

8 Śāstriya Saṅgīt

When Indian court musicians were employed by Malla, Śāha and Rāṇā courts, *śāstriya saṅgīt*¹ remained an exclusive court entertainment until some of these musicians trained disciples from Nepal. If some members of the ruling families attained proficiency in singing or playing in the North Indian classical tradition, this was a strictly private occupation. The last Rudra *vīṇā* player of professional standard was Ekrāj SJB Rāṇā during the 1940s and 1950s (Fig. 387).



Fig. 387: Nepal's last Rudra *vīṇā* player, Ekrāj Shamsheer posing in state attire

1 Nepali term for North Indian classical music/Hindustani music



Fig. 388: Ekrāj Shamsheer's music room at Durgā Bhāvan

On the groundfloor of his Durgā Bhāvan palace² at Taṅgal, Kathmandu, he had installed a lavish music room (Fig. 388) with a garden view where white peacocks strutted next to Italian fountains. There he practised and played for his friends. He owned a complete set of musical instruments made in Calcutta and his library included a Newar *rāgamālā* commissioned by Jagajjotir Malla of Bhaktapur (1614–1637).³

In the 1980s, a handful of Indian and Nepalese musicians—among them the Ganesh Bhandari (*sītār*), Nara Raj Dhakal (*khayāl*), Shambhu Prasad Mishra (*tablā*) and Shamba Dev Sharma

2 now demolished

3 see Wegner and Widdess 2004, 2005

(*harmonium*)—were in the employment of the royal palace in Kathmandu, one of them in charge of organising a monthly fullmoon concert at the Nārāyaṇhiṭī temple in the palace compound. These concerts were accessible to the general public and linked to the inner palace with horrible microphones and electric wires. We never knew if anybody listened at the other end. There were a few senior professional musicians—among them Krishna Narayan Shrestha (*jaltaraṅg*, *dilruba*, *tablā taraṅg* and *harmonium*), Tarabhir Singh Tuladhar (*sitār*), Mohan Prasad Shrestha (*sarod*) and Homnath Upadhyaya (*tablā*) who each helped to raise a new generation of musicians. Tribhuvan University’s Lalit Kala campus offered basic training in *śāstriya saṅgī*. When Nepal TV opened its first studio on the top floor of Singha Durbar, Krishna Narayan Shrestha and I were called to play a televised programme. The payment was Rs. 125 each but we were told to collect the money later. We came to know that the Singha Durbar guards were under order to prevent pedestrians and private vehicles from entering the gate. The taxi fare would have been more than the money that we were supposed to collect. (Figs. 389–392)



Fig. 389: Krishna Narayan Shrestha playing *jaltāraṅg* at the Goethe Institute 22/2/1991

When I played a *tablā* solo in an auditorium in Patan, to my surprise the Nepal TV technicians had installed their recording equipment on stage. They recorded and telecasted the concert without taking the trouble to ask for my permission. Every musician had such stories to tell of betrayal and piracy. Finally, Nepal TV decided to stop telecasting programmes with *śāstriya saṅgī*. Contrary to Indian state media with their earlier educative agenda, Nepal TV caters only for popular tastes. Unlike India where the copyright rests with the performer, in Nepal it is the producer who owns the copyright. In fact, the biggest producer made himself General Secretary

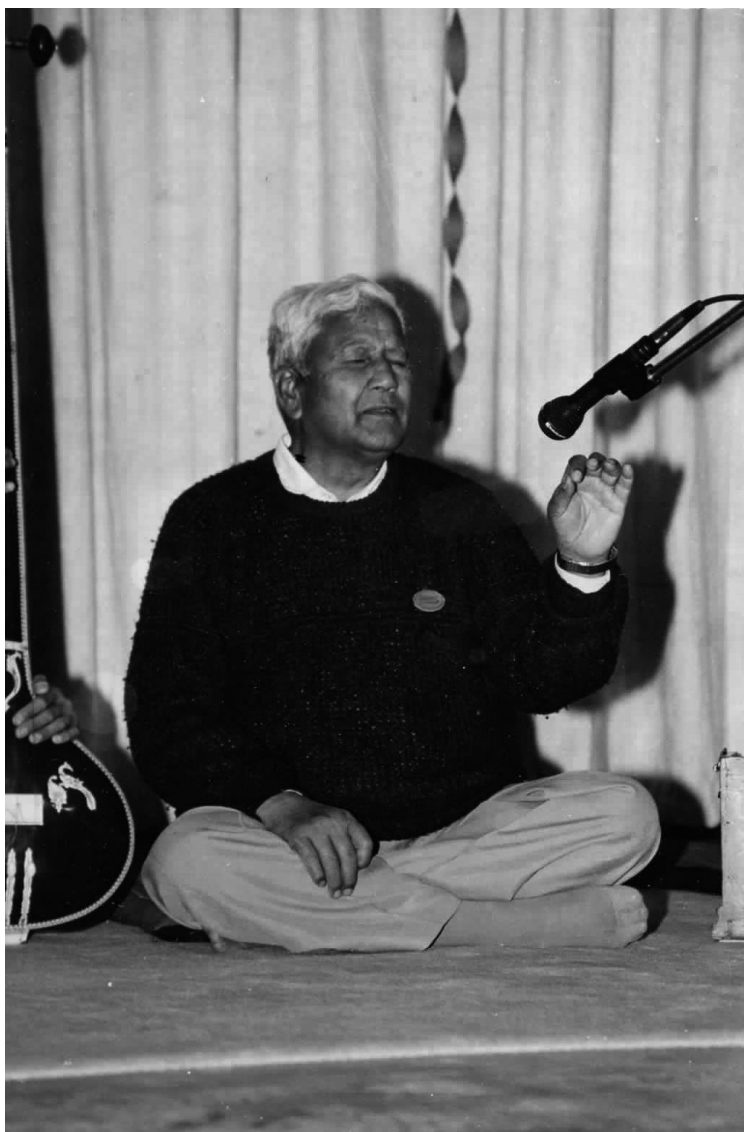


Fig. 390: Court singer Nararaj Dhakal presenting khayāl at the Goethe Institute 1991

of the copyright society that he had founded. This climate of greed and exploitation makes it extremely hard for professional musicians to pull on in Nepal. Consequently, in comparison with North Indian professional standards this noble musical tradition deteriorated to a provincial level. Having to supply dinner music to foreign tourists kills the joy of music. Those musicians who could afford it migrated abroad.



