

# TIMELESS CADENCES: KASHMIR'S CIVILIZATIONAL LEGACY AND THE INTERWOVEN CONTINUUM OF SACRED, CLASSICAL, AND FOLK MUSIC

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## ABSTRACT

*This study undertakes a rigorous exploration of Kashmiri music, situating its semi-classical traditions and Sufiyana Kalam within broader frameworks of musicology, cultural history, and spiritual philosophy. Employing an interdisciplinary lens that combines historical documentation, ethnomusicological analysis, and textual exegesis, the research demonstrates how Kashmiri music evolved as a unique syncretic tradition, assimilating Persian, Central Asian, and Hindustani idioms while retaining its indigenous essence. At its core lies Sufiyana Kalam, transmitted through oral pedagogy and sustained by gharanas such as Saaznawaz, Tibetbaqal, and Qaleenbaaf, with distinctive instrumentation including the Santoor, Saaz-e-Kashmir, and Wasool. The paper further engages with the intellectual legacy of Kashmiri thinkers like Abhinavagupta, Sharangadeva, and Kalhana, whose philosophical and historiographical works continue to inform Indian musicology. It also critically examines the transnational recognition achieved by Kashmiri maestros—Pandit Shivkumar Sharma, Ustad Bhajan Sopori, and Ustad Alla Rakha—who redefined Kashmir's musical identity on global platforms. Through an in-depth analysis of compositional structures, melodic systems, and sociocultural functions of forms such as Thumri, Qawwali, and Tappa within Kashmiri practice, the research highlights music as both an archive of civilizational memory and a medium of metaphysical articulation. Confronting contemporary challenges of cultural marginalization, modernization, and institutional neglect, the paper underscores the urgency of sustained academic inquiry and comprehensive preservation strategies to ensure the survival and revitalization of Kashmir's intangible musical heritage.*

**Keywords:** Kashmir, Abhinavagupta, Music, Sufiyana Kalam, Folk.

## Introduction

Kashmir's musical heritage represents not only an aesthetic tradition but also a living archive of civilizational memory, embodying the intersection of spirituality, philosophy, and artistic practice. Forged over centuries of cultural encounters and mystical inquiry, this tradition synthesizes diverse streams of influence—Persian, Central Asian, and Hindustani—into a distinctly Kashmiri idiom characterized by both classical discipline and folk vitality. At the heart of this continuum lies Sufiyana Kalam, a maqam-based devotional form that articulates Kashmir's metaphysical ethos through intricate modal structures, cyclic rhythmic patterns (talas), and spiritually charged poetry. Its performance, accompanied by instruments such as the Santoor, Saaz-e-Kashmir, and Wasool, epitomizes the region's capacity to localize transregional idioms into indigenous expression. Beyond its sacred framework, Kashmir has also cultivated semi-classical repertoires—Thumri, Qawwali, Tappa, and Dadra—that entered the Valley through sustained cultural contact and were subsequently institutionalized in academic, courtly, and Sufi settings.

This paper approaches Kashmiri music not merely as performance but as an epistemological system, a way of knowing where sound functions as a medium of spiritual realization and social memory. Drawing on the philosophical expositions of Abhinavagupta and Kshemaraja, the musicological insights of Sharangadeva, and the historiographical narratives of Kalhana, the study situates Kashmir's musical thought within the broader intellectual traditions of South Asia. Equally significant are the modern innovations of Kashmiri maestros such as Pandit Shivkumar Sharma, who globalized the Santoor as a classical instrument, and Ustad Bhajan Sopori, whose oeuvre redefined Kashmiri identity in the global soundscape. By integrating textual analysis, ethnomusicological perspectives, and historical

interpretation, this research foregrounds the scholarly significance of Kashmiri music as both an artistic discipline and a spiritual philosophy. Amidst the pressures of modernization, cultural homogenization, and institutional neglect, the introduction underscores the urgency of rigorous documentation, academic engagement, and preservation strategies. It argues that safeguarding Kashmir's intangible musical heritage is not merely a matter of cultural pride but a civilizational imperative, ensuring that its unique synthesis of spirituality, aesthetics, and knowledge continues to inform global discourses in musicology, philosophy, and cultural studies.

