

Kathmandu Dohori Restaurant Performers

A demographic survey of the field in 2007

Anna Stirr
Columbia University

Table of Contents

Kathmandu Dohori Restaurant Performers	1
A demographic survey of the field in 2007	1
Introduction.....	3
Methods.....	3
Dohori Restaurant Performer Survey	3
Dohori Restaurants in Kathmandu: An Introduction	3
Gender and Musical Activity	4
Artists' Home Regions	6
Dohori's History in Western Nepal	6
Caste and Ethnicity	7
Caste/Ethnicity and Region	8
Caste/Ethnicity, Gender and Education	10
Dalits' Situation	11
Genre, Gender and Region	11
Economic Status	14
Education Level.....	14
Gender and Income	15
Women on the low end (3500 or less)	15
Men on the low end (3500 or less)	16
Women on the high end (10,000 or more):.....	16
Men on the high end	16
Gender Disparities	17
Policy Implications	17

Introduction

Dohori song, the flirtatious exchange of improvised lyrics between men and women, provides a unique site to study gender and migration in Nepal. During the last 10 years, this traditional practice of several rural hill ethnic groups has become a commercial phenomenon fuelled largely by migration from rural hill villages to Kathmandu and abroad. This migration has been driven by a complex combination of factors, including mainly the Maoist People's War and economic necessity. As more and more villagers pass through Kathmandu on their way to and from foreign employment, and as more and more villagers migrate to Kathmandu itself in search of employment, dohori has become the backbone of the Nepali recording industry and a popular form of nighttime entertainment, performed in restaurants both staffed and patronized overwhelmingly by migrants from rural hill villages.

Both men and women are employed as performers in dohori restaurants. For performers, dohori is a step up from other forms of wage labor: not only does it provide income, but it also offers opportunities for advancement and the lure of becoming a star. Dohori occupies an ambiguous space in the national imagination, promoted as cultural heritage but also disparaged as low-class and excessively sexual. It appeals to many for its gender egalitarianism, as men and women perform as equal partners in a lyrical battle of wits. Yet dohori restaurants are often derided as little better than brothels, owing to long-standing associations of music and dance with sexual activity that are prevalent throughout South Asia, and to the presence of sexual transactions between dohori restaurant patrons and female employees, both performers and waitresses. Class, caste/ethnicity, and region are also major factors in how dohori and dohori performers are perceived: dohori is seen as music of uneducated, low-class rural laborers, and is mainly associated with Gurungs and Magars from the Gandaki zone. This report, using data from a survey of dohori restaurant performers, aims to provide a demographic picture of the men and women employed in dohori, with a focus on region of origin, ethnicity and income, and the relationship of these three factors with the particular demands and characteristics of this profession.

Methods

Dohori Restaurant Performer Survey

The main survey of dohori restaurant performers on which this report is based is part of a larger Ph.D. dissertation-oriented project on migration, gender and national identity in Nepali dohori song and its related social practices. Research for this study has been ongoing since September 2006 (Bhadou 2063). Participant observation is the main method of this study, supplemented by semi-structured interviews, analysis of audiovisual and print media, and this survey, which contains both quantitative and qualitative questions. My interpretation of survey data is significantly informed by the data I have gathered through other methods.

This survey was designed to collect demographic information on dohori restaurant performers. It focuses only on performers and does not include people employed in dohori restaurants in other capacities, such as servers, kitchen workers or bouncers. It was conducted from April 2007 (Chait 2063) to June 2007 (Asar 2064) in 90% of the 50 dohori restaurants in Kathmandu, and in 100% of the 10 dohori restaurants in Pokhara. Informal surveys were conducted in Narayangadh, Dhangadhi, Butwal and Dharan.¹ I distributed and collected all the forms myself with help from Dr. Narayan Gurung, Ram Kumar Singh, and Kumar Gurung.

At 48 restaurants with an average of 12 performers per restaurant, I estimated that there were 576 dohori restaurant performers in Kathmandu. I distributed forms to 544 people, or 94% of the estimated population. 67% of artists who received forms responded to the survey, providing us with data on 62% of dohori restaurant performers in Kathmandu.

In order to encourage people to answer questions truthfully, respondents had the option to remain anonymous, and many chose to do so. Comparison of the data supplied by those who chose not to remain anonymous, and my personal knowledge of their lives gained through extended participant observation-based fieldwork, suggests that the great majority of artists took this survey seriously and answered truthfully to the best of their abilities. That said, it is true that a small fraction of people answered some questions untruthfully. I was able to cross-check with people who put their names on their forms, and with people I knew well whose identity was obvious even without their names. In some cases I asked them directly and compared their answers with what they wrote; in other cases I asked others close to them if they knew, for example, how much a person had studied, or if a person was a member of the dalit artists' organization despite having written a Chhetri name on their form. People were most likely to lie about their monthly income, caste, and level of education. I believe that the main reason for these answers is that many people did not choose to fill out the forms in private, but rather did so where it was possible for others to see their answers, even though I explained the option of anonymity on the form and in person. Thus, these data should be understood as describing dohori artists as they chose to represent themselves.

Dohori Restaurants in Kathmandu: An Introduction

Walk through Thamel any night of the week; or perhaps down Putali Sadak, Pulchowk, Gaushala, or through the streets surrounding Sundhara or Gongabu Bus Park. Thanks to sound systems cranked up as high as the volume will go, the beat of the madal, tune of the flute, and unmistakable voices will lead you to a dohori restaurant, even if you happen to miss its well-lit signs. Walk through the door and waitresses in low-waisted saris will lead you to a dhaka-covered table in view of

¹ While this report focuses on Kathmandu, I occasionally cite the data from Pokhara and other cities for comparative purposes.

the stage. If you're early enough in the night, the program may consist mostly of *adhunik git* sung by the male harmonium player, as female singers put finishing touches on their makeup and dress (usually Gurung-Magar-style), and appear one by one onstage. More *adhunik git* and solo *lok git* will follow. The later in the evening, the more patrons will be on the dance floor, emboldened by alcohol and perhaps taking their turn at singing *dohori* with the performers onstage. Three or four women in traditional Gurung-Magar dress take turns singing *dohori* with patrons, and with the restaurant's two or three male singers. It's usually male patrons who opt to sing, improvising flirtatious banter with the female singer of their choice. But it is the musicians that make people dance: two men playing *madal* and *dholak*, another on flute or *sarangi*, a harmonium, and the latest addition, a computerized drum pad. If you've come to the right place and request the right song, they might switch over to the instruments of a *panchaj baja*. The music is raucous and lively, as is the dancing; the few female patrons who brave the dance floor are easily overwhelmed by boisterous male camaraderie. From 7 to midnight, while waiters and waitresses keep glasses and bellies full, the performers maintain this atmosphere of welcoming, rowdy energy through their music, improvised words, and movement onstage. It is art, it is entertainment, and for the performers, it is also work.

Dohori restaurants make up a small fraction of Kathmandu's growing restaurant business. Comrade Pitamber, chairman of the central Kathmandu branch of the CPN(M)-affiliated Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union, estimates that in his area alone there are over 1500 restaurants, from the smallest tea shops to the most expensive hotels. He and his colleagues estimate 10,000 restaurants in the Kathmandu valley.² *Dohori* restaurant owners estimate that in 2004, at the peak of the *dohori* craze, there were about 80 *dohori* restaurants in Kathmandu.³ Currently, in 2008, while *dohori* restaurants continue to close and open anew, the number has held steady at about 50 restaurants since 2006.

The *dohori* restaurant business actually started in Pokhara: Captain Min Bahadur Gurung's Danphe Club presented *dohori* occasionally in the mid-1980s. Well-known *dohori* singer Prajapati Parajuli, who performed at the Danphe Club and rose to fame through national *dohori* competitions, started a *dohori* restaurant in his own house in Pokhara. In 1996, Mukta Gurung and Bhumi Raj Gurung from Tanahun opened a restaurant modeled after Prajapati Parajuli's in their hotel, Pukar, in Sundhara, Kathmandu. This was Kathmandu's first commercial *dohori* restaurant, opened, significantly, before the major increase in migration to Kathmandu that arose during the Maoist People's War. Elsewhere I have suggested that the legacy of nationwide *dohori* competitions, combined with Gurung entrepreneurship, concern with cultural tradition, and long-standing involvement in military labor migration with its resulting rise in income and urban nostalgia for rural practices, allowed Pukar to thrive and set the tone associating commercial *dohori* with the Gurung ethnic group.⁴

Pukar was followed by Dovan in Thamel in 1998, which DSP Ganja Singh Gurung (also originally of Tanahun) opened with the aim of promoting traditional Gurung culture of the Gandaki region. As these thrived, other *dohori* restaurants opened. Nationwide *dohori* competitions, begun by the state in the 1980s but abandoned after the 1990 People's Movement changed the face of government, began again with the Visit Nepal '98 tourism campaign. A *dohori* competition, sponsored in part by the Tourism Board, brought live *dohori* into the capital for days of daytime entertainment, drawing an audience mainly of working-class migrants but alerting others to its presence with a booming sound system and the crowds that gathered at the national Exhibition Grounds. 1990s increases in international migration brought more hill villagers to Kathmandu on their way to and from foreign places of employment, and *dohori* sales surged as recording companies capitalized on migrant workers' desire to hear the music of their homeland. The proliferation of FM radio stations, established in Nepal only in 1996, also brought *dohori* into the homes of many new listeners, creating many new folk song programs that primarily played *dohori*, partly because newly established FM stations relied on 20-30 minute long *dohori* songs to fill their airtime. This combination of renewed competitions; increased international migration and thus increased movement from the hills to Kathmandu; and FM radio created a greater awareness of *dohori*, and a favorable environment for *dohori* restaurants.

