Syed Jamil Ahmed

Decoding Myths in the Nepalese Festival of Indra Jātrā

As a rule, news from Nepal gets little or no prominence in the western media – but the regicide of 2001, in which Prince Dipendra allegedly mowed down his parents and then shot himself, was a notable exception. Two years earlier, Syed Jamil Ahmed witnessed Prince Dipendra's and his father King Birendra's participation in the festival of Indra Jātrā, held annually in the nation's capital city, Kathmandu. After an analysis of the myths underlying the festival, and of their modification over centuries to serve changing dynastic priorities, the author provides an account of the festival as a 'first-person felt experience', and then investigates how its contemporary actuality reflects and attempts to perpetuate an intricate network of social and political meanings. Syed Jamil Ahmed is a director and designer based in Bangladesh, where he is Associate Professor at the Department of Theatre and Music in the University of Dhaka. He trained in theatre at the School of Drama in New Delhi, and in 2001–2 was a visiting faculty member at King Alfred's College, Winchester. His full-length publications – *Acinpakhi Infinity: Indigenous Theatre in Bangladesh* (Dhaka University Press, 2000) and *In Praise of Niranjan: Islam, Theatre, and Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Pathak Samabesh, 2001) – catalogue the wide variety of indigenous theatre forms in Bangladesh. He has proceeded to examine the variety of Islamic theatre forms, their inherent features, and their relationship to the corrupting influence of western forms.

THE FESTIVAL of Indra Jātrā, renowned for its spectacle and its vivacity, is an annual 'cultural performance' of thanksgiving held in honour of Indra, the king of gods. The duration of the festival is eight days and the setting is Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. However, the festival is a product not of the whole of Nepal but of the oval-shaped Kathmandu Valley, the area surrounding Kathmandu, bordered by green mountains and covering an area of 218 square miles. In ancient and medieval times, till Prithvi Narayan Shah (the ruler of Gorkha, a small principality west of Kathmandu) conquered the valley in 1768–9, it was divided into three kingdoms: Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. All the ruling dynasties of the valley since the beginning of recorded history, including the Mallas of the medieval period, have been Hindus.

What follows examines the Indra Jātrā to show how the festival re-mobilizes 'signs' drawn from various ethnic and religious sources of the Kathmandu Valley for constructing politically and socially charged networks of meaning which attempt – not always successfully – to reinforce the hegemony of the Hindu state.

The First-Order Semiological System

Three separate strands have merged in the current form of the festival of Indra. These are the Indra Jātrā, Bhairava Jātrā, and Kumārī Jātrā. Indra Jātrā celebrates the imprisonment of Indra, the king of gods, by the people of Kathmandu. It is said that in the days gone by, the mother of Indra desired *pārijāta* flowers, but they were not available in the garden of heaven. The god saw them in Kathmandu Valley and descended there to collect the flowers for his mother. The people of the valley, who took him to be a thief, apprehended him. When his mother came to look for her lost son, she found him bound and caged at Maru Tole in Kathmandu. She revealed his identity and the king offered a bargain: that the god would be released on condition that he bestowed bountiful summer rains and winter fogs for

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plentiful harvests in the valley. Indra readily agreed, and ever since the people have celebrated the event with a festival in his honour.

There is also a Buddhist version of the legend, in which the second half is different. In this variant, Indra's mother Vasundharā came looking for her son in the guise of a *ḍākinī* (Newari, *dāgī).* In addition to bountiful rain, she also promised to take the people to heaven in order to meet their relatives who had died. The people followed her after Indra's release, and on the way they were told to bathe in a pond known as Indra Daha (Indra Lake) for purification. While bathing, a thick fog enveloped the lake and Vasundharā escaped with her son.[1]

The second strand of the festival is related to a terrible deity named Ākāśa Bhairava. According to popular legend, the god Ākāśa Bhairava wanted to help the Kauravas in the Battle of Kurukṣetra. Learning of his intention and apprehensive that his help would surely cause ruin for Pandavas, Kṛṣṇa went to Ākāśa Bhairava, whom he propitiated. For this Ākāśa Bhairava was immensely pleased with Kṛṣṇa and wanted to bestow a boon on him. While feigning reluctance, Kṛṣṇa finally agreed, and after repeated assurances that his wish would be granted, asked for the head of Ākāśa Bhairava, who had no alternative but to comply. The people of the Valley have ever since commemorated this act of wish-fulfilment by the terrible god who knew no bounds in granting a boon by a festival in his honour, implying that anyone who can appease him will enjoy unlimited bounty. Another version replaces Ākāśa Bhairava with Yalambara, the King of the Kirātas, a non-Aryan tribe.

The third strand is the chariot procession of Kumārī, which, again according to popular legend, was incorporated into Indra Jātrā by King Jaya Prakāśa Malla of Kathmandu, a few years before the Gorkha invasion of Prithvi Narayan Shah. It is recounted in the legend that the Malla king, an ardent devotee of the goddess Tāleju, used to play dice with her. One night, driven by erotic desire, the king placed his hand on her thigh. The act enraged the goddess so much that she disappeared immediately. The repentant king made many fruitless attempts to placate her, and the goddess finally appeared to him in a dream, in which she promised her presence in the form of a premenstrual girl of the Newar Buddhist caste of the Śākyas. The king immediately made a search for his patron deity, installed her with due honour as Kumārī (the Living Goddess), and instituted a festival in her honour during the Indra Jātrā.

According to another legend, the Kumārī Jātrā was instituted over two centuries ago when a young Śākya girl appeared to be possessed and declared herself to be a goddess. She was promptly banished by the Malla king for the blasphemy. However, his queen was immediately seized by a fit and the king realized his mistake. He invited the girl back and instituted a yearly festival in her honour.

Finally, there is a legend touching tangentially on the festival, not related to Indra Jātrā but to Prithvi Narayan Shah. It is said that as a boy in his native Gorkha he had visited the temple of Gorakhnāth, a god acculturated into the Hindu pantheon from a cult of yogic practitioners. At the temple, an old man asked for some yoghurt. When he procured some from neighbouring houses, the old man swallowed it all and then spat a little on the boy's outstretched palm. When asked to eat it, the boy threw it away in disgust. The old man said, 'Had you eaten it, all that you speak of would have come true, but since you threw it away and it fell on your feet, all that you tread on will be yours.' So saying, the old man vanished. It is said that he was none other than Gorakhnāth himself.

With their multi-layered polyphony of encoded systems, these four strands constitute the Barthesian 'first-order semiological system' on which the Hindu state of Nepal has built the 'myth' of Indra Jātrā.

