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Influence of Folk Music in Rabindra Saṅgīt –
With special reference to Bāul style

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's Rabindra Saṅgīt comprises over 2,200 songs that blend poetic depth with melodies drawn from Indian classical, Western harmonic practices, and Bengali folk traditions, including Bāul (187 songs), Kīrtan, Ṭappa, Rāmprasādi, and Sārigān. This study examines selected Bāul-influenced compositions to explore Tagore's integration of folk melodic idioms with classical rāga principles and poetic expression.

Keywords: Rabindra Saṅgīt, Tagore, Bāul, Folk music, Rāga, Tāla, Bhāva.

1.0 Introduction

Rabindra Saṅgīt is considered a unique and intellectually rich musical tradition within Indian cultural heritage. Tagore's compositions blend lyrical sophistication with diverse musical influences. Apart from classical Hindustāni and Western idioms, Bengali folk music, especially the Bāul tradition played a central creative role. While Tagore was inspired with other folk styles like Kīrtan, Ṭappa, Rāmprasādi and Sārigān, the Bāul tradition contributed the greatest number of melody-types, emotional frameworks, and philosophical perspectives to Rabindra Saṅgīt. This paper presents a structured overview of Bāul influence, melodic and textual analysis, and interpretive observations.

2.0 Scope of the Study

This paper focuses exclusively on Bāul influence on Rabindra Saṅgīt, including:

- ✓ A rāga-table incorporated to show how folk freedom co-exists with Tagore's classical rāga vocabulary.

- ✓ Melodic Analysis of select compositions in Bāul style (rāga choices, folk modal patterns, and ornamentation).
- ✓ Short analysis of two select compositions in Bāul style (textual and melodic).

3.0 Themes of Rabindra Saṅgīt

The themes of songs under these divisions are broad and various that they convey all aspects and types of human emotions, because of which an ordinary layman or a well-educated affluent person could both equally enjoy this music. This genre is not limited to a particular section of the society; rather, it symbolizes each section of our society. The compilation or anthology of songs written and composed by Rabindranath Tagore is named as the Gītabitān, meaning "Garden of songs" and is divided into six main portions or Parjāy-s and they are as follows:

- ✓ Pūja (offerings)
- ✓ Svadeś (Patriotic)
- ✓ Prēm (Love)
- ✓ Prakṛti (Nature)
- ✓ Bicitra (Amazing) and
- ✓ Anuśṭhānik (Ceremonial)

Like any other classical music, this genre is subject to certain regulations too. It is distinct from other songs by these principles and is sung according to certain rules set out by Rabindranath himself or the wizards of Rabindra Saṅgīt. The notation system is known as Ākārmātrik notation which is being discussed below mapping with Karnāṭaka music.

4.0 Bāul Tradition and Its Influence on Tagore

Bāuls, Bengal's wandering mystic minstrels, embody spiritual humanism through simple instruments (ektāra, dotāra, duggi, khanjani) and themes of inner divinity, ritual detachment, and social critique. Tagore, inspired by Lālon Fakir's followers in Birbhum and Śāntinikētan visitors, absorbed their philosophical proximity universal love, self-search, life's transience without direct imitation, shaping Rabindra Saṅgīt's core.

His Svadeś era engagement peaked with “Āmar keno bibhāi” (1911), rejecting classical-folk divides as cultural alienation. Rural stays in Śilāidaha and Padma journeys, echoing Kabīr-Nānak ideals, fueled this synthesis, elevating folk idioms into refined art that links collective experience with spiritual renewal.

5.0 Rāga Usage in Bāul songs of Rabindra Saṅgīt – A Contextual Table

Although Bāul songs rely basically on folk scales, Tagore’s broader repertoire engages classical rāgas. Tagore employed the suffix “Bāul” to denote not a distinct rāga category, but a stylistic adaptation of classical rāgas shaped by Bāul intonation and melodic contour. The prevalence of *miśra* rāgas further indicates Tagore’s deliberate deviation from strict rāga orthodoxy in favour of an affect-driven melodic design aligned with Bāul expressivity. Through this rāga treatment, Tagore created a hybrid musical language in which classical tonal grammar is internalized rather than explicitly foregrounded, allowing Bāul songs in Rabindra Saṅgīt to function as a refined synthesis of folk spontaneity and rāga-based discipline.

