



## HOW *GHĀTU* FOLK DANCE PERFORMANCE PROMOTES TOURISM INDUSTRY IN NEPAL

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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how *Ghātu* promotes the tourism industry in Nepal. For conservation, the Nepal government does not seem to have promoted such cultural activities of the indigenous people that they are on the verge of extinction. *Ghātu*, the nation's cultural heritage, has several miraculous performances based on spiritual practices that attract tourists. The study attempts to make this *Ghātu* folk dance performance one of the best sources of entertainment for tourists and domestic visitors to enhance the nation's economy. The shaman tradition followed by this cultural activity, as the severing of the dancing girls, is another exciting activity that attracts the audience. So, every tourist should visit Nepal mostly to see such a performance once. The study's findings show that many *Ghātu* villages have not been considered tourist spots. And Nepal is not a popular tourist destination like France and Germany. Therefore, this paper proposes to make the *Ghātu* villages one of the most unavoidable tourist spots, which help sprout the tourism industry and help enhance the sustainable development of the nation. I have employed performance and semiotic theories developed by Schechner and Chandler and ritual theory.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, economy, *Ghātu*, indigenous people, tourism industry

### INTRODUCTION

This paper has analyzed how *Ghātu* promotes the tourism industry in Nepal. The study proposed to make this *Ghātu* site an unavoidable tourist site so that tourists would visit Nepal and see this performance at least once. The performance is full of entertainment because of the artistic presentation of the dancing girls. Their trance dance is beautiful, which we do not find in other communities. Their slow movements of body and hand gestures

are the most attractive performing arts. The Nepal government has to promote the cultural activities of the indigenous people a bit more seriously now than before because they are on the verge of extinction. There are many villages where people do not observe this performance. *Ghātu* has several miraculous performances, and this cultural heritage is classical based on spiritual practices such as the dancers' eyes remaining closed for three days and they cannot open them as they wish to. This *Ghātu* folk dance performance can become one of the best entertainment sources for international and national tourists if the government promotes it sincerely. Many Nepalese have not watched *Ghātu* yet. If only all the internal tourists visited *Ghātu* villages during its performance times, this would also promote the tourism industry. The *Ghātu* villages have to be developed into tourist spots by increasing the number of homestays in the villages.

The *Ghātu* performance time and tourist visit time take place simultaneously, that is, in springtime. However, there are two tourist visit times: the fall and spring. There is *Shrreekrishna Charitra* dance performance in the fall season. This dance is also as interesting as *Ghātu*. This performance will also entertain the visitors. *Ghātu* is, by nature, a meditative trance dance performance that attracts audiences through its artistic presentation of a slow dance flickering the fingers artistically. This folk dance performance brings together people of varied cultures, different social strata, and geographic regions. The classical presentation of the performers attracts and entertains the tourists. Therefore, this paper may help sprout the tourism industry in Nepal and help enhance the economy of the nation so as [t]o promote the globalization of the economy further for the benefits of overall economic performance . . . and for bringing in foreign currency necessary for the economic development of the country (Agrawal & Upadhaya, 2006).

In recent years, trekking has become increasingly popular as a form of travel, replacing traditional pilgrimage to holy sites such as temples, mosques, and churches. Both domestic and foreign tourists now seek out beautiful natural and cultural sites. In this paper, I explore *Ghātu*, an ethnic-indigenous folk performing art, as a cultural destination for travel and tourism in Nepal. However, tourists are less likely to visit sites where amenities are lacking. If the local government and individuals promote homestay facilities, the *Ghātu* site has the potential to become a popular attraction for visitors. Encouraging the growth of homestay facilities in remote and rural areas, which are still in their early stages in Nepal, can

help promote tourism. Along with the *Ghātu* site, many other factors like accessible amenities and available facilities that attract tourists could help foster the tourism industry and be broadcast simultaneously. For instance, trekking has recently become a popular alternative to traditional pilgrimage. Instead of visiting holy sites like temples, mosques, and churches, tourists seek out beautiful natural and cultural destinations domestically and internationally.

