

Special Issue Research Article

Gaddi Music in the YouTube Era: Regional Identities and Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Gaddi music videos have millions of YouTube views and Gaddi singers are prominent among Himachal Pradesh's folk music artists. The Gaddi community is connected in popular imagery to the mountains and known as transhumant agropastoralists who rear sheep and goats. A characteristic of Gaddi singers present online is their activity offline—cultural programs, concerts, and religious rituals. Gaddi vernacular music, online and offline, promotes a version of their cultural identity that is tied to their pastoral heritage. Digitalization has lowered barriers to music production and consumption and, thus, enlarged the possibilities of artistic representations. The YouTube videos produced are highly professional. Their presentations of cultural heritage coincide with a rapid transformation of Gaddi lifestyles in everyday life. The connection between digital Gaddi music and cultural heritage is part of a broader development in productions of regional music in India. In the digital era, regional identities are being reaffirmed, not devalued, by producers and consumers with an increasingly cosmopolitan outlook.

Keywords

Gaddi; folk music; digital media; YouTube; cultural heritage

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Introduction

Gaddi music videos have been appearing on YouTube since 2017. Most of the latest Gaddi songs are available on streaming platforms like Spotify, Gaana, Amazon Music, Apple Music, JioSaavn, Wynk, and Hungama. Singers use Facebook to promote and communicate their work. They post links to their songs and YouTube videos, announce live events, upload videos of performances, and share projects of fellow artists. Contacts and followers in turn like and share songs and leave comments on social media. Many Gaddi music videos have millions of YouTube views. Gaddi music is making its contribution to the field of cultural production flourishing in the digital era.

Vernacular music implies a connection to regional identity. Gaddi songs fall in the realm of vernacular music (Manuel 2014). In this article I take a media anthropology approach to analyze Gaddi songs and show that cultural heritage and identity is central to the musical expressions in question and that the cultural expressions of communities are “processes of storytelling and dialogue” (Menon and Tripathy 2022: 4) in the community and broader social context. Gaddi music is an example of local communities’ appropriation of the internet for cultural representations.

This article focuses on Gaddi digital music, and its scope is limited to singers who use online media; it excludes musical forms and singers not active online. The article employs online ethnography, video interviews with singers, and a broader consideration of live performances: concerts, religious events, and cultural programs.

My previous fieldwork in Kangra and Chamba (2006-2009) serves as the background for the findings, which are situated in the context of media anthropological studies in India. The consideration of Gaddi music on YouTube updates my previous analysis of music on video compact disks (VCD) (Wagner 2013; 2020). I follow up on “stories” of Gaddi belonging, regional

identity, and cosmopolitanism expressed in digital media.

And I address questions about the transformations of vernacular music in the digital era, how embedded narratives in Gaddi music relate to everyday experiences of the singers and music consumers, and how expressions of identity and cultural heritage address questions of regional belonging within the Indian nation-state.

Productions of Regional Music

I begin with media practices in the time of digital production and consumption. The technology that enabled VCD production gave rise to a “VCD culture with its own characteristic genres, conventions and clichés, and associated modes of production and consumption” (Manuel 2014: 391). The technology decentralized the production of regional vernacular music in India. And digitalization let listeners download music onto pen drives and mobile phones to listen to offline (Manuel 2014; Fiol 2018). The widespread use of mobile phones and upsurge in internet access in India personalized consumption (Manuel 2014).

Now, audio streaming platforms have replaced pen drives and mobile downloads, and YouTube music videos can be considered the successor of VCDs. These new digital technologies have lowered production and distribution barriers, increased the possibilities for representation, and facilitated a “remarkable growth in the regional or local forms of cultural expressions since the rise of new technologies in the last four decades” where “the remotest of cultural entities are being drawn into platforms like YouTube with an unrestricted embrace” (Menon and Tripathy (2022: 4).

During an interview for this article, singer Reeta Purhaan described the internet technologies for music production as a medium that has opened new possibilities. She recalled how buying a CD or VCD was often rather expensive and a *big deal*, whereas on YouTube people listen freely to regional music even if they do not comprehend the words. Purhaan’s remark matches my observations from fieldwork in Kangra,

where VCDs were popular but the price of INR 50 made the purchase somewhat extravagant for many. Mobile phones have largely supplanted the VCD market, and free streaming and downloads have expanded the range of music available; it has also had the downstream effect of expanding the access of women and girls mostly confined to home and domestic spaces. Women and girls profit from individualized listening on mobile phones. Public listening—for example, while doing *time pass* (passing the time) at food stalls—has always privileged male consumption.

