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King Rana Bahadur Shah listening attentively the music - presented by musicians from Mugal emperor Akbar's court.  
Picture courtesy: Narottam Das Indira Shrestha Guthi, Kathmandu.

# CLASSICAL MUSIC IN THE SHAH AND RANA ERA: 1768 - 1951 A.D.

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## Abstract

*The tradition of classical music was more justified during the Shah and Rana Dynasty's ruling. During the time the cultural import from neighboring India and the wide appreciation of music by kings and the Royal Palace of Nepal show the influence of Classical music among the Shah and Rana families. Some Rana Prime Ministers wanted to promote classical music but in practice most music was limited to the Royal palace and Rana family. Music Education, as well as all kinds of formal education were banned for the citizens of Nepal during the Rana regime. Those who were close to the Rana family and the palace were supposed to learn classical music from the patronized Ustaad/Pundit of the Palace and private teachers as well. This paper attempts to discuss the overall developing trends of classical music during Shah and Rana periods of Nepal in relation to development, extension and its practices in Nepalese society. All evidences have been taken from several documentaries. Whatever we practice as classical music today has taken the step of development in those periods. The evidence shows that especially raga based different Music genres were practiced and flourished in those periods.*

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## Key Words

**Gawaiya:** Singer of Hindustani classical music at the court of Shahs and Ranas

**Gharana:** Gharanas are also called styles. These schools or Gharanas have their basis in the traditional mode of musical training and education.

**Guthi:** A house where musicians play instruments. A kind of 'trust' founded for musical activities.

**Kaswi:** Female dancer or musician of folk or semi classical music.

**Kathak:** A story teller. A caste of professional musician and dancers in eastern Uttar Pradesh; also, the main form of north Indian Classical Dance.

**Khyal:** Imagination; elaboration of a raaga with lyrical composition consisting of two stanzas.

**Patar:** A clan whose profession is music and prostitution as well

**Raaga:** Modal scale, a musical structure of five or more notes with an identity and mood.

**Ustaad:** Guru, honorary title given to a learned musician. An expert of classical music addressed to both Hindu and Muslim Musicians in Nepal.

## Introduction

Being the universal language of emotion of artistic souls' music can't be confined in a limited geographical boundary,

however, it varies from place to place, culture to culture and generation to generation. For centuries the people of the South Asia have always studied for truth, mysteries and nature.

Music in this sub-continent is said to be one of the oldest unbroken traditions. The origin of this system goes back to the Vedas. Many popular legends have grown up concerning the origins and development classical music in the continent though specific reference of music has been given in Vedic Scriptures.

Nepal has a history since the time of the Lichhavi period. The classical music was able to grow, develop and improve during the Lichhavi, Malla and Shah eras as well as Rana Period. The Lichhavi (185A.D.-733A.D.) kings placed education as "optional" not "requisite" and so as with the musical education. General education and music were limited to some aristocratic people at the "gurukul" or with the private tutors (Sharma, 1990, p. 1). During the Malla period (1382-1769A.D.) the kings were more liberal than the Lichhavi time. the education system followed the same as the Lichhavi period. The system was managed by the private and public institutions like Guthi, Vihaar, Math, Gurukul and some of them were supported by the King. This was the golden period of music and arts and music was widely accepted by the kings and upper class of people.

History shows that despite abundance of reports relating to the Hindu classical music found in Malla period Nepalese music was said to have reached its height of development. Numerous Jatras (festivals), dramas observed in Kathmandu valley, colourful dances, varieties of musical instruments

played in temples and shrines and the commencement of Bhajan mandali (hymn singers) were originated in the Malla period. The tradition of classical music was more justified during the Shah Dynasty's ruling. Cultural exchange from the neighboring nations like India were widely appreciated by kings and the Royal Palace and goes to show the influence of classical music amongst the Shah families. The tradition of classical music and oral education system started from the Royal Palace of Shah Dynasty (1769-1950 A.D).

North Indian Classical Music began to flourish in Nepal around 1800s, when the ruling Rana family imported Indian musicians to perform in their court. Kathmandu was known as an important center for classical Music cultivating frequent exchange with similar centers in the Indian subcontinent (Moisala, 2000, p. 697).

