

## Kantari Festival: A Case Study of Nawalpur District

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### Abstract

This research presents a comprehensive study of the Kantari festival, dedicated to the goddess Kuwarvarti Mai, which is celebrated every five years in Nawalpur district (Bardaghat Susta East). Kuwarvarti Mai is a tutelary deity worshipped by the Tharu community of Nawalpur district as an ancestral goddess of power, protection and abundance. Importantly, the study explores the rituals, traditions, and the syncretic relationship between the Tharu and Magar communities through this festival. It weaves every ritualistic fabric of this festival and delves into its specialty, attraction and uniqueness. It employs a qualitative research methodology, including semi-structured interviews with key informants, participatory observation, and analysis of primary and secondary sources. It documents the procession route of this festival across ten sacred places of worship locally known as thans, the esoteric rituals performed by Gurau priests using a divine sword called Khaand, and the vibrant performing arts integral to the celebration. The findings reveal that Kantari festival serves as a vital mechanism for preserving intangible cultural heritage, fostering communal solidarity, and maintaining the socio-religious structure of Nawalpur district. The syncretic blend between Tharu and Magar communities, manifested through shared worship and reciprocal ritual responsibilities is central to this festival. The article concludes that Kantari festival represents not merely a religious observance but a living cultural heritage that embodies nature worship, ancestral veneration, and the enduring spirit of communal harmony.

**Keywords:** Kantari festival, Kuwarvarti Mai, Gurau, syncretism, intangible cultural heritage

1. Mr. Deepak Gurau is a researcher dedicated to cultural study with a focus on the intersection of heritage and community. Having completed MBS in 2017, MA in Nepalese History, Culture and Archaeology in 2025, and currently pursuing MA in Buddhist Studies, he specializes in ethnographic studies that document local traditions and rituals. His work extends beyond academia into the tourism and hospitality sector, where he serves as a professional guide with a passion for storytelling and offer deep, contextual understanding of cultural processes.

## Introduction

Kantari festival is one of the most vibrant festivals in the Nawalpur district dedicated to the goddess Kuwarvarti Mai. It is celebrated every five years on the full moon of the bright fortnight in *Chaitra*. Its central observance involves a procession spanning over twenty days to visit the goddess's tributaries across the region, characterized by communal participation, tantric rituals, and animal sacrifices. *Khaand*, a divine weapon in which the powers of spirits of ancestors are manifested into, is used for animal sacrifice offered to the Goddess by the head priest known as *Tiket Gurau* (Thanet, 2062, 27).

Different festivals are celebrated by the Tharus of Nawalpur such as *Badki Atwar*, *Jitiya*, *Maghi*, *Faguwa* and others with the plentiful charms which involve traditional songs and music, dancing, feasting, food and delicacies, and rituals (Dahal, 2076, p. 88). They have a rich body of oral tradition. Their acts of daily living are highly based on the faiths, myths and the other traditional cultural values. These socio-cultural practices are centered around deities, the nature spirit and ancestral worship. To the Tharus, these animistic beliefs and practices have helped them to bring about social cohesion at the community levels (Rana, 2024, p. 90).

The traditional music, dancing, cuisine and rituals are revived through the celebration of festivals like Kantari festival. The local people believe that this tantric worship eliminates poverty, enhances agricultural harvest, and promotes happiness and prosperity. Festivals were inaugurated to celebrate annually some event in the scriptures, to pacify the gods, to thank them for the harvest, to honor their birth dates or to celebrate some miraculous performance attributed to them (Anderson, 2005, p. 27).

Kantari festival engages the people in contributing to each other. It offers a dynamic space to reconnect with their ancestral roots. It is a bridge between the past and the present. The information about this festival has not been disseminated to many. Meyer & Deuel (1998) has written about the Kantari festival celebrated to worship God Kumarvarti whereas this festival is dedicated to the Goddess Kuwarvarti. The careful examination about the goddess Kuwarvarti is carried out through this research. In this material world, people are much more obsessed with physical entities due to which traditional culture is being diminished. At present, there are very few priests who have the knowledge to perform the tantric ritual in this festival. On the other hand, the deeper study on the rituals and traditions of Kantari festival helps to fully understand its significance and shared cultural practices between Tharu and Magar communities.

Ministry of education, culture, science and social development, Gandaki province (B.S. 2078) has published the religious and cultural heritage of Gandaki province including Nawalpur district. None of the *thans* except Mahadevathan of Gaidakot municipality associated with this festival has been listed in the religious and cultural heritage of Nawalpur

district. This research presents a detailed study of this festival, exploring its rituals and significance as a vital cultural heritage of the region.

## **Research Objectives**

The research focused on :

- To investigate the rituals of the Kantari festival.
- To document the procession route of the Kantari festival across different sites.
- To analyse the syncretic blend of Tharu and Magar communities during the Kantari festival.

