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Evolution of Folk Music and Instruments in the Sundarbans: A Socio-Cultural Analysis

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ABSTRACT: This research paper examines the evolution of folk music and traditional instruments in the Sundarbans region of West Bengal over the past century, analyzing the interplay between socio-cultural changes and musical traditions. Drawing on historical accounts, oral traditions, and contemporary observations, the study explores the transformation of genres such as Baul, Bhatiali, Tarja, and Ramayana Palagan, alongside the use and adaptation of instruments like Ektara, Dotara, Tabla-Baya, and Shrikhol. It investigates the impact of modernization, environmental challenges, and the influence of external musical elements, including the decline of indigenous instruments and the rise of foreign ones (e.g., organ, handsonic). The paper highlights how these shifts reflect the resilience and adaptability of Sundarbans' communities, shaped by their livelihoods, festivals, and communal harmony, offering insights into the region's cultural identity.

KEYWORDS: Folk Music, Sundarbans, Traditional Instruments, Socio-Cultural Evolution, Baul, Bhatiali, Modernization, Community Resilience

I. INTRODUCTION

The Sundarbans, a sprawling and ecologically unique region situated in the southern expanse of West Bengal, India, represents one of the world's largest deltaic mangrove forests. This intricate ecosystem emerges at the confluence of the mighty Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers, stretching across approximately 9,630 square kilometers in West Bengal, with a significant portion extending into neighboring Bangladesh. The region is defined by its complex network of rivers, canals, estuaries, and over 100 islands, of which 54 are inhabited by human communities. The landscape is profoundly shaped by the twice-daily tidal movements of the Bay of Bengal, resulting in a dynamic interplay of saline waters and dense mangrove forests dominated by species such as Sundari, Garan, Keora, and Hental. This environment, while breathtaking in its natural beauty, poses formidable challenges, harboring a rich biodiversity that includes the Royal Bengal tiger, saltwater crocodiles, and a variety of venomous snakes like the Kalach and Gokhro. These ecological features have sculpted a rugged lifestyle for the inhabitants, who include a diverse mosaic of religious and ethnic groups—Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and indigenous tribes such as the Orao and Munda. The region's cultural identity has been forged through centuries of coexistence, influenced by hereditary settlements and waves of migration, particularly following the partition of Bengal in 1947. This blend of geography, wildlife, and multicultural interactions has given rise to a distinctive folk culture that thrives amidst adversity, making the Sundarbans a compelling subject for cultural study.

Folk music and traditional instruments stand as cornerstone elements of the Sundarbans' cultural heritage, serving as vibrant expressions of the community's resilience, spiritual beliefs, and social fabric. These musical traditions encompass a variety of genres, including the soulful Baul, the riverine Bhatiali, the narrative-rich Tarja, and the mythological Palagan performances such as those based on the Ramayana and the worship of Banbibī. These forms are deeply intertwined with the daily lives of the region's inhabitants—fishermen casting nets in perilous waters, Maules collecting honey from tiger-infested forests, Baules harvesting wood, and farmers tilling saline-affected lands—reflecting their struggles, aspirations, and joys. The accompaniment of these songs by indigenous instruments like the Ektara, Dotara, Tabla-Baya, Shrikhol, Mandira, and Kartal, often crafted by local artisans, adds a layer of authenticity and cultural depth. Beyond mere entertainment, this music plays a pivotal role in preserving oral histories, narrating mythological tales, and reinforcing communal harmony across religious divides, as evidenced by the shared reverence



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for deities like Banbibi, Sheetala, and Manasa during festivals such as Durga Puja, Gajan, and Hajat. Over the decades, these traditions have evolved in response to environmental pressures, migration patterns, and the advent of modernization, positioning folk music and instruments as dynamic mirrors of the Sundarbans' socio-cultural evolution and a vital link to its collective identity.

