

EVOLUTION OF PUNJABI FOLK MUSIC AND THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL FOLK INSTRUMENTS: A CULTURAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Punjabi folk music is a living cultural expression shaped by agriculture, oral tradition, religious devotion, community singing, dance, and regional identity. This paper studies the evolution of Punjabi folk music with special reference to the changing role of traditional folk instruments such as dhol, dholki, tumbi, algoza, sarangi, dhadd, chimta, iktara, gharha, and rabab. The paper argues that these instruments are not only sound-producing objects but also carriers of memory, craft, ritual, rhythm, and social participation. Modern recording technology, urban lifestyles, DJ culture, electronic loops, and the decline of hereditary performers and instrument makers have reduced the everyday use of many traditional instruments. However, the popularity of Punjabi music at national and global levels also provides opportunities for revival. The study recommends documentation, educational workshops, digital archives, stage presentation, and institutional support for artists and artisans as practical steps for preserving this important heritage.

Keywords: Punjabi folk music; folk instruments; intangible cultural heritage; oral tradition; bhangra; cultural preservation

Introduction

Punjabi folk music is one of the most energetic and emotionally expressive traditions of South Asia. It developed through the lived experiences of ordinary people and remained closely connected with farming, festivals, marriage customs, women's songs, heroic ballads, Sufi poetry, Sikh devotional singing, and community dance. Unlike music created only for formal concerts, Punjabi folk music grew in courtyards, fields, fairs, shrines, wedding homes, and village gatherings. Therefore, it must be understood as a social and cultural practice, not merely as a collection of songs.

UNESCO explains intangible cultural heritage as living traditions passed from one generation to another, including oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, festive events, knowledge, skills, and traditional craftsmanship [1]. Musical instruments, performance spaces, and the skills connected with performing arts are also included in this heritage framework [2]. This definition is highly relevant to Punjabi folk music because its survival depends on singers, performers, instrument players, craftsmen, family memory, and

community occasions. The objective of this paper is to examine the evolution of Punjabi folk music and to analyse why several traditional folk instruments are now becoming less visible in regular performance.

Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative and descriptive method. It is based on secondary sources, including academic books, journal articles, institutional web resources, cultural portals, and documented material on Punjabi folk instruments. The approach is interpretive: it examines music as a cultural system by connecting songs, instruments, performers, social occasions, and modernization. Numbered in-text citations have been used throughout the paper, and the corresponding reference list is provided at the end in an APA-style format.

Evolution and Cultural Background of Punjabi Folk Music

The evolution of Punjabi folk music is deeply connected with the history of Punjab as a meeting place of languages, communities, religions, and artistic

traditions. Punjab's musical life has included folk music, Sufi music, Sikh sacred music, heroic ballads, semi-classical forms, hereditary performers, courtesans, bards, and popular music. Kapuria's social history of music in colonial Punjab shows that the region's musical world was much broader than a simple folk-versus-classical division; it involved performers, patrons, gendered spaces, reform movements, and changing public culture [6]. Schreffler similarly argues that Punjabi music should be understood through social function, class, gender, ethnicity, and performance context, rather than only through fixed genre labels [12].

Rural and agricultural life gave Punjabi folk music its rhythmic strength. Sowing, harvesting, spinning, grinding, cattle care, and seasonal festivals created occasions for collective singing and dancing. Baisakhi, Lohri, weddings, melas, and religious gatherings became important cultural spaces for musical performance. The Government of Punjab notes that festivals and expressive dance traditions such as bhangra, jhumar, sammi, and giddha are important parts of Punjabi cultural life [7]. Punjab Tourism also describes bhangra as a spring and village celebration that traditionally used high-tempo dance steps, songs, dhol, iktar, and chimta [8].

Oral transmission is another foundation of Punjabi folk music. Songs were not always written down; they were remembered, repeated, adapted, and performed across generations. Women preserved suhag, ghorian, sithniyan, boliyan, and gidda songs through marriage and household ceremonies. Studies of Punjabi folk songs highlight their importance in understanding emotions, social relationships, values, humour, and family life [3]. Professional performers such as mirasis, dhadis, kavishars, jogis, and ballad singers also carried stories, genealogies, heroic memories, and devotional poetry from one region to another. Thuhi's work on the tumba-algoza ballad tradition shows how oral narrative, regional style, and

instrumental accompaniment together form a complete performance tradition [4].

Role and Classification of Traditional Folk Instruments

Traditional Punjabi instruments are central to the identity of Punjabi folk music. They shape melody, rhythm, mood, movement, and performance context. Punjabi University's documentation of Punjab de Lok Saaz presents folk instruments as an important part of the musical heritage of Punjab [5]. These instruments may be broadly classified into string, wind, and percussion instruments.

