



(LYRCD 7330)

FOLK SONGS of NEPAL

Recording and notes

by Stefano Castelli

From whatever point of view, it is extremely difficult to trace a unifying profile of Nepalese culture. The geographical position and, above all, the geomorphology of this little Himalayan state, which has almost always been isolated from the outside world and literally compressed between the great powers of India and Tibet (China) has resulted in a population which, despite its proximity to one another, speaks different dialects and practices traditions and styles of singing which are quite different from each other. Within each of these "micro-cultures" can be found influences originating in the most diverse territories and ethnic groups and these are not always identifiable or datable.

As a result of internal communication difficulties and scarce economic interest in this mountainous area, the history of Nepal is like a mosaic of small states; only occasionally have these been unified - at least in name - under the same ruler. As an example one could cite both Indian and Tibetan domination before the 4th century D.C. and the dynasties of the Licchavi, the Thankuri and the Malla (see note track 15), whose efforts for unification failed because of impossibility to create a single national sentiment among so many various groups.

Generally speaking, Nepal can be divided into three regions which extend from east to west: in the south there are low foothills which are a part of the Ganges tributary and where the presence of Indians is quite evident; then the central hilly area and finally the Himalayan zone which has such a severe climate so as to discourage prolonged human

settlements, except for small communities of Sherpas, who seem to adapt themselves to the environment. This central, sub-Himalayan area is populated by the Newars and the Tamangs, whose songs are, in fact, the object of this recording. It is here that one finds the cultural and political center of the country as well as the Imperial cities of Bhadgaon, Patan, Katmandu, the important Hindu temple of Pasupatinath and the Buddhist devotional monument of Swayambhu representing Mt. Meru, the center of the earth and the destination of numerous pilgrims who come from faraway China and Tibet. Here one also finds a great variety of themes, song forms and scale types: the Chinese pentatonic scales are often combined with the seven-note structures of the Indian ragas, thus offering some unique melodic designs and combinations.

In the places where the ruling class is in residence the contrast between those in power and the lower classes is strongly evident, as is the resulting cultural order that derives from the prevailing differences. In fact, the song forms in these areas bring to light the critically changing historical and social developments more clearly than in more isolated areas. Furthermore, in the areas near a capital city, where commerce and pilgrimages are more intense, cultural contributions are more diversified and more considerable. In selecting the songs for this recording, preference was given to social rather than musical values, a choice which becomes apparent once one understands the "why" of a certain social or folk music. Here one will find vocal music exclusively, for the most part accompanied by ideophones, among which the dhime (*) or, more simply, by hands beating on a piece of wood, and this because instrumental music has become the almost exclusive domain of professional musicians who are paid to perform during village festivities and who, in turn, transmit an obsolete form of folk music that is by now far removed from its origins. This music, in fact, rather than being produced on the basis of aesthetic or formal research, is the result of functional motivations which totally involve the individual musician in his need to communicate or to obtain results of magical nature, or, to achieve, through music, the comprehension of a transcendental reality.

One can therefore comprehend the whys and wherefores of the hypnotic recitation of a mantra, the simple and repetitive melodic structure of the jhyaure and the Bhimbature songs (track 15), music in the context of a reality completely foreign and difficult to understand by Occidentals, but, by the same token, abounding with suggestivity and subtle messages.

The first half of this recording contains songs, which belong to a corpus of popular songs of recent vintage, music fraught with tension, contrasts, and critical social innuendoes. A special effort was made to organize these songs to form a single dialogue which best illustrates the Nepalese social reality through the oral documents of its popular culture.

Using the criticism of religious power as a point of departure, (a determining factor in most Asian countries), the theme of popular rebellion against state institutions such as the military draft is developed here and documents aspects indicative of prevailing conditions of a large segment of the young generation. This concludes with several examples of jhyaure, i.e., songs performed for the sole purpose of entertainment.

The last five selections contain songs based upon a more ancient and almost tribal reality,

in which the supernatural and magical are presented as a constant background for every action of daily life. The confrontation is with an obscure spiritual world; the desire for protection thus places the religious leader at the top of the social ladder. Even the love songs, which conclude this collection, are permeated with this interpretation of life, as is the style and mode of singing.

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1. PADMA SAMBHAVA CANNOT EAT (0:46)

Padma Sambhava (padma-Lotus/Sam-Sweet words/Bhav-to be, idea), the founder and propagator of the first type of Tibetan Buddhism in the 8th Century, is the most important figure (after Sidhartha Gautama, or Buddha) among the Buddhism Lamaists and the Padmaist, and is a popular traditional figure. This song utilizes the mystical mantra for invocation. But Padma Sambhava, rather than appearing austere is portrayed with humor typical of a profoundly human and religious peasant culture. In contrast to the Master's preaching, the text reads as follows:

*Padma Sambhava cannot eat,
because everybody brings him
incense and flowers,
but no food.
Even when someone offers him rice
or other good things,
the priests chant "Hum Ha Hum"
(a Buddhist invocation)
and eat everything themselves.*

The language used here is a Tibetan Sanskrit deformed to make the text humorous.

2. GANV GANV BATHAUTHA (2:57)

An invitation from a city dweller to his village brethren to become aware of their exploited condition. The author was probably someone belonging to an educated or "illuminated" upper class. The superiority of city dwellers (in contrast to rural inhabitants) further underlines the author's partisan view. The text, in Nepalese, reads as follows:

*Don't sleep all day long;
In order to understand
You must wake up, become aware
of your problems.
Take account of everything,
don't sleep, but contemplate
the true reasons for your problems.*

3. SUNNA NA SUNNA NA (0:44)

This Nepalese song takes the same line, lyrics reading as follows:

Listen my brothers of the villages:

There is a boss who oppresses the people

Day and night and the people suffer

Because of him.

The boss keeps the people hungry.

The people want to be free and want

the boss to go away.

This version is very old, and was "created" a bit at a time on the melody of another song.

4. SUNNA NAHI (N) (1:43)

The lyrics are sung to the melody of an originally patriotic song, when Nepal maintained its independence through Krishnam who defended the country from the invasions of Indian kings. The lyrics:

The people must work, always work,

without eating well, without being able to rest, and worse,

the poor are treated badly by the rich,

who keep them at a distance because they are dirty.

Instead we should all be equal and evenly divide our lands,

the results of our work, so that everybody can eat well and be happy.

5. A SOLDIER'S LETTER (3:15)

This song refers to the time when Nepal was a mosaic of miniature states in constant struggle with each other. This is a letter from home to a soldier at war. His mother tells him to return home, and to remember the sacred cow and the Lama. His wife reminds him of her tears, his older sister of the holy sign on her forehead, following the poetic scheme of continuous repetition of the same grammatical construction. The family asks him to return, for in a peasant family the oldest son is very important for the family work team, and simply because they love him and want him to live. The song is sung in the Nepalese dialect of the Tamang tribe of the Kathmandu area near the Bagmati river in the Himalayas.

6. THE CONDITIONS OF MAN (1:51)

On this very old tetratonic melody the lyrics refer to the miserable conditions of man in general, in particular the peasant, born of woman whose only purpose is to die after a life of work and servility. Man's poverty is such that his only nutrition is a bowl of rice, and very rarely, some char momo, four small rolls of fried bread filled with meat. It is sung in the Tamang dialect.

7. SONG OF THE UNHAPPY YOUNG WOMAN (0:46)

A surprising testimony of female conditions in South Nepal, where Indian influence is very strong. In the North the situation is opposite, where (in the Himalayan region) matriarchy and polyandry exist. The unhappy maiden sings:

*Why was I born into this world?
Perhaps because of the evil I committed in another life,
I find myself lost even before birth?
My parents sent me to another house where I must work so hard just to eat.
I fear, my brother, I am in the house of others and I am not happy.
I'm obliged to demonstrate love for my husband even though I don't want him.
He has a monopoly on me.*

8. THE STORY OF MANU TAMANG (1:49)

Manu Tamang is a boy of eighteen with a very unhappy history, typical of his generation, which is torn between opposing cultures: western culture, exemplified by the "hippy emigration" which (at the time of this field work) is pictured as a desirable civilization in which every one has money without having to work. Their own culture, which is rejected and belittled because it is considered backward and primitive. Manu is rootless, with a history of adoptions and abandonments, first by a Nepalese relative, then by a German girl, who promised to take him to Europe but deserted him in Kathmandu where he steals and sells LSD to survive. This is a song Manu composed one night when he had taken no drugs and felt sad and strange. The music is a popular melody, (a Jhyaure song), and Manu's comments are eloquent:

*This is the story of a mother, and her son.
Who wants to return home because he is far away and sad.
And I am that son.*

9. CANZONE DI MANU TAMANG (2:05)

Another song performed by Manu, composed recently on traditional music. A typical Nepalese dance-song, with courting as the main theme, the only difference from classical songs consisting in allusions to radio and blue jeans.

10. LHASA GITA (1:41)

Like the two which follow, this is a Jhyaure song, from the Newari region in the North, west of Kathmandu, where it is the most common form of entertainment. The text refers to the time when relations between Nepal and Tibet were much warmer than they are today, and when inhabitants of Lhasa would go into town either on business or on some pilgrimage to a monastery.

