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Bal G. Shrestha

*University of Oxford*, bal.shrestha@anthro.ox.ac.uk

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# To Use or Not to Use: Nepal Samvat, the National Era of Nepal

Bal Gopal Shrestha

This paper presents the importance of Nepal Samvat in Nepalese cultural life and compares it with Vikram Samvat, the official calendar of Nepal. Presenting a discussion on eras prevalent in Nepal, this paper examines the significance of the Nepal Government's recent recognition of Nepal Samvat as the national calendar of Nepal. It presents a historical and cultural overview of the different eras and calendars that are in use in Nepal. It attempts to demonstrate a continuous historical legitimacy of Nepal Samvat, in contrast with Vikram Samvat, which is shown to be a fairly recent imposition associated with the Rana period, from 1903 onward. This article argues against any claims that the implementation of Nepal Samvat as an official calendar is impractical. In addition, I address the following issues: (1) how to adapt a lunar calendar to practical use, (2) how to coordinate it with governmental and business interests, and (3) how to coordinate it with external calendars (e.g. the Common Era or 'Christian' calendar).

**Keywords:** era, culture, festivals, history, Nepal Samvat, Nepali, Nepalese, Vikram Samvat.

## Introduction

The people of Nepal celebrate New Year's Day on a number of occasions. The New Year of Nepal Samvat in October/November has become a magnificent event in the Kathmandu Valley and beyond during the past four decades. The Government of Nepal celebrates its New Year's Day when the Vikram calendar changes on the first day of the month of Vaisakh (mid-April). People of Tibeto-Burman origin (Gurung, Tamang, Sherpa) hold New Year festivals called Tola or Tamu Lhosar (December/January), Sonam Lhosar (January/February) and Gyalpo Lhosar (February/March) respectively.<sup>1</sup> The Tharu in the Tarai welcome the New Year, or Maghi, in January, on the first day of the Magh month. The Muslims of Nepal do so according to the Hijri calendar. Most recently, the Kirat, also known as Rai, and the Limbu of Nepal also began to celebrate the New Year of the Yele Samvat.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, certain Buddhist intellectuals seek to recognize the Anjan Samvat which they believe was established by the maternal grandfather of Gautama Buddha in 691 BC (Shakya 2013). Nowadays, the New Year's Day according to the Gregorian calendar is celebrated too. For all official purposes, however, the Government of Nepal utilizes only the Vikram Samvat (henceforth abbreviated VS).

The Nepal Samvat (henceforth abbreviated NS) calendar was prevalent from its inception until the beginning of the Gorkha conquest of Nepal in 1769 AD. However, soon after the Gorkha conquest, the Shah kings started to replace NS either with the Saka Era or with VS. However, NS was not discarded. For instance, a treaty signed between Nepal and

Tibet during the reign of Pratap Singh Shah utilizes the NS calendar. All their successors mainly applied the Saka Era or VS but often cited Nepal-Samvat (Vajracharya and Shrestha 1980) as well.

In 1903, Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shamser introduced a solar-based VS. Despite its lengthy, well attested history, NS has become unfamiliar to many Nepalese people because a foreign and imported Vikram calendar began to dominate their daily lives. This change took place in less than a century, demonstrating how a state power can alter the culture and tradition of a country whenever it desires to do so. The Government of Nepal placed less emphasis on other national calendars at that time.

During the past decades, however, the people of Nepal, especially the Newar residing in the Kathmandu Valley, have initiated nationwide campaigns demanding the recognition of NS as a national calendar. Prior to this, during the Panchayat period (1960-1990), the kings preferred to ignore this call. As the Newar became more vocal, some even began to label NS as a 'Newar' or 'Newari' Era.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the demand for recognition of NS gathered momentum year after year.

The NS acquired a new status following the declaration of Samkhadhar Sakhvah as a national luminary (*rastriya vibhuti*) of Nepal in 1999. Subsequently, in 2008 the Government declared it to be the National Era of Nepal. As the Government has not started to implement NS in any official dealings, those active within the NS movement are skeptical about the value of this declaration (Sakya 2008). In 2011, during the New Year 1132 NS, the second Maoist Prime Minister, Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, announced he would apply NS in the daily matters of the Nepal Government and formed a task force to do so. In a speech, he

made it clear that the NS not only belongs to the Newar but to all Nepalese (Bhattarai 2011). In 2012, during the celebration of the New Year 1133 NS, Prime Minister Bhattarai repeated his intention. He also explicitly stated the need to discard the VS from official use because it had been imported from a foreign country (Bhattarai 2012; 2013). However, as Dr. Bhattarai had to resign as Prime Minister in March 2013, the implementation of NS now hangs in the balance once again. In 2013, Khilraj Regmi, who succeeded Dr. Bhattarai as the Chairman of the interim Government Cabinet, spoke at a function organised to celebrate the New Year's Day of the Nepal Samvat 1134. He described NS as being related to 'Newari' cultural tradition (Regmi 2013) ignoring the decisions of previous governments.

