



The Chariot, Communities, and State: Negotiating Heritage Governance in the Bungadya Jatra

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Abstract

The Bungadya Jatra, also known as the Rato Matsyendranath Festival, is one of the most important living traditions in Nepal, dating back to the 7th century. While the local Newar community is still very much involved in keeping these rituals alive, the physical side of the festival is under a lot of pressure. The massive 60-foot wooden chariot, the traditional parade routes, and ancient objects are all being affected by changing government rules and the fast growth of cities. This research looks at the festival as a special case study, using policies and cultural observations from 2025. It also examines national laws and local city rules. The findings show that the main problems do not come from a lack of rules, but rather from too many different policies and organizations all trying to manage the same things. The study identifies a few major conflicts. For example, there is a constant struggle between keeping the chariot safe and dealing with new buildings that block its path. There is also a tension between the community's need to perform rituals freely and the government's desire to regulate everything. Essentially, protecting the Bungadya Jatra is a constant "negotiation." To keep this tradition going for future generations, the paper suggests that Nepal needs more coordinated policies that actually listen to local people and respect their traditional values.

Keywords: Guthi Governance, Heritage Policy, Living Cultural Heritage, Newar Culture, Urban Conservation

1. Introduction

The Bungadya Jatra, commonly known as the Rato Matsyendranath Jatra and Karunamaya Jatra, is one of the most enduring living traditions in Nepal, with a history reaching back to the 7th century AD. This detailed ritual is more than just a celebration; it represents a deep



connection between the Newar people's beliefs, the farming seasons, and a very advanced social system (Lohuizen & Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1969; Regmi, 1965). The deity Bungadya who is also known as Karunamaya is worshipped by both Buddhists and Hindus as the god of rain and a symbol of kindness. According to ancient myths, he was brought to the Kathmandu Valley through "tantric coercion"—a kind of spiritual trick used to make sure the god stayed to bring prosperity to the land (Owens, 1989).

The main feature of the festival is a huge, 60-foot wooden chariot. This is a brilliant example of traditional engineering because it is built using complex wooden joints without using a single metal nail. This design makes the structure flexible, which helps it survive the physical pressure of a long journey that can last from one to four months, depending on the lunar calendar. The parade eventually ends with the Bhoto Jatra in Jawalakhel, a major national event that shows how important this deity is to Nepal's identity (Anderson, 1971; Bernier, 1970).

This "living cultural system" stays alive thanks to a large network of families, communities and ritual groups organized under the traditional Guthi system. These groups are the main protectors of the Jatra, and they make sure the festival continues by dividing the work into specialized roles.

The Paneju Priests, consisting of people from the Shakya and Bajracharya families, look after the most important sacred rituals and the daily care of the deity. Meanwhile, the Barahi Guthiyar holds the special family duty of keeping the chariot strong, as they are in charge of all the timber and woodwork (Karki et al., 2024). Supporting the structure further, the Yawal Guthi experts work with the complicated rope and rattan frame and also serve as the main navigators who guide the chariot when it moves. The physical movement is handled by the Ghaku Community and the Jyapu Samaj, who have very physical jobs; the Ghaku manage the brakes, while the Jyapu Samaj provides the large group of people needed to pull the heavy 23-ton structure through the city.

Together, these groups protect "tangible" heritage—like the parts of the chariot, ritual tools, and the old paths it travels—as well as "intangible" heritage, such as traditional songs, chants, and special craft skills passed down through the generations (Katapidi, 2023). These community networks have been helped by the Guthi Sansthan, a government-linked organization that provides money for the rituals and helps find the special wood and rattan needed for the chariot (GS Annual Report, 2021). Because of this, the Jatra survives as a balance between ancient community traditions and the management of the modern state.

The management of the Bungadya Jatra involves a complex coordination between state laws, city policies, and local community leadership. To better understand these interactions, this study applies a three-part theoretical framework, starting with the Material-Based Approach (MBA) and the Living-Heritage Approach (LHA). The MBA primarily focuses on the physical preservation of the 60-foot chariot and the historic parade routes, often supported by the Ancient Monument Preservation Act (AMPA) of 1956 to protect historical objects (Karki et al., 2024). While this method emphasizes "saving physical things" through national and international standards (Subedi & Shrestha, 2023; Katapidi, 2023), the LHA shifts the focus toward the people. This perspective prioritizes the specialized skills of the Barahi carpenters



and the ritual knowledge of the priests, placing the local community at the heart of decision-making to ensure their traditions evolve naturally alongside modern society (Katapidi, 2023; Gwervevde, 2023).

