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Cultural Adaptation in *Chorkheli Performance*

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By

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Letter of Approval

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Abstract

Chorkheli, a traditional dance practiced by the Tharu community primarily in the Saptari and Udaypur districts, remains relatively unknown to many outsiders of these regions. This thesis aims to underscore the importance of Chorkheli for the Tharu people and delve into its aesthetic qualities, particularly through the accompanying songs. In an age marked by modernity and migration, cultural exchanges are becoming increasingly common, often leading to greater influence on indigenous cultures. However, this study highlights how the Tharu have not only preserved their tribal culture and identity but have also embraced and adapted the cultural practices and festivals of their neighboring communities. Through ethnographic research, interviews with Chorkheli performers, analysis of the dance's lyrics, and an integration of key theoretical perspectives such as Schechner's views on performance and Guneratne's research on the Tharu, this thesis explores how Chorkheli serves as a cultural symbol of Tharu identity. The performance is not merely a representation of their traditional culture but also reflects the dynamic interplay with neighboring and global influences. Drawing from a variety of sources, including personal interviews, academic articles, journals, and books, the research highlights how Chorkheli stands as an evolving art form shaped by intercultural interactions. Additionally, this study addresses the declining frequency of Chorkheli performances, particularly among the younger Tharu generations, and seeks to identify the factors contributing to its diminishing presence. Despite this, the research concludes that Chorkheli remains a powerful marker of Tharu identity. It not only reinforces their tribal roots but also fosters unity within the community while accommodating regional and global cultural influences, ensuring its continued relevance in the modern era.

Keywords: Tharus, Chorkheli, cultural adaptation, performance, identity

The Tharu people of Nepal are often admired for their resilience in surviving the malaria-prone jungles of the Terai region, which is considered their homeland. Frequently labeled as the indigenous inhabitants of this land, the Tharus possess a profound and extensive understanding of the forest, its animals, and the surrounding environment. Scholars have noted that the Tharus' rich cultural traditions, including their songs and dances, reflect a deep connection to the natural world, illustrating their philosophical approach to life (Guneratne 25). Their rituals and performances are not just expressions of daily survival but are also believed to contain the essence of their visions and worldviews (Guneratne 38). Beyond their relationships with the forest and deities, however, I would argue that the Tharus also maintain complex relationships with neighboring ethnic groups, whose languages and cultures are distinct from their own.

This thesis specifically focuses on the Chorkheli festival performed by the Tharus, which exemplifies their ability to merge indigenous cultural practices with classical Hindu myths and rituals. The Tharus use this dance not only to honor their deities but also to showcase a "socially real" world, reflecting both their traditional beliefs and the influence of neighboring cultures (Wright 72). The performance of Chorkheli allows the Tharu community to project both a spiritual realm of gods and a lived reality, where cultural assimilation with neighboring groups is evident.

In the twenty-first century, Tharus are increasingly mobile within and beyond Nepal's borders. They engage in politics, aligning themselves with various political parties, while recognizing the role of political systems in marginalizing their community (Wright 88). Despite their political awareness, the Tharus remain deeply connected to their cultural identity, grounded in the region where they have lived for centuries. The place they call home has shaped not only their lifestyles but also their

traditions, songs, and rituals. As they navigate a more politically liberal environment, the Tharus simultaneously turn inward, reflecting on their roots, language, and culture.

Living amidst the dense, malaria-infested forests of the Terai, the Tharus have developed a belief system that incorporates not only the natural world but also a rich pantheon of deities, supernatural entities, and spirits. These beliefs are deeply tied to their experiences with climate, disease, and wildlife. In times of illness, Tharu families turn to their deities for intervention, a practice known as bhakal, where prayers are made for healing (Guneratne 112). When children fall ill, the Tharus invoke these divine powers, and their eventual recovery is often seen as a direct result of their divine intervention. This connection between the supernatural and everyday life is reinforced through their rituals, which, while deeply meaningful, also involve fun, community interaction, and philosophical reflection.

This thesis explores how Tharus use singing, dancing, and storytelling to communicate vital messages to one another while simultaneously entertaining themselves and their communities. However, in an era of increasing globalization, migration, and modern influences, their culture is undergoing transformation. As Chorkheli and other traditional performances are increasingly witnessed by both domestic and international tourists, the Tharus find themselves at the crossroads of local tradition and global influence. This shift is evident in their performances, which reflect both indigenous roots and evolving cultural practices.

This thesis specifically examines the ChorkheliNaach of the Tharus of Saptari and Udaypur districts. Unlike previous research that often treats such performances as static tribal practices, this study focuses thatChorkheli is not merely a relic of tribal culture but a dynamic cultural practice that has adapted and evolved over time. By

incorporating elements from both local traditions and external cultural influences, Chorkheli represents the Tharus' capacity to navigate both indigenous and globalized worlds. This analysis contributes to a broader understanding of cultural adaptation and continuity among the Tharu community, demonstrating their ability to retain their identity while engaging with the changing cultural landscape of the modern world.

Chorkheli is a significant dance performed by the Tharu community, traditionally held in October. This performance coincides with the widely celebrated Deepawali festival among Hindus, which adds to the liveliness and cultural visibility of the Chorkheli festival. The timing of the dance creates a unique cultural intersection, as it occurs alongside the Hindu celebrations. This overlap fosters a cultural bond between two distinct ethnolinguistic groups, promoting a shared sense of festivity through songs, dances, and rituals. The Chorkheli performance, while a distinct Tharu tradition, becomes more visible and engaging when it aligns with the broader Hindu celebrations, particularly during the nights of the Gobardhan Puja, when songs and dances are a hallmark of the festival (Guneratne 68).

Historically, it is believed that the Chorkheli performance lasted for an entire month, but in contemporary times, it has been condensed to a span of 2 to 4 days. As the performance dates approach, a ritual begins when a child who has been ill and whose parents have made a bhakal (a plea to the divine for healing) recovers. This child is then chosen to represent Chordev, an incarnation of Lord Shiva. The home where Chordev is set to visit is thoroughly cleaned and purified in preparation for the arrival of the Chordev troupe. The family receives Chordev with great reverence, offering water and a place to sit. Chordev is greeted as an honored guest, a physical manifestation of Shiva, and is highly respected within the community (Wright 112).

The costume of Chordev is an essential component of the performance, adding a visual element that enriches the experience. Chordev is adorned in a striking and amusing fashion, featuring jewels made from jute and a comic-like makeup that transforms him into an almost otherworldly figure. With a jute crown, necklace, rings, earrings, and a sword, Chordev takes on the appearance of a mythical being, amusing spectators with his unconventional look. The costumes play a crucial role in conveying the symbolic meaning of the dance and its rituals. Chidi's research on traditional African dances and the role of costumes highlights their significance in reflecting the "expressive and artistic designs of inner wealth and the dignity of the individual" (89). This notion also applies to the Chordev costume, which, while humorous and visually striking, carries deep cultural meaning and resonates with the beliefs of the Tharu community.

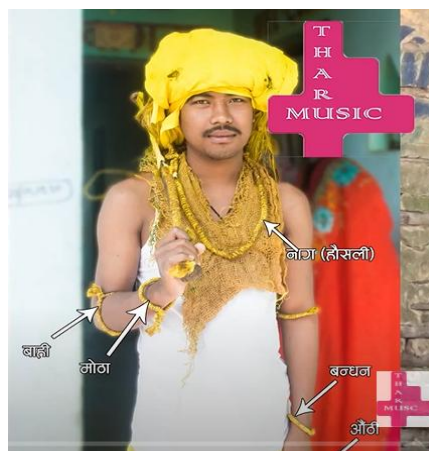


Photo 1: “A man dressed as *Chordev* with all the jewels made of jute”(“Purbi Tharu Chorkheli Nach Ek Parichaya”).

The yellow pigment used on the ornaments of Chordev further emphasizes the sacred nature of the character. His dhoti and kurta, along with the jute ornaments, are worn during the performance, often on cold nights, adding an extra layer of spectacle to the event. Spectators are drawn to this rare and unique figure, whose appearance is

no less significant than Lord Shiva himself, the most revered of Hindu deities. The costume and adornments of Chordev serve as a physical manifestation of the Tharu culture, lifestyle, and belief systems, all of which are communicated through the use of indigenous materials. These rituals and performances, embedded in cultural symbols, demonstrate how the Tharu people adapt their traditions while maintaining a strong connection to their roots and beliefs.

When the performers arrive at a house to present the Chorkheli performance, they immediately immerse themselves in the household's routine, behaving as though they are members of the family. They do not remain passive but actively assist in preparing for the rituals, helping to arrange the necessary materials. The housewife then arrives to clean the space in the yard, which is later purified through a traditional process involving sprinkling water and cleansing the area with mud and cow dung. The atmosphere of the space shifts dramatically as ritual lines are drawn with vermilion and rice flour, infusing the environment with a distinct and sacred vibe that prepares it for the performance (Guneratne 114).

Once the area is ready, the stage is set. Chordev, representing an incarnation of Lord Shiva, stands at one corner of the yard, facing east. Designated individuals then begin the ritual of removing the ornaments from Chordev, a process known as Chorkachi. One of the family members assists by pouring water over the ornaments, which are then placed in the puja ghar (worship area). This ritual symbolizes the divine presence and is a customary part of Chordev's visit to a household, particularly to the home of relatives (Wright 115). After completing the Chorkachi ritual, the performers, including the Nyak (singer) and Natuwa (dancer), begin their dance and song performance to entertain the family and their neighbors.



