# Dotara: Examining Cultural Migration across Time and Space

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## ABSTRACT

Musical instruments are important repositories of heritage depending upon tangible materials, available in each environment, the instrument's role in each culture, and the living/intangible traditions of cultural transmission. In Assam, the dotara is central to the Zikir songs of Sufi Saint Hazrat Shah Miran or Ajan Fakir, multiple regional folk genres, and Dehbisaror geet (philosophical/mystical songs) prevalent in upper and lower Assam. The prominence of the dotara throughout Central Asia and into the former Ottoman Empire and Andalusia indicates that this instrument was transported or shared along the ancient Silk Road. However, in terms of the instrument construction and playing techniques, the Kyrgis komuz or dumbora bears the most salient symmetry with the Assamese dotara, including tuning, use of the plectrum, and functions within its cultural milieu. Assam was important to Silk Road from ancient times (200-300 BCE) and most likely silk came to India from China. The Brahmaputra River served as the main artery between China and the west to India. Cultural interchange between Assam and China is strongly supported by Hiuen Tsang's discussion of a Chinese song that became popular in Assam as early at 636 CE. Historical evidence for the dotara's development will be examined, and comparisons between performance styles and organology. The role of the kingdoms of Assam as a bridge between India and China is not generally known, but potentially this will become a rich vein for future research.

**Keywords:** Dotara, Tokari, Zikir, Assam, Silk Road, Muga silk, Dehbisaror geet.

## INTRODUCTION

For the first author, Utpola Borah, this search for the origins of the dotara was sparked by an unexpected performance Hans's Tajik *dotar* teacher Sirojiddin Juraev in a conference on the "Music of South Central & West Asia" at the Harvard University, USA. This conference was an international consortium on South Asian music—I was amazed at the similarities of pieces to the Assam dotara music I grew up with. This

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journey spans continents and centuries, the transmission of Buddhism and Islamic Sufism between India, China, and Central Asia, and the socio-cultural history of the greater Assam region. Our quest for the dotara began with the melodies and rhythms common to various areas in Assam, Bengal, and Central Asia. We wanted to know origins of this instrument—because the dotara was almost exclusively associated with rural life and folk culture, there is a paucity of written and pictorial evidence about the origin of this family of instruments—however, music and song can serve to preserve the past, and so we began this research through the analysis and comparison of music, performance styles, and organology in South and Central Asia.

Musical instrument are important repositories of intangible heritage—relating to the materials available in each environment, the social and religious importance of the instrument, and the living tradition of cultural transmission (through acculturation, formal instruction, or a combination of both). Historical evidence for the dotara will be presented, followed by a brief discussion of the Tajik and Uzbek tradition of dotar, and then a detailed analysis of the Assamese dotara. Finally, comparisons between performance styles and organology will conclude this journey. We will not presuppose to offer definitive conclusions but hope that this will become a rich vein for future research. The prominence of the dotara throughout Central Asia and into the former Ottoman Empire and Andalusia indicates that this instrument was transported or shared along the ancient Silk Road. However, in terms of the instrument construction and playing techniques, the Kyrgis komuz or dumbora bears the most salient symmetry with the Assamese dotara, including tuning, use of the plectrum, and functions within its cultural milieu.

**Cultural Migration in Ancient Assam**

The history of Assam is recorded in texts such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, wherein the inhabitants are designated as *Mlecchas* and *Asuras*; Cinas and Kirata soldiers are mentioned as part of the army of Bhagadatta in the Mahabharata. The Cinas migrated from China, using ancient trade routes, as did later Tibeto-Burman peoples. A frontier territory of India, Assam has always maintained a distinctive cultural, political, and ethnic identity from India. The geographic features of mountains ranges formed a natural boundary between Burma and China and created two distinct regional identities associated with the hills and the plains in Assam itself (upper and lower Assam). The Brahmaputra River forms a central feature of the life of Assam and facilitated trade and cultural exchange from at least the 2nd century BCE. Assam was known as Pragjyotispur in the Mahabharat, Ramayana, and certain Puranas. The King Bhaskarvarman, an ally of Harsha, and was visited by the famous Chinese explorer Hiuen Tsang in 643 CE. Under the king Mithila, the name was changed to Kamarupa because of the prominence of the Goddess Kamakhya in the region. Both the *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra* (1600 CE)

provide important historical and details about Assam. The current name of the territory derives from the Ahom dynasty (1228-1826), a Thai community that conquered the region.

Silk was an important product of Assam from ancient times (200-300 BCE) and most likely silk came to India from China, and the Brahmaputra River exposed the inhabitants to this craft, who soon mastered it and became an important and renown centre to produce high-quality silk and cotton fabrics and garments (Barua 1951: 93), as well for gold jewellery and gemstones. Trade within India and internationally was facilitated by the Brahmaputra River, and Assam exported textiles and minerals to India and China, Burma, and Tibet. A main route, the Magadha route, ran from the Brahmaputra to the Ganges, and reached Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, and was employed by Hiuen Tsang in his travels (Barua 1951: 98). Assam (Kamarupa) maintained multiple trade routes to China, including a sea route that was specifically under the control of various dynasties; this is attested to by Hiuen Tsang being offered a return to China via the Southern Sea route. A land route also existed through the northern mountains of Assam, which was considered more difficult and perilous than the sea route. Cultural interchange between Assam and China is strongly supported by Hiuen Tsang's discussion of a Chinese song that became popular in Assam as early at 636 CE. This song described the defeat of the rebel general Liu Wou-Cheou by Emperor Kas-Tsou in 619 CE (Barua 1951: 99).

