

Peter J. Karthak. 2018. *Nepali Musicians: Between the Dales of Darjeeling and the Vales of Kathmandu*. Kathmandu: Himal Books.

Peter J. Karthak (1943–2020) was—by his own account—a “hillbilly” from a tea estate in Shillong, India. But his arrival, aged 12, in Darjeeling town for high school and college studies in fact set him off on a rich and varied career. Moving to Nepal in 1965 for a (failed) attempt to run a school in Birganj (together with future luminaries Anuradha Koirala of Maiti Nepal and Ranjit Gazmer) and then setting up in Kathmandu, he was a croupier at a casino, a student at Tribhuvan University (he took an MA in English in 1971), a travel company operative, a prize-winning novelist, an educationist teaching in several colleges and universities, and finally a journalist and

editor in a number of Kathmandu newspapers. Karthak's foundational career, however, was in music. This book in fact reflects all aspects of this varied trajectory: educative, entertaining, and displaying a thorough command of the writer's craft, it deals principally with Karthak's experiences in the musical scenes of Darjeeling and Kathmandu from about 1960 to 1976. Essentially made up by the author's pieces (many of them formerly available online) in Nepali newspapers from 1997 to 2017, revised and re-written for this volume, the book is rounded out with a couple of previously unpublished articles. The book is edited in such a way that the individual chapters still retain the character of stand-alone articles. As a result of this, one can read the chapters in any sequence, but one also finds a significant amount of repetition.

In 1966–1976, Karthak played the guitar, bass guitar and double bass in recordings for Radio Nepal and Ratna Records. He also performed live at the Mahendra Police Club (“a choice venue for the city's elitist events,” p. xi) and was summoned as a “musician for royal-command performances at the Royal Nepal Academy” (p. 150). And he played with all the Kathmandu musical notabilities—people like Bachchu Kailash, Bhaktaraj Acharya, Fatteman, Meera Rana, Narayan Gopal, Nati Kazi, Nirmala Shrestha and the other members of *Lekali*, Prem Dhoj, Shiva Shankar, Tara Devi and many others still.

But it was in Darjeeling that Karthak's musical journey commenced. Here he was in the midst of a rare aggregation of artistic talent. Indeed, in the pages of this book, the Darjeeling of around 1960 appears to have been something of the Calcutta of the Bengali Renaissance, or the Vienna of Mahler, Klimt and Wittgenstein, though of course the urban “swirl” and artistic innovation (Hannerz 1992; Hall 1998) was on a less grand scale in this little town. The people Karthak could count among his musical peers—and often also among his school- or college-mates—make up an impressive list: Amber Gurung, Aruna Lama, Gopal Yonjan, Karma Yonjan, Louis Banks, Ranjit Gazmer, Sharan Pradhan, and Shanti Thatal—among others! Also the literary arts, with for instance Indra Bahadur Rai, Bairagi Kainla and Ishwar Ballav of the *Tesro Āyām* movement, were contributing to the scene. Karthak duly notes the importance of lyricists for modern Nepali songs but leaves them out of his book, with one exception: the Darjeeling writer and school headmaster Agam Singh Giri—who collaborated with Amber Gurung (and was Karthak's neighbor) and whom Karthak sees as a (or even “the”) foundational Nepali songwriter—is given a colorful portrait.

This was a mixed and multicultural musical environment. As a fourth generation Christian, Karthak grew up—courtesy of the omnipresent Scottish mission—with English hymns, Hindi and Nepali translations of the Psalms, and Christian *Īsāi bhajans* in Nepali, and sang in the church choir as a boy while also learning the guitar and harmonica (p. 91–92). As a young man he performed in clubs, restaurants and so on in Kalimpong, Gangtok, Siliguri as well as Darjeeling town itself, and was part of several different groups more or less at the same time. One, the *Sangam* Club, was a musical (and more) society with modern Nepali songs on its menu, another was Karthak’s own rock ’n roll group *the Hillians*, and a third was the jazz-oriented quartet headed by Louis Banks. Banks as well as Ranjit Gazmer (whom Karthak played with in all these groups) later went on to work out significant musical careers, in the Mumbai film music industry and elsewhere. Between them—and complemented by the media (records as well as tuning in to Radio Nepal to hear Nepali songs which the All India Radio didn’t bother to broadcast) and occasional visits by artists from Nepal—these groups covered all sorts of contemporary Anglophone popular music, from Count Basie to Dizzy Gillespie and from Sinatra to Bob Dylan, and Nepali songs as well.

