

Svonti Or Tihar: Festival of Animal Worship Or Lights Siddhi B Ranjitkar

Some call this festival 'Svonti' others call it 'Tihar' some other call it festival of lights, ultimately it is the festival of animal worship. Unlike in any other festival Nepalese worship neither any deity nor they sacrifice any animal rather they worship different animals including humans during the five days of this festival. Folks decorate every house as a new bride, illuminate the whole house making the whole town look like a newly wedded bride with hundreds even thousands of tiny bulbs illuminating every house. This festival is the symbol of the highest level of cultural development Nepalese have achieved. The third day of this festival is the first day of New Year 1137 following the Nepal Sambat.

Unlike in other festivals when Nepalese worship different deities and even demons, during this festival, Nepalese worship only animals including humans on the fourth and fifth day. In this festival, none of the animals has to shed its blood rather everyone poses as a deity for humans to worship. This festival is for beautifying houses and then surely of towns and villages. Each family decorates a house and illuminates it with tiny electric bulbs set in a string of electric wire.

The first day of the festival is the day of crow. I don't know whether the crows know it or not but the humans in Nepal celebrate it the day of crow offering superbly nice and pure food to crows on the parapet of the roof of each Nepali house. Crows are very clever and highly sensitive animals. They get scare of even a slightest movement of humans. So, humans simply leave the offerings to crows on the parapet.

Whether crow represents any divine incarnation or deity or it is a deity or not is very curious question to ask. Surely crow is a bird, and a simple animal living on this wonderful earth along with numerous other living beings. However, some smart folks explain why they worship crow once a year stating crow is a messenger, and it brings news. So, if crow repeatedly crows sitting on the parapet or on the rooftops means the concerned family living in the house has some messages soon to be received. Some coincidences are surely there to make us believe crow is really a messenger. Hence Nepalese worship it.

The second day is the day of our beloved pet called dog. Probably, dogs don't know they have their day, too in this profoundly beautiful world once a year but Nepalese folks have dedicated a day to them. On this day, Nepalese venerated dogs kept as pets or stray or any other dog on the street or at home as a divine.

Dogs live together with humans; so Nepalese folks don't have any problem of making offerings to dogs on the auspicious second day of the festival of animal worship. First thing they do to a dog if it is a pet kept at home give it a nice cleaning-up wash in the morning, then brush or comb its body and dry it. Then, one of the family members with a tray-full of items of offerings worships a dog, and offers it good festive food. So, all dogs across Nepal on this day go wearing a garland of marigold around their necks, and red 'tika' on the forehead.

Some folks like to link the dog with the divine administrator Vishnu extracting a piece of the Mahabharata story. The five brothers called Pandavs and their common spouse Draupadi after completing their lives in the human world wanted to walk to the heaven. On the way, one brother after another including the common spouse died from the exhaustion. Ultimately, the eldest brother called Yudhister has to walk alone. To his surprise a dog gave him a company.

Thinking this old man walking alone on earth for the heaven would never make it; the heavenly ruler called Indra flew down on his aircraft to give Yudhister a ride to heaven. After an exchange of pleasantries, Indra requested Yudhister to board his aircraft for the heaven. Yudhister lifted the dog to board together. Indra stopped Yudhister and said, "I don't take any animal to the heaven." Then, Yudhister simply continued walking. Indra ran after him to persuade him to fly on his aircraft without a dog but Yudhister simply ignored Indra. Finally, the dog transformed itself into a four-arm Vishnu. All the three flew to heaven on the Indra's aircraft. To his surprise, Yudhister found all of his brothers and half brothers and cousins well before he reached the heaven.

The third day of the festival is the day of sacred cow. On this day, folks perform worship to cows as they do to dogs. So, cows enjoy having red 'tika' on their forehead, and garlands of marigold around their necks and a wicker tray full of good food for them to feed on.

