

# Ekhphrases

## Feature Essay



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## Songs of Anguish and Devotion: An Inquiry into the Performing Tradition of *Maadalay*

### Songs of the Darjeeling Hill

*\*Benoy Pradhan*

**Abstract:** The traditional percussion instrument *maadal* serves as the rhythmic base of Nepali folksongs and occupies a crucial position in promoting the cultural identity of the Indian Nepalis. The expert *maadal* players can play various complex rhythmic melodies while singing songs simultaneously. This cultural form, known as *maadalay geet*, played in varied rhythms such as *khyali*, *chodka*, *garra*, *samala*, *tappa* etc. revolves around the varied experiences of the community. The present paper seeks to get a deeper understanding of one of the varieties of *maadalay geet* known as *birani/birahani*. There is a unique element of anguish that characterizes these songs. The reason for which this variety of song has been chosen as focal point is that it is most widespread compared to other *maadalay* songs and offers various issues for interpretation. A close examination of the *birani/birahani* songs, which has been collected from several locations of Darjeeling hills, also allows us to understand that the genre is marked by a distinct devotional spirit. The paper also seeks to examine the ways in which the songs have been sustained intergenerationally.

**Keywords:** folksong, *maadalay geet*, *birani/birahani*, anguish, devotion.

### Introduction

Songs serve as a very powerful medium of articulating emotions and experiences. Throughout history, human beings in any region of the world have used music and song to convey their innermost feelings thereby allowing the listeners to connect on a deeply personal level. With time, songs associated with a certain sentiment, occasion, festival, ritual and situation take on the shape of traditional music of any culture. Such inherited traditions in the context of the Indian Nepalis of the Darjeeling hills<sup>1</sup> have manifested in different genres such as *selo*, *jhyaure*, *sangini*, *malsiri*, *khajjadi*, *balan*, *asare*, *palam* etc. On the basis of the number of participants, these song forms can be categorized as *ekal* (solo), *dohori* (duet) and

*samuhik* (group). However, this division is not rigid because songs like *selo* can be performed both by a solo singer and by a group.

The cylindrical percussion instrument *maadal* forms the backbone of most of the Nepali traditional songs commonly known as *lokgeet*. It is a significant cultural marker for Indian Nepalis, and their pride in the musical instrument is seen in the usage of this instrument as an emblem of various social, political, and non-political organizations. Along with the traditional blade-weapon *khukuri*, this musical instrument serves as a symbol of Nepali identity and is highly revered. If the *khukuri* becomes a metonymic of ‘*bir*’ Nepali/Gorkha<sup>ii</sup> embodying the sentiments of courage and honour in the battlefield, then the traditional percussion *maadal* is connected to the idea of ‘*rausay*’ or joyful Nepali/Gorkha singing songs of their lived experiences. The instrument is integral to traditional songs like *maadalay geet*, *jhyaure*, *deusi*, etc., and more recent folk tune-based songs.

The *maadal* that is common in the Darjeeling hills and Sikkim is known as ‘*purbeli maadal*’, the adjective ‘*purbeli*’ or ‘of east’ connoting to this variety being specific to the Eastern Himalayas. The ‘*purbeli maadal*’ resembles more like other Indian percussion instruments like *dholak*, *mridangam* and *pakhawaj* and is bigger in dimension than its smaller counterpart ‘*paschemey maadal*’. In the Darjeeling hills, the ‘*paschemey maadal*’ is used with fast tempo songs. Although it is common to see the traditional instrument *maadal* being played as an accompaniment in Nepali traditional songs, there is a specific type of music known as *maadalay geet* in which the performers sing and play the instrument themselves. A person who plays the *maadal* is known as *maadalay* and therefore the song sung by the *maadalay* is called *maadalay geet*. These songs may also be performed with a group of backing vocalists, *maadal* musicians and other accompaniment instruments like *jhyali*<sup>iii</sup>, *basuri*<sup>iv</sup>, as well as a male dancer dressed as a woman known as *maaruni*. The rules of the traditional belief system must be properly followed throughout the duration of this type of traditional musical performance, *maaruni naach*, and the *maadalay geet*. There are oral guidelines for how a performance should start and which rhythm should be played at a particular ritualistic phase of the performance. Hence, due to these severe norms, such traditional *maaruni* performances are not usually conducted by the *maadalays* nowadays. Nonetheless, the songs can be performed at any time of the year except the rainy month of *saun*<sup>v</sup>. The *maadalays* perform the songs in various rhythms, and each variant derives its name from its rhythm. To give an instance *samala*, an eight-beat rhythm, that is very popular

