Maharai Gaune: Storytelling as Cultural Politics of Telling History among the Musahars of Tarai

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Abstract

Storytelling is an ancient cultural performance of the Musahar community connecting their present and past in central Madhes. This narratological episteme of tale-telling and performance is an elementary practice of the community for their historical reproduction and understanding of transformation throughout generations. The professional storytelling program locally called Maharai Gaune was regularly organized by the Musahar community to educate the Musahars about their ancestry, culture, belongingness, and political-economic history across the Nepal-India border. Both the Musahars and Non-Musahars participants curiously attended the storytelling program. The storytellers employed art, music, and performance on mythical stories to persuade the participants who followed spatial and temporal landscapes of the story and socio-cultural contexts. The Maharai revolves around how the legendary ancestors Dianabhadri, as the freedom fighter, defeated the landlord who enslaved and exploited the Musahars. The article explores how an illiterate community employs cultural performance and politics to express deep historical belonging in the territory, a sense of freedom, and political economic dimensions of marginalization.

The article is based on ethnographic observation of the Maharai Gaune events as cultural performance in the field as well as interviews with the Musahars participants and storytellers during my Ph.D. research and subsequent visits at Golbaza Municipality of Siraha district in 2015 and 2022. The non-political programs of telling ancestor's stories to the youth is a micro political action of reproduction of territory (the legitimacy of territorial belonging through stories of ancestors and cosmology), culture and social relations with other caste ethnic groups. The cultural politics and performance of storytelling are considered as solidarity, collectivity and the therapeutic function of psychological unity to negotiate with powerful groups around them. They applied it to revitalize Dinabhadri as a heroic figure since they could not utilize other evidence of historical belongingness.

Keywords
Storytelling, Maharai, Dinabhadri, Cultural politics, Performance

1. Introduction
The *Musahars*, the second largest Tarai Dalit caste group (previously untouchable[1]) living in central-east Tarai of Nepal, were mostly *Haruwa-Charuwa* [2] labour before 1990 (Dhakal, 2006). They are populated densely in Central-East Tarai and scattered from east to western Tarai districts of Nepal[3]. According to the census of 2021, the total Musahar population is 264974, the sixth largest population size of Tarai in Nepal (NSO, 2021). Historically, their livelihood has been closely attached to land and labour (soil cutting and agricultural manual labor) but ironically 96.67% of *Musahars* are landless (CEDA, 2007). Their adult literacy, positions in public and government offices, life expectancy, and other indicators of

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[1] Old Civil Code 1854 categorized certain groups of people were untouchable and water unacceptable group. New Civil Code 1963 eliminated caste based discrimination and practice of untouchability. But , certain level of untouchability is still practicing in the communities.

[2] The Government zof Nepal promulgated the Haruwa-Charuwa Labor Prohibition Act 2001 to free and rehabilitate bonded agricultural laborers under the System. The Haruwa-Charuwa system as a whole is an outcome of historically framed patron-client relationship for generations.

[3] Look at population density map of the Musahar in colored area.

human development indices are the lowest (Dahal, 2010). In spite of significant population size, their presence in the local and national political landscape, bureaucracy, security and any other government services is almost non-existent. Moreover, being landless and their culture, they were blamed as newcomer Indians, people without history and culture. Though there is no historical record of their arrival in Nepal, but it is said that large number of *Musahars* entered Nepal during the Rana regime to fall trees for timber needed for the expansion of the Indian railway as well as to cultivate new arable land in the Tarai (Giri, 2018; NNDSWO, 2006). To communicate long historical belongingness, political economic relations, and cultural history in the territory, they regularly organized *Maharai* programs as cultural performance and politics.
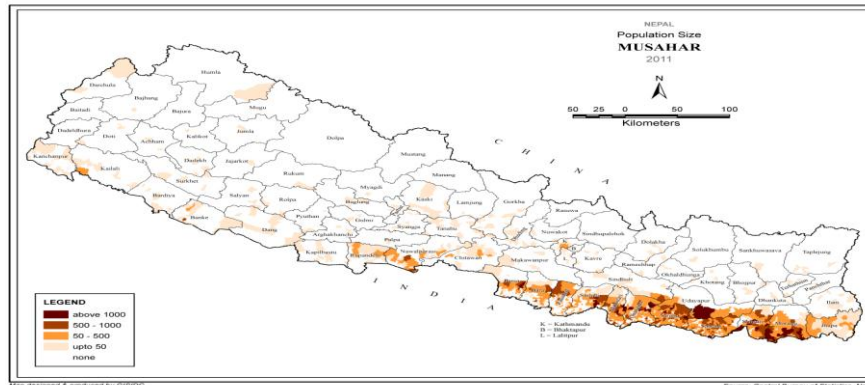
Source: *The Musahars of Nepal (Dahal, Giri, & Mishra, 2014)*

