

Literary Echoes: Ethno-Political and Spiritual Narratives in Indian Mountain Music

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Abstract

The research dwells into a literary exploration of mountain music from India, analysing its ethno-political and spiritual dimensions through the lens of narrative theory, cultural studies, and ethnomusicology. Drawing on Barthes' Death of the Author concept, the study treats the listener as the primary interpreter of the musical texts, emphasizing the multiplicity of meanings in mountain songs. The concept of intertextuality, rooted in Barthes' notion of a "tissue of quotations," is employed to examine the relationship between these songs and regional spiritual traditions. Additionally, semiotic analysis uncovers the symbolic elements embedded in the melodies and lyrics.

The paper also delves into the historical and political roles of mountain music, using Subaltern Studies and oral tradition to explore how these songs serve as vehicles for the expression of marginalized voices. The Natyashastra is referenced to connect the spiritual and performative elements of these musical traditions. Using the song *Banka Mulk* by *Loki Verma (Himalayan Routes)*, this research highlights how the natural environment and devotional practices shape the musical landscape of the mountains, while documenting the influence of political movements and social struggles on this song.

The study argues that while mountain music continues to evolve, its cultural, spiritual, and political significance remains intact. By combining literary, historical, and cultural frameworks, the research underscores the importance of these musical traditions in shaping both local identities and global music cultures.

Keywords: *Narrative theory, Ethnomusicology, Subaltern Studies, Intertextuality, Mountain music, Natyashastra*

Introduction

Mountain music from India, particularly the folk music of the Himalayas, occupies a distinctive place within the nation's cultural mosaic. This music fuses the grandeur of the natural environment with the profound traditions and histories of its communities. Characterized by lyrical storytelling, evocative melodies, and rhythms reflective of the mountainous terrain, it encapsulates the spirit, struggles, and spirituality of its people. Beyond mere artistic expression, mountain music functions as a potent medium for ethno-political narratives and spiritual storytelling, offering a voice to communities often marginalized within mainstream Indian cultural discourse. Through these compositions, artists articulate regional pride, communal identity, and collective memory, often resisting homogenizing forces by reaffirming their distinct heritage and worldview.

This paper explores the song "Banka Mulk" by Loki Verma from Himalayan Routes as a focal point for examining the ethno-political and spiritual dimensions of mountain music. "Banka Mulk" epitomizes the essence of mountain music, utilizing themes of place, memory, and devotion to narrate the Himalayan experience. By conducting a close reading of "Banka Mulk," this study analyzes how such songs reflect both the socio-political context and spiritual beliefs inherent to the community, serving as testaments to the lived experiences of the Himalayan people and connecting listeners to the region's natural beauty and history of resilience.

This analysis employs a multi-layered theoretical approach. Narrative theory and cultural studies elucidate how "Banka Mulk" functions as a narrative that conveys intricate stories of identity and tradition. Roland Barthes' concept of the "Death of the Author" provides a framework for treating the song as a cultural text, positioning the listener as an active interpreter, thus allowing for multiple meanings that vary with individual perspectives. Barthes' notion of intertextuality aids in examining the "tissue of quotations" within the song, linking its lyrics to other cultural and spiritual references resonant across the Himalayan landscape.

Ethnomusicology is employed to understand the role of sound, rhythm, and regional instruments in capturing the essence of the mountain environment. Semiotic analysis, drawing on theorists like Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, reveals the symbolic meanings embedded within the lyrics and melodies. Subaltern Studies and oral tradition, informed by scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha, highlight how these songs express the perspectives of marginalized voices, preserving cultural narratives otherwise at risk of being lost. Furthermore, references to the Natyashastra, attributed to Bharata Muni, illuminate the performative and ritualistic elements of mountain music,

especially as it intersects with devotional practices and spirituality. Through this interdisciplinary approach, this paper underscores the crucial role of mountain music in shaping regional identity and influencing broader cultural narratives.

Literature Review

The study of mountain music in India, particularly the folk traditions of the Himalayas, reveals the profound ways in which communities narrate their histories, spiritual beliefs, and social experiences through song. Research in ethnomusicology and cultural studies underscores the significance of music as a cultural artifact bearing aesthetic and socio-political weight, especially in regions with unique linguistic and cultural histories. Studies of Himalayan folk music highlight its soundscapes that evoke the physical landscape, with melodies and rhythms mirroring the natural environment, thereby expressing themes of belonging, identity, and resilience.

