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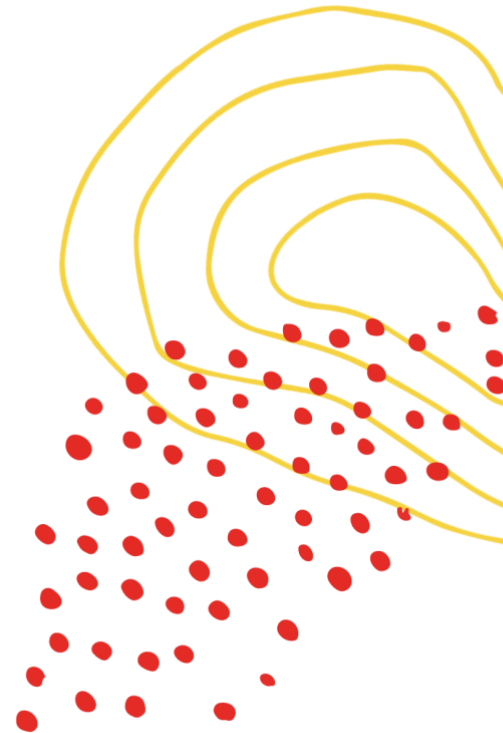
# Facing Heaven - Déuda Folklore & Social Transformation in Nepal

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1. Abstract
  2. Introduction
  3. Literature Review
  4. Methodology & Theoretical Framework
  5. Results & Analysis
  6. Discussion & Conclusion
- Bibliography & Sources
- Appendix 1 - Interviewees



## **Abstract**

This study explores the transformative role of Déuda, a traditional Nepalese singing and performance art, as a catalyst for social change and collective action. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews with over fifteen stakeholders, including singers, scholars, and community members, it employs the Quadruple Helix approach (Dancey 2019) and theoretical frameworks such as Bourdieu's field theory, Gramsci's hegemony, Lacan's social imaginaries, and Canclini's hybridity. These frameworks help to analyse the interplay of cultural practices, power dynamics, and identity formation surrounding Déuda. The research uses a mixed-methods approach, combining ethnography, participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of Déuda's performance elements. An autoethnographic method was also employed, with researchers reflecting on personal experiences with Déuda.

The study highlights Déuda's historical roots in religious festivities and its evolution into a medium for social commentary, incorporating cultural heritage while fostering community ties and challenging social hierarchies. It emphasises the hybrid nature of Déuda, which reflects historical values and assimilates and reshapes new themes, such as domestic violence. The adaptability of Déuda in the face of modern migration and its role in shaping the cultural landscape of far and mid-west Nepal is also explored. The findings stress the importance of



recognising the hybrid nature of cultural practices and the power dynamics in cultural production and consumption. The research advocates for collaborative cultural policies that promote inclusivity and sustainability. This study contributes to understanding Déuda's socio-cultural impact and offers valuable insights for researchers and policymakers in fields such as curriculum development and advocacy through the performing arts.



## 1. Introduction

Funding from the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through the Mobile Arts for Peace (MAP)<sup>1</sup> research project led by the University of Lincoln involved a first phase field visit to Nepal in May 2023, followed by a second phase of data gathering, via semi-structured interviews in September 2023, exploring the role of Nepalese Déuda culture on local conflict issues, peacebuilding and policies for sustainable peace in society. Dr Simon Dancey of the University for the Creative Arts (UK) served as Principal Investigator alongside Co-Investigators Dila Datt Pant and Nar Bahadur Saud.

Déuda is a Nepali genre of song and dance, performed in the Sudurpashchim and Karnali provinces of Nepal, as well as in the Kumaon Division of Uttarakhand state of India (Pant, 2007: 8). It is performed at various festivals, such as Gaura, Bisu, and other celebrative occasions. The dance is performed by singing Déuda songs in a circle with participants holding each other's hands. It is considered part of the cultural heritage of Karnali Province. It is typically performed in the far Western regions of Nepal, often a marginalised and underrepresented region and cultural form. The project had three specific objectives:

- To investigate social structures, values and themes within Déuda, particularly in relation to power, gender and caste.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about Mobile Arts for Peace (MAP), please go to: <https://map.lincoln.ac.uk>




- To explore the impact of the Maoist insurgency on Déuda.
- To explore how Déuda culture can be used to promote dialogue between young people, educators and policymakers.

### ***Background***


Nepal is a landlocked country in South Asia and is bordered by China and India, with a population of over 29 million (CBS, 2021). It is in the Himalayas and contains eight of the world's ten highest peaks, including Everest. The Nepalese Civil War was a protracted armed conflict that took place in the former Kingdom of Nepal from 1996 to 2006. It saw countrywide fighting between the Nepalese royal government and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), with the latter making significant use of guerrilla warfare (Thapa, 2012). The government system is now a federal parliamentary republic.

The Nepalese caste system is a hierarchical social structure that has historically divided Nepalese society into distinct social groups, or castes, based on birth and occupation. At the top of the hierarchy are the Brahmins (priests and scholars), followed by the Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (labourers and artisans). Below these four primary castes are numerous sub-castes and ethnic groups, with the Dalits, or so-called "untouchables," occupying the lowest position and facing social discrimination and exclusion. The caste system has deep roots in Nepalese culture and influences various



aspects of society, including marriage, occupation, and social interaction. Despite constitutional and legal efforts to abolish caste-based discrimination, it continues to persist in many parts of Nepal, impacting the lives and opportunities of millions of people.

In contrast, Déuda, as agreed by most respondents, serves as a common platform where individuals feel relatively free to participate as performers and lead singers, expressing their emotions and suppressed feelings related to personal, interpersonal, and communal spheres. As researchers, we prioritised including the real-life experiences of these individuals. We found that participants felt more comfortable and resilient during Déuda events, where they could articulate their opinions and challenge the societal status quo. One female lead Déuda singer noted that while they might face discrimination elsewhere, they do not experience such treatment at Déuda events. Nor do they feel restricted from raising a finger at social stereotypes. "*This gives us respect, recognition, and appreciation*" (Mamta, 2023). So, Déuda has not just been a perpetuity of culture but an agency and avenue free of social restrictions and discriminations against the so-called lower strata, women and the downtrodden. In this sense, Déuda offers a platform to vent frustrations, disagreements, and question society at large on various anomalies. Challenging such social structures can potentially foster peace within communities. Roger MacGinty highlights the importance of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to




peacebuilding, emphasising the role of local communities in voicing their frustrations and working towards community building (MacGinty, 2010).