Photo 2: “A man in the remaining ornaments of *Chordev* after visiting his kinsfolk and Chorkachi” [My Photograph]

The group of performers usually consists of around six members, including the Nyak, Natuwa, a joker, and others who play various musical instruments. The Nyak and Natuwa sing in high-pitched voices, often causing their voices to crack from the intensity of the singing. Accompanying them are performers playing instruments such as the harmonium, mirdang, and jhyalijhyamta, whose rhythmic sounds bring energy and joy to the cold November night (Guneratne 118). The music and dance blend together seamlessly, creating an atmosphere of celebration and connection.



Photo 3: “Performing ChorkheliNaach” (This is the group that hails from Udaypur district and are praised for in popularizing the dance and songs of Tharus around Saptari and Udaypur. They are self-trained performers.) [My Translation]

Although the dance steps may appear to be choreographed, the Natuwa is not formally trained in dance but instead has learned through observation and practice. Bhikhan Chaudhary, a Natuwa who shared his experience of learning the dance, explained: "I learnt the dance by watching other people perform. There is no formal training; the performance I give just comes naturally" (Chaudhary). This comment emphasizes the informal, organic nature of the learning process within the community. The family, alongside Chordev, warmly welcomes the troupe of performers, acknowledging the significance of their ritual and cultural celebration. In this way, Chorkheli exemplifies the Tharu community's ability to blend social and ritualistic practices with artistic expression, creating a space where cultural traditions, community bonds, and shared joy coexist in a dynamic and evolving performance.

For a first-time observer, it can be difficult to distinguish the gender of the dancers in the Chorkheli performance. The troupe predominantly consists of middle-aged men, dressed in dhotis and kurtas, which are traditional male garments. However, due to the cold nighttime temperatures, they wear trousers underneath their dhotis for warmth. In addition to the dhoti and kurta, they also wear pagaris, cloths that cover their heads, to complete the ensemble. However, the most striking aspect of the performance is the Natuwa, the dancer, who dresses in female attire. The Natuwa wears a blouse, sari, ghaghara (a long skirt), and chuniri (headscarf), all of which are traditional costumes of Tharu women. With makeup applied to complete the transformation, the Natuwa dances energetically around the yard, embodying the role of Parvati, the consort of Shiva, while Chordev, dressed as Shiva, represents the male divine counterpart (Guneratne 119).



Photo 4: “*Natuwa*; a man who is dressed as a woman”. When he dresses up as woman, he is regarded as the Goddess Parvati during ChorkheliNaach. [My Photograph]

The significance of the *Natuwa*'s attire extends beyond visual spectacle. Amirulloh and Badaruddin argue, "Makeup and costumes not only function as decoration, but also convey deep cultural meanings and values" (79). The *Natuwa*'s dress, which contrasts with the traditional male attire of the other performers, carries important symbolic weight within the performance. In embodying Parvati, the *Natuwa* is not merely adopting a female persona for entertainment purposes; the costume itself serves as a conduit for conveying deeper cultural narratives about gender roles, spirituality, and the cosmic marriage between Shiva and Parvati. This duality—one man performing the roles of both masculine Shiva and feminine Parvati—also engages with notions of gender fluidity and transformation, inherent in many traditional performances. The transformation of gender in this ritual highlights how cultural performances can challenge and subvert normative gender roles while simultaneously reinforcing the cultural and spiritual significance of these roles (Guneratne 120).

The visual spectacle of a man dressed as a woman not only captures the attention of older spectators but also fascinates the younger audience, particularly children. For them, it is an awe-inspiring sight to see a man transform into a woman, creating an element of surprise and curiosity about gender and identity. This spectacle plays a key role in drawing the audience's attention, as it provides both entertainment and a moment of cultural reflection. Stuart Hall notes, clothes, and by extension costumes, "double up as signs" that "construct a meaning and carry a message" (37). In the context of the Chorkheli performance, the costumes are not just ornamental; they function as powerful symbols that communicate cultural narratives, such as the fusion of divine masculine and feminine forces in the deities of Hindu mythology.

The costumes worn by the performers serve multiple purposes beyond decoration. First, they provide protection against the cold weather, particularly during the chilly nights in which the performance takes place. However, more significantly, the costumes are an integral part of the performance itself. They act as "signifiers" within the performance—marking the spiritual roles of each character, from Chordev's embodiment of Lord Shiva to the Natuwa's portrayal of Parvati. These signifiers, which include the elaborate attire and makeup, combine to create a visual language that conveys not only the performance's aesthetic qualities but also its deeper cultural and religious meanings. As Hall suggests, these clothes "construct a meaning" through the way they symbolize the community's beliefs, values, and identities, helping the Tharu people assert their cultural continuity and resilience in the face of modern challenges (37).

The costumes in the Chorkheli performance are far from simple adornments. They are a reflection of the Tharu people's cultural heritage, spiritual beliefs, and the adaptive nature of their traditional practices. The performance itself becomes a

cultural space where gender, religion, and identity are fluidly expressed, allowing both the performers and the audience to engage in a shared experience that bridges past and present, local tradition and global influences.

The Chorkheli performance begins after the ritual of Chorkachi (removal of Chordev's ornaments) is completed. The spacious yards of Tharu houses provide an ideal setting for the performers to move freely and engage with the audience. The performance is a rich blend of ritual, storytelling, and cultural expression. Through their songs, the performers convey a deep emotional spectrum, including happiness, sadness, astonishment, life lessons, and the pain of separation from loved ones. These songs offer a reflection of the Tharu community's social and religious life, serving as a medium through which human emotions and experiences are expressed and shared (Guneratne 121). They frequently sing about gods and goddesses, reinforcing their cultural and spiritual ties. These songs are particularly favored by the older generations within the Tharu community, as well as by people from neighboring non-Tharu families. This shared appreciation of the performance fosters a sense of unity and cultural connectivity, even across ethnic and linguistic boundaries (Wright 112).

As the performance unfolds, a key figure who plays a central role is the shaman, Dal Singh Dhama. In the Tharu communities of Saptari and Udaypur, Dal Singh Dhama is venerated as a powerful and miraculous figure. The Tharus believe that he possessed the ability to ward off dangerous wild animals and was also endowed with tantric powers. The song serves as an homage to the shaman's divine power, and its presence in the performance underscores the deep spiritual connection the Tharus have with their rituals and natural surroundings.

In the Chorkheli performance, Dal Singh Dhama plays a pivotal role as a figure of reverence and power, with his spiritual and miraculous abilities deeply

woven into the performance's narrative. The song dedicated to him is not just an expression of admiration, but an embodiment of the Tharu community's belief system and their connection to the supernatural. As the song goes:

Dal Singh Dhami, the son of a Tharu woman
 Who possesses miraculous power
 Who chews betel leaves,
 Who dresses up as a saint/hermit, instead of shaman
 Dal Singh Dhami, who is such a powerful healer
 Who ploughs the field using tiger and ox together
 On the left-hand side of the plough is an ox and on the right-hand side is a
 tiger
 Started to plough in the north-south direction. (Tharu 335-36)

This verse encapsulates the duality of Dal Singh Dhami's identity as both a protector and healer, a figure bridging the human and the supernatural. His portrayal as a healer who uses both a tiger and an ox in the ploughing ritual speaks to the Tharus' deep connection to nature and their belief in the power of the spirit world. Such imagery reflects the Tharu's relationship with their environment, wherein wild animals and domesticated creatures coexist under the watchful eye of spiritual leaders like Dal Singh Dhami. Typically, in the natural world, the tiger, a wild predator, would be seen as a threat to the ox, a domesticated animal that humans rely upon for agriculture. The relationship between the two animals represents opposing forces within the ecosystem: the tiger symbolizes the wild, uncontrollable power of nature, while the ox embodies domestication, labor, and human control. His powers—manifested through his interaction with these animals—are symbolic of the community's understanding of

balance between the natural and supernatural forces that govern their lives (Guneratne 127).

Dal Singh Dhama's role in Chorkheli, as both a shaman and a symbolic protector, can be analyzed through Schechner's concept of performance as a form of "restored behavior" (36). For Schechner, performance is a dynamic interplay of ritual, tradition, and transformation, where past behaviors are reenacted in the present. Chorkheli, in this sense, functions as a medium through which the Tharu people not only reenact their traditional beliefs but also reinforce their collective identity in the face of modernization. The performance serves as a cultural bridge between the mythic past and the present, with figures like Dal Singh Dhama embodying the continuity of Tharu traditions.

The figure of Dal Singh Dhama, especially through the lens of performance, also represents a cultural negotiation between the indigenous and the external. While the Tharu people have long lived in the forests and jungles of the Terai region, their identity has always been influenced by the surrounding cultures—whether through the influence of Hinduism, as seen in the Chorkheli performance, or through the integration of practices from other ethnic groups. In this context, Dal Singh Dhama's role as a tantrik healer can be seen as a blending of Tharu spiritualism with broader South Asian traditions, making his character a symbol of both continuity and cultural adaptation (Wright and Hope 118).

Dal Singh Dhama's transformative role in Chorkheli is further emphasized by the reactions of both the performers and the audience. In interviews with the performers, many noted that Dal Singh Dhama's power and significance transcend the mere enactment of a ritual or story; they are an essential component in communicating the Tharu people's resilience and adaptability. Bhikhan Chaudhary, a

performer and Natuwa in the Chorkheli tradition, remarked, "We learn about Dal Singh Dhami through our songs, and every time we perform, it feels like we're not just telling a story, but we're reminding ourselves of who we are and where we come from" [My Interview].

