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The Musical Making of Bengali Britain, c. 1961-1989

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The Musical Making of Bengali Britain, c. 1961-1989

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Department of Music

UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM



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ABSTRACT

Much of the making of present-day multicultural Britain owes to immigration, including Bengalis from East Pakistan—later Bangladesh—and the Indian state of West Bengal, especially after the second half of the twentieth century. Weaving together Bengali, English, and Sylheti sources, archival and governmental records, old newspapers, song texts, memoirs, film, interviews, and embodied reflections in the form of personal fieldnotes, this thesis presents the first multisensorial and reflexive music history of Bengali Britain, both from a bottom-up and top-down approach.

Foregrounding diasporic Bengali and allied music-making, this thesis aims to 1) challenge monolithic notions of Bengaliness in the context of evolving political, socioeconomic and cultural realities in *desh* (home) and *bidesh* (away); 2) introspect Bengali citizenly identities' fostering of personal and familial intimacies; 3) publics; and 4) understand “subaltern” positionalities.

In the Introduction, I sketch a historical and historiographical background and set out the main themes and methodology. Chapter One reconstructs musical programmes around Rabindranath Tagore's birth centenary celebrations in Britain to locate Bengali musicalities. Chapter Two studies the role of music, or the lack thereof, in the birthing of Bangladesh, lending an ear to both pro-Bangladesh and anti-Bangladesh parties. Chapter Three attempts to capture the eventful 1970s and 1980s in three case studies: cultural nationalism and anti-racism, restaurateurship, and music classes. Voyaging back to the 1960s, Chapter Four reimagines *Baul* musicians' journey to Britain and travels until the late 1980s to study the adaptation of an “old” sound in “new” geographies, appropriations of “Baul”, and simultaneously performances and reception in “mainstream” spaces. Summarising the four chapters, I conclude by answering the posed questions and laying out future research possibilities.

LIST OF CONTENTS

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	4
Notes on Translation and Transliteration	8
List of Illustrations	9
Maps	11
Graph	15
Introduction	16
CHAPTER ONE: The Tagore Centenary in Britain: Centring Musical Bengaliness	54
CHAPTER TWO: 1971 Bangladesh War: Musical Aid and Activism in ‘Third Bengal’	104
CHAPTER THREE: Blood, Curries, Music Classes: Senses and Citizenships	158
CHAPTER FOUR: Baula Britain: Contrasts and Continuities	234
Conclusion	303
List of References	311

Acknowledgements

“...মুর্শিদ ভজ ওমন গাধা, শয়তান তোমার হবে জুদা
ছরকাতে তয়াঙ্গু পাবে, বাউল আমীর উদ্দিন কয়,
গুরু কিন্তু সামান্য ধন নয়।”
- কারি আমীর উদ্দিন

[Chant the murshid’s name, O donkey-minded
And the devil will be besotten.
Says Baul Amir Uddin,
Blessed will be your bread.
The guru is no meagre wealth.]

- extract of a song composed by Baul Kari Amir Uddin [b.1943]

Having begun in October 2019, this PhD has braved the COVID-19 pandemic, the Amphan super cyclone, a major personal health crisis, and several bereavements, not to mention a world constantly being barraged with injustice. Naturally, the road has not always been well-lit, and I have not the slightest hesitation in thinking of the people I mention next as my “gurus”, who have lifted me out, time and again, from “gu” (darkness) towards “ru” (light).

Professor Martin Clayton and Professor Laura Leante have genuinely been the kindest primary and secondary supervisors one could have asked for. Besides their patience in tolerating the several hurdles I have had to overcome, going beyond to offer support, and making incisive observations on my writings, their mentorship during supervision meetings will serve as masterclasses for guiding future researchers to find their path.

I am incredibly grateful to Durham University for fully funding this project with a Durham Doctoral Studentship. At Durham, I have been fortunate enough to land amongst the most talented and friendly community of researchers. I thank Dr Soumyaroop (Roop) Majumdar for the nightlong conversations in Gilesgate, which enriched my desire to write creatively. Dr Lucinda Murphy graciously welcomed a stranger to Meadowfield and has since shared her anthropological vision. Amidst a housing crisis in December 2023, Nashra Ahmad

gave me refuge without blinking an eye, and during my final months of writing up from Kolkata, she went out of her way to get me books from the Billy B. Annie Zaidi, Dr Jake Phipps, Amanda Botelho, and Angus Howie offered a sofa/bed to crash on at different times. Film screenings at the Ethnomusicology Film Club have been enriching and thought-provoking. I must thank its constituent members, Dr Petr Nuska, Dr Samuel Horlor, Dr Matthew Warren, Dr Thomas Graves, and Juliano Abramovay, for all the wisdom and camaraderie they have been a source of.

During a 2015 LSE field trip to Brick Lane, Professor Matthew Engelke made me realise the scope of research this community holds. I remain indebted to Dr Andrea Pia, Dr Amy Penfield and Dr Feyzi Ismail for teaching me academic writing during my undergraduate days. At SOAS, I came across inspirational teachers: Professor Richard Widdess opened my eyes/ears to the ever-changing nature of the Hindustani raga music tradition and enriched me with his wit and erudition over lunches at Chutneys; Professor Angela Impey taught me the art of ethnographic writing and kind-heartedness; Professor Rachel Harris imparted the foundations of ethnomusicology; and finally, Dr Richard David Williams contributed the most towards nurturing this project in its embryonic stage, besides enamouring with the most breathtaking ragamalas and Braj poetry.

At the International Hall, I got to befriend several motivational people. Dr Sudipto Mitra taught me archival research and, more importantly, re-inculcated a love for the Bengali language. Dr Mriganka Mukhopadhyay fed me after exhausting British Library sessions at Tavistock Tandoor, and subsequently, over the London-Amsterdam telephone line, gave me strength with his eloquence and assurance. Anwasha Panigrahi, a discerning listener of ragas, accompanied me on the tanpura during several of my vocal recitals. Anurag Yadav never failed to offer helpful advice and host dinners. Dr Sreenanti Banerjee volunteered to be a sounding board for my ideas. Konina Mandal, Virender Chandel and Radhika Rao were

constant companions for chats, gossip, banter, and chicken wings. Alice Heales partook in dinner table tête-à-têtes.

When I took on the task of researching the music of Bengalis in Britain for my MMus dissertation, I would have hardly been able to make inroads within the community were it not for the magnanimity of Professor John Eade to promptly respond to my email and connect me with Dr Ansar Ahmed Ullah who in turn put me in touch with several community musicians. Faruque Ahmed has been my go-to person for any archival query or contact for any interlocutor; I also thank Jahanara Begum for all the delicious lunches she prepared over my numerous visits to their Enfield residence. Ahmed Moyez has enraptured me with his musical tales of his grandfather Pir Mojir over many wintry nights.

At the Swadhinata Trust, I must mention Julie Begum for being a kind host and encouraging me whenever we bumped into each other with her radiant smile, and Valentine Harding for opening her lovely home to conduct interviews and investing her faith in my research and singing. The more I started digging into the archives, the more they revealed. I am especially thankful to Sanjida Khatun at the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives for suggesting Bengali sources, and to Andrea Zarza at the British Library Sound Archive for digitising the requested collections in no time.

London's fast-pacedness was made more bearable by my *Ustadji* Mehfooz Khokhar with his selfless *taleem* on the rarest of ragas and talas, Suha Priyadarshini Chakravorty with her lip-smacking cooking, Kanak Dasgupta with his insights on the Bangladeshi community in the East End, Dhanraj Persaud Pandey, with whom *riyaz* sessions and food hunts have invariably uplifted my spirits (except for that viscous mango lassi!), and Arka Chakraborty's fraternal inquisitiveness and vivacious harmonium playing. All my interlocutors—unfortunately, too many to be included here—deserve to be commended for all the love and generosity they gave me in their homes, especially Himangshu Goswami and Alaur Rahman.

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Very few have been as influential as my *Gurujee* Pandit Ajoy Chakrabarty in my decision to devote my life to music and sound through singing or writing. Finally, I thank my family for their constant support and encouragement: my paternal grandparents, late Professor Sivabrata Bhattacharjee and late Lilabati Bhattacharjee, whose lives in 1950-60s England have been a personal connection to my work; maternal grandparents, Debika and Sudhansu Sekhar Kundu for their untiring love; Kamal Kumar Sengupta for the Bengali tuitions and Sondhya Sengupta for cooking *gnyadal patar bora* and her signature ‘plastic chutney’; Lisa, the most beautiful spitz for letting her be my leg pillow; Kallol, Sumita and Riddha Kundu for their good wishes and care throughout; Adrija Kundu for drawing me towards *Rabindrasangeet*, who left us too soon; Gouri Prosad Kundu, Suniti Prosad Kundu, Nilima Kundu and Mitali Kundu for giving me a second home in Bhatchala. I dedicate this thesis to my long-suffering parents: my father, Dr Subrata Bhattacharjee, for instilling in me a fascination for history and fountain pens; my mother, Mousumi Bhattacharjee, for reading all avatars of this work and co-living every bit of the struggle throughout my existence.

Notes on Translation and Transliteration

This thesis primarily engages with Bengali, English, and Sylheti sources. Unless mentioned otherwise, all translations, including interviews, are mine. Whenever I had difficulty comprehending a Sylheti word, I sought the help of native speakers, in most cases, Faruque Ahmed and Ahmed Moyez.

Most of the written sources are in Bengali and English. Sylheti has its own Sylheti Nagri script, which, although slowly returning to popularity, is still seldom used; for the period of this work, the usage of Sylheti Nagri was even rarer, and therefore, it is hard to come by written sources in that script. While reading old Bengali newspapers published in Britain, I have sometimes noticed the influence of Sylheti words. My Sylheti-speaking interlocutors during the informal interviews I conducted have shifted between Sylheti and Bengali, sometimes breaking into English. Also, a few Hindi and Urdu sources have fed into building the narrative, even if not referenced explicitly.

Since this work blends oral and written histories, standardising the breadth and beauty of people's pronunciations is challenging and, to some extent, perhaps unfair. In spite of having started using the conventional I.A.S.T. (International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration) system, I later decided to avoid employing diacritics and standard spellings so as not to render Bengali and Sylheti words in terms of a Calcutta/Kolkata-based genteel, Sanskritic/Anglophilic bias. However, I have retained the Sanskritised/Anglicised spellings while referring to names/words that are widely used as such in English scholarship, such as Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul, jayanti, instead of *Robindronath Thakur*, *Nojrul/Nozrul*, and *joyonti*.

Throughout this thesis, I have tried to spell non-English words while keeping the phonetics in mind, as I have perceived.

List of Illustrations

- 1.1: A special programme of music broadcast on the BBC's Far Eastern Service to mark Tagore's birth centenary
- 1.2: Bijoya Chaudhuri playing the harmonium
- 1.3: Sample of a ticket to the Tagore Centenary Celebration Meeting and Concert, held at the Royal Albert Hall
- 1.4: A young Rajeshwari Dutta playing the tanpura
- 1.5: Sushama Sen (right) with her husband, at their Finchley Road, London residence in 1934
- 1.6: Women pictured painting *alpana*, Bengali folk art motifs, on the floor of a replica Bengali hut at the Adam House exhibition
- 1.7: Dr Arthur Geddes during what would be his final trip to India in 1956
- 2.1: Manesh Chandra and Madhukar Kothare at Action Bangla Desh's Trafalgar Square rally
- 2.2: Patriotic songs from the BPCS during the rally
- 2.3: Visuals from the pro-Pakistan Trafalgar Square rally
- 2.4: Advertisement for the Birmingham event published in the Birmingham Evening Mail.
- 2.5: From left to right – Birendra Shankar, Sir Colin Davies, Shri Apa Pant, Glenda Jackson, Shah Ali Sarkar, Chandrakanta Nandy, Lady Pant, Ruma Guha Thakurata, Sabitabrata Dutta, Jamilla Massey, Nirmalendu Chowdhury and Radhakanta Nandy
- 2.6: Cheerful audiences enjoying the performances on a sunny summer's day
- 2.7: Souvenir programme of the event
- 2.8: Stewart performing in his leopard print attire
- 2.9: Lee and Dawn Brennan
- 3.1: Group singing at the Victory Day of Bangladesh, 1988
- 3.2: Audience for *Rabindra Jayanti* celebrations at the Indian YMCA London, 1975
- 3.3: Dan Jones's painting of anti-racist protests in Brick Lane, 1978
- 3.4: Dishari performing for the GLC Jobs for a Change Festival

3.5: Crowds—young and younger—listening to musical performances at the 1984 Bengali New Year celebrations at Trafalgar Square

3.6: An advertisement for the erstwhile Tagore restaurant, 1980s

3.7: Ganges restaurant in London's Soho district, 1960s

3.8: A musical performance in full swing at Salique's restaurant in the late 1980s

3.9: Mahmudur Rahman Benu

3.10: Haridas Ganguly singing for the Bangladesh Youth League, late 1980s

3.11: Himangshu accompanying on the harmonium at a Durga Puja in 1987

4.1: A portrait of Kacha Miah, as published in his songbook, *Monushotto* (Humanity)

4.2: Bauls, Shah Abdul Karim and Durbin Shah photographed at their joint visit to London

4.3: Karim during his second London visit

4.4: Doveton House in Bethnal Green, London

4.5: Shanur Miah at Sangeeta, early 2010s

4.6: Baul Shah Delwar Ali in conversation at the *Surma* office in Whitechapel

4.7: Front cover of *Bhaber shagor* by 'Probasi' (émigré) Rahim Uddin

4.8: A folio from Faruque's retrieved diary of songs written in London

4.9: Faruque in his early London days

Map of the British Isles (Source: 'The British Isles')



Map of Sylhet (Source: 'The roots and tales of the Bangladeshi settlers')



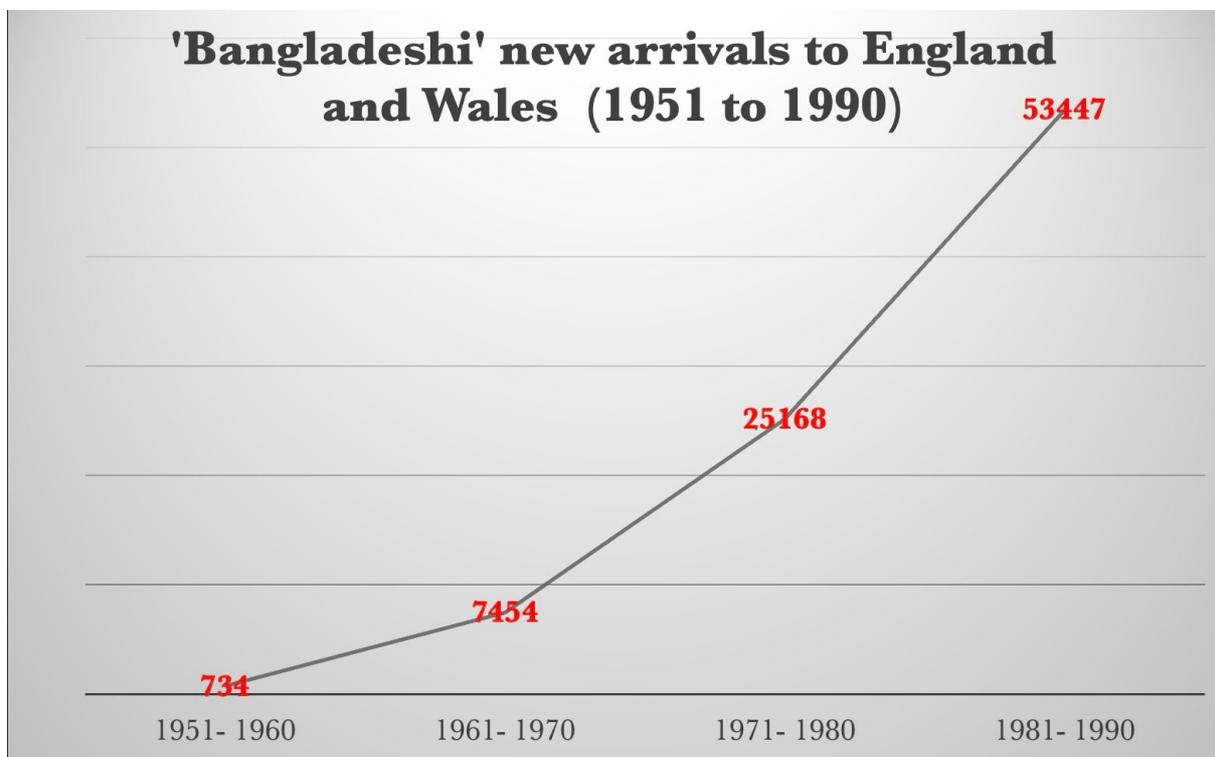
Map of Bangladesh (Source: 'A History of Bangladesh')



Map of West Bengal, India (Source: 'West Bengal since 1977')



Chart plotting the increasing 'Bangladesh' migration to England and Wales from 1951 to 1990



(Source of Dataset: Office for National Statistics, UK)

Introduction



5 September 2020, 7:56 pm.

Photograph: Budhaditya Bhattacharyya

92 Mile End Road, London E1 4UN: A few steps east of the Booth Memorial in Stepney Green by the A11, the adjacent pavement is dotted with shops, most of them Bengali-run. Tucked between a convenience store and the Dhaka Biryani lies Coffee House. A rather garish red, the bilingual shop front sprinkled with internet photos of cups of coffee and bread is not particularly attention-grabbing, as we can see. But for one reason. Below the 'COFFEE HOUSE' is no Bengali description of what they sell, or maybe it is. Instead, what adorns is the refrain of the widely popular Bengali singer Manna Dey's timeless melancholic 'Coffee House' song, 'Kofi hauser shei addata aaj ar nei, aaj ar nei. Kothay hariye gyalo shonali bikel gulo shei...' (No more are the Coffee House chats. Where are gone those golden afternoons?): a lament for long-lost comrades and muses, loves and lives, who once used to gather at Calcutta's iconic Indian Coffee House. Below, in miniscule Roman letters, is an invitation: 'Come in, have a Tea, Coffee, Cappucino Espress Lette, Chana Piaz, Fresh Bakery, Somosa and Singara. Open 7 days a week till late.'



Brick Lane, 1992.

Photograph: Raju Vaidyanathan

Somewhere in Brick Lane, as a vehicle vrooms past to recede in the distance, Bengali tunes reach floating to Peter Cusack's sound recorder. Shahnaz Rahmatullah's patriotic number 'Amay jodi proshno kore' (If I'm asked) is being played nearby, perhaps in a cassette shop or at a restaurant. One has to listen carefully to wade through the cacophony of the clacking of cutlery, traffic, men bantering in Sylheti, and someone asking for available parking space. As the din of daily life ebbs and flows, Rahmatullah's next song 'Ekbar jete de na amar chotto shonar gnay' (For once, please let me go to my tiny golden village), is on the tape. Soon after, the recording fades out...

Recording Source: "Your Favourite London Sounds"
British Library catalogue number: A40645

"Brick Lane", recorded live on location by Peter Cusack

Frozen above are different times, individuals going about their everyday lives, with three decades flowing in between. Yet they tell a similar story. Be it Manna Dey's 'Coffee House' printed on the signboard of Coffee House at Mile End Road or Shahnaz Rahmatullah's Bangladeshi nationalistic songs¹ wafting out in Brick Lane, deeply embedded in them is a sense of loss and pathos, a grieving for the idea of "home". Simultaneously, in each of these musical moments in time lay migrants' enterprise in keeping a community alive, fostering a sense of belonging, and endearing a faraway land, a Bengali Britain: from the invitation to have tea at Mile End Road in 2020 to friends laughing sometime in the 1990s. A people for whom music informs the basis of their daily existence, how do we reconstruct a history of these musical women, children, and men? How can we listen to their triumphs and tribulations, sufferings and solace, fights and friendships, the private and the public? This thesis is an attempt to chronicle their musics of migration, and the migration of their musics.

By the 1990s—what the second card represents — Bengalis in Britain, especially from the Sylhet district of Bangladesh, already had a sizeable community; the 1991 census recorded 162,835 Bangladeshis in England, Wales and Scotland.² However, it was Britain's post-war boom that paved the way for a steady rise in immigration, with job vacancies and increased demand for cheap labour, the former of which began to be filled by doctors from West Bengal joining the National Health Service (NHS), and the latter by Sylheti Muslims in much larger numbers, respectively.³ John Eade has noted that it was in the early 1960s when the period of settling began. This trend rose through the 1970s and 1980s in panicked response to anti-immigration British legislation, namely the 1972 Immigration Act, the 1981 British Nationality Act, and the 1988 Immigration Act; the late 1980s were marked by a rapid influx

¹ Sound recordist Peter Cusack captured what we hear in the 'Brick Lane' recording on location; 'Brick Lane' was released as part of a CD titled 'Your Favourite London Sounds'. To clarify, the music in 'Brick Lane' was not mixed or edited later. Also, Raju Vaidyanath's photograph of Brick Lane in 1992 bears no direct connection to Cusack's recording and is used solely for representational purposes.

² John Eade, Tim Vamplew, and Ceri Peach, "The Bangladeshis: The Encapsulated Community," in *Ethnicity in the 1991 Census*, vol. 3 (1996; HSMO, n.d.).

³ John Eade, "Bengalis in Britain: Migration, State Controls and Settlement.," in *Routledge Handbook of the South Asian Diaspora* (Taylor & Francis, 2013), 283.

of women and children joining what had been primarily a community of bachelors.⁴ Fighting cultural imposition in then-East Pakistan and subsequently authoritarian and religious exclusivist forces in independent Bangladesh, and simultaneously confronting racist movements in Britain, it was during these three decades—the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s—that the Bengali diaspora in Britain took shape, which is why I have chosen to zoom in on this time. Also, throughout this thesis, I remain interested in the political configurations of geographical Bengal, both before and after 1971: East Pakistan—which became Bangladesh—and the Indian state of West Bengal, which has existed since the formation of India as a modern, sovereign nation.⁵

In this thesis, I listen to previously unheard/less-heard histories of how women and men, on the one hand, mobilised their musical capital to exert citizenship and identity in twentieth-century Britain and, on the other, took refuge in music-making to sustain personal and familial intimacies. Through this process, my work seeks to trace the evolving contestations of “Bengaliness” against the backdrop of shifting political, socioeconomic, and cultural realities through the legacy and “new” musicalities of these people in Britain, and at a broader level, to understand the political underpinnings of 20th-century multicultural British society musically. This work contributes to the extensive literature on music research in twentieth-century diasporic contexts, particularly by ethnomusicologists from the 1990s onwards.⁶ Primarily undertaken by ethnomusicologists, attention to archival print sources has been less than warranted. In the context of the surge in anthropological research on the Bengali diaspora in Britain, particularly from the 1990s, this has also been the case.⁷ Using a

⁴ Eade, *Bengalis*. 287.

⁵ Before 1947, the vast colonial Bengal Residency’s borders were partitioned thrice, in 1874, 1905 and 1911.

⁶ It is not possible to cite all the literature here. For a selective area-wise list, see:

https://www.ethnomusicology.org/members/group_content_view.asp?group=144588&id=479944#PartIBiiSubgroup. Later in this Introduction, I will visit a selection of works in the context of South Asian diasporic music in Britain.

⁷ Anthropological research on Bengalis in Britain has surveyed a plethora of themes covering kinship, health, employment and religion, growing since the 1990s. See, for example, Katherine Gavron, “Migrants to Citizens: Changing Orientations among Bangladeshis of Tower Hamlets” (PhD Diss., LSE, 1997).; Roseanna Pollen, “Bangladeshi Family Life in Bethnal Green” (PhD Diss., LSE, 2002).; Katy Gardner, *Narrative, Age and Migration: Life History and the Life Course amongst Bengali Elders in London* (Berg, 2002).;

bricolage of old Bengali and English newspapers, archival records, ephemera, and conversations conducted in Bengali, Sylheti, and English, this historical study takes a step in the direction of recent scholars by paying equal heed to both the archive and the field.⁸

The “Making” in this thesis title is directly inspired by Edward Palmer Thompson’s classic, ‘The Making of the English Working Class’. Rather than being already a finished phenomenon, as Thompson has written, “*Making*, because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning.”⁹ Just like Thompson comments that the working class “did not rise like the sun at an appointed time [and] was present at its own making”, Bengalis in Britain, too, in many ways were the composers of their futures, and even when not allowed to be so, were the audiences of their histories being made. Besides Thompson, there are other resonances with proponents of the British Marxist school of historiography. Eric Hobsbawm explored the challenges of “writing the history of one’s own times”¹⁰ through the framework of “contemporary history... [which] is constructed for us and into which we fit our own experiences”.¹¹ Given that times overlap and, in this case, this work deals with living histories narrated by people who made and lived through them, it may be aptly called a “contemporary music history”.

Prelude

Journeys from Bengal to Britain have a long history. While knowledge of patrician Bengalis travelling to England from the eighteenth century onwards, either for education or travel, was documented, the unearthing of working-class migration required crucial revisionist

Benjamin Zeitlyn, “Growing up Glocal in London and Sylhet” (PhD Diss., University of Sussex, 2010).; Mohammad Mohsin, “An Investigation of Highly Skilled Bangladeshi Migration in the UK: A Micro Study of Edinburgh and London” (PhD Diss., University of Edinburgh, 2011).

⁸ For a precis of recent scholars triangulating archival and fieldwork methods, see the Methodology section of this Introduction.

⁹ EP Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Vintage Books, 1963), 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p 239.

¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (The New Press, 1997), 229.

interventions from Rosina Visram, which traced the history back to the sixteenth century.¹² From the mid-nineteenth century, several hundred Asians lived in Britain, with a diverse demography comprising exiled Indian nobility, students, businessmen, politicians, women activists, and barristers on one side, and the marginalised, like sailors, ayahs, and vagrant entertainers, on the other.¹³ Music-making was part of Bengal’s migrants’ experience from the onset. The following are a few snapshots that stitch together an inexhaustive history to place the musical histories of the focused decades—the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s — into context.

Jhulee Khan from Calcutta, who abandoned ship in 1841, eked out a living playing hornpipes and singing English songs in and around London and across towns in Scotland and England.¹⁴ The Christian missionary Henry Mayhew has written about “lascars”, “East Indians” who earned by playing the “tom-tom”, one of whom was “a very handsome man, swarthy even for a native of Bengal”.¹⁵ More evidence has since emerged regarding the musical lives of these sailors, albeit not always strictly in the context of Britain. Aboard the *Streefkerk*—a cargo ship sailing from India to Europe—on 15 April 1934, the Dutch musicologist Arnold Bake recorded sailors named ‘Sawabali’ and ‘Fayzullah’ singing *pir-murshidi* songs;¹⁶ Moushumi Bhowmik has worked with these recordings and further succeeded in reaching the voice of ‘Sawabali’ to his descendants.¹⁷ For what is, unfortunately, a largely unrecorded history, these shards of information do help in mapping out an idea about these sailing, peripatetic lives when they would have reached Britain.

¹²Rosina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700-1947* (Pluto Press, 1987), ix. It is difficult to pin down who might have been the first Bengali—or from Bengal—to have set foot in Britain. Recorded to have been ‘borne in the Bay of Bengala’, the earliest known is that of one baptised as ‘Peter’ on 22 December 1616, at St Dionis Backchurch in the City of London, in the presence of the Lord Mayor and Aldermen.

¹³Rosina Visram, *Asians in Britain* (Pluto Press, 2002), 44.

¹⁴Ibid. p 66. Also cited in Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, “Negotiating, Defending and Constructing ‘Bengali’ Identity through ‘Bengali’ Music: A Study of the Bangladeshi Community in London” (MMus Diss., 2018).

¹⁵Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, vol. 1 (Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1861). Also cited in Bhattacharyya. “Negotiating”.

¹⁶Songs sung in praise of spiritual guides or masters.

¹⁷Moushumi Bhowmik, “Incomplete Listening, Unfinished Writing: Sound and Silence in Archival Recordings from the Early Twentieth Century,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 44, no. 5 (September 3, 2021): 1000–1015.

When Kundan Lal Jalie ran the Hindustan Community House from 1937 to 1941 for the benefit of former “lascars” and Indians in East London, a gramophone was also offered to listen to “Indian music”.¹⁸ Given that Sylhetis comprised a sizeable percentage of the sailors from the subcontinent, particularly in East London, Bengali records would likely have been played, too. Also, it would not have been fortuitous to chance upon Bengali music records on sale in London by that time. As per a 1927 write-up in the *Daily Mail*, titled ‘Highbrows—And Others—Go to Buy Tunes’, the “cubicles in the audition room of a London gramophone shop” would at times see “a visit from Indian students, or other men of colour, who come to hear records especially procured for them” who could listen to an “Arab song” or “few minutes of Bengali humorous music”.¹⁹ As a passing reference, the fact that one Arthur Hutchinson broadcast a radio programme²⁰ introducing “gramophone records of popular music from Bengal” in October 1946 indicates that music records from South Asia, including Bengal, must have started to get some listenership in mainstream British society, as well.²¹ In 1949, the *Liverpool Echo* published a report on Eid-ul-Fitr celebrations by “Muslim seamen”, on the occasion of which both the Liverpool and Birkenhead sides of the Mersey seamen’s welfare organisations were to provide “special tea parties, film shows, and facilities for native sing-songs.”²²

Similarly, there are musical snippets audible from within aristocratic spaces. Most enamouring is the prominent Bengali cultural icon Rabindranath Tagore’s reminiscing of his first visit to England between 1878 to 1880 when an English lady—who addressed him as ‘Ruby’—would make him sing an eulogy for her husband in Raga Bihag, although ‘Ruby’ was not sure that the mood of Bihag gelled with the English lyric.²³ Moreover, he writes that

¹⁸ “First Report” (Hindustani Community House, April 1940). Available at the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

¹⁹ *Daily Mail Atlantic Edition*, May 29, 1927.

²⁰ It is not mentioned which station the programme was broadcast from.

²¹ *Radio Times*, October 11, 1946.

²² *Liverpool Echo*, July 25, 1949.

²³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Jibansmriti* (1912; repr., Viswa Bharati Granthalay, 1941), 164–84.

while he put up at a house near Regent's Park at the height of winter, a harmonium was his sole companion.²⁴ The same year Bake had recorded the sailors, he was requested by Mrs Emile Mond to present his singing and lecturing on “Indian music” at her home in Hyde Park Square in 1934, where he sang “an Easter song from Burgundy that [had] its replica in Bengal”, with the Maharaja of Burdwan in attendance.²⁵ Bijoy Chand Mahtab, the maharaja of the mofussil²⁶ town of Burdwan—once an important centre for Hindustani music practice²⁷—himself a patron and a gifted composer,²⁸ and a vocal supporter of the British Raj, was reported by the *London Evening Standard* as having “succeeded in amusing a distinguished gathering of Scotsmen” in Edinburgh in 1926.²⁹ Bijoy Chand played a chorus girl, although in his words, “[his] figure [might have been] against [him].”³⁰ In December 1933, one Mr Sen, who had a “vibrant and pleasing voice”, sang “Indian songs” to accompany a dance programme by one Miss Ishvani Goolbano, which included an “age-old” ‘Bengali Boatman’s Song’.³¹

One notable aspect of Bengalis’ early musical practices in Britain is the presence of women. Born to a Bengali Christian family in Calcutta, Bina Addy, a celebrated mezzo-contralto singer from Calcutta, and according to *Radio Times*, “the only Indian woman of professional standing to sing abroad”, performed for BBC Radio at least five times.³² The Bengali monthly literary magazine *Prabasi* featured a piece on the “*shongeeetnipuna*” (virtuoso) “Kumari” (unmarried woman) Bina Addho—“Addho” being the non-Anglicised version—which reported the plaudits that her singing of Tagore’s songs had earned in London, and

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *The Daily Telegraph*, 1934. Date unavailable.

²⁶ A rural or provincial area.

²⁷ For a summative history of Hindustani music in late Mughal Burdwan, see Richard David Williams, *The Scattered Court: Hindustani Music in Colonial Bengal* (University of Chicago Press, 2023), 24–49.

²⁸ For an overarching account on Bijoy Chand Mahtab, see Niradbaran Sarkar, *Bardhaman Ra Iitritta* (Sujata Sarkar, 1999).

²⁹ *London Evening Standard*, November 24, 1926.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *The Times London*, December 27, 1933.

³² *Radio Times*, November 27, 1931.

how she was eager to teach her vocal skills at Tagore's university after returning home.³³ Bina, during her tours of Britain, became one of the leading lights informing upper-class Britons about musical Bengaliness and Indianness, not only by performing Tagore songs but also by translating them for her listeners. While this thesis focuses on later decades, it is imperative that more research and writing be done on Bina Addy, a remarkable woman who finds little space in both music and women's history, not to mention Bengali music-making in Britain. Bina's presence in Britain was bright yet evanescent; she returned to Calcutta and passed away there in 1962.

Like Bina, there were other musicians—unfortunately anonymous—who were transient, if not by their physical presence, but by the limelight they could get. For instance, a Bengali graduate of the University of Edinburgh played “Indian” music, as *The Guardian* reported, “on an instrument said to be the father of all banjos and mandolins” at a celebration of the Hindu festival of Dusshera—signifying the triumph of good over evil—arranged by the World Fellowship of Faiths at the Dorchester Hotel in London in 1939.³⁴ For instance, the three unnamed women who sang an unaccompanied Bengali song at a weekend memorial meeting for Kasturba Gandhi—Indian nationalist and wife of Mahatma Gandhi—at the bare white basement of Swaraj House in London's Bloomsbury in the presence of a small gathering of “students, doctors, a seaman, or two...”³⁵

All the above-presented pieces of scattered evidence suggest that early Bengalis' musical practices in Britain were essentially taking place in parallel, either amidst elite, privately hosted gatherings or among sailors. There would be exceptions, such as Bina Addy, who appeared in Britain's music publics, including on radio broadcasts, as well as regaling people in intimate gatherings. These early histories, before a larger community settled, require

³³ ‘Londoney Shongitnipuna Bhodromohila’, *Prabasi*, 1932?. The National Library of India binding says Volume 1 Part 32. Given that magazine was started in 1901, the year—which is not very legible otherwise—should be 1932.

³⁴ *The Guardian*. 25 October 1939.

³⁵ *The Guardian*. 28 February 1944.

separate attention. However, even solitary instances, such as the sailors who attended Kasturba Gandhi's memorial service and listened to the Bengali song, are enough to question, for future research, to what extent these contrasting sound worlds coalesced, if they did at all.

Bengali Music and Migration in Britain: An Adumbration of Print and Audio Literature

Over the latter part of the twentieth century and the years following the new millennium, historians and anthropologists have taken a keen interest in diasporic cultures, resulting in a vast body of literature that is hardly comprehensively reviewable. To date, no written music history of Bengalis in Britain exists, except for lonely references or in footnotes, therefore making it easy to locate the lacuna in knowledge. The following is a survey of the resources that have been most useful in gathering a general idea of Bengali migration to Britain. I will begin by reviewing written histories before outlining audio literature that has emerged from oral history projects set up to record local stories in the diaspora. Although none of the works are ethno/musicological, I will scoop out traces of information on music from them that have served as lodestars for setting up my fieldwork and archival research. While literature reviews are often limited to secondary works, in this case, I have not adhered to the convention, as many of the following sources have emerged from a blend of local community research and the authors' lived experiences, thereby often obfuscating the distinctions between primary and secondary material.

One of the first sustained efforts to document the lives of early migrants from Bangladesh—sailors from Sylhet in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s who stayed on in Britain—was initiated by Caroline Adams. A volunteer for the Cathedral Relief Service in Calcutta during the 1971 war, Adams had the opportunity to visit Bangladesh soon after, before starting to work as a youth community worker at the Inner London Education Authority

(ILEA) neighbourhood project in Tower Hamlets in 1974. Listening to elders' stories of their erstwhile mariner lives, after her return to Bangladesh in 1980, led to this trailblazing project. Published in 1987, her book 'Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers' was a conscious effort to give primacy to the sailors' voices, through presenting a transcript of the audio interviews.³⁶ Although Adams's book gives very little idea of the musical lives of early Bengali immigrants, it is well possible that the original audio tapes deposited at the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives—closed for eighty-four years under current data legislation—contain more; redacted copies of the same are being made public under an ongoing project in 2024.

Nurul Islam, in his *Probashir Kotha* (Tales of Immigrants), wrote an ambitious and grand history of Bengali migration in 1989. Born in 1932 in Sylhet and a London resident until his recent passing in 2022, Islam's tome is pioneering yet also somewhat scattered. Divided into five sections, the first is a study of Bengalis in *bilat/bilet* (Britain), the Middle East, Canada, Latin America, Australia and New Zealand, although with a notable focus on movements from Sylhet. Next are dedicated sections on older and younger migrants, with the concluding one focusing on the Bangladeshi freedom movement, and an appendix listing London's Bangladeshi-run "Indian" restaurants from the late 1980s. Islam's sociopolitical history has fleeting cultural references, for example, Ayub Ali Master—a sailor and one of the early prominent figures of the Bengali community in Britain—and Samad Chowdhury's encounter with Rabindranath Tagore in New York in 1920, when Chowdhury recited his self-written poem. The music of Bengali Britain is hard to come across in *Probashir Kotha*.³⁷

Four years after Islam, Yousuf Chowdhury published a history of "Bangladeshi" settlers in Britain, although almost entirely focused on Sylhetis. Part-autobiography and part-first-hand account, Chowdhury, originally from Sylhet and a resident of Birmingham until his death, not only tracked the movement of Sylheti seamen but also crucially discussed their political

³⁶ Caroline Adams, *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: Life Stories of Pioneer Sylheti Settlers in Britain* (Eastside Books, 1994).

³⁷ Nurul Islam, *Prabashir Kotha* (Prabasi Pabalikesanas, 1989).

involvement, including mentioning that the well-known Indian nationalist, Bipin Chandra Pal—who hailed from Poil, Habiganj, Sylhet—had “close connections with his fellow Sylheti seamen too”;³⁸ Pal had come to London in 1898 to study Theology. Significantly, Chowdhury’s work is an important counternarrative to the general discourse of the Sylheti as “uneducated” and Sylhet being—in his words—“a desert full of homeless wanderers”.³⁹ Besides the text, Chowdhury’s photographs, taken mainly in Birmingham but also in East London and Luton, are invaluable visual archives, from which I have drawn in chapters 1 and 2, respectively. Besides testimonies on Birmingham’s “Indian” curry trade, Chowdhury’s retelling of his fortuitous journey to his village to get his young daughter in battle-ravaged East Pakistan, and subsequently the moments of Bangladesh’s victory among the community in Birmingham, is one of the few available written accounts.⁴⁰ Although a separate account of cultural activities, such as music and dance, is missing, they are peppered throughout. Chowdhury’s note that higher numbers of “singers, dancers, religious personalities and so on”⁴¹ started visiting the British Bangladeshi community in the 1970s has been a helpful reference point for formulating this thesis’s third chapter.

Similar to Nurul Islam, Ghulam Murshid produced a wide history of Bengalis in Britain, *Kalapanir Hatchani* (The Call of the Sea), focusing primarily from the nineteenth century onwards. After an initial overview of early scattered arrivals from Bengal starting from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, this work tracks a rising trend in the 1800s among the Bengali elite to make the voyage to Britain for education, especially law, to qualify for the bar, prepare for the Indian Civil Service, and also medicine. Especially helpful is the exposition on the poet cum playwright cum composer Dwijendralal Roy. Dwijendralal’s father, Kartikeya Chandra, was highly trained in Hindustani classical music, and therefore, it was easy for him

³⁸ Yousuf Chowdhury, *The Roots and Tales of the Bangladeshi Settlers* (Sylhet Social History Group, 1993), 91.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 155-177.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

to pick up on the tradition. Murshid identifies Dwijendralal as one of the progenitors of Bengali music, who also drew upon Western music after being introduced to it during his time in England as a student.⁴² Other chapters include one on early Bengali women in Britain and one on the travel literature generated by Bengalis from overseas trips before tracing the roots of a Bengali community in Britain, mainly after—in Murshid’s opinion—crossing the seas became less taboo. It was only during the 1930s that there was a proliferation of South Asian sailors, many from Sylhet, who began to settle in Britain.

The remainder of the work comprises contemporary history, events, and times that the London-resident Murshid personally witnessed and experienced. More related to my work have been references to music and dance in the community, mostly the author’s narrative of his personal experiences.⁴³ While Murshid discusses Sylheti patronage of dancers, musicians, and artists from West Bengal and Bangladesh, besides music-making on the occasions of Bengali New Year, Baisaki Mela, and *Bhasha Dibosh* (Bengali Language Martyrs’ Day), his otherwise useful account of the music is also problematic and exclusionary. At times, bordering on being explicit, Murshid’s reservation of the label “*shikhhito Bangali*” (educated Bengali) for people from Dhaka or Calcutta risks undermining the local knowledge networks of those from Sylhet. For instance, according to Murshid, the so-called educated Bengalis from West Bengal have been interested in Christmas and New Year’s festivities, but not the majority population from Bangladesh, a clear reference to Sylhetis.⁴⁴ Also, surprisingly, there is no mention of the *Baul-Fakir* homely soirees, mainly within the Sylheti networks, which gives a false impression that whatever music the Bengalis have had in Britain was predominantly in the so-called educated spheres. Throughout my work, I have attempted to challenge this simplistic and perhaps unintentionally discriminatory narrative.

⁴² Ghulam Murshid, *Kalapanir Hatchani* (Obosor, 2008), 112.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 264–266.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Most recently, in 2021, Faruque Ahmed came up with *Bilate Bangali Obhibashon* (Bengali Settlement in Britain). Ahmed begins with the East India Company period to write about Bengali sailors aboard the company ships. Much of the first section of the book reiterates Murshid; two subsections on Bengalis who travelled to Britain for education and Bengali women in England are even named the same. Ahmed's originality lies in his community research and lived experiences, information that is unlikely to be found in institutional archives. Fascinating is his excavation of stories of routes of illegal migration from Dhaka and Sylhet—starting from the 1970s—when people would enter Britain forging their photos on someone else's passport, a practice then commonly known as “photo altering”; such forged passports were called *gola kata passport* (throat cut) as the images of the original holder were replaced.⁴⁵ *Bilate Bangali Obhibashon* is a medley of different topics, including a history of Bengali religious practices in Britain through a list of mosques and Bengali Islamic organisations, data on Bengali student organisations, the anti-racist movement, the squatting movement, and multiple chapters on the restaurant trade. There is a retrospective, cursory note on Bengali musical and dance practices, although it serves the purpose of giving the reader an idea that music and dance have indeed been a part of the community. Concerning Ahmed's extensive writing, primarily in Bengali but also in English, it is worth noting that his work on Bengali print journalism in Britain has been instrumental in locating old newspapers, which are one of the primary sources in this project. As I learned from Ahmed, he was entrusted with the personal newspaper collections of the then-elders in the community, which led to his decision to write a book on it. Arranged chronologically as per the date of the first issue, ‘Bengali Journals and Journalism in the UK’ documents one hundred and seven Bengali newspapers, journals and periodicals published in Britain from 1916 to 2004.⁴⁶ A fraction of these sources is archived at the British Library and the Tower Hamlets Local

⁴⁵ Faruque Ahmed, *Bilate Bangali Obhibashon* (University Press, 2021), 175–77.

⁴⁶ Faruque Ahmed, *Bengali Journals and Journalism in the UK* (The Ethnic Minorities Original History and Research Centre, 2008).

History Library and Archives. Ahmed, too, sadly, has been able to hold on to only a tiny portion of his received collections owing to multiple shifts in residences and a lack of space. Still, it is not unsurprising to stumble upon a rare old newspaper or two raising their heads from heaps of archival materials at Ahmed's musty Enfield garden shed.

Adhering to the frameworks of 'diaspora' and 'identity'—I deal with these in the following section—Claire Alexander, Joya Chatterji and Annu Jalais, in 'The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration', have combined disciplines like history, anthropology, and sociology, to trace the movement of Muslim migrants across Bangladesh, India, and Britain, and resultantly, challenge homogeneous assumptions and attitudes to 'Muslim' migrants.⁴⁷ Although music and sound are not central enquiries to this work, there are scattered references. The one on Surojit's—the headmaster of a high school in the Muslim-majority district of Murshidabad in West Bengal—view that the Prophet liked music, and that Hindu and Muslim children should learn to celebrate their musical heritage, helps to understand how music feeds into a larger Bengali cultural ethos, which cuts across religious compartmentalisations.⁴⁸ Of Bengali Britain, there are passing references to music, for example, a weekend "sitar fusion music" concert in Bethnal Green in 2008 to mark *Ekushe*, remembering the Bangladeshi Language Martyrs.⁴⁹ Like most ethnographic writings, this original research will likely double up as primary materials for future historians. Reflexively, the nugget of information on Bethnal Green helped me gather an idea of musical practices in the neighbourhood of my residence during fieldwork. Also, as a general resource, it is worth mentioning the literature review compiled by Claire Alexander, Shahzad Firoz and Naaz Rashid; they have acknowledged research on cultural practices on Asian popular youth

⁴⁷ Claire Alexander, Joya Chatterji, and Annu Jalais, *The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration* (Routledge, 2016).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 92.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 191-192.

culture, including the Asian Dub Foundation and the Rich Mix Centre, but these fall outside the purview of my thesis.⁵⁰

Now that I have delineated the most prominent print literature, let me visit the audio sources. An extensive audio documentation project has been undertaken by the Swadhinata Trust, a London-based “secular” Bengali community group, operating since November 2000, which “promotes Bengali history and culture to ensure its representation as an essential part of the history of Britain and by extension, our contemporary world”.⁵¹ Led by the volunteering efforts of Ansar Ahmed Ullah, Jamil Iqbal, Riza Momin, Julie Begum, and Val Harding, the trust recorded the initial batch of oral history interviews in 2006 as part of their ‘Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain’ project, now archived at the Bishopsgate Institute in London. Organised into three main strands, the first two strands dealt with people’s memories of erstwhile East Pakistan and the liberation war, as well as the involvement of the Bengali community in local British politics, respectively. The third strand, although labelled ‘popular culture’, almost solely concentrated on musicians. Counting in their new project, launched in October 2019 in association with the British Library, ‘A History of Bengali Music and Musicians in the UK’, there are forty-seven sessions of audio interviews containing musical material, excluding an interview of mine that Val Harding conducted in March 2023; some of the interviewees are common to both projects. The main themes that come out of the same are i) Listening practices and technologies; ii) Pedagogy and associations of “Bengaliness” with “classical” music in Britain; and iii) British Asian music. The first two bear relevance to my project’s timeline.

Deposited at the British Library, the Bengali singer-songwriter, archivist, and music researcher, Moushumi Bhowmik’s ‘Moushumi Bhowmik Collection’ is a part of the

⁵⁰ Claire Alexander, Shahzad Firoz, and Naaz Rashid, *The Bengali Diaspora in Britain: A Review of the Literature* (N.P: Bangla Stories, 2010).

⁵¹ “About Us - Swadhinata Trust Organisation,” Swadhinata Trust Organisation, November 14, 2023, <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/about-us/>.

‘Migration, Memory and Music’ recordings. Ten files have been digitised and made publicly accessible, with the remainder yet to be completed. As of 2023, a copy of the same is now available at the Mayday Rooms in London. As informative and insightful as the Swadhinata Trust interviews are, the main difference with Bhowmik’s ones lies in the latter’s more informal and relaxed tone and a felt sense of belonging, quite possibly due to her personal history of comings and goings to and from London over the past three decades; in one recording, Bhowmik’s colleague, the sound recordist Sukanta Majumdar is heard frantically seeking out a pair of batteries from the nearest supermarket in Bethnal Green to save a dying voice recorder. The recordings do not stick to the conventional question-and-answer format and are often conversations, which is helpful, as this approach likely brings out the best in the musicians and makes them more revealing. Recorded in August 2006 and March 2008, these group conversations, which capture several stages of migration, revolve around several recurring themes, including the idea of ‘home’ and identity politics. For example, we get to listen to one flautist, Manik Miah, who arrived in the UK in 1969, as well as the British-born sisters, Nieema and Nazia. The sessions with Baul Shohid, Ahmed Moyez, and members of the now-defunct Sylheti Baul Shongith Gushti (Bethnal Green Bauls) have directly influenced the laying out of the groundwork for working with Baul and related musics in Britain. Although material and conversation on the history of early musical gatherings is hard to come by, the recording of the Bethnal Green Bauls is a crucial document for imagining the time and space of the early era due to the presence and participation of those who lived through that time.

“*Amra shobai Hamleti*” (We are all Hamleti): Contribution to Scholarship and Research Questions

It was 5 October 2021. The fallen leaves lining up Bethnal Green Road signalled that summer was over. The evening came shrouded with the annual autumnal London mist.

Taking advantage of relaxed lockdown restrictions amidst what was still an ongoing pandemic, I walked to Brick Lane, where I met two elderly Sylheti gentlemen, Mohammad Sharuk and Dabir Miah. On that particular evening, a constant drizzle added to a certain mysteriousness, leaving the lit-up minaret of the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid barely visible. As I listened to their early memories of visiting the Naz Cinema and their love for buying music, Sharuk, weaving between Sylheti and Bengali, came up with what he said was a jokey comment, “*Amra shobai Hyamleti*” (We’re all *Hamleti*).⁵² On the spot, clearly in my head, he was referring to their long lives spent in Tower Hamlets. I understood *Hamleti* to be a creative expression of belonging.

The conversation shifted elsewhere. This was our only dialogue, and although I bumped into Sharuk and Dabir at least twice in the coming months, the chance to chat never occurred again. However, his *Hamleti* reference—probably his neologism, unlike the in-vogue *Londoni*—lingered on, leading me to an imaginative track of questions. Was he indicating *Hamleti* as his/their identity, or could he also mean it in the sense of them being citizens of Tower Hamlets? For Sharuk, could non-Bengali residents of Tower Hamlets also be *Hamleti*? We do not know what Sharuk’s answers to these questions might have been, or whether he would have questioned them in the first place. However, this meeting inclined me to think about the frameworks of ‘diaspora’, ‘identity’ and ‘citizenship’ as the ones in which this thesis could be grounded. I decided to adopt the twin academic track of ‘citizenship’ and ‘identity’ over ‘diaspora’; I will later present my reasoning behind deciding against ‘diaspora’. In this section, I outline a roadmap for how this work aims to advance ongoing debates concerning the allied frameworks of ‘identity’ and ‘citizenship’.

According to the Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries (OLD), ‘identity’ has two meanings: “what or who somebody is” and “the characteristics, feelings, or beliefs that make people different

⁵² Personal fieldnotes. 5 October 2021.

from others”.⁵³ Finding it implausible to put up a standard definition for ‘identity’, Florian Coulmas has listed a few substitutable words such as “authenticity”, “character”, “commonality”, “distinctiveness” and “exclusivity”, over “individuality” and “self”.⁵⁴ In the traditional sense, as the OLD entry goes, ‘citizenship’ refers to “the legal right to belong to a particular country”;⁵⁵ ‘citizen’, however, goes beyond a strict legal sense to also include “a person who lives in a particular place”.⁵⁶ Till today, the majority of research seeks to understand ‘citizenship’ in its scope granted by the rule of law, “which...presupposes an unmistakable identity for everyone.”⁵⁷ In the context of a nation-state, someone holding its citizenship—attested in documents like passports—will allow them to live in the country, access state benefits, and, in turn, require them, in certain circumstances to pay taxes. Overarchingly, my research contributes to the growing corpus of ‘citizenship’ studies, which expands conventional notions of citizenship through examining it as a claim to social belonging and the struggles involved in achieving equitable distribution.⁵⁸ In this thesis, ‘cultural citizenship’—to quote Aihwa Ong—as a “dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state” has been critical towards studying musical practices in the background of social and political shifts,⁵⁹ and also in terms of thinking about citizenship in terms of social inclusion and belonging.⁶⁰ To listen to migrants’ musicality in the making of the musical citizen in Bengali Britain—those who did not hold a legal citizenship status, and those who despite being legal citizens still remained excluded from the citizenry—I build on Jean Beaman’s inclusive theory of cultural citizenship geared

⁵³ “Identity Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com,” Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com, 2019, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/identity?q=identity>.

⁵⁴ Florian Coulmas, *Identity: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 18, <https://academic.oup.com/book/811>.

⁵⁵ “Citizenship | OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com”.

⁵⁶ “Citizen | OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com”.

⁵⁷ Coulmas, *Identity*, 70.

⁵⁸ Engin F Isin and Bryan S Turner, *Handbook of Citizenship Studies* (Sage, 2002).

⁵⁹ Aihwa Ong, “Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States,” *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 5 (December 1996): 739.

⁶⁰ Gerard Delanty, “Two Conceptions of Cultural Citizenship: A Review of Recent Literature on Culture and Citizenship.”, *Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1, no. 3 (2002): 60–66.

to study marginalised populations, which in his words provides “full societal belonging” by fellow members of society.⁶¹

In the realm of ethnomusicology and music studies, ‘identity’ as a research theme has been studied for way longer than ‘citizenship’. While Martin Stokes has identified the genesis of ‘citizenship’ in ethnomusicology as recently as 2011,⁶² Timothy Rice has observed that ‘identity’ probably entered the lexicon in the 1950s through Erik Erikson’s work on the developmental stages of the individual;⁶³ Nolan Warden has located one of the earliest uses of ‘identity’ by the ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood in 1958, who used it more in the sense of uniqueness, even before Erikson published.⁶⁴

Ethnomusicologists have yet to agree on a framework/frameworks for either, according to Timothy Rice’s stocktaking—although limited to America—of ‘identity’⁶⁵ and Martin Stokes’ very recent reading of ‘citizenship’;⁶⁶ Warden has cast a wider eye, building on Rice’s article, to come to a similar conclusion.⁶⁷ More than analysing individual self-identity, ‘identity’ has been used to study groups of people, positioned into ‘essentialist’ and ‘constructivist’; the former tied to intrinsic qualities of group behaviour thought to be unchangeable, while the latter forwarding the fragility, contingency and instability of identity, ‘always constructed from the cultural resources available at any moment.’⁶⁸ Following a search across three top ethnomusicological journals, Rice has noticed a consistent deployment of the term in the 1980s, after it gained prominence as a psychosocial category of analysis in sociology and

⁶¹ Jean Beaman, “Citizenship as Cultural: Towards a Theory of Cultural Citizenship,” *Sociology Compass* 10, no. 10 (October 2016): 849–57.

⁶² Martin Stokes, *Music and Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 49–76.

⁶³ Timothy Rice, *Modeling Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 142.

⁶⁴ Nolan Warden, “Ethnomusicology’s ‘Identity’ Problem: The History and Definitions of a Troubled Term in Music Research,” *El Oido Pensate* 4, no. 2 (2016): 12.

⁶⁵ Timothy Rice, *Modeling Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 139–60.

⁶⁶ Martin Stokes, *Music and Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁶⁷ Nolan Warden, “Ethnomusicology’s ‘Identity’ Problem: The History and Definitions of a Troubled Term in Music Research,” *El Oido Pensate* 4, no. 2 (2016): 5–25.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

anthropology in the 1960s. Warden has underlined the work of Regula Qureshi in Canada's migrant communities and Gilles Potvin's research on Canadian media autonomy in 1972 as a shift in the trend of focus of identity towards groups, especially 'ethnic identity' and 'cultural identity'.⁶⁹

Continuation of the 'individual-group' turn in ethnomusicology through the 1980s was not isolated, but rather in conjunction—if not inspired by—with a larger ethnographic concern with problematising the term 'culture'; identity was formative and resultative, implying it to be wider.⁷⁰ In the 1990s, ethnomusicologists' understanding of human society as "“fragmented” and “deterritorialized”" was informed by the unknitting of traditional ethnic, national, gender, and class identities to then-increased transnational sociocultural, economic and geographical mobility; it was the constructive approach that was seen as the most appropriate.⁷¹

'Citizenship' and 'Identity' are interacting elements in this thesis, and certainly not mutually exclusive. I am interested in observing whether ethnonationalist tendencies go hand in hand with "citizenship's provocative formulations of 'a fantasy of political belonging without 'identity'"",⁷² whether Bengalis' 'ethnic' music-making in Britain have also been—to borrow from Engin Isin and Greg Nielsen—"acts of citizenship", occurring in everyday life that transcend the legal parameters for formal British citizenship.⁷³ To reiterate myself, 'citizenship' does not make 'identity' a redundant ethnomusicological theme, but makes both inseparable in my case. To take care of the conflicting yet complementary terms, 'citizenship' and 'identity', the "musical citizen" in this dissertation leans on Rosie Roberts's recent neologism 'citizenly identities', which she has used to "acknowledge the agency of people in

⁶⁹ Warden, 12.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 14.

⁷¹ Rice, *Modeling*, 141.

⁷² Stokes. *Music and Citizenship*, 50.

⁷³ Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, eds., *Acts of Citizenship* (Zed Books, 2008), 2.

shaping their translocal and transnational memberships and identifications and to argue that citizenship represents a process of becoming where official designations do not always align with subjective affiliations.”⁷⁴ Reflecting again on Sharuk’s comments, would the musical *Hamleti* in him compartmentalise his participation in local soirees as just imaginative links to ‘homeland’ or the mere organisational ability to do the same as stepping stones to performances of citizenship in a country that gradually became ‘home’? It is these questions that have urged me to let both these themes run through the thesis.

Before proceeding further, I shall explain why I have chosen ‘identity’ and ‘citizenship’ over ‘diaspora’, the latter of which skyrocketed in music studies in the 1990s.⁷⁵ Precisely, what has been considered a strength of “diaspora”—as Thomas Solomon has pointed out—in understanding the portability of sound in understanding diasporic cultural deterritorialisation, and the ability to generate pleasurable experiences in creating a diasporic consciousness,⁷⁶ also risks either romanticisation or sanitisation of the everyday realities of migrant lives. Citing the crucial scholarship of ethnomusicologist Charles Keil—who revealed the crudity of racial myth-making—and Paul Gilroy—who theorised ‘diaspora’ against questions of artistic legacies of slavery—among others, Martin Stokes has noted that “to speak about diaspora rather than migration in this context was to talk about scenes of violent and traumatic displacement, scatterings haunted by painful and irretrievable origin myths, and highly-refracted communication across global spaces.”⁷⁷ Despite this literature being unquestionably crucial in working towards institutional Global North-South equalities, using ‘diaspora’ in such a reformative sense would be presumptuous of inherent violence and trauma in Britain’s Bengali communities and, more impetuously, blanket experiences of even elite, rich Bengalis with those of the working-class, the lesser-offs. Having advocated the

⁷⁴ Rosie Roberts, *Ongoing Mobility Trajectories: Lived Experiences of Global Migration* (Springer, 2019), 139–68.

⁷⁵ Thomas Solomon, “Theorizing Diaspora and Music,” *Urban People* 17, no. 2 (2015): 202.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Martin Stokes, “Migration and Music,” *Music Research Annual* 1 (2020): 4.

consideration of diasporas as “not things...but provisional categories for the understanding of complex and variegated social and cultural processes”, Thomas Solomon has admitted that ‘diaspora’ as a “critical category...may eventually outlive its usefulness...at which point it will simply be necessary to find new categories for understanding the constantly evolving roles and uses of music in...social life”.⁷⁸ ‘Identity’ and ‘citizenship’ jointly serve the purpose, at least for now.

My thesis breaks ground not only in offering the first written musical history of Bengali Britain, but also in situating the musical citizen simultaneously in the domains of public affect and the emotions of the self. In the following chapters, I aim to understand the evolution of the musical citizen by shedding light on how citizenship—in its sensory, corporeal, embodied and emotional meanings—(mutually) feeds into the making of a neo-cultural polity. To do this, I draw upon the notion of ‘sensory citizenship’ as proposed in an edited volume by Susanna Trnka, Christine Dureau and Julie Park, which looks into how the bodily sensory faculties and constituted feelings mediate and “[are] mediated by state and other forms of citizenship”.⁷⁹ I extend the framework of ‘sensory citizenship’ to addressing—in Stokes’s words—‘the ambiguity and ambivalence at the heart of the questions about “control”, “access”, and “identity” confront[ing] the citizen today’’, in regards to which “neither state [in my case, the publics, in general] nor individual is sovereign”.⁸⁰ Although acoustics has been central to historicising musical citizenship in Bengali Britain, this project has been multisensorial, branching out to the visual, spatial, and even the olfactory. Through the attempt to pay equal heed to the spectacles of media and the public, as well as the invisibility and inaudibility of the mundane, my work resonates with Uri Linke—who draws from

⁷⁸ Solomon, “Theorizing Diaspora and Music”. 214.

⁷⁹ Susanna Trnka, Christine Dureau, and Julie Park, *Senses and Citizenships* (Routledge, 2013). 2.

⁸⁰ Stokes. *Music and Citizenship*, 75-76.

Michael Billig—to stress that usually unnoticed activities, such as cooking and listening to music, can be equally formative in citizen-making.⁸¹

The role of music and sound in “marking and making political orientation, aspirations, and sentiment” and collective identity⁸² has been acknowledged. Trnka et al refer to the example of the ‘Africanisation’ of choirs after the consecration of Desmond Tutu as Archbishop of Cape Town, as representative of the “incipient citizenship of South Africa’s disenfranchised millions”.⁸³ Gregory Booth has picked on the voices of Indian playback singers and song lyrics to unravel their emotional responses to memory, nationalism, and gender.⁸⁴ Ilana Webster-Kogen’s study on the Ethiopian community in Tel Aviv⁸⁵ and Siv B. Lie’s work on the jazz associations of France’s Manouche,⁸⁶ a long-settled Roma community in Alsace, serve as examples of investigation of how music’s agentic qualities and images are experienced “from below” by minorities to redress “the imbalances of ‘cultural’ citizenship...and [enable] the simultaneous address of the minoritised group and the broader society”. Chiming with ‘sensory citizenship’, Martin Stokes has identified ethnomusicology’s engagement with ‘intimate citizenship’ in the 2010s as reactive to and informed by Ken Plummer’s ‘intimate politics’ of having (or not) control over one’s body, feelings; access (or not) to public spaces; and choices (or not) regarding identities, gender, and eroticism.⁸⁷

Before the ‘citizenly turn’ in ethnomusicology, the ‘identity’ framework helped to study four roles of music, as Timothy Rice has outlined: how “music gives shape to a preexisting or emergent identity”, how “musical performance provides the opportunity for communities sharing an identity to see themselves in action and to imagine others who might share the

⁸¹ Ibid. 28.

⁸² Ibid. 21.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 161-188.

⁸⁵ Ilana Webster-Kogen, *Citizen Azmari* (Wesleyan University Press, 2018).

⁸⁶ Siv B Lie, *Django Generations* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

⁸⁷ Martin Stokes, *Music and Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 2023). 49-76.

same style of performance”, how “music may contribute to an identity its ‘feel’ or affective quality”, how “music gives to an identity, especially a subaltern identity, a positive valence.”⁸⁸

The most relevant case study to this work is the British Asian music scene, although I stop just before its full-fledged emergence in the early 1990s. Studying Najma Akhtar’s ghazal record and the evolution of the ‘rural folk’ dance form of Punjab, Bhangra, Sabita Banerji forecasted the beginnings of a process of hybridisation of sound and its characteristic cultural duality as decisive factors in South Asian communities’ acceptance or rejection by White British society.⁸⁹ Tracing the earliest “traditional” Bhangra performances in Britain to the 1960s, until 1984, Gerd Baumann, too, predicted Bhangra to represent the ‘new’ sound of the 1990s, especially pointing towards its interaction with Afro-American and Anglo-American popular music.⁹⁰ Focusing on the collaboration of the British Indian producer Bally Sagoo with a ‘white’ male dance-hall rapper Cheshire Cat, Gayatri Gopinath, in a 1995 article, forwarded understandings of Bhangra as a diasporic text.⁹¹ The edited compendium, *Dis-Orienting Rhythms*, critiqued how the ‘new’ Asian dance culture can work to give rise to anti-imperialist projects, and Banerji and Bauman’s readings of Bhangra as sounding a static Asian identity in Britain.⁹² Aware of the British Asian musician’s hesitation to accept their conscious fusion of musical elements from the ‘West’ and the ‘East’, Martin Clayton pointed out their deliberate attempts to express or even forge a distinct British Asian identity.⁹³ In the context of London’s British Bangladeshi community, Nilanjana Bhattacharjya in her PhD thesis, argued that the selection of commercially successful British Asian musicians like

⁸⁸ Timothy Rice, *Modeling Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 139–60.

⁸⁹ Sabita Banerji, “Ghazals to Bhangra in Great Britain,” *Popular Music* 7, no. 2 (May 1988): 207–13.

⁹⁰ Gerd Baumann, “The Re-Invention of Bhangra. Social Change and Aesthetic Shifts in a Punjabi Music in Britain,” *The World of Music* 32, no. 2 (1990): 81–98.

⁹¹ Gayatri Gopinath, “‘Bombay, U.K., Yuba City’: Bhangra Music and the Engendering of Diaspora,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 4, no. 3 (1995): 303–21.

⁹² Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma, *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music* (Zed Books, 1997).

⁹³ Martin Clayton, “‘You Can’t Fuse Yourself’: Contemporary British-Asian Music and the Musical Expression of Identity.,” *East European Meetings in Ethnomusicology* 5 (1998): 73–87.

Deedar and Sam Zaman, Dr. Das, Ansar Ahmed Ullah and DJ Ritu, as judges in the Banglatown Sounds competition, was an attempt to place British Bangladeshi identity under, according to her, a “more desirable realm of British Asian identity”.⁹⁴

Most of the above-engaged, or indeed, existing scholarship has either emphasised the public or, to a lesser extent, the private. My work hopes to look into both from the perspective of another, and linked spaces, what Richard David Williams has termed the ‘networked sphere’.⁹⁵ Martin Stokes has noted the utility of ‘intimate’ citizenship in reading the ‘diva citizen’ and how “‘star’ bodies and voices are pressed into citizenly signification”.⁹⁶ In centre staging the senses—whether it be in analysing archival material or fieldwork—we aim to go beyond “star bodies and voices” and also listen to, in Eric Hobsbawm’s words, ‘uncommon people’, working women and men, who have been assigned to oblivion, and yet contributed to changing the course of history.⁹⁷ Through effectivising and affectivising the complex sensorium of the migrant in Bengali Britain—which “sensory citizenship” enables— this dissertation writes a new history of Bengalis in Britain, how music gives migrant lives a new meaning, a new purpose, and a new nest. In summary, the research questions of this thesis can be framed as:

1. How does studying musical practices help understand the unities and fractures in Bengaliness in the backdrop of evolving political, socioeconomic and cultural realities in *desh* (home) and *bidesh* (away)?
2. What was the role of music-making in
 - i. creating musical publics?
 - ii. fostering personal and familial intimacies?

⁹⁴Nilanjana Bhattacharjya, “AESTHETIC FUSIONS: BRITISH ASIAN MUSIC and DIASPORA CULTURE” (PhD Diss., 2007).

⁹⁵Richard David Williams, *The Scattered Court: Hindustani Music in Colonial Bengal* (University of Chicago Press, 2023), 24–49.

⁹⁶Martin Stokes, *Music and Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 49–76.

⁹⁷Eric John Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz* (Abacus, 2012).

3. Did music give “subaltern” musical citizens a “positive valence” in Bengali Britain?

“Why don’t you speak in Bengali?”: Addressing the Sylheti-Bengali Debate

My first brush with Sylheti occurred during a nervous exchange of pleasantries with a Border Guard Bangladesh officer at the Dawki Indo-Bangladesh border in 2008. To the guard’s query in chaste Sylheti about where I was visiting from, I had replied that I was doing alright, much to his frustration. Cut to an anthropology lecture at the London School of Economics in 2015: personal excitement for coming across something of “my” culture, a YouTube Sylheti rap video, quickly fizzled out after discovering the unintelligibility of what the rapper meant to convey. Successive trips to Banglatown from Aldwych deepened my impression of the Sylheti language, but it sounded nothing like Bengali to me.

Yet the sights, sounds and smells of the East End could not have been more familiar. Before commencing doctoral fieldwork, these experiences and my master’s fieldwork in East London had already made me aware of the need to consider the challenges of working with Sylheti speakers. What further emboldened this Sylheti-Bengali issue was an informal, collegial conversation that I had with an Oxonian fellow PhD student at the British Library around November 2019. Also born and brought up in West Bengal, he casually narrated how he could not make out a single word of a Sylheti shopkeeper in Brick Lane, recalling with laughter how he had retorted, “Why don’t you speak in Bengali?”

Approximately 95% of the British-Bangladeshi population is Sylheti in origin.⁹⁸ Sylheti is still not recognised as a language but instead marked as a “dialect” of “standard” Bengali in Bangladesh, India, or the UK, which hosts the largest Sylheti diaspora. The absence of

⁹⁸ Zahir Ahmed and Katy Gardner, “Fast-Footed Sylhetis,” in *The Bangladesh Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Meghna Guhathakurta and William van Schendel (Duke University Press, 2013), 494.

recognition of Sylheti as a language in both popular discourse and official records is a political issue, much of it stemming from a continued history of hegemonisation of Calcutta over its surrounding geographies and tongue. Published between 1898 and 1928, George Abraham Grierson, in his corpus linguistic survey, mentioned literary Bengali to be “the product of the past century”, “the language of Lower Bengal, or the region of the Gangetic Delta and of the districts immediately above it and to its east”.⁹⁹

Attributing the coming of fore of “standard” Bengali to interventions from the Calcutta-based Sanskrit pundits, Grierson’s stance on “Sanskritisation” was critical of their imposition of “a grotesque and elaborate pattern in Sanskrit” upon the “feeble old frame” of Bengali, “instead of strengthening the web from the same material”.¹⁰⁰ Marking Calcutta to be the local civilisational locus, “then the only seat of learning”, Grierson assigned the Bengali written in Calcutta and the surrounding districts of Twenty-four Parganas, Nadia, Burdwan, Murshidabad, Hooghly, and Howrah to be “Standard Bengali”; “spoken by the educated classes...[and] usually taken as the standard of polite conversation.”¹⁰¹ Distinguishing between the literary and the dialect, the latter, as per Grierson, spoken by the “uneducated”, Sylheti was demoted to “the dialect spoken in Sylhet Town and the North and North-East of the District”. Despite noting its incomprehensibility to the “natives of Central or Northern Bengal” and “some peculiarities of pronunciation”,¹⁰² Grierson did not explicitly pinpoint the reasons behind describing Sylheti as “nevertheless Bengali”.¹⁰³ Adding to the point of unintelligibility, the linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterjee in concurrence with Grierson found the Bengali “dialects” of the extreme east and south-east (Sylhet, Chittagong) as more removed from “Standard Bengali” than Assamese; he mentioned Sylheti to be one of the “extreme

⁹⁹ George Abraham Grierson, *The Linguistic Survey of India*, vol. 5 (1) (Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, India, 1903), II.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁰² Here “peculiar” is meant in the sense of being different rather than eccentric.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 224.

Eastern forms of Vanga speech... foreign to other groups”.¹⁰⁴ As per Chatterjee, Assamese continued to be the language of an independent community and developed its distinct features as it progressed deeper into the Brahmaputra valley.¹⁰⁵

Writing in the context of the Bangladeshi community in Spitalfields, Anne Kershen has outlined the deep linkages of the politics of language recognition to the agency of communities and power. Talking about a colonialist hangover in postcolonial societies, Kershen has commented that the British Raj, the Pakistani administrators post-1947, and the Bangladeshi government post-1971 have all “devalued Sylheti, giving it the status of a ‘dialect’...”.¹⁰⁶ Right after Bengali became the national language after the 1971 Bangladesh War, a cold tussle emerged between Bengali-speakers and Sylheti-speakers over the acceptance of Sylheti as a separate language, even inviting secessionist undertones.

