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RESONANCE OF *PURUṢA* AND *PRAKṚTI*: A *SANKHYA* PERSPECTIVE ON SELECT KUMAONI FOLK INSTRUMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore selected folk instruments of the Kumaun region through the philosophical-ecological lens of Prakriti–Purusha as given in the Sankya school of Indian philosophy, highlighting how musical traditions encode local ecological consciousness. While existing scholarship often documents the performative or aesthetic dimensions of these instruments, there remains a critical gap in interpreting them as reflections of indigenous ecological ethics, cosmology, and cultural sustainability. Grounded in secondary sources, the study categorizes instruments into four classical types: Ghan (solid/metal), Sushir (wind), Avanaddha (membrane), and Tata (string) and further classifies them by material (wood, bamboo, animal skin, metal), linking each to ritual use and symbolic meaning. For instance, the Dhol–Damau, crafted from organic materials, is more than a percussion pair, it is central to Jagar rituals and death ceremonies, believed to guide souls toward moksha while invoking ancestral spirits through sound. By interpreting such instruments not merely as tools but as mediators between human life and the natural world, this paper argues that Kumaoni folk music embodies an integrated view of ecology and spirituality. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of preserving these traditions not only to safeguard intangible cultural heritage but also to recover indigenous knowledge systems that express a holistic relationship with nature, often absent in dominant environmental discourses.

Keywords: *Kumaun instruments, Prakriti–Purusha, ecology, sustainability, folk traditions.*

Introduction

Kumaun, in eastern Uttarakhand, is a culturally rich region whose name is derived from Kurmanchal, the land of *Kurma* the tortoise incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Ancient Hindu texts refer to it as Uttarakoshala (Ramayana), Uttarakuru (Mahabharata), and Manas Khand (Skanda Purana), while the region of neighboring Garhwal is known as Kedar Khand (Krishna, 2024). Despite its remote terrain, Kumaon has long been a crossroads of Hinduism, Buddhism, and tribal animism. Known as *Dev Bhumi* or 'Land of Gods', its spiritual life is deeply interwoven with music, rituals, and nature.

Art in the Kumaoni worldview is understood not merely as a technical skill but as an expression that reflects the emotional, spiritual, and ecological life of the people. The snow-clad peaks, terraced fields, forests, and seasonal cycles of the Himalayan region have historically shaped the thematic and aesthetic dimensions of its artistic traditions. Folk music, ritual dances, and handmade instruments such as the *hudka* or *dhol* are inseparable from the agrarian rhythms and cosmological beliefs of the community. Thus, the natural environment does not function as a passive backdrop but as an active source of inspiration and meaning for artistic creation (Petshali, 2002, p. 15).

As Rawat (2022) and Petshali (2002) note, folk instruments in Kumaon are not only for performance; they are sacred tools used in devotion, storytelling, and the preservation of ecological and ancestral memory. These instruments are deeply embedded in ritual, cosmology, and environmental awareness, yet are rarely studied as reflections of indigenous ecological ethics. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how musical practices encode traditional ecological knowledge and spiritual values that challenge dominant, materialistic environmental discourses. This paper aims to explore selected folk instruments of the Kumaon region through the philosophical lens of *Prakriti–Purusha*, as found in the *Sankhya* school of Indian philosophy. According to C.D Sharma, this system maintains a clear cut dualism between *Purusha* and *Prakriti* and maintains the plurality of *Purushas* (Sharma, 150). The present study interprets the instruments as mediators of ecological consciousness by applying the *Sankhyan* framework.

