

The Bigger Picture: Visual Narrative in Newari Bilampau Paintings

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Introduction

Among the rich artistic traditions of the Newar people of the Kathmandu Valley, the bilampau remains a long-forgotten yet important part of Newar artistic heritage.¹ Painted on cloth, the bilampau resemble the more widely studied paubha paintings, but unlike paubha, which usually features a central deity for devotional viewing, the bilampau are horizontal, scroll-like paintings that function primarily as a visual narrative². By examining bilampaus as “visual texts”, meaning works that narrate through sequential images rather than just written language, this paper compares two bilampaus depicting Bunga Dyo (Red Avalokiteshvara) and argues that they follow a standardized, codified program meant to faithfully impart the legend to its viewers.

Comparative Analysis

For clarity, the Philadelphia Museum of Art scroll will be referred to as the PMA bilampau, and the Himalayan Art Resources example as the HAR bilampau. The first scroll (Figure 1), dated 1712, is held in the PMA and measures over seven feet in length and two feet in height. The second scroll (Figure 2), from a private collection and accessed through the HAR database, is undated. Although the artists of both pieces are unknown, each is attributed to Nepal.

A preliminary comparison reveals that, despite stylistic differences, the two scrolls are very similar. Both depict the same sequence of episodes and contain comparable arrangements of figures, including deities, humans, and demons, as well as nearly identical objects across their compositions. Each scroll is divided into three registers separated by a slightly off-center vertical column, and each contains a line of inscription at the top of every register. This structural

¹ Madan Chitrakar, “‘Bilampau’: A Heritage – Long Forgotten,” *SIRJANĀ – A Journal on Arts and Art Education* 8, no. 1 (2022): 56–65, <https://doi.org/10.3126/sirjana.v8i1.46657>.

² Neeraja Poddar, “Mapping a South Asian Sacred Journey,” *Archives of Asian Art* 74, no. 2 (2024): 153–68, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00666637-11483460>.

consistency establishes a clear narrative parallel between the works. However, personal judgment could take the comparison only so far. To examine the scrolls more closely, I needed the help of someone knowledgeable in the field.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to contact Dr. Naresh Man Bajracharya,³ a scholar and a spiritual leader of Newar Buddhism in Nepal. Despite the limited image quality from PMA and HAR and the presence of cracks, fading, and other damage on the paintings themselves, Dr. Bajracharya examined each register closely and recorded only what he could confirm with certainty (Figs. 16 and 17). He identified the script as an old form of Prachalit Lipi (Newari script), not Devanagari, and confirmed that the inscriptions of both scrolls discuss the same content.

A crucial discovery appears in the third register of the HAR scroll: a date written as Nepal Sambat 737.⁴ Since the current Nepal Sambat year is 1146, this places the HAR scroll in 1616 CE, nearly a century older than the PMA scroll. The corresponding section in the PMA version is too damaged to read, but if the PMA's 1712 date is accurate, this suggests that the PMA scroll was produced as a close recreation of the earlier HAR painting, differing mainly in stylistic details. Further evidence of stylistic variation appears in the inscriptions: the HAR scroll uses decorative floral or sun-like dividers, while the PMA scroll uses simple vertical bars. Likewise, the color of the lines of inscriptions, how the PMA bilampau uses a golden yellow paint over a black background for the inscription, while the HAR bilampau uses black paint over a white background, is also worth noting. These small differences in stylistic choices signify that the

³ Dr. Naresh Man Bajracharya completed his MA, MPhil, and PhD in Buddhist Studies from Delhi University. He is the Founder of Dept. of Buddhist Philosophy at Nepal Sanskrit University, Founding Chair of Central Dept. of Buddhist Studies at Tribhuvan University, Nepal's largest university, and Member Secretary of Lumbini Buddhist University, currently serving as its Vice Chancellor.

⁴ Nepal Sambat is the calendar used by the Newar people.

artists had some level of freedom, and they did not have to take it literally when trying to reproduce the same painting and the same sequence of images.

Beyond textual evidence, the iconography of the scrolls reinforces their Buddhist context. A small stupa is depicted on the right side of the second register next to a figure wrapped by a snake, an element that could be easily overlooked at full scale but is significant upon closer look. Dr. Bajracharya also noted three deities mentioned in the inscriptions: Trailoknath in the second register and Bunga and Minnath in the third. While this multiplicity of deities complicates the naming of the scrolls, the central prominence of Bunga Dyo, especially in later scenes, supports the appropriateness of identifying the works with this deity.