Cow is also an animal that represents the goddess of wealth for the Nepalese folks (Hindus in particular). How a cow became a goddess of wealth is a very nice story, Nepalese have. The ancestors have discovered that cows are the important source of wealth. They get the milk from which they could make varieties of food products, which became the cash products. Cow dung is also the main nutrient to the land for making it fertile for food and cash crops, and is used for smearing the floor. Aruvedic pharmacists refine the sila-git: natural medicine in the cow urine to keep the strength of the medicine. Thus, the then folks using every product of cow made a lot of money. So, they called it a goddess of wealth. Even today, some of the folks in the western Nepal called cows as the 'sampati' means an asset.

On this day of cow, some folks celebrate the birth anniversary of a great poet called Laksmi Prasad Devkota of the Nepalese language. He had contributed greatly to the modernization and improvement of the Nepalese language, which was originally called 'khas' and had been very crude even at the time of the first Nepali language poet Bhanu Bhakta Acharya in the 20th century.

Once an English writing teacher told us in a class that all writers were virtually thieves. I simple bit my tongue at that time but today I found he was somehow correct. The title of one of the Devkota's writings was "Muna Madan" (Muna a woman and Madan a man). Another great writer called Balkrishna Sama had one of his books titled as "Mukunda Indira" (Mukunda a man and Indira a woman), the third poet called Madhav Prasad Ghimire has the similar title of one of his books as Malati Mangale (Malati a woman Mangale a man). Such a copying of title of books not limited to the Nepalese poets and writers but also even to the Russian poet that wrote a book titled "Ruslan and Ludmila" (Ruslan a man and Ludmila a woman). Even William Shakespeare had probably borrowed the title "Romeo and Juliet" from the ancient poet.

The fourth day is the day of bullock used for plowing land. Nepalese folks appreciate the bullocks' work and make offerings to the bullock once a year as to the crow, the dog, and the cow.

Folks have a nice story about why bullocks have to work for humans as draught animals. The Hindu supreme deity called Lord Shiva once in heaven told his all-weather companion called Nandi to go down to earth and tell the humans living there to wash three times and eat only one meal a day. Nandi has never left the company of Lord Shiva. Probably, Nandi has never been out of Lord Shiva's abode, too. So, while traveling in the cosmos down to earth, Nandi has confused three times a day washing with a one-day meal. Nandi told the humans to wash once and eat three meals a day.

Traveling back to heaven and sitting next to Lord Shiva, Nandi took a heavy breadth of relief after completing the job of passing on the message of his lord to humans in the mundane world. Feeling Nandi was sitting next to him; Lord Shiva opened up his eyes and asked the Nandi, "Did you complete the job?" "Yes, prabhu (my lord)" "what did you say to the humans?" "I told them to wash once a day and eat three meals a day." "Disaster, how could humans produce enough food for eating three times a day?" "Nandi, go to the human world and help them to produce enough cereals for them to eat three meals a day." That is how humans come to use bullocks for tilling their land. Use of bullocks for plowing and for any other purpose had been prohibited in the Kathmandu Valley as a respect for the Nandi sitting at the pedestal at the western gate of Pashupati in Kathmandu. Nandis had the pastureland called 'gau-charan' for grazing in the past. Today, the land has been the international airport in Kathmandu.

The fourth day of the animal worshipping festival is also the first day of Nepal Year 1137 following the calendar called Nepal Sambat but only the Nevah community celebrates it. Speaking to the anchor of the Radio Nepal morning program called 'antar-sambad' on October 31, 2016, Professor of History Dr Triratna Manandhar told that a man called Shankhadhar Shakhva introduced a new 'Nepal Sambat' lunar calendar discarding the old calendar in effect with the permission of the then King Raghadev breaking up the tradition of calling a calendar in the name of a king or a celebrity.

Shankhadhar Shakhva was an extremely rich man but for some reasons probably for not willing to reveal his wealth he created a myth of converting sands to gold at the auspicious time to pay for the debts of all citizens and then to mark the day of relieving all the debtors from their debts he introduced a new calendar called Nepal Sambat in 880 AD discarding the existing calendar with the permission of the king.

The professor has hinted at the main intention of Shankhadhar Shakhva was to relieve all citizens from the debts. At that time, folks not being able to pay off the debts became virtually slaves to the creditors. So, Shakhva's intention was to free all citizens from serfdom. At that time, the population was not so large; debtors might be even in a smaller number; so a large amount of money would not need to pay off the debts of the entire population of the debtors, the professor said.

