THE SCHOLAR MUSICIAN AND THE USTADS

Exploring the Birendra Kishore Roy Chowdhury collection

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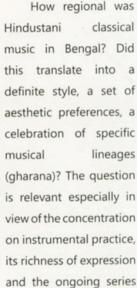


Bengal and Maharashtra became important, and eventually the dominant, centres for Hindustani classical music in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each developed a distinct regional speciality: instrumental music, particularly the sitar and sarod, in Bengal, and the vocal khyal in Maharashtra. A combination of historical and sociological processes enabled

the Bengali middle class to embrace and nurture classical Hindustani music practices that had initially commanded a particular salience the imagination of the regional aristocracy. As Calcutta grew through the late eighteenth and centuries. nineteenth 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.



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