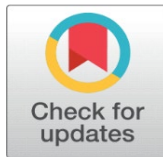


# ECHOES IN DARJEELING HILLS: THE JOURNEY OF GANDHARBAS AND HIS SARANGI

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## ABSTRACT

Gainies who are Nepali professional musicians belonging to the Gandharba community is a common sight in the hills of Darjeeling as the open borders between Nepal and India facilitate easy commute for better economic opportunities. Moreover, the common lingua franca and similarities in culture further allows the Gandharbas to treat the hills as their second home. An important musical instrument which is synonymous with Gandharba community is sarangi which is also a cultural identity marker for the Nepali community. The influence and impact of the sarangi is felt in the music, literature and culture as well as everyday life of the Indian Nepalis living in Darjeeling as these wandering musicians continue to regale the common people with their songs.

This paper serves to provide an overview of the Gandharbas and the sarangi. While sarangi as an instrument is a quintessential part of Nepali folk music, the Gandharbas who are the keepers of this art as well as makers of this instruments are often relegated into the background as they belong to Nepali Dalit community. Moreover, they are a mobile community who continue to cross and recross borders for economic opportunities. This ensures that the Gandharbas continue to remain in the social periphery and face marginalization be it political, economic or social. Hence, this paper traces the relationship between the Gandharbas and the sarangi in the backdrop of the Darjeeling hills in order to highlight the complex and ironical relation between the maker and the instrument.

**Keywords:** Gandharbas, Sarangi, Nepali Folk Music, Marginalization

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The sight of the undulating tea gardens crowned by the sight of the mighty Kanchenjunga remain the quintessential image of the hills of Darjeeling. Located in the Eastern Himalayan region, the hills of Darjeeling is also a rich cultural, literary and musical hub populated mostly by the Indian Nepalis. There is a common saying in Darjeeling that if one takes the time to throw a stone in the air it will invariably land on a musician. Hence, on the way to the marketplace, in the lanes thronged by the endless streams of swarming tourist one will come across a Gainey-a Nepali wandering minstrel sitting crossed legged on his mat on the roadside singing songs accompanied by his musical instrument- sarangi. Together the songs and the musical instrument has socially and culturally been seen as identity markers of the Nepali community as the songs are stories woven in the rich tapestry of traditional

Nepali folk music. Yet the question arises—Who are these singers and what role do they play in the cultural and musical history and narrative of the Indian Nepalis?

## 2. WHO ARE THE GANDHARBAS?

The Gandharbas are part of the Nepali community belonging to the Himalayan belt of Nepal and India who are traditionally associated with the profession of singing and hence the musical instrument sarangi. There are fascinating tales about the origin of the community—'There is a mythological tale according to which the Gandharbas are supposed to have descended from heavenly musicians who used to play in the court of Lord Indra [...] These musicians are supposed to have played music while heavenly dancers known as apsaras danced. The Gandharba community has taken its name from these heavenly beings' (Gajamer, 2022). Likewise, Project Sarangi initiated by Kiran Nepali (<https://projectsarangi.com>) which is an organization dedicated to the preservation of the dying art of the Gandharba community reiterates the tales of how this community is a descendent of a rishi or a wise sage/holy man named Gandharba who was bestowed with the instrument of sarangi by the Gods

However, a more commonplace name for people belonging to Gandharba community is 'Gainey' which translates into the word 'singer' which is a rare example of a community being named after a profession. While this may seem like a reference to the profession alone, it also carries with it the burden of caste as the Gandharbas are placed low in the hierarchy of Nepali caste system and are a part of the Nepali Dalit community. Hence, the use of the word Gandharbas is preferred since it does not carry a direct stigma of caste while also referring to the rich history of mythological tales.

People belonging to this community are traditionally associated with the occupation of singing—'they were nomadic musicians who played traditional folk and historical songs' (Panta, 2021). While these wandering bards played music to entertain, they also had an additional role of storytellers and keepers of history. They are also seen as bearers of news as they travelled from village to village. And although they live at the lowest level of social and political structure their contribution to Nepali music is immense. Purna Nepali writes about their contribution in his book *Gandharba- Sangeet Ra Sanskriti* about how the songs of Gandharba composed in different folktales and rhymes like mantra, ved, sawai, kakha, belol, ramkali, ghatana, mahal, mangal, malashri, dewsi, bhailo, ratyali, asaray etc has still been encouraging well known lyricist and writers (Nepali, 2004). These lines reflect the immense influence of the Gandharba on Nepali folk music and culture.

## 3. SARANGI

While this community is known to play various types of musical instruments, the one instrument they are synonymous with is the sarangi- which roughly translates into 'all the colours' which is a reflection on the universality of music. A sarangi is a 'fretless string instrument which is played using a bow called Dhanu or dhanuki" (Gajamer, 2022). Though it shares its name with another musical instrument in India the sound of the Nepali sarangi is closer to a violin and its sound is considered to be closest to the sound of a singing voice. The players of this instrument are also involved in the painstaking process of making the sarangi which is intricately carved out of a single piece of wood. Sarangi figures prominently as a

background to popular folk songs and Nepali music is closely tied with this instrument.

