

# *The Lutes of the SANTAL*

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*The tribal art of India is widely neglected in Europe and America. Its meaning is largely unknown and it is generally overshadowed by Classical Indian art. European artists at the beginning of the century made us aware of the arts of Africa and Oceania, and perhaps now we should learn to appreciate the formal language of Indian tribal art as well.*



**Dhodro Banam  
Santal, West  
Bengal (fig. 2)**

**T**he independent culture of the Adivasi, the tribal inhabitants of India who are not a part of the Hindu caste system in so far as it still exists today, has not yet been thoroughly researched. There is no extensive literature about the Adivasi as exists, for example, for many African cultures. Elsy Leuzinger's *Propyläen Kunstgeschichte* (1978) reproduces 147 pages of African artifacts, but devotes only 10 pages to Indian tribal art. One of these illustrations depicts a Santal stringed instrument. This object, referred to as a dhodro banam (literally: hollow instrument) forms the basis for this article.

The Santal are the largest group of the Munda people who live in the Indian states of Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal, and subsist primarily by rice farming. Their language, Santali, belongs to the Austroasiatic linguistic family. The patrilineal clan is their largest social unit, and is connected to other clans through marriage. An important part of social life is music, dance and singing in turn. Dances are linked with the fertility of the harvest, and they are performed separately by men and women before and after the rainy season, and between sowing and harvesting. Today, many Santal have adopted Hinduism or Christianity.

Little research has been done about the art of this Indian tribal group. The musical instruments we are addressing here were removed from their original environment by the commercial trade, so it is difficult to retrieve precise information about them, particularly since they have fallen into disuse and have virtually disappeared due to the strong social and cultural pressure of the dominant Hindu population. Despite these obstacles, we will attempt to clarify the situation utilizing the available literature supplemented with observations about instruments in collections, in order to trace the development and meaning of these instruments.

The dhodro banam belongs to the sarinda family, a type of lute with a partially open body that is covered with skin on the lower part. This instrument is played with a bow in the manner of a violin, but in a vertical position, and is found in Iran, Pakistan, Nepal, India and Central Asia.

From a musical viewpoint, the dhodro banam is a simple instrument. It generally has only one string, and its archaic appearance might lead one to suspect that it is the precursor of the sarinda. Its birthplace, however, seems not to have been India but Central Asia. An instrument played by the shamans of that region has the typical characteristics of the sarinda, although it looks quite different on first sight. This instrument, the kobyz, is slightly bow shaped and has a two-part body that is open on the upper half and covered with skin in the lower half.

The Indian musicologist Onkar Prasad considers the dhodro banam to be a regressive form of the sarinda. Other instruments resembling primitively made sarinda are known to exist, including the sarangi of the Gaine, a Nepalese caste of musicians. The body of this instrument has the typical lateral indentations of the sarinda, but it is not so extremely "wasp-waisted"(fig. 20).

The form of the dhodro banam is somewhat different, however. Its body is long and is not vaulted like the sarinda. The open part can be separated from the covered part by a step or by a more or less continuous transition, and not by a lateral waist-like indentation. This elongation is not restricted to the dhodro banam; northern Pakistan has a similar long and strongly bent type of instrument (fig. 1), and Curt Sachs, who published a classification method for musical instruments in 1923 that is still in use today, describes a tid or tad of similar form from Punjab and Rajastan.

The distribution of the elongated lute is evidently almost identical to that of the rounded form. Thus, at least two types of this stringed lute exist in the cultural area of India that we are examining here: the elongated form that is rounded or slightly broadened at the open part of its body, (e.g. dhodro banam and tid), and the form with a sharply pinched waist between the open and skin-covered sections of the body, generally called a sarinda (or sometimes geychak, sarang, sarangi, sarod, etc.). We have yet to know whether a similar long lute was the widespread precursor of today's Indian sarinda or whether it was developed by different societies according to their needs. It is possible that the tribal and rural population continued to use the type that is more easily manufactured, whereas the Hindu and Muslim societies preferred a more sophisticated version.

The narrower form may have been chosen for technical reasons, since it could be made from thinner trees or large branches without having to cut down bigger trees. This apparent advantage is offset by the drawback that the pith core of the wood generally runs through the instrument. Today, it is sometimes difficult to find the appropriate kind of wood, and many of the more recent pieces are worked in inferior material. The pith core has fallen out of some, rendering them useless.

Two other characteristics of the dhodro banam should be mentioned that are indicative of the special development of this instrument. First, the dhodro banam is played in a different manner than the sarinda, in that it is the inner surface of the stretched fingers that presses the string. Second, the carvings on the top of the dhodro banam face the listener. The figures on the peg box of a sarinda are oriented toward the side. This distinction may seem minor, but it implies an autonomous artistic development.



