Pujari Math : The Background History of the Bhaktapur Development Project

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Pujari Math is situated at Tachapal Tole in Bhaktapur. There is evidence indicating that this Math was built as a residence–cum–office for the priest, or Mahanta of the famous Dattatreya temple. The Dattatreya temple was built during the reign of King Yaksha Malla (1428 A. D.–1482 A. D.) and was opened to the public around 1486 A. D., only after his demise.

The exact date of construction of the Dattatreya temple is still obscure. However, it is certain that Pujari Math was built only after the temple. In fact, the Pujari Math is the oldest Math in the valley. The tradition of building Maths along with temples was initiated in India, by Adi Sankaracharya in the eight century A. D. There is no evidence of Sankaracharya's visit to the Kathmandu valley. However, it might be possible that the founder of Pujari Math, Gurubaksha Giri, was one of the disciples of the Sankaracharya schools of thoughts, in India. Gurubaksha Giri, a merchant by profession, might have visited Nepal when the Mughals (Musalmans) were extending and strengthening their empire in India. During the period not only saints and sadhus, but also a number of royal Hindu took shelter in the dense tarai forests of Nepal, which are located at the foothills of the himalayas. In due course of time the Maths in India developed as the centers of religious learnings and practices, the founder of Pujari Math might also have built it with the same purpose in mind. But the information available tells us that right from its inception, the Pujari Math has been used only as an official residence-cum-bureau for the reigning Mahanta. As a matter of fact, the institution of the Mahanta was established for the management and implementation of various religious and functions, related to the Dattatreya temple.
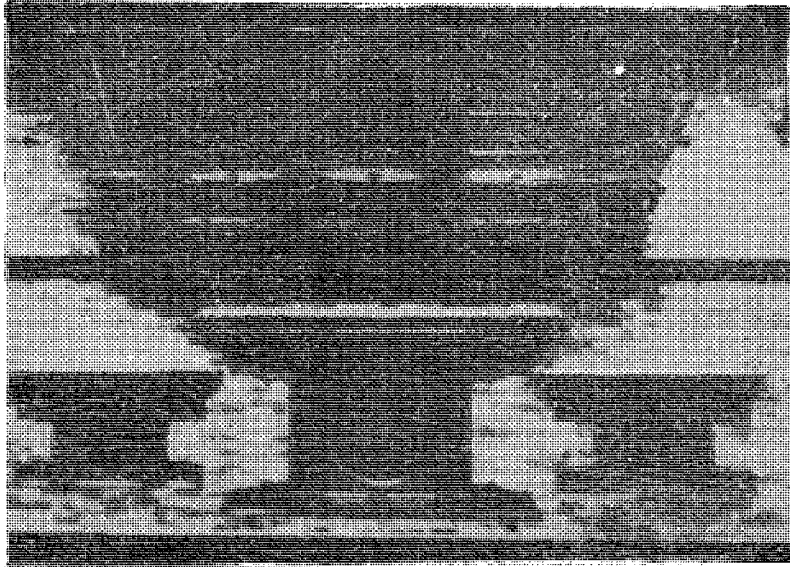
According to a traditional oral belief the Pujari Math was constructed by a Sanyasi, Gosain Gurubaksha Giri, from Mahuragarh in India. Gosain Gurubaksha was a rich trader, who after emassing a fortune in Tibet, returned to Nepal and spent as fabulous amount in the construction of this Math. During the Malla and the early Shah period, there are references indicating trade amongst Gosain merchants, India, Nepal and Tibet. It is also said that while building this temple and the Math, King Yaksha Malla also spent a considerable amount of money. Due to its Tibetan connection through the Gosain traders, the Math annually received ten grammes offerings of gold (one tola), ten grammes of

