

DIGITAL DISRUPTION AND THE ORAL TRANSMISSION OF INDIAN MUSIC

Gurlal Singh

Research Scholar (Music), Central University of Punjab



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ABSTRACT

Indian music traditions—encompassing Hindustani and Carnatic classical music, regional folk traditions, and devotional genres such as Bhajans, Kirtans, Qawwalis, and Bauls—have historically been preserved and transmitted through the oral pedagogical system of the Guru–Shishya Parampara. Grounded in listening, imitation, riyaz (disciplined practice), and direct experiential learning, this tradition has served as the foundation of musical transmission for centuries. The rapid growth of digital technologies, streaming platforms, social media, and virtual learning environments in the twenty-first century has introduced significant changes in the ways Indian musical traditions are preserved, disseminated, and consumed. This paper critically examines the impact of digital disruption on Indian oral music traditions and explores the dual role of technology as both a means of cultural preservation and a potential source of cultural transformation. The study highlights how platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, and online music academies interact with traditional pedagogical practices, reshaping musical learning and performance. The findings suggest that digital disruption represents a process of adaptive continuity rather than cultural decline, enabling Indian music traditions to evolve into hybrid forms while negotiating challenges related to authenticity, commodification, and the diminishing experiential depth of the traditional Guru–Shishya system.

Keywords: Digital Disruption, Guru–Shishya Parampara, Indian Classical Music, Oral Tradition, Cultural Preservations.

Introduction

Indian music is one of the oldest continuously practiced musical traditions in the world, with roots extending back over 3,000 years to the Vedic period. From the Sama Veda — widely regarded as the earliest documentation of melodic chanting — to the highly sophisticated frameworks of Hindustani and Carnatic classical music, Indian musical culture has been shaped fundamentally by oral transmission¹. The ancient system of the Guru–Shishya Parampara, in which a disciple learns through direct, intimate, and prolonged association with a master musician, has historically served as the primary pedagogical mechanism through which musical knowledge — encompassing raga, tala, layakari, bhava, and the subtle nuances of aesthetic expression — was transmitted across generations.

Beyond classical traditions, India's extraordinarily rich landscape of folk and devotional music further illustrates the centrality of oral transmission in cultural life. Genres such as Baul songs from Bengal, Lavani from Maharashtra, Maand from Rajasthan, Bhatiali from the riverine communities of Bengal, Sohar and Birha from Uttar Pradesh, the devotional Bhajans of the Bhakti movement, Sufi Qawwali traditions, Dhrupad, Dhamar, and tribal musical forms from the north-eastern and central regions of India all represent living oral archives through which communities have preserved history, spirituality, social values, and ecological knowledge.

The twenty-first century, however, has introduced profound transformations into this centuries-old system of oral musical transmission. The emergence of what scholars now describe as 'digital disruption' — the large-scale reshaping of communication, education, and cultural life by digital technologies — has introduced new modes of musical learning, preservation, and distribution. Smartphones, online music academies, YouTube tutorials, digital audio archives, Spotify playlists, and social media platforms such as Instagram Reels and Facebook Live have fundamentally altered how Indian musicians teach, learn, perform, and disseminate their art. This transformation presents both unprecedented opportunities and serious challenges for Indian music traditions². On one hand, digital technologies have vastly extended the reach of classical and folk music, bringing raga-based performances to global audiences, enabling diaspora communities to access their musical heritage, and creating permanent digital archives of masters whose oral knowledge might otherwise be lost. On the other hand, digitisation raises urgent questions about the commodification of raga, the erosion of the gurukul experience, the flattening of nuanced oral transmission into instructional video formats, and the threat to the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of Indian musical pedagogy that cannot be adequately captured through screen-based learning.

¹ Bhatkhande, Vishnu Narayan. *Hindustani Sangeet Paddhati*. Sangeet Karyalaya, 1909–1932.

² Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context*. Cambridge UP, 1977.

