

Music, Tradition, and Cultural Identity: A Comparative Study of Maithilī and Māgahī Folk Music

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Abstract

In the heart of Bihar and its neighbouring regions, two lively streams of folk music—Maithilī and Māgahī—have long flowed side by side. Though closely related, each tradition has developed its own individual cultural identity, deeply embedded in the daily rhythms of community life. From the moment of birth to rites of passage, from the toil of agricultural fields to the joy of festivals, the music of these communities provides a soundtrack for every stage of life. (Pathak, 2018) This study studies these living traditions by analysing how song-text, melody, rhythm, voice, movement, ritual, and instruments converge in performance. Rather than viewing the music as a static archive, it is approached as a dynamic practice that expresses emotion, enacts ritual, shapes social relationships, preserves memory, and transmits wisdom from generation to generation. Examples such as the invocation of "Tohre Bharose Braham Baba" in Jhijhiyā, the fellowship of "Sāmā Khele Chhalālī Bhaujī Saṅg Sahelī" in Sāmā-Cakevā, and the celebratory Māgahī sohar and saṁskāra-gīta show how these songs embody the tales and hopes of their communities. Musical instruments such as ḍholaka, nāgara, mañjīrā, jhājh, kartāl, bāsuri, śahnāī, pipahī, and harmonium are vital to these traditions, moulding the soundscape and assisting collective participation. Oral transmission, repetition, and communal involvement are essential to such practices, while different languages, themes, and performance styles contribute to their distinctive character. However, these traditions are not confined to their original village contexts. With the advent of stage performances, recordings, and digital media, Maithilī and Māgahī folk music have adapted to new environments. Keeping these traditions depends on supporting the living contexts—community, performer, and occasion—that enable the music to evolve.

Keywords: Maithilī Folk Music, Māgahī Folk Music, Musical Performance, Folk Tradition, Ethnomusicology, Oral Tradition, Jhijhiyā, Sāmā-Cakevā, Sohar, Folk Instruments, Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

Understanding folk music necessitates attention to the lived experiences of the communities in which it is embedded. In village settings, music is not limited to formal venues or written notation. Instead, it is woven into daily life. Singing accompanies agricultural activities, marks important life events such as marriage and mourning, and provides rhythm for both routine and ritual.

In these villages of Bihar and its neighbouring regions, every folk song is born from a specific moment: a birth, a wedding, a festival, a change of season, or a communal gathering. The music's meaning cannot be separated from these realities. (Maithili Music, n.d.) As this journey progresses, we will see *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* folk music not as isolated melodies but as elaborate weavings in which text, tune, rhythm, movement, ritual, and relationship are inextricably entwined.

In Mithila, the *Maithilī* language is expressed through poetry and song, permeating daily life in the fields and courtyards of Bihar and Nepal's Terai region. These songs recall ancestors, celebrate harvests, and reinforce family ties. In contrast, Magadha, associated with the *Māgahī* language, maintains its own musical tradition. While both regions share themes such as kinship, fertility, devotion, longing, and seasonal cycles, each tradition stands apart through its unique memories, rituals, and linguistic characteristics. (Poetics of Maithili Folk Songs: Re-defining 'Sita' as a Maithil Feminist, 2026, pp. 62-72)

In both *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* country, music is a companion from the cradle to the grave. When a child is born, neighbours gather to sing blessings and hopes for the future. Weddings fill the air with mirth and playful teasing, each stage marked with a special song. As the months turn, villagers sing to welcome the rains, to mourn the end of summer, or to coax new crops from the soil. Even the smallest rituals—a prayer at daybreak, a festival under the full moon—become occasions for music and joint celebration, where movement, objects, and song blend into a single, vibrant tradition.

This story is not about tradition as a dusty heirloom, but as something alive and ever-changing. Each performance breathes new life into old songs, formed by the singer's voice, the mood of the gathering, and the tools of the times—be they hands, drums, or microphones. As we journey onward, we'll see how community, creativity, and even technology keep these traditions vibrant, making sure they remain living forces in the present, not vestiges of the past.

Throughout this survey, we will pause to listen to the sounds of those who carry these traditions forward. We will hear the ritual invocations of *Jhijhiyā*—pleas for protection and prosperity sung in the darkness of night. We will join the circle of women in *Sāmā-Cakevā*, where jovial banter and sisterhood echo in the lyrics. We will also step into *Māgahī* homes, listening as *sohar* and *saṃskāra-gīta* change simple events into occasions of collective meaning. By pursuing these songs into their native habitats, we discover not just their words and melodies, but the deeper stories they tell.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

1. To analyse the cultural, social, and musical features of *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* folk music, including their major functional and thematic categories.
2. To compare the performance contexts, ritual roles, and modes of oral transmission in *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* traditions, with attention to gender participation and musical instruments.
3. To examine the interplay between song-text, melody, rhythm, and ritual action in selected folk songs as performance texts.
4. To assess the impact of modern media, recording, and stage presentation on the transformation, preservation, and transmission of these traditions.

3. Research Methodology

This research uses a richly layered ethnomusicological methodology, blending descriptive, comparative, and performance-oriented approaches to reveal the living traditions of *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* folk music. The inquiry draws on extensive sources, from institutional archives such as those at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts to published collections of folk songs, academic studies, and documented systems of folk classification. The study's foundation is further strengthened by fieldwork and close textual analysis, enabling appreciation of both the music's technique and its social context.

At the centre of this system is the conviction that folk music cannot be understood solely as lyrics or melodies on a page. Instead, selected songs are explored as both cultural texts and living performances, with attention to how melody, rhythm, vocal style, musical instruments, ritual actions, and social participation interact. Each performance is a dynamic event formed by the singers' emotions, the audience's responses, and the exceptional convergence of people, place, and occasion. This analysis treats folk music as a holistic, ever-evolving phenomenon inseparable from the lives of the communities who create and sustain it.

In comparing *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* traditions, the study follows interwoven threads. It studies the vast repertoires and thematic variety of the songs, exploring how stories of love, devotion, kinship, and agriculture are expressed in music and words. It examines the ritual and communal contexts in which these songs are performed, the musical structures that give them form, and the vocal techniques that bring them to life. The research also explores how melodies and rhythms are organised, how instruments are used, and how collective participation shapes the music's expressive power. The study considers the roles of gender and transmission in sustaining tradition, observes natural variation in oral cultures, and reflects on how modern media and technology influence performance practices.