## **Research Methodology**

The research methodology employed in this study is qualitative, exploratory and descriptive approach on the basis of community epistemology, community belief patterns and oblations to understand in-depth perspectives associated with this distinctive festival. Data collection methods include semi structured interviews using open-ended questions with key informants ensuring representation from relevant stakeholder groups. It used consultation with the members of the Kantari management committee, main priest, priest's family, devotees and the local people. Participatory observation of this festival has added in-depth and relevant context to the research. The main shrine and tributaries are visited personally for observation to accomplish the objective, and each icon, images and sculptures are scrutinized.

The researcher has participated in Shirthan *puja* which has intertwined the customary tradition and authenticity. The research is aided by photography. Moreover, consultation of relevant books, articles, journals, textbooks, published and unpublished documents, internet, YouTube on the topic are also used to gather comprehensive insights and validate findings. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and confidentiality, are prioritized throughout the research process to ensure the protection of participants rights and privacy. Serious analysis has been used to analyze the qualitative data, identifying patterns, themes and perspectives. The data and information are verified with the professionals and experts. It also aims to investigate underlying reasons, opinions and motivations. Inductive methods are applied in the entire aspect of the study to develop deep, contextual understanding and broader generalization about Kantari festival.

## **Research Findings**

The research findings have been described, analyzed and presented in different sub-headings below:

## **Kuwarvarti Mai: Reverd Abode of Faith**

On the day of *Chaitra Shukla Purnima* every year, a general worship of goddess Kuwarvarti Mai is performed which is called Shirthan *puja*. And every five years, on the very same day, a more profound and elaborate ceremony of worship occurs which is called Kantari festival. Thousands of people congregate in numbers to witness, perceive and participate in this festival. It is a processional event to every tributary of Shirthan spread in and around the region followed by tantric rituals. At present, it is organized and executed by the Shree Shirthan Kuwarvarti Mai management committee.

Kuwarvarti is regarded as Mai or mother goddess in the Tharu community of Nawalpur. She is a tutelary deity who is sometimes dreadful and sometimes protective, warding off evil influences by virtue of her life-giving energies or *Shakti*. Those who live within her sphere of influence neglect her worship or offend her in any way, instead of securing their well-being, she brings upon them disease and death, drought and sterility with all the ills (James, 1959, p. 114). Her main sacred abode, Shirthan is worshipped as the main source of the *Shakti* or Kuwarvarti Mai which is transmitted, divided and distributed among the several other *thans* in and around the region. The Shakta religion mostly conforms to the tantric ideas and practices, a most notable feature of which is the idea of supreme being as a female power worshipped under different names and forms (Satpathy, 1985, p. 45).

### **Shirthan Puja**

The sacred geography of this district, nestled within the majestic Mahabharat mountain range, is anchored by two major peaks namely Devachuli and Barchuli. Devachuli hill is a prominent landmark which is believed to be the main abode of goddess Kuwarvarti Mai. It harbors a venerable natural cave or *donar* which is reverently worshipped by the indigenous Tharu community of Nawalpur as their pre-eminent main sacred place, Shirthan. Literally, Shirthan means the head of *thans*. Shirthan *puja* commences from the two days before *Chaitra Shukla Purnima*.

The first ritual of Shirthan *puja* is initiated by the main priest, *Tiket* at Shikharabasinitan located at Rajahar. Shikharabasinitan means the *than* of the goddess who resides at the peak of the hill. On the first day, a tantric ritual is performed by the main priest called *Tiket* in Shikharabasinitan and the procession begins. *Tiket* carries the *Khaand*, a divine sword wrapped with white cloth on his shoulder accompanied by seven other priest members who lead the procession to Kirtipur of Devchuli municipality.

On the second day, *Tiket* makes divine prayer in local *than* followed by a *jagar* or invocation ritual. A lot of devotees and local people gather around to observe this ritual. Hereafter, *Tiket* leads the procession to a dry riverbed, Inarchati where they spend another

night. They cut the branches of the trees to set up the tent and collect leaves, which is the mattress for the night. It gives the glimpse of a nomadic lifestyle.

On the day of *Chaitra Shukla Purnima*, all of the devotees take a ritual bath in spring water and the procession begins after the recitation of appraisal “*Shree Shirthan Kuwarvarti Mai ki jai, Shree Chachul Panchayan Kuwarvarti Mai ki jai*” by *Tiket* and “*Jai Jai*” by devotees. The hill echoes with this recitation of appraisal. *Tiket* leads the procession to Shirthan.

The devotees enter inside the cave and worship the goddess. Inside this natural cave or *donar*, there are images of goddess Kuwarvarti Mai in the middle, goddess Chaita on the left and goddess Panchain on the right. One can also observe many idols of horses, elephants, tigers and other animal’s clay figures offered to the goddess. Similar to Shirthan *puja*, a more profound and elaborate ceremony of worship is Kantari festival.

