

TRADITIONAL FOLK INSTRUMENTS OF KASHMIR: A CULTURAL AND MUSICAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

Kashmir, known for its rich cultural heritage and artistic traditions, possesses a distinctive musical identity shaped by its folk instruments. These traditional instruments—such as the santoor, rabab, sarangi, tumbaknaer, and surnai etc—play a vital role in the region's social, spiritual, and ceremonial life. Rooted in centuries-old practices, they reflect a synthesis of indigenous and Central Asian influences, shaped by Kashmir's unique historical and geographical context. This paper explores the construction, function, and cultural significance of these folk instruments within Kashmiri society. Through a study of their use in rituals, festivals, and oral traditions, it highlights their role as carriers of communal memory and artistic expression. The paper also addresses the challenges these instruments face in the modern era, including declining transmission and limited documentation. By focusing on both the tangible and intangible aspects of these instruments, the research emphasizes their importance as living heritage. It calls attention to the need for cultural preservation and increased scholarly engagement to ensure that these musical traditions continue to resonate through future generations.

Keywords: Kashmir, Folk Instrument, Kashmiri Culture, History, Craftsmanship, Heritage

INTRODUCTION

Folk Instruments play a vital role in all the major folk tunes that are connected to the different musical forms. These instruments are available in various categories, shapes and sizes. They carry an important legacy from the historic period. These instruments are more than mere objects of sound; they are carriers of oral histories, spiritual practices, seasonal rituals, and communal celebrations. From the delicate pluck of the santoor to the deep resonance of the rabab, from the earthy beat of the tumbaknaer to the haunting notes of the surnai, each instrument reflects a unique blend of Kashmir's history, environment, and cultural syncretism. Rooted in both Hindu and Sufi traditions, these instruments have accompanied lullabies, weddings, harvests, and devotional songs etc—binding communities together across generations.

This paper examines the folk instruments of Kashmir by exploring their origins, construction methods, musical roles, and cultural contexts. It aims to shed light on how these instruments contribute to the region's intangible heritage and why their preservation remains essential to the continuity of Kashmiri cultural identity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative and descriptive approach to explore the traditional folk instruments of Kashmir. The research focuses on understanding how these instruments are made, how they are played, and their role in Kashmiri cultural life. Information is gathered through interactions with folk musicians and instrument makers, observation of musical performances during festivals and rituals, and the study of existing books, articles, and historical records. Key instruments such as the santoor, rabab, etc. are selected for detailed study. The collected information is analyzed thematically to highlight their musical functions, cultural importance, and the challenges they face in the modern era. This approach helps present a clear understanding of Kashmiri folk instruments as an important part of the region's living cultural heritage.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF KASHMIRI FOLK INSTRUMENTS

The musical traditions of Kashmir have evolved over centuries, shaped by a unique blend of indigenous culture and external influences. The Rajatarangini specifically mentions the art of music and musical instruments in this region from ancient times. The instruments used in Kashmir were largely similar to those found across India during that period. According to Pandit Kalhana, the author of Rajatarangini, folk instruments such as earthen pots and brass vessels were commonly used by the people of Kashmir from very early times. An archaeological discovery from Harwan, dating back to the 4th century A.D., features a tile depicting a female musician playing a drum, alongside another figure playing the veena during a cultural performance. The Rajatarangini also refers to an instrument called the "Hadukka," which is thought to be similar to a large pipe. The roots of Kashmiri folk music can also be traced back to ancient times, particularly to the region's early Hindu and Shaivite practices. Music played an important role in temple rituals and spiritual ceremonies, where instruments were accompanied with devotional singing and dance. The valley's isolation amid the Himalayas helped preserve many of these indigenous musical forms while allowing new influences to penetrate gradually.

In the 14th century, Kashmir underwent significant political and cultural shifts, including invasions and changes in rule—most notably with the early arrival of Central Asian influences, followed later by Mughal expansion. These events introduced new artistic and musical elements to the region. While many of these influences came through forceful means, such as conquest and rule, local musicians adapted certain instruments and styles into their own traditions over time. Instruments like the rabab and santoor became more prominent during this period, though they were reshaped and played according to local customs. During the Mughal period, some folk instruments—such as the sarangi—were refined and began to appear more regularly in both courtly and rural settings. Yet, the true spirit of Kashmiri folk music stayed connected to its roots, as traditional instruments continued to be an essential part of local life—especially in weddings, seasonal festivals, and the oral storytelling traditions passed down through generations. These traditions carried forward the identity and heritage of the region through generations. Folk instruments of Kashmir have carried the cultural voice of the region across generations.

