



#PERSPECTIVE

Drums, beats, and dhakis: A fading tradition

“Dhak, dhol, jhajor baaje,” we recite as children and there is no denying that the beats of the drums that we call ‘dhak’ has something robustly unique about it. Dhak is a familiar musical instrument that is native to the Indian subcontinent.

Aside from their uniquely loud palpitating beats, there are stories behind the sound. Stories that have always been there. Stories of the dhakis.

The dhak

The signature beat of a dhak is impossible to miss or confuse with anything else. We find many references to this in our literature and it’s easy to understand why. Durga Puja does not sound so festive without the frenzied beats of dhak.

The instrument itself is of medieval origin but it is said that dhak was already in play during the Vedic period. The large instrument is made out of a wooden frame with a leather membrane stretched over the opening. The cylindrical or barrel-shaped membranophone is usually around three feet in size. Beating on the membrane creates a loud noise that has a different aura with the power to excite people. Perhaps this is why we often see dhak beats are accompanied by people dancing around them almost in a frenzy.

Ideally, a dhak is made out of mango wood. One can buy a dhak for around Tk



12,000. However, most dhakis prefer to make their own.

“Everything about dhak, whether it’s creating a new one from scratch or repairing the current one, I do it myself. Sure, you can buy one at a shop and it won’t be bad, but I would say that making one is so much better. You can make it just how you want it,” said Ashit Das, a middle-aged dhaki from Pabna.

Sangkar Das from Munshiganj, a seasoned dhaki who has played at all

sorts of festivals, had the same sentiment. “Doing everything myself is not only cheaper, it’s just better. I can tweak the instrument how I want.”

Our dhaki

Playing dhak is no easy task and takes years of practice. Most dhakis start with other instruments and later learn the workings and beats of dhak as they find their talent.

“You start with kashi and continue to practice. It brings fluidity to your hand

movement. Later, you pick up the dhak,” explained Ashit using terms like “haat khulte hobe”.

Sangkar Das has been playing dhak at Mangal Shobhajatra, pujas, and many other festivals for more than two decades. This experienced artiste started his journey by playing kashi. Later, he picked up dhol and finally, in his maturity, took on the mantle of a dhaki. Now, he has a legacy to pass on, one that is quite common for dhakis. Passing the torch, or in this case — the stick.

“I learned from my father. And likewise, my elder son has also learned to play the dhak. This year, he will play by himself,” he said proudly, as all fathers would be watching his legacy continue.

Tapan Chandra Das plays dhak at Dhakeshwari Temple. He learned to play by watching his father, who was also a dhaki at Dhakeshwari Temple. “My father used to try to set me to study. But I didn’t like to study that much, instead I would flee and come here and watch my father play the dhak.”

Goda Das is another dhaki who is part of a band. “I learned from my ustad, Monmohon, who is long gone. Some people start early, I learned this when I was 28 years old. I used to play tabla at that time, and later picked up on dhak, dhol, and other membranophone instruments,” said the veteran artiste.