

Anna Marie Stirr. 2017. *Singing Across Divides: Music and Intimate Politics in Nepal*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dohori. Though not mentioned in the title, this genre of dialogic singing is what Anna Marie Stirr writes about in this new book, from the first page to the last. As we learn from the book, *dohori* is the art of singing and improvising couplets in an ongoing dialogue between two parties—a woman and a man, or groups of women and men. *Dohori* songs are competitive, romantic, teasing, flirtatious, sometimes comic, and sometimes very serious, they include repeated refrains, draw upon stock couplets and can incorporate proverbs—quite possibly all of this within one song. They are most typically sung to short melodies in the major pentatonic scale and propelled by *mādal* drums in the 6-beat *jhyāure* or 4-beat *khyāli* meters. As the title of the book suggests, *dohori* is sung across divides, “at the intersection of social differences” (p. 7). This is to say that unlike the other forms of traditional Nepali music that has captured foreign scholars’ attention—from A.A. Baké in the 1950s and Felix Hoerburger in the 1960s to the more recent works by scholars such as Pirkko Moisala (Gurung music), Carol Tingey (Damai music), Hans Weisethaunet (Gaine music), and Gert Wegner, Richard Widdess and others (Newar music)—*dohori* is not the musical property of any particular caste or ethnic group. In an important sense, as a traditional music it belongs to

everybody in its heartland, the central-western hills of Nepal—*Janajātis* such as Magars and Gurungs as well as Bahuns and Chhetris. *Dohori* is sung across divides also in another sense—by virtue of being at once a traditional, rural genre and a vibrant, commercial urban music (performed live in restaurants and recorded on albums) *dohori* ties together the village and the city. Nurtured by the flow of village-to-Kathmandu migration during the civil war, (commercial) *dohori* was seen as a passing fad in 2006 when Stirr embarked on her research. As is evidently clear from her work, this was not so. The *dohori* industry is still strong, and whole-village, all-ages *dohori* “songfests” have again become “extremely common in many places throughout the central-western hills” (p. 70).

Stirr employs the seven chapters of her book to present and analyze this genre and to tease out what it can tell us about Nepal’s multitude of *jātis* and *Janajātis*, about the corresponding multitude of values, about social norms, honor and danger, about Nepali politics, about ruralization as an important facet of present-day modernity, and ultimately about ways of creating belonging and togetherness that rely on shared experiences of *sukha* and *duḥkha*, happiness and sorrow.

There is no doubt that this book will contribute to important discussions within the general scholarly fields of anthropology and ethnomusicology. In this review, however, the book will be read and discussed as first and foremost as a study of Nepali society, and more specifically as a contribution to the study of Nepali music.

The book is based on research from 2005 to 2015, with principal fieldwork from 2006 to 2008. As Stirr acknowledges, she was helped not only by her research assistants but perhaps most importantly by her friends from the *dohori* field where she was an active participant herself as a *dohori* singer. Fieldwork sites included rural settings in Lamjung, Kaski, Tanahun, Syangja and Palpa as well as urban ones in Butwal, Pokhara and, most importantly, the greater Kathmandu area. The research covered, as Stirr puts it, “the entire scope of noncommercial and commercial interactions involving *dohori*” or the *dohori ksetra* (*dohori* field) for short (p. 9). It is difficult to say what prior understanding of Nepali music, and of Nepal in general that you will need in order to make the most of the book. An ability to read music (in Western notation) will help the reader, but I wouldn’t think it necessary.

The book is particularly strong in its analytic ethnographic descriptions of *dohori* singing and of the couplets and music that make up *dohori* songs.

Just like in Qureshi's (1986) landmark study of interaction and affect in South Asian *qawwālī* performance, Stirr analyzes *dohori* as an unfolding, situated, interactive performance. I also come to think of McLeod's and Herndon's (1980) study of Maltese *Spirtu pront* (improvised song duels). Indeed all these scholars, Stirr included, draw upon Richard Bauman and his "ethnography of performance" approach.

