaka Era (524 B.S.) for the goodwill of his mother Rajyavati (Vajracharya, 2053: 16 & 18). The figure of Lakshmi inscribed on the coin was brought up by him. According to classical beliefs, Goddess Lakshmi is the wife of Lord Vishnu. Hymns were carved on a stone pillar with a big eagle at the front of Satyanarayana Temple in Hadigaun, Kathmandu. The special praise to Ved Vyasa is bening engraved in that inscription reveals the profound faith in Vaishnava sect existing in the society of that time_(Vajracharya, 2053: 162). The Lichhavi's inscription that was kept by King Shivadev I at Lele in Lalitpur is also noteworthy. It describes about the rise of a social organization named 'Vasudeva Brahman Gausthik'. The then king Anshuvarma had offered a golden armor to Changunarayana. This has been mentioned in his inscription placed inside the temple (Joshi, 2030: 266 & 290). Besides, the joint records of Bhimarjunadev and Bishnugupta kept in Yangalahiti of Lalitpur, state that the people of Dakshinkali village helped their kingdom by pulling a large stone to make a statue of Jalaashayan Vishnu (Statue of Vishnu sleeping in water) (Vajracharya, 2053: 444). The king Narendradev, Shivdev II, and Jaydev II also had faith in Vaishnavism. In this way, it is clear that the rulers of the Lichhavi period had helped in great extent for the upliftment of Vaishnava religion.

In Nepal, this religion gained importance even in the medieval ages. In this context, the names of the then king Yaksha Malla, Siddhinarsingh Malla, Pratap Malla, etc. come to the forefront. Yakshamalla had set up various idols of Vishnu in different places of the Nepal valley. King Siddhinarsingh of Lalitpur had a magnificent Krishna temple built in his kingdom. King Pratap Malla of Kantipur also built an octagonal shaped Krishna temple. He also installed the idols of Narasimha, Hanuman, and



Vishwarupa. They are the incarnations and symbol of Lord Vishnu. The Malla kings themselves composed plays, songs, and texts related to Vaishnavism. Their books Ashwamegh, Kanshavadha, Krishnacharita, Harivansh, Mahabharata, Vishnudharma Shastra, Rukmani Parinayan, etc. are written in the language of Sanskrit, Nepalbhasha, and Maithili (Mainali, 2057: 35). Vaishnavism had spread outside Nepal valley to the then independent states, Simraungadh and Karnali region as well. The icons of Vishnu and Vishwarup (universal image of Vishnu), made of black stone are found in Simraungadh and Karnali, respectively. In this way, Vaishnavism developed and has been expanding in Nepal for a long time. In this article, I have tried to shed light on the four famous Vaishnava pilgrimage sites of the country, namely, Varahakshetra, Muktikshetra, Rurukshetra, and Janakpurdham.

Varahakshetra

Varahakshetra is one of the famous pilgrimage sites for Hindus located in the north-western direction of Sunsari district. Once upon a time, when the earth was in a great crisis, Lord Vishnu took the incarnation of Varaha and saved it. Since he liked the place very much, he settled here (Jalaan, 1977: 259). That is why this place has become famous as a Vaishnava pilgrimage site. The Rig Veda also mentions the incarnation of Varaha. According to Brahmanical literature, Varaha had saved the earth that was sinking due to the flood. According to the Mahabharata and mythological literature, Varaha is the third among the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu (Khanal, 2052: 117). The place where the sage Yajnavaraha payed Shraddha (homage) in the name of the departed soul is called 'Varaha Kshetra'. Similarly, Bhishma, who was injured during the Mahabharata war, lying on an arrow bed, ordered Yudhisthira to pay homage in the Varaha area in the name of the ones who died in the war. The above descriptions highlight the importance of the Varaha region (Pandey & Regmi, 2054: 117).

This pilgrimage site is located at the confluence of Koshi and Koka river. As mentioned in the Himvatkhanda literature, Saptakoshi and Kaushiki rivers originated from the sweat of Umadevi's hard meditation. Similarly, the Koka river originates from Koka Mountain. The confluence of these two great rivers is called Varaha Tirtha. There are other temples, including the symbolic statue of Varaha and its temple. Devotees believe that the one who bathes here with devotion, his sins are destroyed and attains Vishnulok. Similarly, the person who performs Shraddha (annual worship and alms in the name of the deceased) at this holy place becomes free from his sins, including all the dead ones from ten generations above and below twenty generations (Yogi & others, 2013: 71). And, it is believed that the creature that dies in this pilgrimage site ends his birth as an animal and will be born as a human being (Jalaan, 1977: 248). That is why people in this region prefer to pay homage to their dead.

