

EXPLORING TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION: RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S MUSICAL CONNECTION WITH DHRUPAD AND THUMRI

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to listen carefully—to sound, to silence, and to moments where different musical worlds meet. It looks at how Rabindranath Tagore interacted with two musical styles that are usually thought to be very different: Thumri and Dhrupad. The paper argues that this involvement significantly influenced Tagore's conception of Indian cultural nationalism. This nationalism was not expressed through loud political statements or slogans. Rather, it was felt quietly, through artistic practice.

Dhrupad represents discipline, seriousness, and an older classical structure rooted in court traditions. Thumri, in contrast, is more flexible, emotional, and intimate in expression. Tagore did not reject one in favor of the other. Instead, he absorbed elements of both. Through this process, he developed a musical language that resisted strict boundaries. The paper suggests that this synthesis was not accidental. It reflected a deeper ideological position—one that was culturally and politically meaningful, even when not directly stated.

By analyzing selected songs, melodic structures, lyrical themes, and historical background, the study shows how Tagore's music carries the formal strength of Dhrupad while also allowing the emotional freedom associated with Thumri. This should not be understood as fusion in a modern or technical sense. Rather, it is a dialogue between traditions, sometimes uneasy, sometimes gentle, but always reflective.

Additionally, the paper situates this synthesis in relation to nationalist ideas of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Tagore's music offered an alternative kind of nationalism - one that was inclusive, adaptable, and human-centered during a time when colonial pressure was being applied to Indian cultural identity. Music evolved into a platform for reconciliation, connection, and resistance.

This study rethinks Indian cultural nationalism as an aesthetic and emotional process shaped by rāga, mood, and memory by emphasizing sound rather than ideology. In the end, it implies that Tagore's interaction with Thumri and Dhrupad was not only a creative decision but also a nuanced framework for envisioning a country that could contain contradictions while maintaining harmony.

Keywords: Dhrupad, Khayal, Thumri, Tagore, Raga and Emotional Expression

Introduction

Indian music has never been only about sound. It carried ideas. Memory. Politics, sometimes quietly. Tagore, Thumri, and Dhrupad stand at three different points of this long musical river, yet they meet. Dhrupad is the oldest among them, severe, meditative, rooted in *nada* and discipline. Dhrupad's emphasis on *alap*, restraint, and spiritual depth created a sonic space where music functioned as devotion rather than entertainment. This seriousness mattered. It offered a classical backbone, a sense of continuity, which later nationalist thinkers would read as authentic India.

Thumri enters from another door - Softer, more human, some would say. Emerging from North Indian courts, thumri thrives on emotion, *sringara*, and personal expression. Thumri blurred the strict line between classical purity and lived experience. (Dutta 1984, p206).

Then comes Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore did not invent music. He listened, absorbed, and reworked. Rabindra Sangeet stands at a strange junction, drawing from Dhrupad's gravity, Thumri's emotional openness, Baul mysticism, and even western harmonies. His music was spiritual, but also modern. Addressing the self, and the nation. This brings us to cultural nationalism in the Indian context, not aggressive, not uniform. Cultural nationalism in India emerged as a response to colonial dominance, where reclaiming indigenous art forms became an act of resistance.

Review of Literature

1. Tagore's Own Writings

Sangeet Chinta (সঙ্গীত চিন্তা) - Rabindranath Tagore

A foundational text where Tagore reflects on the philosophy of music, aesthetics, and emotional expression. Essential for understanding his approach to synthesis.

Gitabitan (গীতবিতান) - Rabindranath Tagore

Not just a collection of songs, but a primary corpus for analyzing melodic, thematic, and stylistic influences.

2. Bengali Musicological Texts

Bharatiya Sangeet Itihas o Paddhati (ভারতীয় সঙ্গীত ইতিহাস ও পদ্ধতি) - Sukumar Roy

A key resource for historical development of Indian classical music, including Dhrupad, Khayal and Thumri traditions.

Sangeet Tattwa (সঙ্গীত তত্ত্ব) - Debabrata Dutta

Useful for theoretical grounding-raga, structure, and stylistic features relevant to music analysis.

