

Narh-The desert flute of Pakistan

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INTRODUCTION

Reed flutes have been commonly used across the Middle East, Central Asia and the surrounding areas. Even in the present day you can find variations of reed flutes from Morocco to Pakistan and to Mongolia. While the Middle Eastern reed flutes 'Ney' became the standard flute for the music of that region and went through many development and refinements. The reed flute of Pakistan (Narh, Narr, Nar), an oblique rim-blown flute, never became mainstreamed and remained prevalent only in the remote areas of Sindh and Baluchistan Provinces and neighboring Rajasthan.

Classical Ney of the Middle East (Persian, Turkish and Arabic) is used for playing melodies, however in Pakistan the Bansuri flute remained firmly established as the main melody flute for the region. This is partly because of the advantage Bansuri has in terms of the range of the pitch as well as the ability to produce 'Meend' slides which are an essential feature of the music of Indian subcontinent. Narh therefore remained in use for more rhythmic play rather than playing of the melody. However this was not the case historically and as we will examine below the melody music 'Gur' was also very much part of the Narh playing however it was restricted a small range of note. When Bansuri developed it almost wiped out most of Narh usage for playing melodies. Narh however still remains prevalent in the rhythmic play and melodic plays occasionally.

Another interesting point to know is that because of this rhythmic and simple tune making function the Narh flute has only four holes in comparison to the Persian Ney which has 5 plus 1 holes and the Turkish and Arabic Neys which have 6 plus 1 holes giving them more range and note playing ability. The smaller number of holes in the Narh flute also point to the fact that it is quite possible that Narh was the oldest of the reed flute varieties whose history goes back to pre-historic times where the primitive music of India was based on only 3-5 notes. (Sengupta, 1991). Another wind instrument clay borrido from Sindh still uses the same 3-5 notes and Narh shows a close relationship in terms of musical note usage. Narh is therefore very important in the history of reed instruments serving as a link between modern and pre-historic music.

Narh's music is linked to Love, parting and pain as per the folk traditions and comes into light in the story of Yusuf and Zulekha. Narh is also linked to the famous Sufi poet Shams Tabriz and probably is related to the Middle Eastern ney in this sense which is an established instrument of the sufi orders specially in Turkey. Narh was also mentioned in his poetry by great Sufi Poet of Sind, Hazrat Shah

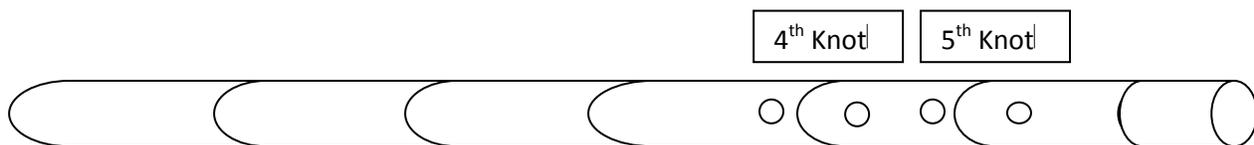
Abdoul Latif Bhattai and the famous poem from Rumi “Nay Namih” which talk about a lover’s separation, personified in a reed, from the bellowed as, a ney is separated from the reed-bed and produces songs of longing (Firoozeh, 2003)

STRUCTURE

The Narh is made usually from the desert reed called Kangore or Sacho Narh as its called in the local language. The best read for Narh grows in the Makran region of Balochistan. The Narh has 7 sections and 6 knots. This is a basic design difference in addition to the difference in number of holes between Narh and the Middle Eastern neys. The Turkish Ney has 9 sections and 8 knots whereas the Persian ney contains 6 sections and 5 knots. Another peculiar feature of Narh is its decorations which include dying the reed with red colour for simple designs to full bounding with strips of raw gut. The decorations on Narh are far more exquisite than any of the reed flutes in the world and are in line with the traditions of the region where musical instruments were revered and decorated.



The basic structure of Narh and hole position. The four holes are positioned around the 4th and 5th Knots.



TECHNIQUE

Narh with its rhythmic playing as well as vocal drone is an extremely difficult instrument to master. The structure of the Narh with the mouth-hole and overall length make the playing possible only in a slant position with an angle of around ten to thirty degrees. The Narh is held between the thumb and the fingers. The usual length of Narh is 2 to 3 1/2 feet however there are two main varieties i.e. Kani and Narh. The Kani is a higher pitch flute around 1-1 1/2 feet long on which simple melody music is played without the vocal drones. This music in local terms is called Gur.

