

Visket Jatra : From the Political Aspect

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ABSTRACT

Visket Jatra is one of the famous festivals of Bhaktapur area, which is being celebrated every year with Mesha Sankranti (Aries Solstice) as the focal point. Many kinds of legends are also prevalent among the people regarding this festival. But recent studies have shown that there is no truth in some of these legends. What exactly Visket Jatra? In this regards it is difficult to interpret it in the true sense by looking at in from a single angle. For this, it is necessary to have study and analysis from various aspects like religious, cultural, social, political etc. From a religious point of view, this Jatra procession is a procession of Bhairav, the chief deity of Bhaktapur city and his consort Bhairavi. Similarly, at the Tantrik level, this Jatra (procession) can be taken as a symbol of mutual intercourse between the two. The Jatra also seems to have a role to play in entertaining the general public. In this way, from the very beginning at the political level, this Jatra was a symbol of good relations between the king and the people. However, there are also rumors that such Jatras (festivals) have been introduced in the name of religion to divert public attention from political issues. But in the case of Bhaktapur, the relationship between the king and the people here have always been sweet and cordial, many historical contexts make this clear. The same intimate relationship used to be revealed in the Visket Jatra. The Jatras festivals has not only the religious or cultural significance but it also has political aspect. This article is prepared in descriptive, analytical and comparative study method. And main conclusion of this study is that how, despite being a traditional Jatra, this Jatra has been going on continuously till today, it has been highlighted that the state or the government also has an important role in this, as well as people's support and participation.

Key words: *Bhairavnath, Vishwa Dhawaja, Dyo liyagu puja, Layaku puja.*

Background of Visket Jatra

Visket Jatra is a main Jatra of Bhaktapur. Visket is a corrupted form of word Vishwaketu, which means Vishwadhvaja or world flag. Every year on the day of Chaitra Masanta raising the world flag and celebrating the Jatra on the day of Mesha Sankranti, it is mentioned in the ancient handwritten text of Gautami Tantra that Manu's words will spread happiness and peace everywhere, the welfare of the living beings and the world, and the destruction of enemies. In this way Visket is basically understood as Lingo Jatra which is carried out by hoisting Vishwadhwoja (world flag). Over time, many sub-Jatras were added to it. Bhairav Bhadrakali's RathaJatra is very famous among such Jatra. This Jatra starts 4 days before the main Jatra and continues till 4 days after the main Jatra ends. Apart from this, on the occasion of Visket, there are many amazing cultural activities along with local level Jatras of Ashta Matrika and other Goddesses established here. Here some people take the legend of Naganagini as evidence and say that the flag hoisted on the lingo is the dead body of Naganagini and this festival is performed in memory of them. But this statement seems to be completely wrong. Mass media and even historians are distorting history by spreading false information by displacing the real thing through propaganda. In reality, Visket is not from Visayat (killed the snake) but Visket from Vishwaketu and from the linguistic point of view, the above statement seems reasonable (Sharma, 2062: 43-44). Even when studying and analyzing the regulations or activities related to this festival, it becomes clear that this festival is completely based on religious background and is completed by Tantric methods. The main hero of this Jatra is Bhairav. On the

basis of archival evidence, it is known that this Jatra belongs to Bhairava. Because if this Jatra was the Jatra of *Naganagini*, there should have been some indication of it in the pair of flags, which are considered to be symbols of *Naganagini*, but no such sign is found in the flag, instead, there is a sculpture of *Akashbhairava* with the emblem of *Ashtamangal*.

In two *Dhwaja* archives of the Shah period of B.S. 1854 and 2004, Lingo is clearly addressed as Akash Bhairava and *Dhwaja*(flag) as *ViraDhwaja* (kayastha, 2070: 138). Also, the *batis hate* (48 feet length) of blue cloth wrapped around the head and arms symbolically at the top of the *lingo* during the Jatra also reveals what the lingo Bhairava symbolizes, as Bhairava's form color is often blue. That is why the tradition of offering blue clothes while worshipping Bhairav is still found today. Also, since *Bhairavanath Guthi* itself has been conducting the Vishwadhvaj Lingo Jatra, it is known that this Jatra is Bhairava's Jatra. From these mentioned facts, it is understood that this Jatra is the Jatra of Akash Bhairav of *Taumadhi Chowk*. *Akash Bhairav* is *Vishwanath Bhairav*. As it is the flag of *Vishwanath Bhairava*, it is called Vishwadhvaja and because of its associated Jatra, it is called *VishwaJatra* or *Vishwadhvaja Jatra*. Therefore, this Jatra is understood to be a state-level approved Jatra. Because the guidance, conduction, control and supervision of this Jatra was done by the kings or state government in the past, but now it is done by local bodies such as District Administration, Police, *Guthi Sansthan*, etc., so the political aspect is more important than other aspects of this Jatra.

