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## Theatre studies for professionalism: A call for secured future

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper highlights the current course and challenges the modern and traditional theatre practitioners in Nepal have faced, and the steps that the stakeholders need to take to herald professionalism in the field. Any step taken by them needs to be guided by the objective of creating economically sustainable ground for the theatre profession. This paper also briefly mentions my findings about the way the stakeholders of the performance culture of Bali, Indonesia have managed to secure a market for their traditional dance and drama forms in the context of tourism of both domestic and international order. In the new political and economic context of Nepal, modern and traditional theatre practitioners need to link their arts and crafts with the urban market. For this, the practitioners need to have access to higher studies and learn to conduct research activities warranted by the market-oriented nature of modern theatre, the paper concludes.*

Keywords: theatre studies, professionalism, urbanism, donor-dependency

### INTRODUCTION

Maithil artists had had significant impact on the performance cultures of the Valley in the medieval period, mainly from the thirteenth century to the eighteenth century. Many Maithil scholars who had contributed to the making of Newar social and cultural order of the day were gradually assimilated into Newar communities. On the contrary, only a handful Maithil artists practice modern Nepali theatre these days. Neither is their presence in mainstream modern Nepali theatre dominant nor has their Maithil theatre gained wider audiences across the cities in Nepal.

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Similarly, only a handful artists coming from the Newar speaking community make their presence in modern theatre activities of Kathmandu Valley, the land of the Newars. On the other hand, the Newars are credited for nurturing a vibrant performance arts and cultures. Abhi Subedi, a contemporary Nepali playwright points out that a group of Newar theatre artists practiced locally developed *pyakhan* or theatre, and also performed in the plays staged in the palaces of the Ranas. Importantly, the Newar artists also practiced theatre in their own language and also performed during the jattras and rituals (83-85). This was the phenomenon of the first half of the twentieth century. But such market oriented theatre and their practitioners do not make any force in the market at the present time. Artists coming from the linguistic and cultural communities such as Rai, Limbu, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Tharu make a force in modern Nepali theatre but they do not make any force in the theatre of their own community. Theatre artists associated with the government run centers like Nachghar and Nepal Academy as well as theatre artists running independent theatre centers have not been able to secure their profession economically as well. Theatre artists combining their talents with the social awareness issues promoted by I/NGOs also feel low for not being able to remain busy, for that matter, earning money throughout the year. These observations are important not only to radicalize the issues of the rights of indigenous artists but also to sensitize the issue of creating professionalism in modern theatre through providing them access to higher studies to the artists.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Neither the practitioners of traditional theatre such as Newari dance and drama of several centuries long history have been able to carve out financially safe and professionally sound career for them, nor have the artists of modern theatre having almost over eighty five years of history been able to live professionally and economically secured career. What could be the reasons behind it? I would like to address this very question not to solve the case but to open the debate that theatre practices in Nepal need to be connected with the market. Theatre practices in Nepal need to be seen as the site of investment, marketing and professionalism. Like any other sectors such as business and education sectors, theatrical practitioners also need the art and cultural policies executed in their favor. Importantly, theatre of both traditional and modern forms need to be accepted as the site of serious academic studies. For this, only the studies of advanced level can enable the practitioners of all kinds of theatre in Nepal to come up with ideas tuned with contemporary market developed by internal mobility of people caused by urbanization and the coming of the tourists because of global capitalism.

### **Research Gap**

Most of the books and articles written on the history of Nepali theater do highlight the academic characteristics of plays. With little biography of playwrights,

such works set out to classify plays in terms of genres and sub-genres. Since the trend in academia in Nepal and elsewhere is to interpret literature through various modern, postmodern and feminist perspectives, most of the research articles and books on Nepali plays and theatre focus on issues such as representation of Dalits, females and marginalized communities accordingly. On the other hand, the popular media often project modern theatre, artists and plays as the world of light and sound, visuals and romantic stories as it were. With the full page blown profiles of celebrity artists, the print medias celebrate its own popularity. I have not come across any serious academic papers written to highlight the problems that professionals in modern theatre have been going through mainly due to the lack of opportunity for higher academic studies. I would like to fill this very research gap by opening up a course for further discussion.

