**Abstract**

There are over 100 castes and ethnic groups in Nepal and more than 80 percent of total population speak Indo-Aryan languages while a large number of lesser known languages belong to Tibeto-Burman family. There are also the speakers of Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian language families. This paper tries to illustrate the language situation of Nepal with reference to oral lore and written literature wherever necessary.

**Nepal and Common Languages**

The total area of 147,181 square km. of Nepal can be divided into three main geographical regions: (1) the plain in the South, (2) the Himalayan mountain ranges in the North and (3) the mid-mountain region in between them. The thickly populated area of Terai is occupied by the speakers of Indo-Aryan languages. But there are also the speakers of Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian languages. The mountain region, which is the least populated region is inhabited by the speakers of several Tibeto-Burman languages and Nepali. The mid-mountain region, which is a meeting point for Aryan and Mongoloid cultures, is occupied by the people of various ethnic groups speaking different Tibeto-Burman languages and Nepali. The cultural and linguistic diversities of Nepal have enabled the people of her dwellers to express their emotions and experiences from time immemorial.

Nepal is described as the flower garden of various castes and ethnic groups. There are over 100 castes and ethnic groups in Nepal and more than 80 percent of total population speak Indo-Aryan languages while a large number of lesser known languages belong to Tibeto-Burman family.

Some of the languages are spoken in more than one country. For example the
major languages like Hindi and Urdu are spoken in Pakistan, India, Nepal and Afghanistan; Bengali in Bangladesh and India; Nepali in Nepal, India and Bhutan; and Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Tharu languages in Nepal and India. Similarly Sindhi and Punjabi are spoken in India and Pakistan; Santali and Rajbamshi in Bangladesh, India and Nepal; and Tamil in India and Sri Lanka. These common languages had their common roots in the past but now they have developed in their own unique environments forming different language ecologies. I would like to quote Fishman (2005:245) who says that "Most of culture is so thoroughly interpenetrated by its traditionally associated language that the culture without that language would not be, could not be, "the same". The body of law, the prayers and ceremonies, the songs, the proverbs, the folktales, the education, the greetings, the blessings, the curses, the jokes, the literature…. all of these are in and through a given language (and only in that language) for a given culture."

The Religions and Religious Life in Nepal

The religious life of Nepal is a blend of Hindu-Buddhist-Animistic traditions and the oral narratives are maintained and transmitted in various religious contexts. There are 80.06 percent Hindus, 10.07% Buddhists, 4.2% Muslims, 3.6% followers of indigenous Kirat religion, 0.5% Christians and 0.4% from other groups. There are also different cults and communities following different beliefs and practices as well as worshipping different gods and goddesses. There are temples of the Hindus, monasteries of the Buddhists and Mosques of the Muslims in different parts of the country. The co-existence and harmony that existed for centuries helped to maintain the oral traditions of different religious groups.

The Oral Narratives: Types, Styles and Genres.

The oral narratives to be discussed are those which are shared by the people of the region. There are some of the oral narratives such as the epic tradition of Ramayana and Mahabharat, the Pauranic narratives, the myths and legends of different caste/ethnic groups transmitted orally from generation to generation. They are either recited or sung by men and women in groups or individually. These traditions have again some kind of common origin. This paper attempts to describe some of the common narratives of the region with special reference to Nepali. Some of them are Ramayana and Mahabharata traditions, the tradition of the saint poets and of the bards.

The Ramayana and Mahabharata

The most important and wide spread narratives are the story of Rama and Krishna. "Like the Ganga or the Himalayas, Rama and Krishna have shaped the contours of the life and art of the peoples not only of India but also of South-East Asia."(Vatsyayan,1980:110). The story of Rama known as Ramayana is found in many languages of the region in their written traditions. But there is also the oral versions of the Ramayana in many languages of the region handed down from generation to generation which are with local variations and adaptations.

The different verities of oral Ramayana in Nepali language are Chait, Dhamari, Nachari and Balun. The Chait are recited in groups during the festivals and on
auspicious occasions. They are generally presented in episodes like that of Sita and Hanumana. Bhatta (1995) also has reported on Chaits of Rama and Krishna from Baitadi, the far western district of Nepal.

