

Class Love and the Unfinished Transformation of Social Hierarchy in Nepali Communist Songs

ANNA STIRR

*Garibko chorāle garibbātai cokho prem pāñcha
 Du:khīko chorāle du:khībātai cokho prem pāñcha
 Eutai vargakā hau hāmi bhani garine prem vyavahārma sā?cho huncha
 Vargiya samājmā vargiya prem mātrai nyāno ra cokho huncha.*

The son of the poor finds true love from the poor
 The son of those who suffer finds true love from those who suffer
 The love that says ‘We are of the same class’ is real in practice
 In class society, only class love is warm and true.¹

WITH THESE WORDS, the Nepali poet, lyricist, and singer Manjul (b. 1947) argues that class love is the type of love that should be valued above all others; indeed, that it is the only true love in a class society. Communist movements have often aimed to replace celebration of romantic love, in its various cultural forms, with celebration of love for the collective.² In Nepal, where communist groups have been a significant force in politics since the 1940s, the majority

¹ Manjul, quoted in Netra Etam, “‘Manjulkā gītharu’mā jīvanko laya”, in *Manjulkā gītharu* (Kathmandu: Dovan Prakashan, 2008), x–xi. All translations from Nepali are my own.

² In his letter to Inessa Armand regarding her writings on sex and romantic love, Lenin writes, ‘what matters is the objective logic of class relations in affairs of love’ (Lenin, letter dated 17 January 1915 to Inessa Armand, *Collected Works*, vol. 34). Examples of shifts in folksong lyrics from a focus on romantic love to an emphasis on love for the collective abound; for example, see C. Fred Blake, ‘Love Songs and the Great Leap: The Role of a Youth Culture in the Revolutionary Phase of China’s Political Development’, *American Ethnologist*, 6/1 (1979), 41–54; Donna Buchanan, *Performing Democracy: Bulgarian Music and Musicians in Transition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 32, 136, 233; Anne de Sales, ‘Remarks on Revolutionary Songs and Iconography’, *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*, 24 (2003), 4–28; Jonathan

of communist artists are quite clear on this point: they sing political songs, not love songs. They sing songs that express the *du:kha* or hardships of the people and glorify revolution, not songs that lead people to forget their troubles with thoughts of the pleasures of romantic love. But class love – *vargiya prem* – appears even in the songs of those artists who argue for the strongest separation of love and politics.

While class solidarity is fundamental to Marxist thought and thus appears in relation to discussions of love in Marxist literature of all eras, the first instance of the term ‘class love’ appears to be Mao’s, in his 1942 Yan’an talks on literature and art.³ Responding, Mao tells us, to comrades who mistakenly think that love should be the fundamental point of departure in artistic production, he defines class love as love grounded in the material reality of the class struggle, the opposite of a bourgeois conception of love in the abstract.⁴ Arguing that there can be no such transcendent love until classes are eliminated, he states that:

Love as an idea is a product of objective practice. Fundamentally, we do not start from ideas but from objective practice. Our writers and artists who come from the ranks of the intellectuals love the proletariat because society has made them feel that they and the proletariat share a common fate.⁵

Class love thus refers to a love based on social solidarity, which in turn stems from the base of common experience. The empirical problem, then, is establishing who exactly counts as members of the valued class. For communist artists in Nepal, defining their role as mediating between intellectual and proletarian aspects of the revolution,⁶ and themselves constantly shifting between the two poles of this dialectic, the question becomes: to whom should their art be addressed? How should they conceive of the groups with whom they should aim to form relations of class love, and how should they imagine and portray this affective aspect of solidarity? In other words: what kind of public is the proletariat?

Artists of all political affiliations in Nepal often talk about ‘the public’, using the English word, to refer sometimes to ‘the people’ (*janata*), sometimes to a

Ritter, ‘Siren Songs: Ritual and Revolution in the Peruvian Andes’, *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 11/1 (2002), 9–42: 30.

³ Mao Tse-tung, ‘Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art’ (1942), in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 69–97.

⁴ Tse-tung, ‘Yenan talks’, 74, 91.

⁵ Tse-tung, ‘Yenan talks’, 91.

