

“Happy Homes Have Gramophones” – Gender, Technology, and the Sonic Restaging of Community Before and After the Partition of Bengal

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Abstract

co-edited by Praseeda Gopinath and Monika Mehta Our listening practices are discursively constructed. In the sonic landscape of India, in particular, the way in which we listen and what we hear are often normative, produced within hegemonic discourses of gender, class, caste, region, and sexuality.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Asian And Asian American Studies, Class, Cultural Studies, Gender



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co-edited by Praseeda
Gopinath and Monika
Mehta

Our listening practices are discursively constructed. In the sonic landscape of India, in particular, the way in which we listen and what we hear are often normative, produced within hegemonic discourses of gender, class, caste, region, and sexuality. . . This forum, *Gendered Soundscapes of India*, offers snapshots of sound at sites of trans/national production, marketing, filmic and musical texts. Complementing these posts, the accompanying photographs offer glimpses of gendered community formation, homosociality, the pervasiveness of sound technology in India, and the discordant stratified soundscapes of the city. This series opens up for us the question of other contexts in India where sound, gender, and technology might intersect, but, more broadly, it demands that we consider how sound exists differently in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Afghanistan. How might we imagine a sonic framework and South Asia from these locations? —**Guest Editors Praseeda Gopinath and Monika Mehta**

For the full introduction to the forum, click [here](#).

To read all of the posts in the forum, click [here](#).

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“She compelled respect at once by refusing on any account to be phonographed: perhaps she thought, amongst other things, that if she committed her soul to a broken piece of wax it might get broken...my subsequent experiences showed that it was only too likely,” wrote the British musicologist [A.H. Fox-Strangways](#) in 1910 about Indian female singer Chandra Prabha, while remarking on the harsh reactions to the gramophone in India (90). Such deep-rooted discomfort with the gramophone speaks to the cognitive, perceptual and experiential challenges faced by a listener/performer when a new auditory technology substitutes familiar terrains of musical production.

In this post, I revisit the decades prior to and following the 1947 [Partition of Bengal](#), a phase singularly volatile not only in India’s political but also its musical and technological histories. I examine how the introduction of European [harmony/polyphony](#) in the aural imaginary of Bengal negotiates ideologies espoused by the nationalists in the (re)constitution of gendered space post-Partition by transforming relations of consumption. The production of gendered domesticity was

vitality related to rigid conceptions of physical space and its allocation in colonial Bengal which, further, influenced music reception in ways worth probing.

The auditory regimes prior to the emergence of recording/radio-broadcast typified *public* modes of listening based on live performances engendering affective flows and presupposed *human* proximity. This culture of aurality is inextricably tied to communal modes of consumption and performance, be it the high-end salon-tradition of the Bengali modern song, the hard-hitting agitprop strains of the Bengal wing of the IPTA ([Indian People's Theatre Association](#)) or even the stylized elite classical genres. The collective nature of musical practice conjures up traditional connotations of masculine spaces, especially in the case of the elite Bengali household where the gendered ideology of spatial orientation relegated the respectable Bengali woman (*bhadramahila*) to the interiors of the house (*antahpur/andarmahal*). The delights of salon-music were to be relished by the man of the house (*babu*).



‘Gramophone – a home entertainer’

Thus, the communitarian character of musical practice often made it elusive to respectable women. However, the emergence and subsequent sophistication of auditory technologies ushered a radical transformation to such a dynamic by dissociating music from the *human performer*. Besides leading to the obvious technological alienation in the listener, the privatization of the listening experience was accompanied by a condition of a penetrating solitude and interiority, a state speaking to the voices and /sounds emanating from the phonograph. At the sociological level, the entry of recording technology redefined long-held divisions of domestic space and the gendered dynamics thereof by not only democratizing musical consumption but also forging provisional collectivities of listeners often cutting across gender, class and caste. Besides, traditional associations of musical genres with specific loci- classical music with the salon/ concert space for instance- gave way to a more fluid conception of domestic space assuming multiple sonic/musical identities depending on what the gramophone played. The phonographic interface, thus, radically reconfigures listening practices and produces a different paradigm of self, sound, community, and gender.