The sarangi has added relevance in the Nepali community as they are considered to be 'Chinharis' or cultural markers of identity as mentioned in *Hamro Lok Baaja Haruko Parichay*, one of the identity markers of our community are our folk musical instruments. Within Nepali community there are multiple types of musical instruments out of which madal, chyabong, damphu, machunga, vinaya and sarangi are considered the most important which further emphasizes the relevance of this instrument (*Hamro Lok Baaja Haruko Parichay*, 2015). Hence, sarangi as a musical instrument may be proudly displayed in Nepali homes even if it is not played as they become a symbol of belongingness to a larger community (Darnal, 2005, Gurung, 2014).

#### 4. THE STORY OF THE MUSICIAN AND HIS INSTRUMENT

As players as well as makers of the sarangi, the Gandharba community has strong historical and cultural ties with the instrument as the entire community is involved in the process of the making of sarangis. Bhokraj Gurung has traced the process of making the instrument in his thesis titled *Dynamics of Interplay between Caste and the Sarangi- A Study on Gandharbas of Nepal*. Here he charts the involvement of the entire Gandharba families in the making from the painstaking process of felling the tree to carving out the musical instrument. The women and children also take an active part in the process of making the sarangi as these instruments are a major source of income for these families (Gurung, 2014). As mentioned earlier, Sarangi is often kept in Nepali households as decorative pieces as it has strong cultural ties to the entire community. Likewise, there is a strong nostalgia attached to the instrument for the Nepali diaspora as well who are buyers of the instrument. Further it has been noted that the tourists also buy this instrument as souvenirs emphasizing the fact that this instrument can be seen as a cultural marker of the Nepali community.

Hence, from an economic point of view the instrument becomes a source of income from its very inception and the Gandharba community take great pride in the craftsmanship of the musical instrument. Likewise, the instrument further adds to economic value to the profession of the Gainey as the instrument is synonymous with the image of the Gainey which has been considered to be a hereditary profession of the people belonging to the Gandharba community so it becomes a means and source of income for the entire community.

#### 5. THE GAP BETWEEN THE MUSICIAN AND HIS INSTRUMENT

The relationship between the sarangi and his player is a multilayered but as reiterated above it is one of the cultural markers of the Nepali community yet the maker has always been in the periphery of society. The Gandharba community face exclusion in several ways but one important form of exclusion is caste- based. As part of a Hindu caste system, they are placed in the lowest rung of caste stratification as Nepali Dalits—' Socially considered an "impure and untouchable" caste within the hierarchical Hindu Varna system they were obliged to work as news bearers in the kingdom of Nepal, where they carried messages and news in the form of music as they moved from one place to another' (Tamang, 2023). He further elaborates that the exclusion that the Gandharba community face is not only on a social level but on a political level too since they are mobile communities who make a living by

crossing national borders. This means they are excluded from the privileges that is experienced by a citizen who is a permanent resident of a place.

This mobility of the Gandharba community is intricately connected with their caste which acts as a deterrent for the overall development. Professionally they remain tied to music due to their caste which means that they continue to face economic challenges. Likewise, the mobility of the community means that they do not experience the same level of growth as other communities—'Gandharbas have witnessed social exclusion due to its historical injustices of caste impositions thus making them mobile consequently leading to degrees of social expulsion: territorial, juridical, political, and economic.' (Tamang, 2023) and while the sarangi as an instrument is a matter of pride for the entirety of the Nepali community celebrated as a cultural marker, ironically it is also a marker of caste for a person belonging to the Gandharba community.

## 6. THE SINGING BARD IN DARJEELING

Gandharbas in Darjeeling as mentioned earlier is a common sight to see in the lanes of Darjeeling hills singing a popular tune catering mainly to the tourists who flock the popular hill station. These wandering minstrels are a permanent fixture in the subconscious mind of an Indian Nepali person residing in the hills of Darjeeling. Ironically, they are seen and yet 'unseen' markers who live in the fringes of the community who appear and disappear like seasons. The 1950 Indo-Nepal Friendship treaty ensured that citizens could move freely between the borders without visa (Subba, 2003). This means that citizens from Nepal come to India for education and economic purposes. Likewise, the Gandharbas typically travel to Darjeeling and nearby hills in hopes of some economic gains. However, life as a migrant worker is precarious for these nomadic people as they are often excluded from being social and political beneficiaries.