The present article deals with the importance of NS to Nepalese cultural life comparing it with VS. Presenting a discussion on the eras prevalent in Nepal, I examine the significance of the Nepal Government's recent recognition of NS as a national calendar. I demonstrate the continuous historical legitimacy of NS in contrast with VS, which is shown to be a fairly recent imposition associated with the Rana period from c.1903 on. This article argues against any claims that the implementation of NS as an official calendar is impractical. In addition, I address the issues of how to adapt a lunar calendar to practical use; how to coordinate it with governmental and business interests; and how to coordinate it with external calendars (e.g. the Common Era or 'Christian' calendar).

### The Eras of Nepal

In Nepal, the Saka or Sake Era (established in 79 AD) and Nepal Samvat (established in 879 AD) are of great importance, as they were prevalent for the longest period of its history (Shrestha 2001). Intermittently, the Kaligata Era

Name	Initiation Year	Prevalence in Nepal	Current year
Sristitogatabda	1955833101 BC		1955835115
Kaligata Samvat	3102 BC		5115
Buddha Samvat	544 BC		2557
Vikram Samvat	57 BC	From 1903 onward	2072
Manadeva Samvat	575 AD	Claimed 604 to 879 AD	
Saka Samvat	79 AD	464-604 +1769-1902 AD	1936
Nepal Samvat	879 AD	From 879 AD to date	1135
Sonam Lho	836 BC		2851
Anjan Samvat	691 BC		2706
Yele (Kirat) Samvat	3060 BC		5074

Table 1. The eras in Nepal.  
(Bal Gopal Shrestha, 2012)

(3102 BC) is also mentioned.<sup>4</sup> Sporadically, we encounter VS (established in 57 BC) which gained importance only from 1903 on when the Rana rulers introduced it as the single official calendar of Nepal. Many Nepalese historians believe in the existence of Manadeva and Amsuvarman Samvat, while others disapprove of such claims.<sup>5</sup> Most recently, Nepal's distinguished scholar Kamal P. Malla scrutinized the authenticity of Mandava Samvat and dismissed it altogether.<sup>6</sup> Other eras, such as Sristitogatabda (elapsed years from creation 1955833101 BC), the Kaligata Era (3102 BC) and the Buddha Era (544 BC), have continuously been mentioned on the front cover of Nepalese almanacs (*pamcanga*). Including the Christian Era, names of all the afore-mentioned eras except the Manadeva Era are printed on the front page of all traditional almanacs (*pamcanga*) published in Nepal to date.

### A Survey of the Eras of Nepal

Looking into the history of Nepal, we find the Saka Era to be first applied in the earliest inscriptional documents of Nepal. Initially, during the Licchavi period (464-604 AD) and later during the Shah period (1769-1902), the Saka Era was prevalent. NS served at the state level as the official calendar of Nepal for 888 years, from its initiation up to 1769, without any interruption. Utilizing NS has continued with regard to all cultural and religious purposes till today, although it did not enjoy any official status. In this respect, NS is the longest ever applied calendar in Nepal (Regmi 2008). Historian Shyam Sundar Rajvamsi deems that the calendars prevalent before the initiation of NS should also be considered an early Nepal Samvat calendar (Rajvamsi 2012).

At present the main calendar systems of Nepal are: (1) VS, used for the day-to-day business of the Government, (2) Christian Era, for dealing with foreign governments and commercial purposes, and (3) the lunar NS, for all religious, cultural, and social activities. The Nepal Almanac Resolution Committee (*Nepal Pamcanga Nirnayaka Samiti*) consists of astrologers and is authorized to issue Samvat calendars. They publish the official calendar around the New Year's Day of the month of Vaisakh (April), based on

the solar calendar, the VS. A *pamcanga* provides detailed information concerning NS as to religious, cultural, and social events. It also includes the dates of the Christian calendar. From the beginning, their publications have included NS identifying it as 'the Era of the country of Nepal' (*nepaldesiya samvat*) or 'the NS created by Samkhadhara' (*sri samkhadharakrita nepaliya samvat*). The first printed Nepalese almanac, the so-called *dhunge-patro*, goes back to 1884 AD. Its author, Dharmadutta Sharma, does not mention the name of the Era, but a printed almanac mentioning the name of Shakhadhara is dated NS 1024/1904 AD. It may be added here that while the Government of Nepal abandoned NS regarding daily matters, astrologers and pundits appointed by the Royal Nepal Almanac Resolution Committee considered it important to mention NS and the names of the months in all almanacs that they were authorized to publish.

Their method of presenting a lunar calendar is close to the Indian astrological systems, but there are certain differences between the Indian and the Nepalese reckoning.<sup>7</sup> Names referring to NS in a noted almanac (*pamcanga*) of Nepal are listed below along with the dates of their first publication and name of the astrologers. In Nepal, the lunar year begins either in the spring or in the autumn. If it begins in the spring, it is referred to as Caitradi, and if it begins in the autumn, as Kartikadi.

