



Folklore and Folklife of Meches: Exploration through Field Research

Introduction

The reports of the studies on Gandharva, Gopali, Aathpahariya Rai and Danuwar folk groups under the Folklore and Folklife Study Project were presented in the earlier issues of the Newsletter (volume 1, 2, 3, and 4). As the project is continuing with Finnish support under local cooperation, we have completed the study of the fifth folk group – the Meches on various aspects related to the people and the culture. The activities completed in connection with the field research of this folk group are going to be reported here. The processes and the activities carried on the field study along with its achievements are described in the following topics.

Preparatory Works

Field research needs some preparatory works which includes purchasing some equipments and preparing the research tools. Therefore, the equipments necessary for field research were purchased, including the digital voice recorder, rewritable CDs, DVCs (digital video cassettes) etc. Moreover, field sheets, questionnaires and schedules were also prepared, prior to the beginning of the field-based activities.

Pre-field Work

The Project Team Leader Prof. Tulasi Diwasa, requested local resident Mr. Tika Bhandari and Mr. Suren Sapkota to visit the field and collect all the necessary information of Meche folk group of Jorsimal, Mechinagar Municipality ward no. 12 and 13, Jhapa district so that we can manage the field stay for the study of the folk group. When they submitted the preliminary field report, the members of the society decided to send the fifth group to the field, and the group was sent to Jhapa on 13th April 2007.

A team was composed of four researchers and appointed for Meche Study Project, agreement was made with them, and MOU and TOR were signed. The composition of the research team was as follows: 1. Mr. Tej Prakash Shrestha (team coordinator) 2. Mr. Ram Kumar Shrestha 3. Mr. Suren Sapkota and 4. Mr. Rohini Raj Nepal.

The researchers practised to operate the essential equipments and tools like digital camera, digital-audio recorder and video cameras from April 1-12, 2007. They also collected some reference materials related to the folk group and were involved in the orientation whereby they were given the necessary guidelines for field work on 6th April. Besides, an interaction programme was organized in the project office to share the experience between them and the earlier field researchers who had completed their field work. Prof. Dr. C. M. Bandhu (coordinator, first research group), Mr. Tej Prakash



Bathau at Chandan Meche's home

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Shrestha (coordinator, second research group) and Mr. Amrit Yonjon (coordinator, third research group) shared their experiences of working in the field in course of data collection on behalf of the earlier research teams. The project team leader Prof. Tulasi Diwasa and Prof. Dr. Abhi Subedi were present in the programme where Prof. Diwasa also provided necessary guidelines for the researchers regarding the field study.

Field Work in Jorsimal and Adjacent Areas of Jhapa

The field researchers collected data covering various aspects of Meche folklore and folklife while they spend three months (from April 14th to July 12th, 2007) in the settlement areas of the Meche folk group in and around Jorsimal VDC - Jhapa district. The work of data collection was divided into four different areas of Meche folklore and folklife that includes: 1) Meche folk language and folk communication, 2) Meche material folk culture and folk heritage, 3) Meche folk literature and performing arts, and 3) Meche socio-cultural folklife and folkways. Mr. Suren Sapkota, Mr. Ram Kumar Shrestha, Mr. Tej Prakash Shrestha (Team Coordinator) and Mr. Rohini Raj Nepal collected the relevant information in the areas respectively.



A big tree of simal at Chaudhary tole

The researchers sent altogether six reports in the interval of every fortnight, reporting their activities, collections and achievements to the project office, Bhatbhateny, Kathmandu during their stay in the field. The relevant information were collected by the researchers by visiting the key informants of the folk group, interviewing them and audio recording the speech, taking photographs, and video-recordings of the several aspects of their life, community, culture, language etc. They also used the field notes and questionnaires for collection of the data. During their fieldwork, the researchers visited almost each and every corner of the Meche folk group settlement area. The Meche people cooperated them a lot during their field visits and data collection.



A view of Muniya gau, Mechinagar-7

Prof. Tulasi Diwasa, the project coordinator, along with the video-cameraman Mohan Bikram Shah made a visit and inquired the achievement and problems of the research work and gave guidelines to the researchers on the 7th July 2007.

Problems and Rapport Building

As in the other field studies conducted under the FOFO Study Project, the researchers had to face the uneasy situation in getting community's belief and support for the study. The reason behind, according to some of the community leaders as they have explained their past experience, was that some experts visited to the Meche settlement areas, consulted them and collected materials; but neither they make clear about their purpose of such "studies" nor they informed them about the research findings. Some of the community members told that some researchers even did distrustful acts like taking valuable documents from the villagers but not returning them back. Thus, they were reluctant to cooperate with the research team.

However, the researchers assured that there will not be any distrustful activities; they convinced the community saying that they will disseminate whatever they find during the research; and they asked for the help of the community. Finally they were successful in rapport building.



Kusumlal, Rabi, Gangaru, Pagalsingh, Taransingh, Manjir and others

Post-field Work

The researchers came back to the project office after completing the work of data collection from the field in the second week of July 2007 and submitted their field study survey report. The information collected from the fieldwork area are documented in the office, mostly in the form of digital audio/video recordings and photographs. Besides, some items representing Meche material folk culture, collected from the field research, are also preserved in the office. Now the researchers are transcribing, analyzing and interpreting the data in order to prepare the detailed report. Some of the researchers had already finished their report writing and submitted to the project office.

Collections and Achievements

The researchers had completed data collection on 12th July 2007 and now they are preparing their reports. The work of data collection from the folk group had been divided among four researchers covering the four main areas of folklore and folklife study. The progress of their work is reported here briefly. They have brought some items representing the Meche material culture. These items include: Dokhna (Sari), Sawl (Pachyaura), Gamcha (towel), Bathau (god), Phurlung (fish storing net), Pangkha (bamboo fan), Burung (bamboo fishing net), Wakholto (musical instrument), Dhanus (bow), etc.



A Meche woman worshipping Bathau

The field researchers have completed video-recordings of the relevant information in altogether 21 DVC cassettes for 21 hours in total length. Besides, altogether 3993 pictures and 61:34:20 hours' long audio materials have been collected. In addition to that the project team leader Prof. Tulasi Diwasa and Cameraman Mr. Mohan Bikram Shah have also visited the area and video-recorded the relevant aspects of Meche folklore and folklife, with the length of 13 hours in total, 473 photographs and 12:47:00 hours audio recordings.

The excerpt of the collections and the achievements of each of the individual researchers based on their reports from the field available in the project office through the team coordinator are presented here.

I. Folk Language and Folk Communication: Mr. Suren Sapkota

Mr. Sapkota has taken 1118 photos, and has audio-recorded oral texts having the total length of 19:40:50 hours so far. He has also collected the video recordings with the length of 10 hours. The collection of the data covers the areas of communication, bilingualism, language attitudes, baby talks, dialect study, etc. Among these areas 113 namelores, 9 onomatopoeic words, 6 prayers, 11 proverbs/proverbial expressions, 10 curses/taunts, 8 blessings, 3 commands, 18 nicknames, 1220 special vocabulary items, 9 adverbials, 14 time adverbials, 430 folk words, 20 name of the diseases, 11 folk medicine terms, 62 kinship terms, 5 riddles, 12 traditional beliefs, 30 names of the traditional food items and folk games, 12 folk ornaments, 2 dialogues/conversations, 3 discussions and sentences have been collected.



Meche and other women at meeting, Mechinagar-13

II. Folk literature and performing arts: Mr. Tej Prakash Shrestha

Mr. Shrestha has taken 702 pictures, and has audio-recorded oral texts with the length of 26:52:12 hours in total. He has also produced a video record with the length of 2 hours. The collection based on the areas of folk narratives, myths,



Meche women dancing at cultural programme

folktales, personal memoirs, folk songs, performing arts, music, musical instruments, etc. Among these areas the collection includes 3 folk narratives, 1 myth, 16 folk tales, 3 folk legends, 9 personal memoirs, 49 folk songs, 12 religious songs, 2 seasonal/festival songs, 13 folk dances, 1 children's song, 14 folk music and musical instruments, 26 folk games, 11 riddles and 10 proverbs.

