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## Theatricality of the Body in *Bode Jatra*: A Study of the Tongue-Piercing Culture

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### Abstract

The present paper attempts to explore the body in relation to theatricality in *Bode Jatra*, the tongue-piercing festival of the Newar community in Bode, Bhaktapur. The study treats body as the territorial site to foreground how body performance becomes theatrical, taking the performance of *Bode Jatra*, the performativity of the tongue-piercing, as its text. The raving performance of tongue piercing generates an expression of cosmogonic consciousness. It encompasses the movement of the body both from micro and macro facet which constitutes the theatrical culmination. Therefore, performativity of the body becomes a trope that necessitates in studying the conception and evolution of theatre with the view that bodily performance is the epitome of theatricality which has hitherto remained veiled. The body which performs liminal in *Bode Jatra* exerts cosmogonic force that subverts the traditional hierarchy — the mundane world and the world of spirit.

**Keywords:** *Bode Jatra*, body, cosmogonic consciousness, performance, theatricality

### Introduction

Bode, a historical city, located on the northern side of Madhyapur Thimi Municipality, Bhaktapur, observes a festival called *Bisket Jatra* or *Biska Jatra*. The *Bisket Jatra* is mostly celebrated throughout the downtowns of the densely populated Newar community like Bhaktapur, Thimi, Bode, Tokha and Dhapasi of Kathmandu valley on the occasion of Nepali New Year, around mid-April every year. This *Bisket Jatra* incorporates a unique practice of tongue-piercing (*Jibro Chhedne* in the Nepali language) performance, which is called *Bode Jatra* (*Bode Festival*). Historically, Bode is identified by altered names in different context and time. A local historian Sajib Shrestha in *Aitihāsik Shahar Bode: Ek Parichaya (Historical City Bode: An Introduction)* opines that Bode is known as “sometimes *Bosing Gram*, sometimes *Bunde* and sometimes *Dhampuri*” (4-5). According to Shrestha, Bode has been named by a historical king

Subarna Malla in 633 (Nepal Sambat). In *Bode Jatra*, the local people celebrate the festival based on the myth of ghost, which used to terrify the locals. Later, they captured the ghost and pierced its tongue. Today's tongue piercer personifies the ghost that was captured by the local people in the past. However, the question of the different bodily activities of today's tongue piercer is still veiled. Therefore, this paper attempts to unveil the significance and appropriateness of these bodily activities of the tongue piercer. The body stands as a centre of performativity. In the various performances of *Bode Jatra*, bodily activities and body itself explicate theatricality. The paper primarily argues how the festival perceives the body and how the body demonstrates theatricality.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In *Sanskrit Drama in Performance*, Kapila Vatsyayan analyzes myriad aspects of Sanskrit Theatre and dance. According to her, the movement of the body communicates various forms of messages as she argues, "Movements of the body do not function alone, but rather a vehicle of communication within an artistic form which is a total amalgam of various media of expression" (49). Vatsyayan believes that the movement of the body carries the performativity and communication. Then, the movement of body acts as a catalyst between micro and macro movements. She further elucidates, "The methodology by which relationships are established between micro movements (facial and hands) and macro movements (those of head, chest, arms, legs) and the word (recited or sung), music (vocal or instrumental) and the metrical cycle is instrumental for theoretical formulation and creativity" (50). She considers the relationships of word, music and body movement as a medium to formulate the theory about performance and body.

Jerzy Grotowski defines the theatricality through his theory of 'poor theatre' in *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Grotowski believes that the theory of poor theatre values the performance of the actor and its relation with the spectators rather than costumes, décor and music. Grotowski clarifies, "Theatre can exist without makeup, without automatic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc." (19). Grotowski stresses on the perpetual relationship between actor and spectators. There should be 'live communication' between the actor and spectators rather than the beautification of the theatre. Grotowski juxtaposes between the poor and rich theatre. He further argues "The rich theatre depends on artistic kleptomania, drawing from other disciplines, constructing hybrid- spectacles, conglomerates without back-bone or integrity, yet presented as an organic art work" (19). Thus, according to Grotowski, the performance of the artists defines the richness or poorness of theatre rather than the outer look of the theatre. He claims that theatre values the performance of the actor and its relation with the spectator. Costumes, decor and music add more in the theatricality.