The professor said that a lot of folks have mistaken the Nepal Sambat calendar for the calendar of the Nevah but it was practically and really the calendar of all Nepalese living in the then Nepal stretching from Assam to the east to Garwal to the west at the time of the Licchavi rule in 880. At that time, the Licchavis had been considerably weakened and the then Nepal was disintegrated into 22 states, and 24 states and the Nepal Valley States. Unfortunately, other States except for the Valley States shed the name "Nepal". Surely, the Nevahs have safeguarded the Nepal Sambat.

The first Shah ruler of Nepal: Prithvi Narayan Shah introduced a solar Vikram calendar but the Nepal Sambat continued as the working calendar, and then Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher enforced the Vikram calendar; however, the Nepal Sambat continues to work for the folks celebrating the different festivals even today, the professor said. Chandra enforced the Vikram Calendar because he needed to pay one extra salary to the State employees following the lunar Nepal Sambat calendar.

The professor also said that Nepal of the Licchavi times had been very prosperous and the people were rich. Both the Hindus and Buddhists shared their deities with each other. So, even today, Nepal has the Buddhist deities and Hindu deities live together. People of both the faith worship the same deity in different names. However, in 1962, the then ruler

Mahendra declared Nepal a Hindu kingdom alienating the people of other faith, and breaking up the religious harmony, the professor said.

Nepal Sambat is the pride of Nepal, and all Nepalese need to be proud of such an identity, the professor said. He also said that Nepal needs to state this pride of Nepal in one way or another in the Nepalese passports or the State documents so that Nepal could let the world know that the Nepalese have such a unique identity. Thus, Nepalese need to take pride in the Nepal Sambat rather than setting it aside as the calendar of the Newar community.

The fourth day of the festival is also the day for the Newar community to celebrate the "Mha puja" means body worship. On the New Year day following the Nepal Sambat, the Newar community makes self-offerings to purify their mind, speech, and body and then empowered them for a year. That is the reality of performing 'Mha puja'.

The fifth day and the final day of the five-day festival is the brother's day. Sisters perform worship to brothers, and offer sweets, dry fruits and fresh fruits, too. Brothers in turn apply 'tika' on the foreheads of sisters, and give gifts to sisters. Performing the brother worship, both brothers and sisters get empowered.

Those women who have no brothers and those men who have no sisters go to the Balgopalsvora Mahadev at the center of the Ranipokharai in Kathmandu but the temple has been closed since the devastating quakes tore down the small dome-shaped temple in April and May 2015. However, the temple management has announced to keep the picture of the deity at the temple for the devotees to venerate.

Anybody willing to have the public brother worship at Kasthamandap under a tent after the quakes tore it down in April and May 2015 can have it there but you have to pre-register with the woman that performs it. It does not cost you anything but you need to sit cross-legged for the period of the worship that might be an hour or more.

A legend has it that Yama Raja: the ruler of the souls of the dead people got five days off when Lord Vishnu granted the boon of ruling the three worlds: heaven, earth and underworld for five days to Bali Raja. So, not knowing how to use those five days, Yama simply visited his sister. She was so pleased to see her brother Yama after so many years; she made everything possible for the brother to please. Since, then the tradition of brother worships has been set, the legend says.

Another myth is sisters have power even to stop the messengers of Yama from taking the souls of brothers. It happened so that one of the brothers has his life ended on the very day of the brother worship, and messengers of the Yama came to collect his soul. Seeing the sisters are making offerings to brothers, those messengers simply waited for the sisters to complete the worship.

When the messengers did not show up with the soul of the man as his registrar of births and deaths called Chitradupta registered in his book, Yama himself came up to see. Yama himself was surprised at how the sisters were making such absolutely profound offerings to brothers.

Sisters knew that those guys have been waiting for taking one of their brothers, and when Yama himself has showed up they are sure that one of the brothers has to go. So, sisters invited Yama to sit for performing him the brother worship. Those sisters made so well offerings to Yama; he could not leave the place without offering some things to those gorgeous sisters.

