



Ashtimki among the Tharus: A Study of Celebration of the Ritual in Kailali

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Abstract

Background: *Ashtimki* is a ritual festival practiced by Tharu women in Kailali District, Nepal. It is concerned with cultural, social and ethnical norm and values to celebrate *Ashtimki* as other festivals in Kailali, a district in Nepal's Far Western Province. As a part of ritual practice, the women take fasting on *Ashtimki* to purify their body and soul through the festival activities. At the present time, it is significant to new generation to preserve and enrich the Tharu culture through this paper.

Method: This qualitative study examines *Ashtimki*, a ritual festival practiced by boys, girls and women in Kailali. There is no more gender bias because it is believed that male and female have equal rights to celebrate together harmoniously. The research will be based on the field observation and in-depth interview of the respondents, purposively selected for the study has been taken as the source of data. The qualitative data has been interpreted by using theoretical insights from performance studies.

Result: The Tharu practitioners take fasting for good health, agriculture, and the well-being of other family members. It is believed that *Ashtimki* marks the arrival of the new season, and the summer season is over. They get relief from summer diseases. In this festival, the four main ritual activities focus on *Agiyara* (to worship the fire god), *Agrashan* (to worship food god and offer to the god before eating) *Tika*, and *Parohana* (to worship the Ganga or water as holy goddess) These rituals are the main parts of *Ashtimki*, which allow them to confess their past sins.

Conclusion: They celebrate other festivals throughout the year in their own way to strengthen and promote their racial and cultural identity, encouraging cooperation among their youth. The paper serves as a model for other researchers. This festival focuses on regional variations in the celebration of *Ashtimki*.



Novelty: It shows the typicality and richness of the culture's and ritual beliefs' practices. Tharus have their own unique ethnicity, culture, festivals, rites and rituals, and household composition. The cultural traditions, art, literature, songs, and festivals of the Tharu reflect their history. The recorded texts of the personal interviews and folk tales also support this fact, and the respondents' opinions on the socio-cultural questions are expressed.

Keywords: *Ashtimki*, Tharu Festival, Performance, Tharu Spirituality

Introduction

Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural nation. Different languages and cultures in Nepal have created a rich and unique national identity that also depends on cultural and ethnic diversity. It is also known as unity in diversity, and it is an important national heritage that needs to be further strengthened. More attention and effort are needed to promote all languages, religions, cultures, and literature.

There are various festivals in Kailali, and the Tharu have been celebrating according to their cultural norms and values. Among the festivals, Krishna Janmashtami is more popularly known as Krishna Janmashtami or *Ashtimki/Ashtami* in the Tharu language. It falls on the eighth of Bhadra Krishna Pakshya according to the Hindu Lunar Calendar. It is also known as *Krishna Janma Ashtami* and is celebrated as the second festival in the Tharu community in Kailali. It is an important festival in Tharu culture, with devotional singing throughout the night when lord Krishna was born, fasting (upavasa), vigil (RatriJagaram), and a festival on the following days being part of the Janmaashtami celebrations. *Ashtimki* has four ritual activities: *Agiyara*, *Agrashan*, *Tika*, and *Parohna*.

It is believed that Lord Krishna was born on Ashtami (8th Thithi) in Bhadra Krishna Paksha. As the story goes, King Ugrashen was imprisoned by his own son, Kansha. He was a demon king; therefore, Kansha killed seven of his sisters, Dewaki's children. In *Ashtimki*, there is a village where Bashudev and Dewaki live. They settle in the village and construct the garden with a pond and so on. They also set Deities and muses on the eastern side of the village. They offer Chhanki, a type of wine in the Tharu community. That day Isharu

(Bashudev) gathers the village farmers and asks them to go to the forest to make plows for farming. They have walked for a long time, and they reach a dark and deep forest and meet a female tiger. They have also taken their food, fruits, and milk. Isharu has already promised to offer cock and sheep to the Dudhi Baghiniya, a female tiger in the Tharu language, to make his forest journey better. They walk many miles from their village.

