

From Mythic Prestige to Social Precarity: Gandharva Musicians and the Changing Sarangi Tradition in Nepal

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Abstract

This article examines the changing cultural, economic, and symbolic status of Sarangi performance among the Gandharva community of Nepal. It investigates how mythological memory, caste-based marginalisation, changes in livelihoods, and intergenerational transmission shape the contemporary condition of the Sarangi tradition. The study uses a qualitative ethnographic approach supported by descriptive summaries. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 34 participants, including Gandharva musicians, former musicians, teachers, cultural workers, apprentices, and elders across five district-level sites: Baglung, Syangja, Kathmandu, Kailali, and Dailekh. The study also used participant observation, archival and textual analysis, and audio-visual documentation. The findings show that Sarangi music remains an important marker of ancestral identity, especially among older respondents, but its role as a primary livelihood has weakened. In this sample, only 3 of 34 participants reported music as their primary livelihood, while others relied mainly on farming, wage labour, artisanal work, or irregular employment. Youth disengagement was associated with unstable income, caste stigma, migration, digital media, and limited institutional support. The article argues that the weakening of Sarangi practice is not only a matter of cultural decline but also a question of cultural labour, caste justice, and heritage governance.

1. Introduction

The Gandharva, also known in many Nepali contexts as Gaine, are a caste-based musician community historically associated with Sarangi performance, itinerant singing, oral storytelling, social commentary, and the circulation of news through song (Moisala, 2013; Dhakal, 2017; Panta, 2021). Although Gandharva musicians have often been represented through the symbolic language of divine musicianship and cultural memory, their contemporary musical practice is shaped by caste stigma, economic insecurity, changing labour markets, migration, and uneven recognition of heritage. The central problem addressed in this article is therefore not simply

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whether Sarangi music is declining, but how a historically caste-linked musical tradition is being redefined amid social marginalisation and cultural change.

This article does not consider the transition from “celestial musician” to “marginalized artist” as a trajectory of prestige-to-marginalisation in history. Instead, it is used as a symbolic source and as an element of cultural memory through which musical identity is narrated, remembered, and legitimised (Bithell, 2006; Dhakal, 2017). These symbolic depictions, however, coexist with and sometimes mask the actual experiences of caste-based musical labour, poverty, social isolation, and shifting livelihood strategies among modern-day Gandharva musicians (Moisala, 2013). Significantly, scriptural or mythological status does not necessarily translate into social status, economic security, cultural rights, or institutional recognition for modern-day Gandharva musicians.

This article poses three intertwined questions: Firstly, how do the musicians and people of the Gandharva community think of Sarangi as a symbol of identity, memory, livelihood, and stigma? Second, how have caste hierarchy, economic insecurity, migration, education, information technology and new media impacted the intergenerational transmission of Sarangi performance? Third, what roles do heritage governance, community-led transmission, institutional revival, and tourism-oriented staging play in supporting, reframing, or commercialising Gandharva music? The article argues that the weakening of Sarangi transmission is not simply a story of cultural loss, but also a question of cultural labour, caste justice, and heritage governance.

Sarangi is a central part of the Gandharva music. It is not only an instrument of performance but also a cultural artefact that mediates memory, livelihood, caste identity, and emotional expression (de-Miguel-Molina *et al.*, 2021). Traditionally, the Gandharva singers and musicians performed songs and Sarangi music to narrate events in their local area, convey social criticism, express grief and longing, and maintain a connection with the village audience. However, the social ecology that was once conducive to itinerant performance is waning. The viability of Sarangi performance as a livelihood has been adversely affected by the development of electronic media, wage labour, migration, formal education, urban cultural markets and the expectations of younger generations. Meanwhile, the perception, value, and inclusion of Gandharva musicians in Nepali society continue to be shaped by caste-based stigma.

In this article, “Gandharva” refers to the Nepali caste/community historically associated with Sarangi performance and itinerant song. In contrast, “Gaine” refers to an older occupational and caste appellation used in everyday speech and in some scholarship. “Dalit” refers to communities historically subjected to caste-based exclusion within South Asian caste hierarchies. “Sarangi” refers to the Nepali bowed string instrument closely linked to Gandharva musical storytelling. “Intangible cultural heritage” refers to living practices, knowledge, skills, instruments, and cultural spaces that communities recognise as part of their heritage. “Mytho-historical ethnography” refers to reading mythological narratives

as symbolic and cultural-memory materials rather than literal historical evidence, while placing them in dialogue with ethnographic accounts of contemporary Gandharva life.

