The Living Soundscapes of the Chhotanagpur: A Comprehensive Study of Indigenous Musical Instruments in Jharkhand

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Abstract

The traditional music of the *Chhotanagpur* area in the state of Jharkhand represents the confluence of culture, community and nature. This paper investigates the traditional tribal musical instruments of *Santhal*, *Munda*, *Oraon* and *Ho* communities and its cultural, social and religious aspects. The research specifically examines *Banam* which is one of the most significantly emotional and culturally connected musical instrument of Jharkhand from the context of its construction materials, ways of playing and usage during rituals, festivals, agriculture and other folk performance. This paper is also documented to provide a summary and classification of the diverse musical instruments whose melody and beats echo in the tribal lands of Jharkhand.

The study follows an ethnographic and cultural methodology which includes field research, informal communication with artisans, interaction with musicians and investigation of native folk performances. It emphasizes on the use of available local natural materials in construction of instruments like bamboo, wood, leather and gourds which enhance the quality of acoustics of these instruments. It also points out on the degrading impacts on the tradition of tribal music through globalization, urbanization and lack of knowledge transmission to younger generations. Conclusively, musical instruments of *Chhotanagpur* are living emblems of tribal identity and cultural integrity which are needed to be preserved and documented so that the intangible cultural heritage of Jharkhand can be protected in future.

Keywords: Indigenous Instruments, Banam, Tribal Music, Cultural Heritage

1. Introduction

The musical traditions indigenous to the Chhotanagpur region of Jharkhand are a vibrant fusion of ecology, community identity, religion, and culture. Within the diverse spectrum of tribal populations living in this region- the *Munda, Santhal, Ho, Oraon, Kharia, Birhor* to name a few-lie a rich tradition of indigenous musical instruments which are as much

repository of history and ritual, as sources of music and entertainment. In this paper, an attempt is made to interpret the "living soundscape of Chhotanagpur" by cataloguing instruments indigenous to the region, their crafting, acoustic qualities, meanings and current relevance. A survey of instruments like *Banam*, *Mandar*, *Dhol*, *Nagara* (membranophones), *Bansi*, *Singha* (aerophones) and various instruments made of bamboo, wood, gourd and metal (idiophones) and their intricate link with the ecology, use in festival, rituals of cultivation, oral narratives, healing and community celebration is carried out.

Using ethnographic observation, interviews with folk musicians and artisans, and acoustic as well as cultural analysis, the research identifies the challenges faced by these traditions in the era of modernization, migration, commercialization, and declining intergenerational transmission. At the same time, it highlights emerging efforts toward cultural preservation, digital documentation, educational integration, and revival movements led by local communities and cultural organizations.

This paper reflects that the indigenous musical instruments of Jharkhand are not ancient objects but rather living cultural products which continuously sustain identity and survival through evolving social and economic situations. By bringing these sound traditions to the fore this paper contributes to discussions about intangible cultural heritage, ethnomusicology and sustainable cultural preservation in India.

Jharkhand the "land of forests", whose cultural identity has always been inseparable from the soundscape of its tribal communities: *Santhal*, *Munda*, *Oraon*, *Ho*, *Kharia*, music is not simply an aesthetic expression, it is a functional semiotic system used for perpetuating memory, sustaining relationships and communicating with the gods. Indigenous instruments of Jharkand, namely the *Mandar*, *Banam*, *Kendri* and *Tohila* have reached their zenith as highly refined works of folk art and can be identified as material expressions of existence and religiosity.

2. Organological Taxonomy of Jharkhandi Musical Instruments

Scholars and tribal practitioners categorize the state's instruments based on their material construction and mechanism of sound production. This classification reveals a rich and varied musical landscape which are detailed subsequently.

Mandar ***Nagara***

- **Membranophones :** Instruments like the ***Mandar (Tumdak)*** and ***Nagara*** produce sound by striking a stretched skin over a shell.

Singa ***Bansuri*** ***Murli***

- **Chordophones :** Stringed instruments such as the ***Banam***, ***Tohila***, *and* ***Kendri*** rely on the vibration of strings made of silk, metal, or gut.
- **Aerophones *:*** Wind instruments including the ***Bansuri***, ***Murli***, *and* ***Singa*** (a brass instrument often played in pairs) utilize airflow through a tube.
- **Idiophones *:*** Instruments like the ***Kartal*** produce sound through the vibration of the instrument's own body when struck or shaken.

