

Performing Lāthi Nāch to Tourists: Redefining Cultural Art

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ABSTRACT

Among the cultural sites, requiring the observation in the tourist and local culture relationship, one is the Tharu performance culture in Sauraha, particularly, the lāthi nāch. This paper explores the evolution of the Tharu lāthi nāch of a group, still, performing at Tharu Culture House in Sauraha, Chitwan. Several factors in the past had marginalized the Tharu performance culture. The paper reflects on the Tharu culture show performed at Tharu Culture House of Sauraha from Richard Schechner's perspective of cultural ceremony and ritual as art. Borrowing Schechner's definition of art the paper argues lāthi nāch as a performance art, beyond indigenous cultural rituals and ceremony. And then the paper presents how various forms of the Tharus' cultural performance art began to be called Tharu Stick Dance which has been performed every day for tourists, as one of the major activities, for over four decades. The paper's objective is to redefine cultural performance as an art which has been considered mere ritual and ceremony thus far; the objective, at the same time, is to challenge Mike Featherstone's argument that cultural tourism destroys local cultural identities rather than preserving and inventing new one. Thus, the Tharu cultural ritual and ceremony is redefined lāthi nāch as performance art, which has been popular in Sauraha as a major attraction called Tharu Stick Dance, the name collectively used for one show which includes distinct and diverse ritual and ceremonial items.

Key Words: Bhajaiti, Cultural art, Cultural tourism, Jhumrā, Lāthi nāch, Tharu culture.

Introduction

It is a challenging task to generalize the relationship between tourism and local performance culture, for the tourist destinations' culture varies site to site. The relationship is determined by the various factors, such as local culture, the government policies, and tourism itself. Among the cultural sites requiring observation in tourism and the local culture relationship is the Tharu performance culture in Sauraha, particularly, the *lāthi nāch*¹ which is popular among tourists as *Tharu Stick Dance*. The Tharu cultural performances are seasonal and occasional.

¹Local name of the performance and rituals are italicized. *Lāthi* (big stick), *thekarā* (small stick), *damphu* (one-sided hand drum), *jhamtā* (women sing in circle), *bhajaiti* (fire dance), *jhumrā* (comic dance).

Therefore, the performance remained within the cultural context of the Tharu community of Kumroj. The *lāthi nāch* and *jhamtā* were seen performed in the public only during the festival. The other dance items, like *bhajaiti*, *thekara*, *damphu* were rarely seen performed, because they were limited to a particular season. The *Jhumra* or comic dance was performed only at the house of mourning family.

It was only when Chitwan became one of the popular tourist destinations that the Tharus of Kumroj and the young entrepreneur of Sauraha came together to introduce diverse and distinct cultural and ritual performance to the tourist on the stage show as the Tharu culture show which is called the Tharu Stick Dance. The name is translation of *lāthi nāch*, but the term Tharu Stick Dance includes all the other distinct and different performance items such *Jhamtā* (in which women sing and dance in circle), *thekara*, *bhajaiti*, *damphu*, and *jhumra*. Currently, there are three different groups of Tharu Stick Dance, performing for tourists in Sauraha. This paper studied the performance group performing at Tharu Culture Program, located near Hatti-Chowk, Sauraha. For the first time the Tharu Stick Dance was performed indoor and the hotels and guide office led their guests to the Culture program in the evening. Before the indoor culture program, the stick dancers were invited by the hotels when they had a group of tourists.

This paper seeks to answer the questions of how the Tharu Stick Dance evolved from a ritual performance to cultural art and became one of the popular tourist attractions of Chitwan. The evolution of Tharu *lāthi nāch* has fashioned an interesting issue to debate on. Several factors in the past had marginalized the Tharu performance culture. Because of its marginal location and lack of interest of state mechanism to promote marginal cultures, the Tharu performance culture remained in the shadow until the encouragement from tourism sector. “We used to dance at *holi* festival, on the king’s birthday, and in communal celebrations. Now we dance for tourists,”² says Palat Raut, a farmer from Khairhani of Chitwan and, importantly, the leader of the performance group known in local tourism sectors as the Tharu stick dance. His group has been performing the stick dance, hence the Tharu Stick Dance, at Tharu Culture House, Sauraha, since 2002. Until the