## History of Kashmir

The history of Kashmir unfolds as a multilayered narrative of civilizational synthesis, intellectual ferment, and cultural resilience, positioning the Valley as a vital locus in the South Asian imagination. Its early Buddhist foundations under the Mauryan Empire fostered centers of learning and spiritual inquiry, later consolidated by Hindu dynasties such as the Karkotas, whose patronage enabled an efflorescence of philosophy, aesthetics, and scholastic traditions. The 14th-century arrival of Islam introduced Persian, Turkic, and Central Asian influences, catalyzing the rise of a syncretic Sufi-Islamic culture that reshaped Kashmir's religious, literary, and musical landscapes. Subsequent Mughal integration endowed the region with courtly sophistication, architectural grandeur, and refined artistic expression, while the Dogra rule initiated by the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846 marked both political reconfiguration and complex shifts in cultural patronage. The modern era—shaped by Kashmir's accession to the Indian Union in 1947 and transformed further after the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019—has rendered the Valley a contested yet central arena of national and international discourse. Chroniclers such as Kālhana, Jonaraja, and Śrīvara provide invaluable historiographical testimony, documenting Kashmir's dynastic transformations and its artistic life across epochs. Collectively, this historical trajectory illustrates Kashmir as an evolving palimpsest where diverse religious traditions, philosophical thought, and artistic practices intersect, ensuring its enduring stature in the intellectual and cultural history of the subcontinent.

## Geography of Kashmir

Situated at the northern extremity of the Indian subcontinent, Kashmir occupies a geostrategically critical corridor that borders Pakistan and China while remaining politically integrated with the Indian Union, thereby rendering its geography central to both regional and global discourse. Extending between 32.17°N–36.58°N latitude and 73.26°E–80.30°E longitude, the region is differentiated into three ecological and cultural zones: the temperate and agriculturally fertile Kashmir Valley, the subtropical plains and foothills of Jammu, and the high-altitude cold desert of Ladakh. Each zone sustains unique climatic regimes and ecological niches, from the alpine meadows of Gulmarg and saffron fields of Pampore to the stark trans-Himalayan landscapes of Ladakh, collectively positioning Kashmir within the Western Himalayan biodiversity hotspot. Hydrologically, the basin of the Jhelum River, alongside iconic water bodies such as Dal and Wular Lakes, constitutes not only the lifeline of agriculture and economy but also an enduring metaphor in Kashmiri literature, aesthetics, and spiritual imagination. Historically, the Valley's terrain has operated as both a natural bastion and a conduit of civilizational contact, facilitating transregional trade, migration, and cultural diffusion across Central Asia and South Asia. Thus, Kashmir's geography is not a passive setting but an active determinant of its political centrality, ecological wealth, and cultural distinctiveness, shaping its identity as a pivotal crossroads of civilizations.



## Culture of Kashmir

The cultural landscape of Kashmir embodies a deeply stratified synthesis of spirituality, artistry, and linguistic plurality, functioning as both a sacred repository and a dynamic field of secular creativity. Rooted in centuries of philosophical dialogue and civilizational contact, Kashmiri culture integrates Shaivite metaphysics, Buddhist compassion, and Sufi mysticism into a coherent yet pluralistic ethos where spiritual devotion and aesthetic expression converge. The mystical poetics of Lal Ded and Sheikh-ul-Alam stand as emblematic articulations of this syncretic worldview, foregrounding a vision of divine love and human equality that transcends doctrinal boundaries. Linguistically, the region sustains a composite heritage in Kashmiri, Persian, and Urdu, each serving as a vehicle for literary innovation, cultural memory, and performative arts. Intangible traditions such as Rouf, Wanwun, and Wazwan embody collective identity and aesthetic values, while artisanal practices in shawl weaving, papier-mâché, and wood carving attest to the resilience and refinement of Kashmir's material culture. Despite the disruptions of political conflict and socio-economic transformation, the cultural ethos of the Valley has remained remarkably adaptive, serving simultaneously as a locus of identity, resistance, and continuity. Within this broader matrix, the soil has nurtured a fertile ground for the flourishing of Sufiyana Kalam, semi-classical genres, and spiritually inflected performance traditions, situating Kashmiri culture as a unique confluence of devotion, creativity, and civilizational memory.



