

Himalayan Flutes, Sprites and Mountainous Geographies

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The folk epic¹ of Jitū Bagaḍwāl is well known in many parts of Garhwal. In the central episode of the story, Jitu plays his flute (*muralī*)² on a high mountain pasture and thereby attracts the mountain sprites who ultimately cause his downfall. The sound of the flute is thereby linked to the dangerous supernatural world of sprites and to the sonic realm of a mountainous geography.³

Over the past twenty years, I have worked with numerous musicians and other informants in Garhwal and almost all were aware of the Jitu Bagaḍwāl story. A number of recording artists have released commercially available audio tapes of the story, including Uma Shankar Satish (1987) and Hukam Singh Yadav (n.d.). Though it is primarily a Garhwali story, 'Jitū Bagaḍwāl' is also known in parts of Kumaon. The story has become somewhat iconic for the hill regions of Uttarakhand and is frequently interpreted through various artistic mediums including shorter songs, drama and dance. For instance, the 2010 *Uttarākhaṇḍ Mahotsava* held in Delhi (April 4) included a dance version of the story. A film version has also been released in VCD format.

In addition, a number of published versions of the story exist. Govind Chatak includes the story in his *Garhwālī Lok Gāthāeṅ*, originally published in 1958 with a revised edition in 1996. The story is also presented by Haridatt Bhatt 'Shailesh' in his *Garhwālī Bhāshā aur uskā Sāhitya* (1976). Bhatt's version is particularly concise and therefore worth translating here as a starting point for this paper:

Jitu and Shobhanu were the children of Gariba. Sumera was their

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- 1 I use the term 'epic' here to refer to a variety of lengthy sung narratives. The term encompasses genres referred to by other authors variously as *pawārā* and/or *gāthā*.
 - 2 *Bāṅsurī*, *algojā*, *joṅiyā muralī* and sometimes *rāmsur* are also used as names to refer to flutes in the Uttarakhand region. Petshali (2002: 114) also mentions *baisī*, *pāwā*, *kolālu*, *kulāvī* and *kuzhal*.
 - 3 The Hindi word *apasarā* and Garhwali/Kumaoni *ācharī* could potentially be translated as 'sprite', 'nymph', or 'fairy'. I have chosen to translate both words as 'sprite', linking the term to the more malevolent connotations of a sprite.

mother and Phyunli Jaunsu their grandmother. Kunja was their grandfather and Shobhani their sister. Raja Manshaha had given them fertile fields of grain at Bagudi and it is from this that their name became Bagadwal. Jitu Bagadwal was a frivolous man who roamed freely looking for entertainment everywhere. Like a bee he would fly this way and that.

Once as the monsoon arrived he was reminded of the need to transplant the rice in his fields. Jitu sent his brother Shobhanu to consult with their *paṇḍit*. The *paṇḍit* said that, according to his astrological reading, it is their sister, Shobhani (who is married and lives with her in-laws), who must work in the fields. Shobhanu returns and tells his family everything. Their mother wants to send Shobhanu to collect Shobhani but Jitu himself wants to go. 'My brother does not understand things properly, it is I who must go'. At that moment Jitu's goat sneezes. His mother recognises this as an ominous sign and tries to stop him from going. However, Jitu tells her, 'The sixth day of the month of *Asāḍh* has been set down by the *paṇḍit* for transplanting the rice. Whatever it takes, I must bring my sister'.

Jitu gets ready to go. His wife also complains, saying, 'I know what you are really trying to do. You are just going to have a good time with your in-laws'. But Jitu listens to no one. He packs up his flute and heads off.

As he travels through the hot midday sun he reaches Rainthal where, after taking a short rest, he begins to play his nine-note flute. Hearing the sweet sounds of his flute, the nine sprites of Khair come to him and sit on his hands, nose, ears and eyes where they begin to drink his blood. Jitu calls on his house deity, Bhairav, for help. The sprites agree to leave Jitu after making him promise to return.

Jitu reaches his sister Shobhani and meets his in-laws and has a great time. Jitu tells his in-laws that he doesn't know whether he will meet them again.

He returns to his house with his sister. The day for planting arrives and preparations are made. Jitu takes his oxen and reaches the fields. As he takes the second turn with his oxen the sprites land on his nose, ears and eyes and drink all his blood. He falls down and is swallowed into the earth (Bhatt 1976: 181-188).

