

# Functionalism and Psychological Analysis in Understanding Superstitious Beliefs, A Part of Nepalese Culture

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**Abstract :** Despite the advancement of science, technological advancements, and modernization, superstitious beliefs continue to be prevalent in contemporary culture. This paper explores the oriental beliefs related to rain and droughts and identifies other beliefs and analyze it from Functionalism and Psychological approach. The methodology is qualitative approach based on exploration, analysis and narration. It was found that there exist innumerable beliefs related to rain and drought and other beliefs in Nepal. Functionalist analyze it saying if beliefs are functional they maintain social solidarity and value-consensus and Psychological approach claim that beliefs provides strength and positivity to survive and at times may hinder progress incase of negative beliefs.

**Keywords:** Superstitious-beliefs, Functionalism, Psychological, Nepalese- Culture.

**Introduction** - Belief in accordance to Oxford Dictionary refers to acceptance of things as true or what one believes ( Ostler, 1941, p. 48). E.B Tylor shows that all religious beliefs and cults have developed from certain mistaken inferences from observation of such phenomena as dramas, trances, vision, diseases, walking and sleeping, life and death. He defines religion as a belief in Spiritual Beings or the Supernatural. He further added that early men believed that after death the soul left the body, and appeared only sometimes in dreams. They began to believe that everything possessed life and souls, this he termed as 'Animism' belief in spirits. They further believed that these spirits protected their families, tribes and watched over their moral behavior. ( Jha, 1981, pp. 30-31) It perhaps was this attempt to communicate with these departed soul and spirits that gave rise to prayers and active worship. It was later that these spirits took the form of deities. With it emerged 'polytheism', and hierarchy of gods. This developed into 'monotheism'. The seed of so called superstitious beliefs were sown during primitive phase. As soon as they realized the power of nature, they considered it as 'superhuman forces' if there was no rainfall, the spirit of 'rain' was displeased, if landslide occurred the 'mountain spirit' was angry, they offered sacrifices to please it Hence we can say that superstition refers to belief for which there is no real basis in either science or religion. Most superstitions are vestiges of decayed systems of belief.(Tylor,1990, p.513)

The problem of the study is that focused study related to beliefs in Nepal is lacking is the greatest problem of study. The major research objective this paper deals are as follows

a) To explore Oriental beliefs related to rain and droughts  
b) To superstitious identify other beliefs and analyze it from Functionalism and Psychological approach. The methodology is qualitative approach based on exploration, analysis and narration Global Beliefs.

The Dugum Dani tribes lives in the highland of New Guinea, they have no god, but their world is inhabited by host of supernatural beings known a 'Mogat'. The 'Mogat' are the ghost of the dead. They cause illness and death and also control the wind and rain. These tribes are not pious; they do not pray. Their rituals are not to honour or worship the 'Magots' but it was to placate and appease them. ( Harlambos, 1989, p.435 ) This shows that the seed of superstition sown in the primitive phase continued through out the world.

The Teton Sioux tribes live on the northern prairies of USA The belief persists that the nature on which they are dependent, is controlled by 'Wakan Powers'. These powers are stronger and more mysterious than man. They cause the seasons to change, rain to fall, plants to grow and animals to multiply. The 'Waken Powers' were not worshipped but were appealed for assistance and protection. They believed that 'Wakan Powers' save-guarded them. (Harlambos, 1989,, pp. 435-436)

The world has progressed from the discovery of fire to interior heating systems and microwaves. From the earliest wooden wagon to the BMW, rocket, and space shuttle. We may have moved from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, and most of us feel ourselves to be modern, with a liberal outlook on life and its prospects. However, there is a

paranormal effect on real-world happenings in commonplaces everyday; from black cats to ladders, salt to mirrors, objects tend to become superstitious everyday. These seemingly irrational behaviors have a remarkable impact on our mental states and defy reasonable explanation. The fact that most superstitions revolve around unpredictable events is not shocking in the slightest. Similar to other societies, Nepalese culture is deeply ingrained with superstitious beliefs that have been passed down through unknowable ages. These beliefs have a profound impact on the lives of those who live in this ancient, religiously orientated region of legends and myths known as Nepal.

