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# Ruralising the City: Migration and *Viraha* in Translocal Nepal

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## Abstract

*Throughout the history of movement between country and city in the Nepali-speaking areas of the Indian subcontinent, musical links between cities and the rural hills have integrated emotional associations with rural hill life into the fabric of city life. Songs in the thematic genre of viraha – longing and the pain of separation – articulate lyrical and musical tropes that have come to characterise the experience of moving between hill villages, cities, and back again. This article explores over a century of Nepali-language viraha songs related to labour migration, arguing that as these songs take root in translocal publics crossing urban-rural divides, they contribute to an ruralisation of social and emotional life in the cities.*

Nepal's cities are increasingly translocal spaces marked by mobility. The music of mobile populations brings sounds from rural areas (among others) into urban centres. Multiple soundscapes characterise the cities' multiaccentual spaces.<sup>1</sup> With them come aural ways of knowing, sonic epistemologies or 'acoustemologies' and their concomitant structures of feeling.<sup>2</sup> For nearly twenty years now, nightclubs featuring folk music from Nepal's rural hills have added a particular form of rural sound to the night time soundscapes of Kathmandu and other such urban crossroads. Walking along the streets of the city centres and the areas near the long-distance bus parks of Kathmandu, Pokhara, Narayangadh and other urban areas, you can hear the distinctive beats of Nepali folk songs echoing out the windows and down the street, filling the urban canyons as if they were hill valleys. Throughout the history of movement between rural and urban areas in the Nepali-speaking areas of the subcontinent, these musical genres have created links between cities and the rural hills; thus their emotional associations with rural hill life are also a part of city life. Songs in the thematic genre of *viraha* – longing and the pain of separation – articulate lyrical and musical tropes that have come to characterise the experience of moving between hill villages, cities, and back again.

<sup>1</sup>For more on the idea of multiaccentual space and acoustemology, see Andrew Eisenberg, "Islam, Sound, and Space: Acoustemology and Muslim Citizenship on the Kenyan Coast", in *Music, Sound, and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience*, (ed.) Georgina Born (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 186–202.

<sup>2</sup>Steven Feld, "Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea", in *Senses of Place*, (eds.) Steven Feld and Keith Basso (Santa Fe, NM, 1996), pp. 91–136.

The growing presence of the rural in the urban is what Karl Marx refers to as ruralisation.<sup>3</sup> To Marx and his followers, ruralisation is often a synonym for regression or stagnation, a return to a lesser stage of the relations of production and concomitant feudal social relations. From this perspective, the rural is the site of all that is backward and needs to be jettisoned in order for society to progress. Based on Marxist concepts of socioeconomic evolution and development-oriented teleologies like those that Stacy Pigg and Saubhagya Shah have analyzed in the case of Nepal,<sup>4</sup> most accounts of ruralisation worldwide have focused on the problems that rural-urban migrants create in cities. Even Nepal's Maoist ideologue and former Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai adopts a Soviet-inspired orientation in his plans for national development, calling specifically for a stop to the ruralisation of cities, and a concerted effort to urbanise the countryside.<sup>5</sup> With attention to the history of emotions and social relations expressed in rural-associated folk songs as they traverse boundaries separating rural and urban, I begin to rethink this negative assessment of ruralisation.

### Folk Song in Migration History

Migration has long been an important part of livelihoods for many residents of the Himalayan foothills, and indeed, throughout South Asia. Dirk Kolff, in his study *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy*, describes a military labour market throughout the subcontinent from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century. In the prevailing traditions of the time, men would leave their villages to seek employment, and attach themselves to the army of a regional *raja*. This was called *naukari* or service, a term that survives to this day in Nepali, most often referring to military or other service to the state.<sup>6</sup> After the British Indian Army began recruiting soldiers from Nepal, they located a training camp in the city of Lahore which led to Nepali military labour migrants being called *lāhure* in Nepali – one who goes to Lahore. These soldiers are known more widely by their British Army appellation: the Gurkhas.<sup>7</sup> This name comes from Gorkha, a widely-used name for Nepal until the 1930s. Now a district in Nepal, Gorkha was a small principality home to the Shah monarchy that united the Nepali state in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, through campaigns that themselves encouraged military labour migration.

These migration traditions, and their place within social structures and structures of feeling, are described and alluded to in songs and poetry, in particular in the *viraha* genre. The term *viraha*, most simply translated as emotional pain or longing, describes a thematic genre of song and poetry found throughout South Asia with songs about love and the pain of separation.<sup>8</sup> It is this theme of migration, separation, love and longing that marks

<sup>3</sup>Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, translated by Martin Nicolaus (London and New York, 1973).

<sup>4</sup>Stacy Leigh Pigg, "Inventing Social Categories through Place: Social Presentation and Development in Nepal," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34 (1992), pp. 491–513. Saubhagya Shah, "Throes of a Fledgling Nation," *Himal* 6 (1993), pp. 7–10.

<sup>5</sup>Baburam Bhattarai, *Politico-Economic Rationale of People's War*, 2nd edition (Kathmandu, 2006).

<sup>6</sup>Dirk Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy: The Ethno-history of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (New York, 2002).

<sup>7</sup>The Indian army uses the spelling "Gorkha" for their regiments of Nepali soldiers, which remained in India after 1947. Nepali speakers across the northern subcontinent often refer to themselves as Gorkhali, and this term has also been used for the language; "Gorkha" as an ethnonym for Nepali speakers living in India is a twentieth-century development.