To clarify the narrative structure, it is useful to examine several scenes in more detail. These visual comparisons confirm the strong narrative correspondence between the two scrolls and prepare us to interpret the story of Bunga Dyo.

Ritual Offering Episode

The first close-up (Figs. 7 and 8) shows a ritual scene: two priest-like figures sit to the left of a fire, conducting a ceremony, while four richly adorned figures sit to the right wearing elaborate jewelry and garments, suggesting high social status. They appear to be offering prayers to a central white deity, possibly Trailoknath.

Drought Episode

Another scene (Figs. 9 and 10) depicts a figure standing before a makara-shaped hiti (waterspout).⁵ No water flows from the spout, suggesting a period of scarcity. Meanwhile, high-status figures sit contemplatively inside a house, indicated by their elaborate dress and jewelry.

Chariot Procession Episode

The most striking scene (Figs. 11 and 12) features a tall chariot carrying Bunga Dyo, followed by a smaller chariot likely housing Minnath⁶. In the PMA version, the figures are clearer, while the HAR version shows paint loss. Notably, the tall chariot extends beyond the register boundaries, drawing the viewer's attention and emphasizing its narrative centrality, even interrupting the line of inscriptions. In the background, a figure drinks from a pipe emerging from the mouth of a wrathful deity. This image closely resembles the Swet Bhairav⁷ head in Kathmandu, which is opened only during the Indra Jatra festival,⁸ when rice liquor is siphoned out as prasad⁹ for devotees (Figure 18).

Taken together, these visual correspondences reinforce the narrative cohesion between the two scrolls and strengthen the conclusion that the PMA scroll is a later recreation of the older HAR version. With this close comparison established, let's turn to the story of Bunga Dyo to understand how he became one of the most revered deities in Kathmandu.

The Legend of Bunga Dyo

⁵ Makara is a mythological creature with the snout of a crocodile, the trunk of an elephant, the tusks of a boar, and the tail of a peacock. It appears frequently in Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist art.

⁶ Swati Pujari and Alexander R. Jachnow, *MSc Programme in Urban Management and Development Rotterdam, The Netherlands September 2014*, n.d.

⁷ *Wikipedia*, "Swet Bhairav," September 9, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Swet_Bhairav&oldid=1310390693.

⁸ Prerna Pradhan, "Sacred Space, Spectacle and Being Visible: Exploring the Indra Jatra Festival of Kathmandu," *Sacred Space* 8 (2017).

⁹ Prasada is the Nepali term for blessings.

In Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism, Bunga Dyo is understood as a form of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, the embodiment of compassion. This identity is reflected in his Newari name Karunamaya, which translates as “the Compassionate One.”¹⁰ His most common local name, Bunga Dyo, is geographic in origin and refers to the village of Bungamati, regarded as his original home and the place where his image resides for part of the year. Early records consistently use this name, indicating its authenticity among local devotees.¹¹ Bunga Dyo also represents a significant point of interaction between Buddhist and Hindu traditions in the Kathmandu Valley. In the large festival dedicated to him, communities variously identify the deity with Avalokiteshvara, Matsyendranath, or Narayan/Vishnu, reflecting a long history of shared worship.¹² The bilampau examined in this study depicts the “Red Avalokiteshvara,” locally known as Rato Matsyendranath, corresponding in Vajrayana iconography to Padmapani, the red Lotus Holder.¹³

Before analyzing the scrolls further as visual texts, it is important to outline the legend they depict. The narrative begins in the mid-7th Century with a catastrophic twelve-year drought in the Kathmandu Valley. Rain ceases because the yogi Gorakhnath restrains the rain-bringing serpents (nagas) beneath his meditation seat, either in anger or to summon his teacher. With the valley facing ruin, King Narendradeva of Bhaktapur¹⁴ (Fig. 19) consults the Buddhist priest Bandhudatta Acharya, who determines that the only solution is to bring the Bodhisattva Karunamaya, Gorakhnath’s guru, into the valley. Joined by a farmer named Ratna Cakra, the

¹⁰ Bajramuni Bajracharya, “Swayambhu Buddhacharya’s Relationship with Bungadya,” *Cognition* 4, no. 1 (2022): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.3126/cognition.v4i1.46436>.

