



## The Traditional Musical Instruments of the Jaunsari Tribe of Uttarakhand: A Reflection of Their Distinctive Culture

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### Abstract:

*In India, there are numerous tribal communities; over 700 officially recognised tribal groups are present in India, making it the largest country with the most tribes in the world. These tribal groups have unique cultural identity that comes from their unique culture and lifestyle. In their unique culture lie unique traditional musical instruments, which has its own importance. These traditional musical instruments not only reflect their musical culture but also the traditions that have continued since primitive times. The Jaunsari tribe is one such tribe, inhabiting the middle Himalaya region of Uttarakhand in Dehradun district. The tribe includes various ancient musical instruments that are part of their culture, tradition, and identity. The study employs a qualitative multi-method approach combining historical research (through museum visits), personal narratives (informal interviews), textual analysis (books), and observations. The findings suggest that there are various traditional musical instruments in the tribe that are used differently at different periods of time. At every event, whether in marriage, worship of the deity, or death, these instruments have their own importance and specific applications. Thus, this research paper is going to document the traditional musical instruments along with their significance, as well as preserve the knowledge of those traditional instruments that have vanished or are in a state of vanishing in the tribe.*

**Keywords:** Tribal Music, Traditional Music, Jaunsari Musical Instruments, Folk Instruments, Ransingha, Huduk, Bimu

“The distinction between music and noise is never an absolute one, but rather, a matter of cultural conditioning, personal idiosyncrasies, and group identity” (Herndon & McLeod, 1982, p. 12). The group identity or cultural identity brings traditional music, often called folklore or folk music, plays a distinctive role in any society or community.

Traditional music is an intangible part of cultural heritage, and the instruments that produce such music are tangible and powerful expressions of that heritage. These instruments provide a certain kind of identity and, in many ways, distinguish a society, community, or tribe from others.

Indigenous communities have their own distinct traditions, customs, and ways of life, which are also reflected in their music as well as instruments that produce it. In India, there are numerous tribal



communities; over 700 officially recognized tribal groups are present in India, making it home to one of the largest tribal populations in the world. Each tribe has its own importance and significance that preserves its traditional musical instruments. Some of the instruments have been passed down since primitive times. These instruments are not only essential to their musical practise but also serve as a reflection of their distinctive musical culture and identity.

One of the indigenous communities inhabiting the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand in Dehradun district is the Jaunsari tribe. The Jaunsari tribe known for its unique social traditions, customs and folklore, including the once-practised but now largely declining custom of polyandry. The tribe represents a rich and culturally significant community and is also associated with the *Mahabharata*. It is said that the *Pandavas*, during their incognito period, came to this region in disguise under the kingdom of King Virat. Hence, it is believed that the practice of Polyandry began in this region, since then. However, some scholars state that polyandry was practised even before the *Pandavas* came to this region.

The Jaunsari tribe is spread across the Jaunsar-Bawar region of the district, where their folk culture remains vibrant and continues to be expressed through dance, songs, festivals, and traditional practices.

The central feature of this cultural heritage is their traditional musical instruments, which hold deep social and historical significance. These instruments are not merely tools of performance; they are powerful symbols of identity, continuity, and also a source of livelihood and community memory. For instance, the *Ransingha* had historically been used in battles, while the *Nagiya* served to announce news, events, fairs, etc. Such instruments are still used in this region, highlighting its rich history as well as reflecting its rich cultural legacy.

The principal deity of the Jaunsar-Bawar region is *Mahasu Devta*. Many instruments of the tribe are especially dedicated to their deity. Instruments are used for worship, festivals, weddings, and other divine events, even at funeral, etc., hence, without them, all the activities in the tribe are considered incomplete. These folk instruments are related to life and death in this region and have their own importance in their culture.

This paper explores the major traditional musical instruments of the Jaunsari tribe and also documents the structure of these instruments, their methods of performance and their use in a range of social and religious events. Thus, this study highlights the musical role of these instruments in the region and their importance in the Jaunsari tribe as an expression of cultural continuity among the local people.

## Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative multi-method approach, combining historical methods with fieldwork to the museum in Maindrath, where the antiquarian, Dr Surendra Kumar Aryan, provided detailed information on traditional musical instruments. The researchers also collected personal narratives through informal interviews with Shanti Verma, Bhajandas Verma, and Layakram Verma via phone calls. The study also employed textual analysis and observations to understand the traditional musical instruments of the Jaunsar-Bawar region. Hence, everything was done under the ethical standards of research.

## Traditional Musical Instruments

The traditional musical instruments have been divided into two categories by the researchers:

1. Aerophones or Wind instruments
2. Percussion instruments

### 1. Aerophones or Wind instruments

These instruments are called aerophones because they can be played by blowing air across an instrument, producing a sound. The Jaunsari tribe have five folk instruments, such as:

#### ***Ransingha***

It is an aerophone or wind instrument, which is considered the most important folk instrument of the Jaunsar-Bawar region. It is made of either brass or copper, and has two parts. One is thin, which is closer to the mouth. It has a half-oval and small cylindrical shape, while the other is thick and has a half-oval and bigger cylindrical shape. When these two parts are combined, this instrument is played by blowing air through the mouth. The sound it creates is loud and full of echo, which can be heard across the hill.

