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Raga Basanta and the spring songs of the Kathmandu Valley

A musical Great Tradition among Himalayan farmers?

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In February, 1798, Qayum Khan Kalawat was appointed by the royal order of Rana Bahadur, the King of Nepal, as musician at the Kathmandu court. Royal orders also assigned Qayum Khan a handsome jagir – amounting to some 1,500 rupees per year – as remuneration. And he was soon to be joined at the court by other, similarly well-rewarded, artists: the musicians Tapa Kathak and Jiwan Shah Kalawat; Bhawani Dayal Kathak who was appointed chief of music and dancing girls; and Arman Khan and Bhikhan Khan, the sarangiyas. They had all come from the south, where the titles of Kalawa(n)t (which goes back to the court musicians of Akbar) and Kathak belong to the specialists of classical music – those artists who have maintained Hindustani shastriya sangit till the present day, refining their art by intense practice and living a life of music.ⁱ

It is a great step from the King's darbar to the simple resthouse in a neighbourhood in a Kathmandu Valley town. It is far from the music professional to the ordinary people of such a neighbourhood, who find time for their traditional hymns only in the morning or the evening. The men who sing in these groups may come from a variety of occupational groups, but most notably they are farmers by occupation, by caste, or both. And of course, these farmers do not assemble in their resthouse to sing for any worldly sovereign – in fact, they sing for nobody but the gods and themselves, there is no other audience. But introvert as this singing may seem, the devotional singing in the *bhajan* and *dāphā* groups is the kind of music-making that really permeates the Kathmandu Valley. In the Kirtipur neighbourhood where I myself lived for a period of musical fieldwork, there was at that time – and this was in 1986 – two musical resthouses very close to each other. In one, the dapha singers used to assemble, with their drum (khīm) and their pairs of cymbals. The other was the home of the

ⁱ See Regmi (1995, p. 21–22 and p. 30–31, fn. 17, 19, 20, 22) on the appointment of these musicians, and Neuman (1990: 86ff, 124, 273; *passim*) on the titles and the characterisation of classical musicians of North India.

bhajan group, which in addition to the harmonium performed with a nagarā (kettle drum) in the mornings but with a tabla in the evenings.

On my first evening with the bhajan group, there was one song that particularly caught my attention. The meandering melody, the many and long melodic phrases, the seven-beat tala, the shifts of tempo, the enthusiasm with which every participant joined in to sing it – all contributed to set this song off from the other hymns. The singers referred to this song as *Basanta*. The next song, though definitely different in both music and words, was called by the same name. In the morning, the bhajan presented me with still another Basanta melody. And when I went over to the dapha, I was able to add two more Basantas to my collection.

This is a study of Basanta melodies, such as they are sung in different places (Kirtipur, Panga, Kathmandu, Lalitpur), in the Kathmandu Valley today. Four of these Basantas are included on the CD accompanying this issue of the EBHR (I refer to these songs simply as Bs1, Bs2, etc). Two others can be found on from Laurent Aubert's CD. I complemented these with three Basantas from locally produced cassettes and three that I recorded myself, and ended up with a full dozen of Basanta melodies. Though so far my study has produced quite a lot of material, it is by no means complete, and what I present here is not double-checked and just the main points.

Basanta means “spring”ⁱⁱ and these twelve Basantas can simply be described as different spring songs – each with own text and its distinct melody. To be sure, on the surface these distinct melodies have notable similarities. All these songs are in refrain–verse form (and further words will not be wasted on the texts in this strictly musical examination), with distinct melodies for refrain and verse. All melodies move along diatonic scales of the same kind as you find in India, and the movements are almost exclusively stepwise. And all have the verse melody in a higher register than the refrain melody. But these traits are not unique to the Basanta melodies – they are found in much of Kathmandu Valley music and indeed what you generally may expect in South Asia.

But there is one reason to listen for a closer affinity among these spring song melodies. Basanta is referred to as a song (mye) or a melody (laya), but also as a raga. A raga – in the musical Great Tradition of shastriya sangit – is something

ⁱⁱ The spring songs are properly sung only during the six weeks from Basanta pancami (the fifth day of the bright lunar fortnight of Magh, in the first half of February) until Holi purnima (the full moon of Phagun, in March). This period in fact anticipates the season of Basanta proper which starts only in the month after, in Caitra.

quite different from a mere melody.ⁱⁱⁱ But various distinct melodies can well be surface manifestations of the same melodic essence, the same raga. Is this the case among the Basantas? I employed my collection of twelve Basantas to find this out.

II.

