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Listening to Garhwali Popular Music in and out of Place

Stefan Fiol

Listening to popular music is a central means by which people construct their place in the world, both literally and figuratively. For Garhwalis living inside and outside of the Himalayas, listening to vernacular popular music has been one way in which they imagine themselves to be part of a specific place and a larger cultural region. Displacement is a major theme of these songs, and practices of listening underline the mobile and trans-local aspects of life for many Garhwalis. In order to assess the impact of popular music consumption on notions of place, and vice versa, this article provides ethnographic vignettes of musical consumption in Garhwali villages and small towns, Garhwali pilgrimage sites, and migrant contexts outside of Garhwal. I suggest that much of the emotional salience and enduring popularity of Garhwali git derive from the emotional and physical displacement of married women and male migrants.

Keywords: listening, displacement, mobility, commercial music, Garhwal Himalayas.

Introduction

One day in July 2007, while attending a wedding in a village in Pauri Garhwal, I met three young men relaxing in a room and singing Garhwali songs while playing a keyboard. They invited me to participate and I sang a couple of popular songs that I had learned during my fieldwork. After peppering them with questions about their musical tastes and exchanging personal information, I continued on my way to Srinagar, an hour’s drive from the village. When I stopped to recharge my phone at a local shop in Srinagar, the person behind the counter rather nonchalantly said that he recognized me. He took out his phone and showed me a video of my singing, recorded about two hours previously. The phone vendor and the young men in the village did not know each other, but they had a mutual friend who had circulated the video.

This anecdote underlines the mundaneness of most media content that is consumed today, especially by young people, and also demonstrates the way that mobile technology has transformed the nature of fieldwork. I am not an especially good singer of Garhwali songs, and I am confident that it was the novelty factor—the juxtaposition of my foreignness and my familiarity with local music—that made this video worthy of circulation. I was drawn to the young men in the hotel because of a desire to know their relationship to music, but they used their phones to turn the ethnographic gaze back on me. I felt embarrassed while watching this video, partly because of my rough performance, and partly because they did not ask me permission to record or circulate the video. There is poetic justice in this happening to an ethnomusicologist.
More obviously, this anecdote reveals the rapidity with which mass-mediated content is circulated between and consumed in the Himalayan region. The diffusion of mobile telephony has been incredibly rapid in rural India, as in many other parts of the world, and scholars have offered a range of perspectives about the effects of this technology on social life and on conceptions of place. One perspective emphasizes the “democratizing” influence of mobile media which have arguably flattened the experience of physical and social space, as people from across the social spectrum can, (at least in theory), access the same content on their phones irrespective of location (O’Hara and Brown 2006). Some scholars with a postmodernist leaning, such as Tomlinson (1999) and Kupfer (2007), take this to the extreme, arguing that an over-reliance on virtual, electronic connections undermines our connection to actual physical places, threatening to render us forever displaced, adrift in cyberspace. In his article “The Mobile Effect,” Drew Hemment critiques the idea that mobile technologies have led to an experience of placelessness (2006). Aside from the fact that all media users are physically situated in a location, he observes that most people use mobile telephony precisely to bring attention to that location. Paradoxically, the expanded possibilities of mobile consumption are accompanied by a desire to locate oneself more firmly in place.

The mutual entanglements of music, media and place have received sustained, critical attention from ethnomusicologists, music historians, human geographers, and anthropologists for several decades. Scholars have attended to notions of landscape that permeate musical texts (Doyle 2005, Watkins 2011, Gallagher and Prior 2014), explored the spaces of commercial music production, circulation and consumption in local or trans-local scenes (Solomon 1997, Connell and Gibson 2003, Kolioulis 2015), interpolated musical meaning in diasporic and immigrant communities that are shaped by allegiances to multiple places (Levi and Scheding 2010), or attended to cognitive and broader social ecological factors that impact the process of listening (Clarke 2005, Erlmann 2004). Musical discourse draws upon lexical and non-lexical kinds of signs that mark a variety of identities and place-bound experiences. If musical listening is one of the ways in which people often express their belongingness to a place, it can also provide the means of articulating a longing for other places, of feeling “in-between-ness” with regard to multiple places, or of negotiating and transforming hierarchies of place (Stokes 1994: 4). Musical listening may also transform grounded places into more abstract spaces (Wrazen 2007); this is especially common among migrant and diasporic communities that utilize music to conjure imagined landscapes and reconstruct social relations in a new setting.
insiders (for examples, see Fiol 2017a: 87-90). Garhwali listeners tend to demonstrate a nuanced and highly personal relationship to place in the music they listen to. 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. Listening to Garhwali ġīt is thus a way for people “to construct their sense of belonging along a continuum of socio-spatial attachments” (Perman 2012: 378; see also Sigler and Balaji 2013).

This article focuses on the significance of place, displacement, and mobility in the consumption of Garhwali ġīt. Rural, semi-urban, and urban residents may access much of the same musical content, but the ways in which they utilize and make meaning of this content are often very different. As a means of showing how one’s experience of place conditions one’s reception of Garhwali ġīt and vice versa, the first section of this article features ethnographic vignettes of musical consumption in three different types of spaces: Garhwali villages and small towns, Garhwali pilgrimage sites, and migrant contexts outside of Garhwal.1 While I examine variables of gender, age, class and caste as they impact musical consumption patterns, my comments are necessarily brief as I am predominantly focusing on place-based distinctions.

