



THE PERFORMATIVE ASPECTS OF TAMANG RITUAL IN CHAITRA PURNE JATRA

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ABSTRACT

Chaitra Purne Jatra, takes place in the month of *Chaitra* (March/April) when the Tamang people visit Namobuddha, Boudha and Swayambhu and perform special rituals for the salvation of the departed soul. Against this backdrop, the paper explores, examines and analyses the performative aspects of Chaitra Purne Jatra taking Rabindra Tamang's *Timal Jatra* (2054) as a primary text. Moreover, it concentrates on the dynamics of Tamang ritual. Performing specific cultural rites in memory of their family members is a ritual process of the Tamang community. They begin the religious rites from Namobuddha and conclude in Swayambhu lighting the special light made up of *astu* powder, ghee and thread. At the end, people sing, dance and feast, which is reminiscent of the modern performances on theatre that only highlight the subtle performative qualities of the *jatra*. To assess and scrutinize the performativity of the *jatra*, I have employed Richard Schechner and Victor Turner's concepts of ritual and performance.

Keywords: Chaitra Purne Jatra - Tamang community - ritual, departed soul - salvation - performativity.

INTRODUCTION

The Tamang community incorporates unique culture, language, tradition and lifestyle. They practice some ritualistic performances that make them distinctly visible among the other indigenous communities of Nepal. *Chaitra Purne Jatra* is one of the important rituals of the Tamang, which falls every year on the day of *Chaitra Purnima*. Since the ritual comprises several performative aspects, the visual spectacle of the *jatra* connects the dead and live, profane and sacred and material and immaterial. Against this backdrop, the paper analyzes the performative characteristics of *Chaitra Purne Jatra* using Rabindra Tamang's *Timal Jatra* (2054) as a

primary text. The major objective of the paper is to explore and analyze the performative aspects and cultural dynamism of *Chaitra Purne Jatra*, which mainly takes place in the Kathmandu Valley.

Every ritual encapsulates some myths originated from particular place. There is a popular myth about the Kathmandu Valley that in the ancient time it was a huge lake. Such myths are connected with the creative domain of human mind. Regarding myth, Joseph Campbell (1991) states that “Mythology is the song. It’s the song of imagination...” (p. 26). The myth related to the Kathmandu Valley conspicuously portrays the imaginative strand, which connects with the origin of Swayambhu and *Chaitra Purne Jatra*. There is a story about the time of Bipaswi Buddha from Badhumati, who visits the town and observes the lake from Nagarjun hill. He sows the lotus seed on the day of *Chaitra Purnima* that blooms with thousands of petals. From the same lotus, light emerges out on *Aswin Sukla Purnima*, which is known as Swayambhu or the self-created. The self-originated, Swayambhu is one of the important holy places of the Tamang community, where they conclude the rituals of *Chaitra Purne Jatra* (Thupchen G. Lama, 2071).

Mainly, *Chaitra Purne Jatra* is a ritual when the family remember the departed soul and light special butter lamp for them. Tamang people visit Boudha and Swayambhu to take part in the ritualistic performances. In the past, primarily, people from Timal of Kavre district used to attend the *jatra*, however, these days the Tamangs from all over Nepal and even from abroad come to their ancestral place to pay respect for the deceased family members. The main concern of this paper is to analyze the ritualistic and performative aspects of the *jatra*, therefore, I have employed the theoretical concepts of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, who have extensively researched on the area.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The paper has adopted qualitative research approach and textual analysis for the exploration of performativity of *Chaitra Purne Jatra*. I have taken Rabindra Tamang’s *Timal Jatra* as a primary text to concentrate on the performativity of the *jatra*. Since the paper is based on library research, I have consulted several research articles and the concepts of different scholars as secondary sources for the analysis of the primary text under scrutiny.

