

Bel Bibaha Among the Newars and its Social Significance

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Abstract: *The Newars are a fairly complex group, speaking Nepali and Newari, the two languages of Indo-Aryan and a Tibeto-Burmese linguistic group, respectively. The Newars are the oldest among the communities that had settled down in the Kathmandu valley, long back and the majority of them still live there. The Newars distinguish themselves from the dominant Brahmin-Chettris, the Nepali upper castes, in terms of culture. The two important rituals, among many others, that distinguish the Newars from other communities are Ihi and Barha. These rituals, in the mould of “primitive” practice of nature worship, mark two critical junctures in the lives of women. The literal meaning of Ihi is marriage to a belfruit (wood apple) and it is a ceremony of immense social and religious significance to the Newars especially the females. The Ihi ceremony is looked at with high veneration by the Newars. The paper highlights the social significance of the ceremony, the rituals that are performed, the reasons behind its practice and the changes that have come about with the passage of time.*

Keywords: Newars, Ihi, Belbibaha, marriage, Belfruit, Gobaju, Deobaju, Pre-puberty ritual, divine marriage, Gufa, Kanyadaan, Sati, widowhood, widow remarriage.

Introduction

The Nepalese people are the admixture of multiple cultures, traditions and languages. Among them the Newar community is considered to be the exceptional one. The Newars claim themselves as Vaisyas¹ according to the Hindu Varna system. It has been claimed that the Newars are a mixed race of the Mongoloid and Aryan blood. The Newars are divided along religious line; while some follow Hinduism some others follow Buddhism. The Newars had been a fairly complex group, speaking Nepali and Newari, belonging to Indo-Aryan and a Tibeto-Burmese linguistic group, respectively. Newari was the mother tongue of the Newars.

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among many others, that distinguish the Newars from other communities are Ihi and Barha. These rituals, in the mould of “primitive” practice of nature worship, mark two critical junctures in the lives of women. The literal meaning of Ihi is marriage to a belfruit (wood apple) and it is a ceremony of immense social and religious significance to the Newars especially the females. The Ihi ceremony is looked at with high veneration by the Newars. This ritual is in practice since hundreds of years

The Newars, in general, practice monogamy. They prefer to live in joint family, which are patriarchal and patrilocal. Marriage is one of the universal social institutions. Its purposes, functions and forms may differ from society to society. Marriage can have very different implications in different cultures. Marriage indicates a long-lasting bond between the husband and wife; it gets its social recognition through some ceremony.

Newars have their own marriage form and the rituals practiced in marriage, birth and death, which are different from the other Nepali communities. A Newar girl has to first go through the ritual of Ihi before her actual alliance with a human spouse and this custom is accepted and followed by both the Shivamargis and Buddhamargis. A Newar girl goes through the Ihi ceremony before she reaches puberty. In Newar community, Ihi ceremony is seen as the first marriage of the girl and the marriage with the human husband is the second marriage. The ritual of Bel Bibaha is very sacred for the Newari girl and is conducted by the priest called Gobaju⁵ for Buddhist Newars and Deobaju⁶ for the Hindu Newars. Perhaps the most striking feature of the Newars at the present time is their curious mixture of Hindu Buddhist religious ideas.

The present paper is based on a brief field study conducted by me in different areas of Kalimpong town, and in a village inhabited predominantly by the Newars.

Bel Bibaha among the Newars

Newars are well known for the rich and unique culture that they practice. From the birth of a child to death of a man there are different rituals and customs uniquely practiced. Among the Newars, traditionally, girls are to be married three times during their lifetime. The first one being Ihi, where the girl is married to a Bel fruit, second is Bahra, where the girl is married to the Sun God and third with a real human being.

The first marriage is called Ihi in Newari or Bel Sanga Bibaha in Nepali in which the girl marries a Bel fruit (wood apple)⁷ which is considered as a symbol of representation of Lord Shiva.

It is edible even by the Newar girls prior to their Ihi but once the Ihi is done eating of the Bel fruit is forbidden and considered as a taboo. As Bel fruit has a peculiar quality of not getting rotten and remaining fresh forever, it is sometimes considered as divine male or incarnation of God.

