

Nepalese *chadparva* in Singapore, an island nation: Physical Representations of Identity and Culture

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Abstract

Singapore, an island country, has a resident population that includes official categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other. The Nepali ethnicity is categorized under Other and makes up one of the minority groups in the country (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2015). Chadparva, a Nepali term that embodies the meaning of festivals and related celebrations, continues to be held in Singapore. This article uses qualitative method and disciplinary approach: festivalisation, to analyse the material culture of chadparva through the presentation of festivals: Satya Narayan, Teej, Shree Krishnan Janmashtami and the Festival of Joy. Physical representations such as musical instruments, choice of venues and performance practices provide insight into the culture, emotions, and the importance of the instruments, while reflecting and representing the people and community in an urban island setting.

Introduction

Singapore is an island nation which consists of one main island and smaller islands close by (Grydehoj, 2015). Singapore's resident population is made up largely of a culturally diverse Asian population, with the official categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others, commonly refer to as CMIO. The ethnic composition consists of 74.3% Chinese, 13.5% Malay, 9% Indian and 3.2% Others (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2020). According to the Department of Statistics, Singapore (2015), Nepalese ethnicity is categorised under the "Others" ethnic group. There is no specific numbers on the population of Nepalese in Singapore but what we know is that as of 2020, out of the 5.5 million population of Singapore, 28.9% is made up of foreigners. In other words, foreigners make up almost two-fifths of the country's total population. Of Singapore's total foreign population in the year 2011, 4000 of them were Nepalese (Government of Nepal, 2014). With the move in tightening the rules for employing foreigners in Singapore (Chang, 2015; Lim, 2013), the non-resident's figure declined from 6.9% of the population in 2011 to only 2.1% of the population in 2015 (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2020).

This study focuses on Nepalese who came to Singapore mainly during the third significant migration flow of Nepalese migration, as new *Lahures*. Nepal has a net migration rate of 0.386% of the population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015). Most of them left Nepal in the 1970s for job-related reasons (Gellner, Hausner, Laksamba, & Adhikari, 2010). Since then, many Nepalese have travelled out of Nepal for study as well as work. On this island nation, I am third generation Singaporean Chinese. My forefathers were originally from China, who migrated to Singapore in the late 1800s. I offer my discourses from the perspective of an outsider. Although observations were made in my country, Singapore, the culture and language of Nepal is new to me.

Nepalese Festivals in Singapore

Chadparva in the Nepali language denotes festivals. The word *chadparva* displays the Nepali culture because *chad* refers to celebration whilst *parva* refers to festival, which embodies the meaning of festivals and the related celebrations. As the Nepali language originates from Sanskrit, it is no surprise that the word *parva* is also used in the Hindi language.

The sites of festivals are “contact zones” in which the Nepalese in Singapore come together (Pratt, 1992, p. 6). These sites are “highly charged environments” with strong reactions from participants (Harnish, 2006, p. 4). With music being a part of the celebrations, Nepalese migrants, despite being a minority group, have contributed to the shift of the Singapore music scene that I once knew and grew up in. Their musical contributions at festivals add to our existing notions of space, place, and community, which are already complex in our multi-racial society. In creating their music, physical representations such as the Nepalese musical instruments are crucial because musical sessions cannot be made possible without the use of Nepalese musical instruments, and these objects form part of the identity of the Nepalese in Singapore as they make up the frame of reference for the group.

Physical representations provide context for the sound of *chadparva*, for cultural participants are attracted to the music of certain characteristics (Langer, 1942; Milosavljevic, 2014; Morris, 1964; Nettl, 2005; Quinn, 2003). These physical representations are benchmarks for Nepalese to expect of the cultural music and festivity that they are to experience. Analysing physical representations, such as (i) the organology of musical instruments (ii) venues selection; and (iii) performance practice, helps to form links between music and social life (Gerstin, 1998). It is at the festival, through these instruments, that the implications of the culture of the immigrants through the enculturation of the younger generation and the assimilation of their identities surface.

