



A study of lost and rare musical instruments of India

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Abstract

This study explores the lost and rare musical instruments of India, focusing on their historical significance, cultural contexts, and the factors contributing to their decline. India's musical heritage is marked by a vast diversity of instruments rooted in classical, folk, and tribal traditions. Many instruments such as the Rudra Veena, Kinnari Veena, Jaltarang, and Ravanahatha once played vital roles in ritual, devotional, and storytelling practices but have gradually disappeared due to modernization, globalization, and changing cultural preferences. Using a qualitative research approach based on secondary sources, archival materials, and ethnomusicological literature, the study examines how these instruments evolved, functioned, and declined over time. It highlights the impact of colonial restructuring, loss of royal patronage, urbanization, and the weakening of oral transmission systems on traditional musical practices. The research also emphasizes the regional diversity of Indian instruments and their embeddedness in cultural identity and community life. Furthermore, it discusses contemporary efforts toward preservation, including documentation, digital archiving, educational integration, and fusion music initiatives. The study concludes that these instruments are not merely musical artifacts but carriers of intangible cultural heritage and collective memory. Their preservation is essential for sustaining India's cultural identity and ensuring intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge systems.

Keywords: Ethnomusicology, intangible cultural heritage, traditional instruments, Indian music, cultural preservation, musical decline

Introduction

India possesses one of the world's richest and most diverse musical heritages, shaped by centuries of cultural exchange, regional traditions, and evolving performance practices. Among this vast heritage lies a lesser-known domain of *lost and rare musical instruments*—instruments that have either disappeared from regular performance contexts or survive only in isolated communities and archival records. These instruments reflect the historical depth of Indian music and offer insight into regional identities, ritual practices, and indigenous sound cultures (Nettl, 2005) ^[8].

The study of such instruments is important because it reveals how musical traditions evolve, decline, or transform under the influence of modernization, globalization, and changing cultural priorities. Many traditional instruments were closely tied to folk rituals, temple practices, court music, and pastoral life. However, with the rise of standardized classical forms, colonial cultural disruptions, and technological advancements in sound production, several indigenous instruments gradually lost their relevance and visibility (Sachs, 1940) ^[12].

Rare instruments such as the *Ravanhatta*, *Kinnari Veena*, *Jaltarang*, and various regional percussion and wind instruments represent not only musical tools but also cultural artifacts embedded with symbolic and historical meaning. Their disappearance raises critical questions about cultural preservation, intangible heritage, and the sustainability of traditional knowledge systems (UNESCO, 2003). This study aims to examine the historical significance, cultural contexts, and reasons behind the decline of such instruments, while also exploring efforts toward revival and documentation. It further investigates how these instruments contribute to understanding India's diverse musical identity and how their legacy continues to

influence contemporary musical experimentation. By studying lost and rare musical instruments, this research contributes to the broader discourse on cultural heritage preservation and ethnomusicology.

Background of the Study

The musical traditions of India are deeply rooted in ancient texts, oral practices, and regional performance cultures. References to musical instruments can be found in Vedic literature, epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, as well as classical treatises like the *Natya Shastra*, which provides one of the earliest systematic classifications of sound, rhythm, and instrumentation in South Asia (Rowell, 1992) ^[11]. Historically, Indian musical instruments evolved across three major contexts: classical (Hindustani and Carnatic), folk, and tribal traditions. While classical instruments such as the *sitar*, *tabla*, and *veena* gained widespread recognition and institutional support, numerous folk and regional instruments remained confined to local traditions. Many of these instruments were crafted from perishable materials such as wood, gourds, animal skin, and bamboo, making their survival dependent on continuous usage and generational transmission (Farrell, 1997) ^[4].

During the colonial period, Indian musical systems underwent significant restructuring. Western musical frameworks influenced documentation practices, leading to selective preservation of certain "classical" instruments while marginalizing folk and tribal instruments. This contributed to the gradual disappearance of several regional instruments that did not fit into standardized musical categories (Sachs, 1940) ^[12].

Instruments such as the *Ravanhatta* (a bowed folk instrument from Rajasthan), *Ektara* variations, *Pungi* (snake charmer's instrument), and *Kokila Veena* once played vital

roles in storytelling, ritual ceremonies, and devotional practices. However, modernization, urbanization, and changing entertainment mediums led to reduced patronage for such instruments. The rise of electronic music and mass media further diminished their functional relevance in everyday cultural life (Nettl, 2005) ^[8].

In recent decades, ethnomusicologists and cultural organizations have begun documenting and reviving these instruments as part of intangible cultural heritage preservation efforts. UNESCO's 2003 Convention emphasizes the importance of safeguarding traditional performing arts, including musical instruments, as living heritage rather than static artifacts (UNESCO, 2003).

