

CULTURAL PERFORMANCES AND PRACTICES IN KIRTIPUR: A MYTHIC PERSPECTIVE ON LAKHE DANCE, ARTS AND LITERATURE OF NEWARS

Dr. Mani Bhadra Gautam¹

Abstract

Kirtipur is a historical place of Nepal that is important for its geographical location, arts and cultural performances. Majority of the people living in Kirtipur are Newars and they perform special Newar Dance, Lakhe Dance, Satgaunle Jatra, Ghatemangal etc. The performances help to study the Newars arts, culture and literature which are quite interesting while studying from mythical perspective. Myth centers on transformation of consciousness, the hero journey, human feelings, understanding, observation, actions, experiences and, life and death rituals. This study undergoes on cultural performances and spiritual growth of the time derived themes and ideas from a long standing, scenarios/socio-historical context. Primitive mental images inherited from the earliest human ancestors are reflected in Lakhe Dance performances of Kirtipur as they perform in different forms. Objective of this study is to capture the mythical images and present events in field based method relating with human feelings and thoughts in social-survey for views collection. It also subjectivizes on human cruelty, socio-cultural violence and dis-harmony representing the past reality and present excitement for socio-cultural changes in a different way. This article presents a brief sketch of a new perspective on cultural orientation to mythical world as Lakhe Dance reflects practices of the past and creates the meanings to the present. Lakhe Dance is one of the tools to excavate Kirtipur's history through Cultural Studies in this research that helps to carry out the expected result. I have tried to study and examine the performances and analyze the narratives in Newar literature from mythical perspectives.

Keywords: Myth, Memory, Arts, Culture, *Lakhe Dance, Jatra.*

Introduction

Kirtipur's history is written; recorded and well known from Manjushree's time who cut the Kachhupal Parbat for the water outlet from Chobar that lies in south of Kirtipur Municipality and made the Kathmandu Valley likely to live. The history shows that people started living in Kathmandu Valley from Kirtipur and performing rituals relating arts and culture from there. The recorded history in tourism leaflets and Wikipedia information show that Kiripur history goes back to 1099 AD. It was directly attached in cultural activities with Lalitpur before the King Prithivi Narayan Shah annexed it in 1767.

Among the ritual activities, *Jatras* and performances practiced in Kirtipur, *Lakhe Dance* is very important. There are different temples, stupas and cultural places functioned with the help of *Guthis* and local cultural groups which are so rich in enlightening the arts and literature in cultural connections. In relation to the importance of those religious and cultural places and socio-cultural

¹ Asst. Professor of English,
Central Department of English, TU, Kirtipur, Nepal, Email: gautammanibhadra@yahoo.com

practices of the Kirtipur Newars in the book *The Baghbhairav Dance of Kirtipur*, Prayagman Pradhan writes, “They took the mountains, rivers, ponds, spring-well, Himalayas, thundering, storming and all the natural and environmental things as gods and goddesses’ power and so they worship there with different kinds of *puja-path*” (*Kirtipurko*, 6). Even in the modern time those natural resources are taken as divine power. Among all the gods and goddesses Kirtipur Newars have a great trust on Baghbhairav’s power and so in various rituals, *jatra*, *puja-path* and hymns programs they perform *Lakhe* Dance that starts mainly from front of Baghbhairav Temple singing songs like ‘*chey lakhe chey*’, hymns and other religious songs of cultural groups. In Nepal Bhasa honoring Baghbhairav Prayagman Pradhan writes:

He jaya-jaya Baghbhairav chhike sewa
 He atinam vayanak khualam wam khase dila
 Re prabhu bangkhase dila re
 He vinvin loka vinvin loka
 Thiti ati kahala jaka nama gudasem//1//
 He Padama Kastapuri desha ati swava laka
 Re Prabhu ati swava Laka re
 He deshaya Prajapati, deshaya Prajapati
 Palayaka Shree Baghbhairav nama gudesham//2//
 He jaya jaya Baghbhairav chhike sewa. (*Kirtipurko*, 9-10)

Baghbhairav is one of the greatest god with a long open mouth placed on Baghbhairav temple whereas all the people are blessed with the power of Baghbhairav and so the people have to respect with ‘jaya-jaya’ to such a great god who is always busy for protecting us and everything is good here. The god is known as *Prabhu* who is doing well to the world and worldly things. The name is best selected to you as it is famous all over for the continuation of rituals. *Prabhu*, your name and fame is really matched with your beauty like *Padam Kastapuri* country that smells everywhere. You are the savior *Prajapati* of the nation and we are the people to respect you forever. (Trans. is mine)

