

## “May I Elope”: Song Words, Social Status, and Honor among Female Nepali *Dobori* Singers

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Every evening in Kathmandu, a popular rooftop restaurant closes down, and the action moves downstairs to another restaurant, Lalitpur Rodhi Club, that offers musical performance. Here, the main attraction is *dobori* song:<sup>1</sup> the exchange of flirtatious, improvised lyrical couplets between men and women, to the accompaniment of the folk instrumental ensemble popularized by the national radio: the *madal* drum, harmonium, and *bansuri* flute, with the *dbolak* and electric drum pad added in for more danceable “punch.” Restaurant performers, male and female, arrive in unassuming street clothes and head to the dressing rooms to don their performance attire: for men, the *daura suruwāl* and vest—the Nepali national dress, also the traditional costume of high-caste men. Women, regardless of their caste or ethnic background, wear the traditional attire of the Gurung and Magar *janajāti* hill ethnic groups, along with meticulously applied makeup and glittering jewelry: gold earrings and watches, one or more long multi-stranded bead necklaces, sparkling glass bangles, costume versions of the turquoise and red coral necklaces that traditionally represented a Gurung woman’s wealth. The men’s understated attire subtly adds an air of high-caste inflected nationalism, but it is the feminine and the *janajāti* that are on display. Performers take to the stage while waitresses in low-waisted saris serve snacks and alcoholic drinks, accompanied by song-request slips, to the primarily male clientele. Dancing in the style of Nepal’s rural hills along with the male performers as they sing,<sup>2</sup> female *dobori* restaurant performers act out sexualized urban versions of an archetypal *janajāti* village ingénue.

One night in November 2006, a patron at Lalitpur Rodhi Club requested a popular commercial folk song, “*Poīlā Jāna Pām*,” or “May I Elope.” The an-

nouncer welcomed the patron, invited him to sing if he so desired, and had a waitress present him with the restaurant's wireless mic so he could sing from the comfort of his table. There was a quick argument among the female singers about who was going to sing the song: none of them actually wanted to say "may I elope" onstage. The women present included Kusum and Maya Gurung, both janajāti, and Tola Chand Thakuri, who belongs to a high Hindu caste. It was Kusum's turn, but she refused to sing. Saying, "No WAY am I going to sing that song," she handed the mic to another singer, walked to the back of the stage, and sat down.

Why would a woman who has chosen to professionally foreground her sexuality balk at singing the words "may I elope?" To begin to explore this question, it is important to take note of the privileged position most Nepalis accord to song lyrics in general (Jacobson 1999; Henderson 2002/2003). Words are centrally important to dohori and to the wider collection of Nepali genres known as *lok gīt*, or folk song. The common expressions *gīt bhannu* and *gīt batāunu*—"to say" or "to tell" a song—refer not to a speechlike style of delivery, but to the act of putting words to a melody, whether those words are improvised on the spot or composed at an earlier time. A good dohori singer is one who has a way with words. Second in importance is vocal virtuosity, and only then does embodied performance come into evaluations of a live performance or a video recording. In this article, I focus on song words and the social action that they accomplish among women folk and dohori singers from different caste, ethnic, and class backgrounds.

The improvised question-answer genre of dohori has its traditional roots in binding practices of marriage negotiation: in many traditions in different parts of Nepal, the male winner of a dohori contest won his female song-partner as a bride. Durga Rayamajhi, the chairman of dohori competitions' governing body known as the Lok and Dohori Song Academy Nepal, expressed to me in an interview that perhaps because of this history, there is a heightened awareness of the possible performative valence of words in both commercially recorded and improvised dohori songs, and of the potential of these words to have real effects on the world in which they are sung (interview, 16 January 2007, Kathmandu). As Helmi Järviluoma, Pirkko Moisala, and Anni Vilkkö note, performativity depends on "the norms that precede and guide the performance and the performers" (2003:14). In this article I am concerned with the norms that guide what utterances can do: the histories of caste, ethnicity, class, and their interaction that influence the assumptions governing the social action of language in Nepali folk and dohori songs.

### ***Dohori* and Honor: High-Caste Hindu vs. *Janajāti* Social Norms**

Dohori has come to embody a tension in Nepali identity politics, centered on questions of sexual morality and *ijjat*: honor, prestige, or respect. As several studies have shown, *ijjat* is perhaps the most important type of cultural capital in many aspects of Nepali life: it acts almost as a social currency that can be earned, exchanged, gambled, and lost (McHugh 1998, 2001; Bhatt 2003; Liechty 2003). Yet it is also sensed bodily, its possession accompanied by feelings of pride and satisfaction, its loss by secret guilt or public shame. To encompass this felt dimension, I follow McHugh in translating *ijjat* as honor (1998, 2001). Honor is tied to caste-, ethnicity-, and class-related social norms; to material signifiers of status; and to forms of love and marriage. The tension that dohori embodies exists between the dominant, high-caste Hindu social norms—which keep men and women apart until an arranged marriage—and conflicting customs and worldviews of some ethnic groups (*janajātis*), many of which allow, and in some situations encourage, social mixing between unmarried members of both sexes, as well as allowing for love marriages. Each set of ideologies carries different assumptions about what is honorable and dishonorable.

There is great regional diversity as well as caste inequality among the groups that I refer to as “caste Hindu,” and even greater diversity among the fifty-nine ethnic groups that are officially identified as *janajāti* (cf. Nepal Tamang Ghedung 2006), yet the generalized distinction I make above is important to the way members of these two general groups discuss themselves and each other. In discourse about dohori, one hears caste Hindus referred to primarily as “Bahun-Chhetri,” the names of the two highest categories of Hindu castes, members of which are second- and third-most numerous in the dohori field. The term *janajāti* is sometimes replaced by “Gurung-Magar,” the names of the two *janajāti* ethnicities which are, respectively, the fourth and first most represented in commercial dohori.<sup>3</sup> Both groups also sometimes describe themselves and each other in racial terms, with caste Hindus/Bahun-Chhetris referred to as Aryans, and *janajātis*/Gurung-Magars referred to as Mongols (cf. Hangen 2007).<sup>4</sup> In using the terms caste Hindu and *janajāti* as analytical categories, I am not trying to uphold racialized essentialisms but rather to show how they are used rhetorically in discourse on dohori and how another analytical category, class, can invert many of their accompanying assumptions.

