Determinants of Performance Arena of Ḍeuḍā and their Cultural Implications

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Abstract

This article explores Ḍeuḍā, a traditional folk song prominent in Sudurpashchim province, emphasizing its cultural significance and the pivotal role of performance in realizing its essence. The performance arena of Ḍeuḍā transcends mere location, encompassing the interplay of performers, audience, and contextual conditions. It posits that Ḍeuḍā achieves its fullest expression through active performance, with the performers' skill, the audience's engagement, and the setting collectively shaping the experience. The study reflects upon the performance theory and attempts to make an assessment of it in relation to the Deudā song that adopts qualitative research method, using observations and interviews as data collections tools. This study examines Ḍeuḍā performance as a socially situated art, involving the active participation of both performers and audience to co-create meaning. The study also investigates the three primary theaters where Ḍeuḍā is performed: intimate (natural spaces), private/domestic (family-centered), and public (festivals and fairs), each contributing distinct dynamics to the performance styles and themes. The article delves into how these arenas influence the performance's thematic expressions ranging from love and personal reflection to communal values and social commentary. By situating Ḍeuḍā within its cultural, social, and performative frameworks, the study underscores its role as an aesthetic and communicative medium, deeply rooted in the collective identity and traditions of Sudurpaschim. The findings of the study reveal that the performance arena of Ḍeuḍā serves as the focal point where the event takes place. The song achieves its full expression through performance, meaning it may be best understood and appreciated when performed. The interplay between the performer, the art form, the audience, and the setting is essential for Ḍeuḍā performance. The performance arena of Ḍeuḍā encompasses the location or setting, the events, personal and collective conditions, and the nature of its genesis.

Keywords: Ḍeuḍā, cultural performance, determinants, arena, performance theory.

Introduction

Ḍeuḍā, a traditional folk song from the Sudurpaschim province of Nepal, attains its true essence through performance. The performance arena becomes the central stage where the event unfolds, allowing Ḍeuḍā to fully manifest its expressive potential. It is best understood and appreciated in the context of its performance, where the dynamic interaction between the performer, the art form, the audience, and the setting plays a

vital role.

Both the performers and the audience actively contribute to shaping and co-creating meaning. As a socially grounded form of aesthetic communication, *Ḍeuḍā* comes alive through the performers' use of their voices and bodies to convey artistic meaning. The performance situation - including the performers, the art form, the audience, and the surrounding atmosphere -is integral to defining the essence of a *Ḍeuḍā* performance.

Deudā is a lyrical form that conveys meaning through its integration of music and rhythmic language. Without the element of music, the discourse leans more toward prose than verse. In *Deudā*, music emerges from various poetic elements such as metrical patterns, rhyme, internal rhyme, assonance, consonance, alliteration, beats, tempo, and the singers' cadence. The poetic rhythm - the rise and fall of sound - plays a crucial role in shaping the verse. The power of words is amplified by their selection and arrangement, which evoke emotions and establish tone. As Douglas Oliver aptly observes, "As in a song, it is the voiced elements of a poetic line which bear onwards the line's main melody and help to shape it" (37). In *Deudā* songs, a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables forms its meter. Bruce Benward and Marilyn Saker define meter as "a regular, recurring pattern of strong and weak beats. This recurring pattern of durations is identified at the beginning of a composition by a meter signature" (10). Typically, a *Deudā* line comprises fourteen syllables, divided into two parts: the first part usually has eight syllables, and the second has six. Occasionally, the six-syllable section is sung before the eight-syllable one, and vice versa, during performance. For example, the following *Deudā* couplet illustrates this structure:

मूलधाराको पानि खानू, गंगाको जल खानू
भाग्यकी जिउनारी खानू, कर्मका फल खानू

(Drink the water from the main source, drink the sacred water of the Ganga. Accept the sustenance of fate, consume the fruits of your actions.)

This couplet exhibits a distinct internal rhyme within its structure. *Ḍeuḍā* performances are diverse in rhythm and style, with performers actively engaging in the singing while audiences immerse themselves in its aesthetic and creative essence. The cultural setting or theater of the performance also significantly influences the style and delivery of *Ḍeuḍā* verses, shaping their artistic impact.

Methodology

This study examines the performance aspects of *Ḍeuḍā* songs through an ethnographic research approach. Following the principles of qualitative research, it focuses on the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. Grounded in the interpretivist research paradigm, the study explores the performativity of *Ḍeuḍā* songs.

