

Performative Significance of Malashree Songs of Salyan District of Nepal

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Abstract

The Malashree is a common traditional Nepali folk song. It is also sung in different mountainous areas such as Salyan district in Nepal. In this qualitative study, we have utilised the performance theory of Richard Schechner in the special consideration of the performative facet of the Malashree song and the cultural, social, devotional and transformative meaning of the song. As our research shows, Malashree goes beyond the conventional definition of ritual music to influence several other activities of the community. We have absorbed the primary and the secondary data sources that we have in order to examine its historical roots and analyse its musical components by showing how the Malashree songs capture the religious and cultural identity especially at the Dashain festival. Songs practised by the Malashree in Salyan especially, do not serve purely religious functions but they also serve as an indicator of social unity, social cohesion and group attachment. This scholarly paper is set to critically examine and explore its religious value particularly in religious rites. The paper moreover, highlights their role in glorifying the goddess Durga or Bhagwati during the festive occasion. The study stresses on need of the preservation the musical performative heritage of Malashree songs for the reason that its existence at present is at risk due to changing socio-cultural dynamics. So, to keep this heritage alive and to pass it from one generation to the next, it is very important to keep its cultural relevance. The study comes up with the idea that the performative culture itself leads to a better understanding of Malashree as a living cultural legacy, which can be an important part of shaping community identity, social structure, and a shared sense of tradition and devotion. Malshree song practicing communities in Salyan district of Nepal have made a significant contribution to the preservation of the musical tradition alive.

Keywords: Dashain, devotion, dhun, folk culture, performance, prayer, ritual

Introduction

Ritual songs are basically interrelated, from various ways, to folk lives, traditions, and lore since the advent of human civilization. They have been evolving from religious practices, societal norms, and family customs. These songs are found across almost all societies, castes, ethnicities, and nations. Despite the prevalence and dominance of modern music, ritual songs remain connected to people's identity, place, religion, society, and their nationality as well. They are valued because they represent folk lives and their practices in their original form, depicting cultural essence. Ritual songs also embody beliefs tied to rituals, games, and customs (Mushynka, 1993). In many folk traditions, these songs are believed to hold magical powers that ensure good harvests and well-being. The ritual songs of Malashree practised in Salyan District, Nepal, embody these traits fully.

The Malashree songs are performed with a sense of devotion and prayer to the Goddess Bhagwati in the festive season of Dashain, one of the greatest Hindu festivals. Keeping in view the time of performance, it is also associated with the traditionally religious kind of music called the Malashree *dhun*, a devotional form of Dashain music that originated in Newar culture in Kathmandu Valley. Over time, this music spread across Nepal and gained national appreciation. The Malashree *dhun*, which is traditionally sung to invite Dashain, has become Malashree songs, which are sung with religious worship in the Salyan district. Since performance embraces various aspects of intellectual, social, cultural, historical, and artistic life in totality as Gillitt (2013) suggests, the songs performed in the northern Lumbini Province resonate with flexibility and change, having different connotations to the local community.

Music is crucial in defining the behaviour and feelings of a human being. It is commonly perceived as a curing power, which affects feelings and behaviour without any form of planning (Orr et al., 1998). The development of music, together with human civilization has facilitated health, education, culture, and human feeling. It is, however, also abused, as witnessed in instances such as the *Gloomy Sunday* (1936), where music can have a destructive influence on listeners, as it is a part of human culture as well as behaviour. In this regard, Heshmat in his article Music, Emotion, and Well-Being explains how music evokes specific emotions, like sadness from sad tunes or joy from cheerful ones, and even affects shoppers and diners. The performance of Malashree songs during Dashain serves not only to preserve ancient religious tunes but also to reform them with local appeals. These ritual songs cause significantly to the musical landscape of Salyan, especially in relation to the community's devotion to the goddess Durga.