The study of Rabindranath Tagore's music has generated a rich body of scholarship in Bengali, spanning aesthetics, musicology, and cultural thought. At the center of this discourse lies Rabindranath Tagore himself, whose writings provide the most direct insight into his musical philosophy. In *Sangeet Chinta* (সঙ্গীত চিন্তা), Tagore reflects on music not merely as a structured art form but as an emotional and spiritual experience. He resists rigid formalism and instead emphasizes *bhava* (feeling), fluidity, and the organic relationship between word and melody. This perspective becomes crucial in understanding how he could engage with traditions like Dhrupad and Thumri without being confined by them.

The primary corpus for any analytical study remains *Gitabitan* (গীতবিতান), which offers a vast collection of his songs across devotional, romantic, and seasonal categories. Scholars have often turned to this text not only for lyrical analysis but also to trace melodic tendencies and stylistic borrowings. Complementing this, Tagore's advocacy for a more inclusive, humanistic cultural identity. These ideas resonate deeply with his musical practice, where synthesis replaces purity and dialogue replaces hierarchy.

From a musicological standpoint, works such as *Bharatiya Sangeet Itihas o Paddhati* (ভারতীয় সঙ্গীত ইতিহাস ও পদ্ধতি) by Sukumar Roy provide an essential historical framework for understanding the evolution of Indian classical traditions, particularly Dhrupad and Thumri. The text situates Dhrupad within a lineage of devotional and courtly practices, marked by discipline, austerity, and structural rigor, while also tracing the emergence of Thumri as a semi-classical form centered on emotional expression and lyrical freedom. Similarly, *Sangeet Tattwa* (সঙ্গীত তত্ত্ব) by Debabrata Dutta offers theoretical clarity on raga, melodic structure, and stylistic features, enabling a more nuanced comparison between these traditions and their presence in Rabindra Sangeet.

Despite this extensive scholarship, a gap remains in explicitly examining the interrelationship between Dhrupad, Thumri, and Tagore's concept of cultural nationalism. While individual studies address musical structure, aesthetic philosophy, or nationalism separately, few attempt to synthesize these dimensions into a unified analytical framework. The present study seeks to bridge this gap by bringing together musicological analysis and cultural interpretation, thereby offering a more integrated understanding of Tagore's musical synthesis as both an artistic and ideological act.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative and interpretative research methodology**, grounded in the disciplines of musicology, cultural studies, and intellectual history. The objective is to examine how Rabindranath Tagore's engagement with Dhrupad and Thumri contributed to the formation of an alternative model of Indian cultural nationalism.

1. Research Design

The research is primarily **analytical and descriptive in nature**, focusing on the exploration of musical synthesis as both an aesthetic and ideological process. It does not rely on quantitative data; rather, it interprets musical, textual, and historical materials to construct a conceptual argument.

2. Data Sources

a. Primary Sources

This paper was presented at the 'Swar Sanskar National Seminar', organized by Swar Sanskar Sangeet Gurukul
Seminar Convener: Dr. Yash Sanjay Dewale (Co-Founder: Swar Sanskar Sangeet Gurukul, Assistant Professor: MSU Baroda)

Selected compositions of Rabindra Sangeet

Writings of Rabindranath Tagore

Musical texts and notations

b. Secondary Sources

Scholarly works on Indian classical music

Historical texts on Indian cultural nationalism and colonial discourse

Existing research on Tagore's

3. Method of Analysis

a. Musicological Analysis

The study undertakes a close analysis of:

Raga structures and melodic movements

Stylistic elements of Dhrupad (e.g., alap, compositions)

Expressive features of Thumri (e.g., lyrical flexibility, emotional nuance)

This helps identify how these elements are absorbed and transformed within Rabindra Sangeet.

b. Textual and Lyrical Analysis

Song lyrics are examined to understand:

Themes of devotion, love, and longing

Emotional registers and poetic expression

The interplay between music and meaning

c. Historical - Contextual Analysis

The research situates Tagore's musical practice within:

The socio - political context of late 19th and early 20th century colonial India

The emergence of cultural nationalism as a response to colonial modernity

Institutional developments such as Santiniketan and Visva - Bharati

d. Comparative Approach

A comparative framework is used to:

Contrast the formal rigidity of Dhrupad with the fluidity of Thumri

Examine how Tagore negotiates between these traditions

Identify synthesis not as fusion, but as a dialogic process

4. Theoretical Framework

The study draws on:

Cultural nationalism theory (non - political, aesthetic nationalism)

Concepts of syncretism and cultural synthesis

Indian aesthetic principles such as *rasa* and *dhvani* (suggestion)

5. Research Approach

The methodology is interpretive and hermeneutic, emphasizing:

Listening as a critical method

Understanding music as a carrier of ideology, memory, and emotion

Reading sound as a form of cultural expression rather than mere structure

6. Limitations

The study is selective in its choice of songs and may not represent the entire corpus of Rabindra Sangeet

Lack of extensive notational analysis due to the oral and fluid nature of the tradition

Interpretations remain subjective, shaped by aesthetic and cultural perspectives

7. Outcome of Methodology

Through this multi-layered methodology, the research demonstrates that Tagore's musical synthesis:

Is both an artistic and ideological act

Reflects a non - aggressive, inclusive form of nationalism

Functions as a cultural response to colonialism through sound rather than direct political discourse

Results

The analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's musical works, in relation to Dhrupad and Thumri traditions, reveals that his compositional practice embodies a deliberate and nuanced synthesis rather than a superficial blending of styles. The findings suggest that this synthesis operates simultaneously at musical, aesthetic, and ideological levels.

Firstly, the study identifies that structural and stylistic elements of Dhrupad are subtly embedded in many of Tagore's compositions. These include the use of slow, meditative melodic expansion, emphasis on tonal purity, and a contemplative mood that reflects spiritual introspection. Such features contribute to a sense of discipline and gravitas, aligning his music with a classical lineage associated with continuity and cultural depth.

In contrast, the influence of Thumri emerges primarily through expressive and lyrical dimensions. Tagore's songs often display flexibility in melodic phrasing, emotional immediacy, and an emphasis on personal experience - particularly in themes of love, longing, and separation. This reflects Thumri's characteristic focus on subjectivity and emotional nuance, allowing Tagore's music to move beyond rigid classical frameworks.

A key finding is that Tagore does not simply juxtapose these traditions; rather, he reconfigures them into a new musical language. Rabindra Sangeet thus emerges as an independent genre that retains classical depth while remaining accessible and intimate. This synthesis avoids strict adherence to either tradition, instead creating a dynamic space where discipline coexists with emotional freedom.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that this musical synthesis carries significant cultural and ideological implications. Tagore's integration of diverse musical elements reflects a broader vision of Indian cultural nationalism - one that is inclusive, pluralistic, and non - confrontational. Rather than promoting a singular or homogenized identity, his music embraces multiplicity and dialogue, aligning with his humanistic philosophy.

The findings also highlight that music, in Tagore's work, functions as a subtle form of resistance to colonial cultural dominance. By reasserting indigenous musical forms while simultaneously transforming them, Tagore challenges colonial narratives that dismissed Indian music as inferior. His compositions thus become a medium through which cultural autonomy is expressed without overt political rhetoric.

Additionally, the role of institutional and performative spaces - such as Santiniketan - is identified as crucial in sustaining this synthesis. These environments facilitated a non - hierarchical exchange between classical, semi - classical, and folk traditions, reinforcing the idea of music as a shared cultural practice rather than an elite domain.

In conclusion, the results establish that Tagore's engagement with Dhrupad and Thumri is not merely artistic experimentation but a conscious cultural intervention. His music articulates a form of nationalism grounded in aesthetic experience, emotional resonance, and cultural inclusivity. This positions Rabindra Sangeet as both a musical innovation and a philosophical framework for imagining a diverse yet unified cultural identity.

