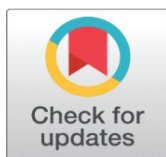
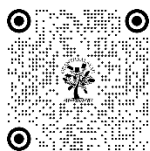


THE ROLE OF KASHMIRI FOLK MUSIC IN PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY AND FOSTERING SOCIAL COHESION

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ABSTRACT

Kashmiri folk music, with its rich tapestry of melodic traditions and lyrical storytelling, plays a pivotal role in preserving the cultural heritage and identity of the Kashmir Valley. This research article explores the historical evolution, distinctive features, and socio-cultural significance of Kashmiri folk music. By examining traditional instruments, musical genres, and the narratives encapsulated in folk songs, the study underscores how this musical heritage reflects the region's diverse cultural influences and historical experiences.

The research delves into the role of folk music in community gatherings, religious ceremonies, and seasonal festivals, highlighting its function in fostering social cohesion and communal harmony. Through qualitative analysis the article sheds light on the transmission of musical knowledge across generations and the adaptive strategies employed to sustain these traditions in the face of modern challenges.

Furthermore, the study addresses the impact of political unrest and socio-economic changes on the folk music landscape, considering how musicians and communities navigate these dynamics to maintain their musical practices. The research concludes by advocating for the preservation and promotion of Kashmiri folk music as an integral part of the region's intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing the need for collaborative efforts between local communities, cultural organizations, and policymakers.

Keywords: Kashmiri Folk Music, Cultural Identity, Social Cohesion, Musical Heritage, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Traditional Instruments

1. INTRODUCTION

Kashmiri folk music, deeply rooted in the picturesque valley of Kashmir, is a vibrant expression of the region's cultural identity and social fabric. This genre of music, characterized by its unique melodies, instruments, and lyrical content, encapsulates the essence of Kashmiri life, traditions, and values. This research article aims to explore the historical evolution, distinctive features, and socio-cultural significance of Kashmiri folk music, while examining its role in preserving cultural identity and fostering social cohesion in the Kashmir Valley.

Historical Evolution of Kashmiri Folk Music

Kashmiri folk music has a long and rich history, influenced by the diverse cultural and religious interactions in the region. The origins of this music can be traced back to ancient times when the valley was a melting pot of various

civilizations, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and later, Islam. Each of these cultural phases contributed to the development of distinct musical traditions.

Ancient Roots

In ancient Kashmir, music was an integral part of religious and social life. The *Natyashastra*, an ancient Indian treatise on performing arts, mentions the musical traditions of Kashmir, highlighting the region's early engagement with music and dance.

Kashmiri folk music has ancient roots that reflect the region's rich and diverse cultural history. The earliest evidence of music in Kashmir can be traced back to the times when the valley was a thriving center of Hinduism and Buddhism. During this period, music played a vital role in religious ceremonies and social gatherings. The ancient Indian treatise on performing arts, the *Natyashastra*, mentions the musical traditions of Kashmir, underscoring the region's early engagement with music and dance (Lawrence, 1895). These early influences laid the foundation for a musical tradition that would evolve and adapt over the centuries, incorporating various cultural and religious elements into its repertoire.

With the advent of Islam in the 14th century, Kashmiri music underwent significant transformations. The introduction of Persian and Central Asian influences, brought by Sufi saints and travelers, enriched the local musical traditions. Sufi music, characterized by its mystical poetry and devotional themes, became an integral part of Kashmiri culture. This blending of indigenous and foreign musical elements created a unique sound that distinguished Kashmiri folk music from other regional traditions (Singh, 2012). The resilience and adaptability of these ancient roots have allowed Kashmiri folk music to endure through various historical changes, preserving the cultural heritage of the region.

Medieval Influences

With the advent of Islam in the 14th century, Persian and Central Asian influences began to permeate Kashmiri music. Sufi saints played a crucial role in this transformation, blending indigenous musical traditions with Persian mystical poetry, leading to the emergence of Sufi music in Kashmir.