At the outset, the Basantas do not appear to present a strong case for having a shared musical essence. The meandering refrain melody of Bs1 does not seem very similar to the straight-forward up-and-down-again melody of the Bs2 refrain or to the three short arcs of the Bs4 refrain. The verses seem mainly to move rather haphazardly around the upper tonic. And most conclusively, these melodies are not even in the same melodic mode! Some songs (like Bs2 on the CD) have all the pitches unaltered, or *shuddha* (a western musician would quite simply find this to be a major scale). Some songs (like A2 or the Gaine song on the Aubert CD) consistently employ the flattened form (*komal*) of three of the pitches: 3, 6 and 7. And some flatten also the pitch 2, consistently (like Bs4) or just here and there (like Bs1).

Let us take good note of this modal inconsistency – and put it aside for later consideration. For the present, we will just stick to a simplified system of notation

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------|----------------|----|----|---------------|----|-----|----|--------|
| | <i>octave:</i> | | | | | | | |
| lower | 1 | 2 | 3 | <i>middle</i> | 5 | 6 | 7 | higher |
| <u>7</u> | 1 | 2 | 3 | <i>middle</i> | 5 | 6 | 7 | 1' etc |
| ni | sā | re | ga | <i>middle</i> | pa | dha | ni | sā |

where 1 is the tonic and, for instance, 2 denotes the second pitch (re), whether in its *shuddha* or *komal* form. This is the first step to find out certain similarities between the melodic processes in the different Basantas. The second step is to consider the phrases that are used in any of these Basantas. These, in fact, can be boiled down to the following set.

ⁱⁱⁱ I have not included diacritics for the transliteration of common musical terms (such as raga, shastriya sangit, etc); for the words for musical instruments, genres etc, specific to the Kathmandu Valley diacritics are given only the first time they occur in the text.

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------|----------|------------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Superordinate phrase: | <i>A</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>C</i> | <i>P</i> | <i>Q</i> |
| Versions: | | <i>X</i> | <i>Z</i> | | |
| Derivative phrases: | | <i>AB'</i> | <i>Z'</i> | <i>P'</i> | |

Among these ten phrases, five can be seen as superordinate types of phrase, which the other phrases either are versions of, or from which they derive.

The first three types of phrase – *A*, *B* and *C* – can be established inductively from the refrains of seven of our Basantas (among them Bs2, Bs3, and the Gaine Basanta on Aubert's CD) easily enough:

- A* an ascent from 1 to 1' where 2 and 5 are omitted
- B* a descent from 1' to 3 (where 5 and 2 are included)
- C* a concluding phrase going from 3 up to 5 and then down (mostly via 7) to the tonic 1.

Some Basantas (like the second phrase in Bs4) fuse the ascent-descent *A + B* into one phrase, *AB'*. Phrase *AB'* and the phrase-pair *A + B* both ascend from 1 (omitting 2 and 5) and then descend to 3. The main difference is that *AB'* is entirely confined to the lower register and does not reach the upper tonic 1'.

The *verses* invariably start directly in the higher register – around 1' – around which the melodies apparently move rather haphazardly. But once we identify two core motifs, and study separately the phrases built around each of these motifs, the apparent confusion in the verse melodies disappears.

| TYPE OF PHRASE | MOTIF | ESSENTIAL MELODICAL IDEA |
|----------------|----------|---|
| <i>P</i> | <i>p</i> | narrowly circumscribing the upper tonic by means of the two sub-motifs 7→1' and 2'→1' |
| <i>Q</i> | <i>q</i> | going down from 3' to the upper tonic 1' |

The two types of phrase here, then, each contain a specific melodic idea, a core motif around which the individual phrase in a specific song gives in its own melodic elaboration and metrical and rhythmic adaptation. Each Basanta has several distinct versions of these phrases. Phrase *P'* – which utilizes only *one* of the two submotifs 7→1' or 2'→1' at the heart of *P* – is found in a few Basantas. In the Basantas (like Bs1 and Bs2) where the verse temporarily stretches down to the lower register with an *X* inserted among the *P*'s and *Q*'s, phrase *Z'* comes directly after this *X* and brings the melody up to the higher register again.

The phrases $X + Z$ – and in that specific order – appear as the concluding melodic statement of a verse. The individual Basantas correspond almost exactly in the pitch-for-pitch outline of the X and Z phrases. The descent $X + Z$ in the verse is never straight but always oblique: when the melody has reached 3 (sometimes 4), it turns upwards temporarily, then turns downwards again at 5 (sometimes 6), and goes on all the way down to the tonic 1.

