

## DHAK AND DHAKI: THE SOUND OF DURGA PUJA AS WELL AS GANESH PUJA

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### ABSTRACT

The dhak is a huge membranophone instrument from Bengal and Assam. The shapes differ from the almost cylindrical to the barrel. The manner of stretching the hide over the mouths and lacing also varies. It suspended from the neck, tied to the waist and kept on the lap or the ground, and usually played with wooden sticks. The left side is coated to give it a heavier sound. It is of medieval origin, and is used in Hindu religious festivals of the region, especially of Sakta and Shaiva traditions, including Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Charak Puja and Ganesh Puja.

**KEYWORDS:** dhak, dhaki, dhunuchi nach, kasor, ghanta, shankh, ulu, dhol, tasha, jhaanj.

### INTRODUCTION

The dhak is a large, barrel-shaped percussion instrument from Bengal and Assam. Made from a hollow wood body covered with animal hide, it is played with wooden

sticks during major Hindu festivals like Durga Puja, Kali Puja, and Charak Puja.



**Figure-1: Dhak & Dhaki.**

### Key Features

- **Design:** A heavy wooden barrel with two animal-hide heads of different thicknesses.
- **Sound:** The thicker side produces a deep, booming tone.

- **Playing Style:** Slung from the shoulder or neck and struck with two bamboo sticks.
- **Cultural Role:** Essential to Bengali celebrations, accompanying the *dhunuchi nritya* (devotional dance) and festive processions.

### Cultural Importance

- **Durga Puja:** The festival is defined by the heavy, rhythmic beats of the dhak played by traditional drummers known as dhakis.
- **Artisans and Players:** Dhakis travel from rural districts of West Bengal to cities like Kolkata for the autumn celebrations.
- **Evolution:** Modern variations include fusion tracks and a growing number of women learning and performing the traditional instrument.

The drum beats, mostly played by the Bengali Hindu community, along with the *arati* (invocation dance) forms an integral part of Durga Puja unique to Bengal. The Bengali devotional dance *Dhunuchi Nritya* is performed with the rhythmic beats of Dhak during Durga Puja and Kali Puja in Bengal. The tea-tribes of Assam play dhak along with nagara. To make a traditional Dhak—the iconic large barrel drum central to West Bengal's Durga Puja and other regional festivals—artisans use specific raw organic materials and traditional curing ingredients.

### 1. Main Structural Materials

- **The Drum Body (Shell):** Traditionally carved from a single large log of mango wood (Amra), though teak

wood (Sagwan) is also widely preferred by certain communities for its durability and high acoustic resonance.

- **The Drumheads (Membranes):** Thick animal hide (most commonly goat skin or calfskin) is stretched across both openings. The two sides feature varying thicknesses to create distinct bass and treble pitches.
- **Rings and Ropes:** The skins are mounted onto circular bamboo rings and secured tightly across the wooden frame using heavy jute ropes or cotton cords.

**2. Processing & Curing Ingredients:** Before assembly, the raw materials undergo a meticulous conditioning process using a unique mix of kitchen and natural ingredients:

- **Water:** Used for a month-long immersion to cure, soften, and preserve the raw wood trunk before it is hollowed out. It is also used to soak and soften the dried goat skin to make it flexible for stretching.
- **Mustard Oil & Garlic Pods:** Once the wood shell is hollowed out, it is soaked in a vat of boiling mustard oil infused with garlic pods. This traditional treatment deepens the wood's durability, prevents pest infestation, and darkens the look of the drum.



Figure-2: Dhak & Bamboo Sticks.

- **Tuning Paste (Dhak Masala):** A specialized acoustic paste made from a mixture of fine sand, grease, and iron filings is layered onto the centre of one of the inner skins to deepen the resonance and provide a heavy bass sound.

**Durga Stuti:** ওগো আমার আগমণী আলো, ওগো আমার আগমণী আলো, জ্বালো প্রদীপ জ্বালো, জ্বালো। ওগো আমার আগমণী আলো। Oh my coming light, oh my coming light, light the lamp light it, light it. Oh my coming light.

### 3. Decorative Elements

To finalize the festive look, the exterior is often heavily adorned with.

- **Kashphool (Kash grass):** The signature fluffy white autumn wild grass flowers.

- **Feathers:** Bundles of white or multi-coloured bird feathers tied to the ends.