### **Kantari Festival**

The recent Kantari festival was celebrated in 2079/80 B.S or 2023 A.D. The next Kantari festival will be held in 2084/85 B.S. or 2028 A.D. Similar to Shirthan *puja*, this festival commences from the two days before *Chaitra Shukla Purnima* and lasts for more than 20 days. It exhibits the unique character of Tharu festival. However, every other ethnic group assembles and celebrates this festival together with great passion and devotion. It is based on the belief of revitalizing the spirit energies of the Tharu community. There is a popular mythology about this festival.

### **Mythology of Kantari Festival**

The origins of the Kantari festival are deeply rooted in the history of Nawalparasi and its first resident, Maharaj *raja*. Local legends, mantras, and rituals describe him as the ancestor of the Tharu people in the region. He resided in Koilapani, a place now known as Hattikhori, which was once his elephant stable. Maharaj *raja* and his seven brothers transformed the dense forests into agricultural settlements.



*Fig. 1:* Maharajrajathan located at Hattikhori. Maharaj *raja* is believed to be the ancestor of Tharus of Nawalpur. They worship a mound of earth here.

Nawalpur was the territory of goddess Kuwarvarti called Kuwarvarti bhumi. She lived on the mountain peak overlooking Nawalparasi. Maharaja *raja* and his brothers were clearing the forest to create villages and farms without asking her permission. The protector was outraged by the destruction of her sacred land. So, she sent her messenger named Sunkusuna to warn Maharaja *raja* and to seek forgiveness for his wrongdoing. Upon arriving at the palace, Sunkusuna waited quietly on the veranda, but no one acknowledged him. Feeling frustrated and ignored, he called out to the goddess and departed. Before he arrived at the palace, the goddess had already appeared in the king's dreams, instructing him to perform a forgiveness ceremony. The king, however, had been too busy with the affairs of his village to heed her warning. As Sunkusuna was leaving, the king's daughters, Chaita and Paita, fell unconscious.

At that moment, a divine voice informed the king that his daughters' condition was a direct result of his disrespect towards the goddess's messenger and her message. The voice commanded him to welcome Sunkusuna with great honor. Seeing his daughters' state and realizing the power of the goddess, the king immediately sent his soldiers to find Sunkusuna and bring him back. However, the king's daughters then vanished.

A divine voice once more spoke to the king, revealing that his daughters were now with the goddess and would be worshipped as her companions. The goddess bestowed upon the king with two *Khaand*. In the name of the divine *Khaand* and the goddess Kuwarvarti as Mai or mother goddess, Maharaj *raja* initiated the Kantari festival. He followed the customs and rituals as detailed by Sunkusuna during the worship. He also agreed to offer the animal sacrifice to the goddess.

The two images flanking the goddess Kuwarvarti Mai in Shirthan are believed to represent the king's daughters. The Maharaj *raja* *than* in Hattikhori is still revered today as the sacred dwelling of the Tharu ancestor. The ancestors are also assimilated with the deities and men interact with ancestors and deities through their shrines or *thans* (McDonaugh, 1985, p. 189). The Kantari festival has been celebrated by the people of Nawalpur for generations, continuing this rich tradition. They must follow the proper route while celebrating this festival.

### **Procession Route of Kantari Festival**

During the reign of Maharaj *raja*, several *thans*, or places of worship, were established in Nawalpur to serve as residences for the goddess Kuwarvarti Mai. These sacred sites or *thans* remain central to the worship practices of the Tharu community. *Tiket* Gurau are the head priests who perform the worship in this *thans*. They also received this title as a priest in this region. Another unusual aspect of the delegation of power from the central authority is the right attributed to priests (*gurau*) to protect an area from epidemics, wild beasts and other threats linked to the Tarai ecosystem (Krauskopff, 2000, p. 40).

The procession including *Tiket* goes to these *thans* in a sequence organized by the management committee. The *Tiket* perform the various rituals in all of these *thans*. It is mandatory for all these *thans* to invite him. Also, they have to receive him and manage the transportation for him. The means of transport has changed from bullock carts to Tuk-Tuk. The priests perform tantric rituals in each of the *thans*. Tharus believe that their destiny and their prosperity which is mainly based on agriculture is influenced by different spirits and in order to evoke them they perform different rituals and practices (Rana, 1999, p. 10).

Shirthan is worshipped as the main source of the power of goddess Kuwarvarti Mai which is transmitted, divided and distributed among the several other *thans* in and around the region. They are Shirthan on Devachuli hill, Jamradthan of Kudhauri, Gadiwanthan of Kushnahari, Devithan of Malpur, Mukundasingh Mahadevthan of Shikhraili, Shikharabasinithan of Rajahar, Bhagwati Devithan of Sandh, Dadawar Devithan of Danda, Paanch Pandava or Madwabharthan of Madanpur and Jamuniyabharithan of Kolkatawa. These are the ten *thans* of the goddess which is the processional route in Kantari festival organized by Shree Shirthan Kuwarvarti Mai Management Committee. Manhikhhamathan of Sardi has been excluded from the procession route because the people of Sardi have not sent the invitation for many years (P.R. Thanet, personal communication, May 2, 2025).