I argue that the musical instruments adopt the role of bringing people together at the festival site, diasporic identity is also formed, presented, and reinforced through their cultural performances. Cultural performance can only be carried out with the presence of these instruments. Through music, dance and cultural presentation, new meanings are constructed.

Nepalese *chadparva* as Ritual Site

The theory of this study emerges from the ethnographic study of the topic. Nepalese *chadparva* is a festival space that reflects the fluid and evolving nature of the Nepalese diaspora in Singapore through the music presented. It is a space where people make time, come together to celebrate, and share a common purpose as a community (Turner, 1982). These ritualistic events are usually accompanied by musical artefacts, styles, genres, and cultures, whose accessibility has improved due to globalisation. Also, with improved cultural flows, people are being exposed to a range of cultures besides the one that they inherited from their ancestors. With increasingly diversified cultures, people have options for choosing the culture with which they want to be associated.

Festivals “derive their appeal from traditional practices” (Negrier, 2014, p.7). People are motivated to attend festivals due to having the same interest in religion, music, and social experience with similar values and interests. Festivals also provide the opportunity for participants to socialize with others and spend time with friends and like-minded people (Tkaczynski & Rundle-Thiele, 2013).

In this ethnomusicological discourse, where music is culture, the festival sounds associated with *chadparva* are important sounds. They are sounds that people have chosen whether mindfully or by default. These sounds matter. Music is interpreted in context and gives meaning to the participant’s behaviour. The *chadparva* is festivalised to include experiences that resonate with and attract participants in Singapore. With the experience of not knowing who they are or what they are supposed to do in the festival, participants’ responsive cultural behaviour is authentic and valuable in this discourse, whilst reflecting their diasporic identity (Harvath, 2013; Turner, 1967).

Rites and rituals play an important role in the formation and development of social identities as they tend to celebrate the essence of an identity and mark the “transition from one identity to another” (Jenkins, 2008, p.177). Rituals promote group identity, strengthen a sense of belonging, and emphasize symbolic boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Rawls, 2001, p.41). “Men and women, insiders and outsiders, young and old, played socially differentiated roles, accomplished socially differentiated tasks and were attributed to socially differentiated spaces” (Picard, 2006, p.67). Festivals provide spaces for attendees to express themselves, constructing various cultural identities based on gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and locality. For instance, women’s festival jobs include dancing and choreography, whilst men are involved in the construction of the festival site.

Method

The main contributions to the discussions throughout this study are interviews with cultural bearers and ethnographic observations. Photographic materials are also used as visual evidence and for discussion. This study analyses the identity of the diasporic Nepalese community in Singapore in terms of the physical representation of objects and music performances. From the data collected, there are three essential factors of physical representations presented at *chadparva*: (i) musical instruments, which include vocals; (ii) venues; and (iii) performance practice.

Nepalese musical instruments present at *chadparva* make up the main physical component of the Nepalese festivals in Singapore. The role of musical instruments is an important one in Nepalese festivities. For a holistic study of music, interpretation of sounds is necessary through material objects, concepts, and behaviour (Johnson, 1995, pp. 258,266). For this reason, the cultural exploration of musical instruments and spaces is essential as a reference point to the music presented at the festivals (Merriam, 1964; Small, 1998). The study of musical instruments, which is also known as organology, is akin to the study of ethnomusicology, anthropology, and cultural studies (Dournon, 1992; Dawe, 2012; Johnson, 1995; Qureshi, 1997). In ethnomusicology, it is essential to study the organology of the

culture's musical instruments because it embraces the history, culture, and technical aspects of the instrument. Therefore, by incorporating socio-cultural factors and beliefs that revolve around the instrument, the instrument would be "imbued with social meanings, norms, values, and beliefs, and [this] helps explain society and culture" (Dawe, 2012, p. 128; DeVale, 1990; Dournon, 1992; Johnson, 1995; Qureshi 1997). The functionality of the instrument - how people use it in their celebrations, and the way people behave with and around the instrument - tells us much about their practice and culture. From these celebrations and behaviour, we deduce shifts in the group's identity.

