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“ALL THE KING’S HORSES, AND ALL THE KING’S MEN”: THE 2004 RED MATSYENDRANĀTHA INCIDENT IN LALITPUR ¹

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall;
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the king’s horses, and all the king’s men,
Couldn’t put Humpty together again.*

Introduction

On Sunday, April 25, 2004 at 9.30 p.m. local time on the second leg of his procession through Lalitpur, Nepal, the ceremonial chariot carrying the so-called ‘Red Matsyendranātha’ fell on its side and its crown touched the ground. This meant the recovery of the god from the chariot and the interruption of the procession for one entire month

1. This article could not have been written without the invaluable help of my dear colleague Nutan Dhar Sharma, M.A. to which my thanks go in the first place. Furthermore, I would like to thank my teacher Laxmi Nath Shrestha for unfolding for me the world of Nepālī newspapers, Rajesh Shrestha from the South Asia Institute Branch Office Kathmandu for helping to collect the press coverage, Anil Bajracharya for introducing me to the procession as well as his brother Arun for calling late on April 25 and making sure I had not been hurt during the dramatic events. I also extend my thanks to all the *guṭhiyārs* involved in the procession’s performance whom I talked to, whose collaboration I cherish and whose work I admire. I greatly thank Niels Gutschow, Axel Michaels and Alexander von Rospatt for critically reading the first draft of this paper, as well as Martin Gaenzle, David Gellner, Roland Hardenberg, Hermann Kulke and William Sax for remarks and fruitful discussions. My final thanks go to the German Research Foundation (DFG) for sponsoring my research as part of the Collaborative Research Centre “Ritual Dynamics”.

due to the complete rebuilding of the vehicle followed by the necessary rituals of atonement and exculpation. Experiencing the daily clash of party supporters with the King's security forces and with the Maoist threat looming larger than ever, people and press were quick to establish sinister links: After 1934, when the Kathmandu Valley was hit by one of its worst earthquakes in recorded history, 1990, when the citizens of Nepal took to the streets in a popular uprising against autocratic rule and in 1999, when almost the entire royal family was wiped out in a palace massacre, this year's incident has been the last in a long line of such incidents marking the country's troubled fate. The article will try to analyze what exactly happened during this year's crash against the background of popular belief, the history and practice of the rite, and how the damage was assessed by the lay folk as well as by the ritual specialists, which measures were recommended and how and for what purpose they were applied. Keeping in mind the two interpretations of the incident as an offence against the godhead or as portentous omen, this is an enquiry into whether in this context there is any appropriate place for or, from the participants' perspective, any acceptance of a notion such as 'mistake' or 'failure'. The recorded actions and testimonies, on the contrary, suggest it may be much more adequate to explore the possibilities and opportunities of re-enacted, or rather pre-enacted and thus calculated catastrophe inherent in this particular ritual, which happens at a moment of crisis, enables the performance of a breakdown, the restoration to a pristine state, forgiveness and well-being. However, if we really would have to talk about the fall of the Red Matsyendranātha in terms of failure, we would have to say: The ritual cannot fail, because, under the current circumstances, it has to fail, in order for the crisis to be overcome.

1. The Procession in History

The current worship of the deity which culminates in its annual procession reveals multiple layers of different divinities and cults.² The earliest identifiable layer probably belongs to the cult of

2. Analyzed by Lienhard 1978, Locke 1973 and 1980 and Vergati 1985.

Bumgadyaḥ and can be connected to the local cult of Bumgamatī, possibly an originally female goddess³ at the centre of an annual fertility rite inviting the first rains to safeguard a rich harvest.⁴ At a later stage a Bodhisattva cult was probably superimposed and subsequently fused with a Śaiva royal cult, affiliated with Lalitpur Newar kingship under the Malla dynasty. The latest layer is constituted by the cult of the Nātha Yogi Matsyendranātha (Nep. Macchindranātha)⁵ which developed out of North Indian Śaiva ascetic movements, supported by the so-called Nāth Yogis, and was itself in turn eventually integrated into a Gorkhalī and Indo-Parbatīyā and finally pan-Nepalese royal state cult.⁶ Today the Matsyendranātha Jātrā is referred to as a ‘national festival’, while maintaining in popular belief its strong connections to the agricultural cycle. The to-date most popular legend connected with the deity testifies to the Nāthyogic layer. Here too, Matsyendranātha is connected with rain as he is brought from Kāmarūpa by a Bhaktapur king, a Brahmin, viz. Buddhist priest (*vajrācārya*) and a farmer (Nep. *jjāpu*) to the Kathmandu Valley, which is suffering from a severe drought, to have his pupil Gorakhnātha, who had sat down blocking the rain-bestowing serpent deities (*nāgas*), rise and pay reverence to his teacher, thereby allowing it to rain again.⁷

The important chronicle *Gopālarājavaṃśāvalī* suggests that the procession was originally introduced by King Narendradeva of Bhaktapur for a divinity called Śrī Bugma Lokeśvara not much prior to 984 A.D.⁸ The Tibetan monk Dharmasvāmin in his account of his visit to Nepal in 1226 describes the rite of reconsecration of a deity called Ārya of Bukham and mentions that its festival includes a round

3. Its temple is referred to as the “bride’s paternal home” (*maiti*). See Locke 1973, 8.

4. On this aspect of the procession see Vergati 1985.

5. In this article in contrast to the frequent Sanskrit terms, for convenience only Nepālī (Nep.) and Nevārī (Nep.) terms given in brackets are identified as such.

6. For an extensive study of the relationship of the cult with Newar and Indo-Parbatīyā kingship see the excellent study by Bruce M. Owens 1989.

7. Locke 1980, 280-296.

8. Locke 1980, 300.

of visits to the homes of people, recalling a monastic begging round.⁹ However, it takes until 1558 (678 N.S.) for the chariot (*ratha*) to be mentioned in a grant. First regulations regarding the rite seem to be laid down in an inscription from February 16, 1673 (793 N.S.) by King Śrīnivāsa Malla at the Tabāhā in Lalitpur.¹⁰ Related rites are subsumed under the term “Four Sisters”, which includes, possibly again pointing at the equivocal gender of the deity, besides the Rāto Matsyendranātha of Lalitpur, the Rāto Matsyendranātha of Cobhar, as well as the Seto (White) Matsyendranātha of both Kathmandu and of Nala. The other three chariot festivals seem to be off-springs of the Lalitpur one¹¹. The rites of the Matsyendranātha of Bhaktapur include a procession together with a host of other local deities. The New Year’s celebrations in Bhaktapur, the Bisket Jātrā, involves a procession of the chariots of the divine couple Bhairava and Bhadrakālī as well as the hoisting of a giant wooden pole (*liṅga*). This latter feat is undertaken in such a way that it takes at least a whole day to accomplish the task. Repeated incidents during the lifting of the pole regularly lead to injury and death, which are, in turn, said to be ominous for the coming year. In April 2004 four men died and half a dozen were injured. Finally, it is possible to draw parallels to the procession of the famous Jagannātha of Puri. It is said there that the collapse of the chariot would be a sign of the dissolution (*pralaya*) of the world. However, although falls from the past are recorded, nowadays nobody seems to remember any fall.¹²

2. *The Procession in Practice*

To put the incident into perspective I will at least briefly sketch the procession and its narrative.¹³ The deity (*deva*, Nev. *dyah*) Red

9. Roerich 1959, 54–55.

10. Tevāri 1963, 10, 7–11.

11. Locke 1980, 243.

12. For the relevant literature s. Mishra 1971 and Macdonald 1975.

13. For detailed ethnographies see Locke 1973, 17–38 and 1980; for a brief sketch of the procession see Anderson 1971, 53–61.

Matsyendranātha (Nep. Rāto Matsyendranātha)¹⁴ spends six months of the year in village Buṅgamatī, six miles south of Lalitpur, and six months at Tabāhā in Lalitpur itself. Every 12th year the procession (*yātrā*, Nep. *jātrā*) is conducted from Buṅgamatī to Lalitpur and back. All the other years it starts at Tabāhā and ends in Buṅgamatī. The god's face is renovated every year before the beginning of the procession in an installation rite (*jīvanyāsapūjā*). During its renovation its spiritual essence is removed from the image and kept in a water pot (*kalaśa*).¹⁵ The god's set life-cycle rites (*daśakarma*) are performed, after which he is placed in the entrance of the central temple at Tabāhā for worshippers to pay reverence (Nep. *darśana linu*).

