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"Balan"- A Folk-Dance Drama of Sikkim

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Abstract

This academic paper examines a sacred ceremony known as "Balan" through descriptive analysis. The Nepali community in India, Nepal, and other countries where the Khas subgroup of Nepalis resides does this cultural leisure with religious faith. The majority of the study is done by confining the research area to the Sikkim state of India just since this paper is the outcome of a minor project by the UGC under Sikkim University for the faculties.

Under the direction of Khalifa (the master performer), some trained young boys conduct a type of religious rite known as the Balan Nach. A set of religious rites are carried out in a predetermined order while paying attention to the purity of body and mind. The dances, music, and other performances are all quite theatrical and filled with religious choruses. Along with the Ramayana and the Mahabharata stories from the Hindu epics, several deities' poojas are also conducted. Since antiquity, various poetic and musical muddles have been played and passed down from one generation to the next.

Keywords: *Balan*, Folk Dance, Folk Drama, Sikkim, Nepali, folk Music

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Introduction:

The cultures and ways in which they are carried out in daily life are extremely diverse throughout the Indian subcontinent. Every few kilometres in the country, one could observe the cultural difference. Since the dawn of civilization, the country's rich cultural history has gained recognition from other countries and been recognised for its distinctiveness. The terms "culture" and "civilization" are sometimes used interchangeably today. Generally speaking, the civilisation is understood through the accomplishments of the inhabitants and has a history. This culture is traditional in nature and is transmitted from one generation to the next with some life lessons that cannot be satisfied by tangible goods. In India, folk culture plays a significant part in providing the needs of the community for basic necessities of existence.

These traditional customs take the form of paintings, dances, songs, and ways of living that make their lives more physically convenient. However, the aesthetic works or traditions, as well as a variety of other forms, such as storytelling and folk theatre, are what ultimately define a culture. One of the earliest forms of cultural expression in the nation is folk theatre, or story telling with gestures and actions that correspond to the plot created for a particular reason. These tales were based on some of the most significant historical occurrences and epics. For the purpose of making the theme and teachings of the folk story that is being played easier to understand, tweaks and adaptations to the plot are occasionally made while playing these folk stories in the forms of folk theatre. These types of folk theatres incorporate not just entertainment but also cultural symbolism and, on occasion, religious faith. The state of Sikkim has its own unique cultural legacy, just as the other ethnic communities in the various Indian states[i]. The primary three ethnic groups that have extended since been in Sikkim each have unique traditions and cultural legacies that contribute to our nation's culture of unity in diversity[ii]. Any individual or group can use music and dance as a means to share their ideas, ideals, and imaginative visions with the world. Since the dawn of human civilization, this has been one of the most powerful forms of artistic expression[iii]. Since the dawn of civilisation, this has developed into a potent means of communication and expression[iv].

The *Hindu* religion in Indian culture is a prime illustration of how music and dance may best symbolise human existence. In the Hindu religion, the Gods and Goddesses are also represented as musicians. The *Shiva* known as *Natraj*, the God of dancing, is holding *Damru*, a percussion instrument, in his hand. *Lord Krishna* is a dancer and a flute player. *Ektara* and *Khrtaal* are held in the hands of the *Narada*. *Veena* is a string instrument that *Maa Saraswati*, the Goddess of Music, Art, Dance, and All Knowledge, plays. Folk music and dance have played an important role in society since the Vedic era. Various religious and social ceremonies, like as marriages and *poojas*, featured various forms of folk music and dancing. The major goals of these gatherings were to provide entertainment while also educating the public about religious and social events. The music and dance served as additional forms of entertainment and added some joy to the gathering. In order to infuse society with *Prana*, music and dance must be a part of daily existence. existence without entertainment is dull and burdensome[v].

Review of related literature:

Tezendra Gurung claims that "*Balan-Nach* is a form of dance, popular in our (Nepalese) society since a long tradition[vi]. This dance and song fall under the category of devotional music. The primary goal of this style is to enjoy values by composing musical couplets in the native Nepali language using abstracts from the *Puranas* and other *Hindu* epics. The folk artists in our society have worked hard to preserve this dance style for a long time. Gurung outlined the meaning of the word "*Balan*" as it relates to dance in his paper.

Few books and articles about *Balan* exist that provide any information about the *Balan* tradition in Sikkim. One book written by *Avichandra Singdel* is titled "*Balan Sangrah*," *Nirman Publication, Sikkim, Namchi* (2001), and it contains a collection of Shlokas used in *Balan* as

well as some information on the language. However, there isn't a lot of literature or research on this type of folk art[vii].

