

TRAVEL AS THEATRE IN NEPAL MANDALA

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Preview

Travel has played very significant part in the performance art in Nepal mandala. The journey has been both metaphysical and realistic in nature. Travel is one such trope that brings human beings on a par with the movements of the divinities and the weather and calendrical cycles. Nepal mandala is a spatial concept that creates a microcosm for the movement. The administrative meaning of *mandala* is country, and it has also another meaning that derives from the position of the urban space with deities protecting it from different corners outside the town. All the spectacles of a performance are generated by the performers' movements over the space defined by the religio-architectural formation. For example, the journeys are choreographed in advance, in the architectural and landscape engineering patterns that have continued to surprise the viewers even today. The spatio-cultural and the human settlement patterns have continued to form the heritage of ritual travels within the Nepal mandala for millennia. These ritual movements have the physical, intercultural and message orientated dimensions. These performances can be seen in the traditional, ritual and contemporary movements of the performers along the contours within the urban space in the mandala. These different modes of travels have also undergone various processes of assimilation. In this short paper I would like to focus on these various dimensions of travel that have always given shape to the theatrical performance in Nepal mandala.

The spatial theatrical mandala is architecturally designed to facilitate a travel of the people of the countryside to the urban area. Lanes leading to the agricultural land bear the landmarks of temples where the marchers stop in the ritual festivals. The farmers who make movements with gods in many cases pass through the trails, a journey that leads them to the heart of the

urban area. The path for the travel links the countryside with the urban centres. Musical instruments accompany the journeys; flutes, percussion and cymbals dominate the ensemble. Singing is also another form of this musical journey. Study of various festivals can reveal this phenomenon. Here I am only proposing the models to study the semiotics of the festivals and rituals that have the significance of performance based on travel. The performance travels especially those presented during the Indrajatra festivals and the Machendranath chariot processions are choreographed in advance. Interestingly, the chariot processions are sometimes marred by physical skirmishes that take place between the parties in the process of pulling the chariot in Bhaktapur. The details about these festivals can be read or seen as they are practised as part of the living culture of the Newars.

Rituals of Travel and Architectural Space

The ritual and travels are, as we suggested earlier, performed on the streets. We can take examples of these street marches and see their theatricality. I would like to cite what I have written earlier about the nature of the march on the occasion of the *gaijatra* festival (Subedi:2001):

Gaijatra festival or literally, cow festival is a journey to the world of the dead. In this festival death is dramatised through movements, impersonation and imagined and ritualised signs of cultural formation. Colourfully decorated bodies of the persons who take out the procession, the movement of the cow or the bovine incarnation of the human person follow the contours of the journey through the towns, visiting important temples and places of worship.

They beaten tracks-- the lanes and streets form the main choreography of the cow festival performance. People who offer worship, tips and things, or those who look at these processions for the dead standing on the fringe of the street or sitting behind windows are the audience or spectators of this street drama. The story is linear, colours are fixed and the methods of movement more or less similar. What gives dynamism to this performance is the space itself, the cultural terrain that this journey covers and the silent grief of people who say goodbye to this journey and remain behind the doors

swallowing tears. So this street performance carries the invisible grief, tears and soft moaning. In short, *Gaijatra* is the humanisation of grief and the memories of the dead *through performance*.

The travels of gods and humanity are designed in front of the houses that have windows open to the streets. This is called frontality in architectural discussion today. The frontality of a stage is decided by the position of the viewers, who sit behind the windows and watch the performance whether that is a dance or a singing or the procession of a chariot. According to Portoghesi (2000:369-70), frontality of the theatre has its origin in the behaviour of the watchers. He says:

This gradual evolution of meaning clarifies a no less "natural" genesis. In this case, it was a behavioural model before it ever became an architectural one. A crowd spontaneously assembles, "faces", "huddles together" when someone feels the need to express himself with words, gestures or sounds. The way in which the group congregates is either a circle, when the action entails gestures, or a semicircle when it is important to listen to two opposing factions.

Architectural constructs are the expressions of words; this also works as an analogy between theatre and words or texts. Audience who sit prepared for words occupy a space which is architecturally defined. The concept of frontality, as discussed by the famous Italian architect who shows the architectural designs as the emulation of nature's patterns, presents the nature of human behaviour, words, theatrical sense in the architectural pattern that he calls frontality in this case.