This paper critically examines these dimensions of digital disruption within the specific context of Indian oral music traditions. By drawing upon ethnomusicological scholarship, digital humanities research, UNESCO documentation frameworks, and cultural theory, the study argues that digital disruption should be understood neither as an unqualified blessing nor as a straightforward cultural threat. Rather, it constitutes a dynamic and complex process of adaptive continuity through which Indian music traditions are simultaneously being preserved, transformed, and reimaged in new technological environments.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary research methodology. The research is based on descriptive, analytical, and interpretative approaches. Data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources include books, scholarly journals, conference proceedings, UNESCO reports, and published research on Indian music traditions, oral culture, and digital media. The study also examines documented examples of digital music platforms, online music education initiatives, and digital archives. The collected data have been analysed thematically to identify key trends related to preservation, accessibility, pedagogy, authenticity, commercialization, and cultural sustainability. The interdisciplinary framework combines insights from ethnomusicology, folklore studies, cultural studies, and digital humanities¹.

The Guru–Shishya Parampara: An Oral Pedagogical System

The Guru–Shishya Parampara (the tradition of master and disciple) represents one of the most refined and sophisticated oral pedagogical systems in world musical culture. Unlike Western conservatory-based music education, which relies heavily upon written notation, standardised syllabi, and institutional examinations, the Indian Guru–Shishya system is grounded in a living, embodied, and relational mode of musical transmission. The shishya (disciple) resided in the guru's household, participated in daily musical rituals, observed the guru's practice over many years, and gradually absorbed musical knowledge through deep listening, imitation, disciplined *riyaz*, and spiritual surrender².

Within this system, musical knowledge is not merely technical information to be transmitted but rather a holistic cultural and spiritual inheritance. Raga is taught not as a scale but as a living personality with distinct emotional qualities — known as *rasa* — that the musician must internalise through years of practice and intimate instruction. Tala systems are transmitted through spoken rhythmic syllables (*bols*) chanted by the guru and internalised by the disciple through repetition and embodied memory. The intricate ornamentation of a *khyal*, the meditative depth of a *Dhrupad alap*, or the microtonal shading of a Carnatic raga's *gamaka* are communicable only through direct demonstration and prolonged oral instruction.

Prominent musicians such as Ustad Alladiya Khan, Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande, Ustad Bismillah Khan, Pandit Ravi Shankar, Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, and, more recently, Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia and Ustad Rashid Khan, have all acknowledged the decisive role of the Guru–Shishya relationship in their musical formation. The *gharana* (stylistic school) system further illustrates the oral nature of Indian classical music: each *gharana* possesses its own distinctive aesthetic identity, repertoire, and performance conventions transmitted orally from generation to generation within specific family and discipleship lineages. The Jaipur–Atrauli, Kirana, Patiala, Agra, and Mewati *gharanas* in Hindustani vocal music, for example, each represent distinct oral musical traditions preserved through unbroken chains of transmission.

The oral nature of this pedagogical system is inseparable from its philosophical and spiritual dimensions. The relationship between guru and shishya involves the transmission of musical culture, encompassing aesthetic sensitivity, emotional depth, intellectual understanding, and spiritual orientation. Many guru-shishya relationships are described in sacred terms, involving rituals of initiation, long periods of *seva* (devoted service), and a gradual unveiling of deeper musical knowledge that cannot be reduced to written instruction. Walter J. Ong's observation that oral cultures emphasise 'participatory mystique' and communal immersion over detached analysis finds a powerful resonance in this tradition (Vansina).

