

4 Dances

In South Asia dance was always considered as the visible, four-dimensional and dynamic realisation of music, *saṅgīta*. Like most other Newar gods and goddesses, Nāsaḥḍyaḥ is depicted in painting and sculpture as a dancer. Nowadays identified with the South Indian Nṛtyanātha, he is the Lord of the Dance. As dancers, the gods unleash and spread their divine powers. As dancers, humans can attain exalted states of consciousness, if there is proper music to induce the transition. There is no better device for losing human identity and the limitations of this body, than wearing a dance mask. In Newar masked dances, masks identify the gods and their entourage. Great care is required by the mask-maker when he produces the clay masks for the Navadurgā dancers of Bhaktapur. Not only the exact size and shape of a mask is prescribed but also every detail of the painting applied to it. When the dancers come out during *mvahani* to perform their annual dance cycle in and around Bhaktapur, people touch the masks to share in the blessings of the Navadurgā. Masks are the seats of the gods they represent, as Nāsaḥḍyaḥ resides in the drums.

The Navadurgā of Bhaktapur are one of the many so-called Aṣṭamātrka dances of the Kathmandu Valley, where tantric mother goddesses make their appearance together with various male gods like Gaṇeśa, Mahādeva and Bhairava—all the characters spreading the powerful blessings of the gods. Referring to the *Bhāṣāvamaśāvalī* chronicle, Veda Nath Regmi¹ mentions that *Jala pyākhā* of Harisiddhi could be the oldest Aṣṭamātrka dance with an obscure origin during the Licchavi period and documented revival during the reign of Amar Malla of Kantipur (1530–1538).² Amar Malla also introduced the Pacalī Bhairav *pyākhā* of Kathmandu-Tekhu, the Rudrāyaṇī *pyākhā*, the Ākāś Bhairav *jātrā*, the Manamaiju *jātrā*, the Bhadrakālī *pyākhā*, Śvetakālī *pyākhā*, and perhaps also the Bāgh Bhairav *jātrā* of Kirtipur. Śrī Nivās Malla of Lalitpur started the *Gā pyākhā*³ around 1563 and added nine nights of performances to the *Katī pyākhā* established by his father Siddhinarasiṃha Malla. Suvarṇa Malla of Bhaktapur (1505–1519) established the Navadurgā *pyākhā* and the Nīl Vārāhī *jātrā*/ Mahālakṣmī *pyākhā* of Bode, both dances after 1512.

The climax of the annual masked dance *Katī pyākhā* at full moon in front of the Patan palace, is the killing of the proud and powerful demon king Hiranyakaśipu by way of divine interference. When the angered demon is about to slay his own son Prahlād—a secret devotee of Lord Viṣṇu—the god comes to Prahlād’s rescue in the form of Narasiṃha⁴, half human half lion. The battle between god and demon takes twenty exciting minutes before the demon king falls. In the

1 Regmi 1987

2 cf. Iltis 1987

3 performed annually by the people of Naka Bahila

4 ²Viṣṇu’s fourth *avatār*



Fig. 133: A painted cloth showing Nāsaḥḍyaḥ dancing and his attendants Nandi and Bṛṅgi as drummers, held in front of the Nāsaḥ shrine at Nāgbāhāḥ, Patan

1980s older people told me that they had witnessed the actual death of the dancer who danced the demon—a human sacrifice. Whenever I witnessed this dance, the dancer fell unconscious and had to be revived with a splash of holy water. The part of Hiranyaśipu had to be taken by a fat member of the Citrakār painter caste whereas the god used to be danced by the *Malla* king himself. Later this role was given to a Brahman. A similar masked dance was performed in Kathmandu where Pratāpa Malla (1624–1674) is known to have danced as Narasimha.

In the case of Patan’s ancient masked dance *Gāpyākhāṣ*, the transition of the dancers is induced by the *Nāsaḥ pūjā* performed in Nāgbāhāḥ—prior to the initial public performance on a stone platform in the main street. The young dancers of the *Śākya* and *Vajrācārya* background—with their heads shaved and in costumes but not yet with masks—each come forward to perform a short dance in front of the Nāsaḥ shrine. Two assistants suspend a painted cloth showing the dancing god with his two dancing drummers, Nandi and Bṛṅgi between the human dancer and the shrine. (Fig. 133)

Even before their dance offering to Nāsaḥḍyaḥ, the dancers start to tremble and need to be supported and carefully led to the shrine. When they finally wear their dance masks, the transition is complete. The gods have taken seat in human shape to spread their blessings during the performance. On the *dabu* stone platform surrounded with a thick crowd, helpful chalk marks guide the dancers to find their way despite their altered state of mind and limited view through tiny eye holes. (Fig. 134)

5 founded around 1663 by Śrīnivāsa Malla, performed annually for nine days, starting *Ghaṭasthāpanā*

In the case of the Navadurgā *pyākhā* of Bhaktapur, trance is induced by different means. Members of the Gāthā gardener caste take turns in performing the annual Navadurgā dance cycle. Before the Navadurgā leave their *dyaḥchē* god house, a vertical soot line is drawn across their forehead with a nail that rests in a silver box filled with soot from the *khame* buffalo sacrifice during Mahānavami. The silver box is attached to the *dyaḥkhī* drum that accompanies their processions and dances. That soot suffices to induce their transition into beneficial vampires. (Fig. 135)

There are other masked dances where trance is not involved, for example the Bhaila *pyākhā* performed by the potters of Bhaktapur. There are various stick dances presented during *sāpāru* and many dances where dancers wear costumes. The ancient *cacā pyākhā* that the Vajrācārya perform in the secrecy of their clan god house *āgaṃchē* was not performed with masks—contrary to contemporary tourist shows. The dancers wore white frocks. Until recently, dances were exclusively performed by males—when required by the character, cross-dressing males. During the past twenty years, some schools trained children of both genders in performing some traditional dances adapted to this purpose. During the New Year festival 2019, a *dhimay* group included girls presenting an abysmal fantasy Bollywood style *dhimay* dance wherever few people cared to watch their presentation.

Evidently, with over twenty regular performances throughout the year, *navabājā* provided a most valuable reservoir of well-rehearsed compositions for most dance groups where musicians are likely to forget things without regular practice and need to have rehearsals before the annual performances during the *sāpāru* week or the following Indra *jātra*. Allusions to masked dances in drum compositions are not restricted to *navabājā*. The *lālākhī* drum repertoire includes dance patterns when it accompanies *dāphā* songs. For example the *cvakh* piece for *dāphā* accompaniment



Fig. 134: About to enter a state of trance, *Gā pyākhā* dancers pray to Nāsaḥdyah.

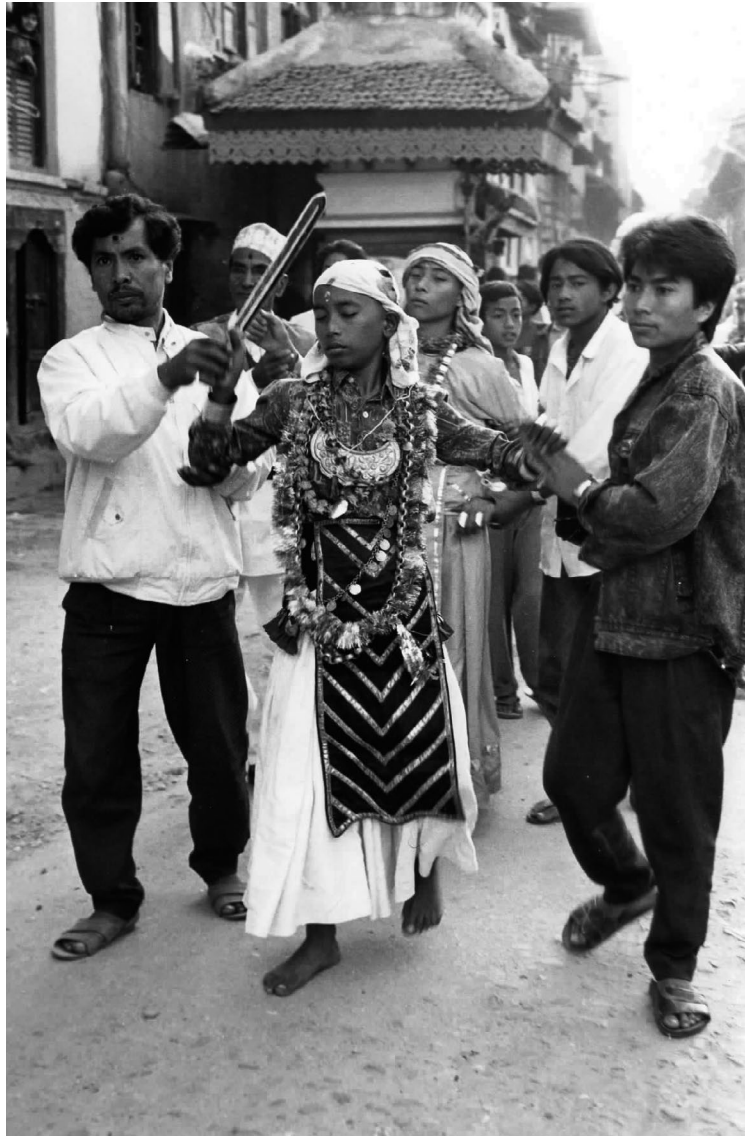


Fig. 135: Gā pyākhā dancers are in a trance and led carefully to the stone platform where they wear the masks to perform the initial series of spectacular masked dances

includes patterns of the otherwise forgotten *nā pyākhā*⁶ and of *bhālū pyākhā*⁷ that is still performed at night during the *sāpāru* week. Whenever those famous patterns are heard, everybody present associates the dances and their characters.

- 6 fish dance
- 7 bear dance

4.1 *Cacā pyākhā* and *Pañcatāla*

Among the oldest surviving dance forms is the Newar Buddhist *cacā pyākhā*, *caryā* dance. Like *caryā* songs⁸, *caryā* dance was introduced in the Kathmandu Valley before the 15th century when tantric cults had permeated earlier Buddhist practice. *Cacā pyākhā* evolved as a medium for the dancer to embody divine qualities of the gods depicted during the dance, to become a god or a Buddha/Bodhisattva for a few moments. It belongs to the secret *āgaṃ* category of Newar ritual music and dance that is accessible only to initiates and performed in the secrecy of the clan god houses of Newar Buddhists, the *āgaṃchē*. There are exceptions to the secrecy. Starting with discussions in the 1950s, there have been attempts by some Vajrācāryas to popularize some of the less sacred *caryā* songs and dances of the so-called *bāhye* kind (about deities). These were taught to students of other castes and later even to foreigners, resulting in regular classes and performance-oriented presentations with fancy costumes and masks. Songs and dances of the *guhye* category are about highest esoteric practices and remain taboo to outsiders. When ethnomusicologist Arnold Bake made his brief silent documentary film of *caryā* dance in 1956, this was only possible in a forest near Kathmandu where nobody else could watch the proceedings.



Fig. 136: Vajrācārya priests during a navagraha pūjā at Bhadrakālī, Kathmandu, Mahānavamī 1991 (left upper corner: Richard Widdess during fieldwork)

8 see Widdess 1992, 1997, 2004

4 Dances

A rare public event where the general public was welcome to witness *caryā* dance in a ritual context, was the annual performance of a *navagraha pūjā* for peace on the nine planets. This *pūjā* was performed with the combined forces of Vajrācārya priests of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur on the day of Mahānavamī at Bhadrakālī, Kathmandu and included brief dances and songs. The ritual was meant to balance the harmful *karma* inflicted by the mass slaughtering of sacrificial animals all over Nepal on that very day. (Fig. 136)



Fig. 137: Vajrācārya performing the Pañcabuddha dance at Svayambhū during Buddhajayantī 1992



Fig. 138: Buddhajayantī procession of Buddha’s relic in Vaṅghaḥ, Kathmandu, 1992. A *pañcatāla* drummer struggles to play the short *tvāka dyahllhāygu*. The notation of drumming syllables has to be carried in front of him. Also the ensemble of four natural trumpets *pāytāḥ khalah* sight-reads the drumming syllables that tell them what to play.