3. Leather Crafted Harmonics

These are examples of musical artistry manifested in its handcrafted nature crafted from various sorts of leathers. These include the *Mandar, Nagara, Dhol, and Dhak*. In particular, there are many beautiful musical instruments that are produced from various kinds of

leathers. They have their own kind of charm to share with the world, from the way the leathers interact with various strikes, beats, or plucks.

- ***Mandar*:** Jharkhand has for itself a popular folk musical instrument known as the *Mandar,* widely regarded as a kind of hand drum. The *Mandar* is basically a kind of percussion instrument with a deep sense of tradition. The *Mandar*, being round in its structure, contains the sound as it goes through the skin that it's covered with. In that sense, striking the surface of this leather instrument brings out percussive sound.
- ***Nagara:*** As a form of double-headed drum, the *Nagara* acts as one of the main musical instrument of the Jharkhand community, while a small version of it is commonly known as the '*Tamak*' when found in *Santhal Pargana*. Produced from leather and metal, this instrument brings out the best out of hand and skin as it makes its dialogue for the celebrations, festive moments or other important events in Jharkhand.
- ***Dhol*:** One of the most iconic and widely recognized musical instruments used across many festivals, marriages and religious ceremonies in Jharkhand is the *Dhol*. Having a body made out of jackfruit or mango wood and a covering of leather, it brings life and excitement wherever it goes. By making sticks, a musician can beat on the Dhol's leathern cover and thus, produce some truly amazing beats.
- ***Dhak:*** The *Dhak* is one of the most prominent musical instruments during Durga-puja and *Mansa* Puja, especially the ones found throughout the state of Jharkhand. This large, leathern-clad drum produces truly impressive beats, with its striking appearance complemented by its sounds and most importantly, its ability to amplify celebratory moments with bursts of sound.

Together, they compose a symphony, underlying the intimate connection between creativity and materiality. In a world often defined by digital sounds, these leather instruments remind us of the visceral beauty of music, inviting us to touch the pulse of history, feel the richness of culture and embrace the bursts of emotion that arise from the dance of hands and leather.

4. Melodious Tunes Via Oral Gustation

A certain sub group of musical instruments draw its melodious cadence from oral gustation. These include *Bansuri, Murali, Kenndri, Singa, Dhamsa, Thala, Shehnai and Madanbheri*. All of these require oral exhalation for a tuneful output.

In the vast tapestry of musical expression, an intriguing array of instruments captivates us with their soul-stirring melodies. These instruments, unlike their struck or plucked counterparts, rely on the intricate art of mouth-blowing to conjure symphonies that resonate through time and across cultures.

- ***Bansuri:*** Deep in the heart of India lies the Bansuri, an instrument often referred to as a flute, which breathes life into notes that seem to dance on the air. The Bansuri is a widely appreciated musical instrument in Jharkhand. Most *Sadari* songs begin with the melodious sound of the *Bansuri*. As breath flows through its delicate holes, ethereal melodies emerge, mirroring the whispers of the natural world. The Bansuri is not merely an instrument; it is a conduit between the musician's breath and the cosmic song, a connection as profound as it is ephemeral.
- ***Murali:*** Venturing into the hilly regions of eastern India, we are surrounded by the mystic charm of the *Murali.* This bamboo flute, with its haunting notes, seems to whisper tales of ancient lore. The act of mouth-blowing becomes a narrative outburst, as the musician's breath carries the stories and traditions that have echoed through generations.
- ***Kenndri:*** Within the tribal heartlands of Santhal, the *Kenndri* captures the very essence of simplicity and harmony. This bamboo flute, played through mouth-blowing, produces music that seems to resonate with the rhythm of life itself. The *Kenndri's* melodies are a burst of natural harmony, reminding us of the inherent beauty found in the simplicity of existence.
- ***Singa:*** Singa, is a horn-like instrument and its sound echoes across the valleys of Jharkhand. The Singa is primarily used during animal hunting to scare them away. As breath courses through it, the Singa transforms into a vessel for melodic conversations. Each note is a burst of communication that transcends words, connecting musicians and listeners alike, and igniting an emotional symphony that knows no boundaries.
- ***Dhamsa:*** As the musician breathes life into this mouth-blown drum, the Dhamsa produces beats that mirror the pulse of nature. Each strike is a burst of rhythm that captures the very heartbeat of the mountains. The *Dhamsa* is frequently used in *Chhau* dances to depict scenes of war or military parades.
- ***Shehnai:*** The grand tapestry of Indian weddings and festivals often features the Shehnai prominently. As breath flows through its tubes, this double-reed instrument

