

THE PANCAI BAJA: REFLECTIONS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN TRADITIONAL NEPALESE MUSIC

CAROL TINGEY

*Music Centre,
School of Oriental
and African Studies
University of London*

When Nepal opened her borders in 1950, 'modern time marched in, accompanied by radio and cinemas' (Bake 1959:316), and a tide of cultural change began. Such changes do not take place in a vacuum. They can only be fully understood in the light of their cultural context. Here, the pañcai bājā - the ubiquitous wedding band of Nepal - will be presented as a traditional institution in the throes of cultural change. The points raised reflect wider issues of change in an attempt to provide some sort of cultural backdrop against which recent political events may be viewed.

The *pañcai bājā*, a mixed ensemble of wind instruments, drums, and cymbals is a common feature of village life throughout much of Nepal. The ensemble is found, with regional variation, across the country from east to west, and from the Terai in the south to the mid-altitude dwellers of the Himalayan foothills, wherever Indo-Nepalese castes have settled. Only amongst the high-altitude dwellers, such as the Sherpas and Tibetan peoples of the northern border, is the ensemble not in use.

Pañcai bājā is played exclusively by a caste of professional musicians - the *damāi* - whose name is taken from the large kettledrum which characterizes the band, the *damāhā*. Their supplementary caste occupation is tailoring. As one of the Indo-Nepalese artisan castes, the *damāi* have an extremely depressed social status, being the outcastes of society, from whom food and water may not be accepted, and contact with whom demands ritual

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purification. Despite their untouchability, the *damāi* are thought to be auspicious (*saguni*), and as both tailors and musicians, they provide indispensable ritual services.

The uses of the *pañcai bājā* are diverse. It is a fundamental requirement for all Hindu rites of passage such as weddings and the sacred thread investiture ceremony for young high-caste boys. It plays for the calendrical cycle of festivals and leads processions of all sorts, and serves a very great percentage of the population. Although a large proportion of its repertoire is purely secular entertainment music (e.g. folk-song tunes, film music), the contexts in which the *pañai bājā* plays are always sacred or semi-sacred in character, and the ensemble is fulfilling a ritual duty.

The question of the function of the ensemble is a complex one. Certainly, in all contexts it appears to have an auspicious role, but it also acts as a signaller (e.g. to announce the departure of the bride), and as a status symbol - a family's economic standing may be determined by the number of musicians playing for their son's wedding.

Traditionally, the repertoire included a whole range of context-specific items, related to particular seasons, times of the day, or ritual activities (Tingey 1990b: 120-238). Many of these were in a rhapsodic improvisatory style in which only the structural outline was predetermined, leaving the musician free to develop and embellish the material. However, most of these items are no longer played.

New Musical Influences

With the advent of Radio Nepal in 1950, a new genre of music was introduced to the people that fused Nepali folk-song idioms with Hindi film music elements to produce a type of Nepali national light music which Anderson and Mitchell describe as 'sufficiently distinctive to serve unequivocally as a symbol of national identity' (1978: 252). The popularity of *adhunik gīt* (modern songs) and radio *lok gīt* ('folk'-songs) is probably due to their simple 'folky' melodies which are accompanied typically by a mixed ensemble of Nepali and Western instruments. The subject matter of *adhunik gīt* and radio *lok gīt* is generally love and other human emotions, and patriotism.¹

Radio Nepal is the most powerful medium of communication in Nepal, broadcasting for about twelve hours each day and reaching at least 55% of the population, including people in remote villages that may be a week's walk from the nearest town, or may be cut

¹ See Grandin for a discussion of the texts of modern songs (1989: 125-9).

off for several months of the winter.² The Sāha government capitalized on this to promote national integration and allegiance, presenting in Nepali and, according to the Government statistics for 1986, devoting 63.9% of music broadcasting to Nepalese music, of which only 0.8% was devoted to songs in minority languages. Indian (mostly film) music accounted for another 34% (Grandin 1989: 132).³ New government broadcasting policy may be more liberal with regard to the music of minority groups. In addition, cassette tapes of Nepali light music are available in bajārs across the country, reflecting the spread of the cassette player, and Grandin estimates that as many as 20,000 copies (including pirate copies) of popular tapes are distributed (Grandin 1989: 137). Patrons like to hear modern songs at their weddings, and a pañcai bājā must be able to reproduce these in order to remain popular. It is hardly surprising that adhunik gīt have been absorbed into the pañcai bājā repertoire.

