Biska Jatra: Myth, Sign, Significance and Bhaktapur

Rajan Phelu[1]

Abstract

The still living ancient festivals which are mysterious, colourful and fun evolved in course of time due to the highest popularity of the paramount deities belonging to the two great religions: Hinduism and the Buddhism. Their rites and rituals possess the background of interesting myths, delightful legends, and captivating folktales. Every year, the Newars celebrate wonderful fairs and festivals on different auspicious days in Bhaktapur. Every festive event of Bhaktapur has its own specialties. This study examines myths and current practice of Biska Jatra in the cultural backdrop of Bhaktapur from the perspective of semiology. The common belief is that celebrating the festival will ward off evil spirits and dangers, boost growth in agriculture production and the economy; maintain peace and prosperity and ensure the protection of the country from the outside invaders. This study argues that the celebration of Biska Jatra depicts its rationality and significance in the socio-cultural lives of the residents of Bhaktapur.

Key Words*: Biska Jatra, Festival, Myth, Semiology, Significance*

Festivals and ceremonies are known as the mirrors of the folktales, history and traditions, way of life, religious beliefs, social harmony, craftsmanship, joys and fears, dreams and sorrows, unity in diversity of the people and entire the country. Especially, they have religious and cultural significance which are celebrated with huge gathering of people on the special auspicious days and time for the fulfillment of certain desires of an individual and community as well. They are related with the memories of special events, to bring happiness to the gods and goddesses. Mary Anderson states, "Festivals were inaugurated to celebrate annually in some event in the scriptures to pacify the gods, to thank them for the harvest, to honour their birth dates or to celebrate some miraculous performance attribute to them" (27). Newars of Bhaktapur have at least one festivity in a month and they enjoy and strengthen their bond celebrating feast and festivals. Being a culturally and historically rich city, Bhaktapur is famous for temples, cultures, and food. Newari people are fond of their festivals, cultures, traditions, and values. Eating different food items and celebrating different festivals is the way of life of the Newari people. Dor Bahadur Bista argues, "Newars observe the greatest number of festivals and feasts. They spend a great amount of money and food on such occasions, the food consisting of buffalo meat, beaten rice, vegetables, pickles, curd and large quantities of beer and spirit" (26). Events are closely associated with human beings. Each and every event directly touches to the society. They do not take place in a vacuum. Therefore, they influence almost every aspect of our lives, whether the religious, socio- cultural, economic, political and ecological as well.

[1] *Rajan Phelu is the teaching assistant of Bagisowri College. He can be reached at phelurajan@gmail.com*

Roland Barthes helped the modern science of semiology applying semiotic methods to the myths that he saw all around him: media, fashion, art, photography, architecture, literature. According to Barthes, anything in culture can be a sign and send a specific message. He describes some methods of deciphering these messages:

Of course, it is not *any* type: language needs special conditions in order to become myth: we shall see them in a minute. But what must be firmly established at the start is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form. Later, we shall have to assign to these form historical limits, conditions of use, and reintroduce society into it: we must nevertheless first describe it as a form. (107)

This means that everything can be myth, provided that it conveys some meaning or message.
There are different myths on how *Biska Jatra* was celebrated. The two myths are widely accepted by the locals on the commencement of this festival. The first myth tells the story of a cursed princess which goes like this:

Once in Bhaktragram, the king had a beautiful daughter. The princess would remain widow since her husband always died the next morning of the marriage. Each day a new man was chosen to marry the princess and the next day, the man would be dead. One day, a young man from another place came to visit Bhaktagram and was fascinated by the tale of the princess. The young man volunteered to go and to find out the truth behind all the deaths. After the wedding, the princess lay in bed and slept quickly. The young man stayed awake and sat beside the princess staring at her face. After some time, two poisonous serpents crawled from the nose of the princess. The young man quickly killed the snakes with his sword. The then King was happy that the princess was free from the curse. He hung the snakes in the tall pole and erected them in *Yosinkhel* to show to the public. The public then started to celebrate the occasion as the special day the princess was freed from the snake curse. (Munankarmi 2-5)

