# Introduction

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## Buṅgadyaḥ and his procession: History, ritual, and urban space

The Buṅgadyaḥ procession, held annually in May/June (Vaiśākha/Jeṭha) at the onset of monsoon, is among the most significant public ritual events of Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. Stretching over several weeks, the chariot festival transforms Patan (Lalitpur), Bungamati, and adjoining localities into a temporarily sacralised urban landscape, in which streets, squares, crossroads, and river crossings become sites of ritual action and collective memory. Buṅgadyaḥ is known by numerous names including Bugma Lokeśvara, Śrī, Karuṇāmaya, Padmapāṇi Lokeśvara, Lokanātha, Trailokyanātha, Āryāvalokiteśvara, Laskaḥ Dyaḥ, and Matsyendranātha reflecting the diverse identities ascribed to him by different communities of devotees. More than a religious festival, the Buṅgadyaḥ procession (New. *jātrā*, Skt. *yātrā*) constitutes a dynamic arena in which socio-religious identities, caste-based roles, gendered participation, and claims to authority are repeatedly enacted and negotiated within Newar society and beyond (Owens 1989). Within this multiplicity and dynamism, Buṅgadyaḥ can be understood to embody three primary identities, as noted by Owens (1989): that of a rain-making god, a Buddhist savior (Avalokiteśvara), and a tantric master (Matsyendranātha). This volume brings together eight scholarly contributions that examine the festival from historical, epigraphical, ethnographic, and spatial perspectives, highlighting how the procession has been shaped by long-term institutional developments as well as by the lived practices of ritual specialists and communities.

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## About ritual placemaking and distributed agency in urban spaces

We situate our analysis in the wider conceptual framework of debates on ritual dynamics, urban placemaking and what we understand as distributed agency. From such a perspective, ritual placemaking is the ongoing production and transformation of place through repeated, embodied, and meaningful practices. Distributed agency describes how this production—rather than agency emerging from singular actors alone—arises from the relational, polyphonic entanglement and interplay of people, institutions and materials, infrastructures, mobilities and spaces. This way, we can grasp the temporal rhythms and variations of a multilayered phenomenon such as the Buṅgadyaḥ procession in the Kathmandu Valley and beyond.

Our approach is such that it aims at using the interdisciplinary readings of our data—inscriptions and other objects, the corresponding practices of agents, and the infrastructures that channel them (e.g., caste and ethnic organisation, labour, transport), allowing for different speeds and temporal rhythms to unfold—to grasp ritual placemaking and distributed agency in South Asia differently. A procession is not simply moving through a neutral spatial or temporal "container." Instead, religious practice is routinely public, mobile, and relational, unfolding in streets, courtyards, along riverbanks, at crossroads, and on neighborhood squares. Here, place is not simply a backdrop for ritual action; it is continually *made and remade* through ritual itself.

Ritual placemaking in this context refers to how festivals, processions, daily offerings, pilgrimages, and cycles of maintenance or erasure transform urban space into meaningful, legitimate, and inhabited place. Streets become sacred routes through repeated procession; intersections turn into centers through pause and performance; courtyards and temple squares gain coherence through rhythmic gathering. These effects are not permanent in a material sense, yet they are durable and robust through repetition. Calendars matter as much as architecture: an annual festival or daily *pūjā* establishes recurring rights to occupy space, shaping how residents-turned-devotees or secular participants understand access, belonging, and authority.

A strong line of theory treats ritual as *doing* that reorganizes bodies, attention, movement, and objects in patterned ways—so it *makes* social and everyday realities rather than only expressing them. In cities, this "doing" is inherently performative, ephemeral and spatial: routes,

thresholds, pauses, crowds, sound, scent, and visibility are part of how ritual works. Conceptually, thus, ritual becomes a form of *worlding*: it produces a lived sense of what a place *is for*, who it *belongs to*, and what kinds of actions are legitimate there.

Anthropological work on ritual has informed this book in its emphasis on practice and power. Victor Turner's (2008) emphasis on process, liminality, and communitas highlights how ritual temporarily reorganizes social and spatial relations, while Catherine Bell's (1992) theory of ritualization underscores how repeated action strategically differentiates spaces and bodies. In South Asia, these dynamics are inseparable from questions of authority and history, as emphasized by William Sax (2002) or Diana Eck (1981), whose work cautions against treating ritual as timeless tradition detached from power. The Collaborative Research Centre "Ritual Dynamics" at Heidelberg University has substantially contributed to our approach in terms of theory and regional expertise, for instance, Axel Michaels (2016) who, theoretically and with respect to Nepal and India, has conceptualized ritual as a dynamic, processual practice shaped by repetition, variation, and social negotiation. Rather than fixed tradition, ritual is a mode of action that generates order, meaning, and authority while remaining adaptable to historical change, context, and the agency of participants and institutions (see also Brosius 2008; Hüsken and Michaels 2013).

Ritual placemaking is inseparable from distributed agency. By this, we mean that practices and positionalities are distributed across a field of action, a field of discourse. They are not arbitrarily scattered but relational. No single actor "creates" ritual space. Instead, agency emerges from the interaction of devotees, ritual specialists, neighborhood committees, municipal authorities, vendors, police, built forms, images, sound systems, weather, and inherited routes. Agency also emerges from shared memories and histories, inscribed in places as well as practices like walking, in performances such as singing or story-telling, in objects such as inscriptions or ritual food. Material settings—narrow streets, steps, thresholds, courtyards—actively choreograph movement and attention, enabling some actions while constraining others. Institutional frameworks such as permits, heritage regulations, or monastic rules do not simply limit ritual; they become part of how ritual unfolds and adapts. Special events, such as the Gorkha Earthquakes of 2015, but also political ruptures and trans/formations, have called for attention in this volume, sometimes through the inscriptions themselves, sometimes through contextual work, offering

perspectives on socio-cultural change and even identity politics that shape ephemeral and asymmetrical relations between state, religious institutions and citizens.

