

## Food and Festivals of Ancient Nepal (4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.): An Inscriptural Overview

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### Abstract

Licchavi kingdom was an ancient kingdom in Nepal, which existed in the Kathmandu Valley from approximately from ca. CE 300 to ca. 879. Centuries earlier at the start of the Buddhist era, a powerful republic known as Licchavi existed in what is today Bihar. It is to be mentioned here, some legendary sources from the Kathmandu Valley also describe the Kirātas as early rulers there, taken over from earlier Gopāls or Ābhiras, both of whom may have been cow herding tribes. The food habit of ancient inhabitants of Nepal was very simple. Paddy was the most important food grain. Different kinds of fishes were available at that time. *Pāniya-goṣṭhikās*, *Pranālī – goṣṭhikās* were formed to supply water for various purposes. The preservation custom seems to be practiced from very ancient time. The oil press (*Tailaśālā*), copper smithies (*Tāmrakuṭaśālā*), Pharmaceutical laboratories (*Ārogyśālā*) and indigo processing workshops (*Nīlīśālā*) were given lands. *Mallayuddha-goṣṭhikās*, *Vāditra – goṣṭhikās* existed and functioned in festivities. *Varāhayātrā*, *Kāraṇapujā* were also used to organise at that time.

**Keywords:** Nepal, Inscription, food, and festival, *goṣṭhikā*, *śālā*, water, fish.

### 1. Introduction

The primary source for the history of the Licchavi Period (ca. A.D. 370 to ca.879) is formed by inscriptions, majority of which appear on stone, the śilāpātra-s. Art and architecture also convey good information in this regard. Other sources for Licchavi history are the vaṃśāvalī-s and the brief but important notes in foreign records, especially the

memoirs of two seventh-century Chinese travellers, the pilgrim Hsuan-tsang and the envoy Wang Hsuan tse.

D.R. Regmi has published 164 inscriptions in his book 'Inscriptions of Ancient Nepal' in 1983. Regmi's *Inscriptions of Ancient Nepal* is divided into four sections, viz. (1) Text, (2) English translation, (3) Plates and (4) Special introductory notes for every inscription in historical perspective. In this paper sometimes the number of inscriptions is cited instead of the name of the inscription. So the inscriptions which are collected and numbered according to D.R. Regmi's *Inscriptions of Ancient Nepal (volume 1)* are given below.

Chabahil Stele (XII), Chāṅgu Pillar Inscription (I), Ādinārāyaṇa (Thankot) Inscription (XX), Satyanārāyaṇa (Harigaon, Kathmandu) Inscription (XXVII), A Stele in front of the Chāṅgu Temple door (west) (LIII), Harihara Image Pedestal Inscription of the Paśupati area (XLV), Viṣṇupādukā Hill Stele near Budhanilakanṭha (XLIX), Bhimsena Temple (Patan) Inscription (LIV), Būḍhānīlakanṭha Stone Inscription (LIX), Inscription of Lele (LXV), Bungmati Inscription (LXVIII), Inscription of Bhatuwal (LXX), Chapatollananhi (Patan) Buddha Image Pedestal Inscription (XC), Tavajahyā (Chinnamastikā) Inscription (XCVII), Bhairavdhokā (southern gate) Inscription in Kathmandu (XCIX), Thankot Inscription (CVI), Caṇḍeśvara Pillar Inscription (CIV), Yangāhiṭi (Kathmandu) Inscription (CIII), Luñjhya Patan (49) Palace Inscription (CXVI), Kasaiñtol (Deopatan) Inscription (CXIX), Inscription of Anantaliṅgeśvara area (CXXII), Giridhārā Inscription (Patan) (CXXI), Lagantol Inscription (CXXXII), Sonagothi or Bhrīṅgāreśvara Slab of stone (CXXXIII), The Paśupati Stele of Jayadeva II (CXLII).