Tourism years like 2011 and 2020 have not been as successful as they had expected. The number of tourists certainly has not met the target of the Nepal Tourism Board. The tourism industry is an excellent helping hand to Nepal's economy. Cultural activities like *Ghātu* can be vital in boosting this sector, but the local government does not care. The village council has to promote the tourism industry, and increasing the number of tourists or visitors is necessary. If we can make the tourists stay one more week, this will help enhance the country's economy. For this, Nepal has to expose the cultural activities of indigenous-ethnic people who have maintained their rich cultural sites. With this *Ghātu* performance, there are other performances: *churkas*, *kauras*, *Lokdohoris*, etc. Thus, this essay focuses on how *Ghātu* promotes tourism.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study employed the semiotic and performance theories developed by Chandler and Schechner and ritual theory. According to semiotic theory, the props used in this cultural activity, the *Ghātu* folk dance performance, symbolize something significant. Everything is symbolically presented. All the images, symbols, and signs are meaningful when interpreted from a symbolic point of view. The main protagonists, the king and queen, symbolize heroic figures. The king wages the war bravely as he is loyal to the nation, and his queen is loyal and submissive to her husband. It indicates that the king symbolizes bravery and loyalty, and the queen symbolizes submissive Hindu women. So, *Ghātu* performance has a very close universal implication in its performance level that can be studied with their relevance mentioned in the above images and symbols.

The degree of feminine submissiveness represented in *Ghātu* is rather extreme because the woman has to self-immolate after her lord's death according to Hindu custom, even though such custom is no longer practiced now. This system is known as the sati system, which began when a woman named Gangamadeviyar was said to have entered the fire

following her husband's death in 1017 A. D. (Orr, 2007, pp. 112-113) in India. Such a concept, rooted in the historical period and space, can be seen in the performance of *Ghātu* when the patriotic male figures and the submissive female figures are depicted during a particular performance. The symbols have several meanings interpreted by the needs of particular races, ethnic groups, and so on. It has helped to break down the arbitrary distinction between primitive man, to whom symbols seem a natural part of everyday life, and modern man, for whom symbols are meaningless and irrelevant (Henderson, 1990, p. 106). In this *Ghātu* tribal festival, the crown image symbolizes the king figure, whereas this king figure may not have meaning or concern to modern youngsters.

*Ghātu* tribal festival is a kind of death ritual. As each ritual has its own structure and its own embodied ritual theory (Gruenwald, 2003, p. 6), this festival is a ceremonial performance observed once a year only in some limited villages. Other essential approaches are performance and ritual theories, in which the performer and audience connect. The impact of *Ghātu* matters in this connection according to performance theory. How important the performance is depends on its impact. The effect of performance is accounted as the measuring rod of performance level. Whether the performance moves the audience is a matter of concern. The performance should attract the audience to have a positive impact. Under performance studies, a kinesthetic presentation plays a vital role. The kinesthetic expression means how performers and audiences are linked. The audience's feedback is considered the most critical factor in all performances.

The feedback has an impact on performance. The sense of body movement in any performance is considered one of the most significant. It is about the notion of internal bodily sensation as an unseen power of the dancer to perform the dances. An unseen link is established between the dance performers and the audience during the performance. This link is known as the kinesthetic impact in the language of performance studies. So does happen in *Ghātu*. In performance studies, the kinesthetic impact has a significant role. Susan Leigh Foster (2008) deals with this kinesthetic impact. This is the technical aspect of performance studies. Kinesthetic impact applies in *Ghātu*. The term kinesthesia, deriving from the Greek *kine*, means "movement," and *aesthesia* means the "sensation" (p. 47). The audience and performers are not linked physically, but with sight and sound, that air and light help them connect. Thus, this *Ghātu* cultural

activity has been analyzed through performance and semiotic theories. This lets the audience know about its universal implications and significance so that the tourists watch this folk-dance performance from an entertainment and universalistic perspective. And one of the great semioticians, Roland Barthes opines that semiotics could help us realize differences and similarities between various media. He argues:

While all verbal language is communication, most communication is non-verbal . . . semiotics could help us to realize differences as well as similarities between various media. It could help us to avoid the routine privilege of one semiotic mode over another, such as the spoken over the written or the verbal over the non-verbal. (qtd in Chandler 2003, 218-9)

Man cannot express everything through verbal language; non-verbal communication has more to say. Facial expressions, hand gestures, body movements, and steps taken by the dancing girls have deeper meanings. For instance, dance symbolizes the bereaved condition, whereas songs show the agony of the queen. In this way, the study considers the semiotics of Gurung culture about *Ghãtu*. As Umberto Eco opines, in a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects . . . [s]emiotics is concerned with meaning-making (qtd. in Chandler, 2003, p. 2). The signs, symbols, and images of *Ghãtu* are concerned with meaning-making. Objects like the golden lion symbolize the king, a bow and arrow mean the Kusunda (nomadic man), and a hen means hunting, the object of prey, respectively.

