

## The Khatajatra of Maitiajima

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes a celebrated and jovial fair popularly known as *Khatajatra* of Maitidevi also known as Maitiajima. A Lichchavi inscription and several other monuments of the Lichchavi period exist within the temple premises of the goddess Maitidevi who is also worshipped as goddess Kumari among the Astamatrikas. Maitiajima is worshipped by both Hindu and Buddhist devotees. The daily rituals are carried out by a Buddhist *Guvaju*. Many festival and fairs are held in the name of the goddess. *Khatajatra* takes place on the fourth day of the dark fortnight of Kartik, beginning at *Dhyochen* of Maitiajima in Maligaunn. In this context, questions such as when the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima was introduced, who conducts it, how it is performed, and why it is observed are addressed here through a framed research. To uncover the facts, this qualitative research was conducted through the observation of *khata jatra*, interviews with experts, *guthiyars*, and priests, as well as consultations of literary sources. Since *khata jatra* begins at *dhyochhen* of Maitiajima in Maligaunn, the geographical scope of this research is delimited to Maligaunn, Gyaneshwor, and Maitidevi, the route followed by the *jatra*. The paper reveals that the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima has been celebrated since the early medieval period by the *Munikaar guthiyars*, who installed Goddess Maitiajima in their farmland and have cared for her since ancient times. It is celebrated over four days with three *khatas* representing Goddess Maitiajima, Ganesh, and the Astamatrikas.

Keywords: Maitidevi, peetha, dapha bhajan, dhyochhen

### Introduction

The Mother Goddess has been worshipped worldwide since prehistoric times. Sculptures of Venus found in Europe and Asia serve as strong evidence of this ancient devotion. Several terracotta images such as the head of a woman, a woman with her child, and

depictions of Shreedevi and Bhudevi were discovered during the excavation of Tilaurakot, Banjarahi, and Kapilvastu in the Terai region of Nepal, dating back to the 3rd century BC. Additionally, an image of Gajalakshmi from the 1st century BC, found in Chyasal Tole, Patan, confirms that Mother Goddesses were worshipped before the beginning of the Christian era. Likewise, goddesses such as the Saptamatrikas were profoundly worshipped at the start of the Christian era. A number of images of the Saptamatrikas—Brahmi, Maheshwari, Kaumari, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrayeni, and Chamunda dating back to the early Christian era and the Licchavi period have been found throughout the Kathmandu Valley. Many of these images from these periods are installed in Maligaunn, Handigaun, Kirtipur, Jayabageshwori, Baglamukhi, Kamaladi, and various other locations in the valley. A Licchavi inscription describing the reinstallation of stone sculptures of the Saptamatrikas in Sikubahi, Patan, replacing earlier terracotta figures, serves as a significant example. Later, the tradition of worshipping the Astamatrikas, Navadurga, and Dasamahavidya through tantric rituals was introduced and flourished during the early medieval period.

The Matrikas are worshipped either in the form of images or as *peethas*. A *peetha* is a simple, uncarved piece of stone often associated with legends, myths, or mystical themes. The temple of Maitidevi is located on the banks of the Rudramati River, near Handigaun and Maligaunn. Maitidevi is worshipped as Kumari, one of the Matrikas among the Astamatrikas. She is also known as Pancha Kumari and is locally referred to as Maitiajima. *Ajima* is a term used by the Newar community for Matrika, meaning "grandmother goddess" or *aji ma*. The name "Maitidevi" is believed to have evolved from "Matrika Devi," as all Saptamatrikas were originally called Matrika rather than by individual names such as Brahmi or Maheshwari. Though she belongs to the Shakta cult, Maitiajima is worshipped by both Hindu and Buddhist devotees. She is also worshipped daily by a Vajracharya, a Buddhist priest. This *peetha* is one of the oldest in the Kathmandu Valley, dating back to the Kirant period, similar to Kanka Ajima and Luti Ajima (Tiwari, 2001, p. 30).