This contextual framework highlights Tagore’s broader melodic palette, which he modified to incorporate folk characteristics. The table is arranged in descending order of rāga usage, beginning with Bibhās, which accounts for the highest number of Bāul compositions, and progressively moving toward rāgas with fewer instances, culminating in Miśra Behāg and Tilak Kāmod, which are represented by only a single song each; this ordering clearly highlights Tagore’s preferential use of certain rāgas over others in the Bāul repertoire, based on the frequency of their occurrence. There are other songs that Tagore has just mentioned as Bāul Sur (tune) that are being taken from other folk song sources. However, this paper will discuss only two different songs which have Karnāṭaka equivalent rāgas to understand how Tagore has used the rāga.

Although Rabindranath Tagore composed approximately 187 Bāul-influenced songs, the present table does not include the complete corpus. Instead, it lists only those compositions associated with rāgas that possess identifiable Karnāṭaka equivalents, thereby facilitating a comparative analytical study between Hindustani and Karnāṭaka traditions.

S. No.	Rāga name	Karnāṭaka equivalent	No. of songs
1	Bibhās	15 th mēḷa janyam Bauḷi	18
2	Khambāj	28 th mēḷa Harikāmbōji	14
3	Bhairavi	8 th mēḷa Hanumatōḍi	13
4	Behāg	29 th mēḷa Śaṅkarābharaṇam janyam	8
5	Pīlu	22 nd mēḷa Kharaharapriya janyam	8
6	Iman	65 th mēḷa Mēcakalyāṇi	5
7	Dēś	28 th mēḷa Harikāmbōji janyam	3
8	Jhijhit	28 th mēḷa Harikāmbōji janyam Comparable to Senjuruṭṭi	2
9	Miśra Behāg	Behāg is generally treated as a bhāṣāṅga janya of Mēḷakarta 29 – Śaṅkarābharaṇam, as it employs an anya swara (kaisiki niṣāda) in addition to the scale derived from Śaṅkarābharaṇam. Hence, “Behāg with kōmal Ni” is still appropriately associated with Mēḷakarta 29. Behāg with kōmal Ni	1
10	Tilak Kāmōd	Close to Nalinakānti (janyam of 65 th mēḷa Mēcakalyāṇi)	1

Tagore's rāga choices in Bāul-influenced Rabindra Saṅgīt align melody with poetic bhāva, treating rāgas as expressive agents beyond tonal frames.

Bibhās (most used, 18 songs) dominates Pūja (devotion) and Prakṛti (nature) for its restrained introspection; it extends to Svadeś (patriotic) and Prēm (love) for moral clarity. Khambāj (14 songs) suits Pūja-Prēm via supple flow; Bhairavi (13 songs) spans Pūja, Prēm, Anuśṭhānik for folk-rooted compassion.

Behāg and Pīlu (8 each) balance Pūja-Prakṛti-Prēm flexibly; Iman (5) and Dēś (3) evoke transcendental Prakṛti moods. Bibhās and Iman are analysed here, Bibhās for devotional gravity, Iman (like Karnāṭaka Mēcakalyāṇi) for luminous contemplation using functional Ākarmātrik-to-Karnāṭaka notation mappings.

Melodic Analysis of Bāul-Influenced Composition 1 – Ōre Grihobāsī

Parjāy	<i>Prakṛti (197) Upa-parjāy: Basanta</i>
Rāga	<i>Bibhās-Bāul</i>
Tāḷa	<i>Kaharwa</i>
Year composed	1931
Svarabitān	5
Notation	Anādikumar Dastidār

Rāgalakṣaṇa of Bibhās (Bāul–Rabindra Saṅgīt Context)

Rāga Bibhās, that is subsequently adapted in Rabindra Saṅgīt’s Bāul compositions, is an auḍava-auḍava rāga characterized by a pentatonic scalar framework. The rāga uses the svaras Sa, kōmal Ri, śuddha Ga, Pa, and kōmal dha, while omitting Ma and Ni in both ascent and descent.

In Karnāṭaka terms, the kōmal Ri and kōmal Dha of Bibhās correspond functionally to śuddha Ri and śuddha Dha respectively, with all other employed svaras remaining śuddha. The scale may thus be represented as:

- Ārohaṇa: S R G P D Ś Avarōhaṇa: Ś D P G R S (Auḍava-Auḍava).
- Svarasthāna-s: Sa, Kōmal Ri, Śuddha Ri of Karnāṭaka music), Śuddha Ga, Śuddha Pa, Kōmal Dha (Śuddha Ri in Karnāṭaka music), Śuddha Ni.
- Bhāva: Devotional (Bhakti Rasa), with a heavy feel, suitable for morning hours.