### ***Déuda***

Déuda is one of the principal folk heritage traditions of the Western parts of Nepal, passed down orally from generation to generation. Also known as Déuda Khel, when performed with a chorus or other participants, Déuda involves singing or dancing in a circular chorus. One of the unique aspects of Déuda is that it is neither purely a dance nor purely a song; the entire performance is central to Déuda. It takes multiple forms across different communities, such as districts and villages in the region.


This dynamic creation and recreation of Déuda through dialogue is crucial, as this process might serve as a form of ritual, facilitating transformation or change from the beginning to the end of the performance. Participants engage in continuous dialogue, reshaping the tradition while expressing their emotions and addressing societal issues. This ritualistic aspect of Déuda can lead to a sense of renewal and empowerment, contributing to community discourse and the potential for societal transformation. There are plenty of examples of such transformational evidence, wherein two otherwise strangers or loosely known Déudiyas (Déuda singers) would begin their Déuda *Khel* from a





general introduction and, over the period, would end up agreeing to marry each other, when one realises his/her ego is settled or emotions resonate well with the said Déudiya. As a result, the two opposite-sex Déudiyas, who begin their introduction with the exchanges of songs, turn out to be strong rivals as the Khel advances. Both take the optimum liberty to satirise each in many forms and employ several figurative tools to disparage each. The end goal of such a battle remains to attain emotional victory. Such victory is fundamentally based on the persuasion of the losing Déudiya, and there is no coercion and grievance left on the loser's part. The important thing in this whole phenomenon of battle is that the loser does not lose self-esteem because he/she vents out all frustrations/ disagreements and questions and gets settled only when there is a convincing response from the counterpart. It is, therefore, even as a loser, he/she commands great respect and appreciation of the entire chorus and audience because, by virtue of songs, he/she offers a huge solace to those in similar circumstances and those who think like him/her.

Déuda is an impromptu rhythmic poetry by two leading singers, using a chorus form, in which one asks the question and the other responds with either a fitting reply or something like a counter-question, which adds to the euphoric mood of the chorus. Such a question answer could take place between singers of the same sex or the opposite for hours and hours, sometimes even for days. Known as a living culture of far and




mid-western Nepal, Déuda Khel is performed on almost all occasions and festivals as the key social event, and it generally mirrors society, including the lives of people, their day-to-day affairs, and emotive feelings such as the pains of separation and the happiness of union, among others. According to UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003 (Article 2(1)), intangible cultural heritage means:

*'The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.'*

In this light, Déuda can be called an intangible heritage that has contributed towards building a common identity and fostering solidarity for creative culture.

The spectrum of Déuda folklore is quite wide, as it includes myth, religion, culture, art, love and romance, history, identity, politics and creativity. Déuda is generally a Question and Counter-question chorus performance divided into two parts. But in a wider sense, it is understood as the entire culture of folklore that includes multiple subgenres such as *Thadi Bhaka*, *Ranputala*, *Chait*, *Bhalaulo*, *Chanchari*,



*Jhoda, Hudkeuli, Dhamari, Faag, Mangal*. It is important to note that Déuda is thus not a homogenous form but an array of forms that are changeable subject to context, dialect, etc.

Etymologically, the term Déuda refers to a song performed with one step further and a half step back, which is equivalent to *dedh paila* (one and a half step) (Pant, 2007: 7). Likewise, there are multiple propositions about why this song is called Déuda. Those who believe in the devotional side of the songs opine that the term Déuda is an outcome of a sum of *deu* (God) plus *dhura* (summit), meaning 'a god of summit'. This proposition takes us to the element of evocation to god/goddess that exists in Déuda, in the broader sense. As the first pieces of Déuda songs are generally offered to the names of the Gods, it can be said that such evocation has some persuasive element about the etymological meaning of the term 'Déuda'. An example of such a generic opener (*Kali gaika puchhadaina Patrika furuka/ Daini bhaye khelle khala daini bhe duruga//*- the tail of a black cow is adorned with some tatters/ may this stage (the performing yard) be good gracious to us and so be Goddess Durga//). Citing this evocation, some say that Déuda was a song sung in the name of the gods in the high hills. These two terms (*deu+dhura*) were mispronounced over time, and the result was Déuda (Upadhyaya, 2024).




## **2. Literature Review**

This literature review synthesises existing scholarship on Déuda, drawing from academic sources, cultural studies, and ethnographic accounts to explore its historical roots, cultural significance, and evolving role in Nepalese society. While Déuda remains a vibrant cultural form in Western Nepal, the literature reveals significant gaps in comprehensive scholarly attention.


A few numbers of previous studies, such as Pant (2007), provide foundational insights into Déuda through collections of songs, primarily as cultural artefacts. Upadhyaya (2024) contributes substantially with the first substantive documentation of Déuda folklore and literature, offering a socio-cultural history specific to Kali and Karnali and a collection of a wide range of songs. Bajgain (2023) explores Déuda songs within the framework of a doctoral thesis from Nepal Sanskrit University, adding depth to our understanding of their cultural context. Further exploration includes master's theses like Bhatt (2012), who examines Déuda songs' role in identity formation through performance, and Malla (2011), whose focus on code-switching enriches linguistic perspectives within Déuda traditions. These studies, however, are limited in scope and primarily focused on local contexts.

Recent research by GC & Jhosi (2024), Air (2022), Stirr (2012), and Air (2023) broadens the perspective by integrating ecological, emotional,



and socio-political dimensions. GC & Jhosi's ecological approach underscores Déuda songs as environmental texts, advocating for their inclusion in educational policies to promote ecological awareness. Air (2022) explores the emotive expressions of Déuda, delving into the concept of Rasa and its cultural significance. Stirr (2012) contextualises Déuda within nationalist discourse, illustrating its role in shaping regional pride and identity politics. Air (2023) extends this discourse by examining Déuda as a form of subaltern cultural expression, emphasising its role in community empowerment and identity assertion. Paudel et al. have collected some songs in their book named *'Karnali Pradeshka Déuda Geet (Déuda Songs from Karnali Province)*. This is just a collection of songs along some themes, including love/romance, family relationships, and environment, among others. Despite these contributions, gaps persist in the literature. There remains a need for a deeper analysis of the socio-economic interface of Déuda, its gender and power dynamics, and its evolving role in contemporary media and digital platforms. Additionally, comparative studies with other folk traditions within and outside Nepal could provide a broader understanding of Déuda's uniqueness and universal themes.