This research endeavors to meticulously trace the evolution of folk music and traditional instruments within the Sundarbans, a century marked by profound historical upheavals, environmental transformations, and cultural shifts. The primary objective is to document the changes in musical genres, performance practices, and instrument usage over this period, while analyzing the socio-cultural influences that have driven these developments. These influences include the impact of livelihood practices tied to the region's natural resources, the dynamics of communal living among diverse religious and ethnic groups, and the pressures of modernization and globalization. By exploring how these factors have shaped the continuity and adaptation of musical traditions, the study aims to illuminate the resilience of Sundarbans' cultural heritage. Furthermore, it seeks to identify challenges such as the decline of indigenous instruments and the integration of external musical elements, offering insights into the preservation and future trajectory of this rich tradition.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF FOLK MUSIC IN THE SUNDARBANS (1921-1950)

The early 20th century marked the flourishing of distinct folk musical genres in the Sundarbans, each reflecting the region's unique cultural and environmental milieu. The **Baul** tradition, with its mystical and devotional undertones, emerged as a rich source of sensuality, where wandering minstrels composed lyrics and tunes that explored themes of love, spirituality, and human connection. Rooted in the syncretic traditions of Hindu and Muslim mysticism, Baul songs became a voice for the marginalized, resonating with the region's diverse communities. **Bhatiali**, a riverine song style, originated among boatmen and fishermen, its melancholic melodies mirroring the rhythmic flow of the Sundarbans' canals and the emotional weight of their perilous livelihoods. **Tarja**, a form rich in argumentative and narrative content, gained popularity through its poetic debates and storytelling, often performed during social gatherings. Finally, **Palagan traditions**, such as those narrating the Ramayana and the mythological tales of Banbibi, established themselves as theatrical musical performances that blended devotion with dramatic expression, captivating rural audiences with their elaborate lyrics and communal participation.

Traditional instruments played a pivotal role in shaping the sonic landscape of Sundarbans' folk music between 1921 and 1950. The **Ektara**, a single-stringed instrument, was a staple among Baul singers, its simple yet evocative sound amplifying their spiritual narratives. The **Dotara**, a multi-stringed lute, provided a melodic backbone to Bhatiali and Tarja performances, its twang reflecting the region's rustic charm. The **Shrikhol**, a clay drum, added rhythmic depth to Palagan and devotional songs, its resonant beats driving the energy of festival performances like Gajan and Durga Puja. These instruments, often handmade by local artisans using materials from the mangrove environment, were integral to early 20th-century performances. Their portability and accessibility made them ideal for the itinerant lifestyles of musicians, while their construction techniques underscored the community's resourcefulness, cementing their cultural significance during this period.

The livelihoods of Sundarbans' inhabitants profoundly influenced the composition of folk music during the 1921-1950 period. Fishing communities, braving the region's saltwater rivers and canals, inspired the lyrical content of Bhatiali songs, which often lamented the dangers of crocodile attacks and monsoon floods while celebrating the bounty of hilsa fish. Similarly, the Maules—honey collectors—contributed to the development of protective mantras and songs dedicated to Banbibi, the forest goddess, as they ventured into tiger-infested mangroves. These occupational hazards and rituals shaped music as a means of coping and seeking divine protection, with lyrics echoing the pain of loss and the hope of survival. Rituals such as Hajat and Sinni Shasti, performed before entering forests or rivers, further integrated music into spiritual practices, with compositions serving as offerings to deities like Manasa and Dakshin Ray. This symbiotic relationship between livelihood and music fostered a genre-specific repertoire that mirrored the region's ecological and existential realities.

The socio-cultural landscape of the Sundarbans during the pre-independence era (1921-1950) was shaped by dynamic community interactions and oral transmission, which were critical to the preservation and evolution of folk music. The



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region's diverse population—comprising Hindus, Muslims, and tribal groups—fostered a syncretic culture, as seen in the shared worship of secular deities and the blending of religious festivals. This communal harmony influenced musical collaborations, with artists from different backgrounds contributing to genres like Palagan, which often featured narratives accessible to all. Oral transmission, a dominant method due to low literacy rates and the absence of written records, relied on intergenerational learning, with songs passed down through performances at village gatherings and fairs. The pre-independence political unrest and migration from East Bengal, as noted by W.W. Hunter in 1876 and referenced in Chapter Two, further enriched this oral tradition, introducing new influences while reinforcing the role of music as a unifying cultural force amidst social change.