Free platforms allow artists to experiment with musical styles, upload their innovations, and even engage in marketing. At the same time, music revenue—arguably always secondary to income from live performances (Tripathy 2012)—has become more elusive because file sharing is easy and consumers expect to stream music for free (Manuel 2014; Fiol 2018). Monetizing YouTube channels can create revenue, but it requires thousands of subscribers and technical knowledge of how to configure advertisements to maximize revenue, and it raises production cost.

Over the past decade, regional and non-mainstream voices have received attention in several media anthropological studies on South Asia. Regional voices are emerging as part of popular culture, political movements, and documentary works (de Maker and Schleiter 2020). The regional has often been understood as a study of cultural peripheries that contrast with mainstream Bollywood or Bengali cinema. However, the “regional” might also be understood as a standpoint that sees “things from within the region” and takes the “region” as a place of everyday life (Menon and Tripathy 2022: 1). Although the term “region” carries the notion of a concrete, empirical reality connected to a certain place on a map, in a study of digital media—with new technologies and production chains—the “region” is becoming increasingly fluid:

Positing the “regional” in an age of affordable and easy replicability as

well as near universal accessibility lends an unforeseen fluidity to the very idea of the region. Although as usual we continue to deal with the provenance, origin, and limited circulation of cultural products easily seen on our geographical maps, a seasoned researcher will realize over time that her area of research has slowly transformed from a supposed “periphery” into an epicenter, becoming a measure for the myriad cultural inputs traveling within and without. (Ibid: 2-3)

The expanding Gaddi music scene seems to be such a regional hub of the cultural productivity of digital media.

Gaddi Songs as Cultural Heritage in the YouTube Era

Gaddi music has been shifting from VCD to YouTube, and increasingly so between 2017 and 2020. The video production quality has improved rapidly. The video imagery is standardized. The number of songs and individual artists on YouTube is increasing continually. Table 1 lists only the most prominent artists. New Gaddi music channels are being continually created; therefore, this list will expand.

Jayanti Mata Cassette, originally a Kangra-based cassette and VCD company, started its YouTube channel in February 2017 featuring Gaddi folk singer Sunil Rana (among others). *Hillywood Studio*, another channel, started in July 2017 by uploading Poonam Bhardwaj’s music (among others). Gaddi singer Ajay Bharmauri joined in 2018, and Sunil Rana started *Shepherd’s Harmony*, his own channel. *Ishant Bhardwaj Official* (Ishant Bhardwaj), *Gaddiyali Mehak* (Surinder Patyal), and *Divine Bhagsu* (Kamal Nehria) all appeared on YouTube in 2019. *Sujata Bhardwaj Mahadev* (Sujata Bhardwaj) and *Mountain Voice* (Anuragini Thakur) appeared in 2020.

Shepherd’s Harmony and *Ishant Bhardwaj Official* each had more than 100,000 subscribers by June 2022. And, with over 13 million views, Ishant Bhardwaj’s song

Singer	Song title	Hashtag on YouTube	Views on YouTube
Ishant Bhardwaj	<i>Bindra Bana Bo Kheri Gojriyo</i>	#Latest Gaddiyali	10,245,376 between Oct 2, 2021 and June 13, 2022
Sunil Rana	<i>Shiv Goura</i>	#NewHimachali, #GaddiPahadiSong	44,360 in seven days between June 7, 2022 and June 13, 2022
Poonam Bhardwaj	<i>Shiva Mere Part -1</i>	#Latest himachali song	6,623,719 between Mar 23, 2021 and June 13, 2020
Sujata Bhardwaj	<i>Shikhra Re Saami</i>		1,342,952 between Oct 5, 2021 and June 13, 2002
Anuragini Thakur	<i>Radha Chandroli</i>	#gaddiyalisong, #paharisong	1,534,967 between Oct 17, 2020 and June 13, 2022
Kamal Nehria	<i>Laadliye</i>	#New Himachali song 2021	4,589,757 between March 26, 2021 and June 13, 2022

Table1 : YouTube views and hashtags of Gaddi vernacular songs

Nikki Jinni Gujri was 20th in a YouTube search for “Himachali song.” Several Gaddi songs tagged #latest Gaddiyali song, #new Himachali song, and #new Pahari song have been viewed over a million times each. YouTube videos by women singers like Poonam Bhardwaj, Anuragini Thakur, and Sujata Bhardwaj are viewed as widely, too.

To set the number of YouTube views in relation to demographics, in 2011 there were 178,000 registered ST Gaddis in Himachal Pradesh, although more people speak the Gaddi dialect (Census of India 2011a). Himachal Pradesh has over 6.8 million inhabitants, with over 2 million people living in the districts with the highest population of Gaddi speakers, Chamba and Kangra (Census of India 2011b).

