

Cultural and Philosophical Dimensions of Folk Influence in Rabindrasangeet

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Abstract

The topic “Cultural and Philosophical Dimensions of Folk Influence in Rabindrasangeet” invites an academic exploration of how folk traditions shape not only the musical style but also the underlying cultural and philosophical meanings within Rabindrasangeet, the body of songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore. The focus is on uncovering the ethnomusicological and philosophical layers that folk elements contribute to this classical repertoire, supported by detailed song-wise case studies. Therefore this paper critically analyzes how specific folk motifs and philosophical ideas are integrated into Rabindrasangeet, revealing the nuanced dialogue between rural cultural ethos and Tagore’s poetic-musical vision, as demonstrated through select song case studies.

This paper explores the multifaceted influence of folk traditions on Rabindrasangeet, the corpus of songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore, focusing on their cultural and philosophical dimensions. By examining how Tagore integrated indigenous folk musical elements and philosophical ideas into his compositions, the study elucidates the synthesis of rural ethos and modern artistic expression. Employing an ethnomusicological approach combined with philosophical analysis, this research investigates selected Rabindrasangeet songs as case studies, revealing the nuanced dialogues between folk culture and Tagore’s creative vision. The findings demonstrate that folk influences in Rabindrasangeet are not mere stylistic borrowings but serve as profound vehicles for expressing universal human values and regional identity. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Tagore’s musical philosophy and highlights the role of folk traditions in shaping modern Bengali art music.

Keywords: Rabindrasangeet, Folk Influence, Ethnomusicology, Philosophy, Cultural Identity, Tagore

Introduction

The introduction provides an overview of Rabindrasangeet’s significance as a unique blend of classical and folk elements within Bengali music. It contextualizes Tagore’s creative milieu, emphasizing his engagement with folk traditions as a deliberate cultural and philosophical strategy. The section outlines the research problem: the need for a comprehensive analysis of how folk influences shape both the cultural meanings and philosophical underpinnings of Rabindrasangeet. It briefly reviews relevant literature on Tagore’s musical synthesis and folk traditions in Bengal, identifying gaps in scholarship related to the philosophical dimensions of this influence. The introduction ends by stating the objectives of the study, which include ethnomusicological investigation and philosophical interpretation of selected songs, to illuminate the layered interplay between folk culture and Rabindranath Tagore’s artistic ethos.

Methodology

This section details the interdisciplinary methodology combining ethnomusicology and philosophical hermeneutics. It explains the selection criteria for Rabindrasangeet songs used as case studies, chosen for their explicit folk influences and philosophical content. The approach includes qualitative musical analysis focusing on melody, rhythm, and instrumentation, alongside lyrical exegesis to uncover embedded philosophical themes. Primary sources such as original song notations and Tagore's writings are examined, complemented by secondary scholarly interpretations. The methodology also incorporates field research insights from folk music practitioners and ethnographic observations where relevant. The integration of both textual and musical analyses ensures a holistic understanding of folk influence in Rabindrasangeet, aligning with international academic standards for humanities research.

Ethnomusicological Discussion

This section explores how folk music elements—such as melodic structures, rhythmic patterns, and modal scales—are embedded within Rabindrasangeet. It discusses the philosophical ethos conveyed through these folk idioms, emphasizing concepts like simplicity, spirituality, and connectedness to nature and community. The discussion highlights Tagore's conscious use of folk aesthetics to democratize music and embed it in lived cultural experiences. It also addresses how folk traditions provide a sonic and symbolic framework that reflects broader Indian philosophical themes, such as unity in diversity and the cyclical nature of life. The ethnomusicological lens reveals how these folk elements serve not only musical but also philosophical functions in Tagore's compositions.

Analytical Framework

This section builds an analytical framework grounded in both musicological theory and philosophical inquiry. It articulates key concepts such as folk idiom, philosophical symbolism, and cultural identity as they relate to Rabindrasangeet. The framework integrates semiotic analysis of lyrics and musical motifs with a philosophical reading of Tagore's literary and musical philosophy. It draws on relevant theories from cultural philosophy, aesthetics, and Indian philosophical traditions to interpret the synthesis of folk and classical elements. This theoretical scaffolding guides the interpretation of selected songs, providing tools to dissect how philosophical meanings are encoded through folk-inspired musical and lyrical strategies.