### The Vikram Era

According to a popular myth, a king named Vikramaditya who reigned over Ujjain (India) initiated the Vikrama Era. However, many scholars consider Vikramaditya a mythical ruler while others assume he was a historical figure.<sup>8</sup> In his book titled *Indian Epigraphy*, D.C. Sircar states that it was only during the eighth century that 'time reckoning' became linked to the name of King Vikramaditya. Prior to this, the Vikrama Era had been associated with the *malava* of Rajasthan. Sircar further states that the Vikrama Era was initially known as the Krita Era and that it was prevalent in Rajasthan among the *malava*. Hence it also began to become known as the Malava Era. He argues it was first called the "Era of Vikram," "the Era known as Vikram," or

Nepal Samvat mentioned as	Almanac ( <i>patro</i> ) by	Initiation
Nepal Samvat	Toyanath Panta	1889 AD
Sri Samkhadharakrita Nepaliya Samvat	Baburam Sharma	1931 AD
Sri Nepaldesiya Samvat	Krishanraj/Mangalraj Joshi	1935 AD
Sri Nepaldesiya Samvat	Dakurnath Sharma	1948 AD

Table 2. Nepal era as mentioned in Nepalese almanac (*patro*).

(Bal Gopal Shrestha, 2012)

“Vikramaditya,” and that “the Era founded by Vikramaditya” is confined only to the medieval period. D.C. Sircar dismisses the claim that King Vikramaditya of Ujjayini defeated the Sakas and founded the VS (Sircar 1996: 251-258). In a discussion on “the alleged use of the Vikrama Era in the Panjab,” Vincent A. Smith insists that this era “came to be known as VS only in or about ninth century” (Smith 1906: 1006). A.L. Basham states that “the only king who both took the title Vikramaditya and drove the Sakas from Ujjayini was Candra Gupta II, who lived over 400 years later than the beginning of the VS” (Basham 1975: 495). P.V. Kane maintains that the VS is mentioned not earlier than the eighth or ninth century AD (Kane 1994:653). Cunningham reports that the earliest inscription mentioning Vikramaditya is dated 794 VS (738 AD) (Cunningham 1883: 48).

At its inception, the change of the year in VS occurred during the month of Kartika, but at around the medieval period (twelfth-eighteenth century AD), it had become Caitradi, or the ending in the month of Caitra. In many parts of India, people still apply VS as a lunar calendar. Up to medieval times, the years of VS counted as beginning from Kartika Sukla the first. Nowadays in North India, VS New Year begins on Chaitra Sukla first. However in South India, it starts from Kartika Sukla the first, with a difference of seven months. In the North, it is counted as Purnamantaka, while in the South it is counted as Amanta. In certain parts of Rajasthan and Gujarati speaking regions, the beginning of the year is counted from Amanta Asadhya, while in Udai-pur region of Rajasthan, it is counted from Purnamantaka. Therefore, depending upon the beginning of the year, VS is known as Karttikadi, Caitradi, Asadhadi, and Sravanadi in India (Sircar 1996: 258). In Nepal, VS no longer serves as a lunar calendar but as a solar calendar and the New Year’s Day of VS is celebrated on the 13 or 14 of April.

Several legends also relate Vikramaditya of Ujjayan with Nepal because of his mysterious deeds (Paudyal 1963: 58-75). In Daniel Wright’s *History of Nepal* we read that during the reign of Amsuvarma, Vikramajit, a powerful monarch from Hindustan who had founded a new era, came to Nepal in order to introduce his era and spend the rest of his life there (Wright 1972: 131-132). Citing the *Bhasa Vamsavali*, a nineteenth-century chronicle written in Khas-Nepali, certain supporters claim the VS to be an original Nepalese era, but there is no evidence to validate this. They claim a bronze sculpture kept at the temple dedicated to Vajrayogini in Sankhu portrays the head of Vikramaditya, which iconographically has been identified to be the head of the Buddha (Sharma 1970: 3). The *Bhasa Vamsavali* includes confusing stories about Vikramsen or Vikramaditya. It credits King Manadev for introducing VS to Nepal. On the

one hand, it presents Vikram as Mandeva’s grandfather; on the other hand, it says Mandava merely obeyed the Emperor Vikramaditya, who initiated VS by using the wealth the female deity Vajrayogini bestowed upon him to relieve people of their debt (Paudyal 1963: 76). The earliest inscription found in Nepal at Patan Sundhara including VS is dated 1404 AD. This inscription mentions VS 1461 together with the Kaligata Era 4505, the Saka Era 1326, and Nepal Samvat 524.<sup>9</sup> Only since 1903 has the Government of Nepal applied the Vikram calendar.<sup>10</sup> From 1911 on, the Government also utilized VS when minting (Pradhan 1998: 30).

