



Foundations Of Systematic Music Education At Santiniketan: Institutionalizing Tagore's Concept Of The Gurukula In Modern Times

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Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore's vision of education at Santiniketan was rooted in the harmonious blending of art, spirituality, and self-realization. Rejecting the rigid colonial model of examinations and rote learning, he sought to revive the *Gurukula* tradition in a modern institutional framework through Visva-Bharati, founded in 1919. Music, for Tagore, was not merely an aesthetic pursuit but an essential medium of holistic education—integral to human growth, moral refinement, and inner joy. This paper traces the systematic institutionalization of music education at Santiniketan, from its informal beginnings in the Ashram to the establishment of *Sangit Bhavana* in 1933. It explores how Tagore's philosophy transformed music from a supplementary art into a core pedagogical element, integrating classical Indian traditions with global perspectives. The study also highlights the contributions of pioneering educators such as Dinendranath Tagore, Bhimrao Shastri, and Hemendra Lal Roy, whose efforts shaped the academic and cultural foundation of Visva-Bharati's music education. By contextualizing Tagore's ideals within the broader postcolonial discourse on education, the paper underscores the enduring relevance of his holistic, art-centred learning model in contemporary pedagogical thought.

Keywords:

Rabindranath Tagore; Santiniketan; Visva-Bharati; Sangit Bhavana; Gurukula system; Indian classical music; holistic education; music pedagogy; art and education; postcolonial education philosophy.

Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of education was deeply connected with the ideals of self-exploration and self-realization. The post-colonial vision of education that he dreamed of was founded on the joyful unfolding of the learner's inner world. He wished that the chanting of hymns in the spirit of the ancient hermitages, oral learning, and self-reflection would all revolve around a simple, rhythmic way of life. For this reason, in the Ashram, music in its broadest sense became as essential to the students as the very act of breathing.

He integrated both formal music education and education through the companionship of music into the intellectual life of the Ashram. Since Santiniketan was a non-communal institution that rose above sectarian religious practices, Tagore wove music into its rituals without idols, its festivals, amusements, joys, and sorrows.

The exclusion of music from school and college education caused deep pain to Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. He was constantly distressed by this neglect, especially as the educated classes of the time showed little interest in honoring music or widening its reach. In Tagore's own words, it was a matter of deep regret that music was not considered a part of the education of the so-called learned classes. In the colleges, which he described as mere factories producing clerks, there was no place for art or music. As a result, music had remained confined to the uneducated, deprived of exposure to the wider world.

Rabindranath did not treat music as an optional subject but made it compulsory at Visva-Bharati. He had immense faith in the educative value of music. The learning process at Santiniketan Ashram itself was steeped in melody and rhythm, and later at Visva-Bharati too, he placed music and the arts above everything else.

On the 18th day of Ashadha, 1326 of the Bengali calendar (3rd July, 1919), under the guidance of Rabindranath Tagore, Visva-Bharati was formally inaugurated. As part of its founding, the VidyaBhavana was established with Bidhushekhara Shastri as its first principal. Tagore envisioned Visva-Bharati as a meeting ground of the East and the West, modeled on the ideals of the ancient Indian hermitages, and open to all regardless of caste or creed. It was to be a centre for the pursuit of modern knowledge and science, while rooted in India's spiritual and cultural traditions.

He imagined Visva-Bharati as a "centre for the cultivation of humanity by all nations," where the whole world would unite in the pursuit and exchange of knowledge—expressed in the Vedic motto '*Yatra Vishvam Bhavatyekanidam*' (Where the world makes its home in a single nest). This ideal became the very soul of Visva-Bharati. The Brahmacharya Vidyalaya was thus transformed into Visva-Bharati.

Rabindranath connected four categories of people with the institution:

1. **Acharyas** – Chosen from among the finest scholars of the world,
2. **Students**,
3. **Professors** – Who shouldered the responsibility of teaching and learning, and
4. **Friends** – Well-wishers of Visva-Bharati from across India and abroad.

Tagore's fundamental aim was to bring Santiniketan into harmony with the world. Through the exchange of global art and culture with that of Santiniketan, he wanted the students to be enriched, their vision broadened, and their spirits nourished by the company of the world's finest minds. He wanted them to find opportunities to apply what they learned in real life. With this purpose, he founded Visva-Bharati.

The overall supervision and administration of the institution were entrusted to Kshitimohan Sen, who was appointed as the first *Sarvadhyaksha* (general superintendent) of Visva-Bharati.

