

Inhumane slaughter at the Gadhimai Festival

Background to the festival

The world's biggest animal sacrifice festival, Gadhimai, is held every 5 years in Southern Nepal. Estimates of a quarter of a million animals are slaughtered during the festival. Animals are imported from all over Nepal and from India for this festival. The handling and slaughter is brutal. The month long festival is held in the month of Mangsir (November / December) once every five years to worship the goddess Gadhimai. The animal sacrifice takes place over two days during the festival period and starts with the temple's head priest performing ritual sacrifice called Panchabali which includes the sacrifice of white mice, pigeons, roosters, ducks, swine and male water buffaloes. This year, the sacrifice will take place on the 28th and 29th of November.

The Gadhimai festival has its origins in the 18th century with a feudal landlord Bhagwan Chaudhary and a village healer adept in the Hindu occult, Dukha Kachadiya. Bhagwan Chaudhary was imprisoned at Makwanpur fort prison 260 years ago. While imprisoned Chaudhary dreamed that his problems would be solved if he made a blood sacrifice to Gadhimai, in other words if he sacrificed an animal. Immediately upon his release from prison Chaudhary took advice from Kachadiya. According to tradition at the time of Chaudhary's sacrifice, a light appeared in an earthenware jar and the gory sacrifice began and has continued every five years for the last 265 years.

Millions of people from India flock to the festival to circumvent laws against animal sacrifice in their own states. Tens of thousands of buffalo are killed in large open-air pens, where they have their heads hacked off, after having their leg tendons cut to bring them to the ground. Thousands of goats, pigs, chickens and other animals are also slaughtered at the festival. Gadhimai and other slaughter festivals in Nepal are currently subsidized by the government, with over £36,500 donated towards the last Gadhimai festival in 2009.



A young water buffalo lies surrounded by the dead bodies of others while one is butchered nearby.
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An example of the way water buffalo can be transported, potentially over long distances.
© People for Cattle in India



A water buffalo is about to be beheaded.
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Welfare Concerns

Transport

Many animals sacrificed at Gadhimai Festival are likely to have been transported very long distances. It is widely accepted that long distance transport is extremely stressful for animals. The investigations of animal welfare charities around the world have also shown that the mode of transport can be extremely cruel, with animals crammed into vehicles with little or no access to food or water for up to days at a time.

Holding

With estimates of a quarter of a million animals slaughtered at Gadhimai Festival, animals must be held in large groups in preparation for slaughter. The tens of thousands of buffalo sacrificed are held in a giant pen for many days before the festival with extremely limited access to food or water. Not only will animals suffer as a result of insufficient food and water, but being surrounded by unfamiliar animals in a crowded environment will be extremely stressful for the buffalo. In any situation where animals are held in a high-stress, crowded environment for a long period of time their susceptibility to disease and illness quickly increases, especially in cases where animals are mixed with animals from other farms or even countries.

Slaughter

At the Gadhimai Festival animals are slaughtered by beheading. In the festival it is not possible to restrain animals suitably for slaughter and reports have stated that some animals have the tendons in their legs cut in order to bring them to the ground in readiness for slaughter. Being immobilized in such a way will not only be extremely painful but being suddenly unable to move will cause very high stress and fear levels. Furthermore reports have suggested that in many cases it is not possible to behead the animals in one swift motion, and the animals instead have their necks cut at multiple times until they are severed from the body. This will cause extreme pain and fear until the point at which the animal loses consciousness.



A young goat that died at the festival before reaching the point of sacrifice. © Roving Eye Film



This piglet's head was cut from its body using a small knife. © Animal Welfare Network Nepal