

# Spiritualism in Ghātu

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## Abstract:

*Ghātu is fully based on spiritual practices. The ethnic group, Gurung observes this Ghātu for good harvesting and faith healing. The performers believe that some of the diseases are healed after taking part in the dance performance. There are several benefits of observing the performance. When Ghātu god is happy the villagers are protected from various kinds of bad luck. The villagers also believe that there will be good harvest after the performance. One most surprising thing is that the protagonist, Yempahawati self immolates for spiritual unification with her husband in the heaven. She believes that she will surely meet her husband in the spiritual world. She does not care of the throne, neither does she care her breast feeding two and half years old boy, Bala Krishna. She is no more interested in such material things. Therefore, this performance is full of spiritual practices.*

Keywords: Faith healing, spiritual power, headgear, self-immolation, chanting, trance dance, Kusunda, aura, Ghāatuni

## Introduction:

Ghātu performance is based on spiritual practices. The ethnic groups who observe this cultural activity have a belief of some kind of unseen power. There is no guarantee of direct benefit to them. But they have belief that they will be benefited either from financial point of view or health point of view. They believe that there is a Ghātu god who becomes happy if the performance is observed properly. And the benefits are a lot more. One of them is healing of some diseases. They observe it for entertainment, faith healing, good harvest and protection from evil spirits. The dancing girls feel proud of participating in the performance that they are not ordinary human beings but some kind of agents of god. What they enact are all godly activities. Why do they think so when they take part in the performance? What makes them think so? The performers think that there is god who blesses them when they perform the dance properly. The spiritual belief makes them think so. The spiritual power is such unavoidable thing that one cannot disbelieve in its presence. The dancing girls wear peculiar dresses and play some props that make them feel differently. The dress and props have some unseen power. According to Schechner, there is a kind of unseen power in a mask (40) or in a headgear in *Ghātu* performance. When the dancing girls wear the headgear and listen to the verses sung by the dance masters, they feel that they are divine figures. What they enact are not the activities that are performed in this mundane world. They think that all their enactments are of the gods and goddesses. And they are no more

human beings they are the queens and king of the *Ghātu*.

One of the former dancers, Sunkashi Gurung, says that she did not even eat for days during the performance. She did not even go to toilet. How did it happen so? She answered that it was because of power of *Ghātu* god. She claims that she did not have hunger, thirst, sleep, going to toilet for days. It is god which saved her. She shares her dream which she sees in the time of her trance mode. She sees the deceased gurus and other dead people of her village in her dream in a strange place. She also sees the hermits in the small cottages (personal interview). She tells all the happenings so lively about that strange place which is very different from this mundane world. She sees the children playing in that strange place. The skin of children looks so pale that they are not real ones. None of them care her visit there. There are small huts that do not look like the real huts. She says that she gets back home when a dog and horse chase her. This is what she experiences in the trance world. Cowan says, "You are now powerful because you have seen these dead people" (15). To see the dead people in the dream is supposed to be good. No question against this claim, why? It is not fact base thing. All the dancers transcend in the spiritual world. All the dancing girls see something in their trance mode but they don't share their experiences like Sunkashi. Some dancing girls are afraid of sharing their dream and some of them want to escape.

Another interesting thing Sunkashi Gurung shares is like this. She says that she feel so uneasy in the time *Ghātu* performance even if she is abroad. She lived in India for some time there because her husband was Indian army. She used to feel a kind of itching on her whole body in the starting time of this performance. She felt that the ants were crawling on her body. She could not sleep well at night. To be free from this irritation, she would burn the incense and request the *Ghātu* god not to bother her in foreign country. Then she would feel fresh. This is what her real experience is. What is the relationship between her itching or allergy and burning the incense? Is the smell of incense the medicine for itching or allergy? No logic.