The procession starts with the ascension of the god onto his chariot (*rathārohana*) to which he is brought on a palanquin, accompanied by the king's chief adviser's (*rājaguru*) guard, the Sarduljang platoon (or Nep. *gurujuko paltana*). The ascension into the chariot is performed at a place called Phulchowk, next to the Eastern so-called 'Aśoka Stūpa', as a temple consecration rite which inaugurates the worship by the local populace as well as pilgrims from all over the country. Besides Matsyendranātha a host of other images, including one of the Buddha Dipāṅkara, said to be of deities, whose processions were suppressed by incorporation into the current cult, are placed onto the chariot. On the fourth day the chariot is set into motion by young men pulling ropes attached to it. It is welcomed by a second, smaller chariot of Mīnanātha (Nep. Cākudyaḥ), pulled only by male children, who leads the Red Matsyendranātha into what may have been the original core of Lalitpur. They stop at a locality called Gābāhā. Two days later the chariot proceeds to a place called Sundhārā, this time preceding the smaller chariot and passing the royal palace where it usually stops for an hour or two. After a period of again two days the procession sets off

14. So called by Hindus and outside Lalitpur, also called bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Nep. Laskadyaḥ), Āryalokeśvara, Padmapāṇi Lokeśvara (Lokanātha) or Karuṇāmaya, by the Buddhists, which form the majority of Lalitpur's inhabitants, and Nep. Buṅgadyaḥ (Skt. Buṅgadeva) by all Newars.

15. See Owens 1995. For the relative rites performed for the restoration of the Svayambhūcaitya s. von Rospatt 2000.

to the southernmost tip of Lalitpur close to the so-called “Southern Aśoka Stūpa” at Lāgamkhel. Here the chariot circumambulates the god’s mother’s shrine thrice and is left standing in an open lot for a day. The chariot is finally pulled to a place nearby called Poḍe and left there for about a month in which period the Lāgamkhel Jātrā is celebrated. This festival includes the casting of a coconut into the crowd from the top of the chariot (hence its more popular Nep. name Narivala Khasalne Jātrā), to be caught by a man who is said to become father of a son within the next year, the celebration of the Rāto Matsyendranātha’s clan deity (*kuladevatā*) as well as the establishment of the right time (*muhūrta*, Nep. *sāita*) for the beginning of the second phase of the procession by astrologers. Within the next two weeks the chariot will be led to a place called Jawalakhel (Nep. Jyāhulākhyah) where a member of the governmental trust (Guṭhi Samsthāna) will show the god’s jewel-spangled vest (Nep. *bhoṭo*, Nev. *bhvata*) to the crowd, the king’s chief adviser’s guard and the king himself, who is also present and pays his homage to the god. After this the god is taken from the chariot and is brought back to Bumgamatī where he is verbally abused by the local populace for his long absence before being welcomed and purified and finally returning to his temple, an event which is celebrated in a festival attracting pilgrims from all over Nepal.

3. The Chariot as Palanquin and Temple

Closely connected with the technical aspect of the rite and its disruptions is the architectural construction of the chariot (Nep. *ratha*, Nev. *khah*) itself.¹⁶ The castes responsible for its construction are people from the carpenter caste (Nep. *vadhāis*), who take care especially of the lower part of the chariot including wheels, chassis and cabin, and people from the construction worker cast (Nep. *yānvalas*, Nev. *yamvams*), who work on the upper part, i.e. the dominating spire. The chariot in its core is made entirely of wood and is assembled without the use of metal, including nails or screws. An important component of the chariot is rattan

16. Studies on the architectural aspects of the chariot have been done by Niels Gutschow in Gutschow 1979 and Gutschow, Kölver & Shreshtacharya 1987, 103-106.

(Nep. *bet*, Nev. *pau*) cut in Indian forests near Susta and Siliguri¹⁷ and kept flexible by being soaked in a large water tank near the place of the chariot's assembly at Phulchowk. The chariot is thus 'sown together' by using one single rattan cane as a 'needle'. A lower deck (Nep. *ghaḥkū* or *hyamvak*) consisting of planks is fixed to a base consisting of two axes and supported by four wheels (made of a wood called Nep. *sānadāna*, Nev. *naṣim*), rimmed by re-enforcing metal rings and covering 18 hand spans (Nep. *hāta*) with each rotation. Between the platform and the axes a huge roughly hewn pole (Nep. *ghaḥmāḥ*) 18 hand spans long (made of a wood called Nep. *saura*, Nev. *ghaḥmāḥ*), is inserted from the front of the chariot, its front end curving up above the height of the deck. It is identified with the *nāga* Karkoṭaka who is supposed to have helped carry Matsyendranātha on the expedition from Kāmarūpa. This and the wheels, which ought to be replaced every 12 years, are the only pieces that can be utilized more than just once. Across the two axes two further poles are placed on the lower platform on both sides of the *ghaḥmāḥ*. On them, which function as the main bases of the lower deck, rests the entire upper structure. On them the upper deck, the "god's place" (Nep. *bimāna khata*, Nev. *dyahḥkhaḥ*, made, as the rest of the scaffolding, of a wood called Nep. *lākuri*, Nev. *sūsi*), measuring 1.6 x 2.3 metres, is placed, rimmed by a railing. It is a special shrine (Nep. *buikaḥ*), built open to four sides with a flat roof. This place, where the god is seated, is claimed to be the part of the chariot to which the strictest rules of construction apply.¹⁸ The Nep. *khata* or Nev. *khah* (the Nev. expression designating also the entire chariot), of which there are nine, vertically constituting the entire chariot, refer not only to the deck's plane, but to the whole scaffold including the deck up to the next level. The roof of the shrine carries a wickerwork of branches (Nep. *soraḥ hate*), fixed to the shrine's roof on a level (Nep. *phuimkhaḥ*) tied together by creepers assembled to form a slender spire, taking the total height of the vehicle to 18 hand spans, called "the pole [which is Mount] Meru" (*meru-daṇḍa*), i.e. the mountain-shaped axis mundi of South Asian cosmology. In a second working phase the chariot is decorated. The wheels are painted by applying three

17. For the use of rattan for the chariot's construction see Amatyā 1997, 18-22.

18. Adhikari 2004.

eyes, their corners oriented towards the axis, whereby they become four Bhairavas which in the Nāthyogic legend, like the giant *nāga*, function as demonic bearers of the palanquin enclosing Matsyendranātha on his way to Nepal. Hence, it may be helpful to conceive of the chariot as a palanquin turned vehicle and the procession as centred round a palanquin-bearing core, remnants of which are still conserved in the preliminary procession of the priests (Nev. *paṃjus*) bearing the deity from its temple at Tabāhā to the chariot at Phulchowk. The wheels, through their identification with the tantric Bhairava,¹⁹ to whom blood sacrifices are offered, are regarded as dangerous as they might crush participants in the procession.²⁰ At the protruding front end of the pole the bronze-cast face of a demon called Vetāla, who usually carries the celestial Akāśa Bhairava, is applied, meant to lead and guide the travellers. Metal work is applied to the platform's railings and especially to the shrine above whose openings bronze tympanums (*toranas*) depicting the Five Buddhas (*pañcabuddhas*) are fixed, a ritual which is carried out during the consecration of temples. Green branches of conifers are applied to the spire giving it the semblance of a forest giant. Finally, a wheel-shaped object termed 'parasol' (Nep. *gajura*, Nev. *byamo*, made of a wood called Nep. *phalauta*), is horizontally fixed at the axis on top of the spire as are three cotton flags together with two long bandanas in the colours of the Five Buddhas (red, blue, white, green, yellow), which reach down to two thirds of the length of the spire and resemble the gilt strips on temple roofs. On completion, the ideal vertical orientation of the spire carrying the so-called 9th floor (Nev. *yakaḥkha*) which should stand at a 90° angle against the ground plane very often happens to end up tilted by about 5°-15°. This is, as was pointed out to me by the supervisor of the construction Dilkumar Vadhai,

19. According to a Varāhi I asked, the relative parts of the axes are also a part of that identification.

20. They require a special consecration which takes place after the mounting of the chariot by Matsyendranātha and after sunset (in this case, 7.45-8.15 p.m., on April 21, 2004), involving the sacrifice (*balipūjā*) of a sheep below the right front wheel of the chariot and the sprinkling of all four wheels with its blood. On that occasion witnesses said that the Bhairavas might draw blood during the procession if it was not given to them in advance. For the parallels to the Jagganath (Jagadnātha) of Puri and the connected sacrifices s. Mishra 1971.

due to its non-rigid, but relatively loose connection to its base²¹ and the relatively mobile web of branches and rattans which have ample space to move and resettle. For foreign observers who see the chariot for the first time, the degree of inclination in relation to its base is frighteningly precarious. However, as the spire is made out of relatively light materials, with its volume and twig and leaf covering hiding a relatively porous interior, the precarious, unstable look is deceptive. The total netto weight of the chariot, according to the construction worker, amounts to roughly 2 tons with the spire making up only 1/4 of the total weight. To this one has to add the weight of an average of 20 people who travel on it during the passage, including the deity, its decor as well as the materials for the daily ritual. To my questions about the considerable incline of the spire this year my informants replied that this was totally within the norm of a chariot constructed according to the rules. When asked about the danger of it toppling they said that the danger lay not in the construction of the chariot, but in the way it was handled on the way, especially on how skilfully it was steered.