The medieval period marked a transformative phase for Kashmiri folk music, as the region experienced significant cultural and religious shifts. With the arrival of Islam in the 14th century, Persian and Central Asian influences began to permeate the local music scene. Sufi saints, who played a crucial role in the spread of Islam in Kashmir, introduced new musical forms and instruments, blending them with the existing traditions. The music of this period often incorporated Persian mystical poetry, which resonated deeply with the spiritual and emotional sensibilities of the Kashmiri people (Singh, 2012). This synthesis of indigenous and foreign elements led to the development of a unique musical tradition that reflected the diverse cultural heritage of the valley.

The impact of Sufi music during the medieval period cannot be overstated. Sufi practices and beliefs, which emphasize the direct personal experience of the divine, found a profound expression in music. The adoption of instruments such as the *Santoor* and *Rabab*, which were common in Persian and Central Asian music, became integral to Kashmiri folk music (Qazi, 2005). Additionally, the lyrical content of folk songs began to reflect themes of love, devotion, and mystical union, resonating with the Sufi ethos. This period also saw the emergence of musical gatherings, or *mehfils*, where musicians and devotees would come together to perform and listen to Sufi music, fostering a sense of community and spiritual connection. These medieval influences have left a lasting legacy on Kashmiri folk music, enriching its tradition and ensuring its continued relevance and vibrancy.

Colonial and Modern Era

The colonial period and subsequent political changes brought new influences and challenges to Kashmiri folk music. Despite these challenges, the traditional music continued to thrive, adapting to contemporary tastes while retaining its core elements.

The colonial period brought profound changes to Kashmiri society, including its musical traditions. Under British colonial rule, Kashmir was exposed to Western cultural influences, leading to a hybridization of musical forms. Despite these changes, Kashmiri folk music retained its unique identity by integrating new elements while preserving its traditional core. The colonial era also saw the introduction of new musical instruments and styles, which were incorporated into folk music performances. Musicians adapted to these influences, creating a fusion that reflected the evolving socio-cultural landscape of the time (Lawrence, 1895).

In the modern era, Kashmiri folk music continues to evolve, facing both opportunities and challenges. The advent of technology and globalization has provided new platforms for the dissemination of folk music, allowing artists to reach

wider audiences through digital media. However, political unrest and socio-economic changes have posed significant challenges to the sustainability of traditional musical practices. Despite these obstacles, Kashmiri musicians have shown remarkable resilience, using music as a medium to express their cultural identity and social realities. Contemporary efforts to preserve and promote Kashmiri folk music, such as documentation projects and cultural festivals, play a crucial role in ensuring that this rich musical heritage endures for future generations (Sheikh & Bhat, 2017).

Distinctive Features of Kashmiri Folk Music

Kashmiri folk music is distinguished by its unique musical instruments, melodic structures, and lyrical themes.

Instruments

Traditional instruments such as the Santoor (a hammered dulcimer), Rabab (a string instrument), Noet (a long flute), and the Sarangi (a bowed string instrument) are central to Kashmiri folk music. These instruments produce a distinctive sound that is both melodious and evocative.

Traditional instruments play a vital role in defining the distinctive sound of Kashmiri folk music. Among these, the Santoor, a hammered dulcimer, stands out for its ethereal and melodious tones. This instrument, with its ancient roots, consists of a wooden trapezoidal box with numerous strings that are struck with lightweight mallets to produce a rich, resonant sound. The Santoor is often used in classical as well as folk music, serving as a bridge between different musical traditions in Kashmir (Koul, 2009). Its versatility and distinctive sound make it a cornerstone of Kashmiri musical performances, contributing significantly to the region's auditory landscape.

Another essential instrument is the Rabab, a plucked string instrument that originated in Central Asia and was introduced to Kashmir through Persian and Afghan influences. The Rabab's deep, resonant tones complement the Santoor, adding depth and texture to musical compositions. Additionally, the Noet, a long flute, and the Sarangi, a bowed string instrument, are integral to Kashmiri folk music. The Noet produces a hauntingly beautiful sound that is often used in solo performances and to accompany vocalists, while the Sarangi, known for its ability to mimic the human voice, adds emotional intensity to the music (Wani & Dar, 2015). These instruments collectively create the unique and enchanting soundscape of Kashmiri folk music, each contributing its distinct voice to the region's rich musical heritage.