Participants were purposively selected, comprising nine individuals knowledgeable about *Ḍeuḍā* performances from various districts in the Sudurpaschim province of Nepal. The study selected *Ḍeuḍā* songs based on their performance and cultural significance. Data collection methods included personal observations, telephonic and face-to-face interviews, and focus group discussions. The collected data were analyzed, and the findings were subsequently discussed.

Results and Discussion

Ḍeuḍā and the Performance Arena

Ḍeuḍā reaches its fullest expression through performance, emphasizing the dynamic interplay of performer, audience, setting, and art form. Performance is central to *Ḍeuḍā*, as Richard Bauman observes: "From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence" (293). In *Ḍeuḍā*, performers and audiences actively co-create meaning, embodying socially situated aesthetic communication. Performers rely on voice, body, and setting to convey the essence of this folk art. The performance arena of *Ḍeuḍā* encompasses the location or setting, the events, personal and collective conditions, and the nature of its genesis. John Miles Foley remarks that for events that are not merely repeated but re-created, the performance arena represents the place where performers go to present them and where the audience goes to experience them (47). *Ḍeuḍā* performances occur across diverse settings, which shape their themes and styles. Ammaraj Joshi elaborates that *Ḍeuḍā* theater has three distinct locations for duet performances: intimate, private/domestic, and public (76). These three spheres contribute a rich diversity to *Ḍeuḍā* poetry. Each setting fosters unique interpretations of *Ḍeuḍā* poetry, reflecting the interplay between environment and artistic expression. Intimate theatre takes place in natural, secluded locations such as forests, riverbanks, meadows, or mountain slopes. These settings suit lyrical solo performances, often voiced by women expressing personal emotions and life's hardships. These intimate theaters allow for the creation of profound love poems filled with sophisticated symbolic and metaphorical imagery. For instance:

डांडाको चौतारी माथि, घोप्टो बस्यो गुनु
म चेलिलाई के दियो हो, घुम्टो हाली रुनु

(A long-tailed monkey sat lying face down on the waiting place on the hilltop. What a fate as a daughter have I got since I have to cry under the veil?)

Such songs, whether performed in isolation or as part of a duet, evoke themes of love, loss, and longing, often resonating deeply with the performers and audiences alike.

Private or domestic theaters are spaces where *Ḍeuḍā* songs revolve around social and familial themes. These performances typically exclude sensual or provocative expressions, as the audience often includes elders and children. *Ḍeuḍā* in this context becomes a celebration of shared experiences, focusing on marriage, religious ceremonies, spiritual love, and communal values. Domestic performances occur within family or community settings during life events like marriages, naming ceremonies, or religious rituals. These performances avoid themes of sensuality or impropriety, instead emphasizing social issues, spirituality, and familial bonds. Gender-segregated groups often perform, reinforcing cultural decorum. Public performances, on the other hand, take place during large gatherings such as festivals, fairs, and religious rituals, often held on uncultivated plains, school grounds, or temple courtyards. These group performances showcase the communal spirit, blending humor, satire, and metaphorical compositions. Participants from various backgrounds gather, celebrating their shared cultural heritage while fostering solidarity and collective joy. These performances are more inclusive and diverse, allowing participants to express themes ranging from satire and irony to profound philosophical ideas. Suresh Awasthi notes that traditional theater performances in South Asia often take place in open-air spaces such as fields, streets, or designated platforms, which aligns with the settings of *Ḍeuḍā* performance in Far Western Nepal (qtd. in Schechner 184). Fairs, festivals, and various cultural or ritual events are occasionally held at different times in Far West Nepal, contributing to the promotion of public theater. However, for *Ḍeuḍā* performances, the courtyard, backyard, or village threshing floor often serves as the stage during personalized celebrations such as Shasti Puja (marking the sixth day after a male child's birth), naming ceremonies, Bratabandha (the sacred thread-wearing ritual), marriages, and other joyous occasions.

