

The 'Seen' and the 'Unseen': Women Musicians in the Darjeeling Hills



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Registered in 2003, Zubaan is a charitable trust based in Delhi. It follows in the footsteps of its parent NGO, Kali for Women, and has been an active participant, chronicler, and publisher of the women's movement since 1984. It works to increase the body of knowledge on women with a special focus on South Asia and India.

Zubaan's work in the past few years has been to achieve this goal through the publication of books and pamphlets, creation of archives (www.posterwomen.org), organizing literary festivals, and encouraging the exchange of authors from under-represented regions and communities, meetings and workshops to bring together multiple feminist perspectives. Zubaan has often brought forward the voices of marginalized communities through its publishing work, focusing on women, queer and trans experiences and in the recent past, has also shifted its focus to research and action work. Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd, an offshoot and sister organisation of Zubaan, continues the publishing tradition in the areas of humanities and social sciences, as well as fiction, general non-fiction, and books for children and young adults under its Young Zubaan imprint.

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'You know a lot of times, people come to watch a girl playing drums on stage, like that's supposed to be something bizarre.'

I met Mingma on a typical cold evening in Darjeeling in a busy cafe over a cup of coffee. She is 28 years old and among other things, she is one of the few female drummers in the region, having played with many rock and pop bands in the hills. She also won the title of the 'Best Drummer' in the Hornbill festival in Nagaland in 2018. I asked her about her experience as a young female drummer and the only woman in music bands dominated by men. She told me that she could definitely do without the 'unwanted attention' that she gets every time she performs on stage. 'You know a lot of times, people come to watch a girl playing drums on stage, like that's supposed to be something bizarre,' she said in a serious tone. She shook her head in utter amazement when she talked about how often she had heard people in the crowd passing comments and taking photographs of her performing on stage and saying how 'interesting' it was to see a woman playing drums in a rock band. She also told me that even after winning the 'Best Drummer' title in the Hornbill festival, she couldn't help but feel a judgemental attitude towards her even from her peers. 'I don't think this would be the case if a man had won the title,' she said almost breaking into a

sarcastic laugh. A woman playing drums in a rock band is considered far from 'normal' even today.

Kalimpong, Kurseong, and Darjeeling which together make up the hill region in West Bengal have a diverse population with different ethnic groups, with their own cultural beliefs and customs. Music in the region is as varied as the population and one can get a deep sense of rootedness in music and the culture of the hill folk. Right from their religious ceremonies to simple activities in their daily lives, music has been passed down for generations and musical traditions are practised with a lot of zeal and zest even today. From playing traditional Nepali instruments like the *madal*, *damphu*, and *sarangi* (traditional musical instruments used by different cultural groups in the Nepali community in their folk songs) to instruments like the cello and violin, the hills have a population that has a knack for and an interest in almost every form and genre of music. The music scene in the hills can be described as an amalgamation of the old and the new, traditional and contemporary; from classical Mozart pieces, classical jazz, traditional ragas and ghazals to contemporary rock and roll, pop, hip hop, rap, and R&B and the ever-expanding Nepali music. The region has welcomed almost every form.

I grew up in Kalimpong, in a family that embraced music in every way with my *bara* (my father's elder brother) being the lead vocalist in a promising Nepali band in the 1990s. My sisters and I grew up around music and lyrics. Unlike a typical family, as kids we were taken to gigs and live shows though during those days there were very few such shows in my home town. Each musical programme we were taken to was an intimate affair for our family because there were always familiar faces in the crowd and on stage. As kids, we were fascinated with the whole thing - the crowd cheering the musicians, the stage, the songs, and the applause. As I look back at those days, I cannot help but notice that there were hardly any notable female musicians on the local scene in Kalimpong and unfortunately that has not changed much even today. Except for a few women like Aruna Lama, Hira Devi Waiba, and Shanti Thatal who left a significant mark on the Nepali music scene in the region and to a huge extent in the neighbouring country of Nepal in the early 1960s and 1970s, the music scene has mostly been dominated by men. Women were hardly seen doing music independently and those few who did, did not do it seriously enough to turn it into a successful career.

