

Śruti to Smṛti: A Study of Cultures, Histories And Memories of Folk Instrument Making in Assam

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Abstract: Promotion of age-old and syncretic folk culture of Assam can be used as a viable framework for self-determination of the indigenous communities of Assam facing the threat of loss of identity, land and livelihood. In an attempt to attain such a framework, cultures of folk instrument making, which are sites of history and embodied performance, should be studied. Existing studies about organology of Assam are replete with the physical and sonic study of folk musical instruments. However, little insight exists into the socio-cultural dimensions of these instruments. Inspired by a combination of de Sousa Santos' 'Epistemologies of the South' (2014) and Shön's (1983) concept of 'knowing-in-action', this paper aims to elucidate the prevailing cultures of folk instrument making in Assam and the methods of its knowledge transmission. In doing so, the folk musical instruments, which produce śruti (that which is heard), are diagnosed as objects of cultural memory or smṛti (that which is remembered) within non-literate and oral universes of the folk people of Assam. This paper includes, amongst other things, oral histories of folk instrument-makers of Assam, whose hands, ears and mastery of local resources are foundational to indigenous aesthetic systems and expressive practices.

Keywords: Assamese folk culture, Folk instrument-makers, Folk musical instruments, History of folk instruments, Organology

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1. Introduction: Self-determination and the Importance of Indigenous Knowledge

'Indigenous' is a contested term across the world. Benedict Kingsbury (2008) advances the concept of indigenous as relatively powerless groups possessing great normative power after having suffered grievous abuses. In India, the native equivalent of indigenous is considered to be 'Adivasi' (Xaxa, 1999). The Indian state, however, has tried to prevent the declaration of any group as such, arguing that given the complex history of migration and cultural exchange, it is difficult to distinguish any group as

indigenous (Erni, n.d.). This is because in claiming indigeneity, the groups would claim certain rights and privileges from the Indian state.

Northeast India, which is often seen as a troubled land, is culturally heterogeneous. Its diverse ethnicity invites a lot of ethnic processes like ethnic assimilation and ethnogenic mixing (creation of a new ethnic group) (Acharya, 1988). Assam has been home to people from different ethnicities including Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic (Gait, 2008). In order to accommodate the demands of the indigenous people of the Northeast, the colonial rulers as well as the Indian state had taken some political-administrative solutions like the creation of Autonomous District (and Regional) Councils and the creation of separate states (Barua, 2008). Despite this, the aspirations of the indigenous have not been fulfilled. This is majorly because of the 'reluctant federal structure' of the Indian state, which keeps the major governing powers with the centre, leaving the Northeast Indian states with little autonomy to govern themselves (Erni, n.d.).

The biggest issue facing Assam is the unchecked migration of people from Bangladesh into Assam (Pisharoty, 2019). The people of Assam fear that if immigration continues unchecked, the indigenous Assamese tribes and communities will become a minority in their own state and their culture/language will be at risk, which is what happened to the indigenous people of Tripura (Erni, n.d.). A memorandum of settlement known as the Assam Accord was signed between the Indian Government and All Assam Students' Union (AASU) in 1985, which promised to identify and deport illegal immigrants in Assam, thus protecting the political, cultural, language and land rights of the indigenous people (Pisharoty, 2019). However, the recently instituted Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of India allows Indian citizenship to immigrants from select religious groups who had entered India before 31st December, 2014¹. The looming displeasure towards it is a result of it being against the soul of the Assam Accord – it will not only bring greater unabated migration from Bangladesh into Assam, but also bring about the loss of rights and resources of the indigenous.

This paper is a response to this threat to self-determination of the indigenous people of Assam. Clause 6 of the Assam Accord speaks of "constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards as may be appropriate to provide to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people" (Pisharoty, 2019). The concept of identity is dependent on 'collective memory' of people, which is "knowledge about the past that is shared, mutually acknowledged, and reinforced by a collectivity" (Savelsberg & King, 2007). As Brigitte French (2012) explains, the minorities of all kinds can and do voice their claims on collective memory and what they define as their authentic history. The process of self-determination demands such memory to be commemorated and this is where the performance of folk culture by the indigenous through ritual singing, dancing, etc. locates its importance. People from varied ethnic and religious backgrounds have brought along a wide variety of folk music in Assam. Hence, the music of Assam is one with high degrees of syncretism (Duwora, 2009). Moreover, folk music of Assam, like in other parts of the world, is an important contributor in generating a shared sense of belonging and purpose (Kerr & Parker, 2019). For example, in the recent protests against CAA in Assam, the indigenous Assamese protestors used folk music as a means of protest².

Indigenous knowledge, being closely related to the ethos of indigenous culture and practices, is of utmost importance when it comes to the right to self-determination of the indigenous groups. Instrument-makers are critical yet unrecognised indigenous knowledge-bearers in the Assamese cultural 'ecosystem'. Their hands, ears and mastery of local resources are foundational to indigenous aesthetic systems and expressive practices. Yet little is known about them and their art is rapidly being undermined by the introduction of Western instruments.

