

Dynamics of Feminine Representation: A Newar Girl Through Its Ritualistic Approach in Sub- Himalayan Region of West Bengal.

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Abstract:

Originally from Nepal, the Kathmandu valley was home to the Newar people. It is believed that the term 'Newar' is originated from the word 'Nepal' itself (Vansittart, 1896, Stiller, 1968). All of Nepal's history has been greatly influenced by their culture. Since their participation in trans-Himalayan commerce was firmly established several years ago, they are likewise regarded as a skillful and prosperous commercial group. Additionally, in Sikkim, India, they have been successful in preserving this picture (Subba, 189:132, Sinha, 1981:192). The most distinctive factor of the community is the rituals that differentiate them from all other Nepali community, associated with girls. Traditionally, the Newar girls are married three times. Firstly, marriage with a "Bail" (wood apple fruit), Secondly, marriage with "the Sun" and finally, marriage with a man (Pradhan B., 1997). Ehe or Bel marriage and the Marriage with "the Sun" are two contradictory ceremonies prevalent in the community. If Ehe symbolizes the Newari girl as an "Eternal Bride," the tradition related with the Sun marriage kept them in oblivion, Throughout, their twelve days long confinement in one of the secluded dark parts of the house. Ehe is performed before the girl attains her puberty whereas the latter one when she attains her first puberty. Thus, if Ehe represent the Newar girls as empowered, at the same time they are secluded through some of its ritualistic approaches. Thus, the article will highlight the dynamics representation of Newar Culture related with girls and some changes in recent times.

Key words: - Marriage, rites, ritual, belief, ceremony, tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Culture infiltrates the social milieu of any human community. It is culture that instructs people on what to eat, what to do and how to do it, how to speak and think. Human actions are greatly influenced by culture as people are born, raised and live in it. Hence, a person can never be free of cultural influences.¹

Every community has its own set of customs, manners, beliefs, and superstitions, and Nepali are no exception. The Nepalis' society is multiethnic society and multi-cultural. It is consisted of different communities and Newar is one among them. Originally from Nepal, the Kathmandu valley was home to the Newar people.² According to D.B. Bista mentioned that the Newar people are the aboriginals of the Kathmandu valley.

They are mostly indulged in trade and commerce and are small business owners, importers, exporters, farmers, artisans and so on.³ It is believed that the term 'Newar' is originated from the name 'Nepal' itself. The history of Nepal is profusely affected by its culture and have been successful in preserving this picture in Sikkim (India) also⁴ and other neighboring areas of Darjeeling hills, Terai, and plains of West Bengal, along with some other parts of India.

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THE NEWARS: A BRIEF DESCRIPTION

According to Suniti Kumar Chatterjee the initial Mongoloid early settlers were a very primitive people, who lived mostly in caves as hunters and food-gatherers. A late Buddhist narrative that has a very little historical significance claims that they arrived in their nation sometime around the Buddha's life-time, which would put it around the middle of the first millennium B.C. They could have been preceded by previous tribes that served as the core of the 'Himalayan' Mongoloids of Nepal, who spoke languages like Newari, Lepcha, Magar and Gurung and the '*pronominalised*' languages like Dhimal, Khambu, Kanawari and others. The Newars, Lepchas, Magars, Gurungs, etc., were the later arrivals and the '*pronominalized*' as earliest. Thus, it is likely that Himalayan groups of Indo-Mongoloids were the first to arrive in India, and established themselves in Nepal, and spread as far west as Garhwal and Kumaon; however, they have persisted mostly in a same primitive state: except Newars.⁵ Sylvain Levi advocated the theory that the Newar have migrated to Nepal from 'northern region of the Himalayas'.⁶ In the year 1793 Kirkpatrick stated that, "the Newars are of a middle size, with broad shoulders and chest, very stout limbs, round and rather flat faces, small eyes, low and somewhat spreading noses".⁷

