



# ECHOES OF THE SACRED DRUM: THE RUNJA TRADITION OF TELANGANA (INDIA) — MYTH, MUSIC, AND ARTISAN IDENTITY

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## Abstract

The Runja (also spelled Rounja or Runjala) is a rare and endangered ritual instrument embedded within the hereditary bardic system of the Vishwakarma (Vishwa Brahmin) communities of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Both a percussion instrument and a vehicle of sacred genealogy, the Runja occupies a distinctive place within Shaivite ritual soundscapes. Crafted from brass and animal hide, capable of producing complex rhythmic patterns and said to generate thirty-two tonal variations, it accompanies mythological narration, lineage recitation, and artisan cosmology. Drawing upon ethnographic accounts, oral narratives, and folklore documentation—including reportage by Aravind Arya (2021)—this article examines the Runja’s origin myths, performance grammar, socio-religious patronage, organology, and its present endangered status. The study argues that the Runja represents a sonic archive of artisan identity, functioning simultaneously as ritual instrument, genealogical record, and sacred sound technology. Immediate documentation and heritage intervention are urgently required.

**Keywords:** Runja Vadyam; Vishwakarma Community; Shaivite Ritual Music; Genealogical Performance; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Endangered Folk Tradition.

## 1. Introduction

Across South India, caste-linked narrative traditions have historically served as custodians of memory, mythology, and occupational identity. Among these, the Runja tradition remains one of the least documented yet culturally significant ritual systems.

The enchanting sound of the Runjala resonates uniquely within the sanctuaries of Vishwa Brahmins, believed to be a divine blessing from Jagat Janani (Mother Goddess). Rooted in Telangana's folk landscape, the art of Runja remains enveloped in sacred mystery. Originating in the Telangana region and historically spreading into coastal Andhra districts such as Srikakulam and East Godavari, the instrument occupies a central place in the ritual life of the Vishwakarma community.

Unlike many itinerant folk instruments, the Runja is not merely accompaniment—it is a ritual proclamation device, genealogical archive, and sonic emblem of artisan cosmology.

## 2. The Instrument: Construction, Structure, and Sonic Power

### Materials and Dimensions

The Runja is:

- Constructed from brass
- Tightly covered with animal hide
- Approximately 3.5 feet in height
- Played using sturdy wooden sticks
- Held between the knees in a forward-leaning posture

Players skillfully adjust tension manually, manipulating the strings or bindings to achieve precise tonal tuning. Though structurally a membranophone, performers claim it can reproduce up to thirty-two different sonic textures, including tonal resemblances to the damaru, dappu, and mridangam.

### Sonic Reach

The instrument's resonance is described as:

- Comparable to a war drum
- Audible across 2–3 kilometres in open rural settings
- Capable of rhythmic acceleration from slow invocations to high-energy crescendos

The performance typically begins with rhythmic syllables such as:

“Thakku Dhikku... Thakadhiku Dhikku... Takamani...”

Gradually, tempo intensifies, enveloping listeners in an immersive acoustic field.

### 3. Mythological Origins and Ritual Legitimacy

Runja mythology situates the instrument within Shaivite cosmology.

According to one origin narrative recorded in community tradition:

- A giant named Ravundasura or Rounja Kasura was slain by Lord Shiva.
- His dying wish was that his limbs be transformed into musical instruments.
- A special caste was created to play them during Shiva's marriage to Parvati.
- Vishwakarma, the divine architect, was ordered to support this newly created Runja caste.

Colonial ethnographer Mr. Hemingway records that the Runjas were considered specially created by Shiva and placed under the protection of Kamsalas (artisan Vishwakarmas), who inherited the obligation of supporting them.

Thus, myth performs three critical cultural functions:

Function	Cultural Role
Ritual Legitimacy	Embeds instrument in sacred Shaivite narrative
Artisan Theology	Links Vishwakarma identity to cosmic creation
Social Contract	Justifies hereditary patronage system

The Runja is therefore not merely an instrument—it is a theological artifact.

### 4. Community Context: The Vishwakarma (Vishwa Brahmin) Lineage

The Runja performers serve the Vishwakarma community, traditionally comprising five artisan categories believed to have emerged from Mata Gayatri's blessing:

- Blacksmiths
- Brass artisans
- Goldsmiths
- Wood craftsmen
- Sculptors

The Runja Vaidyulu function as **Ashritulu** (dependent genealogists) of these communities. They sing about gotras, narrate origin myths, and recount the sacred history of artisan crafts.