This pilgrimage site has been gaining popularity in India as well. There are two copper plates from the reign of Budhagupta (533-52 A.D) found in Damodarpur, India. The copper plates mention about a trader named Ribhupalak who had provided gold coins and some land in the name of Kokamukh Swami and Shwetavarah Swami so as to build a temple, a storehouse and to worship and offer Hawan (ritual of offering prayers to God in front of the fire) (Nepal, 2040: 315). The first record of the Varaha region found in that particular area, is an inscription that belongs to King Rana Bahadur Shah dated 1843



Bikram Samvat (1786 A.D). The inscription states that, Mahanta Shiva Bharati of Chattaramath and his associates brought artisans from the capital of Nepal to rebuild the Varaha region (Nepal, 2040: 309). We can understand from this historical description that the temples were built there before Rana Bahadur Shah. A great earthquake in 1990 B.S. (1933 A.D) had caused extensive damage to the temples in the Varaha region. Later, Rana Prime Minister Juddha Shamsheer had renovated them in 1991 B.S. (1934 A.D). At that time, he even built stairs extending from Dobhan (bank of confluence) up to the temple (Nepal, 2040: 309). In this way, since the ancient times, the Varaha region has been continuously expanding.

Varaha temple

The famous cultural heritage of the Varaha region is the Varaha temple. It is located in a large courtyard to the east of the confluence of rivers Koshi and Koka. As the temple has been renovated from time to time, its original appearance seems to have changed somewhat. Inside the sanctum of this temple is a statue of Varaha. Apart from that, there are eight other small temples of Guruvaraha, Suryavaraha (White Varaha), Indravaraha, Kokavaraha, Nageshwar Varaha, Laxmi Panchayan, and Badrimukteshwar. It is worth mentioning that all these temples are dome structures. In addition, there are idols of Ganesh, Shaligram as well as other deities. The entrance door frame as well as Toran (crescent-shaped metal sheet carved with various artifacts that is placed above the door) of the Varaha temple is made of metal. Metal bells, in the form of decoration are being hanged just above the entrance door. Similarly, there is a circular pathway around the temple for the devotees to circumambulate.



Figure: Varaha temple
(Source: localprayers)

Among the other heritages here, the statue of Guruvaraha is magnificent. The idol stands with its left foot on Sheshnag (snake). However, its right arm cannot be seen as it is entirely broken. Based on the iconic features of this idol, it is presumed to be contemporary with the Varahamurti of Udayagiri in India. The idol is considered to be from the fourth century B.C. (Khanal, 2052: 117). Apart from that, there are some old and new public rest houses as well.

Varaha region, which has been maintaining religious significance since ancient times, also has its cultural features. All the temples are associated with Vaishnavism. The nine temples here are in a certain distance within the premises, but their structural composition is similar. There are many other heritages around it, like Chatradham Vishnupaduka, Ramdhuni, Suryakunda, etc. A big fair is held in Varaha every year on Kartik Purnima (full moon of the Kartik month, October- November) and on the day of Makar Sankranti (first day of the month of Magha according to Bikram Samvat). On the occasion of Kartik Purnima, especially Indian devotees visit here, while in Makar Sankranti, devotees of hilly origin come to



attend the fair. Apart from that, pilgrims also visit on days like Rishi Panchami (fifth day of the waxing phase of moon of the Bhadrapada month, August-September), Vyasa Purnima (Full moon day during Ashadha month, Jun- July), Phagu Purnima (full moon of the Falgun month, February-March), Ekadashi (eleventh day of each of the two lunar phases Kṛṣṇa Pakṣa and Shukla Pakṣa), and other special days. Thus, from a religious point of view, Varaha is very famous and has also become one of the important tourist destinations in Eastern Nepal.

