

*The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture 2018*

# **Nepal Saṃvat and Vikrama Saṃvat**

## **Discerning Original Significance**

**Gautama V. Vajracharya**

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# Nepal Samvat and Vikrama Samvat

Discerning Original Significance

Gautama V. Vajracharya



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Back cover shows Mahesh Chandra Regmi in the audience at the inaugural lecture on 24 April, 2003. Photograph by Bikas Rauniar.

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## I. Introduction

The Newars of the Kathmandu Valley celebrate the New Year's Day of the Nepal Era (Nepala Saṃvat) in autumn with an elaborate indoor ritual known as Hmapūjā. Likewise, they participate enthusiastically in the celebration of the New Year's Day of the Vikrama Era (Vikrama Saṃvat) that takes place in Bhaktapur in the summer with the erection of the cosmic pole, followed by the boisterous outdoor festival called Biskā jātrā. We will make here an unconventional but novel endeavour to detect the original significance of both these eras on the basis of a comparative study of Vedic literature and careful observation of the annual rituals of the new year celebrations in the Valley. Although a link between the Nepal Era and Vikrama Era is discernable, these two eras are conceptually distinct; hence, we treat them separately here.

## II. Nepal Era

Without a doubt, the Newars are a non-Vedic people who speak a Tibeto-Burman language. In our earlier works,<sup>1</sup> however, we have demonstrated that Vedic literature contains not only Indo-Iranian but also some elements of pre-Vedic South Asian culture. The latter is distinct because it is directly related to the geography of the subcontinent (the height of the Himalaya, the flow of the rivers from north to south) and climatic phenomenon (the monsoon rains). Likewise, traditional Newar culture contains archaic components of

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1 Gautama V. Vajracharya, *Nepalese Seasons: Rain and Rituals* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2016), pp. 20-22, and *Frog Hymns and Rain Babies: Monsoon Culture and the Art of Ancient Asia* (Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2013), pp. 29-32, 'Two Ancient Newari Words' in *Sucāruvādadeśika*, edited by Tod Lewis (Kathmandu: Social Science Baha, 2014), pp. 306-318, 'The Adaptation of Monsoon al Culture by R̥gvedic Aryans: A Further Study of the Frog Hymn', *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, 3(2), 1997 (<http://www.shore.net/~india/ejvs>).

a South Asian culture, of ancient times when the inhabitants of the subcontinent, particularly those residing not too far away from the southern slopes of the Himalaya, were cowherds.<sup>2</sup> For these cowherds, the lush vegetation of the rainy season, which provided rich fodder for their cattle, was more important than any other commodity. Just like the Vedic people, the ancestors of the Newars were cattle breeders. Even after the Newars became rice planters, they never completely abandoned the ancient rituals and festivals related to the cow. Thus, it has become possible for us to decipher here the pre-Vedic concept of the gestation of domesticated cows and the cosmic mother in the non-Vedic ritual of the Newar new year's celebration.

## I

The first day of the bright half of the Kārtika month (October-November) is the New Year's Day of the Nepal Era. On this day, both Buddhist and Hindu Newars perform the Hmapūjā ritual in the evening. In this indoor ritual, Buddhists and Hindus identify the presiding deity of this autumnal New Year, represented by the citron fruit, either as Jambhala or Kubera (*facing page*). Although the Nepal Era began only in 879 CE, Mānadeva Saṃvat, which was in use in the ancient period of Nepali history, was also Kārtikādi; that is, it began in the month of Kārtika, and, almost certainly, just like the Nepal Era from the first day of the bright half of that month.<sup>3</sup> Such an autumnal New Year's Day must have been popular in ancient

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2 Kamal Prakash Malla, 'Linguistic Archaeology of the Nepal Valley: A Preliminary Report,' *Kailas*, no. 8, 1981, pp. 5-23.

3 Gautama v. Vajracharya, 'Manadeva Samvat: Old Problem, New Evidence;', *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, Vol. 21, No. 2, December 2016. A slightly different version is also published in Asianart.com, <http://www.asianart.com/articles/manadeva/index.html>.



Hmapūjā Ritual. Photograph: courtesy Prasant Shrestha.

India as well, because of which *śarad*, the Sanskrit word for autumn, became synonymous with an era. Currently, we use the word, *varṣa*, ‘rainy season’, for a year but we do not expect to find the use of the term in this sense in early Vedic texts.