Through the figure of Dal Singh Dhami, the Tharu people express their vision of harmony, where the wild and the domestic, the spiritual and the physical, can coexist and thrive. In performing this song and enacting its symbolism, the Tharus not only honor their ancestors and traditions but also demonstrate their ability to adapt and evolve while staying true to their cultural roots.

As Guneratne discusses in his research, the Tharus have a unique relationship with their cultural heritage, blending ancestral traditions with modern influences as they adapt to contemporary life while maintaining their identity (153). The song about Dal Singh Dhami in Chorkheli, which illustrates his miraculous powers, plays a key role in this negotiation between tradition and adaptation. The song about Dal Singh Dhami in the Chorkheli performance is as much a cultural narrative as it is a spiritual one. It describes the hero's powers to command nature and the supernatural, exemplified by the lines:

Ploughing the field all at once.

Setting out the ox and making the tiger free

Went Biju forest to hunt

Neither he kills deer nor he kills pheasant

But hunts down enormous peacocks

Making an offering to 56 koti gods and goddesses. (Tharu 335-36)

This passage, steeped in myth and spirituality, illuminates Dal Singh Dhami's extraordinary abilities and reflects a worldview where opposites—domestic and wild,

tame and untamable—can exist harmoniously. The juxtaposition of the ox and the tiger in this song once again illustrates the Tharu worldview that seeks to reconcile seemingly contradictory forces. The ox represents the domestic, the tame, the tool of human labor, while the tiger symbolizes the wild, untamed forces of nature. The ability of Dal Singh Dhami to manage both creatures simultaneously—leading them together in harmony—demonstrates his control over both the domestic and the wild. This reconciles the natural world’s opposing forces, a concept central to the Tharu understanding of balance and coexistence.

The act of Dal Singh Dhami hunting enormous peacocks further complicates the binary between wild and domestic. Peacocks, unlike common deer or pheasants, are symbols of beauty, grace, and abundance. They are creatures that transcend mere wildness; their feathers are often associated with deities and the divine. In hunting these majestic birds, Dal Singh Dhami is not simply subduing nature but is also engaging with the divine, blurring the lines between the human, natural, and spiritual realms. This alignment with divine forces is further emphasized in the song’s reference to offering sacrifices to “56 koti gods and goddesses,” which alludes to the Tharu belief in the omnipresence of the divine in every aspect of life.

Richard Schechner’s theories on performance as a dynamic process that bridges various aspects of life—ritual, entertainment, and social functions—are particularly useful in analyzing the Chorkheli performance. Schechner argues that performance is not merely a representation of a fixed tradition but a re-enactment that allows for the expression and negotiation of cultural meanings (36). In the case of Chorkheli, Dal Singh Dhami’s performance is not a passive re-telling of an ancient myth but an active re-negotiation of cultural values and a reflection of how the Tharu

community navigates its relationship with both its indigenous cultural practices and the new forces that challenge them.

Furthermore, the blending of myth and ritual in Chorkheli, along with its vibrant performance, provides an opportunity for the Tharu community to assert their cultural identity. They create a space in which cultural continuity and adaptation coexist. The performance of Chorkheli thus becomes a living tradition that speaks to both the spiritual needs and the social realities of the Tharu people, ensuring that their heritage endures amidst the forces of globalization and cultural exchange.

Also, the Tharu community has interacted with neighboring Hindu and Buddhist populations, it has integrated certain practices and deities into its own belief system. This is particularly evident in the way they have adopted Hindu gods and goddesses, while simultaneously maintaining their own unique rituals and worldview. The performance includes songs about deities such as Shiva and Gauri, which have been adapted to fit the Tharu's local context. This blending of deities from various religious traditions reflects the Tharu's cultural adaptability, as they harmonize their indigenous beliefs with external influences.

One significant example of this syncretism is the song that depicts the conversation between Shiva (Mahadev) and his wife Gauri. This song illustrates the domestic dynamics between the gods, rendering them relatable to the everyday lives of the Tharu people. The Natuwa and Nyak performers sing the following lines:

After roaming the world Mahadev, stands in front of Gauri's palace
 Where are you Oh, Gauri, a guest stands in front of the gate/yard
 On one hand Gauri carries a vessel of water and on the other hand carries a
 mat,
 Wash your feet, have a seat on the mat oh Mahadev, tell me how are you,

I am fine oh Gauri and everything is fine, families are fine as well
 But there is one thing oh dear Gauri, Shiva has married another lady. [My
 translation] (B. Chaudhary 77).

In this dialogue, Mahadev and Gauri discuss issues of marital fidelity and the consequences of polygamy, mirroring real-world social dynamics. The song addresses not only the personal emotions of Gauri but also offers a broader social commentary on the pain and betrayal that comes with polygamy. This aspect of the performance connects the divine to the human experience, emphasizing that even gods are subject to the complexities of human relationships.

Through the lens of performance, the Chorkheli ritual also brings to light the social realities of the Tharu community, particularly in terms of gender roles and marital practices. The relationship between Shiva, Gauri, and Sanjha reflects the issue of polygamy, which was prevalent in contemporary society. The interaction between the three characters highlights not only the emotional turmoil that comes with multiple marriages but also the broader implications for familial harmony. Gauri's anger at Sanjha's marriage to Shiva underscores the emotional and social challenges of polygamy:

You did a good thing marrying again oh Shiva, this will increase in your
 lineage

Will you bring her Oh Shiva? Will you show me my co-consort?

She has a figure like you and is as obedient and as gentle as you

She has a beautiful, charming face, and is named Sanjha

May your parents die Oh Sanjha, may your brothers die

There are many men in the world, yet you came to be my co-consort. [My
 translation] (B. Chaudhary 77).

The emotional complexities explored in this song reflect the Tharu community's engagement with societal issues through performance. While the gods and goddesses in the performance may seem distant from the everyday lives of the Tharu people, their interactions provide a mirror to the social and emotional issues that the community faces. The song's portrayal of Gauri's anger and Sanjha's plea for mercy not only addresses the challenges of polygamy but also comments on the broader human experience of love, jealousy, and reconciliation.

This aspect of the performance aligns with Schechner's concept of "restored behavior," where the re-enactment of these mythic and social narratives allows for the community to reflect on their own experiences, values, and societal norms (40). By performing these stories, the Tharu people engage in a process of cultural adaptation that acknowledges the complexities of their social reality while preserving and adapting their traditional narratives.

The Chorkheli performance, integral to the Tharu community's cultural expression, is both a reflection of their traditions and a medium through which they navigate social realities and evolving cultural influences. As Schechner argues, performance is not just a replication of rituals or historical events but a dynamic, interactive process that allows communities to adapt and respond to changing social contexts (56). The Chorkheli performance, with its ritualistic dances and songs, allows the Tharu people to explore their social environments, relationships, and identities, while also adapting and responding to external influences.

One such example of cultural adaptation in Chorkheli is the popular song "Raja kehabeliya", which narrates the plight of a woman who defies societal norms by attending a dance performance at the king's palace, only to return home to betrayal and rejection from her husband. This song captures themes of marital conflict, love,

betrayal, and societal expectations, resonating with both the older and younger generations within the Tharu community, as well as with surrounding non-Tharu communities.

The “Raja kehabeliya” song centers on a conversation between a husband and wife, separated by a wall, as the wife returns from the king’s palace after watching a dance performance. Her husband, infuriated by her decision to attend the performance without his consent, denies her entry and reveals that he has already taken another wife, the daughter of a fellow villager, Malin. The wife, deeply heartbroken, expresses her pain through the following lyrics:

Wife: The music coming from Madhupur sounds so ear-pleasing
 A dancer is dancing in the King’s palace
 I also want to go and watch the dance
 Husband: If you go, then this will end our love,
 I will shut the huge door from inside
 And sleep inside hassle-free... (Tharu 179)

The lyrics progress to describe the wife’s emotional turmoil as she returns home only to be confronted by her husband’s betrayal. She contemplates the consequences of her actions and the sudden rupture of her once-secure life. This song is particularly significant in its portrayal of a woman’s desire to enjoy the pleasures of life—represented by the dance performance—and the resulting fallout that disrupts her domestic world. The wife’s plea for her husband’s forgiveness and her lamentations about her fate evoke deep emotional responses from the audience, particularly older spectators who relate to the societal constraints and gendered expectations of the time.

Guneratne notes in his study of the Tharu people that the performance of these songs enables communities to revisit the complexities of their social structures,

including gender dynamics, familial roles, and the consequences of defying traditional norms (147). In this context, the song “Raja kehabeliya” offers a social commentary on the fragility of relationships, particularly within a patriarchal society where women’s autonomy is often limited by the expectations and actions of male authority figures.

The song also resonates with the broader issue of how decisions, particularly those made hastily or in defiance of authority, can have far-reaching consequences. The wife’s decision to attend the king’s dance performance—referred to as the “rich men’s dance”—marks a transgressive act, as it goes against the wishes of her husband. The pain that follows her action reflects the Tharu community’s respect for social order and the traditional patriarchal norms that govern marital relationships. The husband’s harsh response, in which he claims to have married another woman, is an attempt to reassert control over the domestic space and to punish the wife for her perceived disobedience.

The song “Raja kehabeliya” is particularly popular among the older generations of the Tharu community, many of whom recall a time when dance performances at the king’s palace were rare and highly anticipated events. According to an interview with the leader of a Chorkheli troupe from Udaypur, villagers in the past would eagerly await dance performances, often inviting dancers from India to entertain them. These performances served as one of the few forms of entertainment available to the community [My Interview]. The song taps into this nostalgia, as it speaks to a time when such performances were a significant cultural event.

