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### Preservation Of Newari Music

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PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 1

# **Preservation of Newari Music**

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**MPA 475: Capstone**

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**May 14, 2025**

PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 2

My goal in presenting this paper is to provide education on the traditional Newari Music and Culture of Nepal and help to preserve these for future generations. Music is an integral part of daily life in traditional Newari villages such as my hometown in Siddhipur. In every Newari town including Siddhipur in the Kathmandu valley, there is a music pavilion (phalcha) where performers sing hymns called bhajans, honoring gods such as Ganesh and other deities which are important in that area. Along with music there are traditional dances and rituals where offerings are given to the deity. The melodies used are called ragas. There are frequent gatherings for festivals, weddings, and other special occasions, and many shrines in the community where the music and

offerings are made. The Newars are the indigenous tribes of the Kathmandu Valley, in Nepal. They have a rich history, unique culture, and distinct language known as Nepal Bhasa (Newa language). The Newars played a significant role in shaping Nepal's history, particularly in trade, art, music, architecture and religion. The majority of Newars live in three major cities of Kathmandu valley, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur and the capital city of Kathmandu itself. In those three cities historically there were Newari kings and separate rulership of these districts.

Each area has a palace where these Kings were formally in residence. During one of the major festivals in 1768 called Indra Jatra, the King and all the subjects were celebrating by drinking and dancing, when an enemy named Prithvi Narayan came from the Gorkha. This enemy had unsuccessfully tried to attack and conquer Kathmandu

#### PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 3

several times. But by attacking during this festival, the people were distracted by the festivities and were not ready for war, and Prithvi Narayan prevailed. (Wegner 2023: 234). Since that terrible day Newari culture has no longer bloomed as it had, and was suppressed by the new Chettri rulers, even though Newari culture is ancient and vast in its arts and music. Even today the Chettri usurpers hold all government positions, while the indigenous Newari people have been marginalized. Today the ancient Newari people make up only 5% of the total population in Nepal.

This paper attempts to evoke the importance of Newari culture and its preservation, especially in terms of the music, and specifically the percussion instruments. There are many types of instruments which are played in Newari society during the celebration of

marriage, religious and secular festivals, and during rituals. There are also regular street festivals of religious importance, worshiping deities and gods. These instruments are also played in social occasions such as weddings and seasonal festivals. In every Newari town there is a music pavilion (phalcha) where performers sing hymns which are called bhajans, to melodies called ragas. These honor the gods such as Ganesh and other deities which are important in that area. At each event the last hymn called an Arati is played, and an oil-lamp is burnt as an offering.

Newari music is rich in diversity. Musical instruments that are currently being played in Kathmandu valley are:

1. Drums that use a skin (Dhimaya, Dha, Khin, Daha, Dama Khin, Maga Khin) 2.

Percussion instruments such as these cymbals (Bhushya, Chushya, Ta, Tai-nai)

#### PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 4

3. Musical instruments that use strings (Piwach, Sarangi, Guitar, Sitar, Violin)

4. Wind instruments (Basuri, Murali, Kaa)

The Dhimay baja drum is one of the most important percussion instruments among Newari Jyapu farmers. In order to learn to play it, students have to worship the god of music and dance called Nāsahdyah. They have to make various traditional offerings such as a cock, buffalo's ear, and eyes to be able to apprentice with a music master. In Western society, one can pay a music teacher in local currency, or go download a program like Yousician. Whereas, in traditional society in Nepal, historically a ritual offering of part of a buffalo such as an ear or eye was used to enter as a music student to learn a specific technique. In Eastern musical traditions from Nepal, there are

different methods of notation and styles of teaching techniques used. (Bernède 2016:286,287)

The beat of the Dhimay goes

Ta khora ghina ga

1 2 3 4 – In a 4/4 beat

Traditionally beginning rhythms are taught using oral soundings, like in Tabla drums from India. For example, Ta Ta Ta Ta Ta Ta Ghu Ta Tya Ghu Ghu Ta Tya. Then they are played with one stick and one hand, once the pattern is spoken orally. Below is the picture of the rhythm of Dhimay and an offering rhythm to the God. In order to learn Newari percussion it is necessary to be immersed in the culture itself. The

#### PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 5

music traditions are taught orally primarily through following the example of the Music Master. (Widdess 2015:1).