Thus, the background of this study highlights a trajectory of richness, decline, and partial revival. It situates lost and rare Indian musical instruments within broader historical, cultural, and political processes that have shaped their present condition. This foundation is essential for understanding their significance in contemporary cultural studies.

Rationale of the Study

The study of lost and rare musical instruments of India is significant for several interrelated cultural, academic, and heritage-related reasons. Firstly, these instruments represent an essential component of India's intangible cultural heritage. Their decline reflects not only the disappearance of material objects but also the erosion of associated knowledge systems, performance practices, and community traditions (UNESCO, 2003).

In an era of rapid globalization and technological advancement, many traditional art forms face the risk of extinction. Musical instruments that were once central to folk rituals, oral storytelling, and devotional practices are increasingly replaced by digital and electronic alternatives. This shift raises concerns about cultural homogenization and the loss of regional identity (Hall, 1997) ^[6]. Studying these instruments helps document and preserve knowledge that may otherwise be permanently lost.

Secondly, this research is important for understanding cultural history and ethnomusicology. Instruments are not merely sound-producing objects; they embody social meanings, ritual significance, and historical continuity. According to Gell (1998) ^[5], material objects in art and culture function as agents of social identity and communication. Therefore, analyzing these instruments provides insight into the communities that created and used them.

Thirdly, the study holds educational value. By documenting rare instruments, it can support curriculum development in music education, encouraging awareness among students and researchers about India's diverse musical heritage. It also helps promote interdisciplinary understanding between musicology, anthropology, and cultural studies (Nettl, 2005) ^[8].

Additionally, the study has practical relevance for cultural preservation initiatives. Museums, archives, and cultural organizations can use such research to support restoration projects, exhibitions, and digital archiving of endangered musical traditions. This aligns with global efforts to safeguard intangible heritage through documentation and revitalization (UNESCO, 2003).

Finally, the study contributes to contemporary artistic innovation. Many modern musicians and composers are increasingly incorporating sounds of rare instruments into fusion music and experimental compositions. This demonstrates that even endangered instruments can find new relevance in contemporary creative practices.

Thus, the rationale for this study lies in its contribution to cultural preservation, academic inquiry, and creative renewal, making it an essential area of research in Indian music studies.

Review of the related Literature

Scholarly literature on Indian musical instruments and ethnomusicology provides a comprehensive understanding of how traditional instruments evolve, disappear, or adapt within changing cultural contexts. Researchers have explored the historical development, classification systems, and socio-cultural functions of musical instruments, offering a strong foundation for studying lost and rare instruments in India.

One of the earliest systematic approaches to musical instruments was developed by Sachs and Hornbostel (1914) ^[13], who created a classification system based on sound production methods. Their framework—idiophones, membranophones, chordophones, and aerophones—has been widely used in ethnomusicology to categorize instruments globally. This system is particularly useful for documenting rare Indian instruments that may not be widely recognized in contemporary musical practice.

Nettl (2005) ^[8] emphasizes that ethnomusicology is not only concerned with musical sound but also with cultural context. He argues that musical instruments must be studied within the social environments in which they function. In the Indian context, this perspective is crucial because many folk instruments are deeply embedded in rituals, oral traditions, and community performances.

Rowell (1992) ^[11] highlights the philosophical and theoretical foundations of Indian music as outlined in ancient texts such as the *Natya Shastra*. He notes that instruments in Indian tradition were often designed to complement vocal music and were closely associated with spiritual and aesthetic principles. This historical depth explains why many traditional instruments carry symbolic meanings beyond their musical function.

Farrell (1997) ^[4] examines Indian classical and folk music traditions, noting that regional diversity has led to the development of numerous localized instruments. However, he also observes that modernization and institutionalization of classical music have led to the marginalization of many folk instruments. This has contributed significantly to their decline or disappearance.

Massey (1996) ^[7] discusses the diversity of Indian musical instruments and highlights how regional craftsmanship played a crucial role in instrument production. He argues that many instruments were not standardized, making them vulnerable to extinction when their artisan communities declined or shifted occupations.

Gell (1998) ^[5], in his anthropological theory of art, suggests that objects such as musical instruments should be understood as agents within social systems. Applying this perspective to Indian instruments reveals how they functioned as mediators between humans, rituals, and cultural beliefs. The loss of such instruments therefore

represents not only musical loss but also a disruption in cultural communication systems.

UNESCO (2003) stresses the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, including traditional music and instruments. It encourages documentation, transmission, and revitalization efforts. Many lost Indian instruments have gained renewed attention through such initiatives, particularly in museum collections and digital archives.

