

Tagore And The Baul Folk: A Coalition In Music Styles

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore was a philanthropist who was well known, not only in Bengal, but in many parts of the world. His philosophy and ideas were seen as revolutionary at his time and his music is still known as the staple in many households. The paper looks into the folk traditions that he borrowed from and incorporated into his work, in terms of tone, mysticism and philosophy. The Baul tradition especially appealed to his sensibilities because of how much the two parties had in common. This has been captured in his music, poem and lifestyle and had ultimately been incorporated into his political ideals as well.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Baul, music, folk, spirituality and philosophy

Music, especially in India, has always been known to be something which attracts great reverence. It calls out to the human soul and allows it to breathe through it. It is perhaps for this purpose that there is such an abundance to rules when it comes to learning and performing Hindustani Classical and Carnatic music. The traditions are strong, rigid and have been passed on from generation to generation. Over time, the true meaning behind these rules have become lost to many because of a strict adherence to them and not to music itself. Rabindranath Tagore is someone who noticed this, not only in terms of music, but in nearly every aspect of society, and tried to break this chain through his music and writing.

His music is a blend of Hindustani Classical, folk music and also has some elements of Western music. The notations to his songs indicate that he has borrowed from Hindustani Classical ragas in such a way that it still recognisable as the raga but is not adapted in its pure form for his music. This is seen by the deviations from fixed notes and rhythms into something which is easily distinguishable and is something away from the raga. This abstraction is where the folk and Western elements appear, giving the music a distinctive tonal quality which is characteristic of Rabindra Sangeet. The collection of the songs he has written throughout his life has been compiled into a book known as Gitabitan or Rabindra Rachanabali which consists of over eight hundred songs.

The reason why this quality appears in Tagore is perhaps because he has never studied music formally. His family was

well-to-do and was musically inclined, either to the Indian or Western form. Since he enjoyed listening to music but rejected formal tutoring, he only heard snippets of the ragas when his siblings would play or sing. It was because of his elder brother, Satyendranath, that Tagore's music career took flight. Rabindranath Tagore was especially fond of Dhrupad, which is a form in Hindustani Classical music and used it in many of his songs. He was also heavily influenced by Baul, Sari and Kirtan singers.

Rabindranath Tagore had a firm stance when it came to his ideology and belief systems and these beliefs can be connected with those of the folk tribes of Bengal. Not only are these qualities seen in his personality but it is reflected in his poetry, stories, music and political approach. By lending his beliefs to his work, the result was something that was wholly original. Apart from this, he was vastly influenced by his own Bengali heritage and "looked to his own tradition and experiences to provide particular images, themes, and symbols for his poetry" (Goldberg, 191).

As per an article published by Martha Nussbaum, Tagore's religion is the religion of a poet and is sceptical about tradition and ritual (152). Religion, then became an inner expression of personal faith. He did not believe in institutionalised education or rote learning and played an active role in the field of education in India by establishing institutions like Shantiniketan, Sriniketan and Visva Bharati Vidyalyaya, because he believed that being connected to nature

through art in an active atmosphere is how one can truly learn and apply their intellectual and artistic abilities. The establishment of Shantiniketan also reflects the importance he felt of the interdependence between man and nature and of man and the universe. According to Tagore, art serves as a link between an individual and the reality around him.

He was against imperialism and fascism and was staunchly against and even disgusted by colonial aggression and portrayed the misery faced by the native Indians under colonial rule. The British mode of taking control over their colonial lands is everything that Tagore was against, which is why he was an active participant in the freedom struggle, aiming for the British to lose their hold over the country.

Tagore is a giant figurehead in the literary realm, even today, because of his contributions and the work he has left behind. His song lyrics are poetic and appealing and his music has become a noted genre in itself.

This paper makes an attempt to understand the manner in which folk tunes in of Bengal have been incorporated into the music created by Rabindranath Tagore. It looks into the influence of Baul tradition in the music of Tagore by recognising the characteristics of each of the two styles and isolating them in the music, in terms of lyric, style, tone, meter, and content. An important factor which is also considered is the artist who sings the song. The song selected for this analysis is "Ekla Chaulo Re" sung by Kishore Kumar.