Another public occasion occurred at the Svayaṃbhū *mahācaitya* on the day of Buddhajayantī, the day of Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and *nirvāṇa*. According to Newar calendars, this falls on Vaiśākh fullmoon in early May⁹. In the morning Vajrācāryas gathered at the *mahācaitya* to perform the Pañcabuddha dance¹⁰ in front of the five shrines of these Buddhas, the dancers wearing brocade costumes, wigs and crowns. (Fig. 137)

On the same day, an elaborate procession with a bone relic of the Buddha started at Sīghaḥbāhā, passing through central Kathmandu. This included several music groups, among them Vajrācārya males with several natural trumpets *pāytāḥ*, *tāḥ* cymbals and the compound drum *pañcatāla*. At prescribed localities, they played the short *tvāka dyahllhāygu* invocation, trying to sight-read the drumming syllables that were written down in extra large letters and carried in front of the struggling musicians. Nobody appeared to know the piece by heart. (Fig. 138)

Similar instrumental ensembles accompany *caryā* dances in the secrecy of the *āgaṃchē*. The fact that during every public performance the *pañcatāla* drummer depends on sight-reading even a short written notation testifies to the rarity of such events and also to the extreme difficulty—as I soon came to know—of learning these compositions by heart. The pieces are almost devoid of

⁹ Tibetans celebrate Buddhajayantī one month later, in June.

¹⁰ cf. Mrigendra M. S. Pradhan 1996



Fig. 139: Pañcatāla ensemble playing *dyaḥlhāygu* during the *pirāne pūjā* of Patan's *gā pyākhā*, 1991. The drummer reads the syllables from a hand-written copy. In the background two dancers without masks are awaiting their first dance in front of the shrine of Nāsaḥḍyaḥ. Dancers and musicians are of the Vajrācārya and Śākya community.



Fig. 140: Pañcatāla instruments and copy with the notated drumming syllables, Patan 1991

rhythmic elements and repeating structures and proceed at a very slow tempo. Traditional *caryā* dances were performed in a systematic manner during a so-called *cakra pūjā*. This was an elaborate and expensive affair that could be afforded only once in a decade, if at all.

Some *cacā pyākhā* drum compositions were performed every year during the first week of *mvahani* in Patan where Śākya and Vajrācārya dancers present the spectacular Aṣṭamāṭṛkā dance *gā pyākhā* that was installed in 1563 by King Śrī Nivās Malla of Lalitpur¹¹. Those unfamiliar with Newar culture may wonder how it is possible to have tantric Hindu gods and goddesses impersonated by Buddhist dancers with *pañcatāla* accompaniment provided by an instrumental



Fig. 141: *Gā pyākhā* dancer wearing the mask of Mahākālī during the initial performance, Patan 1991

ensemble of Vajrācāryas and Śākyas. When this masked dance was founded during the 16th century, Buddhism and Hinduism had already co-existed for centuries and were assimilated by Newar culture that offered a safe haven to a multitude of groups and cults. The worship of Bhairava and the Aṣṭamāṭṛkā mother goddesses is a central cult in every Newar town, whether Bhaktapur with its Hindu majority or Buddhist Patan. (Figs. 139–141)

11 old name of Patan



Fig. 142: Ratnakaji Vajracharya teaching at home 1992

The *āgamchē* of Bhaktapur's Vajrācāryas in Yatachē was within hearing distance from my roof terrace and I remember the muffled sounds of *cacā* singing across the courtyard between the buildings—on one occasion even during a *śraddha* ancestor ritual in a Śākya neighbour's home. But when I asked to learn their drumming repertoire, I was told that it did not exist in Bhaktapur. The door remained shut until I met the only person who was willing to teach outsiders.

The late Ratnakaji Vajracharya of Kathmandu (Fig. 142) was open-minded enough to initiate me with a Nāsaḥ *pūjā*—no blood sacrifice; an offering of eggs and flowers sufficed—at the *lāykū* Nāsaḥdyaḥ shrine next to the New Road roundabout (Fig. 143). He taught me the complete repertoire of the *pañcatāla* drum at his home, reciting the compositions from his family manuscript and demonstrating the playing techniques. The playing technique of *pañcatāla* is compatible with that

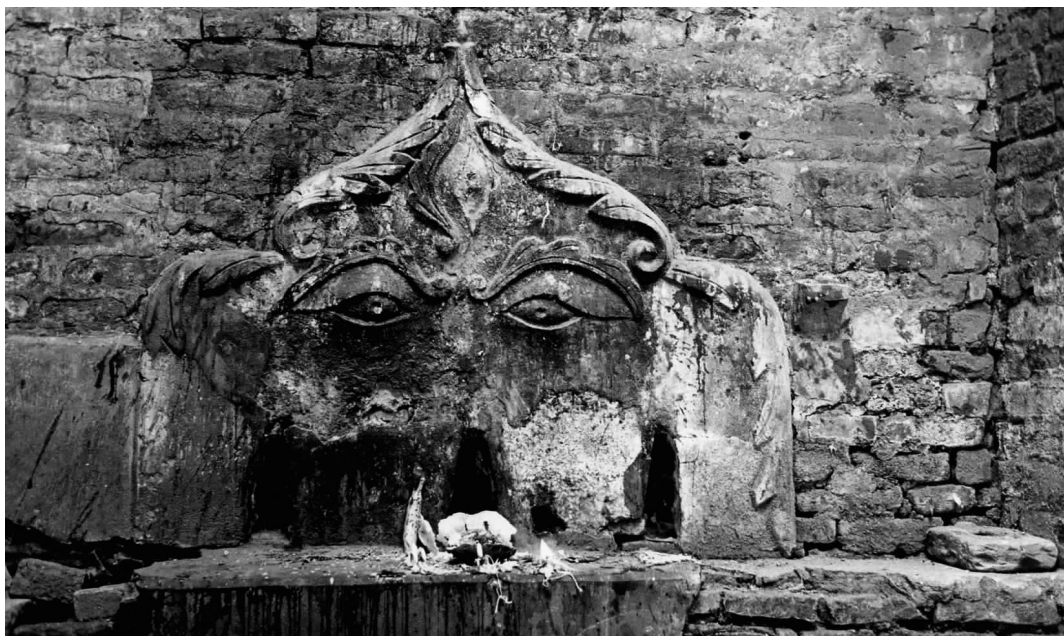


Fig. 143: Lāykū Nāsaḥdyaḥ with offerings, next to the New Road roundabout, Kathmandu 1992

4 Dances

above the basic note. During recitation, almost every note was consistently presented with small inflections, little slurs and waves indicating how the natural trumpets are supposed to play. The total effect of his recitation resembled a tone language. In my notation, these embellishments appear as wiggly lines above the boxes. The following example shows the initial four lines of *mu dyahllhāygu*. The capital letters T and C above the system represent the cymbal strokes *tīn* and *chu*. Syllables in capital letters at the beginning of the piece are not drumming syllables but are sung by the drummer as a time signal to other players:

/Ā - - HĀ - - /HĀ - - HĀ - - /CA - - CA - - /CA - - HAḤ - o /

Sung time signals may appear several times within one composition. Drumming syllables are written in small letters (systems 3 and 4 in the example below). A horizontal line in a box means that the previous syllable continues to sound. A small circle in a box is a rest. (Fig. 145)

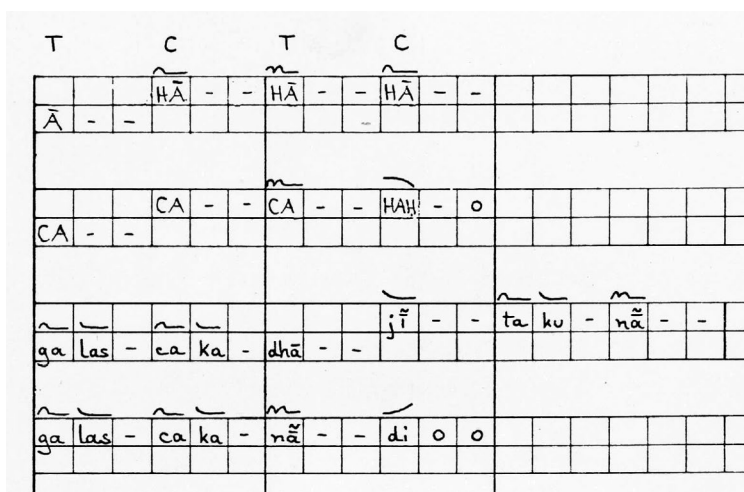


Fig. 145

When my *pañcatāla* apprenticeship was complete, I met the Bhaktapur Guruju who earlier had refused to teach me¹³ and I showed him what I had learnt in Kathmandu. He admitted that the compositions were exactly the same as those that he had, as the repertoire had come from Kathmandu to Bhaktapur. According to him, those few Vajrācāryas in the Kathmandu Valley who were capable of playing the pieces, had to combine forces during important *pūjās*. In 1992, the number of initiated *caryā* dancers had dwindled to twelve individuals. Ratnakaji had already mentioned that it was this critical lack of manpower and concern for the impending end of their tradition that had caused some Vajrācāryas in 1957 to opt for teaching compositions of lesser ritual importance to outsiders. Other Gurujus had insisted on complete secrecy—whatever the consequences. The Bhaktapur Guruju played one piece for me. The syllables were mostly what I

13 He asked me to remain anonymous, fearing criticism from his community.

had learnt in Kathmandu. But his way of playing the drum was different (see second chart below), sometimes using other drumheads than Ratnakaji. Sometimes he used longer rests and different pitches during recitation. It did not significantly alter the result. Finally, he offered to teach me his complete *pañcatāla* repertoire. Chapters 11.18 and 11.19 include both, the Kathmandu repertoire and what remains of the Bhaktapur tradition of *pañcatāla*.

The following charts of drumming syllables and basic patterns of the *pañcatāla* offer comparison between the Kathmandu tradition taught by Ratnakaji Vajracharya and the Bhaktapur way of playing. Three lines represent the compound drum's three heads that are played with dampened, open and ringing strokes. (Figs. 146, 147)

Kathmandu *pañcatāla*:

Loud ringing strokes *nā* and *yā* are produced by the right hand on the higher sounding head of the horizontal *lālākhī* drum and are represented by a circle on the middle line. Open (*ki, gi, ci, tī, tye, da, nye, nva, sī, galascaka*) and dampened (*di*) strokes produced by the right hand on the same drumhead are represented by a dot and a cross on the middle line.

Open (*dha, dhā, dhye, ji*) and dampened (*di*) strokes produced by the left hand on the lower sounding head of the horizontal *lālākhī* drum are represented by a dot and a cross on the lower line.

The upper line represents the small head of the drum tied vertically in front of the *lālākhī*. It is played with both hands producing only dampened (*ta, tan, tā, takūnyekū*) sounds.

The *pañcatāla* drum repertoire of Kathmandu includes the following compositions: *Mū dyaḥl-hāygu, tvāka dyaḥlhāygu, svā chāya, jhapa tāla, jhapa yā kau, eka tāla, jati, durjamān, bhramarā, sanī, caspati, trihudā, jhāka, chādana, maṅgala, lapaha, khatākāra, vatikā, pyēgamātha, māthe yā kau* and *sunyamātha*.

Bhaktapur *pañcatāla*:

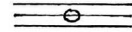
Loud, ringing sounds never occur. The correlation between syllables and playing technique appears arbitrary and inconsistent. I take this as a proof of a sadly neglected tradition of *pañcatāla* playing in Bhaktapur and recommend using the much more dependable Kathmandu version of surviving *pañcatāla* compositions. It represents a living tradition, not a half forgotten one. Bhaktapur *bhramarā* has a brief *mantra pvaṅgā* solo, a recitation and a few drum strokes whereas the Kathmandu *bhramarā* does not have an additional drum section.

