

## Musical Panorama of Bengal

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### Abstract

*My aesthetic Bengal, with her realms of gold  
Land of golden harvest and rich musical philosophy she holds.  
Nature pervades the land with her vivacious hue.  
Dappling her surface with dulcet tunes and tender dew.*

Bengal from her dawn has embedded her invincible status in the court of world music, whose eminence can only be estimated with all pleasure and pride. Her quintessence lies in her being extremely blessed by nature's treasure and all significant aspects of rich musical and literary heritage. It is believed that her lyrical atmosphere has the potency to seize the heart of every music lover.

### Keywords

Bengal, genre, music, origin, instrument

### Introduction

Bengal is renowned for its opulent art and culture as well as the intellectual aura of its people. The richness of Bengali culture also reflects in the music of the state. Music, more than being an art, is a passion for Bengalis. More than a millennium old, Bengali music has become diverse with so many varieties within. The variety is such that once you get familiar with it, you will not need to look beyond it. From classical to rock, folk to devotional, you will get almost every possible music form in Bangla Sangeet. Then, there is the display of a wide range of emotions - be it love, sadness, anxiety, motivation, devotion or spirituality. Let us know more about the music of Bengal.

## **The Root of Bengal's Music**

The ancient music in Bengal was influenced by Sanskrit chants and obtained from Vaishnav poetry such as the 13 century "Gitagovindam" by Jayadeva. The middle ages saw a medley of Hindu and Islamic trends when the musical tradition was formalized under the patronage of Sultans and Nawabs. Much of the early musical precept in devotional, observed in Ramprasad Sen's bhakti songs who captured the Bengali ethos in his poetic, rustic and ecstatic vision of the Hindu Goddess of time, a motherly incarnation, "Ma Kali". Another writer of the time Vidyapati whose devotional poetry is an earthiness that doesn't discriminate between love in its carnal and devotional terms. This is the basic consecration of Bengal music.

## **Different Genres that Edify the Musical Culture of Bengal**

### **Bishnupur Gharana**

This is the sole classical Drupad Gharana of Bengal. It originated in Bishnupur, Bankura by the court musicians of Malla kings. Bahadur Khan of Delhi, a descendant of Tansen, was the father of Bishnupur Gharana, who was brought to Bishnupur by Malla king, Raghunath Singha II.

### **Baul**

Bauls are a group of mystic minstrels of mixed elements of Tantra, Sufism, Vaishnavism, and Buddhism from the Bengal region, who sang primarily in the 17th and 18th centuries. Baul song is greatly influenced by the Hindu tantric sect of Kartabhajas as well by Sufi philosophers. Bauls traveled and sang in search of an internal ideal, 'Moner Manush' (man of the heart). Great saint Lalon Fakir lived in the 19th century in and around Kushtia, is considered to be the greatest of all Bauls. His songs are addressed as Lalon Geeti.

## **Ramprasadi**

The Bengali devotional songs written and music composed by 18th century Bengali saint-poet Ramprasad Sen are called Ramprasadi. They are usually addressed to the Hindu goddess Kali.

## **Shyama Sangeet**

It is a form of Bengali devotional songs dedicated to Goddess Shyama or Kali, a supreme universal form of mother – goddess Durga or Parvati. It is also known as Shaktigity or Durgastuti. It explicates the relationship of eternal and sublime love between mother Kali and her adorable child. Pannalal Bhattacharya, an eminent name who propagated and popularized this genre amongst the common.

## **Kirtan**

It originated as a genre of Bangla devotional songs by Vaishnavas. Kirtan is an ancient form of song describing the qualities of deities and their deeds. Kirtan is of two kinds – 1. Namakirtan or namasangirtan. It refers to devotional songs in which Hari or Vishnu is repeated as; “Hare Krishna, Hare Rama”. 2. Lilakirtan or Rasakirtan refers to narrative songs based on stories of Radha and Krishna and the gopis or milkmaids. The stories of Sri Chaitanya, a Vaisnava ascetic were included in Lilakirtan which is also referred to as Padavali Kirtan. Some famous contributors of Kirtan – Gitagovindam of Jaydev (original source), Baru Chandidas with Sri Krishna Kirtan, Vidyapati (a poet of Mithila) with his Vaishnava songs in Brajabuli.

