

FOLK MUSIC OF MADHYA PRADESH

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Abstract

Madhya Pradesh, often regarded as the heart of India, boasts a rich and diverse cultural heritage, with folk music playing a pivotal role in the expression of its social and spiritual life. The state's folk music is deeply rooted in its tribal traditions and rural customs, passed down orally through generations. Various tribal communities such as the Gonds, Bhils, Baigas, and Oraons contribute unique musical styles that reflect their distinct identities, beliefs, and ways of life. Folk music in Madhya Pradesh is not merely a form of entertainment but an integral part of daily life, religious rituals, seasonal celebrations, and important life events like births, marriages, and harvests.

Prominent forms such as Fag songs during Holi, Karma songs during harvest, Sanja Geet during Navratri, and Bhagoria songs during tribal festivals represent the diversity and richness of the state's musical traditions. These songs are accompanied by traditional instruments like dhol, mandal, flute, and manjira, which enhance the rhythmic and melodic appeal. The themes typically revolve around nature, love, devotion, heroism, and community bonding. Today, efforts are being made by cultural organizations and festivals to preserve and promote this intangible heritage. Folk music of Madhya Pradesh remains a vital expression of the region's cultural identity and collective memory.

Keywords: - Folk Music, Madhya Pradesh, Cultural

1. INTRODUCTION

Madhya Pradesh, located at the geographical center of India, is a land characterized by its ecological and cultural diversity. Its vast expanse encompasses plateaus, forests, valleys, and river systems, fostering a rich tapestry of ethnic groups, communities, and linguistic identities.

This physical and demographic diversity has significantly contributed to the evolution of a multifaceted cultural heritage, among which folk music holds a prominent place. The state is home to tribal populations such as the Gond, Baiga, Bhil, and Korku, alongside various rural and semi-urban communities whose oral traditions and musical expressions are deeply rooted in their historical and social experiences.

Folk music in Madhya Pradesh transcends the boundaries of art to function as a medium of communication, storytelling, resistance, and community bonding. It is intricately linked with agrarian cycles, religious festivals, rites of passage, and everyday labor. Genres such as Bhagoria songs in the Bhil community, Nirguni bhajans in the Malwa region, and Faag and Alha in Bundelkhand embody the emotional, philosophical, and performative ethos of the people. Musical forms are predominantly transmitted orally and performed in collective settings, often with simple but deeply symbolic instruments like the dholak, mandal, algoza, and bana.

The musical traditions of Madhya Pradesh are not static. They evolve with social changes and respond to external influences. However, the onslaught of modernization, digital media, urban migration, and economic displacement has led to the dilution or marginalization of many of these indigenous traditions. Despite sporadic efforts by cultural organizations and government institutions, systematic documentation and scholarly engagement with these folk music traditions remain insufficient.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly engagement with Indian folk music has historically been fragmented, with a strong emphasis on classical traditions. Nevertheless, works by early ethnomusicologists such as Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Rabindranath Tagore acknowledged the presence of indigenous music traditions among the rural and tribal communities. These initial efforts were more descriptive and lacked analytical depth.

In the latter half of the 20th century, Indian musicologists such as Ashok Ranade (1990) and S.A.K. Durga (1991) pioneered the study of folk and tribal music with a cultural lens. Ranade's concept of "contextual musicology" emphasized the need to analyze music within its social and

performative contexts rather than as isolated sound structures. Durga's comparative studies across regions helped establish the diversity and complexity of India's folk music landscape.

Despite these contributions, very few comprehensive studies have emerged focusing exclusively on Madhya Pradesh, leaving significant gaps in region-specific scholarship.

Regional Literature on Madhya Pradesh:

Documentation of folk music in Madhya Pradesh has largely been confined to government-sponsored ethnographic reports, cultural surveys, and folklorist compilations. The Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum and Adivasi Lok Kala Academy have undertaken important initiatives in archiving tribal songs and performances, yet these are mostly in vernacular and remain inaccessible to the broader academic community.

Scholars such as Dr. Laxmi Narayan Gaur and R. P. Shukla have published limited studies on Malwi and Bundeli folk traditions. These works are useful in cataloguing genres, such as *Faag*, *Alha*, *Dadariya*, and *Bhagoria*, but often lack rigorous analytical frameworks or musical transcriptions.