When Yama said, "Have any wish, I will meet it." Sisters immediately in one voice said, "Let the life of our brothers extended to until the 'makhamali' flowers dried up (the flowers never dry up), and the "manda" drawn in oil get dried up (that also never dried up). Thus, sisters extended the lives of brothers.

Svanti or Tihar or the festival of animal worship is also could be called a festival of "sellroti": Nepalese delicacy for this festival every family prepares on this occasion. Every family needs to offer it to Goddess Laksmi, and surely to brothers and sisters, and then relatives and friends. Every family cooks it from the rice soaked in water and then ground up and mixed with sugar, and then deep-frying in oil.

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Happy New Year 1137: Nepal Sambat

(Source: Facebook)



Goddess Lakshmi in Painting

(Source: Facebook)



Goddess Lakshmi In Print

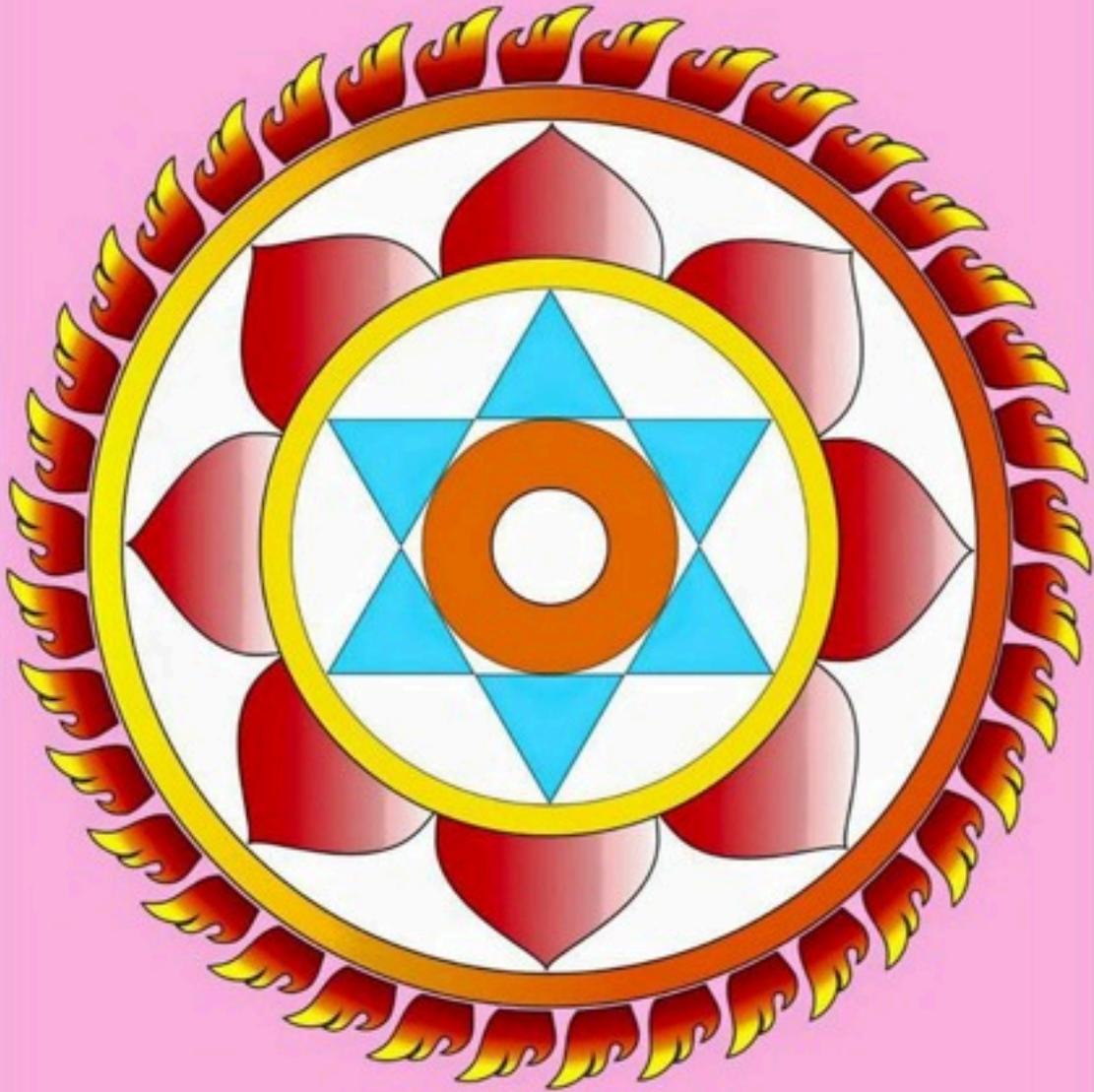
(Source: Facebook)