Essential for the movement of the chariot are 4 ropes attached to the pole and the platform, which extend over a distance of 25 metres in front of the chariot. Young men pull the ropes while one of them sits right in front on top of the *nāga* inciting the pullers and synchronizing the pulls with the call of “A-ste! A-ste!”. The chariot is equipped with no inbuilt steering mechanism, and the ropes’ pull does not enable to control the path of the chariot on an often sloped and almost throughout uneven terrain. Hence, men called Nev. *ghakūs*, usually older than the pulling youths, apply appositely manufactured wedge-like wooden brakes (Nev. *ghaḥ mā*) made out of conical blocks half a metre in length, with thin sticks of a metre’s length pierced through them to handle the wedges which are kept at ground level, to the turning wheels in such a way as to alternately block them thereby determining the direction in which the chariot moves. As this involves working closest to the wheels while the chariot moves this activity is regarded not only the most important for the safe passage of the deity but also as the most dangerous.

21. An informant compared the spire to a very big basket tied on to a car (“*gāḍī-mā lagāeko ḍālo jastai*”).

4. The History of Incidents²²

The first date mentioned in reference to a breakdown of the chariot is 1618 (738 N.S.) when apparently several such incidents resulted in the removal of the deity and its placement in a rest house (Nep. *pāṭi*) for the time of repairs to the chariot.²³ In 1631 (751 Nepāla Saṃvat²⁴) the chariot was blocked for a number of days until the king's chief counsellor (*rājaguru*) ascended it, thereby getting it to move again.²⁵ In 1654 the Buddhist "Wright's Chronicle" mentions several breakdowns.²⁶ In 1656 (776 N.S.) just after his first rice feeding (*annaprāśana*), which happens when children are about six months old, a child climbed onto the chariot, was possessed by the god and complained that the king had built a temple that was taller than the chariot, after which the god left the child and did not talk again.²⁷ The omens persisted during the following year culminating in the theft of jewels from the vest of the deity.²⁸ In 1662 (782 N.S.) because of the death of the Kathmandu king Pratāpa Malla no instruments were played during the procession which led to the death of the prince, a major storm and damage to Lalitpur. The king of Lalitpur went to Cobhar to perform an exculpation rite (*kṣemapūjā*) on the day of the solar eclipse.²⁹ In 1676 (797 N.S.) the paint coating on the god's face came off in blisters. The god had to be taken from the chariot and the re-consecration rituals of face painting had to be repeated before the chariot could move on.³⁰ The deterioration of the paint

22. I have so far not been able to include here the details given in the still unpublished Nevāri Matsyendranāthavaṃśāvali dated 1654 (N.S. 774), Ms. A 922/7 in the catalogue of the Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project, an important text for the history of the incidents surrounding the chariot, on which I am currently working.

23. Regmi 1965–1966 II, 905.

24. This local era beginning in A.D 879 was used particularly in the period of Newar Malla rule in the Kathmandu Valley (Slusser 1982, 389).

25. Padmagiri's chronicle in Hasrat 1970, 69.

26. Wright 240–241.

27. Wright 242.

28. Wright 243.

29. Thapa 1970, 10, 3; Paudel et. al. 2020-2023 II, 65.

30. Rajvamsi 2020, 10.

seems to have been a frequent and important occurrence as it is mentioned as having happened in 1714 (834 N.S.) on day two of the bright half of the month of Caitra,³¹ as well as in 1818, (N.S. 938), when an earthquake rocked the valley as the god was being taken back to Buṃgamatī,³² when the chariot passed a place called Thati on day twelve of the dark half of the month of Vaiśakha. In 1681 (N.S. 801) one of the beams of the chariot broke before leaving Buṃgamatī and four days of exculpation rites had to be performed, but the chariot broke down repeatedly on its way. In 1682 (N.S. 802) the chariot got stuck and an animal sacrifice (*balipūjā*) had to be performed three or four times by a local priest. This having had no effect, a priest was called from Buṃgamatī, but his sacrifice failed too. Finally, a Brahmin from Lalitpur was called to read out texts and this got the chariot moving again.³³ An inscription dating 1690 (N.S. 810) states that this year the chariot fell at Yaṃpibāhā and the god had to be taken out.³⁴ Later chronicles³⁵ comment that an architectural item in gold had to be added to the chariot on request of the deity who spoke through a boy who had just undergone ordination (Nev. *bare chuyegu*). Here we have the first source referring to the lifting up of the chariot with the help of ropes. In 1691 (N.S. 811) the chariot fell over at Būbāhā. There were big difficulties in saving the god who was severely damaged. But repairs were made and the procession continued.³⁶ 1693 (813 N.S.) saw several breakdowns and the chariot apparently even fell into a hole.³⁷ In 1705 (825 N.S.) the main pole broke more than once and each time the exculpation rites could not be performed at the right time. At that time King Yoganārendra of Lalitpur died and King Śrī Śrī Bhāskara Malla of Kathmandu temporarily appropriated the throne.³⁸ In 1708 (828 N.S.) a man who climbed on

31. Paudel et. al. 2020-2023 II 74.

32. Sharma 1969, 6, 18.

33. Regmi 1965-1966 III, 92.

34. Tevārī, 1963, 10, 14.

35. Paudel et. al. 2020-2023 II, 72; Thapa 1970, 10, 7.

36. Regmi 1965-1966 III 35.

37. Regmi 1965-1966 III 97-98.

38. Regmi 1965-1966 III, 52.

top of the chariot's pinnacle fell and died.³⁹ 1717 (837 N.S.) seems to have been a particularly bad year as the chariot's main pole cracked 31 (sic) times and the chariot of Mīnanātha burnt to the ground. Subsequently, an epidemic broke out in Lalitpur and King R̥ddhinarasiṃha died.⁴⁰ In 1724 (844 N.S.) a dog touched the god when he was being taken down from the chariot. On his arrival back in Buṃgamatī the divinity came in contact with a pig and extensive atonement rites (*prāyaścittapūjās*) had to be performed.⁴¹ In 1741 (861 N.S.) the chariot toppled twice and King Rājyaparakāśa Malla performed exculpation rites at the main Śaivite shrine of Paśupatinātha.⁴² 1747 (867 N.S.) had a minor goddess or fairy (*devatā*) touch the chariot to set it going again, after it got stuck.⁴³ In 1760 (880 N.S.) in his temple in Lalitpur Matsyendranātha appeared to King Viśvajita Malla with his back turned towards him. A riot broke out because of the king's mistress and Viśvajita committed suicide.⁴⁴ 1833 (953 N.S.) and 1856 (976 N.S.) had terrible earthquakes which damaged the shrine or disrupted the procession.⁴⁵ In 1862 (982 N.S.) during the reign of Surendra Vikrama Śāha while being pulled from Buṃgamatī the chariot fell and had to be dismantled. Two weeks later another chariot was ready. This suggests that, if the criteria for rebuilding were the same as today, the 'parasol' then had touched the ground. It is worth noting that records of falls which resemble the present one, i.e. in which either the position of the fallen chariot or a reconstruction of the chariot is described do not reach back to the Malla period. Whatever the reason may be, it is conspicuous, that

39. Vajracarya 1975/1976, 29.

40. Regmi 1965–1966 II, 352.

41. Paudel et. al. 2020-2023 II 75.

42. Regmi 1965–1966 II, 190.

43. Paudel et. al. 2020-2023 II 78.

44. Thapa 1970, 10, 11; Regmi 1965–1966 II 362.

45. Rana 1992; Sharma 1969, 6, 25.

46. Adhikari 2004 gives 1802 (V.S. 1858), which falls in the reign of Girvanayuddha Vira Vikrama Śāha (1797-1816), as the first date of a fall comparable to the one in question. Anonymous 2004c follows Adhikari in this.