Discussion

Characteristics of Rabindra Sangeet

Dhrupad begins before history becomes history. In the breath of the Veda, in the slow, stretched syllables of *udatta* and *anudatta*, where Vedic chanting is shown as the acoustic ancestor of Dhrupad's *alap*. Over time, this sacred form moved. From forest hermitages to royal courts. Especially under the Mughal and Rajput patronage (Roy 1975, p49). The temples softened into palaces. Yet the seriousness remained. Dhrupad in the courts of Akbar, Man Singh of Gwalior, and later Jaipur kings was still austere and masculine.

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Thumri tells a different story, a later one, softer, and more fragile. Established in 19th century North India, especially in Awadh and Banaras, thumri carries the voice of longing. Feminine longing. Thumri shifted focus - from purity of Raga to emotional truth. Krishna is no longer a distant god; he is a lover who may not return. The language is Brajbhasha, but the emotion travels. Thumri thrives in semi-classical spaces. It allows bending of rules, and slight disobedience. (Roy 1975, p132)

Rabindranath Tagore enters here, quietly, listening, and absorbing. He never practiced Dhrupad strictly. Nor did he compose Thumri. Yet his music breathes both. Tagore's project was cultural, educational, and political, though he disliked the word. Through music, poetry, and institutions like Santiniketan, he imagined an India rooted in tradition but not imprisoned by it.

Colonization disrupted this musical ecology. British policies dismissed Indian music as primitive, unscientific, not worthy of modernity.

During the Swadeshi and nationalist movements, music stepped onto the streets. Dhrupad's gravity became moral strength, thumri's emotion turned into collective yearning. Rabindranath's songs became flags without cloth. Indian music was not entertainment then. It was assertion, quiet, and persistent.

Rabindranath Tagore's engagement with classical and semi-classical music was never the result of formal institutional training. It was slower, more porous. He absorbed music the way one absorbs language, by listening, by living with it. In the musical atmosphere of Jorasanko, Hindustani classical traditions were already present. Dhrupad, Khayal, and later Thumri floated into his consciousness not as rigid systems but as expressive possibilities. Tagore himself acknowledged this exposure, noting how classical music entered his world through practice, performance, and proximity rather than pedagogy.

Dhrupad, with its gravity and inward discipline, left a deep mark. Tagore was drawn to its stillness. Its devotional core, especially the way it stretches time. "Prathama adi taba shakti" is a striking example of how Rabindranath Tagore absorbed and reinterpreted the classical tradition of Dhrupad within his own musical vision (Tagore 1950, p185).

In many of his Brahma Sangeet and later devotional compositions, echoes of Dhrupad's alap, the slow unfolding of raga, the emphasis on voice rather than ornament can be heard.

But Tagore did not remain within the classical frame. He wandered, he listened to Bauls, with its refusal of hierarchy and its philosophy of the embodied self, offered him something classical music could not. A human voice speaking to another human. This influence was not decorative. It reshaped his musical ethics. This is why many Rabindra Sangeet compositions sit at an uneasy but fertile intersection - classical discipline softened by folk freedom.

Thumri entered Tagore's work differently, quietly. The semi-classical world of Thumri, with its emotional elasticity and romantic suggestiveness, allowed him to explore desire, separation, waiting. Not dramatic love, subtle love. In song like "*O keno bhalobasa janate ase*", the influence of Thumri's dramatic aesthetics is unmistakable. The melody bends, the words linger. Emotion takes precedence over raga purity.

And yet, he never merely borrowed. Tagore was not interested in preservation, he was interested in transformation, classical and semi-classical forms became raw material, what emerged was neither Dhrupad nor Thumri, neither folk nor elite. It became Rabindra Sangeet. A new genre, one that carried classical depth without classical intimidation. One that sounded intimate but was philosophically vast. As Tagore himself insisted, his songs were meant to be sung by people, not specialists (Tagore 1966, p52).

So, Rabindra Sangeet stands today as a synthesis. A meeting ground. Dhrupad's discipline, Thumri's tenderness, Baul's soul, all held together by a poet who listened more than he systematized, and that, perhaps, was his greatest training.