<sup>8</sup>Francesca Orsini, *Love in South Asia* (Cambridge, 2006).

a song as *viraha*. The two most common strands of *viraha* songs diverge along gendered lines: songs about men's migration for military service and trade or labour,<sup>9</sup> and songs about women's migration for marriage.<sup>10</sup> It is of course true that men migrate for reasons other than employment, marriage for instance. Women also migrate to find work. But the lyrical themes of *viraha* songs paint a consistent picture of migration narratives in which men venture out into the world to seek their fortunes, while women stay home and wait for their wandering sons, brothers and lovers – either to return from their wanderings, or to appear to take their wives or sisters back to their natal homes for festivals. For example, Kolff cites the ballad *Visaladevarasa*, composed in Old Marwari around 1450, in which a husband is going into *naukari* (here translated as “service as a courtier”, implying that he is going to serve a foreign king). Kolff comments, “as so often in Indian literature, the woman of the house tries to make her travel-loving husband change his mind”:

O Lord, who tells you to go away and go into service as a courtier?  
 (when the master is away)  
 There is no money in the house or salt in the pitcher,  
 The low-born women quarrel in the house  
 Homes oppressed with debt are unpleasant,  
 Whether the master leaves as a *jogi*  
 Or whether he goes in shame into service as a courtier.<sup>11</sup>

The themes, of women missing their menfolk and trying to convince them to stay home, of poverty, and of debt, run through *viraha* songs. The husbands always leave whether for military service, trade, or to become wandering ascetics, or some combination of these.<sup>12</sup> The tradition of *viraha* songs that express love and longing in the context of migration along these gendered lines provides a set of lyrical tropes on which improvising singers and writers of new folk songs draw, and thus influence the continuing character of migration songs today.

Nevertheless, both gendered categories of migration songs express emotions about longing for the home places in which they were born, a nostalgia that has more similarities than differences.<sup>13</sup> One significant similarity is that of an anticipated series of departures and returns, rather than a single journey that takes an individual away from home forever. *Viraha* songs are songs of memory and longing, but often set within the context of circular migration, a yearly cycle of ritual returns home (especially for women, whose return to their natal homes is expected at certain festivals), or at least a diasporic sensibility in which there is an intent to return home. This circular, rather than linear, trajectory of departures, intense seasons of longing, and returns, characterises Nepali *viraha* songs and the lives of those who sing and listen to them.

<sup>9</sup>Kolff Naukar, *Rajput, and Sepoy; Michael Hutt, Devkota's Muna-Madan: Translation and Analysis* (Kathmandu, 1996).

<sup>10</sup>Kathryn March, “Two Houses and the Pain of Separation in Tamang Narratives from Highland Nepal”, in *Songs, Stories, Lives: Gendered Dialogues and Cultural Critique*, (ed.) Gloria Raheja (New Delhi, 2003); Kirin Narayan, “Singing from Separation: Women's Voices in and about Kangra Folksongs”, *Oral Tradition* 12 (1997), pp. 25–53; Kirin Narayan, “Birds on a Branch: Girlfriends and Wedding Songs in Kangra”, *Ethos* 14 (1987), pp. 47–75.

<sup>11</sup>Smith, *Visaladevarasa*, p. 57, cited in Kolff, Naukar, *Rajput, and Sepoy*, p. 76.

<sup>12</sup>Joseph S. Alter, *Moral Materialism: Sex and Masculinity in Modern India* (Delhi, 2011). Kolff, Naukar, *Rajput, and Sepoy*.

<sup>13</sup>Anna Stirr, *Singing Across Divides: Music and Intimate Politics in Nepal* (Oxford and New York, 2017).

## Lyrics, Music, and Emotion in a Hundred-Year-Old Migration Lament

The oldest example of a migration song recording in the Nepali language, of which I am aware, comes from a German archive from the First World War.<sup>14</sup> It is part of “a collection of more than 2,500 audio-recordings of Allied prisoners of war done by the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission between 29 December 1915 and 19 December 1918, including a large number of non-white colonial prisoners. The soldiers were asked to stand in front of the phonograph, and made to read out a text, or sing a song or tell a story”.<sup>15</sup> Carl Stumpf, one of the founders of the discipline of ethnomusicology, was an initiator of this project, which was framed as a linguistic study. Among the prisoners was a man named Jasbahadur Rai, born in 1893 or 1894 in the Indian district of Darjeeling. In the Zossen POW camp of Wünsdorf, on 6 June 1916, at 4.00 pm, he sang a song in Nepali for a research assistant for the project. The song now survives in a Wünsdorf archive, where it is labelled “Gurkha Song, Own Words”, (PK 308). Jasbahadur Rai died shortly after he sang this song, and was buried in Wünsdorf’s graveyard of the Common Wealth.

The song he sang, transcribed below, heartbreakingly expresses his suffering and his wish to return home, and illustrates some of the themes that continue in *viraha* songs to this day. He addresses the song to the women he loves back home, apparently both wife and sisters, addressing them with terms of endearment and kinship terms “*chari*”, “*didī*” and “*kanchhi*”, but preceding these all with “*sun-lāune*”, “gold-wearing”. This could be understood as an implied criticism, reminding them that it is his sacrifice that has brought them their gold, and leading to the question that runs through many migration songs to this day: was it worth it? The majority of the song expresses his personal experiences, narrating how he has seen the world and suffered greatly. At the end, his implication that he has lost his faith in God seems to suggest that joining the British army and fighting in the First World War was most definitely not worth it.