There is strong belief in the villagers of ethnic groups who observe *Ghātu*. They observe this cultural activity for different purposes. One of them is healing. The performers believe that many kinds of diseases are cured after the dancers take part in the performance. But they should have a belief. This type of healing is faith-healing, a psychological healing as "a person, a family, or a community feels better after some specific activity" (Walter 137). *Ghātu* performance is specific activity. The patient does not get cured immediately after she takes part in the performance. But she believes that her disease will be cured. Then her disease is cured. It does not happen to all the dancers who take part in the performance and all the dancers are not ill, too. Other dancers believe that they will have positive results in future. Even if they are healthy at present, they may be victims of some fatal/chronic diseases and the *Ghātu* god will heal their diseases they will be healthy all the time.

This is what they believe. And this is a psychological treatment, not the medical treatment. All the dancing girls are not so lucky that their diseases are sure to be treated once they take part in the performance. The *Ghātu* guru claim that the dancing girls should have a strong believe or faith on the god, and they get healed since they perform the dance continuously. Having a faith is a kind of treatment. So, it is termed as faith-healing.

The selection method of the dancing girls is spiritually followed. Those who select the dancing girls believe that the Queen Yemphawati was very young. She was supposed to be under pubertal stage. To represent the queen, the dancing girls are selected in the similar manner. Certain age group of girls are collected from the village. Generally they are from four years to five or above. Or the dancing girls must be under the pubertal stage. It means seven or eight years girls are also selected for the same. The teenage girls are not qualified for the selection. There is a belief that the *Ghātu* god does not accept the teenage girls who have crossed the pubertal stage. Those girls, who have already crossed the menstruation period, are not eligible for the performance. Why? No logic works in such cultural activities. This is what spiritual belief system is.

Similarly, there is no logic of number of the dancing girls. Mostly, odd number is entertained. Like 3, 5, 7 and 9. This is a ritual. What happens when even number is entertained? And all the dancing girls must be possessed by the Ghātu aura. Those girls, who are not possessed by Ghātu aura, are not allowed to participate in the performance. In case of ignoring this, the result is beyond expectation. Or if the *Ghātu* aura does not possess some dancing girls, they will not be allowed to participate in the performance. The so called rejected dancing girls by the *Ghātu* aura do not perform the dance. In case of allowance, the dancing girls have to face fatal results. Sometimes, the special care is missed. The girls who are not possessed take part in the performance. This is easily notified by the *Ghātu* god. And the *Ghātu* aura rejected girls do not perform the dance smoothly. They stop abruptly while performance is going on. Instead of dancing, they start acting abnormally. They start quivering and crying loudly. Now the dance masters stop the whole performance and they give a special care to the affected girls. They burn the incense to say sorry for their mistake. They request the *Ghātu* god to excuse them. They clarify that mistake is not committed knowingly. The performance is suspended for hours. Because they have to solve the problems. Anyway, the problem is solved after a long time effort of the dance masters and they resume the performance. Sometimes, they cannot solve the problem and they ask the help from Buddhist priests the *lāma*. There is no way out if *lāma* cannot solve the problem. Either the dancer goes mad or dies.

How to know whether the dancing girl is possessed by Ghātu aura or not? When a girl is possessed by the Ghātu aura, she starts crying and quivering. All

the girls do not cry when they are possessed. But most of them do. After they have been possessed, they are qualified for the performance. All of them are not possessed at a same time. Time differs. Now those who are possessed keep quiet and they stop swaying back and forth, and those who are not possessed go on swaying round and round. The dance masters go on singing the same verse.

What is the selection system? It seems to be simple but very complex. The selected girls are asked to sit on the small piece of wood planks just opposite the dance masters in the face to face position. The stage is well scrubbed by the cow dung. The dance masters start chanting the religious verse of song again and again. The verse of song is all about gods or some supernatural phenomena. When the dance masters start chanting, all the girls start moving clockwise or anti clockwise. The dancers sway the top half of body round and round until they are possessed by the *Ghātu* aura. How long time does it take place to possess the girls? Not predictable. The dance masters go on chanting until the girls are possessed. There is not sure of possessing all the girls.