The current scholarship provides useful foundations for understanding Gandharva musical practice in Nepal. Moisala's work on Gandharva musicians also brings in themes of poverty and social exclusion, relating the marginalisation of the Sarangi to that of the musicians and highlighting their interconnectedness (Moisala, 2013). The study on Gandharvas in Baglung District also shows that many Gandharva families are shifting from traditional music-making activities, such as Sarangi-making and singing, to agriculture, carpentry, wage labour, driving, and other professions, as these are no longer considered their primary sources of income (Panta, 2021). Dhakal's (2017) discussion of the Gandharva's origin and performing arts offers a cultural and historical grounding for the sacred, social, and performative significance of being a Gandharva. More broadly, a study of Dalit identity in Nepal reveals that caste does not disappear in changing urban contexts; it continues to influence access, dignity, identity, and social recognition in urban areas as well (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

Despite these contributions, myth and caste, livelihood and musical transmission, and heritage conservation are treated separately in existing studies. Fewer studies have examined how these dimensions manifest in current changes in Sarangi practice. Connecting cultural memory with social inequality and musical heritage with the material conditions of cultural labour is necessary in the case of Gandharva. The study of Nepali musical economies also implies that musicians must negotiate among various regimes of value, in which artistic prestige, market success, social status, and cultural authenticity do not necessarily overlap (Stirr, 2018). This is relevant to the Gandharva case, as appreciating this music as "heritage" may not translate into economic security and social inclusion for the performers.

This article builds on Moisala's discussion of social exclusion and cultural rights, Dhakal's account of the origin and performance of Gandharva, Panta's work on livelihood change, and Stirr's analysis of musical value in Nepal. Its specific contribution is to bring these strands together into a single ethnographic account of contemporary Sarangi practice. By connecting mythological memory, caste-marked labour, livelihood insecurity, youth disengagement, digital media, and heritage governance, the article shows that the transformation of the Sarangi is not only a musical issue but also a social, economic, and political issue concerning the conditions under which Gandharva musicians can continue their tradition with dignity.

The study foregrounds the voices and experiences of a marginalised musical community, through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, textual analysis and audio-visual documentation with Gandharva musicians, former musicians, teachers, cultural workers, apprentices, and elders at five district-level field sites - Baglung, Syangja, Kathmandu, Kailali, and Dailekh - and thus adds to

a growing body of work concerning South Asia's ethnomusicologies and critical heritage studies. It is important to demonstrate that the transformation of the Sarangi is not just the result of modernisation or a diminished appreciation of music. It is also the result of the stigma of a caste-based occupation, precarious cultural labour, migration, lack of institutional support and the paradox of heritage recognition versus everyday social justice concerns.

2. Literature Review: Gandharva Musicians, Caste, Livelihood, and Heritage Governance

2.1 Gandharva Scholarship in Nepal

This study is based on the existing literature on Gandharva musicians in Nepal. Early descriptions identified the Gandharva as a group of musicians belonging to the caste and engaged in itinerant performance or with oral song traditions. However, such language should be used with caution, as it may reflect an outsider's classification of caste and occupation (Bech, 1975). Recent Nepal-centered scholarship has shifted from description to an investigation of the linkages among music, caste, livelihood, exclusion, and cultural rights. Moisala's study of Gandharva musicians has been particularly significant because it demonstrates the interdependence of poverty, social exclusion, and the inequitable distribution of cultural rights in Nepal, in the context of Sarangi music (Moisala, 2013). Her work shows that this transition in hereditary musical practice is not only a shift in taste but is also linked to the experience of marginality, low income, and a lack of institutional recognition for traditional musicians.

The study of Gandharva origin and performative arts provides important historical and cultural context for the community's performative, social, and sacred identity (Dhakal, 2017). Dhakal argues that the Gandharvas have been associated with folk music, oral narration, interpersonal communication, and the dissemination of information prior to the advent of modern media. Overall, the study demonstrated how changes in livelihoods become integral to the analysis of the decline of hereditary Sarangi performance in Panta's study of Gandharvas in Baglung District. Many Gandharvas have abandoned their traditional singing and Sarangi playing for farming, carpentry, wage work, driving, etc., because music is no longer a reliable occupation for them, as reported by Panta (2021).

Hence, these studies establish the importance of caste, livelihood, and cultural rights in understanding Gandharva music, but further work is needed to examine how these issues intersect with transmission, digital media, and heritage governance.

