

From Silence to Symphony: Reviving Indigenous Music through Circular Cultural Enterprises

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Keywords: Scheduled Tribes, Adivasis, Indigenous, Youth, Culture Revival, Market Linkages, Sustainable Livelihood, Music

Abstract

This paper explores the urgent need to revive Indigenous musical traditions across India, with a focused lens on the tribal communities of Jharkhand. It argues that tribal music, as a living cultural heritage, goes beyond artistic expression—it is deeply interwoven with community identity, well-being, collective memory, and social resilience. It serves as a vital conduit for intergenerational knowledge transfer, allowing stories, values, and ancestral wisdom to be passed down through sound. The article presents a multi-stakeholder framework for a circular Indigenous enterprise model combining documentation, academic integration, capacity building, market development, and financial sustainability. Through the case study of Wings of Chotanagpur, a youth-led cultural collective in Ranchi, the paper illustrates how grassroots efforts can serve as catalytic platforms for musical preservation, intergenerational learning, and socio-economic empowerment. Ultimately, the revival of tribal musical instruments and forms is framed as a pathway to reclaim narrative agency, foster cultural pride, and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future.

Introduction

"Through music, we don't just remember our traditions—we live them, we breathe them, we become them." – Unknown.

India has 104 million Indigenous people, accounting for 21.8 % of the world's total indigenous population.ⁱ According to the 2011 Census and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs,ⁱⁱ the Government of India recognizes 705 Scheduled Tribes (ST) nationwide. These tribes constitute about 8.6% of India's total population and are present in almost all states and union territories, except Haryana, Punjab, Delhi, Puducherry, and Chandigarh. While there is no single official definition, Scheduled Tribes are generally considered to be the indigenous or "Adivasi" peoples of India—relatively homogeneous communities, have distinct cultures, languages, and traditions, and are often socially and economically marginalized.

The share of Scheduled Tribes (ST) varies widely across Indian states.ⁱⁱⁱ In Jharkhand—the focus of this study—STs make up 26.21% of the population, placing it sixth in absolute tribal population nationwide and highlighting its strong Indigenous presence.

Jharkhand, situated in eastern India and established as a separate state from Bihar in 2000, is often referred to as "the land of forests."^{iv} Known for its rich mineral resources, scenic plateaus, and

thriving indigenous cultural heritage, it is home to 32 officially recognized STs, each with distinct cultural, linguistic, and social identities. These tribes play a central role in the state's demographic and cultural landscape. Out of these, five tribes,^v namely Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Ho, and Lohra make up 79% of the total ST population. These communities have a vibrant and ancient musical heritage deeply woven into their daily lives, rituals, and festivals. Their music is not merely for entertainment; it is a living tradition that serves as a medium for storytelling, worship, social communication, and the reinforcement of cultural values.

Each of the tribes in Jharkhand has a distinctive style of music. The Santhal music is known for its rhythmic complexity, and they are often sung in a call-and-response style. The Oraon tribe's music is spiritual and closely tied to agriculture. The Munda are known for their wide range of musical scales, and they celebrate heroes and deities. They use musical instruments such as Dhamsa, Mandar, Nagara, Kartal, and Banam in ways that are unique to their community.

Music is deeply interwoven into the fabric of Indigenous life, accompanying every stage of existence—from birth and harvest to festivals and farewells. It is a powerful force for collective memory, identity, spiritual connection, and a bridge between generations. As Dr. Ram Dayal Munda, a renowned tribal leader and ethnomusicologist, once said, *'Music is the heartbeat of our community; it carries our stories, our history, and our spirit across generations. It is not just sound, but the soul of our identity.'*

The Challenge: Indigenous Music at Risk of Disappearing

Despite its deep roots and cultural significance, the music of Indigenous communities is quietly vanishing. Modernization, urbanization, and displacement have uprooted traditions, and the younger generation finds little incentive to carry forward this legacy, lacking awareness, financial support, and integration into sustainable economic models. Without institutional backing, the craft of instrument-making and traditional performance struggles to survive. As skilled artisans grow old without successors, once-revered instruments fall silent, and musical forms slip into obscurity.

Various newspaper articles^{vi} have mentioned 'Tohila' and 'Kendra', two musical instruments, as "EXTINCT". Both instruments have no players who can play them now. It's hard to believe that we may never experience the sound of a 'Tohila' or a 'Kendra' played live again.

