

The Gaines and the Sarangi: Traditions, digital media and the emerging cultural changes

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the emerging cultural changes brought by the 'Digital Technologies' on the ethnic music of the Gaines. The study explores the emerging changes digital technologies has brought into the everyday life of the Gaine. The study is ethnographic and descriptive. For the purpose of the study, in depth interviews of five Gaines (Sarangi musicians) were conducted. The interviews were conducted in Kathmandu, Nepal. Non-participant observation and diary-keeping methods are also applied. The study considers the Gaine as a subject of ethnomusicology. The Gaines and their traditional occupation represent the vanishing traditions. However, with the intervention of digital technologies and the coming of mass media the Gaines have gained the redemption of physical reality.

Keywords: Digital media, Gaine, sarangi, self-representation, tradition

INTRODUCTION

This study undertakes to explore the Gaines, the ethnic folk musicians of Nepal, known to travel to places in India like Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Sikkim and parts of Assam. The ethnic music of the Gaines traditionally served as a means of disseminating news, information and entertainment often leading to them being termed as the "singing newspapers". It is essential to understand the ethnomusicology of the Gaines with the intervention of digital technology and the proliferation of media, the traditional profession of the Gaines has become obsolete. These challenges find a suitable place in understanding the changing narratives and their everyday life practices where scholars like Kay Kaufman Shelemay from Harvard University, in the article, 'Towards an Ethnomusicology of the Early Music Movement: Thoughts on Bridging Disciplines and Musical Worlds', as it reads "Ethnomusicology has long occupied what might be termed as a liminal space among the disciplines. Triangulating between the arts, humanities, and the social sciences, ethnomusicology has long held the ambiguous middle ground between historical musicology and anthropology" (Shelemay, 2001). The study attempts to understand the relationship between the Gaines, sarangi and the digital media. The study considers certain objectives. In order to understand the traditional practices of the Gaines and the changes in the repertoire of the ethnic music of the Gaines with the intervention of digital media, specific questions arises with the progress of the study.

James (2010) in his study defined digital media as a form of media that can disseminate through the internet, information or digitized content in the form of text, audio, video or graphics. Till the 1980s people were primarily reliant on newspapers and the television for news, information and entertainment. With the emergence and popularity of digital media, people are now reliant on digital media, as it brings together on a single platform the ability to communicate through audio, video, images and text (James, 2010). Digital

media has made possible the convergence of media on a single platform, bringing about immense changes in how we communicate with each other, how we disseminate information and also changes in society.

In the day and age of digital media, folk media/ indigenous media has also been affected. Folk media originates from the beliefs, values, rituals and traditions of a community and can be in the form of dance, music, theatre, puppetry and many other forms. However, the folk media and their various forms are unable to compete with the technological advancements and immediacy offered by digital media. This has led to a decline in the rate of popularity and practice of the traditional folk media. Since people no longer rely on folk media for information and entertainment, folk media is slowly vanishing.

In his study, Hussain (2017), reveals that digital media can support the growth and preservation of folk media for a sustainable future, as it is a more comprehensive form of media and has extensive reach (Hussain, 2017). The widespread reach and diversity of digital media has transformed how people are exposed to folk media practices. The extensive reach and technological advancement of digital media has enabled folk media to reach the everyday life of people and has given a voice to the ordinary people to represent their culture. Digital media is an essential tool for the propagation and preservation of folk media practices due to its extensive reach and technological advancements.

The Gains, the travelling folk musicians of Nepal, are a form of the indigenous media of Nepal. They have been affected by the incursion of digital media. Their traditional occupation of spreading news and entertainment has been deemed obsolete by the digital media. On the other hand, digital media has also enabled the folk practices of the Gains to reach a wider audience. It has provided the community with a platform to represent the community and support their growth and propagation of their traditions.

The study observes the intervention of digital technology and the relationship between the Gaine and his sarangi, their engagement with the music and the way they narrate their stories, the effect of digital media on the traditional occupation of the Gaine community, its influence on the repertoire of Gaine songs and its contribution in the growth and development of the Gaine community.