A *Maharai Gaune (storytelling)* program was collectively organized at Golbazar Municipality by *Sabari Sankalpa Samaj (community-based forum established by the Musahar youths)* and *Nepal Musahar Jatiya Marar-Gorait[4] committee (A traditional Musahar caste council) Siraha* in October, 2013. The Musahars and other caste ethnic people were informed through community leaders, loudspeaker announcement, and the distribution of pamphlets around the Musahars' settlements. I engaged both organization and observation of the program. When they were asked their history and culture, they connected their history with *Dinabhadri* and stories of *Maharai*. I was interested to explore historical and territorial belongingness of the Musahars as well as their physic unity of Maharai program. Large numbers of Musahars including children and women from my study area also participated in the program. It was like a public festival and performance.

The fundamental question of the article is why the Musahars are excited to hear the story of the Dinabhadri. The subsequent question was what are cultural politics of telling and organizing the Maharai regularly in the Musaharis. What are strategies of telling the history and creating legitimacy of their belongingness in a particular territory? Is it just a means of entertainment or it has cultural politics of claiming authenticity of their belongingness? In the last section of the article, I put forward debates of history and story. The main objective of the article is to explore how illiterate people share and communicate their history of authentic citizen to the dominant groups.

2. Research Methodology

This article is primarily based on ethnographic observation when I was in the field for PhD. research in 2013. I engaged with the organizers, storytellers as well as participants of the Maharai Gaune program. I have collected information with both Musahars and Non-Muahars for the triangulation of data as well as a cross-cultural understanding of the Maharani. To collect mythical and historical information, unstructured questions and checklists were used in the field. I have observed the Maharai Gaune program, the facial and bodily gestures of storytellers and the participants. Ethnographic engagement supported me in understanding and interpreting the mythic and historical narratives of the storyteller and the Musahars. David Holmberg defines ethnography as a logical interpretation of present or current history informed by the past (Holmberg, 2008). The descriptive and narrative design was chosen to depict functions and interpretation of participants and storytellers. Collected information was interpreted and analyzed with theoretical support of interpretative and practice theories.

3. Data Presentation and Interpretation
3.1 The Maharai: Organization of the Storytelling

When the date of Maharai was fixed, I was inquisitive to observe the program and record the story of the Maharai. I followed the elderly Musahars to observe their excitement and response about the program. Somana Sada (an old Musahar) and I were sitting under the Jackfruit tree. First, Somana expressed his dissatisfaction with the Musahar youths and their laziness. Then, he shared that there was a medicine to activate the Musahars. He argued that *Dinabhadri Maharai* was the best method of unity and culturally informed history of the Musahars. He told that economic

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[4] Marar and Gorait were functionaries of the Musahar traditional caste counsil.

management of the Program. He proposed each household of the Musahar voluntarily contribute to the success of the program. Somana, ex-leader (*Marar)* of the village, called a few youths and old Musahars of the settlements. Hutilal, Madhulal, Ramlal, and other active Musahars of the community came to join the meeting. When they got news of the Dinabhadri Maharai occasion in the village, they were excited and shared the news with women and children around them. As one of the organizers, Lalraj shared the program planning and possible expenditure. For the Musahars, the program was expensive because most of them hardly saved money. He requested economic support because the organizers were required to manage the food, shelter, and daily expenditure of the Maharai (storyteller) team. Immediately, about 15 households voluntarily assured to donate Rs.100. each for the program. In spite of a shortage of cash in their household, they agreed to borrow cash for the donation of the Dinabhadri Maharai. There was unusual excitement among the *Musahars* who heard about the Maharai program. I was interested to know the way people expressed their voluntary donations. Lalraj Sada repeatedly told, "I became a Musahar when I heard the stories of Dinabhadri first time". He was not a single Musahar who was passionately interested in Dinabhadri stories rather I read similar passion among the *Musahars* of other districts. My mind was boggled at the reiterated statement and listening curiosity of all *Musahars* at the *Maharai Gaune* (mythic storytelling) occasion. Lalraj told that telling all the stories of *Dinabhadri* with musical tone and classical manner was long. They planned 3 days shortened version of Maharani in October 2013. The listeners were from different caste ethnic groups. Most of the people, irrespective of caste and ethnic background, are excited to listen to the stories of Dinabhadri. Every story raised curiosity among participants like a television serial. The story was connected with local deities, pilgrimages, and festivals of people around many districts of eastern Tarai.