What is at stake here is not some covert form of linear technological determinism, but a more nuanced detour around auditory-technologies, spaces of consumption, and the [affordances](#)

thereof that calibrate auditory experience along new registers. What merits contemplation is how (if at all) these technological innovations in the commercial arena complement and usher formal nuances and sonic innovations in the musical works they mediate. The gramophone renders problematic the uncritical conflation of the sonic and visual registers typical of live musical performance and, in the process, sets in motion a unique dynamic of interacting with musical sound. Severed from its visual footholds in live performance, phonographic sounds often provoke the listener to imagine the singing/performing body which, in turn, informs the way the sounds are processed mentally.



Vintage Gramophone spotted in Little India, Serangoon, Singapore, Image by Flickr User Linkway88, (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Indian music has traditionally been based on a single melody which, in its skeletal grammar, is an individual mode of expression, even when performed by a group. The intrinsic form of Indian and traditional East Asian music in general exhibits a non-harmonic character. The concept of musical harmony proper is considered a European import. European harmony, polyphony, and counterpoint are in their very essences a set of disparate tonal registers forging a [gestalt](#) which impresses on the mind of the listener an overarching unity. At an experiential level, the polyphonic form embodies a distinct sonic ontology and a novel dimension, as it were, and thus cannot be reduced to merely a stylistic import. It induces a new auditory *condition*, a new register of [being-in-listening](#) (the lecture snippet from 57:08-1:02:07 effectively demonstrates the morphing of the basic melody of a song into its polyphonic equivalent). The new auditory condition conjoins the familiarity of the melody with the markedly different yet complementing registers of the polyphony, creating a novel sensation for the uninitiated Bengali listener.

Among the very early records to employ musical polyphony in India were two iconic musical works of the mid-20th century, one devotional in intent– *Aham Rudre* from *Mahishasurmardini* (1931) composed by the legendary music director Pankaj Mullick–and the other, a professed experiment in introducing polyphony in Bengali music, *Shurer Ei Jharna* (1958), by the noted composer Salil Chowdhury.



<https://youtu.be/3-BPJYu-Ud4>

In the current context, it is important to note how the sonic dimension of musical polyphony in *Aham Rudre* and *Shurer Ei Jharna* embodies and substitutes notions of aural communities and restages a communitarian character. Notably, the creation and circulation of these works paralleled the establishment of commercial state-radio in India (1930) and the first microgroove record in Kolkata in 1958 by the *Gramophone Company*.

The Gramophone Company in Calcutta marketed its records with the Bengali tagline “*Shukhi Grihokon Shobhe Gramophone/Happy Homes Have Gramophones*,” projecting the phonograph as the symbolic ideal of the domestic idyll and in the process confronting gendered spatial demarcations head-on by invading the auditory horizons of the secluded Bengali women. The striking presence of the gramophone in the iconic *Gramophone Scene* (1:35:17-1:35:28) in Satyajit Ray’s movie *Ghare Baire*–set in the backdrop of the *1905 Partition of Bengal*–beautifully illustrates the sorority forged by the gramophone which, notably, draws even the marginalized widow Bouthan within its field of influence.

<https://youtu.be/pvSsXK4JVLQ>

However, the gramophone superseded its commodity-character to serve not only in crass exhibitionism but also as an index of a masculine, elite consumerist culture where “serious music” and musical connoisseurship often became synonymous with the gramophone and recorded sound. A new breed of “record-collectors” came into existence, mainly belonging to the upwardly-mobile/elite classes whose passion for records was their most prominent identity-marker in the domestic realm, occasionally outweighing even their professional concerns.

But even as the radio and phonograph transcended the hitherto gendered character of musical reception by entering the women’s quarters and dissolving time-honored segregations of auditory spaces within the household, it had to contend with a deep-seated psychological discomfort in the listener, a fundamental unease with befriending technology that substituted the human. I argue that the newly insulated character of the radiophonic auditory experience was counteracted by significant efforts, conscious or otherwise, at *sonically* restaging and reclaiming the community lost in technological mediation.