However, the music as well as the musician has remained in the cultural and literary consciousness of people in the hills of Darjeeling. This impact is reflected in the literature of the region like the story 'Taar Chudeko Sarangi' (Broken Strings of a Sarangi) by Jas Yanzon Pyasi (2015) anthologized in *Sahitya Kunj: A collection of Short Stories and Poems*. It tells the story of a mother and a daughter in search of their son who had crossed to border to earn a living. The story goes on to tell the readers how a young Gainey left his home ten years back and disappeared. After a long wait his mother along with her daughter decides to search for him which takes them to Kurseong where they learn the news that their son/brother met with a fatal accident. Tamang has used this story as an example to elucidate—'how precarious is the life of a Gainey. It suggests the mobile nature of the Gainey and sexual restrictions on who can play the Sarangi. Chatraman was obliged to carry on his ancestral caste-imposed occupation after his father's demise and enter Muglan to earn a livelihood. In search of Chatraman, his mother and sister also had to enter Muglan, where his sister was compelled to learn how to play a Sarangi in order to earn a living' (Tamang, 2023). Further this story also highlights how the story of sarangi and Gainey is an integral part of the literary imagination of the people living in the Darjeeling hills as they are part of stories like the one mentioned and are also part of folk stories and popular songs.

One such song is by the legendary singer Kumar Subba from Darjeeling titled 'Sarangi ko Taarle' which means the strings of a sarangi. (Subba, 1998). The lyrics of the songs can be translated to mean—the strings of the sarangi sing the song of my heart. Likewise, there are popular cafes in the region named 'Sarangi' or have a reference to the instrument which hints at how this instrument is part of the

everyday life as well. Bipul Chettri, another musician from the region who has been credited with popularizing a new wave of Nepali folk music has used the sound of sarangi in his music emphasizing the relevance of sarangi in Nepali music. Kiran Nepali who is a renowned sarangi player is also part of this new wave and plays with Bipul Chettri (Nepali, 2018). Together these examples are a reflection of how sarangi has remained a part of popular culture of the Darjeeling hills which raises the need to uncover the personal narratives of the Gandharbas who travel to Darjeeling hills carrying their sarangi whilst carrying the burden of a cultural marker as well.

## 7. A CONVERSATION WITH A GAINEY

A Gainey is often seen playing his instrument near the Mall Road in Darjeeling by the name of Sanjeev Gandharba who comes from the Jhapa district of Nepal from a place called Pritivinagar. He talks about how he travels to Darjeeling to play the sarangi like his forefathers have always done. He takes immense pride in describing his sarangi which was his grandfathers, the instrument being close to forty years old. He further elaborated on how the sarangi has been part of family forever since they have been playing as well as making the instruments. Sanjeev Gandharba also mentioned how his family practices farming especially during the monsoons when travelling to Darjeeling hills is difficult. The male members of his family have been coming to Darjeeling hills usually during summers and sometimes during winters to play the sarangi and make a living.

A lot of times the Gandharbas choose to play the sarangi in Darjeeling hills due to its close proximity with Nepal in terms of language and culture. The open borders further facilitate easy commuting to the hills of Darjeeling and many a times they have relatives who work and live in this region which makes living arrangements convenient for the musicians. The choice of songs that is played is interesting as they have now taken to also playing popular Bollywood songs according to the changing demands of the audience which are mostly the tourists who have come to visit the hill station and Sanjeev Gandharba takes great pride in sharing the information that his fellow Gainey have even been part of creative process of popular Bollywood songs in Mumbai. While this is a proud moment for the entire community the stark reality of marginalization cannot be ignored. Hence, some contemporary challenges mentioned were the dwindling numbers of these professional musicians which have now reduced to less than hundred which is reiterated by Kiran Nepali in his YouTube video as well who has talked about how parents in the Gandharba community no longer encourage their children to take up the hereditary profession (Nepali, 2018). Moreso, people perceive them as individuals who are not engaged in a profession which leads to further misunderstanding and lack of respect which tells a tale of marginalization and social exclusion.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Hence, in order to mitigate this misrepresentation, it is important for the stories of Gandharbas to be told and retold like their songs which continue to survive in popular imagination. The glaring gap between representation and reality serves as a stark reminder of the complexities that lie within the social fabric of the Nepali community. While cultural representations continue to celebrate the sarangi as an identity marker of the entire Nepali community, the lived experiences of the maker of the same instrument continue to present a disturbing contrast to the projected stereotypical images. The systematic marginalization of the entire community based



on caste and profession paints a rather distressing picture of these mobile communities. And this marginalization continues to obstruct the members of these community from being part of the overall social, political and economic development. The celebration of sarangi has ironically obscured its marker where his image is exoticized fostering false narratives and further alienation.

Hence, as the Darjeeling hills resound with the haunting music of the sarangi, it is pertinent for the listeners to take into account the lived experiences and realities of the Gandharbas who need to be acknowledged as the keepers of this age-old art form. This acknowledgement will not only ensure economic and political gains but will ensure a genuine understanding of the community beyond the prejudices and distinctions of caste where the famous sarangi no longer overshadows its maker.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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