

# Affinity Between Romani and Indian Musical Instruments

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The present study focuses on Romani and Indian folk musical instruments. It undertakes a comparative analysis of the instruments used by the Romani community in Europe and the Kalbeliya community in India, in order to identify similarities between them. For this study, five instruments—bhapang, poongi, khanjari, dholak, and khartal—have been selected. All five instruments exist in both Romani and Indian societies. The similarities have been analyzed and discussed at the levels of name, structure, and melody. In addition, interviews were conducted with Romani and Indian experts, as well as with members of both communities the Roma and the Kalbeliya—and the findings were examined in the light of historical evidence. The study reveals that the Kalbeliya and Roma communities share a common origin. Consequently, similarities can be observed in their languages, folk dances, and musical instruments. Indian influences are still visible today in the lifestyle and social structure of the Romani community. Furthermore, both the Indian Kalbeliya and the European Roma are often referred to by the name “Gypsy”.

*Keywords:* Roma community, Kalbeliya community, Banjara community, Romani and Indian folk musical instruments, Saper dance, Flamenco dance, Rajasthani folk tune

## Introduction

Since the very beginning of human civilization, music has been an essential part of life. It offers significant insights into the study of human origins and human history. Music is a universal and multifunctional cultural practice that exists throughout the entire span of human life. Whether it is the music associated with birth or the music performed on the occasion of death; whether it expresses our joy and celebration or conveys our longing and sorrow—music remains ever-present.

From an evolutionary perspective, the presence of music extends from the activities of hunting and herding to storytelling and play; from washing and eating to prayer and meditation; and from courtship and marriage to healing and burial. In this sense, music is the most profound and universal medium for the expression and communication of emotions—it is the universal language of feelings. Its scope is not limited to any particular nation, era, or society. Its expanse is limitless and boundless. It transcends all boundaries of time and space, permeating every society. Although music is universal, time and place have influenced it and given it distinctive forms.

## Origin of Music, Musical Instruments, and Dance

There is no consensus among scholars regarding the origin of music; significant differences of opinion exist. Adequate historical, archaeological, and ethnographic evidence is not available to determine precisely the period

in which music originated or to make definitive statements about its beginnings. This is largely because the earliest musical instruments have not survived the passage of time.

Due to this lack of concrete evidence, most scholars rely on conjecture when discussing the origin of music. They believe that music has a deep connection with nature and trace its beginnings to natural phenomena. The sounds produced by wind in forests, the murmuring and gushing of waterfalls, and the chirping of birds are all regarded as sources of inspiration for the emergence of music in human life.

Music and dance share an unbroken and interdependent relationship. Dance cannot be conceived without music; even if music is not physically present, it exists in the mind of the performer. From the perspective of antiquity, music and dance are older than language, and they can be seen as means of expression and communication that existed before language developed. Human beings possess an innate ability to produce sound. With the help of this natural ability, humans expressed and communicated their emotions, feelings, needs, and messages through gestures, movements of limbs and sub-limbs.

It is important to note that *nāda* (sound vibration) is the causal element of music. It is through *nāda* that music originated. In the beginning, humans produced struck sounds (*āhata nāda*)<sup>1</sup> in a natural and spontaneous manner, following certain rhythms and pauses. These struck sounds themselves constituted music for them. Through them, humans expressed their emotions and sentiments. Clapping, snapping fingers, striking stones together, and the sound produced by hitting a stick can be regarded as the earliest tools of *nāda*. Over time, in the course of human civilization, various musical instruments were created for convenience. Clearly, from a historical point of view, music has been deeply connected with the development of human civilization. It has been a part of human life since the beginning of civilization. With technological development, the forms and types of music continued to change. In the evolution of musical instruments, some became markers of particular communities or societies—for example, the musical instruments of the Roma community and the Indian Kalbeliya community.

In addition, the study of music and musical instruments is highly useful for understanding patterns of human migration and the history of cultural interactions. Just as genes and language are used as markers of migration, music too can be used to study human evolution, migration patterns, and cultural contacts, because music has the ability to blend as well as to preserve stable signs of cultural interaction.

The musical instruments of the Roma community and the Indian Kalbeliya community have been analysed and examined to identify similarities between them. However, before analysing and discussing these instruments, it is essential to understand the Roma community and the conditions of its migration.

### **Roma Community, Music, and Their Migration**

The Roma community is the largest minority group in Europe, known for its nomadic lifestyle and for its folk music and dance traditions. Always separated from the standards of non-Roma life, the Roma people view their music as a profound expression of their existence, as a means of conveying moral and cultural values, and as a form of liberation from oppression. Romani music expresses the emotional state of the Roma community. It has absorbed pain and instability and turned them into its defining features. Along with mournful, dissonant, melancholic, and rebellious tones, it carries vibrancy, rhythm, and courage; it contains a creativity that is the

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<sup>1</sup> The term Aahat means struck or impacted. The sound produced by striking is called Aahat Naad. This type of sound is considered useful in music. From Aahat Naad, the musical notes (Swaras) have originated.

mature culmination of personal knowledge of life. Like the lifestyle of the Roma, it is dynamic and free. One can see in it traces of the Roma's migration journey, their cultural interactions, and their struggles.