The autumnal ritual of the Newars in the Valley provides us with a clue to understanding the original significance of the new year. On the eve of the New Year’s Day of the Nepala Era, the Valley’s Newars perform a simple ritual of cow worship, which is known to them as Sāpūjā, ‘Worship of a Cow’. This is the day when Dīpāvali is observed all over India and Nepal, and the cow goddess, Lakṣmī, is worshipped. Likewise, both in India and Nepal, the autumnal New Year’s Day of the Nepal Era is celebrated as Govardhana Pūjā, ‘Worship for the Proliferation of Cows’. Although in the story of Kṛṣṇa, Govardhana was interpreted as a mountain, in Nepal, the Nepali-speaking people, even now, prefer to call the day Gorutihār, ‘Bull Festival’. A well-known Newar scholar, following

folk etymology, explains the Newari name for the day as referring to the worship of the physical body *hma* as well as the individual soul (*ātman*).<sup>4</sup> It would not have been too difficult to accept this explanation of the honourable, almost a hundred-year-old scholar if we were not aware of the fact that the Newar New Year's celebration is the continuation of the pre-Hindu, pre-Buddhist custom of celebrating the autumnal conception of the primordial divine fetus as the beginning of time. The modern day Hmapūjā is actually the Mompūjā, 'Worship of a Fetus'. This view is based on three different points. First, according to the 14th-century Newari translations of the Sanskrit lexicographic text, *Amarakośa*, *moṃ* is the classical Newari word for a fetus.<sup>5</sup> The same Newari word is also used for a baby; hence, the Sanskrit word, *stanapā*, is translated as *dudumōṃ*, 'suckling baby'.<sup>6</sup> Second, in Newari, *hma* and *mo* are often interchangeable. For instance, the pronunciation of the Newari word for 'one rupee' is either as *chamo* or *chahmo*. Third, as we will see in the following discussion, the classical Newari word, *moṃ*, rather than the folk etymology, is cogently related to the hidden concepts associated with the New Year's Day ritual of the Nepal Era.

## II

In our earlier works, we have explained that Vedic literature refers to two different versions of a ritual called Gavām Ayana, 'Cows'

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4 Satyamohan Joshi, *Newāraharuko Mahān Cāḍa Mhapūjā: Kina ra Kasarī* (in Nepali) (Kathmandu: Nepalese Folklore Society, 2016), p. 1.

5 Newari Lexicon based on the Amarakosa.

[http://newari.net/srch\\_akssyn.php?skrit\\_font=2&entry\\_font=1&srch\\_corpus=2&char\\_first=&word\\_ndx=&srch\\_type=1&srch\\_term\\_beg=&srch\\_term=&match\\_type=any&show\\_ms=A1&show\\_bn=1&aks\\_srch\\_type=1&aks\\_srch\\_term\\_beg=garbha&aks\\_srch\\_term=garbha&kanda=1&varga=1&shloka=1&sequence\\_no=1&mssimg\\_on=0](http://newari.net/srch_akssyn.php?skrit_font=2&entry_font=1&srch_corpus=2&char_first=&word_ndx=&srch_type=1&srch_term_beg=&srch_term=&match_type=any&show_ms=A1&show_bn=1&aks_srch_type=1&aks_srch_term_beg=garbha&aks_srch_term=garbha&kanda=1&varga=1&shloka=1&sequence_no=1&mssimg_on=0)

6 Ibid.



Path'. The earlier version of the ritual lasted about 10 lunar months, from autumn to the onset of the rainy season, whereas the later version lasted for the entire year, beginning with the vernal equinox.<sup>7</sup> We will explain shortly why the ritual was extended. But, here, we may like to focus on the original version of the ritual, which was also known as Saṃvatsara Satra, a significant nomenclature based on the literal meaning of the word, *saṃvatsara*, 'endowed with a fetus (or a baby)'. In Vedic literature, this word is regularly used for 'a period of gestation'.<sup>8</sup> Although in early Vedic texts, *saṃvatsara* had become synonymous with the 12-month-long year, when it is used in the context of the gestation of a domesticated cow or the atmospheric mother (visualised as a cosmic cow), the word always means about 10 lunar months, from autumn to the beginning of the rainy season, when frogs start croaking.<sup>9</sup> This is the time when a cow as well as the sky mother or the atmospheric mothers called *āpas*, who later became known as *deva-mātrkās*, 'cloud mothers', are expected to carry a baby and deliver the baby or babies at the onset of the monsoon.<sup>10</sup> The rain babies are not only the calves but also all living beings, including human babies.