Recognising the diversity among villages, performers, and ritual occasions, the method treats categories and distinctions as flexible analytical tools rather than rigid boundaries. Variation is not just tolerated but praised as an essential characteristic of oral tradition, showing the creativity and capacity that keep folk music vital across eras and changing times.

Ultimately, the songs selected for close study are presented as representative examples. Their detailed analysis is intended not to offer an exhaustive catalogue of *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* folk traditions, but to illuminate the wider principles, patterns, and living realities that animate this rich and enduring musical heritage.

4. Tradition, Community, and Cultural Identity

Tradition is central to the understanding of folk music. In *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* communities, musical knowledge is frequently embedded within family relationships, ritual practices, seasonal activities, and community meetings.

Unlike formally institutionalised musical traditions, where compositions may be preserved through written notation and standardised pedagogical systems, folk music is primarily transmitted through listening, imitation, memory, and participation. The singer learns not simply a musical phrase or text but also the appropriate occasion, social relationships, manner of singing, rhythmic organisation, and ritual significance associated with the song. (Pathak, 2018)

This makes folk music an important repository of cultural identity. The song's language carries regional identity, while its performance activates collective memory. A marriage song connects the present ceremony with earlier generations; a seasonal song links musical expression to ecological experience; and a birth song connects an individual event to wider ideas of family continuity.

The uploaded study detects kinship, fertility, devotion, separation, agricultural life, seasonal cycles, and domestic negotiation as recurring themes in both traditions. (Pathak, 2018)

5. Maithilī Folk Music: Repertoire and Performance

Maithilī folk music includes a broad repertoire associated with life-cycle events (such as birth, marriage, and rites of passage), annual activities (including harvests and festivals), changing seasons, expressions of devotion, love, beauty, and knowledge, and the preservation of collective memory. These categories are not simply abstract; they are reflected in specific song-types such as *sohar* (birth songs), *samdaun* (bride's departure), *bārahmāsā* (songs of the twelve months), and festival songs linked to rituals like *Sāmā-Cakevā* and *Jhijhiyā*, each corresponding to distinct moments of community life (Kumari, 2025, pp. 1-10; Pathak, 2018). These classifications show that the folk repertoire is closely intertwined with social experience, marking, interpreting, and strengthening the rhythms of communal life (Pathak, 2018).

5.1 Life-Cycle Songs

Birth-related songs, particularly *sohar*, play a key role in *Maithilī* ritual life by welcoming the newborn and articulating blessings for health, prosperity, and family continuity. These songs are not only musical expressions but also vehicles for collectively expressing joy, gratitude, and hope for the future. *Sohar* performances, often led by groups of women, also transmit cultural values and reinforce kinship ties, reflecting the belief that a child's arrival is both a familial and a community occasion (Anand et al., 2026, pp. 45–60; Pathak, 2018).

Marriage in *Maithilī* society produces an extensive repertoire of songs linked to different ritual stages, including pre-wedding, wedding, and post-wedding ceremonies. These songs are rich in auspicious expressions, humour, playful teasing, social negotiation, emotional intensity, and poignant representations of departure and transition. Notably, *samdaun*—a genre associated with the bride's departure from her parental home—expresses separation, love, and social expectation. Performing *samdaun* enables participants to process the mixed emotions of the bride's transition, affording a shared space for grief, hope, and support (Pathak, 2018; Poetics of Maithili Folk Songs, 2026).

Songs connected to rites such as upanayana (sacred thread ceremony) and *munḍana* (first hair-cutting) demonstrate the intimate relationship between music and ritual action. In these contexts, the song does not simply describe the rite; its performance is essential to constituting the ritual experience. Singing, along with ritual gestures and collective participation, transforms the event into a meaningful and memorable occasion, strengthening the rite's social and sacred significance (Pathak, 2018).

5.2 Seasonal and Agricultural Songs

The *Maithilī* repertoire includes a rich variety of seasonal forms, such as *bārahmāsā* (songs of the twelve months), *chaimāsā* (summer songs) and *chaumāsā* (monsoon songs), in which the cyclical passage of months becomes a poetic and musical framework for expressing emotions of love, longing, separation, the beauty of nature, devotion, and philosophical reflection. These songs often use vivid imagery to evoke the changing environment, the rhythms of agricultural life, and individuals' emotional responses to these natural cycles. For example, *bārahmāsā* songs might describe how each month brings a new mood or challenge, using the seasons as metaphors for human relationships and spiritual states (Banisudha et al., 2026, pp. 138-151).

Agricultural songs are performed alongside ploughing, sowing, transplanting, harvesting, and other forms of rural labour. Their rhythms closely synchronise with the physical movements of work, not only making tasks more bearable but also fostering unity and coordination among participants. These songs transmit practical knowledge about the land, weather, and crops, while also reinforcing communal values and

ecological wisdom passed down through generations. Performing agricultural songs transforms routine work into a collective cultural experience, blending utility with artistry and social bonding (Banisudha et al., 2026, pp. 138-151; Kumar & Sharma, 2018, pp. 140-142).

Festival and *vrata* songs, especially those associated with *Sāmā-Cakevā* and other regional observances, further illustrate the intimate connection between music, ritual time, and the transmission of collective memory. Through the repetition of ritual songs and the use of specific melodies and refrains, participants actively recreate and renew their community's shared heritage. These performances mark sacred calendars, reinforce group identity, and ensure the continuity of cultural traditions from one generation to the next (Poetics of Maithili Folk Songs, 2026, pp. 62-72).

6. Jhijhiyā: Ritual, Protection, and Performance

Jhijhiyā is a vivid example of the integrated and multi-modal character of *Maithilī* folk performance, in which song, dance, ritual action, movement, visual symbolism, and collective participation all converge to produce a powerful ritual event (Pathak, 2018, pp. 1-10). The performance of *Jhijhiyā* typically occurs during the autumnal Navarātra festival, when women and girls, carrying earthen pots with perforations and a lamp inside, move in rhythmic procession through the village at night. This visual and kinetic display magnifies the song's ritual power and transforms the communal space (Poetics of Maithili Folk Songs, 2026, pp. 62-72).