Wherever the sound of Runja resonates within these five Vishwakarma households, it is believed to bring auspiciousness and happiness.

### 5. Performance Structure

A typical Runja troupe consists of three members:

1. **The Lead Narrator** – Recites and explains the story
2. **The Runja Player** – Provides rhythmic foundation
3. **The Chorus** – Offers vocal reinforcement

## Ritual Sequence

- Opening with Omkara
- Prayer to Goddess Parvati
- Sanskrit shloka recitation
- Telugu explanation
- Gradual rhythmic intensification

## Narrative Repertoire

Stories performed include:

- Birth of Vishwakarma and the Five Brahmins
- Shiva–Parvati Kalyanam
- Veerabhadra Charitra
- Moola Stambham
- Bhagavata episodes
- Significance of the five crafts

During deity marriages, Mangala Harati traditions are replicated symbolically, and the instrument's Shaivite identity becomes most pronounced.

## 6. Patronage System and Social Structure

The Runja artists traditionally:

- Perform exclusively in Vishwakarma households
- Travel village to village
- Receive alms (grain, cloth, food, small honoraria)
- Combine agriculture with ritual performance

Two communities mentioned in colonial documentation—the Panasa and the Runja—were described as dependent upon Kamsalas. Whether fully accurate or shaped by colonial ethnographic framing, such accounts confirm the long-standing hereditary bond between Runja performers and artisan patrons.

This non-contractual patronage system resembles other South Indian bardic systems but remains uniquely artisan-centric.

## 7. Geographic Spread and Present Status

Historically active in:

- Telangana (Warangal, Karimnagar, Nalgonda, Mahabubnagar)
- Srikakulam district
- United East Godavari region
- Border areas of Odisha

Today, the tradition faces steep decline:

- Fewer practitioners
- Generational discontinuity
- Lack of formal recognition
- Absence of pension or state patronage
- Youth migration away from hereditary arts

As reported in Bathukamma, 21 November 2021, Aravind Arya, the tradition may not survive beyond the next generation if preservation measures are not undertaken.

## 8. Ethnomusicological Significance

Organologically, the Runja is:

- A large brass-bodied membranophone
- Played in vertical forward-tilted position
- Tuned by manual tension adjustments

Its claim of thirty-two sonic textures suggests a complex rhythmic grammar requiring deeper field study.

It embodies:

- Nada Brahma (sound as cosmic principle)
- Ritual announcement
- Genealogical memory
- Artisan metaphysics

The Runja stands at the intersection of music, mythology, caste identity, and sacred economy.

## 9. Intangible Cultural Heritage and Preservation

The Runja fulfills major criteria for UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage:

- Oral traditions
- Performing arts
- Social practices and rituals
- Traditional craftsmanship knowledge

Urgent measures needed:

- Audio-visual documentation
- Technical blueprinting of instrument
- Transcription of tala structures
- State cultural pension inclusion
- Digital archiving
- Academic ethnography

Without intervention, this sound-based identity system risks permanent disappearance.

## 10. Conclusion

The Runja tradition represents a rare survival of ritual genealogical percussion embedded in caste-based patronage structures. Its decline signals more than the loss of an instrument—it signals erosion of artisan cosmology articulated through rhythm. Wherever the Runja resounds, practitioners affirm, happiness follows. If its sound falls silent, an entire sonic archive of Vishwakarma heritage will vanish with it. Preserving Runja is therefore not merely about safeguarding folklore—it is about conserving a worldview expressed through sacred rhythm.

Beyond its musical function, the Runja operates as a living repository of collective memory, transmitting genealogies, sacred narratives, and craft-based identities across generations. Each performance reaffirms bonds between patron and performer, deity and devotee, sound and community. The instrument encodes social history within its rhythms, sustaining an ethical and cosmological framework in which labour, devotion, and artistry converge. In an era marked by rapid modernisation and cultural homogenisation, the disappearance of such traditions would represent not simply cultural impoverishment but the silencing of an epistemology rooted in sound. To preserve the Runja, therefore, is to protect an embodied knowledge system—one that articulates dignity of craft, continuity of lineage, and the metaphysical belief that rhythm itself is a conduit between the human and the divine.

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