Genres

Various genres of folk music, including Rouf, Wanvun, Chakri, and Ladishah, each serve different social and cultural purposes. Rouf is a traditional dance song performed by women, while Wanvun is associated with wedding rituals. Chakri is a narrative ballad that tells stories of love, valor, and folklore, and Ladishah is a satirical genre that comments on social and political issues.

Kashmiri folk music encompasses various genres, each serving distinct social and cultural purposes and reflecting the diverse facets of Kashmiri life. One prominent genre is Rouf, a traditional dance song performed by women, particularly during festive occasions and cultural celebrations. Rouf is characterized by its rhythmic clapping and synchronized footwork, which accompany the melodious singing of folk songs. This genre not only provides entertainment but also fosters social bonds among women, as they come together to celebrate their shared heritage (Sheikh & Bhat, 2017).

Another significant genre is Wanvun, which is closely associated with wedding rituals. Wanvun songs are performed during various stages of wedding ceremonies, encompassing themes of love, blessings, and joy. These songs play a vital role in enhancing the emotional atmosphere of weddings, making them an integral part of Kashmiri matrimonial traditions (Koul, 2009). Chakri, on the other hand, is a narrative ballad that tells stories of love, valor, and folklore, often accompanied by traditional instruments like the Rabab and Santoor. This genre serves as a medium for preserving and transmitting the region's oral history and cultural myths. Additionally, Ladishah is a satirical genre that comments on social and political issues, using humor and wit to critique societal norms and injustices. Through its incisive lyrics, Ladishah provides a platform for social commentary and reflection, making it a powerful tool for cultural expression and critique (Wani & Dar, 2015).

In addition to Rouf, Wanvun, Chakri, and Ladishah, Kashmiri folk music boasts other genres that contribute to the region's rich musical tapestry. One such genre is Hafiz Nagma, which blends music, dance, and poetry to deliver spiritual and philosophical messages. This genre often features the Santoor as the primary instrument and is performed by a lead female dancer, known as the Hafiza, who interprets the poetic verses through expressive movements. Hafiz Nagma performances are typically held during religious and cultural festivals, serving as a means of spiritual reflection and

communal celebration (Bhat, 2013). The genre's intricate choreography and lyrical depth make it a captivating art form that preserves and propagates Sufi mysticism within Kashmiri culture.

Another notable genre is Sufiana Mausiqi, which is deeply rooted in the Sufi traditions of Kashmir. This genre focuses on the expression of divine love and devotion through music, often incorporating Persian and Central Asian influences. Sufiana Mausiqi is typically performed in intimate settings, such as Sufi shrines and mehfiles (musical gatherings), where musicians and listeners engage in a shared spiritual experience. The use of traditional instruments like the Santoor, Rabab, and Sarangi, along with soulful vocals, creates an atmosphere conducive to introspection and mystical contemplation (Bhat, 2013). Sufiana Mausiqi not only provides a spiritual outlet but also strengthens the cultural identity of the Kashmiri people by connecting them to their rich Sufi heritage.

Lyrical Themes

The lyrics of Kashmiri folk songs often reflect themes of love, nature, spirituality, and social life. The use of metaphors and local dialect adds to the richness and authenticity of these songs.

The lyrics of Kashmiri folk songs are imbued with profound themes that resonate deeply with the cultural and emotional landscape of the region. One prevalent theme is love, which is expressed in various forms, including romantic love, familial affection, and love for the homeland. Love songs in Kashmiri folk music often depict the beauty of relationships, the longing of separated lovers, and the celebration of togetherness. These songs are not only expressions of personal emotions but also serve as a reflection of the social norms and values surrounding love in Kashmiri society (Koul, 2009).

Nature serves as another prominent theme in Kashmiri folk songs, highlighting the region's awe-inspiring landscapes and natural beauty. Poetic descriptions of majestic mountains, serene lakes, blooming gardens, and flowing rivers evoke a sense of connection to the natural environment. The lyrics often personify nature, attributing human emotions and characteristics to natural elements, thereby emphasizing the deep spiritual and cultural bond between Kashmiris and their natural surroundings (Singh, 2012).

