

CHAPTER 1

Gorakhvijay and the Religious Festivals of Nepal: Tracing the Cultural Links between the Himalayan Country and Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Gorakhvijay is a medieval Bengali quasi-mythical tale of Gorakhnath / Gorakshnath. The available manuscript was written in 1263 AD. This treatise is one of the several versions of the tale of Gorakhnath that is available in India, each having a different title. Further, this legend is also the source of several religious sects in India, the *Yogis* of Gorakhpur, *Nathas*, *Kanphatas* and *Aghors* are some of them. Similarly, the Himalayan country of Nepal has several festivals that can be linked with the legends described in the Bengali treatise. The festivals of Matsyendranath at Kathmandu, Patan and Sonari are some of them. Even the indigenous ‘Gorkha’ community of Nepal derives its name from Gorakshnath / Gorakhnath. Several scholars, like W. B Brigg, John Kerr Locke and many others have observed the living tradition of the Gorakhnathis and the related *Yogi* sects over the years. Similarly, literary scholars like Sukumar Sen have studied the literary tradition these religious sects. This paper attempts to revisit the living traditions in Nepal, as described by the scholar over the years. It will also link them with the Bengali treatise *Gorakhvijay* in order to trace the cultural linkages between the Himalayan country and Bengal.

Keywords: Bengali Literature, indigenous community, religious communities, history, human anthropology

***Gorakhvijay* and the Religious Festivals of Nepal: Tracing the Cultural Links between the Himalayan Country and Bengal**

The Indian subcontinent spreads from the Caucasian Mountain ranges in the North-West, to the Garo-Khasi hills in the North-East; from the Rann of Kutch in the West to the Gangetic Plains in the East; from the Himalayas in the North to the Indian Ocean down South. The vast spread of the land incorporates within it diverse geographical, cultural, religious and social features. When one looks at the region from an anthropological point-of-view, the richness of the socio-cultural and religious traditions become visible. Linkages are found in these diverse traditions giving the subcontinent its composite culture. For instance, the amalgamation of the Islamic and Hindu traditions gave birth to the *Ganga-Jamuni* tradition in Northern India. In Bengal, the mystic *Baul* tradition is a mix of Hindu and Islamic spiritualism.

Similarly, certain religio-cultural traditions in the region have evolved and exist as a result of continual exchanges and interaction. Commonality between the Bengali treatise *Gorakhvijay* and certain living religious traditions in Nepal proves this fact right. This paper attempts to revisit the living traditions in Nepal, as described by the scholars like Briggs, Landon, Locke and many others, over the years. It will also link them with the Bengali treatise *Gorakhvijay* and facilitate a process of tracing the cultural linkages between the Himalayan country and Bengal.

***Gorakhvijay*: The Legends of Gorakhnath and Matsyendranath**

Gorakhvijay (The Victory of Gorakhnath) is a medieval era handwritten manuscript describing the quasi-mythical legend of Gorakhnath. It is one of the several such treatises, linked to Gorakhnath, that are available in Bengali. *Jugi Kach*, *Meen Chetan* and *Jog Chintamani* are other such works. The text that is being used for analysis for this article was written in 1263 AD. This version is said to have been handwritten by Sri Raghu Pandit. Written in the tradition of the *vrat katha* (ritual tales), the text is meant to be narrated to the audience through song and dance.

The narrative begins in a traditional way with an invocation to the gods of the Hindu pantheon. It gradually shifts towards the story of Gorakhnath. The tale begins with Shiva and Gauri, who are sitting on a raft on the sea. Shiv preaches the words of Truth to Gauri. He tells her the secrets of

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Creation. Meen Mochander, who is one of the disciples of Shiv, hides below the raft and listens to everything. Gauri dozes off mid-way and Meen Mochander keeps responding with a “*Hoonkaar*” (*Gorakhvijay*, 1263, p.11) or the Hmm-sound in place of Gauri. Shiva later finds out that it is Meen who has heard all the secrets. He curses him that one day Meen will forget everything.

