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BHEJA AS A STRATEGIC CULTURAL CONVENTION
Community Resource Management
in the Barha Magarat

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ne important if informal cultural institution that regulates all the functions, feasts, and festivals of the Magars of west Nepal is *Bheja* that affects almost every sphere of their day-to-day life. Although there exists a significant ethnographic literature on the Magars otherwise, it has never been highlighted so far. This article intends to contribute a little in that direction.¹

Put briefly, *Bheja*, which coordinates various rituals of the Magar Community, helps to establish and maintain the community with a certain system of production and enables it to interact harmoniously with nature. Rituals, like the whole culture of which they form a part, have their economic aspects as well the ecological ones and this ritual may be considered a typical way of the Magar way of adapting to their environment.

This analysis and interpretation of *Bheja* is primarily guided by the factors delineated by Rappaport's proposition in his recognized work *Ritual Regulation of Environmental Relations among a New Guinea People*. He proposes that most of the functional studies of religious behaviors in anthropology have as an analytical goal the elucidation of events, processes, or relationships occurring within a 'social unit' of some sort. This 'social unit' is not always well defined, but in some cases it appears to be "... a congregation, a group of people who participate together in the performance of religious rituals".

As Rappaport believed and quoted, the following statement by Homans (1941: 172) represents fairly the dominant line of anthropological thought concerning the functions of religious ritual. According to him, 'ritual actions' do not produce a practical result on the external world - that is one reason for calling them ritual. But to make this statement is 'not to say that ritual has no function'. Its function is not related to the world external to the society but to the 'internal constitution of the society'. It gives the members of the society confidence; it also dispels their anxieties; it disciplines their social organization.

Bheja is an organized body to gain some social goal even though there is no vertical hierarchy to be achieved among the members. Moreover, its existence allows the social/cultural anthropologists to explore and extract the facts about *Bheja*.

Since this article is about one specific cultural tradition of the Magars, it will be relevant to highlight the Magars in brief. Magars have been recognized as simple, polite, honest, brave, and sacrificial in nature. As one of the most numerous indigenous groups of the country, they hold a significant place in terms of population composition,² considered to be the indigenous people of the *Barha Magarat*³ (literally, the twelve regions of the Magars). But, nowadays they have become so widely scattered that they are not new to any other place or group within Nepal. The outside world, however, came to know of Magars only after the British began recruiting soldiers in Nepal for their Gurkha regiment. Wherever and whatever the condition they may be in, they love to maintain their cultural identity. For instance, if asked what makes them a distinct social group, the more traditional/older among them are probably likely to reply that it is the possession of their own language, religion, folklore or custom. The younger ones try to regard their group identity in light of the contribution made by their forefathers in the process of national integration.⁴ The Magars are Mongoloid in appearance and speak a Tibeto-Burman dialect. Their economy is subsistential, primarily based on agriculture, which is practiced only for survival. A considerable amount of grain they produce is spent in making *jaad* and *raksi* (locally brewed beer and liquor). They are very fond of *jaad* and *raksi*, and consider these an inseparable part of their life. Recruitment in the British and Indian army has always remained a center of attraction for most, if not all the, young Magars, and they are well recognized for their sacrificial spirit and bravery among the armies. Employment in foreign army is much sought after for both status and financial reasons, even by the relatively prosperous individuals of the community.

Whatever controversy there may be about their position in the Hindu caste ladder (or debate on their Hindu identity), they consider themselves Hindus. Some also claim that they are Buddhists (Bista: Himal 5:10). However, they are divided into hundreds of sub-castes (Sharma 049: 279; Baral 050: 28). But there is no hierarchical stratification among them and all are treated equally (Baral 050: 30). Politically, militarily, and socially, they occupied a high position in the social scale in the past, but now are suffering from a certain inferiority complex. In this context, Bista is of the opinion that Bahuns are to be blamed for it (Bista: Himal 052: 10). Recently, some

of them who are working for upliftment of the group claim that they are aiming to gain their 'lost' status. The Magars, who carry the legacy of both the rulers and subjects, have developed some of their own specific cultures, which is heavily influenced by their subsistence pattern and exploitative technology or vice versa. Even today, one can observe many such traditions that still exist. *Bheja* is one prominent example of such specific tradition which helps to keep the community intact and functioning.