⁶ Monica Mottin, ‘Catchy Melodies and Clenched Fists: Performance as Politics in Maoist Cultural Programs’, in *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Revolution in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Mahendra Lawoti and Anup Pahari (New York: Routledge, 2010), 52–72.

more specific imagined audience for their art and political messages, or, often, to both. Their use of the term in a sometimes universal, sometimes specific sense coincides with the assertion of many theorists in recent years that there are many publics, not just one (Habermasian) public sphere.⁷ Most of this scholarship has tended to focus on texts and print and broadcast media, in the vein of Anderson's earlier work on imagined communities.⁸ If we follow definitions of publics as groups whose solidarity is facilitated by mediated texts, the idea of a class as a public might seem at odds with Marxist categories, suggesting that class emerges out of the cultural superstructure rather than out of relations of production. But communist artists whose goal is consciousness-raising and awakening the people regard part of their reason for existence as being to mediate communist ideas, and specifically to help people to recognize themselves as members of a proletarian class. This process of mediation is a way of expressing the reality of their own and their audiences' experience.

Recognizing this continuity between practices of signification and lived experience, recent studies of publics have emphasized performance and practices of listening along with media and texts, bringing embodied, sensory experience to the fore in ethnographic work. These and other related studies also trace the processes by which experiences of solidarity, such as listening to recordings of a well-known Muslim orator, sharing the pleasures of music labelled low-class or kitsch, or participating in the conversations of coffeehouse society in eighteenth-century Britain, become discursive signifiers – shorthand for particular kinds of sociality – and are then re-signified as social conditions change.⁹ This chapter proceeds in the same vein. Giving attention to two established artists and their work in two different time periods and communist movements, I examine how the idea of class love becomes a way to link the ideological and abstract with lived experience, framing various forms of solidarity in terms of class.

⁷ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

⁹ See for example: Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Martin Stokes, *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); and, in history, Ann C. Dean, *The Talk of the Town: Figurative Publics in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Bucknell Studies in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2007).

The two artists are Manjul, member of a 1970s progressive artistic movement called Ralfa, and formerly associated with the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist), and Khusiram Pakhrin, the leader of Sāmana (Resistance) Cultural Family since the mid-1980s and Maoist MP in the 2008–12 Constituent Assembly. I contend that their ideas of class love, and of the publics they aim to address, rely on common lyrical and musical tropes of kinship, region, and nation, with complex relationships to the aspects of social hierarchy that communism aims to transform.

Politics, music, love, and difference in Nepal

The twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen great political changes in Nepal. Nepal's Communist Party was founded in 1949, in a time of growing protest against the autocratic rule of the Rana family. A revolution in 1950, led by democratic groups with the support of Nepal's king Tribhuvan and the Indian government, overthrew the Rana regime and ushered in a decade of parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy. After the death of Tribhuvan, his son Mahendra became king and from 1960 reversed the liberal reforms, establishing an absolute monarchy with a unique form of 'one-party democracy' known as the Panchayat system, against which democratic and communist opposition movements remained active. The Panchayat era lasted until another revolution in 1990 that restored Nepal to constitutional monarchy. A subsequent movement in 2006, after ten years of the Maoist people's war, ended in the Maoists joining parliament and the abolition of the monarchy in 2008.

The Panchayat era was significant in the development of musical styles that came to be recognized as national, both by virtue of being broadcast by the state, and by their use in political parties' cultural programmes. During this era, the state-run national radio and national recording company gave priority to two musical genres as a means to unite the nation. These were the cosmopolitan-oriented *ādhunik gīt* or modern song, and the rural-oriented *lok gīt* or folk song. *Ādhunik* drew from Hindustani light classical genres, Western popular song, and Nepali folk music, with an emphasis on literary lyrics. *Lok gīt* drew from Nepal's many folk musical genres, emphasizing the song styles and instruments of the central-western hills, with lyrics highlighting rural ways of speaking. While there were well-known exponents of both genres who were not employed in state institutions, the sponsorship of the state went a long way towards creating associations between these genres and the dominant version of national identity.

In mainstream *lok* and *ādhunik gīt*, romantic love, constructed as wholly apolitical, is a primary topic. During the Panchayat period, 'political' lyrics

expressing opposition to the dominant social order or supporting anything that might be construed as party politics were banned from the radio and from all state-sponsored events. Thus love and politics were constructed as existing in opposition to each other. These views remain common today: the National Folk and Duet Song Academy Nepal forbids political songs at its events, while many political parties discourage or even forbid love songs at theirs.¹⁰

