

Apollonian and Dionysian Elements in the Folk Music of Arghakhanchi and Gulmi

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Abstract

This article argues that most of the Nepali folk music has a provision of combining both the Apollonian and Dionysian virtues. This kind of integration in Nepali folk music can play a vital role in settling the crude emotional force that is produced by the modern music rooted in the Western way of life. The article also presents some evidence and examples of how the ancient peoples of Nepal managed their cultural music and maintained a balance between the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of the human mind. Of course, an unsettled emotion produced by Western culture and music is a problem. Nepali folk music remains to be a solution to such a problem.

Key Words: Apollonian, Dionysian, folk music, folk culture

Introduction

Nepal has its own specific natural and cultural heritage. Just as its wonderful geographical variation that covers from the flat landscape to the highest mountain range in the world, Nepal has a beautiful variation of cultural heritage that has been rich enough, since ancient times, to hold and address the sense of humanity in the world. However, in the present situation of global mass media and so-called modern developmental activities going on in this country under the influence of the Western way of life that is based on the arrogance of physical or mechanical development, people have become selfish, unkind, and prone to violent and destructive activities. Being swept along by the uncontrolled emotional force of the Western culture, they have forgotten basic human norms and values that have been internalized in their original culture and are thus almost sure to drift

like a kite without thread in the sky. In the changing context of the modern way of life, Nepal has already been at risk of losing its originality and basic human character and internal organism of cultural life. While being worried about our cultural life, we need to focus on the vital role of our national folk music in settling the crude emotional tide, vibrating and synthesizing human hearts and thus maintaining the essential virtues of various communities. Of course, analyzing Nepali folk music becomes relevant to see how it represents and upholds Nepalese cultural life. In this regard, some questions naturally arise in me, that is, what are the specific features of Nepali folk music? How does it represent the Nepali way of life?

With these questions in the background, I have come to a point that a close study of Nepali folk music, using the Apollonian and Dionysian ideas in due association with musical interpretation, can really help us grasp the vibration and sensibilities of the Nepali way of life. Folk songs that spring directly out of peoples' hearts can truly represent the lived experiences of folk life and ensure perennial interplay between the singers and the listeners and thus synthesize their hearts and immortalize their relations.

The Apollonian and Dionysian Ideas of Nietzsche

Frederick Nietzsche used these terms in his book called *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* to classify the two basic aspects of the human mind: one aspect refers to refinement, order and intellectuality which is represented by Apollonianism and the other aspect refer to rapture, disorder and passion that is represented by Dionysianism. In other words, the Apollonian suggests reason and culture whereas the Dionysian instinct and primitive nature (Cuddon 49). These are opposing tendencies: one creates disharmony, irrational behavior and loss of normal social balance whereas the other demands clarity, order and calm. As in many societies, we find these tendencies in Nepal represented in the folk tradition.

Folk Music

Folk music is the music of folk life. As an organic part of a given folk life, it holds and represents the collective spirit of that life. We can understand a particular community, locality and nation in depth through the folk music of that community, locality, and nation. In other words, it represents the hearts of given people. Since folk life has a very

long history, folk music as its organic part, has similarly a long journey. In the words of Govinda Acharya, “Folk music is the first expression of human civilization”(5). In the history of human beings, folk music precedes verbal language. The non-verbal elements of the folk music that we very often find in folk songs take us further than the word-level understanding of human life and its surrounding situations. It inspires us to capture the deeper truths of human life. Folk music with its non-verbal force gives life to the words of folk songs and thus makes them ever-flowing, lively and interesting. Dharma Raj Thapa and Hansapure Subedi reinforce the same, “The real beauty of folk song can be observed only with folk music. Folk song becomes dry and lifeless without folk music.”(69). Of course, folk music enlivens the words of folk songs and represents the hearts of a folk life. If we are keen enough, we can feel, through this traditional musical river, the spirit and some of the voice property of our ancient forefathers.

