

Tribal Musical Instruments as Intangible Cultural Heritage of South Gujarat

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ABSTRACT

South Gujarat, stretching from Vapi to Tapi, is distinguished by its rich biodiversity and vibrant tribal culture. The indigenous communities of this region maintain a deep connection with nature, reflected vividly in their musical traditions. This paper provides an ethnomusicological study of traditional tribal instruments, such as Tarpu, Ghaghli, Sangad-Kahaliya, Dhak, Tur, and Madal. These instruments are not merely tools of music but symbolic embodiments of faith, identity, and socio-religious practices. The study draws on qualitative ethnographic methods, including field observations, interviews with musicians, and participant observation in festivals between 2019 and 2023. Findings reveal that tribal instruments are constructed entirely from natural materials and function as integral components of rituals such as Devkari, seasonal celebrations, and communal dances. They embody ecological knowledge, spiritual symbolism, and social unity. However, processes of modernization, urban migration, and declining intergenerational transmission pose serious threats to their survival. By situating South Gujarat's tribal music traditions within broader discourses on intangible cultural heritage, this paper highlights their global significance and comparative relevance to other indigenous practices worldwide. The research concludes that safeguarding these traditions requires not only documentation and revivalist efforts at the community level but also institutional recognition and policy support, including possible inclusion under UNESCO heritage frameworks. Thus, the preservation of these instruments is crucial for sustaining both cultural diversity and the ecological worldview of South Gujarat's tribal communities.

Keywords: South Gujarat, tribal culture, musical instruments, ethnomusicology, intangible heritage, preservation

Introduction

South Gujarat, particularly the tribal belt extending across Valsad, Navsari, Dang, Tapi, Bharuch, and Narmada districts, is home to diverse tribal groups such as the Kukna, Varli, Nayaka, Kotwalia, Chaudhari, Dhodiya, and Vasava. Their cultural identity is deeply intertwined with music, ritual, and performance. They sustain musical traditions that are not simply aesthetic but are **constitutive of ritual, cosmology, and ecological knowledge systems**. Their instruments, crafted exclusively from natural resources such as gourds, bamboo, wood, beeswax, and animal hide, exemplify what Ingold (2000) terms a “dwelling perspective,” in which material culture is embedded in ecological engagement.

While Indian musicology has historically foregrounded the classical traditions of Hindustani and Karnatak music (Neuman, 2015), the **vernacular and tribal soundscapes** have received limited scholarly attention. Ethnomusicology, as theorized by Merriam (1964) and later expanded by Turino (2008), insists on studying music as culture: not only the sound itself but also its function, symbolism, and social role. South Gujarat's tribal instruments are thus best understood not in isolation but as part of a **performance ecology**, where music mediates relationships between humans, ancestors, and the natural world.

The instruments of South Gujarat demand attention also from an **organological perspective** (Hornbostel & Sachs, 1914/1961), since they represent unique categories of idiophones, aerophones, chordophones, and membranophones constructed with localized techniques. Beyond classification, however, their survival implicates discourses of **intangible cultural heritage**. UNESCO's (2003) *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* emphasizes community ownership and intergenerational transmission. In this regard, tribal instruments function as heritage artifacts whose vitality depends not on preservation in museums but on continued use in ritual and performance.

Traditional musical instruments crafted from locally available organic materials serve as integral components of rituals, festivals, and social ceremonies. These instruments exemplify the tribal worldview wherein art, spirituality, and ecology coexist harmoniously. This research investigates the traditional tribal instruments of South Gujarat with emphasis on their typology, usage, and cultural meaning. It situates them within broader ethnomusicological discourses on intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003; Kartomi, 2014).

Literature Review

Previous scholarship has highlighted the role of music in tribal identity formation (Gaikwad, 2017; Khandra, 2021), while studies on ethnomusicology in India (Neuman, 2015; Schreffler, 2018) emphasize the interrelationship between performance and community ritual. Regional studies, such as Chaudhary (2020) on Dev Vadya (ritual instruments), underscore the ritual function of percussion instruments in ancestor worship. However, systematic documentation of South Gujarat's tribal instruments remains limited. This study aims to fill this gap.

Methodology

The research is based on qualitative ethnographic methods, including field visits to tribal villages in Dang, Valsad, and Tapi (2019–2023); interviews with traditional musicians (Bhagat, Vaze); participant observation during festivals (Diwali, Holi, Devkari rituals); and review of secondary sources on tribal folklore and music.

Traditional Instruments of South Gujarat

- **Tarpu (Pawri):** Made from dried gourd, bamboo pipes, cattle horns, and beeswax, the Tarpu is a wind instrument associated with the Kukna, Varli, Kotwalia, and Bhil tribes. It is played during harvest festivals, Mavali Mata worship, and community dances. Distinct melodic patterns are employed depending on ritual context.
- **Ghaghli:** A string instrument constructed from bamboo and dried gourd resonators, often decorated with peacock feathers and flowers. It accompanies devotional storytelling, especially narratives of Dungandev and Mavali Mata.
- **Sangad and Kahaliya:** This ensemble combines the Sangad (percussion similar to tabla), Kahali (reed aerophone resembling shehnai), and Shurate (drone). It is predominantly used in weddings and Holi celebrations, where community dance is integral.
- **Dhak (Damaru-type drum):** A double-headed drum, carved from seasoned wood and covered with animal hide, played in ancestor-worship rituals such as Devkari. It holds strong ritual connotations of solemnity and reverence.
- **Tur:** A cylindrical drum is played with both hands, accompanied by a bronze plate (thali) for rhythm. Central to community dances of the Dhodia and Nayaka tribes.
- **Madal:** Traditionally tied at the waist and played while dancing in wedding ceremonies. Once widespread, its usage has declined, but revivalist efforts are emerging.