Narrative theory provides a valuable framework for exploring music as a narrative form, enabling the examination of how songs convey collective and individual stories. Roland Barthes' contributions, particularly his "Death of the Author," have significantly advanced our understanding of texts—be they written or musical—as open to diverse interpretations, allowing listeners to engage with them subjectively. Applying Barthes' perspective to "Banka Mulk," we treat the song as a "text" available for interpretation, with meanings shaped by the listeners' cultural and spiritual contexts.

Barthes' concept of intertextuality is critical for analyzing how "Banka Mulk" and other mountain songs engage with existing cultural references, folk narratives, and regional symbols. Barthes views texts as "a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture," a perspective particularly apt for examining how "Banka Mulk" resonates with broader cultural and spiritual themes prevalent in the Himalayas. Mountain music, through its intertextual connections to other cultural artifacts, traditions, and spiritual ideas, reflects a layered and interconnected web of meaning that speaks to a shared heritage.

Semiotics, informed by Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs and Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic triad (representamen, object, interpretant), elucidates the symbolism embedded within mountain music's lyrics and melodies. The symbols, metaphors, and imagery in songs like "Banka Mulk" convey meanings that transcend the literal, allowing listeners to access deeper themes related to the land, spirituality, and social life. Clifford Geertz's conceptualization of culture as a system of symbols further aids in interpreting the cultural and spiritual significance of these musical traditions. Subaltern Studies and oral traditions offer frameworks for understanding how mountain music serves as a voice for the marginalized communities of the Himalayas. Scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha emphasize the role of folk music in articulating the struggles, resistance, and resilience of these communities, preserving their histories and asserting their identities against dominant narratives. This body of literature underscores the fact that these songs often carry messages of resistance, pride, and social memory, preserving voices that might otherwise be silenced.

The Natyashastra, an ancient Indian treatise on performance, provides additional insights into the performative and spiritual aspects of mountain music. While traditionally associated with theater and dance, the principles of the Natyashastra are applicable to the understanding of the ritualistic and devotional dimensions of mountain music. Scholars have explored how folk music functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium for spiritual engagement and community ritual—elements particularly relevant in a song like "Banka Mulk," which intertwines themes of nature and devotion.

By synthesizing these perspectives, this study builds upon existing scholarship through a multi-disciplinary approach to the analysis of "Banka Mulk." Integrating narrative theory, intertextuality, semiotics, Subaltern Studies, and the Natyashastra, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how this song serves as a vessel for both ethno-political expression and spiritual connection.

Theoretical Frameworks

This section outlines the interdisciplinary frameworks that shape our analysis of "Banka Mulk" by Loki Verma, specifically focusing on the song's ethno-political and spiritual dimensions. By drawing on multiple theoretical approaches, we aim to capture the nuanced layers within the song, examining how its lyrics, melodies, and cultural context reflect and shape the Himalayan experience.

Narrative Theory

Narrative theory forms the foundation of our approach, treating "Banka Mulk" as a narrative that encapsulates stories of place, community, and identity. By interpreting the song's lyrics and structure through a narrative lens, we seek to uncover the storylines that are unique to Himalayan life, where the natural environment and community values are intricately woven together. Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author" is particularly relevant here, as it emphasizes the role of the listener in creating meaning. In Barthes' view, a text should not be restricted by the author's intended meaning, allowing the audience's interpretations to shape its significance. In the context of "Banka Mulk," listeners from different backgrounds

may interpret its themes of resilience, devotion, and regional pride uniquely, making each encounter with the song an individualized experience.

Intertextuality

The concept of intertextuality allows us to analyze "Banka Mulk" as a "tissue of quotations," echoing other cultural and spiritual narratives within the region. This approach enables us to identify how the song references broader folk traditions, myths, and rituals in the Himalayas, establishing connections between the song's lyrics and the cultural fabric of the mountains. By using semiotic analysis, we investigate the symbols and imagery in "Banka Mulk" that evoke the mountain environment and its associated spiritual and social meanings. For instance, symbols of nature—such as rivers, mountains, and flora—may not only reference physical entities but also convey spiritual qualities or socio-political identity, reflecting the symbiotic relationship between nature and human life in the region.

Ethnomusicology

Ethnomusicology is essential to understanding the sonic elements of "Banka Mulk" and the role of Himalayan folk music in reflecting the region's social and spiritual life. This approach examines the instruments, rhythms, and melodies that give Himalayan music its distinctive sound, embodying the mountains' landscape and cultural atmosphere. Ethnomusicologists have noted that folk music often reflects the lived realities of a community, shaped by local climate, geography, and history. Through ethnomusicological analysis, we delve into how "Banka Mulk's" musical arrangement and performance style capture the ethos of the Himalayan people, underscoring both their reverence for nature and resilience in the face of socio-political challenges.