Though shaped by time and circumstance, folk instruments of Kashmir have remained deeply rooted in local traditions, preserving the essence of Kashmiri identity through music. These folk instruments are generally classified into four main types: Tat Vadya (string instruments), Ghan Vadya (percussion instruments made of solid materials like metal or wood), Sushir Vadya (wind instruments), and Avanaddh Vadya (membranophones or instruments with stretched skins, like drums). Each category reflects a distinct aspect of the region’s musical expression and social tradition.

1. TAT VADYA (STRING INSTRUMENTS)

Tat Vadya refers to instruments that produce sound through the vibration of strings. String instruments occupy a central position in Kashmiri folk music due to their melodic richness and expressive capabilities. Prominent string instruments of Kashmir include Saaz-e-Kashmir, Rabab, Santoor.

SAAZ-E-KASHMIR

Saaz-e-Kashmir is a bowed instrument which is not originated from Kashmir but it has remained in vogue in Kashmir for centuries so, people preferred to call it Saaz-e-Kashmir. It has three prominent strings, two made of silk. The silk string is made worthy of producing musical sound by mixing it with the skin of fish. It is tuned to Sa, while the second one is tuned to Sa (middle octave). The third one is not made use of, as it is not touched by the bow. On either side of the dand, there are seven strigs (right side) made of steel and seven strings (left side) made of brass. Right side resonance strings are turned respectively from Pa to Ma, whereas that of the left side from Sa to Ni (middle octave). Its combination of bowed silk strings with resonating steel and brass strings gives it a **unique voice** that complements vocals and other instruments beautifully. Over centuries, Saaz-e-Kashmir has become an integral part of Kashmir’s musical heritage, representing the region’s cultural identity and the timeless beauty of its traditional music.



RABAB

The **Rabab** is a traditional string instrument that holds a central place in Kashmiri folk music. It is of about three and a half feet in length, typically made from a single piece of wood, such as mulberry or walnut, with a hollowed body and a soundboard covered with animal (goat) skin to amplify its resonant tones. The instrument usually has three main strings which are made of goat’s intestine, sometimes accompanied by sympathetic strings, and a long fretless or movable-fret neck that allows microtonal variations essential to Kashmiri melodies. Played with a plectrum or fingers, the Rabab serves as both a melodic and rhythmic accompaniment to vocal music, particularly in romantic, devotional, and seasonal folk songs. Its warm, expressive sound complements the human voice, while also providing subtle rhythmic support for singers and dancers. Beyond its musical function, the Rabab is a cultural symbol of Kashmiri identity, deeply intertwined with local storytelling, poetry, and Sufi traditions, and historically used by wandering minstrels to narrate tales. Its unique structure and emotive tone make it an indispensable element of Kashmiri folk traditions.



SANTOOR

The Santoor is an important and beautiful instrument in Kashmiri music, known for its soft, melodic, and sparkling sound. It has a trapezoid-shaped wooden body, usually made from walnut or mulberry wood, which acts as a hollow chamber to amplify the sound. The Santoor has around 100–120 metal strings, arranged in groups of 3 or 4 strings for each note, and these strings rest on small movable wooden bridges that help in tuning and adjusting the tone. It is played with light wooden mallets, one in each hand, which strike the strings to



produce music. The instrument is carefully tuned according to the raga or melody, and the strings in each group are tuned to the same note to make the sound fuller and richer.

In Kashmiri music, the Santoor is used both as a solo instrument and as an accompaniment, especially in folk songs, devotional music, and traditional storytelling. Its sound blends beautifully with other instruments like the Rabab and flute, creating a soothing and expressive musical experience. Beyond its musical function, the Santoor is a symbol of Kashmiri culture and tradition, representing the region's rich heritage and the unique emotional depth of its music. It is capable of expressing a wide range of feelings, from happiness and devotion to sadness and longing, making it a central instrument in Kashmir's musical life.

2. GHAN VADYA (PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS)

Ghan Vadya includes percussion instruments that produce sound through the vibration of solid materials such as metal or wood, without the use of strings or membranes. These instruments hold significant importance in Kashmiri folk music as they provide the essential rhythmic framework upon which melodies and vocals are built. They regulate tempo, accentuate lyrical phrases, and enhance the emotional and ceremonial impact of performances. Widely used in folk songs, rituals and festivals, instruments such as gagar, nout, thal and chimta, strengthen collective participation and reinforce the social character of Kashmiri music.

