

RITUALS, RASA, AND ABHINAYA: READING THE AESTHETICS OF MARUNI

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Abstract

*Floating on the gradually changing feather of time, Maruni, with its indigenous identity, has spread its colourful wings on the larger spectrum of art and culture in Nepal. Maruni dance, although previously performed by the male members of the Magar community, has gradually attracted female members of the community to participate in it in the present time. The fulfilment of this performative art lies in the link that connects the performers and the audience through the medium of 'Rasa.' Characters like 'Dhatu-Varay' or 'Lakhe' bring a riot of laughter among the audience with its internal reminder that life is not just a journey of struggle and hardships, but bright sunshine too spread like a new day, new hope. Makeup, costumes, and instruments like the 'Naumati Baja Orchestra' act like spices that enrich the aesthetic taste of the dance performance. The paper aims to draw a detailed cultural picture Maruni. Along with that, it intends to look for various rituals associated with the dance form. The paper also attempts to analyse select maruni dance representations with the aid of 'Rasa' and 'Abhinaya,' present in the book *Natyashastra*.*

Keywords: Song, Dance, performance, Folk, Maruni

INTRODUCTION

'Maruni,' as *Pragya Nepali Brihad Shabdkosh* suggests, refers to a man who dances and sings in the attire of a woman. It is a dance form popular among the Magar community residing in Nepal, Sikkim, and some diasporas of India. Any product of folklore is a reflection of the traditional lifestyle of a particular community. Maruni, being one of the oldest dance forms of Nepal, is not a stranger to this realm. The songs and dance steps of this genre reflect the day-to-day activities of simple villagers. Sometimes in the lyrics they incorporate their respect and love for Lord Rama and Lord Krishna. There are songs also purely made for enjoyment with the theme of courtship and marriage. Depending on the rhythm and themes Maruni can be classified into various categories namely- Birhani, Khwali, Churdki, Samla, Garra, Ramcharit, Krishna charit etc. Each classification of this dance form is replete with the rich folkloric aesthetics which inflict various sentiments among the audience. The dance choreographies also feature various aspects of *Abhinaya*. Thus, an attempt has been made to analyse some selected Maruni performances available in youtube with the theory of *Rasa* present in the book *Natyashastra*. Along with that, the paper has also attempted to discuss and appreciate various rituals associated with the dance form.

BHARATA'S CONCEPT OF RASA AND ABHINAYA:

Bharata muni, with his enormous treasure of knowledge, has created a unique cuisine namely *Natyashastra* that serves to fulfil the aesthetic relish of the art admirers. The book with its 36 chapters and more than 6000 verses tends to comment on the origin of *Natya*, its composition, structure, subject matter, acting, body movements, makeup, costumes, music, *Rasa*, *Abhinaya* etc. He describes 8 types of *Rasa* in the book.

SRINGARA RASA/EROTIC SENTIMENT:

Sringara Rasa deals with love. Its dominant state is called 'rati' or love. The deity of this Sentiment is Vishnu with light green colour as its dominant symbol. *Sringara rasa* is divided into two subcategories namely *Sambhoga sringara* and *Vipralambha sringara*. The happy Union between hero and heroine is called 'sambhoga' and separation is called 'vipralambha.'

HASYA RASA/COMIC SENTIMENT:

Hasya Rasa symbolises laughter. Likewise, its dominant state and Deity are laughter and *Pramatha*. *Hasya rasa* has six sub categories namely *Smita* (gentle smile), *Hasita* (slight laughter), *vihasita* (open laughter),

upahasita (laughter of ridicule), Apahasita (obscene Laughter), and Atihasita (boisterous laughter). Hasya Rasa gets its true Exposure through words, costumes, makeup etc.

KARUNA RASA/ PATHETIC SENTIMENT

The dominant state of *Karun Rasa* is sorrow. The sentiment is signified through grey colour and the deity Yama. It is expressed to reflect sad or unpleasant things on stage (instances like a loved one's death).