²Mr. Raut, age 67, a farmer from Kumroj village of Khairhani Municipality, Ward No.13, is the eldest of the *lāthi nāch* group performing at Tharu Culture Program, Sauraha, Chitwan. Researcher, personally, interviewed him for the purpose of this research paper at the premise of the culture house on 15 May 2014.

stick dance was introduced to tourist in a professional level, local Tharus, like Palat Raut, were not aware of the fact that the dance was an art and it could be one of the means of improving their income.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The paper used qualitative research method. Collected data from empirical observation and expert's opinions from interviews are analyzed from the perspective of aforementioned Schencher's definition of performance art. Apart from field observation, the method used for data collection is expert interview. The members of the Tharu Culture House dance group are selected for the interview as per their depth of knowledge and the length of their experience in the field. I also interviewed the owner of the culture house as the resource person. His role in introducing the Tharu cultural ritual and ceremony as performance items for tourists thirsting for the indigenous performance culture has been valuable in tourism industry of Chitwan.

Analysis of the Tharu Stick Dance

"Performance art", as Richard Schechner sees, "is broad spectrum of activities including the very least performing arts, rituals, healing, sports, popular entertainments, and performance in everyday life" (2008, p.7). Agreeing with Schencher's definition of performance art, this paper reflects on the Tharu *lāthi nāch* as an art form. The paper explores the process, not only of redefinition of the Tharu *lāthi nāch* as an art form but also the accommodation and incorporation of diverse performance items under the popular activity Tharu Stick Dance. The dance which evolved from ritual form to professional art form as developed by the Tharu *lāthi nāch* group of Kumroj village of Khairhani Municipality, Chitwan and the Tharu Culture House of Sauraha.

While exploring the journey, the paper argues against the criticism put forward by Mike Featherstone, that cultural tourism "[...] ceases to be seen as a resource, but may be identified as a major element in the process which is destroying localism and ethnic identities" (2003, p.355). Challenging Featherstone's criticism, the paper presents empirical observation that shows cultural tourism has contributed to sustain local cultural performance and paved the way to invent new forms of performance at par with the old traditions and myths.

In the first part of the essay, the paper briefly reviews the notions and findings of historians and anthropologists about the Tharus. The second part explores the transformation that the *Tharu stick dance* has been going through, especially in the tourism domain, in Sauraha with the argument that cultural tourism has played important role to invent new forms of dance. And in the final part, the paper draws conclusion from the observation and analysis done in the first and the second part of the essay.

The Tharu people are considered the indigenous group living in Terai belt of Nepal since some seven hundred years. These inhabitants of Terai belt have their own distinct ways of life and culture that marks them different from the other ethnic cultures. There are claims that, “The Tharus are a tribe, and not a caste. The Tharus, in fact, stand outside the whole system of varna” (Gunaratne, 2002, p.156). Seen from this perspective the Tharus go beyond the caste system of current Nepal. The claim has deep rooted evidence that there have no records of touchable and untouchable hierarchy within Tharu ethnic group. As we are aware of the fact that the caste system was brought by “The visit of Sankaracharya from south India at the end of first millennium [...]” (Bista, 1991, p.21); and yet, the Tharus are not tainted by the caste system support the observation made by the prominent historian Baburam Acharya that the “Tharu’s originating location cannot be traced outside current Nepal. Thus, they are the indigenous people of Tarai belt” (2010, p.15) [my translation]. Similarly, arguing the Tharus’ origin, Ramananda Prasad Singh refers to “[...] two clans known as the Sakyas and the Kolyas, settled in the woods around Kapilvastu; the Buddha’s father Siddhodana was elected leader of his people, the Sakyas (Gunaratne, 2002, pp.154-155). Very few researches have been done regarding the Tharus identity and their origins, yet, all the findings, to this date, point towards claim that “the Tharus are probably among the oldest groups to inhabit the Terai” (Bista, 1996, p.130).

Although the generic term the Tharu is used for the tribe inhabiting in the Terai belt, there are different cultural attributes and dialects from the Tharu living in Dang to the Tharu living Morang, or from the Tharu living in Chitwan to the Tharu living in Nawalparasi. In his observation of the Tharu cultural performance organized by the Tharu Kalyankari Shabha in Morang, Tetaria in 1991, Arjun Gunaratne writes, “Many different dance troupes, present and performing on the same stage, are there because they are all Tharu; that is the only reason that brings them together” (2002, pp.178-179).