The *pañcatāla* drum repertoire of Bhaktapur includes less compositions. The following pieces of the Kathmandu repertoire were missing: *tvāka dyaḥlhāygu, pyēgamātha* and *māthe yā kau*.

Kathmandu Pañcatāla

Higher sounding head of lālākhī (right hand)

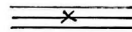
nā̃, yā̃ (loud, ringing)



ki, gi, ci, tū, tye, da, nye, nva, sī (open)



di (dampened)



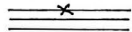
Lower sounding head of lālākhī (left hand)

dī, dha, dhā, dhye, jī



Drum tied in front of lālākhī (both hands)

ta, tan, tā

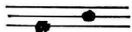


Stroke combinations

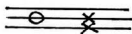
jhī, jhē, thā



dha ga, dī gi



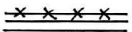
nā̃ dī



takunā̃, khatyenā̃



takūnyekū



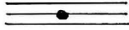
galascaka




Fig. 146

Bhaktapur *Pañcatāla*

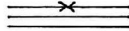
Higher sounding head of *lālākhī* (right hand)

ki, ci, ji, tū, tye, da, di, nā, nye, nva, yā, sī (open) 


Lower sounding head of *lālākhī* (left hand)

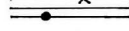
gi, di, dha, dhā, dhi, dhye, ra 

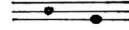
Drum tied in front of *lālākhī* (both hands)

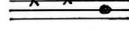
ka, ga, gā, tā, tan, tye, thā, dā, dā, na, nye, nva, ra, sī 


Stroke combinations

jhī, jhē, thā 

dha ga 

nā dī, dī gi 

takunā, khatyenā 

takūnyekū 

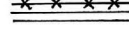
galascaka 

Fig. 147

4 Dances

A typical sequence of *caryā* dances performed during public shows in Kathmandu in the 1990s by dancers trained by Ratnakaji Vajracharya—including his talented son Prajwal Ratna Vajracharya and five more dancers¹⁴:

- *Ṣodaśa lāsya*—dance of sixteen offerings (for three dancers)
- *Mañjurī* (three dancers)
- *Pañcabuddha* (five dancers)
- *Āryatārā* and *Amoghasiddhi* (two dancers)
- *Maṇḍala nṛtya va yoginī*
- *Gaṇeś*
- *Nairātmā*
- *Bhairava*
- *Aṇṇapūrṇa*
- *Siṃha murthī*
- *Māyājālā* (sad, about illusion, only for ritual)
- *Bajrayoginī*
- *Bajrapāṇī*
- *Lokeśvar*
- *Āryatārā*

Performance of this programme takes approximately eighty minutes. Prajwal allowed me to photograph his demonstration of different postures and *mudrā* gestures applied during those dances (Figs. 148–154).

His father and *guru*, Ratnakaji Vajracharya told the story of the origin of *pañcatāla* compositions:

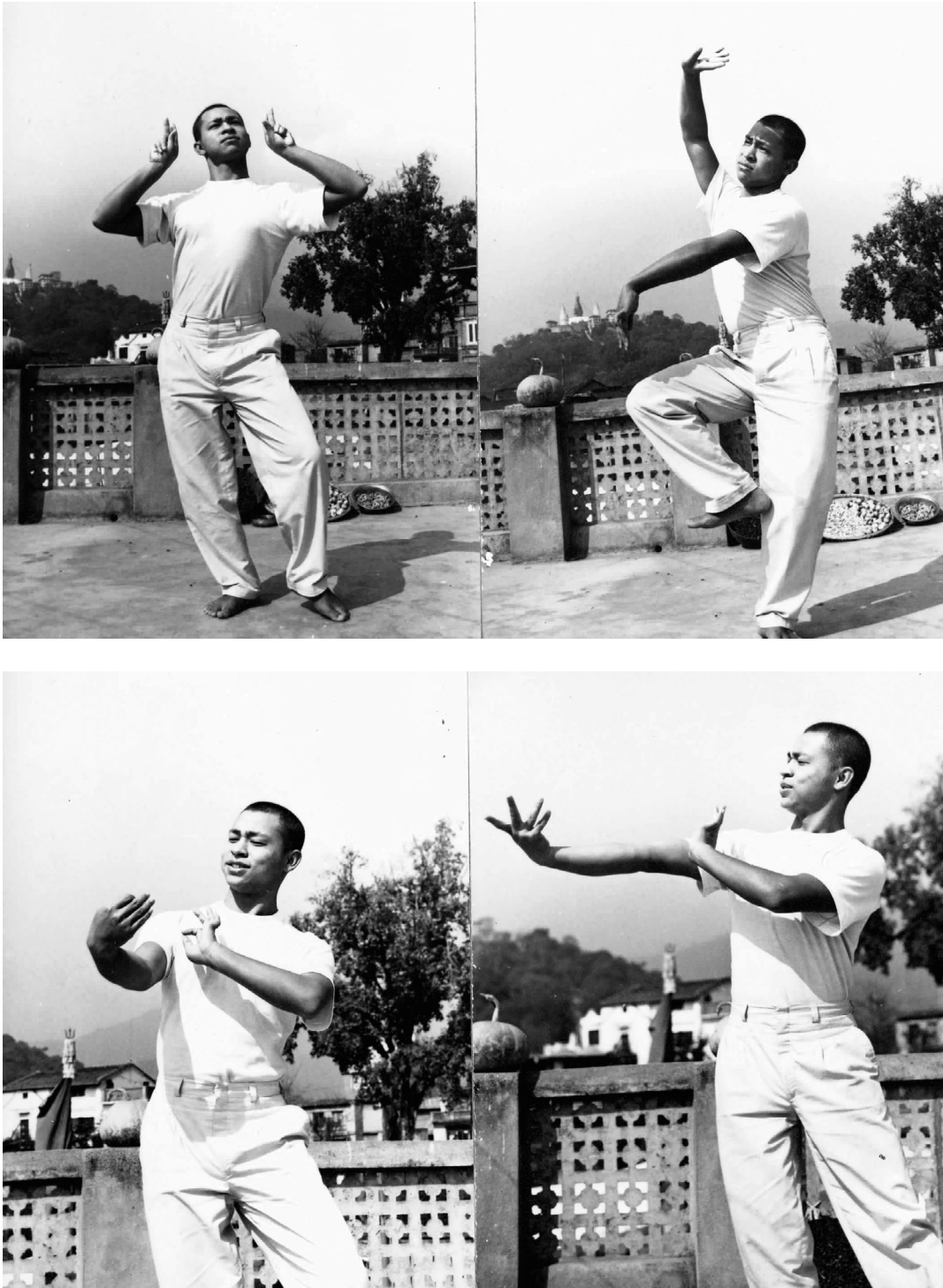
Surtavajra Vajrācārya was a powerful tantric Buddhist yogi who practised spiritual self-discipline *tapasyā* at Guhyeśvarī near Paśupatināth. He attained supernatural magic *siddhi* powers and created the drumming syllables and compositions for the *pañcatāla* drum, weaving in powerful *mantras*.

To master these *mantras*, his disciples were required to face the true nature of their existence by practicing austerities at the *masān* cremation site. They were afraid of this special *sādhana* discipline and learnt only the plain drumming syllables that they passed on. Surtavajra left the Kathmandu Valley to pursue his practice at *Kāśī* (Benares) where local people built a small *caitya* for him. Uttering a special *mantra*, he transferred the monument to Kathmandu. It stands at *Sīghaḥbāhā* (*Śīghaṭamahāvihāra*) or *Kathesībhū* as the centre of the big *caitya* later built around it. Next to this *caitya* stands the *āgāchē* where the highest *caryā* dances were performed in secrecy.



Fig. 148: Prajwal Ratna Vajracharya

14 according to their programme notes



Figs. 149–150: Prajwal Ratna Vajracharya demonstrating caryā dance postures

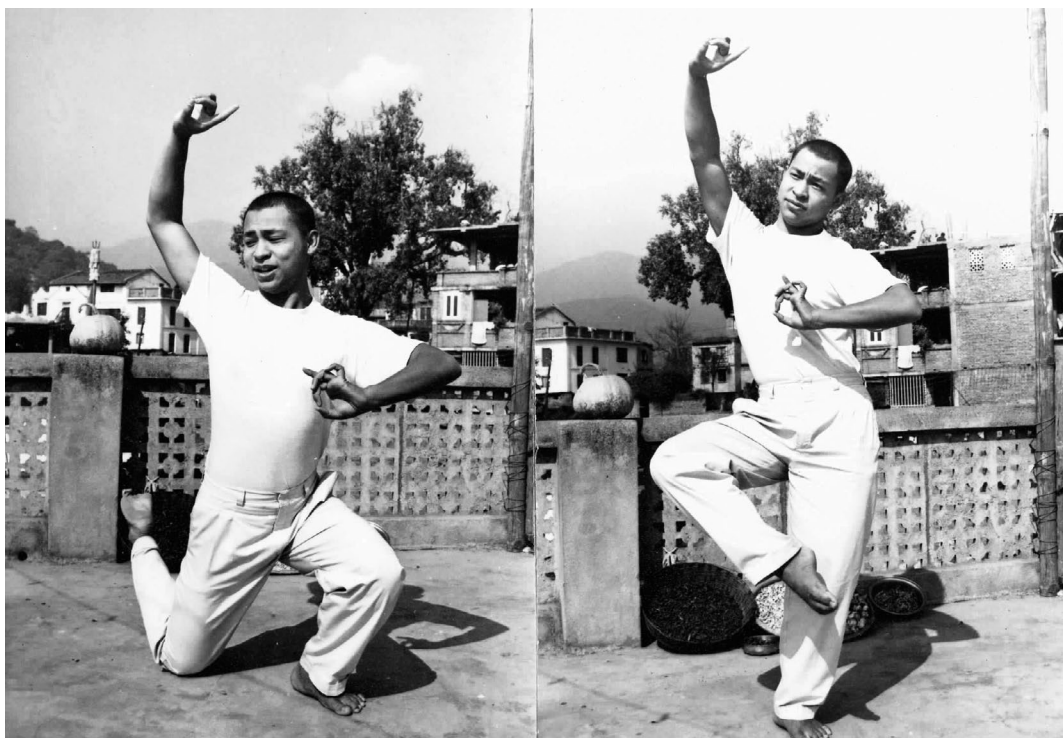


Fig. 151: Prajwal Ratna Vajracharya demonstrating *caryā* dance postures



Figs. 152–154: Prajwal demonstrating *mudrā* gestures, the most prominent element of *caryā* dance

Stylistically the *pañcatāla* repertoire stands apart from all other Newar drum traditions. It is slow and serene in character, almost entirely free of identical repetitions. With the complete absence of lively rhythms, the effect of the pieces resembles that of a slow *sūtra* recitation. The *pañcatāla* drum and the natural trumpets could be later additions to an essentially vocal practice. The number of cymbal strokes that go with the long *mū dyaḥllhāygu* is one hundred and eight—symbolizing perfection and also the number of beads in a Buddhist *mālā* rosary and of the emanations of Avalokiteśvara, et cetera. I presume that much more symbolic meaning is woven into these compositions and could perhaps be revealed after initiation into the dance practice.