*Jatras* have been celebrated in the Kathmandu Valley since the Licchavi period. *Jatras* such as Kailash Yatra, Sovhan Jatra (related with Narayan of Balambu and Pashupatinath), Varaha Jatra around Ananta Lingeshwor Gundu are mentioned in Licchavi inscriptions. These pieces of evidence confirm that these *jatras* were celebrated in honor of deities established during the early period. Several *gosthis*, such as the *dhupa gosthi*, *baditra gosthi*, and *dwaja gosthi*, were also established during this time. These were groups or organizations formed for the management of *jatras*. In addition to honor of deities *jatras* were means of recreation that gathered large crowd. Besides regular worship of Maitiajima, she is venerated with several occasions followed by lunar calendar. Likewise, her *jatra* is celebrated twice a year. The first *jatra* is celebrated on the fourth day of dark fortnight of Baishak. This is celebrated only within the premises of Maitiajima *dhyochhen*, Maligaun. While the second one is celebrated on the fourth day of dark fortnight of Kartik for four days.

The deities are carried in the *khata*s from *dyochhen* to the temple of Maitiajima, thus known as *khata jatra*. This demonstrates that several festivals are celebrated at the Maitiajima temple. There are various *guthis*, such as the Munikar Guthi, Maharjan Guthi, and Khadgi Guthi, associated with the temple. Each of these is linked to specific festivals, temple renovations, and the musical instruments. There are several beliefs regarding the initiation of the *khata jatra*. It is believed that this *khata jatra* has been celebrated since the installation of the temple, although it is also believed to have been introduced during the medieval period. Therefore, the key questions addressed in this article are: What is the historicity of the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima? When was it initiated? Who has been conducting it, and how is it carried out? Why is the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima celebrated? These issues are identified as the central problems of this article, which focuses on uncovering the relevancy and procedure of this celebration.

## Objective of the study

In addition to the daily and occasional worship of Maitiajima, several festivals and *jatras* such as *Baisak Chaturdasi jatra*, *Balachare*, *Lakhe*, *Yenla Parva*, *Kartik Purnima*, and many others are celebrated at the Maitidevi temple. Among these numerous festivals, the focus of this paper is specifically on the *khata jatra*. Thus, the objective of this study is as follows:

- To find out the historicity of *khata jatra* of Maitiajima
- To explore who conducts it and how it is accompanied.
- To analyze why is the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima celebrated.

## Methodology

This qualitative study focuses on the historical and cultural aspects of the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima. To gather historical and cultural facts, a field survey was conducted. Every activity of the *khata jatra* was observed while adhering to ethical considerations and respecting religious norms. With the permission of the *guthiyars* and priests, participatory observation was carried out for certain practices. To ensure authenticity and obtain detailed information, multiple interviews were conducted with priests, *guthiyars*, the *thakali* (chief of *guthiyars*), experts, *dhyopalas* (caretakers of the Maitidevi temple), traditional musical instrument players, and the *dhapa bhajan khala:*, who were directly or indirectly involved in the procedural functioning of the *khata jatra*. Inscriptions explaining the *khata jatra*, historical documents, photographs, and videos were collected. Additionally, published inscriptions, books, journals, dissertations, and other documents related to the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima were gathered and analyzed as secondary sources. To fulfill the objectives of the study, the facts collected from both primary and secondary sources have been analytically discussed, with citations provided at appropriate points. Finally, all literary sources consulted for the study have been listed in the reference section at the end.

## Main findings

The Kathmandu Valley is rich in both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. It celebrates fairs and festivals associated with various deities enshrined in temples, open spaces, alleys, roads, and courtyards almost every day. The *khata jatra* of Maitiajima is a four-day celebration held during the month of Kartik, coinciding with Tihar, at *dhyochhen* in Maligaun and the Maitiajima temple. This paper primarily focuses on the historical significance of the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima, the communities associated with it, the procedural details of the *jatra*, and the reasons for its annual observance. These aspects are discussed in detail below.