ORGANIZATION

Bheja is a colloquial term,⁵ which resembles *Guthi* of the Newars, in its religious functions, and *Dhikuri* of the Thakalis in its economic functions. However, there are significant differences, too. While the other two traditions have been studied and analyzed in detail, *Bheja* remains a novel theme for study. No etymological meaning of *Bheja* exists in the Magar and Nepali languages. It is, therefore, a painstaking task to trace out its origin and development.⁶ During the study period in the field, no one was found who could specifically trace its origin and historical course of development. They rather tended to refer to times unknown on the origin of the community itself. This ignorance does not mean that it has a rudimentary existence among them. They are rather deeply attached to it. In fact, it is so deeply rooted in their lifestyles that it seems difficult for them to confine it to a single definition. *Bheja* is *Bheja* and may mean many things. As a matter of fact, they can not even think of their life in its absence. Thus, the tradition is well established and accepted although still sans a rigorous definition.

There may be more than one *Bheja* in a single community cluster and a single *Bheja* may include more than one cluster. The size of the *Bheja* may differ according to the size of the cluster and any geographical and other forms of disparities. Each and every household of the cluster is supposed to be a member. No specific quality or criterion has to be fulfilled to become a member, but exclusion leads to social ostracism, a pariah status. A member may be suspended, purged, or excluded if he does not attend *poojas* (worship) without a serious reason and if he does not agree to abide by its rules and regulations.

Certain *Bhejas* may allow even the non-Magars to become members, including the untouchable households of the same and a neighboring cluster if the Magars are dominant and others are in minority, but they have definitely more limited roles than the Magars may have. Thus, invited members can neither be the *Mukhiya* (the chairperson) nor a *Pujari* (the priest). Nevertheless, it is not like any

ethnocentric institution or organization which raises voice for ethnic sovereignty and caste purity. Generally, an aged and respected male member of the community is the chairman. Called *Mukhiya*, he is selected by a meeting of the members of the *Bheja* after the demise of the previous one, and is no more than a titular figure. It seems a formal role which does not differ much from the role of other members. However, he chairs the meetings and plays a key role in making some concrete decisions. His presence and suggestions are expected in all meetings. Sometimes, he even orders members to carry out some specific jobs. But, he does not enjoy any particular right or privilege. In the various *poojas* (worships) performed, a *Pujari* (priest) is also needed, who is generally called *Kiwara* or *Kumar* (an unmarried lad).

Around the last month of every year, there is a special *Bheja* event – *Susupak Bheja* – which works as a general assembly of the organization. No household would miss the occasion. This is the time when the rules and regulations are made, corrected or revised; wages, meat price, and other important matters are discussed and decided for the year following; and the *Mukhiya* is selected, if necessary. Therefore they call it *riti-thiti basalne Bheja* (norm-establishing *Bheja*). In some areas it is also known as *Chandi Bheja*, when village matters are discussed at length. Abolition of old customs and practices and adoption of new ones constitute its central tasks (Baral, 050: 124).

FUNCTION

There are no formal, specific rules regulating and binding the various social functions that *Bheja* serves. Yet one common rule is that any decisions regarding religious activities (such as annual *poojas*) and social, agricultural celebrations (for instance, *natley*: an off day) are taken at the *Bheja* meetings. Primarily, it functions to maintain and modify the cultural traditions, social order, and the system of production in the changing context. These functions, however, can be viewed from different perspectives some of which have been briefly discussed below.

Religious Functions

Magar community is a self-perpetuating saturated community. They regard themselves as Hindus and some claim that they are Buddhists, but their religious traditions and practices indicate they are animists.⁷ They certainly do not worship idols of gods or goddesses such as *Vishnu*, *Krishna*, *Ram*, *Laxmi*, or *Kali*, as other Hindus do. Rather they worship their ancestors in one or other forms. *Baje-Bajai Pooja*, *Parange pooja*, *Bes kang Bajai pooja*, *Mandali Baje-Bajai Pooja*, *Panch*

Kanya Mai Pooja, *Ban Jhankri pooja* are forms of their ancestral worship. Every such *pooja* has a legend directly related to the history of their forefathers. They believe that if they do not worship properly and are unable to appease the ancestral spirits, disaster may follow. Therefore they are loyal to their ancestors and worship them with devotion and piety. Such *poojas* do not require temples and specific shrines for deities. The place for the ceremony is fixed by the *Bheja* itself. Generally, they choose a hill-top nearby, in the middle of the forest where cutting timber and livestock grazing is banned. Areas around such places remain densely green. The system therefore has acquired a certain 'conservationist color', a belief system which is a form of their ecological adaptation. Sacrifices of pigs, male buffaloes, goats, and fowls are necessary for all such *poojas* except in *Panch Kanya Mai Pooja* where slaughtering of pigs is not permitted but five different kinds of animals and fowls are slaughtered, called *Pancha Bali*.