While there were several thriving *dohori* restaurants in central Kathmandu throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, it was after the People's War intensified throughout the country that the *dohori* restaurant boom began. While it cannot be said that violence in the countryside was the only thing that caused those not fighting to leave their villages, it added another factor to the push of economic hardship and the pull of opportunity. Some who observed the growth of *dohori* restaurants in this period assumed that performers came to Kathmandu fleeing violence in their villages, and used the skills they had to survive. While this is partially true, *dohori* restaurant performers responding to this survey cite fame, love of music, love of country, and other reasons along with necessity, for joining this particular profession.

Gender and Musical Activity

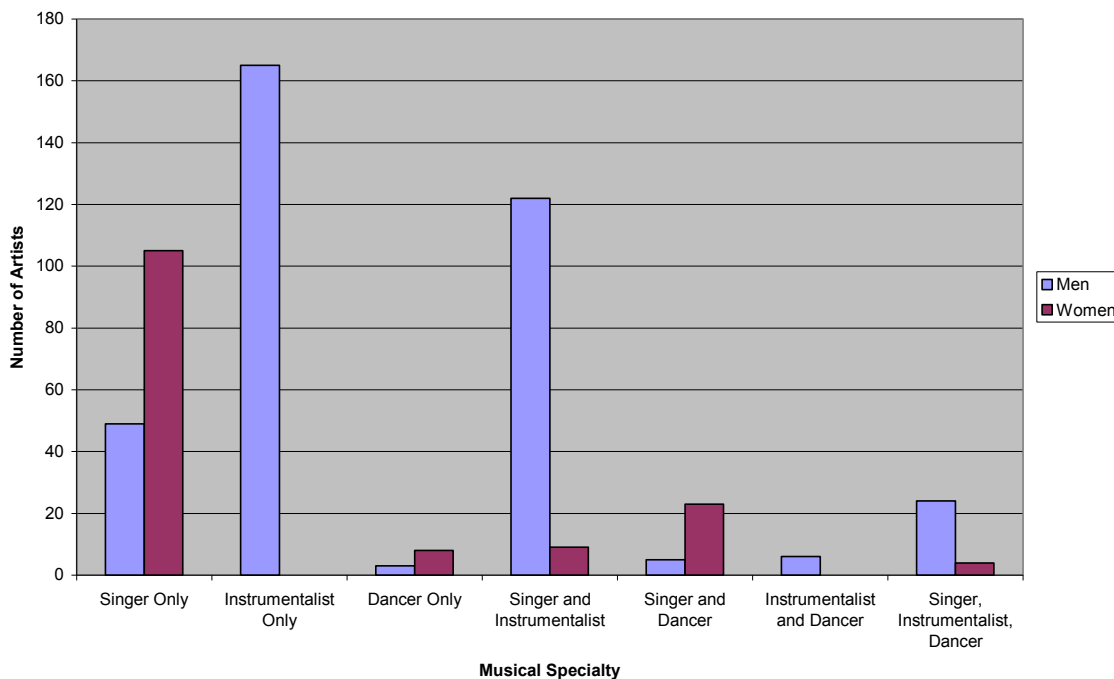
To understand *dohori* artists it is important to understand many things about *dohori* itself. That is, there are many socio-musical reasons that underlie this demographic portrait of one group of migrants to Kathmandu. For example, this chart shows that there are more men than women working in *dohori* restaurants, and that women are primarily employed as singers only, while most instrumentalists are men.

² Interview with Comrade Pitamber, 6.7.08.

³ Interview with Prem Lama, 1.9.07.

⁴ Stirr, Anna. *Sangeet ra basai sarai. Dohori ra Gurung jati ko bhumika*. Paper presented at TECANET, 5/30/2008.

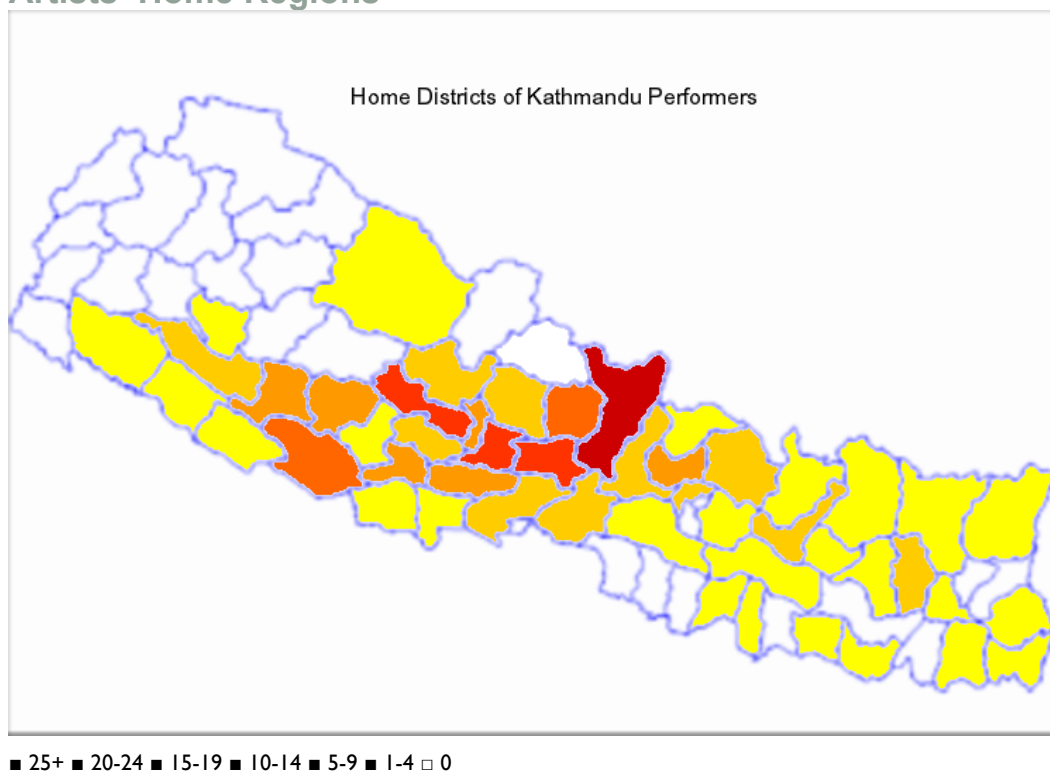
Musical Specialties: Kathmandu Artists



There are more men than women working in dohori restaurants because of the traditional idea that musical instruments are a man’s domain, common among many social groups in the hills of Nepal. A dohori restaurant usually hires three or four female singers, and the other seven or eight singers and musicians are male. Both men and women sing. As this chart shows, only men identify as instrumentalists only, and considerably more women identify as singers only. While a few women sometimes play instruments in dohori restaurants, they are usually filling in for a man on his break. Only a few dohori restaurants employ dancers, both male and female; among dancers it is mostly men who also play instruments and sing. While more women are learning instruments like the madal, harmonium and flute, male instrumentalists remain the norm: even when women do play the instruments used in dohori restaurants, they are not hired to do so.

These data are one example of how cultural ideas about music shape the demographic profile of this group of musicians. The social history of dohori also influences where artists come from, their caste/ethnic and educational backgrounds, and their place in the hierarchy of social class.

Artists' Home Regions



The great majority of performers in Kathmandu dohori restaurants are migrants living far from their original homes and families. Many live alone, while many live with other dohori performers, mutually supporting each other. They rely to a degree on family, regional and caste/ethnic ties for support, but most aim to succeed as independently as possible. While remittances were not measured in this survey, most artists do send money home, supporting parents and grandparents, spouses and children. While they have moved to the capital to work, their lives remain connected to their homes.

