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► **To cite this version:**

Gérard Toffin. The Indra Jatra of Kathmandu as a royal festival: Past and present. Contributions to Nepalese Studies, 1992, 19 (1), pp.73-92. halshs-00175017

HAL Id: halshs-00175017

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00175017>

Submitted on 26 Sep 2007

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THE INDRA JĀTRĀ OF KATHMANDU AS A ROYAL FESTIVAL: PAST AND PRESENT

Gérard Toffin

The Indra Jātrā is one of the main Newar festivals of Kathmandu, together with Pāhā Caḥray (March-April), Janabāhādyah Jātrā (March-April) and Mvahnī (September-October). Its Newari name, Yemnyāḥ, derives from either the Newari name of the capital of Nepal (= Yem) or the word Endayāta, a local corrupted form for Indra Jātrā¹. The Festival lasts for eight days from the twelfth of the bright half of Bhadra (August-September) until the fourth day of the dark half of Āśvin (September-October) during the rainy season. According to the Newar calendar, it falls entirely within Yaṃlā (or Nālā), the sixth month of the year. Indra Jātrā involves nearly all the Newar city dwellers of Kathmandu, Buddhist and Hindu, *jyūpi* (pure castes) and *majyūpi* (impure castes). A great number of rituals are performed during these eight days, most on a collective urban basis, but some also at a domestic and *guthi* (from Skt. *goṣṭhi*) associational level. Clearly, this festival is not merely a public formality, but a lively religious celebration which concerns many areas of the urban life.

According to the local tradition, the origins of Indra Jātrā date back to the very creation of the city. The recent chronicles report straightforwardly that the festival was established in the eleventh century by King Gunakamadeva, the alleged founder of Kathmandu. However, the oldest evidence we are aware of is a stone inscription from Bhaktapur dating from the fifteenth century². During the late medieval period, at a time when the Newars were still the controlling power over the Kathmandu Valley, Indra Jātrā was the main collective festival (*mu* or *deś Jātrā*) of the small Kathmandu's Malla Kingdom. It stood for Kathmandu as Bisket Jatra for Bhaktapur and Rāto Matsyendranāth Jātrā (New. Bumgadyahyah) for Lalitpur. These three festivals, performed on different dates of the religious year, were an established feature of urban life and a matter of considerable pride. They enhanced the identity of the three former petty Newar kingdoms.

Structurally, Indra Jatra is made up of three different series of rituals: Kumārī Jātrā, Indra Jātrā and Bhairava Jātrā,³ each one concentrated on a specific god. Though there are more or less related to each other, these three complex ceremonial components have their own myths and can be analysed quite independently. An hypothesis worth considering is that they originated separately and were brought together in a latter stage. Obviously, the cult of Indra (this god is often called *Yeṃnyāḥdyah* in Newari) forms one of the oldest strata of the festival. But the Kumārī Jātrā, in its turn, was established only by Jaya Prakas Malla (1735-1768): there is indeed some reasons to believe that this ritual was detached from *Mvaḥnī* (= *Durgāpūjā*), of which the Kumārī Pūjā is traditionally an element, and was given a spectacular theatrical expression during the Indra Jātrā in order to strengthen the royal Malla dynasty, which was facing Gorkha's armies in the second part of the eighteenth century. We know little about the origin of the Bhairava Jātrā, and it is difficult to ascertain whether it was celebrated from the beginning along with the festival of Indra or not. We should recall in this connection that the large Śveta Bhairava head affixed to an outside wall of the old royal palace behind a lattice piece of work and displayed only during Indra Jātrā is post-Malla; it was offered by Rana Bahadur Shah in honor of Indra at his festival in a.D. 1795⁴. But, on the whole, it seems that the celebration of Bhairava (New. *Ajudyah* or *Bhailah*) during the festival of Indra is very old and deeply rooted in the Newar folk-culture. It can be noticed in this respect that the Newar *Jyāpu* farmers, who undoubtedly are among the oldest dwellers of Kathmandu Valley,⁵ have very close relationships with this god as well as with Indra.

The rituals focus on several interrelated themes: the relation between life and death, the king's cosmic order, and the general prosperity of the country. Indeed, Indra Jātrā is a multi-facet festival, which in my opinion cannot be reduced to a single meaning. Here I shall restrict my topic to the cult of Indra proper and its related rituals, and analyse their significance from the viewpoint of kingship, ancient and modern⁶. One first point deserves notice: although the Malla Kingdom of Kathmandu disappeared more than two centuries ago during the process of unification of Nepal, Indra Jātrā in its above mentioned restricted sense is still celebrated today in a way which differs little in its essentials from the Malla period. Everything suggests that present Newar festivals reflect without much change the religious aspects of Malla kingship. As will be shown, the shah kings and Rana prime Ministers introduced new elements in the festival of Indra during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but by and large they have preserved most of the Newar kings' rituals and confirmed the old *guthi* lands which were traditionally dedicated to their performance. In doing so, they were searching to legitimate

their power in the eyes of the Newar local population and reinforce the various sacra attached to their throne. Furthermore, the shift of the royal palace in the beginning of the twentieth century from inside the precincts of the old historic city has not altered the basic spatial structure of the festival. The Hanuman Dhoka, the ancient Malla palace in the centre of Kathmandu, is no more the seat of political power, but it still plays a crucial role in all local Newar festivities. Up to now, it has been considered as the symbolic centre of the city, and the main rituals connected with kingship are performed in or around it. Even the sacred sword which belongs to the divine Shah ruler and which embodies the *sakti* of kingship is still kept in the Hanuman Dhoka.

As it is performed today, Indra Jātrā is two-fold. On the one hand, it enhances the existing Nepalese monarchy, originally alien to the Newar's own culture. On the other hand, it keeps alive the glorious past (i.e., the Malla period) of the indigenous population of the Kathmandu Valley. As with most of the ancient royal rituals of the Valley, this festival is an important preservative agent of the cultural traditions of the Newars. Every year, after a nominal recognition of the present authorities, it strengthens the ethnic identity of the group. From a sociological point of view, such a dialectic between state centralization and local ethnic assertion is one of the most interesting and pervasive aspects of the modern Indra Jātrā.