In the second section of the article, I focus on mobile practices of consumption and the significance of sounds, images and subjectivities in Garhwali ġīt that index displacement or an attachment to multiple places simultaneously. Literature on displacement in ethnomusicology has primarily focused on the ways that migration, diaspora, war, genocide, and the uneven spread of global capitalism, have impacted musicians and their work (e.g., Diehl 2002; Levi and Scheding 2010; Bigenho 2012). This article contributes to this literature by discussing displacement as an emotional trope within vernacular popular music that, while exacerbated by the experiences of migrant and diasporic communities, is firmly rooted in indigenous ways of imagining community. In Uttarakhand, as in much of the Himalayas, displacement need not be understood as a condition of modernity or a byproduct of global capitalism. Rather, displacement in the form of highly gendered experiences of circular migration and outmarriage has been a socio-cultural and economic imperative in the central Himalayas for centuries (Gross 1982; Gindwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003).

It is thus unsurprising that the most common subjects of village song styles and commercial Garhwali ġīt are male migrants and outmarried women (dhīyāṇī). In Garhwal, as in many parts of the Himalayan region, the institutions of migration and outmarriage shape the narratives that are most central to family and village life. It is not necessary that consumers of popular music be migrants or dhīyāṇī to identify with the sentiment of dislocation and cultural loss because everyone in the Himalayan region has close friends and family who have left home for reasons of marriage or employment. In his illuminating study of the Bhojpuri music industry, Ratan Tripathy calls this the “vicarious migrant” phenomenon (2012). The narratives of displacement articulated in Garhwali ġīt are thus part of a much longer history of expressive cultural production, and the experience of virtually listening to such narratives—often while being physically disconnected from one’s family or birthplace—produces a powerful shared experience of displacement. This experience may be even more powerfully felt when listeners are themselves in motion. Over the last decade, the dissemination of mobile technology has enabled increasing numbers of people to listen to popular music while moving on roads and pathways. Below, I describe the practices of mobile musical consumption and hypothesize that the experience of mobile listening exacerbates feelings of dislocation and desire to return home.

Technological Change in the Central Himalayas

A few words about the technological shifts that I experienced during the period of my fieldwork are necessary to contextualize the descriptions that follow. I began examining the production and consumption of Garhwali ġīt during two years of fieldwork between 2004 and 2007. At this time, streaming services and mobile devices were in their infancy; video compact disc (VCD) albums were at their apex and cassettes were still quite popular. I had the opportunity to return to Garhwal for shorter fieldwork trips in 2010, 2011, 2014 and 2016. Unsurprisingly, from 2004-2016 I witnessed a dramatic transformation in musical production and consumption practices in the region. Although poverty remains an obstacle to accessing new technologies for some, the vast majority of Garhwalis can now access and share music on their mobile devices. In the migrant and diaspora communities outside of the mountains, free streaming websites like YouTube and others specifically dedicated to Garhwali ġīt have become immensely popular.2 In the Garhwal mountains, downloading and sharing content via Bluetooth or mobile apps is extremely common. The technological interface of Bluetooth and many mobile apps is interesting insofar as it enables the trans-regional dissemination of content, but relies upon and strengthens local social relations and networks.3
Although the consumer base has expanded through these channels, new consumers are not accustomed to paying for musical content. Nowak asks a pivotal question: “How does massive free online access to music inform a creative industry that thrives on being local?” (2014). This shift in consumption practices has induced a feeling of panic and despondency among regional artists and producers who have witnessed a sharp reduction in sales of physical media. Piracy has long cut into the potential profits of music sales, and the unregulated, free distribution of vernacular music has all but eliminated small-scale producers. All but one of the regional music companies that dominated the vernacular music industry during the 1990s and 2000s have folded shop, leaving the majority of production in the hands of T-Series Super Cassettes and its subsidiaries.

In spite of these recent shifts, physical media are not obsolete and their demise has been exaggerated. Many performers continue to record and distribute their own CDs for free as a means of self-promotion for live performances; increased earnings from performances have to some extent offset the demonetization of recorded production. VCD production remains quite popular and is one of the only sectors of the music industry that draws at least some profit. The survival of physical media is also linked to the uneven spread of wireless technology in the central Himalayan region. Mobile networks (2G, 3G, or 4G) are unevenly distributed and access to the internet is extremely limited outside of town centers. Thus, while most people consume music on their mobile phones, they also continue to listen to music through some combination of physical media (VCDs, cassettes), radio and television. My ethnographic observations from the mid-2000s are skewed towards the consumption of physical media, but I have attempted to include more recent observations about consumption via mobile phones.

Musical Consumption in Garhwali Villages and Towns

The first impression of a Garhwali village is often aural, not visual. The boom of dhol-damaun drums or the shrill sound of Garhwali git through speakers can reverberate across mountain valleys for several kilometers. It is not surprising that the notion of “echo” as a metaphor and sonic effect has been pervasive in the literature on Himalayan music (Alter 2014; Diehl 2002; Ghosh 2004; Henderson 1998 and 2002).

Before the 2000s, nearly all Garhwali popular music in villages and towns was consumed via radio, television, and cassette. Today, radio and television broadcasts of vernacular music continue to be popular; there are several music companies that still supply physical albums to independent retailers in mountain towns through wholesale outlets in the major urban centers in the foothills (Haldwani, Rishikesh, Haridwar, Dehradun). The personal relationship between the distributors and the producer is pivotal to this process. One non-Garhwali producer complained to me about the “dirty distribution system” of the hills, noting that his company’s albums did not reach more than the first four or five stations along the main highway into the mountains. Garhwali producers, in contrast, have developed personal connections with distributors and also know more about which local markets to pitch their products. Even if they are from different parts of Garhwal, a shared regional identity between a producer and a distributor can solidify a business relationship; as a result, the products of regional-owned companies are better stocked and reach more areas of the hills. Some seasons are more profitable than others and companies tend to release albums—especially devotional content—just prior to major festivals such as Dussehra, Baisakh, Diwali, Holi, and the Nandā Devī Jāt.

