

Serpent Culture in Nepalese Society

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Abstract

Serpent culture is found in many religions and cultural groups across the world from time immemorial in different forms, i.e. art, festivals, and worship, due to religious and ecological diversities. It is associated with water, earth, trees, longevity, fertility, and is considered a killer, protector, or both. This article explains the culture related to serpents found in Nepal, especially the Maithili and Tharu people of Terai. This article explains the serpent culture of Nepalese terai. The emic view of serpent belief and practices is supported by etic perception during the collection and analysis of data. It is found that serpent culture denotes the belief system, gender role, leadership practices, social bonding, art skills, understanding of nature and natural objects, human desire, cosmology, and above all, it is the system of preservation of tangible and intangible culture.

Key words : festival, lakhapanche, mithila, terai, tharu.

Introduction

Superhuman power is believed to date from time immemorial throughout the world. When human beings have no scientific knowledge about the causes of events or things, they imagine the superpower that governs them. Sometimes they induce the divine character into a historical person who performs extraordinary functions in a society. Buddha, Christ, and Padmasambhava are some of the examples of historical heroic personalities. Even some local heroes are popular as gods in folk religion, for example, Dinabhadri and Salahas in the eastern Terai of Nepal. People worship either benevolent or malevolent objects as gods or goddesses. Benevolent objects are worshiped to receive benefit, while malevolent objects are worshiped to avoid any harm or loss. Some objects have both benevolent and malevolent properties, and these are also respected. The sun, wind, and earth are some of the natural objects that have both positive and negative value in human life.

Animal worship by human being expresses the impact of animal behavior on their life and the knowledge and perception towards the animal. It can be said that animal culture is based on cultural ideas about animal behavior. Animal worship is an integral part of human life, and snake worship is one of them. A snake is diabolical in nature or the object of fear. People fear, but revere, and even admire snakes. Serpents are basically considered harmful creatures and are worshiped to avoid their danger. But, the snake's biological properties, such as slithering and odd locomotion, skin-shedding, unblinking

lidless eyes, or universal emotion of awe, give it its polysemic nature. Snake culture is prevalent throughout the world in different forms.

Methodology

The article is based on interpretations of visual art, human performance, and literary evidence. Painting and plastic art are the main sources of visual interpretation. The participant observation method is used for the collection of data related to serpent festivals. The emic view is revealed by the interview with key informants, i. e., Dhami and Pujari. Emic view has been analyzed on the touchstone of etic interpretation. A qualitative mode of research strategy is adopted from the starting point of data collection to analysis. The delimitation of this article is to describe the serpent culture of the eastern Terai of Nepal, especially in Tharu and Maithili culture, and no explanation is given regarding the classical stories of serpents.

Cultural diversification

The snake is not only the object of belief but also depicted as an anthropomorphic, zoomorphic artistic style. The snake's character is narrated in folklore and literature. Snake is object of myth. Many myths are created around snakes. So many mythical names have been coined for snakes. Different dedicated festivals are celebrated in the name of the serpentine deity. Snakes are associated with wind, rain, sun, and water in different cultures. It is also connected to human health.

The serpent is the object of religious belief in different religions and cultures across the world. Christianity symbolizes snakes as evil. Several other references to the snake can be found in the Bible, with the snake representing wisdom, evil, and an agent of vengeance for God (Murison, 1905; Jeffrey, 1955). But in Hindu classical religion, the snake is symbolized as a divine form. Snake is also imagined as mount of god in Hinduism. Buddhist text Vinaya Sutra tells us that Mucalinda, a seven-headed serpent king, sheltered Buddha during a great storm (Vogel, 1926, p. 102). Sometimes Buddha is found seated upon the serpent in the art form that symbolizes Buddha's victory over the serpent, that is, desire (Therring, p. 16). Americans never kill rattlesnakes and may refer to them as 'grandfather' (Wake, 1873). Ancient Greek material culture and literary sources depicted its nature as a protective, adversaries of heroes or gods, safeguarding the good health of the devotees of different gods (Rodríguez Pérez, 2021, p. 2).

Nepalese Terai

One of the themes of expression of ideas of the human mind is circled around the snake. Serpent culture in Nepalese terai is found in many cultural groups in many ways, especially as an art form, festivals, worship, folktales, etc. Art is one of the mediums of expression of ideas, sentiments, and convictions of human beings. The Mithila tradition recognizes that *Naga* can be frightening and deadly, but it can also be benevolent and protective. The respect for snakes is expressed in different legends and art by the Maithili people of the Nepalese terai. Snakes are widespread and important figures in Mithila rituals, cosmology, and narrative paintings. The Serpent is painted in Maithili paintings.