The progression of the narrative in Chatak's version of the story largely conforms to Bhatt's version as presented here. Some extra detail, particularly related to the history of the Bagadwal family's land grant from the king, as well as the details of the landscape and forest where the sprites meet Jitu, are included. In addition, in Chatak's version, Jitu takes out his flute to play it again while driving his oxen in the fields and this is why the sprites return. However, in both versions, the central episode of the story remains that of the sprites hearing Bagadwal's flute, catching him, and then eventually killing him so that he is swallowed up into the earth.

Elsewhere (Alter 2008: 71-72) I have mentioned this story as well as the paradoxical *imaging* of flutes as instruments 'of the hills' even though they are rarely played in Garhwal at present. Nautiyal (1981: 464) suggests that parents in the hills discourage their children from playing the flute because the flute's sound might attract dangerous sprites just as in the story of Jitu Bagadwal. Petshali (2002: 123) also mentions the present-day limited existence of the flute—more specifically the double flute called the *algojā* (or *joñyā muralī*)—in the hills and, like Nautiyal, suggests that a prevalent attitude linking flutes with dangerous sprites could be a reason for a dearth of such instruments in the hills today. Significantly, as Petshali's (*ibid.*) research suggests, flutes in the Uttarakhand region, while extremely limited in number, are all end-blown types.

Thus, there appears to be a broader imaging of the flute amongst Garhwalis and other hill residents that portrays the instrument as dangerous and therefore best avoided. To me such an attitude is curious and at odds with the broader Indian perception of flutes being played in the mountains. Most people reading this article will agree that the Indian film industry enhances this connection by regularly using flute melodies as sonic backdrops to dance scenes in alpine meadows. At the very least, the situation needs closer investigation to provide more detailed comments about the imaging of the flute in the Himalayas. Does the flute appear in other stories from the region? What are the social meanings attached to the instrument as well as its sound? Does the acoustic environment of mountainous regions have anything at all to do with this?

To begin answering these questions I first turn to the broader folklore sources that I have come across while researching music in the area. Significantly, the epic of Jitu Bagadwal is not alone in mentioning

flutes. A more comprehensive examination of other stories from the region provides a more nuanced perspective on how the instrument is more broadly imagined. Thereafter, an example of flute performance from Nepal is worth mentioning for the different attitude that clearly prevails amongst the Newars of the Kathmandu valley.⁴ A final comment on the flute and its association with Krishna ends this article, because the imagery of Krishna playing the flute is clearly a conventional Hindu imaging of the instrument.

Other examples of flutes in epic tales

In his book, *Garhwālī Lok Gāthāeṅ*, Chatak (1996: 288-460) lists fifteen *pawārās* (heroic tales) as well as a number of other folk epics and stories classified into different genres. 'Jitū Bagaḍwāl' is one of these *pawārās*. Two others also mention flute playing to some extent as part of their stories and these are 'Garhū Summyāl' and 'Sūraj Nāg (Kuñwar)'.⁵ In addition, the story of Kālū Bhaṇḍārī briefly mentions sprites but not in association with flutes. Bhatt (1976: 180-262) gives the stories of ten *pawārās*, amongst which 'Jitū Bagaḍwāl',⁶ 'Garhū Sumyāl' and 'Surjū Kuñwar (Sūraj Nāg)' all refer to flutes somewhere in their stories. Elsewhere, in a segment on ghost and demon stories, Bhatt (1976: 329-330) mentions a short story linking shepherds with sprites, but no flutes are mentioned in this particular story.

Gairola (Oakley and Gairola [1935] 1988: 33-165) presents approximately 28 epic tales in an abbreviated English translation, amongst which two mention flutes: 'Surju Kunwar' and 'Kunji Pal and Kirti Pal'. In addition, the story of 'Brahma Deo and Birma Dotiali' includes a wedding scene in which the hero 'went round dancing and playing on his musical instrument' making the bridegroom's party 'unconscious by means of his magical incantations' (ibid.: 140). In the latter half of the book, Oakley (ibid.: 292-294) relates what he refers to as the story of 'The Prince and the Celestial Flowers', in which a magical flute plays a prominent part.

4 An investigation of flute performance in Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir would of course also be interesting for comparison. However, because of the sources I have at hand, the discussion here is limited to the areas of Uttarakhand and Nepal.