During the 1970s, a battle of mother tongues between Bengali and Sylheti ensued in Tower Hamlets.¹⁰⁷ Nurul Haque, a non-Sylheti-speaking immigrant, started the first “mother-tongue” classes in Bengali for Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets, understandably due to his perceived lack of grasp of Sylheti literature.¹⁰⁸ A battle for the recognition of Sylheti as a “language” which gained momentum in early 1980s Bangladesh, made inroads in Spitalfields. Bangladeshis’ Educational Needs in Tower Hamlets (BENTH), a community organisation, became one of the forums for debating the selection of Sylheti speakers as mother-tongue teachers over Bengali speakers, irrespective of academic qualifications or ability.¹⁰⁹

Greg Smith’s 1985 working paper stated clear organisational divisions: professional Bengali-speaking elite on one side and local Sylheti-speaking workers on the other. Although

¹⁰⁴ Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* (Calcutta University Press, 1926), 138.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁰⁶ Anne Kershen, *Strangers, Aliens and Asians* (Routledge, 2004), 119.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

pro-Sylhetis had the upper hand, internal rivalries led to the closure of BENTH in 1985, almost bringing the pro-Sylheti movement to a screeching halt.¹¹⁰ Chipping in on the Sylheti-Bengali conflict, Smith advocated for more Sylheti-speaking teachers in nursery and reception classes in Tower Hamlets. Although not defiant of an overwhelmingly strong opinion of Sylheti being a “dialect” of Bengali, Smith wanted Sylheti to be “affirmed as the vehicle of vernacular identity and culture”.¹¹¹ Talking about the competing “great tradition of Bengal” and the “vernacular tradition of Sylhet”, Smith noted the latter was not “completely eliminated” and that few Sylhetis “would want to deny their Bangladeshi national identity”.¹¹²

In the British-Bangladeshi community, Sylheti remains the dominant tongue, vital to preserving culture, history, and the Sylheti identity. Nabanipa Bhattacharjee, in her article on Sylheti identity in contemporary India, argues that the community asserts its *Sylhetitta* (Sylhetiness) in a cultural sense, alongside its co-existing Bengali character, the beginnings of which she argues were the inclusion of Sylhet as part of Assam in 1874, except for a short interlude between 1905 and 1911.¹¹³ Drawing from David Kane’s doctoral research—and subsequent book—on *puthi pora*, the melodic tradition of book and manuscript reading, linguists, Candide Simard, Sarah Dopierala and Marie Thaut opine that from the 16th-century onwards, the “Sylheti *puthi* played an important role in communicating Islamic ideals to the people in the Sylhet region, as they were written in the spoken vernacular language”,¹¹⁴ thereby hinting the presence of a centuries-old tradition unique to Sylhet. Furthermore, they argue that the existence of the Sylheti Nagri script—similar to Devanagari

¹¹⁰ Greg Smith, “Language, Ethnicity, Employment, Education and Research: The Struggle of Sylheti Speaking People in London,” *LMP Working Paper* No. 13 (1985): 40.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Nabanipa Bhattacharjee, “‘We Are with Culture but without Geography’: Locating Sylheti Identity in Contemporary India,” *South Asian History and Culture* 3, no. 2 (2012): 220.

¹¹⁴ Candide Simard, Sarah M. Dopierala, and E. Marie Thaut, “Introducing the Sylheti Language and Its Speakers, and the SOAS Sylheti Project,” in *Language Documentation and Description* 18, ed. Candide Simard, Sarah M. Dopierala, and E. Marie Thaut (EL Publishing, 2020), 7.

and Eastern Nagari in which Bengali is written—is among the prime reasons why Sylheti should be considered a separate language, besides structural differences from Bengali in phonetics, lexicon, and grammatical structure.¹¹⁵ Roger Gwynn, the British photographer, translator, and collaborator with the Sylheti community in Britain, has questioned the validity of a uniform “Sylheti” language, given that the area of Greater Sylhet comprises a “fairly distinct cluster of dialects which can be conveniently, if not very precisely, labelled with that term”.¹¹⁶ More than taking a side as to whether Sylheti qualifies as an independent “language” or not, Gwynn importantly recognises that the people using Sylheti in their daily lives have a strong sense of identity as “Sylhetis” and their speech as “Sylheti”, which in his opinion validates these terms more than anything else.¹¹⁷

As a Bengali speaker and a Bengali man working on music and migration between Bengal and Britain, I wanted to learn Sylheti and, more importantly, understand the politics of *Londoni* Sylheti identity; *Londoni* is an umbrella term used by the Sylhetis of Britain to describe their community, not just for those resident in and around London. For the same reason, I joined the online masterclasses led by Marie Thaut, as part of the SOAS Sylheti Language Society in 2020. Vocabulary-building exercises helped me gain enough basic conversational command to conduct fieldwork within Sylheti circles. Taught by British Sylheti women, the classes often included discussions on the need to recognise Sylheti as a language and their views on their Sylheti identity being separate from a Bengali one. However, they held no reservations against being called British-Bangladeshis. Simard, Dopierala and Thaut, in their above-discussed work, argue that Sylheti has lower social prestige than Bengali, including in Britain, as a result of which many Sylheti speakers do not pass it on to the next generations, and openly admit to only speaking Bengali or Sylheti-Bengali.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 8.

¹¹⁶ Roger Gwynn, *Londoni Sylheti Dictionary*, vol. 1 (Acre Press, 2021), i.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Simard, *Introducing the Sylheti Language*, 5.

Through my ethnographic experience and archival research, I have encountered several Bengalis from Dhaka and Calcutta (now Kolkata) who feel culturally superior to Sylhetis, whom they perceive as often lacking in “education” due to their rural background. Combining ethnographic and archival evidence, I have pointed towards this Bengali selectivism and elitism throughout my work. The most elaborate, informal, and frank conversations on the Sylheti-Bengali debate I have had over the years have been with the author Faruque Ahmed—who features throughout this thesis, but most visibly/audibly in chapter four—and the singer Himangshu Goswami—on whom I have written in chapter three—both migrants from Sylhet. I found both Ahmed and Goswami to be appreciative of their local Sylheti identity. At the same time, neither rejects Bengaliness and instead celebrates both; Ahmed has repeatedly declared his own parallel identities to be “Sylheti-Bengali”, “British Bengali” and “British Bangladeshi”. Numerous casual conversations with Sylheti people in the East End lead me to posit that most Sylhetis do not mind identifying themselves as Bengalis.

In some cases, I have seen their “Bengali” cultural identities co-exist with their self-declared religious ones. Nonetheless, I do not discount the possibility that interlocutors might have shied away from offering their honest opinions after they might have gauged my Bengali identity. Propounding whether Sylheti is a separate “language” or not is beyond the scope of my work, and it is best left to Sylhetis to self-determine. Based on the evidence I have come across, I have chosen to stick with “Bengali” as an inclusive term that reflects my collaborators’ sense of belonging. A lack of cognisance of this debate would not have allowed me to attempt to document the unities and fractures of the Bengali people in Britain.

“Archives” in the “field”, “field” in the “archive”: A Note on Methodology

Encircled by Derbyshire Street in the north, Wilmot Street in the east, car workshops underneath the Lea Valley train line in the south, and Vallance Road in the west, stands Weavers Fields, a popular open space for East London's Bethnal Green residents, senior citizens, professionals, local footballers, and toddlers alike. Nestled in its east, overlooking the City of London's growing skyline, is Weavers Woodland Walk, a tiny pistol-shaped strip of land housing rustling Aspen trees, wild cherries, hedgerows and nettles. During the summer, the two wooden sitting tables become a space for elderly Sylheti men to congregate, where they usually discuss politics and household matters, interspersed with rounds of smoking. Having occupied their unsaid "reserved" spaces with my laptop, one of these gentlemen, wearing a mackintosh and a disgruntled look, approached the spot. Finding none of his comrades, he retreated humming a recognisable but unknown tune, one most definitely from Bengal and what would be classified as "folk".¹¹⁹

Throughout my living in Bethnal Green from 2020 to 2023, I have encountered several such instances of the intimacy that people share with music in the "field", sometimes quite literally. Before relocating to East London, I began collecting data for this doctoral project in October 2019. From the outset, the aim was to blend fieldwork and archival research; living in the "field" made a huge difference. While the ethnographer and the historian have rarely succeeded in seeing eye to eye, there is a growing trend amongst music historians and ethnomusicologists to employ each other's methods. Max Katz, in his 'Lineage of Loss', has combined ethnographic, archival and practice-based research to trace the displacement and erasure of the prestige of the court musicians of Lucknow.¹²⁰ James Kippen, also a musician trained in the tradition, has combined musicological and sociological sources in English and the vernacular in 'The Tabla of Lucknow'.¹²¹ More recently, Kirit James Singh has

¹¹⁹ Fieldnotes. 17 May 2023.

¹²⁰ Max Katz, *Lineage of Loss: Counternarratives of North Indian Music* (Wesleyan University Press, 2017).

¹²¹ James Kippen, *The Tabla of Lucknow* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

conducted archival research as well as interviews in Punjab, on both sides of the Indo-Pakistan border, to unearth how Sikh patronage sustained both Hindustani and liturgical musical practices before the partition of India in 1947.¹²² In the context of the Bengal region, musician and music researcher Moushumi Bhowmik has worked with the archived field recordings, notes and letters of the Dutch ethnomusicologist Arnold Bake since 2004, following the trails of Bake to listen and record sounds of the past. Working with a similar set of materials, Christian Poske produced a restudy of Bake's research, alongside conducting his interviews.¹²³ My work contributes to this emerging practice of interweaving methods.

While beginning my doctoral fieldwork, my primary area of interest was East London, which expanded across Britain through snowball sampling within the Bengali/Bangladeshi community.¹²⁴ The interviews I conducted were semi-structured; I would prepare a questionnaire, from which I would select a few questions to ask during the conversation. By living in the "field", I struck up dialogues with strangers, who became interlocutors and collaborators. Interestingly, people like Badshah Miah, featured in Chapter 3, approached me, initiated a chat, and agreed to be recorded. In such instances, semi-structured interviews were ineffective, and I had to treat them as freewheeling, unstructured chats. For cases or encounters where I was not given consent to interact or interview, I made a point to rely particularly on my fieldnotes to support the experience of field research and the interpretation of ethnography.¹²⁵

Archival research for this project began simultaneously with fieldwork. Contrary to historians' typical use of paper files, my focus on the second half of the 20th century allowed

¹²² Kirit James Singh, "Sikh Patronage of Hindustani Music and Śābad Kīrtan in Colonial Punjab, 1857-1947" (PhD Diss., SOAS, 2023).

¹²³ Christian Friedrich Poske, "Continuity and Change: A Restudy of Arnold Adriaan Bake's Research on the Devotional and Folk Music and Dance of Bengal, 1925-1956" (PhD Diss., SOAS, 2020).

¹²⁴ Chaim Noy, "Sampling Knowledge: The Hermeneutics of Snowball Sampling in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11, no. 4 (2008): 330.

¹²⁵ Gregory F. Barz, "Confronting the Field(Note) in and out of the Field: Music, Voices, Texts, and Experiences in Dialogue," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (Oxford University Press, 2008), 215.

me to benefit from sound and video recordings. Although I did not deliberately coordinate my visits to institutional archives with my field interviews, each generated leads for the other, further allowing me to cross-reference information. Beyond the institutional archives, my reliance on the community led me to personal archives, most notably those of Faruque Ahmed, whose vast collection of rare Bengali newspapers, printed in Britain and untraceable elsewhere, has contributed significantly to this work. Working with personal archives also gave me a chance to get, according to Catherine Hobbs, a “sense of feelings, of relationships, and of character.”¹²⁶ According to Hobbs, personal archives, in their departure from formal and organised record-keeping, reflect the intimacy of an individual, emerging from their life’s experiences.¹²⁷ Regular visits to Faruque’s archives and working through stacks and cartons of material not only helped me understand the politics of archiving but also led to the discovery of his songbooks, and thereby “fill past silences” to bring to light the “personal, private, inner life of the ‘citizen’”.¹²⁸

Given my work’s entanglement with intergenerational histories bound across time and space—the ‘home’ and ‘away’—and with materialities of paper, sound, and bodily encounters, experiences of working at the archives and the field are difficult to compartmentalise. Even searching digital and printed catalogues is more than just a researcher-technology interaction. Like other researchers, I have also relied on staff expertise, who have recommended materials that would have been difficult to navigate otherwise. In a sense, live human-human interaction at institutional archives blurs the boundaries between the “archive” and the “field” as much as learning about oral histories from interlocutors’ bodily archives.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Catherine Hobbs, “The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals.,” *Archivaria*, 2001, 133.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹²⁹ Nirmal Puwar. *Carrying as Method: Listening to Bodies as Archives*. *Body & Society* 2021 27:1, 3.

‘Are you returning from *namaz*?’ Reflections on Reflexivity and Positionality

The southwest corner of Bethnal Green Gardens, where Malcolm Place meets Cambridge Heath Road, is perhaps the only space in Bethnal Green from where one can hear the tolls of the nearby St. John’s church mingle with the strains of *Maghrib*¹³⁰ from the East London mosque. A few southward steps towards Whitechapel Road, the *namaz* engulfs the church bells; a couple of yards north, the din from the Salmon & Ball pub and the Bethnal Green tube station drowns the mosque chant. East London, one of the most significant fieldwork and archival research sites for this work, is where such lifeworlds of sounds meet and disperse in coexistence. My personal experience as an ethnomusicologist has not been different.

On one of my regular dusk walks to the *Surma* office via Cambridge Heath Road, I was approached by a group of Sylheti men just off work, brisking up for prayers, “Are you returning from *namaz*?” My “yes” baffled them as to how I could leave mid-way. What was momentarily a casual encounter opened up more profound questions. How was my identity perceived in the field? Did my being perceived as a practising Muslim suggest that fellow Bengalis in the area—predominantly Muslim—would open up more to my questions? To what extent was I an “insider”? Have my identities as a non-religious Bengali and Indian man, and as a performer of Hindustani raga music, influenced my reading of events? Disciplinarily, how does reflexivity influence the ethnomusicologist and the music historian? How does one strive for objectivity, or should one necessarily do so?

Anthropologist Ruth Behar has unhesitatingly argued about the need to recognise “the exposure of the self”, the places it takes the researcher to, which they otherwise would not have been able to reach, thereby essentialising its role in the ethnographic argument.¹³¹

Clifford Geertz has seemingly been half-enthusiastic, half-weary of ethnographic proclivities

¹³⁰ *Maghrib* is the evening Islamic call to prayer.

¹³¹ Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer* (Beacon Press, 1996), 14.

of over-interiorising, what, according to him, is “an intensely public activity” that makes way for more “rumination and self-inspection”.¹³² Behar took up this problem of interiorisation, questioning to what extent ethnography is a “public” activity, given that after collecting data from the field, anthropologists put in their labour to make the/their story before public readership, making the endeavour all the more palimpsestic.¹³³ Behar’s is a pursuit of figuring out, in Geertz’s words, “the language to articulate what takes place when we are in fact at work”. This work takes forward Behar’s quest by sifting through fieldnotes for moments that might otherwise have been forgotten.

While this inherent nature of reflexivity has concomitantly embroiled anthropology and ethnomusicology, historians have also increasingly pondered over it. Led by Ranajit Guha, the Subaltern Studies Collective, working on histories “from below”, has produced measured self-reflexive works. For example, Guha’s own dual engagement with classical Sanskrit and “peasant” proverbs, which he called a “robust hedonism of the mind”.¹³⁴ To contextualise the scenario of this work, my grounding in Hindustani raga music and allied Bengali musics, such as *Rabindrasangeet* and *Nazrulgeeti*, has, at the least, subliminally informed its structure, and also while conducting interviews with performing musicians as part of this project. Initially, I was primarily interested in exploring “folk” musical practices. However, I would have been less likely to consider Bengali associations with Hindustani music culture later on were it not for my musical training.

The nature of reflexivity in this work is rooted in my positionality; my late paternal grandparents originated from Dhaka, while my maternal grandparents both originate in Bardhaman in West Bengal. Identifying as a Bengali Indian, at times, contradictorily made me both an “insider” (emic) and an “outsider” (etic). Whereas my “Indian” identity within

¹³² Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*. (Harvard University Press, 1995), 120.

¹³³ Behar, *The Vulnerable*, 9.

¹³⁴ Ranajit Guha, “Introduction,” in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1987), xxvi.

British Bangladeshi circles was not always received with equal cordiality, I felt interlocutors' knowledge of my Dhaka roots somewhat made me acceptable as an "insider". Accessing women's spaces as a heterosexual man has been less easy than those exclusively for men; however, with senior citizens, the dynamic often changed, with many of them declaring me as "like one of their grandchildren". In a recent encyclopaedia entry, Till Mostowlansky and Andrea Rota have summarised the steady decline of the theoretical relevance of the emic/etic distinction in anthropology since the 1990s before arguing for its continued relevance, including in understanding the relationship between the researcher and the research subject.¹³⁵ Although the emic/etic cannot be employed binarily in my context, they are useful as constructs to complicate my positionality. Throughout this thesis, I have endeavoured to embrace a multi-layered reflexivity without succumbing to self-absorption.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first three are arranged chronologically, and the last one considers all three decades I am primarily interested in. Concentrating on the birth centenary celebrations of Rabindranath Tagore in Britain in 1961, in Chapter One, I look into what the mega event meant musically for the Bengali community in the backdrop of engaged parties like the governments of India and the UK, besides eavesdropping behind the diplomatic curtains to reveal how a globally recognised dancer was refused to perform his specially curated production. Pinning down on the centenary, this chapter also serves to entangle the accessible evidence of anti-Tagore lobbyism in East Pakistan, its repercussions in Britain, and whether it would have factored towards the growing dissent for an independent Bangladesh. Leading up to 1971, the year of the Bangladeshi resistance movement and the

¹³⁵ Till Mostowlansky and Andrea Rota, "Emic and Etic," ed. Joel Robbins et al., *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, December 1, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.29164/2oemicetic>.

creation of Bangladesh, Chapter Two recounts how different sides fought the war through music or not. Spotlighting the musical responses in Britain, I aim to move beyond the predominant discourses of an all-encompassing Bengali unity to listen to those who still supported a united Pakistan, while also featuring the musical aid and activism that emerged in this context. Going later into the seventies and the eighties, Chapter Three studies how the increasing number of settling Bengalis, along with allies from mainstream British society, used music as an agent for anti-racism; the identity politics behind the music in the then growing number of Bengali-run “Indian” restaurants and its implications for Bengaliness; and sets foot inside music classes to analyse the makings of the Bengali musical citizen and Bengali musical identities.

Last but not least, Chapter Four goes back to the 1960s and spreads its vision till the 1980s to meditate on Baul musical practices in Britain, how migration has brought in novel tropes in songwriting, the evolving complexities of the interpretation of “Baul”, before documenting “Baul” music-making in contrasting spaces such as world music festivals. Ethnography and archival history often go hand in hand, as I have already shown earlier. While the first two chapters largely tap into written records, the final two rely on a mix of both written and oral sources.

CHAPTER ONE

The Tagore Centenary in Britain: Centring Musical Bengaliness

[London, 23 October 2021: Owing to the tides of what seems to be an unending pandemic, musical activities, if not for musicians reincarnating as Zoom tiles, have been pretty inexistent, including in the British Bengali community. After months, the Tagore Centre, housed at the Alexandra Park library, opened for the first time to guests after the lockdown, for an informal celebration of Bijoya Dashami, following the Durga Puja. One of the centre's co-founders, a Tagore scholar and an erudite octogenarian, opened the function with his remarks. Addressing an eager, well-dressed gathering, the co-founding member held no bars in declaring his allegiance to Tagore, paying an ode to his hero, and almost gushing over how his works are evergreen and have proved to be a source of strength during these troubling times.]

- excerpt from fieldnotes

[London, 20 December 2021: The Whitechapel office of the Bengali newspaper, Surma, is a lively space for spirited but amicable debates, typically involving impromptu musical performances. Today was no exception. After a scrumptious dinner spread, the discussion steered itself towards Rabindranath Tagore, with one of Surma's senior editorial staff vigorously forwarding his apprehension that Rabindranath, to put it bluntly, might have 'copied' the tune of 'Amar Sonar Bangla'—now the Bangladeshi national anthem—from Gagan Harkara, without actually recognising his inspiration. Soon, the argument opened the can of broader political questions: whether Rabindranath really had an appeal in Bengali Muslim society and whether there were no other eligible figures whose song could have been made the national anthem.]

- excerpt from fieldnotes

The above two entries paint contrasting impressions of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Bengal's pre-eminent global, literary, and cultural icon. Be it in the form of his two songs played formally and/or militaristically—the Indian and Bangladeshi national anthems—before events ranging from cricket matches to diplomatic conventions or the innumerable public roads, cultural bodies, and educational institutions named after him, Tagore's presence permeates aspects of Bengali—and, to an extent, South Asian—life arguably like no other, naturally extending to Britain's diaspora. Whereas in the Tagore Centre event, Rabindranath's image almost equalled that of a demigod, possibly unquestionable, at the *Surma* office dinner, the reverence for him was much shrunken, if not a tastable apathy. Yet,

these discordant voices are part of a pan-Bengali diaspora in Britain today; Bernd-Peter Lange, writing about Tagore in the diaspora, states that his persona “has been firmly inscribed into India’s and Bangladesh’s cultural memory, [although] on a shifting basis”.¹³⁶

Over the past century, Tagorean reception in Britain and the wider West has seen its crests and troughs, both during the man’s lifetime and afterwards. Born into the affluent and anglicised Jorasanko Tagore family—the most visible emblem being their preference of “Tagore” over the indigenous “Thakur”—one of Rabindranath’s brothers, Satyendranath was the first Indian to be admitted to the Imperial Civil Service, an opportunity which Rabindranath himself was provided with by being sent to England to either study for the civil service examinations or the bar, at the age of seventeen.¹³⁷ First living in Brighton with Satyendranath’s wife and children, having been admitted to a public school for pre-legal training, the new visitor soon found himself alone in London, near Regent Gardens, at his brother’s convictions of the capital’s better educational prospects.¹³⁸ Ever repulsive of formal education, Tagore neither became a civil servant nor a lawyer. Instead, he spent some cherished time at the University College, London, studying English with Henry Morley, particularly Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici* and some of Shakespeare’s plays. After around a year in England, Rabindranath returned home at his father’s wish, “presumably not showing any active interest in schooling.”¹³⁹ Except for another month-long trip between 10 September and 9 October 1890, Tagore’s contacts with England mainly persisted through continued study and translation of English literature, before his most important visit in 1912.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Bernd-Peter Lange, “Tagore in the Diaspora: Presence, Ritual, Nostalgia,” *Zeitschrift Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik* 63, no. 4 (2015): 357, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2015-0031>.

¹³⁷ Harish Trivedi, *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India*. (Papyrus, 1993), 74.

¹³⁸ Harold Murvin Hurwitz, “Rabindranath Tagore and England” (PhD Diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1959).

¹³⁹ Abhinash Chandra Bose, *Three Mystic Poets: A Study of W.B Yeats, A.E and Rabindranath Tagore* (School & College Bookstall, 1945), 15.

¹⁴⁰ Hurwitz, *Rabindranath*, 20.

Much of the global presence linked to the personage was moulded from his sudden fame within Western literary circles after being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in November 1913 for an English translation of his anthology of poems, *The Gitanjali*; this being true, the Bengali writer and academic Nabaneeta Dev Sen has argued that Tagore had already “achieved a very significant success in England...to a large extent, responsible for the award”.¹⁴¹ What took off as an infatuation with, as per Amartya Sen, “an air of mysticism”—that factored towards the “‘selling’ of Rabindranath Tagore to the West by Yeats, Ezra Pound, and his other early champions”¹⁴²—quickly ended in disenchantment and boredom; coincidentally, the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre and, thereafter, his protestations with the return of his knighthood had certainly dented his respect for the English administration, though not for the language itself. Until his death, Tagore received “denunciations with...surprise, and barely concealed pain”.¹⁴³

Two decades after his death in 1941, when the craze for the “mystic” had dried, the birth centenary celebrations of Tagore were a global affair. The *UNESCO Courier* noted “many countries marked the anniversary...throughout the year with special radio and television programmes, lectures, conferences, exhibitions, new translations of the poet’s works, and essay contests in the secondary schools”; among the listed countries who partook in the festivities were the U.S.S.R, United Arab Republic, France, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Nepal, the Netherlands, Mexico, Poland, Rumania and Uruguay.¹⁴⁴ In September 1960, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, then High Commissioner of India to the United Kingdom and also the younger sister of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, became the President of a joint Indo-British Committee (Tagore Centenary Celebration

¹⁴¹ Nabaneeta Dev Sen, “The Reception of Rabindranath Tagore in England, France, Germany, and the United States.” (PhD Diss., 1964).

¹⁴² Amartya Sen, “Tagore and His India,” *The New York Review*, June 26, 1997.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ “World’s Homage to a Universal Man,” *UNESCO Courier*, December 27, 1961.

Committee, hereafter TCCC) to plan a programme for the Tagore Centenary the following year.¹⁴⁵ With Pandit presiding over the committee, its members were high profile: vice presidents included the historian A.L. Basham and singer and activist Paul Robeson, while the violinist Yehudi Menuhin happened to be one of the eight vice-chairmen.¹⁴⁶

Spotlighting Tagore's birth centenary celebrations in Britain, this chapter investigates how much this event contributed to diasporic musical Bengaliness. Divided tripartitely, the first section eavesdrops behind the diplomatic corridors of power to understand how British bureaucratic attitudes influenced music patronage in Bengali Britain, before visiting late 1950s and 1960s Belsize Park to make audible, Bengalis' Tagorean music culture of that time in an effort to reconstruct the time building up to this event, both from top-down and bottom-up perspectives. Section two of this chapter asks whether the centenary translated into a re-arrival of Tagore. Picking on West Bengal's Bengalis' letters to the British establishment to support their local initiatives, I lay out questions about whether this enthusiasm could have meant greater musical participation. Later in the same section, I also examine the involvement of the Pakistani government to determine whether their ideas of cultural governance in East Pakistan had any repercussions in the then-nascent Bengali community in Britain.

The third and final section explores a *mélange* of the numerous music and dance programmes in London, Birmingham, Belfast, Newcastle, and Edinburgh. Organised either at the behest of the Pandit-led committee or autonomously by people with close links to them, this section taps into the two main musical identities that were attempted to channelise: "Indian" and/or "Bengali". Though not focused on any particular individual/organisation, the ones that do feature prominently are Rajeshwari Dutta, the London Brahma Samaj, and Arthur Geddes. Primarily by reading old newspaper reports and memoirs, I flesh out music's

¹⁴⁵ Vera Brittain, *Envoy Extraordinary* (George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1965), 136–37.

¹⁴⁶ Tagore Centenary Celebration Committee member list, DO 191/189, The National Archives, Kew, UK.

agency in forming a Bengali musical consciousness in Britain and probe into the collectiveness of such constructs.

Primarily driving the heart of this chapter is the resource of the public institutional archive, which includes—to reiterate myself—diplomatic correspondence, newspapers, and the memoir. Through interacting with these “physical repositories”,¹⁴⁷ I attempt to go beyond established academic understandings of the archive as “official”, to “activate...[the] intensely personal.”¹⁴⁸ Centralising the act of listening to print, I navigate between the senses, to not only uncover events in the musical public sphere, but also to see how they come out of bodily “archives of touch and intimacy”,¹⁴⁹ and hence are interlinked with the private. This approach helps read the “conventional” archive to enable a reflexive, well-situated, “richer, more textured and affective understanding” of the evolving musical citizen in Bengali Britain,¹⁵⁰ and their multifarious interpretations dependent on the “region” and “nation”.

Lead-up: Cultural Diplomacy and Belsize Bengalis

Given the enormity of the Tagore centenary enterprise, it is no surprise that its planning and execution would be a game of multilateral cultural-diplomatic chess. How different governments calibrated their cultural posturing on the world stage came to be reflected in this event. The Tagore centenary year of 1961 seemed to offer a ripe chance for both Britain and India to thaw relations that had gone frosty in the immediate aftermath of the 1947 Indian Partition and complications arising from the onset of the Cold War.¹⁵¹ According to Vera Brittain, biographer of Vijayalakshmi Pandit, the precedence of the Queen and Prince

¹⁴⁷ Andrew Stauffer, “The Nineteenth-Century Archive in the Digital Age,” *European Romantic Review* 23, no. 3 (June 2012): 335–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2012.674264>.

¹⁴⁸ Jennifer Douglas and Allison Mills, “From the Sidelines to the Center: Reconsidering the Potential of the Personal in Archives,” *Archival Science* 18, no. 3 (July 30, 2018): 257–77, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-018-9295-6>.

¹⁴⁹ Santanu Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture. Literature, Images, and Songs*. (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 9.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁵¹ Andrew Wyatt, “India and the United Kingdom: Finding a New Equilibrium,” in *Engaging the World: Indian Foreign Policy since 1947*, ed. Sumit Ganguly (Oxford University Press, 2016), 225–44.

Philip's tour of India starting 21 January 1961 symbolised the 'final restoration of cordial Indo-British relations'.¹⁵² Here, we are interested in looking into Britain's cultural diplomatic stance towards the centenary and what it meant for the emergence of musical practices in Bengali Britain.

With Pandit at the helm, Punjabi author, journalist, broadcaster, and honorary secretary of the Tagore Centenary Committee, Iqbal Singh, approached diplomat Harold Smedley to request "bringing a dance troupe[sic] from India", "getting the BBC to put on special Tagore programmes", and "on publicity generally".¹⁵³ India's forwardness was met with Britain's coldness. On 1 December 1960, British diplomat, Kenneth Crook,¹⁵⁴ replied to his colleague then working for the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO)'s Information Policy Department in London, Harold Smedley,¹⁵⁵ that they had "not been very much concerned with these celebrations" and was "sure [that they] would 'show willing' as far as possible", although he thought that they might have had done "something" about roping in the BBC and publicity.¹⁵⁶

The dance troupe in question was led by none other than Uday Shankar, widely considered one of the greatest revivalist geniuses who put Indian dance on the global cultural map.¹⁵⁷ Through the winter of 1960 in Calcutta, Uday, along with his younger brother, Ravi, "the sitar sage who shook up the Sixties",¹⁵⁸ and his wife Amala as the lead act, commenced working on a new Indian ballet, a theatrical re-interpretation of Tagore's Bengali poem, *Samanya Kshati* (Slight Damage), the story of a righteous king acting against his arrogant queen

¹⁵² Vera Brittain, *Envoy Extraordinary* (George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1965), 136-137.

¹⁵³ Correspondence from Mr. Smedley to Mr. Cook, November 30, 1960, DO 191/189.

¹⁵⁴ Kenneth Roy Crook became the British Deputy High Commissioner in Peshawar from 1962-64, and eventually Ambassador to Afghanistan. It is not clear what his role was during 1960-61. For more on Crook, see: *A Directory of British Diplomats* (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2014), 121.

¹⁵⁵ Following postings in Calcutta and Delhi, Smedley returned to London in 1960, where his job included liaising with the British Council and the BBC. For a transcript of an interview with Smedley, see:

<https://oa.churchillarchives.libnova.com/viewer/1749?iframe=yes&>

¹⁵⁶ Mr. Crook to Mr. Smedley, December 1, 1960, DO 191/189.

¹⁵⁷ Sunil Kothari, "UDAY SHANKAR: AN APPRECIATION," Narthaki, May 2001,

<https://www.narthaki.com/info/profiles/profile2.html>.

¹⁵⁸ *The Times London*. 13 December 2012.

for having destroyed some of her villagers' houses for firewood. Lord Harewood, a cousin of the Queen, was in Calcutta during the dress rehearsals, and according to Oliver Craske, biographer of Ravi Shankar, "thrilled by the production and hoped it could be staged in Britain".¹⁵⁹ Having caught his India fascination after listening to a 1956 Ravi Shankar recital, Lord Harewood was on a lecture tour of India in 1958, before returning in 1961 "to negotiate with the Indian Government for a heavy representation at the 1963 Edinburgh Festival";¹⁶⁰ it would have been during this 1961 tour that he attended the dress rehearsals. *Samanya Kshati (SK)* ultimately did not make it to Britain.

What/who stopped *SK* from being staged in Britain remains nebulous. The CRO was reluctant to sponsor a dance troupe. As early as January 1961, Kenneth Crook, in his minute to Harold Smedley, commented that even though the CRO could pay airfares in that financial year, "the Treasury would [have] very properly [regarded] this as a fiddle".¹⁶¹ Crook's further two points that by inviting the dance troupe, the British government would have ended up creating a "precedent [they] might not [have wanted] to live up to" and would be "overdoing it a bit" are striking.¹⁶² What "precedent" was that the British government was paranoid about living up to in the early 1960s must not be brushed under the carpet. Could it be possible that this seemingly passing comment by a government insider was reflective of the brewing antagonism of right-wing British politics against Commonwealth immigration and the passing of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1962, only a year later?¹⁶³

Four months of radio silence ensued among British diplomats before re-surfacing for one last time, when Smedley opinionatedly replied to Crook that he had heard from impresario and concert organiser, Ian Hunter, about Uday Shankar bringing his troupe, who was "sadly

¹⁵⁹ Oliver Craske, *Indian Sun* (Hachette Books, 2020), 233.

¹⁶⁰ George Henry Hubert Lascelles, *The Tongs and the Bones: The Memoirs of Lord Harewood* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1981), 252.

¹⁶¹ K.R Crook to H. Smedley. 12 January 1961. DO 191/189.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ This act supported by the Conservative Party government tightened regulations, only permitting citizens from Commonwealth countries with government-issued employment vouchers to settle in Britain. This curtailed the perceived heavy influx of migrants, especially from the Indian subcontinent. It was amended again in 1968, before being superseded by the Immigration Act, 1971.

past his best”.¹⁶⁴ Were one to buy Smedley’s comment, there is no denying that Uday Shankar was already sixty-one years of age in 1961, and for any dancer, one would have started losing physical agility by then. Moreover, Uday was still active, touring Europe in the 1950s to raise funds for his school in Calcutta.¹⁶⁵ In *SK*, Uday longed to portray through dance “the elegance, depth and spirit of Tagore’s ideas... [in his] humble way... visualize what would logically follow after the poet left off”.¹⁶⁶ *SK* tasted success. After India-wide shows in Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay, Jaipur, Pune, Nagpur and Ahmedabad, and small towns in West Bengal like Burdwan, Katwa, Kalna and Siuri, *SK* debuted at New York’s City Centre on 26 September 1962. Allen Hughes of the *New York Times (NYT)* found *SK* “[gleaming] with a delicate lustre from beginning to end”, Amala and Uday’s dancing, “full of grace and poetry”, and Ravi’s musical score, the “lifeline of the work”.¹⁶⁷ Smedley’s “sadly past his best” thesis came to be proven wrong.

Although the BC and the BBC were more interested than the CRO in the centenary, monetary support from the British government was lacking. As early as November 1960, George Needham¹⁶⁸—whose designation I have not been able to track yet—had already drawn the attention of the BBC towards these celebrations and further suggested the names of E. Paxton, Assistant Head of Far Eastern Services, Mr. Whitby, Editor of ‘At Home and Abroad’, and Kenneth Lamb, TV Planning Officer, to Kenneth Crook, should Iqbal Singh wished to have contacted them; by then programmes had already been planned in the BBC’s pipeline.¹⁶⁹ In fact, Ben Cockram, then Assistant Under-Secretary for Commonwealth Relations (Information and Culture), scribbled an enthusiastic note to Reginald Herbert Wimble—most likely Principal of the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO)—¹⁷⁰ regarding

¹⁶⁴ Correspondence from Mr. Smedley to Mr. Crook, April 12, 1961, DO 191/189.

¹⁶⁵ Mohan Khokar, *His Dance, His Life* (Himalayan Books, 1983).

¹⁶⁶ *The Uday Shankar Hindu Dancers & Musicians. 1962-63 Ballet Programme.* (S. Hurok, 1962).

¹⁶⁷ *The New York Times.* 27 September 1962.

¹⁶⁸ Mr. Needham’s role in the British civil service is untraceable, so far.

¹⁶⁹ George Needham’s note to Kenneth Crook. 28 December 1960. DO 191/189.

¹⁷⁰ According to the CRO Year Book for 1960, Wimble’s then latest role is mentioned ‘Principal’ starting 15 August 1955.

having contacted the British Council (BC) and was “sure that the Council could lay in a reception of the dance troupe to enable them to meet...the Royal Ballet Company”, further expressing his hopefulness that the “leader of the party might be invited as the guest of the Council”.¹⁷¹ No matter how much willingness was shown to the Indians, it was more often than not the wariness of a rift in Indo-British ties that drove them to tread carefully, rather than out of a special interest or relatability in Tagore.



Illustration 1.1: A special programme of music broadcast on the BBC’s Far Eastern Service to mark Tagore’s birth centenary (Source: *The Listener*)¹⁷²

Regardless of how penetrative its impacts were, the Tagore centenary was arguably one of the early large-scale cultural events to imprint South Asian/Bengali musicality on Britain’s musical publics. Therefore, the criticality of the centenary cannot be discounted in the musical evolution of Bengali Britain. Contextualising the propagation of Indian classical

¹⁷¹ Ben Cockram to Mr. Smedley. 3 January 1961. DO 191/189.

¹⁷² I am yet to discover more detail about this programme.

music in the mid-twentieth century, Amlan Das Gupta has noted that after the independence of India, artists had to negotiate the “pomposity of state officialdom”, instead of having to deal with the “willfulness of aristocratic patrons”.¹⁷³ Unlike that of independent India, the state did not replace private patronage in the musical and cultural events of the centenary in Britain. Instead of a direct state-artist interface, the Indian state often interacted with its British counterpart; as we shall see more evidence in the later sections of this chapter, the Indian government was instrumental in upholding an “Indian” musicality throughout the centenary. However, the “pomposity of [British] officialdom” still indirectly affected artists like Uday Shankar.¹⁷⁴ Concerning Bengali musicality in Britain during the centenary and early days, self-patronage and community initiatives formed the central support system.

Now, I come to Bengalis singing Tagore at their homes and functions on building up to the centenary, through devoting my energies to and around Belsize Park in North London’s Borough of Camden, then a hub of several Bengalis. It would have been ideal to cast my ear across Britain, but for two challenges. First, Bengalis were small in number through the 1950s and 1960s, making it unlikely to come across their homely musical practices reported in old English newspapers. Second, many Bengalis who would have lived in Britain during that period are no more. Therefore, the main reliance has to be on personal writings and left recollections. Kalyan K. Dutt, in his unpublished 1990 report ‘The Bengalis in Camden’, projected that while 10% of the Bengalis in the Camden borough who came from India and West Bengal were “educated and scattered”, the majority coming from Sylhet happened to be “successful entrepreneurs”, but often faced institutional discrimination.¹⁷⁵ Dutt further

¹⁷³ Amlan Das Gupta, *Music, Modernity, and Publicness in India*, ed. Tejaswini Niranjana (Oxford University Press, 2020), 129–41.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Kalyan K. Dutt, “*The Bengalis in Camden.*,” 1990. Available at the Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre.

posited that in the mid-1950s, most migrant Bengalis were men, “often seamen, especially ship’s cooks, who worked as kitchen porters in London hotels and clubs.”¹⁷⁶ However, something not registered in the statistical discourse—probably due to their transient nature—is that there was indeed a tiny community of “educated” Bengalis, as I will also point out in Chapter 4.

The most poignant and intimate account of Bengali musical life leading to the centenary comes from the singer Bijoya Chaudhuri, either from her memoir, ‘*Silet Konyar Atmakatha*’ (Autobiography of a Sylhet Daughter) or via her son, the novelist and musician Amit Chaudhuri. In a 1999 essay for the *Granta* magazine, ‘A Small Bengal, NW3’, Amit wrote about his parents’ lives in Belsize Park in the Fifties till 1961, the year when they returned to India.¹⁷⁷ Going by Amit’s account of Bijoya’s reminiscences, after the partition of the subcontinent, Belsize Park became home to a tiny community of Indian Bengali students taking professional examinations. Before the release of Bijoya’s *Rabindrasangeet* records in India brought her greater recognition, music was very much part of her time in London, thus underlining how music in the migrants’ quotidian lives became portable and subliminal archives of their identities, as is clear from Amit’s writing:

...Belsize Park in the borough of Camden became home to a number of Indian, mainly Bengali, students. They fell into a routine of buying ‘wet fish’, shopping at Finchley Road, going to work, listening to Tagore songs, in between bouts of memorizing the pulmonary functions of the heart or the intricacies of taxation law...my parents, were among the people who lived in Belsize Park in the Fifties...they would travel in Europe; they would make friends among their neighbours; my mother’s singing voice would acquire a new fame in Bengali circles; her reputation as a cook would be established...Without a harmonium or any other accompanying instrument, my mother would keep practising the Tagore songs that she had learned as a child, in Sylhet, which had become part of East

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 3.

¹⁷⁷ Amit Chaudhuri, “A Small Bengal, NW3,” *Granta*, March 25, 1999.

*Pakistan. Her singing was full-throated; her voice would carry in the silent afternoons; once, the spinster landlady, Miss Fox, came down to complain...*¹⁷⁸

From the above-quoted extract, we mostly learn about how Bijoya would fill her loneliness and void with her “full-throated” *Rabindrasangeet* singing and how she had to overcome the lack of musical instruments, that too, sometimes in the vicinity of disinterested listeners like Miss Fox. On the other hand, Amit does give us a glimpse of the continuity of cultural familiarity through musical events, through which her singing would gain popularity. The London-based writer cum filmmaker Sangeeta Dutta, in a recent *Eastern Eye* article on Britain’s Bengali diaspora, has written about Bengalis having taken “their culture with them – their music, poetry, adda (conversations about everything under the sun), cuisine, clothes, their argumentative nature, their nostalgia for home.”¹⁷⁹ Dutta’s account resonates with Amit Chaudhuri; she, too, notes that by the 1950s, there was a “sizeable number of young men qualifying from England”, most of whom returned to India for work, although a few stayed back.¹⁸⁰ Dutta’s father also lived in a Belsize Park bedsit run by a Jewish lady.¹⁸¹ Jill Banerjee, who worked at Camden libraries, too, has recollected her days of staying in a bedsit in 1960s Belsize Park, meeting her husband Bemol, who was “part of the small community of Bengalis drawn to Belsize”, and one Bidhan Bose, the “go to’ person for many of the group”.¹⁸²

Bijoya Chaudhuri née Nandi Majumdar was no untrained singer. As a child growing up in Sylhet, she learnt the ropes of Hindustani ragas, *Rabindrasangeet* and bhajans from the well-known music personality Kumudranjan Goswami, besides picking up tunes of songs by famous singers such as KL Sehgal, Pankaj Mullick and Malati Ghoshal.¹⁸³ Engaged to her

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ *Eastern Eye*, 11 October 2021.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Jill Banerjee, “Japanese Prime Minister Visits at the Crack of Dawn,” Belsize Village (Belsize Village Association), accessed August 24, 2024, https://www.belsizevillage.co.uk/belsize_remembered_stories.htm.

¹⁸³ Bijoya Chaudhuri, *Silet Kanyar Atmakatha* (Anustup, 2004).

elder brother's best friend, Nages Chandra Chaudhuri, Bijoya travelled to England in 1955 and married in London to begin a new life in Belsize Park until 1961, when the couple sailed back to India.¹⁸⁴ Going by Bijoya's memoir, it was after she joined the Indian High Commission that people got to know more about her singing prowess, which brought her more singing invitations.¹⁸⁵ Once, the well-known newsreader Nilima Sanyal, then resident in London, took Bijoya to sing at a Saraswati Puja function organised in Paddington. There, her rendition of the popular Tagore song, '*Ore griho basi*' (O, home dwellers) garnered such appreciation that it was aired by the BBC in London, much to the irksomeness of London's Hindi speakers, who would have preferred a Hindi number over a Bengali one.¹⁸⁶ Quite prominent as a singer in London's Indian and Bengali circles, Bibhutibhushan Mondal, in an article for *Kali-o-Kolom*, opines that there was a time when a Bengali musical programme was almost unthinkable without Bijoya.¹⁸⁷ On another occasion, Hemanta Mukhopadhyay, one of the stalwarts of Bengali songs and *Rabindrasangeet*, came to London to participate in the celebrations of Mahatma Gandhi at the India House.¹⁸⁸ Here, too, Bijoya sang a duet with Hemanta, besides a solo of a Hindi bhajan '*Ek naam hai Ram*' (Ram is one name), which was highly commended by Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Chaudhuri, "A Small Bengal".

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Bibhutibhushan Mondal, "Rabindrasangeet Shilpi Bijoya Chaudhuri," *Kali-o-Kolom*, January 2024.

¹⁸⁸ Bijoya Chaudhuri, *Silet*.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. To listen to Bijoya singing Rabindranath, consult the following YouTube link: Bijoya Chaudhuri - Topic, "Danriye Achho Tumi Amar," YouTube, April 22, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVTCUqmHYcM&list=OLAK5uy_kRntclpKHbWB2dZvaQCTbVGjTmBg8zfqo



Illustration 1.2: Bijoya Chaudhuri playing the harmonium (Source: *The Hindu*)

From the above evidence, we get a crucial peek into Bengali musical life in North London in the 1950s, testifying that a Bengali community different from the one being simultaneously built by the seamen and blue-collar workers—primarily from East Pakistan—did exist at the time of the Tagore centenary; the fact that Bijoya grew up in a Bengali upper-middle/elite household in Sylhet serves as an exception to the then male-dominated Sylheti demographic in Britain. As we shall come across in chapters 3 and 4, North London continued to have a middle-class Bengali community through the 1970s and 1980s, often cut off from the Sylheti population of East London. One thing is clear from Bijoya’s memoir: a community of Indian Bengalis had already grown and would have been interested in the Tagore centenary. Jennifer Post has studied women’s music-making from global cultural perspectives to note that, compared to men, women have had a lesser chance to sing/perform in the public sphere.¹⁹⁰ Pressing upon the need to understand the private and the public as existing “on a continuum rather than as part of a clear dichotomy”, Post questioned to what extent women

¹⁹⁰ Jennifer Post, “Erasing the Boundaries between Public and Private in Women’s Performance Traditions,” in *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, ed. Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou (University of Illinois Press, 1994), 35–51.

“successfully created a new environment” to eliminate such dichotomy, although according to her, in many cultures, “women in the late twentieth century...created for themselves a very different environment from what existed during the previous century”.¹⁹¹ Bijoya’s example—including earlier cases like Bina Addy, whose life we glimpsed into in the Introduction—testifies the fact that in Bengali Britain, even in mid twentieth century, upper middle-class/elite Bengali women had started to break away from the insularity of the private, and begin sounding the woman musical citizen and novel publics; as it seems, Tagorean musicality was at the heart of it. In Bijoya’s case, her private singing practice sessions that somewhat recreated warmth and familiarity fed into the public recitals, thereby blurring ideas of a private/public divide.

This sketch of the picture in the run-up to the centenary shows that musical and cultural fault lines were present at multiple levels. From the archived diplomatic correspondence, we noticed a lackadaisical attitude of most British diplomacy towards the Tagore centenary and the barring of Uday Shankar and his troupe for reasons yet to be deciphered. Even within the Bengali community, we do not see the involvement of Bijoya’s fellow Sylhetis—the ship cooks, kitchen porters whom Kalyan Dutt mentioned in his report—in the informal cultural gatherings of the Belsize Bengalis of the 1950s and early 1960s. Through the absence of the working-class Bengali migrants, the most audible thing is class compartmentalisation; we hardly hear them in events celebrating Tagore. With the pan-subcontinental migrant population, we also come across an instance of linguistic intolerance: the Hindi speakers who had vented their irritation at the transmission of a Bengali song and not a Hindi one. Of course, this was not a one-off incident; in the 1980s, there would be clashes over television programming between the Bangladeshi and the wider Asian community, something I will briefly touch upon in Chapter 3. Having said that, this incident does not by any means

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 47-48.

establish anti-Bengali attitudes within the pan-South Asian community, or that the Tagore songs performed as part of the centenary would not have necessarily gone down well with non-Bengali speakers. It would be more prudent to say that the non-Bengali speakers celebrating Tagore in Britain in 1961 would have approached the celebration from a different perspective than the Bengalis. For Bengalis, Tagore would have been a more personable one.

A Tagore Renaissance?

At the same time as the Tagore centenary became a matter of cultural diplomacy involving a lot of behind-the-doors diplomatic conversation—as captured partly in the last section—the cultural public sphere, especially in West Bengal, saw a resurgence in interest in Tagore. In an essay for the *Desh* periodical, the linguist, Rabindra Kumar Dasgupta, commented that the massiveness of discussion and analysis on Tagore generated in 1961 proved the timelessness and mass appeal of the Tagorean corpus.¹⁹² A year before the centenary, the poet Hirendranath Dutta called for a well-thought-out plan to execute the celebrations in the *Desh* that would reach Tagore to the “illiterate” and the “child” alike.¹⁹³ Creating wider circulation of Tagorean literature, for Dutta, would aid in nation-building, whereas *Rabindrasangeet* and dance dramas were essential to introducing who Tagore was to the “commoner”;¹⁹⁴ music and dance, after all, transcended the demands of knowing the letters and a reader’s attention.

As intense as the urge within the Bengali intelligentsia to revive Tagore in cities and villages, on streets and in function halls throughout India, it was no less to reach out overseas, including Britain. B Sinha, joint secretary of a local organisation based in West Bengal’s Malda district, *Rabindra Sansad* (Rabindra Association), mailed Fleet Street, expressing

¹⁹² Rabindra Kumar Dasgupta, *Desh*, May 5, 1962..

¹⁹³ Hirendranath Dutta, *Desh*, May 1, 1960.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

gratitude in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* that “Indians [were] proud of Britain’s participation in the worldwide celebration, as part of an effort to collect photographs, copies of letters connected to Tagore’s tour of Britain”.¹⁹⁵ Some were more ambitious. Dr Kanai Chandra Paul of the Calcutta-based *Choddarer Pallir Rabindra Satatama Purti Utsav* (14th Ward Rabindra Centenary Festival) wrote a letter to the Duke of Devonshire, Andrew Cavendish, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, in a plea for a personal message from the Duke for publication in their brochure, an occasion where “many renowned artists, musicians and dancers [were scheduled] to participate in [a] musical soiree”;¹⁹⁶ possible bewilderment and amusement at the prospect of the Duke having to revert to festivals as local as ward-level ones even resulted in a panicked message from his Private Secretary to V.C Martin whether this meant “that at least another 13 wards [were] ready to apply?”¹⁹⁷

Even the British Prime Minister was written to. DC Sanyal, secretary of a Howrah-based local cultural body, *Dakshin Howrah Rabindra Sanskriti Sammelan* (South Howrah Rabindra Cultural Conference)—then in its fourth year of celebrating Tagore’s birth anniversary— put forward a request to Prime Minister Harold Macmillan for a personal message to be printed in their souvenir.¹⁹⁸ There were not only Bengali Tagore admirers from West Bengal but also from the diaspora in Britain. Responding to advice sought from the Prime Minister’s Private Secretary, Harold Smedley’s note to Cockram reveals that “an Indian society from Scotland” also wrote to the PM for a similar personal message.¹⁹⁹ Since it was not exactly feasible for the PM to personally respond to every local organiser, the British government had to carefully frame their reply so as not to trigger misunderstanding. Unsurprisingly, to Smedley, it

¹⁹⁵ *The Daily Telegraph*, June 21, 1961.

¹⁹⁶ Dr. Kanai Chandra Paul’s letter to the Duke of Devonshire, May 4, 1961, DO 191/189.

¹⁹⁷ Message from Private Secretary, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State to V.C. Martin, May 8 1961, DO 191/189.

¹⁹⁸ DC Sanyal’s letter to PM Harold Macmillan, April 24, 1961, DO 191/189.

¹⁹⁹ Correspondence from Mr. Smedley to Mr. Cockram, March 28, 1961, DO 191/189.

probably appeared that there were “some odd people on the Tagore Centenary Committee, and no doubt some even odder ones in the local bodies...”.²⁰⁰ It is possible that had other Britain-based organisations written to the PM, No. 10 Downing Street would not have deemed it necessary to pass information on all of them to the CRO.

What can we learn from these “odder ones in the local bodies”? Did their—be it those from West Bengal or the one in Scotland—keenness on getting responses from British politicians stem from Anglophilia, a special or often blind admiration for Britain? If so, how might that have factored in Bengali diasporic musical participation during the centenary? Harish Trivedi has argued that Tagore was “recognizably an anglophile”, which was intrinsic to his politico-philosophical making and ambivalence to both imperialism and Indian anti-imperialism—and in my opinion, music was not divorced—although he received acclaim during his 1913 trip to Britain, “for the quintessentially Indian and oriental resonance of his poetic voice”.²⁰¹ In broad agreement with Trivedi, for Narasingha Sil, Rabindranath simultaneously “remained an unabashed anglophile because of his admiration for British civilization [and] found the colonial state a poison breathing Leviathan that must be tamed.”²⁰² For Tagore followers like B Sinha, Kanai Paul and DC Sanyal, it is plausible that Rabindranath’s deemed Anglophilia would have imbued their ideas of Bengaliness and Indianness, and therefore, have directly/indirectly influenced elite musical Bengaliness in Britain.

There is little doubt that the event was highly anticipated by the Indian community, perhaps more exclusively, the budding Bengali community, as the musical archival evidence in the following section will tell. The above-discussed correspondence from the English-educated Bengalis/cognoscenti would be in semblance to earlier endeavours that, as per

²⁰⁰ Correspondence from Mr. Smedley to Mr. Cockram, March 28, 1961, DO 191/189.

²⁰¹ Harish Trivedi, *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India*. (Papyrus, 1993), 74.

²⁰² Narasingha P. Sil, “Rabindranath Tagore’s Nationalist Thought: A Retrospect,” *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 1 (2012): 10.

Partha Chatterjee, have been instrumental in the cultural imagining of independent India,²⁰³ although it must not be befuddled as mere appendants to colonial hegemony, but rather as both personal and collective acts of re-validating Bengali artistic sentimentality. Common to Bengalis' messaging was extra information on their planned cultural/musical programmes, indicating their seriousness. Applicable in the diasporic context, the local organisations' insistence on personal messages comes off as acts of localism, whereas divergently as performative aspirations of internationalism, parallel to the Tagore that the Indian government projected. There is no doubt that Rabindranath faded from British memory after his death in 1941. Kalyan Kundu has forwarded the view that the centenary celebrations went unnoticed in Britain, and there was no initiative either from the government or any private enterprise "to keep his works alive for posterity".²⁰⁴ For Kundu, it was not until 1985 that the popularity enjoyed by William Radice's new translations proved to be a "new dawn" for Tagore consciousness in British society.²⁰⁵ Irrefutably, the centenary in Britain by no means created a Tagorean renaissance. However, significant British press coverage and advertisements leading up to the centenary events show that interest in Tagore was not completely barren. One-off reports on arrangements for the travel of hundreds of sixth-form pupils to London to participate in the centenary indicate that Tagore did scratch British public consciousness;²⁰⁶ at the very least, it regenerated a discussion.

So far, I have focused on the centenary-centred resurgence of Tagore in West Bengal and whether it had any musical effects on the diaspora in Britain. All the while, this resurgence was seen in East Pakistan, too, among its Bengali population. However, unlike the intertwinement of Anglophilia with localism in the case of heightened reception of Tagore in

²⁰³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 35–76.

²⁰⁴ Kalyan Kundu, "United Kingdom," in *Rabindranath Tagore: One Hundred Years of Global Reception*, ed. Martin Kämpchen, Imre Bangha, and Uma Das Gupta (Orient Blackswan, 2014), 509–43.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ *Birmingham Daily Post*, May 1, 1961.

West Bengal and the Indian Bengali community in Britain, acts of celebrating Tagore in East Pakistan—especially present-day Bangladesh—were a different cause. Often heard and read as symbolic of a “Hindu” civilisational ethos, Tagore, to the Pakistani administration, naturally was incompatible with the Islamic foundations of their nation-state.²⁰⁷ However, he continued to be celebrated through observance of his birth and death anniversaries, inclusion in academic syllabi, and broadcast of his songs and writings on state radio. Very much active as a then-PhD student at the University of Dhaka, the Bangladeshi academic and literary figure, Anisuzzaman, has tapped from memory to comment that Tagore became the eye of an intensifying political storm in East Pakistan with the imminence of the centenary, marked by mounting opposition from the military establishment, and even refusals from the Bengali Academy to take any proactive part.²⁰⁸

Among the worship of writers who lived through 1961, there is overall experiential consensus over the Pakistani state's inclination to accelerate the exercise of its hegemony over Bengali culture. For musicologist and author Sanjida Khatun, it was the very thought of “Bangla” and “Bangali” that they were desperate to discard.²⁰⁹ Without risking confrontation with the authorities, Tagore admirers collectively organised cultural events in 1961, many of whom were unfamiliar faces.²¹⁰ Khatun became a musical foot soldier and was instrumental in creating the *Chhayanaut* institution in Dhaka. Beyond Tagore, *Chhayanaut*'s eagle-eyed focus was to showcase the music of Dwijendralal Roy, Rajanikanta Sen, Nazrul, and also the canon of ragas, all of which, for them, holistically made up their Bengali soul.²¹¹

²⁰⁷ Pinki Saha, “Purbobanglar Shomaj O Sonskrite Deshbhager Probbab,” in *Bangla-Deshbhag: Smriti, Sanskriti, Aartha-Rajniiti*, ed. Sushanta Pal (Punascha, 2024), 175–85.

²⁰⁸ Anisuzzaman, “Claiming and Disclaiming a Cultural Icon: Tagore in East Pakistan and Bangladesh.,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (2008): 1060–61.

²⁰⁹ Sanjida Khatun, “Rabindranath O Bangladesher Gaaner Bhubon,” in *Rabindrik Utoradhikar O Bangali Samaj*, ed. Abhra Ghosh (Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, 2015), 25.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

Another front of the Dhaka cultural war essentially played out in the print media in the form of an ugly anti-Tagore charge spearheaded by the Dhaka-based *Azad* daily, decrying him as “imperialist [and] communalist”; they interpreted his ideals as antipathetic to those of Pakistan.²¹² In an elaborate report for *The Times of India*, Girilal Jain held Maulana Akram Khan, editor of the *Azad*, mainly responsible for stoking anti-Tagore flames, in whose apprehension, Tagore would be “utilised to revive ‘West Bengal’s cultural onslaught and disseminate ideas of Bengal’s cultural unity’”.²¹³ An erstwhile President of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, Maulana Akram Khan believed the Mughals to be the precursors of sovereign Pakistan; in his reading, “Tagore’s attitude towards the Moguls was not ‘happy’.”²¹⁴ Counterbalancing *Azad*’s communalist sentiments was the Tofajjal Hussain-edited *Ittefaq* daily, with sharp, logical and factual critiques of *Azad* articles, supplanted by the *Sangbad*’s widespread coverage of the celebrations across East Pakistan and reportage on West Pakistani leaders’ rare positive comments on Tagore.²¹⁵ Music and print were two technologies that disseminated the Tagore debate—and in effect a broader one on the desirable ingredients of a new East Pakistani culture—to the public sphere across eastern Bengal. Writing about suffragette cultures in the United States, Mary Chapman has underscored the need “to acknowledge the aurality of the modern campaign and the links between the print cultural/visual and the aural...by paying attention to the ubiquity of both literal and metaphorical noise”.²¹⁶ In Bengal and beyond, the centenary reignited a conversation on Tagore—and hence, campaigns of culture and identity—in the public sphere via “metaphorical noise”/sonic metaphors in print. According to Ghulam Murshid, the centenary heightened Tagore awareness in eastern Bengal like never before, with print even

²¹² Anisuzzaman, *Claiming*.

²¹³ Girilal Jain, “Fear of Cultural Onslaught: Opposition to Tagore Centenary Celebration,” *The Times of India*, May 9, 1961.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ Selina Hossain, *Uttorodhikar*, Agrohayan, 1411 Bengali Year.

²¹⁶ Mary Chapman, *Making Noise, Making News: Suffrage Print Culture and U.S. Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 27–53.

capturing those readers' interest who would have been likely to remain disinterested in arts and literature otherwise.²¹⁷

Did this Tagore tide in East Pakistan create any ripples across the shores of Britain? Pro-Bengali *Ittefaq* and *Sangbad* also had their supporters in Britain, most prominently in the *Deshar Daak*, a Bengali newspaper that came out from London's Kensington High Street. Initiated and edited by the enterprising London-based journalist and restaurateur, the late Tassaduq Ahmad—who finds more space in the following chapters—*Deshar Daak* reflected the Bengali nationalistic sentiments of its owner.²¹⁸ Now long defunct, copies of the *Deshar Daak* are exceedingly rare, a handful surviving at the British Library and in Faruque Ahmed's personal collections, who features extensively through this thesis and as a case study in Chapter Four. Following a lengthy discussion with Ahmed, a specialist on Bengali print journalism in Britain, we concluded that a temporary shutdown of the paper might explain the absence of issues from May to August, the months of the centenary events. Unable to achieve economies of scale owing to the small local Bengali readership, many early Bengali self-funded publishing efforts often had to come to a standstill. However, we do find November issues of the *Deshar Daak* reporting on the news of the upcoming painting exhibition, and the final leg of cultural programmes organised by the Indian High Commission in London as part of the centenary.²¹⁹ What makes Tasadduq and *Deshar Daak*'s allegiances clearer is their September 1961 report on the news of the arrests of the Bengali litterateur Allauddin Al-Azad, journalist K.G. Mustafa and Anwar Zahid under the East Pakistan Public Safety Ordinance, who were said to have been deeply involved with the Tagore centenary in Dhaka.²²⁰ That Tassaduq would have undoubtedly taken a pro-Tagore stance is also explained by the fact that it was

²¹⁷ Ghulam Murshid, *Rabindrabishe Purbabanga Purbange Rabindracharcha*. (Bangla Academy, 1981).

²¹⁸ Faruque Ahmed, *Bengali Journals and Journalism in the United Kingdom* (The Ethnic Minorities Original History and Research Centre), 26.

²¹⁹ *Deshar Daak*, November 14, 1961.

²²⁰ *Deshar Daak*, September 14, 1961.

around him that a group of Bengali student activists in London was formed, in reaction to General Ayub Khan's imposition of martial law in Pakistan in October 1958, as Sarah Glynn has documented.²²¹

Proof of hard-hitting evidence of the Pakistani state-sponsored anti-Tagore campaign in Britain post-1961 is good reason to postulate two things: i. Pakistan's anti-Tagore feelings in Britain could not have cropped up suddenly in 1961, ii. the success of the Tagore centenary in Britain, or rather, the Indian government's hand in it, discomfited the Pakistani counterpart and hence the aftereffect. My inkling behind the latent anti-Tagore feelings in the Pakistani establishment gets confirmed by Sahana Bajpaie in her recent publication, where she mentions that after the success of the centenary in East Pakistan and its positive reception in West Bengal and beyond, "the entrenched military regime in Pakistan, driven by its own ideological agenda, perceived Rabindranath as a potential threat to the cohesion of Muslim unity...leading to a marked reluctance on the part of the government to grant official approval for the festivities."²²² A 1962 *Deshar Daak* report says the Pakistan High Commission denied permission for Tagore's birthday celebrations at the Pakistan Student House.²²³ Nazrul's—the Bengali rebel poet, writer and musician and later the national poet of Bangladesh, whose religious inclusivity was ignored by Pakistan to be pitted against Tagore—and Iqbal's—Pakistan's national poet, who eventually advocated for a united front against the Hindus and the British— birthday celebrations did not pose a problem for them. Like Sanjida Khatun's *Chhayanaut* in Dhaka, music became the medium of cultural expression when the undeterred Students' Federation celebrated Tagore's birthday with a recital of songs and poems. The Pakistan High Commission, however, did not budge, and the venue was shifted

²²¹ Sarah Glynn, *Class, Ethnicity and Religion in the Bengali East End* (Manchester University Press, 2016), 45.

²²² Sahana Bajpaie, "The Contested Legacy of Rabindrasangit : Musical Nationalism, Political Symbolism, and the Shaping of Bangladesh's Cultural Identity," *Ethnomusicology Forum*, June 4, 2025, 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2025.2504252>.

²²³ *Deshar Daak*, June 1962. The faded print of the dates of the 7th year 11th edition is unreadable.

to the Student Movement House, then located at 103 Gower Street in London's Bloomsbury district.

Of course, the Pakistani government's policy of refusing permission was not new; for comparison with a non-Tagore scenario, Priyanka Basu's article on dancer, Bulbul Chowdhury—"who excavated Muslims pasts to create a vocabulary of "national dance" for Pakistan"—shows that S K Dehlavi, a Pakistani embassy official in London, tried to stop the performance of his choreography, *Lest We Forget*, in 1953, as it was apparently showing Pakistan in a bad light.²²⁴ After all, arrangements finalised under the aegis of the Indian Deputy High Commissioner's office, troupes readied by the West Bengal Academy of Dance, Drama and Music for a performance of dance dramas, *Shyama* and *Chitrangada*, in Dhaka, were denied visas in 1960; a humbler Tagore celebration featuring a dance-drama in Dhaka in 1959 was attended by the Governor and the Martial Law Administrator.²²⁵ Of relevance here is the politics of the press. Behind *Deshar Daak's* conscious choice to bring this news to the public lay an initiative to cultivate musical public opinion of the Pakistani government's anti-Tagore policy, which was being peddled by the Pakistani establishment. This interaction of a new middle-class with the elite maps to an extent with Radha Kapuria's recent social history of music in colonial Punjab, where she has demonstrated how modern technologies like print saw the interaction of emerging middle-class and existing courtly networks, in the formation of music publics in cities like Lahore, and smaller centres such as Patiala, Kapurthala, and Jalandhar.²²⁶

1962 was a momentous year in Pakistani politics. In June, the country's new constitution came into effect, and it became a presidential republic. Bengali literary and musical dissent

²²⁴ Priyanka Basu, "The Nightingale Is a Graceful Dancer": Bulbul Chowdhury, Dance Heritage, and the New Nation-State of Pakistan," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 579–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2022.2131100>.

²²⁵ Jain. *Fear*. The Times of India. 9 May 1961.

²²⁶ Radha Kapuria, *Music in Colonial Punjab* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 189-276.

bubbled in Britain, resulting in the creation of the Bangla Academy and *Purbashuri* (Pioneers) in London as a rebuttal to the pro-Pakistani Pakistan Youth Federation.²²⁷ Founded to campaign for Bengali liberation, *Purbashuri*'s—what Glynn has phrased—“prime instigator” was Zakaria Khan Chowdhury, who came to London in 1957 to train as a barrister at the Lincoln's Inn, “had intended to keep his head down until he had qualified, but ‘could not remain silent when all those heart-rending things were happening in Pakistan’”.²²⁸ The very month of the Student Movement House programme, Khan Chowdhury produced another concert of a bouquet of songs at Conway Hall, named ‘*Amar shonar bangla. Ami tomay bhalobashi*’ (My Golden Bengal) after the famous Tagore song, which would be adopted as Bangladesh's national anthem nine years later.²²⁹ Featuring Bengali student musicians under the supervision of Shafique Ahmed and Mahmudur Rahman on the tabla, these musical mobilisations indicate that in the vortex of political upheavals in Pakistan, compounded efforts to thwart Tagore in 1961 only added to the storm of rising Bengali secessionist student politics in Britain. June 1962 saw another musical event arranged by *Shilpo Shongho*, a students' organisation, which featured artists of Calcutta and Dhaka at London's Tripoli Gate Theatre in Golden Lane.²³⁰ The Pakistan High Commission, who had objected to Tagore's birthday celebration in 1962, was not keen on making their aversion for Tagore too public to the British upper echelons and had not failed in paying the annual fees of £100 on behalf of the Government of Pakistan to one of the partners of the London Tagore Centenary Celebrations Committee East India Association that very year.²³¹

The Pakistani government's Tagore phobia only escalated in the following years, reaching its crescendo after Khwaja Shahabuddin, minister of information and broadcasting, informed

²²⁷ Glynn, *Bengali East End*, 32.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ *Deshar Daak*, June 1962

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ Mss Eur F147/119.

the National Assembly of Pakistan that the electronic media had been directed to stop broadcasting Tagore songs in June 1967.²³² Anisuzzaman's ensuing efforts to compile an anthology of essays on Tagore by East Pakistan took a different meaning after this; a work of literary translation, in his words, "[became] a mark of protest against the government and an assertion of the Bengali cultural tradition."²³³ It is true that the tug-of-war over Tagore brought Tagorean music and thought back to the centre stage in East Pakistan, even the diaspora. However, was it a "renaissance"? It was, but quite different to the part-Anglophilic phenomenon in West Bengal and its diaspora in Britain. Sanjida Khatun has emphasised that Bangladesh's Tagore is different from other countries, an enduring musical and poetic symbol of resistance for a "*chintanayokshunyo hotobhagyo Bangladesh*" (an unlucky Bangladesh devoid of a thinking hero).²³⁴ This was no different for the East Pakistani diaspora in the context of the Tagore centenary in Britain, when Tagore became an instrument of dissent, making up the tectonic movements that would lead to the seismic event of the 1971 Bangladesh War.

Competing Musicalities

The Tagore centenary ushered in an era of *Rabindrasangeet*, when All India Radio allocated more airtime, and the Gramophone Company of India released albums of songs from Rabindranath's dance dramas. The Bengali singer-songwriter and author, Kabir Suman, has narrated that this sudden resurgence in Rabindranath's works made him an infallible and unquestionable "icon" in middle-class Bengali society, which, as a result, eclipsed other forms of music and dance in Bengali society.²³⁵ According to Suman's observation, the centenary witnessed channelling of Indian public funds on a scale unseen after 1947.²³⁶ With the Indian

²³² Anisuzzaman. *Claiming*. 1060-61.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Khatun. *Rabindranath*. 26.

²³⁵ Kabir Suman, *Kon Pothe Gelo Gaan* (Aajkal, 2006), 43.

²³⁶ Ibid.

government's direct or indirect hand behind the musical celebrations beyond India, how did "Indian" and "Bengali" musical identities interact in Britain? Did this string of events make an impact on Bengaliness in Britain? Did the "Indian" musical citizen overbear their "Bengali" counterpart in Britain, or vice versa? What ramifications did the tension between the region (Bengal) and the nation (India/pre-1971 Pakistan) have for Bengali Britain? This section explores these questions.

Among the events in Britain, the most enterprise-demanding was arguably the 'Tagore Centenary Celebration Meeting & Concert' (TCCC), held on 8 May. Organised as a flagship event by the TCCC London in collaboration with the Royal Society of Arts, the Royal Commonwealth Society, the Royal India, Pakistan and Ceylon Society, and the East India Association, this event came to be held at the Royal Albert Hall after deliberation.²³⁷ Ayana Deva Angadi, a committed socialist and a member of the pro-independence India League, was in charge of Music, Dance and Drama as a sub-committee convenor; together with his wife, Patricia Fell-Clarke, they established the Asian Music Circle in 1946.²³⁸ The centrality of bilateralism to the Indian state was reflected in the exercise of singing both the British, and the Indian—Tagore-composed—national anthems. For India, it was essential to export Tagore's poetry and music on the world stage. Perhaps no other venue embodied such global status as the Albert Hall did. The entire package had to be understandable to the Anglophone audiences, which saw a translation of the Indian national anthem in English, especially for the occasion. Whether this act was appreciated by the non-Bengali speakers is unknown; there remains a crease of doubt. The chairman of the centenary committee, Reginald Sorenson, himself a Labour MP, who had already expressed his desire to join in singing the Indian national anthem, felt that the English words did not "seem to fit in".²³⁹

²³⁷ Minutes of the Tagore Centenary Committee, November 1960, 3, DO 191/189.

²³⁸ "Ayana Deva Angadi | Making Britain," Open.ac.uk, 2024, <https://www5.open.ac.uk/research-projects/making-britain/content/ayana-deva-angadi>.

²³⁹ "Words v Music," *The Daily Telegraph*, May 4, 1961..