"Banam," a traditional stringed instrument, is on the verge of extinction. "The root causes include a lack of interest among the younger generation in both learning and playing the instrument, as well as a scarcity of trained artisans to carry on the tradition," - Village Square.^{vii}

The decline of traditional musical instruments is not limited to Jharkhand—it is happening across India and globally. In Rajasthan, the Nagphani, played by the Bhil and Bhilala tribes, is endangered, as is the Bana, used by the Gond Tribe in Madhya Pradesh. Across Africa, instruments like the Mbira (Zimbabwe), Kora (West Africa), and various drums and stringed instruments face similar threats. Even the Didgeridoo (Yidaki) of Australia, though still in use, is at risk in some regions.

Resurgence Efforts: Pathways of Revival across Regions

In recent years, there has been a growing effort around the world to document, protect, and bring back Indigenous musical traditions. In India, artists and bands rooted in specific regions are working hard to keep their local music alive. They are sharing these traditions with wider audiences and finding ways to connect them with mainstream music platforms. For example, Ahowee – Garo Band is the Cultural Ambassador of Meghalaya.^{viii} The resurgence of Lepcha music in Sikkim was spearheaded by Sonam Tshering Lepcha.^{ix} The Tetseo Sisters^x of Kohima, Nagaland, and Mangka,^{xi} a renowned Manipuri folk singer, are actively involved in reviving and promoting the rich tradition of Manipuri folk music.

At the Global level, Australia’s Aboriginal Didgeridoo^{xii} revival-community-led enterprises, tourism, and global music collaborations, and Bolivia’s Charango instrument renewal through school curriculum integration and artisan cooperatives are some examples to cite.

Jharkhand has witnessed several efforts to revive Indigenous music, led by both individuals and organizations. The Save Akhra Campaign^{xiii} (2023), the annual Samvaad Conclave^{xiv} through its “Rhythms of the Earth” initiative by the Tata Steel Foundation, and the Documentation and Preservation Project by the Dr. Ram Dayal Munda Tribal Welfare Research Institute^{xv} (2022–2023) are some key examples.

Artists like Nandlal Nayak, Tej and Monika Mundu,^{xvi} and Mukund Nayak have played an active role in these efforts. Organizations such as Kalamandir, Jharkhand Janadhikar Bhumi Adhikar Andolan (JJBA), and Bal Akhra are also contributing to a shared goal—reviving and promoting Indigenous music for future generations.

All these efforts are commendable, but the real challenge lies in creating a sustainable path forward—one where communities, especially the younger generation, take the lead in preserving their musical heritage. This process should strengthen cultural identity, instill pride, and most importantly, connect to sustainable livelihoods. Building strong market linkages is crucial, ensuring that these efforts are financially viable and can thrive independently over time, leading to the overall development of the community.

Case Study: Wings of Chotanagpur – A Community-Led Initiative for Indigenous Music Revival

Wings of Chotanagpur, a socio-cultural organization based in Ranchi, Jharkhand, was established by Manoj Kujur on 5 January 2023. Its mission is to empower tribal youth, create career opportunities, and address socio-economic challenges through community-driven engagement and action-oriented research. It has initiated several programs focused on areas like indigenous food and seed preservation, digital literacy, and cultural storytelling.

Among its key initiatives is the Wings of Chotanagpur Cultural Collective—a youth-led effort to revive and promote the musical heritage of Jharkhand’s tribal communities. Formed under the organization’s umbrella, the collective includes around 25 tribal youth, with girls leading

performances of traditional songs and dances, supported by boys who play instruments such as the *Mandar*, *Banam*, *Theska*, and *Nagara*. Despite having no formal training, the group meets weekly at an *Akhra* (community rehearsal space) to practice their folksongs, play musical instruments, and perfect their traditional dances through peer learning and shared experience.

The collective regularly performs at cultural events across villages, districts, and state levels—sometimes participating in competitions, and at other times, performing by invitation. While travel is often covered by sponsors, any honorarium received is divided among the group members, with a small portion retained for organizational needs. Additional expenses, such as lodging and food, are supported through individual donations, often coordinated through personal networks.

Though still in its nascent stage, the group exemplifies the potential of grassroots organizations to anchor culturally rooted and economically sustainable initiatives. This section proposes a circular economy model that leverages the work of such organizations, integrating diverse stakeholders into a cohesive framework for heritage preservation, community empowerment, and livelihood generation.

