



The Transformative Power of Music: Philosophical Perspectives of Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract: *Music has occupied a central place in human civilization as a medium of emotional expression, spiritual realization, cultural transmission, and aesthetic fulfillment. Among the modern Indian thinkers who profoundly reflected on the significance of music, Rabindranath Tagore stands as one of the most influential figures. His understanding of music transcended the conventional boundaries of artistic performance and entertainment. For Tagore, music was a transformative force capable of shaping human consciousness, cultivating moral sensibility, promoting spiritual growth, and fostering universal harmony. Rooted in the traditions of Indian philosophy while simultaneously embracing global humanistic ideals, Tagore's musical philosophy presents a holistic vision of human life and development. Through his songs, essays, educational practices, and philosophical reflections, he demonstrated how music could transform individuals and societies by awakening inner freedom, emotional refinement, creativity, and social unity. This article examines the transformative power of music in Tagore's philosophical thought, analyzing its spiritual, aesthetic, educational, cultural, and social dimensions. The study further explores the contemporary relevance of his musical philosophy in addressing the challenges of modern society, including alienation, cultural fragmentation, and the crisis of values.*

Keywords: *Rabindranath Tagore, Music, Philosophy, Transformation, Spirituality, Rabindra Sangeet, Education, Aesthetics, Humanism, Culture.*

Introduction: Music has always been more than a form of artistic expression. Throughout history, civilizations have recognized its power to influence human emotions, shape social relationships, preserve cultural traditions, and facilitate spiritual experiences. From the sacred chants of ancient civilizations to contemporary musical forms, music has remained one of humanity's most universal and transformative cultural practices. In India, music has traditionally been viewed as a sacred discipline intimately connected with spirituality, self-realization, and the pursuit of higher truth. Within this rich tradition, Rabindranath Tagore emerged as a visionary thinker who offered a unique philosophical interpretation of the transformative power of music.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), the first Asian Nobel Laureate, was a poet, philosopher, educator, composer, playwright, artist, and social reformer. His contributions to literature and education are widely acknowledged, but his role as a musical philosopher deserves equal attention. Tagore composed more than two thousand songs, collectively known as Rabindra Sangeet, which continue to occupy a significant place in Indian cultural life. His songs reflect a profound understanding of human emotions, spirituality, nature, and universal human values.

Unlike many musicians who regarded music primarily as an aesthetic activity, Tagore viewed it as a comprehensive mode of human development. He believed that music possesses the power to transform the individual from within, awakening latent capacities of imagination, sensitivity, empathy, and spiritual awareness. At the same time, music can foster social harmony by transcending barriers of class, caste, religion, language, and nationality.

Tagore's musical philosophy emerged from his conviction that human beings are fundamentally creative and spiritual beings. Music enables individuals to experience a deeper connection with themselves, with others, with nature, and with the divine. Through musical experience, one discovers the unity underlying the apparent diversity of existence. This realization constitutes the essence of transformation in Tagore's thought.

Objectives: The present article seeks to explore the transformative power of music from Tagore's philosophical perspective. It examines how music functions as a medium of spiritual awakening, emotional refinement, aesthetic appreciation, educational development, cultural integration, and social transformation.

Philosophical Foundations of Tagore's Musical Thought: The philosophical foundations of Rabindranath Tagore's understanding of music emerged from a rich synthesis of Indian spiritual traditions, cultural experiences, and global intellectual influences. Among these influences, the Upanishadic tradition occupies a central place in shaping his musical worldview. The Upanishads emphasize the essential unity of existence, the interconnectedness of all living beings, and the presence of the divine spirit within every individual (Radhakrishnan, 1953). Tagore deeply internalized these principles and incorporated them into his philosophical, literary, and musical expressions. He perceived the universe as a manifestation of a supreme spiritual reality rather than a collection of isolated material objects. This vision profoundly influenced his conception of music as a medium through which individuals could experience harmony with the cosmos (Tagore, 1917).

For Tagore, human life is meaningful only when it becomes attuned to the universal rhythm that governs existence. He believed that every aspect of nature—from the movement of rivers and the changing seasons to the songs of birds—participates in a cosmic symphony. Music, therefore, becomes a means of recognizing and participating in this universal harmony (Tagore, 1931). Through musical experience, individuals transcend the limitations of the ego and become conscious of their intimate connection with the larger universe. This realization of unity constitutes one of the highest forms of spiritual fulfillment (Dasgupta, 1962).

