

THE SCHOLAR MUSICIAN AND THE USTADS

Exploring the Birendra Kishore Roy Chowdhury collection

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Archive series



'My labour will bear proper fruits if the learned lovers of Indian music give a little time to go through its contents.'— Author's appeal in *Indian Music and Mian Tansen*.

Bengal and Maharashtra became important, and eventually the dominant, centres for Hindustani classical music in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each developed a distinct regional speciality: instrumental music, particularly the sitar and sarod, in Bengal, and the vocal *khyal* in Maharashtra. A combination of historical and sociological processes enabled the Bengali middle class to embrace and nurture Hindustani classical music practices that had initially commanded a particular salience in the imagination of the regional aristocracy. As Calcutta grew through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an interest in music emerged, while several zamindari establishments in eastern Bengal, inspired perhaps by the practices of the Murshidabad nawabs, aspired to patronize an older legacy of Indo-Islamic musical aesthetic and culture. However, it was the arrival of the Nawab of Awadh to Calcutta in 1856,¹ along with his retinue of great musicians, that initiated the flowering of Bengal's fascination with Hindustani musical practice. In the early twentieth century, the Gauripur family in Mymensingh was particularly energetic in inducting leading *ustads* into local musical networks, supporting pedagogic and performative exchanges and producing scholar musicians such as Birendra Kishore Roy Chowdhury (1903-1975). We are fortunate in that Birendra Kishore left behind written collections of

his extensive *talim*, his readings and his scholarly labours. These are helpful in tracking the regional history of Hindustani classical music, the *ustads* who made Bengal their home and taught scores of Bengali middle class Hindu students, musicologists, musicians as well as the music associations that were central to the formation of a distinctly Bengali modern musical public.



How regional was Hindustani classical music in Bengal? Did this translate into a definite style, a set of aesthetic preferences, a celebration of specific musical lineages (*gharana*)? The question is relevant especially in view of the concentration on instrumental practice, its richness of expression and the ongoing series

of great artistes. The question also opens up the history of Bengal's longer engagement with Indo-Islamic culture and trans-regional exchanges that manifest in several ways, the kingdom of Bishnupur providing the best example. As Kumkum Chatterjee's work suggests, the cultural efflorescence of Bishnupur from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries drew from a rich repertoire of devotional, political and cultural resources associated with Mughal-Rajput etiquette and Vaishnav networks of Braj that the former supported and sponsored.² The nexus between existing Vaishnava devotional practices, Rajput devotional culture and Mughal

Figure 1: Birendra Kishore Roy Chowdhury with his rabab
Courtesy, Birendra Kishore Roy Chowdhury Collection