"Resham phiriri, resham phiriri

Udeyera jaunkee dandaa ma bhanjyang

Resham phiriri"

"Like a silk scarf flying freely in the air, I wish to fly over the hills"

(An extract from a popular Nepali folk song)

" Dynamics of Interplay between Caste and the Sarangi- A study on the Gandharbas of Nepal"

By

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Preface

It was the winter of 2012 and I was back in Nepal for a month visiting family and friends. I was also carrying out the responsibility of visiting a school in the village of *Pyarjung* in Northern-central Nepal on behalf of the Nepalese societies at the University of Kent and Canterbury Christchurch University UK, which had cooperatively donated some money to the school. It was during this visit when travelling outside Kathmandu that conducting research on the *Gandharbas* developed as a possible incentive. Although I was aware of such wandering singers commonly referred to as *Gaines,*[1] who also frequently roamed the tourist areas of Kathmandu with their quintessential *'Sarangi,'* a bowed string instrument, I was intrigued by the performance of a particular *Gaine* who got on the bus I was travelling in. Personally, it was an exciting spectacle considering that I'd hardly witnessed something like this before - although I wasn't too sure what the other passengers thought about it. He sang in manner archetypal of a *"lok-geet"* or folk music merged with lyrics about the *Manakamana temple,* a site sacred to Hindu devotees that happened to be within the area, a melodic caricature about students going to college and falling in love and a few other popular folk tunes. After this brief performance, a few passengers including myself offered him some money and at the next stop he was immediately ushered off the bus by the conductor who was urging more passengers to get on the bus as if it wasn't already over congested. The stereo resumed to its mundane assortment of popular Bollywood and Nepalese songs as we continued on our journey. However, the image of the *Gaine* with his *'Sarangi'* lingered on in my mind and it was as if, *'I wanted to know him completely,'* as Crapanzano (1980) referred to *Tuhami*.

This experience partly resonates my motivation and choice for this research on the *Gandharbas,* which not only lies in my personal interest to better understand the present situation of *Gandharbas* by means of the *Sarangi*, but also seeks to draw attention to the intricate fabric of *caste* within a mosaic social setting. My own interest in Social Anthropology is innately reflected and channelled in my personal upbringing and the experiences that have led me to persistently question myself

[1] The term "Gaine" (pronounced "guy-nay" in Nepali) translates to a "singer" in the English language, however, it is also a term used loosely to refer to the *Gandharba* caste in conversational discourse.

"what circumstances brought me to where I am today"? As a Nepalese individual, this research necessitates that I move beyond my undertaking as an anthropologist with a recognition that *'fieldwork'* is itself a dialectic between reflection and immediacy, wherein both are cultural constructs since neither the subject nor the object remain static (Rabinow, 1977: 38-39). My writing is also a faithful endeavour to express a unique cultural aspect of the *Gandharbas* through the figure of the *'Sarangi'* that encompasses their very social life. In many ways, this is also symptomatic of the hopes, fears and aspirations of many *Gandharba* individuals whom I met during my fieldwork- as one elderly woman expressed, *"you need to learn everything about the Sarangi and our culture… you should take a lot of pictures and videos, and show it to everybody when you go back… let them learn about the Gandharbas…"*

I also beseech my readers to humbly recognize my use of the term *Gandharbas*[2] not as a condescending or a sweeping statement to refer to my informants, but rather as a sincere attempt to illustrate a unique cultural group within complex social trajectories, which I consider fruitful towards this purpose. Even more so, it was very common that during conversations in the field individuals spoke on behalf of the caste group, as a 'collective' rather than on individual basis (statements such as- the Gods presented 'Us' with the *Sarangi* for a purpose, 'We' were marginalized as a lower caste in the past or the *Sarangi* is 'Our' cultural identity).

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[2] It is a common practice for people to question an individual (stranger) about his/her caste or ethnic background during an initiatory conversation in Nepal, which is tantamount to enquiring about his/her regional home district (For example, a Newar from Bhaktapur/Kathmandu, a Sherpa from Solukhumbu or a Tamang from Sindhupalchok). Hence during the course of my fieldwork, I grew accustomed to using the phrase, 'I am a Gurung from Kathmandu, but my ancestral village is in Lamjung …' (very often this also involved correcting people who had already assumed and stated my caste).

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Fig. 1. 1. Field map.

Bhansar is located 138 km to the west of Kathmandu and 44 km to the east of Pokhara along the *Prithvi Rajmarg* (highway), which connects the two cities. However, one must get off at the highway town of *Dumre* and take the route towards *Lamjung district* in order to reach *Bhansar* (about 2 km). The majority of my fieldwork was conducted in *Bhansar* and the highway town of *Aanbu Khaireni* (17km east of *Dumre*).

Introduction

"I felt embarrassed since many people also consider it to be a form of begging… an individual even mocked me by asserting that I should seek an alternative form of earning money rather than singing (or begging) in a manner such as this..."

-Padam Bahadur Gandharba (Field Notes)

The above statement made by one of my key contacts early on during one of our conversations, made me immediately realize that the *Gandharba* purpose of the past as *'singing newspapers,*' of narrating messages, myths, news to society at large by wandering between places was simply unfeasible if not rare in the present situation. At the same time, this also epitomised a public discourse on the *Gandharba* image as wandering singers in concurrence with a personal and self-conscious awareness of the self as a *Gandharba* individual in relation to a caste-given profession. In retrospect, this also perhaps explicates my failure to encounter any *Gaines* during my bus travels along the *Prithvi Highway* during the first few weeks of my research. Hence, it was at a rather early phase of my fieldwork that I had to discard my predisposed expectations of simply encountering *Gaines* singing on buses. During the course of my three months fieldwork in Nepal, I was intrigued to learn that most *Gandharbas* were now involved in a more financially viable pursuit of producing and selling '*Sarangis'* or even taking up other forms of profession rather than engaging in their traditional form of singing. This *social alteration*, I take as a key analytical construct for my thesis. My endeavour here is not simply to illustrate a chronological shift of *Gandharbas* from their traditional musical performers to producers of a commodity in terms of economic rationale, but to draw out the complex social relations and meanings that are manifested through the object of the *Sarangi*. Such relations, as we shall see, are complexly entwined in a dynamic interaction of historical trajectories, and political and socio-economical changes.

The notion of change is an imperative tenet since it gives emphasis to both the empirical and theoretical underpinnings in the various discussions during the course of this thesis. In other words, this encompasses the myriad embedded meanings and manifestations of the *Sarangi* within a vibrant social fabric and economic relations that enable us to examine complex notions such as caste, identity and the nation.

Throughout my fieldwork, I persistently endeavoured to probe and understand the social and economic implications of varying circumstances of the *Sarangi*. As such, I have sought to wrest my discussions in a dialectical manner with a profound reliance on this notion of change in the *Gandharba* tradition of engaging in music with a particular focus on the *Sarangi* by espousing Appadurai's (1986) notion that *"commodities like persons, have social lives."* Such an approach serves as a valuable theoretical point of departure for my thesis since it enables us to explore the meaning and role of the *Sarangi* in their different situations or social setting.

In general, the first three chapters are an attempt to bring this intent to the fore, relying richly on individual narratives coupled with theoretical discussions, since they focus on the movement of the *Sarangi* from the domestic spheres of production to its dissemination in the marketplace. Hence I've decide to call these chapters as *Sarangi at home, Sarangi in the Market* and *Everybody's Sarangi,* with a purpose of highlighting the various forms, ways and spaces of circulation of the *Sarangi*. What is clear from the discussions is that for the *Gandharba*s, the *Sarangi* is a significant part of their identity (both past and present) and a range of values are attached to it even when they are made in home or sold in the marketplace. The very dissemination of the *Sarangi* is productive of social relationships allowing for an examination into the various meanings that they manifest.

'Sarangi at home' illustrates the changing meaning and purpose of the *Sarangi* for the *Gandharbas* by juxtaposing its historical and present manifestation in socio-economic relations. This chapter illustrates the use of the *Sarangi* and its significance for the *Gandharba* caste, also bringing forth interesting debates on the concept of 'cultural property.' My main aim here is to disclose how *Sarangis* are produced in the domestic sphere, which also represents very complex social forms and distributions of knowledge. The intricacies of *Sarangi* making, notions of *Gandharba* community, difference and individual agency will also be discussed here.

The role of the market will be discussed in the chapter *Sarangi in the market*. In order to ascertain how the *Sarangi* comes to establish itself in the marketplace, this chapter explores the various spaces and conditions in the circulation of the *Sarangi* as an economic object. Empirical discussions will focus on the various forms (designs and sizes) and the relationship of *Gandharbas* with musical instrument brokers

(shopkeepers) or tourists/locals as potential buyers. The chapter *Everybody's Sarangi,* is grounded in the notion that meanings of objects are context specific. In following the earlier preceding chapters, this section explores the relationship of the *Sarangi* with consumers and brings forth discussions about the myriad affective and sensory relations that people maintain with things. This is because as the *Sarangi* transcends beyond the liminal spaces of personal and domestic spheres of *Gandharbas*, it comes to occupy new spaces in its circulation, taking up new forms and meanings that are entwined in complex social relationships.

However, it is imperative to hold onto the notion that the *Sarangi* is grounded in both its traditional and contemporary significance throughout the course of this thesis. For the *Gandharbas,* this is a crucial aspect since we observe a dynamic interaction of caste and identity, which also reflects the social position and traditional practices of *Gandharbas* simultaneously. Therefore, *Gandharba: Caste as Identity,* focuses on the theories and workings of the caste system and its social implications in order to illustrate the situation of the *Gandharbas* in Nepal. In this chapter, I draw on various observations and examples from the field to argue that caste, as identity for the *Gandharbas,* is imperative within the socio-political discourse of *change* in Nepal. I also demonstrate food as a signifier for caste identities and social boundaries to draw out the social complexities within a caste structure and probe how the *Sarangi* is encompassed within it. The chapter, *Reimagining a Caste and Nation,* seeks to elucidate the juxtaposition of the *Sarangi* in discussions with the *Gandharba* caste and the nation. As we shall learn, the *Sarangi* represents a certain paradox in the discourse of national politics since it serves as a medium for enabling fragmented and unstable claims to the nation. In addition, this chapter also further examines the notions of time and space, identity and difference*,* since the *Sarangi* as an object is representative of the caste when the position of the *Gandharbas* are placed within the concept of the nation. The concluding chapter, *A Praxis of Representation* bears a more personal reflection towards fieldwork and my position as a researcher. I consider this to be of huge significance since I believe that as a Nepalese individual, I am part of that very situation as my informants, thus rendering me as *'an instrument in my own research'* (Nash, 1976).

Sarangi at Home

"... Neither life nor history is an enterprise for those who seek simplicity and consistency."

-Jared Diamond (2005), *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*

It was already early June and the summer heat had been truly unbearable in the past few weeks, especially in *Bhansar* given its location[3]. It is also usually around this time that the monsoon season takes essential precedence in Nepal with regular downpours bringing both verve and havoc in terms of agricultural significance and infrastructure permanence, respectively. Like many locals in the area including my *Gandharba* friends, my days were often saturated with hope for the blessings of rain whilst the nights were but a small matter of successfully evading importunate mosquitoes coupled with frequent power cuts. The 7th of June was a warm Saturday morning and I was accompanying *Padam Bahadur Gandharba,* his son *Manoj* and son-in-law *Ek Bahadur* to a nearby area in order to fell two fairly moderate sized trees. Before we undertook the tree crashing proceedings, *Padam Bahadur* and the owner of the plot of land (and hence the trees) engaged in a brief discussion regarding financial payments. It was a rather arduous task but we somehow managed to complete it quite easily within about three hours with the help of an axe, saw and a sickle, although I believe my contribution was minimal. Nonetheless, by lunchtime we were already heading back for home, carrying two long logs of wood between the four of us but leaving behind a few smaller pieces for further collection. Within less than a month, these logs would undergo a meticulous transformation and be brought to *life* in the form of *Sarangis,* accessible as commodities in the streets of *Kathmandu* or speckled along the prominent *Prithvi Highway* that connected the capital to the tourist city of *Pokhara*.