in recent folk compositions as well, is the name of the rhythm as well as the songs sung to this rhythm.

### **Filling the research gaps**

A cursory review of research in the study of Indian Nepalis from the Darjeeling hills will show that the focus has always centred on the issue of identity (Chettri; Golay; Pradhan) eclipsing other aspects of the community. There is a clear void in the study of the diverse musical genres of this region. The analysis of songs can provide knowledge on the historical, social, political, geographic, and economic facets of any community comprising the composite Indian Nepalis. Sometimes, a specific musical genre or instrument comes to be closely associated with a specific caste or community and starts to serve as an expression of their cultural identity. So, while also being a part of Nepali music, the *selo* will simultaneously express the cultural identity of the Tamangs', the *hakpare* and *palam* of the Limbus', the *naumati baja* of the Damais' and so on. At the same time, when we note the fact that there are fewer people who are proficient in playing certain instruments, such as *naumati baja*<sup>vi</sup> and *sarangī*<sup>vii</sup>, opens up intricate concerns of caste hierarchy and financial standing for further in-depth study. This paper intends to examine one of the varieties of the musical genre of maadalay geet in-depth, variously termed as *birani* or *birahani*, in such an effort to document and analyse such songs. The songs that are discussed in this paper have been collected personally from various parts of Darjeeling hills and in an attempt to retain the original essence of the song have been presented in Roman transliteration along with an English translation by myself.

### **Songs of anguish**

The maadalay geet known as birani or birahani, which is one of the several varieties, continues to hold a prominent position till date. The term birani, which has become equally prevalent as birahani, has been a quicker way of pronouncing the word by the common people. The appellation birani/birahani seems in all probability to be derived from the noun *viraha* referring to separation, absence, or the anguish of separation. The subject matter of these birani/birahani songs is anguish ensuing from the separation of husbands, parting of daughters from her paternal kin, and atrocities of mother-in-law, sister-in-law, and co-wife (Rawal, 65). It should be noted that in a traditional maadalay geet, the singer is a male performer whose songs are intended for the dance performance of maaruni, who is, as previously said, a male dancer dressed in a woman's garb. The majority of his birani/birahani

songs aim to reproduce the emotions of women, and the maaruni expresses these emotions through his bodily movements. The following few lines from a birani/birahani song describes the agony of a woman whose husband has married a co-wife:

*Siraiko sindurai mero ha....  
Launai bhani kinay theay  
Launnai paaena  
Galaiko rajiya  
Launai bhani kinay theay  
Launnai paaena  
Sauteynilay khosi lagyo  
Launnai paaena<sup>viii</sup>....*

The vermilion for my head  
Was bought to put on  
Couldn't put on  
The necklace for my neck  
Was bought to put on  
Couldn't put on  
Co-wife snatched away  
Couldn't put on....



*Fig. 1: Sri Ram Kumar Rasaily singing maadaly geet with his grandson at his residence, Pokhreybong, Darjeeling, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2022. Photo by Benoy Pradhan.*

In the song, the speaker enlists a number of items starting from vermilion for the head to *rajiya* or necklace, *phariya* or saree, *pauju* or ankle bracelet which she had bought to adorn herself. But she bemoans the fact that the co-wife has literally and figuratively stolen all these things away from her.