Line	Nepali Transcription <sup>16</sup>	English Translation
1	<i>Sisai</i> <sup>17</sup> <i>kholā baḍhi jyān</i> <sup>18</sup> āyo <i>bagāyo bulbule</i>	With the rising of the Sisai river, I came, carried in its bubbling flow
2	<i>Germany deśmā āipugyau hamī Angrezko hukumle</i>	We arrived in the country, Germany, at the orders of the British

<sup>14</sup>I am grateful to Santanu Das for bringing this song to my attention, and to Ram Kumar Singh for helping with transcription.

<sup>15</sup>Santanu Das, ‘The Indian Sepoy in the First World War’, *British Library* (London, 2014) <http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/the-indian-sepoy-in-the-first-world-war> (accessed 24 February 2017).

<sup>16</sup>Note on transcription: I give priority to the sound of what was sung and to visually representing poetic meter in the Nepali, so some spellings are nonstandard. And I follow colloquial Nepali Romanisation conventions and use ch and chh, instead of c and ch as in Sanskrit conventions.

<sup>17</sup>Perhaps the name of a river, as I have translated it, or perhaps he means “*susāt*”, “whistling”, a term commonly used to describe the sound of flowing streams.

<sup>18</sup>*Jyān* literally means “life” but also “body” – something like “incarnation” in the material sense, the material manifestation of life, different from *juni*, which is the time-span of “this life” as opposed to past and future lives. He uses this word to refer to himself and to other people, as well as sometimes to his body. This is common in songs and some rural, colloquial speech today as well. I have translated it differently in different verses according to the context. Since it appears so much throughout the song, it could also be treated as a *thego* – a word used not for its meaning but to fill out the syllables of the meter. I have translated as a meaningful word and not a *thego*, but either way it does not change the meaning much. *Jiu* is another word for body that he also uses, which connotes only the material body.

3	<i>Hai suna suna, sun läume charī</i> , <sup>19</sup> <i>Angrezko hukunile</i>	Listen, oh listen, gold-wearing birdie, at the orders of the British
4	<i>Nepālī jyānko tīn dhāre pānī mul pānī turūrū</i>	Nepalis have three water taps, water flowing from the source
5	<i>Nepālī jyānko marne na bāchne man pani durūrū</i>	Nepali people, neither dying nor surviving, the heart also sobbing
6	<i>Na uđī jānu na basī āunu, man rūnchha durūrū</i>	Neither can we fly away, nor can we arrive while staying put, the heart cries, sobbing
7	<i>Hai suna suna, sun läume didī, man rūnchha durūrū</i>	Listen, oh listen, gold-wearing sister, the heart cries, sobbing
8	<i>Pāniko bulbul, yo manko chulbul, bujhāuchhau katin din</i>	The bubbling of water, the restlessness of this heart, how many days will it take to console yourself?
9	<i>Hai suna suna, sun läume kānchhī, bujhāuchhau katin din</i>	Listen, oh listen, gold-wearing little one, how many days will it take to console yourself?
10	<i>Dui paisa bache kaopalmar sigret salkāula mārchiisle</i>	If I save two cents, I'll light a Kaopalmar cigarette with matches
11	<i>Hindustān pārī, ke rāmro pahāđ, ghāsaiko khaliyo</i>	Across Hindustan, what beautiful hills, storage places for fodder
12	<i>Baseko pīrtī, chutāunam bhayo, man bāđha baliyo</i>	The love we've had, we now have to break apart, bind your heart and be strong
13	<i>Hai suna suna, sun läume charī, man bāđha baliyo</i>	Listen, oh listen, gold-wearing birdie, bind your heart and be strong
<i>2<sup>nd</sup> recording:</i>		
14	<i>Europai jyānko ke rāmro tarī gāseko tillī pāt</i>	The Europeans have such beautiful fields, shining leaves sewn together
15	<i>gwāpeko hunchha Tihara kisim dunaiko Dillī pāt</i>	They're joined together as if for Tihar, <sup>20</sup> a bowl made of leaves from Delhi
16	<i>he suna suna, sun laune didī, dunaiko Dillī pāt</i>	Listen, oh listen, gold-wearing sister, a bowl made of leaves from Delhi
17	<i>Europai jyānko baganai rāmro, torīko phul phulchha-phul phulchha phulchha man</i> <sup>21</sup>	The Europeans have such beautiful gardens, mustard flowers bloom—when flowers bloom, so does the heart
18	<i>chaudhai sālko lađāiko suru dunyaiko bhukta man</i>	When the war of the year 14 began, the world's hearts suffered greatly
19	<i>garmiko mausam—garmiko mausam, garmi jyān bhayo, pankhaile humkaideu</i>	Hot summer weather—Hot summer weather, my body is hot, cool it off with a fan
20	<i>Europeko deśmā basnu man chhaina, India pathāideu</i>	I don't want to stay in a European country, please send me to India
21	<i>Gorkhālī khānchha khasiko shikhār khādaina rājai hās</i>	A Gorkhali eats goat meat, he doesn't eat swans
22	<i>Na bachdā gati, na mardā mati, Belgiumko mahārāj</i>	Surviving brings no progress, dying brings no knowledge, king of Belgium
23	<i>Jānu jyān jānu, jādā nai mero, dhou bhane kati dhou,</i>	Bodies must go, and when mine goes, if you wash it, how much can it be washed?

<sup>19</sup> *Charī* ("birdie") is often used to refer to a girl in folk songs.

