

Article

Bengali Music and Musicians in the UK Oral History Project

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Introduction

Music plays a vital part in the life of any community. Stories of everyday life, of home, of belonging, or of being apart (e.g. through migration), and stories of emotion, love, tragedy, beauty, and philosophical ideas, are all told through music and song, and identities and memories are held in the experience of music.

In 2016 we set up an oral history project at the Swadhinata Trust aiming to document multi-generational experiences of Bengali music in Britain. Our collection of oral histories and interviews is a collaboration between the Swadhinata Trust and the British Library Sound Archive. The Swadhinata Trust is based in East London and is a secular group that works to promote Bengali history and heritage amongst young people. To date we have collected thirty interviews and various musical recordings that can be found on our website (<https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/a-history-of-bengali-music-and-musicians-in-the-uk/>). Our focus is not intended to be solely on London, although that is where most of our interviews to date have taken place, but we hope to include a wider area in due course.

Oral history is all about learning from others, and bringing to life the voices of people who might not otherwise be heard in their own voice. Thompson writes that “the oral historian comes to the interview to learn: to sit at the feet of others”. (1988:11)

All of us who work on this project are volunteers. To date there have been four of us. These include, Valentine Harding, Julie Begum (Chair of Swadhinata Trust), Ansar Ahmed Ullah, and Mike Sherriff. Julie and Ansar are themselves from the British Bangladeshi community, and so bring to this project their own first hand experiences of migration and music in the community. Valentine is of white British origin and worked in the Bangladesh Refugee Camps in 1971, and as a part-time musician took an interest in Bengali music, and has been studying Indian and Bengali music for some years now in London. Mike, also of white British origin, spends much of his time in Bangladesh, and is a fluent Bengali speaker and sings Bengali songs.

Background and Context

Bengali music in the UK has a long and rich history. There has been an Asian presence in Britain for 400 years, and music has inevitably played a part in this presence. There are records from the mid nineteenth century of

Displaced Voices: A Journal of Archives, Migration and Cultural Heritage

Vol.1 (2020), 86-90. © The Author

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various musicians from India who earned a living in London as street performers and performers in public houses. One such record from 1895 describes a regular meeting in the back of a dilapidated public house in the East End of London where working-class Indian residents and others gathered regularly to listen to an Indian sitar and tambour player. This group was likely to include lascars and seamen who worked on British owned ships, many of whom were from the region of Bengal in East India (nowadays Bangladesh), and life in the UK for them would have been extremely difficult and hard. (Visram 2002:65). Others followed throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and many were also seamen working for the Merchant Navy. (For oral histories of these migrants see Adams (1987) *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers*)

In the mid twentieth century, in the 1950s/60s and 70s, Bengali migrants to the UK faced many barriers. Both Julie Begum and Mahmudur Rahman in their interviews describe their experience of the gradual emergence of music that hitherto had been kept hidden behind closed doors because of the racism faced by people in Britain. It was not until the UK began to embrace multi-culturalism in the late 1970s and 80s, in London through organisations such as the Greater London Council and Inner London Education Authority, that Bengali music could be more openly celebrated and practiced.

Since then, there has been a prolific growth of music making. We now have classes and community learning, and plenty of concerts and musical venues, such as the *Rich Mix* in Bethnal Green, *Kobi Nazrul Centre* and *Brady Centre* in Whitechapel, and the annual *Baishaki Mela* in Tower Hamlets. There is now a younger generation growing up and learning the music of their cultural origin, and producing a fusion of music that reflects their Bengali and British backgrounds.

Our project aims to demonstrate the life of music in the community. This project is not so much about the music itself, although that is important, but about people who make music, and what it means in their lives.

We have deliberately not targeted many well-known performers, star artists, or emerging artists, although some of them are included. Neither is it research that focuses on typical examples and genres of music. But it is a review of the culture that surrounds music, the influences of migration, and community involvement in music. We have also involved interviewees who are not from the Bengali community but who have been influenced by Bengali music. The project is inclusive of all Bengali music whether this is from Bangladesh or West Bengal in India. Originally, before Partition in 1947, Bengal was one province, and these two areas share a common language and cultural heritage.

It is important also to note that the history of Bengali music in the UK has not been as well documented as some other post-colonial diasporic communities (Quader 2019), and we hope that our project will go some way towards providing such historical documentation.

An Outline of the Oral History Collection To Date.

Our oral history interviews go back to memories from the 1970s onwards in the UK, and prior to that memories of music back home in Bangladesh. There are two interviews given in Bengali language, Mahmudur Rahman (Benubhai) and Himangshu Goswami. These are translated in the audio summaries that accompany each interview. Both these interviewees felt more comfortable speaking in their mother tongue, particularly in the case of Mahmudur Rahman who describes his life during 1971 and the Bangladesh War and his participation in a troupe of musicians singing Freedom Songs. In contrast, other of our interviewees from a younger generation born in the UK speak English as their first language.

