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Deudā: A Verbal Art of the Subaltern

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Abstract

Folk songs express the felt experiences and feelings of the common mass and seek to re-envision the traditions and practices of society. *Deudā*, in particular, is a folk poetic song popular in the Sudurpashchim and Karnali regions. The present research on *Deudā* songs holds special promise as it opens up avenues to look into folk traditions, practices, and social standings. Delving into Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Ranajit Guha's ideas of the subaltern, this study analyzes social association and representation by touching upon the subaltern consciousness in *Deudā*. It attempts to make an assessment of *Deudā* as the art of the humble people from the lower strata of life who create it to express their emotions and subaltern consciousness. The researcher has used interviews, focus group discussions, and observation as data collection techniques in this qualitative research. The main purpose of this study is to examine the voices of people from the margins, such as peasants, poor, women, and unprivileged caste groups belonging to the lower echelons of the communities, who express their felt experiences of life and break their silent marginal borders through *Deudā* songs. The findings of this research show that the *Deudā* songs convey the throbbing hearts of the subaltern people of the region with their emotions of pain, pathos, suffering, misery, hardships, compassion, fury or anger, silent protest, and rebellion.

Keywords: *Deudā*, folklore, subaltern, lower echelons, protest, discrimination, hegemony

Introduction

Deudā is a living folk song in which the inhabitants of the hilly districts of Far Western and Karnali provinces of Nepal find expression of the heart. At present, *Deudā* has

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got wider resonance all over the country and foreign lands due to migration and immigration from the above-mentioned locations. It is sung privately in some intimate locations like forests, farmland, and the like and performed as a dance on different occasions like festivals, fairs, wedding ceremonies, and similar other festive events. *Deudā* has originally evolved as an artistic expression of the humble masses who live in the village and have the lower strata of life. It is a medium of evoking the felt experiences of the hearts of those who hardly know anything about literary embellishment. Therefore, *Deudā* involves simple folk language in which poetic elements like images and symbols are inbuilt. It usually communicates the contemporary social message and themes such as love and hate, happiness and sadness, pain, troubles, miseries, and similar other experiences of subalterns caused by daily tribulations faced in life. Defining the term ‘subaltern’, Ranjit G. (1982) states, “The subaltern is a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way” (p. vii). Taking Guha’s ideas into consideration, the present research has selected male-female relationships, casteism, and poverty as the major areas to look into *Deudā* as the subaltern art.

Deudā is all incorporative: society and an individual go together. It is a dominant mode of aesthetic expression of a large agrarian community of the region. People in the agrarian economy take resort to *Deudā* performances to avoid the monotony and banality of everyday hardships on farms. *Deudā* encapsulates the feelings of happiness, misery, pathos, sorrow, and poverty in its unwritten store. Vladimir P. (1997) opines that folklore is “the art of the oppressed classes, both peasants and workers, but also of the intermediate strata that gravitate toward the lower social classes. One can speak with some reservations of lower middle-class folklore, but never of the folklore of the aristocracy” (p. 5). Taking this definition into consideration, *Deudā* is the product of all strata of the population except the dominant one; the latter’s verbal art belongs to literature.

People who have passed their lives in the above-mentioned rural loci in pure seclusion without being exposed to the outer developed parts of the country express themselves in the form of *Deudā*. Participant “Bharat Luhar,” a 58-year-old man from Dadeldhura, described his experiences regarding *Deudā* as “the expressive art of the common masses and it functions as a folk form of literary communication in which the non-literate humble people of far western hills of Nepal evoke their feelings.” Several other participants agreed, describing *Deudā* as “a verbal art of the commoners expressing the traditional themes of love, life, and suffering.” Referring to a similar issue, Ammaraj J. (2011) opines, “*Deudā* has class and gendered subaltern literary origin. *Deudā* is mainly the poetic occupation of those who live in the village, who have humble economic and social base, who have no or rare access to education. . . . Those who belong to higher social,

economic, and cultural class tend to be the observers of *Deudā* performed by common class people” (p. 4). In the common tongue, one easily expresses the troubles of his heart in the *Deudā* couplet. The couplet is loaded with meanings in a compact form. The sentiments of an individual *Deudā* singer represent the feelings of the mass and community as in the following song:

chhakālā lāgyākā ghāma, rukhakā phirkai chha
saulijā pānikā nāulā, makana tirkhāi chha

(The tree is withered due to the scorching sun in the afternoon. May the water of the well be neat, and clean so that I can quench my thirst!¹)

The scorching sunlight on the tree symbolized the hardships and trouble. The thirst signifies the extreme desire of the singer for transformation in society and the muddy and unclean water well symbolizes the traditional society with different hierarchical layers in which subalterns dwell.