After the rise of Rana rulers in Nepal some of them like Bir Shamsher, Chandra Shamsher, Bhim Shamsher, Juddha Shamsher wanted to promote classical music but in practice, all sorts of music was allocated in the Royal palace and Rana family. Music as well as all kinds of formal education was banned for the citizens of Nepal during the Rana regime (1846-1951A.D.). Those who were close to the Rana families and the palace were allowed to learn classical music from the private teachers of the palace.

### **Shah Period (1768AD-1951AD)**

The tradition of classical music was more justified during Shah Dynasty's rule. Cultural exchange from the neighboring countries like India, and a wide appreciation of music and its

professionals by kings and the Royal Palace show the influence of classical music.

The tradition of classical music and oral education system started from the Royal Palace of Shah Dynasty. The Year 1769 marks the beginning of modern Nepalese history, ending the Malla rule in Kathmandu valley and installing the Shah Dynasty with the invasion of Kathmandu valley by Gorkha King Prithivi Narayan Shah. The Shah Dynasty initially ruled the kingdom of Gorkha.

To begin with the reign of the king Ram Shah, Gorkha state flourished in art and culture. It is said that, the great Indian Musician Niyamat Khan (around 1750 A.D.) had come to Gorkha and spent time spanning over one and half years. At that time he used to perform there. Once, he also presented a composition "Raga kaushi ki kanhada" in the Gorkha palace and impressed the king and the courtiers with his arts (Regmi, 2003, p.186).

This evidence suggests that the foreign scholars and classical musicians had already been in the Gorkha Palace before the unification of Nepal. In a divine sermon, King Prithvi Narayan Shah advised the people if they sought entertainment, they might enjoy music and dance of the Newars (an ethnic community) of the Kathmandu valley. According to Babu Ram Acharya, an eminent historian, there used to be Indian dancers and singers in the palaces of the Malla kings. On the contrary, Prithivi Narayan Shah gave priority to Nepali songs and dances because he feared that the presence of foreign musicians in the Royal court heighten the possibility of leakage of state secrets (Acharya, 1965, p.139).

Prithivi Narayan Shah had the vision of a nation builder who wanted to unite all the races and fractions scattered in the Himalayan region. Therefore, his first act after settling himself in the splendid Malla palace in Kathmandu was to assure safety to the important administrators and traders of the valley. He engaged master craftsmen for three principal cities (Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, Lalitpur) and also of Kirtipur to build separate blocks of building attached to the Nasal Chowk Durbar of the Malla kings. Similarly he invited dancers and musicians to the palace and encouraged Nepalese arts and crafts (Rana, 1995, p.81).

The Gorkha Kings at Kathmandu engaged themselves in building some scattered temples, bringing Tibetan bronze images of considerable size in to the valley, patronizing Newari dances and dramas, folk dances from the hills and performing elaborate religious rituals in their Durbar by incorporating practices prevalent among different sects and tribes in Nepal for the growth and development of cultural activities.

King Pratap Singh Shah, son of Prithivi Narayan Shah was also a great music lover and himself a good singer. He initiated a custom of installing the wooden pole at Hanumandhoka palace for Indraajatra instead of Nuwakot Palace. All the courtiers had to be present for a week to celebrate the festival amid fireworks and other ceremonies and shows. A special type of singing and dancing marked the ceremony. It is said that the festive tradition continued till 1951 and even till today it is exist in some forms.

King Rana Bahadur Shah, son of Pratap Singh Shah was a good musician and



*Goddess Saraswati singing in the royal court - a painting during king Rana Bahadur Shah's time. Note the artist's effort to depict and imagine the ambience inside the famed Hanuman Dhoka Palace Courtyard.*

*Picture courtesy: Narottam Das Indira Shrestha Guthi, Kathmandu.*

music lover too. He enjoyed music by bringing foreign musicians and dancers. He also became expert in playing sitar. It is also said that Rana Bahadur Shah learnt music from Indian artist Nirmal Khan and Jafar Khan.