Folk and Devotional Music as Living Oral Archives

Beyond the sphere of classical music, India's vast landscape of folk and devotional musical traditions represents equally significant oral cultural archives. These traditions are not simply musical genres but complex living systems of knowledge encoding history, ecology, spirituality, social relations, and communal identity. Unlike classical music, which has historically been associated with courts, temples, and educated patronage networks, folk music traditions emerge from agricultural communities, artisan castes, nomadic groups, tribal communities, and devotional movements, transmitted through communal practice rather than specialised pedagogical relationships. The Baul tradition of Bengal and Bangladesh exemplifies this dimension of Indian oral musical culture. Baul singers compose and transmit mystical songs concerning the nature of the divine, the human body, and spiritual liberation through an oral tradition rooted in direct experience, community performance, and itinerant wandering. Baul musical philosophy, aesthetics, and cosmological knowledge are transmitted orally through the

1 Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York UP, 2006.

2 Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, editors. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge UP, 1983.

guru-disciple relationship and communal singing (kirtan) practices. UNESCO recognised the Baul tradition as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, acknowledging both its significance and its vulnerability to cultural decline.

Similarly, the Maand tradition of Rajasthan preserves the social histories, romantic narratives, and royal chronicles of Rajput courts through oral musical performance. The Langas and Manganiyars, hereditary communities of professional musicians in Rajasthan, transmit an extraordinary repertoire of folk songs, wedding music, seasonal songs, and devotional compositions through oral pedagogy within family lineages. These traditions carry detailed historical memories and social knowledge that exist nowhere in written form. As Misra observes, oral traditions function as 'community-based systems of knowledge that preserve regional histories, ethical values, social customs, and cosmological beliefs' (90).

Devotional music traditions — including the Bhakti movement's kirtan and bhajan practices, Sufi qawwali, and the ritual music of Shaiva and Vaishnava communities — further demonstrate the depth and variety of India's oral musical heritage. These traditions are deeply embedded within ritual and communal contexts. A kirtan is not merely a musical performance but a participatory devotional event in which the boundaries between performer and audience dissolve. The Warkari tradition of Maharashtra, centred on the devotional songs of poets such as Sant Dnyaneshwar, Sant Namdev, and Sant Tukaram, has been transmitted primarily through oral performance and communal pilgrimage practices for centuries.

Digital Disruption and Its Impact on Indian Music Transmission

The digital revolution of the twenty-first century has introduced profoundly transformative changes into the systems through which Indian music is taught, learned, performed, and consumed. Several major vectors of digital disruption can be identified within the Indian musical context.

Online Music Education and the Transformation of the Gurukul

Perhaps the most far-reaching transformation concerns music pedagogy itself. The emergence of online music learning platforms — including institutional academies such as Swarnabhoomi Academy, individual teacher profiles on platforms such as Udemy and Coursera, and the proliferation of YouTube tutorial channels by leading classical and folk musicians — has created an entirely new educational infrastructure for Indian music that operates largely outside the Guru–Shishya framework. Platforms such as Nimikter, iMusicSchool India, and various WhatsApp-based music coaching communities now offer structured lessons in Hindustani vocal, sitar, tabla, flute, and Carnatic music to learners across India and the Indian diaspora worldwide¹.

This development democratises access to Indian classical music in genuinely significant ways. Learners in small towns and rural areas who lack access to qualified classical musicians can now receive instruction from accomplished artists in major metropolitan centres. Diaspora communities in North America, Europe, Australia, and Southeast Asia can maintain connections with Indian musical heritage through online instruction. Students can replay instructional videos repeatedly, a luxury unavailable within traditional oral pedagogy where the demonstration was ephemeral and had to be internalised through memory.

Yet these gains come with high costs. The Guru–Shishya relationship involves dimensions of transmission that are fundamentally resistant to digital mediation. The prolonged communal experience of the gurukul, the subtle correction of a student's posture or breathing through physical proximity, the transmission of raga mood through the guru's presence and personality, and the gradual deepening of musical and spiritual sensitivity through years of shared daily life — these pedagogical elements cannot be replicated through video call instruction. As senior Carnatic vocalist T.M. Krishna has articulated in his writings, the guru-shishya relationship is not merely an educational arrangement but a philosophical and human bond through which musical culture is transmitted in its fullness².

