

## Multimodal Digital Stories of *Herne Katha* and Advocacy for Social Justice

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### ***Abstract***

This study examines selected, representative episodes of *Herne Katha*, a YouTube-based documentary series produced in Nepal in which the directors and presenters—Bidhya Chapagain and Kamal Kumar— disseminate the multimodal digital stories of ordinary Nepali people. I argue this as an example of accessible multimodal and digital story has afforded to amplify the voices of the marginalized communities thus the *Herne Katha* team has contributed to social justice by bring the stories to public perceptions. The study has two purposes: to examine rhetorical elements and multimodal strategies mobilized in the selected episodes from the series, and to examine how the episodes bring forth the narratives and articulate critical concerns surrounding pervasive social issues in Nepal. To this ends, thematic textual analysis and rhetorical analysis was conducted by deploying the key concepts pertaining to multimodality and digital storytelling. The discussion shows the affordances of multimodal components of digital stories to bring forth the most entrenched issues of social justice of Nepal, such as caste-based discrimination, gender abuse, alcoholism, superstition, political frustration, unemployment, and poverty. The study concludes that the effective use of multimodal digital components facilitates viewers' critical engagement with crucial social issues.

**Keywords:** Herne Katha, Digital Storytelling, Social Justice, Multimodality, Rhetorical Analysis

## Introduction

Digital storytelling has increasingly been recognized as crucial communicative practice in contemporary media ecologies, bringing the lived experiences of ordinary individuals to circulate beyond local contexts and enter broader public discourse (Lamber, 2013; Hartley & McWilliam, 2009). In Nepal, this mode of storytelling has taken on particular importance as digital platforms supplement and, in some cases, challenge traditional journalistic institutions (Shrestha, 2025; Pachhai, 2025). One of the most notable examples is *Herne Katha*, a YouTube-based documentary series produced by Tana Bana Digital and presented by Bidhya Chapagain and Kamal Kumar.

As its website states, the primary aim of *Herne Katha* is “to feature unheard, marginalized and silenced stories from Nepal. Each episode features a different part of Nepal where the local communities will tell us their stories – in their own words and in their own style” (*Herne Katha*, n.d.). The series began in 2018 when the former BBC journalists, Bidhya Chapagain and Kamal Kumar, who were previously the presenter and producer of the debate program *Sajha Sawal*, left mainstream journalism to pursue a more community-centered mode of story collection with the explicit intention of telling “the stories of common Nepali people” (*Onlinekhabar*, 2023, para. 5). Their commitment to documenting the lives of ordinary Nepali people shaped the series from the start, beginning with the inaugural episode, “Eauta Schoolko Katha,” which highlighted the experiences of Muslim girls at Umme Ammar Girls’ College in Kapilvastu district—a site that remains culturally sensitive and difficult for many journalists to access. Since then, *Herne Katha* has continued to publish its stories on YouTube as multimodal narratives.

The stories of *Herne Katha* are digital and multimodal, weaving together visual footage, voiceover narration, ambient sound, music, interviews, and on-screen text to construct meaning. This multimodal approach is not merely aesthetic—it is rhetorical. Chapagain and Kumar’s choices shape the framing of interview narratives, uphold participants’ autonomy and agency in telling their stories, use music to evoke particular moods, and employ voiceovers to provide context or background for the issues under discussion. Each decision influences how audiences interpret social issues and empathize with the storytellers. These rhetorical strategies are especially significant in a context where caste-based discrimination,

gender inequality, alcoholism, superstition, unemployment, and unequal access to infrastructure remain deeply entrenched.

Existing scholarship on digital storytelling and web documentaries highlights their potential to democratize representation, amplify marginalized voices, and foster civic engagement. Scholars have argued that multimodal digital narratives can circulate lived experiences beyond local communities and create new spaces for public deliberation (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009; Lamber, 2013). Despite this growing body of work, scholarly engagement with *Herne Katha* itself—particularly with its multimodal strategies and justice-oriented advocacy—remains limited. Although the series has garnered widespread public attention and is praised for exploring social issues, few studies have systematically examined how its production team mobilizes multimodal resources to intervene in social and political discourse. Given this influence, a systematic examination of *Herne Katha*'s multimodal strategies is both timely and essential in a media environment where multimodal texts are becoming increasingly popular among audiences. This gap is particularly notable given the series' influence on public debate, policy conversations, and community awareness in Nepal. Responding to this gap, this study analyzes the multimodal rhetorical choices employed in selected *Herne Katha* episodes and examines how these choices contribute to the series' advocacy for social justice.

The objective of this research is to examine how *Herne Katha* constructs its digital narratives to explore marginalized experiences and contribute to public conversations about social justice in Nepal. In that sense, this sheds light on the narrative strategies and social function of the series by analyzing selected episodes and the viewers' responses. Specifically, in my analysis and discussion I address the following two questions:

- What social issues are foregrounded in the selected stories, and what impact do they have on viewers regarding the issue of social justice?
- What multimodal rhetorical choices do the digital stories of *Herne Katha* incorporate, and why?

