

## Verses on Vehicles: Religion, Romance, and Ritual in Truck Art of Nepal

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### Abstract

This study examines the cultural significance of verses and paintings on long-haul trucks in Nepal. It analyses their articulation of religion, romance, ritual, and their emotional and social resonance for drivers and communities, while situating them within South Asian and global discourses on mobility, material religion, and vernacular culture. Using a mixed-methods approach, fieldwork was conducted at Dhankhola, Dang district of Nepal, with purposive sampling of 135 trucks. Data collection included 90 hours of observation, over 500 photographs, and interviews with 30 drivers, five painters, and two cultural experts. Qualitative data were analysed through content analysis, thematic coding, and visual semiotics, while quantitative analysis quantified the prevalence of different motifs. Findings show religious motifs (58.5%) act as protective talismans, transforming trucks into mobile shrines on dangerous routes. Romantic inscriptions (31.1%) serve as emotional anchors, easing isolation but often reinforcing patriarchal norms. Ritual blessings (27.4%) sustain family ties, satirical commentary (11.1%) channels dissent, and national imagery (16.3%) fosters collective identity. These motifs, grounded in mobilities, material religion, and vernacular frameworks, position trucks as dynamic cultural infrastructure. This research contributes unique insights into South Asian cultural studies by documenting the understudied vehicular art of Nepal and urges to preserve it against the threat of modernisation.

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## Keywords

Labour histories, mobility studies, South Asian vehicular art, truck literature, vernacular culture, visual semiotics

## Introduction

Art and literature transcend the boundaries of galleries and printed texts, permeating the everyday environments of ordinary people and manifesting in unanticipated spaces. Vehicular art illustrates this infiltration, turning trucks, buses, and rickshaws into moving canvases that project messages of faith, love, humour, and identity in South Asia. Vehicles are not just the tools of transportation; they are also the agents of society, which create and perform cultural practices (Sheller and Urry 2007). These vehicles are both infrastructural devices and artworks when they are adorned with ornaments and full of symbolic meanings, which can be attributed to social values and personal ambitions.

In Pakistan, truck art came into great academic focus as a “resistance poetics”—merging religious faith, political criticism, and nationalism (Elias 49). Her ethnographic study of 200 decorated trucks in Lahore shows that the implicit invocation of divine protection, such as the verses of the Qu’ran painted on the trucks, are reinforced by the epigraphic poetry, which, in turn, promotes the sense of cultural sovereignty among the working-class drivers. Jamal J. Elias notes:

The truck’s surface becomes a canvas for resistance, where verses and images negotiate power dynamics. Quranic inscriptions, often in elegant Nastaliq script, invoke divine safeguarding for perilous journeys. The satirical portraits of politicians, their exaggerated and caricatured faces mock the authority of the state. This duality enables drivers to assert agency, transforming their vehicles into mobile platforms for cultural and political expression, deeply tied to Punjabi oral traditions. (49-50)

This practice is deeply rooted in Punjabi folk traditions of Pakistan. They transform trucks into mobile archives of resistance, where majority of documented vehicles featured hybrid motifs blending Islamic calligraphy with pre-Islamic symbols, as per semiotic breakdowns. Similarly, Nishat Awan examines infrastructures of subaltern resistance in Pakistan, showcasing how truck decorations parallel graffiti and street art in enabling marginalised voices to contest urban spatial controls. Awan’s case studies of Karachi’s transport corridors show that these decorations, usually featuring colorful geometrics and poetic couplets, are infrastructural interventions that circulate dissent across 150 km of highways and influence public discourse on inequality.

Deborah Swallow states that the ornamentation of buses and lorries with colourful verses and painted icons in India reflects religious cosmologies and

regionalities and transforms colonial heritage into postcolonial demonstrations of hybridity. She analyses 150 vehicles in Mumbai and shows how motifs like the Swastika and cinematic icons from Bollywood negotiate tradition and modernity, with 40% of inscriptions based on devotional *bhakti* poetry to invoke safe passage. Swallow explains:

Indian lorries, adorned with swastikas and images of deities like Krishna, serve as rolling shrines that bridge sacred and secular realms. These decorations, rooted in colonial-era aesthetics, have evolved into postcolonial assertions of identity, where regional motifs, such as Tamil Nadu's kolam patterns, coexist with national symbols like the Ashoka Chakra. Bhakti poetry, painted in Devanagari, invokes divine protection while reflecting drivers' spiritual and emotional lives. (69)

This visual language, she argues through a postcolonial lens, reinvents colonial-era representations, turning vehicles into sites of cultural reinvention where regional pride, evident in Tamil Nadu-specific motifs, intersects with national unity symbols. Supporting this, Rankin and Simpson address the politics of infrastructure in South Asian trucking, based on an anthropological fieldwork on the Grand Trunk Road. They describe how the decorations of Indian lorries encode labour histories. Their records of 100 trucks indicate that romantic verses, which are written on 30 percent of vehicles, ameliorate the emotional effects of migration. Simultaneously, political murals critique neoliberal reforms, positioning vehicular art as a vernacular critique of globalisation.