Spirituality is a fundamental theme that permeates Kashmiri folk music, reflecting the region's diverse religious heritage. Sufi poetry, in particular, explores themes of divine love, spiritual enlightenment, and the quest for inner peace. The lyrics often convey profound spiritual teachings and mystical experiences, encouraging listeners to contemplate deeper truths and transcendental realities. Through metaphors, allegories, and symbolic language, Kashmiri folk songs convey spiritual wisdom that transcends religious boundaries, fostering a sense of unity and harmony among diverse communities (Bhat, 2013).

Socio-Cultural Significance

Kashmiri folk music is not merely an artistic expression but a vital component of the region's socio-cultural landscape.

Community Gatherings

Folk music is an integral part of community gatherings, religious ceremonies, and seasonal festivals. These musical events foster a sense of belonging and communal harmony, bringing people together to celebrate their shared heritage. Community gatherings play a pivotal role in the preservation and transmission of Kashmiri folk music, serving as vibrant hubs where musical traditions are celebrated and passed down through generations. These gatherings, whether at weddings, religious festivals, or cultural events, provide invaluable opportunities for community members to engage with their musical heritage firsthand, fostering a sense of cultural continuity and social cohesion (Sheikh & Bhat, 2017). Through shared experiences of music and dance, participants not only strengthen their bonds with each other but also reaffirm their collective identity rooted in the rich tapestry of Kashmiri cultural expressions.

Transmission of Knowledge

The oral tradition of passing down folk music from one generation to the next ensures the continuity of this cultural heritage. Elderly musicians and community leaders play a crucial role in teaching younger generations, thus preserving the musical traditions. The transmission of knowledge in Kashmiri folk music occurs through a dynamic interplay of oral traditions, mentorship, and community participation. Elders and experienced musicians serve as custodians of cultural knowledge, imparting traditional songs, melodies, and playing techniques to younger generations through direct apprenticeships and informal learning settings (Koul, 2009). This intimate passing down of knowledge within families and communities ensures the continuity of musical traditions, preserving nuances in performance style, regional

dialects, and emotional depth unique to Kashmiri folk music. As such, the transmission process not only safeguards cultural heritage but also nurtures a sense of identity and belonging among learners, reinforcing the cultural fabric of Kashmiri society.

Adaptation and Resilience

Despite facing numerous challenges, including political unrest and socio-economic changes, Kashmiri folk music has shown remarkable resilience. Musicians and communities have adopted various strategies to sustain their musical practices, such as incorporating modern elements and utilizing digital platforms to reach wider audiences. Adaptation and resilience are fundamental characteristics of Kashmiri folk music, reflecting its ability to evolve amidst changing socio-cultural landscapes and external pressures. Over centuries, Kashmiri musicians have adeptly integrated new influences while preserving core traditions, demonstrating a remarkable ability to adapt their musical expressions to contemporary contexts (Sheikh & Bhat, 2017). This resilience is evident in the fusion of traditional melodies with modern instruments, the incorporation of new lyrical themes that reflect current social issues, and the exploration of innovative performance styles that appeal to diverse audiences. By embracing adaptation, Kashmiri folk music not only sustains its relevance but also reinforces its role as a dynamic cultural force that bridges past traditions with present-day realities.

Impact of Political Unrest and Socio-Economic Changes

The political turmoil and socio-economic changes in Kashmir have had a significant impact on its folk music.

Political Unrest

The prolonged conflict in the region has disrupted cultural activities, including musical performances. However, music has also served as a medium for expressing resistance and resilience, with folk songs often reflecting the struggles and aspirations of the people.

The Kashmir region has experienced prolonged political unrest, which has had significant ramifications for its cultural activities, including musical performances. The conflict has led to disruptions in public gatherings, restrictions on artistic expressions, and challenges in preserving and transmitting traditional musical practices. Musicians have faced difficulties in accessing venues for performances and in gathering audiences due to security concerns and curfews imposed during periods of heightened tension (Zutshi, 2014).