RAUDRA RASA/FURIOUS SENTIMENT:

Raudra Rasa or 'furious statement's' dominant state lies in anger and it is expressed Through colour red and the deity Rudra. The expression can be shown on stage through red eyes, knitting of eyebrows, teeth movements etc.

VIRA RASA/HEROIC SENTIMENT

Vira rasa or heroic sentiment is associated with pride, superiority, war, discipline, military strength, aggression and influence. *Vira rasa's* dominant state is 'heroism.' The heroism gets expressed through saffron colour and the deity is Indra.

BHAYANAK RASA/TERRIBLE SENTIMENT

Bhayanak Rasa or Terrible sentiment's dominant state is fear. Noises, ghosts, owls, etc act as signifiers of this rasa. This Rasa gets expressed through black colour and the Deity is Kaal.

BIVATSA RASA/THE ODIOS STATEMENT

Odiuous statement or bivatsa rasa finds its dominant state in disgust. The dominant deity of This rasa is Shiva. It gets expressed through blue colour.

ADVUTA RASA/MARVELLOUS SENTIMENT:

Advuta rasa or marvellous statement's dominant state is astonishment. The presiding deity of advuta rasa is Brahma and It gets expressed through yellow colour.

ABHINAYA

In *Natyashastra*, Bharata muni talks about four kinds of *abhinaya* namely *Angika* or gestures, *vacika* or words, *aharya* or dress and makeup, *sattvika* or temperament. Each of these categories express themselves through different body parts of the performers. *Angika* or gestures are expressed through face, limbs, and various movements of the body. In the book limbs are further divided into two categories - major and minor. Head, breast, waist, hand, feet, and sides are tagged as major limbs. On the other hand, eyes, lower lip, eyebrows, nose, and chin are called minor limbs. Bharata in his book then goes on to describe the further subcategories and functions of each of these limbs mentioned as major and minor. In Maruni dance mainly *angika* and *aharya abhinaya* play a significant role. Thus, the researchers have tried to look for the use of these two 'abhinaya' s in their analysis of the Selected performances.

MARUNI DANCE

Maruni as described in the introduction of the article traditionally refers to men in the attire of women. Prem Kumar Rai mentions in his thesis a quote by Motilal Parajuliko regarding the definition of maruni dance. Parajuliko writes that "maruni is a dance form where men dance in the attire of women. It is a generational dance form...This dance form consists of two marunis, one purusunge, one dhatu-waray and two madal players. All the performers of a maruni dance are traditionally men (Rai 29)." The number and types of performers variates from place to place. For example, an article titled 'Maruni nach lop: ke ho Maruni nach, kasri nache' published in the newspaper Ranimahal Sangbaddata mentions that a maruni dance performance requires two marunis, three madal players, one purusinge, and six to ten singers (Gaha). The news article talks about a character called 'lakhe' the description of whom match the characteristics of 'dhatu-waray.' It says

that the men who do not develop beards are the perfect choice for being a maruni. Others can also be selected but in that case they must shave their beards. Purusinge refers to a man who does not decorate himself in women's attire. He dances independently as a man beside marunis and madal players. He leads the entire dance group. The marunis follow his expressions and rhythms (Gaha). It further adds that, lakhe the comic figure of the dance form decorates himself by wearing a cartoonist mask and tying a straw in his body. He carries a crooked stick in his hand. He goes in front of the audience and asks for money from them. He is called the husband of marunis. The pair of maruni and lakhe is traditionally believed to be the incarnation of Mahadev and Parvati. Thus, it is believed that if the audience teases the lakhe too much, he can take the form of bhairava and curse them (Gaha).