Determinants of *Ḍeuḍā* as Performance Art

Ḍeuḍā encompasses various determinants of performance art. The determinants of *Ḍeuḍā* performance are shaped by the interaction between performers, audiences, and contextual elements. The location and setting of *Ḍeuḍā* performances significantly influence their form and tone, as the physical venue dictates the nature of artistic expression. Intimate settings often inspire lyrical and emotional solos, creating a reflective atmosphere, whereas public venues encourage vibrant and communal expressions that resonate with a larger audience. Similarly, themes and structure play a pivotal role in shaping *Ḍeuḍā* songs, which are categorized into solo, duet, and group performances. Solo performances typically reflect personal introspection and explore light, serious, or romantic themes. Duet performances are often emotional and humorous, showcasing playful or sentimental exchanges between performers. Group

performances, on the other hand, blend literary, satirical, and symbolic elements, addressing broader societal themes and fostering collective engagement. The lead singers orally compose the songs according to the demand of the context in the dialogic form and the performance develops as a battle. The rhythm of the songs is changed time to time to repress the monotony of the single rhythm. In this concern, Ruth Finnegan argues, "A performer can inflect the message or atmosphere of a poem by his own dramatization, speed, singing style, pauses, rhythmic movement, gestures, facial expression and so on" (125). A performer has significant agency in shaping the audience's experience of a poem by utilizing various expressive tools. During a solo performance of Ḍeuḍā, the singer typically inserts one index finger into one ear to block out external noise and taps the fingers of the other hand against their throat to maintain the song's rhythm. In duet performances, singers use hand, finger, eye, and head gestures to enhance their expression. In group performances, participants hold hands and dance in a circle, stepping one step forward and half a step back. Bir Bahadur Katuwal describes *Deudākhel* as a performing art form characterized by the circular movement of participants. He explains that the performers arrange themselves in a circle, hold hands, and step with their legs in a slanted manner (39). Deuḍā performers adjust their gestures and movement pace to align with the rhythm, tone, and tempo of the song.

The role of the audience further enriches the performance, as their presence provides feedback and encouragement that energize the performers. Ḍeuḍā performance brings together poets, performers, and audiences in a vibrant interplay of creativity and participation. As Dharma Raj Upadhyay notes, "People of all ages, professions, ethnicities, genders, classes, and castes can participate as verse composers, performers, and members of the audience" (76). The inclusivity of Ḍeuḍā performances strengthens community ties, as participants engage in a collective expression of joy, sorrow, and cultural pride. The dramatic structure of Ḍeuḍā performance - gathering, performing, and dispersing - enhances its ceremonial nature. Victor Turner highlights the importance of the audience, stating, "Theatre comes into existence when a separation occurs between audience and performers" (112). This relationship between performers and spectators breathes life into the performance, transforming it into a communal celebration. Moreover, cultural rituals and traditions deeply embed Ḍeuḍā performances within festivals like Gaurā, Dasārā, and regional fairs. These events ground the performances in religious and social customs, as seen during the Gaurā festival, where women honor Goddess Gauri through Ḍeuḍā, blending devotion with artistic expression. Together, these elements illustrate the multifaceted nature of Ḍeuḍā as both an artistic and cultural phenomenon.

Cultural Implications of *Ḍeuḍā*

Ḍeuḍā is deeply embedded in the cultural and religious fabric of the region. It not only entertains but also serves as a medium for social critique and cultural preservation. The lead singers often compose verses spontaneously in response to the performance's context, creating a dialogic interaction that transforms the event into a poetic battle. The rhythmic variations and thematic diversity classify *Ḍeuḍā* into three forms: solo, duet, and group performances. Solo performances are light and introspective; duets are humorous and emotional, while group performances incorporate symbolic, satirical, and artistic elements.

During intimate performances, themes of love and companionship often lead to deep emotional connections, sometimes culminating in marriage. This intimate sphere is characterized by an expectation of decency, as trust and respect are fundamental. Public theaters, however, provide greater freedom of expression, fostering solidarity and the exchange of folk knowledge across generations. Marcel Danesi observes, "Culture is a system of symbolic and expressive structures that a particular group of people develops and utilizes to enhance solidarity, understanding, and transmission of knowledge" (3). *Ḍeuḍā* epitomizes this cultural function, reinforcing communal bonds and perpetuating regional heritage.

Ḍeuḍā performances are integral to various cultural and religious events in Sudurpaschim province. Festivals such as Gaurā, Dasārā, and regional fairs feature *Ḍeuḍā* as a central element. The Gaurā festival, in particular, highlights the cultural and religious significance of *Ḍeuḍā* songs, with women singing to honor goddess Gauri and pray for their husbands' well-being. These performances blend sacred and secular themes, reflecting the region's spiritual devotion and communal spirit. A representative song from the Gaurā festival illustrates this blend of spirituality and folk tradition:

केलडिका पातमुनि, गाईदिया गुवानी

दाइन भया गौरा देवी, दाइन भ्या भवानी

(I have fed some food to the cow, wrapping it with the leaves of a flowering plant named Keladi for religious purposes. May there be the grace of Goddesses Gauri and Bhavani upon us!)