The Ceremonial Pole and the Banner of Indra

The beginning of the festival is marked by the erection of an approximately sixty feet high pole called *yaḥṣī* in Newari and *liṅga* in Nepali⁷. The pole bears a banner known as *hari patāḥ*, which is kept inside the old Malla palace of Hanuman Dhoka during the rest of the year. The banner is under the supervision of Guthi Samsthan, a state agency in charge of religious endowments. The eight signs of good luck, *aṣṭa maṅgala*, are painted on this piece of cloth. Branches and fruits (especially *bhogaṭe*, a kind of pommelo), evidently symbols of fertility, as well as a small national flag, are fixed on the top of the *yaḥṣī*. In the religious calendar, sold in Nepal, the *pātro*, this pole and its banner are also known as *indradvaja*, the banner of Indra. The pole-raising ceremony itself is known by the sanskrit expressions *Indradhvajothāna*.

The *yaḥṣī* is a pine-tree (*sāla*) selected a year before the festival from a small forest called Yaḥṣī Gū near Nala. Traditionally, the representatives of the nine Mānandhar's (oil-pressers) "wards" of Kathmandu participated to its selection. A goat was set free in the above mentioned forest, and the tree against which the goat rubbed its back was chosen. Now days the rituals have been simplified and the selection of the tree (and its transport) has been given

in contract to a person belonging to another caste group. But the tree is still cut down one month before the festival, and a goat is still sacrificed before it is felled. A Parbatiya Brahman, appointed by the *rāj purohit* of the king, must worship the tree at that time and perform an offering to Ban Devī, the Nepali Goddess of the Forest. Incidentally, the tree used for the ceremonial pillar erected in Bhaktapur during Bisket Jatra is selected in the same forest and according to the same rules. However, in that case, the *yaḥsī* is called by the sanskrit name *viśvadhvaḥ*, the banner of the Universe. To come back to the *indradhvaḥ* of Kathmandu, once cut, the tree is shaped into a pole and carried by the army (formerly by the Manandhars) to Thimi, a large village between Bhaktapur and the capital, and then to Kathmandu. The pole is first brought to the northern part of the old city, near Bhotahiti, on *Kāyā Aṣṭamī* day, that is, the eighth day of the bright half of Bhādra. Four days later, it is taken through Indrachok (another reference to Indra) to Hanuman Dhoka, near the statue of Kāl Bhairava, for erection.

At present, the official date for the pole-raising ceremony is the twelfth of the bright half of Bhādra, in the morning, at an auspicious moment, *sait*, determined by astrologers attached to the royal palace. The exact time is chosen nearly one month before, during *Kriṣṇa Aṣṭamī*. There is some evidence, however, that until the reign of Pratap Singh Shah (1775-77), the pole-raising occurred on the eleventh day of the bright half of Bhādra⁸, which is still today considered by some sources to be the correct time for the beginning of the festival⁹. It is on this very day that the king sends invitations to Kumārī, Gaṇeśh and Bhairava to attend the festival and that the head masks of Bhairava are brought out into the streets and displayed on sheds raised for the occasions.

Indra's pole and its banner are erected, *yaḥsī thanegu* (New.), in front of Hanuman Dhoka, in the historic centre of the city. The heavy *yaḥsī* is tugged and pulled with bamboos and thick ropes to slowly raise it. Its base is inserted in a hole, often filled with water, which bears a *yoni* design on the surface. Hundreds of spectators watch, crowded into the palace square, and gun shots salute. Formerly, the pole was raised by the Mānandhar oil-pressers of the capital. But for the last ten years police recruits have replaced the oil-pressers. Only the leader (*nāyo*) of the Mānandhars has to be present today to witness the ritual¹⁰. Similarly, the king no longer attends the ceremony, as he did until the rule of king Tribhuvan (1911-1955). He is only represented by a white horse from the royal stable and by a sacred sword, *khadga*, wrapped with cloth. This sword, ordinarily kept in the former Malla royal palace, is held during the ritual by the supervisor, *hākim*, of Hanuman Dhoka or by a person designated by him¹¹. In 1992, the holder was a Newar Jyāpu from Lalitpur, in full official dress. At the end of the ceremony, the sword is

circumambulated three times around the pole, followed by *Damāī* musicians, a detachment of a Gorkhali regiment in ancient uniforms, bearing outmoded rifles and sabres, and a military band. Then the National anthem is played by the army in front of the sword. All these elements stand as symbols of the present ruling Shah family. Let us stress in this connection that it is not the Taleju's horse (the former Malla kings' protective deity) who has to witness the ceremony, but the Shah king's one. The rituals have been clearly reshaped by the new ruling dynasty and by the dominant Parbatiya elite.

Until recently, most of the senior government officials were present in the Hanuman Dhoka palace throughout the night on the eleventh day of the bright half of *Bhādra* and the next morning for the pole-raising ceremony. When I first saw the festival in 1970, only a few officials were there. In 1992, the royal astrologer, the royal *purohit* and his assistant, the head of the Guthi Samsthan and the *hākim* of Hanuman Dhoka palace (a Newar himself) were present. All of them were interviewed during the ceremony by Nepal TV journalists who came to film the event. The supervisor of Hanuman Dhoka gave a bitter comment on the way the Guthi Samsthan was managing, without any efficacy according to him, the expenses of the Indra Jātrā. This institution's role, long controversial, has been a matter of brisk discussion between officers in charge of the royal rituals. It has been placed under the direction of the Ministry of Land Re-form after the dramatic changes of 1990 and the restoration of a democratic regime in Nepal. Nowadays, some of the expenditures of Indra Jatra are directly under the control of the Department of Archeology. It is important in any case to note the presence of the royal priest (*purohit*) of the current Shah dynasty during the pole-raising. This Brahman, attached to the new Narayan Hiti palace, has to worship the base and the top of the pine tree before its erection. As we will see later on, other Brahmans and priests are appointed to the cult of Indra during the course of the festival.

