

The Guitar and its Significance among the Youth of Sikkim and North Bengal

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Abstract

The guitar is a very popular musical instrument throughout the world. It is very popular in the state of Sikkim and the region of North Bengal also. It was brought here by Christian missionaries and now is featured on a variety of music genres. Businesses have sprung up which revolve around the guitar. Job opportunities have been created and careers have been made because of the instrument. The guitar has become an avenue for the youth to explore their creativity. It has shielded many of them from society's darker aspects. This paper explores the importance of state of the instrument among the youth in the region of Sikkim and the neighbouring areas. The different trends regarding the instrument has been analysed and draw conclusions which hopefully will shed light on the hitherto unknown aspects of the instrument and music in general. This hopefully in turn will shape the future of music in the region.

Keywords: Guitar, music, history, youth, career.

Introduction:

The guitar is an instrument which is very popular all over the world. Its prominence in popular cultures across the world is because of its immense exposure through different kinds of media. It is used extensively by musicians. We can find it being used in a variety of musical genres. This is because of its easy playability as well as scope for technical mastery. As we can see the guitar is very popular in the region of Sikkim and North Bengal. It has enjoyed almost six decades of immense popularity among the people, especially among those interested in music and the youth.

In this paper I have used autoethnography and digital survey methods to research in the given topic.

History and State of the Guitar:

Earliest string instruments resembling the guitar were developed in Spain in the sixteenth century. These instruments had four or five courses¹ of strings rather than six strings

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which we see today (Alves, 2015). Then slowly these instruments started to evolve. Instruments which can be identified as “guitars” by laymen were developed around the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. During the second half of the nineteenth century guitars started to take the familiar shape that we know today. Guitars which can be called classical guitars today were made during this time. Then during the twentieth century the modern guitar was created through constant development which happened during each of its decades (Bacon & Day, 1991).

Before 1835 Darjeeling was a part of Sikkim and it was during that year that the region was gifted by the King of Sikkim through a Deed of Grant (History of Darjeeling). Western music first came here during this time when the British colonisers planned and constructed the town centre and the neighbouring tea estates. The colonisers brought along with them their own form of music, which included music from the British Isles and Europe. Christian gospel music was also introduced in the hills at this time (Peter, 2014). A respected musician from Sikkim, Mr. Vinod Rai, has said in the book titled “Black n White Sikkim Maa Sangeet Bhitarka Haru” that the guitar and violin came to Darjeeling through Christian brothers and it is they who inspired interest in the people towards these instruments. He further says that this way the guitar and violin became popular in Sikkim as well (Niraula, 2015).

The guitar gained importance in the musical scenario of the region during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when rock and roll started to gain popularity. Bands playing western music like The Orchids and Flickers, both from Gangtok and others like Forbidden Fruit and The Reincarnations from Darjeeling were active in the musical scene of the region. The guitar being used extensively by these bands started to become recognised by people who saw them performing. Young people started to show interest in the guitar and western music in general. At the same time we saw that Indian Bollywood film music and Nepali popular music also endorsed the guitar. Well known Indian composers like R.D. Burman and popular Nepali artistes like Narayan Gopal also started using the guitar in their songs. Many more composers and musicians started to employ the instrument. So this era saw the rise of the guitar in the musical scenario of the time. People of the region started to show interest in it, many young people bought the instrument and many started to learn it. Within a few years it became very common in the region. This is true till this very day, as even though there was some rise and fall in the guitar’s popularity through the decades; it never went away from the public imagination.

In the area of study of this paper i.e. Sikkim and North Bengal, the interest shown by the people regarding this instrument is equally great. It is used in almost all the music genres popular among the people living here. This instrument easily comes up while discussing different forms of modern music popular in this region. These forms are pop, rock, folk fusion, RnB, Christian gospel etc. all of which are in English, Hindi, Nepali, Bhutia, Lepcha which are the major languages spoken here. Along with these more traditional forms of music such as folk music, Nepali *adhunik* music, certain *bhajan* songs etc. also use the guitar. According to a research conducted among the students of Sikkim University, we can find a

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guitar in almost every home in Sikkim irrespective of economic status (Vedabala & Bandopadhyay, 2018). In other words the instrument is considered the musical instrument of choice by many. Majority of the people can play the instrument, even if at a very basic level, irrespective of gender, age and social status. If we look at guitar players from this region, we find that they play a number of music genres.

One of the music genres which has a history of around a hundred years in North Bengal and which uses the guitar extensively is Western Classical Music. There are several music schools in the main towns of the region which teach students Western Classical Music. Many are affiliated to international exam boards such as Trinity College of London and ABRSM (the exam board of the Royal Schools of Music London). Graded examinations and diploma courses are offered to students in these schools. These are for several instruments including the guitar.

Another musical genre which has captured the imagination of guitar players in the region is rock music and its sub genres. Young guitar players first learn the instrument by learning and playing along to popular rock songs. Then as they progressively acquire more skill, they start to learn more challenging songs, which require more technical prowess and maturity. So this genre provides guitar players with interesting prospects with regard to their musical development. Many consider rock music as a stepping stone from which one can explore other genres like blues, jazz, funk etc.