The theatricality of the journey is decided by where the people end their journey. The destinations are fixed in the case of the rituals. People choose steps and pavements around the main theatre, *dabus*, courtyards and streets to sit and watch the performance that has travelled down to the place. The congregation of the group takes place when they want to watch their own mirrors presented through the steps of cosmogonic significance. The frontality of the architectural patterns, the houses of gods and the space of interaction between gods and people which is at the root of the cosmogonic drama, gives a shape to the nature of performance of words and movements

as put in Portoghesi's examples. The movement of the people from the country to the urban area has a unique theatrical value. The urban architectural spaces are the theatres for the people who live on farms or in the urban centres. As mentioned by Portoghesi in his book, the architectural patterns follow the patterns of life and living styles. The theatrical spaces of the Kathmandu architectural patterns made by people's performance culture. Architecturally the farmers themselves create architectural spaces for the performances of the theatrical ritual. Referring to such free movement of the people to the frontality of the architecturally designed places of the Kathmandu valley Mary S. Slausser (1998:130) makes a very brilliant observation. She says:

In its simplest, most elemental form, the traditional building style of the Kathmandu Valley, the Newar style, is to be found in the Newar farmhouse. This is, of course, also a "town house," since Newar farmers are town dwellers. A farmhouse, moreover, is no different from the houses of neighbouring artisans (who may also farm). Houses of wealthy merchants or, formerly, the nobility, and palace and monastery quadrangles are only more elaborate versions of the farmhouse. Community buildings and temples also share its basic structure, and even some aspects of design and decoration. But the Newar house is architecturally important in its own right. It is the basic unit of the traditional village and town, and fundamental to their harmony. Some houses, by virtue of a two-century antiquity (and more), are also "historic monuments"; and some, no less than the neighbouring houses of the gods, are masterpieces of the builders' art.

We notice a unique relationship between the frontality of the theatre and spectators' participation. Free movements of the people within and without the frontality of the architectural locations is the main feature of the performance culture in Kathmandu. People greet the marchers who are completely and earnestly undertaking the travel of performance. The travelling performance in Kathmandu is so strong that it has become part of the rhythm of both the nation and the narration. The enactment of narration on space through marches has become the metaphor of modern nation. Therefore by studying an exclusive Newar mode of performance culture, we

can say that the travelling theatre has shaped this bigger Nepal's nation history both culturally and politically. When King Prithvi Narayan Shah of the house of Gorkha and the founder of the bigger Nepal made his final attack on Kathmandu, he chose the day of the Indraajatra festival. He rode right into the middle of the performance when people were making preparations to take their king Jaya Prakash Malla to a chariot procession, a travel which has been part of the ritual performance. His choice of the performance theatre shows his knowledge about the power of performance and the intensity of people's involvement into the community theatre. Prithvi Narayan Shah walked into the middle of the performance in Kathmandu like a character in a street play in 1766 and fully used the carnivalesque quality of the ritual and performance mood when he rode on the chariot prepared for the King's procession, the protagonist's city travel, and went around the city. As in the performance of a play the character was changed but the stage and the form of performance remained the same.

Street March as Power of Performance

The heritage of travel remains as the central concept of creating rapport with the audience and in most part, that is guided by the spirit of the community in Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur. But after Prithvi Narayan Shah rode on the chariot, the act changed. Kathmandu streets have been used for broader political demonstrations. But the Newar street performance, the carnivalesque mode of demonstration remains at the heart of the modern time street demonstrations. With Kathmandu's shifting demographic structure, the migration of the people to the valley from different parts of the country, as it became the capital city after Prithvi Narayan Shah rode the chariot in the performance, the nature of the street performance has changed. People, who came to the street after the overthrow of the Rana rule in 1950, did project political sense of theatricality. Streets see very many forms of performances of the political nature. According to John Bell (1998:278):

Parades and processions make more complete use of the street as performance site than do stationary street performances. They exploit not only the public nature of such sites and the possibility of reaching an undifferentiated audience which exists on the street, but also the physical length of the street

and the possibilities of movement along, which are in fact the essence of the street's spatial and public character.

The events during the historical procession of the year 2046 B.S. (1990) that brought about the democratic system of government in Nepal did have the element of festivity. As a close witness myself to the street demonstrations, the power of the street that circulated among the people then was contained in the tidings about the movement of the people of the three valley towns. Slogans and news that circulated around were like 'now the demonstrations from Bhakatapur or Patan or Kirtipur has arrived' and so on. The language used by people then was the same as that which is used when a jatra comes to a certain space in the mandala. Reaching became a symbolic victory. When the marchers arrived people poured water, threw flowers from windows for the comfort and welcome of the marchers in the scorching heat of the day, cut onions and gave the marchers to counter the effects of teargas as I personally benefited from one near Ranipokhari during the process of the march in 1990.

