

A Study of “Dhak”-A Percussion Instrument widely used in the State of West Bengal during Durga Puja and other pujas and their present scenario.

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Abstract: This is a study about Dhak –a percussion instrument (Membranophone/Avanadha in Sanskrit) (large hollow wooden barrel with the middle portion looking bulgy) used in West Bengal during Durga Puja and other pujas. It is relevant to understand this dying art under study as it is economically unviable for the players to continue as it is not remunerative and the business is occasional. Notwithstanding the fact that there is a famous proverb in West Bengal “bharo mashey tero parbon” (which means in 12 months in a year there are 13 religious functions) the percussion players are not given opportunities except in few religious festivals or functions namely Durga puja or Kali puja et al. We can call them as “Season time” but during “off season”, the percussion players engage themselves in part time employment or daily labour or do farming. They mostly come from the districts as they cannot afford urban expensive living. By reading this paper one would understand the plight of some of these talented economically backward “Musicians” if I may say so.

Key words: Dhak, Durga puja, Kali puja, jagadhatri puja, viswakarma puja, Dhak by women

Introduction:

Origin :

Etymologically, the word ‘Dhak’, which denotes one of the many kinds of traditional drums to be found in West Bengal, comes from the ‘Dhak’ tree (scientific name -butea monosperma, Sanskrit -Kingshuk), whose wood is used in the construction of the main drum body. This tree is available in plenty in the Indian subcontinent. It is said that Dhak originated from West Bengal and Bangladesh. It is also widely played in Assam and West Bengal. It is one of the popular and important percussion instrument used during religious functions of West Bengal.

What is a Dhak

Dhak¹ is a huge membranophone and looks like a large hollow wooden barrel with the middle portion looking bulgy and is a old percussion instrument of north-eastern and eastern India.

¹ The Music and musical instruments of North Eastern India, Dilip Ranjan Thakur, P.97, Mittal Publications, New Delhi

See picture below:



Parts of the Dhak:

1. It has two sides. Both the sides are covered with goat skin and both the sides are laced together with straps which are made of cow skin.
2. The non playing side has the black patch called the Gab or syahi or karanai in tamil made of combination of iron ore and some manganese oxide.
3. The instrument is often adorned with the most traditional white flowers of Kash grass (sugarcane) –Kashphool especially on festive occasions or multi coloured feathers or white feathers. They are mostly of killed egrets and using them is illegal, the West Bengal State Forest Department has warned the Durga puja organisers in the city² .

Types of dhak:

A larger Dhak is often called `Joy Dhak`. The dhaks of different districts in West Bengal have different shape and size, though all sound the same.

Posture:

1. Standing: The Dhak player usually suspends the instrument on his left side with a cloth strap over the shoulder.
2. Sitting: Sometimes it is played by placing it on the ground.

Random Bols or syllables:

16 matras-in madhya(medium) speed

Na thariketa theta, Na thariketa theta| Na thariketa theta, Na thariketa theta|

² Egret feathers on Puja dhaks raise hackles-page-22,The Telegraph, Kolkata edition dated 28th September 2016

Na thariketa theta, Na thariketa theta| Na thariketa theta, Na thariketa theta||

16 matras-in drut (medium and fast)speed

Dhang tha da dhang,dhang thana tha|| x 4 times

Uru danga dang nak danga dang-|| x 4 times

16 matras-medium speed

Dhang tha da da dhang,dhang thana dang,urrr,,dhang|| x 2 times

Sometimes “rhymes” are taken as bols for example-8 matras

BORO CHHOTO DADA BHAI PRANAM PRANAM in Bengali (elder brother younger brother salutations)

4 matras-Dhak Bol Krishna Radhey in bengali (Dhak says Krishna Radhey)

The rhythm usually follows “Triplets” while playing

Method of Playing:

1. Although it has two sides, but only one side is played with a pair of bamboo sticks.
2. To maintain the rhythm, a kanser ghanta (brass plate) often accompanies the Dhak like Jalra (brass cymbal) in nagaswaram (a south Indian instrument) performance who maintains the rhythm.