Albums are also released during harvest seasons (from February-March and May-July), when lorry drivers haul agricultural goods up and down the highways to the tune of the latest release, as well as marriage seasons (September, December and May-June), when deejays and bands look for the newest and most popular songs. In towns, large canvas tents or halls that are booked for marriages, (called “wedding points”), play Garhwali and Hindi hits at high volume on rotation. Invitees usually dance to aptly named “non-stop” albums in which as many as 50 Garhwali songs are looped together under a rhythmic background. In village weddings, Hindi and Garhwali music plays continuously from the home of the bride or bridegroom. Playback devices are generally located in the largest rooms of the house, but speakers are often mounted on the verandah (tībārī), allowing recorded music to bleed into public spaces. During wedding rituals, auspicious songs (māṅgal gīt) that were once sung by elderly women are more often heard on commercial recordings. At night, deejAYS may be hired from a nearby town.

In Jaunsar-Bawar, a region in western Garhwal, commercial music is frequently worked into communal dance-songs during festivals. My interest in studying Garhwali popular music was initially sparked by discovering that the festivals’ dance-songs (tāndī, hārūl) that I had learned and recorded in Rawain and Jaunsar during the summer of 2003 were in fact commercial Garhwali git that were previously distributed throughout this region. Many recording artists,
anticipating the use of their songs in communal dances, utilized antiphonal phrase structures and local, up-tempo drumming patterns during studio productions. Many of the songs they recorded were not original compositions, but rather were part of the inherited repertory of their village. I became intrigued with the possibility that cassette and VCD consumption was rejuvenating oral traditions (Fiol 2011). Indeed, some elders decried the youth for their lack of traditional knowledge, and credited these albums with inculcating pride for folk traditions among the youth. One man noted that only in the last twenty years, as a consequence of Garhwali git, had there been an interest among the youth in his village to speak the local language and identify as Garhwali.

If a great deal of commercial music is consumed (and re-presented) collectively, mobile telephony and the mp3 have also expanded the possibilities for personalized consumption. I use the term personalized consumption rather than private consumption because, in my experience, rural residents tend to listen to mp3s through the speakers on their phones—inviting others to listen in—rather than listening through ear buds. In Garhwali villages with electricity, and especially in the homes of large landowners, the viewing of VCDs is a common activity in the evenings. The motivations for watching video albums, gathered from informal conversations with different villagers, are quite diverse. Some explained their interest as mere diversion or curiosity, while others enjoyed learning dance steps and singing parts that they could incorporate into festival performance. Still others enjoyed the exposure to new people and places on the albums. Given the plethora of video albums that are recorded in many parts of Garhwal, some viewers purchased albums in order to see themselves or someone they knew on screen. Young and old family members watching commodified depictions of their “folk culture” invariably provoked discussion and entertainment.

Sipping chai and discussing music with kiosk owners in the town of Srinagar in 2007, I became aware of the extent to which location influenced patterns of musical consumption. It was common to see messengers from other kiosks delivering requests for this or that cassette or VCD on a piece of paper. Owners covered for each other if there was a shortage of a particular album and would make runs together to the wholesalers in the plains each month. The social relationships between retailers and customers also had a direct influence on purchasing behavior. Many customers visited cassette kiosks several times a week, listening to the latest songs, keeping track of their favorites, and seeking recommendations from the retailers.

In general, retailers claimed that cassette and VCD sales offered a consistent return and low overhead. The turnover of stock and buying tastes varied considerably depending on the location of the kiosks. On main roads and in large bazaars, one found kiosks exclusively devoted to music with a large variety of genres, from Hindi to international, Bhojpuri to Garhwali. Retailers located on the main highway to Badrinath sold an average of 50 cassettes per day during peak season, 80% of which were Garhwali. Retailers in other parts of the bazaar with more local traffic claimed to sell equal amounts of Garhwali and Hindi albums, split along a predictable demographic: older Garhwalis from rural areas purchased more of the former, while urban youth purchased more of the latter. Interestingly, all of the retailers distinguished customers by their buying times: older men brought Garhwali music back to the village in the morning, whereas younger men with diverse tastes browsed and roamed the bazaar in the evening. These consumption patterns reinforce the point made by Beaster-Jones (2014) that the commodity fetish of music reproduces social relations at the local level.

While conducting fieldwork in Garhwali interior towns and villages, I observed the widespread practice of dubbing “mix tapes”. The farther I traveled away from the urbanized areas, the more I found this practice of personalized dubbing quite out in the open; often, it was the only consumer option. Retailers kept just one original copy of each album on hand, which kept their overhead low and their business discreet (as most did not pay the exorbitant entertainment license fee). Customers asked for a “made-to-order” cassette or CD of their favorite, personally selected songs. Electricity and functional equipment permitting, a vendor produced the album within a day. Like Napster, this customized and personalized form of consumption enabled listeners to choose the songs they like on a particular album. This practice changed listening preferences in ways that anticipated the mp3. Many young people could not say the name of their favorite album, but they were quick to name (or sing) their favorite songs. Dubbing practices allowed fans to create greatest-hits albums according to a theme or genre. For instance, fans could request an album of all-jāgar (music from possession rituals), all-thadyā (festival dance-songs), or personal favorites. By selecting and reordering particular songs, consumers exerted their own agency. Personalized dubbing provided distinctly subversive pleasures to the mountain-dwelling consumer because it offered choice when there normally was none, and it operated on a purely local level that was parallel to but also independent from the market economy.
With the rise of the mp3 and the expansion of mobile technology in the late 2000s and 2010s, these dubbing stations have almost entirely disappeared. It is unclear what impact mobile telephony has had, if any, on communal performances of dance-songs, but there is little doubt that it has offered more flexibility to the individual listener. The affordability of mobile devices and the ease with which digital content can be downloaded and shared has enabled individuals to create large, personalized playlists. During a high-altitude trek near Tungnath, I encountered a young man taking his goats out to graze while listening to Garhwali gid through his speaker phone. He was able to mention several favorite artists by name, but he was largely unaware of the names of the specific singers or the songs loaded onto his phone. As Nowak observes, downloading and streaming practices frequently lead to a loss of knowledge about singers and tracks (2014); illegally downloaded tracks are often renamed to avoid detection, leading to titles such as “gg00011256,” and many listeners arbitrarily choose mp3s on the basis of their genre or regional provenance.