contemporary journalism⁴⁶ and popular memory⁴⁷ connect the beginning of a history of falls exclusively with the Śāha dynasty and neither take into account the dramatic breakdowns during the Mallas, nor consider it an event which has to be mentioned in connection with the procession from its onset. In 1833 during the circumambulation of the shrine of Matsyendranātha's mother a fire broke out on the chariot, lasted for two hours and damage was done to the god which had to be repaired, after removing the image, through appeasement rites (*śānti-vastipūjās*).⁴⁸ The same happened four years later, this time including the chariot of Minanātha, but without damage to the image. In 1875 the chariot broke apart near modern day Maṅgalbajāra (Nev. Maṅgaḥ). Also this occasion must have been similar to the incident of 2004, because a new chariot was constructed. During the continuation of the procession King Surendra died, which brought the festival to a standstill lasting 13 days.⁴⁹ In 1934 an earthquake levelled an extensive number of buildings in the Kathmandu Valley including the temple of the god at Tabāhā. During that year's subsequent procession the chariot fell.⁵⁰ 1970 and 1971 (Vikrama Saṃvat⁵¹ 2026 and 2027) the chariot fell in Nakkhu and Saugaḥ respectively, completely broke apart both times, the second time even the 'parasol' touching the ground (see picture 1): In early 1972 King Mahendra passed away.⁵² 1980 (V.S. 2036), when a controversial referendum was held, first only the chariot's spire broke, leaving the 'parasol' undefiled, but then the chariot fell on its left side and had to be reconstructed (see

47. Gīrvaṇyuddha Vira Vikrama Śāha (1797-1816) was mentioned to me twice when asking about the first such incident. Many interlocutors however, as vague as they may be, point out that such incidents had not always occurred and had become more frequent in recent times.

48. Sharma 1969, 6, 25.

49. Sharma 1968, 5, 28.

50. However, Adhikari 2004 also refers to falls in the years 1944 (V.S. 2001), 1951 (V.S. 2008), 1955 (V.S. 2012), 1969 (V.S. 2026).

51. This is an era of Indian origin beginning 57/56 B.C. and has been in use in the Kathmandu Valley since the beginning of the Śāha period (Slusser 1982, 384-385).

52. Sangraula 2004; Adhikari 2004b.

picture 2).⁵³ In 1990 (V.S. 2046) the chariot fell. The same year the democracy movement toppled the one-party Pañcāyata system.⁵⁴ 2001 (V.S. 2057) the chariot fell at a place calle Naḥ, just after leaving Phulchowk, allegedly breaking up entirely⁵⁵ and within a month, on June 1st the massacre of the royal family took place.⁵⁶ The last time Matsyendranātha fell was as recent as last year, 2003, (V.S. 2060), again a couple of hundred metres after the start at Phulchowk. Leaving aside the ongoing political crisis, no exceptional political event was remembered to have been connected to the incident.

As we have no handbooks dealing with the prescribed ritual of the procession as a whole, these sources help us shed some light on the possible development of aspects of the ritual. Certainly, what we have here are reports from a variety of heterogeneous sources, the value of each single one would have to be assessed according to its place, time and author. However, the voices we hear are, except the more recent ones, all from chronicles which generally tend to try to explain certain events at the royal court, be it political decisions or changes in power and seem to connect them with events surrounding complications in the transfer of the chariot or the state of the god's image. On the other hand, we also find explanations of changes in ritual which indirectly may allow speculation on a possible political situation within the community of ritual specialists and the groups in charge of the cult. What is interesting is that the fall of the chariot does not always seem to have been the major worry of the practitioners of the cult, as it is today. The dangers facing the god on its journey seem to have been much more diverse in the past. The chariot on the whole seems to have been much more frail, if one believes the numbers of break-

53. Sangraula 2004. A photograph in my possession documents a crash in 1984 (V.S. 2040) when the chariot apparently came off the road and crashed into a house under construction, though remaining intact and with the parasol way above the first floor.

54. Sangraula 2004; Adhikari 2004. Again, according to Adhikari the chariot also "completely gave away" in the years 1992 (V.S. 2048), 1996 (V.S. 2052), while it "broke down three times" in 1994 (V.S. 2050).

55. Adhikari 2004.

56. Maharjan 2004.

downs during one procession in several years. Yet, it is not to be excluded that these figures were influenced by current historiographical and political motives. Damage through fire, ritual pollution through animals and the deterioration of the gods paint coating seem to have been major threats, which the few people I asked today about it were not able to remember to have occurred during their lifetime. On the other hand it is remarkable that this year's incident and the subsequent measures taken, to be mentioned below, though not described in detail, seem to have been no novelty.

5. The 2004 Incident and Its Assessment

On Sunday, April 25, 2004 (13 Vaiśākha), 9.30 p.m. the chariot toppled at a place called Calācheṁ, 200 metres before reaching its prescribed halt at Sundhārā, falling on its right side crashing onto the ground just between the Nārāyaṇa temple and a small Gaṇeśa shrine, slightly damaging the latter (see picture 3). Eight people including two policemen, two priests and four 'locals', i.e. people from the neighbourhood, were injured, two of them seriously.⁵⁷ The image of Matsyendranātha was hardly damaged at all, whereas materials for worship and the images of the other deities on board were scattered all over the ground and had to be collected and safeguarded by the priests. The figure of people present at the site was said to be in the thousands.⁵⁸ The Chief of Lalitpur District Police was quoted as saying that "the chariot had started leaning from Saturday"⁵⁹ already, from which one would assume that a trained eye might have been able to observe a change in the structure, – an assumption for which I was not able to get any independent confirmation. On Monday, April 26 workers started preparing to raise the chariot again which on the same evening was re-erected by the help of two cranes and left standing at the site of its crash.⁶⁰

57. Maharjan 2004.

58. Ojha 2004.

59. Ojha 2004.

60. Rāsasa 2004a.

Speculations as to the reason of the fall shot up the same night. They generally divided into three lines of argument, one seeing faults in the construction of the chariot, the other in the way it was handled and in the continuation of the procession after dark and the last in religious shortcomings during the entire process.⁶¹ What lends weight to the first assumption is the fact that since V.S. 2050 there have been repeated incidents of the structure of the chariot giving away, though without always leading to a fall. However, apparently on-the-road repairs had become much more frequent than before.⁶² The few voices I heard directly accused the *Vadhais* and *Yānvalas* of not doing their job properly. *Prakriti Adhikari*, correspondent for the government-owned paper "The Rising Nepal", reports on the more serious accusation of the groups in question actually bagging profits, to which the response was that everyday orders were far more profitable than the construction of the chariot considered mainly for its religious merit.⁶³ A member of the *Guthi Samsthāna*, who wanted to remain unnamed, favouring himself the line of a faulty construction, disagreed, saying that the reason for the frequent breakdowns lay rather in the employment of young inexperienced artisans and in the lack of engagement in supervising the basic fitting work by the elders. When asked by the press whether the materials used by the artisans had been checked by the *Guthi Samsthāna*, its *Lalitpur* branch's director *Hari Prasad Joshi* declared that he would prefer to leave these decisions to the artisans themselves.⁶⁴ The arguments and the officials' reactions identify this position as one which intends to put the blame on the *Guthi*

61. E.g. *Adhikari* 2004: "The reason for the eventful fall this time was neither of the two mentioned here, it was because those dragging the huge structure did not deter in their ordeal despite the darkness that prevailed till late night. The enthusiastic participants in the chariot procession went on pulling the chariot in the same direction encountering an eventual accident."

62. *Adhikari* 2004. *S.M. Amatya* mentions that the accident presumably of 1994 was explained to have happened due to the poor quality of the rattan employed (*Amatya* 1997, 20).

63. *Adhikari* 2004.

64. *Adhikari* 2004. Here *H.P. Joshi* is quoted as not wanting to engage in speculations about the reason of the crash: "I am least aware about the reasons that lead to the falling down of the chariot."

Samsthāna. This may partly be motivated by the intention of certain groups, particularly the people living between Mangālbajāra and Sundhārā directly affected by the crash, to make claims and push for negotiations.

