

## ETHNIC IDENTITY IN MUSIC: A STUDY ON THE ETHNIC MUSIC OF GURUNG COMMUNITY

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### Abstract

Ethnic identity in music refers to the historical, social and cultural elements which shapes the music of a particular group or community. It includes a wide range of factors like language, traditions, rituals, rhythms, melodies, musical instruments and lyrical themes. Understanding ethnic identity through ethnomusicological study requires an appreciation of the broader cultural, historical and social context in which a particular style or tradition has developed. The study of ethnomusicology of the Gurung ethnic group involves examining their musical traditions within the broader context of their culture. They have a rich cultural heritage, including distinctive music and dance forms that play a crucial role in expressing their identity and social cohesion.

**Keywords:** music, identity, culture, Gurung, ethnomusicology

### INTRODUCTION

The Gurung people are an ethnic group primarily found in the foothills of the Himalayas like in the central and western Nepal, in India in Darjeeling hills and Tarai regions of West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam, and other North East States of India. The Gurung people themselves have their own oral traditions and myths regarding their origin. According to one theory Gurungs migrated from Mongolia in the 6th century to the central region of Asia. The word 'Gurung' is actually pronounced as 'Gu-Rewang', which is the combination of two sounds- 'Gu' and 'Rewang'. 'Gu' means nine according to Tibetan language and 'Rewang' means Mountains and hills. Therefore the word 'Gu-Rewang' signifies people living in and around the Mountains and Hills, which match quite well with their historical background (Lama, 2018). Their ancient religious practiced was Bon or Bonpo (nature worship), later converting to Tibetan Buddhism. Today, Gurungs follow Buddhism as well as their own primitive religion (Lama, 2018). They speak Sino-Tibetan language called Tamu Kyi and they do not have particular script. They used three or four scripts for writing like Devnagari, Tibetan script, khemaa lipi script which is the combination of both Tibetan and Devnagari and Roman script (Glover and Landon, 1980). An overall Gurung ethnic person has a rich and vibrant culture.

According to Hood ethnomusicology is an approach to the study of any Music not only in terms of itself but also in relation to the cultural contexts. He also points out that the discipline Ethnomusicology is oriented towards the study of Cultural Musicology (Durga, 2017). This discipline developed after Second World War in Western countries with special emphasis on the interdisciplinary approach to music. At present the Ethnomusicologists strives for an "All Embracing approach" that deals with any music and "everything that can shed light on the human context of music" (Durga, 2017). This article is an attempt to established the fact that how ethnic music can be an identical factor to the ethnic culture and identity.

## **THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE AND IDENTITY**

The identities can be formed through cultures and subcultures to which people belong or in which people participate, which means that culture and identity are inseparable and are like two sides of a coin. Culture is the collective space where the meanings we produce are assimilated or resisted. It is the battleground where the ideologies of those in power are established or dissolved; it is the public and private terrain where we create our personal and social identities. Culture with its values, points of view, and traditions shapes the way we see life, understand the world, define ourselves, think, act, create community, relate to others, and express our sense of belonging to family, groups, and nations (Saenz and Yamada, 2023). Culture gives meaning to human life. It does not only shape the personality of the members of a society, it also controls their behaviours and directs their relationship within the group even in a formal organization. Aspect of culture can be either material or non-material (Adenuga, 2023). Within this realm ethnic music is also an indispensable part of any ethnic culture. The separation of ethnic music with culture is not possible and the theme of ethnomusicology aims to establish the fact that ethnic music being an integral part of culture can determine the identity of that particular ethnic group. Here Gurung ethnic music can be studied as an important factor to determine their culture and identity.

## **GURUNG CULTURE OF MUSIC AND DANCE**

The Gurungs have a rich culture of music. One of the characteristic features of Gurung culture is their music. The traditional Gurung music has some unique aspects which distinguish this ethnic group from other castes, ethnic group and communities. The Gurung ethnic music as a part of their culture is a major factor that has retain and secure their identity living under a multi-cultured and multi-ethnic Gorkha community in Nepal and various parts of India. Thus it is interesting to have a holistic study about the ethnic music of Gurung and how their music is playing a role in maintaining their ethno-cultural identity

## **CULTURE OF RODHI GHAR**

Rodhi culture is one of the most distinct features of Gurung community and its culture. Rodhi Ghar was essentially a place to relax, a house in the village where the community gathered after a full day's work to sing, dance and be festive. Men and women gathered at Rodhi Ghar, sat on two opposing sides, and engaged in a playful battle of wit, deep into the night. This Rodhi institution has a great impact on Gurung culture especially in their traditional music. Many of the Gurung traditional tunes and dances were created through this tradition. But at present unfortunately the Rodighar culture seems to be dying out and many Gurung villages no longer have fixed Rodi houses as such, although they did in the recent past. It has been suggested this might be because a society that allows girls and boys to gather and interact socially is considered lax and immoral, thus social disapproval coming from outside the community initially, then influences the thinking of the community.