One group of Newar mask-dancers also attends the ceremony. They are Jyāpu farmers from Kilagal. Their dance called *devi pyākhā*, includes the Kumārī, Bhairava, Caṇḍī, Vetālā, and an unmasked *daitya* (demon) wearing an ornament (*mukut*) on the head. According to Rajendra Pradhan: "Bhairava and Kumārī have to fight with the *daitya*. The demon once ruled the three worlds. Unable to stand this state of affairs, Bhairava assaulted the demon while he was dancing alone. They fought hard and long. Bhairava, unable to defeat the demon, appealed to Kumārī for help. Kumārī then fought with the demon, recharging her energy (*śakti*) whenever he conceded defeat. She finally killed him"¹². During the pole-raising, these dancers perform only a brief dance. The *devi pyākhā* is repeated in a more complete way some days later in Kilagal.

Indra's pole is lowered eight days later, on the fourth of the dark fortnight of Āśvin, at a time fixed by the royal astrologer, usually between 10 and 11 pm. This ritual is called *indradvajapātana* in the Nepalese religious calendar. The stones which maintain the *yahsī* in its hole are removed, and the pine-tree suddenly falls, within seconds, on the straw-covered ground. The moment it comes to rest upon the ground, hundreds of worshippers rush forward to touch it with their foreheads. Some teenagers hurl down and throw bundles of straw to each other in a rather surrealistic battle. In 1991, this excitement produced severe trouble with the police: 34 persons were wounded. Next year, special police forces were posted all around the Hanuman Dhoka palace, but no clash occurred.

The *yāhṣī* is then dragged by the army recruits toward the lower part of the city, through Jaisidewal, Hyumat and Teku, and immersed at the confluence of the Visnumati and the Bagmati. The *rāj purohit* of the Shah royal family is also present at that time. He offers some rice, flowers and red powder (New. *sinhaḥ*) to the pole before its immersion in the water. A. Bake saw the wood being used by the *sadhus* living near the confluence for heating¹³. But normally, the pole is taken away by the *Podē* (fishermen) in charge of the nearby temple of Pacali, the Bhairava of the southern part of Kathmandu. This is probably why some informants reported that pieces of the *yahsī* have to be burnt and the ashes scattered on this very Bhairava's temple. In the old days, the Manandhars of the city used to buy the pole from *Podē* and make use of it in their oil presses.

Indra Jātrā and Classical India

For a full understanding of the ceremonial pole and its link with kingship in the modern context, we have to look backward to Hindu tradition. As is well known, Indra, in classical India, is closely associated with the royal function. He is the king of the gods and of the world, the prototype of sovereignty in its warlike, dominating and dynamic aspects. The king is the representative of Indra on earth. Some texts even assert that the ruler can attain the condition of king of the gods if he remains faithful to his duties. More generally, Indra is linked with the Ksatriyas. He is the great deity of the warrior class, the one who destroys the enemies. His strength is said to be prodigious.

As a matter of fact, a royal ritual very similar to the existing Nepalese Indra Jātrā was performed in ancient India. It was called *indramaha*, *indramahotsva* or *indrayajña*. Sanskrit texts give several descriptions and comments on it. The *Viṣṇudharmottara* (II, CLV) tells us, for instance, that Indra's banner was created by Indra with the help of Viṣṇu during the churning of the primeval ocean of milk to defend the gods from the attacks of

the *asuras*.¹⁴ Raised on the ceremonial chariot of Indra, the banner frightened the demons and gave the victory to the gods. Likewise, the king who raises a similar *dhvaja* every year, adorned with jewels and precious pieces of cloth, will overcome his enemies. His subjects will be protected from disease and other misfortune; they will have an abundance of food and will be contented. *Indramaha* was consequently a very important festival for the ruler. The banner of Indra appears to be a sort of emblem of the king. Let us remark that this ritual brings victory and is at the same time related to the general welfare of the kingdom; two complementary aspects which, as we will discuss later on, always go together among the kingly features of Indra.

The *Viṣṇudharmottara* also provides interesting details on the manner of celebrating this ritual. The *indramaha* has to be performed during the bright half of Bhādra (as is actually done in Nepal), in other words during the rainy season. The tree should be selected on a auspicious day by Brahmans assisted by carpenters. It can be of six kinds: either *arjuna* (*Terminalia arjuna*), *aśvakarna* (*Vatica robusta*), *prikaya* (*Terminalia tormentosa*), *dhava* (*Grislea tormentosa*), *udumbara* (*Ficus glomerata*) or bamboo¹⁵. According to the way it falls, the astrologers make some prophecies. Then the tree is immersed in water and carried into the city accompanied by numerous dancing and singing people. The peasants decorate the pole with crowns of flowers, clothes, handkerchiefs, and so forth. The *indradhvaja* is revered in this way for twelve days. Then it is raised under the direction of the king surrounded by his ministers. He worships the pole with flowers, food items, and perfumes. The banner has to be lowered on the fifth day and carried by elephants to the river where it is immersed.¹⁶

The *Mahābhārat* (*Ādiparvan*, ch. LXIII) also refers to the *indradhvaja* festival. It states that this religious feast was initiated by a very pious king named Uparicara or Vasu. This king left his kingdom to live in the forest as a hermit. The gods were afraid of this threatening ascetic behaviour. They asked Indra to divert Vasu from such a way of life. Then Indra gave him a bamboo staff as a gift to protect the people. The following year, Vasu planted the pole in the earth to pay homage to Indra. Since that day, kings have followed the example of Vasu. Every year they erect a bamboo pole, with ornaments and garlands suspended on it, as a reverence to the king of the gods. "The king who performs this ceremony, promised Indra, will obtain victory over his enemies: his kingdom will be prosperous and will have plenty of crops." Kings even carried this staff onto the battle-field; its destruction meant the defeat of the ruler.¹⁷

As in Kathmandu Valley, Brahman priests took an active part in this ancient royal ceremony and acted in collaboration with kings throughout the rituals. Referring to ancient texts (*Atharvavede among others*), J. Gonda

writes: "The monarch and his *purohita* should bathe, put on new and unwashed clothes, anoint themselves with sweet-smelling unguents of an excellent kind, in a mood belonging to the religious action, observing their vows, and without breaking their fast, celebrate together the festival known as *indramahotsava* in other words, Indra's feast. The *purohita* should take hold of the king with his hand (...) and pour the oblation into the fire".¹⁸ The priest had to recite some stanzas taken from the *Vedas* during the pole-raising ceremony and use *śānti* rituals to ward off evils in the event that anything goes wrong. "He also has to consecrate the king with a series of formulas taken from the *Atharvaveda* and used, in the *Kauśika-sūtra*, in a battle rite, in order to gain victory."¹⁹