This research aims to explore these gaps, utilising interdisciplinary approaches to grasp Déuda's multifaceted nature and its implications for global discourses on culture, social transformation, peacebuilding and identity, among others. Addressing these areas will enrich our



understanding of Déuda as a dynamic cultural heritage and a potent medium for social transformation in Nepal and beyond.

### **Form**

The structure of the song has a strong link to the movement and rhythm of the dance. Many songs are long-lived in societies, and they speak of fatalism, pain, helplessness, social structures, love, and so on.


*Rajpur hai Jangipur, Kanya hai Kachali/  
Kya chadhi gulabi ranga, kya maya basali//  
(The first segment of the journey is from Rajpur to Jangipur and  
the next from Kanya to Kachali/ You are blushed with rosy cheeks;  
I wonder if you get in love with me//)*

*Kasaiki Basmati Dhan, Kasaiki Kode Nai/  
Kasaiki sunako har, kasaiki pote nai//  
(Some feed on the Basmati rice, while others do not even have  
millet to eat/ Some are so privileged to own the chains of gold,  
while others do not even own the normal bead//)*

It is also a tradition that such template-based songs are adapted to local circumstances, e.g., looking for work and the consequence thereof.

*Ka falu dukhako bhari khutta tutan lagya/  
Pradeshi karam mero sath chhutan lagya//  
(Where do I put my burdens on? My legs are nearly collapsing. I/  
Fated to be a migrant worker abroad; I am to lose all my  
companions//)*

Déuda was felt to catch the context of a changing society and was part of all festivals except funerals. As an exception and a very rare incident, we experienced that the public tends to outpour their love and respect to the cultural artists of the Déuda genre for offering their last tributes.



However, such singing takes place in the form of melancholic offerings to the deceased (mainly as per the wish of the dying artist), and no dance form is seen in such a situation. One such incident (perhaps the first ever recorded) was seen on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2024 to mourn the untimely death of a famous Déuda singer, Dal Bahadur Bogati, in Dhangadhi. This again reinforces the researchers' conclusion that whether it is in the high times of social happiness or it is in the low times like death, people come together to express their shared feelings, forgetting all other individual grievances whatsoever.

### **3. Methodology & Theoretical Framework**

The methodology section outlines the research design, including the selection of participants, data collection methods, and analytical procedures. It discusses the rationale behind the use of interviews and the application of theoretical frameworks to guide the analysis. A socio-cultural approach was adopted. Initially, accessing relevant literature presented a challenge due to its limited availability in English, requiring researchers to rely on resources in Nepali to construct the Literature Review.

The research approach was conducted over two phases, comprising a field trip followed by a second visit to conduct Semi-structured interviews with fifteen key stakeholders involved in Déuda in Nepal to explore varied values, perspectives, and practices. Interviewees were

chosen to reflect a broad range of perspectives and included performers, academics, policymakers and politicians. Formal and informal performances were also observed and recorded for analysis. A list of interviewees is provided in Appendix 1 below.

### **Phase 1 - Fieldtrip May 2023**


Dr Simon Dancey undertook an inception research visit to Nepal for the setup of the yearlong project in May 2023 alongside Dila Datt Pant. The field trip commenced with a series of engagements in Kathmandu, including a national-level consultation program titled "*Discourse on Déuda Folklore*." This event brought together artists, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to explore the cultural significance of Déuda and its potential contributions to peace. Discussions highlighted themes such as gender dynamics, regionalism, historicity, and critiques of governance within Déuda folklore, underscoring its relevance to contemporary socio-political realities.



Figure 1: Research area

Subsequent visits to rural communities, including Achham and Doti, provided deeper insights into the lived experiences of individuals engaging with Déuda culture. In Achham, the team were welcomed with traditional ceremonies and immersed in vibrant cultural





performances, including a Déuda competition attended by over 1,500 participants. These experiences underscored the integral role of Déuda in identity formation, particularly in marginalised regions of Nepal. Concluding the field trip in Dhangadhi, meetings with local politicians, and interviews with community members further enriched the understanding of Déuda's significance within Nepali society, revealing the importance of Déuda culture and its potential as a tool for social transformation. In this study, social transformation indicates changes in a society's social structures, institutions, and cultural practices, leading to a more equitable, inclusive, and progressive community in the region. It encompasses the potential for shifts in power dynamics and the alteration of challenging norms and values.

The inception field trip provided a foundational understanding of Déuda folklore and its socio-cultural implications in Nepal. Moving forward, the MAP project aims to build upon these insights through rigorous research methodologies, including semi-structured interviews and participatory workshops. By centring the voices of local communities and leveraging the rich cultural heritage of Déuda, the project seeks to contribute to peacebuilding efforts by utilising Déuda as a force for social transformation and conflict resolution.




## ***Phase 2 – Semi-Structured Interviews***

In September 2023, the team undertook over fifteen interviews in Kathmandu and Dhangadi, gathering primary data via semi-structured interviews with social actors in Nepal and exploring the research objectives. This research project is an important effort to explore Déuda culture in Nepal, which is an integral part of the country's cultural heritage, whilst acknowledging this is just one interpretation of many, with the form being viewed differently by many interviewees.

## ***Theoretical Framework***

The theoretical framework drew on the Quadruple Helix model (Dancey, 2019), comprising four interconnected sociocultural facets that serve as tools for interpreting the actions of social actors: Hegemony, Cultural Field, Hybridity and Imaginaries. The first facet delved into Gramscian concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony, exploring the influence of dominant narratives and resistance movements within the context of Nepalese Déuda folklore. Secondly, Bourdieusian theories of Fields, Doxa, and Heterodoxy were applied to understand the shared values and competing discourses within the cultural policy landscape of Nepal, including alternative narratives surrounding Déuda folklore. Thirdly, Canclini's notion of hybridity was employed to analyse the fluid and dynamic nature of social relations, particularly in the context of cultural policy structures pertaining to Déuda folklore, challenging assumptions of uniformity and generalisability. Finally, the exploration of imaginaries




offered insights into the construction of reality by various social groups, shedding light on hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses within the realm of Déuda folklore and the cultural policies surrounding it. The frameworks each reveal different facets of socio-cultural dynamics to provide a broad understanding and interrogation of Déuda folklore and complex social phenomena in the Nepalese context.