In the course of musical 'Rodhi' evening many social norms and emphases of Gurung society and culture are conveyed. Patterns for reciprocal and collective activities are also learned and stressed in the music making. Rodhi occupies a central position in maintaining an old Gurung musical tradition called 'Ghatu'.

Public musical performances of the 'Ghatu', the 'Sorathi' and the Krishna Charita are important social gathering in Gurung village communities. These musical performances are used to mark occasion within the society, such as that welcoming a visitor, blessing a house, the first male child of family or a new marriage, and also to celebrate a day of religious importance. Performances provide an important social setting the people to meet each other.

## **GHATU DANCE AND MUSIC**

Ghatu or Ghaptu is a narrative song and dance tradition of the Gurung people. Ghatu song and dance performances are one of the richest and beautiful forms of artistic expression in the Himalayan region. Yet it remains unheard of and invisible in common knowledge and popular culture (Rai, 2023). Ghatu is performed not only for fun and entertainment but also because it is primarily a socio-cultural display and has historically played a key role in achieving amplified social cohesion among the native Gurung, Magar, and other indigenous communities of Central West Nepal. The Ghatu is the most complex form of musical performances performed by the Gurungs. The complete performance of Ghatu last "three days and night". It takes place once in a year during the full moon in mid-May during the Bhaishak Purnima festival. After the festival rice is planted. The performance is meant to please the gods in order to guarantee a good crop. This performance is preceded by another, shorter performance of the part of the Ghatu, Which takes place in Febraury during the Shree Panchami festivals. The purpose of it is 'to call for gods' (Rai, 2023).

There are three types of Ghatu dances. The Barahmase, Kusunda, and the Sati Ghatu. While the Barahmase Ghatu is more common than others and doesn't adhere to strict regulations and is performed during celebrations, the Kusunda Ghatu depicts scenes of a Jogi, living as a hermit in a place called Kusunda and an interaction with the Kusunda forest Gods. Here, we must understand that the Sati Ghatu is the complete story and performance while the Barahmase and the Kusunda Ghatu are merely some scenes picked up from the complete Sati Ghatu. This traditional Ghatu dance is intimately connected with a song and the beat of the Maadal (percussion), for hours on end (Rai, 2023).

Ghatu is a long, oral epic and its form can be divided into three basic categories Dhile, Chamke and Yalala. Dhile performance is slow and gradual while Chamke is fast and Yalala is something in between (Rai, 2023). The story of Ghatu tells about the life and death of king Pasuram and queen Yasmawwati. It is very possible that the story of Ghatu dance varied in different areas. The written and oral description of its content differs from each other as well. However there are some basic elements which are present in each of this description. The Ghatu includes several parts which can be performed separately. Each of

these parts has its own theme, such as rice planting, wedding, flowers, a hermit, hunting and battle. The part which features the Sati, the custom according to which the Queen allows herself to be burned alive with her deceased husband, is only performed during the Baisakh Purne festival. Other parts of the story may be performed separately (Moisala, 2018).

The language in which the Ghatu is sung is unknown. It is neither Nepali nor Gurung. While some written sources claim that it is old fashioned Nepali. The leader of the musical group simply calls it their 'Ghatu Language'. The audience does not understand the meaning of the words, but they are able to follow approximately what is going on. Not even the singers understand the words exactly. However they can explain the meaning of the single sentences if asked. The forgotten language demonstrates the archaic nature of the Ghatu (Moisala, 2018).