Another popular myth about *Biska Jatra* tells the story of Lichchhavi King Shivadev which narrates:
During the reign of King Shivadev, the Kirants attacked Bhaktapur and tortured the people. The King consulted with a tantric Shekhar Acharya who transformed himself into a tiger and chased the Kirants. One day, the tantric Shekhar Acharya's wife wanted to see the Azinger (python) and requested her husband to change shape. The tantric agreed and gave rice grains to sprinkle over him so that he could return back to his original form. But after he turned into the python, his wife was frightened and ran away. She ate the rice grains herself and turned her into a python. Both the couple turned to python and by realizing that they could not turn back to their original form, they committed suicide on the river bank. The kings then started to erect the lingum pole along with a pair of flag in memory of the couple. (Joshi 76-77)

While analyzing both of the myths, the main reason behind the celebration of *Biska Jatra* is crystal clear. Indeed, this festival is celebrated to disseminate the message of victory. In the first myth, the young man got victory over the cursed snakes which freed the princess being widow

whereas in the second myth, Shekhar Acharya protected the country from the kirants' invasion. As Gopal Singh Nepali's study mentions, "Besides symbolizing the celebration of the New Year's day of the Vikram era, this festival signifies a kind of propitiation principally designed for the protection of Bhaktapur town" (344). In both of myths though they are different, the kings became happy and started to observe *Biska Jatra* in the celebration of victory over the curse and enemy. Thus, *Biska Jatra* is observed every year disseminating the message among the locals that the observers of this festival won't be cursed by ill fate and will be able to defeat the enemies throughout the year.

Moreover, the Newars of Bhaktapur have maintained considerable social and cultural order. They observe the fairs and festivals in harmony preserving all the functions that are symbolically well off. Robert Levy reports, "Bhaktapur, the argument goes, can be considered to have interesting typological analogies with archaic cities insofar as it represents a community elaborately organized on a spatial base through a system of marked symbolism" (27). In addition to the myth, the events that take place during *Biska Jatra* are rich in symbolic meanings. They can be studied with the help of semiotic activities. Generally, semiotic is the study of signs or an epistemology about the existence or the actuality of sign in societal life. Semiotic accounts for everything that can be seen or be interpreted as a sign. Saussure states, "A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology" (16). Since *Biska Jatra* is loaded with numerous symbolic meanings, they have their own significance in the socio-cultural lives of the inhabitants of Bhaktapur.

In the cultural city Bhaktapur, Lord Bhairabnath and his terrifying wife Bhadrakali are the main deities of the festival, *Biska Jatra*. The festival marks the beginning of the New Year, which always falls in the middle of April. As Anderson's study mentions, "It is believed that the Bhadgaon festival is called Bisket in reference to the Newari words bi for 'snake', and *syako* for 'slaughter', forming the term which eventually became Bisket, a celebration to commemorate the death of two serpent demons" (41). The festival lasts for nine conjunctive days and is celebrated with great joy and fanfare by the city crowds. Four days before the New Year, Bhairab and Bhadrakali are enshrined in their respective temple shaped chariots *Ratha*, which inaugurate the *Biska Jatra* celebration. The Ratha Jatra starts from Taumadhi tole of the city of Bhaktapur. The chariot of a wrathful god, Bhairab is pulled by both the parties of *Thane* (Upper) and *Kwone* (Lower). The tug of war starts between the two parties to bring the chariot to their respective area. Thousands of people gather at Taumadhi Square to take part in the festival and local television channels broadcast the festival live so that other people could watch the festival from their home. The winning party takes the chariot to their respective area. Munankarmi states, "The swarming mobs of celebrators try their level best to pull and move the chariot in their own direction shouting *Hose Haise*" (39). The two factors-space and movement should be taken in consideration while studying about the Newar performance art. The most unique feature of the Newar performance arts is the continuous blend of space and movement. Slausser mentions, "Architecturally insignificant but of considerable institutional importance are the masonry platforms known in Nepali as *dabali* . . . it was the traditional place for the performance of sacred dance dramas; and some *dabalis* have special names and designated uses" (159). The

dramatic shows, dancing and other forms of performances have direct symbiosis with the spatial dimension of the city.