One traditional example supplied for this study is:

“Tohre Bharose Barham Baba Jhijhiyā Banailli Ho”

Another example includes:

“Devi More Aylin Nihuri Paiyā Lāgu”

and the expressive phrase:

“Chal Chal Ge Dainiyā...”

These song texts reveal a ritual and protective orientation. The invocation of *Braham Baba* (a local protective deity) in *“Tohre Bharose Barham Baba”* establishes a relationship between the performers and a supernatural protector, asking for security and health. The reference to *dainiyā* (witch or harmful spirit) in *“Chal Chal Ge Dainiyā...”* dramatizes the opposition between protection and danger, strengthening the ritual's function as an act of communal safeguarding (Pathak, 2018, pp. 110-113).

The performance is therefore far more than a simple musical rendition of a text. Its ritual effectiveness derives from repetition of key phrases, invocations of deities, collective responses, rhythmic group movement, and the symbolic action of carrying the lamp-lit pots. This blending of music, movement, and visual symbolism creates a powerful combined experience that both enacts and supports communal protection, memory, and identity (Poetics of Maithili Folk Songs, 2026, pp. 62-72; Pathak, 2018).

6.1 “Tohre Bharose Braham Baba”

A recorded version of *“Tohre Bharose Braham Baba”* is performed by Rashmi Rani with a chorus. The lyrics are credited as traditional, with music by Dhananjay Mishra, and the recording was released under T-Series.

The commercial recording offers an example of transforming a traditional repertoire into a contemporary mediated form. The traditional song shifts from a community-based ritual environment to a studio-produced recording.

This distinction is important. The recording preserves elements of the inherited song while including contemporary arrangements, amplification, instrumental treatment, and a mediated listening environment.

The song demonstrates that tradition can survive technological transformation. The contemporary recording does not replace the traditional practice but creates another mode of circulation.

7. Sāmā-Cakevā: Seasonal Ritual and Collective Participation

Sāmā-Cakevā is among the most vibrant and socially significant Maithilī seasonal and ritual traditions, celebrated primarily by women and girls during the month of Kārtik (October–November). This tradition unfolds over several nights and brings together narrative storytelling, the singing of specialised seasonal songs, the use of ritual objects such as clay figurines of Sāmā and Chakēbā, and communal activity in open-air gatherings (Poetics of Maithili Folk Songs, 2026, pp. 73–88).

Examples supplied for this study include:

“Sāmā Chak Sāmā Chak Abihā He”

“Nadiyā Ke Tīre-Tīre Phalā Bhaiyā Khelathi Śikār”

“Kaune Bhaiyā Ropal Āmun-Jāmuna”

“Dubhiyā Bhojana Karu Sāmā He Chakēbā”

“Sāmā Khele Chhalālī Bhaujī Saṅg Sahelī”

These songs illustrate the repertoire's collective and dialogic nature. Performances are structured around call-and-response exchanges, shared refrains, and communal improvisation, fostering engaged involvement and strengthening social bonds (Das, 2023; Poetics of Maithili Folk Songs, 2026).

The line *“Sāmā Khele Chhalālī Bhaujī Saṅg Sahelī”* is especially significant because it highlights the prominent roles of *bhabhī* (sister-in-law) and *sahelī* (female friends), foregrounding the festival as a social space for female participation and solidarity. Through these performances, women collectively celebrate their relationships and negotiate their social identities inside the community (Das, 2023, pp. 41–44).

Sāmā-Cakevā is not simply a musical event but an immersive social and ritual practice. The songs frequently recount the legend of *Sāmā* and *Chakēbā*, invoking themes of virtue, adversity, and reunion, while the repeated ritual actions and communal interaction create a performative environment for teaching, renewing, and transmitting cultural knowledge and memory. The tradition strengthens intergenerational bonds, fosters group identity, and ensures the ongoing vitality of Maithilī folk culture (Poetics of Maithili Folk Songs, 2026, pp. 73–88; Das, 2023).

8. Māgahī Folk Music: Repertoire and Performance

Māgahī folk music encompasses a substantial, vibrant repertoire that reflects the different experiences and cultural manifestations of its communities (Pankaj, 2025; Siṃha & Kumārī, 1999). Prominent genres include *saṃskāra-gīta* (songs for life-cycle rituals), seasonal songs, work songs, agricultural songs, devotional traditions, narrative ballads, and forms unique to specific castes, villages, or occupations (Prasāda, 1962).

Saṃskāra-gīta occupy a central role in *Māgahī* musical life, accompanying significant rites of passage such as birth, initiation (*muṇḍana*), marriage, and *gauna*. These songs mark transitions in family and social life, blending ritual observance with musical skill. Seasonal and agricultural songs connect nature's patterns and the agricultural calendar with musical performance—villagers sing to welcome the rains, celebrate harvests, or mark festivals. Work songs, often sung collectively in the fields or at group meetings,

foster social cohesion, provide encouragement during labour, and preserve oral histories.

Devotional and narrative songs enrich the *Māgahī* repertoire, telling stories of local deities, legendary heroes, or moral lessons, and are often performed in both household and community sacred contexts. The diversity of these traditions is apparent in the stylistic differences, dialect differences, and performance practices found throughout different *Māgahī*-speaking regions.

The careful documentation of *Māgahī Saṃskāra-Gīta* in scholarly and community archives affirms the lasting significance of life-cycle singing, showing how these songs not only accompany but also mould the most meaningful moments in *Māgahī* social and ritual life.

8.1 Māgahī Sohar

Sohar is an important birth-song tradition across several eastern Hindi-speaking communities, including *Māgahī*.

Representative examples supplied for the present study include:

“*Aīlī Aṅganā Meṃ Lalanā*” is a classic *Māgahī sohar* sung to celebrate a child's birth, especially a son, in the household. The lyrics describe the newborn's arrival in the courtyard (*anganā*) and express joy, gratitude, and hope for the child's future. Female relatives and neighbours perform the song, gathering around the mother and child to sing blessings, narrate the happiness filling the home, and invoke deities for protection and prosperity (Anand et al., 2026, pp. 45-60).

