

Research Report

Vitality and Sustainability of Traditional Music: A Survey of Devotional Singing Groups (*dāphā khalah*) in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal

Nutandhar Sharma

Lumbini University

Richard Widdess

SOAS University of London

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Abstract

Dāphā bhajan is a participatory genre of Hindu–Buddhist devotional music, sung by groups of farmers and other Newar singers in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. It is deeply integrated with local neighbourhood communities, but owing to recent disasters (the 2015 earthquake, the 2020–2022 Covid-19 pandemic) and ongoing cultural changes, its sustainability is in doubt. In 2022–2023 the authors conducted a survey of selected groups to investigate the performers’ perspectives. In this preliminary report we find that *dāphā* groups showed resilience in recovering from the recent disasters, the main effect of which was to exacerbate ongoing systemic problems. Chief among these is the difficulty of recruiting and training new members, to which some groups are responding with innovative solutions. But a range of other interconnected issues also emerged. We conclude that although many groups exhibit continuing vitality and an integrated relationship with the local communities in which they are embedded, their dependence on traditional models may be unsustainable without a degree of change.

Keywords

Newar music; Kathmandu Valley; sustainability; devotional singing; participatory music

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Introduction

Recent literature on “endangered music” has drawn on linguistic and ecological parallels to assess *vitality*, or the current level of activity of a genre, and *sustainability*, or the degree to which activity can be continued in the future, with or without internal change or external support (Grant 2014, Schippers and Grant 2016, Titon 2020). In this research report we consider *dāphā bhajan* as a potentially endangered musical tradition.

Dāphā bhajan is a genre of Hindu-Buddhist devotional singing performed in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal (Widdess 2013, Palanchoke 2021). It is embedded within the Newar community, comprising speakers of the Tibeto-Burman Newar language, constituting around 50% of the inhabitants of the Valley, alongside speakers of the Indo-Aryan Nepali language. *Dāphā* was patronised by the 17th and early 18th century Newar kings of the Valley, the Mallas, and by the Shāh kings of Gorkha, from their conquest of the Valley (1768-1769) until the 20th century.

Dāphā is traditionally performed by small groups of male singers, singing antiphonally in two facing rows or clusters, accompanying themselves on cymbals. Additional accompaniment is played on the barrel-drum (*khū*), and sometimes the natural trumpet (*pvañā*). Performance is in public, typically on a covered platform (*phalcā*) adjacent to a temple (*vihāra*). Performers are mainly from the farmer castes, or lower, and are drawn from the local community; higher caste groups are rare. Performers traditionally undergo an intensive formal training as children or adolescents, framed by rituals, whereafter they become members of the adult community and initiates of Nāsaḥḍyaḥ, patron deity of music and dance. But *dāphā* singers are not professional musicians, and performance is participatory (i.e. for the performers themselves rather than for an audience: Henry 1988; Turino 2008). For many Newars, *dāphā* is an emblem of Newar history and culture, and of local identity. But such perceptions are waning in the face of social changes, economic pressures, and other

challenges to the sustainability of traditional musical activities.

In 2021–23 the authors carried out a survey of 47 selected *dāphā* groups from different parts of the Kathmandu Valley:

Kathmandu:	12
Bhaktapur:	10
Patan:	10
Elsewhere:	15
Total:	47 groups

We believe this to be a small proportion of the number of *dāphā* groups in existence, possibly around one fifth. Choice of groups was determined largely by availability, but we sought to represent a range of social strata and religious traditions. We asked about the specific effects on the groups of the 2015 earthquake and the 2020–2022 Covid-19 pandemic, and more generally about their ongoing activities and issues.

An earlier survey of *dāphā* groups, carried out by G.-M. Wegner in 1984, elicited detailed data about each of 70 groups in Bhaktapur, without asking explicitly about sustainability issues. Our broader survey of the Kathmandu Valley attempted to balance specific information about each group with questions about recent challenges and ongoing changes. The survey was limited by time and budget to a small sample, and we could not elicit answers to every question from every group. But we believe our results can inform debate about the vitality and sustainability of *dāphā*, by reflecting the perceptions of *dāphā* singers themselves.

