

Nepal women keep the art of traditional instruments alive despite their past stigma

By **Niranjan Shrestha**
The Associated Press

KATHMANDU, Nepal — As a child, Shanti Chaudhari was scolded by her parents for standing too close to a group of musicians playing the naumati baja, Nepal’s nine traditional instruments, because they were identified with the Damai, part of the lowest caste that was formerly known as “untouchables.”

Chaudhari, now 41, eventually overcame her family’s opposition and today performs in a band of her own called Shrijanshil Mahila Sanstha, or the Self-Reliant Women’s Group. Her husband, who also was initially against her participation, now supports her musical pursuit and cooks meals when she gets home late from a performance.

Bal Kumari Bhusal, the band’s founder, says she was criticized when she first set up the band, which includes members from various castes. The band was tutored by Dalit musicians — the formerly untouchable class — when it was formed in 2021.

“Previously, there were few women musicians, but now we’re growing in numbers on this journey. It’s not just about preserving our cultural heritage. It’s also about empowering women in today’s challenging world,” Bhusal said.

Despite increased representation in society and more progressive laws, women in Nepal continue to face gender discrimination in the patriarchal society.

Nepal’s parliament in 2017 passed a bill that aimed to make women safer by strengthening laws against acid attacks, limiting the ancient Hindu custom of demanding dowry payments for marriage, and ending the practice of exiling women who are menstruating.

Discrimination based on caste is also believed to have caused some Dalit musicians to quit playing naumati baja. Today, people from different castes help keep the art alive.

Shrijanshil Mahila Sanstha performs a range of songs, from religious to folk and popular tunes, on percussion and wind instruments. They play at weddings, birthdays, religious ceremonies, and even political gatherings.

The nine members, wearing black saris and matching blazers, recently led a groom’s procession to the wedding venue through the lanes of old Kathmandu. The music they played ranged from raucous — catering to the mood of the dancers in the group — to somber, with the wind instruments slow and heavy.

A band member can earn \$30 to \$40 per show. Those who were previously confined to domestic chores say they are happy to see more of the world outside their homes.

Dragon Ball creator Akira Toriyama dies at 68

By **Mari Yamaguchi**
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Akira Toriyama, the creator of the best-selling *Dragon Ball* and other popular anime who influenced Japanese comics, has died, his studio said. He was 68 years old.

Toriyama’s *Dragon Ball* manga series, which started in 1984, has sold millions of copies globally and was adapted into hugely popular animated TV shows, video games, and films.

Toriyama died March 1 of a blood clot in his brain, Bird Studio said in a statement.

“He was working enthusiastically on many projects, and there was still much he was looking forward to accomplishing,” the studio wrote.

A new TV adaptation of Toriyama’s *Sand Land*, a desert adventure story released in 2000 and later adapted into a 2023 anime movie, is due to be released on Disney+ in the spring.

Messages of condolences and grief from fellow creators and fans filled social media.

Eiichiro Oda, creator of the blockbuster manga *One Piece*, said Toriyama’s presence was like a “big tree” to younger artists.

“He showed us all these things manga can do, a dream of going to another world,” Oda said in a statement. His death leaves “a hole too big to fill,” Oda added.

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PRESERVING CULTURE. Maya Ghale, 48, left photo, worships her instrument before a rehearsal of the Shrijanshil Mahila Sanstha, or the Self-Reliant Women’s Group, in Kathmandu, Nepal. Once associated only with men from the Damai community, part of the lowest caste, nine women from varied castes have come together in this band to play the naumati baja, or nine traditional instruments. In the right photo, Durga Gautam, 30, plays a Karnal, a traditional musical instrument, during rehearsals of naumati baja. (AP Photos/Niranjan Shrestha)

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