

GHATU NAACH: EMBODYING THE SACRED THROUGH TRANCE AND RITUAL IN GORKHA CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Ghatu is one of the most significant traditional folk dance-drama forms of the Gorkha community. Rooted in centuries-old cultural and ritual practices, it integrates dance, music, storytelling, and spiritual elements. This paper examines the historical origins, ritualistic dimensions, musical structure, narrative themes, and socio-cultural significance of Ghatu. Drawing upon oral traditions, local beliefs, and modern scholarly documentation, the study explores how Ghatu functions as a medium of cultural expression, devotion, and collective memory. The paper also traces its continuity and transformation in response to changing social contexts, including its adaptation for cultural festivals and tourism. It highlights Ghatu as a living cultural heritage that reflects the identity, spirituality, and communal values of the Gurung people, while emphasizing the need for its preservation and promotion in contemporary society

Keywords: Ghatu, Folk traditions, Gorkha folk, Gorkha Music, Nepalese Music

Introduction

Folk performance traditions have always played a vital role in preserving culture and communicating social and spiritual values within communities. They serve not only as sources of entertainment but also as powerful mediums through which traditions, beliefs, and collective identities are transmitted from one generation to another. Ghatu holds a distinctive place as a traditional dance-drama form of the Gorkha community, combining music, dance, storytelling, and ritualistic elements. Through its graceful and symbolic performances, it reflects the cultural ethos, spirituality, and emotional world of the community.

The term Ghatu refers to a unique ritual dance tradition deeply rooted in oral narratives and mythological themes, particularly the story of King Pashramu and Queen Yambawati. Unlike many other folk forms, Ghatu is closely associated with religious beliefs and is often performed in a semi-trance state by young girls, believed to be spiritually guided during the performance. The dance is accompanied by traditional songs sung by a group of performers, without the use of elaborate musical instruments, which enhances its sacred and meditative character.

Although written documentation on Ghatu is limited, its historical significance is preserved through oral traditions, community practices, and cultural continuity. It is traditionally performed during specific occasions such as Baisakh Purnima and other ritual events, often in open communal spaces. The performance is not merely artistic but also devotional, symbolizing a connection between the human and the divine while reinforcing social cohesion within the Gurung community.

This research paper aims to examine the historical background, performance structure, ritual significance, and contemporary relevance of the Ghatu tradition. By analyzing its evolution and cultural importance, the study highlights Ghatu as a living heritage that embodies the identity and spirituality of the Gurung people, while also emphasizing the urgent need for its preservation and promotion in this world of modernization.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach to examine Ghatu as a traditional dance-drama form of the Gorkha community. The research is based on the study of oral traditions, cultural practices, ethnographic accounts, and existing literature related to Gorkha folk performance traditions. An interpretative method has been employed to understand the socio-cultural themes, narrative structure, ritualistic dimensions, and spiritual aspects of Ghatu.

In addition, the study considers community-based practices and performance contexts to analyze the role of Ghatu within the cultural life of the Gurung people. Attention has also been given to its transmission through generations, particularly the

training and participation of young performers. The research further examines the evolution and contemporary relevance of the Ghatu tradition in the context of modernization, cultural festivals, and tourism, highlighting both its continuity and transformation.

Ghatu Dance

The people of the Himalayan region have long been deeply spiritual, maintaining a rich ceremonial life that is vividly expressed through music and dance. One important example is the **Ghatu dance**, a traditional folk dance practiced primarily by the Gurung and Magar communities. According to Ghatu gurus, the term *Ghatu* originates from the Gurung language: *Gha* means “a wound that never heals,” and *Tu* means “sewing.” Together, the word symbolizes the act of sewing together a wound that never fully heals.

The dance is performed to commemorate the tragic story of a Gurung king and queen, functioning both as a ritual and as a medium of cultural storytelling. Because the tradition has historically been transmitted orally, its precise origins were uncertain for a long time. However, recent research suggests that the Gurung community were the original creators of this dance, which was later adopted by other groups such as the Magar, Dura, and Kumal.

Ghatu dance is not performed merely for entertainment; it represents an important socio-cultural expression within these communities. It is a slow group dance that dramatizes scenes from local mythology and is accompanied by songs and traditional musical instruments, particularly the *madal* drum. Performances often last for several hours, during which dancers may enter trance-like states. The dancers, known as *Ghatu sari*, sometimes faint while moving rhythmically to the songs and drumbeats. In such instances, the continued rhythm of the music is believed to help revive them.