This research paper fulfills the objective to explore the oriental beliefs associated with rain and drought.

**Rain/Drought associated with Oriental Beliefs** - It is interesting to note the oriental beliefs associated with rain and droughts. Prior to that it is note-worthy matter to know about the definitions related to the existing beliefs.

Since beliefs are "part of a system that includes our values and attitudes, plus our personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals and other interpretive perceptions of the social world,"(Saldana, 2016, p.132). Beliefs can also be embedded or implicit in many other study topics, such as judgements, ideologies, concepts, attitudes, or theories. ( Pajares, 1994, pp 193-203).

Superstition is described as an unreasonable, baseless phenomenon.( Vyse, 1997 ) It is described as a notion that one occurrence happens because of another, without any natural mechanism that links the two. ( Jahoda, 2007, pp.20, 594-595 ). It appears that superstitious beliefs are similar to intuitive thinking. (Genovese, 2005, Hergovich & Arendasy, 2005; Lindeman& Aarnio, 2006 ).

There exist contradictory results related to superstitious beliefs. It has been inferred that weak analytical thinking is correlated with superstitious beliefs and those based on logic and reasoning, is opposite to superstitious thinking or beliefs. ( Bressan, 2002, pp.17-34 )

Whatever it maybe, weak analytical thinking or logic and reasoning based beliefs. Despite 21st century we are still within the web of these beliefs.

**Beliefs on Rain & Drought** - In the remote villages of Nepal, if there is no rain for a long period of time, the belief persists that if women-folks in the middle of the night plough the field completely naked. There will be rainfall. Research foretells.



**Fig. - 1 Frogs wedding**

**Frogs Wedding** in the city of Bhaktapur and other surrounding areas of Kathmandu valley where there exist agricultural lands; if in case, there is a long period of drought, the villagers start their traditional rituals, where they worship 'Lord Indra' deity of the rain and end the ritual by conducting a traditional wedding of a Male Frog with a Female Frog. Both frogs have to be brought from different streams. They chant holy mantras and complete the sacred marriage and finally leave the married 'frogs' in a pond. This wedding of a frog and a female frog was recently conducted in the year of 2009 at Bhaktapur when the valley went without rain for nearly eight months. This belief exists to this day in Nepal. Such marriages take place at Madhya Pradesh also by the farming community. When many locals were interviewed out of 30 samples (comprising of elders, middle-aged and youths). Majority agreed that such rituals were good for them. After observing it, rainfall did take place. Functionalist claim that be it beliefs or values, if functional for the community and society, it will help to maintain value consensus and social solidarity. While Psychological approach claims that when belief and traditions are so very embedded into their minds and the strong belief, actually fulfills their wish and self -satisfaction is acquired.

Surrounding **Swyambhunath temple and King pratap Malla** are the shrines of five elements earth, water, fire, wind and sky.

- Basupura is the shrine of the earth, where the image of Basundhara , the divinity of the crop is placed.
- Nagapura Nagas (serpent) are believed to be the agent of rain and water. Thus to signify water, Nagapura or the shrine is dedicated to Naga lies to the north of the stupa.
- Agnipura or the shrine dedicated to Agni or fire stands on the northern western corner of the stupa dome.
- Bayupura, it is dedicated to the god of the wind and is situated on the south western corner of swaymbhu.