However, the song also provides a critical lens through which the community can reflect on the changing roles of women and the broader social transformations that have occurred over time. As the wife in the song longs to experience the joys of

watching the dance, she is confronted with the consequences of defying her husband's authority. The emotional depth of the song allows the older generation to relive past experiences while also reflecting on the evolving roles of women and the complexities of marital dynamics in their society.

Another noteworthy aspect of Chorkheli performance is the adaptability of the songs to different times of the day, highlighting the cultural flexibility of the Tharu community. For example, the parati song is traditionally sung at dawn, as the troupe bids farewell to their host homes. According to Guneratne, such songs often carry messages of gratitude, farewell, and blessings (156). Through songs like parati, the performers continue to engage with their audiences, reinforcing cultural norms while adapting their performances to fit the time and place of the ritual. The parati song, like other ritual songs, reflects a communal engagement with time, space, and social relations, serving both a functional and symbolic role within the performance.

The Chorkheli performance, with its intricate blend of music, dance, and narrative, serves as a powerful tool for the Tharu community to explore and adapt to their evolving social and cultural environments. Through songs like "Raja kehabeliya" and parati, the Tharu people engage in a process of cultural negotiation, adapting traditional narratives to address contemporary issues such as marital conflict, gender roles, and social expectations. As Schechner argues, performance is an active site of cultural transformation and adaptation, where communities reflect on their values, traditions, and changing identities (78). In this sense, the Chorkheli performance not only preserves the cultural heritage of the Tharu people but also enables them to confront and engage with the challenges of modern life.

The Chorkheli performance, a key element of Tharu cultural expression, is not only a medium of entertainment but also a space for the adaptation and negotiation of

cultural traditions. As Schechner asserts, performance is a dynamic process through which communities reflect, adapt, and express their identities (56). One of the most significant adaptations within Chorkheli performance is the integration of Hindu influences, particularly through songs that incorporate elements of Hindu mythology. A prime example is the parati song, which features Lord Krishna—one of the central deities of Hinduism—and presents his daily chores in a relatable, humanized manner.

The parati song is deeply rooted in Hinduism, borrowing elements of Lord Krishna's life and portraying them in a way that renders him not as a divine figure but as a regular human being engaged in everyday chores. The song begins with the Koel bird waking Krishna up in the morning, signaling the start of his day. The lyrics describe how Krishna, like a farmer, takes care of his cattle and performs other domestic tasks:

It is now dawn oh Krishna, even the Koel has started to sing

Wake up oh Krishna it is now morning

Everyone's cattle Oh Krishna are moving to the Keyali forest where Koel bird is singing

But your cattle oh Krishna, are waiting for you mooing,

Take the ropes to tie your cattle, turban for your head, water pot and clogs,

Oh, Krishna milk the cattle, when the calves are held behind by Radha. [My translation]

This song portrays Lord Krishna as a farmer, engaging in activities such as milking cattle and caring for animals. The underlying message of this parati song is one of discipline and the importance of completing daily tasks in a timely and organized manner. The Tharu people, like the character of Krishna in the song, are encouraged to perform their chores with dedication and efficiency. As the song conveys, the day

begins with the milking of cattle and other essential tasks, and only through such discipline can a person hope to live a productive and fulfilling life. This theme reflects a broader societal emphasis on hard work, simplicity, and a deep connection to nature, values that are intrinsic to the Tharu way of life.

As Guneratne notes in his study of the Tharu people, the incorporation of Hindu elements such as Krishna into Chorkheli performance reveals the dynamic process of cultural adaptation, where the Tharus have incorporated Hindu influences into their own unique cultural context (147). By doing so, they maintain their connection to Hindu traditions while also expressing their own cultural values and practices.

As Schechner suggests, performance is an effective means of communicating social norms and values, and in this case, the parati song serves as a reminder to the audience—both within and outside the Tharu community—that a disciplined, simple lifestyle is the foundation of a harmonious and successful existence (78). In this way, the Chorkheli performance becomes a vehicle for transmitting these cultural ideals to both the younger generation and outsiders, ensuring the continuity of Tharu values while adapting them to contemporary circumstances.

The Chorkheli performance is not just about the lyrics of the songs; it is also about the dance movements that accompany them. The Natuwa, the primary male dancer, plays a crucial role in conveying the emotions and messages embedded in the songs. As Bhikhan Chaudhary, a Natuwa from a troupe in Udaypur, explains, “The dance movements are the way of expressing what the song is trying to tell” [My Interview]. The Natuwa uses hand gestures and body movements to mirror the actions and emotions described in the songs, creating a visual and emotional connection with the audience. This integration of dance and song allows the performers to engage the

audience on multiple levels, drawing them into the narrative while also evoking emotional responses. For the older generations, the performance is filled with nostalgia, as the songs and dances recall memories of their own youth and cultural traditions. Through these performances, the Tharu people not only preserve their cultural heritage but also create a space for reflection on their past and present.

Additionally, the performances serve as a platform for communicating contemporary social messages. The parati song, for example, may appear simple on the surface, but its themes of discipline, simplicity, and hard work are directly relevant to the everyday lives of the Tharu people. The audience, particularly the youth, is encouraged to take these lessons to heart, understanding that the pursuit of a disciplined life and respect for nature is as important today as it has been throughout history.

A key feature of Chorkheli performance is its ritualistic nature, which helps to further cement the connection between the performers and the audience. The songs, dances, and rituals that unfold during a performance are not only for entertainment but also serve to reinforce cultural values and social norms. The audience's active participation is encouraged, either through their emotional engagement with the performance or by observing the rituals that follow. As Schechner suggests, ritual is an integral component of performance, allowing for the transmission of cultural meaning through both structured and spontaneous actions (90). In the context of Chorkheli, the performers ensure that the audience is immersed in the experience, both through the music and the accompanying rituals. This dynamic interaction between performers and spectators contributes to the overall success of the performance, as it fosters a sense of communal participation and cultural cohesion.

The Chorkheli performance is a powerful example of cultural adaptation, blending traditional Tharu values with influences from neighboring Hindu traditions. Through songs like *parati*, which humanize deities like Krishna, the Tharu people have adapted Hindu elements into their own cultural practices, creating a space where discipline, simplicity, and respect for nature are celebrated. Chorkheli serves as both a means of protecting their cultural heritage and adapting it to modern realities, integrating influences from neighboring traditions, particularly Hinduism.

Similarly, oral tradition is at the heart of Tharu culture, serving as the primary means by which the community preserves its collective memory and transmits cultural knowledge. As Bhattarai notes, oral traditions are essential for capturing "the disappearing traditions of the countryside" (14). The Chorkheli performance, deeply rooted in these oral traditions, reflects the Tharus' values, societal structures, and spiritual beliefs. These performances—along with the songs that accompany them—are not only a source of entertainment but also serve as a vehicle for storytelling, providing a window into the life and worldview of the Tharu people, particularly those from the Saptari and Udaypur regions.

The Tharus, particularly those in the eastern regions of Nepal, have long embraced Hindu traditions, blending them with their indigenous beliefs. Songs like those about Dal Singh Dhami and Krishna showcase the interconnectedness of Tharu culture with broader Hindu traditions. MP Kharel asserts, the Tharu people have incorporated themes from Hindu scriptures into their cultural practices, reflecting a syncretic blend of local beliefs and Hindu influences (Kharel 98). The Tharus have not merely adopted Hinduism passively; they have incorporated it into their own cultural fabric, adapting Hindu deities and mythological figures to reflect their own

experiences and worldview. This process of cultural adaptation allows the Tharu people to navigate their identity in a multicultural and evolving society.

The Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha, an organization dedicated to the welfare of the Tharu community, has taken steps to address the concerns of documentation of the songs associated with the dance. Through the efforts of various Tharu activists, the Sabha has begun documenting and publishing the lyrics of Tharu songs and the processes of their rituals. These efforts are crucial for preserving the intangible heritage of the Tharu people, as they provide a written record of the traditions that have long been transmitted orally. However, these efforts remain insufficient, and there is still much work to be done to ensure the survival and promotion of Chorkheli performance.

Chorkheli performance represents a dynamic process of cultural adaptation, where the Tharu people negotiate their indigenous practices with external influences, particularly Hinduism. The performance is a living tradition that reflects the values, social structures, and spiritual beliefs of the Tharu community. Through oral traditions, the Tharu people preserve their collective memory, passing down stories and songs that provide insight into their way of life. However, this tradition is under threat due to the pressures of globalization and modernization. Efforts to document and promote Chorkheli are crucial for its survival, but these efforts must be coupled with initiatives to engage the younger generation and ensure that these traditions are valued and maintained for future generations.

As Schechner emphasizes, performance is not just about maintaining the past but also about adapting it to the present (90). Chorkheli's ability to incorporate Hindu elements while retaining its distinct Tharu identity is a testament to its adaptability and resilience. By documenting and promoting these performances, the Tharu people

can ensure that their cultural heritage continues to thrive, even in the face of external pressures.

The Tharu people have long lived in the dense jungles of the Terai, where they have developed a profound belief in the supernatural forces that guide and protect their lives. This belief system is reflected in their Chorkheli performances, where rituals play a crucial role. The Tharu community has always considered their land as sacred, and they attribute their survival in the harsh environment to the intervention of deities, both local and Hindu. As Tej Narayan Panjiar observes, the Tharu people have adapted uniquely to the jungle environment of the Terai, which sets them apart from other communities in Nepal (53). Their survival is viewed as a testament to the protection of benevolent spirits, which is acknowledged and celebrated through ritual performances.

