

Rituals followed by Newaras of Kathmandu Valley

Mala Malla¹

Nepal lies on the lap of The Newaras are the indigenous people and the creators of the historical civilization of Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. The Valley and surrounding territory have been known from ancient times as Nepal Mandala.

Newaras have lived in Nepal Mandala since very early times, and immigrants that arrived at different periods in its history eventually merged with the local population by adopting their language and customs. Newaras are a linguistic and cultural community of mostly Tibeto-Burman and some Indo-Aryan ethnicities. Scholars have also described the Newaras as being a nation.

Scholars in this field have consensus that Newaras were originally interconnected to the ancient Kirat people (Kiratis). Stone Age, prehistoric tools found by Anatoly Yakoblave Shetenko (Leningrad Institute of Archaeology) date back to 30,000 years ago, matching prehistoric tools unearthed in China's Gobi Desert and Yunnan. According to Nepal's 2001 census, the 1,245,232 Newaras in the country are the nation's sixth largest group, representing 5.48% of the population.

Newaras practice Hinduism as well as Buddhism. Those who followed Hinduism, they keep Rajopadhyaya as their priest and Vajracharyas by Buddhists. They have their own culture, followed their own festivals that are unique in the world.

Newara culture is very rich in pageantry and ritual throughout the year. Many festivals are tied to Hindu holidays, Buddha's birth and the harvest cycle. The important Newar festivals are "Mha Puja", celebrated on the occasion of the New Year as per local calendar (Nepal Sambat), Bisket Jatra celebrated on the first of Baisakh and many more. One of the important festivals celebrated by Newar people is Gunhu Punhi. During this nine-day festival, Newar men and women drink a bowl of sprouted mixed cereals and offer food to frogs in the farmers' fields. On the second day, Sa Paru (Gai Jatra), people who have lost a family member in the past year dress up as cows or anything comical and parade through town, a ritual carried by a king to show his queen that not only his son died but other people die too. The last day of Gunhu Punhi is Krishnastami, the birthday of lord Krishna, an incarnation of lord Vishnu.

Many rituals relate to the stages of life stages from birth, first rice-feeding, childhood, puberty, marriage, seniority and death. The complexity and all-encompassing nature of these rituals cannot be exaggerated. For instance, Newar girls undergo a Bahra ceremony when

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they reach menarche. Because menstruation is considered ritually impure, girls undergo ritual confinement for 12 days. Girls are separated from all males and from sunlight for 12 days while they are doted upon by female relatives. On 12th day the girl must pay homage to the sun.

Should a Newar man or women live long enough, there are five rituals, known as 'janku,'—which can be confusing, as the first rice feeding ceremony of a child is referred to as 'janku' as well—performed between the age of 77 and 106. Thus, at the age 77 years, 7 months, 7 days; 83 years, 4 months, 4 days (after one has seen 1000 full moons in one's life); 88 years, 8 months, 8 days; 99 years, 9 months, 9 days; and, finally, at 105 years, 8 months, 8 days. After these rituals are performed, the person will be regarded as a god. Husband and wife will perform their rituals together, as the events occur for the husband.

Here are some of the rites and rituals

Elaborate ceremonies chronicle the life cycle of a Newara from birth till death. Hindu Newaras consider life-cycle rituals as a preparation for death and the life after it. There are various customs such as *Machābu byankeyu* when the child becomes ten days. As the girl or boy child grew up according to the growth there are several ceremonies and gatherings such as Jarmani (birth day celebration), *Machā Jamku*, *Ihi*, *Bāra tayegu*, *Kayatāpujā*, *Ihipā*. *Machā Jamku*, the first rice feeding ceremony, is performed at the age of six or eight months for boys and at the age of five or seven months for girls. A male child approaches puberty, the *Bhusā Khāyegu*, the first hair cutting and *Kayatāpujā*, a rite of initiation, is performed. *Busankhā* means shaving of hair from the time of birth. It is done at the age of 6 or 7. Shaving of hair is done by the maternal uncle of the boy and the sister of the boy's father holds the shaved hair. These days, *Busankhā* is done at the time of *Kayatāpujā*. *Kayatāpujā* or fixing of loin cloth is done to mark the attainment of puberty. Bajracharya and Shakyas perform the tonsure ceremony, *Chudākarma*. During this, one has to visit shrines and pay homage to *Kwāhpāhdyoh* and make offerings. After *Kayatāpujā*, *Jyāpus* and *Sāyamis* undergo *Ohlā*, which is less practiced these days. Buddhists like Shakyas and Bajracharyas perform *Bare Chhuyegu* which is an initiation into the monkhood. The boy disrobes and goes back to being a layman after four days.

