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Forgotten Music Lover Aristocracy of Calcutta

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Abstract: During late eighteenth century to ninetieth century some aristocratic family members of Calcutta, now called Kolkata patronised music and musicians. Their patronage was important to keep alive the flow of existing stream of music and also to add to it other forms of music from different parts of India even from abroad. But their contribution to music as such is totally forgotten by people. We here try to give a short outline of the contribution towards music of some of such families.

Key words: 18th and 19th century Calcutta, music, aristocracy.

Introduction:

It is a well documented fact that Mughals patronised music and musicians. In their court they had a regular session of music and dance. They were a great appreciator of art of all forms. That time music was valued as invaluable gems and musicians were proud possessions of the court of the Emperor himself or of sultans and kings. It is said that Emperor Akbar allocated income from seven villages to Tansen - such was his respect to the musician. One can even now visit Fatehpur Skiri and see the platform from where Tansen used to perform for the great Akbar.

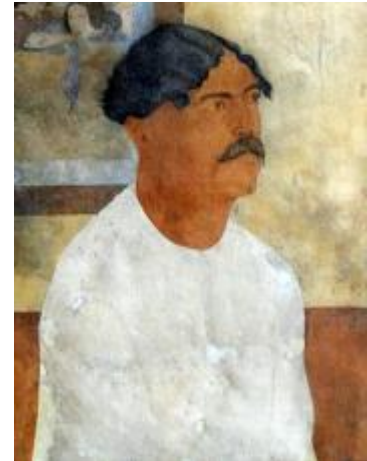
The fall of Mughals and rise of British had also a cultural impact all over India as well as on Bengal specially Calcutta. The first impact was music and musicians got freedom from durbars of emperor, sultans and kings and reached to the houses of rich aristocratic people in Calcutta. There was a flow of musicians from north India to Calcutta and around as it was then business hub of India. The aristocratic families never got quick fortune from their British connection but were traditionally rich as they had prestigious positions in the courts of Nawabs and Sultans. They had independent business and the British could not ignore their influence and importance in the economic, political and cultural sphere of the society. Most of the aristocratic families of Calcutta in 18th to 19th century traditionally were great appreciators of music and had permanent stage in their house where regular performance of music and dance were held. Still music was a prestigious and proud possession of nobles only and they rightly thought that only they can appreciate it and pay for it.

But rise of British rule in India gave birth to a new class of rich people, called "*Babu*". We give here three pictures to show how a typical *babu* looks like. Fig 1a, a sketch of a *babu* by an unknown artist, Fig 1b, a *babu* carrying fish by Bhaskar Citrkar, and Fig 1c a great painting of a *babu* by famous painter Abonindranath Tagore. The "*babus*" or "*baboos*" were high-class, neo-urban race of, flamboyant English knowing Bengali gentlemen, who came into being as a result of intimate interaction with the British in the late 18th and 19th century Calcutta. They earned immense fortune and often took excuses to throw parties, "*mujras*". They invited on regular basis *Baijis*, mainly from Lucknow or Banaras to perform dance and music called *mujra* in their *baithakkhana mehfil*. But they were not always a really good appreciator of music; all they did were only to uphold their status as rich people. Birthday party, marriage ceremony, and any other such occasions were used to host dance and music by hiring *Baijis* with much fanfare. British officers were also invited. These were nothing but a hard endeavour to show off their richness.

However the common people had not any chance to enjoy the music or dance anywhere. They were neither invited by the aristocratic families nor by the *Babus*. They were themselves satisfied with the folk music, the music of the commons which they understood very well and easy to host as it was a low cost event.

These were, *Kabigan*, *Panchali*, and *Kheur* etc. *Akhari* and *Half-akhari*, which to some opinion originated from Mughal Durbar and had some classical overtones. So *Akhari* and *Half-akhari* were not performed or whenever performed the classical overtones in them were drastically suppressed by the brute force of popular demand.

Since discs or any other forms/system of recording were not available then, and artists never performed for mass in general, so patronage of rich people were necessary to earn bread and butter and to make the stream of music flow. The music of common man was gradually decayed out due to lack of patronage as it was stamped as marginalised songs of people of lower strata. Though some of the lyrics of the above said songs of the common are still available but the music is lost forever.