2.2 Caste, Dalit identity, and Musical Labour

The Gandharva case needs to be understood in the context of a larger discourse on caste and Dalit identity in Nepal. Caste is not limited to a ritual hierarchy; it also determines the nature of occupation, dignity, means of social access, public interaction, and the value of certain types of labour. For Gandharva musicians, the

Sarangi carries a double meaning. It is part of Nepali cultural heritage but is also historically linked to a caste-marked occupation that many younger Gandharvas face as socially discredited. This tension explains why cultural recognition alone cannot guarantee social dignity or economic security.

Research on Dalit identity in Nepal demonstrates that caste is a relevant factor even in the evolving urban and post-conflict settings. Caste is not necessarily lost in the city, however, as argued by [Pariyar & Lovett \(2016\)](#). This insight is relevant to the Gandharva case because if the musicians have to migrate to Kathmandu or other urban centres, they may find new opportunities for education and performance. However, they will also encounter new ways of being commodified, exoticised, and judged through caste-based assumptions. It must also be read as a consequence of the stigmatisation of hereditary performers as communities historically subjected to caste-based exclusion and the lack of institutional safeguards and protection for these groups, as well as the insecurity of their patrons.

Sarangi performance should therefore not be understood merely as musical activity. It is a product of cultural work that is linked to social stratification. The performance is carried out by the musician's body, instrument, voice, caste identity and economic status. An ethnomusicological approach is helpful here because it considers music as a social practice, perceived not only as sound but also as shaped by power, inequality, economy, and representation ([Nooshin, 2011](#); [Seeger & Schippers, 2022](#)). From a Gandharva perspective, this would imply that, in the study of Sarangi music, the conditions under which musicians learn, perform, travel, earn, and negotiate dignity within a caste-stratified society must be included.

2.3 Sarangi Transmission, Livelihood Change, and the Political Economy of Performance

The second strand of literature concerns livelihood change and the politics of music performance. Traditional activities of Gandharva music were based on interpersonal connections with villagers, patronage, ceremonial events, narration, and the transmission of oral information. It is not just that young people are interested in modern music; learning Sarangi takes time, discipline, social commitment, and sacrifice, and in the occupation itself, they often find they earn meagre wages and lack status.

It is useful to understand this shift because, as Stirr shows, musicians in Nepal need to navigate multiple regimes of value: artistic prestige, market income, moral reputation, social respectability, and cultural authenticity ([Stirr, 2018](#)). This can help to explain why a group of musicians, whose music is traditionally considered “authentic” folk art, can still be criticised for lack of income or social status. Here, in this respect, the Sarangi music performance finds itself at the intersection of heritage value and labour insecurity. The instrument might have symbolic value on the stage, in schools, in the tourism industry, or in cultural

programs. However, the musicians who carry on this tradition may not be paid enough, well recognised, or provided with institutional support.

This is corroborated by Panta's research on Gandharva livelihoods in Baglung, which found that many Gandharvas have abandoned their traditional professions of singing and Sarangi playing and have taken up other professions due to poverty and a lack of musical patronage (Panta, 2021). The loss of the Gandharva musical tradition is not only due to personal disinterest but also to social exclusion and cultural rights issues (Moisala, 2013). In fact, these studies indicate that the Sarangi tradition is not solely at risk of vulnerability due to modernisation. It is in the process of being altered by unfair conditions of work, caste stigma, the possibility of education, migration and the folk performance market.

2.4 Mythological Memory and Cultural Identity

The mythological depiction of Gandharva as celestial musicians is significant but should be treated with care. Hindu texts and cultural imagination have been linked to the figure of the Gandharva through music, beauty, divine mediation and aesthetic refinement. However, such mythological prestige should not be interpreted as evidence that today's Gandharva musicians had a firm or universally respected social status. Rather, mythological stories can be seen as symbolic tools for the recall, telling, and legitimisation of musical identity.

An understanding of the difference can be gained through cultural memory studies. The functions of music in collective memory are often intertwined with sound, performance, emotion, place and identity, and span generations (Bithell, 2006). The Sarangi is the instrument, but it is also a memorial object, a symbolic object through which the ancestry, suffering, dignity and the continuity of the Gandharva musicians are expressed. Meanwhile, the mythological status can veil from view the actual conditions of caste-based labour and economic marginalisation. Hence, the juxtaposition of "celestial musician" and "marginalized artist" must not be taken as an unproblematic "fall from honour to exclusion". It is more commonly thought of as a conflict between symbolic recognition and material insecurity.

The study does not romanticise the past; rather, it treats mythological memory as a symbolic resource while examining contemporary experiences of caste oppression, livelihood change, and uneven recognition of heritage. From this perspective, mythological memory is not denied but rather critically reinterpreted in light of the present social situation.