GAGAR

The Gagar is a traditional percussion instrument that holds a special place in Kashmiri folk music. Traditionally, it is made from brass or copper, shaped like a wide-mouthed vessel with a rounded or slightly flattened bottom. The sound of the gagar is shaped by the metal's thickness and the vessel's size, which determine its depth and resonance. The gagar is played by striking it with both hands, often with rings worn on the fingers to amplify its sharp, resonant tone. This technique produces a rhythmic, metallic sound that is lively, earthy, and grounding, providing a steady beat for folk songs, dances, and ceremonial music. The Gagar links modern performances with centuries-old musical practices, preserving the authentic folk sound of Kashmir. Its use in songs, dances, rituals, and storytelling shows its adaptability and central role across different contexts.



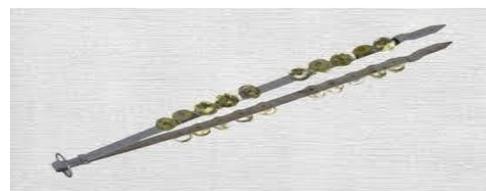
NOUT

The Nout (sometimes called Noet) is a traditional percussion instrument from Kashmir. It is basically a hollow, rounded clay pot, similar in concept to instruments like the South Indian ghatam. The Nout is typically made of earthenware clay, shaped with a large, rounded body and a small opening at the top. When struck with the hands or fingers, the hollow body resonates, creating a natural, earthy sound. In Kashmiri folk music, especially in long narrative songs like Chakri, the Nout provides the beat and rhythm, keeping the performance in tempo. Its deep, resonant sound is a defining feature of folk ensembles, helping preserve and transmit traditional music across generations. By giving structure to rhythm and energy to performances, it plays a crucial role in keeping Kashmiri folk music alive and vibrant.



CHIMTA

The Chimta is a traditional percussion instrument widely used in Kashmir, made of a long, flat piece of iron with small metal jingles attached along its length. It is held in the hands and struck rhythmically, producing a sharp, jingling sound that is both vibrant and energetic. In Kashmiri Pandit music, the chimta holds both musical and cultural significance. It is often used in devotional songs and traditional celebrations, contributing to the distinctive sound of Pandit musical heritage and helping preserve rituals and folk melodies unique to the community. The instrument's simplicity and portability make it accessible while its resonant sound ensures it remains a key element of rhythm and festivity, bridging both folk and religious musical traditions in Kashmir.



3. AVANADDHA VADYA (*MEMBRNOPHONES*)

Avanaddha Vadya is a category of musical instruments in Indian music that refers to membranophones—those that produce sound when struck, beaten, or tapped. The word comes from Sanskrit, where Avanaddha means “covered” or “stretched,” often referring to a stretched membrane on drums, though it also includes metal or clay instruments that are struck. In Kashmiri folk music, percussion instruments like Tumbakhnaeri, Bum/Matth, and Dhola play a vital role in creating rhythm and energy. They form the heartbeat of folk songs and dances, keeping tempo for performances like Rouf, Chakri, and Wanwun. Their resonant

beats not only enhance the musical experience but also connect performers and audiences, making these instruments indispensable to Kashmir's vibrant folk traditions.

TUMBAKHNARI

The Tumbaknari (also called Tumbaknaer) is a traditional goblet-shaped drum from Kashmir. Made of baked clay, it has a long, funnel-like body with an open back, and its drumhead is stretched using sheep or goat skin. This instrument is a key element of Kashmiri folk music, producing deep, resonant rhythms. It is especially played during weddings and festive occasions, where women often accompany folk songs, adding energy and rhythm to the celebrations. The Tumbaknari is a hand-played percussion instrument, where the performer strikes the drumhead with their hands or fingers to create lively and rhythmic beats. Tumbaknari not only provides a musical backbone for folk ensembles but also plays an important cultural role in preserving and celebrating Kashmiri traditions. In Kashmir, no festival or celebration is complete without the Tumbaknari, as its deep, resonant beats bring life, rhythm, and energy to every folk song, dance.