Fig 1a *babu* by unknownFig 1b *babu* by Bhaskar CitrkarFig 1c *babu* by Abonindranath Tagore

There should not be any misunderstanding that Calcutta and Bengal were devoid of classical music before fall of Mughal Empire or rise of British power in India; rather it was vibrant with its own form of classical music. Though Bengal had a strong tradition of classical music it was open minded to accept any new form of music. Bengal had many centres of classical music of which most famous is “Bishnupur Gharana” which is still vibrant with Dhrupad as one main form. Some opine that rich *babus*, who invited north Indian musicians, especially Baijis to organise musical extravaganza and in the way opened doors for Hindustani classical music to mix up with Bengal’s won classical music [1]. But the floodgate of north Indian classical music was actually opened in 1856 when Wajid Ali Shah was exiled from Lucknow to Calcutta and he came with hundreds of his musicians, singers, dancers and instrumentalists.

It is a fact that security of personal life and stability of social life is necessary for cultivation of art of any form. Durbar of Mughals, Sultans and Kings used to provide both security and stability to the musicians and this is the reason behind the rise of art and culture to an unbelievable height in that period. In the British period the social life was stable in and around Calcutta in spite of some problems in far parts of Bengal. The personal life was also secured and so the Baijis and their accompanying musicians could earn a great fortune by performing mujras for the aristocrats or the *babus*.

Many of the aristocrats of 18th to 19th century Calcutta have an important place in the history of music for preservation of Indian classical music (Hindustani) which emancipated from the Mughal durbar with its fall to the British. We describe here some of the important aristocratic families of Calcutta of that period who have contribution to music in one way or another.

Shovabazar Raj family: Raja Nabakrishna Dev (Bahadur) (1732 to 97) (Fig 2a) is the founder of this family. His ancestors were employee of the East India Company. Nabakrishna was well versed in Persian, Urdu, and English. He was appointed as Persian teacher of Warren Hastings and later become close associate of Lord Clive. Nabakrishna, a famous patron of art and culture especially music, often organised conferences of learned persons in his palace. He had two sons one adopted Raja Gopi Mohon Dev (1798-1847) and Raja Rajkrishna Dev (1782 to 1823). Gopi Mohon had only one son Radhakanta Dev (1784- 1867) (Fig 2b) but Rajkrishna had eight sons. Radhakanta Dev was a great scholar like his father. He was proficient in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic and published a dictionary of Sanskrit language “*SABDA KALPA DRUM*”. He was founder member of British Indian Association and held it till his death. Narendra Krishna Deb (1822 to 1904) (Fig 2C) son of Rajkrishna was very famous in his time. He held various important posts wiz: Commissioner Calcutta Municipality, Fellow Calcutta University, President of British Indian Association,

member Governor-General's legislative council, honorary magistrate, etc. He was awarded KCIE the Knight Commander of Indian Empire. A legal battle is still in court of law since 1836 to decide claim of property by KS Ghosh and KC Ghosh the maternal uncles of Rajkrishna, who were legal guardians of Rajkrishna during his childhood.

Nabakrishna organised Durga Puja first in 1757, after defeat of Siraj ud-Daulah with much fanfare and set a pattern of the Puja which became a symbol of fashion of rich people in Calcutta and has become now a famous annual festival in Bengal and Bengalis all over the world. Nabakrishna himself was not only a scholar but was also a great supporter of learned persons. It is said that he collected rare books and *Puthi* (hand written books) in Sanskrit, Persian and other languages for his library but also made copies of them to be distributed among learned persons. Among the many courtiers in the court of Raja Nabakrishna Deb famous were Jagannath Tarkapanchanan and Banerwar Bidyalankar. [2]