Conceptual framework

The spectacularity of ritual and *jatra* (fair) get intensified through its procedure and performances that takes place within specific time and location. For instance, *Chaitra Purne Jatra* falls in *Chaitra Purnima*, which is mainly celebrated in Boudha and Swayambhu by the Tamang community. It holds tremendous religious significance for the Tamang people since it connects with dead and live. Such ritual connects both, the religious and emotional sentiments of the people and carries specific procedure, which sheds light on the performative feature of a ritual. In this regard, Schechner (2005) postulates, “Rituals are performative: they are acts done, and performances are ritualized: they are codified, repeatable actions” (p. 613). Naturally, rituals create powerful imagery in people’s mind as it is repeatedly performed in the stipulated date and places. Similarly, David Holmberg (2005) emphasizes that rituals are performed by fix persons into specific territory and social domain (p. xvii). Their view aptly matches the elements of *Chaitra Purne Jatra* when the Tamang people visit Boudha and Swayambhu for their religious rites. Nevertheless, some people begin their pilgrimage from Namobuddha of Kavre district, which is one of the important holy places of the Tamang community.

Rituals hold power as they symbolically connect the world of living and the dead. Catherine Bell (2009) analyzes ritual as symbolic power that gets demonstrated through the external forces, such as ancestors or deities (p. 211). Likewise, Holmberg (2000) describes Tamang ritual as performative and means of production of power. Moreover, several critics have discussed about the symbolic power, which in a sense controls the quotidian life of people. In Tamang community, *pitris* and the departed souls have special position, who work as controlling forces. They perform specific *jatra* and rituals to obey and allow such cultural frame to guide their everyday life. It is closer to the institutional power or the power of social system that guides and controls people (Foucault, 1978). For instance, *ghewa* (death ritual) is one of the ritualistic acts that carries high importance within the Tamang community. It is believed that the departed soul roams around the house unless the proper *ghewa* ritual is performed. Even after the physical death of a person, the soul remains around the house for forty nine days (Amrit Yonjan-Tamang, 2067). The family members have to provide a proper death rituals for the salvation of the deceased members. It means, there is always certain connection between the life and death in the Tamang community.

Moreover, a single cultural totem holds lots of power, as it directly connects to people's faith and belief. The special butter-lamp and *satbij* (mixture of grains) are the important ritual symbols for *Chaitre Purne Jatra*, as these things are offered to the dead. Therefore, *Chaitre Purne Jatra* becomes more important for them whose family member has been recently passed away. For that purpose, they visit important religious sites remembering their family members. However, they need to be fully prepared for the whole ritualistic performances before the pilgrimage. In this regards, the ideas of Schechner (2005), Holmberg (2000) and Turner (1977) importantly illustrate the symbolic power, performativity and procedures of rituals.

The cultural authority set special measures and guidance for each ritualistic performance. The performers pass through several phases while following the assigned procedures. Regarding the issue, Turner (2008) points out such phases as separation, margin (limen) and aggregation (p. 89). He analyzes the ritualistic involvement as a special phase when the involvers become different persons. They return back to their ordinary self only after the completion of the whole performances. In the similar manner, the performers of *Chaitra Purne Jatra* go through various stages and transform to different persons while visiting Boudha and Swayambhu on the particular day. They prepare for the rituals and separate themselves from others from the previous day of pilgrimage. They become different to the ordinary people at the time they light the holy lamps and pray for the salvation of the departed souls. Nevertheless, after the completion of the rituals they get back into their usual self (Turner, 2008). Ultimately, they mix up with other people and become a part of the ritualistic celebration, which suggests reintegration.

The performative aspect of ritual gets verified through its reiterating procedures. During *Chaitra Purne Jatra*, people repeat the same ritualistic process in Swayambhu, which they perform in Boudha Stupa. In this sense, they prepare themselves psychologically and physically for the repeatedly continuing processes. Their ritualistic psychology is complimented by the essential materials they carry for the day. The most important things are *satbij* and the special butter lamp. They scatter the grains around stupa and light the lamps remembering their deceased family members. Levi-Strauss's concept of myth could be connected with rituals, as they go side by side. He claims that Myth has its own language, which needs to be known and told (Levi-Strauss, 1995). *Chaitra Purne Jatra* as a myth-woven ritual gets transferred to the people through performances. Therefore, the

