

**RAIN FOR THE DROUGHT:
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE
STRUCTURE OF A BUDDHIST FESTIVAL
IN KATHMANDU**

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Introduction

Rituals as cultural systems always follow certain basic rules that provide a distinct structure and meaning. Most Nepali festivals and rituals, whether they are Hindu, Buddhist, or other follow the historically maintained calendar and a structural organizational pattern. The ritual structure may consist of aims and objectives of the rites or the occasions, the chief and subsidiary ritual functionaries, offering to the deities and the priest, that is, the ritual behavioural-interaction and spiritual codes, and the commensal and/or other forms of interaction. Matsyendranatha, the subject matter of this article, is considered a Saivite saint and first teacher of the Natha sect. But the Buddhists of Nepal have created and maintained a popular cult in his name. Locke, mentions:

“It is not ... that the Buddhists of Nepal worship Matsyendranath as a form of Avalokitesvara. Rather, Matsyendranath.” (1980:405).

In Briggs's genealogy (1973:77) Matsyendranatha figures as the spiritual son and successor of Jalandhar, who was an evil spirit. Matsyendranatha, in turn, initiated four main disciples: Gorkhanatha, Pangal, Nimnath and Parasnath. Matsyendranatha is described as a great yogi inheriting the knowledge indirectly from Siva while he was giving lesson to Parvati. Matsyendra is also known as a disciple of Adinath.

The *vamsāvalis* (chronicles) compiled in the early modern period (18th century AD) describe Matsyendranatha as a popular early medieval Buddhist deity. Later in the Malla period a highly elaborate premonsoon annual festival and several minor rituals as paraphernalia of the cult were created and fostered. The main objective of this paper would be to discuss the main structural aspect of the cult festival and discern its religious, cultural and

political features as interlinking phenomena of the main festival. The narration of the *bhasa* and other chronicles is taken here to analyse the content of the story related to this famous divine personality and his cult that has grown very popular in Nepal.

Both the Hindu and the Buddhist cosmologies perceive the positions of the stars and planets of our universe as the guiding forces behind all movements of life. The heavenly bodies become even more meaningful and forces to be reckoned with as they control natural and supernatural phenomena where man is but an infinitesimal being. Man, as a smaller part of the large system, needs to maintain a balance with the forces in order to guarantee his survival and prosperity.

Matsyendranatha has three names in one: Matsya, because he was born from fish (Briggs: 125), Indra (the Hindu rain god), and Natha (meaning Lord). According to the Saivite tradition, he was one of the 84 siddhas who roamed the subcontinent and were famous for perfection in their tantric, supernatural power and performances. Matsyendranatha originally hailed from India and had close relation with Nepal. Later however, he was given the status of Karunamaya Lokeswara in Mahayana/Vajrayana Buddhism in Nepal. This was a time when Vajrayana sect was flourishing in the Kathmandu Valley. Both the words Matsya and Indra have connotation related to water. Matsyendranatha is, therefore, related to water, too. An annual festival called *rathajātrā* (chariot festival) is held in honour of this deity in the city of Patan, and the 12 yearly festival is held both in Patan and Bungmati, the latter being the original home of Lokeswara Matsyendranatha, who is also known as Bungadeo or Bungadya (the god of Bungmati). The time of the festival is before the monsoon when rain is expected to fall and hit the parched, dry land bringing a pleasant relief to the community of weary farmers of the Kathmandu Valley and beyond.

The ratha festival is long and colourful often stretching more than a month. There is a group of *gyotishis* (astrologers) to calculate the auspicious moments to begin, continue and end the festival. First of all they study the cosmic position of stars, find the most suitable days/moments to perform various functions and activities of the festival—beginning of the ratha construction, bathing of the god at a township called Lagankhel, the first moving of the ratha from Pulchowk near the famous Asokan stupa, pulling of the ratha from Pulchowk, Gabahal, Sundhara, Lagankhel and arrival at Jawalakhel and finally the demonstration of the ancient *bhoto* kept in the custody of Lokeswara Matsyendranatha (Machhendranatha). Strict tantric rules and codes are followed in order to lift the god, bathe him, place him on throne and perform other activities of the ritual in question.

One major contribution of the Hindu and the Buddhist tantric cults in Nepal could be called the creation of a host of gods and goddesses with clear cut iconography, cult stories and powers or functions attributed to them. Prominent divinities have grown with their own cults whereas lesser deities find themselves associated as subordinate to major gods and goddesses. Farming being the most important vocation of the Nepalese people, several Hindu and Buddhist deities have emerged as guardian deities to promote the farming enterprises and safeguard the farmer's interest. Thus, when the Spring phases away and the Summer approaches, Nepalese eyes begin to scan all corners of the sky above them. It is time patches of dark cloud cluster together and move around. If no such celestial development is in sight, Nepalese mind begins to be concerned about and search for possible causes of the disappearance of the milch cloud. The first step towards warding off the impending danger of drought is to seek divine help. It is common then to adopt host of magico-religious ritual practices as means to pursue Heaven to let the strands of rain loose to drench the thirsty soil below. Such means may range from simple magic ritual, feasting, clan and communal worship and sacrifices to more elaborate and sophisticated tantric festivals such as the one dedicated to Red Matsyendranatha Ratha (car). Festival held annually in Kathmandu in the month of May and organized by the urban Newar farmers and priests and participated by devotees of all vocations and pursuits.