Spatio-Temporal Patterns and Rhythms

The 'locus' of Indra Jātrā is Hanuman Dhoka. More precisely, the 'locus' of the state-sponsored elements of the festival is the Durbar Square in front of the palace of Hanuman Dhoka (the historic seat of Nepalese royalty where the kings are crowned and coronation

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solemnized), but the vivacity of the occasion (a complex and non-homogeneous interaction of the 'signs' drawn from various ethnic and religious sources) causes its locus to shift away from Hanuman Dhoka into its immediate neighbourhood – Indra Chowk, Maru Tole, Kilagal, and Nardevi, the streets of the city, dilapidated Buddhist establishments (*bahi*s), and precincts of Hindu temples. All these, together, form 'interpenetrating spaces – a reflection of the heterogeneity of the events, of the people who attend, . . . and the absence of any sharp distinction between the performers and the spectators'.[2]

For the eight days of the festival, Hanuman Dhoka, its immediate neighbourhood, and the streets leading from it is transformed into a space which is indeed 'kaleidoscopic, rarely well defined – a reflection of the surging, shifting, inchoate character of life'.[3] However, the 'inchoate character' is curiously at odds with the normative character of urban life, because although the festival extends from the 12th of the bright half of Bhādra (August–September) to the 4th of the dark half of Āśvin (September–October), not all the hours of these eight days are set aside for the celebration. Except for the morning of day one, all the rest of the festival days begin in the afternoon and end by late evening.

The temporal rhythm of the festival is thus more like a tide – the 'high' usually coming in the evenings, or in afternoons which spread into evenings. During the mornings, traces of the sediments deposited by the festival on the previous evening can still be felt and the people await another tidal surge in the evening.

The spatio-temporal pattern and rhythm of the festival's high tide is well reflected in the 'fluidity of roles' of the participants in the festival. However, the extent of this 'fluidity' varies. At one end of the spectrum are the state-sponsored rituals signifying the political hegemony of the ruling elite, where the officiants 'transform rather than perform'.[4] These officiants, be they Brahman priests or the king himself, perform as 'architect-builders': their gestures and incantations 'create' a reality charged with 'divine potency'.

Examples of such state-sponsored rituals can be seen in the erection of Indradhaja, the inauguration procession of Kumārī Jātrā, and the *tikā* ceremony (placing rice immersed in curd and red pigment on the forehead, as a token of blessing) of the king by Kumārī the Living Goddess. In these rituals, the 'common people' are participants who maintain (or are required to maintain) a physical distance, not as disinterested or casual onlookers but as members of a congregation who participate vicariously, and wish the rituals to be successful. However, there are others who do not join all the rituals, and thus these rituals also highlight grey areas, problematic interstices. But more about that later: for now it will suffice to note that the ritual components of Indra Jātrā are given a halo of seriousness dictated by compulsion for precision. Their officiants regard them, not without understandable political interest, as an efficacious means of upholding the existing social order.

At the other end of the spectrum are gathered various popular performances of a less formal character. These lack both the seriousness of the rituals and the compulsion for precision. The spectators laugh, jostle, move in and out, and often transgress the amorphous barriers between their space and that of the performers. Examples of such popular performances are the dances of Lākhe and Pulukeśī, in which everyone seems to be involved – plunged in the very vortex of a swirling and confusing rhythm of life, brimming over in the celebration of life itself. However, as we shall see, the 'celebration' is conflict-ridden as well. It is a fluid field of assertions and denials, a threshold of challenges and submissions – and not without a threat of imminent violence.

Between the ends of the spectrum – the ritual 'high' and the popular 'low' – lie heterogeneous events, whose position on the spectrum reflects degrees of tension the state ideology faces.

The Performance: the First Day

The cultural performance of the Indra Jātrā as I observed it in 1999 was inaugurated on

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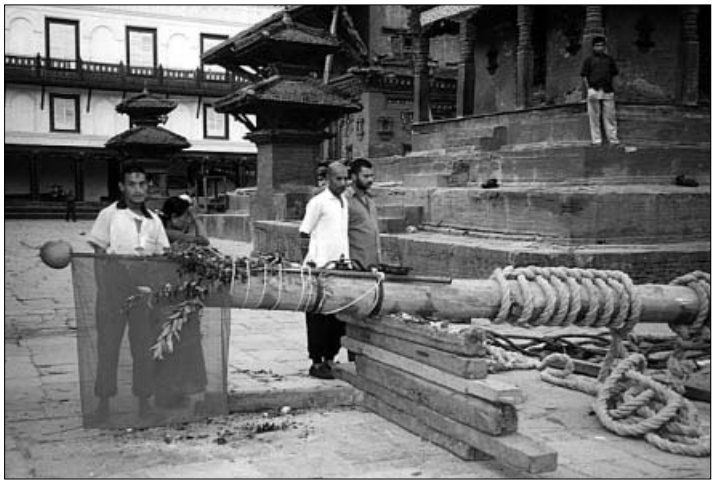
22 September. I arrived at Hanuman Dhoka (in front of Kāl Bhairava statue) at 6.30 in the morning. Some of the roads leading to Hanuman Dhoka were already busy with vegetable sellers sitting at the roadside and children rushing off to school. However, Hanuman Dhoka was desolate.

The Indradhaja (or Liṅga), a timber pole some 50-feet long, was lying on the ground, with all the ritual accessories (including the flag of Indra) already attached and four long, heavy ropes tied firmly to it. It had been virtually dragged here from a pine forest 16 kilometres distant, where it was axed after an elaborate ritual involving the royal astrologer and the royal priest. A heap of burnt-out wood and a thin smoke indicated that a ritual involving sacrificial fire (*hom*) had already been performed. People passed, offering their respect to the pole but no one stopped. Numerous pigeons fed on cereals scattered by passers-by.



By 7.00 a.m., when a thin crowd of curious foreigners and local residents had gathered on the steps of nearby temples, the royal horse and the sword made their arrival as representatives of royalty, escorted by two attendants. Then arrived the chief priest, with various state functionaries, police officers, soldiers of the army (in white shorts and vests), and the ceremonial guards of the royal priest (carrying archaic rifles). The soldiers now trooped out, ranged in four files opposite to the palace, radiating away from the pole to stand holding the ropes.

By then, the space had acquired all the characteristics of a state-sponsored ritual. As the state functionaries performed ritualized worship of a miniature Indra at the foot of the pole, I heard a jingling sound of ankle-bells, turned, and there were the Devī Dance (Devī Pyākhā) performers, standing in a circle