performative features of the *jatra* becomes its own language that urges the Tamangs to take part and celebrate both, life and death together. Moreover, rituals incorporate not only the superstitious belief, but also becomes an anchoring means for communal unity. Consequently, Chaitra Purne Jatra becomes an important ritualistic performance that binds the whole Tamang community in a single thread of cultural fraternity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Chaitra Purne Jatra embodies ritualistic essence as it is performed on the stipulated schedule with systematic procedures. A Buddhist priest (Lama) takes major role as a performer throughout the ritualistic part of the *jatra*. During the ritual process, people visit Boudha and Swayambhu along with their family, friends and a priest. The worshippers need to follow several ritualistic steps as instructed by the Lama. Rabindra Tamang (2054) explains the ritualistic procedure as follows:

Worshippers follow certain way of circling around the Boudha Stupa. They start spinning the small manes keeping the Stupa at their right. And then, they worship *Majyajima* (who built Boudha stupa), who is there at the southern side of Stupa. After that, the worshippers step into the third floor of the dome and scatter *satbij*, light 108 butter lamps and circle around the stupa. (p. 19)

Each ritual step that Tamang has explained, discloses the performative feature of *Chaitra Purne Jatra*. Primarily, the ritual connects the world of living and the dead, nonetheless, it touches the emotions of the family, who has just lost their beloved one. They light the special lamp to provide brightness to their dark path. The lamp lighting process also follows some procedure which unveils the performative and a ritualistic aspect of the *jatra*. While lighting the lamps, people must follow certain steps like an artist performs on the stage. More importantly, the ritual of *Chaitra Purne Jatra* is performed not only for the dead, but as Tamang (2054) states, “It is also celebrated for the happiness and prosperity of the people” (p. 4). In this sense, the *jatra* equally prioritizes the happiness and peaceful life of the living. The Tamang people adopt unique culture of remembering both, the living and the dead at the same time. They show respect to their ancestors and pray for the salvation of the deceased. It reveals a typical nature of Nepali culture. Amar Giri (2067) highlights it as honoring own “traditionality, originality and dynamism” (p. 22). The indigenous ritual

such as *Chaitra Purne Jatra* exposes the traditional, local and original cultural ritual of the Tamang community.

Song, dance and feast remain at the heart of *jatras*. During *Chaitra Purne Jatra*, people involve themselves into joyful celebration after the completion of their ritualistic performances. The Tamang people sing and dance in each festival playing *damphu* (hand drum). *Damphu* is Tamang community's musical instrument without which their rituals and cultural festival remain incomplete. Since the Tamangs are very fun-loving people, they dance playing *damphu* in every cultural festival (Yonjan-Tamang, 2067, 2068). In fact, song and dance are main cultural heritage of the community. They have their typical song and dance called *selo*, which is the creation of original folk tradition of the Tamangs. Such traditional song and dance illustrate the distinct life pattern, cultural identity and their communal ideology (Sirjana Tamang 2018). In fact, Tamang people have different songs that are sung in birth, marriage and death rituals. Likewise, they have songs to sing in *Chaitra Purne Jatra* that reveals their huge respect for *pitri* and the departed souls. Their songs play as powerful means to connect the world of live and dead in the rituals.

Music is instrumental to connect individual with the society. It becomes more significant in the ritualistic performances. As Schechner (2005) claims, "performance is the way these worlds are given concrete shape in time and space, expressed as gestures, dances, words, masks, music and narratives" (p. 644). The Tamang community, along with the performance of ritualistic procedure, narrates their life and experiences through the songs. They open and express their heart through words, dance, music and narration as Schechner has pointed out. Their songs are full of personal stories, cultural aesthetics and the world view of their community. Within such typical songs, there lies the distinct, but valuable feature of their culture. Moreover, the concept of culture is "the concept of difference, a contrastive rather than substantive property" (Arjun Appadurai 1996, p. 12). The Tamang community has practically embraced and acknowledged their distinctive cultural values in a form of rituals and cultural festivals.