The long procession that marched towards the Narayanhiti palace on the deciding day in a quiet manner did impress the King himself who has always been a very important protagonist in the street rituals and marches. He became the audience and the marchers became the performers. Street became the theatre, the Royal Palace became the audience's place and the slogans for political change from non-party system of government to a multiparty system of government became the dramatic text. The rhythmic slogans, marching rhythms and the use of colours did evoke a sense of street theatre. The marches and demonstrations on the streets have a great theatrical value. The big march was a combination of theatre and ritual. The marches did create a new context of performance and enactment of narration. The nationalism evoked by these marches was different from the one evoked by the ritual marches. But the ritual and theatrical modes of the marches in the new context in the Nepal mandala did show the same carnivalesque or ritualistic features as can be seen in every form of street rituals involving marches.

The symbiosis of the marches with the formation of the modern nation's nationalistic and political drama can be seen by examining some interesting events of the recent times, the most revealing of which can be seen in the events that happened during and following the movement for the restoration of democracy in 1990, the main centre of which was the Nepal Mandala. And

naturally as said earlier, the marches did play very significant part in that street drama.

Ironically, people did not much know about the leaders whom they saw for the first time in the open theatre. Ganesh Man Singh, the octogenarian leader, a great freedom fighter from the 40s onwards and also called the 'commander' of the people's movement had been drawing an analogy between the political leaders and the people by using the most famous icon of the theatrical-ritual march in the Nepal Mandala, the procession of Machendra's chariot. Singh who comes from the cultural background of Kathmandu presented this narration of a new form of national movement in one of his speeches to give the ritual assessment of the people's movement, that we can transform into a drama in three scenes. The chariot by analogy is democracy and those who pull the chariot to its destination are the people in this drama and the dog is the leader of the movement. This is the cast. The drama can go like this.

In the first scene when the chariot is static a dog slips underneath and goes to a doggy sleep as usual. In the next scene he wakes up to the hullabaloo and feels a tug; the chariot had already started rolling after people started pulling it. This is the most problematic scene— the scene of greatest conflict. The dog realises its *hubris* in the act but the destiny is powerful that it is unavoidable. The only way open to the doggy is to hold composure and go on fighting against the huge chariot of the universe where gods sit above enjoying all the power. The power structure is vertical and the nature of the drama is cosmogonic. He is a tiny dog, what could he do except rolling on by avoiding being crushed by the wheel. He is an existentialist hero, who suffers from all the *angst*; he is a tragic hero caught between the wheels of destiny. The second act is the real play to interpret which we can use all the great theories of tragedy and the impending catastrophe. The final scene is the scene of *dénouement*. The chariot comes to its destination. It comes to a halt. The dog is bewildered for a moment and can not decide whether to come out from the underground or not, but boldly does come out to his relief that the people are all looking at him with love and excitement that he has come unscathed from underneath, from the underground position.

The fact of the matter was that they too needed the dog because they needed a character that was outside this ritual that they were performing for millennia. They needed a hero, an outsider, and a character who emerged from a limbo. He also symbolised the power of the mighty's mercy. A truly democratic atmosphere prevailed. But as for the dog himself he chooses a

position, let us say the Khulamancha and looks at the chariot, and says to himself, "my god, I never knew that I was so powerful that I could carry such a huge chariot on my back!" But his other mind keeps telling him all along that he in fact has not been carrying the chariot on his back. But he finds the analogy tremendously useful and from the Khulamancha he declares that he has in fact carried the chariot on his back. He repeatedly tells this story to himself until he himself begins to believe it.

The dog was like the political leaders of the 1990 rebellion, including Ganesh Man Singh himself, as he confessed. The leaders' claim was vacuous as that of the dog, who have gone a little too far today. This analogy made by the great leader, a Newar himself, speaks about the relationship between the power of the theatrical march, festivity and this enactment of the nation's narration in the new context in Nepal Mandala.

This subject has become very important in the modern street theatrical discourse. Richard Schechner's interpretation of the event of the 1989 in China is very revealing in this context (p.p. 202):

The struggle in Tiananmen Square before the entrance of the tanks was not between rigid ritual and rebellious theatre, but between two groups of authors (or authorities) each of whom desired to compose the script of China's future and each of whom drew on both theatre and ritual. The students improvised in public, while the officials, as always, rehearsed their options behind closed doors. The students took Tiananmen Square, the centre stage and ritual focus of Chinese history.

