

Tribhuvan University

*BelBibaha*: Celebration of Female Identity in Newari Culture

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Letter of Recommendation

Luna Shrestha has completed her thesis entitled “*BelBibaha: Celebration of Feminine Identity*” under my supervision. She carried out her research from July 20 to August20. I hereby recommend her thesis be submitted for viva voce.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "*BelBibaha: Celebration of Female Identity in Newari Culture*" by Luna Shrestha submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, has been approved by the undersigned members of research committee.

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## Abstract

*This research analyses the rituals of BelBibaha of Newari community. There are lots of rituals followed by Newari people among them BelBibahais such a ritual which empowers women, free them from the so called notion widowhood of the society. It is a ritual which accepts the female identity and her existence. This ritual teaches people to value females. Though the women of third world countries are subjugated institutionally, some rituals in Newari culture which support females to establish their own identity as well as help them to make safe position in the society. BelBibahain Newari culture is such ritual which is symbolic of the celebration of cultural self of the Newari people. It is analyzed with theoretical ideas of Victor Turner, Elizabeth Bell's symbolic and ritual theory. It is very old tradition but also it is against the present orthodoxies of widowhood.*

**Keyword:** *BelBibaha, Newari culture, Ritual, Existence, Identity*

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## I. Introduction to *BelBibaha* in Newari Community

This research veers around the issue of the cultural law *BelBibaha* which allows to celebrate feminine identity to Newari community. Though the women of the third world countries are subjugated institutionally there are some of the rituals in Newari community which support, the females to establish their own identity as well as help them to make a safe position in the society. *BelBibaha* in Newari culture is such a ritual performance among the Newari girls at the age between five to eleven. It is a ritual of symbolic marriage with *Bel* (*Byah* in Newari language) the symbol of lord Vishnu an immortal god. So, *BelBibaha* is a ritual of Newari culture empowering the independent female identity and liberates them from the institution and practice of widowhood. The research analyzes on the issue of *BelBibaha* one of the most important Newari cultural factors which symbolizes the celebration of the cultural self of the Newari people.

The Newari tradition and culture is almost like an ocean. Newari culture is very rich throughout the year. Many festivals are tied to Hindu and Buddhist holidays. There are many festivals celebrated in Newari culture. It starts from *Gathanmugah* and ends in *SithiNakah*. *Gathanmugah* is also known as *KayahmachaNakah* (son festival) and *SithiNakah* is also known as *MhayamachaNakah* (the daughter festival). Likewise *Mha Puja* celebrated in the occasion of the New Year, during the festival of *Tihar* as per local calendar (*Nepal Sambat*), *BisketJatra* celebrated on the first of *Baisakh* and many more. Another festival celebrated by Newari people is *GunhuPunhi*. During this nine-day festival, Newari men and women drink a bowl of sprouted mixed cereals and offer food for frogs in the field. On the second day, *SaParu* (*GaiJatra*), people who have lost a family members in the last year dress up



as cow or anything comical and parade through town, a ritual initiated by a king to show his queen, who was in grief because of his son's demise. The last day of *GunhuPunhiis Krishnastami*, the birthday of lord Krishna, an incarnation of lord Vishnu.

*YanhaPunhi (IndraJatra)* is a holiday related to Hindu god, king of heaven. The festival begins with the carnival-like erection of *Yosin*, ceremonial pole, accompanied by the rare display of the deity *AakashBhairab*, represented by a massive mask and procession of Kumari, the living goddess along with others gods *Ganesh* and *Kumar*. Similarly another festival *Mohani (Dasain)* is observed for two weeks by sowing barley seed on first day and is nurtured for nine days. On the ninth day Durga is worshipped. There is another occasion Tihar known as *Swanti* It is celebrated for five days. There is one occasion in *Tihar* called *Mha Puja (Self Worship)* where people worship themselves in which they eat good food and wear good clothes, this day is also Newari new year or *NepalSambat* in which a rally takes place where people go round town in motorcycles, busses and huge celebration. It is another emerging ritual that even young people take it deep.

Many rituals are followed by Newari people which is related with various stages of human life; from birth, rice feeding, childhood, puberty, marriage, seniority and finally death. The complexities and the encompassing nature of these rituals cannot be exaggerated. Before the onset of menstruation period Newari girls go through the ritual *BelBibaha* and after that marking the puberty they go through the ritual known as *BahraTayegu*. Menstruation is considered ritually impure, they undergo ritual; confinement for twelve days. Girls are kept in dark room away from sunlight and contact from male. On the twelfth day the girl must pay homage and are married to sun god.

They also celebrate old age, when they reach the age of 77 years Newari man and woman performed *Janku*. There are five *Jankus* performed in the life time if they live up to 106 years old. The feast rice feeding ceremony is referred to as *Jankuas* well as performed between the age of 77 to 106. These are performed at the age of 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 the age of 105 years, 8 months, 8 days. After performing these all rituals, the person will be regarded as god. Husband and wife perform this ritual together, as the event occurs for husband. Among the many festivals the present research is concentrated on the celebration of the feminine self of Newar Girls. The ceremony of *BelBibaha* is a ritual marriage to Vishnu Narayan, who is worshipped in the form of Narayan. In contrast to lord Shiva and other Devi, he never receives bloody sacrifices but only vegetables offering. Mostly the Hindus and Buddhist celebrates this ritual in Newari community.

