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ECHOES OF KASHMIR: THE CIVILIZATIONAL AND AESTHETIC LEGACY OF ITS MUSICAL TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

Growing up in Kashmir, music is often found not just in concert halls but in kitchens, markets, and open fields. People rarely speak of "learning music" in formal terms—it simply happens, often without a name. One watches an uncle play a tune or hums along with elders at weddings. That is where most of the training occurs. It's not that rules don't exist, but they are seldom written down. This way of passing down knowledge relies more on memory and emotion than on theory. Some may call it chaotic, but it works—people remember songs because they feel them. That emotional memory often lasts longer than notes written on paper. Even those who later join formal music institutions carry that raw, intuitive bond. In many cases, it's the informal moments, not the structured lectures, that shape the true artist. In Kashmir, music is lived before it is learned.

Keywords: *Kashmir, Abhinavgupta, Classical, Sufiana, Chakri, Rov, Challant.*

Introduction

You often hear about Kashmir's beauty, but there is more here than just scenery. The people live with music—it's not just something they listen to. It weaves into stories, prayers, and even the way they speak. No book teaches it, no classroom explains it. It simply exists—like breathing. It passes from father to son, from an elder's humming to a child's listening ear. There's something deeper in it. Perhaps it's how the mountains carry echoes. Or how belief and daily life are blended—Hindu chants, Sufi melodies, and old folk songs, all living side by side. Instruments like the Santoor or the Saaz-e-Kashmir don't seem special to the locals—they are part of what everyday life sounds like. Music here doesn't need a stage or applause. It's less about performance, more about memory, more about feeling.

History of Kashmir

You can't sum up Kashmir in just rulers and dates. It's way more than that. It goes back to ancient times—you'll even find its name in old Vedic writings. Then, somewhere around 3rd century BCE, Ashoka showed up and helped make it a peaceful spot for Buddhist learning. Fast forward to the Karkota dynasty—7th to 9th century—and you've got folks like Abhinavagupta and Vasugupta changing how people thought about life, art, even God. Later on, in the 1300s, Sufi saints like Bulbul Shah came. They didn't wipe out older beliefs—they sort of mixed in. That's how "Kashmiriyat" happened. After that, other rulers—Shah Miris, Mughals, Dogras—they all left their marks too, mostly in music and art. Today? It's not what it was, sure. But in the middle of all the noise, you still hear something. A song, a story, maybe just a feeling. That's Kashmir, still there—just quieter now.

Geography of Kashmir

Kashmir's landscape isn't just about mountains and rivers—it's like a layered memory, full of life. The region breaks into three big parts: the green, quiet Kashmir Valley, the warmer plains of Jammu, and the

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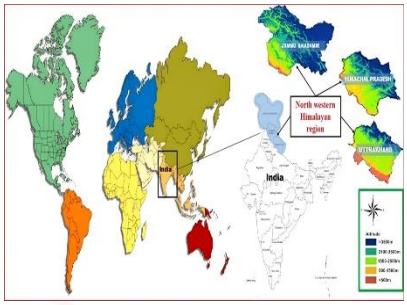
dry, high-altitude land of Ladakh. Right in the middle, the valley lies tucked between the Pir Panjal and the Himalayas, like a cradle. It's cool here. Snow melts into rivers, forests stretch far, and fields stay lush. The Jhelum River—ancient name Vitasta—starts from Verinag spring and flows gently through the valley, almost like it's watching over everything. It didn't just carry water. It carried ideas, goods, stories. This river used to connect Kashmir to the rest of the world—Central Asia, India, you name it. The land didn't hold culture back—it pushed it forward. Because of where Kashmir sits, it's always been a meeting ground. And that's shaped who the people are.



