

Nepalese Culture: Special Reference to Folk Music and Dance

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Abstract

Folk music of Nepal reflects the aesthetic sense of the people and has been preserved by Oral tradition. Religions practiced in Nepal are Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism, Bon, ancestor worship, and animism. The majority of Nepalese are Hindus and Buddhists too, and these two religions have co-existed in harmony through centuries. Nepal is a multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-diverse country. Being a small country located in between China and India of south Asia, though it has multi-dimensional folk and traditional culture and dances among the many ethnicities, tribes, and indigenous people. Many scattered contributions can be found in the literature but the concise and specific study about the topic is still unexplored. This paper highlighted to explore overall Nepalese culture and folk music and dances which are existed in various places of social life.

Keywords: culture, music-dance, rituals, festivals, religion

Introduction

The folk song is one that is passed on in the oral tradition rather than in written form. Folk songs represent the musical expressions of the common people (White, 1928). These songs are not composed in that they are not the works of skilled, tutored musicians. It is more accurate to say that they have been created rather than composed. A song, which the music and text have been handed down by oral tradition among the common people (Prouty, 2006). The music must be very old, that it is a particular style of music, that the author is not known. An art song is one that is written by a trained composer and is passed on in written form (Bennett, 1976). Folk music is defined as the pulse of the people and wealth of society (Frith, 1981). Today's world is a land of varied cultures and traditions. Diversities in all spheres make its culture quite unique. Folk and tribal Music is a product of different socio-economic set up and traditions evolved overages. We have festivals and celebrations virtually every day, and dances are performed to express joy and festivity. Since every festival is accompanied by celebration, folk Music has become an integral part of our social milieu. There are numerous folk and tribal songs, tunes, dances, and almost all of them have continuously evolved and improvised (Lomax, 1959). Since we talk about folk songs there should be knowledge of our rich tradition of folk songs.

Nepal is a land of great sages with rich cultural heritage. Hinduism and Buddhism are practiced in Nepal hand in hand. Peaceful co-existence is the sticking feature of the country. Mutual respect, co-existence cooperation, and peace are the cultural features of the nation (Jiabao, 2004). The country never experienced religious conflict rather people lived in harmony helping each other. People are inspired by the high ideals of the great thinkers. They venerate them and worship them in different holy shrines. Nepali

Hindus worship the ancient Vedic gods. Bramha the Creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer as the Supreme Hindu trinity (Low & Muniapan 2011).

People pray to the Shiva Linga or the phallic symbol of Lord Shiva in most Shiva temples. Shakti, the dynamic element in the female counterpart of Shiva, is highly revered and feared and some of the names given to her are Mahadevi, Mahakali, Bhagabati, and Ishwari. Kumari, the Virgin Goddess, also represents Shakti. Other popular deities are Ganesh for luck, Saraswati for knowledge, Lakshmi for wealth, and Hanuman for protection. Krishna believed to be the human incarnation of Lord Vishnu is also worshipped widely. Hindu Holy Scriptures: Bhagawat Gita, Ramayan, and Mahabharat are widely read in Nepal (Gharti, 2018). Vedas, Upanishads, and other holy scriptures are read by learned Brahmin Pundits during special occasions. Buddha is widely worshipped by both Buddhists and Hindus of Nepal. The five Dhyani Buddhas; Vairochana, Akshobhaya, Rathasambhava, Amitabha, and Amoghasiddhi represent the five basic elements: earth, fire, water, air, and ether (Bhagawat, 2009). Buddhist philosophy conceives these deities to be the manifestations of Sunya or absolute void. Mahakaala and Bajrayogini are Buddhist deities of the Vajrayan sect worshipped by Hindus as well (Wein, 2016). Customs and traditions differ from one part of Nepal to another. The capital city Kathmandu enjoys a rich tapestry of cultures blending to form a national identity. Kathmandu Valley has served as the country's cultural metropolis since the unification of Nepal in the 18th Century. A prominent factor in Nepali's everyday life is religion. Adding color to the lives of Nepalese are festivals the year round which they celebrate with much pomp and ceremony. Food plays an important role in the celebration of these festivals.

The rich, multi-ethnic, and multi-dimensional culture of Nepal is based on centuries-old traditions

and social customs. Its diverse range of mountain communities and social strata are expressed in music, dance, folklore, language, and religion. The cultural practice of Nepal is essential of the Hindu and Buddhist derivation finding expression in the numerous rites and rituals, beliefs, social values, festivals, art, and architecture of the land (Sharma, 1983). The habitats of these various groups are found distributed everywhere, from the Terai to the hills. Different ethnicities are staying in the different regions of Nepal. Some of them living in the Terai whose population ranges from a few thousand among the smaller groups to several hundred thousand among the larger ones, are Meche, Satar, Rajbansi, Dhimal, etc. But the largest ethnic group of Terai is Tharu from east to west.