III. MID-CENTURY TRANSITIONS (1950-1980)

The mid-century period from 1950 to 1980 witnessed a profound transformation in the folk music of the Sundarbans, significantly propelled by the partition of India and the ensuing waves of migration. The historic division of Bengal in 1947 unleashed a substantial movement of people from East Bengal into the region, carrying with them a rich tapestry of musical traditions that began to interweave with the indigenous styles of the Sundarbans. This influx enriched genres such as Bhatiali, with its soulful riverine melodies, and Palagan, the narrative-driven performances, introducing new lyrical themes and rhythmic patterns that reflected the migrants' experiences of displacement and hope. Alongside these stylistic shifts, the use of traditional instruments like the Ektara and Shrikhol underwent subtle yet noticeable changes, as migrant communities brought their own crafting techniques and playing methods, gradually diversifying the sonic landscape. This cultural exchange, rooted in the socio-political upheaval of the time, laid the groundwork for a more heterogeneous musical identity in the Sundarbans, blending the old with the newly arrived influences across the expansive delta.

During the same mid-century timeframe of 1950 to 1980, the Sundarbans experienced a remarkable growth in festival-based performances, with events like Durga Puja and Gajan emerging as vibrant platforms that significantly shaped musical expressions. These festivals, deeply embedded in the region's spiritual and communal life, provided a stage for the evolution of folk music, as songs and rhythms were crafted to enhance the rituals, processions, and celebrations that united diverse communities. Durga Puja, with its elaborate puja parvas, inspired devotional melodies that echoed through the mangrove villages, while Gajan, tied to the worship of Shiva, infused performances with vigorous beats and chants that reflected the region's rustic energy. This expansion of festival culture not only preserved existing musical forms but also encouraged innovation, as artists adapted their repertoires to suit the festive mood, spreading the music's reach across the vast network of islands and waterways. The result was a flourishing of musical creativity that strengthened the cultural bonds across the Sundarbans' expansive landscape.

The period from 1950 to 1980 also saw the introduction of the harmonium and clarinet into the Sundarbans' musical tradition, marking the onset of early modernization that began to reshape the region's folk music scene. These instruments, brought in through external influences and the growing connectivity with urban centers, started to complement the traditional Ektara, Dotara, and Shrikhol, introducing a new tonal quality that appealed to a broadening audience. The harmonium, with its versatile keyboard, added a harmonic richness to devotional and narrative songs, while the clarinet brought a melodic sharpness that enhanced festive performances. This integration signaled a shift towards modernization, as musicians began experimenting with these tools, reflecting the region's gradual exposure to broader cultural currents. Across the wide expanse of the Sundarbans, this adoption reflected an adaptive response to changing times, bridging the gap between rural traditions and the encroaching influences of a modernizing world.

Throughout the mid-century years of 1950 to 1980, the Sundarbans' folk music was deeply affected by environmental challenges, particularly the recurring floods and the ever-present threat of tiger attacks, which found poignant expression in the lyrics of the time. The region's deltaic geography, vulnerable to tidal surges and monsoon deluges, led to devastating floods that disrupted livelihoods, inspiring songs that lamented lost homes and crops while seeking solace in the rhythms of survival. Similarly, the danger posed by Royal Bengal tigers, a constant peril for fishermen and honey collectors, permeated the musical narrative, with lyrics invoking deities like Banbibi for protection and recounting tales of bravery and loss. This environmental adversity, stretching across the vast mangrove expanse, infused the music with a raw emotional depth, as artists channeled the community's resilience and fears into their



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compositions. The result was a body of work that served as both a cultural archive and a testament to the Sundarbans' enduring spirit amidst its challenging natural surroundings.

