

Dhol Sāgar: Aspects of Drum Knowledge amongst Musicians in Garhwal, North India

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In the Central Himalayan region of Garhwal,¹ drummers of the dominant musician caste group (referred to as Bājī, Dās, or Aujī) are particularly known for their performance of two outdoor drums, the *ḍhol* and the *damaṃ*. Through their performances on these drums, drummers maintain a crucial role in ritual activity at processions, festivals, weddings, and other critical events. Though the intricacies of their drumming practice are not understood by a majority of the region's population, drummers themselves maintain a repertoire of rhythms and patterns called '*bāje*' which are linked to specific ritual moments. In spite of changes to repertoire and practice brought about by various factors during the past century, some drummers today maintain aspects of a musical knowledge that appears to have a lengthy history. The existence of an ostensibly written source for this knowledge is a curious part of what is otherwise an oral tradition.

This paper explores the nature of drum knowledge in Garhwal as it relates to oral and literate practice. In particular, the paper investigates the available published references to - or 'versions' of - the *Dhol Sāgar*, a supposedly written 'text' on drum history, knowledge, and practice. This examination reveals a conceptual approach to drumming practice that hints at a deeper system of knowledge in which drum patterns may hold - or have held - esoteric meaning. Consequently, the examination reveals the unique relationship between aspects of drum practice and Hindu philosophy regarding the metaphysics of sound.

Aujī caste members are not the only musicians who play drums in Garhwal. For instance, *hurkiyās* (performers of the drum called a *hurki*) and *ḍauñriyās* (performers of the drum called a *ḍauñr*) are shamanic ritual specialists who perform and entertain on smaller drums at indoor occasions. Though drums of all kinds are ritually significant, Aujīs and their drums - the *ḍhol* and the *damaṃ* - are unique in a number of significant ways. Firstly, the fact that Aujīs are part of a large endogamous caste group intrinsically links their vocational practice and knowledge to their identity as a caste group. *Hurkiyās* and *ḍauñriyās*, by contrast, are not normally designated as musical caste groups. Consequently, they usually learn their repertoire from specialists with whom they have no kin relationship. Secondly, *ḍhol-damaṃ* repertoire is distinguished by the fact that it may

¹ In 2000, Uttaranchal was designated as a state bordering Tibet to the north and Uttar Pradesh to the south. Uttaranchal comprises the regions of Garhwal and Kumaon.

exist separately to song texts. Though *hurkiyās* and *ḍauñriyās* use their drums to accompany the singing of shamanic and epic texts, in general they do not identify their drum practice as separate to their singing/recitation. Aujīs, by contrast, consider their drum knowledge *in and by itself* to contain embedded meaning and structure whether or not sung texts are accompanied by, or interspersed with, drumming. Thirdly, *ḍhol-damaun* are played in outdoor rituals and may be attached to larger ensembles including various trumpets and bagpipes. The *hurki* and *ḍauñr* are only played indoors and are only accompanied by a performer who rhythmically strikes a metal plate. In this way, the knowledge of Aujī drummers is significantly different to that of shamans and other drummers and remains a unique part of the caste group's identity.

Aujī musicians frequently refer to the knowledge and history that surrounds the performance practice of the *ḍhol*, as '*Ḍhol Sāgar*;² literally 'the ocean of drumming.' Many believe the *Ḍhol Sāgar* to be a written source that contains the mystical and practical information on 'all things' dealing with the *ḍhol*'s correct use in ritual occasions. Its content is intimately linked to Aujī notions of the nature of drum knowledge, and the power that this knowledge encompasses. As stated in various versions of the *Ḍhol Sāgar*, Mahādeva (Śiva) played his drum and thereby intoned the primordial sound (*nāda*) to bring forth the universe. Today, every drummer's performance potentially harnesses the creative power inherent in the *ḍhol*'s sound, as a reflection of the world's initial creation. Thus, *Ḍhol Sāgar* is at once drum knowledge and history. It explains creation, and by association, authenticates the knowledge of drummers, thereby emphasizing their role in society.