In regard to the poetics of performance, Richard Schechner provides different laws and principles of the performance in "Toward a Poetics of Performance". Schechner furnishes the definition of theatre and things to be done by the actor before and during the performance as he postulates:

At all levels theatre includes mechanisms for transformation. At the level of staging there are costumes and masks, exercises and incantations, incense and music, all designed to 'make-believe' in the literal sense- to help the performer make her/himself into another or being, existing at another time in another place, and to manifest this presence here and now, in this theatre, so that time and place are at least doubled. (163)

Schechner illuminates various techniques of transformation for the performer. All the rituals and techniques inspire the performer to offer real acting and to empathize the prevalent circumstance.

Like Schechner, Armin W. Geertz explores the relationship among brain, body and culture in his article “Brain, Body and Culture: A Biocultural Theory”. Geertz contends that rituals are one of the most dramatic ways to manipulate bodily and mental states. He explicates the techniques that are often used to manipulate are:

- Song, dance, clapping, swaying, jumping in the place, hopping;
- Diverse body postures such as bowing, strutting and prostration;
- Torture and violence in initiation, vision and mysticism rituals;
- Alcohol, drugs, fasting and extreme movement or mobility;
- Photic and sonic drive technique. (307)

According to Geertz, the practices of the ritual incorporate bodily activities. These activities illustrate the theatricality and continuity of cultural dynamics. These dramatic ways postulate the importance of body in the cultural performance.

Thus, Vatsyayan’s notions of micro and macro movements of the body reinforce to validate the theatricality of the body in *Bode Jatra*. Her projection of the relationship of words, music and body prevails in the tongue piercing culture of the *Bode Jatra*. Grotowski’s concept of poor culture solidifies the theatricality of the body. The tongue piercing culture of the Bode festival incorporates the poor theater aspect of Grotowski. It does not emphasize the sophisticated stage for the theatricality. It underlines the performance of the artists to identify the richness and poorness of the theater. Schechner and Geertz underscore the significance of the rituals to examine the theatricality of the body. In the same line, the tongue piercing culture accentuates the rituals as the tools to study how the ritualized body demonstrates the theatricality.

### Performing the Tongue-Piercing Event: An Analysis

The theatricality of the body in *Bode Jatra* begins with the celebration of *Bisket Jatra* or *Biska Jatra*. However, Bode celebrates the *Bisket Jatra* in the name of *Bode Jatra* in a spectacular and unique way by performing the tongue-piercing event. The *Bisket Jatra* celebration officially opens in Bode when the Gods *Bhairab* and *Bhadra Kali* are enshrined in their respective chariots/palanquins and pulled by the cheering crowds as shown in Figure 1. Sajib Shrestha narrates, “*Bisket* at Bode commences four days prior to the New Year of Nepali Calendar” (4). The festival starts on the first day of Baisakh, which is the Nepali New Year, which comes in the middle of April month.



Fig 1: People celebrating *Bisket Jatra* in Bhaktapur  
Source: Photo shoot by the author, 2022

The *Bode Jatra* assimilates the encounter of living and non-living. It subverts the traditional hierarchy of mundane and the world of spirits as Eugenio Barba notes, “Theatre is the place in which the living could meet the nonliving” (14). Barba means that theatre is not only the meeting of livings but also the meeting between living and non-living. On the first day of the festival, the priests (locally called *Thakuli* and *Nanki*) observe fasting to perform the special worship of Nilbarahi god. A procession goes to Nilbarahi temple from the house of *Guthiyar* [Trustee] by playing a musical instrument called *Nayakhin* or *Kasahi Baja* to perform a special worship of Nilbarahi as Geertz’s argument “song and dance” (307). This performance manipulates the bodily and mental states of the people of Bode. The statue of god of two *Mana* [about half kilogram] rice with the eyes of black beans and silver belt on the forehead is prepared to perform *Puja* [worship of a particular god]. The cock is slaughtered as a *Bali* [sacrifice by killing] to the god during the special *Puja*. The members of *Guthi* [Trust] return home after having *Samayabaji* [a typical Nepali food with beaten rice and beans]. The members of *Guthi* take special food of chicken. In this way, the performance of the first day reminds of the theatricality. The performance of the priests, including other rituals imparts the theatricality of meeting between living and non-living.