In a practical sense, this elucidates one of the qualms of acquiring wood for many *Gandharbas* involved in the practice of *Sarangi* making, since more stringent laws are now in place that forbid the felling of trees from local forests without official authority. However, what I have sought to emphasize here through this anecdote

[3] See Figure 1.1. Field map

concerning the genesis of the *Sarangi* before it can even make its appearance as a *commodity* in the marketplace, is its part of a dynamic and multifaceted social relations that I seek to explicate throughout the course of this paper, relative to Appadurai's (1986) call for examining the 'life histories' and 'paths' of things:

'It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculation that enliven things. Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things in motion that illuminate their human and social context.'

(Appadurai, 1986:5)

The use of the term *home* in the title of the chapter itself is an effort to emphasize the significance of the *Sarangi* for the *Gandharbas* since this brings into dialogue the more traditional use of the *Sarangi* in juxtaposition to its space of production. Indeed, *Gandharbas* have always produced *Sarangis* within their domestic spheres for personal use, however it is the increased production and its rationale in the present situation that calls for an anthropological enquiry that this chapter seeks to attend to. This chapter will also illustrate that the boundaries of material production are not simply restricted to the *Gandharba* caste alone, but also negotiable to other caste groups as in the case of *Bhansar*. Hence, the social implications of this in terms of caste relations are of particular interest here and for the following chapters, since the *Sarangi* transcends its feature as an object or commodity to that of negotiating social relations, apparent in more ways, than the one with which I began this chapter. Furthermore, debates concerning the notion of 'cultural property' coupled with the case of *Thakur Gandharba* sheds some interesting light on one's stance towards the *Sarangi*, which encompasses an array of experiences that embrace and challenge one another.

In such a sense, approaching commodities as things in a certain situation, a situation that can characterize many different kinds of things at different points in their *social lives,* consigns a profitable basis for grasping a better understanding of the *Sarangi* through its complex historical and socio-political trajectories. But first, let us examine the traditional and historical use of the *Sarangi,* which I contend must be realized as an instrument exclusive to the *Gandharba* caste. In the past, the *Sarangi* was (and

arguably is still) an implicit marker of *Gandharba* identity, not solely in its visuality as a material object or musical instrument, but also as indicative of a caste given profession: that of 'singing.' As such, in a local context the term *'Gaine'* is immediately part of a public discourse that embraces a particular rhetoric on *Gandharba* identity as singers *(*and a lower caste*),* and the presence of the idiosyncratic *Sarangi* itself serves as a verification of this. When conversing with an elderly woman on a local bus journey during my fieldwork, she described to me:

"I remember certain occasions when a *Gaine* would come to our village with his distinctive *Sarangi* and perform in different houses or at the local *chautari*[4] where very often a large audience would gather to witness his performance. The mellifluous sound of the *Sarangi* always poignantly captured both my soul and imagination, and it still continues to do so every time I hear it… "

Similarly talking about the past, *Padam Bahadur* explicates that *Gandharbas* usually performed three distinct *'raag'* or styles of religious songs with the *Sarangi* depending on the time of the day (morning, afternoon or evening), when travelling between places. However, musical narratives in the form of *'ghatanas,'* or 'factual events' were more conventional, which in a way also served as a performative blueprint of an itinerant *Gandharba* lifestyle. He further explains that people often offered them money or uncooked food (e.g. maize or rice grains) and fruits. Yet, they were generally accustomed to cooking their own food or were required to wash the dishes from which they had eaten if food was accepted from others, thus concerning caste related food taboos which we shall learn more about later.

The *Gandharba* is *(was)* the only caste in Nepal exclusively engaged in music as a (caste-given) profession and hence also regarded as a music-making caste. As a further result, the moniker '*Gaines'* (*singers*) is a frequently used rhetoric to refer to *Gandharbas* in everyday public discourse (as was frequently the case during my fieldwork). As such, the use and meaning of the terms *Gaines* and *Gandharbas* are arguably synonymous. However it is the *'Sarangi,'* that takes an exclusive and supreme prominence in their engagement with music making, both as an instrument

[4] A communal resting area made of stone slabs, usually under a large tree, commonly found along walking routes and crossroads.

and as a social marker of *Gandharba* identity. Much of their musical performances (past and present) are primarily defined by a socio-cultural context, which encompasses how music is created, performed, listened to, appreciated, experienced, socialised, symbolised and thought of in a reference to 'ethnomusicology' (See Deschenes, 1998). Although I do not seek to immerse extensively into discussions of ethnomusicology, its indispensible bearing on the aspect of cultural identity, necessitates a brief explanation, which is equally significant and rewarding for my purpose.

Paradigms in ethnomusicology are distinctive because of the two components they combine: one focusing on music itself, and the other situating music within other cultural activities[5] (Bohlman, 1998). In this way, traditional music and cultural identity impart an historical impetus to ethnomusicology because of the ways they coalesce and relate with each other. Hoerburger (1970) has argued that amongst the *Gaines*[6] there were two significant changes taking place in the traditional meaning and purpose of their music. First was a shift away from their original musical referent as a medium of oral newspaper, and second was the integration of the "*jhyaure"* style amongst younger generation of Gaines which is distinct from the traditional old "*folk ragas,"* mainly due to the increasing influence of Indian entertainment music on Nepalese radio. This certainly was the case in terms of the latter amongst *Gandharbas* who still engaged in singing, as concluded from my information gathered in the field. However, the more contemporary approach of making and selling *Sarangis* amongst *Gandharbas* very much overshadows these practices of engaging in music. Over the course of my fieldwork, I only met three *Gandharba* individuals who were actively (but sporadically) involved in music making. One was *Akkale Gandharba,* who happened to earn his living by singing at the eminent and historic *Gorkha Durbar Temple* in the city of Gorkha (about 43 km from *Bhansar*). According to him, the religious site of the temple has been a convivial sanctuary for his musical performances for over a decade, and he proposes to keep it this way rather than

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[5] An ethnography of sound as a cultural system can be found in Feld's (1990) work amongst the Kaluli people of New Guinea, with an understanding of sound (both natural and human) as meaningfully situated in the ethos, or emotional tone, of Kaluli expression. As such, Feld's illustration of sounds as embodiment of feelings in its construction and interpretation are suggestive of social relations.

[6] Note Hoerburger's use of the term *Gaines* as a reference to *Gandharbas*.

making *Sarangis* when I questioned his music obligations. As a result, one must not regard the practice of *Sarangi-making* as an all-encompassing shift for *Gandharbas* from their conventional form of singing. In fact, other professions that eschew an engagement with the *Sarangi* are paradoxically embedded into the desires and hopes for many *Gandharbas* in terms of caste and identity, which I will elucidate in the end of this chapter.

In a simple sense the *Gaine* profession may be likened to that of street performers who so frequently display their talent coupled with the use of various musical instruments or objects as props in everyday public spaces (like high streets, train stations, popular tourist hubs etc). Although, the economic aspect of such a remark holds true for *Gaines,* the content, style and meanings of their songs are a matter that necessitates an entirely different examination altogether, an aspect not completely canvassed in this paper. But what I wish to embrace here is the use and purpose of the *Sarangi* as an instrument or object that is inherently suggestive of a certain cultural group clearly articulated into the rhetoric of caste identity, which in turn, raises some interesting debates on the notion of the *Sarangi* as a *property*.

While intellectual property commonly refers to the immaterial productions of minds, its practical sense defines ownership for resources that are increasingly becoming more tangible through its circulation. Geismer (2013) states that the term cultural property is commonly used to refer to certain *"things,"* or objects that are habitually sheltered in the antiquities galleries of national museums as:

'… collections of national patrimony held in trust by these elite institutions for their citizens and for the ultimate benefit of all humankind. It is in fact, a category defined by the intangibility of culture theory that holistically defines collective identity through a wide array of symbolic expression (see Brown, 2003; Appiah, 2006; Cuno 2008, 2009) and which acknowledges the dynamic power relations that underscore the value that is culture.'

(Geismer, 2013:2)

Geismer's (2013) own study in Vanuata and Aotearoa, New Zealand examines the ways in which global and indigenous discourses about cultural and intellectual property overlap to redefine and challenge notions of the relations between the local

and global. Likewise, addressing the issues and debates surrounding cultural or indigenous ownership of 'aboriginal paintings' as *property,* Fred Myers (2004) raises some critical questions regarding the threats posed by non-Aboriginal artists painting in an Aboriginal style or even concealing themselves as Aboriginal. The issue here deals with the tensions surrounding a certain form of cultural being in an uncorrupted sphere in which ''Aboriginal people'' themselves are able to communicate, since for others to presume to speak in their voices (through art) corrupts Aboriginal people's opportunities for self-determination (Myers, 2004:15). This raises questions about the cultural (racial or ethnic) identity of Indigenous Australian art, its motivations, and its implications or questions of 'ownership':

'Rather than detaching producers, objects, and owners, the circulation of Aboriginal images is producing new identities… the scandals represent a significant moment in the conceptualization or institutionalization of cultural property, a social drama or struggle in which contested evaluations are made evident and hierarchies (or regimes of value) are put to the test.'

(Myers, 2004:14)

However, rather than espousing an understanding of property as a circumscribed object or a reservoir for ownership, I believe embracing it as a channel for relationships seems most propitious here in the case of the *Sarangi*. Such a notion is succinctly delivered if the *Sarangi* is understood to resonate a *'flexible nexi of multiple and negotiable relationships between persons and things that continually shift to accommodate historical recognitions of prior inequities and current social needs'* (Coombes, 1998:208 in Geismer, 2013:18). The *Sarangi* has always occupied a central position in the everyday social life of *Gandharbas* and it evidently continues to do so, albeit channelled in newer ways. They embody complex forms of knowledge entangled with ideas beyond the notions of caste, profession and identity of *Gandharbas* to an arena encompassing the nation, which will be discussed further in the following chapters.

Interestingly, I also came to learn that the material production of the *Sarangi* was not exclusively restricted to the *Gandharbas* but also negotiable to other cultural groups as in the case in *Bhansar*. I use the term negotiable here closely with Strassler's (2013) notion of *"refraction,"* in the sense that it permits the *Sarangi's* role in

generating new spatial and temporal orientations. This idea of refraction enables a double gaze for this purpose - both as an exchange of material object and an exchange of ideas on it. I realised that at least four individuals from the *Tamang caste* were also involved in *Sarangi*-making within the vicinity, all of who had acquired their skills through the help of their *Gandharba* companions. *Manoj* seemed even more impressed when informing me about the exceptional *Sarangi-playing* prowess of a particular *non-Gandharba* individual who lived nearby, when even his own skills were almost short of average. Unlike the threats posed by non-Aboriginal painters on indigenous ownership of paintings (*property*) as discussed earlier, the *Sarangi* draws together diverse actors from fairly different social spheres towards a mutual course of actions enabling its very procreation and dissemination. Myers (2004) has emphasised on the Aboriginal exchange of paintings with outsiders on terms that define their *desired relationships*, thus enabling images to bear the potential for identification and shared identity by stating:

"… Indigenous paintings are tokens of exchange with the dominant society as objectifications or emblems of the desire for relationship. They are a medium of identity and relatedness and, therefore, cannot easily be understood as existing within boundaries. They are, moreover, objects around whose production and dissemination identities are managed, regulated, and policed."