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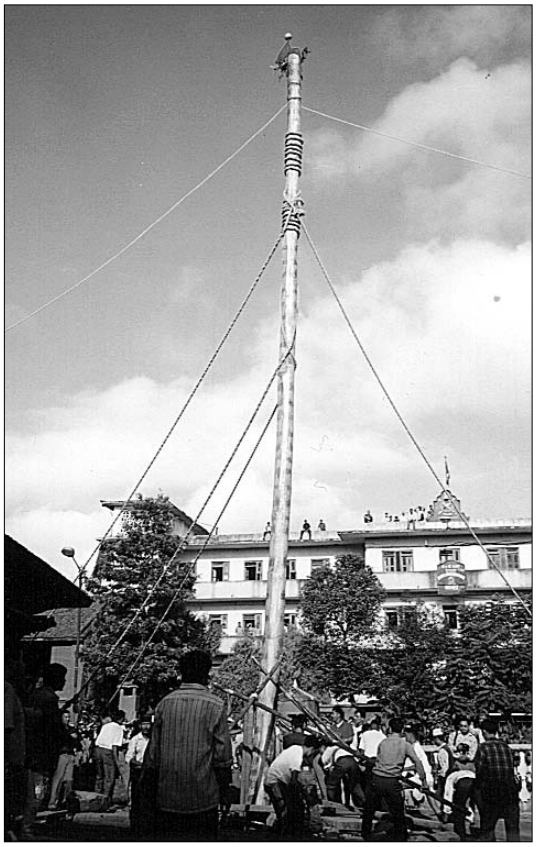
a few feet away from me. Round and round they went in circles, enacting episodes based on the 'Devī Māhātmya', part of the *Mārkeṇḍaya Purāṇa* (Chapters 81 to 93). Then, at 7.45, the guards of the royal priest fired a few shots in the air as hundreds of pigeons scattered to safety. Spectators, by then a few hundred, cheered as the pole began to rise. The dancing had stopped with the gunshots. The dancers stood in single file, facing the pole as the three deities of the Devī Dance (Bhairava, Kumārī, and Caṇḍī) stood, holding their right arms at waist level and shaking their upheld swords. When the pole was



finally in position, they disappeared as quietly as they had come.

Very soon the crowd thinned. I decided it was time for my breakfast. Later in the day, I went to Hanuman Dhoka to have another look at Indradhaja. There it stood majestically, surrounded by eight shorter poles, which represented Tantric deities. At the foot of the *dhaja* lay a small cage, inside which had been placed a small copper-cast image of Indra, embellished in gold. Thus lay the thief-god caged on the first day of the festival,

waiting for his release on the eighth day. A little distance away, at the corner of the palace wall in Hanuman Dhoka, devotees were still getting ready the giant mask of Ākāśa Bhairava. I was told that in the evening beer will flow out from his mouth . As I passed Indra Chowk, Maru Tole, Kilagal, and Nardevi, I saw at each of these places an image of Indra with outstretched arms (signifying that he has not stolen anything), perched high on a wooden structure (Indra Khāt) with long posts. These were facing west, the direction of Indra Daha.

In the afternoon, I reached Hanuman Dhoka and found myself a good seat on the steps beside the gate of the palace. There was

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only a thin crowd, and soon it started to drizzle. Indra is the god of rain, so rain is his blessing, but the children were impatient to see the dancers. As the rains got harder, everyone abandoned the steps. Early in the evening came a group of Mahākālī dancers from Bhaktapur. When the rain subsided, they gave an excerpt from their dance, which is also based on the 'Devī Māhātmya', part of the *Mārkenḍaya Purāṇa.* ▲

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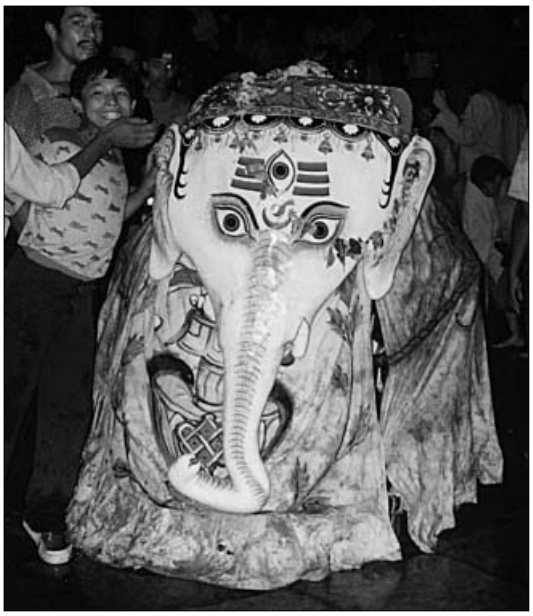
On enquiry, I learnt that they would perform their full dance only on payment of at least a hundred dollars. The money is usually collected by a group of devotees, who then commission the group to perform in their locality. However, today they had not been commissioned, but were performing as a token of their respect to the King. The custom of performing the dances of Mahākālī, Devī, Pulukeśī, and Lākhe, even the giant mask of Ākāśa Bhairava which issues free drink during the festival of Indra, goes back to the reign of King Pratap Singh Shah, who reigned from 1775 to 1777.[5]

By then, the swirling rhythm of a festival had intensified considerably. Suddenly a scream and the sound of music came from the far end of the courtyard, the people began to disperse, and the performance space of the Mahākālī Dance melted. I looked up, and there, charging towards me, was Pulukeśī, Indra's white elephant. Hurriedly I got out of its path, and the elephant veered away in another direction. One man to each side, holding a burning torch, was guiding it, with two musicians following, one playing a drum and the other a gong.

After a while I saw the elephant resting, and plucked up courage to venture nearer. I was told that two cowherds from Kilagal were inside the elephant, constructed from a cane basket covered with a decorated piece of white cloth and a mask attached to the front. It was looking for its master Indra, who lay captive with the people of Kathmandu. (However, the Buddhists read a different sign in the elephant: for them, as in many countries in South-East Asia, a white elephant signifies a previous incarnation of the Buddha.) After a while, when Pulukeśī had regained its breath, it resumed the search for its master by charging at maddened speed while the crowd – including the dancers – cheered. It departed as abruptly as it came.



A little later, the crowd had gathered again to watch the Monkey Dance (Ghintāg-kiśitoākā), performed by a group of twenty-four boys from Bhaktapur. Their dance is said to be based on an episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa* which describes the monkey army's dance of joy when Rāmacandra was reunited with Sītā at the end of the war with Rāvaṇa. They handled their sticks with ease and

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grace and played so well that the crowd cheered and clapped.

Suddenly I heard the sound of an approaching drum, and a group with the Living Gaṇeśa (a young boy consecrated as the deity) arrived, moving at quite a fast pace with the god perched on a man's shoulder. A sizeable crowd followed the god, and many watching the Monkey Dance now abandoned Rāmacandra's army. The locus of the festival had shifted. I thought it best to let myself be carried away by the throbbing vivacity of Gaṇeśa's devotees. As he was carried into Kumārī House I found myself stranded outside with the large crowd which had gathered near the house to catch a glimpse of the Living Goddess, who was about to take a tour on her palanquin.

The Pageant of Daśavatāra

Soon the Living Bhairava (another young boy ▶ consecrated as the deity) arrived, perched on a woman's shoulder. Excitement was high by now. It was also nearly time for the pageant of Daśavatāra, where tableaux of the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu would be presented on top of the steps of the Viṣṇu Temple opposite the temple of Kumārī. I decided to wait there and enjoy the excitement in the drizzle.

The pageant then began, with a tableau of ▼ Gaṇeśa followed by that of Sāradā (a deity mounted on a peacock), which I took to be introductory scenes. Tableaux of Matsya (the Fish), Kaccha (Kūrma, the Tortoise), Varāha (the Boar), and Narasiṅha (the Man-Lion) followed. When Vāmana the Dwarf incarnation came on, people rushed to the side entrance of Kumārī House, to watch the emergence in procession of Gaṇeśa, Bhairava, and Kumārī. She was seated on her majestic palanquin, with the two attendant gods walking in front of her, carrying with them a vortex of charged devotion.