Research Methodology

The methodology for the proposed study based on primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include information collected from related to the concerned government bodies such as CDO office, Guthi Sansthan of Bhaktapur, statements of the heads of the affiliated local Guthis, information obtained from on-site study, study of *Thyasaphu* (folding book) obtained in Bhaktapur, etc. and secondary source materials include books, text and articles published in various journals. Comparative, analytical and historical study methods have been used to study these mentioned resource materials. It is based on true facts and authentic documents. This research is completed in APA 6.

Objective

The main objective of this research is to analyze and highlight the political as well as various aspects of the religious and cultural festival *Visket*, a famous Jatra of Bhaktapur.

Discussion

The *Visket Jatra* and the various cultural activities associated with it are symbols of historical significance. In this type of old cultural festival, the culture of the Malla period is extensively involved. However, not only *Visket* but most of the festivals in Bhaktapur are a product of Malla period culture. In its upliftment, protection, promotion etc. of the rulers of the time are found to have a great contribution. It was the gift of the Malla kings to extend the *Visket Jatra* from 2 days to 9 days. In this, especially the names of Malla kings Viswa Malla, Jagajyotir Malla, Jagatprakash Malla, Jitamitra Malla, Bhupatindra Malla etc. are noteworthy. They had made various arrangements for conducting this Jatra. Until now, this festival has been protected at the state level.

Although the Jatra (procession) seems to have been started only with the help and participation of the people from the Brahmins to the Shudras in the local society, in fact the ruling class is also known to have played an important role from the study of the rules and regulations of the Jatra (procession). Also, from another point of view, it can be taken as a symbol of the good relationship between the king and the people. In fact, in Bhaktapur many contexts confirm that there was a sweet and cordial relationship between the king and

the people throughout the Malla period. Such as king Jagatprakash Malla(1643-1672AD) wrote that there is no difference between me and Chandrashekhar(minister) (poudel, 2008: 41). And many famous works written jointly by the king and the minister in the name of Jagatchandra are still found here and there. At that time, the kings used to seek the advice, suggestions and help of the local people, whether it was for the cause of religion and virtue, or for development, or for the relief of the state. The following context makes it clear that such a cordial relationship was maintained till the end of malla period. For example, due to the onslaught of the Gurkha army, the kings of the neighboring states of Kantipur and Lalitpur came to seek refuge. The fact that the king of Bhaktapur asked for people's opinion on whether to grant asylum or not, and in the end, kings of Kantipur and Lalitpur were granted asylum on the advice of the people, Is clear from the historical evidence (vaidya, 1996: 24, Misra, 1994: 24 & Pradhanang, 1993: 9-11). In this way, the king appreciates the feelings of the people and the people also support the king in every step of the way, so popular rule was maintained in Bhaktapur. This Jatra (Procession) should be taken as a symbol of this good relationship. This fact is confirmed by the fact that even today during the Jatra (procession), the symbol of the king, the sword, and the symbol of the people's representative (minister), a Brahmin, are not placed in a chariot, the Jatra (procession) is not formally conducted (Information obtained by field study). Thus, the Jatra (procession) was carried out with the support and active participation of both the king and the people.