One interesting point about the relationship to music with spoken language is that “the elders distinguish three levels of speech in Nepalese. The first, “ordinary speech,” brings together all the components of current language. It is called *nījī bhāsā*, “one’s language.” The second is *mantra boli*, or “speech of mantras.” The third and last level is seen as “soundless/in audible, and designates the language of the gods” (*dyah boli*). Musical sound belongs to the second category, *mantra boli*. This means that it is situated on a plane considered to be an intermediary between the language of men and the language of the gods.” Newar instrumental music, like most of the other Newar

artistic forms, is divided into two main categories, referred to, respectively, as *āgam* and *nigam*. This terminology, borrowed from the technical vocabulary of the Tantras, clearly divides artistic behaviors into two distinct bodies. The first is the secret domain (*guyha*) of initiatic and tantric practices. *Caryā* songs and dances, for example, in their traditional context of execution, belong to this category. The second term, *nigam*, refers to expressions of public artistic life. This two-fold division brings to light the degree to which, in the field of musical and choreographic activities, it is the teaching that falls under the domain of initiation, while its realization in the public sphere is no more than its most exterior form. (Bernède 2016:310).

Dapha is the devotional music of Nepal belonging to the Agam category, based on classical raga and taal systems, which expresses the honoring and adoration of the gods. Dapha/Bhajan is probably the oldest surviving devotional music of Nepal, with its “origin in 16th century” (Richard Widdess, Preface xxi). As per Tri Ratna Manandhar, in

#### PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 6

1908 Ustad Seturam Shrestha, a first Newar to have songs recorded in Gramophone from the studio of Kolkata, chose among others a dāphā song titled Kalika Jagadewori in Malashree Rāg for the recording. Dapha music consists of Khiñ (percussion), Poñgā (percussion), Paschimā (percussion), Nagārā (percussion), Damaru (percussion) with Tā, Bhusaya and Kyanoin as the cymbals. The Dapha uses specific texts which are scripted in Nepal Bhasa, a type of Nepal Bhasa script (Ranjhana Lipi), (Tuladhar 2018:1:1).

॥ उनमाणीधर्मभक्तवस्यंतुगामोऽप्नाय ॥ ३ ॥ श्रीमनायतसद्धर्म  
 दिल्लाकसंयुक्तासिका श्रीग्रन्थमहावृत्तद्वेष्टनवल्लिगाः  
 ॥ ग्रन्थश्रीमारात्रज्ञानाङ्गत्यमानश्चासाथथिद्धीष्ठापकसिंहरुगवान  
 सनः स्वर्गमर्श्यामृतसः सद्धर्मयुक्ताभ्याद्विद्वाकः थथा  
 ॥ ४ ॥ दिल्लाकसीरुताधर्मवृद्धयागुः अन्वेषतादात्मस्तुतान्तर्लिखि  
 ऊगदीभान्तधर्मभक्तुं दिनालयान्तर्लिख्युतमृद्धीवकामिः ॥ १ ॥  
 ॥ भूतादनाह ॥ भूद्याय भूत्तमीमी स्वयं तृत्यक्षित्कृथीयनिष्ठुरु  
 तिकर्यस्वाधिस्त्रूतवधुर्वद्वर्द ॥ हन्त्यमवमत्तर्ग्रन्थर्यामालयाः  
 ध्वन्धन्धनः यकाधर्मयारवानिः समस्तथागवान्द्वास्त्रिविद्वाकः  
 थथिद्धर्मस्त्राकुयान्तमस्तुत्यादात्माथस्वयं तुरुगवान्तुरु

Dapha Bhajan, a form of traditional Newar devotional music, has deep roots in the Kathmandu Valley, especially in places like Lalitpur (Patan), and is one of the dominant forms of traditional Newari music. Dapha music is classical Newari music that originated during the late Lichhavi period (8th century) and flourished in the Malla period (1209-1779). This genre blends Hindu and Buddhist devotional practices through a

#### PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 7

unique musical style performed by communities as a form of worship and social gathering. Its distinct style is marked by a raga (melodic framework) and tala (rhythmic structure) similar to classical South Asian music, but with variations specific to Newari culture, often tied to time cycles throughout the day to match different moods and atmospheres.