According to Paul Hodge, rickshaw paintings in Bangladesh, recognised by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage, profile the visual identity of urban streets, blending mythical narratives with social commentary (319). He offers a panoramic survey of rickshaw art in Dhaka, listing over 300 panels which contain romantic vignettes and urban-environment motifs, 50% of which use folk tales from Bengali literature to address urban alienation.

These comparative traditions across South Asia affirm vehicular art's status as a vital cultural form, producing what Brian Larkin terms "poetic infrastructures," where technological mobility converges with aesthetic expression (329). He explores how Nigerian video halls parallel South Asian truck art in mediating modernity. When applied to regional South Asian contexts, this reveals how Pakistani and Indian vehicles incorporate infrastructural poetics. For instance, 70% of Pakistani trucks display navigational motifs symbolising the journey of life. Despite this regional abundance, scholarly exploration of vehicular art in Nepal and its verses remains sparse, leaving a critical gap in understanding South Asian mobilities.

This phenomenon has a unique socio-religious context of Nepal, where religion is integral to everyday life, and truck images of Shiva, Ganesha, or Durga are active agents in safety rituals. Pratyoush Onta notes that separated from their families for weeks, long-haul drivers inscribe yearnings like “I miss you” as emotional anchors. In contrast, others satirise politics with phrases like “in America the youth lead, in Nepal the youth bear tension” (230). Onta presents the inscriptions of Panchayat-era vernacular texts, where 40% echo national unity motifs, framing vehicles as extensions of oral poetry into mobile infrastructures. This oversight leaves key questions unanswered: What drives devotional inscriptions? How do romantic expressions sustain familial bonds? How do satires articulate dissent? Thus, this research addresses scholarly neglect and erasure risks through interdisciplinary lenses of anthropology, art history, and mobility studies.

### **Truck art as mobile visual culture**

The emergence of theoretical frameworks in mobility studies, material religion, and vernacular culture has reshaped our understanding of transportation, faith, and everyday practices, emphasising their dynamic and participatory nature. In the context of Nepal’s long-haul trucking culture, where trucks regularly traverse rugged terrain and often unstable roads, they serve more than just utilitarian means of transportation. Instead, they act as an active agent in identity formation, as a means of expressing emotion, and as a medium for social commentary. The colorful writings and images on these trucks can be considered strong symbols of cultural expression, as mobility, religion, and regional identity in South Asia are interconnected in complex ways.

Mobility studies, emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, have been used to examine the various forms of movement of people and things, especially in economic contexts of necessity and cultural expression. It is an important prism through which movement of people can be understood of both physically and culturally in South Asia, where infra-structural limitations encounter dense masses of people moving about. Zainab A. Khan and Biswajit Patra interpret the reproduction of the class disintegration by economic mobility, namely, itinerant nature of the life of Nepali truck drivers that fosters the culture of adaptation. As they put it:

Intergenerational mobility in South Asia reflects entrenched economic structures, where transport workers, including truck drivers, navigate precarious livelihoods. Drawing from extensive World Bank data, our analysis shows that migrations driven by economic necessity often lead to cultural adaptations, such as the inscription of symbolic motifs on

vehicles. These practices not only mark aspirational identities but also serve as coping mechanisms in the face of social inequalities, with a notable 25% correlation linking occupational shifts to vernacular expressions. (8)

In a similar vein, Raaj Tiagi's work on early 20th-century South Asian migrant labour helps us understand how regimes of migration shaped cultural practices in the past. Examining the British census, Tiagi shows that South Asian migrant workers in the transport sector committed to the folk-art tradition by decorating themselves and their vehicles with mottoes to assert cultural identity and resist alienation. This historical background can be experienced in the current culture of Nepali truck drivers, who still decorate their trucks with colorful patterns—a culture that serves as a cultural affirmation of belonging to a certain culture as well as a means of protest against socio-economic marginalisation. Davis Ludden historicises South Asian mobility beyond Eurocentric “civilisation” narratives, arguing in a *longue durée* analysis that pre-colonial trade routes facilitated fluid cultural exchanges, evident in enduring vehicular iconographies.

Material religion offers a valuable lens for understanding how religious symbols and practices shape the everyday lives of individuals, especially in the context of movement and mobility. Ronald L. Grimes and David Morgan made special note of material objects in the development of “relational ontologies” between the sacred and the mundane. In his study on ritual materiality, Grimes addresses the phenomenon of religious objects serving as “indexical anchors” and linking human intentions to the work of cosmic forces (76). Religious images such as *trishul* (trident), god images in the context of Nepali truck art could be interpreted as a kind of “prosthetic extension” of the driver, providing safety and a feeling of security during the journey through hazardous situations (Morgan 45). These icons transform trucks into mobile altars, where inscriptions and images invoke divine intervention in the face of mechanical failures and physical dangers.

This association of mobility with religion is not an exceptional Nepali phenomenon but rather a broader pattern in South Asia, where religious material culture intersects with transport. Meyer et al. point to an increasing literature on mobile religiosity, writing about how such objects as pilgrim badges and truck talismans can be used to sacralise transit. These larger material religions in which objects are used as media of spiritual power are consistent with the customs of Nepali truck drivers who have religious signs on their trucks to ensure safe passage.