As the hashtags (Table 1) show, songs in the Gaddi dialect are tagged not only as Gaddi but also as Himachali or Pahari. Several singers write their lyrics or have them written by professional lyricists, but the lyrics of most songs produced as YouTube videos are “traditional,” or adapted from oral traditions and not attributable to a single artist. Professional music composers and directors, and not the singers, compose the music. One prominent producer of

Gaddi music is Surinder Negi, a professional music director and composer originally from the Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh.¹

The production quality of almost all recently produced Gaddi music videos on YouTube is highly professional. Expensive equipment like drones is used to film high-resolution videos. The end credits refer to the videos as a “film.” The words “a film by” are used to credit the filmmaker. The singers work with professional film producers who specialize in music videos and often wedding photography. One prominent filmmaker of Gaddi videos is A.S. Pahadi. Kangra district has other film-making and production studios.

The music videos are filmed at locations in the Dhaula Dhar Mountains. The setting is standardized, almost invariably depicting a mountain landscape with sheep and goats in the background and dance troupes in Gaddi dress (women in *nuanchari*, a colorful dress with a long, wide skirt and men in a *chola*, a white wool gown, and a *dora*, a black wool cord worn as a belt). In the film, images of a singer or mixed-gender couple alternate with images of a troupe performing circle dances. The dances are choreographed to send the women’s skirts flying and to

have the image captured by the cameras in the overhead drones. The visuals also render the lyrics and depict local temples and village life such as courtyards, kitchen fires, women ambling through the fields, wool spinning, and weaving blankets out of white and black wool in the Gaddi style. The images augment the spoken words to construct a tableau of Gaddi culture.

The images have not changed substantially from the representation of the Gaddi people in earlier VCDs (Wagner 2013) but the attention to detail has improved. Women still wear the *nuanchari* but now also carefully matched silver jewelry and the *dupatta* (headscarves). And men almost always wear the *chola* and *dora* matched with ornamented scarves. If early VCD images created “virtual” Gaddi in the sense of a hyper-real, condensed image (Adams 1996; Wagner 2020), now this image is even more condensed.² Pastoral imagery continues to be the dominant characterization of Gaddi music despite accelerations in social media, digital platforms, video production, and socioeconomic changes in Gaddi life.

The depiction of rural life in music videos is not unique to Gaddi music; it has parallels in video productions of other vernacular music. The visual imagery in VCDs from the Braj region are “fairly literal picturizations of the songs’ lyric content, with the added element of dance” (Manuel 2014: 406). Similar to Gaddi music videos, the videos from the Braj region affirm “the unpretentious charm and validity of lower-class village life by being staged in typical rural settings—a field, a riverside or a courtyard by a mud hut” in contrast with Bollywood glamour (Manuel 2014: 408).

Gaddi music videos have a unique feature: the imagery uses repetitive visual language to construct the ongoing link between Gaddi identity and mountain pastoralism, a key trope of Gaddi belonging. The singers do not simply entertain Gaddi and other Himachali listeners, they also naturalize mountain pastoralism as central to Gaddi cultural heritage. These images are notable because they emphasize pastoral continuity at a time when Gaddi lifestyles are moving away

from the images and underlying values depicted in the videos (Simpson 2022).

The Gaddi community, geographically and historically based at the northwest of the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, is connected in popular imagery to the mountains. The Gaddis are widely known as transhumant agropastoralists who rear sheep and goats—although it was never the case that all the Gaddi people engaged in shepherding, and in several parts earlier generations of many families had opted out of pastoralism and into sedentary forms of employment. While shepherds still herd flocks between the Punjab foothills and the high Himalayan pastures, most of their offspring receive higher education and turn to other forms of employment.

The historical connection to shepherding, however, is the primary reason that Himachal Pradesh recognizes the Gaddis as a Scheduled Tribe in the Chamba and Kangra districts, an administrative status granted at different times. However, Scheduled Caste communities self-identifying as Gaddi that are excluded contest the classification of Gaddis as a Scheduled Tribe (Christopher 2020a; Christopher and Phillimore 2023). A more inclusive definition of “Gaddi” is as a linguistic community of those who speak the Gaddi dialect.

Such a definition is fitting for the study of music, as in this article: the Gaddi dialect is the primary identifier of individual songs and artists, although Kangra-based Gaddi speakers live in caste heterogeneous, ethnically plural villages with Pahari or Kangri speakers and are fluent in both dialects and in standard Hindi from government education. I consider “Gaddi vernacular music” an inclusive signifier that includes all songs in the Gaddi dialect whether the performer self-identifies as Gaddi.