- **Bright Fabric:** Colourful clothes and threads wrapped around the body.

The traditional Dhak (Bengali drum) is crafted from seasoned mango tree wood for the hollow barrel body, stretched with goat, cow, or buffalo skin for the membranes, and assembled using natural ropes, mustard oil, garlic pods, and bamboo sticks for playing.

### Main Ingredients and Materials

- **Mango Wood:** The trunk of a mature mango tree is chosen, soaked or cured, and hollowed out into a barrel or cylindrical shell to provide natural strength and acoustic resonance.
- **Animal Hide:** Goatskin, cowhide, or buffalo hide is used for the drumheads or membranes; a thicker hide is

typically placed on the left side to produce a deeper bass sound.

- **Mustard Oil and Garlic:** The wooden shell is often soaked in a vat of mustard oil and crushed garlic pods, then heated over a fire to cure the wood and protect it from splitting or pests.
- **Tension Ropes and Lacing:** Strong natural or synthetic fibre ropes are laced in a zigzag pattern across

the length of the body to stretch and tune the animal skins tightly over the rims.

- **Bamboo Sticks:** A pair of slender, lightweight bamboo sticks is carved for striking the drum during performances.
- **Coating Materials:** A heavy paste or tuning mixture is occasionally applied to one side of the drum membrane to weigh it down and achieve the signature low-pitched resonance.



Figure-3: Dhunuchi Dance.

The dhak is the large barrel-shaped drum of Bengal, played with two sticks and topped with white plumes of kash flowers or feathers, and the dhaki is the drummer who plays it. During Durga Puja, dhakis, many of them from rural districts of West Bengal who travel to Kolkata to be hired, play through the rituals: at aarti, for dhunuchi naach, at Sandhi Puja and on the immersion procession. With the kashor gong, conch and ululation, the dhak is the sound most Bengalis associate with Pujo. The dhak is the big barrel drum you hear everywhere during Durga Puja, and the dhaki is the musician who plays it. Hung

from the shoulder and crowned with white plumes, it sets the pace of every ritual, from the first morning aarti to the final immersion. Ask a Bengali what Pujo sounds like and the answer is almost always the dhak, with the clang of the kashor, the call of the shankh (conch) and the trill of ulu (ululation).

**Sandhi Puja** is the most spiritually significant and potent ritual of Durga Puja, performed during the exact 48-minute transition window (Sandhikhan) between Maha Ashtami and Maha Navami.

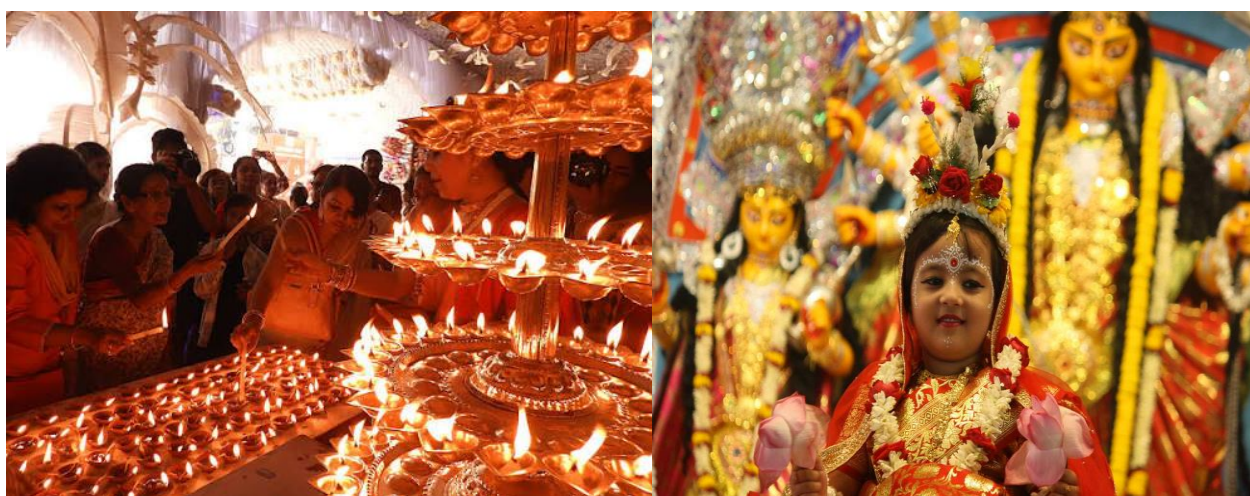


Figure-4: Sandhi Puja & Kumari Puja.