Fig. 391: Tarabir Singh Tuladhar playing *sitār* at the Goethe Institute 1991



Fig. 392: Mohan Sundar Shrestha playing *sarod* at the Goethe Institute 1991



Fig. 393: Keshab Narayan Tamrakar during a 1988 practice session at my Bhaktapur home with a pair of *tablā* made in Bombay by Vishnu Vitthal Sutar (photo courtesy of Kevin Bubriski)

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was only a single Newar *tablā* player in Bhaktapur, Keshab Narayan Tamrakar (Fig. 393) who had learnt the Benares style of *tablā* from court musician Shambhu Prasad Mishra. Being the wealthy owner of a tourist shop, Keshab organised occasional public concerts in Bhaktapur with invited musicians from Patan, Kathmandu and Germany (author). These performances of *śāstriya saṅgīt* attracted only a limited circle of a few local people trained in this tradition. To other citizens it was a musical language different from their own, that they could enjoy only at a superficial level. Another Tamrakār family in Kvāchē kept a few instruments

with broken strings as family memorabilia from a time when *śāstriya saṅgīt* was practised more and recognized as South Asia's supreme musical achievement (Fig. 394). Extreme dedication to practice, learning and perfection combined with the essential talent deserve unconditional support. This is how humanity can blossom and proceed.

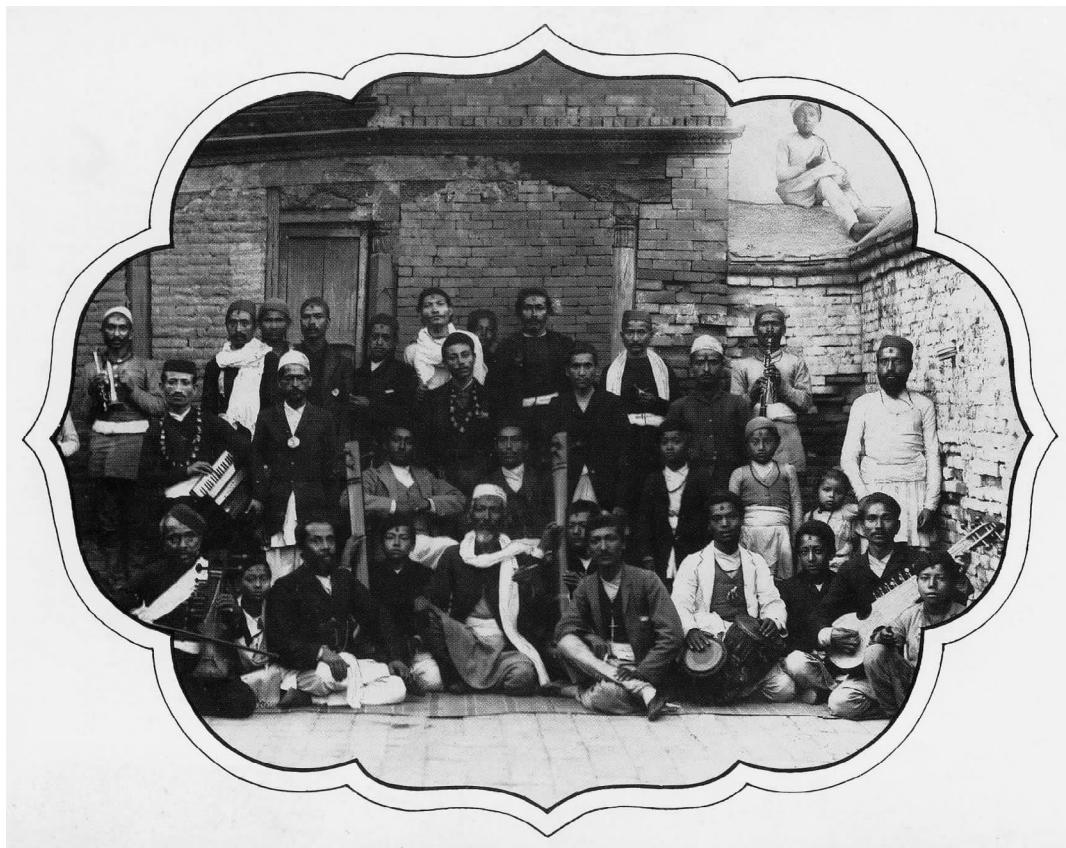


Fig. 394: Musicians of *śāstriya saṅgīt* (front) and other genres—Kathmandu, early 20th century (postcard)

During my years as resident of Bhaktapur, I trained several *tablā* students in the style of Laliyānā *gharānā*. Three of them found employment at Kathmandu University's Department of Music. As I published my complete *tablā* repertoire in 2004⁴ in Delhi, transcriptions in this publication do not include *tablā*. When Newar farmers play *tablā* for *bhajan* accompaniment, this is usually done with drums that are out of tune and in a comparatively basic and crude manner. But they manage to inspire the singers, leading them to joyous climaxes.

4 Wegner 2004