The songs of oppositional political movements during the Panchayat era, both communist and democratic, were known as *pragatisil git*, or progressive song.¹¹ Musically, these songs are pretty much the same as mainstream *lok* and *ādhunik git*. The lyrics of progressive songs differ, however, in that they take a social realist perspective, emphasizing the hardships of ordinary people and pointing out injustices in political and social systems, and they are decidedly not about romantic love. While in China there are examples of local love songs being modified so that communist ideology becomes a desirable quality in a mate,¹² I am not aware of this strategy having been used in Nepal. Rather, as in Peru, songs in Nepali communist contexts took ‘a 180-degree turn’ from themes of love towards political messages.¹³ Unlike in Peru, themes of daily life remained common in Nepali communist songs. Where the lyrics of progressive and mainstream songs from the Panchayat era converge is in their imagery of nature – poetic images evocative of everyday rural life and its combinations of beauty and hardship. This is combined, in both types of songs, with a large amount of nationalist sentiment. As Grandin writes,

In [Panchayat-era] progressive rhetorics as a whole, stock-in-trade leftist notions of a generalized proletariat and internationalist solidarity are replaced by descriptions and metaphors firmly rooted in Nepalese nature and culture, and an overtly patriotic devotion to the motherland.¹⁴

¹⁰ Prajapati Parajuli, *Vedana ra marma* (Kathmandu: Kapila Publications, 2006), 6; Anna Stirr, ‘Singing Dialogic Space into Being: Communist Language and Democratic Hopes at a Radio Nepal Dohori Competition’, *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, 15/2 (2010), 297–330.

¹¹ For more on Nepali progressive song, see the following by Ingemar Grandin: ‘To Change the Face of This Country: Nepali Progressive Songs under Panchayat Democracy’, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 29/1 (1996), 175–89; ‘Local Cultural Activism and the Production of Public Meaning’, paper presented at the conference *The Creation of Public Meaning in Nepal’s Democratic Transition*, Kathmandu, Nepal, 3 September 2011; *Music and Media in Local Life: Music Practice in a Newar Neighborhood* (Lingköping, Sweden: Lingköping University Press, 1989); ‘Music under Development: Children’s Songs, Artists, and the (Panchayat) State’, *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, 10/2 (2005), 255–93.

¹² Blake, ‘Love Songs and the Great Leap’.

¹³ Ritter, ‘Siren Songs’, 30.

¹⁴ Grandin, ‘To Change the Face of This Country’, 8.

The nationalist sentiment in Panchayat-era progressive songs coincides with that expressed in mainstream songs, such that these songs, taken together, appear to be part of the same project of nation-building, albeit from different political perspectives. Progressive and mainstream songs from this period also share an avoidance of issues of ethnicity and caste, glossing over these differences in favour of references to national unity. Again, Grandin notes:

The progressive songs categorize the people of Nepal as farmers, workers, landlords and so on, but never in ethnic terms as for instance Rais, Gurungs or Chetris. This ethnical silence underlines the progressive agreement with panchayat objectives also in another sense: in the creation and support of the Nepali 'national culture'.¹⁵

Definitions of national culture have however been increasingly contested since 1990, and as Grandin puts it, those who created progressive songs have had to 'face their own rhetoric'. One of the results of this is that the emphasis in songs has changed along with changes in political emphasis, meaning that caste, ethnicity, and regional diversity are now given prominent attention in cultural performances across the political spectrum. This new emphasis on diversity leaves some nostalgic for the previous emphasis on national unity or international proletarian solidarity. But what I aim to show here is that what is happening, in progressive and communist song as well as in Nepal as a whole, is not just a shift from universalism to particularism and a fragmented understanding of society, but an attempt to acknowledge and to represent the complex interrelations between aspects of social difference and various forms of oppression.

Manjul and Ralfa in the 1960s and 1970s

In the late 1960s, a group of artists inspired by Marxist, anarchist, and existentialist thought formed in the Nepalese capital Kathmandu. They called themselves Ralfa,¹⁶ and among them were writers and musicians, including their most famous member, the writer Parijat.¹⁷ Ralfa was not affiliated with any political party, but members of Ralfa later joined various communist parties, and communist artists today see Ralfa as the beginning of a lineage of

¹⁵ Grandin, 'To Change the Face of This Country', 9.

¹⁶ At Manjul's request I spell Ralfa with an 'f' rather than the conventional transliteration with 'ph'.

¹⁷ Michael Hutt, *Himalayan Voices: An Introduction to Modern Nepali Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

communist cultural groups, known as ‘cultural families’ (*samskr̥tik parivār*).¹⁸ Manjul, the author of the lyrics that began this chapter, is a well-known poet, lyricist, and singer of progressive song, and was a part of Ralfa in his youth.

