

Indrajatra: Its Evolution and Interpretation

By Siddhi B. Ranjitkar

Indrajatra has evolved from its initial structure to its present form at least at the three stages of historical development and during the periods of different dynasties such as Licchavi, Malla and Shah. The recorded history of Nepal began in the Licchavi period; hence, we assume that the tradition of Indrajatra was set in the initial form at that time.

Licchavi Period: Indrajatra comprised 1) Making offerings to Living Goddess Kumari and taking Her around the town 2) display of a life size Indra with his hand outstretched on a wooden platform built specially for that purpose at Maru tole, and other busts of Bhairav in different parts of the old Kathmandu, 3) Dakine Devi (Da-gi) going around of the town in search of her son: Indra, 4) Upaku-wonegu: offerings of wick lamps on clay dishes in the names of the deceased people in a year on the streets of the Kathmandu town of that time, 5) Tana-kishi (white elephant) going around in search of his master.

Licchavi King Gunakam Dev set the tradition of receiving a "Tika" at the end of Kumari jatra from the Living Goddess Kumari as a mandate to rule the country. To receive a "Tika" from Goddess Kumari means to obtain power from Her. By tradition Living Goddess Kumari first touches both the shoulders of the "Tika" receiving king with her Khadga: a kind of divine sword. Then, the king takes the feet of the Living Goddess Kumari, and touches them to his forehead. Thereafter, the Living Goddess Kumari bestows "Tika" on the forehead of the king.

A life size idol of Indra with outstretched arms bound by raw cotton yarn is put up for a public display on a wooden platform at Maru tole. This is the Licchavi tradition that continues even today. A legend has it that Indra came to earth in search of an unique flower called Parijat not available in heaven but it was indispensable for his mother to make offerings to Lord Mahadev (Avaloketeswor for Buddhists) on the third day (Teej) of the light fortnight in Bhadra: the fifth month in the Bikram calendar. The flower was not available in heaven because Lord Krishna and his friend called Satyabhama brought it down to earth. As Indra sneaked into a garden, the gardener happened to be a great Tantric scholar of that time, not only noticed him but even identified him, by the power of his spiritual Tantric wisdom. He immediately spread his spiritual lasso called Taraan, and encircled and bound Indra up with his Taraan. Indra could not move beyond that Taraan.

Different people interpret the imprisoned Indra differently. Tantriks interpret imprisoned Indra in their own way. They say that they put the imprisoned Indra to a public display for people to know and follow what Tantriks believe. Binding Indra up is only a symbolic. The real meaning of binding Indra up is binding one's own mind, as Indra is our mind. Indra is the king of heaven. Mind is the king of our body. Hence, mind is Indra and Indra is mind.

Tantriks say that we can enjoy a normal household life, and at the same time, we can achieve Nirvana too. It is very attractive. Therefore, if we control our mind, concentrate it and perform healthy meditation, and keep our desire, ego and contempt under control, certainly we achieve Nirvana. This is the message of Indra displayed at Maru tole during the festival of Indrajatra.

In a simple way, people believe that Indra is a god. Human physical eyes cannot simply see him. He has not a physical body as humans have. His is a spiritual body; only Tantriks can see him by their Tantric vision, and bound him up with a Tantra called Taraan: a kind of a spiritual lasso in the Tantric language. Tantriks used such a spiritual lasso to catch many divine spirits such as Mahankal in Kathmandu, Bhairav in Bhaktapur and so on. The outstretched hands of Indra displayed at Maru tole during the Indrajatra festival indicate

that Indra has surrendered himself to the Tantrik, and symbolically has conveyed the message that even Indra cannot escape from punishment when someone does something wrong.

When Indra's mother found that her son did not show up with the flower he was supposed to bring; she herself came down to earth in search of her son Indra. She was called Dakine Devi (Da-gi). She went around the town in search of her son and found out her son caught up in the Tantric web. She had tough negotiations with the Tantrik and ultimately succeeded to free her son from the Tantrik' control.