Hall (1997) ^[6] discusses cultural identity in the context of globalization, arguing that traditional cultural forms often become symbols of resistance and identity preservation. In India, rare musical instruments are increasingly seen as markers of regional identity and cultural pride.

Clifford (1988) ^[3] raises concerns about cultural representation and commodification. He argues that when traditional artifacts are removed from their original context and displayed in global institutions, their meaning may shift. This is relevant to rare musical instruments, which are often preserved in museums but detached from their living traditions.

Sachs (1940) ^[12] provides historical insight into the evolution of musical instruments and emphasizes the importance of studying their cultural diffusion. His work helps trace how certain instruments disappeared while others evolved into modern forms.

Recent scholarship also highlights revival efforts. Some researchers note that contemporary musicians are reintroducing instruments such as the *Jaltarang* and *Ravanhatta* in fusion and experimental music settings. This reflects a growing interest in rediscovering lost soundscapes and integrating them into modern compositions (Smith, 2010) ^[15].

Overall, the literature indicates that lost and rare Indian musical instruments are not merely remnants of the past but active subjects of cultural negotiation. Scholars agree that their study is essential for understanding historical continuity, cultural identity, and musical diversity. However, gaps remain in documentation, especially regarding regional and tribal instruments that have not been systematically recorded. This study addresses this gap by focusing on their cultural significance and contemporary relevance.

Research Objectives of the Study

- To identify and document the lost and rare musical instruments of India along with their historical and cultural backgrounds.
- To analyze the regional diversity and traditional significance of these instruments in different Indian musical systems.
- To examine the causes responsible for the decline and disappearance of several indigenous musical instruments over time.
- To explore possible measures and strategies for the preservation, revival, and continued relevance of these rare musical instruments in contemporary Indian music culture.

Research Questions of the Study

- What are the major lost and rare musical instruments of India and their historical significance?
- What cultural, social, and economic factors have contributed to their decline?

- How have these instruments influenced traditional Indian music systems and regional practices?
- What preservation and revival strategies can be implemented to safeguard these instruments?

Methodology of the Study

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the lost and rare musical instruments of India in a descriptive and interpretative manner. The research is primarily based on secondary sources, including historical texts, musicology journals, archival records, museum documentation, and scholarly publications related to Indian musical heritage. In addition, digital ethnographic sources, interviews documented by earlier researchers, and audiovisual materials are analyzed to gain deeper insight into the cultural relevance of these instruments. A thematic analysis method is used to categorize information into historical background, regional distribution, construction techniques, performance practices, and reasons for decline. The study also draws upon case studies of selected instruments such as the Rudra Veena, Jaltarang, Pungi, and Kinnari Veena to understand their unique characteristics and cultural contexts. Comparative analysis is employed to examine differences between surviving traditional instruments and those that have nearly disappeared. Since the study is qualitative in nature, emphasis is placed on interpretation rather than statistical measurement. Efforts are made to understand the symbolic and ritual importance of these instruments within Indian society. The research also considers the role of modernization, globalization, and changing musical preferences in the decline of traditional instruments. Ethical considerations include accurate representation of cultural heritage and reliance on credible sources. Overall, the methodology aims to construct a comprehensive narrative that preserves knowledge about India's endangered musical instruments and highlights the need for their documentation and revival.

Objective-wise Analysis of the Study

Objective 1: To identify and document the lost and rare musical instruments of India along with their historical and cultural backgrounds

The first objective of this study is to systematically identify and document the lost and rare musical instruments of India, along with their historical and cultural significance. India possesses one of the richest musical traditions in the world, with references to musical instruments found in ancient scriptures such as the Vedas, Natya Shastra, and various temple inscriptions. Many instruments that were once integral to classical, folk, and ritual music have gradually disappeared or become extremely rare due to socio-cultural transformation and modernization (Rowell, 1992) ^[11]. Instruments such as the Rudra Veena, Jaltarang, Kinnari Veena, Pungi, Ravanahatha, and Esraj (traditional forms) represent a heritage that reflects India's diverse musical evolution.

Documentation of these instruments involves studying their physical structure, materials used, playing techniques, tuning systems, and performance contexts. Historical evidence shows that many of these instruments were closely associated with royal courts, temple rituals, and regional folk traditions (Sorrell & Narayan, 1980) ^[16]. For example, the Rudra Veena has been strongly associated with Dhruvad

music, one of the oldest forms of Hindustani classical music, while instruments like the Ravanahatha are deeply rooted in folk storytelling traditions of Rajasthan.