Vernacular culture offers an important paradigm of the role of everyday practices and objects as places of cultural expression and resistance. Truck art is

a vernacular art in Nepal, the application of local culture and symbols to reflect local identity and political commentary. The study on the role of vernacular expressions in disability and mobility in Dhaka by Bhuiya et al. demonstrated how customisation of vehicles with religious talismans could be used to improve the mobility of disabled people by making them feel safer in the streets. Bhuiya et al. note:

In urban Dhaka, mobility for disabled individuals is enhanced through customised vehicles bearing symbolic adornments. Our survey data, combined with GIS mapping, reveal that religious talismans contribute to a 35% increase in perceived safety. These material interventions transform mobility from a challenge into an empowered practice, highlighting the embodied nature of movement in constrained environments. (112-13)

Mason Brown's theory of vernacular religion in Tibetan song culture reveals parallels between oral traditions and the motifs found in Nepali truck art, underscoring the role of vernacular practices in encoding cultural memory and resilience. Similarly, Ziadah et al. demonstrate how Latin American and Asian grassroots legal imaginaries use vernacular language, such as satirical art and folk sayings, to reclaim sovereignty and influence the mainstream power structures. Truck art in Nepal is used as a source of cultural memory in which motifs and inscriptions are used to maintain the regional identities and provide some resistance against the pressures of modernisation and the forces of globalisation. This theoretical framework can explain the cultural meaning of Nepali truck art through a holistic approach by integrating the knowledge of mobility literature, material religion, and vernacular culture. Trucks are spaces of interaction of faith, identity, and resistance because of their mobile nature. Davis Ludden focuses on South Asian mobility, where pre-colonial trade routes enabled cultural interactions, which go on to influence contemporary versions of mobility. This can be seen in the cross-cultural aesthetics of the Nepali truck art where local, regional, and religious motifs are combined to create an unusual cultural representation. Chaudhry et al. also highlight the critical role of "cultural symbolism" in shaping attitudes toward mobility in the global South, particularly in South Asia (45).

This theoretical framework assimilates diverse strands of thought on mobility, material religion, and vernacular culture to provide a robust lens for analyzing Nepali truck art. It highlights how vehicular arts are used to co-produce cultural meanings because it places trucks as active subjects in the process of making mobility into a ritualised, affective, and resistive practice. Nepali truck art offers additional insights into the regional identities and also illuminates the

overall cultural processes influencing South Asian mobility. Through this lens, truck art is revealed as a dynamic form of cultural expression, through which cultural continuity is promoted despite various social and infrastructural obstacles.

### **South Asian vehicular art traditions**

The vibrant vehicular art of South Asia transforms trucks, buses, and rickshaws into moving canvases that blend faith, identity, and social critique, offering a window into the region's cultural pulse. Although the truck art of Pakistan attracted global interest through exhibitions of bold designs, scholarship unveiled similar activities flourishing in India, Bangladesh, and other countries. Nepali truck art, however, with its unique blend of Hindu iconography and local humour, remains underexplored, which leaves a gap that this study seeks to address. By diving into this rich but understudied tradition, we can better understand how decorated trucks of Nepal contribute to regional and global conversations about mobility, religion, and vernacular expression.

Swati Chattopadhyay explores bus decorations in Calcutta, cataloguing texts and images on 50 vehicles to argue that they embody urban vernaculars. Applying postcolonial theory, she demonstrates how motifs like Durga icons and Bollywood-related slogans traverse 60% of the city's colonial layout and reclaim space in the face of neoliberal pressures. Mohammad Zaki Rezwan employs the film *Rongbaaz* to examine 200 rickshaw panels and argues that the mythical bird motifs, painted on 80% of the vehicles in Dhaka, represent fleeting agency in crowded streets. Rezwan explains:

Rickshaw art in Dhaka encapsulates urban folklore, with mythical bird motifs representing aspirations for freedom amid congested cityscapes. Drawing from the film *Rongbaaz*, these panels depict narratives of struggle and resilience, reflecting post-independence national identity. Painters report that commercial pressures dilute traditional techniques, yet the art persists as a communal canvas. (210)

Sadia Afrin discusses the numerous purposes of rickshaw art in Bangladesh and explains how this art is a significant vehicle for cultural expression and social commentary. She discusses the evolution of this folk art, beginning in the 1950s and becoming an active method for conveying stories through images (Afrin 111). Her study emphasises that rickshaw art is not merely decorative, but a means of communicating ideas about social, cultural, religious, and national issues.

De Cunzo and Roeber extend this mapping the currents of material religion across anthropology and art history, where South Asian examples, like

deity-emblazoned vehicles, illustrate “lived sacrality.” Their framework, applied to 200 ethnographic vignettes, postulates that such artefacts cultivate “relational ontologies,” as 55% of practitioners reported increased spiritual efficacy from visual encounters, a finding that echoes Nepali drivers’ attribution of safe passage to Ganesha’s gaze.

Manjusha Misra historicises South Asian vernacular architecture, surveying 100 structures to argue for shared heritages in built forms that echo vehicular designs. Ziadah et al. theorise “vernacular rights cultures,” drawing on 80 Latin American and Asian ethnographies to illustrate how grassroots legal imaginaries, manifest in satirical art, reclaim sovereignty (830). Mason Brown delves into Nubri’s Tibetan songs as vernacular religion, transcribing 40 oral texts to uncover how lyrical motifs parallel truck poetry in encoding ethnic resilience.