Fig 2a Nabakrishna Dev



Fig 2b Radhakanta Dev



Fig 2c Narendrakrishna Dev

Many famous learned persons from west took his hospitality on different occasions. He was patron of numerous performing artists and learned persons. Contemporary musicians and learned persons must have visited his court at least once in life time, a Mecca of music and culture. Lord Clive and Warren Hasting were regular visitors of the palace; Rabindranath Tagore and Raja Rammohan also visited the palace. Raja Binoy Deb, grand children of Nabakrishna organised first reception of Swami Vivekanda in the palace when he returned from Chicago [3]. Now people take Baijis as simple sex workers but they used to go through rigorous training to have a mastery over different forms of classical music and dance. They were epitome of etiquette of Durbari culture which has been decayed out of the society with time. Shovabazar Raj family also patronized the Baijis and they were invited to perform during Durga Puja years back. Famous Baijis, Gauhar Jan, Malka Jaan, Amran Bai, Begum Jaan, Supan Jaan among others performed many times in the court of the palace [1]. The famous Bengali Baiji Jadumani spent some time in direct financial support from Shovabazar Raj Bari [4]. Descendants of Raja Nabakrishna Deb still live in a part of the palace, still Durga Puja is held there every year and upcoming singers are invited there to perform, which they take as a milestone in their musical journey, but the past glory is no more.

Pathuriaghata aristocracy families:

In this group there belong three families, **Tagore** family, **Ghosh** family and **Mullick** family.

Pathuriaghata is a place in north Calcutta where rich Bengalis used to live. The past glory of the place can be conceived even now looking at the depleted buildings on both sides of the narrow roads. One will find remnant parts of palatial buildings with cloths of the encroachers hanging everywhere. We can't stop to give here two pictures of the palaces of glorious **Tagores of Pathuriaghata**. First picture [Fig 3a; Tagore Castle] was built by Kali Kumar Tagore in 1820 and drastically renovated by Jatindramohan Tagore in 1895. Prasanna Kumar Tagore (1801-86) built a mansion called Tagore Palace [Fig 3b, Tagore Palace] just opposite of the castle.

Historians are divided about the ancestry of the Tagores. In an interview on Tagore family history with Anirban Bhattacharya, Mr. Pramantha Mohun Tagore a descendent of Pathuriaghata Tagore family traced the root of the family since 994Ad when five Brahmins came from Kanauj to purify religious practices of Bengal [5]. But Banglapedia (Banglapedia -Tagore family), the national encyclopaedia of Bangladesh observe that some ancestors of the Tagores carried away by a Muslim fakir and converted to Islam. So they were out-casted and called Pirali Brahmin.



Fig 3a; Tagore Castle



Fig 3b, Tagore Palace

We give below a few pictures (Fig 4 a, to Fig 4d) of the prominent persons of the Tagore family before discussing their interest and achievement in arts and culture, especially music.



Fig 4a Gopimohan



Fig 4b Prasanna Kumar



Fig 4c Jatindramohan



Fig 4d Sourindramohan

Gopimohan (1760-93) was a polygot, new many languages, i.e. Urdu, Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, English and obviously Bengali. He translated many Sanskrit books in Bengali and was a patron of the then Hindu college now the Presidency University. The tradition of patronising art, especially music started from his period. Musicians from different parts of India were invited in his court. Two famous vocalist of that period Sajju Khan and Lala Kawal Kisan used to get monthly stipend from him. Gopimohan got training in vocal music from the famous musician Hassu Khan of Gwalior. His son Hara Coomar (1798-1858), a learned person like his father, built a Sanskrit library and tried to extract the structures of music from the *Shlokas* of Sam Veda. He was trained in vocal music, later he learned percussion instrument and string instrument, basically Sitar. He was rather an introvert person and loved to practice music alone. Sons of Hara Coomer, Jatindramohan Tagore (1831-1908), KCSI (Knighthood Commander Star of India) and Sourindramohan Tagore (1840-1914) CIE, (Commander of Indian Empire) had great interest not only in music but also in all sorts of arts. They started first private theatre in 1850, *Banga Natyalaya*. They always looked for talents in music and patronised many musicians in their court namely Khetramohan Goswami, Jadu Vatta both from Bishnupur and Lakshmi Prasad Mishra from Banaras, prominent among others. The two brothers, with the help of their court musicians did experiments to introduced orchestra in Indian music. Sourindramohan was awarded Doctor of Music by Oxford University in absentia and also from Philadelphia University in 1875. He founded the Banga Sangit Vidyalaya in 1871 and the Bengal Academy of Music in 1881. It may be mentioned that Pathuriaghata Tagore family is totally covered by hallows of the Jorashanko Tagore family to which Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore belongs.