“*Rām Ke Janamwā Bhail*” draws from epic themes, recounting the birth of Lord Rama as a parallel to the birth of a local child. This song situates the newborn within a sacred genealogy, suggesting that every child's arrival is blessed and monumental. The lyrics often blend mythological references with immediate family joy, strengthening the cultural importance of birth and the continuity of tradition (Negotiating Patriarchy Through Performance, 2024).

“*Lalanā Janmaleṃ Ho*” is a celebratory song focusing on the collective aspect of childbirth. The song's refrain announces the birth of a precious child (*lalanā*), while the verses recount collective excitement, blessings from elders, and rituals to welcome the new life. The song may include jovial banter and affectionate teasing, underscoring shared happiness and strengthening social relationships among women in the community (Anand et al., 2026, pp. 45-60).

These songs are not purely lyrical expressions but are vital to the ritual of *sohar*, transforming childbirth into a social and musical event. The performance allows women to communicate their experiences, reinforce kinship, and transmit cultural values to the next generation (Anand et al., 2026, pp. 45-60; Negotiating Patriarchy Through Performance, 2024).

These songs celebrate a child's birth and express family happiness, blessings, kinship, humour, and expectations of family continuity.

The performance of *sohar* transforms childbirth from a private domestic event into a collective social and musical occasion. The newborn becomes the focus of a network of family and community relationships. (Negotiating patriarchy through performance: A gendered analysis of Sohar songs among Magahi women in Bihar, 2023, pp. 500-515)

The uploaded study notes that women's *sohar* performances can simultaneously reproduce and negotiate gender norms. (Anand et al., 2026, pp. 45-60)

Thus, *Māgahī sohar* has both musical and social significance. It provides a space for women to express experiences of motherhood, family relationships, social expectations, and emotional life.

9. Māgahī Saṃskāra-gīta

Saṃskāra-gīta refers to songs associated with life-cycle rituals. The repertoire can include songs connected with birth, *muṇḍana*, marriage, *gauna*, and other transitional events.

Examples provided for the present study include:

“*Sundar Dulhā Khojal Gel*”
 “*Bābā Ke Aṅganwā Meṃ Bāje Śahnāī*”
 “*Nimiyā Ke Ḍāri Maiyā*”

These songs demonstrate how music accompanies transitions in family and social life.

The example “*Bābā Ke Aṅganwā Meṃ Bāje Śahnāī*” is significant because the *śahnāī* itself becomes part of the textual representation of the ceremony. The instrument's sound evokes the ceremonial environment and links musical sound with social meaning.

The *śahnāī* is commonly associated with weddings, processions, and auspicious occasions. Its inclusion in the song-text shows that instruments can function as both musical resources and symbols within folk poetry. (Panche Baja: Nepal's Five-Instrument Auspicious Wedding Ensemble, 2026) (Gurung, 2018)

10. Comparative Repertoire

The major repertoires of the two traditions can be summarised as follows:

Category	Classification / associated songs	Nature / emphasis
Birth	Sohar and related ritual songs	Sohar and sa skāra-gīta
Marriage	Vivāha-gīta, samdaun and associated songs	Marriage sa skāra-gīta
Seasonal	Bārahmāsā, chaimāsā, chaumāsā, Sāmā-Cakevā	Seasonal and festival songs
Ritual performance	Jhijhiyā, Sāmā-Cakevā	Sa skāra-gīta and devotional traditions
Agriculture	Agricultural and work songs	Agricultural, work, and ecological songs
Devotional	Śiva, Śakti, Vi u, Rāma, K a, Ga gā and others	Devotional and narrative traditions
Women's repertoire	Strong domestic and ritual participation	Strong domestic and ritual participation
Oral transmission	Central	Central

Classification of Maithali Folk Songs and Performance Tradition

The comparison indicates notable similarities while demonstrating different regional expressions.

11. Musical Characteristics of *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* Folk Music

Maithilī and *Māgahī* folk traditions share several broad musical principles: oral transmission, functional association with social and ritual occasions, collective participation, recurrent melodic phrases, flexible ornamentation, and rhythmic motifs suited to movement and group singing. (Sharma, 2023, pp. 1-10)

Neither tradition should be reduced to a single scale, *rāga*, or *tāla*. Local performance may employ modal material that overlaps with wider North Indian musical practice without necessarily following the formal rules of classical *rāga*. (Manuel, 2015, pp. 82-115)

11.1 Melody

Folk melodies frequently employ relatively short and repetitive phrases, a feature that reflects the concise and recurrent nature of the song-texts themselves. The melodic structure is closely connected to the textual structure, so repeated musical phrases often coincide with the recurrence of key words or lines in the lyrics. This close relationship between melody and text makes songs easier to memorise and transmit across generations, keeping the oral tradition at the heart of *Maithilī* folk music (Kumar & Sharma, 2018, pp. 123-145).

Repetition serves both musical and social purposes. Musically, it aids memorisation, creates continuity, and supplies a framework for improvisation. Socially, repetition enables other participants—whether singers, instrumentalists, or listeners—to join in, supporting collective participation and consolidating social ties (Kumar & Sharma, 2018, pp. 123-145).

The melodic realisation of a song is not fixed; it may vary according to the singer's individual style, the locality, the occasion, and the emotional setting of the performance. Such flexibility is a hallmark of oral tradition, allowing songs to adapt to different settings while maintaining recognisable core features (Martí, 2024).

11.2 Vocal Expression

Folk singing generally prioritises textual intelligibility and emotional communication. Singers may employ glides, grace notes, oscillations, nasal resonance, and expressive pitch inflexions. (Jha, 1986, pp. 223-230)

Women's group singing frequently involves lead-and-response structures, while solo or semi-solo performances allow greater flexibility in tempo and ornamentation. (Negotiating patriarchy through performance: A gendered analysis of Sohar songs among Magahi women in Bihar, 2024)

12. Rhythm and Tāla

Rhythm is central to folk performance because it coordinates singers, dancers, and instrumentalists, providing a temporal framework that enables the flawless integration of musical and bodily movement. In both *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* traditions, rhythm acts as a binding force that not only organises musical sound but also synchronises collective action during performance (Clayton, 2008).