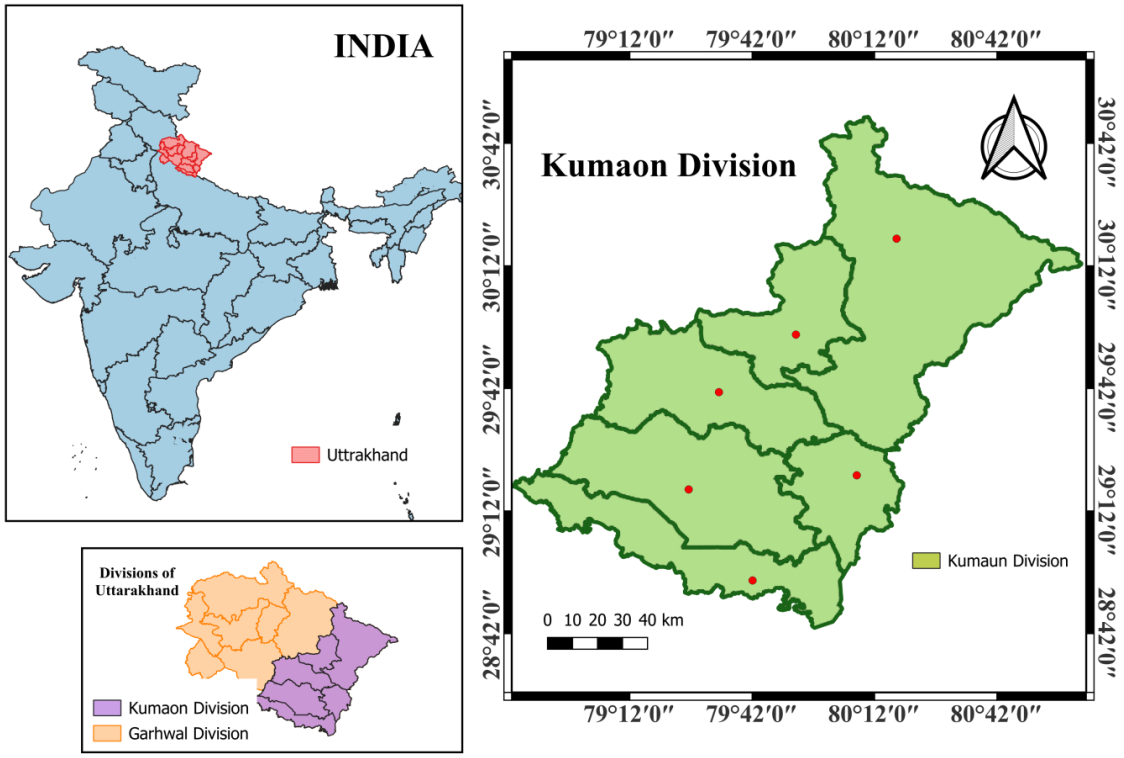
Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design focused on selected Kumauni folk musical instruments to explore their cultural and philosophical significance. Data were gathered through field visits, document analysis, interviews with local practitioners, and photographic documentation. Purposive sampling was used to select ten representative instruments based on their cultural importance, continued use, and availability of descriptive material.

Fieldwork was conducted in culturally significant settings such as melas, temples, Holi celebrations, Ramleela performances, and Jagars, where these instruments are traditionally performed. Each instrument was examined in terms of its construction, material composition, ritual context, and symbolic meaning. The study applies the *Purusha–Prakriti* framework from *Sankhya* philosophy to interpret how natural materials such as wood, metal, and animal hide are transformed into meaningful cultural expressions through human consciousness.

All procedures followed ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from local practitioners and participants during interviews and observations. Their traditional knowledge and contributions have been acknowledged respectfully, and no information was recorded or published without their permission. The study ensures that cultural sensitivity and respect for indigenous heritage were maintained throughout the research process.

