



Thus 'Viṣṇudevī' is a rather localized deity though the name looks quite Sanskritized. In order to grasp the identity of this deity it is necessary to pay attention to South Asian and indigenous aspects.

From the iconographic point of view, it is almost certain that the deity is Vaiṣṇavī, one of the Aṣṭamātrkā or eight mother goddesses<sup>4</sup>.



For example, Satungal Viṣṇudevī is standing in the middle of eight goddesses (represented only by their masks). They are Varahī, Kālikā, Kumārī, Mahālakṣmī, Indrayanī (or

Indrāṇī), Brahmayaṇī (or Brahmāṇī), Gaṅgāyaṇī, and Maheśvarī. Here Vaiṣṇavī, one of the ordinary members of the Aṣṭamātrkā, is absent and Viṣṇudevī joins as the central figure instead.

This Viṣṇudevī is a small but full-length statue with twelve arms and various ornaments. It forms a *bindu mudrā* with the first right and left hands, other left hands hold a shield, trident, mace, human head, and conch, and on its right hands are a sword, discus, *ḍamarū* drum, chopper, and flower. A small Garuḍa figure is squatting in front of the right leg of the goddess and there is a Garuḍa relief on the front side of the pedestal. These show fairly clearly that the deity can be identified as Vaisṇavī.

But the figure has some characteristics which make it different from ordinary Vaiṣṇavī. First of all, it is not treated here on a par with other Aṣṭamātrkā; it is the only full-length figure standing in the center of other goddesses (including Gaṅgāyaṇī not usually listed among the Aṣṭamātrkā). To have twelve arms is not so usual for Vaiṣṇavī; many images show Aṣṭamātrkā goddesses having two, four, or eight arms. On the other hand, it is not rare for the goddess Durgā to have more arms. In this regard Satungal 'Viṣṇudevī' holding a sword, shield, etc. bears some resemblance to Durgā. This figure is especially reminiscent of the goddess Taleju found on top of the *toraṇa* (gateway tympanum) of Taleju temple of the old Bhaktapur palace said to be 'depicted as Vaiṣṇavī or Viṣṇu's consort mounting on Garuḍa though it

makes a pose of Maḥiṣāsuramardīnī' (Tachikawa 1990: 25). Taleju is known to be a manifestation of Durgā. Thus Satungal Viṣṇudevī may also represent Durgā (Maḥiṣāsuramardīnī, buffalo-demon-killing goddess) in the form of Vaiṣṇavī.

In Satungal, I have come across no one to identify this goddess as Vaiṣṇavī. Besides, the sculptor in Patan who made the image of Satungal Viṣṇudevī keeps a record of his works in which the deity's name is clearly written as 'Viṣṇudevī'.

It is not easy to get a clear explanation from villagers what kind of deity this goddess is. The most ordinary explanation is that she is the deity who presides over everything in the village and who should be worshiped in many occasions including life cycle rituals, major calendric festivals, feasts (of peer artisans, at the time of harvest, etc.), initiations, and propitiation rituals. The senior-most Sesyaḥ elder who is in charge of the execution of the Viṣṇudevī Jātrā (festival) points out that Viṣṇudevī is Bhagavatī but wonders why, as he knows that the vehicle for Bhagavatī is Simha (lion) whereas Viṣṇudevī is attended by Garuḍa as is Viṣṇu. This elder's consideration is quite to the point if we take into account the above equation of Viṣṇudevī with Durgā (= Bhagavatī).

As for the deity's name, this elder says that Vaiṣṇuvī-devī, Vaiṣṇu-devī, and Viṣṇudevī are the same ('V' is interchangeable with 'B' in pronunciation and spelling). From this it is possible to surmise that Vaiṣṇavī-devī changed to Vaiṣṇuvī-devī and Vaisnu-devī, and finally to Viṣnudevī.

## Visnudevī Festival

The Viṣṇudevī Festival in Satungal, usually just called 'Jātrā (Festival)', is celebrated for several days in *śukla pakṣa* (the fortnight of the waxing moon) in Mārga month in the beginning of winter. Main activities during the Festival are as follows<sup>5</sup>.

Nyūtā (on *pañcamī*, 5th lunar day) – preparation.

Chwaylābhū (on *ṣaṣṭhī*, 6th lunar day) –  
'roasted meat festival' to perform a buffalo  
sacrifice, etc.

Mūyāḥ (on *saptamī*, 7th lunar day) –  
'main festival' to perform a secret sheep  
sacrifice, *homa*, etc.