¹¹ “Karunamaya--the Cult of Avalokitesvara-Matsyendranath in the Valley of Nepal by John K. Locke,” n.d.

¹² Bajracharya, “Swayambhu Buddhacharya’s Relationship with Bungadya.”

¹³ “Rato” is the Nepali word for red. The red form of Padmapani in Vajrayana Buddhism is an emanation of Avalokiteshvara who belongs to the lotus family of Amitabha Buddha (Buddha of Infinite Light).

¹⁴ Bhaktapur is one of three cities inside the Kathmandu Valley.

king and priest set out on an arduous journey to Kamarukamaksha in present-day Assam to retrieve the deity. After many trials, some of which are visually echoed in the bilampau, they succeed in bringing Karunamaya back to Nepal. The story's turning point occurs when the party returns to Kathmandu. As soon as Karunamaya arrives, Gorakhnath rises to pay respect. This movement frees the serpents, who ascend to the sky and release torrential rain. The long drought ends, and the valley is saved. Karunamaya, now revered as Bunga Dyo, agrees to remain in the valley, dividing his time between his residence in Bungamati and a shrine in Patan¹⁵.

To commemorate this divine intervention, the ratha jatra, or chariot festival, is held every year in Kathmandu. It begins every year in the month of Baisakh, the start of the Bikram Sambat calendar¹⁶, and involves the procession of Bunga Dyo's tall wooden chariot through the cities of the valley.

This legend is not merely mythology, as it provides the theological foundation for the visual program of both Bilampaus. Several scenes from the scrolls directly correspond to episodes in the narrative. For example, the hiti scene analyzed earlier (Figs. 9 and 10), showing a dry waterspout and the anxiety of residents, visually reflects the twelve-year drought that initiates the story. Likewise, the towering chariot scene (Figs. 11 and 12) corresponds to the establishment of the ratha jatra, the ritual procession commemorating Bunga Dyo's arrival and the restoration of rain. These visual parallels show that the scrolls narrate the key turning points of the legend, reinforcing their function as visual texts designed to transmit narrative and ritual knowledge through sequential imagery.

¹⁵ Patan is one of the three cities in the Kathmandu Valley. It is also known as Lalitpur.

¹⁶ Bikram Sambat is the Hindu lunisolar calendar. Baisakh is the first month on the calendar, which corresponds to April and May in the Gregorian calendar.

It is also evident that the deity being worshipped in the chariot procession scene is Rato Matsyendranath (Bunga Dyo), as the depiction in the bilampau (Figs. 13 and 14) closely resembles his actual sculpture (Fig. 15). This clear visual identification reinforces Bunga Dyo's central presence within the narrative. Because the scrolls depict the legend so faithfully, and because Bunga Dyo occupies the central role in both the narrative and the visual composition, it is appropriate that these paintings are named after him. The tale provides the interpretive framework that allows the scrolls to be understood not simply as art objects but as narrative instruments that situate the viewer within the religious memory of the legend.

The Bilampaus as a Narrative Map

The Gosainkunda pilgrimage scroll (Fig. 19) provides a useful model for understanding how bilampaus function as visual texts. Operating as a sacred map, it charts the full pilgrimage route to the Himalayan lake¹⁷, arranging temples, settlements, and natural landmarks in the order a traveler would encounter them. For those unable to make the journey, the scroll served as a ritual substitute and was treated as an icon in its own right. Its value depends on how accurately it portrays the actual route that pilgrims would traverse if they made the trek to Gosainkunda¹⁸.

The two Bunga Dyo bilampaus follow the same underlying logic, although they map narrative rather than geography. Their registers lead the viewer through the story in a fixed sequence that matches the order of the Bunga Dyo legend. Although some episodes are more easily connected to the story of the patron deity than others, the bilampaus rely on standardized sequencing rather than artistic variation. The close similarity between the PMA and HAR examples suggests that the artists followed a consistent visual program designed to preserve and transmit the legend

¹⁷ Check Figure 21 to see the location of Gosainkunda lake in relation to Kathmandu

¹⁸ Poddar, "Mapping a South Asian Sacred Journey."

faithfully. In this sense, the Bunga Dyo bilampaus operate as narrative maps, visual texts whose authority lies in their ability to guide viewers through the story.