Close-up on Gaddi YouTube Singers

Who are the Gaddi singers presenting this pastoral image of Gaddi cultural heritage using hashtags such as #GaddiPahadiSong? What are their larger musical ambitions?

The most widely known singer is probably Sunil Rana, from Dharamsala in Kangra district. Rana produces videos of *bhajan* (devotional songs) and vernacular songs with both “traditional” and original lyrics.³ He used to record VCD albums—for example, Lok Ramayan—before the YouTube era began (Gupta 2007). Both his band and YouTube channel are called *Shepherd’s Harmony*. Rana produces music with Jayanti Mata Cassette (JMC) Productions and releases videos on his own YouTube channel. Like many other artists, Rana performs live at concerts, performances at village festivals, and religious events. His professional Facebook profile name is “Sunil Rana Himachali Folk Singer.” The introduction to the profile is “To uplift the Himachali and Gaddi culture is my passion.”⁴ Rana is also a *nuala* (night-long vigil for the god Shiva) singer. On his Facebook page he uploads short videos of *nuala* events, links to his YouTube videos, and advertisements for concerts. In 2022, between April and June, he advertised on Facebook his performances at the Live Star Night at the Satovari Mela, at a temple in Mandi, a *nuala*, one forum in Kullu, and his live act at the Summer Festival Dharamshala.⁵

Ishant Bhardwaj, often advertised as a “Himachali folk singer,” was the most watched Gaddi singer on YouTube in 2022 (according to view counts). Bhardwaj sings vernacular and devotional songs and “traditional” and innovated lyrical compositions. Like Rana, he also engages in *nuala* singing and performs at live events ranging from Star Nights⁶ to *jagran* (singing devotional music at all-night vigils). In 2022, between April and June, he advertised on his Facebook page *jagran* in Chamba and Palampur, a concert in Palampur with his band, a *nuala* in Baijnath, a live performance with his band in Hamirpur, a Star Night performance at the Palampur Fair, and the Palampur Sulah Star Night.⁷

Surinder Patyal, from Bharmour, introduces himself on his Facebook page as a singer of *aincali* (Gaddi devotional songs). *Aincali* songs should adhere strictly to convention;

therefore, folk songs provide more artistic freedom, explains Patyal. He also produces music videos of vernacular songs, with both “traditional” and original lyrics, and uploads them on his YouTube channel—sometimes in collaboration with the singer Anuragini Thakur.⁸ Patyal is a teacher by profession. He followed his father into *nuala* singing and has been performing at ritual occasions, village fairs, and cultural programs in Himachal Pradesh and India for over 20 years.

Patyal and his group represented Himachal Pradesh at the National Tribal Dance Festival at Odisha in 2022 with a Gaddi music-and-dance performance. In a personal interview soon after his return, he described his goal as the preservation of Gaddi *sanskriti* (culture): reproducing the lyrics of *aincali* songs but also compositions, instrumentation, dance, dress, ornamentation, and the “style of singing,” the latter requiring singers and musicians to sit while performing.

Kamal Nehria from Dharamsala became a professional singer only in 2019, but his first appearance on stage was 30 years ago, when he was still in school, as a dancer in a program organized for the birthday of his Holiness the Dalai Lama. In college, he danced in cultural programs; later, he was active in participating and organizing cultural programs in McLeod Ganj and Bhagsu Nag. Although Nehria mainly sings Gaddi devotional songs and performs as a *nuala* singer, he has recently been exploring romantic genres and songs in Kangri. His music videos, foremost songs with “traditional” lyrics, are showcased on his YouTube channel *Divine Bhagsu*.

Nehria, too, emphasizes that his goal is to present cultural heritage. On Facebook his intro reads “We welcome you all to our Divine Bhagsu page. We are here to showcase our cultural heritage.”⁹ In a personal interview, he explained to me that the musical instruments form a unique aspect of Gaddi songs and the proper display of Gaddi dress and ornaments in performances and videos is important.

Reeta Purhaan, from Baijnath in Kangra District, started singing in her senior year in secondary school. Later, she represented her college as a singer and started her career as a performer at youth festivals. Purhaan is the first stage performer in her family but follows her mother who has been an active singer in the context of women's village performances. She mostly performs live but has also recorded audio songs and is increasingly recording videos. Purhaan experiments with what she referred to in a personal interview as a "mash-up" of different Himachali styles.