After walking day and night, they arrive in the (Kajarik Banuwa) forest and feel very tired and hungry. So, they sit under a tree and eat their food, and then they choose the woods to make the plow. They select the woods and cut down, for instance, Sisau for Juwa (a plowing implement), Saal for a harrow, and Khayer for other purposes. When they return from the forest, they again meet Dudhi Baghiniya (a female tiger). They offer and pray to the tigress to make their journey successful. They prepare all farming tools at their home and go to till their field. Isharu also goes into the field and starts tilling it. The right ox's name is Bashaha, and the



right ox's name is Sirake Sindur. Isharu starts plowing from East to West and from North to South. The north is Shiva Jagannath.

At first, it was a grassy field because of the barren so-called Kushaha field. During plowing the field, Jashu (Dewaki) cooks at home and goes to the field to give him. She has cooked *jhalimakuniya urud mungarik daal* (pulse soup), *Ghataru's* meat (name of pigeon), *Rohani* (name of fish). He continues plowing after eating his meal. At the same time, a man comes and asks him, "Was not the field swampy, and who created it so we can plow now?" Isharu replies that the tapeworm has brought the mud from the seventh layer of the earth. The man again asks him, "Who created the paddy that we can sow?" (Personal Interview July 2012) Isharu replies that the god has given us. By the god Shiva, whom we all know, the man goes somewhere. After giving food, she starts collecting firewood and plucking green leaves for vegetables. She becomes pregnant, and her gestation is ten months, so she feels labor pain, and then Isharu orders Dengiya (a messenger or message conveyer) to call the Sorhiniya (Sudheni). Dengiya goes home, but he does not see it, so he asks the children, and they tell him they do not know. He asks them to ask Babhana (Priest).

He goes to the priest's house and asks him about her house. Finally, the priest shows her house and arrives there. When she sees her home, she guesses that he has surely brought the message of Isharu, and she also asks him to sit on a Machiya (small cot). Sudheni brings him a jug of cold water first. Immediately, he tells her that Isharu has asked her to meet him because his wife is pregnant. She tells him she could not go there without any means. She asks him to bring an elephant, and then he brings one, but she tells him she is frightened by the elephant's big ears and long trunk, so she wishes to ride a camel. He also brings the camel, but she says she is afraid of its neck, so she refuses to ride it. Later on, she asks him to bring a horse.

Dengiya (The messenger) brings the horse, but she again says she is afraid of blue eyes and a tail. She wishes to go on a man's shoulder, so he manages the man for her, but she again refuses to go on his shoulder. At last, Dengiya gets angry and says that he has fulfilled her desire, but she has not gone, so he has threatened her to cut her tongue with a knife. He takes out the sword, so she gets frightened and gets ready to go to Isharu's house. Finally, they arrive at Isharu's house. Isharu welcomes and tells her the pregnancy date. She asks him to bring oil for a massage. At midnight, Dewaki gives birth to a miracle child. It is the 8th of Bhadra Krishna Pakshya. They fare very well, according to their custom. The astrologer's name is Krishna Kanaiya. Since that day, it is believed that Kanha/Krishna protects all the villagers from the evils after his birth.

From that day onward, people in the Tharu community worship Lord Krishna at *Ashtimki*. They celebrate *Ashtimki* to atone for past sinful activities. Consequently, the festival signifies both human behavioral matters and physical well-being. They practice fasting to purify their bodies and souls from past sinful activities. It has gained widespread and lasting recognition amongst the Tharu to acquire a merit that transcends any particular period. It also seems to be an exceptional work of art that has emerged from the Tharu festival. It is believed that *Ashtimki* is practiced to celebrate the cultural and ritual significance of the Tharu festival



in Nepal's far western region. It is not only for females and girls; boys can also take an active part in large numbers, with their own desires, beliefs, and hopes for improving their futures. Males rarely take part in this occasion. There is no gender discrimination.

Regarding Krishna Janmashtami, historians Agrawal and Mudgal argue that Lord Krishna was born in a cell in Dwaparyug, biologically to Vasudeva and Devaki. However, Vasudeva had to cross the Yamuna River in a stormy night to deliver his child to a friend so that he could save the child from the evil hands of Kansa. So, technically, Maiya Yashoda and Nanda of the Gokul region of Mathura were the foster parents of Lord Krishna. Janmashtami, also known as Krishna Janmashtami, is the birthday of Lord Krishna, celebrated with great fervor and zeal in India during the monsoon months. According to the Hindu calendar, this important day falls on Ashtami, the eighth day of the Krishna Paksha, or the dark fortnight, in the month of Bhadra. No one actually knows when this festival originated, but it may have been a thousand years ago that this festival found its foothold in our culture. One would actually come across various legendary stories and myths encircling the birth of Janmashtami. Sahani Brothers Dictionary. New Delhi: Agrawal Publication, Agra, 2005.