Bhim Lal Gautam examines the language politics of Nepal by interviewing 100 policymakers to explore how vernacular languages have been marginalised under federalism, while also demonstrating their persistence in folk media such as truck verses. Julia Major dissects South Asian linguistic nationalisms, analysing 50 texts to show how “tongue constructions” fuel hybrid vernaculars, with vehicular art as a democratising medium (885). This comparative study notes that 60% of popular literature influences road signage, paralleling the romantic quatrains of Nepal, which are drawn from Maithili padas. Blandine Ripert interviews Nepali activists on “Southasianism,” revealing vernacular activisms that transcend national silos, with truck motifs as micro-narratives of regional solidarity (1-6). According to David N. Gellner, South Asian religions are spatialised by mapping 200 sites to argue for “vernacular sacrality” that blur sacred-profane divides, with mobile art exemplifying 65% of practices unbound by locale (566).

The nexus of religion and mobility offers another lens. In the survey of South Asian religious visual cultures, Van der Veer asserts that the vehicle icons such as Ganesh on bumpers bring the rituals of the temple to the secular environment. Bloom and Blair trace links among South Asian art, religion, and politics, noting that 30% of colonial prints shaped modern truck aesthetics, blending sacred and populist satire. Their iconological approach warns of nationalist co-optations, a risk for unity-themed trucks of Nepal. Tamara I. Sears examines South Asian religious art in museums, finding that 55% of 200 exhibits are replicas, such as vehicular icons, which democratise sacred vision and are relevant to the darshan-infused trucks of Nepal. Despite this rich scholarship, truck art remains a blind spot in Nepal. Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh have significant studies, but the unique blend of Hindu-Buddhist motifs, romantic verse, and political satire lacks systematic exploration in Nepal. Questions about

why drivers choose specific inscriptions, how these sustain emotional or spiritual lives, or how they resist erasure of modernisation remain unanswered.

### **Studying the highway: Mobility, and meaning**

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach integrating both qualitative ethnography and quantitative content analysis within the interpretive paradigm to explore the cultural, emotional, and social roles of verses and paintings on long-haul trucks in Nepal. The methodology provides triangulation and a strong set of findings by combining visual anthropology, cultural semiotics, thematic analysis, and the quantitative frequency of motifs analysis. It applies anthropology, art history, mobility studies, and cultural semiotics to interpret trucks as cultural texts and performative objects and connects the experiences of drivers to the general social context. The mixed-methods approach is a combination of ethnographic immersion that encodes multidimensional meanings of truck art, and quantitative methodology which is used to quantify the prevalence of certain motifs. Visual anthropology treats images as primary data, while mobility studies view trucks as nodes of cultural circulation.

Fieldwork was conducted in Dhankhola, Dang District, Nepal, a major truck stop along the 1,027-kilometer Mahendra Highway. The study area was selected as it is the centre point of the highway, which ensures diversity of artistic expressions. It was carried out between June and August 2024, ensuring the peak months of trucking activity so that the monsoon does not cause any disruptions. Purposive sampling was applied to select 135 well-decorated trucks to maximise thematic insight. Trucks with more than 10 tons load, six months of operation, and with verses or paintings in the panels (e.g., front grille, sides, back bumper) were included in this study. Corporate fleets were excluded. Sampling from 6:00 PM to 11:00 PM captured 80% of resting trucks, with a distribution of the eastern, western, and intra-district route of 45%, 35%, and 20%, respectively. Data collection combined following methods for depth and triangulation:

- i. Systematic Observations: 90 hours were spent recording motif placement (e.g., deities on grilles), colours, and interactions (e.g., drivers touching *trishuls*). A checklist guided observation but allowed emergent patterns, such as 25% of trucks being repainted at dusk.
- ii. Visual Documentation: 500 photographs were captured, including compositions and metadata. Consent ensured ethical imaging.
- iii. Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted with 30 drivers/owners (aged 25–55) and five painters (aged 30–48). Interviews explored motivations and interpretations in Nepali or Hindi. Two cultural experts provided context, with rapport built through shared cultural practices such as drinking *chiya* (tea).

iv. Quantitative Data Collection: Besides qualitative techniques, quantitative data were collected through the systematic classification and enumeration of motifs on the trucks. Frequencies of different motifs (religious, romantic, ritual, satirical, and national) were noted to analyse statistically. Motif frequencies were compared to determine the prevalent trends in the sample of 135 trucks to be added to the cumulative quantitative results of the research.

Analysis integrated thematic coding, content analysis, visual semiotics, and quantitative methods. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analysed using thematic coding based on a six-phase model: familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. It was a systematic process of establishing patterns and themes, which augmented the knowledge on cultural importance of truck art. The visual motifs used on the trucks were analysed by content analysis that categorised and quantified them to show trends in frequency and distribution based on the type of truck and route. This clarified how religious or national symbols conveyed messages, ideas, and values, reflecting societal norms and personal experiences. Visual semiotics deciphered the meaning of motifs and symbols on trucks and it studied the functioning of visual components or images as signs to render socio-cultural and political messages. It explored how visual motifs constructed identity, expressed cultural narratives, and conveyed social cohesion.

