

Spring 2014

# Study of Nagara Drum in Pushkar, Rajasthan

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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## STUDY OF NAGARA DRUM IN PUSHKAR, RAJASTHAN

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Spring 2014

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the history and present functions of the pair of kettledrums called Nagara in Rajasthan, India. The location of study was centered in Pushkar. Library research, informants, and lessons on the drums make up the basis for the study. This essay focuses on the contemporary use of the ancient drum in traditional and performance contexts. Informants included Nagara players as well as supporters of Rajasthani folk music. The study focuses mainly on one family of drummers in Pushkar, the Solanki family. The drum has been adapted to many different contexts, and remained in use for traditional, religious and cultural performance. This study brings forth some contemporary issues folk musicians such as Nagara players face while trying to make a living or pursue their art form in the modern world.

### **Acknowledgments**

Formal Thank You To: Dr. Mary Storm, Guy-ji, Savita-ji, Pralad-ji, Dirwaj-ji and Vinita-ji, Gotu Solanki, Ravi Sharma, Kailash Solanki, and Nathul Solanki.

### **Dedication**

Thank you to everyone, professors and staff at SIT India National Identity and the Arts for making this research possible. Thank you to my professors at Mount Holyoke College, Hampshire College, and Smith College. Thank you to my family and friends for continuously supporting my interests.

Study of the Nagara Drum in Pushkar, Rajasthan

“To activate the drum is to enact the drama of creation of sound, but on a human plane.”  
-Ashok Da. Ranade

### **Introduction**

This essay examines the Nagara drum in the present day, as observed through a one month study period including research and fieldwork. The Nagara as a pair of kettledrums is well known in Rajasthan, but as an instrument in North Indian percussion is not as popular as the tabla or dholak. While the tabla seems to have received the most attention from musicians and

researchers, the tabla's structure was heavily inspired by the Nagara.<sup>1</sup> The Nagara is an ancient drum brought into India in the Middle Ages, most likely by the Arabs and Persians.<sup>2</sup> A Nagara, (which can be spelled a variety of different ways, see Appendices) can consist of one large drum, played with two sticks, or a massive drum played with two larger sticks. The Nagara as discussed here is a pair of kettledrums. The smaller one is called Nagari, and larger Nagara. The term Nagara is used for the pair in this context. My approach in this project was to begin with library research on the drum in Rajasthan. What I found and couldn't find prepared me for my fieldwork. In the library of Ethnomusicology and Archives Center for Ethnomusicology in Gurgaon, concrete information regarding the Nagara's uses and functions was scarce. I drew information from a variety of literature that mentioned Nagara only in one or two pages. I watched two videos, one of a man demonstrating different rhythms on Nagara. The problem was that there was hardly any context for the video, filmed in the 1980s. The collector's name was present, but no further information about the collector, why he was interested in Nagara, who the musician was, etc. Another film clip I viewed also from the 1980s was merely a collection of footage from various processions and ceremonies. There was only one instance of the Nagara as a pair of kettledrums in the film, where the Nagara was being played on camelback, one drum on either side of the camel and the player sitting on top of the animal. One of the most helpful books regarding the history of the Nagara was *Aini Akbari*. The *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* entry on Nagara was informative, covering a range of different Nagara drums, and even featured a picture of a player in Kishangarh, Rajasthan (near the location of this study) in kettledrum style. There were countless books about tabla, while not even a full chapter of one book discussed Nagara.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Sadie. Editor. *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*. (Macmillan Press. 1985), 740.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley, *New Grove*, 740.

During the fieldwork period I took drum lessons and spoke with people affiliated with the Nagara: musicians, supporters, and local people. I watched many performances. There is one family of master drummers living in Pushkar, the Solanki family. I worked with them the most. There is another master drummer, Sitaram, unrelated to the Solanki family who plays in the Old Ranaganot Temple. Abroad, as well as in Pushkar and surrounding areas in Rajasthan, Nagara has been made famous by this family's success with the instrument. Nathul Solanki, the oldest master drummer in Pushkar, is in the midst of world tours-solo, and with his band, the Master Drummers of Rajasthan. The band includes his three sons. Nathul's brother and teacher, Ram Kishan Solanki, who passed away in 2008, was an extraordinary world renown master drummer. His son, Gotu Solanki, is a good drummer, but his profession has not brought him outside of India.

A larger problem within traditional music and their musical instruments in present society was exposed through my study. In the musician caste in a place like Pushkar, some players play when they are called by wedding parties or special occasions, making up their primary source of income. However, when they are not needed for work, they suffer. Others have managed to use their profession in many performance contexts in and outside of India, and do quite well for themselves. They need performance in tourist settings to make their livings, while it seems that in the past there was a stronger mode of patronage for their art that paid for their families to live without worry. I will now give a brief introduction to my informants, mentioned throughout this paper. Manish is a young Nagara player from Devli Village, about two hours from Ajmer. He is the only Nagara player I interviewed from outside of Pushkar. Nathul Solanki is a world renown master drummer. Narender is his son, who benefits from his father's teaching and connections, and also performs outside of India. Gotu Solanki is the son of master drummer Ram Kishan

Solanki, now deceased. Kailash Solanki is Gotu's nephew, grandson of Ram Kishan. Ravi Sharma is a Brahman priest, Roots of Pushkar record label founder, and record store owner in Pushkar.

