

## SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

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# **Redefining Contemporaneity: Seeing the Tradition as the New Contemporary**

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### **Abstract**

Music undergoes significant expressional changes owing to the parallel changes in the time it belongs to as art adapts itself to the changing time. Such developments are reflected directly in its expressions. It can be assumed, that the impact of the social changes making art look 'relevant' or 'contemporary' seemingly contributes to the perpetuation of art. The difference of times apposes the binary of tradition and contemporaneity to the further binaries of old and new. When the individual talent rises as part of both tradition and the contemporary, tradition after a point itself becomes contemporized. This paper aims to elucidate the various aspects of the coexistence of tradition and contemporaneity in Indian classical music and Rabindrasangeet. The paper also aims to discuss the contemporary time necessitating a change in art, the presence of tradition in contemporaneity, and the acceptance of tradition as the new contemporary.

**Keywords:** music, tradition, contemporaneity, classical, individuality.

# **Redefining Contemporaneity: Seeing the Tradition as the New Contemporary**

Subhadrakalyan Rana

## **Introduction:**

There have been numerous works and discussions on the binary of tradition and contemporaneity in the context of art and its different mediums of expression; for example, music. The arguments so far formulated have mostly been around proposing either a further perpetuation of the binary, or a unification of the two. Both remain problematic as a logical coexistence of tradition and contemporaneity is hardly suggested anywhere save in T. S. Eliot's seminal essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent.' If the binary of tradition and contemporaneity remains, they exist as individual entities with no interaction whatsoever. In case of a unification of the two, the attempt doesn't reach a proper fulfilment as the unified unit again treats them as further individual units. In such works, there are chances of a misinterpretation of the tradition as its apparent interaction with the contemporary dilutes their individual identities and the obvious hierarchies. This paper, thus, aims to elucidate the coexistence of tradition and contemporaneity in music with an added focus on the genres of Indian classical music and Rabindrasangeet. The paper shall also discuss the contemporary time necessitating a change in art and the appropriation of the tradition by the contemporary time which renders the tradition as the new contemporary.

## **The Tradition and the Contemporary:**

Considering that the function of art is to exist as a substitute for real life, this very function has changed with the change in society and the change in the dynamics of real life. Sometimes even

irrespective of the change in the geographical location of people, the change is felt owing to the change in time which makes experiences variable. T. S. Eliot quite emphasised on the difference in time bringing in changes in experiences:

“But people do not only experience the world differently in different places, they experience it differently at different times. In fact, our sensibility is constantly changing, as the world about us changes: ours is not the same as that of the Chinese or the Hindu, but also it is not the same as that of our ancestors several hundred years ago” (10).

From what the above quote tries to convey, it is evidently clear that time makes things relative. This brings us to the conclusion that tradition and contemporaneity are all about their being in and belonging to a particular time. The currentness of a time defines the contemporary which means, the contemporary relevantly exists in the present time. Past the time, what is now contemporary is considered part of the tradition. Tradition being what all were contemporary at different times in the past, remains fixed within particular frames of time cumulatively forming the history. The different ‘contemporaries’ turning into ‘traditions’ at different times thus form a continuum which is the tradition as a whole.

The binary of tradition and contemporaneity is quite often apposed to the further binaries of old and new, unfamiliar and familiar, irrelevant and relevant, and unrelatable and relatable. Such semiotic connections attributed to the tradition often lead to a preference for the contemporary to the tradition. The two combined, there is generally an excruciating urge to contemporize art which appears as a recontextualization of art in the present time. Ernst Fischer would advocate the contemporization of art and would show a stark contrast between tradition as an austere practice and the contemporary as a counter-movement. Without going into the Marxist argument Fischer raised, I would like to just point out how the

contemporization of art is largely necessitated, once again as a counter to the tradition, as a means to perpetuate art to save it from extinction.