III. Material folk culture and folk heritage:

Mr. Ram Kumar Shrestha

Mr. Shrestha has taken 1118 photographs and has audio-recorded oral texts with the total length of 06:38:30 hours. He has also done a video record with the length of 6 hours. The field of research covered includes rites and rituals, folk foods and festivals, folk clothes, folk feasts, folk medicine, folk gods and goddesses, folk religion, folk art and crafts, traditional technology, etc. His collection also includes 16 folk foods, 9 folk clothes, 3 folk festivals, 8 folk feasts, 14 folk medicines, 12 folk gods and goddesses, 14 folk arts and crafts, 1 folk religion, 2 folk furniture, 13 folk weapons and 8 traditional technology and wisdoms.



Dewari Meche (40) weaving gamsa at her loom, Mechinagar-12

IV. Socio-cultural folklife and folkways:

Mr. Rohini Raj Nepal

Mr. Nepal has taken 1070 photographs, and has audio-recorded the oral texts with the length of 8:22:48 hours. The subject matter covered in the collection includes: folk life and daily activities, source of income, method of harvesting, rites of the passage, folk beliefs, customs and livelihood, division of labour, gender issues, decision making procedures, kinship system, family structure, religious beliefs, folk gods and goddesses, etc. He has also video-recorded the relevant information with the total length of 3 hours. He has collected 24 folk beliefs.



Paddy transplanting

Concluding Remarks

As a whole, the researchers have completed the field research successfully among the Meche folk group. The research has two very important consequences at this stage. First of these, various aspects of the folklore and folk life have been explored and the information have been collected which will be the useful resources for outsiders to understand the community and to know about their rich cultural heritage. Secondly, the community members themselves become aware in preserving and promoting their language, culture, folk ways, folk traditions and other several aspects of their own cultural heritages. Such an awareness among the community members lead them towards enthusiasm and the initiative role in organizing programs to promote their cultural heritages and uplift and empower the community so that the community can stand in its own and identify in terms of its own cultural heritages. The lesson learned from this research activity is that the debate on whether the outcome should be scholarly and for the scholars or should be presented in simple non-technical language and for the people who own the resources can be solved easily if the researchers work together with the community members; let the community member feel that the research is done for them, they should be involved, and the outcomes are for their use; help the people in empowering themselves; be honest to the community; and finally present the report semi-scholarly so that it could be used by both the scholars and the community members.

The research team has collected lots of information and materials on Meche folk group during the three months stay at Jorsimal. They get invaluable support from the community during the field visit and they have had many opportunities to see, to entertain the social and cultural performances, and captured them in audio and audio-visual forms. Thus, it has become very successful and fruitful field visit in terms of qualitative as well as quantitative point of view.

Cellular SAARC folk¹

- Abhi Subedi

A civil society is an amorphous concept. The layman's meaning of civil society in Nepal is that it is the group of a few dedicated people who caution the political parties about their digressions. Their role is to keep it all going. Though they are few in numbers, they work with their conscience without any party's pressure. If such be the glory of civil society, what would be the vision that they would teach the architects of political ideologies and plans?

But the reality is dominated by the increasing confusions within each party about the goals and architecture of the political future. The confusions come out of two things- ideologies' inability to locate the right political solution and a try-and-error method in policy making. The confusing political statements about what should be the political solution and who are the people that should be given attention to indicate the political parties' search for meanings and solutions in a situation that is out of context. Anachronism, one suspects, has governed the Nepali political ideologies.

As I am attending a SAARC folklore conference (6-9 December 2007), the discourses here are governed by anachronism too. Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi is the subject of cyclone. The spectre of the Hindu militancy has been evoked following Modi's alleged controversial statement during election campaign.

Nepal trickles here in a few items of news in papers that pick up the confusions and quite unexpected signals in Nepali politics. Folklorists who converge here make meanings out of those trickles that say the CPN (Maoist) have supported the royalists and the Shah kings have a Tharu lineage.

At the folklore congress organized by the Indian writer Ajeet Cour at the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature that she says she has been running from the proceeds of the sale of her daughter Arpana Cour's paintings. I follow the discussions at the seminar with great interest. I present my own views about folk discourses in sessions assigned to me.

Senior Nepali folklorists Tulasi Diwasa and Chudamani Bandhu present the picture of Nepali folklore, their visions and the trajectories that their field research works have covered. Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi folklorists bring up different brilliant perspectives. The politics of folklore and debates surrounding the vulnerability of the folk life appear to govern the discourses on folklore in South Asia today.

The concept of god and demon, correspondingly government and terrorists, does seem to need new

interpretation. We should not easily transform the concept of god/demon nexus to life. That may create confusions in the domain of folklore interpretation. In folklore studies the binary of pristine folk and destruction of that shows that we are getting carried away by the *vikas* concept. Using folk for *vikas* is an extremely sensitive question. Folklorists stressed on the question of patronising knowledge of folklore. Knowledge of folklore raises questions regarding its agency and source. Questions come whose knowledge we are talking about. If your knowledge of folklore is oppressive to the people they could either be rebellious or stick to religious formalism to save identity.

But taking folklore out of minispheres, using it for development and creating civil societies through folklore involve some conscious efforts. That involves the politics of folklore. But the reality is that society conceived by folk is a consummate structure. A civil, political *gramin* utopic form conceived in folklore represents a total society. You either study and use that perfect form as model of development or you destroy the folk bases.

The Gandhian evocation of the ideal *gramin* model is the recognition of that perfect state. The Delhi gathering of tens of thousands of peasants in a Gandhian style last month dramatizes that *gramin* imaginary of a perfect folk form. Repeated calls for using the *gram* for politics has been a South Asian political discourse.

You bring industrialization to use folklore for *vikas*. Is not that tantamount to the destruction of the folk? What the Bengali novelist Mahasweta Devi is doing with the Nandigram farmers' displacement question is metaphorically a move against the destruction of a folklore and folklife pattern.

Having said this, I want to return to my original point of discussion. Institutions and individuals should create what the new age intellectuals call 'cellular organisations' and work independently. This folklore congress is one such activity that brought folklorists of the region together. In Nepal where politicians are not quite sure about the alliances and future courses, the public should pursue 'cellular activities' with vigour and sense of independence. If we look back at the panorama of cellular activities in Nepal, we can see that the linguists, folklorists, women groups and educationists have sustained this society and taken it forward. They have never waited for politics of the land to settle and become sensible. They even worked during the most atrocious days of the home war.

Cellular activism has increased in the entire South Asia today. The rejection of the power sponsored forms and creation of cellular chains by independent institutions and individuals has been gaining new strength in South Asia today. Civil societies too should draw strength from the cellular energy.

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FOLKLORE: TRAVERSING ALONG A NOVEL PATH²

- Govinda Raj Bhattarai

The indications of the fact that the nation is bent upon taking a new course are becoming more obvious. No sooner did the conflict recede and peace started resettling in the nation, people started nurturing hopes for safety and security of life. Driven by this optimism, people have started organizing different academic activities in Kathmandu. Last month, the 12th Himalayan Languages Symposium was held in Kathmandu.

Followed by this, SAARC level Fiction Writers' Meet was organized, and during the first quarter of the present month, Folklore Society of Nepal held its First National Folklore Congress on 15-16 December 2006. The society, established a decade ago, has already accomplished two International Folklore Congresses. Those congresses provided the scholars forums for carrying out discourses on language, literature, culture, etc. The paper presentations and discussion seminars, panel sessions and discourses were on literature, folklife, anthropology, architecture, medicine, language and folkloristics. Nepal has a long history of study and research in such topics. Such topics as above are of great importance in the context of a country characterized by rich diversity.

In the present article, I would like to record some of the very important and praiseworthy activities that the society has accomplished during recent years. It is because, at this juncture of time, when the nation is making an attempt towards the establishment of pluralistic and open society, the Society has made praiseworthy efforts towards introducing and conserving some of the rare cultural heritage which are on the verge of extinction. At this moment, the nation should promote such activities as these.

The main reason behind this is that the present day world has experienced a paradigm shift globally and the world is shifting its importance towards the 'Folk Element'. There are hosts of disciplines such as postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, cultural studies, ethnic studies, non western studies, transactional studies, diasporic studies, women's studies, and so on. These are the new disciplines proliferating today. These have become the area of study and research everywhere. These are also incorporated in our university syllabus. All these disciplines are helpful for establishing the identity of the third world nations. These help to characterize them and introduce the third world communities, which are veiled in darkness- are ignorant for the lack of education and awareness. These are the constant victims of exploitation and poverty. We are not content simply by being introduced or understood by others, we should understand ourselves the importance of exploring our identity through our own efforts, we should be able to evaluate our own position in the present day world. We should be aware of ignorance and rise in our own strength. Today the very democratic spirit of the world is directed towards such disadvantaged and deprived societies/communities and nations. It has started penetrating deep into its history, geography, literature and culture.