The link between Indra's feast and the king is also perfectly clear in these old texts. The aim of this rite was to consolidate and preserve the power of the king. "By celebrating the *indramahotsava*, the kingdom becomes day by day greater, the king attains the position of sole ruler of the earth and shall live a full lifetime. This is why the process of erecting the tree should be carefully watched by an astrologer: any accident or derivation from the prescribed source of action is significant for the future of the ruler and the realm. If for instance a vulture alights on the tree, there is a danger of death."
(20)

The similarities between these textual traditions and the Indra Jātrā of Kathmandu Valley are striking. The Nepalese festival of Indra is unquestionably based upon ancient Indian beliefs and rituals. In this connection, attention must be paid to another interesting point. In classical India, *indrādhvaja* was closely related to theatrical performance. The feast of Indra's banner was associated with plays in which the king himself appeared on the stage.²¹ Now, we know from Capucin missionaries that plays were performed in the beginning of the eighteenth century inside the royal palace of Kathmandu, Nāsal chok, during Indra Jatra.²² In Nepal as in India, theatre was often a kingly affair. Even now, a series of pantomimes illustrating the ten incarnations of Lord Visnu, *daśa avatāra*, is acted on the fourteenth of the bright half of Bhadra on a stage in front of the former royal palace, Hanuman Dhoka. Until the mid twentieth century, the king of Nepal used to sit on a movable throne, *gaḍḍi*, to watch these sketches. This was called *gaddi cvanegu* in Newari or *gaḍḍi ārohaṇa samāroha* in Sankrit.²³ Moreover, Indra's festival is traditionally a time for performance of popular plays (*pyākhā* or *gyāpu pyākhā* in Newari) all over the Kathmandu Valley, in towns as well as villages.

What can be said about the symbolism of Indra's banner? In which way was it relevant to Nepalese kingship? In spatial terms, first of all, this ceremonial pole reinforces the central location of the palace in the city. It

emphasizes the centrality of the king in the urban society and gives a social content to the Malla's palace. Through the rituals, the ruler was viewed as the coordinator and the sustainer of the realm. But there is more to say. The pole raised in front of the royal palace also incarnates, in some respects, the cosmic pillar that supports the universe and the *axis mundi* linking Heaven and Earth.²⁴ It symbolises the very road along which the blessings of Heaven reach the Earth. According to some Newar scholars, the word *yaḥsī* (which etymologically comes from *yaḥ*, "beloved", and *si*, "wood") itself could be derived from the Newari *yalasi*²⁵ which designates the sacrificial stake *yūpa* of Hindu tradition, a stake associated with important cosmological significance. Through this play of metaphors between microcosm and macrocosm, the palace merges with that of Indra in heaven, and thus gains a cosmic dimension.

It is difficult to ascertain whether the king was ritually identified with Indra. We may, however, mention in this connection that a bronze, gold-plated statue of the king of the gods is still set on a platform (New.: *dabū*) on which the throne of the king was formerly placed during coronations.²⁶ This statue of Indra is ordinarily housed inside the temple of *Degutale*, one of the tutelary gods of the former Malla royal family. It is brought out on the first day of the festival in a procession led by farmers of the Jyāpu caste and placed on the central platform of Nāsal chok, in Hanuman Dhoka. It is displayed on this spot for eight days and worshipped daily (*nitya pūjā*) by the supervisor of Hanuman Dhoka or a member of his staff. On the first and last days, Newar Rājopādhyāya Brahmans from Indra chok come to pay homage to the deity. This custom is said to date back to King Pratap Malla (1641-1674). Even if the identification between the king and Indra is not totally clear, we have evidence in this peculiar case of close parallelism between the earthly king and his divine prototype during the rituals.

We may go further in the symbolic significance of Indra's feast by considering its position within the annual religious calendar. As we pointed out earlier, according to the Hindu tradition, *indramaha* was originally established to defeat the enemies of the gods, in other words the *asuras* who threaten the order of the world. It is worth noticing in this respect that the Indra Jatra falls during the Four months, *caturmās*, of the rainy season. During these months Viṣṇu is sleeping on his Nāga bed, leaving the world to disorder. It is a time of unrest and disturbance particularly difficult for the Hindu king. As a matter of fact, the whole of the month of Bhādra is symbolically a period of contestation and licence in the Kathmandu Valley. The demons who have apparently dethroned the gods dance in the streets (*lākhe pyākhā*) and threaten the universe. The people gather in certain parts of the city and improvise comic scenes, *khyālah* which target political or

religious personality, a rich merchant or a well-known person. Viewed in this light, we may wonder if the raising of Indra's banner does not express the strength and the authority of the king over disrupting forces. The demons disappear and criticisms cease at the end of the festival. Like the Durgā Pūjā (*Mvahñī*) one month later, Indra Jātrā can be seen as a ritual of renewal of royal power, putting an end - at least temporarily - to anarchic elements and restoring the king's order.

Village Cults in India and the Kathmandu Valley

With one exception in Orissa, this royal symbolic enactment is no longer performed in India²⁷. Here, as in other areas, the Kathmandu Valley appears to be a particularly conservative place which has preserved old Indian traditions elsewhere vanished. However, as Gonda has rightly remarked,²⁸ the traditional festivals of Indra in classical India fall in two categories: some, based on sanskrit texts, were performed in the capital of the kingdom; others were celebrated by villagers in different localities according to unwritten ancestral tradition. The second type of festival still exists today in the subcontinent, especially in Bengal focusing mainly on the fertility functions of Indra. It is worth quoting in this connection P. Mahapatra's study on the tree symbol worship: "The tribal people of the western border of Bengal have a special regard for the *Sāl* (*Shorea Robusta*) tree. It is believed that the *Sāl* tree is the symbol of Indra. The tree is worshipped for general welfare, victory in battle, bumper crop and success in life. During the festival of *indradvaja* this tree is worshipped The *Sāl* tree is worshipped on the twelfth day of the brighter half of the moon in the month of Bhadra (July-August). Before the day of worship, two *sal* trees are marked in the forest. On the day of worship these two marked trees are cut and brought to the place of worship, planted side by side, decorated with leaves, flowers and pieces of new cloth. A big umbrella made of bamboo and cloth is placed on the top of the trees. The trees are worshipped. Curd and puffed rice (*khai*) are offered to them. The umbrella is called *indrachhatra*, the umbrella of Indra. This is not only a ritual or a religious ceremony, but it has its social significance. It continues for about a week and the people of the locality are invited to attend the ceremony and have a mass feast. They rejoice with music and dance. In the medieval period, this ceremony was limited to local chiefs and rich businessmen, but nowadays it is also observed by the tribal people."²⁹