Streaming Platforms and the Commodification of Raga

The rise of music streaming platforms — including Spotify, Apple Music, Gaana, JioSaavn, and YouTube Music — has profoundly reshaped how Indian classical and folk music reaches audiences. These platforms have made the recordings of great masters such as Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, Ustad Vilayat Khan, M.S. Subbulakshmi, and Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma available to global audiences instantaneously and at minimal cost. For cultural preservation, this accessibility represents a remarkable achievement: performances that were previously available only through expensive vinyl records, limited cassette distribution, or physical concert attendance are now accessible to anyone with a smartphone.

1 Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition as History*. U of Wisconsin P, 1985.

2 Misra, Sanghamitra. "Oral Traditions, Folk Cultures, and Digital Mediation in South Asia." *South Asian Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2021, pp. 88–104.

However, the algorithmic logic of streaming platforms introduces a structural tension with the nature of Indian classical music itself. Raga-based music is fundamentally temporally expansive — a full performance of Raga Yaman or Raga Bhairav may unfold over forty-five minutes to several hours, with the alap section alone occupying a long meditative duration. Streaming platform algorithms, however, prioritise short listening durations, high skip rates, and commercial playlists. As a result, Indian classical music on streaming platforms is frequently truncated, repackaged into 'Indian Classical Chill' playlists, or algorithmically matched with unrelated content. This process risks reducing raga — a sophisticated musical system of melodic grammar, emotional architecture, and temporal structure — into background sonic wallpaper.

Marshall McLuhan's formulation that 'the medium is the message' finds a particularly apt illustration here (7). The streaming platform medium fundamentally reshapes the cultural message of Indian classical music by imposing commercial algorithmic logics that are structurally misaligned with the aesthetic and philosophical foundations of raga performance.

Social Media and Folk Music Visibility

Social media platforms — particularly YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook — have created unprecedented visibility for Indian folk music traditions. Traditional folk artists who once performed exclusively in village contexts, at melas (fairs), or within specific community ritual events have found global audiences through social media. The Rajasthani folk musician Nooran Sisters reached massive national audiences through reality television and subsequent social media circulation. Coke Studio India and Coke Studio Pakistan brought regional folk traditions — including Sufi qawwali, Punjabi folk, and tribal music forms — into mainstream commercial visibility by fusing traditional oral styles with contemporary production aesthetics.

This visibility has provided economic opportunities for folk musicians and has generated genuine appreciation for endangered traditions among younger urban audiences. Documentation projects such as the Ektara Collective, the Folklore Foundation, and various state-sponsored digital ethnomusicology initiatives have used social media to document and disseminate endangered folk traditions with community involvement.

At the same time, social media's structural logic of viral content, aesthetic spectacle, and commercial entertainment creates pressures that can distort folk traditions. A Baul song shared on Instagram Reels must compete for attention within seconds. Platform aesthetics encourage visual spectacle, energy, and accessibility rather than the meditative depth, spiritual ambiguity, and communal participation that characterise Baul performance in its native context. Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture illuminates how social media enables audiences to remix and redistribute cultural content (3), but this participatory logic also generates processes of decontextualization and commodification when applied to sacred or ritually embedded musical traditions.

Digital Initiatives in Indian Music Preservation

Alongside these commercially driven transformations, significant institutional initiatives in digital preservation have been undertaken to safeguard India's oral musical heritage. The Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA), the state-funded national academy for performing arts, has undertaken systematic audio and video documentation of classical and folk musical traditions since the 1950s, with digitisation of its archives representing a major contemporary preservation effort. The Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology (ARCE), operated by the American Institute of Indian Studies in Gurgaon, maintains one of the most extensive archives of Indian folk and classical music in the world, with over 30,000 recordings representing more than 500 musical traditions from across India¹.

