

Bisket Jatra: The festival of Dead Serpents  
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The Bisket festival has five main components. They are the pulling of the chariots to God Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali, bringing the 'Yeo-sin-dyo' to a standing position and lowering it down, the portable chariot festival of Goddess Mahalaxmi and Goddess Mahakali, the portable chariot festival of Goddess Brahmayani and elephant-headed god called Chuma-gane-dyo, and the ceremony of revering all gods and goddesses participating in this festival one day before the completion of the eight-night and nine-day festival.

In the evening of the first day of the festival i.e. four days before the New Year's Day following the Vikram Calendar, residents of Bhaktapur celebrate the chariot-pulling festival of God Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali. This day is the first day of the outing of different deities in Bhaktapur.

In preparation for this festival, caretaker priests perform pre-outing rituals to the God Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali at their respective town temples. Thereafter, the ancient-palace authorities send the state offerings to God Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali officially approving the outings of these deities.

After completion of these offerings, priests carry the deities to their respective chariot and the priest in-charge of the respective god holds the deity by his arms in the inner sanctum of the chariot. Another priest comes with the State's sword from the Bhaktapur palace and takes his position in the chamber of the chariot of God Bhairava. Historically, the Head of State personally participated in this festival.

When everything is ready, revelers pull the chariot by ropes tied to the beams of the chariots and merry-make. When chariot pullers have enough fun they parked both the chariots at the area called "ga-hiti". Thereafter, caretaker priests take God Bhairava from the chariot to the god guesthouse called 'cha-phali' at Lako-la-chi and other caretaker priests take Goddess Bhadrakali from her chariot to the goddess guest house at the same area. Both the deities do not go back to their permanent abodes because they have set off for a nine-day festival journey.

From the first night to the third day, priests perform various kinds of offerings to the deities at their respective god guesthouse. Before installing the deities at their respective guesthouse, priests perform offerings called "lamo-thapan" means emplacement of the god temporarily at the god guesthouse. Thereafter, they offer "maha-bali" means a great sacrifice to God Bhairava on this night. On the second day, priests perform "nitya puja" means regular offerings. On the third day, they make offerings of five different animals and birds' sacrifices called "pancha-bali".

On the fourth day, both the deities ride on their respective chariot to the area called 'khana-la' from where they watch the rising 'Yeo-sin dyo'. Before taking the deities to their chariots on behalf of the palace authorities, priests make state offerings to the deities. They release two male black goats at the "ga-hity" square and watch the goats to which directions they move. The goat moving to the north is sacrificed to the God Bhairava and another to the Goddess Bhadrakali. Thereafter, caretaker priests take the deities to their respective chariot. A priest with a State's sword takes his position in the chariot of Lord Bhairava making ready for volunteers to pull the chariot to 'khana-la'.

In the afternoon of the fourth day, people make preparations for pulling 'Yeo-sin-dyo' to the standing position. 'Yeo-sin-dyo' is the deity in a pole with hands and a head at the top of the pole. For securing an approval of bringing a wooden pole stored nearby, priests make Tantric

offerings called 'ganga-puja' comprising a sacrifice of a male buffalo to Goddess Bhadrakali at her 'pith' means a field shrine.

After the completion of this offering, local people drag the wooden pole from the store-shade to the area where it will be pulled to the standing position. Then people responsible for preparing 'Yeo-sin-dyo' to erect, first bind several tree trunks at about ten-forearm length down the top of the pole to make the out-stretched arms of "Yeo-sin-dyo". Then, they role the arms and part of the pole above the arms with blue cloth to symbolize God Akash (sky) Bhairava.

They set a copper mask of God Akash Bhairava: the combined form of both the deities called Bhairava and Bhadrakali at the cross-point of the outstretched arms and the pole. They also set a bunch of green twigs at the both ends of the out-stretched arms and at the top of the pole.

Then, they bind two long flags at the armpit of the "Yeo-sin-dyo". One flag of thirty-five-forearm length represents a male serpent and another of thirty-four-forearm length a female serpent. Both the flags are of one-forearm width. These two flags are made of layers of colored-linen and have eight auspicious symbols and numerous (te-tis-koti devata) deities painted on them.

After completion of binding the flags to the armpit they bind four ropes each at the right and the left armpits. Each rope represents one mother goddess thus eight ropes represent eight mother goddesses belonging to the Nava Durga troupe in Bhaktapur. Then, all the ropes with the strength of eight mother goddesses are fully stretched symbolizing eight mother goddesses pulling it; then only, "Yeo-sin dyo" rises from the ground. Caretakers of the Nava Durga troupe symbolically take back eight mother goddesses after completion of the "Yeo-sin-dyo" pulling ceremony.