The History

The cult of Matsyendranatha festival is believed to have originated around the late tenth and early 11th century AD although some chronicles date it back to 6th century AD and give credit to King Narendradeva (Anandadeva?) for the beginning of the cult. (Some legends mention Gunakamadeva as the founder of the rain-god's cult). Several cultural and political factors seem to have contributed to the emergence of this tantric cult so popular among the Buddhist believers of Nepal. This was a time when the post-Licchavi Hindu state and polity were shrinking to all time low reputation and experiencing the weakening of the forces that supported them. The central political authority was loosening its grip on the land it subjugated for several centuries. Although politically in the state of confusion and instability, the Kathmandu Valley was becoming a flourishing centre of cultural activities with the emergence of new religious cults, art schools, languages, and scripts. In the lack of coercive Hindu political authority in the centre, Buddhist faiths flourished without disruption. The existing polity was bound to recognize these developments. In far western Nepal, in the Karnali basin, the *khasa* Hindu kings fostered both Hindu and Buddhist faiths in

their kingdoms and some rulers even began their writing with a prayer to Buddha to show openly their faith in Buddhism. Thus Vajrayana had already become the mainstay of the culture of the Kathmandu valley. From here the faith travelled toward west Nepal and finally into different parts of Tibet, often following the historically known "silk road," to Central Asia.

It appears from the available documents that ritualistic Buddhism was not new faith in the culture of the Valley. Mahayana Buddhism was already a pervading force in the early historic society and culture of Kathmandu in particular and Nepal in general. It became stronger still with the emergence a canonical force, monastic institutions and following. The period in question seems to be a very critical period historically and culturally. First, the fall of Shankaracharya had left an emotional, cultural void in the Valley. Second, the fall of Buddhism in India, growth of ritualistic trend in Nepali Buddhism collectively helped usher in a new phase of cultural and ritual revolution. The situation paved the way for tantric Buddhism, the Vajrayana. Several tantric cults had already flourished in east India, and Nepal had obtained their influence in literature and in the art forms especially on stone, bronze and painting.

The Vajrayana school of Buddhism, therefore, emerged as a prominent and viable force after the historic, aborted voyage of Shankaracharya to KTM Valley. Shankaracharya's mission, it appears, could not permanently erase the influence Buddhism had achieved in Nepal throughout history. In fact, the tide of the legendary monk's revitalization of Hinduism, the *adwaitavada*, subsided after his mysterious fall and disappearance in the snowy ridges of the Himalaya.

After the fall of Shankaracharya, the Nepali Buddhists reorganized the monastic orders and institutions with unprecedented zeal and commitment. We find the inscriptional and literary references to the constructions and renovations of several old and prominent *Viharas* (lit. the Buddhist monastic schools run by the sangha or brotherhood) of the Valley by the Hindu Thakuri rulers and/or men of high births and fortune. The Buddhist pundits from Indian universities, such as Nalanda, Bikramshila, Ballabhi, visited frequently Kathmandu's prominent viharas and contributed significantly to the development of esoteric schools of Buddhism. The names of Thabahi, Gunbahi, Hiranyavarna, Rudravarna Vihara, among others, figure prominently as centres of Buddhist learning during the period in question. Since the Moslem conquest of India had destroyed the long history of Buddhist faith and culture in the plains of India, it was quite natural that Nepal could become a safe haven and an attraction for the Buddhist men of letters from the south. Nepal also became an academic destination for the visiting Buddhist scholars from Tibet, China and

perhaps, as far as Mongolia. Toward the beginning of the second millenia AD Nepal was witnessing a phenomenal growth and advance of culture mainly due to the new wave of development in Buddhist art, religion, philosophy, script and nature of worship. Many thousand tantric texts were composed and copied during this time in the viharas of Nepal.

The story of Matsyendranatha and foundation of his cult in the Kathmandu Valley is a part of the growth of tantric schools of Buddhism in early medieval Nepal. It would be relevant here to briefly sketch one of the popular versions of the story of the entry of Matsyendranatha to the Kathmandu Valley.

