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Music as Resistance: Revisiting Melawa Devi and Her Songs

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate how Melawa Devi takes music as an instrument to form her agency from the minimum resources available in her transitional phases of life struggles. To address this objective, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of gender subaltern has been employed as theoretical perspective and Naila Kabeer's framework of women empowerment to access the contextual layers surrounding Melawa Devi's narratives associated to her music career. This paper equally examines the representative songs of Melawa Devi with regards to the aesthetics of resistance consciousness. The findings show the essence of her creative struggle that transformed her into a bold singer cum song and music composer in Nepali music history. In conclusion, when Melawa Devi and her song have been studied from the perspective of subaltern historiography, she appears as an empowered music mentor skillful to use music as a tool to resistance and existence.

Keywords: Music, gender subaltern, resistance consciousness, women empowerment

Introduction

This paper explores the voices of resistance in Melawa Devi and her songs, which is discussed from the gender subaltern perspective with reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Naila Kabeer's conceptual framework about women empowerment. Melawa Devi struggled hard throughout her life pursuing a career in music and ultimately marked her name in history in Nepali music as the first female singer to record Nepali songs. She was also recognized as a versatile singer as well as song and music composer. Her songs "Nagharlai Ghar Kahinchha" (Not Saying Home as Home) and "Sawari Mero Railaima" (My Visit to Train) found documented in a book *Swodeshi Megaphone ke Naye Recordings* (New Recordings of Indian Megaphone) published in 1935 (Praksh 18). Nevertheless, she could never stand

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in a position to live autonomous and dignified life despite her ceaseless struggle as a singer, song and music composer and music instructor. There is not enough foundation to her to speak but she never lost her hope to her mission of empowerment through music.

Subaltern studies including postcolonial studies examines the experience and existence of the oppressed people, whose voices have been silenced and attempts to replace the Euro-centric and national elitist narratives with the cultural and indigenous studies of the oppressed communities. It aims to create space to the excluded women and disempowered communities from the dominant political representation. For Antonio Gramsci, the history of the subaltern classes is as complex as the history of dominant class. The history of Melawa Devi appears distorted and fragmented but her voices are heard eloquent through her musical performances. The term 'music' refers to the vocal and instrumental performing arts, often accompanied by dancing – the arrangement of sounds in a pleasing sequence or combination to be sung or played on instruments (Hornby 277; qtd. in Regmi 2); the combination of vocal, instrumental and dance is known as *sangeet* (Saranadev 6; qtd. in Regmi 2). Music is a high quality art, a ladder that one moves on towards attaining salvation (Shastri 1). A person, who possesses knowledge of all these arts – vocal, instrumental, and dance – is considered a perfect musician (Deva 1).

In Nepal, as elsewhere, music is a sacred part of human life, a way of living in communication with God while seeking salvation. In addition to the holy place that music occupies in Nepal, it also has social, cultural, religious, educational, and occupational dimensions, not to mention just an entertainment. There is hardly any aspect of human life that is not touched by the infinite scope of music (Regmi 3). The history tells absolute monarchs or rulers played a leading role in every public sector, including the arts and music, which flourished and spread under the patronage of monarchy. In early days, *bhat* singers (eulogizers) were recruited to the royal courts to sing valorous songs and eulogies of praise of encouraging the rulers to go to war or punish traitors. History is replete with the accounts of kings marching into battle accompanied by a band of musicians, warriors wielded their weapons with the rhythm of music and the king's messages were conveyed by playing musical instruments. As noted in *Kautilya Arthashastra*, the monarchs patronized accomplished musicians and ethnic caste groups for their musical expertise earned their living by playing music at the court (Tripathi 253; qtd. in Regmi 6). Melawa Davi also played a role of *bhat* singers in the palace of Chandra Shamsher but after she left the palace, she began to sing eloquently.

