

Rath Jatra of Rato Machchhendranath

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The Lichhvi Kings and later the Malla Kings intertwined social and religious celebrations with myths to provide explanations of the remedies for natural phenomena and disasters. The Nepali people continue to observe these celebrations in the form of festivals without questioning but rather adding new activities over time. About two month long Rath Jatra (chariot-pulling) festival of the Rato (red) Machchhendranath in Patan is one such festival that had been developed in the course of time. One of the later additions to this festival was the public display of “Bhoto”- a vest embroidered with jewels in Jawalakhel on the last day of the festival. This is popularly known as “Bhoto Jatra”.

MACHCHHENDRANATH - KARUNAMAYA

The name Machchhendranath is a synthesis of three Sanskrit words: “Machchhe”, “Indra” and “Nath”. “Machchhe” means a far-away country or fish; “Indra” means rain god or The King of Heaven; and “Nath” means a master of all. When these three words are combined together, we have the name “Machchhendranath” meaning the god brought from

a distant country, a rain god or a master of all living beings, whichever way you may like to interpret the word.

Machchhendranath is a symbol of religious harmony. Shaivas worship Him as Shiva, Vaisnavis as Vishnu, and Buddhists as Avalokitesvara the Dhyani Buddha. There are four Machchhendranaths in the Kathmandu Valley. Two are red, and two are white. The famous red Machchhendranath resides in Bungamati in the first half of a year, and in Patan in the second half of the year. The second red Machchhendranath resides in a stunning temple located on the top of the Chovar hill in Kirtipur. The white Machchhendranath popularly known as Jan-Ma-Deo is at Jan-Baha, in the heart of Kathmandu, while the other is at Nala, about 15 km. east of Kathmandu. Both the red Machchhendranaths are worshipped for good agricultural harvests while the white Machchhendranaths are worshipped for good health. All of them are called, “Karunamaya”-- the compassionate god.

The legend of Machchhendranath concerns a legendary drought which lasted for twelve years in the Kathmandu Valley and tells the story of how the

kings of the city-states of Bhaktapur, Patan and Kathmandu cooperated to bring the deity Machchhendranath from a far away country to solve the problem of the prolonged and persistent drought. The rulers of the three city-states assigned Tantric priest Shantikar Bajracharya, to ascertain the reasons for drought. The Tantric priest found that deity Gorkhanath was meditating while sitting on a cushion of nine snake gods causing drought. The only possible remedy to the drought was to set the serpents free, which was possible by bringing Machchhendranath, the Guru of Gorkhanath.

As suggested by the Tantrist, King Narendradev of Bhaktapur took the Tantric priest Bandhudatta Bajracharya from Kathmandu, and skilful porter Rathan Chakra from Patan, and went off to find and bring Machchhendranath to Nepal. The Tantrist communicated directly with the gods, and found that Machchhendranath's mother was unwilling to send her son off. Therefore, the Tantrist converted the young Machchhendranath into a bee, and hid it in a "Kalash"-- a ceremonial holy water vessel. Porter Rathan Chakra carried it clandestinely to Nepal under the protection of the King's royal guard. After the arduous journey, the trio stopped first at Bungamati, Lalitpur. Gorkhanath, knowing about the arrival of his Guru, hurried to Bungamati, releasing serpents from his cushion, automatically causing rains. Thus, the team of a king, a Tantrist and a porter established Rato Machchhendranath in Bungamati. Later, kings of other city-states established their own red or white machchhendranaths, and run festivals of these Machchhendranaths.

THE FESTIVAL OF CHARIOT-PULLING

The chariot-pulling festival is observed in Patan every year, but once every twelve years, the festival is celebrated with added enthusiasm. Once every twelve years, the festival starts in Bungamati, then

continues in Patan and ends in Bungamati after more than three months of celebration. The last twelve year festival in this cycle was observed in 1991. A. D.

The annual festival begins with the bathing of the idol of the Rato Machchhendranath in Lagankhel, Patan on the first day of the waning moon of Chaitra (March-April). After fifteen days of the bathing ceremony, the chariot-pulling festival starts with the placing of the idol in a special chamber built within the fifty feet high chariot in Pulchok, Patan, and about one month outing of the god through several lanes of Patan. The festival ends at Jawalakhel after the public show of the embroidered vest in Jestha-Ashad (June-July). Thereafter, the god is carried on a portable shrine to Bungamati where the god resides for six months.

