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TIHAR-DEEPAWALI-YAMAPANCHAK GREETINGS TO ALL!

Tihar or Deepawali(Festival of lights and colors) is a five day long festival which is also known as Yama Panchak. This festival marks the reconfirmation of human relationship with the animals; honoring and propitiating the Goddess of both material and spiritual abundance (Goddess Laxmi); celebration of relationships between the brothers and sisters; family reunions and unity, etc. Among the infinite festivals celebrated in Nepal, Tihar, is celebrated throughout Nepal and the neighboring countries with great joy.

The term Yama Panchak means to honor Yama the Lord of the Yonder World (Lord of Death, Dying and Arbiter of the Souls after Death). The ceremonies and festivities celebrated during this time is also to re enforce ourselves to be able to face and tackle the severe winter season that is coming very soon and to place the unforeseen circumstances. On the one hand is the the festival of family get-together especially between brothers and sisters where the sister blesses the brother. On the other hand it is also to placate the premature death and to protect from the clutch of Yama's messengers (Yamadutas). Not only that if we look from the shamanic spiritual perspective, it is the festival to honor the friendly and helpful animals and their spiritual aspects. These panchaks or five days of the festivals are celebrated in the following ways:

November 05: The first day of the Tihar is Kaag(crow) Tihar: Crow as the messenger of Yama or the go between the human world and the yonder world where Yama rules. On this day the people prepare food and keep on the rooftop or under the trees so that the crows enjoy that ceremonial meal and would not bring any bad news from the lord of the yonder world. As crow is also related to planet Saturn, is disarrayed can bring obstacles and difficulties in everyday lives. So, it is an important day to honor and journey to crow and make necessary rituals in your/our own ways besides the traditional festivities.

November 06: The second day is Kukur Tihar (Dog):The Dogs are considered to be the door keepers in the reign of Yamaraja. The myths tells us that Shyam and Sabal are the two guardian dogs in the palace of Lord Yamaraja. On this day the dogs are honored by offering marygold garlands, vermilion- red colored blessings on the foreheads and delicious foods are offered. It is also the day to mark the relationship between the humans and dogs: protectors. What we understand here is that the dogs are one of the closest friends of humans. The other thing is that as they are the guardians of the palace of the Lord of the Yonder World, honoring them and creating a strong bond of relationships with them would help the souls to cross over the gate to the other world easily. Yet, dog is a vehicle of Bhairava the wrathful deity who helps every being in times of difficulties.

November 07: The third day is Gai(Cow) Tihar and Laxmi Puja: which is dedicated to sacred Cow. On this morning the people cleanse the whole body of the cow by water, apply white rice flour paste, vermilion and yellow powder in the frontal part of the cow and also in the whole body by using marrigold flower. Incenses are offered and delicious special foods are given. A sacred altar is created by using the cow excrements on the floor with small holes where the cow milk is offered. The holes can be 54 or 84 or 108. Flowers, colorful stripes of cloths, incenses and rice cakes are also offered. Songs dedicated to sacred cow are also song accompanied by drums, bells, conch shells and metal rattles. Having offered the food to the 'Mother Cow', and flower garlands, the sacred threads that were tied in the human wrist during

the Janaipurnima, the full moon of August are untied and transferred to the cow's tail. The cow here becomes the mediator between the human realm and the realm of the deities and the ancestors. The cows are also the agents of soul retrieval for young children(not necessary to discuss here).

In the evening of the same day of Gai Tihar, Laxmi Puja is conducted. On this special day all the households are smeared with red mud/earth and cow dung(these elements are no more used in concrete city houses but waters from different sources are used instead); inside and outside of the households are illuminated by oil wickers and multi-color electric lamps; most of the pots and pans made out of copper are cleaned and decorated by flower garlands; the family jewelleries and valuables are put in the altar on a copper pot along with the picture of Goddess Laxmi; sacred books are also kept together and prayers offered. But before this in front of the main door of the house a special design is made using 5-7 different colors (rangoli) and a rice flour sacred path is created connecting the rangoli with the main altar inside the house. In this sacred path foot prints of the Goddess of Abundance are created thus welcoming her into the house. Oil wickers are lighted in the outside altar and number of oil wickers are lighted in the path going into the house. Candles are illuminated in all the doors, windows, cowsheds, etc. This ritual of Laxmi Puja is to thank for the health, peace, abundance and spiritual progression of the family members.

The night of Laxmi Puja is also called 'Sukha-Ratri', the night of bliss and happiness.

On this evening female members of the community go from home to home chanting the sacred and devotional songs accompanied by musical instruments and dancers. The songs are devoted to Laxmi, Saraswati, Rama, Krishna, etc. focused on blessings and protection. The singing groups are honored by giving special rice cakes, fruits, sweets and some donations.

After the female groups bestow blessings by singing 'deusi-bhaili' songs, the male members of the community start visiting households singing 'Bhailo' songs of blessings and protection.

November 08: The fourth day is Goru(oxen) Tihar or sometimes as Gobardhan Puja. The oxes are honored and thanked for the ploughing work they did throughout the year by applying sacred colors in the frontal parts of the body, offering flower garlands and giving special foods. On this day Lord Krishna is also remembered by creating a sacred mountain called the Gobardhana when he had saved the world from the deluge. Most of the time a mud mount is made with different symbols depicted on it. Milk, flowers, colors and stripes of cloths are offered.

November 09: The fifth day of Tihar is Bhai Tika. On this special day, traditionally brothers visit the sister's house or in some cases both brothers and sisters get-together at parent's home. As a custom the sisters dress up with the most beautiful dresses and the brothers also dress up with traditional dresses. The sisters honor Yama and pray for the longevity of their brothers by making water and oil circles around the seat where brother/s are seated. Walnut fruit representing the Yama is kept outside the house and prayers are offered. The sisters apply oil in brothers head, sprinkle special water and flowers and offer a vertical tika in the forehead. The tika is made out of seven colors representing the rainbow bridge and the seven colors of the spiritual centres in the body/ 7 chakras. The brothers are given the best possible gifts, masala (packets with multiple dried fruits), etc. In return the brothers offer the tika in the same way they received and give a handsome gift.

This ritual is to protect the brothers for any unforeseen circumstances and obstacles. This day is also remembered as a day when Yama's sister Yami had blessed him.

Ancestors for thousands of years have celebrated these rituals and ceremonies and passed

onto us as the sources and means of keeping the families intact, continuous exchanges and visits and maintaining the sense of community and spiritual connections.

During these five days of specific ceremonies and practices, we also continue with our everyday practices.

For those folks involved in healing and shamanic spiritual practices it has a great meaning in every aspects of our inner and outer journeys and to maintain a deep and strong relationship with ALL THAT IS.

HAPPY TIHAR TO ALL!

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