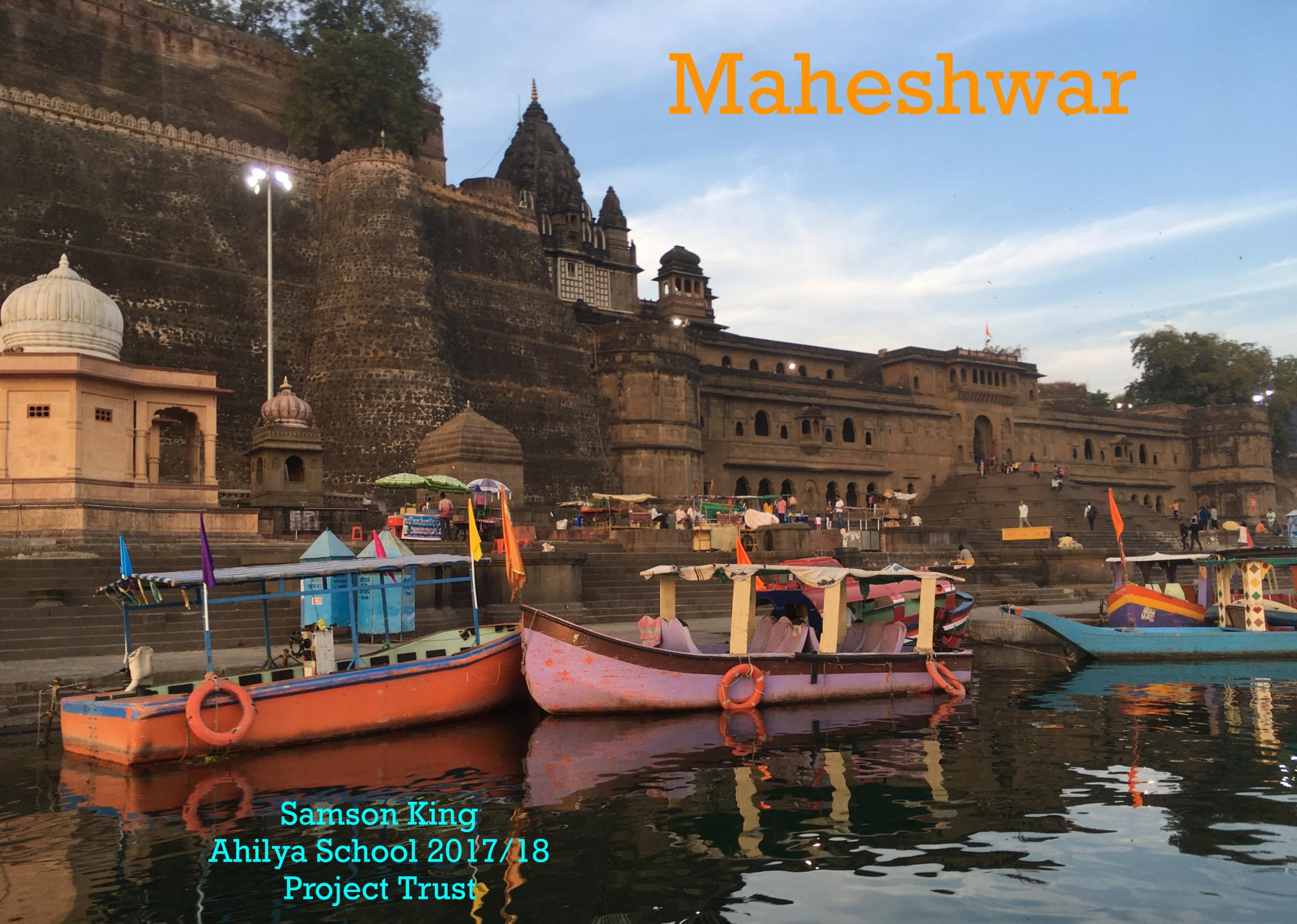


# Maheshwar



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This year I have been teaching at the Ahilya Bal Jyoti School in Maheshwar. Maheshwar is located in Madhya Pradesh in central India, on the banks of the Narmada River. The Narmada is considered to be a holy river in Hinduism and the town itself is an ancient site of Hindu pilgrimage. This means that Hinduism has a very strong presence in Maheshwar, which can be seen by the many temples both throughout the town and at the ghats along the river's edge. However, it is not only temples that are found in Maheshwar, there are also a large number of mosques within the town. These mosques are place of worship for the Muslim community, the town has roughly an even split between Islam and Hinduism. These two groups live side by side without issue, and integrate in many areas. This can clearly be seen at the school, where all but one of the teachers are Hindu, whereas around 80% of the students are Muslim.

The Ahilya School was set up to provide education for some of the poorest children in Maheshwar. Around 240 children attend the school, with the help of 16 full time teachers. It is able to provide this affordable schooling thanks to funding from Rehwa Society. Rehwa Society is an organisation that supports handloom weaving, historically Maheshwar's most famous tradition. Handloom weaving of sarees, scarves and

material was a traditional skill that was nearly wiped out before being revived by Rehwa. Originally, weaving was done mostly by Muslims. This could account for the high amount of Muslim children at the school as the majority of the pupils are children of weavers.

The school and Rehwa Society are both located within the walls of the ancient Ahilya Fort. This was the home of the former royal family of the district, and their descendants still live in the fort today. The fort on one side overlooks the Narmada, and on the other side the rest of the town and the market. The river is