(Myers, 2004:16).

He maintains that ''art'' has offered a medium through which indigenous people in Australia, as in North America and elsewhere, have been able to make themselves visible on their own terms, allowing them more or less to intervene in the representations circulating ''about'' them. Arguably, the circulation of the *Sarangi* itself is a desired self-representative process of *Gandharba* identity making, one that seeks to move beyond an antecedent allusion of their belonging to a certain lower caste in society by refracting newer forms of ideas about the *Sarangi* and evoking fresh ways of comprehending social relations with people. Indeed, the main producers of *Sarangis* are *Gandharba* individuals themselves and in *Bhansar,* more than half the households in the neighbourhood were involved in such a business. Although it was the men that dealt with a majority of the undertakings, women figures as wives, daughters, nieces etc. also carried out essential responsibilities in supporting their male counterparts. They very often helped out with the preparation of the tuning pegs,

bows and colouring of the *Sarangis* amongst others in addition to their other domestic duties. *Milan Gandharba,* the nephew of *Padam Bahadur* is only 13 years old but an exceptionally skilled *Sarangi*-maker. Although he could not play the *Sarangi* or sing at all, his technical prowess in the designing of this instrument was impressive, also earning him a great deal of applause from his elders. He was quick to show me his art book, which contained numerous images/designs for his *Sarangis* that one might deem as rather unorthodox and modern (e.g. Dragons, Hindu Demons, Flowers etc). He even managed to make me a *Sarangi* with the logo of my beloved *Arsenal Football Club*, which I now flaunt proudly to all my friends.

During my time in *Bhansar*, I was also able to grasp a sense of a communal coherence amongst the *Gandharbas* when I attended a *"gunthi"* or monthly communal meeting on the 14th of May 2014. This particular meeting took place in the courtyard of a house in the village with an attendance of about thirty people (and at least one member from each family). Every family was required to make a monthly payment of 20 rupees to a 'communal fund' during this meeting. At the same time individuals were also required to pay their monthly interests for any sum borrowed from the fund. After I questioned people about the purpose of this fund, they replied that it functioned as an emergency fund that people could borrow money from if necessary and some had even borrowed money to support their *Sarangi* ventures. They were also quick to stress that this was rather necessary and for the interest of the *Gandharbas* in *Bhansar,* since other castes in the vicinity also had their own *'gunthis.'* When juxtaposed with earlier discussions on the local producers of *Sarangis* (including individuals from other castes), this discloses very complex social forms and distributions of local knowledge. At the same time we also construe a realisation of an intricately complex and embedded local *Gandharba* historicity and caste identity through the realm of the *Sarangi*.

Along such an enquiry, I wish to illustrate the case of *Thakur Gandharba* as an individual and a particular figure that evokes both underlying historical processes and "structures of feeling" of a particular space and time which Barker and Lindquist (2009) highlight in *"figures of Indonesian modernity."* A secondary school English teacher by profession with a University degree, *Thakur* not only marks a historical

shift of a *Gandharba* from that of a wandering singer, an 'image' reverently reminiscent of the *Sarangi,* but his repute also ascertains a certain distance from the many *Gandharba* individuals engaging in *Sarangi* making (including his own brother). This underscores an emancipated social position. Furthermore, his profession as a teacher also ensures a particular subject position that is suggestive of the complex social and political transformations and struggles (especially when the Maoist government came to power in 2008) in Nepal over the past decade. *Thakur* tells me that although by law caste discrimination has already been abolished in Nepal, its remnants are still existent in everyday fragments of social interactions and are probably best epitomised in my own case when my *Gandharba* informants invited me for dinner one evening. When I informed my host lady *(who was from a different caste)* about the invitation so that she wouldn't have to prepare my meal that evening, she told me: *"we have never eaten food cooked by a lower caste… may be you shouldn't too but of course this doesn't make much difference to you since you live abroad…"* My point here is not that of demeaning one caste in favour of another but to illustrate existing social tensions and taboos of 'social consciousness' about caste in Nepal where caste or ethnic identity is immensely valued. Like many other *Gandharba* individuals that I met and conversed with during my time in Nepal, *Thakur* too was exceedingly proud of belonging to a caste with a unique historical tradition and cultural practice of engaging in music making such as theirs. However, unlike the past, *Thakur* assured me that his profession is very much indicative of an ongoing peregrination of *Gandharba* 'social inclusion,' and their desire to be on par with every other caste/ethnic group in Nepal as such. For *Thakur*, the narrative of belonging to a lower caste as a fragment of the past serves to construct a space of creating a 'possible self,' thus allowing him to participate in a contemporary sphere of social equality. This is best channelled through his profession as a teacher. Although *Thakur* himself is not involved in a practice of *Sarangi* making or singing, he is part of a collective historical trajectory epitomised through the *Sarangi* as a representative object of the *Gandharba* caste.

As such, his figure provides a valuable starting point for considering contemporary lives of many *Gandharbas*, in part because it provides points of relative fixity where scholarly and everyday discourses may converge and become entangled (Barker and

Lindquist, 2009:70). The image of *Thakur* promises a way forward for *Gandharba* individuals to move beyond the social tensions of caste categorization and identification by asserting his position as an educated individual without any shame in his profession, when placed in dialogue with the statement with which I began this section. Just as Strassler (2010) depicts various ways through which everyday ambitions, preoccupations and sentiments of ordinary people are personalised in components of the nation via the medium of photography in Indonesia, the figure of *Thakur* refracts an understanding of *Gandharbas* and their social position through their actions in a particular given space and time. Even though his father was involved in *Sarangi* making and his brother too has followed suit, *Thakur* has utilised the medium of education to channel his desire to be a part of a modern society and affirm his identify as a *Gandharba* without any professional engagement with the *Sarangi*. His figure represents a dynamic and complex set of relationships that bind him both to his caste and the wider Nepalese society.

What we gather from the various discussions throughout this chapter is the potential of the *Sarangi* to enact a certain function as a 'cultural broker' of negotiating new forms of social relationships between *Gandharbas* themselves and also other Nepalese ethnic groups. This blurs caste adhered boundaries and possibly also turns the whole notion of caste on its head. If the *Sarangi* was an obvious indication of fabricating a subordinate position in the social sphere of caste hierarchy in the past, then it also possesses a certain agency that serves the potential to quash such a notion through its production and circulation in an increasing commercial marketplace at present. The object of the *Sarangi* clearly juxtaposes the notion of a caste given profession, whether as singers, manufacturers of them or even as *Gandharba* individuals who are not involved in these mentioned practices. Such complexities coexist in a certain tension since they not only push and probe existing social boundaries but also give new meanings and social forms to the *Sarangi*.

Fig. 1.2 Manoj Gandharba felling a tree with an axe in Bhansar.

Fig. 1.3. Sarangis and bows being preparared at home.

Sarangi in the Market

Don't, just don't, ask for or expect a clear definition of 'stuff'

- Daniel Miller (2010)

Gandharba Tol or *Gandharba neighbourhood* in *Bhansar* is where I conducted a majority of my research is a small area consisting of about 25-26 *Gandharba* households. It is only 5-minutes away from where I had taken up my accommodation with a couple in their house as a paying guest. My host uncle is a retired military man who is now working as a part time security guard at a local bank in the town of *Dumre,* 2 km away. At the same time, the couple also run a convenience store on the ground floor of their house, which also sub-functions as a local butcher's (although only offering chicken), an occasional communal gathering area and even as an unconventional pub (offering *'local raksi,'* home made millet or rice alcohol) with a few local visitors guaranteed every evening. It was very often the case that a medley of sounds of chisel chipping away at wood would greet me on a daily basis as I approached *Gandharba Tol*. This was confirmed by a convivial sight of *Sarangis* basking out on verandas of houses in their diverse shapes and sizes, a sign of their near completion and readiness for the *bazaar*.

Appadurai's (1986) suggestion that commodities be approached as things in a certain *situation* with the potential to characterize myriad things at different points in their social lives has already been taken into consideration in the previous chapter in the 'domestic space' of *Sarangis*. A dedicated endeavour to explore the conditions under which the *Sarangi* circulates in different regimes of value in space and time necessitates a further enquiry of the *Sarangi* in the marketplace, which this chapter will seek to ascertain. Empirical discussions will focus on the various forms (designs) of *Sarangis* and the ways through which they come into circulation, which also underscore the relationship between producers and musical instrument brokers (shopkeepers), tourists and local customers alike. Hence, this chapter expounds on the role of the market and the various spaces that influence how *Sarangis* come into exchange and what they might signify in the market. This also transcends its notion from a simple commodity to that as a marker of folk music, Nepalese heritage, authenticity and *Gandharba* caste itself.

As a customer, one may come to possess a *Sarangi* in two ways: either by buying it directly from a *Sarangi*-maker himself or through one of the many musical instrument shops that retail it. If one is to ever visit the streets of *Thamel,* a major tourist hub in the heart of Kathmandu, the person is most likely to encounter a *Sarangi* wielding *Gandharba* displaying his musical skills with an equally impressive display of customer rapport. The many musical instrument shops in the area also have *Sarangis* hanging on display.

Likewise, when I accompanied *Ek Bahadur* on a few occasions in his quest of selling *Sarangis* in the bustling highway town of *Aanbu Khaireni* along the *Prithvi Highway,* I was able to witness how individuals played a diverse and pivotal role as producers of cultural forms, its carriers, cultural brokers and consumers all enthralled in a common cause of the *Sarangi*. After a few trips, it became obvious that the *'hathay byapaar'* or *hand-to-hand* dealing of *Sarangis* along the highway was also very much a case of sheer luck. This was because there was never a guarantee if the countless vehicles going in either direction would halt for customer meals or travel breaks in *Aanbu Khaireni*. But as a business strategy, it is clear that the location of *Aanbu Khaireni* is a favourable one for selling *Sarangis* due to the numerous restaurants, shops and large communal restroom in the area. It is also the junction that connects the route Northwards towards the historic town of *Gorkha*. In *Aanbu Khaireni*, we often took refuge in a particular restaurant or a shop dealing with musical instruments. The owner of the latter also happened to regularly order *Sarangis* for his shop from *Ek Bahadur* when necessary. Every time a tourist bus, jeep or car happened to halt, *Ek Bahadur* would approach towards it playing a *Sarangi* in order to get the attention of passengers and try to negotiate a deal. This is very much the normal routine of selling *Sarangis* via a hand-to-hand basis, whether in Kathmandu or any another place along the *Prithvi Highway*. And indeed, foreign tourists are targeted as potential buyers bringing higher economic benefits for obvious reasons. I was told that sometimes, if one was lucky, he could make a profit 3-5 times higher for a *Sarangi* than the price of what he would make when selling it to a wholesale buyer. However, it is evident that although the financial rewards are higher when dealing in person, it is a rather arduous and time-consuming task in contrast to guaranteed bulk sales at a slightly lower price. Most *Gandharbas* in *Bhansar* visit Kathmandu at least once a month to sell their *Sarangis*, usually when they are fulfilling advance orders from their regular

wholesale dealers. It is also during such visits to the city that they try to capitalise on a few higher priced sales with tourists in the streets of Thamel, Kathmandu. During the course of my fieldwork, both *Padam Bahadur* and *Manoj Gandharba* also made 3 visits each to Kathmandu to deliver *Sarangis* to their usual wholesale buyers in the city. In such a case the buyers already determine the quantity, sizes and designs of *Sarangis* and the producers simply oblige and deliver them.