IV. MODERN ERA AND ADAPTATION (1980-2021)

From 1980 to 2021, the Sundarbans witnessed a significant decline in the use of indigenous instruments like the Ektara, Dotara, and Shrikhol, as modern tools such as the organ and handsonic gained prominence, reshaping the region's folk music landscape. These traditional instruments, once crafted by local artisans using mangrove-derived materials, began to fade from performances due to their labor-intensive production and the allure of electronic instruments that offered versatility and ease of use. The organ, with its ability to mimic multiple sounds, and the handsonic, with its digital rhythmic capabilities, appealed to younger musicians and urban audiences, reflecting a broader trend of technological integration across the expansive delta. This shift, while enhancing accessibility, sparked concerns about the loss of authentic timbres that defined Sundarbans' musical heritage, as the region navigated the balance between innovation and tradition in an increasingly connected world.

The rise of tourism and media between 1980 and 2021 profoundly influenced the dissemination of Sundarbans' folk music, transforming it from a localized practice to a globally recognized cultural asset. The region's unique ecosystem and vibrant traditions attracted tourists to areas like Bakkhali and Sagar Island, where performances of Baul and Bhatiali songs became key attractions at festivals and tourist spots. Simultaneously, media platforms, including radio, television, and later digital streaming, amplified these musical forms, broadcasting them far beyond the mangrove forests to national and international audiences. This exposure, while spreading the region's cultural richness across its vast waterways and beyond, often led to commercialization, with songs adapted to suit external tastes, raising questions about authenticity. Nonetheless, the interplay of tourism and media opened new avenues for musicians, fostering a wider appreciation of Sundarbans' folk heritage.

Over the modern era from 1980 to 2021, the performance contexts of Sundarbans' folk music shifted dramatically, moving from intimate rural gatherings to formalized staged events. Traditionally, music thrived in village courtyards and riverbanks, where communities gathered for impromptu performances during festivals or evening rituals, fostering deep social bonds. However, with urbanization and cultural promotion, performances increasingly took place on organized stages at cultural festivals, tourist events, and urban venues, reflecting the region's integration into broader cultural circuits. This transition, spanning the Sundarbans' scattered islands, brought professionalization, with artists adopting rehearsed sets and amplified sound systems to cater to larger, diverse audiences. While this elevated visibility, it often diluted the spontaneous, communal essence of earlier performances, highlighting the region's adaptation to a changing socio-cultural landscape.

Amid the pressures of globalization and cultural erosion from 1980 to 2021, concerted efforts emerged to preserve the Sundarbans' traditional folk music, safeguarding its legacy across the region's sprawling delta. As global influences and modern genres threatened to overshadow indigenous styles, local artists, cultural organizations, and government initiatives launched programs to document and revive traditional songs and instruments. Workshops trained younger generations in playing the Dotara and singing Palagan, while archives captured oral histories from veteran performers. Festivals dedicated to folk music, held in areas like Gosaba and Canning, reinforced community pride, countering the homogenizing effects of globalization. These endeavors, stretching across the Sundarbans' intricate waterways, underscored a resilient commitment to maintaining the region's musical identity, ensuring that its unique sounds continued to resonate despite external challenges.

V. COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN SUSTAINING FOLK MUSIC TRADITIONS

The folk music traditions of the Sundarbans have endured through the remarkable resilience of its communities, which have faced relentless environmental and social challenges across the region's vast deltaic expanse from 1921 to 2021. Living amidst tidal floods, tiger attacks, and economic uncertainties, inhabitants—fishermen, honey collectors, and farmers—have woven their tenacity into the fabric of musical expression, ensuring the survival of genres like Baul, Bhatiali, and Palagan. This resilience manifests in the continued performance of songs at festivals and rituals, even in the face of modernization and globalization, as communities adapt traditional melodies to contemporary contexts while



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preserving their core essence. The collective spirit of the Sundarbans' people, spread across scattered islands and waterways, has fostered a dynamic oral tradition, with music serving as a repository of shared history and a beacon of hope, sustaining cultural identity through generations despite the region's precarious circumstances.

