

MUSIC PEDAGOGY IN TRANSITION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GURU–SHISHYA TRADITION AND INSTITUTIONAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the Guru–Shishya tradition and institutional education in the context of music training in India. The Guru–Shishya Parampara, rooted in ancient Indian culture, represents an immersive and personalized mode of learning based on oral transmission, long-term mentorship, and stylistic continuity through the gharana system. In contrast, institutional education reflects a modern, structured approach characterized by standardized curricula, time-bound training, and formal evaluation methods.

The study examines key differences between these two systems in terms of pedagogy, curriculum design, evaluation processes, learning tools, and outcomes. While institutional education has played a significant role in democratizing access to music and producing qualified educators, it often lacks the depth, rigor, and stylistic coherence inherent in traditional training. The Guru–Shishya tradition, on the other hand, fosters the development of highly skilled performers capable of preserving and advancing musical lineages.

The paper argues that although both systems have their respective advantages, the Guru–Shishya tradition remains indispensable for achieving artistic excellence in Indian classical music. It emphasizes the need for preserving this traditional pedagogy alongside modern educational frameworks to ensure the continuity and richness of India's musical heritage.

Keywords: Guru–Shishya Tradition; Institutional Music Education; Gharana System; Hindustani Classical Music; Music Pedagogy; Oral Tradition; Music Training

Introduction

The transmission of knowledge in Indian culture has traditionally been rooted in deeply experiential and value-oriented systems, where the Guru holds a position of profound reverence. In the realm of fine arts, particularly music, the Guru–Shishya tradition has served not merely as a pedagogical method but as a holistic process of artistic and personal transformation. The Guru is not only an instructor but also a mentor, guide, and custodian of tradition, shaping the disciple's intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic sensibilities.

In ancient India, formal educational institutions such as schools and universities were either absent or limited in their scope. Knowledge was imparted within the Guru's ashram, where disciples lived for extended periods and underwent rigorous, immersive training. This system emphasized discipline, devotion, and continuity of tradition. In music, such an environment enabled the gradual internalization of complex concepts and the development of a deep, intuitive understanding of the art.

With the passage of time, especially during the colonial period and the subsequent era of globalization, the educational landscape in India underwent significant changes. Institutional education emerged as a structured and standardized system, incorporating fixed curricula, examinations, and certification. Music education, too, became integrated into this framework, leading to the establishment of schools, colleges, and universities dedicated to the teaching of music.

While institutional education has played a crucial role in expanding access to music learning, it has also introduced certain limitations. The structured and time-bound nature of this system often restricts the depth and individuality of learning. In contrast, the traditional Guru–Shishya system continues to offer an immersive and personalized approach, raising important questions about the effectiveness and adequacy of modern pedagogical models in music training.

Guru–Shishya Tradition

The Guru–Shishya tradition represents one of the most enduring and distinctive features of Indian cultural and educational heritage. In the field of Indian classical music, this tradition has been instrumental in preserving and transmitting knowledge across generations. A key outcome of this system is the development of the *gharana* tradition, which embodies lineage-based stylistic identities.

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Historically, the emergence of gharanas can be traced to the medieval period, when the decline of royal patronage led to reduced interaction among artists. In response, musicians continued their practice within relatively isolated environments, often under the guidance of a single Guru. Over time, this led to the development of distinct stylistic approaches, each reflecting the aesthetic vision and pedagogical methods of a particular lineage.

The gharana system has significantly enriched Indian classical music by introducing diversity within a shared framework. Each gharana is characterized by unique approaches to raga development, rhythmic interpretation, ornamentation, and improvisation. These stylistic differences not only enhance the artistic richness of the tradition but also provide multiple perspectives on the same musical concepts.

At the same time, the gharana system reflects a balance between preservation and limitation. While it ensures the continuity of specific stylistic features, it may also restrict exposure to alternative approaches. However, this apparent limitation has played a crucial role in maintaining the integrity and depth of individual traditions.

Pedagogical Features of the Guru–Shishya System

The Guru–Shishya tradition is defined by a set of pedagogical principles that distinguish it from modern educational systems. Foremost among these is the emphasis on oral transmission. Knowledge is imparted directly from the Guru to the disciple through demonstration, repetition, and imitation, rather than through written notation. This method enhances the disciple’s listening ability, memory, and sensitivity to nuance.

Another defining feature is the absence of a fixed syllabus. The Guru determines the course of instruction based on the disciple’s aptitude, progress, and individual needs. This flexibility allows for a highly personalized learning experience, ensuring that each disciple develops according to their unique potential.