As mentioned by Gunaratne, there are different dance troupes within the Tharu culture that varies as per their locality and region. The stick dance under this research study comes from the Tharu of Chitwan, specifically from Sauraha and Kumroj villages, which may, as well, belong to the Tharu culture living in other parts of Nepal. This paper is concerned with the stick dance group from Kumroj responsible for performing at the Tharu Culture House, Sauraha and their journey from local ritual ceremony to the stage as professional performers for tourists.

The dance is performed as Tharu ritual on the day of Holi festival, and other cultural rites. It is the major form of performance that the Tharus express their happiness, sorrow and bravery in a dance form. Be it technique of defending the community from invader in *lāthi nāch* or humorous *Jhumrā nāch* at a house of the family of deceased. “The older people informed that earlier when they were young, they used to sing and dance during marriage and death rites” (Kunwar, 2002, p.115).

The evening before the *Holi* festival the Tharus perform ritual called *chit* burning, by setting fire on wooden pyre. Underneath pyre ritually decorated chicken is carefully kept that it cannot escape. In the act of decorating the animal of ritual the Gurau, a Tharu priest, believed to transfer the bad omens, misfortunes and evil forces affecting people’s lives onto the chicken. The priest torches the pyre and the men, who are witnessing, try to take the chicken out of burning pyre, alive. Whoever gets hold of the chicken brings to the priest and all the members of the ritual feast on it. And they take dip in the nearby river and purify themselves. And on the following day, the *holi*, all the members of the *chit* burning gather after the morning meal and start rubbing red, yellow and blue colors on each other’s face. Once they have colored each other’s face, the stick dance take place, first on the premise of the head of the village and go on dancing door to door celebrating the day on which the evil force is driven away from the village.

The dance is all about driving out the mythological evil force which is harmful to community or collectivity. Victor and Edie Turner note that “Cultural experience, regarded both as the experience of individuals, and as the collective experience of its members embodied in myths, ritual, symbols, and celebrations” (2008, p.323). This kind of cultural experiences binds the people in collectivity which guards the sanctity of the community. The stick dance has come to this stage from the active participation generations of ritual performance and it carries the stories and myth

from the past generations. In other words, “Rituals are performances that provide structure and continuity to our lives. They are means of ordering the world to fit our perception” (Bial, 2008, p.87).

The dance was performed once a year during the festival, as I mentioned above, until the day in Panchayat era when village leaders asked the dancers to perform on the occasion of King’s birthday. In order to offer a culture of local flavor, to the invited guests, the Tharus from Kumroj staged the performance other than the ritual day. Thus, the dance, *lāthi nāch*, was brought outside its ritual and cultural boundaries to socio-political stage where it was identified as a cultural performance distinct and different from the performance found among other ethnic groups of Nepali society. Bika Mahato, age 45, one of the team members of the group, recollecting his first performance says, “It was in 1980 that I performed first time in a public ceremony at the local school on the occasion of King Birendra’s birthday”³.

Besides few invited guests and local villagers, there were no other viewers from outside their clan community. Therefore, the stick dance remained within the local sphere until 1986 when the local group was invited to perform for the tourists for the first time. “We were so excited. All we cared, then, was just to present our dance to the foreigners. We wanted to show them what we have. We had no dance uniform, then, as we have now. We danced barefooted just as we worked at the field. We did not talk about money, then. It just did not occur to us at that time”, says Bika Mahato.

The other member of the group Hathan Chaudhary confirms that the group was told that they would be paid fifteen hundred rupees a month for the half an hour of the stick dance at Kasturi Lodge, Sauraha. The group of dancers consisted of 14 adult males. After agreeing to the offer to perform at the lodge in regular basis they came to know that their performance, *lāthi nāch* was called the Tharu Stick Dance by tourists. It became one of the popular activities among tourists. After their day’s adventure in the jungle, the stick dance entertained tourists in the evening. Anthropologist Professor Ramesh raj Kuwan remarks, “In Sauraha the

³ Mr. Mahato, age 47, was second in leader of the group I interviewed after Mr. Raut on the same day. He introduced me to youngest members of the group Bishal Mahato and Laxman Mahato, age 13 from the same village, Kumroj, who are studying at grade eight at the local school.

buyers [tourists] delightfully enjoy the Tharu cultural program which is popularly known as Tharu stick dance” (2002, p.118).