It is true that a cow can conceive at any time of the year. However, people in ancient South Asia, including Vedic people, thought that autumn was the perfect time for a cow to conceive. With this in mind, cow-breeders of ancient South Asia kept a bull or bulls separately and released them in the autumn, either in the month of Āśvina or Kārtika, with the performance of a ritual designated in Vedic literature as Vṛṣotsarga, 'release of a bull'.<sup>11</sup> We would like to find out if this pastoral autumnal ritual has anything to do with the bull

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7 Vajracharya, *Frog Hymns and Rain Babies*, p. 29.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 29–32.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Vajracharya, *Nepalese Seasons*, pp. 17–18. See also the endnote 13.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

and cow worship and the celebration of Hmapūjā on the New Year's Day of the Nepal Era. Our observation of these autumnal rituals, however, will not be meaningful without paying attention to the fact that these rituals are interconnected with another cow-related Newar festival performed during the monsoon rain. This annual festival is called Sāyā in Newari and Gāijātrā in Nepali. Both these words literally mean 'the procession of cows (or calves)'. On this day, Newar children, adorned with bamboo headgears decorated with the face of a cow, ritually turn into calves and participate in a procession together with real cows and calves (*below*). In Bhaktapur, which is one of the three major cities in the Valley, we see an additional feature in the procession. Here, people carry images of golden bulls in a highly decorated, open palanquin. Although in India people celebrate Rākhī and Śrāvaṇī a day before Sāyā or Gāijātrā of the Valley, to my knowledge, nowhere in India is such a cow-related monsoonal festival currently observed during the rainy



Cow Festival known to Newar as Sāyā. Photograph: courtesy Suman Bajracharya.

season. The festival must have been discontinued in India many centuries ago because no classical period Sanskrit texts refer to it. This is indeed one of the many cultural aspects of ancient South Asia, lost in India, but found in Nepal.

### III

Before we continue our discussion, we would like to present here a list of Newar rituals and festivals related to our investigation. Nepala Saṃvat follows the *amānta* system in which a month ends on the last day of the dark half of the moon. According to the Nepala Saṃvat calendar of 1137, which corresponds to the 2016-2017 CE calendar, the seasonal rituals and festivals are celebrated from October to August on the following days:

October 30, 2016 (Āśvina Kṛṣṇa Amāvāsyā). Gāitihār or Lakṣmīpūjā, known to Newars as Sāpūjā ‘Cow Worship.’

October 31, 2016 (Kārtika Śukla Pratipadā). Gorutihār or Govarddhanapūjā ‘Worship for the Proliferation of Cows’, New Year’s Day celebration known to Newars as Hmapūjā or Mompūjā.

(Approximately 290 days later)

August 7, 2017 (Śrāvaṇa Śukla Pūñimā). Śrāvaṇī, the full-moon day of the Śrāvaṇa month, Newar ritual of ‘Frog Worship’, the last day of *saṃvatsara* in early Vedic period.<sup>12</sup>

August 8, 2017 (Śrāvaṇa Kṛṣṇa Pratipadā). The Procession of Cows or Calves (Newari Sāyā, Nepali Gāijātrā).

If we compare the sequence of these bull- and cow-related Newar

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12 For a detailed study of the significance of this day in ancient India and Nepal readers may like to read the first chapter of my book, *Frog Hymns and Rain Baby*.

festivals of the autumn and the rainy season with the Vedic ritual related to *vṛṣotsarga*, ‘the release of a bull’, and the original significance of *saṃvatsara*, (the period of gestation lasting for about 10 lunar months from autumn to the rainy season), one can easily comprehend that the bull- and cow-related Newar rituals and festivals actually originated from the ancient pastoral lifestyle of the subcontinent.

The gestation period of a cow, just like that of a human being, is approximately 10 lunar months (280 days for a human, 283 days for a cow). Accordingly, an autumnal conception of the cow ends with the birth of a calf during the rainy season when plenty of vegetation is available for the mother cow and the calf. Although there is no reference to *vṛṣotsarga* in the *R̥gveda*, this earliest Vedic text (10.87.17) does mention the availability of cow milk at the end of *saṃvatsara*, namely, at the onset of the monsoon rain.<sup>13</sup> In Afghanistan, which was the earlier homeland of the Vedic Aryans, the calving time and the availability of milk are around the beginning of spring.<sup>14</sup> Since the concept of *saṃvatsara* is so closely related to the South Asian climate, it is highly possible that the Vedic ritual ‘release of a bull’ was not exactly Vedic. It was indeed based on the practicality of pre-Vedic pastoral life of South Asia.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for our study, it becomes highly important to pay attention to the time difference between the cow-related festivals of the autumn and the rainy season.

Note that Sāpūjā (cow worship) and Hmapūjā ritual of the New Year’s Day take place in the autumn, approximately 290 days before

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13 Vajracharya, *Nepalese Seasons*, p. 30.

14 Vajracharya, *Frog Hymns and Rain Babies*, p. 28.

15 During the post-Vedic period, the seasonal association of *vṛṣotsarga* was completely forgotten. As a result, it became a part of the mortuary rituals and was observed on the 11th day after the death of a person. See Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, 5 vols (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1940, vol. 5, part 1), p. 416.