The second position connecting the fall with the chariot's handling was by far the most frequent. Alcohol consumption of those who pulled, physical and mental exhaustion and the practice of continuing after dark, i.e. after 9 or even 10 p.m., were the reasons mentioned, also adding the fact that the group straightening the spire was working from the housetops.⁶⁵ The most widely favoured explanation was that the coordination between the group of people which was responsible for the braking and steering of the chariot and the group conducting the straightening of the spire became increasingly difficult due to the above mentioned reasons which resulted in both a final conflicting steer and pull which had the chariot topple.⁶⁶ People I talked to referred to an existing rule of stopping the chariot at sunset even though the prescribed destination is not reached which has been practically entirely given up in recent years. The president of Lalitpur's powerful Farmers' Caste Society, the *Jyāpu Samāja*, Chiri Babu Maharjan was the strongest public spokesperson in favour of prohibiting the procession to continue after dark.⁶⁷ Another argument mirroring the argument of faulty construction and brought up twice on the streets of Lalitpur, but which I was not able to find in the press, was that the group which was responsible for the moving of the chariot had been newly engaged for that purpose, was inexperienced and underpaid, which sounds like yet another shot aimed at the Guṭhi Samsthāna. Another opinion I heard and read was that the chariot was pulled down on purpose by parts of the crowd involved. That hooliganism and ill-will of certain groups may also be a factored in, is the

65. Ojha 2004. Ojha adds that "the road was bad, still was being pulled." After looking at the place of the crash I would discard this additional cause.

66. Maharjan 2004.

67. Adhikari 2004. Currently, discussions are being conducted how to enforce this proposition.

perspective of an elite minority⁶⁸ and might be overstretched and polarising, but it touches upon an important point and shows, that explaining the accident as a mere technical failure of an otherwise competent, focussed, coordinated and success-oriented group fails to do justice to the complexity of this event. Trying to ensure safe passage is as much part of the performance as trying to challenge the safety measures, as well as having a good time by doing both. Another key feature of the way people talk about the procession is ascribing certain roles to certain groups active in the process and at the same time discrediting others, while justifying oneself. A web of claims, assumed duties, accusations and challenges help define the roles played in the procession and weave the tangled texture of which both produces and is produced by this event.

The third line of argument, finally, combines both previous lines. It claims that over the last years things have been going wrong, both during the construction of the chariot and during the procession. Taribabu Dangol, the elder (Nep. *thakāli*) of the Yānvala Guṭhi,⁶⁹ denying any faulty assembly and taking over the perspective of the Brahmin elite, with their stress on wrong and right and their insistence on mistakes, maintains that these days the rules of conduct (Nep. *ācārako niyama*) which apply to those who work on the construction site until the completion of the chariot, such as abstaining from garlic, meat and sex, are not followed any more. Similarly, Taribabu points out, that during the procession many of the youngsters pulling the chariot fail to take off their leather belts. His most vitriolic attack is directed towards those riding the chariot: "People ride on the chariot carelessly, so the god is angry and then the chariot dilapidates suddenly." Additionally, he mentions that women are more and more frequently seen on the deck of the chariot.⁷⁰

68. One of the two Brahmins travelling on the chariot this year, Prakashdhar Sharma, is quoted by Adhikari 2004.

69. Adhikari 2004.

70. Adhikari 2004 refers to three women who rode on the chariot in 1994 (V.S. 2050) and caused it to break down thrice that year.

In this context the question of the cause is closely connected with the question of the effect. The most immediate effect was the injury of the eight people mentioned in the reports. As I was told from the Guṭhi Saṃsthāna, demands of reimbursement of the treatment costs of the hospitalized was the most obvious and pressing consequence. The above criticism directed towards the construction and handling, has to do with a genuine personal pain, with venting a general anger at the authorities and at raising the stakes and increasing the chances of success of pushing through financial demands. Also in this incident the deeply ingrained reflex of blaming the authorities and making demands in such diverse cases as natural disasters, rebel violence, electrocution or road accidents in the light of a state on the verge of financial meltdown and shackled by widespread corruption, shows that the self-paternalizing attitude in political matters of much of the public persists unbroken within the religious setup. On the other hand, it also shows the strong resistance to an elite which claims the monopoly of determining what is right and wrong, to condemn and possibly punish trespassers, – resistance which does not take the form of refuting that claim, but retaliates with the counter-claim that the elite, which is expected to take care of the people's well-being, compensate for not living up to the expectation of being omnipotent. The conflict of the elite and the non-elite is a main feature of this event, which can only be understood if one does not adopt the perspective of one party, but listens to their polyphony. To adopt the elite-centred discourse of right or wrong, success or failure precludes polyphony.

A second almost immediate effect to be witnessed the next morning was a general and strong downbeat feeling of people I met, among acquaintances, neighbours, shopkeepers and people on the street, the crash being the major topic of discussion. This was especially true for the neighbourhood, the quarter of Calācheṃ, but also in a broader sense for the community between Gābāhā and Sundhārā, and ultimately for Lalitpur. This concentric expansion of damage becomes clear when you speak to people from other parts of Lalitpur who sympathize with the inhabitants of Calācheṃ who see the fall as a setback regarding the merit they would have received if the chariot had passed

successfully, and which now had turned into a negative premonition. Exactly which concrete effects the fall could or would have, was never explicitly stated, merely that it was bad for the people living there and that something had to be done immediately. Further, a frequent complaint by people from other parts of town was the delay in completing the procession, which now was likely to finish a month behind schedule. A neighbour referred to the present situation as if he had to take a deep breath (Nep. "*malāi ṭhulo sāsa linuparthyo*") until the procession would resume. References to the Kathmandu Valley, the country as a whole and even to the monarchy were comparatively rare and were to be found much more in the contemporary press releases.⁷¹ However, first reactions to the crash were full of hints about the current state of the country, the criticism of the king's as well as the parties' and even the Maoists' policies. The strikes called by both Maoists and parties as well as the demonstrations especially by the student's unions in the weeks after the incident, leading to the resignation of Prime Minister Thapa installed by the king last year were continuously read and referred to in the light of the fall of the Rāto Matsyendranātha. These, however, are readings which I only heard from people who are not ritual specialists, not involved with the organization or performance of the event. They seemed to refer to the event as if it were to confirm something which they had already known or feared anyway, who expressed their pessimistic attitude towards political and social affairs by calling on a divine event. It seems as if those outside the realm of ritual responsibility for it referred to the event from the perspective of inverted prophesy and in a more deterministic way stressing the connection between the fall which had happened and events which also had just happened or were just taking place.

It is interesting to note that in opposition to that view, ritual specialists seem to downplay the necessity of a linkage between the fall and current or past political events or even of bad effects on the local community close to the accident. Bageswar Rajopadhaya, a Brahmin of Lalitpur, whom I asked about his view on the matter, especially whether

71. Maharjan 2004; Sangraula 2004.

he considered the fall of the deity an ill omen for the neighbourhood, Lalitpur, the country and the crown, dismissed these views as wrong and bad. He said that it could not be that just because some people had pulled the chariot badly and made it fall the whole country should suffer. Instead, he said that the necessary measures would be taken to make sure that the damage done to the deity and to the chariot was repaired, and that the safe passage of the chariot during the remaining part of the procession was guaranteed. He added that there are obstacles (*vighna*) on every journey (Nep. *jātrā*) and that with the help of the knowledge of the priests and engineers and the financial contribution from the responsible authorities the enterprise would be led to a successful conclusion. Different from the non-specialists view of seeing the past accident as cause for past or present political trouble, he seemed to rather have in eye the possible future dangers which have to be avoided on the god's journey.⁷² As we will see below, this is also the view of the chief astrologer employed for planning the new start of the procession. However, there the focus will be on both appeasing the inimical planetary deities who keep the chariot blocked and smoothing the way to ward off future obstacles. The talk of obstructions seems to be the common way to denote the incident among ritual specialists as also Nucheman Shakya, senior member of the priest body from Buṅgamatī speaks of "obstructions or accidents" met by the deity on its way.⁷³ Both the reaction of Bageshwar as well as of Prakashdhar Sharma, quoted above, seem to follow the strategy of transposing the cause for the disruption outside the ritual. It is an external impediment, the wrong handling by simply ignorant or willingly disruptive elements⁷⁴ alien to the know-how and the inner ritual core of the performance, thus echoing the Puranic and Sanskritic narrative of the dark and demonic *asuras* who disrupt the gods' noble activities. This transposition of responsibility and the elite's use of the categories good and bad, right and wrong, is

72. Axel Michaels points at the conflict within the Brahmanical tradition that the pilgrimage as journey must include and take into account the dangers of defilement implied when leaving the ritual arena of the house (Michaels 1994, 306).