silver, one horse, one woolen carpet, three hundred and sixty-five pieces of walnuts, and two hundred and sixteen rupees in cash, from the Tibetan Government. This practice continued till the Prime-Ministership of Chandra Shumsher. It seems that the Lasha court terminated this practice in anger, after the arrival of young husband's mission in 1904 to Tibet. This practice ended because the Tibetans believed that the British Government of India was aided by Nepal to make this mission successful.
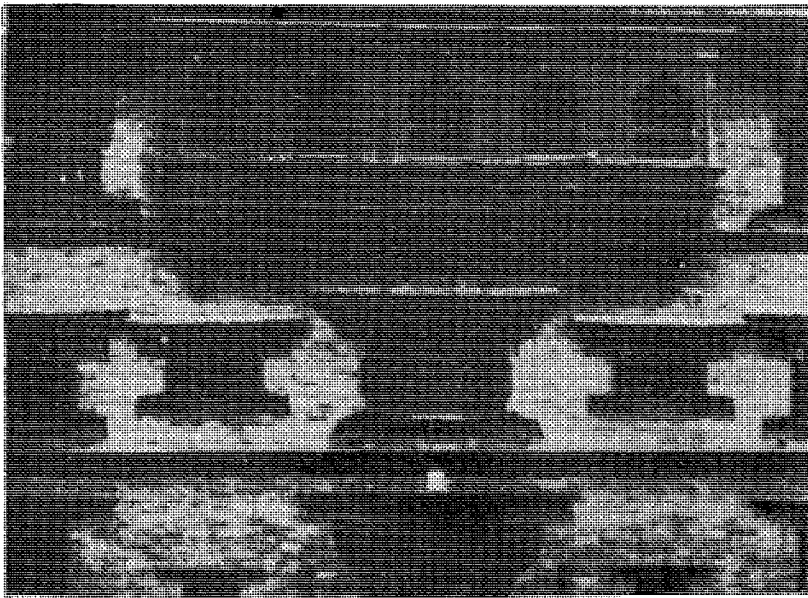
The first Mahanta was the founder, Gosain Gurubaksha Giri himself. His throne, even today is well maintained along with his linen, water vessel and agnipatra, on the first floor of the building. In a manuscript belonging to Krishna Bahadur Giri, the names of twenty-four Mahantas have been recorded. According to this manuscript, originally these Mahantas belonged to Kanauj in India. The names of the Mahantas are in chronological order and are as follows: Ram Datta Giri (1763), Kisora Giri, Gautama Giri, Santosa Giri, Madhava Giri, Bala Giri, Siva Giri, Kailash Giri, Gunari Giri, Lokanatha Giri, (19th century A. D.), Kulamana Giri, Bhupananda Giri, Kailash Giri, Kalika Prasad Giri and Vishomver Giri. At present, the son of Vishomver Giri, Rajendra Giri is the Mahanta of Pujari Math. Records tell us that a Sanyasi, Rama Datta Giri was commissioned by the last Malla ruler of Bhaktapur, King Ranjit Malla, in 1763 to be the Mahanta of Pujari Math. All the Mahantas that came later except may be one or two are the descendants of Rama Datta Giri. Who actually succeeded the founder Gurubaksha Giri is not yet known. However, there is evidence indicating that from 1486 to 1763, this Math was under the care of the Naga Sadhus from India.

Since these Naga Sadhus were found to be irresponsible and inefficient in administration of the Math, they were removed. Then member of Dasanami Sanyasi's family known as the Giri family was appointed as the Mahanta. At times, the nomination of successor took place on the death-bed of the Mahanta when he passed on the honour to his best pupil. But at present the Mahantaship is hereditary in succession. After the death of the Mahanta, his eldest son gets the title. In case his eldest son is mentally retarded, physically unfit or inefficient in carrying out the administration, he can be removed by the Government. He is then replaced by one of his sons, brothers, nephews or relatives. Another person can also be appointed as the Mahanta on the basis of merit.

Legally the Government can appoint any qualified person as the Mahanta of Pujari Math. The Mahanta is responsible for running day today affairs of the temple and the Math. The Mahanta does not work as a priest particularly in the Dattatreya temple. He appoints others to perform the functions of the priest. At present there are two priests, Pasupati Jha and Kedar Giri. Jha is the priest for the Mahadev temple of the Math and Kedar Giri is the priest for the Dattatreya temple. But in times of necessity both these priest can interchange or mix their rules. Although the Mahanta is not the priest of the temple he is the only person who is entitled to receive all the offerings made to the temple. In the beginning, the Mahantas had the full responsibility of the temples as well as the Math, including the priestly duties. However, once the Mahantas became wealthy and rich they forgot their responsibilities and began to lead luxuirous lives. This led to the renunciation of their priestly duties, which were handed over to subordinate Brahmins.

