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Musical Instruments: The Sociocultural Significance of Tamak and Tumdak in Santhal Traditions

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Abstract:

This paper explores the sociocultural importance of Tamak and Tumdak, the two traditional drums used by the Santhal tribe, one of the largest Adivasi communities in eastern India. These instruments are not just used for music but they are a key part of Santhal identity, rituals, and everyday life. Their rhythms bring people together, creating a sense of happiness and unity within the community. Steven Brown highlights, "Music is not merely an artistic expression but a social tool that connects individuals to their collective past." The research is based on qualitative methods, including ethnographic fieldwork, participants' observation and interviews with Santhal drummers, senior citizens—and community members. These methods help to capture the deep meanings and lived experiences associated with the instruments. Additionally, textual analysis of oral narratives and cultural rituals provides insights into the symbolic meanings attached to Tamak and Tumdak. This research engages theories on the anthropology of music, including Stokes' observation that "musical instruments act as symbols, articulating and reinforcing communal

identities." By examining the physical construction and symbolic meanings of Tamak and Tumdak, this study underscores their position as cultural touchstones within the Santhal community. The paper also discusses how modern changes—urbanization, globalization and economic pressure—are affecting the traditional use of these instruments. Despite these challenges, Tamak and Tumdak continue to play a strong role in keeping Santhal culture looking live, vibrant and meaningful. By focusing on these instruments, the research highlights how music and cultural practices are linked to emotional well-being and identity of Santhals. It also shows how Adivasi communities are associated with traditional art to celebrate life and protect their heritage.

Keywords: music, traditional instruments, culture, rituals, heritage, ethnomusicology.

Introduction

Tribal communities, referred to as an Indigenous or Adivasi community in India, represent distinct cultural groups with their own languages, customs and traditions. These communities are characterized by their deep-rooted connections to land, nature, and communal living, which shape their cultural practices and social structures. As a large and distinct group, the Santhals having a rich heritage that is vividly portrayed through various art forms, including music, dance, and oral literature. These expressions serve not only as entertainment but also as vital components of their social fabric, reflecting their unique worldview, historical experiences, and communal values. The Santhal community is one of the largest tribal groups in India, primarily found in the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and Chhattisgarh. Their rich cultural heritage includes various forms of art wall painting by natural colors is one of them, dance-and music. The practices of dance and music in Santhal communities could only be understood through ethnomusicology,

a study of music and how it connects to people's lives and cultures. It looks at music not just as sounds or songs, but as something people do in their daily lives. Ethnomusicologists learn about different kinds of music from around the world, whether it's folk music, pop, or music for special events. They study how music can show who we are, like our nationality or background, and how it plays a part in traditions, celebrations, and even protests. They use ideas from both music and the study of cultures to understand how music helps people to express themselves and feel connected to their communities. Ethnomusicologists also think about how things like the internet, new technologies, and global connections are changing how music is made and shared. Among the many musical instruments used in Santhal traditions, Tamak and Tumdak hold special significance. No cultural ceremonies, dance and music are complete without these two instruments—Tamak and Tumdak. These instruments are not just tools for making music; they are deeply woven into the fabric of Santhal life, reflecting their beliefs, values, and social structures. The Santhal community has a rich history and a vibrant culture that includes unique customs, traditions, and languages. Their way of life is closely tied to nature—and they have a deep respect for their environment. Music plays a vital role in their daily lives, serving as a means of communication, celebration—and storytelling. Music is an essential part of Santhal traditions or we can say music resides in their soul, no cultural activity is complete without music. It is present in various aspects of life, from rituals and festivals to daily activities. Songs and dances often accompany with important events, such as weddings, harvests and religious ceremonies. Music helps to strengthen community ties and pass down cultural knowledge from one generation to another. Musical instruments hold a significant place in the cultural and social life of the Santhal community. These instruments are not only tools for creating music but are essential components of the Santhals' cultural identity, social cohesion, and rituals. In traditional Santhal society, music

and dance are integral part of various ceremonies and celebrations, helping to preserve their rich cultural heritage. One of the primary roles of musical instruments in the Santhal community is their contribution to ceremonial practices. Santhal rituals, such as weddings, festivals, and harvest celebrations, often feature music as a central component. Instruments like Tamak (a large drum), Tumdak (another kind of drum), Madol (also a type of drum), and Bansuri (flute) are widely used in these events to create rhythms that accompany traditional dances and songs. These musical elements help to mark significant events and reinforce cultural narratives within the community. Musical instruments also serve as a medium for storytelling and the transmission of cultural knowledge. Through music, the history, traditional beliefs, and folklore of the Santhal people are passed down from generation to generation, ensuring the preservation of their cultural heritage. Songs often tell stories of heroism, love, and the community's connection to nature. It uses instruments prominently Tamak and Tumdak, to enhance the narrative and emotional impact. Furthermore, the use of musical instruments is closely tied to the Santhals' spiritual beliefs. Many instruments are considered sacred and are believed to have protective and healing properties. Their sounds are thought to invoke spiritual forces, offering a means of communication with ancestral spirits and deities. This spiritual aspect of music strengthens the Santhal's connection to their traditional beliefs and reinforces the sacredness of their cultural practices.