In some cases, after the ceremony, the Bel is immersed in some sacred river in fear of getting damaged and as widows are allowed to remarry among the Newar community a woman is never considered a widow since the Bel fruit to which she was originally married is presumed to be always in existence.

The ceremony of Ihi is performed both at the collective level and individually. The marriage between a virgin Newari girl and Bel fruit is held before the girl attains puberty. In this marriage ceremony, known as Ihi, the Bel fruit must look rich and ripe and must not be damaged in any form. If by chance the fruit turns out to be a 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 god, the woman will remain pure and chaste for her entire life. With this marriage to the immortal Lord the Newar girl will not follow widowhood even when her husband passes away.

Performance of Ihi adds status to a grown-up girl in the society. Once Ihi is performed, the girl is considered as mature and expected to behave as an adult. If the girl dying after her Ihi, would be treated as an adult and all the death rites meant for an adult would be performed.

Age of Marriage: The ritual is recognized as a pre-puberty ritual, so it is performed before puberty. It is held at a girl's odd age and the generally accepted age is five, seven, nine and eleven years of age. The standard age for performing Ihi is considered is seven, before a girl starts menstruating.

Rituals and procedures followed during the Ihi ceremony: The rites and rituals for performing Ihi are similar to an actual marriage. The date is set by consulting a Brahmin along with the girl's horoscope. Before the ceremony, there is a ritual known as Guffaw Racine, where the girl is kept in a Gufa (Dark place) for three days. Within this period the girl is not

supposed to have any kind of interaction with the male members, she is allowed to interact with the female members only. No sunlight is allowed to penetrate where the girl is kept. The bride has to fast all these days. She is allowed to eat only after the worshipping is over after sun set. She is supposed to eat only fruits, sweets etc. but no salty food is to be taken.

The main ceremony of Ihi is carried out for two days. It begins with a purification ritual and ends with Kanyadaan⁸ of the girl by her father. In the absence of the girl's father the girl's grandfather or her father's brother can do it.

The first day of Ihi is called Dusala Kriya. On this day, the house is cleaned, washed and purified with a mixture of red-soil and cow-dung. The girl has to take bath and come out of the Gufa and perform a *puja* in front of the Sun God. She has to meet the early sun rays and worship the Sun God, and then she is escorted to the place where the ceremony is to be held by her father. She is adorned in all finery, new clothes, gold ornaments. In the case of mass Ihi, the girls assemble outside at the purified courtyard, where the ceremony is held. They sit in a neat line around the courtyard. The priest then performs the Lasakus *puja* (a welcoming rite) followed by rounds of rituals.

On the very day of Ihi, i.e. the second day, the major event takes place. A mandap or enclosure is constructed out of banana stems and at the centre is suspended a real square cloth tied to the four corners of the stems. The day starts with a bath and the girl has to fast and not eat anything until the rituals are completed. The girl is dressed in a bridal suit, different kinds of ornaments, red *tika*, their feet and toes are painted with red colour. Godadhune or washing of the girl's feet is done by her parents and her family members who also fast until the rituals are over. Vermillion powder is applied on the girl's hair parting or *sindoor* in Nepali signifying wedlock.

The *bel* fruit is wrapped with several rounds of yellow threads and it represents the bride's groom. During the ceremony, the girl is given the *bel* to hold and during the Kanyadaan the *bel* is handed over to the girl by her parents. After the completion of the rituals, the girl is given jewelry, ornaments, money as a sort of dowry. All the relatives of the girl attend the ceremony to give her blessings. A feast is organized at the end of the day. Ihi is performed with great zeal. When the ceremony is over, the *bel* is wrapped in a piece of cloth and kept away by the family elders in a separate and sacred place to prevent any damage. In the event of detection of damage to the *bel*, the girl is considered a widow from then on. If the girl

dies before her real marriage to a human groom, then her *bel* is immersed in a river, so that it is washed away.

Myth and Reasons behind the practice of Ihi

There are myths and historical reasons behind the practice of the ritual of Ihi. The most common reason is that during the time of Ranas⁹, the dignity of the Newari girls was under threat. The Ranas and his men used to follow the girls and look at them with lusty eyes. The worried Newars, at this juncture, planned and married their daughters to the *bel* fruit in order to save their future generations. They selected *bel* since it is widely considered holy and found in single. The Ranas had the tradition of respecting and protecting the married women. The Ranas also became conscious of not disturbing the married girls because *bel* marriage involves god and had religious sanction. Since marrying with a *bel* fruit saved the Newari girls from the evil men and also saved the Newari community the practice is still prevalent. With changing times, the marriage has gained symbolic value.