As with the advent of radio, the cinema was a post-Rānā introduction to Nepal, but it met with such an enthusiastic response that just six years after the collapse of the Rānā regime, there were no fewer than eleven cinemas in Kathmandu, and Hindi film musica in was inaugurated (see Grandin 1989: 113), the films based on Indian models, with an ample sprinkling of musical numbers. Outside the Valley, cinema itself has not had a direct impact until very recently, with the introduction of the video, but the music of the film industry is carried to people across the country via Radio Nepal. When people of the hills have to go to the Kathmandu Valley or to the Terai, they often treat themselves to a trip to one of the cinemas whilst they are there, and in many places entrepreneurs are presenting hired videos in their homes, using generator power, to eager audiences. With the spread of electricity, this type of presentation could become an increasing trend, and the mass culture of the film industry and its music will reach further into the hills. Already, in 1986-88 one of the most popular items in pañcai bājā repertoires across the country was the title song of the Nepali film *Kusume rumāl*.

A third source of new musical material for pañcai bājās is the army, for which *damāi* are the traditional bandsmen. When *damāi* army band recruits return home they take with them their experience of formal military musical training, and new items inevitably make their appearance in pañcai bājā repertoires. These are known popularly as *paltan nayā bākya*, or 'new army (platoon) tunes', and they exhibit a typically military-style rhythmic accompaniment. *Paltan nayā bākya*,³ once incorporated, tend to become primary processional music of the pañcai bājā.

² Recent statistics for radio broadcasting and consumption, and the impact of cinema and the other media in Nepal are provided by Gradin (189: 114; 136ff).

³ Statistics for 1986 from a Nepal Government source.

The 'modernization' of the repertoire may be seen as a combination of conscious and unconscious process on the part of the musicians. For younger musicians, the process is a conscious one - they can win popularity among their peers by demonstrating an ability to play the latest film hits and *adhunik gīt* (modern songs) imitated from Radio Nepal broadcasts. As there is no prestige value attached to knowledge of traditional items of repertoire, there is no incentive to learn them. There is not such a clear-cut distinction to be made with regard to older musicians who know (at least some of) the traditional repertoire. Musicians rely on their memories to recall their store of melodies, and they improvise a medley of tunes as items come to mind. Far from being consciously suppressed, it seems more likely that sporadically played traditional items are recalled less readily, as they are crushed out from minds saturated with the latest Radio Nepal numbers.

An unequivocally conscious modernizing process is the adoption of Western band instruments. This desire for a 'modern' ensemble is not a recent one, as its precursor was the Westernization of the Nepalese army band by Bhimsen Thāpā more than a century ago (Boonzayer: unpubl.).

Bands of Western instruments (*ben bājā*, 'band ensemble') were in use in Kathmandu for wedding processions before 1950, but it appears to have been the prerogative of the Rānās, Sāhas and military dignitaries (Grandin 1989: 107). However, by the mid-1950s, the *ben bājā* was firmly established in the Valley. During wedding seasons, throughout the Kathmandu Valley varied combinations of clarinets, trumpets, cornets, horns, trombones, euphoniums, snare and bass drums, cymbals and maraccas, played by uniformed bandmen constitute the marriage bands. This type of band corresponds exactly in instrumentation, performance style, presentation and function with the *āgrezī bāid* ('English band') favoured in Uttar Pradesh (Henry 1973: 213-19) and found across India. According to Grandin, *ben bājā* made their appearance in Kirtipur about thirty to forty years ago, and gradually supplanted the traditional band. The last wedding to employ the old style (Newār) *pañcai bājā* took place twenty years ago (Grandin 1989: 109).

The bulk of *ben bājā* repertoire seems to be Nepali and Hindi film hits, and *adhunik gīt* from Radio Nepal, but some Newār songs and *maṅgal dhun* (auspicious tunes for weddings) have been retained.