73. Sangraula 2004.

74. Often also called "miscreants" in the Nepalese press in line with post-colonial South Asian official parlance.

still mirrored in the opinion of the chief supervisor of the construction who cites the non-dharmic behaviour of his collaborators as responsible for the incident. He as supervisor and carrying the moral authority of the elder remains detached from the wrongdoings by knowing the right conduct and bemoaning the downfall. Interestingly, however, in his case the group of people or rather the ensemble of actions undermining the effort is allowed far more into the core of the ritual performance, including those who ride on the chariot and those who put it together.

According to the local office of the Guṭhi Saṁsthāna its first reaction was to issue a report of the incident to the central office of the Guṭhi Saṁsthāna with a carbon copy to the Royal Police. According to §8 of the Saṁsthāna's statute⁷⁵ it is the board of directors (Nep. *saṁkṣāla samiti*) which has to decide which further steps to take. It is supposed to nominate a specialized committee (Nep. *vidvat samiti*) of seven members, this year chaired by Dr. Madhava Bhattarai, the Deputy Royal Priest (Nep. *nayah badaguruju*), and co-chaired by the Royal Astrologer Angur Baba Joshi and five people of high social standing. Conspicuously, this year Buddhists were missing from the list, as I was told by the officer in charge. The directors board would commission a report, to be delivered to the Royal Palace by the board of experts, demanding information as to the condition of the chariot, the amount of new materials needed, the time employed for rebuilding, what kind of rituals would be necessary and what changes the board of experts would suggest. The board of experts convened on Friday, April 30, consisting additionally of Rudra Kumar Shrestha, an influential member of the city council of Lalitpur, representatives of the Ministries of Home, Law and Culture, the Director General of the Departments of Land Reform and Management. The results were sent to the central office, announced immediately and published the day after.⁷⁶ The reason given for the crash was darkness and the carelessness of those pulling the chariot. Six people had been injured by the collapse of the structure, three seriously and still hospitalized with a leg fracture, a spine fracture and a severe

75. Śreṣṭha 2053, 196-228.

76. Rāsasa 2004c and 2004d.

concussion respectively. Some ornaments of the chariot were found missing. The most important decision, however, i.e. whether the chariot would have to be rebuilt before the procession could continue or not, remained undecided. Instead, it was advised that one consult old local residents, knowledgeable people (Nep. *vidvat*) and heads of local *guṭhi* (Nep. *guṭhiyārs*) and have the matter discussed. As the officer at the branch office told me, there are no texts available for these situations. Instead, one relies on personal advice founded on the oral transmission of precedents. Rebuilding would imply the sorting out of reusable and not reusable parts, which would have to be discarded. Furthermore, it transpired that the Guṭhi Saṁsthāna considered allowing metal parts to be used in building future chariots. This proposal, which has been brought up before,⁷⁷ came among complaints that the kinds of materials, especially wood required for certain parts of the construction were hard to find and amidst speculations that the replacement of some parts by unfit materials could have led to the crash. However, this push for allegedly safer building techniques was said to have been opposed by traditionalists who felt that “any deviation from tradition in the way the chariot is built would violate religious norms.”⁷⁸

After premature reports that the procession would continue, on Thursday, April 29⁷⁹ it already had become clear that the ‘parasol’s’ contact with the ground would make it necessary to disassemble most of the chariot and have it rebuilt before continuing the procession.⁸⁰ The decisive document in this matter, which was made accessible to

77. Adhikari 2004.

78. Ibid. Adhikari 2004 quotes a *gyāpu* elder, Chirikaji Maharjan, who objected especially to the shape of the chariot being altered, as well as Cetonath Sharma, whom Adhikari calls “cultural scientist”, as supporting a modification of the chariot’s shape “to ensure security and to save tradition.”

79. Rāsasa 2004b.

80. “Because of the chariot’s ‘parasol’ (*gajura*) touching the ground they thought this to be a serious matter. [...] According to their tradition, after the chariot’s parasol has touched the ground, a whole new chariot has to be built.” (*yasapāli rathako gajurale bhui nai choekolāi unīharule jhan gambhira māneko chan. [...] unakā anusāra, yasari rathako gajurale bhui choepachi pheri nayā ratha nai banāunuparcha.*) Maharjan 2004.

me, is a letter in Nepālī⁸¹ from the astrologer Kirti Bharata Joshi, chosen to present the decisive diagnosis, to the Head of the Guṭhi Saṃsthāna of Lalitpur (*śrīmāna pramukha jyū*), Hariprasad Joshi, dating May 14, 2004 (Jyeṣṭha 1, V.S. 2061) giving an astrological analysis of the time of the fall, giving the correct timing (*sāita*) for the repeated ascension of the deity onto the chariot (*punaḥ rathārohana*) for Friday, May 21, 2004 (*jyeṣṭha 8, śukravāra*, V.S. 2061) on page one and on the following eight recommending the procedures for the appeasement rite (*śāntisvāstī[-pūjā]*). The letter states that the chariot happened to have fallen pointing south (*dakṣītarpha paṭīekovare*) in Calācheṃ near Sundhārā on the sixth day (*ṣaṣṭhān-tithi*) of the light half of the month Vaiśakha N.S. 1124, viz. V.S. 2061, under the lunar mansion (*nakṣatra*) of *ārdra* or *punavarsu* (sic)⁸², the conjunction (*yoga*) *sukarma*,⁸³ the lunar division of the day (*karaṇa*)⁸⁴ being *kaulava* or *taitila*⁸⁵, the day Sunday, Vaiśakha 30, the planetary deities having been visible in an inauspicious way (*grha aśubha dekhiakole*) Mars (*maṅgala*), Mercury (*budha*), Saturn (*śani*), the lunar eclipse deities Rāhu and Ketu, the Moon (*candramā*), the Sun (*sūrya*) and so on (*-ādi*), meaning possible other relevant deities not mentioned. The instructions for the offering to the planetary deities repeat the timing, mention the astrological 'location' (*grhasthāna*) of the chariot's fall as bad and foresee bad consequences (*vividha duṣṭsaphalanivarana*) for country and king if these rites are not carried through. In order to achieve pleasure (*sukha*) and prosperity (*aiśvarya*) and in order to complete the procession without prior obstacle (*nirvighna pūrvaka*) offerings have to be made to the obstructing deities which are given in the following list. The letter then mentions the other rites required for the complex appeasement

81. In quoting from the letter, which is in a highly Sanskrit Nepālī, I refrain from specifying the language of terms or phrases.

82. Skt. *ārdra* being the fourth and *punarvasu* the fifth of seven lunar mansions.

83. The seventh of the 27 yogas, in which the joint motion in longitude of the sun and moon amounts to 13°20'.

84. An astrological unit by which the day is divided in 11 parts, measuring the waxing and waning of the moon.

85. The third and fourth astronomical daily period respectively.

ritual which further include a fire sacrifice (*homa*), worship (*pūjā*) dedicated to Kumbheśvara (the form of Śiva to which Lalitpur's biggest Śaivite temple is dedicated), the virgin goddess Kumārī, Paśupati (the form of Śiva at his most revered temple in the Valley), his consort Guhyeśvarī, Śrī Macchindranātha (sic) himself, to Bhairavanātha along with a sacrifice (*bali*), Mahākāla, Ganeśa the deity of beginnings, ways and obstacles, "and others" (*-ādi*). Further text reading (*pāṭha*) is required, chanting (*japa*) and a concluding exculpation rite (*kṣemapūjā*).

6. Re-Instalment and Appeasement

On Thursday, April 29 the Annapūrṇa Poṣṭ published a note reporting that the king and his queen together with the crown prince and his wife in their first public appearance since the incident had gone to a visit to the shrine at Dakshinkali and offered to the goddess, protector of the royal family as prescribed by the texts.⁸⁶ Comments by acquaintances of mine pointed to a connection between this visit and the event, stressing its gravity for the crown. According to the Nicaya Raja Shakya, representative of the Lalitpur Buddhists during the procession and in charge for the last 21 years, the time window for the reconstruction of the chariot would be till June 4.⁸⁷ After that the next window would be from August 31 to September 5.⁸⁸ Hariprasad Joshi stated that a reconstruction would cost NEPR 600 000,- and that the government had given the permission to procure the necessary choice of timber.⁸⁹

On Wednesday, May 5 between 8.00 and 8.10 p.m. a rite was celebrated to inaugurate the reconstruction (*ratha punaḥ nirmāṇa*) of the

86. *śāstroktā vidhipūrvakā dakṣiṇakālī bhagavatīko pūjā-ārcanā garibaksyo*. Rāsasa 2004b.

87. In contrast, repairs to the Bhaktapur chariot during Bisket, being much smaller, can usually be done within a day, even in case of a broken axis. The chariot has three days to cover a much shorter distance and always reaches its destination (personal communication by Niels Gutschow).

