



Role of Institutions vs Traditional Gharana System in Vocal Music Education

Devrishi Sagre

MUR2400712, Master of Arts- Vocal Music, 4th Semester, Mewar University
Chittorgarh, Rajasthan-312901

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20680637>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 22-05-2026

Published: 10-06-2026

Keywords:

*Gharana, Institutions,
Vocal Music, Guru–
Shishya Parampara,
Hindustani Music,
Pedagogy, Music
Education*

ABSTRACT

Indian classical vocal music has developed through two major systems of education: the traditional Gharana system, based on the Guru–Shishya Parampara, and the modern institutional system, which emerged with the growth of formal education. The Gharana system emphasizes personal guidance, oral transmission, and artistic individuality, while institutions focus on structured syllabus, accessibility, and academic recognition. This paper presents a detailed examination of both systems, discussing their historical roots, pedagogical methods, strengths, and limitations. It also analyses how these systems function in the present-day context influenced by modernization and technology. The study suggests that neither system alone can meet all contemporary educational needs, and therefore, a combined approach is necessary for effective vocal music training.

1. Introduction

Music is an integral part of Indian culture, deeply connected with spirituality, emotion, and tradition. Among various art forms, **vocal music** holds a unique position because it directly expresses human feelings through the voice. The teaching and learning of vocal music in India have undergone significant transformation over time.

Traditionally, music education was carried out through the **Guru–Shishya relationship**, where a student lived with the Guru and absorbed knowledge through continuous practice and observation. Over time, this system developed into **Gharanas**, which represent distinct stylistic traditions.



In the modern period, with the introduction of universities and music institutions, a new system of teaching emerged. This system provided wider access to music education through organized courses, degrees, and examinations.

Today, both systems coexist, and each plays an important role in shaping vocal music education. This research paper aims to study and compare these two approaches and understand their relevance in the present era.

2. Historical Background of Music Education

2.1 Early Tradition of Music Learning

In ancient India, music learning was based completely on **oral teaching**. There were no books, written notes, or printed materials. All knowledge was given by the Guru directly to the student through **listening, practice, and repetition**.

This system is called the **Guru–Shishya Parampara**, where the Guru (teacher) and Shishya (student) shared a very close relationship. In many cases, the student lived with the Guru in a place called a **Gurukul**. Here, learning was not limited to music only, but also included discipline, behavior, and values.

The student learned music by:

- Carefully listening to the Guru
- Repeating what the Guru demonstrated
- Practicing regularly for many hours

There was no fixed syllabus. The Guru decided what and how to teach, based on the student's ability and progress. Learning was slow but very deep.

Music was not treated as a simple subject or profession. It was seen as a **sacred art**, connected with devotion and inner growth. The Guru was respected not just as a teacher, but also as a guide who shaped the student's personality.[1]

Because everything was taught without writing, students had to **remember everything by heart**. This helped them understand music deeply, including small details of sound, emotion, and expression.



Thus, early music education in India was based on **practice, discipline, dedication, and personal guidance**, making it a very strong and meaningful learning system.

2.2 Rise of Gharanas

As time passed, music started developing different styles in different regions of India. Musicians in various places began to follow their own way of singing and teaching. These styles were passed from one generation to another within families or groups.

These traditions came to be known as **Gharanas**, which means “family” or “house” of music. A Gharana is a **school of music**, where a specific style is followed and preserved.

The Gharana system developed mainly during the time when kings and rulers supported musicians. These musicians were given respect and financial support, which allowed them to develop their own unique style. Over time, these styles became permanent traditions.

Each Gharana became special because of:

- Its own way of singing
- Its own method of voice training
- Its own style of improvisation
- Its own compositions (bandish)

For example, some Gharanas focused more on **slow and detailed singing**, while others focused on **fast and decorative styles**.

The Gharana system helped to:

- Preserve traditional knowledge
- Maintain the originality of music
- Create variety and richness in vocal music

Even today, many great musicians are known for belonging to a particular Gharana.

So, the rise of Gharanas made Indian classical music more **diverse, rich, and expressive**, while still keeping its traditional roots strong.



2.3 Beginning of Institutional Education

In earlier times, music education was limited to a small number of students who could learn directly from a Guru. But later, people realized that music should be **accessible to everyone**, not just a few selected learners.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, great scholars like **Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar** and **Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande** worked to change the system of music education. They wanted to make learning music easier and more systematic.

They started music schools and institutions where students could learn music in an organized way.