The Drought and Matsyendra's arrival to Nepal: Once *siddha* Gorakhanatha, the resident Saiva *siddha* of the land of Gorkha was on a visit to the Kathmandu Valley. At some point the *siddha* was insulted by the people of Kathmandu. Hurt and angry, the *siddha* decided to teach the indisciplined, impolite and inhospitable people of Kathmandu and their king a lesson to be remembered. Thus he used his tantric power, *siddhi*, to bind all the 9 *nāgas* (serpents) together and himself sat on them and started meditating, causing a devastating and prolonged drought for 12 long years. It took long time for the king and his astrologers to find out the cause of the drought: the imprisonment of the nine *nāgas* of the Valley. Acharya Bandhudatta, the renowned Buddhist tantric priest hold the king that rain would fall only when Gorakhanatha would get up from the seat to greet his *guru* Matsyendranatha because then the *nāgas* could be free and move out and bring the cherished rain in the parching Valley. Matsyendra was a resident of Kamrup-Kamakhyā (today's Assam in East India). Well advised, the king therefore dispatched a Nepali team led by none others than Bandhudatta along with a Jyāpu, a farmer and the Karkotak *nāga*, the serpent king, to Assam to persuade Matsyendranatha to come to help the famine stricken people of the Valley. The chronicler gives a long, dramatic narration of the entry of Matsyendranatha's caravan to Nepal. In short, the Nepali team was successful in its mission. Matsyendra agreed to come to Nepal. Back in Kamarup, his disciples were not in favour of his migration to Nepal. They even tried to take him back. So toward the last leg of his journey he took the form of a bee. The Nepali team hid him in a jar and he arrived at a place called Kotwal (Kotpala) lake in southern corner of Kathmandu on the Bagmati river. As soon as he arrived in the Valley his disciple Gorakhanatha rose from his seat to greet him and the nine *nagas* quickly freed themselves and ran away to continue their work of making rain. People were happy after all. Buddhists of Kathmandu made two shrines to house Matsyendranatha—one in Bungmati, where the god had first landed

became his main home, and another in Patan, where the god moves when the sun is in the northern hemisphere. The cult of Matsyendranatha became popular as he was known as Lord of Compassion, Karunamaya Lokeswara. Red was his colour, hence the name Red Matsyendranatha. Several rituals and festivals were developed in his holy name during the calendar year. The famous Rathajatra or the festival of chariot is the supreme festival often lasting more than a month before the monsoon arrives. It is important that monsoon arrives on time so the god is taken out in the chariot through the streets of Patan and thousands of devotees worship him asking him for rain on time and many other blessings for their wellbeing. The festival concludes with the display of an old and bejewelled *bhoto*, or jacket and the last festival is therefore called *bhotojatra*.

Minanatha, the junior associate of Matsyendranatha, also occupies an important place in the cult. A ratha is made for him and he is also taken around the streets of Patan along with Matsyendranath. Minanatha, like Matsyendra, is regarded as the Master of Senses (Tucci, 1969:62, quoted by owners, 1989:170).

The Objectives of the Festival

Broadly, the Newar rituals are classified into three basic types or groups:

- (a) The secret or the closed type performed and officiated by the Newar priests who have duly gone through the highly specialized ritual, called *dikshya* or initiation. The main objective of such rite is to enhance the power of the deity, ask for special favour, assert transcendental power and authority of the deity that manifest partly through and mediated by the priest/expert himself.
- (b) The open type with mundane character, officiated by the *diskshit* or initiated priest yet participated by the family, the community of relatives and people at large. The goal is more pronounced; and it seeks to maintain the order against impending chaos, immediate concerns and problems.
- (c) The third type can be defined as family or community rituals organized for family's purity, participating member's growth or initiation, other forms of purification and promotion, and finally, communal solidarity and integrity.

The ratha festival of Matsyendranatha combines the characteristics of all the three types in one.

Each festival has some objectives that are expected to be fulfilled while organizing the festival. The functionaries and organizers see to it that the festival is performed accurately according to the standard rules set by the

tradition. Considering the above paradigm some popular objectives of the Matsyendranath festival could be the following:

- (a) to bring rain for the plantation of rice
- (b) to renew and reaffirm the mediating role of the king as the witness to the festival
- (c) to renew the temple hierarchy led by the sangha priest
- (d) to ensure emotional security among the believers
- (e) to link two Newar settlements Patan and Bungmati under the umbrella of the cult
- (f) to mend the relationship between Saiva and Buddhist pantheons over common crises.

As mentioned, the main objective of the Matsyendranatha festival is to ensure the timely monsoon rain for rice cultivation. Rice being the staple crop in the Valley a delay in rain would mean a famine.

The Ritual Structure of the Festival

Festivals and rituals in Nepal have a special structure that maintains significance in the culture they represent. Each festival has a distinct personality of its own. It has a philosophy with defined function and special objectives behind the celebration. In this particular festival one can see a vertical arrangement of persons and groups with horizontal functions. All those involved in the festival form the ritual structure of the ratha festival.