The people living in the hilly region are distributed in the various ecological and altitude zones, such as the river basins, lower sub-tropical hills, and the higher sub-temperate hills. The groups living in the warm and low altitude valley-bottoms are the poorer and economically more backward people such as Raji, Majhi, Bote, Kumal, Danuwar, Darai, etc. At a little higher altitude, Raute, Magar, Chepang, the Thani, and Hayu live. The zone close to the high Himalayas, along with the Himalayan south face and in the trans-Himalayan valleys, live the Bhote (Tibetan) population of many regional and dialectical groups, the Sherpas, the Thakalis, and the Manangis being the best-known among them (www.iexplore.com). The diversity in Nepal in terms of ethnicity again makes room for various sets of customs. Most of these customs go back to the Hindu, Buddhist, or other religious traditions. Among them, the rules of marriage are particularly interesting. Traditional marriages call for deals arranged by parents after the boy or girl come of age.

Methods and Materials

The study based on secondary sources of data collected from various sources like books, thesis, journals, websites, and articles. Analysis of the information is made in descriptive and qualitative approaches.

Culture

The culture of Nepal is rich and unique. The cultural heritage of Nepal has evolved over the centuries. This multi-dimensional heritage encompasses the diversities of Nepal's ethnic, tribal, and social groups, and it manifests in music and dance; art and craft; folklore and folktales; languages and literature; philosophy and religion; festivals and celebration; foods and drinks (MoFA, 2019). According to Hindu mythology, the Himalayas are the abode of the gods and are specifically associated with Lord Shiva, one of the three principal Hindu deities. Pashupatinath, a large Shiva temple in Kathmandu, is among the holiest sites in Nepal and attracts Hindu pilgrims from all over South Asia. In the Kathmandu

Valley alone, there are hundreds of such shrines, large and small, in which the major gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, as well as local and minor divinities, are worshiped. Many of these shrines are constructed nearby the rivers or at the base of Piplal trees, which are considered sacred. Besides this, Manakamana temple, DakshinKali, Muktinath, Gosainkunda, Khaptad, Sworgadwari, Barah Kshetra, Janakpur Byasgufa, Pathibhara and other more Hindu holy sites are popular for the cultural tour in Nepal.

For Buddhists, Nepal is significant as the birthplace of Lord Buddha, the apostle of peace. It is also home to a number of important Buddhist monasteries and stupas, including Bouddhanath and Swayambhu, whose dome shaped architecture and painted all-seeing eyes have become symbols of the Kathmandu Valley. Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, is another major destination for Buddhist pilgrims and cultural tourism in Nepal. The capital city of Kathmandu set in a wide valley ringed by forested hills and snow-capped peaks is a fascinating city and an ideal base for cultural tourism in Nepal. Together with another two ancient cities of Lalitpur (Patan) & Bhaktapur (Bhadgaon), the three cities of the Kathmandu valley form the historical and cultural heart of Nepal with a number of unique templates, stupas, squares, places, and museums.

The culture of Nepal is as diverse as the ethnic-lingual groups of people present in Nepal. These groups - some natives, some arrived from other countries, together create a vibrant and vivid culture of Nepal, which is similar in some aspects to the culture of its neighboring areas like India and Tibet and with some unique and distinct features of its own. Nepal has a rich tradition of folk, as well as classical dances. According to Hindu mythology, Shiva, who is the God of dance in his Nataraja form, used to do his famous Tandava dance here in the Himalayas. Different communities have their own dance forms which are performed during various festivals, fairs, and family occasions. Some folk dances include

Music and Dance

For centuries various ethnic groups of Nepal have survived due to their knowledge and practices relating to nature and the universe, which has been handed down from generation to generation through the spoken word. The knowledge of cultivating fields and taming animals, preparing and using agricultural tools, designing houses and furniture, using tools and techniques for fishing, hunting and gathering are all skills passed from generation to generation. Folk dances are the dances of the people which are performed spontaneously. All that is expressed by them is natural and original, effortlessly with great ease and grace. These are performed by the whole village

community, by the young and the old alike. It marks the celebration of a wedding, a festival, a harvest, an initiation of a maiden, or sometimes a funeral rite too. Besides these, the folk dances are performed after a hunt, to celebrate a victory after a war, sometimes to herald the advent of the spring season, /the rains or in order to pacify or to ward off the impending natural calamities or any evil, which can befall the whole village. These are performed by ordinary people who are not trained or professional dancers. They are not performed for want of appreciation or reward of any kind. They are danced since dance as such, forms an integral part of their everyday life, their religious beliefs, customs, and rituals.

