

Introduction

The Archetypal Indra Festival

On the third day of Kathmandu's Indra festival in 2005, I pressed in with the crowd gathering underneath the overhanging balcony of Gaddi Baithak on the west side of the royal palace. Standing in stark contrast to the brick pagoda-style temples throughout the palace area, its neoclassical architecture recalls the intertwined history of Nepal and Europe and the British empire. Surrounded by a community of diplomats, ambassadors, and officials from across the globe at this most festive moment of the eight-day festival, and anticipating the first and most significant chariot procession of the living goddess Kumari, King Gyanendra distributed to the crowd the symbolic largesse of one-rupee coins. No one could have predicted that this would be the final time in Nepal's history that this particular scene would play out.

On February 1, 2005, Gyanendra dismissed the government and suspended the seven major political parties. With the intention of bringing to an end the decade-long civil war with Maoist rebels, Gyanendra only succeeded in alienating local and international allies as well as the general public. Political strikes turned into five days of nationwide protests. Gyanendra's government responded with a "shoot to kill" curfew that brought the whole country to a near standstill for three weeks, completely disrupting life. Nearly fourteen months later, in April 2006, and under pressure from all quarters, Gyanendra reinstated the government and stepped down from the throne, essentially ending Nepal's monarchy.

Over the next two years, Gyanendra was gradually stripped of all of his real and symbolic power. As the most public expression of his status as the king of Nepal—then referred to as the “the only Hindu kingdom in the world”—the Indra festival charted his fall from power. For the 2006 festival, his official domestic and international circles abandoned him, and by 2007 he was replaced by the prime minister, Girija Prasad Koirala. This symbolic act is one of many that would make up the “New Nepal” that will, it is hoped, further the country’s path toward democracy and integration into a global economy.¹

The role of Kathmandu’s Indra festival in this fourteen-month period from February 2005 to April 2006 is instructive for understanding the history of the festival, as far back as its earliest appearance in the Sanskrit text of the *Mahābhārata*. A festival whose textual origins lie in the fuzzy boundaries between late Vedic and early medieval periods, the autumnal Indra festival celebrates Hindu kingship in all of its urban glory. Its narrative of origin variously is told in the *Mahābhārata*, *Bṛihat Saṃhitā*, and *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and the story of its demise is found in the *Bhāgavatā Purāṇa*. The Indra festival continues to be celebrated in Kathmandu according to the Sanskrit textual tradition. This book covers the Indra festival from its narrative inception in these texts up to the present, noting the consistent ways it innovates. Like the 2007 festival in Kathmandu that communicated a shift in the political situation in Nepal, the Indra festival has consistently stood as a cipher for innovation, signaling shifts in religious practices, royal dynasties, and architectural styles.

The performance of the festival can be summarized rather easily. It begins when a small coterie of local officials charged by the king travels to a nearby forest, where they cut down a tree. The tree is pulled to the city where it is twice celebrated as a king: in its majestic entrance down the royal road and again in its grand installation in the center of the city. The festival concludes after a number of days when the tree is taken down and pulled to a nearby body of water. The names of the festival are only slightly more complicated. In the Sanskrit of classical India, it is the *Indradhvajotsava*, *Indramaha*, or *Śakramahotsava*; in Nepali, the *Indrajātrā* or the slightly more Sanskritized *Indrayātrā*; and in the Newar language of the Kathmandu Valley, the *yeṃ yāḥ* (*punhi*). All of these terms translate to “the festival of Indra” except the first one, *Indradhvajotsava*, which adds a reference to Indra’s *dhvaja*—the forty-foot-tall wooden pole raised in the city’s

royal square—and the last one, the Newar *yeṃ yāḥi* (*punhi*), which refers to the chronological and geographical setting of its celebration as “the (full moon) festival of Kathmandu,” eliding any direct reference to Indra or his ritual pole.² First mentioned in the epic *Mahābhārata* some two thousand years ago, the South Asian festival of Indra has been celebrated within a variety of overlapping settings throughout India and Nepal: urban and rural; royal and agricultural; and Hindu, Jain, and Newar.³

Despite Indra’s precipitous post-Vedic decline, scholars writing on early medieval India or contemporary Kathmandu have occasionally attended to the central role of the Indra festival. Art historian Mary Shepherd Slusser asserts that Indra is “still an important and honored deity [in Nepal, whose] name is familiar to every tongue, his images abound, and he is the center of an annual festival whose duration is exceeded only by that of the premier goddess, Durga” (1982: 1:267). Slusser might be overstating her case here. Even in Nepal, Indra has no temple, no priests, and no regular devotees, and once his festival ends, he and his images go into mothballs for the remainder of the year, with a periodicity that replicates the temporariness of his worship from the Vedic period (Kuiper 1975: 111, 1977: 42).⁴