To understand the characteristics of the Baul tradition, we first must be aware of what their tradition is. Baul is a folk style of Bengal which emerged in the eleventh century AD from the Bhakti Movement, whereby the artists are non-conformist wandering poets who perform their work in the form of songs which are either of a spiritual nature or something which enhances our understanding of the Supreme. The music is generally spontaneous and any number of musicians can join into the mix.

They are generally clad in saffron coloured robes and others have robes of patchwork, have long uncut hair and beads hanging around their necks or tied around their wrists, and finally, have at least one instrument at all times because they are always ready to express their emotions through music. The popular instruments are *ektara* (single-stringed instrument), *dotara* (two-stringed instrument) *khamak* (one-headed drum with strings), *khol* (two-headed drum), *manjira* (small hand cymbals) and *ghungroo* (a belt of bells tied around ankles).

Baul singers follow a tribal, nomadic life, travelling from village to village to propagate their beliefs through music. They live a solitary life and live independently. Bauls rarely perform in cities and prefer to be surrounded by nature professing the "ultimate reality" (Kuckertz, 85) through their music and poetic expression. The most characteristic feature of Baul music is to picturesquely present fully developed ideas and observations taken from their surroundings using rustic language and imagery.

The basic philosophy of the Bauls is that of 'Ulta Sadhan' or 'the reverse path' according to which, they are to walk in a path that is the opposite of the path followed by unaware people in order to return to their own self. They believe in the concept of 'Moner Manush' or 'Man of my Heart' whereby they believe that man has an intense yearning of the heart for

the divine which is in Man and not in the temple or in scriptures, images or symbols (Dasgupta, 72).

It was during Tagore's vacation in Giridih, a region in rural Bengal, that he had been greatly moved by the folk music of Bengal, especially the folk music belonging to the Baul tradition. This was so not only because of its appealing tonal quality, but because it called out to his spirit. He saw a correlation between his personal beliefs and the beliefs of the Baul folk. Their longing for the Divine is what appealed to Tagore the most. His admiration for their tradition is reflected in the way he incorporated their music styles into his own work.

Tagore also documented at least one hundred Bengali folk rhymes, thus preserving them in a written form and keeping the tradition alive in his own way. Another reason that compelled him to collect folk literature and fuse them into his work was the awareness of the growth in the feeling of nationalism in colonial India. He was aware of his position and respectability and used it to propagate his ideas. The native literary elites who were English educated wanted to find a cultural connection to their roots through these stories and raised a need to preserve these traditions. Doing so would provoke the masses to rise up and demand independence from the British and bring the nation closer to self-governance.

A noted example of the blend between Indian Classical and Baul music is seen in the case of the song "Ekla Chaulo Re". It is a very well known song which comes under Rabindrasangeet. It is a patriotic song written in the Baul tradition and was Gandhi's favourite composition of Rabindranath Tagore's. It was composed in Giridih when he was forty-four years of age. The song was initially titled 'Eka' and was written by Tagore for a magazine called *Bhandar* in the year 1905 and the musical notations were composed by his niece, Indira Devi Choudharani.

The tune conforms to the Baul mode but the lyrics are patriotic and evoke nationalistic sensibilities. It was used frequently during the independence movement. The lyrics urge the listener to have courage and to continue to follow one's calling, giving no regard to any external responses given by anyone. It centres its theme on independence and self-reliance, which is a virtue which was greatly valued during the freedom struggle and was a notion that was propagated by freedom fighters throughout.

Bauls are people who do not conform to the social structures that have been established, this notion instilled in them so much that the word 'baul' itself means 'madcap'. Since it is this culture that Tagore is inspired by to bring about change in society, it is only fitting that he uses their mode of musical styles to write and compose a patriotic song which moves to bring people together for bringing about a mass transformation in the nation through the freedom struggle.