Muktikshetra

This pilgrimage site is located in Mustang district. It is known as the district beyond the Himalayas. It has an elevation of 3781 m (12402 ft.) above the sea level (Mechidekhi, 2031: 514). The Annapurna and Dhaulagiri ranges are only 16 kilometers away. A beautiful temple of Muktinath is seven kilometers away from Kagbeni, located at the banks of the famous Kaligandaki River. This temple is an important pilgrimage area for both Hindus and Buddhists. People believe that the greatest tri-deity of the Hindu sect Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwar (Shiva) reside in this place as Hawan, Jal (holy water), and Agni (fire) sequentially. According to Hindu religious beliefs, one who bathes and chants in this region attains Mukti (salvation) (Yogi & others, 2013: 130). It is said that a person who circumambulates this holy place to bath and worship God, he would be fortunate enough not to be born again. As a result, people are becoming more attracted to this place. There were Ashrams (residences) of the two sages named Pulah and Pulatsya in Muktikshetra. Those sages had meditated on this holy place. Similarly, Rajarshi Bharat of Mithila Pradesh had also left the throne and meditated in this region (Podddhar, 2061: 154). In the seventy-eighth chapter of Padmapuran Patalkhand, all the mountains of this region are described as idols of Muktinath. The same thing has been mentioned in Vishnu Purana as well (Ghimire, 2034: 254) .

The importance of the Kaligandaki river has been mentioned above. This sacred river is known as Tapobhumi (the center place for deep meditation) of sages since ancient times. In this region, Saalankayan Muni got the opportunity to meet Lord Narayana through deep meditation (Ghimire, 2034: 254). The fact that Shaligram can be found in this river, has also been discussed above. Thus, from the earliest times, Muktikshetra has been gaining popularity in society.

Muktinath Temple

The Muktinath Temple is a famous heritage of this pilgrimage site. As this temple is about 3800 meters above the sea level, it is called as a temple above the clouds. It is built in a multi-tiered style that is surrounded by a circular path of 10 feet wide. There is a 6-foot-high stone wall around the temple premise. At the front of the temple are two paati (public rest house) attached to the wall. Between those paati, there is a wooden door with two panels to enter the temple premises. The roofs of both paati are covered with corrugated galvanized sheets. Each paati has a wooden Ankhijyal (traditional eye window) in it.



Figure: Muktinath Temple area
(Source: goldennepalholidays)

All the roofs of the three-storied temple have slate tiles. There are fifty-two Tundals (wooden struts) installed under the roof to support them. No artwork is carved in those Tundals. The second and third floors have 'Faya Gan' (small wind bells) as decorations under the roof. All the walls under the roof have wooden Ankhijhyal (traditional wooden eye window). As in other temples, a metal Gajur (pinnacle) is instilled on top of the temple. The main entrance of the temple has two gold plated door panels. Inside the sanctuary of this quadrangular temple, a one-meter high statue of Muktinath is placed on a silver seat with a serpent's hood. The face of the idol is round, and it has a crown on its head, earrings on ears, and a long garland of three layers on its neck. Among the four hands, the upper hands of the idol on both sides have held the wheel and conch shell. This idol looks different from other idols of Vishnu. To the right and left side of the statue are two women in a standing position. They both are standing with their one hand raised. Their faces are round and have worn crowns on their head, necklace around the neck, rings on ears, and bangles on their hands. Scholars have expressed their views that those female idols are Lakshmi and Saraswati. However, those idols are different from the traditional Lakshmi and Saraswati. Similarly, there are two other small statues on the right and left of Muktinath that stand in front of the female idols. There are also eagle statues and small metal Buddha statues on the right side in front of the temple.



This temple is a center of faith for both Hindus and Buddhists. Hindus consider it as Mukdishetra, while Buddhists consider it as a symbol of 'Chuminyatso'. Chuminyatso is a Tibetan name that denotes the meaning 'Hundred Waters'. This place is one of the twenty-four Tantric places of the devotees of this community (Wikipedia, 2020). Followers of this religion believe that their great founder Padmasambhava traveled to Tibet in ancient times to spread Buddhism and that he practiced yogism while living there. That is why they consider this place as a pilgrimage site (Wikipedia, 2020). The people who serve inside this temple are from both sects. The main priest of the temple is a Hindu (Brahmin) and there are monks, i.e. Jhuma, who do the cleaning works including distribution of offerings. Muktinath area is considered as a pilgrimage site reflecting religious harmony between both Hindu and Buddhist communities.

