



INDIGENOUS MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF THE GORKHA COMMUNITY: TRADITION, RITUAL, AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

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ABSTRACT

Folk instruments of the Gorkha community are powerful markers of cultural identity, ritual expression, and historical consciousness, blending indigenous Himalayan traditions with broader South Asian musical influences. This study examines their historical evolution, construction, classification, and cultural roles through qualitative fieldwork, performance observation, and literary analysis. Organised under Tat Vadya, Ghan Vadya, Avanaddha Vadya, and Sushir Vadya, instruments such as the sarangi, madal, narsingha, and bansuri are explored in depth. The study also addresses growing threats of modernization and declining transmission, urging systematic documentation and preservation of this vital intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Gorkha, Folk Instruments, Gorkha Culture, History, Craftsmanship, Heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Folk instruments play a vital role in the major folk tunes associated with the diverse musical traditions of the Gorkha community. These instruments exist in various categories, shapes, and sizes, and carry a rich legacy inherited from a deep historical past. Far more than simple sound-producing objects, they serve as living vessels of oral traditions, spiritual beliefs, seasonal rituals, and collective celebrations. From the rhythmic resonance of the *madal* to the soulful melodies of the *sarangi*, from the gentle breath of the *bansuri* to the energetic beats of traditional drums heard in *jhyaure* and *sorathi* songs, each instrument reflects a profound connection to the Gorkha people's history, landscape, and way of life.

The Gorkha community, spread across the Himalayan foothills of Nepal, the Darjeeling hills, Sikkim, and the northeastern regions of India, has cultivated a distinct and layered musical culture over centuries. Rooted in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, their folk instruments have long accompanied narratives of mythology and heroism, the cycles of agricultural life, the joys of weddings and communal festivals, the solemnity of devotional practices, and the discipline of martial identity. These instruments do not merely provide musical accompaniment — they are living symbols of memory, binding communities to their ancestry and to each other across time and geography.

The construction of these instruments itself represents a form of traditional knowledge passed down through hereditary communities of craftsmen. Materials sourced from local forests, animal hides, and metals are fashioned using techniques refined over generations, reflecting an intimate relationship between the Gorkha people and their natural environment. Each instrument carries within its physical form a history of adaptation — absorbing influences from neighbouring Himalayan cultures, Newari traditions, North Indian classical systems, and indigenous tribal practices — while retaining a distinctly Gorkha character.

Yet this heritage is increasingly fragile. Rapid urbanization, the migration of younger generations, the dominance of digital and commercial music, and the declining social prestige of traditional musician communities have collectively weakened the chain of intergenerational transmission. Many instruments are now rarely heard outside of ceremonial contexts, and the craftsmen who build them are dwindling in number. Academic documentation of these traditions has also remained limited, leaving significant gaps in the scholarly record.

This paper examines the folk instruments of the Gorkha community by exploring their origins, construction techniques, musical functions, and cultural contexts. It seeks to highlight their contribution to intangible cultural heritage and underscores the critical importance of sustained preservation efforts, community engagement, and academic inquiry to ensure the continuity of Gorkha cultural identity for generations to come.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research approach to explore the traditional folk instruments of the Gorkha community. The research focuses on understanding the processes of instrument-making, performance practices, and the role these instruments play in Gorkha cultural and social life. Data is collected through interactions with folk musicians, cultural practitioners, and traditional instrument makers, as well as through direct observation of musical performances during



festivals, rituals, and community gatherings. In addition, secondary sources such as books, research articles, folk literature, and historical records are consulted to support the study. Key instruments such as the *madal*, *sarangi*, *bansuri*, and other traditional percussion and wind instruments are selected for detailed examination. The collected data is analyzed thematically to highlight their musical functions, cultural significance, and the challenges they face in the contemporary era. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of Gorkha folk instruments as an integral component of the community's living cultural heritage.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF GORKHA FOLK INSTRUMENTS

The musical traditions of the Gorkha community have evolved over centuries, shaped by a dynamic blend of indigenous cultural practices and external influences from neighboring Himalayan and South Asian regions. Folk narratives, oral histories, and early historical accounts highlight the presence of music and musical instruments in Gorkha society since ancient times. The instruments used by early Gorkha communities were largely similar to those found across the Himalayan belt and the Indian subcontinent, reflecting shared cultural exchanges and material resources. Simple folk instruments made from everyday objects—such as earthen vessels, wooden containers, animal skins, and metal utensils—were commonly used by the people in domestic, ritual, and communal settings. These instruments demonstrate the close relationship between daily life and musical expression in traditional Gorkha culture.