Politics does never bring the social forces and elements together, it can never bind them and establish harmony among the people, it rather forces wedges into it and creates gaps further. Instead we should try to find elements that forge our society which we find in folk life. It is the folklore that pervades deeply into the human life and draws a complete picture of the same. It is therefore that folklore is becoming more popular growingly. These studies are not only intangible objects like folk speech and saga, music, dance and literature which are expressed through arts but also include tangible objects like dress and medicine, food and all the physical objects that occur in human life. This also incorporates in its study invisible entities like faith and superstition, belief and everything that life is shrouded with. It encompasses elements like language and religion, culture, custom and tradition, rituals and rites and ceremonies from birth to death, it also indicates the modes of changes experienced in social life. In fact the true picture of culture and whole civilization is contained in 'folk'.

Many people's attention is being attracted towards this topic after the establishment of Nepali Folklore Society. The Society gave training to young researchers from various fields like Linguistics, Anthropology, Sociology, Literature, Human Geography, sent a strong cadre of young researchers for long field studies, each team led by senior scholars and renowned linguist like Professor C.M. Bandhu and others studied the *Gandharbas* of Pokhara, the *Gopali* community of Kunchhal the *Athpariya Rais* of Dhankuta, and the *Danuwar*s of Dukuchhap, - a very rigorous, folkloristic studies of great importance were being carried out there.

When we heard the field researchers presenting their great findings and reports during the present conference, everybody was highly convinced that the nation has initiated works of great importance. Of about eighty ethnic communities, seven were targeted by the society. The study findings of four folk groups attracted the scholars/participants and showed their deep concerns about the same. Dying languages and cultures and lifestyles, fast disappearing were made points of study and very substantial achievements were recorded. We require to sustain a similar concern about the remaining folklore and folklife.

Apart from the four studies above, many other presentations were made, discussions were held during the two day Congress



First National Folklore Congress

²First Published in *Kantipur Daily*, January 6, 2007



Participants of First National Folklore Congress

this time. This discourse was accomplished among all the new, young generation people, who are educated, conscious and aware of the dying languages and cultures, who were worried about the ethnic and linguistic identity. The participants, young researchers, include the *Gandharba, Rai, Danuwar, Tharu, Chaudhary, Tamang, Sunuwar, Magar, Limbu, Chepang* and young researchers/students with background of Linguistics, Sociology, Anthropology, Folklore and so on. They have developed leadership in the study of their own cultural, ethnic communities. This is perhaps the greatest contribution that the Society has made - developing indigenous researchers, scholarship and academia. The Congress was attended by folklorists, historians, professors of literature, linguistics, language teachers, medical science practitioners, architects, engineer, geographers, anthropologists, journalists and free lancers - these were people from different walks of life. There was no subject bar. Mostly, Nepali had been chosen as medium of delivery, discussion and presentation which ultimately showed that Nepali language is developing its strength and capacity to carry out academic discourse. Moreover, it was also felt there that the capacity of Nepali should further be strengthened in order to develop it as a medium of higher discourse.

In fact, folklore is the all encompassing area - a topic of all. It is like a melting pot where everything can amalgamate, be poured into and be accommodated. A discipline consisting of many, whichever subject we teach or learn, folklore is a whole subject which stands for the lives of many, literate or illiterate, the life pattern of the common mass. In our context it had remained ignored for long. This open book of human life, though being written for centuries, was never read before so seriously until the Nepali Folklore Society came into being. If we fail to read this very book, there is no use of entering any other discipline or pondering over the *shastras*.

The present day world is thriving on hybridized elements - different disciplines join together and constitute a third one, so everything has gone interdisciplinary. The demarcation line that the tradition has drawn between different disciplines are getting blurred, the boundaries are shaky and more unclear. Folklore is the catalyst agent that can secure one and all together. At this moment, to put in the words of Satyamohan Joshi, the

unity among political units does not build a nation, that does not last long. Different linguistic, cultural and ethnic/racial groups should join together with bond of mutual trust and understanding. They should be tied through mutual trust and unity. Love should be the lasting and binding force to sustain harmony. One should have full faith and respect towards his neighbors' life patterns. They should be read, understood, and their importance should be felt by others. In fact, only when the cultural units are linked does a nation stand vibrantly as a living entity. In order to achieve this, one should study the language and culture, literature and lifestyle of his neighbors, should teach and learn and promote this feeling. In fact, we are behind the call of time, our Universities should have opened Folklore Department long back, we are getting late, the Ministry should contemplate that Folklore requires a separate Academy for its fully fledged development. We have even submitted an appeal before the concerned authorities, let's wait and see, what the future has in its store for us, Even the Honorable Minister Mr. Pradip Gyawali took this topic very seriously during his inaugural speech, as he had touched upon this.

The Nepali Folklore Society has initiated this very activity. It has tried to further it too. Many people are devoted towards creating an academic atmosphere in Nepal - Linguistics, Culture, Literature, Sociology every discipline is linked to it. Prof. Abhi Subedi, uses every second of his time that he can spare from drama, Professor CM Bandhu has devoted his retired life and experience in the promotion of Folkloristics. There are Dr. Rudra Laxmi Shrestha and other younger enthusiasts - Mr. Kusumakar Nyaupane, Omkareshwor Shrestha, Tej Prakash Shrestha, Bulu Mukarung, Amrit Yonjan, Ajitman Tamang, Shambhu Prasad Khatiwada, Luisang Waiba, Yadav Subedi and Man Bahadur Sahu. Many a young researcher are getting prepared for tomorrow for greater responsibilities, however, at the centre of all these persons and activities is Prof. Tulasi Diwasa, a pivotal driving force who creates vibrancy and movement at the heart of the institution. He is no longer a renowned poet, as in every inch of his heart and mind there is only the Folklore Society. He is an Academy himself, no institution of lesser power and capacity can drive the force and power generated during the recent years. This is the novel and meaningful destination that the nation is heading for under his guidance and able leadership.



Speakers of the valedictory session of the Folklore Congress

Maithili Identity and Ethnicity in Folklore³

- Bijay Kumar Rauniyar

Why Tell a Tale?

Long ago, I first narrated Maithili folk tales to Prof. Marylyn Berg Callander, Drew University, U.S.A. then visiting Nepal, and got it recorded on a cassette. Later, I translated some tales from and articles on Maithili, Nepali and Limbu literature (anthologized in erstwhile Royal Nepal Academy's *Journal of Nepalese Studies*, 1996, *Sayapatri*, 1998, and *Stories from Nepal*, 2002) as well as edited its revised version of *Limbu-Nepali-English Dictionary* (2003).

Reminiscences and Reflections Galore

I'm virtually a displaced and precociously urbanized person. Due to inevitable family (first joint, and now nuclear family) reasons, I have also been disconnected with my native land, language and literature. As a *chatiya*, I had my primary education in an improvised hut through a stern guru. We would sit on a *patiya* and read *Manohar Pothi* in Hindi. We would rub hard and shine wooden *patis* with charcoal and battery water, and write on them with rough rustic chalk balls. Only later did we use plain sheets and scribble with bamboo pens or clumsy reeds dipped in something called *dawat*. On Saturdays, we would visit homes for *sanichari*. Besides, we would manage to buy *Tota Maina ki Kahani* and similar cheap literatures flushed in weekly local *hatiyas*. When admitted in L. C. M. High English School, Jaleshwar, I also chanced to browse different journals like *Mithila Mihir* brought to our *kirana dukan* by a poor postman for some extra income. Actually, they were sent and meant for some non-existing local libraries. They duly whetted my interest in different languages and literatures. But though I belonged to a *baniya* family, I did not get enough academic support. Besides, being a cypher in mathematics, I was never calculative.