There are various other heritages in this area as Jwalamai temple, Muktidhara, Hansatirtha, Yagyatirtha, Shiva temple. Inside the Jwalamai temple, a small blue light is burning from the ground continuously, which is called the Agnikunda. The Hindus have accepted it as the triune power of Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwar, just as the Buddhists have considered it as the incredible power of Avalokitesvara. The fire seems to be ignited by the gas that comes naturally from the underground. Another dominant heritage here is the Muktidhara (taps) that is located within the temple premises. There are 108 taps just behind the temple to make it easier for pilgrims for the bath. The water from the taps are coming from top of the hill. There is a belief that bathing in these taps will bring good results. Bathing in those taps is considered sacred. Arrangements have been made so as to collect the water from those taps into the two ponds, located in front of the temple premises. These ponds are called Hansa Tirtha and Yagya Tirtha. There is a trend where pilgrims bathe in the pond after taking bath in Muktidhara. Only after bathing, devotees worship Muktinath temple.

A big fair is held at this pilgrimage site on the special day of Rishitarpani, which is also known as the Janaipurne, (full moon of the Shrawan month, July- August). On this day, a large number of devotees come here to worship Muktinath and give charity. Other festivals like Chait Dashain (on the eighth day of the waxing phase of moon of the month of Chaitra), Ram Navami (next day of Chait Dashain), and Badadashain (tenth day of the waxing phase of moon of the Ashvin month, September-October) have also attracted internal devotees along with Indian and Tibetan devotees. From that, it is clear that Mukdishetra has gained popularity even in abroad.

Rurukshetra (Ridi)

Rurukshetra also comes at the forefront among the famous Vaishnava pilgrimage sites in Nepal. It is located at the banks of Kaligandaki River, the main junction of the three districts, Gulmi, Palpa, and Syangja in western Nepal. Rurukshetra, which is the gateway to Gulmi district, looks like a valley as it is a flat area surrounded by hills. The Puranas have mentioned the religious significance of this region. Lord Vishnu was pleased with the deep meditation of a girl named Ruru and appeared in front of her as Rishikesh. She requested him to stay in the same place forever. As per her wish, Rishikesh agreed to stay there and blessed her as a representative of the goddess. Also, God blessed that area and said that it would be known as Ruru pilgrimage site (Jalaan, 1977: 273-275)



Another name for this sacred religious area is 'Ridi'. The word Ridi is said to have come from the Magar language. According to the popular belief, two separate letters 'ri' and 'di' refers to water and black in Magar language. As black water flows in the Kaligandaki river, it is called as 'Ridi' (Bhandari, 2016). However, we cannot accept this statement easily as the name Kaligandaki comes from Goddess Kali.

Rurukshetra is also known as Vanaras of Nepal. Scholar Perceval Landon, in his book 'Nepal', says that all the features available in Vanaras correspond to Rurukshetra. That is why this region has been called as Vanaras of Nepal (Bhandari, 2016). Apart from this, there are more than 40 other religious heritages around one Kos (measuring about 3.7 km) distance of Kaligandaki. Similarly, Shaligram of different sizes can be found in the river Kaligandaki. Therefore, this region has a special significance in the religious history of Nepal.

Rishikesh temple

The main temple of this religious region is Rishikesh temple. Among the other temples here, Rishikesh temple has become a popular and attractive center, which is a dome structure. The temple is located in a large courtyard at the banks of the river Kaligandaki, The temple has increased the religious significance of Rurukshetra in society. It was built in the Medieval Age by the Palpali king Mukunda Sen (1517-1554 AD) (Pandey & Regmi, 2054: 148). Initially, the structure of this temple is said to be in Shikhar style. After repeated renovations, it transformed into a dome style. Due to its unique appearance, it has become one of the most famous temples in Nepal. The topmost part of the temple has a Gajur (pinnacle). There are a couple of other small temples on the right and left side of the dome. The main entrance of the temple has a metal roof. Under the roof, brass leaves are hanging in rows, like garlands. To the right and left of the main entrance, there is a female statue holding 'Chamarapankha' (the fans made of peacock feathers and yak tails). There are metal statues of 'Shardul' on the right and left side of the roof at the main entrance. A large metal bell established on the right side of the entrance gate has also helped to increase the beauty of the temple and the courtyard. In the sanctuary of the temple, there is a statue of Lord Rishikesh which is made of black stone, three feet nine inches high. The idol holds 'Shankh' (conch shell), 'Chakra' (wheel), 'Gada' (mace), and 'Padhama' (lotus flower) with its four hands. The statue with its gentle face and proportionate limbs looks magnificent and alive. The statue has been compared to the Pala-Sena art style (that style flourished in eastern India in the ninth-eleventh century). It is said that the idol was found by King Mukunda Sen in the river Gandaki (Pandey & Regmi, 2054: 149).