This is also exactly how the descent is shaped in the phrase-pair $B + C$ that concludes the refrain. (As I have said, $X + Z$ are indeed versions of $B + C$.) The specific $B + C$ in many Basantas are nearly identical in overall length and metric positioning and differ only in details of rhythmic and melodic embellishments. $X + Z$, on the other hand, share the same general melodic outline only in the different songs. They are treated much more freely metrically, and can be drawn out into a sequence of 10 measures (or more properly speaking, 10 cycles of the tala) as in Bs4, or be condensed to a quick eighth-note pattern, as in the Z of the song *Siri siri phasa jita*, probably the most well-known of all Basantas.

III.

In the sample of twelve spring songs, each individual Basanta melody can be described with the set of five plus five phrase-types. To give a few examples:

| Song | Refrain | Verse sect I | Verse sect II |
|------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Bs2 | $A \quad B \quad C$ | $Q \quad X \quad Z' \quad Q$ | $Q \quad Q \quad P \quad X \quad Z$ |
| Bs3 | $A \quad B \quad C$ | $Q \quad P$ | $P \quad P \quad P' \quad X \quad Z$ |
| Bs4 | $C \quad AB' \quad C$ | $P \quad Q$ | $P' \quad Q \quad X \quad Z' \quad C$ |
| Bs1 | $B \quad C \quad AB' \quad BC$ | $P \quad Q \quad Q \quad X \quad Z' \quad Q$ | $P \quad Q \quad P \quad Q \quad P \quad X \quad Z \quad B \quad C$ |

This suggests a close melodic relationship between the individual Basantas. And the picture of the individual Basantas as different manifestations of a shared set of melodic ideas becomes even deeper when we study the motifs. A set of seven basic motifs plus two derivative motifs can be identified in the various Basantas. All the basic motifs, save one, is found in every single tune. And the melodic processes, save in detail, of each individual tune can be accounted for from these nine motifs. These motifs are listed below.

| MOTIF | PHRASE | CORE MELODICAL IDEA |
|----------|---|---|
| <i>a</i> | <i>A</i> <i>AB'</i> | ascent from 1 |
| <i>b</i> | <i>B</i> <i>AB'</i> <i>X</i> | descent, but not further than to 3 |
| <i>k</i> | <i>B→C</i> <i>X→Z</i> <i>X→Z'</i> | down-up kink at (about) 3 |
| <i>c</i> | <i>C</i> <i>Z</i> | up-down kink at (about) 5 |
| <i>d</i> | <i>C</i> <i>Z</i> | descent to 1 |
| <i>p</i> | <i>P</i> | narrowly circumscribing the upper tonic by means of the two sub-motifs $7 \rightarrow 1'$ and $2' \rightarrow 1'$. |
| <i>q</i> | <i>Q</i> | going down from $3'$ to the upper tonic |

Derivative motifs:

| | | |
|-----------|-----------|--|
| <i>p'</i> | <i>P'</i> | <i>one</i> of the <i>p</i> sub-motifs, that is, either $7 \rightarrow 1'$ or $2' \rightarrow 1'$ |
| <i>c'</i> | <i>Z'</i> | ascent from (about) 3 to (about) 6, that is, the second half of <i>k</i> or the first half of <i>c</i> . |

There is, as we can see, a close correspondence between phrases and motifs. Most of these motifs can be thought of as the essence of the corresponding phrase. But there is one that will escape unnoticed unless we consider also the way phrases are put together. This is the motif *k* which is found in the phrase-pairs *B + C* and *X + Z*. As we have noted, these phrases outline an oblique descent with two kinks or turning points: an upward turn at 3 (motif *k*), a downward turn at 5 (motif *c*).

A study of the individual pitches – their relative prominence in the melodic flow, the way they are used, and in what melodic contexts they appear – confirms further the picture of deep melodic affinities between the different *Basantas*. I have calculated 1) the overall duration of each note in the total melodic flow, and 2) how often a note occurs in a stressed position

(operationalized as occurrence on the sam, the first beat of the tāla cycle). From all this, the following rank of the individual pitches emerge.

| | per cent of total melodical flow | stressed position (in per cent of all sams) |
|---------|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1 (sā) | 27% | 42% |
| 3 (ga) | 18% | 16% |
| 5 (pa) | 10% | 13% |
| 6 (dha) | 10% | 10% |
| 7 (ni) | 13% | 6% |
| 4 (ma) | 10% | 6% |
| 2 (re) | 8% | 3% |

Its sheer quantitative weight makes 1 stand out as the evident melodical point of reference. But also each of the other pitches has its particular melodical role.

