

# CHHAKER: THE LIVING FOLK MUSIC TRADITION OF KASHMIR

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## ABSTRACT

*Chhaker is a responsorial folk music form indigenous to the Kashmir Valley, in which a lead vocalist and accompanying chorus perform lyrical compositions rooted in love, spirituality, mysticism, and regional narrative traditions. Emerging from the convergence of pre-Islamic indigenous practices and Persian, Central Asian, and Sufi cultural currents, Chhaker occupies a central position within the ecology of Kashmiri folk expression, continuing to be performed and cherished across communities in the valley to this day. This paper presents a comprehensive scholarly account of Chhaker — its etymology, historical origins, musical and poetic structure, etc. Drawing on oral history methodology and folk music scholarship, the study demonstrates that Chhaker functions not merely as aesthetic entertainment but as a living repository of collective memory, cultural identity, and shared human experience. The paper aims to document and illuminate this rich tradition and its significant place within Kashmir's broader folk cultural heritage.*

**Keywords:** Chhaker, Chakri, Kashmir, Folk Music, Sufi Traditions, Kashmiri Folk Music.

## Introduction

Chhaker is among the most deeply rooted and widely performed folk music traditions of the Kashmir Valley, occupying a position of cultural centrality that few other regional folk forms can claim. Performed at weddings, harvest celebrations, and communal gatherings, Chhaker has historically permeated the ceremonial, devotional, and recreational life of Kashmiri communities, functioning as a shared musical vocabulary that transcends religious and social boundaries. Its lyrical repertoire ranges from romantic narratives and allegorical love poetry to devotional compositions inspired by Sufi mysticism and the teachings of Kashmir's revered saints, reflecting the composite cultural personality of a valley shaped by centuries of intersecting civilisations and artistic traditions.

The tradition has been passed down through the living voices and memories of performers — through the relationship between master and apprentice, between singer and audience — carrying within it the accumulated weight of centuries of oral transmission. This embodied, community-rooted mode of transmission has given Chhaker both its remarkable continuity and its characteristic capacity for adaptation across changing historical circumstances.

This paper presents a comprehensive scholarly account of Chhaker — its etymology, historical origins, musical and poetic structure, performance conventions, thematic concerns, and its enduring role as a form of cultural and communal expression in the Kashmir Valley. Drawing on oral history methodology and folk music scholarship, it treats the living memories and testimonies of practicing artists as valuable historical sources that enrich our understanding of the tradition alongside existing written accounts. The overarching aim is to document and illuminate Chhaker as a living tradition — one that continues to be sung, performed, and cherished — and to offer a detailed, accessible, and rigorous scholarly account of its place within Kashmir's rich folk cultural heritage.

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary research methodology, drawing on the frameworks of oral history, folklore studies, and performance studies. The research is grounded in primary fieldwork conducted across multiple localities in the Kashmir Valley, comprising performance recordings, field observations, and direct engagement with practicing Chhaker artists, elder performers, and community members.

Field notes documenting performance contexts, audience interactions, instrument use, and performance environments constitute the primary layer of data informing this study. These are supplemented by secondary sources including published scholarship on Kashmiri folk music, historical accounts of Kashmir's cultural development, and theoretical literature on oral history and intangible cultural heritage, all engaged critically to contextualise the primary findings. The study recognises that oral memory is a dynamic, socially shaped form of historical consciousness, and it is this quality that makes oral history methodology particularly well suited to the study of a living tradition such as Chhaker.

## Etymology and Conceptual Framework

The term "Chhaker" carries rich linguistic roots that reflect the syncretic cultural history of Kashmir itself. Several derivations have been proposed, each illuminating a different dimension of the tradition.

The most widely cited derivation traces "Chhaker" to the Sanskrit root *chakra*, meaning a "circle," "wheel," or "cycle." This etymology resonates directly with the form's most defining structural feature — its responsorial, cyclical organisation, in which a lead vocalist initiates a phrase that is taken up and completed by an accompanying chorus, creating a continuous circular movement of call and response. The cyclical dimension also evokes the circular cosmological symbolism shared by both Hindu and Sufi traditions present in Kashmir, from devotional dance movements to the recurring cycles of seasonal celebration with which Chhaker has long been associated.