Through *Mithila Mihir*, however, I knew that Maithili is similar to Bangla in script and many morphophonemic features. For example, *kukur* is same in Bangla, Maithili and Nepali. *Kuta* is an urban version, derived from Hindi. For the rest, I did not have sufficient orientation in Maithili language and literature, let alone learn *shuddha* Maithili. The one I speak is quite different from that used by people of other clans and those living in dense rural areas or other parts of Mithilāchal which spans a vast area in both east and west, and across the Indian border inhabited by people of linguistic groups like Bajaki, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Awadhi, and so on. Moreover, the only link to my birthplace and kins are my wife and younger son, who frequent the places and bring a store of stories. Often my wife "shares" beds with our three grown-up and nubile kids to tell these stories.

Maithili Khissas

Maithili *khissas* are a study in ethnic identity. They reveal myth, psyche and a palimpsest of sociocultural and linguistic aspects of the people living in the Mithilāchal which, I believe,

is "a Granary of Folklore." They have a rich oral tradition, which allows passing to generations different folklore that still affects the life and culture of Maithili-speaking people. The present paper attempts to present some of these aspects through granny's stories that lull the *nenha bhutkas* to slumber, on the one hand, and move the hearts of many *chhaura chhauris* and *budhwa budhiyas*, and give a distinct identity of ethnic Mithila culture, on the other.

Oral Tradition and Women's Wonder World

While Maithili *khissas* bare the women's wonder world, they bear classical oral tradition. They are also called *kissas*, *kathas*, or *kahanis*. Maithils are good at both weaving *daliyas* and spinning yarns. Especially women fall into storytelling during domestic chores like smearing floors and walls with *gobar mati*; making *goitha* and *chipari*; visiting *khet khalihan* with *panpiyai*; boiling and drying paddy; winnowing and sorting husked rice; grinding on *dheki*, *jāta*, and *khal*; doing creative works like making Mithila or Madhubani painting; going to *melathela* and carting on a long journey; observing religious rites like *chhatha*, *sama chakewa*, *bhagtai*, etc.; celebrating the complete life cycle – *chhatiyar*, *bhatkhai*, *muran*, *vyah*, *donga*, *dwiragaman* or *gauna* and *marnidharni*; reciting *alha rudal*, and so on and so forth. Like all literatures, Maithili folk tales serve dual purpose of edutainment, that is they not only instruct but also delight.

Thus Maithili *akhians* smell of *gamghar* and its *mat*. They are related around a *ghur* or *borsi*. They are also told in a cosy and snug bed on winter nights. On summer nights, they take place on the rooftop or in the courtyard under the cool moon. The narrator, usually a granny or other elderly member, uses gestures and postures, mimicks characters, and charms the listeners by their tricky pauses making them ask curious questions like *tekra bad* and express exclamations of sorrow, happiness, fear, and forgiveness. S/He also drives home the moral of the said stories lest the listeners commit the same mistakes done by protagonists or antagonists.

During the storytelling, both the narrator and the listeners play pranks. For example, some listeners hold their breath, some their nature call. Some others release themselves here and there or in the granny's lap. At that, the lady cries and curses in the middle of night – "*Mar mujhausa, godi me haig delkai*." Then rubbing their butts with straw or something like that, she would continue. Or at some point, the elderly narrator checks the listeners, "*Suit rahli ge jharkalahi?*" Or she herself gives a yawn and say, "*Pheun kailha kahabau*." By the time, either the baby listeners get asleep or request the narrator to continue ahead: "*Nai, nai. Aga kahi na ge dadi / nani / phuwa / mausi*," all cajole in a chorus. "*Achchha*," she reciprocates. Or "*Mar bong baharak poti*," the old narrator calls names for wiping her running nose in her frill instead of her makeshift *gāti*. Soon, however, she resumes. Or even "*Bhelau nai budhiya? Aiye sab katha kahidebi?*" comes a voice from the nearby cot. Then "*Jo, jo suita raha. Dada / nana khisiaichhau*." Finally, "*Bha gelai. Hamra bina ninda nai paraihau budhwa?*" Soon the duo goes snoring.

³Presented at 1st National Folklore Congress, Kathmandu, December 15-16, 2006.

Fostering Nationhood

Maithili literature is well established in national, Nepali literature with a deep-seated tradition of oral storytelling. According to Dr. Jayadhri Singh, "[O]ral literature reigned in almost all genres of Maithili before the printing facility As a result, the folk tales told in villages were a literature representative of the genre . . ." (quoted in LI 173-74).

But the trend of labeling Mithila and Maithili, like other regions and languages, with such canonical constructs as "ethnic," "exclusive," "federal," "separatist" is merely fueling the fire. There is, and should be, no doubt whatsoever that Mithila is Nepal, a part and parcel of the state. Mithilāchal has always promoted nationhood and nationalism. It has been a seat of wisdom, gallantry, peace, prosperity, national integrity, fraternity and sublime humanitarianism. Hence, I urge all that Maithili language and literature be regarded as the mainstream, national canon. Maithil identity is essentially national identity in "originary" and many other aspects as well.

Deconstructing Mithila

The two stories below (see Appendices 1-2) very well deconstruct Mithila, which is known by many as a land of Janak, Janki (Sita) and many known literati and littérateur like Yagyawalakya, Gargi, Maitreyi, Vidyapati, and the legendary *katha samrat*, Gonu Vinod Jha. They clearly feature the Mithila lifestyle. Though they portray royal characters, they stress on wit, envy, patience, dedication, and dramaticity. Besides, they expose common practices like stepmother's maltreatment, tantrik *shakti*, consulting an ascetic, showing and analyzing horoscope, hermit's *tapasya*, alms-begging, hurling blessings and curses, and their consequences. The narrative matches suspense and continuity like those of *Arabian Nights*. It deals with ubiquitous narrative elements like fate, chance and accident. They also feature exclusively Mithila surroundings, rough wild tracks, probably of malarial *charkose jhadi* teeming with ferocious wildlife and dainty roots and fruits. In addition, they bring out mythological characters like *nagkanya*, and exotic overseas land with a strange tree bearing medicinal plant or fruit on fierce, ominous night called *amasya*, demons and their devilish deeds of abduction, sufferings, ultimate victory of good over evil, and happy union or reunion.

Conclusion

Maithili identity and ethnicity has suffered a lot due to obvious political and linguistic reasons as well as prejudiced polity of state. Regionally also, it is being overshadowed by other local languages despite the fact that Maithili language and literature once enjoyed national status. Mushrooming mass media have marred the fun of storytelling and listening, even among the poor, deprived and destitute. Nepali and Indian film industries have popularized more vulgar Bhojpuri films and dialects than sweet subtleties of its own and Maithili language and literature. According to a news report, even Big B or megastar of Bollywood, Amitabh Bachchan, and stuntman-turned-actor of Kollywood (Kathmandu), Nikhil Uprety, have recently been playing major roles in Bhojpuri

flicks (*City Post* II). Ignorance of common Nepalese regarding these national languages causes further devastation to them. Collection, publication and transmission of Maithili folklore may, therefore, add laurel to both regional and national literatures. MY MITHILA IS, INDEED, MY PRIDE.

Appendix 1

Haughty Heiress (Narrator: Mrs. Asha Devi Rauniyar, Wife)

Long ago, a Mithila king had two daughters– the eldest being fairer and so, self-willed. Proud of her hue, the princess did whatever she thought was good for herself. The haughty heiress married a young prince of equally fair complexion against everybody's will. She even defied her best friend's suggestion regarding consulting a *sadhu* and showing her horoscope to the latter, who warned of the grave post-nuptial consequences.

Soon the couple decided to go on a honeymoon trip. As they were ready to set off, the hermit in disguise emerged from nowhere and asked for some water: "*Bauwa, dukhiya ke paina pilawa.*" But the femme fatale, as usual, turned a deaf ear, saying, "*Budhwa, sujhai nai hau. Ham rajkumari chhi. Ja apne paina khoja, nai ta kuwan (inar) me duiba ke mair ja.*" Furious, the sage appeared in his real feature and cursed her: "*Tora a tohar gharbala ke vinas hotau.*"

So, as they horse rode through a jungle, the prince fell off the saddle and landed on a thornbush. He got thorns pricked all over his body.

Repentant, yet unyielding, the lady tried to heal her hubby, eating wild roots and fruits like *harfarauni*. There she also met a young, beautiful girl who offered her help. The princess kept pulling the thorns out of her groom's body. But as the curse and fate had it, she could weed out only two thorns a day.

