Evolution and History of Chordophones in Asia: A Focused Study on Sāraṅgī

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution and historical significance of chordophones in Asia, with a particular focus on the sāraṅgī and sarindā. Chordophones, defined as instruments that produce sound through vibrating strings, encompass a diverse range of stringed instruments. This study traces the roots of chordophones from ancient hunting bows to their complex modern forms, highlighting the similarities between sāraṅgī and sarinda, using the Hornbostel-Sachs classification system. The sāraṅgī, renowned for its expressive capabilities, is deeply intertwined with the cultural practices of the Gandharva community in Nepal, while the sarindā, significant in the folk traditions of North and Eastern India and Pakistan, offers a contrasting yet complementary perspective on bowed instruments. This paper hence identifies shared characteristics and cultural contexts, emphasizing the intricate connections between these instruments and their roles in shaping regional identities, through comparative analysis. By examining the historical trajectories and contemporary significance of the sāraṅgī, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the rich tradition of chordophones across Asia.

Key words: Asia, chordophones, musical landscape, Nepali music, sāraṅgī

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According to Hornbostel and Sachs, "a chordophone is any musical instrument that makes sound by way of a vibrating string or strings stretched between two points" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). This term broadly encompasses stringed instruments, technically referring to those that are bowed, plucked, or strummed (Lee, 2019). The Hornbostel-Sachs classification system, developed by Erich Moritz von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs, was first published in 1914 in the Zeitschrift für Ethnologie. This system remains the most widely accepted method for categorizing musical instruments (Lee, 2019).

Characteristics and Types of Chordophones

Most string instruments, including the guitar, lute, violin, mandolin, cello, bass, harp, musical bow, and even the piano, fall under the category of chordophones. When the strings of these instruments are plucked or strummed, they vibrate, and the sound reverberates against their usually hollow bodies. The strings may be plucked (as with the harp), strummed (as in the guitar or lute), bowed (as with the cello, viola, or violin), or thumped (as with the piano). Notably, both the sāraṅgī and the ārbājā, instruments of the Gandharvas, are classified as chordophones. The Nepali sāraṅgī can be plucked, strummed, and bowed, whereas the ārbājā is primarily strummed and plucked.

Historical Roots of String Instruments

Hunting bows are often considered the origins of stringed instruments (Kasliwal, 2001). Numerous pieces of evidence suggest this, including primitive instruments resembling harps depicted in ancient paintings in France (dating back 15,000 years), Egypt (5,000-year-old tombs), and various handmade harps in Africa. Musical bows, thought to be the first chordophones, are illustrated in paintings from the Trois Frères cave, dating as far back as 13,000 to 11,000 BC (Leroi-Gourhan, 1967).

The invention of the complete bow is believed to have occurred around the 3rd century BC (Balfour, 1899). Given the numerous references to the bow in ancient literature and history, it is reasonable to conclude that it is an ancient invention (Lawergren, 1988). The bow's significance lies in its contribution to the development of various musical instruments. According to Saint-George (1922), bowed instruments are of oriental origin. The "ravanastron" or "ravanahatha," a string instrument believed to have originated in India and Sri Lanka, is generally recognized as the oldest stringed instrument. Made from coconut shell, bamboo, goat skin, and natural fiber, this one-stringed instrument has a 22-inch string that can produce a tonal range similar to that of a violin (Saint-George, 1922). The Ramayana mentions the ravanastron, translating to "Ravana's hand" (Saint-George, 1922).

According to Jahnel and Clarke (2000), the ancient inhabitants of the Mediterranean region used tortoise shells and empty gourds as resonators for early musical instruments, with the gourd being particularly favored in Mesopotamia and India, where it was modified to create the tanpur, the Indian version of the lute. The development of plucked instruments is seen across various cultures, including the use of coconut shells and bamboo stems. The precise origins and timeline for these instruments remain uncertain, but by the 4th century BC, Western Asia had transformed simple instruments into more sophisticated designs like harps, lyres, citharas, and lutes.