The Ghatu is performed by a male chorus, three to four Madal drummers and two to three young female dancers. The dancers should be of premenstrual age and skilful. Their dances should be graceful and fluid. According to Gurung belief only such girls can be "touched by the God", i.e to fall into a trance, which is an essential part of the performance. Each part of Ghatu has a few basic melodies which are highly varied during long performances. Performance practice, the vibrated style of singing, the undulating of voices and the heterophonic style of group singing, create the characteristic and unique sound quality of Ghatu (Moisala, 2018). The style of dancing is very slow. The dancers bow slowly down around their axis and move up again. Occasionally small finger gestures decorate the dance. Because the Ghatu is oral tradition, the leader of the musical group, the Guru, must know the long story by heart.

## **SORATHI DANCE AND MUSIC**

Sorathi is another important dance form of the Gurungs. It is said to originate during the fourteenth century before the formation of Nepal. It is claimed that it was brought by the Aryan people from the Indian peninsula. Besides Gurungs, Sorathi is also performed by another Nepalese ethnic group, the Mangars. It is transmitted orally as well. The language in which the Sorathi is sung may be old fashioned Nepali. The audience finds it easier to understand than the singing of Ghatu. This may indicate that the latter is an older genre, or that the two texts are different languages (Moisala, 2018).

The song of Sorathi tells about the story of King Jaising, whose first six wives did not give him a child. He then married another woman and this youngest wife gave him a daughter. The six older wives became jealous of this. They bribed the astrologer, and told the king that this daughter might trouble the kingdom in future. As a solution astrologer advised the king to throw the baby into river in a golden box. King ordered the blacksmith to prepare the golden box and threw the baby into the river. However the box became trapped in the net of the fisherman and he took the baby as his own daughter. Years later king madly fell in love with

the daughter of the fisherman but quickly came to know that the girl is his own daughter. The story has a happy ending girl finally met with her parents (Moisala, 2018).

Sorathi is performed by the male singers, two to four male drummers, four male dancers and a male actor. Two of the male dancers are dressed in women's clothing. There is also masked man, a 'jogi', who plays several roles during the performance. He is the astrologer, the blacksmith who makes the golden box and the fisherman who finds the baby. He does not participate in the dance, instead he plays his roles by using various devices appropriate to the text of the song. In the very beginning of the performance the performer ask the Hindu goddess Saraswati for a blessing. According to a belief, people who are touched by the goddess Saraswati began to tremble. Thus when a selected, sensible person start to tremble, people know that the goddess is attaining the performance. The trembling is made to stop at the end of the performance.

The singing style of the male chorus is heterophonic. Vibrato is used, but it is not as strong as in the performance of Ghatu. The style of dancing is livelier, the dancers move around a rather large dancing area in two pairs, making mirror figures on the ground. They give quick steps and decorate the dance with wide arm movements (Moisala, 2018).

## **MARUNI DANCE**

Gurung villages also perform the dances like Maruni that begins in Shrawan and ends in Poush. In this dance form, the male performers disguise themselves as women called marunis and jokers named fusrunges. Other participants play madals, beat drums, clang cymbals, sing, and danc. The latter is performed by four young men especially at Dasain (Nepali festival), funerals, weddings, and at putpute, a ceremony held for the eldest male child of a family (Gurung, 2012).

## **DANCE DRAMA OF KRISHNA CHARITA**

Another important musical performance of the Gurung community is dance drama 'Krishna Charita'. The story tells about the life of Lord Krishna. It does not belong to the oldest strata of the Gurung musical repertoire, but which was composed 1910 by a Gurung man on the basis of Hindu mythology. The performance displays seven episodes from Krishna's life. The themes of the episodes are Krishna's birth, his childhood, Krishna and Radha, the snake, Krishna's love, the Holi, and the seizing of garments. The text is in Nepali.

The Krishna Charitra, like the Ghatu and the Sorathi is performed when ordered by someone. Its performance, however also has a special context. It is usually the core of the Purpute ceremony. The 'purpute' is, as Gurungs say, "a happy occasion to honour the first son of a Gurung family".it is arranged when the son reaches the approximate age of one. The tradition originates from an event in which Lord Krishna's birth was celebrated all through the night. The dance drama is performed toless the first son of that he will grow to become like Lord

Krishna. The happy celebration of the purpote and the music of the Krishna Charita, bring almost all the village together (Moisala, 2018).