The *byend* ('band') or *sarkārko bājā* (government ensemble) was carried to garrison towns all over Nepal during the Rānā period, but in the hills communities have been slower in adopting the new-style band. It has not superseded the *pañcai bājā* as it has in the Kathmandu Valley, and it is used mostly as a supplement to, rather than a replacement of, the *pañcai bājā*, as the ultimate ostentation. Availability and purchase cost of band instruments are significant factors retarding the adoption of the *byend* by rural *damāi*, and

their repair involves not only expense, but a trip to the Kathmandu Valley to a specialist repair shop.

It seems that the byend does not pose an immediate threat to the continued existence of the pañcai bājā. However, as an official ensemble and the superlative of wedding musics, with all its cosmopolitan associations, its desirability may well be in excess of its availability.

The Impact of the Economy

New musical influences are not the only contributors to changes in the pañcai bājā tradition. Economic factors too, are affecting the tradition.

Invariably, socially depressed groups in Nepal have limited access to land, so that ritual low status and poverty have always been closely related (see Seddon 1979: 77). In Gorkha, damāi land-holdings are minimal. None of the damāi households have irrigated land (*khet*) for growing rice, and most do not have dry fields (*bāri*) apart from the small plots immediately surrounding their homes.

Most damāi rely on the traditional patronage system – *bā ghar bista* – for their livelihoods. They work for a number of patrons, making and mending clothes, sometimes engaging in fieldwork, and providing pañcai bājā music at any life cycle rites and pūjās celebrated by the patron's household. In return, they receive payment in crops after each harvest. A survey carried out in Gorkha in 1987 (Tingey 1990b: 250-1) showed that the foodstuffs paid to damāi were seldom sufficient to meet a family's needs, and supplementary cash incomes had become essential.

Furthermore, some of the younger generation of Gorkha damāi expressed dissatisfaction with the traditional system of patronage, thinking it antiquated and insufficient. They are in need of cash with which to purchase all the accoutrements of modern life: radios, stereo cassette players, watches and other consumer goods. Ideally, families would like to have at least one son in the army or police band, or employed by Gorkha Darbār or another temple to play ritual music. The main source of cash income for those working within the traditional system in playing for weddings, when they may expect to receive a fee of Rs. 50/- to 100/-, but for young damāi, there are insufficient opportunities and money for them to realize their desires. They are abandoning the patronage system to tailor from small workshops in the bajārs, attached to Newāar cloth merchants, who pass them trade in return for a levy.

There is an increasing trend for sons to migrate, at least temporarily, to the big towns of the Terai and Kathmandu Valley, lured by the promise of better rates for their works. When working away from their village environments, these young men usually give up playing music and concentrate exclusively on tailoring to reproduce the latest Western fashions. In the Terai towns to the south of Gorkha (eg. Nārāyānghāt and Hetauda), there is a notable dearth of able musicians. Thus, a groom coming from Nārāyānghāt to marry in Gorkha, and wanting a traditional pañcai bājā for his wedding procession, had to rely on a band from the bride's locality, which travelled 10 km by coach to meet the groom's party and accompany it back to the bride's house.

Thus, the monetization of Nepalese village economy is having a significant impact on the functioning of the pañcai bājā. Young damāi desire cash, and are prepared to move (at least temporarily) to urban centres where they have greater earning power as tailors. Playing music is not as lucrative as the business of tailoring Western-style shirts, suits and children's clothes, and if a young damāi can earn a satisfactory income from sewing, he may feel disinclined to expend effort in providing music for wedding processions for comparatively small returns.⁴

Status Awareness

All economic strength of the damāi and kusle has always been that they alone could provide the auspicious music essential for certain rituals. Today, this exclusivity seems threatened. Grandin reports that in the Valley town of Kirtipur, the provision of marriage procession music by new-style bands utilizing Western band instruments (*ben bājā*) is no longer the exclusive domain of the damāi or kusle tailor-musicians, but has been taken up as a lucrative occupation by mid-caste Newārs. *Jyāpus* (farmers) comprise three of the town's bands, the members of two of which were trained by a resident damāi musician, who has also instructed Newārs from surrounding villages in the technique of playing *ben bājā*. One of these groups was established about thirteen years ago and is run as a co-operative business (Grandin 1989: 108-11). Similarly, in the Newār settlements of Panauti and Pyangau, members of the *nāy* (butcher) and *jyāpu* castes have taken up the profession of playing *ben bājā* (Toffin 1984: 410; 136). This implies that the caste restrictions and social stigma associated with playing pañcai bājā do not necessarily apply to the playing of Western instruments. In Kirtipur an interesting social situation has developed as most of the traditional musicians have given up their caste profession by *achieved* musicians.

