Reimagining Musical Identity: The Classicisation of Bengali Music through S.M. Tagore's Musico-Textual Writings and Postcolonial Debates in 19th Century Bengal

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Abstract: This article interrogates the epistemological foundations of musical notation in nineteenth-century Bengal. Atarthi (2017) contends that the musicological writings of figures such as Sourindro Mohun Tagore should not be understood exclusively through the lenses of colonialism and musical nationalism [1]. The first section critically examines the multifaceted concept of classicisation, situating it within the broader discourse on Mughal tropes of classicisation while also exploring the pre-colonial motivations behind Tagore's efforts to canonise Bengali music. The second section addresses how Tagore deftly navigated the interests of both colonial authorities and local audiences through his musicological writings, along with the ensuing debates. Drawing on primary sources, including Tagore's transcription of the English anthem "God Save the Queen" into Bengali, this article unpacks classicisation tropes such as "scientific" and "modernity," and critically engages with the dichotomies embedded within these frameworks. Rather than categorising colonial and vernacular knowledge as distinct and opposing entities, this article foregrounds the hybridity of paracolonial knowledge production, thereby examining how Tagore's involvement in these discourses exemplifies this hybridity.

1. Introduction

The processes of musical canonisation and classicisation within colonial and postcolonial contexts have long been pivotal to scholarly inquiry, reflecting the broader entanglements between music, nationalism, and imperial power. In the context of nineteenth-century Bengal, Sourindro Mohun Tagore emerges as a seminal figure whose musico-textual contributions are positioned at the nexus of intricate cultural negotiations. His endeavours to transcribe and codify Bengali music, particularly within the frameworks of colonial modernity and local cultural revivalism, represent a complex project aimed at reimagining musical identity amidst shifting political and intellectual landscapes.

This article positions Tagore's musicological writings within the theoretical framework of paracolonialism—a perspective that seeks to transcend traditional binaries of colonial versus vernacular knowledge. Paracolonialism recognises the reciprocal entanglement of colonial and indigenous epistemologies, underscoring how figures like Tagore reappropriated colonial discourses while simultaneously asserting local cultural authority. By examining Tagore's hybridisation of Mughal, Sanskritic, and Western musicological traditions, this study interrogates the production, circulation, and contestation of knowledge across colonial and indigenous domains.

The concept of classicisation—the elevation of certain musical practices to the status of "classical" or canonised forms—serves as a key analytical entry point for this exploration. Building on Schofield's work on Mughal musicology [5] and Atarthi's reflections on Bengali musical writing [1], this study critically engages with how classicisation reflects and constitutes power dynamics within colonial contexts. The term "classical," often burdened with Eurocentric connotations, is problematised here in relation to non-Western musical traditions, where its deployment frequently serves as an instrument of cultural hegemony. However, as this article demonstrates, Tagore's appropriation of the classicisation process was far from passive; rather, it entailed a dynamic reconfiguration of multiple epistemic traditions, culminating in a hybridised and contested form of knowledge production.

Central to this discussion is Tagore's strategic use of music notation as a mechanism for consolidating and challenging cultural authority. His development of a "Hindu Notation" system, alongside his efforts to translate the English anthem "God Save the Queen" into Bengali musical modes, exemplifies his engagement with both colonial and vernacular audiences. These musico-textual practices reflect Tagore's intent to bridge disparate cultural worlds, while also highlighting the inherent tensions involved in translating oral musical traditions into textual forms—tensions that speak to broader debates within ethnomusicology regarding the politics of transcription and representation.

By situating Tagore's work within broader discourses of classicisation, paracolonialism, and the politics of knowledge production, this article aims to deepen our understanding of how musical practices are intricately linked to questions of identity, power, and cultural heritage in colonial and postcolonial South Asia. An analysis of Tagore's writings provides a critical lens through which we can revisit the intersections of music, colonialism, and nationalism, while also complicating traditional narratives of cultural resistance and domination. Through this exploration, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in the fields of ethnomusicology, intangible heritage studies, and postcolonial studies concerning the fluid and contested nature of cultural production in colonial contexts, while foregrounding the central role of music in these negotiations.