The lead singer (guru) of the group is called raura. Before the dance performance, he worships the entire attire of the marunis consisting of dresses and ornaments. According to Premkumar Rai, a maruni song has three parts- adi (beginning), Madhya (middle), and antya (end). To avoid any kind of bad mishaps, the group sings mangalgeeti of a particular god or goddess to invoke and invite them on earth. During this invocation, one or two maruni starts shaking. It is traditionally believed that goddess Nateswori's (in some places goddess Saraswati) spirit enters the body of maruni and possesses him for some time. The maruni is then decorated with feminine cloth and ornaments, already worshipped by the Raura. Meanwhile the Raura worships the instruments with sacred cow ghee (clarified butter), incense, accheta (mixture of rice and curd), and puts garlands in the neck of the instrumentalists and singers. Soyeohang Rai, an insider comments on this phenomena, when the feminine energy enters the masculine body, it expresses itself in the form of maruni (the possession of the feminine energy). This belief has been carried down through ages. In the evolutionary form of maruni, the male through symbolism of wearing red and ornaments is honouring this transition between two energies. It is considered extremely sacred, so each step is done with utmost respect to all the five elements. After dancing maruni, too, the male has to transit to its masculine form following proper steps respectively as he did while entering. (Rai 2022)

He then proceeds to put the traditional auspicious tika made with vermilion, rice and curd on the forehead of the performers. After the completion of all these rituals the dance performance starts. The performance of the rituals, the mangal geetis, maruni's solah shringar falls under the first part of maruni that is beginning or adya parva.

MAKEUP AND COSTUME

Makeup and costume is an essential part of any performance. In *Natyashastra* it is called 'aharya abhinaya.' Although in the chapter 'costumes and make up' the book recommends several ornaments and jewellery, when it comes to the regional representations it says, "human females are to have dresses and ornaments according to their places of origin"(420). As Maruni is a dance form popular among the Magar community, the performers wear traditional costumes and ornaments which are signifiers of their Magar identity. The women wear chaubandi-cholo and fariya. They are mainly red in colour. They tie it up with a belt which is traditionally known as patuki. The various ornaments they wear have different names. They decorate their noses with phuli and bulaki which are worn consecutively on the left and middle side of the nose. On the neck they wear tilhari, naugedi, and potey. A tilhari is green in colour and can have different sizes. Sometimes, the performers wear a big tilhari cross side. It is called chadke tilhari. Potey is a small neckpiece which is yellow or green in colour. Jantar's uniqueness lies in its rectangular pendant. Naugedi is another necklace with nine gold beads and is a symbol of married woman. Sometimes additionally the marunis wear hamel whose body consists of round, gold coins. They decorate their ears with dhungri which are round in shape. They adorn their head with sribindi and jun clip. Sribindi is an ornament worn at the middle partition of the hair. Jun clip resembles the moon and

star which are placed on the sides of the head. The reflection of all these details can be found in the performances which the researchers have chosen for analysis.

Song 1

Hamari Mamajaiko Bayupankhini Ghoda

An important variant of maruni song and dance is khayali. The simple villagers' lives are replete with struggles, and pain. The festivals, the dance, and music bring an air of refreshment in the lives of these villagers. Thus, these music or dance forms act as an escapism for them. This genre of maruni is characterised by melodious rhythm, themes of happiness, humour, philosophy etc. The first video that have been chosen for analysis is called *Hamari Mamajaiko Bayupankhini Ghoda* sung by Nabin Khadka and his team. The video shows the glimpses of various rituals associated with the dance form. It starts with the raura worshipping the dress and ornaments of the maruni, offering blessings to the women and placing the thali in their hands. The two girls with their *anjali* hand gesture greet the raura, take the thali and *Kalash* from his hand. *Kalash*, a sacred pot, filled with flower and clean water is an essential element in the rituals associated with maruni dance. They then take the sacred thali to the inside of the house and the maruni after showing his respect to each of the ornaments and dresses, starts wearing them with the help of two women. His red attire, golden ornaments act as a homage to the everlasting femininity which is divine, fertile. After this episode they come to the courtyard where after the maruni shows his respect, the Raura puts garlands on his neck and places the auspicious tika in his forehead. The maruni, his two female partners sit and pray for some time after which the dance starts.