One undoubtedly positive aspect of listening through mobile devices is the access it offers women and young girls (cf. Manuel 2014, Tripathy 2012). In Garhwali towns and villages, men have long dominated spaces of mass-mediated musical production and consumption. In my experience, purchasing music from kiosks in the bazaar has been a male-dominated activity. If a woman desired to purchase a particular album, she often needed to order it through a male member of the household. In recent years, however, many young women now own their own mobile phones, allowing them to download or share their preferred songs. To understand the shift in female consumption habits, and the pleasure and anxiety this brings to men, one need only consider the videos and lyrics of recent Garhwali gid like “Babli Tero Mobile” [Babli Your Mobile] by Gajendra Rana (2007), “Mobile Phone ku Jamanu” [The Age of the Mobile] by Virendra Rajput (2012), and “Hath Ma Mobile” [Mobile in Your Hand] by Rajju Bish (2016). Such songs fetishize the mobile phone as an instrument of independence and modernity that has fundamentally reshaped patterns of gendered behavior and musical consumption.

**Listening to Badrinath**

Uttarakhand, like other Himalayan regions such as Himachal Pradesh, Tibet, and Ladakh, is popularly marketed as Dev Bhūmī or “Land of the Gods.” The prevalence of sacred pilgrimage sites draws Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs to the region in large numbers. Here, I consider the use of popular music to engineer an atmosphere of devotion in pilgrimage sites. Similarly, Greene (1999) considers how Tamil devotees of the goddess Mariamma use “sound engineering”—the use of musical sound to execute social strategies—to construct ideal relationships to the deity and to exert control over social space through cassette playback.

In Garhwal, there are dozens of temples and religious sites that attract a large number of regional pilgrims throughout the year. Many of these pilgrimage sites market commercial music to devotees. Albums of devotional recordings sold at these locations prominently feature an image of the honored god or goddess, thereby transferring auspiciousness onto the consumer (cf. Manuel 1993: 121). One producer explained, “Say if someone is [recording] for their god or goddess, for some devta and all, so they know that on this particular day, at these temples, this many copies will be sold. And you know, there is a hub, a marketplace, when these festivals are conducted and organized, all the people come to one particular place to celebrate . . . so it’s easier to sell.” At the temple for Golu (Gwel) devtā in Chitai, near Almora, the temple committee plays a recording of Jai Golu Devtā (2005) throughout the day, and sells a copy of the recording on a table outside the temple. The tunes and texts of this recording were assembled by local scholar Jugal Petshali. According to Rajender Tiwari of Almora, however, many locals now accept this recording as “traditional” and consider it a necessary part of the devotional aura around the temple.

In contrast to regional pilgrimage sites, Badrinath (part of the regional and national Chār Dhām pilgrimage) and Hemkund Sahib attract a very large number of national and international pilgrims and spiritual tourists, particularly in the summer months. The observations that follow are based on trips to Badrinath in July 2005 and July 2014. As one of India’s most famous pilgrimage places, Badrinath faces an incessant rush of visitors between May and July. During this time, the music shops outside the temple complex predominantly sell and market recordings of Hindi bhajan. During the rest of the season, (July–October), these same shops sell primarily Garhwali language albums to the local devotees who come to Badrinath in larger numbers. In contrast to the rest of Uttarakhand, piracy is limited in Badrinath. This may be a result of greater surveillance by company officials and police along the Badrinath route, which represents the single largest tourism market in the hills. One cassette shop owner in Badrinath provided a spiritual explanation: “Piracy is simply not done,” he said, “because the sanctity of the site and the power of Lord Badrinath discourage people from this kind of sin.”
Inside the temple complex, live bhajan in Hindi are performed by groups of devotees and amplified through speakers mounted around the temple site. Outside the temple complex, several music shops line the road, each displaying a more or less identical collection of albums. While devotional music is available in many languages, albums of Hindi bhajan are prominent alongside small trinkets, prayer books, bhajan texts and mantras, and other materials for puja. Pilgrims and tourists entering the town have no choice but to hear devotional music blaring continuously throughout their stay. Most of the visitors contribute to the musical cacophony by playing music out of their vehicles, and their vehicle types tend to correlate with musical style: groups from Vaishnavite maths from as near as Rishikesh and as far as Tamil Nadu travel in hired buses and listen to Sanskrit chants or bhajan; middle-class Indian families and government servants blast film music out of their SUVs; Garhwalis listen to the driver’s choice of Garhwali geet; and foreign tourists and young Sikh devotees on their way to Hemkund Sahib usually travel by motorcycle, content with singing and waving to passers-by.

The aural space of Badrinath is dominated by the bhajan of a singer from Rishikesh named Pawan Godiyal. Outside of the temple complex, nearly every music shop I encountered in 2005 was playing one of his Vishnu bhajan with the continuous mantra, “Narayan, oh Narayan.” Godiyal had effectively cornered the bhajan market in Badrinath and Kedarnath through a combination of marketing and self-aggrandizement. He had the allegiance of all the local shop owners in Badrinath, who continuously played recordings of his bhajan. He also had the support of local authorities who, I was told by one vendor, carefully monitored and enforced the number of entertainment licenses sold in Badrinath. The cassette shop owners were almost all local Garhwalis from nearby towns of Gopeshwar and Joshimath, and though I was not able to confirm this, I suspect that they received some financial incentive for exclusively promoting Godiyal’s recordings.