Map 1: Area of Study (Geographical location of Kumaun region, Uttarakhand)



Source: Prepared by authors using QGIS

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in the metaphysical system of *Sankhya* philosophy, one of the foundational schools of Indian thought, which proposes a dualistic cosmology centered on the interrelationship between *Prakṛti* (nature or primordial matter) and *Puruṣa* (pure consciousness or Self). According to *Sankhya*, *Prakṛti* is the unconscious and unmanifest material reality, constituted by three guṇas *sattva* (harmony), *rajas* (activity), and *tamas* (inertia) which remain in a state of equilibrium until disrupted by the proximity of *Puruṣa*. This disruption initiates the process of creation. As explained by Dutta and Chatterjee (2007), *rajas* is the first to activate, setting the other *guṇas* into motion and causing an imbalance that leads to the formation of the physical world (p. 250). These *guṇas,* through their permutations and combinations, give rise to all objects and phenomena (Dutta & Chatterjee, 2007, p. 252), including the cultural artefacts and practices associated with folk life. In this system, perception and transformation are made possible by the contact between *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa*. *Prakṛti* requires the presence of *Puruṣa* to be apprehended, while *Puruṣa* requires *Prakṛti* to distinguish itself and attain liberation (*kaivalya*) (Dutta & Chatterjee, 2007, p. 250). As noted by the authors, this philosophical model treats matter and consciousness as distinct yet interdependent principles (Dutta & Chatterjee, 2007, p. 238).

Within this framework, the folk instruments studied in this research are viewed as material forms of *Prakṛti*, as they are made out of natural elements such as wood, metal, and animal hide that are shaped into meaningful cultural expressions through the intervention of human consciousness (*Puruṣa*). These instruments are not merely utilitarian; they are embedded in ritual and cultural contexts such as *Jagar, Choliya* dance, and *Bhajan-Kirtan*, where the transformation of raw material into sound and

rhythm reflects the active role of consciousness in organizing and giving significance to the material world. The *Sankhya* view allows for an understanding of these instruments as more than tools, they are manifestations of the interaction between the conscious and the material. Their materiality is not isolated from meaning; rather, meaning arises through the alignment of *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*. This theoretical lens helps position folk instruments within a larger cosmological system, where the creation and use of musical forms reflect the fundamental principles of interdependence between nature and consciousness.

Classical and Material-Based Classification of Folk Instruments

The classification of Indian musical instruments has historically followed the fourfold typology presented in the *Natyasastra* by Bharata Muni. This system categorizes instruments based on the primary mode of sound production: *Ghana Vadya* (idiophones – solid instruments producing sound through striking), *Avanaddha Vadya* (membranophones – sound through stretched membranes), *Sushira Vadya* (aerophones – sound through wind), and *Tat Vadya* (chordophones – sound through plucked or bowed strings). Lalmani Mishra (2020), as cited in Snehi (2024), expanded upon the classical fourfold classification of Indian folk instruments by proposing two additional categories *Tatanand* and *Tarang*. Petshali (2002) affirms the continued relevance of this classical classification in his study of Uttarakhand's folk instruments, highlighting how many local instruments still align with these ancient categories (p. 22). For example, the *Hudka* and *Dhol* fall under *Avanaddha Vadya*, while *Thali* (a brass plate struck with sticks) represents *Ghana Vadya*. This schema provides a sonic taxonomy as well as reflects a cosmological and aesthetic order wherein each instrument's form and function isrooted in historical tradition.

In addition to classical typologies, a material-based classification reveals a deeper ecological consciousness embedded in the folk traditions of Uttarakhand. Instruments are primarily crafted from locally sourced and organic materials: wood (*khimar kaṭh, ber*), bamboo, animal hide (goat, buffalo), metal (brass, copper), and gut or intestine for strings and bindings. These materials are often harvested seasonally, respecting natural cycles such as using wood only from trees that have naturally dried or fallen, or drying fresh wood in the sun to avoid killing living trees prematurely (Petshali, 2002). The crafting of instruments is not purely mechanical it often involves ritual practices, such as selecting auspicious days for cutting wood or preparing animal skin, and sometimes includes blessings or mantras during the making process. These actions reflect an ecological ethic, where resource use is regulated not only by availability but by values of restraint and respect for nature. In this sense, the folk instrument is not merely an artefact of sound but a symbol of sustainable living and spiritual awareness. The careful selection of raw materials and the community knowledge surrounding their preparation exemplify ecological wisdom, a form of Indigenous knowledge that remains largely undervalued in contemporary discourse.