When the cult was first introduced in the Valley, the clergy and the king played an important role to make it popular. Hence the original structure remained like this:

Paradigm one

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 1. The Spiritual World | the God (Matsyendranatha) |
| 2. The Ritual World | (a) the King as the Chief Client, and Sacrificer |
| | (b) the Priest as the Mediator |
| 3. The Mundane World | Farmers as participants |

As the cult grew in its intensity, its ritual, festive aspect grew to be more elaborate also. As a result the structure took a complex shape with different sets of performers. Posited in vertical order the traditional structure of the Matsyendra *ratha* festival could look like the following:

Paradigm two

1. The Spiritual World (a) Matsyendra, the cult figure
 (b) Kumari, the female companion of Matsyendra
2. The Ritual World (a) The King, the sovereign protector, witness, client
 (b) The Sangha and Priest, the main ritual functionaries
3. The Political World (a) the King's court, witness
 (b) the Gorkha army unit, band player, honour and protection to deity
4. The Mundane World (a) the helpers fixing and pulling ratha
 (b) the caretakers managing the jatra
 (c) the farmers, lay devotees, participants
5. The Supernatural World (a) demons who disturb the god's trail.
 (b) the nagas, or serpents

Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha or the Buddhist *triratna* (three jewels) are well represented in this festival. The community of priests along with the followers makes the *Sangha*, the Buddhist Brotherhood that executes all the ritual functions related to the festivals. Representing the mundane/political world there is the *guthi* to oversee the entire festival from the beginning to the completion. There is also a separate, government *guthi* office to take care of the vast area of the god's land and organise cult festivals.

The jatra is controlled, regulated and organized by the group of upper caste Newar priests although like in many Newar festivals and rituals, other caste Newars also play traditionally ascribed role in the festival. It functions to strengthen their clan and caste solidarity. The king plays an important role as the human guardian of the people. Therefore he figures in the structure of the festival as the political counterpart of the god. Others figuring in the structure play equally an important ritual role in the whole structure. Because the god was brought to make rain and farmers tilled the land of the king and the priests, it was imperative and quite natural that they took the opportunity to show their commitment to the festival. The chronicler indeed mentions that Acharya Bandhudatta had actually taken a Jyapu from the city of Patan along with him to Kamrupa. The inclusion of a farmer in the trip is symbolically significant because one major function of the deity was to assume the status of Lokeswara Karunamaya and to bring rain and please the king, the farmers and save the life of the people of the Valley.

It appears that the original founders, namely, the Malla king, the cult priests of the Vajrayana sect of Buddhism, and other functionaries such as the farmers made the festival all-pervading and colourful. The community of farmers settled around the shrine and behind the priests's block in Bungmati. Other caste Newars of Bungmati also became part of the cult as the construction and movement of the huge ratha for the annual festival was to be done by other caste than the priests. More families then moved from Patan and settled in the town of Bungmati to form the large community of cult functionaries and farmers to till the vast area of the god's land in this part of the Valley.

The Panejus or the priests: The *Paneju* is a respectable term used to address the class of residential priests responsible for organizing and officiating the host of rites and rituals around the cult of Matsyendranatha. The Panejus constitute a team of thirty-one initiated priests commissioned by the the greater *sangha*, the Buddhist brotherhood, and approved by the government of Nepal to conduct regular worship in turn and perform the jatra festivals and other regular rituals. They identify themselves as a family of thirty-two including the Lokeswara himself. During the annual rathajatra, the old *panejus* train the duly initiated new boys who are likely to substitute them later. After initiation the male Shakya and Bajracharyas can be potential priest/panejus of the sangha and thus receive a place in the cult as priest/servants. The ones officiating in the bhotojatra are commissioned by the government.

The *paneju* status is hereditary. They come from different with various clans families and as such they intermarry among themselves. The group is divided between Patan and Bungmati as there are two main shrines for the god. Whether Buddha or Hindu, the main function of Dharma is to maintain order by doing away with the prevailing chaos, disorder, and crises of all kinds. The rituals or *jatras* are the more pronounced expression of the practical aspects of religion; the objective and is to bring the god participants together in one environment and setting.

The other actors that feature in the structure of the jatra are as follows:

The farmer who cured the eyes of naga's wife got the *bhoto* from the naga as a gift; the demon who stole the farmer's bhoto when the latter was busy in the field; the naga or the resident divine serpent king who accompanied the team to bring Matsyendranatha to the Kathmandu Valley; the king who, as the high Jajman (client to the rites) and a witness to the *bhoto* episode forms an important part of the structure. By his presence, the Hindu king is showing his concern in the cult for the rain and to see that rice farming goes all right in his kingdom.

The Main Highlights of the Festival

The festival is called the *rathajatra*, the chariot festival. The god is kept on a built-in throne in a 60-foot tall chariot, made mainly of wood. A chariot is an honour to the deity, manifestation of his status, power and part of the regalia, the royalty. Taking the chariot around the city is a gala moment, an element added to the cult to show his presence. People like to be blessed by the god touching him physically. In a stratified manner, the chariot is pulled by: men, boys, females, then common people along the streets of Patan. Hard labour is considered a service to the god. Besides, the god is bringing rain so touching the *ratha* or giving hand to pull it a bit further can therefore bring a good luck. He is All-Compassionate, Karunamaya. Being a part of the *ratha* festival is considered a work of religious merit. Then it also pays because from early period people donated lands to the god and he began to have lots of property. Donated rice fields were distributed among the servants and priests. It made a good living for so many functionaries of the cult.