In this area also, the similarities with Kathmandu Valley are striking. Such local festivals in honour of Indra are not performed in every Newar village. But in at least one case, in Pyangaon (Lalitpur district), it is still celebrated in a very similar way to its manner of celebration in West Bengal. The main festival of this village, *deśjātrā*, takes place at the end of Bhādra and the

beginning of Āśvin, during the time of Indra Jatra. It lasts for eleven days and involves all the villagers. Theatrical plays and worship of Kāleśvar Mahadev, the tutelary deity of the locality, are enacted. The interesting point is that two poles, called here also *yaḥsi* or *lyahsi*, are erected in the village street during this communal feast. The two pillars, which are attached together, are made of pine tree. Contrary to what happens in Kathmandu, they are not changed every year; during the rest of the year they are kept in the collective *guthi* house. They symbolise *Tāhādyah*, "the great god." One is considered male, the second female. The lower parts are covered with straw of wheat and of sugarcane. Small umbrellas, made of bamboo and leaves, are placed on the top. These *yaḥsī* are raised on the eleventh of the bright fortnight of Bhadra and lowered on the fifth of the dark fortnight of Asvin. During this period, they are worshipped by the elders of the village as well as by groups of dancers and players of musical instruments. These pillars are not explicitly referred to as belonging to Indra but the context suggests that this is the case. Furthermore, five statues of gods are displayed under temporary shelters during the festival. Though all of them do not clearly represent Indra, they are called *Indra Maharaj* by the villagers. Interestingly, this festival is not only linked with general prosperity and good crops, but also with power.³⁰ It legitimizes the authority of the elders of Pyangaon and is associated with the mythical creation of the village. In my opinion, we have here a local counterpart of what is being celebrated in Kathmandu City during the same period.

Indra, the Thief-God

Let us return to the royal festival of Kathmandu. At the feet of Indra's pole of Hanuman Dhoka is placed a small iron cage in which Indra, mounted on his elephant and facing west, is represented with his arms out-stretched, bound with ropes as a sign of captivity. This statue is worshipped daily in the morning and evening by a Parbatiya Brahman appointed by the Narayan Hiti Palace. Presently, this charge belongs to a Satyal family from Thamel (Kathmandu). The priest also makes daily offerings to the Aṣṭa Mātrikā goddesses and the Aṣṭa Bhairava. These gods are represented by eight small posts which are stuck around the ceremonial pole just after his erection on the first day of the festival.³¹ They are believed to guard Indra. A Putuwār (a specific Newar caste of low status) from *Pulāngu Guhyeśvarī*, near Balaju, keeps watch over the Indra statue for the eight days of the festival and takes all the daily offerings made by the people of Indra: mainly rice, barley and sesame seeds (New: *hāmvaḥ*).³² This man, called *dyah pālā*, "the guard of the god", has to offer oil lamps twice a day to Indra. In exchange, he receives daily some rice, saffron and mustard oil from the Guthi Samsthan office.

Normally, a Kusle (an impure Newar caste, formerly Kanphata Yogi ascetics) musician is also supposed to come and play oboe daily at the feet of Indra's pole. But I never saw him in 1992. Apparently, this custom is vanishing.

On the first day of or a day before the festival groups of Jyāpu farmers set out in the streets four other images of Indra represented in the same way. The god is seated in the lotus position, his arms raised stiffly sideways at the shoulders parallel to the ground, with the palms of his hands facing up. These images are displayed (New. *indra bvayegu*) in Indrachok (Wāghah), Maru, Kilagal and Nardevi on small raised shelters called *vimāna* ("divine or aerial cart") in Sanskrit and *bhikhāchē* in Newari.³³ The statues are disposed in wooden structures referred to as *indra khat* "chariots of Indra". Raised high on four carved posts, the shelter of *Maru tol* is supported by four carved wooden elephants. All the images normally face west, so that Indra can see *Indra Daha*, the pond from which, as we will see later, his mother left the valley of Nepal (= Kathmandu) long ago. A Rājopādhyāya Brahman is attached to the statue of Wāghah, but Vajrācārya Buddhist priests are the *pūjārī* for the three other Indra. The *nitya pūjā*, however, are performed by Jyapu caretakers. The main day for the worship of these Indra is the day of the full moon.³⁴ Buddhist women offer lamps of one hundred and eight lit wicks to Indra on behalf of the recently deceased, and Hindus throw the protective sacred thread (*rakṣabandha*) tied around their wrist under the raised sheds on which the images of Indra are housed. A concluding ceremony, *visarjana pūjā*, takes place on the fifth of the dark half of Asvin. For this ceremony, Jyāpus from the neighbourhood offer rice-cakes called *yaḥmari* in Newari to all the directions of the universe. Then the *vimana* are dismantled and the statues of Indra are taken back to private houses or temples.³⁵ In Wāghah, the image is first brought to a Rājopādhyāya Brahman who purifies it. In this *tol* Indra is afterward introduced in a procession with music into the *Ākāśa Bhairava* temple where he stays throughout the year. Aside from the period of the Indra Jātrā, the king of the gods is generally ignored by the public.