Selected Folk Instruments of Kumaun: Material, Meaning, and Making

S.no	Instrument	Material Composition	Cultural Use / Ritual Context
1.	*Hudka*	Made from *khimir* or jungle *ber* wood both sides covered with goat's stomach (*amasaya*); hollow wooden shaft (*nali*), cloth strap to hang around neck.	Used extensively in *Jagar* rituals across Kumaon, particularly in the worship of local deities like Ganganath. The sound is believed to invoke spirits. (Petshali, 2002, pp. 51–52).
2.	*Damau*	Wooden body with iron fittings, buffalo hide (from animals aged 4+ years), tied using animal intestine rather than rope.	Companion to the *Dhol*, the Damau is played during *Jagar*, death rituals, and *Choliya* dance. It is believed to guide souls in the afterlife and plays specific *tals* (rhythmic cycles) associated with spiritual transitions (Petshali, 2002, p. 71).
3.	*Dafli*	Circular frame made from wood or tin, covered with goat or deer skin, and fitted with metal rings and ghunghroos (tiny bells).	Common in devotional music such as *Bhajan* and *Kirtan*, especially among women. Its simplicity and portability have made it widely used in domestic religious contexts.
4.	*Sarangi*	Hand-carved wooden body with gut strings, traditionally made by local artisans.	Once integral to *Riturang* songs of the *Chaitra* season, performed by *Mirasi* women and their husbands. Played as an accompanying instrument, now largely extinct due to caste-based exclusion and modern neglect (Petshali, 2002, p. 145).

5.	*Kanse ki Thali*	Large brass or bronze plate (*thali*), called *Kansasuri Thal* in local dialect.	Used only in *Jagar*, exclusively by men. Its name derives from the myth of Kans (Kans + Asur), linking it to symbolic cosmic battles. Played to complement Hudka's rhythm (Petshali, 2002, p. 30).
6.	*Ghana/ Ghanti*	Thin brass (*peetal*) shell with internal iron clapper (*mungri*), some have ropes for hanging around cattle necks.	Played in temples and tied around livestock to regulate movement. The calm "tan-tan" sound is symbolic of rural life and animal domestication (Petshali, 2002, p. 32).
7.	*Turuhi*	Metallic trumpet made of brass or copper, played by blowing air.	A martial instrument, once used in wars to boost morale. Now played in *Choliya* dances and during auspicious occasions. Requires controlled breath and technique (Petshali, 2002, pp. 125–126).
8.	*Ransingha*	Ancient trumpet made from *tamba* (copper), shaped in a curved form.	Mentioned in myths of *Devas* celebrating victory. Used today in weddings, *Choliya* dance, and ceremonies marking triumph. Played alongside *Dhol* and *Damau* (Petshali, 2002, p. 126).
9.	*Dhol*	Made from *Vijaysar* wood; length 2 to 2.5 feet. One end uses thick goat skin (*bhasa*), the other a thinner membrane; rope-secured tensioning system.	Central to the *Baisi* folk festival where it is played in 22 *taus* (rhythmic patterns) across four directions to invoke emotional resonance. Also vital to *Choliya Nritya* (martial folk dance) where it supports movement and posture. Usually paired with *Damau* for rhythmic enhancement (Petshali, 2002, pp. 75–76).
10.	*Nagara / Nagadd*	Large kettle drum made from copper (*tamba*), skin made from mature buffaloes aged 4+ years; tensioned using animal intestines instead of ropes.	Historically used to boost soldier morale during royal battles now a symbolic palace relic. Sometimes featured in ceremonial or festive functions with strong tonal depth (Petshali, 2002, p. 106).