Musical instruments constitute one of the most basic material ingredients of cultural performance and are crucial to the production and recollection of collective social memory. The study of musical instruments and their science of construction, or ‘organology’ used to be largely drawn from wood studies, material conservation, museum studies, etc (Dawe, 2001). However, today musical instruments are seen beyond their material and acoustic properties. They are located within historical contexts and political discourses, and are viewed sites of creation of ‘instrumentscapes’ and as inspiring ‘multi-sensorial dimensionality’ (Dawe, 2011). The sensations and emotions related to musical instruments and their sounds do not merely touch individual and social identities. Their ‘thing power’ or agency as material objects are sites of retaining cultural memory, reconstructing the past and negotiating new meanings (Qureshi, 1997; Bates, 2012). The present piece of work tries to diagnose folk musical instruments of Assam as objects of knowledge within non-literate and oral universes of the folk people, through myriad interdisciplinary approaches. It also treats the experiences of instrument-makers, whose knowledge is integral to creating cultural/musical works, as the driving force of cultural production and self-determination.

2. Methodology

This is primarily an oral history project requiring travel to different villages/towns of Assam to identify folk musical instruments and interview select instrument-makers and collectors to record the oral histories. The setting up of focus group discussions with some of the instrument-makers has enabled discussions regarding their practices of instrument making and modes of transmission of their traditional knowledge.

The fieldwork was carried out across three districts of Assam.

- Sonitpur district: The first fieldwork visit was made to a *satra* (a Neo-Vaishnavite monastery) by the name of Balipukhuri Satra.
- Nagaon district: The author visited a museum at Puranigudam called Kolong Kala Kendra, where an archival section is specifically devoted to Assamese folk musical instruments. The visit to Nagaon district also included meeting well-known folk musicians and instrument-makers Mr. Kaliram Bora, Mr. Nandalal Ravidas, Mr. Golap Bora and Mr. Prafulla Das.
- Golaghat district: At Dergaon, a visit was made to the residence and recording studios of Mr. Wazidur Rahman, a businessman and practitioner of jikir (a form of Islamic folk music of Assam).

Keeping ethical considerations in mind, permission to use the information provided by the interviewees for the purpose of this research have been obtained and preserved in audio recordings by the author. The photographs used in the paper are property of the author.

3. Historical Practices of Instrument Making in Assam

The culture of musical instruments has existed since ancient times in Assam. It is often observed that musical instruments and the stories of their origins are traced through religious scriptures and literature in India (Bora, 2018). While plenty of names of musical instruments occur in religious or other texts, very little is known about their shape, size, categorization or practices of playing.

Indian instruments have been divided into four common categories. The musical instruments of Assam follow the same categorisation (Bordoloi, 2014).

- *Tata bādya* : The musical instruments where sound is produced through vibrating strings. For example, *sārindā*, *lāutokārī*, *dotorā*, etc.

- *Ghana bādya*: The musical instruments made of wood, bamboo or bell metal, the sound on which is produced by striking it with a wooden or bamboo stick. For example, *bor kāh*, *saru kāh*, *khanjari*, etc.
- *Suṣir bādya*: The musical instruments in which sound is produced by blowing air into them. For example, *pepā*, *sutuli*, *gaganā*, etc.
- *Āvanaddha bādya*: The musical instruments in which the surface, which is hit for producing sound, is made of leather. These are played with the hand or bamboo/wooden stick. For example, *dhol*, *nāgerā*, *khol*, etc.

In the book ‘Asomar Badyajantra’, Mr. Dharmeshwar Duwora talks about the musical instruments of Assam in two different chapters. One deals with the musical instruments in mainstream Assamese folk culture, while the other delves into those specific to the different tribes and communities (Duwora, 2009). The instrument makers who were interviewed for the purpose of the present work are makers of the mainstream Assamese folk musical instruments. Many of these instruments are regional expressions of translocal forms. For example, the *dotorā* of Assam is similar in its physical and sonic features to the *duitārā* of the Khasis and Jaintiyas (Kharmawphlang, 1996).

3.1. Tata Bādya

The category of instrument most widely studied in this research work is *tata bādya* or string instruments. Two of the very interesting *tata bādya* called *rebāb* and *sebāb* find their mention in many Assamese folk songs (Bora, 2018). *Sebāb* is also known as *sārindā*. A fascinating encounter with *sārindā* happened at Balipukhuri Satra. The family of the the *Satrādhikār* (head of the *satra*) talked about a reward that their ancestor, who was the founder of the *satra*, had received from an Ahom king almost three hundred years ago. They have no knowledge of the name of the king. Sources however suggest that Ahom king Rudrasingha, who ruled Assam during that time and also provided royal patronage for Assamese and Hindustani musical instruments, must have presented the gifts to the ancestor (Dutta, 2020). Among the articles in the gift was a *sārindā*, which is an archaic bowed string instrument or a *tata bādya*. The mention of the *sārindā* brought forth invocation of memories and history. The *Dekā Satrādhikār* (younger head of the *satra*) and his brothers brought out a piece of paper where their family tree was recorded. In sheer excitement, they explained the entire lineage and the history of the *satra*.