The existence and nature of *Ḍhol Sāgar* is enigmatic. No musicians with whom I spoke while undertaking fieldwork in Garhwal were able to show me a copy of a book in printed form. Some claimed to have seen it, or stated that they knew of someone who had a copy. However, very few ever claimed with confidence, that they had read a book purported to be the *Ḍhol Sāgar*. Many Aujī musicians remain only moderately literate today, and it is doubtful that their limited literacy would equip them with the skills to read whatever written versions of the *Ḍhol Sāgar* may exist. Furthermore, available written segments are in a macaronic linguistic form, combining Hindi, Garhwali, and Sanskrit, which adds to the ambiguity of their meaning. Nonetheless, some drummers are able to recite orally transmitted verses and vocable syllables representing drum strokes, all of which they believe comprises a form of *Ḍhol Sāgar*. In spite of the ambiguous nature and meaning of the *Ḍhol Sāgar*'s text, it remains critical to the self-concept of Aujī musicians and their tradition.

² People refer to this knowledge/book using either one word '*Ḍholsāgar*' (see Dabral 1989), or two '*Ḍhol Sāgar*' (see Bhatt 1976). In general, I refer to it using two words.

The *Ḍholsāgar Saṅgrah*: A recent scholarly publication

In 1989 Shivprasad Dabral published a compilation of three text fragment documents that were in his possession, two of which were believed to be part of *Ḍhol Sāgar*, and a third, which is referred to as *Damaṃsāgar*. In addition, Dabral briefly mentions a fourth document, *Daiṇtsaṅghār*, which he suggests describes drumming practice in relation to exorcism (1989: 2). His reference to the *Daiṇtsaṅghār* is brief, and no segment of any text is given.

Dabral prefaces his reprinted texts with an introduction and four chapters in which information on the instruments of Garhwal, the circumstances of the *Ḍhol Sāgar*'s creation, information on the Auḷi caste group, and an exegesis of the *Ḍhol Sāgar*'s content are given (*ibid.*: 3-8). The reprinted texts from Dabral's three documents comprise 36 pages, while the remainder of the book is 93 pages in length. The chapter on Garhwali folk instruments is written by Keshav Anuragi, while the remainder of the chapters are Dabral's own.

The first reprinted document is referred to as *Brhad Ḍholsāgar* [The Comprehensive *Ḍholsāgar*], a name given it by its original publisher, Paṇḍit Bhawanidatt Parvatiya. As Dabral states, Parvatiya published his *Brhad Ḍholsāgar* in 1926 through the Bharat Printing Press in the town of Meerut near Delhi. Dabral's own copy of the *Brhad Ḍholsāgar* was a poorly photocopied and incomplete version of the original (*ibid.*: 3). Dabral contends, that Parvatiya's publication is simply a transcription of a recitation by an illiterate drummer or some unnamed knowledgeable person. Thus, phonetic confusion and the obscure meanings of words and phrases in the original, as well as the poor quality of Dabral's photocopy, compounded the problems Dabral faced as its publisher in 1989. Though Dabral does not dismiss Parvatiya's *Brhad Ḍholsāgar* as inauthentic, he does suggest that the lack of documentation about its origin, and the problems associated with the incomplete and damaged nature of his own copy, cast doubt on its usefulness as a scholarly document. Amongst other things, Dabral believes that the person/s who originally recited the *Brhad Ḍholsāgar* to Parvatiya placed the *anuswār* (the nasal *m*) after many words to lend it the prestige and feeling of Sanskrit (*ibid.*: 4). However, according to Dabral, the language is not Sanskrit but a mixture of Hindi and Garhwali.