Musical Dialogue and Cultural Transformation in Tagore's Work

Rabindranath Tagore never believed music was neutral. It always takes sides. Sometimes quietly. In colonial Bengal, culture itself became a battlefield. The British dismissed Indian music as primitive, fragmented, unsuitable for modern life. Tagore responded not with slogans, but with sound. He blended what was kept apart. Classical discipline and folk looseness. This synthesis was not accidental. It was political, deeply so.

Tagore's musical world refused hierarchy. Dhrupad and Baul walked into the same room. Thumri's tenderness touched Brahma devotion. In *Rabindra-Sangit*, raga grammar exists, but it breathes. He believed India was plural by nature. So, its music had to be plural too. This synthesis also challenged colonial cultural suppression. The British promoted Western art music as universal, while Indian traditions were labelled regional or backward. Tagore answered with a different universalism. Music that carried local soil but spoke human language.

Music became a peaceful weapon. No violence, no noise, only resonance. Through songs of nature, love, and devotion, Tagore reclaimed emotional autonomy. Singing itself became an act of resistance. When students of Bangladesh sang "*Amar Sonar*

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Bangla Ami Tomay Bhalobasi", it was not protest in the street. It was something quieter. Colonial power feared this intimacy. Because it could not be policed. Institutions mattered here. Very much.

Visva-Bharati was not just a university. It was an experiment in cultural freedom. Music education at *Sangit Bhavana* rejected both colonial syllabi and narrow gharana loyalty. Teachers like Dinendranath Tagore and Indira Devi emphasized listening, feeling, and cultural context.

Folk musicians were invited, so were classical maestros. No one was superior. This itself was radical. In a society fractured by caste, class, and colonial categories, musical equality carried symbolic force. It said: Indian culture survives by connection, not separation.

Tagore's synthesis, then, was not aesthetic compromise. It was cultural courage, by blending spiritual calm with sensual warmth, discipline with freedom, he created a sonic model for the nation he imagined - diverse, dialogic, and alive. Not a nation that shouts. One that sings.

From Musical Tradition to National Consciousness

The national anthem of India, "*Jana Gana Mana Adhinayak Jaya He*", composed by Rabindranath Tagore, stands as a profound reflection of his unique vision of nationalism, which was markedly different from the aggressive, exclusionary nationalism that dominated much of the twentieth century. Tagore's nationalism was rooted in humanism, cultural inclusivity, and spiritual unity rather than political spirit. In the anthem, he invokes the "Adhinayak," not as a political leader or monarch, but as the eternal spirit guiding the destiny of the people, a divine presence that transcends boundaries of caste, creed, and region. The verses celebrate the diversity of India, its rivers, mountains, languages, and traditions while weaving them into a harmonious whole, symbolizing Tagore's belief that true nationalism must embrace plurality and unity without erasing difference. Unlike the narrow slogan "my country, right or wrong," Tagore's anthem emphasizes a collective identity that is both national and universal, acknowledging India's cultural richness while situating it within the broader human community. His nationalism rejected violent patriotism and warned against blind imitation of Western models of nationhood, which he saw as destructive (Tagore 1966, p267). Instead, he envisioned India as a moral and spiritual leader, contributing to global harmony through its values of tolerance and inclusivity. The anthem, therefore, is not a call to arms but a prayer for unity, dignity, and peace, embodying his conviction that the nation is not merely a political construct, but a living organism sustained by the shared aspirations of its people. *Jana Gana Mana* mirrors this philosophy by presenting the nation as a collective journey under divine guidance, rather than a battlefield of competing interests. It is both patriotic and cosmopolitan, affirming India's identity while rejecting chauvinism. Thus, a study of the anthem alongside Tagore's writings reveals his attempt to redefine nationalism as a force of cultural synthesis and ethical responsibility. His vision remains deeply relevant today, reminding us that nationalism, when divorced from humanity, becomes destructive, but when rooted in inclusivity and moral values, it can inspire unity and progress. In this way, the anthem is not only India's song of pride but also a testament to Tagore's enduring philosophy of universal humanism expressed through the lens of Indian nationalism.

