

DESHI DHOL: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEARNING MUSICAL INSTRUMENT IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF LOWER ASSAM AND NORTH BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

Assam is a notable state in North East India where most of the tribes of the mentioned region live. In the surrounding areas of Dhubri district in Lower Assam, The Deshi Dhol is a musical instrument that originated from the 'Deshi Band' (Indigenous Folk Band) or 'Deshi Baij – Bhuinmali' which is currently used in various folk genres in this region over the year. The 'Bhuinmali' group applies their art in several types of festivals of the Rajbanshi group of people. One of the notable folk music of this region is Bhawaiya Folk. Bhawaiya folk singer Padmashree Pratima Barua Pandey was the first legend to start using Deshi Dhol in this Bhawaiya song. Since the 'Deshi' or 'Desi' people of this region used to sing Bhawaiya songs in their voices, she called these songs are 'Deshi Songs.' Later, she was the first to start using Deshi Dhol in these songs, which is still appreciated by everyone. Although the practice and learning of this indigenous drum has been continued traditionally for a long time, in the present time, with the inclusion of this indigenous drum in the curriculum in various educational institutions, the need to determine the correct measurement of its Varna, Tune, and Rhythm has begun. In keeping with the curriculum of other arts or other subjects of the educational institution, a glimpse of the education of indigenous drum in various courses is currently being seen. The traditional practice of playing the drum will continue, just as folk music changes in the world. But in the field of teaching the drum in educational institutions, artists will be more career-oriented, employment will be created, and young people will be interested in taking up this art.

Keywords: Lower Assam, North Bengal, Deshi Dhol, Learning of Deshi Dhol

Introduction:

The 'Dhol' (Drum) percussion (Anaddhya) musical instrument is derived from the Bhuinmali indigenous Band of Rajbanshi Group of peoples, and it has been used in music of Ceremonies, Marriage, Welcome events, and other festivals over the years since long times. This instrument is seen in architectural monuments in various places in India. In the Northern part of West Bengal and lower Assam, one of the forms of the Indigenous Dhol is the 'Deshi dhol'. Its history is also related to the Kamatapur Dyanasty and still very popular in North-East India, North Bengal and Bangladesh. It's made of leather-covered of Goat, Cow or Buffalo, Neem or mango wood pieces. Deshi Dhol is separately still used in the folk practices in the ritualistic songs of Rajbanshi, and in their 'Puja Parvans', 'Bhawaiya' songs and in the 'Bhuinmali' indigenous band group. In the current era of globalization, new musical instruments are being introduced in society, and the tastes of the audience are also changing day by day; that's why modern electronic musical instruments have silently entered the long-standing folk music. In this case, the place of the 'Deshi Dhol' has been somewhat narrowed as practice professionally. However, it is undeniable that the Deshi Dhol has a great emotional in folk music for the audience or listeners in this region to play a popular role in various programs and music. (Ray, 2023)

Special cultural zones, known as "Upper Assam" or "Eastern Portion" and "Lower Assam" or "Western Portion," have existed in Assam or Kamrup. Even throughout the Ahom Dynasty, there had been internal cultural conflicts since the beginning. There was little division between Upper and Lower Assam during the Ahom period, but once the British Divide and Rule Policy was implemented in Assam, the state was split into two distinct zones, making Upper and Lower Assam easily distinguishable. (Mollah, 2024)

The region has a very rich and fascinating history. Different parts of the region have distinct and different historical settings. Darjeeling, Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Kalimpong Maldaha, North & South

Dinajpur etc. have distinct sociocultural backgrounds. However, in the process of making modern India all these places formed themselves as one unit and became North Bengal region. Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Dinajpur had their own separate kingdoms. Similarly entire Dooars region was the part and parcel of Bhutan. In fact it was the main gateway to enter the Bhutan region. Hence, in the process of development or in the process of making India as a nation all these independent kingdoms and regions amalgamated into one region known as North Bengal Region. (Tamang, 2018)

It is worth noting that several 'Deshi Dhol' artists of the region have been learning this folk instrument traditionally. This was an oral and observational learning. In line with the current education system, an effort is being made to include 'Deshi Dhol' in the curriculum of various educational institutions, which is commendable. In this educational system, in addition to describing the different parts of the Desi Dhol, an effort is being made to record the rhythm, melody, words and letters of the Dhol for education, which will help the next generation to learn Desi Dhol in short time with scientifically.

