

Paragon of Musical Fiesta in Assam

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ABSTRACT

Assam is a land where great many tribes commingle. Traces of several ethnic groups like Negrito, Austric, Alpine, Aryan, Dravidian and Vedic Aryans are residing in Assam. Few tribes of Assam are Ahom, Karbi, Boro, Tiwa, Dimasa, Deori, Mising and so on. These tribes have a rich heritage associated with music, art and culture. However music and instruments are the nucleus of entertainment for these tribes. An air of melancholy surrounds the valleys of Assam as proper study of the tribal music and instruments haven't been laid hold of. This paper endeavours the musical interest of the many tribes found in Assam along with their musical instruments.

KEYWORDS: Assam, Music, Culture, Tribes, Instruments

How to cite this paper: Richa Gogoi | Jyoti Senapati "Paragon of Musical Fiesta in Assam" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-4 | Issue-6, October 2020, pp.287-291, URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd33351.pdf



IJTSRD33351

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1. INTRODUCTION

The state of Assam in the Northeast of India is an abode to cultural amalgamation. This valley is home to diverse tribes, communities and ethnic groups dwelling in harmony. Countless number of people belonging to various tribes and groups have immigrated to Assam from time immemorial. These tribes have brought with themselves art forms and culture the heritage of which is enriched with value. The Assamese Culture and Heritage is hence built upon the fusion of divergent culture. Races like the Negrito, Austric, Mongolian, Alpine, Aryan and Dravid have combined and thereafter influenced the tradition. Among the great many contribution made by these tribes, races and groups, the musical instruments that they introduced are worthy to be mentioned. The traditionally coined musical instruments have brought substantial value to the Assamese culture.

The Music tradition of Assam has been in action since a very long period of time. This is evident in the *Sānchi Puthi* which are the Palm leaf text containing the authentic description of Historic glory of the Vaishnava era. Since Music is the blend of songs, dances and instruments, therefore the information about the same are obtained from these texts. String instruments like *Veena*, *Tokari*, etc. and Rhythm instruments like *Taal*, *Bhurtaal*, etc. Woodwind instruments like *Hinga*, *Pepa*, *Conch Shell*, *Flute*, *Gagana*, etc. Beat Instruments like *Nagara*, *Doba*, *Mridanga*, *Dhul*, etc. are mentioned in the ancient scriptures and other canonical texts. Other than this, the instruments represent the cultured and harmonious customs of the Tribes and communities. The objective of the article is to showcase an illustrated account of these significant musical instruments.

A description of the musical instruments traditionally used by the *Mishing*, *Bodo*, *Rabha*, *Tiwa*, *Dimasa*, *Karbi*, *Tea-Plantation Workers Community* and *Sonowal Kachari* have been made an attempt hereafter:

1.1. The Musical Instruments of the Misings:

The number of instruments used by the Misings are not any less in number. They also use various kinds of instruments and incorporate the sound into their music. Some of which are *Lelong*, *Marbang*, *Lupi*, *Kokter Toka*, *Mibuigosa*, *Deoghanta*, etc with lesser known instruments such as *Dendun*, *Kekung*, *Bin* or *Tokari*, woodwind instruments like *Aejok Aapung*, *Gugang*, *Pempa*, *Hinga*, *Tulu*, *Puli*, and Beat Instruments like *Dumpak*, *Dumdum*, *Dhulki*, are worth mentioning.

1. **Lelong:** Lelong is an instrument like that of a Borkaah in shape of disc made of metal. It has ear like structure on plates of metal. The ear like structures have hole in them and cloth ropes are attached to suspend and wrap the lelong to play it.

2. **Marbang or Barbang:** just like the lelong, Marbang is also a metal instrument shaped like discs and wrapped with cloth to bang against each other producing music.

Lelong and Marbang are both exclusive instruments in the Mising Culture. Both are played in special occasions like *Aliyai ligang*, *Da-ang* meaningspecially invited youngsters organised Ligang Bihu, Funeral of the head of the family/society, Religious occasion, *Gumraag* Dance occasions, *Kebang* events are mention worthy. These precious instruments are considered to be heirloom property.