There was a stage and a group of storyteller with their musical instrument occupied the space in the stage. Among the participants, elderly male sat close to the stage. Women and children sat behind the male participants. I also sat with the male elderly. There were very few Musahars who knew the detailed story of the Maharai. Namsaran claimed that he had had better knowledge of the Dinabhadri's stories of bravery. He stressed that the bravery of the Dinabhadri was the core theme of the Maharai.

When we were talking, one of the storytellers started story of the *Dinabhadri* and *Sabari* (female saint in Hindu epic). He shared shared a piece of story as:

Dinabhadri and *Dinaram* (collectively named Dinabhadri) were the decedents of *Sabari Risi* mentioned in Hindu epic Ramayan. *Sabari Risi* offered fruits to Ram [Hero of the Hindu epic Ramayan] for hospitality while he was to lead his life of 14 years Jungle. Sabari belonged to a tribal group (some of them believed that she was non-caste therefore, untouchable). Ram was pleased with her hospitality. Ram asked her if she had any demands in her life. She demanded two brave brothers as Ram and Laxman in her family. Ram blessed her. It was believed that a Musahar woman gave birth to twin sons named *Dinabhadri* and *Dinaram* at Musahar settlement in Saptari district at around 10th century AD. They were freedom fighters who freed the Musahars from the slavery. Therefore, all the Musahars worshipped Dinabhadri as family deity (N. Sada, personal communication, October 25, 2014).

Their birth was interpreted as the wishes of Sabari. Therefore, they argued that all *Musahars* were the descendants of Sabari and Dinabhadri. When there was any function organized by the Musahars, participants used to put on *tika* (put a sign on forehead) carried out the soil from *Dinabhadri*'s temple in Saptari. Again, the storyteller continued the story of *Dinabhadri* and the life history of the *Musahars*. The story was:

Dinabhadri were sons of Kallu Sada and Nirshu Sada. Their parents including all Musahars were enslaved and tortured by powerful landlord named Kanak Singh Rajput. The next day of Dinabhadri's Marriage, there was a paddy plantation program for the landlord. Kanak Singh informed all the villagers of the paddy plantation. Dinabhadri denied to work in the field. Then, there was a fight between Kanak and Dinabhadri. Kanak Singh was defeated and seriously injured. Dinabhadri declared free from slavery of the Kanak Singh.. It was not only the defeat of Kanak Singh but also the defeat of the rule of the landlord. Then, Dinabhadri were regarded as God among the community (Personal record, October 19-23, 2018).

Three members team told stories of *Dinabhadri* in different versions. Sometimes, it was like lyrical music with dance and sometimes it was public speaking. A loudspeaker was connected to make the program's social and cultural marketing. The Musical version of the Maharai Gaune program started by reciting slogans of the Dinabhadri: *Jay Dinabhadri* (Long live Dinabhadri), Dinabhadri ke Maurai sunio (Listen to the stories of Dinabhadri), and *Pahalmani ke gaathas yai* (History of powerful fighter). It was repeated both by the storytellers and participants. When I observed the program, it was a total social *prestations* (Mauss, 1990) and performances of the Musahars' history and ancestry. The organizers thought that it was a 'social gift' (Mauss, 1990) without any sense of commercialization of the culture. Lalraj, one of the organizers of the program, said that the Maharai program was frequently organized when there were many storytellers in their community. He remembered his childhood and adulthood when his father frequently called *Maharai* in the community. His family managed the living and food expenses of the team of four members. The community hosted the guests and organized three to four-day programs. It was expensive because of the scarcity of storytellers in the communities and hard to find storytellers in different southern villages of Siraha. He shared his childhood experiences

that the program was easy and the storyteller also moved around different communities. This was a prestigious livelihood occupation of knowledgeable storytellers. They collected grain and kind gifts from the people.

