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In memory of Bhulu Murmu
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Foreword

‘Cadence and Counterpoint: Documenting Santal Musical Traditions’, a beautiful exhibition on the musical instruments of the Santal Community and photo archives of their musical tradition, is part of a series of collaborations between museums in India and museums in Switzerland. Since 2010, UNESCO India has been focusing on museum-to-museum collaboration to enable capacity building of Indian museums in a sustained way.

The idea of a long term partnership took shape with the determined commitment of Dr. Marie-Eve Celio-Scheurer, a Swiss professional museum curator who was then living in Delhi, who offered us effective coordination with the Government of Switzerland and museums there, and Dr. Ruchira Ghose, heading the Crafts Museum in New Delhi, who agreed to this experimental partnership. The collaborative work began in 2011 with a series of
three workshops at the Crafts Museum on handling museum artefacts, basic preventive conservation, and development of a storage system. The workshops were conducted under the guidance of Dr. Celio-Scheurer and two other experts from Switzerland and were attended by museology students, young conservators, and the museum staff.

The diligent efforts of Marie-Eve Celio-Scheurer and Ruchira Ghose have resulted in a joint research and exhibition project between Museum Rietberg, Zurich and the Crafts Museum, New Delhi as well as the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal and the National Museum, New Delhi, where the exhibition was mounted in April–May 2015.

With the kind consent of Marie-Eve and Ruchira, UNESCO took the opportunity of this exhibition to further facilitate museum access by opening it to blind people. With support from the National Museum and in consultation with Saksham Trust, the exhibition space was equipped with tactile path for easy navigation of the blind. Audio guides, Braille booklets, tactile images of the exhibits and replicas of select objects for handling were provided. The National Museum volunteers assisted with a special guided tour for blind visitors. The exhibition thus presented an opportunity for the visually impaired
to participate in cultural exploration and also served as a valuable practical learning for museum professionals on ways to make museums more inclusive. We hope to see more museum-to-museum collaborations come to fruition in India and more museums commit to making their spaces more inclusive.

Shigeru Aoyagi
Director and UNESCO Representative to Bhutan, India, Sri Lanka and Maldives

New Delhi, 2015
Introduction
Ruchira Ghose
Marie-Eve Celio-Scheurer

The present publication is the result of an Indo-Swiss project on Santal musical traditions initiated by the Museum Rietberg in Zurich. The initiative was supported by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture, UNESCO, and by the Embassy of Switzerland in India.

The roots of this project go back to 2013 when Museum Rietberg received a unique collection of 92 stringed instruments. The collection was partly bought from, and partly donated by, a German collector, Bengt Fosshag, who never travelled to India, but acquired his entire collection from dealers in Europe between 1960 and the late 1990s. It is a practice at Museum Rietberg to celebrate any major new acquisition through a publication and an exhibition. While preparing for these, we found ourselves particularly fascinated by a group of 44 Santal stringed instruments, called Banam. Curious to
know more, we approached the Crafts Museum in New Delhi, well-known for its work in the preservation and valorization of the folk and tribal crafts of India, and proposed a cooperation project for which we secured the financial support of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture.

To preserve and valorize world heritage, tangible or intangible, it is essential today to create links between institutions and experts, as well as between objects and their origin. This project enabled us to carry out fieldtrips in India, and work among the Santal communities to document and better understand Santal musical traditions. Our research led us to find photographic archives not only in India, but in Europe as well, and to discover other interesting collections of Santal musical instruments that lay hidden in the storage of the National Museum in New Delhi and at the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya in Bhopal.

Two exhibitions were presented, one in Switzerland and one in India: ‘Sculpted Sound: Stringed Instruments from India’, Museum Rietberg, Zurich, 4 September 2014–19 April 2015, and ‘Cadence and Counterpoint: Documenting Santal Musical Traditions’, National Museum, New Delhi, 15 April–17 May 2015. Each exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue.
The English catalogue that accompanied the exhibition at the National Museum in India is a publication based on field research and testimonies from the Santal community, supported by photographic documentation from the 1950s to 2014. The actual event of the exhibition however, provided further opportunity for thought and reflection. In particular, the juxtaposition of Banam from three diverse collections encouraged an exploration of their differences. This essay is an attempt to understand the distinctive features of three Banam, selected from each of the three collections, and their connection to the time, context and purpose of the original collection.