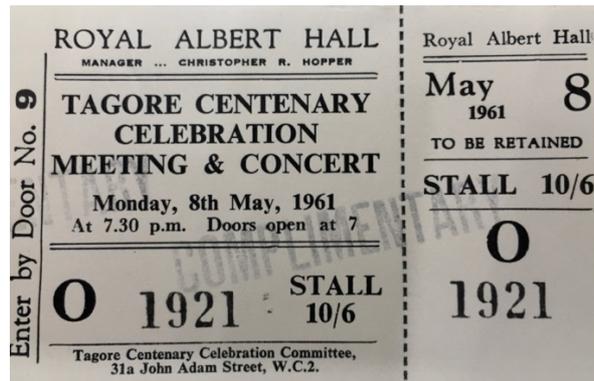


Illustration 1.3: Sample of a ticket to the Tagore Centenary Celebration Meeting and Concert, held at the Royal Albert Hall (Source: National Archives, Kew)

Probably self-aware that the projection of Tagore as wholly “Indian” would be jingoistic, the editor of the London centenary souvenir kept a clarificatory footnote in an attempt to simultaneously preserve Tagore’s ideas of universality of humanity, and milk cultural currency for India, saying that the Indian national anthem was “not alone for India but for all mankind, [that sang] of peace and friendship and co-operation among all peoples, East and West and North and South.”²⁴⁰ Nowhere did Tagore’s grounding in Bengali culture feature. This palpable desire of the Indian government to own Tagore was picked up by the Jalandhar-born Pakistani journalist, Hamidullah Khan Burki, then posted as the London correspondent for the *Civil & Military Gazette (Lahore)*; Burki had been an Olympian hockey player in the newly constituted Pakistan team.²⁴¹ Burki wrote that although the Indian community was having a “great time” in celebrating the centenary, they were “of course exploiting, if not working to death, the versatile talents and achievements of the great man”.²⁴² Written from a pro-Pakistan viewpoint, for Burki, even the Albert Hall

²⁴⁰ *Tagore Centenary Celebrations*, 37.

²⁴¹ “Partition Voices: H.K. Burki,” ANDREW WHITEHEAD, 2014, <https://www.andrewwhitehead.net/partition-voices-hk-burki.html>.

²⁴² H.K Burki, “India-U.K. ‘Sympathy’: Attitude towards Pakistan: Guidebooks,” *Civil & Military Gazette (Lahore)*, May 18, 1961.

performances were “a bit thin and threadbare... [although] on paper, it had sounded all rather impressive”. He cited how a restive Sikh family sitting right next to him had “muttered in robust Punjabi its disappointment and boredom”.²⁴³ Vebhuti Duggal and Radha Kapuria, in the introduction to their edited volume on Punjab’s sounds, have opined that the sonic markers define the “region” more easily than the “nation”, further indicating its applicability to other contexts, including Bengal.²⁴⁴ In reading/listening to the region as a verb, Duggal and Kapuria argue that “regioning” is done in different ways by sound: “from functioning as a sign of the region to carrying it as an embodied and material trace in sounds”.²⁴⁵ In this context, despite the Indian government’s projection of “Indian culture” and owning Tagore as an “Indian” cultural figure in the Albert Hall, the story of the muttering, bored Punjabi family, tells us that there must also have been embodied and material typicalisms in the music programming that perceivably shone Tagore as “Bengali” light, instead of a wider “national” one.

Piggybacking on Tagore, the idea of the Indian establishment to showcase homegrown talent was partly realised through the orchestral playing of compositions of the Calcutta-born musician John Mayer, who perfectly fitted the bill to marry the so-called Orient and the Occident. Born to an Anglo-Indian father and a Tamil mother in abject poverty, John studied the violin and Indian classical music theory in Calcutta. In 1952, a scholarship sailed him to London’s Royal Academy to study composition with Matyas Sether.²⁴⁶ Empty-pocketed a year later, Mayer put to use his talent as a violinist with the London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO). In a rare instance, while Mayer himself was part of the violin section, his compositions were being interpreted by fellow instrumentalists.²⁴⁷ Mayer started making a

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Vebhuti Duggal and Radha Kapuria, “Introduction: Regioning Sound from South Asia,” in *Punjab Sounds: In and beyond the Region*, ed. Radha Kapuria (Routledge, 2025), 1–28.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ “Biography – John Mayer – Composer,” Johnmayercomposer.co.uk, 2024, https://johnmayercomposer.co.uk/?page_id=g.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

mark as a composer with his Dance Suite for sitar, tabla, tanpura and symphony orchestra, which was premiered by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic in 1958.²⁴⁸ When Mayer's Tagore centenary chamber symphony, conducted by the LPO's Sir Adrian Boult, debuted at the Albert Hall on 8 May, he had already given up his LPO job, after facing managerial opposition. By all chance, in 1961, Mayer would have been at a critical juncture in his composing career, and the Albert Hall performance must have been significant; during the Tagore centenary, Mayer was a member of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.²⁴⁹ Although a nod to Tagore's project to reconcile the East and West, John Mayer's vision of such musical symbiosis did not have much to do with Tagore's body of music. Based on a tune that Mayer had heard on the streets of Calcutta, the chamber symphony was thought to have been best left on its own, with *The Times* commenting on the "dichotomy of styles [to be] alarming", "only a celebratory east-west handshake...could [one] hope to excuse it."²⁵⁰ For the *Daily Telegraph*, "in the scherzo, for example, [the] Calcutta street song retain[ed] its identity for just as long as the composer renounce[ed] Western harmony."²⁵¹ Not musical Bengaliness or Indianness per se, Mayer's piece spurred a questioning but novel sonic imagination of Calcutta in the British press.

More than any artist involved in the British Tagore centenary, it was arguably Rajeshwari Dutta who attracted the most attention from the London press. Born to Rai Bahadur²⁵² Arjandas Vasudev, a judge at the Lahore High Court, the highly meritorious Dutta née Vasudev, endowed with a knack for languages and singing, did her schooling from Lahore's Sacred Heart Convent School before reading Sanskrit at the Lahore Government College.²⁵³

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Tagore Centenary Celebrations booklet. London.

²⁵⁰ "Musical Tribute to "Indian Leonardo", " *The Times*, May 9, 1961.

²⁵¹ "3 Songs of Tagore: Concert Marks Centenary," *The Daily Telegraph*, May 9, 1961.

²⁵² Rai Bahadur was an imperial title of honour bestowed upon the British Raj to individuals for public services.

²⁵³ Swati Lahiri, "Rabindranather Gaaner Ononnyo Shilpi: Rajeshwari Dutta," *Jyobangla*, March 4, 2022, https://www.jyobangla.com/bn/author/swati-lahiri?%20oq&utm_source=outstanding-singers-of-rabindrasangitrajeshwari-%20dutta&utm_medium=post.

Having heard of Rabindranath's *ashram* at the age of twelve, where being a woman was no barrier to learning singing, Rajeshwari followed her heart to Santiniketan in 1938.²⁵⁴

Primarily a disciple of the musical stalwart, Santidev Ghose, Rajeshwari also had the privilege of gaining direct discipleship of Tagore himself; one finds the scene of Tagore teaching a young Rajeshwari at the south-west corner of his 'Udayan' residence, as chronicled by Sudhir Chandra Kar in '*Kabikatha*'.²⁵⁵ Rajeshwari's ascent as a singer was fast, singing the poet's compositions, '*Aji tomay abar*' and '*Badaldiner Pratham Kadam Phul*', on the occasion of the celebratory monsoon *Barshamangal* festival in 1938 itself.²⁵⁶ Her first record came not long after, in 1941, while still resident at Santiniketan.²⁵⁷

Two decades later, the National Tagore Centenary Committee invited Rajeshwari Dutta as a *Rabindrasangeet* specialist to sing in London, Sorbonne, Rome, and Bonn, respectively. To Taya Zinkin,²⁵⁸ the French-Russian polyglot emigrée and a prominent journalist for *The Guardian*, Rajeshwari was a living Tagore song, a singer of India-wide fame, a polyglot and a polymath all at once. Smitten by Rajeshwari's talents, Zinkin's piece reads like an eulogy. It is only sensible that Zinkin is quoted at length, for it captures the sheer aura that Rajeshwari's performances must have generally cast in London in 1961. Zinkin gushed:

Delicate, fragile without being petite or frail, Rajeshwari is like a melody, a trifle nostalgic- like Tagore's songs. Supremely civilized, she is at ease in all worlds and all cultures; a great lady. Talking to her is like reading Jane Austen: one wishes it would not end. Few women can be as accomplished and less assuming than this singer who combines grace with knowledge. Completely quintilingual in French, English, Italian, Bengali, and Hindi, Rajeshwari is a Sanskrit scholar and a first-class cook as well as

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Sudhir Chandra Kar, *Kabikatha* (Sri Nikhil Dutta, 1951).

²⁵⁶ Swapan Shome, "Rajeshwari Dutta: Kheyal-Tappar Moto Kothin Rabindrasangeet Chhilo Tnar Priyo," *Ananda Bazar Patrika Online*, December 27, 2020, <https://www.anandabazar.com/rabibashoriyo/life-story-of-rajeshwari-dutta-1.1249753>.

²⁵⁷ Amiya Deb, *Sudhindranath Dutta* (Pashchimanga Bangla Akademi, 2001), 100.

²⁵⁸ Taya Zinkin was declared as persona non grata in Pakistan by Ayub Khan, after she discovered that the Chinese were building a road in Indian Aksai Chin, and privately reported to Nehru; thereby being an indirect cause to the Indo-Sino War in 1962.

*a singer of all-India fame...Her admirable hands, at once vital and languid, caress the tambura (the four-stringed instrument which hums the background) while, serene, she sings the soft, sad songs.*²⁵⁹

All this praise came despite Zinkin's feeling that Tagore's music was a nasalised version of the French composer Reynaldo Hahn's music of Verlaine's poems. Edward Said has commented that informed by pluralist sense of history as advocated by the German philosopher Herder, an eighteenth-century orientalist mind could still break down the doctrinal walls 'and see hidden elements of kinship between himself and the Orient', further citing Mozart's 'The Magic Flute and The Abduction from Seraglio', which "locate a particularly magnanimous form of humanity in the Orient".²⁶⁰ Joanna De Groot argues that orientalist attitudes penetrated larger masses in British society in the twentieth century via audiovisual reproduction of themes and images, elaborated initially in the early nineteenth century in the form of 'orientalist' genres of literature, painting and travel writing.²⁶¹ Music from the 'East' was part of the cultural apparatus of the Other in 1960s Britain, as can be evidenced from critics' views of Rajeshwari's recitals, which were far from disdainful but frank admissions of unfamiliarity and even respectful, perhaps cognisant of "[a particular] magnanimous form of humanity".

On Rajeshwari's Albert Hall recital, *The Daily Telegraph* warned that "despite the distinction and authority of Mrs. Data's [sic] art—perhaps because of them—one is bound to confess that problems of language and idiom loom[ed] large even for the most capacious and compliant of Western ears".²⁶² *The Times* reporter who mistook her tanpura for a sitar was repentant; three songs to them did not give Dutta a fair chance to make a definite impression of the "subtle melodic inflections of Indian music" on "Western ears" with her voice which

²⁵⁹ Taya Zinkin, "Singer of Tagore," *The Guardian*, May 10, 1961.

²⁶⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979), 113.

²⁶¹ Joanne De Groot, "'Sex' and 'Race': The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century," in *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Catherine Hall (Routledge, 2000), 40.

²⁶² "Prime Minister Praises Tagore: Centenary Rally," *The Daily Telegraph*, May 9, 1961.

was found to be of a “cool and compelling quality, dark in colour”.²⁶³ Even Zinkin had warned that “a Western audience may find Indian music, even the highly Westernised Indian music of Tagore, unnatural”.²⁶⁴ This distance of the British press from subcontinental music, let alone Tagore’s songs, meant that for them, acts of remembering Tagore were windows to “Indian” music—instead of local exposure to Bengali musicality—for which they deemed Rajeshwari a suitable emblem. The only partial exception that I have been able to spot is A.V Coton’s *The Daily Telegraph* review of the closing event of the first half of the centenary celebrations on May 16 and 17, at the St. Pancras Town Hall in London’s King’s Cross, where he wholeheartedly praised “some astonishingly simple and perfect songs by Tagore [which] were sung with subdued and touching passion by Rajeshwari Datta- an interpretation matched only by the elegant virtuosity displayed by K. Sathe, a tabla player, in an instrumental suite on evening themes”, although he was generous with his adulation for the staging of *Shyama*, a Tagore dance-drama depicting the love of court dancer, *Shyama*, for an itinerant merchant, *Vajrasen* ending on a tragic note.²⁶⁵ I say partial exception, as even for Coton, it was the “Indian idiom” that shone through, as apparent from the unequivocal title of his sub-heading ‘INDIAN IDIOM MADE FLUENTLY CLEAR’; the Pancras Hall function also featured a recital of Raga *Bhairavi-Asavari* and Tagore’s songs by V.S. Nulkar on the sitar, with P. Chowdhury, P.R. Desai and V Sathe as tabla accompanists, and Ayana Angadi himself accompanying on the tanpura.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ *The Times*, May 9, 1961.

²⁶⁴ Zinkin, “Singer”.

²⁶⁵ A.V Coton. “Dance Drama in St. Pancras: Indian Idiom Made Fluently Clear.” *The Daily Telegraph*, May 17, 1961.

²⁶⁶ *Tagore Centenary Celebrations*, (Tagore Centenary Celebration Committee: 1961), 19.



Illustration 1.4: A young Rajeshwari Dutta playing the tanpura (Source: London Tagore Centenary Celebrations booklet)

A straddler of many worlds—from linguistics to music—and geographies—from her native Punjab to Bengal—Rajeshwari was as much Punjabi as Bengali, as much Indian as a global citizen. This mosaic of identities in her personage meant that Rajeshwari’s reception would be far from monotonous, much like Tagore’s. In the British press, Rajeshwari’s reception has partial resonances with Lauren Berlant’s notion of ‘Diva citizenship’ in the sense that she was seen as almost having individually achieved the “grand scale of [‘Indian’] nationality”, which would have also contributed to the “privatization of citizenship” by transforming the public sphere; however, to what extent Rajeshwari’s image as symbolic of a pan-Indian musical sensibility would have “dissolve[ed] the hierarchies of exploitation...constitu[ting] the material conditions of contemporary national life” is doubtful.²⁶⁷ At the crossroads of emerging Indian (and Pakistani) postcolonialities—not to forget its diasporic complications—and ideas of Bengalihood, the “star vocalist” in Rajeshwari, to borrow from Martin Stokes, “found [herself]...in...moments of political transformation...”²⁶⁸

Rajeshwari’s involvement in the London centenary was not just as a *Rabindrasangeet* “star”. At the Albert Hall, she led a party of locally resident Bengali musicians, including Tapasi Roy, Pinaki Chowdhury, Sugata Das, Minakshi Ghosal, Supriyo Ghosh, Krishna Mitra,

²⁶⁷ Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Duke University Press, 1997), 1–25.

²⁶⁸ Martin Stokes, *Music and Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 2023). 70.

Utpal Roy, Arati Sen Gupta, Jayanti Bhattacharyya and Ajit Ghosh.²⁶⁹ On May 5, Dutta presided over the opening session of a seminar organised by the committee at the Indian YMCA's Gandhi Hall, where, as per *India News*, Tagore songs were sung by “amateur Bengali artists...to create the right atmosphere for these discussions”;²⁷⁰ Arnold Bake, Arthur Geddes, Ayana Angadi, and Dennis Stoll were among the co-panellists to speak on Tagore, the musician.²⁷¹ Rajeshwari's astounding simplicity in her renderings of Tagore songs had established her as one of the leading *Rabindrasangeet* artists way before the 1960s. To say that Rajeshwari's 1961 London recitals were seminal moments in cementing a Tagore-powered Bengali musical identity might be an overstatement. However, it is plausible to affirm that she was an important part of regenerating musical interest in Tagore in England in 1961, reinvigorating local Bengalis' music-making, if not vocal Indian music at large.

Veiled behind all the glory lay strains of sorrow, which her peripatetic existence only reinforced. Months before her 1961 Europe tour, Rajeshwari prematurely lost her husband, the poet Sudhindranath Dutta, on 25 June; Damayanti Basu Singh, daughter of the Bengali author Buddhadev Bose and singer-turned-author Protiva Bose—who were family friends with Sudhindranath and Rajeshwari—has written the day Sudhindranath passed away, a shocked Rajeshwari had asked her to come closer and hugged her tightly.²⁷² Impressive sales of her *Rabindrasangeet* records and acclaim as a singer did not necessarily translate into an all-encompassing acceptance in Bengali society. The news of Rajeshwari's marriage to a much older and already-married Sudhindranath had spread like wildfire within Calcutta's intelligentsia. Many did not take to it positively, including the scientist and polymath, Satyendranath Bose, who severed ties with his old friend, Sudhindranath.

²⁶⁹ *Tagore Centenary*, TCCC, 19.

²⁷⁰ “Tagore Celebrations in London,” *India News London*, May 13, 1961.

²⁷¹ *Tagore Centenary Celebrations* (Tagore Centenary Celebration Committee: 1961), 29.

²⁷² Damayanti Basu Singh, “Sudhindranath: The Person I Knew,” Parabaas.com, 2024, <https://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/authors/texts/sudhindranathdutta.html>.

Exactly to what extent Rajeshwari's recitals struck a chord with London's Bengalis at that time is difficult to tell. However, it is true that she perhaps did not receive her due from Bengalis in London either. Although an incident in the early 1970s, Anisuzzaman's memoir, *Bipula Prithibi* (Immense Earth), bears witness to petty Bengali antagonism. One afternoon, Anisuzzaman had accompanied Tarapada Mukherjee, then a Bengali teacher at SOAS, and Nimai Chatterji, an avid collector and producer at the Bengali division of the BBC World Service who broadcast a half-hour programme on the arts, *Shilpa Prangan*, for lunch at SOAS's Senior Common Room. Seeing Rajeshwari Dutta inside, Tarapada muffled "Rajo!", shut the door and escaped to the Senate House for the meal along with Anisuzzaman and Nimai. Anisuzzaman, too, had felt that there was an existing rift between Tarapada and Rajeshwari; most likely, it was before this rift had developed that Tarapada Mukherjee had recorded Rajeshwari's songs of Tagore on spool tapes.²⁷³ During Anisuzzaman's second and last visit to Rajeshwari's flat, smoking her favourite brand of mild cigarette, a teary-eyed Dutta had brought up the SOAS incident, and rued that she was not accepted because she was not a Bengali. Perhaps that was why Anisuzzaman had asked her to write her memoirs and asked about her Punjabi background.²⁷⁴ As William Radice has recalled, Rajeshwari chose a path of reclusion, more so after Sudhindranath's passing away, moving far away from the limelight as a singer, only singing to her students' requests during her time as a lecturer in Indian music at SOAS. As an interesting sidenote, around the same time in June 1970, Mechthild Guha, anthropologist and wife of the historian and founder of subaltern studies, Ranajit Guha, too, in her words, was subject to some "downright unpleasant... cold-

²⁷³ William Radice mentioned about these recordings entrusted to him by Mukherjee before his death at the Sudhakar Chattopadhyay Memorial Lecture in Shantiniketan on 31 March, 2006, later published in the *Visva-Bharati* quarterly, and in a collection of essays entitled 'Celebrating Tagore'.

²⁷⁴ Anisuzzaman, *Bipula Prithibi* (Prothoma Prokashan, 2015), 148–51.

shouldering by some of the Bengali women in London”, after rumour spread that “Ranjit had got himself a tall blonde Swedish au pair!”²⁷⁵

The dominance of the TCCC was also reflected in the events organised by other parties in London. The London Brahma Samaj (LBS) was ostensibly one among them. The Brahma Samaj's origins were in its founding by Raja Ram Mohun Roy in 1828 as a theistic movement within Hinduism that rejected Hindu rituals and denounced polytheism, idolatry, and the caste system. Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's father, broke away from the folds of Hinduism in 1850, repudiating Vedic authority and emphasising reason as the pillar of Brahmanism. In Rabindranath's non-subscribing to any particular religion, the tenets of Brahma universalism were the closest to Rabindranath's thought and were the basis of his establishing Visva Bharati University. At its peak in the nineteenth century, social reform and nationalism were imbricated in the Brahma project led by the Bengali culturati and intelligentsia. David Kopf has argued that modern Bengali *bhadralok* culture was formed largely in the mould of the Brahma Samaj, with Brahma universalist values in Rabindranath and his attempts towards bringing closer Hindu and Brahma values influencing the rubric of the Bengali middle-class, including Hindus and Muslims; it would be these *bhadralok* values of justice, compassion and syncretism that would propel the Indian freedom struggle,²⁷⁶ and later, the Indian nation-building project. The LBS Tagore centenary organised by Bengali Brahmans, in line with Kopf's argument, too, was an ode to the nationalist in Tagore.

Organised at the Indian YMCA on May 7, a Sunday—after the TCCC's two-day event at the same venue—the event involved months of planning; Amit Chanda, then Secretary of the LBS, had already sent invitations on April 22.²⁷⁷ With the influential Lord Sinha of Raipur²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ Mechthild Guha, *Danube, Ganges, and Other Life Streams* (Permanent Black, 2014), 18.

²⁷⁶ David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*. (Princeton University Press). 2015.

²⁷⁷ Invitation from the London Brahma Samaj. Mss Eur F141/101.

²⁷⁸ Here, Lord Sinha of Raipur would be Arun Kumar Sinha, the son of the first Lord Sinha, Satyendra Prasanna (SP) Sinha, as Sushama Sen clarifies in a footnote. After SP Sinha's passing away, Arun Kumar had to go great lengths to prove he was the eldest lawful male heir, in order to inherit the Sinha peerage. To read more about the case, see here: <https://archives.blog.parliament.uk/2021/08/05/the-house-of-lords-goes-to-india-the-sinha-peerage-case/>.

serving as the President and Reginald Sorenson²⁷⁹ as the Vice-President of the LBS cum the Chairman of the TCCC, and speakers including Lord Pethick-Lawrence, T.N. Kaul, Lord Listowel, and an ex-member of the Indian parliament, Sushama Sen, it is obvious that the LBS and TCCC, although separate, were linked. Sen's 'Memoirs of an Octogenarian' provides her account of the London Tagore centenary. Having retired from parliament in 1957, Sen was involved with women's rights in India and had familial contacts with the Jorasanko Tagores, of whom Rabindranath was a part. Sen came from a noted background. Romesh Chandra Dutt, who became the president of the Indian National Congress in 1899, was her maternal grandfather.²⁸⁰



Illustration 1.5: Sushama Sen (right) with her husband, Prosanto, at their Finchley Road, London residence in 1934 (Source: *Memoirs of an Octogenarian*)

²⁷⁹ Considering that Reginald Sorenson was a Unitarian minister (including his father-in-law), his association with the London Brahmo Samaj becomes all the more clear. Yvonne Aburrow has explored the historical relationship between the Unitarians and the Brahmo Samaj. See: <https://hcommons.org/deposits/objects/hc:20910/datastreams/CONTENT/content>.

Unlike the Albert Hall event—which showcased Tagore as India’s artistic contribution to the world—the LBS function celebrated Indianness differently by acknowledging Tagore’s contribution to the Indian nationalist project while not excluding Tagore’s situatedness in Bengal. Sushama Sen’s recollections of the event that “all the speeches revealed that it was Rabindranath’s literature, songs and poems, which regenerated the background of India, and its thought and culture” speak of the same Indian nationalist sentiment, albeit one that is peculiar to Bengalis’ pride in their collective contribution to the building of independent India.²⁸¹ From Sushama Sen, we know that the Prabhu Sen-led Ashor choir offered musical tributes in the form of ten of Tagore’s songs;²⁸² the ten songs were ‘*Namo namo namo tumi sundaratamo*’, ‘*Tumi kamon korey gun karo hey guni*’, ‘*Hey nutan dekha dik arbar*’, ‘*Akash bhora surja tara*’, ‘*Amarey di tomar hatey*’, ‘*Darao amar akhiro agey*’, ‘*Tora je ja bolish bhai amar sonar harin chai*’, ‘*Jaya tabo bichitra Ananda hey kobi jaya tomaro koruna*’, ‘*Sarthaka janamo amar jonmechi aei deshey*’ and ‘*Alo amar aloo go alo bhubon bhara*’.²⁸³ Overwhelmingly comprised of Bengalis, the “enthusiastic band of young artists” who had on this occasion performed ‘*Hey nutan*’— composed by Tagore on the occasion of what would be his last birthday— “with great pathos”, the vocalists included Dolly Chakraborty, Krishna Mitra, Krishna Biswas, Devika Biswas, Prabhu Sen, Amiya P. Ghosh, Shyamal Lodh and A.R Gupta. In contrast, Prodyot Sen, Anil Dharadhar, B.K. Nair and Amiya Ranjan Biswas provided instrumental accompaniment.

Profiles of these musicians have most likely been lost in the annals of time. However, rather unexpectedly, I stumbled upon information on Prodyot Sen from Siddhartha Ganguli’s recollection of his father’s friend in London in 1962, in his ‘Smart Leading and Parenting of Teenage Kids in the Digital Era’. Prodyot then lived out of a Finsbury Park apartment with his nurse wife and their daughter, working in a senior position at the Indian

²⁸¹ Sushama Sen, *Memoirs of an Octogenarian*. (Anjali). 1971

²⁸² Ibid. Sen mentions that both Prabhu Sen and Shyamal Lodh led the choir but the programme published by the London Brahma Samaj only mentions the former as the leader.

²⁸³ For English translations of these songs, see: gectabitan.com.

High Commission. An associate of Ravi Shankar, Prodyot had hosted Shankar before the latter's 1962 Edinburgh Festival performance and later supported him as a tanpura player on many of his European shows. Additionally, Peggy Holroyde's 'Indian Music: A Vast Ocean of Promise' informs us that Prodyot Sen later used to work for the Hindustan Steel Company in London. Concerning the LBS, it is not that the Tagore centenary resuscitated a Tagorean interest, for Tagore was already active in their quotidian musicality. As per Sen, *Ashor*, who aimed at "cultivating Rabindra Sangeet", was active in the anniversary celebrations of the Brahma Samaj in London on 24 January 1960. On 27 September, people involved with the LBS, like Amio Dutt and Bidhan Bose, and very likely, members of the *Ashor* choir too, made the annual trip organised by the India House to mark the death anniversary of Raja Rammohun Roy in Bristol, singing Tagore songs on the way; *Ashor* had also performed hymns at the Essex Hall in 1962.²⁸⁴

Be it in Rajeshwari Dutta's performances with local Bengali artistes in London, or the LBS' commemoration of the centenary, the hazy boundaries between an "Indian" musical idiom and a "Bengali" regional musicality grab attention. Rajeshwari's Punjabi upbringing furthers complications. Ranbir K. Johal and Kiran K. Sunar's theorisation of *giddha* from a queer feminist trans Punjabi perspective is relevant here. Just like Johal and Sunar have marked Punjabi women's audiotopias as "'identificatory 'contact zones'" where conflict and possibility, difference and unity, can exist in tandem",²⁸⁵ the intersecting Punjabi/Bengali feminine constructs in Rajeshwari playing out during the Tagore centenary in Britain became such a site/zone. Whereas the British press' failure to listen to the finer nuances of Tagore's musical regionality does not come as a surprise, the Britain-resident Indian Bengalis' choice to also not make this differentiation is ironic. They were trying to sonically mark an "Indian"

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ranbir K. Johal and Kiran K. Sunar, "Triñjan Audiotopias: Complaint, Desire, and the Bawdy in Punjabi Giddha Performance Practices," in *Punjab Sounds: In and beyond the Region*, ed. Vebhuti Duggal and Radha Kapuria (Routledge, 2025), 93–123.

national identity in Bengali Britain—and therefore, an “Indian” musical citizen—rather than a “Bengali” regionality; that it was easier to imagine a “nation” than a “region” is an exception to Kapuria and Duggal’s findings on regioning. Picking on the relatedness of “identity” to “being”, “feeling” and “doing”, Tania Das Gupta’s argument of how West Bengalis, or Indian Bengalis in Canada, ‘share a sense of “being” and “feeling Bengali as well as Indian...’²⁸⁶ fits into the story of parties like the LBS. What they were ending up doing was entrenching the Bengali musical citizen in Britain under an umbrella “Indianness”, an act of postcolonial sensibility, which curiously, had its roots in colonial “Bengali intelligentsia’s notion of core ethnicity in the future nation-state in India with Hindu elites at its ethnic core”,²⁸⁷ even for the LBS.

Up in the Midlands, on the same day as the Albert Hall function, Birmingham’s Digbeth Civic Hall saw another event with “Indian” dances, songs and music.²⁸⁸ Attended by K.L. Bindra, then Assistant High Commissioner for India, Tagore was also projected here as an internationalist figure who was a product of India. Sir Robert Aitken, then Vice-Chancellor of Birmingham University, spoke to an audience of Indians and English, saying that Britain and the rest of the world could be proud of India’s contribution to international society and the values that Tagore stood for. Professor of English at Birmingham, T.J.B. Spencer, spoke about Tagore’s visit to the city in 1921. Other cities celebrating the centenary included Belfast, Northern Ireland, and Newcastle in northern England. It would not be surprising if Tagore’s long association with Yeats were a factor in the traction that the centenary got in a small city like Belfast. Immediately preceding Tagore’s birthday, the *Belfast Telegraph* published a piece on Tagore, hailing him as the “finest interpreter of Indian mysticism to the

²⁸⁶ Tania Das Gupta, ““” Are You a Bengali or Are You Indian“?: Bengalis in Canada.”, *Alternate Routes: A Journal of Critical Social Research* 30, no. 1 (2019).

²⁸⁷ Subho Basu, “The Dialectics of Resistance: Colonial Geography, Bengali Literati and the Racial Mapping of Indian Identity,” *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 1 (November 6, 2009): 53–79, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x09990060>.

²⁸⁸ *Birmingham Daily Post*, May 8, 1961.

Western world”.²⁸⁹ Direct governmental engagement for the centenary seems to have been less in Belfast than in London and, rather, driven by public initiatives. Dr Jovinder Singh Jassal, then president of the Belfast Indians’ Association, took the initiative to organise a programme at the Belfast British Council in the presence of Professor of English at Queen’s, P.H Butler, and H.W.F.R Ricketts, Belfast representative of the British Council; involvement of Queen’s students meant that Jassal had to postpone because of the former recovering from examinations.²⁹⁰ In June, Belfast-based Lyric Players Theatre Drama students enacted Rabindranath’s *The Post Office*, also performed by the Dublin-based Abbey Theatre.²⁹¹ Unfortunately, a scanty *Newcastle Journal* report does not say much about Newcastle’s Connaught Hall event, except that the organiser, Newcastle Indian Association, featured two dancers, Noor Hajee from Kenya and Phoola Deepan from Trinidad. Given the strong possibility that both Hajee and Deepan were of Indian descent, or even perhaps Indians themselves, it is likely that the Newcastle event, too, like in Belfast and Birmingham, was largely Indians owning Tagore rather than Bengalis exclusively. Interestingly, Yousuf Chowdhury has chronicled a few Sylheti men who got together at 125 Upper Sutton Street, Aston, Birmingham and formed a group called *Jubo Sangha* (Youth Association), including “singer Kacha Miah”—who is a case study in Chapter 4—in 1961.²⁹² Going by Chowdhury, the members “contributed money and bought a few musical instruments...every weekend they came to their shed to get together and play their music, sang a few songs, and before they went back home, had a cup of tea together”.²⁹³ When I interviewed Kacha Miah, I asked him about the Tagore centenary celebrations, but he seemed to have no recollection of this particular Birmingham event. Sylhetis were making music in Birmingham in 1961.

²⁸⁹ *Belfast Telegraph*, May 6, 1961.

²⁹⁰ *Belfast Telegraph*, 21 October 1961.

²⁹¹ *Belfast Telegraph*, 22 June 1961.

²⁹² Yousuf Chowdhury, *The Roots and Tales of the Bangladeshi Settlers* (Sylhet Social History Group, 1993), 138–140.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

However, it is unlikely that many of these people would have taken part in the Tagore centenary at Digbeth Hall.

Among all the centenary events, perhaps the most innovative was the one in Edinburgh, spearheaded by Dr Arthur Geddes, a human geographer who taught at the University of Edinburgh and was also the head of the Tagore Centenary Committee in Scotland. Son of the veteran sociologist, town planner, and biologist Sir Patrick Geddes, both father and son had deep ties with and a reverence for Tagore.²⁹⁴ Arthur was a deeply musical man, a talented violinist and a specialist in Gaelic tunes; his mother, Anna Geddes, was known in Europe as a gifted singer. Rabindranath liked Arthur's writing style and insisted that he translate some of his songs at Santiniketan and in the Shillong hills in 1923.²⁹⁵ During his 1938 visit to Santiniketan, Arthur met Tagore again to discuss further his plans to publish some of the latter's songs in staff notation, along with English and French translations. In an interview with the Associated Press on that trip, Geddes had held no bars in clarifying his love for Bengal and her music as a Scottish geographer and sociologist, to whom "the culture of man and his environment are closely linked, [and that in his first book on Bengal, he] dealt with Bengal's soil and civilisation, from its physical and its historical geography to some of the burning questions relating to rivers, agriculture and health, and national culture."²⁹⁶ Kalyan Kundu has outlined that Arthur had commented that young people in Britain were already beginning to listen to Tagore's songs with a sense of discovery, where he hoped his translations would be useful.²⁹⁷ Geddes hoped his translations would help clear the clouds of prejudice amongst the older generation of readers, who had been disenchanted. In 1912, Tagore had written from London to Sanskrit scholar Kshitimohan Sen,²⁹⁸ of his being

²⁹⁴ J. Wreford Watson, "Arthur Geddes, D.ès L., Ph.D.," *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 84, no. 2 (September 1968): 127–28.

²⁹⁵ Songs by Rabindranath Tagore with their own melodies. MSS Eur F147/101.

²⁹⁶ Interview of Arthur Geddes with the Associated Press. MSS Eur F147/101.

²⁹⁷ Kundu, "United Kingdom".

²⁹⁸ Kshitimohan Sen also happened to be the grandfather of economist Amartya Sen.

unconfident in his English and that he was equally elated and weary of the prospects of translating his work.²⁹⁹ Rabindranath's wish was fulfilled in 1961 by printing twelve translated songs accompanied by staff notation.

Despite being part of the TCCC nexus, Geddes's celebration of Tagore had a more personal touch. Perhaps his relationship with Tagore, Bengal and India meant that he enjoyed autonomy over how he would have liked to pay tribute as "one of [his] loving *chelas*³⁰⁰ in the west".³⁰¹ J. Wreford Watson, in Geddes's obituary, commented that India was his "first love [where] he spent the last years of his life wrestling with the problems of the living and the dying...".³⁰² From Geddes's detailed article for *The Scotsman*, 'Rabindranath Tagore- Bard, Musician and Mystic', it is quite unambiguous that for him, Tagore was first and foremost a Bengali, besides definitely being an Indian, impressing his opinion that "knowing much of classical melody and Sanskrit song, [Tagore] was also, and perhaps most at home in Bengali folksong, heard upon the rivers and among the villages of his land."³⁰³ To add to the evidence, Geddes had noted how Rabindranath composed mainly to the five fundamentally pentatonic modes and their "Indian variants... so much sung by the Bengal Villagers among whom [he] dwelt and composed his 2000 songs". While it would be simplistic to say Tagore's compositional repertoire primarily concerned pentatonic modes, Geddes's comments aimed at the critics' overt classicisation of Tagore's songs; his *Gurudev*, in his view, "preferred these to the over-refinements of classical and courtly teaching by pundits or court musicians", thereby inevitably putting Bengal, its people and culture in the centre.

As part of the Edinburgh Festival, a special centenary exhibition titled 'Presenting Tagore in Sound and Sight' was held from 30 August to 9 October at Adam House in Chambers

²⁹⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 90.

³⁰⁰ *Chela* means disciple.

³⁰¹ Bashabi Fraser, ed., *A Meeting of Two Minds* (Word Power Books, 2005), 117

³⁰² Watson, *Arthur Geddes*.

³⁰³ *The Scotsman*, May 13, 1961.

Street.³⁰⁴ The exhibition was arguably a performance of Bengal, an attempt to uphold Tagore’s works by immersing attendees in the sound and images intrinsically attached to the geographies where he lived his life. According to the exhibition booklet, visitors would pass through a “Bengali hut, typical of those to be found in the villages of Tagore’s homeland”, flanked by plants and foliage of common varieties native to India and Pakistan.³⁰⁵ A solemn and reflective atmosphere was created: in the half-dark, the first recorded song from *Raja* (*The King of the Dark Chamber*), “Deep in my heart He lies” (*Antare jagiche antarjami* being the original Bengali) was meant to give a “glimpse of Rabindranath’s life-long search for God”.³⁰⁶ Arunendu Banerjee, in his book on Patrick Geddes and Rabindranath, has opined that such a themed presentation would be rare and unique even in contemporary times.³⁰⁷ According to Banerjee, Bengal’s riverine cultural expressions also found space in the essence of Tagore’s affinity with his land’s rivers.³⁰⁸ In charge of the music were Mona Benson and her pupil, Angus Hood, who took up the task of singing the translated songs—both had to chip in on short notice as the first contacted singer fell ill—and recorded these melodies on tape to be played in the gallery; given that neither got the scope to listen to Tagore’s songs in Bengali, their approach was original, which Geddes mentioned were a “fresh European interpretation”. Benson and Hood also did live performances at a ceilidh on 2 September.³⁰⁹ Anuradha Gupta sang in the original Bengali, while Paresh Chakraborty, an Edinburgh College of Art student, spoke. Angus Mackintosh sang Tagore’s favourite Gaelic songs.

³⁰⁴ *ibid*

³⁰⁵ Presenting Tagore in Sound and Sight. Exhibition Booklet.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*.

³⁰⁷ Arunendu Banerjee, *Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes: The Ecological Cultural Variations* (The Asiatic Society, 2005), 22.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁰⁹ *The Edinburgh Evening News*, September 2, 1961.



Illustration 1.6: Women pictured painting *alpana*, Bengali folk art motifs, on the floor of a replica Bengali hut at the Adam House exhibition (Source: *The Edinburgh Evening News*)

Geddes upheld Tagore's Bengali roots and connection to the folk sphere, but this did not mean his Indianness was ignored. In fact, Geddes demonstrated how these two identities were inseparable in Tagore. Referring back to his *The Scotsman* article, Geddes made it clear that on the floor above the exhibition, Tagore was to be "seen as the Forefather of India's Five Year Plans to overcome the Tyranny of Want".³¹⁰ As he saw, Rabindranath's nationalism was not tied to the solitary end goal of achieving independence from British rule. Going beyond, Tagore, for Geddes, saw through the perils of "usury of money-lenders, the profit-making of shopkeepers and the ruthlessness of mill owners and financial corporations to homeless labourers, weary women and child workers."³¹¹ Drawing from the bank of his conversations with his guru, Geddes stated that for Rabindranath, absolute freedom would be achieved if the society overcame "the tyrannies of Hindu orthodoxy...its denials of humanity, its

³¹⁰ *The Scotsman*, 13 May 1961.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

falsifications of truth—human, mystical and scientific—its supine acceptance of others’ ills, its worship of evils.”³¹² In a progress report dated 27 April 1961, Arthur Geddes stated that the main purpose of the exhibition was to not only express Rabindranath as the “‘Bard’ of Bengal and India” but also to portray his work as “man and friend, as national leader and practical initiator...with a world message for men and women in all lands”.³¹³ The exhibition was a success: at least Geddes could bring to fruition his endeavours to celebrate Tagore, connecting “sound with sight, hearing with seeing, in a traditional way but with new means.”³¹⁴ Whether Geddes’s vision to bring about a renewal in Tagorean thought by making a lasting impact in “recreating the momentum of his power, for India, the East and the world”³¹⁵ came into being cannot be told without further conclusive evidence. Also, it is unclear whether Edinburgh attracted the Bengali diaspora to the same effect as London. Some traces show it did, even if to an extent. In the above-discussed *The Scotsman* article, Geddes’s doubtful cast on Tagore’s acceptability in Muslim society was met with a rebuttal in a letter from one Edinburgh-based Mrs Rokeya Sultana the very next day, which said being a “Bengali Moslem [herself she knew] what Rabindranath [was to them] all”, further urging Dr Geddes to change his opinion.³¹⁶ People were indeed taking notice.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Progress Report by the Chairman, Dr. Arthur Geddes. Mus Box. 687.17. National Library of Scotland.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ *The Scotsman*, 16 May 1961.



Illustration 1.7: Dr Arthur Geddes during what would be his final trip to India in 1956
(Source: *A Meeting of Two Minds: Geddes Tagore Letters*)

Conclusion

Accounting for the many countries that saw celebrations of Tagore's birth centenary, the one in Britain was important for the Indian government and the Bengali diaspora alike. Long before the proceedings of the celebration in Britain began, one Mr. George Cloyne of *The Times London*, had thrown "cold water on the whole idea", most likely because the 'West' would not seem to consider the moral values held by Tagore important, whose leadership, in his opinion, was deemed inconsequential by the Western intelligentsia.³¹⁷ Blockading of Uday Shankar's *Samanya Kshati* in Britain failed to set a precedent for Bengalis/South Asians in Britain to rely on financial support from the British government, and instead count more on self-patronage.

Tagore's symbolism during 1961 served as an occasion for the Tagore enthusiasts and admirers from West Bengal to exercise their Anglophilic sympathies by entangling their cultural and musical aspirations directly with the British political and royal class. On the other hand, for many Bengalis of East Pakistan and in the diaspora—largely following the

³¹⁷ Mulk Raj Anand, *Indian Literature* 4, no. 1/2 (1960): 192.

success of the event—Tagore became a symbol of dissent; the mere act of celebrating his birthday through his poems and songs equalled acts of defiance against Pakistani politics for ostracising Tagore as incompatible with their Islamic ideas of the Pakistani nation. Despite Bengali newspapers printed in London and elsewhere in Britain during the months of the celebrations being missing, evidence from the following year shows that Rabindranath’s music and poetry increasingly became a symbol of Bengali self-determination in London’s East Pakistani student politics.

Driven by the Indian political will in Britain to show Rabindranath as a globally significant litterateur from India, the bard’s Bengali roots, and hence, regional Bengaliness, were often outshone by Indianness in its musical programmes, especially in the Albert Hall function, which also became a platform to display Indo-British cultural ties. Not overlooked by the British media, the “Indian” music mostly went unappreciated because of its perceived differences in musical style. Barring Taya Zinkin of *The Guardian*, who saw Rajeshwari Dutta as an embodiment of Tagore’s song, the press found it difficult to appreciate the cultural and musical dissimilarities that Rajeshwari’s “Indian” music posed, although they never fell short of respect for her recitals and her unquestionable authenticity. While it can be understood that her then towering popularity as a *Rabindrasangeet* artiste would have made a mark among London’s Bengali literati, Anisuzzaman’s recollections of Bengali animosity from a decade later raise doubts regarding Rajeshwari’s acceptability due to her being Punjabi by birth. Rabindranath, the “Indian”, not the “Bengali”, found the centre stage in the London Brahma Samaj’s celebrations, though they marked the event with his Bengali songs. For the Bengali Brahma organisers, their “Indian” positionality matched with the Tagore Centenary Celebrations Committee in terms of shared belonging and pride in the Indian project of nationalist and social renewal. The complex layers of identities in Tagore were more successfully preserved by one of his endeared disciples, Arthur Geddes, in the form of his

curated audiovisual exhibition in Edinburgh, which strove to represent the bard's grounding in Bengal, his appeal as an Indian nationalist and simultaneously a universalist.

The dense networks of actors at play— the Indian, British and Pakistani political top brass; Bengalis from India and East Pakistan; the British print media—dislocated monolithic tendencies in the making of the musical citizen in Bengali Britain. Examples of musicians like Bijoya Chaudhuri in the run-up to the centenary celebrations evidence that Bengali women musicians active in the private sphere also had the chance to shape Bengali musical consciousness in Britain, thus trailblazing cultural citizenship-making for the decades to come. At a time when the Bengali diaspora was developing and Bengali public music-making was not a regular occurrence, the plethora of music programming that we come across in newspapers tells us that the musical citizen in Bengali Britain would have had a chance to strengthen their cultural position; in this light, it is essential here to recognise the risks of homogenising the musical citizen in Bengali Britain. Despite the presence of the Sylheti working-class during 1961 across British *metropoli*, their silence of subalterity—arguably, with the elite and middle-class Bengalis, and governmental actors, occupying higher positionalities, respectively³¹⁸—in both the public and private archive shrieks loudly. These differences in the formation of musical citizenship form one of the bases of enquiry in the next chapter, where I study the Bangladesh war in Britain.

³¹⁸ Gyanendra Pandey, "The Subaltern as Subaltern Citizen," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 46 (November 2006): 4735–41.

CHAPTER TWO

1971 Bangladesh War: Musical Aid and Activism in “Third Bengal”

[Bethnal Green, East London, 9 September 2022: Walking down Bethnal Green Road amidst a chill in the air—signalling the retreat of an unforgiving summer—I struck up a conversation with the British Bangladeshi singer, Arifa Hafiz. After learning that I was writing about the famous Action Bangla Desh rally at Trafalgar Square, Arifa enthusiastically responded that she remembers vividly being present there as a four-year-old, accompanying her parents. Her parents had even captured the rally on film, but probably that is now lost. Asking if she had understood the event's relevance back then, Arifa said perhaps her four-year-old self could not, but even then, it was clear to her that this was something big. Details are understandably hazy in her mind, but images of singing and dancing and massive crowds still linger...]

- excerpt from fieldnotes

Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War are deeply embedded in the Bangladeshi collective consciousness, be that of victims of violence or agents of protest.³¹⁹ What sets Hafiz's recollection apart from the rest is that she was all of four years old, bearing testimony to the impact the demonstrations must have had on a young child and, thus, the grave impact of the war on Bengalis' public life. Also known as the Bangladesh Liberation War, it was precipitated by a combination of political, economic, and cultural tensions that had been building up for years. One of the primary factors was the political disenfranchisement of East Pakistan. Despite having a larger population, East Pakistan was consistently marginalised by the West Pakistani leadership, which dominated the central government.³²⁰ The situation reached a tipping point after the 1970 general elections, when the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, secured a decisive victory, advocating for greater autonomy.³²¹

³¹⁹ See: Swadhinata Trust's Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain project, 2006; recent work on war memories include: Yasmin Saikia's "Women, War and the making of Bangladesh"; Sarmilla Bose's "Dead reckoning"; Nayanika Mookherjee's "Spectral Wound".

³²⁰ Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (University of California Press, 1991).

³²¹ *Ibid.*

However, the West Pakistani authorities refused to transfer power, fearing a loss of control over the region.

Economic exploitation further fuelled the grievances in East Pakistan. The region was systematically underdeveloped and economically marginalised, with resources and revenues generated in East Pakistan often redirected to benefit West Pakistan.³²² This economic disparity deepened the sense of alienation and injustice among the Bengali population, intensifying their demands for economic and political rights.³²³ Cultural and linguistic differences also played a significant role in the growing tensions. The imposition of Urdu as the national language in the 1950s, despite Bengali being the mother tongue of the majority in East Pakistan, created widespread resentment.³²⁴ This cultural imposition was seen as an attempt to undermine Bengali identity, further alienating the people of East Pakistan from the central government.³²⁵ The final catalyst for the war was the military crackdown on 25 March 1971, known as ‘Operation Searchlight.’³²⁶ The Pakistani military launched a brutal campaign to suppress the autonomy movement in East Pakistan, targeting political leaders, students, and civilians. The scale of violence and repression only intensified Bengali nationalism, transforming the demand for autonomy into a full-scale war for independence, ultimately leading to the creation of Bangladesh. Nine months of war between the Pakistan Army and the *Mukti Bahini*—a Bengali guerrilla resistance movement comprising East Pakistani/Bengali liberation fighters—claimed somewhere between half a million and a million lives.³²⁷ These confrontations and the violence between East and West Pakistanis also spilt over to the diaspora in Britain.³²⁸

³²² Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (Columbia University Press., 1972).

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ Susobhan Chandra Sarkar, *Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays* (People’s Publishing House, 1970).

³²⁵ *Ibid.*

³²⁶ Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

³²⁷ Christian Gerlach, “East Pakistan/Bangladesh 1971–1972: How Many Victims, Who, and Why?,” in *The Civilianization of War: The Changing Civil–Military Divide, 1914–2014*, ed. Andrew Barros and Martin Thomas Martin Thomas (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 116–40.

³²⁸ Again see: Swadhinata Trust’s Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain project, 2006.

Literature on this conflict is vast, especially in Bengali.³²⁹ However, most have been partial to the victorious Bangladeshi side, fixated on wartime rhetoric and lacking critical reading. There is substantial scholarly work on the war, focusing on geopolitics, policymaking and diplomacy.³³⁰ On the other hand, from the disciplinary angles of music history and ethnomusicology, academic scholarship on the Bangladesh war is virtually non-existent, particularly regarding the diaspora. Consulting hitherto un/underutilised sources—memoirs, newspaper reports, ephemera, film, pictorial sources, and oral histories—this chapter demonstrates the centrality of music in the diasporic making of Bangladesh.

First, while listening to how music served as a weapon of Bangladeshi activism and brought together a sonic front, this chapter reveals that Bengali unity was not absolute, thereby challenging narratives in circulation. The following section meditates on Trafalgar Square as a sonic protest and publics-making site for the warring parties, focusing on the 1 August rally and the retaliatory one organised two weeks later. Among the South Asian diaspora, the major pro-Bangladesh rally is known and discussed, but the pro-Pakistan one has been lost in the annals of history. Besides mapping the Bengalis' long-distance musical nationalism in this widely known liberationist protest, the chapter attempts to set the record straight by describing efforts from the other side led by a Sylheti leader, further complicating the possible reasoning behind the loud absence of music in the pro-Pakistan one.

1971 saw one of the world's first humanitarian concerts, the Concert for Bangla Desh, organised by Ravi Shankar and George Harrison, at New York's Madison Square Garden. Around the same time, Britain saw two musical fundraisers for the cause of Bangladesh: the Concert in Sympathy and the Goodbye Summer. This chapter uncovers events behind the scenes, simultaneously critiquing the beginnings of the culture of celebrity humanitarianism

³²⁹ To name a few: Jahanara Imam's *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Days of Seventy-one); Basanti Guhathakurata's *Ekattorer Smriti* (Memories of Seventy-One); Anisuzzaman ed *Roktakto Bangla* (Bengal Bloodied); *Bangladesh Kotha Koy* (Bangladesh Speaks).

³³⁰ Sisson, *War and Secession*.

and investigating the extent to which they successfully contributed to the cause of the Bangladesh war. The final section shifts the focus back to grassroots musical activism. Two case studies, Iskandar Miah of Oldham and Liverpoolian musician Lee Brennan, reveal how the war forged communal solidarities between the Bengali diaspora and local British society. “Third Bengal” is a direct translation of what Mahmoud Rauf—a London-based Bengali activist during the war featured in this chapter—described Britain for Bengalis during our conversation: *tritiyo Bangla*. In Rauf’s opinion, the contribution of Bengalis in Britain towards the creation of Bangladesh was crucial enough to designate Britain as another “Bengal”.

Drawing from Angharad Closs Stephens’s ‘affective atmospheres of nationalism’, in this chapter, I consider multiple tonalities and intensities of nationality to study the nebulousness of feelings and space in engendering the Bangladeshi nation in Britain.³³¹ Extending Michael Billig’s identification of an “aura attend[ing] the very idea of nationhood”,³³² I argue that in the context of the Bangladesh War in Britain, the “aural” significantly made up that “aura”, generated “as...temporally and spatially specific encounter[s] of swirling affects, memories, sounds, rhythms and images sticking to particular assemblages of bodies and materials.”³³³ In accounting for the materiality of diasporic musical nationalism, I continue my approach in studying the ecology of the Kolkata tanpura, in ensuring that “human agency... [is] not occluded, but further recognised and studied.”³³⁴ Unlike Timothy Morton, my surveying of the ‘atmosphere’ in Britain during the 1971 Bangladesh war does not essentially aim to subvert anthropocentrism; its location-less/ultra-locational and surface-less/ultra-surfacely qualities, however, go on to achieve a similar thing: conceive the playing out of identities and communalisms in Bengali/pro-Bangladeshi/anti-Bangladeshi nationalisms as mereological of

³³¹ Angharad Closs Stephens, “The affective atmospheres of nationalism,” *cultural geographies* 23, no. 2 (February 17, 2015): 181–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474015569994>.

³³² Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (Sage, 1995), 4.

³³³ Closs Stephens, “The affective atmospheres of nationalism,” 191.

³³⁴ Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, “The Changing Ecology of the Kolkata Tanpura,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 45, no. 6 (October 2, 2022): 1097, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2022.2118480>.

sensory and (un)musical/(in)audible citizenship.³³⁵ Hannah Truus Dreblow, in her doctoral thesis, ‘Feeling American’, has shown “how messy, diffuse and intimate” bodily, atmospheric, and spatial constructs of nationalism can be.³³⁶ In the following case studies, I attempt to navigate the bodily and spatial through the fluidity of atmospherics.

Consolidating a Sonic Front

Long before Pakistani President Yahya Khan’s army had launched its offensive, codenamed Operation Searchlight, across East Pakistan on 26 March 1971, a Bengali political and cultural resistance to West Pakistan’s policies had been growing stealthily. The case was no different in Bengali Britain. Immediately after Pakistan came into existence in 1947, Bengali sailors from East Pakistan started experiencing hostile undercurrents in the form of delays in getting passports from the Pakistan High Commission in London.³³⁷ Stemming from the burgeoning dissent, the Pakistan Welfare Association was formed in 1950, leading to the establishment of similar organisations in different cities across Britain, like Birmingham, Manchester, Coventry, Bedford, Leeds, Luton and Sheffield.³³⁸ After martial law was declared in Pakistan in 1958, protests from the Bengali community rose again, led mainly by the leftist student community.³³⁹

Even though Bengali students from East Pakistan used to be the majority in the leadership of the Pakistan Student Federation, demands of the Bengali students regarding lodging fell on deaf ears; the Pakistan Student Hostel—a cultural hub and temporary student residence at 15-16 Chesham Place, London SW1, was still run by West Pakistani students.³⁴⁰ Yahya

³³⁵ Timothy Morton, “Why Ambient Poetics? Outline for a Depthless Ecology,” *The Wordsworth Circle* 33, no. 1 (January 2002): 52–56, <https://doi.org/10.1086/twc24045032>.

³³⁶ Hannah Truus Dreblow, “Feeling American: Spatialising Emotion, Embodiment and Affective Atmospheres in the Emergence of Everyday National Identities” (PhD Diss., 2019), theses.ncl.ac.uk/jspui/bitstream/10443/4640/1/Dreblow%20H%202019.pdf.

³³⁷ Mohammad Ali Asghar, *Bangladeshi Community Organisations in East London* (Bangla Heritage Ltd, 1996), 22.

³³⁸ *ibid*

³³⁹ Iskander Mirza, the first President of Pakistan declared martial law on 7 October, 1971. Mirza was himself deposed by General Ayub Khan on October 27.

³⁴⁰ Abu Sayeed, *Bangladesh Swadhinata Kutnoitik Juddho* (Bangla Academy, 2014), 118.

Khan's military rule split the student community into a reactionary and a progressive group; while the former celebrated the Independence Day of Pakistan, the latter were invested in organising cultural programmes on the occasion of the Language Day, Bengali New Year and the birth anniversary of Tagore.³⁴¹ These two groups clashed over cultural programmes, as we saw in the previous chapter, before Tagore's birth anniversary celebrations in 1962. Responding to the anti-Bengali establishment, the East Pakistan Student House was established in 1964, comprising students who believed in the independence of East Pakistan. Fractures developed even within the leftist student circles, with a faction of the progressive students of the Student Federation opposing complete independence, eventually leading to the disintegration of this body and the formation of the People's Democratic Front of Pakistan.³⁴²

Besides London, Birmingham was one of the major centres of Bengali nationalistic resistance, where the East Pakistan Liberation Front (EPLF) came into existence in August 1969. Involved in publishing a Bengali newsletter called *Bidrohi Bangla* (Rebellious Bengal), EPLF organised a huge rally at Birmingham's Digbeth Civic Hall on 29 November 1970. Mohammed Israel, one of the members of the Birmingham-based organisation, recalled in an interview with the Swadhinata Trust, "the meeting decided that there [was] no other way to solve the crisis but to make East Pakistan an independent state".³⁴³ In the weeks leading to Operation Searchlight, Rabindranath's '*Amar Sonar Bangla*' (My Golden Bengal) started circulating as Bangladesh's de facto national anthem. David Ludden writes that an apex student action committee, *Swadhin Bangla Kendriya Chhatra Sangram Parishad* (Independent Bengal's Central Student Revolutionary Council) led a massive public meeting at Paltan Maidan, Dhaka, on 3 March, 1971; they sang the national anthem, as they "invited to form

³⁴¹ Faruque Ahmed. *Bengal Politics in Britain* (Lulu.com), 65.

³⁴² For an account of the factionalisms in leftist Bengali student politics in Britain, see: Sarah Glynn, *Class, Ethnicity and Religion in the Bengali East End* (Manchester University Press, 2016).

³⁴³ Mohammed Israel, interviewed by Jamil Iqbal, 25 February 2006, *Swadhinata Trust*.

resistance cells in every village, town and city.”³⁴⁴ On 26 March 1971—as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman awaited arrest by the Pakistan army—Amir Ali led the hoisting of the Bangladeshi flag at the East Pakistan House in London, to the accompaniment of a chorus rendition of *Sonar Bangla*, quite possibly for the first time in Britain.³⁴⁵ Benedict Anderson in ‘Imagined Communities’ writes how the collective singing of national anthems lends an experience of simultaneity and unisonance, thereby binding even strangers in a common thread.³⁴⁶ For Ali, the act of singing in a chorus helped them in the physical realisation of their new identity, and thereby contributed towards their becoming musical citizens of an imagined community. Like in *desh*, the national anthem rapidly captured the nationalistic fervour of the pro-independence supporters in Britain, through print circulation. In May, the Bangladesh Students’ Action Committee in Great Britain—an organisation located at 35 Gamage Building, 120 Holborn, London EC1—were printing and distributing leaflets containing the verses of *Sonar Bangla*, prominently labelled as the *jatiyo songeet* (national anthem).³⁴⁷

On 28 March 1971, Jebunnessa Baksh, Lulu Bilquis Banu and Ferdous Rahman convened a meeting at Baksh’s West London residence in 103 Ledbury Street to discuss plans for stepping up women’s resistance in Britain.³⁴⁸ Another meeting followed on 31 March, which saw the establishment of the Bangla Desh Women’s Association of U.K (BWA). Getting personally involved in the politics of the war would not have been easy, especially for Ferdous Rahman, whose husband, Habibur Rahman, worked for the Pakistan High Commission in London. However, Habibur soon protested by expressing his disgust and condemnation towards the Pakistan authorities in the early hours of 3 April, by not only letting protesting

³⁴⁴ David Ludden, “The Politics of Independence in Bangladesh,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 35 (2011): 83.

³⁴⁵ As of 22 April 2022, Amir Ali is hospitalised. I had approached Ameer Ali for a telephonic interview in November, 2021. Owing to his health reasons, the interview never happened at length. However, during the short telephonic conversation, Ali did briefly speak about his pride for hoisting the flag; he also confirmed that the national anthem was sung.

³⁴⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; repr., Verso, 2006), 145.

³⁴⁷ *Bangladesher Swadhinata Juddho: Dolipotro* (Ministry of Information, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 1992), 4: 68.

³⁴⁸ Ferdous Rahman, *Probase Mohila Muktijoddha* (Shapla Prokhashoni, 2009), 22.

students into his office, but also offering them tea.³⁴⁹ That very day, the nascent BWA organised their first major march in London involving various allied organisations, which saw an estimated 200 women march through the streets of central London, chanting slogans of the likes of ‘Not a penny not a gun, Yahya Bhutto Tikka Khan’. Munni Rahman had joined the association the previous day along with Sofia Rahman and Anowara Jahan, who met at the Woodseer café in Oxford Street. Bengali women from a patriarchal society had to face challenges to muster fellow women to join the liberation movement in Britain. Birmingham resident Nazma Khaliq, in an interview, later recalled the opposition young women had to face to lend their voices. Khaliq, who enjoyed cooperation from her doctor-husband, went on to mention that men often saw the women organisers as “bad influences” who were trying to take their “wives out”.³⁵⁰

Up north in the Midlands, the Birmingham City Council hastily approved a gathering at Small Heath Park from 26 March onwards. According to activist Badrun Nessa Pasha, the meeting attracted crowds in the “thousands”.³⁵¹ This is where the Bangladesh Action Committee was formed, and banners carrying the words “Peoples’ Republic of Bangla Desh” were seen in large print.³⁵² Begum Rashid, a homemaker living with her husband in Birmingham, had attended the protest meeting. Rashid later recalled in an interview:

On 27th March we attended a gathering at Small Heath Park and Mr Ravi Shankar, you probably know him, played sitar in support of us, and the whole world listened to it. Like his music, we reached out to people all over the world with our voices, the media, presidents and nations, and let them know that we were fighting for our liberation.

³⁴⁹ Ibid, 47.

³⁵⁰ Romena Toki et al., *The Legacy of Women’s Contribution in 1971: An Oral History of Women’s Participation from the UK in the Liberation Movement of Bangladesh*. (The Central London Youth Development Trust, 2012), 106.

³⁵¹ *ibid.* p 66.

³⁵² Abu Sayed, *Bangladesher Swadhinata Kutnoitik Juddho* (Bangla Academy, 2014), 122.

Given the lack of evidence in print sources, Ravi Shankar is unlikely to have performed before the gathering at Small Heath Park. What seems more likely is that Begum Rashid retrospectively referred to the 26 July Concert for Bangladesh held at New York's Madison Square Gardens, which instantly put Bangladesh on the world map. However, it is difficult to completely write off the possibility of Shankar's participation at Small Heath Park; after all, he had played the premier of a sitar and western orchestra collaboration at the Royal Festival Hall in London on 28 January 1971,³⁵³ and might have stayed on in Britain till March. Whatever the case, it is undeniable from Begum Rashid's reminiscing that music played a pivotal role towards building a Bengali-led resistance from diasporic locations. Runi Khan had left Dhaka with three of her children, Victor, Kishon and Simone, in May 1971. Runi's sentiments surrounding the role of music activism during the war echo with those of Begum Rashid's:

...the Concert for Bangladesh '71 by George Harrison, Ravi Shankar and friends was instrumental in reaching the Bangladesh Liberation War and the genocide to ordinary people in all corners of the world. Bangladesh was recognised in the minds of the people through this one charity concert even before this country was born. The importance of the power and outreach of music has to be noted...³⁵⁴

In May 1971, a meeting was convened right in the heart of leafy Bloomsbury at 59, Seymour House, Tavistock Place, London WC1, to establish the *Bangladesh Gana Sanskriti Sangsad/ Bangladesh Peoples' Cultural Society* (BPCS).³⁵⁵ The cosy flat at Seymour House was the residence of a prominent women's leader, Munni Rahman. Enamul Haque had organised the meeting; Haque, a multi-talented archaeo-museologist, art historian and musician, had

³⁵³ Oliver Craske, *Indian Sun* (Hachette Books, 2020), 214.

³⁵⁴ *The Legacy of Women's Contribution in 1971*.

³⁵⁵ Khandakar Mosharaf Hosen. *Muktijuddhe Bilat Probasider Abadan*. Ahmed Publishing House. 2008.

arrived in England for further studies after serving as the Director of the Dhaka Museum in 1969.³⁵⁶

With Munni Rahman serving as the General Secretary and Enamul Haque as President, BPCS issued an action plan in response to the conflict in June 1971, a month after its formation.³⁵⁷ Declaring themselves as a collective of writers, poets, painters, musicians, singers, teachers, students, scientists and “all others from Bangladesh engaged in cultural activities”, the aim was to spread its appeal across as many people from the diaspora as possible. To quote a paragraph from their action plan:

*The object of the Society is to support the liberation struggle of the people of Bangladesh, to project the cultural basis of our nationalism to impress upon the world opinion the inevitability of the independence of Bangladesh, and particularly to establish close contact with and obtain support from the progressive and freedom-loving intellectuals of the world in favour of the struggle against the worst kind of dictatorship and colonialism in Bangladesh.*³⁵⁸

Calling upon citizens of a Bangladesh yet to be formally recognised, Rahman and company were keen to tap into the agentive qualities of artistic expression, including music, and also build an extra-diasporic public awareness about the war. The BPCS produced a stage drama titled ‘*Ostro haatey tuley naao*’ (Take up arms) under the leadership of Haque, who wrote the script, composed the music, and directed the play. Three women were at the forefront of the performance: Runi Khan led the singing, Manju Hafiz the dancing, and Juthi Pradhan played the harmonium.³⁵⁹ Notable performance venues would include the Institute of Contemporary Arts Gallery at the Mall in London, arranged by the BBC journalist Simon

³⁵⁶ Dr Enamul Haque was awarded the Padmashree— India’s fourth-highest civilian honour— by the Government of India in 2020. In an interview to Prasar Bharati, India’s state-sponsored broadcaster, Haque mentions of considering himself to be a musician and a lyricist. In Haque’s own words, he has composed four lyrical dance dramas, and modern songs. Link to his interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqBU8JiIV8&ab_channel=NEWSONAIROFFICIAL.

³⁵⁷ “Aims and Action Plan of the Bangladesh Peoples’ Cultural Association. Papers of the Bangladesh Peoples’ Cultural Association,” in *Bangladesher Swadhinata Juddho: Dotilpotro* (Ministry of Information, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 1992).

³⁵⁸ *ibid*

³⁵⁹ *The Legacy of Women’s Contribution in 1971*, 70.

Dring.³⁶⁰ While BPCS's production toured across Britain and successfully fundraised for the war within Bengali spaces, it also found visibility in mainstream society.

Veiled behind the apparently unputdownable solidaristic exterior were fractures, stemming not just from political differences but also ethnonationalist constructs; seemingly, a metropolitan elitist superiority complex over the largely rural population originating from the district of Sylhet, the Sylhetis, who formed the majority of the Bengali diaspora in Britain. Abul H Saaduddin, an ethnomusicologist at UCLA, was regularly corresponding with Enamul Haque across the Atlantic. After an initial telephonic conversation, Saaduddin wrote a letter to Haque, dated 7 June 1971, narrating the incident of him being hit by a person from the Sylheti community after he had left a meeting “in disgust”; the Sylhetis alleged that they had been divested of powers.³⁶¹ Quoting Tagore from one of his poems written in 1896, *Bangamata* (Mother of Bengal)—where he quipped about the disunity amongst Bengalis to lead a fight against the British Raj—Saaduddin commented:

*I just returned from a meeting of the American League of Bangladesh, Los Angeles and I feel ashamed to tell you what happened there. The Sylheti group (who form the manpower, not the brain-power) was looking for an opportunity to create disruptions because they did not have any office in the Organisation. I did not know earlier that they had a sinister motive to put us in embarrassment and that is exactly what happened. Instead of discussing anything about the present situation in Bangladesh they demanded to look into our accounts as if we were a bunch of cheats... One fellow was so mad that he hit me outside the building and called me son of a bitch. Only if he could fix Yahya Khan instead of this stupid Saaduddin!...I heard that same kind of things were happening in England too.*³⁶²

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ “Saaduddin’s Letter to Enamul Haque,” in *Bangladesher Swadhinata Juddho: Doliptoro* (Ministry of Information, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 1992).

³⁶² Ibid.

One of the main reasons that the idea of Pakistan came to fruition was that Jinnah's Muslim League got traction from Bengali Muslim nationalism. Policies to Islamicise Bangla had only fanned more discontent and mistrust within the Bengali intelligentsia; the Bureau of National Reconstruction (BNR) set up during the Ayub regime to grant funds to Bengali artists had also fallen on its face.³⁶³ Mujib's brand of secular politics—which had been growing from the 1950s—had reached its moment to realise its nationalistic goal, which was “decidedly regional, linked with one particular linguistic group...”.³⁶⁴ Mujib's singularisation of a Bengali nationalism was based on what he said to be an amalgam of “Bengali culture, language, folklore, mores, and the general Bengali environment...”.³⁶⁵ Though this ideology had the potency to cure religious fault lines, it failed to be linguistically inclusive; the constitution of Bangladesh would go on to recognise only Bangla as the official national language³⁶⁶, leaving behind more than forty minority languages, including Sylheti, spoken within its territory.³⁶⁷ Saaduddin's comment in passing on the Sylhetis of not having brain-power was microcosmic of a then latent politics of Bengali classism and language-based hegemony.

There was discontent even within the Sylheti community. Fifty-six people from the Moulvibazar Sub-division of Sylhet district of Bangladesh, then residing in Britain, were signatories to a letter addressed to the Convention Committee of the Action Committee in London. The letter dated 1 October 1971 was in protest against a few “self-styled leaders” in London, who had set up an organisation called the Moulvibazar Association, and were

³⁶³ Zillur R. Khan, “Islam and Bengali Nationalism,” *Asian Survey* 25, no. 8 (1985): 834–51.

³⁶⁴ Willem van Schendel, “Who Speaks for the Nation? Nationalist Rhetoric and the Challenge of Cultural Pluralism in Bangladesh,” in *Identity Politics in Central Asia and the Muslim World: Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Willem van Schendel and Erik J. Zürcher (I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2001), 108.

³⁶⁵ Zillur R. Khan, “Islam and Bengali Nationalism,” *Asian Survey* 25, no. 8 (1985): 834–51.

³⁶⁶ “The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh,” Minlaw.gov.bd, 2024, <http://bdllaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-367/section-24550.html>.

³⁶⁷ Candide Simard, Sarah M. Dopierala, and E. Marie Thaut, “Introducing the Sylheti Language and Its Speakers, and the SOAS Sylheti Project,” in *Language Documentation and Description 18*, ed. Candide Simard, Sarah M. Dopierala, and E. Marie Thaut (EL Publishing, 2020), 1–22.

seeking publicity through the press, and apparently, drawing the attention of the Pakistani army.³⁶⁸ Alleging the Moulvibazar Association of denting Bengali nationalistic sentiments in Britain, the letter further went on to question their refugee fundraising initiatives. To quote an extract from the letter:

... We understand the so-called Moulvibazar Association remitted some money to India in the name of 'helping the refugees' a few months ago and subsequently put up a huge publicity in the press in this country, as well as, in India. This sort of cheap publicity caused an awful damage in promoting a national feeling among all Bengali people in U.K. and, we feel, it created doubt and misunderstanding in the minds of other Bengali brethren about the activities of people from Moulvibazar... This sort of parochialism is indeed most regrettable which, we apprehend, will create further misunderstanding in the minds of freedom-loving people of Bangladesh and discourage our brothers from Moulvibazar in the U.K. to participate more actively in our movement. Hope you will no doubt give due consideration to this matter and see that no parochial slogan is encouraged.

Without further corroboration, it is hard to tell whether there was any parochialism in the nature of the slogans raised. However, what can be affirmed from these scraps of evidence is that unity in the Bengali diasporic front was not absolute. Not all Bengalis in Britain were supporters of the Bangladesh movement. Despite differences within the community, decades of cultural subversion by the West Pakistan regime influenced the underground developments of a Bengali music front in Britain. The start of the war was the final straw.

Trafalgar Square Rallies

Among the string of pro-independence rallies held in Britain throughout the Bangladesh war, one of the largest took place on 1 August 1971 in London's Trafalgar Square. Organised by Action Bangla Desh (ABD), the 'Stop Genocide Recognise Bangla Desh' protests drew people

³⁶⁸ Letter to Action Committee," in *Bangladesher Swadhinata Juddho: Dolipotro* (Ministry of Information, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1992).

from across Britain, a majority of them who reached London in hired coaches. ABD—referred to as “the most significant non-Bengali pressure group” by Richard Pilkington—had been active right from the Pakistani cricket team’s tour of England, when they organised a demonstration in London’s Mayfair.³⁶⁹ Under the leadership of Paul Connett, ABD had already organised a major humanitarian aid operation named ‘Omega-1’, which started on 1 July.

Bringing together a rally of this size was a mammoth task. The *Reuters* covered the event on film; according to the voiceover in their footage, it took a publicity campaign “running into thousands of pounds” to attract crowds from across Britain.³⁷⁰ Several thousand people from the Birmingham area alone had come.³⁷¹ Restaurateurs sacrificed a brisk Sunday’s profit to be in attendance; at least six restaurants in Cambridge were shut, and the city’s New Bengal Restaurant’s manager, Abul Haris, took charge to gather people for the rally.³⁷² To seek people’s attention in the run-up to their D-day, the organisers and their allies needed hype. Music was chosen for the task.