The Tharu people's reliance on ritual and spiritual practice extends to their belief in shamanism, which is a key element in their cultural adaptation and survival. Shamanism, as Schechner notes, is a widespread practice that has been integral to many indigenous societies, including the Tharus. Originally associated with hunter-gatherer societies, shamanism has adapted to agricultural, industrial, and even post-industrial societies, as people continue to seek the guidance and healing power of shamans (139). The Tharu people's belief in shamans, particularly in the form of the dhami (or goraus in the western Terai), is a testament to the community's adaptation of shamanistic practices to their unique environment.

Shamans in Tharu culture are believed to have the ability to channel positive energies and communicate with spirits to ensure the well-being of the community. They perform rituals that are believed to bring prosperity, protect the community from harm, and ensure a successful harvest. The connection between

Chorkheli performances and shamanistic rituals is evident, as the dance and songs often invoke blessings from these spiritual figures. The dhami or guraus perform their rituals with the belief that they are not only serving the immediate needs of the community but also ensuring its long-term survival and prosperity.

While the Tharu people have retained many of their indigenous beliefs, they have also integrated elements from Hinduism into their rituals and performances. This cultural adaptation is evident in the Tharu's incorporation of Hindu gods, particularly Lord Krishna, into their songs and dances. As noted by Guneratne, the Tharu people have long adapted to Brahminical traditions while maintaining their own cultural practices, creating a unique synthesis of local and Hindu influences (9). This syncretism is reflected in the Chorkheli performance, where songs honoring Krishna and other Hindu deities coexist with traditional Tharu beliefs.

The incorporation of Hinduism into the Tharu's indigenous practices illustrates their adaptability and resilience. While they have maintained their tribal identity, they have also embraced the spiritual practices of other communities, particularly those of the Brahminical traditions that dominate the Indian subcontinent. This process of cultural adaptation is not unique to the Tharu but is a common feature of indigenous groups worldwide, who often absorb and reinterpret external influences in ways that allow them to maintain their distinctiveness.

Despite the cultural richness of the Tharu community, the preservation of their rituals, including those associated with Chorkheli, faces significant challenges. Globalization, modernization, and the encroachment of external cultural forces have all contributed to the erosion of traditional practices. As Guneratne points out, the Tharu people are often viewed as "tribal" because they occupy an interstitial space between the dominant cultures of the mountain people and the plains (9). This

marginalization has contributed to the neglect of their cultural practices, including Chorkheli performance.

Furthermore, the lack of documentation of oral traditions and rituals has made it difficult to preserve the intricate details of these practices. Without proper support and recognition, the Tharu's performance traditions risk being lost to future generations, and with them, the unique blend of indigenous and Hindu elements that characterize their cultural identity. The documentation of songs, dances, and rituals allows younger Tharu people to connect with their heritage and continue the performance traditions in the face of modern pressures. However, these efforts must be expanded to include wider community participation and greater recognition from national and international cultural preservation bodies. While efforts by organizations like the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha to document songs and rituals are commendable, they remain insufficient to ensure the long-term survival of these traditions.

By documenting their traditions and engaging younger generations, the Tharu people can ensure that their performance practices, such as Chorkheli, continue to thrive as a living expression of their unique cultural identity. As Schechner suggests, performance is a means of sustaining cultural memory while allowing for adaptation and change (90). The Chorkheli performance, with its rich blend of ritual, dance, and song, exemplifies this process of cultural adaptation and survival.

For the Tharu people of Saptari and Udaypur, the Chorkheli performance is not merely a form of artistic expression; it is a ritual deeply rooted in their faith, culture, and social identity. Through these performances, the Tharu people maintain a connection with their spiritual beliefs, honor their ancestors, and express their understanding of the universe. As Schechner asserts, "Rituals are social, religious or aesthetic—or a combination of these" (121), and the Chorkheli performance

exemplifies this combination of functions. In this context, rituals such as Chorkheli are a way for the Tharu people to navigate their beliefs, preserve their cultural practices, and adapt to both ancient and contemporary challenges.

The Chorkheli performance is both a ritual and an act of prayer, performed as an offering to the gods and a tribute to the ancestors. The performance takes on a significant role in maintaining the community's connection to the sacred, reinforcing their sense of purpose in the universe. For the Tharu people, this ritual is a means of marking their existence and ensuring their survival in a challenging environment. Schechner's idea that rituals are "more than structures and functions; they are also powerful experiences" (149) is relevant here, as the Chorkheli ritual encapsulates a spiritual experience that reinforces the community's collective memory and identity.

The influence of shamanism is also evident in the way Tharus approach their daily lives. Their belief in the presence of both good and evil spirits, as well as their reverence for deities, influences their songs, dances, and rituals. They pay tribute to the shaman like Dal Singh Dhama, which marks the beginning of the performance, blending the elements of faith, healing, and community building. According to Schechner, shamanic performance serves multiple functions: "to entertain, to create beauty, to mark change or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach or persuade, to deal with the sacred and the demon" (19). In the case of the Tharu people, the Chorkheli performance fulfills these functions, particularly the role of healing.

For example, when a child is born weak or sickly, the family may consult a shaman to invoke blessings for the child's health and well-being. The shaman conducts a ritual that includes songs, dances, and prayers aimed at ensuring the child's recovery. This ritual is part of the broader cultural practice that links the

community's health and prosperity to spiritual well-being. The performance of Chorkheli thus becomes a healing act, not only for the child but for the entire community, as it fosters a collective sense of spiritual protection and well-being.

The belief in the power of shamans and the healing process they facilitate through ritual is central to the Tharu community's survival. Through these rituals, the Tharu people believe they are able to deal with negative energies and evil spirits that could harm their families and their community. As Schechner notes, these performances serve to "deal with the sacred and the demon" (19), and in the context of the Tharu, this involves invoking spiritual powers that protect the community from harm and promote its prosperity. As Schechner's theory of performance suggests, rituals like Chorkheli serve multiple functions, including healing, fostering community, and dealing with the sacred and the demonic (19). For the Tharu people, Chorkheli is a performance that transcends entertainment; it is a vital ritual that reinforces their connection to their deities, their ancestors, and their environment. In this way, the performance of Chorkheli is a form of cultural adaptation that allows the Tharu people to navigate both their traditional beliefs and the changing realities of the modern world.

The continued practice of Chorkheli, however, faces challenges. As globalization and modernity increasingly influence rural communities, traditional performances and rituals such as Chorkheli are at risk of being overshadowed or forgotten. The loss of these rituals would not only mean the erosion of an important cultural practice but also the loss of a way for the Tharu people to connect with their spiritual and historical roots.

The Chorkhelinaach is a ritual dance performance that goes beyond healing; it is a cultural act that weaves together social relations, religious beliefs, and community

building. In the context of the Tharu people in Saptari and Udaypur, this performance plays a pivotal role in both the spiritual and social dimensions of their lives. The families are asked to host the troupe of performers and the Chordev (the shaman or spiritual guide), inviting them into their homes as part of the ritual. This house-to-house journey is not just a practical necessity but a way to strengthen bonds with family members, neighbors, and the broader community. While the healing function of Chorkheli is paramount, its significance extends to fostering familial ties, social cohesion, and reinforcing the cultural fabric of the community. As Schechner observes, "Rituals put people in touch with transcendent beings and forces, guide them through life-and-identity transitions, confirm them as belonging to a family, community, or nation, and smooth their way through their daily routine" (121). The Chorkhelinaach serves these very functions, bridging the spiritual and social realms and helping the Tharu people navigate their relationships with each other and the divine.

Schechner's perspective on ritual underscores the importance of these communal aspects, noting that rituals "help people deal with transitions, relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed, or violate the norms of daily life" (122). In the case of Chorkheli, the ritual transcends the immediate purpose of healing, creating a space for the participants to reaffirm their social roles, familial relationships, and place within the community. As such, the dance itself becomes a medium for individuals to reaffirm their identities and strengthen their ties to both family and society.

The Tharu people's belief that the 'transcendental beings'—through the rituals of Chorkheli—will guide, heal, and help them prosper is central to the cultural significance of this performance. The ritual, therefore, serves as a means of invoking

divine protection, while also acting as a mechanism for reinforcing community ties. By participating in the Chorkheli performance, individuals experience a spiritual connection to the divine and the human community, reinforcing the idea that their well-being is intertwined with the collective health of their social group.

The Chorkhelinaach is also an act of connecting not just individuals within a family or village, but entire communities. The troupes of performers often come from different villages, making the performance a cross-village affair. This convergence of individuals from various communities highlights the broader social function of the dance: it is a means of solidarity and shared cultural expression. Through the performance, people from different villages unite to pay tribute to the gods and to show gratitude for the healing of a child or a member of the community. Schechner's assertion that "people perform rituals both sacred and secular from before birth to after death; people play throughout their lives" (122) is particularly relevant here, as the Chorkheli performance spans the entire life cycle of the Tharu people, creating a sense of continuity and shared experience across generations and communities.

This cross-village connection is not just about the spiritual act of the dance; it is also about creating a sense of belonging and unity across different social and geographical boundaries. In a way, the ritual performance allows for the creation of a larger, interconnected community that extends beyond the confines of a single family or village, reflecting the collective nature of Tharu identity.

