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Dashain Folk Songs: An Introduction

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1. Background

Nepal is one of the many South Asian nations. A landlocked country, it has China to its north, while India lies to east, west and south. In its north are lofty mountains, while to its south lie long stretched extension of plains. It also has the glory of having world's highest mountain peak: Mount Everest. Its social life too is characterized by various folk literatures, folk music, folk art, folk skills, folk dresses, folk jewelries, folk rituals, folk festivals, folk beliefs, folk tradition, folk medications, folk maxims and the like. Of these,

Dashain is one of the main festivals of Nepal, which is rich in both nature and culture.

The Hindus of Nepal observed Dashain with a great splendor and reverence. There are various rituals in which the communities observe the festival. During the performance of such rituals, certain categories of folk songs are added, to make the air more festive and blissful. This write-up aims to identify such rituals to introduce them. For this, the essay concentrates on the Dashain Folk Songs, and presents a brief introduction of them, limiting itself to the songs collected primarily from mid-western region of Nepal.

2. Dashain Festival

Dashain Festival, celebrated to uphold the victory of good over evil, has two types: big and small. The bigger one falls more or less in October everywhere, during the bright fortnight. Starting from the first day of the fortnight, it is celebrated until the fifteenth day, which is the full moon day. The smaller Dashain is celebrated in April, also during the bright fortnight. Since it falls in the Nepali month of Chait, people also called it 'Chaite Dashain'. This festival is celebrated from the first to the ninth day of the fortnight. But the bigger Dashain is celebrated with more pomp and enthusiasm.

All activities performed during the festival evoke purity of mind and happiness in life. Before the festival sets in, the Hindus clean and whitewash their homes and temples. When the festival begins, altars of Devi are established at shrines, temples and homes. Near the statue of Devi, jamara—maize of jawar seeds sown to germinate—is kept. The statues and photos are embellished with redwood paste, red flowers and votive grain dipped in red vermillion. In mornings and evenings, Devi is invoked and worshipped. Doing this will fill the homes and shrines with fresh, tantalizing fragrance. On the tenth day of the ritual, people accept tika, as a mark of blessing, from their elders. The practice continues upto the full moon day, which is called Kojagrat Poornima. On the night of the Poornima Day, all jamaras, leaves and flowers from Devi's shrine are taken to the Ganga—represented by any river in the vicinity—and offered to the water there. This festival, that begins on the first day of the bright fortnight, and ends on the full moon day, is the 'Badha Dashain' or the larger Dashain.

3. Folk Songs Related with Dashain

During Dashain, the Nepalese sing two types of songs: Barhamase Songs, and Dashain Songs. Barhamase ('barha' meaning twelve and 'mas' meaning 'months') are those songs which can be sung all the year round. Among such songs are Salaijo, Yanimaya, Sunimaya, Gallalagare, Kheli etc. Devotional songs and hymns too are sung round the year at or near the shrine of Devi. On the other hands, there are children's songs like 'Dahain aayo, khaula piyula' (Dashain is nearing; we get good food and cloth" sung at any time of the year for entertainment. So, since these are perennial songs, and do not exclusively represent songs of Dashain, they are not Dashain songs.

Dashain songs are those, that are sung only during Dashain, and whose singing mode, content, feeling, melody and meter suggest the coming of Dashain, are Dashain songs. Such, exclusive Dashain songs are Malasiri, Sarayen, Biwas, Ping Kheldako Geet (song of the swing), Sewa Laune Geet, Turi Khelne Geet, Dashain Selaune Geet, etc.

3.1 Malasiri

Malasiri is a song sung during the Dashain festival, before the tenth day (Vijaya Dashami Day). This song is commonly referred to as Malasiri, Malsiri, Maarasiri, Marsiri, Malasi, Malashree or Malawashree. All these words have descended from Sanskrit word 'Malasi' that changed into Malashree, and to other words. (Pokharel, 1983, pp. 10). This song, that entered Nepal from India, was in vogue even during the Malla regime. (Thapa et.al. 1984, pp. 165; Parajuli, 2000, pp 108). Since then, old folks and youths of Brahmin, Kshetri, Magar and Gaine communities gather around temples and shrine of Devi, and sing this song, even without dancing. Though the Gandarvas sing it on their traditional lute called Sarangi, other communities perform it orally. While this song is sung, both the singer and the listener sway softly with the song. In this song, which has a slow tempo has the opening couplet, refrain and stanzas, also have discourse markers like aa, ho, e, ha, hau, ho etc. The song, whose content is the invocation of Devi the Goddess, has a mixture of Sanskrit, Nepali and Hindi vocabularies. And since the song is a dialogue between Devi and her devotees, it has descriptive and dialogic pattern. Though the song evokes the ethos of bravery at times, the fundamental ethos it evokes is one of devotion or bhakti. An instance is drawn from the following lines of Malsiri, sung by a Gandarva:

Jai de|bi bhai|rabi Gorakhna|tha

Darsan di|you bhuma|ni hou||| ho|||