The Narh which is longer instrument is mostly used with the vocal drone playing and this style is called Phook in the local language. Whereas in Ney the music played would be closer to the Gur music of Narh, the phook music (drone) is a higher level development of Narh which distinguishes it from other

reed varieties of the Middle East. The vocal drone reed flute playing though is also prevalent in Mongolia however the Mongolian style of drone is more constant as compared to the heavily modulated drone of the Narh, which has similarities to other modulate drone playing in the region specially on instruments such as Surando, Kamaycha and Alghoza.

Whereas the Gur playing manipulates musical notes, the Phook spell out words. The combination of melody, rhythm and drone in Phook playing creates complicated sounds with are unique to the Narh and require a great deal of skill. The Narh musical performance has two parts much like normal folk musical presentations for other instruments in the region and include the introduction called Uthan or Saddu (meaning call) which would be classified as an alaap in classical terms and the actual Phook which is the main part of the performance.

Narh is also used as an accompanying instrument for dastan and bait singing both in Balochistan, Sindh and Rajasthan. The Narh player in Balochistan region are revered and come from higher balochi caste backgrounds. In Sindh and Balochistan various styles or schools of Narh developed which all were based on the principal of Gur being the base and Phook an additionality to the playing patterns. However these schools developed different distinct styles. Among the more known schools include Narhey-jo-Narh (The Narho Style), Larh-jo-Narh (The Southern Sind Style), Jati-Thhathhey-Jo Narh (Jati-Thatta Style), Uttar-jo-Narh (Northern Sind School) and the Balochi Style which is prevalent in various areas of Balochistan. The Narh playing in Balochistan is still holding strong whereas in Sindh Narh has lost ground to Bansuri as well as Alghoza.

Baloch (1966, pp. 19-20) has quoted Ganhwar Chahva who was a great master of Narh playing to have devised a scheme for different note patterns on Narh which are summarized below;

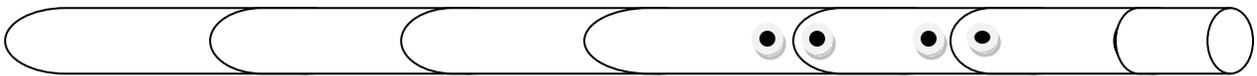
1. Roop or Sur: the upper 3 holes are closed with the lowest hole open. This position is used for a number of folk and classical tunes.
2. Katth: for this pattern all holes remain closed. This is mostly used in the Gur style music which does not use drones.
3. Morhalo: Only the upper two holes remain open with lower holes remaining closed. Mainly used in Lahra style of playing.
4. Kharaz: top hole is open and lower three holes remain closed. Used for higher pitched varieties of Gur including Mathahan Gur.
5. Phook: the top hole is closed with lower 3 holes remaining open. Used in Phook (drone) style of playing.
6. Nutt: Upper two holes are closed and lower two remain open. This is a tune pattern which supports Morhalo tunes.
7. Phookun-jo-Katth: the same fingering as in Phook however the throat sound (drone) is tuned at the highest pitch pattern of the Phook tune.

There are basically five Register levels on the Narh with the 5th only hardly used for a single note. The Base register produces the same notes an octave lower the 1st register. However there are missing notes and movement from lower octave to the main octave is not possible. The Base level playing is heavily used in Persian and Turkish classical Ney playing.

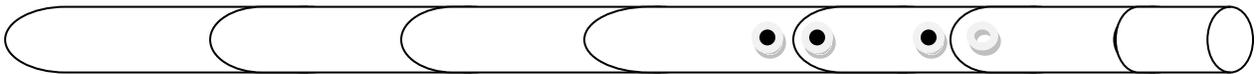
NOTES ON A 'Bb' SCALE NARH

BASE REGISTER AND 1ST REGISTER

All holes closed will sound Bb



Upper three holes closed. 1st lowest hole Open will sound C



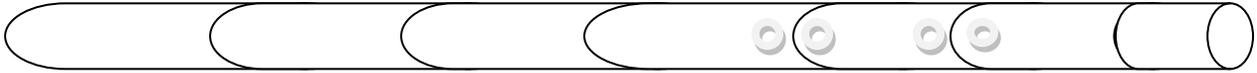
Upper two holes closed. 1st and 2nd lowest hole open will sound D(1/2)b



Upper most hole is closed. Remaining three holes are open. This will sound Eb



All holes remain open. This will sound F



2nd REGISTER

All holes closed will sound F



Upper three holes closed. 1st lowest hole open will sound G



Upper two holes closed. 1st and 2nd lowest hole open will sound A(1/2)b



Upper most hole is closed. Remaining three holes are open. This will sound Bb of the higher octave.



SAMPLES OF NARH MUSIC



Balochi Narr Pattern.mp3



Balochi Narr Pattern 2.mp3

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