Another famous family that flourished in Pathuriaghata is the **Ghosh** family, which had a great contribution to music and performing arts. The interest in music of the family is old and started during the period of Trailokya Nath Ghosh, father of Bhupendra Nath Ghosh. Trailokya Nath used to play pakhwaj and sitar. The family patronized many musicians namely: dhrupad-khayal singer Jay Karanji, Tappa singer Ramchandra Chattopdhyay and Radhika Prasad Goswami the esteemed singer from the Bishnupur Gharana are a few of them. Many prominent persons were regular visitors of the Ghosh mansion to have music lesions from Radhika Prasad Goswami. Some of them are Soumendranath Tagore, Dilip Kumar Roy and singer Girija Shankar Chakraborty. Bhupendra and his son Manmathanath were well trained in vocal as well as instruments. Before 1920 a regular concert of dhrupad were held in the court of the Ghosh mansion. Later the house was thrown open for great musicians of all types. It is noted that Faiyaz Khan and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar were frequent visitors of the court. More over so-called Baijis Gauharjan, Malkajan, Noorjahan, and

Zohrabai performed there regularly. The All Bengal Music Conference is still organised here and it was first inaugurated by Rabindranath Tagore with Manmathanath Ghose in 1937 in the court of Ghose mansion. Manmathanath was a very progressive minded man and he took it as his honour to host talented person. During that period public performance of music was only held by Baijis, but he invited Hirabai Borodekar in his house. Pt. Ravisankar-ji and his Guru-ji Allauddin Khan also visited Ghose Mansion. We here give pictures of two prominent persons of the Ghose family; Fig 5a Khelat Ghose (1829-1878) and Fig 5b Manmathanath Ghose (1908-1983). We also give here in Fig 5c, the picture of a part of the Ghose mansion, the Thakur Dalan (The hall where the deity of the family is kept and worshiped). From the view of the Thakur Dalan one can imagine the enormous structure of Ghose mansion and its decoration.



Fig 5a Khelat Ghose



Fig 5b Manmathanath



Fig 5c Thakur Dalan of Ghose Mansion

Next influential family of Pathuriaghata is the **Mullick** family. Two important persons of the family are Jadunath Mullick (1844-1894) (Fig 6a) and Manmatha Nath Mullick (1879-1947) (Fig 6b). Their palace is called marble palace, structure of which is made of cast-iron frames imported from abroad, stands still with pride and decedents of Mullick family still lives there. Raja Rajendralal Mullick (1819-87), adopted son of Nilmoni Mullick of Pathuriaghata built the mansion at Mukhtaram Babu Street and Lord Minto named it Marble Palace when he visited it. For architectural history of other great mansions and palaces built in 18th Calcutta we refer to [6]. A glimpse (Fig 6c) of the entrance of the receiving hall is enough for giving an idea of the beauty of the palace. Rajendralal was not only interested in music but also in arts and natural history. He was famous for his philanthropy and his relief works for the poor during 1865-66, great famine of Bengal earned him the title of Rai Bahadur from Lord Lytton himself who gifted him a big diamond ring in the ceremony. The practice of feeding poor is still carried out by his descendents through a trust formed by him. One of the rooms of the mansion is now used as store of beautiful miniature paintings of Mughal style, Kangra style, Basuli style and Rajasthani miniature style. These were collected at different period by the family members. There is an auditorium in the palace where musical concert were held regularly and many singers held concerts there. In recent past famous Dhrupad singer brothers Aminuddin Dagar and his brother Moinuddin Dagar held concert in the auditorium of the palace. Manmatha himself practiced classical music and patronized many singers.

The discussion of culture of music by aristocrats of 19th century Calcutta cannot be completed without discussing the contribution of **Wajid Ali Shah** (1822-1887) (Fig 7). He was actually king of Awadh or Oudh with capital at Lucknow but exiled by British Governor to Calcutta and settled in Metiabruz, then outskirt of Calcutta.