Notwithstanding a packed programme of speeches by Labour MPs John Stonehouse and Reg Prentice, Reverend Kenyon Wright, Lord Brockway, and the screening of an eyewitness tape, it was the music programming that enjoyed the press limelight. On the day of the rally, the widely circulated London-based Bengali weekly, *Janomot*, carried a news feature titled, ‘*Trafalgar Square’e Gana Sangeet’* (People’s songs in Trafalgar Square), which asserted the participation of “acclaimed musicians from Bangladesh”.³⁷³ To propound their agenda of nationalistic journalism, the *Janomot* had been harnessing musical references to stimulate greater awareness among its readership. Quoting from one of Kazi Nazrul Islam’s most well-

³⁶⁹ Richard Pilkington, *The West and the Birth of Bangladesh* (UBC Press, 2021), 158..

³⁷⁰ Reuters, British Pathé, 2022, <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/VLVABVOZ65VBZG1QN717JCE6BAEK4-UK-PRO-PAKISTAN-RALLY-MASSES-IN-LONDON/query/east+pakistan+trafalgar>.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² *Cambridge Daily News*, July 31, 1971.

³⁷³ *Janomot*, August 1, 1971.

recognised poems —later sung as a song—‘*Kandari hushiyar*’ (Beware, O helmsman!), the *Janomot* ran an arousing headline, ‘*langhite hobe ratri nishithe jatrira hushiyar*’ (In the darkness of the night shall we overcome! Beware, voyagers!).

At the Trafalgar Square rally, music provided a live soundtrack to the intensifying Bangladeshi nationalism. The Indian sitarist Manesh Chandra started off the musical proceedings with the tabla accompaniment of Madhukar Kothare.³⁷⁴ The “*gana sangeet*” advertised by the *Janomot* was the thirty-minute 3:45 pm slot for the BPCS’s musical ensemble, comprising children, women and men. Now in his seventies, Mahmoud Rauf, then a student activist and one of the singers of the group, recalled:

*Thousands of people listened to us attentively as we sang. The crowds maintained pin-drop silence, and I feel they definitely enjoyed our performance.*³⁷⁵

Rauf further reminisced that the defection of the Second Secretary of the Pakistan High Commission had put them in high spirits and showed them signs of circumstances turning towards their favour. Such acts of collective sounding forged deep patriotic solidarities. Yves Deloye has written on the ‘invisibility’ of national reproduction to point out how microsocial practices such as listening to songs can contribute to it.³⁷⁶ Deloye’s work on everyday nationalism focuses on citizens’ auditory fields, such as playing and listening to music.³⁷⁷ While the efforts people made to attend this rally—especially for those from outside London—cannot be unintended, according to Rauf’s belief, music was not necessarily the

³⁷⁴ Both Chandra and Kothare led dual lives, working in full-time jobs and simultaneously playing music professionally. Robert Cockcroft of the Yorkshire Post had a feature on Chandra, which mentions that he worked as a senior customs officer, and also happened to be the recipient of a first-of-its-kind senior lectureship in ‘multi-cultural music’, awarded by the City of Leeds College of Music. A feature on Kothare in *DNA India* reveals that he worked as a chemical pathologist at London’s Royal Free Hospital, besides regularly accompanying artistes of the calibre of Mohammad Rafi, Mukesh, Talat Mehmood and Anup Jalota.

³⁷⁵ Mahmoud Rauf, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 30 June 2021.

³⁷⁶ Yves Déloye, “National Identity and Everyday Life,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, ed. John Breuilly (Oxford University Press, 2013), 615–31.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 613.

natural medium of registering protest for all rally-goers; many participants ended up extemporaneously joining the collective of listeners. Such passive acts of performing well-known patriotic songs, in Deloye’s words, “[federated] citizens and [made] the simultaneous communion of minds heard.”³⁷⁸

When I asked Rauf what songs they had performed, he gave a somewhat blurry but sentimental account:

*These were all well-known, popular nationalistic songs. We used to start with songs like Dhono dhanye pushpe bhora (Wealth, grains and flowers, abound). Bandh bhenge dao (Break the barrier) would come next...we would select songs like these for different performances. We sang songs of the land, which our Bengali ancestors have kept for us...*³⁷⁹

For Benedict Anderson, expressions of “nation-ness” are often tied to things that are not under the choice of its citizens: the idea of kinship, and natural resources found in the “home”.³⁸⁰ Similarly, the BPCS’s possible repertoire of songs like Dwijendralal Ray’s *Dhono dhanye pushpe bhora* would have helped in imagining a motherland replete with food and beauty. Anderson also comments on the insignificant element of hatred that the colonised have generally held towards their imperialist rulers.³⁸¹ However impassioned organisations like the BPCS might have been, the repertoire that Rauf talked about—including Tagore’s *Bandh bhenge dao*—allude to collective aspirations of emancipation, instead of a pointed hatred towards Pakistan’s ruling political establishment, at least so far as diasporic artistic mediums of resistance were concerned.

The first two verses of *Bandh bhenge dao* were published—in Bengali script, Roman transliteration, and English translation—by the ABD in their programme booklet, distributed

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Mahmoud Rauf, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 30 June 2021.

³⁸⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; repr., Verso, 2006), 141.

³⁸¹ Ibid, 142.

at the rally; the chorus part of the song was also printed below a donation appeal.³⁸²

Exploring popular songs in postcolonial Colombia's nationalist discourse, Ana María Ochoa Gautier in 'Aurality' meditates how materiality of the song enables hybrid forms of mobility, whether it be translated into a different language, or its nature of what she calls "malleability", that is the virtue that the songs hold to be reproduced in different artifacts, and across mediums.³⁸³ In this context, multimodal circulation of '*Bandh bhenge dao*'—in booklets, and donation appeal forms—shows how music percolated into the roots of the diasporic Bangladeshi freedom movement, not only through the performativity of singing and listening, but also through jointly channelling the orality of poetics and the aurality of music.

The ABD rally was deemed a success by the advocates of liberation. One of the protagonists of the movement in Britain, Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury from the Dhaka High Court—who made a zesty speech at the rally—captured the atmosphere in *Prabase Muktijuddher Dinguli* (Days of the Liberation Struggle Abroad) through his emotional prose. Though Chowdhury made no explicit mention of the music, he deserves to be quoted for its sheer descriptive and enlivening quality:

*The rally venue had not the slightest place left. There were innumerable people gathered along the footpaths encircling Trafalgar Square. Even the verandas of the National Gallery overlooking Trafalgar Square were full. It was an unforgettable sight for Londoners. This is because London does not hold rallies of this size. There, public rallies are the same size as seminars in our country.*³⁸⁴

Drawing extensively on the aurality of the protests, the *Janomot* report sang of the success with grandiloquence:

³⁸² "Booklet Published by Action Bangla Desh," in *Bangladesher Swadhinata Juddho: Dolipotro* (Ministry of Information, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1992).

³⁸³ Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Duke University Press, 2014), 80.

³⁸⁴ Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, *Prabase Muktijuddher Dinguli* (University Press, 1990).

...It felt like as if everyone was preparing for a festival... People came from all corners of Britain to recognise Bangladesh. In attendance were English, Greeks, Africans, Italians, people from the Middle East and other regions. Banners of the Cambridge Students' Union, Young Socialist, Workers' Press were drawing people's attention, even from a distance. Trafalgar Square was a sea of people. Some said, more than 30,000 people had attended the gathering... "Joy Bangla! Joy Bangabandhu!" slogans in voices that would reach the sky, would have perhaps shaken the Houses of Parliament a few times too. This seemed unending. Sixty-thousand hands and six lakh fingers of the thirty-thousand people pointing towards the sky. All of them firmly chanting "Joi Bangla!"...³⁸⁵

The same pressing conviction about the success cannot be found in J Banerjee's report for *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, which remarked on the "few white faces around"; Reverend Wright was disappointed to "see so few of [his] fellow countrymen among the crowd".³⁸⁶ Sceptical that the rally might not realise its objective, Banerjee was more positive about the fact that "Bangla Desh [was] not alone in its hour of trial". Balancing their report, Banerjee did not write off the sonic moments of glory. In the write-up, they talked about how "Trafalgar Square was frequently filled with 'Joi Bangla' slogans from the crowds", fundraising through the sale of disc records, and George Harrison's then recently released song, '*Bangla Desh*', being projected through loudspeakers.

Trafalgar Square, as a highly visible site for Bengali resistance, was not just the fruit of the members of the community who were living their "politics long-distance, without accountability".³⁸⁷ It was the result of—in Doreen Massey's words—"articulated moments in networks of social relations"³⁸⁸ that the Bengalis had started developing with the mainstream British society, which was reflected in the involvement of British leftist student groups and the

³⁸⁵ *Janomot*, August 1, 1971.

³⁸⁶ "The Illustrated Weekly of India Vol.92, No.27-39(July-Sept) 1971," 2024, <https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.110098/2015.110098.The-Illustrated-Weekly-Of-India-Vol92-No27-39july-sept1971-djvu.txt>.

³⁸⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics* (Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam), 1992), 12.

³⁸⁸ Doreen Massey, "A Global Sense of Place," [banmarchive.org.uk](https://banmarchive.org.uk/marxism-today/june-1991/a-global-sense-of-place), June 1991, <https://banmarchive.org.uk/marxism-today/june-1991/a-global-sense-of-place>.

Labour Party. According to Ajmat Ullah—then a Luton-based shopkeeper involved in fundraising—protests were organised every Sunday in Trafalgar Square.³⁸⁹ The ABD rally was the crescendo to such protestations that had been going on for months.



Illustration 2.1 (L): Manesh Chandra and Madhukar Kothare at Action Bangla Desh’s Trafalgar Square rally (Source: Screenshot from film footage); Illustration 2.2 (R): Patriotic songs from the BPCS during the rally (Source: Liberation War Museum Bangladesh)

Two weeks after the ABD rally, on 15 August, the pro-Pakistan side came up with their response. Organised by the Pakistan Solidarity Front (PSF), founded in February 1971—which claimed the support of 147 Pakistani groups and 140,000 individuals in Britain³⁹⁰—their rally saw a massive turnout of men, as well as a few women and children. The PSF ostensibly put an advertisement in the *Times*, calling all Pakistanis in the United Kingdom to assemble on the occasion of the 24th anniversary of Pakistan’s independence.³⁹¹ Leading the pro-Pakistan side was the PSF’s founder, Mohamed Abul Hayat, who was described as an “energetic political leader from Sylhet” in *Pakistan Affairs*, a publication run by the Pakistan

³⁸⁹ Ajmat Ullah, interviewed by Jamil Iqbal, Ansar Ullah and Maliha Haque, 23 June 2006, *Swadhinata Trust*.

³⁹⁰ *Coventry Telegraph*, August 30, 1971.

³⁹¹ *The Times*, August 3, 1971.

Embassy in Washington, DC.³⁹² Hayat was also behind another major London march in April that drew 7,000 protestors.³⁹³ Despite an overwhelming majority of Bengalis supporting independence, a minority advocated for the preservation of Pakistan's unity. Caroline Adams, in her seminal work, 'Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers', has documented the story of Nawab Ali from Gulabganj, Sylhet, who strongly supported the Bangladeshi cause, but "not immediately, of course...because [they] fought to make Pakistan...[they] didn't want to lose it."³⁹⁴

Philip Oldenburg argues that, for Bengalis, Pakistan was a state to protect themselves from Hindu domination, in contrast to West Pakistanis, who dreamed of building the nation based on Islamic solidarity.³⁹⁵ In a press conference preceding the 15 August rally, Hayat had stated that "no part of Muslim homeland should or could fall under the domination of Hindu India".³⁹⁶ Resonating with Nawab Ali's initial feelings, perhaps besides just religious exclusivism, his assertion of Islam being the paramount unifying factor in Pakistan grew out of some Bengali Muslims' paranoia of being the religious minority and losing something they had campaigned for.³⁹⁷ From Trafalgar Square, Hayat had said:

*Governments can change in Pakistan and so can the country's constitutions but no power on earth can change the map of the sacred homeland of Muslims founded after great sacrifice in 1947.*³⁹⁸

The PSF was in denial regarding the claims of genocide that were being voiced in the British press.³⁹⁹ To what extent this attitude held by the PSF top brass came solely out of their

³⁹² *Pakistan*, April 30, 1971.

³⁹³ "7000 March in London Demo," *Daily Telegraph*, April 26, 1971.

³⁹⁴ Caroline Adams, *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: Life Stories of Pioneer Sylheti Settlers in Britain* (Eastside Books, 1994), 83.

³⁹⁵ Philip Oldenburg, "'A Place Insufficiently Imagined': Language, Belief, and the Pakistan Crisis of 1971," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (August 1985): 723.

³⁹⁶ *Pakistan*, April 30, 1971.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁹ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, August 30, 1971.

personal faith in the Pakistani army is doubtful. After all, an investigation by Anthony Mascarenhas of *The Times* revealed that a sum of £2640 had been handed over in cash by the Pakistan High Commission in London to one of the PSF representatives; the 3 August advertisement was, in reality, paid for by the Pakistani government.⁴⁰⁰ The evidence of cash transfer indicates that the PSF might have been more than a one-off mercenary of the Pakistani government, but those Bengalis who did not buy the idea of Bangladesh based on their personal conviction and are still around, fear revealing such ideas in the post-independent nation, for they risk being outcast in the present society. In spite of meeting a few such people in the community, they were uncomfortable with their opinions being recorded. As a result, the story of Bengalis supporting Pakistan during 1971 is not well-lit yet. Although made around thirty years after Bangladesh's independence, Tareque Masud's film, '*Matir Moyna*' (*The Clay Bird*), successfully articulates this idea. In the film, a staunch Islamist, Kazi—the father of his protagonist son, Anu—remains unflinching in his belief that the presence of the Pakistani army in their village was to uphold law and order; his rejectionist stance towards Anu's interest in Bengali secular culture, such as local songs and *pathi* recitation, is shown as metonymical of the pro-Pakistani Bengali mindset.

As in the case of the ABD rally, Reuters covered the PSF one, too. The film shows protestors—mostly men but also a few women and children—carrying flags to chants of “Long live Pakistan!”. While the PSF rally did not have musical programmes, the synopsis of the Reuters report mentions that the “march was peaceful – but accompanied by chanting, dancing and beating of the breasts in the fashion of Moslem mourning”,⁴⁰¹ referring to Shiite rituals of commemorating the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali in the battle of Karbala, during the month of Muharram. Without concrete evidence, it is difficult to decipher what such a

⁴⁰⁰ “Who Pays the Pakistani Piper,” *The Sunday Times*, October 10, 1971.

⁴⁰¹ Reuters, British Pathé, 2022, <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/VLVABVOZ65VBZGtQN7t7JGE6BAEK4-UK-PRO-PAKISTAN-RALLY-MASSES-IN-LONDON/query/east+pakistan+trafalgar>.

demonstration of grief tried to signal. The presence of diasporic Pakistani Shia Muslims—in the overwhelmingly Sunni majority country—in the rally can be speculatively read in different ways. Andreas T. Rieck in ‘The Shias of Pakistan’ argues the Sunni-Shia divide in Pakistan generally has never been a major political issue, although, to quote him, “conflicts with the Sunni majority ...have been numerous and sometimes violent already during the first three decades of Pakistan...”.⁴⁰² It could either have been a conscious effort on the part of the PSF to stage a pan-Islamic unity through representing minority Shiias, or a genuine effort by the Shiias to voice collective grief at the prospect of losing East Pakistan.

Intended as a counter-demonstration to the pro-Bangladeshi show of strength, sound was an important medium here, too; the absence of music can, however, be perhaps attributed to curatorial motives to project Pakistan’s Islamic foundations; music in the rally would not align with their religion-based nationalism. According to Reuters, the “marchers shouted slogans against Bangla Desh followers, the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the BBC and the British Labour Party.”⁴⁰³ It was not all tit for tat and aggressive vocalisations; interestingly, “among the Punjabi workers contingent, sympathy with the East Pakistanis was reportedly also noticeable”.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰² Andreas Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 327.

⁴⁰³ Reuters, British Pathé.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.



Illustration 2.3: Visuals from the pro-Pakistan Trafalgar Square rally (Screengrab from the video footage)

Especially in the context of Bangladesh’s victory, the PSF Trafalgar Square rally has been pushed into obscurity. But there is no denying the fact that both the ABD and the PSF rallies were well attended, although there is no consensus on the figures. The former attracted 10,000 people according to *Reuters*, and “about 20,000” according to the *Birmingham Daily Post*;⁴⁰⁵ while *Reuters* and the *Nottingham Guardian* estimated 15,000 people for the latter.⁴⁰⁶ Trafalgar Square became an important space for both sides to showcase their nationalism and make their movements audible/visible. This is reflected in the propagandistic attendance figures forwarded by both parties; while the *Janomot* claimed a figure of 30,000 for the ABD rally, *Pakistan Affairs* quoted 50,000 for the PSF one. The clash of the pro and anti-Bangladesh parties at the Square took place essentially through the medium of sound; for the former, music was vital to their enterprise.

Using examples from English music between 1880-1940, George Revill has explored how “sound informs moral geographies of landscape, nation, and citizen.”⁴⁰⁷ To Revill, nationalistic music is built on the material and phenomenal properties of sound, produced in

⁴⁰⁵ *Birmingham Daily Post*, August 2, 1971.

⁴⁰⁶ *Nottingham Guardian*, August 16, 1971.

⁴⁰⁷ George Revill, “Music and the Politics of Sound: Nationalism, Citizenship, and Auditory Space,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18, no. 5 (October 2000): 597–613, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d224t>.

material and imagined networks of musical performance. The opposing ABD and PSF rallies created their cultural geographies/citizenships in Bengali Britain through sonic production. For both the pro and anti-Bangladesh bodies, who were physically separated from their ‘homelands’—the cartographical demarcations of East and West Pakistan, and even West Bengal—the Trafalgar Square rallies became sonorous sites/sights of what Michael Herzfeld has called ‘cultural intimacy’, which “erupt[ed] into public life”.⁴⁰⁸ In these rallies’ making of music and sound publics, as Herzfeld has noted, cultural intimacy “[provided] insiders with their assurance of common sociality... [promised] the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence... [and] reinforc[ed] the effectiveness of intimidation.”⁴⁰⁹

Musical Celebrity Humanitarianism

Concert in Sympathy

Birendra Shankar was beginning to make a name for himself as a promoter of the Indian arts in the 1960s; he first appeared during the Tagore Centenary Celebrations in 1961; in 1966, he organised the ‘Festival of Light and Folk Music’ in London and Birmingham; in the following year, he presented and produced ‘Dance and Music of India’ at London’s Scala Theatre, under his uncle, Ravi Shankar’s artistic direction; and started the first *Sanskritik Festival* at London’s Royal Festival and Queen Festival halls in 1970.⁴¹⁰ Birendra returned to Britain in March 1971, the month the war started. In his memoir, ‘Heritage, Harmony & Understanding’, Shankar writes that at the door of his Grafton Way office, he found a letter asking him to organise protests against the ongoing atrocities in East Pakistan, signed by people involved in the restaurant trade; some of whom had offered food for artistes and

⁴⁰⁸ Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (Routledge, 2005).

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid. 3.

⁴¹⁰ Barbara Shankar, “Birendra Shankar Obituary” (The Guardian, June 18, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jun/18/birendra-shankar-obituary>.

volunteers at concessionary rates for the 1966 festival he had organised.⁴¹¹ Instead of organising the festival, a decision was taken to go ahead with a series of fundraising programmes, Concert in Sympathy (CiS), to let the British public know about the distressing situation in East Pakistan.⁴¹² Shankar went to India again in June 1971 to discuss arrangements with paediatrician and music connoisseur Dr Manindralal Biswas and his elder brother, Bhudeb, who both lent their residences in Calcutta for the initial rehearsals to take place.⁴¹³

CiS was undoubtedly an “Indian” product, although primarily put together by artists from Bengal. ‘Indian’ identity was at the heart of Birendra’s endeavours; in fact, he had established the Centre of Indian Arts in London in 1969, with the objective “to represent Indian Arts in a manner faithful to the highest professional standards...”⁴¹⁴ The leaflet distributed for its flagship event at London’s Sadler’s Wells Theatre described it as “a sequence of music, folk and contemporary, based on Bengal and performed by famous singers and instrumentalists from India.”⁴¹⁵ All donations were earmarked for the Prime Minister’s National Relief Fund in India, to aid East Pakistani refugees coming into West Bengal. Following Birendra’s account in his memoir, there remains no chance for conjecture:

*The artistic aspect of this ‘Concert in Sympathy’, based on Bengal, was twofold. Artistes from West and East Bengal, showed something of the soul of its millions, along with British artistes who dedicated Western worlds and music to express their sympathy. Bengal has contributed immensely to the Indian voice. The production included folk, traditional and contemporary aspects of life in Bengal, and drew on the genius of two of its greatest sons, Rabindranath Tagore and Nazrul Islam.*⁴¹⁶

⁴¹¹ “Concert in Symphony,” 1971, CD Booklet.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Birendra Shankar, *Heritage, Harmony and Understanding* (Shubhi Publications, 2014), 114.

⁴¹⁴ Sanskritik Pamphlet. GLC/RA/GR/01/001. London Metropolitan Archives.

⁴¹⁵ “Concert in Sympathy,” 1971, Leaflet.

⁴¹⁶ Shankar, *Heritage*.

While the CiS was “Indian”, its foundation was an entangled sense of Bengali nationalism and nostalgia for the ‘motherland’. Scenes from a typical Bengali village were conceptualised by Khaled Chowdhury and brought to reality by Dibyendu Sinha on stage. Feelings of grief for Bengal also found expression through the motif of a burnt crepe jasmine flower—*tagar* in Bengali—designed by the Calcutta-based Sisir Dutta.⁴¹⁷ According to the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, the burnt flower symbol “was seen by millions in the UK...and spelt out for the British public the extent and implications of the great tragedy”.⁴¹⁸ Through CiS, Birendra tried to direct his sense of personal loss and familial attachment by visually and musically replicating his ancestral village. His evocative reminiscing in his memoir is worth quoting:

My paternal family’s ancestral village was in Kalia in the district of Jessore, (which was then in undivided Bengal, but now Bangladesh), which we visited four or five times each year during seasonal and religious festivals, until I was about fifteen years of age. I can still remember the morning awakening of the village, along with its own inimitable atmosphere. This I tried to put across in the village scenes, by sight, sound, melody and rhythm, including specially selected songs, music and drums, in duets, trios and ensembles...⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁷ “Concert in Symphony,” 1971, CD Booklet.

⁴¹⁸ *Illustrated Weekly of India* 93 (1971).

⁴¹⁹ Shankar, *Heritage*, 114.

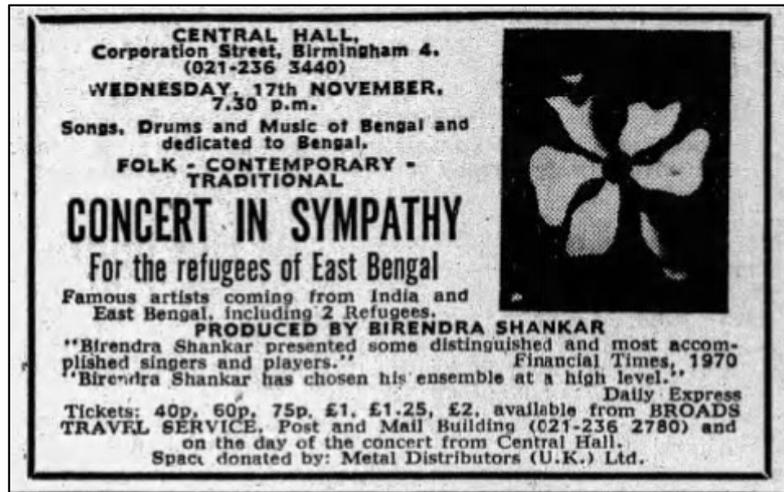


Illustration 2.4: Advertisement for the Birmingham event published in the Birmingham Evening Mail

CiS was a huge undertaking, which toured Leicester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds and Newcastle, besides, of course, London. The Sadler's Wells event was a medley of performances. Shankar roped in some big names from Bengal and Britain. Among them were Ruma Guha Thakurata, a distinguished singer known for having found the Calcutta Youth Choir; Nirmalendu Chowdhury, then a famous folk singer across *desh* and *bidesh*, who performed the well-known song, '*Allah megh de, paani de*' (Allah, bless us with clouds and rain); acclaimed percussionist, Radhakanta Nandy; Academy award winning actress Glenda Jackson, who read translations of three Bengali poems. Flautist, Chandrakanta, Radhakanta's brother, did a "pensive solo" in Raga Bhairavi. Keith Harvey played Immanuel Moore's 'Prelude' on the cello to the piano accompaniment of Meralyn Knight; two cello items, 'Oriental' and 'Granadina', composed by Granados and Yorkim Nin, were part of the concert, too.

The 1970s saw the rise of the phenomenon of fundraising through charity concerts; this was one among them. *The Newcastle Chronicle* reported, "Symphony concerts are nothing new,

of course, but have you ever been to a Concert in Sympathy?”⁴²⁰ Donations between £4000 to £5000 were expected to be raised from the series of performances throughout the country.⁴²¹ Rita Chapman reported a figure of £199.15 from the Leicester event;⁴²² around a thousand people were expected to attend the same.⁴²³ Exactly how much money the CiS managed to fundraise is not known. Still, Birendra’s emotional involvement in the Bangladesh cause becomes clearer from the fact that he went ahead with organising the event despite high financial risks and considerable personal stake. According to his claims, all financial liabilities had to be underwritten in their name.⁴²⁴ Even his meeting—convened by Dr. Bharatram⁴²⁵—with Padmaja Naidu for initial working capital for concert promotions, was not fruitful; Naidu had been the Governor of West Bengal and was then chairing a relief fund committee.⁴²⁶

Birendra deserves credit for his extensive efforts in bringing together two refugee artists from Bangladesh, Mohammed Moshad Ali and Shah Ali Sarkar, UK-based Bengali artistes like Gopa Bose, Manju Roy, Netai Dasgupta, Monisha Smith, Manjusree Sarkar, Pushpita Chowdhury and Kamal Hazarika, organising informal late night programmes for the Bengali restaurateurs to “alleviate their stress and boost their morale”, and simultaneously shoring up support and publicity from influential figures, including Glenda Jackson, Cleo Laine and Norma Winstone.⁴²⁷ The CiS committee comprised nine patrons, including the Earl of Harewood; then vice-chancellor of the University of London, Sir Brian Windeyer; and the Lord Mayor of Birmingham, Alderman Victor Turton.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁰ *Newcastle Chronicle*, November 20, 1971.

⁴²¹ *Birmingham Evening Mail*, November 1, 1971.

⁴²² *Leicester Mercury*, December 10, 1971.

⁴²³ *Leicester Mercury*, November 15, 1971.

⁴²⁴ “Concert in Symphony,” 1971, CD Booklet.

⁴²⁵ Shankar does not mention which member of the Ram family he was; most likely, seems to have been the industrialist Lala Bharat Ram.

⁴²⁶ Shankar, *Heritage*, III.

⁴²⁷ Chapter 3 features Netai Dasgupta and Monisha Smith’s music teaching.

⁴²⁸ “Concert in Symphony,” 1971, Souvenir.

Given Birendra’s close relations with his uncle, Ravi Shankar—Ravi was part of Sanskritik’s Festival of India the year before—ideas about organising a Bangladesh charity concert were likely to have been exchanged between the two. Still, the Concert for Bangladesh and the Concert in Sympathy were independent projects; the latter came nowhere close in terms of the scale of operations and media outreach. Despite these stark differences, the essential common ground was a politics of pity. Luc Boltanski has argued that pity is a key aspect of celebrity humanitarianism, whereby the relationship between those suffering and the audience becomes divorced, with the suffering turned into a spectacle of cultural performance.⁴²⁹ The success of the CiS would be in the fact that by involving Bengalis, and to repeat, the two refugees, they were, in Boltanski’s words, able to “come together in person to invade the space of those more fortunate”; here, the “fortunate” could be mainstream British audiences, who were present just to support the cause and not sufferers of the war. No matter how resorting to celebritised means—according to Lisa Ann Richey—upheld the invincibility of the “celebrity” and perhaps further entrenched stereotypical notions of the Western Self and the “Other”,⁴³⁰ Birendra Shankar did manage to strike some balance between the commodification of solidarity and humanising it.

Henrik Bang has identified how citizenship in late modernity has been driven by subjects’ desire for self-expression, which makes the politics of ‘everyday making’ critical.⁴³¹ Celebrities, in this regard, according to David Nolan and Stephanie Brookes, act as a bridge between politics and the identities of ‘everyday makers’; “they offer an accessible and popular site for political engagement...” around which identity is negotiated.⁴³² Without further information, it would perhaps be ambitious to say that the musical and cultural celebrities

⁴²⁹ Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4.

⁴³⁰ Lisa Ann Richey, ed., *Celebrity Humanitarianism and North-South Relations: Politics, Place and Power* (Routledge, 2016), 5.

⁴³¹ Henrik P. Bang, “‘Yes We Can’: Identity Politics and Project Politics for a Late-Modern World,” *Urban Research & Practice* 2, no. 2 (2009): 117–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17535060902979022>.

⁴³² David Nolan and Stephanie Brookes, “The Problems of Populism: Celebrity Politics and Citizenship,” *Communication Research and Practice* 1, no. 4 (October 2, 2015): 349–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2015.1108812>.

involved in the CiS were making an “accessible and popular site” for the musical citizen in Bengali Britain to contribute to the Bangladeshi independence movement. However, it is also true that the involvement of the local Bengali restaurateurs in inspiring Birendra Shankar to organise these events means that the CiS was, in a way, driven by their desire for self-expression, which shaped their citizenship. Also, Birendra’s informal late-night musical programmes involving local musicians and restaurateurs deserve attention. While not much of it is traceable so far, it is a sign that the politics of musical citizenship-making/performing nationalism did not always revolve “around contests between members of a ‘network elite’”.⁴³³ The musical subalterns, even in Birendra’s networks involving elite members of British society, were lending their voices to the making of Bangladesh.



Illustration 2.5: From left to right – Birendra Shankar, Sir Colin Davies, Shri Apa Pant, Glenda Jackson, Shah Ali Sarkar, Chandrakanta Nandy, Lady Pant, Ruma Guha Thakurata, Sabitabrata Dutta, Jamilla Massey, Nirmalendu Chowdhury and Radhakanta Nandy.

⁴³³ Bang. “Yes We Can”.

Goodbye Summer concert

Buffalo—comprising then four newly formed artist management companies—produced the rock ‘n’ roll charity concert, Goodbye Summer (GS), at the Oval cricket ground on 18 September 1971, to raise money for the Bangladesh war. The line-up of star bands included the likes of the Who, Faces, and others like Lindisfarne, Atomic Rooster, and Quintessence. GS was a success, both in terms of attendance and profits, and in achieving its goal of saving the SCCC.⁴³⁴ Exactly a week after the concert, *The Daily Telegraph* reported the “Bangla Desh charity pop at the Oval” to have registered a profit of £18,386 and attendance figures of 34,932. Rikki Farr, managing director of Buffalo, was at the helm of affairs; others involved in presenting the event were Ron and Bill Foulk, and Mike Baxter.

Journalist Niaz Alam managed to record the Who’s lead guitarist, Pete Townshend’s memories of the concert. Townshend vaguely remembered the event, attributing their sense of charity to a London-specific multiculturalism:

*The thing about Bangladesh was...these were our people. People that don't know about London, people that think, oh well it's just a big conurbation full of all different kinds of people. In West London, we grew up in a really mixed race place. Polish, Japanese, lots of Jewish people, mainly from Poland, but also from Russia. People from Somalia, I think we brought in ten thousands Somalians after the War. So these were kids of our age from the Caribbean and Bangladesh. The Bangladeshis tended to work very hard, so we respected them. We adored them and we wanted to help. You know it was a terrible tragedy. It was a flood, wasn't it? So we were honoured to be able to help. And I hope what he knows is that I feel the same way now. I know the difference between somebody from India and Bangladesh, and also somebody from Pakistan.*⁴³⁵

⁴³⁴ The SCCC earned £4,210 for hosting the event, which was one of the primary reasons the club managed to earn a modest profit of £561 that year. See: Adam Sofroniou, “Goodbye Summer but Not Goodbye to Surrey: 1971 - Kia Oval,” Kia Oval, October 22, 2021, <https://www.kiaoval.com/goodbye-summer-but-not-goodbye-to-surrey-1971/>.

⁴³⁵ Niaz Alam, “Interviews and Writing | Niaz Alam FRSA,” Niaz Alam FRSA, 2016, <https://alamniaz.wixsite.com/niaz-alam/copy-3-of-projector>. Townshend was read out Alam’s question by Deborah Bonetti, Director of the Foreign Press Association, during the release of the latter’s novel at The Sloane Club in London on 7 November 2019. Thus, Townshend refers to Alam as ‘he’.

According to Alam, more than the money raised, its significance was in the fact that it “drew attention to and used the name Bangladesh.”⁴³⁶ However, to what extent did the concert manage to raise awareness of the cause of Bangladesh in popular British consciousness? Was charity the sole reason behind the event? How did the media receive it? Did it have any implications for Bengali Britain?

Before the concert took a philanthropic turn, the Surrey County Cricket Club (SCCC) was considering hosting a pop concert, in a desperate attempt to keep the club afloat. Losses were projected around £10,000;⁴³⁷ more worryingly, spectators had been on the wane for years.⁴³⁸ GS was successful in helping the SCCC make a profit in 1971. Journalist and TV presenter, Anne Robinson, wrote an incisive piece for *The Sunday Times*, attempting to figure out when exactly the endeavour became charitable.⁴³⁹ Robinson presented two conflicting versions of how the cause of Bangladesh came into the picture: the one forwarded by Pete Townshend and the other by Farr himself. Walking down Park Lane, Farr came to know about the atrocities after talking to “Pakistanis” who were in a Bangladesh march. After attending a film screening on Bangla Desh with them, Farr claimed to have decided to channel the concert earnings towards this cause. Townshend’s version differs in the sense that he, being the first artist to be approached for the concert by Farr, agreed only if the proceeds went to charity, in his words, “something like Bangla Desh”. Moreover, according to Townshend, Farr had trouble figuring out where Bangladesh was or the problems it had been facing.

Seen as emblematic of a fast-evolving English society—where the youth seemed more disinterested in English traditions, including cricket—the idea of hosting a pop concert on a hallowed cricket ground did not go down well with the English cricket purists. J.W.M.

⁴³⁶ “All the Concerts for Bangladesh,” Opinion Mongrel, accessed August 28, 2022, <https://opinionmongrel.medium.com/all-the-concert-s-for-bangladesh-25bb5387491a>.

⁴³⁷ Alex Bannister, “Surrey Face Cricket Survival Crisis,” *Daily Mail*, March 15, 1971.

⁴³⁸ “Fewer Cricket Spectators,” *The Times*, November 19, 1958.

⁴³⁹ Anne Robinson, “How Charitable Will the Oval Pop Be?,” *The Sunday Times*, September 19, 1971.

Thompson wrote a detailed ground report in *The Sunday Telegraph*, where he remarked on the importance of the event:

*The pop festival at the Oval yesterday was all too plainly a watershed in English social history. It was a sort of one-day match between the Past and the Present, with the Present scoring a thunderous victory on a scale undreamed of it in Wisden's most stirring pages.*⁴⁴⁰

Throughout the article, Thompson's personal sentiments spilled over, which resonated with the older generation of cricket enthusiasts. Thompson did not hold back in expressing his sense of bizarreness at the sight of the hotdog stand that had been put in front of the scoreboard, and the stage that had been erected at one side of the ground. Similar feelings were not unexpected from the Surrey staff. Thompson had quoted one such person:

*To think...that Jack Hobbs and all the famous cricketers couldn't get a crowd like this, and yet a chap makes a horrible noise like that and they all pour in.*⁴⁴¹

Laden with sarcasm, Thompson commented on the attending crowd, who were "obviously entranced by the torments of sound which swept across the pitch". The organised crowd, efficient management, "gaudy clothes" of youth, the possible partaking of drugs, cricketing puns, chantings of "monkish figures in robes... with exotically shaved heads" amidst the perceived din featured in the report. The fact that this massive initiative generated funds for Bangladesh gained little critical appreciation from Thompson; he almost read it as a footnote to the whole story. The charitable angle of the event was a consolation for Thompson, which cricket had failed to achieve:

⁴⁴⁰ J.W.M Thompson, "A Thunderous Oval Victory for Pop," *The Sunday Telegraph*, September 19, 1971.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

*...It was as pleasant for the pop audience as for those who cheered Hobbs to spend a day in the open air away from office and shop and factory. They even had the satisfaction of knowing that their £1.25 entrance money would do something to relieve famine in Bangla Desh, in the best tradition of the charity cricket match.*⁴⁴²

On concert day, the *Daily Mail* published in its ‘Comment’ section a write-up lamenting the state of cricket, which was being intruded on by newer cultures, the mood being very similar to Thompson’s:

*The first few leaves of autumn patter on to the outfield. Homeward the groundsman plods his weary way. The cricket season is over. The old men in blazers grumble that the game isn’t what it was. There is talk of bats made of carbon fibres and pitches made of plastic. And today pop groups will be capering across the hallowed turf of The Oval... The Who and Rod Stewart and The Faces wailing where once the loudest voice was a murmur of ‘Well left, sir.’*⁴⁴³

Two days before the concert, Philip Howard reflected on the inevitability of change with time in an article for *The Times*. Howard’s antagonism towards the hosting of a pop concert on a historic cricketing venue was much subdued, however, present:

*In his office in Curzon Street, full of hubbub and beautiful people moaning from behind dark glasses about having been up late last night, Mr Rikki Farr, the producer of Saturday’s show, said that he aims to provide a form of circus relevant to 1971.*⁴⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the fact that efforts were made to make the “circus” relevant to 1971 is exceptional in itself. Be it a strategy to salvage Buffalo’s reputation after their failure at the Isle of Wight festival or not, Farr left no stone unturned to advertise the charitable underpinnings

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ “Keep Your Eye on the Ball, but Keep off the Cider,” *Daily Mail*, September 18, 1971.

⁴⁴⁴ “Wilder Notes than Sweet Music of Ball on Bat,” *The Times*, September 15, 1971.

of the concert. In retaliation to the antipathetic attitude of the British press and the stubborn conservatism of the elder generation, Farr praised the enthusiasm of the generally ridiculed youth for contributing financially to the people of Bangladesh:

If rock and roll can help to salvage the financial situation of the Oval, then cricket should be in awe of rock and roll and not the other way round.

The astonishing thing about Saturday is that thousands of the generation that is the whipping donkey of the establishment will be paying £1.25 each knowing that the profits from the concert will go to the relief of refugees from East Bengal.⁴⁴⁵



Illustration 2.6: Cheerful audiences enjoying the performances on a sunny summer's day
(Source: Surrey County Cricket Club)

Unlike most of the available newspaper reports, the Bangladesh agenda featured quite prominently in a report on *The Daily Telegraph*, which published a photo of the Surrey Taverners playing Norwood at the Oval, with concert arrangements visible in the backdrop. The brief photo caption recognised the immensity of the fact that the English tradition of cricket had been foregrounded by events in a nation still in its making, “Surrey Taverners

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

and Norwood keeping things strictly in perspective yesterday at the Oval where tradition takes a back seat for today's pop festival in aid of Bangla Desh." Moreover, it is probably the only one on GS that explicitly mentioned the East Pakistan war; the others that did highlight the Bangladesh issue in this light talked about the event being in aid of either flood victims or famine, which were indeed problems at that time, too. So far as GS was concerned, the British press largely remained apathetic to the Bangladesh issue and was instead more bothered about the dilution of Englishness as a result of their perceived enfeeblement of the English national game, the invention of which tradition had been synchronous with the creation of an English identity and allied ideas of gentility from the late-eighteenth century onwards.⁴⁴⁶

GS was arguably a pastiche of the Concert for Bangla Desh. The organisers had invited both George Harrison and Paul McCartney; while they did not hear back from Harrison, McCartney's spokesperson said, "I gather he's been invited, but he's not seriously considering accepting."⁴⁴⁷ Logistically, GS was nowhere nearly as well organised as the Concert for Bangla Desh. The PA system was reported to be dysfunctional; six people were taken to the hospital for burns after a gas cylinder for balloons exploded on-site.⁴⁴⁸ Also, the recording of the concert never saw the light of day, most likely after negotiations among various parties fell apart. Samantha Christiansen argues that by portraying rock and roll as the saviour, the Shankar-Harrison celebrity relief concert did more to assert Western cultural and moral supremacy rather than spreading awareness about the nuances of the conflict.⁴⁴⁹ The same argument of the imposition of a Western cultural hegemonisation can be applied here, so far as promoters' quest for celebrity bands—the WHO and the Faces were chart-topping bands

⁴⁴⁶ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁴⁴⁷ "Who, Faces for a Cricket Concert—and McCartney Scores a Duck!," *Disc and Music Echo*, September 11, 1971.

⁴⁴⁸ "Pop Festival Gas Blast," *The Sunday Times*, September 19, 1971.

⁴⁴⁹ Samantha Christiansen, "From 'Help!' to 'Helping out a Friend': Imagining South Asia through the Beatles and the Concert for Bangladesh," *Rock Music Studies* 1, no. 2 (April 10, 2014): 132–47.

with a significant transatlantic following, though not comparable to the Beatles—to drawing more crowds is concerned.

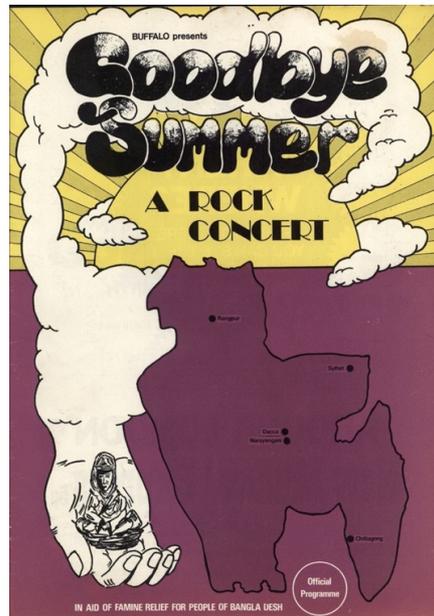


Illustration 2.7: Souvenir programme of the event (Source: rarevinyl.com)

Warwick Conway, a member of the audience, wrote that he had “attended this concert primarily to see The Who.”⁴⁵⁰ However, for one Jo L. from London, it was not only the stars but also the use of substances:

*The reason this was such a f***ing great gig was because not only were the bands better then but so were the drugs. My now husband and I were part of a group of ‘heads’ who started a charity for the children [of] Bangla Desh – who were involved in the organisation of the concert – called Kastur (in*

⁴⁵⁰ “Goodbye Summer - Concert for Bangladesh - the Oval 9-18-71,” Ukrockfestivals.com, 2014, <https://www.ukrockfestivals.com/goodbye-summer-vftmud.html>.

*Penge, Bromley, Kent, England)... We also had a joint or two with Keith Moon and other members of The Who.*⁴⁵¹

According to oral testimonies, Rod Stewart of the Faces had auctioned off his costume for victims of the conflict.⁴⁵² The Oval gig was remarkable for Stewart, not for its charitable angle; it signalled fulfilment and fame for him. This reads best in Stewart's words from his autobiography:

...in September of that year, we appeared at an outdoor show at the Oval cricket ground, Kennington, in a concert for Bangladesh on a bill featuring the Who.

I was rarely in a position to drive myself to a gig, in my own car, but this time I could. Accordingly, I arrived that afternoon in a white Lamborghini, recently bought with the earnings from my solo albums, in my stage outfit: leopard-skin coat and matching trousers that I had bought for the occasion from the Granny Takes a Trip boutique on the King's Road. All of us musicians used to shop at the same place in those days, which worked out very well from the point of view of avoiding fashion clash disasters...

Anyway, I remember swinging into the Oval car park behind the scenes, and climbing out of the Lambo, dressed as a leopard from head to toe, with my girlfriend, Dee Harrington, who was wearing a tiny skirt, legs up to her neck, and the two of us setting off for the dressing room, arm in arm. And right there, as we walked, I had the overwhelming sensation of having arrived—not just at the Oval, but at a certain point in life, and thinking to myself, “Bloody hell—you’re quite the rock star, aren’t you, son?”

*One other thing about the Oval show: I did the gig, drinking onstage, police everywhere; I came off, had another drink with the lads; and then I got in the Lamborghini and drove home, waved cheerfully on my way by the police officers at the gate. And nobody thought anything of it...*⁴⁵³

⁴⁵¹ Ibid. Christiansen argues that the New York concert provided a moment for the countercultural scene—which had become associated with heavy drugs and violence—to ‘feel good about itself’. Going by Jo L’s memories, it is difficult to agree with Christiansen here.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Rod Stewart, *Rod: The Autobiography* (Crown Archetype, 2012), 277.



Illustration 2.8: Stewart performing in his leopard print attire (Source: aboutsell.com)

GS had a problem of representation. The programme booklet featured a graphic of a begging hand with an impoverished lady carrying her child sprouting from a map of Bangladesh. Precisely, this can be seen as a sign of their seriousness in spreading the word about the suffering. Unfortunately, it ended up presenting a totalising image of the conflict, as if the people had no agency. Bangladesh was at the back of the audience's minds, although for a section of the crowd, it was a summer entertainment opportunity. GS meant different things to those involved. The SCCC was interested in the money. The English cricket purists were largely bothered about the bastardisation of tradition. The audiences were primarily drawn by the music stars, who were themselves keen on getting traction and visibility.

The above-presented data does not show much involvement of the Bengalis in GS, except for the fact that Rikki Farr came to know about the Bangladesh war after talking to some protestors; it is possible that despite having attended the event and getting inspired to organise a charity concert, Farr would have remained dark about the position of Bangladesh in the

world map. If this history is read in good faith, the organisers come off as well-intentioned, as well as members of the audience, like Warwick Conway, who and her husband were personally involved in raising funds. Compared to the CiS, GS would have had a lesser impact on the Bengali diaspora. In whatever ways it did manage to amplify the events in East Pakistan, its subliminal way of connecting the White British public sphere to a Bengali one cannot be denied.

Voices from the Grassroots

As we have already seen, Britain was replete with grand musical initiatives—be it the ABD Trafalgar Square rally, the Goodbye Summer concert, or the Concert in Sympathy. Unlike the ABD rally, the Concert in Sympathy was not as politically explicit in its messaging, and Goodbye Summer was even less so. Nevertheless, all three stood up for the humanitarian crisis and, more importantly, raised funds. However, behind the limelight, there were local musicians whose independent efforts largely went unnoticed in the public eye. These initiatives cropped up largely self-inspired and took birth at the grassroots to contribute to funds going into the war and refugee relief from Britain. Moving from the largely London-centric narrative presented so far, in this section, I put the spotlight on the work of two musicians as archetypal of musical acts of solidarity and resistance that came from ‘below’.

Liverpool’s Lee Brennan

The Kismet restaurant in Liverpool, run by one Mr. Sayyad from Sylhet, had become the hub of fundraising activity for the Bangla Desh Association U.K. in the Merseyside area.⁴⁵⁴ According to Muntasir Mamoon, this was where people used to congregate and make further

⁴⁵⁴ Zaid Kalam, “The Daily Star,” *The Daily Star*, December 29, 2014, <https://www.thedailystar.net/songs-of-freedom-57663>.

plans for donations.⁴⁵⁵ Mahmubar Rahman Khan, a botanist from Dhaka University, was in Liverpool on a scholarship from the Pakistan government.⁴⁵⁶ According to an interview given by Mahmubar to the Dhaka-based daily *Prothom Alo*, it was at the Kismet where he met Lee Brennan, a local singer from Liverpool, in March 1971.⁴⁵⁷ Brennan had learnt about the situation from the BBC and was interested in contributing to the cause. Exactly how Brennan connected with the Bangla Desh Association is contested. As per a story in the *Liverpool Echo*, it started after Brennan “befriended an East Pakistani waiter in a restaurant”.⁴⁵⁸ In the *Prothom Alo* interview, Mahmubar claimed credit in entirety for having inspired Brennan; the former had supposedly stoked confidence with these words, “You’re an artist. With your arms, you can come forward to the help of the people of Bangladesh”.⁴⁵⁹ According to Mahmubar’s oral testimony, Brennan had only given him an indicative smile and left. The very next day, Brennan turned up in his Jaguar at the residence of Mahmubar. Having composed four songs for Bangladesh, Brennan invited Mahmubar to his house, where the latter also found the other band members, Pete Thomas, John Brown and Jimmy Seftonhad; Lee’s wife, Dawn, accompanied on the drums. From Mahmubar’s account, Brennan recorded the song at the BBC studios a day after he had already recorded the songs on his Philips recorder. However, from the cover of the LP that Rahman left with the *Daily Star* office in Dhaka, it appears those songs were recorded not at the BBC studios but in a small recording studio in Liverpool, CAM, run by electrical engineer Charles Weston.⁴⁶⁰ It is not known if Mahmubar was working as a waiter in the restaurant that Brennan mentioned, but the latter’s account hinged on the unnamed East Pakistani. To quote Brennan from the newspaper report:

⁴⁵⁵Muntasir Mamun, *Bhindhuder Muktijuddho* (Samay Prakashan, 2019).

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid. In April, 2022, I had contacted Professor Mihir Lal Saha, a student of Professor Mahmubar. Saha informed me that Mahmubar had passed away, and that he was in Liverpool to pursue his PhD.

⁴⁵⁷ Naima Nijam, “Nikhonj Param Attio,” *Prothom Alo*, March 25, 2011.

⁴⁵⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, August 9, 1971.

⁴⁵⁹ Nijam, “Nikhonj Param Attio,”.

⁴⁶⁰ Michael Brocken, *Other Voices: Hidden Histories of Liverpool’s Popular Music Scenes, 1930s-1970s* (Routledge, 2016), 215.

We got talking about his people and I wrote a song about the problem called 'Mr. Human'. Later I was invited to sing it at a meeting of the Merseyside Bangla Desh Association.⁴⁶¹

According to Brennan's version, the association asked him to record these songs after the meeting. In whatever manner Brennan got involved in the cause, it is undeniable that Rahman had his role; in a telephonic conversation, Mihir Lal Saha mentioned that Rahman, his mentor, used to proudly reminisce about his role in the fundraising activities in Liverpool.

What came out of the collaboration was a remarkable 45 rpm EP, with a note of thanks to the four musicians from Justice Chowdhury, printed on its cover, and a personal plea from Brennan to help the victims, "In the name of humanity don't allow Bangla Desh to fight alone. Help them in their hour of need." The first song, 'Freedom Fighters', opening with exuberant guitar chords, was a clarion call for the "brothers and sisters of Bangladesh" to "unite together and stay that way". It was a reminder to the common people to remain positive as the freedom fighters were on their way. In this opening track, Brennan's vocals called for the people "not to despair", accompanied by an equally fervent flute. In the second track, 'Mr. Human', Brennan's songwriting was perhaps deliberately monotonic to get his humanistic message across. Details of atrocities from the field, which had been trickling down to the world through the news and personal accounts, made their way into 'Mr. Human',

An army came and killed my loving mother.

And my father's not been seen.

And they've got my sister down with typhoid.

And my little brother's got a damaged spleen.

My granddad and grandmother are gasping their last breath. They didn't know they'd have to go so soon.

Mr. Human, they're starving to death...

⁴⁶¹ *Liverpool Echo*, August 9, 1971.

The third track was an equally charged offering, with a harmonica prelude bursting open after a few seconds of haunting silence. Unlike the previous track, ‘Fight, Fight, Fight’ was a direct address to all the diasporic Bengalis to take on the Yahya regime. Interspersed with evocative choruses, the song went as follows:

*If you're too far away...there're lots of things that you can do.
You can help your countryman against that Yahya clan.
And liberty will then come true.
So day and night, We will fight, fight, fight!*

Supported by the harmonica, Brennan and his three co-musicians went on with a simple message—to fight,

*So answer the call, even if you're too far away.
Help your countryman fight against that Yahya clan.
And liberty will come one day.
So day and night, we will fight, fight, fight!
Bangla Desh depends on you!
Fight, fight, fight!*

The record closed with a song of hope and optimism, again to the accompaniment of the guitar, drums and the harmonica. Composed in the early days of the war, 1971—even before Colonel Osmani was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Mukti Bahini, a month later in April—‘We will survive’ spoke of a time when people would have been liberated. Brennan and his band sent a message of resilience to the people:

You can take us out and shoot us

*And bury us alive.
But Bangla Desh as a nation will always survive.
We're free again. We're free again.
Let's hold our hands up high.
And don't be afraid to say it, 'We will survive!'*

*Liberty is on its way, so don't give up the race.
Remember where you come from and give a smile upon your face.
We're free again...*

*When the strike is over in our land of East Bengal, all the people in Bangla Desh rejoice when they
hear the call...*

Tuned to simple melodies, Brennan's anthems for Bangladesh would have been easy listening and accessible to many people. Copies of the record were up for sale at the Kismet, with the sale proceeds meant for donation. However, the popularity of the record is likely to have been far from staggering. Brennan had only appeared in Liverpool's popular music scene in 1970, when he put up a band with his friends to perform Bee Gees numbers.⁴⁶² A fan of the American singer-songwriter, Johnny Cash,⁴⁶³ Brennan was a newcomer duetting with Dawn in Liverpool's local clubs when this record was released.⁴⁶⁴ Michael Brocken in 'Other Voices' has written that by the mid-1970s, Brennan had stopped imitating Cash and was writing his own songs.⁴⁶⁵ Given the fact that Brennan had no original numbers to his credit, these songs dedicated to the Bangladesh movement would have been his first; this stands as testimony to the genuineness of Brennan's project. Also, Brennan and his band would have had to guarantee payment for the entire process, including studio time, microphone use, and

⁴⁶² *Liverpool Echo*, October 1, 1977.

⁴⁶³ *Liverpool Echo*, October 16, 1990.

⁴⁶⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, August 9, 1971.

⁴⁶⁵ Brocken, *Other Voices*, 129.

disc pressing.⁴⁶⁶ Lee and Dawn Brennan went on to achieve local fame as “Merseyside’s Country and Western stars”.⁴⁶⁷



Illustration 2.9: Lee and Dawn Brennan (Source: *Liverpool Echo*)

Lee’s looks—the cascading locks, the cowboy hat, the white suit, and the beard—evoked the stereotype of an American country singer; the local press received it that way, too.⁴⁶⁸ Despite the American country influence, Brennan’s pride in his Liverpudlian roots is evident in the self-composed album he released in 1976, containing songs themed on Merseyside. Brennan’s voice indeed reminds the listener of Cash and even Bob Dylan. Nonetheless, his contribution to the 1971 war was more Liverpudlian than anything else. More significantly, this album was sent to be played on Radio Bangla Desh, where millions would have heard

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁴⁶⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, October 29, 1976.

⁴⁶⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, October 1, 1977.

it.⁴⁶⁹ Brennan's contribution remains largely unacknowledged and unknown to the Bangladeshi people.⁴⁷⁰ Lee Brennan, born Leslie Victor Brennan, passed away aged 70 on 30 January 2015.⁴⁷¹

Solidarising with the cause of Bangladesh via the above-discussed songs, for Brennan, came through mixed registers of disgust and hope. Picking on the violence of war, a perished family—a dead mother, a missing father, a sister “down with typhoid”, and a little brother with a “damaged spleen, and everyone “starving to death”—in the song ‘Mr. Human’, Brennan invoked tropes of disgust and morbidity, in an act of countering the aesthetic of hope, in Carolyn Korsmeyer's words, “profoundly recogni[sing]-intimately and personally—that it is our mortal nature to die and to rot.”⁴⁷² However, Brennan's acquiescence to the terrible realities of war victims only makes the theme of hope and victory more effective. Like Ghassan Hage, concerning state-citizen relationships, has interpreted “societies as mechanisms for the distribution of hope... [and creator] of affective attachment (worrying or caring)”,⁴⁷³ Brennan's singing and songwriting served as a mechanism for spreading hope through the affect of care and inspiration.

Oldham's Iskandar Miah

Born to Mohammad Abdul Hamid and Sayeeda Mirzan Bibi⁴⁷⁴ in the village of Terautia, Pailgaon, Sylhet, on 15 January 1936, Iskandar Miah was a man of music, right from his childhood, having involved himself as a performer of the musical styles of *maljora*, *jatra-pala* and *kobi gaan*.⁴⁷⁵ Migrating to Heywood in 1963, Iskandar joined the Manor Mill as a cotton

⁴⁶⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, August 9, 1971.

⁴⁷⁰ In a telephonic conversation with Professor Muntasir Mamun, I was informed that the Bangladeshi government had made attempts to recognise Brennan's efforts, but had failed to establish contact with his family.

⁴⁷¹ “The Obituary Notice of Leslie Victor Brennan,” *Funeral-notices.co.uk*, February 11, 2015, <https://funeral-notices.co.uk/notice/brenna/1108249>.

⁴⁷² Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 178.

⁴⁷³ Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* (Pluto Press, 2003), 3.

⁴⁷⁴ Mirzan Bibi, Iskandar's mother drew lineage to the Sufi saint, Hazrat Tajuddin.

⁴⁷⁵ Iskandar Miah, *Iskandar Giti*, vol. 1 (Sheikh Phul Bibi Orofe Sheikh Phul Mala Khatun, 2002).

factory worker. According to Hannan Miah, who joined Iskandar in 1973, Manor Mill had become a meeting point for Bengalis, especially Sylhetis; often colloquially pronounced “*monor mil*” in Sylheti—meaning ‘heart’s resonance’—there was, however, little for the soul that the factory could offer, except a living.⁴⁷⁶ Working at the factory did not deter Iskandar from his creative pursuits. In his memoir, *Ekjon Prabasir Kichu Smriti* (Few Memories of an Émigré), Iskandar stated that because of his friends, musical life was as rich in Britain as it was back in Sylhet.⁴⁷⁷

Consolidating people through music had been in Iskandar’s mind right from the onset of his immigrant life. He established a musical circle, ‘*Sabuj Ashor*’ (Green Gatherings), comprising nearly 1200 members, which operated from an empty space below a coffee bar in Oldham and became a hub of music, plays and dramas.⁴⁷⁸ It was while being involved with the group that Iskandar took up songwriting.⁴⁷⁹ Politics, nationalism and music were interconnected for Iskandar, who showed unflinching support for the centre-left Awami League led by Mujib. Hannan Miah recollected that conversations at home would unfailingly revolve around the Awami League, even long after Bangladesh had gained independence. So much so that Hannan’s then growing-up children had named him ‘*Awami League dada*’ (Awami League grandfather).⁴⁸⁰ Naturally, when the war had started, Iskandar felt compelled to engage in activism, which he referred to in his memoir; below is a translated excerpt:

When I was busy with my music, clouds of sorrow gathered in my inner sky... Cries of ‘Joy Bangla’ started filling up the streets. From a faraway land, we became worried for our near and dear ones. We formed the Oldham Bangladeshi Youth Front, whose General Secretary was Mohammad Kacha Miah

⁴⁷⁶ Hannan Miah, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 5 November 2021.

⁴⁷⁷ Iskandar Miah, *Ekjon Prabasir Kichu Smriti* (Bashia Prokashoni, 2005), 36.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid. 37; Matiar Choudhury’s piece in memory of Iskandar also mentions ‘Sabuj Ashor’ to have been based out of Oldham’s Barker Street.⁴⁷⁸ It is possible that, both Iskandar and Matiar referred to the Barker Street Community Centre, off Eden Street, as no ‘Barker Street’ exists in Oldham. Also, both Hannan Miah and Iskandar’s son, Yousuf, made references to musical gatherings in community centres.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid. 37.

⁴⁸⁰ Hannan Miah, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 5 November 2021.

*from Biswanath. Our goal was to support the Bangladeshi government in the war through monetary assistance...I collected funds by singing in different cities. I personally handed over £2500 to Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury...*⁴⁸¹

Stories of their Bengali resistance in Britain were a common theme for Iskandar, especially among family members and close friends. In an interview in Oldham, Yousuf Miah, his younger son, suggested that though he had a crucial role in fundraising, he could not have done it singlehandedly. He reminisced about his father saying, “all Sylhetis at that time were freedom fighters.”⁴⁸²

Iskandar Miah passed away in 2014. Unfortunately, there is little available on him in print. In his memoir, Iskandar wrote that he knew no language to convey how he plunged into activism during the war, and if he were to write about all his comrades, even a thousand-page book would not be enough.⁴⁸³ Yousuf’s opinion of the coming-together of the community gets verified in the 187 names that Iskandar listed as his fellow war activists. Yousuf Miah provided me with a couple of names, such as Arob Ali and Abdul Bari, whom he knew were part of his father’s band.⁴⁸⁴ While from Iskandar’s list, it is not clear in what exact capacity the individuals had participated during the war, it paves the way for an imaginative reconstitution of Iskandar’s musical team or at least people who contributed in their individual capacity. Among the ten lyricists and musicians from the list, Mohammad Fatik Miah is mentioned as someone who had an impressive voice and played a leading role in the freedom struggle.⁴⁸⁵ Mohammad Abdul Rahman’s contribution also stands out as a *Baul* and well-known singer who composed the song, *Chil shokune manush khay haire shonar Banglay* (Vultures prey on the dead in our golden land of Bengal), which created ripples in Britain.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Yousuf Miah, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 5 July 2021.

⁴⁸³ Iskandar, *Ekjon*, 36.

⁴⁸⁴ Yousuf Miah, 5 July 2021.

⁴⁸⁵ Iskandar, *Ekjon*, 24.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid, 26.

Abdul Rahman sang to collect funds, which he deposited into the war fund. Others whom Iskandar mentioned are lyricists Mohammad Abdul Haq, Ramiz Ali, Mohammad Shueb Ahmed Shaokati, Ilias Uddin Ahmed, and vocalists Mohammad Jahid Miah, Mohammad Monaf, Shah Mohammad Labu Miah, and Mohammad Nuruzzaman.

Across the eleven volumes of songs that Iskandar has left us, none of them is dated, thus making it impossible to locate what he had composed during wartime. The fact that most of the songs seem to have been written post-1971 suggests that the freedom struggle was his constant point of reference, a light of hope to address issues of unrest that plagued independent Bangladesh. In the song, *Bangladesh swadhin kore dilen Mujibur Rahman* (Bangladesh has been set free by Mujibur Rahman), Iskandar calls for the country-loving citizen to fly high the flag of Bangladesh, and end violence following the ideals of Mujib. The song goes as follows:

*Bangladesh shadhin kore dilen Mujibur Rahman.
Deshpremik manush shobe uraore Banglar Nishan.*

*Krishok shromik gyani mani
Shobe bao banglar tarani.
Eke onnye apon jani
Hailo baitha rakho shabdhan.*

*Keuke keu korona hotya
Manushe manushe barao mamata
Ganatronter hao hota
Shokol hoiya aguyan.*

*Hatey dhore haat milaiya
Mujib adorshe choliya
Kabi Iskandar jay kohiya
Hingshar ghotao obosan.*

[Bangladesh has been freed by Mujibur Rahman. Lovers of the land, fly high the symbol of Bangla. Farmers, labourers and the learned: row the boat that is Bengal. Everyone is each other's own; hold the rudder with care. Do not kill each other. Spread love, and come together with initiative to preach democracy. Holding each other's hands, following Mujib's ideals, Poet Iskandar appeals for an end to violence.]

Tomra bao baore (*Row the boat*) was a similar appeal to the people to bring back the zeal seen during the war to participate in building back the nation to bring a smile to every Bengali mother's face:

Tomra bao baore
Bangladeshe Sheikh Mujiber nao.
Rokte ranga shobuj nishan
akashe urao.
Ekattorer moto abar
Joy Banglar gaan gao.
Joy Bangla Joy Bangabandhur
naoye pal tangao.

Desh gorar kaaje shobai
monojog lagao.
Banglar mayer molin mukhe
hashiti fotao.

Acho joto deshpremik
Hatey haath milao.
Iskandar koy pran khuliya
Mamata barao.

[*Steer the sails—of Sheikh Mujib's boat in Bangladesh.*
Fly the blood stained green flag in the sky. Sing the song of 'Joy Bangla' like you did during the war.
Hail Bengal! Hail Bangabandu! Spread the boat's mast! Help build the nation with full dedication,

and bring smiles to the pale face of Bengal's mothers. Lovers of the land, hold your hands wherever you are. Iskandar implores all to spread love with full hearts.]

Though an unsung hero, memories of Iskandar are still fresh among his friends and followers. In his piece honouring Iskandar, Sayed Sadek Ahmed wrote how he and his friends walked “mile after mile” to collect money. Organising musical fundraisers would have been no mean feat. Both Hannan and Yousuf shared stories of Iskandar and his friends, who had to face institutional obstacles to travel out of Oldham in the first place. Being out of station meant absence from the factory, necessitating permission to leave, which the administration often denied. Desperate to support the cause of Bangladesh, as told to Hannan by Yousuf, they would often approach doctors through the back door to get hold of fake medical certificates to convince the factory bosses. The veracity of these details is difficult to prove, given the lack of archival evidence. What remains undeniable is that Iskandar can be seen as a musical representative of diasporic grassroots Bengali resistance.

Having reconstructed a ‘feeling’ of Iskandar’s Bangladeshi/Bengali musical nationalism staying in Britain, it is possible to imagine his—and his associates’—position in British society as what Gyanendra Pandey calls the ‘subaltern citizen’; “immigrant and other minority communities...who have been granted the status of citizens (rights-holders, inhabitants, subjects of the state) without becoming quite ‘mainstream’”.⁴⁸⁷ Bringing to the fore the cases of songs of refugees during the war, recorded by the sound recordist Deben Bhattacharya in West Bengal, Sushrita Acharjee has commented on the liminality of the border space, in her words, “dangerous, uncomfortable yet fertile and full of possibilities”.⁴⁸⁸ In Bengali Britain, the liminality of the border space worked somewhat differently: for people like Iskandar, who were physically far away from *desh*, the danger and discomfort lay in the relative

⁴⁸⁷ Gyanendra Pandey, ed., *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories* (Routledge, 2009), 1–13.

⁴⁸⁸ Sushrita Acharjee, “THE GREAT EXODUS of 1971: Towards Sensing the Liminality of Bengal Borderlands Bengal Border through Aesthetic Registers,” in *The Routledge History of the Senses*, ed. Andrew Keller and William Tullett (Routledge, 2025), 615.

inaccessibility, their inability to perform nationalism, as they would have been able to do, were they present in East Pakistan, or even West Bengal, a physical border that was much more porous than the geographical distance between Bengal and Britain. Music and sound enabled the activation of the atmospheric archives of ‘golden Bengal’, be it in Iskandar’s metaphorical usage of dark clouds gathering in his inner sky, or his clarion call to fly high the blood-tinged flag of Bangladesh. For the subaltern musical citizen like Iskandar, singing and writing Bangladesh allowed them to tie aural threads of solidarity across local networks of listenership, gave them an agency to inscribe an imagined nation in the hearts of the auditoriums of their people, community, across towns, villages, and poleis in Britain.

Conclusion

While I was securing contacts for collecting primary materials in connection with the Bangladesh war, I was advised by several people to meet Hannan Miah of Oldham; we just heard from him in the last section. After a successful conversation in June 2021, Hannan invited me once again to interview him in November of that very year. It was Guy Fawkes Night, with smoke from crackers intensifying the already-hazy industrial night sky of Oldham. Sat with Hannan at the makeshift studios of Probash Bangla TV, an Oldham-based Bengali/Bangladeshi television network, while remembering Iskandar Miah, he had a burst of emotion, narrating the lyrics of *Chil shokune manush khay haire shonar Banglay*.⁴⁸⁹ The image of a vulture hovering over war-torn skies in 1971 got superimposed in my mind with the sounds of firecrackers in Oldham, and the discussion of Iskandar’s music-making during the conflict. Atmospheric of the images and (musical) sounds of this moment in time increasingly became crucial to this chapter’s attempt to pay attention to the ‘affective atmospheres of nationalism’.

⁴⁸⁹ Personal Fieldnotes. 5 November 2021. We came across this song in the case study of Iskandar Miah.

Giving primacy to the atmospheres of spaces and time during the 1971 Bangladesh war in Bengali Britain has offered a bird's-eye view—here, I do not intend to romanticise the gory image of the vulture—of the bewildering mesh of actors we encountered in this chapter. Decades of cultural discord brewing between the East Pakistanis and the West Pakistanis in Britain ensured instantaneous repercussions within the diasporic communities after the war officially started. For the Bengalis in Britain, music became the linchpin of their independence movement—especially the national anthem—which helped fuel the realities of a new nation.

Backed by a strong presence of people, both the pro-Bangladesh and pro-Pakistan sides registered vast protests. Despite archival records pointing to the elitist Bengalis' superiority complex over Sylhetis, and a minority of Bengalis supporting Pakistan on the basis of religion, the pro-independence camp managed to put up a unified face. Su Zheng has compared Black cultural nationalism with that of Asian Americans. According to Zheng, for the former, there has always been a claim to a 'primordial connection' with the mother continent, Africa, something which Asian Americans have been reluctant to do due to "fear of exoticization, discrimination, and exclusion from the dominant society."⁴⁹⁰ Resonant of Black nationalism, Bengalis' music—especially the BPCS's dance drama or their performance at the ABD Trafalgar Square rally—stressed a "primordial connection" to a homogeneous cultural geography of Bengal.

The evidence of the distribution of leaflets, people taking to the streets with flags across multiple geographies in Britain, and the first likely hoisting of the Bangladeshi flag in Britain by Amir Ali all share a common aspect: the presence of the national anthem/music. Whereas the array of sources presented in the case studies makes the role of hearing and vision obvious, these instances also show the entwining of the tactile with light and sound. In the

⁴⁹⁰ Su Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/Chinese America* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 332.

same vein, placing feelings and sound as crucial agents in this history has helped to try to move towards understanding the absence of music and songs in the opposing camp. As I have mentioned before, this understudied side of the story will only come to the surface, if we try to understand the ‘atmosphere’, the ‘feelings’ that were making these citizens of Bengali Britain; to come close to the musical citizen, the (un)musical parties need to be given a fair chance, as well.

We saw a big cultural shift in the nature of humanitarian work with the emergence of large-scale charity concerts. While the Concert in Sympathy grew out of Birendra Shankar’s personal and familial connection to Bangladesh, the Goodbye Summer concert was arguably a byproduct of the Surrey County Cricket Club’s dwindling finances, although successful in its own right in raising money for Bangladesh. Far from protest, varying degrees of political aloofness fed into both the CiS and GS; both initiatives relied on the clout of the celebrity. Apparently disjoint, grand projects like the CiS and GS were connected to the private sphere. The CiS arguably took shape after a written plea from local Bengali restaurateurs; Ricki Farr declaredly started GS after coming into contact with a Bangladeshi march. Two main forms of musical support—protest and pity—channelled from the British public sphere either contributed to the formation of the Bangladeshi musical citizen or raised awareness. Localised phenomena, like Iskandar Miah’s musical fundraisers, show how the Bengali diaspora took music as a medium for nationalistic reimagination. Contributions of Lee Brennan point towards multicultural solidarity and suggest that working-class Bengalis—here, restaurateurs—were increasingly collaborating culturally and musically with citizens of British mainstream society. Surfacing the complex interplay of forces, the common denominator would be that music was crucial to Britain becoming one of the most important midwives in the birth of Bangladesh.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood, Curries, Music Classes: Senses and Citizenships

[London, 13 November 2019: A short London trip from Durham to accompany my guru, Ajoy Chakrabarty, for his vocal recital, could not prevent me from popping by Banglatown. Pacing down Osborn Street, onto Brick Lane, I crossed paths with a young, jovial Bengali gentleman gobbling down his lunch, streaming Kumar Sanu songs from Hindi blockbusters on YouTube. That he was in a hurry did not allow much communication. Still, he managed to say that he was Bengali by blood, a Bangladeshi now settled in the UK, works at a nearby restaurant as a cook, loves Hindi and Bengali songs, and Kumar Sanu happens to be his favourite singer. Most strikingly, the mobile phone for him was his music class and Sanu, in a way, his music teacher.]

- excerpt from fieldnotes

What was a fleeting meeting, in retrospect, ties together the three case studies that run through this chapter. The above story of the gentleman embodies the primal role of music-making in sounding how the migrant in Bengali Britain has corporeally navigated the question of cultural citizenship. My fieldnote from 2019 resonates with the reality of an earlier time, the 1970s and 1980s, which this chapter attempts to capture through three themes. In “Blood, Curries, Music Classes”, “blood” is used both in the sense of origin or ethnic identity—that was reproduced by cultural nationalism—and also, in a more literal sense, keeping in mind the violence of racial hatred. “Curries” reflect the gastronomic associations with the sonic in the essentially Bengali/Bangladeshi-run curry trade. “Music classes” self-explanatorily refer to the musical teaching and learning environment in the community.