After the 'Yeo-sin-dyo' pulling ceremony is over, God Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali travel on their respective chariot to the area where the 'Yeo-sin-dyo' is standing to accept the field offerings. As soon as 'Yeo-sin-dyo' is up, a group of people pull the chariot to the God Bhairava and the Goddess Bhadrakali from 'khana-la' to the area where 'Yeo-sin-dyo' stands.

Upon arrival at the area, a priest carries the god on his arms from the chariot to the eight-cornered pavilion and the goddess to her field shrine called "pith" for a night stay. A priest makes first offerings called "tha-puja" means an emplacement worship. At night they perform Tantric offerings called "maha-deep puja" to God Bhairava.

On the New Year day i.e. on the fifth day of the festival from the early morning, people visit 'Yeo-sin-dyo', God Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali. Women, men, and children take a purification dip or wash their faces in the water of the Hamumantay stream at the area called 'Chupin-ghat' nearby the area where 'Yeo-sin-dyo' is standing. People believe that taking a purification dip in the water of the stream on this day would make them immune to all kinds of diseases for a year. Thereafter, they pay homage to 'Yeo-sin-dyo', God Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali.

Farmers make offerings of female-chicken sacrifices to the demigod called 'Betal' attached to the tip of the upward bending beam of the three-tiered chait of God Bhairava believing the demigod protects them from the evil spirits while working in their farms.

Some people belonging to the Tamang ethnic group visit "Bagh dvar" at the Shivpuri hills to take a purification bath on the New Year eve and then visit 'Yeo-sin-dyo' on the next day morning.

God Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali return to their respective god guesthouse after the ceremony of lowering 'Yeo-sin-dyo'. After the completion of all Tantric offerings to God Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali and 'Yeo-sin-dyo', priests take God Bhairava to the three-tiered chariot and the Goddess Bhadrakali to the two-tiered chariot in reparation for taking them to their respective guesthouse after the lowering of 'Yeo-sin-deo'.

A huge crowd gathers there to watch the lowering of 'Yeo-sin-dyo'. It has been standing for a whole night and for a whole day. then, it is time to lower it down with fanfare to complete the rising and lowering of 'Yeo-sin-dyo'. As soon as the pole is lowered, some people rush to collect some portions of twigs attached to it as the blessing from the deity.

Thereafter, the deities: Lord Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali travel back on their respective chariot to "ga-hity". Where the chariots are parked again and the deities are carried to their respective guesthouse for staying on for the rest of the festival nights and days.

On the sixth day, people in the northern part of Bhaktapur celebrate the outings of Mother Goddess Mahalaxmi and Mahakali. In the afternoon, devotees carry the goddesses on their respective portable shrine or chariot and bring them together to meet each other. This is a symbolic annual meeting of two sister goddesses. On this occasion, devotees make offerings to these deities.

On the seventh day, a festival of goddess Brahmayani is held in the northeastern part of Bhaktapur. A priest makes a Tantric offering to the Goddess. Thereafter, sixteen caretakers carry her on a portable chariot on two long shoulders poles for her outings. A musical band leads the chariot and some devotees singing hymns follow it.

In other part of the town, an outing festival of elephant-headed god called "Chuma Gane dyo" is held. The local people celebrate the festival of this elephant-headed god. They take Him around the neighborhood for the devotees to make offerings. After an outing for a while, the deity comes back to his outdoor shrine.

On the eight day, a daylong festival of reverence for all gods and goddesses is held. This festival is called 'dyo-sagan-bi-ya-gu' means wishing good luck to all deities after having a fun for seven nights and eight days.

This is the last day of outing of all the deities participating in the Bisket festival except for Lord Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali. Therefore, devotees make offerings to all deities all over Bhaktapur town before they return to their permanent god houses.

Devotees carry one item of offerings or another and offer such items to all gods and goddesses of different names at different areas in Bhaktapur town. Some devotees offer a large dish of the Nevah festival to every deity. After the completion of this festival, all deities except for God Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali have their last outings at night and then move on to their respective abode.

On the ninth day, God Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali complete their nine-day outings. The chief priest makes Tantric offerings to the deities throughout the day. In the evening, they travel in their respective chariot pulled by volunteer devotees to the main areas of

Bhaktapur town. When revelers have had an enough fun of pulling the chariots, they parked them at the Taumadhi Square.