The pamphlets and loudspeakers symbolize the adequate dissemination of the news of the program. Moreover, the organizer has published pamphlets and disseminated news of the *Maharai* from local FM radio, pamphlets, and informal networks among many Musahari. Like local festivals, the social and psychological environment of the community smells of *Dinabhadri*. When the *Musahars* of different villages meet, they exchanged greeting by saying "*Jay Dinabhadri*!" (Heir to *Dinabhadri*!). If two parties knew each other as members of Musahar, they greeted by saying *Jay Dinabhadri!* and by touching their own chest with the right hand. The facial and bodily gestures of the greeting were symbolic and emotional intimacy. The greeting phrase and gesture emotionally prepared them to invest time and resources for the unity and solidarity of the event.

The community also employed "soft power" as argued by Bourdieu (1991) and cultural politics to get recognition of the community and their history. The organizer of the program observed that the *Dinabhadri* Maharai played a central role in the psychological empowerment of the *Musahars*. As they told, the Maharai program built internal cohesion which was a fundamental element to resist against the dominant community. Furthermore, they believed that the Maharai program revitalized their energy to fight against everyday forms of resistance (Scott, 1990). Namsaran, one of the members of the organizing committee, organized such cultural programs to make the community visible in public spheres. Without making events, the state and dominant community did not realize the presence of the Musahar. He told:

> *The Musahars are poor and landless. But without any support from local government and civil society, we can organize this type of program with our own capacity. We are not poor in culture, history and sense of belongingness. We have a sense of unity, collectivity, and deep reverence towards Dinabhadri. The Dinabhadri provide the strength and capacity to accomplish such program. Moreover, this is our duty to preserve and protect history. The state and dominant community do not pay much attention to protecting Musahrs' history. If we protect Dinabhadri, God will protect the Musahars. Therefore, Dinabhadri and the Musahars are inseparable. Guarding Dinabhadri is another way of protecting the Musahars' history and culture. (N. Sada, personal communication, October 19-23, 2013).*

Source: *Photos taken by the researcher in 2013*

There were few lunch and snack breaks in the programs. Breaks were more interesting because participants corrected each other's version of sub-stories and some of them did not agree with others' version of the story. There were some meetings and introductions of newcomers and strangers. Most of them found curious to learn about some new stories that they had missed. I read the faces of the participants. They looked cheerful and inquisitive. Lalraj was lying down under a tree. I too was searching for a cool place because it was very hot out there. I sat close to Lalraj. We exchanged Jay *Dinabhadri* greeting with each other. Based on familiarity and a series of earlier conversations, I had asked him what he thought of program. He answered, "By listening to stories, lyrics and interpretation of Maharai of Dinabhadri, I feel that the Musahars are authentic citizens of Nepal and legitimate inheritors of *Dinabhadri*". He argued that dominant people blamed the Musahars were Indians and new settlers in Nepal. If they are new comer, he questioned, "Who made Dinabhadri temple in Saptari in 18th century"? Obviously, the temple was made by the Musahars. The successors of the Dinabhadri are still there as mentioned spatial location in the story. He claimed that the Maharai is the evidence of the Musahars' historic belongingness in tarai-Madhes of Nepal. He has listened the maharani many times earlier but he found deeper sense of meaning and interpretations in each times. This time, he realized that the *Musahars* were not poor and marginalized human beings as now. They were made free by Dinabhadri but again they were enslaved by landlords during Rana period in Nepal. His face was full of anger and irritation. He tried to justify the organization of the Maharai program to keep oral history of the Musahar alive. He added that the Musahar could not preserve the history by writing

because few literate Musahars have no idea of history writing. He argued that the Maharai was their history, culture and legitimacy of belongingness in the territory of Nepal. He claimed that when they listen the Maharai, they felt empowered, dignified and moral people. The organizers said that the Maharai program supports to make unity, solidarity and cultural consciousness.

The conversation among the Musahars made me rethink the cultural construction and continuation of *Dinabhadri's* story and Maharai among the bereft community. Goody (2010) succinctly argued that oral stories and the oral myths of marginalized communities were distorted when they mixed up with dominant cultural groups. The dominant history, culture, and myth influenced the making of characters and plots of the oral narratives (Goody, 2010). Therefore, the life of the oral history, myth, and story was suppressed and infiltrated by politico-economically dominant history and myth. The Maharai was not free from penetration, modification, and exaggeration of some plots and characters. Many marginalized communities were unable to continue a life of their history, myth, and culture. In this vein, the social life of story, myth, and history faced similar types of socio-cultural suffering, physical mutilation, and the identity of the Musahar people.

