

Naumati Baja: The Tradition of Nine Musical Instruments in Nepali Folk Music

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Abstract

Eastern Himalaya region is a home to multiple ethnic groups and cultures. The socio-cultural study of these groups through ethnomusicological methodology will help in understanding some ethnic groups of this region. Nepali ethnic people are an important group residing in the Nepal, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Utterkhand, states of North East India, even in Bhutan and the socio-cultural study of this group in identifying their ethnic identity through Intercultural Musicology will be an interesting exploration. Nepali culture is very prosperous in terms of folklore and folk music. The Nepali folk music is an indispensable factor of their ethnic identity. The tradition of 'Naumati Baja' is a unique feature of their folk culture. In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss the history, importance, relevance of ethnic musical tradition of Naumati Baja of Nepali ethnic people which is instrumental for their cultural and ethnic identity.

Keywords: ethnic group, culture, music, identity, Naumati Baja



Introduction

Music exists wherever there is civilization. The most significant components of each civilization are its folklore and folk music, which are unique to each country, society, and group. Music has the ability to strongly evoke a feeling of place or ethnic group identity. It also plays a socially significant role in society by supplying and recognizing the identities of the community. The traditional folk music and instruments represent the structural status of an ethnic group, caste hierarchy, and cultural identity of a given community. The creation of music is a reflection of the connections between culture and social structure (Firth, 1989), as it is one of the active ingredients of social formation that reflects the structural

resemblance between music and social behaviour. In this context the discussion on the role and importance of Naumati Baja, which is the traditional nine musical instrument in Nepali culture and society is certainly an interesting one. The Naumati Baja tradition holds a unique identity and prominence in Nepali folk culture not only in Nepal but in everywhere where Nepali ethnic people exist. This musical tradition is engraved in Nepali culture so strongly which can never be separated. Naumati Baja is considered as an auspicious band plays during different cultural, religious, social occasions. The Naumati Baja has a great social and cultural significance.

Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the socio-cultural significance of Naumati Baja
2. To understand the ethnic relation with music through the tradition of Naumati Baja
3. To investigate the background of Naumati Baja and its present value in Nepali culture and society.

Methodology

This study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Among primary sources like videos, recorded interviews, recorded videos of festivals, social gatherings etc. The secondary data has been collected from some published and unpublished books, research articles, dissertations etc.

Origin of Naumati Baja

Naumati Baja is actually a more comprehensive version of Panchai Baaja, or the traditional name of Naumati Baja is Panchai Baja which is related with the Hindu philosophy of five elements of life. In Nepali culture, Panchai Baaja, a group of five instruments, is performed as an auspicious musical band for any fortunate event from ancient times. The scriptures mention that on the auspicious occasion of Lord Krishna's Christening Ceremony, Panchai Baaja was performed in the Dwapar Yuga. The Panchai Baaja stands for the five metals, and the pictures of the five deities—Ganesh, Vishnu, Shiva, Goddess, and Sun—were preserved as the background when creating these instruments. Later on, Naumati Baaja—which has nine or possibly more instruments to play—was created from this set of five instruments (Thatal, Bhim, 2007).

Looking back into history, it is impossible to pinpoint the precise moment that Panche Baja originated. The music is thought to have been brought to Nepal by the Rajputs, who left India in the fourteenth century to avoid Muslim rulers' political and cultural atrocities (Tingey, 1990:14). The musical ensemble has resemblance to the band of the Muslim invaders of India's Sultanate court (Darnal, Ramsaran, 1999). Subsequently, musicians from Nepal who belonged to the Damai caste—tailors employed by the Royals in hilly regions—added Sahanai and Dahmah along with other musical instruments, renaming it Panche Baaja and endowing it with the five major Vedic elements of religious significance (Tingey, 1994).

Naumati Baja culturally attaches more strongly with a particular Nepali community, they are Damai community. The artists of Naumati Baja are mainly from this community, although there is no such conventional law but as a tradition they also accept this profession. In fact, since decades Damai community has been protecting, preserving and performing this tradition of Naumati Baja. Because of such attachment of Damai community with this traditional music it is also called 'Damai Baja' relating with the instrument Dahmah of Naumati Baja.