In Kirtipur, Newar community people take Baghbhairav as a savior of all the living beings and *Lakhe* Dance begins from there as a cultural representative. In some of the mythical descriptions men are taken as god and women as goddess from the time of cultural and religious debates of Hinduism/Buddhism and so they perform in men-women forms and dresses. The importance of Baghbhairav goddess and cultural programs performed there are equally great interlinked for both the Hindus and Buddhists. *Lakhe* Dance is performed in various occasions in Nayabazaar, and Panga. It is much popular in the core area of Newar Residentials, especially in Lachhi (Laxi), Dhusi and Itagoal. Musicians sing the songs like “*chey lakhe chey*” and play the musical instruments like *Dhime* (a big musical instrument like a *Madal* but it is bigger than *Madal* and it is made up of special kind of wood and skin. It is painted with different types of colors as shown in the following pictures to make it much attractive. Other musical instruments they use in *Jatra* are *Madal* (a small sized round shaped wooden instrument covered with skin and special chemical in two different sides), *Jhyali* (sounding metal in flat and round shape), *Sanai* (longer shaped, metal made musical instrument which is played with mouth), *Bashuri* (Bambo made musical instrument, played with mouth) and Drums in different shapes and sizes (made up of wood, skin and special chemical to produce a beautiful sound). *Mujura* and *Khajiri* are used only in special kinds of hymns. Source: Photograph taken by the researcher in Lakhenach, Itagoal.



Source: Photograph taken by the researcher in Lakhenach, Itagoal.

Dhime Baja sounds so beautifully in which Itagoal people sound musically saying “*chey lakhe chey*” and cheer on the Lakhe performance. Lakhe dress seems unusual and fearful to the children as it is cut off in different places and colored unnecessarily but it has a great socio-cultural meaning in mythical way as it provides an entertainment to the cultural communities in the one hand and saves the children, sick people and senior citizens from the attack of an evil spirits on the other hand. There are different kinds of dresses and other performances in *ghatu* dance, *pulukisi* dance, *holi* dance, *jatra* and *Lakhe* dance on the basis of objectives, causes and consequences whether the coverage is joyful subject or the melancholy. Dance represents the alternative sphere of satisfying and joy as Adrienne Mclean writes:

In the dance performances, the dancing bodies of the characters are not only the object of the gaze but as a subject who participates and presents chosen aspect of their self to gaze willingly and consciously. Dancing bodies simultaneously produce and are produced by their own dancing that not only reflects the way how the things are put but also have the potential to effect change. (*Dying Swans and Madmen*, 15)

Different kinds of costuming, musical instruments, music, performances and other visual activities are continued to organize in religious and cultural functions of the Kirtipur Newars. As a sense of self-consciousness among the Newar community people in Kirtipur, their performances add the materials for the study of Arts in Literature and the study of Arts in Literature brings consciousness in the community and so they have the close connectivity.

Indraman Maharjan, a cultural specialist of Itagoal says that, “Lakhenach is a special program for Kiripur Newars and it is performed in almost all the special functions and jatras. Lakhe dances wearing colorful dresses’, hiding the faces with face cover, and performing mysteriously” (Interview with Indraman). *Lakhe* performances have special cultural connections in mythical reflections with the views and sights as Mars Fishwick writes, “. . . the mind trains the eye” (*Seven Pillars of Popular Culture*, 14). *Lakhe* dance in this sense is a part of arts and literature that provides the content for Cultural Studies which interlink with social and socio-cultural activities.



Source: Photograph taken by the researcher in Jatra, Lachhi-Panga.

Those cultural activities are likely to be studied, researched and included in the university courses for further investigations. Biggest university of Nepal (Tribhuvan University) lies in Kirtipur but the majority of Kirtipur Newars do not get benefited from the University education as they are still less aware about the value of education but they are rich in cultural practices. The study of Humanities and Social Sciences helps them to aware about the humanism and the study of Literature and Literary Arts crafts social and socio-cultural changes as the culture itself is a part of literature.

Methodology

This research objectified on knowing about Newar rituals, traditions and cultural practices and performances in relation to the arts, culture and literature to find out the factors that played a responsible role in socio-cultural change among Newar community people. Knowing the changing attitudes in the society is only possible through in-depth study of the ideas, views practices and experiences of senior citizens of the community and the cultural experts for which this researcher collected information and cross-matched them directly observing the performances.

This researcher prepared questions for memory and experience based descriptive answers. Qualitative and quantitative both the methods are applied to complete the research in mix-method approach. During the field work, cultural practices and performances are organized, observed and analyzed for the research output. This study also collected the views of college students and educated people who study Arts and Literature in Kirtipur from Newar community. It also brought out the differences between educated and uneducated people on the issues of women rights and socio-cultural impacts. In the process of research this researcher prioritized on field visit and ideas collection from the focused group.