**Fig 1 a Swayambhunath and Shantipur stupa( Source Net)**

**Fig 1 b King Pratap Malla**

Shantipur lies on the northern side of Swyambhu. This shrine is dedicated to the sky. It is believed that there are nearly twenty-seven subterranean dark chambers within this shrine. In this last 300 years no one has dared to enter it. Once there was serious drought in the valley. It is believed that King Pratap Malla of Kantipur entered into the underground cells and was able to bring out 'manuscripts'

written with blood of (Naga) serpents. This chanting lead to heavy rainfall. ( Varya, 1981, pp 113-114 ). This is historically mentioned in the New Vamsawali ( local text) . When analyzing this the functionalist would generate that, King Pratap Malla a tantric was able to read the text and enter the holy place. To this day only tantric 'Guvajus' (well-versed tantric) enter for worship once a year. Be what may Functionalism claims that any beliefs or rituals that benefits all, is valuable for the universe. Psychological approach views that the existing beliefs actually manifests itself and befits them if the wish and belief is strong.

**Croaking of the Frog** - During long period of drought, the farmers in various part of Nepal keep listening for the croaking of the frogs. Belief persists that, if the frogs croak loudly, there is sure to be rainfall. This is a belief passed down from generations to generations. Earlier when there was no science and technology to predict rainfall. The farmers relied on the saying of their elders. When people were interviewed, new generation had no idea, they just said their granny talked about it. But, among the farmers, to this day they believe and majority claim it is true. They believe that it will rain. Functionalist claim that any values or beliefs that is fruitful to the community and society helps to maintain 'value-consensus' in the society. Psychological approach views that if any beliefs help to provide peace of mind and brings happiness among all it is acclaimed as positive constructionism.

**Circling of Kankakuli ( Eagle/ Cheel)** - When eagles fly in circles, whistling loudly all the time it means that they are asking for water. Belief exist that they do not drink water from lakes, rivers because they see it as dirt, blood they drink only the rainwater as it falls. Hence, when they cry as they fly, people believe that it is going to rain. They term them as 'Kamkakuli'.

There is an interesting myth related to this bird termed as 'Kamkakuli' in Nepalese culture. Story foretells of a man who happened to be very greedy, one day a dying man came to his door-step and requested for a drop of water to drink; but the greedy man shut the door on his face. After he died he turned into 'Kamkakuli' bird that cannot drink water from ponds or rivers but have to wait for rainfall to quench their thirst. The new generation have forgotten about it, however, if there are elderlies in the family, then such local tales are passed down from generations to generations. Functionalism claim that if beliefs does not harm anyone and is functional then it helps to maintain balance in the society. Psychological approach is that such tales also is a didactics as it teaches us moral values of helping others in need.

**Hom / Yajna Rituals and Songs/ Dance** - Another common practice among the Nepalese people during prolonged draught is to offer prayers and 'agni-hom' and chant from the 'veda' in name of Indra deva. Among the Hindus Lord Indra is regarded as the 'God of Rain'. This belief exists to this day. Despite secular Nepal, majority

are Hindus who are involved in rituals and worships if anything goes wrong.

There are ancient classical songs and music termed as 'Megha Malahara' Megaha refers to the dark floating clouds that brings rain and 'malahara' is the classical song associated with it. Belief exists that when an artist with extraordinary voice sings the 'Megaha Malhara' from the very core of his soul, there will be rainfall. To this day story of Tansen who by singing 'Megha Malhara' brought rainfall, is famous here in Nepal too. Among the Newar community on the day of Indra Jatra ( Festivity celebrated for Lord Indra) on this day there is dance pf " Majipa Lakhey" ( Masked Dancer.)



**Fig - 2 " Majipa Lakhey" ( Masked Dancer)**

Majipa is derived from the words Manjupattan, which means 'the city built by Manjushree,' and Lakhey, which means 'the carnivorous demon of Majipa.' The Lakhey dances to the music and proceeds through the procession. It is said that the harvest will be good and there will be timely rainfall. The Functionalist approach views that these persisting beliefs are so very strong that it is passed down from generations to generations. This benefits and is functional to maintain one's traditions and culture. Likewise, Psychological approach views that our attitude, thinking and what we do or believe are the products of our mind. If thinking is positive than it helps to safe-guard one's culture and traditions. If not, it will vanish with time.