### Historicity of Khata Jatra of Maitiajima

The temple of Maitiajima is located in Maitidevi, Kathmandu, near the ancient city of Handigau/Maligaun. The locality itself is named after the goddess. Among the eight *Matrikas* installed by King Gunakamadeva following the establishment of his reign in Kathmandu, Maitiajima is believed to be one of them (Rajopadhyay, 2079, p.106). However, locals believe that the *peetha* of Maitiajima was installed in ancient times by local farmers. Additionally, the presence of an early sculpture of Ganesh, now popularly known as Siddhi Binayak dating back to the 2nd or 3rd century CE, along with a Licchavi inscription from the 6th or 7th century CE and Licchavi-era images of Buddha and Nandi (bull) within the Maitidevi temple premises, provides evidence that the temple has existed since the early Christian era.

A Licchavi inscription from the reign of King Amshuvarma is found within the premises of the Maitidevi temple (Department of Archaeology, 2061, p.134). Inside the temple, there is a small, single-roofed stone shrine where the *pitha* of Maitiajima is enshrined. This temple is considered one of the earliest examples of Licchavi architecture. At the entrance of Maitidevi temple, two lion statues are installed, each bearing inscriptions on their pedestals. These lions were established on N.S. 792 (B.S. 1728) on the fourth day of the dark fortnight of Ashwin during the reign of King Pratap Malla (Department of Archaeology, 2061, p.56). This is further verified by *Devimala Vamsabali*, which states that King Pratap Malla constructed a temple for *Pancha Kumari* or *Maitiajima*, who had been residing in *Mayur Tirtha* since earlier times (Yogi, 2013, p.101). Hence, based on these evidences, it is evident that the *peetha* of Maitiajima was enshrined in a very early period. A stone temple was built during the Licchavi period, and later, during the reign of King Pratap Malla, the present single-roofed temple was constructed, enclosing the original one.

The introduction of Tantrism in the Kathmandu Valley during the early medieval period from Bihar and Bengal in India led to the worship of deities through tantric rituals. This required a secluded space for conducting secret rituals, leading to the establishment of *dhyochhen* or *aagam ghar*, sacred homes for deities. A *dhyochhen* for Maitiajima was constructed in Maligaun, Kathmandu, approximately 1.5 km from the Maitiajima temple.

According to *Bhasa Vamsabali*, King Gunakamadeva of Kathmandu established a new settlement in *Naya Tole of Magal Desh* (present-day Maligaun) for the goddess *Pancha Kumari* or *Maitiajima* (Lamsal, 2023, p. 21). Likewise, Wright chronology also describes the same statement that King Gunakamadeva established a *dhyochhen* for Maitiajima in Maligaun (Wright, 1972, p. 140). These historical references indicate that the *dhyochhen* was built during his reign, likely to promote tantric rituals, which were widely practiced at the time. At the main entrance of the *dhyochhen*, two stone lions were installed, dated NS 800 (BS 1763), placing them in the later medieval period. These lions were placed by the Vajracharya family of Musyabahal, Kathmandu (Department of Archaeology, 2061, p. 166). This suggests that the Vajracharya family undertook renovations of the *dhyochhen* originally built by King Gunakamadeva and commemorated the occasion by installing the lions.

It is noteworthy that the stone lions at the *dhyochhen* were installed on the fourth day of the dark fortnight of Kartik in NS 800 (BS 1763) (Department of Archaeology, 2061, p. 166), the same day on which the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima is conducted. This suggests that the *khata jatra* has been an ongoing tradition since an earlier period. Many believe that King Gunakamadeva, when establishing the *dhyochhen* in Maligaun, also introduced the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima. However, another perspective links the festival's origins to the celebration of *Mha Puja* and the beginning of Nepal Samvat, as the *khata jatra* is observed around the same time. This has led to the belief that the *khata jatra* was initiated as part of the New Year celebrations. An important fact to consider is that during every *jatra*, especially the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima, the metal masks of goddess Maitiajima, Ganesh, and Bhairab are essential elements. These sacred images, carried in a bamboo basket by *Munika guthiyars*, exhibit the finest artistic features of early medieval art. This serves as compelling evidence that the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima was introduced during the early medieval period, with a strong likelihood that it originated during the reign of King Gunakamadeva.