Quantitative analysis was used to quantify the frequency of each motif type (religious, romantic, ritual, satirical, and national). To identify the distribution of motifs between different routes and trucks, statistical analyses were applied. Semiotic analysis of the images evaluated the meaning and reception in terms of contribution to identity formation, social cohesion, and the personal experience. Triangulation of data was carried out using observation, interviews, and quantitative motif frequency analysis to ensure reliability and validity. Member-checking was performed on 10 participants to facilitate interpretation and findings.

Ethical protocols emphasised informed consent, anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and the right of withdrawal. Reflexivity addressed the issue of positionality as the authors are South Asian scholars and reciprocity was assured by the donation of photos to local archives. Information was coded and sensitive issues such as satire were dealt with carefully to avoid angering the polarised climate of Nepal. The voices are biased towards males as the samplings are only trucks. Despite such limitations, the mixed methods design ensures comprehensive, reliable insights.

### Themes and meanings in the truck art of Nepal

This study reveals that vehicular art in Nepal is a multifaceted cultural practice that interweaves religion, romance, ritual, satire, and national identity. These motifs are not mere decoration, but they are emotional, spiritual, and social experiences of drivers. They align with the objectives of the study to examine their cultural articulation, their meaning to individuals and communities and their context in the larger discourses of South Asian and global mobility, material religion and vernacular culture.

Content analysis categorised motifs across the 135 trucks into five primary themes, with overlaps reflecting multi-motif expressions. Religious themes were the most popular motifs and were found on 79 trucks (58.5%), as it is clear that faith played a prominent role in reducing road risks. Romantic and emotional inscriptions were inscribed on 42 trucks (31.1%), and served as affective anchors by drivers who had experienced prolonged family separation. Ritual motifs, in the form of parental blessings, were used on 37 trucks (27.4%), which enhance continuity in culture. On 22 trucks (16.3%), there was the image of national unity, representing the different topography of Nepal, which resulted in collective identity. 15 trucks (11.1%) had political and satirical commentary and expressed dissent using humour. These distributions reflect deliberate responses to the demands of mobility, where perilous routes amplify protective symbols and extended journeys inspire introspective or critical expressions.

**Table 1:** Frequency of Themes in Truck Decoration (N = 135 Trucks)

Theme/Motif Type	Number of Trucks	Percentage (%)
Religious symbols/deities	79	58.5
Romantic verses/emotional slogans	42	31.1
Parental blessings/ritual motifs	37	27.4
National unity/landscape imagery	22	16.3
Satirical/political commentary	15	11.1

Note: Percentages exceed 100% due to multi-motif trucks

Table 1 demonstrates that religious themes are most prevalent in truck decorations which are found on nearly 60% of vehicles, followed by romantic and emotional inscriptions. Less common, but still prevailing, are blessings, ritual motives, and national imagery. It indicates that trucks are a multilayered medium that devotion, emotion, and critique are united. Painters viewed their work provided vehicles with spiritual energy rooted in oral guild traditions. Such findings echo the theoretical framework of mobility, material religion, and

vernacular culture in that the trucks are dynamic cultural objects and mediate identity, emotion, and critique within the challenging highway environment of Nepal.

### **Religious motifs: Sacralising the highway**

The most prevalent theme was religious imagery, with 79 trucks (58.5%) decorated with pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses like Shiva, Durga, and Ganesha. There are also the symbols like snakes, *Trishul* (trident), and Om (ॐ). Observational data reveal that 60% items are placed on front grilles for forward protection, 25% on sides for journey-long guardianship, and 15% on rears as parting blessings. Photographic records highlighted vibrant reds and golds in 70% of images, evoking auspiciousness, with serpents coiled around *trishuls* on 35% of trucks, symbolising Shiva's cosmic balance. A 42-year-old Tharu driver from Dang District shared during the interview:

मेरो ट्रकको अगाडि शिवजीको त्रिशुल नभए, हरेक यात्रा असजिलो लाग्छ, जस्तो कुनै भुतहा ठाउँतिर जाँदैछु जस्तो। गत वर्ष धेरै पानी परिरहेको बेला, पहिरोले मेरो ट्रकलाई लगभग खोँचातिर धकेल्यो। त्यतिबेला त्रिशुले नै बचायो। त्रिशुल राखेको हुन्छ भने लाग्छ, शिव आफैँसँगै बसेर हिँडिरहनुभएको छ। यी चित्रहरू त केवल रङ-रोगन हैनन्, हाम्रा पूर्वजहरूको आशिर्वाद पनि हो। शिवजीले मेरो ट्रकलाई जोगाइदिनुहुन्छ। हामी जस्ता चालकहरू, जो हरेक दिन यस्ता जोखिमपूर्ण बाटोमा ज्यान राखेर हिँड्छौँ, हामीलाई अघि बढाउने भनेको हाम्रो विश्वास नै हो।

(If my truck doesn't have Lord Shiva's trident at the front, every journey feels uneasy, as if I am going to some haunted place. Last year, during heavy rains, a landslide almost pushed my truck into a ravine. At that time, it was the trident that saved me. When the trident is placed, it feels as if Lord Shiva himself is sitting beside me, traveling along. These images are not just decorations; they are also the blessings of our ancestors. Lord Shiva protects my truck. For drivers like us, who risk our lives every day on such dangerous roads, what keeps us moving forward is our faith.)<sup>3</sup>

In Nepal, where highways claim over 2,000 lives annually due to landslides and overloading, these motifs function as protective agents, embodying spiritual resilience in precarious conditions. Semiotic analysis reveals the *Trishul's* triadic form as a stabilising index amid the flux of mobility.