2.5 Intangible Cultural Heritage, Safeguarding, and Heritage Governance

In this article, safeguarding is used in two related senses: first, as a UNESCO-derived policy concept concerned with the protection and transmission of intangible cultural heritage, and second, as a community-level practice through which Gandharva families, elders, teachers, and cultural workers attempt to sustain Sarangi knowledge. When intangible cultural heritage is linked to the experiences of

Gandharva practitioners, the literature on intangible cultural heritage can be helpful. According to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, intangible cultural heritage consists of living practices, expressions, knowledge, skills, instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces that communities identify as part of their heritage (UNESCO, 2003). Significantly, this definition goes beyond simply showcasing or documenting cultural practices to maintaining and upholding the people, skills, and conditions that enable them.

It is argued that safeguarding should be community-based and focus on intergenerational transmission, cultural agency, and sustainable practice, rather than on music as a spectacle or on preserving music in a museum (de Oliveira Pinto, 2023; Seeger & Schippers, 2022). This argument is directly pertinent to the Sarangi tradition. Safeguarding the instrument, recordings, or public performances might help preserve the sound of Sarangi music, but it overlooks the social and economic vulnerability of Gandharva musicians. A more meaningful safeguarding approach should ask whether musicians have opportunities to teach and are paid fairly, whether they have social dignity, cultural ownership, and institutional recognition.

Safeguarding is particularly significant in Nepal, as many traditional practices are observed nationwide, and the communities where they are still practised are socially and economically marginalised. UNESCO's efforts on intangible cultural heritage in Nepal place an emphasis on documentation, classification, the transmission of folklore and traditional culture and forward-looking protection of these practices (UNESCO, 2007). In the case of Gandharva, this should not be solely about presenting the Sarangi as a national folk instrument. It ought to encompass community-based education, anti-discrimination, support for young learners, performance spaces, documentation under practitioners' control, and assistance with musicians' livelihoods.

2.6 Digital Media, Revival, and Commodification

The analysis of digital media and revival must be carried out carefully. On the other hand, the dissemination of Sarangi music has been made possible by recordings, social media, online teaching, stage performances, and cultural programmes, which have helped spread it beyond its older village context. They can attract new audiences and create opportunities for young musicians to reinterpret the tradition. However, digital visibility does not necessarily improve practitioners' income, agency, or social dignity. Sarangi music can be recorded, shared and celebrated without any economic security and social integration for Gandharva musicians.

Comparative scholarship on digitisation and ICH reminds us that digital preservation can reflect unequal power dynamics when communities lack control over representation, access, and the benefits derived from these practices (Ocón, 2021). This is important for the Gandharva case, since the main question is not just whether Sarangi music is visible on the internet or in urban cultural contexts. The central issue is whether this visibility enhances Gandharva agency, income and dignity. Whereas Sarangi music is played primarily for tourists, festivals, schools,

or urban audiences and fails to enhance the lives of Gandharva musicians, its revival can perpetuate the very inequality it seeks to correct.

Hence, the revival should be seen as an ambivalent process. It can enable transmission and pride, but it can also commercialise tradition by reducing complex musical work based on caste into a sellable 'authentic' Nepalese ethnic product. This is why keeping Sarangi music alive should be linked to issues of ownership, representation, proper remuneration, community engagement, and caste justice.

Existing studies have examined Gandharva origin, performance practice, livelihood change, social exclusion, and cultural rights. However, fewer studies have examined how mythological memory, caste-marked labour, livelihood insecurity, youth transmission, digital media, and heritage governance intersect in contemporary Sarangi practice. This article addresses that gap by integrating these dimensions through a mytho-historical and ethnographic analysis of Gandharva musical life across five district-level sites in Nepal.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic design supported by descriptive summaries. Ethnography was appropriate because the study examined lived musical practice, caste identity, changes in livelihoods, cultural memory, and intergenerational transmission among Gandharva musicians and community members. The study employed a range of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, textual analysis, field notes and audio-visual documentation. The data from 34 participants were summarised using descriptive numbers and percentages only to provide information on their responses, not for statistical generalisation. The study was informed by symbolic interactionism, critical ethnomusicology and cultural memory studies. Such viewpoints led to the Sarangi being seen as a symbol of identity, stigma, livelihood, memory, and heritage.

