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Music and Marginalization: A Case Study of Gaines of India

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Abstract: The Gaine community in the eastern Himalayan region of India, known for their traditional music, faces significant socio-economic, cultural, and music marginalization within India. Through a qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews, participant observation and ethnography, the research explores the challenges the musicians encounter. The study finds that the Gaine people's reliance on street performance and begging for survival exacerbates their economic hardships and contributes to a cycle of poverty. Additionally, their cultural identity sometimes obscure their distinct regional roots, making it more difficult to gain visibility and respect within the broader Indian music landscape. The findings underscore the need for targeted initiatives to support the community, including financial aid, performance opportunities, and platforms for showcasing their music. By addressing these challenges, India can foster a more inclusive and diverse musical environment that honors the country's multifaceted heritage.

Keywords: Gaines of India, Music, Marginalization, Cultural Identity.

INTRODUCTION

India is a nation known for its rich cultural diversity, with a multitude of languages, traditions, and art forms across its vast geography. This diversity is particularly evident in the domain of music, where regional styles and genres have been shaped by centuries of history and heritage. However, amid this vibrant landscape, there are communities whose contributions often remain on the fringes. Among the great musical traditions, such as the classical forms of Hindustani and Carnatic music[1], and popular genres like Bollywood music[2], there are also numerous regional and folk musical traditions that form the cultural fabric of the nation. However, some of these traditional music forms are often overshadowed by mainstream genres (Ford, 2017) and may be neglected in terms of recognition and support. Many traditional musicians, especially those associated with lesser-known or marginalized music forms, face significant challenges. They experience marginalization on several levels. Traditional musicians, particularly those from rural or underprivileged backgrounds, struggle for their social recognition (Vriend, 2000). The mainstream focus on more popular music styles often leaves these artists and their traditions out of the public spotlight. As a result, their contributions to the country's cultural heritage go unrecognized, and they did not receive the respect and appreciation they deserve. Musicians working in traditional and regional music genres often face economic hardships (Altun, 2023). These artists lacks access to stable income sources or professional opportunities compared to those in mainstream music (Pecknold, 2007). The lack of resources and support for these musicians can make it challenging for them to sustain their art and livelihoods (Mahon, 2018). In some cases, traditional musicians and their cultural practices may be side lined in the political landscape. Governments or institutions prioritize other forms of music or cultural expressions, neglecting the rich heritage of regional and folk traditions. As a result, these musicians find it difficult to secure funding, performance opportunities, or platforms to showcase their art (Davidson, 2015).

The *Gaines*, also known as *Gandharvas*, are a community of musicians and storytellers found in Nepal and eastern Himalayan region of India, primarily in the states of Sikkim and West Bengal (Sachdeva, 2018). In Sikkim, they are an integral part of the Nepali community, which constitutes a significant portion of the state's population. In West Bengal, the *Gaines* are mainly concentrated in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts, which are known for their significant Nepali-speaking

[1] Hindustani and Carnatic music are the classical musical traditions of North and South India respectively. Northern India, known for its improvisational nature and intricate ragas, while Carnatic music is characterized by characterized by its devotional themes and structured compositions.

[2] Bollywood music is the popular music genre of Indian cinema, known for its catchy melodies, diverse musical influences, and integration of various styles such as classical, folk, and modern genres to accompany the storylines in Hindi-language films.

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population. Here, they continue to play traditional Nepali musical instruments like the nepali- sarangi and perform songs that tell stories of love, spirituality, and folklore. They are part of the broader Nepali-speaking population and have a long-standing tradition of performing music and songs that convey historical, cultural, and spiritual narratives (Shneiderman, 2015). Using traditional instruments Nepali sarangi the *Gaines* preserve their musical heritage while also providing entertainment and education through their storytelling. The *Gaines* also have a presence in other regions of India with significant Nepali populations, such as Assam (Newar, 2013) and parts of Uttarakhand. However, their primary concentrations remain in Sikkim and West Bengal.