Extended such analyses make up most of Chapter Two and Chapter Seven, but they appear also in most other chapters. In fact the Introduction opens in this way, with a short ethnographic vignette from *dohori* as sung during millet-planting in Bandipur. In other places we are given a short but very evocative description of the musical multitude at a Maghe Sakranti *melā* (pp. 89–90), of *dohori* at a village celebration (Chapter Two), of *dohori* in the restaurant setting (pp. 132–137), of a national *dohori* competition (pp. 149–157), of another *dohori* competition, now however within a political context otherwise rather alien to *dohori* (pp. 181–187), of *dohori* among professional performers in the aftermath of a three-day festival (pp. 209–233), and—beautifully completing the circle—of village *dohori* at the occasion of a professional performer's first return to her *māita*, natal home (pp. 235–240).

This ethnography forms the backbone of the book. But before the ethnographic story really starts, and after the Introduction, Chapter One presents *dohori*'s elevation from one musical tradition out of many into something of an icon of Nepal's national essence. Much of this chapter relies on previous studies, but the section on how and why national competitions came to be a new feature in the *dohori* field presents highly interesting original research. This elevation was part of Pancayat-era nation-building—*dohori*'s regional identity tallied well with the conception of the rural central-western hills as the Nepali heartland, and of the village as the nation's cultural heart. As Stirr shows, Radio Nepal was instrumental in singling out "the central-western hill sound" (p. 34) for national (folk song) prominence. She specifically cites "the curatorial roles" (p. 34) of Kumar Basnet and Dharma Raj Thapa in this process. That Thapa, as a part of these curatorial efforts, also recruited Jhalakman Gandharva to Radio Nepal could have been cited by Stirr to give even more weight to her analysis. With Jhalakman, who is from the same village as Thapa, the Gaine caste and the *sāraṅgi* were promoted as iconically Nepali on both the airwaves and in recorded media.

The brevity of a general introduction such as that in Chapter One means that some nuances might be lost. One such nuance is that though *ādhunīk*

gīt may “rely on tonal harmonies or harmonic motions” (p. 32) it is not universally so. Also in *ādhunik* harmonies can be ornamental rather than being foundational to the melodic lines. To give just a few cases, such songs as *Sabaile bhanthe* (Aruna Lama, music Amber Gurung), *Māncheko māyā* (Narayan Gopal and Gyanu Rana, music Shiva Shankar), the film-song *Kalakala Salasala* (Aruna Lama and Prasad Shrestha, music Gopal Yonjan) or Amber Gurung’s raga Bihag-based *Ākhāle ke ke malāi* do not rely on harmonic motions in their melodies, though chords are often present and though chord-based interludes may be included.

On a more general level, the book tends to make Panchayat Nepal musically more monolithic and state-controlled than it really was. Progressive artists not only sang overtly political songs (kept out of official media) but indeed made up an alternative scene with its own forms of music distribution centered on live performances, formal and less formal, and complemented with (under-the-shelf) cassettes and booklets. And consequently, in spite of the growing recording industry I’m not so sure that there was really “increasing musical plurality” (p. 47) in the 1990s. The musical diversity one encountered in Kathmandu in the 1980s—under Panchayat rule—was really stunning.

In the following chapters, the book details how *dohori* is performed, who participate in the performances, and when is it performed. In rural settings—at festivals, at nighttime songfest gatherings, during agricultural labor—there are many ways of participating. The singers repeat well known lyrical couplets and improvise new ones; others join in on the refrain or on repeated couplets; still others play the *mādal*, dance, claps and hoots, or just sit and listen.

Restaurant performances aim for the atmosphere of a village festival. In contrast to village performances, there are professionals for the musical accompaniment on a variety of traditional and modern instruments, and also the singers are professionals, skilled in interacting with the guests who may dance, request songs and take part in the singing themselves. Both performers and fans of city *dohori* are drawn especially from the rural migrants—again, the same *jātis* and *janajātis* as in the *dohori* heartland in central-western hills.

An important aspect of the book is the way it brings out how *dohori* is implicated in social fabrics, the roles and functions if you wish of this genre. Stirr’s analyses show how *dohori* is a medium for developing relationships all the way to being a form of courtship, how *dohori* fosters affections and

engenders intimacies on a larger scale by the camaraderie and warmth of singing and participating together, and how *dohori* is embedded in and contributes to various material exchanges between parties. Situated as it is at “the intersection of social differences,” the female-male interactions and exchanges in *dohori* present dangers to participants’ honor and challenge them to maintain that honor. The theme of honor and danger is indeed a major theme of the book. Such dangers include that the mere presence at a *dohori* event is seen as potentially leading to relations also across social boundaries. As Stirr notes, following Seira Tamang, “being in public can be all it takes for a woman’s honor to be brought into question” (p. 163). A restaurant female singer has to cope with demands from the audience for frivolous songs, and to sing couplets in flirtatious exchanges with male customers. For a man, being a professional in *dohori* risks being considered as following a low-caste occupation. In its ethnographic analyses, the book shows how people work, in various ways, to divert these challenges.