Manjul comes from a Brahmin family in Bhojpur in Nepal’s eastern hills, and was educated in a village school in Bhojpur, a college in the regional centre of Dharan, and a university in Kathmandu. He is best known as a poet, but during his Ralfa years he was known as a singer and guitarist as well. In the early 1970s Ralfa split up, with members affiliating with two different communist parties whose differences stemmed both from internal disagreements and from the Sino-Soviet split. There were further artistic disagreements among the former Ralfa members and other communist artists throughout the 1980s. In the last thirty years, after becoming disillusioned with the communist parties and the politics among artists, Manjul has moved away from the political stances of his youth. He now separates art from politics and firmly believes, contra Mao, that love for humanity *should* be the fundamental basis for the creation of art. However, he has continued to maintain a complex relationship with communist thought, combining an orthodox Marxist understanding of class society with an outspoken stance against violence in all forms, and an aesthete’s appreciation for beauty in the everyday.

Between 1968 and 1973, with their songs banned from state media, Manjul and his fellow Ralfa musician Ramesh Shrestha went on journeys through their home region of Nepal’s eastern hills, on a mission of raising consciousness among the villagers. Putting aside the ‘experimental’ idiom that had characterized their earlier songs, with lyrics that used highly literary language and extended metaphors that others had denounced as incomprehensible, they adopted a new style fitting the broad parameters of social realism. These ‘new’ songs, drawing on folk melodies, beats, and poetic forms, mixed with modern instrumentation and song forms, and, using vernacular language, aimed to ground communist thought in familiar expressive forms and thus awaken villagers to their shared membership in a proletarian class. They often used eastern Nepali folk melodies that Manjul and Ramesh learned in their childhoods in this area, and in their wanderings as consciousness-raising artists. An example of a song they collected and helped to make famous is ‘Chamelī’:¹⁹

¹⁸ Khusiram Pakhrin, ‘Rājnaik, ārthik, ra samskr̥tik kshetramā krānti nayā janabādi krānti ho’, *Dalit Aawaj*, March–April 2010 (Baisakh 2067 V.S.), 12.

¹⁹ ‘Chamelī’ means ‘jasmine’, and here it is a girl’s name.

*Rāto bhāle dhurimā karāyo, karāyo
 Garibko Chamelī nisāphai harāyo.
 Dhanilātī chadaicha cain cain
 Gariblātī Chamelī lāgdaina ain.*

Red rooster on the roof-tree crowed, crowed
 For the poor, Chameli, justice is lost.
 The rich have whatever they want
 The poor, Chameli, have no law on their side.²⁰

They learned this song from a young girl in Okhaldhunga district, and added new lyrics in their performances. The first line about the red rooster is typical of first lines of many Nepalese folksong couplets, which contain images not necessarily directly related to the rest of the lyrics, leaving the listener to draw connections. As these images most often depict aspects of rural life, they continued to give political songs a rural and localized flavour even when the political message was very generalized. Musical style also localized political songs. Ralfa's frequent use of eastern Nepali melodies highlighted the importance of sonic signifiers of place in establishing connections between artists and their audience. As sons of the east, singing in the east, they aimed to establish a bond with audiences based on shared local sounds, even with their new and exciting foreign instrument – the guitar.

Writing about Manjul's songs, Netra Etam highlights how Manjul emphasizes class love over other forms of social solidarity:

In Manjul's songs caste, language, religion, gender, or region-based themes are not found; instead, they sing the glory of social relationships based on ideological and economic class. These songs show that because there are two social classes, the exploiters and the exploited, even if they may be united on another basis, exploitation continues to exist between them. Thus, as long as class society persists, other forms of love are untrustworthy.²¹

A passage from Manjul's memoir *The Footsteps of Memory: Memoirs of a Musical Journey* illustrates more about how Manjul understood class love at this time:

the people of Sanghutar arranged a huge program in a newly built, open room. There was a gigantic crowd, all packed into the room . . . we sang the folk songs made by the people, and the songs we had made in the interests of the people. We saw the faces in our audiences shine brightly as they listened. Seeing how

²⁰ Manjul, *Samjhanakā pailāharu: gīti yātrako saṁsmaran* (Kathmandu: Ananda, 1988), 16.