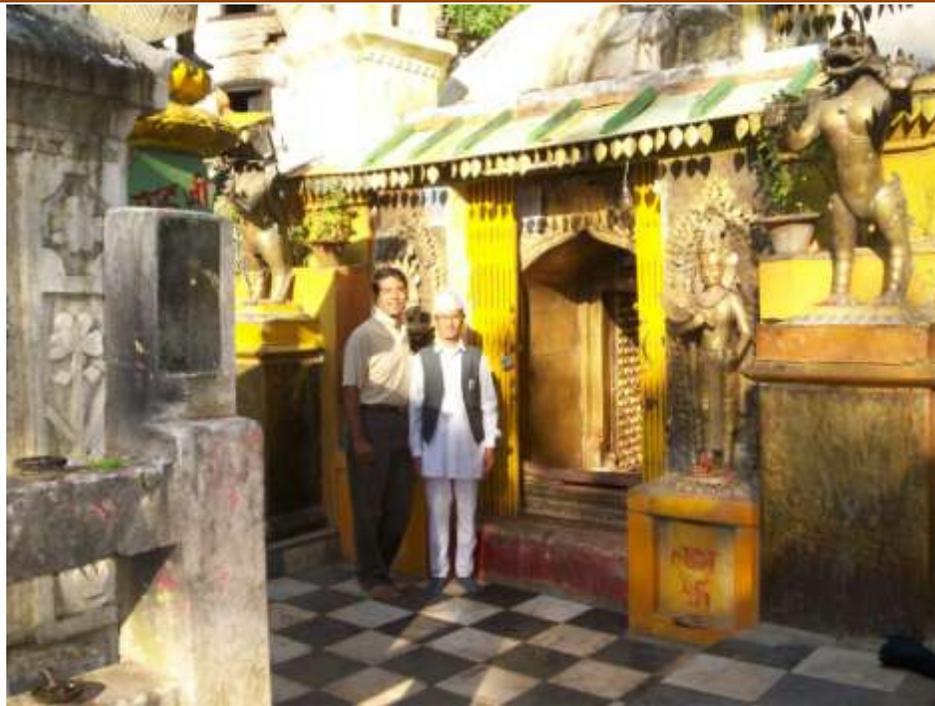


Figure: Rishikesh temple

(Source: Author)

There are many temples of other deities in the Rishikesh complex. These temples belong to Shiva, Radha Krishna, Ruru, Bhimsen, and Hanuman. Statues of Ganga, Yamuna, Lakshmi, Gayatri, and Saraswati are present in the courtyard. Apart from this, the temples of Bhagwati, Bhimsen, Shiva, and Buddha, in the vicinity of Gulmi district are also noteworthy. Bhrgitung Cave, located at a distance of about 97 km north of Ridi is said to be the place of pilgrimage, where the upper teeth of the dead body of Lord Shiva's wife Sati Devi fell (Dusav, 2058: 90). Another importance of this area is that Devadatta Muni did a deep meditation in this cave and got salvation from the human life. Other heritages of this region are Ganesh Cave, Galfule Cave, Hanuman Cave, Satyavati Pond, Anandakuti, Ramkuti, Ranighat, Ramdighat and Gaighat.

In the Rishikesh area, people celebrate a big fair on the special day of Makar Sankranti. On this day, devotees bathe in Kaligandaki and visit Rishikesh and Rurukanya. Devotees come from different districts of the country, namely Gulmi, Palpa, Syangja, Arghakhanchi, Pyuthan, Rupandehi, Parbat, Baglung, Kathmandu Valley and other parts of India to attend the fair that day. On the day of Kartik Shukla Dwadashi (second day of the waxing phase of moon in the month of Kartika) a grand fair is held, in remembrance of Ruru's meet with Lord Vishnu. On this occasion, the tradition of Rath Jatra (fair of chariots) is prevalent. Also, a special fair is held on the day of Shivaratri (thirteenth day of the waning phase of moon in the month of Falgun, February/March). Apart from that, on every Purnima (full moon day of the each month), Aunsi (the day of the new moon of each month), eclipse, and every Saturday of the month of Baishakh, fairs are organized. Because this region has established religious significance since ancient times, devotees get involved in every religious and cultural activity.