Complementing these is the Value-Based Approach (VBA), which examines the cultural and symbolic meanings that stakeholders assign to the festival (Olukoya, 2021). This framework suggests that the true value of heritage lies not just in the physical objects, but in the "qualities people see," such as the social and historical significance of the event (Olukoya, 2021; Mason, 2019). In the context of the Bungadya Jatra, this includes the collective identity of the Newar community and the formal recognition provided by the state, particularly during high-profile events like the Bhoto Jatra when the President is in attendance. By analyzing the festival through these three lenses, the study highlights how the preservation of the chariot is a constant negotiation between physical safety, community rituals, and shared cultural values.

In modern Lalitpur, these three approaches often clash. For example, laws like the Local Government Operation Act give the city office (LMC) control over heritage areas and logistics. However, these "top-down" policies—which mostly care about the physical appearance of the city—often cause problems for the festival. The giant chariot must travel through narrow streets and past new high-rise buildings, creating a conflict between modern urban planning and ancient traditions (Katapidi, 2023). While the rituals remain strong, the physical parts of the festival are under pressure because government agencies often care more about static monuments, while local people represent a living, changing culture.

1.1 Governance Complexity and Fragmentation

As Lalitpur grows and becomes more modern, the ancient tradition of the Bungadya Jatra is facing a very complicated management situation. Because there are so many different organizations involved, it can be difficult to decide who is in charge of what. On one hand, the government uses laws like the Local Government Operation Act to give the Lalitpur Metropolitan City (LMC) control over heritage areas. This means the city manages things like cleaning and providing resources (Subedi & Shrestha, 2023).

At the same time, other government offices have different roles. The Guthi Sansthan is responsible for managing the money and physical objects of the festival (Karki et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the District Administration Office (DAO) works with the police and army to handle security and planning. Even with all these government offices, the local community groups, known as Guthis, are still the most important part of the festival. These family and professional groups are the ones who actually keep the rituals alive and pass down special skills (Pant & Pant, 2002).

Although these different groups usually work together, they also have disagreements. These conflicts usually happen because of narrow streets, traffic problems, or arguments over who has the final say in a decision (Amatya, 1987; Toffin, 2005). A good example of this was the recent rebuilding of the Bungmati temple. The project was delayed many times because it was difficult to follow the strict government rules from the Department of Archaeology while also trying to find the right traditional materials.



In the end, the biggest problem for the festival's future is not a lack of rules, but the fact that these rules often overlap or contradict each other. While the government often sees the Jatra as an old object that needs to be regulated, the local people see it as a living part of their identity that is still changing today (Katapidi, 2023).

1.2 Research Problem

There is a growing gap between official government conservation laws and the actual needs of this active festival. Most national laws, like the Ancient Monument Preservation Act (AMPA), focus on a "Material-Based Approach." This means they mainly protect static buildings and physical objects by creating protected zones (Poulios, 2014; Subedi & Shrestha, 2023). However, modern city life—such as new tall buildings, narrow streets, and underground pipes—often gets in the way of the 60-foot chariot's traditional path. This creates serious risks for both the structure of the chariot and the rituals themselves (Tiwari, 2007).

The conflict between traditional needs and modern city planning is seen clearly in the chariot's design. It is built using a flexible method without any metal nails, which makes it very sensitive to uneven roads or low-hanging power lines (Pant & Pant, 2002). Even though the festival is very famous, there is not much research on its cost, the workers involved, or how it is managed. The traditional economy of the festival is also struggling. This is because the government took over their traditional lands, which used to be their main source of income (Amatya, 1987; Karki et al., 2024).

Additionally, there is confusion about who is in charge. Different groups like the Department of Archaeology (DOA), the Lalitpur City office (LMC), and the Guthi Sansthan often face poor coordination when preparing for the festival (Toffin, 2005). This paper looks at how heritage is managed among these different organizations. While the government sees the festival as a regulated asset that needs to be controlled, the community sees it as a living part of their identity (Katapidi, 2023). Understanding this balance is essential for making sure the festival survives in the long term.

1.3 Research Question and Structure

The main goal of this research is to see how government rules and traditional community systems work together, or sometimes disagree, to keep the Bungadya Jatra alive in today's modern cities. To answer this question, the paper is divided into seven main parts.

Section 2 explains the theoretical ideas used in the study. It uses three different viewpoints—focusing on physical objects, living traditions, and cultural values—to look at the festival from all sides. After setting these ideas, Section 3 describes the research methods, which involved studying policies and observing the community in person.

In Section 4, we look at how the Jatra actually works by identifying the specific families and organizations that take part. Then, Section 5 examines the laws and government offices involved, especially how national heritage laws overlap with local city rules.