Female artists' contribution to the modern Nepali music is of no mean order (Basnet and Paudyal 114). But, alike Melawa Devi, Nepali music history has many female singers established as male singers; they have marked a noteworthy contribution to establish the modern mainstream music history (Sthapit 5). Ram Saran Darnal in his book *Nepali Sangeet Sadhak* (Devoties in Nepali Music) documents 101 such singers and lyricists tracing Nepali music history from Ujir Tandukar (1921-1991 vs) including brief biographies of 19 remarkable women singers. Narendra Raj Prasai in one of his books has included 54 singers, among them are 13 female singers including Melawa Devi. Meanwhile, Rajaram Phuyal in his comprehensive book *Nepali Sangeetama Nari* (Women in Nepali Music) gives bulky information of Nepali women singers tracing the references roughly from mythical era to the present.

Despite the scarcity of available references, Melawa Devi remains a recurring figure in Nepali music literature. But most of the references about her exist in the form of grey literature. The sources from a few writers, i.e., Swami Prapannacharya, Ram Saran Darnal, and Bulu Mukarung look more authentic. Curiously, academic research dedicated to Melawa Devi and other female singers remains absent to the date.

Therefore, this research attempts to explore how she sustained her music career during the Rana regime is an important research question that the academia ignored till date.

Research Methods

This qualitative study investigates the voices of resistance in Melawa Devi's life struggle as a singer, song and music composer, and music instructor from the gender subaltern perspective with reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Drawing upon Naila Kabeer's conceptual framework of "resources, agency, and achievements," this study explored how Melawa Devi's access to resources, her autonomy in decision-making, and her notable accomplishments intersect with gender, music, and empowerment. Throughout history, women have faced limitations on their ability to make life choices, and this research sheds light on the intricate relationship between the following dimensions:

Resources: Melawa Devi's access to resources plays a crucial role in shaping her journey. These resources could include her musical training, exposure to different genres, mentors, and family support. This study considers how her access to these resources influenced her artistic development and opportunities.

Agency: Agency refers to Melawa Devi's autonomy in decision-making. Did she have the freedom to choose her musical path, collaborate with other artists, and express herself authentically? This study tries to explore moments where her agency was evident, such as composing her own songs or challenging societal norms.

Achievements: Melawa Devi's accomplishments are the markers of her impact. These could include her performances, compositions, and contributions to Nepali music, which reflect on how her achievements resonate beyond her individual journey and contribute to broader discussions about gender empowerment.

By examining these dimensions, this study sheds light on the intricate relationship between gender, music, and empowerment. Melawa Devi's story transcends the limits, weaving itself into the very fabric of cultural memory. Her story becomes a powerful lens through which the challenges and triumphs faced by women in the music industry are understood for analysis. This study combines rigorous literature review with firsthand insights. Key informant interviews (ten in total) connect this study to individuals who intersected with Melawa Devi's musical life journey. Through their narratives, the study weaves a rich tapestry of her impact in Nepali music.

Results and Discussion

Melawa Devi appears as a gender subaltern having the voices of resistance in Nepali music. She was a female singer having skill of using music as a tool to resistance and existence. As subaltern studies comprehends that the study of history, culture, society, and literature excluded from the established political representation and denied their voice at the centre of discourse labaling an inferior position in terms of class, caste, gender, and culture – a person or groups of people "rendered without agency" (Young 345), Melawa Devi exists at the centre of Nepali music. For Gramsci, 'subaltern' refers to the working class people, who are subject to the hegemony of the dominant ruling class. The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a unified group. The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic (Gramsci 52, 54). The subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise – only 'permanent' victory breaks their subordination and that not immediately. In reality, even when they appear triumphant, the subaltern groups are merely anxious to defend themselves (55). To defend them, Gramsci points out the role of new intellectuals. There are certain elements

of subaltern-community-friendly new intellectualism in Melawa Devi's struggle in Nepali music history. She knowingly or unknowingly played a role, as Gramsci appeals, of new intellectualism by corresponding the aspirations of the oppressed people to help them in their real forms of life through music. Gramsci writes, "The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator" (10). Melawa Devi through music exercised the intellectual function, connecting all social groups and inserting the voices of resistance in the listeners of her songs and observers of her life struggle.

