



The Magnanimous Mangar: Through the Landscape of Folklore in the Indo-Nepali Society.

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Abstract

The Magars or Mangars are one of the indigenous groups of Sikkim and Nepal, belong to the Kirata community of the Eastern Himalayas. They are stocky, strong, vigorous, hardy and relatively fat. They are typically five feet to five feet three inches. The Mangar in the folklores which has been passed through generation to generation, portray them as the simplest minded, innocent and docile people in the Nepali society. The narrative of Mangar in Nepali literature, writings and folklores somehow mentioned them not as someone with quick intelligence, keen perception and the ability to understand or learn things rapidly. Hence, the article narrates them based on the Nepali folklores and their inability to be part of the mainstream of contemporary Indo-Nepali society.

Keywords: Folklore, oral narrative, myth, docile, indigenous, Mongoloid.

Introduction

Folklore is the active recollection of a people, handing down values, beliefs, and world views from generation to generation in the form of oral narratives, songs, dances, and stories. The Mangar community, one of the numerous ethnic communities in India and Nepal, has a distinct cultural position with a very strong tradition of folk songs, rituals, and performance practices. The term 'folk' can be referred to a group of people and the term 'lore' can be referred to the various activities of that particular group of people or a community, such as verbal lore, material lore and customary lore.¹ It connects the past and present by reflecting and preserving a community's common identity through anything from rituals, crafts, and even food ways to proverbs, music, and fairy tales.

¹Toelken Barre, 1996, *The Dynamics of Folklore*, University Press of Colorado, Utah State University Press, pp.,1-12.

According to M. H. Abrams, since the mid 19th century, Folklore has been the collective name applied to sayings, verbal compositions, and social rituals that have been handed down solely or at least primarily, by word of mouth or example rather than in written form.... Folklore includes legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs, riddles, spells,...customary activities at births, marriages, and deaths: and traditional dances and forms of drama performed on holidays or at communal gatherings. ² Martha C. Sims and Martin Stephens in their text, *Living Folklore* mentions, Folklore is informally learnt, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures and our traditions, that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions behaviors and materials. It is also the interactive, dynamic process of creating, communicating, and performing as we share that knowledge with other people.³

Jane Garry and Hasan El_ Shamy quote Alan Dundes' narrate folklore as;

Folklore includes myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue twisters and leave- taking formulas. It also includes folk costumes, folk dance, folk drama, folk art, folk belief, folk medicine, folk instrumental music, folk metaphors and names.⁴

Stith Thompson opined that though the word folklore is more than a century old, no exact consensus has ever been reached as to its meaning. The common idea exist in all folklore is that of tradition, something transmitted from one person to another and preserved either by memory, or practice rather than written record.⁵ Jan Harold Brunvand mentions, "Folklore is the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses the knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings and beliefs transmitted in the traditional forms by word of mouth or customary".⁶

Alan Dundes's study of folklore explains folklore as a vital medium to pass down the cultural knowledge and wisdom from generation to generation and from peer to peer. Dundes's title invokes the "mirror" concept of Franz Boas (the father of modern anthropology), that folklore is invaluable as a reflection of a particular

² M. H. Abrams, Geoffrey Galt Harpham , *A Glossary of Literary Terms, Ninth Edition*, Michael Rosenberg, 2009, Wadsworth Cengage Learning, pp.,138-139.

³ Sims C. Martha and Martine Stephens.2011, *Living folklore: An introduction to the study of people and their traditions*. University Press of Colorado, p.,12.

⁴ Garry, Jane Hasan El Shamy, 2017, *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook*: Routledge, p. 8.

⁵ Thompson, Stith, 1955, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, Volume 4: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances*, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends. Vol.4, Indiana University Press.