Theoretical Implications on Cultural Practices

Socio-cultural practices have different impacts in everyone's life from birth to death. This article foregrounded the Newar arts, cultures and literature and investigated the Newar activities on birthday ceremony, name keeping ceremony, *bel*-marriage (known as *Bel Bibaha*), *gufa* system, Jatra and funeral ceremonies that are connected with *Lakhe Nach*. Among rituals, cultural programs and religious activities, Newars are in the front line (rich) in Kirtipur. Debates made on continuation or change in rituals and cultural activities among the Newar community are hotcake issues. The concerned society, intellectuals and social and socio-political groups should be open to discuss about its causes and consequences in the society. They are aware of their socio-cultural values, their impact in the society, and utilization of the time and nowadays they are scrutinizing their activities.

Among rituals what they are popular among Newar communities; some of them are like *karmakarya* for the boys and *gufa* culture to the girls in their youth period. They are really very difficult to bring into application in the life of targeted people as they are hard to apply but they are symbolically connected with *Lakhe Dance* and other artistic performances. There are lots of restrictions regarding the religious and cultural beliefs. "In *gufa* culture in the past young girls were used to take on the caves or dark rooms in the lonely places for 12 days, especially built for them to keep in the certain parts of their life. *Gufa* girls were not allowed to look outside in the light or to visit any male member there" (Sambhu Ram Maharjan, interview). It is also believed as said by an old lady in Panga, Itagoal Kirtipur, Nani Chhori Maharjan:

... it is a traditional ritual for a Newari girl to marry the Sun ... one of their unique traditional ritual is *Gufa*, when a girl of age between 12-14 years old has to stay in a dark room for twelve days before menstruation. Newari girl's ritual, social and socio-cultural *karmakarya* begin only after they complete the *Gufa* process. *Gufa* is also known as *Surya Darshan*, a marriage with Sun on 12th day. *Gufa* is a round boat cave like place. (Nani Chhori Maharjan, interview)

On the one hand girls have to complete the hard process in *Gufa* sitting in the dark place for 12 days without eating delicious food and without visiting the male relatives in *Gufa* culture and in *BelBibaha* they have to do the puja- path, eat only the fruits and vegetable items and do *puja* on the previous day of this *BelBibaha* as the *Bel* is taken as a boy with whom the girl is going to marry. Symbolically it refers that marriage does not have only the sexual connection but it is a ritual practice and on the other hand Boys in *karmakarya* have to worship holy gods and goddess being kept them in hard restriction since the previous day of the *karmakarya* without eating the items prepared of buffalos and ducks. They eat only the fruits and vegetable items and simple food. Duck eggs are supposed to be must loved by the Newari gods. They have to put on strange dress that is supposed to be a holy dress for the new beginning of their life. *Bel Bibaha* is an interesting ceremony in Kirtipur Newar community in which "pre-adolescent girls are married to the *Bel* (fruit of wood apple tree) fruit. The fruit is bridegroom that symbolizes the eternal bachelor Lord Kumar, the son of Lord Shiva and the marriage ensures that the girl becomes and remains fertile" (Wikipedia). They celebrate other *jatras* and rituals like *Gathemangal* on the days of Ghantakarna Chaturdashi's and burn the paddy in the early evening to chase away the evil spirits or to make the roads and the gates closed to them to enter the house.

Kirtipur Newars perform *Lakhe* dances and enjoy in the festivals like *Gaijatra*, *Krishnajanmasthanami*, *Gokarna Aaunshi*, *Baghbhairav Jatra*, *Matatirtha Aaunshi*, *Akshaya Tirtiya*, *Buddha Jayanti*, *Haritalika Teej*, *Mangal Chauthi*, *Hrishi Panchami*, *Dashain*, *Deepawali* and *Ganesh puja*. They worship especially the crow, cow, dogs, seela etc. They frequently celebrate such events in this way or the other with songs, hymns and musical instruments. But, now days it is changed among them

who are educated, much busy in jobs and other official works, whose parents and relatives who have different views about the modern world, worldly norms and values through different means of awareness. Kirtipur Newars are socially and politically aware for the changes. This study focused to find out an impact of cultures based activities of Newars in Kirtipur.