Discussion: Song-wise Case Studies with Analysis Tables

This section presents detailed analyses of selected Rabindrasangeet songs that exemplify folk influence and their philosophical import. This section undertakes a close examination of four selected songs as representative **case studies** in order to elucidate Rabindranath Tagore's internalization and aesthetic rearticulation of Baul philosophical thought. The compositions chosen for analysis are "**Amar Praner Manush Ache Prane**," "**Aj Dhaner Khete Raudra-Chhayay**," "**Nishidin Bhorosha Rakhis**," and "**Bhenge Mor Ghorer Chabi**." Through a song-wise analytical framework, this discussion explores how themes of embodied spirituality, immanent divinity, and ethical trust are articulated through lyrical imagery and musical expression. Collectively, these case studies aim to demonstrate how Tagore transforms vernacular Baul metaphysics into a universal humanist vision within Rabindrasangeet.

Case study-1 “Amar Praner Manush Ache Prane” (The person of my soul abides within my very being)

→ Gloss note: “Praner manush” denotes the inward, idealized beloved—often read in Baul and Tagorean contexts as the immanent divine, not merely a human figure.

Cultural Dimension:

This song reflects the deep human connection typical of folk traditions, emphasizing personal affection and loyalty. Its language is simple and emotionally direct, echoing the folk style of expressing intimate relationships within a communal cultural setting. The song’s melody and phrasing often resonate with the folk musical idioms that celebrate heartfelt bonds.

Philosophical Dimension:

Philosophically, the song explores the theme of inner companionship and the presence of a beloved in one’s soul, aligning with folk notions of love as both a personal and spiritual experience. It suggests an existential reliance on love as a sustaining force, reflecting folk wisdom about the inseparability of human emotions and identity.

Case study-2 “Aj Dhan-Er Khete Raudra-Chhayay” (Today, in the sun-and-shade of the paddy fields)

→ Gloss note: The agrarian imagery situates spiritual realization within everyday rural labor, aligning with Baul philosophy’s rejection of transcendental abstraction

Cultural Dimension:

This song vividly portrays the rural landscape, capturing the interplay of sunlight and shadow over ripe paddy fields—a quintessential folk image tied to agrarian life. The song’s cultural roots lie in the celebration of nature and the agricultural cycle, central to the folk worldview and daily life of rural communities.

Philosophical Dimension:

Philosophically, the song meditates on the transient beauty of nature and the rhythms of life, reflecting folk philosophies that see human existence as part of a larger, cyclical natural order. It evokes awareness of impermanence and the harmony between human labor and nature’s bounty.

Case-study-3 “Nishidin Bhorsa Rakhis”(Keep faith, day and night)

→ Gloss note: The imperative voice suggests ethical perseverance and embodied trust rather than ritualized devotion.

Cultural Dimension:

This song draws from the folk tradition of imparting ethical and spiritual lessons through repetitive, memorable verses. Its tone and structure encourage communal singing and oral transmission, typical of folk devotional songs that nurture trust and moral resilience within the community.

Philosophical Dimension:

The song's core message—maintaining unwavering trust or faith—resonates with folk philosophical teachings about hope and endurance amid life's uncertainties. It embodies a spiritual optimism that is both practical and deeply existential, emphasizing reliance on inner strength and faith.

Case study-4 “Bhenge Mor Ghorer Chabi” (Break the key of my house)

→ Gloss note: Symbolically indicates the dissolution of enclosure—ego, bodily confinement, or social boundaries—central to Baul notions of liberation through openness

Cultural Dimension:

Reflecting folk narratives of struggle and liberation, this song uses the metaphor of breaking a lock to symbolize breaking free from confinement. Its cultural dimension is marked by the use of everyday symbols and vivid imagery rooted in folk life and oral storytelling traditions.

