

Vikram Samvat and Nepal's Distinct Identity

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It is notable that the people of Nepal celebrate New Year's Day several times in a year. The Government of Nepal celebrates its New Year's Day during the change of the Vikram calendar on the first day of Vaisakh in mid-April. The people of Tibeto-Burman and Mongol origin in Nepal, such as the Gurung, the Tamang and the Sherpa celebrate their New Year festivals Tola or Tamu Lhosar (December/January), Sonam Lhosar (January/February) and Gyaplo Lhosar (February/March), respectively in three different times of a year. Similarly, peoples in Tarai celebrate their New Year at different times of a year. Nowadays a small minority in Nepal also celebrate New Year on the first day of January with the change of the Gregorian calendar. Most recently Rai and Limbu people also began to celebrate New Year of the Kirata or Yela Samvat. However, only the Vikram Samvat is used for official purposes in Nepal while all other calendars do not receive any such recognition.

Since the past several decades, people across Nepal, especially the Newar people began nationwide campaigns demanding recognition of the Nepal Samvat as a national calendar. Due to the fact that the Vikram era had its origin in ancient India while the Nepal Era was originated in Nepal and named after the country 'Nepal' itself, the pressure for the recognition started to grow. In 1999, the then Government led by the Nepali Congress Party recognized Samkhadar Sakhva, the person believed to be founder of the Nepal era as a national hero of Nepal. On 24th October 2008, the Maoists led cabinet meeting of the Government of the Republic of Nepal unanimous declared the Nepal Samvat as a National era of Nepal. Even though the people are optimistic, recognition of the Nepal era as an official calendar in Nepal is still a long way ahead.

The Government of Nepal adopted the Vikram era as the official calendar of Nepal only in 1903 AD. Least emphasis has given to other calendars. Even the Nepal Samvat, despites its 1130 years long history, has become obscure for many Nepalese people. It all

happened within a century or less, which shows how a state power can alter the culture and tradition of a country when it desires. It is a practice to name an era after a king, a popular individual or a religion throughout the history, but in case of the Nepal Samvat it is named after the country itself. In this regard, it is a unique example. However, because of the policy of the Government, the Nepal era has lost in status despite its exclusive history. This clearly indicates the disrespect to the culture and tradition of the country by the then Governments. They went as far as importing a foreign calendar to replace already widely used era.

The facts about the Vikram Era

A most widely believed myth is that the king named Vikramaditya of Ujjain in India initiated the Vikram Samvat. However, many scholars consider Vikramaditya was a legendary ruler, while others stress him as a historical figure and founder of the Vikram Era (Pandey 1951). However, in his book D.C. Sircar states, it was only in the 8th century that the reckoning began to attach with the name of the king Vikramaditya, before that the era was associated with the Malavas of Rajasthan. He further states, the era was at first known as the Krita era and prevalent in Rajasthan among the Malava, hence also began to be known as the Malava era. He asserts the epoch era began to be called the 'era of Vikram' 'the era known as Vikram' or 'Vikramaditya' and 'the era founded by Vikramaditya' only in the medieval period. He dismisses the claim that king Vikramaditya of Ujjayini ever defeated the Sakas and founded the Vikram era (Sircar 1996:251-58). Another scholar Basham (1975:495) states 'the only king who both took the title Vikramaditya and drove the Sakas from Ujjyini was Candra Gupta II, who lived over 400 years later than the beginning of the Vikram era'. Similarly, Kane (1994:653) maintains that the Vikram era is found mentioned not earlier than 8th or 9th century AD.

At its inception, the change of the year in the Vikram era used to be in the month of Kartika, but by the medieval period (twelfth to eighteenth century AD), it had become Caitradi or the ending in the month of Caitra. At many parts of India, still people use it as a

lunar calendar. Till the medieval times the years of the epoch counted as beginning from Kartika Sukla 1. Nowadays, in North India the Vikram era New Year begins on Chaitra Sukla 1 but in the South India from Kartika Sukla 1, in a difference of seven months. In the North, it is counted as Purnamantaka while in the South it is counted as Amanta. In some parts of Rajasthan and Gujarati speaking areas, the beginning of the year is counted from Amanta Asadha while in Udaipur region of Rajasthan it is counted from Purnamantaka. Therefore, depending upon the beginning of the year, the Vikram era is known as Karttikadi, Caitradi, Asadhadi and Sravanadi in India (Sircar 1996:258). In Nepal, it is used as a solar calendar for official purpose. In Nepal, every year in April the New Year's Day of the Vikram era is celebrated.

