

## **Folklore and Folk Traditions as a Cohesive in Nepali Community in India**

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A prominent feature of modern reality today is communal mobility. This has evolved as a leitmotif of contemporary times within a globalized world where politico-cultural iconography is understood as a fluid rather than a solid entity (Bauman 2000; Castells 1998; Scholte 2000; Urry 2000). Bauman calls this a 'liquid modernity' that transforms even before gaining shape.

As several scholars have noted (Augé 1995; Malkki 1995), diaspora communities have become groupings who symbolize the fluidity and mobility of political and cultural identities. They occupy what Brah (1996: 209) refers to as a 'diaspora space,' located somewhere between the local and the global. Negotiating the problem of this 'diaspora space' and preserving and nurturing a sense of their identity poses a challenge today. Folklore and keeping extant folk traditions are offered as suggestions to this critical question (Bascom 1954).

William R. Bascom, American anthropologist and folklorist, states that folklore can serve four primary functions in a culture (1954):

1. Folklore lets people escape from repressions imposed upon them by society.
2. Folklore is a pedagogic device that reinforces morals and values and builds wit.
3. Folklore is a means of applying social pressure and exercising social control.

4. Folklore validates culture, justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them.

It is these functions of folklore in a diasporic society that the present chapter proposes to explore with reference to Nepali settlements spread throughout India. The search for identity of this minority group, containing possibilities of some recreation through mythic revisiting of the imaginary homeland stands reinforced by their conscious and continuing practice of folklore and folk traditions. These practices have helped create in this diasporic, vastly dispersed, community the sense of cohesion that is both temporal as well as actual by locating the community in the imaginary homeland that centralizes, binds and keeps alive awareness of identity beyond the flux, confusion and loss of the actual homeland. It attempts to pre-empt forgetting and alienation from the remembered home through generations and so prevents sociocultural dilution where “being rootless, displaced between worlds, living between a lost past and a fluid present, are perhaps the most fitting metaphors for the journeying modern consciousness” (Rapport and Dawson 1998: 23).

History and politics both have had a very significant influence on the fate and character of the Nepali people in India, making it a community that is yet to formally receive a distinct place amongst the other Indian communities. This statement is especially true of the Indian Nepalis of North Bengal in West Bengal, namely the Darjeeling Hills, people who came with the land when it was annexed to India and made a part of West Bengal. However, that is not to marginalize the legitimate claims of the vast number of Nepalis who later migrated to Assam and the north-east of India either through the British (later, Indian) military recruitments, or as cheap labour under the The Indo–Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty, Kathmandu, July 31, 1950.

To elaborate the above statements one has to turn some pages of history; see Pemble (2009) and Naravane (2006: 189–91). Rivalry between Nepal and British India culminated in the signing of the Treaty of Sagauli in 1816, ceding large parts of Nepali territories in Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, the Terai, the Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim (nearly one-third of the country) to the British in exchange for Nepali autonomy. As the ceded territories were not restored to Nepal by the British when freedom was granted to the people of British India, these have become a part of the Republic of India, Sikkim joining later in 1975.

The British, impressed by the valour of the Gurkha soldiers witnessed during the Anglo-Nepal War, incorporated into the nine articles of the

Treaty of Sagauli one that gave the right to recruit the Gurkhas as soldiers. The disbanded Nepali soldiers became the booty and were gathered by the British into a new force. Thus, on the ashes of defeat was born the first ethnically exclusive Gurkha Regiment, the very first to be created on ethnic lines in the Indian Army.

The third wave of migration came at the wake of the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty signed in 1950 that opened the doors of both countries to each other's citizens: the rich business houses from India set up shop in Nepal and thousands of cheap Nepali migrant labour became available in India. The migrants to India came looking for betterment, having escaped severe economic hardship in Nepal.

The Nepalis of India have any of these three reasons for being in India today (Kansakar 1984; Tyagi 1974).

Against such a historico-political context one seeks answers, futilely perhaps, for generations of voiceless, stateless people who are questioned about, and in turn question, their identity. Flung into distant corners of a land where their survival has depended on merging optimally with the local inhabitants, it is the folk songs, lores and practices that by keeping alive the practices of folk tradition, have nourished not just an awareness of the memory of a lost homeland but also helped delineate and keep alive a sense of their identity in the inevitable process of acculturation.