A fascinating feature of these different types of maadaly geet from the Darjeeling hills is that one can notice the variations in the style of playing the different rhythms, singing

and the structure of the same category of songs. The same birani/birahani of six beats is played in different styles at different places though the total count of beats remains the same. Certain variations in the lyrics of the same song can also be perceived. For instance, the aforementioned song from Pokhreybung, a small suburb, around 30 kms away from Darjeeling was sung with alteration of words and sentences at a place named Rajbari in Darjeeling town, yet the central theme was kept unchanged. The song is as follows:

*Sirai kyaray sindurai ta ha....  
Launai bhani lyae thea  
Sauteynilay khosima lagyo  
Launai paaena*

*Sauteyniko darailay rani bana gayethe  
Rani jo banaima pare gayo raat  
Banaima basoo bhanay bagheniko darr  
Gharmai jau bhanay sauteyniko darr  
Banaima basoo bhanay nageniko darr  
Gharmai jau bhanay sauteyniko darr*

*Konai bela ujjalo hola  
Mero swami aaulaa  
Swamijyuko kakhaima basi  
Dukhai kahulaa sukhai kahulaa<sup>ix</sup>*

The vermilion for my head  
Was brought to put on  
Co-wife snatched away  
Couldn't put on....  
Went to the large forest out of co-wife's dread  
The night descended on the large forest  
Tigress' threat prevailed if remained in the forest  
Co-wife's dread detained the return to home  
Serpent's threat prevailed if remained in the forest  
Co-wife's dread detained the return to home

At what hour will it dawn?  
My husband might arrive  
Sitting by his side  
Will apprise him of sorrow and joy.



Fig.2  
Sri Guman Singh Lakandri at his residence, Rajbari, Darjeeling, 9<sup>th</sup> August, 2022. Photo by Benoy Pradhan.

In this song, the verb *kinay* or ‘buying’ of the vermilion of the earlier song has been replaced by *lyae* meaning ‘brought’, which has the same syllable count as *kinay* and hence does not affect the rhythm of the song and there is also only a subtle change in the meaning of the sentence. However, instead of enumerating the ornaments and attire, in this song the speaker narrativizes her ordeal. She describes how out of fear of the co-wife, she went to the dense forest. As night fell, the distraught woman in the forest was petrified of the tiger and snake but was unable to return home due to the trepidation of the co-wife. She relates how anxiously she waited for the dawn as well as for the return of her husband.

These enduring traditional birani/birahani songs are set in an era and locale that are far apart from the present. Therefore, even though polygamy is no longer practiced, many of the songs concern the experiences of women whose husbands have married another woman; the husbands leaving their houses in search of employment and the ensuing isolation, longing, and anguish of the women. At times, the pathos of the song is resultant of the woman’s longing for her paternal home, *maita*. In the following song, a woman whose husband has left his village expresses a deep sense of anguish settled within her heart. As time goes by, she yearns for his return to chase away the painful loneliness:

*Udhai jada dekhayni maelay*  
*Saipatri biruwa*  
*Ubhai auda hey meri didai*  
*Bhayo kopila*  
*Ah ha hai bhayo kopila didai*  
*Bhayo kopila<sup>x</sup>*

While going downhill

I saw a marigold sapling  
While coming uphill, dear sister  
*Ah ha hai* it had turned into a bud, sister  
Turned into a bud.

In the course of my field work, it was observed that in some places the marigold flower mentioned in this song is also substituted by Cockscomb flower or *Chituchangay* in local language. Given the prolonged flowering of *Chituchangay*, it works well in the song to illustrate the long passage of time the husband was away. As these songs exist in oral form, it has led to such variations of lyrics. In the lines that follows, the woman reflects that if she picks the flower, it will wither; if she breaks the branch with the flower, it will dry; and if she weaves a garland, it will rot:

*Tipi chudi rakhau nay bhaney*  
*Oili jaijala*  
*Dalai bhachi rakhau nay bhaney*  
*Suki jaijala*  
*Mala guthi rakhau hae bhaney*  
*Ah ha hai kuhi jaijala*

If I try to retain the flower by plucking,  
It might wither  
If I try to retain the flower by breaking off the branch  
It will dry  
If I try to retain the flower by weaving a garland  
It will rot.