3 (ga) is where the melodies make the inevitable kink in the descent (motif *k*). In the upper register the 3' in phrase *Q* often marks the melodical peak of the entire song and is a rather frequent turning point.

5 (pa) is treated most characteristically of all the seven pitches. It is absent in the ascent, emphasised in the descent, and it is, as a turning-point in the oblique descent in phrases of type *C* and *Z*, an essential part of one of the most characteristically Basantic motifs, *c*.

6 (dha) is the only pitch that can be found in all Basanta phrases. It is an essential and mostly emphasised part of the ascending *A* and *AB'* phrases. It is always featured (but not emphasised) in the descending phrases *B* and *X*. As the lowest pitch of the upper register, where it is optional in the *P* and *Q* phrases, it is frequently (but not essentially) used as a turning point, as the point of departure, or as the final note (sometimes cadenced upon). Similarly, it is optionally a part of the concluding *C* and *Z* phrases of the lower register.

7 (ni) has its chief importance in the upper register, as passing note and turning point in the *P* phrases; and – in many but not all Basantas – as a suspension note before the final tonic (1 → 7 → 1) in the refrain. In most Basantas, 7, rather than 1, sound on the final *sam* – they go on to 1 only after this formal ending of the song.

4 (ma) is used mostly as a passing note – it is not an essential part of any basic Basanta motif, but sometimes substituted for 3 or 5 in the descent kinks (motifs *k* and *c*).

2 (re) is a turning point in the higher register (phrase *P*) and is also conspicuous by its absence in the ascent.

The four pitches 1, 3, 5 and 6 are the notes most frequently stressed and each has its characteristic melodic role. Among the others, 7 is the most prominent, 2 has a few characteristic contributions, while 4 on the whole is not used in any characteristic way.

The notes 1 and 3 are the resting points of a Basanta tune: 1 especially at beginnings and ends of sections; 3 more temporarily in mid-sections. While 1 and 3 so to speak anchor the melodic processes, it is the treatment of 6 and, especially, 5 that is most striking. These two pitches in many ways appear as complementary^{iv}: 6 is essential and often emphasised in the ascent to which 5 gives a characteristic colour by its absence; 5 is essential and often emphasised in the descent where 6 is more weakly present. Much of the melodic dynamics in a Basanta derives from the opposition and interplay between 6 and 5; and from the tension between these two pitches and the static safety of 3 and 1, on which the melody temporarily and ultimately falls back.

This way of using the different pitches is inferred from the whole corpus but all the individual Basantas adhere well to this pattern. Of course, the various melodies are not totally uniform: some songs give more weight to 5 than to 6, others more to 6 than to 5. This only confirms the identification of 6 and 5 as the major combatants in the Basantic musical drama.

IV.

The individual Basanta songs have most of their melodic substance in common. They work from the same set of phrases and motifs, and they are strikingly consistent in their use of the pitches.

Whatever the extent of the transformations and repositionings of the component phrases, all Basantas end their refrains with *B+C*, and most end their verses with *X+Z*. As we know well by now, *X+Z* and *B+C* both essentially outline an oblique descent $1' \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 5 \rightarrow 1$. And this descent appears in the verse also of those songs not actually ending it with *X+Z* – here, as can be seen in the above chart (p. 5), *C* or *B + C* (as “borrowed” from the refrain) have been substituted. The oblique descent, then, is always the melodic statement that brings both

^{iv} The complementarity extends to the descent kink *c*, where 6 sometimes takes the role of 5.

verse and refrain to their conclusion. In this final position, it seems to reinforce the “Basantic” identity of a composition – as does the ascent where 2 and 5 are omitted.

The pentatonic ascent. Both 2 and 5 are consistently omitted in all ascending movements in all Basantas – with one exception, a 6→5→6 cadence occurring once in Bs1 and Bs4.

The oblique descent down to 1 is, in fact, a consistent feature of all our Basantas. There is no instance in any Basanta of a straight descent down to 1. Mostly, these kinks occur as an upward turn at 3, downwards again at 5. There are, however, exceptions where the upward turn occurs already at 4 (instead of at 3), or where the downward turn is at 6 (instead of at 5). There are even cases of the downward turn occurring already at 4 or where 6 has been prefaced with 7 (in Bs1). All this suggests that the oblique descent as melodic process is more intrinsic to Basanta than the exact point at which the turns occur.

V.