Offerings To Laksmi

(Source: Facebook)

मह पूजा मंदः



Drawing for Mha Puja

(Source: Facebook)



Dog Worship: American Ambassador In Nepal
(Source: U.S. Embassy, Nepal Facebook)



राष्ट्रीय विभूति शंखधर साखवा

Shankhadhar Shakhva

(Source: Facebook)



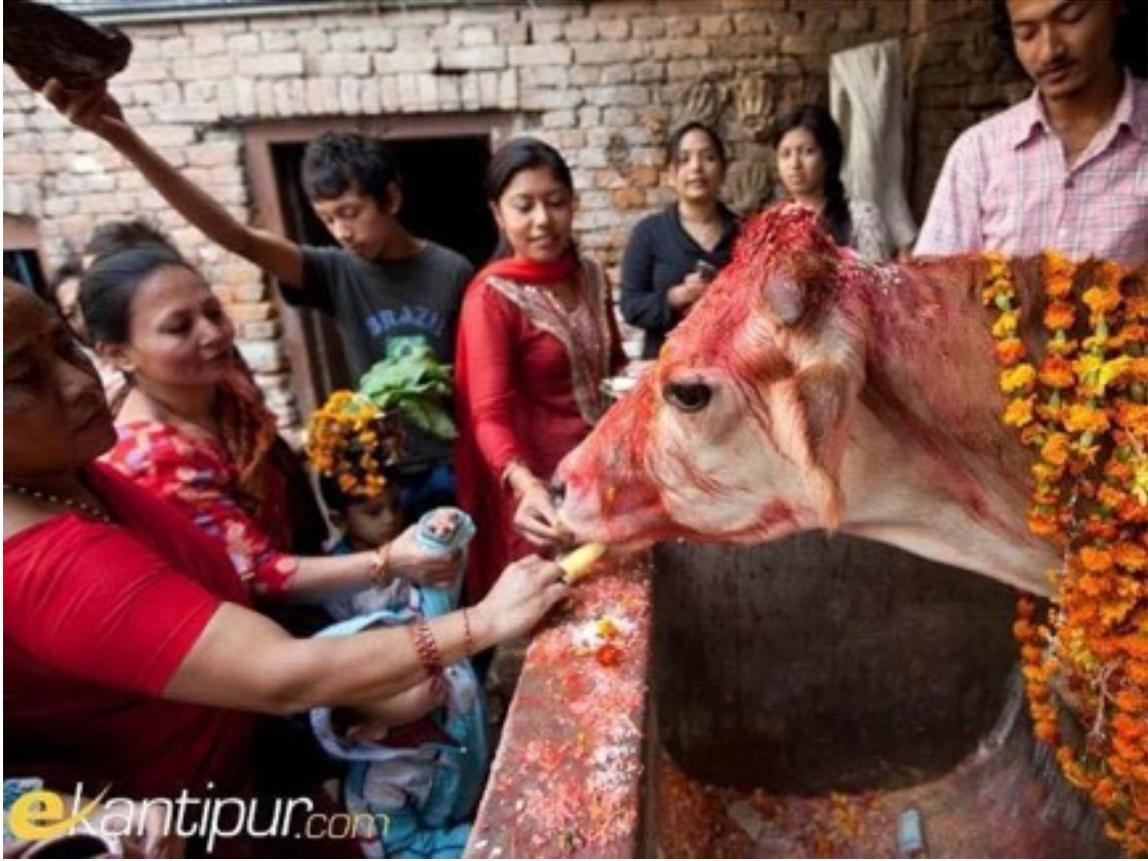
Sellroti: Delicacy for the Festival

(Source: Facebook)