5 Sung by Mangat Das of Tyunkhar and Rudi of Tilpara. See footnote 11 for an explanation of the connection between the family names of Nag, Kunwar, Kanwal and Ramola.

6 No singer given.

Oakley and Gairola's publication includes no mention of the story of Jitū Bagadwāl.⁷

The story of Malushahi and Rajula is particularly well known in Kumaon. Meissner's three volume set titled *Malushahi and Rajula: A ballad from Kumaon (India) as sung by Gopi Das* is perhaps the most in-depth study. In addition, Upreti (n.d.) provides a shorter summary of the epic and gives three versions sung by different singers.⁸ The first version, sung by Mohan Singh, includes a scene in which the Ramola family plays their 'flute and drum', thus attracting sprites to dance (Upreti *ibid.*: 14). Chatak and Bhatt both also provide versions of the story of Malushahi and Rajula but neither includes a scene with flutes. Similarly, Gairola (Oakley and Gairola [1935] 1988: 92-94) provides a version of the same epic but no mention of flutes is made.

Amongst my own field recordings of singers from the Garhwal region the epic of Kirthipal and Kunjpal, sung by Bhag Chand, is the only story in which flutes play a part. The version of the same story presented by Gairola does not include a mention of flutes.

Prayag Joshi has published at least three volumes of compilations of folk epics from Kumaon under the title *Kumāonī Lok Gāthāeṅ*. While I have been unable to consult all of these volumes, flutes certainly play a part in the particular stories I have read. His publications tend to give more lengthy versions of the stories than publications by authors such as Gairola, Bhatt, Chatak and Upreti. For instance, in Part 2 of his third volume he relates the epic associated with the Ramaol family. Various Garhwali epics include references to the Ramaol family but naturally they use the Garhwali pronunciation—*Ramolā*. In addition, the Kanwal family, who are the in-laws of the Ramaols, feature prominently in the 'Ramaol' epic. The Kanwals too appear in various Garhwali epics but again with the Garhwali pronunciation—*Kuṅwar*. However, in spite of the dual provenance of the family names in Kumaon and Garhwal, the epic is clearly a Kumaoni epic and Joshi simply titles it 'Ramaol'. Joshi's presentation of the epic (1994: Pt. 2, 1-130) includes four somewhat distinct segments. Within these, the

7 The fact that Oakley and Gairola's sources are largely from Kumaon or Eastern Garhwal seems to explain this absence.

8 The second version provided by Upreti is by a singer named Gopi Das who may well be the same singer recorded by Meissner. However, Upreti's publication does not make this clear. Upreti's third version is sung by Jogaram.

segments titled 'Dūdh Kañwal', 'Himānt Jātrā', 'Barmī Kañwal', and 'Sūraj Kañwal' all include scenes with flutes.⁹

This brief summary of folk epics from the state of Uttarakhand is by no means comprehensive. Undoubtedly there are other songs, ballads and epics that portray the flute in ways similar or slightly different to the sources mentioned here. However, at the very least, the list given here provides a snapshot of a number of different collections of epics, and examines a variety of references to flutes within a broad section of the folklore of the region.

Orality and the construction of stories

Before proceeding further, it is essential to reiterate a long-standing problem that influences any study of folklore such as this. Texts that are created for the purposes of publication, even if they purport to be transcriptions of original oral renditions, are very distant from their original sources. In this context it is important to note that Chatak, Upreti, and Joshi all provide the names of their informants. Hence the footnotes in the present article provide the names of these oral sources. Nonetheless, the exact processes involved in the transcription, abbreviation, and translation (between Garhwali, Kumaoni, Hindi and English) of the stories mentioned are exceedingly complex and undoubtedly influence aspects of what I discuss below. Perhaps of most significance here is an acknowledgement that these stories originally existed (and in some cases still exist) as oral renditions. The extensive theoretical literature surrounding the study of oral traditions such as these warns us to understand texts not only as constructed by literate researchers but also influenced by processes of oral construction.

While the literature surrounding the study of orality and oral traditions is too extensive to be meaningfully cited here, one particular aspect deserves attention. The exact nature of a story and what constitutes the boundaries for any particular story are not exact. Aspects such as scenes, themes, common collocations of words and emphatic verbal gestures may emerge again and again in a variety of stories, either as performative techniques or as structural aids. Numerous examples of such devices could be provided from the stories mentioned above, including flying

9 All segments are sung by Kaluram of Masrari in Pithoragarh District.

horses, message-carrying bees, disguised jogis, oaths between mothers during coincident pregnancies, and hiding people's souls in parrots. 'Sweet sounding flutes' may well be a trans-epic theme that at least partially results from processes of oral rendition. The appearance in several different stories of flutes in association with sprites, shepherds and dancing could well result from an oral tradition in which these links are regularly made as performance devices. However, I believe the issue is more complex than this.

The imaging of flutes in other epics

When flutes are mentioned in other stories they are almost always associated with magic powers that involve either special forms of communication or murderous intentions. When flutes are played forest sprites frequently appear, and such scenes are always set in high mountain geographies. A summary of episodes that incorporate flutes is of value here to illustrate the ways in which the instrument is described consistently across many different stories from the Uttarakhand region.

Garhū Summyāl

Garhu is an accomplished flute player. He takes his nine-note flute into the forest while looking for his uncle's buffaloes. There he takes out his flute and begins to play, and its sound spreads throughout the forest. Saru Kumen, a stunningly beautiful woman, lives in Gangoli Hat near the forest. She hears the sound of Garhu's flute and goes off in search of the flute player. She tells her girlfriends to keep her disappearance secret, and to tell her mother that she has either drowned in a river or fallen off a cliff. When she meets Garhu she sees that he is indeed a strong and handsome man. He takes her home to introduce her to his mother and then marries her.

Sūraj Nāg (Kuñwar)

With great difficulty and the help of Guru Gorakhnath, Suraj Nag manages to escape from a witches' circle. Climbing a mountain ridge of Khaint, he reaches the top where he sits down to take a rest. There he takes out his nine-note flute and plays it, filling the mountain peaks with its sound. The snow mountains reverberate with the sound of his flute. It also reaches the ears of the sprites who live in that area. 'Who is making this haunting

melody on the flute?’ they ask themselves and race to find out. Suraj remains a prisoner of the sprites for nine days and nine nights. Then he comes to his senses and tells the sprites, ‘I must go to the land of Bhot to collect my wife. Don’t worry, I will return to you after I do this’.

Gairola’s version of the ‘Surju Kunwar’ story is clearly related to Bhatt’s and Chatak’s ‘Sūraj Nāg’, although it is not exactly the same. However, even in Gairola’s (ibid.: 45) version, a flute is used to call and capture the sprites of Khaint.

Kirthipāl and Kunjepāl

Elsewhere (Alter 2008: 175) I have related the story of Kirthipal and Kunjepal, in which Kunjepal’s son, Khetrapal, dressed like a *sādhu*, arrives with his flute at a wedding party. The groom’s party is preparing to marry Lilawati (who was betrothed to Khetrapal earlier in the story). Khetrapal takes out his flute and makes the wedding party dance. He makes the bread and even the stove on which it was cooked dance. Eventually he kills the bridegroom’s party by making them dance.

Malushahi and Rajula

Mohan Singh’s version of ‘Malushahi and Rajula’ as presented by Upreti (ibid.: 14) makes only one brief reference to flutes. The father of Rajula travels to Bairath to do some trading, and on the way he meets the Ramolas. At night the Ramolas hold a celebration at which they play their flute and drum. Hearing the flute and drum, the sprites ‘came down from the Court of Indra to dance to their music’ (ibid.). In Upreti’s translation, nothing particularly ominous happens, though the flute is used to make the sprites dance.

The Prince and the Celestial Flowers

In this story as related by Oakley (Oakley and Gairola ibid.: 288-295), a servant of the king is sent to collect celestial flowers (*parijat*). A dervish tells him that there is a certain place where fairies ‘dance to the tune of a flute’ and ‘whenever the flute is blown the fairies dance and the celestial flowers fall down on them’ (ibid.: 292). He manages to see the event and collects the flute when they finish their dancing in the morning. The flute is clearly magical and is desired by many of the people he meets on the way home. When he finally returns to the king’s court he takes out the flute

and plays it. The fairies ‘danced so bewitchingly that the celestial flowers poured down on them in the presence of the king and his courtiers’ (ibid.: 294). Thus the servant, who actually turns out to be a prince, gains what he desires.

Ramaol

The more lengthy segments of the epic ‘Ramaol’ presented by Joshi (1994, vol. 3, pt. 2: 1-130)¹⁰ seem to have a number of indirect links to some of the stories mentioned above. First, the name ‘Ramaol’, which Joshi gives to the overall set of stories, provides a link to the episode in ‘Malushahi and Rajula’ sung by Mohan Singh, in which the Ramolas (Ramaols) also feature. Second, the Kanwals (Garhwali: *Kuñwar*) and the Ramaols are related. As Joshi (1994: ii) mentions, the Ramaols are the in-laws of the Kanwals and therefore the segments within the epic carry the names of many Kanwals. In particular, the fourth segment of Joshi’s version is given the subtitle ‘Sūraj Kañwal’ which, as a title/name, is linked to the ‘Sūraj Nāg (Kuñwar)’ stories given by Gairola, Bhatt and Chatak.¹¹ However, Joshi’s version is significantly different to the Garhwali versions and is also much more lengthy. The length and style of Joshi’s presentation may in some ways account for the considerable differences between the Garhwali and Kumaoni versions. For the purposes of the present discussion, the individual listing of segments of the story as presented by Joshi makes it easier to refer to episodes within the story.

Ramaol: Dūdh Kañwal

The story of Dūdh Kañwal contains three separate instances of flute playing. In the first (Joshi ibid.: 20-21) Dudh Kanwal dreams of a beautiful woman from Hundesh (Tibet), named Hyunkali Kumari. The dream astounds him so much that he wakes in the middle of the night feeling very confused. He takes out his golden flute and breaks the silence with his notes. His first phrase goes to the underworld. His second phrase goes to the heavenly abode of Indra and wakes the sprites of Indra. The third

10 In this publication, Joshi divides the book into two parts and begins the pagination again from number 1 in the second part.

11 The Kanwals are related to the Nag caste through their mother’s lineage. *Kuñwar* is the Garhwali pronunciation of the Kumaoni *Kañwal*. Therefore some authors treat *Nāg*, *Kañwal* and *Kuñwar* synonymously. The Kunwars and the Ramolas are in-laws.

phrase goes to the nine regions of the Earth. His flute eventually wakes his mother, who asks him what is going on.

In the second episode that incorporates a flute, Dudh Kanwal is on his way to Hundesh. In the high mountains, where the trees are covered with dew from the clouds, he stops to rest. He takes out his sweet sounding flute and fills the land of Hundesh with his meaningful sound (*shabd-nād*). The women of Hundesh are spinning rope from the grass of the high mountains. They hear his flute and stop their spinning to come to see who has arrived in their midst.

The last episode in this segment of the story in which the flute is referenced is part of a more lengthy scene involving music making of various kinds (Joshi *ibid.*: 32-33). The sound of the flute makes the people of Hundesh aware of Dudh Kanwal's imminent arrival. Later he and his entourage disguise themselves as lamas and use their drums (*ḍamru*) to mesmerise the Huniyas and make them dance.

Ramaol: Himānt Jātrā

The second segment of Joshi's 'Ramaol' is titled 'Himānt Jātrā' and in it there is an episode in which Sidwa and Bidwa Ramaol use their flutes and whistles to call and collect a flock of sheep together.¹²

Ramaol: Barmī Kañwal

The third segment of the Ramaol epic is largely centred around the protagonist Bhrām Kanwal (Barmi Kanwal). After the story has proceeded for some time, Bhrām Kanwal sees the beautiful Hyunlawati of Hundesh in a dream. He wakes up and is inspired to play his flute. This wakes his mother, who asks him why he has played his flute in the middle of the night. At this moment in the story, nothing particularly magical or ominous is associated with the flute's sound.

Later in the story, Bhrām Kanwal and his brother-in-law Vikhyat Ramaol are travelling near Khaint Khal (*ibid.*: 90-91).¹³ Ramaol grabs his many-coloured flute and fills the alpine meadows with its sound before

12 In the story that Gairola (*ibid.*:92) titles 'Gangu Ramola' the story's main protagonists, Sidwa and Bidwa Ramola (Ramaol), are the sons of Gangu Ramola. Sidwa and Bidwa appear again in Joshi's 'Sūraj Kañwal' story.