They also worship the sun, river, tree, snake, and earth as gods and goddesses. This appears as their way to maintain a close relationship with nature. *Poojas* of ancestors and nature take place seasonally and, often, also annually. *Bheja* manages and makes all the arrangements for *poojas* which are performed on some particular days of the various seasons. To arrange *pooja*, a meeting is called to fix the date and assign roles and duties to members. For *pooja* they do not employ any outsider or high caste priest. Rather they select an unmarried boy from their own community. Certain special functions, such as prayers for soliciting blessing, are, however, performed by the *Mukhiya*.

Agricultural Functions

Another significant cultural practice of the community is *Natley*, a day when people do not work outside the house, specially on the farm. This system prevails in other communities, too, but it is more common among the Magars. The day differs from place to place and from group to group, since it is fixed by *Bheja*. Often, *Poomima*, the full moon day, is observed as the day of *Natley* or it is *Aunsi*, the new moon day. In some areas they simply select Monday or Wednesday.

In the past, outsiders and strangers were prohibited to enter the village and villagers to go outside on the day of *Natley*. The defaulters were penalized. On such a day *Bheja* (i.e., a man assigned by *Bheja*, in most of the cases, the *Mukhiya*) offers *dhuup* (incense) to *Bhumi* (the earth), called *Main Dhare*.

The local people interpret *Natley* in their own ways. It allows people and their oxen rest after a long tiring agricultural work and

gives them time to spend with their own family. Such regular meetings make social interaction also possible.

Most of the agricultural works are done by what goes by the name of *Parima* (reciprocal exchange of labor), and sometimes by a temporarily formed labor group known as *Bhaijari* (or *Hori* in certain areas). Thus formed labor groups are regulated by *Bheja* and are not offered any wage except two meals and drinks (Baral 050: 58). Wage labor is not considered a prestigious job and only the landless people are involved in it for their livelihood. *Bheja* fixes the date for work in the field and all households get an opportunity to do their work properly on time and according to their need. *Bheja*, of course, was not started for such farm work. But it can now fix and even revise the wage for labor. The Magars therefore do not face labor crisis during the peak farming seasons.

Economic Significance

Although *Bheja* does not operate any particular economic activity directly, its direct influence can be seen in the various decisions that directly or indirectly affect the economy of both the Magar village and its individuals.

Bheja performs important management functions by fixing the price of sacrificial meat which is to be charged from the member households. For example, if the price of pork is 40 rupees per kg at one *Bheja* and Rs. 50 per kg in the next one, and if the member of the latter one wants to buy the pork from the former one, he pays Rs. 50, not Rs. 40. In some cases, such meat is not sold to the outsiders or those who are not the members of the body.

Since the area is densely populated by Magars and they need such animals at the time of *pooja*, it sometimes becomes necessary to procure animals from other communities. Some *Bhejas* have started now rearing animals for sacrifice. For this purpose, a certain amount of money is collected from every member household to buy piglets. An indent member household, which can not buy and rear its own animal, is given the piglets for rearing. The sacrificial pork is distributed among all the member households. The price of the pork thus fixed is often considerably lower than the one prevailing in the market. Half of such money goes to the household which reared the pigs and, with the other half, the piglets are bought for the future *pooja*. Apart from the economy it brings, the system also solves the problem of scarcity of sacrificial animals.

Although every member household does not keep fowls and goats, they need them at the time of *pooja*. They then prefer to buy them from the members of the same *Bheja*, which encourages some of

them to rear such animals as a major source of income. Thus the market is also ensured for sale of the livestock raised.

Now some of the *Bhejas* of the study area have started raising levy from member households. The money collected is lent out to the members with an interest, to be refunded when another member needs that money for some serious occasion, such as death, serious illness, or accident. Part of the money is used to buy household items such as steel plates, jars, jugs, *kachauras*, cups to drink *juad*, and cooking utensils, utilized at the time of feasts and other rituals. When not in use, they are rented. Individual loans are also offered to fellow-members. In this way, *Bheja* is also taking on the form of a local self-help bank.

Resource Management

Bheja is one appropriate way of community management of public resource. In many rural areas, consumer groups have been formed for resource utilization and management. But keen competition for scarce resources has brought failure of such groups, even social conflicts. The Magar community is an exception in this context. Decisions are made and implemented on the basis of consensus of the members. The actions, fines, and punishments, taken against those who violate the rules and regulations, are all determined by *Bheja*.

