

Singing for Change: Reimagining the Songs of Master Mitrasen in the Freedom Struggle Context



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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the role of Master Mitrasen's songs as a medium of social reforms and upliftment during Indian freedom struggle movement. By utilizing the traditional folk genre jhyaure, Mitrasen was able to foster a sense of unity among the Nepalis in India and abroad and promote awareness on the various social evils of the time. The creation of this unity and the consequent emergence of a common Nepali identity in addition to Mitrasen's popularity among the people was a driving force behind the Gorkha soldiers joining the Indian National Army. The paper also assesses the factors for the popularity of Mitrasen's songs and its continuation through generations. Examining the role of Mitrasen's songs, the article aims to highlight his contribution to the freedom movement and in enriching the Nepali folk music domain.

Keywords: Master Mitrasen, Freedom movement, Reform, Nepali folksong, *Jhyaure*.

Research Paper

Introduction

In mid-July 2022 when the pipes and drums band comprising the students of Kumudini Homes, a government school in Kalimpong, West Bengal participated in the historic Basel Tattoo in Switzerland, an annual military musical festival, the Swiss air reverberated with their performance of Indian national anthem as well as with a very popular Nepali melody. This particular song *lahurayko relimai* composed by Master Mitrasen in the 1930s is widespread among the Nepali community worldwide. The song's continued popularity cutting across generations underscores the effectiveness of music in appealing to the sensibility of the listeners. By utilizing this potential of music, Mitrasen through his songs forged a sense of identity and unity among the Nepalis living in different parts of India which was highly instrumental in the community's mobilization during the freedom struggle of the country.

Despite the musical popularity of Master Mitrasen there still remains a dearth of writings on his songs or the other aspects of his versatile personality. Therefore, this paper explores some of the songs of Master Mitrasen vis-à-vis Indian nationalism. It also seeks to study how Mitrasen's songs contributed to his connection with the

common people in the freedom struggle context, how the songs were utilized to improve the community's morals and social standing, the subjects of the songs, and the rationale behind their enduring existence. To do so, it becomes imperative to first understand the life of Mitrasen and his role in the formation of the collective Nepali consciousness.

The Making of 'Master' Mitrasen

Mitrasen Thapa was born on January 29, 1895, in Bhagshu cantonment, Himachal Pradesh. He was significantly affected by the bloodshed and brutality during his eight years of service (1912–1920) as a soldier in the 1/1 Gorkha Rifles, the majority of which were spent on European war zones. He came to the realization that serving his own countrymen would be more worthwhile endeavour than fighting for others ('Pathik' 14). On his return in 1920, he resigned from the army and decided to pursue literature, music, theatre, and social work. By establishing the Himalayan Theatrical Company at Bhagshu in 1926, where he was in charge of the direction, singing, and song writing, he became well-known in many places including the Bhagshu cantonment, Dharmashala, Palampur, Kangra, Shahpur, Kotla, Nurpur, Pathankot, Gurdaspur, and

Batla. He was bestowed with the title of “Master” at this time by the populace in recognition of his artistic brilliance (Sharma 43). From 1928 to 1932, he visited villages in western Punjab serving as a religious preacher for four consecutive years under the Sanatan Dharma Pratinidhi Sabha. During this period Mitrasen came under the influences of the poetry of Mohammad Iqbal and especially of Gandhi, whose autobiography was published serially in a Nepali magazine from Dehradun named Tarun Gorkha in 1932. Inspired by Lokmanya Tilak’s Geeta Rahasya and Gandhi’s Anasakti Yoga, he also translated Gita into Nepali (‘Pathik’ 9). But more importantly, all these prepared and inspired him to dedicate himself to the service of his fellow citizen.

Forging Unity Through Music

During the 1920s when the ‘Nepali’ consciousness was getting rooted through language and literature in Darjeeling hills, Mitrasen was involved with similar engagement through his music. The formation of Nepali Sahitya Sammelan in 1924 with an intent of upliftment of the Nepali language was followed by significant developments in the fields of language and literature but most importantly contributed to the formation of Nepali identity. Identically, Mitrasen’s songs composed in simple, layman’s Nepali language had a pivotal role in forming the Nepali consciousness. During the early 1930s Mitrasen travelled various places performing his songs like Dehradun, Banaras, Darjeeling, Shillong, and later Nepal also (Chalmers 334-335). His devotional songs and folksongs sung in simple Nepali language imbued a sense of oneness among the Gorkha soldiers as well as those Nepali families who had settled near the cantonments. The citation by the Dept of Posts, Govt. of India, while releasing a commemorative postal stamp of Mitrasen in Oct 2001 states Mitrasen’s role in infusing self-respect and patriotism in his community that was crucial in the Gorkha soldiers in Malaya joining Indian National Army.