bursts forth with melodies that herald celebrations. The mouth-blown music of the Shehnai becomes a burst of pure joy, uniting people in shared moments of happiness. The Shehnai is a main musical instrument used in *Chhau, Paika and Natua* dances.

- ***Madanbheri:*** The musician's breath, directed through the mouthpiece, is transformed into deep, sonorous tones. The music of the *Madanbheri* transports listeners through time, evoking the echoes of ancient rituals and traditions. In Jharkhand, this instrument is played during wedding ceremonies with the *Mandar* and *Nagara* to accompany dancing.

As we explore the *Bansuri, Murali, Kenndri, Singa, Dhamsa, Thala, Shehnai, and Madanbheri*, we realize that the essence they embody is not simply about melodies-it is about the synergy between breath, musician, and instrument. It is about the fusion of human spirit and artistic expression.

In a world often dominated by technology, these instruments serve as a powerful reminder of the raw, unadulterated beauty of our breath as a creative force. They invite us to burst forth with music that originates from the very essence of our being-a testament to the fact that music is not just an art form; it is a burst of life itself.

5. Rhythmic Heartbeats: The Percussive Ensemble

Instruments that provide the percussive energy produce rhythmic heartbeats that work in conjunction with time. *Jhal, Kartal, Thal, Bell, Ghungroo, Manjira*; all play their part in the ever enduring "Percussion Instruments". Amongst the variety of musical instruments, these provide the rhythm that pulses to the sound and reverberate through history.

- ***Jhal:*** In any cultural tradition, the Jhal can be seen as an obvious percussive element. These instruments' sounds are produced by the skilled tapping of hands against their surface, producing rhythm that echoes stories and tradition. With the striking of their beats, the *Jhal* will tell a story that resonates through time, a story that links the past to the present and connects cultures to the world around it.
- ***Kartal:*** The *Karta*l, as a percussive ornament is found with the devotional music. Through the combination of hands striking the instruments together, they emit rhythmic beats that are representative of a group heartbeat. Through this simple action

of striking the Kartals together, these musical instruments bring unity amongst the hands and souls playing them.

- ***Thal*:** This percussive plate may also seem plain but serves as a canvas for beats that expresses stories and emotions of all types. With every stroke of these musical pieces we receive a burst of language from in tune with the *Thal*'s rhythmic speech.
- ***Manjira*:** Manjiras are commonly made from a variety of different metals such as bronze, metal, copper zinc and even chime metal, as the names suggests the music from these instruments come from a line that connects the metals. As one plays these instruments by bringing them together they produce a tinkling sound. These instruments can create different tones depending on how much pressure and impact put onto the instruments.

Percussion Instruments act as voices of humans and bring together every beat of the human heartbeat. Their bursts of sound are not only songs; these beats are stories and feelings as they convey memories. These pieces represent the celebrations in our lives, their devotion to our religious leaders, and the unity amongst humanity.

Kartal

Kendri

Banam

Ektara

6. Rare and Endangered Chordophones: Kendri and Tohila

While the Mandar and Banam remain widely used, other traditional instruments are on the verge of extinction.

- **The Kendri:** Often referred to as "Jharkhand's violin," the Kendri is primarily associated with the **Jugi** wandering folk singers. It consists of a hollow bamboo neck and a resonator made from a dried gourd or coconut shell covered with goat skin. It is academically debated as a potential precursor to the classical **Sarangi** due to its similar bowed mechanism and soulful, haunting tone.
- **The Tohila (Tuila):** This rare one-stringed instrument is made using a dried pumpkin shell as a resonator. It is noted for its unique sound which is produced through chest modulation. Currently, only a few remaining artists in villages like *Khunti* and *Sonahatu* can play this traditional instrument.
- **Buang:** A unique Santal instrument made of a bow and a large dried gourd (*Tumba*). When the string is struck, it produces a rhythmic "buang-buang" sound, providing a steady beat for dancers.