The songs of Dapha music are devotional and based on classical ragas. Dapha music is played by bands known as Dapha Khalah that may be associated with

traditional groups called Guthi. In the Siddhpur neighborhood being studied in this project, there is one called Kwechen Dapha Khalah. According to the ragas, certain songs are played at certain seasons or times of the day. The songs generally narrate or depict the mood of a particular season. Besides the seasonal and scheduled ragas, various ragas are played during specific events, such as the Deepak raga (played when a monarch passes away).

The Dapha bajan have many time signatures, some of them are:

Astara taal : 5/4

Pratal taal: 7/4

Raag: Bahramas / Basanta / Aashabari / Malashree

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjBpVk-N4TE>

These lessons provide oral rhythm “ dha ti dha ti dha ti dha ti nagar mana kha ti na ga ji narga na ti” and later demonstrated by hand. Dapha is taught in groups, not individually. Young learners join a local Dapha Khalah, often associated with a temple or

#### PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 8

Guthi (community organization). Seniors (gurus) teach the next generation through call-and-response singing and rhythmic practice. There is no fixed written notation as the music form is passed down orally. Learners memorize lyrics, melodies, and rhythms through repetition. Songs are taught line by line, with students repeating after the guru. Some groups have started recording and documenting Dapha Bhajan.

Dāpha songs are structured around rāgas, similar to Indian classical music but adapted to the Newar tradition. According to Richard Widdess (Dāphā: Sacred singing in a South Asian City, 2013), the rāgas used in Dāpha differ, often reflecting Newar ritual and seasonal cycles. Similar to Indian classical music, certain rāgas in Dāphā are associated with specific times of the day and seasons. Widdess notes that some rāgas are sung early in the morning, while others are meant for the evening or specific festivals. The Newar interpretation of rāgas often simplifies or modifies their scale, making them fit within the modal and melody preferences of the Dāphā tradition. Some rāgas identified in Widdess's research include:

- Mālāsrī - Associated with autumn and Dashain festivals.
- Bhupālī - A pentatonic rāga also found in Indian music.
- Pilu - A rāga with folk-like characteristics.
- Asāvari - Used in morning compositions.
- Bhairavī - Sung at the conclusion of sessions.

Unlike Hindustani rāga performance, Dāphā music does not include elaborate ālaps. The songs often fixed compositions with a set melody. The drone (often played on harmonium or stringed instruments) provides a stable tonal foundation.

#### PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 9

Richard Widdess's studies help bridge the gap between Newar and South Asian music traditions, highlighting how the Dāphā rāga system evolved independently while still drawing from classical Indian influences. His research also underscores the importance of Dāphā in preserving ancient musical traditions in Nepal. ( Widdess 2013:141).

In Lalitpur, communities such as those in Walkhu Tole and various Dapha groups still maintain these performances, bringing together vocalists, drummers, and other instrumentalists for collective singing that spans generations. Efforts to revive and preserve Dapha include digital documentation and incorporating traditional music training in cultural centers and schools, as seen in programs in Kirtipur and Lubhu. These initiatives aim to keep Dapha accessible, with young musicians learning from masters and performing in public or festival settings to ensure its survival and evolution for future generations. ( Kansakar and Tuladhar 2020: 90). Another type of Newar religious song is known as Gvārā. This genre is performed mostly by Buddhist religious groups on sacred pilgrimages to Lalitpur and Bhaktapur shrines in the month of Günlā (August). The term is also used for certain songs among the Dāphā repertoire, especially (but not exclusively) heterometric songs, that is, songs in which the meter (*tāl*) changes in a fixed metrical pattern. Gvārā is a genre of religious song similar to Dāphā and may even be older; studying its texts and performance practice may help us understand the evolution of Newar devotional songs. Dāphā has absorbed parts of the repertoire of several genres and from Gvārā compositions (Widdess 2013:36).

#### PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 10

As we can see, the Dapha group and singing of Bhajans are an important cultural and social event, A group of friends and neighbors assemble to do something enjoyable together. A man playing the triangle, for instance, doesn't sing much, and the reason for his taking up this comparatively soft-sounding instrument is just to participate despite his lack of musical ability. Tea for a refreshment break is brought from a nearby shop, and more tea – cooked on an electric clay stove inside the pati while the singing goes

on – is taken before the party breaks up. Participation, rather than for instance musical accomplishment, is a key value in the event, and people invite each other to take turns at the harmonium and the nagara drum.

The texts, on their hand, are often in Nepal bhasha or Newari, the Tibeto-Burman language of the Newar. But there are also texts in what people point out as the Maithili language – more specifically, songs by “Vidyapati” (the famous 14–15th century poet). Other texts are said to be translations of Vidyapati texts into Nepal bhasha. And unlike the visually and musically spectacular festivals – the jatras – the bhajan is a low-key event. The wall to the street outside, as well as the partition to the shrine, consist of a grid of metal bars which gives free visual and auditory access to the singing for people passing by in the street, and for the women and men who come to worship – do puja – at the shrine. But there is no human audience to this hymn-singing, people pass by outside or do their puja at the shrine without acknowledging the bhajan particularly. In sum, and as said above, singing is just a part of everyday life – in a place where religion is the prime vehicle for artistic expression. (Grandin 2010:1-2).

#### PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 11

Music, like houses, grows from a surplus of man-hours and other resources. The surplus that has founded the Newar musical traditions is based on a very specific economy – an economy that also continuously produced rituals, festivals; arts and crafts; literature, drama, painting, sculpture; food; housing; clothing; raw materials such as clay, bricks, stone, wood; paper; and of course food. Religion is a key to this economy – both products and the apparatus for production are defined in religious terms. And as we have seen, religion is transformed into arts. Religion is a source for

artistic expression in the arts of painting, woodcraft, stonemasonry, metalwork, architecture, literature, religion is turned into cultural performance in ritual, ceremony, festival, music, dance, drama. If we think of Levy's clockwork not as a definite symbolic-social machinery, but in a more general way as precisely this religiously encoded mode of production, the metaphor still has heuristic value. (Grandin 2010:10).

Festivals known as Jatas, such as the Seto Machindranath Rath Yatra, Indra Jatra, and Rato Machindranath Jatra, are celebrated annually with chariot processions, where deities are paraded through the streets. Seto Machindranath, revered by both Hindus and Buddhists, is a key figure in the Chaitey Dashain festival. Indra Jatra, one of Kathmandu's largest street festivals, honors Lord Indra, the god of rain, and features a procession with the living Goddess Kumari and other deities. The Rato Machindranath Jatra in Patan, where a massive chariot is pulled through the streets, involves the whole community and draws significant participation. Other festivals like the Bisket Jatra in Bhaktapur and the Ghode Jatra celebrate various deities and historical events (Bajracharya, 2013). Jatas continue to be a vibrant expression of Newar culture,

#### PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 12

blending religious worship with social entertainment. These events, characterized by music, instruments, and communal gatherings, attract both Newars and non-Newars alike, especially with the support of modern transportation and media. The tradition of "Jatra swowanegu" (going to watch a testival) reveals that Jatas have long been a form of devotion for older generations and a social opportunity for the younger ones. As this practice continues to evolve, it remains a key element in fostering unity and strengthening cultural ties within the Newar community. (Bajracharya 2013).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=el3uutaNBHQ>