## **Folk Music**

This type of ancient music that springs from the heart of a community, based on their natural style of expressions. Any mode or form created by the combination of both folk tunes, song, and dance may be called folk music. It is mostly composed by rural folk based on ancient rules transmitted orally. It can be sung in groups or individually and can be composed and performed by illiterate or semi-literate people in easy language, the local dialect, and simple

tune. The theme of the songs depends on nature and rural environment and joys and sorrows of daily life. It contains strong emotive expressions of human love and separation. Bengal has a rich amalgamation of folk music, based on culture, festivals, views of rural life, natural beauty, and riverine life. The songs are also about inequality and poverty, the material world and the supernatural. Some of the exoteric genres of folk music are Patua Sangeet, Gombhira, Bhadu, Tusu, Jhumur, Bhawaiya, Bolan, and Bhatiali.

### **Jatra Pala**

Songs associated exclusively with plays performed on stage usually involves colorful presentation of historical themes.

### **Kavigan**

Poems sung with simple music usually presented and created live on stage as a musical battle between poets.

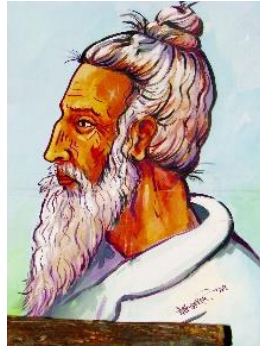
### **Agamani– Vijaya**

Agamanigan (Songs of advent) and Vijaya (Songs of parting) are genres of Bengali folk songs, sung for the Autumnal festival of Durga Puja. The Agamoni songs describe the return of Parvati to her home in rural Bengal, not as Goddess but as daughter, and are followed by Vijaya songs which describe the sorrow of separation three days later, as Parvati returns to her husband Shiva's abode in Mount Kailash.

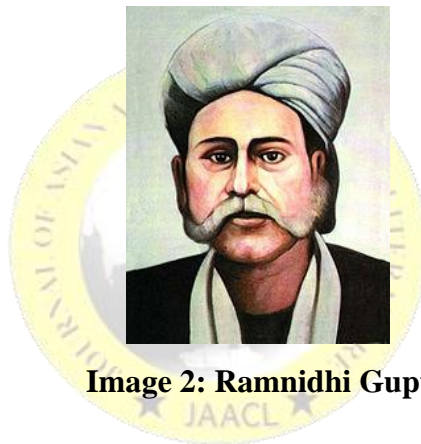
### **Tappa**

Tappa is originated from folk songs of camel riders in Punjab. Later the style was refined and introduced to the imperial court by Mian Ghulam Nabi Shori, a court singer of Asaf ud-Dowlah, Nawab of Awadh. This form is semi-classical vocal music. Its specialty is a rolling pace based on fast, subtle, and knotty construction and depicts the emotional outbursts of a lover. Tappe (plural) were sung mostly by songstresses known as baigees in royal courts. In Bengal Ramnidhi Gupta and Kalidas Chattopadhyay, composed Bengali tappa, and they are

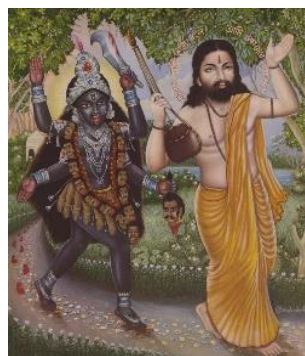
called Nidhu Babu's tappa. Tappa gayaki (presentation) took a new shape and over decades became puratani (old), a semi-classical form of Bengali songs.



**Image 1: Lalon Fakir**



**Image 2: Ramnidhi Gupta**



**Image 3: Ramprasad Sen**

## **Dwijendrageeti**

These are songs that belong to the composer Dwijendralal Ray, which number over 500 and create a separate sub-genre of Bengali music. His two most famous compositions are 'Dhana Dhanya Pushpa Bhara' and 'Banga Amar Janani Amar'. He is considered to be one of the most important figures in modern Bengali literature.

## **Autulprasadi**

Autul Prasad Sen, one of the major lyricist and composer of the early-modern period, is also widely popular in Bengal. Atul Prasad is credited with introducing the Thumri style in Bengali music. His songs are centered on three broad subjects: patriotism, devotion and love.