Manjira

Jhal

Tuila

7. Most widely used traditional instruments of Jharkhand

Banam: The Ancestral Voice

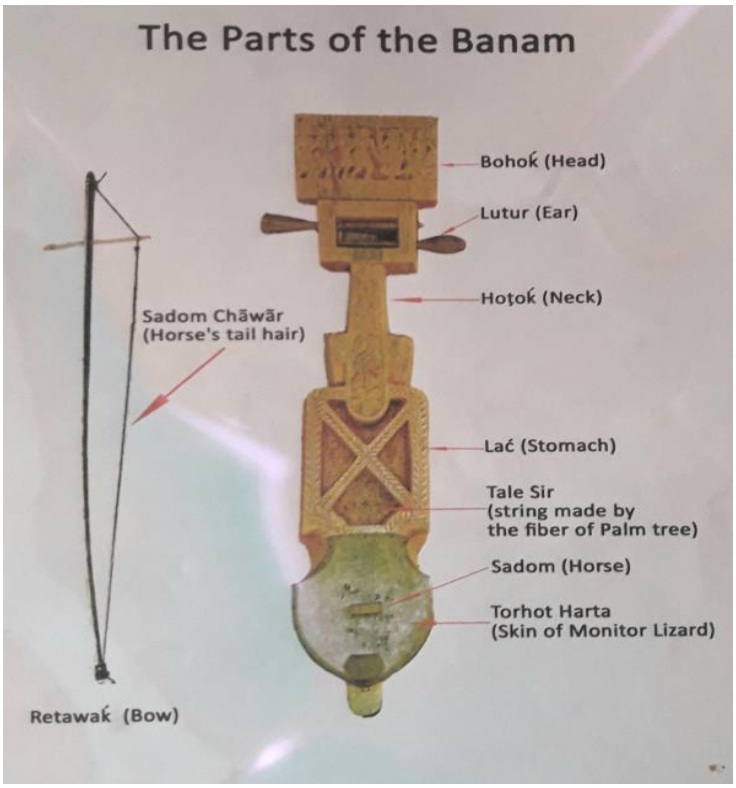
The **Banam** is a single- string wooden lute or fiddle and is one of the ancient bowed string instrument central to Santhal culture. According to its different shapes, sizes and types, the Banam has different names and creates various tunes. Though making of Banam is an art, it is

now a diminishing culture in Jharkhand in the recent times due to lack of its proper engagement and improper generational transmission. It is often treated as a living entity, with its parts named after human anatomy: the *bohok* (head) the top part , often elaborately carved with figures, *lutur* (ear) the tuning pegs, *hotok* (neck) the narrow part facilitating the player's grip, a hollow rectangular section representing the lungs in the chest and *lac* (stomach) the hollowed out oval base, covered with the skin of monitor lizard. It is regarded not merely as a tool but as a living entity, an extension of the physical self.

Different types of *Banam* collected from different artisans of Jharkhand

- **Construction and materials:** The instrument is made of wood; the lower part is covered with *Torhot Harta*, the hide of Bengal monitor lizard and tightened with bamboo pegs. It consists of *Tale Sir* which is astring made by the fiber of Palm tree, a *sadom* and a *Retawak* (bow) made up of *Sadom Chawar* (Horse's tail hair). Traditionally, the *Banams* have human faces, faces or masks of animals , birds and sometimes of the abstract figures of *Bongas* which are carved on them. In the recent times, figures of contemporary stories are also depicted.

- **Artistic Symbolism:** *Banam* makers often carve elaborate sculptures onto the instrument's "head." These carvings depict scenes from everyday life, such as families, elephant riders, and traditional dances, or figures from Santhal creation myths like the earthworm (*lenget*) and prawn (*icak hako*). *Banams* mostly accompany the songs that are related to the spirits and ancestors, like the songs in the *Dasae Porob* (Dasai Festival) or the *Bhandan* (Death Rites). This musical instrument not only gives joy through its enchganting music but also has a great role in creating ambience to connect human souls with their ancestors and spirits. The songs that go with Banam help us to understand the deeper meaning of the spiritual and religious life of the *Santhal* community. For the *Santhals*, the Banam is an embodiment of the self. They *believe* that as a human being sings, so does the instrument, with the soul keeping the body alive just as the music animates the wood.