This study seeks to examine whether *Deudā* is only a way of sharing the joys and sorrows of the indigenous people dwelling in the remoteness of the Western part of Nepal or it evokes the subaltern consciousness, particularly of women, *Dalit*, and indigent people. The main purpose of this study is to examine how *Deudā* song imparts an incoherent philosophy cobbled together from cultural relics that has found its way to the lower strata of the social hierarchy. The songs reflect the ethnic culture and tradition of the people and their experiences. Particular emphasis is placed on analyzing the localized aesthetics of subalterns in *Deudā* songs.

Deudā poets present the critical condition of poor peasants who are not able to buy their own land for agriculture and are compelled to work as farmers for the landlords without questioning them. In this connection, Dhurba Bahadur Singh (personal communication, February 11, 2023) acknowledges that *Deudā* is a source of expressing human feelings by the majority living in the margins of the society. The song represents the feelings of subalterns who are victims of poverty, casteism, and gender discrimination in the twenty-first century even after decades of elimination of caste and gender discrimination. The singers’ increasing knowledge and understanding of their subaltern positions can be taken as the

1 All the translations of *Deudā* songs in this research work are my own translations.

growth of the self as evoked in the song below:

binnabādal megha āũdaina, bādal gheridaina
naihuno manako jaso, bānā pheridaina

(Since the sky is not shrouded in clouds, there is no rain. Since there has been no change in society, things do not go as we would like.)

The rain symbolizes the transformation in society. The song implies a subaltern's wish for timely social reform and change.

The folk poets' effort to give justice to the 'collective others' like peasants, women, and *Dalits*, shows their positive attitude towards the subaltern. As Spivak G. C. (1991) argues, "There are layers of subaltern. Those who are at the bottom are more subaltern than those who are in the layers" (p. 173). Though the majority of people are powerless due to poverty, casteism, and patriarchy, some indigent people and farmers are more in trouble than the rest. Dipesh C. (1986) defines subaltern consciousness as the "peasant consciousness" (p. 372). The farmers have been doubly exploited as farmers with no earnings and as *Dalit* with no opportunities.

Deudā singers present the relationship between society and the self. They show that the peasant's self has been ignored by the dominant class in society. In this context, Garnett M. (2011) states that "subalterns' public self is controlled by the people at the center" (p. 8). In the past, *Dalits* were limited to certain rights and they lacked their public sphere. The constitution of Nepal has written about the equality of the castes and has made the law against casteism. In spite of this, *Dalits* are discriminated in the society and the negative impact of casteism is not eliminated yet. They are positioned at the receiving ends.

The subalterns, thus, have to struggle hard to widen and strengthen their public selves. The texts of folk cultures speak for the subalterns as they are their own creations. Regarding the folk text and its evocation of subaltern consciousness, Tara Lal Shrestha (2010) states that various forms of oral folk cultural texts offer more autonomous space to the subaltern groups of people to express their consciousness (p.134). It reveals that the folk culture which is often detached from the power center offers the subaltern characters an autonomous space to express their consciousness. The *Dalits* lack history even though they are there in the society. Their rights have been ignored by the people at the center. Subalterns are treated as a commodity by the dominant people in the society. They are not given opportunities in the society and their voices are unheard. They are taken as people from other world with different identities.

