



Folk musical instruments of the land

Melody is part of the Bangladeshi DNA, and no melody is complete without an instrument to go with it. Words often do not need a place as the sound of the bamboo flute mingles into the moonlight.

Bangladesh's heritage is home to myriad musical instruments, instruments that have come from afar and have been embraced by the locals through the ages, and instruments that have originated from these very lands.

A modern day ensemble easily accommodates from the much adored *ektara* to the specialised synthesisers. It is a wondrous trip when the list of instruments, known and unknown, are rolled out, and the wonder does not halt there!

To start this musical trip, it is best to start with the most familiar one — the string instruments, technically classified as chordophone instruments.

String instruments of this region have a prominent longer neck, one or more sound chamber, and more often than not, mistaken one for the other by the common eye.

Ektara, the ever prominent musical instrument in *Baul* performances, is what its name signifies — an instrument of one string.

Considered to be the original precursor of the complex *beena*, the *ektara* has a prominent presence with its haunting tunes. Without any accompaniment, the *ektara* can be used for any song.

An interesting mention should be the *gopi-jantra*, which is commonly referred to as the *ektara*! As both instruments have a prominent single string that is plucked or struck to create sound, the mistake in this case is understandable. However, Lalon followers throughout the greater Kushtia region use this instrument and have referred to this as the *ektara*.

The *dotara*, another slightly misleading instrument name that does not consist of two strings, is a traditional instrument of Bangladesh, and quite often attributed as a traditional instrument of the sub-continent as well.

Coming to the number of strings, this instrument actually has four strings. It is even often customised to three or even five strings, but never only two strings. An essential for all types of folk songs in this region, the *dotara* is a prominent life-bringer to the folk songs like *Bhawaiya*, *Bhatiyali*, *Murshidi*, *Marfoti*, and

many more. Particularly for the *bhawaiya*, the *dotara* is so essential that the song is often referred to as 'the song of the *dotara*.'

An intriguing instrument in the string section would be the *Anandalahari*. Resembling a small open drum on one end, this is a one-stringed instrument that has a metal disc attached to one end of the string and is played by hitting the attached disc with another disc. The created tune lives up to its name as it resembles a joyous sound. Also known as *khamak*, this instrument lives up baul and bhatiyali performances, as well as providing an essential sound much needed for dramas, particularly for scenes that need a humorous touch.

Beena, *sitar* and *tanpura* — are all prominent, highly prized, separate

Shankar, and bands like the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones. An essential for raga, the *sitar*, literally means "three strings" in Persian, but it can have anywhere from 18 to 21 strings, with student/learner ones coming with seven strings. The instrument requires immense dexterity to play and produce the desired sound.

The *tanpura* is distinctly different from both the *sitar* and the *beena* in two aspects. It does not have two prominent sound chambers. Also, while the *beena* and the *sitar* have frets (guiding divisions on the neck of the instrument), the *tanpura* is without frets. It is popular as an accompanying instrument.

The mentioned instruments so far require plucking the strings by fingers, or by a small plucking pick, or by other gliding hand movements to

violin.

Behala has a widespread usage, from folk music to raga, and has prominent presence in terms of styles and performance.

Just as the violin requires a bow, there are two more bowed, stringed instruments that are used throughout musical performances in the country. The *sarinda*, a three stringed instrument, is used by sufi practitioners in marfati songs as well as by bauls and shadhaks. The *sarengi*, another four-stringed bowed instrument, is rectangular shaped compared to the violin and the *sarinda*. Used as an instrument on its own or as an accompaniment, the *sarengi* too enjoys widespread usage across the sub-continent in folk music.

Following the stringed instruments are the membranophones, or instruments that make sound when a membrane is hit with the hands, or with any other object to create vibrations. Membranophone instruments were originally used to send signals in primitive times. The most common and well known instruments in this segment would be the *tabla* and *baya*, which are played by hitting the top of the instruments with the palm of the hand. Commonly referred to as *tabla*, the duo is essential for not only maintaining beat and providing bass, but also for a livening ambience in a performance. The *baya* is often paired with the *ektara* in baul performances.

For Rabindra Sangeet performances, the *khol* is widely used, and usually played while sitting.

It is widest in the middle and tapers down to two sides. It is also widely used in kirtan performances. Interestingly, the *khol* sounds similar to the *baya* on one side, and the *tabla* on the other!

Besides using hands to play, membranophone instruments can also be hit with sticks to produce sound, the typical relatable example being the various western drums.

Kara-nakara, often mentioned in classical Bangla literature, is still popular to this day. Both are drum like instruments, and were originally used at times of war to send special messages and signals.

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stringed classical instruments of the region, and very often mistaken for the other. They are, as expected, different from the other, not only in appearance, but also in sound and usage.

The *beena* is probably the oldest, possibly originated and used from the times of the Indus Valley Civilisations, back in 3,000 BC. Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge, is also known as *beenpani* as she is always portrayed with a *beena*.

The *beena* is made up of up to seven strings and creates a simply magical tune that cannot be replicated by any other instrument. Classified under the *beena* is the *sitar*, which is well known not only throughout this sub-continent, but also the world.

The *sitar* has been made famous in modern times by Pandit Ravi

produce sound. There are, of course, a number of stringed instruments that require the usage of a bow (typically made of horsehair attached to a stick). The bowed string instruments produce sounds almost similar to the human singing voice.

Out of all the many bowed instruments, the most popular would be the violin; popularly known as *behala* (meaning an instrument that is played by placing on the bahu, or arm). It has enormous presence in local folk songs.

The violin, as we know in its modern form, came from Europe in the late 16th century, but organologists have placed similar instruments along the entire Eurasian region. Out of them, *Ravanahatha* as the name suggests, is a two-stringed bowed instrument used by the fabled King of Lanka — Ravana, and is thought to be the precursor to the

Photo: Shahrear Kabir Heemel
Performance by Joler Gaan
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