North elevation of Pujari Math

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Therefore administration became the main duty of the Mahantas.

During the Prime Ministership of Juddha Shumsher, Bhupananda Giri was removed from the Mahantaship and a Sadhu was appointed in his place. The Sadhu could not perform his duties well and ultimately during the Prime Ministership of Mohan Shumsher in 1950 (2006 B. S.), Kalika Prasad Giri, the son of Bhupananda Giri was once again appointed as the Mahanta of Pujari Math. The Khadga Nishana (official document with the seal of the Prime Minister) issued by the last Rana Prime Minister, Mohan Shumsher, has not only appointed Kalika Prasad Giri as the Mahanta, but also made the Mahantaship hereditary amongst his family members. Again in 1965 (2022 B.S.), Vishomvar Giri, was removed from the Mahantaship and replaced by a paid Mahanta by the Guthi Sansthan (a semi-government undertaking responsible for management of trusts). This was against the promise of Mahantaship given to the family of Vishomvar Giri. He filed a case against the Guthi Sansthan and won. Once again Vishomvar Giri was reinstalled as the Mahanta. The present Mahanta took over the Mahantaship in 1978 (2035 B. S.).

The Mahanta is the owner of considerable landed property and has considerable amount of income. Pujari Math is registered as Chhut-Guthi (semi-private trust). This means the landed property under this trust can neither belong to the government, nor to the Mahanta, but only to the temple and the Math. The Mahanta does not have to pay land revenue or any other kind of taxation. The tillers of the land have to pay annually a share to the temple and the Math, either in cash or crops. Although the tillers are not the owners of the land, they can sell their tillers' right to any Nepalese citizen. Pujari Math owns sixteen hundred ropanis or about one hundred and fifteen bigahas of land, in the Kathmandu valley. The Mahanta receives his share from the tillers. His share is about one hundred sixty two kilos of paddy, eighteen kilos of wheat and two rupees. In total, annually he receives about two hundred tons of paddy, twenty-eight tons of wheat and thirty two hundred rupees in cash from the tillers. The Dattatreya temple and Pujari Math became rich because during different period of history vast areas of land were donated to them by various people. A copper plate inscription says that Vimal Giri was one such person who donated fifty two ropanis of good fertile land in Nepal Sambat 846 (i. e. 1783 B.S.) to the Lord Bisheshor Mahadev. He also donated house, situated in the north-west corner of the Dattatreya temple, to the Lord to use it as rest house for the pilgrims. In another copper plate inscription, Dayal Giri was credited for donating fifty-two ropanis of land to Sri Bishonath. He also donated some land to built a Math at Bolachen. This Math at present is known as Jangam Math. As stated earlier, it is the primary duty of the Mahanta to look after and provide all necessary materials for daily worship of the Dattatreya and other surrounding temples. Apart from this, the Mahanta has to perform various religious and social functions annually. For example, on the day of Baisakh Purnima, a goat is sacrificed at the shrine of Ganesh, inside the Pujari Math. On the day of Kumar Sasthi, or Sithi Nakha, all the Mahantas of Dattatreya Akhada, numbering eleven Math in Bhaktapur District, have to worship their family diety or Kuldevata. On this Dewali day all the Mahantas come to Pujari Math to worship the Kuldevi Durga. It is said that their was a beautiful bronze image of Durga in Pujari

Math, which was stolen during its renovation in 1972. On the day of Bhadra Krishna Dutiya, that is the day after Gaijatra (cow-festival), the Khat Yatra or the palanquin festival of Guru Dattatreya is organised. In this festival, all the eleven Mahantas have to join together to take part in the procession. The palanquin of Guru Dattatreya is stopped only at the eleven sister Maths of Dasanami Sanyasis at Bhaktapur, except at the Taumadhi square in front of the Nyatapola temple where Puja is received from a Newar family. During the Dasain festival, nine virgin girls, who have not yet attained puberty are worshipped and offered food, as they are considered the representatives of the living godess Kumari. Last but not least, in the month of Falgun, the Math has to perform Gota Puja (worshipping a heap of ash) which is kept in the throne room of Guru Dattatreya at Pujari Math.