Analyzing Folk Songs and Ballads of Arghakhanchi

Wali

As the rainy season approaches, people start preparing their fields for transplanting paddy seedlings, which is called *ropain* in Nepali. There is a special song called *wali* that people sing during *ropain*. This song is with special tune and music. Many Nepali scholars have tried to define *wali* in their own ways. Among them Chudamani Bandhu’s definition of *wali* goes this way:

In the *asaare* song [*ohali* or *wali*], there is an expression of the folk spirit of the time with the background of the rainy season, the transplantations of paddy seedlings, and social relations. *Asaare* songs start flowing spontaneously when the ploughmen plough and puddle up the paddy field, the spade-men level the mud in the plots, a large number of women transplant the paddy seedlings with one hand, keeping a handful of seedlings in another hand, releasing through their mouths a special type of musical wave suitable for the tempo of transplantation. (176)

This definition of *wali* takes us to the total environment of the rainy season in which the whole life gets involved in the process of transplantation with suitable music. *Wali* represents the lived experiences of folk life in the rainy season. Similarly, let’s see other definitions:

In the words of Govinda Acharya, “*Wali* is a women’s group song which they sing in a long time without any dancing performance”(53). *Wali* is a group song of women singers who sing it the whole day while transplanting seedlings. As there is no regular timing pattern in it, they sing it without a dancing performance.

Thapa and Subedi have defined it this way, “*Asaaregeet* is an action song...that is sung with a long, wavy and delightful tune which relieves and refreshes the people tired during transplantation” (141). They named it an action song as its melodious tune enables the singers to transplant the seedlings delightfully.

Krishnadev Upadhyaya called it a *ropain geet*, “The songs which are sung during transplanting the paddy seedlings are called *ropain geet*. We find the reflection of domestic life in these songs” (92). Of course, the women express their lived experiences of domestic life in this song.

After going through these definitions, we can have an understanding of *wali*, in brief, that is, it is a women’s group-song with a long, wavy and delightful tune without dancing performance that not only expresses the folk spirit and the domestic life of the time but also refreshes the people who are tired during transplantation.

The invoking part of *wali*, for example, runs as follows:

Yahan kere sime bhume gare rakshe pala

Hami cheli hanscham khelchham gare rakshe pala

Timla dimla sime bhume kali gaiko doodah dhara
Timla dimla sile dhanko aksheti jo dimla
Hami cheli hanscham khelchham gare rakshe pala
Timla dimla reshamako dhajo hamicheli hanschha
Khelchham gare rakshe pala

O Gods of earth and water!

Protect us while we are working and playing here

We shall offer you the milk of black cow

We shall offer you the *aksheti* of special rice, *silee*

We shall offer you a strip of silk

Protect us while we are working and playing.

Jeetkumari Ghimire, Age-86, Patauti-2, Arghakhanchi

Date: 2069/3/16

The opening part of *wali* involves Apollonian elements with its invocation of some local deities like *sime*, *bhume*, *bhanyer*, and so on for the goodness and protection of crops, the landowners, and all, including the ploughman and the *wali* singers. *Wali* is associated with agricultural aspects of life. It expresses the lived experiences of domestic life which women have to pass through, particularly in their husbands' houses. Since women are the main singers of *wali* and men play only the supportive role in it, this song usually releases women's problems and dreams in a patriarchal society.

From musical point of view, the tune of *wali* is so long that it goes beyond the limited steps of timing which is usually indicated by musical instruments like tomtom or drum. It is for this reason that *wali* is sung without any musical instrument.

The invocation of local deities and its serious tune enables people to be in order and control whereas the part of *wali* that follows the invocation is mostly involved in entertainment almost leading to the expression and activities beyond control. The latter part naturally reflects Dionysian elements.