#### Meaning and Timing

- **Definition:** Sandhi means junction or transition point.

- **Duration:** It spans 48 minutes total—the last 24 minutes of Ashtami Tithi and the first 24 minutes of Navami Tithi.

**Kumari Puja** is a sacred Hindu ritual where a pre-pubescent girl is ceremonially worshipped as the living embodiment of the Divine Mother (Goddess Durga or Shakti). In Bengal, it is traditionally celebrated on Maha Ashtami during Durga Puja, while in North India and other states, it is known as Kanya Puja and often observed on the eighth or ninth day of Navaratri.

### Significance and Origin

- **Divine Feminine:** The ritual highlights the belief that the universal feminine energy (Shakti) resides in every woman and girl, emphasizing respect and reverence for female life.
- **Legend and History:** It commemorates Goddess Kali slaying the demon Kolasur, and was famously revived and popularized in modern times by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda at Belur Math.
- **Ages & Names:** Girls typically between the ages of 1 and 16 (before puberty) are chosen, with different ages representing distinct forms of the Goddess (such as Sandhya, Kalyani, Rohini, etc.).

### Key Rituals

- **Purification:** The young girl's feet are washed with holy water, and she is dressed in a traditional red or yellow saree with jewelry and a tilak.
- **Worship (Puja):** She is seated on a raised pedestal in front of the idol, and devotees offer flowers, incense, lamps, and mantras, invoking divine presence.
- **Prasad & Gifts:** After the prayers, she is offered sacred food (such as halwa-chana, poori, and sweets) along with gifts, clothes, or token money (dakshina).

The dhak is a large, roughly barrel-shaped wooden drum with animal-skin heads stretched over both ends and laced with cords. It is heavy and loud, built to carry over crowds and across neighbourhoods. How it's held. The dhaki slings the drum from a strap over the shoulder or around the neck, so it hangs at an angle in front of the

body, and plays standing or walking. It is usually struck with two thin sticks, often of cane or bamboo, on one head. The sticks produce sharp, fast, cracking strokes and deep resonant ones, depending on where and how the head is struck. For the puja the drum is decorated with tall white plumes, made of kash phool (kash flowers, a wild grass whose white plumes fill the Bengal countryside in autumn) or bird feathers. Kash flowers [*Saccharum spontaneum*] are themselves a symbol of sharat (autumn) and of the coming of the goddess, so the plume links the drum to the season. Drums of this family have long been played across Bengal for festivals, processions and worship. The dhak is associated with Durga Puja above all, but you will also hear it at Kali Puja and other occasions.

**Dhakis:** Most dhakis are not professional musicians in the concert sense. Many are farmers or labourers from rural districts of West Bengal, and the craft often passes from father to son, so a family may have played the dhak for generations. Young boys often accompany their fathers, playing the kashor (a bell-metal gong) or a smaller drum.

It is widely reported that, in the days before the puja, many dhakis travel to Kolkata and wait at railway stations, especially at Sealdah, where puja committees and families come to hear them play and hire them. The scene of drummers playing on the station platform, each trying to catch a buyer's ear, has become one of the familiar images of the run-up to Pujo. Other dhakis are booked in advance through long relationships with a particular para (neighbourhood) or family. Once hired, a dhaki usually stays with the puja for all the main days, playing from dawn into the night. The work is seasonal and often modestly paid, and many dhakis rely on the tips and gifts they receive from families and visitors during the festival.