The notion of 'the intellectuals' for Gramsci is simple. For him, the perception of intellectuals as a distinct social category independent of class is a myth. Philosophically, they connect with the proposition that "all men are philosophers" and in his words "all men are potentially intellectuals in the sense of having an intellect and using it, but not all are intellectuals by social function" (3). For him, "all men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals" (8, 9) because, in his words, "it can happen that everyone at some time fries a couple of eggs or sews up a tear in a jacket, we do not say that everyone is a cook or a tailor" (9). Similarly, how persistently someone played a role as an intellectual matters a lot in the agency formation and empowerment of the oppressed class. Melawa Devi in this regards played a role as an instructor, singer, and song and music composer with the voices of resistance throughout her life. Still, she looks invisible in the national historiography.

Shifting Subaltern Identity and Becoming Melawa Devi

The historiography of the subaltern, as discussed above, is often distorted and fragmented; so is the case of Melawa Devi. The transformation of an ordinary girl into Melawa Devi, that looks like a myth, appeals everyone. But, the date of her birth variation has not been validated till date. According to *Sargam Magazine*, Melawa Devi was born in 1956 BS. For example, Ram Saran Darnal writes, "Melawa Devi was born in 1964 BS" (55). Master Ratna Das Prakash and Bulu Mukarung claim along with a few others that she was born in 1959 BS. The dispute goes on regarding her birthplace as well. But most of the scholars agree that she was born in Rumjatar, Okhaldhunga. DR Pokharel writes that she might have been born in Gorkha.

Similarly, Melawa Devi has also been known with multiple names. Her name in her birthplace, as Swami Prapannacharya and Bulu Mukarung write, was Sunmaya-Sulabha. She was born in the Lamichhane Gurung family. Her father's name was Gyan Bahadur. Her visit to Kathmandu is also not clear. The available texts tell that her mother Sapta Devi took her to Kathmandu when she was just 7. But Swami Prapannacharya and Bulu Mukarung believe that her mother left her in the palace of Chandra Shamsher when she was of 14. She was physically beautiful and popular among courtiers (Pradhan 56). She devoted to her music practice for 10 years within the palace. She got a new name 'Melawa Devi' from Chandra Shamsher. In the palace, Melawa Devi got a cohort of ustajs (music players, singers, and performers) from her childhood that sharpened her musical skills. She was popular as a singer of the palace and a loving singer of Chandra Shamsher (56). A myth about Melawa Devi narrates a story in the Rana Palace that Kesar Shamsher made her sing and told to bring rain via her singing. According to Bimala Diksichit, "She kept on singing and finally it rained and she got 5000 rupees" (*Sangeet Sarita* 1).

Chandra Shamsher would take her everywhere, even during hunting camp (Prasai 39). Whenever she was at the Rana Palace, she was always praised due to her

beauty and the best musical performance. She would make the rulers and guests happy with her performances and get valuable gifts (Rawal 203). But she left the palace after her vocal weakened due to poisonous *paan* served to her. Chandra Shamsher helped to bring her vocal back as earlier with the best treatment, but all efforts failed. People were jealous, as Darnal writes, “Chandra Shamsher liked her so much and being jealousy someone gave her *paan* mixing something (poison) and her vocal was distorted. Chandra Shamsher called a doctor from United Kingdom but her vocal could not recover as before” (57). She had to leave the palace in her early twenties. At that time, she was in her prime of youth.

Bhakta Krishna Manandhar, a tabala player of the Palace, was close to her. Melawa Devi fell in love with him and became his second wife. She transformed into Melawa Devi Manandhar. Some of the scholars claim that she was his third wife. She gave birth to four children – two sons, (Om and Mohan) and two daughters (Shanta and Bimala). The grey literature shows in a meager form that her two sons died early. Bhakta Krishna lost his job after he married Melawa Devi. Though born as Gurung, she came closer to the Newar culture of Kathmandu. Asha Gopal Gurwacharya from Chhetrapati and Bhakta Krishna were close to each other. Chandra Shamsher liked Melawa Devi and had built a house for her in lower Chhauni, Bijeshowri, Kathmandu. Living outside the palace and becoming closer to Bhakta Krishna and the Newar community changed her life significantly. She began to sing a few songs in the Newari language as well.