3.2 Dinabhadri Performance

When they were talking about the social and cultural life of *Dinabhadri* story, a group of storytellers started reciting *Dinabhadri* hymn with music, two Musahar youths as representatives of *Dinabhadri*, danced with bows and arrows in their hands. Both replicas of *Dinabhadri* dancers wore Dhoti (loincloth), artificial mustache, and turban. Their face was decorated as *Dinabhadri*. The dance continued about 15 minutes. It presented a part of the story in audio-visual form. The *Dinabhadri* dance was another attraction of the program. When they were on the stage, the people in the audience were excited and whistled. Some of them emotionally expressed their bravery. The organizer cashed the emotional sentiment by shouting the *Dinabhadri* slogan on the loudspeaker. The mass was excited and emotionally united for the reverence of *Dinabhadri*. The mass added extra excitement to the dancers for their durable performance. The climax of the performance was participatory because most of the people in the audience recited hymns with the music of claps. The storyteller said:

> *It is a difficult job because the dead aroused life by making the living bear their names. This is done for several reasons,- to revive the memory of the brave men, and to invite them who shall bear their names to imitate their courage; to take revenge upon the landlords and other enemies, for them who take the names of the heroes killed in a battle bind the Musahars to avenge the death of Dinabhadri; to entertain the audience, because the organizers who call them to observe the life of the Dinabhadri, and who perform Dinabhadri, because they bring them back to life for the sake of the community (J. Saday, K. Rishidev, personal communication, October 19-23, 2013).*

The *Musahars* have customs of the regular resurrection of names of *Dinabhadri*. Occasionally, they evoked *Dinabhadri* back to life through archery dance, heroic fighting, and staged performances. A similar kind of *Dinabhadri* archery performance was observed in Janakpur and the southern villages of Siraha. Some elderly Musahars were trained dancers in this portion of the Maharai. Lalraj shared that he was one of the best *Dinabhadri* dancers when he was young. He trained some youth in his settlement at Jamdaha. He added that when he saw *Dinabhadri* dancers on the stage, unbelievable energy vibrated in his body and mind. He gave me the reason why some of the elderly *Musahars* expressed their bodily power during the *Dinabhadri* Dance. Many *Musahars* were interested in joining the dancers on the stage. The organizers controlled them to enter the stage. Women, children, and all age groups enjoyed the dance. The mass was not only *Musahars*, there were also other caste people. *Dinabhadri* dance continued for about half an hour. Besides the robust physicality of the dancers, bow, arrow, and turban articulated the political power of the *Dinabhadri*.

My conversations and observations of *Dinabhadri* dance yielded an answer to my old question: Why did *Musahars* start their history from *Dinabhadri*? Without storytelling, worshipping, dancing, singing hymns, and imitating *Dinabhadri*, no auspicious and important function started in the Musahar settlements. Like Gods among the Hindu communities and God Pawa Cherenzi among the Sherpa (Ortner, 1989), *Dinabhadri* was identified with merciful compassion, God of success, God of accomplishment, God of love, protector God and the only name they remembered in the time of crisis. they compared *Dinabhadri* Maharai with famous TV serials. Those in the audience who knew the taste of the Maharai curiously waited for the next episode. The storyteller stopped somewhere in the middle of the story so that those in the audience were curious to hear the coming incident. Some of the listeners made comments and add to the story because they heard the story many times. The social life of the story continued through the exchange of heard versions of the story and telling to a new audience.

During the narration of oral histories and stories, the authority of the speaker was unbound because the narrator chose selective recollection of events and experiences. As the team told me, complete storytelling can be extended up to 5 days. They argued that storytellers concluded the program on the third day by compressing stories in shorter versions and excluding small incidents in the story. The learning of art and knowledge of storytelling or *Maharai Gaune* was long informal schooling. The main storyteller said that he had followed another Guru as an assistant for a few years. This type of Guru-Chela (master-student) relations was well interpreted by David Holmberg's (1989) Shamanic schooling among the Tamang community. He notes that the "performing *lasol* for three consecutive years in conjunction with the guru, a

bombo can begin sounding independent" (Holmberg, 1989, p.147-148). Like *bombo*, the Maharai storyteller was considered a well-skilled person. The storyteller told that he learned music, different accents, and different versions of storytelling skills. He claimed that a mere story was boring. He knows telling the story in artistic ways. Therefore, storytelling was an art of resistance. He knew other stories too but many of them were intertwined. He remembered days when he was busy for monthly storytelling programs in different villages. The story with performance was bought by rich people when there were marriage and religious occasions. Maharai teller said that hosted family or community paid about Rs. 10,000 per night. They were invited mostly during festivals and relatively in relax times.