This map shows the home districts of Kathmandu dohori performers. It is clear that the majority of performers hail from central Nepal, officially its Western Development Region. Most significantly represented is the Gandaki zone and its near surroundings, especially the districts of Gorkha, Tanahun, Syangja, and Lamjung in the Gandaki zone, and Baglung in Dhaulagiri. The Far-Western region is not represented at all, and the Central and Eastern regions, especially the eastern Tarai, are home to comparatively fewer performers. While concentrated on the Gandaki zone, dohori performers' home districts lie throughout Nepal's hill region. Tarai districts home to the greatest number of dohori performers—Dang, Nawalparasi, and Chitwan, are the Inner Tarai or Chure-Bhabar districts, common destinations for many migrants from the hills.

The six districts home to the greatest number of artists—Gorkha, Baglung, Tanahun, Syangja, Lamjung, and Dang—are notable because of their relationship with the road to Kathmandu. The southern areas of Gorkha and Lamjung, along with Tanahun and Syangja, lie along the road connecting Kathmandu with Pokhara and the Tarai's east-west highway through Butwal. This road has been a magnet for migration out of the hills, as families leave their remote rural landholdings for the promise of jobs and better education in the bazaars strung like beads along the road. Baglung has its own such road, which joins the Dhaulagiri zone's major bazaar, Beni, with the major east-west route at Pokhara; Dang, the major migration destination for families from Pyuthan, Rolpa, Salyan and further north in the hills, lies along the east-west highway in the Tarai. While other urban areas lie in between, years of centralized policies have made Kathmandu the center of Nepal's development, the beacon for Nepalis looking for educational and economic opportunities, or a new life in the city. Most foreign employment recruiting agencies operate through Kathmandu, the site of Nepal's only international airport; a large percentage of dohori restaurants' clientele are international migrants passing through Kathmandu, and people associated with recruiting agencies. It is to Kathmandu that artists in search of opportunities turn.

Dohori's History in Western Nepal

There are many factors that contribute to this distribution of Kathmandu dohori artists' original homes, but I argue that the main factor is musical: dohori's home is in Nepal's central hills. The majority of dohori songs sung at competitions, released on albums, and sung in dohori restaurants are based on the genres and styles associated with the

Western Development Region and its near surroundings. Central among these is the Gandaki zone. The Central Development Region, the Far West, and the East, are home to other types of question-answer song such as *deuda*, *Tamang selo*, *gothalo git*, *hakpare*, and *dhaan naach*, which do not enjoy the same degree of commercial popularity.

The Gandaki zone's prominence in the history of Nepali folk music is no accident, and has much to do with those in charge at Radio Nepal during its 46-year heyday as Nepal's only radio station.⁵ Dharma Raj Thapa, in charge of the Folk Music department, hails from Batulechaur village in Kaski district. His leadership ensured that the songs of his home region were broadcast nationwide, more than songs from any other regions, and that musicians from his home area, such as the legendary *Jhalak Man Gandharva*, became household names far beyond the borders of Kaski district or the Gandaki zone. Thapa's writings on Nepali folk music concentrate on the Gandaki zone while representing themselves as depictions of the Nepali nation and its music. Equally important in bringing the Gandaki zone to national musical prominence is Kumar Basnet, Nepal's premier folk song collector, singer, dancer, and longtime Radio Nepal staff member. Though he himself hails from Dolakha, he saves his highest praise for the music of the Gandaki zone: "I always say: the Gandaki zone is Nepal's richest musical area."⁶

Kumar Basnet had direct influence over the musical shape that commercial *dohori* would take. In the early 1980s, as the Sports Council planned to add *dohori* competitions to the upcoming national games, Basnet was in charge of developing judging criteria and choosing talented singers. To ensure that singers from different areas could compete in the same tune, he wrote a song and circulated it widely among Nepal's 75 districts. The song was a *jhyure bhaka* tune⁷, with 20-syllable couplets and a *thego* or refrain, in a major pentatonic scale: a typical style from the Gandaki zone, yet a style not identified with any particular ethnic group. This first song set the tone for *dohori* in nationwide competitions and in the recording industry, and Bambahadur Karki and Prem Raja Mahat's pioneering release of a 30-minute *dohori* song, *Khola Paari Nirmaya* (Music Nepal 1984), followed suit with a similar tune, meter and beat. Recorded *dohori* songs, and songs sung at competitions, continued to follow this pattern throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s; this style of song remains by far the most popular within commercial *dohori*. While Nepalis from other areas may argue with Kumar Basnet's opinion on their quality, the musical styles of the Gandaki zone and the wider Western Development Region are surely the most well-recognized throughout the nation.

Caste and Ethnicity

[I became an artist] because I was born in a Gurung community where there was a rodhi ghar tradition in the village; it was my personal interest since I was little. Also, [I wanted] to stop our culture from being lost and to preserve it. (21 year old Gurung man from Gorkha).

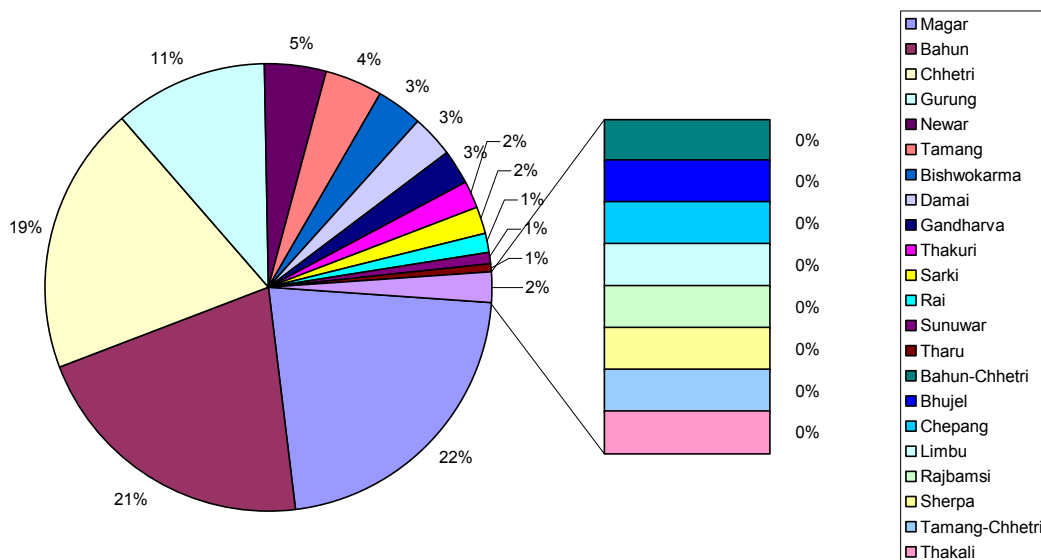
The popular styles of *dohori* singing from Nepal's Western Development Region owe much to Gurung and Magar traditional practices, including the youth dormitory traditions of *Rodhi* (Gurung) and *Basghar* (Magar; also known by many other names regionally) and the practice of singing *dohori* all night, which has come to be often referred to as *Rodhi* after the Gurung tradition, though it is practiced by members of other castes and ethnicities as well. 2001 census data shows that while Gurungs dominate in the northern Gandaki zone, Magars are the major ethnic group in the southern part of this zone, extending westward into the hills of Rapti and Dhaulagiri. Brahmins and Chhetris also have a significant presence in this primarily Magar domain (Sharma 2008:21). These major ethnic/caste groups in the central/western region of Nepal are also the groups most prominent in Kathmandu *dohori* restaurants.

⁵ See Pratyoush Onta, ed. *Radio Nepalko Samajik Itihas* for a history of Radio Nepal.

⁶ Interview with Kumar Basnet, 7/11/08.

⁷ For a musical explanation of *jhyure bhaka* and other genres, see Subi Shah's work on folk music.

Kathmandu Dohori Restaurant Performers: Caste/Ethnicity



Caste/Ethnicity and Region

This chart shows that the greatest number of Kathmandu dohori performers are Magar (22%), followed closely by Brahmin (21%) and Chhetri (19%), with Gurungs in a distant fourth place (11%).⁸ These numbers are somewhat in line with the 2001 census numbers for the largest ethnic/caste populations in the six main districts these artists call home:⁹ Gorkha (Gurung), Baglung (Magar), Tanahun (Magar), Syangja (Brahmin), Lamjung (Gurung), and Dang (Chhetri) (Sharma 2008:16). The major discrepancy is in the surprisingly low number of Gurungs. Why are so few Gurungs represented in Kathmandu dohori restaurants, when dohori is promoted as their own ethnic heritage, and the districts in which they form the largest population are so well represented?