## 2. Food and Drink

It is very difficult to have a comprehensive account of food habit of the people of ancient Nepal from the data available in the inscriptions. It is assumed that there might also be variations of food stuff and drinks. Paddy was the most important food grains cultivated in ancient Nepal. So, boiled rice must have been as at present the most commonly used and in all probability the staple food of the rich and the poor in their everyday life. The words *Gohale Goyudhe* (Thankot Inscription) suggest that ploughing was done by bullocks. The word *Mānikaor Mā* appears as the grain measure in the inscriptions of Nepal and *Bhumī* appears as a land measure and *Piṅḍaka* is the paddy or grain measure. Soil of Kathmandu

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Valley is very fertile from the ancient time. It is said that “The Valley is filled with alluvial soils deposited under lacustrine conditions with characteristic telltale ripple marks, diatomaceous clays, and peat lenses. The presence of fossils dates the soils to the Pleistocene age. In time the relatively level expanse of grazing and farmlands and the exceptionally fertile soil of the former lake bed began to attract settlers.”<sup>1</sup>

There were different types of fish available in Nepal. Fishes were brought and sold in the marketplace. *Bhukkunḍikā* fish (L) *Malla* and *Mallpota* fish (XLIX, LXVIII, CIII, LXII), *Bramśafish* (LXXVIII) *Muktā* fish (L) are mentioned. The common people obviously had the food habit of taking fish or meat regularly. Bungmati Inscription (LXIII) indicates that the profession of raising fowl, pigs, and young *mallas* was encouraged by the royal authority. To make the food delicious potherbs might be used by them at that time because through one inscription potherbs were prohibited for sale (LIII). In the same inscription some privileges were given to the villagers to bring charcoal, *chakra*, a medicinal plant and pine wood pieces from the forest.

In Nepal, the royal authority was very much conscious about water. In Lele Stele certain amount of land had been given to *Pāniya-goṣṭhikās*, the body that was in charge to supply drinking water and *Pranālī – goṣṭhikās*, the body that was in charge of the irrigation channels. The *Paulampāniya- goṣṭhikā* was perhaps related with water supply. In the Pharping Inscription dated 605 A.D. (LXXXIII) it is stated that the king Kalahābhīmānī (Aṃśuvarmā) brought a channel from some river into the residential complex of the *Āryas* and the work is compared with the great effort of Bagiratha to coax the sacred Gaṅgā to come down from heaven to earth. Jiṣṇugupta refers in one of his edicts to the repairs of a water course (*tilamaka*) which had been dug by Aṃśuvarman for the benefit of some villages. About agricultural development in Nepal, Banerjee says “Repeated mention of renovation of conduits and water- tanks seems to indicate that Ancient Nepal had been reach in agricultural resources which had developed to a great extent.”<sup>2</sup>

In this connection it is to be noted that-

Like India, in Nepal too. the preservation custom seems to be practiced from very ancient time. The caves of the Muktinath valley of Nepal are the most prominent examples.