The deliberate return to the archaic, the mythical, the ‘primitive’ in many works and movements of modern art has also something to do with this. The fetish-like character, not only of the commodity but also of a whole world of technical, economic and social machinery from which the artist is totally alienated, the infinite specialization and differentiation of the late bourgeois world, all this creates a nostalgia for the ‘source’, for a unity complete unto itself: “... The sensuous art of the Impressionists who dissolved the world in light, colour, and atmosphere was followed by a counter movement....” (187).

This is the point where it is quite important to ask if at all it is possible to discard the tradition while contemporizing art. Contemporary art stands as a piece of time, but does it really shed off the invincible traces of the tradition which, once again, T. S. Eliot believed made the existence of the contemporary possible? How far is it justified to conclude the contemporary as a counter to the tradition if the contemporary itself is soon to turn into the tradition and be part of the continuum that enlists every contemporary as tradition after its time is past?

T. S. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ delineates the palpable presence of the tradition in modern literature and argues that the tradition is what the contemporary is largely formed of. In another essay, ‘What is a Classic?’ Eliot again discusses the role of the tradition in making the existence of the contemporary possible. In the next two sections of the paper, I will be discussing modern, contemporary forms of Indian classical music coming to function, and their innate retentive link to the tradition. Rabindrasangeet will eventually come as another important aspect of contemporaneity where Rabindranath Tagore’s thoughts on music, as inferred from his compositions, would be illuminated on with reference to a few of

his compositions, thus establishing him both as an individual talent and the tradition itself for the later time to come.

### **The Tradition in the Contemporary:**

One may now refer to Ravi Shankar's experimental collaborative works with Lord Yehudi Menuhin, Andre Previn, Zubin Mehta, and Phillip Glass to understand the contemporary form of the traditional Indian classical music. These works started to be published since late sixties after he set foot in the West to cause 'the great Sitar explosion.' Known widely as 'fusion,' such works now come under the purview of World Music. But, given a thought, is it really too much to ask for a little more attention to think if at all the works were really more contemporary than they were traditional just because of the connotation of the West? Does the idea of the contemporaneity mislead us to take the works devoid of traces of the tradition?

'The great sitar explosion' in the sixties changed both Ravi Shankar and his music for better, and revolutionised the entire art of Sitar playing further. There has been a consistent complaint that his exposure of the West made his music restless. This restlessness was, however, a product of his acquaintance with post-war Europe and his involvement with the leftist art movements, and it remained a constant feature of his art not only in his international career but also during the time he played a few duets with his former wife, Annapurna Devi. That Ravi Shankar had a very early exposure to Europe and its music, and that he was impacted by the time he lived in should not, however, be a reason to conclude that his focus on contemporizing art kept him estranged from the tradition should anyone make a gross judgement of his mind from his experimental works. They were, rather, impeccable examples of how the tradition coexists with contemporaneity, one sometimes facilitating the presence of the other.

If listened to carefully, his Sitar concertos in collaboration with Andre Previn's London Symphony and Zubin Mehta's New York Philharmonic Orchestras, comprised of movements rooted in the raga system of Indian classical music. The ragas for the first concerto with Previn were Khamaj, Sindhi Bhairavi, Adana, and Manj Khamaj, and for the second concerto with Mehta were Lalit, Bairagi, Yaman Kalyan, and Miyan Ki Malhar. It is worthwhile to note that all the eight ragas are distinctively Indian, but Ravi Shankar chose them on the basis of the possibilities of harmonic explorations in them. Khamaj, Manj Khamaj and Yaman Kalyan provide the spaces to explore on the tonic and subdominant major chords. Lalit and Bairagi focus on the natural and augmented fourths. And, Adana and Miyan Ki Malhar are derivatives of the natural and melodic minor scales. Not only did Ravi Shankar's profound knowledge of both Indian classical and his close acquaintance with Western classical music converge in his concertos, but what rather captures the attention of a listener is how he applied his training in the tradition of Indian classical music, and kept it up right through, in making a fusion work which modernizes, or contemporizes, the tradition as well as enhances it as an essential part of it. His interpretations of the ragas could be traced back to the tradition of the Senia Maihar Gharana, the particular school of classical instrumental music that he hailed from, and the blend of the ragas with the Western harmonic and chordal melodic structures brought the ragas close to the European reality of music, the fundamentals of the raga remaining uncompromised. The interaction between the Orient and the Occident might be looked at from the popular viewpoint of Europe symbolizing modernity and contemporaneity affecting the austere tradition of Indian classical music to the core, and bringing it out to the world. While through an interaction the tradition of European music too comes in contact with Indian classical music, the above statement should not be considered an endorsement of the assumed superiority of the Whites as it is indeed a truth that Indian classical music has hardly any link to the society around, and that the European classical music is a product of the European reality. The internal interaction