Archaeological and historical evidence from the Himalayan region suggests that music was an essential element of social and cultural life. Visual representations and historical references depict musicians playing drums, string instruments, and wind instruments during communal gatherings and ceremonial performances. Instruments such as early forms of drums, flutes, and stringed instruments like the *sarangi* and *tungna* were integral to these traditions. The roots of Gorkha folk music can be traced to ancient Hindu and Buddhist practices, where music played a central role in temple rituals, monastic ceremonies, and spiritual observances. Devotional singing accompanied by instruments was a vital medium for expressing faith, storytelling, and moral teachings. The geographical isolation of the Himalayan regions helped preserve many indigenous musical forms, while gradual interactions through trade, migration, and warfare allowed external influences to be incorporated over time.

From the medieval period onward, the Gorkha region experienced significant political and cultural transformations, including territorial expansion, migration, and increased interaction with neighboring cultures. These developments introduced new musical elements, instruments, and performance styles. While some influences arrived through conflict and political change, Gorkha musicians selectively adapted external instruments and techniques into their own traditions. Instruments such as the *sarangi*, *madal*, and *bansuri* gained wider prominence during this period and were refined according to local aesthetics and performance practices. Over time, these instruments came to be used in both courtly environments and village life. Despite these changes, the core spirit of Gorkha folk music remained firmly rooted in traditional practices, with folk instruments continuing to play a central role in weddings, seasonal festivals, agricultural rituals, and oral storytelling traditions passed down through generations.

Folk instruments of the Gorkha community have thus served as carriers of cultural memory and identity across centuries. Although shaped by historical changes and cultural interactions, these instruments have remained deeply embedded in local traditions, preserving the essence of Gorkha heritage through music.

CLASSIFICATION OF GORKHA FOLK INSTRUMENTS

Gorkha folk instruments are generally classified into four main categories: Tat Vadya (string instruments), Ghan Vadya (solid percussion instruments made of metal or wood), Sushir Vadya (wind instruments), and Avanaddh Vadya (membranophones or skin-covered instruments such as drums). Each category reflects a distinct dimension of Gorkha musical expression, social life, and cultural tradition.

TAT VADYA (STRING INSTRUMENTS):

Tat Vadya refers to instruments that produce sound through the vibration of strings. String instruments play an important role in Gorkha folk music due to their melodic depth and expressive versatility. These instruments play a vital role in conveying emotions, storytelling, and cultural traditions of the Gorkha community. Prominent string instruments of Gorkha music include the *Sarangi*, *Tungna*, and *Arbajo*, which are widely used in folk songs and traditional performances.

SARANGI:

The Nepali *Sarangi* is a traditional folk string instrument of Nepal. It is a chordophone played with a bow. Traditionally, the *Sarangi* was performed exclusively by members of the Gandharba or Gaine community (terms that are often used interchangeably and remain contested), who used it to accompany narrative ballads and folk songs. In contemporary times,

however, the instrument's popularity has expanded beyond the Gandharba community and is now played by individuals from various social groups. The Sarangi has also gained prominence in other musical genres, including Nepali rock and film music.

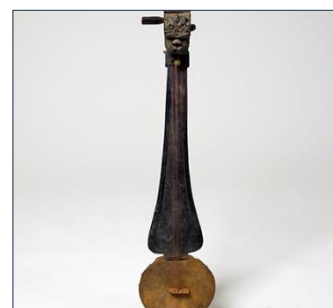
Nepali Sarangi and Indian Sarangi

The Indian Sarangi is a complex bowed instrument used mainly in Hindustani classical music, featuring numerous sympathetic strings that produce a rich, resonant sound. In contrast, the Nepali Sarangi is simpler in construction, lacks sympathetic strings, and is primarily used in folk music by the *Gandharba* community for storytelling and song accompaniment. Both instruments generate expressive, voice-like tones when played vertically with a bow; however, the Nepali Sarangi is an important part of Nepal's traditional traditions, while the Indian Sarangi is essential to classical improvisation. The Nepali Sarangi is traditionally carved from a single piece of wood such as saaj, sisau, or salla, and features a fretless neck, a double-chambered body with a skin-covered lower chamber, and four strings. Played with a horsehair or nylon bow, it spans nearly two octaves and is tuned in a fifth-based pattern, with strings set as lower fifth, root, root, and fifth of the key.