3.2 Field Sites

Five district-level sites, namely Baglung, Syangja, Kathmandu, Kailali, and Dailekh, were selected for fieldwork. The choice of the towns Baglung and Syangja was due to their historical connection with the Gandharva settlement and the Sarangi practice. Kathmandu was chosen as an urban location for the teaching, performance and reinterpretation of Sarangi music. Kailali and Dailekh were added to explore the issues of livelihood insecurity, caste marginalisation, and older Sarangi traditions.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

The study participants were 34 people selected using purposive and snowball sampling. The participants included both Gandharva community members and individuals directly involved in Sarangi teaching, performance, or cultural preservation. Most participants were Gandharva musicians, former musicians, apprentices, or elders, while a smaller number were teachers or cultural workers connected to Sarangi preservation. Where teachers or cultural workers were not

from the Gandharva community, their views were used only to contextualise preservation and institutional support, not to represent the Gandharva lived experience. Purposively, five district-level sites were selected: Baglung, Syangja, Kathmandu, Kailali, and Dailekh, with a total of 34 participants. The two sites, Baglung and Syangja, are discussed together as the Gandaki Province field cluster because both are historically linked to the Gandharva settlement and Sarangi performance.

Table 1: Participant profile and recruitment summary

Field site	n	Age range	Main participant category	Recruitment pathway
Baglung and Syangja	10	25–60	Musicians, farmers, and elders	Purposive and referral
Kathmandu Valley	8	20–45	Teachers, students, cultural workers	Sarangi centres and referral
Kailali	8	30–65	Labourers, artisans, former musicians	Community referral
Dailekh	8	35–70	Retired musicians, elders	Snowball referral
Total	34	20–70	Musicians, former musicians, teachers, workers, and elders	Purposive and snowball

3.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Based on the requirements of the study, the participants included those who identified as Gandharva, those who were active or former Sarangi players, those who lived in a Gandharva household, those who knew the oral tradition, and those who directly participated in the teaching, playing, and preservation of the Sarangi. The participants were excluded if they had no direct association with Gandharva music, Sarangi practice, community memory, or cultural preservation.

3.5 Data Collection

Fieldwork was conducted over six months, from January to June 2025, with two visits to each field site. Data collection included 34 semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45–90 minutes; participant observation during household visits, community gatherings, Sarangi lessons, and musical performances; archival and textual analysis; and audio-visual documentation of selected performances and teaching sessions, with consent. Audio-visual documentation included selected Sarangi performances, teaching sessions, household-based musical demonstrations, and field situations relevant to the interpretation of performance practice. These materials were used only as supplementary ethnographic records to support field notes and interview interpretation. Interviews were conducted on the themes of music learning, performance contexts, cultural identity, economic pressures, and aspirations.

The participant observation method was used in household visits, community meetings, Sarangi lessons and musical performances. The study interviews were tape-recorded and later verbatim transcribed in Nepali. A second bilingual researcher checked selected Nepali-to-English translations to help ensure accuracy and fidelity to the original meaning. Where dialectal differences occurred, local interpreters were used. The researcher used a reflexive field journal for the entire process.

3.6 Translation and Transcription

The interviews were almost all in Nepali, and local interpreters were employed when needed. The interviews were transcribed and then translated into English. To minimise distortion, key quotations in Nepali were translated from the original text. Translated quotations were checked against the original Nepali wording to preserve meaning, tone, and context. Lightly edited quotations have been inserted for clarity and are indicated as being translated by the author.

3.7 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of data was used. Transcripts of interviews, field notes, textual materials, and audiovisual notes were read repeatedly. The early codes were: Sarangi identity, caste stigma, livelihood change, disengagement of youth, migration, modernisation and preservation. These were classified under the following general themes: Symbolic identity, marginalisation of caste communities, changing livelihoods, intergenerational transmission, modernisation and revival. Triangulation was achieved by comparing interviews, observations, textual materials, and audiovisual materials. Gender-based analysis was not attempted because gender data were not systematically collected across all field sites. This is acknowledged as a limitation of the study.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study was ethically approved by the Research Management Cell, Mahendra Multiple Campus, Nepalgunj (Tribhuvan University). Informed consent (verbal and/or written, depending on the participant's ability to read and willingness to do so) was obtained after participants received a clear explanation of the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the research in Nepali. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by using pseudonyms, and data were stored securely on password-protected devices, accessible only by the research team. They were told that they could withdraw at any time and that the quotations attributed to them were granted. All of the audiovisual recordings are for academic purposes only and will be shared with participating communities where possible. Audio-visual recordings were made only with participant consent and were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. No identifiable fieldwork photographs are reproduced in this article. Where possible, selected recordings and findings will be shared with participating communities in appropriate non-commercial forms. The materials are not treated as public archival objects unless separate permission is obtained.

