

*Songs of Action, Songs of Calm:*  
Rabindranath Tagore and the Aural Fabric of Bengali Life in America

Nandini Rupa Banerjee-Datta

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# ABSTRACT

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Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is often considered the most important literary figure in modern Bengali history. He lived through the transformation of Bengali culture and society from colonial to anticolonial to post-colonial times. Tagore was a playwright, novelist, philosopher, and songwriter. He wrote and composed nearly 2,500 songs, called Rabindrasangeet. My interlocutors ascribe Tagore's songs with a particular affective strength that has become a medium for the construction of diasporic identity. In this dissertation, I explore the lives of three generations of women – from precolonial Bengal, post-independence Bengal, and the modern diaspora – and the types of movement they have experienced. I identify a rupture between the familiar and the immediate that accompanies their movement, and characterize this rupture as creating space for multiple identities, reflections, and intimacies, and the continuous building, dismantling, and rebuilding of culture.

I argue that the genre of Rabindrasangeet forms and reforms in the diaspora through embodied processes of micro-level performance. Through friendships, kinships, inter-generational relationships, and technologically mediated connections, Rabindrasangeet remains present. It is a tool for self-making, and used to convey unspoken feelings in a gendered world.

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## Acknowledgements

This is a dissertation about family, friendship, identity, and love, and the language that connects it all. It is about the work of Rabindranath Tagore, yes, but it is mostly (if not all) about the lives which have been touched in some way by his music. Ordinary lives, and the ordinary stories that create these lives, are what I have built my dissertation on. I will never accurately be able to put into words how much I have learned from my friends, family, and guides. However, I will try my best here.

I am grateful to my co-Sponsors at Columbia University, Aaron Fox and Alessandra Ciucci. Aaron was the very first professor I contacted at Columbia, and my immediate connection to his work on ordinary talk – and the immense importance of it – has not ceased. It is his work that originally inspired me to write about *how* people talk about Rabindranath. Thank you to Alessandra for always encouraging me to think deeper about gender. For providing such thoughtful feedback each and every time, and for being a kind mentor. Also, I am grateful to my outstanding dissertation committee. Thank you Dr. Sudipta Kaviraj, who not only read me countless times with a deeply theoretical eye, but did so with an openness and kindness that encouraged me so much after every meeting. I felt confident in my writing and thinking, and I cannot thank you enough for this. I would be remiss to not mention that Dr. Kaviraj attended my defense over Zoom from India which, with the time difference, lasted from midnight until 2:30am. His presence and contemplative discussion provided me with the grounded encouragement I needed. Thank you Kevin Fellezs, for teaching me throughout my time at Columbia, and for reading my work thoroughly. And lastly, thank you Dr. Alex Chavez. I consider myself incredibly lucky to have had you on my dissertation committee. Your work has

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I ultimately dedicate this dissertation to my parents. It is in some form a love letter to them.

## Introduction

My earliest memory is from a tiny student-housing apartment in Southern Illinois. I am perhaps two years old and my young mother and father are singing a Bengali *Rabindrasangeet*<sup>1</sup> to me as it simultaneously plays from a second-hand cassette deck.

*Tumi khushi thako  
Amar paane cheye cheye  
Tomar anginathe berai geye geye*

May You be happy  
By watching me play  
By watching me frolic in Your courtyard

*Tomar porosh amar majhe  
Shure shure buke baaje,  
Shei ananda nachaye chhanda  
Viswa bhuban chheye chheye.*

Your touch remains among me  
Its melody resonates in my soul  
That bliss gives rhythm  
To the entire world You've created.<sup>2</sup>

I do not know how to speak in full sentences yet, but I am singing the refrain with my parents in my toddler language. I am blissful, and my parents are smiling and laughing as I sing with them, their eyes twinkling. It's just the three of us in the apartment, and my parents' joy fills me with comfort and a sense of completeness. We are singing together in a country that is still unknown to my young parents – a country where they have just started their family, where the only solace of familiarity they have are the few cassettes they brought and the language and melodies that emanate from them.

Twenty-six years later, my Ma and I are sitting in our sunlit Brooklyn living room on a Saturday afternoon. My father is at work, and it's just the two of us. After chatting for hours, we sit in comfortable silence. We feel close to each other, connected. Suddenly – and this happens often – I pull my phone out of my pocket and search for a song on YouTube. Today I choose the Rabindrasangeet “*Kaal Rater Bela Gaan Elo Mor Mone*,” the version sung by Sagar Sen. I know this is one of my Ma's favorite songs, and I want her to feel loved, supported, and protected –

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<sup>1</sup> “Rabindra”: a shortening of Tagore's first name; “sangeet”: song

<sup>2</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee.

just as she makes me feel. We both listen as my mother sways her head and taps her feet absentmindedly. I feel at peace watching her happiness and her familiarity.

*Kaal rater bela gaan elo mor mone  
Tokhon tumi chhile na mor shone.*

A song stirred in my mind last night  
But you were not there with me then.

*Je kathati bolbo tomay bole  
Kaatlo jiban nirab chokher jole.*

All the words I wish to tell you  
I've spent a lifetime in tearful silence

*Sei kothati surer homanale.  
Utlo jole ekta aandhar khone*

The words, blazed with pure melody  
For a split second of darkness

*Tokhon tumi chhile na mor shone.*

But you were not there with me then.<sup>3</sup>

A while later, my mother looks up with a smile on her face. “When I was a teenager, I would always think of what a lucky woman Sagar Sen’s wife must have been. She got to hear his beautiful songs all the time. [Laughing] As if all he did was sing to his wife!” These innocent thoughts flood back into my Ma’s memories, bringing with them an ephemeral sense of calm.

Today, I sing to my daughter. Her name is Leela, a Sanskrit word based on the philosophy of the Upanishads, meaning cosmic or transcendental play, residing at the limits of reason. Rabindranath Tagore ruminated on the *Upanishads*, and this term in particular, as a way to live life through play, or as he has written, *jiban leela* (lit. life-play). In his own philosophy – based on the *Upanishads* – *leela* functioned as an ultimate critique of reason and which thus interrupted (without making irrelevant) the specifically political. In his essay, *Kabir kaifiyat* (1915), he explained his preference for the expression *jiban-leela* over the Western expression “struggle for existence (or survival)” by pointing out that, to him, “struggle” was a more partial description of the business of existence than *leela* was.

“The phenomenon that we call *jiban-leela* is called ‘struggle for existence’ across the Western seas. But the difficulty is that we feel ashamed to use this expression these days. Life is *leela* (play) and nothing else! What would the tough peoples of the world say [of us] if they

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<sup>3</sup> *Rabindrasangeet* translated by Nandini Banerjee.



heard [us say this]...! I confess that I have no sense of shame... “Leela” expresses the whole of the concept, ‘struggle’ truncates it” (Vol.14:301).

Rabindranath’s writings have carved out deep and permanent spaces in my life. His particular reflection of the term, specifically its distinction between the prosaic and the poetic, the transportation of the everyday to the level of the transcendental, is what inspired me to name my daughter Leela – years before I was even pregnant. When I sing to Leela, I sing from memory. I sing songs that bring back the innocence of childhood, songs that help me identify with motherhood, and songs that remind me of my own Ma.

*Tomar khola hawaye, lagie pale  
Tukro kore kachi ami dubte raji achi.*

Unfurling my sails in your unbridled wind  
Tearing away its anchors, I am willing to sink

*Shokal amar gelo miche,  
bikel je jaye tari piche go  
Rekho na ar, bedhona ar, kuler kachakachi.*

The morning goes by in vain  
And dusk too follows the same  
Please do not keep me chained to the shore.

*Majhir lagi achi jage shokol ratribela  
Dheugulo je amaye niye kore kebol khela.  
Jhwarke ami korbo mite,  
dorbo na tar bhrukutite  
Dao chhere dao, ogo, ami tufan pele banchi.*

For the boatman I stay awake the entire night  
As the waves continue to play with me,  
I will make the storm my friend,  
And not be daunted again by its frown  
Release me, oh, for only in a tempest can I find myself.<sup>4</sup>

I have become so immersed in motherhood, so guided by this newfound role, that the only way to describe my relationship to Leela is pure surrender. To watch her grow, to navigate together her struggles, and to celebrate her accomplishments, to surrender myself to the beautiful chaos of motherhood is how I have found myself anew.

A lot has changed for my family in the years that have passed between these memories. For one, I am the one speaking in full sentences. Cassette decks are obsolete, and the tapes that were played on them have been reduced to mere relics. My family moved halfway across the United States and bought a house, everyone has a stable career that they are proud of, I got married, and

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<sup>4</sup> *Rabindrasangeet* translated by Nandini Banerjee.

now we have Leela. What has carried through is the animating presence of Rabindranath Tagore's music, and the simplicity, ordinariness, and – one could say – melancholy, of these memories. The space that his music, *Rabindrasangeet*, provides for my family to express emotions that are too layered, too deep to formulate into words, has remained central in the production of their identity – and my own – as Bengalis in the diaspora.

My basic argument is that, for Bengali-Americans, the words and songs of Rabindranath Tagore are a medium for the construction of diasporic identity. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), is often considered the most important literary figure in modern Bengali history. He became the first non-European Nobel laureate in 1913, when he won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his book of “Song Offerings,” called *Gitanjali*. He was a playwright, novelist, philosopher, and songwriter. He wrote and composed nearly 2,500 songs, a handful of which I am lucky to explore. With the proceeds from his Nobel Prize, Rabindranath established an experimental education institution in Birbhum, West Bengal on a plot of his grandfather's land named *Shantiniketan*, or “the abode of peace.” Rabindranath called the institution Viswa Bharati. It was modeled after the forest hermitages of classical India. Classes were taught with simplicity as a cardinal principle, and were held outside under the shade of trees, where teachers and students shared an integral social and cultural life. Tagore's main mission at the university was to create a zone of bonding that would sensitize the elite class to the plight of the rural milieu. In 1951, four years after India became an independent nation, Viswa Bharati was granted full university status. In his essay “Two Giant Brothers: Tagore's Revisionist Orient,” in *Clearing a Spade: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture* (2008), Amit Chaudhuri describes Tagore as a writer who dismantles the western opposition of nature and culture: “for Tagore, nature is *the* site of civilization, refinement, and of certain ideals of the secular Enlightenment, such as the

ideal of living in harmony with the world: and it's a specifically Indian location for these things” (134). Viswa Bharati was a prime example of that.

Rabindranath became the first composer to have created the national anthems for two separate countries. In 1911, Rabindranath wrote the song *Jana Gana Mana* in highly Sankritized Bengali. It was officially adopted as the Indian national anthem in 1950. He wrote *Amar Sonar Bangla* even earlier in 1906 after the first partition of Bengal in 1905 in order to rekindle the unified spirit of Bengal and to raise public consciousness against the communal political divide. This song was adopted as the national anthem of Bangladesh after the 1971 Liberation War.

Rabindranath lived through the transformation of Bengali culture and society from colonial to anticolonial to post-colonial. I will discuss his biography in more detail later in the chapter. I revisit this almost over-represented figure in the fresh light of the ethnography of song and singing because there has been a paradigm shift of how people think about song in relation to power and politics. I connect musical, literary, and colonial history together because it contributes to the creation of Tagore as a premodern and postcolonial character. I am exploring what it means to study a literary figure in terms of vernacular culture - moving from the object of Rabindranath and Rabindrasangeet to the subject of those who listen, perform, and live through this music, drawing on people and listening to their stories. While Rabindranath Tagore remains a steadfast marker of identity, an icon that has been associated with tropes of nationalism, anti-colonialism, classic literature, and many times elite culture, I propose that his work is malleable and opens up space for discussion. The simultaneous locality and universality that radiate from his songs contribute to the construction, interpretation, and remaking of multivariate identities. I frame my analysis within a paradigm in which the persistence of the colonial encounter and anti-colonial struggle remains pertinent in diasporic consciousness. As Amit Chaudhuri writes in *The*

*Essential Tagore* (2011), “Tagore was absorbed in the everyday, the domestic, and his modernist love of the momentary” (xix). My work serves to show how his philosophies of the mundane and ephemeral continue through song in the United States today.

My theoretical and methodological praxis stems from my own positionality and intimate involvement in the communities that I explore. Lila Abu Lughod writes in *Writing Womens Worlds* (1993), “Whether its goal is to engage in cultural self-critique or to assert enlightened tolerance through relativism, anthropology needs others that are different from the self. Yet a difference between self and other will always be hierarchical because the self is sensed as primary, self-formed, active, and complex, if not positive. At the very least, the self is always the interpreter and the other is the interpreted” (13). How then, am I to interrogate and challenge my positionality as a Bengali-American who has grown up with Rabindrasangeet? I follow Alex Chavez’s ethnography *Sounds of Crossing* and its deliberate use of autobiography as a reflective strategy to decenter the ontology of objective ethnography. I am exploring this intentional style of writing in order to challenge the authority that comes with ethnographic and academic scholarship.

My interrogation into the performed world of Rabindrasangeet is gendered. I focus on three generations of women, but also include many men in my ethnography. Male and female Rabindrasangeet performers take on different kinds of labor in the worlds I explore: affective, musical, pedagogical, performative, and social. Men and women move differently through these worlds, inhabiting gendered spheres within India and Bengali-America that dictate the boundaries of possibility and self-making. I go into the specific contours of this gendered vocality in Chapter 2.

## **Literature Review**

This project centers on voice, poetics, gender, diaspora, and intimacy. It is about how Bengali immigrants use Rabindrasangeet to “make do” (de Certeau 1988), not only to get by in the course of everyday life, but also intentionally contributing to a process of self-making. This concept of music’s part in the shaping of human subjects in social environments is inspired by Louis Althusser’s (1971) concept of interpellation. I take inspiration from Judith Butler’s work on gender, subjectivity, and subjection (1990, 1997), and Lila Abu Lughod (1986, 1993) and Kamala Visweswaran’s (1994) multifaceted takes on feminist ethnography. The people who I write about use the special expressive power of Rabindrasangeet to maneuver between the public and private, and thus studies of cultural intimacy and the public sphere (Stewart 1988, 2007; Herzfeld 1997, Berlant 2000, Warner 2005, Stokes 2010, Pilzer 2011, Chavez 2013) remain central in every chapter. I will spend much of my time attending to emergent moments, stressing the fact that song details and intimacy matter in the broadest questions of power, identity, and history.

I elaborate on the historical contours of Bengali music to argue that Rabindrasangeet, like any genre, is socially shaped and emergent (Bauman and Briggs 1992). I follow scholars like Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), Louise Meintjes (2003), Lauren Berlant (2008), and Ellen Gray (2013), and argue for the sociohistorical contingency of genre (Bakhtin: 12), as opposed to a rigid formality. Ellen Gray’s (2013) work on the affective world of *fado* has also shaped the ways in which I privilege the voice, sound, and listening as key sites through which to understand self-making through Rabindrasangeet in the diaspora.