Conclusion

The two bilampaus examined in this study reveal a coherent and standardized visual program through which Newar artists conveyed the legend of Bunga Dyo. Their close structural, iconographic, and narrative parallels demonstrate that the scrolls were conceived as vessels for transmitting a fixed, authoritative sequence of events. With the discovery that the HAR bilampau is nearly a century older than the PMA scroll, further questions arise regarding the motivation behind creating a later bilampau that is almost identical to the earlier one. Even so, these horizontal paintings can still be used to learn and faithfully transmit the legend of Bunga Dyo. The value of the bilampau lies not only in its artistic qualities but also in its role as an enduring narrative instrument. In this way, they function as visual texts whose meaning unfolds through carefully ordered imagery with clarity, precision, and devotion.

Figures



Figure 1. Bunga Dyo, the Legend of Red Avalokitesvara, ca. 1712; Collection: Philadelphia Museum of Art, Photograph: Philadelphia Museum of Art¹⁹



Figure 2. Painting of the Legend of Red Avalokitesvara; Collection: private, Photograph: Himalayan Art Resources²⁰



¹⁹ “Artist/Maker Unknown, Bunga Dyo, the Legend of Red Avalokitesvara, 1712,” accessed December 3, 2025, <https://www.visitpham.org/objects/298333>.

²⁰ “Himalayan Art: Item No. 19466,” accessed December 3, 2025, <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/19466>.

Figures 3 and 4. Vertical bars vs floral dividers in the inscriptions of the two bilampaus



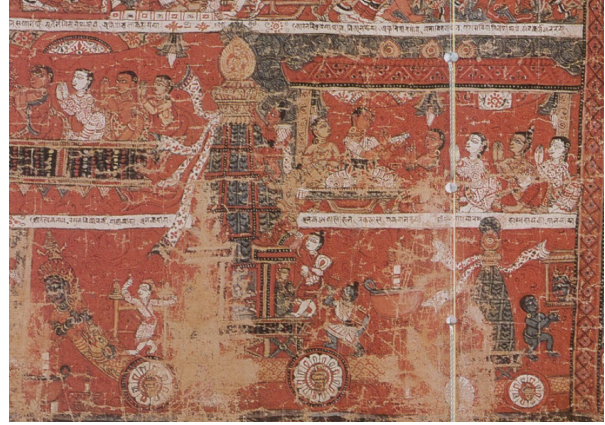
Figures 5 and 6. Stupa painted on both the bilampaus, next to an image of a snake wrapping around a figure



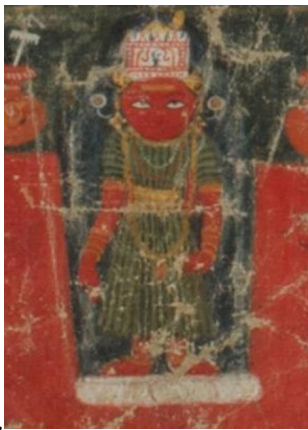
Figures 7 and 8. Ritual offering episode (PMA scroll on the left and HAR scroll on the right)



Figures 9 and 10. Drought episode (PMA scroll on the left and HAR scroll on the right)



Figures 11 and 12. Chariot procession episode (PMA scroll on the left and HAR scroll on the right)



Figures 13 and 14. Representation of Bunga Dyo in the PMA (left) and HAR (right) bilampaus



Figure 15. Actual sculpture of Bunga Dyo worshipped in Patan (2021) (Photo: Rajesh Dhungana)

Inscriptions from the Himalayan Art: Item No 19466
 2nd Line
 स-य-स श्री लोकेस्वराय श्री देव, ब्रह्मा, विष्णु लोकेश्वर-
 साहेत शुभं श्री महादेव श्री ब्रह्मा व ताति, श्री - - -
 स - ककुच्छन्दतयागत, श्री सैकेश्वर श्री वा - - वि - स्वविरव
 विखुनि सराजने - सुवर्ण विमानयगाव - निपा - लोके शयगा
 १ - कारन वि - उपा - ५ विखुनडा, अकृ - तारमाव
 परावित श्री - - - मि - विव - - - खनकसधररय ।
 ॥ विखुनरव - कर्म तरिता, प्रकुरि शाधयाः दा न जमदु ॥ न
 नू स - सुगरनकाडा - नाम - सन रिमा, यथमतिरिखा,
 - - सा । - - - विखुन चवयथ स - रिता न ताव
 अ कुरि व शाधयाव । - - - विन हाकुहि - ही ताव
 निर्म तीर्थ, श्री सुमेरु पर्वतस समस्त देव - क सिद्धाक
 अस्त श्री शम्भु - चन्द्र सूर्य न प्रद रिता - - - - - ।