The practices of folk culture or tradition (ballads, riddles, stories) are those elements that help define the people to themselves by transmitting their values and their traditions, and thus help surmount the otherwise differentiating factors of spatial distances between the groups of settlements by clearly etching and reinforcing their sense of sameness and identity, despite and beyond the superficial differences due to variables of geographical, political and social factors. Remembrance of homeland, real and imaginary, and the wistful but unrealistic desire to return, are pivots on which the community's identity stands.

It is an accepted practice amongst Nepali folklorists, as no doubt with others, to group the oral tradition in terms of either their subject or form. Thus, *Lokgatha* are legends and stories, sung as ballads, of historical personages, heroes and kings and also include tales from religious epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and sometimes of ordinary mortals facing extraordinary human conditions. The strong Hindu feature of the community is not only reflected and reinforced, but also reflects the harmonious coexistence of the Buddhist or animistic beliefs of various ethnic groups of the community alongside the Hindu, insofar as the followers of Buddhist or of animistic beliefs too identify with, and weave

into their value system, lessons learnt from the retelling of Hindu myths and tales. Likewise with animistic beliefs as also with Buddhist tales, primarily because for many ethnic groups who have adopted Hinduism, the animistic beliefs represent a part of their cultural roots, while the Buddha is held as yet another religious teacher or even an avatar of the myriad Hindu gods. This is perhaps an important factor behind the total lack of religious conflict within the community.

Bravery, the trait that, like a badge of honour, has been conferred on the community by the world at large, is unquestionably sown and nourished by innumerable ballads that sing of battles and victories, *Veergatha*, that include even comparatively recent subjects as the warrior Balabhadra, while filial devotion is nourished by ballads, for example, of Sravankumar. The pain of separation of householders forced by economic hardship to seek livelihoods outside their village, state or nation is delineated as a fact of Nepali life by ballads (for example, *Muna Madan*) and folk tales, but more so by folk ditties where it is viewed light-heartedly:

*Ek dui paisa vyapar ma*  
*Katuwa khanu paper ma*  
*Switha Lahore ma*

A bit of money through trade  
 Will buy me tobacco in a paper  
 Hence, off to Lahore

“Lahore” stands in metonymic relationship to places of work outside the homeland, travelled to and lived in for economic reasons. Paper to roll tobacco in is a rare luxury for people who would normally roll it out in dry leaf, beedi-style. The ditty indicates that for economic betterment one needs to leave hearth and home and move to alien lands. The relating of the idea of leaving home to travel and live in often inhospitable lands to the idea of economic betterment for parents, wives and children left behind in the homeland is so deeply entrenched in the mind of the members of the community that travelling abroad for work is accepted as the norm. The profile of the Nepali people has developed as very adjustable, honest, hard working and non-threatening. Most also pick up languages easily, a feature that allows them easier existence and access in alien cultures.

They have a deep sense of their roots, never forget their identity and the folk customs and lore help them know themselves, vital in a diasporic community. Folklore shapes the perspective, morals and values of the community by delineating for them their own defining characteristics,

and reinforcing them through multi-pronged repetitions: for instance, the same features may be stated in a ditty, again in a proverb, as well as figure in a ballad.

A feature that has helped keep alive the ballads through the centuries is not only, as with all verse sung, traceable to the rhythm and rhyme that are mnemonic aids, but also to the fact that the community has a separate caste, *gaienay*, of wandering minstrels who pass the oral tradition of *Lokgatha* from father to son and spread the stories far and wide as they roam with their sarangis. Even today the *gaienay* roam through villages giving life and longevity to their repertoire. They sing for their livelihood and often a village or a group may even today solicit their participation in celebrations and festivities. These folk minstrels enter the various pockets of Nepali settlements in India and bind them by giving a glimpse not just of a common heritage of culture but also indirectly by transmitting through them the mores and codes that have shaped the community.