Since her paternal home is far away, she cannot offer it to her brothers or *maiti* also during the festival of *Bhai tika*. Traditionally in the Nepali culture, the sisters, or *cheli*, offer special prayers for the brothers and offer a garland of *Makhamali* flowers or *Gomphrena globosa* on the third day of the festival of *Tihar* or *Diwali*. This *Makhamali* flower is especially renowned for its durability, and its garland keeps its colour for a considerable amount of time. The flower serves as a representation of the brothers' longevity. The sister-brother connection, known as *cheli-maiti*, is marked by respect and affection between the two, and the presence of both is necessary for the performance of many rituals in the Nepali community such as *Chhewer* or tonsuring ritual of children.

In the song, the speaker asks her friend who will put on the flower because she cannot meet her *maiti* during the festival and her spouse is also in a distant land:

*Maiti hamro duraema desae*  
*Swami hamro pardesae*  
*Yo phula ko laula ni didai*

Our *maiti* is in a faraway land  
Our husband is in a foreign land  
Who will wear this flower, sister?

The husband being in some distant land might be a reference to the historical fact that many men from the hills used to enlist in the British army and were stationed throughout the world. After the acquisition of Darjeeling by the British through the Deed of Grant in 1835, it was turned into an important centre for the recruitment of the Gorkha soldiers to fight for the Britishers abroad. Jahar Sen writes,

“As the headquarter of eastern zone for recruitment of Gurkha soldiers, the importance of Darjeeling is quite well-known. From 1886 to 1904 as many as 27,428 Gurkha soldiers were recruited by the Darjeeling Recruiting Centre. Probably in 1890, the recruiting Officer for the Gurkhas established an office in Darjeeling. Some of the annual reports of the Deputy Commissioner, Darjeeling, contain interesting information as to the purpose of the recruiting work. During 1891-91 one thousand hill people from Darjeeling were recruited for military transport in Burma and 350 for Chittagong” (61-62).

In the song of our discussion, the lonely predicament of the woman compels the nature to respond as well. The flower tries to comfort the woman, telling her not to cry because it will bloom once again when her *maiti* arrives next year:

*Dhuru dhuru na ruwa hai cheli*  
*Ah ha hai timro maiti aula samma*  
*Ma pheri phulaula*

Do not weep bitterly, *cheli*  
*Ah ha hai* till your *maiti* arrives  
I will bloom again.

The woman replies to the flower, telling it that while the splendour of its youth will return when it blooms in the upcoming season, humans are allowed to experience youthfulness only once in this life. The fleeting nature of youthfulness or *joban* and human life in general is one of the central concerns in the maadaly songs. The woman could not spend her youthful days along with her husband and the pain of this realisation is reflected in the song:

*Phula joban baram bar auchha*  
*Yo joban ekai bar*  
*Teyrae ritu aula sakhi*  
*Sai ranga phulaula*  
*Hamro ritu gayo gangai par sakhi*  
*Janma ekai bar.*

The youthfulness of flower comes time and again  
Our youthfulness comes only once



Your season might come, friend  
You might blossom in hundred colours  
Our season has flowed across Ganga, friend  
Our birth is only for once.