I made a hasty return to the pageant to catch a glimpse of Paraśurāma. Then came Rāma, and the performance ended with Balarāma-Kṛṣṇa, having presented tableaux of all the incarnations of Viṣṇu save Śākyamuni Buddha and Kalkī (who I thought were included among the ten accepted incar-

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nations of the god). Surprised, I went up the steps and asked the director why he had shown only eight tableaux. He grew quite angry at my ignorance and counted ten for my enlightenment, including Gaṇeśa and Sāradā. Why no Buddha and Kalkī, I tried to insist. The director did not even care to explain. He has served the most important patron in his country – the King himself. Why should he care?

In a way I was glad that the Buddha was not shown as Viṣṇu's incarnation. But from another point of view, this also reflects how unimportant the Buddhists now are in Nepal: they do not even need to be acculturated – they are completely 'harmless'. On the day after tomorrow the king is going to see this show, which clearly implies that he approves the ideology it projects.

As I walked past Hanuman Dhoka, the place seemed to have lost much of its celebratory rhythm. I saw beer flowing from a pipe extended from the mouth of a huge mask of Ākāśa Bhairava, which had been installed at a corner of the palace wall. With carnivalesque abandon, young people were drinking and jostling for the drink which issued from the mouth of the god. Anyone able to appease him can earn limitless boon from the god: but here, was the god or the king granting limitless boon/booze to all those who wished to drink? Was the king appeasing the people and hence the god or was the god appeasing the people and hence the king – or did it all amount to the same thing?

As I stood watching the young men from a little distance, I wondered whether Bakhtin would have defined their raucous merry-making as 'carnival laughter'. I doubted it, for this was hardly the 'people's laughter', 'directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants'[6] – most of the people had gone home, or were busy elsewhere. The shrieks of laughter of the young men were hardly 'ambivalent', hardly 'asserting and denying', 'triumphant and deriding'. This was a group of urban youths who had here a chance to release all their pent-up energy for violence. There were already a few engaged in scuffles. I decided that either I did not know 'carnival humour' or this display of it was not to my taste.

Dance of the Demon God

When I reached Chhetrapati, quite a large crowd had gathered on the street. They appeared like a distant island throbbing with life in the emptiness of a vast night. Changing my direction, I approached them. Sure enough, there was Lākhe with two torch-bearers at his sides, dancing furiously with jerky movements, shooting his hands up one after the other. Two musicians were accompanying the dancer, one with a double-ended drum and another with a pair of large cymbals. Lākhe was wearing a golden dress with heavy bells around his waist and a red mask with wide eyes and large fangs. On his head was an auburn wig – a fluffed mass of long hair. A pair of colourful 'bat-wings' attached to his sleeves and two sides of his dress added to his demonic charm as he lifted his arms while dancing with demonic ▼

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abandon – throbbing on the borderline of violence.

The Lākhes are believed to be demons (*rākṣasas*) living in dense forests who hunt animals and people passing through. It is said that a Lākhe fell in love with a beautiful princess and, in order to win her, wooed her in human form. Soon after their marriage, people began to die mysteriously. At one point, the truth was discovered and the Lākhe was apprehended. The demon swore his love for the princess and promised to work for the people as their guardian and protective deity. It is popularly believed that in earlier times the Lākhe dancers used to sacrifice humans to propitiate the demons.

I looked around for Jhyualincha, a second dancer dressed in a white dress but without a mask, impersonating a naughty boy who, I was told, plays pranks on Lākhe and continuously evades the pursuing demon. However, the young boy was not to be found. Lākhe was dancing alone in front of a house, in honour of a woman who had made a payment and who was now standing at the entrance. People watched in awe as the demon-turned-protector moved towards her and away, shooting his arms diagonally upwards, one after the other. As I watched those large eyes lit by torchlight, I glimpsed a wild charge in him, something of imminent violence. The wildness oppressed the sensibility yet made it impossible to move away. At last the demon-god turned and danced down the street, the torchbearers leading the way, carrying with them their tiny island of swirling excitement. Some people followed, some went indoors. I stood in the empty street and listened to the fading thumping of the drum. It seemed to thump in my heart.

The Second Day

On the second evening, the crowd was larger at Hanuman Dhoka and the sky was clearer. The rhythm of the festival built up with the arrival of a troupe of boys with their Monkey Dance. No sooner had they formed two files than Lākhe arrived, dancing belligerently, and that was the end of the Monkey Dance. A little later the crowd roared with apprehension as Indra's elephant appeared from another direction.

While the excited crowd gathered round, suddenly and unexpectedly there was a new vortex of the festival, verging on the threshold of a challenge. Lākhe stood his ground, dancing menacingly. The elephant wavered and then began to retrace its steps, the crowd roaring as Lākhe moved forward. After a few tense moments the elephant turned and fled. At one end I saw the attendants of the elephant coaxing it to confront Lākhe again. Unwillingly it moved forward, but Lākhe possibly did not want to take a chance with a second confrontation of uncertain outcome, so he veered from his course, appearing to overlook Indra's mount, and went on his way. The elephant pranced a while before moving off in another direction.

At this point the police officers on duty got very active and began to clear the courtyard. Thinking that a new event of importance was about to take place, I sat on the steps, waiting for the drums. What came was not a group of dancers, but Crown Prince Birendra in a shining Nissan Patrol, driving the car himself. This certainly was the most effective act of transgression which made amorphous the distinction between the performers and spectators!

The crowd sat, no one seemed to smile or make an effort to cheer. The rosy-cheeked prince alighted from the car and went inside the palace to offer his *pūjā*. Another group of Mahākālī dancers came, and waited for the prince to depart. But a prince is no prince if the world does not wait for him. Nearly an hour passed and it was after nine in the evening. The crowd had already thinned and the throbbing excitement had considerably ebbed. I saw the Mahākālī troupe moving off. It was clear that there would be no more performances at Hanuman Dhoka. A performer who had a mask slung to one side of his head was carrying a little boy, his son, still wearing his costume as an attendant spirit of the deities. The boy was sleeping calmly, oblivious of the crowd and the noise.