A consistent use of the pitches. A scale that is different in its ascending and descending forms (gapped in the ascent, oblique movement in the descent). Typical melodic turns. This is what the individual Basantas share, and in fact it is nothing less than the defining features of a raga, according to the musical canon maintained by court musicians such as Qayum Khan. In this Great Tradition of classical music, the features of a raga include:

- a specific musical scale. This is always stated in both ascending and descending form since these are often (but not necessarily) different.
- certain specific important pitches. These always include the tonic which is the final point of reference to all melodic processes (and reinforced by drones in classical music) but also what is known as vadi and samvadi. This can roughly be translated as “dominant” and “co-dominant” if we strip these concepts from any harmonic or functional connotations (harmony and chord progressions are entirely alien to this fundamentally melodic music). Which pitches are actually vadi and samvadi in a certain raga contributes to making it distinct from other ragas which use the same scale.
- certain specific typical melodic turns. These, which are known as pakads, are what – together with which pitches are vadi and samvadi – gives a raga its particular and individual identity, and keeps it distinct from other ragas.

This is exactly what the twelve Basanta melodies share – with the exception of a common scale. The uniformity between the Basantas of different scalar modes is certainly a striking feature of this corpus of tunes. I suggest that this is not one raga, but a family of ragas, using different scales but otherwise nearly identical, and that by processes of time probable qualifying names have been lost until all simply are referred to as Basanta. Such closely related ragas are not without parallels in North Indian raga demography.^v

VI.

It might seem that the individual Basanta melody is entirely formulaic, that it consists only of the stringing together of standard phrases. But while the twelve Basantas share this melodical substance, they are not uniform in the way they use it. Let us study the individual case of Bs1 in this respect. This is the seven-beat Basanta sung by the Kirtipur bhajan-singers. As a glance at the chart on page 5 reveals, this Basanta is thoroughly elaborated. A rough notation is given on p. X-Y.

Refrain

^v This would be worth further exploration, but the size of the present sample is rather too small for that.

Verse (section 1)

musical notation for Verse (section 1) in G minor, 4/4 time. It consists of three staves. The first staff is labeled *motif p (1)*. The second staff contains *motif q (1)*, *motif q (2)*, and *phrase X*. The third staff contains *motif k*, *phrase Z'*, and *motif q (3)*. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Verse (section 2)

musical notation for Verse (section 2) in G minor, 4/4 time. It consists of six staves. The first staff is labeled *motif p (2)*. The second staff contains *motif q (4)* and *motif p (3)*. The third staff is labeled *motif q (5)*. The fourth staff is labeled *motif p (4)*, *motif k*, and *motif c*. The fifth staff is labeled *B*. The sixth staff is labeled *C*. The piece ends with a double bar line.

Refrain

musical notation for Refrain in G minor, 4/4 time. It consists of three staves. The first staff is labeled *AB'*. The second staff is labeled *B*. The third staff is labeled *C*. The piece ends with a double bar line.

This song consists of the basic types of phrase, but in many cases these phrases have been extended considerably. These extensions are no mere random melodic elaborations. Quite to the contrary. Instead, the extensions are made up by inserting and adding the basic Basanta motifs. Most significantly, the motifs *k* and *c* are extensively used. Similarly, the pitches 5 and 6 are prominent in the extensions. It seems that the melody really goes a long way to explore the interplay between these two pitches.

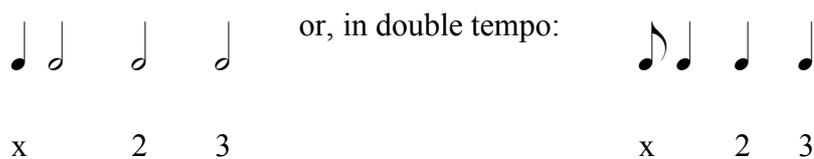
To consider this in a little more detail, let us start with the refrain. In many Basantas, the refrain quite simply states the ascent and descent forms of the scale. In our present song the refrain has been developed into *B C AB' B C*. It has both repositioned the phrases and extended them. The refrain actually starts with the descent phrases *B + C*. While *B* has the straight-forward form found in most Basantas, phrase *C* has been extended by the insertion of the motifs *c* and *k*. In this way, the initial half of the phrase has been doubled: ascent from 3, descent to 3; then ascent from 3 and descent to 3 *again* before finally going on to the characteristic $2 \rightarrow 1 \rightarrow \underline{7} \rightarrow 1$ end of the phrase. The refrain melody then goes on to a phrase of type *AB'*. This phrase starts from $\underline{7}$, and states all the five pitches of the ascent ($\underline{7} 1 3 4 6$) – and hence shows the omission of 2 and 5. It is very much extended – but made up entirely by the basic motifs. Instead of rising directly from 3 over 4 to 6, the ascent part of the melody has been prolonged, and falls back temporarily to 3 twice before going on to 6 for the straight descent to 3. This means that the series *c k c k c* is inserted after the ascent motif *a* and before the descent motif *b*. Moreover, the phrase has been concluded with a new ascent, *a*. Hence the whole phrase reads *a c k c k c b a* instead of a simple *a b*. Maybe the best way of describing this phrase is as a condensed version of the whole refrain – though with the important addition of motif *a* at the end. This makes it clear that it is not a final musical statement after all – Basanta's final statements always end on 1 – and that we should expect a continuation. Indeed, such a continuation appears: *B + C* are repeated. Only with the final 1 in phrase *C*, the refrain melody is brought to its completion.