An equally significant derivation connects "Chhaker" to the Persian and Urdu word *chakar* or *chakkar*, also meaning "circle" or "rotation," but carrying the additional connotation of devoted attendance and orbiting around a beloved — divine or earthly. This resonates with the Sufi devotional poetry that deeply permeates the Chhaker repertoire. The convergence of the Sanskrit *chakra* and the Persian *chakkar* in a single term thus embodies Kashmir's identity as a meeting point of Indic and Persianate civilisations. Conceptually, Chhaker designates three interrelated realities simultaneously — a musical form, a repertoire of lyrical compositions, and a social practice embedded in communal life. This triadic identity renders Chhaker at once a genre of folk music, a body of oral literature, and a living mode of cultural participation.

## Historical Origins and Evolution

### 1. Deep Roots: Pre-Islamic Musical Culture of Kashmir

The historical origins of Chhaker are deeply intertwined with the broader musical history of the Kashmir Valley, which stretches back several millennia. The earliest musical traditions of Kashmir were bound up with the region's role as a major centre of Hindu and Buddhist civilisation. References to music, song, and dance appear throughout the ancient Kashmiri literary corpus — in the *Nilamatapurana*, the *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana, and in the devotional poetry of the Shaivite mystic-poets of medieval Kashmir. The *Natyashastra*, the foundational Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts, provides a theoretical framework within which these early musical practices were situated. Within this ancient musical landscape, the practice of communal singing — in which a lead voice and a responding ensemble participate together — appears deeply rooted. The responsorial structure that defines Chhaker reflects a mode of musical participation indigenous to the social life of the valley, whose seeds were planted in this earliest stratum of Kashmiri cultural life.

### 2. The Medieval Transformation: Persian, Central Asian, and Sufi Influences

The most significant transformation in Kashmiri musical history occurred with the gradual arrival of Persian, Central Asian, and Sufi cultural influences from the fourteenth century onward. The reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin in the fifteenth century proved particularly pivotal — his court became a meeting ground of musicians, poets, and scholars, under whose patronage instruments such as the Rabab and Sarangi were consolidated in the valley, both of which became indispensable to Chhaker performance. The *sama* gatherings of Sufi orders, in which devotional poetry was sung to musical accompaniment, provided both a model and a repertoire for Chhaker's devotional dimension. The teachings of great Kashmiri Sufi saints permeate the Chhaker repertoire to this day.

### 3. The Modern Period

The introduction of radio broadcasting in the mid-twentieth century through All India Radio's Kashmir station marked a watershed moment in Chhaker's modern history. For the first time, performances reached audiences far beyond the village setting, and singers achieved widespread recognition, bringing Chhaker into the homes of Kashmiris across the region and elevating it to a celebrated symbol of Kashmiri cultural identity.

## Poetic, Musical, and Performative Structure

### 1. Verse Form and Lyrical Organisation

Chhaker's poetic structure is characterised by a flexibility that reflects its origins in oral composition and communal performance. The typical Chhaker composition consists of a principal verse or *mukhda* — a melodically and lyrically complete opening unit — followed by a series of *antara* or interior verses that develop the thematic content established in the opening. This structural organisation is given a distinctively Kashmiri character through the language, imagery, and performative conventions specific to the valley. The lyrical language of Chhaker is primarily Kashmiri, though compositions incorporating Persian, Urdu, and Pahari phrases are not uncommon, reflecting the multilingual cultural environment of the valley. The imagery draws deeply on the natural world of Kashmir — the Dal Lake, the chinar tree, the saffron fields of Pampore, the snow-covered peaks of the surrounding mountains etc — deploying these landscapes as metaphors for emotional and spiritual

states. Love, both earthly and divine, is the most pervasive thematic current, expressed through an idiom in which the beloved and the divine are frequently interchangeable — a hallmark of the Sufi poetic tradition that has profoundly shaped Kashmiri literary consciousness.