Despite these challenges, music has emerged as a powerful medium for expressing resistance and resilience in the face of adversity. Kashmiri folk songs, infused with poignant lyrics and emotive melodies, often serve as vehicles for articulating the struggles, aspirations, and grievances of the people. These songs reflect the collective consciousness of Kashmiris, conveying narratives of loss, displacement, and the longing for peace and justice. By voicing societal concerns through music, Kashmiri artists assert their cultural identity and assert their right to self-expression amidst turbulent political realities (Sheikh & Bhat, 2017).

Moreover, music has played a unifying role in fostering solidarity and mobilizing communities during times of political upheaval. Folk musicians have utilized their artistry to galvanize public sentiment, mobilize support for social movements, and commemorate significant events in Kashmir's history. Musical performances at protests, rallies, and cultural events serve not only as platforms for artistic expression but also as forums for collective mourning, resilience-building, and advocacy for social change (Qazi, 2005).

Socio-Economic Changes

Economic challenges and modernization have influenced the traditional livelihoods of musicians. Many traditional artisans and musicians have had to adapt to changing circumstances, finding new ways to sustain their art.

The socio-economic landscape of Kashmir has undergone significant transformations, impacting the traditional livelihoods of musicians and artisans in the region. Economic challenges, exacerbated by political instability and limited access to resources, have posed formidable obstacles to sustaining traditional musical practices. Many musicians, who rely on live performances and local patronage, have faced dwindling opportunities for economic support and cultural patronage amidst shifting socio-economic dynamics (Sheikh & Bhat, 2017).

Moreover, modernization and globalization have introduced new opportunities and challenges for Kashmiri musicians. The advent of digital technology and online platforms has provided avenues for reaching broader audiences and preserving traditional music in digital formats. However, these advancements have also prompted shifts in audience preferences and consumption patterns, impacting the demand for traditional folk music performances and recordings. As a result, musicians have been compelled to adapt their artistic practices and marketing strategies to align with

contemporary market demands while safeguarding the authenticity and integrity of their cultural heritage (Wani & Dar, 2015).

In response to these socio-economic changes, efforts are underway to support the sustainability of Kashmiri folk music. Cultural organizations and non-profit initiatives have been instrumental in providing financial assistance, training programs, and marketing support to musicians and artisans. These initiatives aim to empower local communities, preserve cultural traditions, and promote the economic viability of traditional artistic practices in Kashmir. By fostering collaborations between artists, cultural entrepreneurs, and policymakers, these efforts seek to ensure that Kashmiri folk music continues to thrive as a vibrant expression of the region's cultural identity (Bhat, 2013).

Preservation and Promotion of Kashmiri Folk Music

Preserving and promoting Kashmiri folk music requires concerted efforts from local communities, cultural organizations, and policymakers.

Documentation and Archiving

Systematic documentation and archiving of folk music are essential for preserving this intangible cultural heritage. Efforts should be made to record and transcribe folk songs, along with their historical and cultural contexts.

Systematic documentation and archiving of Kashmiri folk music are crucial endeavors for safeguarding this invaluable intangible cultural heritage. As a repository of centuries-old traditions, folk music serves not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a vital link to Kashmir's cultural history and identity. Documenting folk songs involves recording and transcribing melodies, lyrics, and performances, capturing the nuances of regional dialects and musical styles that are integral to the authenticity of Kashmiri music (Koul, 2009).

Efforts to document Kashmiri folk music are multifaceted, involving collaborations between ethnomusicologists, cultural historians, and local communities. Ethnomusicological studies play a pivotal role in analyzing the structural elements and cultural significance of folk songs, providing insights into their evolution and adaptation over time. Archival initiatives aim to preserve recorded materials, manuscripts, and oral histories related to folk music, ensuring their accessibility for future generations of researchers and enthusiasts (Singh, 2012).

Furthermore, documenting folk music helps in contextualizing these musical traditions within broader socio-cultural frameworks. By elucidating the historical contexts and societal functions of folk songs, researchers contribute to a deeper understanding of Kashmiri cultural practices and their relevance in contemporary times. This comprehensive approach to documentation not only safeguards the intangible heritage of Kashmiri folk music but also fosters appreciation and awareness of its cultural significance among global audiences (Bhat, 2013).