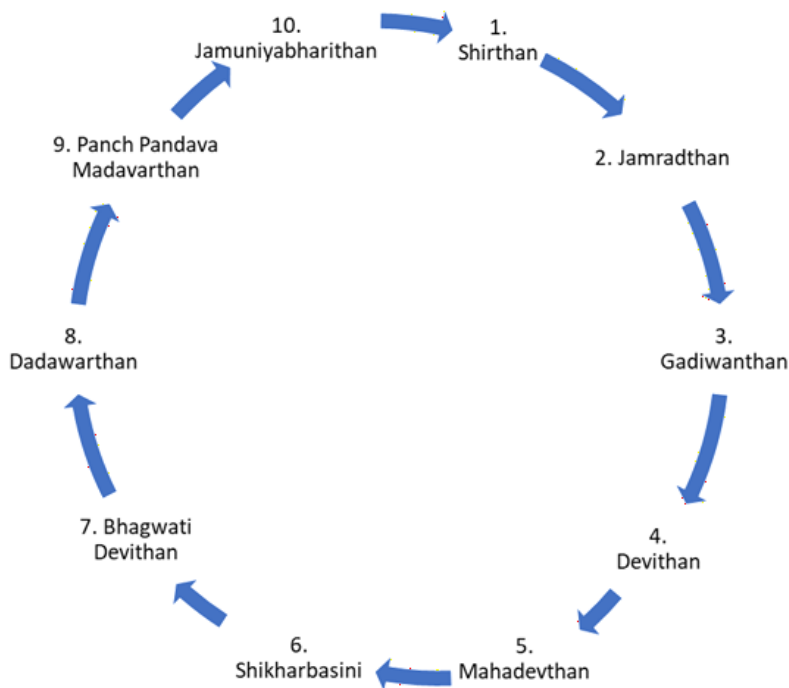
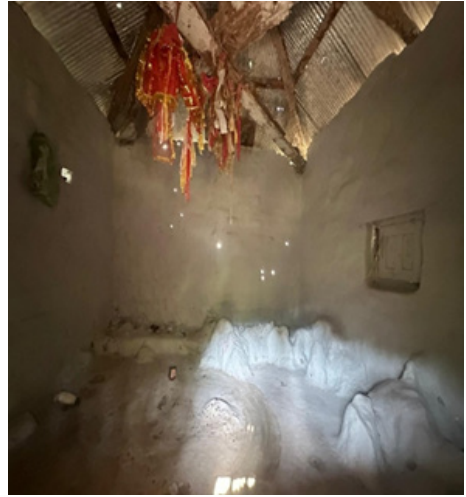


Fig. 2: Procession route of Kantari festival



*Fig. 3: Gadiwanthan (Outside view)*



*Fig. 4: Gadiwanthan (Inside view)*



*Fig. 5: Mahadevathan located at Sikhrauli*



Fig. 6: Jamuniyabharthan located at Kolkatawa Fig. 7: A new than being constructed for Jamuniyabharthan

### Rituals and Traditions Performed during Kantari Festival

The Tharu community possesses a rich intangible cultural heritage, which is manifested through a variety of social practices, rituals, and festive events. Traditional music, dance, prayers, and songs are integral to their celebrations, with specific performances and attire reserved for different occasions. The Kantari festival is marked by specific music, dance, prayers, and songs. Through the mastery of Tantrism, the priests, Gurau perform various rituals and have established themselves as distinguished practitioners of this art.

### Ritualistic Practices

There are special rituals to be performed in this festival. Divine prayers are made with the medium of nature and ancestral spirits. The pervasive influence of Jhankrism (Shamanism) the culture of mediums and sorcerers who bear various names (Guruwa in Tharu), remains apparent in the animistic–shamanistic religion of the Tharus (Maslak, 2003, p. 152). The priest, Gurau enchants *mantras* which results in different physical sensation including shaking of the devotees. Etymologically, *mantra* derives from the verbal root *man* that means to think or contemplate and the agentive or instrumental suffix *tra*, so that mantra would mean “an instrument of thought” (Yelle, 2003, p. 9). The devotees often make a vow or *bhokal* involving animal sacrifices upon the fulfillment of their wishes.