Khoria (the slash-and-burn mode of agriculture), a part of the traditional farming system of the Magar people, is applied to the slopes of the government forest. They cut down small trees, slash bushes, and burn them so that they provide nutrients to the crops. This also prevents weeds and wild plants from growing. In most of the area, such a practice has now been banned for various reasons. However, in periods of drought and shortfalls in production caused by hailstorms, floods, and pests, the community allows *Khoria* cultivation, for it is then the best alternative for deficit food management. However, no wanton slashing and burning is permitted. The issues decided by *Bheja* on such occasions are collective in nature: who is in severe need and which part of the forest is to be used for the purpose. Often those who cultivate *Khoria* land must offer a part of the grain harvested or money as rent or *sherma* to the *Bheja*. If, however, *Khoria* is done on a private *lhose*, *sherma* is paid to the owner.

Activities such as construction and repairment of irrigation canals, roads, and trails are taken up by the people according to the decisions taken in the *Bheja* meetings. In managing common property, *Bheja* thus plays a quite effective role.

Nutrition

Since the geo-climatic conditions of the agricultural space occupied by Magar territory do not favor high-yield cultivation, they practice subsistence agriculture and grow only a few vegetables. A considerable amount of the grain they produce, moreover, goes into distilling *jaal* and *raksi*. This adversely affects their nutritional intake which is obviously low. But the frequent *pooja* rituals partly make up for their nutritional deficiency since these ceremonies ensure a continuous supply of animal protein and other nutrients from the animals and fowls slaughtered. On such occasions, younger children are treated with well-cooked pork to let them take weight. Plumpness in the community is held to be synonymous with health.

Dispute Mediation

In ordinary circumstances, when some dispute arises among the members of the community (or between its members and outsiders), the case is taken up by the kins of the parties in conflict. When they fail, the case is referred to the *Mukhiya* of the *Bheja*. If his decision is acceptable to neither party, the case is put before a public assembly called by the *Bheja*. It is a practice which is still quite popular (Baral 050: 59). Discussion follows on various aspects of the issue and fines and compensations are set by that gathering. Till recently, the money thus collected went into drinking parties or, else, the disputant groups used it up. Most of the conjugal disputes such as elopement, forced marriage, and *jaari* (compensation money paid by the abductor of a woman to her previous husband) are solved by the *Bheja*.

Community Solidarity

Bheja also serves an integrative role in Magar society by fostering community solidarity and social consensus. It gives the community the feeling of a single extended family.

The real significance of the institution becomes evident on critical social occasions. At the time of marriage and other social ceremonies, for instance, it helps in the performance of specific tasks and ceremonial functions.

When, moreover, someone from a member household dies, others extend their helping hand to the grieving family, join in the funeral procession and death rituals. During the thirteen days of mourning (*tera din kriya basne*), the member households visit the deceased family with a *mana* (about 1/2 kg) of hulled rice and one rupee, which is used on the thirteenth day of mourning (*teraun*). On

that day, the members and others are invited to partake of the feast called *Sudhyain*.

They also help each other at the time of happier occasions like marriage, *chewar*, and *pooja*, when families, relatives, and acquaintances assemble for help and celebration.

Entertainment

On a *pooja* day, the member households do not work in the fields. The family members and their relatives are expected to be at home or the place of *pooja* to celebrate. Drinking *jaal* and *raksi* and merry-making, jokes, and laughter are common. Young boys and girls gather in groups for dancing and singing contests. Dances vary according to the occasion and season. Sometimes such groups go door to door dancing and singing, but most of the time they gather in a common place, like *rodi*, and sing and dance throughout the night. Even the elderly members, both male and female, participate.

On such occasions women and children appear quite active. All the arrangements inside the house are basically done by women who have a hectic schedule preparing foods and drinks and exchanging *pahur*, the gift. Some women also participate in *pooja*.

CRITIQUE

Bheja, however, is not without its problems. Some may perceive in it the scope for raising communal feelings and social conflict with other *jats* (caste groups). It can certainly become a place for articulation and aggregation of their ethnic passions, where they can be more sensitive about their communal identity. Since all social functions are generally determined and monitored by the *Bheja*, it may also be hindering the growth of modern institutions. In certain cases, *Bheja* also seems to be bypassing the official institutions, such as the VDC, court, police, etc. Above all, it has drawn fire from the non-Magars for the waste of money it causes on various rituals. Some 'higher caste' people are of the opinion that rituals have impoverished quite a few Magars. Children are held back from schools, for social merry-making.

After the restoration of the multiparty system, politicization has set in also in this traditional institution which is showing partisan trends. Some elder persons are therefore genuinely worried over the prospects of an increase in social strife and community disintegration.

CONCLUSION

Although *Bheja* performs regular religious tasks of the community, it has a broader impact on the overall activities and functioning of the *Barha Magarat* and has become one inseparable part

of the Magar life there. Primarily, it helps to maintain social integrity of the community through various functions and keeps its cultural identity alive.

