

**F**ILMMAKER **KESANG TSETEN, A CITIZEN OF NEPAL**, has created a magnificently choreographed depiction of a twelve-year Newari festival. The Newari are the indigenous group of the Kathmandu Valley. The festival is said to have been observed in the Kathmandu Valley for a millennium. During the festival, a chariot (ratha, a flat platform on four huge wheels) bearing the red god Macchendranath goes on the road between the towns of Bungamati (near Kathmandu) and Patan, with stops in between. This festival (jatra) is organized by various Newari Hindu and Buddhist devotional societies. To Hindus, the deity is Shiva; to Buddhists, he is Avalokiteshwara.

The film at first focuses on members of the two castes who construct main components of the ratha with its gigantic tower of woven branches and wooden wheels. At the tower's base is a cave-like area where the red-painted image of Macchendranath travels with one or two priests. The tower is decorated with evergreen branches, flags, and the hinged, golden metal banners often seen hanging from the peaks of Nepali temples. Some of the tower-builder-weavers ride high on the moving tower and help to guide the ratha through narrow streets, around power lines, and between tall buildings. One of them proudly asserts that while he is of low caste, his job allows him to ride high above the deity. Projected in front of the ratha and lashed to it is a long, heavy timber (representing a naga, a divine snake), upon which sits a young man who clings with one arm to its prow while sweeping forward with his other to urge the pullers onward. When the chariot reaches the town of Patan, it meets the smaller ratha of the deity Minnath, pulled by children, and the two rathas proceed together through the streets, Minnath following Macchendranath.

The film narration consists partly of voice-overs by the filmmaker. Conversations among jatra principals and interviews with individuals are subtitled in English. We quickly meet Kapil, the main priest, and caste-leader-participants. Kapil performs most of the rituals because it was his ances-

# ON THE ROAD WITH THE RED GOD MACCHENDRANATH

DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY KESANG TSETEN

DVD, 72 MINUTES, COLOR, 2005

DISTRIBUTION: CONTACT THE FILMMAKER, MR. TSETEN AT [kesang@homebase.wlink.com.np](mailto:kesang@homebase.wlink.com.np)  
(SCREENING COPIES ARE AVAILABLE FROM A USA MAILING ADDRESS)

REVIEWED BY JOANNA KIRKPATRICK

tor who stole the deity from the distant forest and brought it to Bungamati. He also rides on the ratha. The jatra has a foundation myth, illustrated by voice-over narration and hand-painted pictures, about the magical transformation of the god into a bee that is put in a pot and secretly stolen from its demon mother. Throughout the proceedings, Priest Kapil must perform rituals on the roads and in the forest to appease the demon mother by sacrificing goats, otherwise she will come and spoil the festival.

**WHEN WE SEE THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HUGE WOODEN WHEELS AND THEIR DECORATION WITH LARGE PAINTED EYES**, we learn that they represent the demon-fighter deity, Bhaivrava. Since his mask hangs on the prow of the chariot, we understand that he is bearing Macchendranath along in his protection. We are shown the cutting of tree branches to fashion wooden brake-

wedges, and we meet the main brakeman, who has been doing this job all his life, as have the other leader participants. As the chariot moves, we see the brakemen in action, stopping the ratha from hurtling out of control. As the huge thing moves in fits and starts, everyone is having fun and enjoying the suspense: will it get through to Patan and safely back to Bungamati? At one point, the tower leans down forty-five degrees. More ropes are brought to pull it back up. A crane stands by in case of need, but nobody wants to use the crane.

If the participants who pull and push the ratha succeed in getting it to Patan and back to Bungamati with the tower and chariot intact, devotees say that the god is satisfied and that he will ensure prosperity for everyone. If they don't succeed and the tower falls, or the ratha tips over and cannot be righted, the god will be displeased and people will die. A bystander says that the previous king died because of accidents at the last Macchendranath jatra. It is only by agreement of the god that the

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heavy chariot moves or doesn't move. The ritual imperative—that everything must be done right with no flaws—is what keeps the god agreeable.

**A POIGNANT SUBTEXT WINDING THROUGH THE FILM IS THE STORY OF PRIEST KAPIL'S DESERTION BY HIS MOTHER**, who, when he was just a child, vanished after her husband took a second wife. Kapil says that he later discovered where his mother was living and went to see her. They wept together, but she told him to go away and not come back. Kapil tells us how he longs for his mother to visit the jatra and see him at work. He comments on the irony of his being the priest who ritually appeases the god's demon mother, keeping her away,

while he himself cannot see his own mother. The god does not allow it, he complains, though he has served the god faithfully. "If I could see her it would be like seeing god."

The diagesis includes shots of two different towns' auspicious Kumaris, the living virgin goddesses, sitting with their families to watch the procession. Popular excitement peaks when the King, traditionally the chief jatra patron, the Queen, and the King's entourage come in a parade of large automobiles to get the blessing of the god. Finally the ratha reaches its starting point. The film ends as one of the tower weavers and a toothless, ninety-year-old fellow wearing huge sunglasses, converse and joke about how the god was pleased with the jatra because all went well, and now they can eat meat, dance, drink, and be happy.

This is a complex film. Not only does it cover ratha construction in detail, and stories pertinent to areas the chariot passes through, but it also deals with religious rationales and social and gender roles involved in performing the jatra. The ironic subtext of the priest Kapil's longing for his mother invites the viewer's personal interest. Scenes of thousands of devotees, amassed in the landscape, pulling or watching, cheering on the ratha, some dancing before it, provide suspense. There is also fighting during var-

ious phases of the festival. Devotees angrily comment that arguments are caused by greed and envy. Nevertheless, the conflicts blow over and peace finally reigns. The jatra achieves its mission—to go on the road and return in one piece to its starting place. The film is thus a first-rate visual exposition of collective liminality, of how the performance of this widely popular ritual both divides and unites the human collective in shared exertion, expense, suffering, and happiness.

**INSTRUCTIONAL USE OF THIS FILM MAY ENHANCE THE ILLUSTRATION AND ANALYSIS OF SUCH TOPICS AS SOCIAL ROLES** and metaphors in the conversion of nature to culture; comparative ritual structure; gender issues and hierarchies; social issues such as caste and class; rural-urban contrasts in myth and ritual; geography in the organization of processions and festivals; religious hybridity; and, comparative approaches to ritual processions in Asia or even across the vast Asian super-continent (which could include such processions in Europe as well). This many-faceted film offers great potential for instruction in the cultural study of Asia in general (or beyond), and South Asia in particular. ■

**JOANNA KIRKPATRICK** is the author and producer of *Transports of Delight: The Ricksha Arts of Bangladesh*, Indiana University Press, 2003, a multimedia CD-ROM. She is a cultural and social anthropologist who specializes in South Asia, both India and Bangladesh. Since doing her first fieldwork in Punjab, India, in 1965-66, from which she authored a medical anthropology study, *The Sociology of an Indian Hospital Ward*, 1980, she has published in the fields of medical anthropology, women's studies, and popular arts in Bangladesh. Currently she is a film review editor for the journal, *Visual Anthropology*.

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