For a female child, *Ihi* (also called *Bel bibāha*) is performed between the ages of five to nine. The daughters of Newara should be married with a *Bel* before they are actually married to a boy. This customary marriage with a *Bel* (fruit) is known as *Ihi*. From the spiritual and religious point of view, *bel* is considered to be the vegetative form of God Shrivana Kumara who is also one of the form of Lord Shiva. It is his concrete form, whereas Shivalingam is his abstract form. The ritualistic performance of *Ihi* is exactly the same as a real marriage. Maidens, which marriages are to be solemnized, are kept in pairs and are given *sindur* and portray the items considered sacred and inevitable in a Hindu marriage, along with other gifts and presents.

Normally Newara girls are married thrice in their lives. The first marriage is called *Ihi* (Newari) or *Bel sanga bibāha* (Nepali). And then they are married to the Sun which is called *Barā tayegu* (Newari) or *Guphā rākhne* (Nepali). When they get into a human conjugal relationship,

it's actually their marriage. These marriage ceremonies are conducted both among Buddhist Newars and Hindu Newaras. Before Newara girls reach their puberty they are married to the fruit of wood-apple tree called *Bel*. It is performed at the girl's odd age like 5, 7, 9 before they start menstruation. *Ihi* is a two-day ceremony commencing with purification rituals and ending with *Kanyādān* of the girl by her father meaning "giving away the virgin". This *Kanyādān* ceremony performed in Non-Newara Hindu marriage. So *Ihi* could actually be taken as the first marriage of the Newara girls except for that they are married to an icon of Suvarna Kumar, the immortal God. *Ihi* is regarded a very sacred Newari ritual and it's a must for all Newara girls. The ceremony is conducted by Priest called *Gubhāju* for Buddhist Newaras and *Deobhaju* for Hindu Newaras. The rite is held whenever sponsors are prepared to meet the considerable expenses. Though a member of the girls is always jointly initiated, the scale can vary from just a few closely related members of the same caste to as many as three or four hundred drawn from a wide range of castes. *Ihi* is often held in conjunction with another ceremony, such as old age ceremony.

The first day of the *Ihi* is called *dusala Kriyā*. On this day, the girls prepare at home with the purification bath and dress in new clothes and put on the ornaments. The girls then assemble at previously purified courtyard accompanied by a senior woman of the father's lineage. And the priest, with the help of his wife, takes the girls through a sequence of ritual actions of purification. The main event takes place on the second day. The girls are dressed elaborately in glittering bridal suit comprising of ankle length skirt, blouse and shawl. The day begins with the purification rituals and proceeds to *Kanyādāna*. The father gives the girl's to Suvarna Kumar. *Kanyādāna* concludes with the giving of a set of clothes owned by married women to girl by her parents. *Ihi* is performed to save from various dangers, in particular the possibility of attack from malicious spirits. But by far the most commonly given reason is to protect the girl from the awful stigma of widowhood. *Ihi* links the girl in an eternal marriage with a god. Therefore the death of a mortal human spouse cannot deprive her of her married status, thus freeing her from the custom of having to burn on one's husband's funeral pyre which was prevalent among Hindu communities a few centuries ago. *Ihi* rite also enforces the right of the widow's remarriage in the Newara Community, thus liberating the women from the Hindu orthodox viewpoint of one life one marriage system. Though the original rite seems to have been lost to the cultural invasion in the Valley, *Ihi* is still performed among Newaras with compulsion.

The next ceremony is *Barhā tayegu* (*Guphā*), when a girl child approaches puberty. Because menstruation is considered ritually impure, Newara girls undergo ritual confinement for 12 days. Girls are separated from all males and from sunlight during these 12 days while they are doted upon by female relatives. During these days she is generally taught domestic sciences. On 12th day the girl must pay homage to the sun. At the end of the retreat, a service is held.

The next ceremony is *Ihipā* (marriage) which is followed by both the traits. Marriage in Newara culture is a social union of two families. The parents arrange marriage for their sons and daughters. After the groom's and bride's families decision, the marriage is confirmed by

giving 10 betel nuts along with fruits, sweets, etc. (known as *lākhā*) from the groom's family to the bride.

The marriage ceremony was performed at the time scheduled by the astrologer. *Swayambara*, *Honkegu*, *Chipan Theeke* (symbol of sharing everything) is performed. Bride presents 10 betel nuts to all her family members. Brother of her mother, *paju*, takes on his back and carries her out of the house. He then presents her to the groom's family. The bride's family visits the groom's house on the 4th day, to see how the bride is being treated, which is known as *Khwāh Soye* (seeing the bride's face).