The maadalays that I interacted with talked of continuing this genre orally, and consequently the playing and singing styles both has remain unstandardized. But it may not be assumed that the songs which have been handed down generationally continue in their pristine form. Modifications take place as these are transferred from one generation to another. To use D. Venkat Rao's term "responsive reception" (219) takes place. When the songs are transferred through the generations, the generation receiving the cultural form respond to them and modifications might be taking place in their response. In the spontaneity of the flow of the song, the maadalay may add new words and lines to the existing song or may omit some from the original ones. Such an exercise is not premeditated but may occur when the performer is engrossed in creative sensibility. This leads not only to the modifications in the songs but also enriches and sustains the cultural form. This "improvisational element" is what has ensured the continuity of the birani/birahani songs.

### **Songs of devotion**

A prominent feature of the birani/birahani songs of the Darjeeling hills is the inescapable devotional flavour. Songs on the characters and episodes of Ramayana, and about Krishna, Radha and Gopis are prevalent. The parting of Ram, Sita, and Laxman from Dasratha during their exile of fourteen years, the separation of husband and wife when Sita is abducted by Ravana and the resultant pain offers suitable subjects for the birani/birahani songs wherein the predominant emotion is that of anguish expressed in a sombre tone and slow-paced tempo. Songs that are devoted to Krishna, Radha, and the Gopis are also sombre in tone and treat the subject matter of making offerings to them by the maadalay rather than retelling Krishna's rasa lila. In the course of my interactions with the maadalays, it was discovered that some of them also credit the origin of maadal to Lord Krishna. This may also explain why there is such a fervent adoration to Lord Krishna in these songs. The following song manifests such devotion to Krishna:

*Ha aaa ....*

*Laykhai kyaray malingo ta ha...  
Hey rajai phedhai dhali  
Yo tuppoi chhasi banaula bansuri*

*Banau bansuri laalai banau bansuri*

*Bansuri bajyo lailai murali bajyo lailai*  
*Ah ha hai Krishnajyuko yo mandiraima Bansuri bajyo*  
*Ha ha hai Krishnajyuko yo mandiraima Bansuri bajyo*

.....  
.....  
*Radhai aayo nachdai nachdai*  
*Krishna aayo gaudai bajaudai*  
*Ah ha hai solaha saina Gopiniko nachai laayo<sup>xi</sup>*

*Ha aaa ....*  
The bamboo of the higher slopes  
*Hey rajai* will be cut from the bottom  
Trimmed from the top to make the flute  
To make the flute for lord, to make the flute

The flute was played, the fife was played  
*Ah ha hai* in the temple of Krishna, the flute sounded  
*Ah ha hai* in the temple of Krishna, the flute sounded

.....  
.....  
Radha came swaying, dancing  
Krishna came singing, playing  
*Ah ha hai* the sixteen thousand gopis started dancing.



Fig. 3: Sri Bijay Biswakarma at his residence, Tukvar, Darjeeling, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2022. Photo by Prashanta Gurung.

The speaker with great devotion lists the many musical instruments, such as the *kathataal<sup>xii</sup>* and *sankha<sup>xiii</sup>*, that might be heard in the temple of God Krishna. Localization of the characters and context of Hindu mythology is also evident in these songs. The honorific Nepali word “*jyu*” which is akin to the Hindi word “*ji*” and used while addressing elders or individuals with respect, is used to refer to the gods. In most cases, the flora and fauna mentioned in the lyrics are also exclusive to the hilly area. In the songs, the divine mystical

flute of Krishna is also prepared from a species of bamboo, *malingo*, that grows in the higher altitudes. The soulful music of Krishna's flute which could captivate every listener, troubles the heart of maadalay in one of the birani/birahani songs and, therefore, he appeals Krishna not to continue playing the flute:

*Na bajau na bajau krishna swami  
Laalai timro murali laalai timro basuri  
Ah ha hai hamaray mana biraktaa bhaego  
Na bajau basuri....<sup>xiv</sup>*

Do not play your flute, lord Krishna  
Dear your fife, dear your flute  
*Ah ha hai* my heart has become free from passion  
Do not play your flute...