The breadth of academic scholarship that exists on Rabindranath Tagore is vast. His sociopolitical influence has been analyzed and explored at length by scholars of subaltern studies (Chatterjee 1989, 1993, 2011; Chakrabarty 1996, 2000; Sudpita Kaviraj 2015) and post-colonial

studies (Saha 2013), linguists, historians, and sociologists (Dimock 1959; Robinson 1991, 1995; Nandy 1994; Dasgupta 2004 2013; Roma Chatterji 2016). Analyses on Tagore's ruminations on nationalism, explorations of his innovative writing style, and studies on his pioneering views on feminism have guided my own research. Reba Som's (2009) English writing on Rabindrasangeet, connecting Tagore's poetry and song to social life, has shown me the possibilities of this subject, but also the dearth that exists. The diasporic outlook of my writing follows not only the academic scholarship of Purnima Mankekar (1999, 2015), Lisa Lowe (1996, 2015), Su Zheng (2010), and Sunaina Maira (2002, 2016), but also the vibrant fiction writings of Durga Chew Bose, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Tanai's.

My influence from scholars of song is vast. Ethnomusicologists who write on the impact of technology (Meintjes 2003; Hirschkind 2006; Kunreuther 2006), transnational circulations (Fellezs 2011, 2019; Novak 2013), and the centrality of the voice in identity formation (Fox 2004; Gray 2013; Ciucci 2012; Chavez 2017; Weidman 2006, 2016) have formed the crux of my theoretical interventions.

My research fills the gap in connecting studies on the history and politics of Rabindranath to current lives of diasporic and musical individuals, residing at the juncture of colonial nationalism and migration.

What follows is a concise musical, geographic, and political history of Bengal. I focus on the history of recorded Bengali song up until the era of Rabindranath Tagore's musical compositions, and Bengal's peculiar position in the British Raj at that time – its colonial, and synchronously deeply anti-imperial and nationalist, experience. I sketch this historical web to not only contextualize the environment that fostered and nourished Rabindranath Tagore and created and reified Rabindrasangeet as a musical genre, but also in order to make sense of how Bengalis

in diaspora may view their relationship to a collective home, how the interconnection between individual and collective remembrance creates a historical consciousness of their homeland, and how the evocation of a national past and future, or the reflection about individual and cultural memory create different forms of nostalgia in the Bengali American diaspora. Through my sketch, I emphasize a decentering of “Bengal” as an imaginary figure that maintains an embedded presence particularly in the diaspora. My work ultimately theorizes the potency of Rabindrasangeet in its many forms at the intersection of anti-colonial nationalist literature and contemporary women’s aurality and vernacular diasporic discourse.

### **Rabindranath Tagore’s Cosmopolitanism**

Political movements and nationalist fervor came in the year 1903, when Lord Curzon (1859-1925), the British Viceroy in India, initiated the first partition of Bengal, which separated the largely Muslim eastern areas from the predominantly Hindu western areas. His initiation spurred an already-present patriotism amongst Bengali visionaries of the time and inspired protests for which Rabindranath composed numerous songs. On October 16, 1905, the partition became a reality. In a form of protest, Rabindranath deemed the dark day into a mass festival known as *Rakhi Bandhan*, or the tying of the band of friendship. At his call, hundreds of Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta, Dhaka, and Sylhet came out in thousands to tie *rakhi*, or a symbolic thread, transforming the previously-religious tradition to a secular motif of unity amongst diversity. Rabindranath Tagore was physically at the forefront of the many protests and was a pivotal force behind the morale of freedom fighters. With a *dhol*<sup>5</sup> slung around his neck, he led marches against the British division of the province. His words were filled with conviction and love and served as march slogans.

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<sup>5</sup> A two-sided barrel drum. The size varies from region to region.

*Bidhir bhadhan katbe tumi emon shaktiman  
Tumi ki emni shaktiman  
Amader bhanga gara tomar haate emon abhiman  
Tomader emni abhiman  
Chirodin tanbe piche chirodin rakhbe niche  
Etoi bal nai re tomar sabe na sei tan  
Shasone jatoi ghera ache bal durbalero  
Hou na jatoi baro achen bhagoban  
Amader Shakti mere torao bachbinere  
Bojha tor bhari holeo dubbe torikhon*

Defy the limits of destiny – are you so powerful?  
Oh, are you so powerful?  
You think you can control our lives, our ups and our downs  
You think you can control it all!  
Always pulling us behind, always keeping us below  
No, you don't have that might, you can't keep up that force  
You can stifle us with rules, but even the weak has their strength  
Sure, you may be big, but the biggest remains God  
If you destroy our force, you shall be destroyed too  
Too much burden of power shall sink your ship, too.<sup>6</sup>

Intense outrage soared in the form of the *Swadeshi* movement and Bengal was reunited in 1911 due to intense political protests and in an effort to quell the uproar<sup>7</sup>. Despite Rabindranath's feelings of patriotism, he did not condone violence. During this time, Rabindranath Tagore wrote his two songs, *Amar Sonar Bangla*<sup>8</sup> and *Jana Gana Mana*<sup>9</sup>. *Amar Sonar Bangla* was intended to rouse Bengalis to protest the division of Bengal by invoking the image of a once-whole mother whose very body was now endangered. Tagore's distinct brand of love for his country emerged in such writings.

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<sup>6</sup> Translation by Nandini Banerjee-Datta. This song is typically heard as a chorus.

<sup>7</sup> Although Britain reunified Bengal in 1911, the provinces of Bihar and Orissa were created out of Bengali land and the central government's capital was moved from Calcutta to Delhi.

<sup>8</sup> *Amar Sonar Bangla*, written in 1906 by Rabindranath Tagore after the first partition of Bengal, was adopted as the national anthem of Bangladesh after the 1971 Liberation War. Tagore wrote the song to rekindle the unified spirit of Bengal and to raise public consciousness against the communal political divide.

<sup>9</sup> *Jana Gana Mana* is the national anthem of India that was composed and scored by Rabindranath Tagore. It was written in highly Sankritized Bengali in 1911 and officially adopted as the Indian national anthem in 1950.



In 1915, Rabindranath was granted knighthood by the Queen of England. In 1919, the Rowlatt Act<sup>10</sup> was passed in India, dashing any hope of self-government, something that the British rulers kept promising to Indians throughout the war years. After the 1919 massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, Punjab, where approximately 1,000 peacefully gathered civilians were murdered by the British Indian army, Rabindranath renounced his knighthood in a symbolic act of protest. He wrote, “The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of my countrymen who, for their so-called insignificance are liable to suffer degradation not fit for human beings. These are the reasons which have painfully compelled me to ask Your Excellency...to relieve me of my title of Knighthood...” (*Modern Review* 1919).

### **A Brief History of Bengali Song**

Ever-present in this dissertation is the concept of mobility – whether physical or emotional, the types of movement that I write about are ultimately forced. I identify a certain type of rupture between the familiar and the immediate that accompanies this movement, and characterize this type of rupture as making space for multiple iterations of identity, reflections, intimacies, and the continuous building, dismantling, and rebuilding of culture. As I will elaborate, Bengali song was in constant flux since its inception. Great migrations, political shifts, and religious campaigns all influenced the lyrical, melodic, and instrumental content of the compositions.

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<sup>10</sup> Also known as the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919, it indefinitely extended the emergency measures of preventive indefinite detention, incarceration without trial, and judicial review. It authorized the colonial British government to imprison any person suspected of terrorism living in British India for up to two years without trial, and gave the colonial authorities power to deal with all revolutionary activities.

Thus, what is at stake through my upcoming exploration of genres such as *Charya* and *Kirtan* is the constant processes of self-making through mobility.

Bengali song is known to have started in the form of musical composition through *Charya* (Dasgupta 1964). *Charya*, or *Charyapada*, were a collection of songs and mystical poetry meant to express the experience of the enlightened state. *Charya* songs were composed by Buddhist saints during a period extending from the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Pal 1996), during the rules of the Buddhist Pala Empire and the Hindu Sena or Sen Dynasty, and were written in pre-modern Bengali, Assamese, Maithili and Oriya languages.

As the *Charya* gained popularity, the Sen Dynasty was in full power in Bengal. Ballal Sen (reign 1160-1179) was known for his revival of orthodox Hindu practices, and for establishing Kulin Brahminism<sup>11</sup> in Bengal. Hindu orthodoxy, religious ritualism, and the silencing of lower castes were rampant under his rule, and this hegemony infiltrated into the prose and poetry of the time. There were three major sections of literary traditions in what is called the first history of Bengal literature, ending in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Kaviraj 2015): the major texts of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* that were renditions and transfers from the Sanskrit canon, the *mangalkavyas*<sup>12</sup>, which celebrated the powers of popular deities in the context of a specific and local geography, and the corpus of work associated with the composers Vidyapati (1352-1448) and Baru Chandidas (c.1408-1430). Manuscripts document their *Viashnav*-influenced *Kirtans*, a type of

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<sup>11</sup> Kulin Brahmins are Brahmin families in Bengal that can trace themselves back to the first five families who migrated to Bengal from Uttar Pradesh. They were given great amounts of power during the Sen Dynasty, and lived orthodox lives in order to keep their positions.

<sup>12</sup> The *mangalkaya* tradition offers a detailed picture of a lower-class social world. As Kaviraj (2015) writes, they represent a highly significant complex of literary sensibility. They combined a distinctly subaltern religious spirit with the depiction of a peasant world of want and domestic troubles.

congregational ballad performance in devotion to the god Vishnu. Called *Vaishnav Padavali*<sup>13</sup>, their narrative structure centered on the trysts of Radha and Krishna, the eternal feminine and masculine realities of God in Vedic culture. The Kirtans combined Jaydeb's<sup>14</sup> (c.1170-1245) *Geetagovinda*, Chandidas's *Padavali*, and Vidyapati's verses in the Maithili and Avahattha languages. Although seen by many historians as being firmly a part of the basic definition of Bengali literary history, the Hindu hegemony dominated, silently excluding Islamic texts. This silencing was discouraged by Sri Chaitanya's (1486-1534) religious movement of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which dominated Bengali literary production for nearly two centuries.

The earliest historical record of *Padavali Kirtan* dates back to a religious festival organized by Narottama Das in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. The festival was held in the village of Kheturi, present-day Bangladesh (Graves 2017). Kirtan songs developed a particular call and response form where the lead lines were repeated by a chorus, chanting the names of Radha and Krishna and progressively increasing tempo. The main instrumentation for a Kirtan ensemble has largely remained unchanged since the genre's nascent days – a lead singer, and an accompanying singer or group, *khol*<sup>15</sup>, and *mandira*<sup>16</sup>. The harmonium has been added to most ensembles since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although all compositions during this time addressed divine love, the themes stressed a particularly personal form of devotion, opposing caste distinctions, and creating a detachment from ritual-based Hinduism. Sri Chaitanya's biographer Sishir Kumar Ghosh (1840-

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<sup>13</sup> The Vaishnav Padavali movement, literally meaning the Vaishnav gathering of songs, was a period in medieval Bengali from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> marked by an outpouring of literature and music about the love and trysts between Radha and Krishna.

<sup>14</sup> Jaydeb was the royal poet in the court of Hindu king Lakshman Sen (reign 1178-1206), son and heir of Ballal Sen.

<sup>15</sup> A two-sided, asymmetrical barrel drum used to accompany devotional music in Eastern India. The drum is made of clay, and the two faces of animal hide. It is played with the palms and fingers of both hands.

<sup>16</sup> Two cup-shaped brass or bronze cymbals connected by yarn. It is played by contrasting open and damped sounds together to underline the meter of many devotional genres.

1911) writes that Kirtan played a crucial role in the fusion of religion and Bengali nationalism. Sri Chaitanya's *bhakti* movement instilled in the common man an intense human bond. The structural Brahminic Hinduism that maintained a stronghold until then, resulting in a fragmented society based on caste and creed, was brought together through Kirtan performance. Public group performances that invited anyone to join in regardless of religion or caste, the simplicity of melody with large meters and slow tempos, and the accessible register of language was what attracted the common man, and Sri Chaitanya's followers were able to retain his messages through Vaishnavism and the messages proliferated through his songs.

My attempt here is to lay out a foundation through musical and literary lineages, as well as through colonial history on which to position Rabindranath Tagore. The poetry, gruesome battles, literature, and political oppression outlined in this chapter serves not to merely point out the idiosyncrasies of a particular Bengali history, but to build a story of which Tagore and my interlocutors are a part.

### **Classical, Light Classical, and the Creation of Class**

Many renowned Hindustani classical musicians trace their lineage to branches of the family of Tansen (1506-1589). Born to a Hindu family in Gwalior in modern Madhya Pradesh, Tansen was the court musician of the Mughal emperor Akbar in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Bengal delta was under the rule of the Mughal Empire in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the ultimate decline of the Mughal Empire led to the descendants of Tansen scattering all over north India, creating different centers of music. Two such centers were Vishnupur and Krishnanagar around Calcutta. The musicians from the Vishnupur *gharana*, or lineage, excelled in classical styles

based on the raga structure. *Khayal*<sup>17</sup>, *Tappa*<sup>18</sup>, *Thumri*<sup>19</sup>, and *Dhrupad*<sup>20</sup> were among the classical genres perfected by this lineage.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, lyrical Bengali song began to turn away from an exclusive focus on Radha and Krishna-dominated tales, and elaborated itself with those of Goddesses Durga and Kali, manifestations of strength and the elimination of evil. This turn signified a shift away from Sri Chaitanya's ecumenical Hinduism, to an elite and selective iteration of Hinduism. Lyricists such as Bharat Chandra (1712-1760) and Ramprasad Sen (1720-1781) dominated the Bengali musical world with compositions representative of the transition from the medieval to modern age. During this time, many court poets from royal courts in Delhi and Lucknow came to Bengal in search of patronage and were eagerly welcomed by the new upper class. It is here, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that Bengali song turned to themes of humanism through the genre of Tappa. Bengali Tappa came originally from the folk songs of Arab traders who came to Punjab and Rajasthan through Iran and Afghanistan. Because they would travel with their goods on camels, their music developed into a type of regional song associated with camel herders. A proponent of Tappa was Ghulam Nabi Shori, or Shori Mian (1742-1792), the court singer of the nawab Asaf-Ud-Dowlah (reign 1775-1797) (Manuel 1989). Shori Mian was one of the first men to add vocal ornamentations to the original folk songs of the camel herders, and created a musical school of his own which was a combination of two gharanas: the Gwalior (the birthplace of Tansen) and

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<sup>17</sup> Khayal is a form of Hindustani classical music that comes from the Arabic word meaning "imagination." It allows the performer a lot of space and freedom of expression, and the style calls for technical virtuosity.

<sup>18</sup> Tappa is a form of semi-classical Hindustani music, characterized by fast and subtle vocal embellishments.

<sup>19</sup> The Thumri vocal genre is characterized by dramatic gestures, mild eroticism, and evocative love poetry.

<sup>20</sup> Dhrupad is the most ancient style of vocal Hindustani classical music. It seeks not to entertain, but to evoke feelings of peace and contemplation in the listener, bringing them to a meditative state.

Benares gharanas. Ramnidhi Gupta (1741-1839) was the luminary in the “Bengalization” of this genre.