Another crucial aspect of the Chorkheli ritual is the practice of animal sacrifice. The Tharu people, like many other indigenous groups, believe in the role of animals in mediating the spiritual world and facilitating transitions in life. Animal sacrifice, particularly the offering of a male chicken, goat, pigeon, or buffalo, is a deeply embedded part of the Tharu cosmological view and social network. According

to Berti and Good, animal sacrifice is a widespread practice across various ethnic groups in Nepal, particularly to appease gods and ancestors: “The animal can be decapitated or exsanguinated. Some parts of the animal are gifted to the deities, while the remaining parts are normally consumed by the sacrificer (the one who sponsors the sacrifice) and his family, clan, or caste group” (3).



Photo 5: Family members preparing to sacrifice a male goat to complete the ritual of *Chorkachi* and attain transition in the lives of the family members [My Photograph]

For the Tharu people, the animal sacrifice serves multiple purposes. It is believed that the offering helps appease the gods and spirits, ensuring that the ritual is completed successfully and that the family’s request for healing or blessings is granted. The sacrifice symbolizes the community’s acknowledgment of the spiritual forces at play and their willingness to make offerings in exchange for divine favor. Furthermore, the consumption of the animal after the sacrifice reinforces the social bond within the community, as family members and neighbors come together to share the meal, strengthening their collective ties.

The Chorkhelinaach is a rich and multifaceted cultural performance that transcends the act of healing. Through its ritualistic framework, it serves as a means of building and reinforcing social and spiritual connections, both within families and across villages. The performance is an embodiment of the Tharu people’s deep belief

in the transcendent beings that guide their lives, and it plays a central role in maintaining the health and well-being of the community. As Schechner suggests, rituals such as Chorkheli help individuals navigate life's transitions, foster community cohesion, and reinforce cultural identities (121). The ritual also exemplifies how performance and cultural adaptation intersect, as the Tharu people have managed to retain their indigenous practices while adapting to external influences.

By integrating ritual, dance, and animal sacrifice, the Chorkhelinaach becomes a powerful expression of the Tharu people's resilience, cultural continuity, and social cohesion. Through these performances, the Tharu people not only celebrate their spiritual beliefs but also foster unity, reaffirm their identities, and ensure the survival of their traditions in a changing world. The practice of animal sacrifice has undergone significant cultural adaptation over the years within the Tharu community, especially among the people of Saptari and Udaypur. Traditionally, the act of offering a winter melon or sponge gourd to signify the completion of rituals marked an important transition in their spiritual and social lives. However, as time has passed, animal sacrifice, particularly goats and pigeons, has become a prevalent and symbolic act in the rituals associated with Chorkhelinaach. This shift represents a larger cultural transformation, adapting old practices to meet the needs of an evolving society while still retaining its essential spiritual function. This change illustrates a shift in the physical manifestation of the ritual, where the act of sacrificing animals has come to symbolize a more profound connection to the spiritual realm. As Guneratne notes, the Tharus have always adapted to their surroundings and continuously shaped their identity based on their interaction with the land, the supernatural, and their surrounding environment (9). The integration of animal sacrifice in Chorkheli is an

example of how the community continues to adapt its indigenous practices in response to changing spiritual and social needs.

Schechner's work on ritual and performance provides valuable insight into understanding the significance of such practices. He contends that rituals, whether sacred or secular, are "powerful experiences" that help communities manage transitions and foster relationships (149). In the case of the Tharu people, the ritual of animal sacrifice, thus becomes a performance that bridges the human and the divine, signaling a community's ongoing engagement with their cultural traditions while healing the illness as well as adapting to new conditions.

The ritual itself is a carefully choreographed performance that engages both the physical and spiritual realms. As part of the ceremony, the animal—usually a goat—is brought to the pond where the melon was previously chopped. Here, the animal is purified through the sprinkling of water and rice on its head. If the animal quivers its head, this is interpreted as a sign that it is ready for the sacrifice. Similarly, pigeons are also purified and offered in much the same manner. This sequence of actions is not merely symbolic; it is a performance that confirms the animal's readiness for sacrifice and ensures the success of the ritual.

Following the sacrifice, the Tharu people distribute *prasad*, or blessed food, to those present during the ritual. This typically includes curd, beaten rice, and sugar, shared among family members, neighbors, and others who have participated in the ceremony. The act of distributing *prasad* after the sacrifice serves a dual purpose: it not only nourishes the body but also symbolizes the sharing of spiritual blessings and the strengthening of social bonds.

The consumption of *prasad* is an important communal act that reinforces the unity within the family and broader community. As Schechner argues, rituals foster

community by providing opportunities for individuals to come together and engage in shared experiences that affirm their identities and roles within the group (121). In the case of the Tharu people, the act of sharing *prasad* ensures that the benefits of the ritual are spread throughout the community, reinforcing the interdependent relationships that are vital to the survival of their cultural practices.

The Chorkhelinaach, alongside its accompanying rituals, not only plays a vital role in healing and maintaining spiritual connections but also helps the Tharu communities of Saptari and Udaypur affirm and preserve their identity. These practices are deeply embedded in the Tharu's sense of belonging to their land, which they believe is protected by shamans and deities. Their rituals and performances are more than just ceremonial—they are integral to their daily lives, constantly shaping and reshaping their cultural identity as peasants, tribal people, and stewards of the plain land. In line with Schechner's understanding of performance as a communal act, the Chorkheli performance is “a way for people to connect to a collective, to remember or construct a mythic past, to build social solidarity, and to form or maintain a community” (165). This notion is vital for understanding the role of Chorkheli and similar rituals in the Tharu communities: these practices do not only serve spiritual and therapeutic purposes, but they also maintain social cohesion and provide a sense of continuity in the face of external influences.

The rituals are an affirmation of the Tharus' collective memory and a means of retaining a connection to the past, as Schechner suggests: “Rituals help people connect to a collective and construct a mythic past” (165). These performances are central to the construction of Tharu identity, allowing them to remember their roots and origins while continuing to adapt to changing social conditions. However, these rituals and the broader cultural identity of the Tharus are not immune to external

influences. Over time, the Tharus have undergone significant cultural adaptation, particularly due to migration and state interventions. These factors have altered both the performance style of rituals such as Chorkheli and the broader cultural fabric of the Tharu community in Saptari and Udaypur.

One significant factor driving cultural adaptation among the Tharus is migration. Migration patterns, particularly the movement of people from the hilly regions of eastern Nepal and neighboring districts of India, have brought new cultural influences into the region. As people move from one region to another, they inevitably adapt elements of the culture they encounter. For instance, those who migrate from the hills to the Terai region learn the local languages and adopt aspects of the customs and traditions of the Terai people in order to survive and integrate. This process of cultural adaptation is not unique to the Tharu community but is rather a universal phenomenon among migrants across the world.

As Guneratne points out, the eastern Terai has long been an area of economic significance, shaped by migration patterns from neighboring Indian regions. He writes that “The eastern Terai was always economically more vital for the Himalayan states, and its society was shaped over the centuries by immigration from the border districts of India, which provided a source of labor for the region’s development” (10). The influx of labor from India has had profound effects on the Tharu culture, leading to an increase in cultural exchanges and interactions that have influenced Tharu traditions.

Another critical factor contributing to cultural adaptation is state intervention. The malaria eradication program initiated in the mid-20th century, which targeted the dense forest areas of the Terai where the Tharus lived, brought new populations into direct contact with the Tharu communities. This program led to a significant influx of people from other regions of Nepal and India into these areas. As a result, the

Tharus faced increasing pressure to adapt their cultural practices in order to coexist with these new arrivals. Guneratne notes that the state's initiatives and the influx of outside labor led to "the relative decline in the proportion of Tharu in the population...as Indian labor was recruited, often by Tharu Chiefs themselves" (12). The adaptation to these external influences involved both cultural assimilation and resistance, with Tharus modifying certain practices while maintaining others to preserve their identity.

The process of cultural exchange between the Tharus and the immigrant populations has resulted in the evolution of the Chorkheli performance. Traditional rituals, which once focused exclusively on the Tharu way of life, now incorporate elements from neighboring cultures. This blending of cultures reflects a broader trend of adaptation to external influences while simultaneously preserving essential aspects of Tharu identity. The shared performances of Chorkheli among different communities are not just a reflection of changing cultural norms but also serve as a mechanism for maintaining connections within and between these communities.

Through the lens of Schechner's performance theory, we can see that these adaptations are not signs of cultural loss but rather examples of cultural resilience and evolution. The Tharu community's ability to incorporate new elements while maintaining their core traditions illustrates their continued survival and the ongoing evolution of their identity in the face of changing social, political, and economic circumstances.

The Chorkhelinaach, a significant cultural performance of the Tharu communities in Saptari and Udaypur, serves as a powerful symbol of cultural resilience and transformation. Rooted in indigenous traditions, this dance has evolved over time in response to various external influences, including migration, state

interventions, and colonial impacts. The process of cultural adaptation in the Tharu community, particularly in the eastern region of Nepal, has been shaped by the migration of people from the hills and neighboring India, the influence of Sanskritization, and the political and social changes brought about by colonialism and post-colonial state policies.

As Tharus began to engage with Brahmins and other groups from the hilly regions, a significant process of cultural integration took place. This integration is most notably reflected in the rise of Sanskritization among the Tharu people, a process through which indigenous groups adopt practices from higher caste Hindu communities in order to improve their social status and align themselves with the dominant cultural norms. Guneratne observes, the Tharus in the eastern region began to “sanskritize—notably, to summon Brahmin priests to conduct their life cycle rituals” (12). This process marked a shift in the performance of rituals, including the Chorkhelinaach. The involvement of Brahmin priests in Tharu rituals signifies a blending of indigenous practices with the religious customs of higher-caste Hinduism, reflecting the broader societal shift towards integration into a more multi-ethnic and multi-caste society.