²¹ Etam, “Manjulkā gītharu” mā jīvanko laya’, x.

the hearts of these workers and labourers in our audiences swelled with pride as they listened to songs in their own interest, songs that respected them, our hearts, too, would swell almost to bursting. Perhaps this is what is meant by class love, by class solidarity. Thinking about this my heart still lifts with happiness.²²

Here Manjul equates class love with class solidarity, and finds it in the connection between performer and audience, as he and Ramesh sang songs they had written 'on the side of the people' to an audience of those they imagined to truly be 'the people', in this case, people among whom Ramesh grew up and worked as a young teacher. As educated people who lived in the city, they were divided from the villagers with little education and experience of travel, but they were united by their regional backgrounds, the class from which they originated, and the heightened sociability they created through performance. Manjul highly valued this connection, and remarked upon it throughout his narrative. According to *The Footsteps of Memory*, it was always music or poetry that mediated this connection; and it was always those with money and positions of authority who expressed dislike for the songs, stood apart from the crowd, or ordered Manjul and Ramesh to cease their incendiary performances and leave the villages.

Love in its non-sexual and non-individualistic forms remains a theme throughout *The Footsteps of Memory* and in his work up to the present day, as represented in *Manjul's Songs*, the 2008 anthology of poems/song lyrics from the earliest days of Ralfa through to the present. Kinship remains the dominant metaphor of deep connection, yet friendship is also valued. Terms like *sneha* (affection) and *dayā* (compassion) appear frequently along with words describing hardships, sorrows, troubles, and the poignant combination of destitution and back-breaking work while surrounded by breathtaking natural beauty. This highlighting of natural beauty as an affecting presence and a uniting force links these songs to the mainstream *lok* and *ādhunik* songs, in which nature often stands for nation.²³

Though his certainty that class is the most fundamental social division comes through strongly in his work, Manjul also wrote songs about the need for caste and gender equality, and there is plenty about cross-caste and cross-ethnic friendship in *The Footsteps of Memory*. But themes of ethnic or linguistic inequality do not appear in his work, from his early songs through to his more recent poems and writings. This is perhaps due to the times in which he came of age as an artist, when caste, ethnicity, and other forms of identity

²² Manjul, *Samjhanakā pailāharu*, 21–22.

²³ Grandin, 'To Change the Face of This Country'.

politics were actively suppressed in favour of national unity in the mainstream political sphere, and placed as subordinate to class issues within communist and communist-influenced movements. This would change after the 1990 revolution, as identity politics came to dominate national political discourse, and some of the communist parties dissatisfied with the outcome regrouped as the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and, in 1996, started a people's war that would last until 2006.

Khusiram Pakhrin and the Maoist Party in the 1990s and 2000s

Khusiram Pakhrin (b. 1952) comes from the Tamang *janajāti* ethnic group, which has endured a long history of oppression and, historically, enslavement.²⁴ His home is in Gorkha in the western hills but he was raised in Kathmandu, and came to politics as a student in the 1980 movement for parliamentary democracy, joining the Communist Party of Nepal (Fourth Convention) as an artist. He stuck with the Maoist-oriented factions led by Nirmal Lama throughout the many party splits in the 1980s and 1990s, leading what would become the central cultural group of the current United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist); he lived in the Maoist base areas and saw combat during the People's War, and his own son was killed in battle. He served as an MP in the Constituent Assembly from 2008 to 2012.

While Pakhrin generally attributes all of his musical inspiration to the Nepali people, he acknowledges Ralpa as a source of inspiration and as an important predecessor of all Nepali communist cultural groups.²⁵ While Manjul is best known for his lyrics, Pakhrin is best known for his music, and is respected as a composer and arranger beyond communist circles. His many compositions mix *lok* and *ādhunik gīt* styles.²⁶ In his writings and in my discussions with him, he supports the Maoist concept of dialectical interdependence between art and politics, or as he puts it in an orthodox Marxist way, superstructure and base.²⁷ In songs, he says, the lyrics provide the base on which a musical superstructure

²⁴ David Holmberg, *Order in Paradox: Myth, Ritual, and Exchange among Nepal's Tamang* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Mukta S. Tamang, 'Tamang Activism, History, and Territorial Consciousness', in *Ethnic Activism and Civil Society in South Asia*, ed. David Gellner (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009), 161–96.

²⁵ Pakhrin, 'Rājnaitik, ārthik', 12.