These songs connect performers and audiences to their cultural roots, ensuring the transmission of traditions across generations.

Ḍeuḍā songs, often referred to as the valuable asset of Farwestern region, are more than mere entertainment. They encapsulate the cultural, historical, and artistic identity of the region, preserving ancient rhythms, values, and narratives. These songs serve as a bridge between past and present, teaching moral values, promoting harmony, and celebrating the human experience. By embracing *Ḍeuḍā*, communities honor their

ancestors' wisdom while fostering a sense of unity and cultural pride. Despite the challenges posed by modernization, *Ḍeuḍā* continues to thrive as a testament to the enduring power of folk traditions to inspire and connect people.

The *Ḍeuḍā* songs, which cover the collective feelings of the people of all ages and classes, are sung in group performance. They represent the whole society, time and nature. Dustin Kido opines, "Folk culture is local, rooted in regional identity" (5). The *Ḍeuḍā* as a folk literary art of the far western region reflects the culture and identity of the local people. These songs expose the perversions, anomalies, exploitation, injustice, biasness, corruption, superstitions and all the stereotypes in the society, as depicted in the following couplets:

आउन्तक बाजुरा बाटी, सिधा जान्दे डोटी
म पढ्या कर्मका भर, कर्म रैछ खोटी

(I came through Bajura on my way, now let me head straight to Doti. I placed my faith in karma, but my karma proved to be flawed.)

न मैले कोपिला टिप्नु, न फूल पैरनु
जो दु:ख दैवले दियो, त्यो दु:ख सैरनु

(Neither should I pluck a flower, nor should I tread on it. The sorrow given by fate, I must endure.)

रोज्या फल औरले खायो, मेरा चन्नी हात
मान्छेका परान भन्ना, धन्न तेरा जात

(The ripe fruit was consumed by others, leaving me with nothing. You prioritize caste over the essence of people's hearts.)

गोठको गोठिगाड बाच्छो, बनतिर फर्क्यांको
बाइर चानु झलकनो, अन्तर दरक्याको

(A calf kept inside the barn has now turned toward the forest. A face that glows outwardly yet conceals a fractured heart within.)

कसैखी कम्पनी माला, कसैखी पोत्या नाइँ
कसैखी जिउनारी बासी, कसैखी कोद्या नाइँ

(Some adorn themselves with gold necklaces, while others don't even have a simple beaded necklace to wear. Some have plenty of food to eat, while others lack even millet to satisfy their hunger.)

गैला सेल बसु भन्या, रुखका पात छैन
भोकलाई भोजन छैन, मायालाई जात छैन

(The tree's branches are bare, even when I seek its shade to shield myself from the blazing sun. Hunger needs no special food, and love transcends caste.)

The first song suggests the speaker's reliance on the principle that actions and their moral consequences determine life's outcomes. By relying on karma, the speaker

acknowledges faith in the natural justice of cause and effect. However, the realization that their karma turned out flawed implies an awareness that their past actions- intentional or unintentional - may have led to unfavorable results. This interpretation reinforces the belief in karma's impartiality while reflecting on personal responsibility for one's circumstances. The second song reflects the inevitability of suffering that comes from external forces or circumstances beyond one's control, such as fate. It suggests that rather than resisting or avoiding sorrow, one must accept it and find the strength to endure it, as it is part of the human experience. The suffering is a part of the journey of life that must be faced with resilience. The third couplet conveys a sense of loss and helplessness, with a critique of societal values that prioritize material possessions and social status over human life and dignity.