On the day before New Year the *lingam* pole (a twenty five meter long wooden pole flanked by a pair of flags symbolizing the dead serpents) is erected at the festive place called: *Yosinkhel*. As soon as the *lingam* pole is erected, people start to climb up it to pluck the flower on the top believing that the one that becomes successful to do so will have the son. There is sublime feeling in attempting so. The day ends with erecting the *Yosin Dyo*, thus marking the end of the year. It is believed that the side on which *Yosin Dyo* faces will gain lots of rainfall and the agriculture will flourish there. Hariram Joshi argues, "On the day of New Year, the people from Bhaktapur visit *Yosin Khel* to worship the gods and get blessings for their upcoming year" (19). In the evening, the *Yosin Dyo* is pulled down. After *Yosin Dyo* is pulled down, the Bhaila Kha (the chariot of Bhairabhnat) and Nakinchu Kha (the chariot of Bhadrakali) are pulled towards Gahiti. At Gahiti, both the chariots clash at midnight symbolizing copulation. As the chariot procession is a very important event, the people of Bhaktapur engage in celebrations throughout *Biska Jatra*. The city is divided into eight zones; each one presided over by one of the eight forms of the goddess Astamatrika (the eight mothers). Arun Gupto opines, "The worship of the Matrikas and Nava Durgas are performed during Biskit Jatra (carnival) and Dashami" (52). On the last day of *Biska Jatra*, the chariot of Bhairabnath is again pulled by the two parties to bring the god to their respective area. The chariot is pulled from Gahiti by the Upper and Lower parties. The chariot after pulled to the respective area will be pulled back to Taumadhi where it stays for a while and then is dismantled until the next year.

There is another popular belief to *Biska Jatra*. It is believed that the sky and the earth are the forms of divine male and female in the form of Lord Bhairab and Goddess Bhadrakali. Ancient Newari mythology believes that the divine mating of the sky and earth has made creation possible. The rain showering from the sky denotes the life giving elements with the earth considered as the creative base. Tejeshworbabu Gwonga insists, "The pole has a hole in it that signifies the female reproductive organ" (152). So *Biska Jatra* is essentially the celebration of mating Bhairab and Bhadrakali. It is the celebration of creation and continuity of life. The mating of Bhairab and Bhadrakali is also symbolic to the creation that comes after the beginning of spring. The spring in fact brings life back, makes the surrounding green and yielding. This is of course the moment of happiness and time to cheer.

In Bhaktapur, the festivals are celebrated with gusto but if the cultural practices are not studied in association with the social living of the people and environmental phenomena, they will remain merely in myth and superstition. *Biska Jatra* has carried myths and meanings which are directly and indirectly associated with the life of local residents of Bhaktapur. Thus, the Newars observe this festival so lively and energetically every year with the anticipation of socio-economic prosperity throughout the year. As each and every events of *Biska Jatra* signifies particular meaning, it has great cultural and religious importance in the livelihood of the Newars of Bhaktapur.

Works Cited

Anderson, Mary M. *The Festivals of Nepal*. Rupa & co., 1977.

Barthes, Ronald. *Mythologies*. Seuil, 1957.

Bista, Dor Bahadur. *People of Nepal*. Ratna Pustak Bhandar,1980.

Gupto, Arun. *Goddesses of Kathmandu Valley: Grace, Rage and Knowledge*. Routledge, 2020.

Gwonga, Tejesworbabu. "Vasnaka Bimba Yatra-Bisket." *Sanskritika Ayam.* Dr. Bijaya Shrestha, 2052, pp. 151-154.

Joshi, Hariram. "Bisketjatra." *Khwopring*. Bhaktapur Bikas Sahayog Sangh, 2051, pp. 19-21.

Joshi, Satya Mohan. *Nepali Chadparwa.* Sajha Prakashan, 2039.

Levy, Robert. *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the Organization of a Traditional Newar City in Nepal*. University of California Press, 1990.

Munankarmi, Lilabhakta. *Bisket Jatrako Sanskriti*. Bhaktapur Municipality, 2053.

Nepali, Gopal Singh. *The Newars: An Ethno-Sociological Study of a Himalayan Community.* Mandala Book Point, 2015.

Saussure, Ferdinand De. *Course in General Lingustics*. Philosophical Library, 1974.

Slusser, Mary Shepherd. *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*. Princeton University Press, 1982.