In the following sections, I first explore the pre-colonial Mughal ideologies of classicisation that informed Tagore's intellectual framework. I then move to an analysis of his musicological writings, focusing on the debates surrounding his transcription of the English national anthem and the implications of his "Hindu Notation" system for both colonial and vernacular audiences. This analysis foregrounds the hybridity of Tagore's work, positioning it as a critical site of paracolonial knowledge production in nineteenth-century Bengal.

2. Mughal Tropes of Classicisation – Pre-19th Century

Tagore's project of musical canonisation cannot be comprehended without reference to the classicisation ideologies of the Mughal Empire, which prefigured his work. Schofield (2010) outlines that Mughal musicology relied on several key tropes, including critiques of performer illiteracy, efforts to "scientise" music, and veneration of a Sanskritic Golden Age [5]. These ideologies were integral to the Mughal approach to canonisation, positioning music as both an

intellectual and performative art form governed by scholarly principles.

The Mughal tradition of classicisation drew from Indo-Persianate aesthetics and epistemologies, where music was perceived as a branch of scientific knowledge (*'ilm*), contingent upon formal theoretical underpinnings. The emphasis on literate forms of music, where musicianship was intertwined with scholarship, reflects a prioritisation of documentation and treatise writing. This tradition influenced Tagore's project, which attempted to confer a similar sense of scholarly legitimacy onto Bengali music by framing it within a "scientific" canon that would appeal to an educated, elite audience. Tagore's invocation of the Sanskritic past aligns with Mughal ideologies that valorised ancient knowledge, situating Bengali music within a culturally prestigious and historically rooted framework [1].

In postcolonial studies, such invocation of a "Golden Age" can be understood as an effort to legitimise indigenous practices by appealing to pre-colonial authority. Tagore's adoption of these tropes exemplifies a form of "subaltern appropriation," wherein colonial subjects reconfigure dominant paradigms to assert indigenous cultural identities. This approach resonates with recent scholarship in intangible heritage, which posits that preservation is inherently a political act that reflects power dynamics within society. In positioning Bengali music within this framework, Tagore not only adopted Mughal modes of canonisation but also adapted them to create a hybridised version of musical classicism that would resonate within both colonial and local contexts.

3. Revival of Hindustani Music in Calcutta and the Emerging Ustad-Shagirt (Master-Disciple) Knowledge Framework

The development of Tagore's musicological project coincided with a revival of Hindustani music in Calcutta, following the relocation of Wajid Ali Shah from Lucknow. Shah's deportation marked a significant shift in the musical landscape, as Calcutta transformed into the "second Lucknow," as noted by *Avadh Akbar*, a newspaper from Shah's former court [1]. With the establishment of his new court at Matiya Burj, Shah attracted musicians, dancers, and poets, replicating the vibrant cultural environment of Lucknow. The musical revival in Calcutta fostered the emergence of *ustad-shagirt* (master-disciple) relationships, deeply rooted in oral transmission and hierarchical knowledge-sharing.

Tagore's involvement in the Bishnupur gharana, a tradition linked to both Mughal and Sanskritic influences, illustrates how he harnessed this *ustad-shagirt* structure to bridge Indo-Persianate and local Bengali practices. Tagore's master, Kshetra Mohun Goswami, and his predecessor, Radhamodan Sen Das, were dedicated to synthesising Indo-Persianate music into a distinctly Bengali system, exemplifying a broader nationalist trend in which Bengali music was "shaped in the background of a musical encounter with the Matiyaburj" [1, 7]. This effort represents not merely a cultural exchange but also a deliberate project of redefining regional music within a nationalist framework, aligning with theories in intangible heritage that highlight the role of oral traditions in maintaining cultural continuity amidst external pressures.

The *ustad-shagirt* structure embodies the complexities of intangible heritage, where oral-aural transmission serves as both a preservation method and a site of cultural negotiation. Intangible heritage scholars argue that these master-disciple relationships represent a "vernacular science," through which knowledge is codified, preserved, and adapted without the need for written documentation [2]. In Tagore's case, his gatherings of musicians to discuss theory and practice reveal an attempt to reconcile oral traditions with the colonial emphasis on written documentation. This synthesis of oral knowledge within a textual framework exemplifies the adaptive processes inherent in intangible heritage, where traditions are reimagined to align with the demands of modernity while retaining their indigenous essence.