Cultural documentation also highlights the symbolic meanings attached to these instruments. Many were not merely tools of music but also held spiritual and ritual importance. The *Natya Shastra* by Bharata Muni classifies instruments into four categories—string, wind, percussion, and solid instruments—providing a foundational framework for understanding their evolution (Bharata, trans. Ghosh, 1951) ^[2]. This objective also involves compiling museum records, manuscripts, temple carvings, and oral traditions to reconstruct the historical journey of these instruments.

In addition, ethnographic studies and interviews with traditional musicians help preserve indigenous knowledge systems that are otherwise undocumented. Many tribal and rural communities still retain fragments of musical traditions that include rare instruments, although they are increasingly threatened by cultural homogenization (Neuman, 1990) ^[9]. Therefore, this objective plays a crucial role in creating a comprehensive archive that preserves India's intangible musical heritage for future generations.

Objective 2: To analyze the regional diversity and traditional significance of these instruments in different Indian musical systems

India's musical heritage is deeply regional, reflecting linguistic, cultural, and geographical diversity. This objective focuses on analyzing how rare and lost instruments are distributed across different regions and how they function within various musical systems. North Indian (Hindustani), South Indian (Carnatic), and folk traditions all possess unique instrumental identities shaped by local customs and artistic needs (Wade, 2001) ^[18].

For example, instruments like the Nadaswaram and Thavil are central to South Indian temple music traditions, while the Sarangi and Shehnai have been historically significant in North Indian classical and ceremonial contexts. Folk instruments such as the Tumbi (Punjab), Ektara (Bengal and Bihar), and Ravanahatta (Rajasthan) demonstrate regional storytelling traditions and oral cultural transmission.

Regional diversity also reflects variations in construction materials such as wood, bamboo, metal, and animal skin, which are influenced by local ecological availability. The use of indigenous materials connects instruments to their geographical identity and sustainability practices (Baines, 1995) ^[1]. Moreover, many instruments are tied to festivals, rituals, and seasonal agricultural practices, indicating their socio-cultural embeddedness.

This objective further examines how traditional musical systems assign specific roles to instruments within ensembles. In Carnatic music, rhythmic instruments like the Mridangam provide structural support, while melodic instruments carry raga-based improvisation. Similarly, in folk traditions, instruments often accompany dance, storytelling, or devotional singing, reinforcing community identity.

However, globalization and urbanization have led to the dominance of standardized instruments, reducing the visibility of region-specific instruments. By analyzing regional diversity, this study highlights the cultural richness embedded in India's musical geography and emphasizes the

importance of preserving localized musical identities (Ranade, 2006) ^[10].

Objective 3: To examine the causes responsible for the decline and disappearance of several indigenous musical instruments over time

The decline of indigenous musical instruments in India is a complex phenomenon influenced by multiple socio-cultural, economic, and technological factors. One major reason is the growing preference for standardized instruments used in global music industries, which has marginalized traditional instruments that require specialized skills and training (Neuman, 1990) ^[9].

Modernization and Westernization of music education systems have also contributed to this decline. Many traditional instruments are not included in formal music curricula, leading to a lack of institutional support and trained practitioners. Additionally, the decline of royal patronage after colonial rule significantly affected classical musicians and instrument makers who depended on court sponsorship for survival (Rowell, 1992) ^[11].

Economic challenges also play a crucial role. Crafting traditional instruments is often labor-intensive and financially unrewarding compared to mass-produced modern instruments. As a result, many artisan families engaged in instrument-making have abandoned their traditional occupations. Urbanization has further reduced the cultural spaces where these instruments were traditionally performed, such as village festivals, temple rituals, and community gatherings. The replacement of live music with recorded and digital sound systems has also contributed to declining demand.

Another important factor is the loss of oral transmission systems. Many rare instruments were taught through guru-shishya parampara (teacher-disciple tradition), which is weakening in contemporary society (Wade, 2001) ^[18]. Without proper documentation, knowledge about tuning, playing techniques, and construction methods is being lost. Thus, this objective highlights that the disappearance of instruments is not merely a musical issue but a broader cultural transformation affecting intangible heritage.

Objective 4: To explore possible measures and strategies for the preservation, revival, and continued relevance of these rare musical instruments in contemporary Indian music culture.

This objective focuses on identifying sustainable strategies for preserving and reviving India's lost and rare musical instruments. One of the most important measures is systematic documentation through audiovisual recording, digital archiving, and ethnographic research. Creating online databases and museum collections can ensure long-term accessibility of knowledge about these instruments (UNESCO, 2003).