Janakpurdham

Janakpurdham is a famous religious heritage located in the central Terai region of Nepal. In ancient times, Janakpur region was the center of Maithili culture. At that time, this place was also the capital of the then Mithila, Bideha, and Tirhut (Tirbhukti) kingdoms. According to mythology, the area of this ancient city spread over five Kos (measuring about 3.7 km). It is believed that Kapileshwar, Jaleshwar, Kshireswar, and Kalyaneshwar, the four Mahadevs established in four directions East, West, North, and South, have been protecting the city (Shrestha, 2044: 43). The most famous king of Mithila kingdom was Janak and his daughter was named Janaki (Sita). Ram Chandra, son of King Dasharatha of Ayodhya, was also present at Sita's wedding celebration held at Janakpurdham. He picked up a bow named Shivadhanush and showed his manhood by breaking it into two pieces and married Sita. Followers of Hinduism consider the dignified man Ramchandra to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Therefore, this place is known as a sacred and intellectual area of Hindus since Vedic times. Literary sources say that scholars like Yagyavalkya, Maitreyi, Gargi, and Vidushis were born in this place (Pandey & Regmi, 2054: 154).

When Nanyadeva of the Karnat dynasty established a new state at Simraungadh, the Janakpur region was under his control. During the reign of these Karnat dynasty kings, Janakpur was very prosperous. People believe that most of the existing heritages are from that time period. On the other hand, Janakpur is a city rich in cultural heritage. Therefore, this place has become a center of attraction for both national and international pilgrims, and tourists as well. Many pilgrims come here to attend festivals and fairs and to worship and visit temples, lakes, ponds, Viwaha Mandap (Wedding pavilion), and monuments. The famous heritages of Janakpur are as follows.



Figure: Janaki Mandir

(Source: ktmguide)



a) **Janaki Mandir (Temple):** It is the most famous and largest temple in Janakpur. The present temple was rebuilt in 1910 A.D. by Queen Brisha Bhanu of Tikamgarh, India (Wikipedia, 2020). It is said that nine hundred thousand rupees were spent to build this temple at that time. The total amount is called 'Nau lakh' in Nepalese language. That is why this temple is called 'Naulakha Temple'. The temple is at the center of a huge courtyard that is surrounded by a row of houses. These surrounding structures are of different stories which have bastions above it. There are large number of rooms in the surrounding rows of houses where saints and priests have been living. Between these rows is a quadrangular Janaki temple built in the Mughal style with two floors and domes above it. A twenty feet wide circumambulation path has been constructed between the temple and the rows of houses so that everyone can circulate the temple. Inside the sanctuary of the temple is a beautiful statue of Ram and Janaki seated on a silver throne. The main entrances of the temple are in the east and south direction. At the southern gate, there are two statues of lion kept as a gatekeeper. On the top floor of the temple, on the east side, there is a room covered with glass, called 'Shisha Mahal' and on the north side, there are rooms for the saints. Behind the Janaki temple is the Janak temple connected to it. Apart from that, Girija temple, Lord Ram's bathroom, and storage room are present here. This historic and famous temple is excellent in terms of architecture. The temple is spread over about 4860 square feet and is 50 feet high. Therefore, based on the area, it is known as the largest temple in Nepal. Since all these heritages are linked with the temple, its size is comparatively large.

b) **Ram Mandir:** This multi-tiered temple was built in 1839 Bikram Samvat (1782 A.D) by Amar Singh Thapa. There are idols of various deities of Ram, Sita, Bharat, Laxman, Shatrughan, and Vishnu inside the sanctorum of this two-storied temple. Inside the courtyard of this temple, there exists an idol of a mother with her baby. In addition, an Ek-Mukhi (one-faced) Shivalinga is located in the north side. The scholar has expressed the view that those statues are made in Pala-Kala style (Pandey & Regmi, 2054: 145). The fact that Hemkarna Sen offered the land (Kushvirta) in the name of Ram temple, its information is engraved in the copperplate of the same temple. Similarly, a wooden archive of the temple states that in 1933 B.S. (1876 A.D), Prime Minister Jung Bahadur issued strict rules forbidding the slaughter of animals and birds for meat at the holy place of Janakpurdham (Poudyal, 2057: 179-180). These historical sources and existing traditions highlight the religious and cultural significance of the region.