The Bode community exercises the cosmogonic practices during the time of festival. The cosmogonic consciousness prevails in the residents of Bode. Youths of Bode intend to continue the festival. They believe that this *Jatra* as the harbinger of their identity and continuity of their cultural phenomenon. The continuity of meeting between living and non-living remains on the second and the third day of *Bode Jatra* as well. The members of *Guthi* perform a special worship of goddess Kumari (a sacred unmarried deity). The special worship of goddess Kumari is similar to Nilbarahi puja. People perform similar activities as in the Nilbarahi puja. On the third day of *Bode Jatra*, the Kasahi community do a special puja of Mahalaxmi without any *Bali*. The Kasahi community should go to the Mahalaxmi temple to do *Puja* up to the third of Baisakha month of Nepali New Year.

The body of the individual turns into the theatre on the fourth day of the *Bode Jatra* onwards up to the last day of this festival. The day starts with *Puja* of goddess Mahalaxmi by the members of *Guthi*. They even offer ornaments to the goddess Mahalaxmi. Later, the members of *Guthi* erect the pole of Mahalaxmi on a direction of *Karmi Naike* [the main tongue-piercing person]. The Bode people observe feasting in the evening of the same day. The members of *Guthi* also bring the chariot of God Ganesh and make a procession around Bode with *Dhime Baja* [a typical musical instrument of Newars]. On the same day, the selection of the person who wants to pierce the tongue during the *Jatra* is made. A man of Bode usually volunteers undergo this sacred religious atonement. If not, one is chosen who did it in the previous year. This man has to undergo a strict ‘purification’ activities. He shaves his beard, eyebrows and hair. He stays alone in a room of his home. No person can touch and besmirch him. Even he is not allowed to touch ‘women’ during this period. He takes ‘clean’ food once a day. He does not take meat, garlic or salt during this time. The body undergoes in a ritualized mode. Moreover, he makes a movement of his tongue. The rehearsals of his tongue remain continuously up to the last performance. He develops his body as a stage. His body transforms into a focal point of attraction for the *Bode Jatra*.

The dramatic rehearsal, and the meeting of the living and nonliving exist in an interesting anecdote of the inception of *Bode Jatra*. In regard to this event, Schechner claims, “We are used to do rehearsals for weddings and other religious and civic ceremonies” (174). Schechner believes that the rehearsal provides a perfection for the

performance. The legend unveils the myth regarding its inception. In this context, Gurung in *Festivals & Fetes in Nepal* uncovers the myth as:

In an ancient time, once the inhabitants of Bode were very much terrified and frightened by a ghost. So they were very much desperate and unhappy. One day they decided to go at Tantric (soothsayer) named Bandhu Dutta Karmacharya. They requested him to set them free out of that agent. Soothsayer Bandhu Dutta calculated and blew his spiritual formula; and at last he succeeded to grab the ghost. (8)

The stated myth clearly shows the relation between self and ritual. Rituals stand as the vehicles for making and expressing self or other relations. The captured ghost represents the tongue piercer during the festival. The cosmogonic sense of *Bode Jatra* prevails throughout the festival in the mind of residents of Bode.