The lute family evolved into two main categories: shaft lutes and necked lutes, further classified into shell-shaft lutes, box-shaft lutes, shell-necked lutes, and box-necked lutes (Jahnel & Clarke ,2000). Notable instruments include the Egyptian rebāb esh-sha'er (poet's fiddle), the ancient Indian ravanastron, the American banjo, and the Chinese san hsien. Shell-necked lutes include the therobos, mandolins, and tanbur-type instruments, while box-necked lutes encompass Coptic lutes, guitars, citterns, violins, and gambas. By

500 BC, lutes were being constructed in Turkestan, with designs that influenced neighboring cultures, leading to the evolution of instruments like the tanbur, single-string qopuz, double-string dutar, and three-string sitar. The early oud, characterized by four strings and frets, also emerged during this period, alongside various types of lutes such as the Arabian al'ud and narrow rebāb that spread throughout Spain in the 8th and 9th centuries.

Development of Chordophones in Asia

Saint-George (1922) suggests that even the Goudok, a three-stringed bowed instrument played by rural farmers in Russia, is related to the three-stringed rebāb, which is itself a descendant of the ravanastron. The bow is prevalent in the "glorious Orient," where many ancient instruments are found. For instance, the Arabian two-stringed fiddle, "Kemangeh-a-gouz," is believed to share roots with the ravanastron. The term 'Kemangeh' translates to "place of the bow" in Persian, while 'gouz' means ancient, thus signifying an "ancient fiddle." Similarly, the Chinese fiddle "erhu" resembles the ravanastron in its construction. The bow gained significant popularity in Persia, Turkey, and various regions of Arabia, being used to play instruments such as the kemangeh and the rebāb.

The rebec, a popular musical instrument during the medieval and early Renaissance periods in Europe, is considered an ancestor of modern instruments like the violin and cello, evolving from the Arabic rebāb (Lee, 2019). The three-stringed rebec is mentioned in Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, where it is referred to as a "ribibl" (Chaucer, 2003).

Chinese musical traditions have significantly influenced the development of chordophones, especially through instruments like the erhu (Stock, 1993). This two-stringed fiddle, part of the huqin family, is known for its emotional depth and versatility and is used in street performances and formal concerts. The origins of the erhu are debated; while some scholars suggest it was introduced from

abroad, others assert that it developed independently within China and may be as old as the millennia (Zhang, 2010). The instrument's distinctive sound has been shaped by various musical traditions, including Persian and Uighur (Stock, 1993).

Chinese music has also significantly impacted neighboring countries, such as Korea and Japan, leading to a rich tapestry of musical instruments and styles. In the fifth century, Japan's exchanges with China and Korea introduced Asian music styles, establishing gagaku as refined official music by 701. During the Heian period (794–1182), it flourished as both ceremonial and entertainment music (Seiko, 2013). The shamisen is a three-stringed spike lute believed to have evolved from the Chinese sanxian, while the kokyu complements the shamisen in ensemble settings. The Thai saw sam sai and the Cambodian tro khmer are traditional three-stringed fiddles that highlight the cultural connection between Thailand and Cambodia with their 436 years of shared history as part of the Ayutthaya Kingdom (1351-1767). Both instruments belong to the spike fiddle category, characterized by a handle that passes through the resonator and is played with a bow (Musikarun et al., 2019). Both of these are believed to have roots in the Iranian rebab. The rebab, thought to have developed from the lutes found in Arab and Persian cultures, is a significant bowed instrument in the gamelan orchestras of Java, Indonesia.

Asia presents a remarkable diversity of bowed instruments (Fig. 1), each narrating a unique story of origins and adaptations from instruments like the Komuz from Central Asia, the Ur-heen, Erhu, Uh-Ch'in, Saw-oo, and Sawduang from China, as well as the Saw-tai from Thailand to the sāraṅgī, veena, tanbura, sitar, rabab, and sarandi of the Indian subcontinent. Instruments like the Mongolian tovshuur and the kobyz, or qobyz, a Turkic bowed instrument used by Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, Bashkirs, Tatars, and Kyrgyz, are also prominent. The Silk Road played a key role in