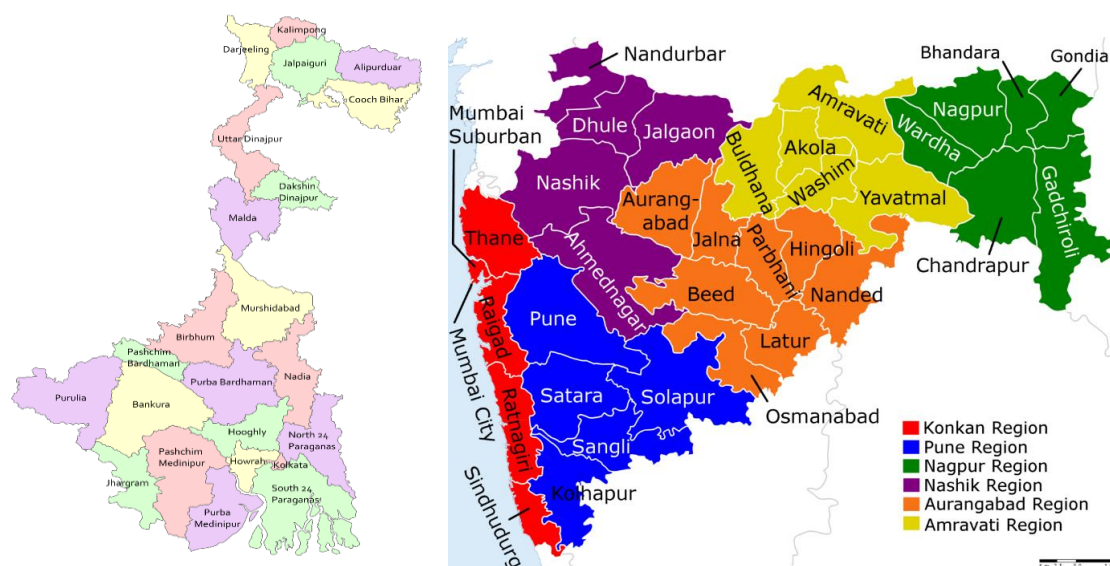


Figure-5: West Bengal & Maharashtra Map.

**Dhakis:** They play different rhythms for different moments in the ritual. Exact patterns vary by region, family tradition and the individual drummer, and there is no single fixed list, but in general.

**Aarti:** During the morning and evening aarti the rhythm is steady and driving, building in intensity with the waving of lamps, the conch and the bells. It often speeds up towards the end.

**Dhunuchi naach:** For the dhunuchi dance, where dancers move with smoking clay incense burners, the beat is fast, energetic and playful, and dancers and drummer often egg each other on, the dhaki picking up speed as the dance grows wilder.

**Ritual moments:** At key rituals such as *bodhon*, the bathing of the *Nabapatrika* and *Sandhi* Puja, the dhak marks the beginning and climax of the rite and can be urgent and loud.

**Bisarjan:** On Dashami, as the goddess is carried to the river, the rhythm becomes a processional beat for walking and dancing, and many people hear in it both celebration and sadness. Listen for how the same dhaki changes tone across a single day: calm and steady in the morning, festive at night.

**Kashor:** A flat bell-metal gong, held by a cord and struck with a stick, giving a bright metallic clang that cuts through the drum. It is often played by a boy or a second musician.

**Ghonta:** The hand bell rung by the priest during worship.

**Shankh:** The conch, blown at auspicious moments.

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**Ulu:** The high trilling ululation made by women at moments of welcome and blessing.

Together, dhak, kashor, shankh and ulu make up what people mean by the sound of Pujo.

Early morning is the best time to hear a dhaki properly, during the morning puja and aarti, before crowds and loudspeakers take over. Evening aarti at a neighbourhood puja, with dhunuchi naach, is one of the liveliest scenes of the festival. Bonedi bari pujas in north Kolkata often keep their dhakis close to the thakur dalan. A dhak is a large wooden barrel drum from Bengal with skin heads on both ends. It is hung from the shoulder or around the neck, played with two thin sticks on one face, and decorated with tall white plumes, and it is the main instrument of Durga Puja.



Figure-6: Goddess Durga & Kash Flower.

• **Thunderous Resonance:** The instrument is exceptionally loud and deep, designed to project across vast open spaces. When a group of dhakis (drummers) play together, the vibration can be physically felt.

• **Asymmetrical Drumheads:** The body is carved out of a single wooden log (often mango or seasoned wood).

The left drumhead is covered in a thicker animal hide (buffalo) and coated internally with a special paste to give a heavy, deep bass sound. The right drumhead uses a thinner hide (goatskin) for a crisp, high-pitched response.



Figure-7: Ganesh with Dhol & Tasha.