*BelBibaha* is very important in terms of social matters. It is like a domestic ceremony of the Newars. This celebration usually involves five to forty Newari girls who are in no way, linked kinship. The domestic priests (*purohit*) know the local community very well prepares the lists of the girls of the right age to undergo the ceremony. *BelBibaha* is the ceremony in Nepal in which pre-adolescent girl are married to the *Bel* (wood apple), which is a symbol of the god Vishnu ensuring that the girl becomes and remain fertile. It is believed that if the girl's husband dies later in life, she is not considered widow as she is already married with *Bel* symbol of immortal god Lord *Vishnu*. *Bel* is considered to be very tough fruit because of its hard shell. It has a peculiar quality of not getting rotten and remaining fresh forever, it is also considered as *DivyaPurush* (Divine Male) or incarnation of the god. The *Bel* fruit

must look rich and ripe and must not be damaged in any kind. It is believed if the fruit is damaged in any way; the bride will be destined with ugly and unfaithful husband after her real marriage. Newar girls are married for thrice in their lives. The first is with fruit Bel, the marriage is called *BelBibaha*, and the second is the marriage with Sun which is called *BahraTayegu* or *GufaRakhne* and the third marriage with real bridegroom. These marriages are practiced by both Hindus and Buddhist Newars.

Thus, the research mainly focuses upon how the *BelBibahais* the symbol of the manifestation of feminine self of Newari culture. Nepal is a patriarchal society where the females are the underdogs manipulated and used by the males. But such ceremonies in Newari culture help the females assert their own existence in the context of Nepal's such ceremonies stuck against the gizzard of the patriarchal society that relegates the females to the platonic binary opposition where all the positive qualities are given to the males and the negative attributes are given to the females.

Robert Levi, added the following interesting and valid point about *Ihi* ceremony in Newari Girls. Here Levy talks about the ritual of marrying with Bel fruit which avoid the custom of widowhood:

The *Ihi* ceremony is, as a marriage had to be in Hindu tradition, a pre-menarche marriage. This means that the second marriage, the one to a mortal, can be delayed as all second marriage can, until after menarche- often long after it. Thus both the necessity of child marriage and full force of widow disability are ameliorated by the invention of this *Newarsamskara*. (112)

It is believed that *BelBibaha* or "*Ihi* in Newari language as a very peculiar kind of ritual. This is a ritual; of an extreme importance, for a girl who has not wedded a Bel is not eligible to marry a male. It is a ceremony of social and religious significance to

Newari females. Before a Newari girl attains puberty and before commences menarche, this ritual has to be completed.

Gopal Singh Nepali also clears that the real marriage of Newari girl is always with Lord *Vishnu*. The girl does not have any identity and without marrying with *Bel* and can leave husband and claim for divorce. He opines that:

Marriage is, however not recognize as a sacrament, though it involves worship of several Hindu deities. They refuse to give such recognition on the ground that the real marriage of Newari girl is always with God Narayan though the ceremony of *BelBibaha*. A Newar Woman can, therefore in theory leave her husband as many times as she likes. In the event of her husband's death she does not become a widow, since her real husband, God Narayan is immortal.

(189)

Robert I, Levy when investigating about marriage to lord

*Vishnu* Bhaktapur was recounted the following interesting original tale as an explanation for the rites *BelBibha*.

Parvati was the daughter of Himalayan, the deity of Himalayas. When she was married to Siva, Himalayan gave Nepal (that is, the present Kathmandu Valley) to her as her dowry. One day as Parvati was walking through the valley she heard an old woman crying. Parvati asked her why she was crying. "My husband is dead. A husband is necessary for a woman, without husband a woman's life terrible". Parvati pitied her and asked *Siva* for boon. "Can you do something for the women of my natal home so that they will not become widow?" Siva answered, "Narayan and I will arrange it so that they will no longer be any widows in Nepal". Thus the Newar were given the *Ihi* ceremony where Narayan was the groom, and Siva the witness. (66)

In my opinion, the main objectives in the Newar in the primary marriage are to maintain the hierarchical status of woman and to confer on her the full status of a lineage and cast membership. This primary marriage ensures that she will never suffer a loss or a decline in status because of the death of her husband or following divorce from him. In Newar society, for both Hindus and Buddhist, the pre occupation with maintaining ritual purity is constant. Micheal Allen has rightly observed that the higher a group is placed in the cast hierarchy the greater is the concern of its member with maintaining the rules of ritual purity in general and with controlling female sexuality. Among the Newar girls, who marry *Nambudiri Brahmins* as first ritual bridegrooms, before taking other husbands, likewise conserve thereby their status and their purity. In both one might argue that we are in the presence of hypergamy. However, *Ihi* determines the purity and the status of girl who goes through the ritual; it does not determine the purity or impurity of her progeny. The purity and the social status acquired through *Ihi* can be lost or squandered through a “bad” human marriage. With regard to the difference between woman and man, the *Ihi* by linking woman to the divinity frees them for life in this world whereas the males’ *samskars* imprison man in the social life of this world with the promise of freedom in the next.