### **Communities associated with Khata Jatra of Maitiajima**

Temple of Maitiajima is located at the banks of the Rudramati river, which was agricultural land with plenty of alluvial soil in the past. The legend describes that once a farmer found a small stone stele while working in his field. He shifted the stone aside and went home after completing his farming chores. The next day, he found the stone in the same place from where he had shifted it. He repeated this process many times but failed. At last, goddess Maitiajima emerged out of the stone and instructed him to install her in his farm, promising to care for him in return. The farmer installed the goddess within a small shrine made of hay and mud. The farmer who installed the goddess was Munika. Munikars belong to the *gyapu*/farmers group among the Newar community. Later, during the Licchavi period, a small single-story temple made of stone was constructed for the goddess. It is believed that this temple was installed by King Amshuvarma. During the early medieval period, when King Gunakamadeva established a *dhyochhen* for Maitiajima in Maligaun and allocated

a new colony for the Munikars, the caretakers of Maitiajima, he also allotted them land to cultivate *musva* (Lamsal, 2023, p. 21). *Musva* is a variety of flower also locally known as *babari* and is believed to be a favorite flower of goddess Maitiajima.

Since the Munikars were the founders of goddess Maitiajima and had been taking care of her from ancient times, King Gunakamadeva might have assigned them the responsibility of conducting every ritual linked with the goddess, as well as the specific occupation of earning their living by cultivating *musva*. Thus, the Munikars are the main *guthiyars* associated with Maitiajima, and every occasional rite, ritual, and festival is conducted in their presence. As time passed, Maitiajima temple was enriched with heritages installed by devotees and valuables offered to her. The fame of the goddess attracted many people to worship her daily and on special occasions, even from distant places. This prompted to appoint a caretaker to look after the assets of the goddess and the temple area permanently. Thus, *dhyopala* from Dhalko of Kathmandu were allocated as the caretaker of goddess Maitiajima. *Dhyopalas* belong to the *Dhyola* caste in the Newar community and are well-known as caretakers of the Matrikas around the Kathmandu valley. Hence, from the late medieval period, the *dhyopalas* of Dhalko have been guarding goddess Maitiajima.

The *guthi* members of the *dhyopalas*, through a rotational system, have been taking turns in guarding the goddess. Every fifteen days, a new *dhyopala* from their *guthi* is appointed. The designated *dhyopala*, along with his family members, must stay within the premises of Maitiajima temple. Maitiajima was being worshiped by local farmers and other local people as a permanent priest was not appointed earlier for her daily worship. During the period of Bhim Shamsher, he appointed a Guvaju, a Buddhist priest, for her daily worship along with an installation of *guthi*. The appointment of Guvaju instead of Rajopadhyay or Karmacharya priest in Maitiajima temple might be the reason that the locals of Maitidevi area are the follower of the Buddhist religion. As demanded by them, Vajracharya might have been allocated. In this way, goddess Maitiajima is daily worshiped by the Guvajus (Tirtha Ratan Vajracharya/Raj Bhai Vajracharya), and their presence is essential in every ritual and *jatra* associated with Maitiajima. Munikar, Maharjan, Tuladhar, Tandukar, Shrestha, and Khadgi have the majority of domiciles around the Maitidevi area. The Maharjan were assigned the responsibility of making and maintaining wooden bridges across the Rudramati river to ensure easy access for people to Maitidevi temple. However, this tradition vanished due to the construction of permanent bridges over the river. Maharjan, Tandukar, Tuladhar, and Khadgi are involved in playing the *dhime* and *nayakhin baja*. Their presence is compulsory in every occasion associated with goddess Maitiajima.

### **Procedure of celebrating the Khata Jatra of Maitiajima**

The *khata jatra* of Maitiajima is celebrated for four days. The initial ritual of the *jatra* is conducted in Maitiajima temple on the third day of the dark fortnight of Kartik. The



sacrifice of a buffalo, known as *mecha puja*, is performed on this day. The objective of this offering is to pacify and make content Maitiajima, as well as her *ganas* (attendants) demons, dead, and evil spirits living in and around the temple and *masanghat* (cremation site close to Maitiajima temple). It is believed that making them content at first would help avoid accidents during the *khata jatra*.