PROCESS OF MARGINALIZATION

Marginalization is the process of pushing a particular group or individual to the edge of society (Bhardwaj, 2017) by denying them access to rights, resources, and opportunities that are available to others. This occurs due to a variety of factors such as social, economic, cultural, racial, or gender-based discrimination. People or groups who are marginalized often face barriers to participation in various aspects of life (O'Donnell, 2016) such as education, employment, healthcare, political representation, and cultural or artistic expression. In the context of Indian music, marginalization occurs when certain groups such as musicians from lower castes, women, or those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are excluded from opportunities for education, performance, recognition, and career advancement. This happens due to systemic biases, historical prejudices, or lack of resources and support (Sue, 2010).

In music specific musical traditions, genres, communities, or artists are pushed to the edges of the mainstream music industry and cultural conversation. This includes disparities in social and economic status that hinder access to resources, funding, or platforms for underprivileged musicians. Music from certain cultural or ethnic groups are undervalued or overlooked due to biases or unfamiliarity by mainstream audiences. Musicians from rural or remote areas face geographical isolation, limiting their exposure and access to networks and resources found in urban centres. Marginalized groups also suffer from a lack of representation, resulting in less media coverage (Ittefaq, 2023), industry support, or recognition compared to more mainstream genres. Language barriers impedes wider recognition for musical traditions performed in non-mainstream languages and dialects (Wallach, 2002). Additionally, political, social, or religious censorship restrict the dissemination and impact of certain forms of music (Martiniello, 2008). Marginalization in music leads to the loss of cultural heritage and underrepresentation (Topaz, 2022) of diverse voices in the broader musical landscape, perpetuating stereotypes and inequalities within the industry.

The Gaines of the hilly terrain of India, face multiple levels of marginalization. Along with the music marginalization, the socio-economic and cultural marginalization makes it more complex. As a community deeply rooted in traditional music, they encounter significant challenges in accessing socio-economic equality and finding their place within the mainstream music space of India. This includes not only classical music but also other popular genres and established folk traditions. *Gaine* musicians often find themselves at a disadvantage due to limited access to performance platforms and exposure. Their music, deeply rooted in the regional traditions, does not receive the same level of recognition or support as other mainstream forms. This lack of visibility hinder their ability to reach wider audiences (Vedabala, 2023).

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study to analyze the socio-economic and musical marginalization of the *gaine* people employed a comprehensive qualitative research methods. Researchers began by conducting an in-depth literature review to understand the historical context and current state of the *gaine* tradition, particularly its role and status within the broader Indian music landscape. This provided a foundation for the study and informed the subsequent data collection methods (deMarrais, 2003). Qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were held with *gaine* musicians, community members, and cultural experts to gather detailed insights into their experiences of marginalization. These interviews focused on the musicians' perspectives on socio-economic challenges, such as income instability, lack of access to resources, and limited performance opportunities. The interviews also explored the musicians' thoughts on their identity and place within the larger musical traditions of India. Participant observation was another crucial component of the study. Researcher attended *gaine* performances on the

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streets and community events to observe their musical practices, audience interactions, and the reception of their music by different groups. This allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the gaine people's cultural expressions and the challenges they face in gaining recognition (Tedlock, 2005). Data analysis involved thematic analysis of interview and observation data to identify recurring patterns and themes (Wiltshire, 2021) related to the *gaine* community's marginalization. This included issues such as economic hardship, limited access to platforms for performing, and difficulties in gaining recognition within mainstream Indian music.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings revealed that the *gaine* people face significant socio-economic and musical marginalization due to limited access to resources, financial instability, and a lack of opportunities to showcase their music in mainstream venues. Historically, they have faced various forms of marginalization that which affect their ability to thrive and preserve their cultural heritage.