In the Malla period, the state would try to make the Jatra (procession) as exciting as possible by inviting the natives of Visket Jatra to join it a few days before the Jatra started (P. Manandhar, personal communication, July 15 2010.). From this it is understood that the intention of the state or the then ruling class was to get maximum participation in the Jatra and to complete the procession on time. In the society of the time where other means of entertainment were not available, it would be unnatural to try to entertain and provide as many local people as possible by participating in such festivals. But even more important and serious is the assumption that the largest manpower, at that time was the peasant community, is still. They used to be busy in farming. When farming is done, they should not engage in other activities, especially not in politics, to govern easily, the peasant community, which is a large manpower of the society, needs to be engaged in such cultural activities with the help of religion can be easily guessed by the state or the ruling class. For this reason, every class living in the state was given a responsibility for the Jatra. As far as the participation of the people of neighboring states in this procession is concerned, it shows that people from the surrounding states used to come to Bhaktapur at this time to observe the *Visket* festival or to see the procession of their relatives and to return with joy. But sometimes what would happen if in a political matter between one state and another state, that is to say, if there was animosity and enmity between the Malla kings, a difficult situation would have arisen at that time. People from neighboring states, who came to visit their relatives to celebrate *Visket* or to watch the procession were not barred from entering Bhaktapur, however, it is known from the historical evidence that people used to be imprisoned and tortured when they came to know that they were the enemy state (Bajracharya, 1984: 24 & Bajracharya, 1996: 66). In this context, it is pertinent to mention here an event which took place towards the end of the Malla period. Once some youths of Kantipur came to Bhaktapur to see the *Visket Jatra* on the occasion of New year. But king Ranjit Malla arrested and imprisoned them on the charge of being too proud of clothes and jewels they wore. But later, When Jayprakash Malla, king of Kantipur (Kathmandu), got angry and threatened to attack to Bhaktapur, the boys were released. In retaliation for this incident, 7 months later, Jayaprakash Malla also detained some devotees who had come to Pashupati to sow *Sadbij* (seeds) during the *Bala Chaturdashi* festival. Later, they were released after Bhaktapur paid compensation to Kantipur (Anderson, 1971: 206 & Lamsal, 1966: 117). Thus, it is learned from this that due to the mutual animosity of the Malla kings, in the then situation, even the common people who come and go to celebrate the Jatra festival used to suffer.

Similarly, the fact that the battle between the Malla kings also had a direct effect on this Jatra, which is confirmed by the incident of Visket Jatra of 1663 AD. What's memorable here is that *Visket's Lingo Jatra* takes place in *Yosinkhel*, outside of the main town. But at that time, the kings of Kantipur and Lalitpur were across the river were sitting outside the city with their armies. They obstructed the Jatra procession that it would not be possible to carry out it unless they gave their order. Therefore, the Lingo could not be raised. Bhairav's chariot could not reach the *Lingo Jatrasite*. At *Gahiti* (on the way to Jatra) the deity was taken down from the chariot and placed in the belt of the individual's house and worshiped. Due to the army siege of Kantipur and Lalitpur, people were not able to go out and inside the city, there were not available calves, even the goats are sacrificed and guthiyars are fed Samyehbaji (a kind of pure and sacred food). Even though the Jatra procession could not take place in this way, Visket was completed, it has come to be known (Thya saphu, an original text, 2020: 6,7 & 8). This shows the fact that once the *Visket Jatra* could not be held in Bhaktapur due to the invasion of neighboring states during the Malla period.

The Jatra in Shah Period

Significant changes were also seen in the Visket Jatra after the Malla period. In the past, the Malla kings themselves were participated in the Jatra and instructed to conduct the Jatra procession in an orderly and dignified manner. But when Bhaktapur was not independent state, the procession started from center (capital Kathmandu). After the conquest of the Kathmandu valley by king Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha, Kathmandu became the capital of the whole of Nepal and royal palace became Hanuman Dhoka Durbar. After this, in the annual Visket Jatra in Bhaktapur, the sword was sent to Bhaktapur from Hanuman Dhoka Durbar as a symbol of the king. The same royal sword introduced the tradition of representing the king in the main activities of the Procession. In addition to this, the Malla kings themselves used to participate in the worship of the gods and goddesses associated with this Procession (Bajracharya, 1984: 30). Now that tradition has also stopped. The important thing is that Visket Jatra Procession take place only according to the way and method used in Malla period. From this, it is clear that since the *Newar* art culture of the Kathmandu valley was not theirs, the Shah kings did not show much interest in its promotion and development. Accordingly, it is known that they had neither special interest nor opposition to this Jatra procession. However, the historical evidence makes it clear that the *Shah* dynasty kings also contributed to the preservation of the cultural tradition of the annual Visket Jatra (procession) in Bhaktapur, as in other major Jatras (processions) in the valley. For example, the flag *Viswa Dhwaja* that was flown at *Visket Jatra* was replaced by a new flag when it became obsolete, to provide wood materials required for the construction of Bhairav Bhadrakali's chariot, when the temple of Bhairavnath, the chief deity of the Jatra, collapses due to the earthquake and other reasons, its maintenance, restoration and reconstruction work will be done, overall Visket Jatra was conducted through *Guthi* system even during the Shah (Rana) period. These facts are known from the *Swarnapatra* (gold leaf), *Tamrapatra* (copper leaf), Dhwoja archive of the Shah Kings in the *Bhairavnath* temple of Bhaktapur (Munankarmi, 1996: 35-36).

