

Bhaktapur
Nepal's Capital of Music and Dance
A Study on Conservation & Promotion of Traditional Music and Dance

Jagadish Rana
Kathmandu

Bhaktapur is a unique satellite town, 15 kms from Kathmandu, the capital of the Himalayan country of Nepal. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that its 60,000 peasant population can boast of over 200 groups of traditional dance and music, performing to this day. These age old forms of performing arts have been preserved and perpetuated by the local inhabitants through many generations, by their system of verbal tradition and complete socialization. Almost every male member of the town - young and old, is a performing artist, while the women folk give the necessary encouragement and stimulus to their men. Hence, they undoubtedly form a distinct part of the large mosaic of the International Heritage of performing Arts.

To a modern man, who marks the passage of time according to a glossy calender on cold office walls, it will appear rather strange that the calender of Bhaktapur is represented by a single dance - the Nava Durga dance. The life cycle of this dance divides their calender year into lunar cycles. It is therefore, the performing arts which establish the basic harmony of Bhaktapur. They provide an insight into the primordial function of art. As well as, display a novel variant of sonorous improvisation and exotic symbols moving towards aesthetics, which repudiate the hegemony of intellect and allow the artists to express freely and subjectively as a community.

This unique and ancient culture of dance and music is facing the onslaught of physical, social and economic presence, which is predictably leading it towards a process of decline. The world of Bhaktapur has expanded and the tide of time has entered Bhaktapur to make its presence felt. The influx of foreign tourists and the itch of the new generation to grow out of the town is evident. The change in the occupational scenario has added to the problems of the performing artistes. Devoted patrons and generous donors are few and far between. The costumes of the dancers are threadbare whereas, the instruments of the musicians are also in a pathetic condition. Due to inflation of the materials and wages of the craftsmen, and conversely, the comparative decline of income of the artists, their predicament is even more sorry than ever before. Their land donations (which provided the 'kulus' or drum makers with a yearly amount of rice for maintenance of the instruments, drum house, expenses of Lamp oil, wicks and biannual rituals) has been stopped off, which has driven the traditional groups towards impending elimination.

It is now for the present generation of patriotic people of Nepal who care for their cultural heritage, promoters of cultural Heritage and Art and International Agencies to step forward to help save these economically handicapped, yet culturally proud music lovers and dancers of Bhaktapur. One might wonder if it is possible to conserve and promote the traditional music and dance of Bhaktapur at this stage. If so then how?

In fact, there is yet much traditional dance and music in Bhaktapur, which can be conserved and promoted. Anyone visiting this small but compact town in the mornings and evenings any day of the year will witness dancers and musicians with scintillating music, casually filing past. But those ardent lovers of traditional arts, who want to be part of a more complete and intense experience, mingling with the tumultuous crowds of the town, engulfed obliviously in their cultural activities - a la Bhaktapur - should visit the town during particular festivals.

Their New Year starts near 13th April every year, with the "Bisket Jatra" festival. For five days the inhabitants of Bhaktapur, one and all, are in a riotous festive mood. Musical processions of singers and drummers is a common sight. The 10 days of Mvahani (Bhaktapur's Dassera) which falls in September/October (during the bright half of the month of Aswin), provides the best opportunity for

those interested in ritualistic prayers and dances. To witness and understand the completeness of socialization of the dances and music by its inhabitants, the week of 'Sapar' (beginning from the first day of the dark half of the month of Bhadra around 18th August), provides the ideal opportunity. The first day of the festival, Gai Jatra (Cow Festival), provides an enthralling experience in itself.

It is of little wonder that even today there are 6 navadapha, 63 dapha and 36 dhalca, 1 kvakhi baja, 23 dhimaybaja, 3 dhabaja, a nayakhi baja, 2 kabaja, 3 gulabaja (Sayami), 3 gulabaja (Sakya) -- all these are groups of voluntary drummers and traditional musicians. There are 6 gaine or sarangi players and 9 jugi groups, who are sustained by local donations. There are 13 bhajan groups who sing and chant religious prayers and even the epic poem of Jai Deva, the great poet-saint. When required, these groups are supported by necessary numbers. There are also 30 dance groups existing, performing a wide range of traditional dances from the primitive forms to the very elaborate Tantric forms. All these dances represent myriad felt experiences - intense, immediate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid and rhythmic. The predominantly "Tantric" dances lift the lid of the repressive authority which a conscious mind exerts on the unconscious. Thus, making it possible for the sympathetic audience to reach out and experience the mytho-poetic level of consciousness.