### History

The Nagara was originally intended for war use because of its booming quality. It has been called the loudest drum in India. The Nagara provided the royal courts in Rajasthan with a rhythm to live by. When used in battle, the drum was used as a signifier of assault. It was beaten when an army was approaching another or when being attacked. The loud, resonant sound of the Nagara gave the battling armies a sense of urgency, and fueled the fire to fight. The Nagara was also used in a more peaceful context, often stationed above gateways to royal forts. The drum would be played as a welcome gesture for people entering the area. In the time of Emperor Akbar, around 20 Nagaras made up a large ensemble called the *Naubot Khana* or *Naqarahkhana*. The *Naqarahkhana* ensemble consisted of: Kuwarga, 18 pair; Naqara, 20 pair; Duhul, 4; Karna (brass, gold, or silver horn), 4 or more; Surna (Persian, Indian), 9; Nafir, (Persian, Euro, Indian), "some of each;" Sing (brass cow horn), 2; and Sanj (symbol), 3 pair. Some of these instruments including Nagara were stationed above the gateways, played from the early morning to nighttime. Gharis, or special interludes, were played in this routine: four gharis before beginning of night; one at midnight; another at dawn; one ghari before sunrise; and one after sunrise without Nagara. One hour after sunrise the Nagaras started, with blessings to the Emperor.<sup>3</sup> The group of musicians also held a special location in the public meeting hall. At the end of public audience hall, "at a distance of twelve tanabs," was the *Naqqara Khana*. The *Naqqara Khana* is

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<sup>3</sup> Abu'l-Fazl Allami. (Translated from Original Persian by H. Blochman. *Aini Akbari*. Second Edition Revised and Edited by Lieut. Colonel D.C. Phillott. Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, New Delhi. Distributed by Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers PUT Ltd. New Delhi. Third Edition, reprinted from Second Edition of 1927. Published by Asiatic Society, Calcutta. 1977) 53.

a turret on the top of which the band plays.<sup>4</sup> They would play by the light of an *Akas diya*, or a high pole where an immense lamp is fixed and lights up a space of 1530 yards.<sup>5</sup> The Nagara was of special interest to the emperor, “His majesty [Akbar] has such knowledge of the science of music as trained musicians do not possess; he is likewise an excellent hand in performing, especially on the Nagara.”<sup>6</sup> It is said that Akbar had a “love of order,”<sup>7</sup> and the Nagara serving a special role in establishing that order with a loud reverberation.

### Components

The Nagara is largely made up of animal leather. Usually, a buffalo or camel hide is stretched across the round bowl-shaped body. The bowl is made of iron, clay or some metal. Ropes interlock to keep the leather in place. The Nagara is very loud and low pitched, and referred to as male. The Nagari is higher pitched, traditionally made of goat skin, and female. However, recently plastic has been a wider used material, because it is cheaper and the sound isn't affected by the weather. Sometimes on the Nagara, sticks are broken and placed under the intertwining rope to make the pitch lower or higher. In the heat, the Nagara is tuned by pouring water on the animal skin, and wiped with a cloth. The Nagari can be tuned to a lower or higher pitch by tightening or loosening the bolts around the rim. Another method for tuning the Nagara involves pouring water in through a small hole in the base, and tuning by an interior resinous tuning-load stuck under the skin.<sup>8</sup> In the rainy seasons, the Nagara has a duller sound. One technique for better pitch I observed was slathering masala mix and curd on the face, and letting it dry overnight. Then gee or butter is poured in through the hole at the bottom. This makes the pitch lower and more resonant. The musicians who showed me this process were adamant about

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<sup>4</sup> Allami. *Aini Akbari*, 48, footnote 2.

<sup>5</sup> Allami. *Aini Akbari*, 49, footnote 3.

<sup>6</sup> Allami. *Aini Akbari*, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Allami. *Aini Akbari*, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Sadie, *New Grove*, 740.



me not telling anyone it was how they achieved their desired sound, and other people would not know how to get the best quality resonance.

### The Drums and Geography

The region that makes up present day Rajasthan has seen a large amount of foreign conquest and battle between rulers. The regions that comprise Rajasthan consist of expansive mountain ranges and the Thar Desert. The land is quite barren and difficult to subsist on. The people of Rajasthan depend on their knowledge of the land to properly survive through agriculture and livestock.<sup>9</sup> I assume the Nagara was important because they needed a loud drum to cut across the territory. It is interesting because the same drums were used for the court, a calmer place. The Nagara was important musically, but the thunderous boom was crucial for people to hear what time of day it was. The Nagara is also a way to call people to gather, therefore requiring a clearly audible sound.

The material that comprise the Nagara, specifically the animal leather of the ropes and face can be explained by the availability of buffalo and camels.

### Technique

The two kettledrums are called Nagara and Nagari. They belong to the category of *membranophones*. The Nagara is usually around one and a half to two and a half times the size of the Nagari. In one of my lessons, my Guru-ji asked what my dominant hand was. He said the Nagara usually goes on the side of the dominant hand. However, when Manish played, he had the Nagara on the side of his weak hand. Sticks are used to beat the drums. One stick is thicker and heavier, used for the Nagara. A loose grip on the stick is essential, and the player's thumb is aligned straight along the stick. For the Nagari, the wrist is flicked in a backwards motion, palm facing up. The Nagari requires a lighter and slightly thinner stick. There are several places that

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<sup>9</sup> Rustom Bharucha, *Rajasthan, an Oral History*. (Penguin Books. New Delhi, India. 2003.) 37.

can be struck on each drum face, and several techniques to obtain different sounds in those places. When the Nagari is struck in the middle, it's called "ti." When struck in the middle on the side closest to the player, it's called "na." When hit under "na," it's called "ka." The Nagara struck in the middle, alone, is called "ge." To create a dampened sound, the drum can be struck in the same place, but with the wrist held tighter. The drum can also be hit on the edge, on the metal. On the Nagari, the tighter leather or plastic allows for the player to make a solid strike, or a strike that bounces off the leather in the right way to create a reverberated sound. This can be done with one or both sticks. The Nagari can also be struck on the side of the drum, on both the leather and metal. This can also be done with one or both sticks. Pitch of the drums is not an extremely important factor, but aforementioned tuning methods are used for suitable pitch.

#### Physical Problems with Playing

Almost all Nagara players I spoke with talked about a problem they had with their veins in their wrists painfully tightening, making them unable to play. In some interviewees it was the right hand, which requires more power than the left hand. Kailash said that his biggest disappointment was when this happened to him in his forearm, and he couldn't play for an entire month. All players had extremely hard calluses on their hands. Some of the players experienced pain in their left hands as well, the hand used in the backwards flick on Nagari. Gotu once showed me a bracelet he had on his left wrist. He told me that he was playing extremely powerfully, but his wrist started to hurt during performance. He then put on this special bracelet, and indicated to me that it had healing qualities.