⁶ Brunvand, Jan Harold, 1968, *The study of American folklore: An introduction*, WW Norton, Cerny, Charlene. "Exploring Folk Art: Twenty Years of Thought on Craft, Work and Aesthetics." (1991): 431-433.

culture's conditions and values.⁷ Barre, in the *Dynamics of Folklore*, perceives that to consider folklore only as 'verbal art' is to limit the term to oral art forms whereas folk arts like dance forms, painting or sculpture fall outside of the range of such a term.⁸

According to Sachlinkert, folklore is an expressive culture shared by a specific group of people, culture, or subculture. It includes oral traditions such as tales, legends, Proverbs, poems, and other oral traditions.⁹ The Mangar an indigenous tribe and one of the prominent castes of Nepali community is similarly surrounded with folklores via assumptions, feelings and beliefs transmitted in the traditional forms by word of mouth or customary.

The Mangar as an Indigenous Tribe

The Magars or Mangars,¹⁰ are one of the indigenous groups of Sikkim and Nepal, belong to the Kirata community of the Eastern Himalayas. They are one of the oldest tribes of Sikkim. According to Rajesh Verma, the Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Mangar, and Tamang tribes of Sikkim are all considered Kiratis. The first people to settle in ancient Sikkim were the Mangars, Limbus, and Lepcha. Iman Singh Chemjong opined that the ancestral home of Mangar was a place called as Shin in the northern Himalayas.¹¹ Hamilton (1819) described the Magar as a Himalayan Tribe "Wallowing in all the ancient abominations of the mountaineers", and found anywhere in the Himalayan region.¹²

In a Copper Plate Inscription of Shivadeva, dated 221 Newar Era (1110CE) is discovered.¹³ on which the name of a *vishaya*, or province, called Mangavara is engraved. Numerous Scholars believe that the name was an archaic form of Magar. Michael Witzel also mentioned that, "Magars were apparently known already to the Mahabharata as Maga, to the Purnas under the name of Mangara and in a Nepalese copper plate inscription of 1100/1AD as Mangvara".¹⁴ They turn into prominence as a great power in about 1100 A.D., when Mukunda Sena, the Magar King of Nepal invaded and conquered the Nepal Valley. He committed dreadful atrocities

⁷ Simon J. Bronner, 2007, *The Meaning of Folklore An Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*, Utah State University Press, pp., 53-54.

⁸ Barre, Toelken.1996, *The Dynamics of Folklore*. Utah State University Press, pp. 183-184.

⁹ Schlinkert jane c., 2007, *Lebendige folkloristische Ausdrucksweisen traditioneller Gemeinschaften (English translated)*. Berlin, Germany: BWV–Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag., pp.30 & 33.

¹⁰ Grierson A. G.1909, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 3, Part-I, Calcutta. the name of the tribe is sometimes spelt Magar and sometimes Mangar. The latter form is apparently common in Darjeeling.p.206.

¹¹ Chemjong I.S.,1967, *History and Culture of KiratPeople*, Kanchan Printing Press,Kathmandu, 4th edition, 2003, pp.70-71.

¹² Vansittart Eden, 1896, *Notes on Nepal*, Government Printing India, Calcutta p.104

¹³ Pradhan Kumar,1991, *The Gorkha Conquests, the process and consequences of the Unification of Nepal, with reference to Eastern Nepal*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 2nd edition, 2009,p.35.

¹⁴ Michael Witzel, E.J., 1991, *Kham Magar shamanism of Nepal*, Kathmandu, p.18.

during the reign of Hari Deva, King of Nepal.¹⁵ S.K. Chatterjee mentioned that the Mongoloid tribes speaking dialects of the *Tibeto- Burman* branch of the Sino- Tibetan family started locating themselves in India and Tibet before 1000 B.C., the Newar, Lepchas, Magars, Gurung etc, were the later arrivals speakers in India.¹⁶

Physical Characteristics of Mangar

Their general characteristics are that they are stocky, strong, vigorous, hardy and relatively fat. They are typically five feet to five feet three inches, though some northern Magars are taller than average, maybe due to the Bhotia people being mixed into their blood. The skin complexion of the people in the plains and lower altitude Terai regions is darker to light brown, whereas the ones living in the hills have a light brown to fair complexion. They have less facial and body hairs and prominent malar bones (cheekbones). They have an epicanthus fold in their eyes (small normal fold of skin from the upper eyelid sometimes covering the inner corner of the eye, as in many Asian peoples). Their eyebrows are very slight and perched on the high brow ridges.