*Ransingha* is used when there is *Dev Jagara*, and when the deity is travelling, also even on auspicious events (*Bissu*, *Maun*), weddings, etc. It is also used in *Harul* (Regional Ballad), which reflects *Veer-rasa* and narrates bravery.



Fig.1 *Ransingha*, when played



Fig.2 *Ransingha*, when packed, in which smaller part is inside the bigger.

#### ***Karnai and Sarnai***

*Karnai* is another folk instrument made by metals of iron, copper, brass, or silver. It is related to divine events; earlier, it was also used at sunset, informing everybody in the village that the sun has set. It has a shape like *Bhankor*, only used for the regional deity (*Devta*)

*Sarnai*, on the other hand, is similar to *karnai*, but bigger and thick in size.



Fig.3 Karnai with Dhol and Damana  
Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/DL2oNMpzoQN/?img\\_index=2&igsh=MWxwcGE4Z2hkdGZkag==](https://www.instagram.com/p/DL2oNMpzoQN/?img_index=2&igsh=MWxwcGE4Z2hkdGZkag==)



Fig.4 Sarnai made of Brass  
Source:  
<https://i0.wp.com/richardrego.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/music-instru-cu.jpg?ssl=1>

### **Bherai (Benai)**

*Bherai* is made of brass or iron, and has a shape similar to Soprano. This instrument is used in festivals like *Dev Yatra*, *Jagara*, and also during worship of the God or deity. The other time it is used during death rituals, due to its unique sound that indicates distinctive features related to a sad or melancholy event.

### **Bimu**

*Bimu* is a folk instrument of the Jaunsar-Bawar region, used to be played by local people while grazing cattle. It is an aerophone instrument shaped like a mouth harp. It is played by putting it between the teeth. It contains a small wire called *Kanda*, which is played by fingers, through which a beautiful sound is created.

It is usually made of iron, but people used to make it of silver, gold, and copper too. *Bimu* is the only instrument which was played by both men and women (especially women). However, due to some reasons, this instrument was lost or disappeared from the culture of the Jaunsar, but Dr. Surendra Kumar Aryan, a teacher as well as antiquarian, is trying to revive this instrument as well as preserve the lost culture and artefacts in his museum in Maindrath village.



Fig.5 Bimu

### **Banshuri**

There are two types of *Bansuris* found in the region. One is called *Doraas Banshuri*, which is made by combining two bamboo *Bansuri*. It is casually played by young boys who used to go for cattle grazing to pass time as well as for entertainment. This is played by putting it in the mouth, holding it straight and using both hands to play it. However, *Doraas Banshuri* has been disappeared in current times. Another *Bansuri* is called *Pandraans Banshuri*, which is played like Krishna, the lord used to play. It is made up of a single bamboo stick with small holes on it.

## **2. Percussion instruments**

These instruments create sound when they are hit, shaken, or scraped by hands or any other objects. Hence, researchers further divided percussion instruments into two kinds: Hand Percussion and Object Percussion instruments.

**Hand percussion instruments, which are played by hands only, such as:**

### **Dholki**

This is the instrument used during *Gaayan*. *Gaayan* is the local name for the indoor group song and dance (while having duet) in the late evening till morning. This instrument used almost in every event related to entertainment. Its membrane is made of goatskin or sheep, and the rest of body is made of wood. It is played by using both hands and fingers.



Fig.6 Dholki

### **Huduk (Moonda)**

*Huduk* is an instrument which is used for creating a base in music. *Huduk* is played by one hand, while the other hand is holding it at the centre. This instrument is the vertical version of *Dholki*, but is tightly covered by vertical ropes around it. While playing, these ropes are used to create a base. It has another name called *Moonda* in this region. The instrument is played during the *Deepawali* festival while *Chaandera* or *Budhiaat* dance in the Jaunsar-Bawar region.



Fig.7 Huduk

### ***Khanjiri (Dhafli)***

It is a folk instrument which is played together with the *Dholki (Dholak)*, meaning it is played during *Gaayan*. It is played with one hand, held with the other. It is round in shape; one side of the instrument's membrane is made of goatskin, and the other side is nothing. At the sides, bells or cymbals were placed to create a sound. Although this type of *Khanjiri* is disappeared or no longer in use. Plastic *Dhafli* has become a trend in the status quo.



Fig.8 Old Wooden *Khanjiri*



Fig.9 Old *Khanjiri*



Fig.10 New *Khanjiri* (Mostly Plastic)

### ***Pungra (Ghada)***

A folk instrument, again used to play during *gaayan* for creating a base. As it is round in shape, *Pungra* is placed between the legs, and with the help of hands, it is played in beats and rhythm. *Pungra* is made

of either clay or copper or bronze and creates a unique sound for entertainment during *gaayan*, i.e indoor folk songs, music, and dance.