<sup>20</sup> While the song is quite clear here, I do not understand what a leaf-bowl from Delhi is supposed to signify in this context. It is still possible that I am mishearing /t/ as /d/, in which case "tillī pāt" would refer to leaves that were shining rather than coming from Delhi.

<sup>21</sup> Here he is changing the last phrase to rhyme with the next half of the couplet. So *torīko phul phulchha* (mustard flowers bloom) is the phrase that he is throwing out.

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24	<i>Parālko āgo, jiu bhayo dāgo, rou bhane kati rou<sup>22</sup></i>	Fire of straw, my body has become like a string, if I cry, how much can I cry?
25	<i>Pharānse jyānko kyā ramro tarī, thulo chha suntalā</i>	The French have such beautiful fields, and there are large orange trees
26	<i>Pharāns ni miche ma herdā kheri, jiu badhchha tīn tolā</i>	I pushed through France too, and when I look back at it, my body gains 36 grams [becoming heavy with fright] <sup>23</sup>
27	<i>Usai ra mero sānō jyān sānō ma kholdai kholdina</i>	That and my body is small, so small, I don't open up at all
28	<i>Germanko deśmā bātai jyān bujhaina ma lājaile boldina</i>	In the country of the Germans, I don't understand their talk, and out of embarrassment, I don't speak
29	<i>Ki bhannu thulo bhagavān bhannu dāju ke lāī?</i>	Tell me, brother, what can we call powerful – God?
30	<i>Madeše jyānko hariyo pipal ghās kātū yellāī.</i>	Our green pipal tree of the plains might as well be cut down for fodder.

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There are two recordings, recorded on two separate cylinders. While a difference in pitch at the beginning of the second recording suggests that some time elapsed between the two, the description of how prisoners' songs and testimonies were recorded also leads me to believe that there was not a break of more than a few minutes. I present them here as one song, but acknowledge a slight difference in thematic content between the two cylinders.

The first one focuses on telling how he got there and addressing the women he loves; in the last couplets, he says what he must have known to be his last goodbye to them, asking his “*sun lāune chan*” to bind her heart and be strong. The *viraha* aspects of love and longing are particularly highlighted in this first half, as are nostalgic memories of the hills of Hindustan and the mundane objects of everyday life, like the storage places for animals' fodder, or the bowls made of leaves.

The second recording turns to his experiences in war and as a prisoner, admiring the fields and gardens of Europe while remembering the horror of fighting, expressing the frustrations and humiliations of the POW camp, and wishing explicitly to be sent home. Line 28 is the only line in which he breaks the poetic meter, in an iconic illustration of discomfort and embarrassment at being unable to communicate while imprisoned in Germany. Lines 29 and 30, the final couplet of the song, suggest that he has lost his faith. The first line of the couplet asks somewhat sarcastically what we can now call powerful after the suffering of the worlds' hearts in the war (mentioned in line 18), questioning if God can actually be believed to have any power. The second line of the couplet turns to a metaphor, the pipal tree that is worshipped as God. Saying that it might as well be cut down for fodder implies that he has lost all faith.

In musical terms, what Jasbahadur Rai sang is a *jhyāure* song, defined as such by its poetic meter (*chhanda*, this particular one technically called *Asāre Jhyāure*), and by its six-beat

<sup>22</sup>The two lines of this couplet refer to funerary rituals – washing the body, making a cremation fire with straw as tinder.

<sup>23</sup>*Tolā* is a measure of weight. One *tolā* equals 12 grams. As to why he uses this particular number, *tīn tolā* is a common phrase in songs, often referring to gold. I think the phrase is *tīn tolā* and not, for example, *chār tolā*, because people find the alliteration pleasing.

1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1		
	Dhin	Tang	--	Phat	Tang	Dhin		Dhin	Tang	--	Phat	Tang	Dhin	

Figure 1. An example of one rhythmic pattern in slow *jhyāure tāl*.

## "Gurkha Song, Own Words"

Sung by Jasbahadur Rai at Zossen POW Camp, Wünsdorf, Germany, 1916

Figure 2. The melody of the first two couplets of Jasbahadur Rai's song.

rhythmic cycle, or *tāl*. *Asāre Jhyāure* poetic meter is associated with love songs of all varieties, tragic or happy.<sup>24</sup> Although Jasbahadur is singing alone without rhythmic accompaniment, the slow *jhyāure tāl* that would go along with this song, shown below with one possible pattern of *bols* for the *mādal*, is one often used with sad songs. This combination of poetic meter and *tāl* is common in slow, sad love songs. The melody used by Jasbahadur is a typical melody for this poetic meter.

Literary sources from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demonstrate the association of *Asāre Jhyāure* poetic meter with love.<sup>25</sup> So, we can make the informed assumption that this melody (based as it is on the same poetic meter) would likely have held similar associations for Jasbahadur Rai at the time when he recorded it.<sup>26</sup> Although he himself was from Darjeeling, this melody would sound at home in any number of places across the Nepali-speaking hill regions of the subcontinent. It is hard to know if

<sup>24</sup> Surendra Bikram (Subi) Shah, *Nepali Lokgitko Jhalak* (Kathmandu, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Rhoderick Chalmers, "Pandits and Pulp Fiction: Popular Publishing and the Birth of Print Capitalism in Banaras", *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 7 (2002), pp. 35–97; Rhoderick Chalmers, "When Folk Culture Met Print Culture: Some Thoughts On The Commercialisation, Transformation and Propagation of Traditional Genres in Nepali", *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 31 (2004), pp. 243–56; Anna Stirr, "Sounding and Writing a Nepali Public Sphere: The Music and Language of Jhyāure", *Asian Music* 46, 1 (2015), pp. 3–38.