#### **4. Results & Analysis**

Key themes in Déuda's performance emerged from the qualitative interviews, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of this cultural practice within Nepalese society. An overarching theme that emerged from the interviews was the role of Déuda as a platform for social commentary and awareness. For example, the Déuda song below illustrates the realities of social class within the community:

*Kasai ki kampanimala, kasaiki potya naai/  
Kasai ki basmati bhaat, kasaiki kodyaa naai//*  
(Some boast of Victorian jewellery while others don't even have normal beads/ Some enjoy the delicacy of Basmati Rice, while others don't have even millets to feed//)

This narrative compels listeners to reflect on their social standing and motivates them towards communal change. Furthermore, respondents highlighted the capacity of Déuda songs to address a myriad of social issues, including gender inequality, caste discrimination, environmental degradation, and political unrest. Through poignant lyrics and emotive performances, Déuda singers navigate complex social landscapes,




provoking critical reflection, fostering dialogue, and mobilising communities around pressing social concerns and themes.

### ***Caste Dynamics & Social Transformation***

The entrenched caste system is particularly pronounced in the Sudurpaschim region. Deepak P Bhatta (2023) compares it to the hierarchical structure seen in regions like Uttarakhand, India, stating, *"The Sudurpaschim region is a set of pure Hindu caste hierarchy system... similar to the Indian region of Uttarakhand."* Despite constitutional provisions, caste-based discrimination persists, with Bhatta remarking, *"Untouchability is declared as an unconstitutional practice... but they are still in practice"*.

The Déuda folk tradition, for instance, reflects both the resilience and marginalisation of Dalit communities. Despite facing discrimination, Dalit artists find recognition outside Nepal, with one respondent highlighting, *"A community which has been under suppression for thousands of years is still persistently doing that."* Interviewees emphasised the need for research and institutional support to preserve cultural diversity and challenge dominant narratives. Bhatta notes, *"Nationally, people are becoming more familiar with cultural identities in different parts of Nepal."*



However, interviewees expressed concern about governmental commitment to cultural preservation. Bhatta observes, "*As a government, as an entity, they have been doing very less... political influence is hindering all these things.*" The interviews underscored the imperative for research, institutional support, and political engagement to address systemic inequalities and promote cultural diversity in Nepalese society.


Respondents reflect on historical patterns of caste-based discrimination within the Déuda community and discuss efforts to promote social inclusion and challenge caste-based hierarchies. They highlight instances of social transformation, such as the breaking of gender and caste barriers in Déuda participation, while also acknowledging the enduring challenges of caste-based prejudice and discrimination that persist in certain regions. The study underscores the importance of addressing caste-based inequalities within Nepalese society as despite Déuda including 'untouchables', it can also exclude them. As Bhatta further observes:

*"There are some districts in this province where so-called untouchables are not part of the Déuda culture. For example, an untouchable boy cannot be a Déuda singer in the same chorus that has a Brahmin girl. It's a formal thing. A Dalit boy cannot challenge a non-Dalit girl in his (other respondent's) district, but that's not the case in mine. I have seen Dalits joining hands together and playing, but some districts are more conservative, more closed, and more compartmental with their perceptions about the caste system. As Govinda was saying, Dalits have a different chorus of Déuda till today. They will either be beating the*



*drums in the distance. They will be celebrating your happiness but from a distance. They will be a part of your culture but from a distance. Your melody is a pleasure for you, as an elite, but their presence is not."*

As the interviewee pointed out, any culture reflects the society it is practised by. A key figure in cultural studies, Raymond Williams has explored the relationship between culture and society in works like "Culture and Society" (1958) and "The Long Revolution" (1961). He emphasised how culture is both a product of and a response to the material conditions and social relations of society. Drawing an analogy along this, we can state that there existed reflection of domination and discrimination in Déuda. The symbols, such as the language of Déuda, were one of such inherited conceptions where the so-called upper caste Singer (Déudiya) would enjoy questioning the social strata, caste and belongingness of the counterpart Déudiya, especially when he intended to boast of his social strata. However, it is important to note that Déuda, being an inclusive chorus that requires holding hands or tying arms with the surrounding participants of the chorus, offers a non-discriminatory pattern due to this physical proximity. This challenges the notion of so-called untouchables and untouchability. Interestingly, the meritorious Déuda singers have been from the so-called Dalit families. In this sense, Déuda as a form of art offers Dalits an avenue to challenge the social ills and discriminations, which otherwise would not be easy to do so in day-to-day life. In Déuda culture, in a very straightforward language. A singer will ask the counterpart what his name and caste are and which social




group he belongs to during the intro. Sometimes, if they disclose their Dalit identity, the whole chorus gets dispersed, and they stop playing. Even this time, I have joined Déuda in ten different places and the same thing happened. This discrimination can, in turn, be challenged by Déuda, allowing critique and discourse against the dominant discriminatory mode.

Some respondents, however, agreed that taking part as a lead singer in a Déuda event provides a sense of respect and allows them to be heard through their performance. One Dalit respondent in Dhangadhi stated, “I have never been personally humiliated at a Déuda event. However, I have heard of discriminatory behaviours in some cases, which might be due to illiteracy.” He further asserted that if “we can entertain others, they enjoy listening and participating”. He noted that participating in Déuda events has helped raise awareness about social issues. This statement highlights that while caste-based discrimination still exists, Déuda can be a platform to connect people through song and performance.

### ***Cultural Integrity, Language, Heritage & Geography***

The interviews highlighted the profound cultural significance of Déuda singing as an essential component of Nepal's intangible cultural heritage. Respondents express a deep attachment to Déuda, viewing it as a repository of traditional knowledge, historical narratives, and cultural




practices that are integral to the collective memory and identity of Nepalese communities. They emphasised Déuda's crucial role in transmitting cultural values, rituals, and folklore across generations, thereby contributing to the continuity and resilience of Nepal's cultural heritage amidst the forces of modernisation and globalisation. It is also, however, important to note the fluid and changing form of Déuda, incorporating new themes and transmitted through multiple dialects. It is evolving and flexing over time but retains a certain number of core components.