13 The reference to Khaint Khal is reminiscent of 'Jitū Bagaḍwāl'. Most people who speak about the Bagaḍwal story suggest that it is on Khaint mountain that Jitū plays his flute.

leaving to ask for alms somewhere far away. In the mean time Bhram Kanwal falls asleep.

There are sixteen hundred sprites of Khaint who live amongst the many branches of the trees surrounding the meadow. They are attracted by the pathos of the flute's sound and begin looking for the person who played it. Vikhyat Ramaol's drum is also lying there. When the sprites arrive, they think that perhaps someone has died and left his drum out in the open. The narrator of the story tells the sprites: 'Don't cause any trouble here—go back to your mountain peaks'. They all go back except for the very last one, named Padma. She sees Bhram Kanwal and steals away his soul to Indra's heavenly abode. Vikhyat Ramaol returns from seeking alms and starts searching for Bhram Kanwal. 'Say something my brother-in-law. Speak!', he calls out. But how can someone without a soul speak? Another member of the Ramaol family, Sidwa Ramaol, plays his flute and its sound goes to the mountain peaks. The sixteen hundred sprites come down to speak, saying, 'We are your sisters, Ramaol'. Vikhyat Ramaol does not greet them but blames them for taking the life of his brother-in-law, Bhram Kanwal.

Later, at the end of the story, Vikhyat Ramaol goes to Hundesh and marries Hyunlawati. She helps him find his brother-in-law's body and they get the sprites to bring him back to life, though in this case no flute is used.

Ramaol: Sūraj Kaiwal

In the land of the Ramaols there is a great drought. The Ramaols take out their flutes and their unfortunate circumstances are forgotten as they play (*ibid.*: 116). They take out their drums and the sound of their music reaches the heavenly abode of Indra and Shiva where there are 22 sprite sisters. 21 sprites fly back to Indraoti, leaving one behind. The last sprite sucks out the life of Bidwa Kanwal, leaving his brother Sidwa behind. Sidwa goes in search of his brother.

Cultural imagination and the flute

The brief excerpts of scenes with flutes provided here demonstrate several things about the way the instrument is perceived in the region of Uttarakhand. First, its appearance in many different stories and epics seems to suggest a broader cultural imagination for the instrument that

goes beyond a mere prop or an interesting episode. Second, its association with supernatural beings seems to indicate a general acceptance that the instrument's sound may well hold spiritual power of some kind. Third, the instrument is much more frequently associated with high altitude, alpine locations than with lower altitudes or valleys.

This is what the stories and epics tell us. By contrast, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, I have only rarely come across flute players in the rural regions of Garhwal where I have undertaken research. People whom I have asked about the fact suggest that high mountain shepherds sometimes play the instrument, though I have never been sure if this kind of response is based on actual observation or on stories such as those mentioned above. Other researchers in the Garhwal area with whom I have spoken have admitted that their experience is similar to mine. While not totally absent, the flute's presence is certainly minimal. The citations of Nautiyal and Petshali given earlier in this paper confirm a situation of limited flute performance practice in the hills.

The distinction between rural and urban locations is important to mention here. In Uttarakhand, urban centres with populations of more than 100,000 exist only on the plains and the situation regarding the performance of flutes in these larger urban centres is very different to those associated with the stories given above. The imaging of flutes as dangerous and/or magical is undoubtedly a part of rural societies and not so strongly associated with urban locations. What is described above for Uttarakhand, therefore, may well hold true for other rural communities in other parts of the Himalaya, including Nepal. However, the musical practices of urbanised Newar communities in the Kathmandu valley are remarkably different to those described above.

Newar flutes in the Kathmandu valley

Greene (2003) presents an extended description of the way in which flutes play a significant role in daily pilgrimages carried out by Buddhist Newars during the summer month of Gunla. He describes his particular research undertaken with the Maharjan farmer caste of Newars who form musical ensembles containing many flutes and percussion instruments. Before the month of Gunla, groups begin to gather together to rehearse for the pilgrimage in which specific repertoire items are associated with specific stupas and temples along the route.

As music and procession were used to pay homage to the Buddha at his cremation, so Mahārjans play music and conduct processions to pay homage to the chaityas and stūpas that mark key places on the landscape of northwestern Kathmandu....Worshipful activity, particularly evident in flute and drum pilgrimage, is how the Buddhist marg is enacted by Mahārjans (Greene 2003: 211).