The most important part of the study is Section 6. This section analyzes how these different groups negotiate in real life and shows where they cooperate or clash on the ground. Finally, Section 7 brings all the findings together and offers specific advice for future policies. These suggestions aim to help this living tradition survive for many years to come.



2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review: Identifying the Governance Gap

Academic interest in the Bungadya Jatra has traditionally focused on its religious side and the meaning of its symbols. Early researchers like Anderson (1971) and Bernier (1970) wrote a lot about the festival's complex myths, how it blends Hindu and Buddhist identities, and its important role in bringing the Newar community together. Locke (1980) did foundational work by recording the urban heritage and rituals that give the city of Lalitpur its sacred character. Similarly, Owens (1989) examines the "politics of divinity" by exploring how the Bungadya Jatra serves as a site of negotiation between religious myth, Newar social identity, and the state's use of ritual to maintain political authority. However, while these studies show how culturally important the tradition is, there is very little research on the government policies involved in the festival.

More recently, scholars have started to look at how fast-growing cities affect these traditions. Tiwari (2007) noticed that modern city needs often conflict with traditional festival paths. At the same time, Dangol (2010) pointed out that traditional craft systems are disappearing because the economy is changing. Even with these observations, there is still not enough research on how government offices, like the Department of Archaeology (DOA), work together with traditional groups like the Guthi Sansthan. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on how heritage is managed within these overlapping legal and organizational systems.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: The Triangulated Lens

To understand the complex way the Bungadya Jatra is managed, this study uses a three-part analytical framework. This includes the Material-Based, Living-Heritage, and Value-Based approaches. This framework is a useful tool for explaining the disagreements and connections between government policies and the actual traditions of the community.

2.2.1 Material-Based Approach (MBA)

The Material-Based Approach (MBA) focuses on saving the physical parts of our heritage. In the case of the Jatra, this means looking after the physical condition of the temples, the special way the 60-foot chariot is built without nails, and keeping the traditional parade route clear. National rules, such as the Ancient Monument Preservation Act (AMPA), are perfect examples of this style. They create Protected Monument Zones and control new building work to make sure the physical structures are kept safe for people in the future.

2.2.2 Living-Heritage Approach (LHA)

The Living-Heritage Approach (LHA) focuses on the importance of the community, the continuation of rituals, and passing down knowledge from one generation to the next. This perspective shifts the attention to the active role of Guthi institutions and family groups, such as the Barahi carpenters and Paneju priests. These people keep the festival alive as a changing cultural system rather than just an old object from the past. It shows that the survival of the Jatra depends on the local community's ongoing participation and their specialized work in performing the rituals.



2.2.3 Value-Based Approach (VBA)

The Value-Based Approach (VBA) focuses on the cultural meaning and symbolic importance that people give to the festival. This includes the shared identity connected to the deity Karunamaya and the social and political commitment shown when government leaders attend events like the Bhoto Jatra. This approach is very important for explaining the problems that happen when modern city projects conflict with strong cultural beliefs or traditional values.

By combining these three perspectives, the study gives a complete view of the Bungadya Jatra. It connects physical challenges and community traditions with the wider management and government policies in Nepal today.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and policy-focused research method to look at the Bungadya Jatra as a "living cultural system." By using a descriptive approach, I have explored how official government rules meet the daily lives and traditions of the local community. This method is perfect for showing the complicated balance between top-down government orders and bottom-up cultural traditions. It focuses on understanding how things work in the real world based on local experiences.

3.1 Data Collection Methods and Sampling

The primary data for this study was collected using three different methods to get a balanced view of the legal, official, and cultural parts of the festival. First, I conducted a deep analysis of documents and policies. This involved looking at national laws, such as the Ancient Monument Preservation Act (AMPA) and the Guthi Act of 1976. I also reviewed local rules from the Lalitpur Metropolitan City (LMC), plans from the Guthi Sansthan, and historical records to understand how the government manages and coordinates the event.

To see how the tradition works in real life, I performed direct cultural observations during the festival cycles between March and May 2025. This fieldwork allowed me to record how the chariot is built, how it moves during rituals, and the physical problems it faces in the modern city, like nearby buildings and power poles. I also watched how the crowd was managed and the roles played by the Nepal Police, the Armed Police Force, and the Nepal Army.

Finally, the information was improved through interviews with eleven important people from different groups in May 2025. These interviews included experts like Dil Kumar Barahi, who talked about traditional woodworking, and Yagyaratna Shakya, who explained how rituals are managed. I also spoke with Mahendrananda Shakya about managing shrines after the earthquake. From the government side, I interviewed officers Lachhuna Sharma Kafle and Deepak Khawas regarding traditional record-keeping and logistics. Lastly, Bikash Man Shrestha from the city office provided information on how the city supports the festival's infrastructure.