### **Methodology**

This paper borrows critical concepts from theatre scholars of the west and Nepal. Theatre artists need to hold practical and academic knowledge on various aspects of theatre art in an extensive manner is the mantra for their success. Evoking this very multiple features of modern theatre and the demand of critical theatre studies, Richard Schechner, a world famous American theatre director and theorist argues that modern theatre needs to be taken understood as entertaining service "offered at the edge of work days, "after work"", "mercantile process", and "a product itself of the working middle-class" (157). This means to say that theatre practices need to be addressed in terms of factors such as aesthetics, glamour, economy, technology, politics and pedagogy of the place. Theatre artists need to bring changes within to become able to expand their self and profession outside. They need to be exposed to a systematically designed academic program. Evoking this form of changes theatre studies in the West has gone through at its pedagogical level, Christopher B. Balme, a theatre studies expert remarks, "Since the middle of the 1980s, the call for an integrated approach to theatre studies has become increasingly audible. There are a number of reasons for this. An important one is the necessity to accommodate new works that transcend conventional generic boundaries" (04). Plays and theatrical performances have stood as subjects of aesthetic interpretation for ages. One thinks of genre and subgenre, schools of thoughts when the discussion of plays and theatre take place. But equally important is to define them now as part of political, economic and social context of society that the artists and the audience belong. We need to accept the fact that theatre is market oriented art. Richard Schechner makes the observation that "Competition is fierce among theaters - this competition is for customers not prizes; when prizes are given they are used to attract more customers. Regardless of their artistic quality, most shows fail (which means they don't attract buyers), but hits run as long as people will pay to see them. Thus, in all these ways, the proscenium theater is a model of

capitalism" (157). Schechner points out a fact the modern theatre did rise along with the capitalism. Therefore, it needs to be addressed as part and parcel of capitalism. This means to say artists need to be capable of knowing the market of their production and perform strategies to secure their profession along with staging plays and other performances for their audience. Susan Bennet, another renowned western theatre critic defines modern theatre as a cultural commodity: "Theatre as a cultural commodity is probably best understood as the result of its conditions of production and reception. The two elements of production and reception cannot be separated and an important area for further research is the relationship between the two for specific cultural environments, for specific types of theatre, and so on" (263). Bennet also points out the very market oriented nature is the main spirit of modern theatre in the late 1980s. Definitely, the market oriented nature of modern theatre has gone through changes over the decades. Mirna Leko Šimić, who has researched on the market-oriented nature of modern theatre in Croatia emphasizes that theatre creators and policy makers need to understand the nature of urban-based youths as the audience of their shows. These youths/ audiences come to be seen, to enjoy and also expect modern amenities around: "...we suggest focusing and deeper analysis of different profiles of young theatre audience and introduction of applicable level of flexibility in all elements of the marketing program, especially communication". Agreeing with Šimić, what can be said about theatre in Kathmandu is that the audiences, their ages, ethnicity and expectations about the amenities available need to be addressed by theatre group operators and artists.

Importantly, Chaitanya Mishra, a senior Nepali sociologist and Pitambar Sharma, a senior expert on urbanism in Nepal highlight the political economic journey that Nepali cities have been marching through in the current years. They highlight a fact that urbanization is taking place at a fast pace for good, and it is necessary to break the old notion of production and consumption of knowledge and art. Mishra points out the significance changes that the urbanization in Nepal is bringing in the domain of self and social relationship in Nepali society (13-15). In one of his articles published in the recent times, he emphasizes an important fact that Nepal is no longer a nation of the villages: "The rise of the urban culture has brought out the previously circumscribed sense of personal, political and economic possibilities and imagination. This applies to all rural dwellers, but in particular to Nepal's women, Dalits and other identity-marginalised. It is a different matter that not all are in a position to realise what they imagine". Mishra asks politicians and policy makers to accept the important changing fact about the nation they vow to bring changes and transformations. Urbanism expert, Pitambar Sharma reviewing the 2017 census and the demographic movement taking place in Nepal concludes that urbanization and the pattern it is creating needs to be taken very seriously by the policy makers: "The trends in the spatial shift of population also appears to be

well set in terms of the continuing movement from the hill-mountains to the Tarai, and from rural to urban areas” (56). I believe that the analysis and the views provided by Mishra and Sharma above need to be taken seriously by Nepali art and cultural policy makers. Importantly, theatre creators in Nepal should awake with such data about the shifts taking place in demography and the process of urbanization in Nepal.

