

Sa-paru And Gupunhi
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The first day of the dark fortnight of *Bhadra* (August/September) is called *Sa-paru* means the first day of cow in the *Nevah* language. "Sa" means cow and "paru" means the first day of every fortnight in the lunar calendar. Most of the Nepalese festivals follow the lunar calendar. Today, *Sa-paru* is popularly known as *Gai-jatra* means the cow festival celebrated across the Nepal.

Gupunhi is the short-form of *Gunhu-punhi*, which literally means nine-day full moon day. It is so called, as the day starts off the nine-day festival of entertainment. For eight days, they entertained with many street dance shows, comedy shows in public, dramas on the public courtyards, and so on. The ninth day is the birthday of Lord Krishna: one of the Hindu demigods. Thus, *Gupunhi* ends with the birthday celebration of Lord Krishna.

On the morning of this day, all the Hindu and Buddhist deities carved in wood, others in bronze or clay residing in *Bahi* means monastery come out and sit on the sills along the monastery or the public hangout places called *phal-chha*. They stay there for the public display for eight days. This is called *Bahi-boya* means the display of *Bahi*. At the Bhagvan Bahal, Thamel in Kathmandu, a magnificent Buddhist scripture written in golden letters is kept on display today.

Farmers in Bhaktapur have the tradition of honoring the spirits of frogs. On this day, they prepare a special holy dish fitting to the spirits of frogs, and they take this dish to their respective rice field and they invoke the spirits of those frogs killed while plowing the land for rice transplanted, and then they offer this dish to the spirits of those dead frogs. This is popularly called as feeding rice to frogs.

During this full moon day, Nepalese eat a soup called *kvanti* made of nine different beans; some people change nine different clothing; they change clothing for going out nine times each time wearing a different clothing, and go out with nine different things, and do nine different things fitting to the *Gunhu-punhi*.

The nine-bean soup *kvanti* is a seasonal dish prepared and eaten after the hard work of rice transplanted. Farmers deplete their physical strength doing the hard work of rice transplanted often for twelve hours a day. So, they need to recoup the lost strength. *Kvanti* is there to do so. In addition, they believe that after eating *kvanti*, the season changes from the summer to early autumn.

Each family invites married daughters and sisters to have *kvanti* together. Traditionally, they eat *kvanti* with home-baked wheat bread. They take complete rest on this day. Most of them sit on the doorsills or the sills along the houses for chats, and they enjoy greeting each other, and then talking to any known passerby.

In the evening, the traditional State-sponsored stick dance starting from the *Layakuli* means a royal courtyard goes around the Bhaktapur town. This dance going around the town symbolically opens the nine-day entertaining festival. Watching this stick dance ends the *Gunhu-punhi* day in Bhaktapur.

This *Gunhu-punhi* day is also called *Janai Purnima (punhi)*. On this day, people having the tradition of wearing *janai* means the sacred threads change the a-year-old threads with new ones. The day before the sacred-thread-changing day, they need to shave their heads, eat only a single auspicious meal to keep their body and mind clean to wear new sacred threads next day.

One of the unique traditions has been that the parents-in-law have to invite their sons-in-law to have their sacred threads changed or they have to send all their items of new sacred threads and foodstuffs to the homes of the sons-in-law.

All the holy places such as *Pashupati* in Kathmandu, *Khumveshover* in Patan, *Hanumanghat* in Bhaktapur, Gosainkunda in the Rasuwa district, *Muktinath* in the Mustang District, and many other holy places across Nepal are crowded with the sacred-threads-wearing men to change their worn-out sacred threads.

First, they take a holy dip in a Holy River or holy pond to clean their bodies for the last time for changing the a-year-old sacred thread. They visit the deity primarily the Hindu Supreme deity called *Mahadev* means god of all gods or Shiva, and they pray to the deity for blessing them with good and successful lives for the rest of the year. Then, they go to an officiating Hindu priest.

The Hindu priest first invokes three Hindu deities called Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesvore into the threads making them sacred threads. These three deities are the Hindu-world creator called Brahma, the Hindu-world administrator Vishnu, and finally the Hindu-world Transformer Mahesvore. All these three deities represent the life cycle in the Hindu world. Brahma creates the Hindu-world life, Vishnu maintains the law and order, and finally, Mahesvore completes the life cycle. Then, the priest officiates the rituals of changing the sacred threads. They dispose of the old ones in the holy river, and wear the new ones for another year.