## 2. Musical Structure and Instruments

Chhaker is defined musically by its responsorial structure — the call-and-response interplay between the lead singer and the accompanying chorus that gives the tradition its characteristic energy and communal warmth. The lead singer carries the principal melodic line and lyrical content, while the chorus responds with a recurring refrain that reinforces and amplifies the lead voice, enacting in musical terms the relationship between the individual and the community. The instrumental ensemble is one of Chhaker's most culturally distinctive features. The core ensemble comprises the Rabab, Sarangi, and Matka — instruments whose presence reflects the historical convergence of indigenous and Persianate musical cultures. The Tumbaknaer, an ancient clay drum, the Noet, a long melodic flute, and the Chimta, a pair of jingling metal tongs, complete the traditional ensemble. In contemporary performance, the harmonium has been naturally incorporated alongside these traditional instruments, demonstrating Chhaker's organic capacity for adaptation.

## 3. Rhythm and Melodic Organisation

Chhaker compositions draw on both the raga framework of North Indian classical music and the indigenous modal traditions of Kashmiri folk music known as *Mukam*, employing ragas such as Pahari, Bhairavi, and Khamaj etc. A characteristic feature of Chhaker performance is its gradual acceleration toward an energised conclusion that transitions naturally into the dance form of Rouf — a section known as *Chhakertirouf* — which brings performances to a joyful and celebratory close.

### Chhaker Song

Sthayi : Bomburo Bomburo Sham Rang Bomburo

Keyaze chukh Schu Yuet Nalaano.

Antra : Haal baav panunvey Ha Sham soandro-

Aase Kar hoey Jan qurbano.

Meaning: In this song, the poet compares his love, life, and the pain of separation to a wasp (*Bhanwra*) that continually circles around flowers but is unable to truly reach them. Through this metaphor, the poet expresses deep emotional longing and helplessness. He attempts to put his sorrow into words, yet feels that his suffering is beyond expression. The poet suggests that only the end of life can bring an end to his pain. At the same time, the song carries a spiritual dimension, as the poet prays for the reunion of two pure and devoted souls.

Musically, the song is composed in the eight-beat cycle of the Keharva tala. It begins at a medium tempo, creating a reflective and emotional atmosphere, and gradually shifts to a faster pace, adding intensity and emotional depth to the performance.

### Musical Notation

STHAI							
X				0			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Sa	Sa	Sa	Sa	Sa	Sa	Sa	Sa
Bum	bu	ro	-	Bum	bu	ro	-
Sa	Re	Re	Ga	Ga	Ga	Ga	Re
Sha	mu	ran	gu	bum	bu	ro	-
Sa	Sa	Re	Re	Ga	Ga	Pa	Pa
Keya	ze	chuk	schu	yu	et	na	-
Ma	Ma	Pa	Pa	Pa	Ma	Ga	Re
La	-	no	-	-	-	-	-
ANTRA							
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Pa	Pa	Pa	Pa	Ma	Pa	Dha	Dha
Ha	al	ba	av	Pa	nu	nuy	e
Pa	Pa	Ma	Re	Ga	Re	Re	Re
Ha	-	Sha	m	sun	da	ro	-
Sa	Sa	Re	Re	Ga	Ga	Pa	Pa
Asi	kar	Ho	ye	Ja	-n	qu	-r
Ma	Ma	Pa	Pa	Pa	Ma	Ga	Re
Ba	-	no	-	-	-	-	-

## Performance Conventions and Costume

Chhaker performance is a vibrant social tradition that combines music, poetry, costume, and community participation. It is traditionally performed in open spaces such as village courtyards, paddy fields during harvests, shrine forecourts during festivals, and homes celebrating weddings or births. Each setting gives the performance a special cultural meaning, linking Chhaker with both sacred and everyday life.

Performers usually wear the traditional Kashmiri *Pheran* along with customary headgear. The lead singer maintains a calm and dignified posture, expressing emotions mainly through voice, facial expressions, and subtle gestures rather than dramatic movement. Chorus members surround the lead singer, reinforcing the collective spirit of the performance.

Audience interaction is an essential part of Chhaker. Listeners actively join in by responding to refrains and appreciating improvisations. Traditionally, performers were honoured with gifts such as grain, food, and cloth, reflecting the strong social and cultural bonds between artists and the Kashmiri community.

## Thematic Concerns

The thematic world of Chhaker is rich and diverse, reflecting the cultural and emotional life of the Kashmir Valley. Unlike some Kashmiri folk traditions that focus on specific subjects, Chhaker embraces a wide variety of themes, making it one of the most expressive and inclusive folk musical forms of the region.