The major *ratha* festival is celebrated every 12 years. It is said that in the beginning the huge *ratha* was constructed or fixed annually at Bungmati and drawn several kilometers north to Patan for a tour of the city and for the *bhotojatra*. Later on it became difficult to organize such a long and arduous trip for the god. There were also accidents along the way. So a new plan was made according to which the *rathajatra* began to be performed annually in Patan and Bungmati. For the 12 yearly festival a whole new set of *ratha* is prepared with new panels of wood, a new set of clothes and a new set of gold and silver ornaments to decorate the god and his chariot.

The *ratha* festival concludes with the *bhotojatra* or the festive display of a *bhoto* at Jawalakhel. The *bhoto* story has been a part of the main festival, so it would be relevant to mention it in brief.

The chronicles mention that the *bhoto* belonged to Karkotaka, the king of the nagas in the subterranean world of Kathmandu. Once his wife's eye sore was cured by a *Jyapu*. Pleased with his service, Karkotaka gave the farmer his valuable jacket or *bhoto*. But one day a demon stole the jacket he had taken off while working in the field. On the *rathajatra* day in Patan the farmer saw a tall strange figure adorned with his jacket. He knew the jacket was his so he jumped on him to snatch it away. But the farmer was a poor match for the giant, and a tough fight for the jacket ensued. Soon the case was taken to the king's court, whereupon the king gave a verdict that since it was difficult to determine who the real owner was the jacket would be kept in the custody of Matsyendranatha himself until the real owner came with reliable evidence to claim it. Every year the *rathajatra* in Patan concludes at Jawalakhel with the display of the *bhoto* to the people and the

king is still the main witness to the fact that the article is safe and none of the feuding parties has come to claim it. Yet it is believed that all the parties concerned—the naga, the farmer, and the demon come to witness the *jatra* even today; they witness the *bhoto* and pay homage to Matsyendra and return. Since rain is the main objective of the month-or-so long festival, the main focus is on the monsoon rain that makes all happy.

The festival tells the history of Bungmati—how the town grew with the popularity of the cult of Matsyendranatha. The land was fertile, and as priests would not till their land, they needed tillers so the Newars of the farmer caste came down from Patan to settle here.

The god seated on a golden throne is pulled on a huge, wheeled *ratha*. Along the route. He is awaited by thousands of people who seek his blessings as He travels through the streets of Patan. People assemble along the street to welcome Him there and worship him. People's participation is what makes the *jatra* so elaborate, as a large crowd comes to participate in this festival.

The Role of the King in the Festival

The king played a very important role in the *ratha* festival from the very beginning. First of all, according to the legends, it was the king who sent the Nepali delegation to Assam to bring Matsyendranatha to Kathmandu. He then became part of the ritual system. In the past, the Malla kings (prior to 1768 A.D. conquest of the Valley by Gorkha Shahas) used to exchange their sword with Matsyendranatha. The sword was sent to Bungmati and the *ratha* festival would then commence from Bungmati. The king as head of the state and descendant of Anandadeva (?) and the founder of the cult took part as the main *jajaman* (client) of the rites performed in the *rathajatra*. Later a Newar *jajman* substitute was selected and this continues till today. The rite of sword exchange does not take place but the king of Nepal takes part in the last part of the festival.

First, more than month long *rathajatra* is held concluding with the *bhotojatra* at Jawalakhel. On the *Bhotojatra* day, the king takes his seat to watch the old *bhoto* displayed to the public. Along with the arrival of the began the god Kathmandu rain and the cult of the rain god was established and the festival started. The king's role is that of the main witness of the display of *bhoto*, the jewel-studded jacket kept in the custody of Matsyendra as per the agreement between the feuding Jyapu and the demon. The last occasion is held to demonstrate that functionaries and the king guarantee the safety of it.

The king along with nation's high dignitaries attends the *bhotojatra*. The king's presence also gives a political colour to this festival. Rain for

agriculture is the main objective of the *bhotojatra* but the secular demand is met through religious festival. It also renews bonds between the members of family, relatives and kinship network. The king is there to assert Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha as they influence the life of his people.

By placing the king in the structure of the ritual the founders of the cult made the involvement of the state of permanent feature of the ritual. The king is powerful on earth but without the blessing of the god the land cannot produce and sustain him and his people. So it was necessary for the founders to recreate the structure with divinity, the king, who is part-divinity, and other functionaries at different level and phases of the ritual. The festival then stabilized and perpetuated. It therefore maintains a functional significance in the Newar society.

The king has to show his presence in the *bhoto* festival to observe that gods, demons, nagas and farmers are happy in his kingdom means that there will be timely monsoon and people's expectations are assured.

Thus the Hindu king's presence and participation in this festival clearly demonstrates the strong element of religious syncretism in the performances of several Hindu and Buddhist rites and festivals prevalent in the Valley.