3.2 Data Analysis Techniques

The data I collected was analyzed using a thematic approach to find common "tensions" and disagreements between official government laws and local community traditions. This part of the research involved creating a map of the different organizations to see exactly where the



responsibilities of the Department of Archaeology (DOA), Lalitpur City (LMC), and the Guthi Sansthan overlap and cause conflict.

Additionally, the research included an analysis of physical objects to check the condition of heritage sites, such as the temples in Patan and Bungamati. I looked at whether these structures were being kept in good condition according to traditional methods.

Finally, I conducted an assessment of "intangible" heritage. This meant looking at how traditional knowledge and craft skills—especially those of the Barahi and Yawal families—are being preserved or lost because of modern challenges like fast city growth and people moving away for work.

3.3 Positionality and Ethical Considerations

This study focuses on "local groundedness" by keeping traditional terms—such as Bungadya, Guthiyar, Paneju, and Bhoto Jatra—to make sure the culture is described accurately. Ethical issues were also carefully managed throughout the research. First, the study was transparent; all participants were told about the goals of the research and gave their consent to take part. Additionally, special care was taken to treat sensitive ritual knowledge and traditional caste roles with great cultural respect. Finally, the research methods acknowledged the researcher's own perspective when comparing local cultural traditions with government orders. This complete approach ensures that the findings show the real challenges of keeping a centuries-old tradition alive in a fast-changing city.

4. The Bungadya Jatra as a Living Heritage System

The Bungadya Jatra relies on a very specialized network of families and ritual groups who have passed down their roles through many generations. These groups protect "tangible" items—like the different parts of the chariot and the sacred paths it follows—as well as "intangible" heritage, which includes traditional knowledge and special craft skills (Amatya, 1987; Toffin, 2005).

4.1 Hereditary Roles and Operational Responsibilities

The success of the Bungadya Jatra depends on the traditional Guthi system, where specific groups have family duties they have performed for generations. At the heart of the festival's physical work is the Barahi Guthiyar. They are the only ones allowed to do the timber and woodwork for the 60-foot tall chariot. They use traditional methods to join wood without using any metal nails (D. K. Barahi, personal communication, May 23, 2025).

This community handles everything from finding the wood to building and taking apart the chariot base each year. These skills are taught by word of mouth, but the group is currently struggling financially because they no longer earn as much money from their traditional lands (Karki et al., 2024). During my 2025 visit, I confirmed that the chariot base is still built using these ancient wooden joints¹.

The religious heart of the festival is managed by the Paneju (Priest) Community. These priests, from the Shakya and Bajracharya families, are the protectors of rituals related to rain and

¹ Field observations conducted by the author between March and May 2025 during the chariot construction phase in Lalitpur.



agriculture (Locke, 1980). They are organized by the Paneju Sangh, which runs a rotation system and ensures all priests follow a strict code of conduct (Y. Shakya, personal communication, May 5, 2025). During the 2025 festival, I observed the Paneju Sangh actively managing these rotations and enforcing the rules².

Another essential group is the Yawal Guthi. These specialists handle the complex rope and rattan parts of the chariot and serve as guides when it is in motion. They assist the priests, place the deity inside the chariot, and care for sacred objects (B. Yawal, personal communication, May 10, 2025). They also organize volunteers and act as a link between the state and the local community. The physical movement of the chariot is handled by two other teams: the Ghaku Community manages the brakes, while the Jyapu Samaj provides the large group of people needed to pull the massive structure (Nepali, 1965).

Finally, other specialized groups help keep social and religious traditions alive. For example, a committee organizes a specific event where only women pull the chariot³. The Sa: Guthi, led by their leaders known as Naikes, is also vital for keeping the festival conserved by protecting traditional ornaments and decorations of the deity (M. Shakya, personal communication, May 15, 2025).

4.2 Socio-Cultural Significance and Sacred Geography

The festival is deeply connected to the beliefs and social identity of the Newar communities. The Jatra started with a legend about bringing rain back to a valley suffering from a dry spell. This belief is so strong that local people still believe it will definitely rain during the festival (Doig et al., 1999). During my 2025 visit, I noticed that residents still hold onto this belief. During my 2025 field visit, it rained exactly during the period when the community expected it, confirming the deeply held belief in the deity's power to provide for the farming season⁴.