A career in music was not seen as a sensible career option in the past and even today it is not considered a serious career choice. It is always looked at as a 'risky' business and parents often advise their children against it. '*Music le khanu didaina*' (music will not put food on the table) is something that parents tell their children when it comes to taking a decision about their careers. Women have it even harder, because even today the 'stage' and performing in front of a crowd is not looked at as a space that can belong to a woman. Women singing on stage in front of people was not considered respectable in traditional orthodox societies in the past and even today not much has changed. As a 26-year-old female musician put it, 'My parents were against me joining a band and singing in pubs or restaurants. They were scared of the crowd, they were scared of the judgements the people and the neighbours would pass, and most of all they were scared of what this exposure would do to me, to my womanhood,' she says.

There is an image of a woman that is acceptable in society, how a girl dresses, walks, eats, and even sings. Even when it comes to music, the demure, soft spoken, gentle girl singing soft melodious songs, performing traditional classical music in a lady-like posture with the right clothes is somehow more acceptable and women musicians like Mingma are always juxtaposed with this image. When you are a woman playing drums or any other instrument in an all-male band, let alone a rock band, prejudices are not uncommon. 'Everyone thought I smoked and got drunk because I was always hanging out with the boys in the band,' Mingma laughs. That is an image she constantly had to tussle with and justify to her family and the society she lived in. 'My clothes didn't help, you know,' she adds laughing, as she confesses her love for graphic band tees and baggy pants. In a society which calls itself progressive and modern, it is ironic to see that many women are still discouraged when it comes to taking up music independently and as a career. 'It is never up to us, I have come to believe that,' Mingma told me towards the end of our interview after letting me know that she is no longer pursuing music full time.



You got to have a backup plan, *di*!!

Bimochana Lomjel is a 26-year-old budding musician who has just started her musical career in Nepali music. She belongs to a musical family with her parents being thus inclined; her mother started singing Nepali folk songs as a teenager. She says she is fortunate to have a family that supports and most of all understands her decision of making music a career. 'It is very important to have a family that supports you in this because it is risky,' she tells me before explaining how long it took her to actually take the plunge and decide on this career path. She explains that she made sure that she completed her graduation and Master's before pursuing music full time, because as she put it, 'You got to have a backup plan, *di*.' Perhaps this could be one of the reasons why so many women and men end up not pursuing music full time because unlike other jobs that promise a certain financial stability, music does not.

Over the years, music has gone through tremendous changes along with changes in society. In the Darjeeling hills this change can be seen in the newer ways of creating and producing music. With the advent of social media and newer alternative ways of showcasing one's talent, many young men and women are trying out these approaches in music. One very significant factor that led to a transformation of the music scene in the hills was when a lot of young musicians started looking beyond the region to pursue a career in music. Reality shows on television is one such platform where young budding musicians are trying their luck. Reality shows like *Indian Idol*, *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa*, and *The Stage* have had a lot of young men and women from the region participating and this has worked out well for many of them. Abhishek Gurung, the front man of India's most successful rock band 'Gingerfeet' participated in the second season of the reality show *The Stage* where he was the 1st runner up. Even before that, in 2007 Prashant Tamang was the first ever youth from the region to participate in the second season of the musical reality show *Indian Idol* where he was victorious. However, one cannot help but notice that the participation of women even in reality shows is comparatively much lower than that of men. Most of the prominent singers and musicians who have turned music into a career are men from the region.

Bimochana participated in the reality show the *Voice of Nepal* last year representing the region along with fellow contestant Yankee Yolmo, also from Darjeeling, and even though they did not win the competition, the two young women received a lot of exposure that catapulted their musical careers. Bimochana told me that the reality show in Nepal was a turning point in her

life because she never thought she was ‘good enough’ to receive the kind of admiration and recognition that she got post the show. She did her first international tour to Dubai and Abu Dhabi and has been teaching music in a private music school in Siliguri. I asked her about the challenges of being a young female musician writing and composing in Nepali to which she said, ‘It is fun but also difficult especially because I am a girl.’ She added that she always had to be cautious and careful when she travelled for gigs and live shows because ‘I am surrounded by men, from the organisers to people who play for me on stage. Gigs in pubs are especially challenging because you always have people who are drunk, who come up to you and try to take advantage. It is difficult because as a performer I can’t be rude and I have to be smiling and cordial,’ she says, adding, ‘You can’t give the wrong idea to people.’ She says that she thinks a thousand times before dressing up for a show.