Some important changes introduced by them were:

- **Written notation system:** Music was written down so that it could be preserved and understood easily
- **Syllabus:** A proper course was created for students to follow step by step
- **Examinations:** Students were tested and given certificates

Earlier, because there was no writing, many musical compositions were forgotten over time. Written notation helped in saving these compositions for future generations.

Institutions like music colleges and universities also made it possible for many students to learn music at the same time. This increased the spread of music education across the country.

However, this system was different from the traditional way because:

- Teaching was done in groups
- Time was limited
- Personal guidance was less

Still, institutional education played a very important role in:

- Making music education widely available
- Bringing structure and system in learning



- Encouraging research and academic study

Thus, the beginning of institutional education marked a shift from **traditional personal learning to modern organized learning**, helping music reach more people.[2]

3. The Traditional Gharana System

3.1 Basic Concept

The **Gharana system** is one of the most important traditions in Indian classical music. It is based on a **close and personal relationship between the Guru (teacher) and the disciple (student)**. This relationship is not formal or limited to classroom teaching. Instead, it is deep, continuous, and based on trust, respect, and dedication.

In this system, the student learns music directly from the Guru over many years. There is usually **no fixed timetable, syllabus, or classroom structure**. The process of learning is flexible and depends on the student's ability, interest, and dedication.

The Guru observes the student carefully and decides:

- What to teach
- When to teach
- How much to teach

This type of teaching is completely personalized. Every student receives **different guidance according to their capacity**. The main aim is not only to teach music but also to develop the student into a complete artist.

The Gharana system also focuses on **continuity of tradition**. The student learns the same style that has been passed down from earlier generations. In this way, the Gharana preserves its identity and uniqueness.

3.2 Mode of Teaching

The teaching method of the Gharana system is very different from modern classroom education. It is mainly practical and based on **direct experience** rather than written study.

The main features of teaching are:



- **Oral Transmission**

All knowledge is given by the Guru through singing and demonstration. There are usually no books or written notes. The student learns by listening and remembering.

- **Learning through Listening and Imitation**

The student carefully listens to the Guru and then tries to copy the same style. This helps in understanding the correct tone, expression, and presentation.

- **Gradual Progress**

Learning happens step by step. The student first learns basic elements and then slowly moves to advanced techniques. The Guru ensures that the student becomes strong in fundamentals before moving ahead.

- **Regular and Intensive Practice**

Daily practice (riyaz) is very important. Students are expected to practice for long hours to improve their voice, control, and understanding.

- **Personal Attention**

The Guru gives full attention to the student. Weak points are corrected immediately, and strengths are improved further.

In this system, teaching is not rushed. It is a slow and deep process where knowledge is built carefully over time.

3.3 Importance in Vocal Music

The Gharana system plays a very important role in maintaining the **purity and authenticity of Indian classical vocal music**. It helps to preserve the original form and spirit of music.

Its importance can be understood in the following ways:

- **Preservation of Traditional Compositions (Bandish)**

Many rare and old compositions are kept safe within a Gharana. These compositions are passed from Guru to student without change.[3]

- **Development of Improvisation Skills**

Indian classical music depends heavily on improvisation. The Gharana system teaches how to develop *alap*, *taan*, and other creative expressions in a systematic way.



- **Transmission of Artistic Values**

The student learns not only technique but also the deeper meaning of music, such as emotion (bhava), expression, and aesthetic beauty.

- **Emotional Connection with Music**

Because the training is long and intense, the student develops a deep emotional bond with music. Music becomes a part of their life, not just a skill.

- **Maintenance of Style and Identity**

Each Gharana has its own style. This system ensures that these styles are maintained and continued without losing their originality.

Thus, the Gharana system plays a key role in **keeping the tradition of vocal music alive and meaningful.**

3.4 Advantages

The Gharana system has many important benefits for students of vocal music:

- **Deep Understanding of Music**

Since the learning process is slow and detailed, the student gains strong knowledge of every aspect of music.

- **Development of Personal Style**

Although the student follows the Gharana style, over time they develop their own unique way of singing.

- **Strong Technical Foundation**

Continuous practice and detailed training help in building excellent voice control, clarity, and expression.

- **Cultural Learning**

The student learns about the history, tradition, and values of Indian music along with singing.

- **Spiritual Growth**

Music is treated as a form of devotion, which helps in emotional and spiritual development.



- **Close Teacher-Student Bond**

The strong relationship between Guru and student provides guidance, motivation, and inspiration.

