

9 Musical Change

In trying to reconstruct the musical history of the Kathmandu Valley, scholars face the problem of limited written historical data. The National Archive keeps approximately one hundred twenty music manuscripts—among them the oldest existing manuscript of Bhārata's *nāṭyaśāstra*.¹ Among a few other South Asian music treatises, most of these manuscripts are songbooks. Other information can be extracted from the *vaṃśāvalī* chronicles of the kings of Nepal. They mention masked dances or musical instruments sponsored by a king or introduced under his reign. Other sources are stone inscriptions and deed documents kept by music groups, inscriptions on musical instruments and depictions of music performances in painting and carvings in stone, metal or wood. The information generated so far allows only for a broad outline of the historical development, leaving huge gaps.² This may become more precise as more scholars take interest and contribute their findings. Another source of information is a critical look at the repertoire. This allows us to identify stylistic changes and innovations that may have been caused by creative minds or by political, social, economic or technological developments. This publication identifies at least five different styles of Newar drumming repertoires of different castes that do not share any common patterns. This could suggest separate origins during different stages in history.

The study of musical change becomes even more important in our time of accelerating change. Alarm bells should sound when an entire musical tradition is on the verge of extinction. It shows that the foundations of a society are about to collapse. This is different from the continuous change of traditions that keep renewing themselves, gradually taking a new shape. That should be no reason for concern. Oral traditions were always enhanced by creative minds or suffered from memory lapses. They are living, not static. This should be kept in mind when using my notations of the Bhaktapur repertoire. These can be an effective teaching and learning aid. They should not be mistaken for an everlasting version. Whenever good ideas for improvement and addition arrive, they should be incorporated to keep the music alive. Notations can be rewritten.

Stabilising Factors

When we try to list stabilising factors that kept the Newar musical traditions going over the centuries, there was obviously the absolute monarchy that perceived change as a potential threat and

1 the original written approximately 1800 to 2000 years ago

2 cf. chapter 1.

guaranteed continuity. The Malla kings and a few members of the following Shah dynasty took personal interest and supported music groups with land deeds and—in some cases—personal participation. *Guthī* organisations for the maintenance of music groups have been in existence at least since the early seventh century.³ The value of these social organisations for the continuity of musical practice and maintenance of temples, musical instruments, songbooks, etc. cannot be overstated. The *guthī* system is largely responsible for the continuity of Newar music culture for over two centuries after the end of Malla rule in 1769. The foundation of *navadāphā* groups with their regular performance of drum compositions created a unique pool of reference for other groups that were always welcome to refresh their memory by way of communication with the leading *navabājā* drummers and singers.

Last not least, the essential Newar cultural values of participation and contribution kept the music alive. It was natural for a young farmer to learn music and dance and actively participate in the opulent town rituals. All these activities were established and channeled through the cult of Nāsaḥḍyaḥ, confirming the essential ritual function of music and dance as means of communication with the domain of the divine. *Dyaḥlhāygu* invocations are held sacred. This saved their essential patterns from change. For example, the *cicāhāḥgu dyaḥlhāygu* of *dhimaybājā* can be found in many *dhimay* repertoires across the Kathmandu Valley—even in such a remote place as Lele-Bārikhel.⁴ It must have served over a millennium as a proven method for actualising divine inspiration. But when an entire *pañcatāla* group needs to sight-read *tvāka dyaḥlhāygu* to perform it in public with difficulty, the end is near.⁵

Destabilising Factors

When we look at the dramatic changes that happened in Nepal during the recent past, we perceive an acceleration of the speed of change that goes along with the disappearance of many aspects of Newar music that I was still able to document in the 1980s. This applies also to other musical traditions of Nepal, of course. This publication makes it clear that the confiscation of Newar *guthī* land endowments during King Mahendra Shah's rule in 1963 has been a most destructive factor in the loss of musical heritage.

The other, equally destructive factor is the mindless suppression of lower caste musicians that is still common practice in Nepal. Only if society allows musicians to lead a decent life by teaching and performing, their conditions and status will improve. Musicians who depend on performing as a livelihood need to be paid an appropriate amount for their services just like any other profession. Their traditions will survive and add meaning, stability and beauty to peoples' lives and contribute to the wellbeing of the nation.

3 cf. Wegner with Sharma 1994 and 1995

4 cf. chapter 11.6 and Wegner/Sharma 1994 and 1995

5 cf. chapter 4.1

What We Could Do

When I realized what an enormous cultural loss this catastrophic change meant for the Nepalese nation, my focus changed from participant observation and documentation to what is now called applied ethnomusicology. It was my aim to train as many intelligent young people in Nepal to appreciate, safeguard and work creatively with their own musical traditions. With the support of Kathmandu University and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) it was possible in 1996 to found the Department of Music in the idyllic setting of the restored Dhaubhadel Śivālaya at the outskirts of Bhaktapur and employ as many local musicians and other academic teachers from Bhaktapur, Patan and Kathmandu as possible. Over the past decades, our staff members and graduates contributed not only to traditional music but their knowledge and training in traditional music affected their own creative output in the field of popular music.⁶

In our age traditional music performances in Bhaktapur have become few and irregular and are drowned by noisy vehicles. Now it is of vital importance to rely on written notation to preserve this unique repertoire for future generations of literate musicians and make the process of learning the repertoire much easier. Notations cannot replace the motivation that is generated by groups that include three generations of musicians united in the musical worship of the gods and by a regular performance schedule.

Occasionally, educated Nepalese concerned about the loss of their musical heritage asked me, what they could do to prevent further decline. The answers:

1. In developing the vital community spirit that supports a musical culture, it is important to offer your children (boys AND girls) exposure to music and town rituals (explain the meaning!) at an early age. This is more important than school homework.
2. The support of musical traditions should be given equal importance as restoration of heritage sites. Both, tangible AND intangible cultural heritage must be preserved, ideally in projects combining both, restoration of physical facilities and their meaningful use.
3. Invest in music education. Create scholarships. Organize performances and competitions. By offering special training and job opportunities, local musicians should be educated and encouraged to apply their knowledge and skills as music teachers in general school education.
4. Include the academic discipline of ethnomusicology in every university and apply the methods of ethnomusicology in systematic documentation and support of the living musical heritage.

6 Fabian Bakel's PhD thesis 'Ethnomusicology, Popular Music and Preservation of Traditional Music in Nepal'—to be published soon—highlights these developments

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5. Prevent suppression and exploitation of musicians. If you organize a paid performance, do not allow musicians to exploit each other. Pay everybody separately and in person.
6. Support music and dance groups as a participating sponsor—regardless of their members' political leaning.
7. Help preserving the skills of making good quality and authentic instruments and sponsor the learning of threatened instruments like *mvālī* shawms, *pvagā* and *kā* natural trumpets and drums.
8. Sponsor reconstruction and maintenance of *phalcā* shelters for music groups.
9. Create the political will to make the old towns permanently free of motorized traffic.
10. Lobby for a copyright law that ensures that performance, dissemination and reproduction rights belong to the performer, not to the producer.
11. By presenting informed and meaningful documentaries, television producers should accept the duty to educate, not merely entertain.
12. Music inspired by Nāsaḥḍyaḥ reveals that our true nature is cosmic creative energy, nothing less. This awareness wants to be nurtured and cultivated.