Judda Shamsher came in power after Chandra Shamsher. Judda Shamsher did not like Melawa Devi. The key cause was that she sang a song by Sukra Raj Shastri “Na Gharlaai Ghar Kahinchha” (Not Saying Home as Home). The song gives the voices of resistance to gender subalterns, saying “naari nai darbar ho/ek matrai dharm saadhan/sworgako dwar ho” (female is the palace- only religious script and way to heaven is female) prepared for his play *Sorgako Dwar (The Palace of the Heaven)*. After Melawa Devi sang this song, she appeared at the center of contestations within the Rana Palace. The reason of debate was that she was assigned as a singer of palace, but she sang the outsider’s song. Secondly, there was fear of revolution. Bal Kumari Devi, the wife of Chandra Shamsher, also did not like Melawa Devi (Rawal 204). The number goes further who were jealous on Melawa’s genius melody power. Finally, Melawa Devi decided to leave the country and took shelter in India. Selling her house gifted by Chandra Shamsher in Bijeswori, she left Nepal with her daughters. The palace neither remained her shelter nor her husband’s house. She was active in her music career even after she left the palace. She sang a song giving condolence on the demise of people of the catastrophic earthquake in 1990 BS. The song “*Bhukhya juya manu dakwa sita*” (*Earthquake killed lots of people*) was in nepa: *bhasha* (Newari language), dedicated to the dead and wounded and homeless of the earthquake. The music composer was her husband Bhakata Krishna.

In India, Melawa Devi began to participate in various musical functions. She changed her name and earned fame in India singing as Sumalanda Devi. She had changed her name again so that the Rana rulers could not watch her as before. She similarly wanted to give her new identity. She participated in the Thumari festival in Islamabad; she was recognized as Thumariko Rani (Dancing Queen) (Darnal 60). She recorded five modern songs, two hymns and few Newari songs and marked as the first Nepali singer to record Nepali songs. She moved on to Kanpur, Islamabad, Calcutta, and Delhi attaining musical performances (Darnal 60).

Melawa Devi might have wished to live a happy married life with Bhakta Krishna, but it could not as she wished. Becoming a second or third wife and living a dignified life as a singer or music composer was a sweet dream in Nepal; it is hard in the

current time too (Stirr xii). The gaze to look at a female singer and performer in Nepal is not good (Mukarung Interview). Melawa Devi had to struggle hard to rear four children and pursue her music career. Unfortunately, her both sons died early. She decided to leave Nepal with her two daughters, who settled in India after they got married. Melawa Devi again began to live in Elaventh North Street in Calcutta alone, teaching music to few tycoon family children. Master Ratna Das Prakash, Pravin Dhakal, and few others who would go to India for recording. She was close to Gopal Shrestha, too, who was teaching music in Calcutta. However, she was feeling lonely (Prakash 19). She recorded “Baba ma Bambay Janna” (Father, I’ll not Go to Bambay) and “Papi Bhamara” (Vicious Bumblebee) from Dev Nararayan invested for that. The big disk record was taking to Nepal from His Master Voice, and when they reached Bhimphedi, they heard rigid censorship of Judda Shamsher and left the disk record at Bhimphedi and returned to India, as recalled by Dwarika Narayan Manandhar (Sayami Interview). She was familiar of poetic quality; she could compose music as well; she composed music of Sukra Raj Joshi (Shastri) song for his play. She had given voice to “Rajamati Kumati” (Foolish Rajamati) in female voice in the words of JL Karmacharya (Mukarung Interview).

Melawa Devi died in an accident when she was preparing food in the stove in 2012 BS. Prakash Sayami writes that she died in 2011 BS (*Nepali Sangeetko Ek Satak* 6). Indian media published the news and a few members of her husband joined her funeral (Mukarung, “Arambhakalin Surkarmi” 115). Her daughter Bimala Manandhar Dikschhit came to Kathmandu in around 2070 BS and published an article about her in *Sangeet Sarita* titled “Samjhanaka Jhyalbata” (Through the Window of Reminiscences) based on her. In her article, Bimala wrote her mother favored by Chandra Shamsher, who would take her during the hunting tours as well and enjoy with her songs during the hunting as well. Chandra Shamsher had declared that when the herd of deer comes closer listening to her songs, not to fire/kill them. Thus, he respected her songs. Too lately, in 2077/78 BS, her statue in Rumjatar found established with the name Melawa Devi.