4. Theoretical Approaches and Discussion
4.1 Maharai: Cultural Politics of History and Myth
History writing is not free from the political-economic influences of the state. Historians can transform history into myth and myth into history with the support of power. The *Musahars* did not have their written history to show evidence of their belongingness as old settlers in the country. Their oral narratives and cultural heritage were the testimonies of their historical presence in the territory. Therefore, the *Dianabhadri Maharai* was both cultural politics to reestablish their ancestors as a national hero[5] and dissemination of their oral history as a testimony of their long presence in Nepal. The politics of storytelling campaigns was to restore disgraced dignity, respect, and humanity to the community (Aboubakr, 2019). The Musahars were depicted as half-human, uncivilized, the lowest and untouchable in the caste ethnic hierarchy. These are everyday forms of symbolic violence (Thapar-Björkert et. al., 2016, Bourdieu, 1991) in terms of degradation of human dignity, respect, and misrecognition. The *Maharai* is fundamental not only to the authentication of the historical process of political-economic shift but also a medium claiming historical belongingness, and marginalization. Anthropologists and historians argue that oral narratives, paintings, cultural heritages, arts, and folk songs are mediums to tell the history of belongingness of the community (Vansin, 1965; Amin, 1995; Cohn, 1987, Maskarinec, 1995). The Maharai Gaune program is cultural politics of claiming authentic citizens and cultural legacy of belonging in the territory of the Musahars against hegemonic narratives (Gramsci as cited in Forgacs, 2000) as they are people without history and culture.

Maharai narrative was the favorite part of the story for the Musahar because it not only explored the origin of the Musahar but also narrated the bravery of their ancestors. Though there were various oral myths of origin and naming of the Musahar, *Dinabhadri Maharai* was the most reliable source to understand their historical status. The extraordinary life stories of *Dina Bhadri*, far from being mere fabrications, were not just entertaining fictions but meaningful explorations of life that reveal emotional and social realities that otherwise elude identification and explanation. These accounts not only reflect the common self-image, but they also serve to justify the effort to regain one's noble and rightful heritage. These mythic stories were culturally produced history and awareness of the past among marginalized communities (Vansina, 1965). Fisher (1987) shows an intermix of mythical origin stories and culturally mixed ancestry which is historically involved in the history of different Magars out of 'Kaike' Magar. He notes how 'Kaike' speaking angle mother and human father got married and gave birth three sons. Their three sons produced different clan by marrying girls from three different communities (Fisher, 1987, p. 35-42). The Magars believed that the mythic story was modified version of cultural contexts of the historical juncture. Similarly, the *Musahars* cherished different myths of their origin and name of "*Musahars*" but they shared a common myth of descent from Dina-Bhadri. Somana Sada heard that his human ancestor came out of the earth like other soil creatures. Soil is everything from the beginning of life to death for them. He gave an example of the origin of Sita (daughter of the King Janak of Mithila) who was found on the soil as per the Hindu epic. He prompted me to remind the blurred boundary between myth and history in Hindu epic in which Janak was considered the historical king of Mithila whereas Sita had a mythic origin. Myth and history are not clearly separated in South Asian societies. Thapar (1996) clearly stated that myths generally narrated cosmological primordial events; atemporal moments which constituted sacred time and differed from the profane time of daily routines. She added that a mixture of sacred and profane, temporal and atemporal events was intermixed in south Asian histories. The construction of genealogical narratives was immense and after hundreds of generations, such genealogical records could have been hardly an authentic record (Thapar, 1996, p.29). When heroic figures were considered as god, temporal contexts also transformed atempoal and sacred for subsequent generations. Similar intermixing was found in the Maharai stories and the history of the Musahar community. Dinabhadri was brave Musahar and his life histories and contributions were presented as if he was not a common human.

By observing the event, I questioned Gramscian hegemony (Forgace, 2000) when powerless community claimed their historical belongingness and dignified culture against dominant groups' narratives. This anti-hegemonic ideology was employed by Maskarinec in the Rulings *of the Night* (Maskarinec, 1995). Maskarinec shows how the untouchable caste shamans, during their dramatic night-long performances, reversed the worlds of everyday forms of order. Shamans were from marginalized communities. They were exploited in everyday socio-politics but they reversed the rules at night

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[5] There was a campaigner who printed flex pictorial posters of *Dinabhadri* for the establishment of them as national heroes.

through shamanic words and orders (Maskarinec, 1995). This anti-hegemonic performance found in Maharai telling. The storytellers including Musahar audiences create the world of stories in which they exist. In real life, they were powerless but they reversed the context during Maharai. They not only established supremacy over the Jamindars but also exemplified their world and society in the worlds of Maharai. Further, the program as a ritual of reverse order of power in the society could be linked with concepts of 'symbolic power' and 'rituals of resistance' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991; Kaplan & Kelly, 1994).