The fourth song symbolizes a longing for freedom or a break from confinement. It reflects the duality of appearances and inner reality. It suggests someone who projects an image of happiness, confidence, or brightness to the world, but internally they are struggling, hurt, or broken. It speaks to the hidden emotional struggles that may not be evident on the surface. Together, these lines may suggest themes of hidden struggles, a longing for liberation, or the contrast between external appearances and internal truths. They reflect a commentary on human nature, societal expectations, or the complexities of personal growth and transformation. The fifth couplet symbolizes the unequal distribution of wealth and luxury. It emphasizes the disparity in access to basic necessities like food. While some live in abundance and wastefulness, others face dire scarcity, unable to meet their basic needs. In this line, referring Ḍeuḍā song, Narendra Bahadur Air states, "The song represents the feelings of subalterns who are the victims of poverty, casteism, and gender discrimination in the twenty-first century even after the decade of elimination of caste and gender discrimination" (162). The poetic lines draw attention to the pervasive social and economic inequalities that exist within communities. They evoke empathy for those less fortunate and may serve as a critique of the system that allows such disparities to persist. It calls for reflection on privilege and responsibility toward creating a more equitable society. The sixth song underscores that basic human needs, like hunger, are universal and require no special conditions, while love is a profound force that surpasses societal constructs like caste.

The Ḍeuḍā performance held in the village is modest and moral, reflecting the everyday realities, hopes, pains, sorrows, hardships, and joys of the local people. In such performances, even village elders take delight in playing alongside the younger generation. Public theater offers performers significant freedom as it transcends the boundaries of private spaces. Stepping into the public sphere, performers share responsibilities, allowing them to set aside concerns about right and wrong or ethical

and unethical issues. The duet performances in public theater can involve any pairing, such as men with men, women with women, men with women, boys with boys, girls with girls, boys with girls, and more. This variety in group formations adds richness and diversity to the themes and performances.

In the *Ḍeuḍā* performance, participants engage with enthusiasm, energy, and agility, inspired by the presence and encouragement of a large audience. This public form of *Ḍeuḍā* dance is accompanied by songs, making it visually appealing while serving as a medium to pass on folk knowledge to the younger generation. As Danesi explains, "Culture is a system of symbolic and expressive structures that a particular group of people develops and utilizes to enhance solidarity, understanding, and transmission of knowledge" (3). Similarly, the public performance of *Ḍeuḍā* fosters solidarity, mutual understanding, and the transfer of knowledge across generations.

Ḍeuḍā performance blends poetry and performance, traditionally set in scenic mountain meadows surrounded by forests, near temples of local deities, public squares, school grounds, playgrounds, riverbanks, and other suitable venues during feasts, fairs, and religious festivals. These settings enhance the atmosphere, aligning it with religious and spiritual values. Solo performances often occur in secluded spots like forest groves, mountain slopes, hills, paddy fields, or other private areas. While *Ḍeuḍā* singers often reflect the struggles of agrarian life, the performance itself is serene, joyful, colorful, and solemn, aiming to inspire deeper interest and happiness. The lamentations do not dwell on life's hardships or misery but rather help participants momentarily forget them, offering liberation from the mundane world. Through the dramatic world of *Ḍeuḍā*, the daily struggles, pain, and turmoil of peasant life are transformed and purified. Performances typically take place in either naturally beautiful, isolated locations or places of religious importance, drawing large crowds of participants, performers, and spectators. The natural and social settings profoundly shape the mode of communication, with the physical surroundings enhancing the sensory appeal of the *Ḍeuḍā* experience.

Every community has its own unique way of organizing and sustaining communal life and daily practices through distinct beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, performances, art, language, dress, cuisine, and other forms of human expression, intellect, and communication specific to a group at a particular time. Jan Vansina emphasizes this idea, stating, "A performance is the normal expression of a whole tradition. The conditions of its reproduction are those of the tradition itself" (39). In Sudurpaschim province, numerous festivals, fairs, and wedding ceremonies are deeply intertwined with Hindu culture, local traditions, and customs. Cultural events such as the Gaurā festival, Jagaram at weddings, Jãt, and Bhũwo prominently incorporate the enactment of *Ḍeuḍā*, reflecting its significance within the region's cultural context.

During the Gaurā festival, women perform the *Ḍeuḍā* dance to the melodies of traditional folk songs. These *Ḍeuḍā* songs are centered on praising the great goddess Gauri. During this festival, women especially worship goddess Gauri, praying for their husbands' good health, prosperity, and longevity. *Ḍeuḍā* songs hold a significant place in certain cultural festivals, particularly in the Sudurpaschim region. These songs are more than just musical expressions; they are deeply woven into the social, religious, and cultural identity of the community. Closely tied to the worship of goddess Gauri (also known as goddess Pārvati), the Gaurā festival reflects devotion and cultural heritage. Through the performance of *Ḍeuḍā* songs, the legacy of faith and tradition is preserved, connecting the present generation to their ancestors. These songs also express a wide range of emotions, including sorrow, joy, and love, as reflected in the examples below:

हिउँ भउतै मालिका पड्डो, पाटन पुरिदैन
साई दुरै म पन दुरै, माया दुरिदैन

(Snowfall in the higher elevations cannot bury the plain land. Even if people stay away from each other, their love does not fade away.)

These songs are performed in a spontaneous, dialogic style, with one singer offering reassurance to the other that their bond of love can endure despite physical separation. The Gaurā festival, characterized by its religious rituals and the dual secular and sacred nature of *Ḍeuḍā* songs, embodies the cultural essence of the region. As Richard Schechner aptly notes, "Rituals are sacred or secular. Sacred rituals express or enact beliefs linking people to transcendent beings" (122). While most sacred rituals today are tied to specific religions, many individuals also engage in personal rituals. Secular rituals, by contrast, are interwoven into state ceremonies, everyday life, and various other activities.

Ḍeuḍā singers begin their performance by invoking a god or goddess, transition to a theme of their choice in the middle, and conclude the dance with a customary prayer to the divine for longevity. Saroj G.C. and Bhupesh Joshi state: "One way the Deuda songs impart ecological wisdom is through the evocation of spiritual dimensions" (11). *Ḍeuḍā* songs impart ecological wisdom by incorporating spiritual elements. These songs do not just focus on environmental themes in a practical sense, but also connect nature to spiritual beliefs and values. The following representative Deuḍā songs, which mark the beginning of the Deuḍā performance, are taken from performances held during the Gaurā Festival:

केलडिका पातमुनि, गाइदिया गुवानि
दाइन भया गौरा देवी, दाइन भ्या भवानी

(I have offered food to the cow wrapped in the leaves of a flowering plant called Kelaḍi as a religious act. May the blessings of Goddesses Gaurā and Bhavāni be upon us!)

दाइन भयै गमरा देवी, दाइन खेल्या गडा
म तेरी सौंराइले आया, काँछै रानीचडा ?

(May the blessings of Goddess Gauri and the sacred space of performance be upon us! I have arrived because of your love; where are you, oh robin bird?)

The songs signal the start of the *Ḍeuḍā* performance, which takes place during the Gaurā festival. These songs encourage a deeper understanding of the environment, where natural elements are viewed not only as physical entities but also as part of a spiritual and harmonious relationship with the world. This approach helps to foster respect and awareness of nature within the community. The singer invokes and venerates the goddess Gaura and the performance site in the song.

Any participants, regardless of age, gender, caste, education, or ethical standing, are free to join in *Ḍeuḍā* Khel. As Yagyaraj Upadhyaya argues, men and women of any age, rank and caste can participate in the *Ḍeuḍā* performance by shaking hands. However, certain discriminatory boundaries persist between men's and women's group performances, reflecting a feudalistic culture that originated in the Middle Ages (192). Upadhyaya further explains that while Brahmin-Chhetri men may perform with Dalit women, Dalit men are prohibited from performing with Brahmin-Chhetri women. Additionally, family ties impose restrictions on men and women participating in *Ḍeuḍā*. Unmarried girls enjoy greater freedom to perform in such groups compared to married women (my trans.; 192-93). Though *Ḍeuḍā* is open to all, caste and gender-based restrictions persist, reflecting feudalistic traditions. Unmarried girls enjoy more freedom to perform than married women, with family and societal ties imposing additional limits. These factors influence both the course of the performance and the message it communicates.

There are three types of participants in *Ḍeuḍā* Khel: poets or singers, performers or dancers, and spectators or audiences. The lead singers assume the role of composers or authors, the performers contribute to the dance and play, while the spectators observe, analyze, evaluate the performance, and offer feedback. As Dharmaraj Upadhyay states, "People of all ages, professions, ethnicities, genders, classes, and castes can participate as verse composers, performers, and members of the audience, as the performances are ever-expanding, all-inclusive public events" (76). All the participants are local farmhands from the far western hills, familiar with their culture and communicatively informed of the performance venue.