To address these research questions, this study investigates the purposively selected episodes that feature real participants narrating their experiences in their own voices and that foreground major social issues in Nepal, including

caste discrimination, gender violence, political disillusionment, alcoholism, unemployment, geographical marginalization, and poverty. The narratives are examined through thematic analysis, while their social impacts are explored through audience-response analysis based on viewers' comments. In addition, the study draws on theoretical perspectives on multimodal digital storytelling to examine its capacity to amplify marginalized voices and enhance storytellers' agency in the pursuit of social justice.

## Literature Review

This literature review positions my study of *Herne Katha* within the broader fields of digital storytelling, multimodality, and social-justice-oriented media practices. It examines how digital narratives are created, circulated, and interpreted, and how they operate as tools for advocacy and social change. Scholars have highlighted the capacity of digital stories to convey lived struggles and amplify marginalized voices. For instance, Mathews and Sunderland (2017) show that narratives grounded in the experiences of vulnerable or marginalized individuals can meaningfully influence policymaking and social-justice agendas when institutions engage with them in transformative ways. Building on this insight, this study treats *Herne Katha* not merely as a collection of expressive narratives but as a rhetorical vehicle capable of shaping public understanding, policy responses, and institutional practices. Despite growing attention to digital storytelling, there remains limited research on how multimodal media in South Asia, particularly Nepal, leverages narrative strategies to advocate for social justice—a gap this study addresses.

Furthermore, scholarship on digital storytelling normally stresses its potential to cultivate civic sense regarding the topic of social justice. Lambert (2013) and Couldry (2008) explained how personal digital stories shared through digital platforms can shape collective awareness and mobilize communities around the issues of injustices. Although these scholars did not write specifically about *Herne Katha*, their theoretical frameworks can help illuminate how the stories of the web documentary function rhetorically. These stories bring social ills by foregrounding the embodied experiences of ordinary people and invite both viewers and concerned agencies to reconsider the widely prevalent issues of caste, gender, poverty, unemployment, and state neglect.

Moreover, scholarship on digital storytelling often emphasizes its potential to cultivate civic awareness around social justice issues. Lambert (2013) and Couldry (2008) argue that personal digital stories shared on online platforms can shape collective understanding and mobilize communities to address injustices. While these scholars do not focus specifically on *Herne Katha*, their insights are helpful to read explore rhetorical force and function of this series. The series reports the embodied experiences of ordinary people, bringing social ills into view and inviting both viewers and concerned agencies to reconsider deep-seated issues of caste, gender, poverty, unemployment, and state neglect.

*Herne Katha* has emerged as one of the most influential web documentary series, serving as a narrative intervention in public discourses on social justice. Despite its strong social content and popularity among national and international audiences, scholarly research on the series and its social impact remains limited. Early attention came primarily from media outlets and viewers who praised its storytelling. Highlighting its growing influence, Guragain (2019) wrote in *The Kathmandu Post*, “Within a year of the team launching their audio-visual platform for storytelling, the channel has won hearts and set itself apart from the rest—mostly with intriguing stories of the common people’s suffering” (para. 8). Similarly, Karki (2021) emphasized the documentary’s resonance during national hardships: “Posted on YouTube and broadcast on Kantipur Television every alternate Tuesday at 6:30 pm, the web series *Herne Katha* has uplifting stories of struggle, survival, and triumph—a message especially important at a time when Nepalis are suffering such hardships” (para. 5). Both Guragain and Karki emphasize that *Herne Katha* gave voices to ordinary people so that they could present their embodied experiences of hardship and deprivation in their vernacular expressions.

Despite the series’ positive reception in mainstream media, only a limited number of academic studies have examined its social justice dimensions and multimodal features. Mijar (2025), for instance, emphasizing the media’s role in shaping social inclusion, argued that *Herne Katha* “provided platforms for marginalized communities to voice their concerns and experiences” (p. 18). Yet, his study does not engage with the multimodal elements central to the series’ storytelling strategies. Similarly, Khadra (2014) highlighted *Herne Katha*’s transformative role in Nepali media, noting that it foregrounds the hidden lives of people in remote regions of Nepal and “ventures past conventional media narratives to

highlight the lives of those usually missed by mainstream protection” (para. 1). Both studies underscore the series’ contribution to social advocacy, but neither fully addresses the interplay of multimodal techniques and rhetorical strategies that shape audience interpretation.

