Subi Shah's Holistic Theory of Nepali Performing Arts: Implications for Research and Teaching

Anna Marie Stirr
University of Hawai'i at Manoa, United States of America
e-mail: stirr@hawaii.edu

Abstract

Subi Shah (1922-2008) was a Nepali performer and educator whose life's work was to preserve and promote Nepali folk genres of music, song, dance, and drama, especially the wide variety of these that make up the tradition known as *Pangdure*. Raised in this tradition, he became one of its leading exponents. He did so outside of the academy and was thus free from disciplinary strictures. Although he was consulted and honored by state cultural policymakers in the 1980s and 1990s, many of his contributions remain unrecognized. This study analyzes five of his texts, building on my 20 years of engagement as a scholar and performer with the traditions described therein. The objectives of the study are to identify key aspects of Shah's theories of performance. The study finds that Shah's descriptions and analysis of integrated performance practice valorize a performance tradition with its own unique worldviews and theories. It concludes that teaching these worldviews and theories will help maintain the cultural sustainability of this and other Nepali performance traditions, by helping students make connections among the traditionally related aspects of performance; instrumental music, song, poetry, dance, and drama. Further, it demonstrates the broader applicability of Shah's methods for holistic performance scholarship within and beyond Nepal, which contributes to decolonizing ethnomusicology by centering a non-Western theory and methodology from outside the academy.

Keywords: cultural sustainability, dance, decolonizing, drama, music, Nepal, performance

Introduction

Surendra Bikram "Subi" Shah (1922-2008) was a Nepali performer and educator whose life's work was to preserve and promote Nepali folk genres of music, song, dance, and drama, especially the wide variety of these that make up the tradition known as *Pangdure*. Raised in this tradition, he became one of its leading exponents and innovators, first as a performer in his village, then as a member of the Royal Nepal Army's performance troupe, and finally as a K-12 educator and cultural policy consultant until his death in 2008. He did so outside of the world of higher education, so was relatively unhindered by disciplinary strictures or colonial epistemologies. Although he was consulted and honored by state officials, many of his contributions remain unrecognized. I met Subi Shah in 2005, and since 2017 have been translating his works into English. In this article, I show how Shah links aspects of melody, rhythm, poetics, dance, and drama together to demonstrate their essential interconnections. I argue that Shah's championing of the Pangdure tradition through a holistic methodology provides a model for decolonial performance scholarship in and beyond Nepal.

Challenging Eurocentric Knowledge Structures

Subi Shah's scholarship paves the way for decolonizing performance studies across the disciplines by challenging and posing an alternative to Eurocentric structures of knowledge. One aspect of colonial scholarship is its insistence on simplification of complex wholes into component parts, which leads to increased specialization (Mignolo, 2007). Ethnomusicologist Carol Babiracki notes that in colonial India, British scholars were most interested in the song texts of folk and tribal musics, viewing them as examples

of oral literature. They collected and published the song texts, without musical notation, attention to performance context, or much information of *emic* cultural significance. This model of folklore scholarship was taken up by local scholars, and its narrow focus on text still predominates (Babiracki, 1991, p. 83).

The same is true in Nepal. Most academic folklore studies have focused narrowly on song texts as oral literature; far fewer studies on other aspects of performance remain specialized in music theory; dance, or the anthropology of performance as ritual. Studies of minimally-contextualized song texts as oral literature continue to dominate (Parajuli & Giri, 2011), with a few including musical transcriptions (Acharya & Rayamajhi, 2017). Yet Subi Shah focused on the complex whole of performance-as-social-action in the Pangdure tradition. This social action includes both human and nonhuman actors; (a) the natural world determines a seasonal performance calendar, and (b) spirits and deities are central to everything from the efficacy of a performance to the correct application of instrumental technique. As Shah demonstrates, it is essential to treat all aspects of this broad performance tradition holistically and relationally, in order to understand its importance to social life across the Himalayan foothills and become a good performer in any of its genres. In this way, his methodology joins theory and praxis. This methodological holism can be an exemplar for further decolonial projects invested in doing research guided by local and indigenous knowledge structures, and contributing to their cultural sustainability (Mason & Turner, 2020) by legitimizing vernacular pedagogies.

Legitimizing and Sustaining Vernacular Knowledge Systems

In addition to eschewing dominant Eurocentric knowledge structures, Shah also takes aim at the regional hegemony of Hindustani classical music and its knowledge structures and teaching methods. In particular, he focuses on those methods and ideas that have evolved from the early 20th century movements to standardize classical music theory and teaching, moving it from the courts into the school systems. This musical reform movement was a product of the colonial encounter and involved local and British notions about what was considered "classical," and what should be taught as such (Bakhle, 2005; Weidman, 2007). As Shalini Ayyagari has shown, the vernacular music-theoretical basis for some local traditions has been nearly eclipsed by this universalization of classical-based pedagogy (Ayyagari, 2012). The reformed system universalizes music education and enables cross-regional musical communication, yet also erases local knowledge.

Nepali musicians were also involved in the early 20th century music education reform project, in dialog with their counterparts in India. Nepal, though not colonized by the British, suffered from internal colonial rule by the Rana family (1846-1951). Formal performance education in Nepal increased after a democratic movement overthrew the Ranas in 1950. During the Panchayat era (1960-1990), Nepal's King Mahendra set up new state institutions focused on education and the arts. While folk arts were promoted widely through national competitions, they were only loosely included in school curricula. The formerly court-centric system of classical music and its reformed teaching methods spread throughout Nepal, gaining legitimacy and authority and creating a hierarchy that elevated the "classical" and positioned other Nepali forms of performance as "folk" traditions of lesser importance. To this day, Nepali tertiary education focuses on Hindustani classical music and dance forms, especially *khyal* music and *kathak* dance. Shah condemns this hierarchy of performance knowledge on the grounds that complex local systems of "classical" performance already existed in Nepal, and have been marginalized by the rise of Hindustani court traditions in Nepali state cultural institutions.

Treatise writing has historically been a way for scholars and performers of music, dance, and drama to assert the authority and legitimacy of their theories and practices. By writing what amounts to a series of modern-day treatises on the broad genres of the Pangdure tradition, Shah gives all the genres a textual legitimacy that brings them closer to the world of the *shastriya*—the classical, understood as such due to its basis in treatises or *shastras*. At times his arguments connect Pangdure dances and dance-dramas to existing treatises; at other times, he argues that it is a separate form that can stand on its own, separate, theoretical basis. His works are the *only* existing written material that goes into this level of depth about all aspects of the Pangdure tradition. They thus form an invaluable storehouse of vernacular knowledge that is essential for the sustainability of this tradition. Pangdure performances are increasingly being recorded in music video form, in addition to the myriad examples of live performances that audience members have uploaded to YouTube. It is clear that the tradition carries great cultural importance to this day. Promoting Shah's works contributes to its sustainability by giving it greater recognition locally, nationally, and worldwide.

Background

The term Pangdure is most often used in central Nepal to describe a set of dance forms that includes the Charitra and Sorati dance-dramas, as well as the Jhyaure, Khyali, and Chudka dances that the Pangdure troupes perform. This set of dance forms is also known as Maruni from central Nepal east to Darjeeling and southern Bhutan, and Singaru further west. Many different performance forms can be included in this tradition, and Shah takes a broad view. He writes from the perspective of his own training as a Pangdure performer in the village of Jyamrung in Dhading district in central Nepal.

Shah's article "Pangdure Dance" (In Mrigendraman et al., 1994, pp. 115–162) introduces the genres on which he concentrates the most throughout his works. These are the standalone genres Khyali. Jhyaure, and Chudka, and the dance-dramas Charitra and Sorathi. Rejecting the "folk" category as an umbrella genre, asks readers to join him in treating each of these genres on its own terms, and as part of Pangdure performance. Each genre has its own rhythmic cycle (*tāl*), poetic meters (*chhanda*), and dance form. To illustrate the interrelationship between the human dancers and audience, the realm of spirits and deities, sonic power, and the context and space of performance, it is worth quoting at length from the introduction to "Pangdure Dance."

> The name pāngdure dance is used for dances that are performed with the mādal and follow particular rules. The first thing done before performing these dances is the ritual of *sākhī lagāune*. This involves worshiping the thirty-three hundred thousand deities. It is also referred to as "binding the troupe together." No dances are performed while "binding the troupe"; only the mādal is played and the *sākhī lagāune* song is sung. The goal of this is to make sure no one will be able to overpower the dancers through magical incantations. After the ritual begins, those who become possessed by Saraswati come into the midst of the dancers, and once *thakan hānne tāl* begins, these individuals begin to shake. It is considered to be the responsibility of the dancers who play the mādal to return these people to their normal state through playing the *thakan hānne tāl*. Most often, Pāngdure dances start with an invocation to Saraswati, and the song is often in Charitra *tāl* ... (p. 114)

Here, Shah begins to describe some of the interrelationships between performance and aspects of the human and spirit worlds. A successful performance first requires a ritual "binding" of performers, accomplished through a song of worship, followed by a rhythmic pattern that both calls the goddess Saraswati to enter into the human bodies that she wishes to possess, and signals that she should leave these bodies. Shah then describes how the patterns of different rhythmic cycles (*tāl*) guide dancers in their movements, noting that most often, the gestures in Pangdure dance follow the rhythms of the madal rather than the words of the songs, and the dancers retain their three main role types: male role (*purushange*), female role (*mārunī*), and mādal player (*mādale*) regardless of the characters in the story. This brief and incomplete introduction is one illustration of how Shah considers various aspects of pangdure performance together, whereas others might separate aspects of rhythm, dance, song lyrics, and story. The article elaborates on more roles, and explains how rhythmic cycles (*tāl*) and songs' poetic meters (*chhanda*) guide the dances in each dance form. Shah articulates his ideas about melody in *Introduction to Nepali Tunes* (S. Shah, n.d).

Melody

Introduction to Nepali Tunes articulates Shah's interpretation of a Nepali hill-area theory of melody that is different from the dominant Hindustani raga system. This theory of musical modes is based on the flute, and transfers to the shehnai as well. The musical modes that Shah describes are formed based on the number of holes closed on the flute to play the tonic note (*sor*). Shah names these modes after the number of holes closed to play the tonic: six-hole mode, five-hole mode, etc. This way of understanding the basis for melody is not unique to the world of Pangdure dance troupes; it is also the way that Nepal's Panchai Baja ensembles classify their melodic modes on the basis of the holes of the shehnai (Shah, 2006, 34). In the Panchai Baja system and Shah's system, the flute or shehnai is not simply a technical object used to produce pre-conceived sounds, but an "epistemic thing" (Rheinberger, 1997) that is the sensory, experiential basis for understanding melody. This classification system differs from the Hindustani *thāt* system as its note groups are broader, yet Shah too uses the word *thāt* to describe each mode. *Thāt* indicates a group of pitches that can be used to make different melodies or ragas (Brown, 2004; Jairazbhoy, 2008; Nayar, 1989, p. 138). Shah's choice of this word indicates that he sees these modes as building blocks for tunes.

Poetic meter and speech melody in song lyrics also contribute to musical melody, as Shah argues in *Glimpses of Nepali Folk Song*. Here he coins the term "*bhangit*," joining *bhannu* (to say) with *sangit* (music) to refer to speech melody or prosody. Shah argues that the rise and fall of intonation in speech, and the patterns of stress on different syllables of words, influence how poetic meters are formed and how they are set to melody in songs. This creates a link between melody and rhythm. The melodies that follow poetic meters also follow their rhythmic rules. For example, a syllable that is stressed when speaking a word must be put on a stressed beat in the rhythm of the song. This makes specific poetic meters more suited to specific rhythmic cycles (*tāl*).

Ryhthm

Shah argues that *tāl* is the guiding principle of Pangdure performance, and the identifying factor of both song and dance genre. The main song and dance genres of the Pangdure tradition, based on their *tāl*, include jhyaure (6-beat, with slow and fast variations); khyali (4-beat, medium tempo); chudka (4-beat, with slow and fast variations); charitra (6-beat, medium tempo); and the Sorathi dance-drama which has two characteristic *tāl*: Lami *tāl* (7-beat, medium tempo) and Chhoti *tāl* (4-beat, medium to fast tempo). Each of these *tāl* has its own characteristic rhythmic patterns. In Shah's system, the word *bol* refers to the syllables that reference drum strokes, and to the patterns created from those syllables/drum strokes. *Tāl* is closely related to dance, as madal players lead the dancers and singers through changing rhythmic patterns within the *tāl*.

Dance

In the Pangdure performance tradition, there are two types of dance. First, there are dances in which the steps and gestures can, but do not need to, illustrate the story being told in the lyrics of the song. Most of the Pangdure dances conform to this type. Second, there are dances that do illustrate the story; Sorathi is the primary example of this type in the Pangdure tradition. In both types of dance, while *tāl* defines the genre categories of songs and dances, dance influences *tāl*, song structure, and tempo. Shah emphasizes the interplay between dancers and madal players in performance, and how the relation of dance steps to *tāl* is central to how this dialog of theirs shapes the performance (S. B. (Subi) Shah, 1981).

We can see how this works by analyzing a performance of Charitra dance, done by a troupe from Tanahun district and uploaded to YouTube on April 8, 2019, by a photographer named Fal Thapa.[1] The video is titled "Typical Krishna Charitra Nachari Naach," where Nachari refers to a dance performed to a Hindu devotional song, and Naach simply means dance.[2] Charitra dance-dramas present stories from the Hindu Puranas, in this case from the life of Krishna. The dances do not fully act out the story of Krishna's life through movement and gesture, though some of their gestures do relate to some of the lyrics. Rather, the words that depict a moment in the life of Krishna are repeated many times over, as the madal-playing dancers shift their rhythmic patterns and likewise their own steps, guiding the steps of the purushange and maruni dancers as well. In Charitra, the tempo must be medium, or the dancers cannot execute the steps. The words to the refrain (*tukka*) in this song are, "Living in the village, Krishna played with anything he found." So you can imagine the delightful baby god Krishna playing and doing amusing things. Here I reproduce Shah's description of how Charitra dance is danced, with time codes referring to the video. This illustrates that the paradigm Shah describes for the dance remains in practice, and allows us to make connections between dance steps, *tāl*, and song.

In charitra dance, the first thing that happens is that dancers dance to various mādal bols. When the *mādale* dancers have taken their places, only then does the *purushange* bow to the mādal with his hands, and coming from one side to the other, take his place. Then the *mārunī* bow to the mādal and take their places. When the *mārunī* have taken their places, the guru begins to sing. The *mārunī* and *purushange* come forward and gesture along with the song, moving backward again when the song has finished.

The video starts when the guru is already singing, the *purushange* and *mārunī* are waiting to begin dancing, and the *madale* are demonstrating their steps to various madal bols. The song is being sung syllabically, with syllables that are stressed when speaking placed on stressed beats of the *tāl*, and the short melismas are being sung on vocables (here /a/ and /ho/). At (02:11), the *purushange* comes out and bows to the *madale* and to their drums, making his acrobatic entrance by climbing on and jumping off the madals at (03:03). The *mārunī* dancers enter at (03:36). After their introductory steps of circling around, which

differ from Shah's description of introductory steps, Shah's description again applies in general to the rest of the dance:

> Now the *purushange* takes the *mārunī* dancers to different places with all kinds of different gestures, signaling a cadence in the *tāl* by bringing the *mārunī* dancers forward and having them crouch down, going back to get the mādale dancers and bringing them forward to crouch down among the mārunī dancers; then a cadence is played again. During this, everyone turns around and jumps energetically four or five times, after which they continue again as above, according to the mādal *bols*. When three or four repetitions of the *tāl* have been played, then the crouching (*baithan*) bol is played for the dancers to crouch down. Now, the beginning *bol* is played on the mādal and the guru starts to sing the verse …

The dancers remain crouched down throughout the verse, until they go through a specific set of steps to lead back to the refrain, which is repeated several times, as Shah describes. At the end of this charitra performance the singers invoke a deity again: "Jai Shri Ram!" Thus we can see that despite much of Shah's work being written decades ago, his descriptions of the interplay between madal, song, and dancers remain accurate descriptions of the charitra performances of today, even when accounting for regional variation as well as change over time. Looking at the interplay between madal, song, and dancers, we have a better idea of what Shah means when he writes, "the full realization of music is dance, so song and instrumental playing according to the rules of the dance can be referred to as *sangit*" (S. B. (Subi) Shah, 2006, p. 34). Here the term *sangit* connotes a holistic art; not simply song, dance, or instrumental music, but their unified performance.

Conclusion

Shah's work is an important contribution to cultural sustainability among the people of central Nepal's hill villages and their worldwide networks, and is a model for performance and scholarship on vernacular traditions worldwide. Shah's careful work provides a clearly articulated picture of a vernacular musical tradition, which enables Nepali music education to draw on local theories instead of Hindustani and Western ones. The holism of Shah's Nepali performance theories is important for students and performers to understand how different melodies, rhythmic patterns, genres, and dance steps exist in relation to each other, and affect the seen and unseen world including humans, deities, spirits, and the surrounding environment. This holistic perspective can help us better understand the Pangdure genres and enable cross-regional and cross-genre comparison. Applying this knowledge in study and performance is a step toward greater cultural sustainability, so involving students in learning from vernacular performers, especially those who are masters of their art, is key to the development of Nepali music education. More broadly, centering theories of performance like Shah's on their own terms is a step toward decolonization of performance studies, because it puts these theories on par with the dominant ones and asserts their equal value worldwide, and greater value in connection to their own local lifeworlds. Pangdure theories have much to tell us about how performers in Nepal's central hills conceive of performance as social action, and the place of the interrelated arts in the cosmos. Toward such an understanding, Shah's holism provides a model for others to emulate in documenting and analyzing complex performance traditions.

Shah sees his tradition being devalued in Nepal in favor of Indian and Western genres, in both the commercial music industry and the world of performance education. The solution, he argues, is to promote full knowledge of the Pangdure tradition. This includes how melodies are classified and derived from embodied knowledge of an instrument, how rhythm relates to dance and poetic meters, and how rhythm, dance, melodies, and stories link the human and spirit worlds. Yet there is a dialectical tension in Shah's work, between his desire to standardize a Nepali national performance theory on the one hand, and to be true to local vernaculars on the other. S. Shankar's theorization of the vernacular is helpful in making sense of this. Shankar understands "vernacular" as a term that registers power hierarchies without claiming a moral high ground: "it identifies the dominated element in relation to opposing elements commonly manifested as the transnational, the national, the universal, the classical, and so on" (Shankar, 2012, p. 148). The vernacular cannot be understood beyond local limits without translation, but it also cannot be fully translated.

Pangdure itself is such a term. Here I have been treating it as simply the local name of the performance tradition. But it has more connotations. In the dictionary, we find Pangdure dance, noun; "(a) a type of dance performed when *pangdur* millet is ripe; and (b) uncivilized or hick type of dance" (Royal Nepal Academy, 2003, p. 760). The word I translate here as "hick" is *pakhe*; a *pakha* is a field, a moor, or

a pasture on the outskirts of a settled area. A *pakhe* person is one from the fields, a rural person. A *pakhe* dance is a rural dance. From the perspective of the urbanites who compiled the dictionary, neither are "civilized." But the dance tradition and the people who embody it are representatives of the vernacular. Shah's primary desire is that they be understood on their own merits, and that the relationships between aspects of melody, rhythm, dance, song, and the human and spirit worlds that they connect are felt to be important enough to sustain.

Endnotes

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lGLxlJQykkU

[2] I chose this example out of the many available on YouTube because it was a relatively well-filmed live performance that helped illustrate Shah's descriptions of Charitra dance. Due to COVID-19, we have not been able to film performances.

References

Acharya, G., & Rayamajhi, D. (2017). *Magar jatiko lokgit tatha loksangit*. Nepal Music Center.

Ayyagari, S. (2012). Spaces betwixt and between: Musical borderlands and the manganiyar musicians of Rajasthan. *Asian Music*, *43*(1), 3-33.

Babiracki, C. (1991). Tribal music in the study of great and little traditions of Indian music. In B. Nettl & P. V. Bohlman (Eds.), *Comparative musicology and anthropology of music* (pp. 69-87). University of Chicago Press.

Bakhle, J. (2005). *Two men and music*. Oxford University Press.

Brown, K. B. (2004). The that system of seventeenth-century North Indian ragas: A preliminary report on the treatises of kamilkhani. *Asian Music*, *35*(1), 1-13.

Jairazbhoy, N. A. (2008). What happened to Indian music theory? Indo-Occidentalism? *Ethnomusicology*, *52*(3), 329-377.

Mason, M. A., & Turner, R. (2020). Cultural sustainability: A framework for relationships, understanding, and action. *Journal of American Folklore*, *133*(527), 81–99.

Mignolo, W. D. (2007). Introduction: Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking. *Cultural Studies*, *21*(2-3), 155-167.

Mrigendraman, S., Shah, S., & Bajracharya, B. (1994). *Nrityakala* (2nd ed.). Sajha Prakashan.

Nayar, S. (1989). *Bhatkande's contribution to music: A historical perspective*. Popular Prakashan.

Parajuli, M., & Giri, J. D. (2011). *Nepali lok sahityako ruprekha*. Sajha Prakashan.

Rheinberger, H.-J. (1997). *Toward a theory of epistemic things: Synthesizing proteins in the test tube*. Stanford University Press.

Royal Nepal Academy. (2003). *Brihat Nepali shabdakosh* (6th ed.). Academy Publishers.

Shah, S. B. (n.d). *Introduction to Nepali tunes*. Unpublished manuscript.

Shah, S. B. (Subi). (1981). *Madal*. Sajha Prakashan.

Shah, S. B. (Subi). (2006). *Nepali lokgitko jhalak*. Sajha Prakashan.

Shankar, S. (2012). *Flesh and fish blood: Postcolonialism, translation, and the vernacular*. UC Press.

Weidman, A. (2007). *Singing the classical, voicing the modern*. Duke University Press.