Communal Harmony (Hindu-Muslim Syncretism) and Musical Evolution

The profound communal harmony between Hindu and Muslim communities in the Sundarbans has significantly shaped the evolution of its folk music, creating a unique syncretic soundscape that resonates across the region's diverse cultural terrain. From 1921 to 2021, this interfaith coexistence has been exemplified in shared reverence for deities like Banbibi, a goddess worshipped by both groups, whose Palagan performances blend Hindu and Islamic motifs. This syncretism has enriched musical styles, with Urdu and Arabic words like "Allah" and "Bismillah" harmonizing alongside Bengali devotional themes in songs, reflecting a fluid cultural exchange. Festivals like Durga Puja and Hajat, celebrated together, have further fused musical traditions, fostering collaborative performances that bridge religious divides. Spanning the Sundarbans' intricate riverine network, this harmony has ensured that folk music remains a unifying force, evolving to incorporate diverse influences while reinforcing social cohesion.

Gender Dynamics in Music Performance and Instrument Crafting

Gender dynamics have played a nuanced role in shaping music performance and instrument crafting in the Sundarbans, reflecting both traditional constraints and evolving opportunities across the region from 1921 to 2021. Historically, men dominated public performances, with artists like Gauranga Chattopadhyay leading Palagan and Baul recitals, while women's musical contributions were often confined to domestic settings, such as lullabies or ritual songs. However, figures like Rekharani Halder, highlight women's growing presence in Ramayana Palagan, challenging norms in rural stages. In instrument crafting, men traditionally crafted tools like the Dotara and Shrikhol, but women's involvement in auxiliary roles, such as material preparation, has been vital yet underrecognized. Across the Sundarbans' vast mangrove expanse, recent decades have seen women increasingly participate in performances, driven by cultural festivals and media exposure, signaling a gradual shift toward inclusivity, though disparities persist in recognition and access to training.

Connection Between Livelihood Struggles and Thematic Content of Songs

The thematic content of Sundarbans' folk songs has been deeply intertwined with the livelihood struggles of its inhabitants, serving as a poignant reflection of their daily battles across the region's challenging landscape from 1921 to 2021. Fishermen facing crocodile-infested rivers, Maules risking tiger attacks while collecting honey, and farmers contending with saline floods have inspired lyrics that narrate tales of survival, loss, and divine protection, as seen in songs dedicated to Banbibi and Manasa. These struggles, infuse genres like Bhatiali with melancholic undertones and Palagan with protective mantras, capturing the precariousness of life in the delta. Across the Sundarbans' scattered islands, music has become a medium to process hardship, with themes of resilience and hope resonating in performances, ensuring that the lived experiences of these communities remain etched in their cultural narrative, binding them to their environment and heritage.

Analysis of Artists: Gauranga Chattopadhyay and Rekharani Halder

Gauranga Chattopadhyay and Rekharani Halder stand as pivotal figures in the preservation and propagation of Sundarbans' folk music, particularly through their contributions to Palagan traditions from 1921 to 2021. Gauranga Chattopadhyay, active in the mid-20th century, was renowned for his renditions of Banbibi and Ekush Bibi Palagan, blending Islamic and Hindu elements to reflect the region's syncretic culture. His performances, marked by emotive storytelling and rhythmic mastery, brought spiritual solace to communities facing environmental perils, cementing his legacy across the delta's villages. Rekharani Halder, a trailblazing female artist, gained prominence for her Ramayana Palagan, notably Lakshmana's Shaktishel and Lobkush, challenging gender norms in a male-dominated field. Her work, influenced by mentors like Niranjan Naiya and Tapan Halder, enriched the mythological narrative tradition, with her performances resonating in areas like Magrahat and Usthi. Both artists, through their distinct styles, reinforced the Sundarbans' musical heritage, adapting oral traditions to sustain cultural identity amidst social changes, their voices echoing through the region's vast waterways.