Everyday, the princess would take a bath in the nearby *pokhair* or *sarovar*. Then she would pray to God, and pick out two thorns. The ailing prince gave such a shriek that rent their hearts, sky and the vicinity. First day she took bath, prayed to God, and took out the thorns. Second day she did the same. Third day she repeated the process. Then next day. Another day. Yet another day.

Weeks passed. Months passed. Years passed. Finally, two thorns were left– one on each eyelid. So she went to the nearby *sarovar*, gave herself a vigorous bath, and started her *sorah singar* before meeting her ailing husband. Meanwhile, the other girl approached him. Taking pity, she pulled out the remaining thorns. When the recuperating *rajkumar* opened his sore eyes, he mistook the girl as his *rajkumari* as he had not seen her for a long time, and rode back to his principality, and lived happily ever after. It was too late for the legitimate wife to realize her mistake. Not knowing what to do, she wandered here and there and was ultimately devoured by wild animals.

Moral: A fair lady need not have a fair luck.

Appendix 2

Humped Prince (Narrator: Mr. Nishant Kumar Rauniyar, Son)

Once upon a time, Birat Raja had a humped son, called Ram, born of his queen. She died soon after the childbirth. So the king married another princess of the nearby petty state. She, however, troubled the ugly-looking prince. He, then, left secretly for an unknown destination. On the way, he met a *sadhu* performing penance. He advised, "Go across seven seas. There, in a magical land, grows a strange tree. It bears fruits only on *amasya*. If you pluck and eat it on the ominous day, you will be cured."

Meanwhile, the second queen gave birth to a child called Shyam. He was very arrogant. His *mama* was adept in tantra. At his instance, prince Shyam went to the site of the hermit's penance and tried to detract the latter. The irate ascetic cursed him into a *rakshas*. # When the mother queen saw him, he rushed to behead the sage. The *sadhu* knew it in advance and cursed her, "*Tore karan tohar beta mair jatau*." The tantrik *mama*, however, knew that Shyam could be cured by eating the magical fruit brought over by his stepbrother, Ram.

On the other hand, Ram decided to bathe before eating the holy fruit. As he approached a pond, he saw a *nagkanya* taking a bath. The lady got angry as it was blasphemous to see a naked lady having a bath. She raised her hood, hissed furiously, and tried to sting Ram. But the fang fell on the fruit saving lucky Ram. The tantrik *mama* was watching the event; he disguised himself as a vulture, snatched the fruit, and dropped it in the lap of the wailing queen. When she gave it to Shyam, he died immediately as it was poisoned through the lady cobra's sting. Shocked, the queen committed suicide. The *sadhu*'s curses, thus, proved true.

Meanwhile, Ram reached the palace following the vulture. As he was about to eat the left-over fruit, the *sadhu* emerged before him and said, "Only the *nagkanya* can extract the venom out of the fruit." So he headed towards the pond. There a demon was trying to abduct the *vishkanya*. Ram protected her by killing the demon. Impressed, she sucked the poison out of the fruit and gave it back to Ram. On eating it, he got cured and appeared as a very handsome prince. The *ichchhadhari nagkanya*, too, turned into a winsome princess and proposed to marry him as he was the first male to see her in her natural, naked dress. "It is only the privilege of a husband to see the bride in her bareness." Thus the two went to the palace where they were heartily welcomed by the king, courtiers and people. Then they all lived happily ever after.

Moral: The good wins ultimately over the evil.

Note: The narrator, conscious about accuracy, insisted on portraying the mother as obnoxious and causing her own and son's death by planning to behead the *sadhu* (not sending her son for it as I had wrongly recorded), and thus asserted his authenticity.

Explanations of Dialogs

Mar mujhausa, godi me haig delkai

Suit rahli ge jharkalahi?

Pheun kailha kahabau

Nai, nai

Aga kahi na ge dadi / nani /

phuwa / mausi

Achchha

Mar bong baharak poti

gāti

Bhelau nai budhiya?

Aiye sab katha kahidebi

Jo, jo suita raha

Dada / nana khisiaichhau

Bha gelai

Hamra bina ninda nai paraihau

budhwa?

Bauwa, dukhiya ke paina pilawa

Budhwa, sujhai nai hau

Ham rajkumari chhi

Ja apne paina khoja, nai ta

kuwan (inar) me duiba ke mair ja

Tora a tohar gharbala ke vinas hotau

Tore karan tohar beta mair jatau

Glossary

Maithili, Bangla

Sayapatri

chatiya

patiya

Manohar Pothi

patis

dawat

sanichari

Tota Maina ki Kahani

hatiyas

kirana dukan

Mihir

baniya

kukur, kuta

shuddha, jharro

Khissas, kissas, kathas, kahanis

Mithilāchal

Damn it, they have
purged in my lap
Have you, fireburnt gal,
already slept?
I'll continue tomorrow
No, no
Please tell us what
happened next, grandma
/aunt
Okay
Damn you, the
granddaughter of the
lady (hinting at her in-
laws) infected with
uterine prolapse
muffler; scarf
Aren't you off yet, you
old woman?
Are you going to finish
all the stories today?
Go at once and sleep
The grandpa is getting
angry
I'm done
Can't you sleep
without me, you oldie?
Dear, get me, a poor old
man, some water
You oldie, don't you see
I'm a princess
Go and look for water
yourself, or drown
yourself in a well and die
therein
May hell hurl on you and
your husband
You will be the cause of
your son's death

Indo-Aryan languages
marigold
pupil, disciple
mat
lit. good book; a primer
slates
ink
blend of uncooked rice
and molass
Hindi tales of parrot and
mynah bird
markets
grocery shop
sun or moon
businessman; a member
of business family
dog
pure
tales; stories
Mithila region

Maithili Identity and Ethnicity in Folklore

<i>nenha bhutkas</i>	tiny tots	<i>mait*</i>	soil; compare <i>mati</i> above
<i>chhaura chhauris</i>	youths		(some Maithili morphemes
<i>budhwa budhiyas</i>	the old (people)		have a unique but very
<i>daliyas</i>	baskets		scientific way of pronouncing
<i>gobar mati*</i>	cattle dung and soil		their medial and end-
	(latter one is also called		positioned short "i" and "u";
	<i>chikni mati</i> , of which		e.g. in <i>mait</i> , the vowel is
	the first morpheme is a		pronounced before the
	taboo in Nepali)		consonant "t" as dfl6; so is the
<i>goitha</i>	long rolls of cattle dung		case in <i>pain</i> (kflg; water), <i>saus</i>
	and straw, used for burning		(; f; ; mother-in-law), <i>maus</i>
<i>chipari</i>	round cakes of cattle		(df; ; meat), and so on)
	dung and straw, used for	<i>ghur</i>	bonfire or campfire made of
	burning		straw
<i>khet khalihan</i>	fields and farms	<i>pora</i>	straw
<i>panpiyai</i>	breakfast often consisting of	<i>borsi, makal</i>	firepot
	rice flakes, a pinch of salt,	<i>tekra bad</i>	then; what (happened) next
	onion, and green chilli, or	<i>dadi</i>	grandmother; father's mother
	millet bread and chutney	<i>nani</i>	grandmother; mother's mother
<i>dheki</i>	pedalled mortar having a	<i>phuwa</i>	aunt; father's sister
	long pestle for husking rice	<i>mausi</i>	aunt; mother's sister
<i>jāta</i>	flour-mill	<i>Dada</i>	grandfather; father's father
<i>khal</i>	mortar	<i>nana</i>	grandfather; mother's father
<i>Mithila / Madhubani</i>	famous art of drawing on	<i>katha samrat</i>	king of tales
	mud walls, papers and other	<i>shakti</i>	power
	<i>painting</i> similar materials	<i>tapasya</i>	penance
<i>melathela</i>	fanfares	<i>charkose jhadi</i>	lit. thick malarial forests
<i>chhatha</i>	a kind of sun worship		spanning about 3 kilometers
<i>sama chakewa</i>	brother worship		in central region of Nepal
<i>bhagtai</i>	shamanism; exorcizing	<i>nagkanya, vishkanya</i>	lady cobra
<i>chhatiyar</i>	fifth or sixth day of a	<i>amasya, aunsi</i>	new moon day
	child's birth as per its sex	<i>sadhu</i>	sage; hermit; ascetic
<i>bhatkhai</i>	rice feeding to the child	<i>harfarauni</i>	green, sour berries
<i>muran</i>	shaving head or lock of	<i>pokhair, sarovar</i>	pond
	hair as in <i>bratabandha</i>	<i>sorah singar</i>	heavy make-up
<i>vyah, vivah</i>	marriage	<i>rajkumar</i>	prince
<i>donga, dwiragaman, gauna</i>	second coming or marriage	<i>rajkumari</i>	princess
<i>marnidharni</i>	death and funerals	<i>mama</i>	maternal uncle
<i>alha rudal</i>	musical play or recital	<i>rakshas</i>	demon
<i>akhians</i>	stories; tales	<i>ichchhadhari</i>	one with magical power to
<i>gamghar</i>	locality; villages		take any form

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Diversed Nepali Cultures Under Study by Culture Experts⁴

- Ganesh Rai

Linguists and folk culture experts have initiated overall study of the diverse Nepali cultures and lifestyles with lots of interesting outcomes already in hands.