Malashree songs of Salyan district have additionally, cultural value that go beyond their religious implications. The performances and singing of these songs are a means of transferring from one generation to the next oral traditions, historical information, and common communal ideals. In addition to being a religious ceremony, the Dashain Malashree song's performance is a communal one in which the assembly of people strengthens social cohesiveness and group identification. These songs serve as a cultural anchor in a world that is quickly modernising, protecting the traditional knowledge systems and customs that have defined the area for many years. Their performance is cyclical, following the agricultural cycle and religious festivals, which illustrates the close relationship that exists in rural Nepal between music, livelihood, and spirituality. Since the Malashree songs are ingrained in the sociocultural and economic fabric of the folks of Salyan, they go beyond simple ritualistic manifestations and highlight the continued value of folk customs in modern society.

Review of Literature

Nepali Ritual Songs

Nepali ritual songs are sung with or without performance in ritual ceremonies for worship and entertainment, and the significance of events in the various seasons that fall according to the lunar calendar and agricultural cycles. In religious celebrations Nepalese ritual songs often feature free-flowing and improvised melodies that offer information and detail on each of the songs (Nepal: Ritual and Entertainment). The significance of the Nepali ritual songs and their efficacy is that they enhance divine blessings, fertility, prosperity, health, and happiness (Tingey, 1993). That is why the ritual songs, along with their performance, are in existence not only in Nepal but almost everywhere in the globe despite the fact that there are some occasional hindrances. Moreover, the effects of the traditional ritual performance have been a matter of people's identity related to their culture, language, nation, and religion. Nepal has a wealth of folk songs that can simply be classified into religious and secular songs. Astuti, Malshree geet, Balun geet, and Boddheshela are some examples of religious ritual songs (Kaufmann, 1962) in existence

both in Nepal and India, including the entire Indian sub-continent. When we talk of the term 'rites', it refers to religious procedures. Almost every ritual is identified with its specific sound properties or musical features. Most of these rites are supposed to have been made for human welfare.

The Nepali ritual songs and their performances are produced to express inclusive feelings for mutual helpfulness among all human beings. The Malashree songs, both in singing and performing forms, are no exception in this case. The performing act of this ritual song in Salyan district of Nepal seems to have been tempered by a sense of equality among human feelings and a sense of human warfare and benevolence, for the straightforward reason that the song prays to the goddess with full devotion in both soul and physics because of the attitude of humanness inherent in their rites and ritual songs, and so their music is solemn' (Ghimire, 2017). This type of ritual music can create harmony and morality among human beings. Such feelings are what we desperately need at present everywhere. The Nepali ritual songs are undoubtedly functioning the same for ages.

Research Methodology

We have offered an analytical reading of one of the ritual songs - the Malashree songs that are sung and performed in Salyan district of Lumbini Province of Nepal during the festive time of the great Hindu festival Dashain. To show their solemnity, we visited a particular place Khalanga of Salyan district and in this research paper, have presented some of the ritual songs in their original forms in the *Devanagari* script as well. The Malshree is a folk music of the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. It is also famous due to its cultural background and unique tunes. The Malshree songs are sung with the inclusion of vocal effects, music involvement, and emotional impact. The objective of this discourse is to examine the fundamental elements of execution in the Malshree songs, with a specific focus on the methods utilized by musicians to communicate the true nature of this musical style. The research work basically concentrates on examining the significance of ritual music in connection to the cultural performative dimensions of local songs of Salyan in particular. In the changing global scenario, the theory of adoption applies to almost all fields of human life. That can well be noticed in the singing and enacting of the ritual songs of Salyan district. The enactment of ritual music has helped to popularize ritual songs, especially among the people of the young generation. In this paper, the qualitative research method has been applied, for which we've visited a few libraries, both virtual and physical, as the secondary sources of data to study and analyse issues raised.

Music of Dashain in Salyan

On the 10th day of Dashain (Tika Day) in the district of Salyan, Nepal, people gather at the temple of the goddess Durga for a typical musical performance. After receiving *Tika* from the elders, the *pujaris*, i.e., religious priests, and other people gather at the temple of the goddess Durga. Each of them holds either a stick or one of the weapons, like a sword. The Pundits follow the exciting jumping dance and sing the song of Malashree, which is directly or indirectly closer to the Newa (Newar) art form Malashree dhun that performs devotional music based on the classical raga, a pattern of the traditional eastern music, taal, or rhythm system. The Malashree dhun, which originated in the 17th century, is one of the oldest Newar devotional kinds of music in existence that originally belonged to Newari culture in the Kathmandu valley. People play this religious tune to show respect to the goddess Durga. It later made its way into the entire Nepali musical culture, especially during the festive time of Dashain, the longest-celebrated festival in Nepal (Grandin, 2010). The Malshree *dhun* has now become the 'Dashain music' and it signals the arrival as well as the duration of Dashain (Khadgi, 2021). Like the Malashree dhun, the significance of the Malashree song is that it produces an effect of calmness and devotion in the hearts of the people or

audience. These rituals assimilate humankind with the gods. Unsettled emotion, in any form, is a problem in human life. However, Nepali ritual songs tune the emotions to noble religious songs that concern the welfare of the whole of humanity.

Performance in Malshree Songs

Ritualization corresponds to the phenomenon of encountering a gap between the cultural norms and the circumstances of the present time. It's a power technique that involves social practices and production aimed at eliminating the need for conceptualization (Bell, 1990, p.310). Thus, it has the potential to be the most influential setting where the acts of internalizing and objectifying might occur without conscious awareness. Therefore, the ritual Malashree songs, typically performed as a religious song during the greatest Hindu festival of Dashain and celebrated in devotion to the goddess Durga, tell more than what the lyrics literally mean when the performers roam around the temple area in a circle, playing musical instruments like the flute, *Nagara*, *Jhayali*, and *damaha*. The performers believe that they establish a kind of communication with the goddess herself by singing, playing Malshree dhun, and performing this ritual dance. This very practice can be linked with performance theorists' opinion that rituals can communicate and contribute to social relations among people by affecting their perceptions of reality. Thus, rituals not only express aspects of reality but also negotiate reality (Larsen, 2009). On top of that, the performing act can contribute to the active construction of social life, in which interactions in various forms occur between and among the performers as well as the audience. The male and female performers, equal in number, sing inside and outside the temple premises during the ritualistic dance performance of Malshree. They praise and pray to the goddess, believing that this will protect them from the local evil spirits and negative forces. Manohar Lamichhane (2074), in his article "*Lokvartaka Kehi Paksha*" mentions one of the Malashree songs like this:

He Khiarabangi Bhagawati hamlai rakkhyal garya !

(/हे खैराबांगी भगवती हाम्लाई रक्ख्याल गर्या/)

He devi hamlai abhay bar diya !!

(/हे देवी हाम्लाई अभय वर दिया/)

Ho, ho Salyanai ka Kalika debi sabai deuta !

(/हो हो सल्यानैका कालिका देवी सबै देउता/)

Kashika ha Kashika Bishweshwori guru ras hamara hamara!!

(/काशीका हा काशीका बिश्वेश्वरी गुरु रस हमरा हमरा/)

Charai kuna charai disha gharma duwar ugharaula!

(/चारै कुना चारै दिशा घरमे दुवार उघारौला/)

Charai kuna charai disha jumle paat ubaraula!!

(/चारै कुना चारै दिशा जुमले पात उबारौला/)

(p. 114)

English Translation of the song:

O Khairabangi Bhagwati, take care of us!

O Goddess, make us free from fear!!

O all the Kalika debi gods and goddesses of Salyan!

Gods from Kashi Bishweshwori Guru grant us pleasure !!

Four corners and four directions we'll open the door from!

From four corners and four directions, we'll offer you twin leaves!!

Similarly, in another Malashree song, the village participants narrate the anecdote of Goddess Durga Bhagawati during their performance of the song that they sing by putting on traditional dance

dresses. They dance to religious harmony in the slow rhythm singing in the chorus of the folk saga- “*Ha ha, ha ha re.....*” by playing musical instruments like jhyali, madal, shankha, chap, and damphu:

He he devi deurali timi rakkhyaal garya!

/हे हे देवी देउराली तिमी रक्ख्याल गर्या/

He he devi deurali timi bachaya malai!!