## Gurau: The Sacred Master of Tantric Rituals in Kantari Festival

The Kantari festival is a complex ritual system partaken by specific individuals and groups. Its primary custodians are the Gurau, or priests, of the Tharu community, who are responsible for executing the tantric rituals. Gurau is the intermediary between human, society and that of the supernatural, he intercedes with the gods only in matters pertaining to sickness and barrenness in women (Guneratne, 1999, p. 4). This role is passed down through inheritance and involves a rigorous apprenticeship under an existing Gurau for several years. The eloquence that began as poetic insight from a close relationship with the gods, move into a form of ritual expertise which in turn becomes an instrument that addresses a problematic situation (Patton, 2005, p. 151).

*Tiket* is a title given to the main priest of Kantari festival who must stem from Gurau clan. The present *Tiket* of the Kantari festival is Bhawani Gurau, who lives in Rajahar near Shikharbasinithan. His father, Shiva Narayan Gurau remained *Tiket* until he died in 2070 B.S. He is responsible for performing the central tantric rituals of the festival. The specific roles and responsibilities of the Gurau are allocated by the Tharu Guthiyar Samiti. The invocations of all *bhuhyar*, *jagar* or invocation rituals, animal sacrifices are central to the practices at every *than* including *barna* or village worship in *Jakhadi* or place of worship by Gurau.

Tharu have a number of village gods at their village shrine called *bhuhyar*, which means watchman or landowner (Meyer and Deuel, 1998, p. 5). During Kantari festival, names of all of the village gods and goddesses or *bhuhyar* must be recited in order to invoke them. The name of sisters of goddess Kuwarvarti Mai has been noted as Shitaladevi Mai, Phulmantadevi Mai, Kalikadevi Mai, Mankamanadevi Mai, GadhiMai, SuhadraMai, and HathiMai (B. Gurau, personal communication, May 4, 2025). Not only the gods and goddesses, but they revere their ancestors as well like Maharaj *raja* and his brothers, Yogi Gurau, Tika Gurau, Gad Baba, Gaddevi and consider them as *Bhuhyar*. They are all invoked from their residences which are the route of Kantari festival. *Tiket* must acknowledge the name of *Bhuhyar* to perform the *jagar* ritual.

Invocation, or *Jagar*, is a central esoteric tradition of this festival. This ritual is performed by the *Tiket* at every place of worship or *thans* where he leads the procession. It serves as an appeal to intercede with the spirits of goddesses, nature, and ancestors. The ritual is conducted in the form of a song, which begins with the phrase "*Kude Deutan*". Given its tantric nature, it's believed that this song should not be sung outside of the Kantari festival. It is performed with accompanying music, and ritual objects are prepared, including *akshyata* (a mixture of blood of sacrificed animal and rice grain), flowers, incense, a *diwa* or oil lamp and others.

The Gurau initiate the *Jagar* by singing hymns, playing music and spraying *akshyata* which can induce physical sensations, such as shaking, in some of the participating devotees when they listen to the hymns and music. The unique musical instruments used during this ritual intensify the experience. These physical sensations are only experienced by a few people, who are believed to gain the power of foresight. It gives a glimpse of traditional spirit beliefs in shamanistic practice. The Guruwa are known as faith healers, shamans and Tharu cultural leaders (Maycock and Chaudhary, 2022, p. 37).

### Offering Animal Sacrifice

Following the performance of *Jagar* or invocation rituals, worship is conducted at the main temple the next day. Devotees begin to gather at the *than* in the morning to offer prayers and perform animal sacrifices. Before this, the chief priest, known as the *Tiket*, offers prayers inside the *than* and sacrifices animals to the goddess using a sacred weapon called *Khaand*. This weapon is believed to be imbued with the power of ancestral spirits and is exclusively used for animal sacrifice to Goddess Kuwarvarti Mai.



Fig. 8: *Khaand*, a divine sword wrapped with a white cloth

According to local legend, the *Khaand* was a divine gift from Goddess Kuwarvarti Mai to Maharaj *raja*. This weapon is used only during the Kantari festival; at all other times, it is stored in the Shikharabasinithan in Rajahar, where it is continually worshipped by the *Tiket*, who lives nearby. Throughout the festival, the *Tiket* carries the *Khaand* on his shoulder, leading the procession and using it for all animal sacrifices. The weapon's name is Chandrahansa *Khaand* (Thanet, 2062, p. 21).

The sacrificial post in front of every *thans* called *maula* is used by the devotees to perform animal sacrifice. The new sacrificial post is added when the previous one gets older or if they can't be of use due to wear and tear by climate in the time being. The animal sacrifice must be offered to the goddess after the *jagar* ritual in Kantari festival. The prescribed animal offerings, known as Panchabali, include rams, ewes, doelings, bucklings, and buffaloes. Additionally, sacrifices of *unarmus* (wild rat), *kakada* (crab), *thankar* (a type of a comb made from a thorn-like plant), *dobi tarul* (wild yam), *dodahi macchar* (a kind of small fish), sparrow is offered along with pigeon in pairs which devotees may either sacrifice or release. The tradition of animal sacrifice is rooted in the belief that mother goddesses delight in blood offerings and may cause diseases, sickness, and death if not appeased (James, 1959, p. 117).

