

# The Chariot Festival of Karunamaya Lokeswor

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## **Abstract**

Nepal Mandala – the ancient name of Kathmandu Valley is indeed a cradle of civilization that has continued for centuries making it the center for cultural and religious evolution of Nepal. Nepal Mandala the valley of Kathmandu was said to be a great lake which was drained by Manjushree by cutting a hill on the southern part of the lake to form the inhabitable valley. The earliest inhabitants of the valley were the “Nears” and through centuries the development of the Newar civilization created the most architecturally endowed city- the Nepal Mandala. The original Newars were Buddhists though Hinduism also developed with the migration and settlement of various other ethnic groups. The original Buddhist religion and traditions of the Newars were slowly infiltrated by Hindu culture depending on the strength of the ruling clans controlling the city nation. However, history has been a witness to a peaceful coexistence of Buddhism and Hinduism among the people of this valley further enriching the social, traditional, religious and ritualistic diversity of the city.

Kathmandu Valley is truly a city of gods with temples, stupas, and statues in every corner of the city. There is never a month that one or the other kind of religious ceremony is celebrated by the people in the valley. The life style of the people is definitely a living culture and tradition that has helped to conserve the religion and tradition of Buddhism. Any researcher or anthropologist researching on Nepal cannot complete his studies without studying the ‘Newar’ people and their culture.

**Keywords:** Chariot Festival, Karunamaya Lokeswor

Among the many festivals that are celebrated in Kathmandu Valley, I would like to present to you the chariot festival of Bungadya or Rato Machendranath - the longest festival celebrated on April / May of the year just before the monsoon to worship for rain and good harvest and which could last for almost two months. Hence, Bungadya is also referred to as God of Rain. Bunga-dya, Karunamaya or Machendranath is the reincarna-

tion of God of Compassion – Avalokiteshwara.

From the earliest reference as early as eleventh century, Bungadya has been identified as the “Bodhisatwa Avalokiteswara. The 11<sup>th</sup> century manuscript painting of Bungadya Lokeswara shows a two-handed figure of Padmapani Lokeswara with red complexion. A sage named Dharmaswami then describes the Bungadya Lokeswara as being of sandalwood of red colour in the aspect of a 5 year old boy.



The Newari account uses the name of Bunga-dya, Avalokiteswara and Karunamaya and the festival of Bunga-dya was entirely Buddhist in nature from its inception and has remained so down to the present day. There are four principal well known temples of Avalokiteswara in the Kathmandu Valley ,namely

- 1) Seto (White) Avalokiteswara in Jana Baha in the heart of Kathmandu City.
- 2) Rato (Red) Avalokiteswara or Bunga-dya in Bungamati , 7 kms.

### South of Kathmandu City

- 3) Chobar Avalokiteswara (Red) on top of a hill in Kirtipur , 3 kms. South west of Kathmandu.
- 4) Nala Avalokiteswara (White) in Kavre District around 20 kms. East of Kathmandu.

The most important of the four Lokeswaras recognized is undoubtedly that of Rato (Red) Avalokiteswara, Machendranath or Bunga-dya of Bungamati in Patan. The annual 'ratha' chariot festival of Rato Machendranath is still the most important and popular festival than that of other Lokeswaras and it is the only one of the festivals that draws people from all over the Valley while the other festivals of Lokeswaras are mostly localized.

### **Origin and Legend of Karunamaya Lokeswor :**

We shall first dwell on how Rato (Red) Lokeswara was brought to Nepal Mandala or Kathmandu Valley and why this deity is of such special importance to the people of Kathmandu. There are numerous accounts and chronicles relating to the bringing of Bungadya, Avalokitesvara or Machendranath to Nepal ( ancient name for Kathmandu was Nepal or Nepal Mandala ). However the legend revolves around substantially on the story of a long spell of drought in the country though additions, changes and interpretation were made as it was passed down through different periods of ruling kings. Only the name Karunamaya Lokeswara will henceforth be used not to confuse the readers with many other names as mentioned above.