Composition of Naumati Baja:

The main instrument of Naumati Baja:

1. Narsingha, 1 in number
2. karnal, 1 in number
3. Damaha 1 in Number
4. Baauntal 1 in number
5. Sanai 2 in Number
6. Tyamko 1 in Number
7. Dholaki 1 in Number
8. Jhyali/Jhaymta 1 in Number

According to Western system there are three categories of musical instruments:

1. Wind or the instruments that are played by blowing air into them like flute, trumpet, horn, etc.
2. Percussion or instruments that are played by beating like drum, etc.
3. String or the instruments that are played by plucking like guitar, violin etc.

As per the Indian system, there are four classifications of musical instruments viz;

1. Tatvaadhya or Chordophones: These instruments are played by plucking or scratching. Strings are the sources of sound in such instruments. Saarangi, Veena, etc.
2. Sushirvaadhya or Aerophones: These instruments are played by blowing air into them. Sahnai, Turahi etc. These are further categorized into instruments with holes; e.g., Baansuri and without holes e.g. Sankha.
3. Aandhyavaadhya or Membranophones: These instruments are played by beating with a hand or stick and are made up of leather. E.g. Nagada, Damaha, Dholak, etc.
4. Ghanvaadhya or Idiophones: These instruments are played by rubbing against one another or by beating. E.g. Jhyaali, Jhyamta etc.

According to some music experts out of the four category of musical instruments all the other three types of instruments except the Chordophone are present in Naumati Baja. Membranophone, Aerophone and Idiophone are included in it. Dahmah, Dholki, and Tamko belong to Membranophone, while Sanai, Narsingha and Karnal under Aerophone, similarly the cymbals.

1. **Sahnai:** Sahnai dates back to the Persian era of history. It is called Sahnai in Hindi and Urdu, and Sanaai, Sanai, Surnaai, Pipahi, or even Piperi in Nepali. Its origins can be traced to the following languages: Japanese Hichiriki, Persian Surnaai, English Swam or Bassoon, and Scottish Bagpipe. There are three varieties of Nepali Sahnai: Dhod, which is the largest; Majhaua, which is the medium-sized one; and Pothi, also known as Kaanchhi Sahnai (Bhim Thatal), which is the smallest. Two Sahnai that are similar are played in Naumati. While the other Sahnai plays ragas, numbers, and other pieces, the first one sets the rhythm.

The Phuli, or broader open section of the Sahnai in front, is composed of either brass or silver. Its central section is composed of wood, similar to that of Dar, Asana, Sisau, Khayer, and Salisaal, among others. This wooden pipe has eight holes that are used by fingers to create rhythm as air is blown into them. By using a metal strap to tighten the wood, each hole is kept apart from the others. The Nali, a very thin pipe, is part of the top section that must be placed into the mouth in order to blow air. It

always has a porcupine dart attached to it to help remove any obstacles. A slender Taarika sits atop this Nali. The plant is the source of the name.

2. **Narsinga:** There is a Hindu mythological belief that during the Mahabharata era, Lord Shiva travelled to the mountainous regions with Goddess Parvati, who manifested to him as a hunter with a burning horn. It is thought that this horn gave origin to the present Narsinga, which in Sanskrit is called Turya. Eventually, this became known in Nepal as the Narsinga, or Turahi. For many years, the Narsinga has been a weapon of both victory and war.
Narsinga is played in Naumati when the marriage procession departs for the bride's home. It is then played along the way at the intersections of rivers and rivulets, sacred sites, and temples. It is reported that the Narsinga are able to make symbolic sounds, such as yelling obscenities, reprimanding, or telling another marriage procession to move aside at small intersections. The Narsinga is composed of two pieces and copper metal. Dhobana refers to the smaller portion and Dhaturu to the larger portion. This instrument has a S form. The two are joined during blowing because the smaller piece is placed within the larger one. Thus, a 15-kilometer radius can hear the tremendous boom that is created. The other instruments alter their playing pattern when this is being blown.
3. **Karnaal:** The Karnaal, like the Narsinga, is a wind instrument. The Narsinga is shaped like S, but this one is a long pipe that has been chopped into two pieces. That is the only difference. This kind of instrument is known as a trumpet in English. It's composed of brass. But of days, practically nothing is done with the Karnaal.
4. **Tyamko:** This instrument is used to maintain the correct beat in music. The Sahnai plays for the first time in Naumati Baaja. Then, while other instruments are played as supplementary measures, the Tyamko picks up the beat and keeps it going. It is a little instrument that is made up of leather-covered by a copper container. The leather is obtained from deceased bulls. From the mathura or mathaari to its base, known as Kumbhi, the upper portion of the Tyamko is fastened with leather threads, or taana. A tiny opening at the Tyamko's base needs to be sealed with a sutlo, or piece of fabric. This is necessary to guarantee enough vibration because the instrument depends on the vibration that is produced in this way.
5. **Baauntal:** It is merely the Tyamko in larger form. It should be mentioned that while the Dahmah needs to be kept wet, the Tyamko and the Baauntal are played with their leather dried out. Baauntal just helps Dahmah throughout the entire undertaking. Nevertheless, the Baauntal plays a different beat, typically a 2/4 beat, while the marriage celebration is in full flow. This beat has a well-known folktale that should be played:
6. **Dahmah:** This is alike the other two Membranophones. This is, however, kept wet before and while beating. The Damaha has been playing the role of Base Guitar or Base Drum. It is believed that the skin of the right thigh of a red ox is the most suitable leather for making the Damaha.
7. **Dholaki:** This is similar to the Dholak which is played during Holi or other Indian festivals. The Dholaki is beaten with a palm on its left part and with a stick on its right part. At times, this can also be used to replace the Tyamko.
8. **Jhyamtaa:** It is also called Jhyaali or the Jhyamtaa compensates for the work of Cymbal in the Naumati. This is a pair of brass bowl-like structures with its borders widened so as to beat together to produce the sound. These two are connected by way of string passing through the wholes. In Hindi music, this has commonly been used in Jhankaar beats.