From the very beginning of the Santiniketan Brahmacharyashram, Rabindranath kept examinations away from its system of education. His purpose was that the Ashram should not become merely a centre of bookish learning, and that its students should not be reduced to instruments of an examination-driven mechanism.

In accordance with his wishes, education at Santiniketan Ashram was imparted through the close association with the teacher, following the *guru-shishya parampara*. Even at the time of the establishment of Visva-Bharati, one of its principal policies was - "The system of examinations will have no place whatever in the Visvabharati, nor is there any conferring of degrees."

At the very inception of Visva-Bharati, Rabindranath Tagore wrote that if the institution were to be established, the teaching of Indian music and painting should become its principal pillars. Accordingly, with the foundation of Visva-Bharati, the first formal teaching of music and the fine arts began at Santiniketan Ashram. At that time, however, Sangit Bhavana had not yet been established as a separate entity.

Before 1919, music at Santiniketan was never taught formally in the classroom. Instead, it was woven into the very life of the Ashram—present in its courtyards and open spaces, in the air and the skies, in its joys and sorrows, in its festivals and ceremonies. In 1919, music and art were formally introduced together in a house known as *Dwarik*, under the name *Kala Bhavana*. In English, it was referred to as the ‘*Department of Arts and Music*’. Classes of Kala Bhavana were held on the upper floor of the Dwarik house, while those of the music department were conducted on the ground floor. Initially, Dwarik was a single-storey building, but when it was later expanded into two floors, Kala Bhavana was set up on the upper level in 1919.

Although Kala Bhavana was formally established in 1919, its seeds had been sown much earlier, in 1911. That year, at Rabindranath’s invitation, artist Asit Kumar Haldar came to Santiniketan. Tagore asked him to create an art centre with the Ashram’s children, especially those who loved to draw. With them, Asit Kumar laid the foundation of a small art centre in Santiniketan, which in time grew into the great Kala Bhavana. Among its early members were Mukul Dey, Dhiren Deb Burman, Manibhushan Gupta, Annada Majumdar, and Santosh Mitra.

It was in this very Dwarik house, on the ground floor, that the *Department of Music* was formally inaugurated on July 3, 1919. The first principal of the music department was Shri Dinendranath Tagore.

From the summary of Acharya Rabindranath Tagore’s address on the opening day of Visva-Bharati, it is known that Bhimrao Shastri and Dinendranath Tagore took charge of teaching music, and they were joined by Nakuleshwar Goswami of Bishnupur, who taught with the surbahar. In the field of visual arts, the professors were Nandalal Bose and Surendranath Kar.

When formal music education began at Santiniketan, Rabindranath paid special attention to ensuring that students developed a strong and deep foundation in music. The training included traditional instruction in Indian classical music, acquaintance with various *ragas* and *raginis*, accurate knowledge of pitch, rhythmic training, and instrumental practice—all of which were integral parts of music education.

Rabindranath Tagore sincerely invited eminent scholars of classical music to teach at Visva-Bharati. The significance of this invitation lay in his belief that, to sing—especially to sing his own compositions—one must possess a fundamental understanding of Indian classical music.

In 1326 of the Bengali calendar (1919 AD), the total number of students at Visva-Bharati was about sixty-five, among whom only six were enrolled in the Department of Music.

During this period, Shri Bhimrao Shastri taught *ragas*, *raginis*, and Hindi songs accompanied by instruments. Shri Dinendranath Tagore devoted himself with great care to teaching both new and old Rabindra Sangeet, as well as instruments such as the esraj, thereby enriching the musical atmosphere of the Ashram.

At that time, there were also provisions for teaching students to read and sing from musical notation and to write notations themselves. For students who came specifically to study music, a course of about two years—or even less—was arranged to train them both in Rabindra Sangeet and in traditional Hindustani classical music.

In the first year of Visva-Bharati, despite the presence of distinguished teachers such as Dinendranath Tagore and Bhimrao Shastri, and despite the complete arrangements made for vocal and instrumental training, there were still very few students solely dedicated to the study of music. It was mainly the Ashram's own students who participated in music learning at that time.

For instruction in visual arts, the students were guided by Nandalal Bose and Surendranath Kar.

In the year 1327 of the Bengali calendar, Visva-Bharati comprised three main departments: (1) Literature, (2) Fine Arts, and (3) Music. A total of fourteen teachers served across these departments.