#### Nagara as Timekeeper

Sitaram mentioned in his interview one problem he sometimes encounters with vocalists. The Nagara can be played in slow or fast tempos, with a distinctive meter due to the paired drum

style of playing. Sometimes when a vocalist is even slightly off tempo, it can be hard for the Nagara player to follow correctly. The Nagara thrives in solo performances, and in interlocking with other percussion instruments. It's crucial in some dance forms, such as Goomar dance. The loud downbeat on Nagara is easy for the dancers to hear. When Gotu accompanies Gypsy dance, I noticed that the Nagara leads the other percussion instruments, dhol and dholak. Sitaram said that a traditional vocal song cannot be played with tabla, but only on Nagara. He said the tabla is better with fast music, but the Nagara can be fast or slow.

### **Nagara, Kettledrum in Rajasthan**

In a map of different folk instruments from the book *Where Silence Sings: Sounds and Rhythms of Rajasthan*, it is shown that some areas in Rajasthan where Nagara is in use today are: Bikaner, Bharatpur, Kota, Kishangarh, and Jodhpur. The map showed that the Nagara was not common in Thar desert.<sup>10</sup>

The type of Nagara played in Rajasthan today as a pair of drums is not what Nagara consisted of in Akbar's days. That was just the one drum. There are other drums similar in name and components, but are different from the Nagara in Rajasthan. One is an extremely large Nagara drum, sometimes referred to as *Bam*. In Nepal, the Nagara is one drum played with 2 sticks, and looks similar to the Rajasthani male Nagara. The drum was played in temples, especially for Lord Shiva. It used to be largely played, but now is rarely in use.<sup>11</sup>

### **Function**

Nagara still serves in the entrance of gateways, but no longer for a royal court. A *Naubot Khana* or *Naqqara Khana* can still be found in some places, such as City Palace in Jaipur. In

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<sup>10</sup> Tripti Pandey. *Where Silence Sings: Sounds and Rhythms of Rajasthan*. (HarperCollins Publishers India Pvt Ltd. 1999. New Delhi.) vii.

<sup>11</sup> Ingemar Grandin. *Music and media in Local Life- Music Practice in a Newar Neighborhood in Nepal*. (Mandala Book Point, 2011. Kathmandu) 64.

Pushkar there is an ensemble in the New Rangi temple, but unfortunately foreigners are not allowed to enter. They play at certain times of the day, similar to Akbar's court. It is common to see a Nagara and Shehnai located at the gateways for weddings or other special occasions, for good luck. The Nagara is also played in temples, as a holy drum. The Nagara accompanies *Goomar* dance, and other folk dances. It is used in *Khyal* performance. The Nagara is played for purely performance functions all over Rajasthan and around the world. While the Nagara in the past seemed to have a relatively clear function or purpose, there are now many uses for the drum with the rise of performance practice and mobility around India.

### **Tradition**

Traditionally, people born into the musician caste rely on a mode of patronage, usually from families who employ them to play for religious and cultural occasions. In this system, the patron family supports the musician and their families including women and children. In this way, musicians served a function similar to artisans or other skilled laborers. This dwindling network still operates in some places today, and due to my location is not the process I studied exclusively.

What my study revealed was a complex network of folk musicians caught in the push and pull of contemporary society. While many artists no longer rely on formal patronage to live, they are caught somewhere in between, making a living looking to play shows. However, their services continue to be needed for cultural events. Instead of one family hiring musicians for a long term contract, the musicians obtain work through many different patrons. The system has almost begun to mirror the musician who seeks performances in a Western culture wishing to heighten their fame-but in this case the musician finds work in weddings, special occasions, and the cultural like, and hopefully will stand out enough to be called again. Presently, it seems to be

a professional caste musician's dream to play shows for large audiences in major cities in India, and if they're lucky enough, outside of India. But the average Nagara player derives his income from these cultural events. It is important to understand that "It [folk music] has survived because of the very concrete support provided by local castes, communities, and people at large, cutting across different religious groups. Even from particular families, but not from the State, which can merely recognize talent by awarding fellowships and awards. But the state can neither create or sustain talent. For the survival of traditional musicians, we have to look elsewhere."<sup>12</sup> Although there are establishments such as the Sangeet Music Akademi, and governmental factions that claim to support the arts of Rajasthan, it is largely devoted to touristic desires and does not directly enhance folk music in Rajasthan. For the support of the music, people like Ravi-ji and the Roots of Pushkar Record Label, and Vinod Joshi of the Virsat foundation are examples of entities helping folk musicians.

Some Nagara players are employed to bring messages between people or villages where telephones are rare. The message could be anything from an invitation to governmental purposes-such as in Nathul's case where he was employed to play Nagara and bringing the message that people were being evicted from their homes. He was also employed by the police force band to play Nagara, in parades.

### Specific Traditions

Therefore, the Nagara can be considered an exclusive instrument because Nagara players are often born into the musician caste, and the men learn from their fathers and grandfathers. However, I learned that this was not the case with my primary informants, the Solanki family, although they claimed to be a Nagara family. They learned when their family began working at the Brahma temple in Pushkar. The story of origin is discussed further in the specific sections

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<sup>12</sup> Bharucha, *Rajasthan, an Oral History*, 218.

focusing my interviewees. Drawing from my informants, it seems that when they were children they all learned by first begin watching their fathers play. One informant, Sitaram, has played Nagara for 74 years. He started playing when he was one and a half years old. The other informants hovered around the ages five to eight before beginning to play.

I asked Gotu why he usually plays around dusk, faithfully every night (if he is in Pushkar) at the Sunset Cafe. His answer was, “Because my father used to do it. I don’t know why I do it, but my father did, so I do the same. It’s a good atmosphere. People go on the spiritual walk, and the water is nice at that time. People sit, listening to the music and have chai.” I had thought maybe there was a ritualistic reason for playing at sunset, because the first Nagara performance I saw in Pushkar took place when the sun was going down. Such is the way with many customs, the Solanki family has developed their own specific rituals with the Nagara. In addition, Nathul and/or his sons always hold a workshop on Gaungur Ghat at sunset. Often, the tradition seems to solely consist of following what a player’s guru-ji did before them.