between the notes forming harmonies in the tradition of European classical music might also be drawn a parallel with music connecting with the world outside in Europe, and therefore, the Indian ragas being backed up by chordal and harmonic music should be called a shift of Indian classical music towards a contemporary ideal with its own, innate tradition remaining unaffected in Ravi Shankar's hands.

A closer example where we can find tradition blending with contemporaneity where the former stands a representative of India and the latter, of the West, is doubtless Rabindranath Tagore. Sobhanlal Datta Gupta writes in the *Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*:

At one level, Tagore was a product of Indian and specifically Upanishadic tradition together with Western modernity, a mix that characterized the Tagore family. At another level, he was writing as a colonized subject in British India, experiencing colonial rule at first hand and the responses it evoked at various levels in his own country. He therefore had two rather easy options open before him. The first was to accept British rule in a spirit of servility like any 'brown sahib' of his day; the second, to completely reject the West, turning instead to nationalism or uncritical nativism. Tagore took neither of these two paths. His position on colonialism, more specifically on colonial modernity, was meditated through a total worldview evolving since his youth.

Tagore's contemporaries viewed India on an existential level through their lived experience of colonialism, and hence often resorted to nationalism by rejecting the West; but for Tagore the global citizen, the East-West binary was methodologically irrelevant. He attempted to blend critical readings of both Indian and Western tradition, culture, and values, viewing India in the world's mirror and thereby analysing her maladies, and also vice versa." (279, 280)

As a composer, Rabindranath Tagore was deeply rooted in the tradition of Indian classical music, but was vehemently against a religious adherence to it, because he believed that such a thing would limit the art and its expressions. He continuously attacked the preference for grammar and technique to expression in his *Sangitchinta*, and advocated thoughts on translating emotions through melodies. For the ragas, he remarked that it was useless to see what notes they included and what notes they did not, and that musicians should rather think of what modifications should be brought in for the perfect expressions of emotions. On one level, the tradition here is functional in the ragas, and contemporaneity, in their interpretations. On another level, the tradition stands for the emotions, and contemporaneity, their expressions. His inclination towards and curiosities about the West made him sure about his choices of the ragas for his songs, the movements of the melodic phrases suiting the literature adeptly, and the points of departure within the traditional framework of the ragas. His thoughts on the appropriation of the European harmony in Indian music too suggest his expressional aesthetics which might be an add-on to what made his views largely contemporary.

Unlike Ravi Shankar who blended Indian classical and Western classical music as two largely traditional disciplines resulting in the formation of a contemporary third, Rabindranath Tagore's concepts were from the very beginning a conglomeration of both Indian and European, as put in the above quote. However, the element of modernity came to him through the West as well, because his idea of prioritizing expression over grammar was once again a principle largely followed in the European tradition. A few of his compositions do demand an in-depth analysis to see how they naturally emerged as contemporary with a proper proportion of Indian and European disciplines put together in them. Once again, the difference between Ravi Shankar's and Tagore's works remains the very fact that India and Europe are explicitly



discreet in Ravi Shankar; probably also because his works were collaborative; whereas in Tagore, the contemporaneity came to existence at an arguably nascent stage.