Hamari Mamajaiko Bayupankhini ghoda

Meralekhi bijuleika baal

Meralekhi bijuleika baal

Keko Maharajaiho haveli ma parbama sa

(Khadka, YouTube)

Translation: Our mamaji has a flying horse/Its hair looks like current/ Why the king goes to the forest leaving the mansion?

The lyrics of the song 'Hamari mamajaiko Bayupankhini ghoda' are simple yet ambiguous as the context of the song is not mentioned anywhere in the video. The words can be interpreted as an allusion to the story of King Ram and his sorrowful life. Although he had power, valour, and all the luxurious of life, he had to leave all these privileges. The phrases like 'Bayupankhi Ghoda' or 'bijuleika baal' can be interpreted as symbols of power and privilege. He left the royal kingdom and spent his life like a ascetic for fourteen years.

Akasheima erong ho jhilimili tara

Dhartima porigoyo ra

Dhartima porigoyo ra

Ranajeeti onusari hasimukho marau lagau.

(Khadka YouTube)

Translation: The shining stars of the colourful sky/ has come down to the earth/ It has come down to the earth/ Recall the rules of warfare, and with a smiling face, die.

The shining stars can be interpreted here as the three royal members of Ayodhya – king Ram, his wife Seeta, and Ram's brother Lakshman. In this context, the earth can be interpreted as a symbol of the forest. They left

the mansion and all the royal luxurious of life with smiles in their face, like a warrior. In this part of the song the maruni dances with two thalis in his two hands. The choreography includes mainly whining with the thalis in hands. To imply shining stars, the female dancers use 'padmakosha' hand gesture. The maruni also repeats the act but with the thalis in his hands. To show the fall of the stars the maruni whines for two times and sits with his hand placing the thalis at the right and left side consecutively. These steps repeat in the depiction of the last line also which means a king and his soldiers should die with a smile. The expression, the dance steps in this part transcends to veera rasa. The dance choreography also involves the use of jhyamta by the female dancers.

Jonmodinei ammaju ho, kormo dinei babaju

Lekhi dinei bhabhi rajaile

Lekhi dinei bhabhi rajaile

Ke lekhouni bhabhi raja jonomoko dukhimona.

(Khadka YouTube)

Translation: Mother gives birth, father gives deed/ Writings are given to the future king/ Writings are also given to the future king also/ Writings are given to the future king also/ Who writes the future king's sorrowful heart at the time of his birth.

In the context of the *Ramayana*, the line 'Kormo dinei babaju' can be interpreted as the king Dasharath's misdeeds in the past. He, in his greed of hunting a deer, unknowingly threw his bow towards Shrivana, an innocent, devoted son who went to fetch water for his thirsty parents. Dasharath was cursed of encountering a similar fate in future by Shrivana's father. Thus, a humble, honest prince like Ram had to suffer a life full of misery only for his father's deeds. The maruni dancer in this part takes in his head a big thali filled with *Kalash*, places his feet in a thali and tries to swing, symbolizing the difficulties king Ram tackled throughout his life.

Chhatibanei katahaki madanu hain mero

Sapni ma diu jai de le

Sapni ma diu jai de le

Kinnarou nouli chhari purse mayao sanjaidenge

(Khadka YouTube)

Translation: The chest has been slit with the arrow/ The god of illusion shows dreams/ The god of illusion shows dreams. It is time to transform into the masculine form again, leaving the *kinnar*'s attire.

This is the last part of the song where the dancer shows his acrobatic skills. The line 'chhatibanei katahaki Madanu hain mero' symbolizes the final episode of *Ramayana*, the death of demon-king Ravana in the hands of Rama. Symbolically it indicates the end of the performance. It says that the god has shown him a dream that the possession has been completed. Thus, he should leave his feminine attire and turn into his original masculine form. The female dancers thus start taking out the ornaments and dress from his body. At the end of the song he, like a *purusange* dances with the two girls who seem like his wives.