#### Nagara in Tourist Context

At the mock Rajasthani village Choki Dhani, I met two Nagara players. There was one right outside the entrance, before one even enters with payment-perhaps reinforcing the tradition of a Nagara player at the gate. The Nagara player also had a shehnai, the dynamic duo. Inside there was one stage area with two people: one with Nagara, and one with an instrument that looked like a drinking pot, called a “Chari.” There was also a younger boy, a fire eater. The Nagara player’s name was Dinesh. He started playing drums when he was ten years old, taught by his father. He was born in Jaipur. Unfortunately, because of the language barrier I could not ask him any further questions about the tradition of Nagara in his family. Yet there was something to be said about Choki Dhani as a tourist location itself. The performers did not look particularly spirited or happy to be there, contrasting with other performances I’ve seen around

Pushkar. There were many stages with artists and no audience. When I approached the Nagara player his face lit up when I asked if I could play. It seemed like I was the first person to take interest in some amount of time. The fact that the Rajasthani tourist department and the Choki Dhani establishment decided that this collection of artists would accurately represent Rajasthani folk life speaks about the focus on catering to the tourist population.

Pushkar itself is a holy place, but also a widely known tourist area. Because of this, Gotu always plays at sunset and collects money from the people listening. Nathul also makes the Nagara widely accessible to anyone who wants to learn. The tourist population has played a role in the Nagara becoming a more widely known drum. The longer a tourist stays in Pushkar, the better they can become at playing the drum through lessons.

### **Specific Case Studies**

#### **Manish**

Each player I spoke with seemed to recognize that people in large cities or other places besides Rajasthan mostly don't know about the Nagara in kettledrum style. Manish, from Devli Village was the only Nagara player I interviewed who wasn't from Pushkar. He was also the youngest, twenty years old. Manish stood out in my line of informants, because his involvement with the Nagara differs from the others. He is completing a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, Geography and Hindi Literature, as well as diploma in Tabla from Bhartiya Sangeet Academy, Jaipur. The Nagara is also a family instrument for him, but he is not expected to survive solely off the it. This is made clear through his involvement with academics and other instruments, such as tabla and dholak. He said that his elder uncle is now his teacher, as his grandfather passed away. Because of his studies and involvement with different musical groups, including playing Nagara in the temple, he only intensely practices Nagara about ten days out of the month. He said that there are many artists and musicians who live in his village and nearby villages. He said

that among all the districts of Rajasthan there is a good deal of Nagara players. He is in a group called the Nagori Musical Group which consists of eight people, including ladies. They all play Nagara together. He talked about Nagara being the traditional Rajasthani instrument used in Rajasthani Folk Dances. He is the main Nagara Player of Shriman Harish Nagori Group. In the future, Manish wants to become an accomplished and well known Nagara player. After his interview, he demonstrated a number of different beats used for various activities such as dance or temple rhythms. His skill is already impressive, especially given that he is not solely devoted to the instrument. He said that he is inspired by Ram Kishan Solanki. Manish stands out because he has obviously had the opportunity to pursue other ventures besides Nagara. He uses Nagara in his own performance contexts, with his friends, resembling any musician's interest in forming a band for fun, instead of playing to survive. And despite this range of activities, he impressively *still* brings in about 20,000 Rs a month from his Nagara playing.

#### Narender

Narender Solanki is the son of Nathul Solanki. He has benefited from his playing and Nathul's teaching, traveling outside of India playing Nagara. His dream is to expose the very old, traditional instrument to the world. He talked about how the current generation is usually not interested in folk music, and he wants to make Nagara famous and expose its value. People abroad love the instrument, and he wants to spread love with the drum. He told me about instances where people were crying, moved by his playing. He said that so many people approached him because of his playing-wanting to learn, or just talk to him. He glowed with pride when he said that many girls were enthralled by his Nagara.

Ram Kishan Solanki (deceased)



It would be foolish of me not to include a section dedicated to Ram Kishan Solanki, disciple of Shri Laluju Eгоре. Gotu's pride, joy, and only inspiration on the drum, Ram Kishan was a world-renown master. Good friends with Ustaaд Zikar (Jacky) Hussain Sahib, tabla player, Ram Kishan experienced traveling the world performing with the tabla. He also made an impact within India, and played for the President of India and Chief Minister of Rajasthan. He played on the radio and was given countless awards. He was recognized as a master of his instrument and was widely known throughout India.

Gotu and his father were both awarded in Ajmer. Every Nagara player I spoke to always mentioned Ram Kishan. He had an outstanding impact on the Nagara's popularity. He received tremendous recognition within India and abroad for his playing.

During awards ceremonies through Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1992, the President of India Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma present, cited in some of Ram Kishan's papers I reviewed. In April 1976, Sangeet Akademi wrote a letter of recommendation for Ram Kishan, as follows:

“Shri Rama Kishan Nagarchi of Pushkar, Rajasthan is known to me for several years. He is recognized as one of the most outstanding Nagara players in Rajasthan. An accomplished player, Kishan has distinguished himself both as a soloist and as an accompanist of rare quality. Apart from mastering the traditional knowledge and practice of Nagara as practiced in Rajasthan, he has imbibed a great deal from the technique of the Tabla and Pakhawaj playing in North Indian Classical Music. As a percussionist in the Khyal form of Folk Theater of Rajasthan, Shri Rama Kishan has few equals. While I wish Kishan all the success as a drummer, I also hope that the ‘Nagara’ will achieve its due status in the musical hierarchy and realize its full potential through such practitioners of Nagara as Shri Rama Kishan.”

SIGNED, K.S. Kothari, Assistant Secretary.”