Fig 6a Jadunath Mullick



Fig 6b Manmatha Nath Mullick



Fig 6c Entrance of the receiving hall

He created a miniature Lucknow in Metiabruz and started practicing music in his new-built durbar. It can be said that such a big assembly of musicians, singers, dancers cannot be seen anywhere in world during that time. The durbar was held at the first floor of a house by the side of the Ganges.



Fig 7 Wajid Ali Shah

It is said that tunes of music did never stop for a moment in the durbar of the king. When king was not present in the durbar even then Sanai or Shehnai was played all through. So there were more Sanai players than other instrument players in his durbar. Besides dancers and other artists there were about one hundred and fifty vocalists and instrumentalists. Names of vocalist and instrumentalists in the durbar of Wajid Ali Shah can be known from books written by the king himself. Prominent among the vocalists were Gulam Hussein Khan, Peer Khan, Ali Bux Khan, and Enayat Khan. Khwaja Bux was prominent Tabla player and Nisar Ali Khan was prominent Pakhavaj Player. The king not only enjoyed the music of his court musicians but also invited great musicians from across the country in his durbar. Many among them took his hospitality for many days and some other lived under the patronage of the king throughout their life. Jadu Vatta, Keshab Chandra Mitra, Bamacharan Bandyopadhyay, Kaliprasanna Bandyopadhyay and other great musicians of Bengal visited his durbar. The Nawab though himself was a Shia Muslim but he was a great admirer of Hindu god Krishna and celebrated Hindu festivals Holi, Basant Panchami, Saawan with great funfair. He learnt Kathak from Pt. Thakur Prasad and appointed the brothers Kalka and Bindadin Maharaj in his court. Great Kathak legend Pt. Birju Maharaj is a descendent of this family. It is said that the king exiled in Metiabruz celebrated Holi in 1867 by dancing Kathak and singing Thumri. It is Wajid Ali who introduced Thumri of Lucknow Gharana in Calcutta and mesmerized all. Raja Sourindramohan often visited the durbar of Wajid Ali Shah at Metiabruz to enjoy Lucknow Gharana Thumri. Great musicians Aghorenath Chakraborty, Jadunath Bhattacharya and others were really fans of Thumri played in the durbar of Wajid Ali. The King was an expert of different instruments. He learnt Sitar from Ustad Kutub Ali Khan. Ustad Basat Khan brought Rabab and some other instruments in his durbar. Modern Sarod was created in the durbar of Wajid Ali by Ustad Nayamatullah Khan. Wajid Ali Shah popularised Tabla in Calcutta and staged many dramas written by him but his dramas were

not popular in Calcutta as it was in Lucknow. He made Metiabruz a great seat of music the effect of which is still present. People may have forgotten Nawab Wajid Ali Shah as a true secular king and his contribution to various forms of arts, fine arts and performing arts but for one song written by him in Raag Bhairavi “Babul More Naihar Chhooto Jaye” he is still living in our heart. This song was written by him in the metaphor of a bride going away from her parent’s house for ever after marriage, remembering his final departure from the Lucknow palace to an unknown destination Calcutta.

Conclusion:

Beside the above mentioned families there are some other families not discussed here for paucity of space. For a report on business houses of Calcutta in colonial period please consult Kundu et.al. [7]. The *Babu* class of gentleman of that period, who became suddenly rich with British connection held concerts with much fanfare but failed to develop any tradition of patronizing music. The reason behind the migration of musicians from north India to Calcutta and its surroundings was a socio-political force. Rise of British colonial power through East India Company destabilized princely states and Mughal power in north India. As their revenue generation base became smaller it became hard for them to support musicians financially. Many musicians settled in and around Calcutta for new opportunity [8]. This opened up a new space for mixing up of two different genera of music and enrichment of Indian classical music. The aristocratic families described here and some other families not discussed here gave enough space and opportunities for fusion of the different Gharanas of classical music of north India with that of classical music practised at that time in and around Calcutta.

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