Godiyal was part of a wave of Hindu evangelists who were using the mass media to reach the living rooms of middle-classes in India and abroad. Though born and raised in a small village near Rudraprayag, he cultivated the image of a learned pandit from the plains; nothing in his music, dress, or countenance would suggest that he was a Garhwali. Wearing an all-white dhoti, a prominent tikka, and the markings on his forehead (nāmam) of a follower of Vishnu, Godiyal talked to me in his large storefront that was stocked with his T-Series albums. He fielded my interview questions about his commercial practice with extended explanations about the meaning of life and the purifying quality of the air in Badrinath. He explained his presence each year in Badrinath as about giving, not earning. His earnings, he said, were made during the live shows that he gave in large concert halls in the plains, during which he got people to first laugh, opening their hearts and minds, and then accept his spiritual teaching through song. In his words: “it’s like giving medicine to a child—you have to promise lots of things before they’ll open up and swallow.” He enjoyed the opportunity to interact with the pilgrims/customers who ascend to Badrinath from all over the world.

Godiyal did not see a conflict between capitalistic opportunism and spiritual claims to authenticity. He explained his role as a bhajan singer as something of a calling. While on a pilgrimage some years ago, he noticed that unlike other major Hindu pilgrimage sites in India, the soundscape of Badrinath did not feature any specific bhajan in praise of Badri Narayan, (or none that he heard at the time). So, after a period of research with pandits and an intensive study of the Skanda Purāṇa, Shiv Mā Purāṇa, and Ling Purāṇa, Godiyal recorded an album at Rama Cassettes in Delhi with his daughter Savita. In 2001, he came to Badrinath during the pilgrimage season, lining up copies of his cassette on a table. By his own telling, he used to sing bhajan on the cassettes to attract passing customers to his kiosk. After acquiring some notoriety, he approached India’s largest music company, T-Series—in his words, “why go to anyone but the best”—and recorded a series of albums in the tradition of a kathā, weaving bhajan together with the history of pilgrimage places in Garhwal. He had recorded at least twenty albums, each earning him approximately 50,000 rupees (slightly less than $1000).

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When I asked Godiyal if he had ever consulted the rural ballad singers of Garhwal, who perform long gāthā about local heroes and devi-devtāō (gods and goddesses), he said no he could not risk “making a mistake” because he was accountable to the pandits in the plains and must remain true to the written Sanskrit sources. I have dwelt upon Godiyal’s story in order to show how commercial devotional music plays a dominant role in the construction of a devotional space at pilgrimage sites. Moreover, as a Garhwali entrepreneur who values the sounds and content of “classical,” text-based, Hindi and Sanskrit practice over orally-transmitted, Garhwali “folk” practices, Godiyal exemplifies the cultural bias towards desi practices over and above local practices.

**Musical Consumption in Garhwali Migrant Communities**

Until quite recently, it was uncommon for Garhwali migrants in Delhi and other Indian cities to openly identify as Garhwalis. For Godiyal and the many hundreds of
thousands of low-skilled migrants who have moved to the urban South to seek employment as drivers, waiters, and other service providers, there was a feeling of shame in culturally identifying as Garhwali. Unlike most other regional migrant groups in Delhi, Garhwalis rarely used their own language even in domestic settings. Local religious rituals—like the all-night jāgar possession rituals—tended to be performed indoors, perfunctorily and quietly, so as not to draw the suspicion of neighbors. Status-conscious migrants were much more likely to listen to vernacular music on ear buds than their rural counterparts. Many of the most intimate aspects of regional cultural practice concerning diet, language and spirituality were linked with feelings of social backwardness and a lack of development.

Prior to the mp3 boom, Garhwali albums were difficult to find in mainstream retail outlets outside of Uttarakhand. Most regional music companies specializing in vernacular and Hindi music had a kiosk at Lajpatrai Market in Old Delhi, and this remains one of the only places where one can locate physical copies of old and new Garhwali albums. Yet only larger music companies like T-Series with a large infrastructure and a diverse catalogue could afford to supply Garhwali albums to migrant communities in the urban plains. The producer Anil Bisht noted, “The problems in the plains are different, because people don’t know the market. In Mumbai, the chance of finding a Garhwali CD is like, finding a pearl in the ocean [laughing]. Where will you find it? There may be something there, but who knows about it? The shopkeeper is probably Marathi, so what will he know about it?”

The feelings of cultural shame once prevalent among Garhwali migrants are less prevalent today. Online chat rooms and the comments section of YouTube videos are spaces where Garhwalis frequently admonish their compatriots for not speaking Garhwali and for ignoring their cultural traditions. One marker of this positive shift in the collective self-image is the increased public consumption of vernacular popular music. The past two decades have seen a significant expansion of live shows in Delhi, particularly in the neighborhoods where Garhwali populations are concentrated, such as Mayur Vihar, R.K. Puram, and Laxmi Nagar. Variety shows called “Garhwali Nights” feature local businessmen, dance troupes, comedians, and musical performances of well-known Garhwali and Kumaoni performers. Singers draw significant income from these shows, with some commanding fees of more than 60,000 rupees (about $1,000 US) for a single live show. State ministries, local businesses, individual patrons, and music companies provide the funding for these events. The Garhwali producer, Anil Bisht, uses stage programs as a platform to test out new material that he may subsequently record on future albums. He described live shows as one of the only spaces where he sells recordings in large numbers: “[We] take our own CDs and cassettes with us, and after our stage shows we have a sale. They all get [sold out]. Now summer season is starting and those migrants will be returning to the hills. In July when they come back … we will have a show and then there will be a sale. They’ll take them and go home [to the plains].”

