

Rabindranath Tagore and the Hindustani Classical Tradition: A Study of Musical Adaptation and Innovation

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Abstract

The lively tradition of Hindustani classical music that thrived in the Tagore family of Jorasanko had a big impact on Rabindranath Tagore's musical philosophy. Dwarkanath and Debendranath Tagore's family spent time with famous classical musicians, especially those from the Bishnupur gharana, which helped art and music grow. This study investigates the influence of the structure, aesthetics, and essence of Hindustani classical traditions—namely Pada-gāna, Dhāmar, and Khayāl—on Rabindranath's musical compositions. Rabindra Sangeet, while deeply entrenched in classical heritage, surpasses conventional constraints through its amalgamation of melody, emotion, and poetic sensibility. The paper also looks at how Rabindranath used classical forms, rhythmic frameworks, and melodic structures for his works and how he changed these aspects to fit the emotive and philosophical parts of his work. Ultimately, Rabindra Sangeet evolves into a distinctive artistic language that fuses the rigor of classical music with the spontaneity of lyrical music. This shows how Tagore saw music as a way to talk to God and feel things.

Key Words

Rabindra Sangeet; Hindustani Classical Music; Bishnupur Gharana; Pada-gāna; Khayāl; Dhāmar; Rāga; Tagore Family; Musical Aesthetics; Indian Classical Tradition.

Objectives of the Study:

- (a) To examine the historical and cultural underpinnings of the Tagore's family's engagement with Hindustani classical music.
- (b) To ascertain the stylistic and structural impacts of the Bishnupur gharana on Rabindra Sangeet
- (c) To examine the relationship between the Pada-gāna and Khayāl traditions and their representation in Tagore's works.
- (d) To analyze Rabindranath Tagore's reimagining of classical musical structures and his conversion of rāga and tāla into emotive components.
- (e) To understand how Rabindra Sangeet changed into a unique musical style that combines classical rigor with freedom of expression and emotion.

Methodologies:

The study employs a qualitative and analytical methodology, largely utilizing textual, historical, and musicological materials. A comparative musical analysis was carried out between various Hindustani Pada-gāna and Khayāl compositions and their respective Rabindra Sangeet counterparts. The study uses ideas from Indian aesthetics to look at what Tagore said about music and how it can be used to express emotions.

Introduction:

This study looks at how the structure, beauty, and soul of Hindustani classical traditions, including Pada-gāna, Dhāmar, and Khayāl, influenced Rabindranath's music. Rabindra Sangeet is profoundly rooted in classical music, yet it goes beyond traditional limits by combining melody, emotion, and poetic sensibility. The study also talks about how Rabindranath used classical forms, rhythmic frameworks, and melodic structures in his work and how he customized these things to meet the emotional and philosophical aspects of his work.

The Tagore family of Jorasanko has a long history of classical music and related fields that goes back to Dwarkanath Tagore. He was a patron and supporter of various artistic institutions and theatrical movements of his time. Under his guidance and influence, with the encouragement of his wife Digambari Devi and his son Debendranath Tagore, discussions and practice of Hindustani classical music became more extensive within the Tagore household. During his time, the house at Jorasanko became a meeting ground for musicians from different parts of India.

The sons and daughters of the Tagore family grew up in an atmosphere deeply steeped in art and music. With the desire to cultivate refined taste and proficiency, contemporary eminent musicians such as Kshetramohan Goswami, Radhika Prasad Goswami, Shyamsundar Mitra, Jadunath Bhattacharya, and Biswanath Chattopadhyay were appointed as teachers of classical music in the Tagore household.

The sons of Mahesh Tagore—Satyendranath, Jyotirindranath, and Somendranath—became well-versed in classical music through regular training. This long-standing musical tradition, together with the artistic ambience of the house, had a profound impact on the young Rabindranath. His early training under Biswanath Chattopadhyay gave him a fine sense of classical structure and melodic precision. Most of the musicians who visited and taught at Jorasanko belonged to the Bishnupur gharana, and as a result, the aesthetic of that gharana was strongly impressed upon Rabindranath's mind during his formative years.

The early musical environment of his childhood deeply shaped Rabindranath's sensitivity toward sound and melody. From his own recollections, it is clear that he was introduced to the charm and grace of Hindustani melodies at a very young age, and that his ears and mind were moulded by their rhythm and sentiment.

Because almost all of the music instructors at Jorasanko were trained in the Bishnupur tradition, that gharana's influence appears most prominently in Rabindranath's compositions. This connection can be examined through the following analysis.

The Spirit of *Pada-gāna* in Rabindra Sangeet

From the third decade of the nineteenth century, *Pada-gāna* (lyric-based devotional compositions) gained popularity in Bengal with social encouragement, and the Tagore household played an active role in promoting this art form. Through close association with Bishnupur gharana singers, *Pada-gāna* became internalized in Rabindranath's creative consciousness.

The *Pada-gāna* structure traditionally consists of four parts—*sthāyī*, *antara*, *sanchārī*, and *abhoga*. These divisions are also evident in Rabindranath's songs. The linguistic depth, emotional restraint, and measured ornamentation of the *Pada-gāna* tradition are preserved in his compositions.