The ITC Sangeet Research Academy in Kolkata, dedicated to the preservation of Hindustani classical music, has maintained rigorous documentation of gharana traditions and has made significant archival recordings of senior masters available for institutional preservation. The Prasar Bharati archives of All India Radio (AIR) represent another extraordinary oral musical resource: AIR began systematic recording of classical and folk musicians from the 1940s onwards, resulting in archives of extraordinary historical and cultural significance that are now being partially digitised. UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage has provided an international policy framework for these preservation efforts². Several Indian oral musical traditions have been recognised under UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, including the Vedic chanting tradition (2008) and the Ramlila of Ramnagar (2008). These recognitions have catalysed digital documentation efforts by state and national institutions.

Contemporary digital humanities projects further demonstrate the richness of current preservation activity. Online raga databases — including the comprehensive Raag Hindustani project, the ITC SRA digital catalogue, and online gharana documentation initiatives — create accessible digital archives of raga grammar, performance conventions, and representative

1 Misra, Sanghamitra. "Oral Traditions, Folk Cultures, and Digital Mediation in South Asia." *South Asian Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2021, pp. 88–104.

2 UNESCO. *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. UNESCO Publishing, 2003. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage

recordings. These resources support both scholarly research and student learning while making oral musical knowledge accessible beyond the limitations of direct guru instruction.

Habibie and Malik's observation that the most sustainable preservation models prioritise 'community participation in the creation, curation, and dissemination of cultural narratives' (110) finds direct resonance in the best Indian music preservation initiatives, which involve the musicians and communities themselves as active agents rather than merely as subjects of documentation¹.

Authenticity, Cultural Sovereignty, and the Question of Raga Identity

Digital disruption raises profound questions about musical authenticity within Indian traditions. The concept of authenticity in Indian classical music is itself complex and contested. Gharana traditions have always involved creative interpretation alongside faithful transmission; great musicians both inherit and innovate. However, digital platforms create specific pressures that can accelerate processes of homogenization and decontextualization.

The phenomenon of 'fusion' music, vastly accelerated by digital distribution, illustrates these tensions. The blending of raga-based improvisation with jazz, electronic dance music, hip-hop production, and Western classical composition has generated genuinely creative hybrid forms — from Pandit Ravi Shankar's pioneering collaborations with George Harrison to contemporary artists such as Anoushka Shankar, Niladri Kumar, and Aditya Prakash Ensemble. Yet fusion also creates the risk of what ethnomusicologists describe as the 'deracination' of musical tradition: the extraction of surface sonic elements from a raga (its characteristic melodic phrases or mood associations) while discarding the philosophical and structural frameworks — the raga grammar, the time theory of raga, the seasonal and emotional associations — that constitute the raga's full cultural meaning.

Cultural sovereignty — the right of communities to control the representation and circulation of their cultural heritage — becomes increasingly critical within digital environments. Many Indian folk traditions involve sacred or ritually sensitive knowledge that community elders may not wish to be freely circulated online. The sacred songs of tribal communities in Jharkhand, Odisha, and the north-eastern states, the secret mantra-chants of certain devotional lineages, and the esoteric compositions preserved within specific gharanas represent knowledge whose unrestricted digital circulation may violate the cultural and spiritual protocols of the communities that have preserved them. Eric Hobsbawm's insight that traditions are continuously 'reinvented' according to changing historical conditions (1) must be balanced against the recognition that communities themselves must hold authority over the terms of such reinvention.

The digital divide further complicates questions of cultural sovereignty. Many of the most culturally significant oral musical traditions in India are preserved by rural, tribal, and economically marginalised communities who lack access to digital infrastructure and institutional resources. Paradoxically, it is often external cultural organisations, academic institutions, and commercial platforms that possess the technological capacity to document and circulate these traditions online, raising serious questions about representation, consent, and the distribution of cultural and economic benefits.