The fullest account of the legend is contained in a modern 'Newari' work by Sri Asakaji Vajracharya of Patan. The story begins with a prophecy uttered by god Narayana in the time of King Gunakamanadeva. According to the prophecy, Padma Arya Avalokitesvara Karunamaya will come to Nepal during the reign of the King's son Narendradeva. The story then recounts the birth of Gorakhnath from a heap of cow dung and his initiation into the tantric practices of the 'kanphatta' Yogis by Karunamaya himself. This Gorakhnath is in fact the god Narayana and remembering his prophecy to bring Karunamaya to Nepal, he sets out for Nepal. After arriving in Nepal, he was insulted by being tricked into losing a bet and in his anger he binds the 'nagas' (serpents) which brings rain to Nepal and

stays in the forest of Mrigasthali nearby Pashupatinath. This creates a long spell of drought and famine in the country for twelve long years.

After much consultations, the King's pundits and astrologers advises him of the cause for the drought and tells him that the only way to get Gorakhnath to release the 'nagas' was to bring his guru Karunamaya Lokeswora to Nepal. Karunamaya Lokeswora also Avalokitesvara is living in Kamarupa (present day Assam in India) as the youngest son of the King of that region. King Narendradeva then sets off for Kamarupa to fetch Karunamaya Lokeswora (Bungadya, Avalokitesvara, Machendranath) along with Bandhudatta, a learned Vajracharya and a Jyapu (farmer) named Ratna Chakra of Patan. They use various tricks and tantric powers on the King and Queen of Kamarupa(Assam) and get hold of the boy Karunamaya Lokeswora . The boy Karunamaya Lokeswora is carried on a carrier by four Bhairavas who also act as protectors.

Bandhudatta, with his tantric powers had to turn the boy into a bumble bee and hide him in a 'kalasa' to evade the spells and obstacles of yaksas, ghosts and goblins on the way. The party finally reaches Bunga ( present day Bungamati) in Nepal where the four Bhairavas set the carrier down and vanishes. At that moment all the gods from Amarapur in heaven come to greet Karunamaya Lokeswor and worship him. Gorakhnath also hears of the arrival of his 'guru' and rises from his seat to greet his guru thus releasing the 'nagas' (serpents) and rain falls once again in the country ending the long spell of drought.

Though there is no clear account of the temple of Bungadya in Bungamati, Bandhudatta considered Bungamati where the four Bhairavas set down the carrier as the birthplace of Karunamaya (Bungadya). King Narendradeva then decides to build a city there and it is called Amarapur in honor of all the Gods who came there to greet Karunamaya. The King also orders to hold an annual chariot festival for Karunamaya Lokeswor. There was however a dispute on where to hold the festival and it was decided to be held in Patan. An image maker from Patan was called to make an image of the Karunamaya Lokeswor and a temple was also built in Patan. This is how two places of residence of Karunamaya came to be built and it was decided also that the image of Karunamaya was to be kept for 6 months in Bungamati and 6 months in Patan.

## The Sangha of Bungamati and Worship of Deity

A 'sangha' or association comprising of nearly 400 initiated members of Bungamati has been formed to take care of the temple of Karunamaya Lokeswor. The 'sangha' comprises of Shakyas and Vajrcharyas with an inner core of 31 members known as the 'panjus' who have the exclusive right to service and take care of the deity.

The newly appointed 'panjus' or one looking after the deity is given a special initiation known as 'acarya diksya'. Once initiated a certain standard of conduct is expected of him. He must be able to take up his religious duties on the appointed day and remain faithful to them throughout his term of service. The official attire of the 'panjus' is the long white robe and a red sash. For the principal events of the annual festival those on duty wear a red robe. Every 'panjus' or temple priest must undergo the necessary training which demands a rigorous discipline and commitment. The principal duty of the deity priest is temple service and service of the deity. The daily duty consists of four worships or 'pujas' to be performed – one in the morning, once in the afternoon, once in the evening and once in the middle of the night.



## **Annual Festival of Karunamaya Lokeswora :**

The most important of the annual events associated with Karunamaya Lokeswora is the chariot festival celebrated in April to June in Patan. The ceremonies of the annual chariot festival can be divided into three stages

- A) The bathing and consecration ceremonies.
- B) The chariot pulling event.
- C) The Jawalakhel Jatra and 'Bhoto Jatra' or showing of the vest.