## **Nazrul Geeti**

Nazrul Geeti or Nazrul Sangeet, refers to the songs written and composed by Kazi Nazrul Islam. His compositions incorporate revolutionary notions and also spiritual, philosophical and romantic themes. He wrote and composed nearly 4000 songs (including gramophone records) which are widely popular in Bangladesh and India. Nazrul's mass music and poems during the Indian independence movement and Bangladesh Liberation War is highly motivational and revolutionary with strong powerful words provoking and captivating tunes. They talk against conservatism and about life and broader parameter of philosophy and spirituality. Among his revolutionary songs 'Karar Oi Louho Kopat' (Prison doors of steel) is best known. His acquaintance with Persian ghazals, a form of love songs, was very significant in the sense that it paved the way of his successful efforts in composing Bengali ghazals.

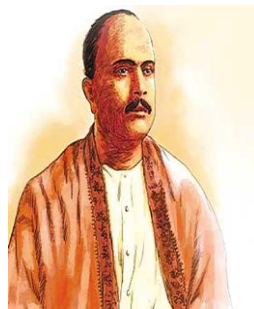
## **Rabindra Sangeet**

The leading proponent of Bengali music is Rabindranath Tagore, popularly known as Robithakur or Gurudev. Tagore was a prolific composer with around 2230 songs and they are termed as Rabindra Sangeet (Tagore's song) which merges fluidly into his literature,

most of which – poems or parts of novels, stories or plays alike – were lyricized. Influenced by Thumri style of Hindustani Music, they ran the entire gamut of human emotion, ranging from Brahma devotional hymns to quasi-erotic compositions. They emulated tonal color of classical ragas. The body of tunes revamped with fresh values from select Western, Hindustani, Bengali folk and other regional flavors. His music is an exemplary instance of Kavya-geeti i.e., poetic songs. His distinguished compositions ‘Amar Sonar Bangla’ making national anthem of Bangladesh. ‘Jana Gana Mana’ was written in ‘Sadhu bhasha’ a Sanskritised form of Bengali. It was first sung in 1911 at a Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress and was adopted in 1950 by the Constituent Assembly of the Republic of India as its National Anthem. Most of his musical poems are detailed in two series of books – ‘The Gitabitan’ (that only has the text of the poems) and ‘The Swarabitan’ (that has the poems and their musical notations). Thus, Tagore’s contribution to Bengal music is immeasurable leaving indelible marks in hearts of millions.



**Image 4: Dwijendralal Roy**



**Image 5: Atul Prasad Sen**



**Image 6: Kazi Nazrul Islam**



**Image 7: Rabindranath Tagore**

### **Adhunik Sangeet (Modern Bengali Music)**

Modern Bengali music is considered to be the new style of music that took the fruit in Bengali culture with many poets and music composers combining folk and raga-based melodies, mixing every common style of music from classical to semi-classical. The modern form of music also includes rock music. The Bengali bands use a wide variety of styles such as rock, pop, folk, and fusion.

### **Musical Instruments of Bengal**

Bengal has a rich musical heritage. With music comes a variety of musical instruments, both rural and urban communities who consider music as an integral part of their life. The vast tradition of folklore singers known as bauls and fakirs have the special instruments that they play. In the Darjeeling hills Bhutia singers use ornate trumpets with a flared megaphone made of metal. A trumpet known as Thanchen is used by monks for their ritual music and dance.



Drums known as Srikhols, Ghungroos, Nupur and metal cymbals of different sizes known as Mandira are played by Vaishnav bairagis (worshippers of Lord Krishna). The Rajbonsgshis play folk music on Do-tara. Some of the folk instruments are 1) Banam 2) Beena 3) Dhak 4) Dhol 5) Dotara 6) Ek-tara 7) Khamok 8) Madol 9) Mandira 10) Banshi 11) Khol 12) Dhamsa.



**Image 8: Ektara**



**Image 9: Khamak**



**Image 10: Khol**



**Image 11: Banam**



**Image 12: Manjira**



**Image 13: Madol**

## Conclusion

The sumptuous history of Bengal's music has paved a long way to enlighten the path of musical devotees. Bengali music comprises a long tradition of religious and secular songs written over a period of almost a millennium.

The high literary value of lyrics and melody of songs has made every lyrical journey a divine celebration.

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### About the Author

Ms. Indrani Chatterjee is from Kolkata (West Bengal). She is a self-motivated writer and prefers to pen verses and has co-authored three anthologies of poetry. She is also a vocalist of classical music and Rabindra Sangeet, currently pursuing the course of Senior Diploma. She has a profound inclination for art and is an emotive person.