The Festival Cosmology, Religious Harmony and Syncretism

A typical festival in Nepal has a cosmology of its own within the periphery of the cult it represents. In this particular festival the universe of the god is divided into two hemisphere: the north and the south. There are two shrines made for him, located in two poles—north and south—Patan and Bungmati. The god moves back and forth between the two shrines, the only god in Nepal to have two dwellings at his disposal. When the sun goes to northern hemisphere the god travels to north, when the sun goes to southern hemisphere he goes to south, Bungmati. The god's movement according to the movement of the sun is important and symbolic. The sun causes the seasons to change from one to the next and provides water, warmth, and other elements of life. Also, there will be no health problem, for the the people who worship him and his spiritual companion, the Kumari. Kumari was given to the god at the final leg of his entry to Kathmandu. Since then she has remained his spiritual companion and guide. The office of the Bungmati Kumari is maintained by the clan families of the Bajracharya priests of the town.

It is to be noted here that the god is partly Hindu as one of the 84 *siddhas* of the natha cult that became popular in the early and late medieval period but he is Lord Compassionate, the Karunamaya, too. The *jatra* revolves around his cult. This festival therefore demonstrates the religious/ritual harmony between the ruler and the people in the beginning of the millenia.

How and when the Saiva saint was given the status of Lokeswara can be an interesting topic for further research. But according to the *parampara* (tradition) of the Gorakhnath yogis what is certain is that both Matsyendra and Gorakhnathga came from the same Saivite siddha cult. Their relation was that of teacher and pupil. The Vajrayana Buddhist tradition has depicted the Saiva saint as one who hated the people of the Kathmandu Valley and used his siddhi to capture the nagas and stop rain for a prolonged period. They then invited Matsyendranatha to come to rescue the nagas and provided relief to the king and people. Looking from this perspective the teacher-pupil relation seems odd. Gorakhnath symbolises anger and Matsyendra demonstrates Karuna, Compassion. One can say that both the Hindu and the Buddhist tantric system stand a rival position. Buddhist tantric system triumphs over the Hindu. But the king comes as a mediator and occupies a position in the structure.

With the passage of time, however, Matsyendra began to be regarded as the rain god so equally important for both the Buddhists and the Hindus of the country. The two names—Machhendranathā, the siddha, and Lokeswara, Matsyendranatha—and forms of the god demonstrate that there is strong element of religious syncretism in this cult as both Hindus and Buddhists worship him now. On Shivaratri festival Hindus worship Matsyendra's *paduka* (Briggs, p. 131).

This ratha festival brings three worlds—the heaven (the god), the earth (the king and the people) and the underworld (the nagas and the demons) together. All of them have a significant role in the structure of this festival.

The *naga* cult remains important in Asia. The legendary history describes the Kathmandu Valley as the home of many nagas in the prehistoric age. Then, it was called *nagrhad*, or the serpent lake.

The entire worship of the *ratha* festival is based on the Mahayani/Vajrayani tantric system. The *ratha* is a centre of the universe, the cosmos. It is supported by tantric gods—the four Bhairavas whose eyes are painted in the huge wheels of the ratha. Similarly, the Karkotaka naga and his wife in the form of huge and long wooden beams supporting the tall *ratha*. The nagas represent rain and general welfare of the people. The close relationship between Matsyendranatha and naga king Karkotaka is old and common in India also. Briggs mention of Karkotaka naga *tirtha* (pilgrimage) in Ujjain (1973:121

The main puja ritual inside the *ratha* is done by the Vajracharya Newar priests who are initiated according to the Vajrayana *tantric* system. In the beginning of the *ratha* festival, however, it is the Nikhu caste Saivite Hindu Newar who ritually begin the festival using Hindu tantric system and then hand the rituals over to the Buddhist priests who then complete the festival.

As mentioned elsewhere, more complex tantric system flourished in the Kathmandu Valley approximately after the tenth century A.D. Tantric ritual texts influenced the festivals both at micro—the family/community level and macro the universal level's where events are dramatized and elaborate *pujas* are performed. Although Matsyendranatha has his origin in the Saiva Hindu pantheon, his ritual now rests mainly on the Newar culture and the entire priesthood comes from the Newar community only. Owens (1989:165) argues that even the Kanphatta yogis (followers of siddha Gorakhanatha) regard Matsyendranatha as a divine figure, the Lokeswara Padmapani. Owens draws this conclusion from an image of Padmapani at the entrance of the siddha Gorakhanatha shrine at Gorkha where Matsyendranatha is shown as the Hindu trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva in one) in a panel with *hamsa* (duck, the vehicle of Brahma; garuda, the vehicle of Vishnu, and nandi the vehicle of Shiva). This suggests that in the cult of Matsyendranatha both natha Saiva and Buddhist tantra are coalescing here. The participation by thousands of Buddhist and Hindu believers and other people of the valley makes the jatra colourful and lively.

The cosmology of the Matsyendranatha ratha festival is not limited to Patan and Bungmati. As Owens mentions (1989:167) Matsyendra maintains ritual relationship with the five other prominent Lokeswaras—Minanatha, (Chakwadya), Kwapadya, Chobhadya, Janmadya of Kathmandu Valley and Naladya from Nala in East Nepal. Red Matsyendra also has his form duly worshipped in the small old, predominantly Hindu Newar township of Dolakha in east Nepal.