Besides these religious functions, the Mahanta of Pujari Math was obliged to perform many other functions. For example, every month, on the day of the full moon, the Math had to feed Bhandara, i. e. a simple dinner of rice, pulse soup, and vegetables, to the saints and the poor people. Similarly, on the any of the new moon, the Math had to distribute wheat flour was discontinued after 1964 due to the passing of new Land Reforms Act. The Math was unable to collect enough paddy and wheat from the tillers. This new act also forbid the Math from collecting more than one crop per year from the tillers. Each year, on the first day of Magh (Maghe Sankranti) the Math has to distribute side, i. e. cooked rice, vegetable, pulse to the sadhus and poor people. During the Siva Ratri festival, the Mahanta arranges the board lodging and firewood for the hordes of pilgrims, particularly the Sanyasi Sadhus. The Mahantas

has to provide these facilities for the pilgrims for three to four days. On other occassions the Mahanta has to feed the pilgrims at least for a day.

The Pujari Math was not only the most important but also the eldest and most beautiful Math in the kingdom of Bhaktapur. During the course of history it has inspired the construction of eleven Maths in and around Bhaktapur. All these Maths are either attached to a Siva temple or have Siva shrines in one of their courtyards. As Pujari Math is considered the founder Math, it is popularly known as Pir Math. According to the present Mahanta, Rajendra Giri, it became popular as Pujari Math because it received Puja or offerings from the rest of the eleven Maths. Pujari Math is also known as Dattatreya Math i. e. the Math attached to the Dattatreyas. This Math has branches at Anekakot, in Panchkhal, the Kavre District, Panauti (Bhavar) in the Kavrey District, Chaling (Bhaktapur) and at Jitpur in the Kathmandu District. These sub-Maths are managed and controlled by the Pujari Math.

It is believed that a further function of the Math, at least in the past, was to look after theological studies. But unlike the Indian Maths, the Maths of Bhaktapur did not play any significant role in popularising the Hindu theology. If these Maths even played the role of an educational institution it is reasonable to except that like the Buddhist monasteries, or the Viharas of Kathmandu Valley they should possess at least a few volumes of religious manuscripts. According to Nav Raj Giri, the Mahanta of Pulanchota Math, and Rajendra Giri, the Mahanta of Pujari Math, the Maths of Bhaktapur had only occasionally played the role of educational institutions. This depended upon the need of the

individual students and intellectual capacity of the Mahanta. But these Maths have been playing the role of religious centers, and the Mahantas used to teach and train their successors or pupils during their tenure of office. This made it easier for the successor of the Mahanta to carryout his duties as the Mahanta at short notice.

Pujari Math was reconstructed during the reign of Viswa Malla (1548–1560 A. D.), since this Math was badly damaged during a severe earthquake. Tradition says that extensive repair work was undertaken when Kripala Giri and Loknath Giri was Mahantas. If trace the line of the Mahantas and roughly estimate four to five Mahantas per century, we can place Loknath Giri in the nineteenth century, and Kripala Giri in the eighteenth century (1763 A. D.). It therefore becomes evident that in every century a thorough renovation of the existing structure took place. Both the stone inscriptions installed in 1763 in the middle court-yard of the Math, during the reign of the last Malla king of Bhaktapur, refer to the restoration being done in the eighteenth century. The earthquake of 1934 came when Kailasa Prasad was the Mahanta. It caused extensive damage in the whole of Nepal and completely destroyed a number of important monuments. The walls of the Math came down and the normal drainage system was blocked. This resulted in the dampness of the walls and the woodwork. The bricks and wood which were closely linked were squeezed out of shape. The worst parts were repaired out of necessity. However, for decades the condition remained critical.

The original shape of the Math has changed a lot in time. At present the wood-carvings particularly carved windows, door-ways, pillars, sculptures, etc. that are seen belonged to the eighteenth century. According to the inscription dated 1763, the present shape of the Math took place during the reign of the last Malla ruler, Ranjit Malla. In fact the house as it stands today is vastly different from the original, built during the fifteenth century. Evidence indicated that many wooden-structures, particularly the carvings, belong to the eighteenth century.