The first section of the verse – which is repeated – opens with a *P* where the position of two submotifs has been reversed, that is, first $2' \rightarrow 1'$, then $7 \rightarrow 1'$, instead of the other way round which is the standard procedure. Then it goes on to three *Q* phrases, each differently shaped both metrically and melodically. Before the last of these three *Q* phrases, the pair *X + Z'* is inserted, taking the melody temporarily down to the lower register and of course including the motif *k*, the characteristic Basanta kink at 3.

The second section of the verse doubles the tempo. This section opens with *P + Q*, stated twice. The third time a *P* appears here (and like all *P* phrases in this

song, it has reversed the submotifs, making for melodic consistency within the song) it is to initiate the descent $X + Z$. It may be noted that the k kink here occurs already at 4 (instead of at 3), but a more significant feature is the addition at the end – like in the phrase AB' of the refrain – of the ascent motif a . Again, since this ends not on the tonic 1, but on 4, this makes it clear that $X + Z$ is not the final musical statement of the verse in this song – and indeed, the phrases B and C follow here. This whole sequence – $PQ PQ PXZ BC$ – is repeated before the refrain appears again, however now reduced to just $AB' BC$. This is only logical, for the initial refrain phrases B and C have already been sung.

The five Q phrases in this song make clear the degrees of freedom of how to articulate and give melodic details within the formulaic framework. Among these phrases, $Q5$ is but a version of $Q4$. But each of the first four phrases has been given a distinct shape, both metrically and melodically. The individual notes of the core motif (3' 2' 1') have been given various metrical assignments. The tala of this song is divided 3+2+2, typically articulated



and each of the motif notes can be found in almost any of these four metric positions. Each core note is similarly found in various durational values. Melodically, the phrases work with reiterations of the core notes, and with different ways to “frame” the core motif with beginnings and ends. $Q1$ is prefaced with an extension further up in the register, above 3' which is otherwise the topmost pitch in this Basanta. In contrast, $Q3$ sets out from below 1', whereas $Q2$ starts with 1' itself. $Q4$, contrastingly, starts directly with the motif but has extended the phrase at the end instead: here we find the characteristic cadence upon 6.

To sum up, the actual melodic shape of this Basanta can be entirely accounted for, but certainly not predicted from, the set of basic phrases and motifs. The song makes extensive use of all kinds of transformations: repositioning the overall order of phrases, extending the individual phrases, shaping (metrically and melodically) each individual instance of a phrase differently. Still the song adheres in every respect – ascending and descending forms, typical turns, the use of the different pitches – to the shared melodic material of the Basanta family.

The different songs seem to derive from a basic model, but the individual shape of a particular Basanta melody cannot be predicted from the sets of phrases and motifs.

VII.

We have found that the individual Basanta melodies all share a set of essential melodic features. We have seen that this set of features is that of a raga in the Great Tradition sense. We have noted that these features are consistently employed in each individual Basanta melody. And we have observed that the individual melodies are distinct but create this individuality by their particular way of using the shared melodic material. True, the sample is not large. And we should not conclude that each and every time the term “raga” is used in Kathmandu Valley music does it have these Great Traditional denotations. But it does permit one to conclude that Basanta is not just assorted spring song melodies. The Basanta of the Kathmandu Valley farmers very much looks like a raga in the Great Tradition sense of the term.^{vi}

Certainly, there are important differences. The North Indian classical musician emphasises individuality, improvisation and virtuoso performance. There is nothing of this in Kathmandu Valley devotional singing. Seen from the singers’ perspective, “raga Basanta” noted in the song-book is an aid to memory but far from specific enough to generate the performance. The singers are not expected to extemporise a singable shape of this raga at the spur of the moment. They will sing a fixed composition – as they learned it from their guru. But this is a question of the nature of these genres. The singing should fit a certain text and is done unisono in a group. Fixed compositions fulfill these requirements, improvisatory development is rather out of the question.