The offering of animal sacrifice is a mandatory component of the Kantari festival. The Shree Shirthan Kuwarvarti Mai management committee extends an invitation to all villages, and their participation is voluntary. If a village accepts, it must collectively sponsor at least one of the five types of animals for sacrifice. The management committee allocates the sponsored animals to the various *thans* along the festival route. Each and every member of the community participates in this festival with great joy and happiness. On different occasions, Tharu people sing different songs and perform different dances like *Jhamata* (a type of a Tharu dance) wearing their traditional dresses.

### **Songs and Dances**

The songs and dances performed in Tharu community during Kantari festival are based on the devotion towards the goddess Kuwarvarti Mai. While performing *jagar*, a group of priests sing the song to invoke the spirit of the goddess, nature and the ancestor. These songs are capable of interceding with the spirits to invite them to their residence in this realm. The experience in such sensation eliminates the illusions and fabrications.

They are only sung by the priests or Gurau as this song includes the divine power. The musical instruments are also played by the priests or Gurau. The Tharu performance is not the sort of drama but it is closer in form to the classic Greek drama in which the story is told through the dancing of performers and the singing of the traditional Tharu text in a chorus (Meyer and Deuel, 1998, p. 6). A mass of people flocks in number to observe this ritual which is called *deu khelne* or *jagar* in local language and the name of the song is *Neutari*. After the calling of the spirits, *Pujawat maharaji* is sung on the next day during offering of animal sacrifice.

In the group of the priests, there is no female priest. Only men in the Gurau clan are supposed to be the priest. Also, the women are prohibited to participate in *jagar* but are allowed to observe it. Tharu women are entitled to believe in gods and spirits but are not permitted to participate in rituals that include interaction with them (Maslak, 2003, p. 149). Different types of dances are performed by the women of the Tharu community. Depending

upon the locations, they perform various dances after the worship. Their song is rich in lyrics and its pitch. They wear their traditional dresses and ornaments. Along with the traditional music, they sing a song, clap their hands in a rhythm, bend down in their hips and move in a circle.

### **Traditional Musical Instruments**

During the performance of music, songs and dances, the traditional musical instruments are used. They are not played on any other occasion than the Kantari festival. They have a different way of making these instruments. They use the skin of different animals like deer and other wild animals. In the modern times, they use the skin of rams and others. In the special worship of Kantari, *Khajjadi* (a traditional musical instrument) with the intestine of sacrificed sheep is played in the song of origin and legend of the goddess, so this tradition has been believed to be a tantric tradition (Gurung, 2061, p. 182).

Different types of musical instruments are used in this festival like *Manar* (a sacred drum played during invocation), *Khajjadi*, *Tabala* (a musical instrument like a drum), *Daph* (a traditional musical instrument like percussion), *Daak* (a traditional musical instrument like hand drum) and others. As per the conversation, it has been noted that the ram (young male sheep) is sacrificed in Jamradthan of Kudhauri during Kantari festival. The leaf tripe is extracted from the small intestine and kept over *Daak*, a type of a hand drum. The music player has to consume raw meat of the sheep and play it. (P.L. Gurau, personal communication, July 29, 2025). These instruments are played in different beats or tempo. When the procession proceeds to the *than* from village, they play it in the beat of *saharuniya* (a song sung during invocation) and continue. When the *jagar* is performed it is played in the beat of “*kude deutun*” or initial part and continues.

These traditional musical instruments have their own importance. They must be played in a specific way. They are passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition. They intensify the performance in the festival. It accompanies Gurau to intercede with the spirit of goddesses, nature and ancestor while performing songs, chanting *mantras* and reciting hymns. It creates a vibration in the cultural atmosphere. It activates and triggers the tantric rituals to be performed in this festival, Kantari.

### **Traditional Dresses and Ornaments**

The traditional dresses and ornaments reflect the history, culture and tradition of Tharus of Nawalpur and enhance their appearance. Due to the hot and humid climate, they wear very light and bright dresses. Men wear white shirts and white *dhoti* and women wear white sari and black blouses. These are common and traditional dresses that they wear during the festival.

The ornaments worn by the Tharu women are very diverse. They wear *tariwon* and *compass* as an ear ring, *hasuli* around their neck, *chakati* as a necklace of coins, *chanrahaar*

as a necklace, *tadiya* as a wristlet, *vijayath* as armband, *kammarbandh* around their waist, and *gudhula* as an anklet. On specific occasions like the Kantari festival, the men and women wear these traditional dresses and ornaments. In their daily life, it has been replaced by modern wear.