4.2 Navadurgā *pyākhā*

Members of the Gāthā¹⁵ gardener caste take turns in performing the annual Navadurgā dance cycle that was introduced by King Suvarṇa Malla of Bhaktapur (1505–1519). The caste ranges at the same ritual level as other lower occupational castes, blacksmiths, barbers, painters, oilpressers, torch bearers, dyers, palanquin bearers, etc. According to legend their musical instruments—the barrel-shaped *dyaḥkhī* drum, the hourglass-shaped *ḍamaru/dabadaba* drum, the pair of heavy *tāḥ* cymbals made of bronze and the large pair of flat *jhyāli* cymbals made of brass—were stolen in Harisiddhi and brought to Bhaktapur during the early 16th century when the Navadurgā dance started. The *dyaḥkhī* carries a small silver mask of Kālī in front of the ram's horns representing Nāsaḥḍyaḥ tied to it.¹⁶ It also carries a silver container with a nail pointing into black *mvahani* soot preserved from the *khame* buffalo sacrifice during Mahānavamī. Before the Navadurgā leave their *dyaḥchē* god house for processions, a vertical line is drawn with sacrificial soot on every dancer's forehead, supposedly transporting them into another state of consciousness. (Fig. 155)

Originally, the Navadurgā roamed as bloodthirsty man-eaters in a forest near Nala. They were tamed and subdued with magic. A Brahman with rare tantric skills and strong charms succeeded in turning them into a beneficial troupe of powerful divine protectors. A scary uneasiness remains, as no charm was strong enough to suppress their vampire habits. Painted fangs on their masks betray their lust for blood gushing from the severed jugular vein of sacrificial animals. They maintain a playful but disturbing habit of catching children—reluctantly releasing them after a few seconds—with their veins intact.

Until the general use of mobile phones in Bhaktapur for the past twenty-five years, taking pictures of the Navadurgā remained strictly taboo. The dancers are bound by an oath not to reveal any detail of their sacred tradition. This concerns also their music. As a resident of Bhaktapur I was obliged to respect their rules and over the years we became friends. In 1988, ten young Gāthā men chose me as their teacher of the *dhimay* drum. But discretion had to be maintained. Sorry, dear reader, but the study of the music of the Navadurgā remains to be documented by a future ethnomusicologist—possibly of educated Gāthā background. My colleague under the German Nepal Research Programme, the architectural anthropologist Niels Gutschow is much

15 Gathu in Kathmandu Newari.

16 The only other drum carrying such horns is the *kvakhī/dhā* played during *navabājā* performances.

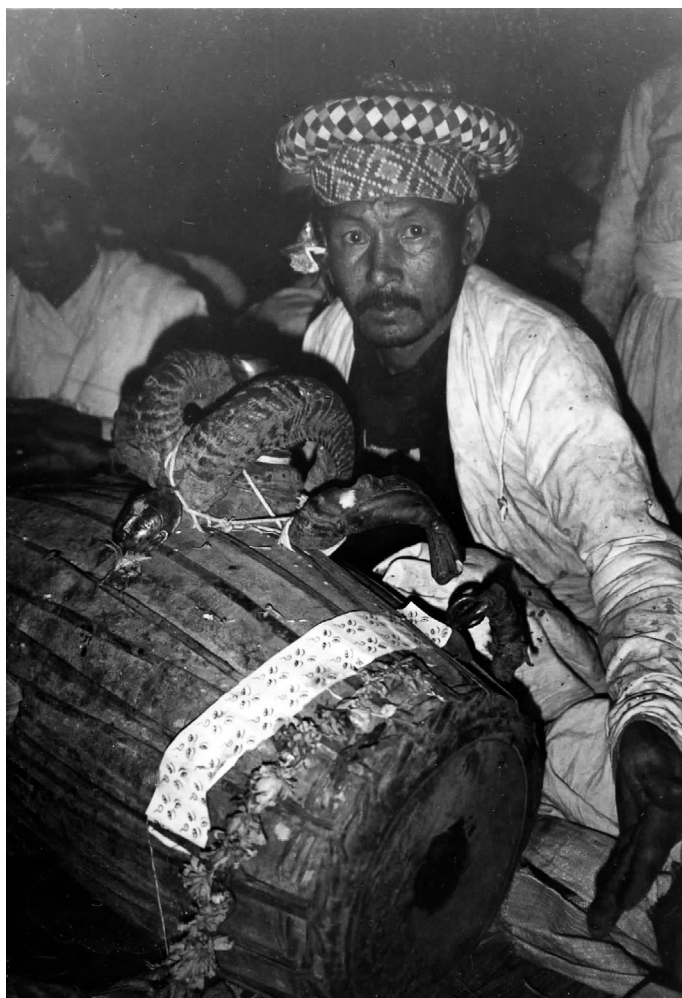


Fig. 155: Harsha Prasad Banmala playing the *dyaḥkhī* during a ram sacrifice in Jēlā on Mahāṣṭamī 1983. The drum carries ram horns representing Nasahdyah and a small silver mask of Mahākālī. Then ignorant of the rules, I contributed the sacrificial animal against permission to take pictures during the ritual. After the first picture, this was prevented by an angry mob. The incident stifled my urge to document the music of the Navadurgā.

taller than I and capable of staring down a charging elephant, let alone an angered Bhaktapur mob. His impressive photo documentation of Navadurgā dancers and maps of their processional routes provide rare insight into this cult.¹⁷ In 1990 and 1991 the Norwegian anthropologist Tordis Korvald applied her considerable charm as a fearless young lady from Bergen, and the Navadurgā instantly adopted her as permanent company.¹⁸ A miracle!

¹⁷ cf. Gutschow and Basukala 1987 and Gutschow 2017 vol. 1, part II, pp. 42–109

¹⁸ Korvald 1993

During the rainy season Bhaktapur is left without protection of the Navadurgā. The dance masks are cremated on the day of Bhāgasiti (May/June). During monsoon the gods await reincarnation whilst people suffer from seasonal infectious diseases. This is regularly highlighted by the Municipality's efforts in spraying white chlorinated lime powder in the mucky areas bordering the brick pavement of Bhaktapur's less populated roads. On the day of Ghatāmugaḥ carhe (July/August) the advent of the new life cycle of the gods is heralded by a procession of Navadurgā dancers clad in white frocks and preceded by four Jugi shawm players and Sāymi oilpressers playing natural *kā* trumpets. They proceed from their *dyaḥchē* in Gachē to the potters' quarter Tālākva. The Navadurgā *nāyaḥ* draws a *maṇḍala* on the head potter's hand, blesses him for successful work and gives him a silver coin as an advance for various clay vessels that the Navadurgā are going to collect on Mahāṣṭhamī. The Navadurgā collect black clay to deliver it at the mask-maker's workshop in Yāchē. There they kneed the clay and divide it into proper portions, before consecrating the clay portions with a chicken sacrifice and returning to their *dyaḥchē* where the Jugi and Sāymi musicians are invited for a feast. Also the *khamē* buffalo arrives at the Navadurgā *dyaḥchē*, to be fattened up and taken good care of until it is sacrificed on Mahānavamī at Brahmāyaṇī.

On the same day of Ghatāmugaḥ carhe people build ninety Gathāmugaḥ disease demons¹⁹ in different localities of Bhaktapur. They use straw bundles and sticks for limbs, a painted round tray for a menacing face and a prominent arrangement of two grapefruits and a whopping straw phallus for male sexual organs. At dusk, the naughty effigies are pulled out of town and burnt at the periphery to the cheers of the crowd. Mothers purify their babies in the smoke. It is the beginning of the festival season.

Until *mvahani* (September/October), the mask-maker Purṇa Chittrakār builds the dance masks to prescribed size and paints the glorious faces of the gods. The Navadurgā masks include the gods Śiva, Gaṇeśa, Maheśvarī, Brahmāyaṇī, Kumārī, Bhadrakālī, Vārāhī, Indrāyaṇī, Mahākālī, Siṃha, Bhairava, Duṃha and Śveta Bhairava. Arguably they are the most beautiful and perfect dance masks made in the Kathmandu Valley. They differ in material, size and painted detail from similar masks sold in tourist shops. Dancers support the heavy masks with a turban protecting their heads.

Apprenticeship of new dancers starts during the month of Śrāvaṇ (July/August). Every morning at 3 a.m. they wash their face and offer prayer at Brahmāyaṇī. In the evening they visit Jēlā Nāsaḥḍyaḥ with small offerings and prayer. The guru teaches them in their respective homes where both aspects of the music god, Jēlā Nāsaḥḍyaḥ and Haimāḍyaḥ are present in the form of betelnuts on rice mounds kept in clay cups²⁰. Each dancer practises alone at home until one month before Mahāṣṭhamī. During this final month all dancers rehearse together in the courtyard behind the Navadurgā *dyaḥchē*. In the evening of Mahāṣṭhamī, the dancers are initiated at the shrine of Nāsaḥḍyaḥ in Jēlā. The drum, the two pairs of cymbals and the ankle bells for the dancers are placed on diagrams prepared with flour by the officiating tantric Ācāju ritual specialist. The instruments are decorated with flowers and other offerings to Nāsaḥḍyaḥ who resides in them and enables the annual re-appearance of musical sound.²¹ In turn, the dancers receive their ankle-bells

19 cf. chapter 3

20 cf. chapter 2

21 cf. photo on p. 159

from the Ācāju who then proceeds to prepare the sacrificial ram for the sacrifice. As soon as the ram is sacrificed at the shrine of Nāsaḥḍyaḥ, the dancers rush to be the first one to drink warm blood from the animal's severed throat. Accompanied with *dyaḥkhī* and cymbals they perform the initial dance of their annual cycle—still without dance masks—before returning to their *dyaḥchē* for a feast. In a niche on the ground floor of the *dyaḥchē* the huge *khome* buffalo munches his fodder. He has another day to live.

In the late afternoon of Mahānavamī, the mask-maker displays the finished masks in the courtyard below his workshop in Yāchē. Thousands of Bhaktapurians pass through this courtyard to worship the masks and behold them in their glory. On the following day the masks will be soiled with sacrificial blood and red powder. In front of the temple of Yachē Gaṇeśa the local *navadāphā* group performs. Gradually people disperse until the Navadurgā dancers arrive late at night to collect the masks and carry them to the Brahmāyaṇī shrine east of Bhaktapur. It is inauspicious to watch them in the process. People keep away. Outsiders are prohibited from watching the earlier proceedings at Brahmāyaṇī. With the expert assistance of a senior Nāy butcher²², the *khome* buffalo is sacrificed as part of the ritual of the annual rebirth of the Navadurgā in their new masks. Carrying chunks of buffalo meat, seven Navadurgā dancers proceed to Yachē to provide meat as payment to the mask-maker before returning to Brahmāyaṇī with the new set of masks in their baskets.

In the early morning hours of Vijayā Daśamī a huge crowd arrives to take a purifying dip in the river—nowadays only a brief sprinkle of polluted river water or only a gesture suggesting sprinkling—and receive blessings from the Navadurgā. After a sleepless night and soaked with buffalo blood, the Navadurgā dancers distribute blessings in the form of flowers, food and ritual *pasūkā* garlands of differently coloured threads. The dancers rest until the late afternoon when the festive crowd returns to witness the sacred moments when at dusk the dancers put on the masks one after another and enter Bhaktapur in a glorious procession. The masks are brimming with powerful divine presence. The crowd escorts the gods into Bhaktapur in a grand manner. Cotton sheets are spread for the shivering dancers to proceed on with their bare feet.²³ People touch the masks, then their forehead with their right hand to partake in the divine energy. Processional music groups arrive with flowers and edible offerings. The arrival of the Navadurgā is a supreme moment of bliss. Until the early 1960s an ensemble of eighteen Sāymi oilpressers preceded the gods with natural *kā* trumpets, producing an ominous, powerful roar. Behind them followed the percussion ensemble of the Navadurgā with their rattling hourglass-drum and the scattered rhythms produced by *dyaḥkhī* and special cymbals. No other music sounds like that of the Navadurgā. At night it is instantly identified from a distance. Other music ensembles escort the Navadurgā at times, starting with the butchers' *nāykhībājā*, the natural trumpets played by oilpressers, further *dhimaybājā*, *dhābājā* and ensembles of transverse flutes *bāsuri*. These processional music groups play at the same time but never together with the *Navadurgā*. Stylistically apart, the music of the gods appears to come from another source beyond musical compatibility. People love making funny allusions based on drum patterns. The following citation of the basic

22 For several decades, this was the duty of my teacher of *nāykhībājā*, the late Kajilal Shahi.

23 shivering indicates being possessed

processional Navadurgā pattern is a joke referring to the notorious alcohol consumption of the dancers. The words imitate the five beat metre and the cymbal strokes:

/ 1 2 / 3 4 5 / 1 2 / 3 4 5 /
 / khē o / kāl o o / bhatti o / thvā o o /

Khē kāl translates as ‘fry scrambled egg’, *bhatti thvā* as ‘local rice beer bar’, meaning:

‘Here comes the bar!’