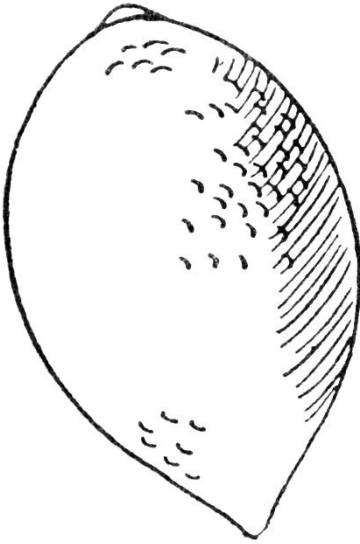
the procession of cows (Sāyā) of the rainy season. This time period is in harmony with the autumnal release of a bull (*vr̥ṣotsarga*) and the end of the *saṃvatsara* 'gestation period' during the rainy season.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it should not be surprising that Hmapūjā is known to Nepali-speaking people as Gorutihār, 'Bull festival'. This festival has to be a vestige of the Vedic or pre-Vedic custom of the impregnation of cows. By the same token, the procession of cows, Sāyā, which is observed at the end of *saṃvatsara*, cannot be other than the ritual celebration of calving. Once we are aware of the original significance of these bull- and cow-related Newar rituals and festivals, one can logically deduce that the original Newari nomenclature for the Newar New Year's Day is actually Moṃpūjā, 'the fetus worship', rather than Hmapūjā. This Newar ritual, due to its original association with monsoon-based agriculture, cannot be viewed as an example of the Vedic influence on South Asian culture; rather, it should be considered other way around.

#### IV

Additional support of our view regarding Moṃpūjā comes from the symbolic significance of the citron worshipped as a deity presiding over the New Year's Day. In Sanskrit and Prakrit, this citrus fruit is called *jambhīra* and *jambhala* (or *jambhara*), respectively, and has been identified by modern Sanskritists as a citron. In Sanskrit, the fruit is also known as *bijapūraka*, 'supplier of germ/seed'. The Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, call it *taḥsi*, 'large fruit', which ripens in the autumn and is available locally only around that season. Certainly,

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16 The procession of cows and calves, Sāyā is observed one day after the full moon day of Śrāvaṇa. It is true that in our time the monsoon rains are expected to begin not around this time but almost a month earlier. In Vedic times, however, the end of the Śrāvaṇa month was indeed the beginning of the monsoon. See endnote 19.



## Jambhara

Drawing of jambhala fruit. Courtesy:  
Antoinette K. Gordan, *The Iconography  
of Tibetan Lamaism* (Vermont:  
Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1959).

*jalendra*, 'divine monarch (*indra*) of water', and offering water to him is recommended in several other sections of the *Sādhana-mālā* (289, 290 and 291). The god is also known as *Dhārājambhala*, 'Rain Shower Jambhala'. The Buddhist Newars of the Valley, in their daily ritual, express Jambhala's association with water more vividly by keeping

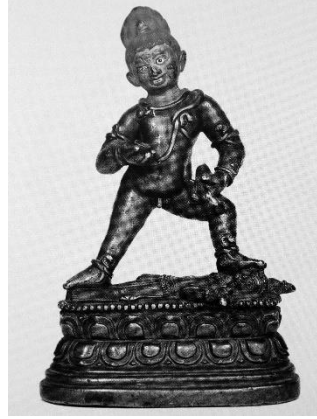
it is a larger variety of citron, which is becoming more and more difficult to find in the Valley. In Tibetan and Newar art manuals, the fruit is shown as an oval citrus fruit and in the label it is identified as *jambhara* (left).<sup>17</sup> The nomenclature of the god of wealth, Jambhala, after this autumnal fruit cannot be the invention of the Newars of the Valley because it is a popular name of the pre-Buddhist agrarian deity, incorporated as the Buddhist god of wealth in the works of various Indian authors collected in the *Sāadhanamālā*.

Further, the authors of the *Sāadhanamālā* (289 and 395), describe the god Jambhala as

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17 Antoinette K. Gordan, *The Iconography of Tibetan Lamaism* (Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1959), p. 15.

Jambhala's image continually immersed in water inside a deep and wide metal pot kept in their private shrines. To my knowledge, this is the only god treated in this manner. Let me explain why this ritual is significant for our investigation. The *Sādhanamālā* (295) states that the image of this water god should look like a five-year-old child. Besides, in a different section of the same text (*Sādhanamālā*, 291), the god is described as a baby whose earlobes are not yet pierced (*aviddhakarṇa*). This is why some images of Jambhala depict him deprived of earrings although he is richly adorned



The fetus god Jambhala (12th/13th CE). Courtesy: Ulrich von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*.

with many other ornaments such as necklaces and armlets (*above*). More importantly, the authors of the *Sādhanamālā* (292 and 294) repeatedly describe the god as a *dimbha*, 'fetus'. If we focus on the fact that in South Asian art a fetus, such as the fetus of *Mahāvīra*, is regularly depicted as a child, it becomes abundantly clear why the god has to look like a five-year-old child.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Jambhala may not be too different from *apām garbha*, 'the fetus of the waters', an ancient popular theory of cosmic fetus frequently described in Vedic literature. The most preferable date for the commencement of creating the image of this child god, including choosing a stone to make the image, is the full-moon day of the month of Kārtika (*Sādhanamālā*, 295). This explains why in the Buddhist and Hindu Newar ritual of Mompūjā the egg-shaped citron represents Kuvera/Jambhala, the fetus god. As we mentioned earlier, in Sanskrit, this fruit is also designated as

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18 Douglas Barrett, and Basil Gray, *Indian Painting* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc. 1978), p. 59.