Another significant influence on Tagore's musical philosophy was the Bhakti tradition of India. The Bhakti movement emphasized devotion, love, and emotional communion with the divine through poetry and music (De, 1961). The devotional songs of medieval saints such as Kabir, Chaitanya, Mirabai, and Tulsidas demonstrated the transformative power of music in cultivating spiritual awareness. Tagore admired this tradition and incorporated many of its emotional and spiritual elements into his own musical compositions. However, unlike conventional devotional approaches that often centered on specific religious identities, Tagore broadened the scope of spirituality by grounding it in universal human values (Kripalani, 1980).

Tagore's understanding of spirituality extended beyond institutional religion and ritual practices. He believed that spirituality manifests itself through love, creativity, compassion, and harmonious relationships among individuals and communities (Tagore, 1922). Music became a powerful vehicle for expressing these ideals because it possesses the unique ability to communicate emotions and experiences that transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. Through music, individuals can experience a sense of unity that surpasses differences of nationality, religion, race, or social status (Mukherjee, 2014).

Furthermore, Tagore's exposure to Western literature, philosophy, and music enriched and broadened his artistic outlook. During his travels across Europe, America, and Asia, he encountered diverse cultural

traditions that reinforced his belief in the universality of artistic expression (Dutta & Robinson, 1995). While remaining deeply rooted in Indian culture, he embraced elements of Western musical forms and philosophical ideas. This synthesis of Eastern spirituality and Western humanism became a defining feature of his musical philosophy. Consequently, Tagore envisioned music as a bridge connecting diverse cultures and promoting mutual understanding among humanity (Sen, 1997).

Thus, Tagore's musical thought emerged from a harmonious integration of Upanishadic philosophy, Bhakti spirituality, Bengali cultural traditions, and universal humanism. His philosophy presents music not merely as an artistic activity but as a transformative force capable of fostering self-realization, spiritual awakening, and global harmony.

Music as a Path to Spiritual Awakening: One of the most profound dimensions of Tagore's musical philosophy is its emphasis on spiritual awakening. Tagore regarded music as a powerful means of elevating human consciousness beyond ordinary experience and facilitating contact with the infinite (Tagore, 1917). For him, music was not simply an aesthetic pleasure but a pathway toward deeper self-understanding and spiritual realization.

According to Tagore, spirituality does not require withdrawal from the world or renunciation of worldly responsibilities. Rather, it involves recognizing the divine presence within everyday life and experiencing unity with all existence (Tagore, 1922). Music facilitates this realization by creating moments of transcendence during which individuals become aware of beauty, harmony, and interconnectedness. Through music, one can experience a reality that transcends material concerns and intellectual limitations (Radhakrishnan, 1953).

Tagore frequently described music as the "language of the soul." Unlike ordinary language, which relies on concepts and definitions, music communicates directly with the deeper layers of human consciousness (Kripalani, 1980). Melody, rhythm, and tonal expression possess the capacity to evoke profound spiritual experiences that often defy verbal explanation. Through music, individuals encounter truths that cannot be fully captured through rational discourse alone (Mukherjee, 2014).

This spiritual orientation is particularly evident in Rabindra Sangeet. Many of Tagore's songs express a longing for communion with the divine and a desire to transcend the limitations of the individual self. However, this longing is not characterized by escapism or rejection of the material world. Instead, it reflects an affirmation of life and an appreciation of the sacredness inherent in everyday experiences (Tagore, 1931). The divine, according to Tagore, is encountered in nature, human relationships, labor, creativity, and acts of love. Music becomes a means of discovering this sacred presence within ordinary existence.

The transformative power of music lies in its ability to dissolve ego-centered consciousness and foster a sense of unity with the larger universe (Dasgupta, 1962). During moments of deep musical engagement, individuals often experience a transcendence of personal concerns and become aware of their participation in a greater reality. Such experiences cultivate humility, compassion, gratitude, and spiritual insight. Music thus becomes a means of self-transformation and moral growth.

For Tagore, therefore, music is not merely an accompaniment to spiritual life; it is itself a spiritual discipline. Through regular engagement with music, individuals develop inner harmony, emotional balance, and a deeper understanding of life's ultimate meaning (Sen, 1997). Music serves as a bridge between the finite and the infinite, enabling human beings to experience the profound unity that underlies all existence.

Music and Emotional Transformation: Tagore attached immense importance to the emotional dimension of human life and regarded emotional refinement as an essential aspect of personal development. He believed that emotions are not obstacles to human growth but powerful forces that, when properly cultivated,

contribute to self-realization and social harmony (Tagore, 1922). Music plays a central role in this process because of its unique capacity to express, shape, and refine human emotions.