Affectionately known as Nidhu Babu, Gupta was a member of the Bengali *bhadralok*, the middle-class educated elite of colonial Bengal. The *babus* of colonial Bengal, and more specifically of Calcutta, during the eighteenth century were seen as part of the higher echelon of society, and as proponents of the arts. The so-called “gentle folk” (*bhadra* meaning gentle and *lok* meaning folk) were the political and economic elite of Calcutta, and worked toward categorically defining what it meant to be Bengali, and what that emergent Bengali national culture should look like. They viewed physical and moral regeneration as a step toward national renewal. Within their home and private spheres, the *bhadralok* increasingly adopted European ideas of diet, hygiene, clothes, and even the concept of time. As Partha Chatterjee writes, - Bengalis were elitist because of their newly acquired socioeconomic status and xenophilia (1993). These quintessential *babus* quickly began harboring a paradoxical identity. By striving to reap the benefits of a modern world, the *babus* of Calcutta lived in their own self-constructed world where European modernity reigned as a supreme ideology. They became alienated from their own society and culture, and began to be looked upon as self-hating and cunning. In other words, the *babus*, as well as the rulers of that time, lived in a world of contradictions. Though desperately wanting to be a part of the world of their colonizers, they could not quench their thirst for Bengali “pre-modern” aesthetic pleasures (Kaviraj 2000). As Indian nationalists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century argued, the West should be imitated in only the material aspects of life, as the spiritual domain of the East was superior to that of the West. Problems posed by issues of social reform in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were tackled by nationalists who maintained the position that “In the

world, imitation of and adaptation to Western norms was a necessity: at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one's very identity" (Chatterjee 1989:624-25).

Nidhu Babu was able to single-handedly herald the change in Bengali song from the subdued human love that could be discerned in religious songs, to candidly emphasized physical human love. It was here, for the first time, that Bengali songs began to show obvious influence from Hindustani classical forms. It was also when this light classical genre began to blossom and develop into a very particular urban culture. However, whereas Shori Mian's Tappa was characterized by a particular swiftness, Nidhu Babu used soft vibrations to accentuate the Bengali language's poetic beauty whilst keeping the basic raga and tala structures of Hindustani Tappa.

When Nidhu Babu began composing Tappas in Bengali, he incorporated a crucial element that was missing: human love. Rabindranath Tagore's book of poems, *Sonar Tari* (1894), grappled with this same concept – how to humanize and make mundane the exuberant treatises of love that were in vogue at the time. His own evocation of the Durga *sloka* in "Bahe Nirantara" portrays a depth in his relation to God that is more personal, more human. He intentionally rejects exuberance in his songs about devotion and worship, focusing rather on the calm and tranquil modes of spirituality. Nidhu Babu's songs similarly depicted the personal life and passionate feelings of individuals, and he was able to pull Bengali song out of the strict confines of religion. He began teaching this particular style of song to the middleclass elite, and began holding free and public concerts at his home. With him came a revolutionary wave in the cultural domain of Bengal. The Mughal Empire in Bengal fell in 1765 and the center of Indian culture and trade shifted from Delhi to Calcutta. Kings, Princes, and the Nawabs of Bengal, such as Tejchand, the Maharaja of Burdwan, and Mahananda Roy of Murshidabad, who were in control

of the region after the Mughal decline, were great advocates of Nidhu Babu's Tappa (Mukerji 2013).

One of Nidhu Babu most important critics was Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). He was a Hindu spiritual leader and monk whose primary belief was that religion could not be found in dogma but in being and becoming, and that one's ultimate duty was to labor for the benefit of humanity. Swami Vivekananda's critique of Nidhu Babu's Tappas was that it was too soft and tender, and did not ignite powerful feelings of emancipation.

According to music historian Ramakanta Chakrabarty (1987), Tappa's cultural value began declining due to its assumed association with courtesans and their clientele. In addition, the Bengali babus began showing a strong preference from western cultural media and began to oppose native Bengali aesthetics. Bengali Tappa "was hated by the puritans [as well], who regarded it as a symptom of social degradation" (41). It was this upper echelon of society that was opposed to the secularism and humanism that Nidhu Babu and his contemporaries preached. The puritans were desperate to maintain their social status and believed that speaking up against their colonizers would jeopardize their privileged lives.

### **Colonialism to Nationalism**

The 1757 Battle of Plassey between the British and the last independent Nawab of Bengal was seminal in securing the British East India Company's control over Bengal. In the years after this British victory the East India Company broadened its power, resulting in the colonization of almost all of the Indian subcontinent. Barely five years into the rule of the British East India



Company, between the years of 1769 and 1773, the first great famine in Bengal occurred<sup>21</sup>, killing upwards of 10 million people.

Following the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, which was the first major war of independence against the British, the Government of India Act in 1858 led to the British Crown, the new British Raj, assuming direct control of India. A new interest in Western music was brought by the beginning of British rule. Calcutta's English-educated class and wealthy patrons of music kept alive this interest in Western classical music. Professional Italian opera groups and English Shakespearean companies were invited by the English community in Calcutta, and soon Indian musicians began playing these orchestral pieces with Western musical instruments for theater productions. Synchronously, the urban musical scene in Bengal in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by Hindustani classical music, patronized by the princely class and *zamindar*<sup>22</sup> families like the Tagores.

Rabindranath came of age at a time when religious and philosophical, literary, and political reformations were reaching their full height. The Bengal Renaissance of the 1820s and the founding of the *Brahmo Samaj* were influenced most notably by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831), and Maharshi Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905). These thinkers used Western rationalism to encourage freethinking and question orthodox Hindu customs and conventions. Ram Mohan Roy, sometimes called "the father of modern India," worked to undo India's proclivity to ritual and superstition, which he believed

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<sup>21</sup> Due to constant increases in land tax and British insistence on cultivating the more profitable opium poppy and indigo in preference to food crops, the Bengal Famine of 1770 reached a virulent height that could have been suppressed earlier (Das 2009). It must be mentioned here that the last major Bengal Famine occurred between the years of 1943 and 1944 under British rule and particularly under the watch of Winston Churchill, and killed nearly 4 million Indians. This was an artificial famine created by the British government. After Bengal's bountiful harvest in 1942, the British started diverting enormous quantities of grain from India to Britain.

<sup>22</sup> Land-owning aristocrat.

undermined its strong spiritual legacy. He advocated Western education for Indians while simultaneously encouraging Indians to respect their own heritage, particularly the Upanishads which revealed the monotheistic basis of Hinduism. This movement fiercely challenged social and religious orthodoxy, and stressed the need to inculcate a culture of debate and dialectical thought amongst Bengali youth. The formation of the monotheistic Brahmo Samaj in 1828 gave a material expression to Raja Ram Mohan Roy's concept of universal worship. Members preached anti-idolatry, and emphasized nondiscrimination between caste or religion. It was established as an effort to reform Hinduism from within. Historian Amiya Sen says, "It was a movement that struck a fine balance between reform and rejection. These were people willing to change contemporary Hindu society without uprooting themselves from tradition – obviously, this was guided by the emergence of a sense of cultural pride and patriotism to which, paradoxically, modern Western education had greatly contributed" (2021).

A literary revolution was simultaneously taking place, pioneered in Bengal by the writer Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), who introduced the concept of romantic love into Bengali literature. As Sudipta Kaviraj (2015) writes, "...literary discourse forms the directions and contours of our emotions, structures moral intentionality, and shapes the moral personality of ordinary individuals by celebrating the modern way of being in the world as both intellectually admirable and social possible" (26), and the trends of mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali literature reflected just that. Conventional love poetry and prose, which focused on love, feminine beauty, and physical eroticism was starting to be replaced by a "poetic elaboration of subjectivity" (34), with writings on physical ordinariness and emotional attractiveness.

Rabindranath's novels, short stories, songs, poetry, dance-dramas, essays, and even paintings spoke to topics political and personal. They show the definite emergence of a new ideal of love

in Bengali society, both an aesthetic ideal and an ideal of the ethical life. I argue that he was an ardent feminist, as he spoke ahead of his time on the social oppression of women.

Rabindranath's writing was characterized by an insistence on women finding identities of their own, of which wifhood and motherhood were only small parts of their whole being. He wrote against the grain of nationalist thought at the time, which advocated that the home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and spoke against the trope of patriarchy that insisted on the woman's responsibility never to lose their essentially spiritual and feminine virtues so as to protect and nurture the inner sanctum of the home (Chatterjee 1989). In *Rabindra Rachanabali*, he wrote "The discriminatory treatment of women had existed, complacently in our society for ages. Men must accept the responsibility for sustaining this discriminatory practice of the past" (24). His works revealed the unequal social structure of his time, and created courageous women who challenged tradition. Of these writings, *Postmaster*, *Streer Patra* (Letter from a Wife), and *Laboratory* were but a few in which Rabindranath situated women in their real worlds, seeing them as reasoning and desiring subjects who were held down by societal norms. He wrote, "I can feel that a new age has dawned in the world... Women are coming forward to build the new civilization. The purdah over their faces has vanished, and along with it has gone the purdah that kept their mind away from exposure to their outer world" (ibid 380).

Rabindranath introduced a new ideal of refinement and sensitivity that made women noticeable in everyday life and narratively interesting in his novels, and did so by heralding new prose and verse forms and the use of colloquial language into Bengali literature, freeing it from traditional models that were based on classical Sanskrit. The strategy that Rabindranath developed in his writing was to not only write about the nation (for example, by evoking the

archetypal Bengali village) with a critical eye but also to embody the beautiful or sublime qualities of the nation. He, like his literary predecessors and contemporaries, wrote about the Bengali *graam*, or village, as a holistic construct that represents authentic Bengali culture, a symbol of where the national soul dwells. I draw a similarity between the Bengali *graam* and the Mexican *rancho*, which Alex Chávez (2017) writes is “a repository for an assumed collective heritage rooted in expressive cultural practices...” (44). Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, or the intrinsic connectedness in literature of spatial and temporal relationships, Chávez introduces the concept of the *ranchero chrono-trope* as an imagining of the rancho as a protonational space-time, and as a way of understanding the history behind the essentialist and racialized representations of Mexican culture. The conflicting cultural semiotics that the chronotope elicits – eliding the “reality that the political and economic marginality of [Bengal or India] is at the center of the project of modernity” – continues to present day, where urban-dwelling, affluent Bengalis travel to the villages of West Bengal to get closer to their Bengali “roots,” while berating the villagers and their ways of “primitive” life as soon as they are back in their city homes. I will develop this ethnography in detail in the coming chapters.

In Tagore’s writings, particularly on the Bengali village as a manifestation of the heart and soul of Bengal, a division of labor was represented – the prosaic representing the historicist angle that spoke of reasons for the need for reform, and the poetic as that which, outside of ontological events in history, presented the nation as the archetype for peace, grace, and beauty (Chakrabarty 2000). Tagore employed the prosaic and the poetic as both posing and answering the question of the two ways of seeing in Bengali nationalism, revealing as Jakobson (1987) said, intentional agency through which speakers play with structural understanding. In his view, music’s formal and structured communication “heighten poetic texts and produce a musical metalanguage” (Feld

and Fox 27). Jakobson's claim that the point of art is not to decorate but to change and adjust to the world as a site of innovation rather than replication applies directly to Rabindranath's literary experimentations, where he showed his intuitive but not unconscious knowledge of the structure of his language.

### **The Bauls and Rabindranath**

At the insistence of his father, Rabindranath found himself in charge of a family estate in rural Bengal. Living in his houseboat, he began to know of rural life - its hardships and beauty, and its inextricable blend of human life and nature.<sup>23</sup>

Out of the numerous music genres from rural Bengal, including Bhatiali (boatmen's songs that are typically sung during low-tide), Saari (boatmen's songs that are sung during high-tide), Jhummur (non-spiritual love songs), and Bhaowaiyya (a staccato-clad genre of the Rajbanshi tribe in North Bengal), Rabindranath was influenced most by the songs of the Bauls of Bengal. According to Oxford Music Online, "Baul is a Bengali heterodox religious sect, characterized by its male and female followers' rejection of caste and scripture-based ideals and their assertion that the mind and body are the paths to enlightenment, in part derived from the *bhakti* (devotional) Vaisnava traditions of Sri Chaitanya." Bauls indicate a type of mendicant religious singer who wanders from village to village celebrating God through entranced songs. A Baul's hair is typically long and overgrown. As they sing, they accompany themselves on an *ektara*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The 1965 film directed by Tapan Sinha, *Atithi*, which was based on a short story by Rabindranath, brought to life mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. Using the Rabindrasangeet *Amar Mukti* as a sonic thread throughout the film, Sinha portrays the era in which Rabindranath lived. He touches upon the religious and societal orthodoxy by bringing in a character who is a child widow, the intertwining of music and seasons, Rabindranath's lifelong relationship with restlessness and ephemerality. Although the film is in black and white, it is no difficult task to imagine the brilliant hues of rural Bengal at the time.

<sup>24</sup> A one-stringed drone lute that is made of a gourd resonator covered with skin, through which a bamboo neck is inserted. An *ektara* is plucked with one finger.

and sometimes a *khamak*<sup>25</sup> and *ghungroo*<sup>26</sup>. Edward Dimmock has written at great length about the Bauls' influence on Rabindranath. "[Bauls] seem somehow to come as strangers to the world. They accept no tradition or custom of society. An overwhelming feeling of the presence of God drives them to search for him. They feel that man is deluded by his sense, trapped by the snare of the body...The true Baul finally realizes that the sound of the flute which has driven him mad comes from within his own heart. Then his madness becomes the madness of joy, the madness of the realization that he contains the seeds of bliss within himself" (1959: 38-39).



Basudeb Baul singing at the Kopai market in Shantiniketan, West Bengal

Until Rabindranath and those following in his footsteps began to write down and preserve the songs of the Bauls, the Baul tradition was entirely oral. The Baul guru, Lalan Phakir, had a profound influence on Rabindranath's life. He guided much of Rabindranath's philosophical musings. Born in the Nadia district of West Bengal in 1775, Lalan spent his life contemplating Hindu and Sufi doctrines. He set up his household on the outskirts of a leper colony called Seuriya, which was within the territory of the Tagore family. Tagore wrote in *Religion of Man*,

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<sup>25</sup> A one-headed drum with a string attached. The only difference between this and an ektara is that no bamboo is used to stretch the string. Rather, the string is held by one hand while being plucked with the other. The player tightens and loosens the string for tuning.

<sup>26</sup> A bunch of bells typically worn on the feet to provide rhythm.

“One day I chanced to hear a song from a beggar belonging to the Baul sect of Bengal... What struck me in this simple song was a religious expression that was neither grossly concrete, full of crude details, nor metaphysical in its rarified transcendentalism. At the same time, it was alive with an emotional sincerity. It spoke of an intense yearning of the heart for the divine which is in man and not in the temple...” (1931:110-111). Rabindranath grew out of institutionalized religion when he heard the Bauls. Their declaration of love for God was through God’s expression in humanity, and essentially monistic. Rabindranath took their doctrines a step further, asserting the unity of man and nature.