Indra images displayed during this eight-day festival are apparently unique to the Kathmandu Valley.³⁶ As represented here, Indra is a thief-god, *khūdyah*, publicly disgraced for stealing flowers from a garden in Kathmandu. This is explained in a local myth of which several versions exist. According to that legend, the king of the gods went one day to the Kathmandu Valley to gather the flowers of the *pārijāt* tree (*Nyctanthes arbro-tristis*, Lin), a variety of *jasmine*, for his mother. Indra descended into the Valley hidden in a cloud. Unfortunately, a Kathmandu peasant (or a gardener) surprised him at the moment he was stealing the flowers in Maruhiti tol. The god was taken prisoner in front of the *Ākāśa Bhairava*

temple, in Wagah, and exposed to the eyes of the population for seven days, his arms tied to a pole. On the eighth day, Indra's mother, worried about the absence of her son, also went to Kathmandu. The king realized his error and proposed to Indra to release him on two conditions: that the god come back to the capital every year to be exhibited as a prisoner and that he provide the peasants sufficient fog and dew in winter for the crops to mature. Indra accepted. He was venerated by the crowd; then he and his mother mounted on the white elephant *Airāvata*, at Kilagal and left the inhabitants of Kathmandu near the temple of Nardevi (Neta Maru Ajimā) constructed at the western limits of the city.³⁷

Some elements of the Indra Jātrā are linked to this legend. For instance, the four statues of Indra which are displayed in the streets during the festival are located in the different *ṭols* (quarters) mentioned in the myth. Secondly, two farmers from Kilagal carry at night an effigy of Indra's elephant made from cane and covered with a painted cloth. Accompanied by musicians, the elephant rushes about everywhere searching for its master. Lastly, on the fourth day of the festival, there is a funeral procession which refers to a Buddhist version of the myth. According to this version, Indra's mother (= Vasundharā) came to Kathmandu disguised as a demoness (Dāgī, from Dākinī), to search for her son.³⁸ When she found him in the palace bound up like a thief, she promised to ensure mist and dew for the winter crops in exchange for his release. She also promised to lead the inhabitants of Kathmandu to heaven to meet their deceased relatives. They followed her when she departed with Indra. But when they reached the top of the hill from which they were to ascend to heaven, she informed them that they could not enter heaven without first bathing in a pond known as *Indra Daha* (= Yamki Dā in Newari) to purify themselves. While they were bathing in the pond, they were enveloped by a thick mist. Taking advantage of this, she escaped to heaven with Indra.

Accordingly, on the fourth day of Indra festival, recently bereaved Buddhist Newar families circumambulate the city of Kathmandu following a Jyapu farmer from Tyengah possessed by Dagi (New.: *dāgī vanigu* or *cāḥsijyā*). This man wears a white mask representing the mother of Indra and is guided by two attendants. He starts as soon as the Kumari's chariot is driven back to Hanuman Dhoka following its circle in the lower section of Kathmandu. The procession begins and ends at Lakphal or Maru Cvasapakha (Maru Tol), near Kasthamandap, where the Dagi mask is kept in a Tuladhar's house. It is led by a Jyapu group from Maru Tol holding *dhunya* bamboo poles decorated with yak tails and playing *dhimay* drums. This procession follows the route of the Kumārī's chariot at a rapid pace, first in the lower part of the city, then in the upper part. It is said that visually the route draws the figure of a sword

in the streets of Kathmandu, remembering that king Gunakamadeva founded the city on the model of the Kali's sword. The circumambulation of the city is performed in order to reach heaven in the Dagi's footsteps to meet the dead relatives. The families scatter grain by the wayside so that they would not forget the way home. Once finished, they throw what remains of their offerings in a place called Bhuta Satta, near Kasthamandap, and wash their faces in the Maru Hiti fountain. Afterwards, they either return home or go to bathe in Indra's Pond (Yaṃki Dā), which is located on a hill 12 kilometers west of Kathmandu. Some time later, this same night, a few Manandhars rush along this same ritual road carrying a long bamboo structure on which lit candles have been placed. This is called *bau mata* in Newari. These lights are meant to show the way back to those who have lost their way during the preceding procession. The ritual is supposed to transfer the merit acquired by participating in the procession of the recently dead.

Indra thus appears to the inhabitants of Kathmandu as a thief-god, *khudyah*. This is not merely a Nepalese fancy. In the Hindu classical mythology itself, Indra is often described as a thief, especially of *soma*, the ritual plant considered in the Vedic text as a god-king, or of inebriating drinks by which man surpasses himself.³⁹ Indra also stole the horse which was on the point of being sacrificed during *aśvamedha*, so that the king who performed this ritual could not become his equal.⁴⁰ The search for the *pārijāt* flower is also a common theme in Indian literature. Indra is often described quarrelling with Kṛṣṇa for the possession of this plant, which is said to fulfill all wishes.⁴¹ The only difference is that in the Nepalese myth, the *pārijāt* is growing on earth, contrary to Hindu classical myths where this plant is to be found only in heaven.

This local myth clearly puts emphasis on the fertility and prosperity functions of Indra. It is worth noticing that such aspects correspond to some ritual elements performed during the festival. In the village of Pyangaon, for instance, young boys belonging to a traditional youth association (*balmu guthi*) have to steal cucumbers in the garden of the locality during the feast of Indra. These cucumbers are offered to a god called Tusikhūimadyaḥ ("the god who steals cucumber"), perhaps a form of Indra, and represented by a head ornament (*kikimpā*).⁴² The ornament in turn is kept concealed under a piece of cloth by the eldest members of the association. No women can approach or see it. On the fourteenth of Bhādra, bright fortnight, this god is worshipped and the cucumbers are taken as *prasād* (returned worship substances) by the young boys. Such rituals are widely shared in Newar villages.⁴³ Indra is especially revered by the Jyāpu farmers, mostly young people, during Indra Jātrā.