Due to the popularity of his songs, especially *lahurayko relimai*, Mitrasen was a well-known name among the soldiers. The Gorkha soldiers sang the same song inside the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway taking them from Ghoom depot in Darjeeling to the War zone during 1943-44 (Rai 54). During the Second World War the Gorkha soldiers, amongst the prisoners of war joining the Indian National Army (INA), were recruited in the Bahadur Group of INA that played a decisive role in its advancement in Imphal and Kohima. Durga Malla, who significantly contributed in the intelligence branch

of INA and was raised to the rank of Major, had been greatly inspired by the poet and social reformer Subedar-Major Bahadur Singh Baral and Master Mitra Sen Thapa. For the country’s freedom, Mitrasen had reverence for both the courses of action of Subhas Chandra Bose and Gandhiji.



Fig : Postal stamp of Master Mitrasen issued under Personality series in 2001. Source: <https://www.indiangorkhas.in/2016/06/master-mitrasen-thapa-1895-1946-gorkha.html>

K.K. Muktan writing on the freedom struggle vis-à-vis Indian Gorkhas discusses the part played by the Nepali periodicals in spreading Gandhiji’s thoughts and instilling nationalism among the Gorkhas. He observes, “British (sic) wanted that the Gorkha young boys should not be adulterated by political ideologies which might erode their loyalty to the Crown and, therefore, they kept strict vigilance on them. One Nepali periodical named Gorkhali was proscribed by the Government of India in 1922 under Indian Vernacular Press Act of 1910 on the suspicion that it disseminated nationalist ideas among the Gorkhas (Muktan 5).

Hence, it may be due to these factors that we do not see any overt discussions on nationalism in Mitrasen’s songs. But more importantly, his songs are grounded on the Gandhian notions of eradicating the social evils and uplifting oneself and the society. During the colonial rule, Indian society suffered from various vices like illiteracy, gender inequality, social inequality, alcoholism, poverty, caste discrimination etc. which were hurdles in the path of the freedom and furthermore posed as future challenges once the independence of the country was achieved. Inspired by Gandhiji’s thought that moral upliftment was vitally important for the progress of society, Mitrasen realized that the masses had to be instructed about the eradication of these vices

and the best way to serve this message to the masses was through his songs.

The Folksong Genre Jhyaure

Jhyaure is a Nepali folk genre of music with a broad range of themes and can be sung any time of the year. The term, equally prevalent in literature, also denotes poetic meter, a six-beat rhythm as well as the song genre (Stirr 7). Its fast rhythm makes it a danceable form. It can be sung as a solo, duet or group song, with or without accompanying instruments. Usually the traditional percussion instrument, *maadal* is made use of for rhythm.

By engaging the listeners with his songs, Mitrasen could very efficaciously express his ideas and create awareness on the social issues. In his diary, Mitrasen has confessed of the dedication and sacrifice that the service for the community demanded but has also added of a peculiar delight that he derived from it. To serve the community, Mitrasen even rejected many offers of a comfortable life including that from the director of a certain Radha Film Company (Mitrasen 11-12) during his successful musical popularity.

Recursing to the song tradition of *jhyaure* helped Mitrasen to talk on varied themes like alcoholism, gambling, exploitation of women etc., prevalent in the society in a humorous yet satirical manner. The catchy tune, relatable lyrics resonated with the audience that made his songs popular. The songs' continued existence till date is evidence to Mitrasen's creativity as well as the *jhyaure* song tradition's simple yet enduring melody. Thus, Mitrasen simultaneously belongs to the tradition and has expanded the tradition too with his compositions. Correspondingly, songs are the dominant cultural forms in what D. Venkat Rao postulates as cultures of memory or mnemoculture. Such cultural forms like songs, dance, rituals are part of cultures of memory which have been sustained and transferred from one generation to another by means of speech and gesture or oral communication. Unlike the cultures of archive where memory is retained externally in museums, libraries, database, etc, in mnemoculture the body sustains the cultural memories (India, Europe 24). Mitrasen's songs and for that matter the *jhyaure* song tradition has continued to endure as embodied memories. Songs are the most common cultural form in all the cultures of the world. Even though there may be variety of song genres and an equal variety of style of singing but the way the body is used for the performance of the songs is same. Rao states, "Speech and gesture technics or the prosthetics of the

body come forth through the morphing of the body, through the body's own internal/external torsions. If the internal movement of the body organs is essential for the emergence of the significance of sound, the external gesticulations of limbs and face function as irreducible supplements of utterance" (Cultures of Memory 81).

Exploring the Songs

The song *lahurayko relimai* presents the fashion of *lahuray* or a Gorkha soldier in an upbeat music but light heartedly ventures into the serious concerns. Though the central point of the song is the fashion of the then Gorkha soldiers, wherein the first two lines becomes a refrain, but it moves on to discuss their bad habits like alcoholism and its effect on society. The well-dressed soldiers going home on leave used to check in to the hotels at transit junctions where they were cheated by the hoteliers unscrupulously after they got drunk. The song starts with a woman asking the soldier about his fashion in a flirtatious tone. To this query the song begins to describe his fashion or *fayshon* as used in the song to reproduce the pronunciation by the masses:

Lahurayko relimai, fayshonnai ramro
Rato rumal relimai khukuri bhireko
Kalo coat seto jangay galbandilai bherye
Musumus haschhan churot thuti tarunilai heri

Lahuray's relimai, fashion is splendid
 Red handkerchief *relimai* carrying a *khukuri*
 Black coat, white shorts and wearing a muffler
 Puffing a cigarette, smiles looking at the young woman.