The idea of distributed agency draws on both material and relational approaches. Alfred Gell's theory of the "distributed person" in his work on art and agency (1998) and Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (2005) help frame agency as emerging from interactions among people, objects, architectures, and institutions. This perspective has proven especially productive in South Asia, where ritual action depends on streets, courtyards, images, sound, calendars, and regulatory regimes.

Regionally grounded scholarship sharpens these insights. Studies by David Gellner (1992), Gérard Toffin (2007 and 2025), and Robert Levy (1990) on ritual, ethnicity and society in Newar cities, and Niels Gutschow (1993) and Reinhard Herdick (1988) on Kathmandu Valley urban form demonstrate how ritual practice, urban morphology, and social difference are co-constitutive. Related to the Buṅgadyaḥ Jātrā, Bruce Owens (1989) or Swati Pujari (2014), along with documentary films, such as Kesang Tseten's film *On the Road with the Red God: Machhendranath* (2005) focus on spatial, architectural and everyday dimensions of the procession in the recent years and decades.

The Buṅgadyaḥ tradition is itself the product of centuries of accumulated interventions by shifting constellations of actors, institutions, and material infrastructures. Their traces persist in contemporary practice, just as present-day actors—from heritage initiatives to cultural activism—actively reclaim and reinterpret this layered past. The following sections outline this history from the earliest attestations to the present.

## Early epigraphical contexts and the problem of origins

The earliest historical horizons relevant to Buṅgadyaḥ do not yet attest to the deity by name, but they illuminate two foundational contexts: early Avalokiteśvara devotion in Nepal and the antiquity of Bungamati as a settlement central to the cult. An undated pedestal inscription, commonly assigned to the mid-sixth century and often associated with the reign of the Licchavi king Rāmadeva, mentions Āryāvalokiteśvaranātha and was found reused in a water conduit at Lagantole (D. Vajrācārya VS 2030, 177; Regmi 1983, vol. 1, 34–35; Regmi 1983, vol. 2, 23). A decisive early milestone is the decree of King Aṃśuvarman dated 605/606 CE (Saṃvat 29; VS 662), which provides the

earliest epigraphical reference to Bugāyumīgrāma, the earlier name of Bungamati. Although the inscription does not concern Buṅgadyaḥ directly, the stone later acquired ritual significance and was displayed during the twelve-year cycle of the festival, illustrating how early documentary artefacts were absorbed into later ritual practice and local historical consciousness (Indraji and Bühler 1880, 166–170; D. Vajrācārya VS 2030, 290–300; Witzel 1990). An undated Licchavi-period inscription from Bungamati referring to compassion (*kāruṇya*)[1] further suggests a religious milieu compatible with Avalokiteśvara devotion, though without securely identifying Buṅgadyaḥ (D. Vajrācārya VS 2030, 586–587; Locke 1980, 250).

Chronicles (*vaṃśāvalīs*) attribute the origin of the Buṅgadyaḥ procession to the reign of Licchavi King Narendradeva (ca. 643–679 CE), narrating that a devastating twelve-year drought afflicted Nepālamaṇḍala and that Narendradeva, together with Ācārya Bandhudatta and Lalita Jyāpu, travelled to Kāmunīkṣetra or Kāmarūpa to bring Buṅgadyaḥ to the Valley (Owens 1989, 148–152; A. Vajrācārya VS 2022, 26). Yet the chronicle tradition is internally inconsistent. The *Maṇiratnamālā-Avadāna* places the event in Kaligata Saṃvat 3600 (ca. 498 CE) (A. Vajrācārya VS 2042, 84), the *Nepālikabhūpavaṃśāvalī* in Kaligata Saṃvat 3623 (ca. 521 CE) (Bajracharya and Michaels 2016, 13.221), the *Padmagirivaṃśāvalī* in Kaligata Saṃvat 3548 (ca. 446 CE) (Hasrat 1970, 45), and the *Bhāṣāvaṃśāvalī* in Kaligata Saṃvat 3676 (ca. 574 CE) (Laṃsāla VS 2023, 12). The *Gopālarājavaṃśāvalī* (folio 23A; ed. and trans. in Vajrācārya and Malla 1985, 31 and 126), widely regarded as the most reliable chronicle for historical work, records that Narendradeva and Bandhudatta organised the festival of Bugma Lokeśvara Bhaṭṭāraka (Buṅgadyaḥ) but does not provide a date. Significantly, none of Narendradeva's surviving inscriptions mention Buṅgadyaḥ, necessitating a clear distinction between later narrative memory and contemporaneous epigraphical evidence.

