

# The Influence of Jhumur Sangeet on the Thematic and Structural Development of Medieval Bengali Music and Literature

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## Abstract

This paper challenges the conventional understanding of Jhumur Sangeet as a folk tradition that merely absorbed the motifs of the mainstream Vaishnava Bhakti movement. It posits that Jhumur is, in fact, an ancient, autonomous, and profoundly influential aesthetic stream that predates and significantly shaped the thematic and structural development of medieval Bengali music and literature. Through a close analysis of pre-Chaitanya canonical texts, including *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva and *Sri Krishna Kirtan* of Baru Chandidas, this research demonstrates that the earthy, human-centric portrayal of divine love (*shringara rasa*) and the witty, dialogic structure central to these works are derived from a pre-existing folk sensibility characteristic of Jhumur. The discovery of a "Jhumri" verse composed by the 14th-century poet Vidyapati provides critical evidence, confirming Jhumur's status as a recognized genre prior to the widespread influence of Chaitanya. Ultimately, this paper re-evaluates Jhumur not as a peripheral folk form, but as a primary cultural wellspring, highlighting a process of cultural syncretism where the aesthetic sensibilities of the folk (*desiya*) actively informed and enriched the classical and literary (*margiya*) traditions of Bengal.

**Keywords:** Jhumur Sangeet, Kirtan, Mangal Kavya, Vaishnava Padavali, Sri Krishna Kirtan, Gita Govinda, Radha-Krishna, Folk Music, Rarh Bengal, Shringara Rasa, Vidyapati, Chandidas.

## 1. Introduction

The rich soundscape of the Indian subcontinent is broadly defined by two parallel streams: the structured, grammar-bound classical tradition (*margiya*) and the fluid, community-rooted folk tradition (*desiya*). While classical music adheres to the intricate science of *raga* and *tala*, folk music emerges from the soil of everyday life, echoing the collective joys, sorrows, rituals, and spiritual yearnings of the people. Within this vibrant folk tapestry, Jhumur Sangeet stands out as a tradition of profound antiquity and influence. Originating in the Chotonagpur plateau region and nurtured for centuries by indigenous communities such as the Santhal, Munda, and Oraon, Jhumur is a performance art that seamlessly blends song, dance, and dramatic dialogue (Dutt, 1954). Its thematic heart pulsates with the rhythms of nature, the raw emotions of human love, and, most significantly, the enduring devotional narrative of Radha and Krishna.

For many years, the prevailing academic view held that the incorporation of Radha-Krishna themes in Jhumur was a later development, a consequence of the Bhakti movement popularized by Śrī Chaitanya Mahāprabhu in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent adoption of Vaishnavism by regional rulers. This perspective positions Jhumur as a recipient of influence, a folk form that absorbed the sophisticated theological and literary motifs of mainstream devotionalism. However, a closer examination of pre-Chaitanya literature and the inherent characteristics of Jhumur itself challenges this chronology. This paper argues for a reversal of that narrative, positing that Jhumur Sangeet is, in fact, an ancient and foundational aesthetic stream that predates the widespread Vaishnava movement and profoundly shaped the thematic content, narrative structure, and performance style of canonical Bengali works, including Kirtan, Mangal Kavya, and the Vaishnava Padavali (Bhattacharya, 1962; Dimock & Levertov, 1967)).

To substantiate the claim that Jhumur Sangeet is a foundational aesthetic stream in Bengal, this study will trace its deep-seated influence within seminal pre-Chaitanya texts, notably the *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva (1977), *Sri Krishna Kirtan* of Baru Chandidas (1916), and the padas of Vidyapati. While these literary masterpieces are celebrated for their evocative portrayal of Radha and Krishna, a closer analysis reveals that their earthy, human-centric eroticism (*shringara rasa*) and their depiction of divine figures as relatable rural characters are profoundly indebted to a pre-existing, popular folk tradition—the very essence of Jhumur. Far from emerging in isolation, these works were shaped by a rich legacy of oral storytelling and song, in which the divine is cast in accessible, human terms.

Furthermore, the documented composition of a "Jhumri" verse by the Maithili poet Vidyapati serves as critical and irrefutable evidence of the genre's practice and prestige prior to the widespread Bhakti movement of the 15th century. By engaging with the scholarly discourse of luminaries such as Harekrishna Mukhopadhyay and Rajeshwar Mitra and analyzing the structural parallels in dialogue and performance, this paper will demonstrate that Jhumur provided a foundational blueprint for the later devotional music that would come to define Bengal. Ultimately, this research repositions Jhumur Sangeet not as a peripheral folk curiosity but as a vital cultural source, from which Bengal's great literary and musical traditions drew narrative power and emotional resonance.