देवताको नाम: त्रैलोक्यनाथ

Third Line Inscriptions: a few letters are missing
 - सु र व स्रि सं - मेपालिक ६३६ जेसमाय शुक्लपत्र - - - तांताहार - - निवासी
 काशी राज ता सैन श्री श्री श्री तुंगतथ दूट ओ लहवत फल वलहाद्य प्रतिष्ठायाडा ॥
 (ना नात्रोत्रयाक - तार, वंहुनि महान, लिवाक ०००० श्री त्रैलोक्यनाथ, रवस विद्या
 रक, जात्रायाडा, अनेक की प - - - अनेक - - - तालो हन रक फोल,
 एक तात - - ॥ ॥ श्री श्री ननाथ आरथ स वास यका - र या डा ॥
 आचार्य - थ न न श्री ब्र - क ल स, न सा या डा, श्री त्रैलोक्यनाथ विराहा या डा,
 ता - या या तात । श्री - - - - - स - - - - - हो क ल स स,
 स नान - - - - - स नान - - - - - ना ना वा य - - - - - न श्वा, द ष्ठा य
 श्री त्रैलोक्यनाथ, महासन्तान - - - - - पवित्रा ति - - - - -

देवताको नाम अ. तुंग
 देवताको नाम (२) कनिनाथ
 संवत् ६३६
 साल ११४५
 - ६३६
 ४०५ वर्ष (२००)

Figures 16 and 17. Dr. Bajracharya's notes on the inscriptions on the HAR bilampau



Figure 18. Swet Bhairav's head siphoning alcohol during Indra Jatra festival in Kathmandu (Photo: www.thrillingtravel.in)

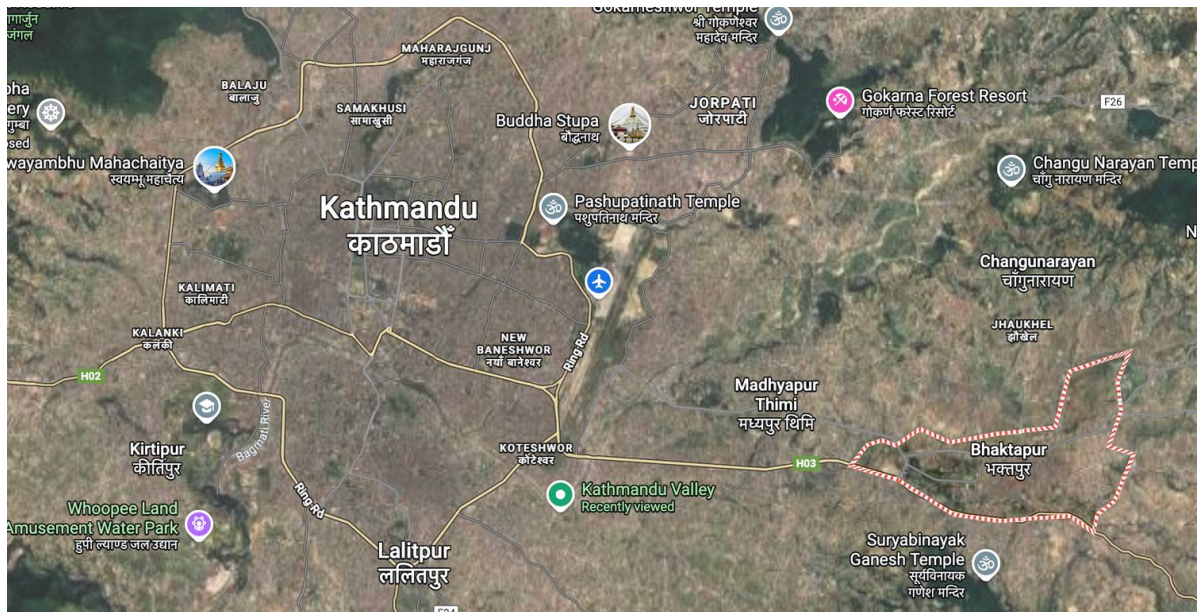


Figure 19. Location of Bhaktapur in relation to Kathmandu and Lalitpur (Photograph: Google Maps)