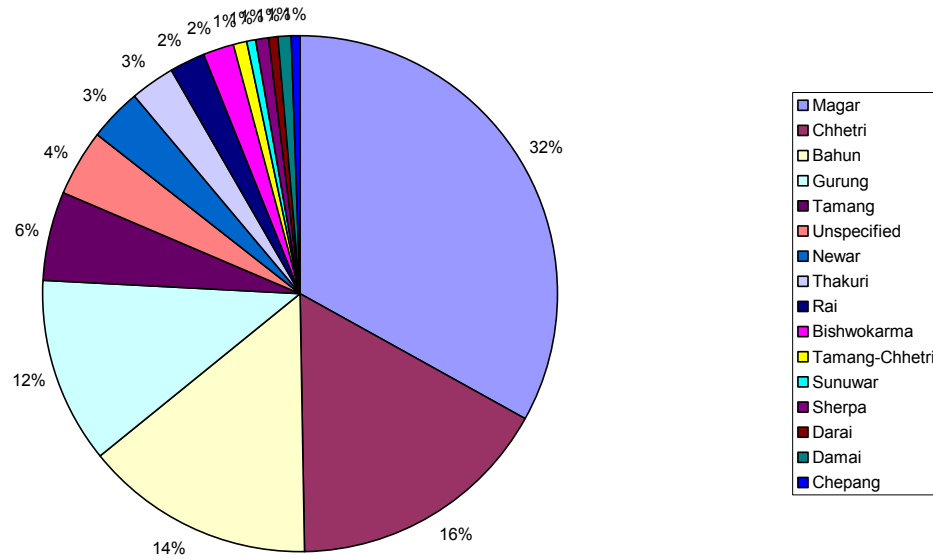
First of all, based on 2001 census data, Gurungs form a much smaller percentage (2.39%) of Nepal’s overall population than do Chhetris (15.8%), Brahmins (12.74%), or Magars (7.14%). In relation to their proportion of the overall population, Gurungs are thus very well-represented in the dohori restaurant world—their percent share of the dohori restaurant performer population is almost five times their percent share of the total population of Nepal. Second, though Gurungs may be most populous in Lamjung and Gorkha, they dominate in the more remote, northern parts of the districts (Nepal Tamang Ghedung 2006:13; Sharma 2008:21). When looking at performers’ home VDCs along with their home districts, it becomes apparent that most artists from Gorkha and Lamjung, where Gurungs are most populous, come from the southern parts of these districts, where Magars, Brahmins and Chhetris live in greater concentrations than Gurungs (Sharma 2008:21), and access to the road and to jobs in Kathmandu is more readily available. Thus, many artists from these districts are not necessarily Gurung, but rather belong to the other three prominent ethnic/caste groups.

The castes and ethnicities that make up the smaller percentages of the dohori restaurant population include several Dalit castes, two whose traditional occupation is music—Gandharva and Damai—as well as the more populous Bishwokarma (Kami) and Sarki groups. The janajati groups that fall in the minority are mainly from eastern areas of Nepal, where dohori is less popular, with slightly larger numbers of Tamangs and Newars, the most populous janajati groups in Kathmandu and its surrounding areas. Lastly, some people identified as belonging to two different castes; I include these hyphenated identities as an important reminder that ethnicity and caste are shifting categories, and these boundaries that we set up for the purpose of data analysis may not necessarily be the same ones that define dohori artists’ experience in their daily lives.

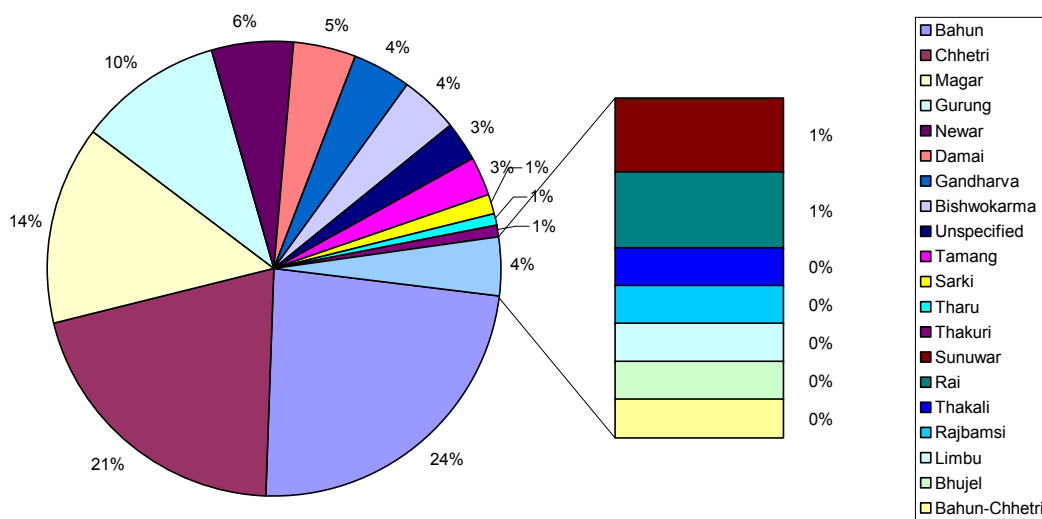
⁸ Ethnic groups that make up less than 1% of the population have been rounded down to 0% on this and the following ethnicity charts; in actuality their numbers lie between 0 and 1%.

⁹ Though a particular group may be the largest ethnic/caste group in a district, this does not necessarily mean they hold a majority (greater than 50%).

Kathmandu Women: Caste-Ethnicity



Kathmandu Men: Caste-Ethnicity



Caste/Ethnicity, Gender and Education

There are significant gender differences in the ethnic/caste makeup of Kathmandu's dohori artist population. Put most simply, a greater percent of women come from janajati ethnic groups, while a greater percent of men come from caste Hindu groups. As the charts above show, a full 60% of women come from janajati ethnic groups (32% Magar and 12% Gurung), with 30% identifying as Brahmin and Chhetri, and only 3% from the Dalit castes. Among the men, roughly 37% come from janajati ethnic groups (14% Magar and 10% Gurung), while 45% identify as Brahmin and Chhetri and 9% as Dalit. Eastern janajati groups and multi-caste identities make up the minority groups of both men and women.

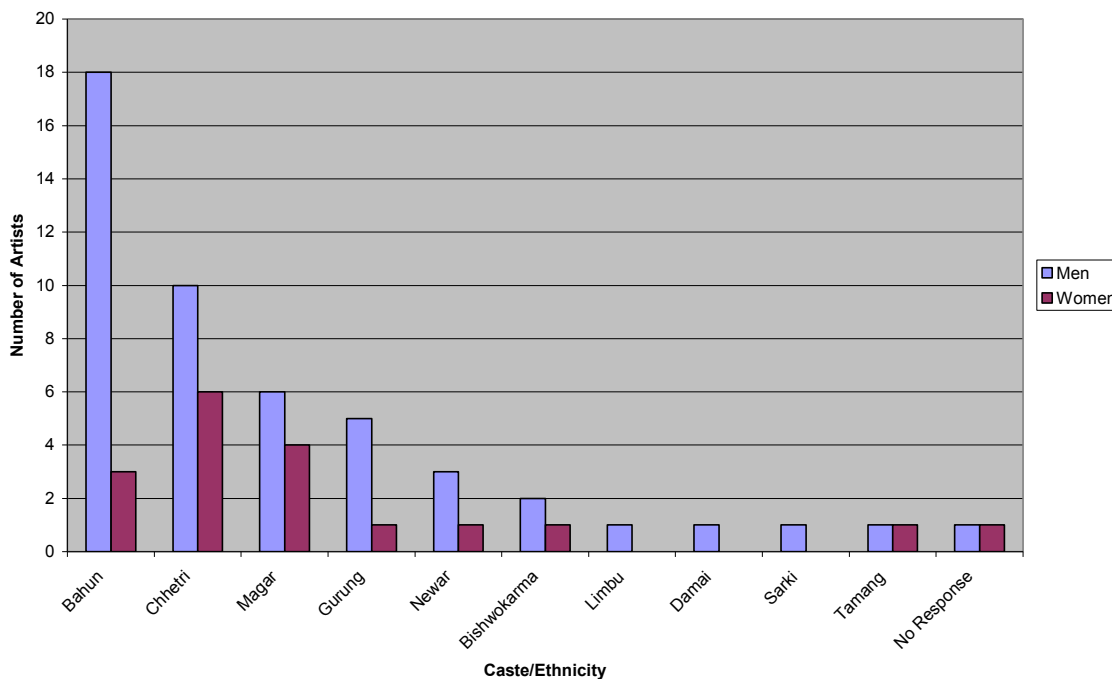
There are several separate factors that influence these gender differences. The facts that dohori is a Gurung-Magar tradition, and that janajati women have traditionally enjoyed more freedom in interacting with the opposite sex than have caste Hindu women, probably contribute to the large number of janajati women and comparatively smaller number of caste Hindu women working in dohori restaurants. Janajati women are also proportionally less likely than Brahmins and Chhetris to have had secondary education, making them more likely to work in jobs like dohori, which do not require formal education (Nepal Tamang Ghedung 2006:59-61). The Brahmin-Chhetri emphasis both on education and on separating the sexes may also serve to keep Brahmin-Chhetri women away from dohori restaurant jobs; unlike the large number of Brahmin-Chhetri men who work in dohori to pay the bills while studying (see below), only 18% of Brahmin-Chhetri women dohori performers are students as well. This suggests that Brahmin-Chhetri student women, of which there are many in Kathmandu, choose to work in dohori much less often than do Brahmin-Chhetri men.