Results 1: Recent disasters

Despite the severe impact of both the 2015 earthquake and the Covid-19 pandemic on the life of the nation (Hutt et al. 2021, Pandey et al. 2022), *dāphā* groups have shown considerable resilience in surviving these disasters. Almost half the groups interviewed (twenty) claimed that the earthquake had no effect on them. But sixteen groups reported that they stopped singing for between one and 12 months. Damage to property was mentioned by ten groups, six

of them in Bhaktapur, where the effects of the earthquake were particularly severe. Damaged property included houses used for training and storage, and platforms used for performance. Three groups reported damage to instruments and songbooks. But only one group suffered fatalities, and one, minor injuries. That casualties were so limited may be due to the earthquake happening in daytime, and at a time of year when few *dāphā* groups would normally perform.

Damage to older houses in the city centre led, in Bhaktapur, to a dispersal of *dāphā* group members to safer but more distant accommodation in the outskirts, making participation in singing more difficult. But no groups reported relocating to a different area, showing that *dāphā* is strongly associated with specific locations – neighbourhoods and temples. Dispersal of neighbourhood communities is an ongoing phenomenon, as we discuss below.

According to our informants, the pandemic effected considerably more damage on *dāphā* groups than the earthquake, causing more groups to stop singing, and often for longer. This is not surprising, given the much longer duration of the pandemic. Six groups, mostly from small towns or villages, claimed that the pandemic had no effect on them; but 35 groups, mostly urban, reported that they stopped singing for a period ranging from three days to three years. 17 of these groups stopped for 12 months or more. But as with the earthquake, very few fatalities were reported. Possibly those accustomed to regular singing before the pandemic were better able to survive respiratory infection.

Seven groups reported that the pandemic interrupted or delayed their training programmes. Restrictions on gatherings of people must have inhibited the traditional training method, whereby a group of students is taught in a closed room, daily, over many weeks or months. It seems that the main effect of both disasters was to exacerbate ongoing systemic problems, especially that of intergenerational transmission.

Results 2: Vitality and sustainability

Many groups maintain an extensive performance schedule, singing for major religious festivals, local festivals and rituals, auspicious days of the month or week, or (rarely) daily throughout the year. They may also sing for occasional rituals of group or community members, such as weddings. From this perspective, *dāphā* maintains considerable vitality as an expression of religious and social culture. Responses to our question “What is the purpose of singing *dāphā*?” were evenly split between maintaining cultural tradition, and performing religious devotion or duty.

The most serious challenge confronting virtually all *dāphā* groups is transmission of the tradition to the next generation. This involves recruitment and retention of new members as well as teaching. Many groups complain that recruitment is increasingly difficult.

While the earthquake and pandemic disrupted training, ongoing or planned, some groups had not trained for some years anyway. 15 had last trained more than 10 years before our survey, and three had not trained for more than 30 years. 15 groups were planning to start or continue a training programme within the next two years, but 13 had no immediate plans. Where training had been held, the number of trainees enrolled, including singers and instrumentalists, varied around 5–20 (occasionally more); but nine groups reported student drop-out rates of 50–90% before completion of the programme. This statistic raises serious concern about the viability of traditional teaching methods in the present-day context.

Accordingly, some groups are actively modifying traditional teaching methods. Instead of relying on students memorising songs through oral–aural transmission, many groups now provide singers with computer-printed song-sheets, and four reported using notation. Others use students’ mobile phones to record lessons, or make model recordings of songs. One guru had used the

Internet to continue teaching during lockdown. In three groups, students sit with the group as they sing, and learn the repertoire through participation instead of the traditional formal training. While this seems a promising development, it contravenes traditional concepts, according to which music is esoteric knowledge that must be transmitted in secrecy and consecrated by rituals (Widdess 2013: 207–18). That approach, though costly, involves the whole neighbourhood community, and confers spiritual benefits and social prestige on the students.

A more radical innovation to counteract the decline in the number of male singers is to recruit and train women. Six groups interviewed have already done so, and others are considering it. Yet others resist this change, on social rather than musical grounds. *Dāphā* group membership usually reflects the caste-based social composition of the neighbourhood. No groups reported recruiting from other areas or castes in order to increase numbers. Occasionally two groups from the same neighbourhood join forces to mitigate the decline in numbers, but there was little evidence of wider collaboration between groups.