Despite the influences of modern media, respondents agreed that the core values of Déuda have remained consistent over time. One interviewee illustrates this point, stating, *“Modern influences and media have introduced new elements into Déuda, but the core remains the same - it’s about expressing the community’s soul and struggles.”* This sentiment underscores Déuda's enduring function as a means of conveying the community's essence and challenges, reinforcing its status as a vital cultural practice.

### ***Regionalism***


The very different local socio-cultural imaginary of the Western region versus the hegemonic dominant national socio-cultural imaginary and the marginalisation of Western cultural forms is a strong theme. Such a sense of regionalism was unprecedentedly evident during the





federalisation process of Nepal, particularly when Nepal was struggling to delineate the provincial boundaries. The nine districts of the then far Western Region took to the streets for months, imposing Bandh (general strike for weeks) and waged a huge movement named '*Akhanda Sudurpaschim*' meaning 'Undivided Far West'. This crippled the entire public lives and established the fact that the far-westerners could not compromise with anything other than their historically delineated boundaries. A song by Binod Bajureli included the lyrics '*Akhanda Sudurpaschim, Hamro Chahana/ Swikarya Chhaina Aba Kunai Bahana* (Undivided Sudurpaschim-our demand/ No excuse whatsoever is acceptable to us anymore) and went viral during those protests.


Finally, the State negotiated with the Far-western population and agreed to retain their long-established development region as the seventh province under Nepal's federal structure. The entire country was re-divided into seven provinces with new boundaries, but the Far-westerners resisted this federalisation process. Specifically, there were proposals to merge the Terai plains of the Far-west with other provinces and discussions to disintegrate the Far-west entirely to form a separate province for the Tharu indigenous community, granting them greater autonomy. It is important to note that of the nine districts in this region, the two Terai districts of Seti and Mahakali zones have significant Tharu populations, who speak their language and possess a distinct culture.



These communities had called for the creation of a federal state that would recognise their identity and historical significance, contrasting with the Hill population, who opposed such changes.

This opposition reflects the distinct social psychology and cultural identity that the Far-westerners, particularly those of hill origin, hold deeply. Historically marginalised by the State in terms of development, Sudurpaschim has long felt alienated from the political and economic mainstream of Nepal. The name "Sudurpaschim," which means 'Far-west,' not only refers to its geographic distance from the Kathmandu-centered government but also carries a metaphorical significance of neglect and exclusion by the State apparatus. This sense of alienation was further reinforced when the other six provinces adopted new names, but the Far West chose to retain its designation as Sudurpaschim. This decision signalled a reluctance to embrace new identities or names, underscoring a desire to maintain continuity with their regional identity.


The regionalism and sense of isolation felt by Sudurpaschim is also expressed through Déuda songs, such as the following: "*Kali ko ladkanya macho Karnalika bhe/ Hridaya jalyako jalyai kaile hola shela*" (A robustly playful fish of Kali [referring to the Mahakali River of Sudurpaschim] has fallen prey to the swollen Karnali /Our hearts are aching and aching, we've no idea of relief thereof).



These lyrics highlight the deep linguistic, cultural, and folkloric connections between the Kali and Karnali rivers, reflecting the intertwined relationships between these geographic and cultural spaces. As the following sections will demonstrate, this cultural expression is key to understanding the social and political dynamics in the region.


The interviews also examined the intricate social fabric of Nepalese society, with a specific focus on the far-western region. Language and dialects emerge as crucial elements shaping societal interactions, with the diversity of dialects reflecting the multi-linguistic nature of Nepalese society and the contentious issues of dialectic about identity and politics. Déuda offers a voice to the disenfranchised and a change to use their dialectic to articulate challenges to power and their very identity. Bhatta, as a resident of Sudurpaschim, reflects on his challenges of learning the Nepali language, stating, *"When interacting with the outer world... there are difficulties to learn the Nepali language... partly, the subject Nepali, is used to be taught in the local dialect, i.e. Dotelee."*

Jivendra Deo Giri, a retired professor from Tribhuvan University, offers insights into the cultural significance and heritage preservation of Déuda as a cherished folk tradition. Drawing from his expertise in language and folklore, Giri provides a comprehensive analysis of Déuda's uniqueness and its evolution over time. Giri underscores Déuda's deep-rooted popularity in western Nepal, describing it as akin to revered religious texts like the Veda: *"Déuda is very popular in western Nepal..."*



*The whole village can sing and dance together"*, highlighting its role as a communal activity that binds communities together through shared rhythms and melodies.

Interviewees raised concerns regarding the commercialisation of Déuda singing and its potential impact on the integrity of traditional cultural practices. Respondents express a desire to preserve the authentic essence of Déuda amidst increasing commercial pressures and changing societal values. They advocate for a balance between economic viability and cultural preservation, emphasising the importance of maintaining the integrity of Déuda as a cultural practice deeply rooted in the collective memory and identity of the Nepalese people (Halbwachs 1992). As Halbwachs posited, collective memory is a shared pool of information held by a group of people, passed down through generations, and often tied to specific cultural practices and traditions. Connecting this theory, Déuda also reveals a cultural practice that serves as a medium for collective memory among the people of Nepal. Through the performance of Déuda, memories of significant historical events, social norms, and cultural values are preserved and conveyed across generations. Thus, the study underscores the need for continued efforts to safeguard the cultural integrity of Déuda and mitigate the risks of commodification and commercialisation in the contemporary cultural landscape of Nepal.




Regarding government support, the singers express both appreciation for recent initiatives, such as the declaration of a national holiday for the festival of '*Gaura Parwa*,' and frustration at the sporadic nature of assistance for cultural preservation endeavours. They advocate for more consistent support to elevate Déuda to national and international platforms, expressing a desire to share their cultural heritage with a broader audience.

### ***Gender Dynamics & Empowerment***

The interviews illuminated evolving gender dynamics within the realm of Déuda singing, with female respondents challenging traditional norms and asserting their presence in what has historically been a male-dominated domain. Female Déuda singers articulated their experiences navigating gendered expectations and stereotypes, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges in achieving gender equity within the Déuda community. They emphasised the empowering potential of Déuda participation for women while also acknowledging the need to address entrenched gender inequalities and foster inclusive spaces for female performers.