Having entered Bhaktapur at the eastern gate, the Navadurgā attend their first invitations for ritual *dyaḥbhvaykegu* feasts, before proceeding to the Golden Gate leading to the Taleju temple in the palace compound of the Malla kings. The Taleju priests meet the Navadurgā in front of the gate, before they proceed to the inner *mūlcok* to greet Taleju. It was on this occasion when King Raṇajit Malla and his royal guest from Gorkha, Pṛthvīnārāyaṇa Sāha awaited the Navadurgā, that Bhairava presented *prasād* not to the King of Bhaktapur but to his cunning guest who was already planning to conquer the Malla kingdoms²⁴. Every year the priests come outside with two insignia of the Malla kings, a sword and a horse. Together with the gods they walk along the *pradakṣiṇā*, first through the Lower Town, then the Upper Town. Hindu kings were considered *avatārs* of Lord Viṣṇu. So it was natural for them to keep good relations with other gods—definitely excellent publicity. If after 1769 the deposed Malla kings were reduced to symbolic representation in absentia, the *Sāha* (Shah) kings of Nepal and their queens visited the Navadurgā every Daśamī full moon in their *dyaḥchē*, to receive blessings in the form of a *tika* mark on the forehead and *prasād*. Every year, King Birendra Shah and later his brother Gyānendra donated a new set of costumes to the dancers. When monarchy was abolished in 2008, the Navadurgā lost important royal sponsors.

During private invitations to the Navadurgā people welcome the gods to feast and dance in front of their homes. Usually a piglet is sacrificed by ripping out its little heart. After a brief dance, Bhairava slits the skin open with a sharp fingernail, tears out the heart and throws it in front of the roofed palanquin of the oleander goddess Siphvadyaḥ. In front of the pot with oleander branches stands a wrought silver plaque depicting Mahālakṣmī. The mask of Mahādeva is tied to the roof pinnacle. This palanquin is always carried along when the Navadurgā attend private invitations and during their twenty-one neighbourhood visits. Immediately the other dancers arrive, keen on drinking their share of fresh blood. On special occasions, a family may offer *pañcabali*, five different sacrificial animals. In 1984 I witnessed a *pañcabali* offering in Kvāchē where the horrified buffalo calf watched with bulging eyes as the frenzied dancers sunk their teeth into its neck. During *dyaḥbhvaykegu* food and drinks are offered in excess. The dancers drink much, eat little and carry the rest home. Each of them has a grubby cotton bag attached to the right side of his coat, containing a mixture of food, raw meat and fruit. When the dancers want to offer a special treat to someone they are fond of, their hand disappears in the bag and emerges with a squeezed

24 according to Nepālikabhūpavaṃśāvalī 108–111, see Bajracharya and Michaels, 2016, p. 97

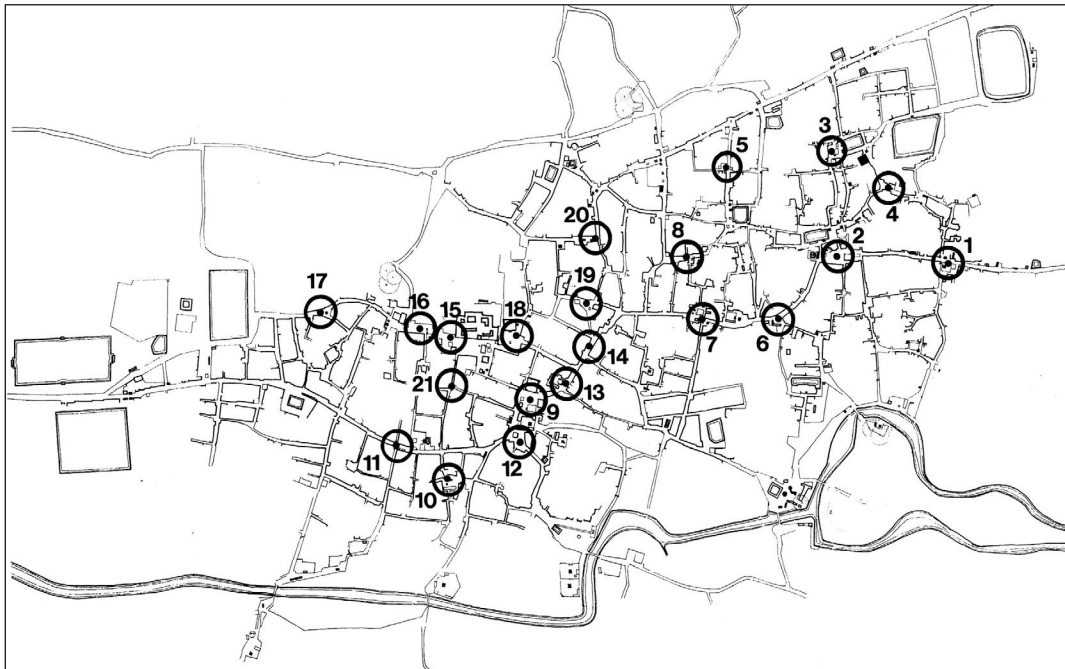
mixture of its contents that is offered as *prasād*, edible blessing. It should be eaten only by those who know exactly what they are doing.²⁵

Before the 2015 earthquake, every full moon after *mvahani* was the day when the Navadurgā visited my home, a splendid 19th century structure inhabited by various descendants of the wealthy Śākya merchant who had built the house and had donated massive silver waist bells to the dancers. On this full moon occasion the dancers arrived not only wearing those precious waist bells but also with their portable palanquin and the severed head of the *khame* buffalo. A drummer and a *sichyāḥ* cymbal-player of the Nāy butcher caste used to walk in front of the Navadurgā, playing the *nāykhī* piece *pūjākhī* whilst carrying the reeking buffalo head. From personal experience as *nāykhī* drummer I can certify to the physical challenge of playing the *pūjākhī* piece during the procession from the Navadurgā *dyaḥchē* to my home in Yatāchē, with a bamboo pole resting on my right shoulder, carrying the dangling buffalo head. The gods receive offerings in exchange for distributing blessings. Before the feast begins, Kumāri holds a skull cup filled with rice beer and dances a polite beer-offering dance in front of the palanquin of the oleander goddess Siphvadyaḥ with the silver plaque of Mahālakṣmī. Having had their feast and a taste of fresh piglet blood, the Navadurgā used to come upstairs for a sip of cognac—their stomach lining being in superb condition.

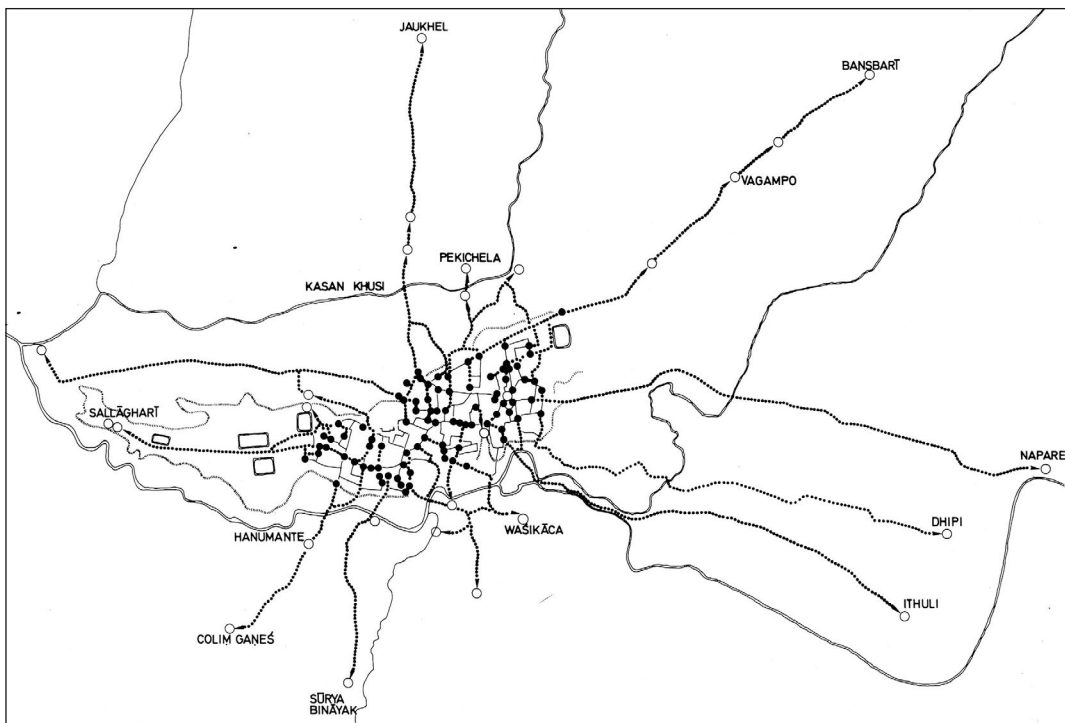
The most significant event after the *khame* buffalo sacrifice follows eight days after Mahānavamī. It is called *bihi*, the blood-drinking ritual. For a week after the sacrifice, the *khame* blood and brains are left to decay in big clay pots kept in the Navadurgā *dyaḥchē*. The *bihi* ritual starts in the evening with Kumārī dancing in the courtyard of the *math* next to the Dattātreya temple, before the Navadurgā proceed to Gaḥchē where the remaining gods dance spectacular individual dances until those ghastly refreshments arrive from the Navadurgā *dyaḥchē*. During gaps between the individual Navadurgā dances, the butchers entertain onlookers by playing their lively dance piece *calti*. In the 1980s, the blood drinking ritual combined five different music ensembles playing simultaneously, lending significance to this event. It was the prime occasion for the earlier Gaḥchē *navabājā* to play. The ensemble did not survive King Mahendra's 'land reform'. Owing to the late hour, the climax of the ritual attracted only a handful of onlookers. On the arrival of the decayed blood and brains, the Navadurgā reveal their lust for blood in a telling display of frenzy.

When I trained ten Navadurgā dancers as *dhimay* drummers, I asked them casually how they could possibly consume those revolting things with such relish. "In everyday life we would not touch such things. When the goddess possesses us, it tastes like the most delicious food. It happens as soon as the mark of soot from the silver container tied to the drum touches our forehead," was the answer. Before the Navadurgā leave their *dyaḥchē*, a vertical soot line is drawn across their forehead with that nail in the silver soot container. That suffices to induce their lucid state as divine beings—their beneficial powers mixed with a streak of the old vampire habit. Communicating with them when they were in this state reminded me of certain situations in the psychedelic age back in the late 1960s. (Map 30, 31)

25 *Prasād* must not touch the ground. My advice: If you are not equipped with a resilient stomach lining, give the clammy lot to a child, make big eyes and say '*prasād*'. Children love this.