It may be noted that the Membranophones discussed above need some kind of lever to play. Such a common device is called Gazza. Gazza or Gazzas are made up of bamboo sticks or of any other wood. Gazzas for Tyamko is long and sleek while for Baauntal and Damaha they are shorter and thicker. The word Gazza originates from the word gauge or 36 inches in length (Bhim Thatal)

Naumati Baaja can play Mangal dhun, Ramkali, Chanchari, Malsri and Diwas Raaga, etc. Though Naumati is commonly played during the marriage, it is also played on several other occasions in the same tune. However, bethhi or the music while paddy transplantation is played on a different tune.

Thus those instruments of Panchai Baja group have different use, symbol and sound. It can be easily assumed that the Naumati Baja was conceived to give a slightly larger form to the Panchai Baja group that has been played since ancient times. By adding one more Sanai, one more Dahmah, one Narsingha and one Karnal to Panchai Baja extended as Naumati Baja. Because there is only kind of similar instruments in Panchai Baja. For instance it is very difficult to play Sanai continuously by a single artist. Thus in Naumati Baja there is an addition of one more Sanai, may be it is to assist each other. According to Ramsaran Darnal, a popular and renowned Nepali folk artist, the name Naumati Baja has nothing to do with the nine instrument in this group. According to him in Naumati Baja group there can add upto thirty six more instruments. He believes that the word Naumati Baja may be the distorted form of Persian word 'Naubatkhana'. During the Mughal period there used to be a house to celebrate musically religious and auspicious events, just above the door of this house there used to be a doom on the both sides of which there used to play Sanai and Nagara, it was called Naubatkhana. So from this word and traditions the tradition of Panchai Baja might have entered into the Nepali culture. But gradually it became popular as Naumati Baja in Nepali culture.

The artist and instruments in Naumati Baja:

Although Naumati Baja is nine in number but there involve only seven types of musical instruments. As we already discussed about the instrument lets know about the persons who play these instruments. Are represented in Idiophone.

Person who plays the Sanai earlier he was called as Sanaichi or Sahanaichi, but today these words are considered as derogatory. Thus people prefer to call them as Sanaiwadak or who play Sanai. Just like earlier it was called Tabalchi to person who play Tabala. But today he is also address as Tabala Wadak. Similarly earlier person who play Dholaki was called Dholakchi or Dholake but today he is address as Dholak Wadak, and Dahmah player as Damahi, Tyamko as Tyakey, Narsingha as Narsinghey, Karnal as Karnalchi. But today they are prefer to called wadak or player of such instruments. To address these artists after their preferred instruments is taken offensive way or as derogatory term (Darnal, Ramsaran.1999).