“Linguists, anthropologists, folk culture experts and human geography experts have been jointly studying the overall Nepali life and culture,” said Prof Tulsi Diwasa, Chairperson of Folklore Society of Nepal.

According to him, this is the first ever initiation taken by a private sector that is doing and would continue to do an overall and serious study on the diverse cultures, languages and socio-economic status and lifestyles found in Nepal.

Kriyashil Society (active society) has been active in studying cultures and lifestyles of Gandarva, Gopali, Athpaharia Rai and Danuwar community for the past three years. The study included from the daily activities of Gardarvas of Batulechaur area of Kaski district to traditional Karkha singing.

According to a popular culture expert and the team leader of Gandarva study group Prof. Dr. Chundamadi Bandhu, “Singing or playing music is no more the profession of the Gardarvas; they have begun to adopt other professions, and most of the Kartha songs have simply been forgotten,” he noted.

He further informed that the team recently held ‘Karkha competition’ to revive the traditional singing of Gandarvas. “The Society established in 2051 to save, promote and research on folk cultures have extended the working area in the recent times,” he added.

Similarly, study about the Gopali dynasty, which has its own historic significance, is an interesting chapter added by the Society. This community is presently found in Bajrabarahi VDC of Makwanpur district. “Studying about the various groups at once also means creating equal opportunity for less privileged groups or paving way for their access to policy making level as well,” maintains Diwas. “Such coexistence and harmony between the diverged groups ultimately create our one and unique national identity like the rainbow, which is one, has diverged colors.”

The society has also studied about Athpaharia Rai. The Rais are one among the groups under Kirat dynasty who displaced Mahispal dynasty to come into power. Now, the Athpaharia Rai are found basically in and around Dhankuta headquarters.

The other community studied by the Society is Danuwar living in Dukuchaap area of Lalitpur district.

Separate study teams have been formed to conduct study over separate communities. So far, the teams have already recorded from major to minute details of all traditions of various communities. “We also have 75 hours long visual tape recorded during the study that has captured the overall lifestyles and history about the all four (jatis),” said Sangram Waiba, one of the members of the office staff. He informed there are 16000 photographs.

Diwasa said making of cultural documentary on the studied communities is underway. “This would help fill gap between the old and new generations, instill self respect, enhance the living standard of the communities by handing over of the traditional profession and skills, apart from glorifying their separate identity,” he summed up. He added that the society would continue to do the job while the reports would just be a public property.

⁴First Published in *Kantipur Daily*, January 7, 2007



Chandan Meche in weekly hatiya (market) Dhulabari



Jabbar Singh with his family members

Meche Folklore and Folklife: A Close Observation

Introduction

The term *Meche* is used for both the folk group and the language which is a given term by outsiders. The folk group prefers to use *Bodo* for both the language and the people. Besides, the *Meche* people accept their relationship to *Bodo* folk group settled in Asam state of eastern India. *Kachhari* folk group in Bangladesh is also supposed to belong to the same group.

Meche are mongoloid people whose origin and the date of arrival and settlement into Nepal is not much clear. However, there are a few different views on their settlement in Nepal.

One of these views relates the group to *Mahabharata* era. According to the view king *Vanasura* *Meche* was ruling in the state somewhere in the present Nepal territory which was defeated by *Krishna*. *Krishna*, then, established the *Gopal* dynasty. *Gopal* dynasty is the oldest dynasty recorded in Nepalese history. This view introduces *Meche* folk group as first settlers of Nepal.

Another view about *Meche* is that a group departed from Tibet was divided into three sub groups and one went to Asam in India and settled there which is known as *Bodo*, another group went to present Bangladesh and settled there which is known as *Kachhari* and third group came to east Nepal and settled there which is known as *Meche*.

According to the third view *Rai*, *Limbu* and *Meche* were three brothers who are settled in eastern hills of present Nepal. They went to Terai for the search of job. After twelve years, they decided to return back for their home. While preparing to returning back *Meche* got a bit late and *Rai* and *Limbu* left him. *Meche* tried to follow them but failed. He was lost on the way and remained in the jungle. He settled on the riverside in the jungle of eastern Terai of present Nepal. His descendants are known as *Meche* people now.



Bohani Meche (85), Hemasisi (55), Dankhalni Meche (71) and other

Settlement and population

Meche folk group is settled mainly in Jhapa and also found in a very few number in Sunsari and Morang districts of Nepal. According to the census report 2001, the total population of this group is 3763. *Meche* has altogether twelve clans these include – 1) *Gayari*, 2) *Narjihari*, 3) *Wasamothari*, 4) *Machhahari*, 5) *Harjidhari*, 6) *Chhangphranghari*, 7) *Raungadiyari*, 8) *Owahari*, 9) *Daimari*, 10) *Khunthaiyari*, 11) *Kharjiyari*, 12) *Sanyasiyari*.



A Meche village, Jalthal-6

House construction and use

Houses in the *Meche* settlement are found scattered instead of dense. Though they prefer to have *Meche* people as their neighbors, there are other people also found among their villages now. Almost all the houses in *Meche* villages are in the same structure. The houses are built around the open yard. There is a shrine of ancestral deity called *Bathau* at the middle of the yard which is in front of main building that is faced south. The house has two rooms inside – kitchen and the bed room which are opposite to each other. Around the yard there are other buildings like cowshed, cages for pigs and hens etc. Most of the traditional buildings are made of bamboo, mud, and hay.



Traditional wall paintings of Meche's house, Jalthal - 7

Society and family structure

Meche people have their own chief of the village called *Mankhal* who serves as an administrative as well as judicial head of the village. He settles the cases among *Meche* people within the community. There is *Roja* who serves as priest in the society. *Phanthol* is the assistant of *Roja*.

Nuclear family is common among *Meche* folk group because son and daughter leave their parents after they get married.



A small family of Bhakta Meche, Belasiri Meche, Rosan Meche and Rekha Meche

Meche Language

Meche language is spoken by *Meche* folk group as their mother tongue. It is placed under East Himalayish subgroup of Himalayish group of the *Bodic* section of Tibeto-Burman languages of Sino-Tibetan language family in the genetic classification. It is genetically close to Kirati languages and aerially close to Nepali, Rajbanshi, Bangali, Hindi and Asami.

The language is not yet used in education, mass media and in the office. Mother tongue speakers of this language are 3301 out of 3763 total *Meche* people. Most of the *Meche* people



Sondari Meche, Kandri Meche, Fulkumari and other, Mechinagar-13

are bilingual and multilingual. However, very few old *Meche* people are found monolingual. The bilingual or multilingual people speak Nepali, Hindi, Bengali and Rajbanshi as their second language. They have positive attitude towards their language.

The language has no written tradition and its own orthography yet. It is highly influenced by Nepali. The language has 6 vowels and 15 consonants. It has singular and plural two numbers, past and non past two tenses, perfective and progressive two aspects, and indicative, interrogative, imperative, and optative four moods. *Meche* is S(subject) O(object) V(erb) language in terms of word order.

Folk belief

Meche folk group have some beliefs about omen. Crawling of a dog, crossing the road by cat and snake, meeting with the corpse while going out for some auspicious work, and crowing of the crow near house are supposed to be bad omens. If the cocks or hens fight they believe that the guests will come. To see the pot with full water is good omen for this group.