Tagore was critical of educational and social systems that emphasized intellectual achievement while neglecting emotional development. He argued that modern civilization often prioritizes material success and technical efficiency at the expense of emotional sensitivity and aesthetic awareness (Tagore, 1917). Such imbalance, he believed, contributes to alienation, conflict, and moral decline. Music offers an effective means of restoring this balance by nurturing the emotional capacities that are fundamental to human well-being (Kripalani, 1980).

Music contributes to emotional transformation by providing a medium through which individuals can express and understand their feelings. Human emotions are often complex, subtle, and difficult to articulate through ordinary language. Music gives form and expression to these emotions, allowing individuals to confront, explore, and integrate their inner experiences (Mukherjee, 2014). Through musical engagement, people gain greater awareness of their emotional states and develop the capacity for self-reflection.

The songs of Tagore encompass a wide spectrum of human emotions, including joy, sorrow, hope, despair, love, devotion, longing, gratitude, and wonder. By engaging with these songs, listeners are invited to experience and reflect upon the richness of human emotional life (Dutta & Robinson, 1995). This process fosters emotional maturity by encouraging individuals to embrace their feelings with sensitivity and understanding rather than suppressing or ignoring them.

Furthermore, Tagore believed that music cultivates empathy and compassion by enabling individuals to share emotional experiences with others. Musical participation creates a common emotional space in which differences of social status, religion, language, and culture become less significant (Sen, 1997). Through collective singing and listening, individuals develop a deeper appreciation for the experiences and emotions of others. Such shared emotional experiences strengthen interpersonal relationships and promote social cohesion.

The transformative impact of music extends beyond individual psychology to the broader social sphere. By fostering empathy, understanding, and emotional sensitivity, music contributes to the development of more harmonious communities and societies (Dasgupta, 1962). In a world often characterized by conflict, division, and misunderstanding, Tagore's vision of music as a means of emotional transformation remains profoundly relevant.

Thus, for Tagore, music is not merely an artistic expression of emotion but a powerful instrument for emotional education and human development. Through music, individuals cultivate self-awareness, empathy, and emotional maturity, thereby contributing to both personal fulfillment and collective well-being.

Music and the Experience of Beauty: The concept of beauty occupies a central and indispensable position in Rabindranath Tagore's philosophical worldview. He regarded beauty not merely as an aesthetic category but as a manifestation of truth, harmony, and the deeper spiritual reality underlying human existence (Tagore, 1917). For Tagore, beauty possesses the power to reveal dimensions of reality that often remain hidden from ordinary perception. It serves as a bridge between the material and the spiritual, enabling individuals to experience a profound sense of unity with the world around them (Radhakrishnan, 1953). Within this framework, music emerges as one of the most refined and powerful expressions of beauty, capable of transforming human consciousness and enriching life with meaning and purpose.

Tagore believed that aesthetic experience plays a crucial role in human development because it expands perception, imagination, and emotional sensitivity (Tagore, 1922). In modern societies increasingly dominated by utilitarian values, material pursuits, and technological concerns, individuals often lose touch with the deeper dimensions of life. Beauty, according to Tagore, serves as a reminder of those values that

transcend material utility and connect human beings to truth, goodness, and spiritual fulfillment (Kripalani, 1980). Through aesthetic experiences, individuals become aware of the richness and complexity of existence, thereby cultivating a more holistic understanding of life.

Music occupies a privileged place within this aesthetic framework because of its unique ability to awaken a sense of wonder and appreciation for the world (Mukherjee, 2014). Through melody, rhythm, and harmony, music creates emotional and imaginative experiences that deepen one's awareness of the beauty inherent in nature and human life. Tagore frequently drew inspiration from natural phenomena such as the changing seasons, flowing rivers, blooming flowers, and birdsong, integrating these elements into his musical compositions (Dutta & Robinson, 1995). Through such compositions, listeners become more receptive to the subtle rhythms and harmonies that characterize existence itself.

This heightened sensitivity contributes significantly to personal transformation. Music encourages individuals to move beyond routine habits of perception and engage more deeply with the world around them. By cultivating creativity, openness, and emotional responsiveness, music expands the horizons of human experience and enables individuals to appreciate life in more meaningful ways (Sen, 1997). For Tagore, aesthetic experience was not a luxury but a necessity for the development of a balanced and fulfilled personality.

A distinctive feature of Tagore's philosophy of beauty is his rejection of the notion that beauty is an external object to be possessed or consumed. Instead, he understood beauty as a relationship or experience that arises through meaningful engagement with the world (Tagore, 1931). Beauty is realized when individuals enter into harmonious relationships with themselves, with others, and with nature. Music facilitates such harmony by creating moments of emotional and spiritual resonance that transcend the boundaries of individual existence.

