

## Religious And Economic Significance Of Dashain Festival Siddhi B Ranjitkar

Dashain is a 15-day annual festival of Goddess of Warfare Bhagavati often address as Durga Bhavani or Taleju Bhavani. All Hindus and even non-Hindus celebrate it praying to the goddess for the first nine days, and then congratulating each other for her victory over the demon called Mahisashur on the remaining days until the full moon day of the bright fortnight of September/October every year. It has a great religious significance as it symbolizes the victory of good over the evil, and it also has the economic significance, as common folks with gusto engage in the economic and business activities fueling the economic prosperity, as every folk makes money and spends it. Folks start off preparing for this festival at least six months ahead.

Dashain festival: The eighteen-limbed Goddess of Warfare Bhagavati thrusting the trident Lord Shiva bestowed on her with her right hand on the chest of demon Mahisashur in a paper portrait is the main item of worship for revelers. She rides on a ferocious lion: the most powerful animal. No other deity has the right to ride on a lion.

The Terai folks make the artistic clay idols of Bhagavati and decorate it as in a paper portrait and make offerings to the goddess during the festival days, and dispose them on the last day of the festival. A single clay deity cost thousands of NPR and even more depending on the size and decoration. So, this festival is the festival of the opportunity of making money not only for the people engaged in other businesses but also for the makers of clay sculptures of Bhagavati.

Demon Mahisashur became so powerful after he received a boon from Lord Shiva that he drove heavenly King Indra out of the cosmic world, and ruled the three worlds such as cosmic world of Indra, human world and the underworld making all the deities of the cosmic world refugees.

So, all the nervous deities gathered at the abode of Lord Shiva in the cosmic world, and pleaded him to create a most powerful deity to finish off the demon that has been creating havoc in the worlds of deities, humans and the underworld souls mercilessly running his demonic administration, and restore the rule of the respective world to the rightful claimants.

Seeing the urgency of the need for getting rid of the monster Mahisashur that has been once the favorite but then nuisance to the universe, Lord Shiva created an eighteen-limbed Goddess Durga Bhavani, and ordered all powerful deities to hand out their respective arms and armor to the deity, and Lord Shiva himself bestowed his most powerful trident on the deity.

Nine-supreme goddesses called Nava Durga dwell in Bhagavati. So, Bhagavati has eighteen limbs. Nine had been the entire numbers covering the universe before our ancestors invented zero. So, nine Durgas mean everything in the universe so is the Durga Bhavani.

Holding all the weapons of the mass destruction in her eighteen hands, Bhagavati fought with the demon army and demon Mahisashur for six months, and the last 15 days became the decisive battle. Mahisashur developed such a unique power that every drop of the demon soldier killed and dropped on the ground gave birth to an instant new demon soldier making the demon army even greater and stronger and almost indestructible.

So, Bhagavati set her tongue as a carpet on the battleground, and absorbed all the blood the demon army shed making no more new demon soldiers popping up. When I was a

young boy, the tradition had been not to wear a shoe during the festival starting on the first day of the bright fortnight of September/October and ending on the ninth day believing we would hurt the goddess's tongue if we were to wear shoes. Another belief is that no matter to which deity we make an animal sacrifice, it goes to Bhagavati during the Dashain festival.

Then, the demon soldiers went on hiding in the animals but it was only a desperate move of Mahisashur to keep his army and him alive for some time. On the ninth day of this festival, Bhagavati wiped out the demon army, and slew Monster Mahisashur at the late midnight, restoring the cosmic world to Indra, human world and the underworld to the respective claimants.

So, every old Neva town looked like a battleground on the ninth day, as the Neva sacrificed buffaloes, goats, roosters and ducks at the neighborhood temples to the deities and at home, too, making everywhere splashed with blood. They sacrificed as many animals as possible believing they would gain so much in doing so, as they were destroying the evils hiding in the animals.