When Ram Kishan and other musicians of his status were recognized by the state, all logistics were arranged for them. Accommodations for the musicians and spouses were set out. It looked like, from the papers I reviewed, they could bring more than one person with them. The itinerary even incorporated some sightseeing time into the program. They sent letters to the

musicians thanking for their participation, and provided photos of the events. Ram Kishan tragically died playing Nagara in New York City, mid drum stroke. Gotu said that people carried him off the stage, and the performance went on.

#### Gotu

Gotu Solanki is the son of Ram Kishan Solanki, and the informant I spent the most time with. To me, he represents the struggle folk musicians face in today's society. There is still work for him, but it is not always consistent. Some of his work includes playing for tourists and relying on donations made. He possesses a great deal of skill on the Nagara, and has played in major cities around India, but never abroad. He laments about this, and I feel he is utterly disappointed by his career in comparison with his father's. He constantly talked about his desire to travel. Nonetheless, he lacks the connections his father had, and is bitterly displeased that the people who loved his father have paid no attention to his family. He is especially peeved at Jacky Hussain, who his father died playing with. Gotu derives his income from playing wherever he is called to. He never turns down a job, unless he is already booked. He needs whatever work he can get to support himself and his family.

#### Kailash

When asked what was more important, the work or the money, Kailash answered the money of course, because it's how he supports himself and his family. This exemplifies the importance of the Nagara as a skill for such musicians. First, he learned the Jap Taal & Tin Taal from his grandfather, Ram Kishan Solanki. He is solely inspired by Ram Kishan, also his guru-Ji since the age of five until his death in 2008. When Kailash is playing Nagara, the intense concentration on his face is very clear. He is powerful and precise in his playing. He also wishes to travel abroad playing Nagara.

## Ravi Sharma

Ravi-ji is from the Brahman caste, and his family is very prestigious in Pushkar. When he was young, music in the temple inspired him and fueled his love for the art. Mostly he listened to Bajans sung in the temple, and after youth he decided to study music in Ajmer. He opened his record store in 1994. Ravi-ji found that people wanted Rajasthani folk music, but it was difficult to get quality recordings. Five years back, he decided to record folk musicians professionally. He tried putting them in separate rooms with headphones, as is done in other recording sessions, but that did not work. This is because folk musicians need to see each other's eyes and faces in order to produce their desired sound. Therefore, all the recordings on the Roots of Pushkar's records are live. Ravi-ji's recording of the folk musicians awarded them world popularity, and many are now well off financially. Before, musicians were of the poorest castes, but with Ravi-ji's help many are doing quite well for themselves and their families. Traditionally, musicians would survive through work from royal families and patrons. The system is dwindling, and the government is not supportive. From a government show a musician might make about Rs 700, but from one of Ravi-ji's shows they're pulling in around Rs 20,000.

Ravi-ji describes his work with musicians as a "collaboration." He never takes commission from the musicians. Still, musicians will get heated over many issues including monetary in a second, and Ravi-ji just peacefully lets them steam. Sometimes they will get mad over small things, and seem to forget that Ravi-ji is helping them. But Ravi-ji does not get offended, he just goes about his business, knowing that they will get over their problem soon. Ravi-ji wants to create a DVD of Gypsy traditions throughout Rajasthan, which are all surprisingly different. He hopes to start the project soon, but he needs to work out more details first. One problem Ravi-ji mentioned with Gotu as a Nagara player is that he slouches, and his

quality is not always there. Ravi-ji looks for quality and outstanding musicians. Gotu's father Ram Kishan once said to Ravi-ji, "Nagara is the beat, and from the beat the horse stands up." So Ravi-ji said that mediocre musicians will still have work, but they'll play for weddings, special occasions, and in temples. But the excellent musicians have the potential to be recognized on a global level.

Ravi-ji met Vinod Joshi of the Virsat Foundation, an organization dedicated to helping folk musicians, at a management conference. From there he learned the phrase "Tangible Heritage." He turned the phrase into "Intangible Heritage of Rajasthan" as a slogan for his music ventures. There are some problems with Roots of Pushkar record label, such as the decline in CDs sales. And Ravi-ji is not the most internet-savvy. But in his record store he meets interesting people from all over the world, and he likes this. He has never been outside of India.

He is inspired by his father, but he takes inspiration from everyone he meets. Once, an Italian man gave him a cassette of Western-Indian fusion music, and it played a key role in inspiring him to open his record store.

#### Nathul Solanki

Currently the oldest and most successful drummer in Pushkar, Nathul has two brothers and five sisters. His brother, Ram Kishan was born outside of Pushkar first, and the rest of the family was born when the family moved to Pushkar to work in the Brahma temple for salary. This is where Nathul "joined Nagara," as he said. This is why I saw that although they Solanki family says their are a Nagara family, this is not exactly the case. They are from the musician caste. Sometimes the temple players would get "lazy," telling Nathul and Ram Kishan to play. So the two brothers would sit and wait for people to get tired and then play the drums. Ram Kishan began to play with Khyal performance, following the performers, playing whatever beat

they needed. People started to call them for work. Nathul began to feel strongly connected to the Nagara. He talked about how when he was young, he started practicing with stones and sticks, copying rhythms his brother played. Then he graduated to metal where he could actually make sound. Nathul started working for the government, playing for people who don't pay their house loans-where he would go with the Nagari bringing the message that the people were about to be evicted, walking from village to village. Once, his brother developed a problem in his hand. So Nathul filled in playing for him, and Ram Kishan taught enhanced his knowledge. Slowly he learned different ways to play. Through his practice he got invited to play with the police force. He served in the band for several years. After this, a German scholar employed him to collect oral stories and help write a book. Nathul translated English and Hindi. In 1992, he and Ram Kishan were awarded the Sangeet Akademi Award. He worked with the Akademi giving pension to musicians. Later, Nathul met Vinod Joshi while performing in Jaipur. Vinod wanted him to help select folk musicians. Vinod came to Pushkar, and they figured out 80 artists to book for a festival. Nathul talked about how the foundation used to be more fulfilling, with 200-300 artists working, but now there has been a sharp decrease. I asked why, and the answer was money and politics. Nathul said that sometimes the Virsat Foundation would employ many musicians, but only use a few for performance in Jaipur. Nathul wants to found a school in Ram Kishan's name and statue, as he recognizes that everything he has is a gift from his brother. Nathul has been creative in combining traditional rhythms with his own compositions.