In Gaddi, Purhaan's passion is *lok geet* (folk songs) which, she explained, can convey a broad array of topics, from love affairs to commentary on old age. She also sings in Kangri, Hindi, and English, depending on the audience. Purhaan has started singing at *jagrata* (nightlong vigils for the mother goddess). A longtime research collaborator of Stephen Christopher (the co-editor of this Special Issue), she has a unique background as a Hindi teacher at Yale University (for the Fulbright Program). Her image graces the cover of this Special Issue.

Poonam Bhardwaj, from Chamba town, represents another style. Bhardwaj sings the "traditional" lyrics of Gaddi devotional music to disco and pop music. Her Facebook page introduces her as a music teacher and as professional singer.¹⁰ She produces videos and performs live. Bhardwaj has recorded videos in several Himachali dialects besides Gaddi.¹¹

Others who deserve attention in the future are Anuragini Thakur, Sujata Bhardwaj, and Ajay Bharmauri. Although professional singers, many are trained in other fields and have other lines of employment. Overall, the Gaddi music scene is vibrant but small in size; it is characterized by personal contacts between singers who frequently refer to and promote each other's works on social media. Women are strongly represented in digital media, like in other vernacular musical traditions in India: the Bhojपुरi music DVD scene is made up of "aspiring singers—male and female, of diverse class and caste backgrounds" (Manuel 2014: 402),

and Bihari music is a respectable option for women singers (Tripathy 2012).

Many Gaddis in Kangra speak Gaddi, Pahari (Kangri), and Hindi fluently. Unsurprisingly, singers experiment with linguistic mash-ups and crossovers. Both Purhaan and Nehria report that Kangri speakers listen to Gaddi music. And both perform Gaddi and Kangri songs for Kangri-speaking audiences. The linguistic hybridity is evident in the performance schedules of Start Night performances or in the identification of singers as generic Himachali folk singers. Kirin Narayan notes the "deep hybridity of languages" (2015: 229) in women's songs—Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, English, Kangri, and Pahari (1997: 28)—in the parallel Kangri musical tradition. A fuller analysis of song lyrics is needed to properly understand linguistic hybridity and the context for code-switching.

The Gaddi singers prolific on digital platforms depict rural imagery—notable because while mostly village-dwelling, they are also rather cosmopolitan and often college-educated. Video production is centered in the Kangra Valley—and, in particular, Dharamsala—where local residents pride themselves on their cosmopolitanism, partly attributable to the status of Dharamsala as a "Smart City"¹² (Christopher 2020b). In Kangra—and, especially, around Dharamsala—the internet connection is good and widely available and smartphone ownership is widespread. The internet connection in the Bharmaur area of Chamba, to which YouTube videos allude, is of slower speeds; therefore, spots toward the Kangra side of the Dhaura Dhar are selected for video shooting (Patyal, personal communication).

Other impediments to digital participation are smartphone ownership, the means to fund video production, different degrees of digital literacy based on age cohort, and educational attainment. Cultural production on YouTube depicts, but does not necessarily represent, local village culture, as many musical activities prevalent in Gaddi village life are not represented on digital media or online platforms.

Beyond YouTube: Live Performances

All Gaddi singers described in this article create YouTube content and perform live at cultural programs, concerts, and religious rituals. What Manuel (2014: 409) notes for the Bhojpur region—musical activity is both digital and live, and live performances “continue to constitute primary income sources for singers and dance troupes as well”—is true for Himachali Gaddi music as well.

During the pandemic, singers streamed performances on Facebook Live or uploaded short videos onto their Facebook Page to stay connected to their audience. And many Gaddi cultural groups invited singers to perform on Facebook Live. The Kangra-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Youth Development Centre organized folk art events online (The Tribune 2021). In 2022, shortly after the COVID-19 lockdowns had ended and normal life had slowly started to resume, I interviewed the singers. All of them said that in addition to financial benefits, live performances have artistic value and allow for personal interaction and direct feedback.

Cultural programs

Cultural programs are organized by the central government or state governments. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs supports the National Tribal Dance Festival of Odisha. The Department of Language, Art and Culture, Government of Himachal Pradesh organizes events. The Sangeet Natak Akademi, Ministry of Culture, Government of India, writes (2022):

Since its inception, the Folk and Tribal Section has been working in the field of performing arts in the country, preserving and promoting the vast intangible heritage of India’s diverse culture expressed in forms of traditional, folk & tribal music, dance and drama.

Dance groups represent the Gaddi community and the state of Himachal Pradesh to showcase their intangible cultural heritage. The Department of Tourism and Culture,

Government of Chhattisgarh organized the third National Tribal Festival at Raipur in November 2022. A Gaddi dance group from Chamba placed third in the Harvesting Crops Dance Category and won a prize of INR 200,000.