The Newars of present generation is an amalgamation of Indian and Thibetian ancestors, and their religion is also an amalgamation of Indian and Thibetian creeds. The Newar's religion, language, characteristics, and physical appearances all reflect the predominance of Thibetian over Indian ancestry in their blood composition.⁸ Today the word Newar' refers to individuals of both Mongoloid and Mediterranean physical appearances, who speaks Nepali, an Indo-Aryan language and Newari, a Tibeto-Burman language with a half a dozen dialects,⁹ which seems appropriate in the case of the Indian Newars as well Newars are 'either Hindu or Buddhist or even both; and furthermore.' Earlier, they were assumed as Buddhist and the Hinduism was later brought by the Brahmin immigrants in Nepal.¹⁰ Therefore, the Newars of India have the same effect and follow the both religions closely. But the Newars of this region follow the Hinduism more closely. As per Census report of 1872, the total Newars in Darjeeling were 3020, similarly in 1891 it was 4953, by 1901 they were 11,912 in number which increased to 17,262 by the year 1941 and as per the Census report of 1951 the total number of Newars in Darjeeling itself was 19,413.¹¹ J.F. Grunning has stated that there were 2770 Newar people in Jalpaiguri district in 1911.^{11a}

THE MYTHOLOGICAL STORY BEHIND THE CEREMONY

Himavan, the Himalya's deity, was the father of Parvati. As a dowry, Himavan, handed her the present-day Kathmandu Valley, when she was to marry Siva. Parvati heard an elderly woman weeping one day, while she was strolling across the valley. Parvati enquired her about at which the lady replied that she lost her husband and her life would be devastated without him. Parvati sympathized her and requested Siva for a blessing to protect the women of her birthplace from widowhood. Siva responded that he and Narayana would plan arrangements, so that Nepal would not have widows anymore. Thus, the *Ehee* or *Ihi* ceremonial was passed down to the Newars subsequently, Narayana became the bridegroom, and Siva, the witness.¹² According to a Buddhist pandit *Ihi* is a *samkalpa*.¹³ He further included this in his Dictionary of the Nepali Language, where he defined *Samkalpa*, as the Newar ceremony of marrying a girl to *bel* fruit in order that she may never become a widow.¹⁴

THE MARRIAGE TO A WOOD APPLE (*EHEE* or *IHI* SANSKAR)

The most distinctive ritualistic feature of the Newar, associated with the girls is the ritual that differentiate them from all other Nepali communities. Almost all the Newars before their girls marry

a man, they perform symbolic marriage of their daughters with a '*bel fruit*. Since it is generally believed in Hindu and the Buddhist Newar communities that a proper marriage with full rites can be held once in lifetime. This marriage is performed when the girl is seven to nine years old, or before she reaches puberty, her subsequent marriage with full rites can be considered of secondary importance.

¹⁵ Traditionally, the Newar girls are married three times. Firstly, marriage with a '*Bel*' (wood apple fruit). Secondly, marriage with 'the Sun' and finally, marriage with a man. ¹⁶ Every Newar girl is married off as a kid to a '*bel*' fruit which is then ceremoniously dipped into some holy river. Since, the '*bel*' to whom she was first wedded is said to exist perpetually, a Newar lady is never a widow. ¹⁷

While most of the life-cycle rituals or *samskaras* are mostly specific to castes or caste- categories, not to mention religion also, *Ihi* is widely regarded by the Newars as uniquely their ritual; aside from untouchables and usually, the Dyah Brahmans or Hindus, by all Newar castes, it is practiced. The *sanskrit* terms for the ceremony are *prathamavivaha* (first marriage) or *sriphalavivaha* (the blessed fruit marriage). ¹⁸

Ehee or Ihi is said to have started after the attack of Shamsuddin Ilyas, a Bengal warrior of 14th century who plundered temples, slaughtered men and boys, abducted females but avoided the married girls. This gave rise to the myth that marrying pre-puberty girls, would protect them from disgrace from future invasion from the warlord. ¹⁹ *Ehee or Ihi* is performed before attaining puberty by the Newar girls and this ceremony is very significant among them. The observation of this ritual is nothing less than the marriage ceremony. It is organized separately or collectively in a house gathering of all the girls for the purpose. The girls wear all the clothes and ornaments of a bride on the day. There is chanting of mantras of a marriage ceremony by the priest. The *Nawmati baja* (nine musical instruments) prominent among Newars is also played on this auspicious occasion. On the girl's hair parting crimson is applied. ²⁰ After the *Ehee* marriage is performed, a married girl from the Newar family never becomes a widow. She is free to marry again.