Sinhayāh (on *aṣṭamī*, 8th lunar day) —

'tīkā festival' to carry the goddess to Baḥkhū and feed her with rice.

Sulaṃ (on *navamī*, 9th lunar day) – a day of rest.

Pwaṃkhaḥ (on *daśamī*, 10th lunar day) –  
'empty palanquin' to carry an empty  
palanquin within the village.

The animal sacrifices and the rice feeding ritual among the above are performed in Baḥkhū (Balkhū in Nepali) between Satungal and Kirtipur.

Baḥkhū is a *tīrtha* (sacred place, river confluence) where various deities are enshrined and cremation grounds are located. Chief among them is 'Viṣṇudevī' enshrined in a stone *pīṭha* with other Aṣṭamātrkā goddesses.

In the Festival, this stone Viṣṇudevī is covered with a metal mask. Said to be the mother of village deities around, she receives her children on this occasion. In the morning of *aṣṭamī*, four sibling deities are carried to Baḥkhū in order 'to meet their mother'. They are: Viṣṇudevī of Satungal, Viṣṇudevī of Machegaun each in a palanquin, and Bhairav of Bwasigaun and Bhairav of Lohnkot in the form of big rice-beer pots. After arriving at Baḥkhū they are placed in front of their 'mother' and are ritually fed with rice.

This rice feeding ritual, explained in kinship terms and related to day-to-day activities, contrasts with the sacrificial rituals. Performed at midnight by Sesyah (dominant caste) elders and specialized castes and in one case hidden from ordinary people, they show dominant caste's centrality, separation of specialists from laymen, and esoteric features. The rice feeding

ritual, on the other hand, is performed in the morning by elders in a bright daylight amidst many spectators and gives more open and familiar impression. The deities' image in this ritual is not that of blood thirsty goddesses but that of an intimate family; Satungal villagers say their Viṣṇudevī is the youngest daughter of Baḥkhū Viṣṇudevī, comes to sit on her mother's lap, and is fed at the end.

This festival, especially the visit to Baḥkhū Viṣṇudevī, forms a part of an inter-village festival called 'Nhaygāmyā Jātrā (Seven-village Festival)' in which neighbouring villages celebrate their festivals in a synchronized way. Kirtipur, Panga, and Nagaun are other member villages but they celebrate their festivals differently. For example, Panga Viṣṇudevī is



said to visit her mother Viṣṇudevī at nearby Bhajaṅgaḥ (Chobhar-Bhajangal, a place of *masān* or cremation ground). Bālkumārī, another important goddess in Panga, is also worshiped on the same occasion<sup>6</sup>. In Kirtipur the main deity in this festival is Indrayaṇī, and in Nagaun Bālkumārī. It is not known how these deities have come to be united in one festival but Herdick infers that some political power might have extended to this area from Kirtipur (Herdick 1988: 167).

## Bisen Devi, Besin Devi, and Viṣṇudevī

G.S. Nepali points out that Bisen Devi, the presiding deity of the village of Panga belongs to the class of goddesses called Mais or 'lower forms of Durga or Kali' (Nepali 1965: 310-11) <sup>7</sup>.

Her temple is situated at two different places – one in the centre of the village ... . In her aboriginal form, she has a temple at Bhajangle ... where she is supposed to preside over the crematorium. There she is



represented by a row of a few rounded stones (ibid.: 310-11).

The festival of Bisen Devi takes place on the eighth of the bright-half of Marga (Nov-Dec.). In fact it is composed of two different festivals in honour of two different goddesses — Bisen Devi and Bal Kumari (ibid: 351).

[G]oddesses Bisen Devi and Bal Kumari, worshipped in the village temple, are the respective sisters of Bisen Devi and Bal Kumari in the border temples. Thus the visit of these goddesses to the border temples is explained as the "meeting of two sisters." They also believe that the temples on the border of the village are the respective *maitees* (natal home ...) of these goddesses (ibid: 352).

People's explanations conflict with each other in minute points, which Nepali notes as 'curious' (ibid.). The goddesses in the village and on the border may



be sisters only. On the other hand, if the two sister goddesses meet at their natal home, they may do so to meet their mother (not mentioned above). Whatever the case, 'the mother goddesses ... are part of an interlocking kinship system in which they are also mothers and daughters, wives and sisters ...' (Slusser 1982: 341) and people have various versions to relate them.