3.9 Researcher Positionality

As non-Gandharva researchers with prior experience in ethnomusicology and community-based fieldwork in rural Nepal, we maintained ongoing reflexivity regarding our social location, power dynamics, and potential influence on data collection and interpretation. This involved frequent field memos documenting access, building rapport and the ethics of conducting research in a marginalised Dalit community. Special consideration was given to avoiding extractive practices and to returning findings to participants and local stakeholders.

3.10 Limitations

The study is exploratory and of 34 purposively selected participants. Hence, the results are not statistically representative of the entire Gandharva community in Nepal. Some participants found it difficult to gain access due to seasonal migration, work schedules, suspicion of outsiders, and sensitivity of caste identity. Interviews, observations, text and audio-visual sources, however, were triangulated, which enhanced the trustworthiness of the results.

4. Data Analysis, Results and Discussion

4.1 Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Interview transcripts, translated quotations, field notes, observation notes, text notes, and AV notes have been read several times to identify common themes and variations across participants and field sites. Initial Open codes were: Revival efforts, community memory, institutional support, migration, youth disengagement, tourist performance, musical livelihood, caste stigma, and identity (Sarangi). These initial codes were then grouped into broader analytical themes: mythological memory and symbolic identity; caste-based marginalisation; livelihood transition; intergenerational transmission; modernisation and migration; and preservation, revival, and commodification.

The analysis was an inductive and theory-informed interpretation. The codes were generated by the participants' stories, and the interpretations of Sarangi music as a symbol, a means of livelihood, a memory object, and a locus of social struggle were explored using the concepts of symbolic interactionism, critical ethnomusicology, and cultural memory studies. Because it was a single-researcher qualitative study, the formal intercoder reliability was not computed. Rather, credibility was enhanced by multiple coding, analytic memo writing, comparisons across field sites, and triangulation among interviews, observations, textual materials, and audiovisual records. Negative and contradictory cases were also taken into account, particularly when some younger participants refused to see Sarangi as a symbol of poverty. However, others perceived it as a source of pride. The following descriptive numbers are only applicable to the 34 participants in this study. They are not meant to be a generalisation based on statistics of all Gandharva communities of Nepal. Percentages are reported only when there are actual numbers of respondents and a clear denominator.

4.2 Sarangi as Cultural Memory and Symbolic Identity

In all the interviews, the older participants from the Gandharva community spoke not only about the instrument, but also about its significance to them as a symbol of ancestry, memory and dignity. Their instrument was a means of memory for family labour, the movement of the village, the oral narration of the past and its public proclamation. One of the senior participants in Dailekh explained:

For us older ones, the Sarangi is not merely an instrument. It is the heartbeat of our identity. Without it, we would not exist as Gandharvas.
(Translated by author)

This statement should not be read merely as an expression of personal attachment. It explains the functioning of the Sarangi as a symbolic instrument that enables older Gandharvas to create a collective identity. The Sarangi, seen through the lens of symbolic interactionism, is a tool produced through social interaction, transforming from an ancestral, caste-marked object of wealth into a staged heritage tool. The study of cultural memory can also contribute to understanding the continued significance of the Sarangi, even in contexts where it no longer provides an adequate livelihood. Memory is not stored in the instrument; it is unstable, meaning that younger generations do not always agree with the value it holds.

4.3 Caste, Dignity and Musical Labour

One of the key themes that arose in the interviews was caste. The participants did not just define caste in terms of an abstraction, an identity category. They said it was something that had to be lived through, performed in public, experienced in the relationship between men and women, in social gatherings, in the audience's reactions, and in the acquisition of respect. Some participants described the Sarangi's music as part of the culture and noted that its performers were formally celebrated but not necessarily equally in social life. One of the participants, in the middle-aged group from Kailali, said:

When I play the Sarangi, I do not just play music; I carry the weight of many years of suffering. It is not only an instrument. It is also what we were made to endure. (Translated by author)

From this quotation, it is clear that the Sarangi is not just an object of sound. It is also linked with the embodied caste memory. Critical ethnomusicology can help here, as it focuses on music as art rather than as labour under unequal social circumstances. While the beauty of Gandharva music may be appreciated, Gandharva musicians can also suffer from social isolation, low remuneration, and caste-coded humiliation. This paradox is at the heart of the study's results.

4.4 Livelihood Transition and Economic Insecurity

Livelihood insecurity was repeatedly mentioned as contributing to the deterioration of Sarangi's performance. Older participants recalled music as a form of work related to movement, narration, village sponsorship, and exchange. However, most participants reported that Sarangi's performance is not able to meet the needs of

household survival. Consequently, many Gandharvas have shifted their livelihoods to agriculture, wage employment, arts and crafts, teaching, the informal sector, and unemployment.