c) **Rajdevi Mandir:** This temple is on the north side of Ram Temple. Rajdevi is also called Rajeshwari. She is the family goddess (Kuldevi) of the kings of Janak dynasty. Taleju Bhagwati, the family goddess of the medieval Malla kings of the Nepal Valley is not a human figure but a symbolic goddess. Similarly, the idol of Rajeshwari is also not a human form. In this Rajdevi temple, there is a custom of sacrificing a large number of goats every year on the day of Maha Ashtami and Mahanavami during the Dashain festival. Apart from the above mentioned, there are also temples of Janak, Laxman, Dasharatha, Hanuman, Shiva, Sankat Mochan, Rasik and other god and goddess.



d) **Viwaha Mandap**: Next remarkable cultural heritage of Janakpur is the Viwaha Mandapa (wedding pavilion). It is a two-story structure built on the south side of Janaki Mandir. The present temple was built after the great earthquake of 1990 B.S. (1933 A.D). There are various statues of deities and sages that have been installed inside the Mandapa. Towards the middle, there are idols of Ram, Sita, Dasharatha, Janak, and their chief priests. The pillars of this Mandapa are made artistic through carved figures of various deities. There are two large scenic parks in the front and back of the heritage, which have added to the beauty of the Mandapa.

There are many other heritages around Janakpur. Among those temples Kupeshwar Nath, Kapileshwar Nath, Kshireswar, and Bahakuti temples are the famous ones. The first two temples have idols of Mahadev and the last temple has a statue of Lakshmi Narayan. Another feature of Janakpur are the ponds present in large numbers. There are more than seventy ponds that are considered sacred religiously and culturally. Hence, it is also called the city of ponds. These ponds are famous as Sitakunda, Viharkunda, Agnikunda, Ratnasagar, Gangasagar, Dhanushsagar, Ramsagar, Anuragasur, Kapal Mochni, Paap Mochni, Murali, Laxman, Vidala and Janak. Dhanushadham is believed to have the remnants of Shivadhanush (bow) broken by Ram Chandra. There is a temple of Jaleshwar Mahadev in the south-west direction of Janakpur, which currently falls under Mahottari district. The temple is said to have been built by King Janak in Mahottari. There are large ponds at the front and back sides of Jaleshwar Mahadev Temple. The front pond is called Varunsar, while the back pond is called Kshireswar (Shrestha, 2044: 40). Despite Janakpur being a Vaishnava pilgrimage site, still, there are many Shivalayas.

Janakpur is a well-known spot for its various historical processions, festivals, celebrations and fairs as well as its traditional culture. The biggest celebration here is Vivah Panchami, which is observed on Margashukla Panchami (fifth day of the waxing phase of moon in the month of Mangsir, November- December). There is a custom to carry Dwoli (sedan chair) from Ram temple to the Janaki temple. This festival is celebrated in remembrance of the historical event, where Ram and Sita got married. Many pilgrims from Nepal and India participate in this occasion. Similarly, every year on Chaitrashukla Navami (ninth day of the waxing phase of moon in the month of Chaitra, March-April). local people grandly celebrate Ram Navami to commemorate the birth of the dignified man Shri Ram. Besides, there is a tradition of celebrating Janaki Navami on Baisakhshukla Navami (ninth day of the waxing phase of moon in the month of Baishakh, April-May) to celebrate the birthday of Sita.

The Jhulan Mela takes place at the Janaki temple premises every year for a total of 15 days from Shravan Shukla Pratipada to Purnima (all the fifteen days of waxing phase of moon in the month of Shravan, July-August). On this occasion, the idols of Ram and Janaki are placed on a "Jhulanga" (swing). Another cultural festival is Parikrama Utsav, which is celebrated from Phalgunashukla Pratipada to Purnima (all the fifteen days of the waxing phase of moon in the month of Falgun, February- March). In this festival, the idols of Ram and Sita are placed in a chariot and circulated in the Janakpur city. On this occasion, there is a custom of worshipping various local deities. In addition, there is also a tradition to worship on the full moon day of Kartik as well as on the special day of Chhath festival.



