



*Feature Essay*

***Shreemaadal, Maadabay Geet, Maaruni Naach: The Prime Music of Hills  
Practised in the Regions of Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong***

***\*\*Nishaant Singh***

**Abstract:** This essay explores the vibrant and culturally significant folk music traditions of the Indian Himalayan region, with a focus on Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong. Central to this study are three key elements of Indian Nepali folk heritage: *Shreemaadal*, *Maadabay Geet*, and *Maaruni Naach*. Together, these represent a holistic form of musical expression consistent with the Indian classical concept of “*Geetam Vaadyam Tathaa Nrityam Trayam Sangeetam Uchyate*,” wherein vocal music, instrumental accompaniment, and dance are integrally combined. Of these, the *Shreemaadal*—a barrel-shaped leather drum akin to the *Pakhawaj*—emerges as the primary percussion instrument, grounding performances with its rich, resonant rhythm. The study also highlights the *Paschimey Maadal*, a smaller, high-pitched Nepali drum used widely in folk and film music. Though centered on Indian Nepali traditions, the work also touches upon the musical expressions of the Bhutia and Lepcha communities, framing all within a broader ethnomusicological lens. Drawing from ethnography, linguistics, and musicology, the research emphasizes how these traditions sustain cultural identity, foster intergenerational transmission, and strengthen community bonds. This study reaffirms the importance of preserving these traditions as part of India’s intangible cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** *Shreemaadal, Maadabay Geet, Maaruni Naach, Indian Nepali Folk Music, Himalayan Musical Traditions.*

Like it is elsewhere in the entire Himalayan region, the zones of Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong, are home to several different communities that have their own cultures and traditions. Three of the major cultural groups inhabiting these zones are Indian Nepalis, Bhutias, and Lepchas. Each of them has their own language, rituals, and styles of music. The Indian Nepali community has its own kind of folk music that is different from the Bhutia and

Lepcha traditions. It has grown from the daily lives and culture of Nepali speaking people living in India, not by copying the other two groups. Some important forms of Indian Nepali folk music are *Shreemaadal*, *Maadalay Geet*, and *Maaruni Naach*. The *Shreemaadal* is not just a drum, it's also a symbol of culture and plays a role in religion, everyday life, and art. *Maadalay Geet* (songs) and *Maaruni Naach* (a type of dance) are ways for the community to tell stories, celebrate, and show who they are. Altogether, these musical styles express the identity, traditions, and life of the Indian Nepali people, and they are very different from the music and culture of the Bhutias and Lepchas.

This essay focuses on the folk music traditions of the Nepali community in India, specifically those practiced in Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong. By providing a thorough examination of the *Shreemaadal*, the role of folk songs (particularly *Maadalay Geet*), and dance (*Maaruni Naach*), this paper offers perspectives on the cultural contributions of the Bhutia, Lepcha, and Indian Nepali tribes. It explores the unique instruments that define these music traditions, with a special focus on their performance practices.

Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong are in northeast India, near the Himalayas. This area has a rich mix of cultures because it has been home to many different communities for a long time. The major cultural groups living here are the Bhutias, Lepchas, and Indian Nepali people. Each group has its own special traditions, music, and ways of life that have been passed down to them, successively, for generations. The Indian Nepali people did not migrate from Nepal, they have lived in this region for centuries, as it was once a part of the *Greater Nepal* kingdom. After India's partition and the changing of borders owing to several reasons, the people stayed on where they had lived on for centuries, unaffected by the change in boundaries. Because of their long and separate history in India, the folk music of the Indian Nepali community is completely different from the folk culture of Nepal. It developed independently and is deeply rooted in the Indian Himalayan region.

- **Bhutia Tribe:** The Bhutia people are primarily Tibetan Buddhists who migrated to the region from Tibet in the fourteenth century. The Bhutia have a rich tradition of dances, songs, and folktales. The popular Bhutia folk dances are *Denzong-Neh-Na*, *Ta-Shi-Yang-Ku*, *Tashi Shabdo*, *Guru-Chinlap*, *Singhi Chham* and *Yak Chham*. The musical instruments used are flute, yangjey, drum, and yarga. Bhutia folk music is heavily

influenced by Tibetan Buddhist chants and prayers, and their songs are often dedicated to deities and nature.

- **Lepcha Tribe:** The Lepcha people, considered the indigenous inhabitants of Sikkim and parts of Darjeeling, have their own unique language, music, and traditions. Their folk music is characterized by the use of bamboo flutes, drums, and stringed instruments. The popular Lepcha folk dances are *Zo-Mal-Lok*, *Chu-Faat*, *Tendong Lo Rum Faat*, and *Kinchum-Chu-Bomsa*. Musical instruments used are sanga (drum), yangjey (string instrument), fungal, yarka, flute, and tungbuk during festivals and rituals, celebrating the tribe's connection with nature and the spirit world.
- **Indian Nepali Tribe:** The Indian Nepali community, or Gorkhas, music is deeply influenced by the Shreemaadal (Indian) and *Paschimey maadal* (Nepal), - the two types of traditional Nepali drums. The Nepali people in India have integrated elements from both Nepalese and Indian musical traditions, creating a rich blend of rhythmic patterns, melodies, and song structures.