No doubt, the deities Nepali is talking about here is the same as those I dealt with above as Panga Viṣṇudevī and Bālkumārī, though there is no mention of 'Viṣṇudevī' or Nhaygāmyā Jātrā in his book. As for the deity's name, we can find 'Bakhu Besin Devi' related to 'Nhyaya Gaya Jatra' in Anderson's book (Anderson 1971: 199). It might be possible that 'Bisen Devi', 'Besin Devi', and 'Viṣṇudevī' (Bishnudevi, Bismudevi)' all derived from 'Vaiṣṇavī(devi)' and interchangeable. But it is also possible that the name 'Bisen' or 'Besin' is more local in origin related to 'a frequent metamorphosis in the Kathmandu Valley, where venerable *ajimās* and *māīs* have taken on new names and a suitable iconography to conform with deities of the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon' (Slusser 1982: 349).

Names apart, the stone Viṣṇudevī and other goddesses in Baḥkhū and Bhajangaḥ almost surely inherit old and indigenous forms of mother goddesses. There might have been a period when they had not been merged with deities of the great traditions of South Asia. But this remains a mere conjecture. The characteristics of the goddesses we see today are inseparably mixed with those of great tradition goddesses such as Durgā, Kālī, and Devī. For example, they are located near cremation grounds and in favour of animal sacrifice. These features are known to be typical of those fierce great mother goddesses, though there is a possibility that they had been influenced by indigenous elements.

## Vaiṣṇavī among the Aṣṭamātrkā and Viṣnudevī

It is now well known that the Kathmandu Valley including the cities and villages are protected by mother goddesses (Slusser 1982: 344-9, Gutchow 1982, Toffin 1984, 2000). 'A fundamental role of the mother goddesses is as guardian protectors of Nepal Mandala, a task specifically devolving on the Mātrkās,

the collective manifestation of Durgā' (Slusser 1982: 344). The number of tutelary mother goddesses varies according the size of settlements; we have seen that Satungal has one tutelary goddess and Panga two. Toffin points out that Panauti has three main religious quarters each of which is protected by a mother goddess (Toffin 1984: 485). Much larger settlements like Thimi and the three cities have Aṣṭamātrkā rings encircling them.

Gutchow shows that Kathmandu is encircled by three (ideally) concentric rings of Aṣṭamāṭṛkā temples, the outermost of which encircles the Valley. These 24 (8 times 3) Māṭṛkā temples, he notes, are visited by Bajrācārya (*sic*) families in Kathmandu in one year in the interval of 14 days (Gutchow 1982: 22).

Each of the above concentric rings includes Vaiṣṇavī. In the middle circle, the place of the temple of Vaiṣṇavī is 'Balakhu khusī' ('khusī' means a small river). Situated to the west of Kirtipur, this certainly coincides with Baḥkhū Viṣṇudevī above. In the outermost circle, the place for Vaiṣṇavī is Yappā, the place where I pointed out above as the location of 'Viṣṇudevī'.

In these circles, each goddess is placed in her own direction: Vaiṣṇavī's direction is south-west. We have seen above that Viṣṇudevī temples are mainly found in the south-western area of the Kathmandu Valley. This overlap may again endorse that Viṣṇudevī is Vaiṣṇavī. But we should note at the same time that there are Vaiṣṇavī temples, *pīṭhas*, and figures not having the name 'Viṣṇudevī' in other places. Why this name is found in limited areas is a question still difficult to answer.

There is no mention of 'Viṣṇudevī' in Gutschow's book; the Aṣṭamātrkā goddess in Balakhu khusī and Yappā is just Vaiṣṇavī. From this we can guess that the name 'Viṣṇudevī' may not exist in the notion of the people (most probably learned Kathmandu Vajrācāryas) on whom Gutschow depended for information; their concern being focused on their city, and the village area including Panga, Satungal, etc. put out of their scope.

In Satungal, on the other hand, I have come across no one to talk about the above concentric divine rings of Mātrkā temples or Vajrācārya families' visit to them. For them, Bahḥkḥū Viṣṇudevī is important as the mother of Viṣṇudevī and Bhairav. What is emphasized is their familial relation as well as her

outstanding status rather than her role to protect Kathmandu (and other cities) together with other goddesses.

## Closing Remarks: with Conjectures

There is a system of paired shrines of *dya/hchē* (god house) and *pīṭha* in the Kathmandu Valley. Usually situated inside the city wall '[t]he *deocherṃ* serves as a special residence for the *pīṭha-devatās*' outside (Slusser 1982: 326, see also Toffin 2000: 67-8).