Near Chhetrapati, there was the crowd again, watching Lākhe dance. Good, I thought. Two nights end with Lākhe. I hoped I had as

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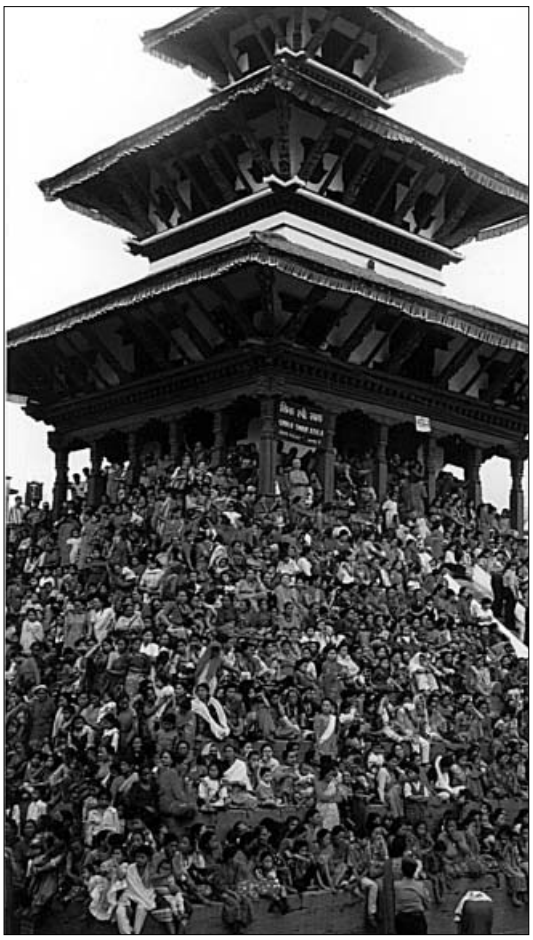
good luck with Śavā Bāhkku, whom I had not yet seen. Just at that moment Lākhe chose to notice me, 'incongruous' enough with my camera and notebook, and approached me threateningly. Where Indra's elephant feared to tread, I would be no match. I bade the demon goodnight and made a hasty exit.

The Third Day

On the third day I reached Darbar Square a little after half past one. The entire square was flooded with people. The steps of Viṣṇu Temple, opposite the Royal Balcony of the palace, were already full. That being the best place to observe the chariots of Kumārī, Gaṇeśa, and Bhairava, I decided to squeeze myself into a corner on the bottom-most step.

The whole square was bustling with expectation. The steps of another temple farther away were crowded with women dressed in their best, making a picturesque composition from where I sat. A little after two, the police officers on duty got very active and began to clear the square and push the people to the periphery, which was then cordoned off. A special performance of the Daśavatāra show was to be put on for His Majesty and for this reason no one could sit immediately in front of the stage. One side of the steps of the Viṣṇu Temple was reserved for journalists, but everybody else was politely cleared away. I had to exert all my charm combined with a scholarly appearance to convince three police officers of my situation, and finally managed to get myself a place among the journalists.

Bhairava and Gaṇeśa, carried shoulder high, arrived separately at Kumārī House around three. About half an hour later the Śavā Bāhkku performers arrived dancing.



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▲ Śavā is Ākāśa Bhairava. He was wearing a deep blue mask, a wig of long hair, a deep blue shirt, and a skirt decorated with golden borders. Held up in his right hand was a sword. Two other dancers representing his attendants (Bāhkku) – who according to some are the deities Caṇḍī and Kumār – were wearing red dresses with red masks.

Although empty-handed, the Bāhkkus held up one of their hands all the same. A local resident informed me that they are angered if they see saris hanging or people with open umbrellas. When the spectator-devotees offer animals, the dancers reportedly tear off the head and suck the blood. In earlier times, water buffalo were sacrificed to appease these gods. The Śavā Bāhkku performers went around the entire square and positioned themselves in front of the Royal Balcony, entertaining the high officials and heads of foreign missions who were gradually beginning to arrive. So, I thought, Ākāśa Bhairava performs only for royalty but bestows boon/booze for the people!

By this time a contingent of the Nepalese Army and the guards of the royal priests had also positioned themselves in front of the main entrance to the palace. The army band was also there, stationed on a stone platform right below the steps of Viṣṇu Temple, where I was sitting. A local journalist whispered to me that King Jaya Prakāśa Malla used to sit there, on a throne under a canopy, and order the procession to begin.

A little after four, Gaṇeśa and Bhairava came out of the Kumārī House and boarded their chariots. One could feel the building excitement of the crowd. Then came the Five Buddhas: Vairocana in white dress, Akṣobhya in blue, Ratnasambhava in yellow, Amitābha in red, and Amoghasiddhi in green. They stood in line facing the royal balcony. A little ▼

later came Kumārī, for whom a strip of white cloth was spread on the ground. Then, with musicians and attendants, she too boarded her chariot. Suddenly, out of nowhere, came Lākhe, with all his fury and power, attended by his musicians. At another corner was Pulukeśī, also with his musicians. A few people held him steadily back, for they did not want confrontation today. When Lākhe had moved off, Pulukeśī was allowed to prance about before being forced to retire to a corner.

Around 4.30, the Prime Minister apeared. The stage was now set for Their Majesties to arrive and the procession to begin. I expected cheers and applause, but there was only a

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murmur as the King and the Queen alighted from a limousine. Lākhe dashed forward to get near, but his fury was futile because the security guards steadfastly held him back. A little later, the royal couple was seen on the balcony, flanked by ministers, their wives, army generals, and heads of foreign missions.

Lākhe could not be held back any more: he scrambled for a royal benediction. By the time he reached the pavement under the balcony, the King had gone to another balcony near the chariots to offer his coins to Kumārī, Bhairava, and Gaṇeśa. Then the band began to play, and this drowned out the musicians of Śavā Bāhkku, Lākhe, and Pulukeśī, who had also gathered under the balony. His Majesty, with his broadest smile, then threw handfuls of coins towards Śavā Bāhkku. Some coins even went to Pulukeśī. But however much Lākhe jumped, nothing came from the King, who merely smiled and waved. Lākhe tried again, but without avail. Pulukeśī must have been quite content with royal justice.

A little before 5.00 there came a volley of bullet shots, and the crowd burst into cheers as the procession began. First passed Gaṇeśa's chariot, then Bhairava's, finally Kumārī's. The king bowed respectfully to the goddess in red as she rode her chariot drawn by devotees to see the festival. The Five Buddhas were in front of the chariot: they would be stopping at all the Buddhist shrines on the way, to perform Tantric Buddhist ritualistic dances. Pulukeśī and Śavā Bāhkku went dancing behind the chariot of Kumārī's, but Lākhe was nowhere to be seen.

Having had enough of royalty, I decided to follow Kumārī's procession. This moved slowly, gyrating forward with tremendous excitement, pulsating in their fervent devotion. Two groups were pulling each of the chariots with two long ropes, guided by two smaller groups who manoeuvred the direction of the wheels with two shorter ropes. Others were jostling for a chance of pulling the chariot, for this is deemed to be an act of religious merit.

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Following Kumārī's chariot were guards of the royal priest, playing as a band, which added a unique festive flavour to the clamorous and bustling human cacophony. The chariots were supposed to move to Lagan, Kohiti, Bhimsen Sthan, Kastha Mandap, and then return to Kumārī House. I followed the crowd till Jaisidewal, where there was to be a performance of Devī Dance. I abandoned the intoxicating, swirling rhythm of the living goddess for her calmer impersonation at the dance.