In other areas of Nepal too, the flute seems to be more prominent than in Uttarakhand. Tingey (1994: 64) describes the use of one or two *muralī* by musician caste group ensembles in Gorkha. Though the instrument is not the main instrument of the ensemble, it is clearly used regularly for ritual purposes and for weddings. Elsewhere, Henderson (1996: 442) mentions the inclusion of flutes in devotional ensembles in Kathmandu. Nonetheless, there appears to be less stigma attached to flute playing in urban locations in Nepal than in the Indian Himalaya of Uttarakhand.

Krishna's flute: magic and the seduction of *gopis*

Any examination of the flute and its associated meanings and images in South Asia must consider the image of Krishna. The ubiquitous image of Krishna playing a transverse flute in bucolic scenes surrounded by cows is well known to almost everyone. As Wade suggests:

In ancient Indian sculpture and painting, flutes are horizontal, not vertical. Such sources frequently show women playing them in accompaniment to dancing; however, from the bhakti period of North Indian religious history (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), the Indian transverse flute emerged as a male-gendered instrument, a sacred and sexual icon seen as the enticing instrument of the sometimes mischievous deity Krishna, whose playing attracted women's devotion (Wade 2000: 306).

Where does Krishna reside in the Garhwali/Kumaoni context? The *Pañḍavalilā* of Garhwal is one place. As Sax (2002) and I (Alter *ibid.*: 93-134) have both documented, the *Pañḍavalilā* is a significant ritual in the higher regions of Garhwal in which the stories of the Pandavas from the *Mahābhārata* are dramatised and danced. Krishna plays a key role in the story as a mentor and ally of the Pandavas. His assistance during various

actions, which includes a fair degree of deceit, helps the Pandavas prevail in their war against the Kauravas (for example, see Sax 2002: 98-105). However, the image of Krishna in the Garhwali *Paiṇḍavalīlā* is a different image to that of the Bhakti traditions. In the Garhwali rituals I observed, he was never shown with a flute. Sax's description of the *Paiṇḍavalīlā* also never mentions Krishna as a flute-playing cowherd. It therefore seems that, for most rural Garhwalis, the image of Krishna is not one that incorporates flute playing.

Other references to Krishna do exist in Kumaon in relation to the story of the Ramaols. In Gairola's story of Gangu Ramaol, Gangu begins as a heretic and a bad ruler. Krishna wants to chastise him and therefore puts him through many adversities. Eventually Gangu is persuaded to consult the Brahmans to try to ascertain why his kingdom is undergoing so many hardships. They tell him his misfortune is due 'to the wrath of his family God Krishna and that he should go on a pilgrimage to Dwarka and appease the God's wrath' (Oakley and Gairola [1935] 1988: 98-99). Gangu does as he is told and then builds a number of temples in honour of Krishna.

The Ramaols' devotion to Krishna is also mentioned by Joshi (1994, vol. 3, Pt 2: 53). In his story of the Himānt Jātrā he refers to Sidwa and Bidwa Ramaol as devotees of Krishna. Significantly, however, in these stories too, Krishna is not portrayed as a flute-playing cowherd.

The beguiling nature of the flute's sound

Clearly, the flute and its sound hold different symbolic meanings for different people in different parts of the Himalaya. The image of the flute revealed in the epics of Uttarakhand is not one that includes stories associated with the Krishna Bhakti traditions of the plains. However, the magical aspects of the flute's sound—particularly the way the instrument has the ability to entrance those who listen to it—would suggest that ideologies surrounding flutes in South Asia may not be as disparate as these examples suggest.

A summary of the flute's imaging within the Uttarakhand epics discussed in this paper may help clarify the situation. The first thing to note is that, in spite of 'Jītū Bagaḍwāl's' popularity and iconicity within the Garhwal region, flutes appear in quite a few other stories. In particular, the 'Ramaol' epic(s) as presented by Joshi (1994) include(s) a plethora of episodes in which music plays a part, and in many of these the

flute is present. While Nautiyal (1981) and Petshali (2002) suggest that ‘Jitū Bagadwālī’ is to blame for the stigma attached to the instrument, there are numerous other stories that could equally shoulder the blame. Flutes are frequently associated with sprites and always have the power to make people and/or sprites dance. In most cases this dancing is in a possessed state and can—as in the story of Kirthipal and Kunjepal—lead to death.