On the fourth day of the dark fortnight of Kartik, or *Kukur Tihar*, three *khatas* and the deities stored in the *dhyochhen* of Maitiajima in Maligaun are cleaned and decorated with ornaments by Munikar *guthiyars*. First, an image of Ganesh is placed on the *khata*, which is then placed in front of the Ganesh temple *dhyochhen* in Maligaun. The second *khata* is placed in front of the *dhyochhen* in Maligaun, on which metal masks of Mahalakshmi, along with the Astamatikas, are kept. There is an interesting story linked with these Matrikas. It is said that the *khata jatra* of these Matrikas was once conducted by a Newar community from Kathmandu valley, but they were unable to continue the *jatra* for some reason. Thus, they left behind the *khata* with the Matrikas in the bush. Fortunately, it was found by the Munikars, who brought them to Maligaun, installed them in a separate *dhyochhen*, and continued their *jatra* along with Maitiajima. The third *khata* prepared for the *jatra* is also kept in front of the *dhyochhen*. It contains two images of Maitiajima and a Dhanavaju.

These days, the early medieval metal masks of Maitiajima, Ganesh, and Bhairab are not placed in the third *khata*. They are only carried during the *jatra* conducted in the month of Bhishak in the premises of the Maligaun *dhyochhen*. Earlier, the third *khata* was larger in size, but when it was renovated due to some damage, unfortunately, its size decreased. Thus, these days, these early medieval metal masks are not carried in the *jatra*. The image of Maitiajima and the Dhanavaju are not placed in the third *khata* immediately after the decoration is completed. They are kept in the dusk after the completion of the *sarkari puja* with a special offering of *panchabali* (a sacrifice of buffalo, goat, sheep, duck, and hen). A *guthi* for offering the *sarkari puja* on this day was established by Bhim Shamsher in BS 1961 (Guthi Sansthan, 3.60 PN. 48). After the completion of the *sarkari puja*, the images of Maitiajima and Dhanabhaju are carried down from the *dhyochhen* to be placed in the *khata* by the *guthiyars*. At night, after having *choila bhu* or a feast by the *guthiyars*, the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima begins.

Traditional music plays a vital role in the *jatra*. It is an essential part of Nepalese culture, used in the worship of deities and in almost every rite of human life, from birth to death. The indication of the beginning of the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima is given by the *nayakhin baja*, which is played by the Khadgis. The Khadgi community among the Newars is popular as leaders. During the medieval period, they were assigned the responsibility of conveying messages in society by playing the *nayakhin baja*. It is believed that the Khadgi community entered the Kathmandu Valley from Simrangadh along with king Harishima Deva and his queen Deval Devi. However, they declare themselves to be as old as Changunarayan

in the valley, as their presence is essential in playing the *nayakhin baja* during the ancient Kanti Bahiraba *jatra* of Changunarayan (Khadgi, 2080, p. 5). Besides the *nayakhin baja*, other traditional musical instruments, such as the *dhime baja*, *bansuri*, and *jhyali*, are also played during the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima. The *dapha bhajan* is another attraction of this *jatra*. The *dhime baja* is played by the Maharjan group.

The group of Khadgi and Maharjan, with the *nayakhin* and *dhime baja*, proceeds first in the *jatra*. The three *khatas*—of Ganesh, Mahalakshmi with Astamatikas, and Maitiajima follow the musical group. After the three *khatas*, the Munikar *guthiyars* sing the *dhapa bhajan*. Finally, the group of Maharjan *guthiyars* moves forward, playing the *bansuri* and *jhyali*. Before leaving the *dhyocheen*, all the *khatas*, including the musical group, rotate the *dhyocheen* three times. The *khatas* are then taken to the crossroad of Maligaun, and from there, to the banks of Rudramati river (Kalopul). Without crossing the bridge, the *khatas* are returned the same way and moved towards Gyneshwor Chowk. Locals from these areas welcome and worship the deities in the *khatas*. From Gyneshwor Chowk, the *khata* of Ganesh is carried towards the ancient Siddhi Binayak temple. The temple of Siddhi Binayak is located a few meters south from Gyneshwor Chowk at Gyneshwor height. After rotating the Ganesh temple three times, the image of Ganesh is taken out of the *khata* and placed inside the temple. At midnight, Ganesh is worshiped through the offering of *samaya baji* by Munikar *guthiyars*.