After conquering Kantipur and ascending the throne on the day of *IndraJatra* in 1767 AD, king Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha allowed the procession to continue uninterrupted and continued the cultural tradition of the defeated Newar people (Vaidya, 1993: 264 & 386). This shows his great sense of national unity. The kings who came after him also maintained harmony without any animosity towards the religion, art and culture of the local Newar people. Therefore, the art, culture, customs, traditions etc. of the Malla period of the Kathmandu valley have survived till today. Thus, even after the rule of the Shah dynasty, kings, the Visket Jatra of Bhaktapur is being completed without any hindrance on the appointed days every year like in the Malla period.

Another important aspect of the Visket Jatra that appeared after the Malla period was Guruju's platoon. Especially after the *Visket Lingo* arose, *Guruju's* platoon introduced the new practice of firing four times

(L. Munankarmi, personal communication, 9 oct. 2007). The platoon used to come to the place of Jatra dressed in black Nepali dress. This platoon was not a platoon of *Newar Guraju* (Bajracharya) but a new tradition that came into vogue with Prithvi Narayan Shah. According to some critics, after the conquest of the valley, king Prithvinarayan Shah of Gorkha sought to control the local Newar people, in order to keep the Newars culturally and psychologically defeated and to keep the spirit of subjugation alive, *Guraju's* platoon has been made to participate in various fairs, festivals, traditions and culture prevalent in the Kathmandu valley (Jhigu swaniga, 2008: 7). For this reason, not only in the *Visket Jatra* of Bhaktapur, but also in the *Kumari Jatra* of Kathmandu and *Machchhendranath Jatra* of Lalitpur, as a symbol of Prithvi Narayan Shah's army, *Guraju's* platoon is updated with the *Rath Jatras*.

But in reality, the flag-raising work of the *Visket* can be taken as a symbol of happiness and good fortune according to the classical beliefs. And in that happiness, it seems natural to fire a gun. There is no need to think otherwise. Because on the evening of the last day of Chaitra when the Lingo with the world flag stands at the main Jatra site *Yosinkhel*, then in that happiness, the deities of *Ganesh*, *Bhairav*, *Ashtamatrika* etc. of the whole Bhaktapur city are brought out of the main temple and the ritual of *Khatyatra* (procession) can be seen in Bhaktapur even today. Anyway, on the occasion of Jatra, *Guraju's* platoon introduced a new practice of firing guns.

On the last day of *Chaitra*, raising the Lingo is very important from the point of view of *Tantra*. Therefore, during the Rana period, on that day, it was customary for the Rana Prime Minister and on the first day of *Baisakha* the king to go to Bhaktapur to see *Visket Jatra*. When the head of government and the head of state were present on the Jatra site, the local authorities used to give instructions to complete the cultural activities of the Jatra procession as soon as possible (Prajapati, 1989: 35). As a result, all the activities of the procession were completed within the stipulated time. No one was allowed to leave the Jatra site until the Jatra procession was completed. Soldiers surrounded the Jatra site. If someone had to defecate or go out, they had to keep the hat they were wearing, but there was no such ban on *Guthiyars* (members) of *Guthi* associated with Jatra. They were free to go in and out. The local administration thought that the *Visket Jatra* would not be completed on time and there would be no public participation in the Jatra. So, it is customart for the local administration to issue tickets to the locals of Bhaktapur for active participation in the Jatra procession 5, 7 days before the commencement of the Jatra (P. Manandhar, personal communication, July 15, 2010). If anyone showed any kind of inactivity or disregard for the Jatra during the Jatra, it was considered as anti-religion and anti-tradition. More importantly, no one dared to go against the orders of the then strict state administration. Thus, till the end of the Rana period, it is known that this procession was being conducted with the help and support of the local people and under the proper supervision of the center (state machinery).