Sacred-threads-wearing men believe that wearing the sacred threads having the spirits of the three Supreme deities of the Hindu world would protect them from evil spirits, make them always good, make them perform well in their daily lives, and make them successful in their human lives among other many things they believe to happen.

The sacred threads carrying three deities convey the message that men wearing the sacred threads have to follow the human code of conduct. They never speak untruth, never trouble others, never kill any living beings, never engage in extramarital sexual activities, never drink alcohol, never eat meat, and eat only the most auspicious meal mostly the vegetarian dishes.

Those men wearing the sacred threads need to keep their bodies clean. They need to take a holy dip in the holy river every morning before doing any business. They need to save the three deities dwelling in the sacred threads from pollution. So, whenever they need to defecate or piss, they hang a portion of the sacred threads on their ears means they have kept the deities above their bodies, and thus they saved the deities from polluting while following the nature's call.

The Hindu caste system has categorized all Hindus into four cases such as Brahman, Chhetri, Vaisya, and Sudra. Only the men of the first two categories are eligible for wearing the sacred threads. Men of the last two categories go without the spirits of the three main Hindu deities carried in sacred threads. So, they don't need to follow the code of conduct prescribed for the sacred-thread wearing people.

However, women belonging to all four categories of the Hindu caste system, and men of the last two categories are eligible to wear yellow sacred threads, men on their right wrists, and women on their left. A priest chanting the Hindu Mantra ties the yellow threads around their wrists. They don't need to keep the sacred threads for a year. They can discard as and when they like even though those yellow threads are for saving them from the evil spirits.

Men of the last two categories of the Hindu caste system don't need to follow the strict Hindu code of conduct prescribed for the sacred-threads wearing men. So, they can eat the meat dish, and have alcohol drinks, and do all kinds of the businesses the first two categories of the Hindu caste system men are prohibited to do.

If men wearing the sacred threads break any one of the codes of conduct means they fall down to the next one lower category or even more below depending on how many codes of conduct have been broken, and they will lose all the privileges and benefits they have by virtue of being the sacred-threads-wearing men but they will enjoy the privileges of the third or fourth category of the Hindu caste system.

Going back to the *Muktinath*, on this full moon day, the *Gurungs* of Manag have the tradition of performing the cleaning-up ceremony to their daughters and sisters going to marry in the year. They come with their daughters and sisters one day before the full moon day to perform the clean-up ceremony to those daughters and sisters. It is a kind of blessing the females are seeking from the deities for wedding.

On the full moon day, first thing, those female members coming to clean up do is run under the 108 bronze-water spouts attached to the three walls of the *Muktinath* temple taking the cold water on their bodies as the body-cleaning ceremony. They have to run pretty fast to keep their body from freezing even in August, as the water is cold in the area at the high altitude of 14,000 ft above the sea level.

Once their bodies are clean in the holy water, then they go to the Hindu *Muktinath* temple and pray to the deity asking for forgiving for any sin if they have committed knowingly or unknowingly so far, and make them eligible for wedding in the year. The Hindu deity Lord Vishnu in the *Muktinath* temple is so kind to them; the deity obviously meets the wishes of those females to be cleaned up for wedding in the year.

Then, they go to the Buddhist deities, and pray to the deities for relieving them from the sins they have willingly or unwillingly committed in their lives, and make them eligible for wedding in the year. Buddhist deities also are so generous; they meet the wishes of the females willing to get married in the year.

Another event the local people held in the *Muktinath* area on this day is called *yartung-mela*. On this day starting early morning, people from surrounding areas wearing in their best some on horses others on foot come to the Buddhist deities and the Hindu deity seeking blessings from the deities for successful business trips to the south.

The local people have completed the harvest for this year then youths seek some sorts of business in the warmer places. So, most of the youths go out of the area to the south for doing various sorts of business during the winter. Before going to the business trip they seek the blessings from the deities and from their seniors. So, they assemble at a small stadium like area where the senior citizens bless the youths. After the blessing ceremony, they hold competition of different sports. One of the senior citizens distributes prizes to the winners.

Elsewhere in Nepal, Hindu and Buddhist deities are not much different from each other for praying in the Nepalese style and for making offering to them as well. So, most of the Nepalese Hindus and Buddhists revere both the Hindu and Buddhist deities.

