‘ALL THE KING’S HORSES AND ALL THE KING’S MEN’: THE 2004 RED MATSYENDRANĀṬHA INCIDENT IN LALITPUR

Christoph Emmrich

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall;
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the king’s horses, and all the king’s men,
Couldn’t put Humpty together again.

1. Introduction

On Sunday, April 25, 2004 at 9.30 p.m. local time on the second leg of its procession through Lalitpur, Nepal, the ceremonial chariot carrying the so-called ‘Red Matsyendranāṭha’ fell on its side and its crown touched the ground. This necessitated the recovery of the god from the chariot and the interruption of the procession for one entire month due to the complete rebuilding of the vehicle followed by the necessary rituals of atonement and exculpation. Experiencing the daily clash of party supporters with the King’s security forces and with the Maoist threat looming larger than ever, people and press were quick to establish sinister links: after 1934, when the Kathmandu Valley was hit by one of its worst earthquakes in recorded history, 1990, when the citizens of Nepal took to the streets in a popular uprising against autocratic rule, and in 1999, when almost the entire royal family was

---

1 This article originally appeared in *Indologica Taurinensia* 32 (2006). It could not have been written without the invaluable help of my dear colleague Nutan Dhar Sharma, M.A., to which my thanks go in the first place. Furthermore, I would like to thank my teacher Laxmi Nath Shreshta for unfolding for me the world of Nepālī newspapers, Rajesh Shrestha from the South Asia Institute Branch Office Kathmandu for helping to collect the press coverage, Anil Bajracharya for introducing me to the procession as well as his brother Arun for calling late on April 25 and making sure I had not been hurt during the dramatic events. I would like to further extend my thanks to all the Guthiyārs involved in the procession’s performance whom I talked to, whose collaboration I cherish and whose work I admire. I greatly thank Niels Gutschow, Axel Michaels and Alexander von Rospatt for critically reading the first draft of this paper, as well as Martin Gaenszle, David Gellner, Roland Hardenberg and Hermann Kulke for remarks and fruitful discussions.
wiped out in a palace massacre, this year’s incident has been the last in a long line marking the country’s troubled fate. The article will try to analyse what exactly happened during this year’s crash against the background of popular belief, the history and practice of the rite, and how the damage was assessed by the lay folk as well as by the ritual specialists, which measures where recommended and how and for what purpose they were applied. Keeping in mind the two interpretations of the incident as offence against the godhead or as portentous omen, this is an enquiry into whether in this context there is any appropriate place for or, from the participants’ perspective, any acceptance of a notion such as ‘mistake’ or ‘failure’. The recorded actions and testimonies, on the contrary, suggest it might be far more appropriate to explore the possibilities and opportunities of re-enacted, or rather pre-enacted and thus calculated catastrophe inherent in this particular ritual, which happens at a moment of crisis, enables the performance of a breakdown, restoration to a pristine state, forgiveness and well-being. However, if we really would have to talk about the fall of the Red Matsyendranātha in terms of failure, we would have to say: the ritual cannot fail, because, under the current circumstances, it has to fail, in order for the crisis to be overcome.

2. *The procession in history*

The current worship of the deity, which culminates in its annual procession, reveals multiple layers of different divinities and cults. The earliest identifiable layer probably belongs to the cult of Būrgadayāḥ and can be connected to the local cult of Būrgamati, possibly an originally female goddess at the centre of an annual fertility rite inviting the first rains to ensure a rich harvest. At a later stage a Bodhisattva cult was probably superimposed and subsequently fused with Śaiva royal cult, affiliated with Lalitpur Newar kingship under the Malla dynasty. The latest layer is constituted by the cult of the Nāth Yogi Matsyendranātha (Nep. Macchindranātha) which developed out of North Indian Śaiva ascetic movements, supported by the so-called Nāth Yogis, and was

---

3 Its temple is referred to as the ‘bride’s paternal home’ (mātī). See Locke 1973: 8.
4 On this aspect of the procession see Vergati 1985.
5 In this article only Nepāl (Nep.) and Nevār (Nev.) terms given in brackets are identified as such. All other terms in brackets are in Sanskrit.