Discussing the continuity of the epics with the Vedas, John Brockington points to the possibility of the festival’s significance. “The epic evidence suggests in fact what other evidence also points to: that Indra maintained a degree of supremacy in more popular belief longer than most Vedic deities. In the early to middle layers of both epics he is prominent and frequently mentioned, both as the ruler of the gods and as the performer of various heroic deeds” (2001: 67). Despite the epics’ continued references to the supremacy of the king of the gods—whose decline in prestige Brockington immediately acknowledges—contemporary scholars have allowed Indra’s festival to remain squarely on the periphery. Thus, whereas such Hindu festivals as the Rāmīlā, Durgā Pūjā, Ganesh Chaturthī, and Kumbha Mela have all come to be part of the general academic consciousness (studies of which have greatly assisted my own research into how Hindu festivals operate), very little secondary literature exists on Indra’s festival. I am still mildly shocked, this many years on, when I encounter any reference to this festival in scholarship on South Asia. Of the references that I have come across, many have been little more than brief asides that acknowledge the festival’s potential past glory but do not provide any larger cultural

context for its performance and certainly do not acknowledge its survival into any contemporary South Asian performative tradition. In translating the Jain *Triśaṣṭisalākāpuruṣacaritra*, Helen Johnson footnotes the text's single reference to the festival: "The Indrotsava is described in the *Natyasastra* I. 55 ff. It apparently does not survive in any extant festival" (Hemacandra 1962: 343, n386). In his translation of chapter 150 of the *Kauśika Sūtra* of the Atharva Veda, Jan Gonda cautiously asserts: "The worship of the sal tree as the *Indradhvaja* is still prevalent in the western parts of Bengal. . . . According to H. A. Oldfield['s 1880 study of Nepal] . . . the Nepalese Gurkhas had, at least 80 years ago, likewise retained this custom" (1967: 413, n4). Brockington speaks to the inclusion in both Sanskrit epics of similes featuring Indra's banner, although he acknowledges that such references become increasingly rare in their later sections (2001: 70).

This book argues that the Indra festival had long been a significant part of the religious history of early medieval India, especially for the religion commonly referred to as Hinduism. The majority of the places where the festival has been celebrated have been Hindu kingdoms with the intellectual resources to produce the texts that used the Indra festival as a significant component of the reproduction of their rule. Thus, whatever the language used to name it, these celebrations focus on the performing king, who is identified with Indra, presides over the festival and its raising of the pole, and receives its ultimate benefits and blessings.

Such consistency can only occur because powerful agents responsible for producing ritual texts and actions (to borrow language from theories of practice) reconstructed the festival with "interested action" (Marshall Sahlins) that referred back and contributed to structuring dispositions (Pierre Bourdieu), provided strategic and practical orientations for acting (Bell 1992: 85), and applied features of asymmetry, inequality, and domination to this archetypal annual festival (Ortner 1989: 11–12). Although such flexible applications initially represent "subjective risks" for the performing culture, the process results in creative and meaningful cultural and symbolic change, Sahlins's "functional revaluation of the categories" (1985: ix). Produced rather than passively recorded by classical and contemporary agents drawing on culturally meaningful actions, narratives, and materials, the Indra festival has consistently been used to support an intimate relationship

to these basic themes, its own *habitus* that is “constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions” (Bourdieu 1990: 52).

Questions over the identity of the festival extend from the Sanskrit record into its new Nepalese home, where authors have wrestled with its flexibility and multiplicity. Henry Oldfield, surgeon for the British resident in Kathmandu whose work Gonda briefly referred to, provides an interpretation of how this festival, by the time of his writing in 1880, incorporated elements from several different festivals: the Newar festival said to be initiated by Guṇakāmadeva in the tenth century and the Hindu Nepali one maintained by Pratap Singh in the eighteenth century. Amid a brief description of the daily performances that local Newar people celebrate nightly—dances, displays of images of deities, and processions within and outside of Kathmandu—Oldfield asserts: “The Indrajatra, though commonly regarded as one festival, is in reality two distinct festivals: one, the Indrajatra proper, in honour of Indra; the other, the Ruthjatra [chariot festival], in honour of Devi Kumari (one of the eight goddess mothers). They have properly *no connection with each other* beyond the fact of their occurring at the same time” (1974 [1881]: 313–14, emphasis added). The dichotomy that Oldfield proposes here is remarkably insightful, though overly simplistic, because it results in two unrelated festivals that just happen to be celebrated at the same time and at the same place. D. R. Regmi, considering the same ritual material—the concurrent rites devoted to Indra, Kumari, and Bhairav—similarly concludes “Although the cult is ancient, the worship of Indra . . . is again so mixed up with the *jātrās* of Kumari and Bhairav that even though the festival is celebrated in the name of Indra, the latter has to share the devotion offered while others tend to dominate” (1966: 615).