Origin of Deshi Dhol:

About the historical perspective and an according to some rural natives of this region, in ancient times, a group of people got tired while hunting and cutting wood in a forest of this region, and they all took shelter under a big tree for rest. At some point, it was seen that drops of water from the resting tree were continuously falling on another big dry tree that had fallen to the ground due to the force of nature. That sound gradually increased from 'Top Top' to 'Dom Dom' in the secluded forest. Out of curiosity, some people went near the fallen tree and hit it hard with a branch of another tree. The sound generated after the hit attracted them, and they decided that if they cut a part of this tree and took it to their residence, the fragmented wooden trunk could be used for exchanging news among the general public. When they returned to their residence, they were worried because they did not get the expected sound from the cut trunk of the tree after hitting it in the same way. Through some experiments, they were able to understand that the two sides of the tree trunk were empty, and therefore, they could not hear the expected sound from that particular tree trunk. Finally, it was decided that the two sides of the tree trunk would be covered with the skin of a hunted animal. Everyone decided to do so, and they all heard the expected sound from the tree trunk covered with the skin, surprisingly. The newly created instrument was used in various functions of the primitive society at that time and in different forms in different festivals, depending on the region. Many believe that today's Deshi Dhol is a modified form of the instrument made from the trunk of that same tree over time.

In Other myth the 'Deshi Dhol' comes from the folk Rajbanshi word 'Dholai' (The providing information, circulating or inviting). The word 'Dhol' comes from 'Dholai'. Initially, this Dhol was used in coronations, festivals, ceremonies, drumming, marriages, Upanayan, etc., of the Rajbanshi folk society. It was used by a folk band called in Rajbanshi dialogue 'Deshi Baij' or 'Bhuimali'(A group of Folk/Indigenous Band). Currently, this Deshi Dhol is used in Bhawaiya, one of the folk songs of the Rajbanshi. The playing method and the tuning method of this 'Deshi Dhol' are very different from the drums of other states of India. In a normal Dhol, the direction of the bass is larger than the direction of the treble. But in this Deshi Dhol, it is the opposite. The method of holding the bamboo stick made of bamboo to play this Dhol is also different. Some of the musicians of the North Eastern region of India also call it "Kathi Dhol" or "Nati Dhol". (Ray, 2023)

Use of the 'Deshi Dhol':

The Deshi Dhol is an uninhibited and widely used folk instrument that plays an important role in various cultural and social spheres of Rajbanshi society. This musical instrument is not limited to the 'Bhuinmali'

tradition only, but its use is observed in various ceremonies of the larger folk society. In particular, Deshi Dhol has a lively presence in folk arts such as Bhawaiya song, Dotra Pala, Bamboo Dance, and Kamadeva Dance. According to the history of the use of Deshi Dhol, its use began in Rajbangshi society through the first 'Bhuinmali' group at wedding ceremonies. (Ray P. , 2025) Gradually, that use spread to the social sphere, and it became an indispensable musical instrument in various religious, social, and cultural ceremonies. Today, the Deshi Dhol is not just a musical instrument, but it is considered an important carrier of the folk tradition, culture, and identity of Rajbangshi society. (Ray N. , 2025)

Deshi Dhol as profession:

According to Deshi Dhol artists like Shusanta Ray, Prankrishna Ray, and Niresch Ray, the Deshi Dhol is not only a cultural exposer instrument but also a means of livelihood for many rural performers. Due to limited job opportunities, many artists have taken up this profession to support their families. Earnings vary depending on the event. When accompanying Bhawaiya Gaan or Dotora Pala, an artist usually earns about one thousand Indian rupees per program. In contrast, those performing with Bhuinmali groups at wedding ceremonies can earn around two thousand Indian rupees per day, as these events often continue for two to three days. For smaller programs like local games or inaugurations, earnings range from five hundred to one thousand Indian rupees per day. Though income is not always stable, the Deshi Dhol remains a vital source of economic support.