### **Nagara in Pushkar**

There is a large tourist population in Pushkar. Many times people will hear the Nagara played at sunset by Gotu, or on the Gangaur Ghat by Nathul's family. Lovers of music will approach the player and ask about their art. They soon find that beginner lessons are available.

At sunset, there is a sort of jam session with Nathul and whoever is learning Nagara at that time. Nathul always invites anyone wandering towards the drums during this time to come and play, and because of this he always has a couple extra drums set up. Therefore, Nathul and his sons have stored Nagaras all over the city. There are some at one hotel, stored in a room near the entrance, for lessons in the morning. Nathul also has many Nagaras at his house. There are Nagaras stored in a closet that opens to the road down to the Ganguar Ghat, for sunset playing and workshops. Nathul is very open to anyone who wants to learn Nagara, in the form of group lessons or individual. Gotu also teaches individuals who want to learn. Gotu stores his own performance drum around Pushkar, sometimes in the Sunset Cafe, sometimes in Hotel Sai Baba. Sitaram has two drums in the Old Ranganot Temple, one at the gate, and one in his practice room on the roof of the temple. In a Nakkarchi caste temple in Pushkar, Nathul has three massive Nagaras. It seems that most tourists have never heard of the drum before, and are thrilled by its accessibility. Nathul's teaching style is quite appealing for newcomers to the drum. By mastering simple rhythms, one feels as though they are learning the instrument rather quickly. This is another source of income for Nathul and his family. At different times during the day, one can walk through Pushkar and usually hear a Nagara being played somewhere, whether it's at a temple or a drum lesson.

### **Musicians, Caste, and "Patrons" in the Present Day**

In the Nakkarchi Caste, women play Nagara with their hands. They usually don't perform, but play in the homes. There is a large Nakkarchi caste population in Jodhpur.<sup>13</sup> There they can be found playing for patrons and for other cultural occasions. The Damani subcaste also plays Nagara. In my conversations with Ravi-ji, he talked about how the musicians are from a very poor caste, usually. The caste system is still largely present in India; however, it has become

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<sup>13</sup> Personal Interview, Nathul Solanki. 23/4/2014.

much more common that different castes interact with each other without problem. Ravi-ji said that before he helped some folk musicians, they were very poor. Now many of them bring in a relatively large amount of money from their performances.

#### Support Through Private Entities

Earlier, I mentioned the Roots of Pushkar Record Label and the Virsat Foundation. Through these institutions, many folk musicians of Rajasthan have been helped to find work and enhance their careers. Among the musicians I spoke with, most mentioned the importance of these organizations to themselves and other musicians. There is also another organization at City Palace, Gunijankhana, which does not specifically bring folk musicians to Jaipur-but folk musicians and classical from all over the world. The full *Naqqara Khana* ensemble, which can be found at City Palace, is supported by this entity.

#### Rajasthani Folk Musicians Abroad

In my conversations with Nagara players who travel abroad, many said that they missed Indian food. In Komal Kothari's description of his experience traveling with the Langas and Manganiyars, he told how they wouldn't eat anything they hadn't seen before, largely suspicious of other culture's food.<sup>14</sup> Nathul said he wouldn't trust any meat from outside India, and would largely stick to vegetables while on tour. They enjoy going to Indian restaurants abroad. Narender also said that he didn't mind trying new food, but missed Indian food very much while he was traveling. Sometimes musicians who are in a place for a long time will be given a house to live in, and they enjoy cooking their own meals.

Another topic addressed in Kothari's description of the Langas and Manganiyars abroad was their lack of stage nerves. He said they were never daunted by large crowds, and in fact, he had problems with them getting too comfortable and losing their authentic mode of performance

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<sup>14</sup> Bharucha, *Rajasthan, Oral History*, 253.

as they realized the audience could easily be grabbed when they “launched into a qawwali-like singing mode...They didn’t understand that qawwali has its own set of rules, and what the folk musicians land up doing sounds like poor imitation of this tradition.”<sup>15</sup> The folk musicians picked up different pre-show preparations they saw other performers do. When I asked Nagara players if they ever feel nervous or pressure when they’re playing, they all replied that they never feel anxious because are completely absorbed in their music. Many said a good Nagara player is distracted by nothing, and I believe this seems to be a common theme among folk musicians, because they never thought of their music as solely a performance where they could potentially “mess up.” They play for themselves, and just happen to be performing for an audience. It would be interesting to research further the changes that come about after a folk musician gains world fame.

Narender was recently in Egypt on an Indian Embassy arts program. He performed with a group called “Bollywood Love Story,” with around 40 other members. He was one of two Nagara players. He told me how the Indian embassy and Egypt embassy are working together on music festivals, notably one called the Nile Festival. He talked about how people love Indian music, and especially Bollywood! The group performed Bollywood songs, complete with dancers. Narender talked about people loving his Nagara playing. Upon arrival in the airport, the group put on a show right there in the terminal. The company specific to Narender’s group is one based in Delhi that Nathul works for, called the Jaipur Literature Festival, a world-renown organization.

### **Problems I Encountered in the Field**

This was my first real ethnomusicological research, and I ran into some problems that I had read about, but never encountered until confronted with them in the field. The first was

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<sup>15</sup> Bharucha, *Rajasthan, Oral History*, 239.



relations between musicians. Although the Solanki family are related, there is a strong rivalry between cousins, nephew and uncle. I had to learn not to mention the amount I was working with either one, because they were distasteful of the other. Once I was sitting with Gotu, and Nathul walked by, stopped to talk to me, but didn't exchange any words with his nephew. In fact, I learned that I couldn't mention any other Nagara players I worked with at all. The musicians thought that since I talked to someone else I was devaluing them as artists. So I learned not to mention other musicians to them, which was difficult because of course I was trying to talk to as many people as I could. However, they began questioning me extensively about who else I spoke with, almost to the point of interrogation about where, when and why I met with another Nagara player.