### **Theater marketing: Youth market**

SEGMENTATION Nepali sociologist, Chaitanya Mishra points out the significant changes that urbanization in Nepal is bringing to the domain of self and social relationships in Nepali society (13-15). In one of his articles published in recent times, he emphasizes an important fact that Nepal is no longer a nation of villages. “The rise of the urban culture has brought out the previously circumscribed sense of personal, political, and economic possibilities and imagination. This applies to all rural dwellers, but in particular to Nepal’s women, Dalits, and other identity-marginalised. It is a different matter that not all are in a position to realize what they imagine”. Pitambar Sharma reviewing the 2017 census and the demographic movement taking place in Nepal concludes that urbanization and the pattern it is creating needs to be taken very seriously by the policy makers: “The trends in the spatial shift of population also appear to be well set in terms of the continuing movement from the hill-mountains to the Tarai, and from rural to urban areas” (56). I believe that the analysis and the views provided by Mishra and Sharma above need to be taken seriously by the Nepali art and cultural policy makers, and importantly, theatre creators in Nepal should awake with such data about the shifts taking place in demography and the process of urbanization in Nepal.

### **Back to the 1960s**

Any journey towards future is bound to recall the journey we have made so far. Nepal set out to institutionalize modern and traditional performing arts through establishing Naachgher and Royal Nepal academy among other art and cultural centers during 1950s - 1960s. This was also the period when the government indirectly curtailed the resources which had supported the productions of traditional performing arts and jatras of the Valley. The coming of Guthi Samsthan is regarded as the blow that the government did punch to the face of traditional performing arts of the Valley. With the new policies, the guthi and guthiyars started to lose their decision making power. This incongruous relationship between traditional arts and mode of art production and the modern nation caused a great cultural loss in Nepal. Since this was the period when the government under the Panchayati regime directly and indirectly promoted the one religion, one language and one culture policy, theatre in Nepali language became synonymous term for modern theatre in Nepal. Such policies the government passed and promulgated

did not create robust modern theatre in the cities of Nepal nor did they give any lease of life to traditional theatre of the land. I think it is necessary to evoke ancestors' soul, the policies passed by the panchayat regime before we move to plan for our safe future.

### **Knowing the present**

One of the driving forces of modern theatre in Kathmandu for some years is the practice of running three-months-long courses for the aspiring artists. A number of students applying for this short term course offered by major theatre groups has increased in Kathmandu, Pokhara and Dharan. On top of that the two Kathmandu-based theatre groups Shilpee and Mandala have started to offer one-year-long course on theatre studies as well. With this the number of trainers and teachers and teaching materials has increased. Mention should be made that the then Royal Nepal Academy offered similar kind of short term course to the aspiring artists in the 1970s. Rashtriya Nachghar has also been offering such course since the late 1990s. But despite almost a five-decade-long history of providing such short term course to the aspiring artists, no effort has been made to establish theatre studies as an academic subject at the university level in Nepal. As a result, only a handful academics on modern theatre studies are available in Nepal. I regard it as one of the most serious issue to be discussed by the stakeholders.

Modern theatre practices in Nepal begun in the premise of school. *Mukunda Indira* written by Balkrishna Sama in 1939 is regarded as the first modern play. Its staging at the premise of Durbar High School at Ranipokhari, Kathmandu is taken as the beginning of modern era in the domain of modern Nepali theatre. Similarly, the plays by Bhimnidhi Tiwari and Vijaya Malla were written for the school and college level students. Several of their plays were staged in the premise of college and schools as well. Later, when the Royal Nepal Academy, the Rashtriya Nachghar and the Education Ministry were established in 1950s, these very playwrights worked at these new established government run academic and theatre centers. When theatre artists with liberal ideas in the 1970s found it difficult to work with the Academy and the Nachghar in the context of party-less Panchayat regime (1960-1990), as they had to please the authority to get their performances staged, they set out to stage plays in the street. Soon they found I/NGOs ready to help them in the early 1980s. Ashesh Malla, the pioneer of modern street theatre is credited to link theatre practices in Nepal with I/NGOs. Along with that he also used street performances to raise political agendas of liberal nature. With the reintroduction of multiparty democracy in Nepal in 1990, theatre artists directly experienced the policies that the democratic government adopted to allow I/NGOs operate their activities in Nepal. This brief history of modern theatre centers in Kathmandu reveal one that theatre has been accepted as an academic and popular medium to modernize Nepali literature and disseminate social and political message across the

regions and communities, but it has not been taken as the subject of serious academic studies.