Sprites and flutes are linked in almost all the stories given above. Death at the hands of sprites who are summoned by the sound of the flute is clearly a potential danger. Jitu Bagadwal, Suraj Nag (Kunwar), Bhrām Kanwal and Bidwa Kanwal are all bewitched by the sprites. In other cases the sprites are clearly attracted by the sound of the flute even if they do not cause any immediate harm. In the epic of Malushahi and Rajula the Ramolas’ flute and drum attract the sprites to dance. Dudh Kanwal’s flute also wakes the sprites of Indra. In ‘The Prince and the Celestial Flowers’ the prince’s flute attracts the fairies who dance and bring the celestial flowers to the king.

Flutes and alpine geographies are also always linked. In this sense it is important to remember that low altitude (roughly 800-1500 metre) forests in the Himalaya are less thick than higher altitude forests (roughly 1500-3500 metres). Higher forests are made up of much larger and more densely organised trees. Consequently, in the mountains, forests are associated more closely with higher altitudes than with lower valleys. Flutes played in forests are, by definition, being played at higher altitudes. Those played on alpine meadows are also, by definition, played at high altitudes. This is where sprites live and this is where shepherds tend their flocks. It should surprise no one that Sidwa and Bidwa Ramola use their whistles and flutes to gather their sheep together.

If references to flutes are made in stories, they frequently are said to have nine notes, and to be colourful, golden and/or sweet sounding. Consequently, if a flute carries an adjective that describes it, it will be one of these. The reference to nine notes is particularly interesting. No stories mention a flute with a different number of notes. Single pipe flutes do not normally have nine holes but, through over blowing, they can sound many more notes than just nine. The double pipe end-blown flute, referred to as either *algojā*, *rāmsur*, or *joṇyā muralī* can, however, have nine ‘holes’: six finger holes on one pipe and three on the second pipe.

This may be what the ‘nine-note *muralī*’ collocation is referring to.

However, I think the significance of the number nine is more cosmological than real. Nine is a significant number that surfaces throughout Hindu practice in different forms. The nine nights of the *Navrātri* festival and the nine planetary gods are two instances in which nine is believed to be significant. Like the flute in the Garhwali and Kumaoni stories mentioned here, other things are described using the number nine: the nine *maund naqārā*, the nine *lākh* warriors, the nine sisters and more. Nine is significant and anything with nine is not just ordinary.

In all the stories referenced here, the extra-ordinary power of the flute is evident. Its ability to communicate across long distances and through disjunctures of space and time is acknowledged. In one sense, this is a recognition of the physical capabilities of the instrument. Anyone who has actually heard a flute being played in the mountains will know that the sound does indeed travel far. The existence of a flute is confirmed by sound before it is located physically. Furthermore, its melody implies pathos. The phrases mean something and indicate a state of mind in the player. Mothers know there is something on their sons' minds. Sprites know there is an emotional tension at the source of the sound. Garhu Summyal's flute mesmerises Saru Kumen and she understands his intentions. In this way the sound of the flute is packed with emotion and meaning that is teleological: it is transported across space and requires a response.

At this level, Krishna's flute is not so different. He uses it to beguile the *gopis*, sending his seductive message through the forest. Like Garhu Sumyal he secures his desires. The *gopis*, like forest sprites, are attracted by the sound of his flute.

Amongst the Newars, the sound of the flute during the month of Gunla is tied to specific locations and creates a sacred geography through which devotees traverse and seek *punya*, religious merit. The situation, and the attitude towards flutes, is therefore *not* like that in Uttarakhand. Nonetheless, with or without potential danger, the flute's sound holds spiritual power. In Nepal this spiritual power is used to gain *punya* while in Garhwal it may result in death and destruction. Krishna's flute, by contrast, is somewhere in between. On the one hand, it is a tool of seduction not unlike the dangerous flutes of Uttarakhand. On the other hand, the result of such seduction is not destructive. Instead, succumbing to such seduction hints at the attainment of a divine love. In none of the three cases does the flute simply produce a sweet melody that acts as a

backdrop to dancing, processing or seduction. Its sound actively provokes those in the vicinity, including supernatural beings, to sit up and take note of who is playing the instrument/s and where they are being played. In hills and forests, the physical experience of a flute is undoubtedly aural before it is visual. We hear it before we see it and are drawn to action by its sound before knowing exactly who the performer/s might be.

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