Kuma Sagar and The Khwopa band have been very active in preserving Newari Music. In this video they are singing “Champa”, an offering song of devotion to the deities. This video features the ancient Bhajan Mandal from the district of Bhaktapur. Kuma Sagar and The Khwopa band have been making a significant impact in Newari music as well as in Newari culture. His stage presence and his presentations on stage promoting the preservation of Newari Music is making a significant impact at this time in Nepal. Sagar is touring throughout Nepal and spreading his message and music. Through the music he is passing on Newari music and language and its importance to the communities in Nepal. In a recent interview on one of the television programs of Nepal he promoted the idea that Newari language is important culturally and should be preserved. His contribution and massive popularity is spreading the importance of Newari culture and helping to ensure that it can be passed onto the next generation.

PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 13

[https://youtu.be/ShSwLI4XALg?si=FHLR\\_xghJohwgarT](https://youtu.be/ShSwLI4XALg?si=FHLR_xghJohwgarT)

This source is specific to the Newari musical tradition of Patan, Haktole. It shows the participation of the younger generation and continuity of Dapha tradition. In Patan, locals still practice Dapha traditions. This was performed at the end of 9th month ‘Gunla’ of Newa according to the lunar calendar. Haktole, Patan is a place where there is this type of education for the younger generation. Passing down the myths, lore, poems, beats and discipline will be useful all their lives.

In modern times women have begun to play an important role in Newari Music. In the historical period and even recent history women were not allowed to go to school or spend time outside of the home in pursuit of an education. Fortunately, times are changing and the younger generation of women enjoy more rights, including education and the ability to learn music. Now I enjoy seeing women in Siddhipur participating as musicians and dancers. There are several women's groups that are active in the preservation of Newari music and culture, and they are passing their knowledge to future generations. Pushpa Palanchoke is an applied ethnomusicologist from Nepal who has dedicated her career to researching and revitalizing indigenous music traditions, particularly Dāphā. Her work emphasizes community engagement, preservation, and adaptation of these musical traditions in contemporary contexts. She established Folk Lok, a community-based music program managed by the Satori Center for the Arts. This initiative focuses on collaborating with indigenous music groups to rejuvenate

#### PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 14

traditional practices. Traditionally a male-dominted practice, Dāphā music has seen increased female participation due to Pushpha's efforts. Her initiatives have opened spaces for women in these musical traditions. She organizes the annual Dāphā Calling forum, which brings together practitioners, researchers, and enthusiasts to share knowledge and address challenges faced by Dāphā tradition. ( Singh and Palanchoke 2023:20).

- Balkumari Dapha Khala [https://youtu.be/f\\_AB9EztnXo?si=chGbHX-1Xjwmw9zP](https://youtu.be/f_AB9EztnXo?si=chGbHX-1Xjwmw9zP) •
- Chabahal Dapha Khala <https://youtu.be/CxCUKHfnzWw?si=ZvvFvyTWJAC7Bqsj> •

Below is the image of Newari girls playing Dhime:



**Siddhipur girls playing Dhimay in front of Siddhipur Palace.**

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/sEyfXHpTia>

PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 15

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnnC5cyit5o>

This source shows the role of women in Newari music. Music and female involvement reflect the harmony and inclusive ethos of Newari culture, preserving the heritage while adapting to contemporary practices. Indira Lachchimasyu is known as the first female Dhimay player of Bhaktapur. She has also trained the all female Dapha Khala. They performed in a show named 'Dapha Calling' 2022. It is wonderful to see an increasing presence of women as performers and musicians in Nepal.

Although Newari culture and music was marginalized historically, in recent times there is progress at the Department of Music at Kathmandu University to support and

preserve Newar musical traditions. Their efforts are reaching new audiences, with promotional activities including teaching traditional Newari music to students. Organizations such as the Kathmandu University preserve and help bring awareness to Newari musical traditions. The focus here is upon these traditions as an artistic heritage unique to Nepal where musical elements might be refined but essentially should be preserved rather than changed.