One more activity was added onto the hotel brochures and tariffs highlighting the Tharu stick dance in three days and two nights package programme. The stick dance has become integral part of the tourism in Sauraha. Until the introduction of Tharu performance the tourists had no more cultural access to local performance activities other than the Tharu village tour and the information at National Park Museum Centre.

It is natural that the members of group were enthusiastic about the changing prospect of their performing art. It is now economically motivating which provides them with extra source of income in using the time they have no other way to put it into resourceful action. It is this tempting prospect they regard in tourism that encouraged them to extend the time by adding up a dance items. In the initial period they performed only three items *laathi* (big stick), *dampfu* (one sided skin drum) and *thekara* (one feet long stick).

In the performance with *laathi* the performers enter the stage carrying big sticks with the beats of the drums and form a circle as they move forward. The performers start playing the stick as the drums change the beats. This item resembles the techniques of defending oneself in the traditional war waged with swords and lances. One can observe how swiftly the performers move around in circles attacking the opponent and defending the attacks with the stick. But *dampfu* and *thekara* items are different in their resemblance. These two items are related to ceremony and ritual of merrymaking in nature. Although, all these three items are performed in holi festival, *dampfu* and *thekara* are not at all aggressive like big stick items. The *dampfu* item is followed by Tharu songs, humorous in their spirit; while the *thekara* is enchanting about sound of small sticks, following the beats of the drums while performers move in the rhythmic circle. For an enchanting performance of the *Tharu Stick-dance*, tourists wanted the duration of performance to be a little longer.

Thus, with the extension of time from thirty minutes to forty minutes, the group added an item called *jhilli naach* at the end of the show, in which the Tharu dancers invite tourists to join them in the singing and dancing circle following the rhythm of the drum and the Tharu songs. Along with the growth of popularity and

the items in the dance the price was increased. By 1993 the price for the stick dance came to be four hundred rupees for one performance.

The group has, now, financial means to make their performance more attractive by having uniform which added local colours to the dance with white *kurta* and *dhoti* with red clothes waist band and head stripe. Furthermore, they have decorated their sticks with colored paint and carving, whereas *damphus* are adorned with peacock feathers.

The group, thus, evolved into a professional team into a well-organized form on the stage. The continual request from tourists and the local hoteliers to the group to extend the time duration of performance encouraged the group to add up two more items. In 2002 the group added two more newly invented items called *bhajaiti* and *jhumra* by lengthening duration of performance to one hour from forty minutes. The *bhajaiti* is a performance by single performer with big stick. It is introduced as a fire-dance by the local guides to the tourists. It is not so different in its style, except the dancer moves faster and looks more warrior-like with fire-light at the both ends of the stick. The most enchanting moment is when the fire-light forms a circle around the dancer which throws sense of excitement among viewers who rise on their seats with thunderous clapping in appreciation at the end of the show. Similarly, the *jhumra* moves the audience in different way. The item is performed by two dancers who are accompanied by drummers and singers. One of the male dancers is dressed in female attire, whereas the other dancer put on clown dress. The clown-looking man chases the female from behind with funny gesture evoked by the song. It is an essentially a comical performance. This item, as told by the anchor of the show, is performed to ease the sorrow of the family members who are mourning the death of their loved one.

According to Tharu ritual story of after-death rites, the dance is performed at the courtyard of the bereaved family. One may ask, what are the naïve looking farmers, with their performance, trying to say to the viewers, in the existential spirit? The dance itself is the answer to that question – the death event is not only for mourning, it is something to be laughed at, too. With its warrior temperament in *bhajaiti* or fire-dance and philosophical twist in *jhumra*, the last two items, gave new life to the whole show.

With the new items added to the dance, the group charged eight hundred rupees per performance. So far, the rising number of tourist viewers not only helped the

dancers to raise the price, but also encouraged them to invent new items in the dance form. In similar context of cultural tourism in Bali, observing the prospect of performance art of Balinese Michel Picard writes, “The advent of tourists [has] greatly stimulated the rise of so called “free” dance performance- free in the sense that they are detached from all ritual or dramatic ties” (1996, p.152). We cannot deny the role of economy in sustenance and development of art. And cultural tourism for Tharu community in Sauraha and Kumroj has come as a blessing by providing them with extra financial support.