Certain peculiar ceremonies relating to marriage may now be described very briefly. In order to avert early widowhood (which was judged from her horoscope) for the girls to be married a ceremony called *Kumbha Vivah* was performed, On the day previous to marriage a jar of water in which a golden image of Vishnu is dipped, is decked with flower and the girl is surrounded in a network of threads. Varuna and Vishnu are worshipped and prayed to give long life to the intended bridegroom. Then the jar is taken out and broken in a pool of water and then sprinkled over the girl with five twigs and to the accompaniment of Brahmins are fed *Bel Bibaha* as a ritual has

been performing in Newar community from the ancient time. It has been handed over from generation to generation. So, different writers had published different books and articles related to this *BelBibha*. Daniel Wright opines:

The marriage tie is by no means binding among the Newars as among Gorkhas. Every Newar girls, while is child, is married to a *bel*-fruit. When she arrives puberty, a husband is selected for her, but, should the marriage prove unpleasant, she can divorce herself by the simple process of placing a betel-nut under her husband's pillow and walking off.(33)

Among the Newar, married wife was however at liberty to claim a divorce if the marriage proved uncongenial, the only thing necessary before leaving the house was that she should place two betel nuts in husband's bed she was then free to choose another husband. It shows that in an intolerable situation women could usually initiate divorce, and play a greater role in choosing a second husband.

Likewise, Anne Vergati says that *BelBibaha* is a sort of marriage that Newari girls go through before menstruation, which is different than Brahmin and Chhetri Women. They are free to divorce and remarry.

The status of Newari woman differs from that of other Hindu woman such, thechetrini or Brahmins crucially, Newari widows may remarry and widowhood doesn't involve in a loss of status in their society. Divorce too is allowed. A woman may have successively, several husbands provided that they have of the same caste as hers. The status peculiar to Newar woman as compare to the woman of other Nepalese ethnic group is said to be the consequences of their having passed through the, initiation ceremony is ritual marriage to Vishnu Narayan is called *Ihi*. (62)

In many respects *Parbatiya* Brahmin's remained different from the Newar society. *Parbatiya* Brahmin asserts that their women are not entitled to remarry and that their men should not marry a widow as such- a man's social status would be lowered in consequence. So, Brahmin and Chhetris do not practice it. On the other hand, the Newar enjoyed the right as before by developing the system a young Newar girl was married with *Bel* fruit which represents the Lord Vishnu. It was believed that Newar women never become widow even her human husband was dead, because her husband was the *Bel* fruit which was presumed to be immortal. With the reference to the various writers it is worthwhile to explore the ritual *BelBibha* as a celebration of feminine identity.

## II: Ihi and the Status of the Women in Newari Culture

The Ihi ceremony is the wedding of a young girl and a fruit, a ritual commonly celebrated by families of Nepal's Newar community. Ihi is normally conducted when a pre-menstrual girl is an odd-number year of age (commonly 5, 7, or 9). The logic of *Ihi* is that by marrying a *Bel* fruit, the girl is taking god (either *Vishnu* or *Kumar*) as her first husband. This means that the girl's human husband will be her second husband, and since her first husband was immortal, the girl will never be widow. Ihi helps solve a problem of Nepali marital tradition: specifically, those Hindu women throughout Nepal are socially vulnerable to the fates of their fathers and husbands, and widows are intensely stigmatized. Hindu widows are not allowed to remarry, not supposed to dress nicely or wear jewelry makeup, not permitted to participate in certain kind of religious practice, and are dependent upon the goodwill of their fathers, brothers or sons for their home and upkeep. But Newar girls who perform Ihi never need to worry about this. Even if their human husbands die, their divine husbands do not, and so a Newar woman can continue to participate in society regardless of what happens to her husband.

The finding of the research also concentrates on the very fact that the Ihi ceremony saves the Newari girls from the widowhood. *Ihi* is interesting in a discussion overall, in that neither partner is really appropriate for a human marital relationship: the groom is a small brown fruit and the bride is a little girl. Nevertheless the wedding is performed very much as if the girl were a full bride. The girl is dressed in red – the wedding color in Nepal – and she is elaborately made-up and covered in gold jewelry. She is then brought to an open space (usually courtyard) and married to the fruit in an abbreviated wedding ceremony. This wedding ceremony can include many of the gesture of a full adult wedding; the girl must worship the fruit as she



would worship her groom, and she will receive *sindhur* powder in her hair (the most common mark of a Nepali married woman) sometimes families will sponsor full vedic fire ceremonies performed by an adult male priest, and often the girl's father will formally present her to the *Bel* fruit in the rituals gesture known as *Kanyadaan* (the gift of a girl), one of the religiously rituals of Hindu tradition. The difference between Hindu culture and the Newar culture is that the Hindu girls have to remain widow after the death of their husband which is not the case in the Newar community. Hamilton writing in 1819, after his brief account of, dwelt in some detail on the associated rights and freedom then exercised by women in their conjugal dealings with men. The abovementioned fact is proved with the help of the following lines by Hamilton:

Whenever a woman pleases, she may leave her husband. The only ceremony or intimation necessary, before she goes away, is placing two betel-nuts on her bed. So long as a woman chooses to live with her husband, he cannot take another wife. (125)

In this way, the Newar girls are rich in the case of freedom in relationship to gaining of the freedom to be equally free even after the death of their mortal husband. It is said that the tradition of *Ihi* started during fourteenth century, after a raid by Shamsuddin Ilyas - a warlord from Bengal. The invading force pillaged the land, burnt palaces, looted temples, killed men and boys, dishonored girls but largely left married women alone. This led people to believe marrying pre-puberty girls to gods would save them from dishonor in any future raid.