The *bel* or wood apple is either kept inside a box safely or immersed in the holy river after the completion of the ceremony. At present most of the girls' family prefer to immerse the fruit into nearby holy river with a belief of prolonged marital life. One of the reasons for immersing the fruit into the river is the belief that if in any circumstances, the fruit get destroyed or broken, the girl might have to lead the life of a widow, even if she is married to a human husband.

On the first day, the rituals of *Dusala Kriya* ²¹ of *bel marriage*, the girl's purification ceremony is held and adorned with new colorful cloths along with their traditional ornaments. During the observation of ceremony, the girl is supposed to take vegetarian foods. *Gubhaju* (a Buddhist Monk or Priest) or a Brahmin priest conclude the rituals related with the marriage. A gorgeous gilt figure of Suvarna Varna Kumara, the golden bachelor son of Siva stands close to the courtyard's center, and the priest guides them in a worship ceremony oriented towards it. ²² The second day is the important part of *Ihi* ceremony, where the girl gets ready into a complete bridal attire with red saree and ornaments. On this day, after worshipping and enchanting mantras of marriage, the marriage concludes with rubbing of vermilion on the parted hair of the girl. This process is generally done with the human hand holding the *bel* fruit, generally this process is done by the priest's pre adolescence daughter. The marriage concludes and here onwards she enjoys the marital status in the society.

On the same occasion, some perform the *kanyadan*, 'the virgin- girl gift,' which is akin to how it is done in an orthodox Hindu marriage ceremony. However, instead of the father giving his daughter to the husband by holding her hands in his, he helps her break free from the *bya* (husband) by untying

her wrists so that the fruit falls out.²³ On the same day feet washing ceremony or *Gura dhune pratha* is also observed by the girls' close family members, which generally means the completion of marriage ceremony of the virgin girl in the region.

Importance of *Ehee* or *Ihi* ceremony

It is carried out to protect the girls from a variety of threats, most notably the potential for attack by malevolent spirits. The most common justification, though is to protect the girl from the stigma of associated with being a widow. As *Ihi* connects the girl to a god in a perpetual marriage, the demise of her mortal partner does not affect her marital status. A girl he would be carried by hand to the cremation site, if she passed away before *ihi*, but she would be eligible to be carried on the *kota*, a ceremonial bier. Similarly, mourning of a girl who passes away before *Ihi* would be a few days, but observing twelve days mourning period is necessary after *ihi*. Most notably, the girls are introduced into the worship of the deity of their father's lineage, immediately after *Ihi*, which is like how boys are initiated.²⁴

THE MARRIAGE OF A GIRL TO THE SUN (THE BARHANG TAYGU)

It is the next ceremony after the wood apple marriage ritual of a Newar maiden. Usually between the age of eight and ten, the girls spend eleven days alone in a darkened room at one of the parts of their houses. During the ceremony the family tries that not a single ray penetrates the secluded room where girl is confined. It is believed that the girl poses a threat to their counterparts, if they are seen. It is stated that the girl would bring some kind of disaster to the males, who happened to see them, might turn into ashes, and die; the belief persists that if a man happened to see them, the girl would at the very least, inflict some kind of disaster to them.²⁵

On the twelfth day, early in the morning, the girl comes out of the confined room fully covering herself. The girls in a particular *hand mudra* or postures get the first glimpse of the sun god Surya Narayana. The girl's mother helps her daughter during the observation of this ceremony. By giving the areca nuts and then observing *argha puja*, she is identified as 'Gauri' (Parvati) and thus admitting Surya Narayana as girls' second husband.²⁶

However, Newar of these areas combine both rituals together now-a-days and observe the rituals in pre- adolescence period. The number of confinement days is also lesser than in Nepal. Hence, *Ihi* declares Suvarna Kumara as her first husband, the *baray tayegu* confers Surya Narayana as her second husband.