Later, one day Gauri asks Shiva why he doesn't have any women as disciples. To this Shiva states that only those who are free of “*kama, krodh, lobha, moha*” (p.12, sexual desires, anger, greed and attachment) can be his disciples. The goddess wanted to test whether the *siddhas*ⁱ (p.12), the disciples are free of them. She asks Shiva to call all of them and created an image of a beautiful woman using “*maya*” (p. 13). When Meen sees the woman, he desires to live with her. Devi blesses him that he will now live in “*Kadali Desh*”, the land of pleasure and luxury (p. 14). Hadipa, on seeing the woman says that he would do “*hadikarm*” (p. 14), i.e.; menial cleaning job for the woman. Devi blesses him that he will hold a broom stick (p.14, “*jhadu*”) and a spade (p.14, “*kodal*”) and go and clean Mainamati's house. Kanpa wishes to play with the woman, so the Devi allows him to do play and have fun. Gabhur Sidhai says that I can get my arms and legs chopped off for this woman. The Devi, therefore, says that he will live with her as her step-son. The step-mother will give you enough torture. Gorkha on seeing the woman says that he wishes to have her as his mother; sit on her lap and drink milk. The Devi decides to test him further while the others are sent to their respective destinations.

All the *siddhas* reach their destinations. Meen Mochander goes to *Kadali Desh* which is a world of luxury, sexual and bodily desires. Meen is made the king of a country of sixteen hundred women or *kadali*” (p.18) and has Mangala and Kamala has his two wives. As he begins to enjoy the world of desires, he forgets his real identity and all the knowledge he has gathered. Meanwhile, Devi decides to test Gorakh and goes to him in the form of an enchanted woman and tries to seduce him. Gorakh captures the woman in the form of a bee and traps her in his stomach. Devi pleads to him for release. Gorakh allows her the anal path. She comes out and is re-born as a Rakshasi. Simultaneously, a young woman prays to Lord Shiva for an eternal husband. Shiva, knowing that Devi and Gorakh are involved in a tussle, decides to give Gorakh to the woman as a boon. Gorakh is asked to marry the woman. Gorakh does as ordered. He asks the girl to drink the water by

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washing his loin cloth or “*karpati*” (p. 26). The young woman gives birth to a boy who is named Karpatinath.

Later, Gorakh learns about Meen’s activities and goes to *Kadali* to rescue him. He takes the disguise of a woman to reach his court, where he reminds Meen about his identity. Gorakh kills his two sons, Nimnath and Parasnath and hangs their skin on a tree to dry so that Meen can repent his actions and be reminded of his true identity. On seeing the dead body of his son, Meen cries and asks Gorakhnath to revive him. Gorakhnath does so, Meen too realises his mistake and decides to leave *Kadali Desh*. He takes his sons along with him as he follows Gorakhnath. *Gorakhvijay* has stories related to the other *siddhas* and their actions as well. However, the main focus is the valour of Gorakhnath.

Several versions of the Gorakhnath legend are available in several Indian languages. From the Himalayan regions of North Bengal emerged the treatise *Jugi Kach*. This treatise is in line with the legend of *Gorakhvijay* as it propagates *Hath Yoga*; the practice of self-restraint. *Hath Yoga* preaches practice of restraint from the instincts of *kama*, *krodh*, *lobha*, *moha*: the parameters that Shiva suggested to Gauri on which his disciples are selected. These treatises can be considered to be the origin of the *Kanphata Yogis*, the split-eared sages.ⁱⁱ This community is spread across the Indian subcontinent and has its centres in the form of shrines and monasteries across the length and breadth of India.

Moreover, one can also state that *Gorakhvijay* by itself and the other similar treatises on Gorakhnath, illustrate allegiance primarily to Shaivism. Sukumar Sen, however, posits the fact that some of the versions of the quasi-mythical tale also have Vaishanava and Islamic influences. According to Sukumar Sen the stories of Gorakhnath were equally popular among the Hindus and Muslims of north and eastern Bengal (1997, p.4). The authors of many of the versions of *Gorakhvijay* have been Muslims themselves. Sukumar Sen (1997) informs that the poet of the preface to *Gorakhvijay* may be Faizulla (p.3). Treatises like *Meen Chetan* indicate influences of Vaishnavism on this cult.

These quasi-mythical tales however, cannot be considered to be completely imaginary. Some of these narratives also provide evidences that the characters in the narratives are real. Their descriptions are, simultaneously, exaggerated in order to make them grand and divine. For instance,

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it is believed that Gorakhnath came from the West to Kamrup (in present Guwahati, Assam) where he rescued Meen from the enticement of the women. At the same time, some of the tales related to him place him in the *Satya Yuga* and some in *Treta Yuga*.ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, Meen Mochander is said to have been born in southern part of Bengal. Due to his love for fish, he was considered to be of the fisherman class. His early days as a *siddha* is said to have been spent in Chandradweep in the Sundarban area. His middle phase was spent in Kamrup. The last phase of his life was spent in Nepal where it is said that he achieved enlightenment through the practice of “*pawan-vijay sadhana*” (Sen, 1997, p.45).