There are certain rules and regulations to perform this meditative trance dance. The performers should follow them strictly. The rules are not made on the logical base. They are made by the performers, the villagers, as necessary. After all, the *Ghātu* god should be happy. The rules are based on religious practices. The dancing girls are selected on the basis of certain criteria. All the criteria are spiritually followed. The starting time is also not logic base. It is confirmed on the basis of the zodiac calendar. The stage is prepared accordingly. The dresses of the dancers are prepared according to *Ghātu* methods. The *Ghātu* dress is not worn by other people or even by the dancing girl except in the performance time. Mostly the headgear is not worn.

The *Ghātu* stage is prepared in religious manner. The general dance stage and *Ghātu* stage differ. The dance masters invoke the god there on the stage. As the main *Ghātu* guru, Chandra Bahadur Gurung pronouces, *Hamara bala kannyako āgai chadi jhulima jhuli awaila*, (personal interview). Whether the god comes there or not, that is not seen by the naked eyes of the people/audience. But the dancing girls behave differently. This is understood as the god has come there. And only the dance masters are allowed to go on the stage. All the activities are performed with the belief of *Ghātu* god. The props are made in the similar ways. And verses of the song are all about god or some unseen power. In case of a simple mistake while performing, the result is fatal like the death of a dancer. It has already been mentioned. Some dancers may go mad in case the dance master forgets some verses of the song. The mistake can never be excused.

The beginning verse differs from village to village, gurus to gurus. Dharma Raj Thapa states this verse of song, “*lipa ho re bhaiya, lipa ho re kali ra gaiko gobarle lipaila. .*” (15). The verse means, scrub the floor to clean. Use the black cow dung

for the same. Cow dung is supposed to control the germs as it is mandatory in such religious activity of worshipping. It is used for sanitary purpose. What are the mistakes? Sometimes, the dance masters forget the verse of the Ghātu song. Sometimes, the dancing girls come in contact with the women or girls who are in menstruation period. There are a many but these are the examples of mistakes. This type of mistake is immediately notified by the *Ghātu* god and the dancing girl is punished. Therefore, the Ghātu performers must be in high alert during the performance.

The ethnic group performs Ghātu in public place in the certain occasion. If they do this cultural dance, they have to be too careful. There should not be any previous Ghātu dancers in the hall or they will easily be possessed. All the people are not possessed by the Ghātu aura but those who, have participated once in the performance, are possessed. Raju Gurung is one of the dance masters. He shares his experience with the researcher. “It was in 2004 in Rastriya Shabhagriha while I was singing the song or chanting to send the dancers into a trance, two audiences were immediately possessed by the *Kusundā* deity or the god” (personal interview). He adds, some members of the ethnic group are living in foreign countries. They remember their culture. If they just want to listen to the Ghātu song, they have to choose certain verse only. They are not allowed to listen to all the verses. Like, the verse of Kusunda episode is strictly prohibited to play out. In case they ignore, they have to face fatal results. The dancing girl, who is called the Ghātuni in the language of Ghātu, must be possessed by the Ghātu aura. There is no guarantee of possessing the girls. Some girls are supposed to be rejected by the *Ghātu* aura. If Ghātu god does not possess the dancing girl(s), there will be no performance that year. They do not observe this festival by force. They postpone it. Everything is spiritually guided. The dancers must be in pre-pubertal stage. It is mandatory. All the activities are performed with a blind belief, not based on the scientific facts. Or the supernatural elements play the vital role in the performance.

**Conclusion:** The dancing girls are given the *Ghātu* name that is king and queen. One who has been possessed by the Ghātu god at first, is given the role of the king and the rest of them do the role of queens. Anyway, there should be a quorum. At least there is one king and one queen. But sometimes only one dancing girl is possessed by the Ghātu god, and she has to play the role of both king and queen. This does not happen all the times but in Rainaskot of Lamjung, there was only a dancing girl possessed by the Ghātu god in 2017 (personal interview). And she played the role of both the king and queen. The number of dancers is three to nine or more. It depends on the access of the dancing girls. All the likely girls do not participate in the performance. Mostly the girls from very rich family do not participate in the dance. Some girls participate with the hope of healing their sicknesses.

Moreover, the performance is fully based on the religious practices. *Ghātu* aura is considered to emanate from spiritual power.

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