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Introduction | Popular Music Across the Himalayas

Noé Dinnerstein
Andrew Alter

Himalayan societies have been commonly depicted as remote and non-technological cultures that preserve traditional life-styles, arts, and language. In reality, areas such as Nepal, Tibet, Uttarakhand, and Ladakh, connected as they are to influential political-economic entities like China and India, have become part of globalizing culture through increased infrastructure like transportation, technology, and mass media. This Special Issue explores the dynamics of popular music and music production from several Himalayan regions and attempts to understand the ways in which music economies, histories, identities and practices have been shaped by both regional and global forces. The initial idea for this collection emerged from a panel of papers presented at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology in Pittsburgh. Subsequently, further contributions were solicited to expand the scope of the issue and thereby provide a more comprehensive picture of the region's contemporary musical practices.

The contributors to this Special Issue examine manifestations of popular music in different places in the Himalayas, looking at regional particularities and identities, national and local markets, caste dynamics in the creation of traditions, and the rising problems surrounding new media and distribution. Among the issues discussed are the history of local music industries, the history of commodification and technology, the impact of national agendas and social structures on regional music practices, representations of

geomorphic spaces in sound, and the evolution of musical styles and instruments.

The physical geography of the mountain terrain has always created challenges for those who live there, as well as those who 'merely' wish to traverse them. Isolation from economic, political, cultural, and technological centers figure prominently in how people throughout the Himalayas negotiate their identity in the modern world. Many have been forced to migrate, either for political reasons, as with the Tibetan diaspora, or for economic and educational reasons, as is often the case in Ladakh, Nepal, and Uttarakhand. Nostalgia for a rural homeland is featured regularly in the textual and compositional content of the popular music of these regions, as well as in visual representations through album covers and videos.

Displacement, then, figures prominently in a number of the articles that comprise this Special Issue. As Stefan Fiol notes, "[i]n Garhwal, as in many parts of the Himalayan region, the institutions of migration and outmarriage shape the narratives that are most central to family and village life." Similarly, Noé Dinnerstein observes how Ladakhi music videos visually portray the rural mountain landscape, often flashing back and forth between that and urban settings where young people are forced to at least temporarily migrate. Themes of dislocation are reiterated in the repertoire examined by Andrew Alter, as well. In Garhwali cassettes, memories of mountains are

created within the studio environment using delay, decay, and reverb. At a more conceptual level, Fiol discusses how popular music consumption both makes and unmakes place, defining locations sonically, in situ and in memory. He notes further that “‘folk elements’ ... index a particular region or locality, making the songs uniquely authentic to cultural insiders.” Sonic references to place and space are also examined by Dinnerstein who notes how Ladakhi popular music has developed a semiotic lexicon that references the music of neighboring Himalayan areas. Instrumentation, melodic and rhythmic style, and studio techniques all evoke a sense for a Ladakhi locale.

The commercialization of music as well as the broader economies that influence networks of music performance, exchange, and distribution are critical for contemporary music industries. Himalayan music industries are influenced by global trends as much as by the political systems of countries in the region. Furthermore, the economies of Himalayan regions are not as prosperous as those in the plains—a function of scant resources, lower population, geographic isolation, and limited infrastructure. Consequently, it is always a struggle to make a living via music, be it performance and/or production. Rampant piracy and easy access to digital files have dramatically influenced musical distribution today. While enhancing some modes of music circulation, the digital revolution has had an impact on the commercial practices of professional musicians. Fiol gives us an enlightening view of the role mobile phones play in the marketing of songs, changing the way in which people share music, and giving women access to music, as well as allowing music to generally move freely. Neo-liberal markets have in part supplanted government patronage, as Anna Stirr discusses apropos of Nepali *lok pop* musicians, leaving them the difficult task of negotiating the new economic landscape.

Music and other allied performing arts are a common vehicle for the assertion of ethnic and linguistic identity. In addition, however, such assertions are influenced by broader agendas including those of the state and the literati class. This is particularly important in the face of active hegemonic forces in the areas of language and political self-determination. Thus, Anna Morcom “look[s] at the different ends of the spectrum of pop and *dunglen* and the degree to which articulation of ‘hard’ identity in Tibetan pop songs can be tolerated under government policy...” She further analyzes how, despite relentless Chinese suppression of Tibetan language and religion, state-based institutional systems for sound recording, radio, and public performance have served to enhance

particular forms of popular music. By contrast, Pande explores the histories of regional identity in Kumaon and identifies ways in which strategies for the creation of a local identity mirror India’s national imperatives. A regional popular ballad is ‘produced’ in various forms, illustrating the impulses of modernism that were prevalent during the freedom struggle and at the beginning of India’s independent era.

Undoubtedly, therefore, music and musical production provide avenues through which identities are created, presented, contested, and in some sense reified. Significantly, each of the articles in this Special Issue illustrates how these identities are located in a mountainous space—a space that holds special resonance for the musicians who make and listen to those sounds. Fiol notes how, “[f]or Garhwalis living inside and outside of the Himalayas, listening to vernacular popular music has been one way in which they imagine themselves to be part of a specific kind of place and a larger cultural region.” Alter suggests further, that the sound recording studio becomes a location in which the broader Himalayan landscape can be fictively created through special effects. Vasudha Pande describes the ballad of Malushahi and reveals characters who traverse the three levels of a Himalayan landscape comprising the highlands of Tibet, the mountains of Kumaon, and the rolling plains of the Terai. Legitimacy for the Kumaoni language is established through its codification in colonial times, and its subsequent adoption by an upper-class elite. In the present-day, however, both Uttarakhandis and Ladakhis are faced with an ocean of Hindi-language popular media that encroaches on language integrity. Mountain populations remain marginal to the mainstream because they are small in number. Regional musical expression frequently relies on unique linguistic expressions to emphasize a distinctiveness. This is most especially the case for Ladakhis, who only number a quarter million in total.

The effects of globalizing modernity have fostered the spread of Anglo-American music styles like rock, and the ubiquitous use of the guitar as a mode of expression for young people. A number of writers have observed processes of naturalization, whereby styles, instruments, motives and other musical elements are adopted from outside a region to become accepted as local practice. For instance, the article by Mason Gordon Brown and Samyog Regmi chronicles the history of the guitar in Nepal. Originally viewed as exotic and foreign, the instrument has now become an integral part of the modern urban music-landscape. Young people routinely learn from YouTube or from

schools that have been set up in Kathmandu. At the same time, guitarists integrate various Nepali rhythmic elements into their performances. In the case of Ladakhi pop styles, many songwriters reference what Dinnerstein terms a “Pan Himalayan” sensibility, employing semiotic elements from across the region in terms of rhythms, melodic style, instrumentation, and the depiction of sonic space.

Our papers here offer a snapshot in time in the exciting evolution of musical products and practices from a select group of locations in the Himalayas. They demonstrate the critical role of music in the creation of regional identities, and illustrate how local decisions are impacted by broader economic networks and practices. They reveal how the ideologies and institutions of nation states interact, influence, and support musical practice in dynamic ways. They confirm how contemporary practices emerge from intertwined histories of tradition, folklore and nationalism. In short, popular music across the Himalayas is a dynamic aural space, constantly adapting to its diverse regional, national, and global contexts.