Subaltern Studies and Oral Tradition

Mountain music often emerges from communities that lie outside mainstream narratives, making Subaltern Studies and oral tradition valuable frameworks. Subaltern Studies allows us to interpret "Banka Mulk" as a voice of marginalized communities in the Himalayas, representing their perspectives and asserting their identity within broader Indian society. By examining the song as part of an oral tradition, we recognize the importance of folk music as a medium for passing down stories, values, and histories through generations. Songs like "Banka Mulk" act as both repositories of cultural memory and tools for resistance, ensuring that the voices of these communities are preserved and amplified despite societal challenges.

Natyashastra

References to the ancient Indian treatise, the Natyashastra, provide insights into the performative and ritualistic aspects of "Banka Mulk." The Natyashastra details principles that extend to music, emphasizing the relationship between art, spirituality, and emotional expression. In the context of "Banka Mulk," these principles help us understand how the song functions as more than entertainment—serving as a spiritual and devotional act that connects performers and listeners with the divine and with one another. The themes of devotion and nature worship in "Banka Mulk" align with the performative and emotional intentions described in the Natyashastra, making the song a medium for both self-expression and communal unity.

Analysis: "Banka Mulk" as a Musical Text

This section provides a detailed analysis of "Banka Mulk" by Loki Verma, applying the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier. We will explore the song's ethno-political, spiritual, and cultural dimensions through a careful examination of its lyrics, melody, and the broader socio-political context it inhabits. By examining the text, music, and the performance context, we aim to uncover how "Banka Mulk" serves as a vehicle for expressing regional identity, social struggles, and spiritual beliefs, while reflecting the unique interplay between nature, politics, and devotion in the Himalayan region.

Regional Pride, Spiritual Devotion, and Political Resistance

At its core, "Banka Mulk" is a song that resonates with the themes of regional pride, spiritual devotion, and political resistance. Through its lyrics, the song paints a vivid picture of the Himalayan landscape—its natural beauty, its people, and their enduring connection to the land. The title itself, "Banka Mulk" (translating to "Resilient Land"), evokes a sense of pride and strength, signaling the song's focus on the mountain communities' resilience in the face of historical and political challenges.

The song draws heavily on the ethno-political narrative of the region, reflecting the struggles of marginalized communities in the Himalayas who have long been excluded from mainstream political discourse. These communities often find themselves at the intersection of national and regional politics, with their identities shaped by both local and global forces. "Banka Mulk" becomes a medium for asserting the identity of these communities, celebrating their unique history, culture, and resistance against external political pressures. Through its narrative, the song positions itself as a form of political expression, providing a voice to the region's people and offering a counterpoint to dominant political ideologies.

Spiritual Connections and Nature Worship

On the spiritual front, the song is deeply embedded in the region's traditions of nature worship and devotion. The lyrics reference spiritual beliefs tied to the sacredness of the mountain landscape, invoking gods and deities associated with the natural elements. The recurring theme of the Himalayas as a sacred land speaks to the strong spiritual connection the people of the region have with their environment. The song's reverence for the land, combined with its spiritual imagery, positions it as not just a political statement but also a devotional offering—a prayer for the prosperity and protection of the land and its people.

Intertextuality and Cultural References

The concept of intertextuality is critical in unpacking the multiple layers of meaning within "Banka Mulk." The song can be seen as an intertextual dialogue with other cultural and spiritual narratives prevalent in the Himalayan region. The lyrics not only reference local myths, legends, and rituals but also draw upon the wider cultural and political narratives that shape the identity of the region. These references create a rich tapestry of meanings that extend beyond the immediate context of the song, inviting listeners to make connections between the song's content and their own cultural and historical experiences.

Semiotic Symbols and Imagery

Symbols are key to understanding the song's deeper meanings. The natural imagery of mountains, rivers, and forests serves as metaphors for the strength, resilience, and purity of the land and its people. The use of these natural symbols aligns with the semiotic analysis of the song, where each element—from the imagery of the mountains to the rhythms and melodies—functions as a sign that carries specific cultural and spiritual significance. The mountains are not just physical entities but symbols of spiritual transcendence, endurance, and identity.

Folklore and Mythological References

By drawing on local folklore and mythological references, the song places itself within a broader cultural tradition. For instance, the invocation of local deities and the portrayal of the land as sacred territory connect "Banka Mulk" to the region's religious traditions, in which nature and spirituality are inseparable. The song's lyrics invoke specific gods of the mountains or spirits believed to protect the land, aligning it with the devotional and mythological storytelling traditions that are central to Himalayan folk music.