Furthermore, the path the festival takes serves as a religious boundary where the government's involvement is very important. This is shown by the fact that the President of the country must attend the Bhoto Jatra, and the Nepal Army (Guraju Paltan) plays a ceremonial role. Traditional Guthi organizations keep things running using their own handwritten record books (lagat) (L. S. Kafle, personal communication, May 20, 2025). These records are usually kept by the Guthi themselves and are only given to the National Archives if specifically requested.

How different organizations work together is quite complicated. The Lalitpur Metropolitan City (LMC) looks after heritage zones and manages basics like cleaning. Meanwhile, the District Administration Office (DAO) organizes meetings for a Festival Management Committee to plan for security. Various security forces, including the Nepal Police, Armed

² Field observation conducted by the author on May 5, 2025, during the ritual rotation phase in Lalitpur.

³ Field observation conducted by the author during the specific 'Yakah Misaya Bhujya' (women-only pulling event) in 2025.

⁴ Field observation conducted by the author in May 2025, noting community discourse during a rainfall event during the festival.



Police Force (APF), and the Nepal Army, help to control the large crowds⁵. Finally, communication between different cities is essential. For example, people from Kirtipur are traditionally responsible for pulling the chariot from Lagankhel to Jawalakhel, and the Kirtipur Municipality coordinates the sacred connection to Yaaka Misa⁶.

4.3 Urban and Infrastructural Challenges

Modern city life creates big risks for the future of the festival. During my 2025 visit, I saw the 60-foot chariot moving through very narrow streets, past new concrete buildings and power poles. These modern structures make it much more likely that the chariot will hit something and be damaged⁷.

City construction projects, such as building drains, sewers, or electrical lines, often get in the way and slow down the chariot's journey (Tiwari, 2007)⁸. Additionally, there are problems with rules not being followed, such as people putting up illegal electric poles or building structures that block the narrow paths where the parade must pass⁹.

4.4 Social and Cultural Transmission

Even though there are many modern pressures, the process of passing down heritage is still very active (Katapidi, 2023). During my 2025 visit, I saw Bajracharya and Shakya youths being trained in traditional ritual chants. At the same time, experienced artisans were teaching younger people essential skills like woodworking and weaving¹⁰.

Younger people are also using technology to help by digitally recording the rituals, which helps make the festival more famous online. Additionally, local residents take an active part in the preparations by repairing their courtyards, local shrines, and streets before the festival begins¹¹.

5. Legal and Institutional Landscape

The management and protection of the Bungadya Jatra take place within a very complicated system of laws and organizations in Nepal. In this environment, national laws, city rules, and traditional community traditions all meet. This creates a situation known as "fragmented governance," where it is often unclear exactly where the government's power ends and the community's traditional authority begins.

⁵ Field observation of the inter-agency security briefing and crowd control deployment at Jawalakhel, 2025.

⁶ Field observation of the chariot pulling transition and the ritual arrival of the Kirtipur delegation, 2025.

⁷ Field observation conducted by the author in April 2025, documenting physical obstructions in the Gabahal and Pulchowk sections of the route.

⁸ Field observation noting construction debris and open trenches causing logistical delays for the chariot pulling teams, 2025.

⁹ Field observation of private property encroachments and unauthorized utility poles along the ritual path in Lalitpur, 2025.

¹⁰ Field observation conducted by the author in April 2025, documenting apprenticeship sessions at the chariot construction site and local bahals.

¹¹ Field observation of community-led maintenance of private and public sacred spaces in Patan and Bungmati prior to the deity's arrival, 2025.



5.1 National Legal Frameworks and Overlapping Jurisdictions

The management of the festival is mainly controlled by three important laws that explain how the government deals with living heritage. The Ancient Monument Preservation Act (AMPA, 1956) is the main rule for protecting heritage. It uses a "Material-Based Approach," which gives the Department of Archaeology (DOA) the power to create Protected Monument Zones. While this law protects physical buildings, it is often difficult to apply to the changing needs of a moving festival (Poulios, 2014; Subedi & Shrestha, 2023).

The Guthi Act (1976) is another key part of the system. This law manages the Guthi Sansthan, which is a government-linked organization that looks after ritual property and money. This act turned community lands into state-regulated assets, which has led to a decrease in the traditional income used for rituals over the years (Karki et al., 2024; Amatya, 1987).

Finally, the Local Government Operation Act (2017) shows a change in how things are run. This newer law has moved power away from the central government, giving the Lalitpur Metropolitan City (LMC) more control over city logistics and infrastructure within heritage areas.