D.C. Rana, the Deputy Commissioner of Chamba, congratulated the dance group saying that national recognition was a “[matter of] pride for Himachal” (*The Tribune* 2022). The *Hindustan Times* (2022) and *Outlook* (Shankar 2022), too, reported on the winners. Such recognition of state-sponsored events works to include minority tribes in constructions of the Indian nation (Maaker 2013). The Gaddis can participate in these cultural festivals because they are classified as a Scheduled Tribe (ST).

Concerts

Singers perform at Star Nights. They may also perform live at official ceremonies, association meetings, or in the café culture spreading from tourism centers like Dharamsala.

The Minjar Mela, is a festival held at the fairground in the middle of Chamba, a town in Himachal Pradesh. The mela is an occasion for concerts as well as cultural programs. In July 2022 the festival featured nationally and regionally famous singers, including Indian Idol star Salman Ali, Himachali folk singer Inderjeet from Kullu, Voice of India singer Shilpa Surroch. Ishant Bhardwaj performed on the fifth day, Sunil Rana as the main act on the sixth day, and Poonam Bhardwaj on the final day.

The concerts were streamed live on the YouTube channels *Chamba Hulchul* and City Channel.

Sunil Rana’s performance on July 29 attracted up to 1,300 online viewers on *Chamba Hulchul*. He sang in Gaddi and interacted with the audience in Hindi. Rana appeared on stage in the *chola, dora*, and *safar* (pink turban) accompanied by a group of women dancers in *nuanchari* and men dancers in *chola*. During a song, Rana invited the Deputy Commissioner of

Chamba, one of the chief guests, on stage to dance.

Ishant Bhardwaj was introduced as the artist receiving “millions of views on YouTube for each song.” Bhardwaj appeared on stage in a business suit, T-shirt, and trademark Himachali cap accompanied by a dance troupe of women in *nuanchari*. His stage show included a light show and pyrotechnics. Bhardwaj sang in Gaddi and interacted with the audience in Hindi.

Poonam Bhardwaj was introduced as “our Himachal’s beautiful voice” and a native Chambiali representing Himachali culture on YouTube. She started her concert with her version of the song *Shiva mere*, herself dressed in a Punjabi salwar kameez but accompanied by four dancers in *nuanchari*.

The aim of cultural programs is the preservation of culture. In contrast, concerts aim to entertain. However, live concerts, too, display Gaddi heritage through dress, dance movements, and lyrics. And the singers take pride in presenting their cultural heritage. Like music videos, live concerts often feature female dancers in *nuanchari* accompanying the Gaddi singer. During the 2022 Minjar Mela, Inderjeet’s dance troupe, too, wore the typical Kullu dress.

Religious rituals

Religious rituals are performed at temples and at public or household functions. Ishant Bhardwaj’s schedule shows several *jagrata* events. All the men mentioned in this article perform at *nuala*, a night-long singing and dancing vigil for the god Shiva. The *nuala* ritual has become a marker of Gaddi identity that sets them apart from proximate Pahari groups (Wagner 2013). Singers need training to acquire the knowledge of the ritual repertoire and structure of *nuala*. The *nuala* is not an individual performance; the *bande*, four men singers, perform the *nuala* seated on blankets on the floor. The singers also play the accompanying instruments: *dholak* (two-headed, barrel-shaped drum) and *thali ghadda* (brass plate on a clay pitcher). Musicians like Ishant Bhardwaj or Ajay Bharmauri also play the keyboard or harmonium. Earlier, only Sippi and Rehare

men could perform the *nuala* professionally (Sharma 2015). The style of *nuala* singing remains consistent and is paired with dancing by the audience. Stage performers like Sunil Rana and Ishant Bhardwaj follow this pattern. Considering that anyone can upload videos, the relatively consistent combination of vernacular music and *nuala* singing by Gaddi YouTube artists is striking because *nuala* singing requires not only musical talent but also cultural competence and practice.

Juxtaposing Star Nights against state-run cultural programs and traditional instrumentation against disco beats raises questions about “authentic” Gaddi culture. In representing the Gaddi cultural heritage, stage performances, YouTube videos, cultural programs, and religious performances show remarkable continuity and the aim to entertain converges with and diverges from the aim to preserve their heritage. This may be due to the uniformity of dress, dance, and visual pastoral markers or to the mix of video production, ritual performance, and cultural knowledge. Moreover, and like elsewhere in India, Gaddi regional music does not pit new against old; rather, it allows tradition and innovation to complement each other. In Garhwal, for example, Fiol (2018) notes that the popularity of digital media productions has revived oral traditions. In Meghalaya, the staged Garo Wangala dance, originally derived from village dance, has popularized village dance (de Maaker 2013).