Legends state that dances in South Asia originated in the abode of Lord Shiva — the Himalayas and the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal — where he performed the tandava dance. This indicates that the dance traditions of Nepal are very ancient. With altitudes and ethnicity, the dances of Nepal slightly change in style as well as in the costumes. Nepalese Performing Arts of folk music constitutes folk music, dance, and drama. There are a variety of songs, dances, and plays performed in different parts of the country by different communities. Each performance creates a unique identity for a particular folk group, and it serves to endorse group identity within the wider Nepalese caste/ethnic group. Folk songs are the most popular genre of Performing Arts in Nepalese society. So much so, those Nepalese folksongs are popular in the high hill areas, where people use their own Tibeto-Burman languages in their day-to-day functions, yet they sing in Nepali (Acrosshimalaya, 2019). Mostly Songs are not only limited to traditional folk singers and dancers like Hudkyas, Dholis, Badis, Gandharvas, and Damais, but are also popular amongst all Nepalese people of all ages. In different regions, children are taught about life through children's folk rhymes or poems, which are recited by the children themselves. Likewise, there are songs appropriate for aged men; they sing various seasonal songs and recite poems and prayers. The folk poems composed in traditional folk meters are generally composed and recited by semi-literate Brahmins and Chhetris in the hill regions. Prayers such as Bhajan, Baalan, Silok and Aarati are performed in the temples, pilgrimage sites, and religious fairs and rites.

The hill regions of Nepal are very much active with songs and dances like Deuda, Jhyaure, Selo, and Sangini. Starting from the west, Deuda is the most popular among both men and women in the far western hills, Jhyaure in the western hills, Selo in the central hills, and Sangini among the women of the eastern hills. Though Jhyaure is a general term for folksong, the words Sangini and Deuda are the songs and dances of the eastern and western regions respectively, and

signify their unique cultural characters. Although geographically limited, Tamang Selo serves the same function as the Tamangs of the central hill region. Ritual songs like Mangal and Sagun are performed mainly by women or by professional singers as part of the performances (UNESCO, 2019).

The tradition of singing ritual songs is also important for the communities who speak Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Tharu in the Terai. Seasonal songs like Teej, Malsiri, Deusi, Bhailo, and Phagu are performed during various related festivals. Hindu women in the hill areas perform the Teej festival in August dancing to the typical tunes of Teej songs. Though the word Malasiri came down from classical traditions it has a place in folk traditions too, notably during the Nepalese festival of Dashain. The songs of Deusi and Bhailo, which are sung during the festival of Tihar are very popular among the hill people. In some parts of Nepal Deusi is performed only by men and Bhailiny by women. These are typical songs often sung visiting neighbors' homes throughout the festival of Tihar in order to wish good health and prosperity to the family members. Phagu is more popular in the Terai regions, where it is performed during the Holly festival in March. It is also celebrated to a lesser extent in the hill areas with local variations. As Nepal (outside of Kathmandu) is still largely an agricultural society, there are several performing arts associated with this livelihood. For example, work songs are sung during the plantation of paddy, weeding of millet, at the time of harvesting and grinding of corn, and during the husking of rice. As is sung during plantations in the field, and it is sometimes known as Ropain Geet "the planting song". The tradition of planting paddy with songs and folk bands of Panchay Baaja has almost vanished as many young farmers look for jobs in the towns, but Asare is still sung alone in some parts. Women also sing songs and ballads during the weeding of millet in the hill areas. However traditional songs are dying out: a typical song called Dain Geet or "harvesting song" is slowly disappearing because the boys who would have performed it in the past are now going to schools. The Gurungs and Athpahare Rais have specific entertainment houses called Rodighar and Deraghar respectively, and it is here that young men and women traditionally assemble for singing and dancing; it serves as a courting place for young boys and girls - a place to meet potential spouses. However, during the last twelve years of insurgency, many of these places have closed down due to the restrictions placed on groups gathering and fear of intimidation. Like the other regions, Western Nepal has many unique folk dances/songs and dramatic performances. Sorathi is perhaps the most popular one. The story of Sorathi which is dramatized in the Magar and Gurung communities of central Nepal is also performed in