Caste inequality is the most common social problem in South Asia and particularly in Nepal in the twenty-first century. Partha C. (2010), in this case, writes, “Indian Society is fragmented due to excessive casteism than class discrimination... caste, in other words, is the form in which classes appear in Indian society” (p. 174). Hindu societies in India and Nepal have many things in common. Taking Chatterjee’s ideas into consideration, the hierarchy of caste has stratified society more than class discrimination, particularly in Western Nepal. Societies in this region at present have been fragmented because of excessive casteism. Different clashes between people take place because of caste discrimination. The so-called upper caste people treat the lower castes as untouchable. They have to work as farmers, garbage pickers, and manual laborers of various kinds for the higher caste people. Their constant struggles to be fixed in a job indicate how subalterns are socially and economically deprived. *Dalits* lack solid identities in the society. The subalterns in Western Nepal are not strong enough to resist all the discriminations and injustices inflicted upon them. They are compelled to be sufferers without resisting the injustices.

The subalterns have worked hard to overcome all kinds of discriminations but they are still unable to get complete freedom and independence. As Spivak (1991) further argues, “No matter how much subaltern rebel and rise against discriminations, they cannot completely overcome them” (p. 102). In the past, subalterns became victims of cruel political systems, poverty, lack of transportation, and other facilities, and now, there is discrimination on the basis of caste and gender. In addition, people at present are marginalized on the basis of their economic status and political access. Economically privileged women and *Dalit* get respect in society whereas financially backward ones are ignored. These impoverished women and *Dalit* are at the bottom of society with limited opportunities. As they are the victim of capitalism, they are considered new subalterns in Western Nepal. They have to strive hard to dismantle various injustices committed against them. Through their songs, they evoke their position in society, and with the help of the *Deudā* song they try to develop their autonomous self. Their songs reflect their subaltern consciousness.

Methodology

Since this paper reflects on the subaltern consciousness in *Deudā* songs, it is based on the ethnographical approach of research. It follows the principles of qualitative research in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. Following the interpretivist research paradigm, this study collects data related to the cultural referentiality of *Deudā* songs. The samples for data collection in this study were selected purposively. The participants of the study include ten people, who had knowledge of *Deudā* songs, from different districts of Far Western and Karnali provinces of Nepal. As a data collection tool, telephonic and face-to-

face interviews, personal observation, and focus group discussions had been conducted. On the basis of their responses, the data/information have been analyzed, and findings have been drawn and discussed.

Results and discussion

This section discusses and analyzes the results of informants' responses collected from the interview, personal observation, and focus group discussion regarding *Deudā* songs in terms of gender, caste, and economic level. All the informants of the research, I interviewed, reflect on the idea that *Deudā* is traditionally a subaltern art. It has been received from the oral tradition as unwritten literature. It includes the throbbing hearts of the people of this locality. It is serious in terms of its subject matter, connotative as well as spontaneous. It has equal influence over people irrespective of their age, caste, and gender.

Deudā is a combination of oral poetry and dance. Although the higher class people get involved in *Deudā Khel*, a dance, it may be formal or in the name of culture or to keep public relations. In fact, *Deudā* is a stream of suffocated feelings and emotions. We can find the fruits of the bare emotions and feelings of the people in such folk songs. It is performed by the women of the Far West mostly on the occasion of *Gaurā Perva* and *Baryā t*, wedding ceremonies especially of their male relatives, and cultural fairs. *Deudā* performed on the occasion of the marriage ceremony is named *Jagaram* in *Doteli* language. It is performed during the nighttime when the marriage procession stays at the home of the bride's parents in a two-day arrange-marriage system.

Deudā poets present the critical situation of all the subalterns including women, *Dalits*, and poor peasants under the patriarchal caste-dominated feudalistic society. The song unearths severe casteism and gender discrimination prevalent in Western Nepal. Subalterns before the advent of democracy in Nepal suffered a lot under Rana Rule and monarchy. They were not taken as humans but as objects almost around 1930s Nepal. In the twenty-first century Nepali society, women, *Dalits*, and poor peasants are not given enough opportunities. During the autocratic Rana rule and monarchy, the subalterns were exploited by the agents of Rana rulers and monarchy. However, Nepalese people overcame the dictatorial political systems with the help of overt and covert resistance on their part. The *Deudā* poets depict the political consciousness of the marginalized people and their struggle for freedom.