The transformative power of beauty, therefore, lies in its capacity to inspire individuals to transcend narrow self-interest and participate in a larger vision of life (Dasgupta, 1962). Through musical experience, people encounter a reality characterized by unity, balance, creativity, and meaning. Such experiences nurture values such as compassion, humility, gratitude, and reverence for life. Consequently, music becomes an important means of fostering not only aesthetic appreciation but also moral and spiritual growth. In Tagore's philosophy, beauty and transformation are inseparable, and music serves as one of the most effective pathways through which this transformation can occur.

Music and Education: Tagore's educational philosophy represents one of the most practical and influential applications of his musical thought. He regarded education as a process of nurturing the complete human personality rather than merely transmitting information or developing vocational skills (Tagore, 1917). At Santiniketan, the educational institution he established in 1901, music occupied a central place in the curriculum and daily life of students. This emphasis reflected his conviction that music is indispensable for the cultivation of intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual capacities (Mukherjee, 2014).

According to Tagore, the primary objective of education is the harmonious development of all aspects of human personality. He criticized conventional educational systems for focusing excessively on intellectual achievement while neglecting imagination, creativity, emotional intelligence, and moral sensitivity (Tagore, 1922). Such an approach, he argued, produces individuals who may possess technical knowledge but lack emotional depth, cultural awareness, and spiritual insight. Music offers a corrective to this imbalance by engaging the whole person rather than merely the intellect.

Music contributes to educational development in multiple ways. It stimulates intellectual growth through the cultivation of concentration, memory, and analytical understanding while simultaneously nurturing emotional and aesthetic sensibilities (Kripalani, 1980). Through participation in musical activities, students

develop discipline, patience, cooperation, and self-expression. Music also enhances creativity by encouraging imagination and innovation, qualities that Tagore regarded as essential for meaningful learning and personal growth (Dutta & Robinson, 1995).

At Santiniketan, music was not confined to specialized lessons or extracurricular activities. Instead, it was integrated into the daily experiences of students through songs, festivals, dramatic performances, and cultural celebrations (Mukherjee, 2014). Morning prayers, seasonal festivals, and communal gatherings often included musical performances that connected education with nature, culture, and community life. This integration reflected Tagore's belief that learning should be joyful, experiential, and closely connected to the rhythms of life.

Music also played a significant role in promoting cultural appreciation and intercultural understanding. Tagore believed that education should cultivate respect for cultural diversity while fostering a sense of global citizenship (Tagore, 1931). By exposing students to a variety of musical traditions from India and other parts of the world, he encouraged openness, curiosity, and mutual respect. Music thus became a medium through which students could appreciate both their own cultural heritage and the richness of other cultures.

Furthermore, Tagore regarded music as a means of cultivating moral and spiritual values. Musical experiences encourage empathy, cooperation, and sensitivity toward others, thereby contributing to ethical development (Dasgupta, 1962). Through music, students learn to appreciate beauty, value harmony, and recognize their interconnectedness with humanity and nature. In this way, music serves as an integral component of holistic education.

Tagore's educational philosophy remains highly relevant in contemporary contexts where educational systems often prioritize examination performance and technical competencies at the expense of creativity and emotional well-being. His emphasis on music as a means of nurturing the whole person offers valuable insights for developing more balanced and humane approaches to education.

Music and Social Transformation: Tagore believed that music possesses immense social significance and transformative potential. Beyond its role in personal development, music serves as a powerful instrument for fostering social cohesion, cultural renewal, and collective identity (Tagore, 1922). He regarded music as a universal language capable of transcending barriers of caste, class, religion, language, and nationality. Through shared musical experiences, individuals develop a sense of common humanity that promotes understanding and solidarity.

The social relevance of Tagore's musical philosophy became particularly evident during the colonial period in India. Colonial rule had generated widespread social fragmentation, political tensions, and cultural insecurity. In this context, Tagore utilized music as a means of cultural revitalization and national awakening (Dutta & Robinson, 1995). His songs inspired feelings of dignity, self-respect, and collective consciousness among the people of India. However, unlike many nationalist movements that emphasized exclusivity or hostility toward others, Tagore's vision of nationalism remained inclusive, humanistic, and universal in character (Sen, 1997).

Music contributes to social transformation by fostering empathy and mutual understanding among diverse groups of people. Collective singing and participation in cultural activities create opportunities for interaction and cooperation that transcend social divisions (Mukherjee, 2014). Through shared musical experiences, individuals recognize common emotional experiences and aspirations, thereby reducing prejudice and promoting social harmony.