*bijapūraka*, ‘supplier of germ/seed’. This is indeed a meaningful word, clearly indicating the concept of a ‘primordial germ’. It is this germ that the sky mother, as a cosmic cow, or the rain rivers (clouds) as mother goddesses (*devamātrikās*) conceive in autumn and deliver in the rainy season.<sup>19</sup> According to this belief, all of the creatures, including

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19 When the rainy season begins is a big question. In Vedic times, the phenomena of monsoon began around Śrāvaṇī, the full-moon day of Śrāvaṇa, or at the beginning of the following month, Prauṣṭhapada (Bhādra). According to Vedic texts, green grass appear at this time of the year (see Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. 2, part 2, p. 806, footnote 1923). According to the *Rāmāyaṇa* (4.27.34), monsoon clouds begin to appear in the month of Prauṣṭhapada. In the Gupta period, however, such a phenomenon was observed not around Śrāvaṇī or Prauṣṭhapada, but at the beginning of the Āṣāḍha month, almost two months earlier; Kalidasa describes the emergence of the dark cloud of the monsoon on the first day of the Āṣāḍha (*Meghadūtam* 2) This is true in our time as well. Such discrepancy is associated with several facts: climate changes over millennia, the variation of the arrival of the monsoon rain in different parts of the subcontinent, and different ways of reckoning the months. More important for our investigation is, however, the change of lifestyle of ancient peoples. When the cowherds of India and Nepal gradually turned into rice planters, they became more concerned with the pre-monsoon rain because they need some rainwater at least two weeks before the onset of the real monsoon rain in order to plant rice seeds. Thus, classical period Indians believed that the rain river, Gaṅgā, descends a few days before the month of Āṣāḍha. This is different from the Vedic concept, according to which the rain river, Sarasvatī, descends at the end of devayāna, around the full-moon day of Śrāvaṇa (Vajracharya, *Frog Hymn, and Rain Babies*, p. 82).

We do see the reflection of this change in the dramatically reduced time of the atmospheric gestation from about 10 lunar months to eight lunar months, as we know from the Gupta period text, *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*. This seems to be the reason that the rain child, Kumāra, was born in the month of Jyeṣṭha rather than in the month of Śrāvaṇa or Prauṣṭhapada (see Vajracharya, *Frog Hymns and Rain Babies*, pp. 175-178). But there is a divine child, whom we know as Kṛṣṇa, who was born around the full-moon day of Śrāvaṇa. Although in the Puranic story, Kumāra and Kṛṣṇa are totally different deities, in terms of their original significance as a child-god, the former does not differ much from the latter, who is



human beings, are manifestations of the same 'primordial germ'. The Newar celebration of New Year's Day in the autumn is actually no other than a communal birthday, the day of conception, in accordance with ancient custom, being considered here the real birth. I am well aware of the fact that the *Sādhanamālā* is a Buddhist work of the mediaeval period of Indian history. Undoubtedly, however, Jambhala's association with water, fetus and the month of Kārtika mentioned in the text resonate with the pre-Buddhist, pre-Hindu concept of gestation. This concept is not transparent by any means, but, at the same time, it is omnipresent in Newar festivals and rituals, as exemplified by the popularity of the dance of conception of mother goddesses, which begins in the autumn and ends with the death of the goddesses on an important day of the rainy season called Valval, Bhalbhal. The latter is a Vedic onomatopoeic word for torrential rain as well as the birth of a child.<sup>20</sup> Thus, our view that Jambhala is reminiscent of the Vedic concept of *apām garbha*, 'the Fetus of the Waters', may not be incorrect. Water, however, means not only life, but also fertility and prosperity. Accordingly, the ancient people of South Asia identified the fetus god with wealth.

Before we switch our discussion to the Vikrama Era, we must pay an attention to a significant point which is related to both the Nepal Era and the Vikrama Era. In ancient times, there was an archaic way of reckoning the era, by which, when the era reached 100, the next year would not be 101, but 1. This system of omitting 100 was known

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described in Sanskrit literature as the son of the thundering atmospheric drum, Ānakadundubhi, an epithetic name of Vasudeva (see Gautama Vajracharya, 'Iconography and Images [Murti]: A Methodology', in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, edited by Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar and Vasudha Narayanan. Consulted online on 01 July 2018 [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019\\_beh\\_COM\\_000382](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019_beh_COM_000382). First published online: 2012).