The large proportion of Brahmin and Chhetri compared to janajati men deserves some attention. I believe that this has much to do with conventional priorities in different caste/ethnic groups, especially those related to education and employment. As Tod Ragsdale notes for Kaski in the 1970s (Ragsdale 1974), Brahmins then focused much more on educating their children to prepare for jobs in the civil service, while Gurungs and Magars aspired to send their sons into the British or Indian armies. 2001 census data suggests that Brahmins and Chhetris continue to prioritize education: 74.7% of hill Brahmin-Chhetri men over 15 years old have ever attended school, compared to 55.7% of hill janajati men.¹⁰ The Nepal Living Standards Survey's statistics on sources of remittances show that in 2003 and 2004, most Brahmins and Chhetris worked in Nepal, while half of the Gurung and Magar workforce was in foreign countries (Nepal Tamang Ghedung 2006:93). My own ethnographic experience suggests that employment in the British and Indian armies remains a prestige occupation among Gurungs and Magars, and that this history of military work abroad, combined with continued Brahmin-Chhetri domination of white-collar jobs within Nepal, has made other types of foreign employment readily acceptable and attractive options for janajati (and Dalit) men, perhaps at an earlier age and a lower level of education than that at which Brahmin-Chhetri men would pursue those avenues.

The following chart depicts the dohori performers who listed "student" as their additional occupation; 18% of dohori artists as a whole. As this was a voluntary category, this is not an exhaustive list: there are other artists who did not indicate their student status on the survey form.

¹⁰ This data places Newars and Thakalis in a separate category; I here cite the data for "other hill janajatis" (Nepal Tamang Ghedun, 2006:59-60).

Caste/Ethnicity of Artists Listing "Student" as Additional Occupation



Among Kathmandu dohori artists, two-thirds of the men who list their additional occupation as “student” are Brahmin and Chhetri. Over half of the men who list no additional occupation are janajati and Dalit. This suggests that more Brahmin and Chhetri men may be staying in Kathmandu to further their education, working in dohori restaurants as temporary jobs to pay the bills, while more janajati and Dalit men are depending on dohori jobs as a livelihood. Given the difference between dohori restaurant income and what can be earned in a month of foreign employment (see the section on income below), it is no surprise that more janajati men would rather choose to work abroad.

Dalits' Situation

The situation for Dalits is somewhat different than that for Brahmin-Chhetris and janajatis. First of all, the number of Dalits working as dohori artists is hard to determine, because not only do some Dalits choose not to report on their caste, they may also report their “stage identities,” names they have adopted which do not signal a Dalit identity. A slightly larger percentage of women (4%) than men (3%) do not specify their caste or ethnicity, suggesting that caste identity may be a greater issue for women than for men. In this survey, 3% of female and 9% of male artists identify as Dalit. While most of the women come from the more populous Bishwokarma (Kami) caste, more of the men come from two occupational musician castes, Gandharva and Damai. These men are working within their traditional occupations, playing the sarangi and the instruments of the Panchai Baja. As it is very rare for women or members of other castes/ethnic groups to play these instruments professionally, these instruments remain the domain of Gandharva and Damai men. Thus it makes sense that there are more Dalit men than Dalit women employed in dohori restaurants.

Genre, Gender and Region

Because lok dohori is the authentic identity of Nepalis, especially of Magars, our own customs, traditions and identity should never be made into a business and should be approached with the goal of letting culture shine through... I hope that we won't change our own essence by combining...rap, jazz etc. I hope that by incorporating old folk instruments and other such things, lok dohori will become even more authentic. (22 year old Chhetri man from Ramechhap)

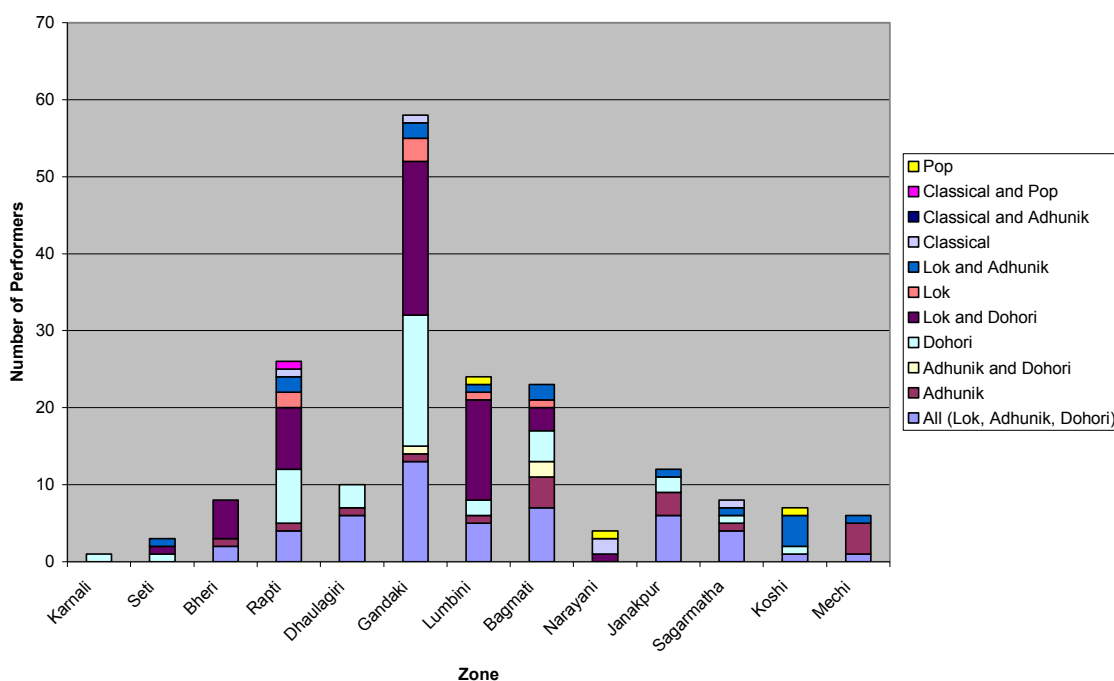
There are a lot of changes that should be made in lok dohori. Mostly lok dohori is only given a place [in restaurants]; instead of doing this it would be good if adhunik, pop, etc. were also given a place. (18 year old Magar woman from Parbat)

The above quotations evince two ideas about genre in dohori restaurants. One wants to keep dohori “authentic” without mixing in foreign-influenced genres, while the other hopes to see these genres take their place in dohori restaurants too. The debate about musical authenticity and innovation takes many forms in the Nepali music world. Regarding dohori, “authenticity” usually refers to keeping foreign, including Indian, influences out of the music, and out of the restaurants.

Yet styles and genres beyond Gandaki-zone dohori are also performed in dohori restaurants, including some with foreign influences. The style of dohori based on tunes from central Nepal, known as Kathe Git since it comes from the area around Kathmandu, is also popular, more so in Kathmandu restaurants than in its market share of the recording industry. In addition to dohori, various types of solo folk songs (lok git) and adhunik and rastriya git (songs on Nepali national themes, musically based on Euro-American style harmonic chord progressions) are also routinely performed in dohori restaurants. An individual dohori restaurant will try to present performers with a diversity of specialties: a man who can sing adhunik git and play the harmonium, a woman whose improvised words in dohori will keep guests coming back for more, a woman whose voice suits adhunik git, a man who is good at kathe dohori. Some performers may not be interested in dohori at all: an aspiring pop guitarist may take a job as a drum pad player in a dohori restaurant, just to pay the bills.