*Lokgeet*, or folk songs, are often tribe or caste-specific. This group comprises such a wide variety of folk songs sung during various agricultural, domestic, religious and cultural occasions like Diwali, *bhai tikka* (ceremony for brothers' welfare) *teej* (festival for married daughters), *binyah* (marriage), *nauran* (naming ceremony), etc. that any discussion of it requires more space to do justice. Since these *Lokgeet* are sung at specific points of the celebrations, their importance in the cultural practices of the community living for generations with great spatial distances between them is obvious. Thus, a Nepali household in any part of India will during *Tiwar* (Diwali, or festival of lights) display a doorway garlanded by marigolds, cook *sel roti* (traditional Nepali snack made from rice flour) along with other regional food they have adopted like the Assamese *pitha* (a snack made rice) or Khasi *kwai* (betelnut). During *teej* the ladies will dance where steps and some parts of the attire are incorporated from the regional dances they are familiar with (for example, the Bihu dance).

As with most folk cultures, children are significant members of the family, often helping the parents economically, through child-labour, or otherwise through help in care of siblings or by undertaking domestic responsibilities. Their importance in the family fold is emphasized by the presence of a number of *Balgeet* and *Nininanee Geet*: they are children's songs that adults sing to children, songs that children hear from infancy. These songs generally are short ditties, often using nonsensical words in between for rhythm, rhyme and lightness of mood. Teaching, entertaining, play and evoking smiles and laughter are the basic aims of these songs. *Lohris* are cradle songs, lullabies sung to the flow of the melody to rock children to sleep in their small baskets or *kokro*, or in their hanging cloth

cradles. These songs are not just catchy but very rhythmic, and not just reflect but perhaps are also the reason behind the community's love for music and dance. The love of rhythm and melody is, as it were, nurtured from the cradle itself to become an integral part of the world view. Most importantly it also defines the community to the individuals in it. Thus, despite the physical and economic hardship, practically every major festival and event in life is marked by singing and dancing; often the songs being event-specific.

As in all communities, marriage is always for the purpose of having children. Being barren is an unthinkable misfortune, and a man is expected to marry again for progeny. Male issue is desired, although the father is generally affectionate towards the daughters. The mother of a son proclaims her status by never plaiting her hair till the very tip, and is alone allowed to participate in some rituals.

A unique musical practice is the *Sareli*. Here a group of young men and women from one village is invited to stay from one festival to the next, usually the tenth day of *Dashai* (the ten days of worship of goddess Durga's return to earth, her parent's home) to the *bhai tikka*, by another village to participate in competitions and performances there. *Sareli* not only brings festivity to a fever pitch of competitiveness but also generates greater interaction between villages and often proves a fertile ground for romantic attachments, or carrying of information about eligible men and women for marriages to be arranged.

But the most interesting of the music-based oral traditions is the *Dohorie* or *Johorie*. This is a musical debate between male and female singers. It is staged as a performance to be watched by the village, or it can form a part of marriage festivities (the traditional Nepali marriage ceremony usually lasts three days, but sometimes five), and it can be incorporated into any social or cultural celebration. The participants, generally young men and women, seat themselves in two groups, gender-wise. Though a leader is chosen by each group, a few may legitimately intervene to help the leader. The subject is always love and the tone and mood playful. Wit is the essence of these songs. The attitude adopted by the leader of the male group is of a man desperately in love with a beautiful woman who is hard to woo. He uses arguments, flattery, promises and wit to woo her while the leader of the female group adamantly refuses to thaw and uses counter arguments, wittily expressed, to show the flaws in his promises. The banter between them is lively, and most significantly, it is impromptu. Each argument is sung in stanzas of four lines, with the main argument or punch line coming in the last one. The group echoes its leader's statement in the last line in a vociferous chorus. Simply accompanied with a *madal*

or small drum, the *Dohorie* continues until a definitive winner emerges. Sometimes, it is said the *Dohorie* goes on for days. Legends and stories about *Dohorie* are numerous: such as one that lasted twelve days, or several where the winner won his competitor as his wife. Humour and wit make this love banter a much-loved folk tradition that is vibrantly alive and practised in the community even today.

Interestingly, this folk tradition has adapted itself facilely to the modern world of cable television. The language channels routinely telecast these musical competitions from the various villages or pockets of Nepali settlements to a vast and rapt audience. The cohesion that folk practices would generate generally is increased manifold in reach, spatial and numerical, and acceptance.