Normally Newar girls are married thrice in their lives. The first marriage is called *Ihi* or *BelSangaBibaha* (Nepali). And then they are married to the Sun which is called *Bara Tayegu* (Newari ) or *GufaRakhne* (Nepali). When they get into human

conjugal relationship its actually their marriage. These marriage ceremonies are conducted both among Buddhist Newars and Hindu Newars. Thus *BelBibaha* is one of the great phase Newar community. Here is a portrait of a Newar girl participating in *puja* during her *Ihi*.



Fig.I: Performing Puja During BelBibaha

First day of the *Ihi* is called *DusalaKriya*. On this day the girl are prepares at home with the purification bath and dress in new cloths and put on ornaments. The girls then assemble at previously purified courtyard accompanied by a senior woman of the father 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 sequences of rituals 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* concluded with the giving of a set of clothes worn by married women to girl by her parents.

The most peculiar ritual followed among Newar girl is *Ihi* (also *Ehee*) . Also known as *BelBibaha*, it is a symbolic marriage with a *Bel* (AegleMermalous) fruit. This ritual is done among the girl between the ages of four to eleven before reaching the period of puberty, where they are married to lord Shiva that the fruit is kept in his place. Newar community has invaded outside Nepal where the traditions are somewhat lost but still it is found in every Newar house that the *BelBibaha* have been made. This customary marriage is thought to be the most holy rituals in this noble clan. With this marriage to the immortal lord the Newar girl will not follow widowhood when their husband passes away. It is believed that even remarriage can be done.

At the day of *Ihi* the place is cleaned and swabbed with cow dung and red soil to make it pure. The *Ihi* girl is bathed and does fasting for whole daylong. The daughter of Brahmin is chosen to represent the fruit, she is called *Locantee*. The ceremony starts in the morning with the Bali (killing) of goat or a duck to lord Ganesha. Followers of Boudhanewar never do the killing and the poor one can do it with fried egg. Eight different flags representing eight Devi are worshiped and immersed to the river. A *Pindah* for a *Bel* fruit is made where bamboo root and grass

is placed. (A *Pindah* is made of *Khir* mixed with black *Teel* and roundly molded).

This is done to please the ancestors of both his father and mother family.

The girl is brought to the *Puja* site where yellow thread is measured from head to feet for 108 times and thereafter a mala is made and given to the girl. Water from the *Thakali*, a water vase is taken by the pundit and sprinkled over the *Ihi* girl to make her pure. 84 different varieties of vegetables are placed before that she needs to taste the five and remaining she will touch it and will be immersed in a holy place. This ends the end of the first day.

The next morning cutting of nails is done followed by the polishing of the nails. A piece of raw meat, little custard oil and some money are given to the *Nini*, the person who cuts the nail. *Nini* of the girl collects the nails in a copper plate, she too will be given money. Then the *Ihi* girl is dressed in red sari or *ChaubandhiCholi* as a bride.

*SichaFhangu* is a custom where the Brahmin girl, the *Locantee* act as a lord Shiva and with the stem of the *Bel* fruit put the *Sindur* on the forehead of the *Ihi* girl. The girl is offered milk, *dahi*, fruits and others. *Kanyadaan*, a hand of *Ihi* girl is given to the hand of *Locantee* to dedicate the girl to the lord. In return the *Ihi* girl touches the feet of *locantee* and washes her feet. New clothes are offered to the *Ihi* girl and three-fist full rice. In some ceremony both the *Ihi* girl and the *Locantee* are carried by the brothers and made to move along the fire for three times. The pundit puts *Tika* on the forehead of the *Ihi* girl and thereafter other too joins to bless the bride girl. There is also tradition that the other family member and the relatives wash the feet of the *Ihi* girl and drink the water of the feet. Food is offered to all the guests and the *Ihi* ceremony end after this.

The *Bel* fruit after the ceremony is kept safely or immersed to the river. It is considered bad luck if the fruit get damaged. Since the girl have already wedded to the lord Shiva, after her marriage to another husband in her later years she shall remain unchanged even she becomes a widow. She shall always remain the wife of Lord Siva at first instant.

An interesting tale has been found regarding the origin of the *BelBibaha* that says, it was during the time of Ranas, the dignity of the Newari girls were under deep trouble. The Rana and his men used to follow the girls and look with lusty eyes. It was this reason for the Newar to save their future generations they made a plan and married their children with the *Bel* fruit. Since this fruit is considered holy and found single that they made the choice. The Ranas used to respect the married women so their inhuman attitude towards the Newari girls also changed. Since marrying with a fruit saved the Newari community for its existence the practice is still prevalent.

After the *Ihi* or the *BelBibaha*, next come the *Bahra*, a tradition rituals confinement of a girl before the onset of menstruation. This ritual is done when a girl enters her youth. A girl after having undergone *Ihi* is kept separated from all makes and from sunlight for 12 days. She has to stay in a dark room. On the 12<sup>th</sup> day the girl is purified and the functions end with a *Bhoj* (traditional Newari meal where all family members are present).

These rituals are of two types, *Bahratyagu* and *BahraChauneygu*. This first ritual performed before the start of menses. This is done between the age of five and thirteen. More than one girl can follow the ritual but in case of *BahraChauneygu*, only one girl has to undergo.