Dādrā- and *kaharvā*-like six- and eight-beat organisations occur commonly in North Indian folk practice, although actual performance may differ from theoretical descriptions. These rhythmic cycles, known for their modifiability, are fundamental to group participation and allow improvisation within a recognisable structure. The percussionist, often playing the *ḍholak* or *nāgara*, responds dynamically to singers and dancers, adjusting tempo, accent, and articulation to suit the performance's mood and context. This interactive quality is a hallmark of live folk music and distinguishes it from more rigidly notated traditions (Clayton, 2008; Rajendran, 2020).

Performers deliberately use accents, pauses, accelerations, and repeated cadences to denote shifts in textual emphasis or transitions between ritual stages. These rhythmic modifications not only enhance the music's expressive potential but also cue listeners and viewers to the event's unfolding structure (Clayton, 2008).

In collective singing, rhythm also performs an important social function. It lets individuals with varying degrees of musical experience participate by providing a shared pulse that supports coordination and inclusion. This accessibility is fundamental to the oral tradition, ensuring folk music remains a participatory, community-oriented practice (Menika, 2025).

13. Musical Instruments and Their Functions

Folk performances in *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* traditions employ a diverse array of musical instruments, which can be broadly categorised into four main types: membranophones (such as drums), idiophones (instruments that produce sound through the vibration of the material itself, like cymbals), aerophones (wind instruments), and chordophones or electro-acoustic instruments (stringed and modern amplified instruments). However, beyond these conventional classifications, each instrument's significance is deeply rooted in its specific role and function within the performance context. The way these instruments are utilised—whether to set rhythm, support melody, or enhance the expressive quality of a performance—often holds greater importance than their technical categorisation (Maithili Music, n.d.).

13.1 Dholaka

The *dholaka* is one of the most adaptable and widely used folk drums in *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* musical traditions. Its double-headed construction allows a range of tonal possibilities, making it suitable for providing the basic rhythmic framework in diverse settings—marriage songs, seasonal singing, devotional repertoire, and community entertainment. The *dholaka*'s portability and versatility mean that it can be played indoors for small gatherings or outdoors for larger communal functions. Rhythms are often tailored to specific song genres and ritual actions, allowing the drum to signal transitions inside ceremonies and coordinate group singing and dancing (Rajendran, 2020; Kumar & Sharma, 2018, pp. 130-132).

Related drums such as *dhol*, *mādal*, and *mandara* are often used for outdoor performances, processions, and dance events that require greater acoustic projection. The larger, louder *dhol* is especially suited to processional contexts, while the *mādal* (common in Nepali and North Indian folk music) and *mandara* (a barrel-shaped drum) add regional colour and rhythmic diversity. The choice of drum frequently reflects the scale of the event, the nature of participation, and the need for sonic reach in open-air settings (Gurung, 2018; Sharma & Ojha, 2023, p. 3383).

13.2 Nāgara and Large Drums

The *nāgara* and other large drums provide powerful acoustic projection and are traditionally associated with public ceremonies, religious festivals, processions, and dance events. Their deep, resonant sound can announce the commencement of major communal gatherings, mark the climax of ritual sequences, or accompany dramatic dance performances. The *nāgara* is often played in pairs and struck with sticks, producing thunderous rhythms that can be heard across considerable distances (Kumar & Sharma, 2018).

The function of *nāgara* and similar large drums is both musical and social: they create a public sonic environment, assert the community's presence and identity, and signal transitions and highlights within communal events. The dramatic timbre and volume of these drums transform the soundscape, turning ordinary spaces into ritual arenas and drawing all participants' attention to key moments in the ceremony (Sharma & Ojha, 2023, p. 3383).

13.3 Mañjirā, Jhājh, and Kartāl

Mañjirā, **jhājh**, and **kartāl** are small idiophones whose bright, percussive sounds reinforce rhythmic cycles and facilitate communal participation during folk performances (Menika, 2025, pp. 4-7). Unlike large or complex percussion instruments, these hand-held instruments are easy to play and require minimal technical training. Their simplicity allows a wide range of participants—including women, children, and elders—to join in, distributing the rhythmic responsibility across the group rather than concentrating it in the hands of a single specialist drummer (Menika, 2025, pp. 4-7).

This distributed approach to rhythm is central to the participatory ethos of *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* folk music.

In many ritual and festive contexts, multiple participants play these instruments together, creating a dense, interlocking texture that supports group singing and dancing. The collaborative use of *mañjīrā*, *jhājh*, and *kartāl* not only strengthens the musical pulse but also symbolises the collective spirit of folk performance, ensuring that rhythm is a shared, community-driven experience (Kumar & Sharma, 2018, pp. 130-132).

13.4 *Bāsurī*, *Śahnāī*, and *Pipahī*

The *bāsurī*, a bamboo flute, enriches folk performances with distinctive melodic colour, especially in pastoral, seasonal, and romantic settings. Its gentle, expressive sound evokes the landscapes and emotional nuances central to many *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* songs, making it an indispensable part of musical storytelling in these traditions (Maithili Music, n.d.).

The *śahnāī*, a double-reed wind instrument, is closely associated with ceremonial occasions. Its resonant and auspicious timbre makes it a fixture at weddings, processions, and other significant rituals, where it is believed to invoke blessings and mark moments of communal celebration. The instrument's cultural role extends beyond mere musicality, serving as a sonic symbol of prosperity and festivity in Bhojpuri and related folk traditions (Bhojpuri Folk Music, n.d.).

Pipahī and similar reed instruments are characterised by a sharp, penetrating tone that carries well in outdoor settings. This quality makes them particularly suitable for open-air performances and public gatherings. Beyond their melodic function, these instruments often serve as tools for ceremonial signalling, announcing events or transitions within ritual contexts. Their versatility and distinctive sound contribute both to the musical fabric and the social function of folk performances (Mishra, 2021).

14. Comparative Performance Analysis of Selected Songs

The selected examples reveal how *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* songs operate as performance texts rather than merely written compositions.