<sup>26</sup> However, this melody is not in the *Asāre raga* of the hills of central and western Nepal, which has further associations with rice planting and thus even greater associations with love. As shown in Figure 2, the melody of Jasbahadur's song is in what could be identified as a major scale, yet without the characteristic patterns of any particular *raga*, classical or otherwise, as far as I am aware. This type of Nepali folk song is not usually attributed to any particular *raga*.

the melody stemmed from his home in Darjeeling, or if he learned it from someone else in his regiment, from another area of the Himalayan foothills. The musical associations with the hills, combined with the lyrics, make this a song of love and ultimate sorrows, a nostalgic lament for a homeland the singer will never see again, mixed with anger at his predicament and the forces that have led him to an end far from home and those he loves. This poignant song blends an established pan-South-Asian tradition of *viraha* poetry with a poetic meter, melodic style, and *tāl* characteristic of Nepali-speaking hill areas. It, thus, serves as an excellent example of how poetics, narrative, and music intertwine to mediate the emotions surrounding a military labour migrant or *lāhure*'s experience. The song is also important as a rare audio example of one of the main genres circulating in an emergent Nepali-language public sphere at this time in history.

### Rural Genres and Emotions in an Emergent Public Sphere

The experience of migration and longing as depicted in vernacular song genres began to become part of a broader experience connecting the urban and the rural, as songs and stories of migration and longing became part of a public sphere mediated not only through performance but also through print media, and later audio recording. Pratyoush Oonta, Rhoderick Chalmers and Francesca Orsini have studied the rise of print capitalism in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Banaras, and its role in creating Nepali and Hindi-language public spheres.<sup>27</sup> During this time, labour migration and travel for education led many young men from Nepal to Indian cities. In particular, the numbers of young men going to work and study in India's cities increased along with rising Gurkha military recruitment, and the growing number of elite families that sent their sons to be educated in British-style colleges in cities like Calcutta, Banaras, Darjeeling, and Dehra Dun.<sup>28</sup> As Chalmers has described, the emergent Nepali-language publishing industry in Banaras saw these young men as their market, and began printing literature that drew on both established urban conventions of moralistic writing,<sup>29</sup> as well as rural genres of poetry and song, including *lahārī* literature that drew on *jhyāure* love songs like the one above; *sawāī* songs and poems describing events; and various forms of religious poetry, including some of the various folk *bhajan* song forms from the Nepali hills.<sup>30</sup> Their poetic meters identify them as song forms, even though no tune is noted for their performance. The poetic meters themselves indicate a range of possible tunes to which they could be sung. It is unlikely that entire booklets were actually used as songs, and more likely that some printed lyrics were taken up in song performance, in a process similar to that joining commercial folk song recordings and live folk song performance today.<sup>31</sup> The Banaras publishing industry built on the existing presence of rural song genres in urban space, embracing them as an important aspect of its

<sup>27</sup> Chalmers, "Pandits and Pulp Fiction"; Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere* (New Delhi, 2009); Pratyoush Oonta, "Creating a Brave Nepali Nation in British India: The Rhetoric of Jati Improvement, the Rediscovery of Bhanubhakta, and the Writing of Bir History", *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 1 (1996), pp. 37–76.

<sup>28</sup> Chalmers, "When Folk Culture Met Print Culture"; Chalmers, "Pandits and Pulp Fiction".

<sup>29</sup> Also see Oonta, "Creating a Brave Nepali Nation in British India".

<sup>30</sup> Chalmers, "Pandits and Pulp Fiction".

<sup>31</sup> Stirr, *Singing Across Divides*.

production for an imagined community of Nepali speakers and readers. This then helped solidify the place of these rural genres in what Onta has called a proto-national literary consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

The emotions expressed in the literature that drew on these rural song genres were many and varied, not limited to *viraha*. But the *lahari* love song literature had plenty of focus on longing both nostalgic and erotic.<sup>33</sup> In contrast to serious, moralistic writings, these songs and their printed booklets were considered a lower form of vernacular popular culture. Aimed at young men – soldiers and students – their mild erotic themes were enough for literary elites to condemn them as not worthy of notice. But by the 1930s their ubiquity was such that poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota could take the risk of foregoing the then dominant Sanskrit poetic meters to publish a folk-based story in verse (*kanda kavyā*) that was written in the same *Asāre Jhyāure* poetic meter of Jasbahadur Rai's song above. This verse novella, *Muna Madan*, called after the names of the two protagonists, combined a folk song and its story from the Newar ethnic group in the Kathmandu Valley with the poetic meter associated with the rural hills, and set it in a high-caste milieu of urban Kathmandu.<sup>34</sup> The result is a novella in *jhyāure* verse on a *viraha* theme, with rural and urban, cross-ethnic, cross-caste resonances in its story and sounds.