Various Nepalese musical instruments were observed to be used frequently by people in the celebration of Nepalese festivities in Singapore. The socio-cultural factors that accompany the Nepalese musical instruments are investigated by focusing on three festivals: Satya Narayan, Teej and Shree Krishna Janmashtami, with The Festival of Joy being an extension of the latter. These festivals form a transcultural contact zone, giving them a different environment away from home. By observing the usage of the musical instruments at these festivals, we look at the implications of the culture of the immigrants through the enculturation of the younger generation and the assimilation of the immigrants' identities.

Ethnographic Observations at Satya Narayan

Satya Narayan is a religious worshipping prayer session of Vishnu. The prayers focus on blessings of health, wealth, wisdom and sometimes for relief from trouble or sickness. Such prayer sessions are traditional rituals that are held by Hindus around the world. Although there is no specific date for performing this ritual, the belief is that when this ritual is carried out on the day of a full moon, it will bring good fortune (Interviewee 4, personal communication, March 16, 2017). An instance of this prayer session was held at the residential apartment of a Nepalese person for the blessing of his house and to welcome good omens into the household.

The group of devotees, consisting of close fellow Nepalese friends, are not restricted to castes. They sat themselves down in front of the altar as one of them led the others in the prayers. The *sankha*¹, a conch shell musical instrument, was blown at random intervals announcing the ritual. As an extension of the ritual, musicking is part of the prayer session. The devotees rearranged their sitting formation by sitting along the walls of the typical four-walled apartment in Singapore, whilst a group of musicians sat along one side of the four-walled room. The musicians formed an ensemble with the following Nepalese musical instruments: *madal*², *khajjadi*³, *damphu*⁴, *sankha*, *bansuri*⁵, *tinchu*⁶ and an adhoc drum improvised using a tissue box with the *bansuri* as the stick. Couples took turns dancing to the music in the centre of the room. One player clapped a steady beat throughout, providing the

¹ A *sankha* is a conch shell musical instrument.

² A *madal* is a two-headed drum, played with the flat of the hand and fingers.

³ A *khajjadi* is a single-skin frame drum, with pegs around the edge.

⁴ A *damphu* is a single-skin frame drum with metal disc around the edge, like the tambourine. Sometimes, the term *khajjadi* and *damphu* are used interchangeably.

⁵ A *bansuri* is a transverse bamboo flute.

⁶ *Tinchu* is a pair of small cymbals.

*tala*⁷. At the same time, participants sang the main melody of the music whilst the *bansuri* played in unison.

The performance space for Satya Narayan is in the lounge of a participant's residential apartment of not more than five metres by three metres. At this festival, attendance is by private invitation, so participants tend to be close friends who know each other. The cosy setting plays a part in the participants' spontaneity. With the familiarity that all participants have with one another, the celebration lacks formality. The musician decides on the spot what to play; music improvisation and dance are apparent, as participants react musically on the spot, spontaneously.

Ethnographic Observations at Teej

Another festival that *madal* plays a prominent role in is the Teej festival. The Teej festival is a vibrantly celebrated festival in Nepal and among the Nepalese diaspora. The festival is part of Hinduism and is celebrated by high-caste women (Goodman, 1992; Jha, 1996; Skinner, Holland, & Adhikari, 1994). It is a re-enactment of Parvati's love for Shiva and focused on obtaining blessings from the deities for things such as longevity for the women's husbands or purification from possible sin. During the Teej festival, the women are expected to walk in the image of Parvati. As part of the ceremony, they fast on the day of Teej; no food or water is to be consumed. Therefore, women in Nepal would sing and dance together in front of the temple complex. However, with the lack of a suitable site for the women, the celebration of the festival is being tweaked to suit the Nepalese community in Singapore.