The *sārindā* is an instrument with four strings. It is carved out of wood and covered with animal skin. It is played with a bow made of horse hair (Bora, 2018). The *sārindā* was mostly used to accompany *Bargīt*, a form of devotional semi-classical musical genre of Assam. Golap Bora mentioned that Late Pratima Barua Pandey, the most famous practitioner of *Gowālpōrīyā lokagīt* also included *sārindā* in her ensemble. This instrument has also been used by the Boro tribe of Assam by the name of *serjā* (Duwora, 2009).

The *sārindā* at Balipukhuri Satra is in a dilapidated condition. The last time anyone repaired and played the instrument was approximately 12 years ago. Nobody among the family heading the *satra* are instrument makers and they have not expressed enthusiasm in the restoration of the instrument. With missing strings and spoilt leather, the instrument merely serves the purpose of ornamentation. It is a living proof of ossification of a significant cultural product (Dutta, 2020).

An instrument which has already undergone cultural ossification was spotted in the Kolong Kala Kendra Museum in Puranigudam. The curator had collected this string instrument (Fig. 5) from Golap Bora. Because of the creator’s death, there is no knowledge of the instrument’s usage and it remains only as an artefact in the museum. This stands in opposition to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay’s



Figure 1: An interior view of the Balipukuri Satra Nāmghar



**Figure 2: The rewards received from the Ahom king on display outside the Balipukhuri Satra:
a śarai (an Assamese platter or tray mounted on a base), a bor kāh and
a sārindā (from left to right)**



Figure 3: The remains of a *sārindā* at Balipukhuri Satra

description of what constitutes real museums, according to which “every item worthy to be displayed has to be alive and vital (Malik, 2017).”



Figure 4: The remains of a string instrument with no recorded history at Kolong Kala Kendra Museum

Another very popular folk instrument of Assam is the *dotorā*. The *dotorā* also finds multiple mentions in Indian mythology as the *rebāb* (Bora, 2018). It is known to have been created by God Shiva and Goddess Parvati. It is also known as *tokārī*, because it is played by striking or making *tokar*

movements on its four strings (Bora, 2018). The shell of the body of the *dotorā* is carved out of the wooden trunk of the trees of *ām* (*Mangifera indica*), *chām* (*Artocarpus chaplasha*)³, *pamā* (*Cedrela toona*) or *mahānim* (*Azadirachta indica*). The hollow body of the *dotorā* is covered using monitor lizard skin. The strings are made of *mugā* thread, which is a golden colour silk produced in Assam. Normally, a pick made out of deer antlers or wood is used to pluck on the strings (Duwora, 2009).

The walls of the sitting area in Mr. Nandalal Ravidas's *kutchā* house (house made of mud) are lined with a collection of *dotorā* made by him. He uses the wood of *mahānim* tree in the making of *dotorā*, which according to him is the better option as it is more durable compared to the other varieties of wood.



Figure 5: Mr. Nandalal Ravidas with his sitting room wall lined with *dotorās*. The crocodile-like objects seen in the left corner, are among the wooden artefacts he prepares.



Figure 6: An informal Lokagīt session with the author, Mr. Nandalal Ravidas, Mr. Jhunakankan Bhuyan and Mr. Bhaskar Saikia (from left to right). The instruments played here are *dagar*, *dotorā* and *tāl*.

The *dotorā* is played with a variety of Assamese folk music like *bairāgi gīt*, *dehbiśār gīt*, *Gowālpōriyā lokagīt* and *Kamrupiā lokagīt*. Mr. Ravidas's life is centred around his musical universe where he makes folk musical instruments among other wooden artefacts and also plays them. He is a practitioner of many forms of folk performance arts like *Pālā* (a form of religious drama of Bengali origin), *Gowālpōriyā lokagīt* and *Kamrupiā lokagīt*. Towards the end of the visit, Mr. Ravidas serenaded us with a few of *lokagīts*, while accompanying himself on the *dotorā*.

Mr. Golap Bora and Mr. Prafulla Das also serenaded us with Assamese folk songs. An authority of Assamese folklore, Mr. Bora talked in depth about the mention of the *dotorā* in the Indian mythology. While he played the *dotorā* and sang, Mr. Das played along on the *lāu tokārī* or *ektārā*. The *lāu tokārī*, which is a single-stringed instrument with its body made out of a water gourd, has a striking omnipresence across different folk music in Assam and West Bengal. Mr. Bora reminisced his friendly relations with Late Hiren Bhatta, a great Assamese poet, by rendering one of the songs of Hiru *Da'* that he had given a tune to. Mr. Bora's recollection of the friendships highlights the individual and social memories he has formed through the folk music and the musical instruments (Qureshi, 1997). The *lāu tokārī* and *dotorā* are sites of memories for him and not merely artefacts or objects.



