

[The Red Parade Of Nepal](#)

Category : [December 1989](#)

Published by Anonymous on Dec. 01, 1989

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Jha, Hari Bansh If you think of Hinduism and Buddhism as two distinct religions, each having tidily protected its theology and practices from the other over time with neat white-picket fences, don't go to Nepal. For, should you, you would soon discover that here religious miscegenation is no sin. Buddhist and Hindu pantheons have been vigorously shuffled together like a deck of cards since Buddha's birth here in 567BCE. The most powerful picture of this hybridization occurs every spring when the nation's 90% Hindu population and Buddhists colorfully worship side by side during the magnificent, two-month-long Machhindranath festival. And this year's was the biggest in the festival's known 300-year history.

A towering - and sometimes teetering - 100-foot-high chariot is drawn along a two kilometer stretch in Kathmandu Valley each June and July. Unexpected overnight squalls often sink its wheels so deep in the mud-swollen road, days pass just unearthing it. But that's not really a problem. The ceremonies go on above as repairs go on underneath. Even the July deadline to reach Jawalekhal, the destination, can be extended if need be - e.g. when wheels actually break and need month-long repairs.

If you ask one of the hundreds of Hindu men hauling the fiery-red sacred cart who the God inside their Promethean shrine is, he would claim, "An incarnation of Vishnu." But if you ask one of the Shakya Bhikshu Buddhist priests who are recognized as Machhindranath's personal priests - and who officiate the pujas in the colossal tower along its route - they would reply, "Avalokiteswara," the feminized Compassionate Boddhisatva. If you asked a third, a Natha Saivite - three gleaming stripes of white ash plastered across his forehead with red dot between his eyes - he'll tell you: "Macchindranath is really the formidable Natha yogi, Matsyendranath." He is referring to Goraknath's guru who lived in the 10th century, revered by Hindus as one of the 18 great siddhars (yoga adepts) and by Buddhists as one of their 84 siddhars. Historically, after Matsyendranath's death, people metamorphosed him into God Machhindranath and Buddhists and Vaishnavites took him into their pantheons. Legend says that his undershirt (bhoto in Nepalese) was kept and saved. It is this shirt (now black velvet and jewel-studded) that rides

in the chariot beside a small murthi of Vishnu. On the last day of the parade, hundreds of thousands gather for darshan (sight) of the bhoto.

But if you want the simplest explanation, ask the devout peasants who surge up close to the slow-moving temple, offering sweets, grains and flowers to the priests. They would say, "Oh, this is Nepal's Patron Deity. He brings the rains to us each year, increases the fertility of our soil, loves and cares for us all - Gurkha, Newari, Buddhist or Hindu."

Nepal, before Tibet, was the favored haunt of great Himalayan yogis - a real mystic sanctuary and crossroads between China and India. Indo/Aryan and Mongoloid Buddhist and Hindu ascetics roamed the cool highlands gathering in remote monasteries. They shared their tantric secrets, knowledge of the Gods and spiritually served the populace incognito, employing powers many now pass off as fiction. Though today Nepal is officially a Hindu kingdom - legal divisions between Hinduism and Buddhism are law - the Macchindranath festival is vital testament to an older Nepal when religious boundaries were hard to maintain and great souls could attain the powers and position of Gods.

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