Representative Maithilī and Māgahī Folk Songs, Ritual Contexts and Performance Characteristics

Folk Song / Title	Tradition / Language	Ritual / Social Context	Principal Theme / Function	Performance Characteristics
“Tohre Bharose Barham Baba”	Maithilī / Jhijhiyā	Ritual	Protection and devotion	Collective, repetitive and ritualistic
“Chal Chal Ge Dainiyā”	Maithilī / Jhijhiyā	Ritual	Confrontation and protection	Dramatic, rhythmic and participatory
“Sāmā Khele Chhalālī Bhaujī Saṅg Sahelī”	Maithilī / Sāmā-Cakevā	Seasonal ritual	Female participation and community bonding	Collective, participatory and socially interactive
“Sāmā Chak Sāmā Chak Abihā He”	Maithilī / Sāmā-Cakevā	Seasonal ritual	Invocation and celebration	Repetitive, communal and ceremonial

“Ailī Aṅganā Mem Lalanā”	Māgahī / Sohar	Birth ritual	Celebration of childbirth	Vocal, communal and celebratory
“Rām Ke Janamwā Bhail”	Māgahī / Sohar	Birth ritual	Birth, auspiciousness and devotional celebration	Devotional, celebratory and communal
“Lalanā Janmaleṃ Ho”	Māgahī / Sohar	Birth ritual	Family continuity and celebration	Celebratory, repetitive and communal
“Sundar Dulhā Khojal Gel”	Māgahī / Saṃskāra-gīta	Marriage ritual	Selection/celebration of the bridegroom and marriage	Ceremonial, participatory and socially oriented
“Bābā Ke Aṅganwā Mem Bāje Śahnāī”	Māgahī / Saṃskāra-gīta	Marriage ritual	Marriage ceremony and festive soundscape	Ceremonial, festive and communal
“Nimiyā Ke Dāri Maiyā”	Māgahī / Saṃskāra-gīta	Ritual	Devotion, worship and ritual observance	Devotional, collective and ritualistic

Representative Maithilī and Māgahī Folk Songs, Ritual Contexts and Performance Characteristics

15. *Jhijhiyā* and *Māgahī Sohar*: A Comparative Interpretation

Jhijhiyā and *Māgahī sohar* offer a particularly instructive comparison because, while both genres are deeply embedded in ritual contexts and rely heavily on communal participation, their thematic and social orientation diverge significantly. *Jhijhiyā*, performed predominantly in the Mithila and Bhojpurī regions during the Dussehra festival, centres on themes of protection, ritual belief, supernatural agency, and collective action. The invocation of Brahm Baba and references to *dainiyā* (witches or malevolent forces) within its lyrics construct a dramatic narrative of safeguarding the community through ritual performance (Verma, 2012). This ritual singing is not merely expressive; it is believed to have real, efficacious power to ward off evil, reinforcing communal bonds through shared vulnerability and collective agency (Narayan, 1994).

In contrast, *Māgahī sohar* songs, sung to mark childbirth and its associated ceremonies, focus on celebration, blessing, kinship, and the affirmation of family continuity. The social function of *sohar* is to transform the arrival of a child into a communal event, emphasising joy, auspiciousness, and the reinforcement of familial and social ties (Jha, 2011). Here, the ritual is less about protection from external threats and more about blessing and integrating the new member into the social fabric.

Despite these thematic differences, both genres share core musical principles that facilitate their social function. Repetition, oral transmission, collective singing, textual emphasis, rhythmic coordination, flexible melodic treatment, and strong contextual dependence characterise both *Jhijhiyā* and *Māgahī sohar* (Manuel, 1993; Henry, 1988). These musical features are not incidental: repetition and collective singing, for example, enable broad participation regardless of individual musical training, reinforcing group identity and cohesion (Blackburn, 1989). Oral transmission and contextual flexibility ensure that the songs

remain relevant and adaptable to local needs and circumstances.

Thus, a comparison of *Jhijhiyā* and *Māgahī sohar* reveals that similar musical mechanisms—anchored in oral, participatory traditions—can serve divergent social and ritual ends, whether invoking supernatural protection or celebrating new life. The musical commonalities underscore the adaptability of oral traditions to varying thematic content and community needs (Manuel, 1993).

16. *Sāmā-Cakevā* and *Māgahī Saṃskāra-gīta*: Ritual and Social Participation

Sāmā-Cakevā and *Māgahī saṃskāra-gīta* also provide a productive basis for comparison. *Sāmā-Cakevā* is deeply embedded within a seasonal and ritual framework, strongly emphasising communal participation. The involvement of women—such as *bhabhī* and *sahelī*—along with ritual objects, narrative, and song, creates a collective social environment. *Māgahī saṃskāra-gīta*, by contrast, accompanies life-cycle transitions such as marriage and other ceremonies, with the song forming part of the ritual sequence and expressing the social significance of transition. Both genres illustrate how musical performance can create social cohesion, as participants in these traditions are not merely listeners but active contributors to the performance event.

17. Gender and Women's Musical Participation

Women have historically been the primary bearers and transmitters of *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* domestic and ritual repertoire. Marriage songs, birth songs, seasonal songs, and domestic ritual songs frequently create spaces for women's collective musical expression, allowing them to communicate emotions, social expectations, humour, family relationships, and experiences of transition. These performances go beyond mere preservation; women actively interpret and modify the songs they inherit. Their role should therefore be seen as one of creative transmission rather than passive preservation. Studying women's folk singing can thus provide valuable insights into gender relations, social expectations, emotional expression, and the construction of community identity.

18. Orality, Memory, and Variation

Folk music is primarily transmitted through listening, repetition, memory, and participation. A song may not possess a single authoritative version. Lyrics often vary according to locality, pronunciation, performer, ritual context, and memory, while melodic phrases may also expand or contract depending on the singer. This variation is a key characteristic of oral tradition, enabling music to remain socially relevant and adaptable. For this reason, documentation should aim to preserve multiple versions wherever possible. The objective should not be to identify one "authentic" version, but rather to document the diversity of performance practices through which the tradition continues to survive.

