

The Folk Drums of North - East: A Versatile Medium of Socio - Cultural Communication of Tribal and Non Tribal Communities

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ABSTRACT

North- eastern region as one of the far off places of the country remained almost inaccessible for many years. This forced its native tribal and non tribal communities to develop their own ways of communication synchronizing with their life. A wide range and variety of folk drums used across the region by these communities are the live example of such efforts. However, very less is known to the world about this amazing communication device of very indigenous nature developed with locally available material. It is a very simple yet very technical in use performing multiple functions of communication. It was an exploratory study carried out using in depth interviews and discussions on key issues from the identified respondents belonging to tribal and non tribal communities of seven out of eight North – eastern States of the country. This paper is an attempt to identify varied types of drums with the major objective “To analyse various communication functions and significance of communicating through different types of folk drums in the socio - cultural lives of the identified tribal and non - tribal communities from the selected States of North east India”. As many as five interesting broader communication functions were found to be existing with many sub - functions under each category. These drums are made differently, played differently and even kept and preserved differently for different communication function. Need for preserving it as intangible heritage and carrying out more intensive studies in the areas has been suggested.

Key words: *North - East India; Folk Drums; Tribal Communication; Socio - cultural Communication;*

Traditional and beautiful yet rhythmic instrument, the “Drum” that remains king of all the musical instruments in north - eastern tribal and non tribal communities for ages, has not only been a symbol of identity of these groups but also a strong means of communication for centuries in the region. The use of ‘Drums’ is steeped in the culture, way of life and indigenous religion of the people of North east. Even today they are the live epitome of the society’s philosophy and tradition affecting widely the socio- cultural makeup of these communities at large. A wide variety and range of such drums are used for different occasions and purposes and expressing varied messages. The art of beating drums goes long back to the tradition of these

where it has been handed down from one to other generation acquired through learning, repetitive practice and constant involvement of the performer with the music. Despite having such old and rich tradition very less researched and recorded work is available. Therefore, looking at the dearth of information and researches in the area an exploratory case study was carried out to identify various types of folk drums of selected tribal and non tribal ethnic communities of the seven States of the Region. Effort was made to find out their significance as a communication tool and medium and their impact in varied ways in different domain of the socio - cultural of life and living of the tribes and ethnic communities of the region.

The objectives of this study was to analyse various communication functions and significance of communicating through different types of folk drums in the socio – cultural lives of the identified tribal and non - tribal communities from the selected States of North east India.

METHODOLOGY

It was an exploratory study carried out using qualitative analysis in seven States out of eight, across North – eastern region of India. These seven states were - Sikkim, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Tripura. Information on different types of folk drums of *Bhutias* and *Tamangs* from Sikkim, Assamese and *Hajongs* from Assam, again *Hajongs*, *Khasis* and *Garos* from Meghalaya, *Meities* of Manipur, *Nagas* of Nagaland, *Mizos* from Mizoram and *Tripurians* from Tripura was collected on identified focused issues pertaining to the varied dimensions of communication function. Drums used by each community as means of varied communication functions, were taken as individual cases for the purpose of the study.

The information obtained on the folk drums used and played in the selected states of North – east reflecting various shades of their life has been classified and arranged under the heads as per pre - identified specific communication functions and is given below:

- i. Sending Community and other Messages of Importance using Varied Sounds and Beats
- ii. Expression of Socio - cultural Status, Socio - cultural Identities and a Symbol of Gender Perceptions.
- iii. Means of Healing in Grief and Source of Strength in Crisis.
- iv. Integral part of Cultural Celebrations and Festivals.
- v. Resonating Religious Faiths, Rituals and Socio - cultural Messages and Providing a Sense of Security from Natural Calamities and Evils.

Information on these pre- defined focused areas was procured conducting informal individual and group interviews and long discussions with village heads, artists and common man from selected non tribal, tribal and ethnic communities. Information obtained was then arranged systematically under different heads and analysed thoroughly. Inferences were drawn accordingly.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results from the information obtained and classified as per pre - identified communication functions, was further analyzed and arranged under each category and sub category. Accordingly, interpretation and suggestions were made and are given as under -

Beating Drums for Sending Community and other Messages of Importance using Varied Sounds and Beats Folk drums in remote and geographically excluded North - eastern region, with a variety of and peculiar beats have been a source of communicating a wide range of messages of importance and connecting people with each other.

The “*Dama Dalsang*” drum is played exclusively to convey messages to the far off situated *jhum* (shifting cultivation) fields among Garo tribe of Meghalaya. Here, variation of beats is used to inform about different events such as the visit of some important person or male relative of *Nokma*, to make invitation to drink rice beer, or to warn about the entry of enemies in the village or outbreak of fire or any such emergency.