After the completion of the chariot-pulling festival, the State's sword bearer returns to the old palace to store the sword for the next year. Each priest takes the deity from the chariot to the respective temple.

Caretakers perform Tantric purification rites to the God Bhairava at the main entrance to the god-home before taking him to this permanent residence. A Tantric priest ritually questions Lord Bhairava where he has been for eight nights and nine days; with whom he has slept and so on. After receiving the satisfactory answers from the god, the caretaker lets the god in the temple. Thus, ends the Biseka festival.

Nepalis in general observe quietly the Nepalese New Year's day according to the Vikram Calendar. It falls in the middle of April in the Gregorian calendar. However, on this occasion people in Bhaktapur, Thimi and Bode celebrate a nine-day religious and cultural festival called Biseka jatra, popularly known as the Bisket Jatra; it literally translates into the festival of dead serpents.

This festival is associated with myths of dead serpents. One is about the serpent mythically comes out of the nostrils of a princess and kills her one lover after another until a brave prince after making a love with the princess watching the sleeping princess sees serpents come out of her nostrils and kills them before they could do any harm to the prince. To celebrate this victory over the serpent, the then king set the tradition of the Bisket Jatra. The two long flags hung on the armpit of 'Yeo-sin-dyo' represent the dead serpents.

The other myth is of a Tantrik transforming him into a huge serpent to meet the wishes of his wife could not change back to a human, as his spouse supposed to toss the rice that has mystical power at the serpent for changing it back to a human but being nervous of seeing such a huge serpent she put the rice grains in her mouth immediately transforming her into another huge serpent.

Both the serpents waited for a long time for the king to see them and change them back to humans using his Tantrik power, as the king was the only person remained to transform those serpents into humans but the king failed to notice them before their death. After knowing the demise of the Tantrik and his spouse, the king set the tradition of the Bisket Jatra in honor of those two dead serpents. The two long flags hung on the armpit of 'Yeo-sin-dyo' represent them.

The highly culture-oriented rulers of the then Nepal adding one new festivity after another to this festival during the last millennium had developed this unique festival into the current celebration of the eight-night and nine-day festival.

The exact date of the origin of the Bisket jatra is not known for sure however, this festival must have started during the period of the Licchavi reign (400 A.D. to 800 A.D.) when Tantric rituals became the part of lives in Nepal, as most of the rituals performed to the main deities called God Bhairava, Goddess Bhadrakali and the God called 'Yeo-sin-dyo' the combined form of both the deities placed on a long wooden pole with two long flags locally known as 'halin pata' associated with Tantra.

The festival has evolved from the two-day ceremony to the current eight-night and nine-day festival. Originally, Bhaktapurians celebrated this festival for two days only displaying the two long flags commemorating the dead serpents on a wooden pole. They erected the pole on the New Year's Eve and lowered down the next day evening keeping it for twenty-four

hours for the people to see it. Initially, there was only the chariot festival of Goddess Bhadrakali.

Later on, King Biswo Malla (1503 A.D.-1575 A.D.) added the chariot festival of God Bhairava to this festival.

King Jaga Jyoti Malla (1586 AD-1613 AD) set the tradition of taking God Bhairava and Goddess Bhadrakali on their respective chariot to the area where 'Yeo-sin-dyo' stands.

King Bhupatindra Malla (1677 A.D.-1702 A.D.) elaborated this festival making a three-tiered Nepali-styled chariot to God Bhairava and a two-tiered chariot to Goddess Bhadrakali in 1681 A.D. He also extended the duration of the festival to nine days adding four more days to continue the festival after the Nepalese New Year's Day following the Vikram Calendar. Thus, the festival took the shape of the current celebration.

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Pulling down the 'Yeo-sin-dyo' next to the three-tiered chariot

Source: Facebook Ranjendra Lage



Betal at tip of the bent-up Wooden Beam supporting the three-tiered chariot

Source: Kiran Kent Ranjit, Facebook



Pulling the chariot in the lane of Bhaktapur

(Source: Facebook)



These two black goats will be released to see which direction they go. One goes to north would be sacrificed to Bhairava and another to Bhadrakali at Ga-hity during the Besika jatra. (Source: The author)



Halin-pata: Flags hanging from the armpit of 'Yeo-sin-dyo'  
(Source: Unknown)



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