**Dhodro Banam  
Santal (?), Eastern  
India  
(fig. 6)**

With the exception of the shared characteristics of the



**Dhodro Banam,  
Santal, Bihar (fig. 9)**

elongated body and the rectangular peg box, the appearance of individual dhodro banam varies greatly. The "shoulders" of the instrument may be cut flat, laterally drawn upward, or rounded. Sometimes extensions of the neck protrude prominently into the open part of the body. Elements forming bridges in various configurations are placed on this part, and sometimes take the form of a human being. The structural transition from the open to the skin-covered parts of the body is contiguous in some instruments, but in others it is clearly articulated as a step. Even the neck varies greatly. Sometimes it is square, sometimes fully rounded, and sometimes it is rounded with a vertical edge. In some examples, it is hollowed out from the back and in others from the sides. In rare cases, the neck is formed in four columns. Unfortunately, it is not possible today to make positive assertions as to whether such stylistic characteristics are the expression of the exuberant imaginations of individual carvers, local variants of a common form, or the fashion of a certain period in time.

In his book *An Introduction to Indian Music* (1977), Vishnudass Shirali reproduces some pencil drawings of Santal, Munda and Ho lutes. However, these illustrations are not very precise in their depiction of specific stylistic elements. Some of the pieces represented come from Verrier Elvin's collection, which may be seen in the National Museum in New Delhi. Elvin, a former missionary and anthropologist, adopted the religion of the Gond tribe and is one of the greatest experts on Indian tribal art to have explored its meaning at an early date. Some instruments collected by him have carved tassel-like elements and inset carved registers of ovals that are not observed in more recent instruments (Figs. 4 and 9). Since the instruments originate from both Bihar and Orissa, we can assume this to be an impact of time rather than a local variation. Although only the Munda, Ho and Santal tribes are mentioned by Shirali, some ornaments, robes or items of jewelry point to quite different groups. Skulls, for example, do not occur in the art of the Santal (fig. 5).



**Huka Banam  
Munda, Munda or  
Santal, Eastern  
India (fig. 10)**



**Dhodro Banam,  
Santal (?), East  
India (fig. 11)**

Figurative representations crowning stringed instruments are found frequently in India, mainly in the east, and in the Himalayas. Animals are depicted, primarily birds but also horses and goats, mythical animals and, in some cases, groups of animals and human beings. In eastern India the peacock is a particularly popular motif.

The Santal prefer human figures. Animals generally appear only in juxtaposition with human figures, e.g., while being ridden. The crossbars and finials of the peg boxes of the lutes often bear relief or fully articulated carvings of groups of women dancing in a chain, sometimes depicted in multiple registers. These women, dressed in skirts or sari-like costumes, are portrayed performing a dance dedicated to the fertility of the earth. Sometimes the accompanying dhol (drum), nagara (kettle-drum) (fig. 9), shanai (oboe) or dhodro banam player is depicted. In addition to these rows of dancers, two figures, usually female (fig. 12), often decorate the top of the dhodro banam. These figures can be presented realistically or in a simplified manner, and are sometimes even

reduced to two small vertical projections. On lutes of Christianized Adivasi, these figures are re-interpreted and depict Adam and Eve, represented as a naked man and woman. One dhodro banam depicts a woman carrying a naked man. In the tradition of the Muria of the Bastar tribe, this represents a bride and bridegroom (Fig. 14). Scenes from everyday life, such as a father, mother and child, horse and elephant riders, and farmers driving carts are popular. The elements bearing these scenes are also ornamented with lines, circular rosettes, sun symbols and scrolls. With varying skill, later owners often added further ornamentation such as fish, birds, mammals or human beings. The sun symbol is frequently depicted and derives, according to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, from associations with the sun god Sing Bongo. These symbols also appear on the wrists of Santal children as a protection against harm.

The peg boxes of sarinda are invariably crowned or closed at the upper end. The kobyz players of Central Asia adorn this shield-like terminal panel with an odd number of movable pieces of metal that can be made to rattle while the instrument is being played. In eastern India, birds or other animals rest on the panel, which is either round or triangular. Likewise, on eastern Indian sarinda, one finds board-like extensions decorated with metal hearts, circles or other carvings projecting beyond the peg-box. This board-like finial has great significance for the dhodro banam. In older instruments, this element may be as much as one third of the height of the whole.



**Dhodro Banam Ho**  
(?), Eastern India,  
(fig. 12)

In India, parts of stringed instruments are traditionally named after parts of the human body. An 18th-century author speaks of "a head, throat, ears and chest" of the sarangi, an instrument similar to the sarinda, and the musician brings forth the voice of the instrument. The Gaine of Nepal likewise claim that their instrument has a mouth, neck, waist and hips. The four strings are named after the members of the family: father, son, daughter and mother. The Santal describe the closed part of the body as the stomach, the open part as the chest, the neck as the neck, and the peg box as the head, in which is stuck the tuning peg, known as the ear.



**Dhodro Banam**  
Central or eastern  
India (?)  
(fig. 13)

There have been many efforts to give the instrument the visual attributes of a human being. The body and peg box are carved with faces, but these are usually unseen by the listener since both the body and the peg box are often open in front and the carvings appear behind. More visible is the head that the famous sarangi player Bundu Khan mounted on top of his instrument so that it looked forward and faced the audience.