Folk god/goddess and Festivals

The gods and goddesses that *Meche* people worship are classified into three types – *nonimodai* (gods of house), *dainimodai* (gods of river) and *gaminanimodai* (gods of village). *Bathau* is their ancestral god. They worship the god *Shiva* in *Bathau* and goddess *Balikhungi* (*Parvati*) in *Nomano*.



Pagal Sing Meche worshipping Bathau

They also worship god of land and the god of village. *Sansari gram puja* is performed collectively which is the worship of village god. They perform *lakhi puja* in *Tihar* and *mai jagawai puja* while planting rice.

Vaishagu, *phagua*, *shiruwa*, *tihar* are observed mainly in the community. Now, they also perform *dashain* and other festivals by the influence of other communities.

Folk dresses and ornaments

The traditional dresses of the male member of *Meche* folk group is loin cloth, *gamchha* (a towel like wrapper for lower part of the body up to the knees), *dhoti* (a wrapper cloth for man like sari for woman), vest and waist coat where the traditional dress for the female member is *dokhana* (a kind of wrapper which covers the breast and the lower part of the body) and shawl. Now, modern dresses like shirt, pant, T-shirt, etc. are also used. They wear the traditional dresses in the religious and cultural ceremonies.



Rekha, Radhika, Pinki and others in traditional Meche dress

Meche men do not wear any ornaments but the women wear silver ornaments in their noze, ear, neck, arms, wrist and feet like *chandrahal*, *thakhahar*, *inthe*, *nakhaphul*, *Basthari*, *authi*, *samkha*, *gotmala*, *khuchchiyamala*, *nathiya*, *achhan*, *pauju*. etc.



Pahati Meche (39)



Hemsiri Meche (52) with Gotmala at Jalthal

Folk medical treatment

Roja (the priest) has the knowledge and practice of the traditional folk medicine among *Meche* folk group which is based on herbal medicine. The *Roja* does not let other people know about the herbs that are used as medicine with the belief that if other people know the herbs that does not work.

Folk literature

There are different genres of folk literature found in practice in *Meche* folk group like folk tale, folk song, proverb, idiom, riddle and folk sayings. The folk tales cover various topics like their origin, nature and animals, traditional technology, nature and profession of man, etc. There are different types of songs in practice. Religious songs like hymns, appreciation of the gods and goddesses are in practice. There are also duet songs.



Ganga Meche (34) and others dancing at puja, Mechinagar

Folk performing arts

There are folk dramas, folk dances and folk music performed among the folk group. It is informed that the folk drama based on the folktale *Khurikhatta khurikhatti buraburi* (woodcutter old couple) has performed for whole night few years ago in the community but there is no information about how old is the tradition. Among the major folk dances *dauwo* dance is performed in *phagua*, *mosabai hawa* is performed with flute by women in the marriage ceremony, and *chorkhela bajlobai* is performed in *Tihar*. There are different folk musics performed with traditional musical instruments among the community.



Dancing Meche girls and boys

Folk tools and weapons

There are several folk tools and weapons found among *Meche* folk group which are used in hunting, farming, fishing, etc. that are the major traditional occupations. These are classified into three groups – metal tools, wooden tools, bamboo tools. *Trishul*, *khukuri*, spear, arrow, *hasiya*, axe, *chulesi*, *kanasi*, *khochha*, *guleli*, plough, *kuto*, spade, hammer, etc. are the metal tools while spear, *guleli*, *dhera*, plough, yoke, etc. are the wooden tools. Bow, *khola*, *burung*, *phati*, *phulung*, *pat*, etc. are the bamboo tools.



Meche bow and arrow at Jalthal

Folk games and entertainments

Traditional folk games popular in *Meche* community are *khomdalainu* (wrestling), *khaude bima*, *gallau* (long jump), *gajau* (high jump), *samthrinai* (swimming), *bitti* (stick game), *gatti khel*, *chatti khel*, *kukhura khel*, *phing* (swing), *jolunga* (swing), *thuka khel* (bow and arrow), *chakum khel*, *dampphil*, *dhus*, *khopi*, *amli*, etc. Now, these are not so popular instead T.V. and Radio are the popular means of entertainment.



Playing Meche children at Jorsimal

Folk musical instruments

Basuri (flute), *bakhalto* (a musical instrument made of bamboo), *granggring*, *jotha* (a small kind of cymbal) are very popular musical instruments among *Meche* folk group while the traditional musical instruments like *dhak* (a huge drum),

kham (a small drum), *serenja* (instrument like *sarangi*), *dothra* or *dottara* (instrument like guitar) are not in practice today. Instead of these traditional instruments *tabla* and *harmonium* are being more popular nowadays.



Drums at Bishulal Meche's home at Jalthal

Traditional knowledge and technology

Meche folk group has knowledge of preparing all the traditional tools and instruments, and goods that are the parts of their daily life. They have knowledge of preparing wine for drink, cloths like *dokhana*, shawl, *gamchha*, etc., ropes, preparing house, preparing plough, yoke, fishing tools, and fishing. Now, these traditional knowledge and skills are gradually losing from the community.



Meche women preparing local wine

Gender issues and decision making procedure

Meche women are involved in wine producing, pig keeping, farming, and working in the wood factories. It makes themselves independent on economic matters. They are more forward than the male members of the society in education. They participate in decision making process within the family.

Rites of the passage

Jalam (the birth rite)

While a woman gives birth to a baby older women in the community care her and the newly born baby. The placenta is buried near the house. There used to be the tradition when the birth labor begins the mother is kept inside *nomano* (the building of goddess *Parvati*). The people promise to offer the child to the god because of the belief that the child will be healthy. They use bamboo slits to cut the umbilical cords. There are five slits if the child is girl and there are seven slits if the child is boy to cut the umbilical cord.

The name giving ceremony is performed when the umbilical cord gets separate completely.

Rice feeding

There is no fix date for the rice feeding ceremony in *Meche* community, when the child wants to eat rice they fix the date and feed the rice. So, it seems a newly established tradition among this group. It may be the influence of other communities over this community. However, there is certain procedure which is followed while rice feeding the child. There is a cactus tree inside the fence of bamboo in front of *nomano*. The child is taken to the side of the tree. Banana leaves, flowers, fragrances, string, fruits, and burning lamp with oil and cotton string are gathered and worshiped in *Bathau*. Then the child is fed rice.

Marriage

There are seven types of marriage found in practice among *Meche* folk group. Among those *Magi vivaha* is arrange marriage in which *goida* (mediator) proposes the marriage and mediates the communication between the boy's and the girl's sides and arranges the meetings. When both sides are positive, the marriage is proposed formally. Three women and two men go to the girl's house and put few coins at *Bathau* to buy the girl which is the formal proposal. If the girl's parents return the coins the marriage supposed to be denied and if they accept the coins it is supposed to be accepted. When the marriage is accepted, the people from

the boy's side go to the girl's house with vessels of wine and rice (uncooked) to decide about the marriage. There is also a pack of betel and betel nut with rice.

There is an interesting bargaining between the bride and the bridegroom sides. Flute and pigs are demanded by the bride's side. They also bargain for the dresses and ornaments. The debate also includes the musical instruments and the players for the marriage. At the end all the things are settled and the date of the marriage is fixed. The relatives are invited with the couple of bundles of betel. The marriage procession without bridegroom is taken to the bride's house on Tuesday evening and brings her to the bridegroom's house on Wednesday. The number of people is just doubled while coming back to the bridegroom's house. A cock and a hen are slaughtered and the heads are thrown towards *Bathau*. The heads face to the east is supposed to be good in the community.

Among other types *Ghichhyaune vivaha* is one in which a girl is captured and married to a boy without her interest and consensus. The people from the boy's side carry the girl on the back to the boy's house while she is alone. *Bhagi vivaha* is a love marriage. It is performed without the permission from the guardians. *Randarandi vivaha* is the marriage between a widow and a widower. *Gharjwain vivaha* is a marriage in which a bridegroom lives in the bride's house after marriage. Normally it is applicable between the boy who has no parents and the girl who has no brothers. *Dangowa vivaha* is a vivaha between a widow with children and a man. The man may be either married or unmarried. He goes to the widow's house and takes care of the children of the woman. When a girl goes to the boy's house and lives there as a wife though the boy does not want to marry with her it is called *Khasunnai vivaha* which is opposite to *Ghichhyaune vivaha*. For this, the girl goes with a jar of water and washes the boy's feet saying "I am your wife."