1. Community-Centred Documentation and Stewardship

A core strategy involves establishing a cohort of trained youth from within the communities—referred to as Wisdom Stewards—who will map, document, and archive the musical instruments, histories, and performance traditions of Jharkhand. These stewards act as both cultural archivists, practitioners, and future custodians of the region’s intangible heritage.

2. Academic Integration and Institutional Partnerships

A consortium of scholars, musicologists, and curriculum experts can collaborate to design academic frameworks that embed tribal music into school and college syllabi. This would include curriculum modules, field-based research, elective courses, and fellowship or internship opportunities. At the global level, universities such as Western Michigan University (WMU)^{xvii} and the University of Hildesheim’s Center for World Music, Germany^{xviii}, have already integrated music into their curriculum. WMU’s curriculum is notable for its direct integration of Indigenous music as a living, evolving, and activist tradition within higher education. Partnerships with established academies^{xix} and universities will ensure knowledge transfer is both rigorous and rooted.

3. Capacity Building Through Skill Transmission

Organizations and foundations can play a critical role in enhancing local capacities by organizing workshops in instrument-making, maintenance, and performance. These programs can specifically engage youth and women and promote master-apprentice models between surviving artisans and aspiring musicians to facilitate direct, practice-based learning.

4. Popularization and Market Development

Collaborations with contemporary musicians, integration into state-sponsored tourism experiences, and participation in cultural festivals can spark wider interest. Digital platforms and e-commerce marketplaces can serve as important channels for promoting tribal instruments and performances to broader, even global, audiences.

5. Government Collaboration and Policy Alignment

To ensure institutional support, the initiative can align with existing government programs. This includes fellowships for tribal youth in state-run Cultural Academies, support for Geographical Indication (GI)^{xx} tagging of tribal instruments, and formal roles for tribal elders as cultural practitioners, ambassadors, and advisors.

6. Financial Sustainability Through Market Linkages

For long-term viability, the model must explore diverse revenue streams, ranging from digital distribution of recordings and virtual concerts to social media-based promotion, influencer collaborations, and educational products. Paid training programs, certification modules, and event partnerships can create recurring income while supporting skill development. This circular framework seeks to transform Indigenous music from a fading tradition into a vibrant, community-owned enterprise, where heritage is not only preserved but also celebrated, taught, and economically sustained. Wings of Chotanagpur, through its ground-level engagement, has the potential to catalyse such a model with institutional support and impact-driven collaborations.

However, it is important to remember that this is a mammoth task, and the resurgence of tribal musical instruments faces several deep-rooted challenges. The foremost is the loss of skilled artisans and the absence of formal documentation, resulting in a dwindling transfer of knowledge across generations. Limited market access and the lack of commercially viable platforms further isolate these crafts from broader audiences. Social stigma, a growing disconnect between generations, and low youth engagement have weakened traditional custodianship. Institutional shortcomings—policy gaps, fragmented cultural programming, and insufficient support systems—have left these traditions vulnerable. Adding to the challenge is the growing dominance of mass-produced instruments and digital music. Traditional songs are increasingly modernized to cater to wider audiences, often losing their original form and cultural depth. These adapted versions—easily accessible on digital platforms—further push community-based musical ecosystems into the background, making it harder for authentic sounds to survive and thrive.

To address these multifaceted challenges, a comprehensive and inclusive approach is necessary:

- **Government incentives** must be created to support artisan clusters, cultural entrepreneurs, and community-led creative economies.
- **Grants, fellowships, and scholarships** should be introduced to encourage research, documentation, and revival of endangered musical forms.

- **Cross-sector partnerships**—between NGOs, academic institutions, and private cultural platforms—can help mainstream tribal music through festivals, school programs, digital archives, and tourism.

Such measures will preserve musical heritage and reframe these traditions as pathways to dignity, income, and intergenerational pride.

Conclusion

Tribal musical instruments are not mere objects of sound—they are living heritage, echoing the identity, environment, and collective memory of communities. As more of these instruments fall silent, we are not just losing melodies—we are losing languages, histories, and ancestral wisdom.

This is a call to recognize their profound value and act with urgency. By integrating revival efforts into community-driven, sustainable business models, we can breathe new life into these traditions. In doing so, we empower communities, create resilient cultural economies, and ensure that future generations inherit a soundscape rich with the rhythm of their roots.

Endnotes

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