ARBAJO:

The arbajo is a traditional four-string lute from Nepal that is mostly utilized in folk music as a rhythmic instrument (tālābājā). While the instrument is historically associated with the Gandarbha (Gaine) community, it has also been an integral part of musical traditions in the Gorkha region, where Gandarbha performers have historically contributed to local cultural and festive practices. In Gandarbha musical culture, the arbajo is regarded as the male counterpart to the sarangi, which is considered the female instrument. Together, these instruments form a complementary pair in performances, with the arbajo providing rhythmic support to the sarangi's melodic narration. In Gorkha, the arbajo was traditionally played during festivals and social events, supporting narrative songs and oral storytelling. However, its usage has declined over time, and it has increasingly been replaced by the sarangi. By the late twentieth century, the sarangi had largely superseded the arbajo in common practice. This decline is attributed to changing musical preferences among younger generations, migration, and reduced transmission of traditional musical knowledge through apprenticeship.



Today, the arbajo is considered endangered in the Gorkha region, with only a few remaining practitioners. Without targeted efforts for cultural preservation, documentation, and intergenerational transmission, the arbajo faces the risk of disappearing from Gorkha's musical heritage.

GHAN VADYA (PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS)

Ghan Vadya refers to percussion instruments that produce sound through the vibration of solid materials, such as metal or wood, without the use of strings or membranes. In Gorkha folk music, these instruments play a crucial role by providing the rhythmic foundation that supports melodies and vocal lines. They regulate tempo, emphasize lyrical phrases, and enhance the emotional and ceremonial impact of performances. Widely used in folk songs, rituals, and festivals, instruments such as jhyali, jhyamta, etc strengthen collective participation and reinforce the communal character of Gorkha music.

JHYALI:

Jhyali is a traditional folk percussion instrument from Nepal. They are thinly walled, consist of a pair of rounds, metal plates, resembling cymbals,¹ and are used in both folk and classical music in Nepal. Unlike most percussion instruments around the world, the Jhyali is played by rubbing the plates with the right hand rising and the left hand descending at the time when they clash. A Nepali alloy known as pancha dhatu, which translates to "five metals," is used to make these percussion instruments. The alloy consists of brass, copper, silver, zinc and gold, and are usually made by blacksmiths. The instrument is played by rhythmically clashing the two cymbals together, producing a sharp, metallic, and reverberating sound that is both vibrant and energetic. Jhyali is



widely used in a variety of settings, including folk music performances, religious ceremonies, temple rituals, and festive processions. It is especially prominent in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, where it accompanies devotional songs (bhajans), prayers, and dance rituals. Ethnic communities like the Newar, Magar, Gurung, and Tamang people use Jhyali during their cultural celebrations, often pairing it with instruments like madal (hand drum), damaha (kettle drum), and shehnai (a traditional oboe-like instrument). Beyond its musical function, the Jhyali also holds symbolic significance, representing auspiciousness and spiritual presence during sacred events.

GONG (Ghanta):

It stands for a "bell" in Nepali, which is a traditional ritual instrument widely used in Hindu and Buddhist religious practices across Nepal. Made from brass or bronze, the ghanta is typically held by hand and rung during pujas (worship rituals), meditation, and temple ceremonies. It produces a clear, high-pitched sound that is believed to purify the environment, ward off evil spirits, and focus the mind during spiritual activities. In Hindu rituals, it is often rung at the beginning of a puja to invite the presence of the deity, while in Buddhist practice, it is paired with the vajra (dorje) to symbolize wisdom and compassion. Though simple in design, the ghanta holds deep spiritual and symbolic meaning, representing the voice of the divine and the vibration of the universe in many South Asian traditions. • The ringing of the ghanta is often accompanied by other instruments like the damaru, conch (shankha), and jhyali. • Some ghantas are elaborately carved with images of deities or sacred symbols like the Om (ॐ), lotus, or vajra. • In tantric rituals, the ghanta represents shakti (divine feminine energy) and is used in various mantra sadhanas. • The vibration of the bell is believed to cleanse both the space and the mind, preparing the environment for divine presence. • The continuous sound of a ghanta is said to resemble Aum (Om), the primal sound of creation in Hindu philosophy.



AVANADDHA VADYA (MEMBRNOPHONES):

Avanaddha Vadya is a category of musical instruments in Indian music that refers to membranophones, which produce sound when a stretched membrane is struck, beaten, or tapped. The term comes from Sanskrit, where *avanaddha* means "covered" or "stretched," referring to the tensioned membrane used in drums. In addition to drums, this category may also include certain struck metal or clay instruments. In Gorkha folk music, membranophones play a central role in shaping rhythm and vitality. Instruments such as the madal, damphu, are widely used to maintain tempo, drive dance movements, and support vocal performances. These drums form the rhythmic core of many Gorkha musical expressions, especially during festivals, rituals, and community gatherings. Their resonant beats not only energize performances but also foster a strong connection between performers and audiences, making membranophones indispensable to the cultural life of Gorkha.

MADAL:

The madal or maadal is a Nepalese folk musical instrument. The madal is used mainly for rhythm-keeping in Nepalese folk music. It is very popular and widely used as a in Nepal. The madal has a cylindrical body with a slight bulge at its center and heads at both ends, one head larger than the other. It is usually played horizontally in a seated position, with both heads played simultaneously. The madal is the national instrument of Nepal and is the backbone of most Nepali folk music. The well-known Nepali musician Ranjit Gazmer introduced this instrument to Bollywood music when he started working under Rahul Dev Burman, and has used it in numerous Bollywood songs such as Hum Dono Do Premi and Kanchi Re Kanchi Re.¹ There is also a madal drum used by certain Adivasi groups. The Madal/Kham served as more than just a musical instrument during its formative years; it was a representation of Nepali identity and tradition.² The Madal/Kham's rhythmic beats evoked a strong sense of ethnic pride and spiritual connection in a variety of rites, celebrations, and social events. From the calm valleys to the busy marketplaces, it was an essential component of Nepal's auditory landscape.



DAMAHA:

Damaha (दमहो) is a traditional Nepali drum known for its deep, echoing "dhoom" sound. Shaped like a half-sphere, it is made from brass, copper, or wood and covered with animal hide. Played with a curved wooden stick and hung around the neck or shoulder, it allows the musician to move freely during processions. The Damaha is a key part of the Panche Baaja ensemble, especially in weddings, festivals, and religious rituals. Traditionally played by the Damai



caste, its sound once echoed in royal courts, military gatherings, and village celebrations. More than just a musical instrument, the Damaha holds spiritual importance—believed to ward off evil, purify the space, and bring blessings. The traditional players of this instrument are called Damai. The term Damai is coined from the musical instrument Damaha. The 1854 Nepalese Muluki Ain (Legal Code) categorized Damai as "Lower caste" category.¹ The Damaha is a traditional Nepali drum made from brass, copper, or wood, with a buffalo or cowhide head stretched over a hemispherical body. It produces a deep, echoing "dhoom" sound and is played with a curved wooden stick while being suspended from the neck or shoulder. The drum is often decorated for special occasions and carefully crafted by local artisans. Before playing, the drumhead is warmed over fire to tighten it. More than just an instrument, the Damaha is a symbol of Nepali tradition, celebration, and cultural identity.

SUSHIR VADYA (WIND INSTRUMENTS):

Sushir Vadya, or wind instruments, occupy a vital place in Gorkha folk music, providing melodic structure to songs, dances, and communal celebrations. These instruments produce sound through the flow of air across or through their bodies, contributing both melody and rhythmic pulse to performances. In Gorkha culture, Sushir Vadya are especially important during weddings, festivals, harvest celebrations, and religious ceremonies, where their resonant tones enhance the festive atmosphere and strengthen communal bonds. Instruments such as bansuri, tyamko (flute variants), and shehnai-like horns are commonly used, enriching the musical expression of Gorkha's traditional cultural events.