In this regard, the Hungarian composer Franz Liszt writes in *Gypsies and Their Music in Hungary*:

...The art of music is for them a sublime language, a song mystic in itself though clear to the initiated, which they use to express what they want without being influenced by anything foreign to their desires. They have invented their music for their own use, to speak, to sing about themselves to themselves, to remain united, and they have invented the most touching monologues. (MUSEU VIRTUAL, n.d.)

Romani music and its instruments have a deep connection with India. Paco Suárez and Santino Spinelli, in their article *The Art of Sounds in Romani Culture*, write that "to better understand Romani music, its origins must be viewed alongside Indian music..." (MUSEU VIRTUAL, n.d.). Historical evidence also supports the Indian origins of the Roma community as well as the beginnings of Romani music. For this reason, there are similarities between traditional Romani instruments and Indian instruments. However, it is important to note that during their migrations, the Roma came into contact with various societies, which influenced Romani music and consequently led to the inclusion of local instruments in Romani folk traditions.

Exploring and studying historical evidence regarding the origins and migration of the Roma reveals that their departure from India took place in 1018 CE due to Mahmud Ghaznavi. Ghaznavi, also known as Ghazni, captured skilled artists, musicians, and dancers, and took them from India to Afghanistan. From there, the Roma community gradually dispersed across Europe. Because they were highly skilled performers, their dance and music still displayed traces of Indian influence.

The Roma are connected to Indian communities such as the Kalbeliya, Gadiya Lohar, and Banjara. Linguistically as well, Roma remains closely related to Indian languages, which is why many Indian-origin words are still present in the Romani language. Owing to these linguistic connections, significant similarities can also be observed in their music. Keeping in mind these musical and dance similarities, the study includes Roma musical instruments. For example, the Kalbeliya community's *cobra dance* and the Roma community's *kuček* dance both use the *pungi*. The Russian Gypsy community uses the *khanjari* instrument, which is discussed later.

### Indian Influence in the Music of the Roma Community

Music has always served as a fundamental support for dance, its gestures, and its movements. The manifestation of music is, in a sense, the expression of the unseen; it is a process that uses symbols for awareness, concentration, idealization, and deification. Indian elements are evident in Romani music. Similarities in footwork and rhythmic singing during dance can be observed in both the Kalbeliya and Roma communities. The basis of North Indian music is the *raga* system, and the seven notes—*sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni*—are reflected in the melodic patterns of Romani music.

Romani music is not bound by strict rules; even meter and rhythm operate with considerable freedom. Ian Hancock (2002) and Isabel Fonseca (1996) argue that Hungarian Romani musicians use metrically patterned vocal rhythms that have deep links with India. The Phrygian Romani mode used in European flamenco is based on the Indian *Bhairavi raga*<sup>2</sup>. Bulgarian Romani saxophonist Yuri Yunakov notes that Indian Rajasthani folk tunes sound similar to *kyuchek*, and that the *kyuchek* rhythm used in Romani songs resembles the Indian *dhol*

<sup>2</sup> This raga is associated with Lord Shiva in his form of Bhairav. In this raga, komal (flat) notes are used extensively, which gives it a calm and melodious feel. The notes Re, Ga, Dha, and Ni are komal, while Ma is considered the Vadi (principal note) and Sa is the Samvadi (second-most important note).

rhythm. The sounds and rhythmic patterns of the “tabla” (Romani *tarabuka*) and “duff/daffli” (Romani *dajre*) are also similar.

Experiences expressed through indirect and humanized forms—sometimes depicted with extra hands or transformed faces—can be related to Vedic ideas. The influence of language’s phonetic features on raga-based music must also be considered. Even in *Sama* chants, musical intonation is possible; the intended effects and offerings described in the *Naivedya*<sup>3</sup> texts depend on the melodic rendition of the *Sama*. The language of music creates multiple forms of words suited to vocal art through their inherent tonal qualities. Oral transmission—*shruti-smriti* tradition—has long been a part of Indian culture, and through this tradition, ragas have been preserved. This is why Romani music still contains elements of Indian music today. Not only in dance but also in musical instruments, Indian similarities can clearly be observed.

### Similarity Between Romani and Indian Musical Instruments

In the *Natya Shastra*, musical instruments are classified into four groups: *Avanaddha Vadya* (percussion instruments with membrane), *Ghana Vadya* (solid or idiophonic instruments), *Sushira Vadya* (wind instruments), and *Tata Vadya* (stringed instruments). This ancient classification of Indian instruments, given by Bharata, was adopted in Europe in the 12th century and was used for the classification of European musical instruments. Later, the four groups were given Greek names: *Chordophones* for *Tata Vadya*, *Membranophones* for *Avanaddha Vadya*, *Aerophones* for *Sushira Vadya*, and *Idiophones* for *Ghana Vadya*. In this way, the Western system of musical instrument classification is based on the ancient Indian *Natya Shastra*.