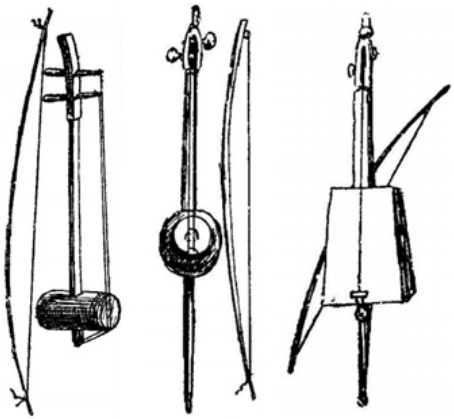
facilitating cultural exchanges between regions, introducing foreign skills and musical instruments that shaped local traditions. Music in these cultures serves not only as a form of entertainment but also as a vital component of religious and societal ceremonies. The dynamic interplay of cultural influences across Asia has fostered a vibrant musical repertoire, underscoring the significance of chordophones in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Structural Characteristics of Bows

The bows of these instruments exhibit notable similarities (Saint-George, 1922). Most ancient bows are relatively simple, made from a short, flexible piece of wood or cane tied with horsehair at one end. This design allows the wood to be bent into an arc shape. While bows used for instruments like the Goudok and Sarìnda are short and firm, those for the ravanastron or omerti are typically longer, slimmer, and more supple. The hairing method also varies, with some bows attaching horsehair through a narrow split, while others use leather thongs or strings.

Figure 1

A Ravanahatha, Kemangeh-a-gouz, Rebâb-el-maghanny



(Illustrations: http://www.antique-ebooks.com/skidoooomnbvcxz/The_Bow.pdf)

The Sāraṅgī and Its Variants

The sāraṅgī in India seems to have made a sudden appearance during the rule of Emperor Akhbar (Bor, 1986). According to Ain-i-Akbari, 'the sāraṅgī is smaller than the rabāb, related to it, and played like the ghichak or kamāncā, the Persian spike fiddle.' There are many seventeenth-century Mughal miniatures that feature the sāraṅgī, most of it also highlighting a holy man along with the fiddler. The Ḍhāḍhī, originally Rājputs, are believed to be the oldest community of musicians who sang karkhās about heroic deeds in battles as well as religious songs. They were known to play the ḍhāḍh as well as the sāraṅgī. They were also known to play religious songs and ballads. Surindo, a close relative of surindā, is often played by professional Sindhi bards like the Māgāniyār, Charan, and Laṅgā of Rajasthan (Baloch, 1966). The sāraṅgī holds a significant place in the musical landscape of South Asia, particularly within the Gandharva community of Nepal. Often referred to as the quintessential accompaniment for Gandharva songs, the Nepali sāraṅgī (Fig. 2) is recognized for its expressive capacity and versatility. This instrument is not merely a musical tool; it is deeply intertwined with the cultural and social practices of the communities that use it. According to the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (n.d.), the sāraṅgī is classified as a bowed chordophone characterized by its waisted body and a wide neck devoid of frets, typically carved from a single piece of wood. The ability to produce both melodic lines and rhythmic accompaniment makes the sāraṅgī particularly valuable in the performance of traditional music.

Historically, the sāraṅgī's lineage is tied to various forms of string instruments across the Indian subcontinent, depending on their context within the community and their usage. There are numerous folk types with distinct regional features. The context

in which these instruments are employed also varies greatly, from local folk performances to grand classical concerts.

The instrument's construction often mirrors that of other regional bowed instruments, which contributes to a shared cultural identity among musicians. For instance, despite sharing a name, the similarities between the Nepali sāraṅgī (Fig. 2) and the Indian sāraṅgī are notable, although distinctions arise in physical construction, intended musical context, tonal quality, and playing techniques. The Indian variant incorporates sympathetic strings, enhancing its harmonic richness, and has evolved into a solo classical instrument within Hindustani classical music. In contrast, the Nepali sāraṅgī is akin to the folk fiddle of India, predominantly used in folk settings. The musicians play both melodic and rhythmic roles, which reflects the instrument's ability to convey emotional depth while maintaining a strong rhythmic foundation. Physical characteristics common to both the Indian and Nepali sāraṅgī include:

- **Construction**. Typically carved from a single piece of wood, ensuring a unified tonal quality.
- **Body Design.** The body is often hollowed out, allowing for resonance and amplification of sound.
- **Neck Design.** Both variants feature a fretless neck, facilitating expressive glissandi and microtonal variations that are integral to South Asian music.
- **String Composition.** While the strings were traditionally made of gut, modern iterations may utilize steel or nylon, affecting timbre and projection.

These commonalities highlight the sāraṅgī's adaptability and its role in maintaining the musical traditions of the regions it inhabits.

