

La Fête Spectacle. Théâtre et rite au Népal

Gérard Toffin

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Reviewed by Arik Moran

Gérard Toffin's study of the Indra Jatra (hereafter IJ), the central festival of the Kathmandu calendar, is a cultural exploration of the 'ethos' of the greater part of the Newar population residing in the Nepali capital (p.xxx). The scope of his analysis is ambitious, encompassing ethnography (including the author's three decades of intermittent observations of the festival), history, Sanskrit traditions and theories from the domains of theatre and anthropology. The sources and methodologies of these domains are examined through the complementary axes of 'spectacle' (chapters 2-5) and 'theatre' (chapters 6-7), which are closely connected through their underlying ritual functions (chapter 8, conclusion) and ultimately exemplify the cultural syncretism of Kathmandu society as manifested in the IJ.

The IJ's central components are outlined in the introduction. These include rituals connected with Indra, processions (*jatras*) of the goddess Kumari, and the widespread worship of Bhairava. Despite dating from different periods and consisting of starkly divergent practices, the ensemble of these components forms a cohesive cultural product that is at once unified and diverse. It is by tracing the links between these elements and resolving their internal contradictions that the meanings behind the IJ are unravelled. To facilitate this enquiry, Toffin points to three fundamental ambiguities of the IJ (p.17): (1) although it is a celebration of royal/state power, the presiding deity of the festival is popularly represented as a weak prisoner; (2) as a Hindu state-level festivity, how is it that one of the most important ritual activities of the IJ is entrusted to a Buddhist girl (the anthropomorphised goddess Kumari) of the Shakya caste of goldsmiths, which is perceived as particularly lowly by Brahmins, whose religious specialists play a key part in overseeing the celebrations? (3) finally, despite being a festival that commemorates the Newars' defeat at the hands of foreign invaders, the primary participants in the IJ

remain the autochthonous residents of the Kathmandu valley. In order to resolve these paradoxes it is, according to Toffin, necessary to account for the fact that the IJ constitutes festival, theatre and ritual all at the same time. Accordingly, the first chapter delves into the connection between these three elements, offering a concise review of scholarly literature on theatrical aspects of ritual (pp.27-30), a discussion on the participatory nature of festivals (pp.33-34) and an exploration of the rituality of theatre (pp.34-37). The coexistence of theatre and ritual, which at times borders on the inextricable (as in plays that entertain spectators while acting as rituals that ward off evil spirits), is thus harnessed to justify the study's mode of enquiry.

The next four chapters address the factual unfolding of the IJ with an emphasis on its ritual and festive/spectacular aspects. The first of these traces the changing character of Indra in Sanskrit culture, from Vedic king of the gods to secondary deity in Puranic literature, and concludes with a detailed description of the Vedic predecessor of the IJ, the *Indra Mahotsava*. The third chapter examines the rituals pertaining to Indra during the eight days of the festival (usefully summarised in a table, p.51) in Kathmandu today (pp.50-54). The paradox of Indra's ambiguous status is also resolved on this occasion: as king of the gods, the deity affirms royal/state power through elaborate rituals that culminate in the erection of a pine mast (*yashim* or *lingam*) in front of the palace grounds, yet, as a deity charged with fertility, the god is popularly represented as a prisoner (as punishment for his stealing of flowers/cucumbers, according to a local myth) who is readily accessible (via the intermediation of Buddhist priests) to the Jyāpu peasants who form the bulk of IJ participants (pp.54-61).

The next chapter arrives at the 'the very core of the *fête-spectacle*' (p.67), namely, the processions of the goddess Kumari and the widespread worship of Bhairava. The goddess's processions through and ritual activities in different parts of the city, which appropriately conclude with the sanction of the state in the royal compound, are thus shown to unite the geographic, social and political components of Kathmandu (pp.67-72), affording an explanation for Kumari's contradictory position as both venerated goddess and seemingly low-caste Buddhist girl. The links between the horrific deity Bhairava and the goddess are noted in the dancers bearing masks of the former who accompany the processions and who, until 1849, used to engage in ritual battles between troupes from the lower and upper

parts of the city (p.79). The Shaivite deity is further present in various neighbourhoods during the IJ, where representations of its head are placed on raised platforms by the Jyāpu peasantry, whose worship includes the drinking of rice beer from a straw protruding from the god's mouth, the revelry that ensues corresponding with classical characterisations of the festival as a space that challenges, or even inverts, normative behaviours. The blurring of boundaries between spectators, participants and deities is facilitated by the contrast between the public display of Indra(s), Kumari and Bhairava(s) in the course of the IJ and their concealment during the remainder of the year (pp.80-83). The fifth chapter outlines the numerous funerary processions that take place during the festival. In highlighting the protective functions of ritual and its relation to the city's communal life (through the delineation of geo-political boundaries between neighbourhoods and of the city as a whole), it brings into consideration the role of Bhairava as a deity associated with death and that of the king, as protector and chief sacrificer/sacrifice of state.