i. ***Cast Based Discrimination:*** The *gaines*, also known today as *gandharvas*, are traditionally classified within the Dalit caste, which, depending on the context, can refer to lower castes, untouchables, or a specific political faction. Like the broader *dalit* community[3], the *gaines* or *gandharvas* encompass a diverse group with varied experiences and opportunities. Differences across generations, as well as between rural and urban settings, lead to varying life circumstances within the community. In addition to denoting caste and social group affiliation, the term *"gaine"* has been used as a surname and sometimes as an ethnic identifier. However, because of the negative connotations associated with caste, many individuals who previously bore the *gaine* surname have opted for different surnames to escape the stigma. Today, as a group of musicians, they prefer to be known as *gandharvas*. *The gandharvas'* preference for this name change highlights their desire to distance themselves from the caste-based discrimination they have historically faced (Pariyar, 2016). This shift reflects broader trends within marginalized communities in India seeking to redefine their identities and assert their agency against entrenched social hierarchies. By embracing the *gandharvas* name, they are emphasizing their rich musical heritage and asserting their place within the cultural landscape, moving beyond the limitations imposed by their traditional caste designation. The *gaines*, part of the dalit community in India, have long experienced caste-based discrimination that significantly limits their access to opportunities, resources, and social mobility. This discrimination impacts various aspects of their lives, including education, employment, housing, and social participation. Gaines face barriers to quality education and employment opportunities outside their traditional roles, often resulting in economic hardship. Additionally, housing discrimination can force them to live in areas with inadequate infrastructure, while social exclusion prevents them from participating in broader community activities. In cultural spaces, they encounter prejudice against their caste and occupation, restricting their visibility and ability to earn a living through their art. These challenges often perpetuate a cycle of poverty and marginalization across generations, highlighting the need for systemic change to address the entrenched biases and inequalities faced by the *gaines* and other *dalit* communities in India.

ii. ***Economic Challenges:*** The *gaines* face significant economic challenges due to their marginalized status and the decline in demand for their traditional occupation as musicians and storytellers in modern India. Traditional performances, such as singing and storytelling using instrument sarangi, once provided a primary source of income. However, changing tastes and the rise of modern entertainment have reduced demand for their services, leaving them with fewer opportunities to earn a living through their art. As a result, many *gaine* musicians are compelled to take to the streets for begging, performing their music in hopes of receiving tips from passers-by

[3] In India, Dalit refers to individuals belonging to historically marginalized and oppressed communities, previously known as "untouchables," who face social, economic, and educational discrimination due to their lower position in the caste hierarchy.

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(Moisal, 2013). This form of street performance often becomes their primary source of income, leaving them vulnerable to financial instability (Holt, 2017). Performing on the streets also expose them to unpredictable working conditions, including weather-related challenges and potential harassment.

Moreover, Gaines struggles to find alternative employment due to limited access to education and vocational training. Their reliance on seasonal work tied to festivals and cultural events creates financial instability, as income is not consistent year-round. Additionally, barriers to entrepreneurship and exploitation in their traditional roles further exacerbate their economic hardship. These challenges, combined with lack of access to healthcare and welfare services, contribute to a cycle of poverty and insecurity for the *gaines*, underscoring the need for targeted support and greater recognition of their cultural heritage.

iii. ***Lack of Representation:*** The community face a lack of representation too that severely limits their ability to share their cultural heritage and traditions with a wider audience. Their presence in mainstream cultural and media platforms is minimal, making it difficult for them to gain visibility and recognition for their musical and storytelling contributions. As a result, their work often remains confined to local settings, festivals, and cultural events, preventing them from reaching national or international audiences. This lack of exposure hampers their ability to earn a sustainable income and perpetuates their marginalization. Moreover, the limited representation in policy-making and decision-making bodies means that their concerns and needs often go unheard, further isolating them from opportunities for advancement. Without adequate representation, the *gaines* struggle to break free from the cycle of poverty and discrimination, emphasizing the need for inclusive platforms and initiatives that promote and elevate their unique cultural identity. Moreover, the lack of recognition for their musical and storytelling traditions within mainstream cultural and media spheres further marginalizes their contributions. Without proper acknowledgment, their rich heritage risks being overshadowed by dominant cultural narratives, making it challenging for the *gaines* to preserve their distinct identity and pass on their traditions to younger generations.