Table 2: Current primary livelihood reported by participants

Current primary livelihood	Participants, n (%)	Approximate self-reported monthly income (NPR)	Analytical note
Traditional musician	3 (8.8%)	6,000	Irregular and performance-dependent
Farmer	7 (20.6%)	10,500	Seasonal and household-dependent
Wage labourer	9 (26.5%)	8,000	Unstable and physically demanding
Artisan/craft worker	5 (14.7%)	12,000	More stable than music, but limited
Unemployed / no regular income	10 (29.4%)	0	Dependent on family or irregular work
Total	34 (100%)	—	—

Note. Income data is self-reported monthly income for each individual, rounded to the nearest thousand. These will only be used as descriptive indicators in this study sample. They do not reflect household income, or there is no statistical evidence available. Unemployed/no regular income” refers to participants who did not report a stable individual monthly income at the time of fieldwork, although some may have contributed to household labour or received family support.

The livelihood data are presented as the current primary livelihood rather than as a measure of occupational change over time. Only 3 of 34 participants reported traditional music as their primary source of income. This does not mean that only three participants had musical knowledge or family connections to Sarangi practice. Rather, it shows the distinction between musical knowledge, musical practice, and musical livelihood.

This distinction is important. The Sarangi tradition is not extinct, but its social and economic basis has weakened. It is declining due to changes in social and economic factors that have historically maintained performance. To make a little more regular income than in music, one might turn to agriculture, wage labour, and artisanal work, but this cannot be seen as a guarantee of security and dignity. Therefore, not leaving music does not solve marginalisation; it may be a transfer from one precarious occupation to another within Gandharva families.

4.5 Intergenerational Transmission and Youth Disengagement

Intergenerational transmission is the best indicator of cultural vulnerability. Older participants tended to use the term “ancestral wealth” for the Sarangi, while younger participants tended to describe it as “too expensive economically” or “uncool

socially”. The young musicians and students from Kathmandu and Gandaki Province who had played the sarangi told us that studying the sarangi took time and discipline. However, unfortunately, it did not bring them much money. Some linked it to poverty, others perceived its value solely as a tool to be attached to education, stage performance or new musical genres. A younger participant from Kathmandu Valley said:

The younger generation sees the Sarangi as something from the past. It is difficult to continue when people respect the music but not the musician.
(Translated by author)

This quotation reveals a central contradiction: the music may be respected as heritage, while the musician may remain socially and economically undervalued. Youth disengagement is therefore not simply a matter of personal interest. The gap between cultural praise and social reward shapes it. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the Sarangi no longer carries a single shared meaning across generations. For elders, it is memory and dignity; for some younger participants, it is stigma and economic risk; for cultural institutions, it is heritage; and for urban audiences, it may become an object of curiosity or nostalgia.

For this reason, the age-based percentages in the manuscript should not be used without appropriate age-group denominators. If there is a clear number of participants in each age group, then the earlier table reporting 15%, 20%, 35% and 50% interest by age group should be deleted. A better alternative is a qualitative rendition, in which the theme of youth disengagement appeared repeatedly in the interviews, but with varying degrees of strength, depending on the site, the type of education, family context, and the opportunity to participate in performance.

4.6 Interconnected Causes of Decline and Transformation

Participants did not attribute the weakening of Sarangi practice to a single cause. Instead, they identified several interrelated pressures—economic insecurity, digital media, migration, urbanisation, education, caste stigma, lack of patronage, tourism, and lack of institutional support. Thus, modernisation should not be considered as a monocausal phenomenon. This is more commonly recognised as a web of social and economic shifts that fuse with casteism and labour insecurity.

Table 3: Factors associated with weakening Sarangi practice

Factors mentioned by participants	Respondents mentioning the factor, n (%)	Basis of coding	Interpretation
Economic pressure / unstable income	27 (79.4%)	Interview coding	Music no longer supports household survival
Digital media and modern music	24 (70.6%)	Interview coding	New media reduce the older role of itinerant musical news and entertainment.

Factors mentioned by participants	Respondents mentioning the factor, n (%)	Basis of coding	Interpretation
Migration and wage labour	17 (50.0%)	Interview and observation	Young people move toward labour markets inside and outside Nepal
Caste stigma	18 (52.9%)	Interview coding	Sarangi performance remains linked to caste-coded humiliation
Limited formal training opportunities	9 (26.5%)	Interview coding	Few structured spaces exist for community-led Sarangi learning
Tourism / staged heritage performance	8 (23.5%)	Interview and observation	Revival creates visibility but may also commodify performers

Note. Multiple responses were possible. Percentages are based on 34 participants and refer to coded mentions rather than mutually exclusive categories.