Tracing the Legacy of *Gorakhvijay* in Nepal

The tradition spelt out in *Gorakhvijay* finds its resonances in the socio-religious and cultural fabric of Nepal. The actions of Meen Mochander, from Shiva’s abode to *Kadalidesh* are that of his downfall while Gorakhnath’s greatness is asserted. These occur in India in the regions of Bengal and Assam. However, the tales related to Meen Mochander in Nepal showcase him as a divine spirit as do the tales about Gorakhnath. The Himalayan region has an indigenous community called *Gorkhas* or the *Gurkhas*, residing predominantly in West Nepal. Manas Chakrabarty, Nihar Ranjan Chaki and Anindya Guha (2010) trace the racial history of the *Gorkhas* back to the year 1700:

From a long time, there is a province called Gorkha in West Nepal. During 1700, the SIGIPIYO clans started to become in this region. The people of this locality are known as GORKHAS. The Tenth King of the Gorkhas, Prithinarayan appeared as a powerful king. In the year 1761, he invaded Kathmandu and was successful. It was from this time, when the Gorkhas came to the forefront, this gave them world publicity. (p. 483) The *Gorkhas* also live in the Himalayan regions of North Bengal; the land which gave birth to *Jugi Kach*. It is believed that the community draws its name from Gorakhnath. According to George Weston Briggs (1938), the town of *Gorakh* gets its name “from Gorakhnath who is said to have resided there. Hence the national name of Gurkhas.” (p.79) The village of Gorkha has a cave temple of Gorakhnath. The cave temple is difficult to access and devotees need to crawl on their knees and hands.

Nevertheless, the association of *Gorakhvijay* to the cultural life of Nepal is not limited to the Gorkhas. Rather, the Hindu community in Nepal borrow some of its practices from the legend of Gorakhnath. The city of Kathmandu also has an association with Gorakhnath. According to Briggs,

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“The word Kathmandu stands for ‘Kath Mandir’ or ‘Temple of Wood.’ a shrine built in about 1600 A.D by Laksmi in honour of Gorakhnath.” (p.79)

Ratho Matsyendranath and Seto Matsyendranath: The ‘Living Traditions’ of Nepal

Matsyendranath or Meen Mochander in *Gorakhvijay* is revered in the Himalayan nation along with Gorakhnath^{iv} He is believed the harbinger of rainfall. According to legends, Gorakhnath cursed the land with a twelve year long drought and had confined the snake gods as they are responsible for causing rainfall. At the behest of king of Nepal, Matsyendranath came to Kathmandu. On hearing about his *Guru’s* arrival, Gorakhnath released the snakes. Hence, the Himalayan kingdom received its rainfall after twelve long years.^v

Briggs in his book titled *Gorakhnath and the Kanpahata Yogis* (1938) informs that the most popular festivals in Nepal are linked to Matsyendranath (p.144) and the celebration of rainfall. The Chariot Festival of Matsyendranath at Patan is also called as *Ratho Matsyendranath*. It is also known as the festival of the red *Karunamaya*, where *Karunamaya* refers to Matsyendranath. The other chariot festival related to him takes place at Kathmandu. *Ratho Matsyendranath* takes place in the month of *Vaishakh* during *Krishnapaksha* (dark lunar fortnight). The temple at Patan is known as *Matsyendranath Deval* or *Taha Bafra* (Locke, 1940, n. pag). Briggs in 1938 describes the festival as one which is celebrated with great reverence and enthusiasm. He reports that the idol of Matsyendranath, which is red, is taken out of the temple. It is placed in a chariot car and pulled up to the south of the town to the tree of Narendra Deva. According to local legend, Narendra Deva had lowered the pot which had Matsyendranath in bee form beneath the tree. It is here that the royal family and the nobles join the procession.

The procession waits at the spot for about three days. The astrologers find an auspicious day for the *Gaudri Yatra*. The procession now moves ahead to the north-east of the town. The idol is disrobed here and bathed. During this ceremony, the priests, also known as *Banras*, display the shirt of Matsyendranath to the devotees. According to Locke, this showing of the shirt ceremony, in local language is known as *Bhoto Jatra*. After waiting for three days, the unrobed idol goes out of Patan to the Bagmati. Bagmati is the place where one of the bearers of the pot of Matsyendranath barked like a dog while returning from Kapotal (Briggs, 1938, 147). The idol remains at Bagmati for six months before returning to Patan.