Musical instruments hold an important place in music. In folk music, instruments are categorized into three types:

1. Stringed instruments—*Bhapang*.
2. Wind instruments—*Pungi*.
3. Percussion instruments—*Khanjari*, *Khartal*.



Figure 1. Bhapang: <https://wmic.net/india-rajasthan-bhapang/>.

This instrument is made from a hollowed-out gourd, with a piece of animal skin stretched over its top. A hole is made in the skin, through which a string made of animal gut or plastic is passed. A small piece of wood is tied to the end of the string. To play the *Bhapang*, the musician holds the instrument under the arm and pulls or loosens the string with one hand while striking it with the wooden piece in the other hand. The *Bhapang* is also known as the “talking drum”.

<sup>3</sup> “Naivedya” also means “purpose” or “offering”.

In the Alwar District, the Kalbeliya (Jogi) community plays the *Bhapang*. While playing, they sing folk tales such as those of King Bharthari, Saint Puranmal, and Heer-Ranjha. In Maharashtra, it is known as *Chongar*, in Gujarat as *Apang*, and in Punjab as *Tumba*. Among the Roma community, it is called *Tumba*. Both communities show similarities in the shape of the instrument and the melodies produced. In Gypsy folk dances, this instrument is used by the Roma community. Along with the similarity in name, there are clear parallels in the tunes and the method of playing.



Figure 2. Pungi: <https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/music-instruments-of-india-23/126641143#21>.

The Pungi is a prominent musical instrument of the Kalbeliya<sup>4</sup> and Roma communities. This instrument is made by making holes in the lower rounded part of a special type of gourd and inserting two pipes. These pipes have holes to produce different notes. Similar to the algoze, one pipe produces a continuous note while the other pipe is used to play melodies.

It is one of the well-known instruments of the Roma (Gypsy) community and is also called Tabliss or Sivol. The Roma use it during dance performances. It is especially used in Quchak dance, a traditional Roma folk dance. The Roma community believes that the Quchak dance is flexible and alluring like a snake, which is also referred to as the “Sapera” dance in India.

This instrument of the Romani community has Indian origins and is used by the Kalbeliya community as well. According to Asha Sapera 10, a Kalbeliya dancer, this dance is performed by both communities. During the performance, the dancer bends backward to lift objects or coins using her mouth. The dance makes full use of the pungi, and the dancers sway gracefully to its tune. This dance continues to be popular in both communities even today.



Figure 3. Saida Qasim, Roma (Gypsy) dancer, London, 2018 (Source: Saida Qasim); Khanjari Instrument (Source: Rimjhim Sinha 2021 Jaipur).

<sup>4</sup> <https://hindi.feminisminindia.com/2022/08/11/asha-sapera-Kalbeliya-dancer-hindi/>.

This instrument is a smaller version of the Dhap. Like the Dhap, it is also covered with animal skin. Kalbeliya Gypsy men play it at a fast pace during their women's dance performances. This instrument is so ingrained in the life of the Kalbeliya people that each note reflects their lifestyle and cultural uniqueness.

In the Balkans, Roma (Gypsy) dancers use it to produce sound during dance performances. Its sound is rustling and metallic. Because there is a metal plate in the center, the sound has a jingling quality, which starts before the song and changes according to the music. This instrument is found in both communities, identical in name, shape, and method of use.



*Figure 4. Dholak (Source: Rimjhim Sinha 2021 Jaipur).*

The Dholak is a variant of the Dhol, smaller in size than the Dhol. Both sides are covered with animal skin, and the tension of the drumheads is adjusted by pulling the cords attached to it. It is played with both hands.

The Dholak is a prominent instrument played by both the Roma and Kalbeliya communities. In European and Balkan music, the Dauli is a type of drum that holds an important place among Romani instruments. It is comparable to the Indian Dhol. Among Russian Roma dancers, the Dholak and Tabla are known by the name Darbuka.



*Figure 5. Khadtaal.*

The Khadtaal is an ancient musical instrument primarily used in devotional songs and folk music. Its name is derived from the Sanskrit words “Kar” (hand) and “Taal” (clap). It consists of discs or plates that produce a jingling sound when struck together.

The European Castanet, used in Flamenco dance, produces rhythmic musical sounds in a manner similar to the Indian Khadtaal.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis clearly shows that there are significant similarities between Roma and Indian musical instruments. When considering these similarities, several key points can be noted: the diversity and quality of music and sound, the structure and purpose of instruments, the shared importance of foundational traditions, and

the influence of travel and environment. Both Indian instruments and Roma music produce sounds that convey intimacy and deep emotion. In both cultures, musical variety and rhythm hold special significance. Many instruments in Roma and Indian music are used for similar purposes. Just as Indian music considers “raga” and “tala”, each sound and rhythm in Roma music also carries specific meaning. Music in both traditions expresses emotions and tells stories.

There are numerous similarities between Roma and Indian musical instruments, whether in the depth of sound, the integration of cultural elements, or the emotional impact of music. These similarities symbolize a profound musical connection between the two cultures.

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