The Tamangs sing to assimilate themselves with the spirit of *jatras*. They involve into feasting, singing and dancing after the ritualistic performances. Normally, people gather at Bhagwan Paau premise in Swayambhu and start cultural song and dance. They also sway their bodies

along with the beats of *damphu* and *selo*. Tamang (2054) has presented a song they sing over there:

Visiting Namobudhha

Bodily sin gets cleansed

Visiting Boudhanath

We get what we wish

Visiting Swayambhu

We get long life (19, Trans. is mine)

The song unfolds religious beliefs embedded within the Tamang community. They visit different holy sites in *Chaitra Purne Jatra* carrying specific wishes in their heart. It unveils their deeper faith that God will provide them with good and long life. Each beat of *damphu* instigate them to enjoy the festival, which at the same time, exhibits their cultural tradition. In this context, Kumari Lama (2022) postulates, “Tamang dances and songs unfold the whole cultural aspects as well as the way of life they live” (p. 73). Specially, *jatra* visitors sing to express their belief and wishes; they also sing to release their inner pain. They articulate their predicaments and sufferings through their songs.

Ritual gatherings and celebrations are universal human activities. People from all around the globe take part into ritual and festivities since the beginning of human civilization. Schechner (2003) shares commonality of ritualistic process and posits that people all over the world have ritualistic performances. During ritualistic *Chaitra Purne Jatra*, people go through full circle of performances and after wrapping up the ritual part, they celebrate. The whole area of Swayambhu becomes a stage, where each individual performs their role. At this point, the *jatra* extensively exhibit its performative aspect. Everyone opens their heart and enjoys the festive environment since such space holds huge importance for every ritualistic activities. Gabriele Tautscher (2007) highlights the importance of spaces in rituals, whereas, Holmsberg (2005) connects ritual performances with the “spatial consciousness” (p. xvii). Both of them emphasize the significance of space, as it always remains at the center of rituals. The Swayambhu premise holds greater importance due to its ritualistic and celebratory values. In the particular areas, The Tamang people from different districts gather and start singing their local songs. The gathering adds liveliness

along with the typical sound of *damphu,selo*, and the festive mood. The *jatra* goes not only perform in that place, but also continue singing on the way back to their home. The whole ritualistic procedure vividly captures the performative nature of *Chaitra Purne Jatra*.

The Tamang community lives simple, peaceful and harmonious life with nature. They have unique and organic way of living, which is guided by Tamba philosophy. Tamba is a person who initiates the conversation. He narrates the history of Tamang ancestors, culture and traditional values of that is deeply connected to nature (Yonjan-Tamang 2072, 21). They stay close to nature properly following its rules and flow. They never carry unnecessary baggages and complications, instead, they live with full of joy and merriment. *Chaitra Purne Jatra* also envisages the most cheerful attributes of the Tamang community. Moreover, such ritual feast are important for family reunion. Mostly, in such occasion, they get chance to be together with friends and family members. In some places, they celebrate inviting their daughter and son-in-law for feast (Tamang, 2054, p. 25). During *jatra* they love welcoming their close relatives, married daughter and son-in-law for the celebrations. Eventually, *Chaitra Purne Jatra* not only propitiates the departed souls but also brings happiness to the family members. In fact, such gatherings strengthen personal relationship and increase respect for each other.

Multicultural Nepali society shows equal respect for every tradition and culture. People do not care about caste and creed, but happily celebrate every festival. Nowadays, people from different communities come together to celebrate *Chaitra Purne Jatra*. The *jatras* become special platform, where people forget their social hierarchies, caste, community, and gender: just they mix up for merriment. As Schechner (2013) observes: "Rituals also help people...deal with difficult translations, ambivalent relationship, hierarchies and desires that trouble, exceed or violate the norms of everyday life" (p. 52). People ignore every socio-cultural and economic barriers and gather for the performance. These days, many people from other communities as well visit Boudha and Swayambhu in *Chaitra Purne Jatra*. We find wonderful fusion of tradition and modernity in *jatras* when people of different age groups, including foreign tourists involve into celebration.