## Secure early medieval attestations

When chronicle narratives are set aside, the earliest secure attestations of Buṅgadyaḥ emerge only in the early medieval period. A manuscript

1 The inscription reads: … *ka. -kāruṇya … praṇihi(ta) … yaś cāvāpya samastabhūmipati(taṃ) … kulavatāṃ* … (D. Vajrācārya VS 2030, 587).

of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prājñāpāramitā* dated 1071 CE, preserved in Royal Asiatic Society, Calcutta, includes an illustration of a red-hued standing Padmapāṇi explicitly identified as Bugma Lokeśvara of Nepal, leaving no doubt about the deity's presence under this name by the eleventh century (Foucher 1900, pl. IV, 1; Slusser 1982, 369). Another evidence of Buṅgadyaḥ's association with Lokeśvara is provided by the *sādhana* text entitled *Trailokyavaśaṅkarāmnāya-bhugmalokeśvara-sādhanā* composed by Śūnyatāsamādhivajra (aka Devākaracandra) who lived in Kathmandu during 1030–1130 (Sakuma 2002, 134–143 and 2006, 1–13). Sakuma affirms the similarity of the iconography of Bhugma-Lokeśvara with that of Bugma Lokeśvara depicted in the *Aṣṭasāhaśrikā Prājñāpāramitā* of 1071 CE. Further confirmation is provided by the Tibetan monk Dharmasvāmin, who resided in the Kathmandu Valley between 1226 and 1234 CE and described a celebrated five-foot-tall sandalwood image of Buṅgadyaḥ (whom he spells as Ārya Bu-kham), renowned even in India and honoured with an annual festival (Roerich 1959, 54–55). By the thirteenth century, then, Buṅgadyaḥ had become a well-established and widely revered figure within the Valley's ritual landscape and beyond (Owens 1989, 143).

## Transcultural formation: Avalokiteśvara and Matsyendranātha

One of the most striking features of the Buṅgadyaḥ tradition is its deeply transcultural and historically entangled formation, in which Buddhist and Hindu elements have long interacted, overlapped, and redefined one another. Buddhists venerate Buṅgadyaḥ as Avalokiteśvara, also known as Karuṇāmaya or Padmapāṇi (Owens 2019). In Nepal, early epigraphical references to Lokeśvara appear in inscriptions associated with the time of King Rāmadeva (ca. 545 CE) and in the Brahmatola inscription dated to Śaka Saṃvat 479 (557 CE), while an inscription of 733 CE mentions Karuṇāmaya Lokeśvara; whether these attestations refer specifically to Buṅgadyaḥ remains uncertain (D. Vajrācārya VS 2030, 177–178). Hindus, on the other hand, worship Buṅgadyaḥ as the Śaivite saint Matsyendranātha, whose earliest textual reference in Nepal appears in the eleventh-century *Kaulajñāna Nirṇaya*, though not in association with Buṅgadyaḥ (Locke 1980, 423). In the late medieval period—particularly under King Śrīnivāsa Malla

(1661–1685)—Buṅgadyaḥ and Matsyendranātha increasingly became synonymous, allowing a Buddhist procession to be re-inscribed with Hindu political-theological symbolism (Bajracharya 2025). Rather than diluting the festival's meaning, this layered formation exemplifies the Kathmandu Valley's long-standing pattern of religious negotiation, shared ritual ownership, and the use of cults as vehicles of royal authority (Owens 1989). This pattern exemplifies what David Gellner (2005) terms the Valley's "polytropy", whereby overlapping Buddhist and Hindu identifications coexisted without demanding exclusive allegiance—though such fluidity operated within hierarchies determined by political competition between high castes and by relations with a state whose king was Hindu.[2]

## Late medieval institutionalisation and Malla patronage

From the fourteenth century onward, Buṅgadyaḥ's festival becomes increasingly visible as a major civic and political institution. An inscription dated 1382 CE (NS 502) from Ituṃ Bahāḥ records that Jaitralakṣmī, the wife of the minister Madanarāma, donated a golden *toraṇa* to Śrīśrī-Bugama-Āryāvalokiteśvara, signalling elite patronage of the cult (D. Vajrācārya VS 2068, 165–167; H. Śākya VS 2048, 10–11; Locke 1980, 301). The festival also functioned as a venue for courtly culture: in 1337 CE (NS 457), during the reign of Arimalla, Mahāpātra Jayasiṃha Malla commissioned the poet Jayata to compose the Sanskrit drama *Mahīrāvaṇavadha* for performance during the festival. At the opening scene of the drama, a salutation to Śriv[b]ugmeśa is made (cf. Nepāla VS 2040, 2). By the late medieval period, Buṅgadyaḥ had become a shared deity of the Nepālamaṇḍala, with the kings of the Valley's three polities participating in the procession and supporting it through endowments, offerings, and ritual regulation.

A decisive moment in the institutional history of the procession is marked by a palmleaf document dated 1558 CE (NS 678), which records land grants to establish a *guthi* for the bathing ceremony of

2 A complementary framing is offered by Tuladhar-Douglas (2005), who theorizes the deity's "many names" as polynomasia: a socially and ritually managed plurality of identifications that enables overlap and accommodation across different publics and religious communities through such mechanisms as differentiated levels of secrecy and the implicit collaboration of shrine priests managing diverse patronage.

Buṅgadyaḥ and Ādinātha (Chobhar) and explicitly mentions the chariot route. This is the earliest inscriptional evidence that directly anchors the *ratha* procession as an endowed and administratively sustained institution (Rājavaṃśī VS 2023, 18–19; H. Śākya VS 2048, 11; Locke 1980, 301). From the seventeenth century onward, a dense epigraphical record documents repairs, gilding, ritual rules, calendrical decisions, and route-linked *pūjā*s, demonstrating how the festival was woven into the political economy and urban order of Malla Patan. Specialized *guthi*s for specific ritual responsibilities are attested from this period: the Luthāma Guthi, established ca. 1610 by Jīvarāja Vandya, was entrusted with maintaining the gilt-paneled *vimāna* (sanctum) of the chariot (Bajracharya, this volume, Chapter 3).