Now, the stick dance group draws twenty-two thousand per months from the Tharu Culture House alone. On top of that they perform for the package group at local tourist lodges as per the request from the group of tourists or the hoteliers. And the group charged one thousand rupees per performance in 2009. Today, the price for the performance is three thousand and five hundred per show⁴. The group consists of thirty-five males of different age group from thirteen to sixty-six. The majority of them are local farmers, yet aware of the importance of their cultural heritage in tourism industry. The others are student in local schools and colleges and are keen to keep the heritage alive in the best form they could manage. Answering the question regarding the preservation of cultural heritage Palat Raut says, “We have allocated some of the earning from the performance, and the tips by the tourist to build a local museum to preserve rare cultural artifacts” (Personal Interview). The group has raised a fund for emergency medical treatment for the locals who has no means of supporting the hospital cost.

Apart from helping the local talented but needy kids for education the group recruit the young people every year and train them to dance so that the old people can take rest. Looking at the dance group of Kumroj, one can say that cultural tourism is a positive force for cultural preservation. Yet, cultural tourism is not completely free of charges because of its vulnerable nature. Along with the positive effects, the negative effects of tourism in local culture cannot be ruled out. Davidson points out that “one possible effect of tourism on culture is trivialization, when aspects of host culture become a degraded and commercialized form of entertainment for tourist” (qtd. in Kunwar, 2002, p.74). What is interesting about the Tharu stick dance is that there’s not to trivialize. It is

⁴ The price for *Lāthi nāch* was provided by Mr. Ranjan Shrestha, owner of the Tharu Culture Program, and by Hathan Chaudhary, one of the performers of the group.

an invented form seasoned with traditional flavour. Tharu stick dance programme is invented tradition as we know it today.

Conclusion

The Tharu Culture House group brought the different pieces of their cultural performance together and gave them an organized dance form, presenting them as a performance art. The very process of cultural ritual and ceremony entering the popular stage of general public beyond The Tharu cultural context is in itself is the process of redefining diverse performance items under the *Tharu Stick-dance*. And it was possible because of the growing interest of local performance culture among the tourists. Critics, such as, Rustum Bharucha, for example, may find cultural tourism an infection into the purity of cultural ritual. His opinion is that “[...] the unfortunate developments of cultural tourism [have] been the influx of fabricated rituals within the cultures of these rituals” (1984, p.16). But what critics like Bharucha do not see is the dynamics of the ritual performance out of which the performers invent new forms which is not an infection but the innovation outside the pure cultural forms. Those new forms come out of the text and from the folk or oral history. It is this new form coming alive from the past stories attracts the touristic gaze. There’s no question of degrading the ritual since the dance form took departure from the core ritual form of performance. There is no priest present on the stage, nor are the ritual objects. Only the performance of the professional dancers is available for touristic gaze. In return the local dancers receive encouraging economy towards preserving their heritage. Now the Tharu youths are taking more interest in performing their culture for the audience outside their community. Indeed, the stick dance is no more a mere ritual performance, but a source of public entertainment and a part of tourists’ attractions in Sauraha.

Finally, what the *lāthi nāch* group of Tharu Culture House achieved from being a part of the cultural tourism would not have achieved half of it had they not found the platform in Sauraha, the third popular tourist destination of Nepal. There are many other Tharu communities in Chitwan, but none of them have introduced and popularized their cultural performance as this group has done so far. The group has been invited to perform in different local and regional institutional events in Nepal since 2008. The group performed International Elephant Race (2008), Chitwan Mahotsav (2008) and in Street Festival Pokhara in (2008). The group has

been performing at different national and international events and conference held in Nepal ever since.

The people, other than the Tharus, do not know that the half of the items in the dance were introduced in the show later. The innovative introduction was so spontaneously attractive that tourist remained spellbound for the whole forty-five minutes. In that very attraction lie the powers of guarding the purity of the original ritual performance which are not meant for the tourists. The locals are not as naïve as academicians take them to be. They know what is for outsiders and what's not. How the Tharu performance cultures guard themselves from the possible infiltration of a culture alien to them can be, yet, another interesting topic for research in performance studies.

Appendix



lāthi nāch – photo 1



Jhumra: photo 2



Bhajaiti or fire-dance: photo 3



Jhamta or women singing in circle: photo 4

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