This important land trade route is far more ancient and was in use at least as early as 2nd century BCE, attested to by the reports of a Chinese ambassador Chang-Kien, who found silk from Assam and China in Bactria, now part of modern-day Tajikistan. A record of this route is found in the Kia-tan (8th century CE), which began in Tokin, to Chou-ko-leang, crossing into Burma, and into the territory of various nomadic tribes, then through the Arakan range into Assam (Barua 1951: 100). A separate trade route went westward from Chou-ko-leang, Ten Ch'ong, the Mi mountains, and finally the Mangaung and Min-no rivers into Assam (Bagchi 1968: 180). Many other trade routes are found dating from early centuries CE, reaching both Tibet and Afghanistan (Barua 1951: 102). The importance of Assam for the silk route is attested by this clear supporting evidence, as is the centrality of this region as an intersection between China, Central Asia, and India.

**The Silk Road—Material and Spiritual Culture**

The words Silk Road call to mind a tactile experience, like touching a Banarasi sari, or finding a cup of chai among nomadic shepherds in remote mountains. Yet, the Silk Road represents a journey throughout time and space, interconnections between vastly distant and diverse cultures, all without the modalities of instant communication and globalised mass culture that permeate our contemporary world. Material culture, music, and language interacted along channels of commerce, a network of routes that reached from

East Asia all the way towards England, from Outer Mongolia to Java and Sumatra, from Samarkand to Istanbul, connecting East and West, but also urban and nomadic peoples. For example, Members of Islamic Sufi orders were instrumental in spreading spiritual songs among their adherents. Wandering dervishes, holy men, and religious storytellers used song and chant as a means of proselytising the moral values of Islam to audiences that gathered to hear them in bazaars, caravanserais, and tea houses. Buddhist monks also brought forms of sacred chant from one part of Asia to another. The Silk Road also spread disease and was the source of conflict between various empires and principalities for over a millennium. Conflicts over these trade routes began as early as the 2nd century BCE.

Emperor Ashoka's missionary zeal in propagating Buddhism was instrumental in creating the trade routes between India, China, and Central Asia. The first trade route was developed between Khotan and China during this period (268-232 BCE) and continued to develop under the Kushana Dynasty (30-350 CE) which extended from Northern India to modern day Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The syncretic mixture of Buddhism and Shaivism, Greek and indigenous religious cultures was evident throughout the history of this empire. This complex cultural matrix supported the transmission of many artefacts, traditional craftsmanship, and music. The development of wealthy courts, as seen in Samarkand, brought together the Eastern and Western trade routes in a central point, and developed a unique artistic synthesis. From this central location, two routes extended, one from Assam and Upper Burma to the Yunnan Provinces in China (Mookerji 1962: 75). Highly flexible, instruments that travelled the Silk Road lent themselves to many kinds of music besides that of the culture of their origin. This flexibility can readily be seen, for example, in the worldwide spread of string or wind instruments like the hammer dulcimer, violin, and flute.

In music and culture, the history of the Silk Road has largely been the history of interaction between two large cultural domains: the sedentary world and the nomadic world. Nomadic and sedentary people have coexisted in Eurasia for thousands of years, but not always easily. In the 13th century, for example, Genghis (Chinghis) Khan's nomadic armies destroyed Samarkand and Baghdad; in the 20th century, the Soviet Union tried forcibly to permanently relocate some of Inner Asia's last nomads. The dotara was primarily associated with rural life, and nomadic culture, and as such was not included in the 'High Culture' of the courts. Yet, references to the dotara are found in the oeuvre of various courts and mystical poets, including Rumi and Hafez. This symbiosis is evident in the way that music and musical instruments have travelled from one cultural realm to the other.

Turkic and Mongolian horsemen from Inner Asia were not only lutenists, but also were probably the world's earliest fiddlers. Upright fiddles strung with horsehair strings, played with horsehair bows, and often featuring a carved horse's head at the end of the neck have an archaic history among the nomadic peoples of Inner Asia and are closely linked to shamanism and spirit worship. Such instruments may have inspired the round-bodied spike fiddles played in West Asia (*kamanche, ghijak*) and Indonesia (*rebab*) and the carved fiddles of the subcontinent (*sorod*, *sarinda, sarangi*). In Rajasthan, the bowed instrument *kamaiche* has a very similar design to that of the Central Asian nomadic variety, complete with horsehair. In Assam, the *been, sarinda* and *rebab* etc., are another example of a spike fiddle. Both varieties of instrument have a virtuosic performance style characteristic of nomadic music (see Table 1 below). Loud oboes called *surnai* in Central Asia became the *shahnai* in India, *suona* in China, and *zurna* in Anatolia. Central Asia in turn imported musical instruments from both East and West. Asians and Europeans alike were attracted by exotic musical forms and instruments, including new scales and rhythms. Instrument makers adopted techniques and forms from nomadic peoples, also introducing non-native rhythmic patterns, scales, and performance techniques. During this period of cultural interconnections, pastoralists and sedentary dwellers preserve distinctive musical identities.

Table 1: Characteristics of Nomadic Music Cultures

| Sr. No. | Characteristics |
|---|---|
| 1 | Bard preeminent in Nomadic cultures |
| 2 | Solo performer who accompanies themselves |
| 3 | Reflect the environment through sounds |
| 4 | Virtuosic traditions |
| 5 | Highly portable instruments |
| 6 | Improvisation is central, abstract asymmetrical rhythms, mirrors environment, travelling on camels or horses |
| 7 | Humour, narrative, and ability to captivate an audience |
| 8 | Shamanism |

The first written record of the dotara is found in the works of the philosopher, music theorist, and historian Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi (870-950 CE). His work *Kitab al-Musiqa al-Kabir* (The Great Book of Music) looked at both the theoretical and practical aspects of music, and drew upon Greek theories of harmonic ratios, and was an important

influence on debates over the legality of music within Islamic culture. From this broad cultural/historical background, we will now move to an examination of the dotara in Assam.

**Dotara: Basic Categories and Typology**

The dotara (also known as dutara, tanbur, dombara) is long-necked or short-necked lute, the name is derived from the Persianate root *tar* for string and *do* meaning two. This instrument is found, with a variety of names, throughout the ancient and modern world. The area of greatest concentration is along the former route of the silk road, from China to Central Asia, to Turkey, and India. Although the dotara found in Eastern India (Assam and West Bengal) and Bangladesh has several shared characteristics in terms of rhythmic patterns and string arrangement, the Central Asian and Turkic dotara is almost exclusively played with the fingers, and features a long, thin neck, as opposed to the Assamese dotara which is a smaller instrument with a much wider neck.

Distinctions notwithstanding, based upon early musicological treatises (*Natya Shastra, Sangita Ratnakara,* and the earliest Persian work on Indian music the *Ghunyatu'l Muntya* (1374-1375), all the musical instruments mentioned as specifically of Indian origin are related to the *Vina,* featuring one or more resonating gourds, and suspended strings (Sarmadee 2002: 65-68). The connection of the trade routes of the ancient Silk Road through Assam, and the prominence of the dotara along these routes does lend some support that the instrument was developed or influenced by the cultural interactions between East Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The Eastern Indian dotara more closely resembles the Anatolian *cura,* and Afghan *dutar.* The following classification scheme is provided by Jean During (2012).

1. Fretless *dombara, dutrcha,* and *dutar-i-madya*
    a. Associated with nomadic peoples
    b. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan
    c. Gut strings
    d. Smaller size
    e. Can be carved from a single piece of wood
2. Khorasan *dotar*
    a. Norther Khoasan, Turmen, Qaraqalpaq, Western Afghanistan
        i. Steel strings
        ii. Wooden sound board
        iii. Neck of apricot wood

3. Sart *dotar*
    a. Khorezm, Bukara-Samarkhand, Ferghana-Tashkent, Northern Tajikistan, and all Uyghur China
        i. Silk strings (now use twisted gut in Uyghur *dotar*)
        ii. Larger size
        iii. Ribbed soundboard

It cannot be ruled out that possible nomadic influence was felt on the dotara of Eastern India. It is one of the most iconic cultural instruments for the Uyghur peoples of China, as well as in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In Uighur China, the *dutar* is the national instrument and is found in variety of sizes. It is used both in Classical and folk forms. The performance techniques and the use of the classical *shesh-maqquam* system of music are shared between Tajik, Uzbek, and Uighur music, although the repertoire is distinct between these regions.

The Kyrgyz *komuz* is a three-stringed instrument used for both accompaniment and solo virtuoso performances. It is a fretless instrument, like the Assamese dotara, and is distinguished from most other instruments in the dotara family by this fact, as well as the use of the plectrum. The Kyrgyz people were primarily nomadic for much of their history, "The ancestral home of the Kyrgyz is believed to be in southern Siberia around the upper Yenisei River. Like most of the nomadic peoples of Central Asia, their history is one of extensive migration, both for better grazing and in defensive or offensive movement against, or in reaction to, competing tribes. In 840 CE, the Kyrgyz were on the offensive: they swept down into central Mongolia and destroyed the Uighur Khanate on the Orkhon River. Less than a century later, the Kyrgyz were violently routed from the same region by the Khitan Khanate. Gradual Kyrgyz movement into present-day Kyrgyzstan likely followed such retreats, though just when is subject of conjecture. Some sources suggest the Kyrgyz may have come there as early as the 10$^{th}$ century, while others say as late as the 17$^{th}$ century.

"The oldest known *komuz*-like instrument dates from the 4$^{th}$ century although the related Azerbaijani *gopuz* is believed to date back to 6000 BCE following an archaeological discovery of clay plates depicting *gopuz* players. In the 1960s American archaeologists working in the Shushdagh mountains near the ancient city of Jygamish in Iranian Azerbaijan, uncovered a number of rare clay plates which dated back to around 6000 BCE which depicted musicians at a council, holding a komuz-like instrument to their chests. The *golcha gopuz* was mentioned in the epic Book of Dede Korkut (www.wikipedia.com/komuz).

**The Dotara in Assam**

Dotara is one of the most important accompanying instruments for Assamese "*lokogeet*" literary means "people's songs" or regional folk song. For myself, Utpola, being a native of the state of Assam, India, I first heard dotara music in my childhood. It formed a part of my experience of growing up in Guwahati—while passing the railway gate near Chandmari bazar or Kachari bazar or by the temple steps in Guwahati I encountered soloists or groups of musicians playing and singing *lokogeet* with dotara accompaniment; these street performers were generally highly skilled and accomplished artists. I grew up listening to dotara music with regional folk genres of Assam such as Goalporiya lokogeet, Kamrupia lokogeet, Dehbisaror geet and Zikir etc., in the All-India Radio (the National Public Radio Broadcaster), as well as Doordarshan (National Television), Guwahati and Dibrugarh, public functions, and during the Bihu festival and Durga Puja celebrations.

**Zikir Songs of Assam**

Assamese Zikir represents one of the outstanding folk musical genres of Assam; they are a group of philosophical/mystical songs primarily prevalent among the Muslims of upper Assam (upstream River Brahmaputra). The term Zikir, derived from Arabic "Ziqr", literary means singing or remembering Allah's name. It applies both to the musical genre and to the occasion of its performance, the devotional assembly of Islamic mysticism or Sufism in Assam. Zikir, took root in Assam during the 17th century within the socio-cultural framework instituted by Bhakti movement of Saint Srimanta Sankardev (1449-1568) and under the patronage of Ahom rulers (1200-1800). The interconnections between the Bhakti movement and Sufism resulted in many rich cultural developments throughout the Indian subcontinent (Hussain 2007). Records of Shaik Jalal al-Din Tabrizi describe his travels from the Decan to Bengal in 13th century (41), and a well-travelled road was established from Eastern India to Delhi.

Assamese Zikirs were mainly composed and popularised by the 17th century Sufi saint and poet Hazrat Shah Miran, popularly known as Ajan Fakir. Azan Fakir came to Assam from Bagdad accompanied by his brother Shah Navi around 1634-35 CE and later settled in Suwaguri Sapori, near present Sibsagar town of Assam. Ajan Fakir reveals much of his personal story and other relevant facts in his music. The following Zikir lyrics composed by Azan Fakir describes his place of residence.

*Saheb jai agote hoi sahib hoi, bhakat jai pasote hoi sahib hoi*
*Hai hai oi,*
*Sonai noier parote ghore, Alla sahib oi, girihat*
*tumi Allha sahib oi, jodi kora doriyar par*

Saheb is going ahead of his devotees/
He resides on the bank of River Sonai/
O lord if you can liberate us from this world.

According to a legend, real name of Ajan Fakir was Hazrat Shah Miran or Milan. He received the name "Ajan Fakir" or Ajan Pir (Saint) because he taught the Assamese Muslims to recite "Azan" as its part of Muslim ritual. He introduced the Muslims of Assam to the *Namaz*, the contents of Quran, the Hadiths (hadith literature is based on oral narratives that were in circulation in society after the death of Prophet Mohammad) and other Islamic literature. At that time, Assamese Muslims had little acquaintance with many fundamental Islamic religious practices, and Ajan Fakir promoted these practices through a range of folk songs and instrumental music. The time of Ajan Fakir cannot be stated positively but from references in two Assamese chronicles and some Zikirs prove his stay in Assam in 17th century during the reign of Ahom King Gadadhar Singha. In the following Zikir, Ajan Fakir described the time he composed Zikir and the Quran the source of the Zikir:

*Dah xa dukuri nabison hijiri/ aru pase bosor jai*
*Ajan Fakire ai Zikir korile/ Koran kitapot pai.*

Ajan Fakir composed the Zikir in 1038 Hijri (1636 CE)/ The Quran is the source of Zikir.

**Muslims in Assam**

According to Gait's *History of Assam* (Gait 1906), Muslim settlers arrived in Assam as Mughal, Turkish and Pathans invaders; from 1206 CE there were a total of seventeen attempted invasions. Muslim rulers made many attempts and expeditions in their attempt to conquer Assam; however, these attempts all failed due to climatic condition of the region and the fierce resistance of the Assamese people. As a result, several Muslims remained as prisoners of war, and eventually became part of the general society, many taking local wives and adopting the local customs. Currently, Assam has the largest concentration of Indian Muslims after Kashmir and compare to North and Western India Muslim in Assam is open, accommodative, and adaptive by nature. Perhaps this situation has been influenced because the "Axomiya Muslims" arrived as soldiers and were imprisoned during the various wars by the Ahom rulers.

Apart from these invasions, during the Ahom reign a few highly skilled Muslim artists were imported from various part of India. Ahom rulers also employed some of the Muslim prisoners in various positions of administration to buttress their espionage system, military techniques and used them as negotiators and diplomats (Robinson

1891: 204, Hunter 1879: 245-46). Several Muslim were appointed by the rulers in army administration like Rupai Gariya, Muslim captain Bagh Hazarika excelled in the army of Lachit Borphukan (the great Ahom Commander who fought against Mughal in the Battle of Saraighat in 1671). The Ahom kings also invited Muslim artisans and employed them as mason, engravers, spinners, and for augmenting the state arsenal. A considerable number of these Muslim settler married local Assamese women, and then adopted Assamese culture and traditions.

**Azan Fakir and Zikir**

Though the underlying motivation of Azan Fakir was preaching Islam and reviving/ reforming traditional practices that had become forgotten by local Muslims, he became deeply influenced by the Vaishnavaite philosophy, spiritual practices, and music of Saint Sankardeva. Saint Sankardeva was a proponent of the monotheistic cult of Vaishnavaite Bhakti, which consisted of *sravana* (hearing or audition) and *kirtana (*group singing*),* however he had his own interpretation and messages which occasionally deviated from other *bhakti* sects. He preached for supreme surrender to one God, Vishnu or Narayana or Krishna who is the central reality (the manifestation of *Prakriti* and *Purusha*) and rejected any dualistic conception of God as Krishna and Radha, which was distinguished from the other Vaishnava bhakti religious movements. He emphasised worship of God through love and devotion which did not recognise any caste, creed, or religion, and was entirely founded on a strict monotheistic interpretation of the universal spirit (Zaman 2006: 118, Saikia 1978: 219-22). Saint Sankardeva had an open door for all including the Muslim devotees like Chad Sai/Khan**,** who later became one of the key religious figures in this movement, and who composed spiritual songs and music influenced like the *Borgeets* of Saint Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. Borgeets are devotional or spiritual songs of Assam. These collections of lyrical songs are set to a specific raga, somewhat like Hindustani classical raga music but have a distinct flavour. These songs are composed by Saint Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in 15$^{th}$ -16$^{th}$ centuries.

It is believed that there were several other composers of Zikir other than Azan Fakir, but he was the foremost among them. In one of his Zikir's he states that *Kalima Zikiror mul* (Kalima is the source of Zikir). Azan Fakir adopted the many features of Vaishnava lyrics and language (Braj bhasa)—for example, one often comes across the lines "*Savaro ghate ghate Alla"* (Allha is everywhere) that is clearly borrowed from Vaishnava poetry. Azan Fakir composed one hundred and sixteen (116) Zikirs in a colloquial Assamese dialect infused with some Arabic and Persian word. Although he spoke Arabic, he learned the Assamese language and mastered the local dialects; his compositions are closely related to the traditional cannon of Assamese folk songs. Zikir were said to have been originally

preserved in both Arabic and Ahom scripts but none of the written Zikirs have been found so far. They are orally transmitted from generation to generation and follow the tradition of Guru-sisya parampara (transmitted from master to disciple).

**Performance**

According to a leading Zikir performer, Zikirs were mainly performed in two different contexts: (1) private gathering- a lead vocalist guides the group, and participants support him with hand clapping without any musical instruments; (2) other time Zikirs were performed with back-and-forth dance steps; as the group sings, they move in a circle, hand clapping and following rhythmic steps, somewhat like Oja-pali performance. Ojapali is an indigenous folk dance-drama tradition from Western Assam. The performance combines narrative singing and dancing by a group of performers. The lead singer or "oja" leads the performance and four or five performers or "palis" support the lead singer by playing cymbal and hand clapping. These could also be an influence from *Zari gan* (songs of Karabala episodes about Hasan-Hosain). *Zari gan* was the dominant Islamic devotional genre prior to Azan Fakir's arrival, and is still performed widely by the Assamese Muslims, especially during the Muharram festival. Zari gaan or Jarigaan is a type of lament, "zari or jari" translated from Persian and Urdu dictionaries as "crying, groaning, wailing". The songs are based on legends relating to heroes of Karbala "Hassan ibn Ali and Hossein ibn Ali", grandsons of Prophet Muhammad. The devoted Muslims enjoy listening to "zari gaan" till late hours of the night. Some of the Assamese zari may be called independent ballads giving the stories of Haidar Ghazi. In Assam Zari gaan is performed only by male performer from Sunni Muslim community.

The late Rekibuddin Ahmed (1939-2001) was an eminent Zikir singer. A schoolteacher by profession, he and his band performed Zikir for the first time on stage at the Dergaon High School in 1954-55. They performed without any musical instruments, remained in a stationary seated position, and used only hand clapping as accompaniment. According to Rekibuddin Ahmed's son Nekibuz Zaman, his father made his first dotara sometime around 1960. It seems he went to Guwahati and first heard dotara and felt that the tune was more suitable for Zikir music than tokari.

In 1963 his Zikir music was recorded by eminent Hindustani classical vocalist Late Biren Phukon for AIR Guwahati. Mr. Ahmed utilised several traditional Assamese musical instruments such as the dotara, tokari, ektara, bahi (bamboo flute) for the first time for the AIR recording and later he also performed for the Assam Sahitya Sabha (State level literary conference in Assam) 1964 in Digboi, Assam. Mr. Rekiduddin Ahmed gave an interview on Zikir in All India Radio on August 21, 1993, mentioned that he learned Zikir from his mentor Saint Piyaruddin Ahmed popularly known as "Gam Fakir

or Gan Fakir" (singing saint) from his village Nahoroni, Golaghat district, as a child Mr. Ahmed remembers listening to Zikir from Gan Fakir with accompaniment of tokari and hand clapping. Since tokari was a popular instrument for mystical/philosophical songs in upper Assam it is possible that dotara was introduced much later in Zikir songs from lower Assam. In some of the recording from Doordarshan Kendra (National Television) Dibrugarh, Rekibuddin Ahmed and band performed Zikir with dotara, lao-tokari and bahi.