Trans-Himalayan patronage to Buṅgadyaḥ extended back to the thirteenth century. Khaśa Malla rulers from western Nepal, operating within networks linking the Gangetic plain, the Kathmandu Valley, and Tibet, patronized Buṅgadyaḥ as part of their Buddhist devotional activities. King Ripumalla's pilgrimage tour of 1312/13—documented through inscriptions at Lumbini, Nigliva, and the Kathmandu Valley—positioned Buṅgadyaḥ as a node within these trans-Himalayan Buddhist networks (Andolfatto, this volume, Chapter 8). These trans-Himalayan connections persisted into the early modern period: The Newar Buddhist scholar and scribe Jayamuni (ca. 1600–1690) and his father Jīvarāja, prominent patrons of Buddhism in Patan, secured donations from wealthy Tibetans in Sikkim to fund refurbishments to the Buṅgadyaḥ chariot (Formigatti and Grimes 2025).[3] In the final decades of Malla rule, Buṅgadyaḥ also appears explicitly as a deity of political sanction: Raṇajit Malla invokes "Śrī Śrī Śrī Karuṇāmaya" as an enforcer of royal rules (D. Vajrācārya VS 2030, 237; Locke 1980, 321). The latest inscription in this sequence, dated 1768 CE (NS 888), records the establishment of a *guthi* for *pūjā*s to Śrīmacchrībuṁgamāvalokiteśvara and stands at the threshold of the Valley's conquest by King Pṛthvīnārāyaṇa Śāha (Sakya and Vaidya 1970, 237–240; Locke 1980, 321).

3 This event is also recorded in a recent inscription composed by Hemarāja Śākya in 1991 CE (see NHDP_0001_0158 in the appendix of Cubelic and Khatiwoda's contribution to this volume, Chapter 5).

## From the Gorkhali conquest to the present

The Gorkhali conquest of 1768/1769 fundamentally altered the political landscape of the Kathmandu Valley, introducing new administrative frameworks that challenged traditional *guthi* autonomy. The imposition of the *ijārā* system from 1773, wherein government-appointed contractors managed *guthi* land endowments, disrupted financial independence and ritual continuity (Bajracharya, this volume, Chapter 3). Despite these pressures, the procession persisted as a central civic ritual, with festival *guthi*s engaging in legal battles throughout the early nineteenth century to reclaim control over their endowments and ritual responsibilities. Early nineteenth-century inscriptions indicate both administrative regulation and *guthi* resistance, as the festival remained embedded in Patan's urban religious landscape.

The Rāṇā period (1846–1951) marked decisive shifts in patronage and symbolic representation. Jaṅga Bahādura Rāṇā and his successors commissioned prominent chariot components and ritual objects, inscribing their names onto the festival's most visible spaces (see Cubelic and Khatiwoda, this volume, Chapter 5). Elite patronage occurred alongside a marked decline of Newari (Nepal Bhasa) in public epigraphy, as Nepali became the language of state power—a shift clearly reflected in the festival's inscriptional record. Parallel to this linguistic displacement and political appropriation, Rāṇā authorities engaged in symbolic recontextualization of Buddhist imagery. As Bühnemann (2012) has demonstrated for the Golden Window of Patan's royal palace—where Avalokiteśvara emanating Hindu deities was reframed through surrounding Hindu imagery—this period witnessed active appropriation of Buddhist symbols. Yet this Hindu reframing did not displace the deity's Buddhist identity.

The fall of the Rāṇā regime in 1951 triggered profound social reconfigurations in ritual sponsorship. The Guthi Saṃsthān Act (1964) centralized ritual endowments under state control, disenfranchising traditional craft and ritual associations and restricting their financial capacity to maintain festivals (Maharjan, this volume, Chapter 4). Alongside this administrative restructuring, alternative forms of community organizations emerged: neighborhood associations (e.g., Ṭola Sudhāra Samiti, "neighbourhood improvement committee"), youth clubs and other youth organisations, Buddhist lay groups, and extended families assumed or expanded their responsibility for maintaining the chariot and funding ritual infrastructure (Brosius, this volume, Chapter 1).

From the 1990s onward, the procession became a site for explicitly performing Newar cultural identity within post-democratization ethnic politics (see Owens, this volume, Chapters 2 and 7). UNESCO-supported renovations (2002) and transnational Buddhist networks repositioned the procession within global heritage frameworks. The monarchy's abolition in 2008 fundamentally altered the procession's political framework. As Mocko (2018) demonstrates for Bhoṭo Jātrā, the culminating display of the sacred vest became a site where royal delegitimation was actively performed: when the prime minister (2007) and subsequently the president replaced the king in receiving *prasāda* from Buṅgadyaḥ/Rāto Matsyendranātha, the ritual's continuity itself demonstrated that royal roles were transferable. This political rupture did not collapse the festival; instead, it underscores that the procession consists of a web of local rituals that had never depended exclusively on monarchical presence (Mocko 2018, 40–41).

Contemporary challenges include the 2015 earthquakes' physical destruction, urbanization threatening craft knowledge (Basukala, this volume, Chapter 6), and generational shifts away from traditional occupations (Maharjan, this volume, Chapter 4). Yet the earthquake also catalyzed revivalist initiatives: municipal investment, neighborhood associations, and heritage activism mobilized to document endangered practices (Basukala, Maharjan, Brosius, this volume). The COVID-19 pandemic (2020/21) exposed tensions between state regulation and ritual autonomy: when government lockdowns delayed the 2020 procession, crowds defied regulations, prompting police intervention (Owens, this volume, Chapter 2). In 2021, local authorities and festival stakeholders jointly organized a "symbolic" (*sāṃketika*) festival. Together, these recent crises underscore the procession's enduring significance—as a site of contestation and innovation, and as a resilient framework through which communities negotiate urban transformation, ritual authority, and collective identity.