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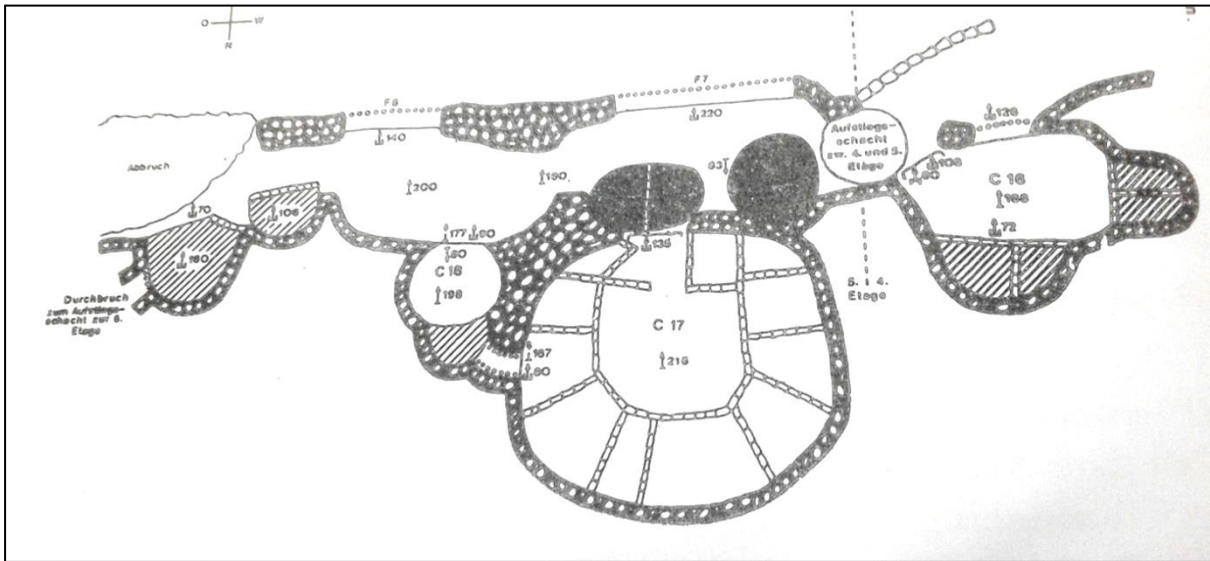
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The series of caves are found which are seems to be the dwelling caves, storage caves etc. It is said that “In settlement C, the storeys 1- consisted completely of dwelling caves. The middle storeys were obviously storage caves. In these storeys the caves generally comprised of small, walled chambers for the storage of grain. The caves C 17 and c 18 show clearly how these chambers were constructed. Additional storage capacity was derived from holes of different sizes.... the organic samples from the bricks of the storage-chamber revealed that some of the chambers were constructed between 600 and 100 B.C.”<sup>3</sup>



**Plans of Caves at Muktinath in Nepal**

In the Saṅgā Inscription (608 A.D.) there is a reference of the custom of preserving oil. According to Dr. Banerjee<sup>4</sup> custom of preserving oil and other commodities is very ancient. In this respect he gives the examples of Brāhmī Inscription of Mahāsthān of 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. and Sohgaūrā Copper Plate Inscription. He reminds that Kauṭilya also uses the words *koṣṭhāgāra* (store house) and *ātyayika* (emergency).

Great care was taken by Aṃśuvarman and his followers to procure water in tunnels and tanks on which agricultural economy depended. Water in the hills had generally been a comparatively scarce commodity. Inadequate rain was one of the reasons for this scarcity. So, people of this area perhaps had to collect water from the far-off springs and had to sustain their agricultural lands and meet other requirements. To remove these discomforts of the people the king had to make permanent arrangements for storing water.

“In this context information supplied by the Vamśāvalī may be taken note of. It is recorded there in the reign of Rājā Aṃśuvarṃā, a certain Vibhuvarṃā Rājavarṃśī, having consecrated a Buddha, built an aqueduct with seven *dhārā*-s or spouts and wrote the following *śloka* on the right side of one of the *dhārā*-s: By the kindness of Aṃśuvarṃā, this aqueduct has been built by Vibhuvarṃā to augment the merits of his father.”<sup>5</sup>

Jiṣṇugupta was also conscious about the continuous supply of watercourse. The Chinnamastika Inscription (XCVII) informs that Jiṣṇugupta presented some irrigable lands or gardens to three villages so that the repair of the *Tilamaka* channel was not interrupted. It was also instructed that out of the income (*Piṇḍakam*) collected from these fields future repair work of the water course was to be done.

Again, the repair-works of watercourse *Tilamakais* mentioned in the Mina-Narayana Inscription (XCIX). Banerjee says about this “The villagers and cultivators making use of this water-course ordered through this edict to pay revenue of one-tenth of their produce [*piṇḍaka-daśa-bhāgampratyākālayya bhavadbhirevopasaṃhartavyaḥ*-1.15]. The edict further carries for the villagers the instructions to worship the deity whose name ends in *leśvarasvāmin* (1.16; it is most probably a portion of one of the names of Lord Viṣṇu), to feed every day the *Pāñcālīs* [*Pāñcālībhojanañca*-1.16], i.e., the members of the village committee and to provide as soon as possible for the repair of the water course [*tilamakapratisaṃskāraścakālānatikrameṇaivakāryaḥ*-1.17], Thus the villagers had to share the expenses and lend manual labour for the fulfilment of Jiṣṇugupta’s mission. This revenue was collected also for the purpose of affording protection and beneficial services to his people.”<sup>6</sup>