The multimodal nature of *Herne Katha* is central to its rhetorical power. This aspect has been briefly noted by Upadhyay (2019), who, citing Kamal Kumal, observed that the combination of words, audio, and visuals in video stories enhances their persuasive capacity, while the use of YouTube as a platform is cost-effective and enables wider circulation. However, Upadhyay’s study is limited to general observations and does not analyze how these multimodal elements are orchestrated to produce meaning or achieve specific rhetorical effects. My discussion of both journalistic and scholarly accounts highlights a critical gap in research on *Herne Katha*, particularly concerning its multimodal rhetorical strategies and its role in advancing social justice. This study addresses this gap by analyzing eight episodes through a thematic and rhetorical lens, demonstrating how *Herne Katha*’s digital stories function as powerful multimodal interventions, exploring the voices of marginalized people and communities.

### **Theoretical Framework: Multimodality and Digital Storytelling**

To link *Herne Katha* with a broader literature, it is necessary to review scholarship that defines multimodality, outlines digital storytelling (DST) methodologies, and explains their theoretical significance for social justice discourse. This theoretical review clarifies how multimodal resources shape meaning in digital stories and how DST functions as an advocacy tool for marginalized communities. Scholars of digital storytelling consistently emphasize that its power lies in its multimodal design and its capacity to elevate marginalized voices. Lambert (2013) identified multimodality as the foundation of digital storytelling, noting that “there are all kinds of stories in our lives that we can develop into multimodal pieces” (p. 19) through the orchestration of soundtracks, photos, and videos as core components. This understanding aligns with a broader definition of a digital story found in Belmihoub (2021), who argued that digital storytellers strategically manipulate online platforms to craft multimodal narratives blending pictures, audio, video, and voiceover to evoke agency and draw policymakers’ attention to community issues (pp. 8–10). Oliva et al. (2017) emphasized the spreadability and emotional impact of online video

storytelling, while Benson (2017) described YouTube's multimodal interface, which combines video, audio, text, numbers, and interactive icons.

Scholars have shed light on digital stories' potential to help storytellers assert agency, claim visibility, express experiential events of injustices, and challenge inequitable power structures. Belmioub (2021) explained that DST is widely used in communities to assert agency and raise voices for social justice. Wachowich and Scobie (2010) showed how youth use online spaces to demand public voice. Hill (2023) argued that DST aims to eliminate oppression, cultivate agency, and establish equitable power dynamics by empowering storytellers. Waycott et al. (2017) discussed how DST gives voice to invisible or vulnerable community members. Dusi and Razzoli (2019) noted that digital documentary projects record biographical narratives of victims, such as migrants, creating "an emphatic media experience" (p. 91) through documentary modes that present people as real and grant them voice, identity, and moral standing. Juppi (2017) similarly underscored how autobiographical digital stories raise awareness and empower communities to address their own problems. Lambert (2013) likewise observed that individuals and communities are increasingly recognizing "the power of their own voice in the media" (p. 4) and expressing themselves through new digital platforms. Individual and community narratives gain further rhetorical force through what Papacharissi (2015) termed "affective publics," digitally connected audiences whose shared affective engagement with stories sparks social change. Their mobilized emotional intensity amplifies awareness of events and issues and generates micro-narratives that disrupt dominant discourses. Couldry (2008) likewise argued that DST enables individuals to circulate personally meaningful stories and represent themselves as social and political agents. Canella (2017) explained how digital media and documentary practices frame and distribute messages of social justice, capturing symbolic power.

These multimodal and justice-oriented affordances further clarify Chapagain and Kumar's decision to publish *Herne Katha* on YouTube. When the first episode was released on 1 March 2018, the producers described the series as telling "stories of common people in the format of short documentaries" (*Herne Katha*). The series pronounced it objective from the very first episode: a story on Muslim girls confined within a madrasa, demonstrating the series' journey is the journey to advocate for

social justice. The series quickly attracted attention for its fusion of music, audio, visuals, and subtitles, as well as for its focus on marginalized communities.

### Study Method

This qualitative study draws eight episodes from a larger corpus of 157 *Herne Katha* episodes produced up to the end of 2025. The selection was guided by the relevance and gravity of the social concerns depicted in the narratives, such as caste discrimination, sexual abuse, poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural deprivation. The analysis combines thematic interpretation of the narrative content with attention to the multimodal composition of the digital stories and their social reception. Following coding and thematic analysis framework suggested by Saldaña (2013) and Geisler and Swarts (2019), I examined the verbal narratives and organized them into major thematic categories supported by textual evidence from the episodes. The verbal content, drawn from subtitles and supplemented by my own translation from Nepali, was analyzed to identify recurring patterns and meanings within the participants' stories. In addition to the verbal narratives, the study interprets the multimodal elements of the episodes—such as visuals, voiceover narration, ambient sound, and music—taking into account their rhetorical functions in relation to context, genre, purpose, and audience. This approach helps explain how the production team structures the episodes and enhances their credibility and emotional resonance. The analysis also situates the issues raised in these digital stories within the broader socio-cultural context of Nepal by providing relevant background information. Furthermore, selected viewers' comments written in both Nepali and English are incorporated to illustrate how audiences interpret the episodes and respond to the social issues they present. Through this combined thematic, multimodal, and audience-response analysis, the study identifies seven recurring themes and six rhetorical features that constitute *Herne Katha* a digital storytelling that advocates for marginalized voices and highlight struggles for social justice.