²⁶ For an in-depth analysis of his opera, *Returning from the Battlefield*, see Anna Stirr, 'Tears for the Revolution: Nepali Musical Nationalism, Emotion, and the Maoist Movement', in *Revolution in Nepal*, ed. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁷ Interview with Khusiram Pakhrin, 8 May 2010.

is then erected. Many of his songs share the same themes as those of Manjul and Ramesh; in his songs from the 1980s published in the anthology *The Melody of Tears*,²⁸ and in more recent works, class love, friendship, and commitment to the revolution through devotion to one's own class are common themes.

Maoist literary critic Chaitanya, writing about *The Melody of Tears*, picks out two songs as especially expressive of class love:

'Recognized from Afar' and 'While Marigold Flowers Bloomed' are especially poignant songs, set during the festival of Tihar. In 'Recognized from Afar', the unhappy experience of meeting Nepali migrants in India at the rail station and remembering their home in the hills is expressed. Remembering the village shining with marigolds, the madal drum playing *jhyāure* beats, the swings constructed for the festival, *deusi* and *bhailo* songs, sisters coming home with flower garlands, they become troubled. The artist feels love for the migrant workers. This feeling of love becomes a class love. This love awakens hatred for those who compel them to leave their country for a foreign land.²⁹

Regarding the second song, Chaitanya discusses how the grief of its protagonist inspires a similar grief and hatred for the oppressors in the hearts of readers and listeners as well, illustrating how songs contribute to the growth of class love along with its opposite, hatred for the oppressors. The emotions of love and hatred thus become a primary means of social classification in this revolutionary worldview. Class consciousness here stems from raw emotion in the face of both exploitation, and, as Grandin has also noted, the details of the local that are just as often associated with *national* consciousness.³⁰ It is tempting to assert that for communist artists, class love replaces national sentiment. But, it is more likely that the two become closely intertwined, as recognized tropes of belonging take on additional meanings. The main difference between this revolutionary perspective and the nationalism promoted by the Panchayat state is that while the Panchayat-era emphasis on unity in diversity preached an inclusive holism that ignored existing hegemonies, class love as a basis for group unity is exclusive to the oppressed class, and oriented towards destroying those hegemonies. There are those who deserve love and those who deserve hatred, and it is the pain upon recognition of injustice that brings one to draw the lines between the two. As in earlier progressive songs and mainstream *lok* and *ādhunik gīt*, but even more so here, nationhood becomes a felt

²⁸ Khusiram Pakhrin, *āsuko bhākā* (Narayangadh: Chintan Prakashan, 1987 (Magh, 2043 V.S.)).

²⁹ Chaitanya, “‘āsuko bhākā’ bhitra sāhaska jhilkaharu”, in *Marxvādi kalādristi ra samikshā* (Kathmandu, 2009), 168.

³⁰ Grandin, ‘To Change the Face of This Country’, 8.

sense of belonging to a place, and the oppressed Nepali people become those who truly deserve to belong.

Pakhrin discussed his understanding of class love with me in more detail, explaining that to perform dances and dramas and sing songs ‘on the side of the people’, was itself an act of class love. Class love was the love that developed ‘for one’s own class, exploited, oppressed, labouring’. But, people born into other classes could experience this kind of love – the determining factor was shared ideological commitment to ending oppression, rather than the class one was born into. To him, class love was prior to all other forms of love, marital, familial, or among friends.³¹

In spite of this assertion of the priority of socio-economic class, Pakhrin’s Tamang ethnicity is clearly important to him. At the time of my interview in August 2011, his living room was adorned with images of Tamang ethnic solidarity, including a Buddhist thangka painting,³² and a poster from Nepal’s celebration of World Indigenous People’s Day earlier that year, depicting Nepal’s indigenous nationalities. He was proud of the poster, but somewhat apologetic about the thangka, possibly due to its overt association with religion: ‘a Tamang group gave it to me when I was elected into the Constituent Assembly’, he said. The emergence of ethnicity as an important (though uneasily embraced) aspect of Nepali Maoist political rhetoric follows from the growth in the 1980s of a worldwide indigenous movement, and, more locally, post-Panchayat political changes that allowed for the rise of ethnic activism in Nepal. After the advent of democracy in 1990, existing forms of protest against the suppression of ethnic identities in the name of national unity coalesced into what came to be called the *janajāti* (indigenous ethnic group) movement.³³ They adopted a stronger discourse of indigeneity, also using the term *adivāsi* to describe themselves, after the International Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1993. While the successive governments during the 1990s and 2000s claimed to treat all

³¹ Interview with Khusiram Pakhrin, 31 August 2011.