While the *khata* halts outside the temple, it is worshiped by offering a sacrifice of a goat. There is no tradition of sacrificing an animal to Lord Ganesh. On the other hand, the two other *khatas*, including Mahalakshmi with Astamatrikas and Maitiajima, are carried down from the hillock of Gyneshwor towards Maitiajima temple. At Maitiajima temple, the *khata* of Mahalakshmi with Astamatrikas is taken to *masanghat*. They make three rotations around *masanghat* and finally place the *khata* at the sanctum of Maitiajima, facing east. The reason for taking this *khata* to *masanghat* is that it includes the image of Chamunda or Kali along with other Matrikas. The next *khata*, which includes Maitiajima and Dhanabhaju, makes three rotations around Maitiajima temple before being placed at the northeast corner of the temple premises. Among the two images of Maitiajima, one is carried inside the temple to be placed on the main *pitha*, while the other is left in the *khata*. Until late at night, a large crowd gathers to observe the *jatra* and to worship Maitiajima. As the crowd slowly decreases, the tantric *puja* of Maitiajima begins.

At midnight, Maitiajima is offered *mamsahuti* Havana (offering of meat in the fire) with tantric rituals. This Havana is conducted in the pit located on the northern side of the temple. There is a specific tradition of offering thirty-two varieties of cereals in this Havana. These items must be provided by the *dhyopalas*, who have their turn to guard Maitiajima among the *guthiyars*. In earlier days, *dhyopalas* had the custom of providing the thirty-two varieties of cereals in a self-made bamboo basket, five feet in width and one foot in depth.



These days, the older generation with such skills has vanished. Thus, *dhyopalas* now provide thirty-two small bamboo baskets available in the market. They place an earthen pot (*bhigut*) in each basket and fill it with the cereals. The Havana is conducted by the Vajracharya Guvaju in the presence of Munikar *thakalis* or the chief of *guthiyars*, each responsible for Mahalakshmi with Astamatikas and Maitiajima. It takes three to four hours to complete all the rituals of Mamsahuti Havana and the puja. This Havana is equated with the sacrifice of a human being.

On the third day of the *khata jatra*, during the dark fortnight of Kartik (Lakshmi Puja), many devotees visit Maitiajima to worship. Munikar *guthiyars*, during the early morning, sing *dapha bhajan* from the *sattal* located north of Maitiajima temple. At noon, a huge pile of *samaya baji*, decorated with a buffalo's head, is offered to Maitiajima. At the same time, a secret tantric puja of Maitiajima and an earthen pot filled with *thon* (local liquor), as a representation of Bhairab, is conducted inside the temple. This is a secret tantric puja, and no one is allowed to enter the sanctum of Maitiajima temple except the Munikar *guthiyars*. Both Maitiajima and Bhairab are adorned with a garland made of buffalo intestine. They are offered cooked rice, dal, and vegetables. This rice, as Prasad, is distributed to a large number of Kumari and Kumar (small boys and girls) in the temple premises. This ritual is known as *maraja*.

During the evening, the *khata* of Ganesh from Gyaneshwor Siddhi Binayak temple is brought to Maitiajima temple. Before lifting all the *khatas* for the *jatra*, a special puja known as *layaku puja* is offered to all the deities and *khatas*. It is performed by the three Munikar *thakalis* associated with the three *khatas*: Ganesh, Mahalakshmi with Astamatikas, and Maitiajima. During this process, all the *thakalis* wear white *pagaris* or straps of long pieces of cloth on their heads, signifying respect for their leadership within the *guthiyars*. After the completion of this ritual, the image of Maitiajima, placed on the *pitha*, is brought outside the temple and placed in the *khata*. The ornaments of the gods and goddesses are checked by the Munikar *thakalis* and Maharjan *guthiyars* and then the *khatas* are lifted. Each *khata* makes a rotation around the Maitiajima temple three times. After the rotations, the *khatas* are moved towards the northwestern side of the Maitiajima temple, crossing the road to Gyaneshwor Ratopul. Munikar, Maharjan, Tandukar, and Shrestha, who reside around this area, offer puja to the *khata* and deities. Since this day is Lakshmi Puja, the *khata jatra* continues into the late night. At midnight, the three *khatas* with the deities are brought back to the Maitiajima temple and placed back in the temple premises.