## The procession as living heritage, ritual and urban practice

While inscriptions reveal the long-term institutional framework of the Buṅgadyaḥ procession, the annual ritual cycle demonstrates how this framework is continually reanimated through communal labour and ritual practice. Preparations begin with the collection of *nhavaṃki*—rice and other offerings for the ritual bathing—by the Suvāḥs of Bungamati,

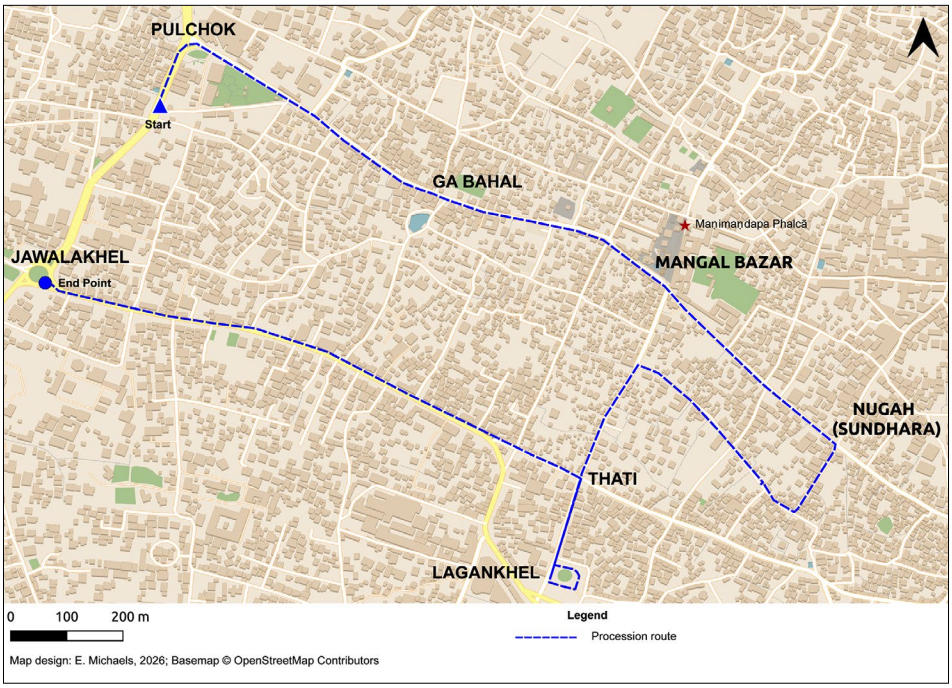


*Figure 1:* The route of the Buṅgadyaḥ chariot procession in Patan, map: Elias Michaels, 2026.

whose door-to-door rounds extend across Patan and other Valley towns. Offering *nhavaṃki* is understood to substitute for daily temple worship, in terms of merit, by those unable to take regular *darśana* (B. Śākya NS 1125, 9). On the full moon day of the month of Caitra, the deity's "life" is ritually removed from the statue (*jīvanyāsa likāygu*), followed by secret pacification rites at the Nhavaṃ Dabū (*śānti āgaṃ kilā pūjā*) (Owens 1989, 199–200; B. Śākya NS 1125, 9). The following day, the Nhavaṃku procession publicly displays the tools and materials used for chariot construction and bathing, transforming urban movement into ritual order (B. Śākya NS 1125, 9–10).

The essence of Buṅgadyaḥ is then transferred into the silver urn known as *bramhakõ*, which is enshrined as the acting presence of the deity while the statue is carried to Lagankhel for the *nhavaṃ* bathing ritual. There, amid *pañcāmṛta*[4] offerings, ritual circumambulation,

4 The "five nectars of immortality"; a mixture of milk, yoghurt, ghee, honey and sugar.

and dance, blessed bath-water (*prasāda*) is distributed to the assembled crowd (Owens 1989, 200–202; B. Śākya NS 1125, 10). After a period of seclusion and repainting, the deity undergoes reconsecration through the *daśakarma* life-cycle rites, followed by further esoteric rituals including a reenactment of the deity's "capture" at the Kvaduvā gorge (*dyaḥ lāygu*), which recalls the chronicle narrative of Buṅgadyaḥ's arrival in the Valley (Owens 1989, 205–222; B. Śākya NS 1125, 11–12).

Only then does Buṅgadyaḥ ascend the massive wooden chariot at Pulchok. The chariot—rebuilt annually and fully reconstructed every twelve years—is a monumental piece of mobile architecture that embodies specialised craft knowledge transmitted within caste-based communities. Its journey unfolds through a sequence of named stopping points—such as Gāḥ Bāhāḥ, Nugaḥ (Sundharā), Lagankhel, and Thati—each associated with specific ritual actions and forms of participation, before culminating at Jawalakhel (see Figure 1). There, the festival reaches its climax with trance rituals, offerings, and the public display of the jeweled vest (Bhoṭo Jātrā), after which the deity is returned to Bungamati. The cycle concludes with rites announcing the successful completion of the procession to cosmic realms (Owens 1989, 221–234; B. Śākya NS 1125, 20–21).

Across its long history—from early epigraphic references to Avalokiteśvara and the first secure medieval attestations of Bugma Lokeśvara, through Malla-period institutionalisation and royal patronage to the eve of the Valley's political transformation in 1768/1769—the Buṅgadyaḥ procession exemplifies how ritual events can preserve historical memory while actively shaping urban space and social relations. Its enduring vitality lies precisely in its layered, transcultural formation, in which Buddhist and Hindu traditions intertwine within a shared yet continually negotiated ritual arena. As both a living festival and a historical institution, the Buṅgadyaḥ procession remains central to understanding the religious, social, and urban history of the Kathmandu Valley. Yet the Buṅgadyaḥ procession does not stand in isolation. Situating it within the wider field of South Asian chariot festivals and alongside other processional traditions of the Kathmandu Valley reveals how transregional ritual forms and local sacred geographies mutually constitute one another.