### **Syncretic Blend of Tharu and Magar Communities in Kantari Festival**

Nawalpur is inhabited by various ethnic groups. Of crucial significance is the demographic shift that has taken place as a substantial proportion of the country's population moved from the hills to the fertile lowlands of the Tarai following the malaria eradication projects of the 1950s (Guneratne, 2002, P. 4). Kantari festival is a multifaceted festival enriched with rituals, performing arts and paraphernalia of worship. Along with it, this festival fosters syncretism between communities.

### **Role of Magar Community in Kantari Festival**

The principal sacred abode of the goddess Kuwarvarti Mai is situated within the cave of Devachuli Hill, known as Shirthan. The site is located approximately 10 kilometers north of Pragatinagar, accessible via the Pragatinagar-Rampur Highway. A challenging, four-kilometer walk over rough terrain from Kirtipur leads to the Shirthan cave. The region between Kirtipur and Devachuli is characterized by a sparse population, predominantly of the Magar community.

There are only two festivals celebrated in Shirthan which are on the occasion of Shirthan *puja* and Kantari festival. It is open to devotees only once a year, on the day of *Chaitra Shukla Purnima*, and remains closed for the rest of the year. Due to the difficult terrain and the fear of the wild, the upkeep of this pilgrimage site is a considerable challenge. This maintenance is made possible by the dedication of the local Magar inhabitants of the Kirtipur region and its vicinity.

The Shirthan *puja* and Kantari festival commences two days prior to *Chaitra Shukla Purnima*. Before this time, members of the Magar community begin to construct and clear a path from Kirtipur to Shirthan. In close collaboration with the Shree Shirthan Kuwarvarti Mai management committee, they perform controlled forest fires to clear the path and ensure a safe passage. Their efforts overcome significant obstacles to prepare the route to Shirthan.

Upon the arrival of the procession in Kirtipur, participants spend the night there and perform rituals at a tributary of the Shirthan. The residents of Kirtipur provide shelter and security to the pilgrims, opening their homes to accommodate devotees of all castes and creeds. Their hospitality ensures that all devotees are housed during the festival. They have their own local committee who organizes and manages all these activities on behalf of pilgrims.

## Fusion in Beliefs and Practices

During the Kantari festival, Kirtipur serves as a focal point for the fusion of beliefs and practices between the Tharu and Magar communities. This is an expression of their shared devotion to Shirthan. The Tharu community believes that Shirthan is the primary sacred abode of the goddess Kuwarvarti Mai, where she resides alongside her companion goddesses, Chaita and Panchain. On the contrary, the Magar community reveres Shirthan as the home of the Three Mother Goddesses, known as Tinmai. The spiritual leadership for the Tharu at Shirthan is held by a priest called *Tiket*, while the Magar community's priests are known as *Dhoke*.

The *Tiket* is the chief priest of the Kantari festival and is drawn from the Gurau clan. He performs sacred and tantric rituals at all *thans* during the festival and is the custodian of the *Khaand*, a divine sword believed to have been given by the goddess Kuwarvarti Mai for the protection. The *Dhoke*, on the other hand, are two young boys who serve as the priests for the Magar community's Tinmai *than*. They conduct daily worship at Tinmai *than* in Kirtipur. They are the ones who perform the worship in the Kantari festival. There is no specific duration for these boys to remain as *Dhoke*. Depending upon their age and decisions of the locals, new *Dhoke* are assigned.

Magar people reverently worship Tinmai *than*. Animal sacrifice is offered to the goddess in this *than*. The beliefs and practices among these communities are almost similar. Both communities honor each other's tradition, culture, customs and values. When the procession, led by the Gurau, arrives in Kirtipur, rituals are performed at a shrine dedicated to the Tharu community, in which local Magar people also participate. While the specific rituals of Kantari festival are not performed at the Magar's Tinmai shrine, located approximately 200 meters away, the Tharu devotees do visit it for worship. The *Tiket* and *Dhoke* meet in Kirtipur before the procession continues its journey over rough terrain to Inarchati.

On the morning of *Chaitra Shukla Purnima*, as the procession ascends to Shirthan, the *Dhoke* and the Magar people lead the way. Upon reaching a location known as Goth Gaun, the *Dhoke* offers prayers and prepares a natural fire by striking two stones. With the fire ignited, the *Dhoke* formally declares the opening of the Shirthan. Following this, the *Tiket* resumes his leadership of the procession. At Shirthan, the *Dhoke* and other Magar seniors perform the first prayers and the initial sacrifice, which is a male goat provided by the people of Kirtipur.

## Discussions

The research delves into investigating Nawalpur's Tharu peoples' devotion towards the goddess Kuwarvarti Mai. Literally, the word '*kuwar*' means pre-adolescent girl in Tharu language. The animals mostly sacrificed for the offering to the goddess in this festival are young ones like ram which is a young male sheep, ewe which is a young female sheep, buckling which is a young male goat, doeling, which is a young female goat.