The dance typically features at least two, and sometimes up to three, adolescent girls as the principal performers. During the ritual, these young dancers—often prepubescent—are believed to become possessed by spiritual forces such as the *Ghatu aura* or ancestral deities. Through visions and utterances, they are thought to convey divine messages that community members interpret as prophecies or spiritual guidance. This trance possession is regarded as a channel for divine intervention, enabling the dancers to diagnose illnesses or help resolve communal disputes by invoking the power of the gods. Historically, Ghatu dance has therefore played a significant role in reinforcing social cohesion and spiritual life among the Gurung and Magar communities.

Historical Roots of Ghatu Dance

Ghatu dance, a significant ritual folk performance of the Gorkha community, has largely been transmitted through oral tradition. As a result, its precise origin remained uncertain for a long time. However, recent scholarly research suggests that the Gurungs were the original creators of this dance form, which was later adopted by neighboring communities such as the Magar, Dura, and Kumal.

Earlier studies identified several inconsistencies between the themes depicted in Ghatu dance and the traditional religious practices of the Gurung people. Historically, the Gurungs practiced Buddhism, Bon, and forms of local Hinduism, with earlier belief systems rooted in animism and shamanism. In contrast, Ghatu dance reflects strong Hindu cultural elements. This divergence raised questions regarding its origin and cultural influences.

One of the most striking elements of Ghatu dance is the theme of *Sati*—the ritual self-immolation of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre—which is not traditionally part of Gurung culture. Later research indicates that the dance likely began to take its present form around the 16th century, following the death of a Gurung king. During this period, the spread of Hinduism in the region, influenced by the migration of Indo-Aryan groups, contributed to the incorporation of Hindu narratives and rituals into the dance tradition.

Another important aspect is the linguistic composition of Ghatu songs. These songs are not performed in the Gurung language or any closely related Tibeto-Burman language. Instead, they are composed in an Indo-Aryan linguistic form resembling early Nepali, with influences from Awadhi, Bhojpuri, and Tharu languages. This linguistic variation suggests cultural interaction and exchange. Some scholars further speculate that Queen Yambawati may have originated from the southern plains and brought these linguistic and cultural elements with her.

King Pashramu and Queen Yambawati are widely believed to have been historical figures associated with the Lamjung Kingdom of Nepal during the sixteenth century, forming the narrative foundation of Ghatu dance.

The Tale Of King Pashramu And Queen Yambawati

A central narrative of Ghatu Naach is the tragic and emotionally powerful story of King Pashramu and Queen Yambawati, which is expressed through dance, music, and ritual performance.

According to oral traditions, King Pashramu was a wise ruler, deeply devoted to his kingdom and his queen, Yambawati. Their relationship symbolized ideal love and harmony, and their reign was marked by prosperity. However, this harmony was disrupted when the king was betrayed by his enemies and killed in a fierce battle.

The queen, devastated by the news of her husband's death, was overwhelmed with grief. In an ultimate act of devotion and loyalty, she chose to perform *Sati*, sacrificing herself on her husband's funeral pyre. This act forms the thematic core of *Sati Ghatu*, where dancers embody the queen's sorrow, devotion, and final moments before her sacrifice.

The narrative also includes the couple's young son, who is left behind to inherit the throne. The prince's journey symbolizes resilience and the burden of legacy, as he grows up amidst loss and uncertainty.

Through this narrative, Ghatu dance conveys profound themes of love, sacrifice, duty, loss, and destiny. The performance thus serves not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a spiritual and cultural medium that preserves the collective memory and values of the community.

Types Of Ghatu Naach

Ghatu Naach is divided into three main types: Sati Ghatu, Baramashey Ghatu and Kusunda Ghatu. Each variation has distinct characteristics and significance within the cultural framework.

- 1. Sati Ghatu:** This type of Ghatu is performed only from Shree Panchami (December/January) to Baisakh Purnima (April/May). It narrates the story of a devoted queen who sacrifices herself upon the death of her husband. The dance is performed exclusively by women and the performers often enter a trance-like state, believed to be a form of spiritual possession by Kusunda spirits. Unlike other forms of Ghatu, Sati Ghatu is performed without musical instruments, relying solely on rhythmic clapping (Tali).
- 2. Baramashey Ghatu:** This form of Ghatu is performed throughout the year and represents the daily lives of people, showcasing activities such as farming and household chores both men and women participate in this dance, men accompanied by singing and the beats of the Madal drum while women dance. The performance also involves the invocation of four deities: *Devi Devchuli, Hemchuli, Gangachuli and Barachuli* symbolizing divine blessings and protection.
- 3. Kusunda Ghatu:** This rare form of Ghatu is deeply spiritual and is linked to ancestral worship. It involves complex rituals where the dancers and priests invoke ancestral spirits, seeking their guidance and blessings for the well-being of the community.