In both occasion a cave of cloths, *BahraKhayak* is made and worshiped. It is believed that the girl is under the evil possession. A separate meal for the *Khayak* is

taken out from the meal of the caved girl. Salt is not used in any of the meal and the girl is entertained with folk songs and dance performed by her friends. For all the 12 days Thakalinaki, worships the *Khyak* and will do all the girl work. She is the medium between the girl and her family.

Till the 11 days the family members are considered impure but the married sisters can not be counted. On the sixth day, particular kerosene oil is provided by the *Paju* (Mama) that is put on the face by the women in the family and finally putting it on the hair of the girl just ending the consumption of salts.

It is only after the 11 days the girl is considered as pure and holy. It is known as *Nishi Yayagu*. Then the girl pays homage to the sun god. She will be bathed and will be blind folded. She is then taken to the open space to have a *Surya Darshan*. During these rituals, Thakalinaki performs the major role. She first worships the *Ganesh* and Sun God. Fistful wheat seed and rice is given to the girl that she throws backward. This is done for three times. *Sindoor* is put on the forehead of the girl and new dress is presented. The girl now can wear a Sari, she is considered as women. In respect to the seniority everyone bless the girl with a *Tika*, made a *Pitho* and oil. The girl is then given *Sagun* (Newari Prasad), first to the ancestral deity, then to other family members. Each family member now considers that the girl is not more child but has now become an adolescent. Her introduction to menstruation is expected and after the *Bhoj* the rituals end.

Regarding ritual and women power female theologian Elizabeth Ursic sheds light what has enabled churches to include female images and ritual choice reflects women's voice. She states that:

“These ritual choices may also reflect women’s voice being shut out from the main religious power centers of ritual performance in which those women were raised or in which they continue to ambivalently participate.”(Ursic, 19)

Within the contemporary women’s spirituality movement the practice of ritual has become associated with the dynamics of transformation and empowerment. Women centered rituals that legitimate notions of female power through the symbols of the goddess have provided a setting for spiritual and social affiliation among women alienated and estranged from the dominant culture.

In the journal article *Women, Ritual, and Power* by Janet L. Jacobs published by University of Nebraska Press states that:

From my own experience of Neo- Pagan rituals, I have come to feel that they have another purpose- to end, for a time, our sense of human alienation from nature and from each other. Rituals seems to be one method of reintegrating individuals and groups into the cosmos, and to tie in the activities of daily life with their ever present, often forgotten, significance...rituals allow us to recreate that unity in an explosive, non- abstract gut level.(Jacob,39)

Like in Newari culture, people they celebrate the first menstruation by the ritual *Barha* ceremony marking it as fertility from the abovementioned line we can understand in in Neo –Pagan society too they ritual has been associated with dynamics of transformation and empowerment. The creation of ritual has begun to inform all aspects of women’s lives, from the celebration of rites of passage (birth, menstruation, and menopause) to healing from victimization.

*Ihi* is performed to save from various dangers, in particular the possibility of attack from malicious spirits. 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 Hindu orthodox viewpoint of one life one marriage system. Though the original rite seems to have been lost with the cultural invasion in the valley, *Ihi* is still performed among Newars with compulsion.

Victor Turner expresses religious beliefs and practices which we follow are not only the reflection of the performances or ritual but that reflects economic, political and social relationship. Turner says that:

I think, becoming widely recognized that religious beliefs and practices are something more than "grotesque" reflection or expression of economic, political, and social relationship; rather they are coming to be seen as decisive keys to the understanding of how people think and feel about those relationships, and about the natural in which they operate and social environments. (Turner, 9)

Another important fact of *BelBibaha* is that the fruit named as the Bel should be intact till the life of the girl. As it is the symbol of the lord, a Newar girl is supposed to be devoid from the God's grace if the fruit is damaged. The marriage between a virgin Newari girl and *Bel* fruit is held before the girl attains puberty. This ensures that the girl acquires active and healthy reproductive powers. Here the Bel fruit is the bridegroom, representative of the eternal bachelor (Lord Kumar, son of Lord Shiva). In this marriage ceremony, known as *Ihi* in Newari, the *Bel* fruit must look rich and ripe and must not be damaged in any kind. If by chance the fruit turns out to be damaged one, it is believed that the girl or the bride will be destined to spend the rest



of her life with an ugly looking unfaithful husband after her real marriage. However the most significant aspect of the “*Bel* marriage” is that once married to the Lord Kumar, the women will remain pure and chaste and even if her husband dies after the marriage she would not be considered a widow, the case in point being that she is already married to the Lord.

Catherin Bell says that ritual is seen as a way to create collective set of belief or ideals. It is the bridge between tradition and constant social change. Ritual symbolism plays a role in natural struggle of humans with their moral self and external “socio political” order and constraints of the world. Bell says that:

What has ritual in common it theatrical performance, dramatic spectacles, and public event, the performative dimension per-se that is, the deliberate self conscious “doing” of highly symbolic actions in public- is key to what makes ritual, theater, and spectacle what they are. While a per formative dimension often coexists with other characteristics of ritual- like behavior, especially in rule- governed sports contests or responses to sacral symbols, in many instances performance is clearly the more dominant oressential element.(Bell,159)



Fig.II: Girl Holding *Bel* Fruit

The photo above is of the Newari girl holding fruit *Bel* during *BelBibaha* which is the symbol of Lord Suvarnakumar immortal god whom she is going to get married and that will free her from the dogma of widow.