3. **Lupi:** The Dhul or drum in Mising music is accompanied by rhythmic instrument like lupi during Bihu performances. The taal they use here as lupi is relatively larger in size. The lupi may weigh from around ½ kg to a whopping 3 kg. The systematic rhythm and chime produced by the lupi cheer the youngsters in celebrating the festivals through music.
4. **Kokter Toka:** A bamboo with a cork at one end is halved into two from the other side and the two halves struck against each other form a rhythm. It is called Kokter in Mising. Dancers use the kaktera and hand clapping alternatively while keeping track of beats while performing Bihu.
5. **Ramtaal:** Ramtaal is made of bamboo and is also known as Kortaal. The Mising Priests are observed to hold cylindrical halved bamboo blocks and strike against each other. The Ramtaal acts both as a alternate to clapping of hands and to keep track of the beats. Generally the Ramtaal has use in the religious rituals of *Purnabhagiya* or *Amayabhagati* named religious songs.
6. **Mibuigosa:** The Deodhai form of dance has been in terms in the Mising culture since time immemorial. The one playing it is referred to as being the Mi'bu and the sword on which metal feather-like plates are attached is called the Yagsa. When the Mi'bu moves the sword holding it by the handle, and sings the auspicious song, the plates strike each other to produce a chimming rhythm to which dances are also performed. Which is why the sword if Mi'bu is also categorized under musical instruments.
7. **Deoghanta:** The Mi'bu of the Mising tribe also use another instrument called the Deoghanta. The Deoghanta is played on the commencement of an event or to sing of the well being as, well as while praying for the recovery of a victim from evil spirit while the Miri recites "Yal" songs to achieve relief.
8. **Aejok Aapung:** Made from the Casket of a Bottle gourd, a horn like instrument similar to that of a Pepa is considered to be as Aejok Aapung in the Mising Culture. The Aejok Aapung is used to welcome the bride and groom and to felicitate special guests. The instrument being in culture from a long time is lesser known of in the present times.
9. **Kekung:** It is a string instrument made from the shells of coconut to form the base and the body is carved out of wood with few pieces of corks strategically attached to keep the string tight and suspended. A string of silk is attached which when struck with a chip from horseshoe produces music. It can be made from shell of coconut, wood or bamboo.
10. **Tokari:** Tokari and Dotara are instruments used in the Mising culture as well.

Other than the aforementioned instruments, the Mising culture also incorporates *Tumor aapung*; *pumsu aapung*; *Diriki aapung*; *Tu- tak aapung*; *Kitpang*; *Guhtrig*; *Bubung*; etc into their music.

1.2. The Musical Instruments of the Bodos:

One of the prominent tribes of Assam the Bodos, have immensely contributed to the diverse culture of Assam. The *Kherai*, *Habajonai*, *Bagarumba* and *Boishagu* four vibrant festivals and their various dance forms and songs are performed in accordance with scientific norms have transported the folk culture of Assam to unimaginable heights.

Some indispensable instruments of the Bodo community are: *Serja*, *Ciphung*, *Khaam*, *Bingi*, *Ramtaal*, *Owa Khowang*, *Gongona*, *Jotha* etc.

1. **Khaam:** The drummers of the Bodos use Khaam. The Khaam is a instrument similar to that of a Madol. A wooden casket is the body of the khaam with covering of leather membrane on both sides. It is around 3 ft in length and is 1 ½ feet wide on both sides. Both the ends are covered and secured with rope. The khaam is considered primary instrument in the Dance music of the Bodo culture.
2. **Ciphung:** Ciphung is a long Flute of the Bodos. It had five to six holes. The tune of Ciphung incorporated into various dance forms attract people.
3. **Serja:** An instrument known by the name of Saarinda is referred to as Serja in the Bodo community. The use of Serja in the Bodo culture is immense. The tune of this string instrument is produced by striking a chip against it's chords and the sound provides an extra nuance to the melody of bodo music.
4. **Jotha:** It is an instrument just like the Khutitaal.
5. **Thoruka:** The instrument used in Bihu Dance or Bihu Naam, generally referred to as Thoruka and Owakhuang in Bodo language.
6. **Gongona:** The instrument generally used in Bihu Dance music known as Gagana is referred to as Gangana in the Bodo language.
7. **Khanjari:** The Bodos use another kind of rhythmic instrument called khanjari. Two blocks of wood around 10 inches long have small handles to hold on to and small corks with bells attached to them which produce chimming rhythm upon movement. The Khanjaris are held close and then separated. These movement in produce rhythmic sound when moved in air and the bells strike against each other. Especially during the *Bordoisila* Dance the Dancers hold on to a Khanjari in one hand and hold the Neck scarf on the other making graceful movements dancing in ten rows or one row.