Revisiting Melawa Devi and Her Songs

Revising the historiography of the subaltern is essential in rewriting history. Since the 1970s, the subaltern studies intellectual group was formed with an aim of rewriting the historiography from the subaltern perspective under the leadership of Ranjit Guha. The group tried to gather the historical evidences to sustain organized history writing project in South Asia. Spivak emphasized the issues of representation and self-representation with reference to the women, tribal, and working class. She agrees the failure of democratic countries like India to recognize the histories and struggles of woman, tribal, and working class in South Asian society (Young 351). In her view, the subaltern histories of resistance are multifaceted, fragmented, and complex. She claims that even the subaltern studies group ignored or failed to give attention to the life and experiences of the subaltern women and distorted the historiography of marginalized and disempowered communities. The dominant politico-cultural, economic, and educational strategies rendered the freedom of life choice, agency, and empowerment of the marginalized communities. She uses deconstruction as an instrument in order to create a wider space for the disempowered women and marginalized communities and attempts to recover the resisting voices of the women and disempowered communities (Spivak 277).

Spivak also criticizes feminists who ignore particular experiences of the Third World marginalized subaltern women in the course of constructing a universal feminist subject or global sisterhood (Morton 39). She claims that gender subaltern, both as object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction

of the elite keeps the patriarchy dominant, and when “the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 287). It means, as she claims, the (gender) subaltern cannot speak; there is no space for gender subaltern to speak because their agency/voices were silenced under politico-cultural hegemony. In her words, she likes the term ‘subaltern’ because it is situational beyond the strict class analysis. But, she is pessimistic that the western or national elite male as well as elite female intellectuals could recover the voices of resistance of the oppressed women and disempowered communities.

The contemporary international division of labor, as Spivak claims in the revised version of her “can the subaltern speak?” the growth of multinational capital and consumerism in the former colonies have shifted the structure of hegemony- the gradual emergence of the new subaltern in the new world order (*Global* 525). Spivak’s revised version firstly comments on and engages in dialogue with the work of the subaltern studies; then it makes a critique of Deleuze’s and Foucault’s notion that subaltern can not only speak but ‘know’ or understand their positions within society; and finally, her revised version of ‘can the subaltern speak?’ situates the subaltern subject within the new globalized capitalist flows and structures of the First/Third Worlds as they emerge from the more conventional realms of imperialism and colonialism. Thus, within this new world order of subaltern, women are ‘doubly effaced’ (Lane 521) and the subaltern (marginalized women and disempowered communities) cannot speak.

Formulating a foundation to the subaltern to speak autonomously often appears a herculean task. It is a more difficult task to the marginalized women and disempowered communities to achieve fame. Melawa Devi, born in Rumjatar, Okaldhunga at that time, as a female singer had less likely to get resources and exposure. She began to influence the villagers through her melodious songs with the minimum resources as compared to inside the Rana Palace. Her parents felt that if resources she could get, she would be a popular singer. As Kabeer argues that the resources include not only access, but also future claims/expectations. As Spivak claims, it is more difficult to the oppressed women to express their consciousness.

People would keep beautiful and talented daughters at the palace then. Melawa Devi had parents, brothers, and sisters; however, she joined the Rana Palace as her maternal sister Balmaya Gurung, who worked as a *susare* (caregiver) of King Tribhuvan’s mother. She had to change her identity. At that time, Mukarung writes, “All *nanis* (young girls) who joined Rana Palace would get a new name; it was a practice of the palace” (*Nepali Sangeet* 115). Melawa Devi became popular and in each performance, getting *baxis* (valuable tips) was normal (Rawal 203). She would influence the guests and courtiers with her beauty and melodious musical performances. When she was called for the performance, she was being carried on *palki* (carriage made of gold and silver) from her residence to the performance site. She got a cohort of singers and musicians, and dancers and performers within the palace. When she left the palace, she was with the musician Bhakta Krishna. Her association with a top figure including freedom fighters, ustajs, and writers offered her confidence to fight against the hindrances.