The argument behind focusing particularly on the 1970s and 1980s in this chapter would be the exponential rise in migration after the creation of Bangladesh, peaking in the 1980s.⁴⁹¹ This meant more activities in the community naturally created new musical worlds for the people. Sylheti men taking up blue-collar jobs formed the majority of Bengali migration in

⁴⁹¹ Ceri Peach, “South Asian Migration and Settlement in Great Britain, 1951–2001,” *Contemporary South Asia* 15, no. 2 (November 23, 2006): 133–46.

response to Britain's labour shortage;⁴⁹² in contrast, Caribbean immigration peaked much earlier in the 1960s. According to Caroline Adams's estimate, up to 5,000 Bengalis were in the UK by 1962;⁴⁹³ Eade, Vamplew and Peach put a figure of 6,000 for the number of Bangladeshis in 1961.⁴⁹⁴ As per the 1991 census, the Bangladeshi population more than doubled every decade: from 22,000 in 1971 to 65,000 in 1981 and 163,000 in 1991.⁴⁹⁵ Simultaneously, the Indian population in the UK jumped from 81,000 in 1961 to 840,000 in 1991, which would have included the Bengalis from India.⁴⁹⁶

For Britain, the 1970s were a decade of ups and downs: whereas 1975/76 witnessed the highest inflation rates since the Napoleonic wars, laws were passed on equal pay, sexual discrimination, and domestic violence.⁴⁹⁷ In Thatcherite Britain, Labour still enjoyed power in small pockets,⁴⁹⁸ all the while, "new individualism" ushered in an era of "relentless emphasis on self-reinvention; an endless hunger for instant change; a fascination with social acceleration, speed and dynamism; and a preoccupation with short-termism and episodicity".⁴⁹⁹ Amidst a Britain in flux, this chapter traces what an increasingly pulsating cultural sphere meant for the musical citizen in Bengali Britain. Examining the role of sound and music in Britain during the Bangladesh War—including towards diasporic Bengali nationalism—the first section tracks down how 'Bangladeshi' cultural nationalism evolved post-1971 through events like Language Martyrs' Day, Victory Day, Independence Day, Bengali New Year, Eid, and the birthday celebrations of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi

⁴⁹² Katy Gardner and Abdus Shukur, "I'm Bengali, I'm Asian, and I'm Living Here," in *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain*, ed. Roger Ballard (C. Hurst & Co, 1994), 142–64.

⁴⁹³ Caroline Adams, *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* (Eastside Books, 1987), 64.

⁴⁹⁴ John Eade, Tim Vamplew, and Ceri Peach, "The Bangladeshis: The Encapsulated Community," in *The Ethnic Minority Populations of Great Britain: Volume 2 of Ethnicity in the 1991 Census*, ed. Ceri Peach (Office for National Statistics, 1996), 151.

⁴⁹⁵ Ceri Peach, "Introduction," in *The Ethnic Minority Populations of Great Britain: Volume 2 of Ethnicity in the 1991 Census*, ed. Ceri Peach (Office for National Statistics, 1996), 9.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁷ Matthew Hilton, Chris Moores, and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, "New Times Revisited: Britain in the 1980s," *Contemporary British History* 31, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 145–65.

⁴⁹⁸ Rupa Huq, "Capital Gains: BrAsian Suburban North-West London," in *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain*, ed. N. Ali, V.S Kalra, and S. Sayyid (C Hurst & Co., 2006), 305–14.

⁴⁹⁹ Anthony Elliot, "The Theory of New Individualism," in *Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century: Psychological, Sociological, and Political Perspectives*, ed. Romin W. Tafarodi (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 190.

Nazrul Islam. Following cultural nationalism, I figure out its connection with Bengali-led anti-racist trends, which got catalysed by the murder of a Bengali garment factory worker, Altab Ali, in 1978. There is a significant body of literature on music in Britain's anti-racist movements, particularly after anti-racism became a common theme in songwriting within the British Asian music scene later in the 1990s. However, existing scholarship has paid less attention to the localised perspective of communities, especially before 1978. This paves the way for questions about what Bengalis' musical expressions of anti-racism were before Asian bands became mainstream. To what extent was their messaging direct? Through approaching these queries, this section aims to contribute towards plugging this gap in the literature.

Music and sound splashed beyond the four walls of the concert stages and music rooms to the "Indian" restaurants across Britain. How did the many Bengalis dominating the British curry trade utilise the agentive power of music to cook up their projected identities? Did the soundscapes of the "Indian" affirm their owners' position as citizens of British society? What ripples did the advent of Bangladesh create in the Bangladeshi-run restaurants' servings of musical sound? This second section peeks in and out of these eateries' private and public musical spaces to explore how "Bengali", "Bangladeshi", and "Indian" identities interacted with each other to support diasporic livelihoods.

Furthering the analysis of Bengali identity constructs in Britain, the final section of this chapter zooms in on four Bengali music teachers to flesh out how music pedagogy facilitated the intergenerational and intercommunal transmission of cultural practices and sonic socialities. I attend to the musical careers of Mahmudur Rahman 'Benu' and Haridas Ganguly in England to understand their versions of Bengaliness inextricably underpinned by Hindustani classical music, and how varied teaching styles influenced their students' ideas of musical identity and citizenship. To further expand musical notions of Bengaliness, a

discussion centred on Himangshu Goswami's "folk" music classes brings to the surface the politics of the "classical" and "folk" in diasporic Bengali identity and where his local Sylheti identity intersects in this mesh.

Binding together the three distinct but also interacting case studies is the framework of "sensory citizenship", informed by the idea that sensory knowing occurs through "a medley of interpenetrating and overlapping sensory 'zones' that inescapably link our bodily knowing to our perceptions of the world."⁵⁰⁰ Centring the "continually linking bodily experience"⁵⁰¹ of the musical citizen in Bengali Britain, it is primarily the auditory sense that occupies the readings of cultural nationalism to unravel how "twinned inclusion and rejection"⁵⁰² becomes essential in the evolution of the musical citizen, and how citizenly identities consolidate the imaginings of a nation. For my work on anti-racism, I interpret race beyond its ocular-centric essentialisation to read into how sound is at the heart of producing the victim and the perpetrator. Concerning the "Indian" curry, the sensory alliance is between the auditory and visual, although the olfactory underlies how smell can construct and convey codes in different spaces.⁵⁰³ Likewise, sensation is essential to knowing the making of musical citizens in music classes, especially touch and sight—besides listening, to mention the obvious—to "emphasize moments of aleatory possibility by highlighting the emergent, the new, and, ultimately, the creative..."⁵⁰⁴ "Blood", "Curries", and "Music Classes" could be looked into separately, but in the interest of representing the realities of the time and space, they are best together.

Cultural Nationalism and Early Anti-racism

⁵⁰⁰ Michael T Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁵⁰¹ Steven Feld, "Places Sensed, Senses Placed: Towards a Sensuous Epistemology of Space.," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Berg, 2005), 179–91.

⁵⁰² Susanna Trnka, Christine Dureau, and Julie Park, *Senses and Citizenships* (Routledge, 2013), 14.

⁵⁰³ Constance Classen, "The Odor of the Other: Olfactory Symbolism and Cultural Categories," *Ethnos* 20, no. 2 (1992): 133–66.

⁵⁰⁴ Melanie White, "Can an Act of Citizenship Be Creative?," in *Acts of Citizenship*, ed. Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen (Zed Books, 2008).

As the Bangladesh war came to an end on 16 December 1971, jubilant scenes in Dhaka gave way to bouts of Bengali vengeance against the city's Urdu-speaking Bihari civilian population, mainly in the form of killings by the *Mukti Bahini*.⁵⁰⁵ For most Bengalis in Britain, victory was a joyous moment. Yousuf Chowdhury, a Sylheti factory worker based in Birmingham, had been on a perilous mission to bring his daughter, Rohema, to their Hallam Street home.⁵⁰⁶ Upon his return to Britain, Yousuf took photographs of the independence-related activities, which later got published in the form of an album. According to Chowdhury, restaurants, shops, and travel agents served as gathering points to mark the moment.⁵⁰⁷ To quote one of Chowdhury's captions:

*When the news of the surrender of the Pakistan army arrived they clapped their hands and sang, "We are Bangladeshis, we are Bangladeshis!"...Everyone felt very happy and kept laughing for joy.*⁵⁰⁸

Like at the Gulistan restaurant, the Birmingham Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh Relief Action Committee organised a celebratory gathering at the Digbeth Civic Hall, where the Bangladeshi national anthem was performed; among them were Mostafizur Rahman, Uzir Miah, Tony Huq, and Abdul Latif. The event hosted a Bangladeshi "folk" singer, besides staging a drama, 'Liberation', written and directed by Mostafizur. Chowdhury's photographs and accompanying captions reveal how singing and dancing served as a medium of expression to invoke their newly born Bangladeshi identity. Scenes in London were no different. Kulsum Ullah, founding member and organiser of the Bangladesh Womens' Association in Britain, recalled phoning "some one hundred and a few more" friends, relatives, and fellow demonstrators the day victory was achieved.⁵⁰⁹ Anowara Jahan, a

⁵⁰⁵ *Hull Daily Mail*. December 20, 1971.

⁵⁰⁶ *Birmingham Mail*. Date not available from the newspaper cutting.

⁵⁰⁷ Yousuf Chowdhury, *An Album of 1971: Bangladesh Liberation Movement* (Ethnic Minorities Original History and Research Centre, 2004).

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid*.

⁵⁰⁹ Interview of Kulsum Ullah by Jamil Iqbal, for the Swadhinata Trust. 01 Jan 2006.

colleague of Kulsum, mentioned spending time with friends and relatives and people organising “late night occasions” on weekends.⁵¹⁰ Expanding on Michael Billig’s “banal nationalism” that emphasises the importance of everyday experiences in building a collective sense of identity and national community, Melanie Schiller argues that popular music can reproduce the nation in “seemingly banal and innocuous situations”.⁵¹¹ In this case—starting from the singing and dancing in restaurants to phone calls—Schiller’s idea can be extended to note that acts of banal nationalism, including through popular music, were also helping enact musical citizenship translocally.

Three dates came to be etched in the cultural and national calendar of Bangladesh: 16 December as *Bijoy Dibosh* (Victory Day); 21 February as *Shohid Dibosh* (Martyrs’ Day) to mark the grim occasion of the killing of students campaigning for the inclusion of Bengali as a national language in Pakistan, which started that very day in Dhaka in 1952; and 26 March as *Shadhinota Dibosh* (Independence Day), the day when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared independence over an early morning radio broadcast from Dhaka, and was soon arrested by the Pakistani authorities.⁵¹² Nationalist pride was fresh among the Bengali diaspora, too. This is evident from rare copies of the Bengali weekly newspaper *Janomot*, perhaps the only one to survive from Bangladesh’s early post-independence days. ‘*Bangladesh songeet*’ (Music of Bangladesh), a poem written by one Shahjada, reflected the hopes and aspirations of the new nation’s diasporic citizenry.⁵¹³ Personifying Bangladesh, the effulgent poem sang high praises of the nation, including being a beacon of peace, a source of employment, and a message of humanity. Immediately after independence, a like-worded poem, ‘*Notuner joygaan*’ (Victory song of the new), by one Shelly, also published in the *Janomot*, portrayed the poet’s dream of

⁵¹⁰ Interview of Anowara Jahan by Jamil Iqbal and Ansar Ahmed Ullah, for the Swadhinata Trust. 04 Jul 2006.

⁵¹¹ Melanie Schiller, “Music and the Nation,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music, Space and Place*, ed. Geoff Stahl and J. Mark Percival (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 303.

⁵¹² “Leader of Rebels in East Pakistan Reported Seized,” *New York Times*, March 27, 1971.

⁵¹³ *Janomot*. February 13, 1972.

inclusivity, oneness, and new beginnings; at the same time, throwing a solid warning that in case of further retaliation, “oppressors” would be strangled.⁵¹⁴



Illustration 3.1: Group singing at the Victory Day of Bangladesh, 1988 (Source: *Surma*)

Fresh from victory, high spirits fuelled the Bangladeshi diaspora across Britain to mark their first Independence Day. The Manchester Bangladesh Association jointly celebrated independence along with Sheikh Mujib’s birthday in Manchester on 26 March 1972, attracting guests from all over the Midlands, including the President of Lancashire Bangladesh Association and Kabir Choudhury from Birmingham, and the Reverend Dean of Manchester as the chief guest.⁵¹⁵ Lee Brennan—a case study in the previous chapter—and his band were the star attraction of the evening musical show, who received thunderous applause from the audience; as we have seen in the previous chapter, Brennan’s self-composed songs enjoyed popularity during the Bangladeshi freedom movement.⁵¹⁶ According

⁵¹⁴ *Janomot*. Date unavailable.

⁵¹⁵ *Janomot*. 9 April 1972.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid*.

to the *Janomot* coverage, patriotic songs, *Rabindrasangeet*, *Nazrulgeeti*, *palli*, *adhunik* and instrumental were part of the presentation; a similar function took place in Oldham as well.⁵¹⁷ Patriotic songs were performed at Bradford University's Great Hall in the presence of around a thousand people as part of this occasion.⁵¹⁸ Luton had its local event, which started with a flag hoisting to the playing of the national anthem, and so did Southsea, where a cultural programme was performed by the likes of Chand Hossain, Komoruddin, Jilolul Haq, Amirul Haq and Rahi.⁵¹⁹ Local events on such a scale underline the promptness of the community organisations; East London's Bangladesh Welfare Association managed to pull together a public gathering and cultural event at Bethnal Green's Denford school to mark their first Victory Day and put up an advertisement in the *Janomot*, the very next day after independence had been achieved.⁵²⁰

From the very onset, engrained in the ideas of Bangladeshi nationalism were Tagore and Nazrul, and naturally, their birth and death anniversaries featured conspicuously in the cultural calendar; according to Lawrence Ziring, their poetic and musical works were 'holy dicta'.⁵²¹ The ascent of *Rabindra-Nazrul* mirrored in its diaspora in Britain. In the light of a newborn Bangladesh, Bengali nationalism was high, which *Janomot's* coverage of Tagore's death anniversary testifies; this lines up with Fakrul Alam's point that Rabindranath's popularity rose in the nascent state of Bangladesh, radio and television broadcasts of his songs on his birth and death anniversaries became regular features, and even those supporting an Islamic cultural tradition started reversing their views.⁵²² Whereas the coverage of his birthday celebrations from Dhaka and London was informative⁵²³—outlining events

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ *Janomot*. 20 August 1972.

⁵²¹ Lawrence Ziring, *Bangladesh* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 188.

⁵²² Fakrul Alam, "Tagore and National Identity Formation in Bangladesh," in *Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century* (Springer India, 2015), 235–41.

⁵²³ *Janomot*. 14 May 1972.

throughout Bangladesh and the Sagar Pare-organised London celebrations—the one on his death anniversary was dramatically nationalistic. Titled ‘*Swadhin Banglay Baishe Srabon*’ (Baishe Srabon in independent Bengal), the stirring piece written from Dhaka marked it as an occasion of Bengali culture’s triumph over Pakistan, comparing the Pakistani regime to a poisonous snake. An excerpt of the piece brings out its emotional nature, even though not all can be retained in translation:

Two long eras of snake-poisoned breath and red-eyed mean-mindedness had silenced the voices of the people of Bangladesh. In the name of opposing Rabindranath, the Pakistani rulers and their circles had started a Rabindra-killing ceremony. That Rabindranath cannot be obliterated remains proven in this year’s Pochishe Baisakh [birthday] and Baishe Srabon [death anniversary] in the heart of Bangladesh. The monstrous, poisonous snake with its massive hood has fallen on its face, and the creator of ‘Amar Sonar Bangla’, Kobiguru Rabindranath Tagore, has made a comeback.⁵²⁴

The *Janomot* report should be taken with a pinch of salt. As we saw in chapter one, celebrating Rabindranath never completely stopped in East Pakistan. *Purbo Bangla*, a monthly published by London’s East Pakistan House, reported in 1964 that Rabindranath’s birthday had been marked with grandeur by numerous cultural organisations all across East Bengal. However, Pakistani administrative policies eventually ensured that no programmes on Tagore aired from the government’s Dhaka radio station.⁵²⁵

In 1970, when Bengali cultural dissent was at its peak in East Pakistan, Hiranmoy Bhattacharya launched *Sagar Pare* —a bi-monthly Bengali literary magazine from London— at Tagore’s birthday celebrations that he had organised on 31 May; Bhattacharya, before having moved to London, had a journalistic career in Calcutta. From the inaugural issue can be read undercurrents of a Bengali cultural revolution, masquerading behind a measured political aloofness; Bhattacharya’s editorial piece drew from his conversation with a fellow

⁵²⁴ *Janomot*. 20 August 1972.

⁵²⁵ *Purbo Bangla*. June, 1964.

Bengali gentleman, to whom the former made clear that to *Sagar Pare*, it was Bengal's art, music and culture that was paramount, more than 'East' or 'West' Bengal, 'Indian' or 'Pakistani'.⁵²⁶ In a posh event at the La Continental in London's Tottenham Court Road that revolved around Dame Sybil Thorndike's reminiscences of her association with Tagore—interspersed with performances of Tagore songs by local artistes of the likes of Pampa Dhar, Mridula Biswas, Manjushree Sarkar, and Tripti Das—and attended by then Indian Ambassador, Hiranmoy in his speech reminded that it was every diasporic Bengali's duty to prove that Tagore's mother tongue, Bengali, was not inferior to others in the world stage.⁵²⁷

Sagar Pare's apparent political agnosticism had arguably begun to flake off in the coming months, traceable in its reporting of *Shahid Dibash* morning rallies that had taken place on 21 February 1971 in cities including London, Birmingham and Manchester; that issue also advertised their plans to organise *Rabindra Jayanti* at London's Indian YMCA, with Rajeshwari Dutta's singing as the main attraction.⁵²⁸ Ascertainable from surviving copies of *Sagar Pare* until 1975, Hiranmoy Bhattacharya's enthusiasm for *Rabindra Jayanti* remained unwavering. By 1974, when Hiranmoy wrote about his perception of a previously unseen frostiness between the Indian and Bangladeshi governments and the press's attempt to exaggerate such differences, he played on the shared mother tongue between the two Bengalis; Tagore, for him, remained a cultural bridge between them.⁵²⁹ The reported uneasiness in India-Bangladesh relations probably did not derail the Rabindra-Nazrul element that had been a binding factor in developing diasporic Bengaliness in Britain. On 26 July 1974, the Students' League at London's Commonwealth Institute organised a *Rabindra-Nazrul Jayanti*, with speeches by then Bangladeshi ambassador Sayed Abdus Sultan, Awami League

⁵²⁶ *Sagar Pare*. June 1970.

⁵²⁷ *Sagar Pare*. August 1970.

⁵²⁸ *Sagar Pare*. February-April 1971.

⁵²⁹ *Sagar Pare*. Vol 5 No 3. June 1974.

President Gaus Khan, and a musical performance by Tripti Das.⁵³⁰ Days earlier, on 19 July, another *Nazrul Jayanti* was celebrated in East London's Commercial Road, where Bengali schoolchildren had taken part.⁵³¹ Concerning Rabindranath, Fakrul Alam posits that after 1975—when military dictatorships began—“a tendency to play off Nazrul against Tagore can be discerned in any scrutiny of the official cultural policy of the period.”⁵³² Indeed, I have come across little evidence of Bangladeshi state officials like Sayed Abdus Sultan participating in *Rabindra-Nazrul* in Britain, which could be a reason for Alam's point of view.



Illustration 3.2: Audience for *Rabindra Jayanti* celebrations at the Indian YMCA, London, 1975 (Source: *Sagar Pare*)

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

⁵³¹ *Janomot*, 4 August 1974.

⁵³² Alam, *Tagore*, 236.

The coming years saw a mushrooming of community organisations celebrating Bengali music and culture. The Tagoreans, established in 1965 by Tapan Gupta, increased their presence through the 1970s, presenting Tagore songs and dances in collaboration with the Dartington College of Arts; in 1977, a tribute to Nazrul was paid at the Unitarian Church Hall in Golders Green, which was the venue for cultural programmes on Tagore from 1978 to 1980.⁵³³ The Bengali diasporic cultural scene only got busier in the 1980s, especially in London, and the Rabindra-Nazrul sphere was no different. The Tagoreans continued their artistic productions, staging Tagore’s compositions between 1981 and 1983, where he used the flute as a romantic Vaishnavite metaphor.⁵³⁴ Establishment of the Tagore Centre (TC)—housed at the Alexandra Park Library in Wood Green—by Sakti Bhattacharyya and Kalyan Kundu in 1985 added to the increasing number of Tagore-centric cultural programmes in the UK.⁵³⁵ The opening of the TC in 1985 was good timing, for it preceded Tagore’s quasiquicentennial by a year.

Tagore’s 125th birthday celebrations took place all across Britain. Compared to the centenary celebrations in 1961, the significant difference was perhaps not so much in the number of events but in the active involvement of Bengalis; migration had been on the rise in these twenty-five years, and therefore, a much stronger sense of community had developed. The Tagoreans put up month-long cultural events across twelve cities in Britain, including Devon, Aberdeen and Newcastle, with main musical attractions being sarodist Ali Akbar Khan, sitarist Imrat Khan, and acclaimed *Rabindrasangeet* artistes, Shantidev Ghosh, Kanika Bandopadhyay and Maya Sen;⁵³⁶ the latter was especially close to the group, going back to 1968.⁵³⁷ On 3 May, the Tagoreans inaugurated their quasiquicentennial programme at

⁵³³ “The Tagoreans, UK,” Tagoreans.org, 2023, <http://tagoreans.org/timeline.aspx>.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ “About Us,” The Tagore Centre UK (The Tagore Centre UK, August 13, 2013), <http://tagorecentre.org.uk/aboutus/>.

⁵³⁶ “The Tagoreans, UK,” Tagoreans.org, 2023, <http://tagoreans.org/timeline.aspx>.

⁵³⁷ “Tribute to Teacher,” The Telegraph Online, March 8, 2013, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/tribute-to-teacher/cid/329784>.

Tagore’s 1913 London residence in Hampstead. On the same day, further northeast, at the Central Library in Wood Green, TC organised a concert, symposium and inauguration of a month-long exhibition in the evening.⁵³⁸ TC’s programme comprised renditions of poems and songs from ‘Gitanjali’, as well as solo vocal renditions by artistes from the diaspora, namely, Susmita Bhattacharya, Pampa Dhar, Sunit Ghatak, Arati Bhattacharya, and a vocal chorus by an ensemble, ‘*Phalguni*’; Arun Mukherjee and Prativa Biswas provided tabla and violin accompaniment.⁵³⁹ Another prominent Tagore quasiquicentenary event was organised by the Teesside Bengalee Institute (TBI) in Middlesbrough on May 30th.⁵⁴⁰ Again, music dominated here, too; following an opening song performance by Ranjit and Biva Mukhopadhyay, there was song, recitation and dance from *Sonar Tori*, one of Tagore’s poetry collections, and an enactment of his musical dance drama, *Chandalika*.⁵⁴¹

The quasiquicentennial was seized as a chance for artistic collaboration between artists from West Bengal and Bangladesh. According to TBI, “a composite team from Calcutta, Dhaka and from Tagore’s own university, SANTINIKETAN [sic] headed by Sri Santidev Ghose, Smt. Kanika Bandopadhyay, Smt. Maya Sen, Smt. Swapna Ghosal, Sri Jog Sundar [and] Sri Jiten Singh” formed their delegation of artistes.⁵⁴² Amit Banerjee, convenor of the TBI Tagore’s 125th Birth Anniversary Celebration, also stressed Tagore’s “unique contribution [as the composer] of two songs today, the national anthem of two countries – India and Bangladesh.”⁵⁴³ The Tagoreans’ *Rabindra Utsab* (Rabindra Festival) at London’s Shaw Theatre—as part of Tagore’s 125th birth celebrations—was reported in a *Deshbarta* story by its editor, Gazi-ul Hasan Khan, as having built bridges between artistes from West Bengal and Bangladesh; *Rabindrasangeet* stars like Kanika Bandopadhyay from Shantiniketan, and

⁵³⁸ “125th anniversary celebration” pamphlet. The Tagore Centre UK archives.

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰ *125th Birthday Anniversary Celebrations Booklet* (25 The Derby, Marton: J.K Chatterjee on behalf of the Teesside Bengalee Institute, n.d.). Courtesy: The Tagore Centre UK archives.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

Bangladeshi artistes, Fahmida Khatun and Farida Parveen, were part of the billing.⁵⁴⁴ Audiences had to return disappointed on 11th, 18th and 25th May, as tickets got sold out. For the *Deshbarta*, the strong demand for tickets reflected not only the success of the organisers but also the cultural awareness of the “*probasi sikkhito Bangali*” (educated diasporic Bengali). Gazi-ul commented that the Tagoreans’ initiative was a matter of immense pride for all Bengalis, and nothing of this scale had been done before in London, despite organisational shortcomings and housing and food problems that artists had to face. The same *Deshbarta* issue carried a disgruntled letter to the editor—titled ‘*sanskritir name byabsha?*’ (*business in the name of culture?*), where six Cardiff-resident Bengalis, Selim, Srijoy, Rowshan, Sulnat, Swagata, and Romena, expressed their grievances at the Tagoreans for failing to feature advertised artistes.⁵⁴⁵ Going by the letter, for the few Cardiff-resident Bengalis, the Tagoreans’ aggressive promotions created hype, especially amongst Bengali women. The main disappointment was the absence of Kanika Bandopadhyay, despite being part of the line-up. Full of rebuke, the organisers were accused of making Kanika a scapegoat for their fabrications; they also raised questions about whether she had travelled all the way for saree and jewellery shopping. In response to the Tagoreans’ ignominious failure in Cardiff, the letter called for “all Bengalis residing in Britain to boycott the organisation, irrespective of caste and religion”, who had supposedly used *Rabindra-Nazrul* for their gains.

Be it with the Tagoreans, the TC, or the TBI event, there was support from the Indian government, with the High Commissioner attending some of these programmes; TBS even got a letter of support from then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in their booklet. The absence of the Bangladeshi government’s counterparts is glaring, especially in 1987, when both established and upcoming artistes from Bangladesh were visiting. What Hiranmoy Bhattacharya had begun to sense in 1974—the Bangladeshi government’s ebbing interest in

⁵⁴⁴ *Deshbarta*. 30 May-6 June, 1986.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

the diaspora's cultural and musical events—was seconded by Gazi-ul Hasan Khan, who opined that post-independence, the Bangladeshi government's attitude to cultural activities had been 'unmotherly'.⁵⁴⁶ To forward Hasan Khan's reading, individual aspirations led to the progress of Bangladesh's cultural and literary spheres, despite the lack of government support. He credited Atikur Rahman, the Tagoreans' Bangladesh coordinator, with the participation of Bangladeshi artistes in these celebrations; also, it was the first time that Bangladeshi theatre artistes had travelled outside their country to perform. Individual support for a unified Bengaliness again came from restaurateurs; as we saw in the preceding chapter, they played a significant role during the 1971 war. Abdus Subhan Khan, proprietor of the Royal Bengal Tandoori Restaurant at Stockton on Tees, advertised in the TBI booklet his pride in having "entertained" artistes who performed at the event with the "finest [of] Indian dishes" for lunch and the "best Indian DINNER", followed by self-promotion of their speciality, "MURGA MUSSALAM"!⁵⁴⁷ Similar examples can be found in the Bengali-run Lal Qila restaurant putting up an advertisement in the TC-presented UK tour of a globetrotting Bengali-run Indian dance group, Dancers' Guild, between 28 September and 2 November 1987.⁵⁴⁸

After the formation of Bangladesh, the formation of musical publics in Bengali Britain largely gravitated towards political leanings and ebbs and flows of nationalism in the new nation, even for the programmes which involved participants from West Bengal. Rewinding to this chapter's introduction, "twinned inclusion and rejection"⁵⁴⁹ in the making of the musical citizen involved the detachment of the diaspora's public from a creeping apathy of the Bangladeshi state towards Tagore—as I pointed out earlier—and instead embracing both Tagore and Nazrul. Sahana Bajpaie has recently published on how *Rabindrasangeet* has

⁵⁴⁶ *Deshbarta*. 23-30 May, 1986.

⁵⁴⁷ *125th Celebrations Booklet* (Teesside Bengalee Institute, n.d.).

⁵⁴⁸ *The Tagore Centre UK Presents Dancers' Guild (India)* (Tagore Centre UK, n.d.).

⁵⁴⁹ Susanna Trnka, et al, *Senses*. 14.

continued to provoke the ire of postcolonial Bangladeshi governments and Islamic exclusivists, and remained a medium of protest for secularists.⁵⁵⁰ In the Bengali Britain of the 1970s and 80s, we do get such glimpses of Bangladesh's stance. However, at least in the case of cultural nationalism, publics were being shaped by unifying sounds from across the India-Bangladesh borders by celebrating *Rabindra-Nazrul* and Bangladeshi national events; it would be safe to incur that the religious fundamentalists present in the community did not yet manage to surface to the diaspora's media, at least not enough to steer public opinion.

As much as the decades of the '70s and '80s were musically fecund, they also witnessed burgeoning racism, with London's East End becoming a hotspot. Less than a month before the Nazrul Festival was to take place, singer Himangshu Goswami was racially attacked by a group of four White youths in Thrawl Street on 26 October 1987.⁵⁵¹ Before the sun had set, Himangshu had gone shopping at Brick Lane—a stone's throw away—when those sixteen-seventeen-year-olds yelled, “Bastard, call the police now!” before repeatedly punching his belly and face.⁵⁵² Himangshu was reportedly rescued by a few residents and taken to the nearest police station, then to a hospital. The closest police station would most probably have been the one at 25 Brick Lane, at the junction of Fashion Street, which opened on 13 January 1984.⁵⁵³ Initially located at 66 Brick Lane, the Brick Lane police station was set up on 13 November 1978 in response to local Bengalis' demands for protection against racism. 1978 was the year of a turning point in the context of racism in the East End when the murder of a

⁵⁵⁰ Sahana Bajpaie, “The Contested Legacy of Rabindrasangīt : Musical Nationalism, Political Symbolism, and the Shaping of Bangladesh's Cultural Identity,” *Ethnomusicology Forum*, June 4, 2025, 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2025.2504252>.

⁵⁵¹ *Bengal Weekly Deshbarā*. 30 Oct- 6 November, 1987.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵⁵³ Ansar Ahmed Ullah, John Eversley, and Swadhinata Trust, *Bengalis in London's East End* (Swadhinata Trust, 2010), 96..

young garment factory worker, Altab Ali, on May 4 triggered a series of Bengali anti-racist protests.⁵⁵⁴

Racial tensions—hostilities towards Bengalis—had been brewing in the East End for more than a decade. Film director and film society activist Alamgir Kabir noticed “a growing mass hysteria against the Pakistanis” in 1965,⁵⁵⁵ during his London days, when he mingled with left-wing political and cultural circles.⁵⁵⁶ Four months after Enoch Powell made his controversial so-called ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, in August 1968, the *Stratford Express*, published a piece on Shyamali Banerjee—a worker for the Council of Citizens of Tower Hamlets responsible for helping immigrants integrate into British society—commenting that “a lot [had] to be done in the race relations field in Tower Hamlets”, even though she did not face any difficulty to adapt to the “British way of life”.⁵⁵⁷ Powell’s speech led to his sacking from the Conservative Shadow Cabinet but won him immense popularity with a large section of the British public. Nicholas Hillman’s study of Powell’s speech has attempted to move away from the existing polarised narratives that either completely deny any form of racialism or peddle a simplistic narrative to paint a picture of Powell the politician, who wavered between admitting to and denying racism, claiming not to have breached party policy and yet later admitting to having done so, further rejecting his speech having any form of influence on the Conservative victory in the 1970 elections before reversing his opinion again.⁵⁵⁸ Whatever it is, Hillman concludes that “it seems likely that Powell’s primary, though not sole, motivation when he rose to speak was genuine concern about the impact of mass migration.”⁵⁵⁹ Powell’s anti-migration remarks reverberated in Tower Hamlets when a

⁵⁵⁴ Kenneth Leach, *Brick Lane, 1978: The Events and Their Significance* (Stepney Books, 1994), 9.

⁵⁵⁵ Alamgir Kabir, “The Growing Campaign against Pakistanis in Britain,” *Peace News*, March 19, 1965.

⁵⁵⁶ Lotte Hoek, “ALAMGIR KABIR: The Conscience Whipper,” *The Daily Star*, January 22, 2023, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/focus/news/alamgir-kabir-the-conscience-whipper-3227996>.

⁵⁵⁷ *Stratford Express*, 9 August 1968.

⁵⁵⁸ Nicholas Hillman, “A ‘Chorus of Execration’? Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ Forty Years On,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 42, no. 1 (February 2008): 104.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

pledge was signed by the likes of MP Ian Mikardo and the Bishop of Stepney under the initiative of the Council of Citizens of Tower Hamlets, who believed that Powell had stoked latent prejudices in people to reach his personal and political end goals.⁵⁶⁰ Derek Humphrey reported in April 1970 that five hundred Pakistani immigrants decided to appeal to the police, the local authorities and the Pakistani High Commissioner to prevent “Paki-bashing” in the East End.⁵⁶¹ While the Bangladesh war was underway, a gang of teenagers made two attacks on a café with bottles and pieces of wood in Stepney in October 1971.⁵⁶²

The noticeable lull in reported instances of racist incidents between 1972 and 1978 does not necessarily link to the fact that the apparently dormant volcano of intensifying racial hostilities erupted all of a sudden in 1977-78; the above-cited media coverage says otherwise. Yet it was not until 1978 that any orchestrated community anti-racist efforts surfaced. What might have been the reasons behind such a latency of around six years? Was it that fresh nationalistic sentiments in the Bengali community were too glaring for the rising phenomenon of racism to be addressed collectively? Scholarship on racism in Britain has focused mainly on the perpetration caused by the White majority over minority communities. Not overriding the massive importance of this literature, it does risk underrepresenting the counter-narrative. ‘*Borno biddesh o amra*’ (Racial hatred and us), an article published in 1970 in *Sagar Pare* by Dr Biplab Dasgupta, offers a fascinating and rare insight into how, at times, the South Asian and Bengali communities in Britain themselves harboured racial sentiments, at the same time being victims of racism.⁵⁶³ Dasgupta recounted a conversation he had with a fellow Bengali gentleman just after Powell’s speech, who had explained to him that there was nothing to be outraged at Powell—who, by the way, even received an invitation to address an

⁵⁶⁰ *East London Express*. 3 January 1969.

⁵⁶¹ *Sunday Times*. 19 April 1970. As a side note, it is worth pondering to what extent the Bengalis of East Pakistanis were comfortable reaching out to their High Commissioner when the Bengali nationalistic movement had already reached a high.

⁵⁶² *East London Advertiser*. 8 October 1971.

⁵⁶³ *Sagar Pare*. August 1970.

Indian gathering—for he had targeted the “Blacks” coming from the West Indies or Africa; the South Asians were after all “Browns”. Dasgupta wrote that a few days later, one of the candidates running for the local council elections in Southall, a Sikh gentleman, sang in the same vein that no matter what, South Asians were Aryans and Caucasians; living under the sun for a few thousand years had tanned their colour. A Bengali gentleman had written a letter to the editor of *The Times* expressing his opinion that “they” were brothers with the British, and it was the Africans who had recently come across the “civilised”. Continuing with Dasgupta’s piece, it becomes clear that colourism and racism interacted with classism. Recalling numerous conversations he had with Indian students in the UK, Dasgupta writes that most of them attributed racial incidents to the “uneducated” people from Sylhet and Punjab, who, to quote his writing, “could not speak English, knew not the etiquettes of dressing, and the ways of living in the land of Shakespeare and Dickens.”

Notions of musical differences as embodiments of cultural incongruities were part and parcel of racism. To Eduardo Mendieta, race “is in the comportment of a whole social body...it is relentlessly attuned to how we walk, how we dance, how we smell...[it] is in the ear, before it is in the gaze”.⁵⁶⁴ Race has been performative of a fully embodied experience in Britain, too. Dasgupta’s report—or rather accusation—of Bengalis deriding their next-door West Indian dance parties indicates how the choreography of the body, sensorily demarcated citizens in a two-way fashion; what we see is that the usual victims—Bengalis here—were in instances also perpetrators themselves. There is no denying the fact that it was the South Asian migrant who had to bear the maximum brunt of racism. Sitara Khatun’s article ‘Skinhead’ in the maiden issue of *Sagar Pare* is an interesting stereotyping of the skinhead, who she posited as the antithesis of the hippie: young with crewcut hair, simple, working-class, and

⁵⁶⁴ Eduardo Mendieta, “The Sound of Race,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 17, no. 1 (2014): 109–31, <https://doi.org/10.5840/radphilrev20143219>.

who would not join the Hare Krishna chant processions of the latter group.⁵⁶⁵ Khatun further saw the skinhead as a friend of the so-called African, opining, ‘*oder matey Negrora kalo saheb*’ (the Negroes are Black Sahibs according to them), which exposes underreported alleged communal alliances, but ironically entrenches Dasgupta’s point of the Bengalis’ snide attitude towards the Blacks, too. The supposed brotherhood between the skinheads and the Blacks, as per Khatun, stemmed mainly from sonic and choreological similarities: much like the skinheads, none stood a chance in dancing and singing before the Blacks, and their music was like ‘pop’, to which one could twist. Moreover, Khatun mentioned that the strong constitution of the Africans also acted as a deterrent. Slightly veering off from the discourse, it is worth keeping in mind that racism was a big agenda in *Sagar Pare* right from the outset, although their activities were far from featuring any conspicuous elements of protest. Whether the cultural programmes organised by them were an implicit reply to the Bengalis’ unshaken attitude to violence is worth questioning. Black lives in Britain have undoubtedly been subjected to denigration; however, their purported alliance with the skinheads is interesting from a Bengali perspective. Shabna Begum’s work on the Bengali squatting movement in the East End sheds light on a couple of such examples. Drawing from an interview Begum conducted with Mashuk Miah—who arrived in 1973—we come to know of a racist attack at the latter’s residence, where they were the ones targeted and not their African neighbours.⁵⁶⁶ The community activist, anti-racism campaigner and painter Dan Jones, in an interview with Begum, opined that the physique of Black people was one of the reasons why skinheads usually did not bother them.⁵⁶⁷ Moreover, Begum has picked up on

⁵⁶⁵ *Sagar Pare*. June 1970.

⁵⁶⁶ Shabna Begum, “From Sylhet to Spitalfields: Exploring Bengali Migrant Homemaking in the Context of a Squatters’ Movement, in 1970s East London.” (PhD Diss., 2021), 106.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 108.

Daniel and McGuire's *The Paint House*, which has documented awkward Black-White tie-ups in the East End Collingwood gang, who would boast about their "Paki-bashing sprees".⁵⁶⁸



Illustration 3.3: Dan Jones's painting 'Brick Lane 1978' depicting anti-racist protests
(Source: spitalfieldslife.com)

Before I discuss the surge of consolidated communal solidarity post-1978, the individual artistic voices of protest must also be heard, the ones which did not find their way to the public narrative back then. Arunendu Das, an architect by profession and a guitarist, singer, and songwriter by passion, arrived in England in the late 1960s. Painted as a reclusive genius in the media and recognised as a pioneer of Bengali alternative songwriting, Das passed away in London in 2019.⁵⁶⁹ Das's response to colourism and racism in Britain came in the form of a lullaby, '*Ghumao re Neela*' (Sleep, Neela), addressing his daughter, Neela, in 1975.⁵⁷⁰ '*Ghumao re Neela*' is an evocative assurance from a father to his daughter, not to worry about the colour

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹ Sadi Mohammad Shahnewaz, "FAREWELL, ARUNENDU DAS," *The Daily Star*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/arts-entertainment/music/news/farewell-arunendu-das-1697383>.

⁵⁷⁰ Arunendu Das, *Choy Taarer Gaan* (Krishna Das, 1996), 27.

of one's skin, for there is no dearth of colours in the world. Radio Quarantine Kolkata broadcast a programme on Das featuring this song; the presenter, Ritam, highlighted the song's uniqueness, which is a lullaby but also highly political.⁵⁷¹ Das's response was fascinating not only because it was a lullaby but yet political; this song, instead of urging the listener to take up agency, draws one inward, where a father advises his daughter not to fail to choose the person in her life with a colourful soul, lest whatever colour our eyes might see, prescribing a path of self-normativity. Singer-music researcher Moushumi Bhowmik was also featured on this programme, where she recalled her long association with Das, dating back to when she lived in London. Describing Das as a man who liked being in his "self-contained world", Bhowmik narrated how Das recorded songs on tapes, sent them back to Calcutta, and loved playing the guitar in pubs. Bhowmik's remark that Das's not participating in the Bengali community's activities was perhaps his choice also raises the question of whether he would have actively participated in anti-racism. Kristine Aquino has recognised how everyday anti-racism is couched in the hard and complicated labour of responding on a micro level by unpacking ideas, stories, discourses and beliefs.⁵⁷² Das's private and personal act of resistance would still qualify as "doing" anti-racism. The act of singing his self-composed lullaby to Neela would have been his space of "encounter",⁵⁷³ his own way of exercising intimate citizenship.

Though not nearly as "unaffiliated" a voice as Arunendu Das, the musical contributions of Abdus Salique—whose career as a restaurateur features later in this chapter—stand apart in the context of anti-racism and the struggle for social equality. Highly visible in the community and well-known as a community leader, Salique went on to form a cultural group, Dishari

⁵⁷¹ Ritam Sarkar and Sayantan Ghosh, "Arundar Gaan" (Radio Quarantine Kolkata, July 12, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiXhsfcLgqw>.

⁵⁷² Kristine Aquino, "Anti-Racism and Everyday Life," in *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Racisms*, ed. John Solomos (Routledge, 2020), 216–30.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*

Shilpi Goshti (Dishari Artistes' Group), which made its maiden appearance at the "first Bangladeshi carnival" following the murder of Altab Ali.⁵⁷⁴ Founded in 1979, the message of anti-racism was crucial for Dishari, with performances at the Brick Lane Carnival and the Arts Against Racism Concert at the Half Moon Theatre.⁵⁷⁵ 1983 and 1984 proved to be extremely busy for Dishari, with performances at the Walthamstowe [sic] Festival for Racial Harmony, GLC International Workers Day, and scheduled performances at the GLC's protest at the visit of the South African head of state, and GLC Jobs for a Change Festival.⁵⁷⁶ Amongst Salique's body of work, the most well-known would arguably be his 'Trade Union' song that appealed to the Bengali migrant worker to unite against racism and fight for their rights by joining the union.⁵⁷⁷ In an interview with Faridha Karim, as part of the Poetic East End project, Salique recalled that he was entrusted with organising Bengali workers and enabling them to learn about their rights as workers.⁵⁷⁸ The Trade Union song was, in fact, in response to the death of a Bengali carpet factory worker in Cannon Street, whose family, according to Salique, was not even paid any compensation. Dishari's Trade Union song became an instant hit; in Salique's words:

*The response was really good, I became a hero. We did about six programmes about my trade union song... In 'Promised Land', I sang my Bengali song, and also in EastEnders and nationwide it was shown.*⁵⁷⁹

Anna Rastas and Elina Seyte have concluded from their research in Finland that for racialised and minoritised subjects such as young Black rappers, becoming musicians can give them

⁵⁷⁴ Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, "Negotiating, Defending and Constructing 'Bengali' Identity through 'Bengali' Music: A Study of the Bangladeshi Community in London" (MMus Diss., 2018), 27.

⁵⁷⁵ GLC/RA/GR/02/067. Statement of Artistic Policy. Dishari. London Metropolitan Archives.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid. Performances given by Dishari since July 1983.

⁵⁷⁷ Bhattacharyya. "Negotiating", 27.

⁵⁷⁸ O/PEE/3/35. ABDUS SALIQUE. Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

“voices and active citizenship”.⁵⁸⁰ Also, according to them, becoming simply a musician—not to be racialised—is less of an option for non-White musicians in a predominantly White society. In a similar vein, Abdus Salique would have been less likely to become a musician in Britain, were it not for the Trade Union song, despite his being exposed to music from his childhood. Rastas’s and Seye’s observation fits in Salique’s case, as “doing” anti-racism through his band, Dishari, did give him a “voice” and sounded him into an active musical citizen in Bengali Britain.

Post-1978, among the first community organisations to emerge from East London was the Bangladesh Youth Front (BYF). Formed immediately in the aftermath of Altab Ali’s murder, by the first week of May 1978, BYF was the merging of the Bengali Youth Centre, East End Bengali Drama Society, and Canon Barnett Football Association.⁵⁸¹ The multiple issues that the Bengali community faced were featured on BYF’s agenda: tackling inequalities in housing, education and health, addressing racism, and facilitating intercommunity dialogue. BYF celebrated major Bengali festivals like Eid, Independence Day and Christmas, with back-to-back events like the Youth Festival on 16 November 1980 at Naz Cinema, New Year’s Party on 1 January 1981 at Montefiore Centre, Childrens [sic] Festival on 6 January 1981 at Brady Club, Martyrs Day on 21 February 1981 at Brady Club, Independence Day on 26 March 1981 at Montefiore School, and the next Youth Festival on 28 June 1981 at Allen Gardens. As per the earliest traceable annual general report of BYF, it is evident that despite their cultural and musical events not bearing solely anti-racist ambitions, Bengalis consolidating to celebrate their own culture was a message of strength:

No nation can do without its social activities. Culture is a vital part of human life, culture is the breadth [sic] of life. Cultural functions such as dance, drama, theatre, art, all give pleasure to the

⁵⁸⁰ Anna Rastas and Elina Seye, “Music and Anti-Racism: Musicians’ Involvement in Anti-Racist Spaces,” *Popular Music and Society* 42, no. 5 (October 22, 2018): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2018.1526527>.

⁵⁸¹ I/SPP/4/9/11/2. Bangladesh Youth Front. Annual General Report. 1981–82. Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

community. But it has been very difficult for the Bengali people in Tower Hamlets to develop time to keeping their culture alive, because social activities come low down on the list when every day is a struggle to live decently.

It was the young Bengali men in the community who felt most need for social activities. When they first came to Tower Hamlets, existing youth provision did not cater for their needs – they were not accepted by local young people, traditionally young Bengali men and women do not mix socially like the host community, and they wished to continue some of the cultural activities of the community...⁵⁸²

That BYF was also an anti-racist organisation is beyond doubt. Bill Blair, Project Co-ordinator of the Spitalfields Project Tower Hamlets, sent a letter to BYF on the occasion of its fifth anniversary, lauding BYF's successful efforts in their fight against institutional racism; Joe Abrams from the Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Justice also sent their wishes.⁵⁸³ Then Councillor Ashek Ali, in a letter to Rafique Ullah of the BYF, described the organisation as “the vanguard of the Youth movements and activities in this multiracial society of ours.”⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸² Ibid.

⁵⁸³ “Bangladesh Youth Front. Annual General Report. 1981-82.”

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.



Illustration 3.4: Dishari performing for the GLC Jobs for a Change Festival (Source: Personal collections of late Abdus Salique)

Around the same time BYF was constituted, the Multiracial Bengalee Association (MBA) came into existence in 1978, under the initiative of community leaders Anwara Jahan, Dan Jones, Tassaduq Ahmed (who featured in Chapter 1 and later here in this chapter in more detail), Mumen Chaudhury, Geoffrey White and Ahmed Fakhruddin.⁵⁸⁵ MBA, however, was the culmination of three years of work, starting with the establishment of the racially mixed Spitalfields Bengalee Action Group. What the MBA projected themselves as can be found from their letterhead description: “a community self-help and no-profit organisation to advance the cause of multiracialism as a philosophy and way of life and awaken the Bengalee community of Spitalfields (and other ethnic minorities as well as the members of the local community) to their social responsibilities in a multiracial and multicultural society.”⁵⁸⁶ Envisaged as “part of the growing movement for black unity”, MBA’s Bengali-centric activities beg the question of to what extent they were really putting up a united multiracial

⁵⁸⁵ I/AVU/A/II/1. File re the Multiracial Bengalee Association and the Bengali Mahila Samity (Women’s Association). Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

front, no matter their honest intentions. Or was “black unity” also a case of tokenism? Records show that the MBA was indeed involved in bringing together activists from different communities. On 11 July 1981, the MBA convened a Multiracial Committee for Peace and Harmony in Brick Lane, inviting local Black and White community activists to ensure peace and harmony. Deep links of cultural and musical nationalism with antiracism are further supplanted by events like the MBA’s celebration of the Bengali Language Martyrs’ Day on 21 February 1979 at the City of London Polytechnic at Whitechapel High Street, a celebration devoted to “recapitulating the events of the past and lessons for the future for...the benefactors of [the] long struggle for liberation and national emancipation.”⁵⁸⁷ Susanna Trnka, in her account of the “political rhetorics” of pain in Fiji and the United States, has enlisted the many ways in which collective suffering—or individualistic suffering as a part of collective suffering—can build a mutual sense of affect, and create an agency for purposeful action.⁵⁸⁸ Putting into perspective, community organisations like BYF or MBA functioned as channels to attend to the painful experience of racism by activating cultural representations—music being one among them—to get people to “identify with the presumed deficiencies of their lives [and] pay attention to claims of injustice...”⁵⁸⁹

Women’s involvement gained further prominence with the establishment of the Bengali Mahila Samity/Women’s Association (BMS) in 1980, aided by the MBA. The first formal women’s organisation I could find was the Nari Samity, established in 1978. Designed primarily to cater to women’s educational and social needs, BMS organised women’s outings, creches, language classes, and sessions to inform about housing needs. The 1983/84 report of the BMS illuminates the reality that for women, sociocultural and religious restrictions within their own community needed to be dealt with; fear of racial hostility came second, which they

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁸ Susanna Trnka, Christine Dureau, and Julie Park, *Senses and Citizenships* (Routledge, 2013), 330.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

aimed to “overcome only by gradually rebuilding their confidence and trust in the older community”.⁵⁹⁰ After forty years of fieldwork in peri-urban Lusaka, Zambia, Ann Schlyter has shown similar realities: negotiations for citizenship start with women’s bodies, and in private spaces, where they contest for agencies in their families.⁵⁹¹ The well-known social worker and anti-racist campaigner Caroline Adams wrote an article titled ‘Women and Freedom’ for a bilingual women’s magazine, *Nari Sangram*, in similar sentiment that girls and young women of Bangladeshi origin had a “special struggle, to emerge as strong, free individuals, without compromising their dignity and their heritage”, further remarking on how women were not free from either racism or sexism, both of which bred violence.⁵⁹² Music boosted women’s morale through BMS’s activities, which organised an Eid Reunion party in 1980, attended by 250 women and 300 children; “Bangladeshi food and entertainment” was also arranged.⁵⁹³ Like fellow community organisations, the BMS also celebrated Victory and Language Days and Bengali New Year’s in the form of an open-air festival at the Chicksand Street Mural Site on 12 April 1981, which they claimed to be the “first open air [sic] function...by the Bengalis in the history of their residence in Gt. Britain.”⁵⁹⁴ More direct references to music can be found in their report covering activities from January 1983 to March 1985, which mentioned music, dance and poetry from the children marked all occasions like Victory Day, Language Day and Eid, that they organised.⁵⁹⁵ Schlyter has warned that participatory development may “actually silence women’s voices...if it lacks involvement with the state”, moreover, highlighting the need to look into the connections between the public and the private sphere, to study the gendered

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁹¹ Ann Schlyter, “Body Politics and the Crafting of Citizenship in Peri-Urban Lusaka,” *Feminist Africa*, no. 13 (December 2009): 23–44.

⁵⁹² Nari Sangram. Martyrs’ Day Special Issue. 1984.

⁵⁹³ Ibid. BMS Annual Report 1980–81.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid. BMS report Jan 1983–March 1985.

nature of citizenship.⁵⁹⁶ The data on women's organisations in Bengali Britain do not show their interaction with the British state. Nevertheless, utilising music and culture to encourage more women to build their personal constructs of citizenship was a good start.

The list of organisations that I discussed is far from exhaustive. Even before the time the aforementioned organisations were well-settled into their regular pace of activities in the mid-1980s, in 1981, the Federation of Bengali Youth Organisations (FBYO) was formed, an alliance of ten independent groups, namely, Bangladesh Youth League-London, Progressive Youth Organisation- London, Bangladeshi Youth Movement- London, Weavers Youth Forum-London, Shapla Shongo- London, League of Joi Bangla Youth-East London, and the Sunrise Youth Project, aimed at making a “considerable impact in the fight against institutional and overt racism and...fostering unity between the Afro-Caribbeans, Chinese, Somali, Vietnamese and Bengali communities in the struggle against discrimination and injustice common to all these groups.”⁵⁹⁷ However, it does paint the picture that post-1978, the causes of cultural nationalism and anti-racism became increasingly interrelated. The first-known Bengali New Year celebrations at Trafalgar Square in 1978, organised by the then newly established Bengali International (BI)—a multicultural, multiracial and multifaith organisation “committed to upholding principles of democracy, secularism and co-existence”⁵⁹⁸—can be seen as a cultural and musical event which sent an implied message to instigators of racial violence. Jenney Ansar, one of the co-founding members of BI and the mother of the British Bangladeshi singer Suzana Ansar—who features later in this chapter—told me in a private conversation that BI was among the frontrunners in the anti-racism movement and that music played a significant role in all their activities.⁵⁹⁹ Addressing racial

⁵⁹⁶Schlyter, “Body Politics,” 25.

⁵⁹⁷I/SPP/4/9/9. FBYO Annual Report 1985.

⁵⁹⁸“Home,” Bengali International (BI), 2012,

https://web.archive.org/web/20120520023425/http://www.bengaliinternational.org/menu_page_view.php?menu_id=106.

⁵⁹⁹ Interview with Jenney Ansar. 31 July 2023.

and institutional inequalities also occurred through diplomatic channels. Then Deputy High Commissioner of the Bangladesh High Commission in London, K.M Shehabuddin, wrote a letter on 28 May 1982 to Richard Dale of the South Asia Department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, reiterating Commissioner, Commission for Racial Equality, Lulu Bilquis Banu's request to David Lane, Chairman, Commission for Racial Equality, for a 5-minutes slot in Bengali in the BBC's two Asian television programmes, broadcast on Wednesdays and Sundays.⁶⁰⁰ Banu met David Barlow, Secretary to the BBC, the latter of whom Banu described as "very sympathetic".⁶⁰¹ Banu's letter of protest to Lane, dated 6 March 1982, took up what she described as "systematic exclusion of Bangladeshi artists and Bengali language from both day's TV programme, [which had] caused great distress", accusing the Asian Programme Unit of the BBC of such negligence.⁶⁰² Banu's letter was an admixture of Bangladeshi nationalism driven by a demand for Bengali linguistic prominence and racial justice, which is worth quoting:

*The two TV programmes are meant for the viewers of India-Pakistan-Bangladesh sub-continent. The exclusion of Bengali language and Bangladeshi artists is therefore malicious because such a decision on the part of the producers of the programmes deprives the Bangladeshi community of a chance to get essential information regarding this society. In the long run this hampers their integration into the British society... When the question of Bengali language came up again and again before the Asian Programme Advisory Committee the two producers repeatedly put forward arguments in order to exclude the language and the Bangladeshi artists as well. They asserted that a summary in Bengali language after the Hindi-Urdu discussion would bring down the quality of the programme.*⁶⁰³

David Page's article, 'Broadcasting to Britain's Asian minorities', partially agreed with Banu, where he recognised Bengalis' and Gujaratis' resentment for Hindi-Urdu programmes but

⁶⁰⁰ FCO 37/2737. Letter from K.M Shehabuddin to David Lane. National Archives, Kew.

⁶⁰¹ FCO 37/2737. Press Release by Lulu Bilquis Banu.

⁶⁰² FCO 37/2737. Letter from Lulu Bilquis Banu to David Lane.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

mentioned those programmes to have “frequently featured artists from those regions”.⁶⁰⁴ Talking about local radio programmes, Lane insisted that local BBC radio stations could respond according to the language of the predominant minority community of the area; for example, Radio Leeds broadcast programmes in Bengali and Hindustani; there were fourteen such stations which rolled out programmes for Asians and Afro-Caribbeans.⁶⁰⁵



Illustration 3.5: Crowds—young and younger—listening to musical performances at the 1984 Bengali New Year celebrations at Trafalgar Square (Source: *Jubobarta*)

Around the same time, in the early to mid-1980s, when Bengali community organisations grew in influence and stature, the Asian underground scene took birth, with Haroon and Farook Shamsheer setting up the League of Joi Bangla Youth Organisation and Joi Bangla in 1983 to undertake community work for children in the East End. However, it would take the Asian underground scene until the beginning of the 1990s to register its mark on British media and make its dissenting anti-racist voices heard, which my thesis stops before looking into.

⁶⁰⁴ David Page, “Broadcasting to Britain’s Asian Minorities,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (June 1983): 165.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 166.

Having painted a history of Bangladeshi nationalism and Bengalis in the anti-racist movement in Britain, the rationale behind it must be made explicitly clear. Bengali nationalism, fresh out of the 1971 victory and the anti-racist movement, which gathered organisational steam after the 1978 Altab Ali murder, was connected. In a 2006 interview, Dan Jones opined that the Bangladesh flag was a big symbol and an inspiration behind the anti-racist struggle.⁶⁰⁶ For youth worker John Newbiggin, the rise in racism rekindled the fire of self-confidence that was present amongst the Bangladeshi supporters in Britain.⁶⁰⁷ Echoing Newbiggin, anti-racist campaigner Rajonuddin Jalal recalled that their “new identity, in a sense [their] own identity of belonging to a community, the right to speak [their] own language...must have played a role in giving us the strength and the impetus for our movement or fight for our survival in Tower Hamlets.”⁶⁰⁸ Ansar Ahmed Ullah, in a recent article celebrating fifty years of Bangladesh’s independence, suggested that even if the Bangladesh War had not directly fed into the anti-racist movement, the accumulated experience to mobilise within the elders, especially the leadership of the Bangladesh Welfare Organisation and the Brick Lane Mosque, contributed to the anti-racist movement in East London.⁶⁰⁹ Musical intertwinements of these two sequential movements are, to an extent, figurative, too. While dropping me off at the Stratford station after a rehearsal for a Durga Puja function in the autumn of 2018, Himangshu Goswami, recollecting his musical memories in Britain in the car, told me that thinking of songs from his “motherland” Bangladesh, gave him the resoluteness of any challenge, life in Britain threw at him, including racism;⁶¹⁰ I had a similar response from Aaur Rahman when I first interviewed him at his Goodmayes residence in July 2018. Neither Himangshu nor Aaur was present in person in

⁶⁰⁶ Dan Jones, interviewed by Jamil Iqbal and Ansar Ahmed Ullah, 6 March 2006. Swadhinata Trust.

⁶⁰⁷ John Newbiggin, interviewed by Jamil Iqbal and Charlie Sen, 21 March 2006. Swadhinata Trust.

⁶⁰⁸ Rajonuddin Jalal, interviewed by Jamil Iqbal and Charlie Sen, 11 March 2006. Swadhinata Trust.

⁶⁰⁹ Ansar Ahmed Ullah, “The Legacy of 1971: How the Bangladesh Independence War Influenced the Anti-Racist Movement in East London,” Toynbee Hall, October 2, 2021, <https://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/02/09/2021/the-legacy-of-1971-how-the-bangladesh-independence-war-influenced-the-anti-racist-movement-in-east-london-by-ansar-ahmed-ullah/>.

⁶¹⁰ Personal fieldnotes, 4 October 2018.

Britain during the Bangladesh War to amass ammunition of memories to supply their courage and initiative during the racism of the 1970s and 1980s. Still, musical nationalism served as an imaginary link to fight such violence.

Bengali/Bangladeshi Restaurateurship and the Sounds of the “Indian” Curry

Amidst a drastically changing Brick Lane—diverse cuisines, trendy galleries, and cafés replacing curry houses—stands Graam Bangla, almost adjacent to the Brick Lane Mosque. Burgeoning costs have proved difficult for the curry trade to sustain, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶¹¹ Notwithstanding, it is hard not to notice the Friday London crowd filling up “Indian” restaurants like Nazrul, Aladin, and Bengal Village. Graam Bangla carries a distinct identity by distancing itself from the “Indian” tag. On the fascia is a neon sign lit to the colours of the Bangladeshi flag, ‘Homestyle Deshi Dining’; “deshi” is clarified in a poster on the shop front window, ‘Authentic Homestyle Bangladeshi Food’. Recently, Graam Bangla popped up in local Tower Hamlets news as well as in the national media after King Charles set foot in the restaurant along with Queen Consort Camilla as part of their visit to Bangla Town on 8 February 2023.⁶¹² Curious to find out if the royal visit had brought any difference to Graam Bangla, I visited in June. These days, one finds several Union Jacks strung below the red and green logo of the restaurant. Entering the establishment, one finds a life-size cardboard cutting of Charles in military robes.⁶¹³ A Coke Studio-style rendition of Baul Kofil Uddin Sarkar’s ‘*Obhagir bashore*’ by the music director JK Majlish and singer Ankon, broadcast on RTV Music, slowly diffuses through the entirety of the space. Getting out of Brick Lane and walking nearly a mile down Whitechapel Road—opposite the Idea

⁶¹¹ Seán Carey, “The Rise and Fall of Brick Lane’s ‘Curry Capital,’” *Anthropology Today* 37, no. 5 (2021): 9.

⁶¹² Tony Jones, “‘Inclusive and Supportive’ King Visits London’s Bangladeshi Community,” *Independent*, February 8, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/camilla-bangladeshi-british-brick-lane-jewish-b2278299.html>.

⁶¹³ This would be as of January 2024.

Store— is another restaurant, Kolapata, which also takes pride in its “Bangladeshi” identity. In October 2018, during a group visit following a Brick Lane Circle conference, I noticed a similar musical selection: renditions of Bengali “folk” music televised on Bangladeshi media. For the restaurant, music has been agentive towards performing a “Bangladeshi” identity, that is, non-Indian. According to food anthropologist Johan Pottier’s ethnographic findings, “the restaurant always plays Bangladeshi music, never Indian [and] even the national anthem can be heard”.⁶¹⁴

Was it always the case that, for Bengali restaurateurs and café owners—major contributors to this industry in Britain—personal, cultural, and nationalistic constructs of citizenly identities have been paramount to their business? How and to what extent has music in restaurants contributed to the evolution of the musical citizen in Bengali Britain? Despite the predominance of Bengali ownership and labour in Britain’s “Indian” curry trade—pioneered by Sake Dean Mahomed in 1810 with the Hindoostanee Coffee-House in London⁶¹⁵—for Bengalis arriving in the first wave of migration, restaurants were not the usual place to work. Though the number of Sylheti-run cafés serving in Tower Hamlets increased through the 1950s and 1960s, most of the demographic earned their livelihood working in the rag trade, while many sought employment in various factories in Luton, Bradford, and Birmingham.⁶¹⁶ “Indian” restaurants had already become part and parcel of the cultural and gastronomic fabric of British society by the end of the Second World War. While Nurul Islam quotes a figure of twenty “Indian” restaurants by the end of the war,⁶¹⁷ Faruque Ahmed gives us an even higher figure of at least seventy “Indian” restaurants and fifty cafés in London by 1946, more than twenty-six of which would have been owned by Bengali settlers.⁶¹⁸ Until 1997, the

⁶¹⁴ Johan Pottier, “Savoring ‘the Authentic,’” *Food, Culture & Society* 17, no. 1 (March 2014): 18.

⁶¹⁵ Rosina Visram, *Asians in Britain* (Pluto Press, 2002), 39.

⁶¹⁶ Pottier, “Savoring”.

⁶¹⁷ Nurul Islam, *Prabasi Katha* (Prabasi Pabalikesanas, 1989).

⁶¹⁸ Faruque Ahmed, *Bilate Bangali Obhibashon* (University Press, 2021).

number of restaurants and cafés in Brick Lane remained at ten;⁶¹⁹ the ascent of Brick Lane as the ‘curry capital’ happened much later in the early years of the new millennium.

It is not known whether any attention was paid to the sonic atmosphere to evoke an identity that would be easily palatable to his Anglo-Indian patrons; the possibility of playing audio recordings is inexistent, as the advent of sound recording technologies came only towards the end of the nineteenth century. However, we do know that Sake Dean Mahomed furnished his coffee house with “Asiatic embellishments”,⁶²⁰ besides aspiring for the dishes to be “unequaled to any curries ever made in England”.⁶²¹ What makes it clear is that ambience in Britain has always been an additional factor towards identity posturing and citizenship-making, besides the food. Matching with the British context, Audrey Sophia Russek, in her doctoral dissertation on culinary citizenship in American restaurants between 1919 and 1964, has argued that food has never been the only factor in the restaurant trade; there have always been debates surrounding broadcasting background music.⁶²² Not much is known about the soundscapes of the early Indian restaurants in Britain, including the Bengali-run ones, although Bengali songs made it to the British aristocratic women’s exclusive spaces, as we saw in the introduction to the thesis, with Bina Addy, the globetrotting mezzo-contralto star from Calcutta, having performed songs of Rabindranath Tagore to Derby Women’s Luncheon Club members at the St. James’ Restaurant in Derby on 28 February 1939.⁶²³

⁶¹⁹ Seán Carey, *Curry Capital: The Restaurant Sector in London’s Brick Lane*, vol. Issue 6 of ICS Working Paper (Institute of Community Studies, 2004), 2.

⁶²⁰ *The Epicure’s Almanack or Calendar of Good Living* (Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1815), 123–24.

⁶²¹ *The Times*, April 20, 1813.

⁶²² Audrey Sophia Russek, “Culinary Citizenship in American Restaurants” (2010).

⁶²³ *The Derby Daily Telegraph*, March 1, 1939.



Illustration 3.6: An advertisement for the erstwhile Tagore restaurant, 1980s (Source: Personal collections of Faruque Ahmed)

It is challenging to ascertain when music records started becoming a regular feature at “Indian” restaurants in Britain, although it looks plausible by the 1960s. As John Reeve, managing director of The Captain’s Table—located in Primrose Hill, Hillfields, a Coventry suburb—celebrated his birthday on 8 November 1964, thieves broke in and stole £500.⁶²⁴ Another casualty on the same street was The Modern Restaurant, “an Indian and Pakistani restaurant” managed by Saad Ghazi, which had been set on fire, leading to the discolouration of the dining room and some missing property.⁶²⁵ The haul, containing a tape recorder and four records of “Indian music” among a camera and cutlery, was left outside the Holmesdale Road divisional police headquarters in Foleshill two months later.⁶²⁶ Ghazi—who was born in present-day Bangladesh in 1944 and moved to England to study for a

⁶²⁴ *The Coventry Evening Telegraph*, November 09, 1964.

⁶²⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁶ *The Coventry Evening Telegraph*, January 16, 1965.

Catering course at Coventry's Henley College of Further Education in 1962—⁶²⁷ was one of the first generations of Bengali migrants who remained veiled behind the garb of a generic “Indian” taste, visuality and sonicity that would have been much more relatable to the White English middle class that they were serving. Here, further occluding their Bengaliness was their sense of belonging to East Pakistan. It is unknown what those four stolen records were, but they are unlikely to have been part of the regional Bengali repertoire that formed part of their personal lives.

Elizabeth Buettner has written about the homogenisation of myriad South Asian identities under the fold of “Indianness” to attract the White customer, which failed to create an awareness of the diverse migrant subcontinental populations within mainstream society.⁶²⁸ Buettner has picked up on the stereotype of ‘saris, samosas and steel bands’ to express how music has informed White understandings of the Afro-Caribbean community; food has represented South Asians.⁶²⁹ However, through mainly scouting old newspapers, I argue that behind the creation of a singular brand of “Indian” cuisine in Britain—85 to 90 per cent of the industry which has been owned and run by Bengalis, particularly Bangladeshi Muslims⁶³⁰—music has played a vital, though often unrecognised role in the making of the architecture of these spaces, and hence citizenship and identity. Jonathan Sterne has studied the function of programmed music towards creating social constructs, focusing on the contrasting acoustical spaces of the Mall of America: the inobtrusive music of the hallways and the “more easily recognisable and more boisterous music in the stores.”⁶³¹ Drawing on Lefebvre’s idea of a social space as characteristic of constant inflow and outflow of energies,

⁶²⁷ Mohammed Abdul Karim, ed., *British Bangladeshi. Who's Who* (British Bangla Media Group, 2010), 51.

⁶²⁸ Elizabeth Buettner, “‘Going for an Indian’: South Asian Restaurants and the Limits of Multiculturalism in Britain,” *The Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 4 (December 2008): 899.

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.*, 867.

⁶³⁰ Katy Gardner and Abdus Sukur, “I’m Bengali, I’m Asian, and I’m Living Here’: The Changing Identity of British Bengalis,” in *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain* (Hurst and Co., 1996).

⁶³¹ Jonathan Sterne, “Sounds like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space,” *Ethnomusicology* 41, no. 1 (1997): 29.

Sterne considers music as one of the energy flows that produces the Mall of America. Similarly, for Britain's "Indian" restaurants, the "Indian" music records constituted the energy flows that were continually feeding an "Indianness" and catered to the music palettes of their customers.

Operating in the late 1970s in London's Victoria, Victoria Tandoori, owned by Mr Matlik, shied away from a Bangladeshi/Bengali identity. Instead of shunning the "Indian" tag, they advertised "East Indian curries" on their menu.⁶³² It seems that the owner took national identity seriously, although projected to customers on a more personal level, as evidenced by their advertisement in the *Fulham Chronicle*, which said, "the owner...believes in taking time and care to explain the finer points of his national dishes". Given the predominance of 'going for an Indian' in Britain in those times, Matlik was half-audacious to bring to light the distinctiveness of Bangladeshi cuisine but did not risk it with the background music, for which he settled for "pleasing...Indian music on cassette".⁶³³ This use of sensate modalities to "invoke both familiarity and unfamiliarity"⁶³⁴—in Matlik's case, the background music for relatability, and the "East Indian" label to move away from it—can also be seen up north in Britain. In a 1979 pre-Christmas and New Year advertisement, Romna Tandoori Indian Restaurant at the seaside town of Whitley Bay in Tyne and Wear proclaimed their "warm welcome and traditional Eastern Hospitality".⁶³⁵ The background music was part of architectonically engendering phantasmagorical experiences of the "East" that customers could access, otherwise deemed unreachable, besides the semiotics of the restaurant logo: a decked-up Indian elephant with a howdah, in the backdrop of a structure with minarets

⁶³² *Fulham Chronicle*, December 1, 1978.

⁶³³ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁴ Aoileann Ní Mhurchú, "Unfamiliar Acts of Citizenship," *Gender, Race and Inclusive Citizenship*, 2022, 273–90, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-36391-8_11.

⁶³⁵ *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, December 21, 1979.

hinting at the Taj Mahal. At the Romna Tandoori, diners could expect “a romantic evening” with “soft traditional Indian music”.

Like Matlik in London, Syed Abdur Razak in Aberdeen, Scotland, was ready to express his Bengali identity by placing a bold advertisement title, ‘When in Rose Street, do as the Bengalis do’.⁶³⁶ At the same time, Razak was tactful enough not to overshoot the mark; his 1978 establishment, the Light of Bengal was catered to people to “savour the delights of traditional Indian Cuisine”.⁶³⁷ As proof of authenticity, the advertising feature leans on approval from *desh* (homeland). Arothi,⁶³⁸ a “famous dancer” visiting Aberdeen as part of a dance troupe from West Bengal, had commented on the food to be “at least as good if not better than she had sampled in Calcutta.”⁶³⁹ Except for the Royal Bengal tiger gracing the advertisement, the name of the restaurant itself, and the title, there was nothing specific to Bengali culture. With candlelit tables, the Light of Bengal offered the generic “intimate, friendly atmosphere” created with “soft Indian music playing [in] the background.”