Adaptive Continuity: The Hybrid Musical Future

The evidence surveyed in this study suggests that the relationship between digital disruption and Indian oral music traditions should not be conceptualised as a simple binary between preservation and loss, tradition and modernity. Rather, Indian music traditions are demonstrating what this paper terms 'adaptive continuity': the capacity to absorb, negotiate, and creatively engage with digital technologies while maintaining essential elements of cultural identity, philosophical orientation, and aesthetic value (Hobsbawm and Ranger).

The concept of secondary orality, developed by Walter J. Ong to describe the electronically mediated orality of radio, television, and digital media (136), is productively applied here. Digital platforms recreate certain dimensions of oral musical culture — the shared listening experience of YouTube live concerts, the participatory aesthetics of online kirtan sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the audiovisual immediacy of tabla master classes on social media — while transforming others². These hybrid forms are neither purely traditional nor simply modern but constitute genuinely new cultural formations.

Several Indian musicians have navigated this hybridity with notable sophistication. Tabla maestro Zakir Hussain has used digital platforms to extend the reach of Hindustani percussion while maintaining the integrity of his Guru-Shishya transmission lineage. Carnatic vocalist T.M. Krishna has employed digital media both to document endangered folk traditions and to critically interrogate the social politics of classical music transmission. The Dharohar Project and similar initiatives

1 Habibie, Dadi Febrian, and Malik Abdul. "Digital Preservation of Oral Traditions: Community-Led Approaches and Cultural Sustainability." *Journal of Digital Cultural Heritage*, vol. 12, 2023, pp. 105–120.

2 Widdess, Richard. *The Ragas of Early Indian Music: Modes, Melodies, and Musical Notations from the Gupta Period to c. 1250*. Clarendon Press, 1995.

have worked with Rajasthani folk musicians to create ethical digital documentation projects that maintain community control over archival materials.

The future of Indian oral music traditions in the digital age will depend upon the capacity of musicians, institutions, educators, and communities to develop preservation strategies that balance technological opportunity with cultural integrity¹. This requires not only the development of ethical digital archives and accessible online learning platforms, but also the continued cultivation of the human relationships, communal practices, and living pedagogical traditions through which Indian musical knowledge has always been most deeply transmitted.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the complex and multidimensional impact of digital disruption on India's oral music traditions, with particular focus on the Guru–Shishya Parampara, the rich landscape of folk and devotional music, and the institutional preservation initiatives currently underway. The analysis reveals that digital disruption is simultaneously a powerful preservationist tool, a transformative educational force, a vehicle for unprecedented cultural visibility, and a source of significant risks concerning authenticity, commodification, and cultural sovereignty. Indian oral music traditions have demonstrated extraordinary resilience and adaptability across centuries of social and political transformation — from the decline of royal court patronage and the disruptions of colonialism to the mass-mediation of music through radio and cassette culture. The current digital disruption represents a new phase of this ongoing negotiation between tradition and transformation, in which the essential vitality of Indian musical culture will be determined by the quality of the human relationships, pedagogical practices, and community commitments through which its deepest values are transmitted. Digital technology, employed with cultural sensitivity, ethical responsibility, and genuine community participation, can make an extraordinary contribution to the preservation and revitalisation of Indian oral musical traditions. It can connect diaspora communities with their heritage, document endangered traditions before they are lost, and bring the music of great masters to audiences across the world. Yet no digital platform can substitute for the living relationship between a guru and a shishya, the communal experience of a Baul gathering, or the spiritual depth of a late-night raga performed in the full awareness of its temporal and emotional dimensions. The future of Indian oral music, therefore, lies not in choosing between digital innovation and traditional transmission, but in cultivating a relationship between them that honours the philosophical depth, communal rootedness, and living experiential quality that have sustained these traditions for millennia. As the great Hindustani maestros have consistently demonstrated, Indian music survives not in archives but in the committed, disciplined, and spiritually alive practice of those who carry it forward².

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¹ Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York UP, 2006.

² UNESCO. *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. UNESCO Publishing, 2003. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage