

Masto Knowledge System in Bajhang

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Abstract

The Masto tradition, deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual life of the Khas people of Bajhang, Nepal, represents a unique and indigenous knowledge system that blends mythology, ritual practices, and community identity. This study explores the historical, spiritual, and socio-cultural significance of Masto regarded as the "God of Gods" and examines how it has shaped the local belief system and daily life of the Khas community. Using a qualitative auto/ethnographic approach within the interpretivist paradigm, the research draws on lived experiences, in-depth interviews, and literature to investigate the relevance and current status of Masto culture in Bajhang. The findings reveal a gradual disconnect between the younger generation and this rich heritage, exacerbated by its minimal representation in the formal school curriculum. The study argues for the urgent need to document, revitalize, and integrate the Masto tradition into local educational practices to preserve cultural identity and foster indigenous knowledge in education.

Keywords: *Masto tradition, Khas community, God of Gods,*

Background

Nepal is a country of diversity with respect to language, culture, religion, traditional beliefs, etc. Here, the Hindu religion is more prosperous and dynamic with comparison to others since its people adopts varieties of traditions, cultures, Gods and Goddesses, rituals, etc. As an example, people worship different Gods like Masto, Lago, Nilkati, Khapar, Dhaulpuro, Masani, Nanan, etc. as their home Gods. Along with, their ways of worshipping and adoption may be quite different from place to place. Such diversity is more prevalent in the Sudurpashchim Province. To say frankly, it more diversified in the Hilly and Himalayan regions of this province.

With comparison to its different districts, Bajhang is supposed as the epicenter of such a God worshipping tradition. According to different sources, this district is considered as the origin of Masto, the God of Gods and Goddesses (Khadka, 2076). With this article, it is aimed

to explore the scope, importance and highlight the hidden treasures of Masto in a minute detail. The word 'Masto' is derived from the Sanskrit 'Masta'. In Sanskrit, the word Masta means head. Similarly, according to the historic legend, Masto is supposed as the commander of the Gods and Goddess and said that he is inherited to save the divinity of all deities around the world (Khadka, 2076 BS). There are many stories and legends regarding the origin of Masto, which are still prevalent in the society. However, such legends are in oral tradition rather than the evidence based facts; as a result, many hearsays are in hidden forms which need to be explored, studied, and documented necessarily (ibid). The Masto tradition is an ancient spiritual practice rooted in the culture of the Khas people of Bajhang, a district in the Far-Western region of Nepal. This tradition is believed to have originated from the Khas Kingdom (11th–14th centuries), which practiced a unique form of shamanism and ancestral worship distinct from mainstream Hinduism (Bista, 1971). The resources show that the royal family of Bajhang adopted Masto as their home God and worshipped the same with the high priority.

The history shows that the origin of Masto in Nepal is from Dhandar, a religious place lies in Masta Rural Municipality, Bajhang. Besides this, there are approximated half a dozen of Masto temples in the different parts Bajhang. Different temples symbolize the different forms of Mastos like Dudhya Masto, Darya Masto, etc. On the basis of their forms, they are worshipped and believed variously. Whatever the forms, the people respect him with kind hearts and hope to bless in their daily life. It is believed that Masto may take care of the prosperity, happiness, and welfare of the family life, livestock, and so on. Moreover, it is being the God of Gods, it is believed that Masto blessed the people to overcome the serious problems of the people.

Despite the grand scope, importance and history of Masto, we hardly get resources and literatures about the same. So far I know, only limited books, newspaper articles, interviews are available. However, some of them are less authentic and without any reliable sources. To fill up this gap, it needs to research, collect information and document the same.

Statement of the problem

The Masto knowledge system is a major cultural heritage of the Khas people in Bajhang District. It embodies indigenous beliefs, rituals, and social structures, playing a vital role in shaping local identity. However, despite its deep-rooted presence, there has been a missing link between people's heritage and day to day practice in their lives. The knowledge has not been embraced fully by the young generation. I, therefore, would like to conduct the study on why the knowledge has been given low priority by the youths. I also realize that the school education system does not seem to have recognized the values of the Masto tradition too.

So far, the academic exploration of how Masto manifests the broader traditions of the Khas people in Bajhang is the center of this study. Additionally, modernization, migration, and changing socio-political dynamics might be influencing the practice and perception of Masto. This study seeks to analyze how the Masto tradition reflects and sustains the cultural identity, religious beliefs, and societal norms of the Khas people in Bajhang. It also aims to explore how external factors are shaping its evolution and continuity. Next, with this study too, I would like to explore whether the Masto tradition has been incorporated within school level local curriculum or not as well.

Literature review

Khas are the people especially lived in Karnali and Sudurpashchim Province with their indigenous identity, culture and tradition (Kafle, 2024). They reflect their unique culture, context, social norms and values and identity. Additionally, they have their own ways of religious tradition and belief system. Like, they worshipped different Gods and Goddesses as per their community and geographical variation. According to Pokhrel (1994), Khas refers to the huge community of people rather than the caste system. Being so, Khas people may share different identities and social norms and values to one another. It is known that they transferred in the different parts of Nepal during Indus Valley Civilization (Devkota, 2007). After that, they might have practiced and adopted their ancestral tradition in an evolutionary ways.

To proceed their ways of living, they might have adopted the worshipping culture. For that, they might have initiated to build temples and keep the symbol of belief to God or Goddess within them. Their civilization could have forwarded along the way of keeping the deities at center so that they could be safe from danger, wild animal attack and others. Among many such divine powers, Khas people have adopted Masto culture over many years to now. Masto is being the God of Gods and Goddesses, they might have worshipped him as a powerful God. Because of the wider influence of Masto among the Khas people of western Nepal, he has been worshipped with great sincerity and respect (Khadka, 2076). To this tradition, he mentioned the Masto culture and belief system. Similarly, Masto has been worshiped with various names in Bajhang like Banni Masto, Dhandar Masto, Budhamasto, Thapa Masto, Punaale Masto, Lankudi Masto, Kurmi Masto, Lato Masto, Kalo Masto, Silla Masto, etc. As per practice, the culture of worshiping is different along with the form variation (ibid.).

The Masto tradition in Bajhang can be theoretically reviewed through the lens of सनातनोसतम पुरुषोमातोमे, which reflects the eternal essence of Sanatan Dharma and its deeply rooted spiritual connection to the divine masculine principle. The Masto deities, regarded as ancestral spirits and divine protectors, embody this eternal principle by acting as intermediaries between the material and spiritual realms. Rooted in the Khas tradition, the worship of Masto aligns with the Sanatan belief in the cyclical nature of dharma, where divine forces continually manifest to guide human society. The ritualistic invocation of Masto, often performed through trance and possession, mirrors the Vedic concept of divine descent (Avataran) and the dynamic interplay of cosmic energies. Thus, the Masto tradition in Bajhang is not merely a local religious practice but a living expression of Sanatan philosophical thought, preserving an ancient yet continuously evolving spiritual heritage.

For this study, I endeavored to apply Cultural Theory propounded by Clifford Geertz. This theory symbolizes culture as a system of symbols and meanings that can help to analyze the people's socio-cultural beliefs. Being this study specialized to Masto culture and tradition, I might explore his scope, socio-cultural influence, contemporary knowledge system and its status in our education system clearly. The theory, I think, might be helpful to interpret the people's belief tradition and the way he influences the daily life of the people. Moreover, this theory can explain how rituals, oral traditions, and spiritual practices serve as a medium for transmitting cultural knowledge too.

Methodology

This study is purely qualitative and tend to explore the scope and influence and status of Masto God within the local level education system. To make this study more specific and in-depth, I chose auto/ethnography as my research design. As a researcher, I would play the role as both insider and outsider. Being I obeyed and adopted Masto culture, I might have various lived experiences and ideas with respect to Masto. Here, I might incorporate them and be reflective along with my participants' during the study. Similarly, I endeavored to explore the Masto tradition and culture within the context and socio-cultural specific. Because of this, I think, auto/ethnography would be viable research design for this study.

For this study, I applied Interpretivism as the research paradigm since it attempts to interpret the socio-cultural tradition (Crotty, 2003; as cited in Shah & Al-Bargi, 2013) with respect to the Masto culture in Bajhang. With the help of Interpretivism, I think that the social reality is what its people perceive ontologically (Neuman, 2014) and the nature of reality might be subjective and multiples in perception. For generating information, I applied in-depth interview and interaction to my participants selected purposefully and reviewed some related literatures to fulfil the purpose the research.

For the study, the home district of Masto God i.e. Bajhang was selected as the research site and two participants who were relatively well familiar with the Masto tradition and culture were selected purposively. With my participants, I engaged for a long time to collect the information so that I could make the study more valuable, authentic and standard. Similarly, I thought for maintaining the quality and ethical standards as well. To maintain its quality standard, I applied trustworthiness, authenticity and reflexivity. For all of these, I would focus on the authentic and credible sources of the data. Timely, I would reflect within and across the information shared by the participants and incorporate my own ideas for making the study more believable, reliable and coverage.

Results

Being the study is purely qualitative, the data/information were collected in a verbal form and analyzed and interpreted accordingly. My focus laid on assembling the information and creating the logical themes as per the purpose and research questions of this study. I endeavored to analyze the information with the help of the following thematic ideas:

Masto as the God of Gods and Goddess

Among Khas community, Masto is considered as the most dominant and powerful God. Regarding its magnificence, Khadka (2076) says that Masto is supposed as the leader of all the Gods and Goddesses. It may be so because of the mythical and divinely influence up on the Khas community in Bajhang and outside. In addition to this, Masto has the highest predictive value with comparison to the other deities. If the issues related with Khas community are severer and more serious, then the people definitely worship to Masto for their speedy recovery.

Similarly, a historian in Bajhang (one of my participants) views about the Masto culture as;

I think Masto is believed and adopted as a powerful God. Such a believe is prolonged throughout the history of Khas in Nepal. So far, I know, different deities walked together

from India to the western Hilly parts of Nepal along the leadership of Masto. His leadership became successful to settle different Gods and Goddesses in different territories in a glorious way safely. Let's see, over the hundreds of years before to now, Royal family of Bajhang, Doti and Karnali Principalities used to worship him a powerful God. Additionally, it is said that Masto is a brother of sixteen different sisters of Goddesses. So, why we cannot imagine, Masto is the God of Gods and Goddesses.

(Bishnu Bhakta Joshi, interview, Phalgu 12, 2081 BS).

Less priority in local level education

As well-known, Masto culture has been inherited with the Khas community over hundreds of years. To believe him, they think, is their day to day ritual and responsibility. By birth and afterwards, every small child and human being become familiar with Masto. With regard to this, one of my participants views as;

Our Khas culture is a culture of believing on deities and worshiping them ritually. To follow such a ritual means forming habits, behaviors, attitudes, etc. accordingly. If so, the divine culture should be well incorporated in school level education. Masto culture should be considered as the heart of such system. However, the practice is quite reverse and tends to minimize its importance. Therefore, though it is too late to address the Masto culture, it needs to be well addressed soon.

(Shyam Khadka, Personal Interview, Phalgun 10, 2081 BS)

Similarly, regarding the way we can address the Masto culture in school education, one of my next participant says;

There are hundreds of legends and myths related with Masto tradition. Many such myths are still in existence and some others have been diminished. It may, I think, be the responsibility of local level authorities to explore and document all of them and incorporate under the school level education. Such cultural and religious artifacts can be incorporated in the forms of folklore, story, lyrics, poems, documents, documentary, project works, etc. From such endeavor, the school level education will be more practical and ritual.

Discussion

Masto culture is inherited with the Khas community, especially, those people live in Sudurpashchim and Karnali Province in Nepal. According to Mishra (2004), the history of the settlement of Khasas to the Western Nepal has gone long back to 1000 BC. If so, they might have migrated with their own culture and tradition too. Doubtlessly, they might have carried the symbol of Masto with them and settled at Dhandar, Bajhang (Khadka, 2076 BS). The prolonged history of Masto culture in Western Nepal has definitely influenced and inherited with the lifestyle, daily behaviors and traditions of Khasas. Since Masto is considered and worshipped as the leading God in our community now, it might have the continuity of the thousands of year's prolonged tradition. As mentioned in Bhagavata Gita, Lord Krishna played the role of divine guide of Arjun to provide knowledge, wisdom and logical power; God Masto has done the same

for the benevolent of dozens' of other Gods and Goddesses. By considering this, Masto culture can be traced as the God of Gods and Goddesses in the Khasa history.