The God, the Kumari, the king, the priest, the farmer, and the naga together represent the cosmology of the benevolent world. The demons represent the nether world of the nefarious elements but in the prevalent belief system and mythology, the good and the bad go together, and it is only to subdue the evil that the gods avail themselves to the situation. The power relation has to be in a balance, or at least not bending on the evil side.

The Social Significance of the Festival

Through various esoteric rites, rituals and festivals, the ethnically heterogenous Newar population of medieval times was organized into ritually homogenous cultural system. The process of cultural integration was realized in early medieval period in Kathmandu Valley when '*Nepal bhasa*' became the lingua franca of the valley population. People worshipped the same class of gods and goddesses and participated collectively in festivals originated in the valley. The major functions of the rituals and festivals were then to maintain solidarity among the highly

heterogenous clan/caste structure. It is the functional nature of the ritual and religious system of the Newar of Kathmandu. From the priests to the *Pode* all have part in the festivals. The festival strengthens the jati based social organization and the interjati relations. All associated with the cult are servants of the god, and all have been given a role to play in order to complete this and many other festivals and rites organized around the cult of Matsyendranath.

Feasting During the Festival: Robertson-Smith theorized that clan solidarity is maintained through ritual commensality and rituals. (quoted by Bloch, *Violence and Blessing* year, p. 4)

Ritual feasting and commensality have a social significance in Nepal. Newar culture, especially the rites and festivals involve communal eating. Most of the clan and religious rituals involve eating together. In this particular *jatra* also they picnic at Jawalakhel during the *bhotojatra*. In the 12 year festival they picnic along the way. Guests, especially family relatives are invited to join the feast. After puja eating together is important. The meal may not be different than regular dish except that there are more varieties of as guests are also joining. Commensality increases solidarity according to the Newar belief system. And now the god is out to bless the people, the *ratha* is the core of the total ceremony.

The *rathajatra* is also an occasion for thousands of people to get away from their hard labour in the farming and enjoy family get-together and entertain themselves. After the conclusion of the festival one can witness young people from the villages collecting in small groups, singing and dancing much unaware of the festival they come to attend.

The religiosity of the festival is closely connected with the secular: the need of rain for the field, the daily hardships such as diseases and other problems in the hot and dry months of the year, losses in business are all reported to the god and his blessings sought. He is Karunamaya, the one full of Compassion.

The Elements of Continuity in the Festival

Matsyendranatha festival is important because of its timing and its focus on farming system in the Valley, so we see wholehearted participation by the population of the Valley regardless of caste, ethnic background and religious following.

While the *viharas* flourished and fostered the theological aspect of religion people in general created variety of rituals in and outside the *vihara* to express and strengthen their belief in the growing number of cult rites and rituals. Since tantrism was the focus of the religion then, tantric rituals

asserting the supremacy of the Shakya Vajracharya caste priest were created and fostered—the *samyak puja*, white and red Matsyendranath a festival and host of other rites and festivals began to be observed around prominent deities. By participating in this particular festival and its rituals, the common people see their objectives being fulfilled, the Lokeswara blessing them. It is the time when people seek to obtain:

- (a) Union with the Supernatural through offering/worship, participation
- (b) Coming of monsoon rain from Matsyendranatha, who is full of Compassion, and
- (c) Welcoming of the god to his original home after nearly six months in Patan.

As in most of the Buddhist religious rituals, the community of the 31 *panejus* mediate with the god and make it possible for the people to obtain these goals. As part of the total cosmology of the rain festival, they themselves share these concerns of the common Buddhist Newars of the Valley. Besides their role as holy men in service of god, they have their secular functionaries and believers. They also maintain their farms in the field and rain is their concern as well.

The *jatra* is specially meaningful for the people of Bungmati. On the concluding day they see the god travelling back with them after six long months of voidness and desertion they have seen in the shrine, which is the centre of hope, veneration and esteem. So the enthusiasm in Bungmati is more than other places. Nearly all elderly people of Bungmati make it a point to go to the *bhotojatra* festival to participate and return home that evening with the god after the conclusion of the *bhotojatra*. The god is brought amidst colourful, royal procession led by the priests, a contingent of old royal army that fires powder guns and thousands of devotees holding long oil lamps and incenses following.

There are few places on the way between Jawalakhel where the *jatra* concludes and Bungmati, the ultimate summer destination of the god. While the procession passes through these spots the god is kept in a very low profile thereby suspending gunfire and music so that his demonic kinsfolk who are believed to be stalking thereabout do not know where he is at that particular moment and therefore cannot jump at the party of devotees to snatch him away from them. It is believed that Matsyendra's kins are always out on the look to force him back to India. For the Nepali Buddhists in particular and farmers of the Valley in general it will be too high a risk to loose him, for it would mean the possibility of inviting yet another crisis of prolonged drought and a loss beyond description.