iv. ***The Instrument and the Nepali Identity:*** A unique aspect of the *gaine* tradition is their instrument called "Nepali Sarangi," an instrument that carries the name of the Nepali community (Stirr,2013). This adds an additional layer of complexity to their identity within India. The use of this instrument may evoke questions of cultural origin and affiliation, leading to potential challenges in defining their place within the broader Indian music landscape. The identity and instrumentation of the *gaine* people are central aspects of their musical tradition, and they add a unique layer to their place within the broader Indian music landscape. The primary instrument of the *gaine* musicians is the "Nepali Sarangi," a bowed string instrument that is a significant part of their musical heritage. The Nepali Sarangi has a distinct sound, with a rich, expressive timbre that evokes a wide range of emotions (Curtis, 2003). It is traditionally carved from a single piece of wood and strung with gut or metal strings. The use of the Nepali Sarangi links the *gaine* tradition to Nepali music and culture (Stirr,2013). This connection is rooted in historical and geographical ties between the *gaine* community and Nepal, as they share similar hilly terrains and cultural heritage.

The *gaine* community's identity is complex, given its connections to both Nepali and Indian cultural traditions. The fusion of these influences shapes their musical style and personal identities, leading to a unique cultural hybridity especially for the mainstream music spaces. Due to their use of the Nepali Sarangi, the *gaine* musicians face challenges in establishing their unique identity within India. The instrument's name and its association with Nepali culture sometimes overshadow the *gaine's* distinct regional identity (Born, 2011). The community takes pride in their heritage and the continuation of their musical tradition. Passing down their skills and knowledge from generation to generation is crucial for maintaining their cultural identity. Despite their rich musical heritage, the people struggle for recognition within the broader Indian music scene.

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Their distinct sound and tradition does not fit neatly within established categories making it challenging for them to gain visibility and acceptance in mainstream music.

v. ***Cultural Decline:*** Cultural decline poses a significant challenge for the community, as their traditional musical and storytelling practices face the risk of fading away. Modernization and changing tastes have led younger generations to pursue contemporary careers and lifestyles, often at the expense of continuing their heritage. As the traditional occupation of the musicians becomes less economically viable, fewer youths are learning the skills required to play instruments like the sarangi and master the art of storytelling. This generational shift threatens the transmission of their cultural knowledge and practices, as the *gaines'* unique traditions are not being passed down effectively. Additionally, the reduced demand for their traditional performances in the face of modern entertainment options further accelerates this decline. *Gaines* find it increasingly difficult to sustain their livelihood through their art, pushing them towards alternative work, which can result in a disconnect from their roots. The lack of support and recognition from mainstream cultural institutions also hampers the preservation and promotion of their heritage. The cultural decline of the *gaines* has wider implications, as it represents a loss of a rich and valuable part of the region's cultural landscape. Addressing this issue requires targeted efforts to create platforms and opportunities for Gaines to showcase their work, as well as programs to support and encourage younger generations to carry on these traditions.

CONCLUSION

To address the complexities surrounding the *gaine* people's identity and instrumentation, creating avenues for greater cultural exchange and dialogue is essential. These initiatives can help bridge cultural gaps and foster a greater understanding and appreciation of the *gaine* tradition within the broader Indian music landscape. By embracing and celebrating the distinct contributions of the *gaine* community, India can cultivate a more inclusive and diverse musical environment that honour its multifaceted heritage.

Marginalization could be addressed by creating more inclusive and equitable environments that provide equal access and opportunities for all musicians. This requires providing *gaine* musicians and other marginalized artists with greater access to established performance platforms, such as major music festivals and concerts, to elevate their visibility and status. Economic support, such as grants and scholarships, can help alleviate financial barriers and allow artists to focus on their craft. Offering education and training programs can empower musicians to hone their skills and expand their knowledge. Efforts to document and preserve the musical heritage of marginalized communities ensure the continuity of their cultural practices.

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