Fig 2: Juju Bhai Shrestha after tongue piercing in *Bode Jatra*

Source: Photo shoot by the author, 2022

The theatricality prevails even in the combination of the ritual and the body. The tongue piercer Juju Bhai (Fig. 2) himself claims that he continues the tradition to preserve the ritual and identity of Bode people. Geertz argues, “The torture of body torture illustrates the ritual” (307). Like Geertz, P. Gurung further unfolds amalgamation of the body and the ritual in the *Bode Jatra* as:

Later, people of Bode assembled there, and shaved the ghost’s head, tore his clothes and made him nude. After that they pierced his tongue along with a pointed iron’s file, and paraded him throughout the city for the punishment to his mischievous deed; that had hampered the inhabitants of the Bode village. Also he was tied with a torched wooden load on his shoulder in such a way that he was unable to escape from there. The ghost was very much afraid; and at last he requested the soothsayer to release him out from that punishment. (8)

In this description, the body and ritual merge together to unfurl the theatricality. The body of ghost transforms into the theatre. The myth of *Bode Jatra* reveals how the tongue piercing festival begins with an assortment of cultural performances.

The tongue-piercing festival embraces a significant place to explore the body as theatre. People celebrate this *Jatra* on the second day of Baisakh of Nepali New Year to commemorate the myth related to the ghost. In the same line, Anna Aalten remarks, “The body has become an important and well- respected subject of anthropological and sociological scholarship which makes in roads to the construction of theatre” (111).

Aalten clarifies that the body itself changes into theatre. In *Bode Jatra*, the second day of Baisakh exerts the specialty for the theatricality from early morning of the day. The body in *Bode Jatra* itself becomes the battle ground for the various types of theatrical performativity. The sound, choreography, structure, painted forms and light of the theatre hit upon the body as the source for the performance. The body performs with the sound of the theatre. The body starts to perform in tune with the choreography of the theatre.

On the same day, the tongue piercer takes holy bath and *Karmi Naike* and *Pradhan* [the traditional head man in the village] sprinkle a few drops of sacred water to the body of the tongue piercer. The people of Bode reach the different shrines of the god and goddess with *Dhimaya Baja* from the early morning. The fete embarks on from the Ganesh temple of Bode. A huge mass of local people and others assemble near the Bode High School and the Ganesh temple where a stage is prepared and a bow shaped wooden chakra [wheel] (which is also called *Mahadwip*) kept opposite to the stage, which is shouldered by the tongue-piercer. The tongue piercer goes to the different lanes of Bode and religious shrines by shouldering the *Mahadwip*. This event entralls the audience. In this sense, rituals act as the theatre guides and vice versa. On the day of tongue-piercing, Bode turns into theatre from early in the morning.



Fig 3: People enjoying *Bode Jatra*

Source: Photo shoot by the author, 2022

The Bode itself turns into theatre as Jerzy Grotowski develops the ideas of a poor and a rich theatre as he explains, “Theatre can exist without make-up, without automatic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area, without lighting and sound effects, etc.” (19). Locals engage in various rituals with *Dhimaya Baja*. People celebrate the festival by dancing and smearing vermilion. The whole Bode itself grows into a stage. The tongue piercer and local people act various types of performances. As shown in Figure 3, the climax comes around 10 or 11 in the morning on the second day of Baisakh when people of *Guthi* draw closer with *Dhimaya Baja*. It is followed by *Naike Pradhan* and *Karmi Naike* who turn up along with *Nayakhi Baja*. As they roll up to the stage, people set off to fetch Nakarmi, the architect of ten-inch-long iron file, which is dipped in an oil pot one month previously. Following the arrival of Nakarmi, people set out to bring the tongue-piercer for three times with *Nayakhi Baja*. Finally, the tongue-piercer clad with traditional costume who gets to *Pancho Ganesh* [a sacred place of Bode, western side of Bode]. His influx in the *Pancho Ganesh* brings thunders in the mass as the actors create enthusiasm and dimensions in the theatricality and audience.