the main geographical feature of Maheshwar and is always bustling with life. At this point in its course the Narmada is wide and flat, one of its most famous features, the Baneshwar temple, is found in the middle of the river. All along the river bank are the ghats, stone steps that lead from the edge of the fort all the way into the river. On the ghats are many temples which are visited daily by both inhabitants of Maheshwar and also people from nearby towns and villages, who come to pray to the Narmada. As well as these visitors you can also find many locals swimming in the river as part of their daily wash, and ladies in brightly coloured sarees washing their family clothes. Whilst all of this is happening there is music playing from the numerous stalls along the ghat, selling items such as coconuts and incense to be used as part of the prayers, and also selling cool drinks and snacks. The market on the other side of the fort is just as busy as the river, but in a completely different way. The main road is filled with countless shops all filled with brightly coloured products, many selling a variety of handloom goods. The narrow street is filled with motorbikes loaded up with men, women and children, zooming up and down, blowing their horns and narrowly avoiding the pedestrians and cows that fill the rest of the space.



The Ahilya School



Weaving at Rehwa

The market gets even more chaotic as you move away from the fort towards the bus stand and the main road out of Maheshwar, fruit sellers line the edge of the street along with small stands selling tea, the customers standing or sitting in the road, unbothered by the relentless traffic and sound. This is just a brief insight into what Maheshwar is like. In this study I am going to look at the role of music within the community and how it links to different parts of daily life, including religion, celebrations and school.

Washing at the ghat



Tuesday fruit market



Devotion



A photograph of the interior of a snake temple. The space is filled with numerous small, colorful lights, creating a vibrant and festive atmosphere. The floor is covered with a layer of purple and yellow flowers. In the center, there is a small shrine or altar with a snake on it, surrounded by more flowers and lights. The text "Snake temple" is overlaid on the image in a white, serif font.