Map 30: Navadurgā annual visits to twenty-one neighbourhoods (map: Niels Gutschow, in Levy 1990, p. 233)



Map 31: Navadurgā visiting localities in and around Bhaktapur (map courtesy of Niels Gutschow)



Fig. 156: Gaṇeśa dances, supported by watching mother goddesses Brahmāyānī, Maheśvarī, Kumārī and Indrāyaṇī with *mudra* gestures. The masks of Mahākālī and Vārāhī are kept hanging at the wall. Annual Navadurgā visit to Sākvalā 2018 (photo: courtesy of Rajkumar Manandhar)

During winter and spring the Navadurgā observe a demanding schedule of visiting twenty-one neighbourhoods of Bhaktapur where they perform their popular *ṅalakegu* ritual, literally ‘fishing’.²⁶ This abbreviation for ‘catching a victim’ hints at earlier human sacrifice in the olden days. Invariably, a local processional music group proceeds to the Navadurgā *dyaḥchē* to escort the gods to their neighbourhood and back. In addition to neighbourhoods the Navadurgā visit nineteen villages within the realm of the old kingdom of Bhaktapur and beyond. They go to Paśupatināth at night to bang against the door of the locked shrine, in a robust greeting to Lord Śiva who prefers to avoid direct encounter. The doors remain shut.²⁷ They also visit the distant Nāsaḥḍyaḥ cave at Kabilās near Nuwakot. (Fig. 156)

The annual cycle of Bhaktapur’s Navadurgā terminates on the day of Bhāgasiti (May/June). The dancers enact their death in the *dyaḥchē*, falling on their back like May beetles. The tuning paste attached to the left drumhead of the *dyaḥkhī* is scraped off and the sacred music dies,

26 Gutschow 2017 offers an exhaustive photo documentation of the *ṅalakegu* ritual and the compulsory pantomime, a love scene or pas-de-deux of Śveta Bhairava and Mahākālī.

27 cf. Michaels 1994, chapter IV



Fig. 157: Shankha Bahadur Kulu performing *chemā pūjā* for the repaired *dyaḥkhī* drum. The ancient ram horns representing Nāsaḥdyaḥ, the silver mask representing Mahākālī and the metal container for sacrificial soot are tied to the drum after delivery to the Navadurgā. September 1990

too. A death procession heralded by butchers playing their death music *sībājā* and—up to the 1960s—eighteen oilpressers playing *kā* trumpets proceeds to Brahmāyaṇī where the masks and the tuning paste are cremated on a lotus-shaped carved stone in front of the shrine. The gods are dead, but not completely. They are said to reside in the flooded paddy fields, taking a temporary appearance as tiny little fish until the dry season arrives and the time for reincarnation as powerful protectors of Bhaktapur.

Before *mvahani* the Kulu drum-maker repairs and tightens the sacred *dyaḥkhī* drum. Both drumheads are made of *nāk* hides.²⁸ Owing to its special status as the seat of Nāsaḥdyaḥ during the annual dance cycle, the Kulu has to perform a *chemā pūjā* on completion of the drum repair, asking the god for excuse for having touched the drum with his feet in the process of tightening the drum straps. Before the 1980s this required a blood sacrifice. Later the god had to be content with an egg—for economic reasons. The original *dyaḥkhī* drum from the early sixteenth century must have been replaced at least once. This one carries the inscription (*siddham*) *śrī śrī sumati (ja)ya jitāmitra malla devasana dayakā samvata (N.S. 805?) vaiśākha śu di śubha*. Unfortunately the carving of the date is damaged but it is clear that King Jitāmitra Malla (r. 1673–1696) donated this drum that is still in use. (Fig. 157)

28 *nāk*: female domestic *yāk*, *Bos gruniens*

Not only musical instruments have a symbolic function. It appears to be typical of Newar culture that almost everything can have another meaning or several layers of meaning. This was very confusing when I began to learn the language. A ‘flat elephant’ means one thousand rupees, a ‘*pirāne pūjā*’ of a drumming apprenticeship means that someone became pregnant, having stomach pain means being jealous, etc. Almost everything can have sexual meaning—definitely when it comes to ‘drums’ and ‘drumming’. It takes years before one can speak Newari with confidence and without causing perpetual merriment. Until then it feels like treading on thin ice.

4.3 *Sāpāru* Dances

Sāpāru is a major town ritual for the living to celebrate the dead, escort them to heaven and dance away grief and sadness caused by the loss of a family member. Conceived to bring a smile to the face of a mourning princess, *sāpāru* required the combined efforts of all Bhaktapurians who exploded on royal command into a hilarious carnival with dances, cross-dressing and theatrical entertainments. The remedy worked. When the princess observed the proceedings, the corners of her mouth began to twitch. She smiled, she giggled and soon lost all regal reservation, roaring with laughter and producing tears of mirth, causing the entire court to indulge in general merriment. Her cure became immensely popular and had to be repeated every year on the day after *Gū punhī* (July/August). The festival is announced on full moon evening by a pitiful little stick dance organised by the local *guṭhi samsthān* office. An underpaid Jugi shawm-player and a *dhā*-drummer play an instrumental version of the identifying song, a dialogue:

Tāhāmacā ganā taye?—Gvakhā pvāle taye.
Gvakhā pvāle manhyā sā.—Khusī cūka chve.

Where to dump the tall cow?—Put it into the wall niche.
 It will not fit in the niche.—Dump it in the river.

Could there be a gentler vehicle for leading departed souls to *vaikuṇṭha*²⁹ than a cow? Every bereaved family prepares a cow effigy to be carried along the *pradakṣiṇa* route. These ‘cows’ can be of six varieties³⁰. The most common variety is called *tāhāsā*, literally ‘tall cow’—in comparison to the small cow effigy used for dead children and shouldered by one person, with eyeholes for orientation. It carries a painted face of a cow, straw horns and a photo of the person who passed away during the past twelve months. In front of the *tāhāsā* cow effigy, family members and friends dance the popular *ghētāgiśi* stick dance³¹ (Fig. 158). Small cow effigies for children are carried along the *pradakṣiṇa* route without music and dance during the night before the main festival day. In the 1980s the festival extended to an entire week of masked dances, theatrical sketches and

29 abode of Nārāyaṇa

30 cf. chapter 3

31 cf. Widdess 2006



Fig. 158: Ghētāgīsi stick dance during sāpāru, preceding two tall cow effigies (in the background), 1988

ballad singing. These were presented every night along the *pradakṣiṇa*, for a maximum number of people to watch at leisure. For the past thirty years stick dances have been performed not only on the first day in front of approximately five hundred cows leading departed souls to heaven but also without cows for the entire week, with banners highlighting some political agenda or just for the fun of it, the ‘Look at me!’ agenda. It is said that there was freedom of speech guaranteed during presentations—an exception during the absolute monarchy before 1990 and even more so during the restrictive Rāṇā regime (1846–1951). Even today, actors proclaiming political criticism prefer to remain unidentified and on the safe side, wearing masks or cotton bands covering their face. When we reconstructed the Dhaubhadel Śivalaya in 1995 to accommodate Kathmandu University’s Department of Music, some members of the local Stalinist party attacked me in style, using Gāicā *pyākhā* as their propaganda mouthpiece during *sāpāru* week. Those who insisted on complete control of Bhaktapur perceived the university department as an intruder. Fortunately things calmed down over the years into relaxed co-existence.

The gods, too, make their appearance during the first days of the *sāpāru* week. The cow processions end with Bhairava participating as a giant straw cow effigy together with his consort, Ajimā³². Two days later Bhairava in the company of a smaller palanquin with a statue of King Girvāṇ Shah are carried along the *pradakṣiṇa*, on the first day through the lower town and on the second day through the upper town. Other processions of gods include Sūrya Vināyak Gaṇeś, Lokeśvar, Caṇḍeśvarī (every twelve years), Dattātreyā and Vārāhī. These processions are announced by several music groups walking in front, raising expectations with a deafening mixture of various processional music genres—all playing and singing simultaneously at maximum volume that makes even the buildings tremble in the presence of the gods. In 1983 we identified the following dances presented during *sāpāru* week. They proceed stepwise along the *pradakṣiṇa*, every night performing in two or three squares where instantly audiences gather to enjoy the spectacle. (Figs. 159–171)

- *māka pyākhā* (monkey dance, virtuosic stick dances with special costumes and choreography, with *dhā* and *lālākhī* accompaniment): 2 or 3 groups,
- *bhālū pyākhā* (bear dance with *lālākhī* accompaniment),
- *mhvayakhā pyākhā* (peacock dance),
- *salācā pyākhā* (horse dance),
- *kalālicā pyākhā* (old ‘woman’ dancing with basket used for ritual offerings with): 3 groups,
- *jaṅgalī pyākhā* (thug dance),
- *khyāḥ pyākhā* (naughty spirits dance with *lālākhī* accompaniment): 3 groups,
- *ṇā pyākhā* (fish dance),
- Hanumān *pyākhā* (dance of the monkey hero with *lālākhī* accompaniment),
- *khicā pyākhā* (dog dance with *lālākhī* accompaniment): 3 or 4 groups,
- *nāgācā pyākhā* (dance of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa with flute ensemble): 6 or 7 groups,
- *phākādāli pyākhā* (butterfly dance with *lālākhī* accompaniment): 3 or 4 groups,
- *lusi pyākhā* (pestle dance): 3 groups,

32 cf. chapter 3



Fig. 159: *Bhālū pyākhā* during *sāpāru* week 1988. The sleeping ‘bear’ crouching in the centre is ready to pounce when angered by two clowns.

- *kavācā pyākhā* (skeleton dance with *lālākhī* accompaniment): 5 or 6 groups,
- *natuvācā pyākhā* (dance with taro leaves): 3 groups,
- *kapāy phenigu pyākhā* (cotton spinning song sung by ‘ladies’ at spinning wheels with *māḍal* and harmonium accompaniment): 6 or 7 groups,
- *Jyāpu-Jyāpunī pyākhā* (farmer ‘women’ serving drinks to farmers with *lālākhī*): many
- *Bhaila pyākhā*³³ (masked dance of the potters, with *dhā*, *lālākhī* and *pvaṅgā*): 3 groups,
- *Gāīncā pyākhā* (Gāine bard with toy *sāraṅgī* or sticks accompanying the song): many groups,
- *jhyāure pyākhā* (‘modern’ dance with pairs representing various ethnic groups): many groups,
- *Rāmāyaṇī pyākhā* (*bhajan* with children dressed as *Rāmāyaṇa* heroes, with *tablā* and harmonium): 3 groups,
- *khyāla pyākhā* (song with *māḍal* accompaniment and pair dances of farmers, mendicants, joker and quarreller): 2 groups,
- *nāṭak* (street theatre): many groups, and
- *kha pyākhā*³⁴ (opulent dance drama about *Mahābhārata* episodes accompanied with song, several drums, cymbals, *bāsuri*, *pvaṅgā* and *mvālī*).

33 see chapter 4.4

34 see chapter 4.6



Fig. 160: Sujamādhī bāsuri khalah accompany their grandsons' Rādhākṛṣṇa *pyākhā* during *sāpāru* 1988. Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa pinch each other's cheeks as part of their foreplay.