**Historical Legendary Tale associated with Rain and Drought**



**Fig - 3 Guru Gorakhnath**



Legend foretells that once Gura Gorakhnath caught hold of nine serpent deities including 'Karakotaka Naga' and confined them, and took to meditation. Because of confinement of Nagas (serpents), Nepal experienced tremendous drought for the period of 12 years. Lord Matshendra Nath, who had been mediating in the Himalayas, came to know about the drought and came to save Nepal. Thus due to him Nepal received rainfall after 12 years. He is regarded as 'Karunamaya' or 'tender soul'. Since then in his honour the festival of 'Machendranath' is practiced every year. Believe it or not, on that day when the chariot of 'Machendranath' is pulled, the valley there is rainfall. Strange! But True. (Shakya, 2024, interview)

#### **Cleaning of the well and Rainfall**



**Fig - 4 Belief associated with well**

The valley once upon a time was a fertile land for agriculture. Hence, rainfall was very much necessary. In the valley to avoid prolonged draught the locals of the valley followed a passed down belief or a custom of cleansing the famous well '**Japa Tung**' made during the period of Brisha Deva the father of Lichhavi King Dharmadeva and grandfather of Manadeva. He was helped by Guvaju tantrik Shantikar Bajracharya. Locals believe that it took 12 years to commemorate it. To this day many elderlies believe that in times of drought or lack of rain for a long time the cleaning of this ancient well will bring rainfall. (Bajracharya, 2024, interview)

**Asking for Rainfall** -In the valley there is a belief that if it does not rain for a long time, then youths who are half naked jump outside the valley yelling 'Hara Hara Mahadeva Pani Dey' 'Holy Mahadeva give us water' At Kirtipur, on such occasion people throw water from house to house, from windows on them. This is said to avoid drought.

Another belief persists that if a cow is taken to the sandy banks of Holy Bagmati and milked, and if 'Holy Rudri' is performed at Sacred Pahupatinath, by 'burning of the holy fire'. There is a belief that it will end drought and rainfall will take place. (Shakya, 2024, interview)

**Researcher's Grandmothers Belief related to rain & drought** - Granny always told us ' Rainfall on Tuesday or Saturday' is taken for the continuity of rainfall for the whole week. Strange but true, as a researcher I have observed that that this seem to be true in Nepal. The rain may not

fall for a week, but it certainly continues for a day or two.

When the rainfalls, if it creates huge big bubbles as it falls, belief persists that there will be heavy rainfall for many days. Likewise, if the eastern sky turns red during sunset time there will be rainfall and if western sky turns red then it will not rain.

If it does not rain for a long time then, belief exist in Nepal that that at midnight if naked women go to the fields and plough it. It will rain.

Another interesting belief related to rainfall is that to see rows of ants running around, shows that there is to be rainfall along with the storm.

If it rains on a wedding day, it is believed that either the groom or the bride has licked the ladle, or the cooking spoon. This saying and belief is true to this day. When married couples were interviewed, 70% who had licked the ladle did have rainfall on their wedding day, but 30% who had licked the ladle but did not experience rainfall on their wedding. Statistically this belief is true, if we are to consider the percentages.

There are also beliefs that if without rainfall; water starts to pour down from the rooftop, known as 'balesi' in Nepal. It is a premonition of bad days ahead to come.