4. S.M. Tagore's Localisation of "God Save the Queen"

Tagore's localisation of "God Save the Queen" into Bengali musical modes (see Figure 1) is emblematic of his strategic engagement with both colonial and local audiences. Following Queen Victoria's proclamation as Empress of India in 1877, British authorities sought to establish the English anthem as a national symbol, entrusting Tagore with the task of adapting the anthem in a way that would resonate with "Oriental" tastes. This endeavour required him to balance the anthem's original structure with Bengali musical sensibilities, resulting in a transcultural work that would reflect both colonial respectability and local identity [3].

Tagore produced multiple settings of the anthem, ranging from versions that closely mirrored the English melody to those that incorporated the *lum jhijhiti* mode, characteristic of Bengali ragas. This adaptation required meticulous attention to tonal and modal structure, exemplifying Tagore's desire to create a hybridised form of music that honored both Western and Bengali traditions [3]. Tagore's localisation project aligns with the concept of "cosmopolitan nationalism" in postcolonial theory, wherein colonial symbols are transformed to reflect local identities, enabling colonial subjects to participate in global modernity without erasing their cultural specificity [4].

Figure 1: Tagore's first, third version (left, right) of the *lum jhijhiti* setting of "God Save the Queen". Whilst the initial score is modally closer to the original English tune, the third version is much closer to the original *rag* [3].

This engagement with colonial forms as a means of asserting local identity highlights the hybrid nature of Tagore's project. His multiple settings of the anthem illustrate a nuanced approach to transcultural musicology, where the objective is not simply to mimic or resist but to blend. In this way, Tagore's adaptations reflect a paracolonial strategy, as he transformed colonial forms into vehicles of local expression, thereby asserting Bengali musical authority within a framework recognisable to both colonial and indigenous audiences.

5. Critiques of Tagore's Notation Systems

Tagore's musico-textual writings, particularly his "Hindu Notation" system (see Figure 2), generated controversy among his contemporaries, including Krishnadhan Bandyopadhyay and Charles Baron Clark. Bandyopadhyay contended that Tagore's notation lacked the "scientific" rigor of Western staff notation, asserting that it was too rooted in practice to be formally codified [1]. In response to Bandyopadhyay, Tagore produced a score which he named the "English ditto" (see Figure 3). This critique underscores a central tension within ethnomusicology: the struggle to reconcile oral-aural traditions with written notation, especially under colonial modernist standards

that equated "scientificity" with Western methodologies [4].

Figure 2: Tagore's "Hindu Notation" [6].

Figure 3: The "English ditto" of Tagore's "Hindu Notation" [6].

Clark, an Orientalist scholar, provided another critique, dismissing Tagore's attempts to incorporate microtonal embellishments into Western notation as "crude" and insufficiently precise, which incited him to provide his own transcription of "God Save the Queen" (see Figure 4) [4]. Clark's preference for Western standards reflects a broader colonial bias that viewed vernacular systems as inferior and incapable of capturing musical complexity. Tagore's notation, however, embodies an alternative knowledge system that prioritises indigenous musical characteristics, challenging colonial expectations and redefining "scientificity" on local terms [3].
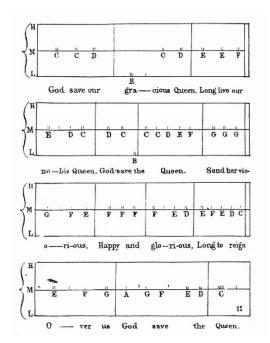
Figure 4: Clark's reproduction of Tagore's Bengali notation of "God Save the Queen" [3].

These critiques underscore the contested nature of Tagore's work, where his efforts to systematise Bengali music were perceived as both innovative and insufficiently modern. In postcolonial studies, such critiques illustrate the struggle for epistemic sovereignty, as indigenous intellectuals sought to validate their systems against the backdrop of colonial hegemonies. Tagore's "Hindu Notation" becomes a site of resistance, challenging colonial assumptions about the inadequacy of vernacular knowledge and asserting the depth and complexity of Bengali music [4]. This tension between oral tradition and scientific notation speaks to the broader challenges of translating intangible heritage into textual forms, a process fraught with both epistemological and cultural negotiations.