The lyrics, in his own translated version, are as follows-
*If they answer not to thy call walk alone,
If they are afraid and cower mutely facing the wall,
O thou of evil luck,
open thy mind and speak out alone.
If they turn away, and desert you when
crossing the wilderness,
O thou of evil luck,
trample the thorns under thy tread,*

*and along the blood-lined track travel alone.
If they do not hold up the light
when the night is troubled with storm,
o thou of evil luck,
with the thunder flame of pain ignite
thine own heart and let it burn alone.* (Bardhan, 305)

As a song, it appeals in three levels- practical, emotional and spiritual. Practical because it urges one to continue towards their goal despite impediments, emotional because going alone and not being heard may cause pain but needs to be done anyway and spiritual because a true patron cannot go forth in a group in order to reach his/her destination.

There is no end product of the song, no destination and no specifics. It therefore becomes something that can be applicable to anyone going through hardships or struggles or to anybody who feels like they are alone. Although written with patriotic motives in mind, the song has become universal in its appeal and relatability. It is a song of resistance and celebrates the individual spirit.

The version of the song being analysed is in Bengali and is sung by Kishore Kumar. The chosen piece is the most popular rendition of the song because of the attention to detail that has been put into this version by the singer and musicians. It captures the spirit of the song by incorporating both, Baul and Indian classical instruments have been used in this song. The instruments used are Ektara, manjira, khol and sitar, three from the Baul tradition and one that is typically Hindustani Classical.

The original lyrics of the song are -
*Jodi tor dak shune keu na aashe toube ekla chaulo re
ekla chaulo, ekla chaulo, ekla chaula, ekla chaulo, re.
jodi keu kathaa na koy, ore ore o aubhaga,
jodi shoubai thake mukh phiraye shaubai kore bhoy
taube pauran khule
o tui mukh phute tor moner katha elka bolo re.
jodi shoubai phire jay, ore ore o aubhaga,
jodi gauhon pauthe jaabar kaale keu phire na chay
taube pauther kanta
o tui rakto-makha chauron taule ekla daulo re.
jodi alo na dhaure, ore ore o aubhaga,
jodi jhaur badole andhar raate duar dey ghaure
taube bajranaule
apon buker paanor jwaliye niye ekla jwalo re.* (Bardhan, 306)

The singer has contributed to the song by giving it a certain flow, placing inflections and stressing on the words which correspond to the beat. The manjira, or small cymbals is an instrument used by Bauls, is used throughout the song to indicate meter and keep up the rhythm.

The movement of the song contribute to the general theme of 'walking on', which is also a Baul element, since they are a nomadic tribe who are never stagnated in one place. It also applies to them because many of the Baul singers and musicians, especially the younger ones, walk through the town or village the pass by as they perform their music.

Their philosophy of ulta sadhana or the reverse man is also evident in the song. Through the lyrics, the listener is told to go in a path that is one's own, which may not be frequented by many, in order to find oneself through their adventure, courage and self-affirmation.

Another common feature of Baul music is the "quick ascend to the octave note and its gradual descent over a series of melodic figures" (Kuckertz, 86). This is present in the song during its transition from the end of a paragraph to the sthai or chorus.

Having one singer only, and no chorus or even duets, contributes to the general tone of the song and the mood set by it, a lone singer singing about walking on alone, another Baul element.

The tune of the song and style in which it is presented is entirely reflective of Bengali folk music, in which every third word is given a special emphasis.

In conclusion, the paper has looked into the beliefs of both, Tagore and the Baul tradition and seen similarities between the two. There has evidently been an impact of the Bauls and other folk traditions in many of the Rabindrasangeet compositions, a prominent example of which is Ekla Chaulo Re. The specific reasons for this is not clear- whether it was done to preserve the art, or to propagate Tagore's own beliefs, or to aid in the freedom struggle by evoking nationalistic sensibilities; it could be two or more of these reasons or wholly other motives.

The influence of other folk traditions that have impacted Tagore can be scope for further research study, as can be the study of the Baul folk rhymes that have been translated by Tagore and many other researchers and scholars. The main focus of the paper was on the music of Tagore alone and not the folk influence on his poems or stories. There is also scope to look at Baul influence on artists other than Tagore. Another area that can be looked into is the influence of Tagore on the Bauls and other Bengal folk artists, since this paper is mainly a one-sided one which focuses on Tagore and not the other.

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