20 Vajracharya, *Frog Hymns and Rain Babies*, pp. 150-152.

to Alberuni as *lokakāla* (a common practice of reckoning time).<sup>21</sup> Because of the popularity of this system both in India and Nepal, the reckoning of the eras, including the Nepal Era and the Vikrama Era, must have gone through the same system. Note that when the Nepal Era was 1, the Caitradi expired Śaka Era was 801. The people of the valley did not accept the Śaka Era exactly as it was but reckoned the era from the month of Kartika and then following the *lokakāla* system, 800 were omitted from the Śaka Era. As a result, the new era Nepal Saṃvat came to existence. A contemporaneous document indicates that before the initiation of the Nepal Era, the Kathmandu valley was going through a difficult time for several years in succession. People were dying of multiple diseases almost certainly caused by drought and famine. During the agricultural cycle of 880 CE when the situation got much better people must have been in a good mood to celebrate a new beginning of life with the Mompūjā ritual of this year as the first day of Nepal Saṃvat. Due to the fact that the subject deserves another detailed study based on textual and visual sources, including the representation of the mythical figure Śaṃkhadhara in Nepali art, we will save the discussion on this subject for a different occasion.

### III. Vikrama Era

Indian, Nepali and Western scholars have written much about the origin of the Vikrama Era. Dinesh Chandra Sircar and some other scholars opine that the Vikrama Saṃvat is a new name for an old era. According to them, the era received the new name after the Gupta emperor Chandragupta II, Vikramāditya, and the new name gained

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21 Edward C. Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, 2 vols (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1989, vol. 2), p. 8.

popularity only in the post-Gupta period.<sup>22</sup> Readers will find a brief but reliable scholarly discussion on this subject in Solomon's work.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, however, none of the previous scholars were familiar with the evidence we are presenting here. Contrary to popular belief and scholarly argument, Vikrama is not the name of an Indian or a Nepali king but a Vedic Sanskrit word for the east/west movement of the solar god.

## I

The scholars of earlier generations were indeed aware of the fact that the Gavām Ayana ritual is closely associated with the Vedic concept of reckoning the year because the ritual was performed in accordance with the yearly progress of the sun. However, they did not pay much attention to the existence of two different versions of the Vedic ritual. As we have explained earlier, the shorter version of the Gavām Ayana ritual was also known as Saṃvatsara Satra 'the ritual of gestation' and its primary purpose was fresh vegetation and the monsoonal birth of babies. Here, we need to keep in mind that monsoons are a local phenomenon, unknown to Vedic Aryans before they migrated to the subcontinent. They were sun worshippers. In their earlier homeland, the snow-melting vernal sunlight rather than the arrival of monsoon signified the beginning of the planting season. Only after they had settled down in the northwest and northern parts of India, did the Vedic Aryans become familiar with the pre-existing, age-old monsoon culture of South Asia. Their reaction to this indigenous culture certainly deserves attention,

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22 Dinesh Chandra Sircar, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, Vol. I (Calcutta: University of Calcutta; 1942), p. 92n.

23 Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the Other Indo-Aryan Languages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 182.

particularly because they did not reject the local rituals as inappropriate but instead adopted them and systematically reinterpreted their significance in accordance with their solar theory. The Gavām Ayana ritual, for instance, was not a solar ritual. It was not related to the sun's annual course at all. This we know for sure because the ritual lasted only about 10 lunar months. In fact, it became a solar ritual only after the Vedic Aryans extended the period of the ritual to an entire year so as to perform the ritual in imitation of the sun's yearly course, with special attention provided to the solstices and equinoxes. In order to understand the association of the Vikrama Era with this Vedic interpretation, we need to pay some attention to both the solar ritual and solar legends described in Vedic literature.

## II

The *Jaimineya Brāhmaṇa* (1.16), an important Vedic text composed around the 9th century BCE, refers to an interesting story of the great god Prajāpati, who stands stretching his legs from the netherworld to the heavens. Because the story helps us to understand the ancient people's imagery regarding solar movement, I quote the story in translation:

Prajāpati, 'the lord of the living beings,' represents the entire period of a year. He stands, raising high one of his feet but switches its position every six months. When he raises his hot foot into the atmosphere, the atmosphere becomes warm, but the underground remains cold. This is why in summer it is hot in the upper region but cold in the lower region [as exemplified by the fact that] in summer the water of the well remains cool. Likewise, as he switches his foot, raising his cold foot into the atmosphere, the atmosphere becomes

cold but the underground warm. This is why in winter the atmosphere is cold but the underground remains warm; so, in winter, the water of the well is warm. In this way, Prajāpati, who symbolizes the year, protects the people.