Performance & Cultural Significance Of Ghatu Naach

Ghatu Naach follows a highly structured sequence of rituals and performances that are deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual traditions of the Gurung community. The celebration begins on the eve of the performance with a communal feast known as *Dar*, where villagers gather to share food, music, and reinforce social bonds. This collective participation reflects the communal nature of the tradition and its role in strengthening cultural identity. The various rituals involved and the elements of performance are mentioned below:

Selection of Dancers (Ghatu Sari)

The selection of dancers, known as *Ghatu Sari*, is a sacred and ritualized process that takes place annually on the occasion of *Shree Panchami*. This process begins with a special *puja* performed to invoke divine guidance. Only prepubescent girls are considered eligible, and they must meet strict criteria symbolizing ritual purity, including having uncut hair since birth and no visible scars or physical blemishes.

During the selection, the girls perform traditional Ghatu songs in a communal setting. Those who exhibit signs of trance or spiritual possession are believed to have been chosen by divine forces and are selected as *Ghatu Sari*. This process reflects the strong belief in supernatural agency and the sacred nature of the performance.



Ritual Cycle and Performance Structure

On the day of the performance, both dancers and priests observe ritual fasting, typically consuming only fruits as a form of purification. The performance formally begins with a ceremonial *puja* conducted by a village priest to invoke blessings from deities and nature spirits.

The ritual cycle continues until *Baisakh Purnima*, which marks the official conclusion of the Ghatu performance season. The final ceremonies are usually held at sacred locations such as temples or riverbanks, where priests perform concluding rituals.

After this, the performance of Ghatu Naach is strictly prohibited until the next *Shree Panchami*, reinforcing its cyclical and sacred character. Although a variation known as *Baramashey Ghatu* exists and can be performed throughout the year, it is generally avoided to preserve ritual sanctity.

Ghatu is an extensive oral epic performance that can be categorized into three main styles:

1. Dhile

- Slow and gradual in tempo.
- Movements are soft, controlled, and meditative.
- Emphasis on emotional depth and spiritual connection.

2. Chamke

- Fast and energetic in nature.
- Includes quicker gestures and dynamic movements.
- Often highlights dramatic or intense moments of the story.

3. Yalala

- Moderate tempo (between Dhile and Chamke).
- Balanced combination of grace and energy.
- Acts as a transitional or expressive middle form.



Narrative and Performative Elements

The central narrative of Ghatu revolves around the tragic story of King Parashuram and Queen Ambawati of Lamjung. The royal couple leads a harmonious life with their son, Balkrishna, until the king departs for war and is killed in battle. Overcome with grief, Queen Ambawati performs *Sati*, culminating in a powerful emotional climax that defines the performance.

A distinctive feature of Ghatu Naach is the precise coordination between music, lyrics, and dance. Each song is associated with specific, predetermined movements, creating a unified and highly symbolic performance. The dance is traditionally performed over three days and three nights, often during the full moon of Baisakh.

The performance begins with the invocation of nature spirits associated with mountains, forests, and rivers, such as Hiuchuli, Barchuli, and Deuchuli. During the dance, the Ghatu sari often perform with closed eyes and may enter trance-like states, which are considered the most sacred aspect of the ritual. These trance states are interpreted as moments of divine possession, reinforcing the spiritual significance of the performance.

Costumes in Ghatu Naach

The costumes of Ghatu Naach are based on traditional Gurung attire, designed for both **ritual purity and ease of movement**. Dancers wear the *Ghalek* (draped blouse), *Lungi* (wrapped skirt), and *colorful shawls*, typically in red, yellow, or maroon, made from fabrics like cotton or velvet.

Headpieces are made from **fresh flowers and roasted paddy**, placed on uncombed hair, symbolizing a connection to **nature, fertility, and the divine**.



Accessories are minimal, usually including **glass beads and simple silver ornaments** such as necklaces and bangles, ensuring the focus remains on the dance's **sacred and symbolic significance** rather than decoration.

Training process of Ghatu Naach

The training of Ghatu dancers begins immediately after their selection on *Shree Panchami* and continues for three to four months, culminating in performances around *Baisakh Purnima*. This period involves intensive physical, vocal, and spiritual preparation.

Physically, dancers must develop strength, balance, and endurance to maintain controlled postures and execute slow, deliberate movements over extended durations. The training is guided by experienced elder women, often referred to as *Ghatu Guruma*, *Lama*, or *Ghatu Maiju*, who transmit the tradition orally. They are sometimes assisted by priests or shamans to ensure ritual authenticity.