The word *relimai* is known as *thego* in the domain of Nepali music. Such words may not have any proper meaning but are used to enhance the rhythmic aspect of the song. From the critique of fashionable lifestyle of the soldier, the song details the *modus operandi* of such hotels. When the woman flirts with her eyes as well as her talk, the soldier overjoyed with pride starts to show off:

Yesto soondaa phurunga bhae lahuray hera dhalkeko
Lekin saale kya hey bhandai churot hay salkeyko
Kena bhulchhas lahuraydai lootma hun palkeko

Hearing this the *lahuray* swags with arrogance
 Saying, *lekin saale kya hai*, lights up his cigarette
 Why do you forget *lahuray* brother,
 they are habituated to loot.

Though the whole song is in Nepali, the use of the Hindi phrase with a swear word, *lekin saale kya hai*, aims to capture the conversational language of the soldier in the cantonments which is usually sprinkled with Hindi. The description of the effects of the alcohol on the soldier is extremely humorous:

*Alik chinma nasha laagyo khutta bhayo bange
Chhatre topi kholkhal pari thaplo pare nange*

Getting intoxicated after a while, the legs became twisted

Taking off the Felt Hat, bared his head

Taking advantage of the inebriated condition of the soldier, the woman steals all his money. Mitrasen had personally witnessed such incidents of dishonesty and records that at times the soldier, who had his money stolen, would return to the cantonment even without visiting their homes (Mitrasen 7).

In an age of political domination, social repression and economic exploitation, Mitrasen through his songs highlighted the prevailing social evils which could be catastrophic to any community. Mahatma Gandhi in his *Rachanatmak Karyakram*, instructing a course of action to the *swayam sevaks* as well as the readers, had also emphasized the necessity of curbing alcoholism as one of the important steps towards achieving 'Purna Swaraj' (Gandhi 15). In another song *Gorkhali bhayau khali* too Mitrasen talks about the ills of alcoholism and extravagant lifestyle:

*Gorkhali bhayau khali, maan phali teen panilay ho ki,
hajura*

Aath aana chha dinko kamai, chha aanako rakshi

Gorkhali have become vacuous, shunning honour,
could be because of teenpani, sir

Eight annas is the day's earning, liquor of six annas.

The song censures the spendthrift nature of the Gorkhali/Nepali community. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century serious situations of debt prevailed in Darjeeling's Nepali society on account of high interest rates of the loans taken by the tea garden workers that was mainly due to their fault of spendthrift nature, alcoholism as well as the shrewdness of the moneylenders (Pradhan 27). Mitrasen, who had a strong sense of pride on the bravery, repute and glory of his community believed that alcoholism was tarnishing their honour. To meet the expenses on alcohol and for keeping up with the new fashion trends, men resorted to loans from the moneylenders which would further deteriorate their financial condition. Sarcastically, Mitrasen sings:

*Sahu sanga munto lukai, heidchhan maski maski
Adalatka manis aauda balla nani jhaski, jhasanga*
Walks shyly hiding head from the moneylender,
Eventually is taken aback at the arrival of judicial
person.

Despite the adversity, neither men could stop their drinking habits nor women their desires to keep pace with the latest trends. By ironically addressing the woman of his community as 'mehsahib' in the song, Mitrasen mocks the women's tendency to emulate the colonizer. Humorously, Mitrasen says that they have even stopped listening to his advice:

*Rakshi nakhau bhanda hera naakma gatho parey
Tyesto jaba geet bhani sunna pani chhadey*

Look how the nose flares when told not to drink liquor
Saying that the song is nonsense, have even stopped
listening

As with the songs, Master Mitrasen also tried to instil nationalism in the youths through his plays like *Parivartan*. Considering Mitrasen's contribution to the social and cultural life of the Nepalis, Indra Bahadur Rai, a renowned litterateur from Darjeeling, opines that Mitrasen was not only a Nepali singer but also a builder of the Indian Nepali society and has definitely contributed to where the Nepali community stands today (Bastola 39).

Conclusion

While Mitrasen's songs had Gandhian ideas of reforming oneself and the society first to achieve the freedom of the country, they are also valuable chronicle of his times documenting the socio-economic conditions. Though Mitrasen wrote or composed his songs, the performance of the songs incorporated them into the performative traditions, which were embodied and enacted. And the oral/aural tradition has sustained them through generations. A versatile personality who was equally successful as a dramatist and a poet, Mitrasen is mainly remembered for his lively *jhyaure* songs. To him goes the credit of spreading this song form in different parts of India and Nepal and is rightly called the '*jhyaure samrat*'. He has significantly added to the tradition of cultural form of Nepali folksongs. Though he has been honoured by both the governments of India and Nepal by issuing postal stamps, serious writings are yet to come out on the different creative aspects of Mitrasen.



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