It is also said that the tradition of Ihi started during the fourteenth century, after a raid by Shams-Uddin-Ilyas a warlord from Bengal. The invading force pillaged the land, burnt palaces, looted temples, killed, men and young boys, dishonored girls but largely left married women alone. This led people to believe that marrying pre-puberty girls to Gods would save them from dishonor in any future raid.

It is also believed that the Newars are Chandrabangshi¹⁰. Hence, marrying their daughters to the *bel* fruit, which is thought of as an icon of representation of Lord Shiva, would mean paying respect and gratitude to him. The Newar girls are dedicated to Lord Shiva on whose head the moon God resides.

In order to prevent the loss of stature and the shame that accompanies widowhood as well as to enable women to divorce if they wish to do so, Newars established the practice of Ihi.

Ihi is performed to save the girls from various dangers, in particular the possible of attacks from malicious spirits. But by far the most commonly given reason is to protect the girl from the awful stigma of widowhood. Since Ihi ties the girls in an eternal marriage with God, the death of a mortal husband cannot deprive her of her married status thus freeing her from the custom of having to burn on her husband's funeral pyre which was prevalent among the Hindu communities earlier.

The reason for the practice of Ihi from economic perspective is that the dowry, gifts, ornaments worn and given at the time of the ceremony are kept and stored for the girl's real marriage ceremony with a human groom. Economically, it is helpful for the girl's parents to conduct a real marriage in the future.

Social Significance of Ihi

Ihi is considered a marriage in Newar society in symbolic terms and it has a meaningful place in the lives of Newari women. It is regarded as the most sacred of all the domestic rituals. It is a ceremony of immense social and religious importance to the Newars especially for the females.

Marrying the girls to God ensures that she becomes and remains fertile. It also ensures that the girl acquires active and healthy reproductive power. The most significant aspect of the Bel marriage is that once married to Lord Shiva, the girl will remain pure and chaste.

The ritual is functionally related to the marriage and remarriage of a Newar girl. It is a tradition that empowers women and gives them some kind of liberation from the social stigmas attached to marriage, divorce and widowhood. Newars believe that once a girl has been married to a divinity, the breakdown of secular marriage can bear no social stigma. Ihi is a tradition that plays a significant role in the life of women as it empowers her and protects her from the awful stigma of widowhood. Thus, even in case of an untimely death of the husband the woman is never observed widowed.

Indeed, Ihi for the Newar girls is a form of empowerment. It saves the women from being sacrificed as Sati¹¹ which was prevalent and practiced a couple of centuries back in Nepal and India and which had sanctions from the Hindu religion. Ihi links the girls in an eternal marriage with God, therefore the death of a mortal human spouse could not deprive her of the married status, thus freeing her from the custom of Sati.

An Ihi rite also accords a widow the right to remarry, thus liberating the women from Hindu orthodoxy. A Newar widow, in the case of her husband's death can marry again according to her will.

The general belief among the Hindu and Buddhist Newar communities is that a proper marriage with full rites can be held only once in a lifetime. Thus, any subsequent marriage, if any, is considered having secondary importance. So, a woman, if she wishes, can theoretically break her marriage

with her husband by giving the gift of betel nuts that she had received during the wedding back to him or by putting those nuts under the pillow and leave the house quietly. There is nothing illegal in this process of divorce of a Newari girl. But nowadays the Newars in general consider this process of ending a marriage outdated. They take the legal route to end a marriage.

Symbolically marriage with God allows freedom to a Newari girl from the boundaries of her social marriage. Therefore, performance of Ihi creates a society with no widows and therefore no stigma is associated with widowhood.

Ihi also functions as an adult initiation ceremony. A Newar girl is treated as an adult member after she observes the Ihi ceremony. She then is allowed to participate in the religious activities and is given her share of family responsibilities. She is also allowed to perform family religious rituals after she observes the Ihi ceremony.