Women, *Dalit*, and poor peasants have been struggling against patriarchy, casteism, and class discrimination respectively in western Nepal at present. They have been given few opportunities in the society. Their private and public spheres have been controlled by men, upper-caste people, and landlords. These people experience silence for the reasons that are

beyond their control including birth and social as well as cultural impositions. Although subalterns dismantle the discrimination in their own ways, they have been facing an identity crisis in some of the places of this region. Though freedom is guaranteed by the constitution at present in Nepal, people in the periphery still find themselves with no solid identity. They have been mistreated, discriminated and exploited at different levels. This study concentrates on a few representative *Bāramāse*, evergreen, *Deudā* songs based on their *Thādi Bhākā*, solo form, and in terms of examining how the subaltern speaks within them. Some *Deudā* songs have also been selected to analyze how the subaltern women, *Dalit*, and poor people speak in these texts collectively. The representative songs below disclose the subaltern consciousness of the women:

pāni napāi sukna lāgyā, shrikhandakā pāta

māita dukhai poila dukhai, yai chelikā jāta

(The sandalwood leaf has been withering owing to the lack of water. A daughter has to suffer doubly both in her own home and her parental house.)

dādā jāu charkyailo ghāma, kholi jāuta airi

māita jāu sauteli ijā, poila sāsu bairi

(If I go to the mountain top, there is the sweltering sun; if I stay to take a rest on the river bed, there are thorny bushes to prick into my body.)

duniyālāi ke bhannuchha, bhābile lekhekai

karamakā abhāgilāi, bārai māsa ekai

(What to say to the world, it is prescribed by God. To a misfortunate person similar is the sorrow in all twelve months.)

The songs reflect the suffocation of the women dwelling in the remote areas of the far-western region of Nepal. The woman singer in the first song above speaks against the prevalent subordination culturally imposed on women. The image of ‘withering leaves of sandalwood’ symbolizes the deteriorating condition of women under patriarchy. She indirectly attacks the weaknesses of the patriarchal socio-cultural structures, injustices, abuses, and ill-treatments from the mothers-in-law and other family members as Sangita R. (2003) wanted to observe through *Teej* songs how a woman “raises her head out of her little nest and begins to sing her little songs, which for once she can call her own” (p. 14). These oral songs provide the subaltern women with an autonomous space to express their subjectivity.

Similarly, the suffering of women finds its best expression in the second song, too. A married woman has a different form of suffering to deal with in comparison to the common troubles faced by other people. When she does not find a comfortable destination at her home or her parental house, her misery multiplies. Her words in the verse reflect her pathetic cry of a daughter-in-law who is made to toil heavily but is deprived of a satisfactory and favorable environment in the patriarchal society. She works hard but her contributions have not been rewarded. Therefore, the song silently imparts the feelings of revolt that Antonio G. (1971) calls “revolution without a revolution, or as passive revolution” (p. 59). While looking into her life through rebellious consciousness, she finds everyone antagonistic to her including her father and her husband.

The story of women suffering has been eloquently narrated in the last *Deudā* song above. As they themselves sing and dance narrating their stories of domination and submission, they become the subjects of their own representation. The women suffer double subordination as Kate C. (2016) states that “the particular predicament of female subalterns, doubly silenced, first because of the subalternity they share with male subalterns, then because of the subalternity they experience as women” (p.12). The song revolves around the pathos of a woman who is doubly marginalized in society: as a woman and as a *Dalit*. The woman singer presents herself as a subaltern in the song. Spivak (1991) takes subaltern as “a gendered category in which women are doubly effaced” (p. 96). Discriminating against people and marginalizing them on the basis of their gender and caste is still prevalent in Western Nepal. Lower-caste women have been doubly marginalized. They are at the bottom of the existing social order there and they tend to believe that their birth in the lower caste family is predestined.

Women experience subalternity as their male counterparts do and as a female as well. “Folk songs are often sung by the weak, and humble people of society who lean more toward emotion than intellect. Women’s involvement in folk songs is greater than men’s because the domination and exploitation of women is higher than men globally” (my trans.; Acharya, 10). Taking Acharya’s ideas into consideration, *Deudā* has subaltern origin and growth. *Deudā* singers create the texts of their expression and weave their screams, torments, and wishes.