## Snake temple

My first introduction to music came very early on in the year simply due to the location of my house, and introduced me to Hindu devotional music. My home is located in the Ahilya Vihar Colony, a small colony which mostly houses weavers and staff from Rehwa Society as well as a small number of teachers from the school. This colony is found within the walls of the fort, around five minutes away from school. There are two small temples in the colony, one dedicated to Sai Baba and the other dedicated to the snake gods. It is the second temple that introduced me to the devotional music. This temple is looked after by a man called Anil Sharma, known to the locals as Anil Baba due to his role at the temple. (Baba is a name given to someone who cares for a temple.) Every morning and evening, at sunrise and sunset, he opens the temple and cleans it, sweeping inside and out in preparation for the day. After it is clean he will perform his prayers, known as puja, and then other residents of the colony will visit to perform their own puja. All the while that the temple is open he will be playing music at a

very loud volume from the speakers within. Early in the year this would wake me up every morning, but as time progressed it became such a part of daily life that I would not even notice it. The songs that are played are all religious, devotional songs, either telling epic stories about the Hindu gods, or are mantras, a type of religious phrase, put to music. All of these songs are accompanied by a number of different instruments, the most common being the hand drum, known as dholak. The dholak is usually around two feet long, it has a wooden body and a head at each end. The drum is made of locally available materials, such as mango wood for the body and goat skin for the heads. The head are different sizes, allowing for a great variety of sounds to be produced. The larger head is played with the left hand, providing the bass notes, whilst the smaller head is played with the right hand, providing treble. The drum is tuned traditionally with rope that attaches to both heads and can be tightened or loosened, but more modern drums feature metal tuners. Both varieties are regularly seen being used. The drum is popular due to its versatility in sound and the fact that it is easily portable, many are attached to a strap so it can be carried under the arm and continue to be played. After some time exploring Maheshwar I came across a street where a number of houses had stacks of dholak piled up outside. I asked some of the children outside the houses why this was and they explained that people brought their drums here when they needed new heads putting on. The few families that lived here were skilled craftsmen at making drum heads, and this fact was known all over Maheshwar.

Other instruments found in these songs include the harmonium, a small keyboard powered by pumping air through with one hand whilst you play, and also the sitar, a large multi stringed instrument. The sound created by this traditional ensemble often develops a repetitive rhythm, leading to a trance like feeling when paired with only a handful of words and often extending up to an hour in length. The small collection of songs played at the temple became a part of daily life in the colony, and one that I began to enjoy and looked forward to hearing every day.

Throughout the year I became good friends with Anil and spent quite some time at the temple, especially over winter when he and his friends would regularly meet at night to sing and play music. On these nights, the group would sing devotional songs, some the same as the ones played in daytime, for hours at a time. The singing was accompanied by a dholak played by one member of the group, and by a small pair of hand cymbals played by another. The other members of the group would all clap to add even more variety to the sound. This collection of instruments produced a very intense rhythm which I was fortunate enough to experience a number of times when I sat in with them. As well as me being very interested in their music, they were also very interested in western music and were excited to discover that I had a guitar at my house. One night I was invited to bring my guitar to the temple in an attempt for us all to play together, but despite the interest and enthusiasm of us all, I was not skilled enough to play along with their singing using only my ear.



## Wedding drum and dancing



Due to the link between Hinduism and music, and also the ready availability of drums in Maheshwar, I found that a huge number of the adults and also children were proficient drummers. There are a small number of basic rhythms that feature in the majority of songs, both recorded and played live, that many people know how to play. At any occasion, such as festival, wedding or birthday there will be someone who is adept at playing the drums, and if this person grows tired at any point then the drum will simply be passed to somebody else who will pick up the rhythm just as it was left off. At events such as these, the drum that was found was not the dholak but instead a different type. This drum followed the same design as the dholak but was larger and had both a plastic body and plastic skins. Another difference was that this drum was not a hand drum, it was played with two long thin plastic sticks instead. This meant that this drum produced a sound very different to that of the dholak, the sound was higher and more piercing, it was also much louder due to the use of sticks which act as a natural amplifier. However despite these differences many of the rhythms that are played on both styles of drum are the same, meaning that ability to play

one drum also gives the drummer the skill to be able to play any similar drum. Another musical feature of weddings took place at the very start of the event, where the groom would ride a white horse to meet the bride accompanied by his family and other guests of the wedding. Whilst he rode with the procession of guests there would be a brass band leading the event. This music was unlike any other in Maheshwar. It was lead by a drummer but also involved the brass instruments being played with a huge number of effects on them, being blasted from speakers inside a truck at the front of the parade. As well as this there was a man shouting with the same effects applied to his voice. This all combined to make a noise that could maybe be described as psychedelic jazz, but was still found at every wedding that took place.