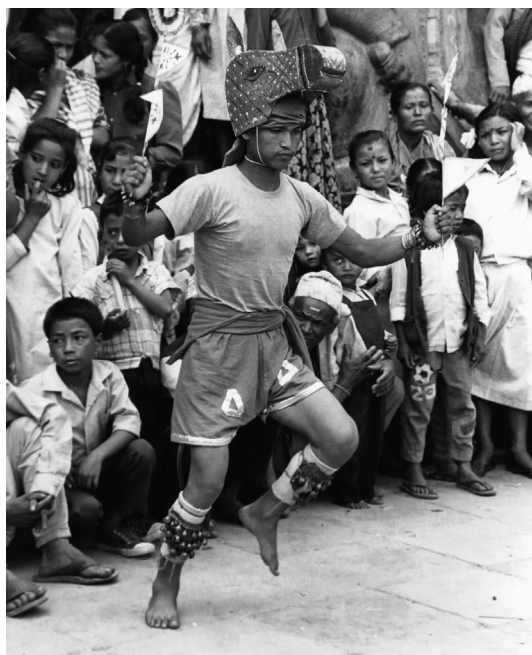


Fig. 161: Salācā pyākhā (horse dance), 1987



Fig. 162: Khyāh pyākhā (naughty ghosts dance) 1988



Fig. 163: Māka pyākhā (monkey stick dance) 1988



Fig. 164: Cross-dressing (Jyāpu-Jyāpunī pyākhā), 1986



Fig. 165: Lākhe pyākhā (man-eating rākṣasa dance), 1986



Fig. 166: *Gāicā pyākhā* (singing bards' dance), 1988



Fig. 167: Garuda eagle, a character of *kha pyākhā*, 1987



Fig. 168: Kapāy phenigu pyākhā (cotton spinning song with beautiful 'ladies' at spinning wheels), 1990



Fig. 169: Bhaila pyākhā (Bhairava dance), 1988



Fig. 170: Khicā pyākhā (dog dance), 1988



Fig. 171: Kavācā pyākhā (skeleton dance), 1988

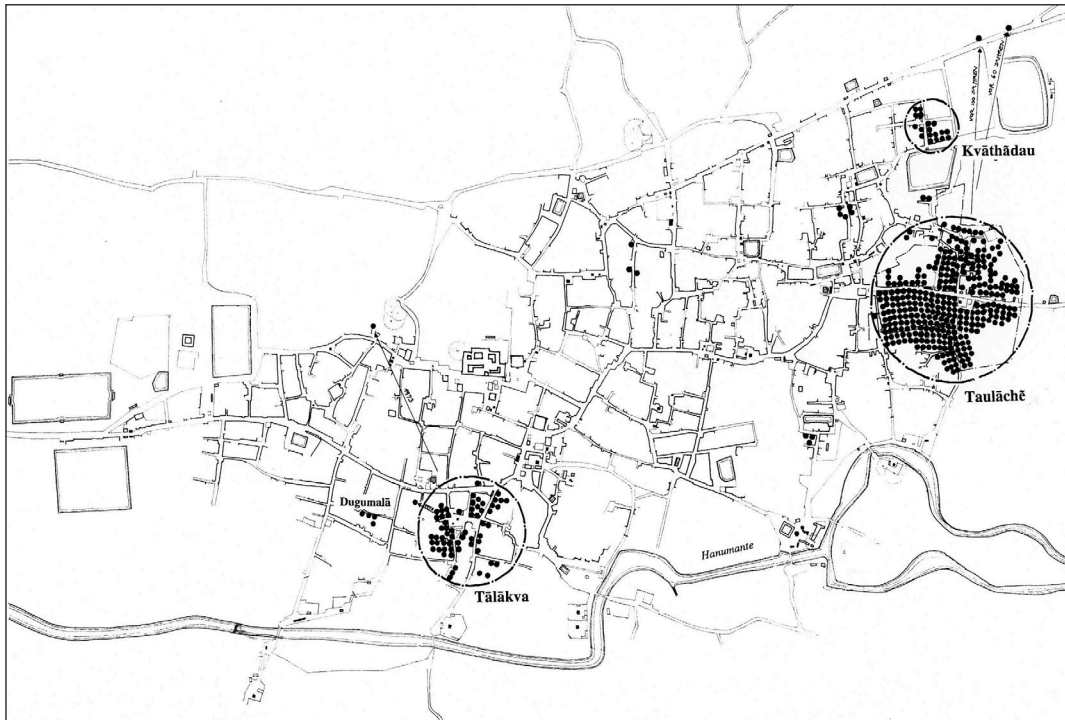
For the past twenty-five years, girls have increasingly participated in stick dances and theatre presentations. Some private schools prepared parades, theatre and dances presented by boys and girls.

The *ghētāgīsi* stick dance is accompanied with two alternating percussion ensembles, one or several *dhā* drums with pairs of *bhuchyāḥ* and *sichyāḥ* cymbals and the *lālākhī* drum with *tāḥ* cymbals. The notations of each drum's patterns are included in chapter 11.17. Before the procession starts, both percussion ensembles play their respective *dyāḥlhāygu* invocations. The dance begins when either one ensemble starts with the basic dance pattern and some of its variants in an even metre. Each pattern is repeated. On the final *tā* stroke of each line, the pair dancers' sticks meet with a clacking sound. When the lead drummer feels that the situation asks for more fire, he switches to a shorter version of the basic pattern that comes in triple metre, having shorter intervals between the clashing stick climaxes. Before everybody gets exhausted, the drummer plays an accelerating roll, signaling a change of percussion ensembles. The other group starts the same procedure from the beginning, allowing the earlier drummers to rest for a few minutes. In this way the procession trundles along the *pradakṣiṇā* route—with necessary interruptions for drinking water. Whenever they pass a temple or a shrine, the respective god or goddess is honoured with *dyāḥlhāygu*. After two to three hours the procession reaches the starting point where the organising family invites all participants for food and drinks. The drums and cymbals are immediately passed on to another procession. On this day, drums are in high demand and may take the round several times. The cow effigy is dismantled and unusable parts are dumped in the river—as the song suggests. Now everybody looks forward to the colourful performances of song, dance and theatre at night, anticipating an entire week of joyous entertainment.

4.4 Bhaila *pyākhā*

One of the most spectacular masked dances performed during *sāparu* week at night, Bhaila *pyākhā* deserves a special chapter in this publication. Rather than telling a story, this is a set of different masked dances presenting Bhairava and his entourage of mother goddesses (Mahākālī, Kumārī, and Vārāhī) and demonic characters infesting cremation grounds—several bloodthirsty Vetālas, a Bhūcā, two dogs and two skeletons. Two acrobats in furry costumes are the undisputed highlight of the show. These Khyāḥ dancers present an instructive variety of erotic acts to the cheering crowd, highlighting sex as an antidote against death. At the finale of the show, a joker cum lion tamer appears with his beasts, a lion and a tiger. He teaches them to bow in front of the gods and serve them as vehicles. The gods dance to the raucous sounds of several *dhā* drums, *bhuchyāḥ* and *sichyāḥ* cymbals and natural trumpets *pvaṅgā*. *Nāykhī* is played only for one short piece before *dhā* drums take over again. The dancers who perform in pairs, Khicā (dogs), Kavācā (skeletons) and Khyāḥ need the softer accompaniment of *lālākhī* and *tāḥ* cymbals. Other drum patterns are also part of the *dhābājā* and *navabājā* repertoires. In the context of Bhaila *pyākhā* they are played much slower, allowing dancers to synchronize their movements with the drumming. Some key patterns appear also in the *lālākhī* accompaniment of *dāphā* songs, reminding singers of the dancing gods. (Figs. 172–181)

Kumāḥ potters live mostly at the southern and eastern end of Bhaktapur, where they produce household ware burnt in small straw-fired kilns (Map 32). Bricks were produced outside the old



Map 32: Kumāh potters' homes are clustered around their kilns and potting wheels (map: Niels Gutschow, in: Gutschow 1982, p. 50)

town. After the 1988 earthquake and with massive building construction taking off during the following decades all over the Kathmandu Valley, brick production became a huge business that brought handsome revenues to the town council issuing permits for installing industrial brick kilns. Vast agricultural farmland around Bhaktapur was lost, polluted or built on. Farmers had sold their land, many finding themselves as a new proletariat. Food prices soared, as it had to be imported. Looking from my rooftop in 2002, we counted one hundred and thirty ring kilns with their chimneys belching out black soot and sulfur dioxide. Air pollution had become a deadly menace. Respiratory problems were the chief cause of death. Industrial ring kilns needed hundreds of cheap workers who lived on the site. Wages were so low and working conditions so abysmal that this attracted more and more seasonal workers from extremely poor rural areas of West Nepal. Despite getting skin eruptions caused by the acidic fumes, needy Bhaktapurians used to knead mud and bake bricks ahead of the expensive New Year festival, to afford sacrificial animals and compulsory gifts for family members. All this made some potters rich whereas most of them remained poor.

It has been the pride and privilege of Bhaktapur's potters to organise and present the spectacular masked dance *Bhaila pyākhā* during the nights of the *sāpāru* week (July/August). The dance group of Tālākva collaborated with tourism entrepreneurs to present staged performances combined with stylish dinners. The potters of *Taulāchē* had always financed their annual masked dance with difficulty. In 1988 Jagadish SJB Rana decided to help this dance group with new costumes, wigs and a set of eight new *pvāṅgā* trumpets.



Fig. 172: Kumāh potters of Taulāchē performing Bhaila pyākhā with dhābājā (sāpāru 1988). Mahākālī (left) and Varāhī (right) threaten demons with swords and skull cups.



Fig. 173: The new pvaṅgā trumpets accompanying a Bhaila pyākhā performance in Yātāchē (1989)



Fig. 174: *Bhaila pyākhā* performance in Yātāchē (1989): Bhūcā, Kumārī, Mahākālī and Bhairava brandishing their swords. Characters in the foreground: Khicā (dog), Betāḥ (Vetāla), Kavācā (skeletons)

Two dogs are part of Bhairava's entourage. They dance a popular duet where the least appealing habits of dogs occupy a prominent place. They frighten children with growling and barking. They even pee on the audience—everything in rhythm, of course.

The composition *dhamāk* for the *navabājā* drums *dhimaycā*, *nāykhīcā*, *dhalak*, *pachimā* and *nagarā* uses the typical patterns of *Khyāḥ pyākhā*, the dance of naughty ghosts that lurk on rooftops at night and paralyze people in their sleep. The victim is unable to move and unable to shout. Paralysis begins in the lower legs before it swiftly moves upwards. Before morning arrives, it vanishes. This kind of nightmare appears to be a common experience with Bhaktapurians—perhaps reflecting the tight rules and restrictions of traditional Newar society. The dance is performed by equally naughty and capable young men wearing fur costumes and dangling tongues. Their acrobatics and demonstrations of erotic postures are a favourite with audiences—everything in rhythm, of course.

Simonne Bailey accompanied the Taulāchē dancers over a decade with the natural trumpet *pvāṅgā*. She observed how all the children in the neighbourhood practised the moves and were clearly impressed by the selected cast members. The skeletons were always the youngest boys. Later they graduated up to be dogs and after they might become other minor gods like Vetāla, Bhūcā or Kumārī. She was impressed with the strong community spirit but noticed also that this was changing by 2014 because of school homework. Some of the boys were barred from dancing because school became more important to families paying school fees. The Taulāchē group surpassed the other *Bhaila pyākhā* groups because they used mature men for the main characters and not callow youth which lacked stature.



Fig. 175: Bhaila pyākhā performed by potters of Taulāchē: Bhairava leading his entourage through a circular dance, brandishing a sword and a skull cup for collecting sacrificial blood (August 1988)



Fig. 176: Silver bracelets worn by Mahākālī



Fig. 177: Bhaila pyākhā: Fastening Khīcā's ankle bells during a performance by potters of Taulāchē 1988



Fig. 178: Khyāḥ pyākhā performed by potters of Taulāchē, August 1988. A pair of Khyāḥ doing it to public glee.



Fig. 179: Bhaila pyākhā: mask of Mahākālī made by Purna Chitrakar



Fig. 180: Bhaila *pyākhā*: Kavācā *pyākhā* performed by potters of Taulāchē, August 1988



Fig. 181: Potters of Taulāchē accompanying Bhaila *pyākhā* with *dhā*, *bhuchyāh* and *tāh*, 1988

The complete transcribed drum repertoires of Bhaila *pyākhā*, Khicā *pyākhā*, Kavācā *pyākhā* and Khyāḥ *pyākhā* are included in chapter 10.6. Drumming syllables differ a little in comparison with similar *navabājā* compositions. The number of pattern repetitions depends on the dancers completing a circle or a specific movement. When I learnt this repertoire and was allowed to accompany the dances, it struck me like a revelation that I was watching a four-dimensional realisation of the drum patterns and their sacred meaning—all this generated by music emanating from my drum. The beauty of this experience was overwhelming.