A closer observation of this legend indicates that one foot of Prajāpati is cold and the other one hot; the phenomena of the summer and winter are caused by the periodic switch of the positions of the stretched legs of the colossus god standing on one foot. Undoubtedly, this is the story of the annual progress of the sun to the north and south (*uttarāyana* and *dakṣiṇāyana*), causing summer and winter solstices. In Sanskrit literature, such a solar movement is called *saṃkrama*, which means 'progress' or 'transference'.

Compare the above-mentioned story with the Ṛgvedic creation story of Indra and Viṣṇu. They bear similarities in terms of the Vedic way of seeing the daily and annual solar movements as giant steps of a great god. According to the Ṛgvedic story, before creation, the heavens and earth were compact. As a result, there was no space for solar movement across the sky. The heroic god Indra, by erecting the cosmic pillar, separated the heavens and earth and created the space for sunrise and sunset. This was the beginning of time, the very first new year of the cosmos. The phenomena of rising, culminating, and setting sun are described in the story as three cosmic strides or steps of the solar god Viṣṇu. Thus, Viṣṇu's first step symbolises the morning of the cosmogonic New Year. The Vedic verb for 'to stride' is *vikram*. In a Ṛgvedic hymn (4.18.11) Indra says to Viṣṇu: *sakhe viṣṇo vitaraṃ vi kramasva*, 'friend Viṣṇu, stride out vastly'.

Viṣṇu's strides are closely connected with Vedic people's fascination with the notion that space does not differ from time. For them, creation means not only establishment of cosmic space by separating heaven and earth, but also the commencement of

time, separating it into two halves such as night and day or winter and summer. According to this theory, the sun's annual journey to the south and the north, causing winter and summer, is related to both space (north and south) and time (summer and winter) simultaneously. In Vedic literature, the solar journeys are designated as *devayāna*, 'divine path', and *pitryāna*, 'ancestral path', whereas in classical Sanskrit they are *uttarāyana*, 'northern journey', and *dakṣiṇāyana*, 'southern journey'. It was believed that the gods live in the north and the ancestors in the south. Just like day and night, *uttarāyana* and *dakṣiṇāyana* are equally divided by the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. According to Vedic authors, *uttarāyana* and *dakṣiṇāyana* are the night and day of the gods.<sup>24</sup>

In the ritual, however, the vernal equinox, due to its proximity with planting time, played a more important role. On the basis of statements found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and other Vedic texts, Tilak has shown that the year-long ritual originally commenced on the day of the vernal equinox. I find Tilak's argument convincing although his view regarding the great antiquity of Vedic civilisation is beyond my vision. Because the ritual was strictly observed in accordance with the sun's yearly course, one has to admit that the vernal equinox was, in a sense, the Vedic New Year.<sup>25</sup> This observation is crucial to our investigation because not only in Nepal but also in South India, the New Year's Day of the Vikrama Era is celebrated on the archaic day of vernal equinox. In our earlier publication, we have explained that the Newar celebration of the New Year in Bhaktapur is known as Biskā Jātrā or Bisket Jātrā, 'the festival of Viskā'.<sup>26</sup> The word

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24 Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa 3.9.22.1 *ekam vā etad devānām aha/ yat saṃvatsarah*, 'one year means one day of the gods'.

25 Bal Gangadhar Tilak, *The Orion: Researches into the Antiquity of the Vedas* (Bombay: Mrs. Radhabhai Atmaram Sagun, 1893), pp. 23-27.

26 This festival is also held on a smaller scale in Hadigaun, an ancient town located about a half mile west of Pashupatinath Temple. The Malla

*bisket* or *biskā* derives from the ancient Newari word *bisika* for the equinox. This, we know, from ancient Newari translations of *Amarakośa*, in which the Sanskrit word *viṣuvad*, 'equinox', is translated as *bisika*. In a version of the translation, *viṣuvad* or *bisika* is explained as a time when the day and night becomes equal. Further, in mediaeval Newari literature, New Year's Day of the Vikrama Era is designated exactly as Bisaka or Bisika. Clearly, the modern-day Biskā or Bisket Jātrā is the celebration of the equinox as the beginning of cosmic time, the New Year.<sup>27</sup> This Newar custom cannot be a mediaeval period invention of the Kathmandu Valley because far away from the Valley, in Kerala, on the Malabar Coast, people celebrate the New Year's Day as Viṣu. Although the real significance of Viṣu seems completely forgotten in Kerala as well, it cannot be other than a synonym for the Sanskrit word Viṣuvad: Viṣu is celebrated exactly on the day of the Bisika (Biskā) festival in Nepal. Because of the enthusiastic celebration of this festival in the Kathmandu Valley, in a traditional calendar (*pañcāṅga*) of the Maithilis, the inhabitants of Mithila, the Vikrama Era is designated as Nepala Saṃvat. Clearly, in South Asian tradition, an era can have multiple names in different locations and times. This is why in various inscriptions, the Vikrama Era is sometimes designated as Kṛta Saṃvat and other times as Malava Saṃvat. The former is named after Kṛta Yuga, the golden age of the cosmogonic time, the latter after the Malavas, the powerful tribal people who ruled around present-day Malwa before the Gupta Period (ca. 320–647 CE).