/हे हे देवी देउराली तिमी बचाया मलाई /

Ha ho devi ho malai bardan deu!

/हा हो देवी हो मलाई वरदान देउ/

Ho devi deurali chhappanna bhog leu!!

/हो देवी देउराली छप्पन्न भोग लेउ /

Ha ha devi deurali mai ho!!

/ह ह देवी देउराली माई हो/

(source: the manuscript provided from the Pateshwori Temple Management Committee)

English translation of the song:

O Goddess Devi-Deurali, protect us!

O Goddess Deurali, save me!!

Oh, goddess, give me a boon!

O Goddess Devi- Deurali accept various food offered!

O Goddess Devi- Deurali, the mother!!

People pray to the goddess Durga Bhagawati with several local names in the religiously devotional songs mentioned above. The singing of the song is an old-aged belief in the goddess, who is a saviour of all the creatures on earth. Traditionally, the celebration itself is a Hindu festival that exemplifies real feminism in cultural and religious practice. It is based on the widely accepted belief that the Goddess Durga Bhawani killed the terrifying and despotic demon named Mahishasura to protect all human beings from his tortures and unjustifiable deeds. On this very occasion, the prayers and other Hindu folks offer the goddess varieties of sacred food items, called *prasad*, to please their goddess, whom they call "mother" or *Ambe Bhagawoti Mata* as well. In the Nepali folk tradition, Goddess Durga is known by many local names, including Devi-Deurali as mentioned in the Malshree song.

The local people in Salyan pray to the Goddess *Devi-Deurali* to protect them, for they are her true worshippers who offer her milk, *aksheti* of special rice, flowers (Ghimire, 2017), and many other holy as well as religious offerings that establish a kind of liaison between the Goddess and her followers. This religious liaison, thus, creates a special emotional as well as devotional bondage between the female deity and the people for whom the Malshree song and its performance play vital roles in *Salyani* folk tradition; however, the music has universal appeal in varied forms, styles, and performances (Heshmat, 2019).

The importance of music in the lives of people is that it works like a companion for them, particularly on religious occasions when it's combined with performances like drama, dancing, worshipping, etc, that give “rise to the extended forms of communication” (Sargam, 2017). This companionship creates a surviving environment for the rituals themselves and the existential meaning for the folks who assimilate them in this or that way. In that sense, the singing of Malashree songs in the Dashain celebration seems to evoke a kind of bhakti rasa (devotional feelings) among the people, leading to a strong psychological belief that the Goddess will listen to them for sure. Here is a similar religious prayer offered to the goddess in yet another Malashree songs:

He Kalika Malika Devi twam sharanam

//हे, कालिका मालिका देवी त्वम् शरणम्//

Hare! Hamro Balu kanya shera chali aau
 // हरे हाम्रो बालु कन्या शेरा चली आउ//
Rayo payo bhay ma twam sharanamho ma sharam
 //रायो पायो भया म त्वम् शरणम् हो म शरण/
Hare ! Hamro balalai tami rakhyal garya
 // हरे हाम्रो बाला लाई तमी रक्षा गर्या//
Kumakhi devi deuta siddathan siddishwari devi
 //कुमाखी देवी देउता सिद्धथान सिद्धेश्वरी देवी//
Hami sharan aayon sharan sharan
 // हामी शरण आयौ शरण शरण//
He Ganga mala devi deurali
 //हे गंगामाला देवी देउराली//
He Siddha kumakhi baba
 //हे सिद्ध कुमाखी बाबा//
Dudhko dhara chadhahi diula hami khushi bhaya
 //दुधको धारा चढाइ दिउला हा मी खुशी भया//
Hamlai satra dhari bardan diya
 //हामलाई सत्रा धारी वरदान दिया//
Hai Pateshwori, Yagnawori sharanam aayon
 //हाई पाटेश्वरी, यज्ञेश्वरी शरणम् आयौ//
Gangamala devi deurali charai tapha raksha garya
 //गंगामाला देवी देउराली चारै तर्फ रक्षा गरया//
Khadgamala dhari varmala pahireki devi
 //खड्गमाला धारी बरमाला पहिरेकी देवी//
Hamlai Raksha garya Salyanki Mai
 //हामलाई रक्षा गरया सल्यानकी माई//
Rasti basti milai timlai pani puja
 //रस्ती बस्ती मिलाई तिमलाई पनी पूजा//
Mai sabko kalyan garya
 //माई सबको कल्याण गरया//