Bourdieu's interrelated terms 'symbolic power', symbolic violence, and symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991) expanded the Weberian construction of power and contribute in important ways to the analysis of Maharai ritual. Kanak Singh's defeat and death were articulations of symbolic power and symbolic domination of the *Musahars* over landlordism. Similarly, Nicholas Dirks (1994) undertakes an analysis of 'ritual and resistance' seeking to remedy Scott's (1985, 1990) limited consideration of ritual performance. Dirks argues that contestation and resistance are inherent aspects of everyday practices associated with ritual. By telling about the power of *Dinabhadri* as a form of the Maharai program, the *Musahars* demonstrate how power is discursively embedded as well as how power becomes symbolized and then deployed in practice.

Lalraj and Somana shared the practical implications in terms of excitement and knowledge of History. Lalraj and Somana argued, when the *Musahars* were passive, internally divided, and socio-politically suppressed, they felt psychologically down. *Maharai* program recharged their psychology as well as moral power. Therefore, Maharai was organized to activate the social, political, and cultural power of the *Musahars*. It was a method of self-empowerment of the community. It is clearly said that they live by mythic stories. Without stories, their existence as the *Musahars* became trivial and meaningless. They said that if there were no mythic stories of *Musahars*, they would have lost their identity. As the *Musahars* of Tarai unanimously agreed, their names and mythic stories were complementary to each other. Their statements demand further analysis of the political economy of history and the roles of hidden hands behind the scenes. Hidden hands of power and economy significantly affected their becoming of the *Musahars* as such in Eastern Tarai. The *Musahars* reproduced their myth and the Musahar people as such through 'art of storytelling. When they were asked their history, they replied telling a long mythical reference of *Dinabhadri*, their ancestral God. To know all stories of *Dinabhadri* was considered a professional skill and achieving social status among the *Musahars*. There were only a few *Musahars* who could tell all stories both in the story and rhythmic verse as well as the musical tempo. Some non-*Musahars* were specialized on the storytelling genre, and they could perform the multidimensional history-making job. The expert storyteller interlinked the myth of *Dinabhadri* with major metanarratives of Madhes like Salhes, King Janak, and Ramayan. The story was connected with local deities, pilgrimages, and festivals of people around the district. Therefore, the mythic stories not only enlightened the *Musahars* but also all caste/ethnic groups around the village. Through these myths, the *Musahars* reproduced their history, geography, and society. The story is not a mere story; it has the power to produce collective culture.

4.2 Cultural Performance Theory

Performance is the fundamental human language of communication which incorporates human actions, gestures, cultural values, meanings, and characters. Anthropologists, from the very beginning, studied the cultural performance of magic, religion, ritual, folklore, drama, and everyday performance (Goffman, 1959); Turner, 1988) among various societies. Malinowski notes that the performance of magic rites is necessary for successful gardening and controlling disaster among the Trobrianders (Malinowski, 1948). Similarly, Turner employed performative genres to interpret human processual activities like pilgrimage, ritual, dance, and theatre (Turner, 1988). Geertz shows how the noble rules are interested in dramatizing their position and political superiority through public ritual performance (Geertz, 1980). Anthropologists believe that the cultural performance approach is relevant to the study of staged and processual cultural activities of people (MacAloon, 1984; Turner, 1988; Tambiah, 1979). They argue cultural performances are more than persuasive formulation, more than entertainment, and more than cathartic indulgences. People reflect on themselves, dramatize their collective myths and history, present themselves with alternatives and eventually motivate for change (MacAloon, 1984).

The Maharai performance of the Musahars is also poetics and politics of culture, identity, belongingness, and beyond interpretations. This type of collective performance of devotional poetic hymns and songs provides participants with entertainment, solidarity, peace, and tranquility, as well as fostering socialization (Dahal, 2024). The significance of devotional performances stimuluses people to participate in collective good, positive energy by following disciplined lives (Dahal, 2024). The devotional storytelling performance of the Dinabhadri also contributes to their recognition as people with long history and culture in the territory. The larger implication of the Maharani performance is educating and socialization of new generations about their history and culture. Dinabhadri was commonly considered not only a freedom fighter but also a common deity because all caste ethnic people worshipped and revered at Dinabhadri temple in Saptari.