We shouldn’t forget the music – the melodies of the songs, the metric (the 6-beat and 4-beat *jhyāure* and *khyāli* meters) and rhythmic properties of both melodies and accompaniment that propels *dohori*. Beside the major pentatonic scale mentioned above Stirr also refers to the *kāṭhe gīt* style of the hills around the Kathmandu Valley. These songs typically use a full seven-note scale with a flat seventh (*komal ni*) [p. 131, figure 4.5]. But they may also use (in Western terms) a Major scale and now it is the natural, not flat, seventh—characteristically employed in phrases “ending with a minor tone up to the tonic” (p. 198, see also figure 6.3)—that makes the melody easily recognized as that of a *kāṭhe gīt*.

Recorded *dohori* combines sounds that evoke the urban (synths, violins, santoor) with instruments that sound rural (*mādal*, *sāraṅgī*, *bāsuri*). A further index of rurality can be “a real village voice” (p. 113) such as that of Bima Kumari Dura—her voice has a “rich, dark timbre” and she is able to effortlessly employ “melismatic ornaments” on “drawn-out vowels” (p. 116). The latter is known as *svar ghumāune*, “turning the voice around” and “embodies a rustic ideal” in contrast to singers that do not employ such melismas (p. 116). An alternative view is that melismatic singing is not rural only, but essentially Nepali—as Amber Gurung once said to me, to “us” (Nepalis) there will be no musical *mīṭhās* (sweetness) without “*ghumāune*.” Indeed, comparing Dura’s singing (in the song the book refers to) to that of Aruna Lama in *Sabaile bhanthe* and *Kalakala salasala* (which are *ādhunīk*

and film songs, not folk songs) they both use melismas in much the same way. To my ears, the difference is rather that Dura's voice is more strident, more like open-air (unamplified) singing whereas Aruna Lama has a much more intimate and soft voice.

In competition *dohori*, “lyrics always take precedence” over the music (p. 146). No competitor should “lose points just because of the tune” (p. 150). Is it perhaps high-caste values that shine through here? As the book points out several times, music as a profession has distinct low-caste connotations. Lyrics and the mastery of language, on the other hand, has always been a part of the Brahman scholarly and priestly traditions.

It is easy to imagine what outcome a scholar of popular music and modernity such as Regev (2013) would have predicted from the influx of people and money into the rapidly growing metropolitan center of Kathmandu during the early 2000s: more modernity, more internationalization, more “international” music genres such as pop-rock-hiphop. A similar popular conception is that modernity implies a linear development from the rural to the urban. This book eloquently shows us that none of this is the case. Instead we find a ruralization of the urban and intensified village—city two-way, circular traffic. The “village is,” Stirr concludes, “a node in a network of mobility and musical circulation” (p. 118). There is ruralization in music videos, recordings and performances which stage and “sound” village Nepal. There are indexes of the rural in lyrics, in musical sounds, in costume, and in stage performance interactions. *Dohori* restaurants stage the village in an urban scene, attempting to combine the atmosphere of a rural festival with urban sophistication. As Stirr argues, ruralization is not just nostalgia but means also that rural “regimes of value [are] becoming increasingly relevant in urban areas” (p. 140).

Stirr suggests that *dohori* presents us with a way out of identity politics traps. Instead of prescribing “one-to-one correspondences between music and identity” (p. 245), *dohori* opens up for other forms of belonging—“across divides,” as it were. In this sense, “May I elope” might signify not just the name of a popular (and controversial) *dohori* song (p. 158) but perhaps also a dream—also among high-caste people themselves—of escaping dominant high-caste and male-inflected norms and honor, and to be able to embrace an idea of sociality and human relations that draws more on female and (idealized, to be sure) *Janajāti* perspectives. At least this is how I interpret

how—in the very last paragraph (pp. 247–248)—the author concludes this well-researched, important and highly readable book.

References

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