The ninth day is the most important day for all the revelers of the Dashain festival, as they kill the demons in the animals rather than the innocent animals. That is the popular belief. Consequently, thousands of innocent male buffaloes, goats, sheep, roosters and ducks lose their lives on the ninth day of the festival. Some people say that they are raised for this purpose.

Every Neva family cleans the tools and instruments of the business, and makes offerings to them on the ninth day. Some Nevahs make offerings of roosters or male ducks or both to the tools and instruments believing offering blood to those instruments would save them from getting accidentally hurt while working with them. Vehicles owners make blood offerings to their vehicles believing it will avoid the road accidents.

The State makes the offerings of 55 male buffaloes to Taleju Bhavani: another name of Bhagavati at the Layaku (royal square) in Kathmandu, and at other Layaku wherever Taleju Bhavani is. The tradition continues even today.

On the night of the ninth day, a male buffalo called Kha-may is sacrificed to Nava Durga troupe at the field temple to the deity called Brahmayani in Bhaktapur. Kha-may symbolizes Mahisashur. Sacrificing the Kha-may ends the animal sacrifices in Dashain thus indicating the total destruction of the demon Mahisashur and his army.

Members of the would-be Nava Durga troupe start raising a male buffalo called Kha-may at one shed within the temple to Nava Durga Bhavani starting on the fourteenth day called Gatha-muga-chare of the dark fortnight of July/August. They buy a buffalo and keep it until the afternoon of the ninth day of Dashain festival. The buffalo cost NPR 100,000 in 2017. It is a significantly large buffalo.

On the afternoon of the ninth day, members of the would-be Nava Durga troupe release Kha-may (a male buffalo raised at the temple shed) from the temple to the Nava Durga in Bhaktapur for shepherding it to the field temple to Brahmayani. Kha-may is fed with home-brewed rice beer, and its body is smeared with the mixture of mustard oil and vermilion. Revelers guide Kha-may to Brahmayani. It is for an enacting of Nava Durga killing Mahisashur ending the demonic rule over the deities of the cosmic world and other two worlds of humans and their souls in another world.

At the temple to Brahmayani on the night of the ninth day, Tantrik priests called Karmacharyas perform the fire worship and the Tantrik rituals to evoke the respective

deities to the 13 newly crafted masks: nine of Nava Durga, one of white Bhairava, two of Simha and Duma, and one of Shiva, and to the bronze idol of the leading deity called Mahalaxmi, and to the drum and cymbal that play music for Nava Durga to dance and perform Tantrik worship and dramas.

With a musical band, members of the would-be Nava Durga troupe go to *ya-chhe* where the masks of the Nava Durga troupe the Chitrakar community has newly crafted are kept on display for the public view on the evening of the ninth day. Folks with or without musical bands visit the area to view the fresh masks until late evening. Then, members of the would-be Nava Durga troupe bring the masks to Brahmayani to Tantrikally evoke the respective deities in the masks.

Then, a bamboo pole is tied to the horns of the buffalo playing the role of Kha-may in other words demon Mahisashur, and some strong men hold the end of the bamboo pole on both sides, and turn the head of the buffalo back. A privileged butcher performs a surgical operation to find a most powerful vein in the neck of Kha-may to make a fountain of blood, and directs the fountain to the mouths of the role-payers of Nava Durga so that everybody drinks the blood in turns.

Next morning, the devotees visiting Brahmayani find the head of Kha-may kept on display at the center of the temple to the deity Brahmayani. Almost all the Bhaktapurians, and the folks from the ancient satellite towns such as Thimi, Bode, and Nare visit Brahmayani in the morning to have the view of the newly installed deities in the fresh masks, and receive the blessing from the Nava Durga troupe.

On the tenth day for almost an entire day, Tantrik Karmacharya priests continue to perform Tantrik service to the Nava Durga to perfectly invoke deities in the masks and the members of the Nava Durga troupe. Only in the early evening, the masks and members of troupe possessing of the divine spirits become fit for performing the duty of the deities.