*Fig. 4: Sri Sun Bahadur Majhi on the left with his friend, Sri Swapan Gurung at his residence in Bada Sittong, subdivision Kurseong, Darjeeling, 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2021. Photo by Benoy Pradhan.*

In another song by another maadalay, the melody from Krishna's flute is also called pensive and melancholic:

*Urathai lagdo basuri bajyo  
Tyo Brindabanaima<sup>xv</sup>*

The flute sounded melancholic  
In the Brindabana.

The genre of birani/birahani songs is lengthier in comparison to other varieties of maadalay geet. Its length enables the unfolding of the narrative and the slow tempo with which birani/birahani songs are played engenders a soul-stirring performance. The next song below gives an idea of how the lengthy duration of the song encourages the expression of thoughts and emotion:

*Purbai disha gadangudoong  
Hey lailai pachima disha kali kali  
Hey meri badali*

*Ah ha hai yehi dishama barshi gayo asina pani*

*Wari bata baghe jharyo  
Paari bata bagdai jharyo  
Ah ha hai dono nadiko milan bhayo Kasipuraima  
Kasipuraima lailai Kasipuraima*

*Ah ha hai dono nadiko naamai rahyo Gangai Jamuna  
Gangai Jamuna lailai Gangai Jamuna*

*Ah ha hai dono nadiko kinaraima  
Phulai phulyo indrakamalko  
Dhakamaka magamaga chalyo basana  
Chalyo basana lailai chalyo basana*

*Chalyo basana lailai chalyo basana  
Ah ha hai ekai thunga phulai tipi  
Krishnajyuko mandiraima chadai jaulaa  
Chadai jaulaa lailai chadai jaulaa*

*Ekai thunga phulai tipi  
Saraswati hey Bhagawati  
Timro mandiraima chadai jaulaa  
Jabima phula mai jabima phula*

*Ah ha hai Saraswati hey Bhagawati  
Timro mayalay ghumai lyayo  
Paryau sarana  
Paryau sarana lailai paryau sarana<sup>vi</sup>*

*Thundering in the eastern direction  
Hey lailai darkness in the west  
Oh, my cloud  
Ah ha hai hailstones showered in this direction*

*Flowing, it fell from this side  
Flowing, it fell from the other side  
Ah ha hai both the rivers met at Kasipur  
At Kasipur lailai at Kasipur*

*Ah ha hai the two rivers were named Ganga Jamuna  
Ganga Jamuna lailai Ganga Jamuna*

*Ah ha hai on the banks of the two rivers  
Blossomed the flower of indrakamal  
In abundance diffused the pleasing fragrance  
Diffused the pleasing fragrance lailai diffused the pleasing fragrance*

*Diffused the pleasing fragrance lailai diffused the pleasing fragrance  
Ah ha hai plucking a single piece of flower  
Will offer in the temple of Krishna  
Will offer lailai will offer*

*Plucking a single piece of flower  
Saraswati oh, Bhagawati*

Will offer in your temple  
Insignificant flower, mother, insignificant flower

*Ah ha hai* Saraswati oh, Bhagawati  
Your love has brought back after wandering  
Seek your refuse  
Seek your refuse *lailai* seek your refuse



Fig.5: Sri Nar Bahadur Gurung at his residence in lower Sittong, sub division Kurseong, Darjeeling, 13<sup>th</sup> April, 2021. Photo by Benoy Pradhan.

The song begins with a description of the thundering in the eastern sky and the dark clouds in the western direction and the showering of the hailstones at the place of the singer. To the maadalay the rains bring in the association of the two rivers flowing from two different directions and converging at *Kasipur*. *Kasi* also referred to as *Kasipuri* in the songs, the present-day Varanasi in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, is inseparable from the idea of salvation and piety in Hinduism and is an important motif in the devotional maadalay geet. The word *jharyo* meaning ‘fell’ to denote the movement of the rivers underscores the hilly locale of the speaker where one can experience the waterfalls falling down the precipice. Besides the banks of these two rivers, named Ganga and Jamuna, blossomed the fragrant flowers of Gardenia or *Indrakamal*. The speaker intends to offer a piece of Gardenia flower at the temple of God Krishna and another bunch at the temple of Goddesses Saraswati and Bhagawati.