The performance of the Devī Dance was given on a concrete platform with a small canopy in front of a shop opposite a Hindu temple, at the crossing of Jaisidewal. The musicians and the choral singers were seated on the steps leading to the shop. The spectators gathered on the street and on the lanes at its sides. Their dance was composed of a number of solo pieces given by Bhairava, Kumārī, and Caṇḍī, and three duets in which each of the deities battles with Mahiṣāsura. Both Caṇḍī and Bhairava fail to vanquish the demon; finally Kumārī succeeds. ▼

The dance was halted twice when the chariots passed. On both occasions, the performers (Bhairava and Kumārī) stood shaking their swords, thus paying homage to the 'living' deity. Each occasion was a unique confrontation of two impersonations – and each time the Living Goddess was more 'alive' than the dancer-impersonator. What was even more exciting was watching how the amorphous space of the moving performance transgressed that of the stationary – the former reducing the latter to complete submission and subjugation. So, I could not help thinking, the efficacy of an 'artistic' performance is amorphous indeed!

A little while after the chariots passed the first time, it began to rain. Indra was obviously pleased with the people of Kathmandu, for the shower was not light. With the rain the crowd thinned; but the poor performers, cursed by the gods and relegated to low social caste, had to continue in the rain, with only a pitifully small awning for shelter. When the dance ended I rushed to Maru Tole, from where Dāgini, one possessed by the spirit of *dāgi* (i.e., the mother of Indra) was supposed to go in a procession.

When I reached Maru Tole, Dāgini had already left. His/her procession was to go to Bangemuda, Indra Chowk, Hanuman Dhoka, from where it would proceed to Jaisidewal before returning to Maru Tole, thus touching all the points Kumārī's chariot would touch. Although s/he is supposed to go to Indra Daha (Lake), it is now rare for this to happen (possibly the financial gain for the performer is not worth the 12-kilometre long detour).

I decided to return to Hanuman Dhoka, past Kumārī House, near which the empty chariots lay, the procession being over by then. Buddhist families passed by carrying incense sticks and lamps in honour of those of their families who had died during the year. I could almost 'touch' a different mode of operation here. Gone was the state hierarchy and its spectacle of power, gone too was Kumārī and her devotional urgency. Here, it was almost soft and quiet, effusing Buddhist compassion.

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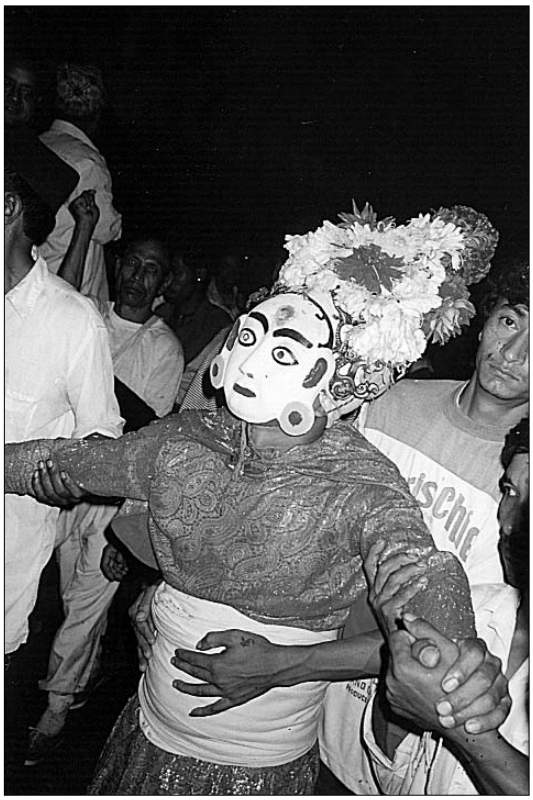
But one could not overlook its marginality: the people with incense sticks and lamps were on ritual circumambulation of the city on a traditional route – not earning merit for themselves but for their beloved who were dead. Some would also bathe in the Indra Lake.

After a little while, I saw a surging crowd moving at a fast pace. No Dāgini could be seen – only pulsating human faces and a long bamboo pole (*dhunya*) decorated near the top with a dangling whisk of yak tail. As the procession passed me, I saw Dāgini, dressed in a long and full-sleeved brocade dress and wearing a white mask with a wreath of flowers on top. Her/his hands, stretched sideways, were held by two young



men, while another man held a gas-pressure lantern in front of the deity. The outstretched arms of Dāgini were strikingly similar to those of Indra displayed in the Indra Khāts.

A group of young men formed a cordon around Dāgini. Two *dhime* drummers and a gong player provided music as a large crowd followed him/her, all moving at a fast pace. It was the re-enactment of the Buddhist legend of Indra: the crowd was following Indra's mother to heaven in order to meet their deceased relatives, scattering grains on the way so as not to lose the way back home. Once again, the spirit of this crowd was different. There was the swirling and confusing rhythm of life, but a life which borders on death – not in terror of mortality, but a reflection of the transience of life.

I followed the procession till Maru Tole and then decided to wait in front of the house from which Dāgini left. After a while the procession returned and the crowd had swelled. I followed again, now to Maru Tole crossing, where Dāgini slipped out of the cordon and raced back to the courtyard of the house. There, after a brief ritual and prayer, the mask was taken off and the performer (a farmer) walked into the house with a few people. They slammed the door after them.

Back at Maru Tole, the musicians were still playing and the people who followed Dāgini were throwing their offerings (which included rice grains and coins) in a heap. A few people were busy collecting the grains and the coins. An old woman, one of the collectors, was screaming her head off at a young boy in rags who had tried to snatch a coin. The boy would not let go, for he said it was Dāgini's and everyone had a right to her. The old woman would not listen to such fancy stuff. She seemed to be hurling all the abusive terms she had accumulated in her life. Unannounced and unintended, a tiny vortex of daily life had upstaged the celebratory rhythm of the festival life: the divine mother had disappeared, and here was a scolding human mother instead.

Meanwhile the crowds were busily moving towards another spectacle – the Bou Mata, a subdued procession with lamps laid on a bamboo structure (a pole of bamboo held horizontally by men, in front of which was a mini-scaffolding also of bamboo). Out of compassion, they were leading back home those who had lost the way trying to follow Dāgini. I followed this procession to Jaisidewal, then decided to find my own way back to my hotel. I just could not get the human mother out of my mind. . . .

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The Fourth Day

Kumārī's procession began again on the fourth day. Around 6.30 it reached Hanuman Dhoka, where I stayed watching a Monkey Dance performance in a light drizzle. The dance melted away as the crowd tried to catch another glimpse of the Living Goddess. But Pulukeśī was in a sad state: his paint had started to run.

Over at Indra Chowk, the Devī Dancers were now performing Mahiṣāsura's dance with Bhairava. Suddenly the sky was abloom with a spectacular display of fireworks – unconnected with Indra Jātrā, for the opening by His Majesty of the Eighth SAF Games that afternoon. The Devī Dancers cut short the final scene as the fireworks above became more spectacular, despite the rain which had set in. There was a time, or so the Purāṇas claim, when the gods could perform such tricks for the devotees. Now the King can afford only a few pitiful pennies for the gods at Indra Jātrā, compared with the thousands of dollars being thrown at the prestigious Games. And the king was only following common sense: after all, times have changed and he has to perform the tricks once left to the gods.