The 'ritual focus of history' can degenerate and take ugly turns for reasons of the rulers never choosing to remain nonchalant about the performances on the street. That dramatises the nature of the tension in the performance on the street.

The nature of marches and travels has shaped the Nepali street performances of more theatrical nature. Different forms of plays were performed in the streets of Kathmandu and other towns at different forms. I have discussed about the heritage of street theatre elsewhere in greater detail.

Element of Journey in Modern Theatre

We can see the element of travel and march in the modern Nepali plays also. In them the well-known dramatic stories present travel or movement in

and out of a locus. Balakrishna Sama's play *Mukunda Indira*, a play that is known for its fine theatrical performance and story of a little conservative order, a character named Bhabadev on his way to Calcutta to fetch the protagonist Mukunda who has been studying there and apparently taken to a little free way of life forgetting his virtuous wife Indira back home, looks back at the space, the Nepal Mandala and sings of the glory of the land, the space and its splendour. He portrays the space that he had not left before as a Shangri-La. In his dramatic outpourings Bhabadev admires the geo-architectural forms or the structures that tell about the dramatic settings of both nature and culture. The patriotic fervour is expressed for reasons of the travel that he undertakes out of the mandala.

In yet another play *Ma* the movement out is dramatised. In *Prempinda* the long play that he wrote to show the power of love on people who live surrounded by power and wealth, the journey of the lover forms the important part of the dramatic finale.

Gopal Prasad Rimal's famous woman protagonist Helen in the well-known realistic play *Masan* finally marches out of the space. That last march is the culmination of the drama. Such journeys out of the place have always appealed to the dramatists here. Vijaya Malla, who came from the very well-known family of the Newar of Bhaktapur did express that creative energy through a unique process of dramatisation. I have my personal experience about playing for the first time in his short play *Pattharkokatha* in 1968, the role of the protagonist Raghubir who is one of the characters in *mrityulok* or the world of the dead, who were killed by the Zamindar, who himself joins them all there later. In this surrealistic play movement is portrayed as a performance made with the force of life, but does freeze once they all get into the world of the dead. Malla's play dramatises the Newar cultural narration, the livid experience of mixing life with the myth of the dead that the *Gaijatra* festival so well represents. This march as said earlier is an experience of life itself--a life experience embedded into the dramatic form of death. The street marches therefore have been central in the performance culture of the Mandala.

The young theatre groups like the Sarwanam who came into existence in the year 1986, did use march or travel as the main energy of the street performance; they also emulated the forms of street theatre in India. In *Hamibasanta Khojiraheka chauni* or 'we are in search of spring', the characters make movements on the streets shuffling the crowd to find spring. One other experience is worth mentioning here. When Sunil Pokhrel, a well-

known director of our times was directing my play *Arukaphulka Sapana* or *Dreams of Peach Blossoms*, which is an attempt to present the human story behind the Newar culture, he decided to exactly incorporate the street theatrical marching into the presentation because he said that without this element of the street march no such drama would be possible. Then he made the woman protagonist leave the space and travel out of the centre. That struck me as very important element of the march. Then I worked on another full-fledged play about journey itself. Again the location is the Nepal Mandala. This absurd nature of the journey that takes place from the old, aristocratic houses to the freak streets, from home to jungle in which process even guns and antiques begin to travel, is being directed by another director of the younger generation Pushkar Gurung, who is going to play with the very theme of marches, journeys to the freak street and out of the established big homes to insecurities.

Conclusion

I do not want to elaborate this theme of marches and journeys in Nepali theatre any more than by giving some examples. But the main thrust of my survey has been the study of the dynamism of the marches of people on the architecturally choreographed space. The use of the mask according to the French director Jacques Lecoq is made "to make the hands and feet stand out so that gesture becomes symbolic. The play of the head, hands and feet completes the body's expression as it completes the form of the theatrical gesture". In this manner he says, one will be able "to go back to a theatre where one's whole being becomes one with the universe" (Lecoq 1996:141). The use of the mask and mime, dance and music enlarges the time scale and the volume of space to the travel--a mixture of theatricality and ritual. The physical nature of the marches in the urban and rural spaces in the Nepal mandala has history and heritage from the mythical journeys to those of the present times when marches on street signify the new contexts of national and cultural consciousness. The marches in the streets of the Nepal mandala therefore have been the agencies of change in the structure of power in the country. This deeply embedded sense of theatricality therefore shapes both the nature of cultural and political rituals in this country, which shows the power of street and performance, which as discussed by Schecner represents the power of the modern street drama that shapes our destiny today.

Note

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