



Marriage of a Newari Girl with a Bel (Fruit)- A Tradition Prevalent among the Newar Community

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Abstract:

The intricate cultural traditions of the Newar community across the globe have long captivated research scholars and anthropologists alike, and one such ritual that has garnered significant attention is the practice of marrying a young Newari girl to a Bel fruit (wood apple). This unique ceremony rooted in centuries-old beliefs and traditions serves as a fascinating intersection of cultural identity, religious symbolism, and gender dynamics. The Newari people renowned for their vibrant cultural heritage have long maintained a deep connection with the natural world and the wood apple or 'Bel' in the local parlance holds a special significance in their religious and social practices. The marriage of Newari girls with the wood apple is a symbolic rite which is believed to confer blessings and protection upon the young bride thereby ensuring well-being and prosperity in her marital life. The performance of this ritual is a complex and multi-faceted event which are marked by a series of traditional ceremonies that bind the bride and the wood apple in a sacred union. As with many other traditional marriage ceremonies across cultures, the Newari girl's marriage with the wood apple is imbued with a sense of sacredness and reverence in which various customary figures, parents and community elders plays a pivotal role during the ceremony.

Keywords: Marriage, Tradition, Newars, Bel fruit

INTRODUCTION

The most peculiar tradition followed by the Newar community since several hundred years is the marriage of a Newari girl with a *bel* fruit (i.e. wood apple) and it is prevalent even today in our society. This marriage is considered to be a significant ceremony among the Newar community. In this ceremony, pre-adolescent girls of Newar community are married to a *bel* fruit (wood apple) which is considered to be a symbol of Lord Shiva by the community. The Newars (also known as Pradhan) are the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley in Nepal but over the years they have migrated and settled in different parts of the world. The Newars have distinct art, crafts, culture and traditions of their own. Their culture has remained highly influential over the period of time. This marriage is considered to be the most sacred ritual in this community and all the customs and rituals of Hindu marriage are performed in this ceremony itself thereby when the actual wedding of the girl takes place later in her life, these rituals are not performed again. It is a two-day ceremony which commences with the purification rituals and ends with the ritual of kanyadaan of a girl performed by her father. This ritual is conducted by a Hindu priest which usually takes place in groups where the marriage ceremony of several girls are performed all at once. The *bel* fruit (wood apple) is regarded as a bridegroom because the wood apple remains fresh for a long period of time and does not get spoilt over the years thus it is considered ideal for this wedding ceremony. The fruit is then kept safely inside a box or immersed into the river after the completion of the ceremony as it is considered inauspicious if the fruit gets damaged by any chance.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

There are several perspectives among researchers with regard to the origin of Bel (fruit) marriage of Newari girls. However, there is no evidence of proper documentation till date. This ceremony of getting married to a fruit was initiated during the reign of Jayasthithi Malla. Some researchers linked this tradition of marrying a bel (fruit) with the invasion of Muslims. It was believed to have commenced after a raid by Shamsuddhin Ilyas- a warlord from Bengal during the 14th century in Nepal. The invading force destroyed the land, killed men, burnt palaces, robbed temples and assaulted young girls but did not touch the married women. This incident led people to assume that marrying pre-adolescent girls would save them from being assaulted in any future raid. Thus, the tradition of marrying pre-adolescent girls started in Nepal which continued over the years (Leinhard, 1996). Another perspective believed that marriage with a bel (fruit) was practised in order to counter the evil practice of sati. The practice of sati required the married women to bury herself in the funeral pyre of her husband. Since the newari girls who were married to a bel (fruit) were not labelled as widow even after the death of her husband thereby it saved them from getting buried (Shrestha, 2007). Another theory behind the practice of marrying a Bel (fruit) was to maintain purity and social status of Newari girls as discussed by an academician named Vergati.

CEREMONIAL PROCESS:

The first day of the ceremony begins with the girls purifying themselves by taking a bath and wearing new clothes and jewellery. Thereafter, the courtyard is purified by cleaning and swabbing with cow dung and red soil where the girls are supposed to assemble. They are usually accompanied by the senior most women of their father lineage. They are asked to be seated in a row around the edge of the courtyard where they undergo a series of rituals for a couple of hours. The ceremony begins with the honour killing of a goat or a duck as a form of offering to the God. There is chanting of the mantras of the Hindu marriage ceremony by the priest. Thereafter, eight different flags representing eight Goddess are worshipped and immersed into the river. A pindah (made of rice, milk and sesame seeds) roundly moulded is prepared in which roots of bamboo plant and grass are placed. This is done in order to please the ancestors of both the parent's family before the wedding. The girls are asked to wear a yellow thread and the length of the thread is measured from their head to toe. The priest then sprinkles water over the head of girls from the water vase after which different varieties of food are placed before them. They are expected to taste those food items and then those food items are immersed in a holy place. With these rituals, the first day of the ceremony comes to an end. On the second day, the ceremony begins by cutting the nails of the girl wherein the girl's aunt (father's sister) collects those nails in a copper plate. Then the girls are dressed as a bride after which the custom of putting vermilion on the forehead of girls takes place. This is done by the daughter of the priest with the help of the stem of bel fruit (wood apple). Thereafter, the kanyadaan as a form of a main ritual takes place where the father of the girl places the hand of the daughter in the bel fruit as an offering to God. Then the girls are carried by their brothers wherein they are asked to take three rounds of the sacred fire in the courtyard. Then the parents along with the relatives washes the feet of those girls and all of them are supposed to drink that water and give their blessings to those girls. The ceremony ends with a feast which is given to all the guests who attend the wedding ceremony. There is another peculiar ritual performed after this wedding which is known as cave (gufa) ritual. According to this ritual, the married girls are supposed to spend twelve days in a darkened room which is considered essential after the wedding with the bel fruit (wood apple) takes place. No male member of the house is supposed to go near that room as the girls who are confined to such a room are not supposed to see the face of any male member. On the twelfth day, a ceremonial purification takes place and the girls are led outdoors. Firstly they are exposed to the rays of the sun after which they are asked to worship the Sun God with rituals which contains elements of a Hindu marriage ceremony. Thereafter, a usual feast concludes the ceremony (Leinhard, 1996). It is believed that even if the girl's husband dies later in her life, she will not be considered as a widow since she is believed to have married Lord Shiva in a form of a bel fruit who is believed to be alive and immortal (Subba, 2008).

SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE:

The Newari community which is considered as a distinct ethnic group indigenous to the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal has a rich cultural heritage that is deeply rooted in their traditions and customs. One such significant ritual that holds immense social and cultural significance is the bel (fruit) marriage, which is a unique marriage ceremony that is deeply ingrained in the Newari way of life. The Newari people are a diverse community that practices a blend of Hinduism and Buddhism with a strong belief in the spirits of the dead and the veneration of their ancestors (Bajracharya, 2014). This unique cultural and religious tapestry is reflected in the intricate rituals and ceremonies which are a part of Newari culture including the Bel (fruit) marriage. This wedding ceremony literally translated as the marriage of the bel fruit is a pre-pubescent marriage ceremony that is performed for Newari girls before they reach menarche. This ritual is believed to hold immense significance in the Newari community since it marks the transition of a girl from childhood to womanhood. It is also viewed as a medium to ensure her auspiciousness and protect her from any kind of negative spiritual influences. This marriage ceremony involves the symbolic marriage of the young girl to a bel fruit which is

considered as a sacred fruit that is highly revered in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. The main domain of anthropologists is known to be family, marriage and kinship. However, in some cultures, marriage does not take place only between a man and a woman, but it can also occur between human beings and other living beings. This form of marriage may be considered as a mock marriage. In mock marriage, the rituals which are performed is similar to that of a real marriage with humans but in case of mock marriage, the bride is human while the other partner may be a living object in a form of tree or fruit. In case of Newar community, the mock marriage is conducted between a girl and the bel fruit (wood apple). This marriage holds the same significance as compared to the marriage with the real human (Allen, 1990). Thus, the relevance of performing this ceremony is to protect the Newari girls from widowhood. In earlier times, it also safeguarded them from the custom of being buried alive on the funeral pyre of their husband i.e. sati system which was prevalent among the Hindus a century ago. It also enforced the system of widow remarriage in the Newar community. Thus, this tradition is still prevalent among the Newar community residing in different parts of the world with some minor alterations in the original customs and traditions.

CONCLUSION:

The practice of performing marriage with a bel-fruit (wood apple) is found only among the Newar community for several centuries. This tradition is still prevalent because of its continuing relevance which gives a distinctive character to Newari culture as compared to others. From an economic perspective, this ceremony will aid in reducing the financial burden of the parents to some extent during the actual wedding of their daughter as parents can keep aside the gifts which they receive in cash or kind during the ceremony and utilise them at the time of marriage with the groom later in her life. Another factor which contributes to the continuation of this ceremony is the sanctity and sacredness of marriage with a bel-fruit (wood apple). However, slight changes and variations can be seen in terms of performing this ceremony in today's world. One of the changes that has been observed in performing this ritual is marked in the duration of the ceremony. Earlier the ceremony was held for two-three days but nowadays, it is conducted and observed for one day which commences in the morning and is completed by the end of the day followed by a feast or get-together of family members and relatives. The other significant changes that has been observed is the duration in the performance of cave (gufa) ritual wherein earlier the girls were confined to a dark room after the ceremony for a period of twelve days but due to time-constraint and other obligations, this ritual is performed only for few hours these days. Other changes that has been observed during the ceremony is the manner in which vermilion powder is applied on the forehead of the girl. The Buddhist uses a coin to apply the vermilion powder while the Hindus uses the stem of the bel fruit for the application of vermilion powder. This age-old tradition practised by the Newari community is marked as the first step of teaching Newari girls about their community, and it is also considered as a formal beginning of their cultural and religious life. After the completion of this ceremony, the Newari girls are expected to behave maturely. In case of a death taking place after this ceremony, all the death rites of an adult would be performed on these girls. This ceremony is carried out both at the individual level and collectively by the Newar community.

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