The Nepalese Society Singapore organised the event for the Nepalese community in Singapore. The venue for holding the festival, Teej on 3 September 2016, was a rented venue at the Ceylon Sports Club, Singapore. It was an enclosed function room at the cricket ground. There were ten round tables with ten chairs, each set up in the room. There was a mix of music played at the festival: recorded music for stage presentations, and live music as part of musicking. A group of women met at the dance studio before the festival to practice their dance items. The choice of music for their dance items, which was recorded, mixed of Nepali songs. The last item on the agenda was the unspoken traditions that go hand-in-hand with the festival – a long stretch of improvised singing and dancing. It was traditionally the women's duty to dance and sing at Teej. The tables were moved to one side of the room whilst chairs were arranged in a big circle. The musicians improvised on the *madal* and *dampfu*, whilst female and male participants clapped to the *tala* and took turns to improvise their dance on the spot. However, there was no singing observed at this event.

The influence of venue is evident in the case of Teej. There were noticeable changes that were observed that evening at the Teej celebrations. One such glaring difference is that, unlike what has been observed in much scholarly research, the Nepalese who came together at the Ceylon Sports Club did not belong to just the high caste. Besides the Brahmins and Chhetris, the castes of the participants include Newar, Gurung, Tamang, and Manga. Without a suitable temple site in Singapore for the Nepalese women to visit for the festival, the women

⁷ *Tala* is the metric and rhythmic foundation of the music.

worshipped Shiva from their homes that morning before celebrating with their fellow countrymen at the Ceylon Sports Club.

Ethnographic Observations at Shree Krishnan Janmashtami

Shree Krishna Janmashtami celebrates the birth of Krishna, who is the most important deity amongst Hindu worshippers. It is a religious festival that is not limited by caste. This event was organised by Radha Madhav Satsang⁸. *Janmashtami*, which is the birthday of Krishna, takes place annually on the eighth day of the dark fortnight in the month of Bhadrapada, according to the Nepali calendar. Krishna is born at midnight, symbolising the arrival of light, which drives away the darkness. Thus, worshipping during Janmashtami is done in the late evening hours. The location for this study was on the second floor of a terrace building, at Radha Madhav Satsang. The room is as big as a basketball court. The celebration in Singapore reminds of [the people's] history and the multicultural society [that Singapore is] today" (Roots, n.d.).

Devotees went to lengths in preparation for the arrival of Krishna. They fast on the day of *Janmashtami*, before the auspicious hour of Shree Krishna's arrival. The worshippers expressed that they treated Krishna as one of their own family members and celebrated his birthday as if he was one of their children. They bathed the Krishna statuette and adorned him with new clothes, flowers, and jewellery. The devotees decorated the room with balloons and toys, creating the ambience of a child's birthday party. There were also candies on the altar. Throughout the session, devotees' fondness for Krishna was evident. When they took turns rocking Krishna in the cradle whilst fanning him with a peacock feathered fan in the air-conditioned room.

Devotees gathered as early as seven o'clock in the evening to sing devotional songs and perform dances. Unlike the other festivals observed, there is no limitation as to who can attend this festival. Devotees were of different nationalities and ethnicities. The musical instruments used include a harmonium, *dholak*⁹, bells, cymbals and *sankha*. An re-enactment of the birth of baby Krishna was carried out at midnight, followed by the procession of Vishnu's avatars - Krishna, Brahma, and Shiva. They walked down the aisle towards the altar whilst showering sweets on the devotees. The celebrative devotees celebrated with dance, songs and cakes.

A *sankha* was blown repeatedly, announcing the arrival of Krishna. There was lots of noise from the cheering of the devotees as they rejoiced in the arrival of Krishna. Devotees came towards the altar to take turns worshipping by presenting candles, and slowly, devotees excused themselves as they made their way home in the early hours of the following morning.