Figure 7: Mr. Golap Bora and Mr. Prafulla Das (from left to right) at Mr. Bora's residence in Puranigudam. Mr. Bora and Mr. Das are seen holding a *dotorā* and a *lāu tokārī* respectively.

The visit to Dergaon in Golaghat district opened windows to interaction with a less popular Assamese folk musical instrument, the *ānandalaharī*. "I have been listening to *jikir* since I was in my mother's womb" says Mr. Wazidur Rahman, a resident of Dergaon and the nephew of *Jikir Samrāt* (the emperor of *jikir*), Late Rekibuddin Ahmed. Among Mr. Rahman's collection of Assamese folk musical instruments in his recording studio laid an *ānandalaharī*. The *ānandalaharī*, which has only

recently been introduced in *jikir* (Assamese Islamic devotional song form), is also an integral part of many other forms of folk music of Assam like *ādhyātmik bhābor lokagīt* (devotional folksongs) and *dehbiśār gīt*. It is a variant of *tokārī*, which is made of a wooden cylindrical outer cover (Duwora, 2009). One side of the cylinder is covered in animal skin while the other side is kept open. A *mugā* thread is tied to the end of the instrument covered with animal skin (goat or cow) and stretched through the cylinder along its length. This thread towards the open end is normally tied to a small piece of wood or balled cloth for a grip. The *ānandalaharī* is held underneath the left armpit, and the wooden/cloth grip is held with the left hand, thus pulling the *mugā* thread to the desired amount. The right hand is then used to pluck the thread with the help of a pluck called *lakṣī*. The *lakṣī* is normally made out of the horn of a deer.

Mr. Rahman guided us on a short trip of history of *jikir* in Assam. Azan Fakir, a Muslim preacher and saint from Baghdad, reached Assam in 1630 and started composing *jikir* while in Sivasagar (Malik, 1958). The section of Assamese people who were converted to Islam by Azan Fakir were in those days considered as the ‘other’ or as being different from the dominant Assamese population. Fakir noticed that the folk tunes belonging to the different forms of Neo-Vaishnavite performance arts were popular among the people of Assam. In an attempt to integrate the Muslims with the rest of Assamese population, while upholding the beliefs and values of Islam at the same time, Fakir composed *jikir* in Assamese folk tunes.



Figure 8: Mr. Wazidur Rahman with his *ānandalaharī*

Today, *jikir* has pervaded the boundaries of religion and is performed by people of all faiths. Dotorā and flute are among the few musical instruments played in *jikir*. Stressing the belief of Islam to integrate the culture of a place with it, Mr. Rahman has been actively trying to further expand the experience of embodied cultural performance of *jikir* by introducing more Assamese folk instruments like the *ānandalaharī* within its performance culture. The *ānandalaharī* has thus become an instrument

which represents the Assamese Muslim heritage while at the same time informing Assamese folk music at large (Dawe, 2001). Over time, he hopes that this ethnically identified commodity of material culture will further allow networks of cultural production to encompass people from diverse cultural heritage (Nuenfeldt, 1997).

3.2. Ghana Bādyā

A *kāh*, which is a *ghana bādyā* was included among the gifts from the Ahom king to the founder of Balipukhuri Satra. It is a musical instrument made of bell metal. *Kāh* comes in big and small sizes. The bigger ones are known as *bor kāh* while the smaller ones are named *xoru kāh*. The sound on a *kāh* is produced by beating it with a wooden or bamboo stick. The *kāh* which their ancestor received is a *bor kāh*. Interestingly, *kāh* is not accompanied with any music. It is an instrument played in religious worship at a *satra*, *nāmghar* (a Neo-Vaishnavite place of worship) or temple, with other percussive instruments such as the *dobā* (Duwora, 2009).



Figure 9: The *bor kāh* at Balipukhuri Satra

A popular *ghana bādyā* that is played across different folk performance art forms as well as religious occasions is the *tāl* or cymbals. Made of bell metal, a cymbal is held in both hands and are struck together to produce a ringing sound. A whole range of music, dance and drama forms in Neo-Vaishnavism use *tāls* as one of the principal instruments. At times, these are ensembles which do not require any tonal instruments, for example, the orchestra called the *gāyan-bāyan* (Barpujari, 2007). When the sounds produced in these ensembles by the *tāl* and other percussive instruments are in a unison, it is known to invoke feelings of devotion.

The *tāls*, depending on their sizes are of four types, viz., *rām tāl*, *bhor tāl*, *khuti tāl* and *kar tāl* (Duwora, 2009). Mr. Golap Bora stated that the *rām tāl* was mostly used by Neo-Vaishnavite women singing *nām* (prayers) called *nāmoti* in the past. The discussion about *tāl* led us to a recollection of history by Mr. Bora about the introduction of the *bhor tāl* in Assam. Assam used to be home to a lot of Buddhist temples in the past. The Buddhists there were mostly decedents of Bhutanese people. When the ancestors of Śrīmanta Śankardev, the founder of Neo-Vaishnavism, defeated the Bhutanese, they retracted into Bhutan. However, they left behind some of their musical instruments such as the *bhor tāl* in Assam. Because of its Bhutanese origin, the *tāl* with a large circumference came to be popularly known as the *bhut tāl*, which later came to be referred to as *bhor tāl*.