Tagore believed that there was a communion between the infinite forces and its expression in the finite form of man. Stemming from the ideal of God-in-man from the Upanishads, the truth of man as the microcosm, Tagore unearthed the life force of his deep recesses and called it his *Jeevan Devata* – or God of Life. He saw the relationship between him and his own *Jeevan Devata*, which was sometimes masculine and sometimes feminine, as one of friendship, bantering, equality, and mutual dependence. He found a deep connection between his own views and that of the Bauls’ *Moner Manush*, or Man of my Heart. Bauls believed that divinity or a divine presence resided within each human. The God that lived within was a friend, an equal, and treating God with respect and love was to treat oneself with the same and vice versa. The bold assertion of equality between man and God and the conversational tone Bauls used to address God inspired Tagore. His own humanist philosophies sought refuge in the Bauls’ way of life.

*Amar praner manush achhe prane  
Tai heri taye shokol khane.  
Achhe se nayantaraye alokdharaye, tai na haraye  
Ami tai dekhi taye jethaye sethaye takai ami je dik pane.  
Ami tar mukher katha shunbo bole gelam kotha  
Shona holo na, holo na,*

*Aaj phire eshe nijer deshe ei je shuni  
Shuni tahar bani apon gaane.  
Ke tora khnujish tare kangal-deshe dware dware,  
Dekha mele na, mele na  
Tora aye re dheye dekh re cheye, amar buke,  
Dhore dekh re amar dui noyane.*

The man of my heart dwells within me,  
So, I find him everywhere.  
He is in my eyes, in streams of light, and therefore I never lose sight  
I see him wherever I look.  
I went near and far to hear him speak  
But I never did, never did  
Now as I return to my own dear land,  
I hear his words in my own songs.  
Those who like beggars go door to door searching for him  
Not able to find him anywhere  
Come quick and see for yourself  
He is here in my heart  
In my eyes, he is here.<sup>27</sup>

Written in the *Puja* chapter, the heavily Baul-influenced lyrics portray the concept of *Moner Manush* – that the divine resides within each of us, and searching for religion and purpose elsewhere will be in vain. It was through this philosophy that he composed his songs that drew from the Bauls’ way of life. In a certain doctrinal and literary sense, Tagore was profoundly influenced by the Bauls’ mysticism, and by their quest of spiritual emancipation and embodiment of an inner god. However, Tagore might have been a long way from being a Baul. He came from an aristocratic family, and thus his image of the Bauls was an idealized one. “Perhaps the wild freedom of the Bauls represented something which he would like to have had” (Dimock 1959). After all, the Bauls’ way of life would be characterized as a form of subalternity, an experience of those who were dispossessed. Rabindranath’s radical admiration for and pursuit of their philosophies was an intellectual attitude. Those who have, incorrectly in my opinion, portrayed

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<sup>27</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.



Rabindranath's poetry and writing on the destitute classes in Bengal as fraught with the dangers of confusion between sympathy and identity also cannot but help utilizing his words when protesting dire working conditions by feudal landlords.

Baul literature had a deeper and personal resonance for Rabindranath, one that fell in stride with his doctrines of anti-colonialism and communal harmony. His lifelong quest for emancipation, a movement from dark to light in multiple contexts, was explored further through his Baul-influenced songs such as *Ami marer sagar pari debo* ("I will set sail on this thrashing sea"), *Bhenge mor ghorer chabi niye jabi ke amare* ("Who can break me out of this house"), or *Na hoye tomar ja hoyeche tai holo* ("If this is all you will ever fulfill"). For Tagore, the challenge was to transcend the educated, urban middle class and bring unity between the rural and urban Bengali. Although Rabindranath felt deeply the sentiments of *Moner Manush*, he felt determined to enjoy life in all its fullness and did not believe that his freedom would come through renunciation or an ascetic withdrawal. He wanted to engage with the world, and it was this combination of different ways of living and enjoying life that constructed his philosophies.

### **Rabindrasangeet**

The *Gitabitan*, Tagore's Bengali compilation of songs, was first published by the Visva-Bharati University in 1930, but the version that is used today was published in 1941. In the preface to the new edition, Tagore wrote: "The editors of the compilation were in a hurry when *Gitabitan* was first published, so they could not maintain the thematic categorization of the songs. Not only did this hamper a fuller usage of the songs, but the artistic merit suffered too. That is why the songs have been arranged according to themes in this edition. This method will help the reader to follow the songs as lyrics even in the absence of tunes." Tagore's precision and delicate attention to his craft has been evident throughout his entire life. The *Gitabitan* contains

1033 pages of Bengali songs, and is regarded by most Bengali families as a “companion to the soul” (Basu 2009). Tagore had said about his compositions, “I do not hesitate to say that my songs have found their place in the heart of my land, along with her flowers that are never exhausted, and that the folk of the future, in days of joys or sorrow or festival, will have to sing them. This too is the work of a revolutionist.”<sup>28</sup>

Rabindranath classified his composed songs into four major categories: *Puja*, or worship, *Swadesh*, or homeland, *Prem*, or love, and *Prakriti*, or nature, and two minor categories, *Bichitra*, or variety, and *Anushthanik*, or ceremonial. Many of his songs were composed for his dance-dramas, which he developed in the 1930s out of his song-dramas composed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. His inspiration for these dance-dramas came from diverse musical theater forms in India, Europe, China, Indonesia, and Japan. Rabindranath’s musical compositions drew inspiration from all over the world. He gathered melodies throughout his travels, and welcomed this cosmopolitan perspective in his process. His travels to England helped him get acquainted to Western music, and he incorporated these tunes in his dance-drama *Valmiki Pratibha*<sup>29</sup>, as well as classical *ragas*. Hindustani light classical genres, Hindustani and Karnatic *ragas*, tunes from Gujarat, Mysore, Karnataka, devotional songs from all over India, rural genres of Baul and Bhatiali, and folk songs of England and Ireland all appear in different Rabindrasangeets. Tagore spoke of the Hindustani raga tradition in 1881, and “explained that each raga conjured a feeling, an emotion, created an ambience through the interplay of selected musical notes in a particular formation of ascent and descent. What was important was to explore why certain notes around

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<sup>28</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, edited by S. Radhakrishnan and J.H. Muirhead. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1936) p. 31-32.

<sup>29</sup> This dance-drama was drawn from a mythological story about Valmiki, a robber thief who, after giving up his violent ways, is gifted by goddess Saraswati a great literary talent. He then goes on to write the *Ramayana*.

certain feelings – why was it that the soft half notes used in *bhairavi* and *purabi* pull on the heart strings to recreate a similar sensation to pain, longing, pathos, and yet why did *bhairavi* additionally bring with it the freshness of morning air and *purabi* instead capture the twilight hours of fading light.” As Reba Som writes, “Rabindranath pointed out how a succession of soft notes running into each other created this helpless pathos of vulnerability, whereas skipping the half tones and going from one flat to the other created quite the opposite emotion of cheerfulness and confidence” (Som 2009:37). The Tappa genre played a particularly strong influence in Rabindranath’s compositions. After his wife Mrinalini Devi’s death in 1901, he utilized the pathos and poignancy of the Tappa style in his compositions to bring a sense of meditative peace into his life. With only an *esraj*<sup>30</sup> as accompaniment, many of his songs from this period of his life were contemplative and full of melisma.

Rabindranath’s songs were the materialization of all the political, historical, and social processes and movements that contributed to the production of the unique environment at the time. His life was during a time of colonial unrest. His complex and difficult position as a modern Indian, a colonial subject, an elite and lettered cosmopolitan, a beneficiary and inventor of Eastern values, and a descendant of the Enlightenment allowed him to be both an insider and outsider of the secular ethos of prose and poetry. Partha Chatterjee has characterized this as a “non-statist” alternative to the nation (2011), one in line with Tagore’s views that the governing force of any collectivity should be spiritual as opposed to material. This mode of reflection, rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> century European thought, shows Tagore’s dependence, even as an anti-colonial intellectual, on the colonial framework of nationalism (Ochoa 2014).

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<sup>30</sup> An *esraj* is a bowed string instrument that combines the characteristics of a sitar and sarangi. Also called a dilruba in certain parts of India, the *esraj* accompanies many Rabindrasangeets,

My attempt at historicizing the aural constructions of Bengali culture reaffirms my argument that Rabindrasangeet is not a static genre, nor a passive historical object. I take a cue from Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) and his writings on historical time and historicity. His argument is that time, the basic code of history, “does not belong to nature...it is not completely independent of human systems of representation. It stands for a particular formation of the modern subject” (74). Rabindrasangeet is, as I show through the historical and social construction of Bengal, an organic and dynamic form of Bengali music that is constantly blooming in its many forms through interactions between social actors and their environments. I attempt to treat the history of Bengal as a series of phases, and intentionally avoid the tendency to compress that history into a homogenized model. The breadth of Rabindranath’s music displays not only his own evolution from what he called a state of being into one of becoming, but it also in a way provides a mapping of the political and social history of Bengal. It reifies tradition as an actively shaping and transformative cultural force, or even a tool, that itself helps to change the shape of experiences. Chakrabarty interprets the ideology of Rabindranath Tagore as a nationalist and author, particularly in regards to historicity and tradition. He writes, “...if the nation, the people, or the country were not just to be observed, described, and critiqued but loved and adored as well, what would guarantee that they were indeed worth loving unless one also saw in them something that was already loveable” (177)? Amit Chaudhuri succinctly writes about the emergence and evolution of language. “The Bengali language emerged from not only a conviction about identity but an intimation of distance, from not just the wellspring of race but disjunction and severance. These essentially cosmopolitan tensions always animate Tagore’s language” (xxi). And as I add to this discourse, his music.

The history of Bengal is one fraught with the simultaneity of a proud anti-colonial and patriotic unity and a distinctive artistic and intellectual identity. As a province of British India, Bengal marked itself as a united nation that was brought together by common linguistic, cultural, and historical markers. The same ideological and affective ties that built its national identity were also being deployed as part of an anticolonial strategy. Bengal's nationhood, as Poulomi Saha (2013) says, "was at once nostalgic and aspirational" (2013:2). Rabindranath Tagore played a critical role during Bengal's anticolonial movements, heralding the way with speeches, songs, and stories that ignited a complex range of responses to British rule. As Saha writes: "Despite the multiplicities of national imagination at work..., Tagore's mythic power still took on an ironic truth over the course of the twentieth century" (2013:2).

## **Conclusion**

My relationships to the three songs I began this chapter with are like old friends. I like to think of them, and I like to think of the experiences we've shared together. And, as Ellen Koskoff said, "...using them with some consciousness to trigger [such] memories with their embodied emotions" (2019:2). Song in general presents a textural and performative face, the power of it lies in the transformation of the text to its instantiation. Rabindrasangeet, I argue, is a living tradition. It is still doing active work producing and adjusting modernity and the conditions of existence under which the people of Bengali descent live. Rabindranath Tagore was a man of his time. His contradictory impulses, interpretations, and meanings, far from compromising his continued relevance, deepens and enriches it because it shows how Bengalis are fraught with these same issues.

Rabindranath's songs and works continue to be contested today with India's rising conservative politics. In 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was urged to replace the existing

national anthem by a song that was composed and sung by the Indian National Army.

Subramanian Swamy, the BJP MP who spearheaded this movement, claimed that the words used in the existing national anthem raises doubts about to whom the poem is addressed – namely its inclusion of contested territories in the Sindh province. This movement continues efforts to spread Hindutva into all facets of India, erasing the religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity that exists.

My decision to write about Rabindrasangeet in the lives of Bengali-American immigrants comes from two places. Most obviously, I chose to write about it because it has impacted mine and my family's existence so greatly that I simply could not gloss over it. I have felt a visceral pull for most of my adult life toward exploring the relationships between Tagore and the diasporic experience on a deeper and more academic level. The second reason is that living in New York City is like living in a bubble. South Asian youth are able to see public figures that look like them and are exposed to greater opportunities to engage with and read books to be inspired by. From Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, and Aravind Adiga, to Mindy Kaling, Hasan Minhaj, and Lily Singh, South Asian names are starting to become more commonplace in our pop culture vocabulary. We absorb their products and feel proud that our friends from other ethnicities know their names too. However, not many of us know exactly where these people are from. Despite their valiant efforts to redefine what it means to be American, their ethnic backstories get lost along the way. Rabindrasangeet is a genre that is not sexy like Bollywood. It doesn't come with dance sequences, and respective dance teams, and has not garnered a diasporic following like Bhangra. It has, however, maintained a deep presence in the lives of many South Asian immigrants; and in New York City, continues to be performed by first generation immigrants and their children.

Bengal boasts an artistic identity that is characteristically different than that of what mainstream “Indian” is known as in the diaspora. Genres such as Bollywood and Bhangra, easily recognizable in the South Asian diaspora, are almost the antithesis of what many Bengalis consider themselves to be. This unique position of being both proudly anti-British and separate from the global conception of “Indian” has made Bengal an ideal catalyst for my work.

## Chapter 1: *Three Generations of Song, Politics, and Movement*

*“Bangla gaan ke jodi ami ekta boto brikkho hishabe dhori, ar ami tar tolai shukno pata kurobar ekta mali hoi, ami khub gorbo onubhob korbo. Je ami Bangla gaaner kichhu kichhu jhora pata kurie rakchi.”*

If I consider Bengali song an old Banyan tree, and myself a gardener in charge of raking away the dry leaves from its shadows, I would swell with pride. That I get to collect some of its fallen leaves.

- Biman Mukhopadhyay (1930-2011), Bengali singer and teacher

“I cannot speak without Tagore. That man has culled all of my feelings from long before my birth. He has understood what I am and he has put in all the words. I read him and I find that all has been said and I have nothing new to say,”

- Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976), Bengali filmmaker and writer

I write about three generations of Bengali women and how they remember the words of a man. I begin with my maternal grandmother or *Dida* Renuka Bhattacharya (1929-2004), and then move onto her daughter – my mother Mukti Banerjee (b.1956), and end with myself (b.1987). The lived and nostalgic experiences of these three women are connected by a thread that I call the sonic memory of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Identity, and particularly Bengali identity, plays a prominent role in the shaping of their lives. But the formation of this identity, and the source from which it has been constructed is where I begin. Rather than perpetuate the totalizing idea of one specific Bengali identity, I weave through cultural and political histories in order to emphasize a hermeneutic understanding of Bengaliness, and challenge the notion that there is one single diasporic identity. I engage with the work of Asian American feminists like Lisa Lowe, Su Zheng, Nayanika Mookherjee, Veena Das, Nandi Bhatia, Purnima Mankekar and Kamala Visweswaran, among others, and write how as Rabindrasangeet became a critical element of Bengali national identity, the nuances of individual diasporic Bengali experiences, particularly those of women and mothers, became obscured into an essentialized and one-dimensional representation of Bengal. For although a history of Bengal is



important to understand what it means to *be* Bengali, the term “Bengal” is multiplicitous in a contemporary context. Complicated and unequal human relationships, sadness, loss, and silence that punctuate daily routines guide us toward discoveries about key issues in the studies of music, social life, women’s experiences, and South Asian modernity. To quote Michael Herzfeld writing about nationalism and its reformulation through ordinary discourse, “Ultimately, the language of national or ethnic identity is indeed a language of morality. It is an encoded discourse about inclusion and exclusion. Like all such systems, it is subject to manipulation in everyday speech. For this reason, a semiotic critique of nationalism must examine the process whereby nationalism invests certain kinds of identity with a rigidity that they do not commonly possess in everyday discourse” (1996:79).