Song 2

La Hai Barilai

The next performance that has been chosen for analysis is a *Garra* dance. A maruni *garra* song is characterised by descriptions of nature, repetitive phrases, group work, chorus etc. Due to its fast rhythm, it sometimes seems like *churdki*. This song is sung to get rid of sleep, tiredness during the performance. In this selected song, the singers repeat the phrase 'la hai barilai' repeat many times to invoke a specific rhythm. The song praises the beauty of nature. Along with that it also provides glimpses of a budding courtship between a young couple. The dance video beautifully captures the use of various hand gestures by the dancers.

Pokhariko chisho pani lai barilai

Cheko kali monrey lai barilai

Laha na ma kecha kecha lai barilai

Dekheo papi monrey lai barilai...

(Khadka Youtube)

Translation: Cold water of the pond/ covers the black heart/ Don't know what words are written in fate/look at the sinful heart.

The lines from the beginning try to amalgamate the description of nature with the lives of human beings. It says although the human heart during childhood remains clean like the cold water of the lake, with time it becomes black. It becomes so sinful that it does not even fear destiny. The dancers to signify these descriptions use specific hand gestures. For example, for the expression 'kecha kecha' *alapadma* has been used.

Aise ruko khedai muni

Kati chisho pani

Maya lagcha boini timro

Laju Shishaikhani

Akashaiko kalo meigho lai barilai

Banalu re ho ki lai barilai

Jethi bhonda kanchhi ramri lai barilai

Gajalure ho ki lai barilai...

(Khadka YouTube)

Translation: Come and stay near the shade of the tree/ See how the cold water falls/ I have fallen for you/ seeing your shy face/what a creation really you are! / The black cloud in the sky/ The younger is more fair than the elder/ the kohl looks lovely your eyes!

Here the singer instructs his beloved to stand under the tree and to drink the cold water of the lake. He also confesses that he has fallen in love with her shy face. The feminine beauty then in the description gets amalgamated with his praises for the black cloud of the sky, the creation of nature. He flatters the girl by saying that she is more beautiful than her elder sister. And the reason of her beauty is the kajal in her eyes. The banter, the funny, flirty, flattery words of the man towards the young girl inflict *sambhoga sringara rasa* among the audience. The dancers to imply 'Kati chisho pani' uses *pushpaputa* gesture. The expression 'Gajalure' has been expressed with the use of *mrigashirsha* and *kartarimukha*.

Mari gaire pani khayō jamke pokharima
Uile hami rudai khelteo lami ko parina
Charimaro shikarire lai barilai
Pokharima khasho lai barilai Sangai basey
vage chaina lai barilai
Jethai maya bansho lai barilai...

(Khadka YouTube)

Translation: Our cow drinks water from the lake/ Even after crying we can not go there/ Hunters kill birds/ the pond is special/ if there is no luck, love is not possible/ no matter how much one loves someone.

These lines again give descriptions of the various elements of nature- the way cow drinks water in joy, the memory of childhood dwellings in the pond, or the hunter's method of hunting a female bird. The tone of this part is pessimistic. The words of sadness echo his voice- if luck does not permit them to stay together no matter how much they love each other the courtship will not be successful. The melody of *vipralambha* reflects here in his tone. The expression of cow has been implied with the use of *chandrakala*.

Kekoduna kekoduna moletuko duna
Paile malai lalai bhakai aile payo runa
Dharthi muni pindalutha lai barilai
Dharti maa ki gaava lai barilai
Timisita maya launa lai barilai
Kanchha mathey baba lai barilai...

(Khadka YouTube)

Translation: which tree which tree, Moletu tree/ At first everything looks sweet in love, but after few years it brings tears/ under the earth lies arum stem/ on the earth lies arum root. I want to marry you/ With your father's permission.

Here again the singer gives descriptions of various creation of nature- maretu (a tree whose leaves are used to make plates and glasses in Nepal), pindalu (arum stem), gaava (arum root).