Much of the scholarship on the Nepalese Indrajatra has concerned itself with this very issue: the extent to which the festival’s diverse constituent rites are “mixed up” and thus the degree to which they might constitute a single archetypal festival. Rajendra Pradhan argues that the festival’s thematically separate rites and themes are “relatively independent of each other,” yet are “different aspects of the same basic idea which is the victory of order over chaos” (1986: 378–79). A. W. van den Hoek similarly asserts a classical Indic foundation for the festival: its “context shows features of a sacrificial arena” (2004: 14) whose “combined features . . . all point to one direction,

that of a sacrificial concourse" (15) that has "the unifying notion of sacrificial death" (60) and that is a sacrificial prelude to the ensuing goddess-oriented Dasain festival (52, 61).

Using such structural language as "innovations, inventions and additions," "accretion" (37, 48, 50), and "embedded" (60), van den Hoek applies the related language of syncretism from his description of the simultaneous appearances of Hindu and Buddhist imagery during the Dasain festival (67) to his analysis of the large golden-colored mask of Seto Bhairav that dispenses beer to Kathmandu's youth during the Indra festival.⁵ This mask is located immediately underneath a smaller replica of the temple to the goddess Taleju, the tutelary goddess of the erstwhile Malla dynasty whose original and larger temple was built nearly two centuries earlier and remains at the core of the old Newar palace approximately one hundred meters to the northeast.⁶ Installed by Rana Bahadur Shah in 1795 several decades after the defeat of the Mallas and prominently displayed only during the Indra festival, Bhairav's mask represents part of the "cult of Svet Bhairav at Hanumāṅdhokā" whose image, "installed by the present Shāhī rulers but with a completely Newar cast and script, is thus a beautiful example of how the new rulers were integrated in the old ritual" (van den Hoek 2004: 46).⁷

Finally, in the writings of Gérard Toffin, a prolific anthropologist who has written on the urban Newar communities of Nepal for several decades, we can see the real difficulties in discerning the festival's unity. Though Toffin has shown an increasing flexibility toward the historical development of Kathmandu's Indra festival, his approach, like those of Oldfield and Regmi, has treated the festival in a similar piecemeal fashion that has presumed a gradual accumulation over time. In a 1992 article, he highlights the place of prominence that the festival gives to the living goddess Kumari and the transgressive deity Bhairav, writing that the "Indra Jatra is made up of three different series of rituals: Kumārī Jātrā, Indra Jātrā and Bhairava Jātrā, each one concentrated on a specific god. Though [they] are more or less related to each other, these three complex ceremonial components have their own myths and can be analysed quite independently. An hypothesis worth considering is that they originated separately and were brought together in a latter stage" (1992: 74). In a 2006 article, he increases the number of constituent elements from three to five, although he considers the organization and development of the fes-

tival to be based on a somewhat haphazard method of interpolation that is rooted in a central festival core, in much the same way that an earlier generation of scholars of the Sanskrit epics had considered their literary development. “The Indrajatra is composed of five parts: Indra, Kumari, Bhairav, funerary rites, masked dances. These five had probably developed independently and then had been progressively combined” (2006: 54). Finally, Toffin reverts to his original tripartite structuring and questions his approach to these three components:

The Nepalese refer to the Kumārī Jātrā, the Bhairava Jātrā and the Indra Jātrā as they consider them three distinct entities. Should one consider these associated rites as one single festival or as three celebrations incorrectly grouped together under one name? The more one would like to interpret this delicate matter according to the facts, and especially to all the facts, the more difficult a goal this is to achieve. We are inclined, however, towards a thesis of structural unity, even if the structured system lacks a completely closed loop. (2010: 16; translation mine)

These citations—especially those that describe the arc of Toffin’s scholarship—help us understand the complexity of the Indra festival: the multiple historical, thematic, and performative threads woven together throughout it and the multiple meanings attached to it. We might place the positions of these scholars into three loose categories, considering the degree of unity they attribute to the festival. Oldfield and Regmi assert the festival’s absence of unity, saying that it contains such diverse and “mixed-up” components that we must see the festival as “two distinct festivals . . . [that] have properly no connection with each other.”⁸ Pradhan and Toffin offer a moderated unity, arguing that the festival has an underlying basic idea or structural unity, though the relative independence of its rites prevents it from achieving a “completely closed loop.”