On the last day of the *khata jatra*, also known as the first day of the light fortnight of Kartik (Mha Puja), all the *khatas* are carried by Munikar *guthiyars* from the Maitiajima temple early in the morning. The *khatas* are taken towards the southwestern side of the temple, moving towards Maitidevi Road and Dillibazar. These areas are home to a significant number of Munikar, Maharjan, Khadgi, and Tandukar families, who worship the deities by offering sacrifices and resting the *khatas* in front of their houses. From Pipalboat in

Dillibazar, the *khata jatra* continues northward towards the ancient Siddhi Binayak temple at Gyaneshwor. The procession then follows the main road through Gyaneshwor Mahadev, Gyaneshwor turning, and Mailigau Chowk, before finally reaching the Maligaun *dyochhen*.

A few decades earlier, the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima from Dillibazar Pipalboat was taken to Thane and Khone of core Kathmandu city via Putalisadak, Bagbazar, Bhotahiti, Ashan, Thahiti, Idrachowk, and many other places. They received offerings and puja from Munikar and Khadgi families. They even received puja from daughters belonging to the Maitidevi area who were married to men from the core areas. While returning from the core city of Kathmandu to Maligaun *dyochhen*, the *khatas* with deities were offered special puja at the Narayanhiti royal palace. However, the route of the *jatra* has diminished in recent years, and it is no longer taken to the core areas. When all the *khatas* reach Maligaun *dyochhen*, the Munikars residing around the *dyochhen*, along with locals, welcome the procession and conduct the *visharjan puja* or offering the final worship to all the deities, including the *khatas*. After the puja, all the *guthiyars* and locals who participated in the *jatra* come together for a feast. The images of Mahalakshmi with Astamatrikas are taken out of the *khata* and placed in the Mahalakshmi *dyochhen*.

Similarly, the images of Maitiajima, Dhanabhaju, and the pre-medieval masks of Maitiajima, Ganesh, and Bhairab are carried by Munikar *guthiyars* in their hands and finally placed in the *guthi ghar* located within the premises of the *dyochhen*, Maligaun. This ritual is known as *pena bicha*, and it marks the end of the annual *khata jatra* of Maitiajima. In the earlier days, a *lingo* or wooden pole was erected in the premises of the ancient Siddhi Binayak temple as a symbol marking the beginning of the Maitiajima *khata jatra*. It was lowered down after the completion of the *jatra*. There is still a small pit on the southwestern side of the Siddhi Binayak temple. However, this tradition is no longer practiced. It is believed that a *halipata* (banner) hung on the wooden pole at the Siddhi Binayak temple in Gyneshwor flew away and merged with a *halipata* of the Biska jatra in Bhaktapur. Since then, the tradition of erecting the *lingo* has been discontinued.

### **Reason for celebrating the Khata Jatra of Maitiajima**

The *pitha* of Maitiajima is located a few meters south of the ancient Bishalnagar settlement area. Bishalnagar, including Hadigau, Maligaun, and Naxal, once extended over a large area. Early sculptures, such as Satyanarayana, Matrikas, Kubera, Vishnu, and many more, found in these areas, prove its antiquity. Vamsabalis states that this ancient city was swept away by a flood (Poudel, 2020, p.63). It also mentions that the city was burned down in a fire (Wright, 1972, p.102). After the downfall of ancient Bishalnagar, people migrated to the core areas of Kathmandu (Regmi, 2051, p.23). Later, some people returned to their original town, the Bishalnagar area, and started earning their living by farming in the fields around the Maitiajima *pitha*. King Gunakamadeva established a new colony for these farmers

