

## JUPITER AND THE AWAKENED PIG

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The collision of Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 with Jupiter on July 16, 1994 sparked media coverage all over the world. Radio Nepal covered the event. The Kagpa listened to Radio Nepal. But that was not the only source of information concerning the impending 'disaster'. The monks were talking about the implications and ramifications of the event. The Kagpa listened to the monks. A third source of information came from tourists, both Nepali and non-Nepali speakers. They must have enjoyed explaining what was happening *akash ma* "in the sky," to the 'native' Bhotes of Kag. The Kagpa listened to the tourists.

What is remarkable is that it took me weeks to link the story that I was being told in the village to the information that I had received on the BBC concerning Jupiter. I only linked the two events when people started telling me that tourists and Radio Nepal also spoken of the event. Even then, it was like we were talking about two different happenings *akash ma*, mine being the *real* event, and theirs being part of some mythical past. The following is the locally accepted narrative of the collision of Jupiter.

There was a god [*lha*], probably Guru Rimpoche, who wrote a book and then the book was thrown to earth where it was found by an old woman who could not read. The old woman gave the book to a school teacher who put the book in his bag and forgot about it for many days. In that time his young son died, and he realized that it was because he had neglected the book. He then showed it to a lama, who realized that it was written by *Lha*. Many copies of this book have been made and taken to various Tibetan areas. Some of the people in Kag have seen the books and have even had them in their own house shrines for a day or two before passing them on. The copies that came here were read by a Dolpo lama and the lama told the people that Guru Rimpoche prophesied the falling of a great star to earth. Wherever it falls, the book says, that place will be destroyed, 10,000 houses destroyed. If it falls on the village of America, it will be destroyed. If it falls on Nepal, Nepal will

be destroyed. The best thing to happen would be for it to fall in a big river or lake. All the water would boil but no one would die. The book told people that they must do many '*om mane padme hū*' and prostrations every day. If they do this, the people here will not be destroyed. Even after the star has fallen people must continue to do these things, as it is obvious that they can avert disasters. Even the tourists known about the star, and it has also been on Radio Nepal. But Guru Rimpoche knew first and told the Buddhists through his book so that they could be saved. That is why for many months here, even after the falling of the star, people have been more religious. They go to the Gomba more often and do protective rituals.

What does the above tell us about the world view of the Kagpa? It helps us to understand *where* the Kagpa place themselves within the moral landscape. They see themselves as Buddhists, and 'the chosen' of Buddhists because of their privileged status with Guru Rimpoche.<sup>1</sup> Bhotes are often seen by other Tibetans as being both inferior Tibetans (culturally corrupt) and inferior Buddhists (religiously corrupt). But the Bhotes represent themselves in the narrative as part of the Buddhist world, and also perhaps superior to other Buddhists. The appearance of Guru Rimpoche in the narrative suggests that the Kagpa feel that they have a direct moral imperative from Guru Rimpoche himself.

"But Guru Rimpoche knew first and told the Buddhists through his book so that they could be saved." Here we see the Buddhist/non-Buddhist distinction that is mentioned in the literature as being part of the central core of Tibetan identity. The people of the village of America were not told first. The people of Nepal were not told first. It was the Buddhists—by implication the only people capable of averting the impending disaster—who were given the responsibility of knowledge of the event before it happened. The narrative also implies that only the Buddhists were deemed worthy of salvation.

The story also imparts moral lessons. First, the old woman: although she was old and illiterate, she knew that her moral duty was to give the book to someone with wisdom. Her only mistake was to give the book to a 'school teacher'. The identity of the school teacher is important. We can assume that the school teacher was Nepali, *rongpa*, because all school teachers in Nepal (where this story takes place) generally are. This assumption was confirmed by my informants. The Nepali school teacher, being lazy, placed the book in his bag. Only after something tragic happened to him *personally* do we see him act. This supports the Bhote claim that while Bhotes have a communal spirit of responsibility, the Nepalese are selfish and egotistical. But even

Nepalese must have redeeming qualities, because the school teacher is said to have given the book to a lama. The lama is learned and responsible, the story reminds the Bhote audience. It was only when he received the book that positive action could be taken, that Guru Rimpoche's words reached the ears of those who could help avert the disaster.

It is interesting also how the impending disaster was described as "... the falling of a great star to earth. Wherever it falls... that place will be destroyed, 10,000 houses destroyed. If it falls on the village of America, it will be destroyed. If it falls on Nepal, Nepal will be destroyed. The best thing to happen would be for it to fall in a big river or lake. All the water would boil but no one would die." As Buddhist areas play a central role in the event, America, a country which usually looms large in the minds of Bhotes, is described as a "village", and a place which, despite its economic and social power on the world scene, can easily be destroyed. The juxtaposition of the village of America and "... a big river or lake..." as possible places where the star might fall is also important. This again implies that America is small and powerless—insignificant really—no bigger really than "a big river or lake." Nepal, too, despite its power in the Bhote regions of Nepal is in the hands of the Buddhists (Bhotes), the only people who can avert the disaster.