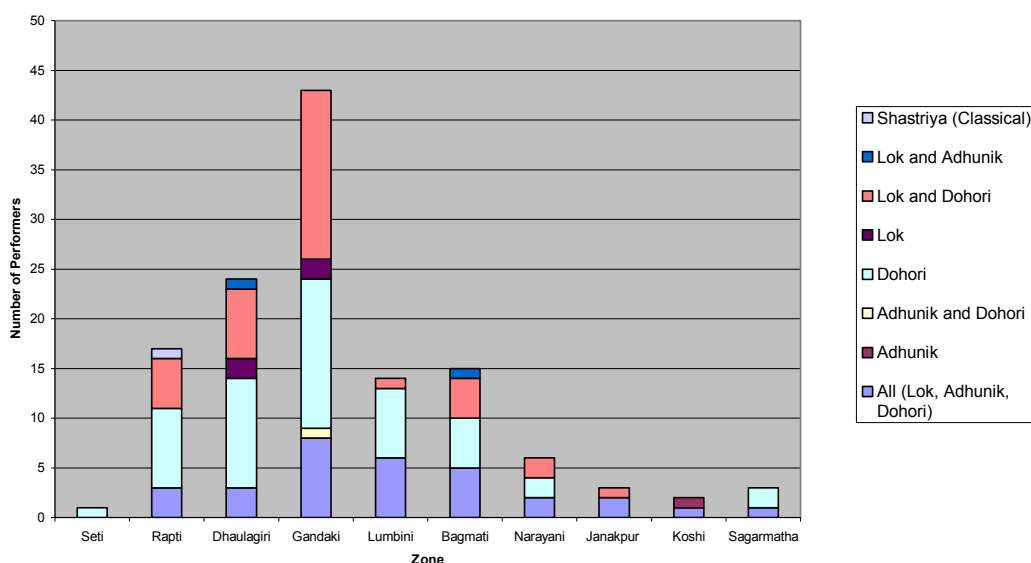
In the survey, I asked what genres artists preferred to perform: did they consider themselves best at lok git, adhunik git, dohori, or another genre? The following charts organize artists' responses by gender and zone. These responses both uphold the argument that many artists hail from the Western region because of its long-standing connection with dohori, and show that artists from other places, while they may be competent at performing dohori, tend to specialize in other genres.

Genre Preferences: Kathmandu Men



The men's chart shows the greatest variety of genre preferences. In addition to the dohori restaurant standbys of lok, adhunik and dohori, several men also listed classical and pop as the genre they preferred to perform. Those who list dohori only as a preference come mainly from the Rapti, Dhaulagiri and Gandaki zones, as do those who list lok and dohori, with the addition of the Lumbini zone. Men from the eastern zones tend to list adhunik as a preference much more. This is not surprising, as western-style dohori is known in the east mostly through recordings, and the scales of eastern folk music use more tones, creating a greater similarity with the European/American-influenced, harmonic-progression-based adhunik and rastriya git. This variety of preferences among the men is not surprising when we remember that men are hired for a variety of musical roles in dohori restaurants, while women performers are hired only as singers.

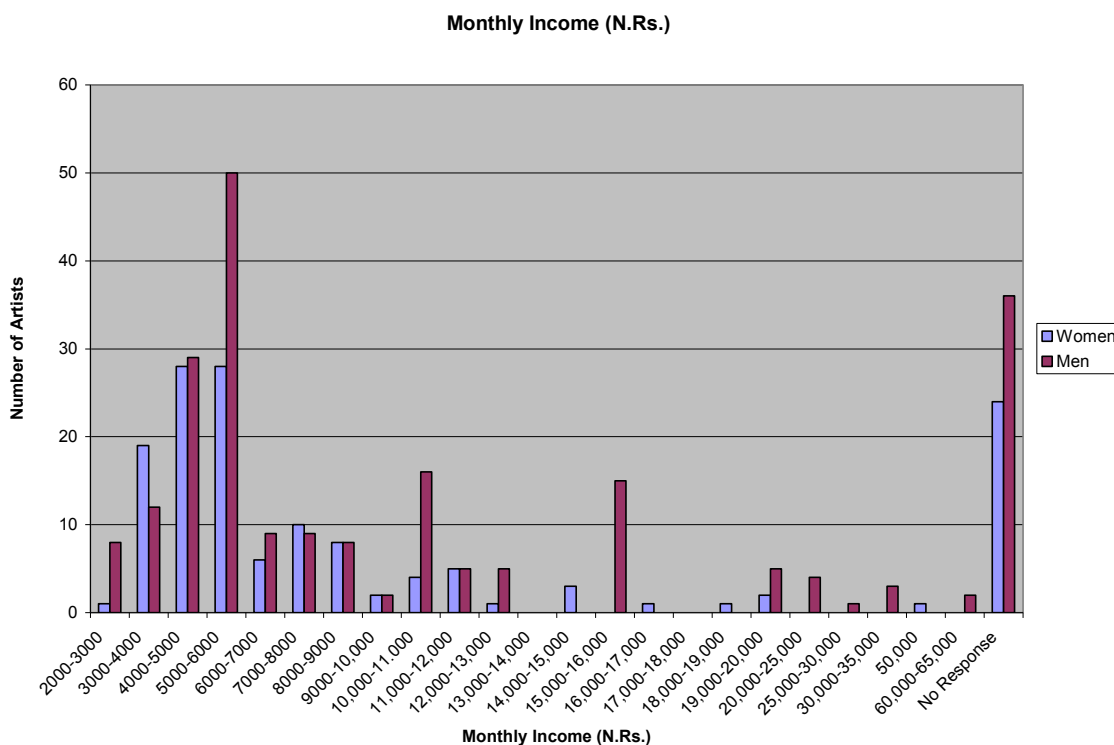
Genre Preferences by Zone: Kathmandu Women



Almost all women include dohori in their list of preferred genres, which is not surprising, as they are mostly hired specifically to sing dohori. Female singers play an important role in dohori restaurants, as they are more often called on to sing dohori with the restaurants' customers than are male singers: the flirtatious dohori popular in the restaurants is almost always sung between members of opposite sexes, and there is a much smaller female clientele. Thus, female singers must be competent dohori singers—one who can only sing solo songs, however good her voice, will not bring in customers who come to dohori to flirt with women in song. However, there are a few women who state preferences for lok only, adhunik only, or classical only. These women may see dohori restaurant jobs as a gateway into other areas of the music industry, a way to gain experience and a way to finance their musical ambitions in other genres, much like the men who do the same.

For some dohori restaurant performers, the dohori stage is just a job; for others, it is a creative outlet that supplements their income from another job; for still others, it is part of their dream of being an artist. Income is a major concern to all artists, whatever their motivation to work in dohori. The next section of this article examines the relation of monthly income to the demographic aspects discussed so far, focusing primarily on differences in income between men and women.

Economic Status



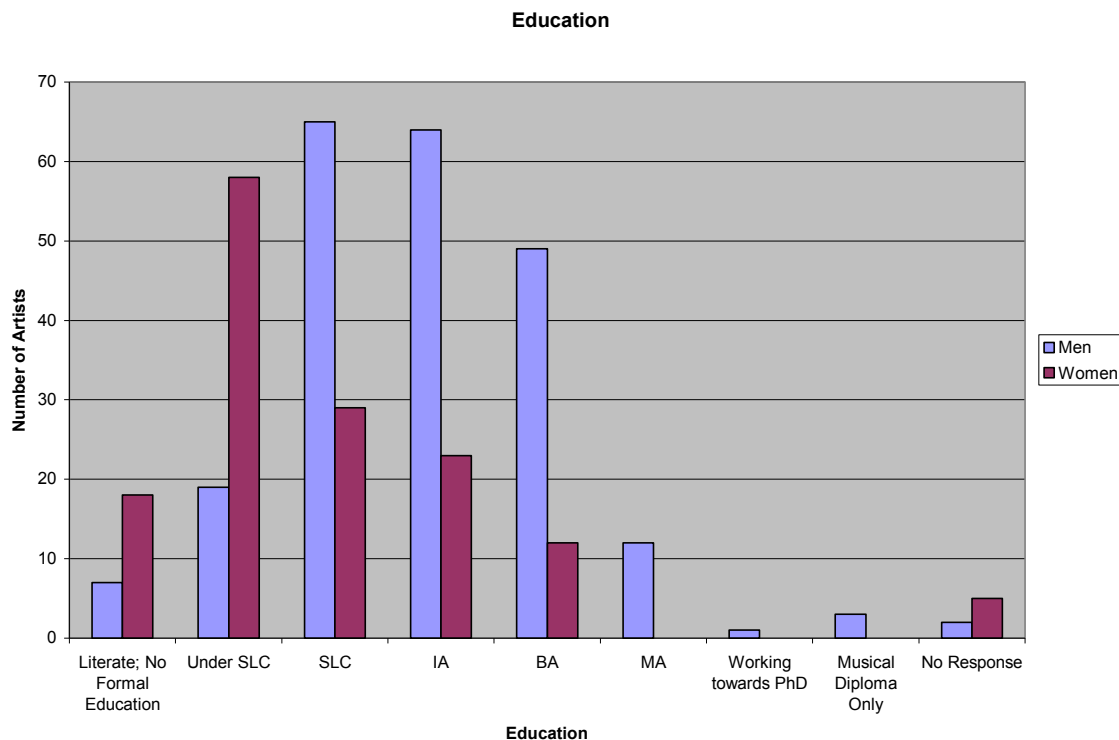
Income, for dohori performers, is a touchy subject. A significant number of people chose not to respond to this question, perhaps because they felt that their answers would not be sufficiently anonymous.¹¹ The median income for dohori performers in Kathmandu is Rs. 5000 per month. The mode, or most frequently occurring income, is also Rs. 5000 per month. To put this in perspective, a teacher in a mid-range private school earns an average monthly income of Rs. 7000, while an entry-level government civil servant earns an average monthly income of Rs. 6500. A waitress in a dohori restaurant earns Rs. 2000 before tips, and a cook in an average restaurant (dohori or otherwise) earns Rs. 3000. The average rented room in the areas where most dohori restaurant performers live is Rs. 3000 per month; the average rented flat (shared) is Rs. 7000 per month.