Interviews revealed the impact of alcoholism mistreatment and domestic violence in far and mid-western hills was a common scene until recently and during Déuda, women would make a mockery of such domination and violence.




In one of our onsite observations of Déuda performances, we found a female performer taking this theme. This was demonstrated in song responses berating 'lazy, drunk men' (*Nash garyo paisa ra jyanko, chedi ka pauna hau/ Ghoda ko mut ghutkyai ghar kya furti launa hau//*) – Uff! What waste of money and health they make and where do they find such stuff for their last rites/ I wonder what swaggering and self-importance they would make by drinking the pee of a horse//).

A growth in AIDS and HIV outbreaks in the Western region has also been linked to migrant Nepali male workers visiting India and returning with infections and this theme has also been integrated into songs for wider social awareness and debate (*Gharbar birsi, dharma birsi, iman fali aya/Bambai ka kothi hai ghar AIDS boki aya//*- Veering from righteousness, you betrayed your family, and forfeited honesty altogether/ All you brought home is nothing but AIDS from the brothels of Bombay//). These songs in the public chorus of Déuda do not just imply their musical message, but far beyond this, they enable women to convey a deep despair linked to such situations.

The interviews delved into the gender dynamics within Déuda, with Giri acknowledging the historical dominance of men in its creation and performance due to the patriarchal norms of society. He notes, "In Déuda songs... sometimes it is also to denote struggles of citizens, discriminations against women, polygamy", highlighting the nuanced portrayal of social issues within Déuda's lyrical narratives.



In a revealing interview with female Déuda singers Bisna (including Urmila and Sarmila), the intricate interplay of gender dynamics and the influence of the Maoist insurgency on Déuda singing in Nepal are explored. Through their firsthand experiences and perspectives, they articulate the evolving role of Déuda as a cultural phenomenon and its significance in societal transformation. The singers expressed a profound emotional connection to Déuda, describing it as a medium to articulate a wide spectrum of human experiences, from sorrows to joys and societal observations. This relates to the research questions by illustrating how Déuda covers a wide range of emotions, highlighting its importance in peacebuilding and societal healing. The singers expressed a profound emotional connection to Déuda, describing it as a medium to articulate a wide spectrum of human experiences, from sorrows to joys and societal observations. They stress its innate nature, with one singer articulating, "Since we were children. It's inherent" (Urmila), underscoring the tradition's deep-rootedness and importance in their lives. By emphasising the emotional breadth of Déuda, the singers underscore their capacity to address complex social issues and foster community discourse, aligning with the research's focus on how cultural practices contribute to peacebuilding and social transformation. Gender dynamics within Déuda are examined, with the singers highlighting a shift towards greater gender equality in recent times. They recall past restrictions on female participation in Déuda and celebrate the changing norms that now allow married women to sing



freely alongside men. As one singer reflects, "*Previously, only unmarried women would sing Déuda now, even married women can sing*" (Bisna), indicating a positive evolution in societal attitudes towards female involvement in Déuda.

Mamta (2023), a passionate Déuda singer from rural Nepal, offers profound insights into the cultural significance of Déuda and its evolving role amidst societal transformations. Drawing from her personal experiences and deep-rooted connection to tradition, Mamta highlights the transformative power of Déuda as a platform for self-expression, social advocacy, and cultural preservation. Mamta's journey with Déuda began in her childhood, influenced by her family's traditions and her innate love for this art form. She reminisces, "*When I was a child, my uncles used to sing Déuda. I grew up listening to that.*" This early exposure instilled in her a profound appreciation for Déuda's expressive potential and cultural significance, laying the foundation for her lifelong dedication.

Despite encountering gender-based discrimination and societal norms, Mamta remained resolute in her commitment to Déuda, using it to challenge conventions and advocate for gender equality. Reflecting on her experiences, she asserts, "*If women want, she can plough a field, she can go to a funeral... not all men are the same.*" Her steadfastness





exemplifies the empowering role of Déuda in challenging social norms and fostering empowerment.


Throughout the interview, Mamta underscores Déuda 's multifaceted nature as a tool for social commentary and awareness. From addressing issues like women's empowerment and hygiene awareness to confronting caste discrimination, Déuda serves as a powerful medium for community engagement and activism. Mamta's advocacy reflects her deep sense of responsibility towards her community and her commitment to leveraging Déuda for positive societal change.

Moreover, Mamta reflected on the intersection of spirituality and activism within Déuda, advocating for a more inclusive and socially conscious approach to its practice. She acknowledges the challenges of balancing tradition with progress but remains hopeful about Déuda's potential to foster inclusivity and empowerment in Nepali society.

Mamta's narrative highlights the resilience of provincial Nepali cultures and the enduring relevance of traditional art forms like Déuda in shaping collective identity and promoting social dialogue.

### ***Impact of Socio-political Changes: Maoist Insurgency***

The interviews contextualise Déuda singing within the broader socio-political landscape of Nepal, examining the impact of historical events such as the Maoist revolution on cultural practices and societal norms. Respondents reflect on the opportunities and challenges presented by



socio-political changes, including shifts in power dynamics, changes in cultural norms, and the reconfiguration of social identities. They discuss the role of Déuda in navigating periods of upheaval and transition, as well as its resilience in the face of socio-political challenges. The study highlights the complex interplay between Déuda singing and broader processes of social change and political transformation in Nepal.

The Maoist insurgency was acknowledged by interviewees as a catalyst for societal shifts, albeit with limited structural changes. Respondents discussed the evolution of power dynamics, with one noting, *"Revolution... created a kind of huge shift in this mentality, at least creating havoc and fear"* (Bhatta, 2023).

The impact of socio-political changes, including historical events such as the Maoist revolution, is also discussed in the context of Déuda singing. Respondents reflect on the opportunities and challenges presented by these changes, highlighting the role of Déuda in navigating periods of upheaval and transition, providing a platform for discussion. This resilience underscores the adaptive capacity of Déuda singing as a cultural practice while also highlighting its potential to contribute to broader processes of social change and political transformation in Nepal. The interview with Jitendra Deo Giri (2023) explores the impact of the Maoist insurgency on Déuda and provides a good summary of the subtlety at play. He acknowledges the presence of Marxist themes in some Déuda songs but questions their efficacy, stating, *"There are some*



*songs with Marxist views. But I think these songs are not so powerful."*

He highlights two significant changes brought about by the insurgency.