Rishi Keshav Raj Regmi, in his study of Tharu culture, asserts that the Tharu community has historically been engaged in the amalgamation of cultures, particularly with those coming from the northern hills and neighboring India (29). This cultural fusion highlights the Tharus’ adaptability in incorporating new traditions while maintaining core aspects of their identity. However, this blending of cultures was not without its challenges. As the Tharus began to adopt aspects of Hindu culture, including the influence of Brahmin priests and the Sanskritization of their rituals, the

purity of their indigenous practices was increasingly intertwined with the broader cultural shifts of the region.

Another crucial factor contributing to the cultural adaptation of the Tharu people was the influence of British colonialism, which, although not directly imposing colonization on Nepal, had significant impacts on the country's social and administrative systems. During the Rana era, which was heavily influenced by the British colony, the Tharus were responsible for paying taxes to the government, a system that continued after Nepal's unification. These taxes played a critical role in funding the activities of the state, including military campaigns and the construction of public infrastructure. As Kurt Meyer notes, the tax contributions of the Tharu people "enabled the rulers of Nepal to finance their wars, their indulgent building follies and their schemes of self-aggrandizement" (19). This tax system, which was rooted in the agricultural labor of the Tharus, tied the community to the state and led to a gradual erosion of their autonomy. In the process, the Tharus became increasingly involved in the economic and political systems of Nepal, further integrating them into the broader socio-political landscape.

Similarly, during the reign of King Mahendra and the subsequent national policies, a unified national identity was promoted, one that was predominantly influenced by the cultural norms of the hill regions (Parbatiya culture). This emphasis on a singular national identity, however, has contributed to the erosion of indigenous cultures, including that of the Tharus in Saptari and Udaypur. The promotion of Parbatiya culture, alongside a lack of state support for indigenous practices, has created a struggle for indigenous groups like the Tharus to maintain their distinct cultural identities. As Lawoti argues, "The indigenous people face cultural imperialism because the state and society promote the Parbatiya culture" (5).

The state's focus on homogenizing cultural practices under a national banner has left little room for the preservation of the traditions and rituals of the Tharus. Cultural imperialism, as Lawoti explains, not only manifests in the promotion of the Parbatiya culture but also in the "demeaning stereotyping of the indigenous people" (6). Indigenous communities, including the Tharus, are often stereotyped based on their language, dress, and educational status. These stereotypes can have far-reaching negative effects, especially on the younger generation, who may internalize such notions and feel alienated from their own cultural practices.

The negative perceptions associated with Tharu culture are particularly evident in the younger generation's engagement with Chorkhelinaach. As younger Tharus are increasingly drawn to the festivals and cultural practices promoted by the state—those associated with the dominant Parbatiya culture—they begin to disengage from traditional Tharu practices. This generational divide poses a threat to the continuation of the Chorkhelinaach in its authentic form. Yet, despite these challenges, the integration of new practices into the Chorkheli ritual, such as the incorporation of Deusi and Bhailo during the festival, reflects a dynamic fusion of cultures. In some ways, this blending of cultures has helped the Tharus retain their cultural relevance in a changing world. The older generation, however, plays a crucial role in bridging this divide by ensuring that the youth remain connected to the core rituals of Chorkhelinaach, ensuring the survival of the tradition in a modern context.

There are positive elements of cultural fusion, despite the challenges posed by cultural imperialism that help the Tharus adapt without losing their core identity. The blending of Parbatiya and Tharu cultures during the Chorkhelinaach celebration is an example of how cultural adaptation can lead to a richer and more diverse cultural expression. As the younger generation participates in Deusi and Bhailo, they engage

in a cultural exchange that, while influenced by Parbatiya traditions, still allows them to maintain a connection to their Tharu heritage through the core ritual practices of the Chorkhelinaach.

This cultural fusion is not necessarily a negative process; instead, it represents the resilience of the Tharu community in maintaining their identity in a rapidly changing world. While the core rituals of Chorkhelinaach have been altered to some extent, they continue to serve as a means for the community to connect with their ancestors, maintain social solidarity, and resist the homogenizing forces of cultural imperialism. The Tharus' ability to adapt and innovate while maintaining a connection to their roots is a testament to their cultural resilience.

Cultural adaptation in the Chorkheli performance of the Tharu communities is a complex process shaped by historical migration, state policies, foreign employment, and the impacts of cultural imperialism. While these forces have presented challenges to the preservation of traditional practices, the Chorkhelinaach continues to evolve, incorporating elements of both indigenous and external cultures. The fusion of Parbatiya and Tharu cultural practices during the Chorkheli festival symbolizes the community's ongoing efforts to navigate cultural change while retaining their core identity. As the Tharus continue to adapt to the evolving socio-political landscape, their cultural resilience and ability to integrate new influences without losing their ancestral traditions will be key to the survival and preservation of the Chorkhelinaach in the future.

The global shift towards modernization and the rise of foreign employment have significantly impacted cultural traditions, particularly in indigenous communities. As contemporary lifestyles spread through modern technologies, the influence of consumer culture has steadily altered societies worldwide. In Nepal,

these changes have created a unique challenge for indigenous cultures, such as the Tharu, whose traditional practices, including the Chorkheli dance, face the risk of extinction. Yet, as C.K. Lal argues, "Modernization of society is, to a large extent, modernization of its values and norms" (256). The Tharu community, in particular, faces a balancing act of preserving cultural heritage while adapting to global advancements. In this process, the Chorkheli dance serves as a crucial example of how indigenous practices navigate these shifts.

Lal further asserts, "Nepali society is under the spell of consumer culture brought by the resurgent West and its slogan of globalization" (256). This wave of modernization has introduced new values, aspirations, and cultural influences that attract younger generations, especially with the rise of consumerism. The growing inclination toward modern culture is most evident in the youth, who often gravitate towards global trends in entertainment and technology. This cultural shift presents a significant challenge for indigenous cultures like the Tharu, whose practices, including the Chorkheli dance, are deeply rooted in spiritual and ritualistic traditions.

However, as Guneratne observes in his research, cultural adaptation is a dynamic process. The Tharus have historically been resilient in the face of external pressures, adapting their practices without losing their identity (10). This flexibility allows for the integration of new ideas while retaining the core elements of their traditions. The Chorkheli dance, which traditionally serves as a healing ritual conducted with the help of shamans, faces a particular challenge in this context. As modern medical advancements become more accessible and widespread, the reliance on shamans has diminished. The introduction of advanced medical technology allows for more immediate, scientifically-based healing methods, leading to a decline in the practice of summoning shamans, a key component of the Chorkheli ritual.

Despite the advancements in medical science, some members of the Tharu community continue to uphold the rituals and dances associated with Chorkheli, though the practice is clearly in decline. Dukhi Lekhi, a leader in the troupe, notes, “Today’s generation is likely to believe in the rituals of Chorkheli, but they do not have time to watch these dances. They have many other sources of entertainment” [My Interview]. This comment underscores a broader issue: the younger generation’s detachment from traditional practices, influenced by their exposure to modern forms of entertainment such as television, digital media, and social platforms.

However, it is also important to recognize that the Tharu community has not completely abandoned these traditions. The Chorkheli dance continues to be performed, albeit with adjustments to accommodate contemporary realities. In an effort to engage the youth, these performances often include both traditional rituals and modern elements. For instance, while the ritual of summoning shamans may no longer be as central to the process, the dance itself still functions as a means of cultural transmission. The younger generation, even if not fully believing in the spiritual efficacy of the rituals, continues to participate in the performance for its cultural and social significance.

One of the most innovative responses to the challenges of modernization has been the incorporation of modern technology to preserve and promote indigenous cultural practices. The Tharus have recognized the importance of documenting their songs and dances, such as Chorkheli, for future generations. Recording these performances and making them accessible via digital platforms not only preserves the traditions but also provides an invaluable learning resource for young people interested in reconnecting with their heritage. This use of technology aligns with Schechner’s concept of performance as both “a way for people to connect to a

collective, to remember or construct a mythic past" (165). Through the digitization of Chorkheli, the Tharus are creating a bridge between the past and the future, ensuring that their culture survives despite the shifting tides of modernity.

Moreover, the adaptation of Chorkheli to include both traditional and contemporary elements serves as a form of cultural resilience. The performance remains a communal experience, preserving social solidarity and linking participants to their ancestors, as Schechner's framework suggests. The incorporation of new forms of entertainment and engagement helps to sustain interest in the dance while ensuring that the Tharu community retains a sense of identity and continuity.

Despite these efforts to adapt, the future of the Chorkheli dance remains uncertain. Bhikhan Chaudhary, a respected Natuwa (dance leader), along with other members of the troupe, emphasizes the need for more proactive efforts to save the dance and its associated rituals. Bhikhan Chaudhary remarks, "More efforts have to be done in saving the dance and the songs associated with it" [My Interview]. As modern medicine continues to replace traditional healing rituals, the challenge for the Tharus lies in maintaining the relevance of the dance while navigating the broader forces of globalization. While the younger generation may not fully embrace the spiritual and ritual aspects of the performance, their involvement in the physical act of the dance ensures that the cultural practice does not fade entirely.

The future of Chorkheli depends on the Tharu community's ability to balance tradition with innovation, blending the old and the new in ways that appeal to younger generations while preserving the essence of their cultural identity. Whether through the strategic use of technology or the continued engagement of the youth in performances, the Chorkheli dance represents both a challenge and an opportunity for cultural adaptation.