### **The Shreemaadal**

The term Shreemaadal is a fusion of two words—*Shree* and *Maadal*. As explained by Padmashri Kaajee Singh, *Shree* is derived from the root *shri* with the *kvip* suffix, which transforms it into *Shree*, a symbol of auspiciousness and respect. The second part, *Maadal*, refers to a drum that has evolved from the ancient *Mardala*. The *Maadal* has a long tradition in South Asia, and the Shreemaadal serves as its distinct regional variation in the hills of India. The Shreemaadal serves as the backbone of many traditional Nepali folk songs and dances, including the Maadalay Geet and Maaruni Naach. Its ability to produce a wide range of sounds, with distinct pitches and rhythms, makes it an essential part of community celebrations, rituals, and social gatherings. The instrument's versatility allows it to create intricate rhythmic patterns, which are essential for accompanying the various *taals* used in these folk forms.

### **Origin of the Shreemaadal**

The origin of the Shreemaadal, a traditional Indian Nepali drum, is surrounded by a variety of conflicting myths and interpretations. However, much of these explanations are rooted in symbolic and anecdotal stories and lacks empirical evidence. Historically, percussion

instruments like the *Damaru* (the small drum associated with Lord Shiva) are believed to be ancient, with references dating back to the Rig Veda (5.33.6). The *Mridanga*, another ancient percussion instrument, is said to have evolved from the *Damaru*. In earlier times, the *Mridanga* was referred to as *Pushkar*, as indicated in various ancient texts.

In ancient Indian traditions, it is believed that sages like Maharishi Swati and Narad were responsible for formulating the foundational music texts. In *Natyashastra* (Chapter 33), Shri Babulal Shastri narrates an anecdote involving Maharishi Swati, who, on a rainy day, heard the sounds of raindrops hitting lotus leaves and the ground. Intrigued by the sweet, melodic sound, the sage sought Vishwakarma's help to create an instrument that could replicate those tones. This led to the creation of hundred different kinds of the *Mridanga*, and eventually, the *Shreemaadal* (also known as *Mardala*) and other instruments like the *Pakhawaj*. This understanding of sound's connection to nature is also echoed in the works of the great scholar Acharya Brihaspati, who attributes the invention of the *Mridanga* to Lord Shiva, in a symbolic sense.

In the eighth century, the text *Sangeet Makarand* by Narada detailed the design and characteristics of the *Mridanga*, suggesting it was made from flawless sandalwood, with two faces, each representing divine energies of Shiva and Shakti. The instrument's construction, including the tying of strings and knots, was described as embodying cosmic principles. The two faces of the instrument produced complementary sounds, one masculine and the other feminine, so that, when played harmoniously, they were believed to bring wealth, prosperity, and spiritual benefits.

Various unverified legends continue to circulate about the creation of the *Mridanga*. Some suggest that Queen Kaushila or Krishna created it, while others attribute it to different mythological figures or communities, such as the Mangars. These stories, while popular, are not supported by logical or historical evidence. An older anecdote from Sikkim provides an alternate, symbolic explanation of the *Shreemaadal*'s origin. According to local traditions, the *Shreemaadal* was created from a hollow log of *Chhatiun* wood, with skins of the *Kamdhenu* cow and a complex process of grinding and pounding materials. The sound produced by the drum's two faces is said to resemble the sound of healing brass bowls on the right side and the roar of a cloud on the left.

In scholarly texts like *Mridang aur Uski Kala* by Dr. Parapanje, the focus shifts to the technical and scientific aspects of the Mridanga's creation, particularly in matching its pitch with specific ragas. It is said that smooth clay from riverbanks, or barley powder, was used to adjust the pitch, aligning the sound with the desired musical tones. The science behind the *Shreemaadal's* origins and its connection to other instruments like the Damaru and Mridanga lies in the broader context of Rudra Damru, the cosmic drum, and the rituals of sound in ancient Indian musicology. While many stories exist regarding its creation, the instrument's enduring significance lies in its connection to ancient Indian musical and spiritual traditions.

### **Maadaly Geet: Folk Songs of the Hills**

Maadaly Geet are traditional folk songs that are sung while playing the Shreemaadal. The person who plays the Shreemaadal is called a *Maadaly*, and they must sing and play the drum at the same time. These songs are passed down from one generation to the next, and different communities may have their own versions. The lyrics often talk about local stories, farming seasons, family life, love, nature, and devotion. They help keep the community's history and culture alive.