## 2. The Erotic and the Divine in *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva:

Composed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Sanskrit lyrical poem of Jayadeva, the *Gita Govinda*, is a cornerstone of Radha-Krishna literature. Its genius lies in its masterful use of *shringara rasa* (the aesthetic mood of love), where it intertwines spiritual devotion with a vivid, and at times explicit, eroticism (Miller, 1977). The text explores the passionate relationship between Krishna and Radha, using the states of *sambhoga* (love in union) and *vipralambha* (love in separation) to articulate not just physical desire but the soul's deep yearning for divine union. However, the source of this potent blend of sensuality and spirituality was not purely literary. As the provided research indicates, Jayadeva was drawing from a reservoir of popular folk tales and songs already prevalent in society. The *Gita Govinda*'s depiction of jealousy of Radha, dalliances of Krishna, and their impassioned reunion reflects the raw, human-centric narratives found in folk traditions. The very act of framing the divine love story with such earthy, accessible emotions suggests an assimilation of folk consciousness, a tradition in which Jhumur was a primary vehicle.

## 3. Folk Realism in *Sri Krishna Kirtan* of Baru Chandidas:

If *Gita Govinda* cloaked its folk roots in sophisticated Sanskrit poetry, Baru Chandidas's 14th-century work, *Sri Krishna Kirtan*, brought them to the forefront. This pastoral Vaishnava drama is a critical link

in understanding influence of Jhumur. Here, Shri Krishna and Radha are portrayed "much like ordinary rural youths," where their "divine aspect is overshadowed by [their] human form." Their love unfolds through longing, affection, separation, and desire, mirroring the lives of common men and women (Chandidas, 1916).

This deliberate humanization is a core tenet of the Jhumur aesthetic. Furthermore, the very structure of *Sri Krishna Kirtan* points to a Jhumur framework. The narrative is propelled by witty, dialogic exchanges between Radha, Krishna, and the intermediary, Badayi. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee notes that this "witty repartee between the hero and heroine" is a chief aspect of Jhumur songs, establishing a direct structural link between the folk form and this canonical literary work. The play was not just a poem to be read, but a drama to be performed, and its form follows the interactive, performance-based model of Jhumur (Bhattacharya, 1984).

#### 4. The Maithili Connection: Vidyapati and the "Jhumri" Verse

Perhaps the most conclusive evidence for pre-Chaitanya antiquity of Jhumur comes from the corpus of the Maithili poet Vidyapati. Within the vast collection of his *padas* (verses), researchers Khagendranath Mitra and Biman Bihari Majumdar identified a single, invaluable composition explicitly labeled a "Jhumri" (Mitra, 1999). The existence of this verse, composed by a celebrated poet of the pre-Chaitanya era, is irrefutable proof that Jhumur was not only present but was a recognized genre with enough cultural prestige to be practiced by a courtly artist. The verse itself, structured as a question-and-answer dialogue between Radha and Krishna at a market, is composed in the quintessential Jhumur style. This single artifact dismantles the notion that Jhumur themes were a later borrowing from Vaishnava Padavali; on the contrary, it shows that the masters of Padavali, like Vidyapati, were themselves influenced by and participated in the Jhumur tradition (Dimock & Levertov, 1967).

#### 5. The Direct Influence of Jhumur on Mainstream Genres

Having established its ancient roots, we can now trace the direct influence of Jhumur Sangeet on the development of major musical and literary genres of Bengal. The evidence demonstrates that Jhumur was not merely a parallel tradition but an active agent that shaped the very fabric of Kirtan and Mangal Kavya.

##### 5.1. Impact of Jhumur on Kirtan

The relationship between Jhumur and Kirtan is a subject of scholarly debate, but the consensus points toward precedence of Jhumur. Scholars Rajeshwar Mitra and Subodh Basu Ray assert that Jhumur existed before Kirtan, a view that positions it as a foundational influence. Even the revered scholar Harekrishna Mukhopadhyay (1954), who considered Jhumur an integral part (*angya*) of Kirtan, acknowledged its deep-seated presence, particularly in the form of 'Ras Kirtaner Jhumur.' This integration is evident in several key areas:

**5.1.1. Thematic Foundation:** The Radha-Krishna narrative, with its blend of playful romance and deep longing, became the cornerstone of Vaishnava Kirtan. As argued by Pandit Ashutosh Bhattacharya (1965), this theme served as a natural bridge between tribal and Bengali Jhumur, providing a ready-made devotional-folk template for Kirtan to adopt and elaborate upon.

**5.1.2. Structural and Performance Style:** The call-and-response and dialogic structure inherent to Jhumur are mirrored in Kirtan performances. The interactive, dramatic enactments of Radha and Krishna's *lila* (divine play), often involving intense emotional expression and dance, are direct descendants of Jhumur's performance-centric model, where music, movement, and narrative are inseparable.