³² A thangka painting is a Buddhist religious painting especially associated with Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Tamangs are traditionally Buddhist, and assertion of Buddhist identity has become a part of asserting a political Tamang identity against what until 2008 was a Hindu state. For more on this, see Mukta Singh Tamang, ‘Himalayan Indigeneity: Histories, Memory, and Identity among the Tamang in Nepal’, Ph.D. thesis (Cornell University, 2008).

³³ See, for example, Susan Irene Hangen, *Creating a ‘New Nepal’: The Ethnic Dimension* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2007) and *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal: Democracy in the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Mahendra Lawoti and Susan Irene Hangen, eds, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series (New York: Routledge, 2010); and Marie Lecomte-Tilouine and Pascale Dolfus, eds, *Ethnic Revival and Religious Turmoil: Identities and Representations in the Himalaya* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

castes and ethnicities equally, they failed to address longstanding structural inequalities and patterns of economic exploitation that were closely bound up with caste and ethnicity, not to mention other aspects of difference such as gender, religion, and region.³⁴ The Maoists incorporated many of the *janajāti* movement's demands for social transformation into its own, endorsing ethnic autonomy before beginning the people's war,³⁵ and calling for an end to ethnic oppression, a secular state, and the equal use of all languages in their forty-point demands at the start of the war.³⁶ Overt incorporation of ethnicity as an aspect of party structure, though, did not happen until 2000 when a central department focused on ethnicity, with different ethnic liberation fronts, was formed under the direction of Dev Gurung. Now, one of the most contentious issues in forming the new government is how to restructure the state along ethnic federal lines, the model long promoted by the *janajāti* movement. The UCPN (Maoist) has been one of ethnic federalism's most vocal proponents, though some argue that this remains merely a pragmatic means towards political power.³⁷ But, according to Maoist leader and current prime minister Baburam Bhattarai, it has a clear Leninist rationale as a means of arriving at 'the inevitable integration of nations' in a classless, stateless, nation-less society through a 'transition period' of the 'complete emancipation of all oppressed nations'.³⁸ Here Bhattarai takes Lenin's use of the word 'nations' to refer to ethnic or regional nationalities within the state, rather than to nation-states.³⁹ This

³⁴ Mallika Shakya, 'Capitalism and Ethnicity: Facing a Rising Wave of Communism in Nepal', in *Ethnicity, Inequality, and Politics in Nepal*, ed. Mahendra Lawoti and Susan Hangen (Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2010), 93–117.

³⁵ Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), 'Aitihāsik janayuddhako pahilo yojanā', July 1995.

³⁶ Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), 'Kehi tatkālin rajnaitik ra sangathanātmak prasnabāre prastāv', February 1997.

³⁷ International Crisis Group, 'Nepal: Identity Politics and Federalism' (Crisis Group Asia Report No. 199, January 2011).

³⁸ Lenin, *National Liberation, Socialism, and Imperialism: Selected Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 2002), 114, cited in Baburam Bhattarai, 'The Question of Building a New Type of State', *The Worker*, 9 (2004), <http://www.cpnm.org/new/English/work/9issue/article_baburam.htm> (accessed 17 January 2012).

³⁹ Bhattarai's conception of oppressed nationalities in Nepal is strongly linked to his analysis of regional economic oppression and his appraisal of Nepal, and areas within Nepal, as existing at various levels of semi-feudal, semi-colonial relationships with India and with Nepal's central government, as argued in Bhattarai, *The Nature of Underdevelopment and Regional Structure of Nepal: A Marxist Analysis* (New Delhi: Adroit, 2003). In a later essay, he states that the physical/spatial structure should be thought of as a reflection of social structure, and links ethnicity specifically with regional underdevelopment and oppression. Bhattarai, 'The Political Economy of the People's War', in *The People's War in Nepal: Left Perspectives*, ed. Arjun Karki and David Seddon (New Delhi: Adroit, 2004), 118–64: 120, 150.

rationale is similar to that of class love: promoting solidarities within oppressed groups as a means of moving towards the dissolution of such distinct groups, as well as of the inequalities within and among them.