Only van den Hoek provides a reading whereby the festival attains an absolute unity, whose “combined features . . . all point to one direction, that of a sacrificial concourse.” In reducing the Indra festival to “the unifying notion of sacrificial death,” however, he overstates the relationship between a classical pan-Indian Hinduism and the system of Newar religious performance that effectively blends Hindu,

Vajrayana Buddhist, and local traditions. Although violent conflict is integral to the Indra festival tradition, it operates fairly independently of the robust textual corpus on classical Vedic and Hindu sacrifice that “has to be agonistic” (Heesterman 1993: 42). Moreover, van den Hoek frequently hedges on the sacrificial unity that he proposes, qualifying his general assertions by acknowledging specific rites that seem not to fit, stretching other examples to fit, or simply asserting it so frequently and in so reductive a manner that it starts to no longer ring true.⁹

The festival’s survival in contemporary Kathmandu indicates its ability to survive in multiple environments, adapting as it shifts historical eras and geographical areas. The Indra festival is consistently connected to a common fund of related ideas: urban power, kingship and rivalry, and innovation and archaism. These related themes define the festival across time and space, as it is periodically regenerated, renewed, and revived. This thematic continuity allows the festival, despite its adaptability, to remain archetypal. Borrowing Humphrey and Laidlaw’s definition that describes rituals as “perceived as discrete, named entities, with their own characters and histories,” the Indra festival possesses and has retained its own “facticity and independent existence” (1994: 89, 100). By treating the Indra festival as “comprehensive” or “archetypal,” I mean that I consider the festival as a singular entity, treating all of its parts together: thematically, systematically, and comprehensively without ahistorically essentializing the festival or the people who celebrate it.

In handing the festival in this holistic way, I seek to neutralize the power of the Sanskrit text, allowing for local performances of the Indra festival tradition to be considered as both independent performances that drive local, regional, and pan-South Asian interpretations and part of the larger Indra festival tradition whose roots are partially in the classical Sanskritic tradition. The festival’s powerful authors and ritualists can then be seen as “contributing to the creative processes of making, remaking, and disseminating *proposed* meanings, some of which are more successful [than] others and some of which lead, in turn, to changes in the way the rite is performed” (Humphreys and Laidlaw 1994: 196).¹⁰ Treating the textual tradition as just one part of the holistic Indra festival tradition, I am drawing on literature on Himalayan performances of the epic *Mahābhārata*, with which this book will conclude. William Sax writes of the epic as not being contained within the printed and published Sanskrit text but

serving for the local community as “a kind of ancestral history that is remembered by the wise and periodically enacted” (2002: 56). Rather than separating “local” from “classical” festival performances (as if the Sanskrit record were not also local), and certainly rather than using the “authoritative” text to explain local performances, I hope to use these local performances to fill in the historical and narrative gaps that clearly exist in the textual record. In doing so, I intend to treat these texts more in the way that Leela Prasad treats the shastras as an “imagined text [in which] the normative manifests as emergent, situated in the local and the larger-than-local, the historical, and the interpersonal” (2007: 119).

Jātrā: Politics, Violence, and Power

The Nepali word *jātrā*, one component of the festival’s most commonly known name Indra*jātrā*, is ultimately derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *√yā* (to go). This emphasis on motion refers to much more than the respectful movement of people, goods, and gods through the streets and neighborhoods of Kathmandu’s old city. The term *jaṭra*, which simply means festival, implies a certain degree of energy or “effervescence” that is related to its Sanskrit synonym *utsava*. Such an event, Jan Gonda writes, is intended “to set in motion, to impel, to rouse, etc.” (1947: 148), the goal of which is the strengthening of the deity through the celebratory actions of human beings. Considering the energy that permeates the Indra festival, it may not be coincidental that the only two hymns in which the word *utsava* occurs in the ancient Hindu text of the *Rig Veda* are directed to and celebrate Indra (1.100.8 and 1.102.1). More than any other, Nepal’s Indra festival embodies Gonda’s definition in all of its parts.