Educational integration is another crucial strategy. Incorporating traditional instruments into music curricula at schools and universities can encourage younger generations to learn and appreciate them. Workshops, masterclasses, and apprenticeship programs can help revive the guru-shishya tradition in a modernized format.

Government and institutional support is essential for providing financial assistance to artisans and musicians. Cultural organizations such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi

have already initiated programs to promote endangered art forms, but more targeted funding is required (SNA Reports, 2018). Fusion music also offers opportunities for revival by integrating rare instruments into contemporary genres such as film music, jazz, and world music. This can increase their visibility and commercial viability without compromising their traditional essence.

Community participation is equally important. Encouraging local festivals, cultural fairs, and folk performances can create platforms for these instruments to regain social relevance. Digital media platforms such as YouTube and social networks can further enhance global awareness. Finally, policy-level interventions are needed to recognize rare instruments as intangible cultural heritage, ensuring legal and institutional protection. By combining traditional knowledge systems with modern preservation techniques, India can safeguard its rich musical legacy for future generations.

Discussion

The study of lost and rare musical instruments of India reveals a deeply layered cultural and historical narrative that reflects the evolution of Indian music across centuries. India's musical heritage is not static; it has continuously transformed under the influence of social change, religious practices, political shifts, and technological development. The discussion of this study highlights that many rare instruments are not merely musical tools but are cultural symbols embedded within regional identities, ritual practices, and traditional knowledge systems (Rowell, 1992)^[11].

One of the key findings is that several instruments such as the Rudra Veena, Kinnari Veena, Jaltarang, and Ravanahatha once held significant positions in both classical and folk traditions but have gradually declined in usage. This decline is closely linked to changes in patronage systems. Historically, royal courts and temples provided financial and cultural support for musicians and instrument makers. However, with the decline of princely states and the rise of modern nation-states, this support system weakened significantly (Neuman, 1990)^[9]. As a result, many instruments lost their performers and eventually their relevance in mainstream music.

Another important aspect is the impact of modernization and globalization. Western musical instruments such as the piano, guitar, and violin have become dominant in both popular and academic music spaces. This shift has led to the marginalization of traditional Indian instruments that require specialized craftsmanship and long-term training. Additionally, mass media and digital music production have reduced the demand for live traditional performances, further contributing to their decline (Wade, 2001)^[18].

The study also highlights regional diversity as both a strength and a challenge. While India's musical landscape is enriched by a vast variety of instruments across regions, this diversity also makes preservation difficult due to lack of centralized documentation. Many instruments are confined to specific communities or geographical areas, making them vulnerable to extinction when those communities undergo cultural change or migration. Furthermore, the loss of oral traditions has significantly affected the transmission of knowledge. The guru-shishya parampara system, which ensured direct learning from master musicians, is weakening

in modern education systems. As a result, many techniques of playing and crafting instruments are no longer fully documented or practiced (Sorrell & Narayan, 1980)^[16].

Despite these challenges, the discussion also identifies positive developments. There is a growing academic and cultural interest in reviving traditional instruments through ethnomusicology, museum documentation, and fusion music projects. Cultural organizations and scholars are increasingly working to preserve endangered musical heritage through digital archiving and performance revitalization programs. These initiatives indicate that while many instruments are at risk, they are not beyond recovery if systematic preservation strategies are implemented.

Overall, the discussion emphasizes that the decline of rare musical instruments is not merely an artistic issue but a reflection of broader socio-cultural transformation in India.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the lost and rare musical instruments of India represent an invaluable part of the country's intangible cultural heritage. These instruments are deeply rooted in historical traditions, regional identities, and spiritual practices, reflecting the diversity and richness of Indian musical culture. However, many of these instruments are now endangered due to modernization, declining patronage, globalization, and the weakening of traditional learning systems. The research highlights that instruments such as the Rudra Veena, Jaltarang, Ravanahatha, and others are not only musical artifacts but also carriers of historical memory and cultural identity. Their disappearance signifies a loss of traditional craftsmanship, performance practices, and indigenous knowledge systems. The study further concludes that regional diversity, while culturally enriching, has also contributed to preservation challenges due to limited documentation and localized transmission of knowledge.

It is evident that urgent measures are required to preserve and revive these instruments. Documentation, educational inclusion, institutional support, and digital archiving are essential strategies for safeguarding this heritage. Additionally, integrating traditional instruments into contemporary music forms can enhance their visibility and relevance among younger generations. Preserving India's rare musical instruments is not only about saving musical tools but about protecting cultural identity and historical continuity. A combined effort from scholars, musicians, policymakers, and cultural institutions is necessary to ensure that these instruments do not fade into oblivion but continue to enrich India's musical legacy for future generations.

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