“Indian” music’s intrinsicness to the curry experience can be gauged from Ian Francis’s review of the Modhubon restaurant in London’s Kensington. It was not just the food that appealed to him, but the whole “event” of eating.⁶⁴⁰ Besides good service and attentive waiting, “Indian music [playing] in the background” ticked the journalist’s boxes for a “superior Indian restaurant”:

Having Indian music isn't as important as the food, but I have eaten in Indian restaurants where the sound of slushy music from the likes of Cliff Richard was enough to kill your appetite.

⁶³⁶ *Aberdeen Evening Express*, July 10, 1984.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁸ I have not been able to find out who this ‘famous’ dancer was. However, it might be possible that ‘Arothi’ was Arati Das, a cabaret dancer going by her stage name ‘Shefali’. Shefali was at the peak of her career in the mid-1980s in Calcutta, having become a prominent sex symbol in the city’s elite circles, including the Firpo’s restaurant and the Grand Hotel. However, no references to this tour in her autobiography, *Sandhyataar Shefali*, have caught my attention.

⁶³⁹ *Aberdeen Evening Express*, July 10, 1984.

⁶⁴⁰ *Kensington Post*, August 12, 1983.

When sentimental music was a turnoff for Francis, the question arises as to why he did not mind the “softness” of the “Indian” music in the restaurants. Perhaps the fact that “Indian” music was playing at an “Indian” restaurant heightened its authenticity for him. Modhubon, a Bengali name meaning the “garden of honey”, was in all likelihood owned by a Bengali, if not a Bangladeshi, and run by staff from the community. Francis’s ignorance of the possible existence of more localised identities, despite his declaration of “a long career of Indian food sampling”, is representative of British mainstream society’s uncritical consumption of public cultures⁶⁴¹ manufactured by the South Asian diaspora to represent a saleable version of their identities. Considering business interests, it was a pan-Asian effort not to override the unwritten rulebook ensuring the “authentic Indian” experience. Established in 1987, the Jahangir restaurant in Dundee, Scotland, lured diners for “a taste of eastern promise in a super Indian atmosphere”.⁶⁴² Still in operation under changed ownership, a quick phone call to the restaurant revealed that a Pakistani, not a Bengali, had established it. Like other players in the market, the Jahangir abided by the formula of fetishisation of the exotic, oriental, and imperial. Following is an excerpt from the advertisement:

*The initial impact of walking into the Jahangir is similar to imagining yourself somewhere in Calcutta during the height of the Raj. The tones are gentle blues and pinks, soft Indian music plays in the background and elephant carvings and Asian pictures add to its charm.*⁶⁴³

These cases of exploiting the deep connections between the gastric and acoustemological—playing unobtrusive “soft Indian” music in the background—routes towards inventing a generic commercial, diasporic identity can be largely attributed to public musical tastes in Britain. Phil Penfold, in his 1990 review of the then newly opened Bilash

⁶⁴¹ Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai, “Public Modernity in India,” in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol Breckenridge (University Of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1–21.

⁶⁴² *The Courier and Advertiser*, July 15, 1988.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*

Tandoori restaurant in Cullercoats, North Tyneside, had found the background music to be “grim”, which “alternated between two tapes, one of the sixties hits, the other of Indian music of a particularly wailing variety.”⁶⁴⁴ In fact, the background “Indian” music had become so ingrained into the psyche of the average British curry customer that a record containing an hour of the most popular music in Indian restaurants was being produced by ex-manager of the Rolling Stones, Andrew Oldham, in 1995.⁶⁴⁵ Targeted for takeaway customers, the record was meant to recreate the atmosphere of the Indian restaurant, something which, according to a spokesperson of Oldham’s record company, would “turn any living room into [one’s] favourite curry house”.⁶⁴⁶ In the same piece, Philip Jay of Curry Direct, too, had attested that curry without Indian music in the background had “something missing.”

Even Tassaduq Ahmed, one of the very influential figures in the Bengali community, could not circumvent business interests. Outside of his restaurant business, Tassaduq dabbled in a plethora of activities in London, starting with serving as the undeclared Office Secretary of the Pakistan Welfare Association and the Pakistan Education Centre, running English newspapers such as *Eastern News* and *Pakistan Today*, and the Bengali newspaper *Deshar Daak*, as well as establishing the Bangladesh Freedom Movement Overseas.⁶⁴⁷ In 1956, Tassaduq and his German wife, Rosemary, jointly started the Ganges restaurant on Gerrard Street, Soho.⁶⁴⁸ Adorned with plain white walls, abstract paintings, greenhouse plants and a fish tank, the restaurant was considered a no-frills Indian restaurant.⁶⁴⁹ In a 1968 review for the *Illustrated London News*, food writer Margaret Costa labelled the Ganges as a “deeply serious restaurant offering the most distinguished Indo-Pakistani cooking in London in all its great variety.”⁶⁵⁰

⁶⁴⁴ *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, October 16, 1990.

⁶⁴⁵ *Daily Mirror*, April 20, 1995.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁷ Tasadduq Ahmed, *Jiban Khatar Kurano Pata (Random Memories)*, ed. Faruque Ahmed (The Ethnic Minorities Original History and Research Center, 2002), 15–19.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁴⁹ *The Sunday Times*, November 27, 1977.

⁶⁵⁰ *The Illustrated London News*, August 24, 1968.

Almost a decade later, in 1977, Anees Jung wrote about the Ganges, specialising in “home style cooking with a distinctive Bengali flavour”. The Ganges came across as living up to gastronomic authenticity both to Costa and Jung, unlike other Indian restaurants. Despite all this, Tassaduq could not make do without the “soft, soothing piped Indian music”,⁶⁵¹ attesting to the fact that “Indian” instrumental music had cemented its place as the aural side to the curry long before the Indian curry trade started picking up in the 1990s.

Tassaduq’s musical tastes were very different. A lover of Bangla “folk” music, he also served as President of the *Bangalee Jatiya Sangskritik Sangsad* (Bengali National Cultural Society). The seriousness of his musical involvement showed in instances like his persuading the Home Office to issue entry certificates for singer Nirmalendu Chowdhury’s group *Loka Bharati* in 1975.⁶⁵² Faruque Ahmed’s editorial piece for Tassaduq’s unfinished memoir and compilation of articles mentions that the Ganges restaurant became a social, cultural and political hub for Bengalis, besides attracting big leftist names of the likes of the former Labour leader Michael Foot, Peter Shore, Tariq Ali and the Urdu bard, Faiz Ahmed Faiz.⁶⁵³ Although we get glimpses of the musical Tassaduq from his memoir, not much can be gleaned from written sources. However, from secondary oral accounts provided by Faruque, it became clear that the very Ganges, which adhered to the “soft Indian music” formula, metamorphosed into a more informal cultural space during its non-operating hours. He also recalled stories of Bengali independentist songs sung at the Ganges during the Bangladesh War, which Tassaduq would narrate to him.⁶⁵⁴ As the evidence tells us, cooking and music-making—even playing it—were important acts of cultural and sensory citizenship in Bengali Britain. For people like Tassaduq, Aberdeen’s Syed Abdur Razak, and Matlik, there was a tussle between the private and public avatars of the “musical citizen” and the “culinary citizen” in them.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid.

⁶⁵² *Financial Times*, August 30, 1975.

⁶⁵³ Tassaduq, *Jiban*, 21.

⁶⁵⁴ Faruque Ahmed, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 20 July 2023.

What they were eating/singing/listening to in their residences differed from the sensory package that was sold to the White customer.



Illustration: 3.7: Ganges restaurant in London's Soho district, 1960s (Source: Personal collections of Faruque Ahmed)

Bengali-run “Indian” restaurants transforming into communal musical spaces during after-hours is something that acclaimed singer Himangshu Goswami talked about while recollecting Bengali diasporic musical habits during the early days of his career in Britain:

These are my life's experiences during the 1980s. When I taught music to children in London, I often had trouble reaching work on time. I would be out of town, singing at Indian restaurants throughout the night on weekdays. Three or four neighbouring restaurants would come together to organise a function. The advantage these establishments had in comparison to London was the space. Some had massive car parks and lounges...100-200 seaters. Most of them would wind up the day's operations around midnight. They would remove the tables, make a stage for me, and convert these restaurants into halls. I would start singing around two in the morning and keep going for four hours...the Taj

*Mahal restaurant in Bristol was one among innumerable restaurants in the country that used to host such events.*⁶⁵⁵

Sitting on his couch at his Forest Gate residence in East London, Himangshu went about animatedly when I asked how engaging the listeners were. For him, the hundred-odd listeners who would gather almost every other night were uncompromising and demanding to the extent that they would only listen to the old *palli* songs, narrating instances when even Nirmalendu Chowdhury's songs would not satisfy audiences, as they had the option of listening to them on records. Usually accompanied by a tabla player and a guitarist—sometimes only a tabla player—Goswami had to take up the challenge of composing new songs. These all-night restaurant gatherings, in a way, were acts of musical reclamation of these spaces and of tuning sonic architectures to their shared identities that otherwise would not be possible during business hours. Himangshu reflected on the monetary gains these musical nights would bring, potentially up to £1500, with everyone contributing £10 or £20. Randall Everett Allsup argues that how human beings position themselves to new music is an enactment of musical citizenship.⁶⁵⁶ The fact that these events opened up avenues for the audiences to exercise their agency to pay and enjoy old and familiar music also enabled them to enact their citizenships. Aoileann Ní Mhurchú has looked at how marginalised intergenerational migrants perform citizenship through “unfamiliar acts” of refusing to identify the nation-state apparatus, through “turning towards vernacular music and language”.⁶⁵⁷ Similarly, the intimate acts of listening/performing vernacular Bengali music in Britain's “Indian” restaurants, as we know from Himangshu's stories, were bolstering the

⁶⁵⁵ Himangshu Goswami, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 24 May 2023.

⁶⁵⁶ Randall Everett Allsup, “On Pluralism, Inclusion and Musical Citizenship,” *Nordic Research in Music Education* 12 (2010): 25.

⁶⁵⁷ Aoileann Ní Mhurchú, “Unfamiliar Acts of Citizenship: Enacting Citizenship in Vernacular Music and Language from the Space of Marginalised Intergenerational Migration,” *Citizenship Studies* 20, no. 2 (January 22, 2016): 156–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2015.1132566>.

Bengali musical citizen, and in ways, challenging ideas of “soft Indian music” in the very same spaces.

There are more instances to support the argument that Bengalis’ regional musical identities rarely found expression in the British curry trade, not at least until the beginning of the millennium. In July 2023, I caught up with the well-known British-Bangladeshi singer Suzanna Ansar and her tabla player husband Yamin Chowdhury (better known as Shagor), as we drove back from tabla maestro Sanju Sahai’s Leicester residence to the East End. Chatting throughout the long drive, I discovered that Suzanna was involved in her father, Mohamed Ansar Uddin’s restaurant business in the 1980s and 1990s, especially during evenings on weekends, receiving orders on the phone and readying takeaway parcels; Ansar Uddin owned several restaurants in the Woodford area, including the Meghna Tandoori, Hillside Tandoori, Balti Queen, The Raj, and The Spicebar. Suzanna made detailed observations on the musicscapes of the “Indian” restaurant in Britain:

In the 80s, everyone used to play the same thing... it was just instrumentals. Just Hawaiian guitar...any random Indian-ish music! Bangla gaan, but instrumental...then, Hariprasad Chaurasia. It had to play in the back. It wasn't loud. There was a trend in the 80s for Kumar Sanu-type Hindi songs. Customers would know that it was an Indian restaurant. It had a sound, isn't it? Ting-ting ting-ting...something like that! When I used to play the music that I liked, my dad used to ask me to stop the music...because he made a lot of money in the restaurant trade. I wanted to listen to whatever I liked. It was Bangla or Asian, not Western. I wanted to listen to vocals. I mean the tyang-tyang of the instrumental, all the time? Take, for example, Manna Dey's Coffee House song. Someone used to bring guitar versions of it...⁶⁵⁸

Diasporic Bengali perceptions of the Indianised guitar in Britain’s curry house ecology are complex. Martin Clayton has highlighted the dichotomy in how the guitar in India has been

⁶⁵⁸ Suzanna Ansar and Yasmin Khan, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 02 July 2023.

simultaneously viewed as a symbol of wealth and modernity, yet also as an intrusion into “traditional” culture.⁶⁵⁹ Clayton’s reflections on the Hawaiian guitar show us that it had become an “important part of the Indian soundscape for several decades, as it became part of the film-music sound-palette [and] employed in other popular genres, particularly in Bengal”.⁶⁶⁰ Though the sound of Hawaiian guitar was “Indian-ish” and relatable enough to partly represent their diasporic identities, the lack of agency to play music at free will, led to reservations for people like Suzanna. It is worth clarifying that the Bengali diaspora was not limited to listening to Bengali songs; Hindi film songs also had a substantial following, especially among the second generation of migrants. Tofial Uddin, a British-Bangladeshi singer of Hindi film songs, recalled to me in a personal conversation about Sunil Ganguly’s electric guitar renditions that played in the restaurants.⁶⁶¹ More often than not, Hindi film songs—including instrumental versions—were part of a Bengaliness that appealed to pan-Asian diasporic musicalities, but simultaneously formed part of the sanitised musical décor of the “Indian” restaurants, keeping in mind the preferences of the majority of the White clientele.

At a time when business interests seemed to urge curry houses to adhere to their signature sound, in 1986, Abdus Salique decided to go against the tide. The novelty of the Salique’s restaurant at Hanbury Street—adjoining Brick Lane—was that they attempted to create a ‘Bengali’ musical public for the White customer to consume, instead of a musical profile that would normally have been expected. However, to what extent the White client can be solely attributed to the emergence of the “soft, piped” sound of the “Indian” restaurant is doubtful. *TimeOut London*’s almost-glowing review of Salique’s in 1986 suggests that people took rather positively to the music:

⁶⁵⁹ Martin Clayton, “Rock to Raga: Many Lives of the Indian Guitar,” in *Guitar Cultures*, ed. Andy Bennett and Kevin Dawe (Berg Publishers, 2001), 29.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁶¹ Online personal communication with Tofial Uddin.

Saving the best till last, there is now one restaurant in the area that qualifies as a night out, rather than ‘nothing on the telly, let’s have a curry’...Salique is the leader of one of the local music groups, so he has installed a stage in his restaurant, where, on Tuesdays and Saturdays, he provides live Bengali music. The restaurant has just opened, with the normal good intentions of a recently opened business in a very competitive field. The décor and space are more West than East End, and the food is superb. The thalis (meat or vegetarian) provide a good sampling of what they have to offer. There are other authentic touches such as the availability of a paan (betel nut) tray as an alternative to After Eights when the bill comes. It gets a bit crowded on music nights, so it may be as well to book.⁶⁶²

To name a few, Salique’s featured artists of fame, such as Paban Das Baul and Kangalini Sufia, hosted Ravi Shankar over dinner, as well as attracted leftist politicians—possibly owing to Abdus Salique’s then pro-Chinese Communist background—including Ken Livingstone and Home Secretary, Jack Straw. Music nights on Tuesdays and Saturdays used to get crowded; Bengalis were likely the majority of the customers rather than Whites. Of course, Salique did not just target White customers. Instead of jumping on the “Indian” restaurant bandwagon, Salique was flexible with both “Bangladeshi” and “Indian” tags, as seen in an advertisement put up at the *Janomot*,⁶⁶³ before the restaurant opened on 12 September 1986. This advertisement lured customers to visit his “Bangladeshi” restaurant to attend “live vocal and instrumental performances of [their] favourite artistes in a homely atmosphere, with video recording facilities”, further proffering potential staff to contact the restaurant authorities, were anyone remained interested in living close to “East London’s Bengali quarters”.⁶⁶⁴ Instead of the usual music iconography in the curry trade—mainly comprising the sitar, tabla, and a dancing girl—instruments used in Bengal’s “folk” repertoire, namely the dotara, ektara, dhol, and the harmonium, featured in the centre of the pamphlet of

⁶⁶² *TimeOut London*, November 5, 1986.

⁶⁶³ *Janomot*. Undated. Courtesy: Abdus Salique.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid*.

Salique's. Perhaps Abdus Salique did not achieve much towards circulating a "Bengali"/"Bangladeshi" musical consciousness among the White British diner, but he was one of the pioneers towards initiating this trend.

Be it the Salique's, Ganges, or any "Indian" restaurant in Britain, it was not only the White customer who was visiting; they were recreational spaces for migrants—Bengalis in this context—, too, whether it be for celebrating birthdays, marriages, or a weekend. Focusing on a New York-based family's daily musical encounters, Claudia Cali has shown how music functions "as a means for building community building, affective bonding bond and a sense of sense of shared identity...through moments of informal, spontaneous and communal...interactions."⁶⁶⁵ The night-long musical gatherings in restaurants and live Bengali music at the Salique's would have provided a scope for the community to build intimacy and spaces of familiarity, and further solidified the position of the Bengali musical citizen in Britain, by the very acts of co-listening to music they would have listened to in *desh*, in an exclusive space.



Illustration 3.8: A musical performance in full swing at Salique's restaurant, the late 1980s
(Source: Personal collections of Abdus Salique)

⁶⁶⁵ Claudia Cali, "Creating Ties of Intimacy through Music: The Case Study of a Family as a Community Music Experience," *International Journal of Community Music* 10, no. 3 (December 1, 2017): 305–16, https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.10.3.305_1.

Around the same time Abdus Salique opened his restaurant, Yousuf Miah ‘Nunu’ arrived in the UK and joined the restaurant trade as a chef in cities like Brighton, Liverpool, Blackpool, and London. Standing in front of the lesser-known Shahid Minar (Martyrs’ Memorial) in Oldham, Yousuf, the elder son of Iskandar Miah—whose fundraising efforts during the Bangladesh War are part of the previous chapter—confessed that music came automatically to him while cooking; according to him, it was all due to seeing his mother and aunts doing the same in the kitchen in *desh*. Yousuf narrated his happy memories of how customers used to react to his kitchen-singing:

...they would sometimes listen to my singing as well. They would enquire as to why the chef was crying. The thing is, our bicchedi melodies are ones of separation, and hence, it is not unreasonable to think of it as crying. This has often happened...in Cheetham Hill and one restaurant in Failsworth, here in Oldham, Spicy Gram. After explaining them, the English customers were pleased and remarked on what a beautiful voice the chef had! My voice would travel across the partitioned space...the kitchen and the dining area were in the same room. On hearing the tunes, many people would request to meet me in the kitchen. After 1986, I stopped working in restaurants and cooked takeaway meals in the open kitchens. That time, many White customers would ask, ‘Chef, why quiet today?’ They would enjoy, and often marvel at the tunes, and ask if these were real songs. When I explained to them what these meant, they would enjoy...⁶⁶⁶

Such pieces of oral evidence further complicate the listening preferences of English diners and, hence, make it more difficult to entirely entangle the signature sound of “Indian” restaurants with clients’ demands. Upon being asked, Yousuf had clarified that White customers had been curious—if not friendly—to his musical outpourings as early as 1986; in contrast, in the same year, “Indian music” became the subject of “racial offensive remarks”; a physical confrontation between Clarke Edward Pierce and Satpal Ram at the Bengali-run Sky Blue restaurant in Lozells Road, Birmingham, led to the death of the former and the

⁶⁶⁶ Yousuf Miah, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 5 July 2021.

latter being consequently charged with murder.⁶⁶⁷ Even during the times when interracial tensions were high, there would have existed spaces of amity, as Yousuf's memories point to.

We can only speculate if the Indian curry would have gained as much popularity were it not for the “soft” music. Yousuf's case suggests that perhaps it would not have made much of a difference. Following the wealth of data that I have banked upon, the sound of the “Indian” restaurant seems to have been a product of customers' choice, as well as hesitation on the part of the wider Asian community to introduce regional musics, that they would typically listen to personally. The “Indian” restaurant in Britain had undoubtedly become a carrier of tastes and sounds of a blanket “Indianness”, which occluded Bengali/Bangladeshi identities, more often than not.

Engendering Bengaliness through Music Pedagogy

Dr K C Bhattacharya⁶⁶⁸ came to England in 1927 for higher studies, after becoming a medical doctor and getting married in the same year in 1925.⁶⁶⁹ Bhattacharya eventually stayed back in London and set up his primary practice at 122 King's Cross Road before being joined by his wife and daughter. Chaya Ray, née Bhattacharya, their elder daughter, was born in London in August 1931. Growing up through the Depression and the Second World War, music played a part in shaping her mixed identity. In 2006, Leslie McCartney interviewed Chaya for the King's Cross Voices Project. Following is an excerpt that highlights how learning music formed her “Bengali” consciousness:

My father was very musical and wanted us to learn music at an early age. I remember going to my piano classes in Penton Rise. There was a lady who had a piano, and he managed to find someone who taught piano, and that's where I had my first lessons. Subsequently, I became a favourite pupil of

⁶⁶⁷ Regina Vs Satpal Ram (No. 3979/C2/87) (Royal Courts of Justice March 6, 1989).

⁶⁶⁸ Dr Bhattacharya can be spotted seated in the first row (extreme left) in Illustration 3.2.

⁶⁶⁹ Chaya Ray, interviewed by Leslie McCartney. KXV-2006-217-01B. Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre.

my teacher at South Hampstead High School and she believed that one should take exams...I took that exam, didn't do as well as I did at the beginning but I did manage to get my Grade 8...Music has been part of my education and I'm so grateful. I have a great appreciation of music, mostly classical but then my origins explain that. I'm quite interested in all sorts of music and Indian music. My father saw to it that we learned to sing Bengali songs. I've really inherited two cultures very nicely. I can speak Bengali. Mother and father found it important to keep your cultural roots...⁶⁷⁰

Chaya belonged to the generation of Bengalis who were raised in a predominantly White British society until the main waves of immigration occurred in the 1960s and the 1970s, when women and children joined in increasing numbers. As these migrants slowly consolidated by establishing community organisations amid Bangladesh in its infancy, what role did music pedagogy in personalised and group settings play in imagining the musical citizen in an increasingly multicultural Britain? To what extent did Bengalis' pedagogic endeavours, in Martin Stokes's words, find "new ways of locating and participating...in everyday spaces of recreation...[and] as a consequence, new ways of engaging and growing the sound of the emergent [Bengali] citizenship practices around [them ?]"⁶⁷¹

Although the sitar was starting to become a mascot of a generic representation of Indian culture in the "West" by the mid 20th-century, Hindustani classical vocalists and teachers were harder to come by in Britain; titans of the sitar, Vilayat Khan and Ravi Shankar, both performed in England in the 1950s; Vilayat was part of a cultural delegation in 1951,⁶⁷² while Ravi's sitar debut took place at the Quaker Center on Euston Road in 1956.⁶⁷³ In 1973, Mahmudur Rahman Benu 'Benubhai' moved to England to study for a second master's in economics at the University of Leeds. Born in Calcutta, Benubhai spent twelve of his formative years in the village of Bhanga, situated in the Faridpur District of the Dhaka

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid. 122 King's Cross Road, featuring the surgery of Bhattacharya, was part of Terence Dalley's pencil sketches of London streets. The Museum of London holds a digitized online copy: <https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/93864.html>.

⁶⁷¹ Martin Stokes, "The Musical Citizen," *Emomuzikoloji Dergisi* 1, no. 2 (2018): 105.

⁶⁷² Namita Devidayal, *The Sixth String of Vilayat Khan* (Context, 2018), 84.

⁶⁷³ Oliver Craske, *Indian Sun* (Hachette Books, 2020), 214. This was, however, not Ravi's first debut in England as an artiste. He had performed in pre-war London, as a dancer in his elder brother, Uday Shankar's troupe.

Division.⁶⁷⁴ After finishing school in Narayanganj, he enrolled at Notre Dame College in Dhaka to read for his matriculation before passing his intermediate examinations in 1961. Music was in Benu and his family. However, it was only during his final year of studying for his bachelor's in statistics at Dhaka University that Benu decided to join *Chhayanaut Sangeet Vidyatan* to learn ragas; he performed on a few informal occasions at the university. It was this moment that changed the course of Benu's life. He went on to complete his master's in statistics and began teaching. Music was never to part from him. During the 1971 war, Benu initiated the *Bangladesh Mukti Shangrami Shilpi Shangstha* (Association of Liberation Artists of Bangladesh), travelling across refugee camps to sing patriotic songs.⁶⁷⁵

Academic life was challenging for Benu, especially after he began his doctorate in economics and transitioned from statistics. According to Benu, music naturally “went behind a bit”. However, his endeavours were successful in keeping the flames of melody alive in him. In a 2016 interview with one of his long-standing comrades and students, Valentine Harding, Benu said:

*I took a bit of a break from music, but I still carried on at home. I used to sing. Music was my life.*⁶⁷⁶

In the winter of 2020, Harding helped me initiate a conversation with Benu, with her joining the discussion. In my first conversation with Benu, I pursued this lead and asked for a more detailed description of his musical life. Benu remarked unreservedly as to what his intentions were in pursuing music amidst the financial and academic hardships that he was facing:

⁶⁷⁴ Desh TV Entertainment, “মাহমুদুর রহমান বেনুও আসাদুজ্জামান নূর। বেলা অবেলা সারাবেলা DeshTv,” YouTube, December 26, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dekyKdkxcis>.

⁶⁷⁵ Tareque and Catherine Masud made a documentary film, *Mukti Gaan (Song of Freedom)* on the artists' collective, using original footage.

⁶⁷⁶ Mahmudur Rahman Benu, interviewed by Val Harding, 08 July 2016, *Swadhinata Trust*.

... I didn't get away from my tradition, which is Indian classical music and classical-based music...you know, Bengali thumris, Bengali dhrupads from Tagore, Bengali khayals from Nazrul Islam, tappas from Nidhu babu (Ramnidhi Gupta)...⁶⁷⁷

Perhaps from the very outset, Benu was keen on spreading his “own music”, the music he had trained in, Indian classical music. He continued:

[I sang] anything that people would accept...mainly Bollywood music. ‘Mohe aayi na jag se laaj’...now that kind of song immediately touched people, who would say, ‘Can I learn that?’ I would teach anything they would like to learn and then very quietly say, ‘Now, did you know that this beautiful song you sing is based on a raga called Khamaj?’ Beautiful, isn't it? Particularly the light classical music...Khamaj, Kafi, Tilak Kamod, Jhinjhoti...I can't see anybody throw it away...Anything based on ragas is very sweet...⁶⁷⁸

It is unclear whether Mahmudur was involved in music teaching during his early days as a student in Leeds or whether music was just an activity confined to his residence. What is evident from the octogenarian's above statement is his intention to spread musical consciousness in his local community.

After a lapse of almost a decade, Benu's life as a music teacher in the UK gathered momentum following a kind of baptism of fire. Then residing in the Harehills area of Leeds—a locality with a sizeable South Asian population—Rob Arneson from the Leeds Council approached him to exhibit his instruments and sing, if requested. According to Benu, Arneson offered to pay £4/hour,⁶⁷⁹ from ten in the morning to four in the afternoon. Benu carried his tanpura, tabla, and harmonium:

⁶⁷⁷ Mahmudur Rahman Benu and Val Harding, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 14 December 2020.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹ He quoted £4.19/h in the interview with Val Harding.

...I was not interested in the money. I went there half an hour before. I set up the instruments. Remember, this was an area of Leeds where about 15,000 subcontinental people lived. I kept waiting. Not a single person turned up. Not even a child. Absolute zero! Four hours... not a single soul appeared. It looked like it was a conscious decision... the local people...the Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis had as if decided, 'We are not going to go there. They are trying to show off multiculturalism or something.' Whatever... I was at the point of tears...that how important Indian music, Indian instruments...is among the Indian people. I was already trying to preach music to the likes of Val, Charles, Frank Stubbs, and Martin. About ten English people were interested. But so far as the Indian people, whose culture it was...that part was absolutely missing...you can explain in many ways. One way of looking at it would be they were trying to tell me, 'Look, when I left India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh, I left everything. So don't try to bring all this to me.'... I was trying to tell everybody how beautiful this cultural history is. Generally, Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis do not take much pride in our culture and keep fighting among themselves all the time. But this is one positive thing. That was the 8th of April, if I remember.⁶⁸⁰

This Harehills community centre event exposed Benu to the apparent distance that had grown in people's minds about Indian music, Indian culture, and Indian heritage, which urged him to take things into his own hands and start free weekly classes at his 2 Burchett Terrace residence. Solely relying on word of mouth, this initiative was successful, with the classes attracting mostly Bangladeshi immigrants, as well as a few Pakistanis and Sikhs. However, with the arrival of autumn, students had to brave the chilly, unheated music room. Benu turned to Arneson for a space; according to the former, the latter had shifted from Harehills to Headingley by then. With the Leeds Council's support, Arneson could offer him the Brudenell Social Club,⁶⁸¹ as well as some fees.

Mahmudur Rahman Benu did not complete his doctorate and instead took a job teaching mathematics in a high school to sustain his livelihood, settling in England. His profession took

⁶⁸⁰ The year of the event was 1982, in most likeliness. During our conversation, he did not mention any year.

⁶⁸¹ Both in the interviews with Harding and me, Benu mentioned the 'Brudenell Centre' in Leeds 6. Also, while conversing with me, he further talked about the centre being located on Brudenell Road. However, no street in Leeds exists in the name of 'Brudenell Road', or did in the past, according to the best of my knowledge; there has been no 'Brudenell Centre' as well. Giving the benefit of doubt to Benu, he might have referred to the Brudenell Social Club.

him to Sheffield before he finally moved to London. Benu had already named his Leeds music school after his musical alma mater, Chhayanaut; the school eventually grew into three further branches, one in Sheffield and two in London. Through Chhayanaut, Benu attempted to make music more accessible to others by creating an intervention in the public sphere at the ground level.⁶⁸² Unsurprisingly, Chhayanaut was more than a music school for Benu:

*...because of the lack of appreciation of Indian music, a whole movement started. I always call Chhayanaut a movement. It was really not just opening a school. It was an attempt to change the cultural attitude of people who moved away to a different country.*⁶⁸³

Nick Stevenson argues a cultural citizen is a “polyglot who [can] move comfortably within multiple and diverse communities while resisting the temptation to search for a purer and less complex identity.”⁶⁸⁴ Similarly, Benu, through his method of teaching lighter idioms of Indian classical music, as well as songs influenced by Western music, was trying to mould his diverse cohort of students into musical citizens who could resort to their musical training to move more effortlessly among various communities, and thereby navigate complex, intersecting identities. As his statements above reveal, Benu was mainly interested in “preaching” the Hindustani system of music, a pan-Indian musical consciousness. Yet, at the core of Benu, pride in his Bengaliness informed his musicality, which was, above all, a “Bengali” one drawing from Indian classical musical thought. Mahmudur Benu, an octogenarian, continues his music classes over Zoom, often slipping into his Bengali, before apologising to his non-Bengali students.

⁶⁸² Nick Stevenson, ed., *Culture and Citizenship* (Open University Press, 2003), 5.

⁶⁸³ Benu and Val, 14 December 2020.

⁶⁸⁴ Stevenson, *Culture*, 2.

Considered to be one of the most crucial musical foot soldiers in the creation of Bangladesh, his pride in his “Bengali” identity is understandable. Benu narrated the story of his English students’ musical triumph in his village:

It is a funny story. I told some people in my village, Bhanga, in Faridpur, that I was bringing some of my English students for a musical performance. So the cultural people had a meeting and asked, ‘So what kind of music are these English people going to sing?’ One of the top gentlemen in the meeting said, ‘Oh, what a stupid question! They will sing English songs, obviously.’...now if they were to sing in English, the crowd would have lost interest and walked away. So, the locals decided to select the tiniest venue possible to avoid any possible embarrassment to their guests from England. It was a small room in the Faridpur Central Library...about twenty people would fit in. One of my colleagues, Jenny Wesby, a French teacher, started singing ‘Bondhu tin din’. Frank Stubbs... he has passed away now...sang ‘Jibono morone’. Then, one of my other students, Martin, sang the thumri-based song, ‘Koyeliya gaan thama, ’ which was composed by Jnan Prakash Ghosh. Immediately, news spread that all these English people were singing Bengali songs. There was absolute fire! Hira bhai, the organiser, suddenly realised that the whole of Faridpur had descended to listen to these English people singing in Bengali. People were climbing trees! There were 600 people outside the venue. It was such an extraordinary experience in my life!⁶⁸⁵

Through Chhayanaut, Benu had undoubtedly gathered a multicultural group of students, which provided a stepping stone for the English population to begin understanding the music of South Asia and a safe space for communities to interact, especially during the 1980s, a decade marred by racist intolerance. Martin Stokes has pointed towards anthropologists’ efforts of studying citizenship ‘from below’, “how everyday people, in everyday life, embrace and mobilise the concept of citizenship”.⁶⁸⁶ Benu’s Chhayanaut initiative can be read as a mission to create musical citizens ‘from below’ within Britain’s immigrant and local musical subalternity. This is evident from what he had to say during the conversation:

⁶⁸⁵ Benu and Val, 14 December 2020.

⁶⁸⁶ Martin Stokes, “The Musical Citizen,” *Etnomüzikoloji Dergisi* 1, no. 2 (2018): 99.

*The intention was to bring it to the locals, not serious, middle-class, already educated, cultured people. But to bring it to the day-to-day people...the lowest end of the society, as it were. Even back in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, perhaps less so in Bangladesh, it is very much a class-based culture. Only educated, middle-class people listen to music. I was trying to bring it to ordinary people, and to some extent, we did succeed.*⁶⁸⁷

From the above statement, as much as Benu's charitable nature becomes apparent, his strong sense of musical allegiance to Indian classical music shows, too. After all, the Bengali diaspora in Britain, led by the Sylhetis, had been listening to and performing *Baul* and the repertoire aligned with folk music. The question of the extent to which Chhayanaut managed to appeal to the Sylheti diaspora cannot be erased. Benu's hailing from an aristocratic Dhaka family—which went downhill financially due to his father's illness—and eventually coming to Britain to start a “movement” to bring music to the “not serious, middle-class, already educated, cultured people” sounds problematic, even sympathetic and elitist. Whether Benu was one of them should not be speculated without concrete evidence. However, at the same time, it is essential to note that the Dhaka middle class has often held a sense of superiority over the Sylhetis. What can be said with conviction is that Mahmudur Rahman Benu was indeed one of the first Indian music teachers, at least in northern England, who sacrificed the allure of money to spread the music that he learnt.

⁶⁸⁷ Benu and Val, 14 December 2020.

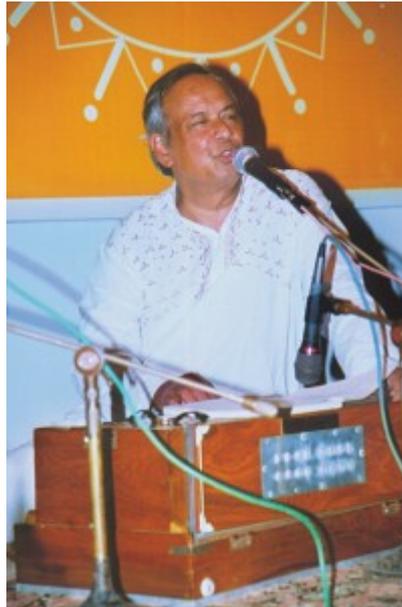


Illustration 3.9: Mahmudur Rahman Benu (Source: *Daily Star*)

Ten years before Mahmudur Rahman Benu arrived in England for his studies, Haridas Ganguly headed for London from Calcutta in 1963.⁶⁸⁸ Nephew of the musician Binode Behari Ganguly, Haridas embarked on his music teaching career in London, leaving behind a band of students, among whom Suzanna Ansar and Alaur Rahman went on to carve their names—although not in Hindustani classical music—in the British-Bangladeshi community. Not many people could provide information about the late Ganguly—who passed away in 2014—except for Suzana and Alaur. As per the moribund website—possibly self-made—that he left us with, Ganguly moved to Calcutta after completing his graduation from B.M. College, Barisal, to train with his uncle.⁶⁸⁹ His uncle’s demise led him to the popular Bengali classical vocalist, Chinmoy Lahiri, before finally learning from the Patiala *gharana* doyen, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan.

⁶⁸⁸ “The Man behind the Music,” Haridas Ganguly, n.d., http://www.geocities.ws/haridasganguly/page_2.html.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Haridas—‘Ganguly uncle’ to Suzana— valued music over anything else. Suzana narrated her memories of ‘Ganguly uncle’:

He would say, ‘Who studies medicine? What do doctors do? He was angry about all these things. Studies for him were not needed; one had to become a good human being first...Ironically, his wife, Shondhya was a nurse with the NHS, and their only daughter, Ratna, went on to become a doctor.

Ganguly’s disenchantment with the medical profession—bordering on aversion—was probably due to his father's insistence that he pursue a degree before coming under the tutelage of his uncle to specialise in thumri.⁶⁹⁰ His thinking of placing music on a higher pedestal also filtered into his musical preferences. Unlike Benu—a generation younger—Haridas was a purist who did not budge in his philosophy, sticking to the canon. Alaur, in an interview with Val Harding, explained how Haridas initiated him into the basics of singing:

I asked my uncle, Abdul Goni, if he could take me to a music teacher. Pandit Ganguly was the only experienced teacher around that time in 1979. He used to live in Brick Lane. I started at his school, and he showed me how to sing grammatically, and I continued with him. By that time, he used to charge £10/hour...quite expensive, isn't it? I used to go once weekly. He taught me ten thaats, the scales. From that, I knew that you can learn so much academically about music. I continued with him for years, before he moved to Green Street.⁶⁹¹

To Val’s query of whether Ganguly taught any songs, Alaur went as follows:

He was teaching raga, ragini and taal. He asked me not to request any songs and taught me only classical. He asked me to choose songs of my own, how to play, and how to pick up. First, he asked us to learn to know the roots of the songs, and where they came from. He was very strict. I could not sing light songs. Semi-classical or classical. Not very light. When I used to go to him, I used to sing

⁶⁹⁰ Suzana Ansar and Yamin Chowdhury ‘Shagor’, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 02 July 2023.

⁶⁹¹ Alaur Rahman, interviewed by Val Harding, 31 October 2016, *Swadhinata Trust*.

*Nazrul, Lalon, and Rabindrasangeet. He would be happy. Mistakenly, if I sang something...light song, he would be like, 'Where did you get it from?' I would say that I had heard from somebody, and I liked the tune. He would say, 'Don't get any bad influence. You can make money and fame, but it will affect your roots.' He was not against any of that, but he wanted us to get a strong foundation.*⁶⁹²

From Alaur's above statement, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent Haridas was inclusive of other musical styles. Possibly, during the interview, Alaur wanted to justify that his own body of work—modern Bengali songs—was in accordance with his teacher's wishes. Also, if Haridas was not exactly approving of “light” music, it is unclear how much he would have liked Lalon, whose songs are widely categorised in the Bengali “folk” repertoire. Alaur gave more detailed recollections of his first meeting with Ganguly, during our conversation at his residence in Goodmayes:

*He was living in a flat in Brick Lane on the second floor. I was around 17-18 years old. To be honest, I was under the impression that I was a great singer. He asked me what I wanted to learn. I told him what would I learn, if you didn't teach me. I sang one of my uncle's songs...Goni shaheb's...Din furalo shondya holo. After all, I felt like a big singer. Besides folk, I was drawn to Mohammed Rafi. After I finished, he sang to me a bandish. I was like what kind of song was it? I had never heard anything like that. After a year, I realised that this was like a limitless ocean. This was not like Lata, Rafi, Abdul Jabbar, or the people whom we follow. This could take one very far.*⁶⁹³

To what extent Ganguly was comfortable beyond the world of ragas is a matter of speculation. However, from the above story of him singing a *bandish* in response to Alaur singing an Abdul Goni composition, it is apparent that Haridas was a stickler for ragas, the “classical” more than “folk”. Alaur and Haridas came from very different musical worlds, and it was Alaur, who, of course, had to adapt to his teacher's style of pedagogy.

⁶⁹² Ibid.

⁶⁹³ Alaur Rahman, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 19 October 2021.

Suzana started learning from Ganguly from the age of eleven—a lot more impressionable age than Alaur—and continued through her A-levels. At their Woodford family residence in East London, Ansar showed me a red diary—one of her two music copies—containing notations of *bandishes* in eighty-odd ragas, including seldom-heard ones like Malgunji. For someone like Suzana, born and brought up in East London, Ganguly’s musical training went much deeper than just shaping her musicianship. Of course, before Ganguly, Suzana had already started receiving her training in playing the harmonium, and singing sargams and Bengali songs from Golak Mohan Chowdhury, who ran Anjaly Musical at 177, Plashet Road, Plaistow, London E13, an ‘Asian Musical Shop & Music School’ specialising in teaching “Asian songs with harmonium, tabla, sitar, keyboard etc. by notation”, and offering repair services for musical instruments.⁶⁹⁴ However, unlike Chowdhury, who would write notations in English, with Ganguly, the young Suzana, attending a private school with little command over Bengali, had to adjust:

*I was ‘Sujana’ to her...He was this Charles Dickens character with a snuff box. I was like a sponge...He is still inside me. He gave me so much ador (love). Just the only thing is I did not understand half of what he was saying. The topics were hard for me, and also the accent. It is not a problem now...I attended private school and we had to study so many subjects. I could not read Bengali at that age, but he would never write down notations in English. I learnt to read and write Bengali because of him. Thank god! I can also read a bit of Hindi as it is close to Bengali.*⁶⁹⁵

Asking if Ganguly ever taught non-Asian students, her answer was negative. As she read her teacher, Haridas would perhaps have never been interested in teaching people outside the community, a very different approach from Benu.⁶⁹⁶ Much of the resolute musicological romanticism to “insist on music’s separateness and specialness” that Martin Stokes has

⁶⁹⁴ *Eternal Vision (Sanatan Darshan)*, 1987.

⁶⁹⁵ Suzana Ansar, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 31 July 2023.

⁶⁹⁶ Stokes. *The Musical Citizen*.

underlined to point out the anxieties in the academy over the extent to which Western art music tradition has been able to produce the ‘modern citizen’, also applies in the case of Hindustani art music.

Interestingly, in the case of Ganguly, whose music pedagogic methods were quite conservative, his teaching was never confined to the art for students like Suzana. Sitting in their drawing room, browsing her music notebook and caressing the reeds of her recently facelifted harmonium, Suzana remembered how ‘Ganguly uncle’ would condemn the colonial past of the British and the perils of capitalism. Haridas’s pedagogy was intimate in the sense that it involved more than direct transmission of the music and acquainting his students with the wider ecology of the music, which echoes Tim Ingold’s extension of James Gibson’s “education of attention”, which involves “training the apprentice in the attentive sensory engagement with an environment”.⁶⁹⁷ It is not only Ganguly’s words and singing that Suzana remembers; it is his whole persona that she thinks is imprinted in her, his quiet way of teaching that extended beyond the verbal medium. Melissa Bremmer and Luc Nijs have written about how instrumental and vocal music teachers use their bodies to introduce task constraints and, thereby, facilitate sensorimotor engagement.⁶⁹⁸ Similarly, Haridas utilised the privacy of his teaching space to use the sensory faculties of touch—teaching Suzana how to write Bengali—, sight—also in a metaphorical way—to both construct his musical citizen, as well as establish a rapport with his disciplines, which only individualistic teaching allowed.

Despite Haridas’ seemingly inward nature, he occasionally surfaced on the performance stage. Besides his organisation, VICAS, which organised classical music programmes for his students annually, Ganguly was a singer on the BBC External Services—after having sung at

⁶⁹⁷ Greg Noble, “Pedagogies of Civic Belonging: Finding One’s Way through Social Space,” in *Cultural Pedagogies and Human Conduct*, ed. Megan Watkins, Greg Noble, and Catherine Driscoll (Routledge, 2015), 32–45.

⁶⁹⁸ Melissa Bremmer and Luc Nijs, “The Role of the Body in Instrumental and Vocal Music Pedagogy: A Dynamical Systems Theory Perspective on the Music Teacher’s Bodily Engagement in Teaching and Learning,” *Frontiers in Education* 5, no. 79 (June 18, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.00079>.

the All India Radio—besides teaching at the Inner London Education Authority.⁶⁹⁹ Archival records contain traces of his presence in the Rabindra-Nazrul circuits; he sang *Nazrulgeeti* at the Festival of India in Britain in 1982.⁷⁰⁰ In 1975, Ganguly performed *Rabindrasangeet* as part of Rabindra Jayanti—Tagore’s birthday celebrations—organised by *Sagar Pare*’s Hiranmoy Bhattacharya, at the Mahatma Gandhi Hall of the Indian YMCA. As per Bhattacharya’s reportage, the celebrations drew people from Oxford, Cambridge, Scotland, and Wales, including Rakhi Ray, a singer based in Hartlepool in County Durham.⁷⁰¹ Ganguly is highlighted for having especially rehearsed Rabindranath’s ‘*ucchango shongeet*’—classical music—for the programme. The mere mention of this makes it evident that Ganguly was keen on preserving his image as a staunch classicist, even while performing Tagore. Not being a very famous figure, it is questionable to what extent Ganguly’s ideas of a classical-oriented Bengali musicality moulded “the democratic emotions” of musical citizens in Bengali Britain.⁷⁰² From whatever information is available on Ganguly, there remains little doubt that his pride in being a Bengali was based on a raga-based musical elitism. What can be concurred with surety is that his individualistic teaching principles were powerful, convincing enough to orient Suzana Ansar—one of his last students—to develop a reluctance to jump at offers from the developing Asian Underground scene, including big names like Talvin Singh and the State of Bengal.⁷⁰³

⁶⁹⁹ *Festival of India in Britain Leaflet*, 1982.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰¹ *Sagar Pare* 6, no. 1 (June 1975): 12.

⁷⁰² Stokes. *The Musical Citizen*, 102.

⁷⁰³ Suzana, 31 July 2023.



Illustration 3.10: Haridas Ganguly singing for the Bangladesh Youth League, late 1980s
(Source: Personal collections of Budhaditya Bhattacharyya)

By the 1980s, several Hindustani classical music teachers had established themselves in the Bengali community, particularly in London. Ranjana Ghatak, a freelance vocalist and teacher born and raised in London, had the opportunity to learn from several teachers. Like Chaya Bhattacharya, Ranjana had her initial exposure to music at home; her father, Sunit, a doctor with the NHS, was an amateur singer, while her mother, Indira, a chemistry researcher, had some initial training in Hindustani classical music and played the Hawaiian guitar. While chatting over brunch at a South Indian food joint in Wood Green, Ghatak shared her musical memories of growing up in the 80s:

Baba was always singing at home. He had a harmonium, and I would sing along...He was singing Rabindrasangeet and old film songs. He studied later when I was growing up. He was a doctor as well and was busy, but music was his outlet. We would have parties, nemontonnos...people would gather. So we had music at the parties. I would hear Rabindrasangeet, bhajans...that kind of thing,

*on the weekends. Just at home in the drawing room. Get the harmonium out...that kind of thing! Very Bengali things!*⁷⁰⁴

Noticing her musicality, Indira decided to initiate music lessons for her. Ranjana's learning continued from different music teachers:

*There was a lady called Tripti Das. I grew up in North London. There were literally two or three people teaching. She was not a professional musician, but she had studied. She was a very sweet lady. I started with her when I was four. I started learning sargams, paltas...then after maybe two years or so, I started learning with Monisha Smith. Monisha mashi was learning from Nitai Dasgupta. She was teaching regularly at the weekends. We learnt about bandishes, taans. She taught from home...she lived in Winchmore Hill, near to where we lived...after learning from Monisha mashi, I was progressing, as in I was learning quite quickly. Then Ma, Baba took me to Nitai Dasgupta. I started with him when I was around eight, and continued when I was twelve or thirteen. I would learn privately with him but also with his daughter, Unnati. The learning was very helpful in that, I learnt how to work out taans, how to count taans, how to write taans. Something hit me when I was nine. I was like, 'Oh my god, I love this music!' I learnt a bandish in Multani...and I learnt these really long 48-beat taans. I learnt a lot of good things. He was very passionate as well. Then, I went to the Bhavan to learn from Gauri Bapat.*⁷⁰⁵

All of Ranjana's music teachers—before her Bhavan days—were Bengalis, all based in North London; the northern suburbs had become home to several Bengali middle-class professionals, many of them from West Bengal, although they were never ghettoised like the East End. Like Haridas Ganguly, Nitai Dasgupta also gained acclaim in the community as a Hindustani music teacher. *Eternal Vision*, the magazine of the Sanaton Association—who still organise a Durga Puja in London annually—contained a gushing advertised writeup on Nitai by one Sanjay, which mentioned his training under his father, Bilash Chandra Dasgupta,

⁷⁰⁴ Ranjana Ghatak, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 24 August 2023.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

Usha Ranjan Mukherjee, and the great Amir Khan, and that he had recorded an album for the BBC in 1970:⁷⁰⁶

Born in Bengal, India...an artiste of international fame, Nitai Dasgupta is also a composer, performer, director and teacher of Classical Vocal Music at Raga Ragini School of Indian Music in London. He is not only well known for his God-gifted voice but also for his compact style and mode on [sic] interpretation of Indian Classical Music...practise, according to Nitai Dasgupta is the disciplined and dedicated performance of a Creative Artiste, playing to his Guru and his God, without any financial obligations or commitments. It is during this practise a performance realises the Truth in a benign ecstasy of spirit...

To what extent music students were practising enough to realise the “benign ecstasy of spirit” is unknown. However, the Bengali Hindustani music teachers—both the so-called professionals and amateurs—operating within the community had already taken up the task of sustaining a Bengaliness so deeply informed by classical music.

From the above case studies, diasporic Bengalis’ fascination with Hindustani classical music—or their conflation of Tagore and Nazrul with the classical idiom, and as part of an elite Bengaliness—can be argued to be a direct import of a twentieth-century *bhadralok* culture; not solely a class or a social category, the *bhadralok* constituted a crisscrossing of class, caste, a grouping which included those considered to be culturally elevated. Richard David Williams has noted that the *bhadralok* increasingly became drawn to their “own shifting sense of Bengali identity”, especially after “Rabindranath Tagore’s innovations became fashionable”.⁷⁰⁷ While the *bhadralok* mainly had been involved with the patronage of culture through the nineteenth century, the democratisation of Hindustani classical music had started to put many in the concert circuits and slowly break away the notions of respectability

⁷⁰⁶ *Eternal Vision (Sanatan Darshan)*, 1987.

⁷⁰⁷ Richard David Williams, *The Scattered Court* (University of Chicago Press, 2023), 316.

attached to being a musician. Be it Mahmudur Benu, Ganguly, or Dasgupta, all of them were products of twentieth-century *bhadralok* culture, for whom being Hindustani classical musicians were not something to be looked down upon, but rather, a matter of honour, through which they could transfer Bengali and a pan-Indian tradition to the generation of British Bengalis, who were then growing up.

Music pedagogy and diasporic Bengali identity were not just fixated on Hindustani classical music. The section of the Bengali community interested in classical music was mostly professionals, a minority in the community; more people would have been interested in “folk” music. Himangshu Goswami, the famous British-Bangladeshi singer, arrived in Britain in 1978 as part of an official cultural delegation from Bangladesh.⁷⁰⁸ In May 2023, sat on a sofa in the drawing room of his Forest Gate residence, wearing a blue printed shirt and a neatly-done dhoti, Himangshu went nostalgic as he remembered his long career in Britain; how he had no intentions of settling here, if not for the insistence of elders in the community; and how a letter of recommendation from the Labour MP, Peter Shore, immediately got him a year of extended stay. In September 1979, the Toynbee Bengali Youth Club advertised the then soon-to-open music college, where Goswami and Amit Kumar Saha from Calcutta were appointed as instructors.⁷⁰⁹ Another advertisement, featuring only Himangshu, surfaced months later, in February 1980, when the college was in operation; Saha had likely dropped out.⁷¹⁰ In our conversation, Himangshu talked about how he started teaching at the Toynbee Hall:

There was an Asian Studies department at the Toynbee Hall. They used to host various activities. Many people were attached there. Tassaduq Ahmed, the first Bengali to receive the MBE and a famed

⁷⁰⁸ Himangshu Goswami, interviewed by Jamil Iqbal, 05 April 2006, *Swadhinata Trust*.

⁷⁰⁹ *Banglar Dak*, September 15, 1979.

⁷¹⁰ *Banglar Dak*, February 9, 1980.

*Asian journalist...was from a respectable family from our Sylhet. He took me to the warden of Toynbee Hall, Donald Chesworth, and explained that I was a renowned singer.*⁷¹¹

Although a handful of Bengalis were teaching Hindustani classical music, teachers for the Bengali folk repertoire were even fewer. Continuing the conversation, Himangshu mentioned that most people in the Bengali diaspora generally loved to listen to folk music, while a few were interested in Tagore and Nazrul's songs, and even fewer in Hindustani classical music. Goswami continued:

*Tassaduq explained to Chesworth that our children here needed to learn and have a source of entertainment and that he wanted me to teach there. Chesworth agreed. There was a basement. I used to teach there on weekends. Then, there was an outpouring of students. And they were not interested in other songs. They would say, 'We do not want to sing sa, re, ga, ma. We have come here to learn songs.' They loved to learn the songs of Hason Raja, Lalon...I mean folk songs. It was not only Bengalis. There were Black and White students, too.*⁷¹²

For Goswami, the main objective was to create an understanding of Bengaliness centred on a "Sylheti" identity; he claimed to have carefully picked songs that originated from Sylhet, where he comes from. Although Himangshu limited himself to teaching "folk", he clarified that all songs from Sylhet were varied in tune and were based on ragas, including naming a few like Durga and Bhupali. After all, Goswami had begun his musical life by training in classical music, before shifting to *palli* and *lokosangit*, realising that not many people took to ragas.⁷¹³

⁷¹¹ Himangshu Goswami, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 24 May 2023.

⁷¹² Ibid.

⁷¹³ Williams, *Scattered*, 316.

⁷¹³ Himangshu Goswami, 05 April 2006.

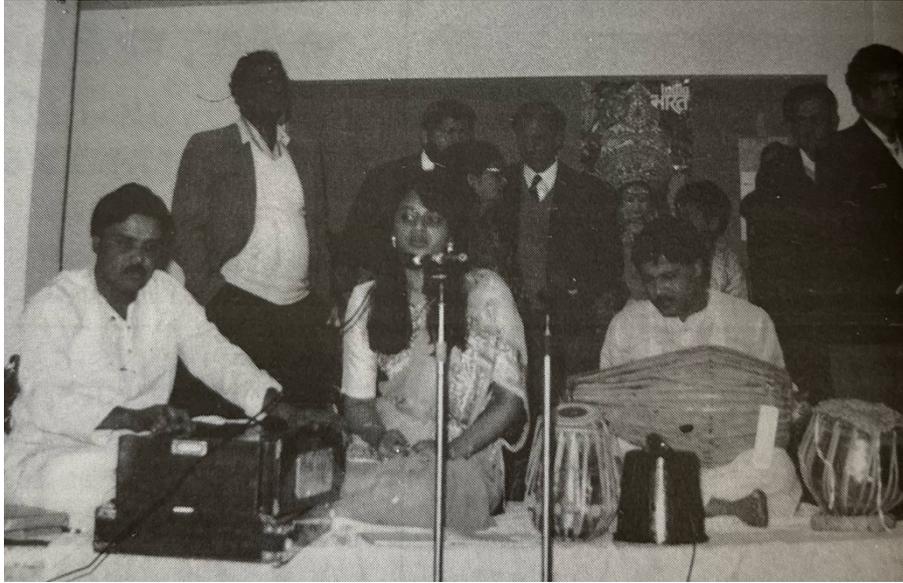


Illustration 3.11: Himangshu accompanying on the harmonium at a Durga Puja in 1987
(Source: *Sanatan Darshan*)

Bengali music classes at the Toynbee Hall served a very different purpose from the Hindustani classical classes that Bengali musicians were conducting at that time, which was to sustain a Bengali consciousness and retain a sonic link to the “homeland”, an imagined one for many of the schoolchildren who had hardly visited Bangladesh or West Bengal. The 1980s saw several similar initiatives pop up in East London. *Khelaghor*, a Tower Hamlets-based organisation focusing on children, ran weekly music classes. Their 1982-83 Annual Report mentioned the inspiration behind the classes:

Khelaghor believes that it is important for the younger generation to have the opportunity to compete in all aspects of their lives with their white counterparts. It is equally important for the young to maintain in [sic] close touch with their own religion and cultural heritage. This balance of learning is only possible when children are aware of their culture and their talents and abilities are methodically used. Another essential role of the music class is to keep minority cultures alive out of the show of the dominant culture, which ultimately enriches the host culture also.⁷¹⁴

⁷¹⁴ *Khelaghor Annual Report. 1983-1984. LC9070. Tower Hamlets Local History and Archives.*

In 1986, the famous Bangladeshi patriotic singer Mohammad Abdul Jabbar opened a music school at 216 Cable Street, London E1; interested parties were invited to contact the artist every morning from 9:30 to 11 and every evening from 6 to 8, in addition to other community organisations based in London and beyond.⁷¹⁵ That year, Jabbar was on a Britain-wide tour organised by Bangladesh Artistes' Association (U.K), with performances scheduled in Portsmouth on 27 July, Newcastle on 3 August, Bradford on 10 August, Cardiff on 17 August, and Birmingham on 31 August;⁷¹⁶ he also appeared at an Eid Reunion party on 17 August in London, at the Asian Studies Centre, alongside artistes of the likes of Abdul Jabbar, Akkas Uddin, Badrul Alam, and Manna Haq.⁷¹⁷ Manna Haq himself started teaching children below sixteen at East London's Denford school every Friday from 1 May 1989; the Sabuj Sathi Supplementary school was behind the programme.⁷¹⁸ The Kobi Nazrul Centre also started hosting weekly drama, tabla, and singing classes from 13 November 1989 onwards.⁷¹⁹ Bengali music pedagogy at schools involved teaching *chhorar gaan*. *Chhora* is only approximately represented in English by the nursery rhyme; in Bengali culture, there are no "nurseries" in the traditional English sense.⁷²⁰ *Chhora* usually refers to traditional, unpolished, naïve verse, where rural household activities, festivities, animated animals, and nature feature largely; not all rhymes have a tune, but the ones with a tune are very recognisable and usually transmitted unaltered.⁷²¹ Funded by the ILEA, Himangshu Goswami was also employed at a school in East London, where he was tasked with teaching Bengali rhymes to three- and four-year-olds belonging to different communities; he and his young students even performed at

⁷¹⁵ *Bengali Weekly Deshbarata*, August 22-29, 1986.

⁷¹⁶ *Bengali Weekly Deshbarata*, July 11-18, 1986.

⁷¹⁷ *Jubo Barta*, August-September, 1986.

⁷¹⁸ *Surma*, May 1-5, 1989.

⁷¹⁹ *Surma*, November 17-23, 1989.

⁷²⁰ Sanjay Sircar, "An Annotated 'Chhara-Punthi': Nursery Rhymes from Bengal," *Asian Folklore Studies* 56, no. 1 (1997): 80..

⁷²¹ *Ibid.*

the Royal Albert Hall in 1982.⁷²² More than a decade later, in 1995, the Tower Hamlets Music Support Service would publish ‘A Collection of Bengali Songs for Many Occasions’, led by the efforts of Maria Busen-Smith, Associate Inspector of Music, and Jayeeta Bhowmick, a professional singer and teacher.⁷²³

As seen in this section, Bengalis were actively involved in teaching music within the community, to the younger generation and in multiracial contexts from as early as the 1960s, which steadily picked up through the later decades as the diaspora strengthened its foothold in British society. For some children, music in their homes was the first gateway to their parental identities, while for many, school and community programmes gave them a chance to discover their hyphenated British-Bengali or British-Bangladeshi identities. As can be observed through the examples, there were chasms, especially between the “classical” and the “folk” worlds. Yet, they were also connected by a common thread of being Bengali.

Conclusion

Let me begin to sum up by quoting two poems:

Watching were the stars that night

Watching was the moon

As Abdul left the bus-stop

Whistling a tune

The street was still and quiet

And the street-lamps they were bright

But something gleamed more brightly

In an alleyway that night

A cold breeze stirred and dwindled;

⁷²² Himangshu Goswami, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 24 May 2023.

⁷²³ Maria Busen-Smith and Jayeeta Bhowmick, *Collection of Bengali Songs, for Many Occasions* (Tower Hamlets, 1995).

*He did not see or hear
The silent youths who played with
The knife as he drew near*

*His eyes were on the street ahead
His thoughts were on his wife
And then he heard their curses
And he struggled for his life*

*They stabbed him in the face and chest
They stabbed him in the back
Then they kicked him as he lay there
And told him to go back*

*In the stillness, in the moonlight
Stands a woman by her gate
Waiting for her husband
But tonight he will be late*

*The police stand by the body
Nothing much to say
Just another Asian
Has been killed today*

*Ei deshe o pukur ache
Pukur bhora hnash ache
Boro boro bnash nei
Choto choto bnash ache.*

*Dhila ache pahar ache
Shorshe kheter bahar ache
Goru, chagol, bhnyara ache*

Projapoti, ghash ache.

Ei desheo akash ache

Himel himel batash ache

Choto boro para ache

Afis jaowar tara ache.

Shada ebong kalo ache

Mondo ebong bhalo ache.

[This land has ponds too, aplenty with fish. Small bamboo trees, not large. Here, too, there are mounds and mountains, beautiful mustard plantations, cows, goats, sheep, butterflies, and grass. This land, too, has skies, cold breezes, and localities that are expansive and small. Here, too, there is the rush to reach the office. There is black and white. Evil and good.]

The above two poems depict contrasting realities of South Asian immigrant life in Britain. ‘Just Another Asian’, published in the Asian Youth Movement’s *Kala Mazdoor* in Sheffield in 1983, zooms into the migrant’s body and the sensorium to depict the victim’s experience of facing racism: a despairing portrait of Abdul whistling a tune back from work, perishing at the hands of racists’ knife attacks under the stillness of the silent night.⁷²⁴ The latter Bengali poem by Rabbani Chaudhuri, ‘*Londony*’ (in London), in contrast, depicts a simultaneous brighter reality of immigrant life—one of hope and aspiration—where the poet seeks to locate a new “home”, and find semblances with the “homeland”, accepting the “good” and “bad” of life in Britain.⁷²⁵ Although the two poems came more than a decade apart, their thematic dichotomy speaks of the decades of the 1970s and ’80s for immigrants from Bengal, which this chapter has primarily concentrated on. Full of ups and downs, as Chaudhuri testifies,

⁷²⁴ *Kala Mazdoor*, 1983.

⁷²⁵ Rabbani Chaudhuri, *Londoner Chhara* (Banglar Mukh, 1994).

these years saw the musical worlds of these people intensify as part of attempts to strengthen them as musical citizens in British society.

In the aftermath of the Bangladesh War, nationalistic sentiments in the diaspora were strong and sounded through musical events throughout the country. Victory Day, Martyrs' Day and Independence Day in Bangladesh found a prominent place in the diasporic cultural calendar, fostering a sense of an exclusivist Bangladeshi/pan-Bengali pride. Even if *Rabindra-Nazrul* ceased to remain part of the Bangladeshi official state narrative in Britain, the common immigrant still subscribed to it. Musical events commemorating Rabindra-Nazrul gained prominence through these two decades, with the Tagoreans continuing their annual events and, later, establishing the TC. Instead of a more exclusive "Bangladeshi" musical identity, these events addressed the pan-Bengali diasporic citizen; the Tagore sesquicentenary organised by the Tagoreans nationwide was promoted as a unionist effort, bringing artists from West Bengal and Bangladesh together. The auditory sensation in the Bengali migrant became one of the primary routes towards crafting cultural nationalism, and thereby influencing the body politic. At the same time, "Bengali" and "Bangladeshi" ethnonationalism were finding expression through music, racism in Britain was on the uptick, to an extent, fanned by Enoch Powell's inciting 'Rivers of Blood' speech. This coincided with growing East Pakistani dissent. After 1971, racist attacks kept growing; the murder of Altab Ali in 1978 mobilised a pan-Asian solidarity. The notion of race was realised multisensorially; musical anti-racist initiatives cemented citizenship in the public sphere, although sound was also a metric in some Bengalis' racial attitudes towards Black communities.

Britain's curry trade was generally a story of conscious veiling of restaurateurs' "Bengali" and "Bangladeshi" identities to project entrepreneurial interests. Despite the restaurant business not being the primary source of income for the diaspora, at least until the 1990s, for the owners, the industry served as a site for executing monetary aspirations and further

solidifying their cultural citizenship in British society. As evident from examples like Saad Ghazi's *The Modern Restaurant*, Matlik's *Victoria Tandoori*, Syed Abdur Razak's *Light of Bengal*, and Tassaduq Ahmed's *Ganges*, none of them risked excluding themselves from exoticised ideas of "soft" "Indian" music, a selling point before most of the local British clientele, except Abdus Salique, who introduced live Bengali music. Faruque Ahmed—a case study in the following chapter—during his early days of working at restaurants in the '80s and later owning a few, recalled that most of the chefs would listen to the Bengali "folk" repertoire like *baul* and *palli* inside the kitchens, but it would be the usual "soft" "Indian" music that would fill the public spaces of the restaurants; even if the music of their taste would be played in the dining areas, it would generally be prior or after business hours, thus signifying a demarcation of personal and public spaces, which as we saw, Himangshu Goswami's memories also confirm.⁷²⁶

Many of Britain's second-generation Bengali immigrants grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. Music was one of the ways these children were introduced to their "native" cultures and a medium of ensuring intergenerational transmission of identities, including nurturing a multicultural spirit. While many children, such as Ranjana Ghatak, Debipriya Sircar—and Chhaya Bhattacharya in the 1940s—developed an ear for informal, homely, quotidian music-making, the question of identity becomes more conspicuous in institutional teaching practices. Case studies of Mahmudur Rahman 'Benu', Haridas Ganguly, and examples of Tripti Das and Nitai Dasgupta point towards a version of Bengaliness deeply mired in Hindustani classical music and an association of *Rabindra-Nazrul* musical styles to the "classical" idiom. Whereas Ganguly had a more bodily approach in training his students into musical citizens, Mahmudur Rahman's efforts to unite pan-Asian and non-Asian communities have been more collectivised. Himangshu Goswami's early music teaching at Toynbee Hall and nursery

⁷²⁶ Faruque Ahmed, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 20 July 2022.

schoolchildren in East London emanated from his self-attributed primacy to the Bengali “folk” repertoire, which, according to him, developed in his birthplace of Sylhet. Nonetheless, Goswami’s importance on the “folk” styles rested on his opinion that he did not ignore Hindustani classical music, probably because he upheld notions of respectability; undoubtedly, his Bengali/Bangladeshi identity was fed by his parallel Sylheti one. Bengalis’ music pedagogy did not project a uniform identity; far from it, myriad identity constructs of Bengaliness further complicated the meaning of ‘Bengali’ musicality and the making of ‘Bengali’ musical citizens.

Whether it is cultural nationalism, restaurateurship, or music pedagogy, citizenly communal music-making has only a faint interaction with the British state. Instead, the Bengali/Bangladeshi, by performing cultural nationalism and anti-racism through music, was simultaneously involved in generating diasporic citizenships—aligned to governmental Bangladeshi-ness, at least until the onset of dictatorship—and in making their culture known to the broader British public. Early linkages of anti-racism to cultural nationalism supplant the fact that, instead of subscribing to/negating the ethnic spectrum of the British nation-state, the Bengali/Bangladeshi community was more interested in becoming musical citizens of Britain by activising neo-localised spheres of migrancy, foregrounded by the auditory faculty, in concert with the visual, olfactory, and the tactile.

CHAPTER FOUR

Baula Britain: Contrasts and Continuities

[Kington, 28 December 2022: A rather nondescript town seemed the perfect getaway for getting some writing done; Kington, skirting the Welsh border, fit the bill. Lodged at a guesthouse with my father—who is visiting me for Christmas—we went scouting for dinner this very evening we arrived.

Unsurprisingly, the quintessential ‘Indian’ restaurant at even the tiniest British hamlet was not hard to spot. The lure of visiting the ‘Taj Mahal’ in Kington was hard to resist. After placing our orders for the British school biryani at the ‘Taj Mahal’—the only one of its kind that comes accompanied with a ‘curry sauce’—I began eavesdropping on conversations about friends and family in Sylheti from the kitchen; my smattering of the language was enough to comprehend. Soon after, a Baula tune wafted synchronously with the increasingly engulfing aroma of the anticipated biryani. When paying the bill, my ethnographic reflexes led me to strike up a conversation with the manager.

Asking him about who the person was singing in the kitchen, the visibly embarrassed man was about to apologise before realising that his clients were more than pleased. Finding a ‘local’ connection, he summoned the kitchen-singer. He was Maqsud, a man of a seemingly shy nature, working as a chef. When I asked him whether he enjoyed singing Baul while cooking, he hesitantly replied, “I do not consider myself a singer, but I love singing. These are songs of my land.”]

- excerpt from fieldnotes

There have been many like Maqsud in Bengali Britain, for whom *Baula* sensibilities are part and parcel of their lives. This glimpse from Maqsud’s life is allegorical of the historical continuities of Bengali migrant musicality, where *Baul* philosophy has been key to sustaining cultural familiarities and links to the “motherland”. However, long before a Bengali community had anchored itself on the shores of Britain and brought along with them *Baula* musical idioms, the presence of the British Raj meant that Anglophone paradigms found their way into the *Baul* song, which had already begun to absorb diverse sociopolitical realities. On the occasion of Queen Victoria’s diamond jubilee, Harinath Majumdar—who composed under the nom de plume, Baul Fikirchand and Kungal Harinath—had published in his anthology ‘*Fikirchander Baul Shongit*’ (Baul Music of Fikirchand), two songs as an ode to the

Empress of India.⁷²⁷ Written in tala Khemta, the piece ‘*arey gaore o bhai, shobey miley gaao, Moharani Bhiktoriar joy*’ (Brothers, sing together, victory to Queen Victoria) was performed to mark the joyous moment.⁷²⁸ Harinath, an educated Bengali journalist and editor of the monthly *Grambarta Prokashika*, wrote *Baul* songs, which included unexpected themes ranging from metaphorical comparisons of Bharat (India) to the mother, to grieving the death of Lord Henry Fawcett, an MP of the Hackney constituency in East London.⁷²⁹ Majumdar never travelled to England.

Without proceeding further, it is imperative to outline *Baul* historiography to survey the different meanings attached to the word “*baul*” over time. Etymologically said to have been derived from Sanskrit *vatula* (affected by the wind disease/mad), or *vyakula* (restless), and also found in usage in medieval Bengali literature, *Baul* today is increasingly used prismatically to represent practitioners of an esoteric cult aimed towards self-realisation, inhabiting greater Bengal (West Bengal and Bangladesh) who may trace their lineage to either Hindu or Muslim families; the term “*fakir*” is likely to be used in the latter context. Although streamlining the definition of *Baul* is a hazardous task, the one usual commonality is a rejectionist attitude towards both orthodoxies and orthopraxis of religions, likely due to its said syncretic roots in Sahajiya Buddhism, Vaishnavism and Sufism.

The production of scholarly literature on *Baul* has compounded exponentially in both Bengali and English over the last century. This thesis is not solely a study of *Baul* culture; it is only plausible to construct a meta-review. Jeanne Openshaw’s historical and anthropological re-analysis of *Baul*, Manjita Mukherjee née Palit’s social-historical reading of rural colonial Bengal through *Baul* song metaphors, and Carola Erika Lorea’s performance-centred study on the songs of the Bengali saint-composer Bhaba Pagla, form the basis of the following

⁷²⁷ Satishchandra Majumdar, ed., *Kangal-Fikirchand Fokirer Baul Shongit* (Kumarkhali Mathuranath Press, 1903), 162.

⁷²⁸ *Ibid*, 163. A footnote mentions that the song was performed in the ‘*nogor*’ (city) but does not specify where.

⁷²⁹ See: Manjita Mukharji (nee Palit), “Reading the Metaphors in *Baul* Songs: Some Reflections on the Social History of Rural Colonial Bengal” (Phd. Thesis, SOAS, 2009), 86-94, where she dealt with Harinath’s songs on Queen Victoria and Lord Fawcett.

outline. Openshaw, Mukherjee, and Lorea agree on three broad developments: i. early negative perceptions, ii. romanticisation, and iii. the surfacing of materialist interpretations.