In Bāul musical practice, Bibhās exhibits minimal gamaka usage, steady intonation, limited oscillation, and phrase repetition, thereby emphasizing textual clarity and devotional effect over melodic elaboration. The rāga’s lakṣaṇa is thus defined less by classical rāgavistāra and more by a stable melodic framework and controlled emotional expression.

Although Bibhās does not admit a direct Karnāṭaka equivalent, its scalar structure and devotional ethos may be vaguely aligned with the Karnāṭaka rāga Bauḷi, a janyam of the 15th mēḷa Mayāmāḷavagauḷa, for purposes of analytical clarity. This

comparison remains illustrative rather than definitive, as the melodic identity of Bibhās is primarily shaped by Bāul modal practice rather than by classical rāga orthodoxy. Consequently, Bibhās serves as the most used rāga through which Bāul folk aesthetics are absorbed and articulated within Rabindra Saṅgīt.

Ōre Grihobāsī (Bibhās-Bāul, Prakṛti: Basanta)

Ākarmātrik notation mapped functionally to Karnāṭaka style (auḍava Bibhās: S R₁ G₃ P D₁; Keherwa tāḷa ≈ 8-beat Āditāḷa, 4+4). Kōmal svaras approximate R₁/D₁; microtones/gamakas implied, not encoded—analytical aid only.

Ākarmātrik notation in Karnāṭaka style

s , r ,	g , r ,	s , r ,	d , , ,	
o ..	r ē	gri ho	bā	
p , , ,	s , d ,	d , p ,	p , dn ,	
śi	khōl	Dār	khō..	
d , p ,	p , d ,	n , n ,	dp , ,	
l.	lāg	lo . je	dō..	
, , , ,	ś , ś ,	n , n ,	d , d ,	
l....	sthōlē	Jōlē	bono	
p , p ,	pd , ,	d , d ,	p , , ,	
tolē	lāg	lo ..jē	dōl	
p , m ,	g , , ,	g , r ,	s , , ,	
dār	khōl	Dār	khōl	

Analysis: Invites indoor folk to join spring's (Basanta) communal joy, personifying renewal across nature. Simple contour, pulsative rhythm suit Bāul group singing; Ni incursions (p-dn) prioritize folk flow over strict auḍava scalar purity (vs. Karnāṭaka Bauḷi). Embodies Bāul egalitarianism—nature-mediated spirituality beyond caste/ritual.

Observations

1. An examination of “Ōre Grihobāsī”, identified in Rabindra Saṅgīt as set to Rāga Bibhās, reveals a melodic structure that departs from the normative grammar of the Hindustāni Bibhās of Bhairav thāt, conventionally aligned with the 15th mēḷa Māyāmāḷavagauḷa in Karnāṭaka theory.

2. The Karnāṭaka-style Ākārmātrik transcription highlights the recurrent use of Ni-centric phrases and transitional movements (notably p–dn and d–p–n), which contravene the auḍava–auḍava scalar prescription of classical Bibhās (S R G P D, with kōmal Ri and Dha and the complete exclusion of Ma and Ni). These deviations from established rāga-lakṣaṇa indicate a modal reinterpretation informed by Bāul melodic practice, wherein expressive continuity and textual articulation take precedence over scalar orthodoxy. Consequently, Bibhās in this composition functions as a Rabindrik, folk-conditioned modal framework rather than as a strict realization of Hindustāni rāga Bibhās.

Melodic Analysis of Bāul-Influenced Composition 2 – Nityo tomār jē phūl
Rāgalakṣaṇa of Yaman / Iman (Bāul–Rabindra Saṅgīt Context) and its Relationship to Mēcakalyāṇi

Parjāy	Pūja Upa-parjāy: Bīśva
Tāl	Ektāl
Rāga	Iman-Bāul
Written on	1913 (29 Ashwin 1320)
Place	Śāntiniketan
Collection	Gītimālya
Svarabīṭān	41
Notation by	Indira Dēbi Coudhurāni / Dīnēndranāth Tagore

Rāga Yaman, referred to as Iman in Rabindra Saṅgīt, is a sampūrṇa–sampūrṇa rāga characterized by a heptatonic scalar framework associated with the Kalyānthāṭ. The rāga uses the svaras Sa, śuddha Re, śuddha Ga, tīvra Ma, Pa, śuddha Dha, and śuddha Ni in both ascent and descent, with the scale generally represented as:

- Ārohaṇa: S R G M P D N ś; Avarōhaṇa: ś N D P M G R S (Sampūrṇa–Sampūrṇa), the raised madhyama (tīvra Ma) imparting its distinctive luminous and elevating colour.