If there is non-stop torrential downpour , only way to stop it; is to heat the iron pan ( Karai) in Nepali and turn the heated 'Karai' upside down below the 'Balesi' or the water poring down from the roof-top. The sound and the smoke that goes up is said to stop the rain. ( Rana, 1980, oral tradition)

**Belief & Rainfall** - Worship of 'Akash Bhairab', Akash means 'sky' and Bhairab is the destructive form of Siva, who is the one of the most important deity in Nepal. Worshipping of the sky existed throughout the world millions of years ago. In Nepal it continues to this very day by burning incense, offering prayers is believed to bring rainfall. In Nepal many farmers offered prayers for rain. Today since most of the land has been used for constructions, its importance has decreased but the rituals, beliefs continue to persist to this day. (Bajracharya, 2024, interview)

When both sun and the rain shines and falls together at the same time, saying goes like this:

"Gham Pani Gham pani,  
Sun, Rain, Sun, Rain,  
Shyala ko biha,  
On the Jackles wedding,  
Kukur janti, Biralu Bahun,  
Dogs are the procession, and Cats are the Brahmins."

The general belief which most of the Nepalese believe is that there will be rainfall on the festivity of Sivaratri and Machendranath jatra. It is interesting to note that it certainly does rain on such festivity. Strange but True can be termed as 'Believe it or Not'

**Functionalism** views that be it beliefs or values or myths , legends as long as they are functional and it helps

to maintain social solidarity and it helps individuals to "Fit In" within these beliefs and values. These beliefs existed, is existing and will continue to exist.

**Psychological approach** claim that these values, beliefs that has been passed down since times unknown have become a part of the society and culture as a result some of it has taken into ritualistic forms. These beliefs helps to provide strength, and may help to provide mental peace of mind and gratifies their needs.

These are just few research collections related to rain and drought. This area is further open for research. Thereby the researcher has fulfilled its first research objective.

The **second objective** is to identify other Superstitious beliefs and analyze it from Functionalism and Psychological approach: Below are few beliefs associated with arrival and departure, that is followed by many to this day.

**Departure & Arrival Beliefs** - In traditional society like Nepal, every little thing is associated with auspicious and inauspicious beliefs. Arrival and departure to both domestic and foreign lands are also associated with numerous beliefs.:

"Mangalbar na bhetnu, Sanibar na chutnu"

"Do not meet on Tuesday, and do not separate on Saturday"

Most people to this day avoid leaving home on Saturday, for a long journey. If it is urgent then on Friday itself one should send ones personal attire or clothing to a relative's home as 'departure sagun' This small ritual signifies that particular individual has left his home on Friday itself. After this he is free to leave his home on Saturday and he will avoid facing ill-omen.

The belief exists that one should avoid travelling on Saturday. If in case of urgency on When a person is about to go to foreign lands he has to undergo through some minor rituals. Prior to his departure he worships 'Lord Ganesha' the 'Elephant God' who is said to remove all obstacles and burns 'oil lamp'. He is applied with 'vermillion tikka' and is given banana, curd etc, and among some ethnic communities like Newars boiled & fried eggs, and fishes are considered very auspicious omen. (Self-Observation since childhood)

**Functionalist** when they analyze the above traditions or beliefs view that as long as these believes do not harm anyone, it can be followed and it is accepted to be functional. While **Psychological approach** analyzes it by saying, if such beliefs develop positivity and good vibes among all, then, it is fruitful for all those who follow it. It will provide them strength and helps to maintain peace of mind in times of trouble.

King or some important person of the country is to depart to foreign lands. It is considered very auspicious to accept flowers from the 'Pancha Kanyas' or 5 young girls. They are regarded as the incarnations of the 'Kumaris'. Their blessings in form of flowers are considered extremely auspicious to the person, leaving his land. This ritual

continues to this day in this land of gods.

A person should not leave home or walk around during the mid-day. It is considered 'unlucky', Research reveals that a lady who left her home on her scooter during mid-day, simply, simply forgot her destination, who she was? She wandered for more then one hour prior to realizing her destination. Since then she never leaves her house during mid-day. Questionnaires reveal that 50% agree to this belief.