⁴ Similarly, Grandin found that 'performing music is not profitable for the kusle of Kirtipur' (1989: 109)

Tewari report that in Uttar Pradesh, Western-style bands are run as commercial enterprises new line – begin quote often under the direction of an upper caste manager who arranges everything including fees, transportation, uniforms and wages for the musicians. The musicians are usually... the former village folk musicians. They are pleased with the status which comes in playing in such a band (Tewari 1974: 19).

These musicians have exchanged their patron-client relationships for an arrangement in which they are the employees of a business concern. In this way, they have lost their autonomy, but apparently have gained prestige from participating in a modern-style band.

In the Nepalese hills, village *damāi* seem to be less concerned with their social standing than are their urbanized counterparts. In Urban settings, access to education and a heightened status consciousness amongst young *damāi* influence the attitudes towards music making, and some *damāi* choose to avoid the social stigma associated with the playing of the *pañcai bājā* instruments. Conversely, others may win popularity with their peers by demonstrating an ability to play the latest film hits. In a limited way, as far as caste restriction allows, education opens doors to other means of livelihood. If a sufficient number of young, 'urbanized' *damāi* return to their rural families with a new social awareness, they could well militate against their traditional tailor-musician role, or at least, attempt a restructuring of the economic organization of the *pañcai bājā* along commercial lines.

For the higher caste patrons of the band, a primary function of the *pañcai bājā* appears to be to act as a status symbol, the social and economic standing of the patrons being reflected not by the quality of musicianship of a celebrated player or by the appeal or propitiousness of the repertoire, but by the size and type of the bands that play at their sons' weddings. Tewari mentions that in Uttar Pradesh this has become so important that the type of band that will play at the wedding is one of the points for discussion during marriage negotiations (1974: 19).

Status symbols are temporary reflections of current fashions. Once popularized, they cease to function as status symbols, and some novel replacement succeeds. Hence, modernism is demanded of the *pañcai bājā* in the form of the latest radio hit and Western-style band instruments. In a society in which traditional values are changing, an ensemble like the *pañcai bājā* faces tough competition. The Ratna Recording Company in Kathmandu has produced a cassette of traditional *pañcai bājā* music which they claim to have 'issued as a low-cost alternative to hiring a live orchestra' (Grandin 1989: 135).⁵ One

5 Ratna cassettes R.C. 45 *Vivaha dhun*

might have expected this not to have been a commercial success, bearing in mind the prestige value of a live pañcai bājā. However, Nepalis are renowned for their love of consumer goods.⁶ The portable stereo cassette player has replaced the wrist watch as a major status symbol, so that patrons may not actually 'lose face' by having a cassette tape instead of a band. The cassette does not appear to have replaced the wedding band, but certainly, it is in use in other processions such as those of pañca bali and phūlko doli offerings.

Conclusion

From the material presented here, it seems that the pañcai bājā is undergoing a dramatic transformation. But is this really the case, or does the tradition have the capacity to accommodate the musical and economic changes without undermining the essential nature of the music?

The successful transmission of a musical culture is dependent on three principle determinants:

1. The nature of the music.
2. The expectations (musical and social) of the musicians who are the culture-bearers of the musical tradition.
3. The functional significance of the music – as understood by the musicians and by the society they serve.

An analysis of the data under these three headings may clarify the situation.

1. The Nature of the Music

Regarding the nature of the sound of pañcai bājā, two complementary trends can be identified – the absorption of new material and the simplification and popularization of the repertoire. When filmī and adhunik gīt are assimilated by the pañcai bājā they become indistinguishable in style from other items of the popular repertoire – their melodies are simply used as the bases of new pieces played in the traditional way. Quite apart from its popularity as a film hit, the song *Kusume rumāl* has probably retained its central place in the pañcai bājā repertoire because its melodic structure lies easily under the fingers of sahanai players. Items taken from the army – the *paltan nayā bākyas* – are more obtrusive

⁶ Newārs joke that whilst they spend all their money on feasting, the Nepalis spend all their on material things.

additions to the repertoire, as they retain something of their military flavour, especially in their rhythmic accompaniments.