Romantic love is given respectability and its acceptance as an important aspect of life, although arranged marriages are generally more the basis of conjugal life, is engendered by popular and defining folk practices like the *Sareli* and the *Johorie*. The humour, the quick-wittedness, the repartee-based banter that Nepalis often indulge in amongst themselves even in daily communication is a rare distinguishing marker of the people that stands out all the more impressively in light of the hardships they live in.

Although *Ukhan* or proverbs are a feature of practically all languages, a mention of it is included here for an interesting reason. It is probably not known to those unfamiliar with the oral form of the Nepali language, that no conversation of some length is complete without at least one speaker using a proverb to bolster his point. Nepalis use proverbs copiously. They are innumerable, pithy, based on observations of common everyday life and striking in the worldly wisdom that is expressed so concisely and often with so much wit and humour. They inform and transmit to the hearers the worldly wisdom of the rural man who understood the ways of the world through keen observation, compassion, often humour and with a courageous acceptance. Examples of just a few from literally hundreds of them that illustrate the statement above are:

1. *Bhir jane goru lai Ram Ram bhanna sakincha, kandh halna sakinna.* Translated it says, the bull sliding downhill is one you bid farewell to, not attempt to lend a shoulder to save, which means that the unacceptable that becomes the inevitable must be accepted.
2. *Jasko tha sing chaina theysko naam theeko.* Translated it says, the bull with no horns is the one named Sharp, which means that there is no causal relation between merit and reward or that often the most inappropriate and inept actually walks off with the prize.

3. *Chinnu, na chinnawnu*. This is almost untranslatable, but generally means that one should aim to know and understand people but resist trying to pass personal opinions or knowledge to others where it may be transformed to mere gossip, be hurtful, inappropriate or cause harm to the subject; keep it as personal enlightenment about those around you.

These proverbs, shared by the community and the Nepali diaspora and used constantly in everyday communication, help shape the ethos by clearly etching the collective perspective and the general world view of the community.

A much-loved, and still flourishing, oral tradition is the *Gaon Khanay Katha*, literally, the village devouring stories. These are riddles that can be played at the domestic, familial level (between siblings, mothers and children: traditionally, the father is a patriarch who may look on indulgently, or help from the sidelines but often does not actively participate in games with his children) or in a larger group like the village. One person asks the riddle, in verse. The audience ventures the answer. They may try as many times as they like. The person who provides the answer then gets the chance to ask the next riddle. If the correct answer is not given, a whole system of negotiations comes into play. The audience offers various villages in mock trade for the correct answer. The quizzer thinks it over but may not accept the trade. Then another village, its beauties and worth exaggeratedly extolled, is offered. Should the quizzer accept it, he says so, but specifies what he accepts. Generally, he says that the dirty dogs, the stinking areas, the beggars and sick people of the village he wants to gift back to the audience, but in return for the answer to his riddle he will accept the better parts of the offered village. As the Nepali people are basically fun-loving, and wit is held in great esteem, the quizzer will use this trade to bring about laughter by specifying which areas, houses, and so on he or rejects and why. The one with the maximum number of villages in his kitty is declared the winner. A few examples of *Gaon Khanay Katha* are:

1. *Khai, khai dai/mo agay jao, kay ho?* Translation: Just a moment, brother, let me go first, what is it? The answer: A walking stick.
2. *Naam cha naari, stree haina/latta cha dhari, jogi haina, kay ho?* Translation: The name is Naari, but she isn't a woman, has dark coarse hair, but isn't a yogi, what is it? The answer: A coconut (*naariyal*).

3. *Agadi sankha, peechadi pankha, kay ho?* Translation: A conch in front and a fan at the back, what is it? The answer: A dog.  
(All passages from Nepali have been translated by the current author.)

Many pleasant, fun-filled evenings in the homes and villages owe their debt to the oral tradition of *Gaon Khanay Katha*. It is a cheap, entertaining pastime that not only bonds the family or the group together, but by providing wit at the heart of the riddles, gives its people the love, appreciation and practice of wit.

In keeping with the changing times, many websites on the Internet are devoted to this form of oral tradition (for example, the Nepali forum, [www.Babbaal.com](http://www.Babbaal.com)). Players from across the globe participate in these tournaments; along with having an interesting time, across the miles Nepalis bond through this traditional practice that keeps them grounded in their ethos, wherever they may be.

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