All-night devotional stage programs called jāgar, (after the possession rituals performed throughout Uttarakhand), or jāgran, (after the large-scale urban rituals performed by Punjabis living in Delhi and Chandigarh), have become especially popular in recent years, drawing crowds of thousands. During these programs, a series of artists perform versions of their recorded bhajan and jāgar-style songs. A significant number of jāgar recordings have also emerged on the market in recent years (Fiol 2010); these spiritual commodities are particularly significant to migrant populations. According to one traditional healer, this culture of ours is hidden. Some of our people from Uttarakhand, those who have settled elsewhere, they have become detached from our culture [hamāri sanskritī se hat gae haiñ]. They don’t remember, and these cassettes give them back these memories of jāgar. That jāgar is also there in our Uttarakhand. And our gods [devi-devtāo] don’t like [mass-mediated versions], so we don’t need them, but these people take them, and the world is buying them. You have got these [cassettes] and wherever you go these will go with you. My heartfelt feeling is, they should remember what is in our Uttarakhand.

The public, large-scale nature of “Garhwali nights” and jāgar programs in North Indian urban centers, and in locations throughout the world with Garhwali diaspora associations, marks an important turning point in the commercialization of Garhwali git. Such shows, and the videos of them that circulate online, offer spaces in which migrants may proudly proclaim their regional belonging.

Displaced Musical Consumption: Migrancy and Outmarriage

Thus far, I have been interested to show how place shapes musical consumption socially and individually, publicly and privately. Yet it would be misleading to examine the musical product in motion while presuming that
the listener is fixed in place. All musical experience and aesthetic sensibility is shaped by exposure to multiple places, real and imagined; in Garhwali git, even more striking than the exposure to multiple places is the separation from and emotional longing for other places. Multiple modes of movement characterize Garhwali social life including travel for pilgrimage, agricultural labor, and various non-specified activities encompassed by the local term ghumne (which can be roughly translated as “roaming”). Arguably the two most fundamental socio-economic institutions of Garhwali society are migration and outmarriage, both of which can be characterized as modes of dislocation because they are expressed and interpreted through song in terms of a separation from and a longing for a place to belong. Garhwalis interpret migrancy and marriage through highly gendered narratives: the dislocational experience of migration is stereotypically male, and the dislocational experience of outmarriage is stereotypically female. As mentioned above, it is not necessary to be an outmarried woman or a male migrant to identify with the emotions of separation: every Garhwali family is built on these social institutions. What are the different logics that account for these social modes of dislocation? And how does the dislocation of outmarriage and migration alter the experience and meaning of mass-mediated music?

Migration from the hill region to the plains cities is commonly explained by various “push” factors, including under-development, lack of employment opportunities, scarcity of arable land, and pressure on agricultural and forest resources. This perspective corresponds with a discourse of decline, wherein migration is understood as a pejorative condition that underpins economic and cultural dependency on the plains, splitting families and communities while bringing undesirable outsiders into the hill region. Migration has been exacerbated by postcolonial politics and global capitalism, but it is also a deeply engrained social institution in Uttarakhand. Economic sustainability in the upper middle Himalayan range depends on communities moving between higher and lower elevations during the year to escape winter temperatures and find green pastures for herds and land for cultivation. Though intensified by ecological and economic pressures in recent decades, migration has been a “traditional part of household economic activity in most parts of the region over many centuries” (Rangan 2000: 59).

Less studied are the various “pull” factors that contribute to the high volume of rural-to-urban migration in the region. The allure of the plains promises better schools and hospitals, enhanced job prospects, a wider range of commodities, and an urban sensibility. Garhwali migrants often cultivate an urban sensibility through clothing style, musical taste, diet, and use of language. When returning to their villages, sometimes after years of schooling and work to acquire the qualifications of success, they come back speaking “proper” Hindi to demonstrate status and they carry commodities—TVs, VCD players, jackets, steel cookware, sunglasses, sarees, etc.—that stand in for urban modernity. Some migrants never return and either send for their families in the hills or simply send money home. The contemporary narrative of plains migration remains one of opportunity and success.

It is interesting that commodity consumption marks the migrants’ movement in the opposite direction as well. For example, grains, pulses and herbs from Garhwali villages (e.g., jhangora, mandua, jhakia, cholai, tūlsi, farārn) are valued by Garhwali migrants as they are connected to their native soil and are understood as the products of their ancestor’s land. Some of my Garhwali friends in Delhi carried bags of these items back to their dwellings in the plains after a visit to the village. Commodities taken from the village are consumed, incorporating these aspects into the body, whereas the items taken from the plains to the villages are usually decorative and fashionable, transferring aspects of the other onto the body or the home.

Popular music is meaningful because it mediates this experience of dislocation in both directions (see Alter 2014: 145). Garhwali git communicate the migrant’s position of “in-betweenness.” As most recording artists are themselves migrants, it makes sense that the subjects of Garhwali git are so often migrants moving between the hills and the plains. For example, one of Narendra Singh Negi’s most beloved songs, “Basant Ritu Mā Jei,” focuses on a Garhwali migrant telling someone, (presumably from the plains), about the beauty they will find in his region during the spring season: “In the high, smooth pastures amidst the spring breeze, the songs of the grass-cutters echo, and the cow-herders play contentedly while the cowbells jingle; if somewhere you find my scattered childhood, collect it if you can and bring it back.” The pathos of nostalgia permeates many songs, as migrants identify with themes of spirituality, natural beauty, and traditionalism. Garhwali videos remind migrant Garhwalis about aspects of their childhood and educates their children about places they may never have visited.