In Sikkim rock music started from the 1960s, when bands like The Orchids and The Flickrs were formed in Gangtok. They were the first ones to introduce rock music in Sikkim. In North Bengal, more specifically in Darjeeling during the same time we had bands like The Hillians, Forbidden Fruit etc. After them many different bands and musicians who played rock music came. Some of the famous ones were Shooting Star, Crabh etc and those that are active today are Still Waters, Girish and the Chronicles etc.

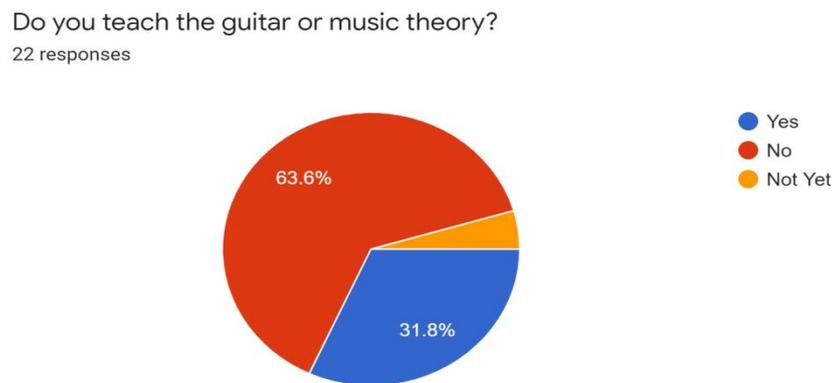
These two musical genres have a very loyal following in the region. The latter having a significantly greater influence over the members of the population who listen to music. But classical music, based on the guitar, is a viable source of income for some. Guitar teachers, both working in music schools, working privately, giving home tuitions or working elsewhere, have a steady income due to giving guitar lessons. As mentioned before there are a number of music institutions providing lessons on the guitar (classical or for other genres). These institutions have in their payroll various guitar teachers who have degrees/diplomas in guitar. They teach their students both practical and theory and this way they are provided with income. Apart from being guitar teachers, we also find guitarists playing in bands and in studios as session musicians. A musician in a band can earn from playing live and selling original music but it is not a steady source of income as not enough live shows happen in the region for a musician to earn enough for a livelihood. If a musician wants to earn a good livelihood by playing live on stage then he or she has to play shows outside the region in the different metropolitan cities. Being session musicians in studios also does not provide much, as one cannot get much work in the region due to having a small population. Various

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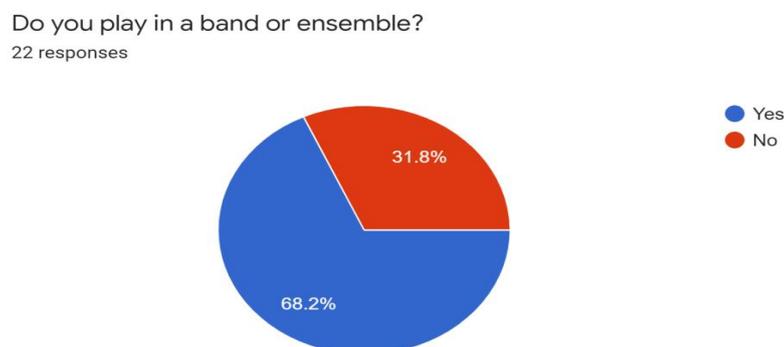
individuals who are accomplished guitar players have open recording studios. This provides them with a good earning. Many have other sources of income as well.

Observation and Analysis:

A random digital survey on Google forms was used to collect data from 22 different respondents. The respondents are guitar players who are professional and semi-professional musicians. They are all male and their age varied in the category of 20-50. They are from different socio-economic backgrounds. This survey was taken on 6th July 2021. Below are the data taken from the survey, which have been represented in graphic format. The pie chart below shows the percentage of respondents who teach the guitar or music theory.

**Figure 1**

We can see that 31.8% teach guitar or music in general, 63.6% do not engage in teaching and the rest 4.5% are planning to teach in the future. So we can say that a reasonable amount of guitar players teach music to students. This is because by doing so they earn a decent amount of money which can support their livelihoods.

**Figure 2**

The pie chart given above shows that 68.2% play in bands and ensembles, whereas 31.8% do not. Through this chart we can see that majority of the guitar players are interested

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in playing in bands and ensembles. Most of the young aspiring musicians are all influenced by musicians who perform live, so they are all interested to become like them. The lure of becoming popular performing musicians and earning considerable amounts of money attracts them and encourages them to play in bands and ensembles.