Now, let us turn to *Sa-paru* or popularly known as *Gai-jatra* means the cow festival. As already mentioned *Sa-paru* means the first day of cow in the Nepalese language. So, the

people celebrate the cow festival parading live cows (rarely) or the cows in effigies in the ancient historical towns across Nepal on this day.

Spiritually talking, Nepalese Hindus and Buddhists believe that on this day called *Sa-paru*, Administrator of the Hindu world of dead: Yama Raj opens the gate to his world for the people died in a year to enter following the merits the people had earned while in the human world. So, if anybody dies on this day means s/he has a change to go straight to the Yama Loka means the world of Yama Raj without waiting.

Chitragupa is the record keeper of any human born or died in the Hindu world. His job is to write the destiny of each child at birth, and then keep the records of every activity of such a person in his or her life, and then add up the merits and demerits s/he has earned during the life in the Hindu world, for sending her/him on this day to the appropriate place depending the balance of merits s/he has.

Speaking about the origin of this cow festival, one of the queens of a Malla King had lost her beloved son to Yama Raj. The queen was so upset the king had had hard time to keep her alive. So, with the advice of the royal counselors, the monarch decreed to hold an entertaining festival in the name of the Hindu deity also an animal cow so that the queen would recover from the depression, and enjoy the life.

The Malla monarch must have named this festival by a cow believing a cow helps a soul of a Hindu to cross an imaginary and very fierce river called *Vaitarni*. A soul can easily cross the river holding the tail of a cow. So, the Hindus have a tradition of granting a cow to a Brahmin priest at the time of the death of a person. Once a soul crosses the river means the soul can easily reach the gate to the world of Yama Raj.

In addition, the monarch also decreed that each family of any body died in the year needed to parade a live cow or a cow in an effigy on the streets of the town, and then it needed to pass through the *Layakuli* so that the queen could watch. So, it is also to demonstrate the queen that not only her son but many sons and daughters of the common folks also have died in a year.

In Bhaktapur, a cow in an effigy made up of linen sheets, and bamboos decorated with a painted cow mask, and dedicated to a dead male or female or child or grownup, or a cow made up of black clay carried in a stretcher made of wood or bamboo preceded by a musical band or even a live cow (rarely) parade on the streets on this day. A group of young males or recently females, too move on the streets performing stick dance to the tune of the music called "ghin-ta-ghising" while some people carry a cow in an effigy.

In Kathmandu, each household having someone died in a family paints a boy as a silly person or as a Shiva and paraded him on the streets. Some people parade a live cow, too.

In Patan, they have a different way of celebrating *Gai-jatra*. All the representatives of families, which have some loved ones died in a year, assemble at the *Layakuli* with small drums. Then, all of them move together pulling drums with strings on the way. They go around the old Patan town.

In Pokhara, Birgunj, Biratnagar and other towns across Nepal, people follow their original tradition and parade a cow or in an effigy to make sure that their deceased loved ones get an entry to the Yama Loka on this cow festival day.

Some virtuous people distribute some sorts of food items or biscuits or cookies to the cows in effigies to earn the merits. In doing so on this day, they could earn a lot of merits. So,

people carrying cows in effigies also carry some bags. By the time, they complete going around the town, they might have a bagful of different items.

Politically, this day had been the most important day for the comedians to make a stinging satire on the Panchayat system King Mahendra introduced in 1960 denying fundamental human rights to the common folks.

Again going back to the Malla King that had the problem of keeping his queen happy had decreed allowing comedians making a satire on the king or queen or anybody of repute without having to face any criminal charge. This tradition had continued during the dark days of the Panchayat system, and Nepalese enjoyed mocking the then rulers, and took satisfaction of exposing their misdeeds on this day.

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A man carrying a cow in an effigy for a dead male child



A musical band leading cows in effigies mad up of black clay carried under the red umbrellas



Cows in effigies made up of linen sheets and bamboos and carried by four men. They are dressed for women.



A decorated girl representing a cow for the dead woman in the picture under the red umbrella



A boy and girl representing Shiva and Parvati for the man pictured under the umbrella



Another cow in an effigy



Cows made up of black clay for a woman and a man on a rickshaw.



Visitors enjoying the stick dance to the tune of the "ghin-ta-ghising" on the streets



Last cows in effigies at the Taumadhi Square for the day. The effigy made up of rice straw at the center is dedicated to Lord Bhairav. It leads a number of other effigies ending the cow festival for the year.

(This picture source: Jatras facebook)