The various phases of relationship are also mentioned here. He says that sometimes in the companionship brings happiness in their face, sometime tears in the eyes. The last line implies that although he wants to marry her, without the permission of his father he cannot do it as in his tradition father holds the power structure. Here the fruit moretu has been expressed through the gesture padmakosha.

Gothalaley ghasey kaito timur boter hirma
Ki mayalai poita loma kira kideu sirma
Kokarere makai dhayo lai barilai
Ani deo khoyaire lai bari lai
Mori banchi kekomoya lai bari lai
Bani deo choyaire lai bari lai...

(Khadka YouTube)

Translation: The cowboy cuts grass and the bush of timur fruit. Some keeps love on the head, someone kicks it with legs. Parrot eats corn in the farmer's field. Give water to the corn field. We live or die who cares? / tie the rope tightly.

The daily lifestyle of a villager is again reflected in the part of the song where a cowboy cuts grass and the bush of timur fruit, and a parrot eats corn in the corn field. He says that love should either be kept in the head or it can be placed in the leg. The choice rests on the lovers. The song also says one should not hold affection for everything. If the parrot is eating corn one should spray water in the cornfield and tie it up tightly with a rope. The expression of Timur here again has been implied by the gesture padmakosha. To show 'Bani dao' mushti gesture has been used.

Keko mala keko mala tulosiko mala

Yehi bori bocha naita morey mathai jala

Pokhariko chisho pani lai barilai

Mogna patey piula lai barilai

Phulki pera devra lelai lai barilai

Jouban kingrai diul lai barilai.

(Khadka YouTube)

Translation: which necklace, which necklace? Basil beads' necklace/ either one should live with it happily, or die with pain. The cold water of the pond. Drink in Moletu leaf. Dedicate flowers on the god's feet. Dedicate life on the god's feet.

The last part of the song transforms the mood of the song from relationship to religion. The lover realises that the ultimate aim of life is to dedicate it in the feet of god. Thus, he instructs his audience to wear the necklace of tulusi bead - a symbol of religious soul, and dedicate flowers and life to the gods. He also asks his viewers to drink cold water in the moreto leaf. Various hand gestures have been used here as well. The phrases *bachan* and *devta* have been expressed through the gesture bhramara and anjali consecutively.

Song 3

Instrumental Performance

One of the special features of Maruni Dance is its association with different types of instruments which bring new shades of tune to the songs as well as the performance. This combination of instruments is often known as 'Naumati Baja'. The performance in the visual representation shows a group of women dancing with their Madalas. They perform a dance with special gestures and steps. From a near-distant point, a comic character like Dhatu-Varay tries to observe and imitate the dancers. His appearance and gait add *Hasya Rasa* or comic sentiment to the performative atmosphere. The way he appears and repeats himself, both the *self-centred* and *others' centred* comic sentiments arise. When the comic character laughs to make others laugh, then it's called self-centred comic sentiment. The Dhatu-Varay creates this type by widely showing teeth, repetitive twinkling and through displacement and misuse of ornaments used by women. On the other hand, when other characters, except the buffoon, laugh, it's called others-centred comic sentiment. The way the woman performer smiles in the middle of her performance, indicates the others-centred comic sentiment. The Dhatu-Varay himself laughs the laughter of ridicule, i.e., *Upahasita* and makes others smiling, i.e., *rihasita* which expresses sweetness and joyful eyes. Here the comic character makes several gestures, like making eyes bigger, use of tongue like an animal to create the comic environment. Although he tries to mimicry and mock the dancers,

but this mimicry makes him sweet, lovable character and adds a new feather of enjoyment to the performance. This is how he, being a passive dancer, plays the role of an active performer.

CONCLUSION

It can be estimated that Maruni, like any other folk performances, nicely portrays the wholesome picture of a community. Celebrations and festivals are short but sweet episodes of life. They bring the chance of refreshment and add new fuel to start life in a faster pace. Maruni dance, with its colourful costumes, make up, comic characters, instruments, and themes proves itself to be a representative of the mine of the cultural heritage, the magar community possesses.

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