Firstly, they wake up at midnight to eat delicious food that is called *Dar*. In *DarDar*, there is a wide variety of vegetables and food items that can be eaten. The participants wake up early in the morning and prepare their necessary materials, such as *Diyos*, *Bati*, *Bettle nut*, *Achhata*, fruits, *Thali*, *Tapari* (leaf plate), *Duna*, and color. They do their work without eating anything, not even water. At noon, the participants take a bath and sit at the designated place, which has already been cleaned with cow dung and mud. They sit, and another family member helps them. They can take tea, water, and *sarbad* (sweet water) after offering pine dust, water, sugar, etc., to the fire god. In the evening, they go to the place where the drawings for *Tika* have been made, with all the necessary materials.

Ashtimki as an Ethnic Celebration

A few writers have discussed the origins of *Ashtimki* as a cultural festival. At this festival, men and women wear their traditional dress. They observe fasting on that day for their family members' peace, progress, good health, and happiness. Regarding *Ashtimki*, Gopal Dahit highlights his views in this way:

Asshtimki brata (fasting) is observed by women as a festival that begins on (Bhadra) Krishna Paksha Athami. Dahit's remark throws clear light on the issue: *Ashtimki* is a festival celebrated by women. *Ashtimki* is a Tharu word and is celebrated as a festival of victory. His interpretation implicitly reveals that the celebration of *Ashtimki* is based on the belief that those women who fast on that day bring happiness and prosperity to their children. (p. 68–69)

Furthermore, Dahit clarifies:

It is mainly the female festival, but boys can also take part in Brata/fasting. Boys wear a *Dhoti*, *Payjama*, and a shirt. The *dhoti* should be white because it reflects the symbolic meaning. White is associated with peace and gentleness, so they wear it during this festival. If someone does not have special dresses at that time, they can wear casual clothes for *Ashtimki*. Boys have their own dress, which also carries cultural values and



assumptions. On the other hand, girls and women have their own special dress. They wear a lehnga, a colorful cloth, a blouse, and an aghran, a head-and-body covering. Lehnga is a handmade item for ritual and customary dress. (77-78)

It is a traditional dress that reflects their cultural norms and values. They have to wear their socio-cultural dress, jewelry, and other cultural ornaments. It is a good environment for them in terms of religious and cultural perspectives. They have been preparing for a long time to wear these outfits at this festival. It is not only traditional but also customary dress for them; except for this, unmarried girls wish to get a good husband and a handsome child in the future. It is believed that the summer season has just passed, and Krishna/Kanha would bring the new winter season from that day onward.

Women fast with the faith that it will fulfill their desires and hopes. They use fasting as an excuse for any sin or mistake they commit. *Astimki* is observed to preserve racial identity, promote culture, foster cooperation, and make merry among friends and relatives. Indra Kumar Mahato has also stated:

Why *Astimki* Fasting? -on the occasion of Victory of justice over injustice, the festival is observed enthusiastically. Women long for progress, good health and long life of their husband by brothers by fasting on this day. This festival is celebrated in order to get rid of injustice and torture. Unmarried women take fasting for the hope of getting a promising couple and their own successful life. (p. 3)

Astimki is an ethnic ritual festival based on the Tharu culture. It is believed that Lord Krishna was born as the 8th child of Devaki, Vasudeva's wife. Regarding *Ashtimki*, many people have viewed in the interviews where Som Kumar Tharu says: "He was a miracle child so that he had shown the unbelievable heroic deeds. Kansha, his maternal uncle had given torture and severe punishment to his sister, Dewaki, so it is believed that it is doomsday for those who dare to give bad behavior to his sister at present in their culture" (Interview App. iii, July 9, 2012). It is an ethnic ritual festival of the Tharu culture. It is believed that Lord Krishna was born as the miracle son of Devaki and Vasudeva.