There also appears to be some confusion about the original circumstances of the publication of the second text segment that Dabral reprints. This segment he states simply to be *Ḍholsāgar*, and suggests that its original publication was in either 1913 or 1932 through the Śrī Badrikedāreśvar Press, Paurī, under the direction of Brahmanand Thapliyal (*ibid.*: 5-6). There is some suggestion that the compilation and typesetting of the document may have begun in 1913, and that Thapliyal's struggles with

establishing his press, including a period in jail during India's independence movement, delayed its actual publication until 1932. In any case, Thapliyal's *Ḍholsāgar* was reprinted in several later volumes. In 1967, Mohanlal Babulkar published his *Garhwāl kī Lokdharmī Kalā* [The Artistry of the Folk Religion of Garhwal] and included an ostensibly complete version of the *Ḍhol Sāgar* within this volume (Dabral 1989: 5). Subsequently, in 1983, he published *Purvāsī* [The Villager], in which he again included the same text. A slightly modified version of this text also appears in Abodhabandhu Bahuguna's 1955 publication *Girīs*, as well as his 1976 publication, *Gāḍamyāteki Gañgā*.

Dabral acknowledges that there are some slight differences between the versions given by Babulkar and Bahuguna (*ibid.*: 6). He outlines some of the history of the documents collected and consulted by the two authors to illustrate the ways in which these differences may have emerged. Ultimately, Dabral suggests that the texts given by both Babulkar and Bahuguna are much clearer to understand and more complete than the *Bṛhad Ḍholsāgar* of Thapliyal. Even then he postulates that, what appear to be omissions and inaccuracies in both texts would probably have occurred during their original oral transmission before they were written down (*ibid.*: 7).

Dabral clearly confirms the view held by many authors, that the *Ḍhol Sāgar* has a close connection with the religious sect of the *Nāths* (*ibid.*: 75 and 80).³ He bases his supposition on the fact that the term 'Nirañjan' appears frequently in the *Ḍhol Sāgar* (*ibid.*: 73). Nirañjan refers to a form/name of Śiva and is used by ascetics such as *Nāths* in their devotional worship. Similarly, the name of 'Gorakhnāth', the founder of the *Nāth* sect, appears regularly in the *Ḍhol Sāgar*. Both names also appear regularly in other religious literature of the sect.⁴ Dabral uses this evidence in attempting to give some idea of the historical development of the *Ḍhol Sāgar*. His comments on the connection between the *Ḍhol Sāgar* and the *Nāth* sect, as well as the oral tradition through which it may have been transmitted are illuminating, and worth citing here:

Even though the *Ḍholsāgar* states that Gorakh is the supreme *devtā*, Brahma, Viśṇu, Maheśwar, and Pārvatī, as well as Gaṇeś and Indra are also mentioned. In spite of their relationship with Gorakh and the other *Nāths*, the *ḍhol*, the *ḍhol's* parts, and the *ḍhol* player have been connected to Brahma and the other *devtās*. There is no comprehensive discussion of Gorakh, other *Nāths*, their philosophical principles, or their practice of *Haṭhyoga*. Only in one place is it asked, "Who is the

³ See also Bhatt (1976: 12), Nautiyal (1981:458), and Anuragi (1983/1984).

⁴ It is significant to note Maskarinec's comments that many shamans in Nepal regard Goraknāth as their "highest" spiritual authority (1995: 7). Though this paper is too brief to provide an in depth discussion of the *Nāth* sect as practiced across various Himalayan regions, the connection would suggest an interesting area for investigation. See also Mazumdar (1998: 107-110) who cites Briggs ([1938]1973) and describes the *Nāth* sect and its practitioners in Central Garhwal in some detail.

guru of Ādināth?" and the answer is, "Anandnāth Gusānī is the *guru* of this *anadī*." From this it is my contention that the original form of the *Ḍholsāgar* was created before the widespread following of Gorakhnāth. Afterwards, as the *Nāth* sect grew, a few of the segments of the text began to mention Gorakh. As a result of its oral transmission, the language continued to change. Repetition is still a part of those questions and answers relating to the *ḍhol*, even though it was not written down. In this way, some segments of the book, including those relating to *tāl* and *swar*, slowly disappeared. (Dabral 1989: 80)

Dabral acknowledges the influence that the oral history of Auḷī drummers undoubtedly had on the *Ḍhol Sāgar* before, and during, its association with the *Nāthpaṇṭhī*s over the past millennium. Furthermore, his suggestion that the *Ḍhol Sāgar* was, in all likelihood, a much larger entity than the written segments he has managed to collect is convincing (*ibid.*: 8 and 67). However, his conclusion that written references to *tāl* and *swar* were once a part of *Ḍhol Sāgar* are more problematic. Very few present-day drummers use the word *tāl* to refer to drum repertoire, and, though rhythmic patterns resembling *tāl* structures do exist, they are referred to today as *bājās* and not *tāls*.