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Briggs describes the festival in the following words;

On every twelfth year Matsyendranath refuses to travel in the usual manner. Consequently, at Bagmati, a car is made, on which it is possible both to carry and bring across the uneven fields, through furrows, streams and gullies, avoiding the roads. In this instance the procession goes right across the uneven fields, through furrows, streams and gullies, avoiding the roads. (p. 147) John K. Locke in *Rato Matsyendranath of Patan and Bangumati* (1933) also gives similar description about the festival. Like Briggs, he notes the changes that are brought to the festival every twelfth year: “Furthermore, every twelve years the chariot is still constructed in Bungamati [Bagmati] and dragged the entire distance to Patan and back. According to the above theory this is done in memory of the original festival.” (p. 18)

A report published in 2018, discusses the structures that need to be followed during the festivities as even little bit of casual attitude has spelled doom in the kingdom:

That’s what happened back in 1680. That was when people noticed that the idol of Matsyendranath had lost some of the paint on its face. The very next morning it was announced that the king, Nipendra Malla, had died. More than a century later, in 1817, the same thing happened: the idol was painted shoddily. That year, a big earthquake struck the country. At another time, another king, Viswajit Malla, had a troublesome thought in his mind as he was attending the festival. He imagined that the idol had shown its back to him, which was not a good sign. He was right. That night, he was murdered in his bed. Yet another king fell victim to the wrath of Matsyendranath. This poor fellow had been helping pull the chariot, but the axle broke into 31 pieces. You can guess what happened: this king also died soon after. And, in 2000, the tower-like mast crashed down into the crowd. No one was hurt, but something more devastating happened the year after—the entire royal family was massacred. (“Patan’s”, 2018, para 2)

The other important festival related to Matsyendranath in Nepal is known as the “festival of Little Matsyendranath” (Briggs, 1938, p.148) and takes place at Kathmandu. This festival started at a later period in comparison to that at Patan. Siddhi B Ranjitkar (2010) informs that the festival was started by King Laksmi Narasimha Malla in the seventeenth century after Patan and Kathmandu split into two independent city-states. “The bitterness between the Malla Kings of different city-states had

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reached so high that the residents of Kathmandu could not go to Patan to watch the chariot festival of red Karunamaya. So, King Laksmi Narasimha Malla set the tradition of holding the chariot festival of white Karunamaya in Kathmandu making the chariot of white Karunamaya identical to the chariot of the red Karunamaya in Patan” (para 3).

Briggs reports that “The religious year which opens with the procession of Matsyendranath, of Patan, closes with the festival of Little Matsyendranath at Kathmandu” (p.148). Locke in his book titled *Karunamaya: The Cult of Avalokisteshvara-Matsyendranath in the Valley of Nepal* published in 1940, describes the temple of *Seto Matsyendranath* and his chariot festival in great detail. The temple is commonly referred as Mecchendra Baha by the non-Newar community. Locals also call the temple *Jana Baha* and the deity as *Jana Baha-dya* or the God of *Jana Baha*. According to John Locke, it is in the festival of Seto Matsyendranath that “full round of ritual [is] performed with the greatest detail and exactness. Furthermore, the priests at this *baha* have a better understanding of the ritual and its meaning than those of Bungamati, Chobhar, or Nala” (p. 125).

The festivities begin when the white idol of Matsyendranath is taken out in a car. Hence, he is called the white *Karunamaya* or *Seto Matsyendranath*. The festival lasts for four days from the eighth to the eleventh of *Chaitra*. This festival is primarily celebrated by the Newars^{vi}, a majorly Hindu community in Nepal. Few Newars also practice Indian form of Buddhism. Since, the final day of the festival coincides with Ram Navami, the Hindus and the Gorkha community join in on that day.

Ranjitkar (2010) describes the festival and the related ritual in the following words;

On the first day of the festival of the chariot pulling, the members of ‘guthi’ ceremoniously install the deity in the chamber of the chariot built at Jamal. Then, people pull the chariot up to the Ason tol. This is the first halt. The next day they pull it up to the old palace area. This is the second halt. On the third day, they pull it up to Lagan where the festival ends. (para 5)

However, the ill omens related to the mishaps or unscheduled halts, like the festival at Patan, are not to be found at Kathmandu. As Ranjitkar states;

It might make several halts at any area, if a problem of breakdown of wheels or axels or obstruction on the way is encountered, as the chariot is so tall and the lane is so narrow. Some

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devotees attempt to make a deliberate halt at their neighborhood hiding the ropes used for pulling the chariot. (para 6)

There is a significant participation of the Buddhist community as well. References to Matsyendranath as Lokeshvara, Aryalokisteshwara, Padmapani etc. indicate the influence of Buddhism in the cult of Matsyendranath. According to Locke, there is a Buddhist recension about the story of the bumble bee entering the pot (*Kalasa*). The prayers offered to Matsyendranath who is in the form of a bumble bee by a Brahman named Suneshwar Misra permitted both Buddhist and Hindus to pay obeisance to the deity (Locke, 1940, 53-54).