Fig. 1: Dotara made by Rekiduddin Ahmed around 1960: The resonator is covered with lizard skin, which is now rare because killing lizard for making instrument is banned by the government and that is why it is replaced by goat skin.

**Dehbisaror Geet: Mystical Songs of Assam**

Apart from Vaishnavite music, Azan Fakir was also greatly inspired by the music and spirit of regional folk songs and musical instruments of Assam, especially Dehbisaror geet (philosophical/mystical songs), Oja-pali and Vaishnavite music. Zikirs are Islamic counterpart of Assamese Dehbisaror geet. Dehbisaror geet literally means songs explaining human body. These philosophical/mystical songs are prevalent in both upper and lower Assam, and are not associated with religious beliefs, but are associated with esoteric sects such as the *Ratikhowa* and *Purnasea* and are associated with tantric and other psycho-spiritual yogic practices and spiritualism. Dehbisaror geet are sung by both Hindu Bairagi and wandering Sufi Fakirs with the accompaniment of a musical instruments known as tokari — hence, Dehbisaror geet is also known as Tokari geet. The following example of Dehbisaror geet explains how Lord Shiva (popularly known as Mahadeva in Assam) made tokari from a tender tree plank:

*Jetiya birikhe dui paat melile*
*Talaloi melile xipa*
*Xei gose jupi khoje Mahadeve*
*Tokari xajugoi diya*

When two leaves came out of the tree/roots goes under the soil
Mahadev search for that tree to make a tokari

In the following Zikir Ajan Fakir mentioned about making of a *tokari*:

*Bismillah buliye kathat kub marilu*
*tokari banabo lage hain*
*zosinkoi kathere posimkoi tokari*
*tar majot tokarir guna he*
*Lokman hakime tokari bonale*
*Adame batile guna hain.*

In the name of lord, we plunk a piece of wood, chosen to make the tokari.

Unknown wood was used to make the tokari (as it originated in the West and was going to be built from a local wood from Assam), with the strings in between.

Lokman Hakim made the tokari and Adam prepared the strings.

Azan Fakir does not mention the name dotara in his Zikirs, most likely he did not use dotara for *Zikir* music, but he employed tokari as an accompanying instrument. The reason being tokari was already a popular folk instrument for Dehbisaror geet, Bairagi geet, and Fakiri geet in upper Assam. Since both dotara and tokari are believed to have originated in the West and they are very similar in construction, but tokari is larger in size. Both are used for spiritual as well as devotional song, and often tokari is used by Hindu Bairagi singer. The following Dehbisaror geet explain about how tokari came to Assam from Bharat (meaning mainland India) and became a part of spiritual music.

*Rebabe sebabe dukhoni tokari*
*ahil Bharostoloi nami*
*ekhon loi gol pogola Shankare*
*ekhon chari vedor sathi*

Two types of tokari referred to rebab (a Central Asian bowed instrument) and tokari, came down from Bharat (India)/Lord Siva took one and other one became companion for four Vedas.

The following Dehbisaror geet contains references to tantric practice, as the union of Shiva and Shakti is a symbolic reference to the uniting of the *kundalini* energy in the base chakra with the that in the crown. Tantra uses the energies in the body itself for spiritual transformation, and in the song, the human body is compared with the instrument itself. The primary channels of spiritual/psychic energy that extend from the base of the spine to the crown are named as the four strings of the tokari (*Ingala, pingala, chitra,* and *susumna).*

*Mahadeu goxaye tokari xajile*
*bate Pareboti guna*
*engala pingala chitra xuxumna*
*ei charigochi guna*

Lord Mahadev made the tokari/
Parvati prepares the strings out of gold thread/ (*muga*)[1]
Ingala, pingala, chitra, and susumna made all four strings.

## TOKARI

Tokari is a long-necked lute stringed instrument. The word "Tokari" means "tokar" meaning sound produced by knocking. The instrument is carved from a single piece of wood, in Northeast India; the wood used is mango (*Mangifera indica*) or *Gomari* (*Gmelina arborea*). The neck, peg box, and finial are all constructed from a single piece of wood. The finial can be in the form of peacock head or any other traditional design depending on the area. Tokari has four pegs of the same wood, and the sound table is made of animal skin: lizard or goat skin. There are a total of four strings, made of nylon thread. A small dear horn plectrum is attached to the instruments with a length of string to playing the instruments. Tokari is played both as a solo instrument and accompaniment.