⁸ Radha Madhav Satsang Singapore is a branch of Jagadguru Kripalu Parishat, "founded in India in 1970 and [run] under the guidance of Jagadguru Shri Kripaluji Maharaj. The Singapore mission is a registered charity under the Singapore Charities Act. The centre's aim is to teach and spread the true eternal knowledge of the Vedas, to provide simple and practical means of spiritual advancement, and to conduct various charitable and humanitarian activities that are beneficial for society" (Radha Madhav Satsang, 2013)

⁹ The *dholak*, an Indian folk musical instrument, is a cylindrical wooden drum. Both ends of the instrument are covered with skin.

Celebrations continued over the weekends when the re-enactment of the ritual was being played, except this time, with children as the focus of the celebrations in the festival of joy.

Physical Representations of Identity and Culture

From this study, we learn that musical instruments make up the ritualistic events, whilst pairing up with the venues of celebrations, reflect the diasporic identity of this Nepalese community in Singapore. Nepalese musical instruments such as *madal*, *damphu*, *khajjadi*, *tinchu*, *bansuri* and *sankha* are exclusive at *chadparva* in Singapore. The sounds of music are made authentic with the choice of musical instruments and songs at the festivals. These instruments bring the Nepalese together, allowing them to socialise through their musicking on these instruments. The choice of music instruments in Singapore is different from what is used in Nepal, but people adapt and make good of what they have. Maybe the Nepalese community chose to involve musical instruments in the carrying out of their festival. This shows that musical instruments have a status in the Nepalese culture, and they are an essential part of festivals in Nepal as well as in the immigrants' lives in Singapore.

Translocation is evidently displayed in the physical representations. The Nepalese musical instruments that the Nepalese in Singapore possess are imported from Nepal. Similarly, the rituals carried out in Singapore are also being imported from Nepal. This is possible because of the choice of venues that the organisers make for the celebration of their festivals. The venues allow the rituals that the participants carried out in Nepal to be carried out in Singapore. With the translocation of these physical representations, the recontextualising of these physical representations is simply placed in a different space, in this case, in a different country.

Singapore is uniquely a multi-cultural state, and this has shaped how Nepalese identities are maintained or transformed. Nepalese are allowed to carry on with their everyday lives and are allowed to continue to celebrate their festivals and practice their traditions. This is made possible because the Singapore government allows them to do so. Priding themselves as a nation united regardless of race, language or religion, Singapore's community accepts the Nepalese's continuation to express themselves through songs and music in their home language and carry out their rituals that they are used to in Nepal.

My observation shows that there is a tendency towards conservatism on the part of diasporic communities. Being physically away from their home, the Nepalese in Singapore display social conservatism, as they show a strong sense of commitment to their traditional celebrations as seen from the physical representations. They rely on their traditional objects and rituals, as close as they can to how the festivals are celebrated in Nepal. This is due to the environment in which they are. Being a minority in Singapore, the participants feel that their culture is important for their survival. That is, for them, it is important to make known to others who they are, and this is what they celebrate. This is something that makes them different from others; they are celebrating their culture, values and being Nepalese in the face of the dominant culture.

Conclusion

The changes in performance traditions reveal the shifting culture among Nepalese in Singapore, as there is a shift in the purpose of Nepalese in celebrating their festivals. They are no longer celebrating it because they have been doing so in the past. They are not celebrating it the way they used to be, but the way they choose to be. Also, they choose to celebrate the festivals because they want to – disregard one's gender to improve one's relationship with their loved ones and adjust to the culture of Singapore. It does not mean that everyone understands the true meaning behind the celebration of the festival. As one interviewee put it, one may be celebrating the festival because their parents celebrate it. However, for Nepalese devotees away from home, the true meaning behind celebrating the festival could be more than just the festival itself. By carrying out *chadparva*, it does not make them feel more Nepalese in Singapore, for it is beyond nationality. It is not about what nationality you are; it is more of a philosophy, an internal religion that one follows with understanding. Nepalese in the diaspora found their sense of familiarity with the atmosphere and ambience created at the festival site by the sounds created from Nepalese musical instruments, venues and performance practices. They carry out *chadparva* with other fellow compatriots regardless of caste, gender, age and religion, but as one identity.

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