The Newar family is patriarchal and the women are generally tied to household chores, bearing and rearing children and serving the other members of the family. A woman is supposed to submit to the desires of her husband. The girls are taught household works in the Ihi ceremony and it was a kind of training for the young adolescent girls to prepare for the future domestic works of everyday life.

Earlier, in Ihi, the girls were kept in the Gufa for three days but now some changes have come about. The significance of this Gufa period for the girls is that during the period of isolation the female members of the family accompany her and discuss about life after marriage. They guide her about what she should and shouldn't do after marriage. They also openly discuss about sexual life after marriage and it was mainly done to control the desires of an adolescent. No male member is allowed to come in contact with the girl during the Gufa period and it is a mode of training the girl regarding maintaining her purity and chastity in the future. Ihi also marks a girl turning into a fertile woman.

Ihi is done during the pre-puberty stage; so, it helps to understand the physical and mental changes occurring at teen age. It is a symbolic way to be prepared for the upcoming physical and mental changes as well as for a greater social responsibility. From economic point of view, Ihi is significant as it acts as a kind of investment by the girl's parents for her future. The gifts, dowry, ornaments used and given during the Ihi ceremony are kept in a store for the real marriage of the girl with a human husband. It, thus,

becomes easier for the parents to organize the real marriage of their daughter a few years later.

According to the customary laws of the Newars, it is binding on a man to get his daughter married before she reaches puberty. The conventional belief was that if a daughter is given away before her first puberty, she would be taken as cent percent virgin and the giving away of a virgin or Kanya in marriage at a ceremony called Kanyadaan was a great *punya* or religious credit. Ihi, in that way saved the girls from child marriage. As the Newar girls were already married to the *bel* fruit at a very young age there was no need to marry very young girls and it prevented child marriage. It also saves the parents from the stigma of going to hell for not marrying pre-puberty daughters as real Kanyadaan is performed during Ihi. It is a tradition that has saved them from dishonor.

Changes and Variations in the Ihi Practices

One of the major changes that has come in some of the rituals of Ihi is the duration of the ceremony. Nowadays instead of two-day ceremony, Ihi is conducted in a day; it starts in the morning and is completed by the evening.

The other change that has come is in the performance of Gufa ritual before the Ihi ceremony. Earlier the girls were kept in the Gufa for three days but nowadays she is kept in isolation for a shorter period ranging between 12 hours and 12 minutes. The main reason behind this change is that people these days, particularly in the urban and semi-urban areas, are busy and they do not have enough leisure to be a part of three-day long celebration. Also, the kind of orientation the girls had to undergo in the Gufa under the supervision of senior and experienced women has now lost its relevance. Girls these days receive the necessary life cycle training through the print media, TV, internet and so on.

One of the differences in the practice of Ihi in the hills of Darjeeling from those of Nepal is the custom of animal sacrifice. In the hills of Darjeeling animal sacrifice is not performed during the ceremony while it is customary in Nepal. Earlier Ihi was not performed separately as a ceremony as it was combined with the house warming ceremony or during a puja performance (called Tanko) by the aged among the Newars.

The other change is that instead of a jagya or holy fire, 108 diya or lights are burnt, particularly by the Buddhist priest. The other change that has come in the Ihi ceremony is that in Nepal it is not performed by the lower

caste Newars such as Dhobi, Khargi but in Darjeeling hills members of all castes practice Ihi.

There are some differences in the performances of rituals of Ihi ceremony when conducted by a Gobaju and a Deobaju. While the Buddhist priest uses a coin to put vermilion powder in the forehead of the bride the Hindu priest uses the stem of the bel fruit to put vermilion powder on the bride's forehead.

Conclusion

The practice of Ihi or Bel Bibaha is found only among the Newars. This traditional ritual, which is still in practice because of its continuing relevance, gives distinctiveness to Newar culture from that of the dominant Brahmin-Chettri culture. The observation of Bel Bibaha by the Newar women contrasts their position and status from that of other Hindu women among the Nepali speaking population. This ritual has been in practice for many centuries both among the Buddhist and Hindu Newars.

Over the years the members of the Newar community have migrated outside Nepal to different regions and they, in the process, have lost many of their traditional cultural practices but the practice of Bel Bibaha can still be found among the Newars universally. The Newars in Kalimpong are scattered in different areas, under panchayat as well as municipal areas. They live in harmony and co-operation with people of other communities, be they tribe or caste. Every tribe has its own unique culture, tradition and history which separate them from the others groups, but the practice of Bel Bibaha adds uniqueness to the culture of the Newars residing in Kalimpong.