Another problem I encountered with Gotu and Kailash was one of my status as a foreigner. When explaining my project to Gotu, I made sure I emphasized I was writing for University. He asked if I hoped to get published someday, and of course I said yes, but without realizing the implications. From then on Gotu thought I was writing a book. We had spoken in casual conversation about how the Nagara tradition needs to be preserved and documented, and he then decided I was the one doing it. He was extremely helpful, and sometimes when he would say something he would follow with, don't put that down in the book though- although I reiterated many times that right now I'm just writing for school. His cousin, Kailash, is a good classical Nagara player who only speaks a little English, and I asked Gotu if he could ask Kailash if I could interview him. When he was talking to Kailash, I heard him say *kitab* (Hindi for book) in his explanation of why I wanted to interview him. Gotu also once asked me if I had been to Jacky Hussain's house in New York City. Gotu also asked if I could bring his resume to a music place in Delhi, and tell them he was a good player and so forth. I promised Gotu I would do the

best I could, but he had to realize I had no real connections, I'm just a student. Kailash and Gotu especially seemed to think I could get them work in America.

#### Musicians and Pride. I'm the Best!

"I'm the best. That other player, he's no good." These kind of statements speak to the developing role in modern musical culture on standing out. I worked closer with Gotu, who to me is a good example of musicians who constitute a better understanding of the Nagara player in modern day life, instead of with Nathul who has played all over the world. Nathul talked a lot about fusion, so it leads me to believe that some of what he plays abroad is not traditional Nagara playing. There is nothing wrong with this in my opinion, but my focus was more centered around Nagara playing in the specific region. Nettl writes, "It is such people who compromise the real mainstream of musical life in the world, making music a cultural and human universal, constituting everyday musical experience of a culture."<sup>16</sup>

#### Technical Problems With Recording/Filming

In this study I learned the real importance of quality equipment for recording any type of music. The beat of the Nagara was heavily distorted on my camera and laptop when I filmed. I was disappointed, because of course for the musicians and myself I wanted good sound. My lack of quality equipment is understandable, as I am still an undergraduate student with a lack of monetary funds. I knew going into the study that my camera was not a particularly good one, but was shocked at how bad for recording sound it was in reality.

#### Problems With Translation

One disadvantage among many of not speaking the same language as your informants, is the need for a translator. The translator I used would write everything down in Hindi, to be

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<sup>16</sup> Bruno Nettl. *The Study of Ethnomusicology, Thirty-one Issues and Concepts*. (1983, 2005 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. First Edition 1983. Printed and Bound in Great Britain by Marston Book Services Limited, Didcot.) 173.

translated later into English. During the interview, he would roughly translate some of what was said, but until I got the final transcription I did not know exactly what the answers were, or if they were what I was looking for. If I had been able to speak the language fluently, I could have asked more follow-up questions. I found that after reading Manish's transcript, there were further questions about his family's history with Nagara I wanted to ask. I also found that sometimes the translator would directly translate my questions and perhaps not achieve my intention with the question, and the interviewee would look confused. I tried to combat this the best I could, but did not succeed in most cases. Because I don't know the Hindi grammatical way of phrasing something, it was hard to compose my questions in a fashion that they understood and could answer accordingly.

### **Conclusion**

The Nagara as it is used in traditional and performance contexts brings forth a larger concept of folk music, survival and musical energy. While folk music is still predominantly practiced in its original group, the rising popularity of folk music commercially has created opportunities and problems for the communities it comes from. The music of the Nagara seems to be balanced between old and new traditions. In human life, a certain type of behavior and feeling emerges, and this can be translated into music or sound. Through understanding the issues fundamental to music in a given context, can an outsider seek to understand the musical culture? Can musical behavior and sound be linked to a cultural core? In the case of the Nagara, this study found that there is a wide range of uses and functions for the instrument-in the case of folk and global. I believe what I learned about the Nagara in Rajasthani culture is that it still functions primarily as an instrument Indians use for cultural occasions or religious purposes. However, it can be utilized as a ticket for recognition of outstanding playing. The Nagara had a very specific function in history, which has developed over time to an instrument associated with

a wide array of application and employment within the musical field-while still being referred to as a folk or traditional instrument. I believe this contributes to a larger question about folk music and the global impact. How does the meaning change when folk music or instruments become famous outside the community they were originally developed? How does the art form being performed for tourists change the perception of the creators? In the case of the Nagara, many players obtain more prestigious status than they would in the past for their skill. Many obstacles arise regarding employment and performance as shown here through study of the Nagara.

### **Further Study Questions and Research Topics**

#### **Nagara in Villages Around Pushkar**

Nathul mentioned some traditional Nagara players in villages surrounding Pushkar he wanted to take me to. Unfortunately because of time and logistics, I was not able to follow on these leads. It would be interesting, having gained the insight I have into the Nagara players who are in between tradition and performance, to learn about this village life and the importance of Nagara in the community.

#### **Intellectual Property Rights**

Intellectual and copyright is an issue in all music that is marketed for sale. How are intellectual property rights dealt with in the folk musician context? It seems that many of the artist's work is put out by independent, small record labels such as Roots of Pushkar. How these compensations and commissions for Ravi-ji work, I didn't have the chance to delve into. What happens when the musicians gain further popularity and a larger record label wants to sign them? What are the politics surrounding sound and content copyright for folk musicians? While common practice is for the collector to own the recordings they make, how does the musician get recognized and reimbursed for distribution? This area seems very grey to me, because folk music is derived from a community of people; therefore, should the one individual who performed a

piece of music get all the credit and money? What happens when the rights are not clear, and some other establishment wants to market the work on a larger scale? While this is something professional folk musicians who have travel experience may be aware of, I think it's safe to say that other folk musicians do not know the politics surrounding use of their work if they are recorded.