Their nose is quite small and flat with depressed nasal roots. Lips are medium and everted (turned outward or inside out) but some show slanted in-tegment lips. This is a Proto-Australoid feature. They also display Mongoloid features, like large teeth. Their incisors are flat choppers and their ears are large.¹⁷

Risley mentioned that judged by their physical characteristics the Mangars, must be classed as Mongoloid, their naso-malar index being slightly lower than that of the Tibetans while their complexion, eyelids, stature, and the general cut of their features stamp them as a cross in which Mongolian element on the whole predominates.¹⁸

Sikhanath Suvedi regarding the physical features of Mangar writes:¹⁹

*“Chepto Chhati pithaun, kamar shir, nayan, kehi sana bhayeka,
Batiyeke pinraula sharibhari nasa dhaki bhitrai gayeka,
Dherai agala na pudka gahun sarir angka, jiu nirogiva bhari,
Nepto nakhh unxajyad aasal magar ka nasty junga na dahri.”*

In other words, the Mangars are of least sharp look with flattened chest and small waist, head, and eyes. All their lower leg's part is covered with veins short heightened, flat nose without having beard or moustache. The Mangars are considered the true portrait of the Gurkha warriors, never turning back and always ready to protect the nation by beheading the enemy head. This is the sort of feeling the Mangar people have about

¹⁵ Vansittart Eden, 1896, *op.cit.*, Calcutta p.103.

¹⁶ Chatterjee S.K.1951, *Kirata-Jana-Kriti, The Indo-Mongoloids: Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India*, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, p.41.

¹⁷ People of Nepal; Magar, 2007, Pilgrims Publishing, Varanasi, pp., 7-8.

¹⁸ Risley H.H., 1891, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta. P., 74.

¹⁹ Suvedi Sikharnath & Sharma Taranth, 1985, *Thar Gotrawali Prabarawali*, Yashoda Pustakalay, Durgaghat, Varanasi, pp., 22-24. He published a genealogy in Benaras, India in 1911 CE (1968, B.S.).

themselves and do not know the caste hierarchy of the Hinduistic state. Thus, the Mangars are the people who are socially placed in the category of the *panichalnejat* meaning those above the water pollution level.²⁰

Description of Mangar in the folklores

- I. In a certain village, there was a Mangar family. The family consisted of a mother, father, and a young son. One day, while searching for prey, he left home with a pack of arrows on his back. He got tired wandering around and started looking for food. He went to quench his thirst to the nearby river. He was fully satisfied after drinking the water and thought of carrying the water to the parents to meet out their hunger. Although he did not get any prey, he was happy he could satisfy his thirst with the cold water and decided to carry same to his parents. He wondered how to get water and found a solution. He took out his arrow holder basket and filled it with water.

After reaching home and he offered the chilled water to the parents and went off for his work. After a while, he came and wished to know from the parents about how the water was, but he found both his mother and father sleeping soundly. At this he thought they really liked the water so sleeping soundly without knowing the fact that the water he brought was poisonous due to the arrows he was carrying for killing the prey. He innocently became happy that he quench their hunger and take out his instrument *madal*. He beat *madal* joyfully and sang the song prominent in the Nepali society, which goes like this;

“Tyang Tyang Khola ko, Matyang pani, Deh e sitlo” (the chilled water of river quenched the thirst and cooled the body)

A similar kind of folklore about a married couple is also found in the practice

Ujjari khola ko khujiro pani, Deh nai sitlo

*Uth n auth nani ko aama, Kya mitho nidlu.*²¹

- II. Once an old Mangar man while resting in the courtyard of his home after working in his field was suddenly pooped by the sparrow who had built the nest in his hut. The poop directly fell on his nose. The old man got angry and burnt down the nest of the sparrow built in his thatched hut. Thus, the fire burnt the bird's shelter and consequently it flew away. Seeing this, the old man rejoiced and started singing without realizing the same fire had also engulfed his own thatched hut.