In the birani/birahani songs, one can notice the mention of ritualist offerings of different flowers and holy water of the river Ganga to different Gods and goddesses. In Darjeeling hills, the Nepali community regard water from various springs, streams and rivers as equally holy as the water of river Ganga, which is why water from these sources is also

called *gangajal*. Besides, earth, sun, sky, the four directions, moon, deities of the local places, etc., are also revered. In the following song, the speaker mentions of making offerings of red sandalwood to the earth and *gajamati* flower to the sun. In Hinduism, the solar deity is worshipped with red sandalwood and red flowers, who blesses the worshipper with prosperity.

*Dhartilai chadaulaa  
Lali rasa Chandana  
Suryalai chadaulaa  
Gajamati phul*

*Mayalay badhaua  
Lali rasa jobanlai  
Ah ha hai piratilay badhaua  
Yo boli bachana<sup>xvii</sup>*

Will offer earth  
Red sandalwood  
Will offer sun  
Gajamati flower

Will tie with love  
Crimson youthfulness  
*Ah ha hai* will bind with affection  
These words and speech.



*Fig. 6: Sri Ram Bahadur Mangrati at his residence in Bijanbari, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2022. Photo by Prashanta Gurung.*

Even in the devotional birani/birahani songs, the impermanence of the stage of youth and its vigour, glamour, strength, and spirit is a recurrent subject matter and therefore the exigency of savouring the phase of youth is significantly dwelt upon. The singer, conscious of the fleeting nature of human life, will tie the crimson-coloured youth with love and will bind the

words and speech with affection. In the following lines, the speaker states that affectionate words and speech can endear a person, however, in his case, he had to undergo a feeling of hurt due to the harsh words:

*Ah ha hai bachanako lai lai  
Bachanako thai thai  
Bachanalay lagyo malai ghau  
Yehi bachanalay lagyo malai ghau*

*Ah ha hai* the words can give repose  
The words can give joy  
The words have wounded me  
These words have wounded me.

The lines also underscore the differential treatment of individuals as a result of the caste structure.

Songs are also drawn from the Ramayana specially from Ayodhya Kanda and Aryanya Kanda and underlines the popularity of the Nepali translation of the epic by Bhanubhakta. The ambience of anguish at Rama's exile for fourteen years, the pain of Rama after Sita's abduction are recurrent themes of the birani/birahani songs. The melody and lyricism of the verses popularised the text even among the uneducated masses. Another reason for the text being endeared by the masses was the fact that Bhanubhakta adopted the elements of Nepali society in his translation. Thus, in Bhanubhakta's Ramayana, we come across Rama and Laxman, who are not averse to non-vegetarian meals. (Sharma, 266-267). The next song narrates the hunting by Rama and Laxman:

*Laxmanko jabima  
Hey rajai sunai thakro, rupai kangro  
Suerai batnay  
Sunai thakro, rupai kangro suerai batnay*

*Aau bhai laxman jau Brindabana  
Ha ha hai harinako sikar garau  
Jau Brindabana<sup>viii</sup>*

Inside Laxman's bag  
*Hey rajai* golden corn, beautiful comb  
To plait the hair

Come brother laxman lets go Brindabana  
*Ha ha hai* lets hunt the deer  
Let's go Brindabana.