The public nature of the Indra festival is a major contributor to the frenetic energy it generates. Although the festival does include private family rites, as do nearly all major festivals, these domestic components are eclipsed by the concentration of vibrant and intense rites performed in some of Kathmandu’s most public areas. Between its formal and scheduled rites and the very public manner in which people might observe and participate in them, the festival includes elements of mild to moderate violence, sometimes by design and sometimes as a result of its public and inclusive nature. Typically

perpetrated by and against the thousands of young men who come from the city and its surrounding villages, the festival is used as a setting to assert their social positions. Late at night the young men fight to obtain a taste of the alcoholic *prasād* blessing from the six-foot-tall golden mask of Seto Bhairav, they fight one other as they try to settle scores accumulated throughout the year, and they are sometimes beaten bloody by the bamboo sticks of police who claim to be keeping order. Having seen multiple festivals in cities and towns throughout the Kathmandu Valley, I am quite sure that the unique and concentrated violence I have repeatedly witnessed—along with the regular sacrifice of multiple animals offered to various forms of Bhairav—is a necessary part of Kathmandu’s Indra festival.

Gonda’s definition of the Sanskrit *utsava* contains another conception that is relevant here: “the generating, stimulating, producing (viz. of power)” (1947: 151). Used throughout the classical texts as a weapon to destroy one’s enemies, Indra’s pole is a symbol of military power. This theme of political violence is inherent in the festival and relates to the construction of modern Nepal, the pole’s installation marking the moment of the 1768 victory of the Hindu Shah dynasty over the Newar Mallas.¹¹ In the mid-eighteenth century, the Shah family reigning in the central hill town of Gorkha began a series of military incursions into the Kathmandu Valley, and by 1769 it had conquered the valley’s four largest cities of Kirtipur, Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. Defeating each city’s king in turn, the Shah king made Kathmandu the capital of a single empire whose geographic extent came to be represented by the nation’s current borders. The primary goal of the early Shah kings was the establishment of Nepal, unified as an *asal Hindustān* (a true Hindu kingdom) that served as a political and cultural bulwark against the Mughal and British imperial threat to the immediate south in India. Just as royal dynasties have done periodically throughout South Asian history, the Shah dynasty in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century used the obscure festival of the Vedic god Indra as a strategic means for asserting its power throughout the expanding and increasingly unified Nepal.

More than simply using, performing, or celebrating the festival, and rather than seeing the Kathmandu Valley only as “a particularly conservative place which has preserved old Indian traditions elsewhere vanished,” as Toffin suggests (1992: 82), I argue that the Shah kings

conscientiously and strategically brought the Indra festival back into existence—they revived, reconstructed, and innovated around it after several centuries of general disuse. This revival took performative and textual forms and developed into what is sometimes referred to as the *mūl jātrā* (root festival) of Kathmandu.¹² This revival of an ancient and moribund festival celebrating Indra signaled their assertion of a festival that was explicitly Hindu in form and that represented a cultural victory over the Buddhist Newars. Though ancient and moribund, the Indra festival still represented a part of the cultural memory of Hindu South Asia, which this book will attempt to unpack. Despite the official processes that transformed Nepal’s monarchy—“the only Hindu kingdom in the world”—into the secular Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal in the 2010s, the festival has survived and continues to be celebrated, maybe now especially celebrated, in the absence of the Hindu king.

This notion of political power is directly related to the particularly tantric aspect of many facets of religion in Nepal. Nascently present in the Sanskrit textual tradition, powerful tantric goddesses are omnipresent in Kathmandu’s festival because they historically supported Nepal’s Hindu king. Most notable is the figure of the Kumari, the living goddess who resides in a special house adjacent to the old royal palace. During the festival, accompanied by her brothers Bhairav and Ganesh, she goes on three chariot processions and dispenses blessings to the city’s residents. Independently of Kumari, masks, wooden posts, and human representations of Bhairav are visible and audible during the festival. Narratives of Bhairav recall and celebrate the ancestors, beings who trouble the notion of the festival as a top-down, state-sponsored, and Indra-directed festival. Rather, its situatedness in Kathmandu allows for an oscillation between universal kingship and local kinship, often in the same ritual performance, location, and character.¹³

We can observe in this larger context how the South Asian religious festival represents a genre of strategic action that serves as an appropriate and successful strategy for the complementarity of innovation and archaism. The Ramlīlā of Rāmnagar at Benares requires the presence of the reigning Mahārājā (Lutgendorf 1991: 259); the Bengali Durgā Pūjā reflects the changing socioeconomic interpretations of the goddess and the demonic Mahiṣa (Rodriguez 2003: 289–90); the Ganesh

festival in Maharashtra includes tableaux of the elephant-headed god placed amid the images of Indian political figures (Courtright 1985: 194); and the Kumbha Melā is attended by itinerant groups of *sadhus* whose simultaneous occupation as traders required them to acquire the warrior skills required to protect their goods” (Maclean 2008: 12).