Mal (Mahal)

The word "*mal*" came from the Sanskrit word "*mangal*", which, later on, came to be spoken as "*maagal*" and "*maahal*". *Mal* is a special ritual song that is sung at the wedding ceremony. The bride's mother and the mother of the bridegroom sing this song

accompanied by the voices of some other elder women in the wedding house when he is to move towards the bride's house. There is no musical instrument to help the song. Still, it is capable in itself of breaking the hearts of people around there because of the compassionate tune that has a direct link to the hearts of mothers. A piece of *mal* goes this way:

Bhalāe sagunāe yeti rāmrai hos
Āja samma meri chhori merai kākha
Āja dekhi meri chhori bhayau birāno
Surya Chandra sākshi chhan rāmrai hos
May this wedding be a grand success!
Oh my child, you were with me till today
Now you are going away from me
May the sun and moon bring good omen
Source: JeetKumari Ghimire

The bride's mother sings this song in which she pours her pure emotion of motherly love into her daughter. In a sense, the song itself is her heart that is vibrating and flowing for her daughter when she is to leave for her husband's house. Her best wish for the grand success of her daughter's married life expresses itself in the above song.

The mood of the bride's departure and the compassionate tune make people around there emotional and most of them cry. This emotional part contains dionysian elements whereas the anchoring of the wedding to the sun and moon pacifies and balances the situation.

Saraen Dance

Saraen is the typical musical performance on the day of *Dashain*, particularly observed in Arghakhanchi and its neighboring districts. After receiving *Tika* from the elders, the *Poojari* and other people gather at the temple of Durga. Each of them holds either a stick or one of the weapons like a sword, *Khukuri*, *Khodas*, the two-edged sword. The band of *Panchebaja* plays very active role in indicating the timing of rhythm that inspires each participant to repeat the words "*Wakhai*" and "*Ho*" with simultaneous jumping of his body. Each time they say "*Wakhai*" following the signal of *Panchebaja*, there is a pause at which each couple turns their body to touch their backs. When they say "*Ho*", the couple turns their body again to face each other. This organized dancing of jumping and turning movement goes around the temple and passes through the village. In this procession, the exciting jumping dance is followed by a group of *Panditas* who sing *Malshree*, that is, a religious song to pray or respect the goddess Durga. This song produces the effect of calmness in the audience.

The jumping dance of the front part of the procession represents the Dionysian life force whereas the singing of *Malshree* expresses the Apollonian harmony, balance or self-control. The emotional tide raised by the front scene of the procession is settled with what is followed.

Bhajan

Bhajan, a Sanskrit word, consists of the root word “*bhaj*” and the suffix “-*an*”, which means a devotional feeling (*bhakti bhav*) towards gods and goddesses. Titon sees folk hymn as “a song praising God and sung in a folk group”(455). Similarly, Irving Lowens has defined it as a “secular folk-tune that happens to be sung to a religious text”(qtd in Titon 456). In other words, a folk hymn (*bhajan*) is a religious song that represents the sincere feelings of a devotee for gods and goddesses. From a musical point of view, it can broadly be divided into two types: long-tuned *bhajan* and short-tuned *bhajan*. One of the long tuned *bhajans* runs this way:

Hari nāma gāwe sādhu merā jo
Hari nāma gāu
Santa ra Janaki ammara
Bhagata janaki ammara
Puri pāi Harika nām gāu
Bhagata āe gāuna lāge
Tripāta jagāi deu
Saguna nirgunama nirguna sagunama
Surtā lagāi deu
O saint, chant the name of Hari
This leads all the saints and devotees

To the state of immortality
If any group of devotees comes to you
And start chanting the name
Light the lamp
And concentrate on phenomenal
As well as non-phenomenal realities
Source: GyanHari Ghimire, Age-48, Panini-4, Patauti, Arghakhanchi
Date: 2060/ 01/ 21