These days, festival organizers attract people's attention through live musical concerts. It indicates the changing socio-cultural environment

that has shaped up the interest of people. Previously, Tamang people used to sing their local songs in a small groups in Chaitra Purne Jatra. However, in present days, program organizers gather huge crowd for musical celebration. Changing faces of a typical *jatra* has been visualized in a documentary directed by Uday Bahadur Lama (2073). It has captured, both, the main ritualistic parts that is performed in Boudha and Swayambhu and the live musical performances that takes place in the same premise. The *Jatra* organizers invite popular artists for their performances, which naturally gathers huge crowd of people. However, indigenous Tamang community exhibits their noticeable cultural identity in every festival through their performances. Some people sing their typical Tamangselo songs beside the loud musical concerts. They seem to be alienated and marginalized in front of the loud live concert, nonetheless, they never bother about the world, and instead, they enjoy singing in a small circle. Apart from musical concert, Swayambhu area is covered by Tamang cultural exhibitions during the *jatra*. The organizers even set up book stalls and sell Tamang literary and religious books; they also put food stall for people to enjoy Tamang cuisines. The whole area transforms into a modern theatre, where different characters spontaneously perform their roles. It brings joy and happiness to every participants as it includes lots of celebrations and feasts. It releases people from their quotidian burden and ease their ailing heart. Tamang (2054) claims that “song and dance take away our psychological burden and guide us to adore and enjoy each moment of our life (p. 25). In fact, such ritual and festivals help us to overcome our miseries and inspires to enjoy the moments.

Chaitra Purne Jatra is quite performative as it includes several ritualistic procedures that performers need to follow systematically. Such ritual activities provide psychological relief; whereas, the song, dance, feast and celebration add more enjoyment in the festive mood. Moreover, the traditional Tamangselos and the live concerts doubles the liveliness of the whole *jatra*. The vibrant youths move their body together; people forget their caste and creed; and everyone becomes apart of the grand celebration. Such *jatras* consistently spread positivity and respect for every culture. *Chaitra Purne Jatra* embodies ritualistic, cultural and celebratory features including dance and song that inculcates its performative aspects.

CONCLUSIONS

Chaitra Purne Jatra is an important ritual of Tamang community, which exhibits ritualistic and performative characteristics. Mainly, the ritual is performed for the salvation of the departed souls. The paper has analyzed

performative aspects of *Chaitra Purne Jatra* using Rabindra Tamang's *Timal Jatra* (2054) as the main text and employing Richard Schechner and Victor Turner's concept of ritual and performance for theoretical backing.

The *jatra* encompasses several performative activities that become more spectacular when people proceed for the ritualistic performances. They light the special butter lamp made up of *astu* powder, ghee and thread. The lamps are lit in Boudha and Swayambhu in the memory of deads. However, the lights are also lit for the happiness, peace and prosperity of the other family members. People start their pilgrimage from Namobuddha, and then they move towards Boudha; and finally they wrap up the *jatra* performing certain rituals at Swayambhu. The *jatra* takes place in the specific location and stipulated time with the involvement of certain group of people (actors). Both, Boudha and Swayambhu looks like theatres, where *jatra* goes perform their specific role as actors. After the completion of ritualistic part, people start singing Tamang Selo and dancing in the rhythm of damphu. They sing to celebrate life and also to remember and honor their *pitris*.

The Tamang community involves themselves whole heartedly into the ritualistic and performative parts of *Chaitra Purne Jatra*. They carry on rituals with specific procedure without missing any steps. They spin manes, circle around Boudha and Swayambhu Stupas, light lamps, and pray for the living and dead. At last, they feast, sing, dance and celebrate momentariness of life. The whole processes of the *jatra* reflect performativity, where every individual plays equal role within the ritualistic frame. To conclude, *Chaitra Purne Jatra* is a distinctive Tamang cultural ritual that encapsulates tremendous performative characteristic.

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