All the signs and symbols convey various primitive realities. *Ghãtu* has several such primitive facts based on the spiritual practices and shaman traditions. Man practiced many such shaman traditions for multiple reasons, like a healing process, to ward off evil spirits and disasters, and to have good fortunes. Different tools and methods, wordings and get-ups, music and literature, are associated with the past, human behaviors, social constructions, etc. Likewise, gestures such as facial expressions and bodily movements of the dancers convey the tragic theme of the royal couple. The toy lion, horse, elephant, pigeon, dog, and bow and arrow signify the ethnography of the Gurungs. And all of these props indicate that hunting and farming were their main occupations. Therefore, literal meaning and literary meaning differ. And *Ghãtu* portrays the history, religion, agriculture, culture, and hunting life.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Numerous tourists worldwide visit Nepal for Mount Everest and Lumbini, the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha. Besides, they do visit Nepal for its natural beauty and cultural heritage. Nepal has been one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world; however, it has yet to be exposed to the world for its unique landscapes, rare species, and remarkable cultural sites. Moreover, as an Asian country, Nepal is well-known for its traditional knowledge of the world. The phrase ‘traditional knowledge’ has been described as the understanding or skill possessed by indigenous peoples pertaining to their culture and folklore (Silva, 2015, p. 41). Gurungs, Magars, and other indigenous groups who observe *Ghātu* have an understanding or skill of their culture and folklore. This projection proves Nepal is one of the most attractive tourist spots. The 2006 provisional data shows that France, Spain, the United States, China, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Germany are the top seven tourism destinations. France has the record for the highest number, 79.1 million international tourist arrivals, and Germany has the record for the least number, 23.6 million international tourists respectively (source: Encarta, 2009). The number of tourists in Nepal is nominal when compared to this data. The other part of this essay explores processes that could make Nepal’s tourism industry famous worldwide, focusing on sustainability.

Different indigenous peoples are the sources of miraculous skills of weaving, carving, singing, dancing, etc. The indigenous peoples in Nepal are the main pillars of music. Similarly, Bhutanese people are experts in weaving. Besides weaving the most intricate, creative, and technically unique textiles, Bhutanese designs are primarily geometric. The geometric symbols used in the textiles have a deep religious significance (Yudon, 2015, p. 242). Nepalese indigenous peoples are experts in singing and dancing skills. Not only this, they are also equally responsible for conserving the religious practices of the nation. So, *Ghātu* has spiritual significance. Therefore, to enhance the tourism industry in Nepal, we have to promote cultural activities. The tourists may not entertain things as it is essential. Nepal’s economy is characterized by heavy dependence on foreign aid. How long do we depend on foreign aid? When will we be free from taking foreign aid? Anyway, the government should lessen this dependency. For this, the concerned body should enhance the cultural activities, fairs (Jatra), feasts, and festivals to attract tourists. These cultural practices, including singing, dancing, and feasting, can enhance the national economy.

Nepal has an agro-based economy. However, only the agriculture sector cannot be supportive of economic growth. Agriculture, culture, and tourism must simultaneously be promoted for economic development. The tourism industry can serve as one of the regular sources of the national economy. As the reference to tourism illustrates, acquiring these objects occurs at the cost of their economic self-sufficiency and often their traditional social values and moral integrity (Darling 8). Cultural activity can promote the financial condition, conventional social values, and moral integrity. Many tourists mainly visit the limited destinations: Kathmandu Valley, Sagarmatha, National Park, Annapurna Conservation Area, and Chitwan National Park, Sauraha. It must be extended simultaneously to other parts of Nepal. Considering Nepal's current scope of the tourism industry, I tend to expose a speculator ethnic performance, the Ghātu dance.

Obviously, the tourists are from various backgrounds. They might be businessmen, administrators, bankers, students, teachers, doctors, farmers etc. They all have different purposes to travel to certain tourist spots and destinations. For instance, a cultural anthropology researcher visiting various sites in an unfamiliar territory or country can concentrate on a particular artistic practice in a smaller location. Similarly, a traveler traveling worldwide can examine a region of a considerably more extensive scope. In other words, they should first understand the people and cultures of Nepal. Several things are related to human life, even in a small cultural text. Most ethnic groups of Nepal are affluent in cultural heritage. All of them are the witnesses of some human realities, history, and contemporaneity. For instance, the *Ghātu* dance performance can become one of the cultural sites for visitors and tourists. It is a significant cultural activity as myths and cultural autonomy characterize it.