Chapters six and seven engage the second axis of research, which links the IJ with theatre. Delving into the theory of classical Indian theatre (*Natyashastra*), Toffin points to an intrinsic connection between Indra as the founder of theatre in classical Sanskrit culture and as presiding deity of the festival, since both phenomena are aimed at 'strengthening the kingdom and its inhabitants, upholding the socio-cosmic order (*dharma*) against obstructive forces and removing sickness', rendering the IJ 'a commemoration of primitive Indian theatre' (pp.97-99). The centrality of dance to Indian theatre and its recurrence in the IJ are then elaborated upon, along with a useful survey of the multiple theatrical performances enacted during the festival (pp.103-113). The seventh chapter enters into the aesthetics of Newar visual arts connected with the festival (masks, in particular) and a discussion of the tensions between its Brahmanic and Tantric elements.

The final chapters link the preceding expositions with the disciplines of history and anthropology. Endorsing Hocart's reading of ritual as a tool for maintaining social cohesion, the eighth chapter makes an important connection between the ritual aspects of the festival and its underlying purpose of upholding the cosmic order through sacrifice, a goal that has similarly been shown to constitute the purpose of Indian/Newar theatre (pp.128-129). This is followed by an instructive survey of the primary groups

participating in the IJ, their associations (*guthis*), their functions and the importance of locality (pp.133-134). The ninth chapter resolves the third paradox noted in the introduction, according to which the autochthonous population's participation in the IJ effectively commemorates its submission to Parbatiya invaders during the eighteenth century (a defeat popularly conceded in the expression '*yamyāh, yamdyā*', 'the Festival of Kathmandu, Kathmandu lost'; p.142). This apparent contradiction is explained as a form of resistance: because the internalisation of the historical defeat is secondary to the indigenous elements of the festival (i.e., the popular vs. state-level worship of Indra, Bhairava, Kumari), it allows for a cultural autonomy that upholds Newar identity in the face of the erstwhile conquerors (p.143). The final chapter provides tentative chronologies for the beginnings of the IJ's components: the festival is dated to the 11-12th centuries, the popular representation of Indra as prisoner to (at least) the 17th century, and Kumari's chariot processions to the 18th century Mallas, although the cult may predate this by five centuries (pp.147-152). Changes in the modern era, including an augmentation of the IJ's spectacular character under the Rana Regime (1846-1951) and the weakening of inter-caste ties as a result of democratisation in post-kingdom Nepal are noted in the closing section (pp.153-155).

Resuming the central argument of his thesis, Toffin concludes with an emphasis on the socio-historical contexts that contributed to the amalgamation of ritual, festival and theatre in the IJ. The problems inherent in ritual are convincingly presented by rallying Hocart's distinction between 'specialized' and 'general' rituals, which nurture a persistent duality in large-scale rituals (pp.160-162). The participation of spectators as a prerequisite for the festival's success is consequently affirmed by noting the IJ's essential constitution of a grand-scale 'metamorphosed ritual' that is supplemented by theatrics (e.g., the focal point of festivities around the raising of the pine mast at the palace grounds). The importance of accounting for social and historical cleavages is underlined in the final section, which calls for more nuanced interpretations of the 'socio-cultural ethos' and 'categories of thought' (p.167) to be discovered from the careful study of the IJ's details.

As a study in culture, the *Fête Spectacle* admirably achieves its goals. It uses empirical data and theoretical elaborations efficiently to advance an interpretation of the ethos of a society through the interdependent

elements of festival, theatre and ritual. This approach inevitably leads to selective readings that are not always congruent with the author's ethnographic observations. This is clearly seen in the grouping together of the rituals connected with Indra, Kumari and Bhairava as the core activities of the IJ, which counters their participants' claim that these are distinctly separate (if overlapping) events (p.71). The drawing of parallels between orthodox and heterodox elements in Nepali (Brahmanical/Tantric) and Ancient Greek (Apollonian/Diyonisian) theatres (pp.121-123) may also seem tenuous, but would no doubt appeal to the broader readership at which the study is aimed. These minor points need not detract from the important contributions made in the linking of different theoretical strands. The tying (and vindication) of Hocart's emphasis on ritual as the primary tool for promoting social cohesion with Roger Caillois's stress on the rituals underlying festivals (pp.128-129), for one, is a particularly welcome observation that illustrates the usefulness of this multi-disciplinary approach. In conclusion, Toffin's study of the eight days in which Kathmandu transforms itself to bring state, public, gods and humans into intimate contact with one another through the theatrical, ritualised chaos of the IJ, offers important insights that remind readers of the broader questions underlying festival celebrations, both in and beyond the Himalaya.