Fate is

basically blamed by the people in these remote areas. So, when something goes wrong with them, whether it is because of usurpation, oppression, or some other social evils, they just blame their destiny. Poverty, death, separation from spouses or others, and scarcity of daily provisions are the things for which fate is blamed in the forms of *Deudā* songs.

The poor people of this locality have no shade of happiness on their countenance and little hope of betterment since they have no good education for a job and no fertile land to grow for their sustenance. They have no hope for a better future, and they have mere frustration, distress, stress, and anxiety in their mind. Even though they are aware of their exploitation, suppression, and oppression, they cannot revolt overtly against the government. In this scenario, the poor subalterns get *Deudā* as a medium to pour their suffocations as in the following:

janma nade bhagawāna, garibkā gharamā

petpālṇa muskilai bhayo, arkākā bharamā

(Oh! Almighty, please, do not give birth to anyone in the poor family! It is rather tough to survive in such a home by working on wages.)

āñ nāñai chha pet bhokaichha, naukari karako

marijāuta kāl āunaina, ma sāukā bharako

(Starving and naked I'm compelled to do things for others. I have to rely on my master for my livelihood leading to my wish to die but death doesn't take me.)

kasaikhi bāsmati dhāna, kasaikhi kodyānāi

kasaikhi kampanimālā, kasaikhi potyānāi

(Some people possess a quality brand of rice named Bāsmati while others do not even have the flour of millet for their sustenance. Some people wear necklaces made of precious metals like silver whereas some others have not even got the string threaded with colorful glass beads.)

jaggā sabai jamindārko, dhan sabai dhaniko

kānun ra adhikār sabai, shosakko kuniko (Shahi, 1)

(The land has been occupied by the landlords and all the sources of money have been captured by the rich. The law and right have been manipulated by the exploiters.)

rāt rātaichha din rātaichha, garibakā din nāi

yi dukkha najādāsamma, källe pan linenāi (Shahi,12)

(Even a sunny day looks bleak to poverty-stricken people. Death does not seem to rescue before the deadline of the miserable lot.)

When it is difficult to earn a living, the poor subaltern appeals to God not to give birth in the house of the poor and in this materialist world. Life in the Himalayan districts of the far-

western region of Nepal is so arduous, terrible, and miserable that people have to work hard even to earn a living. They depend on the local landowners and wealthy people for debts in distress and have to work for them when they cannot repay them and their interest. In this situation, they realize that oblivion is more welcoming than existence, and death is more opted than life because living is no better than dying.

The third song portrays the hierarchy in society on the basis of class. Some people enjoy the luxury of the world while others are unable to fulfill their basic needs. Not only the fertile farmland but the rich landlords have also captured the property, wealth, and money. They often take the law of the nation under their control and utilize all the rights ascribed by the government. However, the discrimination that exists in society has been symbolically evoked with the images of a day and a night in the last song above. The darkness of the night represents the impending troubles and sufferings of the subalterns in society. When poor people cannot get rid of their sorrow for a long time in their lives, they are compelled to desire salvation through death.

When caste discrimination stands as a barrier in the lives of *Dalits*, *Deudā* songs provide them the space to evoke their subaltern consciousness. *Dalits* have been victimized by the so-called upper caste people at different levels. They have been considered untouchable and have been compelled to be their *haliyā* (plowman) to till their farm and many other manual works. The representative songs that follow reflect their sufferings:

sunārale banāunyā sunko jodi, pairanyā rānile

sunārale chhoya bisṇu bhannā, chokhinyā pānile (Mejar, 9)

(The queen wears gold jewelry modeled by the goldsmith. When the same goldsmith touches the body, the upper caste people sprinkle water on their bodies uttering the word *bisṇu*.)

barsabhari halo jotnu, hiunabhari bhāri

dhanile diyako rakam, sakinaina tāri (Mejar, 28)

(I have to till your farm throughout the whole year and carry the necessary materials for the household chores during the winter. It is difficult to pay back the debt of the owner/pawnbroker.)

koi chhana gorukā gwālā, koi chhana haliyā

dhanikā shosaṅ dheki, mānava chhaliyā (Mejar, 28)