Usage:

Dhak is played during major pujas like Durga puja, Kali Puja etc and any other religious functions. Of late Dhaks are played as concert performances. It is similar to Nadaswaram and Thavil or Chenda played in South India and Kerala temples during daily rituals.

Where do they live:

The Dhak players mostly live in the rural areas like, Murshidabad, Birbhum, North 24 Parganas, Bankura (all districts in west Bengal).

Durga Puja and Dhak:

Durga Puja is a major festival celebrated all over West Bengal and by other Bengali residents in India and abroad during the Bengali month of Bengali Calendar - Aashin 1426 which generally falls during September-October every year. Durga puja is a ten-day event, of which the last five days involve certain rituals and practices for five days starting from Sashti to Dashami (6th to 10th) of Hindu calendar. The festivity starts usually from Mahalaya Amavasya (on this day where rituals are performed for the dead ancestors called “pitrapaksha”) and thousands throng the Ganges by taking a dip which is considered to be auspicious). Very early morning around 4 am one can listen to the Chandi path (Mahisasuramardhini) relayed by Akashvani every year as a ritual. Likewise Navarathri is celebrated in Southern India during this period.

Durga puja is heralded by the constant drum roll you hear during the festive season. Shopping malls, roadside crossings, puja pandals (temporary structures) and even at home, beating of the drums in the typical fashion affirm that Puja is here. The Dhakis are an integral part of Durga puja. They play the dhak, often moving around in patterns while playing away to glory. During Durga puja, one can find that every pandal decks up to the tune of the drums beating, be it the dhakis showcasing their art or sadly CDs

and DVDs which have replaced them. Traditionally, the art of playing the dhak has come down from generation to generation ; some of the Dhakis are fifth generation Dhak players. The erstwhile Malla Kings of Bishnupur (District:Bankura in west Bengal) were great patrons of Dhakis, who played on a daily basis at temples and palaces and during festivals. Some of the present day Dhakis are their descendants, probably the last in line performing the dying art.

During durga puja, the Dhakis have literally no time to spare. If they are not performing at a single venue, they have to shift to multiple venues to pay obeisance to the deity. Indeed , this is the time of the year where they are required the most, and the Puja is never complete without the dhakis performing. Traditionally the drum beats used to be slow but now changing times they play much faster for crowd attraction.

There are different stages in puja rituals like Chokku daan-offering of the eyes to the Goddess Durga on Mahalaya meaning the artisan paints the eye of the idol durga, sandhipujo(evening puja), bisarjan(immersion) etc..Dunuchi naach(dance with incense burner) where youngsters dance to the tune of Dhak. Also traditionally, there are different beats for different ceremonies during the Puja, including during the Nowadays, the tune is more or less same.

The tribe of the Dhakis is also decreasing, as the performers who charge less are preferred these days. That is when the kurkure (not the snack but name of another percussion instrument) or tassa is called for, who play the smaller versions of the Dhak. Even so, the bigger pujos including the ones at traditional Bari-s (Home pujas) sometimes invite more than 100 Dhakis to grace their pandals and homes and please the deity³.

Present scenario:

Over the years, playing the Dhak has been a languishing art. The Dhakis are also most of the times not recognized as artists' and thus don't get much recognition and can hardly make ends meet. What with tastes in traditional music changing to the modern trendy funky beats, easy availability of the original tunes on the internet and general patience running out to watch the Dhakis perform, the art is dying a slow death. Added to that, remuneration woes of the Dhakis, the older ones have the experience and demand a higher sum and thus the younger performers preferred, who more often than not don't have a complete grasp of the art form. Moreover, performing needs a lot of energy and movement, which has led to a paradigm shift towards the younger ones. What suffers in between is the traditional music.