Some legends also relate Vikramaditya of Ujjayan with Nepal for his mysterious deeds (Paudyal 1963:58-75). Daniel Wright edited *History of Nepal* tells that during the reign of Amsuvarma, Vikramajit, a powerful monarch of Hindustan who founded a new Era came to Nepal to introduce his era and spent rest of his life (Wright 1972:131-32). However, only rare use of the Vikram era is to be found in Nepal to substantiate its authenticity. The oldest inscription found in Nepal with the Vikram era at Patan Sundhara is dated 1404 AD. This inscription mentions the Vikram era 1461 but together with the Kaligata era 4505, the Saka era 1326 and the Nepal era 524 (Pradhan 1998:66). Only in 1903 AD that the Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shamser introduced the Vikram era in Nepal for the Government administration. By replacing the lunar based Saka calendar with the solar calendar the shrewd Rana Prime Minister tricked the Government staff and reduced the burden of paying salaries for thirteenth months every two years (Pradhan 2000:6).

Jaggannatha and Vaijanath Sendhain's versified panegyrics written in praise of Chandra Shamsher explains his motives for adopting Vikram Samvat and tells how the State benefits from such a measure and how Chandra's calendar reform of "tithi into miti" had finally rid the country of the confusions of lunar tithi, 13-month year and dark half and bright half of a lunar month (Sendhain 1913:84). However, the solar based Vikram era has no cultural value in Nepal because the Nepalese people use lunar calendar for observing all religious festivals, life cycle and death rituals, birthdays and determining auspicious moment (*sait*) for any

religiously important activities, as well as observing holidays.

In India, the central Government has adopted the Saka era as the national and official era together with the Gregorian calendar since 1957. To give uniformity to a national calendar, the Calendar Reform Committee of India submitted this recommendation despite the fact that people belonging to diverse religions, cultures and nationalities in India practised more than thirty epoch calendars before 1957. Since 1957, India celebrates 1 Chaitra (22 March) as the New Year's Day according to the Saka era and observes it as a national holiday, but in different provinces, regional New Year Day are observed according to their own tradition. The publication dates of the Gazette of India, dates in diaries and correspondences of the Government, and newspapers include the National Calendar in addition to the Gregorian date in India. Similarly, early morning broadcasts of All India Radio in various languages announce National Calendar dates (Bandyopadhyay 1981).

The Limitation of the Vikram Era

In fact, the use of the solar-based Vikram calendar in Nepal has its limitation. Even though the Vikram era was introduced in Nepal the Nepal Era, as a lunar-based calendar, remained and continued to be a part of Nepalese culture, especially in the Kathmandu Valley. Astrologers used it for writing horoscopes and determining the dates of all the religious festivals and cultural rituals of Nepal. From the beginning of their publications, the Nepal Almanac Deciding Committee (*Nepal Pamcanga Nirnayaka Samiti*), previously Royal Almanac Deciding Committee (*Nepal Rojakiya Pamcanga Nirnayaka Samiti*), a body composed of astrologers, authorised to publish the solar-based Vikram era calendar have been including the Nepal Samvat identifying it as ‘the era of the country Nepal’ (Nepaldesiya Samvat) or ‘the Nepal era created by Samkhadhara’ (Sri Samkhadharakrita Nepaliya Samvat), etc.

The Government of Nepal has been using the Christian era for all its official dealings with foreign countries but without pronouncing its official status. Especially, since the 1950s the Christian era has become more prevalent in Nepal. The Government as well as non-governmental organizations, and the private sectors use the Christian calendar very commonly, especially