### **Partition and Song: Renuka Bhattacharya**

Renuka, my Dida, was my maternal grandmother. She was born in 1929 in East Bengal, the historical antecedent of Bangladesh, during a time when Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh were all one country, and all under the rule of the British Raj. She was one of eight siblings, and came from a generationally wealthy family. Their house was in the city of Bikrampur – large with sprawling gardens. Her family was highly educated, her father having been a graduate of Hindu College in the early 1900s. Dida’s uncle led a life of renunciation and moved to the United States as a disciple of Swami Vivekananda. Her uncle’s own disciples later came to Dida’s familial house in Bikrampur from the United States to meet their guru’s mom (Dida’s grandmother). “It was the first time we saw *memsahibs* (foreign white women),” Dida had told me. “My sisters and I would peek out from behind the door, just to catch a glimpse.”

In 1947, the province of Bengal was permanently divided into two regions: West Bengal enclosed within India, and East Bengal renamed in its annexation by Pakistan as East Pakistan.

Renuka's entire family – her mother, along with her seven siblings – was forced to flee their home because they were part of the persecuted Hindu minority. Renuka's father refused to leave their ancestral house and insisted on staying to protect what was rightfully his. A few days later, Renuka's mother went back for her husband, only to find him murdered in their home.

The physical and emotional repercussions of refugees during the 1947 partition were broad and deep. Veena Das writes about partition and loss in *Life and Words* (2006), focusing on the Western border of India. She writes of the 1947 Partition not to detail the moments of horror, but rather to represent “what happens to the subject and world when the memory of such events is folded into ongoing relationships” (8). She writes, “My wonder and terror is that it is from such fragile and intimate moments that a shared language had to be built and with no assurance that there were secure conventions on which such a language, in fact, could be founded” (8).

During Dida and her family's forced evacuation, the Chief Minister of West Bengal at the time and freedom fighter Bidhan Roy provided free flights to refugees. A prominent doctor and advocate for women's rights, Roy provided special accommodations for women who came as refugees from Bangladesh. Dida and her family lived in a temporary refugee camp under the Howrah Bridge until the exchange program granted them housing. They went from having everything to nothing overnight. Dida was the first of her seven other siblings to get a job. She was able to get a job as a telephone operator, where her taller-than-average height helped her run the switchboards. After about five years, the telephone department transferred a group of women to the post office. From her clerical job at the post office, Dida worked her way up to becoming head clerk and then to supervisor of her department. She supported her entire family from her sole salary, and made sure all of her siblings either got jobs of their own, or were able to marry into stable families. Her family survived through their “descent into the ordinary” (Das 2006:7),

their everyday lives “as a site of the ordinary buried in itself the violence that provided a certain force within which relationships moved” (11). As Dida grew older and began suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease, one memory maintained a vivid presence in her mind – the murder of her father. She would candidly speak of his murder – a powerful hold the past had on her that had never been explicitly spoken because of her family’s need to keep going. The forced traumatic evacuation from her home and the violence that ensued carved a space so deep in Dida’s mind that it was all she could repeat throughout the last few years of her life. That, and a few melodies.

*Bhajo Gauranga kaho Gauranga*  
*Loho Gauranger naam re*  
*Je bhaje Gauranger naame*  
*Se hoye amar praan re.*

Hail Lord Gauranga, praise Him.  
 Chant Lord Gauranga’s name.  
 Those who worship his name  
 Are those close to my heart.<sup>31</sup>

I remember Dida often singing this fragment of a devotional Kirtan. *Gauranga* was another name for Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the 15<sup>th</sup> century Indian Saint who was believed to be the combined avatar of Radha and Krishna. Religious hymns and Kirtans played an important role in the entanglement of religion and Bengali nationalism. The long rhythmic cycles and slow tempos helped the songs to be accessible and memorable for folks like my Dida’s family. Rabindranath’s songs and poetry were not as popular in East Bengal during the time of her childhood. They gained popularity first amongst the Hindu upper-class and educated communities in West Bengal primarily due to the physical location of Shantiniketan.<sup>32</sup> During the time when Dida and her family sought refuge in West Bengal, Rabindrasangeet was not popular in their community. They did not have the physical nor emotional space to nurture their culture through poetry and

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<sup>31</sup> Devotional Kirtan translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.

<sup>32</sup> Rabindranath, his songs, and his works gained extreme popularity in East Bengal after the *bhasha andolon*, or The Language Movement, that began in 1948. The Dominion of Pakistan, under which fell East Bengal, forcefully established Urdu as the official language of the entire nation. East Bengalis used Rabindranath as a tool to fight for Bengali, which was their mother tongue, as their national language.

song. My grandmother would hum religious tunes, and heave long sighs while reciting part of a scripture, but rarely would she sing an entire song by herself or with her family. The time for self-reflexivity was so scarce that even when she had more time in her golden years, Tagore seemed to occupy a small space of it. This coping mechanism differed from family to family.

Dida's experience as a woman in the workforce and as the sole breadwinner, and her mother's experience as shepherding and protecting her children during the atrocities of Partition are examples of ordinary and mundane tasks fill in the craters that were created by violence and trauma. Finding a home to live in, managing the switchboard at a telephone company, marrying into other families – these “domestic” chores flow back into their lives, serving as a bandage. Sara Lamb's words in *White Saris and Sweet Mangos* remind me of my Dida's Partition experience: “This is why, some men said, it is so difficult for them to loosen their ties of *maya* (affection, attachment, or love) at the end of a lifetime, for they have become so deeply embedded within a family, community, home, soil. Among the several families I knew who had settled in Calcutta apartments after fleeing East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) at the time of partition, men spoke of having been forced painfully to cut apart the ties of their *maya* prematurely, *as a woman does in marriage* (emphasis mine); they viewed the years following independence and partition as very “separate,” “independent,” and *maya*-reducing times.” (2000:209). Dida's mother seemed to endure the rupture from their home with a realistic presence of mind. Without minimizing the extreme violence, mental and physical strain, and uncertainty that she endured, she gained a sense of resilience that strengthened through the unmaking and remaking of connections in her life. In a patriarchal society like that of Bengal, her identity was never attached to a permanent home. She was caught in a sort of waiting game until she was married off, and, despite it all, she was always considered an outsider in her

married home. This notion of constant impermanence for women has been elaborated on by scholars of gender studies. As Jane Sugarman writes in *Engendering Song*, Prespa Albanian families have a similar mindset. For them, “It is the sons of a family on whom such expectations center [assuring continuity of the family line], however, for it is they who will stay within the home and carry on the family line, while their daughters will marry out and become members of other family groups” (1997:1).



Dida, standing on the far right with her arms crossed, and her family in Bikrampur.

I draw from Dipesh Chakrabarty’s article about the essays of Hindu-Bengali refugees during the 1947 partition (1996). Uprooted from their home in East Bengal (what is now Bangladesh), the refugees who wrote these essays were forced to make a new life in the difficult circumstances of the overcrowded city of Calcutta. The essays convey a shared structure of Bengali sentiment through “the grid of which the irrevocable fact of Hindu-Muslim separation in Bengali history and the trauma surrounding the event could be read” (1996:2143). Through Chakrabarty’s article, we get an intimate sense of the sentimental and nostalgic feelings of the lost home in the villages of East Bengal. It was this idea of “home” that, during the nationalist movement, morphed into the idea of the “motherland” from which ancestors of the Bengali people hailed, the abode of tender sentiments of intimacy, innocence, and kinship. A portion of one of these

essays rings true to the plight of the refugee and to the pervasive role of Rabindranath within the souls of the “homeless”:

“Today I am a man of Calcutta. But I cannot forget her in the dust of whose sari-wrapped tender soil I was born...The moment I get a holiday, I feel like running away to that village three hundred miles away. I wish I could walk along the tracks of that dream-tinged green village of Bikrampur and sing like I used to as a child: ‘Blessed is my life, Mother, that I have been born in this land.’ [Tagore, *Sharthoko Jonomo*]. (Chakrabarty 2149).”

“Her” means home for this man. A maternal manifestation of nostalgia and truth.

Rabindrasangeet served as an anchor and a sense of home for many refugees, and the lyrics with their truth-laden meanings were what they identified with. The fluidity with which this man brought up the lyrics to *Sharthoko Jonomo*, a Rabindrasangeet from Tagore’s *Swadesh* chapter, speaks to the depth of association these songs had created amongst the nostalgic, the lost, and the homeless. It is the delicate and nuanced conversation that Chakrabarty quotes, and particularly the evoked song, which lends a moral presence to this otherwise unnamed refugee.

<i>Sharthoko jonomo amar</i>	Blessed is my life, Mother,
<i>Jonmechhi ei deshe</i>	That I have been born in this land
<i>Sharthoko jonomo Maago</i>	Blessed is my life, Mother,
<i>Tomaye bhalobeshe</i>	That I have loved you
<i>Janine tor dhonoroton</i>	I do not know whether you have riches
<i>Achhe kina Ranir moton</i>	Like a queen
<i>Shudhu jani amar ongo juraye</i>	All I know is that I am filled with solace
<i>Tomar chhayaye eshe</i>	When under your shade. <sup>33</sup>

## **Pratibha and Sova**

I now write about two more women in Dida’s generation, who provide different accounts of Rabindrasangeet’s impact on their lives. Through intimate ethnography that critically explores memory and loss, we see how these different relationships to Tagore ultimately strengthen the tradition.

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<sup>33</sup> I associate Suchitra Mitra’s voice with this song. Sung with no percussive accompaniment, this song was composed in the Tappa genre.

This is how Pratibha, a 65-year-old Kolkata native who now lives in Allentown, Pennsylvania with her family, reminisces about her mother. “I remember, after the day’s work in the evenings, she would sit in the dark and sing by herself. A different song on different days, but all Rabindranath’s songs. I didn’t understand them, but they pulled me close. How sweet her voice was! So much *bedona* (pathos), I would feel like crying. *Sandhya holo go, o Ma, bukei dhoru atal kalo sneher majhe dubie amaye snigdho koro* (“Evening has come, oh Mother, in the abyss of your love, immerse me and soothe me”)...I don’t know how, but I retained the songs right after hearing them, and would bother everyone with them!” Pratibha’s description of her mother’s quiet moments of rest complicates the ways in which women in Dida’s generation identified with Rabindrasangeet. Pratibha’s mother utilized the songs as a form of personal remembrance, soothing like a lullaby, something that brought calm into her life after a busy day. In a vein familiar to Indian nationalist discourse, Pratibha’s memory of her mother’s music “comes to stand for what is traditional, or habitual, untouched by time, history, or change, located in a protected inner realm” (Weidman in *Echo and Anthem*, 327). The association of Rabindrasangeet with her mother strengthens the genre’s relation to home, and establishes its permanence as “tradition” for her.

Sova Bhattacharya was born in Calcutta in 1944. Her father died at an early age, leaving her mom and siblings alone in extreme poverty. She took singing lessons at a local music school in North Calcutta, and in exchange for her tuition, she taught younger children in the school how to sing. Radio and public functions had a huge influence in Sova’s life. Her nephew Subendhu, who now lives in New York, reminisces about Sova, “She listened to everything. From

Rabindrasangeet, to *adhunik* (modern songs), Nazrulgeeti<sup>34</sup>, Atul Prashad<sup>35</sup>, Rajanikantha<sup>36</sup>.

There would be free public functions during Durga Puja and *Rabindra Jayanti* (Rabindranath's birthday), which *Mashi* (mom's sister, referring to Sova) would run to. I would join her as well. She couldn't afford a *Gitabitan*, or any books for that matter, so she kept a notebook where she would write down the lyrics of the songs she heard. Whether attending concerts, listening to the radio, or going to see films in theaters, Sova would jot down the songs she heard and loved in her little notebook. Despite the sadness and the poverty in her life, she still sang and taught us how to sing. No money for dinner, but she still had a song in her heart."

This is the song that reminds Subendhu of his Mashi:

*Ami tomay joto shuniechilam gaan  
Tar badale ami chaini kono daan.  
Bhulbe se gaan jodi, na hoy jeo bhule  
Uthbe jakhan tara sandhya sagar kule,  
Tomar sabhaye jabe korbo aboshan  
Ei kodiner shudhu ei koti mor taan.  
Tomar gaan je koto shuniechilem more  
Sei kathati tumi bhulbe kemon kore?  
Sei kathati kobi, porbe tomar mone  
Borshamukhor raate, phagun shomirone  
Eituku mor shudhu roilo abhimaan  
Bhulte se ki paro bhuliyechho mor praan?*

For all the songs I sang to you  
I sang them for no material return  
If you want to forget, by all means do  
When the evening starts to rise upon the ocean blue.  
When I cease to sing in your court  
For these short-lived moments, let these be an ounce of melodies.  
All the songs you sang for me,  
Can you ever forget?  
Those memories will keep haunting you, my Poet  
During nights of dense rain, and in the spring breeze

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<sup>34</sup> Songs written and composed by Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976).

<sup>35</sup> Atul Prashad Sen (1871-1934) was a Bengali polymath like Rabindranath. Not only did he write and compose music, he was a lawyer, social worker, and singer.

<sup>36</sup> Rajanikanta Sen (1865-1910) composed and wrote music that was mostly devotional and patriotic.



All that remains, is a little hurt  
How could you forget, how much you enraptured my heart?<sup>37</sup>

The version sung by Hemanta Mukhopadhyay (1920-1989) is what makes Subendhu automatically think of his Mashi. In this song, the singer confronts a lover, or even the divine, with the argument that for all the songs I have sung for you I have asked for no return. Hemanta played a pivotal role in proliferating Rabindrasangeet to ordinary folks in Bengal. He focused on the simplicity of Rabindranath's lyrics, and mainly sang songs that were in *ektaal* or *dadra* rhythmic cycles.

On a chilly January afternoon in 2017, Sova was chatting with her nephew and I about her relationship to music, while urging us to drink our tea before it got cold. The three of us were sitting on her bed, surrounded by cabinets filled with photographs, books, cassette tapes, and saris. The noise from the street below her second-floor North Calcutta apartment was loud, and we could clearly hear passing conversations, the bells of rickshaw drivers, and the incessant honking of taxis trying to edge their ways through the narrow alleys.



Tea on the bed with Sova, 2017

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<sup>37</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.

“If I’m ever feeling sad, or not having a good day, I’ll put on a Hemanta song. Whether it’s *adhunik* (modern) or a Rabindrasangeet, I love listening to it. I close my eyes and listen. And if I’m feeling happy, I’ll do the same! Drink your tea...