Though running such short term course was initiated by the then Royal Nepal Academy in the 1970s as recalled by Ashesh Malla and Sunil Pokharel and later given continuity by the Nepal Sanskritik Samsthan, Nachghar. But a greater flow of aspiring artists to such kind of course took place since 2003. Sunil Pokharel and Anup Baral opened up this avenues not only to generate income but also push modern theatre further down the road towards professionalism. The students getting enrolled in Aarohan Gurukul ran under the direction of Pokharel would be exposed to "dramatic literature, acting, voice and movement, visual arts and stagecraft, creative writing, directing, courses in Nepal's artistic traditions, theatre as politics, and personal growth as well as workshops, seminars, field trips, productions, and international exchanges" (Davis, 145). So did Baral from his Actor's Studio. Baral's Pratibimba's Actor's Studio has called for the admission for the three-month-long course taking place in Pokhara for this year as well too (Baral's Facebook). So have done Sunil Pokharel and Birendra Hamal under the banner of Aarohan Gurukul at Kunja theatre at Thapa Gaun (Pokharel's Facebook) for this season as well. Sarwanam theatre has also been running the course of same nature this year round at its Kalikasthan theatre too.

Students in their late teens and early twenties are found to apply for such courses. Exposed to the art and charm of performing plays in their school and college, they seem eager to study and practice more on the subject of their interest. Since many of them need to be provided training from basic level of understanding about theatre arts, theatre groups running such courses hire locally available senior directors, experienced choreographers, dramatist and dancers to operate classes and produce a play by the end of the course. During such courses, they are taught academically canonical essays on acting, choreography and history books of theatre from the East and the West (Personal Interview with Yubaraj Ghimire). They are provided training on physical exercises, breathing exercises and yoga. Rehearsal of a play is arranged for them. And, at the end of such course, students come up with the production of a play. These students are also found to be doing very good in the burgeoning field of Nepali cinemas as well.

### **No theatre studies**

Tribhuvan University provides higher studies on fine arts, dance and music for several decades now. Kathmandu University provides B.A. and M.A. in music for almost two decades. But no university in Nepal seems to be ready to offer higher education on theatre studies. Since the aspiring artists are found to be applying for such courses across cities from Kathmandu Valley to Pokhara and Dharan among others, and theatre trainers and teachers have been running such course for a regular basis for over two decades now, a certain potentiality for academic base and market structure of theatre studies in Nepal is sure to have developed.

Lack of exposure to academic studies in Nepal is one of the dominant reasons for the artists' suffering. Parachanda Malla, who had worked with all kinds of talents recall Gopinath Aryal and Bekhama Maharjan who were brilliant artists but could not manage to get good job because they had had no institutionally recognized academic degree (Malla, 115-120 ). Mentioned should be made here that they lived through tragic life because they did not manage to get job. Similarly, artists such as Sushila Rayamajhi writes in her autobiography that despite being liked by her fans and holding over four-decade-long acting career she had to live financially an unsecured retired life (Rayamajhi, 44). She worked for over three decades in Nachghar but lived a life that was full of uncertainty. On the other hand, Dambar Shamsher JBR and Manikman Tuladhar who were trained and exposed to modern theatrics in Calcutta in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are credited for providing greater dynamism to the theatre of the palace and beyond (79-80), Prachanda Malla writes. Malla himself had studied theatre in the USSR, and was credited for maintaining quality in the performances. Sunil Pokharel, Anup Baral and Bimal Subedi among other graduates on theatre studies from National School of Drama live a life of professionals. They have remained vocal and have become the gurus.

### **Donor dependency**

Nepali street theatre artists started staging plays to raise awareness for the donor organizations since the early years of 1980s. Sarwanam theatre group under the leadership of dramatist Ashesh Malla is credited for liberating Nepali theatre artists from the limited mode of production that the Royal Nepal Academy and Nachghar provided or offered to some officially selected artists. At such context, with the help of I/NGOs the Nepali theatre artists became more mobile and vocal. They developed mastery over of the medium to disseminate social awareness among locals across communities. But such mastery has over the medium has not made them economically independent. The almost 45 years-long history of working with I/NGOs has still placed down the path towards the villages. Mention should be made some theatre groups keep on touring around communities across the region and perform one or the other play for raising awareness one or the other I/NGOs throughout the year. No doubt, these artists in Nepal have developed mastery over the medium of expression. They have developed theatre forms such as kachahari, street, forum and so on. But their mastery over the medium of expression has not secured economically secure profession for them in the city. The need for upgrading with the technology warranted by modern theatrics still remains unfulfilled. The need for learning modes and manners of marketing their productions in new context still remains unaddressed. Importantly, the need for developing confidence through higher studies remains a far dream. The mantra is only a systematic training and higher studies can enable theatre artists to survive in



the market. The experience of working in theatre alone is not sufficient. For example, theatre artists associated with Naachghar and other government offices have almost thirty years long experiences but they have not been able to define themselves as movers and shakers of theatre in Nepal. Spending prime time of their career in such nationally recognized offices or art centers should have brought them opportunities to learn and pursue studies on the subjects of their interests. Thus, the need of higher studies.

