Caste, Patronage and the Sacred Realm: Reconsidering the Folkloric in Contemporary Music of Uttarakhand

The Hindi/Sanskrit term “lok” is almost always translated into English as “folk”. Numerous collocations appear to link the folk concept to cultural artefacts of various kinds including ‘lok gīt’ [folk songs], ‘lok saṅgīt’ [folk music] and ‘lok kathā’ [folk tale]. Such an easy translation would suggest that the concept for folkloric practice in India is similar in many, if not most, respects to the concept in Europe/America. However, a more detailed etymological investigation of the term ‘lok’ as well as the dynamics of Hindu caste and religion shape the folk concept in ways that are unique to South Asia.

This presentation examines musical practice in the North Indian state of Uttarakhand to provide examples of ways in which local concepts for folk music are unique, not only to the context of South Asia, but also to the Himalayan region of which Uttarakhand is a part. The presentation will draw on musical examples from ritual drum practice in the region as well as contemporary popular music recordings to reconsider the way folk is a complex concept – one with histories not only associated with India’s colonial past, but also to broader notions of a public sphere within the Sanskritic tradition.

Andrew Alter
Macquarie University, Sydney