In India, the central Government adopted the Saka Era as the national and official era alongside the Gregorian calendar since 1957. In order to provide uniformity to a national calendar, the Calendar Reform Committee of India presented this recommendation despite the fact a population with various religions, cultures, and nationalities utilized more than thirty calendars before 1957. Since 1957, India has celebrated the New Year’s Day designated by the Saka Era, the first of Caitra (22 March), observing it as a national holiday. In various provinces across India, regional New Year Days are observed according to local traditions. The publication dates of the Gazette, dates in diaries, newspapers, and the official correspondence of the Indian Government include the Indian national calendar in addition to the Gregorian dates. Similarly, the early morning broadcasts of All India Radio provided in various languages announce National Calendar dates (Bandyopadhyay 1981).

### Nepal Samvat

The long-standing tradition is to name an era after a king, a popular individual, or a religion. However, NS is named after the country itself. In this regard, NS is unique. This era was founded during the reign of King Raghava Deva on Tuesday, 20 October 879 AD, but the legend surrounding this event is not consistent.<sup>11</sup> It is also claimed that King Raghava Deva himself initiated this era (Prasain 2010). Sylvain Lévi (1863-1935) presents two theories on NS. In the first, he suggests that NS was founded by deducting 800 years from the Saka Era because Nepalese considered the number eight to be inauspicious. The second theory is that NS was founded in order to celebrate Nepal’s liberation from Tibetan oppression following the breakdown of Tibetan power after the assassination of King gLang-dar-ma in 842 AD. However, Nepalese historians reject both these theories. The late Nepalese historian Baburam Acharya assumes that the incoming King Raghava Deva may have initiated the new era in order to mark the recent ascension of a royal dynasty in Nepal but he expressed his disbelief in the “sand turned gold” legend (Acharya 2006: 38, 44).

At its initiation, NS was simply called a 'Samvat' or 'Era.' For instance, early palm-leaf manuscripts kept in Nepalese collections dated NS 28 and NS 40 (908 AD and 920 AD) do not include its name (Malla 1982). The first record of the term 'Nepal' linked to this era was "Nepala-vatsara," as found in a manuscript dated 148 NS (1028 AD), now in the collection of S.K. Saraswati of Calcutta (Petech 1984). The earliest medieval inscriptions and early palm-leaf manuscripts are dated in the NS. This era was also known as *Pasupatibhattarake samvatsarapravrtih krita* and dedicated to Lord Pasupati (Vajracharya 2011: 6)

The legend describes how Samkhadhara Sakhva introduced NS after relieving the country from all its debts. The Bhasa Vamsavalis were compiled between 1829 and the 1880s and narrate the popular legend of the mystical transformation of sand into gold.<sup>12</sup> However, not everybody believes this mythical aspect.

The term 'Nepal' began to be used to refer to this era continuously since AD 1028 in all Nepalese historical documents but it remains unclear when exactly Samkhadhara's name was first connected to NS. However, the first historical evidence of the term 'Samvat Sankudatta' is found in a manuscript dated NS 766 of the *Vasisthalinga Upapurana* (Tamot 2008: 37). The *Jataka Paripatiprabandha*, a manuscript dated NS 864, mentions it to be the "Nepalike Samkhadarabde Samvat."<sup>13</sup> An inscription dated NS 827 found in the Jelam quarter of Bhaktapur refers to it as the "Samkhava Samvat." The first inscription to mention Samkhadhara explicitly is dated as late as Samvat 957 and was discovered in Patan Tichhu Galli. The only reliable archaeological evidence we have is the stone statue said to portray Samkhadhara the retail trader, originally standing by the south gate of the Pashupati temple. Tamot emphasizes that the term 'Samkhadhara' is a derivative of Sankudatta. A dome shaped Buddhist shrine (*chaitya*) located in Madu-khyo (Kathmandu) is said to have been built by Samkhadhara.

Analyzing several inscriptions and copper plates dated between 1441 and 1764 (between NS 561 and 884), Nepal's prominent epigraphist and historian Shyam Sundar Rajvamsi claims that NS itself and pre-NS calendars did not serve only to calculate lunar dates (*tithi*) but also to calculate solar dates (*miti*). He states that the mentioning of the names of the important *samkranti*, the first day of solar months in these inscriptions, copper plates, and in historical documents are proof that NS and in its earlier form served lunar as well as solar calendars. He stresses that the solar calendar of NS also consists of 365 days, as it is the case with VS.<sup>14</sup> Most recently, one tends to relate the

celebration of Bisket festival with VS because it is celebrated around the first day (*samkranti* or *salhu*) of the month of Vaisakh. In fact, the Bisket festival carries a distinct history and myths that are entirely different from those of the VS New Year (Prajapati 2006: 77-84). For the Newars, the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, the first day of the month of Vaisakh was known only as 'Khai Salhu' or 'Biska' until recently. However, because of the official status of VS, its New Year began to receive national attention. Gradually people across Nepal started celebrating its New Year's Day. Prior to the nineteen eighties, commoners were unaware of celebrating the New Year of VS except at the governmental level.

