

Bihal Baoli (Koi Rata Kotli, Azad Jammu & Kashmir): The significance of its Art, Architecture and Iconography

Sadeed Arif, M.Ashraf Khan and Mehwish Muneer
Quaid-I-Azam University, Islamabad

This paper focusses on an important Baoli (Stepped-well) in Kotli district Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Previously many Muslim period Baolis were recorded along Grand trunk road but this Baoli depicts religious cultural elements of Hindu mythology. It was recorded during the Survey and documentation of Azad Jammu and Kashmir by the Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations (TIAC), Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad in 2014. It was used by the local community of the area for various rituals as well as for drinking purpose .

Keywords: Kashmir, Bihal, Art, Architecture, Hinduism, Iconographic, Figurative, decorative reliefs.

The study is purely consisting on the decipherment and cataloging a newly discovered *Baoli* (stepped tank) of Bihal Narotta, Khuiratta, district Kotli, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The *Baoli* was for first time reported by Ashraf Khan with the team members (Sadeed Arif, Ghani-i-Rehman, and Rukhsana Said Khan) in the archaeological survey/documentation of the sites and monuments in Azad Jammu & Kashmir of Pakistan in 2014 (Ashraf & Ghani, 2014,p. 10). The survey and documentation of the sites were carried out with the financial assistance of Higher Education Commission of Pakistan. The extensive survey of Azad Jammu and Kashmir by the authors reported temples, *baolis*, forts, rock carvings, inscriptions and rock cut caves among other art objects. During the exploration in the region a unique Bihal *baoli* in Khuiratta town was reported. The current study focuses on Bihal *baoli* where study revealed richly carved stone blocks of Anthropomorphic and Theriomorphic representations of Hindu cult on three sided walls around water tank of the *baoli*. There are total 42 plates of godly and crypto-zoological figures chiseled on dressed blocks of granite. The entire sculptural panorama shows the continuation of typically Kashmiri style arch in Kotli district of Azad Jammu and Kashmir of Pakistan. The main purpose of the present research is to decipher the type, style, art, architecture, rituals and beliefs that had been associated with this particular *baoli*. The important aspect of this study is also to decipher the iconographic symbolism used in icons of these Hindu sculptures.

Geographical Location of Kotli

Kotli, Azad Jammu and Kashmir is the chief urban town of Kotli District. District Kotli is connected with the main city of Mirpur by two major roads, one through Rajdhani and the other

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. M. Ashraf Khan, Professor, Taxila Institute of Asian Civilization, Quaid-I-Azam University, Islamabad

1. Sadeed Arif carried out field work in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and documented the sites scientifically. He also work on the description of the sites.
2. Ashraf Khan has also carried out field research work in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and classification; analysis of the sites was done by him.
3. Mehwish Muneer is the graduated student of Archaeology from TIAC, QAU, who make plans, drawings and also work on bibliography

through Charhoi. The Rawalpindi district of Punjab is connected with Kotli through Sehnsa and the total distance of District Kotli from Rawalpindi is about 117 Km. The History of the Punjab Hills States written by Hutchinson and J.P. Vogel describe that it was most probably founded in the 15th century by the local imperial family of hilly region of Kashmir. The district Kotli and Poonch of Kashmir were independent till it was finally conquered by the Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab in 1815 and 1819 respectively (Gazetteer, 1991, p. 514).

Bihal *Baoli* is located 33.21'32 N to 74.2'58 E, in a small village of Bihal situated in Khuiratta town. The distance of Bihal village from Khuiratta town is about 4 Km. in east direction (Fig.1). The distance of the village from Kotli district is about 29 km in southeast direction and 165 Km from Islamabad. The village is 7 Km. from the Line of Control and located on the western side of Rajouri sector (Indian occupied Kashmir), with Charhoi to the west, Rajouri to the east, Noushera (IHK) to the south. Nakyal to the northeast and Kotli city to the northwest direction.