More than just political interpretations and applications of religious materials, persons, and performances, however, the origins of these festivals, ancient though they might seem and ancient though some of their roots might be, “inescapably and unmistakably” reflect the politics of the era in which they were strengthened, retooled, fortified, popularized, and in some cases revived (Pennington and Allocco 2018: 9). All of these renovating actions were strategically performed in the context of a relationship with a powerful and contiguous Other, if not in the face of the threat of colonial occupation. Likewise, Hindu agents constructed, fortified, innovated, and revived the Indra festival several times at moments of political upheaval.

The examples throughout this book show how the somewhat contradictory functions of the Indra festival, both conservatively political and flexibly innovative, connect to the process that has come to be known as Sanskritization or even what we might more specifically call Hinduization.¹⁴ The authors of these Indra festival texts have used a highly Sanskritic concept—the ancient Hindu and, more particularly, Vedic deity Indra—as the festival’s focus of divine attention. Despite Slusser’s assertion of Indra’s place in the religious life of post-Vedic South Asia—“whereas in India Indra’s cult seems to have survived only to the tenth century, it is exactly from then that images of Indra begin to be abundant in Nepal” (1982: 1:267)—Indra is an ancient and moribund deity who has no temple or priestly infrastructure. But it is precisely his quality of being ancient that makes him a prime candidate for a festival that reinforces a self-consciously Hindu tradition and identity. There is no way Indra can be confused for or conflated with a divine being from any other religious tradition. Indra’s long-standing identity as a king and victorious combatant over primeval enemies—beginning with his victory over the primordial serpent Vṛtra in *Rig Veda* 1.32—helps define the specifically royal and hegemonic uses to which his festival has been put.

Though the use of the Indra festival as a literary and performative technique was applied infrequently, it attained a degree of consistency

that has shown the power that it continued to exert on court poets and their royal patrons, periodically across approximately one and a half millennia. More than simply a celebration of a particular deity or a moment in the agricultural calendar, performances of the Indra festival show that it is an explicitly Hindu response to potential incursions from religious others. In his study of the Shah dynasty, which revived the Indra festival in early nineteenth-century Nepal in the Buddhist Newar society of the Kathmandu Valley, Subho Basu refers to the ultimate Shah goal of “state-sponsored Hinduism,” asserting, “The quasi-feudal monarchical regime used religion to establish its hegemonic ideological presence in the political landscape” (Basu 2010: 111, 112). This “hegemonic ideological presence” refers to the (largely successful) attempts at national unification that the Shah family effected through techniques we now recognize as standard: the establishment of a single form of government (a monarchy), one language (Nepali), and one religion (Hinduism).¹⁵

This holy trinity of national unification has long been part and parcel of state formation in South Asia (and elsewhere), and the Indra festival has been at the vanguard of these Hindu-centered movements. During opportune times, ritualists, authors, poets, and priests have highlighted if not revived the festival, which publicly displays culturally resonant concepts, practices, and materials, transforming recognizable religious gestures into transhistorical acts of political power. Moreover, the explicit use of Hindu forms in performances of the Indra festival has regularly worked against Buddhist Others.¹⁶ The production of the epic *Mahābhārata* in the post-Aśokan period (Fitzgerald 2004), of the *Vishnudharmottara Purāṇa* among north Indian courts of the seventh century (Inden 1978), and of the *Indradhvajotsava Kathanam* from the Nepali Shah dynasty in the early nineteenth century are all examples of this conservative use of the Indra festival against Buddhist regimes, indicating to its audience the specifically Hindu-based hegemony these dynasties sought to produce.¹⁷ By viewing Nepal’s festival as a revival and as the endpoint of a particular performative lineage with multiple cultural points of origin—local Newar festivals, regional Himalayan *Mahābhārata* performances, and pan-South Asian Hindu forms—we can more easily see how the contemporary festival represents a concerted effort to continue this comprehensive performative tradition, despite local rites and readings that might seem to point elsewhere.¹⁸ If we

view these texts as part of a comprehensive Indra festival tradition and their authors as dependent on the ties between political patronage and Hindu sectarian affiliation, we should not be surprised when overt notions of imperialistic agendas and political hegemony interrupt an otherwise imaginative, mythological, or religious narrative.

The Chronology of the Indra Festival and an Introduction to the Chapters

The Indra festival has a fluid chronology that reflects its larger flexibility over time and helps us understand the main themes of this book. In Nepal, the most popular way of conceiving of the festival duration is to assert that it is an eight-day festival that begins when the pole goes up and ends when it is dropped, pulled away, and disposed of on the final day.¹⁹ By accounting for and troubling this seemingly simple fact, we can see more clearly how acts of revival and archaism have structured the festival throughout its history. Always bracketed by rites dedicated to the pole, the festival's fluid chronology helps us see how all of the festival's rites, even those that precede the pole's installation, are part of the comprehensive and archetypal Indra festival that celebrates both kingship and kinship.