*Fig. 7: Sri. Bidhan Shashankar, Sri. Santosh Portel, Sri. Sukdas Shashankar, Sri Mankumar Majhi, in Phoobsering Tea Estate, District Darjeeling, 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2021. Photo by Benoy Pradhan.*

## **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, the birani/birahani songs prevalent in the Darjeeling hills stand as the most popular among the different varieties of the maadalay geet. However, such a rich cultural inheritance has not been significantly studied and remains conspicuous by its absence in the writings vis-à-vis the Indian Nepalis. The paper, therefore, has been an attempt at the collection, classification and analysis of one of the genres of these songs. The entire corpus of maadalay geet of the Darjeeling hills offers an immense possibility for its extensive research from diverse fields of study such as anthropology, sociology, history, music etc. Such studies, if undertaken, will definitely prove invaluable for a better understanding of the community — moving beyond the stereotypical “martial race” — as well as of the region.

The subject matter of these songs ranges from mundane to spiritual and the ones that are infused with devotional spirit also bring out the colours and flavours of the Darjeeling hills as well. In the present times with the onset of recording technology, female rendition of birani/birahani songs are also available in recorded forms where it has been labelled as maruni geet. The use of the term maruni geet is incorrect as it amalgamates the designation of the dance and song forms. The song genre is designated as maadalay geet and the traditional dance performed on such songs is called maruni naach. Moreover, birani/birahani songs is just a part of the broad-spectrum of maadalay geet. Hence, it would be appropriate to term such songs by its traditional genre title.



## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> By Darjeeling hills, I refer to the hill subdivisions of Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts, West Bengal, India.
- <sup>ii</sup> The Indian Nepalis in search of a suitable nomenclature to represent their Indian identity, which would differentiate them from the citizens of Nepal, use Nepalis, Gorkhas and Indian Nepalis interchangeably. In the political sphere, the use of Gorkha is preferred over Nepali capitalizing on the colonial discourse of “martial race”.
- <sup>iii</sup> Small round shaped disc made of alloy.
- <sup>iv</sup> Bamboo flute.
- <sup>v</sup> The Hindus do not perform any ritualistic worship during *saun*. Since the musicians believe in the divine origin of *maadal* involving Hindu dieties, they abstain from playing it in *saun*. Nevertheless, the damp weather may not be suitable to play the desired scale on the instrument also.
- <sup>vi</sup> *Naumati baja* is a traditional nine musical instruments ensemble played during auspicious occasions. The Damain community trace the origin of the name of the community to one of the instruments of the ensemble, *damaha* (kettledrum).
- <sup>vii</sup> *Sarangi* is a bowed string instrument usually associated with the Gaine or Gandharva caste.
- <sup>viii</sup> Sri Ram Kumar Rasaily, aged 61, resident of Pokhreybong, Darjeeling. Personal Interview, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2022.
- <sup>ix</sup> Sri Guman Singh Lakandri, aged 55, resident of Rajbari, Darjeeling. Personal Interview, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2022.
- <sup>x</sup> Sri Ram Kumar Rasaily, aged 61, resident of Pokhreybong, Darjeeling. Personal Interview, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2022.
- <sup>xi</sup> Sri Bijay Biswakarma, aged 53, resident of Tukvar, Darjeeling. Personal Interview, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2022.
- <sup>xii</sup> Wooden cymbals.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Conch.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Sri Sun Bahadur Majhi, aged 63, resident of Bada Sittong, subdivision Kurseong, Darjeeling. Personal Interview, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2021.
- <sup>xv</sup> Sri Ram Bahadur Mangrati, aged 88, resident of Bijanbari, Darjeeling. Personal Interview, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2022.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Sri Nar Bahadur Gurung, aged 61, resident of Lower Sittong, subdivision Kurseong, District Darjeeling. Personal Interview, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2021.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ram Bahadur Mangrati, aged 88, a resident of Bijanbari, Darjeeling. Personal Interview, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2022.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Sri Sukdas Shashankar, aged 62, resident of Phoobsering Tea Estate, District Darjeeling, 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2021.

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**\*Benoy Pradhan** is Assistant Professor, Department of English, Southfield College (formerly Loreto College), Darjeeling, West Bengal. Email: benoy2@gmail.com