### **A) The Bathing and Consecration Ceremonies :**

The bathing ceremony takes place on the first day of the dark half of the month of Baisakh, i.e. mid-April. On the auspicious day, the officiating priest from Bungamati performs a 'kalasa puja' in Patan and removes the spirit of the deity from the image and places in a large silver 'kalasa' or a special artistically decorated vessel. He also consecrates eight smaller silver vessels of water – two of which is used for bathing the image and other six are placed in the temple and six protective deities are invoked into them. The image is given to a group of people called 'nyekhus' whose duty is to clean, bathe, replaster and repaint the image. On the day of the bathing, a procession of King's guards arrive playing auspicious music followed by a government official carrying the King's sword and takes the image to a raised platform in Lagankhel used for annual bathing ceremony.

While the 'nyekhus' prepare for bathing the deity priest performs a dance 'puja' or worship to the eight guardians of directions. On the auspicious moment, the 'nyekhus' bathe the image by pouring water from the two small silver vessels while the priest recites the 'mantras'. After the bathing ceremony, the image is carried back to the temple in Patan by the procession. The 'nyekhus' then shut the image in a room and for the next two weeks and clean, replaster and repaint the image. After the completion of their duty, the 'nyekhus' hand back the image to the temple priest who then performs the ten life cycle rites or 'dasa karma' and tantric initiations to reconsecrate the image.

## **B) The Chariot (ratha) Festival**

While the bathing, cleaning, replastering and repainting of the image was being done for the past fortnight, the chariot was being built by another designated group of people. The chariot consists of a heavy wooden frame on four large wheels also made of timber and above which is a square wooden platform containing the shrine for the deity. A sort of balcony is made around the main shrine for the attendants and priests. Above the shrine rises a gigantic spire of wooden beams and poles bound together with vines, ropes and canes over which are tied green juniper boughs. At the top of the spire rests a copper disk representing a lotus on which is placed images of Amitabha, Vajrasattva and Swoyambhu.

The various parts of the chariot are personified as different deities. The four large wheels about six feet in diameter are each painted with three large eyes and represent the four Bhairavas. The main beam of the chariot rests on the two axles which extend several feet in front and the back. The front beam is longer and is curved at the front end while the back beam is shorter. This beam represents the 'Karkotaka Nagaraja, a serpent deity. A mask is placed over the curved end of the front beam which represents the Hayagriva Bhairav. The ropes used for pulling the chariot also represent the 'nagas' or serpents. The image of Karunamaya Lokeswor is placed in the centre of the shrine while facing out the back door of the shrine is placed a red bodhisattva image of Bhimesvara Tathagata.

On the first day of the bright half of the month of Baisakh, the image is placed on the chariot at the auspicious moment. The chariot festival then begins through the city of Patan stopping at various intervals at places for the people of that area to make offerings and worship. Another smaller chariot of Minnath is also pulled along with the chariot of Karunamaya festival. Upon arrival at Lagankhel next to the bathing platform, the chariot is pulled once around the shrine of mother of Karunamaya Lokeswor as a mark of respect and the chariot remains there for a day. The following morning a goat is sacrificed and the blood splashed on the chariot wheels to propitiate the four Bhairavas to avoid any kind of mishap. The chariot is then pulled to a location nearby called the Pode Tole until it is time to take the chariot to Jawalakhel, usually about a month away. On that evening the 'dropping of the coconut' ceremony is also performed. An official of the government 'guthi' department climbs to the top of the spire of the chariot and tosses down parched rice, flowers, red powder, two types of sweets, a



few coins and finally a coconut. These are offered as part of ‘astha mangala’ ceremony conducted in thanksgiving for the successful progress of the chariot festival thus far. Popular folklore believes that whoever catches the coconut is blessed with the birth of a son within the year.