While coming to the stage of *Pancho Ganesh*, people kindle oil lamps in the name of gods and goddesses. The *Naike Pradhan* worships the iron needle with flowers,

coins and rice. The *Karmi Naike* pierces the tongue of the man whose body gets ritualized for the last three days. The lamp of the Mahadwip [a flambean with multiple fiery torches] is kindled. Following kindling of the lamps, the tongue piercer parades different parts of Bode shouldering the *Chakra*. Finally, the *Karmi Naike* pulls out the iron needle from the mouth of the tongue piercer in the premises of Mahalaxmi Temple as the *Naike* puts some soil of Mahalaxmi Temple on the pierced tongue of the man. The iron needle is hammered on the Ganesh temple. After the iron needle is pulled out, the tongue piercer worships *Nateswor* [a temple of lord Shiva] and gets permission to eat. All the chariots of gods and goddesses are carried to the different lanes of Bode and are kept in the *Lachhi Tole* [the name of a street]. The priests worship all the gods of the chariots and are brought to the home of *Guthiyar* [Trustees] who turn to all activities for another year. In this way, the *Bode Jatra* comes to an end by expecting the same kind of festivity again.

In general, theatre is a place where events are staged and actions are enacted. During the *Bode Jatra*, the whole locality turns into theatre; the site of *Pancho Ganesh* at the centre of the town becomes the central stage on the day of tongue piercing. The town-turned-theatre blurs a distinction between nature and theatre. Richard Schechner explicates, “The first theatres were ceremonial centres—a part of hunting following food sources according to a seasonal schedule, meeting other human bands, celebrating and marking the celebrations by some kind of writing on a space: an integration of geography, calendar, social interaction and proclivity of people to transform nature into culture” (12). The transformation of nature into culture means to construct a theatre. The integration of geography and social interaction of *Bode Jatra* transforms into theatre. People not only from Bode but also around the valley including some foreigners gather and interact to celebrate the *Bode Jatra*.

The body stands at the centre of theatricality in *Bode Jatra*. In this case, Tadashi Suzuki enlightens the relationship between body and culture as he argues, “In naturalistic theatre, the body undergoes a conscious and voluntary transformation so that one person (actor) becomes a completely different-likely fictional-character” (61). In the same way, the tongue piercer performs many rituals like a fictional character. The *Karmi Naike* takes some ashes from the bonfire and places it on the forehead of the man on the third day of *Bode Jatra*. Fire is kindled in the locality of the tongue piercer to threaten the mythical ghost. He blesses him for the good omen so that he may not suffer from any kind of pain in the time of piercing. People believe that putting ashes on the forehead gives him a lot of spiritual encouragement in the time of piercing. All the theatrical activities concentrate on the body of the tongue piercer that forebodes itself as an important component for the evolution of theatre where the body plays a foundational role.

The *Bode Jatra* begins and ends with the people’s involuntary participation. People erupt and engage in the procession, concentrating on the body of the tongue piercer. Schechner reasons, “The pattern of gathering, performing and dispersing is a specifically theatrical pattern” (176). According to Schechner, the gathering, performing and dispersing of people for a special purpose indicate theatricality of the body. In addition, he further notes, “Eruptions and processions can occur simultaneously, especially when large number of people is involved and the leadership of a group is flexible” (178). Similarly, a large number of people erupt in the festival, but there is no fixed leadership although they perform myriad types of theatricality.

The *Bode Jatra* projects the body as a guide to celebrate the festival. Appropriating the view of Schechner, Victor Turner affirms that “body, brain and culture create a theatre where there is no fixed leader to guide the theatrical

performances, body itself is the guide” (221). Turner believes that the body, brain and culture move together to create theatre. In the same line, the body stands at the centre of *Bode Jatra*. From the beginning to the end of the *Bode Jatra*, the tongue piercer and his bodily activities ignite for the theatricality. The human body entails the trait of theatricality. It plays a crucial role for eruptions and processions as components of the theatre. Here, the body becomes the central point for the performativity of cultural phenomena. In addition, the body remains very flexible as the theatre moves ahead according to the choice of audience.