As known, culture is the reflection of any society or community and counted as per the social norms, values, artifacts, symbols, etc. and their interpretation properly (Geertz, 1973). As like this view, Khasa Community has been enriched with varieties of cultural reflections and symbols. Masto culture and tradition is one of the leading reflections of that community. However, so far I knew, there are no more authentic literatures available related with Masto tradition. As a result, it becomes quite less accessible to those who want to be familiar and acknowledge the prolonged history of Masto in Western Nepal. If such a gap might be overcome, anyone could access the necessary literatures and be supposed to shed the light and respect up on the mythical history of Masto culture.

Next issue to the Masto culture and tradition is the prevalent concerned and responsibility of the Local Government to address the glory of the same within the school level curriculum. Possibly, so far I knew, such a practice has not been applicable yet; as a result, the school level children are unable to be familiar with it. Lets' think, if today's school children are unknown about the Masto culture, then what will they transfer to the future generation? It is, I think, the matter of seriously undertaken and implemented as far as possible. It is the rights and responsibilities Local Government to empower, emblem, conserve and develop the local culture, heritages, customs, literatures, etc. (Nepal Government, 2074 BS). However, in my review, I found that though the local curriculum has been developed, it lacks the proper incorporation of the subject matter regarding the Masto tradition. It is, I consider the violation of local rights and responsibilities by our Local Government so far. Can it not be readdressed and respect the same on behalf of the concerning body of the government?

The Masto tradition significantly influences the livelihood of the Khas people in Bajhang by shaping their social, economic, and cultural practices. Firstly, it plays a vital role in agriculture, as Masto deities are believed to bless the land and ensure good harvests. Farmers perform rituals and seek divine guidance before planting and harvesting, reinforcing their dependence on spiritual practices for agricultural success. Secondly, the tradition strengthens social bonds within communities. Masto worship involves collective participation in ceremonies, fostering unity and cooperation among villagers. This social cohesion helps in mutual aid during farming, house construction, and other communal activities.

Accordingly Before engaging in religious ceremonies, starting new work, or embarking on long journeys, the Khas people seek permission and blessings from the Masto deities. They believe that divine approval ensures success, protection, and prosperity in their endeavors. Rituals, prayers, and offerings are performed to seek guidance and avoid misfortune. This practice reflects their deep spiritual connection and reliance on Masto traditions in making important life decisions.

Thirdly, the tradition supports the local economy through religious tourism and ritualistic offerings. Shamans, priests, and artisans who create ritual items earn their livelihood from Masto-related activities, while local markets benefit from the sale of offerings, clothing, and musical instruments used in ceremonies. Finally, Masto worship influences traditional healing

practices. People rely on Masto priests and shamans for spiritual healing, which reduces dependence on modern medical facilities, particularly in remote areas where access to healthcare is limited. These aspects show how the Masto tradition is deeply intertwined with the livelihood and daily life of the Khas people in Bajhang.

Masto traditions influence the seasonal migration patterns of the Khas people. Many individuals working in urban areas or abroad return home during major Masto festivals to participate in religious ceremonies. This periodic return boosts the local economy as families invest in festival preparations, purchase goods, and engage in social gatherings, reinforcing economic cycles within the community. These examples highlight how the Masto tradition is deeply woven into various aspects of Khas livelihood, shaping their economy, culture, and social structure.

Conclusion

God 'Masto' is a main cultural identity of Khas community. This article is mainly centered to the historic scope and status of Masto and his influence up on the daily life of Khas people over many years to now. This study endeavored to fulfil the purpose of the study from various perspectives like the existing phenomena in the community; status of Masto culture and its incorporation in school level education and analyzing the existing literatures with respect to Masto tradition as well. Till now, the Masto culture is highly dominant and influential; as a result, he is considered as the God of Gods and Goddesses. Moreover, with comparison to its influence in the community, the less priority is given for the incorporation of subject matter related with Masto tradition in Bajhang, which, I think, is essential for the betterment of the school level education and socio-cultural empowerment.

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