Tamak and Tumdak, traditional musical instruments, hold substantial sociocultural significance in the Santhal community of Jharkhand. These instruments are not merely tools of music but serve as vital components of cultural expression and social unity within the community. Firstly, Tamak and Tumdak are integral to Santhal festive occasions and ceremonies. These instruments are prominently featured in the community's major celebrations, such as the Sohrai and Baha festivals. These festivals are crucial to the communal identity, marking the rhythms of

agricultural life and the changing seasons. During these events, the beats of the Tamak and Tumdak create an atmosphere of communal joy and are used to accompany traditional dances and songs, and reinforcing social bonds among community members. In addition to their role in celebrations, these instruments play-an important role in ceremonial rituals. The Santhals have a rich tradition of oral storytelling, music, and dance, where Tamak and Tumdak hold a central place. For example, they are used in wedding rituals and various rites of passage, marking significant transitions in individual lives with culturally resonant music. This usage highlights their importance in personal, religious and social affirmations of identity within the community. Moreover, Tamak and Tumdak serve as symbols of cultural heritage and continuity for the Santhals. In an era of rapid modernization and cultural homogenization, these instruments are a reminder of the Santhal's rich and remarkable history and distinctive cultural practices. They embody the oral and performative traditions of the community that have been passed down through generations, acting as a tangible link to their ancestors and a means to educate younger generations about their heritage and values. Troisi very aptly remarks the traditional participation of girl and boy:

“From the time a girl can toddle, she joins the line of dancers, while little boys {ape the antics} of the drummers” (Troisi 1979: 124).

In Santhal a perfect demarcation can be seen in dance and music. Even these instruments (Tamak and Tumdak) are dominantly played by the male members of the society. Culturally, the making and playing of these instruments involve specialized knowledge and skills, often passed from master to apprentice. The crafting of these instruments requires understanding not only of the materials and construction techniques but also of the cultural contexts within which they will be used. This skill transmission contributes to maintaining cultural knowledge and fostering a sense of pride and identity among the Santhals. Santhal music as well as prominent use of Tamak and

Tumdak in that, whether in social, cultural or any type of Santhali ceremonies, could be properly understood by the study of Martin Stokes.

Martin Stokes, a prominent ethnomusicologist is particularly known for his work on music in relation to social identity-and place. His research has focused on how music interacts with social identities, including ethnicity, nationalism, and personal or collective memory. One of his seminal contributions is his focus on how music is embedded in social and cultural contexts. His book “Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place” (1994) explores how music shapes and reflects identities and how it helps construct a sense of place and belonging. Martin Stokes’ work in ethnomusicology emphasizes how music is deeply intertwined with social identity, place, memory, politics, and everyday life. He explores how music shapes and reflects identities at various levels such as ethnic, national, and local, showing how it helps people to express who they are and where they belong. Stokes highlights the power of music to create a sense of place, anchoring listeners to specific landscapes, communities, or imagined homelands, which is particularly important for migrants and diasporic groups. His research also shows how music carries collective and personal memories, evoking nostalgia and connecting the past with the present. Beyond personal expression, Stokes examines how music serves political functions, acting as a tool for resistance, nation-building-or social change. Finally, he stresses that music is not separate from daily life but is embedded in everyday interactions, emotions, and social relationships, creating spaces where identities are performed and reimagined.

Literature Review

Martin Stokes' approach to music anthropology is centered around understanding music as a cultural expression and exploring its sociocultural significance. This methodology emphasizes ethnographic research and participant observation, aiming to comprehend the cultural contexts and

emotional expressions associated with music from within the communities that create and experience it. This approach aligns with broader anthropological and ethnomusicological practices that prioritize cultural relativism and the avoidance of imposing external value judgments on other cultures (Becker, 2001). Stokes' methodology advocates for bridging the gaps between different musical traditions and exploring the historical contexts and contemporary settings that influence musical performance. This perspective is evident in discussions that relate to bridging disciplines within the early music movement, which emphasizes understanding music within both historical and modern frameworks (Shelemay, 2001). His work suggests that examining popular music requires integrating ethnomusicological perspectives, which often involves analyzing how music functions within social contexts and how it is influenced by or influences cultural dynamics. This integration can be seen in publications like "Analyzing Popular Music," where Stokes contributes to discussions on aligning ethnomusicological insights with popular music studies (Saunders, 2004). Additionally, Stokes is involved in the interdisciplinary approach to musicology, which calls for breaking down traditional academic boundaries between disciplines like ethnomusicology, music sociology, and cultural studies. This interdisciplinary collaboration attempts to rethink methodological approaches and encourage a more integrated understanding of music's social and cultural roles (Born, 2010).