As a part of my research on the use of the *Sarangi,* one of the tasks I set myself was to investigate thoroughly how the maker determined the designs of the instrument. Rather than a single reasoning, this was obviously dependant on various factors, and my conclusion was that this was equally a matter of personal competence as much as it was dependant on the demand in the marketplace. Furthermore, this was also a matter of 'communal learning' amongst *Gandharbas* in *Bhansar,* where critique and feedback on individual work were incessant. For instance, *Padam Bahadur,* his son and nephew often worked together and assisted one another at home within a shared domestic space. However, when it came down to the matter of selling their *Sarangis,* it was very much an individual venture that depended on personal contacts with buyers in Kathmandu and elsewhere. Hence, the young *Milan Gandharba,* still a novice on the logistics of the business left this either to his Grandfather or Uncle.

What we see here is evident of a changing purpose of both the *Sarangi* and the *Gandharbas* when seen in light of their profession as singers. This ties closely with Appadurai's (1986:6) notion that *'commodities are things with a particular type of social potential, that they are distinguishable from 'products,' 'objects,' 'goods,' 'artifacts,' and other sorts of things- but only in certain respects and from a certain point of view,'* rendering the understanding of the *Sarangi* open for discussion. A simple way of looking at the *Sarangi* in the marketplace is through a commonsensical definition of commodity set out by Kopytoff, as an item with both use and exchange value:

'a commodity is a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart, the very fact of exchange indicating that the counterpart has, in the immediate content, an equivalent value.'

(Kopytoff, 1986:68)

At the same time, for those who are completely oblivious to the *Sarangi* (mainly foreign tourists but also including locals alike), I would like to draw on Miller's (2010) use of the term *'stuff,'* in a sense that it does not seek to define things per se but rather reason as to why they are important, which is not because they are evident and physically confined or enabled but rather the opposite. For Miller (2010), it is often precisely due to the very absence of *'stuff'* and our incognizance of it that it more powerfully ascertain our expectations, by setting the scene and ensuring apposite conduct, without being open to confrontation. He states-

'It is not that things are tangible stuff that we can stub out toes against. It is not that they are firm, clear foundations that are opposed to the fluffiness of the images of the mind or abstract ideas. They work by being invisible and unremarked upon, a state they usually achieve by being familiar and taken for granted.'

(Miller, 2010:50)

In reading Miller (2010) we conjure an understanding of material culture, which 'implies that much of what makes us what we are exists, not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompt us.' (Miller, 2010:51). Mariane Ferme's (2001) *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History and the everyday in Serra Leone*, suggests the possibility of material objects to both reveal and conceal secret histories. She argues, *'the material world matters but… the life that objects and subjects take on, from circumstances not of their own making but of their made-ness, produces unstable meanings and unpredictable events'* (Ferme, 2001:21 in Hoskins, 2006:80).

So what is a Sarangi when one buys it and owns it? Is it a contrite reminder of the remnants of a subordinated caste or a facade of it? Or is the Sarangi just a forthright souvenir? Although this study may not bring a closure to these questions, such debates provoke a strong confrontation on assumed ideas of 'objects' akin to culture/s and with it aspects of identity and space reified through social boundaries (Gupta and Ferguson, 2001).

It is resultantly crucial to understand the conditions under which the *Sarangi* as an economic object circulates in different regimes of value in space and time. This may be referred to as the 'commodity situation' in the social life of any thing or *the*

situation in which its exchangeability (past, present or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature (Appadurai, 1986:13). Nancy Munn's (1986) work on *Gawa* canoes and wealth objects describes this *'value creation'* over a biographical cycle, in which the canoes start life as trees grown on clan land, and are then transferred to other clans to be carved, then sailed and traded against yams or shell valuables. The canoe itself is dematerialised but still *'owned'*, although in another form, and it is ultimately converted into what Munn calls 'socio-temporal space-time'. In a certain way, the *Sarangi* is also suggestive of such an understanding since the complexities of caste and profession are entwined in the ways through which identities are realised and cognised, negotiated or imposed, reproduced or transformed.

Kopytoff (1986) argues that issues of singularisation and commoditisation are somehow linked into disparate and morally charged systems that coexist in a certain tension. Singularisation may be understood as an autonomous cognitive and cultural process that socially endows power of some sort after the production of a commodity. As such, when the commodity is effectively out of the commodity sphere, its status is inevitably ambiguous and open to the push and pull of events and desires as it is shuffled in the flux of social life:

'Thus, even things that unambiguously carry an exchange value- formally speaking, therefore, commodities- do absorb the other kind of worth, one that is non monetary and goes beyond exchange worth. We may take this to be the missing non-economic side of what Marx called commodity fetishism.'

(Kopytoff, 1986:83)

Meanwhile, Foster (2006) argues that '*critical fetishism'* or a heightened appreciation for the active materiality of things in motion also indicate people's perspective on distant others which are often filtered through commodity consumption and/or its denial. Espousing Appadurai's argument regarding liquid trope of flow, Foster (2006:285-86) calls for a need to analyse this in terms of intensity, extent and velocity of movements, since tracking commodities and value in motion becomes a means of apprehending the "global consciousness" and work of imagination often associated

with globalisation[7]. Adopting such an actor-oriented perspective enables one to recognise the moments of value contestation that take place at critical interfaces wherein normative discourses and social interests are defined and negotiated, but, more generally, multiplicities and ambiguities of value inhere in the workings of all commodity networks. Following such an understanding, it may be inferred that the use and meanings of *Sarangi* rests where its values are constantly reassembled and altered within located social arenas. As a result, a thing's 'commodity candidacy' (Appadurai, 1986) thus varies as it moves from situation to situation*;* each situation regulated by a different 'regime of value' or set of conventions and criteria governing exchange. This focus holds true in a crucial phase in the biography of the *Sarangi,* evident in the circulation of the *Sarangi* from a 'traditional' and exclusive sphere adhering values of caste (mainly for the purpose of singing) to a more contemporary and global sphere of anonymity as a souvenir, a gift etc. What is taking place is not a simple commodification, nor a reduction of objects' significance to their quantitative exchange value, but rather a reorganization of the hierarchy of values adhering to the objects.

Sarangis are mostly made at home and then taken to the city in bulk to be sold either to wholesale musical instrument retailers or directly to tourists, which requires smart business tactics, verbal prowess and patience when dealing with potential customers. As the *Sarangi* transcends beyond the liminal spaces of personal and domestic spheres of *Gandharbas*, it comes to occupy new 'spaces' in its circulation, taking up new forms and meanings that are entwined in complex social relationships. As a commodity, the very circulation of *Sarangis* signify the changing socio-economic circumstances in Nepal wherein global actors in the form of tourists and local buyers provide a niche market for *Gandharbas* to pursue their economic ventures. The availability of *Sarangis* in numerous intricate designs (which I will discuss further in the coming chapter) depict a stark contrast to the plain and classic *Sarangi* of old, but such designs nonetheless mediate a favourable commercial and aesthetic value to the

[7] The liquid trope of flow refers to the non-isomorphic movements of images, peoples and ideas that describes shifting configuration of *–scapes*. Foster (2006:592-593) proposes tracing circuits of culture by looking at hybrid actor networks (founded on the Actor Network Theory which encourages analysts to investigate empirically how networks of relations hold and extend their shape through geographic space) in analysing interconnectedness of meanings and trope of flow.

Sarangi. In such a sense, 'objects', it seems, do not hold a fixed intrinsic meaning or value but they must rather be understood in their different social arenas and relationships that characterise and signify myriad meanings. Revisiting the original and historical purpose of the *Sarangi* illustrates its use as an object bounded within a private space, accessible only to individuals from the *Gandharba* caste who themselves were seen as untouchables or belonging to a lower caste within the social structure. It seems fair to comment that the availability of the a *Sarangi* in the market is also suggestive of changing socioeconomic and political circumstances that challenges caste given social taboos and boundaries for human actions[8].

Fig. 1.4. Manoj Gandharba's wife Manmaya Gandharba preparing Tuning Pegs.

[8] I also realised that the government had been granting a new house (estimated budget of about 16000 NPR or 1300 Euros) to every *Gandharba* family in the village since 2012 (3 houses in 2012, 7 houses in 2013 followed by 2 houses in 2014). The duration of my fieldwork coincided with the construction of these two new houses, one of which belonged to *Ek Bahadur Gandharba*, although I was unable to witness its completion since I had to depart from Nepal prior to the task. See figure. 2.3.

Fig. 1.5. Three generations at work: Padam Bahadur Gandharba (far right), his nephew Milan Gandharba (middle) and son Manoj Gandharba (left).

Fig. 1.6. Ek Bahadaur Gandharba negotiates with a customer in Aanbu Khaireni along the busy Prithvi Highway also known as the Kathmandu-Pokhara Highway.

Everybody's Sarangi

"Change is one thing. Acceptance is another."

-Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

The discussions I've presented on the *Sarangi* so far is coalescent of *'biographies'* of things as a series of transformation of relationships. In following Hoskins (2006), we encounter an open definition of 'agency,' of objects leading us to question if the notion of agency by itself implies an idiosyncratic power to change the world? If things like persons have social lives, then surely, one must contend in their ability to impose in the social world through the material form multifaceted relations. Much of this entails what we would more familiarly refer to as material culture, with museums positing an unprecedented space for their dissemination (See Bennett, 2009; Tapsell, 2002). Objects at rest in their immaculate settings behind glass frames or raised podiums in museums facilitated with audio-visual aid, seemingly bring this point home. It seems that as manufacturers of objects, we must 'always' (if not often) live with the vestiges of their past. What is also worth noting is that the very 'purpose' of the quintessential thing in question is blurred in a socio temporal space and time. A tribal mask that was once central to an ancestral ritual in Papua New Guinea or a weapon that was used during conflict somewhere in Central Asia, both of which no longer serve the same purpose when displayed behind glass frames. What I wish to indicate here is that meanings of objects rest at poles apart in their different cultural contexts since people relate to them in myriad and contrasting ways. One need not even look beyond the domestic sphere of their own living rooms in family photographs, books, and paintings etc, as apt illustrations of this. Holding such a view that the meanings of objects are context specific, I hope to illustrate that the *Sarangi* is grounded in both its traditional and modern significance in the course of this chapter. For the *Gandharbas,* this is a crucial aspect since in terms of caste values and its hierarchy, we see a dynamic social interplay of social relations bringing forth discussions about the countless affective and sensory relations that people maintain with things.

In reading Miller (2010: 51) we conjure an understanding of material culture, which *'implies that much of what makes us what we are exists, not through our*

consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompt us.' For Miller, material objects act as a certain kind of social setting. They form the very frames that informs our social world which he calls the 'humility of things,' which corresponds closely with what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) termed *'a theory of practice.'* For the *Sarangis* and their producers, the very material possibility of the former is a creation of their own pathways- a process of creating and circulating cultural forms that is both traditional and contemporary. What I am suggesting as contemporary here fervently encompasses the commoditisation of *Sarangis* (in contrast to its more practical use as a musical instrument in the past), in strong relation to Bourdieu's (1998:47) notion of '*symbolic capital,'* which may be understood as a form of property (whether social, cultural, economic or physical), which when perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception, cause them to know it and recognize it, thus conferring its value.