The above mentioned lines confirm the importance of *BelBibaha*, which is regarded a very sacred Newari ritual and it's a must for all Newari girls. The ceremony is conducted by Priest called *Gubhaju* for Buddhist Newars and *Deobhaju* for Hindu Newars. The rite is held whenever sponsors are prepared to meet the considerable expenses. Though a number of girls are 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 other ceremony, such as old age ceremony. A further difference between *Ihi* ceremonies and normal marriages is that they are very frequently performed for several girls at a time. This is not something that ever happens during full adult weddings, suggesting that although the rituals of weddings and *Ihis* are in some respects similar, that they are clearly understood as different kinds of events within the Newar community. There is often dancing and feasting with family members-though on a smaller scale than for a full wedding-and some girls are given money, clothing, and jewelry. The *Ihi* is very much focused on the –bride ‘and the groom’ receives a rather humble role by contrast. The groom ‘is a small brown *Bel* fruit’ a fairly common South Asian fruit (species *Aegle marmelos*), often translated into English as wood apple which generally participates in the rituals as an inanimate image. The *Bel* fruit receives no special status after the rituals, and is respectfully discarded at the end of the ritual. Thus in the Newar community, there is a unique tradition of marrying their girl child to the *bel* fruit. One must be familiar with the term *BelBibaha*. Once Newari girl go through the ritual *Ihi* they are far from the orthodox

Hindu belief of widowhood and are also free to choose their husband. Concentrating in the importance of *Ihi* again Hamilton emphasizes on its saving the feminine existence:

The Newar women are never confined. At eight years of age, they carried are carried to a temple, and married, with the ceremonies usual among Hindus, to a fruit called *Bel*. When a girl arrives at the age of puberty her parents, with her consent, betroth her to some man of the same cast. (42)

Victor Turner further says about ritual that:

A ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving, gesture, words, and , performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities of forces on behalf of the actor's goals and interests. Rituals may be seasonal, hallowing a culturally defined moment of change in the climatic cycle or the inauguration of an activity such as planting, harvesting, or moving from winter to summer pasture; or they may contingent, held in response to an individual or collective crisis. Contingent rituals may be further subdivided into lie crisis ceremonies, which are performed at birth, puberty, marriage, death and so on, to demarcate the passage from one phase to another in individual's life cycle, and ritual of affliction, which are performed to placate or exorcise preternatural beings or forces believed to have afflicted villagers with illness, bad luck, gynecological troubles, severe injuries, and other like. (Turner, 1100)

Thus it's clear that before Newar 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 *Kanyadan* of a girl by her father meaning "giving away the

virgin". This *Kanyadan* ceremony performed in Non- Newar Hindu marriage. So *Ihi* could actually be taken as the first marriage of the Newar girls except for that they are married to an icon of Suvarna Kumar, the immortal God.

There are many pre natal rituals, however majority of those: *pusawankriya*, *simatopanayan*, for example are no longer in existence. Nevertheless, *Dhaubajinakegu*(offering yogurt and flattened rice along with *yomari*, sweets etc) during pregnancy is still practiced by many castes. After child birth, it is informed to maternal home of the mother. It is done by sending sugar candy, nutmeg, ginger, etc. After the birth, concerned family becomes ritually impure. They become pure after *Machaboobyanke* tradition which is done on forth, sixth or tenth day after the child birth. There is also a tradition of offering different kinds of foods from maternal home of the mother within a month of delivery, which is known as *Bajinakahwonegu* or *machabooswahwanegu*.

*MachaJanko*(the rice feeding) is the rice feeding done in sixth or eighth month(in case of a boy) and in fifth or seventh month(in case of a girl).After worshipping Ganesh, the child is offered rice pudding with varieties of food. It is believed that the child gets similar food throughout his life as the food offered on that day. *Busankha* means shaving hair. It is done at the age of 6 or 7. Shaving of hair is done by the maternal uncle of the boy, sister of the boy's father holds the shaved hair. These days, *Busankha* is done at the time of *Kayata Puja*. *Kayata Puja* or fixing of loin cloth is done to mark the attainment of puberty. Bajracharya and Shakyas perform the tonsure ceremony, *Chudakarma*. During this, one has to visit shrines and pay homage to *Kwahpahdyoh* and make offerings. After *Kayata Puja*, Jyapus and Sayamis undergo *Ohla*(which is less practiced these days). *Ihi* is a ritual symbolic marriage with a Bel (Byah) fruit, the symbol of lord Vishnu. This ceremony,

celebrated at the age of 5-11, is done to prevent widowhood. As they are married to immortal lord, the Newar girls never become widow. The girls are also taught household works in *Ihi*. After *Ihi*, a Newar girl undergoes *Bahra*, a ritual confinement of a girl before the onset of menstruation. A girl is kept separated from all males and from sunlight for twelve days. On twelfth day, the girl has to pay homage to the sun. Marriage in Newar culture is 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 ten betel nuts along with fruits, sweets, etc (known as *Lakha*) from groom's family to the bride. Marriage ceremony is performed at the time scheduled by the astrologer. *Swayamber*, *Honkegu*, *ChipaTheeke* (symbol of sharing everything) is performed. Bride presents ten 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 visit the groom's house on the fourth day, to see how the bride is being treated, which is known as *KhwahSoye* (seeing the bride's face).