It is worth emphasizing here that language was a major issue in the struggle for the independence of Bangladesh. Prior to 1971 West Pakistan rulers attempted to repress the use of Bengali language in the region (at that time East Pakistan). In 1952 police murdered four students during protests at Dhaka University calling for Bengali to be recognized as an official language, and this became a trigger point in the fight for Independence. Known as the "language martyrs" the day of their murder, February 21st, eventually became globally marked by UNESCO as World Mother Tongue Day.

Amongst those interviewed who were people who migrated to this country, either as children or adults, there is often an expression of the hardship of psychological adjustment to living in the UK. For some who were practicing musicians or students of music back in Bangladesh and/or India there was a period of time on arrival here when they could not find their voice and found themselves unable to express themselves through singing or music in the way they did back home. For example, interviewees Moushumi Bhowmik, Nadia Wahhab and Alaur Rahman describe this feeling of alienation and disconnection, and how they overcame it. This was often a gradual process, and one only achieved through the encouragement of friends and family.

Mahmudur Rahman was living in Leeds in the 1970s and 80s, and describes how he was involved in setting up a community Bengali music class with the help of a local authority community worker. They were unable to attract anyone to the community centre where the class was to be held. It was only after he opened the doors of his own house and invited people in for tea and socializing along with a music class that he began to attract the

local Asian community, who only felt safe to practice and learn the music of their cultural origin within the sanctuary of a local home.

Julie Begum describes how for many of the second generation of Bengali people born here, like her, in the 1960s and 70s, Bengali music was not easy to access. It was a hostile time with racial violence and harassment. There was a turning point in the late 1970s when young people and community organisations got together to resist racism. Music became more important at that time as a mark of cultural identity. Julie's experience of enjoying music that represented her cultural heritage started when she was a teenager with the *Asian Underground* that included bands such as *Joi*, *Asian Dub Foundation*, and *State of Bengal*. These bands mixed traditional music with dance music to create a new sound. This was Julie's first experience of hearing music from her South Asian/Bengali background fused with her British identity, which no one had previously played or heard, being presented in a way she and her contemporaries could relate to. Asian and British culture was brought together. There was solidarity amongst British young people, especially in urban areas like inner London. For the first time, it was OK/Cool to be Asian.

Many of our interviewees are practitioners of the music of traditional Bengali songwriters such as Rabindranath Tagore (*Rabindrasangeet*), Nazrul Islam (*Nazrul Geeti*), and Hasan Raja, and also North Indian Classical music. North Indian classical music is interwoven in the traditions of folk and modern Bengali music. The region of Bengal itself has been home to many classical musicians such as the renowned artists Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan and their Guru, Ali Akbar Khan's father Allaudin Khan. From a historical perspective we have also included the history of Gauhar Jaan, who was the first Indian musician to be recorded in Calcutta in 1902. The theatre group *Mukul and the Ghetto Tigers* produced the story of Gauhar Jaan in 2018, and the writer of this play, Tarun Jasani, and Theatre Director Mukul Ahmed, are included in our interviewees

The two-way flow of music from Bengal to the UK and back is the backbone of this exploration into Bengali Music and Musicians in the UK and the culture that surrounds music. We therefore see musical developments in Bangladesh and West Bengal themselves as an important dimension. This collection includes two interviews from the younger generation in Bangladesh that demonstrate exquisitely how musical developments take place, and how progress and change is important to the younger generation currently living in Bangladesh who are developing their own genre of folk and rock fusion. (See interviews with Jawad Chowdhury and Mohammed Mobassish Choudhury).

Conclusions

The participants in this collection represent many aspects of the life of Bengali music in the UK: from 1971, and the Bangladesh Independence struggle, to migration, teaching and learning in the UK, present day songwriting and musical composition, the annual *Baishaki Mela*, and theatre. The Bangladesh War of Independence highlighted the significance of language and culture, and 1971 plays a significant role in community life and identity today. Migration to the UK further emphasized the need for cultural identity.

The various styles and genres of Bengali music are a part of an important aesthetic heritage to be valued by music lovers, Bengali and non-Bengali alike. Members of the Bengali community in the UK have also created or co-created new musical expressions, which now form a part of British 'mainstream culture', although, as noted above, not always as well recognized as the music of other diasporic communities. In addition, there are projects such as the *Grand Union Orchestra* led by Tony Haynes that has incorporated Bengali and Indian music in its repertoire with the assistance of *tabla* player Yousuf Ali Khan (see interviews of both). Finally, we see our project as contributing to a history of music in the UK for the benefit of all citizens, and for the promotion of intercultural dialogue and exchange between communities.

Music is a path by which we all get to know each other whatever our backgrounds, a path where we cross boundaries, integrate, and enjoy and celebrate our lives. We are conscious that our collection to date is only a beginning, and our research will continue, and this collection will be added to over the coming months and years.

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