

## Bi-si-ka jatra Festival In Bhaktapur

Siddhi B Ranjitkar

Bhaktapur has a tradition of reveling the festival called 'bi-si-ka' jatra starting four days before the New Year Day on the Vikram calendar, and ending four days after. 'Bi-si-ka' literally means dead serpents. Jatra means festival. 'Bi-si-ka' jatra means the festival of dead serpents in the Nevah language. The festival runs for eight nights and nine days. During this period, God Bhairav, and Goddess Bhadrakali enjoy outing. Almost every neighborhood revels a local festival taking the neighborhood god or goddess out of the respective temple for five days. On the evening practically night of the ninth day, God Bhairav and Goddess Bhadrakali return to the respective temple for living the rest of the year.

Three-tiered and two-tiered wooden chariots are standing at the Taumadhi Square. Carpenters took a week to assembly the chariots. Painters painted huge eyes on each of the four wheels of the chariots. The painted large three eyes on each wheel represent the god of strength invoked by Tantric priests in each of the wheels to carry the mighty god called Bhairav and the mighty goddess called Nakinju Ajima (Bhadrakali). The two-tiered chariot is for Goddess Bhadrakali whereas the three-tier chariot is for Lord Bhairav.

Lord Bhairav has a steed called 'betal': a human-form-divine spirit. Betal is restless and could cause harm to humans if he is unleashed. Lord Bhairav keeps him under control. Lord Bhairav rides on him for travel.

On the first day of the festival, tantric priests make tantric offerings to Betal. The priests make aware Betal through the tantric offerings of outing of Lord Bhairav for eight nights and nine days. They also inform Betal about the need for Betal to remain tied to the top portion of the upward bending wooden axle-like beam of the chariot to Lord Bhairav. The upward bending wooden beam is the spiritual serpent called Karkot Nag. It takes the entire load of the divine passenger.

The upward bending portion of the beam is at the front of the chariot. Betal looks like a driver of the chariot. He remains at the seat for eight nights and nine days during the 'bi-si-ka' jatra. Tantric priests take the large brass mask of Betal to the chariot, and they bind the mask to the upward bending wooden beam at its top. A caretaker keeps watching him for the period of the festival.

On the first day of the festival, Tantric priests make tantric offerings to Lord Bhairav almost for the whole day. They prepare the lord for the festival. The priests tantrically give the message of where the lord is going to stay and what offerings he will receive during the festival days. It is practically the outing of the lord once a year. Tantric priests say to the lord that the lord will enjoy the outings. Finally, the priests secure the acceptance of the lord to take him to the chariot for outing on the first day of the festival. The priests carry the lord on their arms to the inner sanctum of the chariot. The chief priest holds the lord by his left arm in the inner sanctum of the chariot throughout the outing on this night.

A musical band leads other priests to the temple to Goddess Taleju to pick up her double-edge knife called 'khadga'. They bring it to the chariot. One of the priests holds it on the chariot throughout the outing of the lord. It is the symbol of the presence of the head of the state. It also symbolizes the approval of Goddess Taleju to run the festival. Goddess Taleju is the spiritual form of the Living Goddess Kumari that presides over the festival.

Two men dressed in long white skirts, and wearing white turbans flank the chief priest holding Lord Bhairav in the chariot. These two men are known as 'bhailo nayo' means the heads of chariot. Each of the four carpenters stands at each corners of the chariot. Once, everybody is at his position on the chariot, the chief priest declares the outing of Lord Bhairav to start. Then, the revelers pull the chariot to the North or to the South.

Taumadhi Square is at the center of the Bhaktapur town. Revelers from the North and south assemble on the Taumadhi Square to pull the chariot. The chariot stands on the square facing south. The chariot has six ropes in the front and four in the rear.

First, revelers pull the chariot on the Taumadhi Square. They pull back and forth, each side in turn but sometimes both sides pull simultaneously causing the chariot to jump. Most of the time in the past, the pulling of the chariot had been on the Taumadhi Square. Then, they pull the chariot to the direction it faces either to the North or to the South for a short time before parking it at the area called 'gaa-hiti.'

The tradition has been to pull the chariot amicably. Revelers enjoyed pulling the chariot to the North or south without concern. Since last 30 years, revelers had grouped into the North and south. The fighting between the revelers of the North and south has been an annual event and part of the festival. They enjoy hurling bricks at each other.

After the revelers park the chariot at 'gaa-hiti', the chief priest takes Lord Bhairav to a temporary home at 'chaphali' at 'lakola chen', and Goddess Bhadrakali to her temporary home at 'lakola-chen.' It might be late night or even next morning depending on the mood of the revelers.

Devotees make offerings to Lord Bhairav, and Goddess Bhadrakali at their temporary homes. Devotees sing devotional songs at both the lodges of the deities. They keep burning mustard-seed oil lamps while singing the devotional songs. The state also makes offering to Lord Bhairav, and Goddess Bhadrakali during the second and third days.