The Santhal community, one of India's largest indigenous groups, possesses a rich cultural heritage, deeply expressed through its use of traditional instruments like Tamak and Tumdak. These drums are not merely musical instruments but are central to the Santhal's spiritual, social, and environmental practices, symbolizing a bridge between the physical and metaphysical realms (Basu & Basu, 2020; Koustab & Dipankar, n.d.). In festivals such as Sohrai and Baha, the rhythms of the Tamak and Tumdak, passed down through generations, are played to honour deities, mark

seasonal changes, and connect the community with nature (Basu & Basu, 2020; Bevan, 2022; Carrin, 2022). These festivals serve as vital expressions of Santhal identity, reinforcing cultural heritage and communal bonds through collective drumming and storytelling (Carrin, 2022; Dutta & Sinha, 2022). Beyond these formal celebrations, Tamak and Tumdak are woven into daily life, accompanying social gatherings, weddings, and spiritual practices from morning to evening prayers, and underscoring the Santhal's holistic integration of the sacred and mundane (Hembram & Kisku, 2024; Mukherjee & Malik, 2021). Moreover, the preservation of these drumming traditions is crucial for maintaining cultural identity, especially in the face of modern challenges such as urbanization and cultural assimilation. The continue use and transmission of Tamak and Tumdak is both a cultural practice and a political act of self-preservation and resistance, asserting Santhal distinctiveness and resilience (Deb, 2007; Dutta & Sinha, 2022; Bevan, 2022).

Making process of Tamak and Tumdak



The Tamak is a traditional percussion instrument shaped like a conical drum made from iron. It holds cultural significance and is often used in festivals to foster community spirit and cultural identity. Constructed from iron sheets and buffalo hide, it has two drumheads and is played using sticks. Shaped like a bowl, the Tamak produces a louder sound than the Tumdak and is associated with religious and spiritual importance. Its design includes colourful patterns and intricate detailing, with leather heads stretched on both sides.

Tumdak, a folk drum, is a key part of tribal dances. The Santhal people call it the Tumdak or Tumdah. It's about 60cm long and slightly cone-shaped, with the wider end being around 30cm



across. The drum's body is made from burnt clay. Drum makers get hollow clay shapes from potters, and then strengthen them. First, they cover the clay with local white soil. Then, they paste strips of old cloth over it. Next, they add another layer of khori mati (a type of clay). After that, they wrap the whole drum with strips

of colored leather or cane. The two open ends of the drum, which are different sizes, are covered with animal skin. The skin is attached to strong leather rings that fit onto each rim of the drum. These skins are kept tight with leather strips that run up and down the body, connecting the two rings. The left side of the drum has a coating made from finely ground white stones mixed with boiled rice and water. This is applied several times, and then smoothed with water. The right side of the drum is coated with a mix of powdered stones, boiled rice, and lamp black (soot). The smaller right side makes a sharp, high-pitched sound, while the larger left side makes a deep, bass sound. The tone can be changed by adding a black circle of tuning paste, made from rice paste, glue, and iron filings. Tumdaks are always sold in pairs and are always played together with another drum called the Tamak.

Objectives

This paper aims to explore, from an ethnomusicological perspective, the sociocultural significance of Tamak and Tumdak drums within the Santhal tribe, examining how these instruments function as cultural symbols that reinforce communal identity, social cohesion, and emotional well-being. It seeks to understand the lived experiences, symbolic meanings, and

ongoing relevance of these traditional drums in the face of modern challenges, thereby highlighting the intricate connections between music, ritual, and cultural resilience among Adivasi communities.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative ethnomusicological approach to investigate the cultural significance of the Tamak and Tumdak drums among the Santhal tribe. The research is grounded in ethnographic fieldwork, which involves close observation of the community's daily life, rituals, and ceremonies where these drums play a vital role. Through participant observation, the researcher engaged directly in musical performances and social gatherings, gaining an insider perspective on the cultural practices and meanings associated with the instruments. Semi-structured interviews with Santhal drummers, elders, and other community members offered valuable insights into the personal and communal significance of these drums. In addition, the study includes an analysis of oral narratives, songs, and cultural rituals, shedding light on the symbolic roles of these instruments occupy in Santhal society. The research draws upon theoretical perspectives from the anthropology of music and ethnomusicology, particularly Martin Stokes' notion of musical instruments as symbols of communal identity. This comprehensive methodology provides a rich understanding of Tamak and Tumdaks' enduring role in preserving Santhal cultural identity amid contemporary challenges.

Conclusion

This study underscores the deep sociocultural significance of Tamak and Tumdak within the Santhal community. Far from being mere musical instruments, they are potent symbols of Santhal identity, social cohesion, and emotional well-being. Through ethnomusicological research, including ethnographic fieldwork, participants' observation, and interviews, the study reveals how

these drums connect the community to its collective past and sustain cultural practices amid modern pressures like urbanization and economic challenges. Despite these external forces, Tamak and Tumdak continue to play a vital role in expressing cultural identity, reinforcing social bonds, and preserving Santhal heritage. This research highlights the resilience of Adivasi cultural expressions and their ongoing relevance in contemporary life, showing how music functions not only as an art form but as a vital social and cultural resource.

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