in Maligaun, built a *dyochhen* for Maitiajima there, and assigned the farmers to make a living by cultivating *musva*. These farmers became known as Munikar (Lamsal, 2023, p.23). The *pitha* of Maitiajima is a *pingaajima*, or the goddess residing at the cremation site near the Rudramati river. Thus, Maitiajima was worshiped as a powerful goddess and protector deity of Bishalnagar city from early times. The people offered everything cultivated in their fields to her, praying for protection from heavy floods, good harvests, and the salvation of deceased family members cremated within her shrine area. Initially, the Munikar farmers took turns guarding her and worshiping her daily. Later, the Guvaju priest to conduct her daily grand worship was assigned *dhyopalas* to take care of her and her belongings. People began celebrating occasional festivals to honor and please her. Later, after the construction of the *dhyocchen* and the introduction of tantric worship practices during the early medieval period, the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima was initiated as a grand occasion, accompanied by offerings. It has always been, and continues to be, believed that the annual celebration of the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima, with the offering of sacrifices, would recharge the goddess and make her content along with her attendants. This is believed to bring blessings from the goddess to her devotees, ensuring good cultivation, prosperity, and the removal of evils from their surroundings.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The presence of early sculptures dating back to the 2nd/3rd century CE and Licchavi monuments in and around the Maitiajima temple area confirms that the temple has existed since the early Christian Era. The early medieval period saw the rise of tantric worship practices in the Kathmandu Valley, which required secret spaces for deities to conduct these rituals. As a result, King Gunakamadeva established a new settlement in Maligaun for the Munikars, the caretakers of goddess Maitiajima, and built a *dhyochhen* for the goddess and during the installation of the *dhyochhen* in Maligaun, he introduced *khata jatra*. The lions installed at the main entrance of the *dhyochhen* in N.S. 800, on the auspicious day when the *khata jatra* of Maitiajima is conducted, provide strong evidence that the *khata jatra* has been continuously practiced since the early period. The compelling presence of metal masks of deities, showcasing early medieval features, further supports this fact. Since the Munikars have been taking care of Goddess Maitiajima from an early period as the main *guthiyars*, they are mainly associated with the *khata jatra*. Additionally, the Maharjan, Tandukar, Tuladhar, and Khadgi communities residing around the Maitidevi - Maligaun area are involved with various responsibilities associated with *khata jatra* of Maitiajima.

The *khata jatra* of Maitiajima is celebrated over four days. The first day involves pacifying Maitiajima along with her attendants through a sacrifice, ensuring the prosperous completion of the *jatra*. The absence of this ritual is believed to invite unfortunate incidents. The second day consists of placing the movable images of the deities into the *khatas* from the *guthi ghar* and *dyochhen*. While the images of Ganesh and Mahalakshmi with Astamatrikas

are placed earlier, the main image of Maitiajima is only placed after the *sarkari puja*. This highlights the significance of the goddess to the nation. The *khata jatra*, initially carried to the banks of the Rudramati river, then to the Ganesh temple in Gyneshwor, and finally to the Maitiajima temple, follows a traditional route. This route indicates the eastern and southern boundaries of the Bishalnagar/Maligaun area, which was the main path used by the earlier people traveling from Maligaun to Maitidevi.

The second and third days involve the main tantric rituals of Maitiajima, including the *mamsahuti Havana* and secret rites, which are compared to the human sacrifice practices of earlier times. These rituals were intended to pacify Maitiajima and Bhairaba. It is strongly believed that this offering would please the goddess. On the fourth day, the *khatas* of the deities are brought back to the Maligaun *dhyochhen* via Gyneshwor and Maligaun chowk, with the *khatas* no longer being taken to the core city of Kathmandu these days. However, the earlier tradition of taking the *khata jatra* to the core cities symbolizes the greeting of Maitiajima by the Munikar guthiyars and others, who, despite being compelled to migrate from their original town due to natural calamities, continue to honor and celebrate her presence. And finally, it reveals an important fact that the Maitiajima temple area was the southern border of the ancient Bishalnagar area, and Maitiajima was a powerful goddess and protector of the Bishalnagar area. Thus, she was worshipped with great faith from ancient times, and from the early medieval period, the *khata jatra* was initiated to recharge her annually, ensuring that she would shower blessings on her devotees, removing all evils from the city.

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