I did not come across any other instrument that was as widespread as the drum, the next most common was the harmonium but there were only a handful of people I met who could play this with any skill. This point could be illustrated by the two music shops in Maheshwar. Both of these shops have a sign displaying their name and also feature pictures of many different instruments: guitars, pianos, full drum kits, but despite this they both sell nothing but hand drums. This also highlights how strong the link between Hinduism and music is. I also regularly heard popular songs from films being played from houses throughout the town. Over the course of the year, any time I came across music being performed it was always religious songs accompanied by dholak. I did not discover anyone who played an instrument capable of producing a melody, with the one exception of the harmonium. So despite the fact that a large number of people listen to popular music and film songs, there was nobody who would actually perform this music.

## Wedding procession including drums



# Performance



As well as the small meetings of friends at temples to play music, on occasion these would turn into larger scale events. For the first of these that I went to, I was taken by Anil, whose friends were performing. We rode down into the market to a small temple on a street corner. Here a crowd had gathered around a small stage that had been set up along with a PA system. On the stage was a drummer, along with a harmonium, an electric keyboard and a number of different singers. They were performing songs similar to the ones that would be played at the smaller events but with the addition of the extra instruments. The singers would take turns singing songs one at a time but would also often all join in together at certain points. I attended two or three other events like this after the first one, which all followed a similar format of performers and were always well attended by a crowd, despite being held on especially narrow streets. The success of these events, which often continued long into the night, shows that the public interest in religious music is huge.

These musical events can be contrasted with another event that took place, known as the Sacred River Festival. This was a festival of music and dance hosted by the Ahilya Fort hotel, which is run by the former Maharaj of Maheshwar. This is an extremely upmarket hotel, mostly stayed at by wealthy foreigners. The festival took place over three days and was held in a public area next to the Narmada. Each day there was a musical performance, however these performances were different from what is normally seen in Maheshwar. The performers had come from all over India and whilst they still all featured the use of drums, the other instruments used were not those found in Maheshwar. They included sitar, flute and tambura, a one stringed instrument that produces a drone like sound. Another major difference was that none of the performances featured lyrics. One performance did have a vocalist, but he simply used his voice like an instrument. This point highlights an important fact: none of these were religious songs, they were simply musical performances by virtuosos of the instruments. This fact may have contributed to the poor attendance of the event by the local people, the vast majority of the audience was made up of foreign guests. Despite the love of devotional music and popular film songs by the Maheshwari people, this love did not seem to extend to the music being performed at this festival. Another possible reason for the poor attendance could be the link the event had with the Ahilya Fort hotel. This could be for two reasons. Firstly, many people are still very respectful towards the former royal family and do not feel that it is their place to attend an event like this. Secondly, many people feel this event is simply being held for rich tourists and therefore have no interest in attending. Both of these reasons, dislike of the music and association with the fort, can be illustrated by discussions I had with my friend Mina, who owned a small stall next to where the event was taking place. On the first day I asked her if she would be coming that night to listen, but she told me that she didn't have a ticket. I explained that it was a free event open to everybody and that she didn't need a ticket but she still didn't seem particularly interested, and did not attend that day. The next day she did briefly come to listen to one of the performances. I asked if she was enjoying it, to which she replied "No, it's boring.", and left shortly after. I think that her attitude towards the event reflected that of the majority of the local people. Over the three days I did not see any of my other friends at the event.