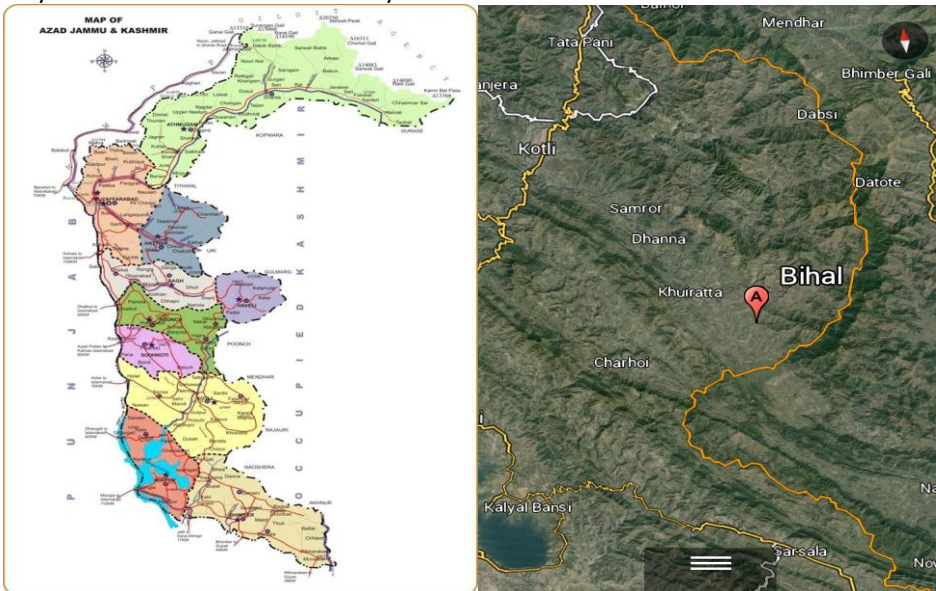


Figure 1, Location Map of Bihal, Kotli (Source: Google)

Plan, Art and Architecture of Bihal Baoli

Bihal *baoli* is square in plan with rectangular water tank and three encasing walls with high reliefs of anthropomorphic or theomorphic and decorative ornaments. There are three walls of the *baoli* consisted of different ornamental and stylistic settings having eastern, northern and southern walls on three sites of water tank to safeguard the overall cistern (Figs.2& 3). All the figurative and decorative bands depicted as nicely and naturally as they are in the similar examples of Hinduistic patronage. The length of walls are 3.4m, width is 3.3m, while height from the floor level is 1.4m, and depth 91.4cm, (Fig. 2). This has richly carved stone blocks of anthropomorphic and theomorphic figures representative of Hindu mythology on three sided walls of natural water tank. There are total 42 plates of godly and crypto-zoological figures chiseled on the walls of the *baoli*. Particularly in Kashmir *Baolies* were constructed on springs due to the presence of innumerable natural springs of transparent water in entire area of Jammu and Kashmir. We may call the Bihal *baoli* as 'sacred spring' specially devoted to the local Hindu community of the area. As the whole structure, being a religious place and the reliefs of the adorned walls are mostly recognizable. There are three façade of the *baoli*

the northern, southern and western with decorative ornamentation. The importance of *baoli* is due to the presence of inscription plaque, carved with Sharada script is being under study.

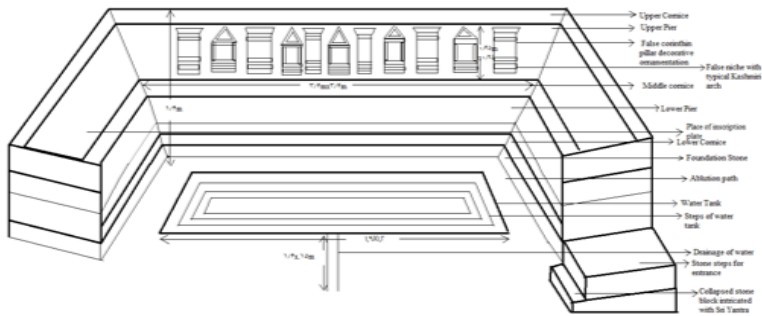


Fig: 2 Plan of Bihar Baoli (Source: Mehwish Muneer)

People of this village sometimes use this *baoli* only for hauling water for their domestic purposes. According to Lalit Gupta¹; "*baolies* are unique example of traditional water harvesting cultural practice in North-Western Himalayas. This practice has roots in community management of water resources for drinking or other needs of the people. The local communities of the area had the right of ownership over the use and utilize local natural resources for their benefit and the state recognized this right. Water was revered and consider as sacred from the time immemorial by the mankind. As the water bodies were considered sacred, therefore they were properly maintained and keep clean. Usually in the hilly area *Baolies* are designed to collect water from subterranean springs of transparent water. The flow of these natural water springs is very sensitive and can be disturbed/disrupt by seismic activity as well as human disturbance. In Jammu many *baolies* have dried up owing to tremors of earthquakes, building of roads, and plantation of water guzzling trees like Eucalyptus. It consist of water tank, encasing walls, ablution place/ circumambulatory passage, attached pillars, stepping stones and outlet (draining passage).

Iconographic Symbolism of Figurative and Decorative Reliefs of Bihal Baoli,

The figurative reliefs show different iconographic symbolism depicted on the walls of Bihal *Baoli*. All the figures are depicted nicely by the artists. It will certainly shed light on similarities and differences of these reliefs with other monuments of Kashmir as well as with Indian sculptures art. The sculptural panorama of Bihal *baoli* will surely help to reconstruct the cultural history of Bihal and of the *Baoli* itself.



¹With email discussion with Dr. Lalit Gupta, a retired professor of Art history, University of Jammu, Poonch House Campus,

Figure 3, General view of Bihal Boali

Shiva Deity (Fig. 4)

The main iconographic features of god Shiva are his third eye on the center of his forehead, the snake Vasuki all around his neck, the white beautiful crescent moon, the transparent water of sacred holy river. The water of holy river of Ganga is beautifully flowing from his knotted hair. The trishula is the popular weapon and damaru is a musical instrument of lord Shiva. In Hindu cult the Shiva is generally worshiped in the aniconic form of Shive Lingam. There is no doubt that Saiva as a popular deity was widely worshipped in the Kashmir valley from ancient times (Ray, 1969, p. 168). Early sculptural representations of god Shiva, which have been still survived are seated figure of Lakulisa, a form of Shiva at Pandrethan. Several sculptural reliefs of god Shiva at the temple of Payar having lord Shiva seated cross-legged on the throne under the canopy of an hanging tree and surmounted by votaries (ibid, p. 172). At the Behal *baoli* the figure is showing a mutilated condition of Shiva but its position in the northern wall can be recognized that is depicted by the side of peacock and Ganesha. According to Hindu mythology Ganesha is believed the son of lord Shiva. The Parvati is the mother of Ganesha. These two members of Shaivite family are popularly found in Kashmir as Shaivism is a popular cult worshipped by Kashmiris.



Figure 4: Shiva deity with its attributes in dilapidated condition. (Source: Researchers)

Peacock or Swan (Fig.5)

The relief of this plate is either a Peacock or a Swan connected to Ganesha as well as Lakshmi. But here it is depicted entirely to the side of Ganesha which make the connection of peacock to an Avatar, the Avatar of Ganesha deity. Its head is turning back, holding some food in its beak. Peacock and Swan are popular animals generally associated to Hindu cult. Swan is the Vahana (vehicle) of Saraswati as Saraswati is the consort of Brahma and is associated to river Saraswati in India.



Figure 5: Peacock relief turning his head back holding piece of food in his beak and sitting on a branch of tree. (Source: TIAC)

As discussed earlier Sarasvati is the famous river in the present India it is generally associated with consciousness which brighten up the process of creation in the world. Apart from this she is also consider the dawn-goddess and her brighten rays vanish the darkness of ignorance as well as backwardness from the world forever. Without her existence there will be chaos and confusion all over the world. If anybody to realize her existence in this world one must have to go beyond the happiness and comfort of the senses and also rejoice in the calmness of the soul. The sacred river Saraswati is usually associated with two vahanas - peacocks and swans.