The segments of the *Ḍhol Sāgar* published by Dabral follow the question and answer format common to many ancient texts. Śiva is asked questions by his consort Pārvatī, and he responds, giving explanations in an expansive manner. Thus, the origin and order of the natural and supernatural worlds are discussed, the origin of the *ḍhol* and its construction are described, the spiritual significance of the *ḍhol*'s various parts are outlined, and matters relating to the metaphysics of sound and the symbolism of the drum are discussed.

Significantly, connections between the *ḍhol*'s sounds and the phonetic structures/symbols of the Devanagari script are frequently made, hinting at the existence of a system of esoteric meaning for drum strokes and patterns. However, the segments of text reprinted by Dabral give no precise information about the playing technique, or repertoire, of the *ḍhol*. For instance, the following passage reveals the way in which sounds are produced by the drum's bracing (*kaṣaṇī*, also *ḍorikā*). Though phonetic syllables representing these sounds are given, there is no indication of how these sounds are produced (*ibid.*: 53):

Śrī īśvarovāca - are gunijan! Prathame kaṣaṇī caḍāite triṇi triṇi tā tā tā ṭhaṇ ṭhaṇ karati, kahaṇti dāvaṇti ḍhol ucate. Duṭiye kaṣaṇī caḍāite dī daṣe kahaṇti dāvaṇti ḍhol ucate. Tṛtiye kaṣaṇī caḍāite tri ti to ka nā tha ca triṇi tā tā dhī dhiga lā dhī jala dhiga lā tā tā anapṭā bajāite ṭhaṇkaraṇti dāvaṇti ḍhol ucate. (Dabral 1989: 107)

Though translation of the segment cited above is difficult, it is possible to discern that Śiva is responding to Pārvatī's question about the sounds of the bracing as they are placed (tightened?) on the *ḍhol*. With the first, the drum sounded: *triṇi triṇi tā tā tā ṭhaṇ ṭhaṇ*. The reference to the second bracing is obscure. With the third, the drum sounded: *tri ti to ka nā tha ca triṇi tā tā dhī dhiga lā dhī jala dhiga lā tā tā*.

Elsewhere, there is an unclear and incomplete indication of 64 animal sounds (mostly birds, but also the cicada, the goat, and the sheep) which may be produced on the *ḍhol* (*ibid.*: 53). For instance, the following segment outlines the sound of the cicada:

Ninyārā ko pucchā—o haṇ raṇ raṇ raṇ raṇ raṇ gaṇ taṇ gaṇ taṇ
kṛidānī kṛidānī binatī binatī binatī bharte pallavantanaḥ picenya sura
nara muni buṇ la ra tā laṣūniṇā mati niṇā pallav tuniā khini khini tā
tā tā nī tā jhe jhe tā jhī gī tā. Jhī gī tā. Tā tā tā digani tā dhī tā jāyate. Iti
ninyārā ko puccha hajāite. (Dabral 1989: 117)

Though the meaning of the segment is obscure, it would appear that the sound of the cicada – *haṇ raṇ raṇ raṇ raṇ raṇ gaṇ taṇ gaṇ taṇ kṛidānī kṛidānī binatī binatī binatī* – is linked to the drum's sounds – *khini khini tā tā tā nī tā jhe jhe tā jhī gī tā. Jhī gī tā. Tā tā tā digani tā dhī tā*. Elsewhere, the text mentions sounds for individual finger strokes, though no specific playing technique is mentioned (*ibid.*: 107).