The era of democracy to the republic

Since the establishment of democracy in 1950 AD till today, the Jatra has completed with the support and coordination of both the state and the people. On the one hand, it has the direct participation of the local people and on the other hand, the role of the state administration is very important. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this Jatra(procession) is being conducted especially under the control and supervision of the state machinery. In order to conduct this Jatra(procession) in a peaceful and orderly manner, a committee is formed under the chairmanship of C.D.O. (central District Officer) 15, 20 days before the commencement of the Jatra (procession) every year (H. Dangi, personal communication, August 15, 2008). The committee consists of enlightened class of the city, eminent personalities, culturologist, officials related to the Jatra(procession), priests, security officials. Major ritual activities from the beginning to the end of the Jatra are carried out under the supervision and management of this committee. In addition, almost all the financial expenses required for conducting the Jatra every year are being managed by the

state plant i.e., *Guthi Sansthan* Bhaktapur. The presence of government officials in the procession enhances the beauty of the procession. The main thing is that the royal sword which is the symbol of state sovereignty or the presence of the king is required in the major ritual activities of the Jatra procession. Therefore, the day before the procession starts, the sword is brought from Kathmandu to Bhaktapur Sallaghari and from there it is brought inside Bhaktapur along with musicians, priest, officials etc. (information obtained by field report). It is known that the king had a big role in this procession due to the tradition of the sword riding on chariot, the symbol of the king. In addition to this, before starting the *rathJatra* at a certain time created by the astrologer, in the temples of main deities of the Jatra Bhairav and Bhairavi, offer worship called *Dyo Liyagu Pooja* and *Layaku Pooja* as worship from the palace till today. These Poojas (worships) are taken as a sign of the king's order to conduct the procession (prajapati, 1989: 32). Only then does the Jatra formally start. The Brahmins, who had been riding sword for nine days, made arrangements to make detailed briefing about the Jatra to the officials of the royal palace at *Taleju Mulchowk* of Bhaktapur (prajapati, 1989: 32).

Another point seems to be that while studying the Dhwoja Abhlek (flag archives), one flag became obsolete and had to be replaced with another new flag, it has been a tradition for the ruling kings to do such good deeds. In this regard specially the names of the Malla and Shah dynasty kings are mentioned (M. Suwal, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2010). As an exception, the name of Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala is mentioned in the flag (*Viswa Dhwoja*) of the present time. Probably because the flag was returned after the establishment of the republic in the country and Prime Minister was incharge of the presidency at that time, so Prime Minister's name was engraved in the flag archive. Any way, it is clear that only the supreme person of the state can change the new flag of *Visket*. This procession, which is being conducted with the participation of the king and the people, proves that the king or the state power has a very close relationship in this Jatra (procession).

If the local public support and participation cannot lift the *ViswaDhoj Lingo*, especially in the case of large size of lingo, the local administration would request government for the help of army. After that, a team of government soldiers from Bhaktapur army barracks went to the place of Jatra and helped the local people to raise the lingo. This process has been going on till the last time of *Panchayat* period. But after the political changes of 1990 AD, the support of Nepal Army does not seem to have been taken for this procession (G. Chhukang, personal communication, July 22, 2009). In this context, it is pertinent to mention here that all the items required for conducting *Visket Jatra* such as pine tree, other timber, rope, blue jin cloth, flag bar, worship materials, animal quadrupeds etc. are being provided by the government body. In the past, all the works related to this was done through Chhebhadel Office. However, after the establishment of *Guthi Sansthan* in the year 1964 AD, the *Guthi Sansthan* has been spending the required amount for the entire cost of this Jatra to be paid by the government. Thus, the amount allocated annually by *Guthi Sansthan* is the main source of running this Jatra at present. Accordingly, the head of the office of *Guthi Sansthan*, Achyutananda Pokharel has informed that the Rs. 8 lakhs have been spent for the *Visket Jatra* of 2008, Rs. 8.5 lakh for the *Visket Jatra* of 2009 and Rs. 10 lakhs for the *Visket Jatra* of 2010 AD (A. pokharel, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2010). From this, it is clear that in view of the fact that *Guthi Sansthan* has been financing all the financial expenses related to the operation of *Visket Jatra*, which is a cultural heritage of the country, this Jatra seems to be being conducted under the proper supervision of the state machinery.

Conclusion

Thus, the fact that the *Visket Jatra* of Bhaktapur has been a Jatra from ancient times till now with the help and participation of the local people, but the fact that the king or the state power has equally important role in it is clear from the above-mentioned illustrations. In fact, under the control and supervision of the state administration, all the activities from beginning to the end of this procession have been carried out even

today. In other words, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the main objective of this Jatra (procession) was to maintain peace, stability and tranquility politically by instilling a sense of harmony, social harmony and mutual unity among the various sections of the society.

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