### An Overview of Selected Episodes

*Herne Katha*, produced by Tana Bana Digital has released 157 episodes by December 2025. From this corpus, eight episodes—“Eauta Schoolko Katha,” “Eauta Adhyaro Katha,” “Rauteka Katha,” “Biteka Katha,” “Baghko Bangara,” “Kumaon ko Katha,” “Ausadhiko Aspatal Yatra,” and “(A)Safaltako Katha”—were purposively selected with an attention to

Nepal's most pressing social issues, such as caste-based discrimination, gender violence, child marriage, unemployment, poverty, superstition, and infrastructural deprivation. These issues in Nepal are deeply intertwined and convoluted intersecting each other.

“Eauta Schoolko Katha” documents the lives of Muslim girls confined within a *Madrassa* in Kapilvastu, revealing gendered religious schooling, limited mobility, and the restricted futures available to these girls. The narrative clarifies how religious conservatism, lack of mainstream educational access, and patriarchal norms shape marginalized identities. Shamim (2023) similarly argued that integrating *Madrassa* curricula into mainstream education is hindered by economic constraints, lack of awareness, conservative parental attitudes, and linguistic barriers. “Eauta Adhyaro Katha” foregrounds the generational exploitation of Badi women in Kailali, whose lives have long been shaped by prostitution. The storytellers recount experiences of gang rape, physical abuse, underpayment, and the trauma of raising fatherless children. Their narratives reveal entrenched caste discrimination, sexual violence, poverty, and illiteracy. Cox (1990) likewise noted the historical commodification of Badi women, stressing that girls are socialized from childhood to expect a life of prostitution. “Rauteka Katha” portrays the Raute, a nomadic Indigenous community facing homelessness, superstition, alcoholism, child marriage, and conflict with settled populations. Derkx et al. (2024) reported similar challenges, including crop-damage disputes and misuse of government allowances on low-quality alcohol.

Additionally, “Biteka Katha” revisits the Maoist insurgency, capturing the former militia's unfulfilled revolutionary aspirations because of corrupt leadership. The episode also depicts their wartime losses, political disillusionment, and present-day struggles for survival. “Kumaon ko Katha” (Story of Kumaon) explores labor migration from Bajura and neighboring districts to India for low-paying work. Adhikari et al. (2023) estimated that at least one million Nepali migrants are there. The episode highlights poverty, humiliation, and chronic unemployment. “Baghko Bangara” (The Tiger's Jaw) records the experiential stories of honey hunters who risk their lives scaling cliffs with rudimentary tools. Their story reveals extreme poverty, superstition, and the perilous nature of traditional honey harvesting. Gautam (2023) similarly emphasized the life-threatening risks involved in harvesting honey hidden in the heights. “Ausadhiko Aspatal Yatra” (Journey of Medicine to Hospital) depicts porters transporting

medicines and a refrigerator to a remote hospital in Mugu, illustrating infrastructural deprivation and limited access to basic healthcare. Finally, “(A)Safaltako Katha” (Story of [Un]success) portrays a Brahmin farmer facing caste-based exclusion for raising pigs. It also depicts his financial loss due to the swine flu and resilience, optimism, and defiance against the caste system amidst failures. Collectively, these episodes illuminate *Herne Katha*’s mission of amplifying marginalized voices and exposing systemic inequities across Nepal.

### **Thematic Analysis**

In this section, I present a textual analysis of selected episodes of *Herne Katha* to highlight the key seven themes: caste discrimination, alcoholism, unemployment, infrastructure deprivation, political disillusionment, superstition, and poverty.

#### ***Caste-based Abuse and Discrimination***

The selected episodes reveal persistent forms of caste-based discrimination embedded in everyday social relations in Nepal. The narratives of marginalized communities particularly expose how caste hierarchies regulate social interaction, marriage, labor, and dignity. A Badi woman, who has been requested to tell her story, describes the exploitation of her community, stating, “high caste men got sexual pleasure from us, became fathers, but did not accept children as their own” (“Eauta Adhyaro Katha,” 4:00–5:00). This statement reflects how caste and gender intersect to produce systemic injustice. She further mentions the severe social exclusion faced by Badi women: “Nobody wanted to marry Badi girls. Even people did not allow them touch water . . . Anyone who dared to marry a Badi girl had to leave their village and flee away” (“Eauta Adhyaro Katha,” 6:00–7:00). Similarly, Radhika BK, a former militia member of Maoist Insurgency, reflects on the enduring nature of caste discrimination by stating, “Casteism was worse than now. When will we be free from it?” (“Biteka Katha,” 16:00–17:00). Caste norms also shape occupational expectations, as Bhim Luitel, a Brahmin framer who has made unconventional and controversial choice of pig husbandry, expresses concern about social judgment when he raises pigs’: “What can I do? If I panic and leave, society will say, ‘See? A Brahmin cannot raise pigs. If I panic and leave now, that will be proven” (“(A)safaltako Katha,” 10:00–11:00). Together, these testimonies reveal how caste continues to regulate personal identity, livelihood, and social belonging.

