

PERFORMERS AND PERFORMANCES

Broadcasting of Bengali Songs through the
Calcutta Radio Station (1927-1947)

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The experimental broadcasting began in India in the mid 1920s and systematic broadcasting started with the establishment of the first broadcasting station at Bombay on July 1927 and then at Calcutta on 26 August 1927.¹ (Figure 1) Music was the main broadcasting item (almost two-thirds) of the Calcutta Radio Station (henceforth CRS) and it played a crucial role as an audio-performative cultural medium in the development of regional culture and regional songs (popularly known as *Bangla gaan* in Bengali) during the first half of the 20th century.

Music as a subject is not an uncharted terrain in India. However, large aspects of the 20th century history of Indian music broadcasting through regional radio stations like the CRS remain under-explored; their detailed history have yet to be filled in.² The cultural contours of dissemination by the CRS have been touched upon through the recitation of experiences, memoirs and anecdotes. The persons involved in broadcasting have elegantly written about the specific situations of their work places. These serve the useful purpose of tracing interesting segments of history, which otherwise would have remained unknown.

The appreciation, encouragement and performance of *Bangla gaan* had begun much earlier than the coming of radio. The culture of musical performance in stage theatre, of

'asar' (small soirees) organized in the houses of connoisseurs, or of Baishnavis singing *kirtan* were long part of the Bengali urban culture. After the establishment of a music school by Sourindramohan Thakur in Calcutta in 1871, several new schools were established. The two music schools—*Sangeet Sangha* and *Sangeet Sammilani*, established between 1908-10, played a crucial role in training women from middle-class families during those early years. The participation of female members of the Tagore family in 'Maghotsav' of the *Brahma Samaj* opened up public space for singers from this society. Lastly, the Gramophone Company was already in the business of recording *Bangla gaan* for quite some time and had marketed more than

700 records of Bengali songs by the end of the year 1926. Though this media had grown under the colonial aegis, in sharp contrast to radio broadcasting, it had not begun with a pedagogic agenda but started as a commercial venture. The gramophone penetrated middle-class families quite extensively and even people in villages had the opportunity to listen to *kaler gaan* (mechanised songs) though they might not have owned one. It was through records that people could hear songs of musicians they had never heard of before.

Each of these institutions and practices which had their own characteristics operated



Figure 1: CRS broadcasting house at No.1 Garstin Place, Sen, Anil Kumar, Inside A.I.R. The Little Flower Press, 1950, p.2; Courtesy Sanjeet Chaudhuri, Kolkata

in their own way in the world of music. Once in place, the density of musical practice could only expand in Bengal when it touched the lives of common people. The earlier private efforts began the process and the advent of radio and gramophone accelerated this trend. Concentrating on the first twenty years of CRS music broadcasting, the emphasis of this essay would be to discuss the production of *Bangla gaan* or Bengali songs through certain key issues between institutions, programmers and audiences in order to embody the emerging character and impact of regional music broadcasting on modern society.³ It would also look into the role of CRS intervention in certain changing cultural mores in the context of female participation in radio musical programmes.

Radio Musicians:

Criteria for Selection

One may divide the phase of public dissemination of music based on the period before and after the advent of microphone. Both the institutions (gramophone and radio) realized from their experience that new techniques and improvisation from vocalists and instrumentalists was required for satisfactory performance. The main problem with early singers, especially sopranos, was volume control. During those early years, the 'Marconi Reitz Microphone' was used in the CRS. In this kind of microphone, if the performer did not keep at least two feet distance, blasting of the valve could occur. This signified overloading of the input circuitry, causing distortion. Some engineers worried about sopranos singing high notes that might shatter their tubes! The *Betar Jagat* (1930) wrote instructions for aspirant performers:

It requires technical proficiency to understand how to synchronize modulation

of voice with that of microphone. More the voice goes up, more the head should be away from the microphone; softer the voice, head comes nearer to microphone. The sounds of harmonium, piano, *tabla* and other accompaniments are also important. If not properly balanced, it would ruin the whole programme. Too loud a noise would even damage the microphone.⁴

It is said about the microphone that it favoured none and allowed no faking. It demanded clean, legitimate execution and beautiful tone. The sensitive electric instrument's photographic reproduction of the performance would not allow any concession and would catch any shortfall in finesse and delicacy of voice. In short, radio required new standards of professional competence and technical efficiency combined with the quality of tone. Every word was to be pronounced with clarity, balance and perfection. Thus, came into vogue a new phrase: *betar upoyogi kanthaswar* (broadcast friendly voice). In 1929, the CRS apologetically announced that if a singer did not have that *betar upoyogi kanthaswar*, he or she would not be chosen for performance, no matter how proficient one was in other aspects. The same argument was repeated in the year 1934 when the CRS advertised for recruitment of artists in newspapers for the first time. It emphatically declared that a singer would not be selected if the voice was not 'microphone friendly'. It was written in the *Betar Jagat* of 1936:

We know the city of Calcutta is abundant with many singers who have had extensive training in music and are also proficient in musicology.

Had all of them possessed sweet and microphone friendly voice, then we need not have to be bothered with our daily input of programmes.

Then, there was an elaborate discussion of how disastrous the output would be if the voice was too loud or too soft, and the undesirability of nodding the head vigorously, of unnatural