Melawa Devi had to make multiple tough decisions in her struggle phase that shaped her life differently. When her mother handed her to the Rana Palace, she was servile to sing eulogies. However, she got training, name, and popularity within the palace. But, sooner, in her early twenties she had to leave the palace. The decision of becoming the second or third wife of Bhakta Krishna changed her life significantly. The processes of decision making – negotiation, deception, and manipulation – are unknown. Obviously, agency is the power, the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them; it is

more than an observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation, and purpose which many individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or ‘the power within’ – also the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. It can be exercised by individuals as well as by collectivities (Kabeer 438). Melawa Devi got married to Bhakta Krishna in the Dakshinkali temple. She gave birth to four children. Then she made another bold decision. She left her husband’s house and began to live in her own house gifted by Chandra Shamsher. Again she made yet another decision to leave Nepal by selling her house. She went to India taking her two daughters after her two sons died early. Unlike Spivak’s claim, Melawa Devi dares to speak, act, and resist using music as a tool to her liberation.

Finally, Melawa Devi chose India, where she acquires further resources and achievements. Her well-being outcomes appear from His Master Voice and Meghaphone Records Company, where she recorded a song “Jhan Para Janchhu Ni Lai Lai, Jhan Maya Lagchha Barilai” (As I go further and further, my love will increase) in her own words and music composition. She appeared as the first Nepali woman to record songs in Nepali music history:

सवारी मेरो रेलैमा (My travel on the train)

सानु र सानु लैलै कुसुमे रुमाल बरिलै (Small & small *kusume* handkerchief)

धोई दिने कोहि छैन (Nobody is there to clean)

विरानो देशमा लैलै मै मरि गैजाउला बरिलै (I may die in the ailine place)

रोइदिने कोहि छैन (Nobody is there to cry)

सवारी मेरो रेलैमा । (My travel on the train) (my trans.; Melawa Devi)

Thus, Meluwa Devi composed many songs based on her life story one after another in her vocal and music composition. Such a popular singer of the Rana Palace had to leave the palace; she also left her husband and her house. She sold her house gifted her by Chandra Shamsher and moved to Culcutta. The place was unfamiliar; she had nobody there to help her. She laments through her song that there would be nobody to cry even in her death. She faced similar death. There was nobody to cry in her death. Her daughters were married. She lived alone in Culcutta. She died when her cooking stove burst. Her relatives knew lately about her death. Her husband Bhakta Krishna was too late to know it either.

Melawa Devi had versatile skills to give vocal and music to her words based on her lived story. She saw *sawari* (visit), garden, *mirmire* (morning) window, the lovebird sorts of nature of male, deserted lover; they all echo in her songs. The wandering *bhamara* (bumblebee) sucking nectar of the flower comes symbolically in her song:

छानी छानी रस लिने (Bumblebee sucks juice)

पेट कालो मुख कालो (Black in heart and face)

पापी भमरा डुलुवा भमरा (Wandering deceptive bumble bee)

कहिले यसमा कहिले उसमा (Sometimes here then there)

जहाँ छ कोपिला त्यहाँ छ भमरा ... (Wherever is buds you are there). (my trans.;

Melawa Devi)

Melawa Devi spent her teen-age singing around the courtiers and rulers. There used to be young girls like buds. She expresses the feeling of male as bumblebee, which she saw or faced inside and outside the Rana Palace. The society she lived then was rigid based on feudal patriarchy. Keeping multiple wives and seeking young girls were normal inside and outside the palace. She herself was the second or third wife of Bhakta Krishna. She

subtly resists against such patriarchy eracting erotic male as a bumblebee, which looks busy sucking buds here and there. She further recorded a historical song:

न घरलाई घर कहिन्छ नारी नै दरबार हो (Home cannot be a home female is the palace)
एक मात्रै धर्मसाधन नारी घरको द्वार हो (Only pious home's entrance is the female)
घरको देवी नारी नै हो नारी घरको ज्योति हो (The goddesses of light of the home is female)
राज्यलक्ष्मी नारी नै हो नारी मणिक मोती हो (The ruling goddess shining diamond is the female)
राजलक्ष्मि तुल्य भै, राजमन्त्री तुल्य भै (Figure alike a worshipping minister goddess)
स्वर्ग राज्य भोगको प्राप्त हुनु सुयोगको (Female makes possible to attain heavenly state).
(my trans.; Melawa Devi)