The social distance between court musicians such as Qayum Khan Kalawat and his colleagues and the hymn-singing farmers is large, but musically they seem very close. How is this possible? Is it really reasonable to expect proper shastriya sangit to be practised among ordinary people, in a remote mountain valley far from the courts and cities of North India? As Neuman (1990: 54) puts it, the ideal shastriya sangit musician – the court musicians of the old days, the contemporary

^{vi} There are a few things in common between raga Basanta and raga Vasanta (Daniélou 1968: 349) as it is sung in North India today. Both omit 2 and 5 in the ascent; both have oblique movement in the descent. But Vasanta leaves out 5 entirely, also in the descent, and moreover it includes *ma tivra* (raised 4).

ustads – “lives, eats, breathes, and sleeps music”. The intricacies of raga music require a life-time of learning and practice to master. This is a task for highly specialized full-time musicians. But the hymn-singing farmers are certainly not full-time musical specialists. Their music groups are operated as independent neighbourhood enterprises which satisfy, one might say, the double aims of devotion and camaraderie. The performers learn the music, once and for all, in sessions of a few months, and the performances they then take part in are held with wide gaps, with no practice in between. One cannot imagine a greater disparity from the iconic maintainers of the Great Tradition – people whose whole life is devoted to music, rather than to growing rice and vegetables.

How come that Great Tradition music is maintained by these Himalayan farmers? And there are more questions to add to this. It is difficult to see the individual Basantas as mere versions – accounted for by the hazards of aural transmission – of each other. Rather, one glimpses the work of a musical mind behind each song, someone who has worked out the melodic material to specific compositions and known how to stay inside the melodic rules. How did the spring song repertoire – of melodies that are distinct yet share the melodic essence of the Basanta ragas – come into being? What has kept the melodies in check with the rules, as is obviously the case? Did these farmers possess the knowledge of the musical shastras necessary to utilize raga concept in this consistent way? And if so, by what historical processes have this been brought about?

VIII.

Of course, it is possible that the Great Tradition music of local farmers amounts to no more than an imitation of the music of the court. Here, as we know, Qayum Khan Kalawat and after him many colleagues from India kept up the musical standards. And nor was Qayum Khan the first North Indian musician to work at the Kathmandu court. Why should Prithvi Narayan issue his ban on such imports^{vii} if not to end a prevailing practice – presumably among the Malla kings whom he defeated? Mahindrasingh Malla, king of Kathmandu in the early 18th century, was known to entertain (and be entertained by) muslim musicians^{viii}, and the presumptions of other Malla kings of being great connoisseurs and

^{vii} In the *Dibya Upadesh*. Translated in Stiller (1989), p. 46.

^{viii} Sattaur & Wegner (1993: 15).

practitioners of the arts – including music and the musical shastras – is well known.

The general logic of this interpretation is well-known in Western context: that musical styles, genres, dance-types found in folk music have filtered down from the refined music of the courts. The musical Great Tradition of the Himalayan farmers would be a case of “filtering down” from the Valley society’s royal centre to its periphery. The society can be imaged as a sugar cone, with status and power most highly elevated at the centre. (This image is in fact quite close to the actual social geography of Valley towns and cities such as Bhaktapur and Kirtipur.) From the top, shastric music then trickles down to the farmers down the slope.

Several questions remain, however. How were the contacts between courts and commoners made exactly? By what means were the local groups able to prevent the borrowed repertoire of melodies from drifting astray, changing a note here and a motif there until it would no more be possible to find the common melodic essence among different Basanta melodies? The gurus of the farmer’s devotional groups might have been responsible for that – but how did they originally get access to this knowledge? And, most importantly, why did the idea of setting up raga-singing devotional groups spread to become an intrinsic feature of each and every neighbourhood, not only in the cities but also in the smaller towns and villages?

There are obviously good reasons to try another logic for the interpretation.

IX.

In the works by western scholars, the Newar culture – as the traditional civilization of the Kathmandu Valley is referred to today – appears as distribution of knowledge, duties, roles, occupations into a well-integrated whole. It is a mode of production with division of labour and strict arrangement of duties according to the caste system where the material production and the production of culture are but the two faces of the same coin. Specialists on all conceivable tasks, whether economical, social, cultural, or ritual, together maintain a “unicultural” system – to pick a word from Robert Levy’s *Mesocosm* (1992, p. 68). Levy traces much of the integration to the royal power at the centre – more specifically to the Malla king, today present only symbolically.