The classical Sanskrit texts fit the festival into the fifteen days of the second, bright half of the autumnal month of Bhādrapad. The *Viṣṇudharottara Purāṇa* states that the royal coterie should proceed to the forest "on the first day of the bright half of Prauṣṭhapāda [Bhādrapad]" (2.155.4a). Lying on display on the outskirts of the city, the pole makes its ritual entrance into the core of city on Bhādra 8 and is installed on Bhādra 12, prominently remaining on display in the center of the city for another four days until the full-moon day at the end of the month (*pūrṇimā*, Bhādra 15).²⁰ Up to this point the classical and contemporary festival calendars are identical. With the classical texts unceremoniously lowering and disposing of the pole on the following day (Āśvin/Asoj 1), the festival thus occupies the entire bright half of Bhādra, from *pratipad* to *pūrṇimā*, neatly bounded by the dark halves of Bhādra and Asoj/Āśvin, inauspicious times typically devoted to rites to the ancestors.²¹

The contemporary Nepalese festival begins on Bhādra 2 and spills over into the first four days of the dark half of Asoj, thus cele-

brated over eighteen days. This difference is mainly due to the pole remaining upright in the center of the city for another four days (eight days total), with the festival concluding on the somewhat anomalous day of Asoj kṛṣṇa 4, a chronological shift that is quite evident in the Nepalese performance.²² Whereas the festival's first half (Bhādra śukla 12–15, the final four days of the month ending with the full moon) is full of activities, the festival's second half (Asoj kṛṣṇa 1–4, the first four days of the next month) is nearly devoid of any unique ritual activities. In fact, the only major activity that occurs in these final four days—aside from the pole's lowering (*pātana*) and disposal (*visarjan*), which must occur on the festival's final day—is the third and final chariot procession of Kumari that also occurs on the final day and is also seen locally as a later addition. There is no easy answer as to why the Nepalese festival continues into the month of Asoj. It is possible that the royal astrologers had wanted to accommodate the festival in a chronological scheme that maintains an eight-day duration with the pole's installation on Bhādra 12, although no documentation exists to support such a claim.²³

We do know that this new chronology was established in the early nineteenth-century Shah court of Kathmandu. Court astrologers in 1843 introduced the specific language of the five *sāit*, the festival's five core events that name and schedule the rites surrounding the pole (Pant 1995: 37, 39).²⁴ These times are now provided by the office of Śākhā Kāryālaya Kāṭhmadāuṃ (Branch Office of Kathmandu) of Gūṭhī Saṃsthān, the Nepali government office that funds local *guthi* organizations upholding facets of local and national heritage. For 2017 (V.S. 2074), the office provided the following *sāit* list, which I transcribe as follows. The first line of each *sāit* copies the official document as accurately as possible—with the name of the event, *gate* date of the Nepali secular calendar, day of the week, and time of day—while the second line provides a translation of the event name, *tithi* Hindu lunar festival date, and date from the Western calendar.

1. Ban Yātrā. Wednesday, Bhadra 7, 11:15 a.m.
 - Journey to the Forest. Bhādra śukla 2 (August 23)
2. Vṛkṣa-kartana. Wednesday, Bhadra 7, 7:33 p.m.
 - Cutting the tree. Bhādra śukla 2 (August 23)

3. Nagara-praveśa. Tuesday, Bhadra 13, 9:32 a.m.
 - Entrance into the city. Bhādra śukla 8 (August 29)
4. Indra-dhvajotthāna. Sunday, Bhadra 18, 8:15 a.m.
 - Raising the pole. Bhādra śukla 12 (September 3)
 Indrajātrā (talloṭol jātrā). Tuesday, Bhadra 20
 - Kumari's lower-city chariot procession (September 5)²⁵
 Māthilo ṭol jātrā. Wednesday, Bhadra 21
 - Kumari's upper-city chariot procession (September 6)
 Nānichā Yātrā. Sunday, Bhadra 25, nighttime of this day
 - Kumari's central-city chariot procession (September 10)
5. Indradhvajapatana. Sunday, Bhadra 25, 10:25 p.m.
 - Lowering of the pole, Asoj kṛṣṇa 4 (September 10)²⁶

In coining this language, the Hindu court astrologers made these events tally with the content of the Sanskrit textual tradition, helping establish the continuity of the revived Nepalese Indrajatra with its classical textual and performative forebears, thus bolstering the *asal Hindustān* and imperial successes of the Shah dynasty. As I read the classical Sanskrit textual record and the contemporary Nepalese performative tradition together as part of the same festival tradition, with each able to interpret the gaps and ambiguities in the other, this *sāit* structure, rather than being anachronistic, will be helpful for establishing, sequencing, and understanding the corresponding rites in both modes of the festival tradition. Each chapter will detail how ritual actors and agents in classical India and contemporary Nepal innovated around the archaic nature of the Indra festival and its central pole, adapting it to their sociocultural needs.