Firstly, political and social issues such as caste, ethnicity, and


untouchability were less prevalent in Déuda before the conflict but

gained prominence afterwards.

*"Politics... after the civil war, these matters are included more. Additionally, questioning governmental policies and justice systems became more common in Déuda post-conflict. However, the insurgency was not the sole driver of these changes, noting. Even before the Maoist insurgency, these matters of awakening were sung in Déuda. It was not only Maoists who made this happen. In the villages, during the insurgency, Maoists used to play Déuda among their battalions. They used to sit and play Déuda."*

The perspective of Déuda singers offers yet more subtlety. The interview delves into the role of Déuda during the Maoist insurgency, where it served as a platform for disseminating revolutionary ideals and fostering empowerment, particularly among women. The singers recall being pressured to sing songs aligned with the Maoist agenda but also note the subsequent freedom to choose their repertoire post-conflict. Despite the coercion, Déuda emerged as a space for women's voices to be heard, as one singer asserts, *"These days, people are listening to us. As singers, as activists. This wasn't possible before"* (Urmila, Barmila, Bisna, 2023).


Interviews offer insights into the evolving nature of the Déuda folk tradition, revealing both the impact of the Maoist insurgency and the tradition's inherent adaptability. While the conflict heightened the inclusion of political and social themes in Déuda, it is evident that such



themes were already present to some extent. The engagement of Maoists with Déuda during the insurgency underscores its role as a means of communication and mobilisation within Nepalese society. In summarising the key themes within Déuda, it is evident that folklore encompasses a broad range of subjects, including gender, regionalism, history, government, love and sex, and form. While Déuda is inclusive of all genders, it notably highlights women's empowerment by challenging gender stereotypes and patriarchal power structures. The songs have been instrumental in raising awareness on issues like HIV/AIDS, linking the outbreaks to migrant workers. Regionalism is another significant theme, as Déuda reflects the unique socio-cultural identity of the Western region, which was particularly evident during Nepal's federalisation process. The historical depth of Déuda is rich, with songs recounting ancient battles and historical events. The government is often critiqued in these songs for corruption and cronyism. Love and sex are prevalent themes, with songs narrating tales of romance and social taboos. Finally, the form of Déuda songs is closely tied to the dance form and its expressive movements, often adapted to reflect local circumstances and societal changes.

## **5. Discussion & Conclusion**

The research conducted in Nepal provides valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of Déuda and its often-profound impact on Nepalese society. The study illuminates the role of Déuda as a dynamic




cultural phenomenon that transcends mere entertainment, serving as a vehicle for cultural heritage preservation, social commentary, gender empowerment, caste dynamics, and socio-political engagement.

The research specifically shed light on the evolving gender dynamics within the Déuda community, with female respondents challenging traditional norms and asserting their presence in what has historically been a male-dominated domain. This shift reflects broader societal changes towards greater gender equity and inclusivity while also highlighting the need for continued efforts to address entrenched gender inequalities and foster inclusive spaces for female performers.

Gender emerged as one of the central themes of the research, with women often playing the dominant role in the art form, challenging norms and values and, particularly, patriarchal power and abuse. Déuda allowed women to take control and project their strong, empowered voices, creating a distinct female socio-cultural imaginary and a counterhegemonic narrative to the patriarchal hegemony.


Intersectionality between gender and caste was also prominent, with caste dynamics emerging as a central factor shaping the landscape of Déuda performance and broader societal interactions in Nepal.

Interviewees disagreed on the importance of caste, some arguing Déuda acted as a neutraliser, whilst others disputed its ability to ignore the systemic inequality built into Nepali society, citing examples of exclusion and bias. The irony that some of the most successful performers are




women and hailing from the untouchable caste is startling. Evidence in the community suggests that neither age nor social hierarchy hinders participation in Déuda. However, participation is a matter of personal choice. Déuda performances can be observed in various configurations: male versus female, male and male, female and female, each taking on the roles of followers and opponents within the specific Déuda form. Additionally, individuals may sing Déuda solo to express their feelings.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the case of the famous female performer Dikra Badi (2003), who perhaps in this research exemplifies the themes and tensions in the Déuda, her life narrative clearly articulating the key themes and transformative power the form has as a means of cultural expression and resistance. Dikra's story is one of extraordinary resistance, shaped by the marginalisation and discrimination endured by her caste group, the Badis, part of the untouchables, where the tradition of singing and dancing, which has been integral to Badi's identity for generations. She reflects on her family's history, stating, "*From our forefather's time, we have been involved in singing and dancing... fall under Badi caste group, the low caste group.*" Dikra's interpretation of Déuda reflects its deep cultural roots and multifaceted nature. For her, Déuda is intertwined with everyday life in western Nepal, sung during various occasions "Déuda is mostly sung when you're grazing your cattle, collecting fodders, in the fields, during festivals and celebrations."



Recognised at an early age, she recorded multiple albums and was the first female from her region to sing Déuda professionally. Through Déuda, Dikra found not only a platform for artistic expression but also a means of economic sustenance for her family: *"The songs that I had sung at that time, maybe 12, 13 albums, were not my investment... They paid all the cost for my album recording."* For Dikra, Déuda serves as a medium to express the struggles and experiences of her community, particularly highlighting the discrimination faced by the Badi caste group. She emphasises, *"My caste group, Badi, is not respected in society... Our songs, our dances, our traditions are not valued."*

Throughout her interview, Dikra challenges stereotypes and societal norms, stressing the equality of all individuals irrespective of caste or gender. She points to the role of poverty and societal prejudice in perpetuating discrimination, advocating for social justice and recognition of Badi culture and traditions. Dikra shares her perspective, stating, *"It's not religion. It is the society that puts a working man or a man with money on a pedestal... It's poverty that we are discriminated against."* Despite the challenges faced by her community, Dikra remains positive about the future of Déuda, acknowledging its evolving nature and adaptation to modern times. While lamenting the commercialisation and distortion of Déuda by modern trends, she celebrates its revival in many parts of Nepal, signalling a renewed




interest among the youth: *"They differ a lot in terms of tune, in terms of words... Youths have made some weird Déuda's these days like a Hindi song, like a rap song."*

Dikra's story illustrates the complex interplay of social structures, power and hegemony. Both gender and caste reflect Gramscian notions of the hegemonic dominance of power shaping the cultural form. Déuda acts as a counter-hegemonic force challenging offers dominant regimes of truth (the Foucauldian xxx notion of dominant sets of values). The research revealed historical patterns of caste-based discrimination within the Déuda community alongside efforts to promote social inclusion and challenge caste-based hierarchies. While instances of social transformation are noted, persistent challenges of caste-based prejudice and discrimination underscore the need for greater equity within Nepalese society.