It supplies animal protein to the members of the society; creates the market for the local livestock, such as goats, pigs, etc.; makes the arrangements required for entertainment; creates the forum for citizen interactions; fosters mutual help and respect; and facilitates the process of socialization.

Bheja also fixes the labor wage, arranges common property management (e.g., forest resource management), and sets up mechanism for mediating community disputes.

All such functions, however, need a good flow of information and communication. *Bheja* fulfills this community need. The flow of information is essential not only for fulfilling such roles, but also for the process of overall development, especially, sustainable development in the present-day context.

Recently, however, *Bheja* has tended to fragment into smaller-sized groups of fifteen to twelve households. A household in such a condition can easily enter into a new *Bheja* in case of expulsion from an old one. This is beginning to effect its traditional functions, particularly because of increasing politicization and partisanship. The institution is therefore growing weaker, specifically in the management of community resources and mediation of community disputes. The steady inroads of market economy have further diluted its capacity. People are today more interested in new and imported cultural norms and values. Nowadays, the Magars are trying to break down the barriers and boundaries of traditions and culture in their pursuit of growth and modernization. The overall consequence is fragmentation and weakening of *Bheja*.

All, however, is not lost yet. Revival and renovation can still put back life into this time-honored institution. NGOs/INGOs can play a key role in a proper reassessment and restructuring of the *Bheja* in the new developmental context of the approaching 21st century.

NOTES

1. The information on which the article is based was collected during the fieldwork conducted between January and April in 1994 in a VDC of eastern Palpa, undertaken for the completion of the Master's degree dissertation. Later, the work was followed up during the next field visit in July-August 1994 for Community Dispute Mediation Study funded by the Asia Foundation, Kathmandu. The information presented here in this paper was collected through interviews and participant observation methods. Thanks are due to Dr. Ganesh Man Gurung, Head of the Department and Dr. K.B. Bhattachan for their helpful comments and suggestions. The author is

- grateful to Pari Thapa and Dal Bahadur Rana Magar for providing valuable information.
2. According to the latest data of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) of His Majesty's Government (HMG), 7.24 percent, i.e., 1,339,308, of the Nepalese people belong to the Magar community of which 32.05 percent speak Magar language as their mother tongue.
 3. The hill regions of Rapti, Lumbini, and Bheri zones are collectively known as *Barha Magarat*, and Magars are considered to be the pioneer settlers of this area.
 4. When Prithvi Narayan Shah, the father of modern Nepal, in the 1750s, consolidated the many petty kingdoms scattered across the land, he counted heavily upon his Magar soldiers, the only Tibeto-Burman group among the people in his army. Others were Bahuns, Khasas, and Thakuris (cf. Stiller, 1967).
 5. Jiro Kawakita in his book "Hill Magars and Their Neighbours" mentions the term *bheja khelne* on the basis of his fieldwork done in Thakkhola region in 1958. According to him, the phrase refers to an archery contest. He writes (p. 399), "On February 29, I saw *bheja khelne* of the Sahabet villagers in fallow paddy fields. In the autumn of 1958, I saw a similar archery context in a Thakali village in the Thakkhola. According to the villagers of Syang, they have an archery contest *Mei* on the day of the festival *Kimi Chheji*, held on a full moon day of Phalgun. In the evening, they drink liquor and boys dance, while women are the audience. But when I inquired about this to the people of my study area, none of them knew about this kind of tradition among them and informed that their culture and the culture of Lekali Magars (the Magars of High altitude), the Kham Magars, differ tremendously" (cf. Molnar, 84: 22 in "Asia High Land Societies", ed. James Fisher).
 6. When the same query was put before MP Dal B. Rana Magar of Palpa, he noted that the practice of *Bheja* indicates that Magars were the systematic rulers of the past. The practice can be seen as one of the surviving legacies of the past Magar administration.
 7. According to B. Bhusan, (*Dictionary of Sociology*, 1984), the term 'animism' was used for the belief that all objects, both animate and inanimate, are permanently or temporarily inhabited by spirits or souls. The spirits have been conceived of as beings with an existence distinct from, and therefore capable of, surviving the death or destruction of, the persons, animals, plants, or objects they inhabit. Often all activities have been believed to be caused by these spirits. Usually, there has been also a belief in the existence of the spiritual beings with powers over the lives of men. The spirit inhabiting objects of nature as well as those in the spirit world may be worshipped or treated with fear and/or respect. In fact, E.B. Tylor has maintained that animism might be man's earliest form of religion.

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