3.3. *Suṣir Bādyā*

Suṣir bādyā or wind instruments occupy a very significant role in Assamese folk music. The least and the most popularly used *suṣir bādyā* in Assamese folk culture are the *kāli* and the *pepā* respectively. Mr. Kaliram Bora of Puranigudam is one of the very few players of *kāli* left in Assam today. He is also an instrument-maker who specialises in the making of a range of folk musical instruments including the *kāli*, *pepā*, *dotorā*, etc. Mr. Bora has been engaged in the preparation of the *kāli* since the year 1992.



Figure 10: Mr. Kaliram Bora playing the *kāli*

According to Mr. Kaliram Bora, *Kāli* is known to have its origins in Bhutan. Over time, it has been colonised by the Assamese folk people like the *bhor tāl* (Duwora, 2009). It is made of copper. Mr. Bora dissembled it into its four components, viz., *chupahi*, *sumi*, *nal* and *nād*. The *supohi* is made of the leaf of *tāl* tree (*Borassus fabellifer*). Once the leaves are procured, he boils them in order to make them slippery for the ease of playing. The *supohi* undergoes breakage often and has to be replaced frequently, because of which a *kāli* player keeps a collection of *supohi* at their disposal at all times.

Bhaonā (Neo-Vaishnavite drama) and marriage ceremonies appear incomplete without the burgeoning sound of the *kāli*. It is known to be similar to the Indian instruments *śahanāī* and *nādaswaram* (Duwora, 2009). According to Mr. Kaliram Bora, the playing of *kāli* demands enormous facial strength, which leaves many people with hesitance to acquire the skills. Mr. Bora himself had partially lost his hearing capacity after some years of playing the *kāli*. However, since he is one of the few people who is holding up the tradition of *kāli* playing, he has received multiples honours from the Assam state government for the same.

Pepā or *mahar śingor pepā* is a musical instrument that is closely related to the fabric of Bohāg Bihu (spring festival of Assam). It is normally played by men in the *Bihu dal* or *Bihu* ensemble. Tribes of Assam like Deuri, Sutiya and Mishing also use the *pepā* for their respective celebrations during Bihu (Duwora, 2009). *Mahar śing* translates to bull's horn in English. The body of the *pepā* is acquired from a bull's horn. Mr. Kaliram Bora dissembled the *pepā* into its four parts. One of the parts is called *gorbhonolā*, which is a small hollow tube made out of bamboo with four holes fashioned out of it. It looks like a miniature model of a flute. Another smaller hollow tube-like structure called *thuri*, which is made out of *tāl* leaf, is fixed to protrude outward from one end of the *garbhanalā*. The buffalo horn structure is used in order to transform the sound into a louder and melodic composite sound. The fourth section of the *pepā* is the *chupahi*, which is fixed to the narrow end of the *mahar śing* in order to support the mouth while playing the *pepā*. The precision with which the bamboo is smoothened using a local Assamese knife is integral in achieving the desired sound from a *pepā*.



Figure 11: Mr. Kaliram Bora assembling the different parts of the *pepā*. He is seen holding the *garbhanalā* between his forefingers here.



Figure 12: The author assisting Mr. Kaliram Bora in carving out a few *garbhanalās* for a *pepā*

Mr. Nandalal Ravidas, who crafts *pepā* as well, says that the making of *pepā* is an extremely taxing process. Moreover, the labour and cost of acquiring the raw materials are quite high. A pungent smell is emitted from the bull horns during the process of *pepā*-making because the flesh inside the horn is made to rot gradually before it is taken out. Because of this scent emitted, Mr. Ravidas sets up a temporary workshop away from human settlements.

Gaganā is another *suṣir bādya* that is popular in the Assamese folk music landscape. It is a lamellophone instrument of about one inch breadth and seven inch long, carved out slenderly on a single piece of bamboo (Duwora, 2009). The performer holds the *gaganā* with their left hand and strikes the semi-flexible tongue-like structure of the instrument with the forefinger of the right hand to produce the characteristic sound. The contour of the mouth changes the timbre of the sound.⁵ Both Mr. Nandalal Ravidas and Mr. Kaliram Bora specialise in making the *gaganā*. Mr. Bora stresses that attaining a particular key (that has been specified by a customer) while preparing the instrument is a daunting task for the instrument-maker. The key of the *gaganā* is determined by the length and girth of the tongue-like structure.