some of the villages of eastern Nepal, and in the Nepalese populated villages of north-eastern India. There are Bhojpuri, Maithili, and Tharu versions of Sorathi. In addition, Ghantu is another dramatic performance that is mainly performed in the Magar and Gurung communities of western Nepal, in which virgin girls are selected to perform a colorful dance. For the Dhimals, the performance of the Badha Nhaka is their great dance drama. Around 400 years ago, singers, saints, and travelers came and helped spread different verbal art forms. The contribution of Gorakhpanthi saints should also be noted in relation to the performances of Sorathi, Gopichan, and the song of Bharathari. For Sherpa Buddhist monks, Mani Rimdu is a significant dance-drama performed during the Mani Rimdu festival at the Monastery of Tengpoche. It is essentially a prayer ceremony in which the dances are symbolic, as are the special costumes and masks are worn by the monks. The main purpose of this dramatic performance is to initiate the fundamentals of Buddhism as practiced by the Sherpas.

There are many other examples of dramatic performances. For example, the episodes of Ramayana and Mahabharata are also performed in many communities during night-long Bhajan sessions after the Satya Narayan Puja and Saptaha. In Bhajan, the singer is the main performer, whilst in Balun groups of four, eight, or sixteen perform important portions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. In addition, the Tharu communities of Dang perform Barkimar, the Maithils of the Terai Jat-Jatin, and the Newark of Kathmandu perform Charya and Kartik Nach in Lalitpur. During traditional performances, people use different types of folk musical instruments and costumes. There are varieties of folk musical instruments used locally in many parts of the country. Some of them are collected and preserved at the Museum of Folk Musical Instruments in Kathmandu (mentioned in Chapter 3). In most of the dances and dramas, typical dresses and costumes are also worn that serve as visual markers for unique cultural identities. Some Popular Dances of Nepal are Dandi Naach which is a stick dance performed during Phagu Purnima, Dhan Naach which is performed by members of the Limbu community to celebrate the harvest of crops, Chandi Naach performed by the Rais during Udhauli and Ubhauli, Panchabuddha Nritya - a Buddhist dance that has to be performed by five people, Bhairab Nritya, where the dancer dances dressed as Bhairab, Khyali Naach, Gauna Nritya, Hanuman Nritya, Kaura Naach, Devi Nritya. Nepalese dances are very important for life, culture, and traditions. It is also a good source of entertainment as well as an effective refresher. The movement of feet and body in the rhythm of song or music in a pleasing way is dance. The complement of dance is song and music. Mainly we can classify

Nepali dance into two kinds, traditional and folk dances. Some traditional and folk dances are Kumari Dance, Manjushree Dance, Sakela, Silu, Bajrayogini Dance, Arya Tara Dance, Lakhe, Matrikastam, Jungwa, Mhendomaya, Sangini, Jhyaware, Deura, Khukuri Nach, Jhyaure, Tappa, Sorathi, Newari (Dhime), Sherpa Dance, Bhojpuri, Dhimal, Ghatu, Khali, Jhijhiya Dance, Tamang Selo, Juhari or Dohori, Chutki, Dhan Nach, Karua, Balan, Maruni Dance, Bethi, Sorathi, Peacock Dance, Maithili dance, Chandi Dance, salejo, Teej, Bhailini, asaare, etc.

Music and dance are also important elements of Nepalese culture. It has been a source of manifestation of their emotions, telling of stories, and also a form of entertainment. Just like dance, Nepalese music is also classified according to the community - the Tamangs, Gurungs, Bahuns, Sherpas, Maithilis, Newars, Kirats, Magars, and Tharus each have their own distinct music and dance. Musical instruments like Madal, Dhimey, Panchai Baja, and Sarangi often accompany the songs (Holidify, 2019).

Religion

Nepal was declared a secular country by the Parliament on 18th May 2006. Religions practiced in Nepal are Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism, Bon, ancestor worship, and animism. The majority of Nepalis are either Hindus or Buddhists and these two religions have co-existed in harmony through centuries (Obeyesekere, 2006). The majority of Nepalese Hindus worship the ancient Vedic gods (Michaels, 2004). Bramha the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer as the Supreme Hindu Trinity (Low & Muniapan, 2011). People pray to the Shiva Linga or the phallic symbol of Lord Shiva in most Shiva temples (Doniger, (2011). Shakti, the dynamic element in the female counterpart of Shiva, is highly revered and feared and some of the names given to her are Mahadevi, Mahakali, Bhagabati, and Ishwari. Kumari, the Virgin Goddess, also represents Shakti. Other popular deities are Ganesh for luck, Saraswati for knowledge, Lakshmi for wealth, and Hanuman for protection. Krishna believed to be the human incarnation of Lord Vishnu is also worshipped widely. Hindu holyscriptures: Bhagawat Gita, Ramayan, and Mahabharat are widely read in Nepal. Vedas, Upanishads, and other holy scriptures are read by learned Brahmin Pundits during special occasions.