It follows that many migrants prefer to listen to these songs while living in the plains rather than the villages. One middle-aged man explained, “I don’t listen in the village much. All the things in these songs are very
common for us when we live in the village, but in the city, when we are alone, these songs touch our hearts and keep us close to home.” The recording artist, Kalpana Chauhan, expressed a similar sentiment while describing the differences between audiences in Delhi and in Garhwali villages: “Now if I sing about ‘scenery’—mountains, waters, etc.—village audiences don’t care, as [these things] are commonplace in the hills...but in Delhi, people love it, they have the visual imagery and feel that there is beauty in the mountains. They are drawn to it there.” Much Garhwali git are also consumed in vehicles while migrants travel to or from the hills. The experience of moving along mountain roads while listening to songs about migration captures the experience of dislocation in a way that stationary listening cannot.15

This sentiment of nostalgia in Garhwali git is equally shared by the dhyāni, or outmarried daughter, who pines for her natal village (mait). In Uttarakhand, a song genre known as khūder git (“song of longing”) takes this narrative of dislocation as its central theme.16 The institution of marriage is a poignant rite of passage for young women in Garhwali, who become the responsibility (and the possession) of the bridegroom’s family. In many ways, newly-married women are regarded as a form of property or commodity that may be exploited by their husband’s entire family. They are physically marked as married by wearing jewelry and red vermillion paste (sindhūr) in the hairline, and they receive and establish new forms of address from and for their new family members.

Anthropologists like William Sax and Karin Polit have persuasively called for a more sensitive discussion of this process, incorporating the difficulties a woman experiences in leaving the family and entering the home of strangers, as well as the continued contact that a dhyāni usually has with her natal village (mait) (Sax 1990; Polit 2011). Married woman are entitled to visit their parents and blood relations during the major sankrānti festivals that fall on the first day of the lunar calendar months. Some women continue to exercise their right to travel to their natal village far into their old age, though most do so less frequently with the passing of years. A dhyāni is entitled to certain privileges while in the village, including the freedom to roam about and be served without doing housework. The dhyāni’s brother is expected to accompany her return to her in-laws home (sauryās) bearing ritual gifts of clothes and food (Krengel 1990; Polit 2011). The ritualized movements of outmarried women are one of the central ways in which rural communities forge and maintain social relations. The negotiations between the two families are often metonymic for their entire lineages, and sometimes for the relations between their respective villages as well. Moreover, for a dhyāni, the mait is not simply “home,” but it is also a place associated with relaxation, freedom, and refuge from the abuse and/or social obligations of the sauryā (Berreman 1963: 526; Sax 1990: 449–500).

Sankrānti festivals are charged emotional spaces in which returned dhyāni reunite with their natal kin, and they are a crucial space in which women learn to cope with the drastic transition of being a daughter-in-law and wife. Some of this coping happens through song, and I spoke with a number of married women who performed khūder git at festivals that were related to the difficulty of this shift in residence and status. Many of these songs protested the unfair treatment of a dhyāni who is often expected to serve her in-laws like a beast of burden (Capila 2002). Other songs evoked the mait of a dhyāni through allusions to natural surroundings and the sweet memories of youth; still others were about the woman’s sentiments of separation from her beloved who has migrated to the plains.

Perhaps the most popular contexts for singing khūder git, however, are as accompaniment to work activities such as collecting wood, cutting grass, planting and weeding in the fields. In these contexts, khūder git have developed as an oral tradition in which many women insert their own emotional phrase into a repetitive, rubato style of singing that differs from cassette interpretations. Music videos of khūder git commonly feature elaborately costumed women reminiscing through song while carrying out daily chores in fields and jungles. Just as roads are the site of consumption that exemplify and intensify the mode of dislocation experienced by male migrants, fields and jungle pathways are the sites that intensify the mode of dislocation experienced by female dhyāni.

One well-known recorded khūder git by Narendra Singh Negi is entitled “Ghūghūti Ghūraun Lagi.” The onomatopoetic sound that a ghūghūti bird makes in the forest during the spring month of chait—the month when many women are also accompanied back to their mait—becomes an index for the longing of a dhyāni who is unable to travel back to her mait and is forced to imagine the scene of home in her head: “Father must be sitting sadly on the verandah, and mother will be giving hopeful glances towards the pathway; when will the Auji [drummer] from my mait come to give disābhen18 and share the news of my brothers and sisters.”

Songs about these social modes of dislocation—migration and outmarriage—are meaningful as coping mechanisms that can articulate the experience of hardship in a foreign place. More broadly, they signify a paradoxical kind of
belonging. The sentiments of dislocation are desirable as emotional anchors; sentimental songs structure pain and longing, transforming them from feelings of individual separation to feelings of shared cultural loss. Garhwali git are forms of expression that are able to stand for individual uniqueness and communal belonging simultaneously (Corbett 1990: 81-82).

Evidence of this shared desire to feel the emotions of dislocation may be found in the continuing popularity of khūder git and migration songs in Garhwali git, at the same time that the conditions underpinning these institutions and driving the sentiments of loss seem to be dissipating. In recent decades, it has become more common for entire families to migrate and settle the plains, mitigating the separation between family members. In many cases, entire villages have been vacated, leading to the phenomenon of “ghost villages.” In addition, more girls in Garhwal are receiving a secondary and post-graduate education and child marriage is much less common than in years past. I spoke with several older women who complained that there is no longer any khūd or “longing” in arranged marriages now; girls know so many things about the boy and the village of her in-laws before the marriage date. The pain of separation that they experienced as young dhyāni, (essentially raised by their in-laws), was viewed as a brutal if necessary part of growing into womanhood. Only through these experiences could one truly experience the sentiment of longing for one’s own home.

In contrast to a dhyāni, who has little option but to leave her mait as staying would violate the family honor, the male migrant usually has a choice to leave the village, decide where to go, how often to visit the village, when to marry, etc. The male migrant also departs from the village and may never again live there permanently, but he does so full of hopes and dreams and with the desire to prove himself. Yet in the case of the migrant, too, the conditions that one might think are responsible for producing nostalgia for “tradition” and the village—namely physical and emotional distance—are arguably less impactful today. With the construction of roads, the bi-directional circulation of commodities, and the ubiquity of mobile telephony, a migrant can visit easily and often, and can remain connected to the village through regular phone contact.