The rhythm of the Shreemaadal is very important—it sets the speed and feeling of the song. The songs are not just for fun; they serve many purposes. Some are sung to ask for blessings, some to celebrate joy and beauty, and others bring humour and fun into the ritual. Together, they create a mix of emotions—*spiritual, joyful, thoughtful, and playful*. They help bring people together, connect them with their culture and faith, and guide the emotions of both the dancers and the audience. They make the performance a complete journey—from devotion to celebration.

Here are the *different types of songs* used in the dance and the kind of feelings or emotions they are meant to express. (Singh 1974)

#### **1. Devotional and Invocatory Songs**

- **Emotion:** Reverence, Spirituality, Respect
- **Songs:** These songs are designed to invoke divine blessings and protection. They are sung in the rhythm of traditional chants and are intended to purify the space and sanctify the dance. The lyrics typically call upon various gods and goddesses, including Kubera

(god of wealth), Mahalakshmi (goddess of prosperity), Jaleshwar (god of water), and the thirty-three crore gods and goddesses.

Examples:

- *“Bring forth, O Lord, bring forth, The golden plate, in the form of Kubera...”*
- *“By the promise of Mahadev, let us awaken the Akshyata (sacred rice) ...”*

Emotion evoked: These songs evoke deep spiritual devotion, urging the performers and audience to align with divine forces, creating a sanctified atmosphere for the dance.

## 2. Songs of Adornment and Beauty

- Emotion: Adoration, Celebration of Beauty
- Songs: These songs celebrate the adornment of the *Maruni*, the central dancer. They describe the beauty of each piece of attire and jewelry, highlighting how the adornments enhance the dancer’s form. The rhythm is usually upbeat and celebratory, reflecting the joy of transformation and aesthetic appreciation.

Examples:

- *“The bright headband on my Maruni's head looks very beautiful...”*
- *“The bright Tilhari around my Maruni's neck looks very beautiful...”*

Emotion evoked: These songs evoke a sense of pride, admiration, and reverence for the *Maruni*. They enhance the emotional atmosphere of beauty and grace, associating the dancer with divine or idealized forms (e.g., Radha or Lakshmi).

## 3. Songs of Blessings and Protection

- Emotion: Hope, Security, Gratitude
- Songs: These songs ask for protection and blessings for the family and the performers. They call upon gods and goddesses to ensure the well-being of the household, the safety of the dancers, and the prosperity of the community. The songs are sung with reverence and a desire for positive outcomes.

Examples:

- *“Let us seek refuge, let us seek refuge, To Brahma-Dev, Vishnu-Dev, Maheshwor...”*
- *“May the thirty-three crore gods and goddesses protect this family...”*

Emotion evoked: These songs evoke a sense of reassurance, safety, and spiritual comfort. They invoke divine protection and emphasize the importance of blessings for harmony and prosperity.

#### 4. Songs of Celebration and Joy

- Emotion: Joy, Festivity, Liveliness
- Songs: These songs express the celebratory mood of the event. They are typically upbeat and filled with excitement, marking the festive nature of the dance, particularly during the festival of lights, Tihar (Diwali). The songs encourage everyone to laugh, dance, and enjoy the moment, emphasizing the short-lived nature of life and the importance of living fully.

Examples:

- *“The sparkling Tihar has arrived. Oh, it shines brightly from outside to inside...”*
- *“We came to laugh, yes, we came to play, yes. To celebrate happiness in your courtyard.”*

Emotion evoked: These songs evoke feelings of happiness, excitement, and communal joy. They remind everyone to celebrate life and enjoy the present moment, in the spirit of festivity.

#### 5. Songs of Farewell and Reflection

- Emotion: Nostalgia, Parting, Reflection on Life
- Songs: As the performance comes to a close, these songs reflect on the transient nature of life and the inevitability of death. There is a mixture of acceptance, longing, and hope for future reunions. The songs express the desire for continuity, even after the performance ends, and convey an emotional departure as the dancers prepare to leave.

Examples:

- *“We lived and came, laughing and playing, what if we die? If God preserves us without dying, we will meet again in time.”*
- *“Where is Maruni from, where is Madalay from? Where is Dhantuware from? Let us know in our hearts, we will meet in time.”*

Emotion evoked: These songs evoke deep reflection, bittersweet emotions, and a sense of both finality and hope. They remind the audience of the impermanence of life while maintaining a sense of optimism about the future.

## 6. Songs of Offering and Gratitude

- Emotion: Gratitude, Humility, Reverence
- Songs: As part of the final phase, these songs express deep gratitude and reverence for the received donations. They emphasize the spiritual significance of the offerings and affirm the community's values of respect, humility, and gratitude toward the deities and hosts.