The Gains of Nepal are the travelling folk musicians. They are known to travel to places in Nepal and various parts of India, like Darjeeling, Sikkim and Assam. They are the indigenous media of the Nepalese society belonging to the Gandharbha caste, the only caste in the Nepalese society, solely involved in music and music-making (MacDonald, 1975). Their traditional occupation is to travel to various places, from the mountainous terrains to the Terai, singing and spreading news and information.

The Gains, Sarangi, and Tradition:

The Gains are accompanied by the Sarangi, a four stringed musical instrument, which is played by bowing. The Gains and the sarangi are inextricably linked. The musical instrument is a symbol of the identity of the Gains. The skill of learning to play the sarangi is passed down through generations through oral transmission. The Gains usually learn to sing and play the sarangi from the male members of their family, especially their fathers. The Gains earlier learnt to play the sarangi by observing the elders in their family

and through practice. Nowadays the sarangi is taught through the notation system. The instrument itself has evolved over the years. For example, the strings of the instrument earlier made from dried goats' intestines (Dhakal, 2017) now are made of metal strings. The instrument has also undergone certain modifications to make it more suitable for stage performances.

The Gains sing of socio-political events, tales of heroic deeds of historical personalities and events and incidents they encounter during their travels. Hence they are often referred to as the "singing newspapers" (Moisala, 2013). The Gains were the travelling folk musicians who spread information and news to remote villages in exchange for food or money. This tradition was practised long before the Nepalese society had access to mass media. The Gains used to compose songs based on events and entertain and inform their audiences who waited anxiously for their visits, as they were the primary source of any information. Also known as the "oral newspapers" (Bech, 1975), the songs of the Gains have been passed down through generations orally and are also a rich source of the oral history of Nepal. The Gains are not just wandering minstrels "but communicators and reporters, keepers of the collective memory of our land. In the days before mass communication, their music was the medium for rural Nepal to learn of and remember battles, brave soldiers, natural disasters, joys and sorrows of everyday life" (Newar, 2004).

The traditional occupation of the Gains dates more than a hundred years, much before the emergence of media (Thapa, 2015). The Gains travelled on foot, through villages, narrating their mythological stories, events, incidents and commentaries on socio political events. Before the advent of media, they fulfilled the responsibility of traveling and disseminating information even to the remotest of villages in the mountainous terrains through their songs that narrated news from various places, heroic deeds, and the incidents that they encountered as they travelled, thereby acting as a messenger for the Nepalese society and enabling the communities to learn from one another (Cherry, 2018).

Gains, the travelling messengers of Nepalese society belong to the Gandharbha caste. According to the Muluki Ain of 1854, the Gaine/ Gandharbha caste is classified as belonging to the lowest of the hierarchy of the castes of Nepal. The Muluki Ain (The National Code of Nepal) of 1854 had classified the castes into a hierarchical system based on the occupations of the various castes. This was done to arrange and standardise the different ethnic groups and customs of the Nepalese society (Hofer, 2004). According to the Muluki Ain of 1854, the Gains have been identified as belonging to the lowest strata of castes in Nepal. This has brought about stigma and caste-based discrimination against the Gains. The caste based discriminations have also led to many of the Gains abandoning their traditional profession and hesitation in using the term "Gaine". They prefer to use the term Gandharbha as an indicator of their caste (Moisala, 2013). The term Gandharbha has its origins in Hindu religious texts as celestial beings engaged in music and dance.

The growth and development of mass media is also a significant factor contributing to the declining rate of Gains who are involved in their traditional profession Since the growing access and immediacy of

mass media has made the traditional function of the Gains as messengers obsolete (Hoerbuerger, 1970), their traditional profession no longer proves to be a viable source of income.

A significant factor contributing to the dwindling number of Gains engaged in their traditional profession, apart from caste based discriminations and marginalisation, was the growth and proliferation of mass media. The rapid growth of mass media diminished the traditional function of *Gains* as disseminators of news and information (Hoerbuerger, 1970). People no longer relied on the *Gains* for information, news, and entertainment. Print, electronic and digital media made news, information and entertainment more accessible and immediate (Shahu, 2013).