Antiphonal singing (*dohoro*), a distinctive feature of *dāphā*, is difficult to maintain with small numbers of singers, and has been abandoned by six groups interviewed.

Several other interconnected changes and challenges affecting their vitality and sustainability were mentioned by *dāphā* groups we interviewed:

1. **Lack of motivation** to join *dāphā* groups, or to continue active membership after joining. Lack of leisure time, demands of education, and rival entertainment possibilities discourage local youth, some of whom also find participation in a mixed-age group unattractive. Decline in religious devotion and in respect for senior members of society, and prioritisation of money-making activities, are also blamed for declining participation. Difficulty in understanding the words

of *dāphā* songs, and lack of scope for individual creativity in this genre, were also mentioned. As a result, even after recruitment and training, many group members attend periodic feasts but do not sing regularly, if at all.

2. **Dispersal of communities** away from neighbourhoods where *dāphā* is performed. This is due to increased population and prosperity, leading to building of new homes outside crowded, noisy, polluted city centres. *Dāphā* performance is rooted in place, and does not move to follow dispersed communities.
3. **Concentration and prospective loss of knowledge** about music and its meanings. Singing gurus (often only one in a group) are over 70 years of age in most groups interviewed (drum gurus may be younger). Few singers apart from senior gurus know the *rāg* melodies – non-metrical melodies sung to non-lexical syllables, solo, before each song – and they are no longer performed in some groups. The repertoire of songs is also contracting: songbooks contain many songs no longer performed, and composition of new songs is rare. Groups anticipate that the death of senior gurus will soon deprive them of essential musical and cultural knowledge.
4. **Loss of sources of income.** Few groups now rely on land, the traditional source, donated by devotees or royal decree in the distant past. Most such land has either been lost to government land reforms, or sold by *dāphā* guthis. Only six groups interviewed, all in Bhaktapur, still have land, and the revenue is sufficient only in one case. Members of the *dāphā* group themselves are the principal source of income today: in most groups, members pay for each feast, or an annual subscription to the group, or both. Some groups also impose a fine on members for non-attendance at feasts or singing sessions. The local community provide occasional support in the form of donations from a temple, or from individuals paying (in kind) for

special services. National government provides almost no support: two groups interviewed receive token payments from a central government department (Guthi Sansthān) in lieu of land appropriated by the government in land reforms. Local government can be more generous: six groups in Kathmandu and three in Patan receive annual grants of 25,000–30,000 rupees from the local municipality or development organization.

5. **Maintenance and tuning of instruments.** According to our informants, only seven traditional instrument makers (*kulu*) remain in the Valley. If true, this represents an existential risk for many genres of Newar traditional music.

Given these and other threats to their sustainability, the continuing vitality of many groups is remarkable. While they may have survived recent disasters, it remains to be seen whether they can adapt to changing economic conditions and social priorities. As a participatory genre, performing a highly integrated role in local communities, it would be difficult, and contrary to its ethos, for *dāphā* to transform into a staged entertainment for a wider audience; but its dependence on traditional models may be unsustainable without some degree of change.

Nutandhar Sharma, MA (Tribhuvan) PhD (Lumbini) is a freelance researcher, writer, lecturer and accredited journalist. He is an affiliate of Lumbini University, Nepal; sometime Research Fellow of the Department of Indology, South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg; and expert member, Committee for Heritage Conservation and Preservation, Kathmandu Metropolitan City. He received the Nepal Vidya Bhushan award in Education, 2018. Publications include Basukala, Bijay, Gutschow, Niels and Sharma, Nutandhar: *Patan-Vābāhā: History and Inventory of a Newar Buddhist Monastery* (2022).

Richard Widdess, MA (Lond) MA MusB PhD (Cantab) is Emeritus Professor of Musicology in the Department of Music, School of Arts, SOAS University of London, and a Fellow of the British Academy. He specialises in the musicology of South Asia, with reference to the history, theory and analysis of music in North India and Nepal. He is the author of *The Rāgas of Early Indian Music* (1995), *Dhrupad: Tradition and Performance in Indian Music* (2004, repr. 2023), and *Dāphā: Sacred Singing in a South Asian City* (2013).

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