Education and Awareness

Incorporating folk music into educational curricula and organizing workshops and seminars can raise awareness about its importance. Encouraging young people to learn and appreciate their musical heritage is crucial for its continuity.

Incorporating Kashmiri folk music into educational curricula and organizing workshops and seminars are essential strategies for promoting awareness and preserving this integral part of cultural heritage. Educational institutions play a pivotal role in nurturing an appreciation for folk music among young learners, providing opportunities for them to explore and engage with their musical heritage. By integrating folk music into school curricula, educators can foster a sense of pride and connection to Kashmir's cultural identity from an early age (Sheikh & Bhat, 2017).

Workshops and seminars offer platforms for hands-on learning and interactive experiences with folk musicians and cultural experts. These events not only provide insights into the technical aspects of traditional music but also delve into the historical, social, and cultural contexts that shape Kashmiri folk music. Participants gain firsthand knowledge about the significance of folk songs in local traditions, their role in community life, and their evolution over time. Such immersive learning experiences encourage active participation and empower individuals to become advocates for the preservation and promotion of Kashmiri folk music (Wani & Dar, 2015).

Furthermore, raising awareness about the importance of folk music through educational initiatives fosters a sense of cultural stewardship among communities. It instills a commitment to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and ensures its continuity across generations. By nurturing young talents and supporting their artistic development, educators and cultural organizations contribute to the revitalization of Kashmiri folk music, reinforcing its relevance and vibrancy in contemporary society (Bhat, 2013).

Support for Musicians

Providing financial and institutional support to traditional musicians can help sustain their livelihoods and encourage them to continue their musical practices. Establishing platforms for performances and collaborations can also enhance the visibility and reach of Kashmiri folk music.

Providing robust financial and institutional support to traditional Kashmiri musicians is crucial for sustaining their livelihoods and preserving the region's rich musical heritage. Many traditional musicians face economic challenges due to limited opportunities for performances and insufficient financial resources (Sheikh & Bhat, 2017). By offering grants, fellowships, and micro-financing options, governments, non-profit organizations, and cultural institutions can empower musicians to continue their artistic practices without financial constraints.

In addition to financial support, establishing institutional frameworks that recognize and promote Kashmiri folk music is essential. Cultural organizations and music academies can collaborate with musicians to create training programs, mentorships, and workshops aimed at skill enhancement and career development (Wani & Dar, 2015). These initiatives not only nurture talent but also ensure the transmission of traditional knowledge and techniques to future generations.

Furthermore, creating platforms for performances and collaborations enhances the visibility and reach of Kashmiri folk music on regional, national, and international stages (Bhat, 2013). Festivals, cultural events, and music showcases provide opportunities for musicians to showcase their talents, connect with diverse audiences, and build networks within the music industry. Such platforms not only celebrate cultural diversity but also contribute to the preservation and promotion of Kashmiri folk music as a vibrant and integral part of global cultural heritage.

2. CONCLUSION

Kashmiri folk music is a vital expression of the region's cultural identity and social cohesion. Its rich history, distinctive features, and socio-cultural significance underscore its importance as an integral part of Kashmir's intangible cultural heritage. Despite facing numerous challenges, Kashmiri folk music continues to thrive, adapting to contemporary contexts while preserving its core essence. Collaborative efforts between local communities, cultural organizations, and policymakers are essential for the preservation and promotion of this musical heritage, ensuring that it continues to resonate with future generations.

In conclusion, Kashmiri folk music emerges not just as a cultural artifact but as a living testament to the resilience and creativity of the Kashmiri people. Despite facing challenges from political unrest, socio-economic changes, and the pressures of modernization, the music thrives as a vital expression of Kashmir's identity. Efforts in documenting, preserving, and promoting this musical heritage are crucial for its continued existence and appreciation by future generations. By integrating folk music into educational curricula, supporting musicians with financial and institutional backing, and fostering awareness through performances and collaborations, Kashmir can ensure that its rich musical traditions endure as a source of cultural pride and unity. In doing so, Kashmiri folk music not only preserves its past but also enriches its present and future cultural landscape.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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