Then, the Nava Durga troupe makes a debut visit to Supreme Deity Taleju Bhavani at Layaku. On the way, devotees make the offerings to the Nava Durga troupe. Members of the troupe also have been exhausted from the night-and-the-day Tantrik activities, as they almost did not have a sleep at the last night because of the engagement in the Tantrik service performed. So, the Nava Durga troupe reaches at Layaku at midnight or even late.

The Nava Durga troupe pays homage to Supreme Deity Taleju Bhavani, and the supreme deity gives the assent on the troupe performing the Tantrik duty for a year. The Nava Durga makes the visit to Taleju on the evenings of the second and third days until the full moon day, to have the final assent on the Nava Durga troupe coming back to a new life to protect the folks from diseases and evil spirits within the jurisdiction of the troupe.

The Nava Durga troupe visits Deupatan and Sakhu in Kathmandu, Banepa, and Panauti in Kavre and so on, and performs Tantrik duties depicted in the dramas and the dances of the members of the troupe for eliminating the evil spirits prevailing or trying to prevail.

In the Bhakapur town, the troupe performs Tantrik dramas and dances for a night and a day at the selected localities in turn over a period of a number of months in a year for safeguarding the common folks from diseases, and from any external assaults of the evil spirits or humans.

The Nevah community calls this festival a Mohani Nakha rather than a Dashain festival.

From my early years until 1970s, Mohani had been the great occasion for me and for the family. Surely, it started off sowing the seeds of buckwheat on the first day of the bright fortnight of September/October for receiving the golden shoots of buckwheat as the blessing of Bhagavati on the tenth day.

However, the animal sacrifice started off on the seventh day called *Phulpati*. On this day, our small community of relatives slaughtered a male buffalo, and every family received the share of the meat in proportion to the contribution made. The main portion of our share of the meat went to the prayer room and remained there as the offering to Bhagavati until the tenth day morning except for a small portion taken for the consumption for the festive dinner on that night.

On the eight day, our family made the offering of a male goat to the deity of business called Bhindyo at the field shrine, and the meat of the goat became the main item for the morning festive dish, and then for the festival dinner called kuchi-bhoya the family ate in the evening.

On the ninth day, we offered the sacrifice of a rooster to the family deity called Balkumari in a niche at the attic. Then, our father as the head of the family made the offering of a male duck to Bhagavati at the prayer room.

We ate the festive morning dish and then evening dish on the evening of the ninth day. By that time, I used to have less appetite for any meat dish, and for any hard drink; however, I continued to eat and drink, as I did not have any choice but to follow the family tradition.

We ate festival meals on the banana leaves starting on the evening of the eighth day, and ending on the evening of the tenth day except for the morning meal of meat and rice on the tenth day.

On the evening of the eighth day and on the morning and evening of the ninth day, my father as the head of the family made the offerings of the twelve festive dishes on the 2"x2" banana leaves to the Durga Bhavani: the nine goddesses, and other three deities, and placed them at the prayer room for eating as the blessing of the deities on the morning of the tenth day while all family members sat together at the prayer room and ate the samay-bazi as the blessing of Bhagavati, and drank the home-brewed rice beer or home-distilled alcohol.

Before eating this auspicious and blessed samay-bazi, my father applied first the red *tika* on everybody's forehead as the blessing of the Durga Bhavani, and then drew a line of soot from the upper portion of *tika* to up above as long as he thought it necessary. As part of the offering to Durga Bhavani on the ninth day, my father lighted a wick placed in mustard seed oil on a stone lamp, and covered it by an inverted baked clay bowl until the tenth day morning for collecting the soot. This soot is called the Mohani, and it is the symbol of power and authority.

Our family tradition had to clean and keep the instrument of work of each family member along with the portrait of Bhagavati at the prayer room and make offerings to the instruments. On the morning of the tenth day before having the blessed samay-bazi, our father hand out one instrument of work after another to every family member.

Finally, the morning of the tenth day had been for the usual meat and rice dish to enjoy after three days of eating festive dishes. This dish had been the most delicious one after so many festival dishes. I knew how I felt the relief from the festival meals when I ate the meat and rice dish.