88. Himalayan News Service 2004.

89. Himalayan News Service 2004.

chariot. In front of the chariot, already depleted of the spire and the shrine, four holes had been dug in which four beams were to be stuck serving as tyre jacks (Nev. *hākī*) for the vehicle for the time of its dis- and reassembly. One woodworker and three scaffolding workers performed the ritual called Nev. *haṃvo puḷā*, which is done before beginning any kind of construction work. On Thursday, May 6, between 10.30 a.m. and 12.30 p.m. the chariot was lifted by the employment of 18 men and four jacks. Skipping the time during which the chariot was being rebuilt, on Friday, May 21 at 8.56 a.m. at the astrologically determined time (Nep. *sāita*) the reconstruction of the chariot by the Vaḍhaīs and Yānvalas under the direction of Senior Engineer (Nep. *variṣṭha injiniyara*) Saroj Thapaliya was declared completed. A group of 10 Rājopādhyāyas and two Jośis under the direction of Shri Kavijananda Rajopadhyaya of Pakutva, Lalitpur recited verses (*japa*) and texts (*pāṭha*) from 9.10 to 11.30 a.m. at the small temple of Vaṃśagopāla at Sundhārā, in accordance with the directions prescribed in the astrologer's letter. At 9.30 a.m. the bronze-cast face of Akāśa Bhairava was brought to the chariot and fixed to the *nāga*'s tip. At 10.09 a.m. the king's adviser's guard arrived at Sundhārā joined by the sword-holder of the king and fired two rounds of salute. At 10.14 a.m. the Rāto Matsyendrātha was taken from the inn in a procession, with the platoon leading the way, followed by a sweeper (Nep. *poḍe*, Nev. *pvaṃ* or *pvaḥ*) with his broom, people laying a strip of white cloth for the god to trod on, two people carrying bells, two sword holders, another sweeper with his broom, a woman offering flowers to the deity, a fly whisk (*camara*) bearer, the main priest, the palanquin of Matsyendrānātha carried by four priests, the Buddha Amitābha or Dīpaṅkara carried by a priest, a man carrying the silver box in which the foot piece (*paduka*) of the deity is kept. The procession took a direct path to the chariot reaching it in seven minutes (i.e. 10.21 a.m.)⁹⁰, after which Matsyendrānātha and Dīpaṅkara were hoisted and placed into the chariot's shrine. Immediately after, at 11.44 a.m., three Vajrācāryas, all of Bungamati, namely the seniormost Suryamuni

90. The mounting of the chariot by the deity had been prescribed for the time between 8.56 and 9.11 a.m. after the completion of an exculpation rite (*kṣemapūjā*). The deviation from this time could not be explained to me.

(officiating as Nev. *thāypājū*), the second seniormost Punyaraj (officiating as *mūlācārya*) and finally Kapilamuni (officiating as *upādhyāya*) started with the exculpation rite (*kṣemapūjā*), the patron (Nep. *jajamāna*) in this case being a Śreṣṭha from Pūrṇacāṇḍī. They were assisted by the staff of the Guṭhi Saṁsthāna and the seniormost priest had a photocopy of the astrologer's letter which he would use to cross-check. The rite started with the *mūlācārya* accepting the cow's gift (*gaudāna*) including a calf, after which, he conducted a worship of the vessel (*kalaśārcana*). At 12.11 p.m., with the assistance of the *upādhyāya*, he begun the central offering to the Nine Planetary Deities (*navagrahadāna*). Throughout this rite the *thapājū* recited the Grahamātrikāpāṭha, the Ganeśapāṭha as well as the Pratyangirapāṭha. To conclude the exculpation rite the patron performed the worship of all the deities present on the chariot (Nev. *cakapujā*), after which the members of the Guṭhi Saṁsthāna present offered their financial contribution (*dakṣinā*) to the priests, and the entire event was wrapped up by 12.41 p.m..

On Saturday, May 22 preparations for the remaining rites started at 10.30 a.m. It was 11.18 a.m. when the diagrams (*yantras*) were drawn on the ground, after which the entire priestly staff of the chariot from Buṁgamatī, i.e. seven Vajrācāryas and 14 Śākyas read and performed the Guṇakaraṇḍavyūha, one after the other. The fire sacrifice (*homa*) was performed by the same *mūlācārya* from the day before, Punyaraj Bajracharya, assisted by the *upādhyāya* Kapilamuni Bajracharya who also performed the protective rite called *pañcarakṣa*. Thereafter, the *thapājū* Sūryamuni Bajracharya celebrated the standard set of life-cycle rites in their reduced version, the *daśakarma*, necessary in the consecration and ritual empowerment of religious artefacts, while the other two Vajrācāryas sang tantric songs (*caryāgīti*), and two other Vajrācāryas performed sacrifices to four of the Eight Mother Goddesses (*aṣṭamātrikābali*) and, according to tradition, most effective one, the Great Sacrifice (*mahābali*). Again, as on the preceding day, the patron was a Śreṣṭha from Pūrṇacāṇḍī, Lalitpur. The *daśakarma* came to an end at 1.00 p.m. and the performers relaxed after having had a meal called Nev. *pañcāku* (Skt. *pañcakuśa*) consisting of five kinds of buffalo meat, which is said to be the

favourite dish of the goddess⁹¹ and in this case included pastry, wine and beer. 1.45 p.m. was the time for the sacrifices, whose texts had been read beforehand: a ram for the Sacrifice for the Eight Mother Goddesses, another ram for the Great Sacrifice dedicated to the Bhairavas of the four wheels and axes as well as a buffalo for the Bhairava of the pole in front. While the chariot was sprayed with powerful spurts issuing from the tied-up buffalo's aorta, the priests in charge of tending to Matsyendranātha covered the entrance to the holiest with a red curtain, thus protecting the Bodhisattva from the gushing blood.⁹² The meat of all three animals was divided up among the Vajrācāryas. The *homa* recommenced at 14.25 and was rounded up by the prescribed offering of a full ladle of ghee into the fire (*pūrṇāhuti*) and the offering of a coconut. An hour later two rams stemming from Buṅgamati were sacrificed in a rite dedicated to the successful execution of the entire ritual regarding the chariot (*viśvakarmabali*) and the meat distributed among the staff of the Guṭhi Saṁsthāna present. Finally, one last ram was offered to the wheel and axis Bhairavas and given to the members of the *guṭhi* responsible for the braking and steering of the chariot, the Ghahkhu Guṭhi. At that time it was 4.00 p.m.. The entire series of rituals can be read as an alternation of rites which repeat those undertaken on the first occasion, i.e. at the beginning of the procession, and of those which intervene taking into account the crisis and helping to solve it. The ascension onto the chariot is repeated (*punar rathārohana*) after which the planets are appeased and the obstacle which is still blocking the chariot at its place is removed. After that the consecrating life-cycle rites of the god are repeated and concluded with an exculpation rite which purifies the travelling god and makes him fit for accomplishing his task. The people, eager to resume the pulling of the chariot, would have to wait until the fourth day counting from Friday, i.e. Monday, May 24 to accomplish what would have been done almost a month earlier if the Red Matsyendranātha had not fallen.⁹³

91. Gellner 1992, 286.

92. Owens has convincingly described the role of sacrifice in a cult centred on a deity which abhors killing. (Owens 1993, 265-266).

93. Rāsasa 2004e and 2004f. It may be of relevance for the continuation of the procession after the incident, that after arriving at Sundhārā, the stop it had failed to reach on April 25, the chariot would have to be turned on the spot to face West: [...] *rathalāi sohī paścima diśātarpha muhāra modera* [...]. (Anonymous 2004b).