The version of folk Ramayana reported by Yatri (1984) is known as Dhamari which is practiced in several districts of western Nepal. Some episodes of Ramayana known as Dhamari are also reported by other scholars. The text of Ramayana collected and published by Yatri (1984) consists of ten episodes. The Indo-Aryan languages of Terai such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Tharu also have narratives of Ramayana in their languages and are performed on various auspicious occasions.

The Brahmans and Chetris of the hill area of Nepal perform Baluns reciting the narratives of Ramayana and Mahabharat. They are the dance-drama played by men in Nepali costume in a group of 8 or 16. As a text it shows a semi-literary characteristics and versions of Baluns from Nepal and Sikkim are available (Koirala, 2006).

Dhamari or Dhamar is the most popular form of the oral narratives in Western Nepal. As narratives of Dhamari contain the stories of Ramayana, Mahabharata as well as of the local gods, goddesses and historical personalities. The word Dhamar is borrowed from Indian classical music. According to Hajari Prasad Drivedi, Dhamaris are the devotional songs of Proto-Hindi preserved in the foothills of the Himalayas. It is said that during the invasion of the Moghals the cultural life of the Indian plains was disturbed and many of the Hindus went to the foothills of the Himalayas for shelter. The Krishna Dhamari referred to by Hajari Prasad Dwivedi are preserved in Doti region of western Nepal which contain the words of Brajaboli.

Caryagiti/Cacaa

Caryagiti, the oldest form of the early eastern New Indo-Aryan languages like Bengali, Assamese, Oriya and Maithili, was housed in the Darbar library of Nepal. It was discovered by Haraprasad Shastri in 1907 and was published in 1916 (Sen, 1973:3). After its publication various studies were made and it was claimed that these songs and Dohas belong to the time when the eastern NIA were not yet split. Later, Arnold Bake and Shashi Bhushan Das Gupta also collected about 100 cacaa songs from the Buddhists community of Nepal (ibid, 5). These days the Caryaa performance is limited in the Bajracharya community of Kathmandu valley. (ibid, 3).

Sorathi, Bharathari and Gopichand: Contributions in Cultural unification

The existence of the story of Sorathi, Bharathari and Gopichan in Maithili, Bhojpuri, Magahi, Nepali and other languages of the region shows that they are the part of the folk traditions of the north-east India and Nepal. The songs of Gopichan and Bharathari are equally popular in Bengal as in Nepal and other parts of India. These performances were taken to the ordinary folk by the followers of Gorakhanatha. They were the people of the Natha sect, an important folk tradition, extended from Kamarup to Kandhar. Gorakhanath and his followers not only united the Shaiva-Shakt-Bajrayan Buddhist traditions but also tuned the hearts of the downtrodden people of both Hindu and Muslims societies. Probably a folk tradition like this was never so powerful in this region of South Asia (Raghava, 1963).

Gorakhanatha, a historic figure of the 9th century A.D. was the most important
source of this tradition who has left a deep influence in various linguistic communities of the region. Matsyendranath, Gorakhanath and other yogis of the Natha sect are remembered and worshipped in Nepal and other parts of the region. According to a legend popular in Nepal Matshyendra Nath was invited from Kamarupa after a draught of 12 years and was placed in the city of Lalitpur. His chariot is pulled in the city of Lalitpur with festive celebrations and he is worshipped every year as a God of rain.

The narratives like Sorathi, Gopichan and Bharathari were spread by the singers, the carriers of the oral traditions who used the spoken vernaculars from the time of Gorakhanatha himself. The Nepali performers still practice them in the Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri and Tharu speaking areas. The Sorathi performance has remained as a symbol of cultural unification in the multiethnic society of Nepal. In central Nepal where the Nepali version is used, the term Sorathi has extended its meaning as a particular style of performance from a particular unit of performance. The Sorathi is also dramatized in Bhojpuri and Maithili speaking areas. This has several local variations in the languages such as Nepali, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Magahi, and Tharu. The Bhojpuri and Magahi versions in India are narrated while they are performed in Nepal. Nepali version of Sorathi is performed specially in central Nepal by the ethnic groups like Magars and Gurung who speak Tibeto-Burman languages. They are also performed by Tharus, Darais and Kumals who are the speakers of Indo-Aryan languages of Magadhan group. The Nepali performance lasts several days depending on the plan of performers. The main performers called guru babu 'the teacher' recites the text, the Maruni dances with the beats of a two sided drum called 'medal'. Maruni as male actors as dancers dressed in the female costume become the central point of attraction. The male performers known as pursunge play the madal and a joker known as Labarpande comes in the interludes to entertain the audience.