Mithili people paint on paper, cloth, the body, movable objects, the floor, and walls. Maithili people celebrate Madhusrawani puja in the first year of their marriage and draw Aripan on this occasion. There are many objects used in *Madhushrawani* figures, such as fish, turtles, conch-shells, a mat, and snakes that symbolize different meanings.

The figure of the snake is also drawn in the Kohabar painting of the Maithili and Tharu people. Kohabar, meaning honeymoon, is a painting drawn on the special occasion of a marriage ceremony. A Kohabar painting is sketched with the help of line and color on the wall of a room called Kohabar ghar. The image of reclining Vishnu on Ananta *Naga*, the massive snake representing endless time, is another popular subject in Mithila painting.

The serpent-related festival is celebrated once a year by Parbate Hindus, while Maithili Hindus celebrate it thrice a year, known as Mauna, Madhushrawani, and Nagpanchami. On the occasion of Mauna festival (Shrawan badi 5) and Nag Panchami (Shrawn sudi 5), picture of the serpent god Nag drawn above the paper, which is hanged over the doors and around the house; a small mound of earth is made in the courtyard and puja is performed using rice flour, vermilion, grass, and flowers by newly-wed women; but in Madhushrawani Puja (Shrawn sudi 3) marks the final day of the 13-day Nag puja, and puja is performed by newly-wed women; and the groom's family sends presents (bhar) to the bride's family (Ishii, 1993, pp. 65-66). People of eastern terai observe a festival related to snakes. Nag Panchami is one of them. This festival is called Nag Panchami because it is observed on Shrawan Shukla Paksha Panchami (fifth day of the bright fortnight of July). During this festival, people worship the snake god which is known as Nag. At this festival, devotees hang a picture of Naga above the doorway and offer tika (red-colored rice grain) and pancharit (mixture of five things; cow ghee, cow milk, cow dung, cow urine, and honey) for snakes. Hindus believe the eight Gotra (clan) of the Nagas, namely; Ananta, Basuki, Padma, Mahapadam, Taksar, Kulir, Karkat, and Shank Nag.

The Tharu people observe the festival known as Lakhpanche or Bishhara. The Tharu word Lakhpanche is derived from the Sanskrit word Nagpanchami. However, Nagpanchami is observed only on the fifth day of bright fortnight of July, Lakhpanche can be celebrated on any Monday of Shrawan month starting from Nagpanchami. Lakhpanche is performed simultaneously or it is performed by many members at their households and it is performed collectively or community level outside the household too. The wife of Gachhadar (community leader) should fix the day of lakhpanche and inform all the households in the community. The assigned day starts with bathing and cleaning the house. A male member should fast on this day. A little water pond is made in the courtyard and poured with cow milk and lawa (rice-flower). The sacred lamp over the heap of rice-grain is to burn in front of the pond and worship the god of serpent with vermilion, betel leaf, coin, etc. and pray as 'hey God, come and eat milk and fried-rice grain; don't bite my family'. The meaning of Bishhara is "poison destroyer. So, Lakhpanche or Bishhara is celebrated to avoid snake bites. The Tharu people worship the Manasadevi inside their household, and they interpret the meaning of Manasa as the

fulfiller of human desire. But, according to Hinduism, the goddess Manasa is identified with the sister of the serpent-king, Vasuki, who was married to the hermit Jaratkaru and became the mother of Astika (Vogel, 1926, p. 278). After the household worshipping, village women wander door to door outside the tole under the leadership of Gachhadar's wife for begging, which is known as Bishharamange. The collected material is used to worship serpent, called Nag, in the bank of river and to eat in the very place. This is the community-level worship of serpents in which women sketch the picture of serpents over the sand of the river bank and offer milk and lawa. Pigeons make flight rather than sacrifice on this occasion.

Conclusion

Although in the broad sense of the term rituals includes "etiquette" and "conventions" designed to grease the wheels of social relations, in a narrow sense it may be understood as stereotyped behavior concerned with phenomena and entities that lie outside the control of ordinary human beings or are of a supernatural to ward off undesirable influences (Ishii, 1993, p. 40). The tangible and intangible sides of the serpent culture of the eastern terai of Nepal express not only the belief and practice of the people, but it also symbolizes various roles of men and women, leadership practices, social bonding, art skills, understanding of nature and natural objects, human desire, cosmology, connected with religion and festivals, life cycle and many more.

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