Figure 2

Nepali sāraṅgī (Left: sāraṅgī made in Kathmandu; Right: sāraṅgī made in Pathariya, Jhapa, Nepal; Photo: Author)

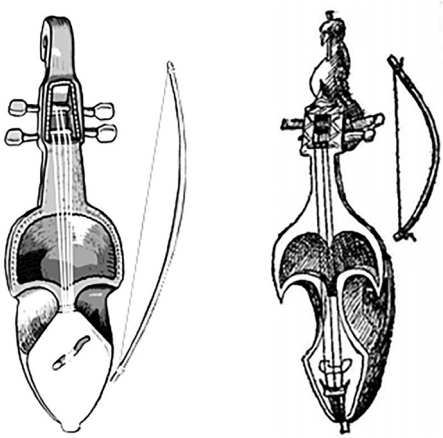
Folk instruments like the sarangat, saranga, saran, sarinda, saroz, and sananta indicate different regional adaptations of the sāraṅgī, each sharing fundamental structural similarities. These instruments are varied in shape and size and are found to have spread in communities across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, and India. For example, the dhodro banam, a primitive tribal variant played by the Santali tribes in Bihar and Odisha, consists of a hollow body made from guloic wood, believed to be organically linked to the Santals. It features a skin-covered belly, an open chest, a short neck, and a uniquely crafted pegbox, which may be shaped like a human head. This one-stringed instrument symbolizes the most basic form of the bowed lute tradition. In contrast, the Sindhi surando, prominent in Sindh, Pakistan,

and the surinda found in Rajasthan and Punjab, possess a more sophisticated structure. The surando has a beautifully shaped upper chamber that acts as a resonator, amplifying sound and enriching tonal quality. This instrument typically includes three main strings and a set of sympathetic strings, traditionally played by professional bards.

The sarindā serves as another important bowed instrument within the South Asian musical spectrum. The sarinda, also known as saranda, is a traditional stringed folk instrument from North and Eastern India and Pakistan. The sarindā, which is played in a vertical position while seated, is believed to have been introduced to the Sikhs and is significant in the music of various ethnic groups, including the Bauls of Bengal and the Punjabi people. Meanwhile, its other relative, the surando is also an ancient Sindhi folk fiddle played in regions like Sindh and the Fakirani Jats of Kutch, derived from the Persian term "Surayindah," meaning "producer of tunes." It is a folk fiddle, crafted from wood and typically featuring eight strings—three bowed, two drones, and sympathetic strings—with a distinct design and decoration. As Bor (1987) outlines, the sarindā typically features a deep head, a short neck, and a heart-shaped belly, which includes both a lower resonance chamber covered with skin and an open upper chamber. While the sarindā shares certain features with the sāraṅgī, particularly in its construction and sound production, distinct differences exist. The sarindā's design allows for an amplification of sound through its upper pear-shaped resonance chamber, facilitating a different tonal quality.

Figure 3

The Nepali sāraṅgī (a) and the Bengali sarindā (b)



[Source: http://www.hm.h555.net/~irom/musical_instruments/bow_sāraṅgī_n.html (a) http://www.antique-ebooks.com/skidoooomnbvcxz/The_Bow.pdf (b)]

The sāraṅgī and its variants share a set of defining structural characteristics that classify them within the same family of instruments. Key features include:

- **Single-block Construction.** All instruments are traditionally carved from a single piece of wood, ensuring unique acoustic properties and durability.
- **Waisted Body.** The waisted design contributes to a distinct sound profile, enhancing projection and resonance.
- **Skin-covered Belly.** The belly is often covered with skin, which serves as a soundboard and contributes to the instrument's tonal qualities.
- **Neck Design.** The neck is generally fretless, allowing for microtonal variations that are crucial in Indian classical music.
- **Hollow Peg Box.** The head of the instrument often features an arched or slit-like opening, housing pegs for string tuning.

Variations within the sāraṅgī family arise in the shape of the belly, neck length, and peg box design. For instance, while some instruments exhibit ornate carvings or inlay work, others maintain a more rustic appearance. Several characteristics are similar, especially between the sāraṅgī and the sarindā (Fig. 3). For example, both instrument families exhibit a strong correlation in terms of the following aspects:

- **Body Structure.** Both types typically feature a hollow body that enhances acoustic resonance.
- **Neck Design.** The absence of frets in both instruments allows for fluid pitch variation.
- **Playing Technique.** Both instruments are played in a vertical position (often while seated) by drawing a bow across the strings or by plucking, although the contexts in which they are used may vary significantly.