Love is the most prominent theme in Chhaker. Songs often describe romantic love with deep emotion and poetic beauty, drawing inspiration from nature, seasons, rivers, flowers, and the scenic landscape of Kashmir. Images of changing weather, blooming spring, and migrating birds are frequently used to express longing, separation, and reunion. Alongside earthly love, Chhaker also explores spiritual devotion, where the beloved symbolizes a higher spiritual presence and love becomes a path toward inner reflection and harmony.



Chhaker also preserves famous romantic and literary tales from Persian and Kashmiri traditions, such as *Yousuf-Zulaikha*, *Laila-Majnun*, and *Shirin-Farhad*. These stories are performed as musical narratives and continue to connect audiences with a shared literary heritage.

Another important aspect of Chhaker is its devotional and mystical content. Songs inspired by Sufi and Rishi traditions praise spiritual values such as love, humility, devotion, and self-awareness. In addition, Chhaker includes seasonal and ceremonial songs connected with harvests, weddings, spring celebrations, and festivals like Navroz, reflecting the rhythms of community and everyday life in Kashmir.

## Chhaker as Oral Historical Discourse and Living Memory

Chhaker is more than a musical tradition; it also serves as a living form of oral history and cultural memory in Kashmir. Through its songs and performances, communities have preserved their experiences, emotions, beliefs, and social values across generations. Chhaker compositions not only describe events but also reflect how people understood and responded to changes in society and everyday life.

Traditionally, Chhaker was learned informally through listening, observation, and participation in community gatherings. Elder performers passed down songs, melodies, and performance styles to younger generations, ensuring the continuity of the tradition. In this way, Chhaker became a medium for preserving stories connected with local customs, important occasions, and shared cultural experiences.

Many compositions also carry memories of social transformation, migration, and community life, offering valuable insight into the historical experiences of the people of Kashmir. Since the tradition depends largely on oral transmission, performers play an important role as custodians of cultural heritage. The preservation and teaching of Chhaker therefore remain essential for safeguarding this rich artistic and historical tradition.

## Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives

Chhaker occupies a unique place within the rich tradition of Kashmiri folk music because of its communal style, wide thematic range, and cultural inclusiveness. Unlike some folk forms that focus on specific themes or performance settings, Chhaker combines narrative, devotional, romantic, and seasonal elements within a shared musical experience. Its responsorial style, where the lead singer is supported by a chorus, highlights the importance of collective participation and community bonding.

Chhaker also shares similarities with several musical traditions across South Asia. It may be compared with the Baul tradition of Bengal, where devotional songs are passed orally through generations, and with the Bhajan and Kirtan traditions of North India, which also involve group singing and spiritual themes. These traditions, like Chhaker, connect music with storytelling, devotion, and social interaction.

From a broader perspective, Chhaker resembles many oral traditions around the world in which music preserves cultural memory and shared values. Scholars of ethnomusicology and oral tradition view Chhaker not only as entertainment, but also as a living cultural practice that reflects community life, heritage, and collective identity.

## Conclusion

Chhaker is one of the most significant and expressive traditions of Kashmiri folk culture, representing a rich blend of music, poetry, storytelling, spirituality, and community life. More than a form of entertainment, it serves as a living cultural archive through which generations have shared emotions, memories, values, and artistic expression. Its songs reflect the beauty of Kashmir's landscapes, the depth of human relationships, the influence of Sufi and Rishi thought, and the literary heritage of Persian and Kashmiri traditions.

The study of Chhaker through oral history highlights its importance as a medium of cultural continuity and collective memory. Performers and community members preserve songs, narratives, melodies, and performance practices through participation, listening, and shared experience. In this way, Chhaker continues to connect people with their traditions, customs, and social heritage.

Comparative and theoretical perspectives further demonstrate that Chhaker belongs to a wider global tradition of oral and musical cultures that preserve history, identity, and spiritual values through performance. Its communal style and inclusive nature make it an important symbol of cultural harmony and artistic creativity.

Chhaker therefore remains an invaluable part of Kashmir's cultural heritage, deserving continued appreciation, documentation, academic study, and support so that future generations may continue to experience and celebrate this remarkable tradition.

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