### ***Alcoholism***

Alcohol consumption emerges as a recurring social concern in marginalized communities depicted in the episodes. The narratives suggest that alcohol use is normalized from an early age and is closely linked with social and economic conditions. Birkha Shahi, a Raute boy, openly acknowledges the normalization of drinking in his community, saying, “When you revisit, please bring me a bottle of alcohol.... Yes, I’ve taken a bit... We drink from an early age. Even those who are younger than me take some. The infants have also tasted it” (“Rauteka Katha,” 13:00–16:00). This statement indicates how alcohol consumption becomes embedded in daily life across generations. Community leaders also highlight its broader social implications. A local primary school headmaster explains, “The major problem of this community is consuming alcohol. They consume alcohol from the monthly allowance given by the government” (“Rauteka Katha,” 19:00–20:00). These perspectives suggest that alcoholism is not merely an individual habit, but a community-level issue shaped by structural conditions and social practices.

### ***Unemployment and Obligation for Foreign Employment***

Another prominent theme across the episodes is the lack of employment opportunities in Nepal, which pushes many individuals to seek work abroad. Foreign employment often appears as the only viable option for economic survival. Hemanta Rumba, an ex-militia who used to play musical instruments and sing revolutionary songs to inspire others during the Maoist Insurgency, explains the inevitability of migration by stating, “The only choice we had was foreign employment.... I lived in Saudi Arabia for about 30 months in the fuming heat of Saudi Arabia” (“Biteka Katha,” 12:00–13:00). Similarly, Shyam Sundar Thapaliya notes the collective nature of this decision: “We had to look after our family .... So many friends went abroad” (“Biteka Katha,” 13:00–14:00). Narratives in the episodes also portray migration as a journey filled with both sacrifice and hope. Bhim Luitel’s story illustrates this duality, as he quit the army, worked in Saudi Arabia, paid his family loans, and “with 4 lakhs in hand, and millions of dreams in his eyes, Bhim returned to Nepal” (Bidhya’s voiceover, “(A)safaltako Katha,” 0:01–2:30). The long history of labor migration is also acknowledged: “It has been generations since people left the mountains of sorrow in Nepal to find happiness in the mountains of India” (Bidhya’s voiceover, “Kumaon ko Katha,” 0:01–1:00). These

narratives portray foreign employment as both a necessity and a reflection of deeper structural inequalities.

### ***Infrastructure Deprivation***

The episodes highlight the severe infrastructural challenges faced by remote communities in Nepal. Poor transportation limited economic opportunities, and a lack of basic services creates significant hardships in everyday life. One participant expresses frustration about the absence of development, stating, “If there was a way to make a living in our country, if the infrastructures were good, I would have stayed back. Why would I come to a foreign land?” (“Kumaon ko Katha,” 3:00–3:30). Similarly, a Nepali porter describes the structural limitations of the national economy: “Nepal does not have an economy. There is no production, no industries.... You cannot earn a single rupee in Nepal.... There is no irrigation during drought” (“Kumaon ko Katha,” 17:00–21:00). The logistical difficulties of delivering basic goods further illustrate this deprivation. As the narrator explains, “Rations for 12 villages in Mugum Karmarong municipality are carried from Chhayla by either humans or mules. Even medicines ride the mules to get to the villages” (Bidhya’s voiceover, “Aushadhiko Aspatal Yatra,” 0:01–1:00). The geographical isolation of the region is emphasized when Bali Thapa notes that “Of all the municipalities in the district, Mugum Karmarong has the largest geographical area. The municipality has not touched a single motor road...there are no motor roads connected” (“Aushadhiko Aspatal Yatra,” 20:00–24:00). Similarly, Kumar describes the physical dangers of traveling in such terrain: “We felt like someone had thrown an inexperienced swimmer into a lake.... If our hands and feet left the ground, we could have fallen hundreds of meters down” (“Baghko Bangara,” 12:00–14:00). These accounts illustrate how infrastructural deprivation shapes the daily struggles of people living in remote areas.