Scholar Dilip Kumar Mukhopadhyaya has mentioned that Karim Sen, the descendent of Tansen, also lived in Nepal in his later days and King Rana Bahadur appointed him as a court musician. He was in Nepal for about six years before his retirement. He had presented a special Tanpura known as Tansen's Tanpura to Rana Bahadur Shah (Regmi, 2003, p.192). After Rana Bahadur Shah, the period of King Girvana Yuddha Bir Bikram Shah and Rajendra Bir Bikram Shah, many musicians were appointed at the palace as

the superintendents for musical activities like Kathaks named Prabhu Dayal, Shiva Patar and singer Panjabi Saraudi on a monthly salary of Rs. 25 and Rs.125 to singer respectively (Regmi, 2003, p.194).

Even at the time of King Surendra Bir Bikram Shah, a group of Muslim singers and dancers from India used to come in the palace for entertaining the king. Laxmandas, the son of Harihar Mishra was born in Nepal and lived in Kaski but he stayed in India for a long time. He was called for by king Surendra and employed as an entertainer and tutor for the trainees. It is said that a drama Named 'Lalhira' in Hindi was played to entertain Queen Rajya Laxmi Devi. And this drama is still famous as a 'lalhira' dance in Patan which was copy of the

Indian drama (Upadhyaya, 1998, p.363). Similarly in the period of King Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah, many musicians and artists from neighbouring country India like Nanak Mishra, Kunj Bihari, Nuruddin and Manikman lived with king's palace in Narayanhiti (Thapa, 1997, p. 47).

The first Mishra musician from Banaras to stay in the palace was Ayodhya Prasad Mishra. His son Nanak Prasad, grandson Jhumak Prasad and great grandson have hugely contributed to the Nepal's history of music. The special feature of this gharana is that they were well known for all kinds of music, dance, vocal and tabala playing (Regmi, 2003, p.192).

It is said that music as well as classical music were appreciated during the period of Shah Regime. The musical environment was created in Shah King's palaces and courts. Most musicians came from India and they were fully patronized by the then kings. Even some kings were also musicians and they loved music very much.

On the basis of the available documents it is understood that Nepali traditional music was greatly supported and promoted by the Shah Kings. In their palaces, the maids were trained for singing traditional mangal dhun. The Guthi (trust) system supported music in temples and ensured that the religious aspects of music flourished in a similar way of Malla period.

The Shah Kings encouraged music in traditional festivals such as Holi and in the temple's daily pooja and aarati. This traditional music, played as it was in temples and other public places, was accessible to all, not just those inside the Palace. The use of music in

religious occasions during Shah Period can be drawn from various religious performances conducted by the Shah Kings. The kings used to appoint instrument players and offered musical instruments on special occasions.

## **Rana Period (1846–1951)**

Rana period is the time when the control of the government was laid in the hands of the Rana family. Jung Bahadur (born in 1817 A.D.) came into power in 1846 and appointed himself as the permanent prime minister. He was given the hereditary title of Rana. Under the Ranas, Nepal maintained good relation with the British. When the British withdrew from India in 1947, the Rana family was exposed to new dangers. They faced a revolution in 1950, and in 1951, under the pressure from India, Nepal's King Tribhuvan took the throne with restored sovereignty.

After the rise of Rana ruler in Nepal some of them like Bir Shamsheer, Chandra Shamsheer, Bhim Shamsheer, Juddha Shamsheer wanted to promote classical music. The primary purpose of music in Jung Bahadur's life was entertainment. He enriched the musical climate greatly in Nepal by not only supporting indigenous Nepalese music, but by bringing in many musicians from India.

As these Indian musicians were predominantly classical and semi-classical musicians, a flourishing classical music community began to form during Janga Bahadur's rule. There are various expositions that show that with the political emergence of Jung Bahadur, Indian music instructors (Ustaad) melodist (gawaiya), dancers (nartaki) began to pour in to Nepal and until 1868 A.D. he even hired music

and dance troupes. With the advent of Jung Bahadur's regime, Indian Ustaad, Gawaiya, dancers, Kaswi, Bai, Najari etc. began sheltering in Nepal. Jung Bahadur also employed performing artists like Gawaiya, Sarangi player, Tawalchi (Tabla player) until around 1868 AD. It is believed that with the fall of Nawab of Lucknow, the artists were brought in to Kathmandu by Jung Bahadur who offered them Patronage. In his time period many classical musicians were appointed in a monthly salary basis.