Sacred River Festival  
(with foreign guests)

# School



स्वतंत्रनाक

घाट

यहाँ पर  
स्नान न करे।

The only link the festival had with the music of Maheshwar was a short piece that opened the event. This was performed by a small group of children from the school who sang the Saraswati Prayer, accompanied by both harmonium and tabla, a traditional pair of hand drums. The tabla are different from the other drums mentioned because they are single headed drums. Tabla are always played in a pair, the larger one played by the left hand and the smaller one played by the right. This means that they can be played in the same way as the dholak and that the rhythms that work on one work on the other too. The smaller tabla drum is made of wood and tuned with rope just as the dholak is, however the larger drum is made of metal, usually copper. This means that the tabla produce a different sound from the other types of drum despite their similarities. Saraswati is the goddess of music, meaning that this one piece did have a religious aspect as well as featuring the typical instruments found in Maheshwar, marking it as different from the rest of the event.

The children had been rehearsing for this event for a long time in school thanks to the music lessons that they receive every week. Twice a week a music teacher comes to the school, each time taking a group of three classes, around 60 children, at once. This music teacher, called Kamlesh, is skilful at playing both the harmonium and tabla. In these lessons the children are taught songs to sing whilst Kamlesh plays the harmonium. He will sometimes pass the harmonium around a few children sitting nearest the front, but mostly the children are just learning to sing rather than learning to play an instrument. The songs that the children learn in these lessons are not religious songs but instead are mostly patriotic songs. Despite Kamlesh being Hindu, along with all but one of the other teachers, the students are around 80% Muslim. This means that the religious songs found elsewhere are not suited to the school environment due to the variety in religion, compared to at a temple where only a single religion will be found. The patriotic songs that are sung are perhaps chosen for the fact that they give a common topic that all of the children feel a link to. One song that was sung regularly throughout the year was Ham Bache Hindustan Ke Hai – We Are Children of India. As well as at the Sacred River Festival, the children also performed their songs at other events during the year including Children's Day and Republic Day. These two performances both happened at the school only in front of the other children and some parents, but still gave the children an opportunity to showcase what they had learned. At these events only a small selection



of children were chosen to perform, including 5-10 singers, one student playing harmonium and Kamlesh on tabla. Leading up to these events the children would practice daily for their performance, mostly without their teacher being present. This shows that the children have a strong interest in music and did not need the extra encouragement of a teacher to want to play.

Not only are patriotic songs a part of the music lessons, they also form part of the daily prayer. Each morning at the beginning of the school day, all of the children line up to say their prayer. This ends with a recital of two songs, firstly a patriotic song entitled Vande Mataram and secondly the national anthem, Jana Gana Mana. The daily performance of these songs shows that the people of Maheshwar are proud of their Indian identity and that they feel that music and singing is the best way of expressing this.

## Children's Day performance



Below is a small selection of photos and videos to show some of the styles of music mentioned.



Tabla practice



Drums at Holi Festival



Video of the school prayer showing both Vande Mataram and Jana Gana Mana. Every Thursday is non-uniform day, turning the school into a mix of bright colours instead of the usual red uniform.



These two videos show different parts of how drumming features at a wedding. The video to the left shows the groom arriving at the event with a band of drummers providing accompaniment. The video below took place inside the home of the groom, and shows a single drummer providing music to be danced to.

Visible in both videos are the larger drums being played by sticks, different to the smaller hand drums such as dholak and tabla.





This is the performance of the Saraswati Prayer which opened the Sacred River Festival. The harmonium and tabla can be clearly seen, including the technique for playing harmonium which involves using the left hand to pump air through whilst the right hand plays the keys.

I hope that this piece has been informative about the role that music plays in daily life in Maheshwar, as I have felt its presence constantly whilst I have been here. Whilst on my travels, I even bought myself a small dholak to take home and learn to play. I am sure that there is so much more to learn about its influence in everyday life and I hope to continue learning about this in the future.