## Kashmir: The Cradle of Classical Resonance- Exploring the Sacred, Sonic, and Spiritual Traditions of Indian Classical Music in the Valley

Classical music in Jammu and Kashmir represents not merely an art form but a sacred epistemology wherein aesthetics, philosophy, and metaphysics converge into a unified discipline. Rooted in authoritative treatises such as Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra and Sharangadeva's Saṅgīta Ratnākara—the latter authored by a Kashmiri musicologist of enduring renown—this tradition is governed by the principles of rāga (melodic framework), tāla (rhythmic cycle), śruti (microtonal nuance), and rasa (emotional essence). Deeply enriched by Shaivite metaphysical thought, particularly the doctrines of nāda (primordial sound) and spanda (cosmic vibration) articulated by Abhinavagupta and Kshemaraja, Kashmir's classical heritage situates sound as both an artistic language and a pathway to transcendence. Far from being confined to scholarly discourse or ritual performance, classical music in the region remains respected, practiced, and venerated as an expression of cultural rootedness and spiritual vitality.



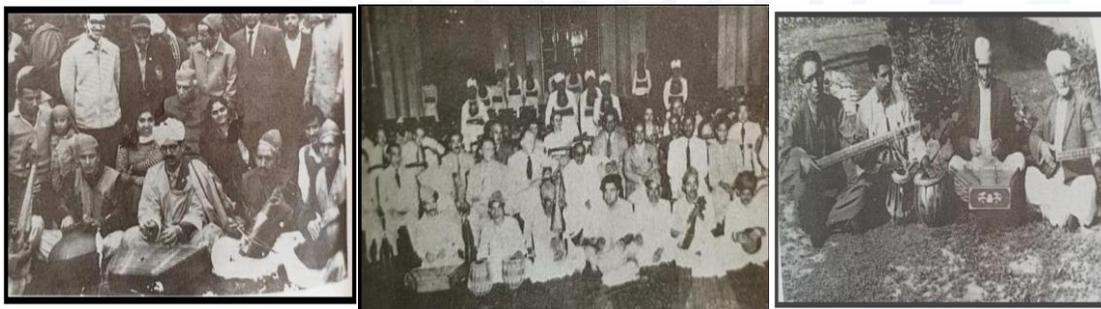
The Valley's instrumental and vocal repertoire illustrates the depth of this tradition, encompassing the Santoor, Sitar, Tabla, Sarangi, Tanpura, Harmonium, and Bansuri, all played with a meditative precision that blends technique with devotion. Structural integrity is maintained through canonical tālas such as Teentaal, Ektaal, Jhaptal, and Chautaal, while expressive range is enriched by rāgas like Yaman, Bhairav, Bhairavi, Malkauns, Darbari Kanada, Bageshree, and Desh, each embodying specific emotional essences that guide performance and improvisation. This lineage has been nurtured by towering figures including Pandit Uma Dutt Sharma, a distinguished Dhrupad vocalist and musicologist, and his legendary son Pandit Shivkumar Sharma, who elevated the Santoor to international classical stature. Further innovation was carried forward by Pandit Bhajan Sopori and Abhay Sopori, who expanded the Santoor's melodic capacities, while in the rhythmic domain, Ustad Alla Rakha Khan and Ustad Zakir Hussain, both

originating from Jammu, transformed the Tabla into a global solo instrument celebrated for its versatility and depth.

Sustained through the guru-shishya paramparā, classical music in Jammu and Kashmir continues to function as a living embodiment of knowledge, spiritual discipline, and artistic continuity within the broader mosaic of Indian classical tradition. Its institutionalization at the Faculty of Music, Institute of Music & Fine Arts, University of Kashmir, ensures rigorous transmission through structured pedagogy in Indian Classical Vocal, Tabla, Sitar, and Santoor, aligning local heritage with national academic standards. Intensive training and professional curricula not only safeguard this tradition but also nurture new generations of practitioners, scholars, and performers who embody excellence while carrying forward the Valley's sacred musical lineage. In this way, Jammu and Kashmir endures as a cradle of classical resonance, where sound remains at once sacred practice, aesthetic discipline, and civilizational inheritance.

### **Kashmir: Where Semi-Classical Music Breathes Mysticism- Tracing the Poetic, Mystical, and Melodic Confluence of Sufi Devotion in the Valley**

Semi-classical music in Kashmir represents a sophisticated confluence of classical rigor, folk spontaneity, and mystical resonance, cultivated through centuries of Sufi devotion and cultural exchange. Rooted in the Sufiana Kalam—the Valley's most profound semi-classical form—this tradition integrates Persian, Central Asian, and Hindustani impulses with Kashmiri philosophical aesthetics. Its soundscape is defined by instruments such as the Santoor, Saaz-e-Kashmir, Rabab, Setar, Wasool, and Tabla, and unfolds through intricate melodic frameworks of revered Maqams like Navroz-i-Saba, Bayat, Araq, Rast, Shehnaz, Jinjoti, and Segah, alongside rhythmic cycles such as Yek Tala, Chapandaaz, Hijiz, Setal, Doroya, Ravani, Neemdur, Chambar, Dori Khafeef, Zarb-i-Turki, and Zarb-i-Fakhta. Each performance becomes not just music but a meditative act, carrying forward the metaphysical thought embedded in Kashmiri Sufi tradition.