During Nepal’s Panchayat period (1962–1990), the state attempted to create a culturally homogeneous Hindu nation, promoting the Nepali language, the Hindu monarchy, and the Hindu religion as signifiers of the national community. Hindu values, especially in their high-caste, middle-class forms, were promoted as national values. This included an emphasis on a particular form

of arranged marriage, the *kanyadān* or “gift of a virgin,” a high-caste custom that emphasizes the bride’s purity and bestows high honor on both families involved in the marriage exchange (Ahearn 2001). Panchayat cultural nationalism also began a project to combine regional sounds into a pan-Nepali genre of folk music, known as *lok gīt*: folk song. In contrast to the state’s emphasis on an orthodox Hindu cultural unity, composers and folk song collectors chose much of this national folk music’s musical material from genres and styles strongly associated with *janajāti* ethnic groups of Nepal’s hill regions; as is the case in the formation of many national folk musics, these songs were simplified and “cleaned up” to better represent the sound of a unified nation (Henderson 2002/2003). The commercial version of *dohori* has been by far the most popular sub-genre within this national folk song, especially in the last ten years. As interactions through *dohori* song are one traditional way in which many young *janajātis* could negotiate love relationships and sometimes marriages, *dohori* continues to be associated with *janajāti* identity, love marriage, and a celebration of female sexuality.<sup>5</sup> The rhetoric of Panchayat nationalism persists even through nearly two decades of attempted democracy. Therefore, while most people of diverse castes and ethnicities follow Hindu norms to understand arranged marriage as the most honorable form of marriage, these folk songs, including *dohori* with its emphasis on love marriage, represent for many the essence of national identity. The association of both high-caste Hindu social norms and *janajāti* culture-based *dohori* songs with Nepali national identity unsettles the dominance of such social norms; in today’s cosmopolitan Kathmandu, where people and ideas from all over come into constant contact, the question of what actually bestows or destroys honor is increasingly complicated.

The politics of caste and ethnicity, usually seen as fixed categories, dominate many discussions of political and social change in Nepal today. But, they are usually discussed separately from socioeconomic class. In attempting to bring these strands of identity politics together, I focus on the song “*Poīlā Jāna Pām*” and its place within “domains of transgression where place, body, group identity and subjectivity interconnect” (Stallybrass and White 1986:25). These domains include two traditional ritual contexts for transgressive activity: the festival of *Tīj* and the Gurung ethnic group’s *rodhi*, both of which, linked with the recording industry and the *dohori* restaurant business, provide important updated and urban contexts for the performance and reception of “*Poīlā Jāna Pām*.” By analyzing the “*Poīlā Jāna Pām*” controversy in the context of the Kathmandu folk and *dohori* music scene, I examine how the politics of caste and ethnicity intertwine with class in shaping the ideologies governing appropriate and honorable behavior for women in Kathmandu today.

### “Poilā Jāna Pām” in Its Original Context: The Tīj Festival

In August 2006, dohori singer Komal Oli, a high-caste, upper-class woman from a landowning family, released a song called “Poilā Jāna Pām,” or “May I Elope,” which became highly controversial (Oli and Pande 2006). “Poilā Jāna Pām” is not a question-answer dohori song, but it falls into a subcategory of the wider lok gīt (commercial popular folk song) genre, of which dohori is also a part. “Poilā Jāna Pām” is a solo song for the holiday of Tīj, a Hindu holiday on which women fast to ask the god Shiva for good husbands if they aren’t married, or for long lives for their husbands if they are. While the classic literature on Tīj describes it as reaffirming patriarchal principles, Tīj is popularly described as the “women’s festival,” because on this day caste Hindu women, traditionally prohibited from singing and dancing in public, can indulge in these highly sexualized activities in public to their hearts’ content. Komal Oli’s 2008 Tīj release celebrates just this idea, with the title “Come On, Girlfriends, Today’s Our Day to Dance” (Oli 2008). The classic explanation for this apparent transgressive aberration is that women’s blatant display of overt sexuality is tempered by their ritual fast (Bennett 1983:254).

Tīj festivities have long been celebrated among many janajāti as well as caste Hindu communities, and Tīj is a day of women’s singing and dancing throughout the Nepali hills. But, as Laura Ahearn notes, Tīj carries a different significance for high-caste Hindus and for janajātis, as most janajāti women are not barred from singing and dancing in public at other times (Ahearn 1998). Thus, the elements of transgression that are foregrounded in caste Hindu Tīj celebrations are less important in janajāti festivities, where Tīj is one instance for women’s public performance among many.<sup>6</sup> However, Tīj songs are a specific genre in which both caste Hindu and janajāti women express feelings that should be kept hidden during the rest of the year; Tīj is the time when women can publicly express their particular, women’s troubles and sorrows (Skinner, Holland, and Adhikari 1994; Ahearn 1998). While such restrictions on expressing feelings may in part be due to the Hindu emphasis on regulating female sexuality, other context-specific factors, including conceptions of public and private, are also involved in determining exactly how these restrictions are put in place. Both caste Hindu and janajāti societies look down on women who are *too* public; however, what it means to be a “public woman” varies widely (Seizer 2005).

The fact that women’s public expressive practices are restricted in both caste Hindu and janajāti societies is significant from a perspective that views such practices as social action. Tīj songs and their performance have been studied by myriad anthropologists, who have often been concerned

with describing Tġj as either subversive or conservative of the dominant Hindu patriarchal and political order (Bennett 1983; Skinner, Holland, and Adhikari 1994; Holland and Skinner 1995; Ahearn 1998). The later studies focus more on the songs than the rituals; while they do not always use the same theoretical terms, these studies are concerned with the performative effect of the words women sing in this socially sanctioned instance of boundary transgression. Acknowledging the dissonance between the patriarchy-affirming rituals of Tġj and the songs' focus on the sorrows of being female, these studies of Tġj ask to what extent the words of Tġj songs produce particular social realities, from new feminine subjectivities to concrete political changes. Instead of focusing on the extent of possible change, I am more interested in the conditions that give utterances their power or constrain their potential effects. The main utterance in question here is the word *poilā*.

### **The Problems with Poilā**

Many commercially recorded folk and dohori songs are released as music videos on video CDs, and "Poilā Jāna Pām" is no exception. In the opening sequence of the *Poilā Jāna Pām* VCD, Komal Oli appears dressed as a *sadhu*, or Hindu holy man. She is surrounded by women in traditional Tġj finery: red saris and ornate gold jewelry. They laugh as she dances, and one runs up to her and pulls off her fake beard, exposing her disguise. All the women begin to dance, and as Komal the *sadhu* disappears from the left side of the frame, Komal the woman enters the dance from the right. Dressed in red like the others, she holds objects of worship in her hands and begins to sing: "God, I worshipped and fasted on Tġj . . ." As the camera pans out slightly, it becomes clear that the women are at Pashupati temple, Nepal's major Shiva temple and the site of the largest Tġj festivities in the Kathmandu Valley. Komal's appearance in a cross-dressed costume fits in with the carnivalesque elements of Tġj, and the image of the *sadhu* evokes the familiar sight of these wandering ascetics at Pashupati. The *sadhu* is often a comic as well as an ascetic figure, embodying both the high and the low; this opening scene can be read as a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the figure of the unmarried daughter, living as an ascetic in her parents' home. It also calls on the viewer to interpret the song that follows in the context of Tġj: as an expression of female desires in a context where they are expected, socially sanctioned, and can easily be framed as non-threatening.