Michael Hutt discusses this elite literary turn toward rural genres in terms of nationalist impulses to differentiate Nepal from India.<sup>35</sup> Such impulses became more prominent as the twentieth century progressed, and other elite Nepali literary figures like Balkrishna Sama also embraced a more colloquial language and writing style. In the realm of music performance and the early recording industry, the world of the Rana courts appears to have remained focused on more classical performance styles up until the fall of the Rana regime in 1950. Musicologist Dhrubesh Chandra Regmi's study of music in the Rana courts emphasises classical performance, while also asserting that classical music in Nepal has continually been informed by folk genres, forms and styles.<sup>36</sup> A more in-depth examination of the relationship between folk and classical music in Rana-era court performance would require further research. One of the few existing examples is court performer Melawa Devi Gurung's earliest recording, *Sawāri Mero Relaimā* (*My Rail Journey*, recorded for His Master's Voice, Calcutta, in 1928), which is in rag Bhairavi and follows the *sthāi-antarā* form, embellished with the melodic runs called *tān* that are a signature part of classical vocal performance. Yet unsurprisingly, *viraha* is present here as well – Melawa Devi's song describes a journey away from the one she loves. In terms of emotion, *viraha* as a thematic genre unites the folk and the classical, the rural and the urban elite, in the expression of longing for home or for those who have gone far away from home.

Recording of Nepali music was conducted in Calcutta for many years. Then, after the fall of the Rana regime in 1950, state-run Radio Nepal and Ratna Recording had a monopoly on recording in Nepal until private music companies were allowed to record and market

<sup>32</sup>Onta, "Creating a Brave Nepali Nation in British India".

<sup>33</sup>Stirr, "Sounding and Writing a Nepali Public Sphere".

<sup>34</sup>Hutt, *Devkota's Muna-Madan*.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup>Dhrubesh Chandra Regmi, "Music in Nepal During the Rana Period" (unpublished PhD dissertation, Delhi University, 2005).

cassettes in 1983. In promoting the genres of *ādhunik gīt* (modern song) and *lok gīt* (folk song) both Radio Nepal and Ratna Recording turned away from classical (the mainstay of All-India Radio) and toward some of Nepal's vernacular musical genres. While *ādhunik gīt* mixed sonic indicators of rural life with aspects of classical *raga* music and western-inspired tonal harmonies,<sup>37</sup> *lok gīt* drew on existing genres and styles from rural Nepal.<sup>38</sup> Many songs of *viraha* were recorded in both the *ādhunik* and *lok* genres, as both value the aesthetic pleasures of longing.

Now, after nearly four decades of musical privatisation, the musical and emotional themes promoted during the years of state musical patronage remain popular in a thriving private music industry. As Stefan Fiol has noted for nearby Garwhal and its regional folk music industry,<sup>39</sup> the boundaries blur between worlds of urban studio production and nightclub performance on the one hand, and performance in rural areas on the other. Despite the geographic distance between rural hill villages and Kathmandu, the networks of musical circulation go along with those of circular migration, comprising a large and dynamic musical field. Instead of the global-pop-influenced 'cultural grey-out' feared by some elite commentators,<sup>40</sup> and against such narratives of cultural imperialism, this process of circulation that is happening now may perhaps be better described in terms of ruralisation. The words, sounds and sets of social relations valued in rural areas are re-territorialised in urban spaces and transnational networks, as people and music circulate. These aspects of the rural come to be part of those spaces. This process is a continuation of what was going on in still-colonial Banaras, when publishers began printing in Nepali for a market of migrant men, and when such men, fighting for their colonial overlords in a war that took them far into unknown lands, found the *viraha* songs to express their longing to return home to the people and places that they loved.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Viraha, Exchange, and the Cycle of Migration and Return***

In this final section I turn to an ethnographic examination of how *viraha* works not only as a trope in songs but also in forming social ties through song performance, through networks that join urban and rural spaces. The musical world and the sonic geographies that I am examining are those of Nepali *lok dohori* song, a subset of the *lok gīt* popularised by Radio Nepal and the private music industry. *Lok dohori* includes folk songs sung solo and as conversational duets, based on various genres of Nepal's middle hills, primarily from the central and western regions of the country. Strongly associated with Nepal's rural hills, it has developed as a commercial genre in urban studios, concert stages, and nightclubs, and recordings and performances made in the city soon feed back into rural performance and

<sup>37</sup> Ingemar Grandin, "The Soundscape of the Radio: Engineering Modern Songs and Superculture in Nepal", in *Wired for Sound*, (eds.) Thomas Porcello and Paul Greene (Middletown, CT, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> David Henderson, "Who Needs 'The Folk'?" A Nepali Remodeling Project", *Asian Music* 34 (2002), p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Stefan Fiol, "From Folk to Popular and Back: Musical Feedback Between Studio Recordings and Festival Dance-Songs in Uttarakhand, North India", *Asian Music* 42 (2011), pp. 24–53.

<sup>40</sup> Kanak Mani Dixit, "The Liberation of Dohori Geet", *Himal South Asian* 15 (2002), p. 60. This is a reference to Alan Lomax's "An Appeal for Cultural Equity", *World of Music* 14, 2 (1972).

<sup>41</sup> Das, "The Indian Sepoy in the First World War"; Santanu Das, "Indian Sepoy Experience in Europe, 1914–18: Archive, Language, and Feeling", *Twentieth Century British History* 25, 3 (2014), pp. 391–417.

listening practices, continuing an ongoing network of circulation. With *dohorī* restaurants – the urban venues for *lok dohorī* performance – in Nepal's major cities and in cities with large Nepali populations all over the world, this rural-urban, international network re-territorialises the sounds of Nepal's hills in new locales, referencing aspects of hill space in order to reassert its associated acoustemology, in terms of songs, their associated emotions, and concomitant social ties, extended across space and time.