One of the earliest mentions of *Baul* is found in William Wilson Hunter's 1875 and 1876 volumes of *Statistical Account of Bengal*, categorised under a larger "Hindu" identity, as "Bairagi" and "Vaishnava" in 1875, and just the latter the following year.⁷³⁰ In Herbert Hope Risley's *Tribe and Castes of Bengal*, 1891, "Baolas" are "despicable mendicant orders", "separated from the main body of Vaishnavas", who were understood to be filthy and immoral.⁷³¹ Bauls were looked down upon by the British administrators, Hindu and Muslim Bengalis alike. Jagendra Nath Bhattacharya's *Hindu Castes and Sects* (1896) imagined Bauls to be "disreputable Chaitanyite sects of Bengal", stressed the entertainment value of their songs, and found their attire, musical instruments, dancing and songs to be "amusing".⁷³² Both Mukherji and Lorea have picked on the now-infamous critique of *Bauls*, *Baul Dhongsho Fotowa* (Destroy the Baul Ruling) (1926), by Maulana Reyajuddin Ahmad, which mentioned that *Bauls* had "contaminated" six million pious Muslims and Hindus.⁷³³

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the popularity of the *Bauls* rose, especially amongst the *bhadralok* class and, much later, the Muslim elite. One of the first people to move away from the negative ideas of *Bauls* was Kangal Harinath—just mentioned above—allegedly one of the first so-called amateur *Bauls*. A wearer of many clothes in life—as a teacher, writer and editor—Harinath shifted from his Brahma associations towards tantric practices, writing and singing songs, often containing socially radical themes, first of which were published as "*Fakir*" and later, "*Baul*".⁷³⁴ However, it was not until the arrival of Rabindranath Tagore with his short review of a collection of *Baul* songs in 1883 that the *bhadralok*'s enchantment

⁷³⁰Jeanne Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 22.; Mukharji, "Reading", 24.

⁷³¹Ibid; Carola Lorea, *Folklore, Religion and the Songs of a Bengali Madman: A Journey between Performance and the Politics of Cultural Representation* (BRILL, 2016), 31.

⁷³²Openshaw, *Seeking*, 23; Mukharji, "Reading", 28.

⁷³³Mukharji, "Reading", 40; Lorea, *Folklore*, 31.

⁷³⁴Openshaw, *Seeking*, 29.

with *Baul* gathered steam.⁷³⁵ Tagore's brush with the Indian nationalist movement paved the way for a "nationalist Baul", a product of it being the publication of a booklet of *swadeshi* (nationalist) songs in 1905—the year of the Partition of Bengal—tuned to a *Baul* melody, prominently featuring a representation of the country as Mother. Disillusionment with the nationalist project, Tagore, inspired mainly by Kshitimohan Sen, made the *Baul*, *udashin*: disconnected with social realities, spiritualised into the figure of a wandering minstrel.⁷³⁶

Broadly speaking, materialist readings came to the fore, led by the seminal work of Upendranath Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul o Baul Gan* (Bengal's *Bauls* and the *Baul* Song), who, through extensive fieldwork, wrote about the esoteric sexo-yogic *Baul* practices. Concentrating on *Baula* bodily practices, Bhattacharya referred *Bauls'* focus on the senses and heightening self-perception through living in the present as *bartaman-panthi*; Openshaw describes this as a "metaphysics of presence".⁷³⁷ Mukherji in her extensive literature review, additionally identifies Purna Das Baul's 1967 trip to America as a watershed moment in the framing of *Baul* as—what she terms—"sexual libertine", influenced by then-strong countercultural currents, that shed *Baul* of its canonical complexities, and instead commercialised it at the junction of "music, sex and hashish" as emancipatory routes to salvation. In the long *Baul* historiography, one of the most recent shifts came about with Sudhir Chakraborty's efforts, imbued with Marxist resonances, to move away from decompartmentalising tendencies that, according to Mukherji, "are fashioned in a process of mutual and dialectical legitimation—not just internally, but also in relation to the external institutionalised religious identities."⁷³⁸

This chapter looks into the variegated journeys of the *Baul* to *bilat* as stories of migration, besides also attempting to locate the above-cursory glance at discursive shifts, in the context of

⁷³⁵ Openshaw, *Seeking*, 32-35; Lorea, *Folklore*, 32-36.

⁷³⁶ Mukharji, "Reading", 38.

⁷³⁷ Openshaw, *Seeking*, 13; Mukharji, "Reading", 50.

⁷³⁸ Mukharji, "Reading", 60.

Britain. Largely grounded in ethnography, this chapter, divided into four sections, also investigates song texts and archival newspapers to argue that *Baula* performativities in Britain have occurred in contrasting yet connected worlds.

In the first section on the *ashor*—intimate gatherings—I have attempted to remap the now-lost early intercity networks of migrants’ homely music-making within the associated philosophies of the *Baul-Pir-Fakir* continuum. Peeping behind the layers of musical kinship and solidarity, I show how these networked spaces also brew feelings of musical competitiveness, besides serving as hubs of reigniting rural connections from *desh*. Moreover, these *Baula* worlds were signifiers of belonging to a so-called uneducated, lower class, ghettoised by the elite, educated Bengalis who were seldom part of these congregations.

In the next section, I focus on how technology mediated modes of *Baula* listening, which in turn saw the emergence of a *Londoni* music economy, mainly concentrated in and around Brick Lane. Depending primarily on memories of erstwhile entrepreneurs in this now-extinct business, I have attempted to piece together the economics behind it and how these amateur productions of *Baula* cassettes and later CDs created sonic doorways to *desh*, and an aural public sphere for the migrant community, especially those originating from Sylhet. Further, I take up the case of Baul Shah Delwar Ali to explore how he has imagined the body as a technology of *Baula* consumption in itself.

Corroborating both print and the aural archive, the chapter meditates on *Baula* compositional creativity in the context of *Bilat*. Here, I unpack several *Londoni Baul* songs to shed light on the contrasts in descriptions of life in *Bilat* and especially London: on the one hand, utopic portrayals of Britain by the acclaimed Baul Shah Abdul Korim; and on the other, inclusion of the mundane and grittier realities by Kari Amir Uddin, another well-known figure. I also critically appreciate how themes of marriage and citizenship have been part of so-called amateur *Baul* songwriting, focusing on Rahim Uddin and the recently

rediscovered “*baul*” in Faruque Ahmed, besides reflecting on Baul Durbin Shah’s esoteric imagination of the London Underground in Dhaka, thereby, adding to complications of what constitutes the *Baul* song and *Baula* identity.

Last but not least, I shift my attention from Bengali diasporic spaces to investigate the reception of *Baul* in mainstream British society, primarily by locating the presence of *Bauls* in British newspapers. Identifying Rufus Collins’ theatrical production ‘*Lila*’ as one of the most important events to feature *Bauls* among London’s multicultural audience, this chapter moves on to look into the celebrity of Purna Das Baul in Britain. Simultaneously localising the transatlantic rise in *Baula* awareness, I study the connections between the spheres of diasporic *Bauls* and those like Purna, who have been mainly operating in Britain’s international music circuits, both of which might apparently seem disjoint. As a point of clarification, I have chosen to use *Baula* instead of *Baul* in the chapter title, not just because it adds a metrical symbiosis, but because I have heard it being used by many people in the diaspora to describe something that is associated with/related to/something like *Baul*.

Jeanne Openshaw has rightly called for the need to look beyond established guru-disciple relationships in the transmission of *Baul*, and in her words, a “constant critique of established religious traditions and authority to the wider society from which they recruit, privileging instead the human being, and each person’s body-centred experience”; this most importantly “offers an alternative view of women.”⁷³⁹ While I concur with Openshaw, to produce a history of *Baul* culture in Britain, I am interested in taking on an ecological approach⁷⁴⁰ to study the technological agents like people, record players, song texts, and newspapers. Given the history of *Baula* Britain—for which scholarly work is almost non-existent—this approach is helpful in order not to enter the field-archive with predetermined notions of the *Baul* as a

⁷³⁹ Openshaw, *Seeking*, 135.

⁷⁴⁰ Daniel M Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition* (University Of Chicago Press, 1990).

wandering/parochial figure. I have taken this cautionary step from my pre-doctoral fieldwork experience,⁷⁴¹ having come across *Baul* souvenirs—(a) wandering minstrel/s with an *ektara/s* in hand—in Brick Lane, which arguably risked enforcing ideas of the *Baul* as lonely, or, contrastingly, clannish. To be able to strike up an open mindset, I “[take] bodies seriously” as opposed to the universal, disembodied citizen—*Baula* bodies in my case—to “enhance the [inherent] materiality in the [*Baul*]”.⁷⁴² This thesis’s multisensory approach to studying music-making as productive of musical citizenship is applicable in this chapter, too, in the perception of the *Baula* “*Citizen Body*” through the irreducibility of sensation and emotion at the level of lived experience.⁷⁴³

Baula-Pir-Murshidi Ashors

The 1992 documentary, ‘The Story of a Community: from Bangladesh to Brick Lane’, opens with Dr Fazal Mahmood singing a lament describing the familiar story of the Bengali immigrant who left a slice of their heart in their motherland following trails of hope, only to find themselves toiling day and night to make ends meet, and their souls yearning for their soulmates.⁷⁴⁴ Accompanied by contrasting shots of a panoramic view of the Christ Church Spitalfields in the backdrop of an increasingly lankier skyline of 1990s London and less glamorous views of Bengali businesses in Brick Lane preparing for another day with consignment boxes littered all around, Mahmood’s song, ‘*Banglar mati chaira ami Birik Lene ailam*’ (I have come to Brick Lane leaving the land of Bengal), set to a very recognisable *Palli/Baula* tune in his words, “reminds people, touches people [with] very practical messages of the Bangladeshi people”. Mahmood, sitting in a living room with his harmonium, further

⁷⁴¹ Personal fieldnotes. 3 August 2015. This was part of a field daytrip to Brick Lane as a bachelor’s student. While my notes from a decade ago are not very extensive, I have mobile video footage to back this.

⁷⁴² Chris Beasley and Carol Bacchi, “Citizen Bodies: Embodying Citizens – a Feminist Analysis,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 2, no. 3 (January 2000): 337–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740050201931>.

⁷⁴³ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Routledge, 2004), 30.

⁷⁴⁴ “The Story of a Community - from Bangladesh to Brick Lane,” 1992, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3R2drycEGek>.

explains the song in the film, “it also said we have been working in the restaurants, in the factories, but what have we got?”

By the time Mahmood was filmed, the Bengali community had started to find a footing in British society, claiming their rightful agency through exerting cultural citizenship, simultaneously dousing the dying flames of vile and racial hatred, as we have seen in the preceding chapter. As I have set out in the thesis’s introduction, Bengali settlement in Britain occurred in waves, the earliest being in the 1930s and 1940s, with the seamen staying back. The largest influx occurred during the 1960s and early 1970s.⁷⁴⁵ Women joined their families much later, during the mid-to-late 1980s.⁷⁴⁶ It is difficult to pinpoint when the earliest *ashor*—homely musical gatherings of warmth and comradeship—would have taken place in Britain. Widespread belief in the community runs that it would have been the sailors who engaged in musical activities as acts of leisure and comfort, thereby pioneering the earliest *ashors* in *bilat*.⁷⁴⁷ Besides the shreds of historical evidence on the musical worlds of the Bengali seamen that I have already presented in the Introduction, slivers of intergenerational anecdotes lie hidden in the most unexpected places. On a late-night trip from King’s Cross station to Bethnal Green in February 2023, Alfu Miah, my cab driver, chatted away that his grandfather had first come to the UK very early on as a *jahaji*⁷⁴⁸ from Sylhet, who was a musical man.⁷⁴⁹ Though Alfu’s grandfather had passed away before his birth, he heard from his father that men would gather among themselves to sing and play.

From the fragments of surviving historical evidence, it can be imagined that at least some sailors would have been keen listeners, if not allied to *Baul* practice or practitioners themselves. Quite akin to the story of the immigrant’s pang of separation in Mahmood’s song,

⁷⁴⁵ John Eade, *The Politics of Community: The Bangladeshi Community in East London* (Avebury, 1989), 26.

⁷⁴⁶ Katy Gardner, “Narrating Location: Space, Age and Gender among Bengali Elders in East London,” *Oral History* 27, no. 1 (1999): 65–74.

⁷⁴⁷ See Prelude in the Introduction.

⁷⁴⁸ ‘*Jahaji*’ in Bengali means sailor.

⁷⁴⁹ Personal fieldnotes, 27 February, 2023.

Caroline Adams has documented how Abdul Malik wrote a song of a similar essence.⁷⁵⁰

Malik from Sandwip in Noakhali district had come to London working as a *bunkerman* on the ships, and later married a lady named Lily; he had already been married to a nine-year-old girl before migrating. His proposal for a divorce from his first wife, via his returning brother-in-law, had not gone down well with her. Malik channelled his guilt and grief, and imagined her sorrows into a song, where Radha longs for Krishna, who is away in Mathura and instead wants to leave her. Malik's description of the song is poignant:

...What can she be thinking?...when I was nine years old he married me, through all my childhood he taught me, he put me in the bath, combed my hair, and all these things, and why he say today he don't want me?' That is the meaning of the song I wrote then, how inside she is feeling that way...⁷⁵¹

No other records of Malik's song exist; he never mentioned it as a *Baul* song. Still, it may very well serve as one, for the Radha-Krishna trope is popular in the corpus, in which compositions are still written regardless of religious affiliations. Malik's association with music was varied. He had brought in Jyoti Hassan as a music teacher and Manesa Bose as a dance teacher for the Tower Hamlets Girls' School.⁷⁵² Scouring these details, it remains less of a conjecture that figures like Abdul Malik would have been involved in the earlier informal musical gatherings. What is absolutely beyond speculation is the anecdote of a *Baul*, Kacha Miah, which I recorded firsthand. Miah, a disciple of Mymensingh's acclaimed Jalal Khan—who passed away in 2020—was a sailor and had travelled to Singapore in 1946. Kacha's testimony puts more weight on the fact that these *ashors* were not necessarily soirees at cosy homes. Rather, they served as a musical medium to metaphorically teleport the idea of the

⁷⁵⁰ Caroline Adams, *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: Life Stories of Pioneer Sylheti Settlers in Britain* (Eastside Books, 1999), 121.

⁷⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵² *Ibid.*, 125.

home. When I asked whether sailors would sing on the decks, Kacha Miah's face lit up as he went on recollecting the circulation of songs on these merchant navy ships:

*...yes, on ships! I have sung so much on board. These ships needed a lot of manpower, somewhere close to 20-25. After the day's work was over, what else was there to do? Whatever songs one knew, they sang. These songs are called Murshidi gaan, Pir-Murshidi gaan. These were Boithoki songs, which people used to sing at gatherings. All of these were good songs...*⁷⁵³

Miah was one of the earliest migrants to the UK whom I could track down, though the exact year of his travel is uncertain. According to Kacha, he flew for thirty-six hours from Dhaka, stopping over in Karachi in 1957. However, his son, who was also listening to our conversation, prompted that the records say "1946"; Kacha, however, was sure that he travelled to Britain much later. Whatever the case, it can be said with certainty that he was part of the early homely musical scene during the 1960s. Kacha first set up base in Birmingham, taking up a job at the Morris factory, where he got to have a taste for the craze for music among his fellow settlers:

I came to England to earn money. The day after I arrived, people came to see me. After all, I am a singer. I remember Abdur Nur, Hador Ali and Quddus Ali would come to visit me. Wednesday or Thursday, they came, and some of them even gave me money—some £5, some £10. Come Saturdays, they would take me for the songs. Arob Ali from Kotalpur had a double room, where he had the violin, dotara and other instruments hanging on the wall. I was surprised to see people kept up these practices even here. Then I saw other people coming as well to sing. There was a brother, Ujir, who would also sing, not much, but a few songs... people would sing, some one song, some two... I realised that people had the habit of singing in this country too. I also attended ashors of Tauris Miah in Bradford, where I stayed for a night at his place. The next month, Tauris moved to Birmingham. I have spent so much time of my life with him. Back in those days, people had a zeal for music. Saturdays approached, and who could stop people! After taking showers and a meal, people would look

⁷⁵³ Kacha Miah, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 9 November 2020.

*at whose house was the ashor happening. Whoever took the responsibility of organising the music would also send the dawat—they cooked the chicken... and it was music and feast.*⁷⁵⁴



Illustration 4.1: A portrait of Kacha Miah, as published in his songbook, *Monushotto* (Humanity)

Though London's East End was being newly ghettoised by Bengali working-class migrants during the 1960s and had the largest concentration of the population, people were scattered all over the islands. From Kacha's account, it becomes clear that music was possibly one of the strongest markers of domestic space. As a result, we see evidence of music-making in *ashors* in areas with smaller communities. For these men who largely hailed from rural backgrounds and ended up in urban spaces often alien to them, music-making in these Saturday *ashors* provided familiar and expected pathways to forge and further reinforce brotherhood; people would often meet one another for the first time in these gatherings, without which they might have lost themselves, in Ruth Finnigan's words, "the impersonal wildernesses of urban life".⁷⁵⁵

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁵ Ruth H. Finnigan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 418.

Saturday *ashors* were also a feature on the London calendar. Abdul Lotif, a *baul* based out of London's East End, was instrumental in organising these sessions as part of his Ektara Baul Group. The late Lotif is believed to have migrated sometime in the 1960s, and to this day, is recognised as a *purana manush* (human of the old days) by prominent figures in the community, including Alaur Rahman and Ansar Ullah. Lotif went on record about the intimate and familial London-Birmingham networks of homely music-making:

*When I came to London, there were very few Bengalis, and the ones who were here were mostly students. The Punjabis were larger in number. I came to Aldgate, and one weekend, I found some Bengalis singing; some had come all the way from Birmingham. I was so happy to be united with them. They were playing the ektara, dotara and all of us started singing together. Ghulam Mustafa from Moulvibazar was the greatest Baula singer in all of Britain. He was the disciple of Mymensingh's Yaqub Miah. He is my teacher and I learned Baula songs from him. We were few people at that time, and I used to sing with Ektara. Many of them are dead now, including Ghulam Mostafa. Suruj Ali was another singer from Chatok. I played Dofki, Mandira and whatever instruments were required of me...*⁷⁵⁶

While conversing with Kacha Miah, I could remap the London-Birmingham *Baula* networks that Lotif had spoken about in 2006. Contrary to my initial findings about the *ashors*, which suggested that these spaces essentially served as grounds for the execution of tearful nostalgia and romanticising the “homeland”,⁷⁵⁷ they also fostered rivalry and competition. Kacha and his friends, Abdur Nur and Quddus Ali, would make occasional weekend trips to London, staying with Syed Ali in Commercial Road, who had a restaurant there.⁷⁵⁸ Kacha reflected on a musical duel organised with the same Ghulam Mustafa. While Lotif had hailed Mustafa

⁷⁵⁶ Abdul Lotif, interviewed by Jamil Iqbal, Abdul Aziz and Riza Momim, *Swadhinata Trust*.

⁷⁵⁷ Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, “Negotiating, Defending and Constructing ‘Bengali’ Identity through ‘Bengali’ Music: A Study of the Bangladeshi Community in London” (MMus Diss., 2018).

⁷⁵⁸ Kacha Miah, 9 November 2020.

as the “greatest Baula singer in all of Britain”,⁷⁵⁹ Kacha’s views on Mustafa were not as appreciative:

*London did not have great singers. It was perhaps 1971 or '72, probably '72, when Commercial Road got a new hall, Bangla Hall. There was a person, Mustafa, who was from Moulvibazar. He did not know music very well. People wanted a contest between us, and we sang.*⁷⁶⁰

This was possibly one of the first *pala* events in Britain.⁷⁶¹ Miah’s and Mustafa’s teachers came from Mymensingh and may have engaged in such events, too. Kacha and Lotif knew each other. While Lotif curiously made no mention of Kacha Miah, the latter spoke almost in a sympathetic tone about the former:

*The day we sang at Bangla Hall, I met a man called Abdul Lotif; he is no more. He used to work as a security guard at the High Commission, and used to play the mandira. After our performances were over, he approached me saying, ‘Brother, I have heard your name. Please come to my place.’ I stayed at his house, and the next day, I sang too. He was a very good man, a devoted person. He used to cook and feed me. After that, I have stayed at Lotif’s place, and sung too.*⁷⁶²

Ashors were highly dependent on word of mouth and personal networks for propagation. However, there do exist records in print. *Deshar Daak* published two pieces to circulate the news of *ashors* in 1963. The first mentioned that four gentlemen, namely Ahmed Ali, Hamid, Musabbir, and Mutlib, had already started preparing to organise a *Pir-Murshidi ashor* in Blackburn.⁷⁶³ The same issue contained another news report about a forthcoming series of charity *ashors* organised by Taimabur Rahman⁷⁶⁴ of the Pakistan Cultural Society, across

⁷⁵⁹ Lotif, interviewed by Iqbal, Aziz and Momim.

⁷⁶⁰ Kacha Miah, 9 November 2020.

⁷⁶¹ *Pala gaan* refers to an allied musical style, where singers sing in turns.

⁷⁶² Ibid.

⁷⁶³ *Deshar Daak*, September 6, 1963.

⁷⁶⁴ The font is not very legible on the newspaper, but it is most likely ‘Taimabur’.

multiple venues.⁷⁶⁵ There are not many other mentions of such musical gatherings to be found, especially during the 1960s, most likely because newspapers like the *Deshar Daak* could not run operations at a stretch—which I have already pointed out in Chapter 1—and most of these newspapers have not been preserved in the archives.

Five years later, in 1965, the Eastern Film Club invited two figures who already had a cult status in Baul culture—both from Sylhet—Durbin Shah and Shah Abdul Karim for a musical tour of Britain.⁷⁶⁶ This double-bill tour has grown legends in the community, foremost around the exact year when Shah and Karim made the trip. While Ajay Pal quotes “1965” in his 1986 interview of Karim for the *Surma*—the latter then was on his second trip to the UK—Shah Mohammad Akhtaruzzaman quotes “1968” in an article on Durbin Shah,⁷⁶⁷ as does Ujjwal Das in a more recent article celebrating Karim’s fandom in *bilat* (Britain) on the occasion of his birth centenary.⁷⁶⁸ Intriguingly, a joint photograph of a suited Karim-Durbin said to have been clicked during this tour mentions “1967”. The only living interlocutor who happened to be around that time during my fieldwork was Kacha again, who could provide some oral testimony. After an initial hesitation, Kacha mentioned 1956 before instantly correcting himself to 1964 or 1965. Based on Kacha’s memory and the earliest traceable print source, both alluding to 1965, this seems to be the most logical year when Karim-Durbin performed for the first time in Britain.

To go by Kacha’s memory, Karim-Durbin sang at different people’s *basha* (residences); audiences would throng the dwellings to catch a glimpse of their favourite *bauls*.⁷⁶⁹ Kacha’s narrative matches that of Syed Juron Ali, whom Akhtaruzzaman had interviewed for a

⁷⁶⁵ *Deshar Daak*, September 6, 1963.

⁷⁶⁶ *Surma*. May 17-23, 1986.

⁷⁶⁷ Shah Mohammad Akhtaruzzaman, *Baul Samrat Durbin Shah*, 2000, 73.

⁷⁶⁸ Ujjwal Das, “Karimer Bilat Dorshon O Tar Bhoktokul,” *Prothom Alo*, 2023.

⁷⁶⁹ Kacha Miah, 9 November 2020.

Prothom Alo article. Juron recalled that one night, the duo were hosted at the *basha* of Camden-resident Surot Miah:

The venues were running out of space for the devoted listeners, and nobody wanted to leave. Back then, ashors of such musical richness were hard to come by, and it was a huge deal to get to witness two stalwarts of folk music.⁷⁷⁰

Though I could not find any other living person who had attended the Karim-Durbin London *ashors*, the *Prothom Alo* article documents senior members of the community who remember Juron and Surot, who have passed away. Surot (Surotur Rahman) and Juron originated from the neighbouring Sylheti villages of Mandaruka and Syed Mandaruka. This visit has gone down into the annals of the oral memory of the diaspora, often considered to be the first significant *Baul* event in Britain that paved the way for future invitations to musicians from *desh*. It seems that Karim-Durbin were hosted by numerous people; perhaps doing so was also an indicator of status and intellectuality. Kacha claimed:

When Karim and Durbin both visited for the first time, permission had been sought from the government. Both stayed with me.⁷⁷¹

⁷⁷⁰ Das, "Karimer Bilat Dorshon,".

⁷⁷¹ Kacha Miah, 9 November 2020.



Illustration 4.2: Bauls, Shah Abdul Karim (L) and Durbin Shah photographed at their joint visit to London (from the personal collections of Baul Shohid)

Karim Shah later visited *bilat* for three months with his disciple, Ruhi Thakur, in 1985.⁷⁷² Ajay Pal interviewed Karim at the former's flat at Doveton House in Doveton Street, Bethnal Green; published by the *Surma*, this makes for a valuable written record.⁷⁷³ Karim and Ruhi were invited by their well-wishers and had declaredly come for the sole purpose of visiting “familiar faces” in London, not singing.⁷⁷⁴ The reason behind this comment to Pal is baffling. There is video footage of Karim and Thakur singing at an *ashor* in London; released by one M. Ali “after thirty years” on YouTube In 2014—which makes it 1984—it is likely that it was indeed from the same visit.⁷⁷⁵ To verify the veracity of the footage and its metadata, I brought

⁷⁷² *Surma*. May 10-16, 1986.

⁷⁷³ A search on ‘Doveton House’ on Google maps provides a curious result. Flat number 17 of the apartment is labelled as ‘Music’, which is ‘permanently closed’. I used to live in the adjoining apartment, Braintree House in 2020. Asking around neighbours as to whether it was a centre of *ashors* did not open up any leads.

⁷⁷⁴ *Surma*. 17-23 May, 1986.

⁷⁷⁵ Retired Traveller. “Abdul Korim Ruhi Tagore Live in My House.” YouTube, June 6, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zy5R1V-XOTw>.

this up during my interview with one of the most venerable but controversial living *bauls*, Kari Amir Uddin, who currently lives in London. Kari mentioned that Karim had indeed visited with Thakur in the 1980s, and the footage should be genuine.⁷⁷⁶ Faruque Ahmed, in an informal conversation, too, did not find anything to question its genuineness. What further clears the mist is Ajay Pal's comment that Karim Shah did not make any overseas trips after 1965, and this was his second one.⁷⁷⁷ Perhaps the available footage is that of a one-off session; the other possibility could be that he might have wanted to avoid visa problems.

In the video, Karim and Ruhi are wearing suits, and the *ustad* also has a tie. The setting is residential, most likely in a drawing room, and the ambience is homely, typical of *ashors*. Ruhi starts off with a *behala* (violin) rendition of a popular Hason Raja song, *Matiro pinjirar majhe bondi hoiya re* (Trapped inside the clay cage). Moushumi Bhowmik has written about an *ashor* in *desh* where she recorded Ruhi, along with his fellow *bauls*, Chandan Miah, Birohi Kala Miah, and Abdul Hamid, among others, at the house of her banker-friend, Ambarish Dutta. Bhowmik talks about the living room of a banker's apartment being "transformed into the space of a mela".⁷⁷⁸ Similarly in these diasporic settings, these *ashors* have been a medium of transforming *bilati* spaces into that of *desh*.

⁷⁷⁶ Kari Amir Uddin, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 13 October 2021.

⁷⁷⁷ *Surma*. 17-23 May, 1986.

⁷⁷⁸ Moushumi Bhowmik and Sukanta Majumdar, "Sylhet, Bangladesh. 20-21 April 2006. Ruhi Thakur and Others – the Travelling Archive," *The travelling archive.org*, 2020, <http://www.thetravellingarchive.org/record-session/sylhet-bangladesh-20-21-april-2006-ruhi-thakur-and-others/>.



Illustration 4.3 (L): Karim during his second London visit, published at *The Surma*; Illustration 4.4 (R): Doveton House in Bethnal Green, London, residence of Ajay Pal, where he interviewed Karim. Photograph by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya. 19 April 2023.

The homely aesthetic of the *ashors* also spilled over to more formal and ticketed events occurring in community halls, thus blurring distinctions between private and public spaces. Sydul Islam Khan, who used to run a travel agency, NCC Travels, became a part-time concert promoter in 1984, sponsoring artists from multiple genres, ranging from *adhunik* (modern) to *baula*. Among *Baula* artists, Sydul brought over Sylhet's Abdul Khaliq, Netrakona's Sirajuddin Pathan, Sufia Kangalini and Anwara Begum. Sydul, in our conversation, told that he organised all over Britain, including Hackney Town Hall and York Hall in east London, Camden Town Hall in north London, Birmingham's Digbeth Hall, Aston University, Bradford University, Newcastle, Manchester, and Scotland; particularly remembering that the two programmes he did at the Hackney Town Hall were "super-duper". Sydul's events were capital-intensive, evident from the advertisements and features he put in newspapers in the late 1980s. I could trace one such piece in the *Surma*, which provided

interested readers with his contact number.⁷⁷⁹ As I read out the piece to him, he confirmed that it was indeed his number and replied with palpable excitement:

I organised almost 220 programmes! The venues would be absolutely filled to the brim! No spaces would be vacant. There was such high demand for baula and palli songs, which has died away now. The atmosphere was very friendly. Audiences would feel free to send song requests in chits, as if they were in their residence. The environment was not very different from the ashors people had in their own places. I remember one such programme, when we had a daytime concert, and students requested the artistes to come to their place for an even informal session. I would prod them saying that such warmth was probably missing back in desh, and they should not think about the money. These artistes were great in their own right, but no one hesitated to oblige.⁷⁸⁰

Ashors, however, were not exclusive to the *Baula-Pir-Murshidi* worlds. Shahagir Bakhth Farrukh, who migrated in 1973, explained that musical genres performed in these homely gatherings were markers of class and status hierarchies. A minority of the Bengali diaspora comprised middle-class professionals, for whom *Baula* spaces were often linked to being so-called “unintellectual”. Farrukh went on to elucidate:

In the old days, there were less number of people. Means of entertainment and relaxation were limited. Music and ashors were hence very crucial. I remember we used to have an ashor somewhere near Turnpike Lane and Wood Green. There was a Bengali shop, where there used to be a spare room on the top. We would occasionally sit there among four or five other friends for cultural activities. However, the musical content was modern songs and Rabindrasangeet, not regional Baula.⁷⁸¹

The Turnpike Lane *ashors* had people, who, according to Farrukh, were “professional and educated people, mainly accountants”, and did not indulge in the *Baula* fare. Farrukh hinted that these spaces were largely segregated, even within the community, further shattering the

⁷⁷⁹ *Surma*. 15-21 September, 1989.

⁷⁸⁰ Sydul Islam Khan, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 7 April 2023.

⁷⁸¹ Shahagir Bakh Farrukh, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 31 January 2023.

myth of pan-Bengali unity, which we have seen in the previous chapters. At a time when far-right nationalism in Britain was on the rise during the 1970s and paving the way for vile racist violence, such intra-communal musical clannishness indicates that anti-racist solidarities were, to some extent, alliances of convenience. Farrukh attended *Baula ashors* in the East End as well, and recollected some of its memories:

*In East London, it was difficult to find people who would sing Rabindrasangeet and modern Bengali songs. There more people listened and performed the baula, palli and murshidi. I remember, sometimes there used to be an ashor in Hanbury Street, near Brick Lane. I have now forgotten the name of the person, who used to lead those ashors; he has passed away unfortunately.*⁷⁸²

As we have seen in Chapter 2, ethnonationalist constructs were present even during the Bangladesh War, which informed multiple fractures in Bengaliness, often in the form of a veiled aversion towards Sylhetis. This contributed to a further ghettoisation of London's East End, as Farrukh's observation alludes to. TM Ahmed Kaysher, a prominent promoter of the arts in Britain, believes these class differences have always existed in the diaspora and stem from misappropriations of Western imports of the bourgeois/proletariat divide. Kaysher, who originates from Sylhet, read in Dhaka, and now works across *desh-bidesh* through his organisation, Saudha Arts, outlined his personal take:

*People from Sylhet are far greater in number in our community, whom the so-called bourgeois have categorised as 'prantik', people of the roots. These feelings also stem from jealousy as many of these people who have directly come from villages are now representing the community in a metropolis like London, and providing jobs to the so-called 'elite' sections of people from Bangladesh...and this often becomes unacceptable to some people.*⁷⁸³

⁷⁸² Ibid.

⁷⁸³ TM Ahmed Kaysher, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 4 February 2023.

Technologies of Consumption

M R Akhtar Mukul, in his 1986 Bengali novel, *‘Londone Chakku Mian’* (Chakku Miah in London), narrates a bustling Brick Lane scene, where the protagonist walks along the footpath to come across the now-shut Nirala restaurant and its Bengali signboard. The moment the protagonist enters the jam-packed restaurant, he is reminded of home: Al-Islam and Islamia restaurants at Dhaka’s Ray Shaheb Bazar. With *porota, halua, kabab*, curry, biryani and bhuna gosht flying off the kitchen counter, the *bhatiyali-bhawaiyya* records are loud enough for the character to pierce through the din from a corner.⁷⁸⁴ Such imagined soundscapes are grounded in reality.

As I pointed out in the Introduction, London was no novice to Bengali music records. However, by 1970, the proliferation of cassette technologies—more easily transportable than vinyl records—in the Global North had democratised, diversified, and decentralised how people consumed music.⁷⁸⁵ Peter Manuel has briefly mentioned Calcutta being a fledgling market for regional Bengali musics, including *Baul*, which saw an increased output after the advent of cassettes.⁷⁸⁶ The scenario in the South Asian diaspora was no different. Just like the West London suburb of Southall—with its large Punjabi population—became one of the primary hotspots for housing South Asian entertainment and musical talent,⁷⁸⁷ Brick Lane, with its music and video record shops, was gradually becoming a cultural and musical hub for the Bengalis. Glamour International, a small shop below the Naz Cinema, was one of the first places in the Brick Lane area to sell Bengali music, newspapers and magazines.⁷⁸⁸ Glamour’s signboard was explicit: ‘Records, Cassettes & Tracks’.

⁷⁸⁴ M. R. Akhtar Mukul, *Landane Chakku Miah* (Sagar Publishers, 1986).

⁷⁸⁵ Peter Lamarche Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 28.

⁷⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁷⁸⁷ Laura Leante, “Shaping Diasporic Sounds: Identity as Meaning in Bhangra,” *The World of Music* 46, no. 1 (2004): 109–34.

⁷⁸⁸ John Eversley and Ansar Ahmed Ullah, *Bengalis in London’s East End* (Swadhinata Trust, 2010), 102.

Tarif Miah, a resident of Bethnal Green, migrated to the UK in 1972. Tarif, a music enthusiast, was a consumer of the early music market. Shifting from Sylheti to English, Tarif mentioned that *Baula* and Bengali folk music were arguably the preferred choice of purchase for most Bengalis:

Brick Lane has now changed beyond recognition. It was so much fun, all Bengali! Now it is all gone. There was so much music all around. I used to visit Brick Lane Music House⁷⁸⁹ very regularly. In those days, even CDs had not arrived. There were cassettes. You won't believe how expensive they were. I would end up spending most of my earnings on buying music. People used to love Baula, you know the folk songs. Records of Shah Abdul Karim would come from Bangladesh. He was in great demand...such a fantastic singer and composer. Also, you will have to credit Kari Amir Uddin. He is still around, and his tapes sold as well.⁷⁹⁰

By the 1980s, more music and video shops had mushroomed across East London. Modern Music Centre at 67 Brick Lane advertised themselves as the “largest stockists of Bengali song cassettes”, where supplies of “original cassettes” came every week from Calcutta and Bangladesh.⁷⁹¹ Almost adjacent to Modern used to stand Jhankar Music Centre at 120, Brick Lane. Jhankar, which was run by now Manchester-resident Abdul Moshahid, used to put up occasional advertisements in the *Somoy* newspaper, with the tagline, ‘*Bangla ganer bipul sombhar*’ (Huge treasure of Bengali songs); along with Hanif Sanket’s parodies, songs of Fakir Alamgir, *Baula* was naturally part of the mix.⁷⁹² Lesser-known names crop up in old Bengali newspapers. 24A Hessel Street in Whitechapel—a rather secluded and unassuming place—was home to Mamun Music & Video.⁷⁹³ Similarly, Video Times was a “specialist in audio cassettes and discs” at 24A Cannon Street.⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁸⁹ First opened in 1974, they later came to be known as Modern Book Shop.

⁷⁹⁰ Tarif Miah, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 25 April 2023.

⁷⁹¹ *Surma*, July 10-16, 1987.

⁷⁹² *Somoy Bengali News*, July 2, 1985.

⁷⁹³ *Surma*, May 26- June 1, 1989.

⁷⁹⁴ *Surma*, May 26, 1989.

Among all the competitors, it was Sangeeta at 22 Brick Lane which arguably rose to become one of the more prominent and lasting players; the company was formally dissolved in November 2017.⁷⁹⁵ Sangeeta had a transfer of ownership in the early 1990s when Khokhan Miah handed over its reins to Shanur Miah. From its inception, demand for music consumption was high; *Baula* was one of the front-runners. Abdul Mukid Mukhtar, a songwriter registered with Radio Bangladesh, came to London in 1979 and eventually found work across various sectors, including restaurants and garment factories. Mukhtar was also employed full-time by Khokhan for a few months in the mid-1980s; he also worked for Abdul Rob's Brick Lane Music Shop, where he used his graphic design skills to produce cassette covers. For Mukhtar, the musical soundscapes of Brick Lane in the 1980s are still vivid:

*Life was very hectic. We only had a day off a week. It was very common for us to converge for adda at restaurants during the weekend...listening to music was a must. That is how we maintained our cultural values. Besides Rob bhai's Music House, there was a shop run by Moshahid bhai, who now lives in Manchester. All of them had music records, ranging from Bollywood to modern Bengali songs. Of course, baula-palli songs, being local, were more relatable to common listeners, especially those who came from Sylhet.*⁷⁹⁶

In 1987, Urmi Rahman and her senior colleague at the BBC's Bengali Service, Nimai Chattopadhyay, recorded their stroll from one end of Brick Lane to the other, leading to Shoreditch, as part of the 'Brick Lane' series, produced by the BBC World Service. Rahman's book, *Brik Len: Bileter Bangalitolā* (Brick Lane: Bengalis' hub in *bilat*), contains a transcript of her conversations with Nimai. What Urmi and Nimai witnessed at that time matches the oral histories I have recorded so far. Both came across a video shop, Pandora Arcade, with a signboard in Bengali, '*niche Bangla gaan*' (Bangla songs downstairs). Among the records of

⁷⁹⁵ "SANGEETA UK LTD Filing History - Find and Update Company Information - GOV.UK," Service.gov.uk, 2017, <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/06937319/filing-history>.

⁷⁹⁶ Abdul Mukid Mukhtar, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 27 April, 2023.

Kananbala Sarkar, Dilruba Khan, Chandana Majumdar and Uma Islam, they found folk songs of Abdul Alim, and locally produced records of Maljura Adam, too.⁷⁹⁷

Tarif and Mukhtar’s memories testify that *Baula* listening preferences were in many ways the crux of the informal music economies of Brick Lane. While Bollywood and Bengali film songs were in good demand, *Baula* records served as a musical link to *desh* for the majority Sylheti migrant population, creating unique metropolitan identities informed by provincial musicalities. Abdul Aziz, the owner of erstwhile garment factories in Bethnal Green and Whitechapel, went nostalgic as he talked about how *Baula* sounds were the lifeblood of his fellow workers. Modes of consumption of *Baula* music that evolved in these industrialised settings correspond to Anahid Kassabian’s concept of “ubiquitous listening”, when it comes to his reading of how people listen to music ““alongside”, or simultaneous[ly] with other activities [blending] into the environment, taking place without calling conscious attention to itself as an activity in itself.”⁷⁹⁸ However, unlike in Kassabian’s “ubiquitous listening”, where listeners are often oblivious of the authorship and source of the music “coming from nowhere and everywhere”, then novel technologies of listening gave the Bengali migrant worker a far greater agency to mediate their sonic industrial worlds; this rather resonates with Peter Martin’s postulation that the “mass availability of radios and disc or tape players [gave] people unprecedented *control* over their sound-environment.”⁷⁹⁹ So far as the Sylhetis’ preference for local *Baula* records is concerned, Aziz’s message echoes that of Mukhtar’s:

I have always been musically minded...I had a garment factory in Bethnal Green...you know there is currently an Iceland on Bethnal Green Road; it used to be on the second floor of the opposite building. Workers were fellow Sylhetis, and the majority of them used to play Baula tapes; Amir Uddin was popular. However, I was more inclined towards Rabindranath’s songs. I like Baula, too, but I also

⁷⁹⁷ Urmi Rahman, *Brik Len: Bangalir Bangalitola* (Sahitya Prakash, 1993), 77.

⁷⁹⁸ Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (University of California Press, 2013), 9.

⁷⁹⁹ Peter J. Martin, *Sounds and Society: Themes in the Sociology of Music* (Manchester University Press, 1995), 21.

*find the tunes to be a bit boring...they all sound similar. Rabindranath's and Nazrul's songs are full of variety.*⁸⁰⁰

Taking the lead of Aziz, a more nuanced reading of how *Baula* was utilised in the creation of collective cultural aesthetics in these industrial environments is possible. Tia DeNora has investigated the role of music “as a device of social ordering [and how music has been] employed, albeit at times unwittingly, as a means of organizing potentially disparate individuals such that their actions may appear to be intersubjective, mutually oriented, coordinated, entrained and aligned.”⁸⁰¹ DeNora’s inclination towards studying settings where various musical tastes are attempted to be aligned is helpful in the case of Aziz. At the garment factories where Aziz worked, he had little control over the *Baula* musical environment he often found himself subjected to. Uses of *Baula* in these diasporic industrial settings towards the creation of sonic and scenic specificities are intrinsically linked towards marking invisible, sound borders of identity and intimacy, particularly an ultra-localised “Sylhetiness” that has often been historically inaccessible to Bengalis not belonging to Sylhet.⁸⁰²

The introduction of cassette technologies in Brick Lane led to the emergence of more intimate listening practices within the Bengali diaspora; Andrew Ross has termed such new cultural practices as “technoculture”.⁸⁰³ *Baul* music became part and parcel of a then-rising local music publishing industry, a “technocultural institution” according to Leslie C. Gay’s terminology.⁸⁰⁴ Muquim Ahmed was one of the early entrepreneurs to venture into importing electrical goods under the brand name ‘Harper’—including cassette players—from Hong

⁸⁰⁰ Abdul Aziz, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 26 April 2023.

⁸⁰¹ Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 109.

⁸⁰² This was not only the case for the Bengali community; Abdul Mukid Mukhtar recalled that the Turkish-owned garment factories he worked for had ‘Turkish’ cassettes playing in them.

⁸⁰³ LysloffRené T. A. and Leslie C. Gay, *Music and Technoculture* (Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 2.

⁸⁰⁴ Leslie C. Gay Jr., “Before the Deluge: The Technoculture of Song-Sheet Publishing Viewed from Late Nineteenth-Century Galveston,” *American Music* 17, no. 4 (1999): 204.

Kong;⁸⁰⁵ he moved to London in 1974 to complete his engineering studies and eventually ended up owning the Naz Cinema, the adjoining Glamour International, and Milfa, which were opposite the Nirala restaurant.⁸⁰⁶ *Baula* cassettes and eventually CDs of artists like Abdul Karim and Kari Amir Uddin—highly popular, especially with the Sylhetis—were largely products of a Bengali-run informal music economy. Shahagir Bakht Farukh, a friend of Muquim, has written about Glamour’s early days in his memoir *Brick Lane: Bari to Basa*:

Muquim Ahmed and I lived upstairs at 48 Brick Lane in two small separate rooms. In the daytime it was busy with customers, but in the evening it was silent, dark and boring, with nowhere to go. The small black and white TV was not sufficient for passing time. There were no Bangladeshi TV channels or Bangladeshi radio stations like Betar Bangla, Spectrum or the BBC Asian Network. So most of the evenings we used to spend recording music on cassettes—C-60, C-90 and C-120—or watching Indian films on videos... In fact, Milfa Ltd was the first to make LP and SP recordings of Himangshu Goswami, Kari Amir Uddin and Shefali Ghosh.⁸⁰⁷

Muquim may have been one of the early movers in the industry, but it is unlikely that Glamour International/Milfa was the very first enterprise in Brick Lane. In a personal conversation with Farook Shamsheer of JOI, Farook chatted away about his father being a musical man, and that his late brother Haroon and he were exposed to *Baula* records from their childhood.⁸⁰⁸ Before the Shamsheer brothers went on to become a pioneering phenomenon in the British Asian music scene through their band, JOI Bangla Sound System—which later became JOI—they would remix their father’s tapes. Interestingly, it may well be said that *Baula* records from Bangladesh were the genesis of a whole new style of music. Stating their father’s influence, the Shamsheer brothers talked about their father’s

⁸⁰⁵ “Hard-Slog Millionaire!,” *Curry Life Magazine*, April 21, 2021.

⁸⁰⁶ LysloffRené and Gay, *Music and Technoculture*, 2.

⁸⁰⁷ Shahagir Bakht Faruk, *Brick Lane: Bari to Basa* (Perfect Publishers Limited, 2016), 32–33.

⁸⁰⁸ Personal fieldnotes, 27 September 2022.

record business, claiming it to be the first in Brick Lane, in an interview with Naeem Mohaiemen:

We were influenced by our father who used to play the flute, he used to be a traditional Bengali musician. Dad came over 40-50 years ago. He's not alive anymore. He was one of the early settlers...He was the first person to set up a Bengali tape shop in Brick Lane. It was the Reena Sari & Music Center. He was quite pioneering. We were part of this as well. Sometimes, Haroon would help out in the back of the shop. Sometimes our dad would want something a little western, to give it more of a modern sound. He had one of those little copycat echo machines, we helped give it a little reverb and do stuff like that. He had a lot of traditional stuff recorded from Bangladesh—like Amir Uddin, Abdul Gani. And we would be remixing those tapes.⁸⁰⁹

Many parallels can be found with Fraser G. McNeil's investigation of the informal reggae music economy in Venda, South Africa. Like in the case of reggae in Venda, the London-dominated *Baula* economy was also distinguished by how, to quote McNeil, "money and debt [circulated] between musicians, producers and sponsors in patron-client scenarios".⁸¹⁰ The production of *Baula-Palli-Murshidi-Maljura* and allied forms was largely dependent on London-Sylhet networks. In most cases, neither artists signed contracts nor recorded their performances in professional or makeshift studios. Before Shanur Miah became one of the industry's most influential players, he recorded artists in Sylhet. Like in Venda, the people recording *ashors* would be compensated through private patronage. Here is a transcript of a joint conversation that I had recorded of Shanur Miah with Faruque Ahmed in 2020, with both recalling the monetary mechanics:

Miah: Baul music...local songs to the accompaniment of dhol-dofki enjoyed the highest demand, and there was also a clientele for artistes like Lata and Bhupen Hazarika. Back in Bangladesh, I used to

⁸⁰⁹ Naeem Mohaiemen, "Joi: Bengali Boys from East London," *Shobak*, 1999.

⁸¹⁰ Fraser G. McNeill, "MAKING MUSIC, MAKING MONEY: INFORMAL MUSICAL PRODUCTION and PERFORMANCE in VENDA, SOUTH AFRICA," *Africa* 82, no. 1 (January 19, 2012): 94.

live in a bideshi area, where people used to bring tape recorders and records from bidesh. A lot of music travelled from Bangladesh to here as well.

Ahmed: People used to record the maljura asors back in desh, and carry them all the way here. Isn't it?

Miah: Oh yes, I have sold a lot of these recordings!

Ahmed: The fun thing is these asors had many people in the front with machines recording them. They were treated like VIPs.

Miah: Yes, there were recorders all around. We had to pay a premium. For example, if the general ticket was priced at 20 taka, we would pay 50 taka for tape record.⁸¹¹

Baula ashors in bilat reconfigured spaces into those of *desh*; consumption of recorded *ashors* achieved pretty much the same, allowing listeners to imagine home more frequently.⁸¹² *Ashors* in *desh* used to be organised in the *haor* areas, with listeners thronging the places from near and distant villages. Going further with Shanur Miah:

These stages were makeshift in nature, mostly made of bamboo and covered with curtains. The fields were huge, and the water would have dried out when these asors used to take place. Organisers would barricade the place, and build the stage at the centre. In desh, I remember attending such asors of Amir Uddin and Shah Abdul Karim...⁸¹³

This informal recording economy comprised a network of actors. Among them, one of the most significant was the agents based in Sylhet—many of whom ran music shops themselves—who conducted the recordings and facilitated shipping the master copies to London in exchange for a commission. The other route of circulation of *Baula* records was through people in the diaspora handing over master cassettes of locally conducted *ashors* to be sold in the music shops, mostly without involving any monetary transaction. Making it to the shelves of a music shop in Brick Lane gave the local artists currency within the community.

⁸¹¹ Shanur Miah and Faruque Ahmed, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 12 October 2020.

⁸¹² Georgina Born, *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1–70.

⁸¹³ Shanur Miah, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 28 April 2023.

Supported by a steady demand and a comparatively low production cost, Shanur explained how these records yielded good profits:

Profits were excellent. Once I got the master tape, it was not a problem. I had a machine that copies could be made on. I used to buy blank cassettes and copy the music onto them. The advantage I had was that I had also been able to set up a printing shop with my business partner...we utilised the facility to manufacture cassette and CD covers, and that saved costs. I even created a music label called 'Sangeeta'...there were very few in Bangladesh back then. I was aware of the problems of international shipping and the massive costs associated with it. Therefore, I used to store material in both Bangladesh and India. Not all songs were released as CDs or DVDs, but in cases when they were, around 200-250 copies used to come to me, and I would replenish the stock after they were sold...There used to be two main holidays: Christmas Day and Boxing Day. During the early days, there used to be ashors organised in the small garment factories. People used to come to me with their recordings of these events and request that I release them in the market. I did not have to do anything. Of course, I had to put a nominal price of £2-2.50, given that I had to incur expenses on producing the packaging, as well as other fixed costs like rent and council tax. Some baula artistes were local, although most of the times, artistes from Bangladesh were invited. Abdul Lotif recorded some songs, and gave it to me days before he passed away. I have sold them too.⁸¹⁴



Illustration 4.5: Shanur Miah at Sangeeta, early 2010s. Next to the music CDs can be seen a carving of the Baul with an ektara in hand, and a replica of an ektara. (from the personal collection of Shanur Miah)

⁸¹⁴ Ibid.

Throughout the years, the *London* music business survived, and visual representations of records transformed. Before the advent of personal computers and graphics editing software, cassette covers were typically handwritten. This came up during Faruque and Shanur's joint conversation in October 2020, when the former mentioned several volumes of Amir Uddins and Abdul Karims, with handwritten covers selling in Brick Lane.⁸¹⁵ More recently, Shanur clarified that he designed cassette covers on type machines to specify where the *ashor* was recorded and what style of music it was, in his words, "whether it came from Karimganj, Rahimganj or if it was *Maljura gaan*."⁸¹⁶ With the advancement in graphics technology and increasing reach during the 1990s, richer iconography linked to *desh* on record covers became increasingly entwined with the music and bearers of cultural authenticity. At a time when Brick Lane was becoming a hotspot for cross-cultural musical flows, ironically creating further sanitised musical spaces,⁸¹⁷ *Baula* iconography was playing a double role in the sustenance of more traditional sounds, as well as showcasing *Baul* culture that was exclusively part of Bengali; Brick Lane had become a transnational meeting hub of local Bengali networks, whose veins had deep pastoral roots. Abdul Mukhtar Mukid detailed how he used computer technologies to produce cassette covers:

I started making cassette covers in 1989, while I was involved with the Surma newspaper. I took computer training and became very good at designing. I purchased my personal computer in the early 1990s, and worked on it too. I primarily used the Pagemaker software back then. Sometimes Rob bhai would give me...let's say ten cassettes, and I would create suitable covers for them. Not only baula-palli, but all kinds of music. If it was a cassette recorded in Sunamganj, I remember putting up an image of an haor...or maybe, an image of Amir Uddin...things like that. We used to source most images from newspapers or magazines. First, I would scan the image, then tweak it on Pagemaker,

⁸¹⁵ Shanur Miah and Faruque Ahmed, 12 October 2020.

⁸¹⁶ Shanur Miah, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 28 April 2023.

⁸¹⁷ Koushik Banerjea, "Sounds of Whose Underground? The Fine Tuning of Diaspora in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Theory, Culture & Society* 17, no. 3 (June 2000): 65.

*and later on Photoshop. Initially, we would print out 3-4 pieces, and then they would reproduce in bulk.*⁸¹⁸

So far, I have discussed the histories of how newer technologies generated newer modes of consuming *Baula* music—which provided a market for the London-centric informal *Baula* music economy to flourish—largely focusing on my ethnomusicological fieldwork in London. These modes of listening and producing *Baula* were on the collective and communal level. Baul Shah Delwar Ali—who migrated to London in 1985 from Jagannathpur, Sylhet—shared his lived experiences of how the human body served as a technology of reflexive and more intimate *Baula* consumption. Delwar, whom I discovered to be a brilliant singer, said that he found work in one of the many sweatshops dotting the Whitechapel area, where he was tasked with operating Singer sewing machines. Working for long shifts in the factories, Delwar said that he kept thinking about his music, even if there was no music around:

*Engaged in my work, I would keep humming the new tune that I got...words would follow soon, and I would have the antara of a song. Storing that in my head, I would return to my basa, write it down and sing it...we regularly used to play records of Karim baul, Amir Uddin, Kamal saheb and other artistes inside the factories. From one melody, I have got inspiration to compose something but there would be days when there were no records playing...records playing or not, it was not difficult to stay immersed in music.*⁸¹⁹

Raphaël Nowak's and Andy Bennett's theorisation of "sound environment" includes the body as one of the three variables through which music gains experientialism, on both individual and collective levels.⁸²⁰ Nowak and Bennett treat the body as a vessel of the human sensorium in connection to music, which applies to Delwar's interpretation.⁸²¹ They have

⁸¹⁸ Abdul Mukid Mukhtar, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 29 April 2023.

⁸¹⁹ Baul Shah Delwar Ali, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 7 May 2023.

⁸²⁰ Raphaël Nowak and Andy Bennett, "Analysing Everyday Sound Environments: The Space, Time and Corporality of Musical Listening," *Cultural Sociology* 8, no. 4 (May 19, 2014): 438..

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*

drawn from their empirical case study to explore how the body reacts to musics mediated through music technologies, particularly the iPhone and the iPod, at home and the gym. Largely building on Tia DeNora's work, "sound environment" surveys how the body serves as a medium to generate musical meaning. However, in the case of Delwar humming *baula* melodies, the "sound environment" is not as helpful in understanding the entanglements of the body-mind and the Self. For Delwar Baul, the body acted not only as a medium but also as a music technology. Delwar's perception of staying "immersed in music" through the activation of the body generated unique sound environments, largely accessible to himself. Delwar, while chatting about his early factory days in London at the Café Italia in Whitechapel, brought up his feelings of nostalgia for the Kushiara river in his village and how he would often feel transported back to his "home"; thus, using his body-mind as a technology of *Baula* consumption, he spun localised temporalities and spatialities. Musical performances, such as humming to oneself, find a place in the body archive and are difficult to access. However, I heard about Iskandar Miah's similar practices of *Baula* humming at his Oldham factory from Hannan Miah.⁸²² These sonic worlds that bauls like Delwar and Iskandar used to create were also opened up at the request of their fellow workers.

⁸²² Hannan Miah, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 5 November 2021.

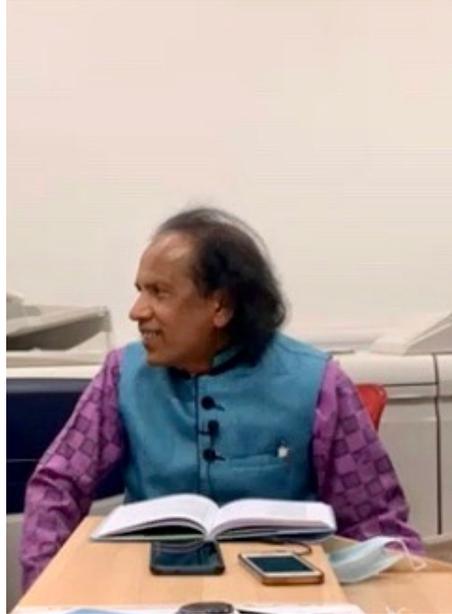


Illustration 4.6: Baul Shah Delwar Ali in conversation at the *Surma* office in Whitechapel. 8 June 2021.

Delwar revealed that, at times, he felt as if he was situated in an ultrasomatic sound environment:

*While stitching, it has happened many a times that even though there was no music playing in the factory, I used to get a 'jhonkar' in my head, and that would lead to new songs.*⁸²³

There are oral testimonies of similar experiences of music inside the head in the context of the Baula immigrant musical body. Oldham's Yousuf Miah 'Nunu' shared that he often had a spark of musical imagination while cooking at takeaways; for him, "these songs of the earth were in a way...ingredients of his curries".⁸²⁴ Yousuf—who has not been a "professional" *Baul* like his father, Iskandar—contemplated the reason behind the omnipresence of music during his culinary stints in the late 1980s, was "*narir taan*" (call of the pulse), a feeling of rooted belonging. On trying to locate the source of this apparently inaudible *'jhonkar'*

⁸²³ 'Jhonkar' in Bangla means a melodic resonance.

⁸²⁴ Yousuf Miah, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 5 July 2021.

(resonance), both Delwar and Yousuf attributed it to an inner voice, the agency of which lay with the divine. Brian Kane draws upon Mladen Dolar's analysis of the iconic painting 'His Master's Voice', where the dog believes the sound is coming out of the gramophone, all the more because of not seeing it.⁸²⁵ The fact that both Delwar and Yousuf do not equate the source of the *jhonkar*' with their bodies makes it easier to understand its source through Kane's concept of *topos*, which he describes as something that "might also be the invisible source of the voice".

Delwar spoke about *dehatattwa*, a Baul philosophy of attaining salvation through bodily practices—as Manjita Mukharji writes—"both through and in the body itself".⁸²⁶ To bring *Baula* practices into relief, Mukharji has also compared them with Brahminic ritual practices, where the ritual body is just a means to an end of attaining the eternal Self; in *Baul* thought, the body is both a means and an end.⁸²⁷ However, for metropolitan *bilati* bauls, I have observed that the body is often not solely an end. For Delwar, the practice of *dehatattwa* is often reliant beyond the human faculties:

*The sewing machine is a machine...its workings are like that of the human body. The body that Allah has given us is also a machine. Using the legs of my body machine, I would be running the sewing machine. Like Allah has given melody and rhythm to our bodies, the sewing machine, too, has a rhythm and melody. With Allah's grace, many songs have been conceived through my body...*⁸²⁸

***Bilat* in Baula registers**

Baul Shohid is an acclaimed name in *Baula* Britain, making regular appearances on Bengali TV channels in the UK, such as Channel S and ATN Bangla UK, and performing at *ashors*

⁸²⁵ Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acoustic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 213.

⁸²⁶ Manjita Mukharji (nee Palit), "Reading the Metaphors in Baul Songs: Some Reflections on the Social History of Rural Colonial Bengal" (Phd. Thesis, SOAS, 2009), 238.

⁸²⁷ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁸²⁸ Baul Shah Delwar Ali, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 7 June 2021.

across *desh* and *bidesh*. Even though Shohid’s primary income comes from driving for Uber, he confessed that *Baul* thought and music are his *hridpindo* (heart). He drove me to his *basa* at Cornwood Drive, Stepney Green, not very far from where I then used to live at Malcolm Street. Starting with stories from *desh*, our tête-à-tête soon meandered into *bilat*. Shohid Baul arrived in London in 1995, searching for *Baula* spaces in *bilat*; he was eventually introduced to Baul Abdul Lotif by one of his uncles, Abdul Jolil Chisti. On my request for a performance of one of his compositions, Shohid instead chose a *Londoni* song, written by Durbin Shah—his *dada ustad* (grand guru)—which came about as a result of his 1965 tour of Britain. That very particular song because Shohid wanted to pay tribute to “all his teachers whom he emulated to learn to sing”.⁸²⁹

Londoni songs may not be essentially *Baula* in soul, and the term “*Londoni*” is not necessarily restricted to the geographical demarcations of London; writing about *Londoni* villages in Sylhet, Katy Gardner clarifies that the term applies to places with high numbers of migration to Britain and not just London.⁸³⁰ These songs speak of stories of coming and going; of and between *desh* and *bidesh*; myths and the realities of life in Britain, a land initially foreign to so many, which eventually becomes their new home. Ever since the waves of mass migration in the 1950s, *Londoni* songs have increasingly become a part of the *Baula* imagination, as Moushumi Bhowmik phrases it as “a vehicle for this two-way homeward journey”.⁸³¹ Despite coming across *Londoni* songs for the first time in 2015 in Brick Lane, it was not until meeting Ahmed Moyez five years later that I began to realise the extent to which it informs the quotidian musical consciousness of *Londonis*. Moyez, who has been a journalist at the *Surma*, is a man of music, of enigma, of many layers. Drawing direct lineage to a family of *pirs*—his

⁸²⁹ Baul Shohid, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 11 October 2021.

⁸³⁰ Katy Gardner, “Keeping Connected: Security, Place, and Social Capital in a ‘Londoni’ Village in Sylhet,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 3 (September 2008): 477–95.

⁸³¹ Moushumi Bhowmik and Sukanta Majumdar, “Surma News Office, Quaker Street, East London. 27 February 2007. Ahmed Moyez – the Travelling Archive,” <https://www.thetravellingarchive.org/record-session/surma-news-office-quaker-street-east-london-27-february-2007-ahmed-moyez/>.

grandfather being the venerable Pir Mojiruddin of Syedpur, Sylhet—Moyez is highly opinionated about the primacy of words over melody, someone whom I have found to be often seeking crossroads between uncompromising religion and the *Baula-Pir-Fakiri* syncretic spaces to which he equally, or probably more strongly, feels a part of himself;⁸³² Bhowmik, who has been collaborating with Moyez since 2006, mentioned in a Kolkata concert in 2019 that “music happens to Moyez”, before going on to sing a Pir Mojir song that she had learnt from him. During one of my innumerable trips to the Surma office in Whitechapel, Moyez broke into a Kari Amir Uddin *Londoni* song, ‘*Shamner maashey baari jaiba Londoni*’ (Next month will the *Londoni* return). Still typesetting the next edition of the *Surma*, Moyez *saheb*—as I address him out of reverence—signalled, ‘*ami thik sur ta niye aashi*’ (Let me fetch the tune). Not having moved an inch from his desktop, he did successfully summon the melody, further explaining how the song speaks of the anticipation of the wife for her *Londoni* husband, who would be coming home the next month. Interspersed with moments of silence, Moyez soon broke emphatically into a rhythm, clapping his hands, singing ‘*chuler kata, mukher paudar, aaro aanba...*’, where the wife demands her *Londoni* husband to bring hairpins and talcum for her.

Bilat and London have been inextricably intertwined as a utopian land replete with opportunities. As in the case of the *Londoni*’s longing wife in Amir Uddin’s ‘*saamner maase baari jaiba Londoni*’, money and gifts from the imagined land of ‘gold, milk and honey’ have acted as status symbols; *Londoni* villages in *desh*, according to Anne Kershen, “were enjoying the benefits of their émigré kin...to distinguish them from the less fortunate.”⁸³³ Money and gifts have remained important *Londoni* tropes in the *Baula* repertoire. However, when it came to London life, the London Underground captured the *Baul*’s creative faculty. Such an Underground song, ‘*Andargraund tren laine hobe jodi pyasenjaar*’, was written by Durbin Shah—who is only known to have visited Britain once—that Baul Shohid had sung to me. The

⁸³² Sudhir Chakraborty, *Gobhir Nijon Pothey* (1989; repr., Ananda Publishers, 2012), 21.

⁸³³ Anne Kershen, *Strangers, Aliens and Asians* (Routledge, 2004), 156.

equation of the railway to the body-railcar is not new in *Baula* creativity. Sudhir Chakraborty, a widely recognised authority on the folkloristic and musical cultures of Bengal, has documented the songs of Kubir Gosain (d. 1879) and Jadubindu (d. 1916) from the allied sect of the *Shahebdhonis*, where the railway trope has been deployed as early as the mid-to-late 19th century.⁸³⁴ In Durbin's Underground song, the worlds of *desh* and *bidesh* coalesce into one, where the city of Dhaka resides within the body-underground. Appropriating the London Underground is also fascinating in the sense that it is a subterranean transport network, apparently invisible to commuters on the ground; as a result, the Underground imagery has left much for actors in the *Baula* networks to draw analogies to their understanding of the human body as a microcosm of hidden cosmological layers. The spiritual master makes an early appearance in the guise of the "*tiket mastaar*"⁸³⁵:

*Andargraund tren laine hobe jodi pyasenjaar,
Taratari tiket kato, sriguru tiket mastaar.*

*Andargraund dehopure, Dhakar sahar taar bhitore
Main chembaare basat kare des rajyer gobharnar,
Oshto jila, baaro thana, atharoti hoy pargana
Kare taate dyakha-shunaa, gyanbabu praim-ministaar...*⁸³⁶

[If you want to be a passenger on the Underground train line, get your tickets fast; Sriguru is the ticket-master. Within the body-Underground resides the city of Dhaka. In the main chamber resides the governor. Eight districts, twelve thanas, and eighteen parganas: the prime minister looks after them all.]

⁸³⁴ Sudhir Chakraborty, ed., *Bangla Dehatotter Gaan* (Progya Prokashon, 1990). Hugh Urban has written about the Shahebdhonis, who share many of the bauls' esoteric, rejective, and syncretic belief systems, drawing from Sufi, Vaishnava, and Tantric traditions. See: Hugh B. Urban, "The Marketplace and the Temple: Economic Metaphors and Religious Meanings in the Folk Songs of Colonial Bengal," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 4 (2001): 1096.

⁸³⁵ Urban, drawing from Sudhir Chakraborty's original collection of Shahebdhonis' songs in '*Shahebdhoni Shomproday: Dhormamata o Sadhontotto*' has translated a Sahebdhani song with the figure of the guru has been compared to that of the *tiket mastar*?

⁸³⁶ Durbin Shah, *Geetimaala* (Privately printed, 1990?), 50.

Somewhere in the vortex of obscure literary imagination, Durbin's Underground song is also a historical document of the actualities of travelling on the tube. The song goes on to mention that passengers caught travelling ticketless would end up paying double the fines. On the other hand, those who could show tickets would get through the turnstiles and reach town. Of course, on a deeper level, the ticketless passengers are those who do not walk in the path of the guru and instead end up paying fines for their deeds:

*Tiket chhara paile kare, mobail kourte dhorbe tare,
Dobol mashul aaday kore, jaar bhaagye je prokaar,
Naamer tiket dibey jara, ek sekend robe na khaara
Main getey paas pabe tara, taun hobe transfar...*

[Those found without tickets will be caught by the 'mobile court'. Double the fines they will extract, whatever is in one's fate. Those showing a ticket in His name need not wait for a second; they will pass through the 'main gate', transferred to town.]

The Underground also appears in Abdul Karim's song, '*Bilater smriti*' (*Memories of Bilat*), which he had composed after his three-month tour of Britain in 1985, and according to the *Surma*, "gifted to its readers".⁸³⁷ Karim takes the reader or the listener on a rollercoaster ride, swooping down from a macrocosmic register to a hypogeal one. Comparing celestial bodies in the universe to a house filled with adornments, Karim Baul expresses wonder at how the technological advancements, which in his eyes, even create the atmosphere. His dive into the subterranean, the very next instance, is probably intentional. Chronicling his ride on the Underground, Karim refers to the Divine's awe-inspiring activities across the theological

⁸³⁷ *Surma*, May 10-16, 1986. First published in the *Surma*, this song has been printed in various texts since, and is immensely popular both in *desh* and *bidesh*. For a performance of the whole song, see: Hayder Rubel Gallery, "বিলাতের স্মৃতি - বশির উদ্দিন সরকার, শাহ আব্দুল করিম | Bilater Smriti - Boshir Uddin | Abdul Korim," YouTube, May 7, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKWSTaUXkO4>.

seven layers of heaven in Islam;⁸³⁸ use of Vaishnavite vocabulary, here the word *lila* often referring to Krishna's dalliance, is typical of the syncretic *Baula* registers:

*Ek gharer bhitare bhora, chondro surjo, groho taara,
Akash mondol toiyar kora boigyanik kaushalete.
Ekdin gelam maatir toley, taara andargraund boley,
Lain aache tren choley, choley sohoshro pothey.
Korchey ki aajob leela, ek tola noy saptam tola,
Haat baajar khela-dhula shanti shrinkholatey...*

[Within one house are the moon, sun, planets and stars. The atmosphere is created with scientific devices. One day I went below the earth, they call it Underground. There are lines underneath; trains run in different directions. Oh what wondrous play he is doing, not one layer but seven. The bazars and all kinds of play are going on peacefully.]

For Delwar Baul, the Underground is again one of the primary attractions in London. Published in his song text, '*Kushiyyarar tirey*' (By the banks of the Kushiyyara), the song '*London thaki aisa bondhu*' (My friend has come from London)—probably written before he migrated to Britain—expresses Delwar's deep desire to visit the sights and sounds of London, and take a ride on the Underground. The song mirrors the desperation of the aspiring immigrant, who is willing to sacrifice anything in the quest for the dream life in *bidesh*, London, in this case:

*London thaki aisa bondhu, kotha holo shakkhate
Shunchi manush London nitay
Amare nio shaathe.*

London niley khushi hoimu London shohor ghurey dekhmu

⁸³⁸ Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 85.

Maatir nichedi treney jaimu
Andargraund lainete.
London boro ajab desh, sokoleri aki besh
Shekhane nai dukkha klesh
Achey manush shukhete.

London jaitam asha korchi, tomake sujoge paichi
Jeta chaibai dimu kosisi
Leikha naao kagojete.

Jaga jomin bechilimu, taka poysha jogar karmu
Shah Dilaor Ali koy London jaimu
Ja ache kopalete.⁸³⁹

[I spoke to my friend who has come from London. I have heard people go to London; take me along. I would be happy if I could go to London. I would see London, take the train that runs beneath the ground. London is a strange land; everyone is similarly dressed. There is no sadness and misery there; people live in peace. I hope to go to London, now that I have met you. Whatever you demand in return, I promise to give you those; take it down in writing. I will sell my land to gather funds. Shah Delwar Ali says that he will go to London, whatever lies in his fate.]

Britain has been a fantastical land to many in *desh*, especially Sylhet. Katy Gardner observed from her fieldwork in Sylhet that despite pull factors in the homeland, people who have never travelled beyond it pine for what she calls a “self-imposed exile”.⁸⁴⁰ Delwar’s opportunism on seeing his *Londoni* friend and initiative to channel his resources to reach the dreamland was no exception; in fact, this fully matches with Gardner’s narrative that “individual opportunism and enterprise [have been]...channelled towards attempting to go abroad...”.⁸⁴¹ In the context of Britain, David Goodhart labels the immigrants’ quest for

⁸³⁹ Baul Shah Delwar, *Kushiarar Teerey* (Prakkrito Prokash, 2015), 93.

⁸⁴⁰ Katy Gardner, “Desh-Bidesh: Sylheti Images of Home and Away,” *Man* 28, no. 1 (March 1993): 1.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid.*: 2.

upward mobility as the “British dream”.⁸⁴² However, taking ‘*London thaki aisa bondhu*’ as a lead, it is evident that it has not only been the quest to move beyond low-status self-employment that has fuelled the “British dream”, but often, a desire for more capital and money. For visiting *Bauls* like Shah Abdul Karim—who never lived in Britain permanently—social security and religious harmony in *bilat* can also be read as part of the British dream. At a time in the mid-1980s, when racist violence in Britain was at its peak, with the police often remaining silent spectators, Karim’s comparison of the British police to “*debota*” (god) and his rosy commentary of British society possibly did not come out of ignorance and Anglophilia, but in light of then ongoing violence, anarchy and corruption in Bangladeshi politics during the autocratic Ershad era:⁸⁴³

Shochokkhe dekhilam jaha bilate,
Taara shobai baash kore, ak bhalobashar jogote.
Bilate pulish jara, maanush noy debota taara,
Dinraat ghurafera kortechhe pothey pothey.
Khaena ghush nai durniti, shorol shanto shuddhomoti,
Janey shudhu prem priti, dhormo kormo koritey.
Ki shundor niti bidhan, shobar odhikar shoman,
Jar tar bhabe gaay gunogaan, moshjid mondir girjatey.
Sorbojonin shikkha byabosthaay, shikkhar alo shobai je paay,
Anonday mon bhore jay, eshob kotha bhabitey.
Gorey tulley shishu shontan, tara jey koto jotnobaan,
Chaay taader bhobishot kolyan uttom shomaj goritey.
Kon shomoy keu byaram holey, daktar aashey khobor diley,
Hashpataley rogi geley, rakhey param shantitey.
Laagey na taka poysha, shobai pay shuchikitsha,
Sheba jatna bhalobasha, bhul nai konn jaygate...
Kandena keu payter khudhaay, desher shomaj byabosthay,

⁸⁴² David Goodhart, *The British Dream: Successes and Failures of Post-War Immigration* (Atlantic Books, 2014), 108.