Cultural and Religious Significance:

The tribal musical instruments of South Gujarat occupy a position far beyond their sonic function; they are deeply embedded within the cosmology, ritual practices, and social fabric of the communities that use them. These instruments serve as cultural markers, embodying tribal identity and expressing spiritual devotion while also strengthening communal bonds.

For many tribes, music is a sacred act that mediates between the human and the divine. The *Dhak*, for instance, is indispensable during the *Devkari* ritual, in which ancestors are invoked and honored as deities. The solemn sound of this drum is believed to channel divine presence, guiding the spirit of the deceased into the role of an ancestral guardian. Similarly, the *Tarpu* is considered auspicious during festivals like Diwali and Dussehra, where its melodies accompany rituals dedicated to *Mavali Mata* and *Dungandev*. The performance of these instruments is therefore not merely artistic but ritualistic, functioning as an offering to gods, spirits, and ancestral beings.

Beyond ritual, these instruments also foster collective identity through performance. The rhythmic interplay of the *Tur* and *Thali* forms the foundation of community dances, where participants hold hands or link shoulders in circular formations, reinforcing solidarity and egalitarian values. Such performances blur the boundaries between performers and audience, reflecting what Turino (2008) calls the “participatory mode of music-making,” in which cultural cohesion is prioritized over individual virtuosity.

The instruments further carry symbolic associations tied to ecological knowledge. Constructed from bamboo, gourds, wood, and animal hides, they embody the intimate relationship between tribes and their natural environment. The process of crafting and consecrating these instruments itself constitutes a ritual act, often accompanied by prayers, songs, and taboos that ensure respect for the natural materials used. Thus, each instrument represents a cycle of ecological reciprocity, cultural expression, and spiritual reverence.

Socially, the performance of these instruments also marks transitions and life-cycle events such as weddings, harvests, and initiation ceremonies. The *Sangad-Kahaliya* ensemble, played during weddings and Holi, symbolizes festivity, fertility, and the continuity of community life. In contrast, the *Madal*, though now rare,

historically functioned as an instrument of entertainment, storytelling, and collective joy during village gatherings.

In sum, the cultural and religious significance of tribal instruments in South Gujarat lies in their multifaceted role as ritual mediators, social binders, ecological symbols, and carriers of intangible knowledge. They serve as a cultural archive through which oral traditions, myths, and collective memories are transmitted across generations. Their preservation is therefore critical not only for musical heritage but also for sustaining the spiritual and social worldview of the region's tribal communities.

However, the continuity of tribal instruments in South Gujarat highlights resilience against cultural homogenization. These instruments remain culturally significant, but their continuity faces challenges from modernization, migration, and declining intergenerational transmission. Instruments such as the *Madal*, once central to wedding entertainment, are now on the verge of disappearance. The fading of these traditions highlights the urgent need for preservation strategies, including community-based revival, academic documentation, and policy-level recognition under heritage frameworks such as UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention.

Conclusion:

The tribal musical instruments of South Gujarat represent a vital aspect of India's intangible cultural heritage. They are not only musical artifacts but also living symbols of ecological wisdom, spiritual expression, and social cohesion. Instruments such as the *Tarpu*, *Ghaghli*, *Dhak*, and *Tur* continue to embody centuries-old traditions that integrate music, ritual, and collective identity. Despite pressures of modernization, these instruments illustrate how indigenous knowledge systems creatively adapt natural resources, such as bamboo, gourds, horns, beeswax, and wood, into meaningful cultural expressions.

The study underscores the urgent need for systematic documentation, preservation, and revitalization of these traditions. Globalization and youth migration threaten the continuity of tribal arts, as younger generations are increasingly disconnected from traditional knowledge. Hence, academic institutions, cultural organizations, and policymakers should collaborate to create safeguarding measures, such as community archives, digital recordings, and inclusion of tribal music in educational curricula. Recognition of these instruments under frameworks like UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* can also strengthen their visibility and transmission.

Furthermore, the ethnomusicological significance of these instruments extends beyond the local context. They provide comparative insights into how indigenous communities worldwide maintain identity and resilience through music. Similar to African drumming traditions or Amazonian ritual music, South Gujarat's tribal instruments reinforce that music is not merely entertainment but a cultural system that shapes worldviews, mediates between the sacred and the social, and sustains ecological harmony.

In conclusion, preserving these instruments is not only about safeguarding artifacts but also about ensuring the survival of a worldview that values community solidarity, interdependence with nature, and spiritual continuity. Future research should expand on performance practices, gender roles in music-making, and cross-cultural comparisons with other indigenous musical traditions. By doing so, scholars can contribute to both local empowerment and global discourses on cultural sustainability.

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