A Gaine's traditional live performance was no longer the primary source of entertainment for the people when they had easy access to television, radio, and compact discs. When a radio or television could reach even the remotest of villages in Nepal, people no longer relied on the Gains for news and entertainment. This led to many Gains finding and opting for other means of livelihood (Gurung, 2011). The Gains had to adapt to the changing conditions brought about by media to their traditional profession. Many of the Gains began to opt for alternate professions. In contrast, those who continued with their traditional profession began to migrate to cities like Kathmandu and Pokhara, where they performed in public transport vehicles and, or the streets of popular tourist hubs to earn a living. With the growth of tourism in Nepal, many Gains began selling sarangis to foreign tourists and also began performing in in restaurants and private events (Morimoto, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Siegfried Kracauer emphasized in his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, wherein he discussed the formative was to strive for the "artistic" to use the influence from the older arts, while the other tendency, the "realistic" was to take pride in the verisimilitude of cinematic reproduction and its ability to capture and preserve unadulterated actuality of events and views as experienced in the films is the pivot of my arguments.

METHODOLOGY

The research is an ethnographic study involving data collection techniques such as non-participant observation, diary keeping, interviews and listening. Semi structured interviews of five Gains were conducted. These Gains were either involved in the traditional profession, were sarangi makers and sellers or were Gains who had migrated to Kathmandu and were working as street performers and restaurant performers. The researchers conducted interviews of migrant Gains in a locality in Kathmandu, named Thamel, where many migrant Gains have settled and are involved in the profession of selling and making sarangis, or are street performers or restaurant performers.

The researchers also conducted interviews of Gains of Kathmandu who were involved in the traditional singing profession.

The researchers also conducted interviews with successful Gaine musicians who were a part of popular bands in Nepal and performed in Nepal and abroad. The following are the respondents of the interviews conducted:

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Respondent 1(R1) - Amrit Gandhari,

Respondent 2 (R2) - Anil Gandharba,

Respondent 3 (R3) - Prince Nepali,

Respondent 4 (R4) - Kiran Nepali,

Respondent 5 (R5) - Kedar Gandhari.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With the growing influence of songs heard over the radio and the television, the music tastes of the Nepalese society was slowly evolving. The Gains too, now began to play popular songs and tunes to entertain their audiences, which now comprised of the urban Nepalese and the tourists. The audiences of the Gains had now transitioned from the rural to the urban and the international tourists (Hoerburger, 1970). Traditional songs like the Karkhas, Mangal and Ghatana, no longer had an audience in the urban settings. Mass media began to influence the repertoire of the Gaine songs. The popular film songs heard over the radio or television began replacing the traditional songs of the Gains. The 1980s and 1990s ushered in the popularity of satellite television and private radio FM stations in Nepal. This resulted in the evolution of the repertoire of the songs of the Gains. Popular songs and western influence began to characterise the repertoire of their songs. The burgeoning growth of digital media brought in a new phase of changes to the Gaine community. Digital media with its access to the masses across borders, popularised the Gaine community and their performances to a broader audience. Broad exposure was provided by digital media to the Gaine community. This created an interest among the researchers, anthropologists and scholars from all over the world to conduct studies and learn about the community. With the help of digital media, a small community of folk musicians, was gaining interest and popularity amongst people from across the globe. Social media, like Facebook and YouTube, with its far reaching users, were enabling the Gaine community in gaining popularity. The availability of user generated content, made possible through the platform of digital media, was lending a voice to the Gaine community for self-representation of their culture and traditions. The Gains, the itinerant folk musicians of Nepal, were the messengers of the Nepalese community before the advent of mass media. The Gains travelled spreading news, information and entertainment, to various places. The traditional profession of the Gaine caste was to travel and sing songs based on socio political events, heroic deeds of historical personalities and incidents they encountered while travelling. Kiran Nepali, a renowned Nepali sarangi musician from the folk band Kutumba, mentions:

"The Gaine was the main source of entertainment, communication as well as the news because they would travel from place to place, storytelling through music."