These structures interplay concerning Déuda were explored in an interview with an academic, Ram Bohara (2023). He reflects on the intricate relationship between Déuda and social structures such as class and caste: *"If we look at the major conflicts of our society [they are] the upper-lower caste, rich-poor, gender inequality."* This acknowledgement reflects the pivotal role of Déuda in initiating conversations around complex social realities despite its ambiguous contribution to societal harmony. As the interviewee notes, *"harmony is maintained as long as*






*these hierarchies are maintained,"* yet Déuda catalyses dialogue, albeit amidst societal tensions. Participants agree that fights rarely break out due to the performance and issues raised in Déuda. However, performances may be abruptly stopped due to other vigilant activities occurring simultaneously.

The interview sheds light on the dual roles of Déuda in both supporting and challenging societal conflicts. The interviewee emphasises Déuda's significance as a platform for some marginalised voices, noting "there are at least opinions coming out, expressions coming out" even within a closed, conservative society. Déuda, from this standpoint, is seen to serve as a crucial outlet for addressing inequalities and expressing dissenting opinions, acting as a "pressure valve" within the societal framework.

Furthermore, the transformative potential of Déuda in effecting social change is highlighted in the interviewee's reflections. He asserts that Déuda "organises the revolutionary consciousness of the people" and transmits messages across generations, challenging oppressive structures and advocating for justice. Through narratives that critique historical injustices, such as feudalistic oppression and unfair taxation, Déuda becomes a vehicle for societal critique and transformation.


Whilst art can challenge power, it can't always change it, but it can add to the cumulative, collective socio-cultural imaginary that begins to pull



back the veils of power. Systems of power and discrimination are built by people. As one interviewee responded when asked about the relationship between power, religion and Déuda:

*"I think everyone's religion is the same. And religion itself doesn't discriminate among people. It is just the perceptions of people that differentiates people" (Badi, 2023).*


Déuda as an art form, though, offers a unique platform and context for both improvisations in terms of call and response and allows the articulation, by often discriminated performers, of counterhegemonic arguments that challenge existing power structures. Similar in some ways to urban hip-hop rap battles, the often-quick-witted responses neutralise and often negate the dominant hegemonic patterns, challenging the intersectionality context of caste, gender and rurality. In conclusion, Déuda emerges as a multifaceted socio-cultural form that both reflects and shapes societal dynamics, as evidenced by the insights gleaned from the interview. Its ability to articulate marginalised voices, particularly that of women, challenge entrenched power structures, and preserve collective memory underscores its significance in the socio-cultural landscape. However, the extent to which Déuda contributes to social harmony or catalyses change remains subject to ongoing inquiry and interpretation within the context of evolving social imaginaries, structures, and power dynamics.



It is also important to note the hybrid nature of the art form here. Déuda is not a monolithic form that carries clear historical values and themes but also assimilates and reshapes new values and themes, including, for example, domestic violence. It is also impacted by the diversity of language and dialect.

The research conducted in Nepal during 2023 provides valuable insights into the complex nature of Déuda singing and its implications for Nepalese society. The study underscores the dynamic interplay of cultural practices, power dynamics, and identity formation within the realm of Déuda singing, highlighting its role as a catalyst for social change, cultural resilience, and community empowerment. The theoretical approach also helped delineate the hybrid nature and hegemonic and counterhegemonic form of Déuda performance. By integrating diverse theoretical perspectives, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the complexities of cultural expression and identity negotiation in contemporary Nepal while also pointing towards possibilities for fostering greater inclusivity, diversity, and cultural sustainability within the Déuda community.

The results then also offer an opportunity for policymakers to incorporate Déuda into their interventions. Firstly, the opportunity to create a local approach to this unique intangible cultural heritage and its traditions, alongside the fostering and development of the involvement



of young people, keeping the art form alive and not just a museum piece. Secondly, the opportunity to incorporate the socially transformative nature of the form into educational curricula, building on its ability to foster dialogue, debate, self-expression and beauty of language whilst simultaneously bringing Déuda to a new generation. Finally, further research is needed to explore the intricacies, dynamics and potent ability of Déuda to challenge power and help create powerful, distinct socio-cultural imaginaries that offer alternative narratives for excluded groups.



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## Appendix – 1: List of Interviewees

Before the second round of in-depth interviews, the project team consulted with Nanda Krishna Joshi, Bhoj Raj Bhatta, Yagya Raj Upadhyaya, as well as other dignitaries, including Dr Padam Prasad Kalauni, Dr Badri Binadi, Amba Datta Bhatta, Dr Bhim Bahadur Rawal, and Krishna Prasad Jaisi.

SN	Name	Background
1.	Mrs. Urmila Saud	Déudiya (Lead artist)
2.	Mrs. Durga Saud	Déuda enthusiast and youth
3.	Ms. Sarmila Saud	
4.	Rtd. Prof. Jivendra Deo Giri	Academic/Folklorist
5.	Mr. Mahesh Auji	Professional Déuda Singer
6.	Mr. Ram Bahadur Rawal	Journalist/ Déuda Researcher
7.	Mr. Maya Prakash Bhatta	Déuda /Cultural expert/ Politician
8.	Mr. Prakash Bhatta	Entrepreneur/ Cultural expert
9.	Mrs. Mamta Dhani	Déudiya
10.	Mrs. Tulsi Bist	Déudiya (Ex-Maoist member of cultural group)
11.	Mr. Lok Bahadur Thapa	Déudiya/Dohari Singer/ Musician
12.	Mr. Mahesh Pariyar	Déudiya





13.	Mrs. Kaushilla Ayer	Déuda enthusiast and performer
14.	Mrs. Dikra Badi and Ms. Rejina Badi	Professional Déuda singer and her daughter