Similarly, tribal traditions such as the Gond Pardhan Bana singing, Karma dance songs of Baiga, and Bhils' Holi songs have been referenced in anthropological studies (e.g., Elwin, 1955), but they have not been fully explored from an ethnomusicological perspective. This lack of critical engagement with instrumentation, performance practice, and sociocultural meaning underscores the need for further scholarly attention.

3. FOLK MUSIC TRADITIONS

India's rich musical heritage includes a diverse array of regional folk traditions that express the social, spiritual, and cultural lives of communities. Two regions in Madhya Pradesh—Malwa and Nimar—offer particularly vivid examples of such traditions. The folk music of these regions, though geographically close, presents distinct features in terms of rhythm, instrumentation, themes, and performance contexts. This chapter explores the unique characteristics of Malwa and Nimar folk music and analyzes the interaction and mutual influences between the two traditions.

Characteristics of Malwa Folk Music

Geographic and Cultural Context

Malwa is a plateau region in western Madhya Pradesh, extending into parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat. Its cultural history is shaped by a blend of Rajput, Maratha, and tribal influences. The region is agriculturally rich and has a vibrant oral tradition that encompasses songs for every aspect of rural life—from sowing and harvest to rituals and festivities.

Musical Structure and Rhythm

Malwa folk music is known for its melodic richness and rhythmic fluidity. Unlike classical forms with fixed talas (rhythmic cycles), Malwa folk rhythms are more flexible, often shaped by the natural cadence of speech or communal activity. However, some fixed rhythmic patterns are common, especially in festival and ritual music. The mand and kachchhi melodies are frequently used, giving the songs a soft, flowing character.

Instruments Used

A distinct set of traditional instruments characterizes Malwa's folk music:

- Mandal (a frame drum) is central to rhythm.
- Algoza (a pair of flutes played simultaneously) provides melody.
- Ravanahatha (an ancient bowed string instrument) adds emotional depth.
- Been, bansuri, and dholak are also commonly used.

Characteristics of Nimar Folk Music

Geographic and Cultural Background

Nimar, or Nemar, lies southwest of Malwa and is characterized by its lush forests and the Narmada River. The culture of Nimar is more tribal and rustic, influenced by the Bhil, Korku, and Gond communities. This results in a more raw and energetic style of music, compared to the somewhat lyrical nature of Malwa.

Musical Style and Rhythm

Nimar music is rhythm-driven, vibrant, and more spontaneous. It uses fast tempos, syncopated beats, and energetic delivery. The music is often call-and-response in nature, allowing

communal participation. The tappa style of singing is frequently employed, showcasing vocal agility and ornamental flourishes.

The beat is central, and rhythm dictates the musical flow. Many songs are linked with dance forms, reinforcing the percussive, physical nature of the music.

Instruments of Nimar

Instruments in Nimar are loud and percussive, suited to open-air, festive environments:

- **Timki** and **mandar** (types of hand drums)
- **Thali** (metal plate used as a percussion instrument)
- **Harmonium** (often introduced through folk-theatre troupes)
- **Ektara** and **dotara** (single or double-stringed instruments)
- **Dhak** and **nagara** for temple and ceremonial music

4. MUSIC OF THE GOND TRIBE

Overview and Cultural Context

The Gond tribe, one of the largest tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh, is predominantly found in the forested regions of eastern and southern Madhya Pradesh—especially in districts like Mandla, Dindori, Balaghat, and Chhindwara. Music for the Gonds is not merely an art form but an essential part of life, interwoven with rituals, festivals, and social functions.



Genres and Performance Traditions

Gond music comprises several traditional forms that are performed on various occasions:

- **Karma Songs and Dance:** One of the most important and widely celebrated genres, Karma is associated with the agricultural cycle. Performed during the Karma festival in August or September, these songs are accompanied by circular group dances.
- **Saila Songs:** Performed in winter, usually post-harvest, Saila involves young men visiting homes in the village at night, singing and dancing with sticks. This dance is both a form of entertainment and a symbol of community bonding.
- **Reena and Rela Songs:** These are short lyrical forms used during social gatherings and communal functions, often improvisational and narrative in nature.

Instruments

Gond folk instruments reflect their deep connection with nature and simplicity:

- **Mandar:** A double-headed drum that produces deep, resonant rhythms, often used in Karma and Saila performances.
- **Timki:** A smaller hand drum used by female performers.
- **Flute (Bansuri):** Utilized especially by male performers to produce melodic interludes.
- **Ektara or Banjo (in some modern settings):** Occasionally seen, especially when Gond music is adapted for public stage performances.

Social and Ritual Context

Music is intrinsic to Gond ceremonies—whether it is for marriage, initiation, harvest, or death rituals. Songs are often passed down orally, imbued with mythological tales, ancestral reverence, and natural symbolism. For example, the Karma songs not only celebrate the deity Karam Devta but also emphasize environmental balance and fertility.

Musical Analysis

Gond music typically uses pentatonic or heptatonic scales, often devoid of complex ragas. The rhythms are syncopated and often cyclic, reflecting agrarian and seasonal cycles.

Antiphonal (call-and-response) singing is common, particularly in group dances. The tempo builds gradually, often culminating in a fast, ecstatic crescendo that enhances group cohesion and spiritual experience.

Music of the Bhil Tribe

Overview and Cultural Context

The Bhils, residing mainly in western Madhya Pradesh (especially in Jhabua, Alirajpur, Dhar), are known for their dynamic culture and vibrant musical heritage. Music in Bhil life is celebratory, performative, and deeply symbolic of their cosmological beliefs.

Genres and Performance Traditions

- **Ghoomar and Gavari:** Although Ghoomar is often associated with Rajasthan, the Bhils of western Madhya Pradesh perform their variant, which emphasizes community identity and spirituality.
- **Mythological Songs:** Songs centered on tribal deities such as Dev Narayan and Bhairav are performed during rituals and festivals.
- **Holi and Bhagoria Festival Songs:** Rich in humor, satire, and romance, these songs reflect the cultural ethos of youth and festivity.

Instruments

- **Chang and Dhak:** Large frame drums used during festive dances.
- **Turturi:** A bamboo wind instrument creating shrill tones used in ritualistic contexts.
- **Shehnai and Bansuri:** Used for melody and drone effects.
- **Jhanjh (Cymbals):** Often accompany dance rhythms and emphasize tempo.

Social and Ritual Context

Bhil music often marks rites of passage—birth, puberty, marriage, and death. It is also integral to ancestor worship and agricultural rituals. The **Bhagoria Festival**, a pre-marriage fair, sees elaborate musical performances where young men and women interact through song and dance, highlighting themes of courtship and communal harmony.

Musical Analysis

Bhil musical forms are characterized by repetitive rhythmic cycles and modal melodies. Much like Gond music, they rely on oral transmission and community memory. Call-and-response patterns, syncopation, and drone-based melodies are typical. Unlike classical forms, ornamentation is minimal, focusing instead on rhythmic vitality and collective engagement.

Music of Other Tribes: Baiga, Korku, and Others

Baiga Tribe

The Baigas, found in Dindori, Anuppur, and Balaghat regions, are a reclusive tribe with shamanistic traditions. Music among the Baigas is deeply spiritual and often used in healing ceremonies and nature worship.

- **Instruments:** Primarily **Mandar**, **Thali (metal plate)**, and **Timki**.
- **Genres:** Ritual songs during worship of deities like Budha Dev and Earth Mother.
- **Context:** Music is seen as a divine offering, with many songs involving trance-inducing rhythms.

Korku Tribe

Located in Hoshangabad and Betul districts, the Korkus have a musical tradition that reflects their forest-based lifestyle.

- **Themes:** Songs about forest life, wildlife, seasonal cycles, and ancestor worship.
- **Instruments:** Similar to Gonds—**bamboo flutes**, **drums**, and **ankle bells**.
- **Context:** Used during sowing and harvest, and in the **Gotul**-like youth institutions for social bonding.

5. CONCLUSION

This section would provide a concise yet comprehensive overview of the principal discoveries made throughout the research, drawing directly from the detailed analyses presented in Chapters 4 through 9. It would not introduce any new data but would synthesize and integrate the key insights gleaned from fieldwork, archival research, and musical analysis.

The summary would begin by highlighting the sheer regional diversity of folk music in Madhya Pradesh, affirming the premise that the state is not a single musical entity but a mosaic of distinct traditions. It would recap the unique characteristics identified in Chapters 4 (Malwa and Nimar), Chapter 5 (Bundelkhand and Baghelkhand), and Chapter 6 (Tribal and Other Variations). For instance, it might contrast the devotional intensity often found in Nimar's Nirguni bhajans with the narrative epic quality of Bundelkhand's Alha or the rhythmic complexity of Gond Karma and Saila music. The summary would emphasize how geography, historical layers, and the dominant communities in each region contribute to these distinct musical soundscapes and social practices.

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