There is one more book authored by *Dr. Om Prakash Bharati* and *Mr. Shankar Dev Dhakal*, titled *"Sikkim ke paramparik Natya 'Balan'*," that I am aware of, but sadly it is not on the market and the researcher has been unable to locate it elsewhere.

Findings:

The *Balan Nach* is a Sikkim folk dance drama that is observed by the state's Nepali ethnic group. The *Balan Nach* is the traditional dance dram of the Nepali people, but the *Bahun-Chettri* (*Khas*) subgroup of Nepalis is where it is most well-known[viii]. It is a tradition of religious dance and theatre that complements Nepalis' culture and religion. Hinduism is referenced in this dance drama, which is performed as a folk dance[ix]. *Puran, Mahabharata*, and other stories are dramatized using various acting and storytelling techniques. It is retained in the category of devotional music and dance[x]. *The Ramayan* and *the Mahabharata* stories are transformed into poetry words and presented musically in a rhythmic and melodious manner.

It is believed that the *Balan Nach* custom in the Nepalese culture dates back to the Vedic era. Some members of the Nepali community assert that the *Balan* dates back to the *Dwapar* era (the era of the *Pandava* and *Krishna*), and they hold that the *Pandava* performed the first *Balan* at *Gokul* at *Yashoda'*s special request. The myths also describe *Draupadi*'s beginning of the *Balan Nach*. According to some academics, the *Maharshi Balmiki* began the "*Balan Nach*" tradition and passed it on to *Lav* and *Kush*, the Sons of *Rama*, during the *Dwapar Yug*. *Lav* and *Kush* were taught the *Ramayana* by *Rishi Valmiki* using the rhythmic and musical melodies found in the *Laya* of *Balan*. Many of the traditional *Balan Nach* singers claim that while they are unsure of the origin of the *Balan Nach*, they are well-versed in its tradition and heritage, which have been passed down through the generations for many years.

The goal of *Balan* is to impart *Sanskar* to the young boys in the community and leave an effect on their culture and society in their minds, in addition to being an enjoyable, spiritual, and religious event. The young boys are instructed in proper social behaviour and interaction with other members of society.

The precise dancing movements of the *Balan*e are tuned to the pulses of the fixed *Balan* style, which blends into the pulsing slow rhythm. Sometimes the *Laya* is changed for amusement purposes, and specifically *Jhaure Laya* with a fast tempo of eight beats is used. The *Khalifa* and performers are dressed in the typical *daura-surual* and jacket or coat of the Neplai tradition, with a Nepali cap on their heads. However, for the *Jhanki* portion, specific characters like *Rama-Sita, Laxman, Hanuman, Krishna,* and other figures from the tale on which the *Balan* is based are clothed in appropriate decorations to perform for the occasion. The *Madal*, flute, and harmonium are occasionally utilised in the musical portion, although only during the *Bhajan* performance. The body's postures and movements make up the majority of the *Balan*, and clapping with both hands conveys the rhythmic cycle.

It is widely believed that *Balan Nach* is performed for the particular request of having a kid by the couples not having any descendants in the *Bahun* and *Chettri* community of the Nepali population of Sikkim. And it is thought that they will be gifted with the baby after experiencing the *Balan Nach* event at home.

Following the completion of religious ceremonies like pooja and yajna, the *Balan Nach* is absorbed. If *Satyanarayan katha* is practised in the village, once the pooja and kata are over, the dancers of *Balan* are invited to perform *Balan*. the *Balan*'s location Performances are held in front of temples, under the shade of yajna locations, or occasionally in a home's courtyard. The base of the plant resembles the *Trideva Bramha, Vishnu,* and *Mahesh*, while the stem of the banana plant is buried in the middle of the courtyard. The lamp is lit close to the base of the stem of the lucky banana plant, and the *Balan Nach* religious ritual begins.

The three specialized term used for the people directly involved in the Performance of this religious dance drama.

a. Khalifa

The leader of the group of *Balan* performers is *Khalifa*, the *Mukhiya,* or the *Nayke* of the *Balan Nach*. He is the lone man who performs the performance, reading the shlokas from the book and setting the tempo and rhythm. The *Balan* dancers or performers perform the same act repeatedly in accordance with a predetermined style. They are typically seasoned, older members *of society.*

b. *Balne*

The *Balne* are ensembles of *Balan* dancers or performers who receive their training from the group's *Khalifa*. Typically, they dance in pairs. Typically, *Balne* are young guys that train with the *Khalifa.*

c. *Balo*

The *Balo* is the person who organised the *Balan Nach* and took the oath to organise the *Balan Nach* or *Yajmaan*.