In the Caṇḍeśvara Inscription of Jiṣṇugupta (CIV) it is declared that from the donated lands the repair work of the temple of Chatra Caṇḍeśvara and the occasional renovation of the spout of the water course in Kūgrāma will be continued.

To show the common practice of drinking habit in ancient Nepal, Prof. Jha has taken the word *Pāniya-goṣṭhī* from Lele Stele of Śivadeva I dated 604 A.D. and the word *Kāraṇapūjā* from Paśupati Inscription of Jayalambha dated 419 A.D. (XI) and Giridhārā

Inscription of Narendradeva dated 659 A.D. (CXXI). According to him the word *Pāniya-goṣṭhī* probably speaks of the organisations which arranged for wine drinking at least during ceremonies occasions.<sup>7</sup>In support of this view he thinks that very cold climate of the country would have necessitated the people to take wine with which the Licchavis and the Guptas were closely associated even before their migration to Nepal. But Regmi, Vajracharya and others take the word *Pāniya-goṣṭhī*as a kind of organisation which provided drinking water for the traveller or for irrigation.<sup>7</sup>

According to Vajracharya<sup>8</sup> *Kāraṇapūjā*means *naimittikapūjā* which does not indicate the sense of wine worship. It is not known if the people of ancient Nepal know about the techniques of making wine. But the sources of ancient history mention that the Kirātas, Shakyas, Koliyas, Licchavis, Mallas, Abhira Guptas, Pundris were the main habitants of the Nepal and due to commercial trade, some people were related with Tibet and India. At that time the drinking pattern was already flourished in China, Tibet and India.<sup>9</sup> It might be possible because of cold weather Nepal people used to take liquor but *Pāniya-goṣṭhī*was certainly not the organisation to provide liquor and *Kāraṇapūjā*means *naimittikapūjā* in which it is not known if wine was used or not.

Different *Śālās*are mentioned in the inscriptions. The household products might be available from production workshops. The oil press (*Tailaśālā*) (LXXV) copper smithies (*Tāmrakuṭaśālā*) Pharmaceutical laboratories (*Ārogyśālā*) (LXV) and indigo processing workshops (*Nīlīśālā*) (LXXIX) were given lands.

The inscriptions of Nepal mention various taxes on necessary products of their day to day life. These products are Jars of oil (LXXV), copper pots (LXX), firewood, iron, flywhisk, hair of deer, musk (LXX), textiles (CVI), onion and garlic (LIV), fish, pig and sheep (LXVIII). The Harigaon Inscription of Aṃśuvarṃā (LXXIV) mentions the phrase *gr̥ha – kṣhetrādiśrāvaṇikā-dāna*....which seems to refer to gifts, grants, or donations of houses and fields through oral orders (*śrāvaṇikā*) or through gift –deeds (*dāna*).

The normal and simple food habit of Nepal people indicates the poor economical condition of Nepal. It seems that they tried to earn their food and drink from their unlimited

natural treasures. The hills, forests, rivers were the primary sources of their foods and other necessary commodities.

“In addition to observations on Nepali clothing, ornamentation and personal hygiene, Wang Hsüan-t’sê noted that the Nepali utensils of copper and that they eschewed spoons and chopsticks but ate, as they still prefer to, with their hands.”<sup>10</sup>

Wang Hsüan-t’sê observed that the wooden houses were sculptured and painted and one of the earliest Licchavi inscriptions refers to a Buddhist shrine decorated with paintings of *Jātaka* stories.

### 3. Festivals & Enjoyments

Man is a social being, so they want to have the company of their fellow creatures to share his pleasure as well as his sorrows. The people of ancient times were delighted by the beauty of nature, seasonal changes, and good harvest etc. They wanted to enjoy these in company of those whom they loved or liked. That is perhaps why the seasonal and pastoral festivities developed.