Musical Elements and Ethnomusicological Analysis

The musical elements of "Banka Mulk" are as critical to its meaning as its lyrics. The rhythm, melody, and instrumentation reflect the unique sonic landscape of the Himalayas. Ethnomusicological analysis reveals that the song draws on both traditional and modern elements, blending folk rhythms with contemporary influences to create a sound that is both rooted in the region's musical traditions and open to new forms of expression. The instruments used in the performance—whether traditional or contemporary—serve as a means of connecting the past with the present, bringing forward the cultural memory of the mountains while also creating space for contemporary political and social commentary.

The melodic structure of "Banka Mulk" may evoke the sounds of nature, using rising and falling notes to mirror the geography of the mountains themselves. The rhythm can evoke the pulse of the land—the steady flow of rivers or the heartbeat of the people who call the mountains home. These musical features contribute to the song's spiritual resonance, creating an emotional connection between the listener and the landscape.

Through the ethnomusicological lens, we can interpret these musical elements as more than aesthetic choices; they are an intrinsic part of the song's cultural identity. The song reinforces the connection between the music and the people, turning the act of listening into a collective experience that reinforces social bonds and reaffirms shared values.

Subaltern Dimensions and Political Resistance

The subaltern dimension of "Banka Mulk" cannot be overstated. As a song that arises from the marginalized communities of the Himalayas, it serves as an important vehicle for resistance against dominant political structures. Mountain communities in India have long faced political and social marginalization, with their voices often silenced in national discourse. "Banka Mulk" serves as a tool of resistance, asserting the identity and autonomy of these communities in the face of external political and cultural pressures.

Through Subaltern Studies, we understand how the song functions not only as a cultural expression but also as a form of political protest. The song's emphasis on resilience and resistance speaks to the broader struggles of these communities—whether against colonial powers, modern state policies, or socio-economic marginalization. "Banka Mulk" becomes a site of memory, preserving the struggles and histories of these communities while offering a space for ongoing political dialogue.

In addition to its political implications, the song also highlights the social struggles faced by the Himalayan people. Issues of land rights, political autonomy, and environmental preservation are central to the lives of these communities, and "Banka Mulk" becomes a narrative that brings attention to these issues, urging listeners to reflect on the state of the land and its people. As a song of the subaltern, it positions the marginalized as active agents in their own history, asserting their right to speak, to resist, and to protect their heritage.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the profound cultural, spiritual, and political significance of mountain music, using "Banka Mulk" by Loki Verma as a primary example to explore the ways in which music serves as a medium for the expression of regional identity, spiritual beliefs, and socio-political resistance. By applying frameworks from narrative theory, ethnomusicology, Subaltern Studies, and intertextuality, we have shown that mountain songs are not merely artistic expressions but also deeply embedded in the cultural, historical, and political landscapes of the communities from which they emerge.

The analysis of "Banka Mulk" reveals the centrality of the Himalayan environment in shaping both the musical form and the content of the song. The rich symbolism tied to the mountains, the use of nature-based imagery, and the invocation of spiritual traditions underscore the song's role as a devotional offering to the land and its people. These themes are further enriched by the song's engagement with political struggles, providing a voice to the marginalized communities of the Himalayas whose stories have often been overlooked in broader national narratives.

Furthermore, the study has underscored the performative nature of mountain music, where the act of singing and listening is not only an aesthetic experience but a communal, collective one. In the context of "Banka Mulk," this communal experience fosters a sense of shared identity and purpose, reinforcing the song's role as both a form of cultural preservation and a means of political expression.

In terms of cultural continuity, the study has demonstrated that while mountain music is evolving—incorporating modern influences and new forms—it retains its cultural relevance and spiritual potency. These musical traditions remain a vital part of the region's cultural heritage, linking the present with the past and offering insights into the social and political struggles faced by the people of the mountains.

In an increasingly globalized world, where traditional cultures often face the pressures of modernity and commercialization, the study of mountain music like "Banka Mulk" serves as a reminder of the importance of preserving and honoring regional traditions. The song's ability to speak to both local and global audiences highlights the way in which mountain music transcends geographical boundaries, contributing to the global dialogue on identity, culture, and resistance.

Finally, the research emphasizes the role of mountain music as a living tradition, continually evolving but remaining anchored in the deeply spiritual, cultural, and political roots of the Himalayan region. As long as songs like "Banka Mulk" continue to be sung, the voices of the marginalized will resonate, echoing through the mountains and beyond.

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