Scholars studying the ethnographic existence of *gaganā* have discovered many interesting facts and stories. *Gaganā* is said to have been introduced in Assam by the Mongolian tribes (Duwora, 2009). It has now deeply entangled itself within the waves of Assamese culture. The gendered divisions in the Assamese society are reflected in the gendered categorisation of the *gaganā*. The women play what is known as *lāhori gaganā* while the men normally play the *rāmdhon gaganā* (Lekharu, 2016). The former has a higher pitch than the latter. *Gaganā* also acts as a site of love among young boys and girls in Assamese culture. Gifting it to one's beloved during Bohāg Bihu signifies love, affection and shared existence (Lekharu, 2016). *Jujonas* (introductory free verses) in Bihu songs talk about how a girl expecting the gift of a *gaganā* from her lover reacts when she does not receive it:



Figure 13: Mr. Chittaranjan Bora pictured with a *gaganā* at Kolong Kala Kendra Museum

“*Jowāto bihute gaganā khujilo*
Eibelio nidilā sāji,
Tomāre gaganā āmāko nelāge
Diyāgoi sijanīk sāji.” (Lekhāru, 2016)

“The *gaganā* I asked of you last Bihu
 Didn’t even reach me this year,
 I do not need your *gaganā* anymore
 Give it to your other girl.” (Translation by Upatyaka Dutta)

This is the manner in which the *gaganā*, which is said to have migrated from Mongolia, has been colonised and given new social meanings in the Assamese cultural fabric (Dawe, 2001). It has ‘become’ a new object and assumed an identity that is possessed by the Assamese folk mind.

3.4. *Āvanaddha Bādyā*

Āvanaddha bādyā proves to serve great purpose in Assamese culture, with utility across rituals of worship as well as folk dance performances. *Dhol*, *nāgerā*, *dobā*, etc. are some examples of the important *āvanaddha bādyā*. A three hundred year old *dobā* was spotted at Balipukhuri Satra in Sonitpur district. Placed in the *satra*, the *dobā* is a large instrument made of copper. It is placed on a raised platform for the convenience of playing it. The membrane of the *dobā* is made of either cow or deer skin. It is played using two wooden sticks or *māri*. The *dobā* is normally played in mornings and evenings at *satras* and *nāmghars* (Neo-Vaishnavite prayer hall). It is also played whenever there is a

nām prasang (prayer session) held at the *satra* (Duwora, 2009). The *sātrādhikār* was kind enough to demonstrate the playing of the *dobā* to us. At first, he softly hit the skin of the *dobā* using the *māri*. Gradually, as the strength in the arms increase, the amplitude gets louder and the frequency of striking the *dobā* with the *māri* also increases. The process is then reversed and it finally comes to a halt. These contours of sound produced while playing the *dobā* are known to arouse feelings of *bhakti* or devotion in the devotees.



Figure 14: A still of the *Satrādhikār* playing the *dobā* at Balipukhuri *satra*

4. Changing Practices of Instrument Making in Assam

The cultures and traditions of instrument making in Assam have undergone changes over time. These changes can be attributed to various factors which include the popularisation of Western and modern Indian musical instruments, changes in the availability of raw materials, etc. Before exploring these, however, it is essential that we understand what ‘tradition’ implies. Tradition is changeable and it is always changing. The meaning of tradition therefore varies from time to time, place to place and also from person to person (Sharma, 2016). T.S. Eliot asserts that tradition is not something that is inherited or is acquired from blind adherence to the past. It can only be acquired through great labour (Eliot, 1982). Hence, the changing traditions and adaptations in instrument making have to be viewed through a dynamic and holistic lens. This will ensure that these changes are not merely passed off as corrupted versions of the so-called ‘original’ versions of the past.

At Mr. Wazidur Rahman’s recording studio in Dergaon, he introduced us to his novel way of preparing a *lāu tokārī* or an *ektārā*. He has recently started using steel as a substitute of the outer shell of the water gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) for the body of the *ektārā*. He states that steel, because of its sturdiness, is more suitable for travelling purposes. However, it is important that the changes accompanied in the sonic characteristics of a *lāu tokārī* when it is made of steel as opposed to a water gourd shell are studied.

Another significant example of change or adaptation in Assamese folk musical instrument is that of the *sārindā*. Over the years, this instrument developed to its modern forms including *behelā* and *sāreṅgi* (Bora, 2018). The *behelā* or the Indian violin has replaced the *sārindā* in almost every folk form including *Gowalporiya lokagīt* and *Bargīt*. Pointing at his old *lāu tokārī* in the sitting room of his residence, Mr. Golap Bora says, “You wouldn’t find a *lāu tokārī* like this in a shop. Those who practice the art procure it by other methods like making it for themselves or getting it custom made from someone. If there were a shop or organization which sold folk musical instruments, maybe there would have been a demand. You can find modern and Western musical instruments, but not folk instruments.”

Adding to the concerns around the preparation of a *lāu tokārī*, Mr. Golap Bora of Kaliabor says, “If somebody asks me to make one for them, I tell them that it’s not easy to find a big round gourd of this size nowadays.” However, if a farmer is asked to save a water gourd of the desired size against an advance payment, there are people who agree to take the responsibility. Pointing at his *lāu tokārī*, he says, “When I made this *lāu tokārī* twenty years back, I asked one farmer to save me a water gourd that turns this size and is round. I made him an offering of Rs. 21 and offered him a prayer. He made sure that the original rustic brown color of the gourd stayed intact.” By the same token, the body of the *ānandalaharī* today is largely made from wood. The wood is a substitute for an elongated bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) shell.