### The Specialty of the Sticks (Kathi)

• **Forceful Rhythm & Speed:** Unlike other Indian drums like the mridangam or dholak which are played with palms and fingers, the dhak relies on thin, flexible bamboo sticks. The sticks allow dhakis to maintain a rapid, frenzied tempo and strike the drumheads with immense power.

• **Butterfly Technique:** Skilled dhakis hold the sticks using a precise three-finger grip (thumb, index, and middle). Their palms move rapidly in a fluttering motion—often described as looking like the wings of a butterfly—to produce intricate, unaltered rhythmic patterns called pujan badyo.

• **Kashphool Decor:** During Durga Puja, the top of the dhak is elaborately adorned with white plumes of kash grass (sacred wild sugarcane flowers) or colorful feathers, making it visually striking.

• **Ritualistic Beats:** The specialty of dhak music lies in its narrative storytelling. Specific, traditional beats are designated for distinct ritual moments, such as the Bodhon (invocation), Sandhi Puja (the junction of the 8th and 9th days), Dhunuchi Naach (devotional incense dance), and Visarjan (immersion procession).

**Dhol-tasha** performances are a central, high-energy tradition during Ganesh Chaturthi [Vinayaka Chaturthi] processions (miravnuks) and the final immersion

(visarjan) celebrations across Maharashtra and other Indian communities.

### Key Aspects of Dhol-Tasha in Ganesh Chaturthi

• **Traditional Pathaks (Troupes):** Organized groups known as dhol tasha pathaks—such as the famous Ramanbaug Dhol-Tasha Pathak and Shiv Pratishtha Pathak—rehearse for weeks leading up to the festival.

#### • Instruments Used

• **Dhol:** Large, heavy double-sided barrel drums (weighing around 15 kg) played with sticks to maintain a deep, resonating base rhythm.

• **Tasha:** Smaller, high-pitched kettle-like drums (weighing around 7 kg) that add sharp, rapid counter-rhythms.

• **Jhaanj & Shankh:** Hand cymbals (jhaanj) and conch shells (shankh) that punctuate the beats with metallic and ceremonial sounds.

• **Signature Taals:** Pathaks perform traditional and energetic patterns like Shivstuti, Kallol taal, and Paramparik taal, replacing noisy loudspeakers and DJ setups with synchronized acoustic percussion.

• **Cultural Significance:** The practice honours Lord Ganesha (Vighnaharta) with disciplined, synchronized team performance, stamina, and deep community pride.



Figure-8: Tasha, Shankh & Jhaanj.

## CONCLUSION

Durga Puja is a major Hindu festival honoring Goddess Durga and her triumph over the demon Mahishasura and Ganesh Puja (also celebrated as Ganesh Chaturthi) is a major Hindu festival honoring Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed deity of wisdom, prosperity, and the remover of obstacles. The dhak is a traditional large barrel-shaped membranophone drum from Bengal that serves as the heartbeat of Durga Puja, while the festive use of traditional drums and percussion also accompanies celebrations like Ganesh Puja.

### The Dhak in Durga Puja

- Heartbeat of Pujo: The thunderous, frenzied beats of the dhak mark the arrival (Agomoni) of Goddess Durga, echoing from Mahalaya through Dashami.
- How it is Played: Played by traditional drummers known as dhakis, the instrument is hung from the neck or chest and struck with two thin cane or wooden sticks, with one side coated for a deeper, resonant bass tone.
- Dhunuchi Naach: The rhythm of the dhak directly fuels the dhunuchi naach, a high-energy traditional devotional dance performed with burning incense-filled earthen pots during evening aartis.
- Dhakis from Districts: Many traditional dhakis travel from rural districts in West Bengal (such as Bardhaman, Birbhum, Nadia, and Purulia) to perform at community pandals across Kolkata and beyond.

### Ganesh Puja and Percussion

- Shared Community Spirit: Both Durga Puja (prominent in eastern India/Bengal) and Ganesh Puja (prominent in Maharashtra and pan-India) expanded as large-scale public community (sarbojanin) festivals during the colonial era for social and cultural gathering.

Role of Drums: While the dhak is uniquely tied to Bengali Shakta/Durga traditions, public processions and aartis in Ganesh Puja similarly rely on traditional ensemble percussion—such as dhol, tasha, and local drums—to build festive momentum and devotional energy during arrivals (sthapana) and immersions (visarjan).

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ganesh\\_Chaturthi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ganesh_Chaturthi)