There are many reasons and myths behind the practice of Bel Bibaha but by far the most commonly given reason is to protect the girl from the awful stigma of widowhood. This is also a reason why a Newar girl is never considered a widow even after the death of her husband; because her first marriage with Bel is considered permanent and Bel fruit the symbolic husband is immortal.

The Newars are of the opinion that performance of Bel Bibaha is important for the continuation and preservation of their culture. They also believe that it is an age-old tradition and they can ill-afford to discontinue it. Notwithstanding some changes in the performance of the rituals and despite some variations in some of the practices of Bel Bibaha in Nepal and in the

Darjeeling hills it is still performed with high veneration by the Newar community even today.

The tradition of Bel Bibaha is still performed in the Newari community with slight changes in the original customs and rites. In Kalimpong, the Newar association named Akhil Bharatiya Newar Sangathan plays a significant role in the preservation of the Newar cultural heritage and upliftment of the community. Bel Bibaha are organized in a mass by the association and even the poorest of the poor families are helped and assisted by the association for the observation of Bel Bibaha of the young girls. The social significance of Ihi is immense for the Newar women. At a time when women were ill-treated as widow, and practices like child marriage and Sati being in vogue, the practice of Ihi saved the women from the social stigma. Ihi also had brought the Newari women a higher status as compared to other Hindu women. The sacredness of the practice is another factor that has ensured its continuity. Looked at it from another angle, it can be seen as a ritual through which patriarchal control over the women's sexuality and social life was maintained since the girls from an early age were supposed to maintain their chastity and not give in to any sexual activity unless her marriage with the human husband.

In today's Darjeeling hills, where every tribe or community is trying to protect and assert its distinctive identity, the Newars certainly show how its cultural distinctiveness can be preserved through the practice of Bel Bibaha.

Notes

1. Vaishya is one of the four varnas of the Hindu social order in Nepal and India. The Vaisyas are the third-highest of the four varnas or categories into which Hindu society is traditionally divided, ranking above the Sudras. Vaisya includes a large number of distinct castes of similar ranking, traditionally traders, moneylenders, or farmers.
2. Those who worshipped Lord Buddha were known as Buddhamargi and those who worshipped Lord Shiva were known as Shivamargi.
3. Ihi is the Newari term for Bel Bibaha (Nepali) which literally means marriage of a girl to a bel fruit.
4. Bahratayegu or bahrachuyegu is a coming of age ritual in Newar community of Nepal in which girls between the ages of 7 to 13 are married to the sun god in a 12-day ceremony. Bahratayegu is a second marriage of a Newar girl, the first one being ihi; the marriage with the bel fruit. In

Nepal Bhasabahra means a “cave” and tayegu or chuyegu mean “to put”, thus Bahratayegu is the ceremony where Newar girls are put in a cave for 12 days.

5. Gobaju is the term which stands for the Buddhist Newar priest
6. Deobaju is the term which stands for the Hindu priest respectively.
7. The *bel* tree (scientific name - *Aegle Marmelos*) is found growing at about 1200-1300 meters above sea level in the Himalayan regions and is found grown especially near Shiva temples. Bel tree is worshipped by all Hindus. A *bel* fruit commonly known as wood apple is round and grey in colour when raw, but turns yellow when ripe. It has a hard outer coat and the inside is orange in colour and fibrous and sweet in taste.
8. Kanyadaan refers to “giving away the virgin”. It is observed as a significant ritual in the Hindu marriage system.
9. Rana dynasty is a Khas Rajput (Chhetri) dynasty and was autocratic leaders which ruled the Kingdom of Nepal from 1846 until 1951. The dynasty is descended from Bal Narsingh Kunwar who was the son-in-law of Thapa Kaji Nain Singh Thapa of powerful Thapa dynasty. The founder of this dynasty was Jung Bahadur Rana
10. The descendants of Chandra (moon God) who resides at the head of Lord Shiva.
11. Sati is an obsolete Hindu funeral custom sanctioned by religious practice in which the women/widow immolates herself on one’s husband’s funeral pyre.

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