It was in the *Art Academy of Music*, set up by Amber Gurung, that all this talent was brought together. Karthak joined it in 1960, at 16, and was impressed with both the musicianship and the sheer size of its orchestra: some 25 to 30 people playing mandolin, tabla, sitar, flute, guitars and violins. Karthak recounts how Amber Gurung gave his musicians practical guided tours of the mixed Nepali/*śāstriya*/Western musical landscape, teaching ragas, talas, notation and improvisation from practical examples of Nepali songs and Hindi film songs, thumri, ghazal and so on. The Academy’s repertoire contained “Nepali music, modern and original” (p. x) and its leader Amber Gurung had already by then developed his own Nepali style with rich harmonies (ninths, diminished chords and so on) and “chromatic melting notes” (p. 50). Moreover, as Karthak points out, Gurung created *Devkota Saṅgīt*, blending folk and modern, and combining Western harmony and polyphony with a *jhyāure* beat, and he also “conveyed Giri’s *jhyaure* lyrics through modern folk” (pp. 68, 94, 130). Strikingly, Amber Gurung—referred to as “our maestro, monitor, guide, and philosopher, a *guru* in more than one *avatar*” as well as a “terrier-size terror” (p. 65) who could reduce Aruna Lama to tears when she happened to sing the wrong note (p. 19)—was

himself self-taught in music (though he seems never to have divulged this secret to his disciples, p. 68).

So much, in this review, for a sample of the Darjeeling musical scene that Karthak brings back to life so vividly in this book. Also the Kathmandu scene is captured in vivid pen-strokes but now the colors are at times rather gloomy. He sees Amber Gurung's many years in the Royal Nepal Academy (a "Kafka's castle") as a "tragic waste" (p. 69). To Karthak, Nepal's capital was an "insular 'source-and-force' jungle of connections" (p. 7), a "feudal, caste-ridden" society (p. 96) plagued by "political intrigues and conspiracies" (p. 104). And Radio Nepal, Karthak writes, was a "black, bureaucratic jungle" (p. 104). The radio was "infested with political vermin" (p. 63) and part of a "feudal setup" (p. 62), used by the Panchayat polity for "propagandistic drivel" (p. 100). When Karthak arrived in this "decrepit, desolate musical netherworld" (p. 101), he found Radio Nepal's studios severely lacking in many respects—musty, dusty, with stale bad air, and only few musical instruments. (The latter problem was addressed to some extent when Nati Kazi was subsequently sent to Japan to buy new instruments.) Recordings were made with two microphones only—one for the singer, another for the whole orchestra. In a rather striking contrast, the Royal Nepal Academy and the Mahendra Police Club were equipped with "the latest JVC system... envied even by the performers from Bombay" and "the best Japanese sound system in town" respectively (p. xi). (One might reflect that Panchayat musical/technical priorities seem to have favored the city elite rather than the country-wide radio audience of ordinary people.)

Yet there is obviously more to this story. Karthak spent ten years at Radio Nepal and—except for a spell at a university in Bangkok—remained in Kathmandu for the rest of his life. One reason for this might be that he obviously found subsequent developments in Darjeeling, with the rise of Subash Ghising and his "goons," distasteful and intimidating (p. 17). Another, and perhaps more compelling reason seems to be that many of the musical talents he knew in Darjeeling also found their way to Kathmandu. As Karthak has it, it was much through the agency of Darjeeling artists that Nepali modern music found its shape. Artists such as Amber Gurung and Gopal Yonjan "ushered in a new awareness" (p. 96) and introduced "bold innovations," making Nepali music "more progressive and exploratory" (p. 5), and similarly, Karthak for instance credits Ranjit Gazmer (and himself) for helping out with the orchestral arrangements of the pioneering and immensely

popular modern folk songs by the *Lekali* group (p. 145). Even if Karthak's evaluations here might reflect a degree of a diasporic idealization of his Darjeeling homeland, and even if he also takes care to elucidate the musical contributions by, among others, Pushpa Nepali, Nati Kazi and Shiva Shankar, it is very clear from his many specific observations that the development of Nepali modern music—like other aspects of modern Nepali national culture (see for instance Onta 1996) cannot be understood from a Kathmandu (or intra-Nepal) perspective only (see also Grandin 2021).

All the people mentioned above appear in the book and many of them are accorded their own chapter. While the book thus is principally about others, Karthak himself is often prominently present—playing the double bass or the guitar, sharing a bottle of rum or moonshine with this or that musical notability. Of course, this short review cannot give justice to all the individual portraits, vivid scenes and lively anecdotes that fill Karthak's book. With a few exceptions (people whom Karthak find less appealing as persons or as artists), his reminiscences are warm and generous, a bit impressionistic and with a light touch yet in fact deeply informative. To just give a few further examples, we meet Narayan Gopal singing bhajans in (what turned out to be) hostile territory, we learn about Kumar Basnet's first (and only) attempt to sing rock 'n roll, we encounter pioneer radio singer *Uhi!* Gobind in his later, farcical radio recordings, and we get to know why the very popular singer Bachchu Kailash withdrew from the public light.

As I hope is clear by now, there is very much to like about this book. It is not a scholarly work—Karthak himself emphasizes that his book “is a collection of my personal reminiscences, and not a set of historical records” (p. x)—but with its abundance of sharp and reflexive first-hand observations Karthak's book provides the groundwork for a more nuanced understanding of modern Nepali music and of what could be called the Darjeeling connection—the intense cultural traffic between Darjeeling and Kathmandu. It should be compulsory reading for anyone interested in the conditions for arts and artists in the Panchayat era or indeed in the foundations of present-day Nepali culture.

References

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