Figure 15: A *lāu tokārī* made of bottle gourd (left); a *lāu tokārī* made of steel (right)

Another major change that Assamese folk instrument making and instrument making in India has seen in today is the lowering use of monitor lizard skin. Monitor lizards are an endangered species today and is listed in Schedule I of Indian Wildlife Act⁶. More and more instrument makers have therefore switched to alternatives like cow or goat skin to prepare a *dotorā*. There are rare instances

where plastic is used as well, which however is not sustainable. Mr. Golap Bora, Mr. Prafulla Das and Mr. Nandalal Ravidas add further cultural layers to this by saying that if they decide to use goat skin, they acquire it by themselves. However, if it is the requirement is that of cow skin, they ask their Muslim friends to acquire, prepare and treat the skin for them. As followers of the Hindu belief system, they abstain from involving in the killing of cows themselves.

In the past, the strings of *dotorā* were made of *mugā* thread, which is difficult to acquire today. Therefore, plastic strings are used for this purpose today. While this acts as a viable substitute, the taut nature of the *mugā* thread is unobtainable through plastic.



Figure 16: A *dotorā* surface made of monitor lizard skin

Over the years, as the use of folk musical instruments has decreased, the knowledge of folk instrument making has become scarce. Resultant ignorant attitudes towards raw materials found in nature for the making of musical instruments is in plentitude. Mr. Chittaranjan Bora related an incident when one fine day, he chanced upon a man who was cutting some *tāl* trees (used as raw material in the production of some *suṣir bādyā*) by a river in Puranigudam to clear the area from transforming into a forest. As was expected, he did not have any knowledge of the use of the tree. On insistence of Mr. Das, he stopped cutting the trees.

During the ‘great derangement’ where climate disruption is pushing humanity to adapt to alternative and sustainable ways of existence, music and particularly folk music and communal singing brings people closer to nature (Kerr & Parker, 2019; Ghosh, 2016). It defeats isolation and builds a shared sense of purpose. Therefore, it is important that musical instruments, which are the basic units of performance arts, are made from sustainable raw materials. It is necessary to advocate for the substitution of the materials of animal origin to be substituted with synthetic polymer materials of similar properties.

5. Trade and the Assamese Folk Mind

The Assamese folk mind has multitude richness in material culture. This includes textiles, wood carvings, bamboo furniture, et al. Being a resource rich area, Assam's indigenous communities have the ability to be self-sufficient in procuring food crops, weaving clothes in family looms, etc. However, like Gait had derived, because of having pleasant weather conditions, sparse population and plentiful natural resources, the indigenous have historically succumbed to laziness in the conducive environment (Gait, 2008). Their position could be aptly described by the popular expression, "neither paucity, nor a store of surplus" (Datta, 1980). Hence, they are known to display averseness towards trade and business. Even after Indian independence the Assamese indigenous has not had the economic control of the state. The Marwari/North Indian communities have a large control of the economy and hence, have a hand in the funding of political parties (Pisharoty, 2019). Scholars like Hiren Gohain believe that only when some amount of economic control comes to the indigenous people of Assam, will they be in the position to protect their 'jāti, māti, bheti' (community, land, identity) (Pisharoty, 2019).

A reflection on the interviewees' attitudes towards utilising folk music and the making of musical instruments to generate an income for a sustainable living lead us to some interesting observations. Mr. Chittaranjan Borah of Kolong Kala Kendra, Puranigudam, categorises the existing demand of musical instruments of Assam into the following two types:

1. The instruments which are used in religious occasions such as *khol*, *nāgerā* or *tāl*. Since the tribes and communities of Assam observe different religious ceremonies, these instruments are used quite often.
2. Indian instruments which are used in modern Assamese music for example, harmonium, violin and *tablā*, have a high demand.

Therefore, it is observed that the instruments which are used exclusively in folk music, for example, *dotorā*, *lāutokārī*, *dagar*, etc. are not normally in demand. They face a larger fear of ossification. This in turn puts the different folk art forms of Assam at risk by denying them an opportunity to be performed under traditional circumstances with the accompaniment of the folk instruments. It is also observed that since the poorer section of the Assamese society is more involved with folk music instrument production, they often get further exploited when it comes to selling instruments to or performing for the comparatively well-off section of the society. Therefore, restoring respect for folk music among different economic sections of the Assamese society is of great importance.

Mr. Golap Bora and Mr. Prafulla Das who are resistant towards business in musical instruments, stress that they make instruments only for their personal use. However, Mr. Nandalal Ravidas of Kaliabor has a different approach. Mr. Ravidas has been doing business in musical instruments every year during the Bohāg Bihu festival season (April) with a local instrument shop at Kaliabor.