These brief examples illustrate how the information in this printed version of the *ḍhol Sāgar* remains esoteric in nature. Though it hints at the existence of meanings for strokes and patterns played on the *ḍhol*, no clear explanation for such meaning or playing techniques is given.

Additional secondary source references to the *ḍhol Sāgar*

It would appear that the publications of Babulkar and Bahuguna are the main sources for other authors' comments about the *ḍhol Sāgar*. Bhatt only briefly mentions the *ḍhol Sāgar* and describes it as an invaluable text for the study of the Garhwali language as well as for gaining knowledge (*gyān*) of the *ḍhol*'s 'tāls' and 'bols.' (1976: 12). Though he uses the terms *tāl* and *bol*, their use is not carefully considered. As Dabral states, no reference to *tāl* is made in current written fragments (*ibid.*). Bhatt's emphasis, therefore appears to be on the knowledge inherent in drumming, rather than on specific metric structures (*tāls*) or strokes (*bols*) which these terms imply.

Anuragi undertakes considerable study of the *ḍhol Sāgar*, and his several articles make frequent reference to what would appear to be Babulkar's and Bahuguna's version of the text (amongst others see Anuragi 1961, 1982, and 1983/1984). His association with both Chandola and Nautiyal, undoubtedly influenced the views of both of these authors on the subject.

Chandola is brief in his references to the *ḍhol sāgar*. He mentions it only in relation to the transmission of drum knowledge (1977: 15-16). Though he does not cite his source, Chandola does suggest that the book is in an esoteric hybrid linguistic form which would be difficult for most drummers to understand.

Nautiyal's references to the *ḍhol sāgar* are much more comprehensive than either Bhatt's or Chandola's (Nautiyal 1981: 380-381 and 458-460; 1991: 57-66). In his 1981 publication *Garhwāl ke Loknṛtya-Gīt*, he cites Bahuguna's 1955 book titled *Giriś*, as well as Babulkar's 1967 publication *Garhwāl kī Lokdharinī Kalā* (ibid.: 458). In Nautiyal's 1991 publication, *Garhwāl kī Lokaṅgīt evaṃ Vādhyā*, he cites Bahuguna's 1976 publication, *Gāḍamyaṭeki Gaṅgā*, as the source for the *ḍhol sāgar*, and reprints the same segments as contained in Bahuguna's earlier publication. Consequently, his comments generally conform to the texts given by Dabral. However, in at least one important respect Nautiyal's *Garhwāl ke Loknṛtya-Gīt* adds considerable exegesis to the 'texts' given by Dabral. He refers to the 'tāls' described in the *ḍhol sāgar*, and then proceeds to name eighteen of these 'tāls' listed within what he calls the 'Madhyānī style' of *ḍhol* performance:

The names of the tāls referred to within the *Madhyānī* style are as follows:

Barhai, Dhuñyel, Tharaharī, Caurās, Cāmañī, Cāsañī, Dabukū, Sultān Cauk, Bailbāle, Śabd Joṛ, Pattan, Rahamānī, Pūchā, Apūchā, Kirañīn, Pāñsāro, Sarauñ, and Cāritālim. (Nautiyal 1981: 381)

In the passage which precedes the quotation given above, it is clear that Nautiyal is referring to the *ḍhol sāgar*. However, the only place that Dabral's reprinted segments of the *ḍhol sāgar* refer to 'tāl' is where the word is used to identify one type of instrument within a list of 36 (Dabral 1989: 110). Nowhere is the term used to refer to repertoire items in the manner adopted by Nautiyal. Nor do any of the passages printed by Dabral give a list of tāls as given by Nautiyal. In some locations in Dabral's reprinted texts, the names that appear in Nautiyal's list are individually referred to in a somewhat tangential manner, but never as 'tāls' (for instance, see Nautiyal 1981: 114 and 117).⁵ It is possible therefore, that Nautiyal is referring to an uncited source different to those mentioned by Dabral, though this is unlikely.