The participants actively engage in the *Ḍeuḍā* performance, dressed in vibrant and festive attire, as they gather in a designated space with a shared goal of achieving happiness and enjoyment. The audience supports the lead singers by participating in the Khel with them, while others remain outside to observe, encourage, and evaluate the

performance. Turner highlights the significance of the audience in any performance, stating: "Theatre comes into existence when a separation occurs between audience and performers. The paradigmatic theatrical situation is a group of performers soliciting an audience who may or may not respond by attending. The audience is free to attend or stay away - and if they stay away, it is the theater that suffers, not its would-be audience" (112). There is a complex relationship between performers and audiences that breathes life into the theater. While the audience has the freedom to attend or abstain, a performance is often incomplete without their presence. Particularly striking are the women and girls, dressed in traditional clothing and adorned with gold and silver jewelry, their locks or ears decorated with flowers, as they move freely on a lush green lawn surrounded by the forest, appearing as living ornaments of the ceremonial event.

After performing for an extended period, the players take a break in the evening or late evening, heading to their villages in groups while discussing the dance. Occasionally, they stop for snacks at temporary stalls set up around the performance site or along their route home. Schechner notes that "The basic performance structure of gathering/performing/dispersing underlies and literally contains the dramatic structure" (189). The players' agreement to meet at a specific time and place to perform, followed by dispersing once the performance concludes, preserves the dramatic essence of *Ḍeuḍā* Khel. Traditionally, *Ḍeuḍā* discourse concludes with farewell songs; however, some performances end without them due to the dispersal of the performers. The following is a sample of the song performed at the end of the performance:

बाँचिरया फूलका भाडी, आशीष छ मेरी
देव-देवता दाइनभया, भेट होइजाली फेरि

(May you all live long, my friends, for I bestow my blessings upon you ! If the deity's blessing is upon us, we are certain to meet again.)

This song, at the end of the performance, reflects a heartfelt wish for the longevity and well-being of the audience or participants. It conveys that the speaker has offered their blessings to everyone, reinforcing a sense of connection and goodwill. The mention of the deity's blessing adds a spiritual dimension, suggesting that divine favor ensures that the bond between individuals will remain strong, leading to future reunions. This expression serves to close the performance on a positive and hopeful note, emphasizing both the speaker's personal blessings and the grace of higher powers.

The *Ḍeuḍā* performed at various religious fairs also carries distinct cultural significance. Yagyaraj Upadhyaya states that *Ḍeuḍā* is performed during weddings, feasts, festivals, fairs, and various other auspicious events and gatherings (my trans.; 191). As Upadhyaya explains, the researcher discovered through field studies and focus

group discussions that group Deuḍā is usually performed during auspicious events and gatherings.

The study found that at certain fairs, such as Badāl Jãt, Bundhan Jãt, Ugratara Jãt, and Durga Jãt in Dadeldhura, women are prohibited from performing the Ḍeuḍā due to cultural reasons. During field visits to these fairs, the researcher noted that women were only spectators while men performed the Ḍeuḍā. Another observation is that the performance is not carried out according to the performers' individual preferences, as there are specific rules that must be followed during these occasions. Typically, the Ḍeuḍā is performed by men after worshiping the relevant deities, both in Rateḍi (at night) and Deuseḍi (during the day). However, at some fairs, like the Dasārā in Khaptad, women are allowed to participate in the performance.

The Ḍeuḍā song is a key cultural element of Sudurpaschim Nepal. While it can generally be seen as a way to spend leisure time, provide entertainment, and showcase creative talent, its significance extends far beyond these aspects. These are merely its secondary functions, with its primary role being the preservation and expression of culture. Culture, as an integrated system of customs, encompasses traditions, arts, character, discipline, religion, language, tools, jewelry, weapons, knowledge, faith, beliefs, and much more, all of which contribute to a sophisticated and social way of life. The true identity of a society is rooted in the unique details of these cultural elements. Similarly, the Ḍeuḍā song reflects and conveys these cultural aspects, making it a vital carrier of the region's heritage.

While Ḍeuḍā songs may not encompass the entirety of the community's literary tradition, they do capture a broad spectrum of the region's popular culture. Every form of literature serves as a unique voice for its language and culture, preserving the heritage of the past, reflecting the realities of the present, and envisioning future possibilities. Neglecting past events and dismissing ancestral experiences risks reducing ethnic identity to mere myth. Unfortunately, the current generation's inclination to learn from their predecessors seems to be waning, primarily because these traditions have not evolved with the times. However, these folk songs are not mere echoes of outdated ideas. Instead, they embody deep emotions that uphold the essence of humanity. They represent a yearning for equality, love, and harmony, values cherished by early human societies. Connoisseurs often compare ancient traditions to gold, valuing them as timeless treasures.