The buffalo meat offered to Bhagavati at the prayer room on the evening of the seventh day came out on the morning of the tenth day with horrible smell. Hardly anybody could tolerate the smell that quickly spread the whole house but it became delicacy after sun drying for a few days.

By tradition, our family sun dried a small portion of the meat of the duck sacrificed to Bhagavati on the ninth day for making offering to the Goddess of Wealth: Laksmi on the third day of the five-day celebration of Svonti Nakha (Tihar) in October/November.

By the time my father turned 90, we reduced the offerings of animal sacrifices to a rooster to Balkumari and a duck to Bhagavati. He did not compromise on the tradition of making animal sacrifices to the deities during the Mohani Nakha beyond this limit.

Now, I totally stopped any animal sacrifices to any deities during the Mohani Nakha but we continued to grow buckwheat shoots for offering to Bhagavati and receiving as the blessing of the supreme warfare deity Bhagavati, and for offering to the relatives as the blessing of the Supreme deity.

The supreme warfare deity Bhagavati won the victory over demon Mahisashur on the early tenth day. On this day, the doors of the temples to Taleju Bhavani: another name for Bhagavati open up to the common folks once a year to make offerings to Taleju Bhavani gorgeously riding on the lion holding all kinds of weapons in her eighteen hands.

Folks go from one family to another for congratulating and celebrating the victory day wearing the forehead full of red *tika*: mixture of rice, vermilion and yogurt, and golden shoots of buckwheat on ears. Such celebration goes on until the full moon day when every family disposes of all the things they have offered to Bhagavati starting on the first day of the festival and ending on the ninth day on a nearby river thus ending a 15-day festival.

Non-Hindus had to celebrate the Dashain festival when they did not have an alternative, as the *Khas* rulers called Shah-Ranas forced all folks to follow Hindu festivals and speak their *Khas* language making celebrating other traditional festivals and speaking other mother tongues as felonies. Now, the country has changed from the despotic rule to the democratic republican setup; so, most of the folks returned to celebrating their original festivals such as Losar, Udhauli-Uvalu and other festivals of ethnic origins.

On one of the convenient days after the Mohani festival, every Nevah family holds a family festive dinner called 'nakha-tya' for the families of the married sisters and daughters. This has been done so to have a family get-together to complete the so important Festival Mohani for a year. Every family misses the company of the married sisters and daughters in celebrating the Mohani festival. 'Nakha-tya' is to compensate the absence of the sisters and daughters in celebrating the Mohani festival. 'Nakha-tya' is a small informal family get-together.

Economics of the festival: At one time, folks consumed everything during this festival they had created over a six-month period in preparation for the festival. They had *masu-bhat* means meat and rice as the festival dish. Some of them had new clothing for the festival. Practically, they ate meat and rice once a year during the festival when the Shah-Rana administration had prevailed for 240 years keeping the entire populace in the absolute poverty.

As a young boy in 1950s I witnessed folks were very poor. They waited for the Dashain festival to eat meat and rice dish. Practically, the folks had hardly anything, as the Shah-

Rana rulers drained most of the resources they created. However, folks were more than happy to celebrate the festival even taking a loan from the local moneylender.

The economics and the business have undergone a sea change in the country from the 1950s to the current days. Business activities remained at the minimum in 1950s and before. Now, the business activities have been thousands of times more than what had been in the Shah-Rana period. The prices of livestock have gone up by 1000 times. A good male goat cost NPR 20, and male buffalo NPR 150, a rooster not more than NPR 3 or so in 1950s. A male buffalo costing NPR 150 in 1950s costs NPR 150,000 in the today's price, a male goat from NPR 20 to NPR 20,000, a male rooster from NPR 3 to NPR 3,000, and a male duck from NPR 5 to NPR 5,000.

The per capita income has increased tremendously even though it has been nowhere near the incomes of other developing countries. Definitely, today's folks have been many times better off than their grandparents and parents in 1950s when a few families of Shah-Rana rulers particularly of the Ranas enjoyed everything leaving others in the dire poverty.