Training of *Balne*:

An essential component of the *Balan Nach* culture in Nepalese society is *Balne* training. The society's young lads were trained during this procedure. The *Blane*'s postures and expressions are taught, explained, and practised one at a time during training. Since position and expression are so crucial to the *Balan*'s performance, it is imperative that every *Balne* receive the right training. During the training time, it is imperative that the *Balne* understand stories written in poetic Nepali and completely recall pronunciations. The process of *Balan Nach* is observed in following Steps:

1. *Arati Gayan*
   Balan Nach begins with the offering of *Arati* to several deities.

2. *Math Nirmaan*
   The dance drama *Balan* is performed with the assumption that the *Pandavas* played it for the first time there, hence the procedure of creating *Maths* is followed. The *Balan* Players (*Balne*) do this rite by burying a tree stem in the courtyard and offering five different types of flowers that represent the five *Pandavas*. They act on the *shlokas* after performing the ceremonies.

3. *Disha Nirman*
   This is the custom of doing the *Balan* to pray to various heavenly bodies for the accomplishment of the wishes that were intended to be attained by performing the *Balan Nach*. An essential component of all *Hindu* ceremonies is the worship of the directional Gods. This phase involves inviting all of the Gods from the many directions to the *Math*, where the *Balan Nach* will be performed, and involves praying for the uninterrupted performance of the holy *Nach*.

4. *Grih Nirman*
   Just prior to the beginning of the holy dance play known as *Balan Nach*, the *Grih Nirman* movements are done after the *Arati, Math Nirman*, and *Disha Nirman*. Making a home for the organiser, *Balo*, in the first step is done metaphorically using bamboo and straw. Following their baths, the *Balo* having their bodies cleansed in preparation for the earlier performed religious ceremonies in the *Math*.

5. *Balneko Varan*
   After the *Grih Nirman* rites are complete, the *Balo* must explain the wish for which he or she organised the *Balne Nach* ritual before presenting the recipient a *Tika* of *Akshat* and *chandan* (a religious emblem on the forehead). For the *Balne* to grant their wishes, they must spend the entire night in the Math performing all of the *Balan Nach* rites.

6. *Chudka*
   These are some musical and lyrical performances with unique beats and rhythms that are only intended for entertainment. These are presented to the audience as a change of pace from the religious narration and show, as well as to give the *Balan* performers some relaxation. The act is carried out in *Jhyaure Laya.*

7. *Pustak Pooja*
   The *Balo* and *Balne* worship the book, on which the *Balan Nach* they are willing to perform, at this stage of the *Balan Nach*. The Nepali community enjoys four different types of *Balan*. *Krishna Ko Das Awtar Balan, Sita Bharat Balan, Ram Bharat Balan,* and *Jaimini Bharat Balan.*

8. *Jhanki*
   Some key acts of the scenario from the narrative, also known as *Jhanki*, are vividly recreated in between *Balan*'s performances. Character *Hanuman* is the subject of the

Balan's most frequent and well-liked *Jhanki*. It's quite cute and hilarious when the *Hanuman* comes and sets the Lanka on fire.

For better performance, several aspects of the story based on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are also portrayed by the actors. In the *Jhanki*, characters such as *Ram, Laxman, Sita, Rawan, Hanuman, Krishna, Balram*, etc. are also portrayed by *Balnes* in appropriate attire. This was a metaphor for how the story of a particular epic was visually presented in order to keep the audience interested throughout *Balan*'s performance that evening.

9. *Ashika*

The *Balan* is carried out during the entire night, and in the morning, the *Balne* blesses the *Balo* once the *Balan Nach* of any selected Book has been completed. The *Balne* carried the *Balo* from the *Math* to the house on their hands after placing *Tika* on their foreheads.

10. *Math Visharjan*

The *Balan* is considered to be a religious *Pooja* or *Yajna* as well, hence the math Nirman (Building of *Math*) must be immersed at the start of the procedures. After returning the *Balo* to their homes at the conclusion of the rituals, the maths immersion is completed. "Does anyone want to organise the *Balan* next?" *Balne* asks the crowd once the *Balo* has reached its conclusion. If someone agrees to organise the *Balan Nach*, the time and day are immediately set, and the subsequent organiser takes the *Sankalp* (oath) to do so.