The four-storeyed Math, with a perimeter of about thirty-four meters in the north-south direction and twenty-three meters in the east-west direction, with a height of eleven meters (only the tower like Pagoda roof rises to a height of fifteen meters), is arranged around three courtyards. All these courtyards are decorated with richly carved windows, pillars, etc. The wood carvings enhance the special charm of the Math. The main doorway on the north-east side of the Math, displays perfection in the art of ornamental and figure carving. The door frame, richly decorated with redoubled lines, has at its centre a tiny Siva seated on the throne. Its' lintel is elongated. From above the Siva, Garuda looks down upon those who enter. He holds in his claws two Nagas who appear to flow in opposite directions in endless coils. Below it there are the Astamangalas i. e. the eight auspicious signs of the Hindus and the Buddhists, flanked on both sides by the figures of the Sun and the Moon. Below this are two figures of Vishnu along with Ganga and Yamuna, and on the bottom are two Bhairabs on both sides. The windows, not only of the courtyards, but, also those of the north-end facade of the house look like original balconies. Inside these are comfortable benches to sit on. A person case lean on the balustrade, land steal look at the street. The eastern side of the building, which runs along along a narrow lane, is decorated

with various types of peacock windows. The best preserved window shows the body of the peacock in the centre with outspread feathers which serve as a filling for the circular opening of the window. The superb execution of the motif has greatly contributed towards the fame of this artistic monument. These peacock windows are one of the main attractions of Bhaktapur for the tourists from all over the world. The wooden carvings of Pujari Math have proved beyond doubt that they are one of the finest examples of mediaeal art in Nepal. In fact, these carvings originated from one of the best workshops of Bhaktapur, and flourished under the last two Malla rulers, Bhupatindra Malla and Ranjit Malla, who were undoubtedly connoisseurs of art.

In 1969, during the auspicious wedding ceremony of the then His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince of Nepal, Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Deva, the President of the Federal Council and the Prime Minister of Saarland of Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) Dr. Franz Joseph Roieder, paid an official visit to Nepal. During this visit Dr. Roieder presented a grant assistance of 1,00,000 D. M. to HMG of Nepal for the restoration of Pujari Math, as the German Government's token wedding gift to HRH, the then Crown Prince Birendra.

With the assistance of the Department of Archaeology, HMG of Nepal, four expert German architects of the Technical University Darmstadt, namely Gerhard Auer, Hans Busch, Niels Gutschou and Wilfried Kroeger came to Nepal and worked here for one year to complete the restoration of Pujari Math. The German experts also provided on the spot training for the Nepalese artizens and craftsmen. The restoration of the Math was completed, in May 1972. On 28 June, 1972, amid a gala function. The Ambassador of FRG, Mr. Meyer Lindemann, handed over the key of the main gate of the Pujari Math to Her Majesty Queen Aishwarya Rajya Laxmi Devi Shah. Her Majesty then handed over the key to the Chairman of the Guthi Sansthan Nayab Bada–Guruju (Deputy Royal Priest), Tek Raj Pandey. On this occasion, Mr. Pandey promised to establish a museum in the Math consisting of the wooden carving collection of the National Art Gallery of Bhaktapur, and a collection of local household items. This renovation costed Rs. 4,45,839/, out of which the German Government donated Rs. 2,97,839. The Guthi Sansthan donated Rs. 1,30,000 and the Department of Archaeology added Rs. 18,000.

The restoration of the Pujari Math is the first contribution towards a new concept, that the monuments of Nepal should be protected in a scientific way. It was also the first Nepalese–German restoration campaign. The architecture and wooden carvings of the Pujari Math have inspired the German architects not only contribute more but also to work substantials harder at Bhaktapur. The project group from Darmstadt has developed a long term project for the protection of monuments in Bhaktapur. The objective of the plan is not the restoration of small isolated objects, but the conservation of whole town areas containing a great number of small, and even smaller individual objects. It was also due to the activities of the "Kurotorium Tettet die Pagoden Nepals e. v." (founded in the summer 1971), that the Federal Government, (Ministry of Economic Cooperation), invited HMG of Nepal to request for Technical Assistance, in view for further monument protection activities. As per request of HMG of Nepal, the Dattatreya square of the Tachapal Tole, at Bhaktapur, was selected for a second Nepalese–German

joint restoration project. This was the foundation of the Bhaktapur Development Project in 1973/74. The restoration and conservation activities have already commenced in 1975, and the famous Pujari Math is being used not only as the headquarters, but also as office premises.

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