Culture, as such, is not common in that it is geographically bounded. Therefore, people do not perform this type of dance in other parts of the world. The peculiar characteristics of this dance attract tourists. There is a practice of shaman tradition in *Ghātu*, which is familiar to many ethnic groups worldwide. Only in a few villages, Gurungs, Duras, and Magars in western Nepal observe *Ghātu*. Besides, the Tamangs of Baikuntha VDC of Makawanpur district also perform this *Ghātu*. The performativity of this cultural practice attracts tourists. There are different parts and episodes in this *Ghātu* performance. They all represent the life-like realities of a human being in Ghātu, based on mythology. Myths explain people's belief systems. So does *Ghātu*. There is a myth in it. One of the *Ghātu* gurus,

Chandra Bahadur Gurung (2018), claims that Pashramu is the king of Shreekrishna Gandaki, whereas Bernard Pignéde (1993) says that he is the king of Gorkha. Although the custom is no longer in practice, it is the history of cultural recognition and identity where there is originality and harmonious human relations in cultural diversity. The myth of this cultural activity is exciting and attracts tourists. The legend is like this:

One day, when the hunting was over, all the Gurungs enjoyed delicious food, and as entertainment, one of the Gurungs jokingly wore the jingled bells garland and started dancing to have a romance. The hunting dogs had worn this garland. Unexpectedly, he was sent into a trance, and he suddenly started quivering and collapsed. In agony, the other Gurungs lamented (sang a song) by composing different wordings that revived him. From that day onwards, they continued the *Ghātu* performance. They do the dance not only based on a hop and a song but also on the power of the deities of the forest, that is, Barchuli, Devchuli, Himchuli, and Gangachuli. There are other myths, too. What all these myths suggest is that *Ghātu* is a fully oral-based text. This type of performance easily attracts audiences. (Gurung 2018)

The purpose of performing *Ghātu* has different beliefs that the dead souls of both the king and the queen go on hovering around the surroundings where they died. Then, according to the Gurus, to solace their souls, the villagers must practice *Ghātu* for the protection and betterment or healing of all the villagers. Even in the *Ceremony*, Silko (1986) has presented the healing process as the curative ceremony. If not, the dead souls may harm the villagers, as worshipping the dead souls is a ritual. They believe that some ills are cured of the girls after they perform this dance. As evidence, one of the *Ghātu* dancers, Sapana Gurung, a heart patient, is mostly cured and started her studies at the school.

Moreover, the people observe the dance to ward off evil spirits, as it is the local belief, and avoid the chances of misfortunes like unnatural deaths and natural disasters. It is not only Nepalese who follow such spiritual activities. Milton also uses myth for what it is: the imaginative projection of all man's deepest hopes and fears (Daiches, 1990, p. 439). It shows that every ritualistic cultural activity is observed for specific hopes and fears, representing a global reality's nexus. Similarly, if the villagers follow *Ghātu*, correctly as the continuum of tradition and ritual, the dead souls will become happy and bestow good harvest and good health to the villagers. In this respect, there is a character of behavioral contagion in



*Ghātu*. All these myths and mythico-cultural spectrum represent the whole of humanity.

*Ghātu* has several relations with other shaman practices of the world. People observe this tribal festival to heal some of the ills and good harvests in Baikuntha VDC of Makawanpur district. Different people perform different unbelievable activities as the young married people lie down in couples on the sown fields and roll several times over on them, believing that this will promote the growth of the crops (Frazer 2009, p. 329). After the rolling of the young married people several times on the sown fields, there is a belief system of having good growth. The cultural belief system is unquestionable, though it is never lab-tested truth. Anyway, it is interesting. This exciting activity attracts tourists.

The most exciting part of this *Ghātu* dance performance is full of surprises that the dancers' eyes remain closed for two days or so, that is, after the cremating performance (Deurali/last episode) is over. The dance masters go on to sing eye-opening songs repeatedly. The dancing girls splashed water non-stop for two hours on their eyes. They do it because they want to open their eyes that have closed. Some dancing girls' eyes get opened after one hour or so, but some other dancing girls' eyes do not get opened for hours. This performance surprises the audience as it is not enactment like in other film shows. Even the dance masters do not know how long after the dancers open their eyes. Those girls whose eyes do not open even if they continuously splash the water for hours get frightened and cry loudly. This cry is not artificial. This natural cry of the girls moves the audience. They become hopeless and harassed when their eyes remain closed for a long time. Then they cry. Therefore, this *Ghātu* performance is much more sensitive. This sensitivity indeed characterizes the whole world. This performance sensitizes as well as attracts tourists.