(source: the manuscript provided by the Pateshwori Temple Management Committee)

English Translation of the song

Oh, Goddess Kalika Malika, I seek your refuge.
Oh, our little daughter, come riding a lion.
We have found a husband. I seek your refuge.
Oh Goddess Kumakhi protect our life.

Deity of Siddhathan, Goddess Siddheshwari,
We have come to seek your refuge, refuge, refuge.
Oh, Gangamala Devi Deurali,
Oh, Siddha Kumakhi Baba,

We pour down a stream of milk, get pleased,
Give us a boon of protection in abundance.
Oh, Pateshwari, Yagnaswari, We have come to seek your refuge.

Gangamala Devi Deurali, protect us on all sides.

Oh, goddess wearing a garland of swords and a garland of flowers,

Protect us, mother goddess of Salyan.

We have come to worship you, managing everything.

May the goddess bring well-being to all.

Results and Discussion

The concept of ritual music in cultural performance suggests the interaction of observations that involves both practitioners and the audience. Performance is a vastness of activities such as arts, rituals, politics, economics, and interpersonal relations (Gillitt, 2013). In this regard, it is also the case that the performance of the religious Dashain songs in the Salyan district of Nepal of interest to us in the context of the interaction of human beings and their female deity, Durga Bhagawati (i.e., the goddess Durga). The musical forms of performances appear to be traditionally used to sort and mould human feelings whether they are mourning, praying or worship. The rituals in that sense are important for they heal individuals or assure some kind of safe passage; and the ceremonies provide an institutionalized outlet for pain, fear, grief and anger (Dissanayake, 2006). The performance of the Malashree songs seems to have possessed a kind of ability to challenge and deconstruct the authority of written texts, illusionism, and the traditional role of actors (Diamond, 1996). The showing of the dancing act in that sense makes even more grave religious, cultural, and devotional appeal not only to the performers themselves but also to the spectators in general. Moreover, the performing environment focuses on the cultural system that establishes the connections and exchanges between individuals (Kharel, 2021). This is how the performative act has led to a blurred division between the fields of dramatic and performance studies. Consequently, performing the songs of Malashree seems like a dramatic religious performance under the direction of some director, but in fact, there is no director at all; the performers spontaneously sing and dance in their devotional mood.

Malashree as the Raga of the Indian Subcontinent

Malashree is also believed to be a seasonal *raga* in the classical music of the Indian subcontinent (Nepal, 1970). They categorize the *ragas* into different seasons according to their temperament and emotional disposition. Originally, the Newars performed or sang Malashree on the full moon before Dashain, one month before the festival, but now they predominantly perform or sing it during the ten days of Dashain. Given the timing of the great festival of Dashain, it is fitting that the songs ascribed to Raga Malashree extol the magnificence of deities in their various manifestations. The Malashrees that reside among the Newars transcend our recognizable ones. Malashree songs come in a wide variety of forms, some of which are indistinguishable from one another, while others deviate significantly from the standard Malashree in terms of pitch. As an additional seasonal raga, Dhanashree replaces Malashree following the Dashain full moon. Malashree is one of the traditional Nepalese raga which is devotional in tone. It's also practiced in other South Asian countries like India. Its long past fits with its name. It is the result of a practice, perhaps the same noble one as the Indian classic, and not the work of a single person. Even though various ragas are found in today's local raga culture, there is a lot of proof and reasoning behind evaluating this traditional raga as the most significant classical music in Nepal.

Significance of the Malshree Songs

Ritualistic religious songs are of greatest importance in most of the religious rituals. They serve as the means of spiritual representation by fostering communal unity that safeguards cultural heritage. Religious

songs that are ritualistic and well incorporated in different religious traditions are a very strong way of sharing faith, seeking spiritual experiences as well as developing a sense of community togetherness. Therefore, the Malashree songs are very significant in the religious rituals arena, since they combine several components of history, culture and society.