Naumati Baja artists basically comprises ten members that involve nine musicians and one extra member, who usually look after their food and other logistics. Today, the band has their own dress code involving Nepali traditional dress i.e. daura-suruwal, sta coat and dhaka topi. Initially, such dress code was not prevalent among the musicians. Today, as per the demand of the day, the band members are conscious about their presentation and uniformity among the musician. Some of the members even interpret their dress code and attire as a mark of their musician identity in any social function. The dress code of Damai musician thus has become a new trend in Nepal and Darjeeling, which the band members gets sometimes from the state or ruling political parties along with their instruments.

The Traditional Tunes of Naumati Baja:

An auspicious band the Naumati Baja plays during prayer offerings, christenings, paddy transplantations, and most importantly, marriage ceremonies, as a sign of respect and welcome for the king, ministers, and well-known individuals. Additionally, it is also learn that the Naumati, melancholy ragas sung to a monotonous pace, are being played while the cortege is being driven to the funeral pyre. It is believed that discovering a resort in perpetual joy with the Naumati's auspicious music is a tremendous blessing for a departed soul.

Generally any tune or music can be play through Naumati Baja. At this present world there is the domination of commercial music and the traditional Naumati Baja is also not in exception to this. But the original tunes and playing style of Naumati Baja cannot be overlook. In folk tradition first Naumati Baja creats folk tunes than the singers following this tune fill the words and sing. Folk songs have only verses and phases. When folk songs are created it travels the area of similar culture and that may influence some tunes and words but the prime and basic tune cannot be change.

The most important traditional tunes of Naumati Baja are Mangal Dhun, Ramkali, Chachari, Malsress, Diwas Rag, a special wedding rite for groom tune, etc. It has also great contribution in samayaik music and labour music. It is believed that whenever the Naumati Baja play the tune of Selo it must arose the divine power. Possession by Saraswati at such an event is a positive thing, but it still contains an element of danger, if the person possessed is not released skillfully, they may become sick. Because of such tough level of music most of the artist of Naumati Baja try to avoid this Selo tune. Mainly Naumati Baja play during the inauguration of any auspicious festival, ceremony, rituals or any mass programme. Even during this digital age Naumati Baja has been successful to maintain its significance.

Some Scholarly Work on Naumati Baja

The research and scholarly work about this tradition of Naumati Baja is not satisfactory. There is need of more ethnomusicological research and studies regarding Naumati Baja. The scholastic work in Nepali ethnomusicology was initiated by the foreign scholars. The credit of first writing about Naubati Baji can be given to the French Musicologist Merrie Helfer. After that British writer Dr. Carol Tingey has written about two books on Naumati Baja. Merrie Helfer published her article 'Fanfares Villageouises on Nepal' in Paris Journal in 1969. Dr. Tingey published his first book 'Heartbeat of Nepal: The Pancaim Baja' in 1990 from Nepali Pragya Pratisthan, Katmandu and another book 'Auspicious Music in a Changing Society: The Damai Musicians of Nepal' was published from Delhi in 1994. Thus a proper book on Naumati Baja was written by these foreign writers. But recently a lot of scholastic work and research have been initiated by the scholars from Nepal and Nepali people outside Nepal.

Conclusion

Naumati Baja carries the traditional values of Nepali folk culture. In spite of being an ancient Nepali tradition Naumati Baja adapts to contemporary needs, showcasing a blend of modern and traditional elements. It has also been successful in preserving the moral and cultural values it inherently possesses. Naumati Baja has earned a special status within Nepali society across the world. Naumati Baja is an essential part of Nepali culture. From birth to death the Naumati Baja finds its place in various rituals and celebration in one form and another in Nepali society. Naumati Baja is omnipresent in the Nepali traditional ceremonies and social gatherings. In religious practices Naumati Baja takes a more profound role serving as a medium for spiritual liberation. Its ancient values continue to be relevant even today, contributing significantly to the cultural and spiritual aspects of the community. Concurrently, one new

trend noticed is that society is also adopting the culture of folk music in many other non-traditional occasions like the tourism festivals, mela and other public gathering. It continues to inspire creativity and maintain harmony, demonstrating its resilience and adaptability in an ever-changing world.

When look at from the ethnomusical prospective, in Nepali Culture and traditions Naumati Baja plays a significant role. In Nepali ethnic music Naymati Baja serves as an essential criterion of their identity. It is an inseparable part of their social and cultural life. But in this age of globalization and digitalization the ethnic culture and traditions are losing its significance gradually. All these root and rich traditional and cultural ethnic legacies have been limited within a formal custom only. It is very important to save and preserve such rich cultural values in the society.

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