The Bhojpuri Sorathi is narrated individually and in a group by some male singers. The text has several editions describing the births and rebirths of Sorathi. A text published in Kolkata and rewritten by Singh has sixty four parts which is said to be a genuine story (Singh, n.d.). The printed version of Bhojpuri is available in three editions and every publisher claims that his version is genuine and the rest is fake. In the text that I found, the stories of earlier births were recent insertions. These popular editions are published for the use of the singers of Sorathi. One can find the The Bhojpuri speaking folks narrating the story of Sorathi and Brijabhar wherever they live.

The text is in Nepali with some influence of Magadhan languages like Bhojpuri or Tharu. Other lesser known Indo-Aryan languages in the are such as Darai, Kumal and Bote living along the river basins in the central Nepal were probably the sources of the folk traditions who brought them to the hills. In the medieval period when the oral tradition was at its height, and the major part of central and eastern Terai and central hill was ruled by the Sen kings, the singers, saints and travelers helped to spread their folklore among the people speaking different languages of the hill areas. The narratives of Bhartrihari and Gopichan are also preserved by Newari speak-
ing people of Kunchal, South-West of Kathmandu, who are known as Gopalis. Shrestha (2006) has reported that they sing parts of these narratives which present a blend of Nepali, Newari, Maithili and Bhojpuri languages.

The Karkha singers
The word Karkha is related to the tradition of Hindustani music. Ain-i-Akbari (1597) of Abu’l-Fadl has mentioned the Dhadi musicians used to sing the warlike and heroic songs called karkha and sadra in various languages. Later they developed their tradition of classical music in Punjab. Thus the karkha is found in Rajasthani, Punjabi, Lahanda, old Hindi and Nepali traditions. According to Faquirullah (1665/66) dhadhis were the oldest community of musicians, and originally Rajputs. They sang karkha, which was ‘composed in four to eight lines to sing the praises of war lords, the brave solders, and to narrate the affairs of battles and war’ (Nijhawan, 5). After the partition of India the tradition of Dhadis of Punjab developed with Sikh musical tradition while in Pakistan they have become the bearers of Sufi traditions. It is interesting that the Nepalese Gandharvas do not know about the Dhadis, neither their relations with the Indian music tradition.

Gandharva and the Ragas
Some old Gandharva singers claim that there are several Ragas of their music. The singers from Pokhara perform these ragas during different time of the day while the singers from Gorkha sing in different seasons. (Sharma, 2003). The names of these ragas are very much related to the musical traditions of North India. Some of them are: Belol rag (rag Bilawal), Dhanasiri rag (rag Dhanashri), and Malsiri rag (the rag Malashri). Ramkali rag (the rag Ramkali), Saranga rag (the rag Saranga) and Maluwa rag (the Rag Malawa). Terms of some of the ragas are localized like "baase" raag which is sung to request for a stay at night during their visits in the villages. The Gandharva singers of old generation claim that they learnt these ragas from their ancestors.

Devotional songs: Nirguns and Sakhis
Another traditional form of the Gandharva music is Mangal. Mangals are the devotional songs which are sung as prayers for Hindu deities like Ganesh, Saraswati, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar, Gorakhanath and Krishna Gandaki etc. These songs describe the power of these classical and folk gods and goddesses and their devotion to them. Another type of the Gandharva devotional music is Nirgun. The Nirguns are the prayers to their Gods and spirituality. These nirguns again show their relationship with North Indian tradition of the saints and singers. The Sakhis are closely related to the Saint-poets of Punjab and Northern India. The saint-poets of North India and Punjab also sang Sakhis in Doha couplets. Nepalese Gandharvas sing Sakhi when they perform Karkhas. The Sakhis of the Gandharvas also help to relate them with the Gorakhapanthis as well as other saint-poets like Kabir Das who had great impact in the oral traditions of the region.

Contextual Variations and Adaptations
The oral narratives transmitted from generation to generation are preserved in the communities but they have been changing every time they are performed. They
show local variations and adaptations. As variations are the main characteristics of the folk genre, the story of Ramayana show changes with time and place. The performers try to repeat the performance, but they never come exactly in the same form. The linguistic, thematic and other variations can also be found. The performers, as carriers of the traditions, also identify themselves with the characters of the performances like Rama, Sita, Hanumana, Krishna, the Pandavas and others.