Through all these aspects pertaining to fecundity and vegetation, Indra is linked with kingship and kings. As is widely reported, the Hindu ruler was considered responsible for the general prosperity of his realm. As Indra, he was a rain-maker, associated with the regulation of the meteorological processes as well as other natural forces. Where|there is no king, assert the classical texts, rain will not fall. Generative power was expressly listed among the various manifestations of sovereignty. The ruler was a producer of wealth.⁴⁴

Conclusions

At this point, four remarks can be made. (1) Indra Jātrā of the Kathmandu Valley is mainly derived from Hindu textual tradition. The local ("folk") aspects of the rituals, such as those observed in the village of Pyangaon, are no less based on themes prevalent in the Hindu high tradition than the central, in other words kingly, ones. (2) Indra is venerated during the festival not only as a Kṣatriya warrior, full of strength and courage, but also as a god of vegetation associated with the general welfare of the kingdom. These two aspects correspond to the dual nature of Hindu kingship: on the one hand, the king's main duty consists in protecting his subjects; but on the other hand, he is also a mediator between man and nature. (3) Consequently, Indra Jātrā is a royal festival in the full sense of the term. It is related to power, prosperity and can be seen as a ritual of renewal of the king's order. A short anecdote taken from a Buddhist Nepalese chronicle is worth quoting in this respect. This chronicle reports, without much detail, that Pratap Malla, a famous king of Kathmandu in the seventeenth century, was once busily engaged in digging a canal in Rani Ban. He stayed a whole year in that place and thus celebrated the Indra Jātrā there, and not in Kathmandu.⁴⁵ This indicates that the festival must take place wherever the king is, his presence being essential. The rituals are entirely focused on his person or on his representative. (4) This festival performed in honour of the god Indra reflects the ambiguous position of the king in the Hindu world. The ruler is often identified with gods. He is considered, in specific contexts, as a divine figure totally distinct from his subjects. But at the same time, he is dependent on deities and on rituals for his legitimacy. This paradoxical situation obviously springs from the classical conundrum of the relationship between spiritual authority and temporal power in Hindu thought as outlined for instance by J.C. Heesterman.

In closing, few words need to be said about the modern sociological significance of this long established royal ritual. At the beginning of this article, I pointed to the combination of two distinct ethnic heritages Parbatiya (Shah) and Newar in the existing Indra Jātrā, especially in the cult of the

indradvaja. As shown both these elements explicitly refer to the Indian classical tradition. But this is not the whole story. It is also worth noticing that the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Nepal in 1990 has not disturbed the performance of the ceremony. The *indradvaja jotthāna* is celebrated today exactly as it was during the panchayat system when the kings had concentrated nearly all the powers in their hands. This questions the widespread assumption of the political manipulation in the Himalayas⁴⁶ here ritual seems of little concern to political events. This unchanging character is not a novelty. As Bert van den Hoek stressed, the royal rituals (coronation, court ceremonials and funerals) survived the virtual seclusion of the kings in the country during the Rana period, when the Rana Prime Ministers were the de facto hereditary rulers of Nepal.⁴⁷ It must be recalled, however, that the first democratic regime in Nepal in 1951 adopted some measures to secularize Indra Jātrā. Thus, the Home Minister B.P. Koirala abolished "the system of compulsory attendance of civil servants at Hanuman Dhoka at night during Indra Jātrā festival" and "the system of compulsory assembly of all the military officers at the time of raising the *linga* at Hanuman Dhoka".⁴⁸ Notably enough, nobody from the government attended the pole-raising ceremony in 1992. Clearly, two theories of legitimation are in conflict in close contact: one invests the people with power, the second brings the king with divinities and extends his sovereignty to nearly all aspects of civic life. How will the democratic forces resolve these problems? Will they promote other types of state rituals, as happened in Europe? Will they **emphasize** secularization, reducing royal rituals to a marginal, folkloric affair? Is Nepal ready for a new delimitation of the respective domains of politics and religion? All these questions are of crucial importance for the future of the democratic movement in Nepal.

Notes

- 1 Cf. David Gellner, *Monk, Householder and priest. Newar Buddhism and its Hierarchy of Ritual* St. John College, Oxford, Ph. D. diss, 1987), 341.
- 2 Dilli R. Regmi, *Medieval Nepal*. 4 vols, vol. 2, Calcutta: K.L. Mukhopadhyaya, 614.
- 3 Lienhard, S. "Problemes du syncretisme religieux au Nepal," *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient*, t. 70 (1): 260.
4. Mary Slusser, *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 198.
5. Gerard Toffin, "The Farmers in the City: The Social and Territorial Organization of the Maharajan of Kathmandu," *The State, the Law and*

Administration in Classical India, edited by B. Kölver (Münich, in press)

6. Ethnographical data were collected from 1970 to 1992 thanks to missions granted by the National Center for Scientific Research (C.N.R.S., France). Fieldwork was carried out especially in the Jyapu (Maharjan) communities of Maru, Wāghah, Wotu Tols (Kathmandu) and of Pyangaon Village. In Kathmandu, I received much information from Tej Ratna Tamrakar (present *hakim* of Hanuman Dhoka), Prem Narayan Manandhar and Punya Ratna Vajracharya. Thanks are also due to Krishna Prasad Rimal, Sushila Manandhar and Corneille Jest.
7. A useful description of the pole-raising ceremony is to be found in Chapter 10 of Rajendra Pradhan, *Domestic and Cosmic Rrituals Among the Hindu Newar of Kathmandu, Nepal* Ph.D., diss Delhi University, Delhi 1988.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 391.
9. Gautam Vajracharya, *Hanumandhoka Rajadurbar* (Hanuman dhoka Royal Palace) (Kirtipur: Tribhuvan University Press, 1967) 170.
10. Cf. Rajendra Pradhan, *op. cit.*, p. 391. Since 1985, the Manandhars of Chyasādo (Kathmandu) are also invited to the ceremony by the Guthi Samsthan.
11. It is the same sword as that used at the sword exchange ceremony (New: *khadga hilegu*) between the king and Pacali Bhairava/Bhadrakali in Makhā Tol during Durga Puja.
12. Cf. Rajendra Pradhan, *op. cit.*, p. 399.
13. A. Bake, "Quelqueséâtre indien," in *Les Théâtes d'Asie* (Paris: Editions du C.N.R.S., 1961), 46. By the same author: "Ein Indradhvajotthana in Nepal," *Indologen-Tagung 1959* Göttingen: E. Waldschmidt, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 116-121.
14. Quoted by Odette Vienhot, *Le Culte de l'arbre dans l'Inde ancienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954) 93. Cf. also J.J. Meyer, *Trilogie altindischer Mächte und Feste der Vegetation*, 3th part, 6-26.
15. Interestingly, the sala tree is not given in this list.
16. O. Viennot, *op. cit.* p. 94. Other references to Sanskrit texts are available in P.V. Kane, *History of the Dharmasastra* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institue 2(2): 824-827.
17. O. Viennot, *op. cit.* pp. 94-95.
18. J. Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), 74-75; idem, "The Indra Festival According to the Atharvavedins," *Journal of the Amercian Oriental Society* (1967) 87: 414-429.
19. J. Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship*, 76.