We trust the essay will help evince some aspects of the objects not usually in common view.
It is said that art is a mirror to culture, that through art one may glimpse the customs, beliefs, values and inherited wisdom of a people. An opportunity to explore the culture of the Santal community through its art and music was offered at the recent exhibition mounted at the National Museum in New Delhi between 15 April and 17 May 2015, titled ‘Cadence and Counterpoint: Documenting Santal Musical Traditions’. In an exhibition that attempted to review Santal musical instruments and tradition over the past century, the Santal stringed musical instrument, the Banam, was the centerpiece of the display.

1 I am very grateful to Dr. Ruchira Ghose and Dr. Marie-Eve Celio-Scheurer for their extensive comments on this essay. Any errors of fact and interpretation that remain are my own.
The Banam is a bowed monochord and the only Santal instrument that falls in the category of chordophones. It is carved out of a single piece of soft wood and the Chhauni or skin cover is made from animal skin. A traditional Banam is played with the bow held in the right hand. The notes are produced by lightly pressing the index and middle fingers of the left hand on the Sadom or string (made of silk thread). The Banam follows the melodic structures of songs. The larger Banam is the Dhodro Banam. There is also the Huka Banam or Reta Banam which are made from coconut shell and bamboo. The bow is traditionally made from bamboo strip and sisal fibre curved to the right shape. A similar instrument is Phet or Pheton Banam, a plucked rather than bowed monochord. It has a fingerboard and one guitar peg fixed at top for tying the thread. The Banam is played while the player is seated or standing, and normally rests on the shoulder of the musician. It is also carried on the shoulder, so its size and weight need to be appropriate. The overall shape of the Banam is inspired by the feminine form and it is only

played by a man. Apart from its musical function, the *Banam* is visually a strong object with a sculpted form determined by the skills and aesthetics of the *Banam* maker.

At the exhibition *'Cadence and Counterpoint: Documenting Santal Musical Traditions'* there were altogether 20 *Banam* displayed from three different collections — from the Verrier Elwin collection of the National Museum, from the Bengt Fosshag collection now at the Rietberg Museum, and — the largest group — from the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya.

The three collections represent quite distinct initiatives and impulses in collecting so it was felt that a comparison of three *Banam*, one taken from each of the three collections, might throw light on the varieties of *Banam*, the changes wrought in the instrument over time, and the nature of the relationship between the *Banam* and the Santal community. *Banam* makers are of different types. Amongst the Santal, there are musicians who make *Banam* for themselves and there are *Banam* makers who are not musicians who make the instrument for others. Then there are occupational carpenters who are not Santal but make all manner of objects in wood, including *Banam*, for the Santal community. Verrier Elwin, the renowned ethnographer, described
two categories of tribal arts — art objects made by tribals for themselves, and art objects made by occupational castes for tribals. The *Banam* fits both categories.³

³ There have been several participants from West Bengal and Jharkhand in the Crafts Demonstration Programme of the Crafts Museum in New Delhi whom I had the opportunity to talk to about the *Banam.* Uday Shankar Mandal, a Santal wood craftsman from village Bagh Danga, District Burdwan, West Bengal, visited the Crafts Museum in 2013. Among the many carved wooden objects he brought, there were some *Dhodro Banam* for sale. His father, Gaurpada Mandal, was also a skilled *Banam* maker. Kartik Mahato, a dancer of *Chhau* — a tribal martial dance performed with masks — of village Jamdeeh, District Saraikela, Jharkhand, participated in the Crafts Demonstration Programme at the Crafts Museum in New Delhi in 2014. Kartik Mahato is not from the Santal community. He told me that about 40 km away from where he lives, in village Haathi Nada there are some talented carpenters, who are not Santal, who do excellent wood carving — doors, frames, palanquins and other household objects — for the Santal community. Bhulu Murmu, a Santal wood carver from village Navasar, District Dumka, Jharkhand, was at the Crafts Museum in December 2014. An excellent wood carver, singer, dancer as well as a talented *Chadar Badar* puppeteer and puppet maker, he made a beautiful *Dhodro Banam* for the Crafts Museum, though he does not play the instrument himself. Bhulu Murmu sadly passed away in October 2015. This publication is dedicated to him.
In our comparative study of the *Banam* from the three collections, we decided to consider the following features:

- Time period instrument is likely to have been made
- Basic form
- Decorative features
- Level of skill invested in its making

The period over which these *Banam* were collected spans from about 1940 to 2003, and it can be reasonably presumed that the period over which they were made spans at maximum 150 years, from around the middle of the 19th century to the early years of the 21st century.

