

# Newar Marriage Customs

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Professor Christoph Furer-Haimendorf of London University writes to his article entitled *Elements of Newar social structure*<sup>1</sup>, "There is every reason to believe that the bulk of the Newar people has been settled in the Nepal valley since pre-historic times".

The majority of the Newars live in the valley of Kathmandu where they form the numerically eminent ethnic element in the capital city of Kathmandu and other towns like Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, Thimi, Sankhu, Banepa and Kirtipur. From the point of view of religious following some are Buddhist and others Hindu.

The three main cities of Nepal Valley owe their unique artistic achievements to the Newars, whose fine workmanship has found full expression in temples and other buildings of historic interest. They have utilised such different media as stone, clay, metal, and wood. This innate love for artistic grace has also stamped Newari social life in a large measure. Newars have been acclaimed for their strong community spirit, for the Newari community is a very well knit society concentrated in a small locality.

Among the Newars the responsibility for marriage arrangement depends wholly on the

parents, although parental control is slowly diminishing among the younger generation as a result of modern habits, western education, political liberation, and economic considerations as well. In a traditional manner of arranged marriage, however, the father employs friends to search for suitable girl for his son, and when found, he sends an intimate of the girl's parents as a Lami or go-between to commence negotiation with her family. If two families agree to negotiation, the girl's parents send their daughter's horoscope to the boy's parents through the same Lami. This horoscope along with the boy's horoscope is taken to an astrologer to determine whether they compatible, upon which only depends the possibility of marriage.

As the first step of marriage rituals, "gue-biye" ten betel nuts and a rupee in a silver pot (lampicha) are sent to the girl's house through the lami. The marriage is confirmed only when these gifts are accepted by the brides family. On the otherhand after some fifteen days the bridegroom's parents send a gift of seasonal fruits and peanuts to the girl. This is called in native language as *sisa fusanake chhoye*, which continues upto the month of marriage.

During the month prior to the marriage,

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1. Journal Royal Anthropological Institute, vol. 86 pt. 2. pp 15-38., 1956, p. 15

a gift of sweets is sent to the girl's house, a practice called **lakha-biye**. The Sweets (**lakha-madhi**), used solely for matrimonial ceremonies, are made of flour and pulse, boiled in ghee and dipped in liquid sugar, these sweets are more than a foot in diameter and more than three inches thick. Along with the sweets it is necessary to send some dried fish. Each time the fruits and the sweets are sent through the **lami**, he is served with wine and eggs by both parties. The sweets and fruits are not eaten by the members of the girl's family alone, but also distributed among her close relatives and friends.

Eight days before the marriage ceremony the boy's parent send **nika** to the girl's family, which is another kind of matrimonial sweet shaped like a ball. Sixty-four pieces of **nika** are placed in a pitcher-shaped clay pot (**madhi-nang**), the mouth of which is covered with a piece of paper which is opened by the prospective bride. On the side of the pot is placed a piece of paper on which is written the auspicious time for the marriage ceremony, as fixed by the **Joshi** (astrologer). Along with this are sent three **pathis** of beaten rice, one dish of sweets, five or six plates of different kinds of fruits, one plate of fried fruits and a plate full of pieces of crystallized molasses, called **nika khyaye chhoye** (**baggi-chhoye**).

Four days before the marriage ceremony the boy's family sends three persons to the girl's house with gifts and food. One of the three is a **Bare** or **Taba** depending on caste status, who gives a golden bracelet, called **Kalya**, to the bride; the second is a **Jyapu** (a member of the Newar cultivator caste), who carry good and gifts to the girl; and the third is **lami**

who introduces the **Bare** or **taba** to the girl and also gives to the girl food sent by the boy's family. on this day the girl must eat this food only. The emissaries are feasted in the house of the girl, and her family sends gifts of food to the bridegroom through the same **jyapu**. The bridegroom also takes only that food on this day, and therefore bride and bridegroom exchange food with each other. This called **Kalya bhynke chhoye**.

Just after the **Kalya**, the bride's near relatives and friends send invitation to her to pay visits at their houses, which occupies her for the four days preceding the wedding. whenever she goes she is feasted. This ceremony (**payena Ja nake**) is a fare well to the girl before her entrance into a new family.

On this day before the marriage ceremony one **Pathi** (approximately one gallon) of milk with some molasses and cardamoms is sent to the girl's house by the boy's family. This called **durdai**, is a ceremonial repayment to the girl's mother for suckling her.

On that evening a big feast (**payena biye bhoye**) is held in the girl's house only the relatives and friends of the girl and the girl's family are invited. The guests present the girl with different kinds of household utensils as dowry which are called **Kosa**. The maternal uncle usually gives a she-goat; the mother gives a metal vermillion Pot called **sinhamoo**; and the father gives a bronze mirror called **Jwala Nhayekang**.

On the same evening a marriage procession of the male guests preceded by musicians goes from the groom's house to the girl's just

2. The **Tabas**, by profession, are a metal beating group while the **Bares** that of silver and gold.

3. The "**doli**" is a means of conveyance consisting of a pole with a cloth in the form of a hammock attached to it. It is carried by two men. Now a days, under so-called modern influence, some Newars have begun to use automobiles instead of traditional **doli**.

before this is sent a traditional musical band called **Pancha bajan**, along with a **iyapu** dressed like a Tibetan, a torch bearer and several **dolis** carriers as an advance party. The presence of a Tibetan in the marriage procession is meant to indicate that the boy's parents have a business establishment in **Lhass**, since in earlier days, anyman of wealth had trade in Tibet. All the guests and musicians are welcomed by the girl's family with the presentation of different kinds of dried fruits and betel leaves. Now a days cigarettes are also added. All the guests, except a few near relatives who must stay over night in the girl's house, go back to their respective house after having received the fruits and betel leaves. The name of this ceremony is **loswo onegu** or **janta onegu**.

At midnight a farewell party is given to the girl by her parents after which the girl's mother hands over the daughter to the **lami**. At this moment the bridegroom's father gives the girl a pair of foot ornaments made of silver called **tuti baggi** (which literally means a

carriage for the feet) and some small brocade purses containing betel nuts. She puts the ornaments herself on her feet and the purses she gives to her parents and near relatives as a token signifying that the hour of her departure is at hand. This is the signal for a general outbreak of weeping and lamentation. The girl then brought downstairs and is put into the **doli**. The bride's father-in-law puts a brocade shawl over the **doli**; and takes her to a friend's house. Along the way, a witty exchange takes place in front of a local shrine between priests representing the bride's and the groom's parties in which the girl becomes the responsibility of her father in law with the presiding diety as witness. This is called **bhaumacha khan lha-ye**. The girl spends the rest of the night in her father in law's friend's house along with the ladies who had accompanied her. This, called **sisitaye**, is done in order to insure the performance of the traditional rites at the exact moment fixed by the **Joshi** (astrologer).

To be continued