The similarities in instruments point to a common ancestry. While the history of the Gandharvas, or Gaines, of Nepal is unclear, some believe that they came to Kaski, Nepal, from Chittorgarh of Rajasthan, India, with the entourage of Kul Mandan Khan, a Sisodia Rajput originally from Mewar of Rajasthan, India. Kul Mandan Khan later took the title 'Shah' that was bestowed on him by the Emperor of Delhi. Kul Mandan Shah became the king of Kaski and was the predecessor of King Prithvi Narayan Shah, who founded the Shah dynasty of Nepal and united the country. The Gandharvas are thought to have been part of a king's entourage. They helped boost morale, sing religious songs, compose and sing songs about heroic deeds in the battles, and entertain their patrons and soldiers with their sāraṅgī. These musicians were a customary part of the battles in many other parts of India as well.

During a time when education, entertainment, and information were primarily accessible to the aristocracy and higher castes, the Gandharvas played a crucial yet understated role in society

as entertainers and conveyors of news and gossip. They shared the struggles and joys of everyday life through their music, effectively uniting common Nepalis. Their performances encapsulated not only their personal narratives but also reflected the daily experiences of their audiences, addressing themes such as politics, religion, discrimination, love, and sorrow. The Gandharvas have significantly contributed to preserving and promoting their unique musical heritage, acting as oral historians by weaving past events and current affairs into their songs. However, with the rise of radio and television, their music has gradually been overlooked, leading many locals to undervalue their contributions.

According to the latest census (CBS, 2011), the Gandharva population stands at 6,791, with 5,021 living in rural areas across 25 districts. Their largest communities are found in the Gandaki zone around Pokhara, while smaller groups exist in midwestern and eastern Nepal, including Kathmandu and districts like Jhapa and Gorkha. Despite the challenges they face, the style of Gandharva music has evolved over recent years; they have incorporated popular songs into their repertoire, including Bollywood hits and contemporary music. The new generation is educated and involved in a variety of careers, including Nepal's pop culture scene. This adaptability highlights their resilience and commitment to preserving their musical identity while engaging with modern influences. Along with the Gandharvas, the sāraṅgī in Nepal has undergone a remarkable transformation. Today, it is frequently featured in contemporary music settings, played alongside modern instruments and styles, which reflects a blend of traditional and contemporary musical practices. from its humble folk origins to a prominent role in contemporary music, often serving as a studio instrument for various song accompaniments. As musical trends have evolved, the sāraṅgī has embraced modern influences, incorporating popular songs and innovative playing techniques. Today, it is frequently featured in contemporary music

settings, played alongside modern instruments and styles, which reflects a blend of traditional and contemporary musical practices. This evolution demonstrates the sāraṅgī's versatility and resilience as it adapts to the changing landscape of Nepali music.

The sāraṅgī and its variants represent a rich tapestry of cultural and musical heritage. From the humble dhodro banam of the Santals to the refined classical sāraṅgī to the Nepali sāraṅī', these instruments embody the diversity and complexity of bowed string instruments across the Indian subcontinent.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the intricate evolution of chordophones in Asia, with a particular emphasis on the sāraṅgī and its cultural significance. By tracing the historical roots and examining the development of these instruments through various cultural influences, we gain a deeper understanding of how they have shaped regional identities, especially that of the sāraṅgī within Nepali music. The sāraṅgī, closely intertwined with the cultural practices of the Gandharva community, serves as a vital component of cultural heritage of Nepal. The comparative analysis reveals both similarities and distinct roles that these instruments play within their respective communities. This focus on the sāraṅgī allows for a richer appreciation of its significance in Nepali music, showcasing how it bridges traditional folk practices and contemporary performances.

This article situates the sāraṅgī within the broader evolution of chordophones across Asia and the Indian subcontinent, highlighting its unique place in the musical landscape. The paper also emphasizes how the sāraṅgī has adapted to modern influences while maintaining its traditional roots that preserves its cultural significance but also ensures its relevance in the contemporary music scene.

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