“Oh, I’ve seen so many live concerts! Hemanta, Sandhya [Mukhopadhyay], Manna [Dey], Dwijen [Bhattacharya], Chinmoy [Chatterjee], Mrinal [Chakraborty]...where there was music, you could find me. Debabrata Biswas, Suchitra Mitra, Kanika Banerjee, will I get any of this again? Never again. Ashoktaru Banerjee. Ashoktaru is actually from this neighborhood. His house was in Goabagan. Subir Sen [another singer]. Drink the tea, it’s getting watery. Me and *chhordidi* [second eldest sister], Babua’s mom...Manna Dey was about to come to Rishikesh Park for a whole night function. Five rupees per ticket, think about that! And in our house, everyone loved music. Regardless if we could sing or not. So *chhordidi* and I went to this function all night. She brought *luchi* and *aloor dum* with us to eat, and water to drink. We got home at five in the morning! There was a function over by where *mejdidi* [third eldest sister] lived in Jadavpur by a bazaar. Me and *mejdidi*, we snuck right in with no tickets. We went to the shops to do some groceries, saw a concert, and sat right down to hear music. These functions don’t happen anymore. Now it’s all about bands.”

Sova’s memories show “a sociability of the local” (Fox 88). Her use of first names when listing famous singers that she has seen performing live, and her intimate knowledge of inner-city neighborhoods function in her particular structuring of nostalgia. These names and places emerge against the background of the ordinary afternoon with tea on the bed. As Aaron Fox (2004) writes, “Such ‘places’ return inexorably to the vast realm of pre-textual space and time, requiring an almost archaeological effort to recover their momentary depth” (90).

### **The Political Situation**

In May 1941, a few months before he left the physical world, Rabindranath wrote *The Crisis of Civilization* in which he reflected upon the violent atrocities that Europe was embroiled in during World War II, the meaning behind the concept of “civilization,” and the hope that “Perhaps...dawn will come from this horizon, from the East” (Tagore 1941). Combined with his seminal poem, “Africa,” which was a vociferous condemnation of colonialism, imperial brutality and racism through the lens of European imperialism in Africa, the final years of his life were spent writing and speaking vehemently against violence and war. His death rocked the lives of

his followers and made an enormous impact on the city of Calcutta. Author Rashid Karim (1925-2011) writes in his story *Pratham Prem* (“First Love”), about the day Rabindranath died.

“...The big movie posters were hanging on the walls as usual...It was quite crowded, yet it was not exactly the same, usual movie-going crowd. I went up the stairs to buy my tickets, and then realized that there was no way I could do it: the big iron gate was locked. Someone hung a cardboard sign on it – it said, ‘The theater is closed today due to the passing of the great poet Rabindranath Tagore’...Even the bubbly Oriya *paan* vendor who probably never heard about Tagore was acting differently, as if he knew a calamity had occurred; he knew it’d gripped the entire population of Calcutta.”<sup>38</sup>

The 1947 Partition and Indian Independence was the result of decades-long activism, bloodshed, and hardship. The British were permanently ousted, but religion was utilized to incite factional violence, and thus divide a once-whole nation. Hindus and Muslims grew an irreparable animosity toward one another, and arbitrary national borders declared who belonged and who did not. Millions of women, whose lives were seen as mere pawns in the larger world of war and national policies and narratives, were raped and rampaged (Das 2006, Chatterji 2007, Mookherjee 2015, Chakraborty 2018). Das elaborates on this paradoxical responsibility of women to uphold the morals of society, while they were mutilated and killed in the name of morality. She writes, “The rhetoric strategy of focusing on abducted and raped women to the exclusion of the sexual violation of men allowed the nation to construct itself as a masculine nation” (13).

### **Post-Partition and Song: Mukti Banerjee**

Mukti was born in Calcutta, West Bengal, nine years after India had gained its independence from the British. She grew up during a time in which, although physically gone, Rabindranath Tagore’s prose, poems, and songs were an ardent part of her daily life. She grew up in a joint family household, sharing a two-bedroom apartment with her paternal uncles and their families,

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<sup>38</sup> Translation taken from *Musicbox and Moonshine* (2018) by Partha Banerjee.

all of whom were refugees from Bangladesh. “We had one bathroom for the fourteen of us,” Mukti recalls. “But my time to shine was in there. As soon as I stepped in for my bath, I sang song after song. My uncle would groan and say, ‘Here goes our daily radio show! Who knows when it will end tonight.’” Her parents enrolled her in singing lessons at a school called “Gitabitan,” named after Rabindranath’s published collection of songs. Not only would she practice her Gitabitan songs in the acoustic-friendly bathroom, she would sing songs that she heard on the radio, depending on her mood. At university, Mukti and her group of friends, which included her future husband, would organize cultural performances. Most of these self-directed productions were Tagore’s dance-dramas such as *Valmiki Pratibha*, *Sapmochan*, and *Raktakarabi*. They self-named another such performance, *Sagarika*, where they pulled songs and poems from Tagore’s different dance-dramas and constructed their own. These productions would be performed at their end of the year prize distribution ceremonies, during Rabindra Jayanti, and during reunions. Mukti continued organizing cultural events even when she began teaching at Vivekananda College. She encouraged her students to produce their own shows, and spearheaded their yearly functions.

In 1986, she voluntarily moved to the United States to join her husband who had moved the year prior to broaden his intellectual reach. Both Mukti and her husband were professors in India before they chose to move. Her husband was feeling intellectually stifled in West Bengal, and it was getting increasingly difficult for him to find steady employment in a habitable place – namely somewhere that wasn’t deep in the heart of the Sundarbans where he had been teaching for the past three years. They made their decision to move together, and although Mukti had a steady and high-paying job in central Calcutta, and they knew absolutely no one in the United States, she supported her husband’s decision to move and saw a bigger and more fulfilling

picture for them as a family. She joined her husband in Southern Illinois, where he was finishing up his PhD in Biology.

Mukti reminisces about her first encounters with Rabindrasangeet. “In my elementary school in Calcutta, Brahma Girls, we had a class period that was dedicated to singing. Because I went to a Brahma school, our morning prayers all consisted of Rabindrasangeet and Brahmosangeet<sup>39</sup>. I remember my teacher’s name too, Geeta Di. I particularly remember *Dnariye acho tumi amar gaaner opare* (“There you are, waiting on the shore of my song”), *Tomar ashime prano mono loye* (“When I dive into the depths of your infinitude”), and *Amar mukti* (“My Liberation”). *Amar mukti* was a song I sang in the bathroom a lot, perhaps for obvious reasons.”

*Amar mukti aloye aloye ei akashe,  
Amar mukti dhulaye dhulaye ghashe ghashe.*

*Deho moner shudur pare hariye pheli aponare,  
Ganer sure amar mukti urdhe bhashe.*

*Amar mukti sarbajaner moner majhe  
Dukhhobipad tucchho kora kathin kaje*

*Biswadhatar joggoshala atmahomer banhi jwala  
Jiban jeno di ahuti mukti ashe.*

My liberation is in the light of the sky  
My liberation is in the dust and grass below.

Often I lose myself in the far beyond  
Melodies help my liberation to sail above.

My liberation is surrounded by universal souls  
In tough situations it stands above stress and distress.

Despite the sacrificial pyre of self-immolation

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<sup>39</sup> Characterized as congregational and solemn. Brahmoism is a religious movement that was started by Ram Mohan Roy during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal Renaissance. The movement encouraged its followers to denounce idol worship and polytheism, reject the caste system, fight for the emancipation of women, and respect all religions. See more on Brahmoism above.

My liberation comes when I offer myself there.<sup>40</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore wrote this song in his Puja chapter in 1926. Over the years, *Amar mukti* has become one of his more popular songs, one that has become almost cliché to perform in front of an audience. I think about Michael Herzfeld's (2005) work on cultural intimacy, or "the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of created irreverence and the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation" (3). This song harbors in it the complex feelings of cultural intimacy. It has transformed from providing millions of Bengalis with a sense of pride in their liberation, as a vessel of love for their own Rabindranath Tagore, to a source of self-consciousness. Why and how did this transformation occur?

Around the late 1940s and 1950s, technical innovations like the radio went from not only being portable, but also affordable. Thus, many middle class and lower-middle class households began owning their own radios. There was no longer an inaccessibility to Rabindrasangeet because All India Radio continuously broadcast Rabindranath's most popular songs. Even if a particular home did not have their own radio, there was a good chance they could hear programming from the next house over – whether they wanted to or not. *Amar mukti* became one of the more commonly broadcast songs due to its proclamation of inner strength – something that was important to identify around the time of India's independence from the British Raj.

In Mukti's generation, the constant presence of *Amar mukti* through the radio transformed its associated affect from solely a declaration of inner strength, to one imbued with

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<sup>40</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.

an internal struggle with identity. Bengalis identify with this song. They know the language, they love the language it is written in, and they pride themselves on knowing the words by heart.

Mukti loves this song not only for her own personal nostalgia and its familiarity, but because it instills a sense of solidarity in every performance. “Whenever this song is performed, whether on stage or in a house, everyone joins in. It builds community and pulls people out of their own heads and into the group,” she says.

However, some do not want their identity to be boiled down to only one (or a few) songs by outsiders. They do not want to be as easily identified, but rather want their culture to remain complex, elusive, and almost enigmatic to those who are not privy. “Rabindranath wrote so many more songs,” says Ananda, who lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. “To me, it’s like, great. Another Bengali singing *Amar mukti*. Is this all we are?”

### **The Political Situation**

Asian Indian immigration to the United States began as early as 1907 (Sudipta Das 2002). The first wave of immigrants entered the United States from British Columbia, Canada’s lumber industry. Punjabi migrants came to work on California farms, in mining and canning factories, and joined Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino workers to constitute a low wage labor force (Shukla 2013). This influx ended with the 1917 Immigration Act, which included India amongst the list of countries whose citizens were banned from entering the United States. This was an effort by nativists to control the composition of immigrant flow and limit “undesirables” (Das 2002) into the country. Between the years of 1923 and 1946, the Asian Indian population dropped drastically as a result of the *U.S. vs. Bhagat Singh Thind* case of 1923, which denied citizenship to Asian Indians because U.S. law only allowed free whites to become naturalized citizens. This case proclaimed that, although anthropologists deemed Indians “Caucasians,” there are profound

differences between them and the average white American. As George Lipsitz (1995) describes, this fictive identity of “whiteness” in the United States was more than the product of private prejudices; it emerged largely because of realities created by slavery and segregation, immigration restriction, and Native American policy, by conquest and colonialism.

In 1946, The Luce-Celler Bill dropped some restrictions on Asian Indian immigration because the United States was beginning to recognize India as a soon-to-be independent and major world power, and allowed in an annual quota of 100 migrants. This second wave of immigrants, which consisted of professional men and their families from larger Indian cities such as Mumbai and Kolkata, settled down in the San Francisco and New York areas. In 1960, only 12,000 Indian immigrants lived in the United States. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 allowed for 170,000 immigrants from the eastern hemisphere, and 20,000 per country annually, and transformed the character of the United States (Shukla 2013). These “first-generation” immigrants, hailing from the second wave of migration, developed communities by building temples and forming local cultural organizations through which they could preserve pieces of their homeland and share stories of their similar struggle. They built homes that maintained a sense of belonging, while shaping new forms of personhood in the United States. This wave was a particularly tumultuous time in the continuous rethinking of race and ethnicity in America. In 2016, Indians were the top recipients of high skilled H-1B temporary visas and were the second largest group of international students in the United States.

As Sandhya Shukla writes in her essay on South Asian migration, “it is a mistake to view South Asian migration through the lens of single-ethnicity formation; we must interpret it as a hybrid, and hybridizing, phenomenon. Identifying cross-cultural inclination from the ‘beginning’ of South Asian migration to the USA [she elaborates on Punjabi men in the first wave of



migration to California marrying and starting families with Mexican women, and Bengali men assuming racial ambiguity and marrying Puerto Rican women in Harlem] also challenges the received view that diversity and multiplicity are only achieved in the second and third generations of migrant culture” (2013:168). I give particular importance to Shukla’s argument that through all the waves of immigration and migration, the United States was simultaneously reimagining itself as a nation. Culture production, tradition, and authenticity and their relationships to the homeland and the host country are by no means linear processes and, in my work I hope to abide by that claim.

The resilience and tenacity of the refugees from the 1947 Partition birthed a new generation of Indian citizens who, although would face life-altering political movements such as the Naxalite Movement of the 1970s and the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971, reaped the benefits of an independent nation free from British colonizers. This generation comprised the majority of immigrants who moved to the United States in the 1970s and 80s, the United Kingdom, and all over the world in search of opportunity. Based on the 2015 Census, the median age for Indian immigrants was 39 years. Their age indicates that most of them came with jobs or plans of higher education.

Mukti came to the United States with a PhD in Botany. She was not allowed to work for the first year of her stay due to her husband’s student visa status, and so took babysitting jobs to combine it with her husband’s student salary in order to make ends meet. One year and a newborn daughter later, Mukti began to work in a laboratory as a researcher. She brought her daughter to work with her on some days, and asked kind friends to look after her on others. For the next twenty years, Mukti worked as a molecular geneticist in different laboratories around Illinois and New York. Alongside working, she arranged for every possible extracurricular

activity for her daughter. From exciting summer camps at the museum, soccer leagues, and math enrichment programs, to sculpture classes, clarinet lessons, and science fairs, she worked tirelessly to adorn her daughter's life with the humble means they had. In her own life, she never stopped initiating cultural programs with her friends. Mukti and her husband took every chance they could to cultivate their culture, to nourish their nostalgia and their senses of self, by organizing and participating in Rabindra Jayanti, Durga Puja, or *Pohela Baishakh* (known as Bengali New Year) functions in their local Bengali organizations. They directed plays for children and adults, and curated themed evenings complete with songs and recitations. I was typically recruited to accompany the adults on the mandira or rhythm egg. Most of my childhood memories consist of evening rehearsals in our small apartment living rooms. There would be tea, some snacks, and sometimes even a potluck dinner for everyone attending. Many of my parents' friends were graduate students who had recently come from India. Looking for an outlet themselves, they found solace in my parents' strong cultural fortitude. They created and contributed to a "diasporic imaginary" (Bhatia 515) that not only allowed them space to build a community of their own, but also painted a picture of their homeland as romantic, carefree, and idealistic.

Mukti recalls a particular show they put together in 1997 for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's independence. They reserved West Hall, an auditorium at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. The rehearsals leading up to the show were filled with laughs because some of their friends, although they knew Tagore's songs by heart and had deep associated memories with them, did not necessarily pride themselves on their singing voices. They were never trained, never took voice lessons, and were amateur singers in the privacy of their own home. It was their deep love for the music and my parents' encouragement that urged them to partake. Mukti and

her husband curated this performance. They chose what would be sung, mostly songs from Rabindranath's Swadesh chapter, appropriate for the occasion but also songs that were not heard as often.

*Hey mor chitto punyo tirthe jaago re dhire  
Ei Bhaarater mahamanober saagorotire.  
Hethay dNaraye du bahu baraye nomi narodebotare  
Udaar chhande paramanande bandan kori taare.  
Dhyanogombhir ei je bhudhar,  
nodi japomaala-dhrito prantar  
Hethay nityo hero pobitro dhoritire  
Ei Bhaarater mahamanober saagorotire.*

O my heart, slowly awaken on this pilgrimage  
On the oceanfront of the incredible Bharat.  
Here I stand arms raised, singing in worship  
I worship the sacred folk with generous rhythm.  
This land is devout in meditation  
lands and rivers strung together like garlands.  
Here we observe the pious land every day.  
On the oceanfront of the incredible Bharat.<sup>41</sup>

Rabindranath wrote this song in 1905, one year before he wrote *Amar Sonar Bangla*. It too was written as a proclamation of the pride in a whole nation, not a divided one.