This oral heritage has been safeguarded through gharanas such as Saaznawaz, Qaleen Baaf, Tibetbaqal, Setari, and Kamaal Bhat, which emphasize fidelity to maqam, poetic intensity, and the transmission of spiritual intent. Legendary figures including Ustad Ghulam Mohammad Saznawaz, Ustad Mohammad Abdullah Tibetbaqal, and Ustad Mushtaq Ahmad Saznawaz embody this legacy, ensuring that technique and transcendence remain inseparably linked. Alongside Sufiana Kalam, allied genres like Qawwali, Thumri, Dadra, Bhajan, and Tappa flourished within Kashmir's artistic soil. Kashmiri Qawwali was revitalized by Mohammad Khalil Bhat and Naseer Ahmad, while maestros such as Pandit Bhajan Sopori and Vijay Kumar Malla nurtured Bhajan and Ghazal traditions, bridging devotional expression with musical refinement. Together, these practices form a spiritually charged continuum, where music becomes an enduring vessel of Kashmir's cultural identity, ensuring that its semi-classical heritage continues to inspire future generations.

## Folk Music of Kashmir

Kashmiri folk music represents the living archive of the Valley's cultural consciousness—interwoven with oral narratives, communal memory, and ritual practices that span centuries. It embodies a wide emotional and thematic range, extending from festive and devotional performance to satire and lament. Among its foremost genres, Chakri functions as a narrative medium with moderate to brisk tempo, distinguished by its antiphonal (call–response) style and use of instruments such as Tumbaknaer, Harmonium, and Rabāb. By contrast, Rov is markedly slower, reflective, and intimate—traditionally sung solo, often by women, as an expression of grief, longing, or twilight meditation.



Wanwun serves a performative and ritual role within weddings and communal gatherings, embedding oral poetics into social bonding, while Ladishah crystallizes public critique through a rhythmic monologue infused with satire and social commentary. Challant (funeral dirges) articulate collective sorrow in slow, plaintive cadences, generally performed without instrumental support. Similarly, Bhand Pather—a composite of folk theatre and music—deploys song, satire, and humor as tools for socio-political reflection.

These traditions are sustained through indigenous instruments like the Surnai, Nout, Tumbaknaer, and Sarangi, with rhythmic structures based on Keharwa, Dadra, Khemta, and Deepchandi. Legendary exponents such as Raj Begum, Ghulam Hassan Sofi, Ghulam Ahmad Sofi, Rashid Hafiz, Gul Akhtar, and Haseena Akhtar have safeguarded and popularized these forms. Collectively, Kashmiri folk music endures as a vital repository of the Valley's linguistic, emotional, and spiritual imagination.

## Conclusion

The musical legacy of Jammu and Kashmir stands as a profound testament to the region's civilizational depth, aesthetic finesse, and spiritual sophistication. Rooted in a geoculturally rich and historically complex landscape, Kashmir's music is not merely an art form but a living epistemology, deeply enmeshed with metaphysical inquiry, devotional expression, and oral pedagogies. From the sacred classical doctrines articulated by Kashmiri polymaths like Abhinavagupta and Sharangadeva to the resonant legacy of Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma and Ustad Alla Rakha Khan, the classical tradition continues to echo through instruments like the Santoor and Tabla. The semi-classical stream, epitomized by Sufiana Kalam and enriched by gharanas such as Saaznawaz and Qaleen Baaf, embodies a seamless confluence of Persian, Central Asian, and Hindustani aesthetics. Forms like Qawwali, Bhajan, Ghazal,

and Thumri find localized expression within this spiritual milieu. Simultaneously, folk traditions such as Chakri, Rov, Wanwun, Bhand Pather, and Ladishah mirror Kashmir's communal ethos and agrarian rhythms, set to indigenous talas and instruments like the Tumbaknaer and Rabab. As a whole, Kashmir's musical continuum—sacred, classical, and folk—demands urgent scholarly attention, preservation, and global celebration as a unique civilizational soundscape of India.

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