A source of earning which Mr. Kaliram Bora has been depending on is teaching the *kālī* under the *Guru-shishyā Paramparā* system⁷ of schooling with the National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama. Under *Guru-shishyā Paramparā*, a scholarship amount is awarded to the student for being enrolled in the training, which sustains their interest in learning.

The musicians/ instrument-makers also confirmed the hypothesis that the making of folk musical instruments or practicing any form of folk art is mostly considered as a part-time means of employment in Assam. For instance, Mr. Kaliram Bora from Puranigudam has a cycle shop, the earning from which is majorly responsible for his family's sustenance. Similarly, Mr. Wazidur Rahman, owns a shop that sells electricals items in Dergaon town.

6. Addressing Structural Issues

Keeping in mind the exigency of the Assamese indigenous to gain some economic control and the important role of musical instruments in harnessing self-determination as part of cultural production, the need for a self-sustaining economic model in instrument making is felt- wherein exists an educational framework for learning about social and cultural life via material/performance culture. In order to develop such a model, it is important to understand the existence of the following structural problems that have to be addressed:

1. Creating a positive attitude towards business or trade: The indigenous have always been at the receiving end of the capitalistic bargain because of which they are averse to the idea of business. Therefore, any economic model designed for preserving and promoting folk musical instruments will have to work towards building a positive attitude towards business.
2. Restoring an ethos of or respect for craftsmanship: The respect and consequently demand for skill-based labour among the indigenous youth in Assam is highly limited, and not many get the encouragement and opportunities to engage in it. Paulo Friere talks about the dilemma of the oppressed wherein they desire freedom and authentic existence but at the same time fear achieving it as they have internalised the oppression of the oppressor (Freire, 2005). Education, Friere says, must take this dilemma into account. It is important that more youth find the opportunity to take up skill-based/vocational education so that they are able to gauge the uplifting power of indigenous cultural practices.
3. Self-representation: Following Santos, an economic model should facilitate the creation of operational measures where the oppressed indigenous Assamese communities are empowered to represent their world in their own terms and change it according to their aspirations, thus attaining social emancipation in the process (Santos, 2018). Community-led action, organisation and education will allow already existing expertise and lived experiences to build ground-up practices (Freire, 2005). In this course of action, the indigenous will represent themselves without relying on representation through any other source thus ensuring that the material culture of instrument making takes place in an inclusive, sustainable and liberating manner.

7. Conclusions

Assamese folk culture has travelled in time through both oral and written traditions. The languages, monuments, song and dance forms, livelihood practices, material culture, etc. have informed tradition and been informed by tradition. The oral histories of musical instrument makers, folk musicians and connoisseurs of musical instruments alike have revealed that these evocative and sound producing objects provide territories where subjectivity and objectivity merge, and allow the stories in the non-literate universe to make its way into literate universe. It has explored the manner in which Assamese folk musical instruments act as the intersectional point of materiality, memories, meanings and metaphors. Investigating the changes in the identified ecosystem of folk instrument making, the present paper has looked into the processes of invention and erasure of traditions. It also highlights the importance of paying heed to the ethical dilemmas involving the use of animal-based raw materials (skin, horns, etc.) in instrument making.

The insights into the attitudes of the instrument makers towards trade further elevates the study of these instruments to industry and commerce. A sustainable community-based economic

and educational framework can be hopeful of encouraging a short-term economic and a long-term structural change to the Assamese indigenous population, who have been oppressed by the reluctant federalist and militaristic attitude of the Indian state. Through a dynamic and live archival structure, the economic model can aim to take the preservation and protection of folk musical instruments and practices beyond museum culture. It is necessary that the instrument makers are treated as the central and most elementary characters upholding performative embodied folk cultural traditions. In addition to assisting in the protection and preservation of cultures of folk instrument making, this would ensure that the instrument makers receive favourable returns for their creative and intellectual labour. Most importantly, the interactive, incremental and dialogical nature of the archives and teaching-learning programs has the power to enable the creation of trust and mutual respect between academia and indigenous activism.

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Notes

1. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50670393>
2. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/protesters-raise-pitch-with-ranasinga-music/articleshow/73185278.cms>
3. The scientific names of the endemic plant species *chām* and *pamā*, have been provided by Dr. Akhil Baruah, Associate Professor, Department of Botany, Darrang College, Tezpur. He is also the author and editor of several books on Plant Taxonomy.
4. The suffix ‘*Dā*’ is a short form of ‘*Dada*’, which refers to brother in Assamese. Late Hiren Bhatta is popularly referred to as Hiru *Dā* by the Assamese people
5. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/music/performing-bihu-to-gaganā-music/article29841404.ece>
6. Retrieved from <https://home.iitm.ac.in/prakriti/prakriti/monitorlizards.html>
7. *Guru-sishyā Paramparā* is an ancient Indian system of education where knowledge is transmitted from the teacher or *guru* to the student or *sishyā* through spiritual mentorship. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@yogasattvam/guru-shishya-parampara-73d0b8b10e43>

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