Evaluation within this system is continuous and informal. The Guru constantly observes and corrects the disciple’s performance, providing immediate feedback. Public performances, such as concerts and competitions, serve as additional platforms for assessing the disciple’s progress.

The relationship between Guru and disciple extends beyond the confines of formal instruction. It is characterized by mutual trust, respect, and long-term commitment. Learning is viewed as a lifelong process, and the disciple continues to refine their art under the Guru’s guidance for many years. Eventually, the disciple assumes the role of a Guru, thereby perpetuating the lineage.

Institutional Education

Institutional education represents the modern approach to music training, characterized by structured curricula, standardized evaluation, and formal certification. This system has played a pivotal role in making music education accessible to a broader section of society.

In institutional settings, students are exposed to both practical and theoretical aspects of music. The use of notation, textbooks, lectures, seminars, and workshops facilitates systematic learning. Unlike the Guru–Shishya tradition, where training is centred around a single lineage, institutional education provides exposure to multiple teachers and stylistic perspectives.

One of the key strengths of institutional education is its ability to democratize knowledge. Individuals who may not have the opportunity to undergo traditional training can still acquire a foundational understanding of music. Additionally, the provision of degrees and diplomas enables students to pursue professional careers in teaching and related fields.

However, the institutional system also has inherent limitations. The fixed duration of courses often restricts the depth of learning, particularly in a discipline like music that requires prolonged and intensive practice. The standardization of curricula may not adequately address individual differences in learning pace and aptitude. Furthermore, the emphasis on examinations and certification can sometimes overshadow the intrinsic value of artistic development.

Comparison between Guru–Shishya Tradition and Institutional Education

There are significant differences in the teaching methodologies of these two systems, which result in distinct outcomes. A comparative overview is as follows:

Aspect	Guru–Shishya Tradition	Institutional Education
Training	Disciples undergo training for many years; the number of students is limited, resulting in high-quality, intensive training.	Students often have little or only basic knowledge of music; the number is large, resulting in primarily elementary-level training.
Syllabus	No fixed syllabus; the Guru decides what and when to teach based on the disciple’s ability and progress.	A fixed syllabus covering both practical and theoretical aspects must be completed within a

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	Each student is taught according to their level.	limited time. A common syllabus is followed for all students.
Learning Tools	Primarily oral transmission (face-to-face learning), observation, and memory; external tools are rarely used.	Extensive use of notation, books, lectures, seminars, workshops, etc.
Evaluation	Continuous assessment by the Guru during training; further evaluation through live performances, competitions, etc.	Periodic examinations (both practical and theoretical) based on the syllabus.
Outcome	Produces highly trained, tradition-bound artists capable of carrying forward the lineage; most accomplished musicians emerge from this system.	Can produce music teachers; however, producing accomplished performing artists through this system is relatively difficult.
Scope of Work	Most prominent Hindustani classical artists belong to this tradition; their primary aim is performance and preservation of the gharana.	The aim is to obtain higher academic qualifications and secure employment as teachers in institutions, schools, or academies.

Contemporary Context and Need for Integration

In the contemporary era, the landscape of music education is undergoing rapid transformation due to technological advancements and globalization. Online learning platforms, digital archives, and virtual classrooms have made music more accessible than ever before. However, these developments also raise concerns regarding the depth and authenticity of learning.

The coexistence of traditional and institutional systems presents an opportunity for integration. Institutional frameworks can incorporate elements of the Guru–Shishya tradition, such as mentorship-based learning, extended training modules, and performance-oriented evaluation. At the same time, traditional systems can benefit from academic resources, documentation, and broader dissemination.

Such a hybrid approach would enable a more balanced and comprehensive model of music education, combining the depth and rigor of traditional training with the accessibility and structure of institutional learning.

Conclusion

The Guru–Shishya tradition and institutional education represent two distinct yet complementary approaches to music training. While institutional education has expanded access and provided formal recognition, it often lacks the depth and continuity required for the development of accomplished performers.

The Guru–Shishya tradition, with its emphasis on personalized mentorship, immersive learning, and lineage-based continuity, remains indispensable for achieving artistic excellence. It has been the primary source of the finest artists in Indian classical music and continues to play a vital role in preserving its richness and diversity.

In the evolving context of music education, it is essential to recognize the strengths of both systems and explore ways to integrate them effectively. Such an approach would not only ensure the preservation of traditional practices but also adapt them to contemporary needs, thereby sustaining the vitality of Indian classical music for future generations.

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