Ganesha Deity (Fig.6)

The Ganesha which is very popular deity in Hinduism therefore their images were mostly carved in various parts of India by the 6th century C.E (Brown, 1959, p. 75). The Ganesha statuary from 9th to12th century C.E. had been well-established as an independent deity with his own sect. The common iconographic features Ganesha comprise head of an elephant as well as a prominent belly. The four arms of the Ganesha is also the common depictions in the iconography of Hindu mythology. He also hold his broken tusk in the lower-right hand. The image of Ganesha while turning his trunk sharply to his left to taste a sweet in the lower-left hand side is usually old feature nowadays. The standard configuration of Ganesha which typically holding an Axe or a Goad in the upper arm and Pasha (noose) in the other upper arm (Dubost, 1997, p. 213)



Fig 6: Ganesha with its attributes but in mutilated condition (Source: TIAC)

All symbolism discussed above are clearly shown in this figurative relief were Ganesha deity having elephant headed with big belly but belly is mutilated here and most probably seem to be flat. The deity has four hands with holding their respective attributes. But all the attributes are not completely recognizable due to the dilapidated condition. Padma pitha or pedestal of Ganesha is clear. The color of Ganesha observed here is partial yellow and red, which can be seen in most parts of Kashmir and India.

Standing Vishnu (Fig.7)

The well-known god Vishnu which generally preserve the entire universe in Hindu mythology. Symbolically this popular god is associated with military power and wars therefore *shankha* (conch used to alert troops), *gada*, (mace), and a *chakra*, (sharpened small wheel used as a weapon) are iconographically represented. The Vishnu god is the central character of the two popular epics stories of Hinduism *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The lord Vishnu in Hindu mythology has many forms, therefore he is usually depicted as a powerful god or as one of his ten incarnations (*Avatars*). Such *Avatars* are existed on earth. One of most popular incarnation of Vishnu is Krishna, which is very common in Hindu art. It is widely worshiped in all over India.



Figure 7: Standing deity of Vishnu holding Gadadevi. (source, TIAC)

In this relief, god Visnu is mutilated and covered with a layer of patina. Gadadevi is shown on the right side of the figure while left side is totally dilapidated.

Naga Pushpa (Fig.8)

This relief shows the Naga Pushpa flower in relief. According to Hindu mythology the flower was given a name of *Naga Lingam*. The trees of these flowers are abundantly planted in the *Shiva* temple all over India. The tree is called Shiv Kamal in the local Hindi language and also famous as "*Kailaspati*". The Tamil people called it *Nagalingam* in local language. The flowers of this tree are called *Shivalinga* in Hindi, *Nagalinga Pushpa* in Kannada, *Nagamalli* or *Mallikarjuna* flowers in Telugu. In Hinduism the tree is sacred as the petals of the flower has close resemblance to the hood of the *Naga* (Serpent). *Naga* is a sacred snake responsible to protect and safeguard a Shiva Lingam.



Figure 8: *Naga Pushpa*, a flower motif mostly used in Hinduism to protect *Shiva lingam*. (Source: TIAC)

Mahisasuramardini (Fig. 9)

This relief show a Mahisasuramardini sitting on a high throne in the center of the Kashmiri style nitch. The multi-armed Durga, crushes the buffalo with her raised powerful legs. She also plunges her trident in the human form of the demon Mahisha which is most probably emerging from the neck of the wild beast. The vehicle of this deity is a lion which joins the fight mauling the buffalo from backside. In this popular relief of Durga which is highly honored by garland-bearing of celestial attendants (gandharvas)



Figure 9: A Relief of *Mahisasura mardini* (Source: TIAC)

Vaikuntha Chaturmurti (Fig.10)