Culture of Kashmir

Kashmir isn't just a place—it breathes culture. You can feel it in the air, especially when the morning azaan echoes from an old shrine and someone next door hums a folk tune while boiling noon chai. It's quiet, layered, deeply lived-in. People speak of Kashmiriyat. Hard to define. It's kindness in a stranger's eyes. It's Sufi saints and ancient mystics living in the same memory. The words of Lal Ded aren't old—they still guide people. Sheikh-ul-Alam, too. Their wisdom was soft, but it stayed. And music? It's different here. Santoor sounds like falling snow. The Saaz-e-Kashmir, delicate, serious. Songs don't entertain—they mean something. They pray. Even now, when everything feels divided and unsure, the culture holds on. Inside homes. At small gatherings. On old carpets. Through stories whispered more than sung. It's fragile, yes. But it hasn't left. Not yet. Not ever.

Nāda and Nirvana: The Classical Musical Ethos of Kashmir

Kashmir's music doesn't shout. It lingers. Soft, inward, and ancient—more prayer than performance. While most of the classical world mapped itself into gharanas and royal courts, Kashmir took a quieter path. Here, music was less about rules and more about revelation. You won't always find it in textbooks. But dig a little, and you'll discover that long before playlists and programs, people in this valley were thinking about nāda—the primordial sound—as a step toward something divine. Abhinavagupta, Kshemaraja… not just philosophers, but spiritual cartographers. For them, sound wasn't entertainment. It was enlightenment. Take the Santoor. What began as a simple folk instrument turned into something profound. Pandit Uma Dutt Sharma gave it voice. Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma made it speak. And with the Sopori family—especially Pandit Bhajan Sopori—it became something else entirely: a soul in strings. Their "Sopori Baaj" wasn't just style. It was a kind of surrender. And rhythm? The tabla beat in Kashmir has its own story. Rooted in the Qureshi family tradition, it added a pulse to the valley's voice. Years later, Zakir Hussain would carry that rhythm to the world. But the seed was here. This music isn't mainstream. It doesn't need to be. It's contemplative, not commercial. A little hidden, maybe. But still alive—in notes that drift across water, or in hands that still remember how to play for the spirit, not the stage.

Kashmir's Semi-Classical Music – Not Loud, But Deep

Ghazals made their way into Kashmiri music too, though not in the grand, polished way they are performed in big cities. Here, they took on a gentler form—songs that felt like personal confessions, shared quietly. Often sung in Urdu, but with a Kashmiri soul, they weren't about impressing anyone. They were about feeling something and letting it out. Qawwali wasn't very common in the Valley, but it

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had its space, especially around Sufi shrines. Groups of men would gather, sit in circles, and sing not to an audience, but to the divine. There were no frills—just raw voices and rhythm. It was never about the applause, only about connection. That's what ties all these forms together—Bhajans, Ghazals, even the rare Qawwalis. They weren't meant for stage or fame. They belonged to homes, shrines, hearts. Kashmir's music, in this way, wasn't borrowed. It was built—piece by piece, feeling by feeling, lived and passed on.

Sufiyana Kalam is not a genre easily boxed into definitions or musical systems. It isn't charted, measured, or concerned with fitting into classical frameworks. It holds its own space — a tradition that has breathed through Kashmir's air for centuries. It is sacred not because of its age, but because it is lived. Passed not through institutions, but from elder to child, ustad to disciple, ear to heart — reverently, silently, patiently. What sets it apart is not just its content, but how it survives: not through fame, but through presence.

Unlike Hindustani or Carnatic traditions, Sufiyana Kalam does not move with rigid formalism. It flows according to its own temperament. It employs maqams — not ragas — rooted in Persian and Central Asian traditions. Hijaz, Nawah, Araq, Shahnaz, Boosleeq — these are not just musical terms in Kashmir; they are emotional states. A maqam is not performed — it is entered. Some rise like prayer, others fall like regret. These forms reward honesty and patience, not technical brilliance.