**“Poilā Jāna Pām:” Sung by Komal Oli  
(Music and Lyrics: Dandapani Pande)**

Refrain:

*Tijaīma vrata basē pujā garē  
bhagwān,  
Aba ta āsha garchhu banos mero  
kān,  
Sadbai bhari maitī gharmā basna  
malāi man chbaina,  
Abilekai sālaimā poilā jāna pām.  
Poilā jāna pām Shiva abilekai sālaimā  
poilā jāna pām.  
Poilā jāna pām, Shiva, poilā jāna pām,  
Poi pāos bhanera japchhu timrai nām.*

*Abilekai sālaimā poilā jāna pām,  
Shiva, poilā jāna pām, pām, pām.*

Verse 1:

*Rabar lā' chba sābrai malāi sindūr  
poṭe lāunalāi,  
Poiko bāta samātera maitī gbara  
āunalāi,  
Bhandaichhu bai Shivaji nāparos bai  
sadbai timro mandir dbāunalāi.*

Verse 2:

*Sarbai rāmro poi paros college-a mā  
paḍbeko,  
Miṭho kbāi rāmro lāi sukbasāga  
bbareko,  
Yasto poi paros ki duniyākā  
keṭībaruko ākha gāḍbeko.*

Refrain:

God, I worshipped and fasted on Tīj,  
Now, I hope that my appeal will be  
successful,  
I don't want to stay in my natal home  
forever,  
This very year, may I elope.  
May I elope, Shiva, may I elope this  
very year.  
May I elope, Shiva, may I elope  
Hoping for a husband, I chant your  
name.  
This very year, may I elope, Shiva, may I  
elope, may I, may I, may I.

Verse 1:

I really want to wear vermilion and  
beads,  
To return to my natal home holding my  
husband's hand,  
I'm telling you, Shivaji, I don't want to  
have to devote myself to your temple  
forever.

Verse 2:

May I get a really good husband, who's  
been to college,  
Who's been filled with happiness, with  
good things to eat and wear,  
I'm hoping for a husband whom all  
girls in the world have eyed.

With such contextualization, it is surprising that “Poilā Jāna Pām” became so controversial; Tīj songs are full of wishes for good husbands, so the problem with “Poilā Jāna Pām” was not merely its strong expression of a woman's desire for marriage. The biggest problem with “Poilā Jāna Pām” is the colloquial expression *poilā jānu*, to “go poilā,” which I have translated above as “to elope.” Poilā, most simply, is a noun that means “husband,” in the locative case. Thus, its simplest meaning would be something like “where my husband is.” The major meanings of poilā differ according to regional use: in far-western Nepal, “poilā jānu”—to “go poilā”—refers to when a child bride who has been living in her parents' home until she comes of age goes to her husband's home. In mid-western Nepal, where Komal Oli is from, to “go

poilā” means to go with a husband of one’s own choosing. In eastern Nepal, to “go poilā” means to run away from one’s husband with another man. In Kathmandu, located in central Nepal, “to elope” is the most common interpretation of “poilā jānu”—more than just choosing your own husband, it is choosing and going without parental permission, but it’s not necessarily leaving the husband you already have.<sup>7</sup> Komal’s line “I don’t want to stay in my natal home forever,” along with images of her doing chores as an unmarried daughter, makes it clear that the song does not depict a woman trying to leave a husband to whom she’s already married. Reports do not make it clear as to which meaning of poilā so incensed people in other districts, but most people in Kathmandu and the surrounding areas took “Poilā Jāna Pām” to express a wish for an elopement or love marriage.

A comparison with Komal Oli’s previous hit, “Bihe Bhā’ Chhaina” (“I’m Still Not Married”; Oli 2005), shows that love marriage or elopement—rather than expression of female desire—is really the issue. This song, also written by Dandapani Pande, contained the chorus “I’m still not married, who’s going to take me, I don’t know, up till now no one’s come to ask for me.” Here she expressed a woman’s desire to get married within high-caste Hindu cultural conventions: she is patiently waiting for a man to come ask for her hand. Still, these conventions are slightly more liberal and less prestigious than those of the ideal of a fully parentally-arranged “gift of a virgin” marriage. “Bihe Bhā’ Chhaina” was slightly unconventional in that the entire song was about a woman’s desire, even outside the context of Tīj, yet it did not go to the extreme of flouting parental authority, which “Poilā Jāna Pām” was interpreted as advocating. Urban young people’s increasing preference for love marriage over arranged marriage signals to many the breakdown of mainstream Hindu ideals of gendered social structure, especially the joint family with its gendered labor hierarchies (Bennett 1983). The unsettling implication of “Poilā Jāna Pām” was that Komal sang as if “going poilā” were the rule, rather than the exception, and whether “poilā” meant choosing your own husband or leaving him for another, both possibilities matched up a little too closely with anxieties over the actual state of things. This is not the first time that a song containing the word poilā has come under scrutiny: in the 1980s, a song called “Sailī ra Mailī Poilā Gayī” (“Second and Third Sister Eloped”) was banned by Radio Nepal for similar reasons (personal communication, Mangal Maharjan, 5 October 2006, Lalitpur).

While “Poilā Jāna Pām” was not banned, it received a great deal of criticism. In Kathmandu, there were protests outside the recording studio while Komal was inside recording. When the song was released in August 2006, the *Kathmandu Post* reported that the Federation of Women Journalists in Komal’s home district of Dang asked her to apologize to the women of Nepal, and called for the album to be banned (Beardedwind 2006). According to

Komal, women's groups in the eastern plains district of Sarlahi also staged a cassette-burning program. Other groups attacked the song for "insulting women's dignity, giving rise to vulgarity and conveying a wrong message to the society" (Beardedwind 2006).

### **Justifying Transgression: The Marginalized as National Essence**

Komal and lyricist Dandapani Pande defend their song on the grounds of preserving national cultural heritage: Komal uses the testimony of Tulsī Diwas, chairman of the Nepal Folklore Society, and Govinda Acharya, scholar of the folk songs of the Rapti zone that is home to both Komal and Dandapani Pande, to argue publicly that "poilā" is "our own village word, which is dying out, and we want to preserve our culture by keeping these typical words in use" (interview, Komal Oli, 12 November 2006, Kathmandu; interview, Dandapani Pande, 15 May 2007, Kathmandu).<sup>8</sup>

Here, they appeal to elements that have been cast as icons of national identity in order to justify singing a song out of line with high-caste Hindu norms. These elements of national essence include the rural hill village and the "typical"—an English word usually used in Nepali discourse to mean "the authentic." In the following translation from one of my interviews with Komal, she groups these qualities with marginalized janajāti identity in explaining how her career got started with the first dohori competitions in the Nepali National Games, in 1983:

I used to sing at home; my mother taught me her own songs. I didn't sing dohori, though—that was for janajātis, and if high-caste people joined them, it was village people, those who came down from the hills to work the fields [of valley landowners] at planting and harvest. Then . . . when I was in eighth grade, some people from the district administration suggested that I participate in a regional dohori competition, one of the first ones sponsored by the government. I didn't know how to sing dohori, but they taught me on the bus to the competition (personal communication, 12 November 2006, Kathmandu).<sup>9</sup>

The connection between various types of marginalization and ideas of national essence and identity is common and well-documented in ethnomusicological and anthropological literature. As Fox and Yano note, marginalization can be associated with "cultural, emotional, human authenticity," which is not merely constructed but socially lived and experienced, and made "real, palpable, and objective" in musical performance. Further, "performed experience, in turn, can be powerfully compensating to the extent that one trope of identity can stand for the authenticity of other identities seeking the cultural margin" (Fox and Yano forthcoming). As others have noted in various contexts—emphasizing the relations between indigeneity and the nation in

realms from Andean panpipe music (Turino 1993) to Australian aboriginal art (Myers 2002), and between gender, marginalized groups, and the nation in contexts from Bulgarian minority-language songs (Buchanan 2006)<sup>10</sup> to the singing and dancing, hyper-gendered representations of minority nationalities in China (Gladney 1994; Schein 1999)—the appropriation of minority or marginalized cultural expression as a sign of national uniqueness is often part of an effort by those belonging to dominant hegemonic groups to experience themselves as part of such authenticity and claim it for the nation.