The Ḍeuḍā songs can be regarded as the treasure of Sudurpaschim. Through their creation, the ancestors of this society not only passed their time and found entertainment but also preserved ancient rhythms and music. These songs served as a guide to embracing life's ideals, teaching the value of life, high morals, original

thought, and noble character. Moreover, they highlight the fact that the region's past was remarkable, as evidenced by the inclusion of various elements of fine arts, such as literature and music. These songs deserve respect and reverence not merely as ancient art or ancestral expression but also for the profound wisdom they embody, shaped by experiences beyond the study and meditation of sacred texts.

Moral values hold a special place in these songs, with a strong emphasis on character and behavior. They outline the actions to be taken and the practices to be followed as a human being, steering away from deceit, conspiracies, and self-serving motives. The core moral message they convey is rooted in theistic thought, promoting the pursuit of a disciplined and meaningful life. According to their teachings, religion is defined as duty, practice, and the honest fulfillment of responsibilities with discipline. These songs also advocate reverence for all elements of nature - earth, sky, sun, moon, stars, fire, wind, trees, plants, water, mountains, fruits, flowers, and grasses - encouraging their recognition as deities. These profound ideas are embedded within Ḍeuḍā verses. Ḍeuḍā songs preserved through oral tradition, passed down from one generation to the next, often evolve by losing certain elements and incorporating new ones. This process not only helps maintain the essence of the old traditions but also solidifies the historical significance of folk life. These songs reflect the collective history of the society rather than individual narratives, preserving past experiences to inform and benefit the present.

Conclusion and Implications

The performance arena of Ḍeuḍā reveals its intricate connection to the cultural, social, and spiritual fabric of Sudurpaschim Province, Nepal. As a performative art form, Ḍeuḍā transcends mere musical expression, embedding itself deeply in the rituals, festivals, and communal gatherings of its practitioners. The interplay among performers, audiences, and settings is crucial, with diverse venues—ranging from intimate private/domestic spaces to public theaters - shaping the nature of its enactment and thematic depth. Themes in Ḍeuḍā performances range widely: from personal introspection and romantic exchanges in intimate settings to social critique, satire, and the reinforcement of communal values in public gatherings. Its spontaneous and participatory nature fosters inclusivity, bridging divides across caste, gender, and generations, making it a unifying force within the community. This dynamic interplay of collective participation and spontaneity underscores Ḍeuḍā's role in preserving cultural traditions, fostering a shared community identity, and facilitating both personal and communal catharsis.

A defining feature of Ḍeuḍā is its ability to blend sacred and secular themes, enriching its cultural significance by connecting the past and present through a shared performative

experience. The findings of this study highlight *Ḍeuḍā*'s cultural, social, and economic value as a repository of intangible heritage that preserves ancient rhythms, values, and narratives. However, modernization and globalization pose significant challenges to its continuity, with younger generations increasingly showing a waning interest in these traditions. To address these challenges, the study recommends proactive measures such as the documentation of *Ḍeuḍā* songs, their inclusion in educational curricula, and the promotion of cultural tourism to generate economic benefits for the region while showcasing its rich traditions. Local governments and cultural organizations are urged to leverage *Ḍeuḍā* as a tool for community empowerment, fostering social cohesion and cultural pride. By preserving and revitalizing this folk art, Sudurpaschim can ensure the transmission of its cultural identity across generations while positioning *Ḍeuḍā* as a dynamic and evolving expression of communal creativity and resilience in the face of modern challenges.

The study's ethnographic approach provides a valuable framework for scholars in folklore, anthropology, and cultural studies to explore other regional performance traditions, thereby enhancing our understanding of cultural diversity. Moreover, *Ḍeuḍā*'s participatory nature strengthens social cohesion and a shared sense of identity, making it a powerful tool for community empowerment. The vibrant and engaging character of *Ḍeuḍā* also holds significant potential for cultural tourism, offering opportunities to generate economic benefits for the region while introducing its rich traditions to a broader audience.

Efforts to integrate *Ḍeuḍā* into educational curricula can instill pride and cultural awareness among younger generations, ensuring the continuity of these practices. Taken together, these measures emphasize the need to protect and promote *Ḍeuḍā* not merely as a cultural artifact but as a dynamic, living expression of communal life and human creativity.

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