**Rhetoric of Nepali Folklore: Past and Present Discourse**

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**Background of Study**

Of late, even if unofficially, few but conceptually significant discussions on Nepali folklore and intangible cultural heritages have begun in the country’s folkloristic sphere. Such intellectual ponderings have, more or less, helped discern varied temporal and spatial discourses upon survivalists’ culture. Most of the intellectuals have pointed out the necessity of studying contemporary Nepali folklores. Many well-known Nepali as well as foreign socio-cultural wizards, scholars and folklorists have in various forums emphatically expressed their concern in inventorying, documenting and safeguarding of such cultural heritages. Some of the prominent scholars from diverse disciplines presented papers on folklore, folk music and folk art in the meetings and conferences which are positive indications in order to foreground study of folklore as intangible cultural heritage. Such discussion is further pertinent in the context of Nepal because it was until the last decade of the 20th century the folklores and intangible cultural heritages (ICHs) of different communities and regions were identified as mere customs, traditions and cultures of local people inherited from their ancestors and there was no point in recognizing them as national heritages. They were sporadically, if not none, considered to be of national importance. Thus, as a result of nationalistic movement, the study and safeguarding of folklore and folklife belonging to indigenous communities was a subject of a far cry from the so-called dominant culture of the country.

Since the logics of cultural reasoning and the metaphors of diverse assumptions of Nepali society are expressed through nationalistic ideology, the study of folklore has remained as one of the survivalist’s cultural bequest – all the time far from the mainstream culture. Hence, the cultures, rituals, traditions, songs, dances, ways of life, etc. of socially and regionally marginalized and deprived communities tended to be folklore. Cultural reasoning, for Sue Tuohy, is both pervasive and persuasive, and hence, an analysis of the cultural reasoning requires an examination of precisely that which appears to be natural and convincing (194). It is ideologically fabricated and socially constructed by those communities who hold power in the state mechanism, whereas, the cultures of other communities are ignored as long as possible. Even if some efforts in studying and safeguarding Nepali folklore have recently begun in the academia, nevertheless, the notion of Nepali folkloristic discourse embraces manifold questions as who the folks are, what folklore does really mean, why aforesaid study represents folklore, and conversely, why biblical episodes, Dhammapad, Bhagawat Geeta, Ramayana, Garud Purana, Rudri, Chandi, Saptasati, Satyanarayan, Krishna Lila are free from the sphere of folklore, why the folklore is a marginalized subject and why the folklore studies in Nepal was bound to remain under the crisis. In addition to it, what sort of rhetorical discourses are found to have used for folklore of Nepal.

**Discourse on Nepali Folklore**

Nepal is rich in folklore as different communities living in this country contain a vast treasure of folkloristic materials which indeed help form its historical and cultural entity. This richness of folklore (that is, the culture, tradition, life-style, etc. of marginalized community and region), is the chief characteristics of multi-ethnic country like Nepal. A crucial challenge for plural societies therefore consists of allowing cultural differences to persist without violating common and socially defined rights. In other words, the challenge consists of finding a viable compromise, for state as well as the citizens (representing power and agency respectively), between equal rights and the right to be different (Bhattarai 293). A British writer Eden Vansittart claims that the aboriginal stock of Nepal is most undoubtly Mongolian. The most ancient records would seem to prove that Nepal was originally inhabited by Mongolians. Probably from one of the great waves of Mongolian conquest, which spread through the breadth of Asia from east to west, some side wave was washed over the bleak snows of the mighty Himalayas into the fertile plains and valleys of Nepal (Vansittart 9). This account shows that the first settlers who were Mongolians had their own native identity right from the beginning. But when Aryan stocks entered into the Himalayan region then slowly and gradually became successful to permeate their culture, tradition, language, literature into the culture and lifestyle of Mongolian people overriding their identity. The problem of cultural, social and political deprivation – both absolute and relative – is central reason of it. The deepening of cultural and social inequalities is the main Vansittart further notes that “Although, perhaps, immensely in the minority, it can be easily conceived how the civilized and intelligent minority would affect the ignorant masses, and, in time imbue the aborigines, to a certain degree, with their customs, manners, and religion” (10). Along with the unification of Nepal, the cultures of marginalized communities, furthermore, were failed to notice as national cultural entity. Hence, discourse of Nepali folklore has for long remained under dilemma and crisis. The culture and identity of various communities sustained long from history became bound to be secondary and tertiary culture against the so-called mainstream culture of Nepal.