Philosophical Dimension:

Philosophically, the song explores themes of freedom, transformation, and the breaking of barriers—whether physical, social, or mental. It aligns with folk-inspired existential quests for liberation and self-realization, highlighting the tension between constraint and the desire for emancipation.

Conceptual coalition: Prāñer Manush and Tagore's Jīban-Devatā

In Tagore's philosophical poetics, **Jīban-Devatā** (the “Lord of Life”) signifies the immanent divine presence realized within lived human experience, rather than an external, transcendental deity. This concept resonates deeply with the Baul notion of **Prāñer Manush** (the Man of the Heart), where spiritual truth is located within the embodied self (**Deho-Sadhana**).

The selected song-lines enact this convergence: agrarian imagery, ethical exhortation, and symbolic rupture collectively articulate a non-dual spirituality, where divine realization emerges through everyday labor, affective trust, and the dissolution of ego-bound enclosures. Tagore's Rabindrasangeet thus transforms Baul metaphysics into a lyrical-humanist ontology, preserving its core while rearticulating it within modern aesthetic and philosophical discourse.

Comparative Baul–Rabindrasangeet Analytical Table (Aligned with Tagore's concept of *Jīban-Devatā*)

Song Line (Roman)	Literal English Gloss	Baul Philosophical Significance	Tagorean Reinterpretation (<i>Jīban-Devatā</i>)	Ethnomusicological Insight
Amar Praner Manush Ache Prane	The person of My soul Abides within my being	Prāner manush as the indwelling divine realized through the body	<i>Jīban-devatā</i> as the inner life-force guiding ethical and creative existence	Marks the shift from Sectarian mysticism to universalized immanent spirituality
Aj Dhan-er Khete Raudra-Chhayay	Today, in the sun-and-shade of the paddy fields	Spiritual realization embedded in agrarian, everyday life	The divine encountered in lived temporality and social labor	Re-situates sacred experience within rural ecology and human praxis
Nishidin Bhorsa Rakhis	Keep faith, day and night	Trust as an experiential discipline, not doctrinal belief	Ethical continuity with the inner divine across time	Emphasizes affective endurance over ritual observance
Bhenge Mor Ghorer Chabi	Break the key of my house	Breaking bodily–ego enclosure (Deher Ghor)	Opening the self to the flow of <i>Jīban-Devatā</i> beyond possession	Symbolizes liberation through openness rather than ascetic withdrawal

Logical Synthesis

This comparative reading demonstrates that Rabindranath Tagore does not merely borrow Baul imagery but **internalizes Baul epistemology**, translating *Deho-tattva* into a broader humanistic spirituality. Through *Jīban-Devatā*, Tagore reframes the Baul “inner man” as a **universal principle of life-consciousness**, accessible through ethical living, creativity, and relational openness. The song thus functions as a **mediating cultural text**, bridging folk mysticism and modern philosophical lyricism. It is also noted that the song-wise analysis confirms that Tagore’s assimilation of folk music transcends mere musical borrowing, representing a profound dialogue between folk cultural philosophies and modern artistic expression. Each selected song exemplifies how folk idioms serve as vehicles to articulate complex philosophical ideas, thereby enriching the cultural fabric of Rabindrasangeet. This synthesis not only preserves folk heritage but elevates it within a refined artistic framework, supporting Tagore’s vision of a humanistic and inclusive cultural identity.

Conclusion

The conclusion synthesizes the findings, reaffirming that folk influence in Rabindrasangeet transcends mere musical borrowing to embody deep cultural and philosophical dimensions. It underscores Tagore’s role as a cultural mediator who transformed folk elements into expressions of universal humanism and Bengali identity. The study contributes to ethnomusicology and Tagore scholarship by highlighting the philosophical richness of folk-infused compositions. Suggestions for future research include comparative studies with other Indian regional folk music traditions and further exploration of performance practices.

The conclusion also reflects on the relevance of this synthesis for contemporary cultural discourse and music pedagogy.

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