Gell (1986) maintains consumption of commodities as part of a process that includes production and exchange, wherein all three are distinct only as phases of the cyclical process of social reproduction, and in which consumption is never terminal. As such, the notion of *consumption* may be seen as a form of symbolic action:

"Consumption is the phase of the cycle in which goods become attached to personal referents, when they cease to be neutral "goods," which could be owned by anybody and identified with anybody, and become attributes of some individual personality, badges of identity, and signifiers of specific interpersonal relationships and obligations." (Gell, 1986:113)

Seen in this light, the consumption of *Sarangis* is suggestive of a multifarious course of symbolic enablement. Take the 'body' or make of the *Sarangis* for instance. In the past, they were rarely produced in elaborate designs or sizes but existed in a plain or classical form (see fig. 1.7.), giving more emphasis to its purpose as a musical instrument rather than a market commodity. However they now come in various *designs* and *sizes* (see fig. 2.1.), which not only embody the maker's skill and artistic ambition but also inform about an increasing lucrative marketplace. Moreover, the availability of the *Sarangi* in the marketplace also advocates an additional purpose: *a collective desire of its producers to disseminate knowledge about the Gandharba caste*. As *Deepak Gandharba* explained to me, *'the Sarangi [was] is ours but it is*

now available to everybody in order to help them realize about the Gandharbas.' It is not simply the availability of the *Sarangi* in the market but also its very consumption that allows it for an engagement with the social and economic dimensions of the *Gandharba* caste. This encompasses a desire for the *Gandharbas* amongst many other so called lower castes for a more equitable, harmonious and contemporary Nepal that has completely shaken off any remaining traces of the caste system and its hierarchical values. In this regard, the *Sarangi* may be deduced as a *vehicle* of change, as an initiator and carrier of *Gandharba* identity and cultural knowledge. It is clear that the symbolic representation of the *Gandharba* caste through the *Sarangi* is inherent and indissoluble. But what we see here is a channelling and dynamic interplay of caste and identity through the circulation of the *Sarangi,* both in terms of historical and socio-economic significance. Jarman's (1998) study on the display of *banners* as *social objects* in a sense of history embodied as *Orange* tradition is evocative of a similar notion. Here, the banners and the images they bear create their meaning within the wider context of commemorative celebrations, through which meaningful histories are re-created and remembered.

Gell's (1998) notion of *'instrumentality'* or *'agency'* is linked closely to the malleability of objects and the numerous ways they may be perceived, in which they induce an emotional response, and are invested with some of the intentionality of their makers. In this sense, the very production of things is a form of instrumental action and a way to influence the thought and actions of others. Gell's stance is symptomatic of a more functioning model of biography of things in which an object may not only construe a number of different identities but also 'interact' with people who gaze upon it, use it and try to possess it. The designs of the *Sarangis* themselves embody a complex form of knowledge and intentionality concurring with a capacity of objects to enact upon social relations and persons alike – all of which I will discuss further a little later.

In *Mythologies,* Barthes (1972) explored the ways in which everyday mundane objects, as 'signs' bear certain messages by developing semiology to explore the contemporary myths of society as revealed by the object milieu. Hence, everything serves its purpose as 'signification' or a sign when used socially. The sign is a symbolic representation of a referent: it is the conceptualisation of an idea that is

based on its two component elements: the signifier or the object and the signified expression. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard (1988:15) also attributed sign-like qualities to objects, arguing that by their nature they 'have a greater internal coherence than human needs and desires that are more difficult to define cognitively.' However, an overemphasis on the importance of the end product or the *sign* digresses from an attention towards how meanings become attached to objects or how the sign is developed. In this regard, Pellegram (1998) argues for a number of ways in which the message bearing qualities of an object can be viewed by considering the overt and dormant messages borne by one class of object, *paper,* and how these messages are developed and manipulated. Thinking of various types of paper found at the workplace, colours and physical nature of paper, which has much to do with the message it conveys, he states:

'The Post-it Note is not selected by the office worker because it conveys a sense of informality: it is selected because it is convenient to the purpose of writing a short note, and it is that purpose, generally informal in character, that has become associated with the objects through habitual reiteration of the act.'

(Pellegram, 1998:109)

Such an approach is most useful in critiquing objects that are purposefully selected by those who influence them; objects that could be termed as commodities whose essential feature lies in their socially relevant 'exchange value' (Appadurai, 1986). Keeping this in mind, it is also worth noting that not all things that carry meanings are exchanged, since some are simply used. Yet, this is where the *Sarangi* as an object is paradoxical in its own right. Production and distribution on one hand, and consumption on the other are often seen as processes that should be linked with each domain evolving its own local consistency as an economic course, though quite often they do not (Miller, 1998:183). In fact this is rarely the case, and these processes may actually even challenge each other to an unexpected extent. Spooner's (1986) argument that although carpets in general are commodities, Oriental carpets are only imperfectly commoditized is highly suggestive of this. Oriental carpets are only part commodity since they are also part symbol and it is in essence of the latter that carpets mean different things to different people in different cultural contexts:

'The real thing is not simply an artefact; it is made by particular individuals, from special handcrafted materials, in particular social, cultural, and environmental conditions, with motifs and designs learned from earlier generations… The social conditions in which the carpets began their journey from weavers through the hands of dealers to consumers are known imperfectly. We receive them divorced from their social context. Our desire for authenticity prompts us to reconstruct that context.'

(Spooner, 1986:199)

Miller (1998) contends that a certain air of 'fear' still exists in *material culture* at present- a fear of objects supplanting people. At least in terms of earlier Marxist form, such a fear was not of material objects per se but of commodity as vehicle for capitalist dominance. His case study on the *coca-cola: a black sweet drink from Trinidad* is an astute illustration of this, rendering it (coca-cola) not merely as material culture but as a symbol that stands for a discussion about materiality of culture. Borrowing Malcolm Quinn's (1994) [9]theory of 'meta-symbol,' Miller argues that the term coca-cola, in a great deal of political, academic and conversational rhetoric, not only implies a particular soft drink but also epitomises a problematic nature of commodities in general (it may stand for commodities or capitalism, and equally Imperialism and Americanisation). As such, coca-cola is unique in its particular ability to objectify globality but in terms of its localised image that is held within a particular frame of spatialized identity as in the case of Trinidad[10].

From a cultural perspective, the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must be not only produced as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing (Kopytoff, 1986:64). Espousing a biographical approach of things seems a profitable way of realizing cultural

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[9] His book on the history of the 'Swastika,' brings forth a notion that rather than standing as the icon for a specific reference, the swastika (rather unusually) has tended to stand more generally for a form of meta-symbolic level that evokes the idea that there exists a higher mystical level of symbolisation.

[10] Here, the desire for commodities is likened to myths (in following Levi-Strauss, 1966) in their capability to ascertain differences in identity and society. For Miller, in the Trinidadian context, ethnicity is one facet in which coca-cola as myth resolves a contradiction in value whilst also retaining a notion of modernity that is nurtured through its advertising. Miller's (1998) case study is clearly an attempt to localise production and consumption separately and in relation to each other.

possibilities that are embodied in its social career. However, such possibilities that makes a biography cultural whether economic, technical or social does not depend on what it deals with, but rather how and from what perspective it is considered (Kopytoff, 1986). Essentially the *Sarangi* is still a musical instrument but it may also stand for other things since its further and telling enquiry rests in the role and position of objects in constituting a societal intricacy such as caste. This is where the potential of object/s to act on behalf of, identify or represent people either on an individual or collective basis comes forth. Furthermore, one may also argue that the *Sarangi* as a market commodity is tantamount to any other object, which very often epitomise authentic *Nepali-ness* (take for example Cashmere/Pashmina shawls, Buddhist *thangka* paintings or hand-woven woollen garments). However, it is evident that it is not just the availability of *Sarangis* for consumption in the market but rather its indispensible historical trajectory and social ties to a certain caste that gives it a distinct yet ambiguous level of symbolisation.

With such an stance, I argue it is essential in understanding the capability of the *Sarangi*, to engage in a dialogue between both the economic and social domains of the *Gandharba* caste, which also have wider nationalist implications as I will discuss further in the next chapter. This in turn, lays emphasis on earlier discussions of Pellegram's (1998) call to temper the sign-signified-signifier relationship with arguments concerning the social production of meaning.

This is why it is imperative that I elaborate on the miscellany of *Sarangi* designs that were being produced by makers in *Bhansar* (which I must reiterate are aesthetically very impressive and lovely to behold). Most common were intricate and skilfully executed designs of religious Hindu deities such as Ganesha or Saraswati etc., and even Lord Buddha. The remaining designs mostly included animal figures such as snakes, birds or dragons but it is the *'umlay'* (or the *'middle-finger'* design- see fig. 1.8.), which profoundly interested me. In terms of size, it was either a standard (approx. 22-24 inches in length) or a small (approx. 15-16 inches) although an occasional three-headed cobra *Sarangi* was much larger and sold for a higher price since it demanded a higher investment of labour, time and expertise[11]. However, it is

[11] Wholesale or retail prices for bulk buyers/shop owners range from about 1000-1500 NPR for standard *Sarangis*; 400-600 NPR for small *Sarangis* and 2500-3000 NPR for three headed-cobra

by no means that the small or three-headed cobra *Sarangis* are highly suitable for learning or playing purposes (although they still function to some extent). But it is rather in their conveniently displayable or '*sajhaune*' disposition, especially in the living rooms of homes that justify their physical build according to many *Gandharba*s themselves. I also came to realize that the *umlay* was a fairly popular *Sarangi* design, particularly amongst foreign tourists. Of course, given the pleasant aesthetic qualities and the symbolic meanings behind the *umlay* design (which may be regarded as playful, candid, rude, simply peculiar or an interesting union of the archetypal and modern), it certainly does not fail to raise a few eyebrows or attract immediate interest from potential customers. At the same time it is rather interesting to note that the more pious designs of deities may also be bought as sacred Hindu objects especially amongst local buyers. Although it would seem irrelevant that such designs would be bought for religious purposes, they still embody and suggest some form or aspect of religious knowledge, which I suppose is best-left open for speculation.

Nevertheless in the wider context of caste and the circulation of *Sarangis*, the designs and sizes are clearly articulated to the rhetoric of social and economic change for the *Gandharbas*, considering that as a material object the *Sarangi* was essentially reserved for a personal space *(of caste and profession)* prior to its emergence in the marketplace. The bodily forms of the *Sarangi* are also very much dependant on other factors such as the type of wood available, since some are more susceptible to damage than others when carving and inscribing designs or the demand of wholesale buyers. But this is also partly down to us as consumers and our affection to judge and distinguish goods in a manner imbued with sophistication and ambiguity that underscores the notions of authenticity and quality. It seems reasonable to adopt a stance that the *Sarangi* is an object of cultural elaboration and social relations not only amongst the people who produce it but also who gaze upon or buy it.

Sarangis. However, the prices are considerably higher (about 80-100% more) when sold in person to foreign tourists along the Prithvi Highway or in Kathmandu (mainly Thamel).

Fig. 1.7. Top left: A Classical Sarangi (without any designs)

Fig.1.8. Top right: An 'Umlay' or a Middle-finger Sarangi

Fig.1.9. A Three-headed Cobra Sarangi (front and back).

Fig. 2.1. Various Sarangi designs (Smaller Lord Ganesha-head designs in the centre).

Fig. 2.2. Sarangis created by Milan Gandharba: (left: A dragon and right: full figure of Lord Ganesha).

Gandharba: Caste as Identity

Caste: NOUN

"Each of the hereditary classes of Hindu society, distinguished by relative degrees of ritual purity or pollution and of social status"

– The Oxford Dictionary

A majority of discussions in the preceding chapters of this thesis give emphasis to the materiality of the *Sarangi,* and a further explication on workings of the caste system and its implications are necessary to highlight the situation of the *Gandharbas* in Nepal. In this section, I draw on observations and examples from the field in order to argue that caste, as identity for the *Gandharbas* is imperative within the socio-political discourse of change in Nepal. I also illustrate food as a signifier for caste identities and social boundaries to draw out social relations and how the *Sarangi* is embraced into such complexities.

The caste system may be recognised as a form of social stratification, essentially exemplified in its division of caste groups, which also determines status, privileges and limitations. Dumont's (1980) study on the Hindu caste system in India illustrates a case whereby a caste is in part defined by other castes, which are either higher or lower in a hierarchical structure. Thus, a certain caste may be understood only in relation to the whole system of castes, giving emphasis to the relationship between them rather than a focus on an individual caste. Dumont (1980) identifies the caste system as a formal and logical system embedded with religious ideals and values, not as a form of stratification but rather a unique mode of inequality or 'hierarchy' underlined by the opposition of 'pure' and 'impure.' At one extreme stands the Brahman (pure) and at the other the untouchables (most impure/polluting), ascertaining a hierarchical principle of purity and pollution for castes in between.

In an historical context, Hofer (1979) has argued that the caste system in Nepal was a necessity to legitimate Nepal's political identity in order to unify the country internally by replacing existing regional legal systems with a cohesive unitary one (in Levine, 1987:40). Muller-Boker (1988) has illustrated the history of the *Newar* caste system in Nepal and its importance on social hierarchy and the construction of caste

occupation[12]. In this regard, society may be seen as structured into clearly defined groups wherein relations with each other are arranged in a strict hierarchy epitomized by 'a fine network of interrelationship and interdependencies' that characterize the caste system (Muller-Boker, 1988:25). Membership in a named ethnic group was a matter of major economic and political significance, giving importance to its use in public discourse as mentioned earlier *(i.e. Gandharba, Sherpa, Gurung, Tamang etc.)*

Meanwhile, Leach's (1969) reasoning for the absence of competition between castes that was largely based on his proposal of social order that supposed each caste to accept its position and abide by the overarching hierarchical order surely demands further scrutiny. Interestingly, even prior to both Leach and Dumont's work, Srinivas notes:

'the caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component is fixed for all the time. Movement has always been possible and especially so in the middle regions of the hierarchy.'

(Srinivas, 1965:30)

More recently, Gupta's (2005) study on the relationship between caste and politics in India suggests a viewing of caste as identity rather than caste as a structure. His analysis underscores the source of symbolic energy to compete for power in the political arena, if castes do not contest their positions in the hierarchy. I believe the case of the *Gandharbas* is particularly abstruse and interesting since it seeks to disrupt a given social order of caste on one hand whilst also trying to maintain a collective caste identity on the other. Throughout my thesis, I have sought to espouse this through the meaning of *Sarangi* as an object enabling myriad socio-economic possibilities. The recent socio-political developments and changes in Nepal have provided the *Gandharba* caste amongst others with a politically charged platform for public recognition within the national discourse. This was largely due to the end of the country's 240-year-old Hindu monarchy in 2008 after a decade-long civil war, which saw the Maoist government elected into power in the national elections. I came to learn that during the tenure of the Maoist government, *Gandharba* representatives

[12] Although the caste system has not been anchored in the legislation since 1963, in practice it is a determining factor of the socio-economic situation in Nepal. The Newars are a high caste in Nepal.

also presented the Prime Minster back then with a *Sarangi* during a public gathering and even proposed it to be declared as Nepal's national instrument in their quest for social equality and recognition in a contemporary Nepal.

My *Gandharba* friends in *Bhansar* also informed me that over the past few years there has been a lot of national and international interest on the *Gandharbas* and their musical culture, and rightly so *(see www.mountainmusicproject.com)*. Many *Gandharbas* were proud to show me photographs and recite anecdotes of their acquaintances with tourists from all over the globe, whom they had managed to befriend when selling *Sarangis*. I was also informed that many *Gandharbas* were now living outside Nepal with their non-Nepalese spouses, whilst some had even received invitations to travel abroad on various occasions in order to participate in musical festivals. In the past, many of my *Gandharba* informants have even brought their international friends to the village *(Bhansar)* to show them their homes and educate them about the *Sarangi* and *Gandharba* culture. A couple of years ago, one particular Australian visitor was even kind enough to donate money for the construction of a new water well in the village, which was named after him by the villagers as a token of gratitude. Unfortunately, the *Julian-Kuwa* (Julian-well) has now run dry and is non-functional at present. At the same time, the Nepalese government's recent initiative to grant a new house to every *Gandharba* family in the village is also suggestive of a political and nationalist discourse that underscores an emancipation of *Gandharbas* from caste discrimination[13]. For the *Gandharbas,* the recent political and socio-economic changes have also rekindled their own interest and awareness of their culture. Earlier explanations about the *"gunthi"* or monthly communal meeting epitomises such a case, thus emphasizing mutuality and collective organisation of the *Gandharbas* in *Bhansar*.

Padam Bahadur's eldest son and grandson now live in Kathmandu and are both involved in the functioning of *Gandharba* Society Nepal (GSN), one of the several *Gandharba* organisations in the city[14]. When I met *Pujan Gandharba* (*Padam*

[13] This ties in strongly with the traditional wandering lifestyle of *Gandharbas,* who were very often seen as lacking an ownership of land and proper homes to settle down permanently.

[14] Although, I am uncertain about the exact figure, I was informed that there were three at present.

Bahadur's grandson, who also happens to be the secretary of the GSN) during one of his visits to *Bhansar,* he explained to me that the overall endeavour of the GSN was to help preserve the culture of *Gandharba*s. The GSN also organises an annual programme called *"Sarangi hamro"* (our *Sarangi*) which allows the public to experience and celebrate *Gandharba* music and culture.

The GSN aims, according to their website are as follows-

- *To unite the Gandharba people and strengthen their capacity and to help them deliver quality services for the Gandharba community.*
- *To build national and international networks and alliances to foster solidarity for promoting Nepali Gandharba rights, culture and traditions.*
- *To create a forum of members to maintain pressure on the authorities to enforce the laws of caste-based discrimination.*
- *To create a sustainability strategy for the economic growth of the Gandharba people, thus enabling them to be responsible for the education, health, livelihood, and their music and cultural traditions.*

(See www.Gandharbas.org)

What is evident from the various discussions above is that the notion of *Gandharba* as caste identity overwhelms the hierarchical status or position of a caste-structure. What is reminiscent here is that a conceptual integration between caste and politics is relational only when the action of the pure ritual hierarchy is supported by wealth and power (Gupta, 2005). In fact, there are multiple hierarchies in the caste order because each caste overvalues itself in relation to others and this can be determined from their origin myths, which, without exception, claim an exalted past regardless of the actual status a caste occupies on the ground. Subedi (2010) notes that caste-based discrimination (private or public/state level) provides a ground for various movements to emancipate the oppressed, and in the case of Nepal, caste is not today what it was before 1950; it has not become completely class or replica of it[15]. Resultantly, the situation of *Gandharba*s in the context of a wider political situation of Nepal concurs

[15] For Subedi (2010), caste may be construed as a special and extreme case of status groups (in following Weber), whereas individuals in a matching economic position constitute a class.

with Gupta's (2005) argument that with the breakdown of the closed village economy and the rise of democratic politics, the competitive element embedded in caste has now come to the fore, which is evident in the rise of caste identities.

Yet, I also find it necessary to briefly expand upon a manifestation of caste through the concept of food since, by large, food and its consumption plays a significant role in our social worlds. In a general sense, food consumption is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family and community relationships that 'marks social differences, boundaries, bonds and contradictions' (Counihan and Van Esterik, 1997: 1). As mentioned earlier, it was my host lady (from another caste), who questioned my eating with my *Gandharba* informants, since this action was construed as somewhat flirting with boundaries of caste-affiliated taboos. Being a Nepalese myself, encountering quandaries related to caste were always inevitable during my fieldwork. At the same time, such occurrences prove rather helpful and rewarding for my purpose of exemplifying what I regard as a 'social consciousness' of caste, which relates to my observations in the field.

According to Douglas (1966), much of what we choose to eat comes down to our interpretations of cultures, and food prohibitions are imperative in determining the edible from the inedible (also see Douglas, 1975). Seen in this light, consumption is socially charged since food consists of a social component and when questioned about its code, food categories encode social events (Leach, 1964; Douglas, 1966, 1975; Bamford, 1998). Adhering to anthropological discussions focused on 'boundaries' of food consumption seems fruitful here, since they conjure a pivotal role in the fortification of caste composition. Such a classification concerning food 'taboos' (Bamford, 1998), 'pollution' (Douglas, 1975) or 'ritual prohibitions' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952) serves to keep certain people, food and things apart[16]. For Radcliffe-Brown (1952:135) such taboos or explicit prohibitions are supported by feelings of sin and supernatural sanction at a conscious level, whilst Douglas's (1966) concept of 'holiness' distinguishes an individual's finer qualities of being a truly religious and ethical being from the negative, and the prohibition of eating the flesh of certain

[16] Douglas (1975) notes that food taboos are acts of separation, which define discrete identities through a system of negative differentiation. For Bamford (1998) food is instilled with social and cosmological significance, and taboos lead to the creation of boundaries regardless of where it lies.

animals classed as 'unclean' is a prime law that impedes an endeavour towards holiness and realization of purity. Meanwhile, Leach (1964) argues that edible food is divided into three parts which includes: edible substances recognized as food (consumed as part of normal diet), edible substances recognized as possible food (consciously tabooed), and edible substances that by culture and language are not recognized as food at all (unconsciously tabooed)[17]. As noted by Dumont (1980), the aspect of 'vegetarianism' represents a superior form of diet amongst the Hindu populace as one of the fundamental norms relating to food and status in contemporary India. Amongst the Brahmans, the eater must be pure (bathed and have his torso bare) when consuming his meal and be sheltered from any form of impure contact that will make the food unfit for consumption[18].

However, the point I am trying to make here gives social prominence not so much to the type of food in question but rather the act of consuming itself. In this case, such an act proffered a position, which opposed a social proscription supported by the caste structure relative to Douglas's (1975: 215) suggestion that, *'the most odious pollutions are those, which threaten to attack a system at its intellectual base.'* A *social consciousness* of caste, I believe, deals largely with the interpretations of certain caste rules (in this case food and consumption), which signify discretion between behaviours that are right and wrong where 'pollution' ideas relate to social life. This is also apparent, if we think back to the customary practice of uncooked food compensation for *Gandharbas* (or having to cook their own food in a separate space) during their musical journeys across rural areas in the past.

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[17] For example, though the dog is an edible animal, it would evoke disgust for any Englishman to eat a dog. This disgust, Leach argues is largely a matter of verbal categories in which language and taboo make us perceive and separate things. Collating this to the dietary rules set in Leviticus, one is able to witness the classification of a clean species from the unclean, and fit for consumption (Douglas, 1975).

[18] Very generally menstruating women or men from lower castes are not allowed to take part in rituals that would increase vulnerability to impurity. Here, Dumont's (1980) analysis gives emphasis to the relation between food and social categories, which concurrently focuses on the purity of food as an index hierarchy.

Fig. 2.3. Ek Bahadur's new government funded house under construction beside his old house (left), one of only two Gandharba houses that were granted this year (2014) in comparison to seven from the previous year. Ongoing speculations are that in 2015, every Gandharba family still awaiting their grant will be fulfilled.

Reimagining a Caste and Nation

'In the past people didn't want to keep Sarangis in their houses. This was obvious since it symbolized the property of a lower caste,' claims *Ek Bahadur Gandharba*. In such a sense of its social significance, it appositely correlates to food and consumption taboos as discussed in the last chapter, which Douglas (1966) refers to as *'matter out of place.'* Hence, it may be inconceivable to possess an object that would threaten a structure, not of things *per se,* but of social norms and values. Even in the comforts of our own home, certain objects as such are deemed as acceptable or unacceptable to occupy a place in our private sphere. Yet, this is also very much a matter of personal (or communal) choice, aesthetic value or availability of the object coupled with financial restrictions - amongst an array of other factors. In the light of such an understanding, the purpose of this chapter is to bring into dialogue discussions of caste and the nation in juxtaposition with the *Sarangi*. This also brings to scrutiny notions of time and space, identity and difference, as the *Sarangi* represents a certain paradox in the discourse of national politics. Hence, what we see here is an unfolding of unstable claims to the nation through the *Sarangi,* which itself manifests a refracted understanding on notions of caste.

When accompanying *Ek Bahadur Gandharba* during one of his several business trips to *Aanbu Khaireni*, I also happened to meet two Nepalese men, who were both permanent residents in the USA but were here on holiday in Nepal. They were clearly fairly interested in the *Sarangis* and eventually bought one each for a reasonable price. Rather bluntly, I questioned one of them if there was any particular reason for buying a *Sarangi*. He replied, *'I am going to hang it in on the wall of my living room. It is obviously an object that is authentically Nepali and besides it's always nice to have something that serves as a reminder of our real home, especially if one is living abroad right?'*

In a broad sense, his statement to some extent also echoes, Said's (1979:18) notion of identity, both in an individual and collective sense since more and more of us now live in 'a generalised condition of homelessness,' and a world where identities are coming to be (in Gupta and Ferguson, 2001:37). In following Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities,' we come to an understanding of the nation through a process of imagination:

'I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion… Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined… Finally, [the nation] is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings.'

(Anderson, 1983:49-50)

However, the telling issue lies in the power of the object or the *Sarangi* to evoke an imagining of the nation. In such a regard, it is not the reflexive production and circulation of *Sarangis,* but as subjects of them that enable *Gandharba*s themselves to become participants in the envisioning of the nation. Anderson's (1983) notion soundly affirms Gellner's (1983) anti-primordialist notion but posits a greater emphasis on the relation between the imaginary and aesthetics, and the nation. Therefore, an imagined community may be rendered possible through the simultaneous circulation, encounter and availability of various aesthetic and narrational artefacts such as the *Sarangi*. Yet, the notions of time and space necessitate that the *Sarangi* and the *Gandharba* caste be examined within their historical context. A romanticised image of the *Gaine* with his ubiquitous *Sarangi* of the past is reminiscent of the *Gandharba* caste on the margins of society and on the periphery of the nation state. Take for example, the proposal by *Gandharbas* for the declaration of the *Sarangi* as the national instrument of Nepal during the early post-republic period after May 2008. Although the veracity of this is still debatable, the *Sarangi* is nonetheless regarded as an authentic marker of Nepalese folk music for very obvious reasons. What we gather here is a realisation of the *Sarangi* that is epitomised in its incongruity in relation to the *Gandharba* caste and the nation, in a changing socio-political space and time.

Nevertheless, the often too easily invoked relationship between performative material embodiment and the nation also calls for its problematisation (Mookherjee, 2011). Following, Butler and Spivak's (2007), '*Who sings the nation-state,'* by drawing on the example of the Bangladeshi national anthem, Mookherjee discloses the ways through which the nation seeks to bind those who not only belong but also 'unbinds, releases, expels or banishes,'-

'The aesthetics of nations is linked to the personal experience of a peculiar emotion, one's feeling for these aesthetic artefacts, as well as the social, political socializations of these feelings.'

(Mookherjee, 2011:5)

Yet if, as producers and carriers of objects that enable the imagining of or feelings for the nation, the *Gandharba*s as a group in relation to caste identity begs into question that of the nation. This in turn brings the *Sarangi* into dialogue with identity and the nation. In the case of the *Sarangi,* its ambiguity lies in its indispensible symbolic referent to the *Gandharba* caste (also as a proponent of folk music) and as a commodity that leaves itself open to myriad meanings. In this regard, the *Sarangi* represents a paradox in the discourse of national politics since it brings forth a refracted understanding on notions of caste, identity and difference that is hinged on an unstable claim of feeing and belonging to a nation state. If the commoditization of the *Sarangi* enables the possibility of ensuring such feelings of belonging to the nation, then concurrently this also requires moving beyond the notion of caste, thus problematising the relation between caste and nation. This also lies closely to Mookherjee's (2011:17) question, *"does memorialisation enable newer forms of forgetting?"* which emphasizes particular interpretations of "the past" that is produced via a complex web of social networks and power relations. When the position of the *Gandharbas* is placed within the concept of the nation, then the *Sarangi* as object, whatever its form or circumstance of production, becomes representative of the caste. Furthermore, the newer forms of *Sarangis* (in their various designs or sizes) through a transformation of their precursory classical or plain-bodied *Sarangis* is also suggestive of insinuating such a memorization of the past in order to foster the identity of the *Gandharba* caste within a discourse of the nation.

As Strassler argues, that 'through popular photographic practices, the nation is not only materialized but also personalised…' (Strassler, 2010:4 [*emphasis added*]), the commercial circulation of the *Sarangi* coupled with its historical trajectory brings the notions of caste and the nation into dialogue in a particular space and time. The *Sarangi* as an object also mediates and interacts with individuals that are not engaged in *Sarangi*-making like the figure of *Thakur Gandharba* I discussed earlier; individuals who not only belong to the *Gandharba* caste but also work as teachers, soldiers, office clerks, government officials etc in a contemporary Nepal. Hence, the *Sarangi,* like images that move around and images that move us, is concerned with the ways in which it takes place in various spaces, and with the role they play in meanings, making and political transformations through its circulation, affect, and publics (Spyer and Steedly, 2013:8).

A pressing issue in anthropology is the need to re-evaluate central analytical concepts such as space and place, within a process of socio-political construction, since such aspects can never be 'given' (Gupta and Ferguson, 2001). It is clear that for many *Gandharbas,* a juxtaposition of their past and present in terms of their use of the *Sarangi* mirrors in many ways the interaction of traditional music and cultural identity that is necessary to the meaning of caste. The circulation of the *Sarangi* in the marketplace at present offers an understanding of identities in ways far more complex and speckled than ever before. Therefore, a conception of space amongst the Gaines may be evoked through the complex insectionality of caste identity and the nation, and the changing nature of their relationship with the *Sarangi*. This in turn allows for exploring the production of difference within common, shared and connected spaces - both in local and national terms. This is evident if we look back at *Gandharba* relations with *Sarangi* producers of the *Tamang* caste in *Bhansar* or the government's initiative to grant new houses to *Gandharbas* in the background of national politics.

Here, it seems relevant to make use of an interesting example on Larkin's (1997) study of Hausa audiences in Africa, in which it is argued that Indian films offer images of a 'parallel modernity'[19] to the west for Hausa viewers where *modernity*

[19] Here, Larkin refers to 'parallel modernities' as the coexistence in space and time of multiple economic, religious and cultural flows that are often subsumed within the term modernity (Larkin, 1997:22). It is through the narratives of Indian film and Hausa love stories that Hausa youths explore

concerns a changing basis of social life conversely embedded in conservative cultural values. For many *Gandharba*s, changes in terms of their relation with the *Sarangi,* whether through music or their trading, entails the recent socio-political changes in Nepal and also a growing influence of the global economy. On his study of the genre of folk-pop music in Nepal, Greene (2003) argues that the paradoxes of memorialising a rural Nepal that still exists is largely due to contradictions that underlie contemporary Nepali ideologies of modernity. Hence, he suggests that '*Lok-pop'* or folk-pop in Nepal is caught up in an equally composing tension between desires for something authentic and traditional on one hand, and drives towards a new, cosmopolitan and commercially empowered society on the other. Similarly, Halper et al (1989) have also demonstrated the influence of music on society through the meaning and use of *Musica Mizrakhi* within Israel's wider social context amongst middle-eastern and north African Jews. Central to their study is the understanding of how music is constructed to suit its audience through *Gans'* concept of '*taste public,'*[20] which simultaneously also represents the general position of its creators in Israel. This focus accommodates Goffman's (1959) notion of performance in a 'working consensus,' where people express different definitions of the social situations they are in (which may also oppose).

However, the significance of these discussions lies in their implication of the dynamic forces and socio-political circumstances that underscore the *Gandharba* rhetoric of a *Sarangi* wielding singer of a lower caste. The pressing question at hand then encompasses a rendering of the present based on historic reflection, which is epitomised in 'an identity making process.' For many *Gandharba*s this is produced from cultural resources available to them and through understandings of themselves that seem to be not only 'of' (about) themselves, representing the dilemmas of their respective social situations, but also 'for' themselves (Holland et al, 1998:4).

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the limits of accepted Hausa attitudes to love and sexuality trying to negotiate the boundaries of tradition and modernity.

[20] The concept of 'taste public' may be understood as a sub cultural aggregate defined primarily by its shared aesthetic values and its choice of cultural products and expressions (Halper et al, 1989).

A Praxis of Representation

"Whenever people see a Sarangi, they immediately refer to the Gandharbas. Our forefathers lived by it… they informed and cheered people through the Sarangi… and fed their families. We continue to do the same… I hope the future generations will realise this…"

-Manoj Gandharba (Field notes)

An indispensable tenet in anthropology's endeavour is grounded in a need to reassess our approaches of *representation,* in the sense of both studying people and writing about them. Fabian (1983) has raised questions on writing as a praxis of representation in the context of power as more essential than the analyses of genres. The *'crisis of representation'* was born to a historical context, mainly in the critique of anthropology in the colonial encounter (Asad, 1973; Scholte, 1974 Said 1978). Asad (1973) declares that the very roots of anthropology are embedded in an unequal power encounter between the West and Third World by stating:

'It is this encounter that gives the West access to cultural and historical information about the societies it has progressively dominated, and thus not only generates a certain kind of universal understanding, but also re-enforces the inequalities in capacity between European and non-European worlds.'