1.3. The Instruments of the Rabhas:

One of the significant tribes of Assam, the Rabhas have a exclusive set of instruments that they use to accomplish their melodies and weave those into rhythmic dances. Some of the instruments are: *Bransi*, *Lakhor Baahi* (Wax Flute), *Hem or Kham*, *Khara Bransi*, *Jaap Khara Baahi*, *Singa Badungdappa* or *Bagadung*, *Manchelenka*, *Gomena*, *Gugumel*, *Gongleng*, *Dayedi* or *Kashi*, *Buburenga*, etc are primarily used.

1. **Bransi:** The Bransi is a bamboo made flute of the Rabhas. The woodwind instrument has 2-3 or more holes in it to let air pass.

2. **Lakhor Baahi**(Wax Flute): The wax flute or Lakhor Bahi is attributed to the shepherd boys. The shepherds during their menaces are seen playing this flute.
3. **Hem or Kham**: The Rabhas refer to the Dhul or Madol as Hem or Kham. Used during Dance- Music, the Kham provides rhythmic beats.
4. **Khara Bransi**: This instrument is made of long pipelike bamboo with a length of 7-8 ft the corks in the middle are strategically carved out. It is blown with air to produce melodious tune. It is also known as *Karhanal Baahi*.
5. **Jaap Khara Baahi**: Just like the Khara Bransi, the Jaap Khara is also a long flute. However, it is played with a few pipes attached to one another.
6. **Singa**: The horns of Buffalo made into an instrument is referred to as the Singa among the Rabhas. Tradition wise this instrument also has its popularity in the Rabha Culture.
7. **Badungdappa or Bagadung**: Made from bamboo with corks the bagadung has small sticks inserted in desired position that when moved produces sound when struck against the body.
8. **Manchelenka**: A 3 ft long block of wood has bird like structures carved out and suspended by ropes and the bird like dolls when move one side to other produce a rhythmic sound. Which is why this can also be regarded as a musical instrument
9. **Buburenga**: The Buburenga is categorised under the woodwind instrument. Made from a bamboo named *Tanga*, the Buburenga can be blown at like a pepa to get desired music.
10. **Dayedi or Kashi**: Rhythmic Instrument made of bell metal called Kaah is widely prevalent in the Rabha community. They refer to this Metal instruments as Dayedi or Kashi.

1.4. The Musical Instruments of the Tiwas:

The Tiwas of Assam residing mainly in the the Nagaon and Morigaon areas traditionally also practice music and instruments into their ritualistic melodies. Their Bihu, Bharat Festival, Sogra Misua, Sokh Lankhun, Fuja, etc festivals have dances in their custom where the use of instruments is known. The primary instruments of the Tiwas are: *Khram, khrambaar, Dogara, Dhul or Dholak, Thorang, Pangchi, Kaali, Toka, Gagana Jatara, Tokari, etc.*

1. **Khram**: Around 3 ft long and 8 inch wide casket of wood is used to make a Khram. The both ends are covered with cow skin. The instrument is played by striking against the ends with bare hands.
2. **Khrambaar**: Khrambaar is smaller in size than Khram and the ends are bigger than the Khram. The rest of it is constructed like the Khram.
3. **Dogara or Tumbang**: The dhul like instrument of the Tiwas is referred to as the Dogara Tumbang. The size is small and the end cover are large in this instrument covered with animal skin. It is played just like the Nagara striking the covers with sticks.

4. **Dhul**:The commonly used drum in the Assamese culture is the same instrument used in the Tiwa Culture.
5. **Thorang**: The commonly known flute in the Assamese tradition is referred to as the Thorang among the Tiwas. Also, in some cases, two pipe like flute are attached in which the first pipe is required to have one hole with corks at either ends and the other pipe has multiple holes to control the air flow in order to designate the sound coming out of it. Its use can be seen in the Dance music of the Tiwas extensively.
6. **Pangchi**: The Tiwas use a flute which they refer to as the Pangchi which is also smaller in size like the regular flute.