On this occasion, family members of deceased people in a year follow in her footprints in the hope of going to heaven, and finding the souls of their deceased loved ones. All of them reach Indradaha where they take a holy dip in preparation for their journey to heaven. Dakine Devi tricked them into staying behind creating heavy fog.

Members of the Manandhar family of the Newar community carry a Baumata to light the way for Dakine Devi and the mundane followers on their way to heaven. Baumata is made of a long bamboo set with a series of clay dishes with wick lamps on them and carried by two men. This is the Licchavi tradition that people followed even today.

Dakine Devi was the mother of Indra for common people but for Tantriks, she was Kundaline power. Human body has eight Chakras. Muladhar chakra is the base chakra from which Kundaline power stimulates. It is the power station of 72,000 nerves, and their systems in a human body. Kundaline may be considered as earth for laymen. One rises from Kundaline (earth) to navel (cosmos) and then to the head (heaven) gaining knowledge through proper meditation. The people carrying Baumata going to Indradaha nearby Jamacho, and worshipping Indra depict this path of knowledge. Baumata symbolizes knowledge. Thus, the prime meaning of Indrajatra is to take people from earth to cosmos and then to heaven.

One most important activity of the Indrajatra is to offer wick lamps on clay dishes in the name of family members died in a year, on the way going around the town of that time. This is called Upaku-wonegu. This tradition is prevalent only among the members of the Vajracharya family of the Newar community. They do not celebrate Gai-jatra (Saya) in the names of their deceased loved ones; hence, they follow the tradition of Upaku-wonegu. People observe this tradition even today. Therefore, some people believe that the main purpose of celebrating Indrajatra at the time of Licchavi was to make special offerings to the souls of deceased loved ones before observing a big festival called Dasain.

The tradition of Tana-kishi going around in search of his master is also continued even today. There is a place called Kishi-gaa literally means an elephant stall, in the old Kathmandu town. People believe that Indra left his elephant on which he rode down to earth, in this area, and then went around in search of the flower called parijat. People in this area paint a white elephant on a wicker mat (recently on canvas), and several other symbols on its body. Two men wrapped in the wicker mat: one stranding and another bending behind him and holding his waist formed an elephant. A man holding an oil lamp in his right hand and his left hand holding the wicker elephant and goes around the town dancing under the music of a single bell. This is Tana-kishi that goes around in search of Indra.

Malla period: The Malla dynasty added the chariot pulling festival of Living Goddess Kumari and Lakhe (demon) dance to the Indrajatra. By that time, the size of Kathmandu has grown larger. The Malla king called Jaya Prakash built a three-tiered chariot to Living Goddess Kumari, one-tiered chariots to Living God Batuk Bhairav and Living God Ganesh. He also set

the tradition of distributing Shamhya-baji: blessings of Goddess Kumari at Jaisidewal on the first day of the chariot-pulling festival, and at Hanumandhoka on the second day.

King Jaya Prakash Malla built an elegant house for residing Living Goddess Kumari and a three-tiered chariot to take the Goddess to the town during the Kumari jatra in honor of Living Goddess Kumari fulfilling his pledge made to the Goddess if he would get back the kingdom. Jaya Prakash was an unlucky king. He lost his throne to his own son. Therefore, he went to Goddess Guheswori, made offerings to her, and pleased her, and obtained Khadga-siddhi: a kind of blessings that empowered him. Goddess Guheswori is another form of Goddess Kumari. So, he regained his lost kingdom and power by the grace of Goddess Kumari. Therefore, he set the tradition of celebrating an elaborate Kumari jatra in honor of Goddess Kumari.

A legend has it that the first Malla king brought with him the Goddess "Taleju" – a Hindu Goddess. The Malla kings used to have direct talks with the Goddess "Taleju". Due to the misdeed of one of the Malla kings, the Goddess refused to have one-on-one talks with the king. However, several years of penance, the Malla king succeeded to persuade the Goddess to appear in person. The Goddess agreed to appear as the Living Goddess Kumari. So, both "Taleju" and "Kumari" is the same Goddess, only a different name for a different faith.