NARSINGHA:

Narsingha is a traditional long, curved brass trumpet commonly used in Nepal, especially in ceremonial and religious events. Made from brass or copper, the instrument produces a powerful, deep, and resonant sound that can be heard over long distances. It is often played during festivals, weddings, processions, and temple rituals, where its majestic tone signals the start of important ceremonies or calls people together. The Narsingha is closely associated with the Panche Baja ensemble and is typically played alongside drums and cymbals by skilled musicians from communities like the Damai. Historically, its bold sound was also used in battlefields and royal courts to announce arrival or signal actions. Today, the Narsingha remains a symbol of tradition and cultural pride, representing Nepal's rich musical and ceremonial heritage. The Narsingha is traditionally played by the Damai caste, known as hereditary musicians and craftsmen, who pass down the skills of playing this instrument through generations. During weddings, funeral processions, temple festivals, and national celebrations, the sound of the Narsingha signals the significance of the occasion, evoking feelings of reverence, joy, or solemnity. The instrument also symbolizes power, authority, and spirituality—its sound believed to invoke divine presence and protection. Making a Narsingha involves skilled metalwork, often resulting in beautifully crafted and decorated instruments. The length and curvature can vary, influencing the pitch and tonal quality of the sound. Despite the rise of modern musical instruments, the Narsingha remains a cherished symbol of Nepalese identity and heritage, celebrated for its unique contribution to the country's vibrant musical tradition.



BANSURI:

The Bansuri is a traditional Nepali bamboo flute widely used in Gorkha folk music. It is a Sushir Vadya (wind instrument) that produces sound when air is blown across its open end, creating a melodious tone that forms the backbone of many folk songs and dance performances. In Gorkha culture, the bansuri is commonly played during weddings, festivals, religious ceremonies, and seasonal celebrations, where its gentle and expressive sound enhances the overall mood and supports vocal melodies.

The Gorkha bansuri is often played in solo performances as well as in ensembles, typically alongside instruments like the madal, damphu, and sarangi. Its sound is considered highly expressive, capable of conveying emotions through slides, ornamentations, and microtones, making it a key instrument in the musical identity of the Gorkha region.



Conclusion

This study affirms that folk instruments occupy a central place in the cultural and musical life of the Gorkha community, serving as living expressions of history, belief, and collective identity. Embedded in everyday practices as well as ceremonial occasions, these instruments are not merely means of sound production but powerful cultural texts through which the Gorkha people articulate their relationship with nature, spirituality, and society. Shaped over centuries, Gorkha folk instruments reveal



a continuous dialogue between indigenous Himalayan traditions and wider South Asian cultural influences, reflecting both continuity and adaptation within the community's musical heritage.

The analytical framework of Tat Vadya, Ghan Vadya, Avanaddha Vadya, and Sushir Vadya demonstrates the structural richness and functional diversity of Gorkha folk music. Instruments such as the sarangi and arbajo give voice to oral narratives and emotional expression, while rhythmic instruments like the madal, damaha, jhyali, and jhyamta sustain communal participation during festivals, rituals, and social gatherings. Wind instruments such as the narsingha and bansuri further enhance ceremonial grandeur and melodic depth, reinforcing the collective and performative nature of Gorkha cultural life. Equally significant is the craftsmanship behind these instruments, which embodies inherited knowledge of materials, techniques, and acoustic sensibilities passed down through generations.

However, the research also brings attention to the fragile condition of these traditions in the face of rapid social and cultural change. Urbanization, modernization, shifting musical tastes, and the erosion of hereditary systems of knowledge transmission have contributed to the declining visibility and practice of several folk instruments. The diminishing social status of traditional musicians and instrument makers further intensifies this challenge, placing valuable aspects of Gorkha musical heritage at risk of loss.

In light of these findings, the study emphasizes the urgent need for sustained documentation, cultural preservation initiatives, and academic engagement with Gorkha folk music. Integrating these traditions into educational curricula, encouraging community-based cultural programs, and supporting traditional artists can play a crucial role in revitalizing this heritage. Ultimately, safeguarding Gorkha folk instruments is not solely about preserving music; it is about protecting a cultural legacy that carries the memories, values, and identity of a community. Ensuring their survival will allow future generations to remain connected to the rich and resonant cultural soundscape of the Gorkha people.

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