### Sound and Reciprocity in the Rural Hill Festival

Across the Himalayan foothills, festivals celebrating various holidays often involve music and dance. Loud drumming by multiple drums in unison (or not) serves to broadcast the location of such festivals, the sound echoing through the hills and 'calling' people to the village where the festival is occurring. At such festivals, groups coming in from further afield use loud drumming to announce their arrival as they walk along the trails at night toward the festival location. As more and more participants arrive, drum groups multiply, as do drummers within the drum groups. There is no electricity and thus no amplification beyond that provided by the hills and by sheer numbers of drummers, singers, and dancers wearing ankle bells. To participate in such a festival is to be immersed in sound, the near-pitch darkness at night requiring you to navigate based on your sense of hearing above others.

In 2007 I attended such a festival in Gorkha district, a celebration of *kauḍā chudkā* music and dance in *lok dohorī* singer Ganesh Gurung's home village of Lower Gyaja. This was a regular rural festival that took place each year at this particular new moon in June. As we arrived, my companions joined a group in performance, playing *khaijadi* drum, and improvising lyrics. I joined the line of women dancing, adjusting my steps to this particular regional version of *kauḍā chudkā*, and we wove in and out of the men's line, following drum cues to change our movements. A *dohorī* song from the radio was being repurposed as a *kauḍā chudkā* dance song, easily re-contextualised as it shared a four-beat *tāl* (rhythmic cycle). Its refrain went: "As long as the wind blows, *siri siri*, my love will not die, sweetheart, as long as there is water in the sea".<sup>42</sup> In the couplets that singers both repeated from the original recording and improvised on their own, two lovers lamented their separation. With *viraha* songs like this one as well as songs of flirtation and politics, the festival continued for three days and nights, more groups joining every evening.

This festival was put on by the youth club of Lower Gyaja. The 'youth club' is an institution that has sprung up all over Nepal's rural hills over the past few decades. In this particular area of Gorkha and this Gurung village of Lower Gyaja, it has direct connections with the previous generation's specifically Gurung youth association, called *rodhī*. Traditionally organised by groups of girls, and attended by groups of boys, *rodhī* groups organise reciprocal labour exchange and provide designated houses for these boys and girls to gather and sing and dance all night. Through organised performances, festivals, pilgrimages and other activities, *rodhī* groups also facilitate formal exchange relationships between youth of different villages, and thus form ties that bind groups and individuals together across hills and across the years

<sup>42</sup>Yam Kshetri, Raju Pariyar and Bishnu Majhi, *Siri Siri Hawa Bahunjel* (Kathmandu, 2007).

of their lives.<sup>43</sup> Note the gendered structure of girls being in charge of the stationary aspects of *rodhī*, while boys move around – this mirrors expectations for gendered behaviour later in life. As this primarily Gurung and Magar area of Gorkha had sent many young men into the British and Indian armies, and many more abroad to work in various jobs, the song themes of men's migration and women's waiting for their menfolk's return remained immediately salient in contemporary life.

For *rodhīs* or youth clubs, hosting a performance helps renew social ties, further establishes loving relationships, and brings honour to the hosts; hosting an entire festival does this on a grander scale. Guests from outside, like us, are obligated to make financial contributions in a public and ritual way. The greater the gift, the more honour both parties receive. Groups that attend are then obligated by strict reciprocity to host festivals in return, the anticipation of the reciprocal party nourishing the relationship between groups as it is “held in tension” until the reciprocal act occurs.<sup>44</sup> This anticipation also takes the form of longing, as love relationships develop between participants in the sung exchanges that characterise performances. Romances certainly occur, but a more generalised form of intensified friendship is also part of such exchanges. As one man who participated in *rodhī* in the 1990s put it, the boys and girls of different villages would develop ‘group love’ for each other. Living in different villages yet longing to see each other again, they would send gifts of berries, home-distilled alcohol and letters and notes, with individuals travelling between the villages. These gifts would be reciprocated in a few days or weeks, and meanwhile each group would enjoy the pleasures of longing and anticipation for the gifts as ‘tokens of love’, as part of the longer wait until they could see each other again.<sup>45</sup> As boys and girls grow up, the patterns of reciprocal expressions of love, and the associated pain of separation and anticipation for reunions among groups of youth from different villages, guide their experiences of other partings and reunions. In these ways, hosting and attending festivals of this nature are important and very public ways to establish and continually reciprocally renew social ties, love and honour, on individual and group levels. This pattern also situates songs of *viraha* within a larger emotional range of songs, associated with a rhythm of meetings and partings that characterises village life. For example, a song from a few years prior articulates this view:

*Salalala bagyo gandakī  
Āja sangai, bholī ho kā ho kā  
Yastai raicha gāñko jindagī.*

The Gandaki river flows, *salala*  
Together today, who knows where we'll be tomorrow  
I find this is what village life is like.

<sup>43</sup>Ellen Andors, ‘The Rodi: Female Associations Among the Gurungs of Nepal’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1976); Donald Messerschmidt, *The Gurungs of Nepal: Conflict and Change in a Village Society* (Delhi, 1976); Alan Macfarlane, *Resources and Population: A Study of the Gurungs of Nepal*, 2nd edition (Kathmandu, 2003); Bernard Pignede, *The Gurungs*, translated by Alan Macfarlane (Kathmandu, 1966); Pirkko Moisala, “Gurung Music and Culture”, *Kailash* 15 (1989), pp. 207–222; Devendra Neupane, ‘Mother's Groups among the Gurung of Bhujung Village of Lamjung District’ (Tribhuvan University, Patan Multiple Campus, 2011).