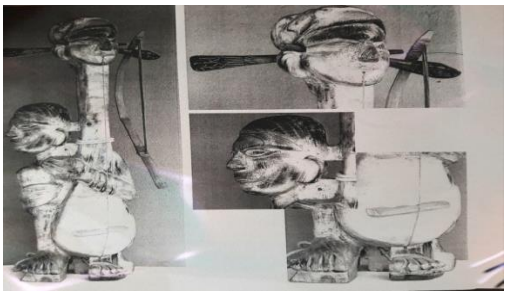


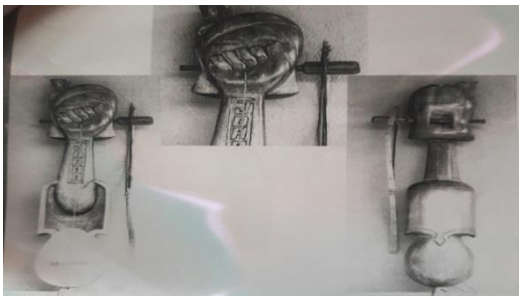
Parts of *Banam*

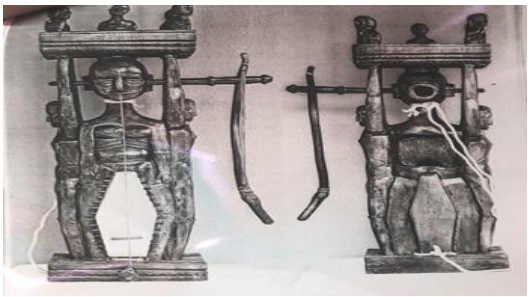
The Legend of Origin Santal folklore traces the **Banam**'s origin to a tragic myth involving seven brothers and their sister. The brothers, captivated by the delicious taste of a meal accidentally seasoned with a drop of their sister's blood, decided to kill and eat her

Different types of *Banam*

The youngest brother, grief-stricken, refused to eat and buried his share of the flesh in the ground. From this spot grew a **Guloj** (or *Gulanj Baha*) tree, which emitted a human-like melody when the wind blew. A wandering folk singer (*Jugi*) eventually carved the first Banam from a branch of this tree, believing it contained the girl's soul.







Different types of artistic figures in the *Banam*

- **Artistic Symbolism** Artisans carve scenes from Santal life into the *Bohok*, depicting families, traditional dances, elephant riders, and symbols like the Sun god ***Sing Bonga***. These carvings allow the instrument to "bring alive the legends of Santal

folklore" during performances. Even the sign *Johar* is depicted in some *Banams* to indicate that the *Banam* is to be respected highly just as a guest. Many of the Banm Makers depict woman figures in their Banams because women symbolize music. Some of them have the face of their spiritual gurus who reminds us of the spiritual life. Some of them even depict the hollow mouth of a skeleton and a frog on the top of

Different shapes and artistic approaches in *Baanm*

the Banam which symbolizes originality. Some of them are decorated with the dancing figures of Santhal women with earthen pots on their head or even the face of the great Rabindranath Tagore. Some of the craftsmen have depicted the *Guloj* tree as the myth considers that it is the tree that grew on the burial site of the sister who was

killed by the five brothers. Banam was made by from this tree by a *Koimar Jugi*. We can find the figure of an elephant that depicts the supreme power that emerges from the mystery of divine emptiness inside the belly of the Banam which is covered by goat skin.

Creative artistic varieties in different parts of Banam

Cultural Lifecycle and Preservation Efforts

The musical instruments of Jharkhand are seasonal and deeply integrated into the agricultural and spiritual cycle of the community.

I. The Role of Music in Community Life Instrument making, particularly *Mandar* making, is often a seasonal occupation practiced during the summer when field work is minimal. These instruments are indispensable during festivals such as ***Sarhul*** (flower festival) and ***Karam***. For example, during the *Karam* festival, the *Banam* and *Mandar* are used to accompany songs that emphasize patience, devotion, and the bond between siblings.