-Kiran Nepali, 18th September, 2021, Zoom interview

With the emergence and growth of media, their traditional occupation has been deemed obsolete and an impracticable means of earning a livelihood. A small percentage of Gaine, mainly belonging to the older generation, are still engaged in the traditional profession of singing, travelling and earning a livelihood.

Mass media has also changed the repertoire of the Gaine songs as they transitioned from folk songs and their traditional performances to popular film songs to cater to their audiences and their evolving taste in music. Anil Gandharbha (musician and member of the Gandharbha Culture and Arts Organisation, Nepal), mentions in his own words that the repertoire of songs of the Gaine has changed:

"Our music has also changed. As a whole what we listen to and what the common Nepali audience listens to, what kind of music is liked by the people [has changed]. I feel the Gandharbha music to a certain extent might be influenced by that. We have strayed from the original [traditional] form of music, maybe because of [the changing] audience taste. But yes we have moved to a different track."

-Anil Gandharbha, 15th September, 2021, face to face interview.

With the displacement of the traditional profession of the Gaine by mass media the Gaine have begun to adapt to the changing environment. They have started opting for alternate professions or have migrated to the cities of Nepal to sing in public transport vehicles, restaurants, popular tourist hubs or private events. However, the growth of digital media has brought many changes to the Gaine community. Kedar Gandhari, belonging to the Gaine community, a social activist, and a music therapist by profession, says:

"The Gaine's profession has been displaced because of the media but we are trying to reinvent and compete with the modern media by reinventing our tradition and culture [with the help of] modern media."

-Kedar Gandhari, 22nd September, 2021, Face to Face interview

The vast exposure provided by digital media and the opportunity to represent their own culture and tradition enabled the Gaine community to engage with an audience across the globe, free from caste-based taboos and discriminations. The sarangi, which was regarded earlier as an instrument of the Gaine community, is now recognised globally. Prince Nepali, a renowned sarangi musician of Nepal, who belongs to the fourth generation of a sarangi musician family belonging to the Gandharbha community, believes that digital media has played an immense role in promoting the sarangi and its music, providing the sarangi musicians a platform to reach the global audience. He says:

"From earlier, only the Gaine community has been playing the sarangi, but today more people are propagating the music of the sarangi, and more people are learning and playing the sarangi."

-Prince Nepali, 20th September, 2021, Face to Face interview

Digital media has played a significant role in promoting the sarangi and enabling sarangi to break free from caste-based stigma. The sarangi sellers, earlier confined to the local markets and tourist hubs, are now reaching consumers worldwide and expanding their customer base. This has been made possible through social media platforms like Facebook. Making and selling of sarangis is proving to be a viable source of income. This has resulted in a spurt of growth of sarangi makers and sellers, who do not belong to the Gaine community. The sarangi, earlier considered as an instrument of a "subordinate caste", is no longer restrained by caste-based taboos. The sarangi sellers are uploading pictures and specifications of the sarangis on sale through social media like Facebook. The interested individuals then contact them through Facebook which may lead to the sale of the merchandise. In this manner, the sarangi sellers are expanding their customer base. Amrit Gandhari (Music Therapist, Sarangi shop owner and member of Gandharbha Culture and Arts Organisation, Nepal) mentions in his own words how social media has provided a platform for him to extend his sarangi business:

"I do not have a website but with my friends sharing my page on social media like YouTube and Facebook, I have received a number of orders for my sarangis, including from places like Japan and Europe. They send the money for the sarangi and I ship it from here."

-Amrit Gandhari, 13th September, 2021, face-to-face interview.