In ancient Nepal the festivities were almost all religious. They arranged various type of enjoyment in these ceremonies. In the Lele Inscription (LXV) it is stated that some plots are allotted to *Mallayuddhagoṣṭhikā*-s. It means the wrestlers of the village of Lembatidraṅga were getting help from the royal palace to make the shows of wrestling at the time of festival of Vāsudeva. Among many sports. Vatsayana refers to wrestling matches. In the Mahābodhi inscription<sup>11</sup> the word *Malla* indicates a boxer.

Thankot Inscription of Bhīmārjunadeva (CVI) states that the people got a special favour from the authority that the tax which they had to pay for a show of bull fight and for every plough of land in Dakṣiṇakoligrāma was cut by half. So, it is proved that *Goyuddhawas* a bull fight show, which was very popular among the local people of Dakṣiṇakoligrāma. The consecration of Lokapālasvāmin is mentioned in the inscription of Anantalingeśvara (CXXII) of Narendradeva dated 656 A.D. On the day of the twelfth phase, the consecrations had arranged and for the sake of propitiatory water to be arranged by Brahmins, 25 *Purāṇas* of *Paṇas* were allotted. It is mentioned that for the provision of materials for setting up the flag

for the cow fight 25 *Purāṇas* were allotted. It seems bullfights or cow fights were arranged regularly during special occasions and festivals.

The hosting of the flag (*dhvaj-ārohaṇa*) which is popular in the south Indian temples was done in Nepal with due Vedic rituals and it was a signal of the commencement of festivals. In the Lele Inscription there is *Dhvaja-goṣṭhikā*. In the Anantalingeśvara Inscription there is a long list of budget items for the ceremony of Lokapālasvāmin. At the last paragraph there is a reference to *Varāhayātrā* within the Haṃsagrhadraṅga on the day of *Jyeṣṭhaśukla* 11. May be *Varāhayātrā* indicates that there was a temple in the *Draṅga* complex wherein God Viṣṇu in his incarnation as the boar was worshipped. It is also possible that in the incarnation of Lokapālasvāmin (Viṣṇu) a procession of god Lokapāla (mounted on a boar) was arranged. The Chando Varaha of Nepal confirms the popularity of the deity in the form of a boar lifting the earth. Giridhārā Inscription (CXXI) of Narendradeva dated 659A.D. mentions *Dhārmikagaṇas*, who were the several members of a body in charge of the conduct of rituals in temples with their administration. The members conducted the ritual of worship called *Kāraṇapujā*. The *Kāraṇapujā* is mentioned in these inscriptions – 1) Jayalambha inscription of Māndaeva I (XI) 2) Buddhanilakantha Inscription of Māndeva I (VI) 3) Kevalpur Inscription (CI). But there is no useful information available about *Kāraṇapujā* in these inscriptions. The Vajraghar Inscription of Narendradeva (CXXVIII) dated 679 A.D. says that the *Kāraṇapujā* involves *snapana* (bath) *gandha*(sandal wood paste), *puṣpa*(offering of flowers), *dhūpa*(burning of incense) lighting the lamp with oil, *vāditra*(playing of musical instruments) usually played in the rainy season and *Japakādina*(muttering of prayers) etc. In the Giridhārā Inscription (CXXI) the phrase appears like this-

*snapanagandhapuṣpadhūpapradīpavarṣavaraddhanavarṣākālavāditrajapakādikākāraṇapūjāk artavyā* (CXXI-line 14-15).