The “*Tanyei Pung*” of Manipur is used to announce time where as “*Tomal Pung*” is used for hunting expedition and war fares and here again both differ in their sound tones.

In Nagaland, the famous “Log Wood Drums” are beaten with different rhythm and beats to announce different messages for example approach of enemies, victory of wars, village feasts, funerals, natural calamities, etc. since ancient time.

In *Mizo* society too, the drums are beaten to the loudest possible sound to scare wild animals away. *Tamang* Community of Sikkim the “*Dhamphu*” made of deer skin having altogether 32 bamboo nails can attract the birds and animals.

Drums as an Expression of Social Status, Socio - cultural Identities and a Symbol of Gender Perceptions: In all the Tribal communities selected for the study, the ‘drums’ have been part and parcel of their socio – cultural life since ages. It has been used not only in all socio – cultural events, and as a symbol of status and identity but also signifies the gender perceptions of these communities.

Drums: As A symbol of Social Status: The music and musical instruments of north-eastern communities not only act as medium that communicates the status of a

person but also identifies the way of living, social structure and organisation, etc.

Among Garo tribes of Meghalaya the folk drum “Krum” is considered as very special and the most sacred drum. It occupies a status of pride and place in the Nokma’s (i.e. head of the village community and custodian of community land) and his close relatives’ house and only ‘Nokma’ is entitled to play it on religious ceremonies. Therefore, it gives a sense of pride, esteem, respect and special status to ‘Nokma’ in the society as a holder and player of “Kram.” (Marak, C.R., 2006)

For Mizos, playing folk drums has always been an occasion for social gatherings and interaction in the evenings as a part of daily activity where the singing and dancing over a rice beer takes place at Chief’s court or residence (Thansanga, B., 2006).

Drums: As an Expression of Socio- Cultural Identity:

The example is “Langte Pung” and “Sating Pung”, the drum used on cultural and traditional festivals of Meities from Manipur like “Lai Haraoba” and “Holi” is strongly connected with their cultural identity. Likewise, the classic “Bihu Dhol” communicates the essence of cultural identity of Assameese and other ethnic groups like “Sonwal Kacharis”, “Marans,” etc., from Assam.

Drums: Signifying Gender Perceptions: Some of the drums, for instance are considered female and some male and accordingly their beating pattern and instrument used for beating, occasion when they are played, etc differs.

On the contrary, though the woman has a very respectable position in Khasi matriarchal society, she is considered as the holder of only “one power” hence only “one female drum” is used to signify her worth, affection and as the person who is the custodian and keeper of property and trust. No stick is used in playing these drums and they are never used for religious purpose.

The other example is of “Khasi Drums” and their different rhythms that explain the role of men and women in the society and even the evolution of clan system of Khasis which is another major tribe of Meghalaya residing predominantly in Khasi hill area of the State. The role of both, male and female is very well depicted through two types of drums viz. “Ka Ksing Shynrang” (the male drum) and “Ka Ksing Kytheio” (the female drum). Here again, the number of drums

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played and different types of rhythmic patterns obtained from various playing techniques signifies the social structure and social role of male and female in matrilineal system of Khasis.

In Khasis, after marriage male goes to stay at his wife’s place and children are known with the clan name of their mother. The female inherit the property. For instance, prevalence of two male drums signifies the dual role males has to play; one as the father of his children in his wife’s clan and another as maternal uncle of his nieces and nephews in his mother’s clan acting as a connecting link between two clans. Similarly, playing technique and the stick used for playing the two drums explains the Khasi concept of man having 12 powers (Syiem, L., 2006). The right side is always indicated by the drum syllable “Dun” and played with stick reflecting the man as the one who protects and shields his own family and clan (wife’s clan) from any threat and misfortune where as the left side’s syllable “Thang” refers to soft advice of maternal uncle to his nieces and nephews.

“Pung” the drum from Manipur is another example which is of three different size variations based on masculine, feminine and child attributes related to it.

In Bhutias of Sikkim there is Sa Gna where Sa means Copper and Gna means drum with male (called as “Fo”) drum in slightly bigger size and female (known as “Mo”) drum in smaller size is played on religious occasions.

Sounds of Drum as a Means of Healing in Grief and Source of Strength in Crisis: The varied variety of north-eastern drums also helps in coming out of pain and sorrows. “Kirtan” is a form of music sung with the drum beats in Hajong tribe of Meghalaya and Assam on deaths and Shradh. “Ahong Pung” is another drum played by Meities of Manipur on death anniversaries to bring solace to the grieved family and relatives. Mizos of Mizoram strongly believe in singing songs of lamentation to control one’s mourning using drums to beat the song in order to make singing a relief to the bereaved family.

Playing Folk Drum as an Integral Part of Cultural Celebrations and Festivals: Drums were the earliest musical instrument in Mizo tribe to choreograph the entire festive dances.