Thus, Janakpurdham has become a holy place of pilgrimage for Vaishnavism since ancient times. The region is rich in art, festivals, fairs, celebrations, and cultural traditions. Developed as a center of Maithili art and culture, the Janakpur region has become a holy place of pilgrimage for local and foreign pilgrims. That is why thousands of pilgrims come here every year.

Conclusion

The most worshiped deity of Vaishnavism, Lord Vishnu is considered to be radiant and eternal. There is a religious belief that he lives in water, land, and the overall universe. Vedic literature has portrayed Vishnu as the Supreme Being. It is said that Vishnu is the truth, which is the basic element of creation. Since there is a great flow of radiance and eternity of this deity throughout the universe, his physical existence in the form of temples and idols have become extensive. The various forms of Vishnu are Shaligram, Varaha, Muktinath, Rishikesh, and Ram. Therefore, Shaligram of Gandaki, Muktikshetra, Rurukshetra, Saptakoshi, Varahkshetra of Kokanadi, Mithila Pradesh are all famous Vaishnava pilgrimage sites of Nepal. Puranic (Legendary) literature like Barah Purana, Pashupati Purana, Skanda Purana, Himavatkhandha discuss these Vaishnava pilgrimage sites. Barahkshetra, Muktikshetra, Rurukshetra, and Janakpurdham, which has developed and expanded since earlier times, are still famous. These heritages have been the center of faith for the followers of the entire Vaishnava religion. It has made a significant contribution to the development and expansion of Vaishnavism.

These pilgrimage sites are also associated with various intangible cultural heritages. Each of these pilgrimage sites have their own festivals to celebrate every year. The cultural aspect that characterizes Nepalese people is that they visit these places of pilgrimage on special occasions. Devotees have a tradition of bathing and praying and even offering Tarpan in the name of the dead. According to mythology, Lord Vishnu rescued the dead by offering Tarpan on behalf of their name. That is why the devotees reach Varahkshetra and offer Tarpan. It is believed that Lord Vishnu appears in front of the devotees in various forms, on the occasion of the festival. Therefore, on the auspicious occasion of Kartik Purnima, Guru Purnima, Makar Sankranti, Baikuntha Chaturdashi, etc., many pilgrims come from different parts of the country including India. Muktikshetra, Rurukshetra, and Janakpurdham also have their cultural festivals. Due to the tradition of celebrating such cultural festivals, these places of pilgrimage have become famous among the people.

Most of the pilgrimage sites in Nepal have become examples of religious tolerance. This characteristic is also found on Vaishnava pilgrimage sites. Muktikshetra is a center for both the followers of Vaishnavism and Buddhism. There is a temple of Shiva in the same area. Therefore, the Shaivites also have faith in this area. The situation is the same for other Vaishnava pilgrimage sites as well. We can frequently find the statues of other sects, in addition to the original deities of different pilgrimage sites. It is a significant aspect illustrating the existing religious tolerance in Nepali society.



Nepal's religious heritage sites are beautiful naturally. Varahkshetra, Muktikshetra, Rurukshetra, and Janakpurdham are in the places that are rich in their natural beauty. Among them, Varahkshetra, Muktikshetra, and Rurukshetra are located on the banks of holy rivers. While traveling to those places, one can breathe the clean air, and the mountains and natural scenery on the way makes the tour exciting. Janakpurdham is a heritage located in the Terai region. Its civilization and culture have established its separate identity. The artifacts and architecture of the heritages of all four Vaishnava pilgrimage sites are unique. The temples of Varah, Ruru, and Janaki are dome structures, while the Muktinath temple is multi-tiered. However, the artwork and architecture of all the heritages are excellent. These natural resources and artifacts can fascinate anyone. Therefore, apart from being a religious center, these places of pilgrimage are also of great importance as tourist destinations.

Apart from Vaishnavism, there are other sects in Hinduism, including Shaivism, Shaktism, and others. They all have their importance and characteristics. It is natural for the followers of different religions and sects to give significance to the religious belief that they have been following. The main objective of any religion is to make human beings dutiful through a spiritual path and to put human virtues into practice. This helps to maintain mutual harmony in society. Therefore, adhering to one's religion and respecting the faith of others is an essential quality of every believer. Making everyone able to show such behavior is the essence of every religion.

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