### ***Political Betrayal and Dissatisfaction***

The narratives also reflect a sense of political disillusionment among individuals who once believed in promises of social transformation. Many people express disappointment with political leaders and movements that failed to deliver meaningful change. Hemanta Rumba observes the contrast between leaders and ordinary supporters, stating, “The leaders who used to walk for the change of nation are in a different situation... the party members of lower level, our situation never got any better” (“Biteka Katha,” 13:00–14:00). Similarly, Radhika BK reflects on the unfulfilled

promises of revolutionary change: “All the dreams (hopes of great changes, liberation from casteism and oppression) we had, they weren’t fulfilled my economic condition got worse” (“Biteka Kura,” 19:00–20:00). Sangam Rai further expresses regret about his past sacrifices, noting, “My past life I lived for someone else who stepped on our backs and got to the power. But for the country, it feels like I did nothing” (“Biteka Katha,” 36:00–38:00). These testimonies demonstrate how political movements that once mobilized hope have, for many participants, resulted in feelings of betrayal and marginalization.

### ***Superstition***

Traditional beliefs and spiritual practices also appear prominently in the episodes, reflecting the cultural frameworks through which communities interpret illness, misfortune, and success. For example, in the Raute community, traditional healing practices remain common. One Raute man explains, “We use herbs and our traditional healer ‘blows mantra’ in the painful areas of the body when we have aches” (“Rauteka Katha,” 24:00–26:00). Similarly, honey hunters describe ritual practices performed before collecting honey, stating, “That’s why he (Dhami/Shaman) gets rid of ghosts and spirits on us.... ‘Oh Lord of Deurali! We hope you get what you want. Many things go smoothly when we harvest the honey. May we not suffer. We make ‘Tate’, offer it. We wash the feet of the hen. Then we make the sacrifice’” (“Baghko Bangara,” 24:00–30:00). These accounts illustrate how spiritual beliefs and rituals function as coping mechanisms that provide psychological assurance and cultural continuity within challenging environments.

### ***Poverty***

Poverty emerges as a fundamental condition underlying many of the social issues depicted in the episodes. Economic hardship compels individuals to take risks and adopt survival strategies. A honey hunter explains the dangerous work he undertakes, saying, “Of course, we get scared! But what can you do with fear? Maybe I could make some money. I need to take care of my family. So, we have to come. What can we do otherwise?” (“Baghko Bangara,” 19:00–21:00). This statement reflects the economic pressures that force individuals into risky livelihoods. Poverty is also discussed from an external perspective by a local school headmaster, who comments on changing occupational patterns: “They love becoming beggars.... Most of them have already left their family occupations”

(“Rauteka Kiatha,” 19:00–20:00). Together, these narratives reveal how economic deprivation shapes decisions, livelihoods, and social perceptions within marginalized communities.

The analysis of selected Herne Katha episodes reveals recurring social issues such as caste-based discrimination, poverty, unemployment, infrastructural deprivation, and political dissatisfaction. The narratives show how structural inequalities continue to shape the everyday lives of marginalized communities, often forcing individuals to migrate for work or adopt risky livelihoods. At the same time, traditional beliefs and community practices remain important coping mechanisms. Overall, these stories highlight the complex social, economic, and cultural challenges faced by many people in contemporary Nepal. All the themes get reinforced by audience comments, too. In the comment sections, viewers frequently frame the stories as evidence of systemic injustice, expressing empathy for marginalized groups and urging governmental or community intervention. For instance, responses to “Eauta Schoolko Katha” highlight concerns about Muslim girls’ restricted access to education, with commenters calling for collaboration among religious leaders and the state to ensure educational equity. Similarly, reactions to “Eauta Adhyaro Katha” emphasize the emotional weight of the Badi community’s struggles, with viewers advocating for educational and economic reforms to break cycles of exploitation. In “Rauteka Katha”, viewers mainly express strong sympathy for the precarious living conditions of the Rautes, calling for improvement, while in “Biteka Katha, most comments focus on the disillusionment and unfulfilled promises experienced by former Maoist combatants, and several viewers also condemn political leaders for abandoning the very people who fought for them. In the comments section of “A(safakta)ko Katha,” viewers admire the featured farmer for his resilience, work ethic, and progressive views on labor and caste. Collectively, these comments function as a public discourse space where viewers interpret the stories as catalysts for social awareness and justice-oriented reflection.

### **Rhetorical Analysis**

Examining the selected episodes, their social content, and impacts on viewers in the form of comments, I have found that the directors, Chapagain and Kumar, have purposefully incorporated some basic components of rhetorical analysis in their multimodal digital stories to

enhance their persuasiveness and authenticity as well as to engage the viewers in social justice agendas.

### ***Multimodal Choices***

In *Herne Katha*, multimodal components are beautifully fused in all stories, and these components have enhanced the rhetorical appeals of the stories. In all selected episodes, the use of video, natural speech, voiceover, English subtitles, local folk songs or hymns, and occasional music are some common multimodal choices the directors have made to augment the effectiveness of every digital story. In the current digital age, people prefer watching stories to reading them. The natural speech of commentators and storytellers adds to the authenticity of the stories being narrated. English subtitles are used to reach international viewers as well as to globalize the raised issues. Local songs are used mainly for two purposes: first, for entertaining the audience through music, and second, for letting the characters or subjects tell their stories through songs. For example, in “Eauta Schoolko Katha”, Sayaza Naziz’s singing “Tarana” (God’s Prayer) reflects Muslim religious practice as well as makes the video sound sonorous. In “Baghko Bangara,” the honey hunters sing to entertain each other and to tell their feelings about nature. In some episodes like “Eauta Adhyaro Katha” and “Baghko Bangara”, the choice of music creates the mood according to the nature of the story. In “Eauta Adhyaro Katha”, sad music reflects both the Badi women’s wretched condition and the physical and mental agony they experience as sex workers. In “Baghko Bangra”, music reflects the fear and threat that honey hunters and production team members feel while walking along the edge of the slopy and dangerous cliff.