So why do the migrant’s and the dhyāni’s sentiments of dislocation, of a longing to return home, continue to have relevance in the content of popular music? I would argue that these sentiments map onto a kind of modernist angst, an expression of longing caught between cultural lack and loss (Fiol 2013). Garhwali git offer the impression of a culturally homogeneous region rooted in traditional lifeways, and they position the consumer just outside of this traditional context, desiring to enter it. I do not mean to imply that dhyāni-s and migrants no longer experience individual pain and longing, but that these sentiments of loss take on broader dimensions that are connected to the experience of modernity. This kind of emotional reframing of experience is enhanced by transitional spaces of consumption: listening or reproducing Garhwali git while moving along roads and pathways reinforces the feelings of dislocation that these songs evoke.

Conclusion

Musical consumption is a central means by which people construct their place in the world, both literally and figuratively. For Garhwalis living inside and outside of the Himalayas, listening to vernacular popular music has been one way in which they imagine themselves to be part of a specific kind of place and a larger cultural region. In order to assess the impact of popular music consumption on notions of place, and vice versa, I have pursued two lines of inquiry. First, I have pursued an ethnographic perspective grounded in particular kinds of places. Inhabitants of Garhwali villages and towns have developed highly idiosyncratic ways of engaging with popular music, ranging from ordering personalized “mix tapes” at dubbing stations, collectively consuming VCDs, and utilizing popular music as a substitute or supplement to longstanding traditional practices like festival dancing and wedding songs. In pilgrimage sites like Badrinath, spiritual tourists and pilgrims may access a range of sound media that fit their cultural and spiritual outlook. In public spaces, however, there is a palpable tension between Garhwali and desi (here articulated as “plains”-centric) modes of sounding spirituality. For migrant communities in urban centers, streaming websites and VCD and mp3 players allow migrants to express their Garhwali-ness in mostly private ways, but the emergence of “Garhwali Nights” and jāgar stage programs indicates the relatively recent public expression of pride in belonging to Garhwal.

In a second line of inquiry, I have explored themes of dislocation in Garhwali git and in society more broadly. The enduring popularity and significance of Garhwali git derives from the deterterritorialization and subsequent re-territorialization of outmarried women and male migrants. Finally, the consumption of popular music while in motion, (i.e., on roads and pathways),
however, are very similar. Garhwalis enjoy Garhwali films, primarily because of the competition from VCD acting in the film (2003: 170-175). Garhwali feature films are different from Hindi: 3) to recognize someone familiar Hindi ones: 1) because they’re Nepali; 2) to see how they’re Nepali films attract the most diverse and well-educated respondents gave the following reasons for attending Nepali films over English or Nepali film, the others are Hindi). Respondents gave the following reasons for attending Garhwali VCD films, these do not appear to attract audiences to the extent that Hindi when cinema halls do screen Garhwali VCD films, these do, for reasons of technical inferiority and regional do not appear to attract audiences to the extent that Hindi ones. The reasons why Garhwalis enjoy Garhwali films, however, are very similar.

Endnotes

1. This article does not consider Garhwali diasporic communities outside of India in any detail. For more on consumption practices in the Garhwali diaspora, see Nowak 2014.


3. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing my thinking on this point.

4. The few cinema halls in the state are located in hill towns or urban areas such as Dehradun, Kotdwar, and Haldwani. When cinema halls do screen Garhwali VCD films, these do not appear to attract audiences to the extent that Hindi films do, for reasons of technical inferiority and regional shame. Liechty notes that middle-class youth in Nepal may attend cinema halls in order to feel cosmopolitan; further, Nepali films attract the most diverse and well-educated audiences to the halls, (about one in seven movies is a Nepali film, the others are Hindi). Respondents gave the following reasons for attending Nepali films over English or Hindi ones: 1) because they’re Nepali; 2) to see how they’re different from Hindi; 3) to recognize someone familiar acting in the film (2003: 170-175). Garhwali feature films are fewer in number and appear less popular than Nepali films in Nepal primarily because of the competition from VCD movies. The reasons why Garhwalis enjoy Garhwali films, however, are very similar.

5. This video can be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMwGIVDtg8>.

6. This video can be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4RrdgCLB6o>.

7. This video can be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2ZB6Ub_Q_c>.

8. Personal communication, Mayur Nichani, March 1, 2005, Dehradun.


11. ibid.

12. A video clip of such an event can be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dezgd8QmLtM>.


14. According to a recent survey sponsored by the National Institute of Rural Development, about 88 percent of the households in the 18 sample villages in Pauri Garhwal and Almora districts had at least one member migrating for employment. The survey also found that about 90 percent of the migrants from these two districts were long-term migrants who left the village for more than one year.

15. The term “outsider” is relative here since most communities have migrated into the hills at one point or another. Claims to early settlement in a village—buttressed by a mixture of origin myths, property holdings, residential location within the village, orally-transmitted genealogies, and positions within the local political arena—are important in determining the internal ranking of caste lineages and sub-lineages, irrespective of the broader classification in terms of varna (i.e., Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Shudra).


17. Recognizing the technological innovations of the early 1980s that made battery-powered cassette players cheaper and more portable, N. S. Negi encouraged “mobile listening” in the hills with his release of the song Chali Bhāi Motor Chali (“As we go, so the ‘motor’ goes”) in 1984. This hit encouraged bus drivers to install cassette players in their vehicles and prompted the production of other driving-themed songs (see Alter 2014: 146).

18. Genre names vary widely in the region. The topical and musical content of khūder gīt may overlap with or be substituted by other genres of song including but not limited to ritu gīt, ghasyāri gīt, bājuband, nyoli, and baira gīt.

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Disabhent is a social custom in Garhwal in which a hereditary drummer, (from a caste called Auji or Bājgi), visits the home of every outmarried woman from his village at least once in her lifetime, bearing token gifts (bhent) and news from her relations, and receiving food and gifts in exchange.

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