THE MARRIAGE WITH A MAN OR *IHIPA*

A Lami or a mediator goes to the house of the girl with a marriage proposal. After the consent from girls' parents, they send 10 pieces of whole beetle nut, a brass cup, one rupee coin and fruits to them through Lami. This custom is called as *Gway Bigu* (giving away areca nuts). On the marriage day, at the bride's place Ganesha is worshipped and a grand feast is organized. The eldest member of the bridegroom's party touches the feet of the bride and ties the *bagi* (a foot ornament *kalli* or *powjeb*) on to her feet. After the visit to the presiding deity of the locality, there is the *sincho-faye-gu*²⁷ ceremony, when vermilion is put on the bride's forehead and they are regarded as husband and wife.

Even when a Newar girl marries a human bridegroom with nearly the entire ceremony, the female keeps her marital status with the '*bel fruit*.' Therefore, if a woman so chooses, she might dissolve her marriage to her husband by returning the present of areca nuts next to his corpse. By doing this, she

escapes the duty of grieving for her husbands' deaths and is free to marry again.²⁸

The *Ehee* Ceremony in Urban Region

The Newars settled in the urban region like, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong, Siliguri, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar etc, observe the ceremony with the help of Brahmin priest. The main objective is to protect their daughters from widowhood. However, with the growing of inter- caste marriage with the other Nepali communities and having the liberal thoughts among the urban people, the urge for the continuation of the ritual is endangered. The other reason is the acceptance of inter caste marriage by the people of these areas, very few of them realize the importance of preserving of this unique tradition. The *Ehee* becomes vague while the Newar girl is being married to other caste. The other Nepali communities have their own set of rites and rituals that are followed. As a result, after the death of their human husband, they are considered widows and accept the cultural conventions for widows.

The *Ehee* Ceremony in Rural Region

The cultural scenario in rural places is differs slightly from that in urban areas. They can be found in many tea gardens areas such as, Kalchini, Hasimara, Dalsingpara, Birpara, Malbazar, Chalsa, Samsing and interior of the Darjeeling hills. They are conscious about the rituals and devote themselves completely to the ceremony. However, the financial situation of the majority of Newars in tea gardens areas is precarious. In such cases, people execute the ceremony in groups and share the expenses. Furthermore, the rural belt's inter-caste marriage system is not very liberal, particularly in the tea garden belt and interior areas. As a result of their assumptions that their daughters will marry Newars, the ceremony is continuing. A Newar girl may not marry to human bridegroom without unless the *Ehee* rite is performed. However, in the case of inter- caste marriage of a Newar girl, the concept of an immortal bride does not apply in rural areas too. Hence, she is regarded as widow with the death of human husband as in the case of urban areas.

EVALUATION

With the growing consciousness among the Newars in the 20th century and their ethnic unification activities, in Sikkim, Darjeeling and its foothills, a unified cultural scenario has come into existence. The sanction of the 'Cultural Board' by the Govt. of West Bengal in 2016 gave a new dimension in their ethnicization process as did the desire to preserve their unique traditions and cultural practices. The concept of immortal bride of a Newar girl is endangered with different societal norms of other Nepali communities. The observation of this rite grants them the ability to be an immortal or eternal bride. The necessity of the hour by other Nepali communities, even in case of inter- caste marriage. The idea of everyone respecting the *Ehee* or *Ihi* ceremony will safeguard the Newar women from the trauma of widowhood. It will preserve the concept of an immortal bride while also demonstrating the efficacy of the ceremony. Thus, the concept of cultural relativism of understanding the one's particular belief and practices must be followed to make *Ehee* evocative. Otherwise, it would become an ambiguous practice, rendering the *Ihi* rite obsolete. Meanwhile, the rituals of marriage with 'the Sun' may reinforce the superstition of confining the girl in a dark secluded room and the application of which may set more rigorous rites for Newar women. Hence, the women may be marginalized, social dogmas may engulf them and the status of women would be jeopardized. The contradiction would occur between two rituals of sanctioning the status of immortal bride and confinement of women while observing the concept of post- menstrual sexuality. As a result of its three diverse ritualistic practices, a Newar girl is concurrently represented as an immortal bride, a restricted girl, and a typical human bride.

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