Table 1
Classification and Cultural Function of Selected Punjabi Folk Instruments

Category	Selected Instruments	Main Cultural Function
String	Tumbi, iktara, sarangi, rabab, kingri	Melody, drone, vocal support, ballads, devotional singing
Wind	Algoza, bansuri, been, vanjli	Melody, pastoral expression, ballad singing, outdoor performance
Percussion	Dhol, dholki, dhadd, chimta, nagara, gharha, bugchu	Rhythm, dance, weddings, fairs, processions, heroic singing

The dhol is the most visible percussion instrument in Punjabi celebration. Its powerful beat gives energy to bhangra, wedding processions, harvest festivals, and public events. The dholki is softer and more intimate, especially in women's wedding songs. The dhadd supports dhadi vaar and heroic singing, while chimta

works both as a rhythmic instrument and as a visual symbol of devotional and folk performance. The tumbi and iktara provide sharp plucked accompaniment for folk singing, while the sarangi and rabab carry emotional and devotional depth. The algoza is especially important in rural and ballad traditions because its twin-pipe sound creates both melody and drone-like support. These instruments show that folk music is not only vocal; it is also material, crafted, embodied, and community-based.

Modernization and the Decline of Folk Instruments

Modernization has brought both visibility and risk to Punjabi music. On the positive side, radio, cassettes, cinema, television, YouTube, streaming platforms, and diaspora performances have made Punjabi music internationally popular. The Punjab Portal notes that bhangra and Punjabi music have gained global attention and that contemporary Punjabi music now includes folk, Sufi, pop, and rap forms [9]. Leante's study of British bhangra shows how Punjabi migration to Britain transformed bhangra into a diasporic sound that combines traditional identity with mainstream popular music [10]. Lightman's research on bhangra production also explains how harvest-based bhangra entered new technological and commercial spaces through synthesizers, studio production, reggae, rock, pop, and Bollywood influences [11].

At the same time, this shift has weakened the regular use of many original instruments. Electronic keyboards, programmed drums, digital loops, DJ systems, and studio samples often replace live dhol, tumbi, algoza, sarangi, or chimta. In commercial recordings, the sound of a folk instrument may be used without the presence of a real player or artisan. This creates a symbolic use of tradition while reducing the actual livelihood and visibility of traditional musicians.

Urbanization has also changed performance spaces. Joint families are smaller, wedding rituals are shorter, village gatherings are less frequent, and many ceremonies now depend on recorded tracks. As a result, young people may know the sound of folk instruments but may not know how they are made, tuned, or played. Schreffler's studies of Punjabi popular music and bhangra show that Punjabi identity has increasingly moved through media, migration, and global popular culture [14], [15]. This global movement is valuable, but it can also disconnect the music from older local performance practices.

Preservation and Revival Strategies

The decline of folk instruments should not be understood as the end of Punjabi folk music. Folk traditions always change. The challenge is to allow change without losing historical memory, performance knowledge, and craftsmanship. Preservation must therefore combine documentation with active practice. First, universities and cultural institutions should create digital archives of instruments, players, makers, songs, rhythms, and regional styles. Second, music departments should include practical training in dhol, algoza, tumbi, dhadd, sarangi, and chimta. Third, workshops with hereditary performers and instrument makers should be organized so that their knowledge is not lost.

Fourth, festivals and youth competitions should encourage live folk instruments instead of only recorded tracks. Fifth, schools and colleges can include short modules on folk instruments, local songs, and oral tradition. Sixth, modern musicians should be encouraged to collaborate with traditional players in recordings and stage productions. This would help create new music while preserving original sound practices. Finally, instrument makers require financial support, recognition, and market access. If the artisans disappear, the instruments will

also disappear. Preservation is therefore not only a musical issue but also an economic, educational, and cultural responsibility.

Conclusion

Punjabi folk music is a living cultural system formed through oral tradition, agricultural life, community celebration, religious devotion, dance, and regional expression. Its traditional instruments are not decorative additions; they are central to the sound, rhythm, emotion, and identity of the tradition. Instruments such as dhol, dholki, tumbi, algoza, sarangi, rabab, dhadd, chimta, iktara, gharha, and bugchu carry memories of performers, artisans, villages, ceremonies, and collective life.

Modern Punjabi music has achieved wide popularity, especially through diaspora networks, recording technology, digital media, and fusion genres. Yet the same processes have reduced the everyday importance of many original folk instruments. Therefore, the future of Punjabi folk music depends on balanced revival: modern creativity must be welcomed, but traditional instruments, performers, and makers must also be protected. Through education, documentation, live performance, institutional support, and youth participation, the vanishing instruments of Punjabi folk music can be restored as active parts of contemporary cultural life.

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