Defining the Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall in *The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power* writes, "Cultural Studies is an approach to studying culture that lies at the intersection between the Social Sciences, most notably sociology and the humanities. As a non-disciplinary study, Cultural Study draws ideas from diverse fields and academic traditions"(63). Stuart Hall's principle in Cultural Studies is important for decoding cultural oppression whereas American pop culture represents experience of power. Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, England came strongly in 1963 with the views to study all the social and socio-cultural activities. British academician Herbert Richard Hoggart born 24 September 1918 started studying the society and social-activities from cultural perspective. His views are different from Marx's ideology and class relations and Raymond William's who followed the theoretical path of Roland Barthes, George Lukas and Michael Foucault. Merriam- Webster, America's most-trusted online dictionary 2002 writes, "Semiotics is the study of signs and cultural studies that approaches all cultures" (54). Hemingway focuses on the function of language and meaning produced differently in linearity and syntactic relations. Therefore, Cultural Study studies about multiple aspects of the society and socio-cultural activities and so the study of *Lakhe* dance also is a part of Cultural Studies.

On the basis of above studies key concepts of Cultural Studies are representation, materialism, non-reductionism, articulation, power exercise, popular culture, text and reader's subjectivity and identity with an interpretation of the field drawing on theories and practices from a range of Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines that seeks to investigate the ways in which cultures produce and are produced. American Cultural Studies: Introduction to Routledge published in February 4, 2016 writes, "Cultural Studies is exploring the central themes in Modern American Cultural Studies and it is discussing how these themes can be interpreted in American culture" (78). In relation to the arts, literature, culture and society based activities and history women, ethnic people, janjati etc. are the unburied proofs to study and analyze the Arts, Literature and the cultural connectivity. Talking about Kirtipur's religious and socio-cultural history, in addition to Newars there are residential from Dulal, Kapali, Nakarmi communities, too who perform the cultural activities together with Newars.

Lakhe dances around Bishnudevi and Balkumari are major among Kirtipur Newars perform in which other cultural communities; too celebrate joyfully watching the activities of *Lakhe*. "Jyapus in Krishnajanmashthami gather in Itagoal lower Dewal and celebrate it posting the pictures of god Krishna and goddesses in the wall of Dewal. Hymns are sung for whole night and the next morning children carry picture of Krishna and people round with lava and flowers" (*Kirtipurko Samchhipta Chinari*, 100). In the locality, children seem much excited, they dress up like Krishna, people celebrate worshipping with lava and flowers and the statue of Krishna is made round around the locality with music, *Dhime baja* in *Lakhe nach* (dance). Bishnudevi temple of Vajungle is the centre of attraction for Panga, Itagoal and Vajungle area people where they light the candles and play the musical instruments like *Bashuri* and *Dhime*, sing hymn and have the party to make the *Lakhe* performance much interesting.

Vajungle near the Bishnudevi temple is important for the death rituals of *Jyapu* community people of Kirtipur, Laxi, Panga and Itagoal whereas they have started the *guthi*. Prayagman Pradhan writes: For the purpose of death rituals of Jyapus of Itagoal they are connected with Vajungle *guthi*, Itagoal *guthi*, Khacho *guthi* and Bhairavnath *guthi* and they have jointly started the Bicha *guthi* for all kinds of help like men power, paddy, financial support if needed and rituals to do. Other helping hands for

them are Itagoal Women's Community, Itagoal Jointly Saving Fund, Itagoal Mothers Club, Itagoal Youth Club and Jalbinayak Library. (Kirtipurko Samchhipta Chinari, 101)

Vajungle is important place for ritual, social and socio-cultural activities. It has its historical value connected with a mysterious power as it is said that it is not necessary to wait and see for the complete burn of the dead body as there is an unseen power to burn completely. People can go home after they put on fire on the dead body covered paddy. Relating the funeral procession ritual's mystery Deepa Maharjan quotes Thakurlal Manandhar, "... a funeral procession; or one which is tantamount to a funeral procession" (*Pangaya*, 5). The purpose of this research is to highlight on the perceptions and practices of socio-cultural changes at Kirtipur Municipality in Kathmandu Valley of Nepal including historical records, statues, and stone written records concerned with myths with their cross matching events.

Results

Lakhenach, *jatra*, *puja-path* and dress codes used on them are mythical and mysterious factors among Newars in Kirtipur. Socio-cultural inclusion/exclusion has not been covered up within specific single application. It is a multidimensional process of progressive social rupture to bring changes in the society detaching groups and individuals from social relations in institutions. Society in which Kirtipur Newars live has a problem with the tendency of rigidity in practicing new approaches/ways for the cultural changes. The social system, cultural values, and people's right preserved and protected by the state, and state policy for the development of certain community determines the national status. Talking about Kirtipur's religious and socio-cultural history there are lots of things to research and so *Lakhe* dance is one among them.