This relief shows Vaikuntha Chaturmurti sitting on high throne flanked by two Corinthian Pilasters in a Kashmir style niche. The Vaikuntha Vishnu is usually a four-headed feature of the god Vishnu which is mostly worship in Kashmir. Generally in the Jayakhya-Samhita, Vaikuntha Chaturmurti has been depicted riding over a vehicle Garuda (vahana) (Gopinath, 1914, p. 254) Nowadays such type of images are very rare in Hindu art. In such configuration of the images, the deity holds a sword, a lotus, a mace or a conch and the chakra (Wheel). Generally, on the four feathers of Garuda (Mythical bird in Hinduism and Buddhism) four female figures in a sitting posture, two on either side of Vaikuntha Chaturmurti are being visible while the identity of the these female figures are unclear. They are most probably look like two goddesses (probably consorts of Vishnu, Lakshmi and Bhumi). (Desai,2013, pp. 42–46). It is very rarely witnessed that Vaikuntha Chaturmurti is accompanied by his consort Lakshmi, who is sitting on the left thigh. Such type of iconography in Hindu mythology is called Lakshmi Vaikuntha in the Jayakhya-Samhita (Desai,2013).



Figure 10:Detail of *Vaikuntha Chaturmurti*, (Source: TIAC)

The image of Vaikuntha Chaturmurti is mostly found in Kashmir areas in which the Bihal *baoli* relief is one of the examples here. This relief is Vaikuntha Chaturmurti and various symbolisms are shown here such as three-faced Visnu is sitting on Garuda . Three faces of Visnu can be easily observed as small structures on left and right side of the god but they are mutilated. Under the back of Visnu in right side, some small carving is being shown and probably is the spouse of Visnu Which is also riding on Garuda with him but at left side consort Bhumi is mutilated completely. Upper half structure of figure is defaced.

Durga (Fig.11)

Durga is one of the popular goddess in Hinduism and is generally believed the wife of the Shiva. The Durga has the role of a warrior goddess who usually destroys the evil spirit of demons. Usually in the Hindu art she is portrayed with his ten arms holding weapons of different gods and goddess. The Durga's vahana is a lion which is used by her for transportation as well as of her many weapons (lotus sculpture).



Figure 11: Relief of *Durga* riding on its *Vahana*, (Source: TIAC)

In this relief only a lion, the *Vahana* of *Durga* is clearly shown. As it is defaced therefore its attributes even her arms cannot be described. It is an important deity of Shivaite cult, and its position is depicted entirely under the relief of *Mahisasuramardini* which is the part of main unit or upper pier.

Garuda (Fig.12)

It is in the shape of a large bird or humanoid bird that mostly be observed in the Buddhist and Hindu Art of India. Generally *Garuda* is the vehicle of (*vahana*) of the lord *Vishnu* in Hindu mythology. It is also the Hindu or Sanskrit origin name used for constellation *Aquila*. In Hinduism the brahminy kite and phoenix are generally consider the contemporary representations of *Garuda* in India (Russel, 1916, p. 2231).

In Hindu mythology *Garuda* is generally considered the symbol of powerful and violent force of speed and of the martial skill. The brave powerful warriors during the fight is moving rapidly on doomed enemies are associated with the *Garuda* attacking on a snake. The defeated warriors are snakes which are beaten by powerful *Garuda* (*Mahabharata*, Book VIII, *Karna Parva*, Section 85).

In *Bihal baoli*, *Garuda* is separately depicted which shows the popularity of *Garuda* in ancient Kashmir. The condition of this relief is best among all the previous discussed panels. Face of bird is more prominent while other physical parts were not carved. Over the head, hairs of *Garuda* were carved prominently.



Figure 12: *Garuda* within the panel of mandala in middle cornice, (Source: TIAC)

Narasimha (Fig.13)

In Hindu mythology *Narasimha* is generally represented as half-man/half-lion as well as semi- humanized form of the *Satya-Yuga*. The *Hiranyakashipu* the elder brother of *Hiranyaksha*, was

given spiritual power by the god Brahma not permitting rakshasa (Demon spirit) to killed human beings or animals, inside or outside, day or night, on earth or in the sky, with his weapons. Vishnu which is also descended as an anthropomorphic *Avatar* (incarnation) having the body of a human head and claws of a lion. He killed the rakshasa (Demon spirit) at the courtyard of his own house, at dusk, with the sharp claws, while he lay on the thighs.