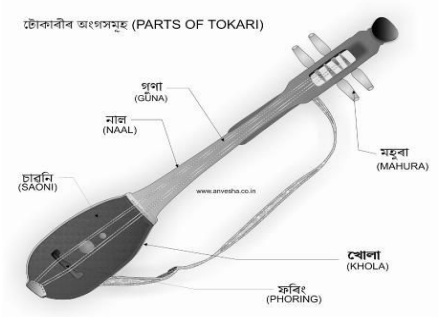


Fig. 2: Parts of Tokari

1 Muga silk is a variety of wild silk from Assam with a yellowish golden texture. Known as *Antheraea assamensis*, the Muga silkworm as a larva and Assam silk moth as an adult, is a moth of the family Saturniidae. Wild silks have been known and used in many countries from early times, although the scale of production is far smaller than that from cultivated silkworms. Silk cocoons and nests often resemble paper or cloth, and their use has arisen independently in many societies to make a woven fabric, silk threads must first be either carded and spun, or extracted as a single intact thread. Wild silks are usually harvested after the moths have left the cocoons, cutting the threads in the process, so that there is not one long thread, as with domesticated silkworms. Wild silks are more difficult to bleach and dye than silk from *Bombyx mori*, but most have naturally attractive colors, particularly the rich golden sheen of the silk produced by the Muga silkworm from Assam often known as Assam silk.

**Lao-Tokari or Ektara**

There is another type of tokari made of *Lao* or gourd, known as "*Lao Tokari*" or *Ektara*, a one string monotone instrument. It has a drum-like body made from gourd, neck is consisting of two bamboo laths, and they are attached to the side of the gourd. A skin soundboard with a string goes from the soundboard to a peg at the end of the neck where laths join the peg-box. This instrument is played by plucking the string, squeezing, and releasing bamboo laths changes the tension of the string and bends the pitch up and down. This instrument is played solo or accompaniment. Similar types of Lao tokari, tokari or ektara can be found among the wandering bards and minstrels in Indian subcontinent, and in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

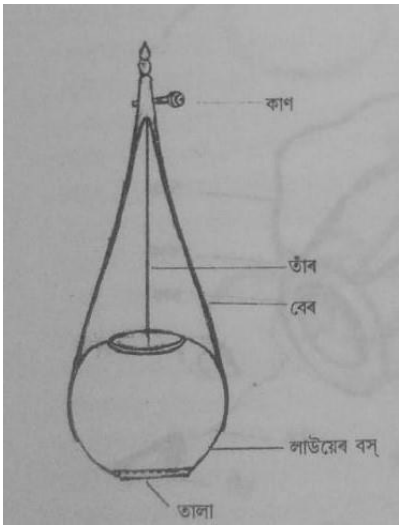


Fig. 3: Line drawing of a Lao-tokari/ektara; name of its parts provided in the figure in Assamese may be read in English as: *Kaan* (peg), *Taar* (string), *Ber* (bamboo laths), *Laoyer bes* (sound box made of gourd) and *Taala* (base of the sound board made of animal skin).

**Dotara of Assam: Historical background**

The earliest reference to dotara can be traced back to the 14th century Sapta Kanda Ramayana of the Assamese poet Madhav Kandali (14th century) who translated Valmiki's Ramayana in the Assamese Brajavali language. This is the earliest translation of the Ramayana into another language. Kandali's Ramayana has a total of Sapta Kanda (seven cantos), and in the Kiskindha Kanda or kiskindha cantos he mentions about an elaborate list of musical instruments. There are different types of instruments and among which the string instruments are dotara and tokari:

*Vira dhoka dhola baje tavala dagara dandi avada suniya kolahala*
*Bhemaca kaimaca caya jhajhara remaci baje ramatala aru karatala*
*Tokari kendara, rudra bipanci dutora baje vina vasi dosari mohari*
*Jinjira kahali ringa bheri dajke nirantara svarga bhuvanako gaila puri.*

Madhavakandali Ramayana, Kiskindha. Madavakandali, *Ramayana*, Kiskanda

In the Kamatapura Kingdom (1257-1587 CE), it was a tradition to play musical instruments during the king's procession. The following folk song from Western Assam written in Brajavali language describes the lists of musical instruments played in king's procession. These are *sankha* (conch), *bell* (ghanta), *karatal* (wooden clapper), *dundubhi*, *dhak*, *dhol*, *dogor*, *nagara* (drums), *bena* (fiddle), *mohari* (wind instruments), *dutora*, *tokari* (string), *rebab*, *sarinda* (fiddle) *maridanga*, *manjira*, *khol* (drums), *gogona* (jew's harp) and *mohari* (flute).

*Sankha ghanta karatal dundubhi bajaye bhaal*
*Dhak, dhol, dogor, nagara*
*Ram bena kabilash Jahar Madhur bhax*
*Khansarika mohari dotara*
*Rababa sarinda baxi jhili jhinjhirik raxi*
*Rudraka tokari baye turi*
*Mridanga manjira khol dhomsir xuni rool*
*Googoona se bajaya mururi.*

The Assamese poet Suryakhari Daivajna lists several instruments in his work *Darrang Raja Vamsavali*: *Bhamari, Bhandi, Bena, Beni, Bhemeci, Dandi, Dinidi, Docari, Dhomaci, Macuvai, Muruya, Panava, Remaci, Singavana, Taka, Tavala, Tupeci, Turya.* This late 18th century text describes the Kamata kingdom during the Koch dynasty (15th century).

Dotara is one of the important string instruments in *Kamatapuri Rajbonshi lokogeet*, popularly known as *Goalporiya lokogeet* from the western region of Assam. It is played solo in ensembles with other musical instruments like *dhak, sarinda, dagar* etc.