More recently, live shows and gigs in restaurants, pubs, and hotels have emerged as a space where musicians are able to perform. With the opening up of numerous pubs and a growing cafe culture in the hills, a lot of locals are organising events where musicians and bands are booked to perform. But even in this area, women face several challenges and restrictions, most of which come from their own families. Being the founder of an event company in my home town, my team and I organised several events from late 2017 and an annual festival for the last two years where music has been at the centre. One thing that we have always struggled with is finding women musicians in the region who are willing to perform. A major issue here is the restrictions faced by young women to stay out at night and perform in a space which is considered by many as ‘unfit’ for girls. In the last three years, I have come across many young women who have cancelled events and performances because of their families who are not very supportive of their daughters being out at night and performing on stage. The few women who are seen performing in live shows and playing in gigs do not have it easy and many of them have had bad experiences. As Mingma put it, ‘Preparing for a show meant practice and that meant spending a lot of time with the band and hours of practice also meant late nights.’ She says there were a lot of times when she had to come back home late and that didn’t go well with her family and being the only woman in an all-male band also had its disadvantages. She doesn’t remember any of the boys in the band being called home early or having any sort of restrictions like she faced. ‘It was frustrating sometimes,

because I needed to practice for a certain gig or show and I also had to go home on time.’

This is not to say that women in the region are not pursuing music as a career. Many women opting for a career in music, especially western music and other non-conventional career choices like ‘deejaying’ choose to go outside their home towns and work in cities. Metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru have a growing music scene where live music is given priority and many young men and women from the hills are seen trying their luck in these cities. Music has turned into a lucrative career option for those willing to work hard and this has opened up a new range of opportunities for budding and promising musicians. Take for instance ‘deejaying’ which is an unconventional career option in music which many women have taken up. Ekta Subba from Kurseong, popularly known as DJ Rachel, is a resident DJ at Taj Palace Hotel, Delhi and she also freelances; Sonika Lama from Darjeeling, popularly known as DJ She, has also made a career out of deejaying. Young budding musicians like Bimochana Lomjel and Yankee Yolmo are also pursuing music as a career and are working on their original music. If we look outside the Darjeeling hills region, the neighbouring northeastern states boasts of many women who are pursuing music full time and have turned it into a sustaining career, one that can put food on the table.

There is no denying that music has gone through its fair share of change with the changing times and surroundings, and a lot of this has been positive. It is safe to say that music today is far more accessible than it used to be and far more ‘do-able.’ As a talented guitarist put it, ‘If you have the talent, the resources and faith in yourself, no one can stop you.’ However, as good as this sounds, I cannot help but wonder if this is true for everyone. There is no dearth of talented musicians in the Darjeeling hills and I have seen this first hand. The question is how many of them can pursue music seriously, not just as a hobby but as something that can be made into a career in the long run. Bimochana told me that when she gets invited to events organised by villages in many rural areas in the region, she is shocked by the sheer number of women and men who can sing and play, but how many of these young men and women can afford to think of music as a career? How many of them can invest the time and money to discover and learn? How many of them have the resources to do so? Music like any other career option comes with its trials and tribulations and it seems that those who do decide to go all the way, accept it with the good and the bad.

I asked Bimochana about her future plans and she said she is working on her third Nepali single at the moment. She wants to try and do everything that is possible with her music before she gets married, ‘Who knows *di*, after marriage a woman has even more responsibilities and I’m not sure if my in-laws will approve of me singing and performing on stage,’ she said laughing nervously. Bimochana dreams of having a band in the future so she can perform shows and travel. ‘Maybe an all-woman band,’ she says happily.