5.2 The Bridging Role of the Lalitpur Metropolitan City (LMC)

In real life, the Lalitpur Metropolitan City (LMC) acts as an important bridge between strict government laws and the changing needs of the Guthi communities. The LMC handles the modern city tasks that the traditional groups cannot manage by themselves, such as cleaning up large amounts of waste, fixing roads, and sharing resources (B. M. Shrestha, personal communication, May 31, 2025).

To reduce the risks caused by city growth, the LMC works together with the District Administration Office (DAO) and utility companies. They manage overhead power lines and traffic flow while the parade is moving. This "administrative help" is necessary to stop the 60-foot chariot from hitting modern structures like poles or wires¹².

5.3 Operational Support of the Guthi Sansthan

Even though there have been disagreements because the government took over traditional lands, the Guthi Sansthan is still the main organization that provides the materials needed for the festival. This group has the difficult job of finding special raw materials, such as specific types of wood and rattan. To do this, they often have to work closely with the Ministry of Forest (D. Khawas, personal communication, May 12, 2025).

Additionally, the organization acts as a financial protector by managing the lagat, which are traditional handwritten record books used to track money spent on rituals. Keeping records this way is a source of pride and helps keep everyone involved accountable (L. S. Kafle, personal communication, May 20, 2025)¹³.

¹² Field observation conducted by the author in May 2025, documenting the coordinated lifting of overhead fiber-optic cables and temporary traffic diversions in Lalitpur.

¹³ Field observation conducted by the author on May 20, 2025, while reviewing the storage and maintenance of physical ledgers at the Guthi Sansthan office.



5.4 International Norms and Local Practice

Because Nepal has signed the UNESCO 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, the government is officially required to make community involvement a priority. This situation supports the "Living-Heritage Approach" (LHA).

As a result, organizations like the Lalitpur Metropolitan City (LMC) and the Department of Archaeology (DOA) are starting to realize that the true value of the festival is found in the community's special skills. For example, the unique way the Barahi artisans build the chariot without using any metal nails is seen as more important than just the physical objects themselves (Katapidi, 2023).

6. Analysis: Negotiating Heritage in Practice

The protection of the Bungadya Jatra is a constant "negotiation" where the community's living traditions often push back against and change the government's focus on physical objects. Using a three-part framework, the following sections look at the main conflicts between traditional ways and modern city rules. This analysis is based on information from interviews and observations made during the 2025 festival.

6.1 Material Integrity vs. Urban Encroachment

The physical survival of the 23-ton, 60-foot chariot is becoming more difficult because of how fast Lalitpur is growing. The chariot has to travel through narrow streets and past new concrete buildings in areas like Gabahal and Pulchowk. During my 2025 visit, I saw the chariot moving through these tight spaces, where overhanging balconies made it very likely that the structure would hit a building (Tiwari, 2007).

The strength of the chariot is maintained by the Barahi and Yawal Guthiyar. They keep the structure safe by using traditional wooden joints that allow the chariot to be flexible but stable. My observations in 2025 confirmed that the wooden base is still made entirely with these traditional methods¹⁴. The community refuses to use modern steel parts, even if it might be safer, because they believe using modern technology would ruin the religious meaning of the festival (Owens, 1989; D. K. Barahi, personal communication, May 23, 2025).

Additionally, modern utilities like overhead internet cables and electricity poles are a major problem. In 2025, I noticed that tall buildings often forced the team to stop for emergency repairs¹⁵. These delays cause problems because they clash with the strict schedule of the rituals (Pant & Pant, 2002).

6.2 Ritual Autonomy vs. State Regulation

The conflict between the Living-Heritage Approach (LHA) and official government rules is most clearly seen in the festival's paperwork and management. Under Section 4 of the AMPA law, traditional rituals do not need government permission to take place. This actually helps protect living traditions within a law that usually only focuses on buildings (Subedi & Shrestha,

¹⁴ Field observation conducted by the author in May 2025, documenting the assembly of the chariot base at Pulchowk using traditional timber-joinery.

¹⁵ Field observation noting several logistical pauses for wire management and pole clearance during the chariot's movement through Gabahal, 2025.



2023). However, during my 2025 visit, I noticed that confusion over whether the Department of Archaeology or the City Office is in charge of the construction of the Bungmati Temple had caused delays¹⁶.

Getting the right materials is another area where the state and the community must work together. The Guthi Sansthan has to coordinate with the Ministry of Forest to get wood and with the Yawal Guthi to get rattan (B. Yawal, personal communication, May 10, 2025). Observations during the 2025 festival showed how difficult it is to transport these heavy materials into the crowded center of the city¹⁷.