Indian cultural nationalism did not arrive with a single anthem. It arrived slowly. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, music became a shared emotional grammar.

This inclusiveness was political. Quietly so. Music emerged as a form of non-violent resistance long before it was theorized as such. Songs were sung in meetings, homes, and theatres. No weapons, only voice. Rabindranath Tagore was acutely aware of this power. He argued that music could awaken ethical consciousness without provoking aggression, shaping resistance through inner transformation rather than confrontation (Tagore 1966, p24). In this sense, music resisted colonial domination not by shouting back, but by refusing cultural erasure. It said, "We exist, we remember, and we choose beauty over fear".

Out of this resistance grew the idea of a "national sound". Not a rigid form, more like a texture. Rooted in tradition, yet open to modern expression. Dhrupad's gravity, Thumri's intimacy, folk tunes from Bengal, Punjab, Maharashtra—everything flowed together. This synthesis allowed Indian music to sound ancient and contemporary at once. Serious, but accessible. Classical, yet emotionally direct.

Theatres played a crucial role here. Public performance spaces became laboratories of nationalism. Songs moved from courts and salons into public halls, into streets, into classrooms. Musical storytelling made political ideas emotionally legible. This shift democratized cultural authority, transferring musical ownership from elites to the people. The "national sound" was not imposed. It was learned, repeated, and loved.

Its legacy is still alive. In modern Indian music education, this synthesis remains foundational. Rabindra Sangeet, nationalist songs, and semi-classical forms continue to be taught as cultural heritage, not museum objects. They encourage students to see tradition as living material - adaptable, questioning, humane. Music taught belonging. And maybe that is its greatest achievement. Indian cultural nationalism did not demand sameness. It offered resonance, different voices, one listening space.

Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore did not use music as decoration. He used it as argument, quiet, persistent, almost stubborn. His engagement with Dhrupad and Thumri was never about imitation. It was about positioning. Dhrupad came to him with its weight - discipline, restraint, gravity. A sound that carried temples, courts, centuries. Thumri arrived softer, intimate, emotional, and personal. And Tagore stood between these two worlds. He listened, then he reworked them.

Through Dhrupad, Tagore found a sonic grammar for seriousness. Many of his devotional and philosophical songs echo Dhrupad's improvisation, its refusal of haste. Cultural nationalism needed depth, not noise.

Thumri, on the other hand, gave Tagore access to emotion without shame. Its fluidity, its half-spoken lyrics, its ability to hover between desire and restraint. He absorbed this sensibility into his romantic and seasonal songs, especially where feminine voice and longing take center stage. This was a political choice too, though it didn't look like one. Because nationalism is not built only on slogans, it is built on feeling. By synthesizing Dhrupad's gravity with Thumri's emotional flexibility, Tagore shaped a cultural identity that was neither revivalist nor blindly modern. He did not reject classical traditions, nor did he fossilize them. He translated them, into a language the educated middle-class Bengali could feel, sing, and internalize. Tagore's cultural project was about creating an inner sovereignty long before political independence arrived. Music played its role here quietly and effectively. This synthesis also challenged rigid hierarchies. Dhrupad had been masculine, elite. Thumri had been feminized, marginal, often morally suspect. Tagore placed both within a shared aesthetic space. He allowed tenderness to coexist with discipline. Emotion with thought. In doing so, he proposed an inclusive idea of Indianness - one that could hold contradictions without collapsing.

In contemporary India, where cultural identity is again being argued, sometimes aggressively, Tagore's musical vision offers another path. Synthesis instead of exclusion, dialogue instead of purity. His songs continue to circulate - in classrooms, protests, films, everyday rituals. Not as museum pieces, but as living sound, still adapting, still slightly unstable. And that instability is the point. Tagore's use of Dhrupad and Thumri reminds people that nationalism, when rooted in cultural synthesis, can remain humane. Flexible, self-critical, music, in his hands, became more than art. It became a way of imagining community. Not loud, but lasting.

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