Traditional theatre practitioners also gather once or twice a year in their communities to discuss and perform their dance and drama. Teachers and senior performers are still available in the community. As fellow members of the community, they arrive on assigned date and place perform the show for their deities and do the karma of maintaining the tradition. But little attention is paid to the fact that their arts and skills can have metropolis audiences on a regular basis. Traditional dance, drama and musical forms are rarely practiced outside the cultural occasions in Kathmandu metropolis. As a result, the size of its professional practitioners has always remained small. The ages old social and cultural organisations and foundations set to manage such art forms lack financial backup.

On the other hand, urbanisation has become a global or universal social and cultural experience. Villages where traditional dance and drama forms once were popular and practiced have become towns or are in a process of becoming urban zones, many of which have already become slum areas. Culturally, Nepalis belong to the era of globalisation, when it is argued that ethnicity can be created and traditional dance and drama forms can be invented and practiced. Culture either Western or Eastern, modern or traditional needs to be taken in its plural forms. Some traditional dance, drama and musical forms are practiced in different styles across the communities. Its practitioners also borrow styles and work accordingly. They also begin their careers as amateurs and gradually achieve a quality of professionals after years of training and performances. Some practitioners always remain better and more dynamic than the others. Some create and practice in new styles whereas others stop performing in no time. World of traditional performing art too functions and flourishes through the talents of the minds involved in it. Therefore, much depends on the quality of the minds of the artworlders here too.

Traditional performing art forms, by the very reason that they are performing arts, can survive only if they are performed regularly. When members of an art community form a group and start performing traditional dance, drama and musical forms on a regular basis, they do take part in rehearsals, create discourses, continue and create traditional forms. They feel pressurised for staging their art forms not in a mono-aesthetic style but in multiple forms. While doing this, they take an important adventure of exploring the domain of their art, culture and profession through inventing, discovering and reinterpreting traditional dance and drama forms. Only this culture of engaging within can create a new dynamism in

traditional performing culture. My nine-month-long research on the culture of performing traditional dance and dramas for the tourists in Bali, Indonesia has revealed to me that when practitioners themselves set to a journey of the above kind then only do they feel secure about their future, and expand and extend the very domain they work on and for, I argue in my book.

### **Danger of limited zone**

Both the students of modern theatre and the practitioners of traditional dance and musical forms in Nepal face a limited audience for their shows. Modern theatre practitioners struggle to draw the flow of audiences on a regular basis. They are productive but their productions have got limited zone of circulations. Similarly, practitioners of traditional theatre have talents and skills but their talents and skills are displayed as offering to the deities on certain occasions and places throughout the year, in some cases once in twelve years. These group of artists can learn from each other and expand their mode of creativity and also create the market for their talents. My research on the performance cultures of Bali, Indonesia has revealed to me the university graduate dancers and musicians and choreographers can work with the practitioners of traditional dance and music (Rijal, 107). Together they garner dynamism in their profession as they form a team and come out to perform for the tourists. With this, modern theatre practitioners can get the lucrative market underneath the banner of tourism both domestic and international. With this, traditional theatre practitioners can also get the metropolitan audiences on a regular basis. Modern and traditional theatre practitioners if they work together they can tap the market underneath the domestic and international tourism in Kathmandu as well. The Bali's case is a proof that the more the artists get engaged with the rehearsals and workshops, the greater incentive do they become.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is time practitioners of modern and traditional theatres drove through the crisis in Nepal. Time has come for them to locate the available human as well as non-human resources theatre centers have generated over the years both by independent theatre groups and the one run and managed by government centres. They need to locate available resources of traditional or paramparik performing arts and cultures across the nation. They need to collect data about the number of aspiring artists and know their expectations and plans. They need to open up dialogue with the pedagogues or education policy makers at government level, theatre centers, aspiring artists, cultural organizations such as guthi, and professional organizations such as Nepal Tourism Board, Hotel Association of Nepal and others. Together they can explore the possibility of creating market for the traditional as well as modern theatre. With the exposure to serious academic studies of choreography, art marketing, music, dance and lighting etc. the

practitioners of traditional theatre or performing arts can make break through and discoveries in their mode of expression, and with the training and academic studies on the traditional theatre studies and its histrionics, modern theatre practitioners in Nepal will be able to get rooted and carve out a safe passage to the market. With this, they can free themselves from all kinds of dependency.

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