All these unique, vibrant, soul stirring music and dance forms which impart a rich experience, are in themselves, a wealth of ancient tradition worthy of being conserved and promoted. It would indeed be a pity to let this 'living' art form fade into oblivion when there is yet so much that can be conserved, before it is too late.

In my book, "Bhaktapur - the capital town of dance and music - A study on conservation and development of traditional dance and music," I have presented in greater detail the need, the process, the necessary steps and the action plan for conservation and promotion of the dances and music of Bhaktapur.

Before venturing into the field of traditional forms of Art or Cultural Heritage there are some fore-warnings to the zealous enthusiast.

- a) The first caution is against the imposition of 'cultural hegemony'. There have been a fair number of instances of well-intentioned intellectuals tearing apart the basic fabric of traditional culture. Not out of malice,

but ignorance. They impose 'cultural hegemony', over what was tradition-organic and based on an ethos different from the 'civilized' reformer. It is a common presumption of modern man, especially those with western education, to regard themselves as the "end product" of civilization.

To dispel this grossly exaggerated and inaccurate presumption, the following example should suffice. The simple peasant folk of Bhaktapur sacrifice animals with the holy intention of appeasing their gods. A so called 'civilized' man, would probably infer it as one of the last relics of barbarianism of a bygone era. But, the same 'civilized' man will partake with great relish, of meat which might have been cured in a brutal manner. In the name of progress, he'll unquestioningly take for granted the manufacture of bombs and arsenal for man, which kill thousands of innocent citizens, resulting in an act akin to man-slaughter. Surely, we cannot claim to be more civilized or morally superior in thought or action than the simple folk of Bhaktapur.

- b) The other pitfall to guard against, is 'Out of Context Exhibition'. Most of the music and dance groups of Bhaktapur combine the artistic achievement with definite social and ritualistic functions. In most cases religious beliefs and practices are the bed-rock of these art forms. Therefore, the element of "Dhyana" or psychic energy generated through concentration on the Nasa Deo (the deity of dance), is central to the artistic performance as a whole. The dance arena are built on city squares. The shrine and shelter of the dance groups with ample sitting arrangements provided by parapets, ascending steps of surrounding temples and houses with intricately carved windows, form a perfect backdrop for the dances. The music is precisely attuned to this setting. Added to this, the sympathetic and completely devoted audience (mostly inhabitants of Bhaktapur and patrons who have made it possible for this ancient art to survive), form the life and spirit of these dances. Though the city and its spirit cannot be carried along to other places great care has to be taken in exhibiting these dances outside Bhaktapur. In fact I have been in the midst of such a predicament myself. While staging a Bhairava Dance in one of the five star hotels of Kathmandu,

the eight Pongas (long trumpets with reed holdings) had to be reduced to four. Even these were too shrill and adversely affected the mellifluous resonance of the instruments.

- c) Caution has to be taken against 'Out of Context' Marketing. To survive in today's world of ever-rising prices, the artistes will have to find new means to substantiate their meagre income. One such profitable and popular concept these days, is to hold stage shows. Staging shows by novices, with the sole intention of commercial gain to the exhibitors (with no understanding or love for their exquisite craft), would amount to gross exploitation of these simple folks of Bhaktapur. Besides, it will erode their creative originality and individuality, which has been conserved so far, against all odds. Having fully understood the implications of the above pitfalls and steering clear of them, the zealous enthusiast venturing into the field of Cultural Heritage and Traditional Art Forms, can make his contribution felt in many ways.

To begin with, the following steps can be taken towards the conservation of the dances and music of Bhaktapur-

- i) Preparing a checklist of existing dances and music in Bhaktapur.
- ii) Gathering information about the individual dancers and musicians (Dr. Gert. Matthais Wegner, a drum-master in his own right, has done considerable work in this respect)
- iii) Drawing up an inventory of the costumes and musical instruments of each group-and their present condition.
- iv) Estimates for repairs and replacement of each costume and instrument.,
- v) Estimate for making each group self-sufficient.
- vi) Finding donors (cash or kind) and devoted patrons (preferably) for each group. They should find means/projects to raise necessary funds for the groups.

At this stage, it is important to understand that these groups have survived till today, because of their unique system of socialization and support from generous patrons. The royal patrons of the Malla regime donated sizable tracts of land. The local patrons also gave land donations, besides out-right

donations, for costumes, instruments and other paraphernalia. Members of each group contributed towards ritual feasts, community worship and other such events. The perfect socialization thus achieved, gave them autonomy and self-sufficiency. They were completely free from bureaucratic dependency and authority, which would have proved lethal to their survival. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that even today these groups be supported by contributions and patronage from individuals, art and culture foundations, voluntary and corporate organizations which are eager to promote these groups without "purchasing" their autonomy. Now a days, there is great enthusiasm in promoting sports and culture. How much more unique would it be to patronize and promote an ancient living art form, with its dazzling tapestry of sound, colour and movement, breaking all barriers of language, colour and creed, making a lasting impact on the psyche of hundreds of people for many years to come.