The average monthly income for Kathmandu dohori performers, Rs. 10333, deserves some explanation. There are several performers whose additional occupations clearly provide the majority of their income; these include mostly men involved in teaching, business ventures, music arranging and technical studio work, and the armed forces. These few individuals with incomes in the 30-65,000 range raise the average. Most artists I know are in fact struggling to make ends meet. The incomes listed here, for the most part, represent dohori restaurant salaries plus income from other steady jobs. As far as I can tell, most artists did not include tips. Restaurant owners often justify low salaries with reference to tips; however, tips are not a guaranteed source of income. During the peak years of dohori restaurants' popularity (2002-2004), tips at one major dohori restaurant averaged Rs. 500 per person nightly. In 2008, artists at the same restaurant estimated a nightly average of Rs. 50 to 100; to earn Rs. 200 in tips is now considered a good night.

Education Level

Income and socioeconomic status are often strongly linked to level of education.

¹¹ "Khannalai pugne;" "pugdaina;" "mero didi bhanda kam" (enough to eat; not enough; less than my sister) and other similar answers are included in the category of "no response".



From this chart one can see that the men working in dohori are more highly educated than the women, as is the case for all of Nepal. 86% of men have passed the SLC or higher, compared to 51% of women. Considering that only 61.1% of men and 32.6% of women over the age of 15 in Nepal have ever attended school, dohori restaurant performers can hardly be dismissed as uneducated. As the following discussion of gender and income shows, education does play a role in the monthly income of dohori artists, though not necessarily within the dohori restaurant business.

Gender and Income

The average monthly income for women is NRs. 6553, and most women make NRs. 5000 per month. The average monthly income for men is NRs. 8344, and most men also make NRs. 5000 per month. In this section I look at the men and women who make the lowest (under 3500) and highest (above 10,000) monthly incomes, and the specific issues relevant to each group.

Women on the low end (3500 or less)

20 women, 13 % of all female performers, report making Rs. 3500 or less per month. The data suggest that most of these women are at a similar point in their careers: just starting out, and trying to make their way up from the bottom. The average age of these women is 20.4, younger than the average age of 22.3 for all women, and most have worked in dohori for one year or less. Two have one album out, and one have five albums out, but most have none. The majority of these women work in the dohori restaurants where both performance quality and salary levels are at their lowest. The others work at well-known and well-to-do establishments, which often hire promising beginners for very low salaries, which are expected to be increased according to their performance. Of the women at well-known establishments, several dance but do not sing, suggesting that dancers' art is less highly valued than singers'. However, these women, on average, still make more than the average waitress's monthly salary of Rs. 2000, suggesting that restaurants do draw a line between the two main types of work that women perform.

Other factors besides inexperience may contribute to these women's low salaries through affecting their abilities to make connections in the profession. Of these women, over half have no formal education, which may inhibit their ability to assert themselves in situations they perceive as unfair. While caste and ethnicity do not seem to be a major factor in women's salaries, regional and ethnic affiliations may hinder opportunities for networking; people often rely on fictive kinship relations to gain influence and visibility, and those without access to creating such relations in the dohori field stand at a disadvantage. Half of these women on the low end of the income scale hail from eastern districts, where Western-Region-style dohori is less popular; they also come from ethnic groups (Rai, Tamang and Sherpa) that are less well-represented among dohori performers, restaurant owners and managers, and among commercial dohori's core audience. Thus, they do not have as much recourse to hometown connections in the world of Kathmandu dohori restaurants, and they have a harder time attracting customers from their own areas.

Men on the low end (3500 or less)

Sixteen men, or 7% of all male performers, make 3500 or less per month. Of these men, all are primarily instrumentalists, nine also sing, and one also dances. Unlike the women on the low end, who are mostly beginners in the field, these men have been working in dohori restaurants for an average of four years, with a range of one to six years. Over half of them have recorded on albums, and several have recorded on more than one. Two-thirds of them list no other occupation, while some others list occupations that may in fact bring their monthly income up considerably, suggesting that they only listed their dohori restaurant salary on their forms. These include government service (naukari, most likely a reference to army or police); music teaching; Radio Nepal performance; and business ventures.

Apart from the fact that instrumentalists are consistently paid less than singers in the dohori field, what could account for these men's low salaries? Most are SLC-passed, and several are working on advanced degrees, so lack of education does not seem to be a factor. Their average age, 25.1, is only slightly older than the men's average age of 24.9, so age does not seem to be a factor either. Most hail from the Gandaki and Bagmati zones, so they are not outsiders in terms of region. It is notable that, apart from one Brahmin in the group, all these men are either Dalit or Janajati. As noted above, Brahmin and Chhetri men significantly dominate the dohori performance scene. While many janajati men have been successful in dohori, this does not mean that their ethnicity may not have created obstacles at some point. Ethnicity may be a factor in these janajati men's unfortunate circumstances, but we cannot point to specific examples using the data at hand.

The five Dalit men in this group have all been working in dohori restaurants for five years or more, and they are significantly older than the other men on the low end of the income spectrum. They work within their traditional occupations, playing sarangi and the instruments of the Panchai Baja (shanaï, damaha, tyamko, dholaki, jhyali and narsingh). Panchai Baja instrument players, though they may be excellent musicians on their own multiple instruments, may be further marginalized in dohori restaurants, as their skills are only needed on certain songs; if they are unable to play madal or sing dohori well, they may be seen as extra musicians not worthy of a full instrumentalist's salary. This could be the situation of the Damai musicians in this group. Though restaurant owners may offer such explanations as evidence that musical considerations rather than caste are the issue, the fact remains that Gandharva and Damai caste musicians are the only ones hired specifically to play sarangi and Panchai Baja (while others may play these instruments, they are not hired specifically to do so). I think it is fair to say that in the case of these five musicians, their caste is the primary factor that determines their low salaries.

Women on the high end (10,000 or more):

The 18 women (12%) working in dohori restaurants who reported making Rs. 10,000 or more per month are primarily highly successful dohori singers. All have albums out: 5 have between 1 and 10 albums out, 3 have 10 to 20, one has over 50, and one has 180. They have been working in dohori restaurants from one year to ten years, with an average of five years. They are mostly educated: four have some education pre-SLC; four are SLC-passed; five have passed their IA; and three have passed their BA. They are musically versatile: all sing, nine also dance, and three sing, dance and play instruments. Several have taken first place in national dohori competitions, and others have placed highly and continue to be invited to perform at various festivals.

They come from various castes and ethnicities: five are Magar, one Tamang, five Brahmin, three Chhetri, two Gurung, and one did not specify her caste/ethnicity. There is at least one Dalit woman who made a comparable salary and enjoyed comparable popularity at the time of the survey, but did not fill out the form. With the exception of three women from the Janakpur, Bagmati and Narayani zones, all are from dohori's heartland in the Western Development Region.

In addition to their dohori singing jobs, four are students, and four are involved in various business ventures; one is a singing teacher, and two are in the police force as artists in the elite police clubs. Three depend on dohori alone, and three did not specify whether or not they have an additional occupation. They work mostly at established dohori restaurants in central Kathmandu, while a few are employed at restaurants that were high-budget startups at the time of the survey. A combination of talent and skill, education, connections, determination and a healthy dose of luck seems to be the recipe for these women's success.

Men on the high end

56 men, or 25% of men employed in dohori restaurants, make NRs. 10,000 or more per month. Unlike the women who are mostly highly successful dohori singers who earn money primarily through performing in dohori restaurants, these men are mostly employed elsewhere as well: only six list no other occupation. But, many of them are employed in musical professions: teachers, recording artists, recording technicians, instrument makers, music distributors, arrangers, etc., and are making a living as professional musicians. A third of these men have no albums out; the others have an average of 5 albums each, some as musicians recording on others' albums, and some as lead vocalists. Several dohori singers who have been highly successful recording artists signed their names to their forms, and appear in this category, including Badri Pangi and Bimal Dangi; others may be included here anonymously. Almost all have passed the SLC and most have higher degrees. Their average age of 28.1 is slightly older than the average of 25 for all men, and they have been working in dohori for an average of nine years, or since the beginning of the Kathmandu dohori restaurant boom.

The major four caste/ethnic groups in dohori restaurants are represented in similar proportions among these men. Brahmins (32%), Chhetris (27%), Magars (14%), and Gurungs (7%) make up the majority of high earners. Magars make up the same proportion of the high-income group as they do of men in dohori restaurants as a whole; Gurungs make up slightly less (down from 10% of all men), and Brahmins and Chhetris make up significantly more (up from 24 and 21%, respectively). 7% of high-income men belong to Dalit castes, with the remaining 5% belonging to other janajati groups.