I am a Tibetan who lives in Lhasa, I don't know anything, don't know how to dance, don't know how to play the drum. I can't give you any baskets of gold, but won't you give me your true heart? If you come with me I shall give you my entire life.

11. JHYAURE EVENING (2:12) - (See track 15).

Typical of courtship, with the man insisting and the girl refusing, first strongly and then more weakly, this piece is done in the evening at home, so that one can go to bed happily. The language is Nepalese; quite possibly the melody originated in the central-southern part. There is one singer and the entire group participates in playing. When the singer signals that he is having difficulty, a man near him helps him by beating time on a bench.

12. JHYAURE OF DHARMA (0:57)

This Jhyaure is sung during the rainy season to help pass the long days when nobody can work. To the usual courting theme are added several verses which ironically suggest not to pay too much attention to the girls; if one does not follow the Dharma (the moral laws) or prays enough, one will surely end up in hell.

13. THE STORY OF PADMA SAMBHAVA (1:34)

This story of Padma Sambhava is a classical mantra (prayer-kament). The Lama recounts the story of Padma Sambhava from his birth from the petals of a flower, to his adoption by the King of Passim, his ejection from Court, finally his triumph and miracles.

14. JHAYANGRI (Shaman therapy) (2:07)

Within the religious-cultural structure of Nepal, the Jhayangri occupy a special place. They are reclusive people who, avoid anyone who tries to study them. This is due to their fear of being robbed of their magic powers; and also their general reluctance to discuss "dangerous subjects" with others. The men are vagrant healers, carriers of a unique cultural patrimony, in part changed by the Shaminist-animist culture of Western Tibet in which one can recognize Indian and other influences from the Ladakh and Kashmir. Their therapy is based on the ancient Bon theory of pho-Iha and dGra-Iha, i.e., of two spirits, good and evil, which co-exist in each human being and complement each other; and which serve as protection against the evil influences of the Klu, the gNyam and the Sa-bdang as well as all the other spirits and demons of the earth and water. (Refer to Taoism). When the two protector spirits leave the body, that person is exposed to sickness. In this case the Shaman calls to the "friendly" spirit (Iha) in order to be guided to the "guilty" one and to recall the protective couple back into the body. For the Jhayangri the "good" or benevolent spirit lives in the great drum (dyangro) helped, if necessary, by the gong of the song and the cymbals, (an important difference between this and other Shaminist cures in which only the little Sivaite drum is utilized). This magic does not possess the ritual formalities of other systems, not having been institutionalized by the State religions (as with Bon by the Lamists, it has maintained a unique vitality.) The Jhayangri seldom goes into deep trance, but moves continuously, and with ease, from the material to the spiritual world, always alert to every signal from either of these worlds. In this recording initially he limits himself to calling on his "guiding" spirit with the dyangro; then, since this seemed insufficient, he breathes the burning prana or "vital breath" on the sick person, with the force of a fire-eater. After a deeper trance (not recorded) he decides to help the dyangro with a little gong tied under his arm pits and with various cymbals and rattles tied to his body, mimics the bellicose spirits of "good" in order to instill fear in the "evil" spirits in the sick person.

15. STORY OF THE MAN WITH TWO HOUSES (1:30)

This is a Tamang song with a particularly obscure text probably because its author is not sufficiently equipped to understand the double meanings of some of the words, which are quite comprehensible to the Tamang of the Himalayas but are difficult to translate. It is the story of a peasant who has two houses but can neither eat nor sleep because those living in these houses have thrown him out (a possible allusion to some old matrimonial

tradition). The style of singing is particularly interesting because Bhimbhadur, the mountaineer who furnished this story, seemed to be revealing a long personal story, in which the words which he pronounces are clearly spoken or sung accents. Even the words spoken during the pauses (and even the sighs) were part of the song. He also claimed not to have sung the song alone: that his friends all joined in to help him.

16. RANI OF THE JUNGLE (8:15)

This love song is sung in the first person and is Tamang (of the hills). The protagonist walk through the jungle; if he looks up he sees obscurity; if he looks down he sees nothing but darkness and vegetation. He sees a vision of a woman and falls in love with her. There is a river and the water is flowing; above, he sees the Rani (Queen) of the jungle. He looks toward the Himalayas and sees her again under a tree. His heart is broken and nobody can mend it. His love is hopeless because he is a simple man while she is a divinity of the jungle. The performers are Suryaman Rumba and a friend.

17. MOUNTAINEER'S LOVE SONG (2:31)

This is a love song of the mountaineer who goes among the mountains and does not know if he will return alive, unless the spirits of the air will help him. The text is literally as follows:

If I do not die I shall send you a letter in which I include a portrait of myself, and when you see it you shall be happy and your heart shall be happy.

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