Cultural Sustainability and Ecological Memory

Folk instruments of the Kumaun region function not only as carriers of rhythm but also as living archives of ecological memory. Each element of their construction, whether the selection of wood, the curing of animal skin, or the season-specific tuning methods, reflects a deep-rooted understanding of the natural world. Instruments like the *Dhol*, *Hudka*, and *Damau* encapsulate centuries of ecological knowledge accumulated through practice and belief. For instance, the notion that the best *Nali* (the hollow shaft of the *Hudka*) should be carved from a tree that has fallen naturally and dried in sunlight illustrates an indigenous ethic of sustainable harvesting. A mythical version of the *Hudka*, described by Petshali (2002, p. 52) as having a Nali made from monkey and langur skin, is believed to possess supernatural powers. However, creating such an instrument is considered sinful, as it involves the killing of those animals. This imagination signals the moral constraints around ecological exploitation, reflecting a cultural ethos that values life.

Similarly, using mature buffalo hide only from animals over four years old is not simply a technical preference but a ritualised practice, rooted in respect for animal life cycles. Often, the hides used for crafting are from domesticated animals such as goats or buffaloes that have died naturally, suggesting an ethic of non-violence and circularity in material use.

These instruments, and the knowledge systems around them, are passed down through oral traditions and ritual performances, making them crucial vehicles for transmission of both music and ecological consciousness. However, with modernization, this chain is increasingly threatened. Synthetic materials, machine-made substitutes, and mass production are rapidly replacing handcrafted instruments. For example, according to D.D. Sharma (2018, p. 267) the *Riturangs* once sung by *Mirasi* women in Pithoragarh performed door-to-door during the month of *Chait* (March–April), accompanied by men playing *Sarangi* have now faded into extinction. These songs, once rich in emotional and seasonal resonance, highlight how musical practices and ecological rhythms were once tightly interwoven.

The *Turahi*, a wind instrument played in martial dances and celebratory rituals such as *Choliya*, exemplifies the evocation of Veer Rasa the aesthetic-emotional essence of courage. Its brass or copper composition and breath-controlled play symbolize the life force being harnessed through the body to animate matter a direct manifestation of the *Purusha–Prakriti* interplay. Similarly, the *Ghanti* (bell), tied to the necks of domesticated animals like goats to regulate their movement and prevent overgrazing, reflects a harmonious integration of human-animal-ecological systems. The calming tan-tan sound (Petshali, 2002, p. 32) not only organizes space but also marks a subtle form of ecological monitoring, echoing the intimate relationship between folk life and environmental management. Moreover, the decline in community rituals and reduced access to forest resources has further endangered traditional instrument-making, especially for younger generations navigating economic pressures and cultural alienation.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that folk instruments of the Kumaun region are far more than tools of musical expression. When seen through indigenous systems such as the *Sankhya* philosophy of *Prakrti* and *Puruṣa*, these instruments reflect an integrated worldview where nature and human consciousness co-create cultural meaning. Whether through the sustainable sourcing of materials, the ritualistic crafting processes, or their use in sacred ceremonies like *Jagar* and *Choliya*, these instruments archive centuries of environmental ethics, artistic wisdom, and spiritual depth.

In a time when cultural homogenization and ecological degradation threaten traditional knowledge systems, the preservation of such musical traditions becomes not only a cultural necessity but also an environmental imperative. Safeguarding these practices helps maintain a pluralistic and holistic understanding of human-nature relationships, often absent in dominant technocratic discourses on sustainability. The ecological sensitivity embedded in the crafting and performance of these instruments can serve as a valuable lens for rethinking sustainability from the ground up.

Future research should aim to document and interpret these traditions in dialogue with local practitioners, especially elders, artisans, and musicians whose voices remain marginalized in academic and policy conversations. By centering indigenous perspectives, we not only protect intangible cultural heritage but also recover alternative ways of knowing and being with nature ways that are rooted, reciprocal, and deeply relevant to contemporary environmental thought.

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