A demon called "Lakhe" not finding his patron Goddess "Taleju" simply followed in the footprints of the Malla king and ended up at the Hanumandhoka where the Malla king enshrined "Taleju". Thus, the Lahke dance simply depicts how the demon went in the search of Goddess Taleju.

The real meaning of Kumari worship is to empower us invoking Goddess Kumari. Our body is also a divine. There is no divine like a human body. Our body has different Piths from where Tantriks generate power. Gods reside in our body. Our body is our own powerhouse. The human body is made of five basic elements called Pancha-Mahabhut. We energize them through worshipping a human body in the Living Goddess Kumari, and then we become empowered from them. This is the meaning of Kumari puja.

Some people described energizing the five basic elements of the human body as the one-on-one talking with goddess Taleju, and some other even went to explain it as the game of dice the Malla kings had played with Goddess Taleju depicted as a gorgeous woman. They played the game with a curtain between them. None of them could see each other. At one time, being very curious about the goddess playing a game with a human, one of the Malla kings cleared off the curtain to see the goddess. Instantly the goddess disappeared saying, "I will never come back to play the game with you. You broke our deal on not to see each other."

It is necessary to make offerings to Goddess Kumari at the end of any auspicious offerings made to any deity. If we do not perform offerings to Goddess Kumari, other deities would not accept our offerings, and our offerings to other deities go astray.

The Living Goddess Kumari is the symbol of religious harmony in Nepal. The Living Goddess Kumari herself is from the Shakya clan of the Nevah Buddhists. They are responsible for taking care of the Living Goddess Kumari whereas a Nevah Hindu Tantric priest called Karmacharya performs daily regular offerings to the Living Goddess Kumari as the goddess Taleju. This has harmonized Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal.

Shah period: The four-day Indrajatra has become an eight-day festival since the Shah rule. Gorkha King Prithvi Narayan Shah succeeded to take the power from the unfortunate last Malla King Jaya Prakash Malla but the people did not accept him as their king, and did not

permit him to receive the blessing from the Living Goddess Kumari that was mandatory for any ruler. The negotiations went on for four days and at the end of the fourth day reaching an agreement, Prithvi Narayan Shah received the "Tika" from the Living Goddess Kumari and became the legitimate king.

The Shah dynasty added another piece of its own to the Indrajattra making the present comprehensive form of the Indrajattra that we observe every year for eight days. This last addition has been the tradition of hoisting a flag called Indra dhoj on a tall wooden pole on the first day of the Indrajattra, and leaves it fluttering for eight days until the festival ends. The popular belief is that flying an Indra's flag once a year will stop all evil spirits entering the kingdom, and any external power from taking over the kingdom.

Tantriks developed a special method of selecting a tree for a pole to be used for flying the Indra's flag. They went to the special forest in Nala of the Kavre district every year to select a pole. Different groups of people pulled the pole from one place to another ultimately reaching Kathmandu just on time for pulling it up.

On the first day of the Indrajattra, people of a special Nevah family in Kathmandu pull up the pole with an Indradhoj on it, and let it flutter for a week. Indradhoj is for saving and protecting the people and the country from the assaults of other kings. If a pole with such a flag stands, nothing could harm the ruler and the people; this is what our people and rulers believed in.

Most of the Nepalis perform rites and rituals without trying to understand what they are doing. Therefore, most of the rites and rituals become mechanical rather than spiritual.

September 30, 2015



Living Goddess Kumari



Goddess Kumari Home



Indra In the Tantric Net Being Revered



A Platoon Of An Ancient Army Escorting Wooden Pole



Tana-kishi or Pulu-kishi Searching For Indra



Lakhe Dance Looking For Goddess Taleju



Another View of Tana-kishi or Pulu-kishi Searching For Indra



Da-gi Mother of Indra



Captured Indra

Acknowledgment: All pictures are from the facebook.