On the fourth day, Lord Bhairav and Goddess Bhadrakali travel to the open area called 'yao-sin-khayo. A pole called 'yao sin dyo' with outstretched hands and a head made out of green tree branches with leaves has to go up at the yao-sin-khayo on the evening of this day at the earliest otherwise at night. The deities have to watch the 'yao sin dyo' pulled up there.

Some attendants unleash two black male goats at 'gaa-hiti.' They are free to move any direction. One that moves to north goes to Lord Bhairav for sacrifice, and another to Goddess Bhadrakali on the morning of the fourth day.

Then, priests take Lord Bhairav to his chariot, and Goddess Bhadrakali to her chariot, too. First, Goddess Bhadrakali travels on her chariot to 'yao-sin-khayo. Lord Bhairav follows her. Revelers pull the chariot in one direction only on the fourth day. They park Goddess Bhadrakali next to her superb field temple, and Lord Bhairav a little farther away from her at 'yao-sin-khayo.'

The local Nevah community called 'pode' pulls the pole from its shed to the area, and sets its bottom near the hole on the ground where it is to be pulled up. Then, another Nevah community called 'sayami' brings eight ropes, and green tree branches. First, they make the hands and head out of the green tree branches at the top of the pole, and set a copper image of the combined deity of Lord Bhairav, and Goddess Bhadrakali at the intersection of the hands with the pole. Then, they tied up two flags almost as long as the pole one to each armpit. They tied up eight ropes: four at each armpit. They also make several two-crossed-log supports to back up the pole while it is rising up.

Tantric priests perform tantric offerings to the pole at its top and at the hole it stands. They tantrically invoke one each of the eight-tantric deities out of Nava Durga means nine goddesses in each of the rope. Spiritually, each tantric deity is pulling one each of the eight ropes. Practically, revelers pull all the eight ropes. Some revelers synchronize pullers of all eight ropes. If they were successful, then 'yao sin dyo' would rise up. Revelers pull the rope only after tantric priests declare that the 'yao sin dyo' is ready for pulling up.

The pole represents the phallus of Lord Bhairav, and the hole on earth represents the female organ of Goddess Bhadrakali. Thus, while standing the 'yao sin dyo' on the hole represents the union of Lord Bhairav and Goddess Bhadrakali.

Some people hold the wooden supports to back up the rising 'yao sin dyo'. If the pullers are tired then 'yao sin dyo' also rests on the supports. As the pullers put more effort on pulling, the people holding supports move them up, too. 'Yao sin dyo' rises up easily when it manages to reach the two-thirds of the 90-degree angle from the ground.

Once, 'yao sin dyo' goes up, attendants to Nava Durga troupe tantrically take back the eight goddesses tantrically deployed to pull the 'yao sin dyo' up.

'Yao sin dyo' thrusts into the hole of Goddess Bhadrakali. Two long flags with the drawings of symbols of thirty-three thousands three hundred and thirty-three deities unfurl, and eight ropes hang from its armpits. Some youths rush to show their strength climbing the ropes. If anyone could reach the armpit of 'yao sin dyo', it is a spectacular sight but rarely anyone could reach even the half way to the armpit.

Tantric priests take Lord Bhairav from the chariot to the local shrine with eight-corner roof. Goddess Bhadrakali goes with other tantric priests to her three-tiered magnificent field temple to reside for a night. Tantric priests make tantric offerings to Lord Bhairav the whole night. Goddess Bhadrakali also receives tantric offerings from other priests on the night.

The fourth day of the Bi-si-ka Jatra is also the day for the deities at neighborhoods to come down from their abodes to the hangout places. Residents of the neighborhoods make offerings to their respective deities. The deities stay on in such shrines for five days.

On the fifth day: the day also the New Year day on the Vikram Calendar, devotees go to the bank of the Hanumante River at the area called Chupingal not far from the area the 'yao sin dyo' is standing, Lord Bhairav and Goddess Bhadrakali are living, to

take a purification dip in the Hanumante River or simply wash their faces. This makes them healthy for a year. This is of course their belief. Then, the devotees first go to 'yao sin dyo' to revere, then Lord Bhairav, and Goddess Bhadrakali and finally to Betal bound to the upward-bending wooden beam of the chariot.

Betal enjoys staying under the open sky. The farmer community makes the offerings of female chicken to Betal. The attendant slits the neck of one chicken after another to offer the blood to Betal, and throws the chicken out. Betal protects the farmers from any possible damages to their health and their crops. The price is only a small chicken for the farmers to pay for the insurance of their crops and even their health.

None of other deities accepts the sacrifice of female animals.

On the evening of the fifth day, the tantric priests make tantric offerings to Lord Bhairav and Goddess Bhadrakali. They prepare the deities for taking to their respective chariot. Tantric offerings are done, the time for the deities to move to their respective chariot.