7. *Getting it Done*

What does it mean, if we, being researchers on ritual, talk, in this case, to Newar ritual specialists and non-specialists about ritual mistake or failure in a Newar ritual? Reactions to my inquiries were very often characterized by politely cloaked irritation. My interlocutors usually were not content just with denying that there was any such thing as a ‘mistake’ (Nep. *galti*; Nev. *dvam̐gu*) or failure (Nep. *asaphaltā*; Nev. *suthām malāhgu* or simply, phonetically for Engl. ‘fail’, *phela*). Rather, the strategies for explaining the incident all resembled the ones depicted above and none would find the term ‘mistake’ adequate, neither for the breakdown of coordination among the pulling parties, nor for the moral conduct of the participants to explain what had happened. The irritation was less veiled and quickly mutated to outright bemusement when I inquired about failure. Replies ranged from assuring me that all the parties involved were working at it to bring the procession to a happy ending, “as they do every year,” to the reaction of an engineering student, Bikash Maharjan, who said to me in English: “Failure is when I fail my exam. When there is no rain or when the king and the Maoists fight, it is not failure, it is very, very worse.”⁹⁴

However, another reaction, which transcends the terminological question and which is much more subtle, was one of indignation. Leaving aside the uneasiness which accompanies discussions of the dark and dangerous sides of events or the impression that people would mind washing their dirty linen in public, both of which I experienced little of, not a few interlocutors, especially those who knew me better, and one Brahmin who did not know me at all, asked me, half, if at all, jokingly, who I thought I was to talk to them about ‘mistakes’ and ‘failures’. The point raised by this reply is not so much that this might be an attempt to deny me the right to formulate my critique, but the much more fundamental point, which identity do I take on when I talk about ritual in such a way. The problem here is the status one acquires and the role one plays or, even worse, the opportunities one forfeits when speaking as a European Indologist and field researcher about ‘mistakes’ and ‘failures’ in a ritual context. While

94. Conversation on August 31, 2004.

searching for an 'indigenous' way to assess what is going on in a Nepalese ritual, the danger is that one takes over the position of the Parbatiyā Brahmin, Newar Rājopādhyāya or Vajrācārya or one which is very similar to it, because it is they who are associated with an authority and a competence which one pretends to have when asking questions of this kind. Discussions with Parbatiyā and Newar ritual specialists about rituals of other practitioners they have witnessed or they collaborated in are generally marked by the focus they put on the mistakes the other did. This is markedly the case when the Newar talks about the "mountain Brahmin's" (Nep. *parbatiyā bahuna*) performance and vice-versa, reflecting a complicated and historically loaded adversarial relation. The dangers of the assimilation of the Western researcher to the specialized elite and the limitations of doing research while turning into 'White Brahmins' are well-known and it is necessary to reduce rather than re-enforce them. The voices documented above show that even when speaking with ritual specialists about the breakdown of this ritual, which is essentially run by Newars and thoroughly embraced by other ethnic groups, there was practically no mention of a particular mistake or an overall failure. Rather, the discussion seems to be oriented much more to the in causes which lie beyond or have made their way into the inner core of the rite. This means that even the Nepalese ritual elite, when faced with different challenges, may have very different ways of speaking about different rituals, whereas the European or American academic conducting 'ritual criticism' would start by applying the categories of mistake and failure to a much larger range of cases. The Brahmins that we try to be might turn out to be more 'white' than 'Brahmanical'.

Is it at all helpful to ask about ritual mistake and failure for the understanding of what has happened during the annual journey of the Red Matsyendranātha? It might be. Yet, I am not interested in arguing that we produce the mistakes and failures we are looking for in an environment that allegedly does not know what we are talking about. This may even be the case and doing so might even produce interesting results. Instead, I would like to close by raising the slightly more disturbing point, that by probing for mistakes and failures and turning ourselves into the referees of this 'ritual match' we take over the role of one ritual group, narrowing down the perspective on what is actu-

ally going on and giving up the advantage of being able to access the event through different social and ethnic groups. Additionally, and even more problematically, by taking over that dominating perspective we assimilate and thereby claim to be those who are in the position to judge what good and what bad rituals are. We do this without actually having to negotiate ourselves what is good and what is bad within a certain ritual or social setup, which the practicing ritual specialist inevitably has to do. We take over the knowledge and claims of the Brahmin without taking over his duties, constraints and the pressures he faces to compromise and find solutions. In order to find out more about the performance, instead of rating it along the lines of right/wrong, good/bad, successful/failed, which we, the performer, the ritual specialist or the broader public might have taken over from a ritual handbook or a group which we have found do be in sync with our own, it would be much more fruitful to measure the performers' work both according to the expectations of the various performers themselves and of their more or less specialized public composed of bystanders, the audience of radio and TV, newspaper readers, artisans, political authorities and ritual specialists. In other words, one would have to let all those who interact in and thereby create the ritual event speak and choose their own categories. The interviewed partners should be the ones not only to tell us under which conditions something is good or bad, but also whether a certain act can be good or bad at all, and, most importantly of all, who is entitled to call something good or bad, right or wrong, a success or a failure. While in the field of the every-day criticism, say, of art⁹⁵ self-entitlement comes easy, as field researchers we should be very wary of self-entitlement regarding partners on whose behalf we tend to speak much too easily. The functioning of art and ritual might have a much larger design which eludes us if we try to speak in the language of only one group, the language of mistakes and failures being such a language. In contrast, I would plead for the event in all its untidiness, for the competing voices issuing from it, to speak and to be listened to.

95. Grimes 1988, 219-220.

Accordingly, the journey of the Red Matsyendranātha, in my view, should not be seen as an event ruled by the obsession with 'getting it right' that allows for the occasional mistakes and failures to which the ritual critic may condescendingly grant the dubious honour of being tools for a better understanding of ritual. Instead, it is about trying to manage in an imperfect world, in which no harvest can be rich enough to feed the mouths of the hungry, in which the onset of the rainy season is always a time of crisis, of hope and preoccupation, where the activities of government, military and rebels are not conducive to peace and prosperity, in which it is a rule that things go other than planned, – though not for good, because there is always a chance for recovery, a way to salvation and there is always time to pick oneself up and remove the obstacles. What happens is not the mistake of a single person, not even of a single group. At the most, diverse groups are said not to have acted according to the norm, but even more so, the world's condition is such that it is this aberrant behaviour that is the norm, not the exception. And it is this condition which both creates the obstacle and demands its removal. The god's fall is no sign which the gods send from above, because the god is at the centre and reaches out to create the periphery and the whole. It is the god who gets angry and throws himself to the ground and he does so because the people act in a way that gives him reason to fall. The god throws himself to the ground and is brought to fall at the same time. The god cannot do otherwise than interrupt the circle of his journey. The drama of breakdown is part of the ritual event and it is in this ritual that the broken can be mended. Nothing goes wrong because everything has already gone wrong. Nobody does a mistake because almost everybody is potentially messing up all the time anyway. Except in the eyes of a few people, this ritual is neither about getting it wrong or getting it right, it is about getting it done. It is the striving for completion and completeness of the incomplete in serving the god and in competing for his favours, which brings about a better life. And, as we have seen, it takes all the king's horses and all the king's men to show that man can get things done, can, so to speak, put Humpty Dumpty together again in a world where things tend, almost inevitably, to break. This year, on the morning of Friday, April 23, two days before the ill-fated day, my neighbours in Cākupāṭa pointed out to me that rain had fallen last night. The Red Matsyendranātha's journey had been successful even before it could fail.

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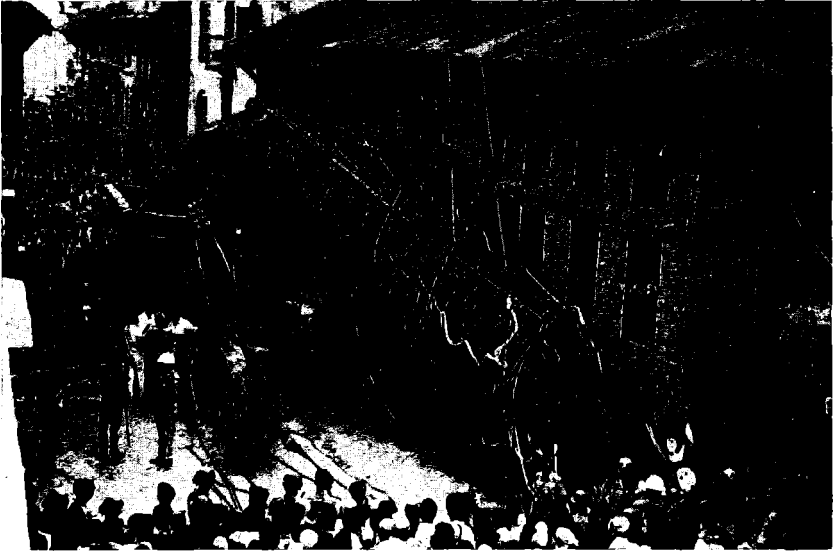


Fig. 1: The 1971 (V.S. 2027) accident in Saugah (Anonymous photographer; Courtesy Christoph Emmrich).



Fig. 2: The 1980 (V. S. 2036) accident in Nakhū (Anonymous photographer; Courtesy Christoph Emmrich).



Fig. 3: The 2004 (V. S. 2061) accident in Calācheñ (Photo by Min Bajracharya; Copyright: Himal Press).