During invocation in the Kantari festival, the priests sing the song about these young animals being offered to the goddess. *Dhoke*, the Magar priest who declares the opening of the Shirthan are the two young boys. It is a social belief that one must not wish for a future husband or wife. Perhaps because the goddess herself is unmarried. She resides in every individual, household, family, community so she is always worshipped in any event.

The places of worship, known as *thans*, often do not house idols of deities. Instead, they typically feature clay figures of animals such as horses, elephants, and tigers, which are considered the mounts of the divinities. The gods are assumed to be in the room when their mounts are present to hear the prayers (Hamilton, 2003, p. 149). This practice underscores the Tharu people's profound reverence as nature worshippers. Mother nature is both womb and tomb, the motion of life and the stasis of death, the continuum of living and dying beings. She is the giver and taker of life at once (Mukhopadhyay, 2018, p. 104).

In the Kantari festival, the central ritual of *jagar* is performed by the *Tiket* to invoke the goddess. This tantric ceremony captivates the event to inspire people to participate in this festival. It intensifies the traditional practices and customary rituals. However, this ceremony requires the reciprocal participation of priests from other temples, who must also perform *neutari* for the *Tiket*. The Kantari festival could not be conducted by the *Tiket* in Manhikhmathan of Sardi because the priests and people of this place failed to do so. The relevant authorities must be concerned to prevent similar disruptions in performing rituals at other *thans*.

Performing arts are the forms of living, dynamic and creative expression that are presented to an audience that reflect human creativity. This continuous practice keeps the heritage alive. This festival promotes social practices, rituals, and festive events. It reflects the beliefs, traditions, and aesthetic values of communities in Nawalpur which has been orally transmitted from generations to generations. It is well known that Tharu people of Nawalpur have their own cultural identity, unique traditions and heritage. It remains alive only when it is celebrated in a more profound and elaborate way as a festival like Kantari. Oral traditions and expressions, performing arts and skills, social customs, rituals and festive events are the domains of intangible cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage as well as Intangible cultural heritage (identification and management) guideline, (2011) by Ministry of culture, tourism and civil aviation, Nepal.

Magar communities have historically resided in the lower hill regions and the Inner Terai, which facilitated close contact with the Tharu. This proximity led to significant social and economic interactions. The Magar, trading blankets and baskets, would come down from the hills to the Tharu villages (McDonaugh, 1989, p. 193). This relationship is defined by a prolonged period of coexistence and a degree of cultural exchange.

The sequential worship in Kantari festival by Tharu and Magar priests demonstrates a profound mutual respect between the two communities. Despite Kantari being a Tharu festival, they grant the Magar community the honor of conducting the first worship and animal sacrifice. Furthermore, as a gesture of gratitude, a buffalo or a prime cut of meat from a sacrificed animal is offered to the Magar community of Kirtipur for their relentless effort and contribution in the accomplishment of this festival. This is an outcome of the fusion of beliefs and practices between these communities having a mutual respect.

## **Conclusion**

This research has studied Kantari festival in detail with its rituals, performing arts and paraphernalia along with the syncretic blend of Tharu and Magar community in this festival for the first time in mainstream academia. Kantari festival is an elaborate, profound and unique festival dedicated to the goddess Kuwarvarti Mai, mother nature and ancestors enriched with sacred and tantric rituals that enhance the syncretic blend among different communities. It is intimately tied with goddess worship, nature worship and ancestral worship guided by myths, traditional beliefs and customary rituals. It also fosters communal solidarity and spiritual patrimony.

This festival is the representation of people of Nawalpur where there is a huge communal participation. This also paves a way to connect people and share their culture with others. It is an expression of abundance and completeness. It is an inspiration to look into the culture through other's eyes. It also provides a platform to appreciate different culture, breaking down the barriers. Moreover, it compels everyone to know and understand the importance of togetherness.

In the fast-paced, often isolating society, this festival provides a crucial opportunity for people to strengthen community bonds and revive a sense of belonging. It serves in community building that brings people together. It fosters a collective sense of pride and shared identity which plays a vital role in modern, urban and diverse societies where social fragmentation is going on. It also promotes the feeling of love, respect and devotion that is being forgotten in modern societies. It is an effective medium to turn materialistic life into religious and spiritual life. It can be a significant economic driver to foster economic development through various approaches. For example, it can be developed as a tourism product.

Conclusively, Kantari festival can be recognized as a living cultural heritage of Nawalpur district. It transforms cultural knowledge into a living experience. The accomplishment of different rituals, social practices, and performing arts complete this unique festival. This study also seeks to engage relevant government authorities to secure the necessary funding and resources required for the seamless execution of this festival. The intricate web of geographical reverence, tantric rituals, and communal participation vividly illustrates the deep-seated spiritual ethos and rich cultural tapestry of the Tharu community in this region of Nepal.

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