The metrical patterns and melodic forms of religious songs, including Malashree songs, help to create a spiritual atmosphere, which allows spiritual reflection. These aspects create some sort of worship and spiritual attachment. This is because the religious songs being practiced are ritualistic songs forming a vital part of practicing worship in various religions. Hinduism students recite Vedic hymns when performing religious rites like Yajnas, which is strongly believed to be a way of gaining the mercy of the god (Bhalla, 2008). In the Christian environment, singing hymns and psalms are practiced by the believers in the process of holding the religious services as a way of enhancing the worship experience and creating a strong bond with God (Tamez, 2013). The collective music experience generates a feeling of unity and togetherness among the worshipers which encourages social unity and solidarity within the community.

The Malashree songs are outstanding ones in terms of supporting individual, social and communal unity. They unite people especially during the festival season. This can be seen even in the ritualistic activities of other religions. The Quranic chanting and singing of religious songs known as nasheeds during group meetings are part of Islam practices that strengthen the relationship between believers (Knysh, 2007). Gurbani being recited by people joining community services like the Amrit Sanchar ceremony helps propagate a sense of oneness among the community (Singh, 2011). Malashree songs of the Hindus are ritualistic and protect cultural and religious heritage. They act as a pool of one generation to another practice. On the same note, the singing of psalms and hymns in the Jewish festivals is a means of enhancing the religious experience as well as ensuring that cultural and theological wisdom is passed on (Buber, 2013). Mbiti (1990) reasons why such songs are vital to the African context: he believes that the meaning of the indigenous religions through oral traditions is an important role played by the ceremonial songs. According to him, the ceremony songs preserve folklore and maintain a connection with the wisdom of the ancestors.

Ritual religious music has been facing challenges in the modern world including the changes in the taste of music and globalisation. This demonstrates the relevancy of the songs even in the shifting cultural circumstances because the local folks have managed to retain them to ritualistic songs. It is very important to conserve religious rituals among the new challenges in the rapidly evolving society. It is the same necessity to comprehend the value of Malashree songs in order to handle the valuable and complex system of world religious diversity not only on behalf of individuals and communities of a certain religion, but also on behalf of the whole human civilization and religious activity.

Conclusion

The Malashree songs of Salyan district are a rich cultural tradition whereby the performers eulogize the Goddess Bhagwati. The performers beg Goddess to favour them in their lives. Musical artistry, cultural symbolism, and spiritual and ritual expression is all captured together by the performance and singing. Their performance suggests vocal purity combined with melodic improvisation and exploration of raga accompanied by rhythmic interaction of traditional instruments. The singing performance per se is one of those cultural and religious spiritual beliefs, flooded with the feeling of religiosity that gives the aesthetic experience of immersion. This performance is indicative of the strong connection of the performers to their culture. Malashree songs are embedded in the local history, folklore, and religious practice and the cultural identity of Salyan. In addition to that, the performance gives the performance an additional local

colour and organicity. The local artists possess the stories of piety, religious belief, affection, and social values, and this is a cultural identification. It is through these songs that communities keep the stories, beliefs and artistic sensibilities that have contributed to the social and cultural life over centuries.

The Malashree songs performances are relevant not merely in artistic perspective, but also, they unify people in cultural and religious perspective. The bliss of religious feast is more spiritual to the locals. The residents of the surrounding neighborhood are able to congregate in order to conduct ritual worship and feast. This move brings about a feeling of belonging, which is common by all and it tends to guard the practices of the religious communities. Their broad experience of emotions can reflect the way the people all around the world feel in addition to glorifying what makes the local community unique. Therefore, the performative meaning of Malashree songs is far more than their music writing. They serve as cultural heritage and help in perpetuating the culture. Besides this, they also enhance community identity and pass spiritual and cultural knowledge to new generations. With these traditions still being dynamic in the modern society, there is the need to focus on their preservation, recording and spreading of the same in order to keep this precious cultural and religious heritage alive.

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