Research Into the Infrastructure of Music Academies, Folk Music Preservation Foundations,  
Government Cultural and Tourism Departments, Etc

How do these entities play a role in supporting folk musicians? How much does the government help or inhibit musicians, and what could be done to improve the system? It seems that the Rajasthani Tourism Department caters to what they think is “traditional” or “authentic” in art and music for the tourists. Are their methods for determining distorted by the need for money from foreigners?

## Appendices

**Goomar Dance:** Traditional Folk Dance in Rajasthan. Usually performed by in a circle, often worshipping the Goddess Saraswati. Shehnai, Nagara, and Dholak.

**Source:** Nathul Solanki. Personal Interview, 23/4/2014

**Khyal Performance:** Form of Classical Dance in Rajasthan. Mode of raga. Emphasis on improvisation, with short songs but long performances.

**Source:** Nathul Solanki. Personal Interview, 23/4/2014.

**Roots of Pushkar:** “The Roots of Pushkar Records is a venture establishment, aimed towards the revival and uplifting of art and music of Rajasthan, which has faded over the course of time. Procurement of opportunities, fostering conditions along with nurturing support are the firm steps which Roots of Pushkar Records is taking to promote the Majestic Intangible Heritage of Rajasthan. Roots of Pushkar Records has introduced legendary artists yet with their current numbers and this team is working relentlessly to introduce more shortly.”

**Source:** Master Drummers of Rajasthan CD. Roots of Pushkar Records. Varah Ghat, Chhoti Basti, Pushkar 305022.

**Jaipur Virsat Foundation:** “The Jaipur Virsat Foundation (JVF) works with and for traditional artists in Rajasthan, a state rich in historic habitations, traditional arts, crafts, and cultural resources. It has pioneered a holistic, culture-based and cross-sector approach to livelihood generation through its various activities, events, advocacy forums and networks, always

employing specialist skills and best practices. A charitable trust since 2002, JVF's development strategy is in synergy with UNESCO charters for the conservation of tangible and intangible heritage and preservation of cultural diversity.”

**Source:** <http://www.jaipurvirasatfoundation.org/>

**Gunijankhana:** “Gunijankhana means a place for people with values. Founded as far back as the 17th century, in Amber, during the rule of Maharaja Ram Singh I, Gunijankhana was the department that extended patronage and support to singers, musicians, and dancers. The Royal Court, where the Maharajas interacted, appreciated, and expressed their interests in the arts. Over centuries, Gunijankhana based within City Palace, grew and was maintained by the Rulers of Jaipur as a place where music, art and dance flourished. With the merger of Jaipur state into Rajasthan in 1949, Gunijankhana too passed into history. And artists spread out near and far. Today, a global outlook is being revived by the City Palace, under the leadership of Princess Diya Kumari, and aims to revive and re-establish Gunijankhana- in a modern avatar...Gunijankhana aims to provide opportunities for cultural, educational, socio-economic and intellectual engagement. It seeks to bring national and international performances to the platform, allow participants to experience and celebrate the arts through live performance, instructive outreach, and experiential education with the appreciation and acceptance of multi-cultural values. Gunijankhana invites individuals, institutions, organizations, embassies, cultural councils, artists, performers and all other interested individuals.

**Source:** Pamphlet and membership form, Gunijankhana. The City Palace, Jaipur 302 002, Raj., India. [www.msmsmuseum.com](http://www.msmsmuseum.com)

**Types of Taal (Rhythm): Nagara Rhythm consists of Taals including –**

- Ek Taal
- Tin Taal
- Rupak Taal
- Jap Taal

### **Glossary of Non-English Terms**

**Taal-** Rhythm in Indian percussion

**Naqqara, Naqara, Naghara, Nagada, Nakkara:** Different spellings for the Nagara. Nagara and corresponding spellings fluctuate between meaning single drum, large or small, and pair, and corresponding spellings are not always consistent. But the composition of the drum is largely the same

**Naqarah Khana-** Many Nagaras and some other percussion instruments such as dholak, often stationed above gateways

**Damka:** The bend at the end of the wooden sticks used to play the Nagara

**Naubat Khana:** Nine piece band including Nagara featured above gateway area leading to royal abodes and temples

**Naubot:** Another term for a very large Nagara

**Saranggi:** Fiddle-like instrument played with the Nagara

**Shehnai:** Oboe-like instrument played with the Nagara

**Nafeeri:** Rudimentary Shehnai played with Nagara

**Joh Nagara:** Term for the pair of drums Nagara/Nagari

**Garana:** Term for when a place is famous for something

**Bhajan:** Spiritual or devotional song to the gods, sung in temples

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Collector: Tom Ault

copy produced on 31 May 1988

ARCE Equipment Sony CCDK to JVC BR6400 (10) (6)

ARCE # 62:11:88

ACCM/VC 307.308/RCVC:100

Nagara demonstration- Bam Kyishinyi- performer

Pushkar, February 1988

Video Clip #2

Collector: Gregory Booth- Festivals. Processions.

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Tape # 72:21:89

23-5-89 Macell-120 For a RCE Preservation Copy

Issued to B.K.N

AC no: VC4001MoS0187

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Bruno Nettl is a professor emeritus of music and anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. A famous name in the field of Ethnomusicology, Nettl gives a full history and breaks down the discipline into different areas of cultural study. He proposes problems and methods within the field, as well as explanation of major concepts. He uses his own field experience for examples.

13. Pandey, Tripti. *Where Silence Sings: Sounds and Rhythms of Rajasthan*. HarperCollins Publishers India Pvt Ltd. 1999. New Delhi.

A tribute in words and photographs by the author to Rajasthani music and dance. Tripti grew up in Rajasthan and devoted her life to exploring the vast region's musical traditions. The book is completely biased to Tripti's complete obsession with the beauty and colors of Rajasthan. It is helpful context for someone who is a dancer in the culture as well as a lover of all things in Rajasthani music.

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Ranade is an Indian ethnomusicologist and musician with interesting insights into scholarly research on Indian music. In this book he covers a wide range of topics within the sphere, from classifications of instruments to methodology and procedures in fieldwork. Helpful for my purposes is the sections on Indian percussion, folk music, and communications.

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*Asian Music*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1982), pp. 39-54

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