Fig.11 *Pungra*

**Object percussion instruments, which are played with external objects like a stick or pair of sticks to produce sound:**

#### ***Dhol- Damana (Damau)***

*Dhol* is the instrument which is very important in the Jaunsari tribe. It is used in every ritual from birth to death. It is an integral part of auspicious ceremonies, agricultural activities, even in funeral rites. *Damana* on the other hand is played alongside the *Dhol* as a complementary instrument. *Dhols* are made of metals such as iron, brass, and copper. Silver-plated drums are also found in sacred places like in *Mahasu Devta* temple. Goat skin is covered on both sides of the *Dhol*, and one side of the *Damana*. Both these instruments are played with the stick, which is made of *Beemal* wood, locally known as *Daukyaate*.

The pair of these instruments is played in every festival of Jaunsar. This instrument is also used in every *Sakranti* of each month, announcing the end as well as beninning of the month. Without this folk instrument any folk music, folk festival, and folk tradition is incomplete.

It is played in various rhythms like: during birth *Badhai* rhythm, during welcome *Shaubaut* rhythm, during *Raaso* folk dance *Ghee* rhythm, and during funeral *Dhoyaakri* and *Muyaakri* rhythm are played. This instrument is generally played by the *Bajgi* caste since generations.



Fig.12 Researcher with Dr. Surendra Kumara Aryan holding Traditional handmade *Dhol*



Fig.13 *Dhol* in *Mahasu Devta* Temple (Hanol)



Fig.14 Dhol with Damana

### **Dhak**

*Dhak* is the smaller version of *Dholki*, used especially during the worship of Goddess *Kaali* and during Diwali festival in Jaunsar-Bawar region. The way it is played particularly during worship, is unusual. It is played in a special form of skill with small wooden stick and using fingers on both sides of the *Dhak* to create a base rhythm.



Fig.15 Dr. Surendra Kumars Aryan, an antiquarian holding *Dhak*

### **Nagiyara**

Earlier, this instrument was played during every *pehar* of deity worship. This is made of thick leather and wood, it is a larger version of *Damana* that produces a loud sound. It is used mainly in rituals dedicated to *Mahasu devta*, and is played through thick stick called *Dakyaate* using both hands.

During the period of deity's travelling, this musical instrument is carried on someone's back by a person from the Bajgi caste, known as *Doudwari*, while someone else plays it. Without this instrument, the divine rituals associated with *Mahasu Devta* are considered incomplete.

*Nagiyara* also has a historical connection with warfare and battles. It is also played during *Bissu* festival, and when the folk festival, events, and music, that reflects bravery and courage.



Fig.16 Nagiyara

### ***Dounru***

*Dounru* is the local name of the pallet drum also called hourglass drum, which commonly referred to India as *Shiv ka damru*. In the tribe, this instrument is mainly used in the *Gogaad* festival. *Gogaad* is the religious occasion in which regional people worship Guru Gorakhnath and Jaharveer Maharaj (Peer) deity.

It is also considered a smaller version of *Huduk*, but played differently. The *Dounru* is played with small stick which is tied to the instrument. Because ropes are fixed around it, the player uses one hand to hold the stick while the other hand loosens and tightens the rope to create a base rhythm. It is made of goatskin and wood.



Fig.17 Dounru

### ***Lota***

The *Lota*, made of either brass or copper, is used as an instrument in the Jaunsari traditional musical instrument. It is mainly played during indoor dance music especially in *gaayan*, while striking a stick on the object (*Lota*) in a rhythm, to create a music.



Fig.18 Lota

### Beluaa

It is an instrument played during the *Chandera* dance on Diwali, but it is primarily played during the *Gayaan*. It is made of Brass as well as copper, and is played with stick, similar to *Lota*. *Beluaa* is played with the same way to create music and enhance entertainment.



Fig.19 *Beluaa*

### Conclusion

Music defines the rich history, culture, and legacy of any community, tribe or clan. The Jaunsari tribe is undoubtedly one of the richest tribes in terms of culture, customs, traditions, rituals, and folklore. The traditional musical instruments that are found in the tribe are yet another examples of its rich legacy and heritage. However, the instruments like *Bhaayan*, *Algoja*, *Doraas Bansuri*, and *Shardi* have disappear or in the state of disappearing from the culture of the Jaunsari tribe.

The instruments mentioned above in the context, their structure, their methods of playing, and the roles they serve all highlights the tribe's beautiful and creative artistic and musical culture. That provides a cultural identity to the people of the tribe.

Their way of playing, whether through blowing from mouth, striking with a stick or using bare hands, these instruments create a sense of belonging and bring a cultural continuity, even in divine occasions, events, festivals, and other ceremonies. Therefore, preserving and documenting these folk instruments is essential to introducing the musical heritage of the Jaunsari tribe to global audience and to sustain and enrich the legacy of the tribe.

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