- Svarasthāna-s: Sa, Śuddha Re, Śuddha Ga, Tivra Ma, Pa, Śuddha Dha, Śuddha Ni.
- Bhāva: Contemplative and devotional (Bhakti and Śṛṅgāra in a spiritualized mode), with a serene, expansive feel, suited to evening or night hours and to meditative, inwardly directed texts.

In Bāul-influenced Rabindra Saṅgīt practice, Iman generally features restrained gamaka usage, smooth meend-based glides, and lyrically aligned phraseology, emphasizing clarity of poetic articulation and a gentle, introspective radiance rather than virtuoso rāgavistāra. The rāga's lakṣaṇa in this context is defined more by its stable, arching melodic lines and controlled emotional uplift than by exhaustive classical elaboration, making it an apt vehicle for expressing inner aspiration, surrender, and spiritualized love. Within Rabindra Saṅgīt, Tagore internalizes this Yaman/Iman grammar while situating it within a carefully composed, structurally regulated framework that balances classical scalar discipline with the fluidity of Bāul-inspired melodic sensibility. Ākārmātrik notation mapped functionally to Karnāṭaka Mēcakalyāṇi (sampūrṇa: S R₂ G₃ M₂ P D₂ N₃; ektāl ≈ Tisra Ēka, 12-mātrā → 3-akṣara groups). Tivra Ma = M₂; glides/microtones implied—structural guide only, not literal.

, , ,	, , ,	s r g	, gg	
. . .	. . .	Nityo	.tomār	
d d n	dp ,mp	g r g	rs p p	
jephūl	fotē	phūlbo	nē..tāri	
pp ,	mp ,	Mpdn n	dmdp m	
modhu	keno	mōnmo	dhūpe	
g , gr gm	g , r	s r g	, g g	
khābāo	nā..	nityo	.tomār	
d d n	d p ,mp	g r g	rs , ,	
jēphūl	fotē	phūlbo	nē..	

Analysis: Maps Hindustāni Īman/Yaman to 65th mēḷa Mēcakalyāṇi for comparison, retaining Tagore's Kalyān-Bāul synthesis. Linear prayōga, restrained gamakas prioritize spiritual yearning (divine nectar) over elaboration; system-specific idioms preserved. Ākārmātrik notation in Karnāṭaka style

Textual Analysis – Transliteration and meaning

Bengali lyrics	English Translation
Nityo tomaar je phul phote phulbone	Flowers blossom in your garden regularly
Taari modhu keno monmodhupe khaawaonaa?	Why don't you feed the nectar that my mind is hungry of?

Observations

The composition "*Nityo tomār jē phūl phōṭē*" illustrates rāga Iman functioning as both a melodic and philosophical medium within Tagore's Bāul-influenced Rabindra Saṅgīt. Its heptatonic structure (SR2G3M2PD2N3S–SN3D2PM2G3R2S), corresponding functionally to the 65th mēḷakarta Mēcakalyāṇi, supports the text's contemplative expression of spiritual yearning. Tagore's treatment of Iman prioritizes restrained gamaka usage, linear prayōga, and lyrical intelligibility over classical rāga elaboration, reflecting core Bāul aesthetics. Consequently, Iman here operates as a context-specific modal adaptation rather than a strict realization of Yaman/Kalyān grammar, shaped by Bāul philosophical and expressive priorities.

6.0 Conclusion

This study confirms the strong influence of Bāul music on Rabindra Saṅgīt, evident in Tagore's integration of melodic structure and lyrical bhāva. His rāga choices reflect a conscious alignment of musical expression with poetic meaning, prioritizing emotional communication over strict classical conformity. The analysis of selected compositions reveals a flexible, folk-informed adaptation of rāga grammar, where Ākārmātrik notation can be mapped only functionally to Karnāṭaka systems. Rabindra Saṅgīt thus emerges as a distinctive synthesis of folk spontaneity and classical discipline, foregrounding bhāva as its central aesthetic principle.

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