(Asad, 1973:16)

Likewise, Edward Said's (1978:2), '*Orientalism'* as a scholarly discourse is *'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the 'orient' and the 'occident'*. Orientalism grounds the opposition of 'the west' to the people of the 'east' in a way so rigid that they might as well be considered innate (Abu Lughod, 1991:470). In such an understanding, anthropology's relationship with colonialism in the post-colonial era is a rather discomfiting one. This is evoked through the inevitable ethical concerns and questions of the 'self,' in the study of people and a need to move beyond seeing them solely as 'objects of observation' (Deloria Jr, 1973). More recently, a 'reflexive-turn' in anthropology has sought to move beyond such bearings in a quest to address an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy (See Rabinow, 1977; Crapanzano, 1980; Jackson, 2000). Keesing further states:

'We are products of an imperialist discourse that irresistibly shapes our language and our perceptions … the processes at play are hugely complex, and our own readings are part of that complexity.'

(Keesing, 1992:208).

Most classical ethnographies indicate an inherent 'distance' between ethnographic subjects (people studied, eg. the Azande or Balinese) and object (the author) both in terms of time and space, thus rendering an original disconnection of the latter as 'us' from the 'other' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). Marcus's (1995) proposal for a multi-sited ethnography in pursuit of a world system perspective, ties in strongly with Gupta and Ferguson's (1992) critique on the 'isomorphism of place and culture.' The classical ethnographers' focus on the so-called 'local' single site, who have so often *'… surrendered to the field and have even been in a way absorbed by it,'* (Hannerz, 2003:364) obliges us to rethink the notion of our 'field' of study since it can no longer be considered as a given or single entity with a clearly defined location. Marcus's (1995) approach offers an innovative way of examining global processes and the increasing interconnectedness of people within the process of globalisation of which the ethnographer is both 'in' and part 'of,' (an inter-subjective relationship).

Reflexivity may be understood as how the studied object in question responds towards the undertakings of fieldwork to mould new epistemological areas of research. It not only opens oneself to conversational practices beyond observation but also refuses epistemological claims that privileges one point of view or voice. As such, reflexivity does not leave the subject lost in its own concerns; it pulls one towards the other and away from isolated attentiveness toward oneself:

'This requires subject and object, breaking the thrall of self-concern by its very drive towards self-knowledge and inevitability takes into account a surrounding world of events, people and places'

(Myerhoff and Ruby, 1982:5)

Fabian's (1971) deals with the key issue of *'inter-subjectivity'* in Anthropology by espousing language as an objective medium that makes possible any attempt at self-understanding through history by addressing to the problems of creativity and historicity of consciousness. In this sense, he argues for communication as

ethnography since it is 'through common language and common understanding that one becomes part of his or her concrete social context' (Fabian, 1971:23). Fabian's call for learning linguistic competence and stepping "into" a historical context is duly recognized by Ferguson (1991) who has sought the *'social facts'* of Copperbelt mineworkers within a communicative context that deals with understanding the core relationship between urban life and how it is lived in relation to *expectations of modernity*. Ferguson considers the global economic process and its consequences in the Zambian Copperbelt as one empirical domain, which is reflected in how the workers speak of their own experiences. At the same time, the nature of Ferguson's relationship with his informants in the field advocates that of belonging to a shared social space of modernity.[21]

Ferguson's (1999:102) analysis deals with situation in which cultural differences (i.e. local' and 'cosmopolitan') are located in a society. On revisiting historical records he explicates that instead of seeing a linear move towards modernity from migration to semi-proletarianisation to full proletarianisation, migrant miners of the 1930' and 40s often already lived a largely urban existence, dismissing assumptions that Zambian Copperbelt miners belonged to a different 'time' or 'evolutionary' phase. His choice of ethnographic topic relates to an emerging inter-subjective understanding of subjects as the very means of emanating knowledge, upon which he draws his discussions. As such, the critical inference is that anthropologists and social scientists cannot exclude themselves out of their own writing or distance themselves from the very people they study. One way of approaching a study of the contemporary world, as argued by Abu-Lughod (1991) is through the use of both practise and discourse of writing against culture ascertained on an assumption of boundedness and idealism. Therefore, one needs to question how knowledge is produced and interconnected through time and space. It is in such a bearing that the locating of histories and specific situations demands anthropological significance. Mintz's (1985) work traces the complex courses of change and exploitation involving sugar in Europe and other parts of the world, stressing on anthropology's confidence towards history to uncover connections of the past with the present.

[21] This is evident in a multiplication of social relations with his young research assistant who was arguably at times also his subject.

Even as I write this paper now, a realisation that the '*ethnographic encounter never ends'* echoes an aspect that appears plainly and yet so essential to hold on to as an anthropologist (Crapanzano, 1980). What and how I have chosen to include and write throughout this thesis is very much also reminiscent of my own subjective position in the field. This was rendered possible through an intricate set of mutual relationships forged with my subjects during fieldwork. On the other hand, as a researcher, one must resign to becoming an *instrument* in the research itself during fieldwork, since the notion of maintaining 'neutrality' is impossible (Nash, 1976). In my case this is essentially stimulated by my personal experiences coupled with a differing stance towards an existing societal consciousness and discrimination based on caste in Nepal. As a Nepalese individual, I am incapable of escaping a shared history of cultural trajectories and power relationships within a discourse of caste with my informants, however given my personal upbringing and residential circumstances (i.e. not living in Nepal but the UK), I believe that I was as much an *'outsider,'* as I was an *'insider,'* which enabled me to subject myself to a mutual relationship with my informants but not without its challenges.

As an anthropologist, this required that I revealed a *'multiplex subjectivity,'* in an interplay between these two positions (Rosaldo, 1989, 168-95). Of course, this was determined through the dominant trajectories of power and an obligation to admit a certain feature of my chosen subjectivity - probably best epitomised in a certain case when my *Gandharba* informants invited me for dinner explained earlier. During another case, my main informant's wife insisted that I refrain from hanging out with a particular group of young *Gandharba* individuals in the village, whom I came to understand were working collectively in making *Sarangis* and had even set up their own bamboo shack as a working area. Her justification was that they might take advantage of my financial position as an *'outsider,'* therefore I should be wary of them, and reassured me that I would be able to learn everything necessary for my research from her family.

Both these cases illustrate the ethical dilemmas and uncertainty of a communicative context wherein I was subjected to a particular relationship that I was obliged to acknowledge as a prerequisite for my access to information. Given the multifaceted

nature of ways in which people identify themselves, there will inevitably be aspects of the self that connect us to the people we study and our aspects that emphasise our difference. It was not only by sharing a common language with my informants that I was able to place myself within a mutual space of complex social relationships but also through other aspects such as eating with them (a customary caste related taboo), travelling or fishing with them, that made it possible for me to probe and move beyond caste related social boundaries.

Sluka's (2011) call for an attention to the politics of ethnographic writing has raised some strong questions about issues of identity and representation, which are at stake, when texts written by anthropologists are read (and contested). In this regard, a consideration of how *'the other talks back'* (See Deloria Jr, 1973; Scheper-Hughes, 1979; Greenberg, 1993), helps us move towards an increased sensitivity and new ways to involve our ethnographic subjects in their self-representation. Therefore, anthropological endeavour in the contemporary world that is grounded within the aspect of fieldwork and ethnographic writing must be seen as a discourse of responsibility through a self-reflexive awareness. Throughout, I have sought to justify my ethnographic findings in a sincere manner that will enable my readers to fully grasp the socio-economic conditions of *Gandharbas,* which accentuate an understanding of the *Sarangi* as an object embedded in social life. The quote that opens this chapter, by *Manoj Gandharba* accommodates such a notion that explicates the *Sarangi* as 'connecting' the past to the present. For the *Gandharbas,* the notion of 'representation,' in terms of both the social and political sphere has always hinged on the boundaries of caste and the *Sarangi*. Recent political and socio-economic changes have enabled many *Gandharbas* to speak for themselves (both individually and collectively). At the same time, this also lends itself significantly towards a process of meaning making, through which cultural forms such as the *Sarangi* find articulation- 'as culture externalised, idealised, hypothesised, reified, fetishized, which acquires a symbolic power that transcends its contents' (Keesing, 1992:196).

Fig. 2.4. Akkale Gandharba Singing- Gorkha Durbar Temple, Gorkha.

Fig. 2.5. After an evening dinner with my Gandharba friends in Bhansar.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this thesis, I have sought to elucidate the complex and myriad ways in which individuals or societies are realised and cognised, negotiated or enforced, manifested or obscured, reproduced or altered, through the realm of objects. The very practice of making and selling *Sarangis* rather than engaging in the traditional form of music making for many *Gandharbas* explicates such a case, which has altered the traditional meaning and use of the *Sarangi* from that of a musical instrument exclusive to the *Gandharba* caste. By following the *Sarangi* for its meanings as inscribed in its uses, its forms and its trajectories, we are able to recognize and interpret human relations through such an analysis of its trajectories. Hence, the object of the *Sarangi* encompasses a social matter that allows for a focus into cultural meanings and social relationships about the myriad, affective and sensory relations that people maintain with things.

With an examination of the interplay between the *Sarangi* and the *Gandharbas* as a cultural group, we also witness a successful channelling of articulate imaginaries that emanate from an awareness of social and cultural history and economic opportunity. Imperative to such an understanding is the very existence and social life of the *Sarangi*. As a result, the analysis of my research has sought to contribute to an understanding of existing societal concerns with regard to changing circumstances amongst the *Gandharbas* in the wider context of Nepalese society. The empirical data and theoretical discussions I have presented necessitates an espousing of objects, such as the *Sarangi* as a socially charged apparatus, which refracts an understanding of identities and bears myriad meanings. As evident, the analysis of my thesis has focused on the *making, use and circulation* of the *Sarangi*, which enables us to understand how meanings are attached to objects and how relations between people and objects are played out not only in different social arenas but also in relation to time and space, which I have constantly emphasised as *change* throughout my thesis. Further examples of *Thakur Gandharba* and *Akkale Gandharba* also illustrate a validation of this.

Furthermore, it is also evident that when the position of the *Gandharbas* are placed within the framework of the nation, then the *Sarangi* as object, regardless of its form (shape and size) or circumstance of production (even if produced by other castes and

sold in musical-instrument shops) becomes representative of the caste. I believe, this has much to do with the indispensable complexities of caste adhered values in relation to the *Gaine* profession which renders the *Sarangi* as a marker of *Gandharba* identity. This also embraces the interesting debates surrounding cultural property and ownership of the *Sarangi*. Nonetheless, the circulation of the *Sarangi* in an array of social and economic spaces brings together actors from diverse cultural arenas whose understandings and perspective about the *Sarangi* are merged into the workings of caste, identity and the nation. Yet, such understandings must be contextualised within their historical, cultural and political setting since they serve as the very means of emanating the knowledge from which I have tried to draw out my discussions.

Overall, it is clear that an examination of the *Sarangi* as a socially vigorous object provides some valuable insights into notions of caste, property and ownership, identity and the nation - all of which coexist in a certain tension. The rendering of *Gandharba*s simply as *Gaines* or as wandering singers calls for an ethnographic enquiry that delves beyond a status quo adherence to a caste structure. Questions of human agency, desires, fears, anxieties and community all come to the fore of 'anthropological knowledge,' since the continuity of their cultural practices consist of specific ways through which they transform themselves. As the *Sarangi* transcends beyond the liminal spaces of personal and domestic spheres of *Gandharbas* in its movement, it comes to occupy new spaces, taking up new forms and meanings that are complexly intertwined in socio-economic relations. The *Sarangi* does not hold a fixed intrinsic meaning or value, but this is rather personified and signified in its myriad meanings, which are dependent on the different social arenas and relationships. Espousing such an understanding, the production, circulation and consumption of *Sarangis* encompass us into a world of possibilities conforming to the idea that objects make us as part of the very process by which we make them.

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