### **C) The Jawalakhel Festival and showing of the Bhoto (vest) :**

On the auspicious day for the pulling of the chariot to Jawalakhel , final venue for the end of the festival, a five-stranded string of five different colors, representing the five Dhyani Buddhas, is attached to the chariot and then pulled. The Patan Kumari, living goddess, is also enthroned in a rest house about half way along the road to Jawalakhel and the chariot pauses for the Kumari to pay respect to the Karunamaya Lokeswor.

It is during the last three days that the festival assumes a national event and character. On the last night of the festival at Jawalakhel, two ceremonies are performed to propitiate the yaksas, ghosts and goblins. The first is the scattering of mandala made of rice to the four winds. This is followed by another ceremony involving the wives of the priests. A tantric ritual invokes the power or ‘shakti’ into the women sending them into a trance causing shaking and trembling of their entire body. It is said that only the power of women is used to frighten away the evil spirits that may have travelled along with the chariot festival.

The last day is the grand finale of the long festival with ceremony of “ Showing of the Bhoto or Vest “ which takes place in the evening. The Patan Kumari, living goddess, is also brought on a portable carrier and enshrined in a rest house near the chariot. The King’s Guards along with musical band arrive with the sword of the King which is placed on the chariot. With the end of monarchy rule, it is the President of Nepal who is accompanied by ministers and government officials to observe the ceremony. Once the Bhoto Jatra is over, the President (previously the King during monarchy rule) offers some coins to the Karunamaya Lokeswor deity ending the long festival.

The image of the deity is then removed from the chariot and carried on a carrier (khat) back to Bungamati along with a procession of King’s Guards playing music with occasional loud blank firing of their rifles. The image is reinstalled in the temple in Bungamati after going through purification ceremony amidst another day long festival with people visiting the temple to see that the deity has returned safely.



## **Twelve Year Festival**

Every twelve year the chariot festival of Karunamaya Lokeswor is begun from Bungamati and not Patan. This is known as the “Twelve Year Festival” which was celebrated this year starting from mid April 2015 or Nepali Year Baisakh, 2072. During this festival a new chariot is built while the bathing ceremony and other ceremonies are performed in Bungamati in the same process as done in Patan every year. The chariot is pulled from Bungamati to Patan and crosses the Nakkhu River on its way where it is said that the Karkotta Naga (serpent) meets his wife. The chariot pauses in the river water while crossing and it is said that many serpents appear at that time around the chariot. The people at this time also bathe in the river and take away the river water as holy water to sprinkle on themselves to bring good luck. Once the chariot reaches Patan, the festival is celebrated as done every year ending with the Bhoto Jatra at Jawalakhel. However, this year the Karunamaya Lokeswor returns to Bungamati on the chariot itself and on reaching Bungamati, another Bhoto Jatra is also celebrated there marking the end of the festival.

As usual this year the 12 Year Festival of Karunamaya Lokeswor began on mid April and the chariot had reached about a kilometer away from Bungamati and was anchored at Sainbu Bhainsepati when the devastating earthquake struck on April 25. The chariot was bending precariously at 45 degree angle and the spire of the chariot was tied down with ropes to prevent the chariot from toppling over. However, after the earthquake, it was thought inauspicious to pull the chariot so the deity priests and the ‘guthi’ or festival trust decided to dismantle the chariot and reconstruct so that the chariot was upright. The chariot festival was not resumed as long as the strong aftershocks of the earthquake continued. On 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 2015, the chariot festival was resumed almost after six months on an auspicious date.

### **Conclusion:**

The chariot festival of Karunamaya Lokeswor is originally a Buddhist festival though through the passage of time with the advent of Hindu rulers there was gradual adaptation of the Hindu culture in this festival. The Sanskritization of all Buddhist scriptures and biased interpretation of these ancient scripts had gradually changed many Buddhist writings to look like works of Hindu culture. However the chariot festival has taken a form of annual national festival and is a symbol of religious and cultural

harmony of Nepal. The essence of the festival has been gaining international significance with many scholars researching on this subject. The continuation of this festival has also given rise to the need for a change in the organizational structure and old processes to suit present day aspirations. Karunamaya Lokeswor will always be close to the heart of Nepalese people as a god of compassion and a savior in times of calamities and difficulties and the celebration will continue for generations to come.

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