3.5 Limitations

Despite its importance, the Gharana system also has some limitations:

- **Limited Access**

Only a small number of students get the opportunity to learn directly from a Guru.

- **Lack of Written Material**

Since teaching is mainly oral, knowledge is not always recorded. This may lead to loss of information over time.

- **Dependence on the Guru**

The quality of learning depends completely on the Guru's knowledge, teaching ability, and availability.

- **Time-Consuming Process**

Learning in this system takes many years. It requires patience and long-term commitment.

- **Difficulty in Standardization**

Since there is no fixed syllabus, it is difficult to measure progress or compare learning levels.

- **Less Exposure to Different Styles**

Students usually follow one Gharana, which may limit exposure to other styles of music.

4. Institutional System of Music Education

4.1 Structure and Organization

Institutional education in vocal music follows a **planned and systematic structure**, unlike the traditional Gharana system. It is organized in a way that makes learning more formal, structured, and easy to manage for a large number of students.

The main elements of this system include:

- **Fixed Curriculum**

Institutions prepare a detailed syllabus in advance. This syllabus includes both theory and



practical topics that students must study during the course. It ensures that all students learn the same basic concepts.

- **Scheduled Classes**

Classes are conducted according to a fixed timetable. Students attend lectures, practical sessions, and group classes regularly. This creates discipline and proper time management.

- **Examinations and Grading**

Students are evaluated through exams, tests, and practical performances. Marks and grades are given based on their performance. This helps in measuring their progress.

- **Certification and Degrees**

After completing the course, students receive certificates, diplomas, or degrees. These qualifications help them in further studies and professional career opportunities.

Overall, the institutional system brings **order, regularity, and clarity** to the process of music education.

4.2 Teaching Approach

The teaching method in institutions is quite different from the traditional Guru–Shishya approach. It is designed to teach many students at the same time in a structured way.

Some important features of institutional teaching are:

- **Group Teaching**

Students are usually taught in groups or classes. This allows more students to learn together, but the teacher cannot give equal attention to each student.

- **Combination of Theory and Practical**

Institutions give importance to both theoretical knowledge and practical performance. Students learn about:

- Raga and Tala theory
- History of music
- Notation system
- Practical singing skills



- **Use of Written and Recorded Material**

Books, notes, recordings, and digital resources are used for teaching. Students can study these materials anytime, which makes learning easier.

- **Fixed Duration of Courses**

Courses are completed within a specific time, such as one year or a semester. Students must learn and perform within this limited time period.[4]

This system helps in providing **organized and balanced learning**, but it may sometimes reduce the depth of individual training.

4.3 Role in Vocal Music Education

Music institutions have played a very important role in spreading and developing vocal music education in modern times.

Their contribution can be seen in the following ways:

- **Wider Access to Music Education**

Institutions make it possible for many students to learn music, regardless of their family background. This has increased the number of learners and performers.

- **Promotion of Research and Academic Study**

Universities encourage students to study music academically. Research work, dissertations, and seminars help in understanding music more deeply.

- **Creation of Career Opportunities**

Institutional education opens many career paths such as:

- Music teacher
- Performer
- Research scholar
- Music examiner



- **Use of Modern Technology**

Institutions use new technologies like recordings, online classes, and digital tools. These tools help students to:

- Practice independently
- Learn from different artists
- Access learning material anytime

Thus, institutional education has helped in making vocal music more **popular, organized, and widely accepted**.

4.4 Advantages

Institutional music education offers many benefits:

- **Accessibility for All Students**

Anyone interested in music can take admission and learn, without needing personal contact with a Guru.

- **Structured Learning Process**

The syllabus provides clear guidance about what to study and when to study, making learning systematic.

- **Recognition Through Degrees**

Certificates and degrees provide official recognition, which is useful for jobs and further education.

- **Exposure to Different Styles**

Students learn from different teachers and study various styles of music, which broadens their knowledge.

- **Balanced Education**

Both theory and practical knowledge are included, giving students a complete understanding of music.



4.5 Limitations

Despite its advantages, institutional education also has some limitations:

- **Less Individual Attention**

Since teaching is done in groups, teachers cannot focus on each student personally.

- **Limited Time for Practice**

Fixed course duration often does not allow enough time for deep practice and mastery.

- **Restriction of Creativity**

Standard syllabus and exam patterns may limit creative thinking and individual expression.

- **Less Emotional Depth**

Compared to the Gharana system, the emotional and spiritual connection with music may not develop fully.

- **Uniform Teaching Method**

All students are taught in the same way, which may not suit the learning style of every student.