In spite of the existence of printed texts such as those consulted by authors like Dabral, Nautiyal, and Anuragi, most scholars admit that the role of performing musicians in the creation and maintenance of the tradition is primary. Nautiyal highlights this fact when he states:

⁵ The drummers with whom I spoke most commonly referred to drum patterns as *bāje* (singular *bājā*). Most have either very limited or no knowledge of the classical tāl system.

In fact, the *Ḍhol-Sāgar* is the foremost literary book of Garhwali folk music. The *Bājgīrs* of Garhwal maintain the book through their knowledge of the various artistic styles of performing the *Ḍhol-damaṃ* which may be found within the volume's text. The *Aujis* have remained the main contributors to the protection of the folk music of Garhwal. (Nautiyal 1981: 380)

Nautiyal's comments clearly acknowledge that practicing artists are significant to the 'folk' music of Garhwal. They not only play their music at musical events, but also maintain their tradition as a practice of performed sounds and performed knowledge. In this context, the distinction between a book with printed words and a knowledge of sounds within an orally transmitted tradition becomes blurred.

Ḍhol Sāgar as an oral entity

The preceding discussion points to a parallel tradition of literary documents and oral tradition. The coexistence of written and oral 'texts' in numerous performance traditions throughout South Asia is well documented. However, classical and folk Hindu epics, as well as the performative and ritual traditions that surround them have inspired researchers to view the oral-written dichotomy with some suspicion. As Blackburn states:

The boundary between written text and oral performance is particularly obscure in a culture like India that has produced (and continues to produce) epics in all shapes and sizes, and has transmitted them by every possible combination of oral and written media. (1999: 105)

Though Blackburn examines only epic repertoire, his comments are relevant to texts such as the *Ḍhol Sāgar* that are not epic in nature. The *Ḍhol Sāgar*'s nebulous character as a largely oral text for which some written documentation exists provides useful comparison to other research on oral and written texts in South Asia.

Interpretation and analysis of epics such as the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* have often focused on the identification of structures that illustrate an oral origin for present-day written editions. Brockington for instance, provides analyses of *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* texts to illustrate that they "represent a culmination of a lengthy tradition of oral poetry (2000: 193)." Though he acknowledges the very real part that writing has played in the transmission of the classical epics, Brockington points to various formulae and text structures all of which suggest an original oral creation (2000: 194). By contrast, Hiltebeitel focuses on the *Mahābhārata* as a literary text within which meaning may be 'excavated' through analysis. Emphasizing the significance of writing for the history of the *Mahābhārata*, Hiltebeitel suggests that his research:

...promote[s] not a single but a double argument about the origins of classical epics on the one hand, and those of India's regional oral martial epics on the other. Rather than positing analogous origins for both in oral epic, I will argue that while Sanskrit epics do generate a new kind of oral tradition, orality in [emphasis original] these epics is above all a literary trope that should be understood against a background of redaction and above all writing: the activities that went into the making of these two Sanskrit epics. (1999: 4)⁶

Thus, the *Mahābhārata* contains structures within it that allow Brockington to point to an original tradition of oral poetry. At the same time it provides a fruitful literary source for Hildebrandt to use textual analysis to trace the ascendance of the Draupadī cult.

Ritual performance of texts in ceremonial occasions, theatrical renditions, dance-drama performances, or shadow puppetry adds a further layer of complexity to the coexistence of oral and written sources in many parts of South Asia. As Honko (2000: 217) and Höfer (1981: 39-41) both note, the researcher's role in determining or identifying the actual text under investigation is often extremely problematic. As Honko states: "...traditional performance strategies and scholarly documentation strategies do not work for similar ends (*ibid.*)."

Even in the absence of scholarly text construction, performance traditions such as shadow puppet performances of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Karnataka and *Paṇḍava līlā* in Garhwal provide examples of differing combinations of both oral and literate practices. As Blackburn notes, the accuracy of puppeteers' performances in Karnataka "...suggests a reliance on written records (1991: 109)." Furthermore, he documents the use of hand written notebooks as mnemonic aids to recitation. By contrast however, the *Paṇḍava līlā* of Garhwal is a localized dramatic rendition of the *Mahābhārata* in which performers are completely amateur, and no written scripts are used (Sax 2002: 47). Thus, bardic recitations, learned as a part of an oral poetic tradition, accompany renditions of scenes to form a localized dance-drama of the *Mahābhārata*.