‘Kanha Basauli Gauthali, tutyo timro bas’

(Where would you stay sparrow? your shelter is shattered)

²⁰ Chemjong I.S., 1967, *History and Culture of Kirat People*, Kanchan Printing Press, Kathmandu, 4th edition, 2003, pp., 148-150.

²¹ Prof Yonjan Josh, 1993, Mangarjong Journal, entitled ‘*Mangar Bhasa Meri mitaama, Mangar Sanskriti mero Mitbabu*’, editor, Prem Kumar Allay, Magar Laga Sangh, Central Committee, Kurseong, pp., 28-29.

But only after the fire that had engulfed his own thatched hut and burned down, the old man regret his mistake, anger, recklessness, and foolishness.²²

From this legend, it is seen that the Mangar caste, when gets angry, tends to be satisfied only after taking revenge without thinking the consequences. However, when it cools down, they also tend to express their sorrow and grief due to their anger. The proof of such feeling is expressed in the song after the sparrow ran away. The Mangars express their feelings in happiness and sorrow through the *Madal*, the musical instrument. This also gives an insight into the structure of the folksongs prevalent among them. It can be summed up that the main musical instrument of the Mangar caste is the *Madal* which has become an integral part of the Nepali culture today.

There is a legend or folktale that explains the connection of the Mangar and Madal. Tihar is one of the auspicious festivals of the Nepali community. *Bhailo* and *deusi* is sung during the time. It is generally played on the new moon of Mangsir, or the end of month October. There is folklore about the *kirat* chief Bali Hang who ordered his subjects to lighten every household on the dark night of this day and pleased the God of Death to avoid his forecasted death. After the king Bali Hang survived, he ordered his chiefs to inform his subjects to observe one day as the day of rejoice. They should eat, drink and make merriment on that day. Hence every new moon of the Mangsir is observed as the festival day every year. Thus, they composed '*Phailo and Deusire*', which means we helped the priest king, later which became '*Bhailo and Deusire*' (*Pha-i-lo* means let us help, *Dewsi* means priest, *Rey* means king).²³

III. Tihar is celebrated by all the Nepali communities with great amusement by beating *madal* and playing '*Bhailo and Deusire*' in every Nepali household. In returns every household welcome and offer them food item, delicacies, handmade alcohol rice bear (prepared by few families). During Tihar, once a Mangar man while playing *deusire* one house to other was offered food and some local beverages. After sipping it in some households, he got intoxicated in the dark night and sang the *deusire* in front of a lighting site considering it a house, till dawn, singing the verse, '*Ghar pati aamay niskinai lagin, daan ko thali lyantai aatin*', which means the lady of the house is about to come with offering. It was in the dawn, he realized that it was a deserted sloping site which was enlightened with fireflies in the night. From this incident onwards the Mangars are known in the Nepali society as the '*oralo ma deusi khelne*', one who plays *deusi* in sloping site.²⁴ The folklores define them as the most simple and docile people of the community.

²² Ibid., pp., 29-30.

²³ Chemjong I.S., *op.cit.* pp., 143-144.

²⁴ Prof Yonjan J.1993, *op.cit.*, p., 30

IV. Apart from this there are other folklores and proverbs which describe the innocence and simplicity of the Mangar people viz.,

- A. *Githa vyagur palayo, Magar buro ramayo*(in Nepali), *Gittha* and *vyagur* are some wild tubers. It is believed that the Mangar man rejoices when it grows in the forests. It reflects that are dependency of Mangar people on forests for their livelihood.
- B. *Bahun ke man, Newar ke dhan, Magar ke van yahake machale* (Mangar language). It is perceived in the Nepali society, that one should not share feelings (ideas) to the Brahmin, property to the Newar and forest to the Mangar. The trio shall respectively make optimum benefits of the aforesaid three factors.
- C. *Magar anikal le masile, makai khareri le masile*
Mangar are considered one of the most hard working and laborious caste in the Nepali society. They are unstoppable and unbreakable and can survive in any rare circumstances in life just like maize survive even in the drought)²⁵
- D. '*Asal magar ka junga nasti*, 'and '*Kuire bahun, khuile khas junge magar ras na bas*' are some of the prominent proverbs have been utilized by some of the renown authors in Nepali literature. Mahakavi Laxmi Prasad Devkota used two of these proverbs in his essays of *Laxmi Nibandh Sangraha*.²⁶
- E. Sikharnath Subedi mentions Mangar as the assiduous and the courageous fighter with fearlessness, skill and valor, in the following way;

"Doko namlo bhari tari pari aaye bokne, Bairi sita aghi sari ladikhana sakne"

*Ladai ma gayepaxi, fateh gari aauni, Sarkar le diyeko takmaharu Laune."*²⁷

Evaluation

The Mangar in the folklores which has been passed through generation to generation portray them as the simplest minded, innocent and docile people in the Nepali society. Though, the narrative of Mangar in Nepali literature, writings and folklores somehow mentioned them not as someone with quick intelligence, keen perception and the ability to understand or learn things rapidly, but it displays the simplicity of the people with Mongolian features in their appearance. Even though, the post colonial century reflects slightly a different scenario of them, some as the renowned author, singer, artists, academician, social and political activist.etc. Late Master Mitrasen Thapa Magar, folk singer, lyrics writer, dramatist social worker and composer of the renowned song *laure ko reli mai* is one such great personality. True warriors, and headstrong people, the Mangars were preferred in the army for their bravery in the war field. However, they could not come at par with other castes of the Nepali community and very rarely found in administrative system. The 21st century has found some academicians, administrators, historians, Social and political activists etc. Some of the

²⁵ Sinjali B. K. & Rana H, 2009, Sinjali Bishnu Magar & Rana Hiramati, 2009, *Conversion on Magar Dhut Language*,Magar Studies Center, Kathmandu, pp.234-240.

²⁶ Prof Yonjan J., 1993, *op.cit.,p., 34*.

²⁷ Subedi Sikharnath, *op.cit., p., 22-24*.

distinguished who have adorned the long found legacy of the Mangars with regard and recognition in the contemporary society are

- Prof. Dr Umesh Thapa, Ph.D., Post-Doc (Italy), Bidhan Chandra Krishi Vishwavidyalaya Nadia, West Bengal.
- Dr Ragini Thapa, M.A. B.Ed., Ph.D. Former Teacher in Charge, Sonada Degree College, Darjeelin.,
- Dr. Basudeo Thapa, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Assistant Prof in Nepali, K. G.T. Mahavidyalay, Bagdogra, Siliguri.
- Ms Namrata Thapa ,IAS (Retd.), Member ITS, (Sikkim),
- Sri Santosh Allay (Sikkim) authored the book, *Mangar Jati ko Itihas Ani Sanskriti: Sikkim ko Sandharbha ma* (2003).
- Smt. Raj Kumari Thapa Deputy Speaker, Sikkim Legislative Assembly.
- Smt. Abhimaya Thapa Joint Secretary of Sikkim Legislative Assembly.
- Sri Nanda Lal Rana Magar, Member of Legislative Council Assembly, Bodoland Territorial Region.

Unfortunately, the majority of Mangars inhabiting in different parts of India, could not be a part of the mainstream Indo-Nepalis society due to various factors, prominently education and economic condition. Hence, the narratives of the slow-witted people in the folklores somehow, sarcastically indicate their inability to rise above as parallels in this world of wit, wisdom and will.