1.5. The Instruments of the Dimasa Tribe:

The districts of Nagaon, North Kachar, Karbianglong, and Kachar of Assam are home to the Dimasa tribe. Their festival of bihu named "Busu" is celebrated in a exclusive manner with songs and dances being performed to enjoy the festivals. Their instruments are of lesser quantity. However, the ones constructed have contributed to the folk dance performances in order to be vibrant and attractive. *Muri, Supin, Muri Batisa, Khramdubung*, are the major instruments.

1. **Muri**: The pepa like instrument is made of wood and has three parts namely Mathi, Murifong and Muribaar. It is generally 3 ½ ft to 4 ft in length. On the other hand, 'Kudan' is another significant part of the Muri.
2. **Khram**:The Dimasa people cut branches from the *Jasim* tree and slit the branches in half to construct the Khram. The taali and the body are both attached to each other with a rope made from buffalo skin. It is an indispensable organ in the Dance music of the Dimasa community.
3. **Supin(Flute)**:The Supin is made of Bamboo. It has some differences to the commonly known flute in the sense that a small bamboo cork is attached to the Supin to facilitate easy passing of air. Therefore two parts are attached to construct a Supin.
4. **Muri Batisa(Flute)**:To construct a Muri Batisa a small pipe of bamboo is made into a flute. The young boys prefer to play this instrument. Since bamboo is referred to as Batisa, the instrument is hence known as Muribatisa.
5. **Khramdubung**:Generally played by the Dimasa women, the Khramdubung is made from dubung(Saccharum) bush's branches are hollowed and other sticks are inserted to form a sieve like structure which when played with hand produce sound. It is around 1 ft wide and 1 ½ ft tall. It is played in harmony with the Muri and Muri batisa.

1.6. The instrument of the Karbi tribe:

One of the tribes of Assam are the Karbis. Their vibrant and elegant culture has contributed to the heritage of Assam. Their *Rongshar, Hascha, Somangkon, etc.* religious and social events having songs and dances have musical instruments in use which extend the attraction of the people. Some of the instruments among the Karbis are: *Cheng, Chengburup, Muritonpo, Panchoi, Chengso etc.*

1. **Cheng:** The most popular drum of the Karbis is called the Cheng. The Cheng is made of a wooden casket of length 16 inches and wide around 10 inches. The main drummer is referred to as the *Chengbrupopi* and the supporting drummer is referred to as the *ChengBrupos*.
2. **Chengburup:** The Chengburup is a drum like instrument suspended beside the waist while playing it. The length and width are both around 8 inches. The covered mouth is also around 8 inches. The one end is covered with skin membrane while the other is blocked with wood and is played by two sticks struck against the covered mouth.
3. **Muritonpo:** A wooden block is carved out in the shape of a Shehnai to design this instrument. It has 6 holes that are controlled with fingers to manipulate the desired tune. Air is blown into a small mouthpiece at the top to play the Muriunpo.
4. **Panchoi:** A flute type instrument made of bamboo is referred to as Panchoi among the Karbis. Both the two kinds of flute constructed in accordance to their culture are widely used their world of music.
5. **Chengso:** The Karbis generally use Khutitaal made of bell metal. This instrument is referred amongst the Karbis as Chengso.

1.7. The instruments of the Tea plantation tribe:

People from various tribes and communities in India from the Third Decade of the Nineteenth Century in search of work under the British Raj arrived in Assam as tea plantation workers to lead a livelihood. Today they are regarded as the Assamese Tea – Plantation Tribe. They have contributed immensely to the Assamese folk tradition. Being a miscellaneous tribe of people coming from various provinces of India, they came together and formed a culture that added a new colour to the Canvas of Assamese Heritage making it more vivid. Their different adaptations from varied parts and cumulative pattern of music and dance forms have added a newness to the existing folk culture. Their festivals, occasions, social ceremonies, incorporate dances and songs to make their customs and rituals bright and attractive with the use of different musical instruments as well. Some of these instruments are: *Dhak, Dhul(Drum), Madol, Flute, Kortaal, Nagara, Dhumsa, Sangu, Dhapu, Dafla, Khutitaal, Dholak, etc.* This working tribe have incorporated some of the indigenous and regional instruments of Assam. However some of these instruments have also been adapted from the overall Indian Folk music or Mainstream music as well.