My parents' modes of identification with Rabindrasangeet were different than that of their parents' generation. For them and their generation, memory and affect served as their motivation. I follow Ellen Gray's (2013) definition of the term "affect" here as foregrounding "the social, historical, and corporeal (sensed) dynamics of feelings" (9). The songs they brought with them were not only absorbed from their mothers, but also typically learned in school. Whether it is the particular memory of learning *Ore Grihobashi* ("Oh home-dweller, open your door") in a pre-school classroom, going to see a free outdoor concert in 1965 where Hemanta Mukherjee sang

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<sup>41</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.

*Oi janalar kachhe boshe ache* (“There she is, sitting by the windowsill”), watching the film *Haatey Bazaarey* (1967) for the first time in which Hemanta Mukherjee sang *Ogo nodi apon bege* (“Oh mighty hasty river”), or a young aunt singing *Ami tomay joto shuniechilem gaan* (“For all the songs I sang to you”) along with the radio on a lazy Sunday evening, first generation immigrants brought with them vibrant images of hearing and singing these songs for the first time in a musically saturated environment. Rabindrasangeet was a monumental and thrilling phenomenon that infiltrated their lives in different ways.

Subendhu, a first-generation immigrant, recalls the first time he heard Hemanta Mukhopadhyay perform live in concert. “...It was at a Tagore birthday celebration in a dingy North Calcutta alleyway, and it blew me away completely. It was maybe 1966 or ‘67, and it was unbelievable. It was such a divine, celestial experience I cannot describe, and coming back home, Hemanta Mukhopadhyay and a few of his songs haunted me. I cried.” At that age, 10 or 11, Subendhu didn’t know anything particular about Tagore’s music, other than the fact that it was great, and that Tagore was like a God to everyone he knew. Even though he had a radio at home, and grew up in a culture of music, he didn’t know much about it. But after listening to Hemanta for the first time, he went back to hear him many times at public functions. The modes by which immigrants of Mukti and Subendhu’s generation identify with Rabindrasangeet only just start to express the multiplicity of diaspora. They “articulate and reveal the differences, slippages, and particularities of Asian Americans” (Zheng, 54), whether through gender or family history. They challenge, as Lisa Lowe writes, the conception of difference as structured by a binary opposition between two terms (1991), and argue for social subjects as the sites of a variety of differences.

### **Postmodern Diaspora and Song: Nandini Banerjee-Datta**

I was born in Illinois in 1987. My first spoken words were in Bengali, and the first time I was able to visit my ancestral home in Calcutta (now Kolkata<sup>42</sup>) was in 1994. Ever since then, I have traveled to Kolkata during my summer vacations and some of my winter breaks to visit my grandparents and my extended family. Growing up, my family seldom traveled around the United States or anywhere else other than Kolkata. As soon as my parents got stable jobs with steady pay, all of their vacation days and extra income would be saved up for our annual trip back to the homeland. It was a chance for them to be with their parents and siblings, to sit with them, chat with them, eat with them, and live a few weeks in their presence. It was also a chance to immerse themselves in the city that made them. Each year, I would be engulfed in the clamor and cacophony of my parents' ancestral city. My joy during these trips, despite the mosquitos and inevitable dysentery, stemmed from my fluency in and proclivity for the Bengali language. Of course, my extended family's intense affection played no small part. But my love of Bengali, and the love I felt back from it, literally provided me the words with which to fully live those months in Kolkata. I was able to partake in jokes between my cousins and their friends, I could spend hours watching Bengali-dubbed *Johnny Bravo* or *Dexter's Laboratory* cartoons during lazy afternoons when everyone was either at work or napping, I was able to engage in intellectual conversations with my grandfather, and, if my shyness didn't get the best of me, I was able to participate in impromptu evenings filled with singing.

My go-to song when teetering between shyness and *communitas* was, and still is, *Amala Dhabala Paale Legeche*. Taught to me by my father, it is a slow and rhythmically simple song

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<sup>42</sup> The West Bengal government passed a constitutional amendment declaring that from January 1, 2001, the beginning of the new millennium, Calcutta was officially renamed Kolkata. Some reasons for this change were, "the new name would reflect the pronunciation of the city's name in Bengali and would protect the state's linguistic identity." *Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History* (2003) by Krishna Dutta has more information on the history of the city's name. In stories that take place post 2001, I will use "Kolkata."

from Tagore's *Prakriti*, or nature, chapter. With a quick glance at the nearest *Gitabitan*, the words become fluid again.

*Amala dhabala pale legeche mondo modhur hawa  
Dekhi nai kobhu dekhi nayi emon toroni bawa.  
Kon sagarer paar hote aane kon sudurer dhon  
Beshe jete chaay mon  
Phele jete chaay ei kinaraay shob chawa shob pawa.  
Pichhone jhorichhe jhoro jhoro jol guru guru dewa daake  
Mukhe eshe pore arunokiron chhinho megheer phaanke.  
Ogo kandari ke go tumi kaar haanshi kannar dhon  
Bhebe more mor mon  
Kon sure aaj bandhibe jontro ke montro hobe gawa.  
Dekhi nai kobhu dekhi nai emon toroni bawa.*

Clean and white sails touched by slow and sweet winds  
Never have I seen boats sail this way  
Bringing riches from far away, from which seas  
My mind wants to drift away  
And leave all I want and all I have on the shore  
Rains fall and clouds call behind me  
But on my face sunshine falls through a space in the clouds  
Oh boatman, what emotions and treasures are you bringing to me  
I fail to understand  
What tune will the music play, which words will I sing  
Never have I seen boats sail this way.<sup>43</sup>



Singing in Kolkata.

As soon as I start the song, I clearly hear a muffled giggle from the side of the room. I know the sound is coming from my cousin Tia, and I can't help but sheepishly smile. *Amala dhabala*

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<sup>43</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.

has assumed the role of my “if all else fails” song. I have sung it so many times that it is probably time to retire it from my repertoire. Moreover, it is also a melodically very simple song. Maybe too simple for someone my age. Written in *Raga Bhairavi*, and performed in *Tala Ektaal*, the *laya*, or tempo, of this song is slow. There is not much melisma, which makes the melody easy to learn and perform. The words as well are uncluttered. The emotions conveyed however, in true Rabindranath form, are anything but obtuse. He deploys the wonderment of nature to express fleeting emotions, a restlessness that characterized his life. His use of the Bengali language, the words with which he paints the emotions of ephemeral intensity and wonder that nature elicits for him, exude pathos. He applies alliteration to his descriptions of the rains and thunder, and his depiction of a ray of sunlight peeking out from behind a cloud is almost palpable.

This isn't the only song I know, but it is one that I can confidently belt out despite my initially quivering voice. I begin in what seems to me a little off-key, and it takes me a couple of lines to get into the groove. I am conscious of my childish voice. I've heard the song sung on a cassette as a duet by Hemanta Mukhopadhyay and his daughter Ranu Mukhopadhyay, and I cannot help but compare my amateur rendition to theirs. I glance at my aunt, who has started to accompany me on her harmonium, and she gives me an encouraging smile. Most of the people at the gathering aren't privy to mine and Tia's embarrassing little joke – my “rueful self-recognition” (Herzfeld, 6). Many have never heard me sing this song before, let alone any song. To them, an American-born girl singing a Rabindrasangeet and furthermore reading from a Bengali *Gitan* is heartening. Tia knows that I have learned other songs in their entirety, many from her mother, and she herself is an avid lover and performer of Rabindrasangeet. This flickering intimate moment that I shared with her, this external embarrassment filled with deep

knowing and affection, imbues our relationship “with lines of potential” (Stewart 2007), and provides me an “assurance of common sociality” (Herzfeld, 3), similar to that of *Amar mukti* above. I concede that Tia’s knowledge of Rabindrasangeet is far greater than mine. I am her older cousin, but the power has momentarily shifted. Nevertheless, this moment fills me with a feeling of partnership. Tia knows my potential, and she and I are on a level of understanding that feels cherished and representative of our close family. This seemingly ordinary moment of singing a profound, yet melodically simple, song about nature becomes charged with affect. I think of Kathleen Stewart’s words, “The ordinary is a drifting immersion that watches and waits for something to pop up” (95), and know that although Tia probably will not bring it up again, this moment has added a visceral force to our sisterhood.

My physical movement between two countries has been intentional and fortunate. I understand the implication of my mobility as “associated with the hierarchy of power, prestige, economic means, and [a] degree of freedom grounded in [my] gender, class, race, or nationality” (Zheng, 41). My family has made it a priority to save up money for these trips, and has been lucky enough to have had the stability to work toward a position where they have money to save. And although my particular type of fluid physical mobility is not the reality for all second-generation immigrants, the types of movements that we do share and continue to navigate through are cultural and philosophical. We possess the ambivalence of balancing two (and sometimes more) worlds at once, thus allowing space for friction.

A particularity about my own identity as a Bengali-American has been that, after marriage, I am now balancing three worlds instead of my usual two. My husband’s family is Punjabi. They are from Delhi and Amritsar and speak a combination of Hindi and Punjabi at home. As opposed to my parents, who grew up in more of a culturally and linguistically homogenous environment,



I was not raised alongside other Bengali-American children. I knew a few through my parents, but mostly I had pan-Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Caucasian friends, with whom I cultivated long lasting relationships. My marriage has brought with it a form of cultural mobility that has intensified my own relationship with the Bengali language and the songs with which I grew up. After I got married, I was determined to teach my husband Bengali. Communicating with my parents in English would be no problem, but I wanted him to feel the comfort I felt when we traveled to Kolkata. Also, and more critically, I wanted to preemptively prepare for our future children. The concept of a “mother tongue” had deep implications for me, as we were preparing to welcome a child into the world. I will go into the contours of balancing this specific brand of friction, that arises from kinship ties, later on in this dissertation.

The inter and intra-relationships between the aforementioned characters and their communities build the network of my research. The ways in which a man’s poetry and philosophy so deeply affected the lives of these women and their communities is what I study. We – and I consciously include myself – have been singing Rabindranath’s words, and making them our own. Although we keep his words, we add our own inflections, our own memories and associations, and our own histories.

As evidenced through this chapter, I approach the challenge of speaking of expressive cultural production in relation to Bengali immigrant personhood in a way that does not rely on material from a distance or lean on historicist assumptions about culture and identity. I draw on people and their experiences, listen to their stories and pay close attention to their voices. I delve deeper into what 21<sup>st</sup> century American life sounds like in places where Rabindrasangeet is thriving, especially in moments of quiet contemplation, unscripted comments, and mundane chatter.

It will also become clear, if it hasn't already, that I use "Bengali music" to refer to the *people* who are performing it rather than the actual location of the performance, or the "work" itself. I use Christopher Small's term, *Musicking*, to talk about the people who are contributing in any and every way to the affective experience of music. Small writes, "To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing, or practicing, by providing material for performance..., or by dancing" (1998). Ellen Gray (2013), in her work on fado, writes beautifully about the roles of listeners in the genre. "For many participants, the term "fadista" refers to both one who sings and one who knows how to listen; through listening, one enters into the affective, poetic, and performative sound world of fado, mind, body, and *soul* (emphasis Gray's)" (7). The people I write about are musicians. They sing, read, listen, and feel. They carry locations with them (Chavez 2017), as well as Rabindranath's words. An inner-city alley in North Kolkata can be imaginatively invoked into a living room in Queens, a trepidation-filled performance in Kolkata can revive feelings of alienation that accompanies diasporic identity. It is the people who evoke music, the voice that brings the words to life.

In the following chapter, I explore the formation of voice, and how, through technology, voice has been produced, circulated and interpreted in different ways. The reanimation of a man's – Rabindranath Tagore's – voice by predominantly women deepens my analysis. I write about YouTube, call-in television shows, and social media as they feature prominently in the lives of first generation Bengali immigrants in the United States. Often, the cultural and spatial contours of their lives are shaped by media. The immediacy of new technology is laminated with interpersonal connections, and it is the polyphony and intertextuality of these experiences that is at the heart of identity-building, and of Rabindrasangeet as a musical genre.

## Chapter 2. *Rabindrasangeet in the Diaspora: Voice and Media*

“A bridge is a connection called up by desire – the desire to move, to greet, to reunite, to make a living. It’s a desire to *go* so that a return can come into being – a crossing. It’s a necessary trajectory. It’s an impulse of a plan, a tactic of change. It’s when your own body loosens and you feel a connection with another being, a place, a verse, a melody, and both of you are affected – the other next to you, embracing you. It’s what the narrative space of performance calls into being – the story conveyed, the emotion elicited, the echoes of meaning that touch.” – *Sounds of Crossing*, Alex Chavez, 219

“The experience that embodies sensory, emotional engagement and remembrance is received in an encapsulated form; shifted from its origin into a surrogate container, a storage vehicle, a substance from which it can be released, liberated at moments of stillness.” – *The Senses Still*, Nadia Seremetakis, 14.

### **Kunal Da**

*After a full day of the long-awaited Durga Puja<sup>44</sup> rituals, a group of friends decide to continue the celebrations in the evening. They gather at a friend’s house twenty minutes away for some conversation, some snacks, and maybe a little singing. After about an hour of discussing the current state of politics in West Bengal, Kunal goes out to his car in the driveway to get the harmonium he keeps in there for times like these – his emergency harmonium. Thus, begins an evening filled with song in the small upstate living room. A few are sung as dedications to someone particular in the room, and others seem to emerge as if through the next breath. Soon, song requests start pouring in from those who were idly listening from the kitchen. Rekha, who was washing some dishes, comes out wiping her hands on a washcloth. “Oh, Kunal Da! Please sing ‘Se din dujone dulechhinu bone’ (‘Back when we met in the woods’).” Kunal smiles and begins. The environment becomes one in which music ignites emotions of laughter, quiet smiles,*

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<sup>44</sup> Durga Puja is an annual Hindu festival, which celebrates the worship of goddess Durga. See Dr. Rachel McDermott’s work on Durga Puja, similar religious public events, and their nostalgic power.

*and gentle tears. The palpable energy shift seems to imbue this small group of Bengali immigrants with the resources to nurture their lives as feelingful individuals in the United States.*



In an Upstate New York living room – Kunal Da on harmonium, Partha singing Kunal “Da”, as he was called to signify his older brother status, was a musical encyclopedia. His friend Partha said he had “North Calcutta charm.” Partha was drawn to Kunal Da through the memories they shared from attending Scottish Church Collegiate School in Calcutta. I saw that intimacy and loved Kunal Da and his wife just the same. Kunal Da knew thousands of songs by heart, including who composed them and in what year. During every get together, his virtuosic harmonium playing would draw people in from other rooms and out of the monotony of their daily lives. “Just wait until you hear this song,” he’d say. “A phenomenal song that I guarantee you haven’t heard in a long time!” After a quick cigarette break, he’d be back to regale us with more. I tended to be one of the only young people rapt with attention.

Partha reminisces about Kunal. “Whenever I was asked to sing Rabindrasangeet at a gathering, Kunal Da was my *cheero shongi* (“forever partner”) on the harmonium. His incredible

skill elevated my performance and gave me the enthusiasm and motivation to delve into my own vault of songs. I would be inspired to sing songs that I had not sung in years.”