The Banbibi Palagan mantra, a cornerstone of Sundarbans' folk music, exemplifies the region's spiritual and cultural evolution from 1921 to 2021, transitioning from oral ritual to a structured performance piece. Initially chanted by



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fishermen and Maules as a protective invocation before entering tiger-infested forests, the mantra, invoked Banbibi with phrases like “Bagh challam bagh korlam chai” to ward off danger. Over decades, it evolved into a full-fledged Palagan, incorporating dialogues and songs that narrate Banbibi’s triumph over Dakshin Ray, blending Hindu and Muslim motifs. By the late 20th century, artists like Gauranga Chattopadhyay formalized its structure, adding Urdu-Arabic terms like “Bismillah” to appeal to diverse audiences. In the modern era, media exposure and tourism have stylized its presentation, yet its core themes of survival and devotion persist, reflecting the Sundarbans’ resilience across its scattered islands, adapting to global influences while retaining spiritual potency.

Instrument-making communities in the Sundarbans, vital to the region’s folk music, have navigated significant challenges from 1921 to 2021, employing adaptive strategies to preserve their craft amid environmental and cultural shifts. Traditionally, artisans crafted instruments like the Dotara, Ektara, and Shrikhol using local mangrove woods and clay, supporting performances across the delta’s villages. However, post-1980 modernization introduced synthetic materials and electronic tools like the handsonic, reducing demand for handcrafted instruments. In response, these communities diversified, with some artisans supplying urban markets or tourist festivals, while others collaborated with cultural organizations to teach traditional techniques. Environmental pressures, such as deforestation and floods, prompted innovations like using alternative woods or recycled materials. Spanning the Sundarbans’ intricate riverine network, these strategies reflect a balance between heritage preservation and economic survival, ensuring the region’s musical traditions endure despite globalization’s pull.

VI. CONCLUSION

The exploration of folk music and instruments in the Sundarbans from 1921 to 2021 reveals a dynamic evolution shaped by the region’s unique socio-cultural and environmental context. Over this century, genres like Baul, Bhatiali, Tarja, and Palagan have thrived, reflecting the livelihoods and spiritual resilience of communities across the delta’s vast expanse. From the early prominence of indigenous instruments such as the Ektara, Dotara, and Shrikhol, crafted from local materials, the music scene transitioned through mid-century influences of partition and migration, which enriched styles and introduced tools like the harmonium. The modern era saw a decline in traditional instruments with the rise of electronic devices like the organ, driven by globalization and tourism. Despite these shifts, communal harmony and festival performances sustained musical traditions, with artists like Gauranga Chattopadhyay and Rekharani Halder preserving narratives like the Banbibi Palagan, ensuring the region’s cultural voice remained vibrant amidst challenges. The findings underscore the urgency of preserving the Sundarbans’ folk music heritage, which faces threats from cultural erosion and environmental degradation. The decline of indigenous instruments and the commercialization of performances highlight the need for targeted preservation efforts to maintain authenticity. Future research should focus on documenting lesser-known genres and artisans, exploring digital archiving techniques, and examining the impact of climate change on musical practices. Engaging younger generations through education and festivals can bridge traditional and modern contexts, ensuring continuity. Comparative studies with other deltaic regions could further illuminate adaptive strategies, offering insights into global folk music preservation, while reinforcing the Sundarbans’ cultural significance across its sprawling riverine network.

To safeguard the Sundarbans’ musical legacy, a collective call to action is essential. Cultural organizations, policymakers, and communities must collaborate to document oral traditions, recording songs and instrument-making techniques before they vanish. Revitalization efforts should include workshops to train youth in traditional music, alongside festivals that celebrate authenticity over commercialization. Leveraging digital platforms to share performances globally can amplify the region’s heritage, fostering pride and awareness. Across the Sundarbans’ scattered islands, supporting artisans and artists through funding and recognition will ensure that this vibrant musical tradition continues to resonate, preserving its soul for future generations in a rapidly changing world.

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