Finally, the way the community acted after the 2015 earthquake shows how fast local groups can move. Local Communities took the lead in looking after temporary shrines. I confirmed through my observations that these community groups still work much faster than government offices to make sure the rituals continue in these temporary spaces (M. Shakya, personal communication, May 15, 2025).

6.3 Funding Traditional Knowledge in a Modern Economy

There is a major conflict between the Value-Based Approach (VBA) and the changing financial situation today. When the government took over Guthi lands, the Barahi Guthiyar became economically weaker, which has put their training systems for young people at risk (Amatya, 1987). During my 2025 visit, I saw that while some young people are still enthusiastic on learning traditional skills, due to financial needs they are switching to alternative professions¹⁸. The management of information serves as another significant point of negotiation between state systems and community practices. The Guthi Sansthan maintains institutional accountability through the use of lagat, which are traditional, handwritten record books used to track ritual expenses and land holdings. My observations in 2025 confirmed that these physical ledgers remain in the direct custody of the Guthi Corporation, acting as a primary source of authority (L. S. Kafle, personal communication, May 20, 2025)¹⁹. In contrast to these formal, state-linked records, local communities are increasingly adopting modern technology to preserve their heritage. By recording ritual affairs in video and various digital formats, the Newar youth are creating a parallel, community-led archive that ensures the festival's visibility and continuity in the digital age.

Additionally, what some call the "Jyapu Usurpation" shows how living heritage is always changing. My observations in 2025 confirmed a shift in power, as young Jyapu men have taken

¹⁶ Field observation conducted by the author in May 2025, recording administrative pauses caused by overlapping municipal and archaeological jurisdictions along the chariot route.

¹⁷ Field observation documenting the logistical transport of timber and rattan bundles through the dense urban core of Patan, 2025.

¹⁸ Field observation conducted by the author in May 2025, recording a decrease in the number of active youth apprentices at the woodworking workshops.

¹⁹ Field observation conducted by the author on May 20, 2025, documenting the physical handling and manual verification of the lagat books during a festival coordination meeting.



the lead in pulling the chariot. This shows how the community is changing traditional ritual roles to fit modern social needs (Owens, 1989)²⁰.

6.4 Synthesis of Negotiations

The survival of the festival depends on how these three approaches work together. While government programs protect the physical structures by providing infrastructure support, my observations show that the community is still the main reason the Jatra stays alive. This is seen through the work of safety volunteers and meetings between different groups, such as the Nepal Police, the Armed Police Force, and the Army (B. M. Shrestha, personal communication, May 31, 2025; Katapidi, 2023)²¹.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The protection of the Bungadya Jatra in Lalitpur is a changing and complex process. It is a place where local living traditions constantly have to work and balance with government rules that focus mostly on physical buildings. This study shows that the festival survives not just because of religious rituals, but because of a complicated mix of official laws, city planning, and the traditional care provided by local families.

7.1 Synthesis of Findings

The application of the triangulated analytical framework reveals the following core insights. Regarding the Material-Based Approach (MBA), laws like the Ancient Monument Preservation Act (AMPA) and the actions of the Lalitpur Metropolitan City (LMC) successfully protect the physical parts of the chariot and the temples. However, their focus is mostly on buildings that do not move. My observations in 2025 showed a major problem: these rules do not consider the needs of the 60-foot tall chariot as it moves. As a result, the chariot often gets stuck in modern city bottlenecks (Subedi & Shrestha, 2023; Tiwari, 2007).

The Living-Heritage Approach (LHA) is still the most important factor for keeping the festival going. Even though the government taking over Guthi lands has caused financial problems (Amatya, 1987), family groups like the Barahi carpenters, Yawal Guthiyar and Paneju priests keep the tradition alive. They do this through their own rules and by teaching younger generations by word of mouth. In 2025, I confirmed that skills like woodworking and religious chanting are still being taught, although these traditions are at risk (Katapidi, 2023).

Finally, the Value-Based Approach (VBA) shows how the symbolic meaning of the Jatra brings the government and the Newar community together. The fact that the President must attend the Bhoto Jatra proves that the deity is part of the national identity. At the same time, the local community protects their sacred traditions through active involvement and by using digital tools to record the events²².

²⁰ Field observation of the chariot pulling phase, documenting the increased organizational leadership and physical participation of the Jyapu youth, 2025.

²¹ Field observation conducted by the author in May 2025, attending a multi-stakeholder security and logistics meeting involving community leaders and national security forces.

²² Field observation conducted by the author in May 2025, documenting community-led digital archiving and youth participation during the Bhoto Jatra ceremony.



