

# REPORT ON DOUBLE REED INSTRUMENTS OF NEPAL<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Nepal, with its extreme topography, is home to a great variety of castes and ethnicities each with their own language and distinct music culture. Insect sounds, and bird songs have influenced folk music composers, musicians and musical instrument makers throughout time and double reed instruments, in particular, tend to mimic natural sounds. More than a score of distinct double reed instruments has been described by Music Museum of Nepal some with straight bodies and others curved like the crescent moon.

**Keywords:** Nepal, musical instruments, double reeds, castes, descriptive methods

## OVERVIEW

Nepali double reed instruments fall into two categories, those played with circular breathing, including five with twin pipes and twin double reeds, and those played with pauses for breath. The reeds can also be described in two main groups. The first type is now usually fashioned from folded layers of smoked palm leaf but, before palm leaves became available in Nepal, the triangular tip of the papery stem-sheath of various bamboo species was used. Smaller reeds, typically made by the *Damai* musician caste, produce a high-pitched sound and larger ones, made by the *Kapali* (temple musicians), are used for lower pitched music. The second type of reed is made from a short length of young, thin bamboo either with a node at each end or at the top end only, and a thinly shaved sliver is cut on the side; this sliver is held open with a female human hair.

The body of highly crafted double reed instruments such as the *sahane* and *muhali* are made of the hard woods, Catechu or Indian rosewood but double reed instruments can also be constructed of bamboo and may incorporate hollow gourds (e.g. *bin*), coconut shells (e.g. *pungi*), animal skins (e.g. *musak bin*) or dry *abel* fruit shell (e.g. *mohola*). The sophisticated wooden instruments may be curved or straight and are always fitted with a metal bell which is shaped like the *Datura* flower. This bell can be removed when playing on sombre occasions such as funeral rituals. Nepal is the only South Asian country to have curved woodwind instruments and these have a conical bore. During construction the curved body is sliced in half lengthways so that the bore can be accurately gauged out and then the halves are carefully put back together and the close-fitting joint is held in place with fish glue and bands of *nigalochoya* (bamboo bark).

A Nepali traditional belief is that any musical instrument might be a gift from God. Trees selected for making woodwind instruments should only be cut on the *saaita*, the astrologically most auspicious date and time, which is chosen with the help of a priest. Rituals are performed, and *mantras* chanted, to obtain permission from the deities to cut the wood, and subsequently to discern the correct time to begin making the musical instrument.

Before playing the new instrument for the first time another special *Tantric* ritual, *Pranaschetana*, is performed, to add *prana* (life force) to the new musical instrument and to invite the Goddess *Saraswati* to reside inside it. This ritual is most commonly performed on *Mahanawami* (ninth day

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<sup>1</sup> This report was given during the 25<sup>th</sup> Colloquium of the International Council for Traditional Music on Double Reed Instruments along the Great Silk Road, held in November 2018 at Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Since it is a short report rather than a paper that problematizes research issues, it was chosen to be presented in AEMR-EJ instead of being integrated in the anthology of reviewed research papers that will be published later about this event.

of *Dashain* festival). The musical instrument may be treated from time to time by dipping them in oil, curd, sour milk, or butter to keep the wood in best condition and extend its life.

Double reed instruments are distributed throughout Nepal from the Himalayas, e.g. *Sherpa ghyaaaling*, and through the mid hill region, e.g. *sahane* played by *Damai* caste musicians, the *Mauri Baja* of the Western hills and the *Brirangi* played in the Eastern hills then down to the plains of the *Terrai* where the *sahanna* is played by the *Musahar* caste. In the Kathmandu Valley the two main types of double reed woodwind instruments are the *sahane*, and the *muwali*, which each have several varieties. The *muwali* appears in eight distinct types.

According to some of Nepal's traditional beliefs, the universe is composed of five elements, earth, fire, water, air, and sky. All wind instruments are thought to belong to the sky element and playing these instruments is believed to purify the sky element. Hence this has to have a healing effect on the whole universe because all beings and environment is surrounded by the sky.

Historically, there were two routes by which Nepalis could join the main Silk Route, which was of great importance to any kind of migration, so does it for the exchange of double reed instruments: the northern route to Tibet or the longer but less arduous route to the south of India and of course travellers and traders took their instruments with them to play on route and to relieve their longing for home.

Double reed instruments are played alone, in sets of several together, or accompanying other instruments particularly other wind instruments and drums. Animal herders play to express emotion, dispel loneliness, to calm down and to round up animals or to communicate with other herders in the forest. These musical instruments are played at all get-togethers and festivals. The sound produced is loud and attracts people from far and wide to join a gathering and they also promote a harmonious atmosphere on any occasion. The double reed instruments are regarded as the queens above all other musical instruments and have the most important role in worship. In the Kathmandu Valley the musicians start playing before sunrise to greet the God on each new day. We can also find inscriptions on the metal bell of some temple instruments which tell us that a king or army commander has donated the instrument to express their gratitude to the Goddesses of a temple after winning a battle.

The melodies of double reed instruments are popular in Nepal and their players, especially those who practice circular breathing, are respected above other musicians because of the difficulty of mastering the technique. A musician who plays with circular breathing is honoured by being given a white turban to wear when playing at special ceremonies. Sadly, fewer people are becoming proficient these days, because there is no longer enough support from the government or from temple *Guthis* (management committees). Musicians are forced by lack of support and lack of money to seek other ways of making a living.

### LIST OF DOUBLE REED INSTRUMENT FOUND IN NEPAL







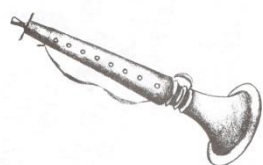

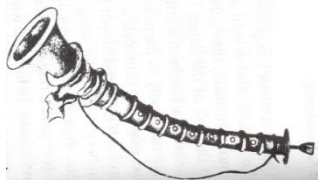
A) Double reed instrument that are played with pauses for breath

1. Bimbili 2. Gujrati Muhali 3. Kohali 4. Piura 5. Puli 6. Ros Mahali 7. Brirangi 8. Jor Sahane 9. Masak Bin 10. Baans Sahane 11. Yab Nali

B) Double reed instrument played with circular breathing

1. Bhamara Muhali 2. Bin 3. Dhode Sahane 4. Mahuri Baja 5. Mohola 6. Moholi 7. Puja Muhali 8. Pugi 9. Rasa 10. Sahane 11. Sherpa Ghyaling 12. Tamang Ghyaling 13. Tip Sahane 14. Sor Sahane

## PICTURES OF DOUBLE REED INSTRUMENTS

	Piuraa <sup>2</sup>		Parts of Sahane Baja <sup>3</sup>
	Sahanaa		Part of Sahane Baja
	Gujraati Muhaali		Reed of Maahuri Baja
	Sahane		Maahuri Baj
	Nal		

An intense study of these reed instruments and their current musicians is under way. It is interesting, how and for what purpose these instruments are locally classified.

## REFERENCES

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Kadel, Ram Prasad. 2007. *Musical Instrument of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Music Museum of Nepal.

<sup>2</sup> All depictions are by courtesy of the Music Museum of Nepal.

<sup>3</sup> All colour pictures are taken by the author.