

# The saga of the tambura

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The lavish murals of Daria Daulat Bagh Palace in Srirangapatna are well-known for the rich depictions of pomp and pageantry. Scenes from wars, such as the Battle of Pollilur, where Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan emerged victorious over the British led by Colonel Bailey, are also portrayed beautifully.

There is a luminescent painting amongst these: Of a group of six women including musicians and a dancer glowing with translucent blue-green and white shades. One is holding a drum like a mridangam, another holding cymbals. Both instruments are depicted in various Indian sculptures such as at the 15th-century Vittala Temple in Hampi.

The third person has a violin, a sign of cross-cultural influence introduced by the European trading companies jockeying and battling for political influence in the 18th century. The violin was part of their military bands but it also highlights Tipu's cosmopolitan tastes.

In the mural, the violin is held downwards, as it is usually held in Carnatic music, rather than the chin and outstretched arm, as is the norm in Western classical music.

The musician next to her plays what looks like a been or pungi. This instrument made of the gourd is usually associated with snake charmers but has two separate reed pipes. This reminds one of Scottish bagpipes.

The fifth musician, clad in what resembles a half-sari, holds a long-stringed instrument similar to the kind of tambura used in Carnatic music, usually made of jackwood with the tuning pegs with knobs clearly visible at the end.

Another mural of a noblewoman with attendants has elements (half-saris and hair ornaments) that remind one of Mysore Wadiyar paintings.

Botanist Francis Buchanan, who surveyed the annexed lands after Tipu Sultan's fall at the siege of Srirangapatna in 1799, made some fairly detailed observations of pre-existing industries and arts and crafts during his travels.

### **Music and steel**

Intriguingly, Buchanan mentioned the manufacture of drawn steel wire used for the strings of musical instruments in Channapatna, the heritage town which is famed for the craft of wooden toy making dating back to Tipu's times.

Buchanan's observations also cover descriptions of iron smelting activities and furnaces in Gettipura along with details of payments made to smelters by Tipu. His accounts indicate the manufacture of crucible steel, accompanied by illuminating sketches.

These suggest that wrought iron was carburised to make higher Wootz steel or ukku steel, in a crucible fired by large bellows. Studies from the late medieval site of Ghattihosahalli in Chitradurga district have confirmed the production of wootz crucible steel.

Gatti or Getti, which typically means hard or congealed in Kannada, may have referred to congealed or vitrified slag or metallurgical debris from crucible steel production. Wootz steel was used for weaponry and it is not clear if it was used in making the strings of instruments, although this points to marked skills in iron and steel technology.

### **A longstanding legacy**

The mural depiction of tamburas in Srirangapatna closely matches those still made in Thanjavur. Down the winding alleys of Raja Vidhi street in Thanjavur, one still finds the busy ateliers of makers of tamburas and veenas, including the Saraswati veena with 24 frets.

I also happened to visit a person who made the Ekantha tambura, from a single elongated piece of jackwood, similar to the kind of tambura depicted in the Srirangapatna mural.

An early sculptural depiction of a full-blown lute as the precursor to the tambura, with a distinct set of tuning pegs at the end, is to be found in a second-century Satavahana Amaravati style sculpture from Andhra Pradesh.

This frieze of musicians associated with the dream of Maya, the mother of Buddha, who dreamt of a white elephant before Buddha's birth is housed in the Kolkata Museum.

The Satavahanas left behind an elegant legacy of sculpture in Kanaganahalli in Kalaburagi district as well, which is of a similar style to that from the Satavahana capital of Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh.

The clear depiction of the lute, amongst the earliest known representations of the instrument, looking like a precursor to the tambura, points to such longstanding musical traditions in the Deccan.

*(The author is Professor, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru)*