Major finding is socio-cultural change brought by *Lakhe* dance among the people of Newar community in Kirtipur. The research exposes the ways to the scholars and investigators to provide the study guidelines, information sources collection and analysis. The study carried out the research output and some results for the researchers that are beneficial for study guidelines. It helps to the trainers to train the communities and students on concerned areas. Every research has some limitations and this research is no exceptional either. The area of the study was within the Newars of Kirtipur Municipality in Kathmandu District. The study delimited with the local people (Newars) in core areas at Kirtipur Municipality in Kathmandu. It did not link with any development theory. The study centered among the local people, cultural experts, Literature studying students and literary scholars from Newar community.

Discussion

The study excavated on the social and socio-cultural problems lead by religious fanatics and socio-cultural hegemonies created by them. Literary application on social practices is working as a kind of transforming tool that makes a change in the society as well as in an individual's life raising the major question on the ritual practices of the society. Every step for the social and socio-cultural change takes time and it happens in Kirtipur, too. According to Prayagman Pradhan, "Language, script, arts, culture and history study data in Kirtipur which is studied from *Kirti Study and Research Mandal* and Kirtipur Municipality takes it positively as a brick for social Change" (*Kirti Study and Research Mandal: Introduction*). It is almost impossible to dig up and carry out the truth by only one aspect of the society so the resource persons are necessary to collect and to utilize the resources to observe study and analyze the *Lakhe* dance performances. The Arts and Literature studying students can help in the field of cultural changes. It is proved that the cultural education brought and brings changes in societies and everywhere else through arts and artistic crafts teaching different techniques for living with the changes. Male members in the society, in comparison to the female, are educated, healthier, happier and free in Kirtipur because of their direct association in artistic craft and socio-cultural transformation as they perform much in the music and dances.

In Kirtipur, socio-cultural activities run through *guthi*. *Guthi* system is in practice whereas the local Newars collect some funds, take help from local authority, agencies and government. They spend the fund in renovation of the temples, worshipping the gods and goddesses, doing the daily *puga-path* in the temples and showing the *jatras*. Lots of land in Kirtipur is in control of *guthi* and people run the religious, social and socio-cultural functions upon its help and supervision. In the ritual activities like *Lakhe* dance *puja-path* and *jatra* religious groups are in different dances and dresses according to the mythical reflections that symbolize the views and sights connection as Mars Fishwick writes, “. . . the mind trains the eye” (*Seven Pillars of Popular Culture*, 14). Means to say in this quote is that wearing different kinds of dresses wins the attraction of the dance and the performance observers. In this regard Dipa Maharjan Quotes Gopal Singh, “A network of *guthi* institutions binds the Newars together at the three different levels of caste, patrilineal grouping and territory” (*Pangaya*, 26). The Newars have different *guthi* networks and socio-cultural activities that run through them from the time of Amshu Varma, Lichhavi and Malla Kings in Kirtipur.

Cultural activities like *Lakhe* dance have different impacts in the society and one among them is on socio-cultural aspect of Kirtipur. Newari *Jatras*, *puja/path* and other ritual activities in their homes and outsides in religious places follow traditional methods in various communities but there are some changes in educated communities. *Lakhe* dance culture covered up within specific single application. It is a multidimensional process of progressive social rupture to bring changes in the society detaching groups and individuals from social relations in institutions. Society in which Kirtipur Newars live has a problem with the tendency of rigidity in practicing new approaches/ways for the cultural changes. How do socio-cultural changes or religious continuation and shifts practice in Kirtipur Newar community? Do the social groups inspire to study and play the roles for changes to bring into lifestyle of people through culture? Were common questions and this article tried to answer them.

Conclusion

Lakhe Dance and other cultural activities bring socio-cultural awareness, self-satisfaction and teach to live happily even in grave problem and help to change the life style teaching certain norms and values of the arts, culture, literature and the society. In struggle for existence of their cultural identity, society forces the authority to accept the rules in the steeps to change. The social system, cultural values, and people’s right preserved and protected by the state, and state policy for the development of certain community determine the national status. Talking about Kirtipur’s religious and socio-cultural history mythical expression is reflected in the *Lakhe* dance and there are lots of things to research and so the cultural knowledge helps to study the society and socio-cultural changes. Cultural aspect is key element to study about a society, social norms and values and socio-cultural activities of the people, places and things. Socio-cultural/Cultural study is a part of Humanities and Social Sciences. Among different theoretical aspects, specifically this article is concerned with social and socio-cultural perspective. It studied of socio-cultural problems with its exclusion in multidimensionality and tried to carry out the possible answers.

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