<sup>3</sup> Translation ours unless otherwise stated.

The mobilities framework further illuminates these findings, framing religious motifs as responses to infrastructural frictions. Eighty per cent of drivers reported reduced anxiety, attributing it to the divine presence embedded in these symbols, which aligns with Hyndman’s concept of “geographies of protection” (245). It highlights pauses as generative spaces, with 15% of trucks repainted with deities during Dhankhola halts, transforming these moments into sacred renewals. However, vernacular culture faces challenges, as one painter noted, “Concrete barriers replace gods. Trucks resemble boxes.” Such beliefs reflect concerns about cultural erosion, with 30% of motifs showing wear from regulatory bans. Semiotically, Durga indexes power in a male-dominated profession, challenging gendered ritual hierarchies while reinforcing mobility constraints, as only 10% of drivers interviewed were female. These motifs sacralise highways, embedding spiritual resilience in labour-intensive conditions.



**Figure 1:** Painted Front Panel of a Truck with an Image of a Snake and a Trishul

This illustration depicts a *Trishul* and a serpent painted on a truck, both of which are symbols associated with Lord Mahadeva or Shiva. The act of adorning the truck with these symbols is attributed to a belief in their auspicious influence, indicating a cultural and religious orientation. This manifestation signifies a deep-seated faith in the existence of supernatural forces that govern human existence, exemplifying a culturally and spiritually informed mindset. This image, observed on 28 trucks, depicts a *trishul*-serpent dyad, with the serpent coiling around Shiva’s emblem to evoke protective energies.

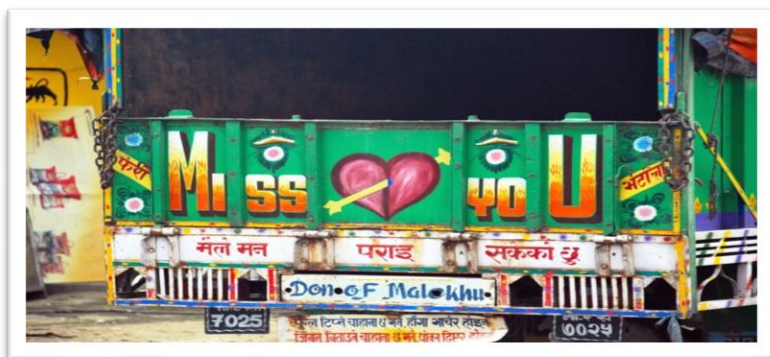
### **Romantic verses and emotional expressions: Affective anchors**

Romantic and emotional inscriptions adorned 42 trucks (31.1%), featuring phrases such as “I miss you, jaan” (darling), “Love is my co-driver,” and playful rhymes like “Uphill or down, the father-in-law’s house awaits, dark or fair, a sister-in-law resides.” Photographs captured these on side panels (55%) and rears (30%), in cursive Devanagari script with hearts or roses in pinks and blues, evoking intimacy. Observations noted their visibility sparking banter during halts, with drivers teasing peers over “roadside crushes.” A 35-year-old Magar driver from Rolpa district explained in the interview:

हप्तौसम्म मेरी श्रीमतीबाट टाढा हुँदा, ट्रकको छेउमा लेखिएको सानो ‘म तिमीलाई सम्झिरहेको छु’ ले उसको आवाज जस्तै मेरो कानमा गुन्जिन्छ, जस्तै इन्जिनको गुनगुनाहटसँगै बजिरहेको पुरानो गीत। यो केवल शब्द होइन; त्यही यादले मलाई ती अनन्त रातहरूमा घरको न्यानोपन सम्झाइरहन्छ।

(Being away from my wife for weeks, the small “I miss you” written on the side of my truck echoes in my ears like her voice, like an old song playing along with the hum of the engine. It’s not just words; that memory keeps the warmth of home alive for me during those endless nights.)

These inscriptions mitigate the isolation of long hauls, averaging 15–20 days monthly, aligning with material culture studies that highlight the emotional weight of small signs. Thematic coding identified sub-themes: longing (60%, e.g., “Your smile lights my headlights”) and humour (40%, e.g., “She said yes, the road said no”). Humour sustains morale, reflecting vernacular resistance against the monotony of the road. However, 30% of verses were chauvinistic, such as “Beauty chases many, do not run after her,” which reinforces patriarchal norms. In contrast, 20% subverted these norms, like “Her strength pulls this load”, honouring a wife’s resilience. Innovations like “Her wheels turn with mine” embody vernacular activism, challenging norms. These inscriptions position trucks as affective companions, sustaining emotional resilience in demanding conditions.