In this context Doniger's comments on orality and writing in South Asia are particularly relevant:

The forms taken by the classics of India challenge our Western assumptions about permanence and impermanence as well as the corollary distinctions we make between written and oral texts. In India, we encounter more oral traditions than written ones, and more fluid traditions than frozen ones. More than that, we also find a reversal of the link we assume exists between what is written and fixed, on the one hand, and what is oral and fluid, on the other. (1991: 31)

⁶ See also Hildebrandt (2001: 4).

Thus, just as the oral tradition of the Rig Veda is frozen, the so-called manuscript tradition of the Mahabharata is hopelessly fluid, in part because of the interaction in India between living oral variants and empty written variants. (1991: 33)

As a result of the difficulty in identifying a clear distinction between oral and written texts in India, Doniger suggests that it is more useful to examine texts on the basis of their use and not on their oral or written nature (*ibid.*: 32). She suggests that the 'inside' of a text, whether oral or written, may be defined as the meaning behind the text; that is, segments of text may be isolated and their inside explained through exegesis. Examples of this in India are the many types of ritual circumstances within which officiates and/or performers take time to explain segments of text (amongst others, see Blackburn 1991: 107; Narayanan 1995: 182). By contrast, some texts are used primarily for the words themselves, without any direct reference to textual meaning. As Doniger suggests, recitation of *Rg Vedā* texts occurs in a completely fixed form and is used in circumstances where meaning may not even be understood (*ibid.*: 33).

Clearly, *Ḍhol Sāgar* is another 'text' that contributes to our understanding of the complex nature of orality and writing in India. Though it bears some resemblance to other oral-written texts, it is unique in a number of fundamental ways. Foremost amongst the unique features of *Ḍhol Sāgar* is its existence as both text and as drum repertoire.

A few musicians with whom I spoke were able to recite memorized segments of verses which they stated to be *Ḍhol Sāgar*. Others more commonly used the term *Ḍhol Sāgar* as a general reference to their drum knowledge. Consequently, there is no single entity that may be referred to as the *Ḍhol Sāgar*. Its identity is partly contained within written sources such as those printed by Dabral. However, it remains partly the performed knowledge of drummers, and partly the memorized texts that link the power of sound to the power of the gods. Many musicians believe there to be an *ur text* of the *Ḍhol Sāgar*, but it would appear unlikely that any such original document exists. Though written sources are fragmentary, incomplete, and scarce, faith in their existence amongst musicians contributes to a mythical source of authenticity.

Notwithstanding the prestige that writing lends to *Ḍhol Sāgar*, its essence is based on the oral-aural world of sound as performed on drums. The connection between orality, writing, words, sound and drumming becomes even more fascinating when considering the relationships that exist between spoken words and 'sounded' drum strokes. Perhaps it is equally valid to speak of sounded words and spoken drum strokes.⁷

⁷ Chandola argues for the creation of a discipline of musicolinguistics in which these issues could be the focus of study. His discussion of issues similar to those raised here is, unfortunately, only cursory and he never directly tackles the issue of esoteric meaning.

Esoteric meaning and drum knowledge

I recorded many hours of drum repertoire throughout several periods of fieldwork that I undertook in Garhwal in 1996, 1999, and 2001. I reached a critical point in my research in November of 1996 when I met Jog Das of Budha Kedar village in central Garhwal. Jog Das had brought no drums to our first meeting, but had come simply to discuss drum repertoire associated with the main festival event (*melā*) held in the village each year. During our discussions, he recited vocable syllables to illustrate the drum sounds and to explain the normal procedure of events. His description showed how segments of drum repertoire are attached to specific episodes within the ritual action undertaken each year at the *melā*.