The rhythmic structures too follow their own course. Instead of standard taals, it features cycles like Yek Tala, Neemdur, Doroya, Chapandaaz, Zarb-i-Turki — gentler, rounder, less rigid. The beat doesn't drive — it supports. The Wasool, a soft barrel drum, remains humble and modest, breathing quietly under the melody. Sufiyana instruments speak not to impress but to stir the soul. The Santoor — struck with fine wooden mallets — sounds like soft snowfall: fleeting, shimmering, unforgettable. The Saaz-e-Kashmir, bowed and resonant, evokes memory more than sound. The Setar and Madham add intentional depth, filling emotional space, not gaps. Even the Tabla, when present, enters with grace and restraint. These instruments know silence — and respect it.

But Sufiyana Kalam lives not in theory or performance alone. It endures through people — gharanas, families, and voices who have kept it alive through silence and turbulence. Saaznawaz, Tibetbaqal, Qaleenbaaf, Kamaal Bhat — these names are entire traditions. In such homes, music was never taught — it was absorbed. A child might be drawn to a resting Santoor not for applause, but for understanding. No lights, no competitions — just discipline and devotion. Its verses come from mystics — Lal Ded, Sheikh-

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ul-Alam, and Persian divans — verses of surrender, truth, longing. Sung at shrines, they require no translation; the soul understands. Sufiyana Kalam does not explain — it awakens.

Today, it may echo less loudly. But it hasn't disappeared. It lives in quiet homes, in the memory of elders, in a Santoor string that still sings when brushed. It survives in gestures, pauses, in a kalam whispered at dawn. Sufiyana Kalam isn't a style — it's a state of being. It does not perform. It remembers. And as long as someone listens — deeply — it will continue to flow, quiet and eternal, like Kashmir's rivers.

Kashmir's Folk Music: What We Grew Up With

Ask any Kashmiri born in the countryside, and they'll tell you—music here doesn't need a stage. It's there when the rice is being threshed, when the bride leaves her father's home, when someone's sorrow sits heavy in the room. You don't learn this music, really—you hear it, feel it, carry it with you. Our folk music is tied to everything. Weddings? There's Wanvun, where women gather around and sing, answering each other in back-and-forth rhythm. The sound of Tumbaknari tapping under someone's shawl is familiar in every home. They don't sing to perform—they sing because they have to. It's how we celebrate, remember, and sometimes, just pass time. Take Bhand Pather, for example. It's street theatre, yes, but it's also sharp, sometimes poking fun at government people, sometimes at our own laziness. You don't need a ticket, just stand there, laugh along, and get the message. Instruments? Maybe a Dhol, maybe just a stick and a pot—what matters is the voice. Then there's Ladishah—one man, a wooden stick, and a lot of courage. He sings what people are too shy to say aloud—about inflation, corruption, or the boy who didn't study and still got the job. It's clever, it's funny, and it's needed. In places like Chenab Valley, the music is different but just as deep. You hear Challant there, soft and sad sometimes, with words that feel like they've been around longer than the houses. We also had our own storytellers—Dastango—who'd gather kids and adults alike, telling tales of Heemal and Nagrai or faraway kings. It wasn't just a story; it was a whole evening gone in magic. Today, a lot of this is fading. You ask a teenager about Rov, and they'll probably shrug. But some of us still carry these songs. Maybe not perfectly. Maybe the words are half-forgotten. But they're ours. And the thing is—folk music in Kashmir wasn't made to impress. It was made to express. That's why it still matters.

Conclusion

Kashmir's music isn't some dead tradition. It's alive—still part of people's lives. You can hear it during weddings or someone just humming while working. It's not perfect music, but it feels real. Not everything is written down. Some songs, people just know. Like they always knew. Kids still learn it by

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listening. It's not taught in schools mostly. Someone plays, someone else copies. That's how it moves on. No big effort, just people loving it. It's not for fame. It's more like comfort. Like memory. Even the instruments, they've got feeling. Santoor, Saaz—they don't just play tunes. They remind people where they came from. If we want it to last, we shouldn't only study it. We should keep singing it. Play it at home. Let it be normal again.

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Interview

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