Identity changes when interpretation of particular thing gets changed over time and context. The meaning of Nepali folklore has also been contingent along with the historical and ideological shifts. Both history and group ideology are the determining factors to develop and possess culture, tradition, literature, way of life in the society. According to Jacob Torfing, “Discourse theory aims to analyse the construction of identity within linguistic system and it holds a relationalist and contextualist view of identity formation. Identity is thus shaped by its relation to other identities within particular historical contexts” (154). Likewise, the community with folkloric identification is also contingent in Nepal. For instance, we observe, before the unification of Nepal as a single country, various community-based territories had their own identical histories, cultures, ideologies, ruling systems, and way of lives. There was shared feeling of commonness and integrity among them. There was no feeling of superiority and inferiority in their culture, tradition and livelihood. No question of folk and non-folk was prevailed in the society. But after the unification of Nepal, the Aryan culture, ideology, tradition, literature, language, religion, and the way of life were established as national identity, whereas, others’ were sidelined from the mainstream state ideology in the process of modernization and national integration. Generally, family and caste members who share a similar world view, language, religion, and social behavior are trusted, found amicable and trusted. Because the caste hill Hindu elite dominate the top leadership positions, their caste brethren, many of whom support their policies, including culturally embedded ones, have benefitted more from these processes (Lawoti 27).Ideologies are the sets of basic beliefs about the political, economic, social and cultural affairs held by the ruler/ruling class/group or majority of people within a country or society. According to Teun A. Van Dijk, ideologies mentally represent the basic social characteristics of a group, such as their identity, tasks, goals, norms, values, position and resources. He opines, “Since ideologies are usually self-serving, it would seem that they are organized by these group-schemata” (18). And, ideology and power are inextricably bound up with social practices; they are “a component of human praxis” because ideology and power are “manifested in its material products, and are thus open to archaeological investigation” (Miller & Tilley I984: I4). Thus, as a result of shifting power in state mechanism, the cultures, rituals, religions, songs, dances and living styles of marginalized indigenous people and region have become as folklores of Nepal. These folklores have sustained in the form of peripheral cosmetics from the mainstream culture, tradition and lifestyles.

Though various cultural enthusiasts and scholars have independently been working in their individual capacity to rescue these priceless treasures on folk-studies, their work has never been coordinated under the umbrella of single institution or organization so as to bring in substantial outcome from it. This need was recently felt by scholars who have been organizing a systematic and scientific study of folkloristics and guiding the researchers. In view of doing the same, for an instance, Nepali Folklore Society, founded in 1995, has involved in studying on various aspects of folklore of Nepal. Through convening of various national and international workshops and conferences, the Society has helped create discourse on Nepali folklore and intangible cultural heritage, and given many scholars a platform for working out in the field of folklore. The most notable documentations materialized by the Society are folklore and folklife on Dhimal, Tharu, Gandharva, Gopali, Meche and Aathpaharia Rai people of Nepal. It was really a pioneering effort done by Nepali Folklore Society as it has been carrying out systematic research on folklore for the past one decade. Such research works obviously open the door of understanding folk traditions, culture, tangible and intangible cultural heritages of the folk groups, and decipher the implicit meanings in their myths, stories, proverbs, jokes, riddles and so on.

While talking of discourse as social practice, it implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it: the discursive event is shaped by one another. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. Since discourse is so socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects – that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258). Similarly, Nepali folklore as well is discursive in the sense that it portrays the culture of minorities and regionally deprived people. They have not been intertwined with the culture of the nation. Therefore, although folklore studies are well-established discipline in Europe and America it is still in the pace of snail in the context of Nepal.

