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Review of "Dāphā: Sacred Singing in a South Asian City: Music, Performance and Meaning in Bhaktapur, Nepal" by Richard Widdess

Subhash Ram Prajapati

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Subhash Ram Prajapati on *Dāphā: Sacred Singing in a South Asian City: Music, Performance and Meaning in Bhaktapur, Nepal*.

***Dāphā: Sacred Singing in a South Asian City: Music, Performance and Meaning in Bhaktapur, Nepal*.**

Richard Widdess. Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013. Xxvii + 336 pages. ISBN 9781409466017.

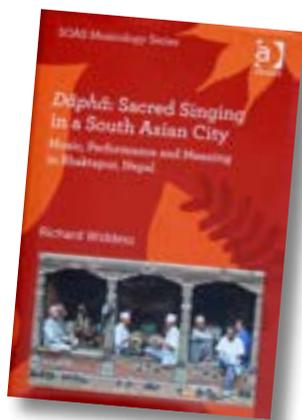
Reviewed by Subhash Ram Prajapati

Richard Widdess' *Dapha: Sacred Singing in a South Asian City* focuses on the *raga-tala*-based South Asian devotional singing tradition of *dapha* from Bhaktapur, Nepal. *Dapha* is a venerable and complicated form of devotional singing in Newar society performed by non-professional male musicians from primarily farmer and other castes such as Manandhar. This singing tradition is on the verge of extinction and the author presents the disappearing tradition in its social and religious context. Accompanied by a CD of live musical recordings, the author also aims to uncover the musical structures of the tradition's songs, transition of the tradition from court to the farmer community and their inseparable interweaving with musical, social, and religious orders in Newar culture. For the study, Widdess uses the ethnographic surveys on *dapha* groups conducted by Wegner in 1984, Tingey in 1992 and the author in 2004, along with other interviews, manuscripts, microfilms and song transcriptions.

The book opens with an introductory chapter that concisely outlines Newar

cultural history from the start of the settlement beginning in the early centuries AD to the present day and introduces the traditional Newar city of Bhaktapur, site of the study. The chapter then explains the three themes or orders: musical, social and sacred. These three orders are the central focus of the study the author discusses throughout the book. As he also argues later in the book, these three orders are interdependent, though they do have some features that make them appear independent. On the basis of a framework of the overlapping structure of these orders, the author identifies the link between music and socio-cultural structures in the following chapters. To do so, he references and follows Blacking (Blacking, John. 1971. 'Deep and Surface Structures in Venda Music,' *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, 3: 91-108) who is considered the pioneer in connecting music and social structure. In addition, Widdess brings perspectives from cognitive psychology as well as cognitive anthropology, and presents his hypothesis of "overarching structural regularities of music, similar regularities in the social and cultural domains, and the 'patterns of emotional and cognitive experience' that may sometimes underlie both, constitute shared cognitive models or schemas" (p. 23). He argues that Newar culture as a whole is permeated by schemas that are frequently articulated in ritualized forms of behavior, of which music is one (p. 24).

The second chapter details the history of *dapha*. Widdess presents *dapha* as a Pan-South Asian phenomenon. He references Malla (Malla, K.P. 2000. *A Dictionary of Classical Newari*. Kathmandu: Nepal Dictionary Committee Cwasa Pasa) and notes that the term '*dapha*' first appeared in literature in 1672 (p. 34). With the help of ancient manuscripts, he describes the affiliation of *dapha* to the Malla royal court in Bhaktapur in the medieval period and its transmission to the farmer community. The royal family donated musical instruments as well as land to the principal temples of the city. The author argues "these centrally-located civic temples were the conduit through which knowledge and practice of *dapha* spread to every neighborhood of the city" (p. 49). Chapter Three discusses the relationship of *dapha* with time by exploring the concept of *tal* (the phenomenon of meter), the repeating and non-repeating patterns, and the weekly, monthly, annual singing calendar and seasonal repertoire. Chapter Four examines the social context of *dapha* in Bhaktapur and discusses the social hierarchy, caste system, and *guthi* (social/religious association) structures of the city. In many places inside the Kathmandu valley, it is compulsory for boys to learn music to be a part of a *guthi*. In Bhaktapur, the *dapha* tradition is voluntary, however, when a boy is initiated to local *dapha* group, it leads to the "enhanced status"



(p. 119) of the family. The author sees *dapha* as an important means of socialization, “of inducting the individual into the local community, of which he must become a part in order to survive” (p. 118). He argues that *dapha* combines both participatory and presentational musical elements with a specific type of psychological experience which Turino (Turino, T. 2008. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 4) defines as ‘flow.’

Chapter Five examines the melodic structure of *dapha* songs. The author in particular looks at the *rag* (modal organization) in the broader context of South Asian concept of *raga*. The author notes that for the *dapha* singers, the *rag* simply means *rag kayegu*, the unmetred introduction of a song sung by a solo singer. The author argues that these melodies are “melodic schemas for song melodies, and that the implicit melodic system most likely represents an inheritance from the musical traditions of the Malla and Shah courts” (p. 142). Chapter Six looks at the religious meaning of *dapha*, benefits of singing *dapha*, and the transmission of musical knowledge as a form of esoteric sacred power and rituals. Chapter Seven documents selected *dapha* songs with notation and translations with instrumental starting and ending patterns. Each example also include commentary on musical structure and the performance context. The author

concludes with a final chapter about music and meaning. He views musical order and social performance as twin products of the same process of cultural learning (p. 303) with many additional layers of meaning as result (p. 304).

The author has carefully organized the chapters on musical analysis and the contextual exploration alternatively. He has done this on purpose with the convention that neither the musical analysis nor the ethnography alone is sufficient to understand the music. For the readers, the alternating chapters vividly portray both musical meaning and social culture as interlocked integral parts of the Newars’ daily lives. The use of various aspects of ethnomusicology, extensive music analysis, cognitive theories and ethnography has made the book comprehensive and useful for a wider audience in addition to musicology or anthropology students and scholars.

There are, however, many notable works on *dapha* traditions from around the Kathmandu Valley written in the Newar and Nepali languages (Prajapati, Satya Narayan. 2000. ‘Dapha’. *Pasooka* 5/7: pp 3-27; Manandhar, Jit Bahadur. 2003. *Mera Kehi Sanskritik Nibhandhaharu - Some of my cultural essays*. Kathmandu: Tara Devi Manandhar; Dangol, Kaji Man. 2006. *Yala Hakha twaya Dapha Bhajan Chhagu Adhyana - A Study of Dapha Bhajan in Hakha Area*. MA Nepalbhasa Thesis, Tribhuvan University

Kathmandu) that the author has not mentioned. He also did not do or include a discussion of any comparative studies on *dapha* traditions from different places in the Kathmandu Valley. Nevertheless, the book has a rich ethnography from Bhaktapur and in-depth musical analysis with investigation of the entwined social and religious components of a music culture in which many traditional models survive into the modern age.

The book makes a significant contribution to the field of Newar music and culture. The book should be recommended to any scholar or student who is interested in Newar music, culture and who wishes to explore South Asian music and meaning.

Subhash Ram Prajapati is an ethnomusicology PhD student at the University of Washington, Seattle. His research interests includes Newar music, Newar language and Nepalese culture. He has authored a half dozen books on Nepalese music and culture.