Social media platforms like Facebook are also utilised by the sarangi musicians to promote their performances, collaborations, workshops and events. Digital media has empowered the Gaine community with its user generated content. Social media like YouTube enables the members of the Gaine community to upload their performances, their traditional songs, and represent their customs and traditions. Many also upload tutorials on playing the sarangi, creating a global community of aspiring sarangi musicians through digital media. Digital media has equipped the Gaine community with the opportunity to self-represent their customs and traditions, music, and culture throughout the world. Amrit Gandhari, a sarangi musician, originally from Gorkha, is currently settled in Kathmandu, Nepal. Similar to other migrant Gains who recognised an economically viable opportunity in selling sarangis, Anil too began selling sarangis. He now owns a sarangi shop in Thamel, Kathmandu. It is also to be noted that he uploads online tutorials on playing the sarangi on YouTube, which is made possible by the proliferation of digital media. He is a music therapist by profession and also a member of Gandharba Culture and Arts Organisation. The Gandharba Culture and Arts Organisation, was established for the development of the Gandharbhas and the preservation of their cultural practices. Anil Gandharbha, began his journey as a street musician and performed for private events. He chose this profession over the traditional profession of travelling to villages, in order to earn a livelihood.

Anil Gandharbha is a sarangi musician from Tanahun district, Nepal. Born to a Gaine family, Anil has been playing the sarangi since he was nine years old. He has collaborated with various bands from Nepal and is also a member of the band Samundra. He is the secretary of the Gandharbha Culture and Arts Organization. During the study, the interview of Prince Nepali, a renowned sarangi musician of Nepal, was also undertaken. Prince Nepali, the son of Shyam Nepali (a renowned sarangi musician), is the fourth generation sarangi musician of an affluent family of sarangi musicians. He is from Kirtipur, Kathmandu, and has collaborated with numerous artists from across the globe. The study reveals that Kiran Nepali is a renowned third-generation Sarangi player in his family and is from Kathmandu, Nepal. A famous musician, he is the member of the folk band, Kutumba. He is also the founder of 'Project Sarangi'. Project Sarangi, is a foundation working for the promotion and preservation of Nepali folk music and Nepali folk musical instruments. During the study, the interview of Kedar Gandhari, a sarangi musician, from Tanahun district, was also undertaken. A music therapist by profession, he is also an active member of the Gandharba Culture and Arts Organization engaged in the upliftment of the Gaine/Gandharba community in Nepal.

Conclusion

The study explores and tries to understand the various dimensions of the effect digital media has had and continues to have on the Gaine community. Though the media has displaced the traditional profession of the Gains, as mediators and disseminators of news and information, it has also provided exposure to the community. This has led to an increase in the interest among researchers, scholars and people worldwide, to learn more about the community. Media has also influenced the repertoire of the songs of the Gains. The Gains, in order to cater to the tastes of the audience have begun performing popular film songs. Media has had an immense influence on the taste and preference of the Nepalese society. The consumption of the folk songs and performances of the Gains has also been changed by the digital media. Digital media has enabled the performances of the Gains to extend to the global level, no longer restricted by geographical boundaries. The reach of digital media has provided exposure to the community and their folk music which would not have been possible otherwise.

By connecting the Gaine entrepreneurs, sellers, and makers of sarangi across the globe, with the potential buyers, digital media has generated opportunities to the community members. What was earlier limited to the local market has now found a potential consumer base worldwide. Digital media enabled the sarangi entrepreneurs to reach a more comprehensive customer base. It also provided information and exposure to the community, across borders. It provided a platform to the community to represent their culture, music and traditions. Hence, empowering the Gaine community. Finally, media has given the community a voice, and an opportunity to self-represent their culture, traditions and music. The old generalization that indigenous folk media is passive in the face of "the overwhelming force of modernity" (Wilson & Stewart, 2008), is not applicable in the case of the Gaine community. Folk media has, with the support, of modern media found a means to grow and propagate themselves. It has enabled them to communicate their stories and propagate and preserve their culture, tradition and music. The intervention of

digital technology, has enabled the Gaine community to emerge beyond the Nepalese society and brought the 'redemption of physical reality' to the oblivion community, and their ethno musical songs.

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