Figure 20. *Pilgrimage to Gosainkund*, Nepal, ca. 1800. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Purchased with the Stella Kramrisch Fund, 2000, 2000-7-3. Photograph: courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art²¹

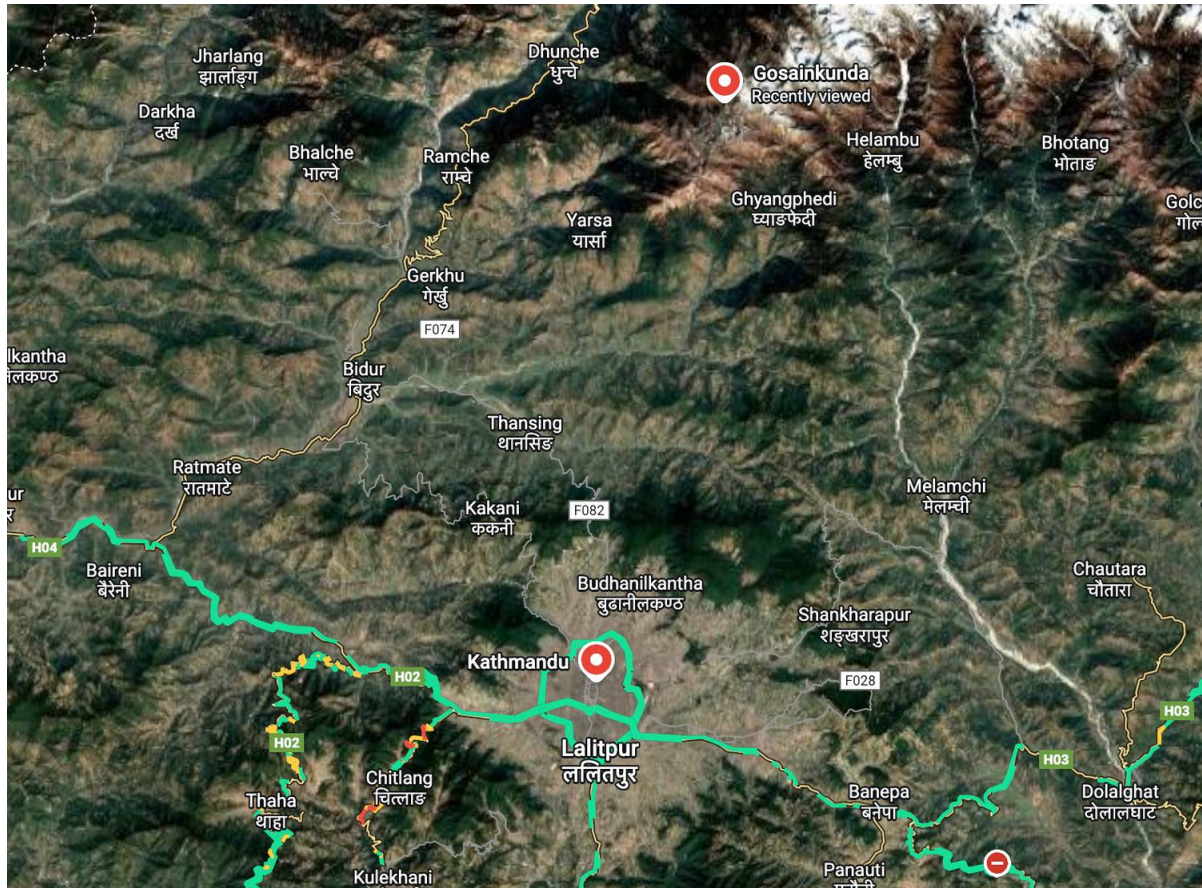


Figure 21. Location of Gosainkund Lake in relation to Kathmandu (Photograph: Google Maps)

²¹ “Artist/Maker Unknown, *Pilgrimage to Gosainkund*, c. 1800,” accessed December 5, 2025, <https://www.visitpham.org/objects/93676>.

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- “Himalayan Art: Item No. 19466.” Accessed December 3, 2025. <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/19466>.
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