Government rhetoric from the 1960s through 1990 emphasized the rural hill village as the essence of Nepali identity (Pigg 1992); at the level of rhetoric, this essentialized village was homogeneous, devoid of regional, caste, ethnic, or class difference. The 1980s government dohori competitions in which Komal took part promoted the genre as village music and thus national music par excellence, obscuring difference in the service of national unity. It was such elisions that allowed high-caste, high-class girls like Komal to go against their social norms and begin to sing on the public stage. Post-1990 ethnic activism has only made this rhetoric of cultural heritage more available to high-caste people: janajātis' fight for political recognition is based in part on the argument that their cultures are unique as well as fully Nepali; they use their music to represent their own group identities, but within the parameters of village authenticity set by the former government's unitary rhetoric of national culture. Prominent journalist Kanak Mani Dixit provides a high-caste Kathmandu elite perspective in an article that romanticizes the freedom of hill villagers (describing janajāti practices without mentioning the word janajāti), positing them as the authentic keepers of Nepali identity and dohori as a symbol of Nepali uniqueness, focusing especially on dohori's female performers (Dixit 2002). Janajātis who have a stake in dohori proudly proclaim that it is their own ethnic cultural heritage, while high-caste Hindu performers and other non-janajātis with stakes in dohori proudly proclaim that it is their own Nepali cultural heritage. International discourses of development and cultural preservation have given the term "cultural heritage" an aura of prestige: calling something "heritage" raises its *ijjat*—its honor—and thus enables it to bestow greater honor on those who appeal to or claim it as their own. Claims to janajāti heritage, whether personal or national, are invoked to give performing women an aura of respectability. The synechdochic chain of associations goes something like this: janajāti women can sing and dance whenever they want, janajāti cultural heritage is Nepali national cultural heritage, therefore high-caste Hindu women singing and dancing in these genres in public is acceptable.

This equation of janajāti identity with essential elements of Nepali national identity has parallels with Partha Chatterjee's depiction of how middle-class Bengali women in India reconciled high-caste Hindu social norms that placed women in the private sphere of the home with the demands of mod-

ern life that called for a greater female public presence. In Bengal, associating the feminine with the inner, spiritual essence of national identity facilitated middle-class women's move into public spaces by casting the woman as Hindu goddess or mother and thus erasing her sexuality outside the home. Needless to say, the publicly private middle-class woman was defined against the lower-class, publicly sexual woman, the sex object for the nationalist man, by definition other than his wife/mother/sister/daughter (Chatterjee 1993:120). I argue that this scheme, reliant on Hindu cosmology, is relevant to and operative in Nepal as well. The elision of the *janajāti*, the village, and the national described above perhaps offers middle-class Nepali women the best of both worlds: supported by the discourse of public privacy that Chatterjee describes, they can embrace some level of sexuality in public by drawing on this idea of national culture.

### **Komal Oli: The Situated Star**

Of all Nepal's commercial lok dohori singers, it is Komal Oli who has exploited the elision of village and *janajāti* cultural heritage to the greatest extent in her career, pushing the boundaries for women in public life and using the connection of rurality, agricultural labor, and *janajāti* cultures with authentic Nepali identity to justify foregrounding her body and her sexuality. A win in that first competition led her and her male song-partner to eventually take first at the national level,<sup>11</sup> and thus began her career as a singer. When she got a job as a radio newsreader, Komal Oli *ko miṭho boli* (Komal Oli's sweet speech) became a prominent public voice. Unlike other female singers of her era and earlier, she expanded her career beyond the recording studio and occasional concert stage. She has released over fifteen albums including both solo lok *gīt* and dohori duets, and runs a training center for radio and television anchoring. Currently studying for a master's in international relations, she is over 40 and has never married. She acts (as opposed to just singing) in her own music videos, and most controversially, she continues to perform live, improvised dohori at festivals and in major concert halls. Komal's own non-traditional life also provided the song's detractors with ammunition and made it clear that the meaning of *poilā* was not the only thing at stake; debates about "Poilā Jāna Pām" almost always turned into discussions of Komal herself.

My friend Asha (a pseudonym) opines: "If anyone other than Komal Oli had recorded "Poilā Jāna Pām," it wouldn't have been controversial." Asha, like Komal, started out in a village in mid-western Nepal and has risen to become a member of the high-caste, middle-class Kathmandu educated and propertied elite; she is a prizewinning poet and radio personality. Yet unlike Komal Oli, she has risen to public acclaim without foregrounding her body and her sexuality, and thus feels that she is Komal's moral superior. As Amanda Weidman

has noted for neighboring India (Weidman 2006), most women who are successful recording artists rarely perform live. Top studio singer Bima Kumari Dura told me that she gave up singing live dohori after winning a competition that guaranteed her a job recording at Radio Nepal. She says, “I wanted to be known for my voice alone” (interview, 28 July 2005). Similarly, another top studio singer, Laxmi Neupane, cites the ability to have some control over her own public image and over the words she sings as reasons for remaining a studio recording artist rather than performing live dohori (interview, 7 August 2007). The privacy of the recording studio allows women to sing and maintain respectable reputations, without the danger of violating high-caste Hindu social norms or middle-class expectations by appearing onstage and thus foregrounding their sexuality through public bodily display. Even several prominent men who came “up” into the recording industry from dohori put live dohori performance behind them for more prestigious and less sexualized solo folk song. But Komal Oli not only performs live, she revels in live dohori, improvising suggestive lyrics back and forth with male partners. In a live performance on the opening day of the Tuborg Beer Dohori Competition in Kathmandu in March 2007, singer Bhagwan Bhandari, playing on her age, cast her as a “ripe fruit” that he’d like to taste, and she replied: “*bolā timī dbardhari runchbau ki; chakdā chakdai bebosai hunchbau ki*” (“you might really sob and cry; tasting it might even make you fall unconscious”). Such public assertions of confident sexuality unnerve many members of her caste and class, leading to much speculation about her sex life.

### **Parody and Personal Attack: “Maile Lyāuna Pām” and the Conflation of Song with Singer**

Idle speculation about Komal’s virginity was taken to a new level with the release of the first parody of “Poilā Jāna Pām.” “Poilā Jāna Pām” inspired two parody songs, which led everyone to comment that now dohori was taking place between albums. The first, “Maile Lyāuna Pām” (“May I Take That One”), is a solo song like Komal’s original, but in a dohori-friendly format. “Poilā Jāna Pām,” as a Tīj song, was not the type of song usually performed in dohori restaurants—its association with a specific festival limits the times of year appropriate for its performance, and its structure makes it hard to sing as dohori. “Maile Lyāuna Pām,” on the other hand, has a couplet-refrain structure like commercial dohori songs, which contributed to its popularity in dohori restaurants.