In the face of globalization, media plays a dual role in both promoting and replacing indigenous cultures, particularly among youth. Appadurai's concept of "scapes" provides a useful framework for understanding how media influences cultural identity. Specifically, Appadurai argues that the "mediascape," which refers to the distribution of electronic capabilities for producing and disseminating information, significantly impacts global cultural flows (35). Through various forms of media, such as television, film, and the internet, Western cultures are heavily promoted, often leading to the erosion of traditional cultural practices. For indigenous groups like the Tharus, this influence is especially pronounced among the younger generation. They are particularly susceptible to the allure of modernity, as media blurs the line between reality and fiction, often encouraging them to adopt foreign cultural norms at the expense of their own.

In Nepal, this dynamic is evident in the case of the Chorkheli dance, a traditional Tharu ritualistic performance. This dance, which has historically been performed as part of a healing ritual, faces the dual pressures of modernization and cultural adaptation. While globalization and the spread of media have made it challenging to preserve traditional practices, they also provide opportunities for the promotion and revitalization of cultural heritage.

Appadurai's theory on mediascapes underscores the power of media in shaping global imaginations. He describes mediascapes as "both the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, film production studios, etc.)" (35). In the context of the Tharu community, the influence of these media platforms has altered the ways in which young people perceive their own culture. As media outlets promote Western

lifestyles and values, younger Tharus are increasingly drawn to these foreign ideas, leading to a decline in their engagement with traditional practices like Chorkheli.

Guneratne's research also reflects this shift. He notes that the younger generation of Tharus is heavily influenced by "other and powerful sources of knowledge and entertainment," including the school system, cinema, and burgeoning urban centers (760). These influences make it difficult to engage the youth in preserving traditional dances like Chorkheli. They are more likely to be attracted to modern entertainment forms, such as Western films and television shows, which further distance them from their cultural roots.

However, there is a silver lining in the way media can also support the preservation and promotion of indigenous cultures. Some youth, aware of the threats to their traditions, are leveraging media to both protect and promote Tharu cultural practices. The rise of digital media platforms like YouTube has allowed young activists and cultural groups to document and share Tharu dances and rituals, thus reaching a global audience. This form of media has become a tool for education, raising awareness about the significance of Chorkheli and other Tharu traditions.

The Tharu Kalyankari Sabha, for example, plays a crucial role in the welfare and cultural preservation of the Tharu people in Nepal. The organization works to document and share the songs, dances, and rituals of the Tharu community, ensuring that these practices are passed down to future generations. Additionally, documentaries made by journalists and cultural activists are available on platforms like YouTube, which feature interviews with performers and showcase the Chorkheli dance itself. Furthermore, to ensure intergenerational transmission of knowledge, it is essential to involve younger Tharus in the rituals and dances associated with Chorkheli, explaining the significance of each step and the role of the performance in

their cultural identity. This hands-on engagement can help bridge the gap between generations and ensure that these practices are not only preserved but also deeply understood and valued. These efforts provide valuable resources for educating both the local and global audience about the rich cultural heritage of the Tharu people.

As Dukhi Lekhi, a leader of a Tharu dance troupe, points out, “Today’s generation is likely to believe in the rituals of Chorkheli, but they do not have time to watch these dances. They have many other sources of entertainment” [My Interview]. This generational shift in interest presents a dilemma: while the dance itself may continue, the traditional context in which it was performed is weakening. However, as Bhikhan Chaudhary, a respected Natuwa (dance leader) in the troupe, argues, “More efforts have to be done in saving the dance and the songs associated with it” [My Interview]. Even if the ritual aspects of Chorkheli are not fully realized in every performance, the continued transmission of the dance and its accompanying songs ensures that the cultural practice can survive in some form.

However, it is essential to recognize that the true essence of a cultural performance, such as Chorkheli, can only be fully appreciated in its live context. As Schechner asserts, “Performance is both a communal event and an individual’s personal involvement in a group experience” (11). The communal nature of the performance, the shared experience between the performers and the audience, and the ritual significance of the event are aspects that cannot be captured fully through digital media alone. Thus, while media can serve as an important tool for preservation and promotion, it cannot replace the lived experience of the performance itself.

In conclusion, media plays a dual role in the cultural adaptation of Chorkheli performance. On one hand, it contributes to the erosion of traditional practices by promoting foreign cultural norms, particularly among the youth. On the other hand,

media offers opportunities for the documentation, promotion, and preservation of indigenous cultures, such as the Tharu community's Chorkheli dance. The challenge lies in finding a balance between these two forces—using media to safeguard cultural traditions while ensuring that these traditions remain alive and meaningful in their original context. Through grassroots initiatives, youth engagement, and the strategic use of media, the Chorkheli dance can continue to thrive in an increasingly globalized world.

The Tharu community, with its rich cultural heritage, provides a fascinating example of cultural resilience and adaptation. Their songs and dances, especially the Chorkheli performance, embody the aesthetic traditions of a time when the Terai region of Nepal remained largely isolated from the influences of the hill people and southern neighbors. This performance, deeply rooted in the rituals and identities of the Tharu, offers a unique lens through which to examine cultural adaptation, hybridization, and the impact of external influences such as migration, media, and globalization. The roles of the Natuwa (dance leader), Nayak (performer/leader), musicians, and the audience are integral to the meaning and significance of the Chorkheli, where the performance transcends mere entertainment and becomes a collective ritual, shaping a shared identity within the community.

In the context of Chorkheli, the Natuwa, Nayak, musicians, and the audience each play vital roles in ensuring that the performance retains its cultural significance. As Schechner highlights in his work on performance, "Performance is both a communal event and an individual's personal involvement in a group experience" (11). The communal aspect of Chorkheli is essential, as it functions as a ritual that brings together not only performers but also the community. The Natuwa, acting as the dance leader, orchestrates the rituals and ensures that the dance is performed

according to tradition, while the Nayak leads the dancers, guiding the movement and rhythm of the performance. The musicians provide the soundtrack, usually consisting of traditional instruments, which accompanies the dancers, adding to the sacredness of the performance.

The audience, in turn, is crucial in shaping the meaning of the performance. Their participation, through singing, clapping, or simply observing, adds to the collective nature of the performance, which is central to its cultural significance. This sense of community in Chorkheli serves as a way for the Tharu people to come together, share their cultural heritage, and reaffirm their identity, especially in the face of increasing diversity and external influences.

This hybridization is not merely a passive process of cultural absorption but a dynamic interaction where the Tharu community adapts and integrates these external elements into their own cultural practices. For instance, during Chorkheli performances, the younger generation often engages in these hybridized forms of cultural expression, such as participating in Deusi and Bhailo dances, which are traditionally part of the Hindu celebrations. At the same time, the older generations continue to preserve the core aspects of the Tharu rituals associated with the Chorkheli, ensuring that their cultural roots are not lost in the process.

The incorporation of external elements, particularly from the Hindu hill culture, has allowed the Tharu people to maintain a sense of relevance and connection to the wider society. This has been especially important in the face of migration, where the younger generation is exposed to new cultural practices through their experiences abroad or in urban centers. As C.K. Lal observes, “Modernization of society is, to a large extent, modernization of its values and norms,” and the Tharu

community's ability to navigate this modernization is reflected in their evolving performance traditions (256).

The process of cultural adaptation in Chorkheli is not without challenges. The Tharus of Saptari and Udaypur have faced the pressures of migration, urbanization, and the influence of modern media, all of which have contributed to a shift in cultural practices. Many young Tharus, influenced by the globalized world, are drawn to new forms of entertainment and have less interest in participating in traditional rituals like Chorkheli. As Dukhi Lekhi, a leader of a Tharu dance troupe, notes, "Today's generation is likely to believe in the rituals of Chorkheli, but they do not have time to watch these dances. They have many other sources of entertainment" [My Interview].

This disconnect between the younger and older generations highlights the struggle to maintain cultural practices that are perceived as less relevant in the modern world. However, the Tharu community has responded by adapting their cultural practices to appeal to younger generations. This includes incorporating modern technology, such as digital recordings of Chorkheli performances, which can be used for education and preservation. The use of social media and video-sharing platforms like YouTube has allowed the Tharus to showcase their cultural performances to a global audience, raising awareness about their traditions and attracting interest from both local and international viewers. These digital efforts are an important part of ensuring the survival of Chorkheli and other Tharu traditions in the digital age.

At the same time, the Tharu community has emphasized the importance of keeping the Chorkheli performance as a live, communal ritual. While digital recordings can serve as a valuable tool for preservation, the true essence of the performance can only be fully experienced in person, within the context of the community. As Schechner argues, performance is not merely about representation but

about experience—“Performance creates the world it represents” (12). In the case of Chorkheli, the performance creates a shared cultural space where participants and audience members alike can experience the continuity of their traditions and their collective identity.

The Chorkheli performance offers a compelling example of how the Tharu community has managed to adapt to external influences while retaining their unique cultural identity. The hybridization of their traditional practices with elements from neighboring cultures, such as those of the Hindu hill people, reflects the Tharus’ ability to evolve and integrate new ideas without losing sight of their roots. Through the roles of the Natuwa, Nayak, musicians, and the audience, Chorkheli remains a communal ritual that fosters a shared sense of identity and belonging.

At the same time, the Tharus are embracing modern technologies and media to ensure the preservation and promotion of their cultural traditions. These efforts, however, cannot replace the lived experience of the performance, which remains the cornerstone of cultural identity. As the Tharu community continues to navigate the challenges of globalization, migration, and media influence, Chorkheli remains a symbol of their resilience and adaptability—a performance that bridges the past with the present and looks toward a future where tradition and innovation coexist.

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