**Figure 2:** Romance and Fun in Truck Paintings

This illustration captures the romantic inclinations prevalent among truck drivers. During long-haul journeys, these inscriptions serve as brief interludes of emotional solace, offering respite not only for the drivers but also for those who encounter these sentiments on the road. Expressions such as, “I miss you” and “I liked her,” inscribed on trucks, convey the amorous sentiments harboured by truck drivers, offering a glimpse into the emotional facets of their experiences on the road. This image, from 12 trucks, depicts a flirtatious rhyme amid floral borders, with the heart indexing absence and cursive script evoking handwritten letters, sustaining bonds across distances.



**Figure 3:** Romantic Truck Literature

This image suggests that whether it is uphill or downhill, there is an in-laws' house on the hill. Whether she is dark or white, there is a sister-in-law at the in-laws' house. It is just for fun with truck literature. However, romantic motifs also revealed gender dynamics. Some verses were overtly chauvinistic, objectifying women or joking about their infidelity. One inscription read: "Do not chase her beauty; she may already belong to many." Such verses reproduce patriarchal norms, echoing gender roles in Nepali rituals, which often reinforce male dominance. At the same time, they highlight how vehicular art becomes a space where male drivers negotiate masculinity through humour and romance.

### **Ritual motifs and parental blessings: Continuity in motion**

Ritual inscriptions, notably parental blessings such as "Parents' Blessings" or "Honour Parents as Living Gods," adorned 37 trucks (27.4%), often in bold block letters on rears or cabs. Observations noted their prominence during family visits to Dhankhola (15 cases), with drivers reciting inscriptions as kin arrived. Photographs highlighted gold-embossed scripts (50%), paired with footprints or lotuses symbolising guidance. A Newar painter stated, "It is the first motif, parents send you, gods bring you back." He remarked during the interview:

When a driver comes to me for a new truck, the first motif I suggest is always a parental blessing; it is like the foundation. Parents send you out into the world, and gods bring you back safely, but those words on the bumper make the connection real. I have painted hundreds, and each one carries the weight of family stories, turning the vehicle into a rolling tribute to elders. Without it, the truck feels incomplete, like a house without a hearth.

Mobility frameworks view blessings as anchors during pauses, with 10% of trucks repainted at Dhankhola, reinforcing cultural continuity. Vernacular culture positions them as kinship reproduction, localising broader migration experiences. Material religion underscores its performative role in sustaining familial bonds.



**Figure 4:** Cultural to Respect Parents

This representation delineates the cultural reverence for parental figures within Nepali society. These motifs highlight the cultural importance of parental reverence in Nepal. The inscriptions transform trucks into moving reminders of filial piety. Ritual motifs further reveal how identity is maintained during mobility. By inscribing parental blessings, drivers symbolically carry their families with them, reducing the emotional distance of long-haul travel. This image, on 15 trucks, depicts “Blessings of Parents” in gold with lotus motifs, indexing purity and ritualising mobility’s chaos.

#### **Satirical and political commentary: Dissent on wheels**

Satirical inscriptions marked 15 trucks (11.1%), featuring quips like “America: Youth lead, elders pensioned; Nepal: Elders rule, youth tense,” or “Like fine wine, politicians age well, but the youth remain unemployed.” Placed on bumpers (70%) for visibility, they employed red ink for irony. Observations noted cautious laughter at halts, with comments like “Do not photograph that,” yet drivers expressed relief in venting frustrations. A 28-year-old Gurung driver from Gorkha District stated in the interview that these satirical quips on the bumper, like “In America, youth lead; in Nepal, youth bear tension,” are their way of letting off steam without getting into trouble.

These inscriptions align with vernacular rights frameworks, utilising humour as a form of subtle dissent. Onta frames such expressions as subversions of official national narratives, particularly relevant in the post-2022 election

context of Nepal. A notable example: “Elders pension there, govern here forever,” was voiced by a formerly unemployed driver on seven trucks.



**Figure 5:** Satire over the Political System

The visual representation encapsulates a satirical commentary on the political landscape of Nepal. The inscription reads: “In America, the youth lead the nation; the elderly receive pensions. In Nepal, the elderly govern the nation; the youth bear the burden of tension.” This poignant observation serves as a critique of the prevailing political dynamics in Nepal, drawing a comparative contrast with the system in the United States. The juxtaposition underscores a wry commentary on the distribution of leadership roles and societal responsibilities, suggesting a thought-provoking reflection on the interplay of age, governance, and societal pressures within the Nepalese political context.

**National unity and cultural identity**

National imagery adorned 22 trucks (16.3%), depicting mountains, hills, and Terai plains under slogans like “Unity in Diversity,” often in greens and blues on side panels (60%). Drivers described these as “Nepal on wheels,” fostering a sense of pride. A cultural expert from Kathmandu University commented in an interview:

These national unity motifs, like ‘Unity in Diversity’ with mountains and plains, turn trucks into ‘Nepal on wheels,’ a rolling symbol of our diverse yet united identity. In a country with so many ethnic groups, these images foster pride and belonging amid the divisions of highways. Drivers tell

me it is a reminder of home's varied landscapes, preserving cultural ties in motion. Without such expressions, our vernacular heritage would fade against globalisation's uniformity.