There is also a practice of polygamy.

Death

The relatives are called when someone dies among the *Meche* folk group. The dead body is kept on the ground which is smeared with cow dung. The body is headed towards south.



Meche bride and bridegroom



Rina Meche with her sons Tikaram and Rabi Meche performing death ritual

If the person has daughter and son in law their presence is compulsory, the corpse is not taken to the grave until they come. After the death of a person his or her son and daughter in law have to have a bath and rub oil on the body. All the relatives put the water in the dead body's mouth from the bowl with coin. The corpse is fed rice with meat and offered money. *Narjihari* cuts the hair of the son, so he gets the money offered to the dead body. The carrier is made of bamboo and the corpse is tied in the carrier with bamboo slits. There are seven slits to tie if the dead person is female and five slits if the dead person is male. *Roja* offers the sacred grass with a jar of water and says "go and stay comfortably" to the dead body as farewell.

The eldest son carries the corpse from the front side. Male and female both participate in the funeral procession. The corpse is buried on the grave. Before digging the trench, the land should be bought from the earth with a little money. While the corpse is buried a hole with bamboo slits is made with the belief that the dead body can have respiration. Chicken is offered to the body which is cooked at home and carried with. After it is buried, the four poles of bamboo are driven and pieces of cloths are put as a signal.

The eldest son should stay separate for mourning and perform all the rites. If the eldest son is not available, the youngest son should perform all the rites. In case the youngest son also not available, the elder than that should perform all the rites.

If the dead person is child before it has teeth, the mourning period is three days, if it is the child with teeth, the period is five days and in other cases it is nine days. The mourner should offer rice and vegetable to three gods everyday before meal.

On the tenth day, all the relatives are gathered; people have bath for purification; the *narjihari* sprays around the pure water from the bowl with sacred grass; and *Roja* worships on *Bathau*. There is a feast with chicken and pork. The family is purified with this ceremony.

Economic life and livelihood

Meche people are found in low-middle class in terms of economic status in average. Their traditional occupations are farming, hunting and fishing. There is no jungle for hunting while fishing is only occasional and it is done for hobby today. Now, they are mainly involved in agriculture, animal husbandry, business and work in the private companies. Foreign employment is also a flowering occupation among this folk group.

They produce rice, maize, vegetables and fruits from the field. Their main food is rice but they also use baked maize. Chilly, ginger, onion, radish, pumpkin, different kinds of gourds and leafy vegetables are the main items of vegetables they produce while mango, coconut, jackfruit, pineapple, etc. are the main fruits they produce. Vegetables and fruits are the main resources of income from the agriculture.



Meche women working at plywood factory in Mechinagar-13

Traditional ethnic institutions

Meche folk group has its own traditional institution in which there are three posts to run the society – *Mankhal* (Chief of the society), *Roja* (folk medicine practitioner), and *Phanthol* (priest). But, the tradition to choose *Mankhal* is gradually disappearing because there is a concept that *Mankhal* exploits the people.



Participants of Sibiyari Afat meeting at Mechinagar-12

Concluding remarks

The *Meche* is one of the folk groups settled in east-southern part of Nepal with their rich cultural heritage. They have their own way of life with traditional institution, language, societal structure, knowledge and technology, and the tools, instruments, objects, literature, etc. as the products of their minds. However, the group is on the pressure of other's ways of life, culture, and knowledge and technology because of the heavy influence in their ways and the changes on the global situation. Thus, has become endangered folk group.

Prepared by: Mr. Tej Prakash Shrestha, Mr. Ram Kumar Shrestha, Mr. Suren Sapkota and Mr. Rohini Raj Nepal

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Some Major NFS Activities

SAARC Folklore Festival

The President of NFS Prof. Tulasi Diwasa, Vice President Prof. Dr. Abhi Subedi and Secretary General Prof. Dr. Churamani Bandhu were invited and participated in a seminar on December 6-9, 2007 organized by Foundation of SAARC writers and Literatures, SAARC Apex body in collaboration with Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India held in New Delhi.



Participants of SAARC Folklore Festival

There were about 50 participants from eight different countries, six from SAARC (except Bhutan and Afghanistan) and two from Europe (Estonia and Finland). Twenty-six papers were presented in the eight sessions, among nine sessions including inaugural session.

Prof. Dr. Abhi Subedi chaired one session in the seminar and Prof. Tulasi Diwasa was the Special Guest in Valedictory session. They also presented their papers.

The former Prime Minister of India V.P. Singh was the Chief Guest at the inaugural session while Prof. Kapila Vatsyayan delivered the keynote address.



A view of paper presentation in SAARC Folklore Festival

Monograph Release

The monograph entitled 'The Intangible Cultural Heritage of Nepal: Future Directions' has been released in a programme organized by UNESCO at Patan Museum on December 18th 2007. The monograph was written by Prof. Tulasi Diwasa, Prof. Dr. Churamani Bandhu and Mr. Bhim Nepal. The monograph is published by UNESCO.

The book is organized in six chapters which includes the information on living cultures and heritages of Nepal and recommends the further steps to be taken in the field.

Prof. Diwasa focused on the need to formulate the appropriate cultural policy which should include all the ethnic



Participants of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Nepal monograph release programme

groups and their languages and cultures and said that living cultural heritage should be preserved. He also emphasized that the language and culture as the most important things acquired by the mankind.

Honourable Minister of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation Prithvi Subba Gurung informed that Government of Nepal has made commitment to sign on UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage within 2008 and working for National Cultural Policy to be formulated within this year.

Director General of the Archaeology Department, suggested to pay the attention on the fact that nationality and identity are related to the culture thus community's active involvement needed to preserve and promote the culture.

Chairperson Satya Mohan Joshi pointed out the need of preservation of the festivals, customs etc. as with the material heritage while the chief of the Department of Archaeology Bhim Nepal threw light on UNESCO convention, 2003.

Joint Secretary at the Ministry of Culture Tourism and Civil Aviation, Jalkrishna Shrestha, Bhim Lal Gurung of National Commission Nepal for UNESCO, National Program Officer of UNESCO office at Kathmandu Tap Raj Pant, also spoke on the different aspects of the preservation of living cultural heritage.

Condolence



Narottam Rajbhandari



Sanu (Sami) Joshi



Jiwan Joshi



Jayanti Joshi



Indrani Prasain

We would like to extend our heartfelt condolence to Prof. Tulasi Diwasa, President of Nepali Folklore Society and other member of his bereaved family at the untimely sad demise of his brother Jiwan Joshi, sisters Sanu (Sami) Joshi (Rajbhandari), Jayanti Joshi (Udas), Indrani Prasain and brother-in-law Narottam Rajbhandari, who passed away in a road accident at Dhansarkhola on September 8, 2007. May their souls rest in eternal peace in heaven.

Nepali Folklore Society
Tangal, Kathmandu

About Nepali Folklore Society

Nepali Folklore Society (NFS) is a non-governmental, non-profit making organization registered in Kathmandu; and it is dedicated to folkloristic scholarship in the form of extensive study with special focus on cultural diversities, and the preservation and promotion of folklore and folklife in the country through research, education, dialogues and interactions, dissemination, publication, networking, awareness raising, and various sorts of field-based activities. NFS wants to contribute towards integrated and sustainable national development in several areas – e.g. folk tourism, gender and social development, etc. – by means of the exploration of ground realities in the communities of various folk groups of the country.

Some of the important works conducted by NFS include: International folklore congresses, various talk programmes and symposiums in the participation of nationally and internationally well-known scholars, poetry recitation by well-known poets (from within the nation as well as foreign countries), participation in the folklore congresses and seminars held in the foreign countries, field research under the Nepali Folklore and Folklife Study Project, etc. Right now, the activities of NFS, particularly those being conducted in this project, are running with Finnish support under Local Cooperation.

Nepali Folklore and Folklife Newsletter

The Newsletter is edited and published semi-annually, by Prof. Tulasi Diwasa on behalf of Nepali Folklore Society, mainly for the purpose of disseminating the activities of the Society. Besides, it also provides a forum for folklorists and the people interested in Nepali folklore and folklife study.

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