Every culture has been more or less influenced by other cultures and has forged its cultural identity in history. Thus, the openness of one culture to others is significant. However, the rapid flow of people, products and information as well as rapid cultural interpenetration caused by imperialization and globalization menaces non-dominant cultures, especially their folk and/or intangible cultural heritage, which has been handed down from generation to generation. In Nepal, folklore refers to the culture, belief system, tradition and lifestyle of the socio-political minority people and regions. The notion of traditions tends to explain the all-inclusive unity of the approved diversity. Different kind of Nepali systems and traditions, such as the ancient tradition, the ruling systems, the regional traditions, the folk tradition, philosophical and religious tradition, and ethnic or national traditions – all of which are required to woven together to form the national identity of Nepal. But, this fact is always overshadowed by the culture, tradition and unitary identity of ruling class people. In practice, mainstream tradition was itself a prime source of authority, located within any particular institution pervading across many aspects of social life of the nation. History as a significant national heritage would get blended with various claims to the nation, to tradition, to change and continuity, and to the persistence of the past in the present. This persistence is understood by these historical documentations displaying as evidence to support contemporary views as an affluent source for folklore studies, but implicit problem is that most of the written history and national identity markers tend to depict to the interest of the state ruling class people as records of their valourizations and eulogisations. They have got mostly written version of traditions, have got procurement of naturalization, and hence got manifested themselves out of orbit of folklore. These traditions, in consequence, have established legitimacy and scholarship as a standard norm of the country and ultimately Garud Purana, Rudri, Chandi, Saptasati, Satyanarayan, Krishna Lila and among others do not fall under the definition of folklore.

**Rhetoric of Nepali Folklore**

The term ‘folk’ refers to the people belonging to different groups which share a common factor like language, religion, culture and traditions. It comprises the traditional beliefs, customs, music, dances, and stories of a community practiced and passed down through the generations by word of mouth. Study of oral traditions is major tool for folklore studies as they have very less, if not none, written documents. Mostly, the ethnic groups embody such kind of attributes and they have been living laboratories in which the processes of acculturation and assimilation could be observed and analyzed at firsthand. It is also referred to as “grassroots culture” to which Ben-Amos defines it as “artistic communication in small groups”, Kirshenblatt- Gimblett says it “the aesthetics of everyday life”, Dundes remarks as oral tradition, or gives the wide variety of itemized definitions including “myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses” (cited in Zeitlin, 3).

The knowledge of such kind is known as folklore. The very notion of folk conjures up the feeling that it belongs to the field of illiterate and marginalized people, of far remote from the mainstream. In this sense, although Nepali folklore comprises multiplicity of subordination, yet broadly, it is doubly marginalized tradition – marginalized folklore of the marginalized community. Because of this reason, many of Nepali folklores have been already died out and many of them are on the verge of disappearing. Therefore, preservation of these traditions of survivalists has insistently been a responsibility of all Nepali people and the government of Nepal, or else, it will obviously drag out to the national developmental activities as present emerging world trend needs to be made more inclusive and democratic welfare nation.

In general, the professional historian equates folklore with rumor, hearsay, untruth, and distortion, and rejects out of hand the spoken tradition for the written word. However, many historians and social scientists have noted that indigenous folklore is a significant indicator of a group’s traditional values. They believe that multi-ethnic relationships would create a “melting pot” in which both dominant groups and minorities would adjust themselves to common ideals and purposes in the form of culture contact and traditions in conflict, cultural assimilation and acculturation. But, in the case of Nepal, indigenous traditions and knowledge are found being overtly overlooked. In the field of education, indigenous knowledge (IK) plays a fundamental role in learning because it is the knowledge base that indigenous children have acquired in their families and communities. It is the knowledge base which has defined who they are and how they perceive their world, their self-esteem and identity with which they come to the learning process in the formal classroom, and will acquire and connect with relevant newly learned concepts. Although an interest in Indigenous Knowledge has begun in a growing number of academic disciplines, important calls for the preservation of IK at the international level, began in 1992 at the Conference of Rio de Janeiro on Bio-Diversity, and in December of the same year the United Nations declared 1993 the International Year of the World’s Indigenous People.