Probably, purchasing power of common folks of today has increased more than thousand folds, too. They could afford to buy the livestock, and other goods at so high prices, as their earnings also must have gone up at the same proportion causing a huge demand for livestock and for almost everything during the festival period.

Folks serving in the high positions of the State administration hardly earned NPR 100 per month or even less in the 1950s and before, neither have a Dashain bonus at the time when Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher used Vikram calendar instead of Nepal Sambat to avoid paying one-month extra salary to State employees once every three years. So, cash available to even the State employees had not much to buy the things required not to mention as wished at that time.

Today's folks serving in the same positions earn NPR 25,000 to NPR 50,000 per month (directly seen earnings), and everybody gets the Dashain bonus of one-month salary. Probably, billions of cash goes in the hands of the State employees as the Dashain bonus. Surely, that money fuels the market activities.

Hundreds of thousands of youths go to work in the Middle East and South-East Asia and elsewhere in the world, and send home billions of NPR every year. Locally also, employment opportunities have gone up but not sufficient to meet the demand of the labor force entering the labor market every year, but they earn something for the festival.

Thus, hundreds of millions of NPR come from the migrant laborers working elsewhere in the world for the festival. Every person serving in the State administration or in the private business receiving the Dashain bonus of one-month salary brings billions of NPR in the market during the Dashain festival creating demand for almost every item.

Probably, billions of NPR goes to the rural areas for buying livestock, food grains and other food items. However, most of the money comes back to the urban areas for buying clothing and other items of daily requirements, and even cell phones, TVs, jewelry, and other items of luxury.

The large cash flow to the market also plays a tremendous role in causing so much of demand for everything including cars, jewelry, garments and surely livestock and food items, as folks buy new things for the festival.

The population growth also must have contributed to so high demand for and consumption of livestock and other items, too. The population has grown almost three folds from 1950s to 2017.

The demand for the livestock has increased probably thousand folds causing the need for importing some livestock from the north and the south even though the in-country production also must have gone up at the same proportion.

Import of male goats and castrated goats from India and male mountain sheep from Tibetan areas of China supplements the national production to meet the demand for the livestock during the festival, as the country has not been able to produce sufficient goats and sheep to meet the festival demand.

However, livestock farmers start off raising male buffaloes, male goats (castrated and not castrated), roosters, and male ducks six months before the festival, as the demand for the livestock grows tremendously for everybody make offerings of animal sacrifices to different deities and then eating at least meat and rice dish during the festival.

Traditionally, all family members have to have new clothing for the Dashain festival. Most of the folks keep this tradition fueling the garment industry in country and in the neighboring countries particularly China and India from where bulks of garments are imported.

The transporters make huge money ferrying Dashain revelers from their workplace to home and back again to their workplace. Millions of folks travel during this festival making huge workload on the bus, minibus and even microbus companies. Well-off folks travel on their private cars or fly to their destinations. Airlines companies take the opportunity of making a lot of money increasing a number of flights to every part of the country during the festival.

Whole sellers, retailers and even the State-owned companies such as Nepal Food Corporation and Salt Trading Company make a lot of money buying and selling different food items for the festival. Nepal Food Corporation imports or purchases in-country castrated goats and mountain sheep and sells at reasonable prices\* that keep the private companies selling such livestock in check at high prices and from taking the undue advantage of high demand for the livestock during this festival. Salt Trading Company sells other items such as salt, sugar, and cooking oils through the fair price stores opened up for the festival sale.

Everybody makes money and spends it on celebrating the festival. Common folks engage in every business make money and then spend on celebrating the festival. Thus, the festival contributes to the economic activities of the common folks. They create worldly supplies and then they consume during the festival. So, the festival is one of the great economic stimulators.

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\* Nepal Food Corporation has set the price of live male goat at NPR 450 per kg, castrated goat at NPR 455 per kg, and mountain goat at NPR 675 per kg for the festival sale in 2017.