The Buddhist devotees of the Valley go back to Bungmati on the fourth day after arrival of the god to Bungmati. They perform special puja for the god. It is called *bica puja* performed to honour the god. On this occasion the people want to know how the god is doing and be sure all is well with Him. On the *bica puja* day devotees come from Patan, Bhaktapur, Kathmandu and also from other Newar (and non-Newar) settlements. Besides major festivals there are also more than 200 annual calendrical rituals observed in the name of Matsyendranatha (Owens: 175).

Conclusion

With wider following and cultural relevance in the pre-monsoon dry months, Matsyendranatha is very popular and his power to rally the wider sections of people remains. The prolonged *rathajatra* still draws crowd from the Valley and beyond. The final ceremony or the *bhotojatra* has its own character. On this day there is collective blessing from the god. Also, there is collective participation when god, king, priests, nagas from the traditional structure and people, the functional elements of of the festival come together.

The festival itself has gone through changes over the centuries through selection pressures as Bloch mentions () new features are always added to the festivals and rituals over time.

Although Matsyendra, the main godhead came originally from the natha cult, and was a noted siddha listed as one of the 84 he was pulled to the Vajrayani Buddhist tradition in Nepal. He slowly lost his prominent Hindu identification, character and functions. The tone of the entire range of rituals and festival organized around his cult is set according to the Buddhist tenets where the priests, who prepare the setting for these rites and preside over them, try to show how powerful and Compassionate the deity is. As the chief functionaries of the Sangha of the Vajrayana school of Buddhism they also assert the need of cosmic balance between god or the supernature, the nature, the king, the human and the subhuman aspects of existence. Since all these powers can create and recreate the world, the ritual organized to replay and recreate their function must make efforts to perpetuate the structure without much extrapolation.

Acharya Bandhudatta regarded as the accredited ancestor of the Vajracharya of the Valley is almost a mythical figure not seen in archaeological documents. References to Matsyendranath as Karunamaya or Lokeshwara are not found in archaeological documents. Bandhu Acharya along with the Jyapu farmer, the king, and the Kumari then formed the original structure of the cult and the festival. Today nobody questions the origin and ancestry of this priest. It was a time when Mahayana Buddhist monks (Vajracharyas)

formed the base of the *vihara* culture and were being initiated to take over as priests of the *vihara* rituals. Buddhism was getting into ritualistic trends. On social context a new ethnicity-to use the anthropological jargon-was being formulated. Later it was known as "Newar" (lit. people of Nepal) after the name of the place Nepala or, Newala. The Vajrayana Newar monastic tradition then naturally regarded Bandhudatta, the noted tantric priest as the human founder of the Matsyendra cult.

One important feature of the Matsyendranatha festival is the inclusion of demons in the narration. Here one question may arise: Why the presence of the demons in the Matsyendranatha festival and what is their ritual role? It should be made clear that the Hindus and Buddhists have very strong sense of evil developed in their mythologies. It is common in oriental cultures as well. In this particular festival there are more than one instances of the evil's presence:

(a) The legends mention that Matsyendranatha himself came from demonic background as the youngest son of the demon (Shi?) although the demons do not surface in the scene. His relation with Jalandhar has already been discussed. They are presumed to have come to Nepal to make an attempt to take Matsyendra back to Kamrupa and therefore cause fear in the mind of the people who are organizing the festival.

(b) There is also a demon who stole the farmer's jacket from the field and appeared to watch the *ratha* festival in Patan only to be caught by the farmer who owned the jacket. Even after being exposed to people by his unusual strength over common man, he put up a fight with the ordinary farmer.

Thus the myths and legends found in the Valley of Kathmandu are full of demons and their heroic deeds. Krishna, the epic hero of Matagarata had drained the water from the lake that for long had engulfed Kathmandu in the ancient times and had fought two heroic demons, finally killing them. Their flesh, bones and blood constituted what is today Kathmandu's fertile soil.

There is lack of sources to trace the evolution of this festival through early to the late medieval periods. The narration in the *vamsavalis* is the only major source of the festival and the cult. One can draw the conclusion that the focus of the Buddhist elite then was to renew the existing ritual hierarchy led by the priest. Secondly, it was to show and prove the fact that *tantric* practice could cause miracles if practiced by an expert. Thirdly, the Vajracharya priests were expert on *tantra* practices in early medieval Nepal. Buddhist priests, whether in the monastery or outside it, were and still are the only experts to organize them and bring desirable results.

Lastly, this article attempts to show how a complex ritual structure and function can be maintained in the setting of a particular *jatra* or festival. Finally, this particular festival shows tantric philosophical and ritual link

with east India. First of all, two *siddhas* seem to bring Nepal and India together. Nepal had welcomed noted Buddhist scholars from that part of India during the early medieval period. The east Indian influence on religion, art and other forms of life is already discussed above the introduction of the cult of the rain god Matsyendranatha are of the exantiles. It could be best described as a form of continuity of the earlier relationship between the two civilizations.

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