Reviving the Huka Banam

Huka Banam Workshop

in Bhurkundabari village, Purulia

2016
The Banam of the Santals is a primitive folk fiddle which accompanies many Santal dances. The Banam comes in various shapes and forms - Dhodro, Huka, Kendri and more recently, Phentor. While the Dhodro Banam is prevalent in in Birbhum and Bardhaman, in Purulia and Bankura, the Huka Banam was once the fiddle of choice.

While on a visit to Purulia last year, we discovered that the Huka Banam, made with bamboo and a coconut shell resonator is gradually becoming extinct. An elderly musician we met, Borka Majhi lamented that the youth of his village were simply not interested in learning this art, preferring to listen to music from their mobile phones. That remark stayed with us and we wished to do something to rectify the situation. Early in 2016, in collaboration with Anthropological Survey of India we organized a workshop, reintroducing the Huka Banam to its stakeholders.

A 7 day workshop between 28th January to 3rd February, 2016 was held at Bhurkundabari in Purulia, a remote village in Neturia block. 15 students ranging from ages 20 to 70 took part. Some travelled from other villages like Kalipathor and 15 kms each day by cycle. They were taught by 3 gurus - part of a dwindling set of Santals still in touch with this instrument. In Kalipathor, before the workshop, out of the 100 males in the village, only 3 or 4 knew how to play the instrument; in Namobathan, out of 200 males, only 2 knew how to play it. In Bhoiramuhul village, only 2 elderly men were familiar with the instrument.

We based ourselves at Raghunathpur town and travelled 25 km to the village each day over bumpy roads for the most part. Our local facilitator was the ever helpful Bimal Baskey.
ROUTE MAP TO BHURKUNDA

Raghunathpur Thermal Power
The first three days were dedicated to learning how to make this primitive instrument and the last three, in learning how to play it. The final day was reserved for performances.
The response to this workshop was terrific. We found that some of the older students (fifty years up) had given up the Huka Banam more than 30 years ago and were eager to get back in touch with their roots. Others had vaguely heard about it but had not found any teachers. Still others were eager to learn something about their tradition, encouraged by the response from their peers.

When we asked the students why it is that they had not attempted to learn earlier, when they were so interested and evidently talented, we were made aware of the unfortunate truth. Most of the Santals in these dry and arid areas struggle to eke out a living, earning no more than Rs 150 a day, should they be fortunate enough to find work - on somebody's field or driving somebody's tractor. Music did not pay and so had to be practised in their free time. Where was the time to learn something new? Where was the impetus? And as for the gurus, it did not interest them sufficiently to round up students to teach. That time could be better spent, earning some money, if possible. So, while a few were content playing for themselves, others were happy to let things slide. That is, until we came into the picture. The interest we showed and the stipends that were given to them gave them the initial push. Daricha Foundation has been in touch since then and true to their word, they have been practising. And the gurus have promised to continue teaching.
All through the 7 days, there was an excited buzz about Bhurkundabari. People young and old and even children kept stopping by - holding, trying to play - disappointed that they had not registered earlier. Once the musical training started, it was wonderful to hear the sound of 18 banams playing together. Heartwarming. Fulfilling. Some youngsters had even composed songs they wished to perform with their banams. They promised they would all work hard at their banams and Daricha, in turn, promised to return.

In fact, this amazing experience taught us how important it was to encourage more and more Santals to get back in touch with their age old tradition through workshops such as this. In the near future, hopefully, it would not be only the tamak and the tumdak drums that would be heard during their festivals, but also the music of the Banams.

Top row : from left, Students Sanatan Kisku, Surjadeb Murmu, Rabindranath Hansda, Rameshwar Tudu, Ramchand Mandi, Laxmikanta Hembrom
Bottom row : Anil Tudu, Basanta Mandi, Sokal Soren, Lakhiram Mandi
The raw materials required to make the Huka Banam are:

- Slender bamboo about 1.5 ” thick (dried for 10-15 days) for the neck of the banam
- Thorns from the Akhra tree (optional).
- Dry and hollowed coconut shells (about 3/4 of the coconut)
- Freshly cut bamboo reeds for the bow
- Cured goat skin for the sound box
- Horse tail hair
- (Guitar gauge) Wire for the strings
- Metal rods, about a foot long
- Sand paper (to smoothen the surface of the coconut shell)
The coconut shell or *Huka* is used as the sound box. Holes are drilled carefully around the top edge of the huka. Though manual drills may be used for the holes, pushing a hot iron spoke through the shell is a more traditional method. Thorns, twigs or bamboo splits are sharpened and pushed in through the holes of the huka. Two more holes are made lower down, on opposite ends of the huka. A couple of sound holes are also drilled into the base of the huka. The surface of the huka is then smoothened with sandpaper.
The sound box is completed by stretching cured and moistened goat skin across the mouth of the huka and nailing it down with the spikes. The skin should have been soaked in water for two to three days before hand.

The bamboo for the neck of the Banam is measured using traditional specifications (1 cubit (Mukah), which is about 15-16", 1 hand span (Bitta) - about 6", two finger width (Bar-Katup) - which is about 1") and cut accordingly. Obviously, the final length will depend upon each person’s body measurements. One end of this bamboo will be attached to the sound box and the other end will be fitted with tuning pegs.
The sound box is attached to the neck of the banam by pushing a metal rod through the two holes made in the opposite ends of the huka and into the hollow of the bamboo neck. The rod is pushed right up to the first node encountered within the bamboo hollow.

Two or three banam strings (wires) are attached to the end of the rod which protrudes from the sound box. There will be as many wires as there are tuning pegs. The tuning pegs (locally known as Lutur) are located near the free end of the neck, preferably at a node.
Tuning holes are burnt through the bamboo at a pre-determined position. The pegs are made with sharpened and chiseled bamboo splits. There can be two or three tuning pegs, with a slight gap between each. The open end of each string tied to the metal rod is tightly wound around its corresponding tuning peg which is then fitted firmly through the hole.
Finally, a narrow bridge for the banam, carved from bamboo or wood, is slid under the wires stretched across the sound box.

The bow (Aah) is crafted from a slim, pliable bamboo reed, preferably with a twig protruding from one end. This is chiseled and gently bent. The bow strings (Chawar) are made with horse tail hair. About seventy strands of 18 " horse tail hair is required for making the bow string. Cotton thread is used to tie the hair to the bow. One end of the bow string is passed through a notch made at the free end of the bow and secured; the other end of the string is then pulled tightly toward the protruding twig at the opposite end and fastened to it. In the absence of a protruding twig, a short sharpened bamboo piece is attached to the bow.
The banam is now ready. However, before a performance, the bowstrings need to be rubbed with rosin to hold the strings together, so that it vibrates better against the banam strings.
The Participants

Anil Tudu, Kalipathor
Rabindranath Hansda, Kalipathor
Basant Mandi, Kalipathor
Surjadeb Murmu, Raibandh
Sanatan Kisku, Namobathan
Guru, Barilal Murmu, Kalipathor
Rameshwar Tudu, Namobathan

Laxmikanta Hembrom, Bhurkundabari

Debilal Hembrom, Bhoiramuhul

Bhutunath Baskey, Bhurkundabari

Lakhiram Mandi, Bhurkundabari

Guru, Shyamsundar Mandi
Bhurkundabari
Moments from the Workshop