### **The Tradition as the Contemporary:**

The last segment of the paper deals with the presence of the tradition in the contemporary as an essential part of it and aims to highlight the point where the tradition itself turns contemporary. T. S. Eliot has discussed quite elaborately in his 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' that the tradition is an inseparable part of anything that is done in the present, and that it is the very presence of the tradition, or the past, that defines contemporaneity. Before delving into the songs of Tagore, and discuss the possibility of their existence as contemporary with reference to Eliot's 'What is a Classic?' I would put a few quotes from his 'Tradition...' for a better understanding of the contemporary having tradition as an innate part of it:

...when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work on which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without his prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestor assert their immortality most vigorously. (100)

And he continues,

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.

You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. (101)

Further, Eliot says,

To proceed to a more intelligible exposition of the relation of the poet to the past: he can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form himself wholly on one or two private admirations, nor can he form himself wholly upon one preferred period.” (102)

I would put Tagore’s songs in three categories, and would talk about a few songs from each, to carry on the discussion. The first category comprises his general songs where one can find quite unrecognizable movements of common and familiar ragas. The second category, the songs he derived directly from the old compositions of different Indian classical traditions such as the Dhrupad and the Khayal. And, the last category is about the songs where the songs are not direct derivations but they have traces of old compositions from the past.

Let us first consider, in the first category, a few of his songs in the raga, Khamaj. Ashish Lahiri writes in the Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore:

In particular, Tagore has been credited with special mastery of Behag and Bhairavi, because the immense variations of these ragas, particularly the latter, abound in his creations, as do the ragas Pilu and Kham[b]aj. (94)

If we look closer into his songs in Khamaj, we can find a few of his songs bear a particular signature that is distinctively Tagore-esque. More so, because Tagore created an equal number of songs in the traditional type of Khamaj that we hear Ravi Shankar or Ali Akbar Khan play. The points of differentiation should become even clearer through a comparison of his own imaginative phrasal structures with the ones we are already familiar with.

A comparative study between 'Tomari Gehe Palichho Snehe' or 'Bone Emon Phul Phutechhe' and 'Amar Shesh Paranir Kori' or 'Ashim Dhan To Achhe Tomar' might be helpful to understand Tagore's interpretation of Khamaj. On one hand, where Khamaj is a major scale with the major third and the fifth as the landing notes, and combination of the notes forming the tonic and subdominant major chords further forming the heart phrases of the raga as discernible from 'Tomari Gehe' or 'Bone Emon,' Tagore's Khamaj in 'Amar Shesh Paranir Kori' or 'Ashim Dhan' employs the natural fourth and the natural sixth as the foundational notes barely escaping an overstep into the borders of Manj Khamaj where they become the landing notes. Such deviations are largely considered as Tagore serving the purpose of the literature of his songs, but the redefinition of a raga in his songs reflected his creative imagination and consciousness combined with his training in Dhrupad in his boyhood days.

A similar example where Tagore brings out an unfamiliar phrasal structure from a seemingly known raga is the song, 'Kotha Je Udhao Holo.' The song is mentioned in the songbook to be based on the raga, Mishra Malhar. However, Mishra Malhar does not justify the song's kinship with Malhar as Malhar is more a raga family than an individual raga despite the existence of Shudh Malhar among the other branches such as Miyan Ki Malhar, Megh Malhar, Ramdasi Malhar, Surdasi Malhar, Gaud Malhar and the likes. It is comprehensible that the type of notes connotating Malhar in the first stanza of the song makes the phrases closer to Sahana Malhar. The heart phrase of Malhar is adequately exploited in the first part of the second stanza. The second stanza then ends with a profound application of the flattened sixth which takes the tune through a detour and brings it close to Meerabai Ki Malhar. Tagore's application of Malhar once again brings to the fore his familiarity with the various forms of Malhar that he might have learned as part of his traditional training in Indian classical music, and his appropriation of the tradition to shape his own creative products which were contemporary in his time.

Let us consider, now in the second category, Tagore's 'Bahe Nirontoro' which was derived from Tulsidas's pada in the raga, Nishasaag, 'Dusaha Dosh Dukh.' This same pada was once again the source of Kazi Nazrul Islam's 'Jaya Narayan.' There could not be a more relevant example than this where the tradition remains contemporary irrespective of the huge time gaps between the creation of the source pada, and its two derivatives coming to shape again in a span of as long as fifty years.

