

Rooting and routing in South Asian popular music: the role of Kathmandu

Ingemar Grandin, Linköpings universitet, Sweden

Let's start with some music – some contemporary popular music.

--- music: Aabhaas, Jindagibhari ---

This is Aabhaas from the album *Pala pala*. The album is quite new – it came in 2004 – but there's a lot of "roots" in this music. (Though we would probably not think of this as "roots music".) The "one take analogue recording", the orchestra and the arrangement, the genre and the composition – in all these aspects Aabhaas's album resonates with and even celebrates the golden age of Nepali *adhunik git*. *Adhunik git* literally translates as "modern song" and the golden age of this genre was around the 1970s.

Aabhaas, one can say, *claims* this music as his "roots" but his own work is rooted also in specific ways. He started out some twenty years ago in the group *Aasthaa* where he was a junior member along foundational artists such as Raamesh and Manjul. And moreover, Aabhaas has been a long-time student of *adhunik git* maestro Amber Gurung, with whom he studied singing for ten years, but also picked up compositional thinking in the process.

So much for roots. When it comes to routes, Aabhaas's album is an equally illustrative case. We'll see presently in what ways.

Concepts and processes

With "roots and routes" the organizers of this session have chosen a suggestive and analytically fruitful pairing of metaphor-based concepts. This pair allows us to capture the sedentary as well as the migratory/mobile (Olsson & Grandin 1999). The concepts make it

easy for use to capture, in a shorthand way, what Arjun Appadurai (1990) theorized as various –scapes for global cultural flows in his seminal article on “Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy” – the interaction between the local and the global; between place and flows; the tensions between the processes of homogenization and heterogenization.

In a sociological context, Per Gustafson (2001) has reviewed this pairing as “two phenomena related to place – place attachment and physical mobility – and in particular the *relationship* [my italics] between these two phenomena” (p 667). Gustafson’s article is a good starting point for exploration of this theoretical area. I will draw upon Gustafson’s review of the relevant works (all quotes in the following paras is from Gustafson), but I’ll apply it to music. In sociology and anthropology, Gustafson says, roots/routes has been used “for discussing how people and places are related to culture, often with a focus on such issues as race, ethnicity, minority politics, racism, hybridity, diaspora, migration, and identity.” In the context of music, we can think of roots and routes as attributes of cultural matter as well as of people.

Roots and routes, Gustafson notes, points to two different perspectives and research traditions.

Roots. In the literature, place is a spatial entity that is “experienced and perceived as meaningful by one person alone or by a group of people”. This can be anything from rooms to nations or even continents. Place attachment, as Gustafson notes, refers to affective, cognitive and behavioral bonds between individuals and place, to place-based community, territoriality, identity, roots. Following Malkki (1992) Gustafson sees roots as “part of a metaphorical system (including the soil, the land, and so forth) linking people to place, identity to territory”.

In music, roots points similarly to the locally attached, to traditions (instruments, genres, artists) specifically belonging to a certain locality. “Folk” or “traditional” music is typically understood in this way, whether we talk about the nyckelharpa and Swedish folk fiddling, or about the Bauls of Bengal.

Today, with all the research on globalization, local-global interrelationships, migrants, travelers, tourists, social theorists are no longer so sure that place is this important. People

seem increasingly mobile and their experiences are “disembedded” from physical locations. Here, Gustafson specifically points out Gilroy (1993), Hall (1995) and Clifford (1997) as scholars who have developed the notion of routes. With this notion, people’s “mobility, their movements, encounters, exchanges and mixtures” come to attention.

It is not difficult to find musical cases that fit well with all this (see Grandin 1995, 2003). One could think of how various local shawm/kettledrum orchestras in Rajasthan, Nepal, and Malaysia are known under similar name and play similar-sounding music . Damai wedding orchestra is just a local version of the naqqarakhana or naubat . All this goes back to an orchestra which was used as symbol of power in the Bagdad caliphate and later in the days of the Delhi sultanate and the Mughals

Or one could think of the free reed principle for sound production (distinct from the way the reed is used in a clarinet or oboe) which is recent in Europe but age-old in East Asia. There is evidence that the Chinese free reed mouth-organ, known as sheng, originated well before 1000 BC. In 1777, this instrument was taken to Europe and inspired European instrument-makers to experiment widely with free reed instruments. In fact, the sheng figures prominently in the pedigree of three very successful instruments: the accordion, the harmonica, and the free reed organ or harmonium. Harmoniums were mass-produced from about 1850, and were manufactured in different shapes and sizes, including small, portable instruments. It was not long until missionaries had brought harmoniums to the colonies: Africa and South Asia.

Stuart Hall thinks that we now see a move from roots to routes. In the domain of Western classical music, it is the other way round. You’ll need good insights in European geography to follow the movements of the composers of the classical canon. Think of Mr. Handel, who presented his Italian operas to London audiences. Or of the Florentian miller’s son, Gianbattista Lulli, in the court of the Roi Soleil. When Machaut in 1337 settled down in Reims he had traveled widely in Europe. Dufay was in the Papal choir in Rome before taking up his assignment in Cambrai. Lassus of the Franco-Flemish school started out in Italy, went on to Antwerp and was based in Munich for the rest of his life – based because he continued to travel throughout his life. Schütz’s carrer brought him from Cassels to Venice, Dresden and Copenhagen. Musical routes all over Europe were maintained already from the late medieval era. In the era of budding nationalism, of course, local roots were sought but even in this time

the routes were kept open. Smetana worked in Gothenburg, Dvorak and many others went to the New World, Vaughan Williams studied in Berlin and Paris... Even Richard Wagner left the German cities to pick up an assignment in Riga – from where his debts drove him by way of Norway and London to a fresh start in Paris.

But roots and routes are not necessarily opposite processes. Both Gilroy and Clifford see them as complementary and “intertwined”. It is in this way that I’ll use them here. In fact, the metaphors of roots and routes – place and flow – capture eminently the nature of Nepali popular music and the role of Kathmandu in this music.

Aims

The case presented in this paper serves two aims. First, I want to shed some light upon one vibrant but rather little known regional scene of popular music, that of Kathmandu, Nepal. Second, I want to try out the roots/routes metaphor and concepts for an analysis of this scene.

Rooting – connecting with and claiming traditional roots

Now, let’s go back to Aabhaas and take a closer look at how his album Pala pala connects to the golden age of Nepali modern song. Let’s listen to another track from the album as well as to a modern song from a generation earlier

--- music, Aabhaas / Narayan Gopal / Aabhaas ---

First, there is the one take analogue recording. The standard practice in Kathmandu studios today is – as everywhere else – to use “the track system” where one instrument at a time is recorded, and where often synthesizers, midis, and computers play an essential role. Aabhaas, on the other hand, recorded all instruments as well as his own voice simultaneously. This reenacts the standard practice of Nepali recordings in the 1960s and 1970s – only in the late 1980s multi-channel equipment started to appear in Kathmandu studios. It also draws upon Aabhaas’s own experiences 20 years earlier, when as a junior member he was able to take

part in and learn from recordings with Aasthaa Pariwaar and renowned senior artists such as Raamesh and Manjul.

Second, there is the way of singing. By choosing to spend many years studying with Amber Gurung, Aabhaas claims musical roots in the golden age of modern song.

Here, Aabhaas's musical learning looks exactly like what we find in the "roots" music that we typically know as folk or traditional music. To apprentice oneself to, and learn from an elder "tradition-bearer" brings credentials and traditional authenticity to performers within such different forms of music as South Asian raga music and Swedish folk music.

Third, there is the genre and the composition. To go into this in detail would lead to far, but Aabhaas clearly follows the musical "recipe" for modern songs of the golden age: there is the strophic structure with a refrain-verse-refrain-verse-refrain format in the lyrics and a different melody for refrain and verse. There is the emphasis on a soloist singer, whose voice is clearly foregrounded in the mix. There is the melody-driven composition – unlike what we find in Western popular music, chord sequences do not structure the composition but are secondary to and derive from the melody. The melodies, moreover, are non-repetitive: instead they are made up from a number of different musical phrases.

Fourth, there is the way all this is fleshed out in the arrangement. The very orchestra Aabhaas recorded with is very close to what Radio Nepal had at about 1980 (Grandin 2005a). And the arrangement is also of vintage modern song variety. Aabhaas told me how he first tried this sort of arrangement a few years earlier, for a concert with the senior singer Phatte Man. The singer had asked for a simple arrangement with guitar, a sitar and a flute, but Aabhaas instead suggested the old Radio Nepal type of arrangement. This means that the nonrepetitive melodies carried by the singer float over an accompaniment where chords, bass and percussion move in short, repetitive figures. Heterophony, countermelodies, chords and harmonic progressions are key features of the arrangement. So is the composed melodies for what is called "the music": the instrumental interludes between verses and refrains, and also the instrumental interjections whenever there is a rest in the vocal melody.

During his long time of studying singing with Amber Gurung, Aabhaas was able to discuss also matters of composition and arrangement with his *guru*. For instance, on the question of counterpoint, Amber Gurung told him to go by the ears rather than by the rules.

An important feature in the arrangement and in the overall “sound” of golden age modern song is the string section, the violins. The violin-players who took part in Aabhaas’s recording were educated at Narayan Gopal Sangit Kosh. This is, the musical school set up in the name of the venerated singer Narayan Gopal who died in 1990 – and located in his residence.

In all these aspects, then, Aabhaas connects with modern songs as they were recorded a generation ago, for instance with Narayan Gopal as the singer.

--- music Narayan Gopal, ma ta laliguras ---

Routing – routes to modern song

Routes in the two senses of (cultural) infrastructure and (social and cultural) flows have been constitutive to modern songs.

From the 1950s onwards, Nepal’s infrastructure for national integration was greatly expanded. When there were very little roads outside the Kathmandu Valley before the mid 1950s, a network of roads connecting major towns inside the country and Nepal with both India and China had been completed already by 1972, and the large growth in education and the infrastructure of communication and culture followed the same pattern. As a part of its cultural infrastructure Nepal had built institutions such as Radio Nepal, the Shri Ratna Recording Corporation, the National Theater, the Royal Nepal Film Corporation, and of course the Royal Nepal Academy (with Amber Gurung in charge of music).

Flows of people and of cultural goods followed this infrastructure. The new resources and possibilities attracted artists from various outlying villages to Kathmandu. These people included Aabhaas’s mentor Raamesh, who had moved to Kathmandu in the 1960s. They also included Aabhaas’s teacher, Amber Gurung, who had been recruited to Kathmandu from Darjeeling also in the 1960s. Moreover, the new infrastructure also made the task of go out

from Kathmandu to the villages to “collect” folk songs and the like much more feasible, which implied that musical materials for giving a folkish, Nepali color to modern songs were routed to Kathmandu’s musical scene.

But the routed goods came from much more distant places than Nepali villages. As is clear from the songs that we have heard, the modern song recipe is deliberately hybridizing. Chords, harmonic sequences, countermelodies all have been routed to Kathmandu from the West, and also the orchestra is of course a mix of Western and local/regional instruments.

Rooting – growing local roots

Let’s put modern songs aside for a moment. Co-residing with this genre in Kathmandu are – of course – much older musical traditions. Unlike what is often assumed about “traditional” music, Kathmandu’s music is aware about its history and this is a history of routing and rooting. Various genres have been “imported” from the South in several waves – Kathmandu scholars would date some of these imports as early as the 11th or 12th centuries. In the process, however, these musical traditions – with their repertoires, their instruments, their performance practices – have been firmly localized and are seen as unique Kathmandu heritage (see Grandin 1997). An important part of this localization or rooting is that these musical genres all have been incorporated in Kathmandu’s traditional economic, social and cultural machinery.

In the same way, Kathmandu’s modern economic, social and cultural machinery has helped rooting modern songs as a firmly *local* cultural product. As it provides resources and opportunities for cultural production and outcomes for some artists and musicians, the local cultural infrastructure with radio stations, disc and cassette producers, and so on, is part of this machinery. As a social correlate of this infrastructure, a network or maybe community of artists and connoisseurs create, take part of, and discuss modern songs. Here, modern songs are part of a local musical scene that includes also a number of other, but related, genres (see further Grandin 1994, 2005a). A wider local audience takes part of modern songs from concert venues, from the radio, and from discs and cassettes.

Routing and rooting – modern songs and the Nepali national scene

Some of the routes that have channeled cultural goods to Kathmandu's musical scene have also made modern songs part of Nepal's national culture. Radio broadcasts with modern songs have reached far out into Nepal's many remote villages – to be listened to but also maybe to be taken up in local music-making. But also artists are routed out from Kathmandu. Around 1970, Aabhaas's mentors, Raamesh and Manjul, were early (though not the first) to venture out for a year-long tour of Nepali villages. (The routing doesn't stop here. As the case of Udit Narayan Jha illustrates, some Kathmandu artists have gone on to the bigger subcontinental scene and become superstars in the Bollywood playback singing arena.)

In this way, modern song and its musical relatives has grown roots not only in Kathmandu but indeed throughout the nation (Grandin 2005b).

Rooting and rooting as processes – conclusions

I have tried to demonstrate in what ways roots and routes are constitutive to a musical tradition. In the case of the specific popular music genre of Nepali modern song, ethnic, regional, and “global” cultural goods have become a universal Nepali genre.

In the case of modern song, we see how cultural goods with varying and different roots have been routed to the same “place” or musical scene, that of Kathmandu. Here, these goods have been refigured into the new genre of modern song. This genre has grown roots locally in Kathmandu, but also been routed out again and become rooted all over Nepal.

Seen in this way, Kathmandu assumes the role of a musical switchboard or router.

We are talking here about rooting and routing as *processes* – rather than just about roots and routes.

Rooting can take several distinct shapes. There is rooting in the sense of growing local roots, as modern songs have done in both Kathmandu and in Nepal. These songs become experienced and perceived as meaningfully connected to a certain *locality* by people who also

perceive themselves attached to this locality. Of course, roots may grow by themselves but they can also be groomed.

But there is also rooting in the sense of claiming, reenacting, and maybe reviving a tradition as one's roots, as Aabhaas has done with modern songs of the golden age.

Maybe rooting and routing is best understood as an unfolding sequence. What has roots in one place is routed, grows new roots, becomes rerouted and rerooted... Specific local scenes act as nodes in these processes; they are also sites of hybridization; here routed goods are accommodated to local conditions. Though people may claim it as their own, music does not belong to a place. This is true in two ways. First, any major culture will have a lot of imported musical goods in "its own music". But moreover, whatever is developed in one place will be diffused to other places, and in this way, the place of origin loses its "ownership" of its musical creations. Once they have migrated to new places, they will be re-interpreted and utilized in new ways in new places. Chinese sheng music, a blues harmonica solo, Scandinavian folk tunes on the accordion, South Asian harmonium-accompanied hymn-singing are all connected in the historical process of musical migration, but the local adaptations are so different that the connection hardly suggests itself to the listener.

One can of course go on further with these metaphorically based concepts. Like Cohen (1997) one might explore further the gardening roots of the metaphor. A question that can come up here is, can roots be brought along or are they shed? The two notions are not really symmetric: roots are something that people or cultural things have whereas routes are something that they use. Roots are properties, routes are means.

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