Deshi Dhol in Bhuinmali:

Deshi Dhol is an essential musical instrument of the 'Bhuinmali' tradition, which is deeply connected to the cultural and spiritual practices of the rural society. In religious ceremonies like the wedding ceremony, goddess prayer, and different folk games, the presence of the deity is felt, and a sacred atmosphere is maintained to the beat of Deshi Dhol. This dhol is not just a musical instrument; it is part of a symbolic practice that reflects the faith and devotion of the community. (Barman N. , 2025) At weddings, Deshi Dhol creates a festive atmosphere and helps strengthen relationships at various social levels. In folk dance performances, this Dhol acts as the main rhythm or center of the beat, this engages the dancers and the audience in a unified emotion. In ritual-based theatrical performances called Naro, Deshi Dhol intensifies the dramatic expression of fear, morality, and mythological themes and creates an atmosphere of mystery. Similarly, in folk plays or rural theatrical performances, the Deshi Dhol brings the festival to life with its color and dramatic momentum, where a cultural bridge is built between generations. Thus, the Deshi Dhol is not just a musical instrument; it is an important vehicle for the spiritual and cultural life of the Bhuinmali tradition. (Barman, 2025)

Deshi Dhol in different genres:

The use of Deshi Dhol in Bhawaiya songs was first popularized by Padmashree Pratima Barua. (Ray, 2023) It was her initiative that led to the Deshi Dhol being recognized as an accompanying musical instrument. This instrument is associated with folk instruments like the Dotara, Sarinda, and Arbanshi, which beautifully convey the rhythm and emotion of the songs. In various compositions of Bhawaiya songs, such as those about separation, nature, or journey, Deshi Dhol is played with a variety of rhythms and beats. Today, this musical instrument has become a crucial part of Bhawaiya performances. Many artists prefer the Deshi Dhol for providing accompaniment and rhythm, as it effectively conveys the emotion and movement of the song. Deshi Dhol is a vital musical instrument of the Bhuinmali tradition, which is closely linked to the cultural and spiritual life of rural society (Barman P. , Interview , 2025). The beat of this drum creates an atmosphere of purity and celebration during Goddess Puja, Sai Tol Puja, and wedding ceremonies. It is not just a musical instrument, but a symbol of the faith and devotion of the community. In ritualistic theatrical performances like folk dance and Naro, the indigenous drum is the

soul of rhythm and drama, which connects the audience and the dancer in one emotion. In rural games and theatrical performances, this drum also builds a cultural bridge between generations. (Barman N. N., 2025)

Classical influence in Deshi Dhol:

Deshi Dhol, although a folk instrument, still has a kind of classicalism in its teaching system and performance style. Just as in Indian classical music, the tradition of music education and practice has developed through the Guru-Shishya tradition, similarly, in the case of Deshi Dhol, such an oral and traditional teaching system exists. The knowledge of this musical instrument has been transmitted from generation to generation mainly by word of mouth, by listening to and watching the playing of experienced artists. Although there is no written system, this tradition has continued through the practical experience of the artists. Currently, there is a growing interest in learning Deshi Dhol among the new generation of artists, and that interest is often taking a regular and institutional form, like the structure of classical music. As a result, the folk education tradition of Deshi Dhol is gradually transforming into a kind of "folk-classical" tradition. In this context, it can be said that Deshi Dhol is not just a folk instrument, but rather it is a carrier of an oral scripture linked to the experiences, education, and musical traditions of folk life. (Ray, 2023).

The concept of Some 'Varnas' collected from (Barman & Ray, Deshi Dhol Shikkha, 2021).

The 'Varnas' towards the right hands of the Desi Dhol:

Ga, Gi, Ge- Lightly strike on the topmost part demarcated as number 1 of the dhol with the striking stick or the lower number 1 with the middle finger of the right hand. There will be a vibration when thus struck.

The 'Varnas' towards the left hands of the Desi Dhol:

Ta, Na – When the 1st part of the treble side of the Dhol is struck with the index finger of the corresponding hand, then the sound produced is Ta or Na. This sound has a fair bit of sustain.

Twak- When the part close to the rim of the treble side of the Dhol is struck and pressed by the four fingers of the left hand, excluding the thumb, then the sound produced is twak.

Towards the both hands of the Desi Dhol

Dhing= Ga/Gee + Na/Ta

Dha = Ghe + Na/Ta

Dhik = Ghe + Twak

Dhet = Ghet + Na/Ta

Conclusion:

The Deshi Dhol stands as a powerful symbol of the Rajbanshi community's cultural identity, spirituality, and musical heritage. Its presence in rituals, folk performances, and everyday celebrations reflects its deep-rooted significance. Despite changes brought by modernization, this instrument continues to offer both artistic expression and livelihood to many. With growing efforts to include it in formal education and preserve its traditional knowledge, the Deshi Dhol holds great potential to inspire future generations and ensure the continuity of a rich folk legacy.

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