Finally, for the third category, I will focus singly on the raga, Chhayana, and on one song by him – 'Bhaktahridibikash Paranabimohana,' and one by his immediate predecessor, his teacher, Jadubhatta – 'Bipod Bhoy Baron.'

'Bhaktahridibikash' was derived once again from 'Shambhuhara Mahesh Adi Trilochana,' a pada by Jadubhatta. However, Jadubhatta's 'Bipod Bhoy Baron' suggests that there was much more than a transactional relation between Jadubhatta and Rabindranath, and that there was quite an interaction of the two times that they individually belonged to. The descension from the tonic of the higher octave to the fifth of the lower octave, the added focus on the natural second, third, fourth and fifth in the middle octave forming a sub-phrase, and a leap from the fifth of the lower octave to the natural second of the middle octave are the commonest features in both the songs among the many others that demand an investigation.

This is the very point I would like to refer again to Eliot and show how as per his own comment, the tradition makes the existence of the contemporary possible, and discuss the credibility of Jadubhatta's preceding composition to make Tagore's song justifiable. In his 'What is a Classic?' Eliot talked at length about the maturity of the poet's mind facilitating the composition of a classic; the poet's maturity being possible with the maturity of the civilization, language, and literature around; the maturity of mind having the consciousness of the history as a major prerequisite, and said:

...it is worth repeating that Virgil's style would not have been possible without a literature behind him, and without his having a very intimate knowledge of this literature.... (64)

It is thus easily concludable that Tagore's composition was a product of the reality his predecessors formed, and his composition bore a clear hint towards his knowledge of the tradition, the past. Tagore internalized the tradition, made it a part of his compositions, and emerged as a contemporary composer often bringing the tradition back as the new contemporary. In the new contemporary, contemporaneity is largely redefined, as neither the tradition nor the contemporary remains as independent pieces of time, but intermingle, coexist complementarily, and help each other exist, the tradition leaving active traces in the contemporary.

### **Conclusion:**

An internalization of the tradition which makes the contemporary possible has already been pointed out. This is the same internalization that has been happening in every poet or artiste at different times in history. Besides making an artiste familiar with a preceding one, this forms the existence of the contemporary artiste as a continuation of someone from the past. This means, in the twenty-first century, an Indian classical musician is as much Ravi Shankar, or a songwriter-composer in the twenty-first century is as much Rabindranath Tagore as he is himself. He represents through his art the tradition set by the masters before, and establishes himself as a contemporary bringing their art back in his. Such cultural exchanges that redefine the tradition as the new contemporary keep going cyclically, and are needed to remain as much perpetuated, since its usefulness is in two ways, one leading to the other: that art ceases to be contemporary unless it carries traces of the tradition as argued and adequately substantiated in

the paper; and that the tradition fades away from our memory if the contemporary is not functional, because it is solely the contemporary which reconnects us with the tradition.

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## About the Author

Subhadrakalyan Rana completed his postgraduate studies at the Department of Comparative Indian Language and Literature, University of Calcutta, and is now pursuing his second postgraduate course in English literature from St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata. A practitioner of Indian classical music, Subhadrakalyan Rana combines music and literature which makes his area of study rather interdisciplinary. He has presented his papers on both music and literature in a few national and international seminars in and around Kolkata. He has recently published his paper, 'The Narrative of a Bandish: Towards Understanding the Representation of Women in the Songs of Khayal', as a chapter in the book, 'Gender and Media.' He has also been working on Rabindrasangeet and writing scholarly articles on the reception of Indian classical music in Rabindrasangeet in various e-journals. Subhadrakalyan Rana writes creative articles too, and has contributed as a junior journalist to The Statesman, Voices; TTIS – The Telegraph in Schools; and Young Metro, The Telegraph. His first poetry anthology, 'Embers and Ashes', came out earlier this year, and was endorsed by notable poets, Pritish Nandy and K Satchidanandan. Among his few notable performances is his recent Tabla-Tarang solo at the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre, Mumbai.