### ***Audience***

The target audience members of *Herne Katha* consist of both national and international audiences. Nepali is the main language used as voiceover and to tell personal stories by characters of episodes. However, English subtitles in every video imply that the directors want to globalize the issues of Nepal by appealing to international audiences as well. English subtitles are available for all selected episodes but “Eauta Adhyaro Katha”.

### ***Genres***

The common genres used in most cases are voiceover, informal interviews, and anecdotes. Voiceover is used mainly to give background

information about storytellers and the settings of the stories. For example, in “(A)safaltako Katha”, Bidhya starts the documentary by giving a short background of Bhim Luitel, the main storyteller, through voiceover, thus: “After being crushed by the war and the weight of loans, Bhim Luitel...resigned from his new job at the army in 2060 BS to go abroad and work in the Gulf” (0:00 -1:00). Voiceover is also used to fill out the gap in the continuity of the story, to introduce new characters, or to add new information. The directors use informal interviews to ease the characters or storytellers to tell their stories without hesitation. The talk between the directors and storytellers is so informal that it seems as if they have known each other for a long time. Letting storytellers tell stories without intervention allows them to assert their agency. It also adds to the validity and authenticity of the stories. For example, in “Eauta Schoolko Katha”, Bidhya behaves with the Muslim girls in a friendly manner and makes them frankly share their fears and dreams. Anecdotes are used by most storytellers to tell their stories of hardships, struggles, and triumphs. For instance, in “Biteka Katha”, all ex-militia tell their anecdotal narratives to link their experience with present conditions.

### ***Context***

All social issues raised in web series have been contextualized in the places of origin. Both Chapagain and Kumar visit different locations in the country to collect the stories. First, they identify an issue in a certain place; then, they visit the place, meet the real people who experience the issue, mingle with them, become friendly, talk with them informally, and prepare a video recording of the conversation (*Onlinekhabar*, 2023). In some cases, like “Baghko Bangara,” they also take risks of experiencing what the storytellers do regularly. Their stories are not fabricated or propagandistic, but real ones told by real people. The video recording of the locations and activities of the characters also authenticates the content presented. For example, the production team of *Herne Katha* visited Kapilvastu to record the stories of the Muslim girls in “Eauta Schoolko Katha” and went to the remote location of Mugu district to prepare the story of “Aushadhiko Aspatal Yatra” featuring the people who experience infrastructure deprivation.

### ***Purposes***

The foregrounded social issues indicate that the purposes of web series can be to raise awareness among people about the gravity of the problems,

to demonstrate to the government and related agencies that the problems are real, urgent, and need to be addressed, and thus to establish democratic ideals of social equity and justice. For example, in “Eauta Adhyaro Katha”, issues like caste-based discrimination and poverty of the Badi community have been brought to light. In “Aushadhiko Aspatal Yatra”, the infrastructure deprivation and its impact on the delivery of basic goods like medicines have been powerfully portrayed. “Kumaon ko Katha” was produced to show the plight of Nepali people in a town of India where they are forced to do low-paying, hard jobs.

### ***Rhetorical and Ethical Considerations***

The production team of *Herne Katha* is very careful about other aspects of digital storytelling. In the case of “Eauta Adhyaro Katha”, the faces of Badi women are hidden from the reach of the camera, and some scenes are intentionally blurred for the safety and privacy of their family members. In the same episode, a dark room is chosen for the interview. It has symbolic meaning as it connotes the dark, unhappy, and tragic lives of the unfortunate. They have shown their creativity in camera focus, capturing panoramic views, and trivial details to make their stories more intense and interesting. For example, in “Bhagako Bangara,” the location has been filmed in such a way that whatever characters do to reach the destination and to collect honey, each moment creates a chilling sensation in viewers, stressing the risks involved in honey collection.