<sup>44</sup>Laura Ring, *Zenana: Everyday Peace in a Karachi Apartment Building* (Bloomington, IN, 2006).

<sup>45</sup>Interview with Khem Jung Gurung, August 2010.

### Urban *Dohorī* Restaurants as Rural Festival Spaces

Back in Kathmandu, Ganesh, Sriram, another one of our travelling companions, Prithvi Gurung, and female singers Muna Thapa Magar and Arati Gurung could be found each night on the stage of Dovan Restaurant and Bar. There they performed versions of *kauḍā chudkā* songs, along with other *lok* and *dohorī* songs. Restaurant patrons danced in front of the stage, made to look like a village house with its courtyard as the dance floor. The bass is turned all the way up, the lower tones of the *mādal* drums resonating through the bodies on the dance floor, spilling out the windows and echoing off the buildings across the street.

Dovan was conceived as a place for performing music from southern Gorkha and Tanahun, and decorated to resemble the space in which a village festival would be held. The original owner of Dovan, Ganja Singh Gurung, was a high-ranking officer in the Kathmandu police force. He had intended to name his restaurant Dovan Rodhī Club. However, the people at City Hall had prevented him from doing so, saying that *rodhī*, as a place where boys and girls spent the night together, was a site for indecent behaviour, and such venues would not be allowed to operate in Kathmandu city.<sup>46</sup> Since Dovan's opening in 1998, this rule has changed, and today many *dohorī* restaurants are known as "rodhī club" and even "rodhī bar". Perhaps this is one example of ruralisation as positive: of a set of rural values coming to be part of an increasingly trans-local urban fabric, having overcome knee-jerk adverse reactions by demonstrating a demotic form of community's value to the larger, multi-ethnic community as a whole.

In *dohorī* restaurants, performers and waiting staff's attentive hosting, and patrons' ways of tipping, resemble the honour-producing exchanges at the festival in Gyaja. Exchanges of *dohorī* song between performers and patrons are central to *dohorī* restaurants' musical offerings. When groups of patrons and performers know each other, group-group exchanges outside the *dohorī* restaurant environment are common. Publicly in the *dohorī* restaurant space, tipping practices, in which patrons place bills in a basket onstage, recall outside guests' financial contributions to a village festival. Performing the roles of village kinfolk or romantic interests to guests' role of the returned migrant, those on stage welcome their guests as returned *lāhures*, with exuberant, cheerful songs of reunion as well as songs of the pain of separation and longing. In a *dohorī* restaurant it is common to hear both reunion songs and songs of parting within several minutes of each other. For example, *Older Brother Lāhure* ("Older brother *lāhure*, back home on leave, let's laugh and talk now that we have the good fortune to meet", in fast *jhyāure tāl*); followed by *Ramdi Bridge* ("If I survive, I'll come down this road again; if I die, I'll have a rifle for a pillow", in slow *jhyāure tāl*).

In these ways, the urban *dohorī* restaurant sonically and relationally reproduces a rural hill festival space, with an emphasis on love and honour in the ongoing stream of partings and reunions. As in the village festival, that space extends sonically past the immediate boundaries of a village or a restaurant. Using electronic technologies to reproduce the echoing, reverberant sounds of large numbers of drums resounding through hills and valleys, restaurants send their sounds out their open windows into the streets. Not only does this call people in, it announces that a festival is going on here, and you can come be a participant

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Ganja Singh Gurung, 5 December 2006.

in its exchanges if you wish. The sound announces the presence of this particular hill-area blend of reciprocal social relations.

To come to a *dohorī* restaurant is to participate in these relations of love and honour, even if only by sitting there, immersed in the sound. *Dohorī* restaurants are often places where members of particular migrants' regional and caste/ethnic associations meet, which further emphasizes their function as spaces for rural social relations reconfigured in urban areas. And, *dohorī* restaurants will hold special parties where they engage in exchanges with their surrounding communities. Dovan had special relationships with the police force; others made donations to hospitals or schools. Dovan often hosted groups from southern Gorkha and eastern Tanahun districts, strengthening the links between the owners and performers' home villages and their new places of work and residence in Kathmandu. For example, in April 2007 they hosted a New Year's party at the Retired Policemen's Hall, with performers of *kauḍā chudkā* from the owner's village. These young men and women would also join the festivities in Gyaja at the next new moon, the same festival that I attended. The songs they sang continued to resonate with the familiar themes of meetings, partings, and the pain of separation in the *viraha* songs that have long circulated through migration and changing media forms.

Thus, from the perspective of rural-urban migrants, the aspects of the rural that they bring with them to the city are important expressions of social ties that help root them in relationships and communities that span locales. The patterns of exchange between different groups in one village, and between different villages, are extended through new social clubs and regional associations to link the rural and the urban. These patterns and the social ties they maintain are part and parcel of the acoustemology of place that *dohorī* restaurants re-territorialise through the sounds of the songs they offer onstage. The way they see it, far from bringing problems that hinder progress, these migrants are connecting the capital to its surrounding areas in a way that is long overdue. To hear and feel the beat of the *mādal*, pulsing from an upper-floor *dohorī* restaurant as you walk down the street in Kathmandu (or perhaps Aldershot, England, or Queens, New York), is to hear and feel something of the presence of these growing trans-local social ties, maintained over space and time in part through shared pleasure in songs of *viraha*, in an ongoing cycle of partings and reunions. [stirr@hawaii.edu](mailto:stirr@hawaii.edu).

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