Examples:

- “Grant boons, O Shiva, grant boons, Reciting the Dhanashree rosary,  
Grant boons, O Shiva, keeping the copper lamp as witness.”

Emotion evoked: These songs evoke a profound sense of reverence and thankfulness, deepening the spiritual connection between the dancers, deities, and household.

### **Maaruni Naach and Kalbeliya: A Shared Language of Movement and Meaning**

At first glance, *Maaruni Naach*, a traditional dance of the Indian Nepali communities in Greater Nepal; now represented by the regions of Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Kalbeliya, the iconic dance of Rajasthan; might appear worlds apart. One belongs to the green hills of the Eastern Himalayas, the other to the dry deserts of the West. Yet, beneath the surface, these two art forms share not only stylistic similarities but a cognitive relationship, a deep mental and emotional structure that informs how they are performed and what they communicate.

Maaruni Naach isn't just a festive dance. It is a living art that expresses joy, sorrow, union, loss, and divine connection all without speaking a single word. Similarly, *Kalbeliya* communicates a wide range of emotions through movement and rhythm. Both forms follow the classical Indian principles of *Nritta* (pure dance technique) and *Natya* (expressive storytelling), showing that folk traditions too can mirror the sophistication of classical theory.

This is not a coincidence. Historical ties between Rajasthan and the Eastern Himalayan regions—especially during the Malla period and later under the Rajput-origin Shah rulers—caused migrations of performers, priests, and nomads. As these people moved, they carried with them not just goods and rituals, but a shared vocabulary of movement, rhythm, and meaning.

The similarities between Kalbeliya and Maaruni are striking:

- Both dance forms feature performers balancing pots on their heads—clay pots in Kalbeliya, and brass lotas with burning oil lamps in Maaruni Naach
- The traditional *lehenga* worn in both styles is nearly identical in design.
- Both traditions use *ghungroos* (ankle bells), though this detail is being forgotten in current Maaruni practice.
- Dancers perform on brass plates, executing fast rhythmic footwork, a skill found in both forms.
- Acrobatics such as flipping backward to pick up currency with the mouth appear in both.
- Each performer moves in tight synchrony with traditional drums—Shreemaadal in Maaruni, *Dhol* or *Khanjari* in Kalbeliya.

These are not random overlaps. They are signs of a shared cognitive framework, two cultures using movement, costume, sound, and spatial rhythm to express a similar worldview. Both dance forms fall under *Sachal Nritya* (moving dance), as opposed to *Achal Nritya* (still, meditative dance), making them vibrant, mobile expressions of life and identity.

Sadly, Maaruni Naach is fading. The lack of formal training, the rise of commercial imitation, and the weakening of intergenerational knowledge have pushed this once-sacred performance to the margins. But forgetting *Maaruni* means losing a vital thread in the cultural fabric of Indian Nepali heritage. Maaruni Naach, like Kalbeliya, is not just a dance—it is cultural memory in motion. It links the past to the present, folk to classical, and region to nation. Their cognitive relationship shows that traditions across geographies can be mentally and spiritually aligned—even if they speak different dialects, their dances speak the same language. Recognizing this connection is not just an academic gesture. It is a call to preserve, document, and elevate Maaruni Naach as a cultural crown jewel of Greater Nepal's Indian Nepali community—a living proof of India's syncretic artistic legacy.

### **Preservation of Folk Music in the Hills**

The folk music traditions of the Bhutia, Lepcha, and Indian Nepali represent a significant aspect of the cultural heritage of the Indian Himalayas. The Shreemaadal, Maadaly Geet, and Maaruni Naach form the heart of these traditions, acting as conduits for cultural expression, community bonding, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. However, these traditions

face numerous challenges, including the decline in interest, among younger generations and the lack of institutional support for preserving these musical forms. This essay argues for a concerted effort to safeguard and promote these art forms, ensuring that they continue to thrive in future generations.

Further research is needed to document the diverse variations of folk songs and dances across different communities and to explore their influence on contemporary musical practices. Collaborative efforts between cultural organizations, musicians, and scholars can help bring these traditions into the mainstream, promoting cultural pride and ensuring their survival.

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**\*\*Nishaant Singh** comes from a long lineage of folk musicians, and the legacy goes back to four generations. He has been playing Pakhawaj for over a decade now. His unique style and techniques have earned him great acclaim in the music world, and he is proud to have worked with some of the best stalwart musicians and young maestros in the Indian classical music industry as a **Pakhawaj artist** as well as a **music composer/director** and a wonderful **rhythm designer**. Whether it's the traditional sound of his ancestors that you are interested in, or a more modern and experimental approach, he is confident that he can create the perfect musical experience for you. Nishaant is also a Fulbrighter. He received the Fulbright Professional Excellence Award in 2023.