
The Living Roots of Art: Rabindranath Tagore's Vision of Folk Culture in West Medinipur

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's literary and philosophical engagements were deeply rooted in the folk culture of Bengal. While much scholarship has addressed his engagement with rural Bengal at large, this paper focuses on how Tagore perceived, interacted with, and responded to the folk traditions particularly resonant in the region of West Medinipur. Drawing from his essays, letters, songs, and educational experiments at Sriniketan, the paper argues that Tagore viewed the folk arts not only as aesthetic expressions but as vital tools of cultural rejuvenation, social harmony, and self-reliant education. The study also brings into focus the convergence of his ideals with the vibrant oral traditions, musical forms, and artisan crafts of West Medinipur, emphasizing how this dialogue shaped Tagore's idea of a holistic, rural-centric modernity.

Keywords: literary and philosophical engagements, aesthetic expressions, oral traditions, musical forms, and artisan crafts

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), the first non-European Nobel Laureate in Literature, was not only a poet, playwright, and philosopher but also a social reformer deeply invested in India's rural landscape. While his contributions to Bengali high literature are well-known, less discussed is the depth of his engagement with folk culture, particularly in districts such as West Medinipur, which historically boasted a rich confluence of Baul, Bhatiali, Jhumur, and Chhou traditions, as well as terracotta crafts and oral storytelling.

Tagore's vision of a regenerative nationalism was grounded not in urban elitism but in the organic creativity of the village. Through institutions like Sriniketan, he sought to integrate folk knowledge into mainstream education and art. West Medinipur, with its

indigenous communities and dynamic performative culture, offered a model of folk vitality that paralleled and reinforced his ideals.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore; Folk Culture; West Medinipur; Jhumur; Baul; Chhou Dance; Sriniketan; Rural Reconstruction; Indigenous Knowledge; Bengali Folklore; Rabindra Sangeet; Cultural Revival; Santiniketan; Folk Education; Bengal Renaissance

Tagore's Philosophy of Folk Culture

For Tagore, folk culture was not an object of mere antiquarian interest but a living epistemology—a way of knowing the world through song, rhythm, myth, and soil. He repeatedly criticized the British education system for being alienated from local realities. In his essay "Tapovan", Tagore champions the forest tradition of learning—an Indian alternative to western schooling—where nature and indigenous culture are central to pedagogy.

He believed that folk songs, stories, and rituals carry a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic wisdom essential for holistic development. His affection for the Baul singers, with their wandering mysticism and refusal to conform to institutional religion, found echoes in the marginalized but resilient cultural practices of West Medinipur's Santal and Kurmi communities.

West Medinipur: A Cultural Landscape

West Medinipur is historically rich in agrarian folk traditions. Among these:

- Jhumur songs, performed by agricultural laborers, narrate love, sorrow, and collective identity.
- Chhou dance, blending martial movements with masked storytelling, expresses epic and folk narratives.
- Kobir Lorai (bardic battles), once popular in village gatherings, are poetic debates steeped in wit and wisdom.
- Patachitra art and terracotta sculptures, especially in areas like Ghatal and Chandrakona, preserve mythological and rural themes with visual flair.

Tagore, though not a frequent traveler to West Medinipur, encountered similar traditions through his wider interaction with rural Bengal and indirectly through his students and

cultural workers at Visva-Bharati. His letters suggest that he admired these forms not only for their artistry but for their community-centric ethos, in contrast to the individualism of western art.

Sriniketan and the Folk Connection

The establishment of Sriniketan in 1922 as an extension of Santiniketan was a decisive turn in Tagore's vision. It was a rural reconstruction center meant to empower villagers through crafts, education, and cooperative farming. While not based in West Medinipur, Sriniketan became a hub where craftsmen, musicians, and educators from districts like Medinipur were invited to teach and learn.

Tagore actively supported the revival of indigenous crafts, believing that village artisans held the key to economic self-reliance. West Medinipur's weaving traditions and clay artistry were in line with the Sriniketan model of "Shilpa Bhavana" (House of Art), where craft was not secondary to art but central to the nation's cultural awakening.

Rabindra Sangeet and Folk Music

A large number of Tagore's songs bear the unmistakable influence of folk melodies. The simplicity and spiritual directness of Baul and Jhumur are evident in songs like: "Amar praner manush ache praney..." (inspired by Baul tune) "Gram chhara oi ranga matir poth..." (evokes village imagery and rhythm)

In his letters, Tagore mentions the "authentic joy and freedom" of village music, contrasting it with the stiffness of classical formats. Scholars have pointed out that Jhumur rhythms from Midnapore and Purulia were adapted into his compositions with refined lyricism, making his music a bridge between folk roots and poetic modernity.

Educational Ideals Rooted in Folk Knowledge

Tagore's Buniyadi Shiksha (basic education) included exposure to local history, storytelling, music, and crafts. This was in line with what West Medinipur's village schools organically practiced: children learning through festivals, folklore, and hands-on skill sharing. Tagore emphasized "joy in learning", often drawing on village games, riddles, and folk plays—many of which align with traditions in West Medinipur.

He believed education should be participatory and ecological, rooted in one's own linguistic and cultural world. His admiration for the Santhals, many of whom live in and around West Medinipur, was based on their sense of community, ecological harmony, and musical sensibility—all vital for a decolonized Indian pedagogy.

Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore's vision of folk culture was neither patronizing nor romanticized. He saw it as a reservoir of creativity, ethics, and beauty that had been sidelined by colonial modernity. His indirect yet deep connection to West Medinipur lies in his philosophical alignment with its traditions—its music, rituals, oral narratives, and artisan life.

Tagore's dream of a rural renaissance resonates strongly with the cultural topography of West Medinipur. In today's context of globalization and cultural homogenization, returning to Tagore's model could inspire new ways of integrating folk traditions into sustainable development, inclusive education, and cultural policymaking.

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