Table 4 presents the main factors that participants associated with the weakening of the Sarangi practice. The categories are multiple-response coded themes from interviews and observations, not mutually exclusive survey responses. Percentages are based on the full sample of 34 participants.

4.7 Preservation, Revival and the Issue of Commodification

Participants described preservation efforts as uneven, sporadic, and dependent on family, community, NGO, and occasional state support. However, to some extent, there was sporadic, project-specific and limited support in urban or staged contexts.

Table 4: Forms of support mentioned by participants

Type of support mentioned	Respondents mentioning support, n (%)	Examples described
Community-led support	12 (35.3%)	Family teaching, local performances, elder-led transmission
NGO or cultural organisation support	9 (26.5%)	Workshops, cultural events, and Sarangi classes
Government support	3 (8.8%)	Occasional grants or cultural programs
No regular support	10 (29.4%)	Absence of sustained institutional assistance

Note. Multiple responses were possible. Percentages are based on N = 34 and refer to coded mentions rather than mutually exclusive categories.

The evidence shows that community-led preservation remains the most significant yet most fragile form of support, as it relies on families and elders already

under economic strain. Support from NGOs and cultural organisations can create new platforms, specifically in Kathmandu, and can also help adapt Sarangi music to suit urban audiences, tourists, or institutional needs. This creates a tension between cultural revival and commercialisation. Revival can offer opportunities to revitalise pride, teach, and make the Sarangi known to new audiences. Simultaneously, it can transform the Gandharva musicians into a symbol of “real folk culture” if their income, agency and dignity are not enhanced. One participant in Kathmandu Valley shared:

They ask us to play for visitors and show them authentic folk music. However, we are not only old culture. We are people living now, with our own problems and stories. (Translated by author)

This statement extends the discussion beyond performance visibility to questions of representation, benefit, and cultural authority. It demonstrates that protection should question who represents, who benefits from the representation, and whether the protection is given to the Gandharva musicians as artists of the present time or as a museum-like custodian of tradition. Thus, the study concludes that the revival of the Sarangi should be based on the principles of community, rights, and the economy.

4.8 Theoretical Interpretation of the Findings

The findings can be interpreted through the three theoretical perspectives used in this study. Symbolic interactionism explains why Sarangi carries different meanings for different groups. Elders often describe it as an ancestral identity and dignity; some younger participants associate it with poverty, stigma, or economic risk; cultural organisations frame it as heritage; and urban or tourist audiences may encounter it as a sign of Nepali folk culture. The meaning of Sarangi is therefore not fixed, but formed through social interaction. Critical ethnomusicology helps explain why the weakening of Sarangi practice is not simply a matter of changing musical taste. Music is produced within social and economic conditions, and in this case, caste hierarchy, precarious patronage, poverty, mobility, education, and cultural markets shape who can continue music and who must leave it. Cultural memory studies explain why Sarangi remains powerful even where it no longer provides a secure livelihood. It carries memories of family heritage, hardship, mobility, dignity, and community identity. However, memory alone cannot sustain the tradition if younger generations do not see a viable future in it.

5. Conclusion

The main thrust of this study is that the decline of the Sarangi tradition should not be attributed to natural consequences of modernisation or to a lack of musical interest among the younger members of the Gandharva community. The findings show that Sarangi remains a powerful symbol of ancestry, memory, and community identity, especially among older participants. However, its ability to sustain a living tradition has weakened because Gandharva musicians continue to face caste stigma,

livelihood insecurity, limited institutional recognition, and uneven authority over the representation of their music.

The study, therefore, calls for a shift from preservation as display to heritage governance as a matter of dignity, livelihood, and community authority. The revival of the Sarangi should not be limited to festivals, documentation, and heritage celebrations. It should include community-led teaching, fair compensation, anti-discrimination practices, ethical representation, and active Gandharva participation in cultural policy and preservation programmes. It is also a critical study that challenges the romantic notion of Gandharvas as “celestial musicians”. It demonstrates that mythological respect does not necessarily translate into social respect in the modern world. The transformation of the Sarangi tradition can thus be understood as a Sarangi caste-justice, cultural labour, and governance issue. Preserving the sound of the Sarangi without addressing the social and economic conditions of Gandharva musicians risks reproducing the very marginalisation that heritage policy claims to remedy.

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