In the 2000s, Khusiram Pakhrin began to highlight caste and ethnicity as a valued basis for social solidarity to a greater degree in his songs. In a 2010 interview with the magazine *Dalit Aawaj (Dalit Voice)*, he says:

Because our movement is for the sake of the oppressed classes, regions, genders, and forgotten groups of people, we find the greatest percent of those present and participating in the arts [in the Maoist party] are Dalit and *adivāsi janajāti* [indigenous nationalities]. We should be very proud of this.⁴⁰

The association of ethnic and caste-based identities with the idea of oppressed classes is clearly foregrounded in the song ‘In our seven villages’, one of a number of his recent songs available as music videos on YouTube.⁴¹ Its lyrics focus on injustices that villagers have to endure and on the eventual creation of a communist utopia, but its use of the Tamang language, plus its musical and visual aspects, highlight ethnicity and localize references to ‘we’ and ‘working together’ in a Tamang community. It begins in the Tamang language before switching to Nepali, and has Tamang-language refrains. Its beat is also Tamang, known as *selo* or often *Tamang selo*. While the song employs the communist tropes of unison singing and dancing, it also shares much with mainstream *lok git* love-song music video productions. Its form is question-answer, reminiscent of the *dohorī* genre, which is traditionally sung between two youths as a means of romantic flirtation.⁴² The video retains the gender structure of *dohorī*, but not its theme of romance, with the boys singing and dancing opposite the girls, each with slightly different things to say about the hardships in their villages and how the revolution will change their village. Performers wear Tamang costumes, but the dance style is pan-Nepali, and the outdoor staging reminiscent of mainstream *lok git* music videos. This highlights a convergence of styles that value the rural and the indigenous in closely related ways. The topic of love and solidarity brings these ways of valuing rurality and marginality even closer together, and the use of a *dohorī* song structure, and common music video dance vocabulary and staging, links them with the broader web of media interconnections that has evolved in Nepal in the past thirty years.

⁴⁰ Pakhrin, ‘Rājnaitik, ārthik’, 11.

⁴¹ Khusiram Pakhrin, ‘Hāmro ta sāt gāū pheromā’ (Kathmandu: UCPN (Maoist), 2009), music video; <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvM8N6GSkkY>> (accessed 17 January 2012).

⁴² For more on *dohorī*, see Anna Stirr, ‘Exchanges of Song: Migration, Gender, and Nation in Nepali Dohori Performance’, Ph.D. thesis (Columbia University, 2009).

Mainstream *lok git* is a genre in which the marginal is central. While communist artists object to its themes of romantic love, *lok git*'s polysemic valuation of marginality associated with the rural, the indigenous, the lower caste, and the female, is particularly relevant to their identification with the oppressed. The new greater emphasis on ethnicity and indigeneity further intertwines the popular imaginary of the rural and marginal as central to nationhood and belonging to a place, with the idea of the proletariat as subject and addressee of communist songs. Songs like 'In our seven villages' at once localize this connection and link it to broader tropes of kinship, nation, and connection to others through the shared experience of social injustice. In this way the 2010 music video of Pakhrin's Tamang song is similar to Manjul and Ramesh's 1970s modification of the folksong 'Chameli': using one of the dominant media forms of the times, it aims to express and create solidarity based on these embodied experiences of (gender-, region-, and caste/ethnicity-inflected) class.

Conclusion

Returning to the question of what kind of public the proletariat is, at least for these Nepali artists, we can say that there has been a shift over the past five or six decades from conceiving of the proletarian class as one homogeneous group, to conceiving of the proletarian class as made up of multiple publics along ethnic, caste, class, regional, gender, and perhaps even religious lines. These publics' primary shared quality is the extent of their oppression; this much remains fundamental. Yet, there is now greater emphasis on how that oppression can be experienced differently, and difference has a greater rhetorical value. Many activists and scholars argue that preventing social groups from asserting collective solidarity is a form of oppression that goes hand in hand with economic disenfranchisement.⁴³ The political shift evident over the past twenty years towards treating caste and ethnicity as important bases for social solidarity, intertwined with class, at the most central political levels, demonstrates a shifting conception of who the proletariat is, and how hierarchies are imagined. Artistic production mediates between the highest levels of political parties and their affiliated grassroots movements, as well as between communist movements and the broader realm of non-communist-identified Nepali society and culture. When artists claim that their music promotes class love, and that performing it is an act of class love, they rely on the sensory, affective resonances of music

⁴³ Tamang, 'Tamang Activism', 286.

and lyrics rich with layers of indexical meaning that bring political messages together with representations of everyday life. Class love offers a way of imagining ethnicity or other forms of marginalized identity and difference through class, or vice versa, such that being janajāti, Dalit, rural, female, etc. is a way of being proletarian. This is not a move from one side of the binary opposition between universalism and particularism to the other, but rather a re-signification of the category of the proletariat to encompass different experiences among those whom Nepali communism continues to imagine within the category of 'the oppressed'.