With fireworks creating a swirling sensation of an invading festival above me, I walked the nearly deserted streets to Maru Bahi (a Buddhist establishment) to watch the

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Mahākālī Dance on one side of the inner courtyard. It was quiet, almost a marooned island of non-official sensibility where the pulsating rhythm of Indra Jātrā had become uncertain. In some respects Mahākālī Dance was similar to the Devī Dance, except that

there are three goddesses in it (Mahālakṣmī, ▲ Mahākālī, and Kumārī) and Mahākālī kills Mahiṣāsura.

Most interesting (because such elements are not seen elsewhere in Indra Jātrā) were three episodes of the dance which projected eroticism and comedy. In the fifth episode of the dance, two *kyāks* (spirits) danced in acrobatic and erotic movements. They also interacted with the children by moving towards them with mock-terrifying gestures, to which the children responded with half-serious screams. The eighth episode also generated comedy, as a dog danced and barked, with the spectators barking and ▼

whooping back in comic response. In the ninth episode, after Mahiṣāsura was killed, an old woman and a lion (Mahālakṣmī's carrier) entered the performance space. As the old woman offered *pūjā* to the deity, the lion made sexual advances to her. ▼

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Having enjoyed the warmth of 'carnival laughter', I emerged onto deserted streets. By then human fireworks had given way to divine starworks.

The festival continued on the fifth, sixth, and seventh days with performances given in a similar manner, but without the chariot procession, which was brought back only on the eighth day. When it did return to Kumārī House via Hanuman Dhoka, the goddess was carried to her temple, for the King to receive her blessing in the form of a *tikā*, interpreted as her permission to rule for another year. After his departure, there was a massive surge of people, throbbing with devotional excitement, to receive the goddess's blessing. Late in the evening Indradhaja was lowered and then cast off into the Bagmati River, signifying Indra's release and the end of the festival. By then, its tidal surge had petered out.

Reading Hegemony and its Resistance

Reading hegemony and resistance in Indra Jātrā needs to be set in the historical context of its evolution. As already noted, the performances of Mahākālī, Devī, Lākhe, and Pulukeśī, as well as the giant mask of Ākāśa Bhairav issuing free drink, were all incorporated into Indra Jātrā by King Pratap Shah. The Monkey Dance and the Daśavatāra pageant, with their obvious overtones of Vaiṣṇavite devotion, were possibly added much later. Devoid of these elements, Indra Jātrā during the reign of Jaya Prakāśa Malla and Pritvi Narayan Shah comprised the processions of Kumārī, Dāgini, and Bou Mata.

If you take away Kumārī's procession as Jaya Prakāśa Malla's contribution, you are left with only the processions of Dāgini and Bou Mata. However, it would be incorrect to credit the Buddhists entirely with the creation of these performances for, as the legends of origin indicate, there was possibly an earlier stratum of a harvest festival of the people of Kathmandu Valley, which the Buddhists had acculturated. This earliest festival was, it appears, a people's celebration related to the harvest and linked also with some victory over an Aryan king (hence Indra, an Aryan god). Thus, the current Indra Jātrā possibly bears three stages of myth-making.

Before reading hegemony in the cultural performance of Indra Jātrā, it may be significant to note that Indra Jātrā is not a Bakhtinian carnival in that it is not 'officially' designed to offer resistance to authority. On the contrary, it is intended to uphold authority. However, what takes place in the interstices is another matter. Consider for example the processions of Dāgini and Bou Mata, neither of which conforms to the official myth which signifies Hindu social order and the Shah dynasty's political order, as we shall see. By timing these immediately after the inauguration of the Kumārī's procession, the Buddhists avoid explicit political confrontation – for officially they are a tiny minority, at 5.3 per cent of the total population.[7] These processions nevertheless tacitly but firmly signify another domain – that of the dead and their well-being. These processions are compassionate, not motivated by political gain.

Indra Jātrā is also not designed to offer images of 'grotesque realism' and the ambivalent 'carnival laughter'. But again, people create space free from official order – even though in the margins – where the Bakhtinian 'material bodily principles' and the 'ambivalence of triumph and derision' find expression, as in the Mahākālī Dance, where for once I witnessed traces of the 'carnivalesque' in the Indra Jātrā. It is not insignificant that the dance was given in a Buddhist establishment and not during the erection of the Indradhaja. Spaces speak eloquently – of affirmation or resistance to authority, and of the shades of grey in between.

Having identified elements of resistance to authority, let us now examine elements which impose hegemony – or attempt to do so, without necessarily succeeding. The first example is the erection of the Indradhaja, which sets itself off as a state-sponsored ritual performed in a clearly demarcated space which separates the spectators and the performers. What is most significant is that there were only a few hundred spectators, only around double the number of the performers. State functionaries appeared serious

in their role of 'architect-builders', attempting to charge the ritual with divine potency, thereby upholding the existing social order. However, many people for whom the social order was being upheld just passed by about the business of 'daily life', paying only token respect to Indra. Most city dwellers did not bother to pass by – they simply abstained. However, such abstention did not signify disinterest in the festival, as all those images of Indra perched high on Indra Khāts imply. The temporal rhythm of surrounding 'daily life' appeared almost to demarcate the hoisting of Indradhaja as an archaic spatio-temporal island.

Was it because of the encroaching industrialization and urbanization that supposedly separates, as Turner would posit, the 'liminal' and the 'liminoid'? Possibly: but as some of my Nepalese friends have suggested, those from the Malla lineage as well as the Buddhists would not attend for other reasons. There will be occasion to examine these threads, but for the moment let us decode three 'signs' employed in the ritual of the Indradhaja – first, the royal horse and the sword; second, the pole, the flag, and the caged image of Indra; and third, the Devī Dance.

Decoding the Devī Dance

The most significant factor is the physical absence of the king. However, his physical absence does not signify voluntary renunciation of his authority or interest, for he is very much present in the horse and the sword. There is an added benefit in the token presence: he does not have to bow in person to the god. Hence, the 'absence' actually magnifies his presence and subtly he appropriates the pole and the flag as his own. Let us examine this process of appropriation. According to Nepalese scholars, the entire ritual of Indradhaja was incorporated in the Indra Jātrā by King Pratap Singh Shah.[8] This obviously means that the hoisting of the pole with the flag did not exist in the tenth century, when, according to local tradition, Indra Jātrā was established by King Gunakamadeva (AD 942–1008) or even in the fifteenth century, from which period, as Slusser points out, comes the earliest recorded evidence of the festival.[9]

This can only mean that the Indradhaja had special significance for the Shah dynasty, and that this significance is related to the dynasty's usurpation of power from the Mallas. When in 1768 Prithvi Narayan Shah swept in with his Gorkha army to capture Kathmandu, the city was celebrating Indra Jātrā. When the army of the reigning king Jaya Prakāśa Malla surrendered, the king hid himself in the Tāleju temple and later fled for his life as the goddess failed to save him. A few years later Prithvi Narayan's son Pratap Singh saw fit to claim dynastic legitimacy through the victory of the people of Kathmandu Valley which Indra Jātrā celebrates – not over Indra the king of the gods, but Jaya Prakāśa, the king of Kathmandu. It is he who lies imprisoned at the foot of the pole and not at its top, as elsewhere in the city.