In this relief Narasimha is shown as yogic form with six hands approximately. Left hand side of deity is partially mutilated but a lion shape head emerges from the round panel of the relief. There is no demon (Hiranyakashipu) on the thigh of Narasimha and its part is dilapidated condition. In Kashmir all the Avatars of Visnu were quite important in ancient times. As in Avantishwami temple, Narasimha was carved as relief and the style of carving is quite different from that of Bihal *Baoli*. Horse riding was carved out in several Hindu Temples and in Kashmir, Narrative scenes of horse riding were very common even in modern period. The theme of horse riding is mostly used in Kashmir wood carvings also.



Figure 13: *Narasimha*: An Avatar of lord Visnu, (Source: TIAC)

Dvarpala (Fig.14)

Dvarapala in Sanskrit is used for a door or gate guardian generally depicted as warrior or fearsome asura giant. It usually decorated with a weapon. The most common weapon is gadha mace. The depiction of Dvarapala image is very common architectural feature of Hindu and Buddhist art India as well as in the other areas influenced by them. In the present relief drvapala in sitting in cross legs holding weapons in his both hands, prominent eyes in a slim body.



Figure 14: *Dinvarpala*: A figure of door Guardian (Source: TIAC)

Conclusion

The Himalaya ranges are gifted with fresh transparent water springs which are spread from Potohar(Pakistan) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir to occupied Jammu (occupied Kashmir). These *baolies* are usually ornamented with sculptures representing the images of the gods and goddesses associated to Indian religion.

The Bihal *baoli* which was recently reported by the authors is well- preserved monument with rectangular water tank and three encasing walls with high reliefs of anthropomorphic and architectural motifs. The *baoli* was scientifically studied and figural representation were identified. In Azad Jammu and Kashmir *baolies* were constructed on natural springs. Since such *baolies* mostly used for drinking purposes or other household tasks like bathing, washing clothes as well as offering water to the gods and goddesses, while worshipping therefore these *baolies* acquire semi-religious status among the local communities. We found these *baolies* properly planned and richly decorated with various figural art. The architectural and masonry style of the *baolies* show that it belongs to 9th and 10th Century C.E. The Bihal *baoli* is a sacred *baoli* associated with local Hindu community. This *baoli* fulfilled the day to day needs of the water of surrounding area. The entire structure of the *baoli* is sacred religious place depicting various religious scenes of Hindu mythology. The figural representation of the various Hindu deities in this *baoli* shows that local community of this area were worshipping these deities. These deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, Mahisasura Mardini, Vaikuntha chaturmurti, Durga, Vahana, Ganesh, Narasimaha, Dvarpala and other major gods of Hindu cult were represented in Behal *baoli*. The Behal *baoli* needs further research and study and also protection from the concerned authority. The govt. of Azad Jammu and Kashmir should immediately declare the monument in protected monuments list.

References

- Ashraf, M.K. & Ghani, R. (2014). *Survey and Documentation in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Northern areas of Pakistan*. Islamabad: TIAC, Quaid-i-Azam University.
- Baner, J. J. N. (1985). *The development of Hindu Iconography*. Calcutta: Munshiram Monoharlal.
- Brown, P. (1942). *Indian Architecture (Bhuddist and Hindu)*. Bombay: Taraporevala Sons and Co. Ltd.
- Desai, K. (2013). *Iconography of Vishnu*. New Dehli: Abhinava Publishers.
- Gazetteer of Kasmir & Ladakh (1991). Lahore: *Sang-e-Meel* Publications.
- Jain, N. J. (1981). *The stepwells of Gujrat in Art-Historical perspective*. New Dehli: Abhinav publication.
- Johannes, B. & James, L. F. (1973). *The Mahabharata*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Kalhana (2015). *Raja Tarangini*. New Dehli: Sahitya Akademi.
- Martin,D.,P. (1997). *Ganesh: The Enchanter of the three worlds*. Mumbai:Indian Cultural Studies.
- Ray, S. C. (1970). *Early History and Culture of Kashmir*. New Dehli: Oriental Publishers.
- Rao, T.A.G. (1916). *Elements of Hindu Iconography*. Madras: Law Printing House.
- Russel, R.V H. (1916). *The tribes and cost of Central provinces of India*. London: Macmillan and company.

Received: July 7, 2019

Revisions Received: Jan 15, 2020