The child had shown unbelievable heroic deeds, and his maternal uncle, Kansha, had also inflicted torture and severe punishment on Dewaki; therefore, that day became a doomsday for Kansha. As Bujhawan Lal Chaudhary says:

It is the period of King Ugrashen who was ruling nicely in his country, when the demon king Kansha started giving torture to people, he even sent his father to prison. Kansha asked his sister Dewaki to get married to Bashudev. At that time, Kansha got information about the cause of his death so that he kept his sister, Dewaki, and her husband, Bashudev in jail. Even then Krishna killed to Kansha therefore it is believed that Krishna is ritually known as new life. Kansha is symbolically evil therefore people want to get rid of him. (Interview July 9, 2012)

His interpretation is that there was a king Ugrashen whom his own son, Kansha, imprisoned. He is the demon king who gives severe torture to people in the Droper Yug. Kansha kills seven children of his sister, Dewaki.



On *Ashtimki*, the drawing songs and other objects are related to the Mahabharata. Therefore, the songs are sung as addresses to the gods and goddesses. The Sun god from the East, the five Pandav brothers from the West, the lord Mahadev from the North, Indra from the sky, Shreehari Bishnu from the South, and the Basshadevsthan from the underground of the earth. The religious songs are sung by people sitting in a jamaat, selected males and women from their community. The drawings are symbolized by signs and symbols such as songs and objects of value to the ritual, which are emblematic of the ethnic way of life itself.

They practice fasting to purify their bodies and souls from sinful past activities, knowingly or unknowingly. *Ashtimki* is also a religious part of the Mahabharata. It has gained widespread and lasting recognition amongst the Tharu to acquire a merit that transcends any particular period. It seems to be an exceptional work of art that has emerged from the Tharu religion and cultural festival. The celebration of *Ashtimki* has four major ritual activities: *Agiyara*, *Tika*, *Parohna*, and *Agrashan*.

Agiyara

Agiyara is an initial ritual process of this festival. It is a symbolic- ritual worship of the fire god. Other members of the house generally prepare it. It is a main part of *Ashtimki*, which represents the worship of Agni Dev (the fire god). It symbolizes their commitment to fasting as a ritual, as they offer water, tea, milk, and other drinks over the fire. They believe that it destroys human evil attitudes and works. It purifies them because the fire is their witness in their life. In the Tharu language, the word "Aagi" means fire, and "Yara" means to give or offer, confessing the past evil activities in front of the fire.

It has a significant role that can be done at noon time/midday after finishing their duties. The fire must be the cow dung. If it is not available, they can use a coal fire. It is a great act of worship of the fire because the fasters believe they will receive protection from God. Regarding *Agiyara*, Dahit highlights:

This ritual task repeats two times. *Tika* falls before and after. The fasters feel internal joy, and they offer to the fire god for their peace, progress, prosperity, good health and their farming. It is not only for him or her but also for the whole family. (pp. 77-8)

This is the first ritual process of *Ashtimki*, which repeats twice. It is a type of worship that falls at the beginning and end of *Tika*. The participants offer water, milk, tea, and sugar water on the fire for their own peace, progress, and good health, as well as for their family members.

Tika

Tika is also the main part of *Ashtimki*. The fasters first take a bath, wear their traditional dress, and take the necessary prayer materials: Abir, Thali, leaf plate, Chamal/Achhata, Diyo, Bati, Dubo, fruits, flowers, and beetle nut from their own home, compulsorily. All the participants go to the house, where the drawing is made in the evening. They put their materials in proper order so they can easily find them the next day and put the *Tika* on each drawing, because each drawing carries ritual and mythical meaning. It is called *Tikaunu* in the Tharu language. It represents a type of ritual and cultural worship. Everyone put *Tika* because it has a significant meaning. Dahit adds:



At first, seniors start to put Tika, and the juniors observe and follow up to the seniors as the ritual norms and values. It is really very exciting because it could be done systematically, but if not, it is not possible. There are more than 600 hundred participants who come from different places and homes. (pp. 77-8)

Dahit clarifies that it is a very systematic way, so the juniors can learn how and where to put Tika. It is a ritual form of worship in the Tharu culture of Kailali. The worship of the drawings is the entire nature; the participants worship one by one, asking Lord Krishna to fulfill their desires in the evening.