19. Folk Music as Cultural Memory

In the villages and towns of Bihar, every melody carries with it the weight of generations. *Maithilī* and *Māgahī* folk songs are not simply artistic expressions, but living vessels of collective memory. Picture a grandmother singing to her grandchildren beneath the shade of a neem tree—her voice weaving together stories of ancestors, tales of harvest and hardship, and the laughter of long-ago weddings. Each note and lyric becomes a thread, binding the past to the present.

Through these songs, families pass down the essence of relationships: the roles of mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and the bonds that hold them together. Rituals—from the lighting of lamps at Diwali to the intricate ceremonies of marriage—are preserved in the refrains and choruses that echo from one generation to the next. Knowledge of planting, reaping, and the changing seasons is encoded in verses sung at dawn and dusk, ensuring that even as the world changes, the land's wisdom endures.

Religious beliefs and local landscapes find voice in these melodies, as do the particular joys and struggles of women—whose songs often offer a glimpse into lives otherwise left unrecorded. Emotional histories, both triumphant and tragic, are sung and resung, so that every heartbreak, hope, and celebration becomes a communal inheritance.

The power of these songs lies in their performance at moments of deep cultural significance. When a wedding song floats through the air, it does more than bless the couple; it bridges generations, reminding all who listen of the enduring ties that shape their lives. A birth song is more than a welcome for a new child—it reaffirms that the family's story continues. Seasonal songs also turn the passage of time into a shared experience, aligning musical expression with the rhythms of nature and community.

20. Custom and Contemporary Transformation

Contemporary social and technological changes have greatly affected Maithilī and Māgahī folk performance. (Baral et al., 2026)

Urban migration has reduced some traditional village-based performance contexts. Recorded music, television, stage performances, amplification, commercial production, and digital media have changed the way songs circulate. (Stirr, 2017, pp. 667-680)

The uploaded research recognises shortened stage versions, keyboard accompaniment, amplification, and digital circulation as important dimensions of contemporary transformation. (Maithili Music, n.d.)

The example of “*Tohre Bharose Braham Baba*” is particularly relevant because a traditional *Jhijhiyā* song has been transformed into a commercial recording involving a named singer, chorus, professional music direction, and studio production.

Similarly, contemporary recordings of *Sāmā-Cakevā* make traditional repertoire available beyond its original community context.

These developments should not automatically be viewed as the disappearance of tradition. They can also be understood as ways tradition adapts to new environments.

21. From Ritual Performance to Mediated Performance

The move from traditional ritual performance to recorded and digital performance changes the relationship between performer and audience. (Perea, 2017)

In a traditional setting, the audience may participate directly through singing, clapping, dancing, responding, or ritual action.

In a recorded performance, the listener becomes a receiver of a mediated musical product.

This transformation can reduce certain contextual dimensions of the custom while increasing accessibility. A recording can reach audiences beyond the first village or region and can become a valuable resource for younger generations.

The challenge, therefore, is to maintain awareness of the authentic cultural context while accepting new forms of dissemination.

A comparative analysis of “*Inaam Mori Nanadi Ki Lebai Baaju*,” “*Baba Ghaat Bajai Ge Badhaiya, Bhaiya Ghar Putra Bhele Re*,” and “*Mahā Mahā Mithilā Ke Mandir*” reveals the diversity and richness of Maithili folk music. While all three songs emerge from a shared oral tradition and exhibit features such as repetition, moderate tempo, refrain-based structure, and close alignment with Maithili linguistic rhythm, each performance adapts these elements to serve unique cultural and expressive functions.

“Inaam Mori Nanadi” centers on feminine kinship and the ritual of gift-giving. Through repetitive refrains and a catalogue of everyday objects transformed into musical symbols, the song creates an intimate world of social affection. The musical structure is straightforward, with direct textual entry and refrain-based organization, allowing for easy communal participation and memory. Ornamentation and subtle vocal nuances reinforce the playful, affectionate tone, while the moderate, steady tempo mirrors the regularity of social exchange.

“Baba Ghaat Bajai” shifts the focus from personal relationships to communal joy. This song celebrates the birth of a male child, drawing the entire community into a shared ritual drama. While it relies on a similar musical vocabulary—repetition, moderate tempo, and refrain—the performance is more expansive, allowing space for narrative variation and collective excitement. Here, ornamentation and vocal expression are employed to heighten the celebratory mood, and the alignment of Maithili prosody with melody ensures that the performance remains accessible and participatory. The refrain serves to unite celebrants and mark the significance of the occasion.

“Mahā Mahā Mithilā Ke Mandir” transforms the conventions of the birth song into a mythological and devotional narrative. The song recounts the miraculous birth of Sītā, intertwining folk narrative, maternal emotion, and regional cultural memory within the expressive framework of the sohar tradition. The moderate tempo is retained but used to heighten emotion and weight particular words, while non-lexical vocables add musical momentum and intensify the devotional atmosphere. The singer’s role expands to embody narrator, devotee, and emotional participant, channeling the collective response of the community to Sītā’s arrival. The refrain, in this context, sanctifies the myth and anchors regional identity.

Despite their differences, the three songs share several structural features: direct textual entry, repetitive melodic formulas, refrain-based organization, and a close relationship between linguistic rhythm and melody. These features, characteristic of oral folk transmission, ensure that melodies are recognizable yet flexible enough to accommodate variations in text and expression. Repetition, far from indicating a lack of musical development, functions as a principle for communal memory and participation, while subtle variations in intervening verses enable narrative progression.

Spatially, the performances trace a conceptual arc from the domestic (household), through the communal (courtyard), to the sacred (the cultural landscape of Mithila). This movement mirrors broader scales of Maithili cultural experience: from interpersonal relationships, to collective ritual, to symbolic and mythological identity. The integration of domestic, ritual, and mythological elements within a unified expressive framework is particularly evident in women’s folk music, reflecting the dynamic role of women as cultural bearers and creators.

In summary, Maithili folk music is not a monolithic entity but a dynamic system that adapts common musical resources—melodic structure, repetition, linguistic rhythm, and communal participation—to a wide range of social, ritual, and symbolic contexts. The apparent simplicity of refrain and moderate tempo belies a deep cultural richness, in which kinship, celebration, mythology, and regional identity are continuously enacted and remembered. By comparing these three performances, we gain insight into how Maithili folk music both preserves tradition and adapts to diverse expressive needs, constructing and reaffirming cultural identity at every level of social life.