To sum up, *Dinabhadri* is the core of their cultural politics as well as social drama (Turner, 1988) of the Musahar community. *Dinabhadri* is a political identity because it symbolizes the struggle for power between the Jamindar and the *Musahars*. *Dinabhadri* won the war also symbolically creates a world of freedom. Their attraction and enthusiasm of the *Musahars* on *Dinabhadri* performance show how much they love and desire the world of freedom created by their ancestor. Their political economic marginalization curtailed their desires of freedom which they expressed through Maharai. The freedom brought by the struggle of their ancestors considered respected human god. In this way, the

Musahars feel that the *Dinabhadri* Maharai is the greatest politico-cultural 'gift' and their responsibility is to transfer the 'gift' to the new generations. Anthropologists argued that 'cultural gift' transcended the political-economic value of the material (Graebner, 2001; Godelier, 1999; Turner, 2008). They argue that the anthropological study of value might be considered something special because there is a fairly widespread feeling among anthropologists that there is something out there that can be called 'value' and that, all human beings do, in some sense, organize their lives, feelings, and desires around the pursuit or furtherance of them, it often seems as if the term could mean almost anything. In terms of value, *Dinabhadri* is a central value of the community. Therefore, *Dinabhadri* possessed political, economic, and cultural values. As Ortner (1989) argued that making a monastery was both event at action and imagery, *Dinabhadri* devotion was a performative event, all members of the community engaged in activities of worshipping, and simultaneously they conceived in their mind the imagery of *Dinabhadri*. *Dinabhadri* Maharai is a key symbolic performance, for the Musahar Community. They felt dignity and respect when the government acknowledged and promoted their tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The *Dinabhadri* is God of mercy, unity, dignity, freedom, identity, and compassion for all Musahars. The cultural politics of the Maharai programs is state recognition to the contributions and cultural values of the Dinabhadri. The Musahars demanded to recognize the Dinabhadri a national hero of Nepal. Because of their political economic status, they are unable to create environment of negotiation with the state. Therefore, they employed cultural politics of Maharai performance for the dignity and belongingness in the state.

5. Conclusion

Maharai Gaune is a kind of performative ritual in which the storyteller expressed poetics and politics of the *Musahars'* ancestors. Both, storytellers and listeners (mostly *Musahars* and some non-*Musahars*) mentally travel together on the historical time and place that was manifested on their facial gesture upon the reaction of characters role in the story. As in the rituals processes, the priest and the actor traveled through the ancestors' spatial-temporal landscape and their relationships with other people and nature, on *Maharai Gaune* storyteller and the listeners were undergoing a similar process. As the priest was called from different communities, the storyteller- as an expert of the oral literature may not belong to the Musahar community. The stories move around Dinabhadri - the protagonist of the stories, their struggle and heroic warfare with landlords and enemies. The performative excitement of the listeners was observed when the protagonist defeated the landlord; similarly, the opposite facial expression was seen when the protagonist was defeated in the story. These story-based performances were not only meant for the entertainment and unity of the marginal people, as anthropologists argued, but also to build historical consciousness, loss of power, property, collective sense of ownership on this mythical landscape, and socialization of the Musahars. The elementary aspect of the *Maharai* event was a production of history like writing and preserving history among literate society. Preliterate people did not know the logical interpretation of history. They told their past through stories, myths, pictures, and memories of particular events. They claimed that *Maharai* was the historical record of their presence in the territory.

By telling and performing the power of *Dinabhadri* as a form of the Maharai program, the *Musahars* demonstrate how power is discursively embedded as well as how power deployed in practice. *The Maharai*, as social drama, was both cultural politics to reestablish their ancestors as a national hero[6] and dissemination of their oral history as a testimony of their long presence in the land. The cultural politics behind the *Maharai* was to restore disgraced dignity, respect, and humanity to the community. They faced various forms of symbolic violence in terms of degradation of human dignity, respect, and personal integrity. Storytelling is fundamental not only to the authentication of the historical process of political-economic marginalization and labor exploitation but also an elementary form of telling history, claims, and cultural politics that many indigenous and preliterate communities practiced all around the world.

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Conflicts of Interest
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[6] The Musahars tried to include Dinabhadri in the name list of national heroes of Nepal.

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