The Krishna Charita is performed by four male dancers, four madal drummers and a group of male singers. Two of the male dancers perform the male role, two a female role. The melody of the singing stays in the pentatonic scale like that of Ghatu and Sorathi. The singing style is less heterophonic uses much less vibrato. The dancing takes place over a considerable large area and involves a lot of lively moments. Hand gestures do not have role in the dance. Sometime drum players also dance in order to provide a balance between rhythm and dance. Each performance of the Krishna Charita begins with an introduction prayer in which the performer asks for blessing from the gods of the sky, of the earth, and from the gods of all directions like sun, moon and stars.

## **OTHER KINDS OF MUSIC**

There are other kinds of music in rural Gurung communities. The activities of Gurung Shamans, the Poju and Klebri include a lot of music-making, both chanting and playing of musical instruments. Oral narrations of the sacred book, the Pe, which are done in the course of funeral rites, are chanted. The playing of musical instruments as an accompaniment to chanting is done to drive away evil spirits or to please gods. Although the rites after death certainly display the beliefs and order of Gurung society, the music performed in the course of the rites is not recognize by the ordinary Gurungs as a source of cultural identity. It in the rites after death is may be in this case, the religious importance precedes the music. The music in the rites after death is only performed by specialized authorities and is not allowed to be made either by a layman or within an improper context.

## **IMPACT OF MUSIC IN GURUNG SOCIETY**

Traditional Gurung musical performances like Ghatu, Sorathi and to some extent Krishna Charita are closely connected to traditional gurung social and religious system. Many practices and beliefs related to traditional music derived from Shamanistic world view. Although Gurung followed Bon as the ancient religious but in later phase of their cultural evolution Hindu religion started influencing their culture. The music and dance form of Ghatu, Sorathi and Krishna Charita signifies the influence. Old Gurung music transmits the values and priorities of the traditional Gurung society. It has a central role in enculturating children to the Gurung culture. These musical performances are used to mark special occasions within the community, such as that of welcoming a visitor, blessing a house, the first male child of a Gurung family or a new marriage, and also to celebrate a day of religious importance or the victory (Tamu, 1999). Performances provide an important social setting for people to meet each other. Characteristic features of the Gurung society, reciprocal activities and hospitality patterns are displayed on these musical occasions.

## **GURUNG ETHNIC MUSIC AND IDENTITY**

The Gurung themselves also recognize the importance of traditional music for their cultural and ethnic identity. When speaking about music they emphasize the value of traditional Gurung music. It is regarded as an important part of Gurung culture and as a supporter of ethnic identity. They believe that their music distinguishes themselves from other people.

Gurung cultural identity has been closely linked with their ethnic identity, which has evolved from their traditional society. They have constructed their cultural identity in relation to other cultures within the neighbourhood. Certain features of the Gurung culture, such as the Rodhi institutions and the rites of passage, especially the rites after deaths, have served as cultural icons and criteria for Gurung identification.

The caste hierarchy, in which the Gurungs are themselves included as a caste, adds as an important dimension to the examination of traditional Gurung identity. There was a time, in Nepali society, when interaction among ethnic groups is to a great extent conducted and limited by the rules of the caste hierarchy. Due to caste hierarchy, ethnic cultures living within close proximity have remained quite influenced by one another. This also concerns the Gurungs, their cultural traits have maintained some features distinct from co-existing fellow cultures. When look at from the ethnomusical prospective, the central role of music in traditional Gurung rites of passage, rituals and ceremonies is organised. Both Rodhi and rites after death as well as the 'Purpute', a rite for blessing the first born child of a family, and all major social and religious rituals employ a great deal of music. Thus it may be claimed that communication of Gurung identity is carried out in rites and ceremonies consisting largely of music. In this respect music serve as an essential criterion of Gurung identity both culturally and ethnically. It is an inseparable part of Gurung's social and cultural life.

## **CONCLUSION**

Unfortunately, today at this age of liberalisation and globalisation these traditional attributes are losing its importance which was in fact pivotal part of Gurung culture. This traditional music today has become only a customary formality in many communities which were once used to symbolise their cultural and ethnic identity. Thus here it is very important to research about this and the role of traditional music of these hill tribals in defining their identity. The formation of 'The West Bengal Gurung Development and Cultural Board' in 2016 and one of its major aim and objectives is to preserve, promote and safeguard the language, traditional folk art, folk music, folk dance and folk culture. Such organisation has to work sincerely to preserve this rich cultural heritage and propagate and promote the cultural legacy to the present and future generation of this ethnic community.

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