Rabindranath viewed *Pada-gāna* as embodying both vastness and discipline. The controlled use of ornamentation and the weight of well-structured melody are features he deeply appreciated and retained in his own music. The intrinsic aesthetic of the Bishnupur gharana remained a lifelong influence on his musical imagination.

Many of his songs, even those outside the *Pada-gāna* form, retain its fourfold division and its disciplined approach to melodic ornamentation. The rhythmic frameworks he used—such as *chautāl*, *āḍā-chautāl*, *jhaptāl*, and *dhāmar*—show

his classical grounding. He also employed uncommon rhythmic patterns like *jhankār*, *ṣaṭpadi*, *pakarā*, *navatāl*, and *ekādashī* in several compositions, all of which echo the structural discipline of the classical *Pada-gāna*.

A comparative study reveals clear parallels between original classical compositions and Rabindra Sangeet pieces inspired by them. For example:

Classical Compositions	Rabindra Sangeet
<i>Phuli bana ghana ghora (Raga Bahar)</i>	<i>Aji momo mono chāhe</i>
<i>Kaunarupa baneho (Raga Tilak Kamod)</i>	<i>Madhuro rupe birajo</i>
<i>Ae batiya mere chīta chari (Raga Sūrata)</i>	<i>E bhārote rākho nitya</i>
<i>Beni nirakhata (Raga Ādaṇā)</i>	<i>Bāñī taba dhāy</i>
<i>Aye ritu pati basant rāj (Raga Bahar)</i>	<i>Bājāo tumi kobi</i>

Similarly, the *dhāmar* songs of Rabindra Sangeet demonstrate the adaptation of classical rhythmic frameworks but with distinct variations in pattern. The traditional *dhāmar tāla* structure of Hindustani music differs from the rhythmic divisions Rabindranath employed in his compositions, showing how he creatively reinterpreted these classical patterns.

In Hindustani music, the structure of Dhamar tala is like this:

1 2 3 4 5 | 6 7 | 8 9 10 | 11 12 13 14 | 1

On the other hand the structure of Dhamar tala that is applied in Rabindra Sangit is like this:

1 2 3 | 4 5 | 6 7 | 8 9 10 | 11 12 13 14 | 1

Some of the Rabindra Sangit those which are composed in the light of Dhamar of Hindustani music are as follows:

Dhamar Composition	Rabindra Sangit
<i>Bina bajay re (Raga Poorvi)</i>	<i>Momo ongone swami</i>
<i>Harasa jogo lal (Raga Hameer)</i>	<i>Horoshe jago aji</i>
<i>Sautan mada mat (Raga Lachari Todi)</i>	<i>Nutono prano dao</i>
<i>Aao fagun (Raga Nayaki Kanada)</i>	<i>Sudhasagorotire</i>
<i>Aj ranga khelata hori (Raga Bihag)</i>	<i>Jage natho jotsnaraate</i>

The Spirit of *Khayāl* in Rabindra Sangeet

The number of songs by Rabindranath based on *khayāl* compositions is smaller compared to those influenced by *Pada-gāna*. Even though he followed classical *khayāl* structures to some extent, his songs do not reproduce the extensive improvisational techniques such as *tān*, *bol-tān*, or *alap* found in traditional *khayāl* singing.

Examples of parallels between classical *khayāl* compositions and Rabindra Sangeet include:

Classical Khayāl	Rabindra Sangeet
<i>Mori nain lagan (Raga Nat-Malhar)</i>	<i>More bāre bāre</i>
<i>Pyāla mujhe vari de (Raga Rāmakali)</i>	<i>Dāo he hriday bhore dāo</i>
<i>Sundara lagāri he (Raga Kānaḍā)</i>	<i>Mondire momo ke</i>
<i>Kari kari kamariya (Raga Paraj)</i>	<i>Tobo premo sudharoshe</i>
<i>Jin chhūo more (Raga Rāmakali)</i>	<i>Āñkhijala muchāile janani</i>

Although Rabindranath practised classical music, he never submitted entirely to its strict formal discipline. Even when his songs are based on the moods of specific *rāgas*, he used them primarily as emotional frameworks rather than rigid melodic prescriptions. For him, *bhāva*—the expression of feeling—was central, while the *rāga* served as its vehicle.

Through poetic sensitivity and aesthetic insight, Rabindranath transformed the technicality of classical form into expressive freedom. He believed that musical craftsmanship is only meaningful when it serves emotion; ornamentation and technique have value only insofar as they support the inner sentiment.

Thus, although classical music deeply influenced him from an early stage, and he drew upon the Hindustani tradition for inspiration, Rabindra Sangeet ultimately evolved into a unique musical idiom—distinct in its synthesis of discipline and emotion, intellect and feeling, structure and spontaneity.

Findings:

The study reveals the connection of Tagore family's with Hindustani classical music, which began with Dwarkanath Tagore which changed over the years and making Jorasanko a thriving hub of musical culture. The Bishnupur gharana had a great effect on Rabindranath Tagore's musical taste because its lyrics were deep and its music was spiritual. Tagore was influenced by khayāl, but he chose to abandon ornamental improvisation in favor of emotional purity over technical showmanship. He saw the rāga as more of a tool to demonstrate bhāva than a strict melody. In the end, Rabindra Sangeet is a mix of classical and modern styles that uses discipline, poetry, and humanistic emotion to create a musical style that is both unique and long-lasting.

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