## Buṅgadyaḥ within South Asian processional culture

The Buṅgadyaḥ procession participates in a wider South Asian culture of chariot festivals whose ritual and political significance extends from Vedic antiquity to the present day. As Elena Mucciarelli has shown, the Ṛgvedic chariot (*ratha*) functioned as a "living prismatic metaphor" (Mucciarelli 2017, 171), condensing swiftness, divine status, conquest, sacrifice, poetry, and fertility; during the middle Vedic period, this semantic range narrowed as the chariot became more closely associated with power and sovereignty (Mucciarelli 2017, 178). Medieval South Asia witnessed what Mucciarelli terms an "adaptive reuse" of the chariot, as processions became instruments for constructing royal authority through *pūjā*-centred devotional practices and a continuous exchange with the divine (Mucciarelli 2017, 179, 189). In kingdoms such as Orissa, royal participation in chariot festivals functioned as "vertical legitimation," enabling the territorial integration of diverse rural and tribal communities into expanding polities (Kulke 1993, 106).

Ronald Inden cautions against approaches that reduce Indic processions to functional instruments of power or confine them to the "superstructural, sacred or cognitive" realm (Inden 1995, 260). Instead, he treats medieval progresses and processions as "life-transforming practices" through which polities simultaneously displayed and constituted political order, mobilizing rulers, deities, and populace as co-agents of the transcendent (Inden 1995, 256, 259–260). Cristina Bignami, for her part, highlights the chariot as a "sacred building in motion" (Bignami 2017, 208) whose passage transforms urban streets into ritual space. The collective act of drawing the chariot, she argues, involves participants from diverse communities in the creation of that space, temporarily dissolving prevailing social distinctions and enabling forms of participation that cut across established community boundaries (Bignami 2017, 203–204, 209).

Within the Kathmandu Valley, Buṅgadyaḥ is one of several major chariot processions through urban space. Most directly comparable is Patan's Janmadyaḥ (Seto Matsyendranāth), with which Buṅgadyaḥ is locally grouped—though not uniformly—as part of the *pengu tāye lokeśvara* alongside related Lokeśvara shrines at Nala and Chobhar (Owens 1989, 12–13). Janmadyaḥ likewise follows an annual *rath jātrā*, and the ritual cycle of Cakwadyaḥ (Minnāth) in Patan is closely interwoven with Buṅgadyaḥ's festival sequence. Practitioners compare

these processions with one another, making differing claims about precedence, centrality, and relative importance.

Kathmandu's Indrajātrā, though centered on pole-raising rather than chariot procession, demonstrates parallel dynamics: an older Newar festival focused on local ancestral city deities acquired a royally sponsored overlay following Śāha conquest in the eighteenth century, when Indic traditions of the Indra festival were introduced and merged with existing practice (Baltutis 2018, 64–65). Like Buṅgadyaḥ, the festival's annual performance instantiates urban space through processional movement—in Indrajātrā's case, connecting eight directional goddess shrines around Kathmandu's perimeter. Both festivals demonstrate how local ritual geographies accommodate successive layers of royal patronage and transregional religious identities without relinquishing their character as urban placemaking practices.

## State of the art

The present volume builds on a substantial body of scholarship on the Buṅgadyaḥ tradition, particularly within the fields of religious history and anthropology. The most comprehensive historical study of the Buṅgadyaḥ cult remains J. K. Locke's work (1973; 1980), which documents not only the historical development of the tradition but also a wide range of contemporary socio-ritual practices and associated religious sites, including inscriptions. Additional historically oriented studies—such as Toffin (1990) and Tuladhar-Douglas (2003)—examine the role of Buṅgadyaḥ worship as a form of royal ritual during the Malla period. H. Śākya (VS 2048 and VS 2049) offers historical accounts of the tradition; A. Vajrācārya (VS 2022 and VS 2042) provides a retelling of the narrative traditions surrounding Buṅgadyaḥ; K. Koirālā (VS 2052) records epigraphical sources; and R. Śākya (NS 1127) edits and studies a *ghaṭanāvalī*, a genre of local historiography that records sequences of events.

From an anthropological perspective, B. Owens (1989)[5] has provided the most detailed analyses of the festival, emphasizing its polyvalent and polycentric nature as shaped by numerous caste groups, each with their own ritual orientations. His work highlights how the procession generates local conceptions of divinity, agency, and personhood.

5 See also Owens 2019 and 2000.

Chr. Emmrich (2007) contributes an account of the 2004 procession, focusing on ritual "failure" and the ways in which deviations from normative procedure become embedded in collective memory.

This volume extends existing scholarship by offering a comprehensive analysis of multiple dimensions of the Buṅgadyaḥ Yātrā—philological, anthropological, archaeological, architectural, and historical—along with detailed documentation of the chariot, associated artifacts, temples, and written materials. By drawing together epigraphy, material culture studies, and ethnographic insight, it engages both historical and anthropological dimensions of the tradition. It demonstrates how inscriptions, ritual objects, spatial practices, and living performance mutually illuminate one another, allowing us to understand the Buṅgadyaḥ procession not merely as a religious festival, but as a multilayered cultural phenomenon in which textual history, political authority, material craftsmanship, and communal memory converge. This edited volume brings together eight scholarly contributions that explore various aspects of the Buṅgadyaḥ procession, offering new insights into its historical development, contemporary practice, and broader cultural significance.