**Days of the week & Beliefs** - When few elderlies were asked about beliefs associated with days of the week. Some had no idea but few enlightened the researcher this way.:

- Monday: We should not purchase new clothes.
- Tuesday : If we leave the city on Tuesday then the belief persists not to return on Saturday.
- Wednesday : Elderly to this day believe that one should not buy cooking oil on Wednesday. This belief has been forgotten today.
- Thursday: There is a belief that a women who are not widows, should avoid washing their hair.
- Friday : One should not eat meat on Friday.
- Saturday: If someone leaves the town on Tuesday they should not return on
- Sunday: Three people leaving the house together on Sunday must avoid heading separate ways to different destination.
- When leaving the house, refrain from cleaning, showering, doing laundry, or removing items to avoid returning them. ( Shakya, 2024, interview)

In todays society such beliefs may not be applicable, however, in the villages of Nepal people continue to follow it.

#### Work Related Beliefs:

- a. To see an empty pitcher is considered ill-omen. To see a filled up pitcher is good.
- b. When one is leaving for some important work, to sneeze or if someone sneezes, it is ill-omen
- c. It is believed that when three persons go together for some business or work it will not be successful.
- d. If a cat or a serpent crosses the road while we are on our way for some work, it is ill-omen, and it is believed that that the work will not be completed

**Functionalist** view that these beliefs that have been passed down from generations if functional to the society then it helps to maintain social solidarity and value consensus. However, if it hampers or acts as an obstacle for the development of the community and society then it generates dysfunction.

**Psychological Approach** on the other hand views that the seed of such beliefs has been sown into the brains of the children during socialization as a result, they start to believe that such beliefs work. Sometimes such beliefs generate positivity while others may hamper their personality and behaviors. Such beliefs develop negativity

in a person and makes them weak.

Beside all these there are other general beliefs that exist here in Nepal that has been termed as:

**Some other Superstitious Beliefs:**

- a. Falling of a chameleon on one-self or some-one is not good it may bring bad news.
- b. Appearance of a big spider on the ceiling is an indication of ensuing quarrel among family members.
- c. It is general belief that to see gold in one's dream is ill-omen it means the person will loose something. If one dreams of stool and urine he will gain something eg. money.
- d. Fluttering of right eyelid is good-luck for male and left is considered bad
- e. For female fluttering of left- eyelid is good, and right is bad omen.
- f. Itching of the right palm for male will bring money and left will loose money and vise-versa for women. (In researcher's case in both case money does come. Believe it or Not.
- g. Itching of the throat is a sign that someone is speaking ill of you.
- h. Itching of the right ear for the male is good, it brings good tidings and vise-versa for the female.
- i. When someone touches the throat, they are to blow over their fingers or it may lead to growth of 'goiter'.
- j. Those with squint – eyes cannot be trusted.
- k. Arrival of a person while someone is speaking of him or her foretells longevity of life. This is believed to this day.
- l. To see pigeon on the roof is good and to see a vulture is considered a bad omen.
- m. Among Nepalese 8th year is considered inauspicious in individuals' life. Example the numbers: 8,18,28,38,48 etc.

**Historical Beliefs:**

- a. King Shiddhi Narashima Malla of Patan saw Radha Krsna in his dream and established the famous Krshna Mandhir at Patan.



**Fig - 5 Krishna Mandhir ( Lalitpur)**

- b. King Pratap Malla of Kathmandu in the 16th century dug a tank at Bhandarkhal and brought water from 'Buddhanilkhanta' but his action displeased Lord Narayana and the king received a curse saying that if

any Nepali king would visit 'Budaniikhanta' they would die. Since then no king can visit Budaniikhanta.

- c. Likewise there are many more of such beliefs that has yet to be researched.

Thus it can be concluded that this research paper has fulfilled its objective to explore Oriental beliefs related to rain and droughts, however many more of such beliefs existing outside Nepal can yet be explored and compared. It has also identified other beliefs and analyzed it from Functionalism and Psychological approach. The paper has opened venue for future researches on such beliefs.

**Note:** The collected beliefs are based on primary sources that have been collected through interviews with elderly women and males of 70 years and above, few 65 years old have been included. (Oral Tradition).

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