The information given by tourists and the media had little effect on the Kagpa; it merely fueled their belief that the event was of colossal importance. And that an event this disastrous could only be explained and averted through dharma. Tourism, a force for cultural change, supported traditional ideology concerning the unstable nature of the universe and the need to be 'dharmaically' vigilant. The media, perceived by the Bhotes to be a fount of unbiased, scientific wisdom, reinforced what was already known of the event. Scientific explanations were irrelevant, however, religious background and imperatives were central.

The Kagpa, and other Baragongba, had to make sense of Jupiter within their own world view, and had to conquer their fear with the only weapon they had—dharma. Guru Rimpoche exhorted Buddhists to continue performing protective rituals after the event. The Kagpa responded in a flurry of religious activity which, to my reckoning, lasted until just after Christmas, when another event captured their collective attention.

Early in the second week of January 1995, an earthquake hit Japan. The event rocked the local population for two reasons: the presence of two village men in Japan, and local perceptions of Japan and the Japanese. The families of the two men came to me—the 'tourist'—to find out where the earthquake was centered and how many people had died.<sup>2</sup> Although they had listened to Radio Nepal, many had not understood the very Sanskritized Nepali which is spoken in the Kathmandu valley. When I had assured the two families that

their brother, husbands and sons were living in an area far away from the epicenter of the quake, I expected local interest in the event to subside. This did not happen.

The Kagpa continued to talk about the disaster because they see the Japanese as *nang-pa*, insiders, because there are a large number of Japanese who are Buddhists. This is important in the local interpretation of the event, but I will come back to that later. The Japanese are seen by Bhotes as more like them than any other tourist group. They are also often perceived as being slightly superior because of their light coloured skin. Many people commented that it was a shame that so many beautiful black-haired, white-skinned people had died. But, they concluded, their deaths were not their own fault (as would have been the case with Jupiter), but the fault of the Japanese lamas. The following conversation took place about a week after the earthquake when I and five other young women were having an all day feast:

Q : Why do you think the earthquake happened?

A : The earthquake in Japan was caused by awakening the pig.

Q : What pig is that?

A : The pig in the center of the world. When it wakes up, it moves its tail and this causes an earthquake.

Q : Why does the pig wake up?

A : Obviously the lamas in Japan were not doing the proper rituals of reading the religious books. If they had been, the pig's tail would not have moved and the earthquake would not have happened.

Q : So, whose fault is the earthquake?

A : I told you, the lamas of Japan are at fault. They were being lazy and now so many people have died.

Q : How big is this pig?

A : I don't know.

Q : Do you think it is bigger or smaller than a regular pig?

A : We don't know whether it is smaller or bigger, do we? Have we ever seen it? But we know it exists and causes earthquakes because that is what the old people told us and the old people must be right.

The women then asked me what I thought was the cause of the earthquake. I tried to explain the basics of tectonic plate movement, but my friends were sceptical. They thought that the pig theory was far more likely.

The local narrative concerning the earthquake again includes elements of dharmic responsibility on the part of Buddhists. But this time, the responsibility lay with the lamas rather than the regular people. That people can suffer by the neglect by lamas of dharmic practices is central to the interpretation of the events leading up to the earthquake.

This story, too, includes a moral element. Despite the fact that these five women are all relatively well educated (I had been engaged in conversation by one of these women previously concerning the Gulf War and Neil Armstrong's history first steps on the moon), they chose to believe that an awakened pig, rather than tectonic plate movement, caused the Japanese earthquake. It did not matter that I was *Emrikar*, or that I was older and more educated than the women to whom I was talking. My opinion was less credible than those of the old men and women in the village. Knowledge is linked inextricably to dharma. As dharma is accumulated, knowledge is accumulated. Life experience does not come into play, only dharmic experience. Knowledge is absorbed over time; one is a passive recipient, not an active accumulator, of knowledge. As one of my friends gently pointed out to me, "An old woman who has never travelled outside of Baragong, who has never gone to school and does not own a radio, is still more qualified to comment on an interpret events than someone who has *bikas* [development]." I stand corrected.

### Notes

1. Guru Rimpoche is an extremely important local figure. Having passed through the Kali Gandaki on his way from Nepal to Tibet (visa versa according to some local histories), he is mythologised in many local legends. On the 10th day of every month villagers gather to perform a Guru Rimpoche ritual called *Chi chi pazin* which is essential for the well-being of the village and the ritual participants. One of the favoured mantra of the Kagpa is an honouring of Guru Rimpoche which goes as follows: *Om A Hu Benza Guru Pedma Sedhe Hū*. This was translated for me roughly as 'Trust in the Lord Guru Rimpoche with most Devotion and he will Acknowledge and Enlighten Your Ways'.
2. No, I do not see myself as a tourist, but the local people do not differentiate linguistically between "foreigners who wander and foreigners who stay." We are all *Emrikar*.