**Christiane Brosius**' chapter, "Shaping Access to Heritage Infrastructures as Placemaking: The Role of the Arcaded Platform in Patan, Nepal," examines the unique phenomenon of the arcaded platform (*phalcā*) as integral to heritage-making and the urban fabric that is more than the backdrop for the procession. Through an ethnographic and spatial analysis of their role in the Buṅgadyaḥ procession, Brosius highlights how these arcaded platforms function as spaces that bridge sacred and secular dimensions. The cultural anthropologist focuses on their roles as nodes for ritual performance, social interactions, and political contestation. Her research connects these structures to broader discussions of heritage in globalizing cities and their robustness in the aftermath of disasters like the 2015 earthquakes. The chapter underscores how *phalcā*s, though not spectacular in appearance, reflect and shape the social fabric and urban topography of the Kathmandu Valley.

In his first chapter in this volume, "Constraining Liminality and Performing Culture: The Festival of Buṅgadyaḥ in the Kathmandu Valley," **Bruce McCoy Owens** delves into the festival's liminal nature, examining how it mediates between tradition and modernity. The anthropologist explores the development of the procession over several decades. He looks at it as a dynamic performance of cultural identity, highlighting its role in shaping communal memory and societal norms.

His work brings to light the tensions between preserving traditional practices and adapting to contemporary urban challenges, emphasizing the procession's role as a platform for negotiating cultural continuity.

**Manik Bajracharya**'s chapter, "Four Centuries of Service: Resilience and Adaptation in the Luthāma Guthi of Buṅgadyaḥ," investigates the historical adaptability of a particular religious association, the Luthāma Guthi, in response to political and economic changes. Bajracharya, a scholar of Newar Buddhism, traces the transformations within this ritual association, emphasizing its central role in sustaining the Buṅgadyaḥ procession and associated rituals. His analysis highlights how *guthi*s serve as resilient socio-religious institutions, navigating shifting political landscapes while maintaining their cultural and religious significance.

In "Constructing Identity with the Chariot of Buṅgadyaḥ: A Case of Bārāhī Guthi from Patan," heritage scholar **Monalisa Maharjan** explores the interplay of identity, memory, and material culture through the Bārāhī Guthi's involvement in the procession. Maharjan focuses on how the community, previously attended with little scholarly interest, uses the chariot and associated rituals to assert and negotiate their identity within the urban and cultural landscape of Patan. Her chapter reveals how material culture, such as the chariot, acts as a medium for articulating community memory and social contestation in the struggle for continuity and visibility.

**Simon Cubelic and Rajan Khatiwoda**, in their chapter "Inscriptions in Motion: The Epigraphic Culture of the Buṅgadyaḥ Procession," analyze the rich corpus of inscriptions associated with the procession. These inscriptions serve as records of socio-religious practices and markers of authority and memory. By examining the performative dimensions of these epigraphs, the Indologists illustrate how they connect past and present, creating a living narrative of the procession's cultural significance.

A detailed exploration of the chariot's architecture and construction is provided by **Bibek Basukala** in his chapter, "The Buṅgadyaḥ Rath: The Process of Construction, Materiality, and Craftsmanship." From an architect's perspective, Basukala highlights the traditional craftsmanship involved in the chariot's creation and the community's participation in this labour-intensive process. Basukala's analysis emphasizes how the chariot serves as a tangible link between historical traditions and contemporary cultural practices, underscoring its symbolic and material importance.

**Bruce McCoy Owens** discusses how photography has been used to document and shape perceptions of the procession in his second contribution to the book, "Photography, Ethnography, and Photographic Repatriation: Recording and Representing Buṅgadyaḥyā Yāṅ." Owens explores the role of visual media in ethnographic representation, addressing issues of memory, authenticity, and cultural repatriation. His chapter underscores the power of photographic narratives in preserving and interpreting the cultural significance of the Buṅgadyaḥ procession.

Finally, archaeologist **David C. Andolfatto**'s chapter, "Far-away Visitors of Buṅgadyaḥ: The Khaśa Mallas of West Nepal and Newar Buddhism," examines historical interactions between the Khaśa Mallas and Newar Buddhism. Andolfatto highlights how these interactions have influenced the development of the Buṅgadyaḥ cult, shedding light on its transregional dimensions. His analysis situates the procession within broader networks of cultural exchange and influence, expanding its historical and geographical significance.

By examining these diverse aspects of the Buṅgadyaḥ procession, this volume aims to contribute to our understanding of the complex relationships between ritual, space, and society in South Asia and beyond. The festival serves as a microcosm through which we can explore broader issues of cultural continuity and change, religious syncretism, and the negotiation of identity in the face of modernization and globalization.

## Methodology

This book is certainly not the only one on the Buṅgadyaḥ procession (see above, state of the art). But we argue that the approach taken in this book is original and productive insofar as it results from almost a decade of cooperation and collaboration across disciplinary boundaries, and with the focus on Kathmandu Valley's rich history in terms of religious, cultural, social and spatial dynamics. All of us have been fortunate to work at a place, Heidelberg University, where strong regional expertise and area studies have been nurtured over decades, especially at the South Asia Institute. This became further enriched with the Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context" (2008–2017) which helped us develop a transcultural approach with a critical area studies angle that was based on "reading in conjunction." By this,

a collaborative way of looking at "the same" data, albeit from different disciplinary and historical perspectives, can be exercised, pushing disciplinary boundaries and concepts, methodological nationalism and regional reifications. For almost a decade, we have been working together to set up an interdisciplinary and comprehensive inventory of predominantly Newar heritage of the Kathmandu Valley, and a database and digital publication platform for archival and related textual sources mainly from the Śāha and Rāṇā periods. Both initiatives are based on long-term projects at Heidelberg University and the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities.[6]

One example for this kind of cooperation is what we call the "anthropology of inscriptions."[7] This approach allows us to see writing in stone as more than a text, but a performative source that enables us to consider agents and agency, ritual practice and political interest, but also the creative and discursive production of place by means of donating for religious merit and place-claiming for social and political status declaration. Studying several dozen inscriptions alone for the Buṅgadyaḥ procession, we found that certain social and political personae and caste groups would invest, contest or negotiate the ritual as a whole, or in detail, that they would develop standards of engagement regulated in and through the inscription. We could also reveal surprising diversity and sometimes innovations introduced and documented in an inscription, of unique dynamics such as neighborhood communities investing collectively in material culture that is used in the sanctum sanctorum of the chariot. We could find female agency, independent from male social status or marriage, acting strategically and politically amidst a patriarchal habitat.