*Jyahjanko* is old age ceremony to mark one's longevity. It is celebrated for five times.

- ) First- *Bhimratharohan* - At the attainment of 77 years, 7 months, 7 days
- ) Second- *ChadRARatharohan* - At the attainment of 83 years, 4 months, 4 days
- ) Third- *Devaratharohan* - At the attainment of 88 years, 8 months, 8 days
- ) Forth- *Divyaratharohan* - At the attainment of 99 years, 9 months, 9 days
- ) Fifth- *Mahadivyaratharohan* - At the attainment of 105 years, 8 months, 8 days

As soon as a person dies, all the *Guthi* (social organization) members are informed

.Four lamps are set around the four direction of the corpse. *Mhagele*, adoration of the

corpse is marked. Funeral procession is accompanied with *Nayahkhin* drum followed by lot people wailing and crying. Cremation is different in different castes.

Normally, Newar girls are married thrice in their lives. The first marriage is called *Ihi* (Newari) or *BelSangaBibaha* (Nepali). And then they are married to the Sun which is called *Bara Tayegu* (Newari) or *GufaRakhne* (Nepali). When they get into human conjugal relationship its actually their marriage. These marriage ceremonies are conducted both among Buddhist Newars and Hindu Newars.

The first day of the *Ihi* which is known by the name called *DusalaKriya* in Newari language. During this ceremony, those girls participating in *BelBibaha* cannot eat certain foods or drinks, especially those with salt. This is a form of fasting to show dedication. Luckily by performing these rituals as a child, it is not necessary to repeat them at their wedding when they are older. The first day is a *puja* from the mother and daughter. Girls are dressed in fullbridal wear which include traditional sarees in the auspicious color of red. While there are many intricate parts to the ritual, one of the highlights involves yellow thread. The thread is looped over a bar which is held over the girl's forehead and down to the ground (a girl is measured 108 times from head to toe with yellow thread). The thread represents the father giving away his daughter to god. The girl wears the thread, as a necklace on the second day of the ceremony.



Fig.III: Measuring *Ihi* Girl

Here in this photo where the girl is being measured by yellow thread. The measurement is done from head to toe with a six standard yellow thread which is then multiplied eighteen-times (nine times from head to toe and back again to head) making an auspicious total of one hundred eight single- stranded body lengths. The thread is placed on the clay where it remains until the next day. Second day the girl in *Ihi* will garland the *Belfruit*. Later she will be given to her human bridegroom on her second marriage.

On day two, called *Kanyadaan*, the father gives away his daughter. Girls are dressed in the same traditional wedding saris; however, this day they will be wearing a lot more ornamentation including large necklaces, hairpins and jewellery. They will

also have their forehead painted orange. In Nepal, *tika* are worn by women and they represent different things.



Fig.IV: *Kanyadaan*

Day two is more important since the actual wedding takes place. The day begins with the purification rituals and proceeds to *Kanyadaan*.

The daughter sits on the lap of father and father gives the girl's to the Suvarna Kumar. *Kanyadaan* concludes with the giving of set of clothes worn by married women to girl by her parents.

Turner further says that ritual deals with the changes of our daily lives and define ritual as: "Rituals are collective memories encoded into actions, Ritual also help people deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that troubles, exceed or violate the norms of daily life." (52)





Fig.V: Performing *BelBibaha* in a Group

The photo above shows the group of Newari girls performing the *Ihi* ritual in group, this too depict the importance of *BelBibaha* in Newari culture and its compulsion.

*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 be burn on one's husband's funeral pyre which was prevalent among 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 Hindu orthodox view point of one life one marriage system. Though the original rite seems to have been lost with the cultural invasion in the valley, *Ihi* is still performed among Newars with compulsion.

*BahraTayegu (GufaRakhne)*

*BahraTayegu* is another ritual in which girls between the ages seven to thirteen are married to the sun god in a twenty-two day ceremony. It's a second marriage of a Newari girl after *Ihi*; the marriage with *Bel* fruit. *Bahra* means "cave" and *Tayegu* means "to put" thus, it's the ceremony where Newari girls are kept away from sun and male. The girl stays inside the room through the period. Her friends and relatives keep her visiting. She has to offer her food to *khyas*: male violent souls before eating. The picture below portrays the Newari girl observing the sun.



Fig. VI: Photo during *Suryadarsan*

On the thirteenth day, the girl dresses up like a bride. She will be taken out of the room to see the sunlight for the first time after ritual confinement. She ought to see the sun before she sees any male and pay homage to the sun. Then she visits every temple and shrine for worshipping them. Final day is marked with the *Bhwe* (a traditional party) and celebrations. It has great importance as it is believed that girl will never widow as she has been married to a god. Because of this belief, the practice

of Sati- widows burn themselves on the funeral pyre of their earthly husbands- has no more existence in Newar community.

In Newar community both *Ihi* and *Bahra* are very important ritual that every girl need to go through unless a girl go through it she is not consider eligible for getting married in the society. During *Bahra* she is introduced with another important aspect of the ritual by letting her offer beetle nuts to every shrine she visits. She becomes familiar about “taking beetle nuts” (*GwayeKayegu*) which in terms is a symbol of freedom and power attributed to her in society. The Newa girl has freedom to choose her bridegroom with her will. Having said this, the decision to get married is up to the girl, not her parents.