**Twice Marginalized Culture**

In a way, the Post-people’s Movement of Nepal 1990 can be labeled as the springtime or the key period for the folklore studies in many respects as marginalized people got hardly any freedom to practice their culture and traditions before this period. However, a very little attention is found to have paid to this discipline of studies yet. Studying and safeguarding of Nepali folklore are not satisfactory. Even Scholars known as folklorists seem to vanish into other fields. Those whom we recognize as folklorists may identify their work – or find their work identified by others – as anthropology, literature, sociolinguistics, performance studies, cultural studies, American studies, gender studies, ethnomusicology, or oral history. There is no concrete national policy regarding the safeguarding of Nepali folklore, culture, literature. As a result, different kinds of movements are seen surfaced in the socio-cultural and political spheres of the country. Raising similar issues Mukta S. Tamang (2001: 22) makes a note that the movement is based on the common experience of the ethnic and indigenous populace that despite the traditional rhetoric of ‘unity in diversity’ and democratic equality, discrimination is continually reproduced. They feel it intensely in almost every dimension of their lives, including economic prosperity, political participation, educational access and cultural dignity. The *jailajati* movement, Tamang stresses, has contributed to strengthening democracy in the country by transforming the public sphere.

Up till now, they are the folks and their traditions, culture, language, religion represent folklore, the object to be explored into. The question of Nepali folklore, then, mostly tends to be the cultures, languages, religions and traditions of marginalized people which are under crisis in the country. The conceptual anomaly of being Hindu state catering to the interests of religious majority but recognizing multireligiosity while attempting to project a secular posture has itself generated societal tension questioning the formation of the identity of the state (Kumar 55). On the other hand, instead of encouraging and promoting cultural beliefs of the marginalized people and regions, the state happened to endorse repressive state ideologies against their folk valuables. Therefore, a folklore study in Nepal has been a subject of the marginal groups/regions and identification of the marginalized people, for the dominant group generally feels mediocre to be called as a folk. However, the idiomatic of “Unity in diversity” has been very much successful in persuading outsiders and insiders, the state overlooked the diverse tradition of the marginalized and downtrodden ethnic people. Consequently, folklore study is facing a dire crisis not only in Nepal but also in other countries with similar state of affairs.

**Conclusion**

Nepali folklore designates to be the cultures, traditions, oral histories, rituals, songs, dances of the marginalized group people and regions as there hardly existed cultural equity or cultural democracy due to endorsement of nationalist ideology of the state. Today, Nepali folklore has become an identity marker of ethnic people because of the policy of cultural denial of the state. Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard (1990:4) articulated that in culturally diverse nation, many cultural traditions co-exist in human society, and that none of these should be allowed to dominate and become an “official culture” and that equity demands fair distribution of cultural resources and support through the society. The study of folklore and folklife of the people continues to grow at colleges and universities in other western countries. In accordance with the survey carried out by Ronald L. Baker (1986: 50), until 1986, at least five hundred and nine American and nineteen Canadian institutions used to offer folklore courses, generally in English departments, with introductory folklore being the most popular course, the degree in folklore programs offering colleges and universities are steadily increasing. Whereas, there is no college and university in Nepal offering folklore courses specifically. In a nutshell, the efforts of individual researchers as well as institutions including Nepali Folklore Society’s involvement in the study of marginalized groups’ folklores are, thus, really commendable activities. If it is ignored and not brought into light in the days to come, then, many of the cultural heritages of the country would get lost soon. Therefore, the study and act of safeguarding of Nepali folklore is very urgent as, Carol Silverman (1983: 50) puts, “With its strong ties to the past and its potential for manipulating the national consciousness, folklore has indeed served to promote nationalism, socialism and ethnic unity.”

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