Chapter 1 details five Sanskrit texts, beginning with the rustic and archaic origin story at the start of the *Mahābhārata*, that use the Indra festival as a framing device for an aspect of social or cultural innovation in medieval India. Steeped in the classical textual tradition, this first chapter will observe changes effected by the classical festival in dharma, drama, royal power, architecture, and devotion, concluding

with a few observations on how the contemporary Nepalese festival similarly draws on these classical themes to highlight the capital city. This urban focus sets up much of the remainder of this book, as the city provides the locus for activities devoted to all of the festival's human and divine players.

Chapter 2 details the festival's first two *sāit*, the rural and royal rites of the Ban Yātrā (the Forest Journey) and the Vṛkṣa-karttana (the Cutting of the Tree) that connect the capital city with the jungles outside of the city. Chapter 3 covers the festival's three urban *sāit*, the rites of the Nagara-praveśa (the Entrance into the City), the Indra-dhvajotthāna (the Raising of Indra's Pole), and the festival's concluding Visarjan (the Disposal) that reify and celebrate the city. These movements of the pole celebrate the urban kingship for which the festival was classically known, while incorporating the parallel internal processions of the goddess Kumari throughout the many neighborhoods of Kathmandu's upper and lower halves.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus squarely on the early nineteenth century and the Shah revival of the Indra festival, each chapter handling one text produced in that period. Chapter 4 handles the text commonly known as the *Wright Vamsavali*, recently retranslated and republished in a multivolume critical edition. This chapter follows recent scholarship that considers the genre of the *vamśvalī* (chronicle) as more literary than historical and will investigate the twin applications in this particular text of the Indra festival and Kumari toward the origins of the Shah dynasty. Chapter 5 considers Śaktivallabh Arjyāl's *Indradhvajotsava Kathanam*, a text whose compilation of and commentary on classical Sanskrit texts, several of which appeared in chapter 1, supported the military incursions of the Shah dynasty and their intentions of constructing a single Nepali nation.

The Shah revival hardly resulted in a single uncontested meaning for the festival, however. The final two chapters attend to the many occasions when Kathmandu's festival diverts from or even challenges its classical focus on the urban king. Local Newar processions for the ancestors and celebrations of the power of the goddess frequently work together to highlight the ways the Indra festival draws on a common Himalayan fund of rhetoric, imagery, and performances connected to the *Mahābhārata*. Chapter 6 focuses on the local story of Bhairav and his victimhood at the hands of Krishna at the epic war in Kurukshetra as a way of thinking about political hierarchies in modern Nepal.

Chapter 7 concludes by considering the role of the ancestors led by Indra's powerful mother against a number of disparate epic elements brought together in Kathmandu's festival that simultaneously celebrates kingship and kinship. Rather than disrupting the festival and despite their absence from the *sāit* schedule, these events trace the multiple boundaries of the city and highlight Kathmandu's multiple royal histories, honoring the local powerful beings whose continued power sustains city and citizen alike. A brief conclusion analyzes the continued significance of the Indra festival in an ever-changing Nepal.

A Note on Language

In describing the contemporary Indra festival in Kathmandu, I use the term *Newar* to refer to those cultural elements specific to the Newar people of the Kathmandu Valley. I use the Nepali-language term *Nepali* to refer to non-Newar Parbatiya people whose Hindu religious culture, promoted by the Shah dynasty after their successful military invasions of the valley in the 1760s, is found throughout Nepal. I use the English-language term *Nepalese* to refer more generally to historical eras, places, and practices that are such a part of the modern nation that it is not possible or relevant to distinguish among ethnic or culture groups. Those readers for whom such a distinction is irrelevant are welcome to ignore it. Despite the difficulties in shifting—culturally, historically, and linguistically—between classical Sanskrit, contemporary Nepali, and Newar, I have attempted to maintain some consistency as I try to weave together these disparate but related cultures while adhering to standard spelling, transliteration, and diacritics, but some idiosyncrasies will doubtless remain.