### 5.2. Imprint of Jhumur on Mangal Kavya

The Mangal Kavya, a genre of narrative poetry celebrating local deities, also bears the unmistakable imprint of folk traditions. While literary in form, these texts were primarily disseminated through oral performance in villages, a context where influence of Jhumur was paramount. The musical recitation, dramatic narration, and community-centric performance style of Mangal Kavya echo the core tenets of Jhumur. Furthermore, the themes themselves—which often address everyday struggles, the human relationship with divinity, and community rituals—align closely with the subjects of Jhumur songs, suggesting that Mangal Kavya drew not only its performance style but also its thematic concerns from the surrounding folk milieu (Bhattacharya, 1962).

### 5.3. The 'Vhanita' Tradition and Autonomy of Jhumur

The debate over the origin of the *vhanita* (a poetic signature line mentioning the composer or patron) further illuminates Jhumur's autonomy. Many researchers have traditionally assumed that the use of *vhanita* in Jhumur was an imitation of the practice in Vaishnava Padavali. However, the existence of Vidyapati's pre-Chaitanya "Jhumri," which includes a *vhanita*, challenges this assumption (Dimock, 1966). It suggests that this tradition was likely native to Jhumur and other folk forms, rather than a top-down borrowing from classical or courtly poetry. This reinforces the argument that Jhumur was a self-sustaining tradition with its own established conventions, which in turn influenced, rather than merely received from, the literary culture of the time.

## 6. Avenues for Future Research

While this paper establishes the foundational role of Jhumur Sangeet in shaping medieval Bengali music and literature, its findings open up several promising avenues for more specialized investigation. The following areas warrant deeper scholarly inquiry to further illuminate the depth and breadth of Jhumur's cultural legacy:

**Comparative Musicological Analysis:** The conclusion briefly mentions the need to explore melodic and rhythmic transfers. Future research could undertake a rigorous comparative analysis of the musical structures of regional Jhumur variants (e.g., from Purulia, Manbhum, or Mithila) and specific Kirtan styles (such as the Manohar Shahi gharana). Using musicological tools to map the specific *ragas*, rhythmic cycles (*talas*), and tonal patterns would provide empirical evidence of the precise musical elements that migrated from the folk tradition into the devotional one.

**6.1 The Evolution into Jatra:** From the literature it may be stated that the "fusion of Jhumur with Kirtan gave rise to the folk theatre tradition of Jatra." This transition represents a significant area for study. A dedicated research project could investigate the specific evolutionary path from the dialogic songs of Jhumur to the full-fledged dramatic structure of Jatra. This would involve analyzing how Jhumur's character archetypes, narrative devices, and musical interludes were adapted and expanded to create a new theatrical form.

**6.2. Linguistic and Dialectical Tracing:** The language of Jhumur, rooted in regional dialects like Rarhi and Jharkhandi, is rich with *tadbhava* (derived) and *ardhatatsama* (semi-Sanskrit) words. A focused linguistic study could trace the migration of specific folk vocabulary, phrases, and idiomatic expressions from the oral tradition of Jhumur into the literary language of the Vaishnava Padavali and Mangal Kavya. This would provide a clearer understanding of how folk language enriched and shaped Bengali literary expression.

**6.3. Socio-Anthropological Studies:** The paper notes Jhumur's origins within indigenous communities and its central role in festivals like Karam and Tusu (Chattopadhyay, 1999). An anthropological investigation could explore the socio-cultural dynamics of Jhumur's evolution. How did the gradual "sanskritization" or refinement of Jhumur themes for a courtly or devotional audience affect its original meaning and function within its native tribal communities? Such a study could provide critical insights into the process of cultural assimilation and its impact on folk art forms.

## 7. Conclusion

The evidence presented throughout this analysis compels a re-evaluation of the historical and cultural significance of Jhumur Sangeet. Far from being a peripheral folk form that simply absorbed the motifs of a dominant Vaishnava culture, Jhumur reveals itself to be an ancient, autonomous, and profoundly influential tradition. Its thematic core—the earthy, humanized portrayal of divine love—provided the emotional and narrative blueprint for canonical works like *Sri Krishna Kirtan* and the *Gita Govinda* (Chandidas, 1916; Jayadeva, 1977). Its structural conventions, particularly the use of witty dialogue and interactive performance, directly shaped the development of Kirtan and the oral recitation of Mangal Kavya.

The discovery of a "Jhumri" verse by the pre-Chaitanya poet Vidyapati serves as a critical anchor, proving that Jhumur was a recognized and respected genre well before the Bhakti movement reached its zenith. This repositions Jhumur not as a recipient of influence, but as a primary source. It is a testament to the process of cultural syncretism where the aesthetic sensibilities of the folk (*desiya*) did not just coexist with but actively informed the classical and literary (*margiya*) traditions. Jhumur Sangeet, therefore, must be understood as a vital cultural wellspring, a foundational stream from which the great devotional and narrative traditions of Bengal drew their enduring power and popular appeal. Further research could fruitfully explore the specific melodic and rhythmic transfers from regional Jhumur variants to specific Kirtan styles, or trace its influence on later folk-theatre forms like Jatra, to continue uncovering the depth of its foundational legacy.

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