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FOLK MUSIC IN THE CASTE SYSTEM OF NEPAL

by Felix Hoerburger

TWELVE YEARS AGO during the IFMC conference at Copenhagen, Arnold Baké gave an excellent paper on Nepalese folk music, which unfortunately appeared in the *Journal* of the IFMC only as a short summary.¹ But even this brief summary shows the very complicated situation arising from the fact that in Nepal two communities, the Nevari and the Nepali, have lived together for two hundred years, each preserving more or less intact its own language and separate musical tradition as well as its own hierarchy of castes. These castes, because of their social separation, continue to keep pure their separate traditions. Hence, one cannot understand the different styles of Nepalese music in their cultural context without taking into account the caste system and its effect on the music.

Arnold Baké stressed quite correctly that there are, generally speaking, two characteristic musical styles in the Kathmandu Valley: that of professional bards and that of the so-called Guthi organizations, performed at innumerable Nevari feasts. These two entirely different but typical musical styles are heard all over the Nepal Valley and will in all probability yield but slightly and only gradually to intrusions from an increasing number of tourists.

The professional bards of the Gaine caste have been discussed by M. Helffer and A. W. MacDonal.² The Gaine is the only caste exclusively engaged in music, except for begging, which is combined with music-making. With their ubiquitous *sarangi* (from the Indian *sarinda*, not *sarangi*!), a kind of violin with four strings, these people wander

¹ Arnold Baké, "Nepalese Folk Music," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, X (1958), 50.

² M. Helffer and A. W. Macdonald, "Sur un Sârangi de Gâine," *Revue de Musée de l'Homme*, VI, no. 2 (Summer, 1966), 133ff.

throughout the valley and appear wherever there is hope of making money. In recent years they have begun to sell their fiddles to tourists, who buy them as souvenirs. It is true that this has somewhat altered the traditional meaning and purpose of music of the Gaine, whose original job it was to spread the news of the world. Alert at all times to the latest political events, they used their own medium as a kind of oral newspaper.

Another change that has taken place in recent times concerns the use of the old folk *rāgas* largely forgotten today. Nowadays, the repertoire of the Gaine songs comprises two quite distinct styles. Most of the younger people sing the Gaine *jhyaure* in a style that bears little relation to the old folk *rāgas*. It is probably influenced by the modern Indian entertainment music heard on the Nepalese radio. If one asks the younger Gaine musicians why they avoid the old folk *rāgas*, they give the plausible explanation that “people” no longer enjoy hearing them. I am sure that, speaking of “people,” they refer not only to tourists but also to the native audiences, who hire them regularly for festive occasions.

There are two other castes professionally engaged in music: the Nevari of the Kusle or Jogi, and the Nepali-speaking Damai. Unlike the Gaine caste, the members of Kusle and Damai have, besides their musicianship, a second profession as tailors. It is not quite clear whether they are tailors first and musicians second, or vice versa. But whether as tailors or musicians, these people, like the Gaine, rank very low in the caste hierarchy; they belong among the unclean.

This fact is not without interest for comparative ethnomusicology. In Nepal the Kusle and the Damai are the only musicians who play different kinds of oriental folk shawms. These shawms, wherever they occur, from northwest Africa to the Balkans and down to southern Asia, are always played by outcasts of one sort or another: in the Balkan states and in Turkey only by gypsies; in Arabic countries by Negroes; in Afghanistan by Jats (a kind of gypsy) or by the socially low members of the barber profession. Yet very important social tasks are associated with the playing of shawms. In Nepal they are considered indispensable at certain folk festivals, especially wedding ceremonies, and can only be played by members of the Damai or the Kusle. Some religious musical performances of the higher castes also call for shawms. But it is unthinkable for a member of a higher caste to play

this instrument himself. Hence, a shawm player from the Kusle caste is brought in, who, in this special case, plays with an instrumental ensemble for money.

The Kusle and Damai castes have certain characteristics in common. Both are tailors as well as musicians. Both have as a main musical instrument the oriental folk shawm, and both have the task of playing for the whole community during feasts of the year and for family occasions. But there is also an important difference between them. The so-called *narsinga*, a copper horn more than two meters in length, is characteristic of the music of the Damai caste. In Nepal it is curved like a half-circle, while in India it is called a *ranasringa* and has the shape of an S.³ Among the Damai it is used mostly in pairs. These horns give the music a marvelous sonorous background, while the music itself, with its folk *rāgas* and *tālas*, is played by the shawms together with drums and cymbals.

During the second half of the sixteenth century, the Mogul Emperor Akbar had a court orchestra whose description has come down to us. Although this orchestra was much bigger than the Damai band, the participating instruments very much resembled those we can still see played by the Damai. Thus, the old Indian court orchestra and that of the Damai might well be related. But the question whether the latter represents a stunted version of the former or the court orchestra was a sophisticated version of an old folk orchestra must remain open.

The Kusle orchestra of the Nevari caste has no horns. It is restricted to shawms, drums, and cymbals. Even so, the variety of their instruments, as among the Damai, is considerable. No less than five different kinds of shawms are used in various combinations. Among these are two kinds that are shaped like the European *cor anglais*.