II. Contemporary Challenges Despite their richness, these traditions are currently threatened by several factors:

- **Modernization:** Younger generations are increasingly drawn to Bollywood and Western music, moving away from traditional folk forms.
- **Loss of Skilled Artisans:** The transfer of knowledge is dwindling as old villagers find fewer youth willing to sit and learn the complex art of instrument making.
- **Environmental Degradation:** Industrialization and deforestation have made natural materials like specific woods and lizard skins harder to procure.

III. Revival and Sustainability Various initiatives are working to safeguard this heritage. The **Ghosaldanga Bishnubati Adibasi Trust** organizes workshops where traditional makers transmit their skills to the youth. Collectives like the **Wings of Chotanagpur** provide platforms for young performers to practice in community spaces known as **Akhra**. Furthermore, there are calls for **Geographical Indication (GI)** tagging for these instruments to provide economic stability for tribal artisans. Notable individuals like the **Mahli duo** (Shankar and Ram Prasad Mahli) have brought global attention to these instruments, performing on international stages.

In conclusion, the indigenous musical instruments of Jharkhand are more than artifacts; they are **vibrating repositories of a unique world-view** that emphasizes the harmony between human, nature, and the divine. Continued institutional support and community engagement are essential to ensuring these ancestral voices do not fall silent..

Conclusion

The indigenous musical instruments of Jharkhand represent far more than tools for producing sound; they embody the living cultural memory, collective identity, and traditional knowledge systems of the communities that have nurtured them for generations. The present study explored the diverse soundscape of the Chhotanagpur region through an examination of

its traditional musical instruments, their construction techniques, performance contexts, acoustic characteristics, and socio-cultural significance. The findings reveal that these instruments are deeply interwoven with the everyday lives, rituals, festivals, agricultural practices, and spiritual beliefs of the tribal and rural communities of Jharkhand.

The investigation highlighted the remarkable diversity of indigenous instruments, including stringed, percussion, and wind instruments, each reflecting the ecological resources, craftsmanship, and artistic sensibilities of the region. Instruments such as the *Banam, Kendri, Tuila, Mandar, Nagara, and Bansuri* are not merely musical devices but cultural artifacts that preserve stories, emotions, and historical experiences. Their unique tonal qualities and performance traditions demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of acoustics developed through centuries of empirical knowledge.

The study further revealed that the musical traditions of Jharkhand function as powerful mediums of social cohesion and cultural continuity. Community gatherings, seasonal festivals, marriage ceremonies, and religious observances continue to provide spaces where these instruments sustain their relevance and meaning. However, the research also identified significant challenges to their survival. Rapid urbanization, changing lifestyles, commercialization of entertainment, migration, and the declining interest of younger generations have contributed to the gradual erosion of traditional musical practices. Many master instrument makers and performers possess invaluable knowledge that remains undocumented and is at risk of being lost.

Scientific acoustic analysis and systematic documentation emerge as essential tools for preserving this rich heritage. By integrating ethnomusicological approaches with modern acoustic measurements, digital archiving, and mathematical modeling, it becomes possible to record, analyze, and disseminate knowledge about these instruments in ways that support both cultural preservation and scholarly advancement. Such interdisciplinary efforts can also inspire innovations in instrument design, music education, and cultural tourism while ensuring that traditional knowledge remains respected and community-centered.

Ultimately, the living soundscapes of the Chhotanagpur region remind us that music is not only an artistic expression but also a repository of identity, history, and human connection. Preserving the indigenous musical instruments of Jharkhand is therefore not merely a cultural obligation but a commitment to safeguarding an irreplaceable part of humanity’s intangible

heritage. Future research should continue to explore the acoustic properties, performance practices, and evolving cultural roles of these instruments while actively involving local communities in preservation initiatives. Through sustained documentation, education, and cultural engagement, the voices of these instruments can continue to resonate across generations, ensuring that the vibrant musical heritage of Jharkhand remains alive and meaningful in the contemporary world.

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*Pictures are collected from different artisans, internet sources and book publications relating to indigenous musical instruments of Jharkhand.