During the Early Medieval Period (879-1199 AD) and the Malla reign (1200-1769 AD), NS was promoted as the official calendar in Nepal. The utilization of NS in Khas Country (Jumla) by the Khas kings during the fourteenth century also shows the popularity of the NS (Tamot 2012). Applying NS was not limited to Nepal, but also took place in China and India. For instance, the Ming Emperor of China sent a document to Saktisingh Ramvardhan, the feudal head of Banepa, dated 535 NS.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Pran Narayan, the king of Kuchbihar (now in West Bengal, India) minted golden coins engraved with 753 NS in 1663 AD (Shrestha 2007).

According to the NS calendar, New Year's Day is celebrated on the first day of Kachala in the month of Kartik (October/November) or on the fourth day of the Dipavali or Tihar, the second largest festival of Nepal, also known as Yamapancaka and Svanti among the Newars (Shrestha 2006). Although related to the New Year, celebrating *mha puja*, the worship of self by the inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, is a much older a tradition than NS. In India, too, those following the Kartikadi lunar calendar celebrate their New Year's Day on the above-mentioned date. Moreover, in Gujarat, the New Year's Day of VS is celebrated on this same day. Tyauhar or Dipavali, or Divali, is a widely celebrated festival among Hindus in India and abroad.

NS is mentioned in Nepalese historical documents, chronicles and scriptures written in Sanskrit, Newar, Mithili, and Gorkhali, as well as Arabian languages. Numerous stone and copper inscriptions dated by means of NS are to be found in public places and private collections, not only in the Valley of Kathmandu but also in the East and West of Nepal and beyond. Similarly, innumerable manuscripts are preserved in the archives of Nepal and various other countries which carry dates presented in NS. After the conquest of Nepal, Prithivinarayan Shah implemented the Saka Era, although the utilization the NS together with Vikram and Saka Eras continued.<sup>16</sup>

NS is based on a lunisolar calendar, which inserts an intercalary (extra) month in order to adjust to the solar calendar. Applying the Sanskrit names of the months together with the NS calendar was a common practice dating from the beginning of NS. However, the names of the months differ from those mentioned in NS.

### Present Status of Nepal Samvat

NS serves as an integral part of Hindu and Buddhist culture that determines religious, social, and cultural events. Although VS was introduced as the country's official calendar, NS continued to be a part of Nepalese culture, especially in the Kathmandu Valley. With a few exceptions, all festivals and holidays in Nepal are based on a lunar calendar. Indeed, the Nepalese observe all religious events and rites of passage according to the lunar calendar. The astrologers apply it in order to determine an auspicious moment (*sait*) when (a) writing horoscopes, (b) determining the dates of all the religious festivals and cultural rituals of Nepal, and (c) observing holidays.<sup>17</sup>

In 1928 AD, Dharmaditya Dharmacarya, editor of a magazine named *Buddhadharma va Nepalabhasa* and a Newar scholar, first demanded that the New Year's Day of NS be celebrated as a national festivity.<sup>18</sup> Cwasa Pasa, a Newar literary association, organized the first public New Year celebration of NS in 1954. It was held at the Hanuman Dhoka courtyard and attended by Nepalese writers including Sardar Narendra Mani Acharya Dixit and Bal Krishna Sama. On this occasion Bal Krishna Sama said he would apply the Samvat "from tomorrow," but this never happened.<sup>19</sup>

Since the nineteen seventies, Newar intellectuals began celebrating the New Year's Day of NS as a public event. They have campaigned for its recognition more vigorously by means of cultural processions and mass meetings held around the New Year's Day since 1979. Their demand was for NS to be recognized it as a National Era. During the Panchayat period (1960-1990), the Government punished and humiliated the people involved in the movement of Nepal Samvat for celebrating the New Year. For instance, the Nepalbhasa Manka Khalah organized a mass rally in Kathmandu in 1985 in order to celebrate the NS New Year which the Government of the time brutally suppressed.

History indicates that the earliest use of the term 'newar' was found in an inscription dated AD 1654 (Slusser 1982: 9). Since the nineteenth century, 'newar' served to indicate the inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley more commonly. On the other hand, the term 'Nepal' has been applied when referring to the country for centuries and now is the name of the modern nation-state of Nepal itself. Therefore, 'Ne-

pal' can no longer serve to indicate any particular community. Therefore, it is incorrect to rename the 1135-year-old era as a 'Newar' or 'Newari' Samvat only because a Newar created it, or because the Newar community began advocating for its recognition as national calendar. In fact, no 'Newar Samvat' as such exists. Terming NS a 'Newar calendar' or 'belonging only to the Newar' would be a distortion of history. Some also believe the demand of recognizing NS is an assertion of Newar nationalism because the Newar people support this demand. In fact, the Newar people must be given credit for preserving and promoting NS to date. It is however absolutely incorrect to link NS to Newar nationalism because the name of the era—'Nepal'—itself makes it clear it belongs to all Nepalese and not only to the Newar. As to the reason why only the Newar and nobody else is concerned about NS, I would like to quote from an article titled "Why only the Newars?" published by the prominent scholar Abhi Subedi soon after witnessing the celebration of the New Year 1124 NS:

But when the Newars celebrated the Nepal Sambat 1124, they celebrated life, they celebrated arts and they celebrated the last cry of a civilisation that is the glory and asset of this land. ... .. The answer to why only the Newars travelled on the occasion of the New Year 1124 is not simple. First, I guess, the non-Newars are insensitive to the important performative culture of the valley and its dynamics. Second reason is, it is only the Newars who have carried down the performative and artistic heritage of the valley to this day. Nepal Sambat should be a great occasion for all Newars and non-Newars alike for the celebration of a performative culture and liminal changes that happen in our lives every year. Let us usher in the new hopes and power of performance with the New Year 1124. (*The Kathmandu Post* 2003).

In a discussion with Khagendra Sangraula on his regular TV show *Dishanirdesh*, Nepal's famous anchor Vijay Kumar Pandey made a very interesting remark on how Pandey and people of his generation were misinformed about NS. Pandey stated:

In our student days we were taught, or rather we believed that to accept the Nepal Samvat was to weaken Nepalese culture. We were so stupid and imprudent. It took me many years before I realized that to celebrate the Nepal Samvat and to accept its importance is to strengthen the national culture of Nepal as a whole, and to respect Samkhadhara Sakhva, is to respect the country itself. (Pandey 2013).



In 1999, the Government of the Nepali Congress Party, under the Premiership of Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, recognized Samkhadara Sakhva as the person believed to be the founder of NS as a national luminary of Nepal. The Nepalese took this as a gesture towards recognizing the calendar he initiated. In 2007, during the celebration of the New Year 1128 NS, the then Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala proclaimed, “The NS will be printed in my letter pad as well as in ministers’ letter pads.”<sup>20</sup> However, his words never came into effect.

The first elected Republican Government of Nepal, declared NS as the ‘National Era of Nepal’ on 24 October 2008. In his speech at a New Year’s function, Premier Prachanda asserted, “Nepalese people have received the declaration as the first gift of the Republic of Nepal.”<sup>21</sup> However, Prachanda’s premiership did not last long enough to see any further progress towards recognizing NS as Nepal’s official calendar. During 2009, his successor, Madhav Kumar Nepal, also assured the formation of a recommendation committee to implement the NS calendar as the official calendar, but this was never implemented.

Despite the high promises and proclamations of the above-mentioned prime ministers, in the course of a discussion held at the 2010 Constituent Assembly (CA) to accredit NS into the new constitution of Nepal, none of the member parties took any interest in supporting the proposal. Therefore, in spite of the Government’s 2008 declaration, NS did not gain any official status. In actuality, those loyal to VS, including several politicians belonging to a caste consisting of Hill Hindu *brahmin* (*bahun*), are totally against recognizing NS as the official calendar of Nepal. For instance, Dirgha Raj Prasain, a staunch monarchist, stated, “Vikram Samvat is a glory of Nepalese Nationalism.” Himself a *bahun*, Prasain ridicules other *bahun* leaders who at one time or another supported NS, claiming, “Nepal Sambat is becoming like the beggar bowl for all parties’ *bahun* leaders” (Prasain 2010). Although Prasain affirms NS to be an indigenous calendar of Nepal, he considers NS unsuitable to be Nepal’s official calendar.

Nevertheless, on 27 October 2011, when addressing the 1132 New Year celebration held at the Open Theatre in Kathmandu, Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai declared that his Government would implement NS as the official calendar of Nepal. For this purpose, he also constituted a task force under the chairmanship of Padma Ratna Tuladhar, an ardent supporter of NS. During the celebration of the New Year 1133 NS, on 14 November 2012, Prime Minister Bhattarai reiterated his assurance of implementing the report Tuladhar submitted to his Government. On 18

January 2013, the Cabinet decided to declare the New Year Day of NS a National Holiday. Unfortunately, Bhattarai had to step down as Prime Minister on 14 March 2013 before implementing his promise to remove VS from official use.

### To Use or Not to Use

Despite the Government declaring NS to be the national calendar of Nepal, the question remains: is it a practical idea to replace VS with NS? In this regard, we see conflicting views. Those in favor believe there should not be any problems, while opponents assume it is impossible to implement NS and provide various justifications for their belief.