The Dotara of Assam is made of either *Neem* (*Azadirachta indica*) or Jackfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) wood or other available hardwoods (depending on the region). The strings run through a cylindrical shaped resonator, and the resonator is covered with lizard skin or goat skin. Dotara has a long fretless fingerboard made of brass or steel attached to a narrow neck or peg-box, which is often elaborately carved in the shape of peacock-head, swan head or head of other animal motifs. It has a total of four strings and is attached at the end of the long neck with four tuning pegs. Dotara is a plucked instrument played by the right hand with a plectrum, while left hand executes the melody, employing techniques such as hammer-ones, glissandos, and chording.

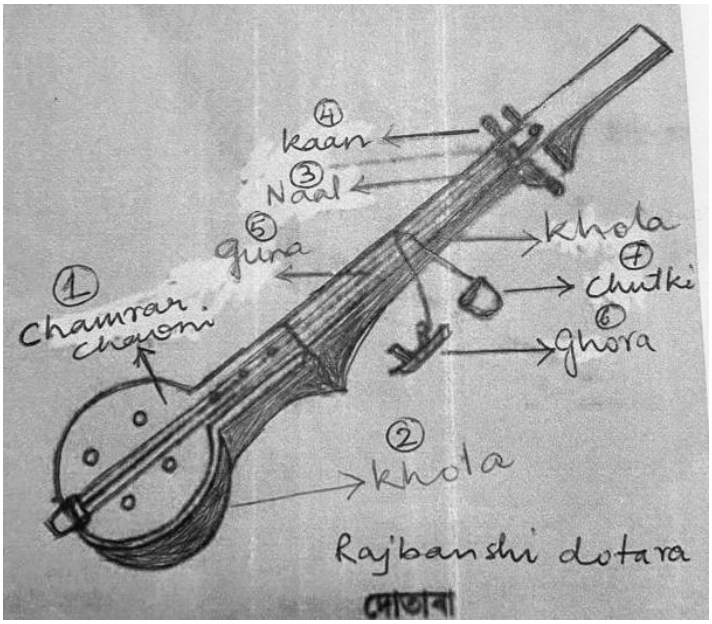


Fig. 4: Parts of Dotara, the Assamese names may be read English as: *Chamrar chaoni* (leather cover over the sound table), *Khola* (body), *Naal* (sounds box), *Kaan* (pegs), *Guna* (strings), *Ghora* (plectrum) and *Chutki* (plectrum).

Fig. 5: Demonstration of a large dotara at the Dotara Museum in Dusanbhe, Tajikistan

Fig. 6: Hans Utter, second author of the paper, playing Tajik Dotara in Dushambe, Tajikistan

The first string (from top to bottom) is thicker than the rest of the three strings. The strings provide the unique timbre of this instrument, made of thick silk thread, giving it a richer tone. Presently, nylon thread is widely used in Assam due to the lower cost and availability. The plectrum is made of buffalo or antler horn or even plant seeds. Dotara strings are tuned as: Soh (lower)-Do-Do-Fah in Western notes. The Hindustani (North Indian) classical notes are Pa-Sa-Sa-Pa or Ma with the tonic/root note of the song. Dotara is an important musical instrument in folk music of West Bengal, East Bihar, and Bangladesh.

## CONCLUSION

The dotara, especially the variants found in Assam, presents a link between ancient cultural encounters and the unique aspects of Northeast India's religious, rural, and musical cultures. Just as the both the Sufi practices of Azan Fakir and the Vaishnavism of Saint Sankardeva, while retaining several elements of both movements as practiced in greater India, became unique cultural expressions in Assam. For example, generally images and pujas are central to Bhakti practices, but in Assam Vaishnavism is entirely *nirguna* (without any image or representation of the Divine, much closer to Islam and Sufi practices in this regard. The dotara itself is found in many forms and performance contexts throughout Central Asia, but based upon the evidence shown in this paper, it is reasonable to posit that the ancient dotara, which made its way from the Near East

several thousand years ago, had at least some impact on both the organology and the performance styles of the Northeast India's dotara. The Kyrgyz *kamouz*, as traditionally played with a plectrum, has striking similarities to the contemporary dotara in Assam, although virtuosic solo performances are very common now, and the tremendous influence of Soviet cultural recreations are evident.

Assam's central position as the crossroads between India and the world at large has been generally neglected in contemporary scholarship. Assam has always been a unique area with a specific cultural identity and serves as the juncture between China, Central Asia, and the West. The generally accepted view that the dotara is uniquely Assamese ignores the centuries of cultural interactions. A striking parallel between the guru-based transmission and training of the dotara in both Assam and Turkmenistan highlights another area where cultural practices can be shared between cultures over time and space. The *Bagshy* (traditional dotara artist) is required to spend many years as an apprentice with a master artist, often living in the master's house, until the tradition is thoroughly imbibed (Gullyev 2005: 211). When the second author of the paper, Hans Utter, studied the dotara in Tajikistan, he was struck by the similarity to India's *guru-shisya parampara* tradition. In Assam artists traditionally learn from accomplished masters; this is the primary means of cultural transmission for this instrument. The dotara is a unique feature of Assamese cultural life and reveals the deep connection of this musical instrument to specific regions, their history, and bears the legacy of centuries of cultural interactions.

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