When she becomes mature to be married, the taking beetle nuts are ingeminate as her acceptance of the marriage proposal from the groom’s side. Otherwise stated, once she accepts she beetle nut, it is confirmed that she has accepted the bridegroom. In traditional way, the girls are empowered and encouraged to make their own decision for their lives. In light of this statement, she can simply leave the groom even after marriage by giving the beetle nuts back to her husband. She is free to take her decision, free to live her life and free to remarry.

Victor Turner wrote for journal science, provides a definition of a ritual and discussion of its characteristics. The second, taken from Turner’s book “The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti- Structure, describes liminality, an important concept which he indentified in one particular kind of ritual, the rite of passage. Rites of passage celebrate the movement of member of a society from one state or condition to another. He says:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.

As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. Their behavior is normally passive and humble; they must obey their instructor's simplicity, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with their stations in life. Among themselves, neophytes tend to develop intense comradeship egalitarianism. (Turner, 95)

The ritual of *Ihi* is of great importance. Firstly, the women are not exposed to the consequence of mortal widowhood, which *Parbatiya* women are. Another significance of it is that the girl is initiated into her father's lineage. She will retain important responsibilities to this lineage even after shifting her lineage membership to that of her husband after marriage and will be invited to many of the celebrations of life cycle rites and festivals held at her father's home. In case of divorce, women can take back all the gifts given in marriage to her by families and friends; *Parbatiya* women do not have this advantage.

Newari girls go through different rituals like *BelBibha*, *Bahra* and finally marriage after attaining puberty. It starts with the pre- puberty rites *Ihi* to *Bahra* which turn a girl into a woman. This tradition marks the maturity of girls. Victor Turner also explains about the Rites of Passage which were first coined by Arnold Van Gennep. The Rites of Passage marks the change of society. Van Gennep defines rites of passage as: "Rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position

anage.” He has shown all rites of passage are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limem, signifying threshold” in Latin), and aggregation. The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure. Fixed point in the social structure.

The gods of Nepal do not represent a forgotten era of the past. The deities here are living, and participate in the ordinary existence everyday life. Nowhere is this exemplified more charmingly than in the uniquely Nepalese custom of *Bel*- marriage. Traditionally the Newars marry their pre- pubescent girls to a fruit of the *Bel* tree which symbolize Lord *Vishnu* himself. The marriage ceremony is elaborate, accompanied by a feast. By this custom if a Newar future mortal husband dies she is not considered widow because she is still the wife of immortal husband “Lord *Vishnu*”. The Newar “widow” therefore undergoes none of the often disgraceful sanctions imposed on widow. Hence is solved the enchanting mystery behind those smartly dressed adolescent girls, thronging the streets of Kathmandu, who in spite of not being married in the ‘earthly’ sense, nevertheless adorn their foreheads with thick swabs of vermilion associated solely with a married status.

## *BelBibaha: A Celebration of Female Identity in Newari Culture*

*BelBibaha* which is also known as *Ihi* in Newari community is one of the very unique cultures. This is the marriage between the girl and a fruit *Bel* at the age between five to nine. Here the fruit *Bel* is symbolic or represents the immortal Lord Vishnu. This is pre-rite puberty. This marriage ensures that the girl acquires active and healthy reproduction powers. Here, the fruit *Bel* is the bridegroom representing Lord *Vishnu*. In this marriage ceremony, the *Bel* fruit must look rich and ripe and must not be damaged in any kind. If by chance the fruit is damaged one, it is believed that the girl or a bride will be destined her life with an ugly looking unfaithful husband after her real marriage. However the most significant aspect of the *BelBibaha* is that once married to lord *kumar* or *Vishnu*, the woman will remain pure and chaste and even if her husband dies after the marriage she would not be considered a widow. This ritual provides her freedom from the stigmas of widowhood. Her life will not change even after the death of her husband. This clarifies her existence. She has freedom; she is not restricted and has her own identity. She is not compelled to burn herself in the pyre of her husband. She can free herself from the domination in the society because of this ritual performance.

She becomes a married woman prior to the establishment of human conjugal relation, so too does remain in that after her mortal partner's is death. Thus, the avoidance of widow status not only obviates the possibility of having to mount her deceased spouse's funeral pyre, but it also provides a rationale both for divorce and widow re- marriage. This marriage is not only followed as custom but in order to avoid what they regard as the undesirable features of Hindu marriage especially the restriction that are placed on a girl as regards choice of spouses and prohibition against widow marriage.

It is a rite the passage in which pre-menstrual virgin girl becomes married woman. This ritual values the female. This ritual highlights the girl, keeps them in center. They are adorned, they are given gifts. By this ritual they are free from all the restriction, they are empowered. After *Ihi*, girls are initiated into the worship of their father's lineage deity. After "*BelBibaha*" Newari girls go through another ritual *Baharawhich* is pre-menstruation rite which clears those Newar women are no more backward and illiterate. The question is here not, whether this custom and many others like *Bahra* continues or disappear. The question is when we will ultimately be a reasonable, scientific, educate and rationale human being.

So going through the ritual *Ihi*, the death of husband will not face her into the observance of the strict laws of widowhood. Their customary marriage is thought to be the most holy rituals in this noble clan. With this marriage to immortal lord the Newar girl will not follow widowhood when their husband passes away. It is believed that even re-marriage can be done.

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