Indian farmers gathered to listen the Farm Forum programme broadcast by All India Radio in the 1950s, Image Courtesy of Flickr User Public Resources.Org, (CC BY 2.0)

Given pet notions of musical anthropology and the chronological coincidence between the early uses of harmony and the entry and sophistication of technologically mediated music in Bengal one could, at the risk of slight oversimplification, posit that the import of the harmonic form at this significant juncture *sonically* compensates the auditory solitude induced by radio/phonograph by recreating a modified and idealized **Platonic** (Platonic here is used as an allusion to ‘music of the spheres’ to point towards how musical harmony since medieval times has been associated with ideal public) community and restaging it within the confines of the constitutive plurality of the polyphonic mode. As an aside, the initial introduction of polyphony in *Shurer Ei Jharna* (1958) garnered flak from a large section of the audience who cognized it as a group of amateur performers ‘*singing out of key*’ (Salil Chowdhury’s lecture from 30:31-31:15). Over the next few decades, however, this form was trans-culturated and seamlessly assimilated within the sonic

vocabulary of the Bengali/Indian masses, so much so that without the regular vocal/instrumental counterpoint, commercial songs nowadays are often felt to be lacking hue.

The sonic changes that I have been investigating preceded or followed the Partition of Bengal, which informed the gendered patterns of popular musical consumption. It is well-known that the exigencies of the Partition proved emancipatory for women in that they were [exposed to the vagaries of the workplace](#), leaving the confines of their quarters. It is with an often uncritical celebratory fervor that the Partition is credited with fashioning the independent, self-reliant and educated middle-class Bengali working woman, on occasion emerging as the sole bread-earner of the family. [Jasodhara Bagchi](#) says that the “partition accelerated the earlier trends of the twentieth century of abolishing the ‘purdah that had confined the Bengali *bhadramahila* to her *antahpur* (private quarters)...The same stroke that brought this flood of uprooted marginalised women to Calcutta also opened the door to many new opportunities for Bengali middle-class Hindu women. They came out of the private domain of domesticity and child rearing to take up public duties.”(8) [Uditi Sen](#), however, in her revisionist reading of the celebratory impulse argues that “situational aberrations” notwithstanding, the Partition did not lead to “a transformation of social norms or any substantive change of women’s ideal role within the bounds of the family.”(16)

In the aftermath of the Second World War, which had also witnessed the entry of women into the professional/public sphere, the USA launched [a propaganda war to restore women to their hearth, revivifying the “cult of the housewife,”](#) deploying films and popular music to promote the trope of the ideal housewife. Redefining domestic spaces as woman’s space had also been in the cards for the Indian state post-Partition, which had to a large extent been governed by patterns of popular media consumption. Arguably, the coincidental emergence of musical harmony and sophistication of private auditory technologies in the years following the Partition contributed to efforts to restore women to their private quarters, by compensating the lost professional community of the self-reliant working woman with the poetic/sonic community embodied by the polyphonic form, in the process enlivening her insipid lived quarters. Popular media technologies often employ innovation in content to revivify clichéd formats; musical harmony coupled with sophisticated audio-reproduction provides a classic instance of inaugurating a new sonic dimension in popular music which provides a powerful and enthralling form of domestic leisure.

Thus, in the context of early 20th century Bengal, the gramophone was a significant import which not only reconfigured perceptual registers and musical cultures but also listening practices by entering the interiors of elite Bengali households. Besides democratizing the listening experience, which till then had largely been restricted to male constituencies, the gramophone privatized musical consumption. It was through the introduction of musical polyphony, which is intrinsically ‘public/ communal’ as regards its sonic character, that this impulse was counteracted. As mentioned earlier, these technical/musical innovations widened the scope and impact of musical performance and arguably contributed to the reconstitution of gendered domestic space post-Partition which points to subtle and complex relations among technology, (musical) genre and gender.

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Featured Image: Screen Capture from by SO! Ed. Satyajit Ray’s Ghare Baire

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