The network of deities in the area we have dealt with is similar to but different from this *dyaḥchē-pīṭha* system in that intra-mural deities of Satungal, Panga, etc. have their extra-mural counterparts in Baḥkhū and Bhajangah but that local people regard them as close kin. The system here is thus a combination of the *dyaḥchē-pīṭha* system and the divine kinship system.

We don't know much about the history of this system. But it is likely that extra-mural deities represented by stones predated intra-mural anthropomorphic statues and that they were connected to each other later, probably when the Mātrkā worship came into vogue, to adapt to the *dyāhchē-pīṭha* system and based on kinship logic. This must have given rise to small divine kin groups around *pīṭhas*.

The divine system of the Nhaygāṃyā Jātrā seems to have been constructed by integrating these pre-existing divine kin groups. As Herdick suggests, some political power must have been there to realize the integration. The main deities integrated are today called Viṣṇudevī (or Bisen (Besin) Devi), Bālkumārī, Indrayaṇī, and Bhairav. Whether Viṣṇudevī was Vaiṣṇavī at the beginning of the Nhaygāṃyā Jātrā cannot be determined. The names of the goddesses may not have been the same as those we come across today. In any case, Nhaygāṃyā Jātrā did not incorporate all of the Aṣṭamātṛkā and its network has been rather loose.

The Aṣṭamātrkā rings around Kathmandu, on the other hand, look quite systematic at least theoretically. A power based in Kathmandu must have worked for its completion. Absorbing and reordering many deities in the Valley, it tried to strengthen the center. It integrated main *pīṭhas* such as Baḥkhū but did not seem to have intervened in the local divine networks; Nhaygāmyā Jātrā continued having the Baḥkhū

1. This is a multi-caste Newar village, where Jyāpu (Maharjan) are the most populous and Sesyaḥ (Śreṣṭha, traditionally dominant in this village) come next. Nāy (Khaḍgī) occupy the third place in population but their number is small compared to the above two. There are other castes represented by one to a few households: they are Barmhu (Brāhmaṇ), Duiṃ (Putuwār), Kau (Nakarmī), Sāymi (Mānandhar), and Jugi (Kapālī). Nau (Nāpit) were invited to live here recently. Today many immigrants from inside and outside the Kathmandu Valley are living in the village. For the traditional occupations of the castes, see Ishii (1995: 116-7)
2. They include Bhagavān Buddha as well as Hindu deities such as Śiva, Nārāyaṇ (Viṣṇu), Gaṇeś, etc.
3. Viṣṇudevī in Bishalnagar is usually called 'Ṭuṇāldevī'. *Kathmandu Valley: A Protective Inventory* gives the name of the deity of Bishalnagar Ṭuṇāl Devī as Vaiṣṇavī (Pruscha & HMG, Vol. II, 1975: 106).
4. I have noted this point in my earlier paper (Ishii 1978: 509). Herdick writes 'Biṣṇu Devi (Vaiṣṇavī)' or 'Vaiṣṇavī (Viṣṇu Devī)' simply showing that B(V)iṣṇu Devī is Vaiṣṇavī (Herdick 1988: 103, 167). Pickett writes 'Vishnu Devi (Vaishnavi)' in his Table 1 (p. 248), but does not give any explanation to it and treats the two names separately in the text (p. 251).
5. See Ishii (1978) for the organization of the Festival and its change.
6. Panga Viṣṇudevī is enshrined together with Bālkumārī in a goddess house in the center of the village. She mounts a Garuḍa.
7. I have not come across the name so-and-so *māi* or *ajimā* applied to Viṣṇudevī. But this is not to deny that she can be classified among the *māi* or *ajimā* category.

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Toffin, G. 1984. *Société et religion chez le Néwar du Népal*.  
 Paris: Centre National de la Recherche  
 Scientifique.

Examples of the web pages dealing with Bishnu Devi:  
Satungal

<http://www.youtube.com/user/bishwombharaja>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yddzOVnNrfAj>  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8\\_M3EXZvU&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8_M3EXZvU&feature=related)

Panga  
<http://www.demotix.com/hub/bishnu-devi-jatra>

Kirtipur-Bhajangal- Panga  
<http://www.onlinekirtipur.com/inside/news/323-bis-hnu-devi-bhajangal-panga-temple-rebuild.html>

Baḥkhū (Tinthana)  
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Bishnu-Devi-Temple/145660965517127>

Seven-village Festival  
<http://www.raonline.ch/pages/np/visin/npfest01a.htm>

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-LK-E5GW\\_k&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-LK-E5GW_k&feature=related)