4.5 Mahākālī *pyākhā*

Mahākālī *pyākhā* is a masked dance based on an episode of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa where the mothergoddesses slay arrogant *daitya* demons. Despite contradictory legends of origin narrated by dancers³⁵, there is no evidence that the music is older than the late 17th or 18th century. Unlike the ancient cult of the Navadurgā with their masks containing the power of the gods, Mahākālī *pyākhā* is a spectacular entertainment celebrating the popular triumph of good over evil. It sets the mood for the advancing *mvahani* festival that celebrates the victory of the goddess Bhagavatī over the demon. The masks are briefly worshipped by the dancers before the performance but not by the public. In contrast to the Navadurgā masks, they are treated as part of the costumes, not as vessels of divine bliss.

The programme of a Mahākālī *pyākhā*³⁶ includes mostly complete *navabājā* compositions to highlight characters and stages of the drama:

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1. <i>ḍyaḥllhāygu</i> | (all dancers pray to Nāsaḥḍyaḥ for a successful performance) |
| 2. <i>jati</i> | (the mothergoddesses: Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmī and Kumārī) |
| 3. <i>partāl</i> | (Mahākālī dances with one Betāḥ, two Khyāḥ and two Bhvucā) |
| 4. <i>dehrā</i> | (Mahālakṣmī dances with one Betāḥ and two Kavācā) |
| 5. <i>calti</i> | (Kumārī dances with one Betāḥ and two Khyāḥ) |
| 6. <i>kavācā khīpvu</i> | (two Kavācā) |
| 7. <i>dhamāk</i> | (two Khyāḥ) |
| 8. <i>jaṅgali khīpvu</i> | (two humans from the jungle) |
| 9. <i>partāl</i> | (Lākhe, a scary but fascinating ogre) |
| 10. <i>calti</i> | (Kumārī slaying the demon Sumbha) |
| 11. <i>dehrā</i> | (Mahālakṣmī slaying the demon Nisumbha) |
| 12. <i>partāl</i> | (Mahākālī slaying the demon Mahesāsūr) |
| 13. <i>dehrā</i> | (the three goddesses Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmī and Kumārī combined) |
| 14. <i>kvakhīcā me</i> | (the three goddesses receive offerings from a ‘farmer woman’) |
| 15. <i>dhētidhā dhā</i> | (a lion trainer cum joker teaches Śiṅgha and Śer how to bow to the goddesses) |

35 see Okuyama 1981

36 also called Devī *pyākhā*



Fig. 182: Surya Shankar Manandhar playing a painted *pachimā* with accompaniment of two Jugi shawm players (Kamal and Maṅgalāl Kapālī) and *sichyah* cymbals for a performance of Bahatāle Devī *pyākhā* in 1989

Among fifteen items, eleven are also *navabājā* compositions played by *dhā*, *pachimā* and *nagarā* drums with cymbals and—the latter two drums—shawm accompaniment. *Jati* is a special piece for the mothergoddesses and their entourage—without demons, of course—to dance a circular dance where the goddesses proceed into the centre and end with a united stamp, telling all demons to take heed.

In the 1980s, Bhaktapur's six Mahākālī *pyākhā* groups performed in Bhaktapur only for touristic events, like 'Traditional Dinner & Masked Dances'. Traditionally Mahākālī *pyākhā* was presented during Indra *jātrā* in Kathmandu where the Mahākālī *pyākhā* dance groups from Bhaktapur performed for local sponsors. After registration at the Hanumān Dhokā palace the groups moved from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. All the groups received payment by His Majesty's Government (HMG). Some of these groups gave weekly tourist performances in Kathmandu hotels. This could explain the odd inclusion of *Lākhe* dance that was never a Bhaktapur tradition. *Lākhe* dance is popular in Kathmandu and in the western part of the Kathmandu Valley. The ogre is said to spontaneously grab a child for human sacrifice from amongst fascinated onlookers—only in the olden days, of course. But *Lākhe* dance with its wild and erratic movements has lost none of its fascination. During the 1980s and 1990s the most professional group was Bahatāle Devī *pyākhā*. Contrary to other groups where children take the minor roles, this group used only adult male dancers who were handpicked from different localities and different castes on the basis of their performance skills. This group was paid Rs. 2,500 for a hotel performance. His Majesty's Government paid Rs. 3,450 for four performances at Hanumān Dhokā during Indra *jātrā*. The group received a minimum of Rs. 500 for performances on private invitation during the Indra *jātrā* week. A *phalicā* porch was supplied for dancers and musicians to sleep in. (Figs. 182–191)



Fig. 183: Mahākālī slaying an evil Daitya demon to the accompaniment of *pachimā* (Bahatāle Devī *pyākhā*)



Fig. 184: Lākhe dance during a recording session of Bahatāle Devī *pyākhā* in Yātāchē 1988



Fig. 185: Jagadish Rana (far right) watching the apotheosis with lion and tiger (Bahatāle Devī *pyākhā*)



Fig. 186: Kumārī (Bahatāle Devī pyākhā)



*Fig. 187: Kavācā mask (Bahatāle Devī *pyākhā*)*



Fig. 188: Demon making noise with his waist bells (Bahatāle Devī pyākhā)



Fig. 189: A strapping Kavācā (Bahatāle Devī pyākhā)



Fig. 190: Charging Lākhe demon (Bahatāle Devī pyākhā)



Fig. 191: Giving the lion a final touch (Bahatāle Devī pyākhā)

4.6 *Kha pyākhā*

An astounding achievement among Newar dance dramas created during the Rāṇā period, *kha pyākhā* was put on by one hundred and fifty farmers of Byāsi. *Kha pyākhā* enacted the Mahābhārata episode of King Virāṭa at whose court—the ruins lie east of Birātnagar—the exiled *Pāṇḍava* brothers found refuge. Starting with the *sāpāru* week, it took twenty-eight days to perform and was presented on *dabu* stone platforms in four localities of Bhaktapur. Dancers acting as royals wore embroidered Rāṇā style costumes. Owing to immense production costs involved and no external funding available, *kha pyākhā* was not sustainable. In 1987 there was an attempt to revive a few dances that allowed me to document a rehearsal in Byāsi. Most of the accompanying drumming pieces were compiled from the *lālākhī* and *navabājā* repertoires. As with the earlier foundation of *navadāphā* groups, a similar concept of including all possible sources of musical sound must have been at work. This extravagant dance drama required singers, two *lālākhī* drums with four *pvaṅgā* natural trumpets, *dhā*, *dhalak*, *pachimā*, *nagarā* drums, *bhuchyāḥ*, *sichyāḥ*, *tāḥ*, *baucā* (*jhyālicā*) cymbals, ten transverse flutes *bāsuri*, four *pvaṅgā* trumpets and four Jugī musicians playing *mvālī* shawms. (Figs. 192–194)



Fig. 192: Character from *kha pyākhā* of Byāsi, 1987



Figs. 193–194: Characters from *kha pyākhā* of Byāsi, 1987

4 Dances

A complete performance of *kha pyākhā* comprised of sixty-six different dances and drumming pieces:

| Dances/Characters ³⁷ | Accompaniment |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Gaṇeśa | <i>jati</i> |
| 2. Sarasvatī | <i>maṇḍala</i> |
| 3. Sutra | <i>jati</i> |
| 4. Nati | <i>maṇḍalā</i> |
| 5. Yudhisthira and five others | <i>jati, cvakh, tipā, maṇḍala</i> |
| 6. Dhritadāsa and army (100) | <i>cvakh</i> |
| 7. Dhauma Ṛṣi (3) | <i>rabi sikha</i> |
| 8. Durapaḍa Rājā and four others | <i>partāl, tipā</i> |
| 9. Rādhikā | <i>tipā</i> |
| 10. Kutyādi | <i>kharjati</i> |
| 11. Birāt Rājā | <i>jati</i> |
| 12. Śedume Dhāgo | <i>kharjati</i> |
| 13. Jimuta Madi | <i>cvakh</i> |
| 14. Achau | <i>kharjati, tipā</i> |
| 15. Bindubāsinī | <i>jhākā, tipā, partāl, palimpi</i> |
| 16. Mu | <i>tipā</i> |
| 17. Birātādī | <i>palimpi, tipā, maṇḍala, partāl</i> |
| 18. Kṛṣṇa Khalag | <i>jati, partāl</i> |
| 19. Bhimādhī | <i>palimpi</i> |
| 20. Bhimasena | <i>partāl</i> |
| 21. Kāsī Rājā | <i>cvakh, tipā</i> |
| 22. Arjunādi | <i>maṇḍala, tipā</i> |
| 23. Draupadi | <i>tipā</i> |
| 24. Meghāṣedu | <i>palimpi</i> |
| 25. Saha | <i>partāl</i> |
| 26. Nakula | <i>tipā, partāl</i> |
| 27. Arjuna | <i>tipā</i> |
| 28. Sudeśa Nādi | <i>tipā, palimpi</i> |
| 29. Anupā | <i>partāl, tipā</i> |
| 30. Utarādī | <i>cvakh</i> |
| 31. Bṛheta Bala | <i>tipā</i> |
| 32. Kṛṣṇa Arjuna | <i>partāl, tipā, palimpi</i> |
| 33. Kāligara | <i>cvakh</i> |
| 34. Upakīcaka | <i>mandala, palimpi</i> |
| 35. Kīcaka | <i>tipā, palimpi, partāl</i> |

³⁷ spelling as given by Byāsi informant

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| 36. Sikārī | <i>tipā</i> |
| 37. Sidhārī | <i>palim̐pi</i> |
| 38. Sudesnā | <i>palim̐pi</i> |
| 39. Mallāḍī | <i>tipā, cvakh</i> |
| 40. Bindu | <i>tipā, palim̐pi</i> |
| 41. Sairandī | <i>tipā, kharjati</i> |
| 42. Rākṣasa | <i>jhākā</i> |
| 43. Ballaba | <i>palim̐pi, tipā, partāl, jhākā</i> |
| 44. Duryodhana | <i>partāl, palim̐pi, tatali, tipā, thatā</i> |
| 45. Cāhārgana | <i>tipā</i> |
| 46. Caukidār | <i>palim̐pi, maṇḍala, tipā</i> |
| 47. Nakali Kīcaka | without drumming |
| 48. Raṇa Macharṇa | <i>tipā</i> |
| 49. Surasena | <i>palim̐pi, cvakh, dukha tipā, tipā</i> |
| 50. Susarmā | <i>cvakh, tipā, palim̐pi, maṇḍala</i> |
| 51. Cāhāra | <i>tipā</i> |
| 52. Khargi (Nāy) | <i>ravisikha, cvakh</i> |
| 53. Prajā | <i>maṇḍala</i> |
| 54. Kāsi Rājā | <i>palim̐pi</i> |
| 55. Gopāla | <i>cvakh, maṇḍala, dukha tipā</i> |
| 56. Bṛhamnalāḍī | <i>palim̐pi, tipā, kharjati, cvakh, maṇḍala</i> |
| 57. Utarāḍī | <i>tipā</i> |
| 58. Utara Kumār | <i>tatali</i> |
| 59. Birgaṇa | <i>maṇḍala</i> |
| 60. Rath ko lāgi | <i>maṇḍala</i> |
| 61. Mantri Ādī | <i>tipā, palim̐pi</i> |
| 62. Yudhisthīra | <i>palim̐pi, partāl, ektā</i> |
| 63. Kabīr | <i>tipā, cvakh</i> |
| 64. Debagāyani | <i>tipā</i> |
| 65. Dhumemāyani | <i>maṇḍala</i> |
| 66. Prajā | <i>jhākā</i> |