Another example is the attention paid to place and practice. There exists a multitude of relevant scholarly literature on religious festivals and processions in South Asia.[8] But besides the attention paid to the ritual and mythological origins of pilgrimage towns such as Benares (see e.g., Eck 1984; Gengnagel 2011; Gutschow and Michaels 1993)

6 These databases are DANAM of the Nepal Heritage Documentation Project (NHDP) and *Documenta Nepalica* of the project "*Documents on the History of Religion and Law of Pre-modern Nepal.*"

7 This collaboration was funded by the Flagship Initiative "Transforming Cultural Heritage" of Heidelberg University from October 2020 to May 2021.

8 For an overview see Jacobsen 2018 and Younger 2018.

or Kanchipuram (Ambach 2022; Buchholz 2022; Hüsken 2025)[9] or Ajmer (Asher 2009; Currie 2006) , very little focus has been aimed at the conditions, potentials and limitations of how space is conceptualized as socially produced (including representation) and productive in social practices (Lefebvre 2001) through religious mobilities and the distributed agency of individuals, groups or organisations involved before, during and after the event.[10] Historical and contemporary conditions of religious mobility and how they need to be studied in terms of everyday lifeworlds and vernacular practice are relevant to this research project. With several of the articles focused on the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, this resonates with the urban experience in many South Asian cities as they are confronted with new temporalities of development and progress. Historical dimensions and expertise are important to better understand this because particular patterns and rhythms of urban life in non-western contexts need to be grasped and read in relation to, and not against, the present-day context. Consider, for example, Colin McFarlane's work on the city as sociospatial assemblage and practice of engaging and learning the city (McFarlane 2011a, b). Assemblage as method enables us to approach the city as a performative, generative, relational space (2011a, 650). The procession is a means of assembling, of taking place through acts and sites, while infrastructure is that which structures and is structured, assembling is the practice of using nodes and connectivities between them, of an infrastructure, to bring together or distribute often more intangible "goods" such as meanings, values, and memories, or rituals and objects (see McFarlane 2011a, 652). Both assemblage and infrastructures are important to understand how the city, how place, is made—how place is cared for, and how placemaking can be a form of *caretaking*, which is more than making something efficient, appealing or marketable. This is what the multipositionality of the approach exercised in this book hoped to avail to the readers.

Buṅgadyaḥ, that is the shared resource as well as object of study of fascinating, diverse, paradoxical and ambivalent data that we availed

9 For a pan-Indian account of pilgrimage and Hindu sacred geography see also Eck 2012. For a regional study of pilgrimage and geographical imagination in Maharashtra, see Feldhaus 2003.

10 For spatial politics and contested processional routes in South India, see Kaali 1999 on the Viṣṇu procession of the Alagarkoyil temple at Tiruppuvanam, where changing routes reflect competing caste and community claims to receive the deity.

to each other, as editors and chapter authors, for reading in conjunction, or at least, as related.

All contributors to this volume employ a range of methodological approaches in their study of the Buṅgadyaḥ procession. These include:

1. Historical analysis of textual sources, including chronicles, inscriptions, and religious texts;
2. Ethnographic fieldwork, involving participant observation, walk-alongs, and interviews with festival participants, organizers, and local residents;
3. Visual, media and material culture studies, examining the iconography, architecture, artifacts and forms of mediatisation associated with the festival;
4. Spatial analysis, mapping the procession route and its impact on urban morphology, and
5. Performance studies approaches, analyzing the festival as a form of embodied cultural practice.

This interdisciplinary approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the Buṅgadyaḥ procession from multiple angles, revealing its complexity and multifaceted significance, but also the productivity of an interdisciplinary and sharing approach like the one we tried to practice here.

As with many traditional practices, the Buṅgadyaḥ procession faces numerous challenges in the twenty-first century. Rapid urbanization, changing demographics, state impositions and the pressures of modernization all pose potential threats to the continuity and authenticity of the festival. At the same time, increased interest in cultural heritage and identity politics has led to renewed efforts to preserve and promote traditional practices like the Buṅgadyaḥ procession.

This volume seeks to address some of the key questions facing the future of the Buṅgadyaḥ tradition:

1. How does the festival adapt to changing urban environments while maintaining its cultural integrity?
2. What role does the Buṅgadyaḥ procession play in contemporary Newar identity formation and cultural politics?
3. How do global influence and international heritage discourses impact the local meaning and practice of the festival?
4. What strategies can be employed to ensure the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills associated with the festival to younger generations?

5. How can the Buṅgadyaḥ procession serve as a model for sustainable cultural practices that contribute to social cohesion and urban vitality?

By addressing these questions, this volume not only contributes to our understanding of the Buṅgadyaḥ procession itself but also offers insights into broader issues of cultural heritage preservation, religious practice in urban contexts, and the negotiation of tradition and modernity in contemporary South Asia.

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