According to Alakananda Bhattacharya, “the *kāraṇapūjā* was associated not only with the Śaivite and Vishṇuite cults but also with the cult of Vaiśampāyana....The manner in which the *kāraṇapūjā* has been referred to in early Nepalese inscriptions indicate worship of images of various deities.”<sup>12</sup>



Literally *kāraṇa* means wine, use of which was one of the essential accessories of *tantric* form of worship. But epigraphic documents of early Nepal do not indicate the use of alcohol in the worship of a deity or of a *liṅga*.<sup>13</sup>

*Kāraṇa* according to M. Williams' Dictionary means, among other things, a deity.<sup>14</sup>

Originally *Kāraṇapujā* means worship done for particular purpose and it is more interesting that special instruments were played in the temples to ensure sufficient rain. In the special occasions this kind of *pūjā* happened. The rainy season was the special occasion here and the worship of Vajreśvara was arranged. Sometimes the birthday ceremonies became the special occasions. On those days the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Pāśupatas* were to be fed.

Regarding this occasion Regmi says – "The *pūjā* is always associated with the *Pāśupata* sect which was popular in India in those days... According to the *Pāśupata Sūtra* the Lord Śiva Paśupati is the cause of universe as well as the destroyer and agency to maintain it. Although it cannot be said precisely if the *Kāraṇapujā* derived its name from the fact of Paśupati being the cause of Universe, some people think the cause of creation was Paśupati and hence the name of his *pūjā*."<sup>15</sup>

It is said that "One of the temples of Matsyendranāth, who is a form of Avalokiteśvara (Lokanāth)... he is believed to bring rain, is situated in Bungamati".<sup>16</sup> The deity Vajreśvara' may be one of the forms of Avalokiteśvara.

Lele Inscription mentions *Vāditra – goṣṭhikās* also. The inscription of Gorkha dated 698A.D (CXXXIV) informs that a grant of certain land for *Kāraṇapūjā* was allotted and *vāditra, pañcharaṅgacitrakarma* (painting) are mentioned in this connection.

It is said that "The worship of the Caitya and the Rath Jatra cart festival of Avalokitesvara were introduced around this period. The chaitya worship in its earliest incarnation was related to the worship of stones, which may have originated in the early Caitya worship -- an important factor in bringing more of the proto-Newar tribal inhabitants into the Buddhist fold, as it was a devotional practice designed for the general public. Thus, the masses probably began practicing the cart festival of Avalokitesvara/Matsyendranath

(Jana Baha Dyah Jatra and Bunga Dyah Jatra) during the latter half of the seventh century AD....The religious processions were not unknown and the beginning of the annual festival of the god Lokeśvara-Matsyendranatha is associated with Narendradeva's reign."<sup>17</sup>

*Indrayātrā* of Kathmandu, Rato Machhindranāth *Rathayātra* of Patan, *Bisketyātrā* and *Bhairavyātrā* of Bhaktapur, *Ghodayātrā* of Kathmandu, Chaṇḍesvariyaṅtrā of Banepa, *Bhagavatiyaṅtrā* of Palanchok and Pulpa are popular cart festivals in Nepal which probably started from *Varāhayātrā* mentioned in the Anantalingeśvara Inscription (CXXII) of Narendradeva dated 656 A.D. The present condition of Nepalese festivals has been painted in this way, Nepalese Festivals are generally woven around the monsoon-driven agricultural cycle, and with rice being the most important staple crop many of these festivities are observed after the planting and harvesting of paddy.

Every festival involves the worshipping of the concerned deities and then sitting for a fest thereafter. A legend or folk lore is behind every festival in Nepal. Mask dances having religious significance are popular with the masses in the country. Masks are used for different religious purposes, and some Gods, particularly Bhairav is worshipped in mask form. All mask dances observed in Nepal have some legend behind them."<sup>18</sup>

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6. *Ibid*, pp. 38, 39.
7. Regmi, D.R., *Ancient Nepal*, p. 292.
8. Vajracharya, Dhanavajra; *Lichhavikalkā Abhilekh*, pp. 62-64, 482.
9. Basham, A.L. *The Wonder that was India*, p. 235-236; Bell, Sir Charles, *Tibet: Past and Present*, p.25.

10. Slusser, Mary Shepherd, *op. cit.*, I, p.38.
11. *C.B.I.*, p. 112, line 3.
12. Bhattacharya, Alakananda, *op. cit.*, p.2-3.
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