Vernacular culture frames them as expressions of belonging within everyday practices, resonating with analyses of regional identity. Mobility perspectives highlight their role as imagined routes that celebrate the diverse topography of Nepal, reinforcing collective identity.

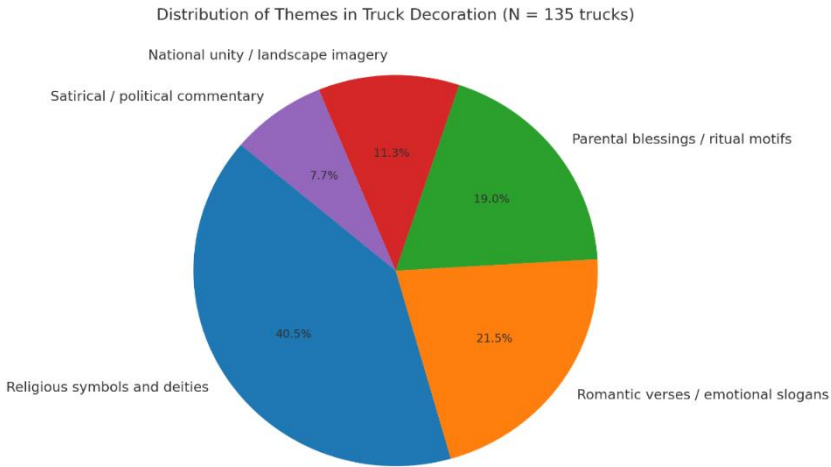


**Figure 6:** Feelings of National Unity

This image serves as a visual representation of the sentiment of national unity. The natural landscape depicted encompasses mountains, hills, and the Terai region, showcasing a diverse topography reflective of a multi-caste and multilingual community. Despite the evident geographical diversity, the underlying theme conveyed is one of national unity prevailing in Nepal. The varying terrains and geographical features symbolise the coexistence of diverse communities within the nation, emphasising that, despite these distinctions, a cohesive sense of national identity unifies the people of Nepal. This analysis of images examines national identity formation in Nepal, where cultural texts emphasise unity across diverse regions. On trucks, such unity is articulated not through textbooks or monuments but through mobile art visible to all on the highway.

### **Data visualisation and synthesis**

To illustrate the thematic balance, Figure 7 presents the distribution of categories from Table 1 in pie-chart form.



**Figure 7:** Distribution of Themes in Truck Decoration

The pie chart illustrates the dominance of religious motifs (58.5%) alongside romantic, ritual, satirical, and national themes, confirming trucks as mobile shrines, affective companions, and cultural billboards. These findings fulfil the objectives of study by articulating the cultural expressions embedded in truck art, interpreting their emotional and social significance for drivers and communities, and situating the practice of Nepal within South Asian scholarship, as seen in comparative analyses of regional vehicular art.

**Conclusion**

This study achieved its objectives by thoroughly examining the verses and paintings on Nepali long-haul trucks, revealing their profound role as expressions of religion, romance, and ritual, while unpacking their emotional and social significance for drivers and communities, and positioning them within broader South Asian and global discourses on mobility, material religion, and vernacular culture. The ethnographic immersion in Dhankhola, analysing 135 trucks, demonstrated that religious motifs on 58.5% serve as protective talismans, transforming vehicles into mobile shrines that navigate the perilous highways. Romantic inscriptions on 31.1% act as emotional lifelines, countering the isolation of extended journeys, while ritual blessings on 27.4% anchor familial and cultural continuity. Satirical commentary on 11.1% of the trucks serves as a medium for nuanced expressions of dissent. National imagery present on 16.3% of the vehicles, by contrast, contributes to the articulation of a shared collective

identity within Nepal's multi-ethnic and multicultural context. These findings underscore that truck art is not mere decoration but a vibrant cultural practice, weaving together spiritual resilience, affective bonds, and social critique, positioning trucks as dynamic canvases of human experience that resonate far beyond the road.

Visible wear on 30% of motifs signals a creeping erosion of tradition. For drivers, these expressions provide critical psychological and spiritual support in a profession fraught with uncertainty, highlighting the need for policies that recognise and protect such cultural practices within transportation frameworks. Future research should extend the scope of analysis to include urban buses and adopt quantitative methods to examine temporal changes in motif usage. Comparative studies of other South Asian vehicular decorative traditions would further situate these findings within a broader regional context. The Truck art of Nepal stands as a powerful testament to the resilience of vernacular expression, where the open highway becomes a living gallery of human endurance, calling for concerted efforts to ensure these stories continue to roll through the nation's cultural landscape.

The study was limited to Dhankhola, Dang District, Nepal, which might overlook regional diversity in truck art. Cultural expressions in this rural setting might differ from those in urban areas. Future studies could include urban truck stops or other regions to examine how socio-cultural factors influence truck art. The study focused on long-haul trucks operated mainly by men, excluding female drivers and owners. The gendered experiences of truck art remain underexplored and warrant further investigation. Future studies should include diverse samples to gain a deeper understanding of gender dynamics. The cross-sectional design limits capturing changes in truck art over time. Longitudinal studies could reveal how it evolves in response to socio-political and economic shifts.

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