From analyzing social media over the past few years and conducting online interviews, my cursory impression is that this conclusion holds for Gaddi music as well: it is now ascendant over Punjabi and Bollywood music. Digital media seems to have renewed interest in Gaddi vernacular songs online as well as offline. During my fieldwork in Himachal between 2006 and 2008, the only recorded music at weddings was played by teenagers who played Punjabi music on cassette players when the groom’s party had left for the bride’s house. They created their own dance floor next to the room where the married women were ritually joking. It

has become customary in the past five years for disk jockeys to play recorded songs on sound systems for dance and entertainment at weddings. Gaddi songs have become a popular choice.

Audience Commentaries

The comment section of YouTube videos gives valuable insights into the audience response to Gaddi songs. Leaving aside the frequent compliments on the artistic performances and voice of the singers, I focus on comments relating to Gaddi identity and the process of identifying songs as Gaddi. These comments are coded as either a reference to Gaddi or Himachali culture. I have taken the liberty of slightly editing the comments for standard grammar. For example, these comments on Sunil Rana's *Heedee*:

Sunil Rana ji thanks for giving new energy to Gaddi culture and community. Feeling proud.

You have given new heights not only to our Gaddi culture but to Himachali music also. Your contribution will be remembered forever by upcoming generations.¹³

Or comments on Ishant Bhardwaj's *Bindra Bana*:

Wow...I played this song in my office. Since then, it is getting repeated on daily basis. We Gaddis are rich by culture.

Proud to be Himachali.

Such a beautiful voice you have. Thanks. Representing our culture so beautifully ... Himachali.

I am from Uttarakhand and proud to Pahadi.

We are proud of you and our Gaddi culture.¹⁴

Or comments on Kamal Nehria's *Laadliye*:

This is my favorite Pahari song. You have a magical voice Kamal ji.

This song represents our divine, spiritual, and rich culture.

Most beautiful song ever in Gaddi culture. ... loved it a lot.¹⁵

Or comments on Surinder Patyal and Anuragini Thakur's *Dharamraj ri Kachehari*:

Real culture *ko dikhane k liye* thanks. [Thanks for showing the real culture.]

Hearty congratulations to all of your group members. You keep serving the folk culture very, very well Anuragini and Patyal ji [...].¹⁶

The comments value the music videos as presentations of Gaddi cultural heritage. Even though clearly marked as Gaddi, the comments move laterally from Gaddi vernacular music to Himachali and Pahari culture. Like the hashtags labeling songs as both Gaddi and Himachali, these comments frame Gaddi songs within the wider Himachali regional culture. In contrast to the ST status that exposes Gaddi belonging as distinct from mainstream Himachali society, the comments clearly reflect the commenters' self-identification as Gaddi and/or Himachali as part of regional belonging. This positioning of Gaddi belonging as Himachali belonging already existed in the early Facebook and VCD era, when representations of Gaddi life—with references to pastoralism, rurality, and the Himalayas—posited Himachali belonging in opposition to the cultures of cities or the plains (Wagner 2020). The YouTube era brings forward a distinctive self-assertive identification with regional belonging that moves the region into the center. The tendency to publicly express regional belonging is shared in social media comments of other regional music productions, for example from Ladakh.

Ladakhi youth are now producing and viewing online music videos that affirm their ties to others from the region, in part through the music, language, and images of the video, but also through interchanges

in the “comments” area on websites like YouTube (Dinnerstein 2018: 106).

A second category of comments reveals social relatedness between the consumer and artistic producer by using affective kinship terms of address, showing the overlap of artists’ online and offline communities. The affective closeness between artists and consumers is noted throughout India and in Garhwali music:

Listeners often favor singers who come from their town/village of origin and they may be able to identify lyrical, melodic, and rhythmic features of local song types, as well as the dance steps and visual aspects of productions that come from particular sub-regions (Fiol 2018: 115).

Often, former tourists, expatriate Gaddis living outside Himachal and, even, India, and others comment on YouTube videos. The dual, competing processes at work make evident that the commenters are forming a network of regional belonging wider and more fluid than the geographical boundaries of Gaddi regional belonging. Conversely, digital music and comments highlight small-scale regional belonging connected to single villages, extended kinship networks, and geographical proximity in Himalayan life.¹⁷ Online media does not do away with the local as an important category for analysis and belonging; rather, socio-geographic identifications have found a new medium of expression. These expressions of local belonging occur as multiple self-identifications revealing “tribal” belonging of national and increasingly cosmopolitan, “digital” subjects. Certainly, these comments express pride in Gaddi belonging; as such, they epitomize the process of small-scale social reproduction through the popular medium of vernacular music. At the same time, they engage with macro processes of national belonging and regional identification vis-à-vis the pan-Indian state.