Languages and literature

As per the 2011 census, 123 languages are spoken in Nepal. Nepal's linguistic heritage has evolved from three major language groups: Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, and indigenous. The major languages of Nepal (percent spoke as mother tongue) are Nepali (44.6%), Maithili (11.7%), Bhojpuri (6%), Tharu (5.8%), Tamang (5.1%), Nepal Bhasa (3.2%),

Magar (3%) and Bajjika (3%). Nepali, written in Devanagari script, is the official national language and serves as lingua franca among Nepalese ethnolinguistic groups. Maithili language that was originated in the Mithila region of Nepal is the de facto official language of Nepal and Madhesh as a whole. Maithili is spoken in Nepal as a second language. Extinct languages of Nepal include Kusunda, Madhesiya, and Waling (Rai, 2017).

Festivals

Several of the festivals of Nepal last from one to several days. Dashain is the longest and the most important festival in Nepal. Generally, Dashain falls in late September to mid-October, right after the end of the monsoon season. It is “a day of Victory over Demons”. The Newars celebrate the festival as Mohani. Tihar or Swanti and Chhath are other important festivals of Nepal. New Year's Day of the lunar calendar Nepal Sambat occurs at this time. Other important festivals include Buddha Jayanti (the celebration of the birth of Buddha) Maha Shivaratri (a festival of Lord Shiva) and Maha Shivaratri festivities, some people consume excessive drinks and smoke charas. Sherpas, mostly located at higher altitudes and in the Mount Everest region, celebrate Mani Rimdu, for the good of the world.

Most festivals include dancing and music, and a variety of foods are consumed during festivals and on special occasions. The varied culture of Nepal is seen through its many festivals. Nepal is celebrated numerous festivals throughout the year, much like the Indians. Major festivals include Dashain (Nepali equivalent of Durga Puja) which marks the victory of Goddess Durga over the demon Mahishasura. It is one of the most anticipated festivals of the year and is celebrated by Nepali Hindus with great pomp and joy for fifteen days in the month of Ashvin (September-October). Tihar (Diwali), also called Swanti and Yamapanchak by some communities, is another famous festival celebrated for five days. In addition to decorating the houses with lights, animals are also worshipped during this period. Other popular festivals in Nepal are Phagu Purnima (Holi), Janai Purnima (Raksha Bandhan), Mahashivratri, Krishna Janmashtami, Gaijatra which is a procession of decorated cows to commemorate the dead and also involves mask dance, mockery, and traditional dance - Ghanta Ghisi. Buddha Jayanti Indrajatra (a street festival involving mask dance, consumption of Nepali liquor - Raksi, worship of Akash Bhairab and young girls, all to pray for a good harvest in the upcoming year), The Sagunn ceremony is the ritualized presentation of five food items (boiled egg, smoked fish, meat, lentil cake, and rice wine) to a person which is done to bring good fortune as per Tantric tradition (UNESCO, 2007).

Conclusion

Traditional folk music and dance of a particular people or areas are called folk music and dance. Folk dance is performed according to folk music. Nepal is a multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-diverse country. The diverse cultures have made it possible for us to have a great number of folks, traditional, classical, martial, devotional, ritualistic dance, and theatrical forms. Folk dances are the dances developed by groups of people that reflect the traditional life of the people. The tradition and culture of a country are generally seen in the art of the state. Nepal, being a vast country has a great and rich cultural heritage that has been handed to the present generation from the previous ones. It is the dance of people who belong to ‘primitive’ and ancient traditions. Nepal is rich in different folk dances. The culture of Nepal is rich and unique. Nepal is a country where art, culture, sacred mantras, and religious stories at the heart of its people. The cultural heritage of Nepal has evolved over the centuries. All society has its own history and traditions. Traditions and cultures are the outcomes of the continuous process of civilization. Traditional songs, dances, music, arts, folklore, tales, proverbs, beliefs, and legends are some units of folk culture. Folk music of Nepal reflects the aesthetic sense of the people and has been preserved by Oral tradition. Religions practiced in Nepal are Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism, Bon, ancestor worship, and animism. The majority of Nepalese are Hindus and Buddhists too, and these two religions have co-existed in harmony through centuries.

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