Moreover, unlike South India where traditional drummers find permanent employment at many temples and festivals, in the eastern parts of the country, the Dhakis have not been preferred for day to day employment. What has resulted in may turning into farmers and goldsmiths; even many becoming rickshaw pullers and cobblers. Such is their plight. In fact, what was once an art handed down from generation to the next has today not found any takers among the present generation. Many of the younger ones have shifted professions completely or have not taken up the learning of the art altogether due to lack of monetary compensation and opportunities. During Durga Puja of yore, Dhakis flourished, their art form was appreciated and they stayed behind even till Vishwakarma puja. They had other occasions and festivals to perform in too, including the Kali puja(during Diwali) ,where their presence was compulsory. But now, even if they perform during Durga Puja, they are not invited for other occasions where recorded music is preferred. Today, their numbers are dwindling, their art is being neglected and their performance many-a-times is not what the old would be proud of. But not all is lost. Every year, the call of the Dhak welcomes Durga Puja.

Women and Dhak

The Dhaks were usually played by men and of late women have also taken up this profession. The womenfolk who are often confined to home managing the family have come out taking up this dying art. A few dozens of women of rural West Bengal have decided to lend beauty and charm to drum beats that are an integral part of the ritual and festivity of Durga puja which used to be the exclusive preserve of menfolk, the credit of which goes to the famous Dhaki player Sri.Gokul Chandra Das, of Maslandpur, Dist: North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.⁴

³.The Telegraph newspaper article dtd 24/09/2016, Kolkata edition, P.10 under Title "The Puja Pot pourri-

⁴ La Belle Drum, page 16,photographs published in The Statesman Kolkata edition under Focus dated 28th September 2019

Annexure for foot note no.3 -Egret feathers on Puja dhaks raise hackles-page-22,The Telegraph, Kolkata edition dated 28th September 2016

Egret feathers on Puja *dhaks* raise hackles

SUBHAJOY ROY

The white feathers that adorn *dhaks* are mostly of killed egrets and using them is illegal, the state forest department has warned Durga puja organisers in the city.

The *dhakis*, most of whom hail from rural areas, kill egrets for their feathers before they head to the city for the autumn festival. The feathers are supposed to catch the eye of the organisers of big-budget pujas that pay well.

The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, bars the killing or hunting of egrets but the timing of Durga Puja has made the birds easy prey to poachers. Egrets breed between May and October, when they do not fly as much as they do at other times, explained a forest department official.

"In all the meetings we have had with puja organisers, we have told them that they should desist from hiring *dhakis* who use egret feathers," said Subhankar Sengupta, conservator of forests (wildlife). Forest department officials are invited to meetings between police and puja organisers before the festival.

In 2014, two *dhakis* who had adorned their *dhaks* with egret feathers were arrested at Sealdah. The news of the arrests spread among the *dhakis* and the feathers were not used as widely last year. "We need

to reiterate the point every year so that the use of the feathers can be stopped gradually," said Sengupta.

Forest officials feel that if puja organisers stop hiring such *dhakis*, the use of egret feathers will automatically reduce. Many puja organisers insist on decorated *dhaks*, pressuring *dhakis* into falling back on the traditional option.

Puja organisers who do not want blood on their hands sometimes find it difficult to identify egret feather. Not all white feathers used on *dhaks* are of egrets: some are poultry feather.

Veteran birder Shubhankar Patra said there were simple ways to distinguish feathers of egrets from those of cocks and hens. Egret feathers are about 1.5ft long whereas poultry feathers are less than a foot long. "Being longer, the egret feathers are more flexible. When a *dhaki* dances, the egret feathers swing more. Also the milk-white egret feathers are brighter than the feathers of hens and cocks," explained Patra.

He said use of egret feathers has reduced over the years but the practice still persists.

The most common egrets in south Bengal are Cattle Egrets, Little Egrets, Intermediate Egrets and Great Egrets. Among them, Intermediate and Great Egrets are killed in large numbers.

EGRET

- **Common types:** Great Egret, Little Egret, Intermediate Egret and Cattle Egret
- **Size:** 102cm maximum for Great Egret
- **Found:** Across India, including Nalban and Rajarhat's Kharibari near Calcutta
- **Breeding season:** April to October
- **Length of feathers:** As much as 2.5ft
- **Diet:** Fish, earthworm, insects and sometimes snakes



Annexure for foot note no.4- La Belle Drum, page 16, photographs published in The Statesman Kolkata edition under Focus dated 28th September 2019

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