(Some people are compelled to be herdsmen and some others have to plow the farm for the landlords.)

chha dinako bāto hidi, boknu padne doli

yo prathā rairanyā hoki, mukti pāulā bholi

(Dalits are compelled to be the palanquin carrier for the upper caste people. Will this evil system remain forever or will we be free from it one day?)

majduri namāgna hune, kar lāgeko hudā

māgyo bhanyā deshnikālā, dar lāgeko hudā (Mejar, 22)

(The wages of the work has not been paid since it has been considered to be their duty ascribed by the caste system in the society.)

kita jāt hunainahunu, bhaihālyā dui hunu

ki suwā maiyāsāb hunu, ki maile lwār hunu

(If only there were no caste system; if not, there were two castes. If only my parrot were from a Thakuri (higher caste) caste or I were a *Dalit*.)

A poor *Dalit* who is the victim of Hindu casteism speaks in the songs above. The first song reveals not only the pathetic condition of a goldsmith at the center; it also represents the revolutionary subaltern consciousness. It speaks from the side of an untouchable *Dalit* who has been mistreated lower than the beast. *Dalit* prepares attractive earrings for Thakuri ladies but they have been discriminated against and ill-treated as an untouchable and when the body of the so-called upper caste has been touched, they splash water over their bodies in the name of Lord Bishnu to purify them. The upper caste people treat *Dalit* as their servants and loan them money on high interest so that they could make them work on their interest when they could not repay it.

Likewise, the exploited *Dalit* demands justice, in the fourth song, and wishes to be free from such evil social custom. So, what he sees from that location of the margin has been eloquently expressed in the song. *Dalit* and women have been marginalized socially, culturally, and financially. In the last verse above, the Thakuri boy expresses his feelings of subaltern consciousness with his *Dalit* beloved, a daughter of an iron-smith, saying that the union would only be possible either if he were an iron-smith or she were a Thakuri. All the above *Deudā* songs represent the voice from below as subaltern consciousness of liberation.

Conclusion and implications

Deudā, thus, exists as the ‘unheard melody’ of the subalterns living in Far western and Karnali provinces of Nepal. It is the verbal art of the humble mass dwelling there. Since the regions have little communication with the rest of the country, literary embellishment

in the modern sense is inconceivable. The song expresses the felt experiences of life and the spontaneous feelings of the subaltern people living on the margins of society. Listening to the sonority of the song is listening to the call and feeling the throbbing of the heart of the subaltern people. Therefore, *Deudā* is originally the oral uncontaminated form of lyric sung by humble people of lower strata without any careful literary adornment as done by any classical writer. However, it possesses inbuilt aesthetic expressivity and poetic flavor that can make the people with literary knowledge aghast. Financially well-established so-called higher caste people are just listeners and observers of *Deudā* sung and performed by the common mass like *Dalit*, poor farmers, and women who still remain on the periphery of the social as well as political sphere. Massive modification in the form, nature and language of *Deudā* has given it a hybrid identity. The form, nature, and language of *Deudā* have undergone significant change, giving it a hybrid identity at present. It has become more popular with its pop nature, as a result, it is deprived of its sonority, resonance, originality, and thematic gravity.

Republican Nepal has not got a great success in improving the critical condition of subalterns yet. Many political parties have emerged in the democratic political system of Nepal but they have been deviated from the reformation agenda of the subalterns. Especially, untouchables, women, and poor farmers are still at the bottom of society, though the empowerment of women and untouchables is the main focus of the nation.

After analyzing the position of the subalterns reflected in the songs, the study finds that though the position of subalterns has transformed slightly from an empty state of powerlessness to the capacity of dismantling discriminations at present in Western Nepal, they have still got a marginal position in the society. Particularly, women, the poor, and lower caste people have not yet achieved freedom, justice, and their rights in the true sense. Though they have witnessed some improvement in their social, financial, and political spheres, their condition still remains problematized as they continue to be at the receiving ends both in private and public spheres. They are, thus, new subalterns with subaltern consciousness at present in western Nepal. Further studies regarding the role of the subalterns would be worthwhile.

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