What is interesting about the two festivals of Matsyendranath is that they both highlight the rich cultural heritage of Nepal. While the Shaivite and Hindu elements are represented through the legends of Gorakhnath and the Gorkha community, Buddhism is a significant influence as well. While talking about the significance of *Ratho Matsyendranath* of Patan in the cultural fabric of Nepal, Locke says that;

It is one of the oldest, uninterrupted festivals kept by the people of the Valley, and into the fabric of this cult are woven the many different religious and cultural strands that have shaped the fabric of the cultural life of the Valley. (1933, p. iii)

This comment stands true for both the festivals related to Matsyendranath. Rather, one can go further to state that the cults of Matsyendranath and Gorakhnath have brought together people from diverse religions, cultures and regions.

Conclusion

Through the study of the Bengali treatise *Gorakhvijay*, the festivities of Kathmandu and Patan establish strong links between the various communities in the Himalayan region of Nepal and the plains of Bengal. The Bengali quasi-mythological tale of *Gorakhvijay* promotes the cult of Gorakhnath and has strong influence of Shaivism in it. The same elements get refurbished in Nepal in the Gorkha community who claim to draw their lineage from Gorakhnath. The network of shared heritage becomes dense when one studies the cult of Matsyendranath that exists in Nepal. The festivals of *Ratho Matsyendranath* and the Chariot Festival of *Seto Matsyendranath* have been celebrated with similar fervour since their inception decades ago. The descriptions of the twin

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chariot festivals by Briggs (1938), Locke (1940) and Ranjitkar (2010) and the article “Patan’s Furious Sage” (2018) prove that these are ‘living traditions’ that now define the religio-cultural fabric of this Himalayan nation. The chariot festivals also present the amalgamation of the Buddhist and Hindu religions in Nepal.

Moreover, *Gorakhvijay* is a precursor of the legends and cult of Matsyendranath in Nepal. If *Gorakhvijay* narrates the glory of Gorakhnath and the actions of Matsyendranath, ranging from his downfall to his rescue by his pupil Gorakhnath; the legends related to Matsyendranath in Nepal project him as a harbinger of rain, a deity and a rescuer (*karunmaya*). Furthermore, one can also state that some of the motifs in *Gorakhvijay* and in the legends of Matsyendranath are repeated. The bee, for instance, is used in both the Bengali text as well as in the legend of Matsyendranath. While Gorakh is known to have captured Devi Parvati in the form of a bee, there is a story of Matsyendranath where he was captured in an earthen pot in the form of a bee. This story plays a significant role in the festival of *Ratho Matsyendranath*. Therefore, to conclude, it can be stated that the cult of Gorakhnath and Matsyendranath, through their ‘living traditions’ - the chariot festivals and the beliefs of Gorkha community - and literatures like *Gorakhvijay* have forged close religio-cultural and literary ties between the Himalayan nation of Nepal and Bengal. These ties have anthropologically brought the two regions closer to each other.

ⁱ Enlightened men

ⁱⁱ The *Kanphata Yogis* have a shrine at Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, India. Apart from Gorakhpur, places like Benaras, Kutch, and many places in Bengal have shrines that are considered to be sacred to this community. They revere to Gorakhnath and split the cartilages of their ears, wear earthen or metal rings in honour of Gorakhnath.

ⁱⁱⁱ Refer to Briggs. Gorakhnath in *Satya Yuga* 98, Gorakhnath in *Treta Yuga* 101.

^{iv} According to Sukumar Sen, Meennath or Meen Mochander’s name has been Sanskritized to Matsyendranath (72). This allows more credibility and draws more reverence from the followers as the quasi-mythological stories adorn the form of the ancient Sanskrit treatises like the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. However, in Nepal he is also known as Aryalokisteshwara, Sri Karunamaya and Bungadeya (in Newari community),

^v Legends related to Matsyendranath and his actions in Nepal are described in Locke.

^{vi} Refer to “Newar”, Britannica.com. < <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Newar>>.

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