Those in favor of NS argue that NS is an important part of Nepalese cultural heritage and that it is deeply rooted in their daily life with its many religious and cultural festivals. All lunar dates (*tithi*) for the religious functions and cultural events are based on this calendar. The lunar calendar has determined the timing of almost all the predominant religious and cultural events of Buddhists and Hindus alike in Nepal since time immemorial. Since Nepal has observed all holidays and religious ceremonies according to the lunar calendar, there is no doubt about its practicality. It can be said that the NS calendar is as scientific as any other lunar calendars found elsewhere in the world. The NS is firmly based on the same astronomy (e.g. *tithi*, *vara*, *paksa*, *masa*, *yoga*, *karana*, *muhurta*, and *prahara*) as the thirty or more eras utilized on the Indian Subcontinent. Whereas a civil day lasts from sunrise to sunrise, a *tithi* may begin at any moment or end at any moment, depending upon the angular distance between the sun and the moon’s position in their orbits.

Opponents of NS argue that, as a lunisolar calendar based on the movement of the moon, it is highly impractical to apply it to everyday governmental affairs. They believe the Government, as well as the vast majority of people in Nepal, are accustomed to the *miti* of VS for all their agendas. They deem it will create unnecessary chaos if NS is introduced to serve day-to-day governmental concerns.

Others wish to adjust the days and dates of NS according to the solar trajectory. They believe that using a lunar calendar will be unworkable, stressing that such an adjustment is not a new phenomenon: even the Christian Era was originally a lunar calendar but was later turned into a solar orbit calendar. In a similar manner, NS can also adopt a solar course for the usual governmental affairs. Recently, researchers such as Devdas Manandhar and Sameer Karmacharya have added the NS calendar to a computer database to then claim it can be implemented by the Gov-

ernment without any hurdles, advocating it to be a fully scientific and very simple calendar. The NS also counts 30 days per month, as other solar calendars do. Manandhar and Karmacharya also claim the dates they have created in the computer remove any confusion when applying its dates simultaneously with any other calendar (S. Manandhar 2008: 3). Recent findings by the historian Shyam Sundar Rajvamsi reveal that NS also served as a solar calendar in the past, making it clear it will not be problematic to apply it again as a solar calendar, albeit with the necessary adjustments.

Yet another group of people prefer replacing the Vikram calendar with the Gregorian one. They regard this as the best option for Nepal because the Gregorian calendar is considered to be the most scientific one and note that it is globally accepted. Governments and people generally, not only in the U.S. and Europe but also in Asia, for example, India, Japan, China, Korea, and Sri Lanka, have long been applying the Christian calendar. Therefore, with regard to the administration of the government, one assumes the best option for Nepal would be to replace VS with the Christian Era. Those involved in the NS movement are, however, strongly against the idea of replacing VS with the Common Era. For instance, the General Secretary of the *Nepalbhasa Mamkah Khalah* continually demands the Government to replace VS with NS (Sakya 2008: 12). Similarly, historians such as Tri Ratna Manandhar consider it a blunder to replace VS with the Christian Era. He suggests introducing NS as an official calendar after completing necessary arrangements to make it convenient to apply; he sees this as especially important because it has been declared the National Era of Nepal. Manandhar believes it is all a matter of practice and that once the Government starts applying it in its day to day affairs, everyone will become accustomed to it (T. Manandhar 2008: 7).

Recently, besides the Newar, several indigenous groups (Gurung, Tamang, Sherpa, Tharu, Rai and Limbu) began to celebrate their New Year's Days according to other calendars. The Government of Nepal has already endorsed a public holiday for each of these communities' New Year's Days. Many regard it unjust to recognize only NS as the official calendar of Nepal. However, not only the Newar but also all patriotic Nepalese began to demand the discarding of VS from official use, as it is an imported calendar originating from a foreign country. For instance, the Mongol Nation Organization presented an appeal against VS during protest rallies requesting to "relinquish the anti-national era." In such an ambiance, it is crucial that Nepal recognizes a national calendar that would be acceptable for the entire Nepalese population. In this regard,

only the NS calendar could be the most appropriate, as it bears the name of the country itself, along with the longest attested history of its prevalence. Although the population is optimistic, it remains unclear when the Government will indeed start applying NS as the official calendar in Nepal.

## Conclusion

At present, the term 'Nepal' does not belong to a certain group but to all Nepalese. Therefore, no reason exists for only the Newar to feel proud of NS because the term 'Nepal' implies it belongs to all the Nepalese people. Keeping up the Vikram calendar for official use in Nepal neither fits Nepal's religious tradition nor does it conform with international standards (Bhattarai 2012). Thus, patriotic Nepalese will be more than happy to abandon VS as soon as possible.

The declaration of NS as the National Era will be meaningful only when the Government adopts it. NS is already prevalent as a cultural calendar, but there remains a need to apply it to official governmental dealings. Besides, the traditional calendars (*patro/pamcanga*), the two Government-run daily newspapers (*Gorkhapatra* and *The Rising Nepal*), and many private newspapers mention NS in their publications together with the Vikram and Christian Eras. Other printed and electronic media may also follow suit in order to present dates as *Gorkhapatra* and *The Rising Nepal* do.