For the conservation of traditional art, it is important to distinguish between conservation of inanimate art objects and 'living' or performing art forms. The conservation of the environment is an important aspect for the survival of the latter.

The dance and music masters, the dancers and musicians themselves, on the one hand; and the audience, patrons and people of Bhaktapur on the other, are intricately linked. There still exist dedicated masters of music and dance, as well as eager students of the art. However, urbanization is first creeping into this peasant town and its new generation is turning to other vocations besides farming, which is seasonal and provides leisure time for indulgence in the arts. Traditional faiths and beliefs are slowly peeling off layer by layer, as are the idols and temples that abound the town.

In the face of present challenges, and to save what remains, the following steps should be taken-

- i) Assist and encourage the master dancers and musicians in every possible way.
- ii) Generate a sense of pride and respect for these art forms among the new generation in Bhaktapur

- iii) Spread awareness of these dances and music in Nepal and abroad. Thus, carving a niche for them among other internationally acclaimed performing arts.

To achieve the above goals, besides involving the society at large for patronizing individual groups, there is an urgent need for setting up a Centre for the Performing Arts at Bhaktapur itself. Here, the government of Nepal should be an active participant in conserving and promoting its country's unique Cultural Heritage by contributing in the following ways-

- i) Provide suitable site and or a historical building for the Centre of Performing Arts (such buildings are being used for art and brass museums and police stations).
- ii) Form an autonomous body to plan and formulate policies for the proper functioning of the Centre.
- iii) Provide funds and assistance to the Centre.
- iv) Help the Centre to procure funds from international agencies and government departments of art and culture, eager to contribute towards its projects.

The Centre should assume the following functions:

- i) It will be the National Centre for the Performing Arts.
- ii) Erect a Deo Chen (House of God), which is necessary for creating a traditional atmosphere for the artists.
- iii) Have a courtyard in its premises for exhibiting and practicing the dances.
- iv) Encourage learning, teaching and experimenting of music, dance and allied subjects by new and existed groups.
- v) Facilities for storing costumes, instruments and other accessories.
- vi) Archives for manuscripts on dance and music. Repository for records, documents, audio-visuals and other information relating to performing arts.
- vii) Library on performing arts.
- viii) Audio-visual facilities to be made available.
- ix) Meeting place for gurus and artistes. Holding of seminars and groups discussions.
- x) Special cell for promoting these groups in Nepal and abroad.

"Concern and partnership without interference" should be the hallmark of the relationship between the Centre and the performing groups, because autonomy is very essential and basic for them to survive and retain their creative originality.

The local gurus, their representatives and the performers themselves, must be actively associated with the running of the centre.

The performing arts of Bhaktapur cannot survive in isolation. They will stagnate and die a natural death, unless far-sighted goals are set for a wider base and acceptance. In achieving this end, the university of Nepal can play a crucial role. The Tribhuvan University should open a Department of Traditional Dances and Music of Nepal. This will promote academic and research oriented study of the subject, thereby adding new dimensions to traditional art forms. Including this in the school and college syllabi will surely arouse awareness and interest among the younger generations of Nepal.

I have mentioned three definite areas where the work for conservation and development of Traditional Dances and Music of Bhaktapur should be taken up. Namely,

- a) Local groups of dancers and musicians, and the society that produces them.
- b) Centre for the Performing Arts (as suggested)
- c) University and Educational Institutions of Nepal

These three focal areas should work in close liaison, so that they can mutually benefit from the knowledge of each. This can be accomplished if the ever expanding audio-visual system is utilized to take up this challenge and maintain the traffic of ideas between these three areas. Culture and civilization flourish where there is exchange of ideas, so it is necessary to create a suitable climate and opportunity within Bhaktapur and cultural centers the world over, which would ensure an all-round progress in this field.

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Setting the delicate balance between benefactors, benefits and beneficiaries is an important aspect where cautious steps have to be taken. To man such a project of Conservation and Development, it is essential to train and educate selected personnel in the field of Traditional Performing Arts and Cultural Heritage as well as in latest audio-visual techniques.

The above suggestions have been given in greater detail in my book *Bhaktapur - The Capital Town of Dance and Music* (in Nepali) [*Nācgānko Rājdhani, Bhaktapur*, Kathmandu 1989, Amar Shamsheer J. B. Rana]