Should a Newara man or women live long enough, there are five rituals, known as *jamku*,—which can be confusing, as the first rice feeding ceremony is referred to as *jamku* as well—performed between the age of 77 and 106. *Jamku* is an old-age ceremony also. This ceremony is conducted for five rituals. Firstly, this is conducted when a person reaches the age of 77 years, seven months, seven days, seven *ghadi* and seven *palas*. Further *Jamku* ceremonies are performed at similar auspicious milestones after which the person is accorded deified status at the age of 81 years or after they saw thousand full moons in their lives, 88years, 8 months, 8 days 8 *ghadi* and 8 *palas*, and lastly at the age of 99 years, 9 months, 9 days, 9 *ghadi* and 9 *palas* and finally, at 105 years, 8 months, 8 days, 8 *ghadi* and 8 *palas*. After these rituals are performed, the person will be regarded as a god. Husband and wife will perform their rituals together, as the events occur for the husband. The *Sagan* ceremony where auspicious food items are presented is an important part of life-cycle rituals.

All Newaras, except the Lākumi and Jogi caste, cremate their dead. The Jogis bury their dead. As part of the funeral, offerings are made to the spirit of the deceased, the crow and the dog. The crow and the dog represent ancestors and the god of death. Subsequently, offerings and rituals *Shrāddha*, *Pinda dāna* are conducted four, seven, eight, 12, 13 and 45 days following death and monthly for a year and then annually. There is a belief in Newara communities that once the *Shrāddha* is conducted in any *Thirtha* (religious places) like Gaya, Badri, etc., then annually *Shrāddha* is not compulsory but only *sidhā dāna* to the priests can also be performed.

Buddhist Newaras also make a *mandala* (sand painting) depicting the Buddha on the third day after death which is preserved for four days.

Another costume, followed by both the sects of the Newaras is *Mha pujā*. *Mha* in Nepali means self/soul/body. Therefore, *Mha puja* means worshipping ones' self. *Mha Puja* is celebrated on the occasion of the New Year as per local calendar *Nepal Sambat*. This custom is prevalent only in Newara Community and not at all, found in other Nepali communities anywhere. On this day *Bahar pujā* or *Gobardhan pujā* is performed in *Swonti (Tihār)* in the month of Kartik, i.e. in the month of November. *Gobardhan puja* is performed in the morning, and in the evening the *Mha pujā* is performed by all Newaras. On this auspicious evening all the members of the family gather together dressed in their best of apparels and perform the *pujā* for themselves.

It is not wrong to say that this *Mha pujā* inculcates self-respect in a person and impels him to lead a life of self-contentment and happiness. *Gita* has all support for this custom. It says, “*Uddaraydatmanataman natmannawasadya*” which means, ‘let all strive to boost up one's morale and let no one despise and look down upon oneself.’

This way Newaras are very rich in culture because of their unique living life style. From the birth of a child to the death of the man there are several ritual customs family gatherings which are very unique. The way of living and the celebration of different festivals which binds the Newar peoples with each other. The traditional customs which also cause of making the Newari culture rich. The Newari culture is very vast and it consists of many castes, each with a different culture, tradition and their own values. The unique culture and tradition of Newaras have been recognized all around the world and has gained overwhelming respect of all.

Ihi or Bel Bibaha

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The first day of the Ihi is called dusala Kriya. On this day, the girls prepare at home with the purification bath and dress in new clothes and put on the ornaments. The girls then assemble at previously purified courtyard accompanied by a senior woman of the father's lineage. They all sit in a neat line around the edge of the courtyard. And then for the next couple of hours the priest, with the help of his wife, takes the girls through a sequence of ritual actions of purification.

The main event takes place on the second day. Once again girls assemble in the courtyard.

Now the girls are dressed elaborately in glittering bridal suit comprising of ankle length skirt, blouse and shawl. They put on more ornaments and red *tika* on their foreheads to give bridal look. The day begins with the purification rituals and proceeds to Kanyadan. The father gives the girl's to Suvarna Kumar Kanyadan concludes with the giving of a set of clothes own by married women to girl by her parents.

Ihi is performed to save from various dangers, in particular the possibility of attack from malicious spirits. But by far the most commonly given reason is to protect the girl from the awful stigma of widowhood. Ihi links the girl in an eternal marriage with a god. Therefore the death of a mortal human spouse cannot deprive her of her married status, thus freeing her from the custom of having to burn on one's husband's funeral pyre which was prevalent among Hindu communities a few centuries ago. Ihi rite also enforces the right of the widow's remarriage in the Newar Community, thus liberating the women from the Hindu orthodox viewpoint of one life one marriage system. Though the original rite seems to have been lost to the cultural invasion in the valley, Ihi is still performed among Newars with compulsion.