Observing *Ghātu* has its benefits, as discussed earlier. The people of indigenous groups seem to have achieved several advantages, though they are not accounted as one, two, and three by celebrating this tribal festival. It is not only Nepal to observe such cultural activity. In Ireland, observing the cultural activity of making rain and sunshine for a better harvest is more or less similar. Their observance made the earth fruitful, produced abundance and prosperity, and kept the king and his land safe from misfortune (Weston, 1920, p. 48). There is a folk group whose belief system is incomparable. Likewise, *Ghātu* is incomparable. Whatever the cultural activity the world

observes, they aim for prosperity and keep safe from misfortune. *Ghātu* has similar belief systems by which the tourists can be motivated. This cultural activity is a centre of attraction for domestic and international audiences.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study was carried out to promote the tourism industry in Nepal by making the *Ghātu* folk dance performance show one of the most unavoidable tourist sites. This paper claimed that the *Ghātu* performance can attract tourists because of the miraculous performing arts of this cultural activity. To analyze this *Ghātu* text, the study employed the semiotic and performance theories and ritual theory. According to semiotic theory, the king represents the patriotic figure, and the queen represents the submissive Hindu woman. The meditative trance dance symbolizes the suffering condition of the queen after her husband died in the war, and the song conveys her lament and agony. The props used in the performance suggest the primitive lifestyles of indigenous people that project the whole scenario of the primitive society. The symbolic meaning differs from village to village and country to country. In one village, the wooden elephant represents the king, whereas the wooden lion represents the king in another. The meaning and interpretation differ from time to time as well. As cultural activity is bound by geography, language and meaning are also bound by geography. Anyway, *Ghātu* represents the universal significance as it projects harmonious human relations.

To foster the tourism industry, travel industry, and hotel industry as such, not only the *Ghātu* but other cultural activities should also be introduced globally through websites, books, articles, journals, periodicals, radios, TVs, blogs, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter so that the world would know what the tourists can see and visit in Nepal. Similarly, *Churka*, *Kaura*, *Rodhi*, *Badka nach*, *Balan*, *Nilbarahi*, *Lakhe*, *Chandi*, *Dhan nach*, which are most exciting and entertaining, can also entertain the tourists. Not only the international tourists but also the domestic tourists are to be informed of such cultural heritages. All these cultural activities promote the localization and globalization of the economy. The study's primary objective was to import more foreign currency into the country for sustainable development. Thus, such *Ghātu* cultural activity is vital in promoting the tourism industry.

The study dwelled upon the ethno-semiotics of *Ghātu* in Gurung Culture to deal with the signs and symbols related to the ritual. It attempted to analyze and interpret the underlying meanings of *Ghātu* as every sign is meaning-making. The various images depicted the primitiveness.

The quivering of the dancer gives an idea of shaman tradition that was in excellent practice. This shaman practice is still in practice at present. The study interpreted all the actions, tools, and objects of the *Ghātu* site semiotically to develop specific meanings so that this tribal festival would appear as the goldmine of the research. Several signs and images were interpreted with different meanings, as the tools and objects represented the handicrafts and the slow-motivated dance of grief. And there were and are many stories that come from superstition or popular myths.

Moreover, foreigners can read this article and will be updated with the Nepali cultural activities so they will not miss this dance performance when they visit Nepal. The media market of the tourism industry does not seem as solid and up-to-date as required in promoting cultural activities. The factors and many other possibilities of Tourism sectors should persistently be advertised through websites and print media so that Nepal can invite numerous tourists worldwide.

In brief, *Ghātu* is the amalgamation of history, myth, contemporaneity, and sociocultural phenomena, whereas it has a distinct value beyond the boundary. It is a unique performance and a significant cultural practice, though it has not been a canonical recognition as an icon. This is the general interpretation of cultural semiotics. It should be advertised through various media so that foreigners would know this, and some tourists visit Nepal especially to watch what the *Ghātu* dance is like. *Ghātu* can promote tourism in a great deal. It improves the nation's economy and can encourage the whole world of humanity as it is an excellent example of teamwork and unity. This *Ghātu* site has been analyzed and interpreted from a semiotic point of view, performance studies perspectives, and a ritualistic approach. In contrast, it can be interpreted from historical, language, and folk drama points of view. These perspectives have not been addressed in the present study. So, see this cultural text from an analytic and cultural semiotic point of view; it has some say, some more to say, make it say more, and it will undoubtedly say you more.

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