⁸⁴³ Peter J. Bertocci, “Bangladesh in 1985: Resolute against the Storms,” *Asian Survey* 26, no. 2 (February 1, 1986): 228.

Kukur biral rayshn paay, shorkar dae hishaab mazotey.

[What I witnessed in *bilat* is that everyone lives there in a world of love. The police in *bilat* are not humans; they are god. Day and night, they patrol the streets. They do not take bribes; there is no corruption. Innocent they are; they are only engaged in their duty and work. What lovely rule of law! Everyone has equal rights; they sing praises in their own way, in the mosque, temple and church. With an egalitarian system of education, everyone sees the light of knowledge. Thinking about these things, my heart gets filled with joy. With such care, they raise their children; they always think about creating the best society. Whenever someone falls ill, the doctor comes on call; the patient is treated in the hospital with love. Everyone receives treatment free of cost; there is no fault in their care and love...No one cries out of hunger due to the state's system. Even dogs and cats get rations, the government doles out in proportion.]

On a superficial level, this song seems counterintuitive to the generally dissenting nature of *Baula* literature; with Karim Baul endorsing the state of affairs in Britain, even expressing astonishment at the sculptures of Madame Tussauds, and comparing the “*raanir baari*” (Queen’s house) to “*shorgopuri*” (abode in heaven). Instead, Karim’s dissent is channelled towards the diaspora, where he observed religious ruptures and people running after self-interests:

*Musholmaan alem jara, dhormo kormey byasto tara,
Taader moddhye duti dhara cholitechen dimotey.
Keu doallin, keu joallin poren, bhaie bhaie bibaad koren,
Asholey keu ki paren, nijeke shamal ditey.
Moshjid madraja hoyeche, jaani na ki hobey paacheh,
Dhormio odhikar acheh, maik jogey ajaan ditey.
Hoyto keu diben gaali, aashol kotha jodi boli,
Choliteche doladoli moshjid madrajatey...*

[The Muslim leaders are busy with their religion; there are two schools among them. Brothers fight among themselves over ‘*doallin*’ and ‘*joallin*’.⁸⁴⁴ In reality, no one is able to control themselves. Mosques and madrasas have been built; who knows what is going to come out of it. People have the right to religion, and broadcast the *azaan* through microphones. If I say the truth, people will curse me; there is a lot of rivalry going on between mosques and madrasas.]

John Eade and David Garbin have written about the dominant discourse regarding migration among Bangladeshi Muslims—especially those from Sylhet—which has been viewed as a path to economic and symbolic success. The building of mosques and madrasas became the heart of the migrants’ idea of migration, creating better collective opportunities, which Eade and Garbin call the “migration miracle”.⁸⁴⁵ Competing interpretations of Islam became more rife among Bengali Muslims in Britain, particularly around the time when Karim wrote the song, simultaneously with the East London Mosque in Whitechapel nearing completion.⁸⁴⁶ Karim Baul’s song, published in one of the most widely circulated Bengali newspapers, would have sounded the alarm bells within the community.

Religious exclusivist ideas and the syncretism of *Baul-Fakir* philosophy have often not gone hand in hand. Kari Amir Uddin, one of the most well-known figures in the *Baula* world—as we have already seen in the previous section—has courted controversy as much as fame. According to Sumankumar Dash’s recent piece for the Bangladeshi daily, *Prothom Alo*, Amir Uddin was forced to take exile in Britain in 2004, after a fallout with religious extremists.⁸⁴⁷ Amir Uddin leads a quiet life, far away from the glare of the public eye, living out of a house

⁸⁴⁴ Here, Karim is referring to the intra-religious conflicts between the Sunnis and Wahabis that was rife in Sylhet in the 1980s, and spilled over to the diaspora. The ‘*doallin-joallin*’ controversy stemmed from the two schools of thoughts regarding the pronunciation of the thirteenth Arabic alphabet. The camp who believed ‘*doad*’ was the correct way referred themselves as ‘*doallin*’; others who preferred ‘*joad*’ were ‘*joallin*’. There was also a third view who took the pronunciation to be somewhere in the middle. Sakrito Noman has written a blogpost about this controversy in Bengali. See: Sokrito Noman, “ভাষার রাজনীতি, ভাষার সংস্কৃতি,” *Chharpatra*, May 8, 2019, chharpatra.com/ভাষার-রাজনীতি-ভাষার-সংস্কৃতি/3826.

⁸⁴⁵ John Eade and David Garbin, “Competing Visions of Identity and Space: Bangladeshi Muslims in Britain,” *Contemporary South Asia* 15, no. 2 (June 2006): 183.

⁸⁴⁶ *Ibid*: 188.

⁸⁴⁷ Sumankumar Dash, “Amir Uddiner Smritir Derai,” *Prothom Alo*, May 16, 2023.

in East London’s Dagenham. To his followers, the Dagenham residence is ‘Alampur’—named after Amir Uddin’s ancestral village—an attempt to replicate “home” in Amir Uddin’s largely exilic existence. Rarely accessible to anyone except his closest disciples, I was fortunate to establish direct contact after reaching him directly by phone. In the autumn of 2021, Amir Uddin asked me to pay him a visit at half eleven at night. He soon started talking about his first visits to Britain in 1983, 1985, and 1987, before settling with his family in 1993.⁸⁴⁸ Amir Uddin too has a *Londoni* song, ‘*Dekhlam Londoner shohorey*’ (As I saw in London town), narrating life in the city. At the very onset of the song, Amir Uddin possibly makes clear his allegiances to the Sufi principle of *marifat* with his analogy of London’s diverse population to the burning of different shades of lamps; the connection he draws is most likely to the practice of burning lamps at the tombs of saints, which *Pirs*, *Fakirs* and *Bauls* follow alike and is not allowed under Islamic law, *Shariyat*. Like Durbin and Karim, Amir Uddin is also blown away by the technological advancements of the West; the Underground and Madame Tussauds make an appearance here, too, as in Karim’s *Londoni* chronicle:

Dekhlam Londoner shohorey
Allah talaar leela shara bissher manush biraaj korey
Manush sada kala jaat bejaati nanan ronger jolchey baati
Tarai korche keramati ninda kori jarey...

Khushitey bhorey jay ontor Hithro bimaan bondor
Banaichey kariya shundor dekhbar moton karey
Choto boro uro jahaaj koto lakh hajarey
Urey parey diba nishi kothay jay key boltey parey...

Taoar brij araaq kul moteo korena bhul
Jahaaj jailey otumetik uthe jaay uparey...

⁸⁴⁸ Kari Amir Uddin, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 12 October 2021.

Du tin shat matir taley lain bashaiche tren chaley
Ek dui lain na dekhle ke bishash korte paarey
Matir nichey shara desh bhroman kortey paarey
Ilektronik tren egula ek miniter pore pore...

Badsha shomrat protapijoni naam kara chul daku
Prachin juger gyani guni obikol rupa dhorey
Mohatta Gandhireo dekchi duti ekkhaan pore
Ekeybarey jibita bujhay oijey Madam Tusher ghorey...

[As I saw in London town, people from all over the world live there. What Allah's magic! People, Black and White, of different races, lamps of different shades burn. They show their glorious feat, whom we slander... Seeing Heathrow Airport, my heart fills with joy. How beautifully they have built! Planes, small and big, in lakhs and hundreds take off day and night! Who knows where they are headed ... Tower Bridge is another, which does not err; it automatically goes up whenever a ship passes through... Two, three, hundred earths below, they have laid tracks; trains run there. Who can believe without seeing for themselves? Under the ground, one can travel across the country. These are electronic trains, arriving every minute... Emperors, valorous people, and ancient sages stand exactly like how they would. Mahatma Gandhi can be seen too; looks as if alive at the Madame Tussauds...]

Where Amir Uddin differs from Karim is that his *Londoni* song relays a reality with greater stoicism. Amir Uddin comes out as a more silent spectator, who keeps his agency largely detached from the narrative that he builds of *Londoni* life. However, in the mere laying out of observations, it is not difficult to discern his cryptic voice; during my night of interaction with Amir Uddin, I noticed him as a man of few words but very layered. Sudhir Chakraborty has written about the challenges of dating songs in his compendium of *deha tattva baul* songs due to the oral nature of their transmission.⁸⁴⁹ Even in the case of living composers—as in here—it sometimes gets a bit challenging to locate the exact time when it was written; disciples of

⁸⁴⁹ Chakraborty, ed., *Bangla Dehatoter Gaan*, 11.

Amir Uddin are yet to come up with a coherent answer. Most likely, Amir Uddin wrote this song only after having developed a good acquaintance with life in Britain. *'Dekhlam Londoner Shohorey'* does not view *bilat* as a dreamland. Rather, Karim's fragrant portrayal is fouled by Amir Uddin's scatological references. The technological prowess of the city comes in contrast to his wry description of the apparent lack of morality:

Londoner karent dekchi geley jaiteo parey
Gharer bhitar baksho thaakey poyscha charlei eshey pore
Onek jaater toilet nuiley paisha charley doraja khuley
Dui peni chariya diya jaitey hoy bhitorey...
Tar deshey dnaraiyya beshi ongshey lok peshab korey
Luta bosta paoa jayna kaaj shaarey toilet peparey...

Jar pokete taka achey jaay Pikadeli sarkaasey
Ei deshey mawder baar ache re bhai hajar hajar
Naari purush ekadharey jaay tar bhitorey
Bangalira sottor ordheker kom phirey
Oboshista shokoli jay mozaa paisey ar ki charey...

Chaibar mowton shobi achey bujhey lao ontorey
Meye purush galagali chuma chumi korey
Setha arob deshir bhodrota naash
Pikadelir kaam bajarey...

Londoner nei jaati bidhan odhikaarey shobai shomana
Mawd maagi ar jua prodaan unnoto shohorey
Daana kaata pori re bhai gulapi rong ghorey
Dekhle paap hoy na dekhleo naya budhay o chay aarey aarey...

[In London, the electricity may go. At homes, there are boxes where people need to put money to get it back. There are various kinds of toilets, where doors only open to people when they put two pennies. In their *desh*, most people urinate standing up.

There are no lotas here. People instead finish their job with toilet papers... People with deep pockets visit Piccadilly Circus. This country has bars in thousands. Men and women go in together. Less than half of the Bengalis turn their backs. The rest all go in; who wants to forego the fun... There is everything to fulfil desires; understand in your heart. Men and women kiss and curse. In Piccadilly's lust-market, the Arabs' etiquette is annihilated... London has no divisions; people have equal rights. Liquor, prostitutes and gambling rule in this developed city. In the pink room stands an angel with clipped wings. To see is sin, still people cannot resist; even the aged eye through side glances...]

This song offers a chance to connect more recent pasts with historic ones. Amir Uddin's portrayal of *Londoni* realities—which he perceived as far from ideal—back in the 1980s is at odds with his 2021 memories of the “*adi manush*” (the original people) of *bilat*. He rued about the lack of musical sensibility of the audiences of the younger generation, who are not as interested in the *Baula-Pir-Murshidi* songs as the appreciative and knowledgeable audiences before; he had stated to me explicitly, “today, give the young people a few tunes to dance to... they are happy with the alcohol, and women... that's all they understand.”⁸⁵⁰ Perhaps, Kari's comments came out of a deep concern for the future, a feeling of nostalgia, which, according to Svetlana Boym, is not necessarily about the past, and can not only be retrospective but also prospective.⁸⁵¹ Also, it speaks of an aspect of migrant memory that essentialises the idea of a past that was always better, obscuring many realities that remain unchanged over generations.

Amir Uddin's labelling of Piccadilly as “*kaam bajar*” is loaded. “*Kaam*” in Bengali can mean lust and desire—in an emotional sense—simultaneously. At the same time, Amir Uddin witnessed frolics in Piccadilly and Bengalis lining up for liquor; many in the community sought love and companionship. Instances of interracial marriages—mostly Bengali men

⁸⁵⁰ Kari Amir Uddin, 12 October 2021.

⁸⁵¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), xvi.

marrying White women—saw a decline with the later generation of migrants. The largely bachelor Bengali population began to be joined by women from *desh*, particularly in the 1970s. Generally speaking, it was around the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s when Bengali girls growing up in Britain started reaching marriageable age. Katy Gardner has noted that by the turn of the millennium, marriage had become one of the predominant routes for migration to Britain, primarily for Bangladeshi men who married British Bengali women, as well as the other way around.⁸⁵² However, besides just love and companionship, it was also the convenience of settling down in *bilat* that lured the bachelors from *desh* and *bidesh*. Bengali bachelors' yearning for British-Bengali brides has made it into the *Baula* repertoire. Rahim Uddin Ahmed, a London-based songwriter originating from the village of Deber Gaw in Sylhet's Sunamganj district, published a song text titled '*Bhaber shohor*' (City of Essences) in 1997.⁸⁵³ Among the one hundred songs published in the text, many are on the life stories of Bengali migrants; marriage is one of the themes Rahim Uddin has written about. The song, '*Sitijen maiyya*', is a *baula* expression of love as a route to British citizenship:

Sitijen maiyyar podo dhuli,
Pailey juray tapito prana,
Ei maiyyar uchillay London,
Gechey koto nojoan

Sitijen maiyya koto guni,
Ki korbo ar bornona,
Bangladesher koto shikkhito,
Ei meye paite deoana...

⁸⁵² Katy Gardner, "Death of a Migrant: Transnational Death Rituals and Gender among British Sylhetis," *Global Networks* 2, no. 3 (July 2002): 193.

⁸⁵³ Probasi Rahim Uddin, *Bhaber Sagor* (Self-published, 1997).

[Feet dust of the citizen girl heals the afflicted heart. So many men have gone to London drawn by the citizen girl. So talented is the citizen girl: to what extent does one describe? So many educated men of Bangladesh are mad to have such women in their lives...]

‘*Sitijen maiyya*’ particularly refers to Bengali women with British citizenship, wooing whom has proven difficult, even for men with educational qualifications. The narrative that most of these unions resulted more out of practicality and opportunism also finds place in this song:

*Ei maiyyader bodoulotey,
Koto jon hoichey shukhi,
Bhala kormer phol bujhena,
Sheshey korey chalaki,
Maiyyare banaiyya dukhi,
Araley jaay shonar chand...*

[So many have been content due to these women. Ignorant of their good deeds, many try to hoodwink. Hurting the women, the golden moon goes into hiding...]

It would be simplistic to say that immigration was the sole reason behind such marriages. Katy Gardner has drawn parallels from Katherine Charsley’s work on marriages within the British-Pakistani community to suggest that “emotional ties of kinship” were part of the reason behind these transnational alliances.⁸⁵⁴ Yet from the anecdotal evidence that I have come across, I would reframe Gardner’s argument. Often, these arranged marriages have fostered feelings of love and a sense of bonding. However, it is indeed true that without the prospect of immigration, the question of arranging these marriages would not have risen in the first place.

⁸⁵⁴ Katy Gardner, “Keeping Connected: Security, Place, and Social Capital in a ‘Londoni’ Village in Sylhet,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 3 (September 2008): 477–95.

Rahim Uddin, who migrated to London in his youth, can be considered one of the many aspirational cosmopolitan *Bauls*, somewhat dislocated from the so-called cult by not being initiated into formal discipleship, and a comparatively subdued presence in the known *ashor* circuits. Rahim is now lost in oblivion within the present-day *Baula-Pir-Murshidi* networks in *bilat*. He would have been a better-known name in the late 1990s, after the release of cassette albums in London—namely *Jafar Shar Shoney* (In honour of Jafar Shah), *Bhaber shagor* and *Kego tumi* (Who are you)—at the insistence of his friends. Whether Rahim’s *Baul* songs were “authentic” is difficult to tell. This is because he was not a self-styled *Baul*; in fact, he shied away from the label itself in the book. Lineage and discipleship are vital tickets to genuineness in the *Baul* ecology. Rahim grew up attending the weekly *ashors* by *Bauls* and *Fakirs* at his nana (maternal grandfather) Jafar Shah’s shrine, but only partook as a listener. Taking hints from Mahmud Ali’s preface in *Bhaber Shagor*, Rahim’s reception as a *Baul* becomes clear. Mahmud, an assistant teacher at the Bir Gaon Imdadul Haque High School in Sunamganj, mentions him as “an outstanding soldier of the Bauls continuing with his duty of composing in a foreign land, far away from the spotlight”.⁸⁵⁵

⁸⁵⁵ Rahim Uddin. *Bhaber Shagor*.

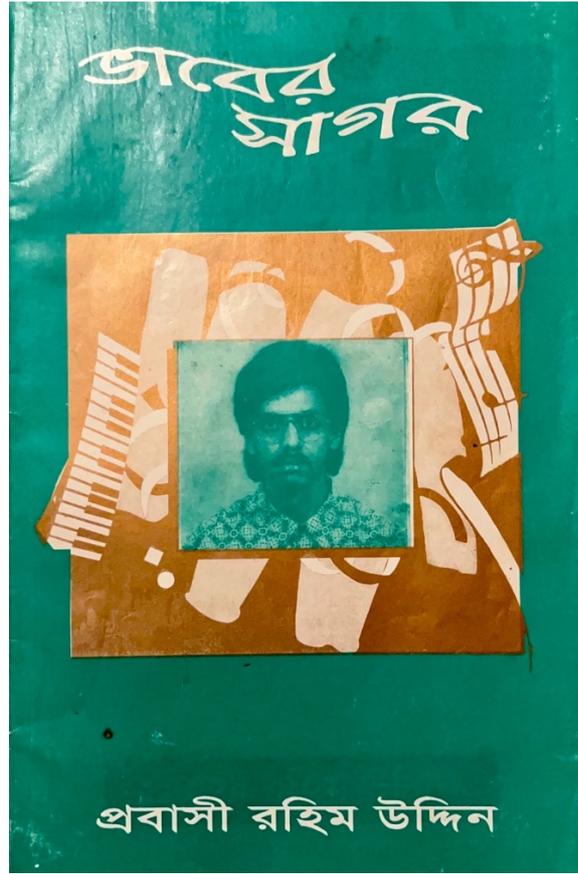


Illustration 4.7: Front cover of *Bhaber shagor* by 'Probasi' (émigré) Rahim Uddin.

While questions of authenticity may arise with figures like Rahim, they become even more complicated with individuals like Faruque Ahmed, one of my primary interlocutors, who has appeared throughout the thesis in multiple capacities, including as a local historian and a restaurateur. Emigration has not meant disengagement from *desh*. In fact, the *Londoni* status of the migrant has arguably helped fuel ambitions towards the publication of *Baula*-style song lyrics leading up to the millennium. When I initially got in touch with Faruque in 2019 for further contacts, he had declared himself to be quite distanced from music. As my visits to his home intensified over the month, peeled-off layers of his past life seemed to resurface to the fore. Chatting away casually in his personal library, Faruque revealed that he was, in fact, involved with music, not least in the capacity of an empanelled songwriter at Radio

Bangladesh, while simultaneously running his pharmacy business in Chhatak, Sylhet, in the 1980s. Five years after migrating to London, Ali Ahmed Chowdhury of Video Times in London's Cannon Street published his book of songs, '*E Matir Baul*' (Baul of this land). The title of the book, taken from one of his songs, hints at a self-scribed attachment to the *Baul*. The late "peoples' poet" from Bharthokhola, Sylhet, Dilwar Khan's preface for the book can be read as a sort of clarification that Faruque is himself not a "*Baul*". Dilwar sympathetically situates Faruque's initiative to publish his songs—primarily written in *desh*—as a commendable act of diasporic love for the "motherland". In Dilwar's public opinion for Faruque, the latter stood as someone who, like many commoners in Bengal, had taken to his heart the *bhab*—the essence and nature—of the *Pirs* and the *Bauls*, and not just turned towards wealth and craving sensual pleasures. Having grown up listening to the *Bauls*, *Pirs*, and *Fakirs* from childhood, yet not actively involved in the *Baula* universe, it is this juxtaposition of distance and affinity that makes figures like Rahim and Faruque easier to relate to as the "amateur" *Baul*.

After reading his song lyrics, it seemed natural to me that Faruque would have continued his habit of writing songs in London, whether it be in a personal capacity. The many times I popped the question, Faruque's answer came in the negative, with him citing that the burden of finding a way to settle in Britain, along with the pressures of working in restaurants, had squashed any chances of songwriting. In April 2023, while scouring decades of dust at Ahmed's personal library, I accidentally got my hands on a few unassuming, yellowed diaries. Sensing some potential, I did not hesitate to interrupt Ahmed, who was busy tidying up his ongoing book manuscript. What turned out to be an epiphanic moment, Faruque told me that we had just discovered some of his lost personal diaries. He had indeed continued to write songs in London. Rummaging through his diaries full of unpublished songs, and while driving back to East London later that day, Faruque recollected anecdotes that he had shared

never before. According to Faruque, at the peak of his songwriting career, he was known as “Baul Faruque” within the community, adding that the litterateur, Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, would have been able to vouch for the fact if he were still alive. It is difficult to ascertain the accuracy of Ahmed’s rediscovered memory. If this were indeed true, there is little doubt that Faruque would have accepted this title with pleasure. Faruque’s inclination towards *Baula* culture is indicative of a surge in *bilati* diasporic aspirations to becoming amateur *Bauls*, similar to the late-eighteenth-century Calcutta-centric phenomenon of lower-middle-class Hindu Bengalis adopting *Baul*-style melodies, and composing so-called “fake Baul songs”.⁸⁵⁶

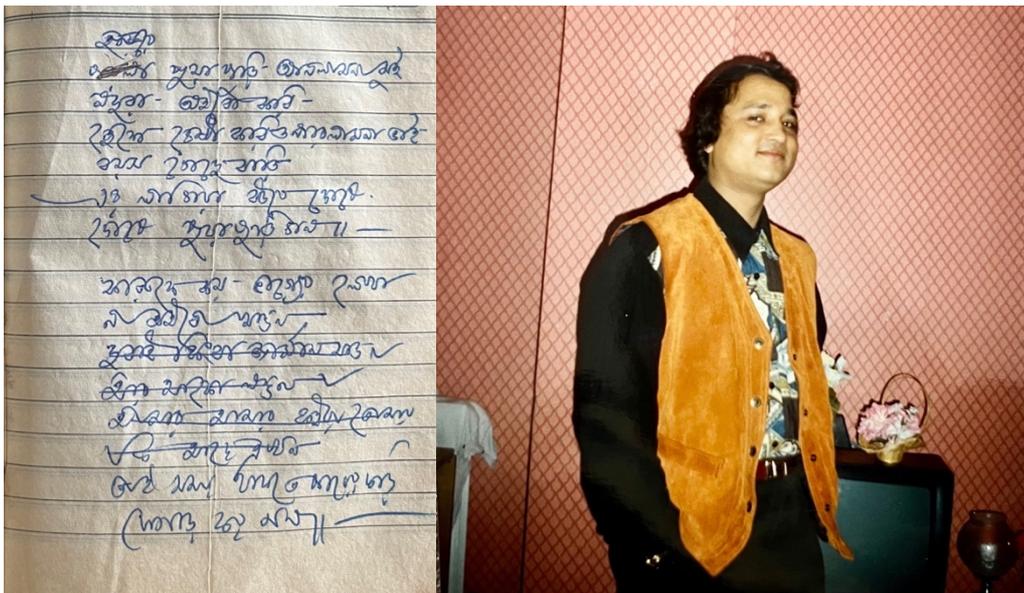


Illustration 4.8 (L): A folio from Faruque’s retrieved diary of songs written in London. Photograph by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya; Illustration 4.9 (R): Faruque in his early London days. (Source: Personal collections of Faruque Ahmed).

The struggle for permanent settlement in Britain, something Faruque had believed until recently, hindered his musical imagination, a theme he explored as a restaurateur. Below the

⁸⁵⁶ Jeanne Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 29.

song remains scribbled the date, time and location when he had birthed the song, “25 June, 10 Palace Gate Road, London S22, 3 am”, a time when his visa had run out and was awaiting an extension. Faruque’s song is an impassioned outflow of emotions, vacillating between betrayal of expectations, panic and desire for citizenship:

Ei dur probashe kyamon achirey, karey janai e khobor
Bhishar shomoy chaila gechey, extenshono hoyni mor
Achi ami Lodoner shohor.
Emoni amar din katey, masher por mash
Asylum chaiya achi, achi porobash
Thaka-khaoar nai thikana, naire barighor...

[I am living in this faraway land; whom do I tell my plight. My visa has expired, extension is due. Yet I am in this London town. Days and months go by as it is. I have sought asylum in this faraway land. I do not have an address, a home...]

“Baul” Faruque’s repertoire is parabolic in many ways. Written in the middle of the night while still on his restaurant duty, Faruque told me that through the song, he did not just want to expose his fears of getting deported. Going beyond, he wanted to use his life story as a cautionary warning to others in a similar flux. Later in the song, Ahmed paints the moral burdens of the migrants, who are expected to send remittances to *desh*, in spite of personal financial struggles:

(Tobu) bari thaika phon ashey, taka chaiya
Kaaj nai kaam nai, kare koi bujhaiya
Amar dukkho keu bujhena, bhabe ami takarghor.

[Still, I get phone calls from home asking for monetary support. Whom do I confide in that I am out of work? No one understands my sorrow, they think I am a building of money.]

Thematically, unlike Durbin Shah's *Londoni* song, '*Ei dur probashe*' might be lacking the esoteric metaphors of the body, those usually considered to be a litmus test of *Baul* literature. Woven into the harsh uncertainties in the migrant's life, the sorrows of separation are rife. Despite no direct theological reference, it is difficult to ignore the resemblances with the literature of *bicchedi gaan* in *Baula* opuses. The phenomenon of publication of *Baul*-themed song texts is not *bilat*-centric. Sudhir Chakraborty, in his '*Baul Fakir Katha*' (Tales of Bauls and Fakirs), has pinpointed the mass desire for inclusion into the word "*Baul*", be it practitioners from different cults like *shahebdhonis*, or *kortabhojas*, to name a few.⁸⁵⁷ Chakraborty has mentioned his collection of "*halka chaler gaan*" (light songs) written by middle-class people, whose songs neither contain *Baul tottwo* (philosophy), nor come out of *Baul* practice. Despite all this, Chakraborty labels them to be "*shikkhito moddhyobitter baul gaan*" (*Baul* songs of the educated middle-class), further problematising notions of *Baula* authenticity.⁸⁵⁸ Creations of songwriters like Faruque, who received a college education in *desh* and seemingly enjoyed allied identities with those of the "*Baul*", can arguably be placed under Chakraborty's classification of *Baul* songs of the educated lower-middle-class.

Carola Erika Lorea has summarised that by the second half of the twentieth century, the image of the *Baul* as wandering minstrels singing songs of love and devotion had begun to be challenged in the academy; what preceded has been the consideration of the involvement of materialist practice, rural, marginalised backgrounds to be the "authentic" traits of the *Baul*;⁸⁵⁹ Lorea has further probed how increasing globalisation and technologisation have supposedly played a role in this phenomenon. With migration added to the already-muddy mix, notions of *Baula* authenticity require even more nuanced lenses. Despite having

⁸⁵⁷ Sudhir Chakraborty, *Baul Fakir Katha* (2001; repr., Ananda Publishers, 2012), 27.

⁸⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵⁹ Carola Erika Lorea, "Searching for the Divine, Handling Mobile Phones," *History and Sociology of South Asia* 8, no. 1 (January 2014): 64.

journeyed to cosmopolitan and industrialised settings in Britain from rural backgrounds, the *Baul* in Britain have still led marginalised lives in a way, often struggling to make ends meet, and yet ascended in terms of social status and monetary power back in *desh*. Contrary to the preponderance of bodily practices of the *Baul* in scholarship, it has remained taboo in *bilat*, perhaps given the performance of *Baul* culture in domesticated spaces. What I have gathered from fieldwork so far is that the practice of the body in a poetic sense has been perceived as a signpost of serious involvement with its philosophy, rather than a literal one.

Extra-Bengali spaces

In May 2023, at the invitation of one of my project collaborators, Val Harding, I attended a performance by the Grand Union Orchestra (GUO) at St. John on Bethnal Green. Co-founded by the late Tony Haynes in 1982, the East London-based orchestra, in his words, “has been making music that reflects and absorbs diversity...to represent the ever-changing demographic and cultural musical influences that thrive in Britain today.”⁸⁶⁰ Presenting a mix of cultures, Haynes came to introduce a Lalon Fakir song ‘*Lalon ki jaat*’, highlighting the message of humanity and unity of the “Sufi”. The piece began with Haynes on the piano, Yousuf Ali Khan on the tabla, the string and percussion section, and chorus singers courting the recorded vocals of Akash Sultan. ‘*Lalon ki jaat*’ is part of GUO’s repertoire; I had heard them perform this, too, on the occasion of the golden jubilee of Bangladesh at the British Library in December 2021.⁸⁶¹ The Swadhinata Trust recorded an erstwhile performance of the same in Leeds; the trust’s website mentions Lalon to be a “*baul*”, not a “*sufi*”.⁸⁶² Incubated in multicultural settings, and performed by Black and White musicians—mostly non-

⁸⁶⁰ “History of the GUO,” Grand Union Orchestra, 2014, <https://www.grandunion.org.uk/history>.

⁸⁶¹ The British Library, “Songs of Freedom Celebrating Fifty Years of Bangladesh,” *The British Library*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.bl.uk/events/songs-of-freedom-celebrating-fifty-years-of-bangladesh>.

⁸⁶² “Grand Union Orchestra - Swadhinata Trust Organisation,” Swadhinata Trust Organisation, December 16, 2019, <https://swadhinata.org.uk/grand-union-orchestra/>.

Bengalis—there are added sonic layers of identity, instead of the “traditional” suite of instruments like the *ektara*, *dotara*, *dofki*, *khamok*, and *behala*. GUO’s appropriation of the *Baul-Fakir* is not novel by any means. At the same time, *Baula* soundworlds were developing within Bengali networks through the 1960s and 1970s, the figure of the *Baul* started gaining currency in mainstream British society: the extra-Bengali spaces.

Clinton Bennett has argued that *Baula* consciousness initially travelled to the West with Tagore’s desexualised and sanitised interpretations of the term.⁸⁶³ Lila Ray credits Tagore for raising awareness about the *baul* even within the *bhadralok* circles in Bengal.⁸⁶⁴ Decentring *Bauls*’ bodily practices to overcoming lust—their route to becoming humans full of love (*moner manush*)—the Tagorean *Baul* instead talks of a divine that is human, a theme that ran through Tagore’s Hibbert Lectures titled ‘Religion of Man’ at Oxford in 1930.⁸⁶⁵ One of the central figures in the propagation of *Baul* philosophy in the West has been Purna Das Baul, whose popularity cuts across cultures. Purna Das’s widely reported encounter with Bob Dylan via the latter’s manager, Albert Grossman, in 1965 is often considered to be the genesis of the transmission of *Baul* music in the music festival circuits globally. However, the widespread dissemination and reception of *Baul* music and thought occurred as part of a broader package of Indic mysticism. Bennett identifies linkages of Tagore, Allen Ginsberg, Dylan, George Harrison, and Mick Jagger in the internationalisation of *Baul* music. One of the events that possibly got Jagger increasingly drawn to broad-brushed Indic spiritualistic ideas of the Body-Mind-Soul—and *Baula* as a result—was the visit of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi to the coastal

⁸⁶³ Clinton Bennett, “Promoting Social and Religious Harmony: Bāul’s Origin, Migration West and Roji Sarker’s Performance in the British Bangladeshi Diaspora,” in *Cultural Fusion of Sufi Islam: Alternative Paths to Mystical Faith*, ed. Sarwar Alam (Routledge, 2019), 80.

⁸⁶⁴ Lila Ray, “The Bauls of Bengal,” *Journal of the Indian Musicological Society* 1, no. 2 (January 1, 1970): 24.

⁸⁶⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* (Monkfish Book Publishing, 1931).

town of Bangor in northwest Wales in August 1967;⁸⁶⁶ the Beatles too had travelled to Wales to attend Maharishi's workshop on "transcendental meditation".⁸⁶⁷

The percolation of *Baula* culture into Britain's public consciousness cannot be segregated from Bengali diasporic activities. Purna Das's stay in London sparked a friendship with Abu Sayeed Chowdhury—the leading activist for Bangladeshi independence in Britain, whom we met in chapter 3—who invited him to a charity recital in Hyde Park during the 1971 Bangladesh War. By 1971, Purna had already begun to gain prominence after his six-month tour of America under the sponsorship of Grossman. Oral accounts from multiple sources, including Toron Miah and Shanur Miah, suggest that Purna Das's LP records did enjoy a listener base in East End London, although nowhere close to the informally recorded tapes of Shah Abdul Karim and Amir Uddin. Perhaps the listenership cannot just be attributed to Das's soaring celebrity; Das's involvement in the war from London must have been a factor. In a telephonic interview, the now-nonagenarian Purna Das recounted his relationship with Chowdhury:

I sang a few songs before the independence of Bangladesh. Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, who later became the President of Bangladesh, used to love me very much. I was a resident of London for almost two and a half years. I had booked the Rainbow House,⁸⁶⁸ where I was doing a play with participants from eighteen countries. The play ran for a very long time. It is here that Chowdhury came and invited me to sing for independence at Hyde Park. He took my son Dibyendu on his lap for a very long time.⁸⁶⁹

⁸⁶⁶ "Music Gives Way to Meditation with Himalayan Mystic," *North Wales Weekly News*, September 1, 1967.

⁸⁶⁷ For more on this trip, see: "The Beatles Travel to Bangor with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi," The Paul McCartney Project, 2023, <https://www.the-paulmccartney-project.com/1967/08/the-beatles-in-bangor/#:~:text=In%20late%20August%201967%2C%20the>.

⁸⁶⁸ He also mentioned about what he pronounced as the *Raabon* House.

⁸⁶⁹ Interview with Purna Das Baul. 20 May 2023. I particularly thank Moushumi Bhowmik and Dibyendu Das Baul 'Bapi' for making this conversation possible.

Purna Das also performed at the Albert Hall to raise funds for the Bangladesh Liberation Movement.⁸⁷⁰ According to the eldest son of Purna Das, Krishnendu Das alias Babu Kishan, it was at the Hyde Park charity concert that Jagger heard Purna for the first time, which led to the commencement of their collaborative journey.⁸⁷¹ Two years later, in 1973, Jagger produced an album by Purna Das titled '*Jai Bangla: Bauls of Bengal*'.

In 1971, the iconic logo of Jagger's Rolling Stones was released: a tantra-inspired image of the tongue of the Hindu goddess, Kali. The following year, the Rolling Stones were part of a theatrical production, 'Lila': The Divine Game, alongside Olivier Boelen, Tony Kent, Michael Butler, and The Rainbow. Staged at London's Roundhouse, 'Lila' was described as "a ritualistic spectacle around the Bauls of Bengal incorporating Tantric concepts, yoga, music and Kathakali dance, as seen through the eyes of a small group of Western actors (disciples)."⁸⁷² Purna's mentioning of "Rainbow" and "Raabon" raises the question whether Purna was himself involved with 'Lila'. Most likely not, because of two reasons. 'Lila' ran from 7 February 1972, nearly two months after Bangladesh had secured independence; Purna performed at Hyde Park in 1971, so his account of meeting Chowdhury at the play does not add up. More importantly, Purna's name is nowhere to be found as part of the cast; instead, Narayan Das, Shyam Das, Gosto Gopal Dass, Hemanta Karmakar and Dilip Banerjee formed 'The Bauls of Bengal'.⁸⁷³ The *Bauls* were projected as a main feature of publicity, with the poster labelling 'Lila' as "the ritualistic musical spectacle featuring the Bauls of Bengal".⁸⁷⁴

⁸⁷⁰ "Purnadas Baul & Dibeyendu Das Baul," Archive.org, 2016,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110917091947/http://www.baulsamrat.com/tours.htm>.

⁸⁷¹ Viral Bhayani, "Baul Bowls Jagger Over," The Times of India (Times Of India, April 6, 2003),

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/stones-in-india/news/baul-bowls-jagger-over/articleshow/42766765.cms>.

⁸⁷² *The Stage*, February 3, 1972.

⁸⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷⁴ '*Lila*' poster, Archives of the Roundhouse.

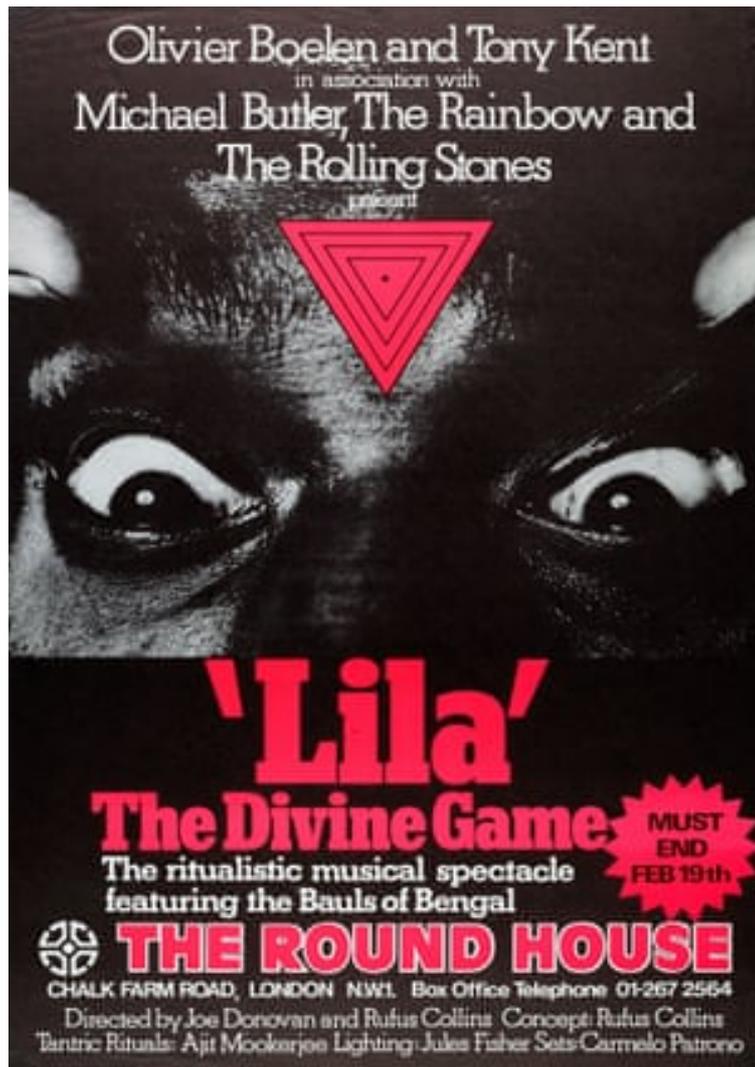


Illustration 4.10: A poster of 'Lila'. (Source: The Roundhouse.)

The “small group of Western actors” were reunited members of the experimental theatre troupe, Living Theatre: Rufus Collins, Leonardo Treviglio and Axel Hyppolite. After disbanding, the trio travelled to India to learn about Hatha yoga, Kathakali, and Tantric rituals. Involvement of the *Bauls* in ‘Lila’ came through the Rolling Stones. *Baula* performativity in these exhibitionistic spaces was in stark contrast to the previously discussed diasporic networks of Kacha Mian, Abdul Lotif and Tauris Mian. While ‘Lila’ attempted to offer Western audiences “an awareness of spontaneity and freedom into the universe” through a theatricalisation of the union of “female energy with the male principal”, the

largely insular homely spaces of the *Baula ashors* were generally spaces of re-evoking kinship and expressing nostalgia for the homeland. Unlike the representation of the *Bauls'* lives in 'Lila' as emancipatory, the lived realities of the performers and audiences in the *bilati Baula-Pir-Murshidi* spheres were entangled in the migrants' struggles for livelihood, encircled in industrial settings and bound by work contracts.

It is likely through 'Lila' that *Baul* music garnered considerable attention from the British national press for the first time. As was the case with Rajeshwari Dutta's vocal recitals during the Tagore Centenary, a similarly glaring cultural gap led to misinterpretations of *Baul* culture. Michael Coveney, in his review of 'Lila' for the *Financial Times*, wrote about the Bauls of Bengal, whom he described as "a radiant, enchanting group".⁸⁷⁵ Generally positive about the production, praising its honest intentions and its appeal to wider audiences, following excerpts on the *Bauls* and sitar playing by Ravi Shankar's disciple, Pramod Kumar, from the review reveal how they appeared to the uninitiated 'Western' eye:

*At first things did not bode at all well. I personally think of sitars as I think of dentists' drills and bagpipes, and after a long introduction, a guru, amidst a flurry of Urdu wailing from the Bauls, took us into his temple; it was just that and no more. No great effort was made to include the audience in the fun. One felt like an orthodox Jew attending a Roman Catholic High Mass sung in Latin...Some man this guru...What humour and saintliness gleamed behind his gargoyles features! I loved him. And as he led the dance, the Bauls took it up and spun ecstatically around the auditorium.*⁸⁷⁶

Exoticisation of the *Bauls* as exuberant is also apparent in Rosemary Say's review for *The Sunday Telegraph*, although it is doubtful to what extent she enjoyed the performances, given that the *ektara* possibly reminded her of plumbing:

⁸⁷⁵ *Financial Times*, February 8, 1972.

⁸⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

*It is peaceful, agreeable to watch, totally incomprehensible and much enlivened by the music of The Bauls, an ebullient troupe who play instruments emitting the sounds of faulty plumbing with much gusto and charm.*⁸⁷⁷

Ironically, “plumbing” could have been a humorous euphemism for the scatological, a nod to the *baula* practice of the “four moons”, namely, consuming semen, menstrual blood, urine and faeces, symbolic of reassimilation of bodily secretions.⁸⁷⁸ However, this is unlikely, given Rosie Say was situated far apart from the worlds of the *Baul*; she joined the *Sunday Telegraph* as a television and film critic after having escaped from Nazi-occupied France during the Second World War.⁸⁷⁹ Irving Wardle, the distinguished theatre critic, too, found aquatic associations to the songs of the “band of gypsy musicians” in his review for *The Times*; unlike Coveney, he saw less of a point in this whole endeavour, which he thought to be an “exotic brevity”:⁸⁸⁰

...and the boisterous Bauls, who bounce through the cheerful-sounding songs (but who knows?) plucking and striking their folksy instruments, including one percussive gourd that emits rhythms like glugging water.

For Robin Denselow, a journalist and broadcaster specialising in music and politics, it was the *baul* who solely stood out in *‘Lila’*; his write-up for *The Guardian* was titled ‘BAULS OF BENGAL at the Roundhouse’. Denselow almost completely focused on the musical aspects of the production, expressing content that *‘Lila’* was far from a gimmick. More appreciative than other critics, Denselow’s description of the *Bauls* still reduced them to their choreographic aspects:

⁸⁷⁷ *The Sunday Telegraph*, February 13, 1972.

⁸⁷⁸ Jeanne Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 225.

⁸⁷⁹ Nick Gutteridge, “Escenic,” *The Telegraph* (*The Telegraph*, September 11, 2012), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatlife/9528073/A-daring-escape-from-Nazi-occupied-France.html?iframe=true&width=90%&height=90%>.

⁸⁸⁰ *The Times*, February 8, 1972.

For the most part, Rock music has got over its obsession with India. The days of the Maharishi are thankfully over, and the sitar is no longer a fashionable gimmick. The hangers-on have left off, but the few true enthusiasts left have gone the whole way. “Lila”...has certainly done that...Enough that sections of the mime are amusing, even if others are somewhat dull, and music, though low key, is excellent throughout. In the end, the Bauls of Bengal who make the whole thing worthwhile—swirling, chanting, banging, scraping and plucking a variety of unlikely primitive instruments. But still, they might have been better in a solo concert.⁸⁸¹

While *Baula* culture evolved in Britain within the private spaces of the Bengali diaspora from the 1960s, but more intensively from the 1970s, *Baul* performance in homely environments cannot be just restricted to the Bengali community. Chris Jagger, brother of Mick, wrote about a lovely Christmas memory in the *Daily Mail* when he had hosted a group of bauls at the request of Rufus Collins.⁸⁸² Though Chris guessed the year to be 1973, it is likely to be the Christmas of 1970, as he had arrived in Stargroves—the Victorian mansion in Hampshire that Mick had purchased, and later became their recording home—to find the Stones finishing the *Sticky Fingers* album. It is possible that the eight *Bauls* that Chris had hosted were part of ‘*Lila*’. The Jagers’ “house party” with the *Bauls* in the snooker room of their mansion could not be more distant from the diasporic *Baula ashors* in restaurants and houses. Stargroves became a site of intermingling between cultures, but celebrations through food and camaraderie were common to what was happening inside the migrants’ spaces. Chris recounts the *Bauls* having arrived in their “bright, orange robes”. The *gerua*—saffron robes—has been the attire of many *Bauls*; they would not have gone out of their way to dress themselves in saffron robes. However, it is true that the resplendent attire caught attention in the West in general and informed notions of *Baula* identity in these extra-Bengali spaces.

⁸⁸¹ *The Guardian*, February 8, 1972.

⁸⁸² *Daily Mail*, December 24, 1998.

From my field experiences, I have not found costume to be considered a crucial part of *Baula-Pir-Fakiri* identities in British Bengali spaces; Kacha Mian personally stressed the importance of the guru in *Baula* thought, which finds expression in one of his songs where he questioned the authenticity of the motley claiming themselves as ‘*Bauls*’. Even in a private Christmas party, the *Bauls* were in a way playing to an identity that Western societies—and before not long, the *bhadralok* classes in Bengal—at large were coming to know of. The following excerpts from Chris’s article give us a rare close-up at the element of awe, wonder and at the same time, warmth, with which the *Bauls* were received by the audience, including invited villagers from East Wood, besides Rufus Collins, and Mick and his mother:

...Arriving at the ‘big house’ in their Sunday best, the villagers entered a room the size of a cottage to be served by long-haired hippies and greeted by dark black faces in the shape of the Bauls. Many villagers had never been in a room with black people, let alone such exotic creatures as The Bauls... The snooker room, I later learned, became the focus of another form of entertainment that Christmas. In the cupboard where the cues were kept, some of The Bauls were introduced to corrupt Western ways by an amorous lass from the village... Soon my Welsh musician friend, Dave Pierce, tinkled on the grand piano and The Bauls gathered on the floor in a circle and started to play their devotional songs. The hymns picked up tempo and damarus (small hand drums) were whirled, tablas drums were tapped, sarods (stringed instruments) were plucked and the sound of the ektara – an amazing one-stringed instrument – filled the hall. As the songs were tossed from one singer to another and the chorus taken up by all, the sound increased and The Bauls rose to dance, stamping their bare feet and shaking their ankle bells in time. For a moment, the cultural gap looked ominous, but caught up in the spirit and, as always, ready to shake a leg, my mother began to rattle a tambourine and dance, aided by Mrs Jones, who ran the local shop. As the sherry flowed and the laughter rang around the hall, runners were dispatched to remove half-burned turkeys from ovens in various parts of the village. Eventually they all departed, leaving the 20 of us to our own Christmas dinner. Tables had to be arranged in the hall and, as the Indians were used to their own food, it was an unusual meal... My mother also insisted everyone try her pudding. The Bengali contingent were about to eat it when they discovered it contained mincemeat, whereupon a lengthy discussion ensued as to whether mincemeat contained meat and, if not, where it got its name. Later, The Bauls’ dancing master stepping tipsily down the large staircase and, picking up the drum sticks to play on the kit, said:

‘Where is the Johnny Walker?’, only to reply to himself *‘That lady has taken it.’* He nodded sagely and indicated my partner Vivian. I think he realised that he had drunk enough.⁸⁸³

What we see inside the exclusive environs of Stargroves reflected how the *Baul* was seen in the British public sphere. Sanatan Das led his *Baul* quartet as part of the *Sounds of India*, held at the Clifton College Theatre in Bristol and the Hindu Temple in Nottingham in February 1985.⁸⁸⁴ Sanatan’s ensemble was featured alongside Sadiq Khan Manganiyar from Rajasthan. Nigel Summerley’s report on the *Bauls* was, in a similar vein, a reductionist perception of “life” and “exuberance” from their songs and dance. Interestingly, for Summerley, the “instruments echoing the cries of the singers – were strangely reminiscent of blues forms.” While other *Bauls* started visiting Britain and outside India, Purna Das kept returning to Britain, supposedly for the “London jazz festival” in 1977, and in 1982 and 1983.⁸⁸⁵ If the year cited is accurate, Purna’s appearance at the jazz festival might have been at the autumn Jazz Week, again at the Roundhouse.⁸⁸⁶ However, I have not yet been able to locate any archival records of this performance. During my telephonic conversation with Purna Das, when I asked him about his most memorable performances in Britain, he brought up his performance at the Royal Albert Hall, which he considers a major milestone in his career.⁸⁸⁷ This happened on 5 March 1986—a year after Sanatan’s tour—when Purna was invited to present ‘Baul Songs from Bengal’ at ‘Chingari: A celebration of Asian Popular Culture’, funded by the Greater London Council; Runa Laila, Iqbal Bano Reshma, Shabana Azmi, Zakir Hussain and Sultan Khan were among fellow artistes.⁸⁸⁸

⁸⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁴ *Bristol Evening Post*, February 15 and 16, 1985.

⁸⁸⁵ “Purnadas Baul & Dibeyendu Das Baul,” Archive.org, 2016,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20100917091947/http://www.baulsamrat.com/tours.htm>.

⁸⁸⁶ *Westminster and Pimlico News*, November 4, 1977.

⁸⁸⁷ Purna Das Baul, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 20 May 2023.

⁸⁸⁸ *The Guardian*, February 25, 1986.

Prestigious fixtures added to Purna's towering fame, but they also raised questions of the genuineness of how *Baula* culture was being represented outside India. At the Kenduli fair of *Bauls* and *Fakirs* in West Bengal, the veteran Rameshwar Das Baul had expressed disapproval at *Bauls*' glossy attires and gimmickry with the *khamok*, in response to Aditya Mukherjee's query on *Baula* authenticity.⁸⁸⁹ Many *Bauls* had conveyed reservations with Purna Das, accusing him of losing the essence of the *Baul* that his father, Nabani Das, had.⁸⁹⁰ Chakraborty's distinction between the "*gayak Bauls*"—who sing and perform the musical repertoire but do not essentially live their materialistic philosophies—and the "*Sadhak Bauls*"—the practitioners of the philosophy, for whom the music is one of the means to end—is useful in how Purna has been received. Whether he succeeded in representing the 'real' *Baul* has also been questioned by Bengalis in Britain. There are several instances that I can recall. One evening at the *Surma* office, during an informal conversation with Ahmed Moyez, the topic of Purna Das came up. Without explicitly referring to Purna, Moyez also expressed frustration at how singers in colourful dresses have come to be known as "*bauls*" in the media over the years, transnationally. As in almost all of our conversations, Moyez went nostalgic about the simplicity of his grandfather, a *pir* in Syedpur, Sylhet. In the autumn of 2018, on the way back to his Stratford residence from a music rehearsal for Durga Puja, Himangshu Goswami went on to the extent that it was only in eastern Bengal and Sylhet that folk melodies had diversity, unlike Purna Das's songs, which to him have seemed monotonous. For Himangshu, more than the visuals, the repertoire was the issue. After my late-night interview with Amir Uddin, Rana Amiri had offered me a lift from 'Alampur' to Bethnal Green when I popped the question of whether they listened to *Bauls* from West Bengal, especially Purna Das. Rana's reply was ambiguous. He said that he liked listening to Purna's

⁸⁸⁹ Chakraborty, *Bakir Fakir*, 110.

⁸⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

records, but for him, the compositions of Amir Uddin carried more meaning and appealed to him personally because they were set in Hindustani ragas.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, *Baul* performances in Britain's 'world' and 'Asian' music spaces rose manifold. The 1990s would see a further increase. Despite the 1990s not being a focus of my thesis, it is pertinent to mention them summarily, so as not to paint an abrupt picture. Purna Das and his group were made a part of WOMAD held at Rivermead, Reading in July 1994.⁸⁹¹ Earlier that year, he would be invited on a six-week residency in Birmingham funded by the Arts Council and West Midlands Arts, as part of the SAMPAD South Asian Arts Festival. Purna Das was a star *Baul* in Britain. Terry Grimley, in his review of the festival, dubbed Purna a "celebrity".⁸⁹² Likewise, Deepa Pathi in her report on the SAMPAD event drew attention to Purna's 'King of Baul' title, and how, according to her was "instrumental in reviving the tradition of story-telling to music in India and abroad."⁸⁹³ In December 1996, Purna and his youngest son, Bapi, were on the 'Asian music festival', Global Spirit, the first London WOMAD Weekend, at the Barbican Centre. Clubbed as part of the generic label of 'Asian music', it remains questionable to what extent the esoteric philosophies of *Baula* thought could have been kept at the fore of these performances. As my telephonic chat with Purna Das progressed, he recalled his performances at the BBC and numerous recitals in different villages and towns of Britain. I asked what he thought about the British audience. The unconditional praise that followed seems to be in defence of the seriousness of his art:

Brilliant! Fantastic! They are so full of life. I have no words to say. They love villages, and respect bauls. They are eager to listen to what the baul has to say. More importantly, they are interested in

⁸⁹¹ *The Stage*, July 21, 1994.

⁸⁹² *Birmingham Daily Post*, March 19, 1994.

⁸⁹³ *Leicester Mercury*, March 11, 1994.

*learning about the intricacies of baul tattwo. Following myself, many have travelled. They have tried to speak about tattwo, but one needs to know it first.*⁸⁹⁴

Furthermore, Purna Das spoke about his father, Nabani Das's well-known association with Rabindranath Tagore, claiming his authentic lineage and agency as an "ambassador" of *Bauls* internationally. The perceived caricaturisation of *Baula* philosophy in these extra-Bengali spaces—a source of discomfort amongst Sylheti migrants—is exactly the opposite of what Purna claims has been his aim. There has also been a lesser sense of attachment to *Bauls* from West Bengal, or more prominently, a greater allegiance to Sylhet and Bangladesh in general—as we saw in the case of Himangshu Goswami—that has driven such beliefs. This is because Amir Uddin, despite his numerous appearances on radio, television in *desh* and British Bengali media, and his fallout with Islamic hardliners, still enjoys a vast following in *bilat* and Bangladesh. Amir, too, told me about his recital at the Albert Hall.⁸⁹⁵ This makes the demarcation of the extra-Bengali and local diasporic spaces hazier. Abdul Lotif has left on record his memories of performing at the House of Commons and the Edinburgh Festival.⁸⁹⁶ However, Lotif's exposure to these spaces did not make him a celebrity. Amir Uddin's status as a celebrity is more complicated: his fan base is spread translocally, rather than on the 'world music' stage, like Purna.

Conclusion

This chapter began with me encountering Maqsud cooking at a restaurant in Kington while humming a *Baula* tune to himself. Using this case as a launchpad, subsequent surveys into Bengali migrant lives show us how *Baul* musical idioms have provided a link to preserve cherished links with the 'homeland'; the *Londoni* music economy plays a vital part in it.

⁸⁹⁴ Purna Das Baul, 20 May 2023.

⁸⁹⁵ Kari Amir Uddin, interviewed by Budhaditya Bhattacharyya, 13 October 2021.

⁸⁹⁶ Abdul Lotif, interviewed by Abdul Aziz, Jamil Iqbal and Riza Momin, 01 April 2006, *Swadhinata Trust*.

Academic ethnographic scholarship in recent decades has focused on recalibrating *Baul's* identity with associated sexual practices, which have historically been enshrouded due to acts of sanitisation and spiritualisation by the Bengali elite, as we saw in the introduction to this chapter. The field, in Bengal and *bilat*, leads to antithetical realities. *Bilati Baula* lived experiences, especially in congregational spaces, have been unerotic; even the sexual has been poetic and imaginative rather than performative. Besides the ethereal, societal themes have been part of *Baula* imagination of British life from the early days of *Baula* circulation, the 1960s onwards, with amateur *Bauls* appropriating them later. From a bird's eye view, *Baul*, in the British public sphere, appears to be inhibiting in contrasting worlds. Accusations of glossification of the *Baul* run deep in the diasporic spaces, with fingers being raised regarding authenticity. Yet, both within the migrants' *Baul* spheres and extra-communal spaces, *Bauls* like Kacha Miah, Amir Uddin, and Purna Das have promulgated non-erotic constructs. Even in industrial and occupational settings, the esoteric and philosophical aspects of the *Baula* have been the soundtrack to Bengali expatriate lives. Running up to the new millennium, it is the juxtapositions of connectivity with stratification, historicity with continuity, public with private, that describe the *Baul* in Britain.

Conclusion

During the summer of 2023, one of my weekend journaling spots was the Bethnal Green Road branch of a café chain called Fuckoffee, located within a stone's throw of my Ellsworth Street apartment. Sporting a trendy vibe with posters of the latest musical events, raves, campaigns against far-right extremism, the need for gender, racial equality and LGBTQI+ rights, hip-hop and rap usually make up the playlist, except one day when the strains of the song, '*Nodir kul*' (River bank) on the sound system, piqued my curiosity.⁸⁹⁷ Asking the barista, I came to know it was the then recently released Coke Studio Bangla interpretation of the song, written by the acclaimed poet Jashimuddin and tuned by the well-known singer Abbasuddin.⁸⁹⁸

Despite Fuckoffee being a welcoming space—at least to me—I never noticed any Bengali/Bangladeshi/Sylheti young customers, let alone anyone from the elderly community. During my conversations with Abdul Aziz and Tarif Miah—featured in Chapter 4—I questioned why they were not keen on visiting cafés like this. To paraphrase, they replied that they were uncomfortable, no matter how many Bengali songs they played. It was a combination of factors that Abdul and Tarif found alienating: the chatter in English, the usual music playlists, the configuration of the physical space, the smell of the bacon toastie and the very “feeling” of the place. Abdul and Tarif's perception of their—musical—citizenly identities through the five senses—hearing, seeing, smelling, touching, tasting—and feelings, serves as a fitting example of how I have approached writing this history. More simply, this thesis has shown how music and sound have been central to the sensorium of the body-self and the body-collective in generating the felt and lived experiences of Bengali Britain.

⁸⁹⁷ Personal fieldnotes, 22 September 2023.

⁸⁹⁸ “Nodir Kul | Coke Studio Bangla | Season 2 | Idris X Arnob X Ripon (Boga),” accessed March 19, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MX_307s6-CE. In this version, Ripon Sarkar aka Boga did the main vocals, the British-Bengali musician Idris Rahman accompanied on the clarinet, the popular Bangladeshi singer Arnob arranged the music, and Jalal Ahmed played the flute.

Permeating through the entire dissertation has been an interplay of differences and unity, dissonances and consonances. What comes from the materials I have worked with is that the musical citizen in Bengali Britain cannot be tied to a monolithic construct; they are distinct from one another, but at the same time are not essentialised, compartmentalised categories: they are fluid and interacting. Ghulam Murshid in *Kalapanir Hatchani*—which I also briefly reviewed in the Introduction of this thesis—has maintained his observation on the compartmentalisation of Bengalis in Britain into those from Sylhet, Dhaka, Calcutta and wider West Bengal.⁸⁹⁹ While this sounds somewhat crude and unrefined, Murshid’s thesis helps map the unities and fractures of Bengaliness, which I set out to answer in the Introduction. In the Tagore centenary music programmes, we saw the participation of Bengalis in two broad streams: the Indian Bengalis, who were audible in the events organised by the Indian government and those organised privately, and Bengali students from Dhaka, for whom the mere celebration of Tagore had dissenting connotations against West Pakistani hegemony. Most notable is the absence of Sylhetis in these Tagore events despite being the majority in the community, which alludes to the understanding that most of them were not much into Tagore’s music. By concentrating on music-making, we realise that Bengaliness in Britain, as a result, was not absolute in its unity, even in the early 1960s, which were still early days as far as a substantial Bengali community was concerned.

Music became an agent of secessionism and the call for independence amongst the Bengalis in Britain during the 1971 Bangladesh War. One of the factors distinguishing the anti-Pakistan and pro-Pakistan parties was music. At the same time, the former paraded their music in rallies and local fundraisers; it was notably absent in the latter. Here, too, we came across intra-Bengali divisions on two levels: the few Bengalis like Abul Hayat of the Pakistan

⁸⁹⁹ Ghulam Murshid, *Kalapanir Hatchani* (Obosor, 2008).

Solidarity Front supporting the pro-Pakistan movement; Dhaka-based Bengali elitism against pro-independence Sylhetis. In response to an uptick of racist incidents from the 1970s onwards, we saw a united Bengali and pan-Asian musical stance. Constructs of Bengaliness, however, got splintered in the music class, with teachers specialising in ‘folk’ and ‘classical’ repertoires. For *Baula* practices in Britain, the stark contrasts were between the localised worlds of the *ashors* led by musicians like Kacha Miah, Kari Amiruddin, and Abdul Lotif, to name a few, in stark contrast to the glitzy, polished extra-Bengali spaces, like ‘Lila’ at London’s Roundhouse. The Calcutta and Dhaka ‘elite’ in Britain largely stayed within the sounds of Tagore’s music and the realms of ‘classical’. At the same time, the Baul and associated repertoire represented the Sylheti working class’s listening preferences.

Contributing further to these differences has been an interlinkage of class with language. The alienation of Sylhetis in Tagorean music programmes and ‘classical’ music spaces is also due to the prevalence of the Bengali language, which, as we saw in the Introduction, bears considerable differences in intelligibility with Sylheti. As important as it is to understand these differences from a macro perspective, we did come across incongruities based on individual tastes. For example, Abdul Aziz, the owner of now-shut garment factories in East London and consumer of *Baul* records, has also been an admirer of Tagore songs.

Much of the musical making of Bengali Britain has been in the public sphere. However, the production of spatialities has never been in isolation, but rather in a networked fashion. Music, either in the form of listening, performance or composition, gave musical bodies a chance to sustain their ideas of personal and collective, familial belonging, resulting in the exertion of cultural citizenship in Britain. Even for temporary residents like singer Bijoya Chaudhuri and Baul Durbin Shah, their musical endeavours both inside residences and more public spaces—especially instances of Chaudhuri’s performance for the BBC—provided a link for later generations in the community to utilise music-making as exercising citizenly

privileges, besides, of course, in advocating versions of Bengaliness steeped in *Rabindrasangeet* and *Baul*, respectively.

Even for spaces that look exclusively ‘private’ or ‘public’, it is challenging to keep them divorced. Paying attention to individual bodies in consolidation with the body politic has helped in forming a clearer picture of large-scale events like the Action Bangladesh Trafalgar Square rally; Mahmoud Rauf’s interview helps us form a sonic image of their music rehearsals, to get an overall reading of the imbrications of the private and public spheres. When it comes to musicians like Arunendu Das or Haridas Ganguly, who arguably were less keen on publicity, their private acts of music-making, composing or teaching have affected Bengali musical publics, even if retrospectively. Creation of Bengali ‘classical’ music publics, by and large, took place inside the insulated spaces of the music class. Because the few available music teachers, like Mahmudur Benubhai, Haridas Ganguly, Nitai Dasgupta, or Monisha Smith, were based in London/absent from rural/semi-urban Britain, the pedagogical transmission quite often involved a multicultural tone. Haridas Ganguly’s singing of a Bengali ‘classical’ public in London is comparable to Radha Kapuria’s ethnography on the engendering of a Punjabi-based post-Partition *ragadari* music public in 1970s-80s London.⁹⁰⁰ Continuing this thesis’s multisensorial, emotional, citizen-centric approach will help understand the threads that tie/untie raga publics in Britain, in the future.

Performances of Bengali ‘folk’ music by community leader Abdus Salique’s band Dishari Shilpi Gushti in anti-racial, solidaristic spaces were simultaneously iconic of engendering a British neo-citizen and crafting personal collective intimacies. Both Bengalis’ music-making as protestations to the Pakistani state and gathering to show support for Pakistan in Britain can be interpreted through Rosie Roberts’s theoretical lens of studying citizenly identities in

⁹⁰⁰ Radha Kapuria, “Strains of Friendship: Post-Partition *Rāgadarī* Music Publics in London,” *South Asian Diaspora*, October 4, 2023, 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2023.2258647>.

translocal and transnational scenarios.⁹⁰¹ Through pledging support for or against Bangladesh, these people not only managed to sing on their old citizenly associations—or aspirations for those fighting for a new country—but also emboldened their emotional, sonic and somatic rights to British citizenship. Whereas these examples show music as a facilitator of citizenly identity, we have also seen in the case of ‘soft Indian’ restaurant music, where in the pursuit of establishing a sonic familiarity with non-South Asian clients and moving towards a generic, acceptable sound, Bengali restaurateurs’ local musical identities were constipated, until they could let the flows of their homely musics after closing hours.

Last but not least, drawing from Timothy Rice, I asked if music gave ‘subaltern’ identities a ‘positive valence’ in the context of Bengali Britain. We have come across the relationality and relativity of the ‘subaltern’, which Ranajit Guha identified as a refinement of his earlier description of the term as the “demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those...described as ‘elite’”;⁹⁰² someone who might be considered as ‘subaltern’ might as well be ‘elite’ in a different power structure. In Bengali Britain, white-collar populations from Dhaka and Calcutta would predominantly be the ‘elite’, when compared to working-class migrants from Sylhet. Whereas if seen from a wider view, the same Bengalis from Dhaka and Calcutta would be ‘subaltern’ before the British state, and the White majority to an extent. Even inside Bengali working-class houses in Britain, women generally would have held lesser power.

The cases of refugee musicians, Mohammed Moshad Ali and Shah Ali Sarkar, performing in the UK to raise funds as part of Birendra Shankar’s Concert in Sympathy; Iskandar Miah and his associates battling hazardous working conditions to organise musical programmes during the Bangladesh War; a distraught Faruque Ahmed channelling his fears of deportation

⁹⁰¹ Rosie Roberts, “Citizenly Identities and Translocal Belonging.,” in *Ongoing Mobility Trajectories: Lived Experiences of Global Migration* (Springer, 2019), 142.

⁹⁰² Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in *Subaltern Studies I*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Oxford University Press, 1982), 1–9.

through writing *Baula* songs from his restaurant, have been indicative of how their musical capital helped them to turn emotions into—as per Beatrice Zani and Lara Momesso—“resources, practices and competences that sustain[ed] [their]...social, economic and cultural positioning in the society.”⁹⁰⁵ These individual and collective performances of emotions—to continue with Zani and Momesso—helped “‘undo’ a condition of subalternity”.⁹⁰⁶ Even for aspiring migrants like Delwar Baul, music-making and songwriting gave him a chance to express his marginality imaginatively. Class played a factor in demarcating the *Rabindrasangeet* and *adhunik ashors* of Turnpike Lake—usually organised and attended by working professionals—from the *Baula* gatherings in Brick Lane—usually comprising the working-class—also generated subaltern musical citizens in Bengali Britain. At this stage, it is safe to remark that music indeed gave a “positive valence” to the citizenly identities of actors who held a lower positionality.

Working from the 1960s to the 1980s—at the intersections of a waning colonial Britain and late twentieth-century modernity and postcolonial society—has provided a vantage point that has often eluded music historians, ethnomusicologists, and perhaps even the growing club of scholars working with historical and ethnographic data who prefer themselves to be called “historical ethnomusicologists”. That advantage has been the chance of working with people who lived that time and could offer first-hand accounts and help navigate the written; to name a few: Mahmoud Rauf in Chapter 2; Himangshu Goswami, Alaur Rahman, and Yousuf Miah in Chapter 3; Kacha Miah, Baul Delwar and Baul Shohid in Chapter 4. Fortunately, in the presence of these interlocutors and teachers, this work has had to a much lesser extent, regret the “absence of time machines [and] instead use an array of imperfect methods to collect, analyse, and interpret the wealth of evidence...which in some cases may

⁹⁰⁵ Beatrice Zani and Lara Momesso, “Can the Subaltern Feel? An Ethnography of Migration, Subalternity, and Emotion,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 39 (May 2021): 100786, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2021.100786>.

⁹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

actually be better described as a modicum of ambiguous data”;⁹⁰⁷ although a time machine would have been a welcome addition. Therefore, I argue and welcome further initiatives to archive these living histories to the fullest. Even with official archives, many local institutions across Britain, West Bengal, and Bangladesh must be accessed to create a richer picture. This thesis has merely scratched the surface, for a treasure trove of vernacular print—largely Bengali—and audio in Bengali homes in Britain remains to be explored; the reconstruction of *Baula* networks and listening technologies from such private archives in Chapter 4 is just a step in that direction.

Future research can take multiple directions. Ploughing through print, it is crucial to undertake the task of writing a sonic history of the transcontinental lives of the largely unsung sailors—Bengalis and the wider Asian community—until the early twentieth century. Such an initiative would require a global archival search and tracking of those people's later generations in the quest for further evidence. Studying 1990s British Asian music anew—especially in studying private intergenerational interactions—will also help question whether it always takes a whole generation for migrant communities to get their “new sound”. Professing a need to go beyond the compartmentalising tendencies of ‘identity’, Yasemin Nuhoğlu Soysal has called for the channelling of energies towards second-generation immigrants, “who are seen as enigmatic producers of diasporic cultures and identities [and are] far from being simple extensions of their ‘homelands’”.⁹⁰⁹ Taking the examples of Bengalis in European capitals, Soysal commented how “they appropriate their identity symbols as much from global cultural flows as from host or home country cultural practices”.⁹¹⁰ While Soysal’s projection has mostly worked for the first two chapters of this thesis, the *Bilati* tropes in *Baula* songwriting by first-generation immigrants/visitors refute the

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid, 39.

⁹⁰⁹ Yasemin Nuhoğlu Soysal, “Citizenship and Identity: Living in Diasporas in Post-War Europe?,” in *The Postnational Self*, ed. Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort (The University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 147.

⁹¹⁰ Ibid.

idea, in the context of Bengali Britain, that it took a generation to get their “new sound”. However, without a comparative study of British Asian music, it is only possible to think of a step change as the second generation took centre stage. It is worth noting that even in early Bengali bodies’ musical innovation, we did not come across, according to Johann Kroier, “...clever crossovers...between ambassadorial self-consciousness and trans-cultural entertainment”.⁹¹¹ This is striking, as “Indian” music ceased being a “strange” subject in British musical publics long before the late 1980s.

Marching into the new millennium, there is much to learn from the rising tide of Islamophobia post 9/11, its connections with religious exclusivist shifts, and how it affected the British Bengalis’/Bangladeshis’ musical practices. Singing of a pre-digital time, the gargantuan shifts in music circulation and listening that accompanied the advent of the Internet age did not come into play in this thesis. As far as communities are concerned, we have yet to explore the musical lives of diasporic Bangladeshi ethnic minorities in Britain, such as the Chakmas, and religious minorities, including Buddhists, and the question of caste, to further the already-multilayered understandings of the Bengali musical citizen that this thesis has presented.

The strengths of this thesis lie in developing the fractures and unities that made up the Bengalis until the late 1980s by consciously striving to read into the narrative from multiple angles and moving away from London-centrism. As the first written music history of Bengali Britain, I humbly hope that this work will serve as a reference for future scholarship, in both refuting and agreeing with it, a history whose contestations and solidarities will equally teach the up-and-coming generations to make a harmonious future.

⁹¹¹ Johann Kroier, “Music, Global History, and Postcoloniality,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 43, no. 1 (June 2012): 139.

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