**Creation of New Narratives**

The Gandharvas of Pokhara sing the narratives of Lahureko Sandesh "The massage of the Lahure". This is message sent to his mother by a Nepali recruit who died during the fighting at the frontier. This is sung by one of the most celebrated singers of the time Jhalak Man Gandharva. Pande (1982) has rightly remarked that Gandharvas served as messengers especially to the families of the lahures, who were away from their homes and fighting in the frontiers. In those days when there was no modern media of communication, the Gandharas were the only source of information. They were able to tell what was going on at the frontiers, in the neighborhood and in the court of the king of Nepal. Similarly, the Gandharvas have been singing the stories of the happenings, specially the tragic ones as Ghatana. These are real happenings in the society around them. They have been creating and singing such narratives in the past but the tragic death of the thousands of Nepalese in the last 12 years time has almost stopped creating Ghatana genre of narratives.

Danfe ra Murali "The pheasant and the murali bird" is the most important symbolic narrative that the Gandharvas have created. In this narrative, the pheasant, the national bird of Nepal is symbolized as an young man. This narrative not only symbolizes the union of the hill and plain people of Nepal but also describes the cultural pluralism of the Nepalese society.

**The performers as tradition bearers**

In Nepalese society different narratives are performed by different people. The Ramayana as Chaits are performed by the aged male and female Brahmans and Chetris. The narratives of Dhamari, Nachari and Sorathi are performed by non-professional and ethnic groups and dalits. The balun is performed by a band of Brahmans and Chetris in white colored Nepali dress. The performances can be found in various linguistic communities of Nepal. The Newars of Kathmandu have rich tradition of dance-drama. The Caryaa dance of the Bajracharya community is performed during their rituals. There are other dance-dramas performed in the cities of Kathmandu valley. The Kartik Nach of Lalitpur was a month-long performance which is reduced to some days for these days. Rana (1989) has mentioned about 200 performance groups of the dancers of Bhaktapur and advocated for their preservation. The performers have been carrying these dances and songs for centuries. In addition to these performances, there are the narratives of the Dhimals (Diwasa, 1978), the Limbus (Kaila, 1998) and of the Maithils (Rakesh, 1989) to mention some of them.

**Conclusion**

Folklore is defined as an artistic interaction in small groups and the narratives emerge, develop and function in small groups. But, as time passes the narratives also
extend to the larger groups. The narratives of various ethnic and caste groups contain
the characters of the supernatural powers as well as the local heroes. The variations
of the narratives found in the villages help identify these small groups. As the terri-
tory is extended we find the narratives traveling in a larger area. Many of the narra-
tives are spread along the foothills of the Himalayas and Genetic plains which are
popularized by the Gorakhapanthis and saint-poets. Again, the stories of Rama and
Krishna are extended further to the larger area of South Asia and beyond.

But folk narratives of the region are becoming shorter and shorter. It is extremely
difficult to find people who can recite or sing the complete texts of the narratives
from the beginning to the end. As the memory of the senior performers weaken, it
was difficult to perform the complete text unless otherwise the ritual processes de-
mand them. The new generation is reluctant to learn and perform these narratives. In
Nepal, more than half of the languages spoken by small number of the people are
facing endangerment. When the languages are lost, not only the narratives but also
the whole knowledge and traditional technology that the language possesses, will
also be lost. On the other hand, globalization, modern education, migration and lack
of awareness have compelled for loss and rapid change in our languages and oral
traditions including the narratives. A good planning for a scientific study, archiving
and promotion of the narratives will certainly help to protect and revitalize them and
their performances for the present and posterity.

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Documenting the Traditional Folk Knowledge

Abstract

Traditional Knowledge reflects its multiple dimensions in our society. The present paper involves issues like-

a. Traditional Knowledge to Modern Technology: The Development and interrelationship

b. Necessity to Document the Traditional Knowledge from being extinct

c. A tentative Scheme of Scientific Documentation of Traditional Knowledge

In this connection I have presented a Case Study on Conch-Shell Craft of West Bengal that involves the case of folk art in particular.