Collectively, these multimodal, rhetorical, and ethical choices demonstrate that *Herne Katha* is not merely a documentary series, but a purposeful enactment of multimodal digital storytelling as theorized by scholars such as Lambert (2013) and Benson (2017). By orchestrating visual footage, natural speech, interviews, subtitles, music, and real-life settings into a cohesive narrative design, Chapagain and Kumar transform everyday experiences of marginalized Nepalis into compelling public stories that circulate across digital platforms. This multimodal immersion not only enhances rhetorical appeals such as authenticity, credibility, and emotional resonance but also mobilizes audiences toward social awareness and civic empathy. Ultimately, the series exemplifies how digital storytelling, when grounded in ethical representation and multimodal design, can function as a powerful rhetorical practice for social justice, one that amplifies marginalized voices, challenges structural inequities, and invites viewers into a shared moral responsibility. In this way, *Herne Katha*

stands as a model for how multimodal narratives can reshape public discourse by making the invisible visible and the unheard heard.

## Discussion

The findings from the textual and rhetorical analyses demonstrate that *Herne Katha* operates as a social justice-oriented digital documentary that documents, interprets, and circulates the lived realities of marginalized Nepali communities or groups by using YouTube as a digital platform. Across the purposively selected eight episodes, the recurrence of themes caste-based discrimination, alcoholism, unemployment, and foreign labor migration, infrastructural deprivation, political disillusionment and betrayal, superstition, and poverty reveals a patterned social landscape marked by structural inequities and injustices, political neglect, and policy-level failures. Although the stories originate from geographically dispersed regions of Nepal, their thematic convergence also reflects the series' broader narrative intention: to foreground the voices of ordinary Nepali people whose experiences are often excluded from media and policy discourse.

The rhetorical analysis further illustrates how the directors' choices amplify the persuasive force and authenticity of the narratives. The integration of natural speech, voiceover, English subtitles, local songs, and ambient soundscapes creates a communicative environment in which viewers encounter not only the content of the stories but also their affective textures that shape the storytellers' embodied experiences. Rhetorically, these multimodal strategies also function as rhetorical appeals *ethos* emerges through the credibility of the narratives told by real people in their own words with minimal intervention of interviewers; *pathos* arises from the emotional resonance created by music, local songs, expressive gestures and speech of the storytellers, and at times voiceover of the presenters; and *logos* is maintained through contextualized explanations provided primarily by voiceover. Additionally, the directors' informal interviewing style and their physical presence in the storied landscapes bolster the *ethos* of the documentary by showing relational engagement rather than detached observation.

The dual-audience orientation through the use of Nepali and English positions *Herne Katha* as both a national mirror and an international gaze, inviting broader publics to watch and respond to Nepal's social ills that are sickening Nepali communities. The main genres used in the selected stories,

such as voiceover, informal interviews, and anecdotal stories, make the stories more accessible, emotionally compelling, and contextually well-grounded. Taken together, the thematic and rhetorical analyses of *Herne Katha* illuminate that it is not merely a web documentary but a form of participatory digital storytelling that uses narrative as a medium to discuss social issues and advocate social justice. By centering marginalized voices and presenting their stories through multimodal formats, *Herne Katha* serves as a space to share the hidden stories of sidelined communities and bring forth their experiences and everyday realities.

## Conclusion

*Herne Katha* employs YouTube as platform to tell stories digitally and document and circulate multimodal narratives of the lived experiences of marginalized Nepali communities. The thematic analysis of the selected episodes demonstrated a consistent pattern of social issues that cut across geographical and demographic boundaries across Nepal. These repeated themes highlight the systemic nature of social injustices in Nepal and underscore the exigency of policy-level and civic interventions. The rhetorical analysis shows that the documentary's persuasive power lies in its multimodal design and its narrative authenticity supported by multimodal components. The natural speech of the storytellers, the filming of local landscapes, the fusion of locally emerged folk songs, and transitional music, English subtitles, and voiceover of the directors make the stories both engaging and emotionally compelling. The field-based, relational approach to interviewing allows storytellers to assert agency and narrate their experiential realities in their own voices, which increases both credibility of the stories and ethical integrity of the presenters. Hence, *Herne Katha* exemplifies how digital storytelling can function as a form of grassroots journalism and social advocacy for justice. By amplifying silenced voices and presenting the stories of marginalized groups with respect and rhetorical care, the web documentary series invites both national and international viewers to recognize social issues that affect ordinary people daily as collective concerns rather than isolated hardships of the storytellers only.

This study, of course, has some limitations. The first limitation of this study is that it examines only a small number of episodes from the series. Given the limited existing scholarship on digital storytelling for social justice in the Nepali context, this research can therefore claim only a

preliminary contribution. Yet, since no research is available on *Herne Katha* using the rhetorical criticisms vis-à-vis digital storytelling and multimodality, I hope this study contributes to paving a way for future investigations. This study will be beneficial to those who are interested in digital rhetoric, particularly digital storytelling as a mode of forming social narratives for social justice. Finally, this study seeks to extend the understanding of the affordances of multimodal digital storytelling in the Nepali context, with particular attention to its role in promoting social justice through voicing marginalized voices and enhancing storytellers' agency (Lambert, 2013). It would also benefit those who want to explore the roles of social media platforms in promoting social justice through posting and uploading video narratives of the underrepresented groups of people.

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