Similarly, in undivided Kamrup, Darrang, Sonitpur and Goal Para district of Assam if people see “Bar

Dhol”, the biggest size Dhol of Assam having length of about one and half meters and half meters diameter of each side, with 15 to 30 men troop of performers from “Bar Dhulia Institution’s players” (Das, P.C., 2006).

The “Dafat” a round shaped musical Instrument and an octagonal shaped “Khanjari” having only one face with bells attached to it, in Manipur is played in “Holi Sankeertans” and “Dafat Chalon (dance)” reflecting the joyful mood of Holi and “The Dhol” is used during “Dhol Chalon” (Dhol Dance) (Sharma, A.C., 2006).

No festivals and dance like “Hajagiri, Lebang”, or famous “Goria dance” of Tripura can be presented without “Kham” or drum which is almost similar to Punjabi Dhol and is beaten by two people at a time with its typical beats.

The varied sounds produced by all instruments create a kind of vibrant atmosphere all over and results in creation of tranquil, joyful and hassle-free environment.

Drum Beats Resonating Religious Faiths, Rituals and Socio - cultural Messages and Providing a Sense of Security from Natural Calamities and Evils: In all the tribes and other ethnic communities of North - east various types of folk drums are used in different forms and ways mainly to communicate for religious purposes especially designed and carved for the occasions. One such interesting example is - three types Garo drums, “Kram,” “Dama” and “Dama Dalsang”, also known as “Dimdima”, the “Krum” is most sacred drum used during ritual of Gods. It is always held in reverence and played following rituals. It is believed that “the God able to cause illness and death” resides in it. By playing the drum properly with respect people try to please him thereby protecting themselves and their families from evils and illness leading to the sense of security and ultimately stress- free healthy life.

Many times sacred deities and idols are worshiped and attempt is made to please them by playing different instruments with a specific rhythm and pitch. This provides a sense of security among people leading to happiness and all time jovial and carefree moods ultimately resulting into long healthy life of these people. For example, in Garo tribe from Garo Hills region of Meghalaya the most famous and awaited “Wangala” festival is characterized by 100 drum dance. It is the “Thanks giving Ceremony” to “Misi Saljong,” the “God

of blessings and distribution” and “Minima Kire Rokkime,” “the Goddess who itself is paddy” which is directly related to their food security rice being the staple diet. Here drums are played with special “Beats” ritually accepted for Wangala.

Among Hajongs, another tribe of Assam and Meghalaya, “Gitalu song” is the lyrical verses of the story Chanda sadagor, Lakhinder and Behula sung during marriage ceremonies, “Mario” puja, or worship.

The drum of Meitie community of Manipur, the “Meitie Pung” is mainly used for religious festivals like Rasa dance, Gaur Lila, Dhumen and Keertans, etc. whereas “Dholak Pung,” a derivative of “Lai Pung” is played to accompany religious festivals like “Nat Sankeertans.”

Log drums of Naga land are not only symbol of Naga heritage but also used in various rituals. Construction of these drum follows a sequence of procedures and rituals and finally its installation is also done carrying out several rituals. The village gates and log drums are as quite similar in many ways as drums are revered as deity. They are considered very pious and pure they are placed at a pure place. For example, the drums to the “Merung” and the boys of “Merung” take it as a sacred responsibility to protect and maintain the log drums. Among Bhutias of Sikkim, again the drum has a major role to play in all religious ceremonies.

Likewise, in Mizo society (Mizoram), even today the drum is used in all religious occasions.

Following Suggestions are given for the Further Researches in the Area -

- i. Further detailed studies on the drums and other musical instrument of each tribe of the region can be carried out to see their wide ranging impact as communication medium and with a view to bring out some new dimensions.
- ii. The effect generated through playing musical instruments in these communities may be tried out on other communities as well to ascertain their effects in objective manner so that it could be utilized for the benefit of society at large.
- iii. Further in - depth studies if carried out, may serve the larger national interest and objective of social and cultural integration as people will come to know more about these communities and their unique knowledge acquired and preserved through ages.

CONCLUSIONS

In nutshell, the ‘drum’ ‘or *dhol*’ is still a very strong and important source of communication in multiple situations in the lives of North - eastern people. They are made differently; they are played differently and even they are preserved or kept differently. In the age of satellite communication these ‘folk drums’ still play a key role in not only communicating important messages, but also generates a feeling of social security, identity and proximity in other wise isolated and secluded ethnic communities of the region.

Possibilities can be worked out for using these simple yet very effective and known communication medium in the region for developing and designing innovative communication strategies to be used for developmental issues.

There is a further need to protect and preserve this marvelous means of communication as an Intangible heritage art and find out its varied possibilities in terms of utility and usage for unfolding other aspects related to social, spiritual, religious and political life of the people of the region.

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