DHOAL

The Dhoal is a membranophone with a rich and ancient history in India, dating back to the Mohenjo-daro civilization. As one of the country's oldest drums, it has been widely used across rural areas and villages throughout India, forming an important part of local musical traditions. In Kashmir, the Dhoal is especially popular in village settings, where it is commonly played to accompany the folk dances performed by the Bhand community. Its deep, resonant beats provide rhythm and energy, making it an essential instrument in the region's folk celebrations and cultural performances. Beyond dance, the Dhoal also provides rhythm for village songs, seasonal festivals, and communal gatherings, making it an essential part of Kashmiri folk culture.



The Dhoal is valued not only for its musical qualities but also for its cultural significance, as it preserves the rhythmic traditions of rural communities and helps maintain the continuity of folk art across generations. Its lively beats and resonant tones ensure that it remains a central feature of both performance and celebration in Kashmir.

4. SUSHIR VADYA (WIND INSTRUMENTS)

Sushir Vadya, or wind instruments, occupies a vital place in Kashmiri folk music, providing the melodic framework for songs, dances, and celebrations. These instruments which produce sound by the flow of air through their structure, adding both rhythm and melody to performances. In Kashmiri folk culture, Sushir Vadya is particularly important during weddings, festivals, harvest celebrations, and religious ceremonies, where their melodious tones enhance the festive spirit and bring communities together.

SWARNAI

The Swar-nai is a prominent wind instrument (Sushir Vadya) in Kashmiri folk music, often compared to the Shahnai in broader Indian musical traditions. Its significance is reflected in ancient texts such as the Nilamata Purana and Kalhana's Rajatarangini, highlighting its long-standing presence in Kashmir's cultural heritage. In fact, because of its similarity to the Shahnai, the Swar-nai is frequently referred to by the same name in local music circles.



The name Swar-nai is derived from two words: Swar (tone) and Nai (flute or pipe). Structurally, it is slightly larger than the Shahnai and is traditionally crafted from wood by skilled instrument makers who have passed down this craft through generations. Near the round mouth of the instrument, there are nine holes, while the player blows air through a square reed-like opening known locally as Tulbarabir or Tulkarav.

In Kashmiri culture, playing the Swar-nai is considered highly auspicious. It is commonly heard during weddings, festivals, Shivratri, Navreh, Eid, and other significant occasions among both Hindus and Muslims. Folk performers, particularly the Bhand community, use the instrument in theatrical performances called Lok Natya, while dancers in the Bachi Nagma folk tradition often accompany their movements with its melodious sound. During the harvest season, Swar-nai players would even visit fields to perform lively tunes, entertaining farmers while participating in the crop-gathering celebrations.

Through its vibrant and expressive tone, the Swar-nai remains an integral part of Kashmiri folk music, bridging communities, rituals, and everyday life with its melodic charm.

CONCLUSION

The traditional folk instruments of Kashmir represent one of the most vibrant and enduring aspects of the region's cultural and musical heritage. Over centuries, these instruments have evolved alongside the social, spiritual, and artistic life of Kashmir, reflecting the valley's unique blend of indigenous traditions and external influences. From the melodious strings of the Santoor and Rabab to the deep rhythms of the Tumbaknari and Dhola, and the expressive tones of the Swar-nai, each instrument carries a distinct voice that contributes to the richness and diversity of Kashmiri folk music.

Beyond their musical function, these instruments are living symbols of identity, creativity, and communal harmony. They embody stories, emotions, and collective memories, serving as vessels that transmit the values, beliefs, and traditions of generations. Their presence in weddings, festivals, devotional gatherings, seasonal celebrations, and folk performances illustrates their integral role in connecting communities, reinforcing social bonds, and celebrating life's milestones. Through these instruments, the artistry and emotional depth of Kashmir's people are expressed in a language that transcends words.

Kashmiri folk instruments also reflect remarkable craftsmanship, combining aesthetic beauty with functional precision. The careful construction, intricate design, and distinctive sound of each instrument reveal the ingenuity and dedication of local artisans who have preserved these traditions for centuries. Their continued use, demonstrates that these instruments are not relics of the past, but living heritage that continues to inspire, entertain, and unite people across generations.

In essence, the folk instruments of Kashmir are a source of cultural pride, artistic inspiration, and emotional resonance. They capture the soul of the valley, celebrating its history, identity, and creativity. By appreciating and cherishing these instruments, Kashmiris and the wider world are reminded of the power of music to bring people together, preserve heritage, and sustain the timeless beauty of human expression. In every note, rhythm, and melody, these instruments echo the enduring spirit of Kashmir, ensuring that its cultural legacy continues to thrive, inspire, and shine brightly for generations to come.

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