The Government has applied the Christian Era in all its official dealings with foreign countries, but without pronouncing its official status. It will be appropriate for the Government to start to utilize Nepal Samvat together with the Christian Era in all national activities and render it mandatory whenever formal matters regarding foreign countries are concerned. This will leave no space for confusion whatsoever while strengthening Nepal's national pride globally because of its uniqueness. Thus declaring NS to officiate as the National Era will bear true meaning.

**Bal Gopal Shrestha** is a researcher at the University of Oxford, UK. An Affiliated Fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden, the Netherlands, Shrestha obtained his PhD in anthropology from the University of Leiden in 2002. From 2006-2007, he taught politics of South and Southeast Asia at the University of Leiden. He has conducted fieldwork in Nepal, India, the UK, and Belgium. He has published widely on Nepalese religious rituals, Hinduism, Buddhism, ethnic nationalism, the Maoist movement, political development in Nepal, and the Nepalese diaspora. He is the author of the monographs: *The Newars of Sikkim: Reinventing Language, Culture, and Identity in the Diaspora* (Vajra Books 2015), *The Sacred Town of Sankhu: The Anthropology of Newar Rituals, Religion and Society in Nepal* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2012, paperback 2013).

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## Endnotes

1. Ajitman Tamang has succinctly discussed the traditions of celebrating Lhochar among various Nepalese communities, comparing them with Chinese and Tibetan traditions (Tamang 2004). Currently, Nepal's ethnic nationalities are strongly demanding recognition of their languages as 'Nepali' against the present position of the government of Nepal calling only the 'Khas' language 'Nepali.' They are also against the trend of using the word 'Nepali' interchangeably to apply to both 'people of Nepal' and the 'Khas' language in English. Taking this into account, I have used the word 'Nepalese' to indicate people of Nepal while 'Khas-Nepali' to refer present 'Nepali' language throughout this article.
2. They claim it is the earliest calendar of Nepal (Rai 2009).
3. For the historicity and etymology of the term 'Nepal' see Malla (1983).
4. In India, the Kaligata Era is also known as the Yudhisthir Era.
5. Dineshraj Pant and Nayraj Pant strongly assert the existence of the Manadev Era (Pant 1981; Pant, et al. 1987). See Regmi (1997: 11) and Pradhan (1998: 28).
6. See Malla (2005) and Rajvamsi (1995).
7. See Visvaram (2000). For an assessment of 'Calendars and Era' in Nepal, see Slusser (1982: 381-91); see Gellner (1992: 39-40).
8. Pandey (1951) strongly claims Vikramaditya to be a historical figure and founder of the Vikram Era.
9. See Pradhan (1998: 66). This inscription is fragmented. A copy hereof is presented by Vajracharya (2011: 207-208).
10. See Pradhan (2000: 6). Jaggannatha and Vaijanath Sendhain's versified panegyrics written in praise of Chandra Shamsheer explain his motives for adopting the VS. It 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 caused by the lunar *tithi*, a 13-month year as well as the dark half and bright half of a lunar month (Sendhain 1913: 84).
11. See Lévi (1905: 179), Slusser (1982: 389), Vajracharya and Malla (1985: 236), Pradhan (1979: 1-6) and (1998: 29). Rajvamsi, however, calculates 9 November 879 AD to be the day of beginning of the NS and criticizes others (Rajvamsi 2008: 5).
12. For more information on these myths see Lamsal (1966: 24-25) and Wright (1972: 163-166). Tamot (2008) presents a lengthy discussion on historicity of Sankhadhar.
13. Tamot (2005: 17-20) has reproduced photographs of the colophon pages of both these manuscripts.
14. See Rajvamsi (2012: 3, 2010). The description found in an inscription dated 1447 AD (567 NS) clearly specifies two Samkranti: the Ksaya (Maghe) Samkranti and the Visva (Vaisakha) Samkranti whereas only the NS is mentioned (Vajracharya 2011: 302-307).
15. A facsimile of the letter together with Devanagari transliteration and translation in Khas-Nepali is presented in Vajracharya (2011: 251-254).
16. See the Shah period inscriptions found in the town of Sankhu and on the premises of the temple dedicated to Vajrayogini (Shrestha 2012: 54-55, 396-399).
17. The first official list of holidays in Nepal was composed during the reign of King Rana Bahadur Shah (1777-1799). See Nepali (1964).
18. For information on the Nepalbhasa Mamkah Khalah see NMK (1993: 65).
19. Personal communication (2010), Kamal P. Malla, a witness of the event.

20. See *The Kathmandu Post*, 12 November 2008.

21. See the extracts of Prime Minister Prachand's speech delivered during the New Year celebration held at the Basantapur Square (Kathmandu) on 29 October 2008 (Prachanda 2008).

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