The festival brings the purified body and individual expression for the theatricality as Kapila Vatsayan argues, “Individual expression of the body is an important concept for the theatre” (55). The individual activities play an important role for the theatricality. The tongue piercer as a purified body has to move the tongue upside down from the beginning day of the festival. The movement of the parts of body renders the theatricality. Performativity of the body inculcates the soul of the theatre. Life-functions, experiences, movements and sounds of the theatre have a symbiotic relation with the body. In this sense, the recorded, structured, sculpted, written, choreographed, or painted forms have this symbiotic relationship.

The ritual practices continue in the *Bode Jatra* from the beginning day to the last day of the festival. Victor Turner, in this case, claims that theatre emerges out of ritual practices. He further states, “Theatre is one of the many inheritors of that great multifaceted system of rituals which embrace ideas and images of cosmos” (12). Rituals inculcate theatricality. In this festival, a selection of the tongue piercer, his purification culture, procession of chariots, worshipping of different gods and goddesses, and tongue piercing itself foreground the rituals of the *Jatra*. These rituals bring theatricality. These ritual practices help to unite the body with the cosmos. Gradually, the *Pancho Ganesh* develops into the stage where various types of rituals occur in the form of theatricality. After the *Kumari Jatra*, three chariots of *Ganesh*, two of *Nilbarahi* and one of *Mahalaxmi* are placed in contour in the streets of *Pancho Ganesh* after making them round of each streets of Bode. In the same line, Grotowski argues, “Theatre is an encounter between creative people” (57). Grotowski finds the theatricality in the encounter of the people. In the twilight of morning of the second day of Nepali New Year, the chariot of *Kumari* is brought from *Bishnughat* [ a name of place of Bode] to the *Pancho Ganesh* street in procession with other chariots to rejoice the much awaited tongue-piercing *Jatra* of Bode. These chariots not only stimulate the people to be there to glimpse the fair but also unveil the significance of body and rituals for the theatricality. They become the source of cosmogonic consciousness and ritual practices in Bode. The people who participate in the *Jatra* perform theatricality on their side. They participate actively with the bodily activities of the tongue piercer.

The body plays a very important part in the theatrical performances. The body is one such trope that brings the theatre on a par with the movements and performativity. Theatre is a spatial concept that creates a microcosm for the movement of the body. All the spectacles of performance are generated by the performers’ movement over the space defined by the religion-architectural formation that is the theatre. Kopila Vatsyayan analyzes myriad aspects of Sanskrit theatre and body movement or dance. Vatsyayan claims that the movement of the body communicates with various forms of messages. She further argues, “Movements of the body do not function alone, but rather a vehicle of communication within an artistic form which is a total amalgam of various media of expression” (49). Vatsyayan believes that the movement of body carries the performativity and communication. In the same way, the body of tongue piercer expresses the theatricality. In this way, the *Bode Jatra* gets completed with the tongue

piercing event. The locals of Bode want to keep it alive as they believe that it brings a good omen for them. They develop unconscious heroism by creating theatricality and bodily performance, which becomes a site for the dramatic spectacle.

### Conclusion

The festival *Bode Jatra* foregrounds the identity, joy and culture of Bode. The theatricality prevails in *Bode Jatra* from the first day to the last day of the festival. Especially, the tongue piercing event stays as a central site of the performance in the festival. The ritualized performativity of the body projects the theatricality through which performance is internalized. The cosmogonic consciousness of the people of Bode supports to enhance their cultural identity even in the modern and global cultures. This cultural practice remains as an symbol of Nepal to expand the national identity across the world. The photic and sonic techniques of the Bode ritual magnify the study of theatricality and culture. The personal and scenic techniques of the actor hit upon the theatricality. The gesture, pain, rehearsal, sound, costumes and language of the tongue piercer intensify the theatrical concept. The performativity of the body in *Bode Jatra* develops into a trope and trajectory for theatricality. Therefore, the *Bode Jatra* opens an avenue for further study about theatricality and role of body to escalate theatrical behavior and mannerism.

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