Tagore also emphasized the role of music in preserving cultural heritage while encouraging creative innovation. He believed that societies must maintain continuity with their traditions without becoming imprisoned by them (Tagore, 1931). Music provides a medium through which cultural values, memories, and

identities can be transmitted across generations while simultaneously adapting to changing circumstances. His own musical compositions exemplify this balance by combining classical Indian, folk, and Western influences into a distinctive artistic form.

Furthermore, music serves as a vehicle for social critique and moral reflection. Many of Tagore's songs address themes such as freedom, justice, human dignity, and social responsibility. Through artistic expression, music can challenge oppressive structures, inspire social awareness, and encourage collective action toward positive change (Dasgupta, 1962).

In contemporary societies characterized by increasing polarization, cultural fragmentation, and social conflict, Tagore's vision of music as a force for social unity remains profoundly relevant. His belief that music can foster dialogue, empathy, and cooperation offers valuable guidance for addressing many of the challenges facing modern communities.

Contemporary Relevance of Tagore's Musical Philosophy: The contemporary world is marked by rapid technological advancement, globalization, environmental crises, mental health challenges, and increasing social fragmentation. In this context, the musical philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore offers important insights into the cultivation of human well-being and social harmony (Sen, 1997). Although formulated more than a century ago, many of his ideas remain remarkably relevant to contemporary concerns.

One of the most significant contributions of Tagore's philosophy is its emphasis on holistic human development. Modern societies often prioritize economic productivity, technological efficiency, and material success while neglecting emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions of life (Tagore, 1922). Tagore's musical philosophy challenges this narrow perspective by emphasizing the importance of creativity, emotional well-being, and inner harmony. Music serves as a means of restoring balance and fostering a more integrated form of human development.

Contemporary research in psychology, neuroscience, and music therapy has increasingly validated Tagore's intuition regarding the transformative potential of music. Studies have demonstrated that musical engagement can reduce stress, improve emotional regulation, enhance cognitive functioning, and promote psychological well-being (Levitin, 2006). Music therapy is now widely recognized as an effective intervention for addressing various mental health and developmental challenges. These findings reinforce Tagore's belief that music possesses profound healing and transformative capacities.

Tagore's commitment to the universality of music also holds considerable significance in an era of globalization. As societies become increasingly interconnected, there is a growing need for intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding. Music provides a common language through which people from diverse cultural backgrounds can communicate and collaborate (Nussbaum, 2010). Tagore's vision of music as a bridge between cultures offers a valuable framework for promoting global citizenship and cultural harmony.

Additionally, Tagore's integration of music with nature provides an important perspective for addressing contemporary environmental concerns. His songs frequently celebrate the beauty, rhythm, and interconnectedness of the natural world (Tagore, 1931). By cultivating sensitivity toward nature through music, individuals may develop a stronger sense of environmental responsibility and ecological awareness. In an age of ecological crisis, such perspectives are increasingly important.

Finally, Tagore's musical philosophy offers a response to the growing sense of alienation and fragmentation experienced in modern societies. Through its capacity to foster emotional connection, aesthetic appreciation, and spiritual awareness, music can help individuals rediscover meaning, purpose, and community (Mukherjee, 2014). It encourages a vision of life grounded in harmony, compassion, and creativity rather than competition and isolation.

Thus, Tagore's musical philosophy continues to provide valuable guidance for individuals, educators, policymakers, and cultural practitioners seeking to promote human flourishing in the twenty-first century. Its enduring relevance lies in its recognition that music is not merely an art form but a transformative force capable of enriching individual lives and contributing to the creation of a more humane and harmonious world.

Conclusion: Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of music represents one of the most comprehensive explorations of music's transformative power in modern thought. For Tagore, music is far more than an artistic activity; it is a means of spiritual awakening, emotional refinement, aesthetic appreciation, educational development, cultural integration, and social transformation.

Rooted in Indian spiritual traditions and enriched by universal humanistic ideals, his musical philosophy emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life and the capacity of music to reveal this unity. Through music, individuals transcend the limitations of the ego, cultivate empathy and sensitivity, experience beauty and harmony, and participate more fully in the creative rhythms of existence.

Tagore's vision remains profoundly relevant in the contemporary world. As societies confront challenges of fragmentation, alienation, and value crises, his understanding of music as a transformative force offers a compelling framework for personal growth and collective well-being. The enduring popularity of Rabindra Sangeet and the continued influence of his educational and cultural ideas testify to the lasting significance of his musical philosophy. Ultimately, Tagore reminds us that music possesses the power not only to delight the senses but also to transform the human spirit and contribute to the creation of a more harmonious and compassionate world.

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