

Famous For Its Mangoes, This UP Town Is Also A Big Supplier Of Dholak, Mridangam And Other Percussion Instruments In India And Across The World



Some have tasted Amroha, but everyone's heard it

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Pick up a South African djembe or the bhangra dhol of Punjab, the mridangam of Carnatic music or a tiny, colourful damru, chances are they came out of Amroha, a town best known for and named after its 'aam' or mangoes.

Set near the Ganga in Uttar Pradesh, about 160km from Delhi, Amroha has been making percussion instruments for centuries, thanks mainly to the abundance of mango wood from the thousands of orchards there. Every year, the instruments made in Amroha are sold in more than 30 countries for a turnover of Rs 150 crore.

"Our elders say that hundreds of years ago, carpenters would choose an unproductive tree in the orchards, fell it and hollow out its trunk. The outer ring was strapped with processed goat or buffalo skin to turn it into a dholak," says Rajeev Prajapati, a fourth-generation manufacturer of percussion instruments.

Thriving Industry

Today, Amroha has 350 karkhanas (workshops) where 10,000 pairs of hands churn out lakhs of these musical instruments annually. The artisans bring skills that have been passed down in their families for generations, and earn up to Rs 1,200 a day depending on the intricacy of their work.

"It is an example of the ustad-shagird (teacher-pupil) tradition. The tone, projection and sustain of a drum depend on the shape of its shell.

"Centuries of mastery in shaping shells sets Amroha a class apart," says 50-year-old Shamsul Islam, a dhol maker.

Making A Drum

Drums come in different sizes. For example, a mridangam is 27 inches long while a Punjabi dholak measures 18 inches. To make them, shells of different sizes are carved out of a trunk. The craftsmen



Photos: Sandeep Rai

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mostly work with locally produced hand tools while machines are used for smoothening the outer shell. Before the shells are closed with animal hide, women workers paint them at home, earning Rs 300-400 a day.

"The making of an instrument involves more than 10 steps, and a trained hand is engaged for each. It's teamwork," says Pra-

japati, who heads the Dholak Hasthkala Association, a group of local instrument manufacturers.

None of the wood goes to waste, he adds, as even the core of the trunk is turned into flowerpots that are "much in demand".

Proud Of Their Work

The Amroha drum makers say their "unmatched workmanship" stalled an invasion of cheap Chinese instruments. "Around 15 years ago, Chinese musical instruments flooded the market. Their throwaway prices worried us but they weren't durable," says Shibli Shehzad, who recently supplied 10,000 small dholaks for distribution in Gujarat government schools.

The Chinese instruments were lacking in musical quality too, Shehzad adds: "A percussion player wants variety in the tones and depths of their instrument. Amroha's instruments can provide almost a dozen different 'tals', where Chinese ones yield not more than five."

While Shehzad swears by the "strength and richness" of mango wood, and Amroha's premium instruments are still made from it, cheaper poplar wood is now used for the mass market.

"The sweetness of the mango comes from the wood of the tree, and it makes a difference in the instruments too," says Prajapati, adding, "There's no comparison (between mango and poplar) but mango wood isn't that abundant anymore and we need to keep costs down. Poplar is the next best thing and good for casual players."

Govt Lends A Hand

The UP government has included Amroha's dholak in its One District One Product (ODOP) scheme, and the instrument also got the geographical indication (GI) tag recently. But local businesses say they can do better with guidance from the government and a delivery system.

Aunjaneya Kumar Singh, divisional commissioner, Moradabad, told **TOI**: "We are working on customised government schemes, like subsidies on loans for the makers of percussion instruments, and helping them tap foreign markets on their own, instead of depending on the export houses."



Rajeev Prajapati, a fourth-generation manufacturer of percussion instruments