After the deities are on their respective chariot, it is time to untie the ropes. It also is time for the 'yao sin dyo' to go down for a year. 'Yao sin dyo' moves back and forth for a few times, and then goes down crashing on the ground. People rush to the head of the deity and take a few pieces of the green leaves as the blessings from the deity.

Lord Bhairav and Goddess Bhadrakali travel back on their respective chariot to 'gaa-hiti'. They again go back to their respective lodges for another four more days. Devotees visit the deities for their blessings. Tantric offerings go on for the rest of the days. Thus, the deities have fun for all the days.

On the sixth and seventh days, locals of different neighborhoods revel the outings of the local deities. On the sixth day, Goddess Mahalaxmi meets the sister Goddess Mahakali at the area half way between their temples. They ride on their respective portable temple to meet each other. Revelers carry them on the shoulder poles. On the seventh day, God Chumaganesh enjoys the outing at the neighborhood. Locals take the god on a portable shrine around the neighborhood. Musical bands play different tunes to appease deities, and devotees sing devotional songs. Similarly, locals of other neighborhoods take out Goddess Brahmayani and Maheswori. They meet at the Dattatraya Square.

On the eighth day, every deity at the neighborhood sits at the hangout place. Devotees from different neighborhoods come to make offerings for the whole day. So, all deities remain busy with accepting the group offerings, individual offerings, a single offering or multiple offerings made by beautiful women dressed in festival attires. Men carry different items of offerings in bamboo baskets suspended from shoulder poles. Women offer so much of the homemade spirit and home-brewed white beer, all deities must be drunk by the evening. Probably, deities are so drunk they don't notice the devotional songs and the noisy musical bands passed by.

This is not all; deities have to go around in the neighborhoods on the night of the eighth day. Both the deities and human revelers are drunk on this night. Drunken revelers sing and dance while carrying the drunken deities on portable temples but everybody including the deities behaves soberly.

Revelers must be tired to death. The deities must be feeling sleepy from overeating and over drinking. It is time for the deities to go back home and revelers to rest. Deities on the arms of priests quietly travel back to their respective abode, and then have sound sleep only to wake up next day: the final day of the festival.

The ninth day is the last day of the bi-si-ka festival. All deities have been back home. Only Lord Bhairav and Goddess Bhadrakali are still at their respective field shrine. Tantric offerings continue at both the field shrines. Probably, Lord Bhairav and Goddess Bhadrakali also have enough of the festivities. They also need the rest but they need to travel to north and south of the town on their respective chariot, and see how the revelers fight a brick war: the recent addition to the festival.

After traveling north and south of the Bhaktapur town, Lord Bhairav stands at the entrance to his abode. The tantric priest does not let him go in. The tantric priest asks the standing lord: had the lord accepted the unacceptable offerings, had committed adultery with any unacceptable woman, and had the lord feasted on the unacceptable dishes, and so on. The lord stands quiet. The tantric priest performs the purification rites and rituals to the lord, and cleanses him. Lord Bhairav finally enters his abode and takes the regular lion seat for the rest of the year.

Bi-si-ka jatra: how this name is derived. A highly skilled tantrik has a beautiful spouse. She hears from her peers, her husband is a high-class tantrik. He can transform him into any sorts of creatures on earth. One day, she says to her husband: I want to see you transform into a large serpent. The tantric spouse says: it is not so easy. The spouse has put so much pressure on the Tantrik. He gives in. He puts his tantric power in a few grains of rice, and gives the rice to her. He said to her, "When you have had enough of seeing me as a serpent, just toss the grains of rice at the serpent, I will transform into a human again." She agrees.

The Tantrik transforms him into a huge serpent. The spouse gets so scared of the serpent. She runs away from the serpent. The Tantrik transformed into a serpent goes after her in anticipation she tosses the grains of rice at him. Once, the serpent gets so close, the spouse was so scared of the reptile, she puts the rice in her mouth from fear. She also transforms her into a serpent.

Nobody could transform them into humans except for the sovereign. They go around the palace. Nobody notices the serpents. The monarch also is a great Tantrik. He knows how to bring the serpents back to humans. The problem is the monarch has not noticed them.

For quite some time, the sovereign has not heard from the famous Tantrik. The monarch sends courtiers to see what the Tantrik has been doing. They find the house empty. Then, the monarch sends a search-and-rescue team across the country. They find two large dead serpents.

The monarch goes to see the dead serpents, and finds they are the Tantrik and his spouse transformed into serpents. To honor the distinguished Tantrik and his spouse, the monarch set the tradition of marking the anniversary of the two dead serpents calling it Bi-si-ka jatra means the festival of dead serpents. Some people believe that the two long flags hung from the armpits of the 'yao sin dyo' are the symbols of the dead serpents.

April 13, 2013