Once every twelve years, the chariot-pulling festival begins in Bungamati. For this special occasion, devotees build a new chariot. Carpenters belonging to "Ba dhais" caste start building wooden parts in "Bhaila khe Bihar", Patan on the auspicious day of Sripanchami (February). This is the day when the goddess of Learning (Saraswati) arrives in Kathmandu from Lhasa, when the spring season starts. They take these wooden and metallic parts from Patan to Bungamati, and assemble them into a fifty feet high chariot in the square next to the temple of the Rato Machchhendranath. They finish it to begin the festival on the first day of the bright moon fortnight in Baisakh (April-May).

The huge spire - the upper part of the chariot built of logs up to four inches in diameter, and decorated with green bough and festoons, standing above the chamber, gives an unique view. A parasol of about five feet in diameter with a pointed metallic head on it, adorns the top of this structure. The chamber stands on a heavy wooden frame on four wheels; and it has a balcony where the attendant priest "Panju" can move around. There is a beam



Rato Machchhendranath, Patan



Rath Jatra of Rato Machchhendranath

which extends several feet in front of the chariot, and bends upward. A brass mask of Bhairab is fixed at the upward-curving end of this beam. Two ropes in each side of the beam are tied to the axle of the chariot to pull it.

Each and every prime part of the chariot is possessed with one deity or another. For example, the wooden wheels have four different mighty Bhairabs. They are Haya-griva, Hari-siddhi, Lubta-sanhara, and Nanda-kunda. Similarly, the long beam represents Karkot Naga - the serpent king. The ropes symbolize such serpent gods like Basuki Naga and Sesh Naga.

Before beginning the chariot-pulling festival, care-taker priests called "Panjus" perform a bathing ceremony to the idol of Machchhendranath. First, Panjus turn over the idol to the Shakya painters called "Nekuju" on the first day of the waning moon in the month of Chaitra (March-April) to repair and paint it. Nekujus, in turn, hand it back to Panjus after thirteen days of work on it. Thereafter, Panjus perform the bathing ceremony to the idol in preparation to the chariot-pulling festival. The painters called "Pun" paint and decorate other parts and the wheels of the chariot.

On the first day of the waxing moon in Baisakh (April-May), the idol is ascended to the chariot at the auspicious hour determined by astrologers. Two Panjus in saffron robes (possibly white but coloured due to vermillion offered to the God) permanently attend the God in the chariot. They must fast, and they take special care not to touch anybody while on duty as touching others renders the pollution of their clean body. They do not eat certain food including garlic, onions, tomatoes for months before they become Panjus.

On the fourth day after the placement of the God in the chamber, people from Patan come with a musical band to begin pulling the chariot in Bungamati. Everyday, at about 4 P.M. they pull the

chariot for an hour. They bring it to a certain point and anchor it for an overnight stay. The pullers from Patan have a "Guthi" or a trust fund, financed jointly by the contribution from the government and the people themselves to bear the expenses for the activities of pulling the chariot. Devotees from Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, Patan and other parts of the Kathmandu Valley visit the God. For those not familiar with the technique of pulling such a tall chariot up and down the hilly topography of the valley, it is amazing and thrilling.

One of the major events of the chariot-pulling from Bungamati to Patan is the crossing of the "Nakh Khola" stream. Thousands of people from different parts of the Kathmandu Valley gather there to watch the chariot crossing the stream. Some people bathe in the down stream coinciding with the time the chariot crosses the stream believing that it helps to cure diseases. People claim that they see serpents taking a dip in the stream on this occasion. A legend has it that the serpent God "Karkot Naga" being the beam of the chariot meets with his wife once every twelve years only while the chariot crosses the stream.

Another interesting event occurs when the chariot passes quietly from Ekantakuna to Pulchok. Devotees pull the chariot at night to avoid the attention of evil spirits and ghosts. A legend has it that goblins and ghosts once obstructed the chariot at Ekantakuna. People had hard time dealing with the evil spirits. The four Bhairabs dwelling in the wheels of the chariot took a form of dog, and chased away the goblins and ghosts. Since then, the tradition had set to pull the chariot quietly at that stretch.

The chariot remains at Pulchok for three days. From there on, the chariot-pulling festival follows an annual celebration. On the fourth day, the chariot of God Minanath is pulled to Pulchok to greet Machchhendranath. Minanath is believed to be the son of Machchhendranath. So the chariot of Minanath

is shorter than that of Machchhendranath. Thereafter, both the chariots move on the annual route. They make three major halts—first at Ga-Baha, second at Sundhara-Nhuga, and third at Lagankhel. At every stop, the chariots stay on about 1-2 days to give sufficient time to the locals for revering the Gods, and celebrating the occasion. In Lagankhel, the chariots stands for more than 2 days because such rituals as pulling the chariots round the shrine of the mother of Machchhendranath, sacrificing a male goat to the Bhairabs in the wheels, and finally dropping a coconut from the top of the spire, are performed there. Of them, the coconut dropping ceremony is the most important.