The training process includes:

- **Vocal Training:** Dancers memorize long narrative songs in archaic forms of Nepali or related dialects, focusing on rhythm, pronunciation, and expressive delivery.
- **Physical Training:** Emphasis is placed on controlled gestures, synchronized group formations, and symbolic movements that align with the narrative structure.
- **Spiritual Preparation:** Rituals such as *pujas* and chanting sessions are conducted to prepare dancers for trance states, which are believed to involve divine possession.

By the end of the training, dancers achieve a high level of synchronization and the ability to perform in deep spiritual immersion, particularly during significant segments such as *Barha Ghatu*. To maintain ritual purity, participants follow strict disciplines, including dietary restrictions—often consuming only fruits on performance days—which is believed to enhance spiritual receptivity.

Instruments Played with Ghatu Naach

Ghatu Naach relies primarily on **vocal music**, with instruments playing a minimal and supportive role. The narrative is carried through traditional songs sung by lead singers, often in a call-and-response style.

Main elements:

- **Vocal singing:** Core of the performance; guides rhythm, mood, and dance movements.
- **Clapping (taal):** Maintains tempo and coordination.

Accompanying instruments:

Madal:

Provides basic rhythmic support.



Jhyaali (cymbals):

Accentuates beats and transitions.



Murchunga:

Adds subtle tonal texture.



Bansuri (flute):

Occasionally used for melody.



Preserving and Promoting Ghatu: Ensuring its Survival

Ghatu dance has adapted in response to modern cultural and social changes, particularly through the introduction of shorter performances designed for tourists and cultural festivals. Traditionally performed over several days, these condensed versions focus on key narrative elements, making the dance more accessible to contemporary audiences while supporting tourism in Gurung-dominated regions such as Lamjung and Syangja. Another significant adaptation is the use of recorded traditional songs, which helps transmit the art form to younger generations, especially as oral traditions decline due to urbanization.

Despite these efforts, Ghatu continues to face serious challenges. Rural-to-urban migration, economic pressures, and a growing emphasis on formal education have led to declining participation among youth. In regions like Palpa and Syangja, the tradition is considered at risk of disappearing without active intervention, as younger generations show diminishing interest in preserving cultural practices.

To counter this decline, community groups and cultural organizations—particularly in Lamjung—have initiated revival programs. These include workshops, training sessions, and the inclusion of Ghatu in school curricula, aiming to pass the tradition on to children. Encouragingly, as of 2025, local initiatives in areas such as Jalpa Dholimara in Palpa have started training young girls in Ghatu, reflecting renewed grassroots commitment to preserving this cultural heritage, especially within the Magar community.

Since the early 2000s, Ghatu has also gained wider recognition by being featured in national cultural events like Tamu Lhosar celebrations. In these contexts, it is sometimes blended with other Gurung folk traditions to strengthen community identity and cultural pride. This increased visibility has contributed to its recognition as an important element of Nepal's intangible cultural heritage, with ongoing safeguarding efforts emphasizing its significance within indigenous performing arts.

Conclusion

Ghatu stands as a profound expression of the cultural, spiritual, and artistic life of the Gurung community. As a traditional dance-drama rooted in oral narratives and ritual practices, it goes beyond mere performance to embody a living heritage that connects generations through shared beliefs, emotions, and collective memory. The study highlights how Ghatu integrates music, movement, mythology, and spirituality into a unified form that reflects themes of love, sacrifice, devotion, and destiny, particularly through the poignant story of King Pashramu and Queen Yambawati.

The analysis of its historical roots reveals the dynamic nature of Ghatu, shaped by cultural interactions and evolving religious influences over time. Despite originating within the Gurung community, the tradition has been adopted and adapted by other communities, demonstrating its wider cultural relevance. Its ritualistic elements—such as trance states, spiritual possession, and strict performer selection—underline its sacred significance and distinguish it from other folk performance traditions.

However, the study also underscores the challenges faced by Ghatu in the contemporary era. Modernization, migration, and changing social priorities have contributed to a decline in participation and transmission. While adaptations such as shorter performances and inclusion in cultural festivals have increased its visibility, they also raise concerns about the dilution of its ritual depth and authenticity.

Encouragingly, recent revival efforts through community initiatives, educational programs, and cultural organizations indicate a renewed commitment to preserving this tradition. Sustained efforts are essential to ensure that Ghatu continues to thrive as a vital component of intangible cultural heritage. This includes documentation, institutional support, intergenerational training, and the active involvement of local communities.

Ghatu is not only an artistic tradition but also a symbol of identity, spirituality, and cultural resilience. Its preservation is crucial, not only for the Gurung community but also for the broader understanding of South Asian folk traditions. Protecting and promoting Ghatu will ensure that its rich legacy endures in an increasingly globalized world.

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