20. Ibid., p. 76.
21. Ibid., p. 73
22. Cf. A.W. Macdonald & A. Vergati-Stahl, *Newar Art* (London: Warminster, Aris & Phillips Ltd. 1979, 112-113.
23. This ritual was also abolished in 1951 by Home Minister B.P. Koirala; cf H.N. Agrawal, *The Administrative System of Nepal from Tradition to Modernity* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1976) 159.
24. N. Gutschow, "Kathandu: historical Development, Spatial Structure, Social and Ritual Topography," in *Kathmandu City "Khumbu Himal"* 13 (3) 250. (Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1979) for the Indian tradition, see also F.B.J. Kuiper, *Ancient Indian cosmology* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983) 13 241-246.
25. Quoted by R. Pradhan, *op. cit.*, p. 392.
26. Cf. *An Introduction to Hanuman Dhoka* (Kirtipur: INAS, Tribhuvan University Press, 1975), 20. Indra is here represented with his arms raised stiffly sideways (cf. *infra*) Photo in M. Slusser, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, fig. 442.
27. Cf. G.C. Tripathi, "Das Indradhvaja-Fest in Orissa," in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, supplement III, (Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977) 2: 1002-1014. In that case, the *indradhvaja* festival is performed in the Jagannatha temple of Puri.
28. J. Gonda, "The Indra Festival According to the Atharvavedins", *op. cit.*, 1967.
29. P. Mahapatra, "Tree-Symbol worship in Bengal", in *Tree-symbol worship in India*, ed. S.S. Gupta (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1965), 133.
30. G. Toffin, "L'Indra jâtrâ à Pyangaon; essai sur une fête néwar de la vallée de Kathmandou," *L'Ethnographie*, vol. 76, no. 1(1978): 109-137
31. We have here a clear cosmological image of the universe. The pole of Indra, linked with the king, stands for the center of the world, and the Mātrkās symbolize the eight cardinal directions. In this way, the capital of the kingdom is transformed into a microcosm of the cosmos.
32. Indra never receives blood-sacrifices in the Kathmandu Valley. It should also be mentioned that a gold-plated copper statue of Visvarupa is displayed at the same time just in front of the Police Station, 20 meters west of the Kal Bhairava of Hanuman Dhoka. This statue is usually housed in the Mulcok of Hanuman Dhoka. Its main priest is the Karmacarya *pujari* of Taleju temple. Visvarupa is here regarded as the universal form of Indra.
33. The *Thakujaju*, descendants of the former Malla royal family, also display a statue of Indra in Thāhiti every six years.

34. Cf. R. Pradhan, *op.cit.* p. 389.
35. In Maru, the statue of Indra is kept throughout the year in the local Asok Vinayak temple just nearby the Kasthamndap. *Nitya puja* is done by the Jyapus in charge of this temple. But the offerings are just made to the door of the room in which Indra is kept, not to the statue itself.
36. As M. Slusser rightly observes: "Of particular interest in the history of Indian religion, whereas in India Indra's cult seems to have survived only to the tenth century, it is exactly from then that images of Indra begin to be abundant in Nepal" *Nepal Mandala*, *op. cit.*, p. 267.
37. M. Slusser, *Op.cit.*, pp. 276-268, and R. Pradhan, *op. cit.* pp. 291-395. See also R. Levy, *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the Organization of a Traditional Newar City in Nepal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 458. Cf. also D. Gellner, *Monk, Householder and Priest* *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 573.
38. Cf. D. Gellner, *op. cit.*, p 573.
39. See for instance G. Dumézil, *La religion romain archaïque* (Paris: Payot, 1965), 196.
40. W. J. Wilkins, *Hindu Mythology* 1982; reprint, (Calcutta: Rupa & Co. 1973) 463.
41. See, among others, W.J. Wilkins, *op. cit.*, p. 60, O. Viennot, *op. cit.*, pp. 79 and 96, and M. Slusser, *op. cit.*, p. 267, note 1.
42. Another god, specific to the Newars, *Nasahdyah*, requires ~~stolen~~ offerings. Young Jyapu boys studying music have to steal a chicken or male goat and sacrifice it to Nasahdyah. For Bhaktapur, see G. Wegner, *The dhimaybaja of Bhaktapur* (Wiesbaden: Kommissions verlag, Franz Steiner, 1986) 14-15.
43. In Theco Village (Lalitpur District), for instance, farmers erect five to six poles shaped like a cross during Indra Jatra. These poles represent *Tusikhuimadyah* (= Indra) and are worshipped especially on the full-moon day. Such poles in the form of cross are also erected in some quarters of Kathmandu City (Thamel, Tebahal, etc.) during the festival of Indra.
44. A strange ceremony is performed around Indrachok (= Kathmandu) on the night of the last of the Indra Jatra. According to M. Anderson, who is the only author to mention it, "A small wooden puppet is brought from the confines of Hanuman Dhoka and used as a weapon to strike small puppets placed behind the images of Indra"; cf. *The Festivals of Nepal* (London: G. Allen & Unwind Ltd., 1975), 137. According to one Jyapu informant of Indrachok, three puppets, called *jhyalica* (New.), are concerned. This ceremony which I could not watch, remains to be explained.

45. D. Wright, *History of Nepal* (Calcutta: Ranjan Press, 1966) 145.
46. Cf. A. W. Macdonald, "Remarks of the Manipulation of Power and Authority in the High Himalayas," *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 12 no. 1 (1987): 3-16. and G. Toffin, "L'usage politique du mythe au Népal. Une lecture ethno-his-torique du dieu matsyendranath," *Annales ESC*, no. 4 (1990): 951-974
47. Bert van den Hoek, "Does Divinity Protect the King? Ritual and Politics in Nepal," *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, (1990): 149.
48. H.N. Agrawal, *The Administrative System of Nepal from Tradition to Modernity* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1976), 159.