6. Conclusion

Sourindro Mohun Tagore's efforts to classicise Bengali music in the nineteenth century must be situated within the broader intellectual and political frameworks that shaped this transformative era. Far from being a mere project of cultural preservation or the wholesale adoption of colonial ideologies, Tagore's work represents a sophisticated negotiation of multiple epistemic traditions. His engagement with Mughal musical ideologies, Sanskritic scholarship, and Western musicological discourses reveals how classicisation functioned not merely as a process of canonisation but as a dynamic tool for articulating cultural identity amidst the pressures of colonial modernity.

Tagore's dual project of codifying Bengali music through his "Hindu Notation" system and adapting Western musical forms—exemplified by his localisation of "God Save the Queen"—demonstrates the complex ways in which musical knowledge was contested, negotiated, and reconfigured during this period. His musico-textual writings represent a form of paracolonial knowledge production—a concept that highlights the interstitial space between colonial and vernacular domains. Rather than occupying a binary position of resistance or accommodation, Tagore's writings exemplify a hybridised knowledge system that engaged with colonial power structures while simultaneously asserting the legitimacy of vernacular intellectual traditions.

The debates surrounding Tagore's notations—whether about the "scientific" rigor critiqued by

Krishnadhan Bandyopadhyay or the tensions between oral-aural traditions and Western staff notation highlighted by Charles Baron Clark—illustrate the epistemological anxieties inherent in attempts to translate oral traditions into textual forms. These debates underscore the ambivalence and hybridity at the core of Tagore's intellectual project, as he sought to accommodate the demands of both colonial and local audiences. His simultaneous deployment of distinct notational systems to cater to different epistemological frameworks represents a conscious effort to navigate the complexities of cultural representation under colonial rule.

Furthermore, Tagore's work on Bengali music resonates with broader trends in the formation of cultural heritage during this period, particularly regarding the processes by which certain musical forms were elevated to the status of the "classical." Drawing on Mughal classicisation models while intertwining them with colonial discourses of modernity and science, Tagore's musicological project underscores the contested and fluid nature of what constitutes "classical" music. His writings contribute to the reimagining of cultural heritage—a process shaped by both nationalist aspirations and colonial exigencies. In this regard, Tagore's efforts echo broader movements in the postcolonial world, where music and culture are often marshaled as symbols of resistance and accommodation.

At the heart of Tagore's project lies a fundamental tension between tradition and modernity, colonial and vernacular knowledge, and textual and oral transmission. These dichotomies, which have structured much of the discourse around colonial and postcolonial knowledge systems, are not merely oppositional in Tagore's writings; rather, they are interwoven into a cohesive, albeit ambivalent, project of cultural rearticulation. His efforts to "scientise" Bengali music through written notation, while retaining the subtlety and fluidity of oral traditions, speak to the larger processes of knowledge formation in colonial contexts, where translating indigenous epistemologies into modern frameworks was inherently fraught with challenges and negotiations.

The significance of Tagore's project lies in its resistance to simplistic categorisation. While his work aligns with colonial modernist objectives in its emphasis on documentation and notation, it also subverts these frameworks by emphasising the limitations of Western notational systems in capturing the intricacies of Bengali and Hindustani music. In this sense, Tagore's project transcends mere classicisation, positioning itself as a critical intervention into the politics of knowledge production—an effort to assert the intellectual and artistic sovereignty of Bengali culture in a rapidly transforming colonial world.

In conclusion, Tagore's significance as a canoniser of Bengali music lies not only in his role as a cultural reformer but also as a paracolonial intellectual whose writings embody the hybridity of colonial knowledge production. His work challenges conventional binaries—ancient versus modern, oral versus textual, colonial versus vernacular—illustrating the need for a nuanced approach to the study of music and culture in colonial contexts. Future research into Tagore's legacy and the broader processes of musical classicisation in colonial South Asia must take seriously the hybrid, contested, and multidirectional flows of knowledge that characterised this period. By doing so, we can move beyond simplistic narratives of cultural domination and resistance towards a more complex understanding of the role music plays in shaping identities within and beyond colonial frameworks.

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