These numbers do not necessarily indicate greater instances of Brahmin-Chhetri privilege in the dohori world compared to the rest of the job market; rather, they underscore the existence of such privilege in all areas, suggesting that Brahmins and Chhetris are more likely to hold better paying jobs in other areas, in addition to working in dohori restaurants.

Gender Disparities

These data reveal that men and women face different challenges in making a living through performing dohori. While most men and women make around NRs. 5000 per month, the average monthly incomes for men remain significantly higher than those of women. It is mostly inexperienced women, and among these, women from eastern districts where dohori is less popular, who make the least amount per month. The men on the low end of the income bracket are overwhelmingly Dalit and janajati, and in the case of the Dalits there is a demonstrable connection between their caste and their low income. The women who make the highest monthly incomes make their money from singing dohori; they are successful artists. The men with the highest monthly incomes are experienced musicians with varying degrees of musical success, and most of them supplement their dohori restaurant incomes with other, often more lucrative, occupations.

A much smaller percentage of men than women make a living solely from performing in dohori restaurants. This discrepancy remains a bone of contention between men and women, as women are frustrated by the lack of job opportunities available to them in other fields, and men are frustrated by women who make more than they do for doing “the same job.” But, the expectations for male and female artists are very different. Men are judged according to musical ability and reliability as employees, while women are judged on youth, beauty, and overall attractiveness on stage – primarily, their attractiveness to male customers – and only after this on musical ability. Women onstage are sexualized in a way that men are not, by restaurant owners, patrons, and often by the men onstage as well. Women’s job of entertaining a primarily male clientele who have come to flirt with them and to listen to their flirtatious banter with others, has a greater element of emotional labor than the job of the men on the same stage. This does not mean that men all have it easy. The basics of the job are demanding for both sexes: dohori restaurants offer little rest, expecting performers to remain onstage for 5 to 6 hours every night with only a short dinner break. Most offer only 2 paid days of leave per month. Instrumentalists, who are all men, are often overworked and underpaid compared to singers of both sexes. However, men, with access to more jobs and to property of their own to mortgage or sell, are much more likely to be able to come up with the money to finance an album, and reach a new level of fame and fortune through the recording industry. Women must often rely on the financial support of others. Women may enter the dohori profession with lofty dreams of fame and fortune or with modest dreams of financial independence, but when financial reality sets in they often turn to others for help. In addition to family and ethnic/caste/region organizations, these sources of financial help often include boyfriends and patrons. The line between such relationships, prostitution, and sexual exploitation of women is blurry, and is the topic of much criticism of women in dohori and of the dohori scene itself.

The gender disparities present in the dohori restaurant industry highlight the issues of gender inequality present in Nepal today. As the data presented above have shown, gender disparities are also inextricably intertwined with issues of caste/ethnicity, region, musical specialty and education. Sociologist Meenakshi Thapan’s words accurately summarize the range of problems migrant women face:

“In migration, women, owing to their structural position in society, have limited access to information and resources which determines the differential experience of men and women, on transit and entry. Women are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, lower wages, and other forms of exploitation. Migration is thus undertaken with the aim of betterment, in terms of employment and economic gains, and as an escape from cultural and societal constraints in terms of achieving greater autonomy and independence. However, while it may afford them material gains, whether migration enables women to completely break away from the binding patriarchal and traditional norms remains questionable”.¹²

Policy Implications

This study has implications for cultural policy and migration policy, or, as it might be called internally, labor policy. Current studies of international migration highlight the need for policies to be reviewed and restructured keeping in mind the migrant’s interest, and also suggest that case studies of specific populations are necessary to understand their particular contexts (cf. Thapan 2006:15). This particular case study has noted some major demographic characteristics of the dohori restaurant performer population in Kathmandu. It is the artists themselves who are most eloquent in speaking of the change they desire:

Artists are the jewels of any nation. Thus art and voice [kala ra gala] should be properly valued. On top of that lok dohori is music of our own country. That is why I want real valuation of art and voice based on talent and not on nepotism and beauty. (20 year old Brahmin male singer from Kaski)

¹² Thapan, Meenakshi. 2006. Series Introduction to Women and Migration in Asia. Vol. 1-5. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

I don't really see any negativity in this field. But to transform the music, the artists should, to some extent, get practical and theoretical education. In that case, I feel that this field will gain even more good reputation. (27 year old male Chhetri flutist from Kathmandu)

In fact, lok dohori used to be a tradition of singing authentic folk tunes, as women and men expressed their words back and forth through the medium of song in village homes, forests and fields, chautaris and the custom of rodhi. Now, these songs are used commercially in the hotels and restaurants of the city, where they are accorded little or no value. Here in the city dohori restaurant managers look only at empty outer beauty; because of this it is only a matter of time before the lok dohori field will slip out of everyone's mind. In the name of lok dohori we, Nepali sisters, are subject to various kinds of bodily exploitation; even so, so many dohori restaurant employees continue to endure it. I want to say that, leaving this kind of degeneration and giving real dohori the value it deserves, we should create and follow a positive road. (Srijana Pun, Magar female singer from Rolpa)

Other artists also echo these concerns with business-focused emphasis on youth, beauty, and sexualization of performers and lyrics; the need for musical education appropriate to the folk field; and the sexual harassment of female artists. Many artists expressed their concerns in nationalist terms, emphasizing their view of dohori as an essentially Nepali music genre and calling for direct government intervention. In effect, they are calling for more effective cultural policy. Combined with strong labor unions and policies that keep workers' rights in mind, revised cultural and labor policies have the potential to address dohori restaurant performers' needs by promoting the development of their art.

Labor Policy

I hope that artists will be able to survive with honor. (24-year-old Male Brahmin singer from Ramechhap)

The most obvious solutions to many problems faced by dohori restaurant performers, and other urban workers, are a revised and expanded set of labor laws and policies. A clear and enforceable labor policy is a must for dohori restaurant workers, to define acceptable hiring and firing practices and to set workplace standards. Efforts should be made to ensure that all employees earn a living wage, and that the criteria for choosing performers are transparent. Strong labor unions should be developed, supported by union-friendly laws. Laws regarding housing and landlord-tenant relations would also be beneficial not only to these migrants but to all who lack property in Kathmandu. Finally, social services directed specifically at labor migrants and specific populations, such as the entertainment sector, should not be left to NGOs alone. Organizations providing such services should receive government recognition and funds when available.

Cultural Policy

Cultural policy has historically been important in shaping national identity. In formulating cultural policies major concerns include national unity, inclusion of all social groups, and ending discrimination.

The state in the Panchayat period emphasized national unity, and Radio Nepal artists strove to create a national sound in folk music by combining elements of various musical traditions, ultimately foregrounding the music of the Western Development Region. This policy was not inclusive; many social groups' own language and culture was suppressed in favor of the state's version of national culture. Since the end of the Panchayat government, various social groups have leapt forward to assert their own, specific cultural identities that differ from the formerly state-sponsored idea of a unitary national culture. A cultural policy that is not inclusive contributes to the isolation of populations within the nation. As Nepal now strives to implement an inclusive cultural policy, policies regarding dohori and folk music are a good place to start.

Dohori restaurant performers' concern with the lack of appropriate music education speaks for a need for folk music-specific music education. Currently, one can study classical music at many institutions, and one can study folk song as part of a Nepali or Culture department at a university; however, this option is not performance-oriented. One can also study madal, bansuri, semiclassical vocals, and dance at the Sanskritik Sansthan (aka Rastriya Nachghar); instruction there is usually quite good. But, it is limited to the styles of the western hills, and there is no instruction in folk-specific vocal technique. A folk music-oriented department at a music school could introduce more regional music genres in both performance oriented and theoretical classes, thereby providing artists with a broader understanding of the music they perform. Diplomas from such an institution would also give graduates qualifications useful in hiring, and provide restaurant owners a means of comparison.

Along with formal education, the government could revive competitions with a focus on more musical styles, encouraging artists to perfect their dohori skills in other genres such as eastern and western salajjo, kauda, hakpare, deuda and/or other dohori-like genres that have received less media attention. Such competitions would promote these styles and encourage performers to become better all-around musicians. Competition regulations, as well as institutional standards, could continue to define what topics are acceptable to sing about (though challenge to such standards is part of art).

Dohori, by nature a site for discussion and exchange between the sexes, will continue to be a site for negotiation of appropriate gendered behavior as expectations change. The musical structure of couplet exchange creates the illusion that men and women are performing on equal terms; this illusion can also be viewed as an inspiration for working toward true equality among all social groups. Dohori, already a genre for social commentary, has the potential to bring about social change as well. It is my hope that performers and all involved may be able to take advantage of the opportunities the music offers.