Parohna

Parohna is a ritual activity of *Ashtimki*. The word "Parohna" means to confess and drift the Diyo, keeping on the leaf plat. Early in the morning, the participants wake up and go to the previous house, where they have already stored their materials, including necessary clothes and worship items. When all the participants gather there, they place Tika on the drawings, then go to the riverside for a group bath. They take a bath and prepare the material for Parohna.

They light the bati with three, five, or seven Diyo and place the Tapari (leaf-plate), believing that this ritual can wash away their past sinful deeds and purify their outer body and inner soul from past sinful work. In this process, lighting Diyos stands for whatever they have done, whether knowingly or unknowingly, and for diseases, problems, grief, and critical situations, which could be swept away. It is called Parohnu in the Tharu language. Dahit explains:

It is Tharu word. Parohanu means to confess their mistakes of past life, and they also believe that it helps to get rid of from the sins and summer, rainy season's diseases would go from their fasting and worship of lord Krishna therefore they keep on Tapary (leaf plate) to sail onto water. When they take a bath, they kindle three, five or seven Baati and ask to excuse to their sinful activities in past. Everything they throw onto water and come back to their home. (pp. 78-9)

Agrashan

Agrashan is the last ritual activity of *Ashtimki/ Ashtami*. The term "Agra" means first, and "Ashana" means place in the Tharu language. It is also called Anna Puja (a type of grain). Other family members actually prepare it. At first, they make a neat and clean place by using cow dung and mud for Agrashan. A wide variety of vegetables, food, and fruits are ready to be offered to God. Everything can be put on the banana leaf in front of them, and they offer some portion from their food and vegetables to God first before they eat. They pray after worship and give it to their close relatives.

If they cannot give this food, they feed it to their cows. They believe that they have gotten rid of their sins. Regarding Agrashan Som Kumar Tharu, he expresses his view explicitly through his interview:

Agrashana is the last ritual process of *Ashtimki/ Ashtami*. The fastors can take some amount of food from their food which they can keep on the banana leaf. It is believed that it is the way to get rid of from the evil or sinful activities of human life. There



should be seven Diyos. They give rice, fruits, vegetables and other things to their relatives after the end of the fasting, is also called Anna Daan” (Interview July 9, 2012)

Conclusion

The findings and analysis of *Ashtimki* of the present research demonstrate that Tharu women have their own rituals and social rules and regulations to celebrate *Ashtimki* and other festivals in Kailali. *Ashtimki* has ritual activities, cultural values, and assumptions. They observe the fast to purify their bodies and souls through ritual activities. Furthermore, Tharu women fast for good health, a good harvest, and the well-being of other family members. It is believed that *Ashtimki* marks the arrival of a new season, as it is associated with summer diseases. They focus on Agiyara, Agrashana, Tika, and Parohana. These ritual activities are the main form of *Ashtimki*'s devotion to confessing their past sins.

They have their own way of celebrating the other festivals of the year to promote, encourage, and foster their racial and cultural identity. The object of this socio-cultural study has been to find answers to elementary questions regarding the Tharu and their ritual festivals in their community, for instance, what are the Tharu ritual festivals of the year. The study's findings reveal the reality of the Tharu people and their festivals, as Tharu culture is embedded in Nepal's ethnic configuration.

In the present situation, the celebration of *Ashtimki* in the Tharu community has separate rules and regulations. It has its own distinct features as a ritual festival. Tharus have their own unique ethnicity, culture, festival, rites, rituals, and household composition. The cultural traditions and festivals of the Tharu reflect their history. The recorded texts from the personal interview and folk tale also support this fact, as they are backed by respondents' opinions in the socio-cultural questionnaires. The responses to the socio-cultural questionnaires indicate that Tharu ritual festivals are distinct and are mainly celebrated across different domains of life within Tharu communities. Although some variations have been observed in their celebration, they are mainly due to geographical distance. However, the respondents in the targeted areas support the separate identity and existence of the Tharu culture. The regional variation result is due to geographical distance.

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