7.2 Challenges to Long-Term Sustainability

Major challenges are currently putting the future of the Jatra at risk. A main concern is the lack of coordination between different organizations. Because groups like the Department of Archaeology (DOA), Lalitpur City (LMC), and the Guthi Sansthan have overlapping responsibilities, it often leads to confusion and long delays. I clearly saw this problem during the rebuilding of the Bungmati temple²³.

Furthermore, there is a serious conflict between modern city life and traditional rituals. This happens because the flexible, nail-less design of the chariot does not fit well with the hard concrete buildings of modern Lalitpur. This mismatch leads to regular risks of the chariot getting damaged or the rituals being interrupted (Pant & Pant, 2002).

Finally, financial problems are making it hard to keep the traditional work system going. The steady drop in income for these rituals means that traditional craftsmen can no longer afford to spend several months at low budget available from Guthi Corporation focusing entirely on building the chariot, which is necessary for the festival to be successful (Karki et al., 2024).

7.3 Policy Recommendations

To protect the Bungadya Jatra as a living cultural system, several policy changes are recommended. First, there is a need for better management through a single Festival Management Authority. This group would combine the city planning of the Lalitpur Metropolitan City (LMC) with the traditional work of the Guthis and government supervision from the Department of Archaeology (DOA) and Guthi Sansthan (GS). This would make the decision-making process much smoother.

Second, the study suggests better planning for city infrastructure by officially naming the parade path a "Mobile Heritage Corridor." Inside this area, all upgrades to utilities—like overhead wires and underground pipes—must follow the specific height and weight needs of the chariot to avoid physical accidents. To help with money problems, the government should start a "Living Human Treasures" program. This would give financial support and technical help directly to the Barahi, Yawal, Paneju, Ghaku and several local community groups, making sure their special skills do not disappear.

Finally, there should be a strong effort to record institutional memories digitally. Helping the Guthi Sansthan put their records into a digital format would make records clearer while still allowing the Guthis to keep control of their own data.

In conclusion, the Bungadya Jatra is a strong but struggling system. Its future depends on moving from a model that only protects physical buildings to a "living heritage" model that gives more power to the community members at its heart.

Declarations

Funding: The research and fieldwork for this study were carried out independently. I did not receive any specific grants or financial help from the government, businesses, or non-profit organizations for this work.

²³ Field observation conducted by the author in May 2025, documenting the stalled progress and administrative confusion at the Bungmati temple reconstruction site.



Conflict of Interest: The author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, writing, or publishing of this paper. This means there are no financial or personal ties with government groups like the Department of Archaeology (DOA), the Guthi Sansthan, or the Lalitpur Metropolitan City.

Ethics Statement: This study is based on an analysis of official policies and observations of public festival events. All traditional terms and local knowledge have been treated with great respect for the Newar community's traditions. When I used personal information from community members, I made sure they were informed about the purpose of the research and that their privacy was protected according to standard research ethics.

Data Availability Statement: The data that supports the findings of this study—including city documents and field observation records from 2025—can be requested from the author. However, access will depend on making sure the community's sensitive ritual traditions are protected.

Glossary of Terms

Bungadya: The indigenous Newar name for the deity of the Rato Matsyendranath festival, worshipped as the provider of rain and prosperity.

Rato Matsyendranath: The Sanskrit designation of the deity, common within Hindu and broader Nepalese contexts.

Karunamaya: A Buddhist title for the deity, meaning "The Compassionate One," highlighting the syncretic nature of the worship.

Jatra: A traditional festival characterized by a public procession, often involving a large chariot.

Bhoto Jatra: The "Festival of the Vest," the final major ritual of the cycle where a sacred garment is displayed to the public in the presence of the Head of State.

Guthi / Guthiyar: A unique socio-economic institution based on land trusts; a Guthiyar is an active member with hereditary responsibilities.

Paneju: The hereditary priests, primarily from the Shakya and Bajracharya families, who perform the inner sanctum rituals for Bungadya.

Barahi: The guild of hereditary carpenters who specialize in the structural woodwork and nail-less joinery of the chariot.

Yawal: The specialized group responsible for the rope-work and rattan bindings that provide the chariot its structural flexibility.

Ghaku: Community members specifically assigned to manage the wooden brakes during the chariot's movement.

Jyapu / Jyapu Samaj: The traditional farming community of the Kathmandu Valley who provide the collective labor required to pull the 23-ton chariot.

Lagat: Traditional, handwritten ledgers used by Guthis and the Guthi Sansthan to track ritual expenditures, history, and land holdings.

BS (Bikram Sambat): The official lunar calendar of Nepal; for example, 2013 BS corresponds to 1956 AD.



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