In his book, *The Tribal Arts of Middle India*, published in the 1950s, Verrier Elwin describes the wood craft tradition of the Santal. There is mention of the *Banam* and it might be reasonably surmised that Elwin would have acquired the *Banam* in his collection in the decade prior to the book’s publication. The Rietberg collection, we know from the donor Bengt Fosshag, was built up over the period 1960 to the late 1990s. As these instruments are likely to have passed through several owners prior to reaching the collector, it would be reasonable to
assume that they passed through three generations or so. This means they go back about a hundred years from the time they were acquired, bringing us to the middle of the 19th century. With the help of these three instruments, we make an attempt to understand the journey of the Banam over the last century and a half.
Banam1
This Banam appears to be the oldest amongst the three Banam selected. It was bought by the collector Bengt Fosshag in 1991 from Lothar Heubel in Cologne, Germany, and given to the Museum Rietberg, Zurich, in 2013 (see ‘Cadence and Counterpoint: Documenting Santal Musical Traditions’, p. 44). Given its modest size and basic, pared-down form, it seems to have been conceived as a pure musical instrument. There is no attempt to make it attractive with any surface decoration or carving. Yet, it is very powerful because of the graphic quality of its simple geometry, and therefore a different kind of visual treat. The Banam looks like a mysterious lady with slightly bent back, her soul in the hollow of the instrument. The dark patina of this Banam, obtained usually from tobacco leaves, is extremely attractive. The size and shape of the Banam is suitable to hang on the shoulder and its light weight makes it comfortable to carry.

Banam I
Pegbox with two Ears
70 × 13 × 13 cm
Wood, leather, thread
Bengt Fosshag Donation
Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Inv. No. 2014.19
Copyrights © Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Banam II
Of the three selected, this *Banam* is the most elaborately carved. Part of the Verrier Elwin collection it was probably acquired between 1940–1950, an early example of tribal art objects in India that show the impact of colonial culture in a powerful way. The motif of the motorcar and British soldier and horse rider carved at the top of this *Banam* is quite unique in an object of this type. In the well-known Bengal textile traditions of *Kantha* and *Baluchari*, these kinds of motifs — of British soldiers, horse-drawn carriages, steamboats etc. — are widely used. But their appearance on a *Banam* suggests the spread and impact of colonial urban culture on the rural tribal arts as well.

The forms of the motorcar, driver, passenger are all carved in careful detail, with the motorcar, wheels and other features depicted in the linear form as in *Kantha* embroidery. The posture of the person seated on the backseat is also interesting,
conveying his enjoyment of the view he gazes upon through the window. Carved next to the motorcar is a British soldier with his *sola topi* or pith helmet, the typical headgear worn by the British in India to protect against the sun. The form of the car is hollowed out with lines as in a picture, whereas the solid form of the horse rider has a more sculptural quality.

The carving is very clear and sharp and has been executed by a woodcarver of great skill. The geometric motifs and patterns sculpted as surface decoration have similarities with the wood carving of other tribal groups of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, also the Kutch region of Gujarat and Rajasthan.

As a musical instrument with melodious sound this *Banam* will please its audience, but its beautifully sculpted form will definitely attract admiration, even when the instrument is not being played. This *Banam* is worthy of pride for its maker and its owner. It is not only a fine example of Santal art and aesthetics but a unique instance of the extraordinary objects that were created as a result of the confluence of cultures in the colonial period.
Banam III Back
Selected from the collection of Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal, this visually powerful Banam is unique and quite distinct from the other two because its structure suggests immediately that it was conceived more as a sculpture, and then transformed or adapted into a Banam.

Usually the motifs carved on the Banam face outwards (or the front) so that the audience can enjoy the beauty of the carving along with the music being played. But in this particular Banam, where the entire instrument is given the definite form of a female figure, the carved form faces the Banam player (or the back). Therefore, in the playing position, the musician has the female figure in his arms, and the audience does not have a view of the sculpted female form. When viewed from the front this Banam has a lizard carved in the hollow, most
likely a reference to the Monitor Lizard, which is found in these areas and the skin of which is traditionally used as a *Chhauni* in the *Banam*. While this *Banam* does not suggest exceptional sculpting skill, it is certainly distinguished in concept. There is a natural spontaneity and boldness in its rendering which endows the sculpture with great energy and strength. It is a good example of contemporary Santal aesthetic and sensibility in woodcraft.
In a comparison of the three Banam the first fact to note is the difference in the intent of the three collections and how each Banam ‘fits’ the intent so appropriately. Banam I was acquired in Germany by a German amateur private collector, Bengt Fosshag, who built up his collection of Banam mainly in the 1990s. His collection was acquired by the Museum Rietberg in 2013. This instrument clearly reflects the features that a European Graphic Designer and amateur musician is likely to have been attracted by. As was described earlier, this very basic Banam seems to have been conceived as a pure musical instrument and has a very powerful graphic quality in its simple geometry.