A ceremony of dropping a coconut from the top of the spire is performed on the auspicious day determined by the astrologers. Thousands of people from all over the Kathmandu Valley gather at Lagankhel on this day to watch this ceremony. In the late afternoon an official of the Guthi Sansthan (Govt-Trust) climbs to the top of the spire attracting the attention of all the people gathered there. Then, the man drops several items of offerings such as rice, flowers, red powder, sweets and so on keeping the crowd impatient. Finally, he tosses down a coconut amid the applause of the crowd. Young men scramble for the catch of the falling coconut believing that the man who catches it, will be blessed with a son in that year. That ends the festival of the coconut dropping.

Early next morning, women only pull the chariot of Machchhendranath from Lagankhel up to the cross-roads about 150 m. to the north of Lagankhel. Rarely do people notice this festival because women pull it almost in darkness. This festival lasts for a short moment. This celebration is for single women who miss the chance to observe the festival with their family members.

The chariot stands at the cross-roads until astrologers fix a day to pull it from the cross-roads to

Jawalakhel—another open square about one km. away from Lagankhel. It may stay at the cross-roads for about one month. Traditionally, a number of astrologers gather at the public place built with sixteen pillars at Managal Bazar to ascertain the most auspicious day for pulling the chariots from the cross-roads to Jawalakhel.

Once the date is fixed, people from the surrounding areas pull the chariot to Jawalakhel. The Living Goddess called Patan Kumari watches the chariot sitting at the public place called “Kumari Pati” on this day.

Usually, on the fourth day after the arrival of the chariot at Jawalakhel, another important event of the festival—a showing of “Bhoto” vest embroidered with jewels takes place in Jestha-Asadh (June-July). The vest belonged to a farmer who received it from the serpent king called Karkot Naga as a reward for healing the eyes of the serpent queen. A ghost had stolen it. On one occasion, the ghost in a human form wearing the vest came to watch the festival of Machchhendranath at Jawalakhel. The farmer noticed the ghost in a human form putting on the vest; and he claimed it. Then there was a row between them, that attracted the attention of the people around. But nobody could judge whom it belonged to, which is why the vest is kept in the custody of the Rato Machchhendranath, and publicly displayed in Jawalakhel every year and once every twelve years in Bungamati.

On the day of “Bhoto Jatra”, people from all parts of the Kathmandu Valley visit Machchhendranath at Jawalakhel from early morning. Devotees revere the god with the lighting of 108 wick lamps fed with mustard oil or ghee because Avalokitesvara has 108 different incarnations. They bring “Puja” offerings to the god. Thus, a religious fair takes place on this day. In the late afternoon, an official of the Guthi Sansthan displays “Bhoto” from

the four corners of the balcony of the chariot, so that people at all sides of Jawalakhel can see the vest. This is a great moment for all the people watching the event. Thereafter, a priest climbs to the top of the spire and drops a copper disc to predict the future of that year. If the disc lands face down, the year will be auspicious, and people expect good harvests and prosperity.

After the display of "Bhoto" at Jawalakhel, in a normal year the god is taken on a portable shrine to Bungamati preceded by a musical band, and accompanied by a religious procession and a unit of the royal army, and thus, ends the festival of Rato Machchhendranath. But once every twelve years, the God returns to Bungamati on the chariot following the route the God had travelled to Patan.

The chariot stays on at the big square in Bungamati. On the fourth day (July-August) after the

arrival of the chariot, there again, people celebrate "Bhoto Jatra". On this day, a religious fair is held where the chariot stands. Devotees from all over the Kathmandu Valley gather there to revere the god, and to watch the "Bhoto Jatra". After the ceremonial display of the vest, the festival of the Rato Machchhendranath concludes.

Care-taker priests perform a purification rite to Machchhendranath before permitting Him to enter the temple. At the main entrance of the temple, the idol of Machchhendranath is kept waiting for washing away the pollution caused by accepting offerings from the people of different castes, and indulging with the women of questionable purity. After the purification rites, Machchhendranath enters the God-house to reside for six months before He is taken to His winter abode at Ta-Baha, Patan.