5. Comparative Study of Both Systems[5]

5.1 Teaching Style

The Gharana system is flexible and personalized, while institutional education is structured and uniform.

5.2 Method of Learning

The traditional system focuses more on practical learning, whereas institutions balance theory and practice.

5.3 Accessibility

The Gharana system is limited in reach, whereas institutions provide education to a large number of students.

5.4 Artistic Development

The Gharana system nurtures individuality, while institutions often follow standardized evaluation methods.



5.5 Preservation vs Expansion

The Gharana system focuses on preserving tradition, whereas institutions focus on spreading knowledge widely.

6. Changing Scenario in Modern Times

In recent years, music education has undergone major changes due to:

- Technology
- Globalization
- Changing lifestyles

Online learning platforms, recordings, and digital tools have made music education more flexible and accessible.

However, these changes have also created new challenges, such as:

- Reduced personal interaction
- Difficulty in maintaining traditional depth
- Increased focus on quick learning

7. Need for a Combined Approach

7.1 Why Integration is Necessary

In today's world, neither the Gharana system nor institutional education alone is sufficient.

A combined approach is needed because:

- Institutions provide reach and structure
- Gharanas provide depth and authenticity

7.2 Suggested Model

An effective model may include:

- Institutional training for basic knowledge



- Gharana training for advanced mastery
- Use of technology for support
- Personal guidance from experts

7.3 Benefits of Combination

- Balanced learning
- Preservation of tradition with modern access
- Development of both skill and understanding

8. Challenges in Present Context

Modern vocal music education faces several issues:

- Declining interest in traditional long-term training
- Commercialization of music
- Influence of popular culture
- Lack of experienced Gurus in institutions

Addressing these challenges requires careful planning and awareness.

9. Conclusion

The study of vocal music education clearly shows that both the **traditional Gharana system** and the **institutional system** have played very important roles in shaping Indian classical music. These two systems are different in their approach, but each has its own strengths and importance.

The **Gharana system** represents the deep roots of Indian musical tradition. It focuses on personal training, long-term practice, and close interaction between Guru and student. Through this system, music is not only learned as a skill but also experienced as a form of **expression, discipline, and devotion**. It helps in developing a strong foundation, individual creativity, and a deep emotional connection with music. The Gharana system also plays a major role in preserving the originality and purity of different styles of vocal music.



On the other hand, **institutional education** has made music more accessible to a wider group of people. It provides a structured way of learning with a clear syllabus, regular classes, and proper evaluation. Institutions also support **academic growth, research, and professional development**. They have helped music education to spread across different regions and social groups, making it possible for many students to learn who otherwise might not have had the opportunity.

In present times, society is changing rapidly due to technology, globalization, and modern lifestyles. In such a situation, depending only on one system is not sufficient. The Gharana system alone may not reach a large number of students, while institutional education alone may not provide the same depth and emotional understanding of music.

Therefore, the most effective approach for modern vocal music education is to **combine the strengths of both systems**. A balanced model can include:

- Institutional teaching for basic knowledge, structure, and wider access
- Gharana training for advanced learning, creativity, and artistic depth

Such integration can help students gain both **technical knowledge and emotional understanding** of music. It will also ensure that the rich tradition of Indian classical music is preserved while adapting to modern needs.

In conclusion, the future of vocal music education depends on maintaining a **balance between tradition and modernity**. By respecting the values of the Gharana system and utilizing the advantages of institutional learning, it is possible to create a strong and meaningful path for the development of music and musicians in the contemporary world.

10. Suggestions for Future Research

- Study of blended learning models in music
- Impact of digital education on traditional arts
- Psychological aspects of vocal training
- Role of modern technology in preserving classical music



References

- Das, R. (2022). Contemporary trends in Hindustani vocal music education. *International Journal of Research Trends and Innovation*, 7(4), 1–5.
- Chen, Y., & Safian, A. R. (2024). Online learning pedagogy and vocal music education. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 14(11), 1842–1858.
- Kunte, K. (2018). Relevant areas of research in Indian musicology today. *International Inventive Multidisciplinary Journal*, 3(6), n.p.
- Clark, T. J. (2024). Vocal pedagogy in 21st century music education. Doctoral Dissertation, Liberty University, pp. 45–78 (example section reference based on document structure; confirm exact pages if citing a specific section).
- Verma, A. K. (2021). *Research in Indian music traditions*. Notion Press, pp. 10–25 (general reference section; exact citation should be adjusted based on edition used).