Do you record guitar based music yourself at home or elsewhere using studio equipment that you own?
22 responses

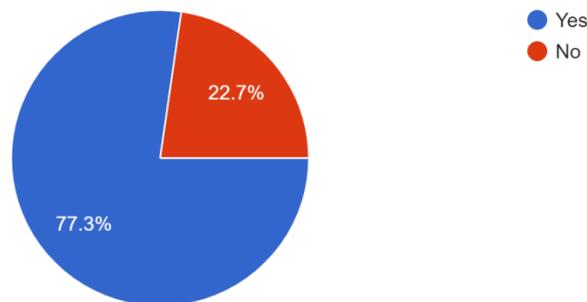


Figure 3

And, in this pie chart we can see that 77.3% records music using studio equipment that they own. So we can see that maximum number of people record music using their own recording equipment, a fairly large amount play in bands and less than 50% teach music. So we can say that teaching music is reserved for only a few, while most of the respondents play in bands and record music. From this we can understand that teaching as a profession is reserved only for a few. As discussed earlier teaching provides a steady source of income, so only a relatively small number of people earn a steady income through the guitar.

At what age did you start to learn how to play the guitar
22 responses

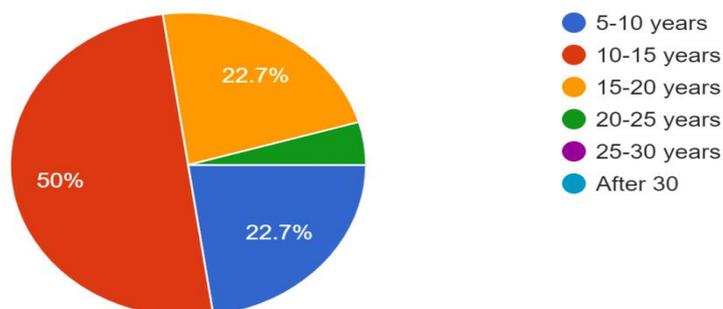


Figure 4

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The above pie chart shows us that 11 of respondents i.e. 50% started learning the guitar between the ages of 10 and 15 years. 5 respondents or 22.7% of the total respondents started even earlier, between 5 and 10 years. So we can say that guitar players start to learn the instrument from an early age. Children are more impressionable than adults and they usually learn from their elders. It can be said that as the guitar is very popular in the region, children see older family members playing the instrument and they get interested as well. This way children and young people take up the instrument.

What types of guitars do you own, if any?

22 responses

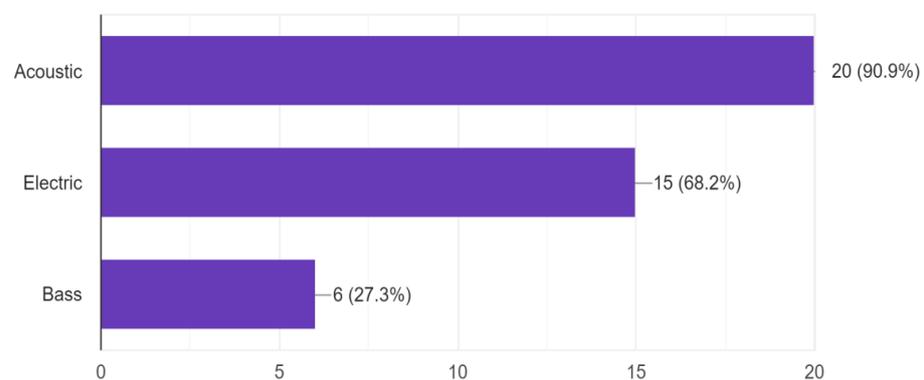


Figure 5

Figure 2 shows us that 20 respondents own an acoustic guitar, as opposed to electric guitars owned by 15 respondents and bass guitars owned by 6 respondents. People generally begin to learn the instrument on acoustic guitars, so most of the respondents own one. It is also usually cheaper than electric guitars, this may also be a reason why most people own one. We also can see that relatively less people own bass guitars.

Result:

We can say that the guitar and the professions surrounding it is very vibrant and active in the hills. The profession of teaching and the aspect of learning the instrument are becoming widespread in the region, even though from the survey we can see that right now only a small percentage of the respondents teach guitar. After learning young aspiring musicians are themselves teaching the instrument, privately or otherwise, or are playing professionally in studios or in bands. Guitar based music is being created for the masses and it is being accepted very amicably. As stated before children from a very small age are influenced to learn the instrument and we can see that this is true in the different music schools. These young enthusiasts start idolizing popular musicians from the regions and from outside the region. They are inspired by the music that these people make and they put in huge efforts to emulate them. This may be the reason for the relatively high number of musicians being

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produced from the region. This in turn has produced a high number of music schools and recording studios.

Therefore, we can come to the conclusion that the instrument in discussion, the guitar, is doing very well in the geographical research area of Sikkim and North Bengal. The youth are very interested in it and jobs opportunities are being created as a result of it. This is very good for the overall development of the youth as they will be able to focus their energies on creative channels and not squander their precious time and energy on detrimental activities. Music has become a beacon of hope for the youth, to guide them and acquaint them with the finer aspects of life. Hopefully we can see many more years in which the guitar's popularity will remain the same if not increase in the region.

ⁱ Set of two or three individual strings played together.

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