1.8. The Instruments of the Sonowal Kachari:

The Sonowal Kachari Tribe of Upper Assam use the commonly used folk music instruments in the Assamese folk culture. However there are some special instruments found in use among their community. These are: *Toka, Haath Toka, Flute, Khuti Taal etc.*

1. **Haath Toka:** The haath toka used by the Sonowal Kachari tribe is much larger than the commonly used toka. Around 3 ft large toka. The end is struck against the ground to make sounds with the toka is therefore referred to as the Haath Toka.

2. **Khutitaal:** Khutitaal is essentially made of bell metal. Its emergence also has a tale. It is believed among them that their worshipped Deity, *Khiring Raja* meaning Lord Shiva teaches the art of playing the Khutitaal. Fungi growing on trees or bamboo grass shaped like that of a mushroom is referred to as the khutitaal.

1.9. The Instruments of the Deori Tribe:

The districts of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur in Assam are home to the people of this community. They have in different seasons of the year, showcased various dances and songs on the occasion of festivals and rituals, religious and social customs. Many kinds of musical instruments are incorporated into their melodies to make their celebration more attractive. Some of the festivals they celebrate are: *Bohagiya Bisu, Kati Bisu, Maghiya Bisu and Deohals have Bohagiya Bisu Puja, Raajkevang, Haauniya Puja*, rituals for the forefathers: *Mimaharerua, Euyoiemedi, etc.* Apart from these religious occasions, the deori people incorporate various musical instruments into their songs and dances. Among these, the dhul *Durum* is an instrument of utmost importance. On top of that some instruments like the *Taal, Pepa, Gagana, Toka, Tokari, Bina, Flute, Hinga(Horn), Khul* are instruments used from time to time.

1. **Halmora Instrument:** Apart from the aforementioned instruments the dhul used in modern times is constructed in a advanced manner from barks of Megela or Thoronga trees. This particular instrument enables the beat to be in place and the sound is produced with clarity on the beats of which the Deodhani music is formed and the Bihu dancers are made to dance.
2. **Dhul- Dhong:** Just like the Halmora Dhul, the Dhul-Dhong is also another instrument played for similar kind of music. It is made with raw bamboo on the body of which two holes are made. On top of that a stick is used to carve out small opening on which the fingers can be struck to produce sound for making the Deodhani dancers dance to the rhythm of the Dhul dhong.
3. **Husori Toka Instrument:** The deoris of the Magh or Bohag i.e. Bihu of the January or April month which they refer to as the “Bisu” have a tradition of singing husori in their courtyard. On this occasion the youngsters preferably take a long bamboo structure which they keep horizontally and strike it at different beats to form a rhythm following which the husori songs are sung. As it is used as a alternative to toka while singing husori, it can therefore be referred to as a kind of rhythmic instrument.

2. CONCLUSION:

Music and Instruments are interwoven structures. If music is a form of worship then, instruments are the vehicle of Art that facilitates the worship. The knowledge of tone, beats and rhythm is significant in order to incorporate the instruments into music. The culture enriched valley of Assam is accustomed to the Tribal and ethnic groups residing here since centuries which is displayed through the instruments that are prevalent in terms of their music tradition. The purity in emotions of the Tribal and ethnic groups are reflected in the vibrant instruments. The purpose of music is to entertain. The way the beats of *Dhul, Madol and Khram* generate vibration into people, similarly the tune of *Flute and Pepa* fetch peace of mind to the listeners.

It is not that these instruments have not gone through the phase of evolution. They have changed under the influence one tribe projects towards another. However, this influences have not hampered the defining features of the instruments. The instruments depending on the places and tribes they are played have different styles of playing them and absorb the local ascendancy.

Summing up, it may be stated that these instrument have exceptional spot in the Culture of Assam. The Musical Scholars and Musicians have brought emphasis on these instruments in the present times and have potential to be a gateway for the identity of different tribes and groups through a dignified manner.

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