The dhodro banam, with its thick peg box that looks like a head itself, is reminiscent of a human figure. This impression is reinforced if the peg box is shaped like a head or if the arms are carved laterally on the body of the instrument. Some

instruments are rendered as a complete figure. Here the instrument maker puts the open part of the body to the rear, so that the resulting surface may be seen as a torso with jewelry, breasts and arms indicated in relief (fig. 15). In this configuration, an inset in the form of a carved braid of hair



**Dhodro Banam**  
Central or eastern

may be added to the opening of the peg box to make the head appear complete. One dhodro banam even has legs (fig. 10). A somewhat similar instrument, called a huka banam, has an element that might be identified as a huge penis, but it may instead be a technical detail and only a finger board. Male or female genitals are rarely represented, and even breasts are only suggested. The huka banam is of interest because it is held and played in a position that is upside down in relation to the dhodro banam.

India (?)  
(fig. 13a)



**Dhodro Banam**  
Central or eastern  
India (?)  
(fig. 14)

When played, the dhodro banam is held vertically in front of the musician, the neck with the striking hand above and the bow hand below. In the case of the huka banam, which rests on the player's chest, the neck and the striking hand are positioned below, and the bow hand above. The huka banam has no pegs and the single string is tied to the neck. Although they are both conceived in anthropomorphic terms, the dhodro banam and huka banam are morphologically unrelated.

A Santal myth reported by the musicologist Onkar Prasad tells the story of seven brothers who one day killed their only sister in order to eat her. The youngest brother, however, could not eat his portion because he so loved his sister, so he buried it in a white ant-hill. On this spot there grew a beautiful guloic tree, from which a melodious sound was heard. A passing yugi, who often came to pick flowers, heard this sound and decided to cut a branch from the tree to make the first dhodro banam. Prasad notes that the Santal believe the musical instruments to be a gift from supernatural forces. With the assistance of these instruments, they can communicate with entities from other worlds. They believe that they are physically related to the dhodro banam and consider the instrument to be a human being. This analogy appears to be rooted in both the instrument's anthropomorphic form and its sound, which is reminiscent of the human voice to the Santal people.



**Dhodro Banam**  
Santal, Orissa  
(fig. 15)



**Dhodro Banam**  
Eastern India  
(fig. 16)

This story demonstrates that the dhodro banam has a layered meaning for its players and their audiences. It is more than a simple tool for producing music and there is a deeper meaning behind the instrument's prestigious appearance than a wish for mere attractiveness.

Verrier Elvin reports that the Santal believe that all beauty created by man is destined to disappear with him, and thus the Santal usually bury or burn their exquisitely decorated instruments. This, however, has not always been the general rule. If one studies older examples of dhodro banam in detail, it can be observed that they have been played by several generations. The patina from use is often quite fresh, although the rest of the instrument may be completely encrusted. Similarly, the awkward decorations that have been added and the different depths of patination point to the fact that an ancient instrument has been recently used.



**Dhodro Banam**  
Eastern India  
(fig. 17)

Apparently these instruments were greatly valued, which accounts for their preservation over generations. In the case of figure 15, even the movable parts were kept. If the body of a precious instrument was destroyed, a new one was grafted to the head.



**Dhodro Banam  
Eastern India  
(fig. 18)**

The dhodro banam is used by beggar yugi who move through the villages of India and are the mythical inventors of this instrument. Some sources indicate that dhodro banam players were semi-professional musicians who were invited from afar for festivities.

The creators of the songs of the Santal remain anonymous. As soon as a new song appeared, it became common property. There was no distinction made between the performers and the composer. Whether the dhodro banam was considered a work of art closely

connected with the name of its maker or if the maker remained anonymous is not clear. However, the surviving material leads us to believe that the creators of the instruments designed their own models and developed their own styles.



**Dhodro Banam  
Eastern India  
(fig. 19)**



**Sarangi Gaine,  
Nepal (fig. 20)**

Dhodro banam makers seem to have created basic models that are to be distinguished from one another only by differences in the richness of ornamentation and minor variations in iconography. The same decorative motif, such as a father with mother and child, was clearly produced by several workshops, as can be deduced from variations in stylistic details and in the forms of the body of the instruments. A dark, hard wood was used in the manufacture of the instruments, possibly that of the guloic tree referenced in the myth of origin. When research on the tribal cultures of India was begun, their civilization was already declining. So far, little attention has been paid to works of art

of this kind, and today few important works of art can be found, since the materials used by these tribal peoples were generally perishable. Among the few remaining objects that evidence their culture, we can appreciate the dhodro banam.

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Photos: Figs. 1-12, 14, 15, 20: Leonid Kamarowsky, Frankfurt;  
Figs. 13, 17, 18: Scott McCue, San Francisco.

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