Banam II was acquired by a British ethnologist, Verrier Elwin, who spent a large part of his life in India, living among and researching tribal communities. His collection entered the National Museum in the 1960s. This extraordinary instrument with the carving depicting a typical colonial scene is entirely consistent with the ethnographic interest Elwin would have had in documenting the arts and crafts of the Santal community in the 1940s and 1950s.

Banam III was acquired by the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal, in 2003. This instrument is the most recent of the three, again confirming its purpose — to build a collection
of exceptional Santal objects for the Bhopal Museum. The object in question, as was described above, is distinguished in concept with a spontaneity and boldness which is powerful, making it an appropriately impressive object for a Museum collection.

There are thus very interesting differences in the provenance of the three Banam. While the Banam in the Verrier Elwin collection were sourced in the 1940s directly from the Santal community among whom Elwin lived and worked, the Banam in the Bengt Fosshag collection were typically found through art dealers and auctions in Europe from the late 1960s onwards. The most recently acquired collection from 2003, is that of the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal, where the Assistant Curator, Dr. Suma Kiro, sourced the instruments through a local contact in Kolkata.

If we physically examine the three Banam, we find that in the first two, from the Bengt Fosshag and Verrier Elwin collections, the skin of the Monitor Lizard was used as Chhauni in both. This was a popular option in the earlier period. In contrast, goat leather is used in the Banam from the more recent collection of the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal, because the skin of the Monitor Lizard has now become much more difficult to procure. The comparison of the three Banam brings out
sharply the modifications and adaptations that have been incorporated because of changing times and conditions, including the availability of materials.

All three instruments come from Bengal. Though Santal communities are found in Bihar, Odisha, Chattisgarh, Eastern Madhya Pradesh and also Nepal and Bangladesh, the tradition of making Banam is strongest in West Bengal. Rural Bengal has had a rich and long tradition of itinerant musicians, performers and ascetics who roamed the villages and sang the myths and legends of local culture. Indeed, according to Santal myth, the first Banam was made by a yogi, or wandering ascetic, who was not a Santal. A link between the Banam and itinerant musicians of other traditions may help to explain the variety of motifs and impressions that are found in Banam decoration.

The Banam is important in Santal culture not only as an instrument for Santal music but also for the craft skill required in its fabrication, and the decorative motifs and sculptural forms it embodies. While the origin and significance of these motifs, patterns and forms may not always be evident, their representation has kept alive the visual memory of the community. The Banam thus helps to preserve the Santal musical tradition as well the community’s aesthetics, ancestral myths and memories, that are passed on through successive generations.
The *Banam* from the Bengt Fosshag and Verrier Elwin collections were created by a Santal community in India, under British rule, relatively untouched by urbanization and its associated effects. On the other hand, the *Banam* from the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, was created by a Santal artist who inhabits contemporary India, where the impact of urbanization and its attendant forces are keenly felt. Yet, one may argue, though conditions in society change significantly, certain traditions survive because they are so deeply rooted. This seems to be the case of the *Banam*, which has caught the imagination of many, travelled far and wide and, changing and evolving, continues its journey still.

4 In May 2015 I saw a carved and decorated *Banam* at the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal. It had been collected from the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, inhabited mainly by the Madia and Muria tribals. The Pardhan Gonds of District Mandla, Madhya Pradesh also have the tradition of making and playing the *Banam*, which they call *Bana*. They are considered the bards of the Gond community who sing myths and legends and family histories of Gonds, accompanied by the *Bana*. According to Gond mythology, the *Bana* is considered the home of Bara Deo, the supreme deity of the Gonds. While the tradition seems to have declined and it is difficult to find a *Bana* player in the area, some Gond artists still depict the *Bana* in their paintings as part of their ancestral memory (see the two attached cards by Sukhmani Dharve and Amar Lal).
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