Levy does not say much about music, but the Malla kings were clearly interested in this particular form of cultural production. The many manuscripts of learned texts from Malla-time Nepal include copies, translations, and

commentaries upon classical treatises on music commissioned for or authored by the kings.^{ix} The chronicles attribute to Jayasthiti Malla (14th century) a prescription that “raga Dipaka should be performed while the dead bodies were being burned” (Wright 1877: 182). There was such direct intervention in musical affairs also when royal patrons founded the *navadāphās* (a *dāphā* ensemble with nine additional drums) of Bhaktapur. As Wegner (1987) tells us, the royal patrons donated the set of instruments together with a piece of land to cover the musical expenses. This was “as a regular offering to the major gods of the town” (p. 474) and one group even “once served the king at his palace” (p. 472). Is this the way the whole thing originated?

We might tentatively assume, then, that the various local groups for Great Tradition music were originally set up by the royal centre – to maintain the religious life of the town or even to serve in the palace. In addition to land and instruments, these local music groups may have been endowed with their repertoire and with a guru well-instructed in the canons of music.

Newar culture, as Levy (1992: 15) puts it, has gone on “in very much the old way, like a clockwork mechanism assembled long ago that no one had bothered to disassemble”. The present-day music of the Kathmandu Valley looks like a part of that clockwork mechanism. Farmers were appointed as the musical specialists within the system – in the sense of adopting the responsibility for Great Traditional devotional singing, not in that of having music as their full occupation – and they have gone on to provide their services (like many others have done) though the royal centre vanished long ago.

X.

In an article some years ago, Daniel M. Neuman (1985) contrasted the classical traditions – in terms of music patronage and music performance – of North and South India. I reproduce key elements of Neuman’s discussion in the table below, and add the Great Tradition as maintained in the Kathmandu Valley^x.

^{ix} Kaufmann (1968: 44–5) mentions a ms. from 1308 written for Bhumalla Deva, Daniélou (1968: 381–6) lists four other Nepalese mss. among which are the *Sangitabhaskara* authored by Jagajjyotir Malla and Vamsamani Jha (Shaha 1992: 77; see also Malla 1982: 40, 45, 47, 61).

^x For certain of these features, see further Grandin (1989), ch. 2.

| North India | South India | Kathmandu Valley |
|--|--|--|
| indoor music: in palace or (later) auditorium hall | outdoor music, at temple | outdoor music, in resthouse or at temple |
| court | devotional | devotional |
| professional musicians | amateur musicians | amateur musicians |
| audience of musically non-involved nobles or (later) middle-class | participatory audience | no audience |
| tabla drum-pair | mridanga barrel drum | khim barrel drum |
| no external time-keeping; tala articulated by theka (pattern of drum-strokes) only | external time-keeping: tala articulated by handclapping | external time-keeping: tala articulated by cymbals |
| virtuoso improvisation | composition; improvisation | composition, no improvisation |
| instrumental music important; distinct forms for instrumental music | instrumental music and its forms derivative of vocal music | instrumental music and its forms derivative of vocal music |

The picture is quite clear. In feature after feature, Kathmandu Valley lines up with South India.

Neuman argues that the North Indian features were brought about by changing patronage of music by the Islamic nobility. Like South India, the Kathmandu Valley has obviously retained non-Islamicized ways of practising music. As Chittadhar “Hriday” says (1957: 3–4), ragas were introduced in the Kathmandu Valley almost as soon as they were invented by Mahadev. The late scholar Thakur Lal Manandhar (personal communication) has given more precise estimates. According to him, dapha music was imported from Mithila at the time – probably the 12th or 13th centuries A.D. – the connections between this

kingdom and the Valley were at their height. This is long before the intensive Islamization of North Indian music – in the 17th and 18th centuries – that Neuman talks about. It seems that this musical Great Tradition kept out North Indian influences, and went on to meet the present day in this ancient social organisation of performance.

The Kathmandu Valley lost the last “Newar” king of its own in 1769. If the mesocosmic interpretation is to be tenable, the Great Tradition as maintained by the farmers today must have been firmly established long before that. The more archaic social organisation – and maybe the different content of the ragas – is in line with this interpretation. To be sure, the North Indian variety is also found in Nepal. Maybe the social distance between Qayum Khan Kalawat and his successors at the Kathmandu court, and the farmers in their neighbourhood resthouses, has been the reason why these two forms of Great Traditional music still can be found, each on its own and with few signs that the up-to-date North Indian variety should transform what is sung by the farmers.

Time to end this discussion which by now has gone rather far from its base: the observation of certain melodic similarities among a group of Kathmandu Valley spring songs. But if nothing else, I hope I have suggested some avenues for further research – research that can corroborate, modify or refute the various points that I have raised here.

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NOTES

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