Even after the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley by the Gurkhas, the Nevari formed the biggest and most important ethnic group of the population. It also remained a closed community with its own caste hierarchy, from Brahmins down to untouchables. These castes have preserved old Nevari customs in which music plays a most important part.

The role of music in the caste system of the Nevari is so complicated that it can scarcely be comprehended. From the great concern with details in these musical traditions we gain the impression that there

³ Curt Sachs, *Reallexikon der Musikinstrumente* (Hildesheim, 1964), p. 315.

must be a whole code of rules and prescriptions. Thus the question why just one particular drum, and not any other, belongs to a given feast seems ridiculous to people who simply can't conceive of an alternative. Yet this system has no written tradition, only an oral one.

In the body of Nevari musical traditions, the music of the Kusle represents only a single aspect. The Guthis, to whom the families of the castes send representatives, also have important social tasks. There is a Guthi, for example, who takes care of the entire funeral ceremony when a member of the caste dies. The musical Guthis provide music for every religious occasion. There are seasons when religious ceremonies take place daily in front of a temple, and Guthis make the appropriate music.

Some of the Guthis, especially those of the bigger castes, have groups called *ghalas*, equipped with different instruments. The Jyapu caste, for example, has a *dapa ghala* with vertical flutes (*bae*) and a group of singers to sing the proper hymns, a *bansuri ghala* with transverse flutes (*bansuri*) and a *dhime ghala* with a big drum (*dhime*) as the leading instrument. Each of these *ghalas* has its special function.

The middle Nevari castes have large musical Guthis. The most important is the Jyapu (peasant) caste, which has the most highly developed music of all Nevari castes. Besides drums and cymbals they play vertical and transverse flutes, while the lower Saimi caste has only vertical flutes (a kind of recorder). Other castes have no flutes at all.

One of the strangest phenomena in the music of the Nevari Guthi is the *ponga*, a short copper tuba limited to a single tone. The *ponga* tones, scarcely "music" in the proper sense, except in combination with *tāla* instruments (drums and cymbals), have a special place in religious feasts and processions, providing divine invocations.

Once again, I would propose a possible relationship with the court music of Emperor Akbar, also with the strange lamaistic temple orchestras of Tibet and their Nepalese parallels as, for example, the Lama orchestras of the Tamang communities in the Himalayas. Perhaps the *ponga* is a stunted form of the big tubas of the Tibetan orchestra, unless these long tubas are actually more highly developed variants of the *ponga*.

At any rate, the intention in either case is not to make "music" but rather to appeal to the deity. The "Dyo Lahegu," which is played with the *ponga* and percussion as an introduction to every musical perfor-

mance in honor of the god, can only be understood in the context of the crucial and intrinsic connections between music and religious function. When I was invited to a musical Guthi of the Jyapu caste for a recording session, the program began with the "Dyo Lahegu." After the playing and singing, rice brandy was served, but the first glass was not offered, as one might expect, to the guest but to the figure of Nasadeo (dancing Siva), the protecting god of the musical Guthi.

It is interesting to note that, on the one hand, special instruments of given castes are reserved for special feasts, and that these relationships cannot be changed at all, while, on the other hand, the boundaries between the castes seem to dissolve more or less. One can see this during one of those big feasts of holy masked dancers, mentioned by Arnold Baké, which I had an opportunity to observe. Here the main music was made by a Guthi of the Gubaju caste (one of the highest Nevari castes), together with some Jyapu people who played the *pongas*. Since the feast was an affair of the Nevari community as a whole, even the lowest Nevari castes participated actively; two men of the Pore caste performed a kind of parody comparable to those of European sword dances.

Finally, the making and repairing of musical instruments is also in the hands of special castes, high as well as low. For example, copper horns, bells, and cymbals are made by artisans of high castes. The drum-makers of the Kullu caste, on the other hand, belong to the untouchables, even though they have a close relationship to the musical Guthis of all the Nevari castes. Every year the Guthis pay them a certain sum of money in return for which they have to take care of the drums, repair them, or even make new ones.

The organization of music within the framework of the castes is, I believe, of general interest to musical folklore. Folk music always has a certain relationship to art music. And folk music is, in the highly developed cultures of this world, not only a possession of *one* social stratum but an aggregate of the musical expressions of different strata. This is why the study of social organization is so important in a society in which the strata are, because of the caste system, so strictly separated from one another. And it is due to these strata that socially conditioned musical characteristics can be discerned more easily here than in other high cultures.

Even so, some elements are shared by different castes, and the music

of one caste is influenced by the music of another, even by art music. Certain *rāgas* are common to different caste organizations because they belong to a special feast rather than a special caste. Generally, it can be said that *rāgas*, which are elements of art music, extend down to the lowest strata. The professional musicians of the Gaine, Kusle, and Damai like to refer to them, although it must be said that among the lower castes the idea of *rāga* becomes quite nebulous.

The observations made here will hopefully serve two purposes: make possible a better understanding of the music of Nepal, and point specifically to the importance of *folk* music in Asia, a domain that has often been neglected in favor of art music. May future study of this music in turn shed further light on the broader aspects of folk expression.