If no one volunteers to organise the *Balan Nach* the following year, the *Math Visharjan* becomes required, and the ceremonies are carried out. At the *Tulshi* plant, the temple, or the river, the *Math Visharjan* is performed. Since there were individuals who volunteered to organise the *Balan Nach* for the following turn, the *Math Visharjan* was extremely uncommon in earlier times. However, in the contemporary environment, tradition is no longer followed, therefore math *Visharjan* is regularly performed.

11. *Dakshina*

The *Balo*'s desires are granted in the home of the *Balo*'s organisers by the *Balne*, the *Balan Nach*'s performers. The *Balne* devotes herself to performing the sacred dance all night long. After receiving the *Dakshina*, the *Balne* bestows blessings on the *Balo* for the accomplishment of their wishes for which they had organised the *Balan Nach*. The *Balo* distributes the *Dakshina* to the *Balne* team in the form of money, fabric, grains, diamonds, gold, etc. as a gesture of gratitude to the *Balne* and the team.

Conclusion:

Balan Nach is a dance drama performed by the men in the Nepali community especially in *Bahun* and *Chettri* sub-Community of Nepalis. But not bound to these communities only, in current scenario the other sub-communities belong of Nepali community are also adopting the

culture of *Balan Nach* performance and learning it. The myth for the origin of the dance drama goes from *Dwapar Yug* and *Treta yug*, but this is clear that this is an art form that has been developed and transmitted to the next generation as a lineage since many centuries from one generation to another generation. The dance drama has some aesthetic components according to the Rasa theory explained in the *'Natyashastra'* that is act by the *Balne* with motions and expressions with the *Laya* of *Balan shlokas*[xi]. The *Balan* is performed for the fulfilment of certain specific wishes that to be requested from the God and Goddesses on special occasions like *Poojas,* Festivals etc. The *Balan* performers including the *Khalifa* or *Mukhiya* or *Nayake*, the *Balne* (The young boy dancers) are reached by the organizers (*Balo*) for the performance. In many cases the *Balan* performance date and venue is fixed by the *Khalifa* and the *Balo* at the end of *Balan* performance at previous place where it was organized. The next organizers have to be present in the *Balan* Performance of that place to take the responsibility of the Next *Balan* performance. One the date is fixed the *Balan* team will come to the fixed date at the venue decided. The venue of the *Balan* performance is mostly the courtyard of the houseowner or the organizer or the courtyard of the temple. The *Balan* is performed with all the religious purity and have certain rules to be followed. The dancers' dances in the pair and the number of pair may vary depending upon the organizer's capacity. The number of pairs may vary from three to seven or more; therefor the numbers of exact players may vary from five to 15 and more respectively. The *Khalifa* or the *Naike* conduct the whole process of the *Balan* performance, according to the instruction given by the *Khalifa* the *Balne* act on the fixed rhythm and tempo of the *Balan*.

The story of the Epics of the *Purans, Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* can be seen little different than that is popular in the other part of the country. In the Sita Bharat *Balan* there is a character who is sister of the *Rama* is mentioned and it is a unique character in the story of the *Ramayan*. The whole story of the *Balan* goes much closed to the day today activity of the family life in the *Hindu* society of the Nepali community. The Idea behind the *Balan* performance would be the connecting the peoples with the teaching of the social and family life showing the examples from the idols and Gods story.

After going through the '*Balan Nach*' traditions in Sikkim it is not clear that it should be kept in which category of performing form. It is a kind of story telling with religious elements but perform with certain dancing movements than it may be kept in dance form. On the other hand, the expression of the performers according to the story and character is also done in the performance and including of the *Jhanki* resembles it as a folk drama group of performing art. In my opinion it can be put under the performing art form of Dance drama that includes the story telling style and some dancing movements too.

The Dance drama *Balan* is a religious performance and there are not certain groups of people who are totally dependent on the profession of *Balan Nach* in Sikkim. It Is completely parttime entertainment and religious event. There are certain groups of *Balan Nach* in East, West and South districts of Sikkim who performs *Balan* professionally and take the performance to rest part of the world but they are also not fully depending on the *Balan Nach* performance only for their lively hood.

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