Melawa Devi kept on recording organic songs based on her experiences. But “Na Ghar Lai Ghar Kahinchha, Nari Nai Darbar Ho” (Not Saying Home as Home, Women Are Palace) in Sukra Raj Shastri's word and her music composition came to be a historical song. This song resists the patriarchal notions claiming that female is palace, goddess, and door to heaven. The song was composed by one of the freedom fighters; thus, it got public and palace's attention. Sukra Raj Shastri's book *Sworgako Darbar (The Palace of the Heaven)* published in 1986 BS has incorporated this song on page 192 (qtd. in Prakash 19). How did Melawa Devi compose this song? Did she meet Shastri and take this song or she took the song from the book that remains a mystery because Shastri was hanged by the Rana ruler in 1997 BS and Melawa Devi died in an accident while preparing her meal in 2012 BS (Prakash 21). Nevertheless, the song “Na Gharlai Ghar Kahinchha Nari Nai Darbar Ho” stands as a bold entry of resistance for the gender subaltern then. The lyric compares women as goddesses, very powerful and pious that was a direct intervention against the feudal structures attached with patriarchy. It was the song published in *Swadeshi Megaphone ke Naye Recordings (New Recordings of Indian Megaphone)* in 1935 along with another song “*Sawari Mero Railaima*” (My Visit to Train) to promote the recordings.

Melawa Devi did not live a passive life breaking her music practices. In her own words and music composition other songs available are: “*Thapa Na Thali Darbar*” (Thapathali Palace), “*Yo Jindagiko Ke Bharosa*” (This Life Has No Trust), “*Kaiyau Phoolbari*” (Numerous Gardens), “*Maya Mari Nisthurile*” (She Left Me), “*Hai Mero Pardesi Pritam*” (My Foreign Love), “*Aauna Basam Piyari Mirmire Jhyalaima*” (My Love, Please Come and Sit Beside the Window), “*Bhukampa Tras*” (Fear of Earthquake), and some songs as eulogies of Judda Shamsher are available in the Nepali music archive. After her songs appeared popular in Nepali communities within and outside Nepal, her husband Bhakta Krishna went to Calcutta to return her back to Nepal. But it was too late; in the words of Mukarung, “She had been passed away before he reached there” (Nepali Sangeet 115). According to the literature available, Melawa Devi is the pioneer female singer to record Nepali songs. She recorded Nepali songs mostly with her own words and music composition from Calcutta, India in the late 1930s and early 40s. The songs “*Sawari Mero Railaima*,” “*Aauna Basa Piyari*,” “*Na Ghar Lai Ghar Kahinchha*,” “*Paapi Bhamara*” appeared as milestones from her unique female voice. She sustained her livelihood completely from the music practices and existed as a versatile woman singer, and song and music composer outside the Rana Palace; she dared to live without her husband's shelter as well; when a situation did not favor her music career, she further dared to leave the country. Among the public introducing sophisticated singing techniques, most importantly Melawa Devi recorded her songs in His Master Voice in Calcutta since 1935 BS, marking in history as the first Nepali female singer to record Nepali songs. Her records were sold 5000 copies then (Prasai 43); but critics

doubt that the number might be 500, when music market was small at that time. But, it might be true that she was popular in India; her songs were published in the book form as an advertisement of new songs in Indian, where music lovers were large in number and 5000 copies could be sold sooner. In the words of Sayami, music gave her life meaning. He writes,

Melawa Devi had a sense of making decision apt to the context. She could combine consciousness of modernity and social psychology. She knew the trend of music of that time and attracted audiences since the beginning. She had the capacity of mass reading and making decision of composing and recording song in her won cost. With this skill she made her life meaningful and successful.... She composed songs of multiple themes that cover women awaking, slavery evolution, freedom fighters' appeal and indigenous aesthetics. (*Nepali Sangitako* 5)