The performance of Devī Dance adds to the prestige of the ritual. The dance featuring the battle between the Virtuous and the Evil, in which the goddess Kumārī finally vanquishes the demon, fits well with the myth which the Shah dynasty wants to generate – its victory over the Mallas – intentionally equating itself with the patron deity of the vanquished. When the pole is erected, the dancers stand in a single file facing the pole, while the deities hold their swords upright. It is significant that the three deities pay tribute to the Indradhaja, which is to be read here in the flag of the King. The presence of Kumārī is most significant, as we shall see. And it should not be overlooked that Pratap Shah's incorporation of Devī Dance and Mahākālī Dance from neighbouring Bhaktapur – which was an independent kingdom a few years earlier – was designed precisely to construct a sense of 'national unity' through cultural tools.

The official inauguration of Kumārī Jātrā by the King is an ingenious 'allegory' which objectifies a 'natural and appropriate ideal image of society', seeking to create a memorable impression on the people by making 'the ideals of the social order objectively present in the here and now' – a social order

which is sanctioned by and is a reflection of 'a larger cosmic hierarchy of orderly differentiation, superiority, and inferiority, in which every element has a determinate place'.[10]

Let us begin our examination of Kumārī Jātrā with the performance space of the event. The people were distanced literally – held back by roped cordons and policemen on the periphery of the Durbar Square. A few privileged journalists, were stationed on the steps of the Viṣṇu Temple, closer to the royal balcony on the first floor of the palace, the most commanding position. There, the King was the most privileged spectator (and performer), and the elite of the Nepalese state was present, along with diplomats, arranged according to social position and importance.

The social hierarchy reflected the 'larger cosmic hierarchy of orderly differentiation' which was made visible in the procession of the Living Goddess. In order of importance, from the bottom to the top, were the people pulling the chariots, the Five Buddhas, Pulukeśī and Śavā Bāhkku, Gaṇeśa and Bhairava (their chariots being lower than that of the goddess), and finally Kumārī. The most strikingly discordant element was the absence of Lākhe.

Significantly, when Jaya Prakāśa Malla initiated the procession, he sat on a much lower platform in front of the Viṣṇu Temple, so that when the procession passed he would be positioned lower than the chariot of the Living Goddess. However, King Birendra Shah was obviously making a special point by positioning himself on a higher level than the living incarnation of the patron goddess of the Mallas. Nor did he risk much of divine wrath, for his dynasty's patron god is Gorakhnāth. Most importantly, the King was playing his role in confirming the legitimacy of his dynasty, which came into power more by physical might than divine sanction.

The procession also made explicit how the Nepalese state views social and political harmony – for the Five Buddhas (as 'representatives' of the Buddhist community) were made to walk on the street, whereas the goddess rode in the highest chariot. This is not an 'invention' of the Shah dynasty: they merely kept intact the order they inherited from the Mallas. For their part, the Mallas – specifically, Jaya Prakāśa – 'invented' the 'allegory' of Kumārī's procession for 'social harmony' with the Buddhists, assigning them a place in the hierarchy which was, in keeping with Malla ideology, lower than that of the Hindus.

Legitimacy and Authority

As my Buddhist and Malla friends indicated, most of their community of friends and relatives did not consider the inaugural ceremony important enough to attend. Many Mallas abstain simply because they refuse to affirm what they consider the 'questionable legitimacy' of the Shah dynasty. They may have a point, for the people cheered not for the King but for the Living Goddess. As for the Buddhists, when the inaugural ceremony is in progress many are busy preparing for the processions of Dāgini and Bou Mata. And perhaps there is more to be read into Lākhe's 'walkout', which may imply the King's willingness to patronize the 'harmless' images shadowed by Buddhism (Pulukeśī) but not the 'uncontrolled wildness' of Kathmandu Valley (Lākhe) – his dynasty originally coming from Gorkha. Thus, despite the inaugural ceremony's magnificence, it is also 'susceptible to "demonic" misappropriation' and to 'generate surplus meaning'.[11]

The royal *tikā* ritual, which takes place at the temple of Kumārī, is also endowed with the halo of seriousness dictated by precision. When the royal ceremony takes place, the temple is clearly marked off – distanced from the people. It upholds the existing social order, for the King is 'permitted' by the goddess to rule for another year. One notes a reversal of roles from that of the inaugural ceremony. Here, the King has to submit – literally put himself in a lower position, for the little girl to reach up to his forehead. Even the Buddhists are happy since the girl and most of the ritual priests are Buddhists.

However, questions do arise in the mind of a few sceptics. For example, how much 'real' authority does the Living Goddess hold? How much does the king take for granted that the *tikā* will be stamped on his

forehead in any case? What would happen should the goddess decide not to stamp the *tikā*? These questions are not entirely fanciful, because Kumārī, after all, is not the patron deity of the Shah dynasty and each new Kumārī has to be approved by the King. The Shah dynasty is merely following the practice instituted by the Mallas – the most important benefit being the sanction they derive from the greater cosmic order in the gesture of the Living Goddess, thus brushing aside their 'questionable legitimacy'.

For his part, Jaya Prakāśa tried to obtain the allegiance of the Buddhists by constructing a myth which used a Śākya (Buddhist) girl. In terms of the political uncertainties he was facing, this was certainly expedient – and makes a splendid gesture, for it shows that the earthly ruler is prepared to accept the verdict of the divine ruler. What happens after the verdict is granted is another matter. In any case, by thus obtaining legitimacy the Shah dynasty – as earlier the Mallas – can hope to continue unchallenged by any moral authority.

The validity of this view is confirmed by another element of popular tradition. It is said that when Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered Kathmandu during the celebration of Indra Jātrā, for reasons not elaborated he brought himself into the presence of the Living Goddess, who wasted no time in marking a *tikā* on his forehead. The sign was enough – because by this act the patron deity of the Mallas acknowledged that Prithvi Narayan Shah was the new monarch.

Over some two and a half centuries, the Shah dynasty as well as the Mallas have attempted to domesticate Indra Jātrā by remobilizing what they considered efficacious 'signs' for constructing politically and socially charged networks of meaning, all with the purpose of reinforcing the hegemony of the Hindu state. At the same time, social and political forces not aligned to the state have also been active, however subtly, in creating a space free from official order. Hence the charm and vivacity of the splendid myth of Indra Jātrā.

The festival also offers a parable which reminds the hegemonic authorities that water always runs out of cupped palms – however hard you press your fingers. The more the hegemonic authority attempts to impose, the more vulnerable it becomes, to the point of being self-destructive. The shocking regicide of 2001, in which Prince Dipendra allegedly mowed down his parents and then shot himself, acts as a sober reminder that the state of Nepal is in desperate need of new efficacious myths. Perhaps this is a pure fancy which is out of place at the close of a 'scholarly discourse', but since I heard the news of the regicide I have been haunted by the dance of Lākhe – performed by Prince Dipendra – juxtaposed with King Birendra's refusal to bestow favour in the inaugural ceremony of Kumārī's procession. Lākhe too was in love, you remember?

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