Media Practices as Storytelling: Regional Identities and Cultural Heritage

In India, vernacular music has created niches within digital media. In the context of vernacular music performances on digital media, this article considers consumer responses as affirmations of local and regional identities, the standardization of visual tropes in Gaddi music, the professionalization of the production of Gaddi music videos in the digital era, and Gaddi music videos’ depiction of an ongoing link between Gaddi cultural identity and mountain pastoralism. Given the size of the Gaddispeaking community, Gaddi music is having a significant impact on Himachali regional music online, as evidenced by the millions of views received by Gaddi music videos on YouTube.

The connection between digital vernacular music and cultural heritage is not unique to Gaddi music; it is part of broader developments in the production of Indian regional music. The “regional” is moving into the center of both cultural production and scholarly analysis. As consumption of online media is largely independent of concrete geographical venues, and digital access produces new regional networks independent of location, the concept of the “region” becomes more fluid and wider than its geographical mapping.

Gaddi music occupies a small online niche; nevertheless, it is becoming a staple in Himachali digital media productions. The popularity of vernacular music, as evident from the number of views on YouTube and the rising popularity of singers, is a way of maintaining links with Gaddi cultural heritage when few follow the pastoral lifestyle. The presentations of cultural heritage—like the typical Gaddi dress and jewelry—have increased in YouTube videos over VCDs. At the same time, however, contrasts are decreasing in the digital era as producers and consumers with an increasingly cosmopolitan outlook affirm regional identity through music. This era of increasing cosmopolitanism does not discard regional identities; instead, it magnifies cultural

productions in vernacular languages. The vernacular or regional is not in contrast to the cosmopolitan but mutually reinforcing.

For instance, the rise of Bhojpuri music and cinema is part of the broader development in the realm of language across India: while Hindi has become the common medium in Northwest India, vernacular languages are simultaneously moving from “private spaces to the public domain” (Tripathy 2012: 64). The public consumption of vernacular popular music serves as a marker of a positive collective self-image (Fiol 2018). Similarly, online and offline performances enhance each other and contribute to the popularity of vernacular music.

Apart from Punjabi music, several “regional cultures are still in the process of working out ways of affirming at once modernity and regional identity, especially when that identity is most characteristically associated with rural traditions” (Manuel 2014, 401). Contemporary Gaddi music seems to have “worked out” its way or to have at least found its niche within the Himachali music scene.

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Endnotes

1. For Surinder Negi’s background see Bharat Bhushan Negi, “An Exclusive Interview With Surender Negi,” YouTube video, 32:34, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-B8IAL7o9MM> (last accessed December 22, 2022).
2. This emphasis on typical dress shows a parallel to a development in the German state of Bavaria around 2006-2010. Here the Bavarian dress of *Lederhosen* and *Dirndl* dress experienced a revival as a fashionable outfit among the youth while it had previously been associated with the old generation and rural backwardness.
3. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-Cpt8mjKHa6b036ogSWigEQ> (last accessed August 25, 2023).
4. <https://www.facebook.com/sunilrana003> (last accessed June 23, 2022).
5. <https://www.facebook.com/sunilrana003> (last accessed June 23, 2022).
6. “Star Nights” are folk music concerts, often hosted at fairs and headlining several popular singers.
7. <https://www.facebook.com/ishant.bhardwaj.756> (last accessed June 23, 2022).
8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOn0Mti-M_8 (last accessed August 25, 2023).
9. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064095192334> (last accessed June 23, 2022).
10. <https://www.facebook.com/paharimastani> (last accessed June 26, 2022).
11. <https://www.youtube.com/@poonambhardwajofficial/featured> (last accessed December 29, 2022).
12. The Government of India’s Smart Cities Mission promotes and supports smart solutions to infrastructure, sustainable environment, and quality of life. One hundred cities have been awarded the title “Smart City”.
13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okysxmk-3du> (last accessed June

23, 2022).

14. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0tlmw9t1pc> (last accessed June 26, 2022).

15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygdrikfoit0> (last accessed June 26, 2022).

16. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-va6y5Yx5v4> (last accessed June 26, 2022).

17. Recent uploads also show differentiations within Gaddi music at the village or valley level.

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