Jog Das' vocable patterns were onomatopoeic equivalents for the combined sounds of the *ḍhol* and *damaṃ*. Though they relate most directly to the *ḍhol*'s strokes, each stroke is not necessarily symbolized by a specific syllable. In spite of the fact that no exact correlation between syllable and drum stroke appears to exist, these syllables are a means to remember the rhythmic patterns associated with specific events. They represent a mnemonic aid, which relates combined drum stroke patterns to particular phenomena and ritual activity. For instance, a particular repertoire item called *Baḍhai* is used at the beginning of ritual segments to create auspiciousness. Another called *Ghāya* is used to accompany specific processions that hold symbolic reference to historical events. Another called *Hanūmānī Madhyānī* is used to awaken the local deity before his form (a trident) is paraded through the village (see further Alter 2000: 244-61).

After I became aware of the use of syllables by musicians such as Jog Das, I made it a regular part of my research to ask musicians to recite their repertoire in addition to playing it. My questions elicited a variety of responses that were often more confusing than illuminating.

I frequently used the term '*bol*' to refer to drum strokes. It was the term used by Jog Das and is also the term used by classical musicians in India today. However, invariably when I asked drummers to recite the *bols* of a particular repertoire item, they would not recite drum strokes. Rather, they would either begin to sing particular songs (the *bols*) associated with repertoire, or they would just play their drums, assuming the *bols* (drum strokes) to have been 'sounded' as required. Thus, some musicians assumed my reference to *bols* was in fact to the words of songs while others assumed the sounded drum strokes were all I needed to hear. Recitation of vocable syllables as Jog Das had demonstrated earlier was either haphazard or simply considered to be a part of an esoteric drum knowledge that only drummers would understand. Furthermore, the link between vocable syllables and actual drum repertoire was not obvious.

The situation I found myself in raised numerous questions about the nature of drum knowledge and the esoteric meaning/understanding inherent in some aspects of repertoire. Moreover, the frequent reference by musicians to a time in the past when drum repertoire incorporated lexical meaning like words, continued to inspire my curiosity. Jog Das and other drummers whom I met, often told stories of how their forefathers would use their drumming to put a curse on a fellow drummer. References to communication with drums across mountain valleys during processions or military campaigns were also frequent. Thus, it became clear during the course of my research that the distinction between drum stroke syllables and word syllables was not as great as I had initially assumed. In the past, drummers may have used their drum repertoire as a communication medium and spoken to each other in ways that resembled verbal discourse. However, interpretation of the sounds remained an esoteric knowledge known only to drummers.

Wegner has presented documentation of drum repertoire in Bhaktapur, Nepal, which is similar to my own (1986 and 1988). His documentation of drum strokes and vocable syllables appears to demonstrate similar sound structures to those I heard in Garhwal. Curiously, Wegner also describes a series of repertoire items for which direct lexical meaning is attached (1986: 28-30). Drummers in Bhaktapur use these items to tease or taunt one another in ways that only other drummers understand. Though I found no similar repertoire items in Garhwal, the stories of a past tradition of drum communication, in addition to the obvious confusion between 'sounded words' and 'spoken syllables', has led me to assume that drummers clearly consider their repertoire to contain esoteric meaning known only to themselves. Whether this meaning is simply a part of drum knowledge through which specific repertoire items are associated with specific ritual actions, or whether the knowledge encompasses more lexical meaning as is said to have occurred in the past, such drum knowledge is all a part of musicians' perceptions of *Dhol Sāgar*.

Written segments of *Dhol Sāgar* do exist as evidenced by Dabral's scholarship. However, the true *Ocean of Drumming*, is as much an oral tradition as a literate one. It is a sea of knowledge, ambiguously defined by mystical texts, authenticated by the prestige of writing, and maintained within an oral tradition of fragmented text recitation and memorized drumming. In the same way that Śiva sounded his drum to create the universe, the drummers of Garhwal sound their drums as if to echo the original creative power of the spiritual world from which both language and drum repertoire emerge.

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