At that time, Asit Kumar Haldar was the professor in charge of the Fine Arts Department. The faculty of the Music Department included Shri Bhimrao Hasulkar Shastri, who taught *veena*, *mridangam*, and Hindi songs; Shri Dinendranath Tagore, who was responsible for teaching Bengali songs; and Shri Nakuleshwar Goswami, who taught both vocal music and *esraj*. In addition, Anadi Kumar Dastidar and Tejesh Chandra Sen also trained students in music with great dedication.

Records from this period show that the Fine Arts Department had twelve students, while the Music Department had twenty-two—twelve male and ten female students. Under the leadership and direction of Bhimrao Shastri, the Music Department progressed with great enthusiasm. That year, the students of Hindi music studied *ragas* such as *Bhairav*, *Bhairavi*, *Todi*, and *Asawari*. Nearly all the songs learned by the students were notated in writing. Alongside the steady progress in Bengali songs under Dinendranath Tagore's guidance, the teaching of *mridangam*, *tabla*, *veena*, and *esraj* also continued with equal zeal. The students of the department showed remarkable and praiseworthy improvement.

During this period, the students of the Ashram also received training in rhythmic physical exercises to the beat of the *mridangam* under the instruction of Buddhamantra Singh, who had been sent by Maharaja Birendra Kishore of Tripura.

It is noteworthy that in 1919, during his visit to Sylhet, Rabindranath Tagore was deeply captivated by the dance of a Manipuri boy. So impressed was he that he requested the Maharaja to send a dance teacher to Santiniketan to train the boys in that art form. In response, the Maharaja sent his court dancer, the renowned Buddhamantra Singh, to Santiniketan in 1920.

However, as dance was not yet widely accepted within the Ashram community, Rabindranath had to describe it as physical exercise accompanied by *mridangam* rhythms to gain acceptance. Later, before his departure for Europe the following spring, he instructed Buddhamantra not to return after the summer vacation. Consequently, dance as a formal subject did not find a place in the Visva-Bharati curriculum for many years.

In the meantime, the first curriculum of Visva-Bharati was published. A month later, a revised version—the second curriculum—was also released. The section of the syllabus related to Music was outlined as follows:

“The course of Music, too, is of six years, three years being for general efficiency and three years for higher proficiency.

Lessons are given in classical Indian Music as well as in Rabindranath's songs. For comparative study, western Music is also taught in a general manner.

Lessons in Instrumental Music are given also.”

In 1921, the departments of Fine Arts and Music at Visva-Bharati were merged and collectively named *Kala-Bhavana* (School of Art and Music). For nearly the next ten years, the annual reports of Visva-Bharati referred to this combined institution as *Kala-Bhavana (School of Art and Music)*.

Nearly thirty years later, in 1951—ten years after Rabindranath Tagore's passing—Visva-Bharati was handed over to the Government of India and accorded the status of a Central University. The first Vice-Chancellor of Visva-Bharati was the poet's son, Shri Rathindranath Tagore.

From 1919 to 1932, the teaching of music and fine arts at Visva-Bharati continued jointly under one institution. The independent organization of *Sangit Bhavana* took place in 1933. From that time onward, music education at Santiniketan began to follow a structured curriculum, and students with a genuine interest in vocal music, dance, and instrumental music started to gather at Sangit Bhavana.

Even then, the classes at Sangit Bhavana were not limited only to its own students; pupils from all departments of the Ashram could also come and learn music there. In 1929, a new building named *Nandan* was constructed for *Kala Bhavana*. Several houses were built nearby, where classes in both visual arts and music were conducted.

In 1933, while the departments were still housed in these buildings, Kala Bhavana was divided into two separate sections — the visual arts department retained the name *Kala Bhavana*, and the music department was given the name *Sangit Bhavana*. The two institutions continued to work together harmoniously for about five years. Later, in 1935, Sangit Bhavana was shifted to a new location—on the western side of the building known as *Purvatarini*, which had served as a residence for former students and now lies near the present-day *Cheena Bhavana*.

In 1932, the appointment of Hemendra Lal Roy as Professor of Hindustani Classical Music filled an important gap in the teaching of classical music at Sangit Bhavana. It had already been recognized that, alongside the instruction of Rabindra Sangeet and instrumental music, the inclusion of Hindustani classical training would enrich and complete the institution's character.

Rabindranath Tagore always wished that Sangit Bhavana would attain perfection in every respect. He wanted the students to build a strong and sound foundation in music within its walls. He believed that without the study of Hindustani classical music, this goal could never be fully achieved. It was for this very reason that, even when he first planned to introduce formal music education at the Ashram, he brought Bhimrao Shastri to Santiniketan to teach classical music.

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