On his return from England in 1851 Jung Bahadur brought English instruments. The use of piano, silvered instruments, and orchestral instruments were introduced in Nepal after his famous visit. A dance and music training centre had already been opened in Jung Bahadur's Thapathali palace by 1848. A record of 1851, says that Jung Bahadur had made necessary provisions for a training institute at his palace. The record has a mention of names of 22 women and their respective remuneration (ranging from Rs. 27 to 37).

Similarly, the names of 23 women receiving singing training and their wages (Rs.26) are also mentioned there (Bhattarai, 1987, p. 214). After the death of Jung Bahadur, his brother Rannodip Singh (1877-1885) became the Prime Minister of Nepal.

During this time, the renowned musician Laxmandas, a descendant in Tansen's maternal lineage was a music expert in Nepal. His disciples of stature were experts of Dhrupad, Khayal, and Prabandha. Thuli Hasina and Sangramsur Bista, both good singers were also appointed in the court of Rannodip (Mukhopadhyaya, 1970). Rannodip

himself was also a good music lover. After the assassination of Prime Minister Rannodip Singh, Bir Shamsher became the Prime Minister of Nepal. He followed the footsteps of Jung Bahadur as a music lover and seems to have been even more interested in classical music.

It was Bir Shamsher who organized the historical Bagedi musical conference (Vasant, 1999, page 480) that continued till 1900 and brought many musicians from all over the Indian subcontinent into Nepal. In his time, Lucknow's Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, Dunde Khan were renowned Tappa and Khayal singers, who sought refuge in Nepal in 1857. Likewise, Tansen's descendant Taj Khan, a Dhrupad and Dhamar singer lived under the care and support of Bir Shamsher.

Bir Shamsher allowed a mosque to be built near his Palace and also allowed to make a graveyard near Swayabhunath area. In this graveyard, Taj Khan and Dunde Khan were buried (Jabara, 1989, p.282). During this time, Inayat Hussain Khan, a khyal singer from Bareilly, Dhrupad and khyal singer Ram Sevak from Manohar family of Varanasi, Veena and Pakhawaj Player Binakar Bhatta from Dakshinatya, Kanthe Maharaj of Ram Sahaya family from Varanasi, Khyal singer Haider Khan, Classical singer and Kathak dancer Jagdeep Mishra from Varanasi, Veena player Bande Ali Khan, Dhrupad singer Gulam Hussain, Nepali ustad Nandalal, were also employed in the Bir Shamsher's palace.

Apart from these renowned Indian artists, some Nepalese musicians like Laxmandas, Pt. Birendra Keshari Pokharel, Pt. Dev Chandra Regmi were also employed in his Palace. (Regmi, 2003, p.219). After Bir Shamsher, Dev Shamsher

became the Prime Minister of Nepal but he could not sustain himself in Power.

During the Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher (1901-1929) Melwa Devi, a famous artist of Nepal and Bala Prasad, an Indian artist were employed in the Royal Palace. In 1927, an eminent Indian Musician Omkarnath Thakur and his elder brother Ram Chandra also visited Nepal with a letter of recommendation from Baroda's Deewan Sir Manubhai Mehta.

It is said that Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher had welcomed them like Royal guests and also offered handsome amount as a reward at the end of their exceptional musical presentation (Thakur, 1995, p.427). After Chandra Shamsher, Bhim Shamsher (1929-1932) became the Prime Minister of Nepal. It is known that Pt. Bishnu Digamber Paluskar also visited Nepal during this period with the purpose of getting donation for promoting institutionalized music education in India. Pt. Omkarnath Thakur was again invited in Nepal in 1930-31 to perform classical music at the wedding ceremony of the daughter of Mohan Shamsher with Charkari Maharaja of India (Regmi, 2003).

It is also said that Pt. Thakur received the title of "Sangeet Mahamahopadhyaya" by Prime Minister Bhim Shamsher during the reign of King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah (Thakur, 1995, p.436). It is said that Bhim Shamsher didn't have much interest for music but most of family members like sons and grandsons were deeply interested in classical music especially in Sitar. Most of them used to take Sitar lessons from Nepali renowned musician Pt. Krishna Chandra Regmi, Dev Chandra Regmi, Purna Chandra Regmi and Satish

Chandra Regmi. After Bhim Shamsher, Juddha Shamsher (1932-1945) became the Prime minister of Nepal. He also started to promote the Nepalese musicians in his Palace and other music activities.

During this time, the number of Nepalese musicians and ustaad was seen to have increased and were being venerated and rewarded in the place of foreign musicians and ustaad. While visiting India Juddha Shamsher donated 20-25 thousand Rupees to Rabindra Nath Tagore at Biswa Bharati foundation (Regmi, 2003, p. 234).

After his renunciation of premiership in 1945, his successors Padma Shamsher Rana(1945-1948A.D.) and Mohan Shamsher (1948-1950A.D.) could not do much substantial things for music during their short and unstable rule.

Some Indian notable Ustaads and pundits who were patronized by the Shah and Ranas were Bala Prasad, Ayodhya Prasad Mishra, Nanak Prasad Mishra, Jhummak Lal Mishra, Bade Ram Das, Mustaq Hussain Khan, Goolam Rasool Khan, Kanthe Maharaj, Bal Krishna Buwa Ichalakaranjekar, Pratap Maharaj, Prasiddhu Manohar, Baladev Sahaya, Raja Bali Khaan, Alladiya Khan, Ram Krishna Buwa Baje, Shiva Pashupati, Fida Hussain Khan, Khem Chandra Prakash, Bindadin Maharaj, Mohan Prasad Shivadhar, Ali Mohammad Khan, Nanku Miyan, Beeru mishra, Inayat Hussain Khan, Goolam Mohammad Hussain Khan, Dunde Khan, Taj Khan etc.

Some notable Nepalese classical musicians who also got the height by learning and doing musical accompaniment with Indian ustaad and Pandits are, Ustaad Nandalal, Bikram Raj Panday,



Ustaad Bhagat Krishna, Ustaad Badri Shrestha, pt. Ganga Dutta Parajuli, Ek Raj Shumsher, Yajya Raj Sharma, Dwarika Bhakta Mathema, Ram Bahadur Tandukar, Laxman Shumsher Ja. Ba. Ra., Melva Devi, Ram Nath Tandukar, Rana Hari Babu, Ram Prasad Raya Tharu, Master Mitra Sen, Master Ratna Das Prakash, pt. Dev Chandra Regmi, Suchet Singh Kanchha Ustad, Ustaad Govinda Nepali, Ustaad Suchet Man Amatya, Tirtha Raj Manandhar, Bakhat Bir Budhapirithi, Manpriya Ditthini, Debendra Shumsher, Trailokya Shumsher Rana etc. (Regmi, 2003).

Some more renowned artists were Indra Gurung, Dr. A. M. Pathan, Karna Jung Sijapati, Kali Prasad Sharma, Kali Bhakta Panta, Kanchha Buddha Bajracharya, Krishna Chandra Regmi, Khaje Dura, Khushbu and Sulabha, Keshar Man Tuladhar, Gangi Kaswi, Gunna Kaji, Chet Nath Sharma, Jaya Dev Ditiya, Jaya Prithibi Bahadur Singh, Jhangan Gurung, T.N. Rana, Dev Chandra Regmi, Dharmananda Rajopadhyaya, Narayan Prasad Shrestha, Pushpa Shumsher Rana, Bakhat Bir Budha pirti, Bajir Man, Bahadur Singh Baral, Buddhi Man Chaudhari, Bekha Maharjan, Bej Lal Chaudhari, Bhedi Kharke Sahila, Bhairab Bahadur Thapa, Manju Bajra Bajracharya, Moti Ram Bhatta, Ram Bahadur Tandukar etc. (Mukarung, 2014).

## Conclusion

During the Shah and Rana periods of Nepal Classical music climbed the ultimate height of progress strengthening its root very strong. Many top most ustaads and pundits from neighboring country India visited Nepal and some of them lived permanently in Nepal patronized by Shah Kings and Rana

Prime Ministers which also developed the classical music tradition of Nepal. Between 18th and 20th century massive political changes were taking place in India when and new rulers were coming from Europe.

Most of the Indian states fell under the British rule. The British rulers had no taste for classical music. The adverse situation worsened the status of Indian classical musicians. Due to that they desperately sought safe kingdoms where their talent could be honored and appreciated. It was in pursuit of honor and security that Indian musicians poured into Nepal. They not only performed and entertained in the Rana and Royal Palaces but also taught music to the kings and Rana family members as well as some interested Nepalese music lovers who were closed to Shah and Rana family.

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