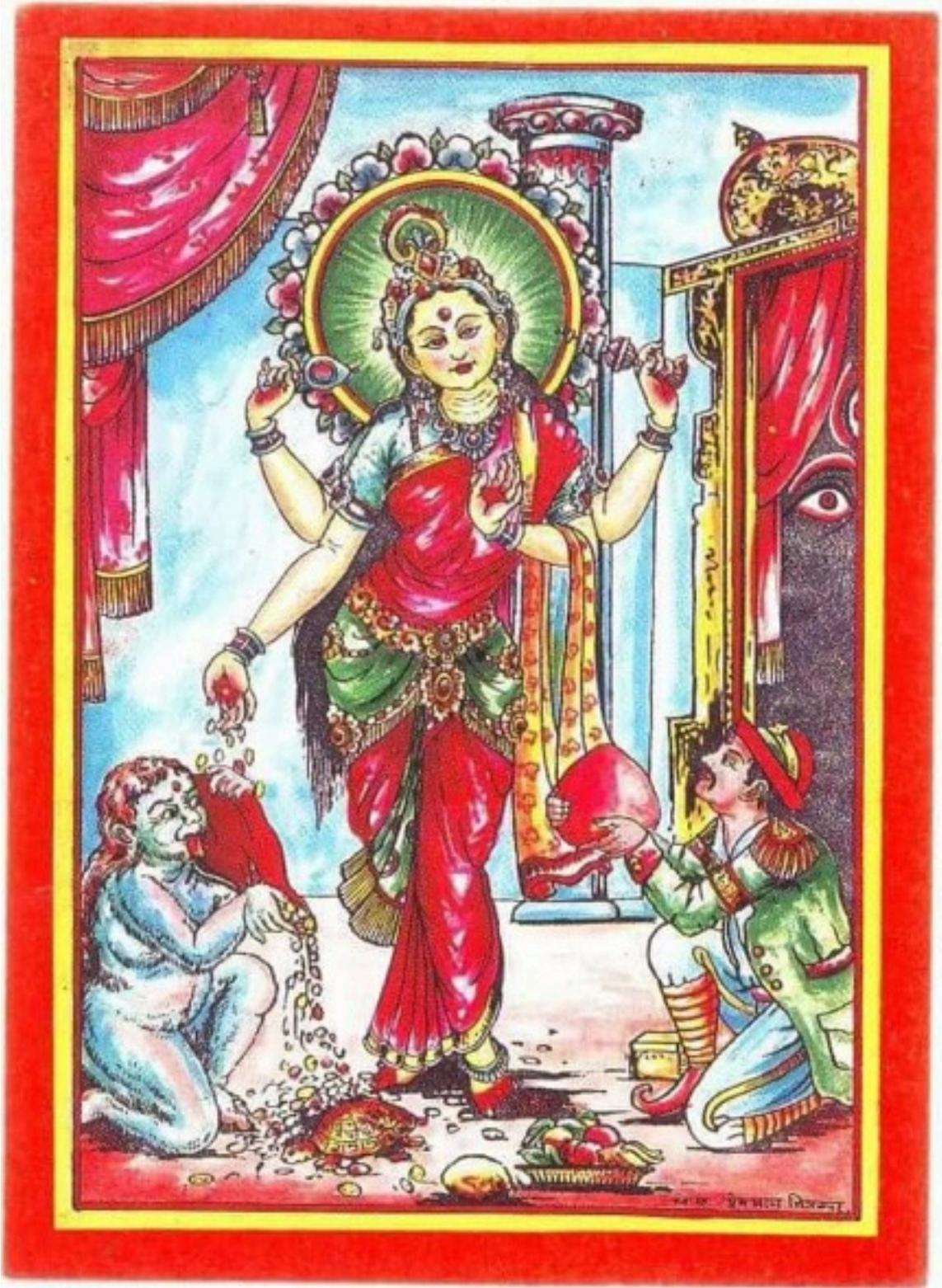
Brother Worship In The Nevah Style

(Source: Facebook)



Cow Worship

(Source: Facebook)



Stepping In Laksmi: Goddess of Wealth

(Source: Facebook)



Crow Worship

(Source: Facebook)

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