Parameter	Inaam Mori Nanadi	Baba Ghaat Bajai	Mahā Mahā Mithilā
Primary context	Domestic/familial, gift-giving	Birth celebration/Badhai	Mythological-devotional/sohar-like

Central relationship	Nanad and feminine kinship	Piya, bhaiya, naihar	Sītā, Janaka, Mithila
Main subject	Gifts and adornment	Birth of son and celebration	Birth/arrival of Sītā
Detected tempo	107.116 BPM	102.358 BPM	107.116 BPM
Laya	Moderate, steady	Moderate, slightly more relaxed	Moderate, expressive
Melodic identity	Folk-modal	Folk-modal	Folk-modal/devotional
Definitive rāga	Not established	Not established	Not established
Likely structural principle	Refrain + catalogue verses	Refrain + narrative verses	Narrative + refrain
Principal refrain	“Inaam mori nanadi...”	“Lalana re chalu piya...”	“Lalana re Sītā āelī...”
Textual character	Enumerative	Dramatic/social	Mythological/devotional
Emotional centre	Affection/playfulness	Joy/celebration	Vātsalya/adbhuta/bhakti
Principal space	Household	Courtyard/community	Mithila/sacred landscape
Vocal emphasis	Kinship and objects	Birth and celebration	Sītā, dhartī, Janak, māyē
Major function of repetition	Social participation and memory	Celebration and narrative continuity	Cultural memory and devotional intensification
Dominant perspective	Women’s domestic/social world	Women’s participation in birth celebration	Mythology interpreted through folk women’s expressive idiom design this table in HD quality.

Comparative Analysis of Three Maithili Folk Performances

22. Discussion

The comparative study shows that Maithilī and Māgahī folk music function as **integrated cultural systems** rather than isolated collections of songs. (Sharma & Ojha, 2023, p. 3383)

- First, tradition is inseparable from performance. A song’s meaning emerges through its social and ritual context.
- Second, oral transmission is central to continuity. Variation is not necessarily a sign of deterioration but an essential mechanism that keeps tradition adaptable.
- Third, collective participation is fundamental. Folk music frequently distributes musical duty among singers, instrumentalists, dancers, and community members.
- Fourth, musical instruments are functional components of performance. Percussion coordinates bodies and time; idiophones reinforce communal rhythm; aerophones expand ceremonial space; and harmonium supports contemporary vocal performance.
- Fifth, women have played an important role in preserving and reshaping domestic and ritual repertoires.
- Sixth, contemporary media simultaneously challenge and support traditional practices.

Commercialisation may alter performance contexts, but recording and digital dissemination can also support preservation and wider cultural engagement.

The central analytical shift is therefore from asking “Which instrument belongs to which song?” to asking “What does the instrument enable performers to do within a particular social situation?” This approach frames musical performance as an active social process.

23. Major Findings

The study produces several major findings.

- Maithilī and Māgahī folk music are fundamentally contextual traditions. Their musical meaning depends on ritual, season, social relationship, and performance environment.
- Oral transmission is the main mechanism of continuity. Songs are learned through participation and memory, resulting in regional and unique variations.
- Collective performance is central to both traditions. Repetition, accessible melodic phrases, rhythmic motifs, and response structures facilitate community participation. Musical instruments have functional and symbolic significance. They do not only accompany singing; they also structure movement, establish rhythm, signal ritual transitions, and shape the event's acoustic identity.
- Fifth, women are important musical agents. Their role goes beyond preservation to interpretation, adaptation, and social expression.
- Sixth, Maithilī and Māgahī traditions share musical principles while maintaining distinctive cultural identities through language, repertoire, ritual practices, and regional performance conventions.
- The seventh is that modernisation has produced modification rather than simple disappearance. Traditional repertoire continues to circulate through stage performance, commercial recordings, and digital outlets.

24. Conclusion

Maithilī and Māgahī folk music represent rich and dynamic traditions in which music is inseparable from social life. Their repertoires encompass birth, marriage, agriculture, seasonal cycles, festivals, devotion, ritual, and emotional experience.

The comparative analysis shows that tradition and performance depend on each other. A folk song acquires cultural meaning through the circumstances in which it is sung and through the participation of performers and communities.

The selected examples reinforce this argument. Jhijhiyā demonstrates the relationship between music, ritual protection, belief, movement, and collective performance. Sāmā-Cakevā demonstrates the relationship between seasonal ritual, narrative, women's participation, and communal activity. Māgahī sohar turns childbirth into a collective celebration of family and continuity, while Māgahī saṃskāra-gīta links musical performance to life-cycle transitions and ceremonial practice.

The musical characteristics of these traditions—repetition, flexible melodic organisation, rhythmic cycles, expressive vocalisation, collective response, and contextual performance—make them particularly suited to oral transmission. Instruments such as ḍholaka, nāgara, mañjirā, jhājh, kartāl, bāsurī, śahnāī, pipahī, and harmonium further shape the sonic and collective dimensions of performance.

The study also indicates that folk music should not be understood as static heritage. Contemporary recording, amplification, stage presentation, migration, commercialisation, and digital media have changed

performance conditions. Yet these evolutions also offer new possibilities for dissemination and preservation.

The future preservation of Maithilī and Māgahī folk music should therefore focus on living performance traditions rather than merely collecting textual versions of songs. Documentation should include recordings, musical analysis, performer narratives, ritual contexts, regional variations, gender perspectives, and information concerning instruments and performance practices.

Ultimately, Maithilī and Māgahī folk music demonstrate that musical tradition survives through performance. People remember tradition through singing, renew it through participation, modify it through interpretation, and transmit it through social relationships. The continued vitality of these traditions therefore depends on supporting the communities and performance environments that keep musical knowledge meaningful.

As the uploaded study finishes, future research would benefit from combining detailed musical transcription with long-term ethnographic fieldwork, community partnership, gender-sensitive analysis, and methodical documentation of regional variation.

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