Despite the fact that in the classical period, the Vedic story of

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period inscriptions of the Hanumāndhokā palace inform us that during the mediaeval period Kathmandu also celebrated the New Year's Day of the Vikrama Era by erecting a pole near the Duimāju shrine in modern-day Tundikhel (Gautam Vajracharya, *Hanumāndhokā Rajadarabāra* [Kirtipur: Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, 1975], pp.154-155).

27 For a popular story of the Newar festival, readers may refer to Mary M. Anderson, *The Festivals of Nepal* (Calcutta: Rupa and Co. 1988), pp. 41-49.

Viṣṇu went through modification and was replaced by the Puranic story of Trivikrama Viṣṇu, the earlier Vedic story of the solar god was not completely forgotten during the Gupta period. Candra Gupta II's epithetic name, Vikramāditya, which literally means 'striding sun', is actually based on the Vedic story. The story of Trivikrama Viṣṇu has no direct association with 'striding sun' and differs considerably from the Vedic story of Indra and Viṣṇu.

More important, the Vikrama Era is 57 years older than the Common Era; hence, the era cannot have been propagated by Chandra Gupta II, who ruled c. 380 to c. 415 CE. Thus, we can safely deduce that the Vikrama Era is actually named after the very first stride of Vedic Viṣṇu symbolising the beginning of cosmogonic time.

Before we conclude our discussion, we need to pay attention to an important point, namely, the precession of the equinoxes. In modern times, the vernal equinox takes place around March 21, but due to the gradual precession of equinoxes, it is highly possible that it took place around April 15 at a time when people decided to use the pre-existing Vedic equinoctial era adopting a nomenclature that associates the significance of the day with the cosmogonic story of Viṣṇu's Vikrama.<sup>28</sup>

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28 For the precession of the equinoxes, see K. Ramasubramanian, M.S. Sriram, *Tantrasagraha of Nilakantha Somayaji* (New York: Springer, 2011), pp. 460–461. The following statement explains how in ancient times the vernal equinox around April 15 is possible: 'A Vernal Equinox in April 15 means it occurred 25 days later than March 21 (current date of Vernal Equinox). Since 365.25 days of the year corresponds to 360 degrees of the zodiac, 25 days corresponds to 24.64 degrees. One degree shift requires 71.6 years, so 24.64 degrees shift requires 1764.27 years. So Vernal Equinox was at April 15 1764.27 years ago, i.e. in 247 ce. During this time the Vernal Equinox point was still in Pisces but very close to the beginning of Aries. Hence the builders of calendars in those days chose Aries as the first month and first zodiac sign. The arrival of calendar start dates based on the Gregorian calendar is not absolutely accurate because of errors in Gregorian-Julian calendar and because of the Luni-Solar nature of the Vishu Calendar due to which New Year day



## IV. Conclusion

With these diachronic and synchronic investigations, we can safely deduce that the concepts related to both the Nepal Era and the Vikrama Era go back to the pre-Vedic and Vedic periods. The Nepal Era and its New Year's Day celebration as Hmapūjā or Momṡpūjā actually originated from the pre-Vedic indigenous custom of the autumnal conception of cows and the monsoonal birth of calves. On the other hand, the Vikrama Era and the Newar custom of celebrating its New Year on the archaic day of the vernal equinox emanated from the Vedic Aryan's solar interpretation of the pre-existing indigenous ritual. Continuity of these pre-Vedic and Vedic rituals in Newar culture provides us with excellent examples to demonstrate that some important aspects of ancient South Asian civilisation did manage to survive in the Kathmandu Valley much more meaningfully than in other parts of South Asia.

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(Vishu) varies as April 14, 15 and 16.' <http://ancientvoice.wikidot.com/article:kalachakFra>, viewed on February 19, 2015.

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(1929-2003)

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His publication include *Nepalese Seasons: Rain and Ritual* (2016), written for the Rubin Museum, New York, as part of the 2017 exhibition 'Nepalese Seasons, Rain and Ritual', which he himself curated. Other of his publications include *Frog Hymn and Rain Babies: Monsoon Culture and the Art of Ancient South Asia* (2013), *Himalayas: An Aesthetic Adventure* (2003) (co-author), and *Watson Collection of Indian Miniatures at the Elvehjem Museum of Art: A Detailed Study of Selected Works* (2002).