Written by Nibam Kshatri and sung by the male singer Suman Budha Magar, its chorus goes *Ke ho tinko nām? “Poilā Jāna Pām, pām, pām, Shiva” bbannelāi maile lyāuna pām* (“What’s her name? May I take that one who says ‘Shiva, I want to go poilā!’”) (Budha, Kshatri, and Baral 2006). When

people requested “Poilā Jāna Pām” in dohori restaurants, performers would respond with “Maile Lyāuna Pām.” To turn it into a dohori song, women made up an appropriate chorus for their side: “What’s his name? May I go with the one who says, ‘Shiva, I want to take that one poilā!’” Note that the frequently repeated chorus still contains the phrase “Poilā Jāna Pām.” While many radio and television stations boycotted “Poilā Jāna Pām,” they played “Maile Lyāuna Pām” over and over, until people, including me, began to confuse the two songs. The melody of “Maile Lyāuna Pām,” however, was inspired by Komal’s biggest hit: “Tulsipur mā Ma Jāda Kheri” (“While I Was Going to Tulsipur”), in a not-so-subtle sonic reminder of just whose song was being parodied.

The verse couplets in Suman Budha’s recorded version of “Maile Lyāuna Pām” contain many personal jibes at Komal Oli, referring to her age and her trademark hairstyle, and questioning her virginity. In the video, the actor lip-synching to Suman Budha’s voice punctuates each repetition of the words “pām, pām, pām,” with exaggerated pelvic thrusts, thus implying the “real” reason why anyone must want to go poilā (Budha, Kshatri, and Baral 2006). Suman Budha states that he believes “Maile Lyāuna Pām” needed to be released to counter the potential adverse effects of “Poilā Jāna Pām.” He described “Poilā Jāna Pām” as “unbefitting of Nepali women,” and was afraid that women might follow its implied lead (i.e., elopement) (interview, 7 January 2007, Kathmandu).<sup>12</sup> His sentiments were echoed by the male comedian Jitu Nepal, who, in a comedy performance in between sets at a dohori competition at the February 2007 Waling Festival in Syangja District, did a piece on the degeneration of Nepali folk songs centered around “Poilā Jāna Pām,” in which he implied that the song would set women off down a slippery slope of destroying the traditional family structure. “What’s next?” he asked. “*Bibe nagarī bachcha pāuna pām, pām, pām* (‘I want to have a baby without getting married’) . . . ?” He sang these words not to the tune of “Poilā Jāna Pām,” but to “Maile Lyāuna Pām.”

In their disapproving parodies that directly attacked Komal Oli, Suman Budha and Jitu Nepal joined many of her detractors who conflated the song’s narrative voice with the actual singer, interpreting both “I’m Still Not Married” and “May I Elope” as expressions of Komal’s own inner wishes.<sup>13</sup> Equating the words she sings with her own sincere thoughts, this interpretation casts Komal as the type of woman who flaunts convention—lightly and forgivably with “Bihe Bhā’ Chhaina,” but transgressively and unacceptably with “Poilā Jāna Pām.” When the original song became conflated with Suman Budha’s parody, Komal’s image suffered even more. The phrase “Poilā Jāna Pām” came to connote not only the varied meanings of “poilā,” but also the entire generally negative discourse surrounding the original song, its reception, and its parodies, and Komal herself became an easy target for public ridicule. While she expressed her hurt feelings to close friends in private, she continued, undaunted, to appear in live concerts and work on recording new albums,

and the notoriety she gained from “Poilā Jāna Pām” ended up having rather lucrative results (interview, 4 August 2007, Kathmandu).<sup>14</sup> As the first female dohori performer to become a commercial star, capitalizing on notoriety is not totally new to Komal; she is used to dealing with criticism from the media, her audiences, and her family.

Komal’s ability to bounce back from the ridicule she faced after “Poilā Jāna Pām” is directly related to her class position. Socioeconomic class, unlike caste or honor, is not something that can be lost through transgressive behavior alone, thus she continues to have recourse to the discourses of middle class femininity. Onstage, she is able to draw on the elision of the janajāti with the national through the honorable, prestigious concept of heritage. Offstage, in her jobs as radio newsreader and voice coach, she is still able to draw on the middle-class scheme of erasing sexuality outside the home (Chatterjee 1993), and her adherence to high-caste, high-class social norms continues to tip the scales in her moral favor. Komal is known for her polite, “sweet” (*miṭho*) way with words, and her modest yet fashionable style of dress. Her non-performing jobs fit well with the expectations for upper-middle-class women who work outside the home, and she consciously avoids performing in venues deemed inappropriate for a woman of her station, namely, dohori restaurants. For example, when dohori restaurant owners attempted to recruit her with extremely high salary offers, she deferred to her family’s emphatic objections.

While Komal won’t sing in a dohori restaurant in deference to the expectations of her class, some dohori restaurant performers want nothing to do with Komal. In the next section I explore the dohori restaurant, its roots in the Gurung rodhi tradition, and the attitude of working-class female restaurant performers toward “Poilā Jāna Pām,” Komal Oli, and the economy of honor in Kathmandu.

### ***Rodhi Ghar to Rodhi Bar: A Janajāti Tradition in Cosmopolitan Kathmandu***

Dohori restaurants consciously associate themselves with janajāti cultures and rural village life. While many janajāti and caste Hindu groups in Nepal’s middle hills have traditions of question-answer singing, dohori in its current commercial incarnation is most closely associated with the traditions of the Gurung ethnic group. The restaurant setting for dohori performance is said to have grown out of the Gurung tradition of a youth organization called rodhi:<sup>15</sup> a *rodhi ghar* or “rodhi house” would be chosen for unmarried youth to meet, at which all-night gatherings of singing, eating, and drinking would often take place. Anthropologists have documented that sexual activity also took place in traditional rodhi houses; it was silently condoned by

adult chaperones at night, yet condemned through gossip by day (Andors 1976:153; Messerschmidt 1976:51; Moisala 1991; Macfarlane 1976:224).

According to Andors (1976), the traditional rodhi was an age-based, female-run association that functioned as a sanctioned space in which youth could “rebel” against their elders while simultaneously being socialized into the values that would govern their adult lives after marriage. This structural-functionalist interpretation has interesting parallels with the classic interpretations of Tġj; unfortunately, neither Andors nor Moisala goes into depth about the social significance of rodhi songs.<sup>16</sup> Still, conversations with older Gurungs who participated in rodhis in their youth, along with the general value placed on creative sexual innuendo in dohori songs, suggest that the lyrics of songs sung in the rodhi had a sexual current that was in some ways specific to its performance context (personal communications, Dr. Narayan Gurung, 25 March 2007, Lalitpur; Dr. Om Gurung, 12 April 2007, Lalitpur; Tilsubha Gurung, 17 August 2007, Tangting, Kaski).

Works by non-Gurung Nepali ethnographers discuss the rodhi as a space where transgressive extramarital sexuality was socially sanctioned (Parajuli 2000:251; Majupuria 2007:257);<sup>17</sup> some of their interpretations are hotly contested by Gurungs committed to promoting a purified version of their heritage (personal communications, Dr. Narayan Gurung, June 2007, Kathmandu; Krishna Gurung, 12 August 2007, Kathmandu). As previously mentioned, at some time in the past, dohori in many traditional settings was a binding marriage negotiation contest: whoever ran out of lyrics first lost, and if the man won, he won the right to marry the woman. According to Moisala, this type of dohori contest was separate from the dohori that took place in the Gurung rodhi, and other ethnographers make no mention of it in reference to rodhi. Although rodhi no longer fulfills the same functions of education and socialization of Gurung village youth, it has become one of the main symbols of Gurung identity (Gurung 2008), and is closely associated with dohori through mass-mediated representations on Radio Nepal and other FM radio stations, in the private recording industry, and in dohori restaurants. The first dohori restaurants in Kathmandu were opened by Gurungs. One of these, Dovan Restaurant and Bar, is still in operation today. Its owner, retired Deputy Superintendent of Police Ganja Singh Gurung, says that in 1998 he wanted to register the restaurant as “Dovan Rodhi Ghar,” but was denied by the municipal planning office on the grounds that the word rodhi suggested a level of licentiousness that the city could not allow (interview, 5 December 2006). Now, according to the restaurant names registered on the March 2007 version of the Lok Dohori Professionals Association roster of member restaurants, over half of Kathmandu’s dohori restaurants advertise themselves as “Rodhi Club” or “Rodhi Bar.”

Despite this strong association with Gurung and other janajāti cultures, dohori restaurant performers actually come from many backgrounds. At the

dohori restaurant Lalitpur Rodhi Club, performers hail from a mix of various janajāti ethnic groups as well as high-caste Brahmins, Chhetris, and Thakuris. All are migrants from rural hill villages, and the great majority can be described as members of an urban working class. The public performance of female sexuality through song and dance, for which Komal has become notorious among the middle- and upper-class, high-caste Kathmandu elite, is routine in dohori restaurants like Lalitpur Rodhi Club. While dohori restaurant performers of all backgrounds rely to some extent on the legitimating discourse of hill rurality and janajāti culture as national heritage, their social position does not allow them to use it in the same way as the relatively elite Komal Oli. As Mark Liechty and Ernestine McHugh have demonstrated, status within both Kathmandu's urban middle classes and rural Gurung villages is closely tied with honor (McHugh 2001; Liechty 2003). While the legitimating discourse of rurality and janajāti culture as national cultural heritage may help performers at Lalitpur Rodhi Club justify their jobs to their friends and family, it can't justify everything that might put their honor on the line. For some of the female artists at Lalitpur, "Poilā Jāna Pām," or, more accurately, its parody song "Maile Lyāuna Pām," proved too threatening to perform.

### **Performing "Poilā Jāna Pām"/ "Maile Lyāuna Pām" in a Dohori Restaurant**

Let us return to the night in November 2006, when a Lalitpur Rodhi Club patron named Krishna requested "Poilā Jāna Pām" as a dohori song. The announcer quickly changed the request to the dohori-friendly and seasonally appropriate "Maile Lyāuna Pām." Onstage, there was a quick argument about who was going to sing the song. It was no big deal for the men, but none of the women actually wanted to say "may I elope" onstage. The women present included Kusum and Maya Gurung, both janajāti, and Tola Chand Thakuri, who belongs to a high Hindu caste. Kusum refused to take her turn, saying, "No WAY am I going to sing that song." Tola's turn was next, but she also refused. Kusum, who is happily married, is from eastern Nepal and understands *poilā* mainly to mean "run away from your husband." Tola's husband, who is also from eastern Nepal, happens to be the sound man at Lalitpur Rodhi Club, listening to every word she sings. Maya, from western Nepal, was the unmarried one whose background made her less likely to balk at singing "may I elope." So, the task fell to Maya to lead the song, but she had never heard it before. Tola agreed to sing backup to teach her the melody and the words to the female chorus. The following transcript lists the couplets sung by Maya and her song-partner onstage, Baburam Adhikari; in the last exchanges, Baburam is replaced by the song's requestor, Krishna, who joins in from his

table with the wireless house microphone that is passed around for those patrons who wish to sing with the stage performers.

**“Maile Lyāuna Pām.” Original music and lyrics: Suman Budha and Nibam Kshatri. Sung by: Maya Gurung (backup: Tola Thakuri), with Baburam Adhikari and patron Krishna (backup: Navin), 6 November 2006, Lalitpur Rodhi Club.**

Male Refrain: *Ke ho unko nām?* “Poilā Jāna Pām *pām pām*, *Shiva*,” *bbannelāi maile lyāuna pām*.

What’s her name? May I take the one who says “Shiva! May I go poilā?”

Female Refrain: *Ke ho unko nām?* “Poilā *lyāuna pām pām pām*, *Shiva*,” *bhan-nesang hāmī jāna pām*.

What’s his name? May I go with the one who says “Shiva! May I take her poilā?”

1. Baburam: *Swayambharko lāūchhan reṭikā*;

*Krishnajiko bandeu bho Radhika*

He’ll put on [honorific-2] the engagement tika;

Oh, come on! Become Lord Krishna’s Radhika.

2. Maya: *Chhānnalāi ta chha siūdo kbāli*;

*bunchhan re ni Krishna ta nau jāli*.

The part of my hair is empty [of vermilion], I’m ready to be chosen;

But I hear Lord Krishna’s really cunning.

3. Baburam: *Gara bibā bbeṭa bho chhoṭi ni*;

*Krisnbajikai bandeu bho gopinī*.

[to Krishna] Get married, now you’ve met a girl;

[to Maya] Why don’t you become Lord Krishna’s Gopini anyway?

4. Maya: *Ke bannu ra gopini maile*;

*Kabile bachan dindāinan Krishnale*

Why should I become a Gopini, huh?

Krishna never makes promises.

5. Baburam: *Arko sāl ta paibalchha chboro*;

*Timlāi lina Krishna chhan ekoboro*

Right away next year you’ll have a son;

Krishna is determined to take you away.

6. Maya: *Yastai raichha lobbi jāt, moro*,

*Napāesamma jo pani ekoboro*

I see the never-satisfied kind are like this, silly;

Until they get what they want they’re all determined.

7. Krishna: *Lobb garne ta jātaile pāeko*,

*Tebi bhaera rodbimā āeko*.

It’s my nature to be unsatisfied;

That’s why I’m here at the rodhi.

8. Maya: *Najar pani lāunchban katilāi;*  
*Yasai bbanbhan bbetekā jatilāi.*  
 He [honorific-2] looks greedily at so many;  
 This is what he says to everyone he meets.
9. Krishna: *Kumārai cbbau, ārop chābi nalāunu’;*  
*Aunu’ timī daine bāt samāunu’.*  
 We’re bachelors/virgins, please don’t bring accusations [honorific-3];  
 please come [honorific-3], dear [honorific-2], and take hold of my right hand  
 [honorific-3].

This dohori exchange takes a form that is fairly standard for romance-oriented dohori songs in all performance contexts: the male singer entreats and cajoles, and the female singer resists. It is not unusual that the theme of pursuit and resistance in their sung conversation contrasts with that of mutual desire in the recorded versions of “Poilā Jāna Pām”/ “Maile Lyāuna Pām”; dohori singers will often ignore the theme of the recorded song and its refrain when improvising their own conversational lyrics. However, it is still significant that Maya chooses to play the role of the resistant object of desire rather than that of the equally desiring subject. The theme of male pursuit and female resistance is common not only in dohori, but in song, film, and drama throughout South Asia, as dominant social mores discourage women from expressing sexual desire. Maya is thus choosing the path of modesty. In the chorus after couplet 6, Maya and Tola delete the loaded word *poilā* from their chorus, replacing it with the innocuous word *bibe*—marriage. It was clear that they were uncomfortable singing this song, but as paid performers, they were obliged to fulfill the customer’s request.

Further evidence of Maya’s efforts to distance her performance from the implications of “Poilā Jāna Pām”—to distance her public self from the kind of woman who would go *poilā*—is present in the way she uses honorific language. Baburam starts out by casting the patron Krishna as Lord Krishna and Maya as Radha—in restaurant dohori, it is customary to acknowledge the song’s requestor in the first couplet. Baburam’s choice of the word “*lāūchban*” in his first couplet can be understood as referring either to Krishna, in the second-level honorific form, or to someone else in the first-level or lowest form of the plural (the forms are identical): he’s either saying in a slightly more respectful way that Krishna will put engagement *tika* on his “Radhika,”<sup>18</sup> or, in ordinary conversational language, that someone else will put *tika* on both of them. Either meaning is acceptable, though the second meaning is more in line with general marriage practices. Maya’s choice of honorific level in her response is thus significant. Maya interprets Baburam’s use of “*lāūchban*” as referring to Krishna, and continues to use second-level honorifics in references to Krishna throughout the song. This is not always done: in most restaurant,

recorded, and concert dohori, and in many songs about Lord Krishna, the most familiar first-level honorific form of third-person address is often preferred. Using the second level is Maya's conscious choice to try to give the song an air of respectability and to cast herself as someone who displays respect and honor and is thus worthy of receiving it from others. The topic of Radha and Krishna is common across genres of South Asian song, including those in which female performers stand at the intersections of value systems that frame them as both goddesses and loose women (cf. Babiracki 1997); in this case it is not only the topic itself that Maya uses to represent herself as respectable, but also the honorific language.

When Maya and I later transcribed this performance together, she said she believed that the song's requestor, Krishna, understood this move of hers and mocked her by using higher honorific forms ironically in his final couplet. In the last two exchanges of couplets, Krishna takes the place of Baburam and sings with Maya himself. Krishna uses the infinitive form of the verbs *lāunu*, *āunu*, and *samāunu* as commands. This form is close to the third-level honorific command form but lacks this command form's final /s/. Maya heard this use of infinitives as commands as situated at a higher honorific level than the second-level pronoun *timī* that Krishna uses in the same couplet, and thus understood it as a demonstration of ironic, "excessive" respect. She understood this intonation as calling attention to these third-level honorific forms and connoting a strong entreaty, highlighting the male prerogative of expressing strong desire. The way she saw it, this ironic show of excessive respect cast her as unworthy of receiving respect in return for offering it to others, and implied that as a restaurant dohori singer, her primary role is to be an object of male sexual desire, not a "respectable" woman.

Maya's interpretation is not the only possible way to read this sung interaction. I remember Krishna's tone and demeanor that night as sarcastic, but this may only be due to my loyalty to Maya and my awareness of her mounting frustration at having to perform this song that the other female singers had rejected as demeaning. The use of infinitives as commands, though non-standard in terms of grammar, in fact often accompanies the second-level honorific pronoun *timī*, and thus Krishna's use of the two forms together could be understood as grammatically correct and lacking any sarcasm or irony.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, in the two couplets Krishna sings, he does not use any standard conjugations, suggesting that Nepali may not be his first language, and that he is using non-conjugated forms of verbs in the manner of many non-native speakers. Maya, a native speaker of Nepali, attributed to Krishna a linguistic competence he may not have possessed, as well as a derogatory purpose to his final couplet that he may not have intended.

## Conclusion

What I think is interesting about this instance, and the discussions about whether or not Komal Oli really wants to elope, is the idea of sincerity in performance. Due to dohori's history as a binding practice of marriage negotiation, today's commercial dohori lyrics are taken, to an extent, as performative language in Austin's sense: language that constitutes social reality (Austin 1962). Kusum won't sing the words "Poilā Jāna Pām" because of the implication that she might actually want to leave her husband. Tola doesn't want to sing these lyrics, but agrees because she has to teach Maya the song, plus her husband is used to standing there by the soundboard while she flirts with other men. Maya sticks to the Radha-Krishna topic and uses the honorifics that it enables, in order to give the song, and herself, as respectable a tone as she can. All of these women sing on a regular basis about getting married to men other than their husbands. The problem with "Poilā Jāna Pām" and the word *poilā* is the extensive media controversy about the song; even today, just reference to the song often leads to heated debate. Even though this is the parody song released to criticize Komal and "Poilā Jāna Pām," these women don't want to be associated with it, or with the image of the transgressive Komal Oli that the song conjures up. Under the rhetoric that Komal uses, Kusum and Maya should have no problem with singing about going *poilā*, whatever it means to them, because they're Gurung and, as Komal might see it, they're allowed to have love marriages. Taking this perspective even further, perhaps Tola shouldn't mind either, because even if she's not *janajāti*, she's from a rural hill village and has grown up with Gurungs and Magars all around her. But dohori restaurant performers have a different perspective from that of Komal.

Dohori restaurant performers, as members of Kathmandu's working class whose work is by nature very public, have limited access to the discourse of an "inner strength forged indoors," the public privacy inherent in respectable femininity (Seizer 2005:302). Dohori restaurant performers embody Chatterjee's sexualized other against whom middle-class respectable femininity is defined (Chatterjee 1993). These women are walking a fine line between class categories of artists admired for their talent and skill, and low-class entertainers or prostitutes: their currency in the status economy is not money or political connections, but honor. Dohori restaurant performers are surviving financially on a combination of looks, wit, and vocal virtuosity. Honor is what ties them to the social networks that provide support in hard times. No matter what one actually does privately, it is crucial to keep up an honorable reputation. In the eyes of these dohori performers, Komal has thrown her reputation away; though she is financially well-off, she is bankrupt in terms of honor. Playing Komal's part, saying "*poilā*" onstage, unashamed, is thus a dangerous breach of class protocol.

As Voloshinov reminds us, “Each word, as we know it, is a little arena for the clash and criss-crossing of differently oriented social accents. A word in the mouth of a particular individual person is a product of the living interaction of social forces” (Voloshinov 1986:41). Singers are judged by the words they sing, and class, caste, ethnic and regional affiliations influence how they reconcile their profession with their values and concepts of honor. While Komal can justify singing “May I Elope” by appealing to an imagined rural-janajāti space outside of caste Hindu social restrictions, working-class migrant women of various castes and ethnicities embrace those same restrictions to ensure that their honor remains intact in the big city. If folk music is supposed to represent the essence of Nepali identity, the controversy over “Poilā Jāna Pām” shows that the identities dohori is meant to unite remain messy, contradictory, evolving, and constantly debated.

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## Notes

1. Since I am trying make this genre somewhat familiar to readers, and using diacritics on the genre name would add a layer of highlighted difference, I have omitted the macron on the “i” of dohori in this article. Elsewhere, I use diacritics for Nepali terms except in proper names. An /h/ after a consonant indicates that the consonant is aspirated.

2. Dohori singers are not professional or usually even trained dancers; dancers are seen as belonging to a separate profession. The dohori performed in Kathmandu restaurants comes from a traditional genre that is performed seated, while audience members dance; in 2003, restaurant owner Chhiring Sherpa had his dohori singers perform standing, swaying from side to side and dancing in the amateur, rural style of *jhyaure* dance also familiar to restaurant patrons. Other restaurants followed suit. The style of dance in dohori restaurants serves as a marker of rurality, but it is also a business-oriented practice that calls attention to performers’ bodies. Performers’ dancing also encourages patrons to dance on the dance floor directly in front of the stage, where they are almost, but not quite, dancing with the performers onstage. The overall effect of adding dancing to dohori stages has been to sexualize performers more than when dohori was previously performed seated, by turning the focus of performance to bodily display.

3. According to a survey of all Kathmandu dohori restaurants I conducted in March-May 2007, the demographic breakdown of dohori restaurant performers (whose numbers reflect the wider community of dohori singers and instrumentalists, as most begin their careers with at least a short stint in a restaurant) was as follows: Magar (22%); Bahun (Nepali hill Brahmin) (21%); Chhetri (19%); Gurung (11%); Newar (5%); Tamang (4%); Kami (3%); Damai (3%); Gandharva (Gaine) 3%; Other castes and ethnicities including Thakuri, Rai, Sunuwar, Tharu, Bhujel, Chepang, Limbu, Rajbamsi, and Sherpa (less than 2% each).

4. It is significant that *dalits* (Kami, Damai, Sarki, Gandharva) are left out of this formulation, especially when discussing honor. Dalits remain the other with reference to whom people of high castes and janajāti ethnic groups evaluate their own thoughts and actions: “What Kami-Damai behavior!” is a common epithet used by many high caste people and janajātis alike when criticizing peers or trying to keep children in line.

5. The term “dohori” refers both to the practice of question-answer singing in any genre and to the popular commercial genre of question-answer folk song. Some examples of well-known question-answer song genres that are not part of the mainstream commercial genre, and are associated with particular ethnicities and regions, include *tbaḍo bāka* (Gurung and Dura, Lamjung); *kauda* and *chudkā* (Gurung and Magar, Gandaki area); *selo* (Tamang and Sherpa, central Nepal); *dbān nāch* (Limbu, eastern Nepal); *bākpāre* (Gurung, Tamang, Rai; Sankhuwasabha and Taplejung); and *deuda* (caste Hindu, far western Nepal). Of these, *deuda* is the only well-known genre associated primarily with caste Hindu society.

6. Though it is not evident from their performances on the dohori stage, in which neither of them dance very much, Komal Oli and Maya Gurung embody this dichotomy to some extent. Komal, the protected, high-caste, high-class woman who only performed in school while growing up, is not known for her dancing, and dances very little in her music videos. Maya, on the other hand, won several district-level folk dance competitions in her teens and early twenties.

7. Throughout the year after “Poilā Jāna Pām” was released I documented actual uses of *poilā* in regular conversation, and not surprisingly found more, situationally dependent, shades of meaning, which may or may not have been influenced by the song.

8. Komal also cited these same scholars’ opinions in an interview with the online magazine *Cybersansar* (8/23/06), available at <http://www.cybersansar.com/csnew/article.php?aid=1825>.

9. This conversation took place before the formal interview of the same day, while we were driving in Komal’s car.

10. See especially Chapter Eleven on the song “Dilmano, Dilbero” (“Tell Me How a Pepper is Planted”).

11. The male partner was Narayan Pande, who passed away sometime in the 1990s. Some argue that Narayan, with his inimitable voice and quick wit, was the real reason for Komal’s success in competitions, as dohori teams are judged by the combined scores from the performances of their male and female lead singers in different competition rounds. This argument is popular among people critical of Komal who wish to insinuate that she rose to prominence through means other than her own talent.

12. Despite his criticisms, Suman also says that he tried to tone down the direct attacks on Komal, editing out the harsher parts of Nibam Kshatri’s original lyrics.

13. Gossip about Komal Oli’s Tj 2007 release, “Don’t Bring Home a Second Wife, My Husband,” continued to harp on these themes, wondering if the Komal Oli of “I’m Still Not Married” and “May I Elope” has in fact secretly eloped with the “husband” that the newer song addresses.

14. Later in 2007, Komal Oli and Suman Budha released an album together. While the dohori songs on this album had nothing to do with “Poilā Jāna Pām” and all its parody songs, their joint album sent the message that they had reconciled their personal differences, thus restoring their honor in the eyes of some of their detractors. Komal continues to perform “Poilā Jāna Pām” live, and it is often this song in particular that audiences come to hear.

15. Two Gurung etymologies of the word *rodhi* are usually offered to me. The first is that *rodhi* is a compound of *ro*, to sleep, and *dhi*, house, meaning a house where people sleep; the second takes *ro* to mean wool and interprets *rodhi* as a house where people spin wool. *Ro* has a third meaning, to bloom, which is less frequently invoked to emphasize *rodhi* as a house where youth “bloom” with both connotations of gaining maturity and of expressing youthful energy artistically in song. Gurung is a tonal language and the three meanings of *ro* are pronounced with different tones in some, but not all, dialects. The second meaning makes sense in light of Andors’s research, as spinning wool was a common female activity and the *rodhi* was a female-run association for collective labor as well as for all-night songfests. This meaning is also preferred

by those Gurungs who wish to stress the collective labor aspect of the rodhi institution over its infamy as a site for sexual transgression.

16. Moaisala discusses the songs sung in rodhis, though not their role in participants' social interaction (1991:173-83).

17. Majupuria actually denies that rodhi was a "place of prostitution" as others have alleged, but the two full paragraphs devoted to rodhi in her section on prostitution (2007:257), compared to the half a sentence devoted to rodhi in her section on music and dance (ibid.:266), along with her assertion that marriage proposals were negotiated among rodhi participants (ibid.:257), anger some Gurungs who accuse her of perpetuating dominant-caste prejudices against their culture and heritage.

18. Tika is a mix of rice, yogurt, and (sometimes) vermilion powder applied to the forehead as a blessing.

19. The conventional honorific level of this non-standard use of infinitives as commands is unclear; some Nepalis I have talked with place it on the second honorific level, others on the third. Linguistic anthropologist Laura Ahearn suggested that it occupies a space in between the two levels (personal communication, 10 September 2009, New York City).

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