The assimilation of new, popular material seems to be going hand-in-hand with a simplification of the repertoire. The rhapsodic improvisatory style that is characteristic of the traditional repertoire is infrequently heard from contemporary sahanai players. Today, the emphasis is on short, catchy melodies that are strung together in endless series of repetitions, their rhythms coinciding with and reinforcing the rhythmic pulse, rather than evading it or pulling against it as in the melismatic improvisatory style. This implies a standardization or popularization of the musical language. Nettle believes that such processes are typical of musics that have become receptive to new cultural inputs, for 'standardization and simplification may release energy... (that can be spent on the absorption of new musical ideas)' (1978: 131). Increasingly, music of the popular repertoire is played in place of older, context-related items, and many of these traditional pieces have not entered the repertoires of the younger generation of damāi. 'Modern' radio and film songs have become more popular with both patrons and musicians than the traditional 'home-spun' pañcai bājā repertoire.

2. Expectations of Musicians

The parochial outlook of rural damāi has been considerably widened by their changing work patterns involving tailoring in the cities, and by the radio which brings Kathmandu culture to village environments. Younger musicians seem to be receptive to 'modern' ideas, both musical and socio-economic. With the monetization of the economy, commercialism is beginning to play a role in the organization of village music.

Together with the other occupational castes, the damāi represent the bottom of both the economic and the social scales. In their myths of origin, they acknowledge material rewards as compensation for their low social standing, but today, the remuneration is no longer commensurate. Unless the monetary returns are increased and/or their social status is enhanced, with the alleviation of some of the stigma associated with their caste profession, young damāi may choose not to become active musicians.

3. The Functional Significance of the Music

Essentially, the pañcai bājā is a processional band that provides auspicious music during ritual journeys. Pañcai bājā processions have several functions – they link together, through music, areas of ritual significance; they facilitate the auspicious passage of humans

and deities from one ritual space to another; they symbolize the transition from one human stage of life to the next. Journeys, whether physical or symbolic, can be dangerous undertakings. The pañcai bājā provides an auspicious environment in which ritual subjects may move with confidence.

In the hills of Central Nepal, the pañcai bājā still plays in the established contexts, and functions in the traditional way, despite the modernization and popularization of the repertoire. If the auspicious basis of the pañcai bājā has not been undermined by the loss of much of the traditional context-related repertoire, the question arises of whether new musical items, such as filmī and adhunik gīt, once incorporated into the pañcai bājā repertoire, are invested with an auspicious quality, simply due to their performance context and/or the auspicious musical genre.

The symbolic statements made by pañcai bājā music have not changed for the public at large, because people's musical perception is minimal. Patrons were found to have scant knowledge of the band and were ignorant of the existence of an auspicious context-related repertoire. They do not share the musicians' knowledge of particular items being appropriate to certain situations or times, and they do not distinguish between pieces, unless they recognize a popular number from the radio or cinema. Thus for patrons, merely the *sound* of the pañcai bājā fulfils the auspicious requirement.

Whilst bygone generations of musicians had the specialist knowledge that designated items of repertoire were particularly auspicious if played in certain contexts, only a fraction of this expertise has been passed on to the young musicians of today. For young damāi, as for their patrons, all pañcai bājā music is auspicious. The decline in value for musicians of this specialist knowledge is, perhaps, the most significant catalyst in the modernization of the pañcai bājā repertoire.

Henry found that in Uttar Pradesh, despite the complete transformation of the traditional wedding band into the āgrezī bāid, it was still regarded as *mangala* (1973: 214). So far, musical change in the pañcai bājā tradition seems to equate with other types of cultural innovation – eg. it has become customary for the groom to sport sunglasses and a new pair of 'Warrior' training shoes, and in Terai and Valley towns a car has replaced the traditional litter. These are superficial innovations which have by no means impinged upon the ethos of the wedding. The whole style and repertoire of the Central Nepalese pañcai bājā is changing, due to the broader horizons of Nepalese village experience, but innovations are being accommodated within a continuing tradition, the essential nature of which remains unaffected.

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