People usually sing this *bhajan* in a ritual or religious ceremony organized at someone else's house. There are also some occasions like *shivaratri* in which people sing this *bhajan* at some public places. In Arghakhanchi and Gulmi, *bhajan* and *keertan* are regarded as two different types of religious songs. People usually sing *bhajan* at night. It starts in the evening with *aaratibhajan* and ends at around four a.m. with *Bhimmalubhajan*. It carries stories from *The Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Krishnacharitra*, *Swasthani*, and so on. Unlike *bhajan*, *keertan* consists of a few lines. It is sung slowly at the beginning but fast towards the end. However, *Bhajan* has the same tempo from the beginning to the end. The above-mentioned *bhajan* is called *Nirgun bhajan* and is concerned with ultimate reality. Those who sing and listen to this kind of *bhajan* are believed to achieve salvation. Saint Shashidhar suggests this in Janaklal Sharma's *Josmanee Santaparampara ra Sahitya* more assertively, "Anchoring our singing to the unqualified supreme power *Brahma* with deep concentration will lead to our salvation"(15). Inspired by Saint Shashidhar, many devotees in Gulmi and Arghakhanchi have produced a lot of *Nirgun bhajans*.

The long-tuned *bhajan* can be associated with the apollonian position in that it has a serious tune that enables people to be connected to the ultimate reality. It is impossible to achieve this position without self-control and a balanced state of mind. However, the short-tuned (*chudka*) *bhajan*, which is sung in the middle of the long-tuned *bhajan*, can be associated with Dionysian forces. In the case of *chudka bhajan*, sometimes one among the audiences or *bhajan* singers suddenly starts shivering and dancing and performing the roles suggested by the singers. People regard this performance as *hunumanutranuduring* which all the musical instruments like *khainjadi* (tambourine), *majura* (cyambals) and, sometimes, tomtom, too, go fast in equation with the energetic performance of *hanuman*.

Maruni

Maruni is a folk dance usually performed at Deepawali. Among the dancers, *maruni* are the ones who, with special dresses and adornments, look almost like women. As *maruni* plays the central role in this folk dance, the whole performance is called *maruni*. This dance begins with the invocation of the local deities and this part is carried on with a serious tune that is very slow. However, the other tunes, particularly the *kheli*,

have got fast tunes. The serious tune with the invocation of gods and goddesses bears Apollonian character but the part of *kheli* with its fast tune produces an emotional tide in the audiences. A piece of *Maruni* song runs like this:

Bihānamā japaunla Harijuko nāma

Belukimā japounlā Rāmako nāma,

Let's sing Hari in the morning

Let's sing Ram in the evening

Source: Tilbir Gahamagar, Age-82, Panini-5, Bhartapur, Arghakhanchi,

Date: 2069/ 07/ 26

Regarding musical instruments in *maruni*, the usual set consists of a tomtom, small cymbals and a flute.

Ratyuli

Ratyuli is a ritual dance-song in which a group of women, some of them in the guise of the male, sing and dance usually throughout the night at the bridegroom's house after he departs for the bride in a wedding ceremony. Some lines of *ratyeuli* are as follows:

Pannita bhanchhan panita bhachhan

Banaras padhera

Hāmarā bālā Ramchandra jastāle

Lyāunchhan doli bhorera

Having studied in Banarasa, he is called pandit

My child is just like Ramchandra

He is sure to bring his wife in the palanquin

Source: JeetKumari Ghimire

The term “pannita” refers to a person well-versed in *Shastras*. Here the bridegroom is supposed to have achieved the position of a *pannita*. The slow and gentle tune with the impression of a highly educated personality produces the Apollonian effect. However, a lot of other songs with sentiments of love and laughter clearly reflect Dionysian tendencies.

Conclusion

In this way, we have seen that the performance of agricultural songs, ritual songs, religious songs and festival songs of Arghakhanchi reveal two fundamental tendencies of human life: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Unsettled emotion is a problem in human life. But in Nepali ballads and folk songs, the emotion is tempered with noble religious thoughts or

songs that concern the welfare of human beings. Of course, our forefathers were wise enough to establish such folk performances to manage and promote human life. Now it is our duty to preserve and promote this cultural heritage.

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