Swami Prapannachary, Subi Shah, Ram Saran Darnal, Prakash Sayami, and Bulu Mukarung are few among many who have written about Melawa Devi. Her life is filled with full of struggles and her songs carry the essence of her life struggle. Dilmaya Khatri was much influenced with Melawa Devi as Hiranya Bhojpure wrote an article on her in *Sangeetka Nalibeli (Accounts of Music)*. Lochan Rizal celebrated her century; Kamal Mani Dikchhit wrote about her (Sayami, *Pratham Nepali*). Nagendra Thapa in an interview published in Shriram Singh Basnet and Subash Chandra Paudyal's *Trivenika Laharharu (The Waves of Triveni)* says, "among few female singers, Melawa is the most versatile one, who combines all three elements of lyric – vocal, music and words" (114). In the same book, Amber Gurung claims, "Songs have power, which can help to transform society" (3). Melawa Devi is one of the examples; she exists as an inspiration and example of forming the agency and achieving empowerment from the gender subaltern position.

Resistance and Existence of Melawa Devi

This paper examined how Melawa Devi remained at the core of attraction from her childhood to the death with the help of music, when a female as a singer and a performer was hard to survive of their own in the Nepali society. She as a single woman and mother used her agency in such a way that she articulated her pioneer position in Nepali music history. She left her birthplace Rumjatar, Okhaldhunga in her childhood to become a *nani* in the Rana Palace of Chandra Shamsher. A subaltern girl got resources to sharpen her art related to music skills. She had to change her name according to the rule of the palace from Sunamaya-Sulabha to Melawa Devi. As Spivak argues, a gender subaltern had no agency to speak against it at the Rana Palace; she had to play a role as a *bhat* singer and performer eulogizing the ruler's deeds. She had to pay high price after she became a popular singer in the Rana Palace. Chandra Shamsher loved her and took her with him in hunting as well. As a reward of it, she earned a lot of jealous courtiers and she had to leave the palace, then her husband's home, and then the country. However, she never obstructed her devotion to music. She used music, recording songs one after another, as an instrument to sustenance and resistance from India. She changed her name in India as Sumalanda Devi with the title she achieved 'Thumariki Rani' but her identity Melawa Devi given from the Rana Palace of Chandra Shamsher superimposed her other names.

This study found the agency of Melawa Devi combined with her melodious words, music, and vocal. As Spivak and Kabeer believe, she appears as a versatile gender subaltern who played a certain role as a 'permanent persuader' involving in an active participation in her practical life. Becoming a singer, performer, song and music

composer till day of her death and serving Nepali music with gender subaltern consciousness is definitely remarkable. She influenced the villagers via her melodious voice in her childhood. Seeking the resources to nurture her artistic skills, she became *nani* (caregiver girl) in the Rana Palace. There, she influenced courtiers and rulers with her melodious vocal and performance. Her journey took a turn towards a different way when she left the palace. She faced the challenges as a singer mother; however, she struggled to sustain her livelihood as a music instructor. Undeterred by obstacles, Melawa Devi eventually left Nepal and embarked on a new chapter in India, adopting a new name. There, she impressed *ustads* (master) and classical music experts with her versatile musical personality with her enchanting voice and music skills. From her available resources, she exercised her agency and achieved significant milestone respects, marking her name as a mythlike bold personality in Nepali music history. She kept on recording the masterpiece songs in her own words and music.

Conclusion

To conclude, Melawa Devi's access to resources whatever available to her seems to have multiplied in shaping her journey. These resources were her musical training at village while childhood, inside and outside the Rana Palace in Nepal and India. This study primarily presented how she could use that opportunities for creating her agency and accomplished achievements. Her autonomy in decision-making – the freedom to choose her musical path, collaboration with other artists, and articulations of her authentic songs established her as the pioneering figure in Nepali music history. Her accomplishments such as her recorded songs are contributions to Nepali music, which reflect an impression to others, especially to the marginalized women and disempowered communities. Indeed, Melawa Devi's stories help transform the ordinary individual for the agency formation and practical achievements in their real life. Melawa Devi's melodious agency transcends and transforms her from a gender subaltern position to an empowered woman in Nepali music history. She appears as a music mentor to the subalterns, who wish to speak and play a role of permanent persuader. As Kabeer argues, the resources offered her agency and due to her skill of using music as a tool to resistance and existence, Melawa Devi achieved a pioneering space in Nepali music, from where she speaks the voices of the marginalized women and disempowered communities.

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