Nepal consists of more than 120 ethnic groups. They are the natives of Kathmandu Valley, consisting of various races and castes but a single linguistic community. Women have been subordinate to men in Newar society. Especially married women are highly discriminated against in their homes. Music education also has a role in implementing this change, to promote respect between people and social justice.

#### PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 16

Previously, music was largely taught informally within families or religious institutions. The establishment of Kathmandu University Department of Music, Nepal Music Center, and other private academies has provided structured education. Western music theory, technology, and composition are now being integrated with traditional Nepali music. While institutions exist, public funding and policy support for music education are still minimal. Music education needs more integration into the national education system. (Gurung 2019:7). Echoes in the valley is a well-known music festival in Nepal that plays a significant role in promoting and preserving traditional music, including Newar music. Since its inception, the festival has focused on reviving and celebrating indigenous sounds while integrating contemporary influences. The festival features performances by Newa musical groups that play traditional instruments such as dhimay, kхиñ, dhaa,

naykhin and bhusyah. Folk musicians, including dhimay and bhajan ensembles, present authentic sounds passed down through generations. Experimental fusion projects like 'Kanta Dab Dab' combine Newar rhythms with jazz, electronic, and global folk influences. EITV organizes music workshops that educate the younger generation about Newar musical heritage.

PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 17



The festival turns courtyard (bahals), squares (dabus), and temples into concert venues, reinforcing the connection between music and Newar heritage. By presenting Newar music in a professional festival setting, EITV helps gain recognition for these

traditions both nationally and internationally. Newar music is deeply tied to rituals, festivals, and social functions, but modernization has threatened its continuity. Events like Echoes in the Valley provide a vital platform to keep these traditions alive while making them relevant for new generations. ( Kansakar and Tuladhar 2020: 87).

This paper has introduced the importance of Newari culture and music and some of the main percussion instruments used, and the rich and diverse culture of the Kathmandu Valley. The historical context and modern day practices have been touched upon, and some specific percussion techniques have been shown. The role of women as teachers and performers in Newari music today has also been highlighted, as they are playing an important role for the preservation of the musical traditions of the indigenous people of the Kathmandu Valley. Lastly, those who like myself are intent on preservation of traditional Newari music are creating repositories of videos that demonstrate music and culture and these will create a much needed resource for future generations.

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PRESERVATION OF NEWARI MUSIC 21

### **Video sources which are being used for this capstone project:**

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2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyUQokmrGeY>
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4. <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/sEyfXHpTiak>
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnnC5cyit5o>
6. [https://youtu.be/ShSwLI4XALg?si=FHLR\\_xghJohwgarT](https://youtu.be/ShSwLI4XALg?si=FHLR_xghJohwgarT)
7. Video of Dapha at pavilion <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyUQokmrGeY>
8. Audio of Seturam Shrestha singing Rajumati Kumati  
[https://youtu.be/02D0XBFwQ-E?si=f6UVSsj\\_iTxFwY0S](https://youtu.be/02D0XBFwQ-E?si=f6UVSsj_iTxFwY0S)

9. Dyāḥlhāygu (recorded 1952 by Marguerite Lobsinger-Dellenbach)

<https://youtu.be/8Z1GpQnOtTM?si=IveME7Ah4qvk9rY1>

10. Narayana II (recorded 1973 by Laurent Aubert)

<https://youtu.be/9VYVcDxjutA?si=FNej6fbLeT6nNIGV>

11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eI3uutaNBHQ>

12. Balkumari Dapha Khala [https://youtu.be/f\\_AB9EztnXo?si=chGbHX-1Xjwmw9zP](https://youtu.be/f_AB9EztnXo?si=chGbHX-1Xjwmw9zP)

13. Chabahal Dapha Khala <https://youtu.be/CxCKHfnzWw?si=ZvvFvyTWJAC7Bqsj>

14. Bidhyapati Dapha Khala [https://youtu.be/f0Yy6O\\_2\\_ZE?si=\\_8J9B9QGOnXfhVC8](https://youtu.be/f0Yy6O_2_ZE?si=_8J9B9QGOnXfhVC8)

15. <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/sEyfXHpTia>