I build this chapter on Partha and Kunal’s relationship – the uniqueness and banality of a relationship built on shared memories from their homeland. Their memories were not experienced together, and they did not know each other in India. Rather, they met in the United States and found that they had commonalities in their upbringing. They both recalled watching swimmers at Hedua Park, they remembered when the Chakraborty family of Beadon Street (now Abhedananda Road) got the first refrigerator in the neighborhood, and the first time Goabagan Athletic Club hosted Hemanta Mukherjee, who regaled the neighborhood with a free outdoor concert.

Bengali immigrants like Partha and Kunal have moved to the United States after the 1970s – a period of time when upwards of 51,000 foreign born people from India migrated to the United States. They have diverse ways of relating to and engaging with Rabindrasangeet. I argue that the genre of Rabindrasangeet forms and reforms in the diaspora through embodied processes of micro-level performance, or a “decompression of routine temporal experience and its subsequent re-compression into surrogate vehicle and substance” (Seremetakis, 14). I write about everyday life because of its relationship with instances of distraction and inattention, its perception as a region of devaluation, and its ultimate role as a space where loud silences and lost glances seep through the cracks of official and recorded cultural narratives. This mode of ethnography follows scholars like Kathleen Stewart and Ellen Gray (2013) who writes that affective publics are created and maintained through all levels of performance – “with performances of the everyday at one end and highly framed, formal, or staged performances at the other,” (7) all ultimately inter-animating one another.

How might Rabindrasangeet shape the ways in which Bengali-Americans experience their lives as immigrants, reconciling (or not) Bengal's colonial past and America's contemporary present? How do these songs help Bengali-American immigrants articulate their feelings of alienation, belonging, and camaraderie? How are gendered identities formed and maintained through Rabindranath's words? The most salient arguments and theoretical approaches that I engage with in this chapter include voice, mediation, and affect, particularly in feminist and postcolonial studies, (Ahmed 2004, Berlant 2000, Gray 2013, Mankekar 2015, Stewart 2007, Weidman 2006). I construct the diasporic world of Rabindrasangeet through these tropes to show how complex and integral all the parts are to the construction and maintenance of this tradition. I privilege voice, sound, and listening as key sites through which to understand how subjectivities are shaped, and how intimate and public experiences intertwine to play a pivotal role in shaping notions of selfhood.

Much of my ethnography in this chapter is the result of waiting. Waiting and listening. By immersing myself in the daily talks and the everyday socialities of the Bengali immigrants with whom I conducted close research, I stood by for what leaked through, for what was mentioned as an afterthought, or for what was left unsaid. Kunal Da and his friends comprise a group of Bengali immigrants who immigrated to the United States from Kolkata and its surrounding townships. I explore Rabindrasangeet's role in the ebbs and flows of this group, from the birth of friendships, the maintenance of culture within multi-generational families, and even to the very end of some relationships. I have conducted participant-observation and interviews with this group officially from 2008 to 2017. Unofficially, I have been participating and observing for my entire life. We have celebrated birthdays and religious occasions, enjoyed Sunday afternoon picnics, and have mourned together at funerals. Over the past few years I have

had, for many reasons, some distance from this dynamic group, and have thus been able to think deeply about our roles as Bengali-Americans. The purpose of the stories that follow is to highlight the deeply intertextual ways by which Bengali-Americans experience Rabindrasangeet, and the ways they perform their culture. I weave together stories of live performances in living rooms, basements, public elementary school auditoriums, and privately funded community centers, along with mediated performances on the internet, and on television, to demonstrate how they all serve to build and reshape Rabindrasangeet as a genre. I explore the “surrogate homes” (Wang 2018) they have created in the United States, reproducing icons of their homeland in order to remain connected to a home of some sort. A critical framework that animates this chapter is a history of mediation and the notion that contemporary electronic media are continuations of this history, rather than ruptures in it. I analyze mediation as a key site through which subjectivity and sociality are experienced in the Bengali-American diaspora.

### **An Immigrant’s Home**

A Bengali immigrant’s home, like any immigrant home, can be a place of nostalgia, and the aesthetic can feel like a purposeful form of expression – shelves upon shelves of bound books by Sunil Ganguly, Leela Majumdar, Rajshekhar Basu (also known as Parashuram), and smattering of New York Times best-selling novels; DVDs of Satyajit Ray films; a Bengali-year calendar from a sweetshop in North Calcutta occupies a small corner, there may be some dusty trinkets from a recent trip to Rajasthan and Orissa, a framed painting of Rabindranath, a tattered copy of the *Gitabitan*, a conch shell with remnants of lipstick on it from a recent event. The curation of a living room morphs through the years of life in America. Shelves that once held the small figurines that came in store-bought tea boxes have been replaced with souvenirs from Puerto Rico and Costa Rica; racks of VHS tapes and DVDs have been replaced with a slim

marble mantel that holds a candle votive on either side. And then there are some cassette tapes and compact discs, which, despite the DVD disappearance, have retained a prominent spot in the living room. Why are these relics still present, even though there isn't anything to play them on? The CD inlays have pictures and words, tangible and "real." No longer audibly practical, they serve as decoration, memories of the days when they were bought, each carrying with them a different story.



On the left: a shelf with books on and by Rabindranath, along with a sketch of the man himself.  
On the right: stacks of CDs labeled by genre.

The majority of the cassette tapes have been copied from their originals, all of which are still in India. Other cassettes in the collection are Bengali mixtapes – a medley of favorite songs that were recorded onto blank cassettes. Some of these tapes are labeled by genre:

“Rabindrasangeet”, “*Adhunik*”, or “Nazrulgeeti” to name a few, and others are labeled by artist: “Hemanta Mukherjee”, or “Debabrata Biswas”, or “Nachiketa.” These mixtapes are not only the



result of the enthusiast's extensive musical knowledge, but the process is meticulously intentional, curated with love and attention, and with a future in mind. Peter Manuel (1993) writes about the cassette tape's impact on musical trends, live performances, devotional usage, and religious factionalism, among numerous other areas of everyday life in North India. The cassette tape's tendency to eliminate improvisation, and perpetuate the decoration of songs with instrumental interludes (1991: 201), allowed the medium to be perfect for Rabindrasangeet. These transnational, portable, and durable objects also reflect multiple belongings, and hold memories and experiences that are to be carried forward. In my exploration, I am reminded of Yael Navaro's work on affective geography and *make-believe space*. Navaro uses a word, *maraz*, which describes a melancholic force that is exerted by objects that are either left behind by people, or that travel across borders. This force also emanates through the objects' movement, through their interactions with people, and through different relationships. The cassette mixtapes, and some of the original cassette tapes that travel across borders, carry this force with them. Although they may not be played on a tape deck anymore, they hold deep significance of the melancholy that travels with immigrants who come to the United States with very little other than their music and their language.

### **The Construction of a *Rabindrik* Voice**

This section takes a look back to Rabindranath's time. I elaborate on the lives and musical careers of four singers, all of whom were part of Rabindranath's musical lineage, and who built and proliferated the affective sonic environment of Rabindrasangeet – an environment that to this day exists with fervor. My rationale for including this section in my chapter on Bengali-American immigrants is to broaden the understanding of Rabindrasangeet's expansion, particularly its expansion through voice and live performances, and to help situate some of the

ethnographic stories that will come later in this chapter. I use Amanda Weidman's (2014) analysis of "voicing," and Alessandra Ciucci's exploration on "what allows the poem to last" (2012:478), to illuminate my discussion of these singers and their affective roles within the musical world of Bengali-Americans. Weidman writes, "Voices are constructed not only by those who produce them but also by those who interpret, circulate, and reanimate them: by the communities of listeners, publics, and public spaces in which they can resonate and by the technologies of reproduction, amplification, and broadcasting that make them audible. Individual voices are created, in this sense, by audiences, fans, critics, and cultural commentators as well as by the larger spirit of their times" (45). We will see how the four voices I describe have shaped and have been shaped by listeners of Rabindrasangeet.

The 1940s in West Bengal, as in most of the world, was a turbulent time. The Bengal Famine of 1943, the Partition of 1947, and the subsequent great migration and sectarian violence, although all after Rabindranath's passing in 1941, called forth an insurgence of music and art. The Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA) was founded in 1943<sup>45</sup> in support of anti-fascist movements. It gave a new direction to Indian theater. In his presidential address to the first committee meeting, Professor Hiren Mukherjee said, "Come writer and the artist, come actor and the playwright, come all who work by hand or by brain, dedicate yourselves to the task of building a brave new world of freedom and social justice" (Mukherjee 1943). The goal of the IPTA was to represent the crisis of the times through the medium of theater and music and to help people understand their rights and duties. Along with its sister organization, the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), the IPTA was established primarily in response to the Bengal Famine of 1943 and the inaction of the British administration and wealthy Indians to prevent it

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<sup>45</sup> Was later reformed in the 1960s.

from happening<sup>46</sup>. It was the first organized national theater movement in India that developed and performed plays addressing social injustice and British imperialism. Artists in the IPTA began to seek and reconstruct an alternative, radical tradition for Bengali culture, particularly through their ideologically driven, excessive rejection of modern Bengali elite culture. A line of their first bulletin in 1943 reads, “In the wake of their great struggle for national existence and freedom, for defeat of fascism and imperialism for a free India in a free world, a great cultural movement has sprung up from amongst these defiant sons of our soil and factories which breaths of the new spirit” (July 1943). A young and influential member of the IPTA, composer, lyricist, and singer Salil Choudhuri (1922-1995) wrote and composed songs, travelling through the villages and cities to bring these songs to every community. Choudhuri and his fellow IPTA members found their musical influence primarily in the rich heritage of rural genres – sung by tillers of the earth, by Bengal’s boatmen, by women doing household chores – transforming the repetitive labor of their work into songs of deep signification or political satire. Notable singers in the IPTA included Hemanta Mukherjee, Suchitra Mitra, and Debabrata Biswas.

The popularization and dissemination of Rabindranath’s work assumed renewed importance, and the role of FM radio, free public concerts, and protest marches were the spaces in which his work flourished. Rabindranath’s students, all of whom studied under his auspices at Shantiniketan, shared his work all around Bengal and India. Primary among the singers were Pankaj Kumar Mallik, Hemanta Mukherjee, Shantideb Ghosh, Suchitra Mitra, and Debabrata Biswas.

### **Pankaj Kumar Mallik (1905-1978)**

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<sup>46</sup> The Bengal Famine of 1943 was manmade, as local rice was directed to Britain’s war effort overseas rather than feeding the hungry in Bengal.

I begin by writing about Pankaj Kumar Mallik, one of the earliest exponents of Rabindrasangeet. He sang and composed music for Bengali, Urdu, Hindi, and Tamil films for over thirty-seven years. Mallik's immense contribution to the pedagogy of Rabindrasangeet was what set him apart from his contemporaries. He was one of the earliest employees of the Indian Broadcasting Corporation, which would eventually become All India Radio. His first, and arguably most important for Rabindrasangeet, pedagogical contribution was the introduction of *Sangeet Shikshar Ashor* ("An Assembly to Learn Music"), a radio program in which he taught music and which aired live every Sunday at 9am for forty-seven years. This radio show helped free Rabindrasangeet from its confines among the elite and made the genre popular among the masses, bringing it into ordinary homes and allowing for anyone with access to a radio to learn. He was the first to introduce Rabindrasangeet in cinema with the 1937 film *Mukti*, and was known for introducing the use of the tabla in Rabindrasangeet performance. He was a pioneer who paid this genre close attention and took it to a much broader public.

I spoke to Sarita, Pankaj Kumar Mallik's granddaughter, about his influence in the world of Rabindrasangeet. "*Gaan Dadu* insisted on proper pronunciation for the songs that he taught on his radio show. Only through proper pronunciation, he said, can the song's true feelings be expressed - each *r* each *sh*. He described the song not just as a poem, but as a picture...Bengali immigrants who are now in their seventies can attest to the comfort *Sangeet Shikshar Ashor* brought to them every Sunday." Sarita told me about her grandfather's role in teaching famous singers such as Dwijen Mukherjee and even Hemanta Mukherjee the nuances of Rabindrasangeet. The figure of Mallik's voice, reproduced by the radio, created a community, producing affective relations, subjects, and diverse temporalities (Kunreuther 2006). Mallik used

the radio as a medium of transparent and direct connection. The radio re-produced not only his own voice, but that of Rabindranath.

### **Hemanta Mukherjee (1920-1989)**

Hemanta Mukherjee's first song was aired on All India Radio in 1933 when he was only thirteen years old. He gained his popularity through his prominence as a playback singer, predominantly for actor Uttam Kumar in Bengali films, in Bollywood films, and by composing film scores. In 1944, almost ten years after he started his singing career, Hemanta became closely intertwined with Rabindrasangeet, marking a completely new turn for his career. It was difficult for him to make a name for himself in this genre because stalwarts such as Pankaj Kumar Mallick had already brought it from the realms of the musically educated to the common Bengali household with his radio show. It was Bengali musician and composer Sailesh Duttagupta who first showed Hemanta that there were notations written for Rabindrasangeet singers. His performance of the song *Aji Bijon Ghare* ("Tonight in my lonely room") was characterized by his rich voice with a clear throw of words, and he was able to transform many Rabindrasangeets, which were undoubtedly popular at that time, into hits with his specific talent of pronunciation and his nuanced voice. Hemanta was the first person to bring the famous playback singer, Lata Mangeshkar (b. 1929), to Bengal. Lata had wanted to sing Bengali songs, and to that Hemanta said, "If it's Bengali songs you want to sing, then sing Rabindrasangeet" (author's translation from Bengali interview by Subir Ghosh). As Hemanta's friend Sudhiranjan writes, "Rabindrasangeet and Bengali modern songs had made Hemanta the darling of the Bengalis, Bombay gave him nationwide recognition" (Mukhopadyay, nd).

It is evident from Hemanta's life and performances of Rabindrasangeet and other genres that he was part of an affective world, a world that had already been inhabited by singers like Pankaj

Kumar Mallik. His deep and paced vocal timbre in *Aji Bijon Ghare* is reminiscent of his predecessors. However, because he was not only a part of the Rabindrasangeet public culture but also a part of the popular film industry as well, his unique vocal style brings forth affective responses from many different Indian communities.

### **Suchitra Mitra (1924-2011)**

Suchitra Mitra received her first Rabindrasangeet lesson from Pankaj Kumar Mallik. She is known as one of the leading exponents and authorities of Rabindrasangeet, having studied at the Sangeet Bhavan in Shantiniketan under a music scholarship, and later founding *Rabitirtha*, one of the leading schools of Rabindrasangeet in Kolkata. Mitra has written countless books on Rabindrasangeet, and has compiled an encyclopedia of Tagore's songs for students and researchers. In 1993, Raja Sen directed a documentary on Suchitra Mitra's life. Despite the film being a biography of her life, it feels like an homage to Rabindranath. "I can't imagine myself without Rabindranath," Mitra says, her voice trembling with emotion. "His songs are like light and air to my life. It happened gradually throughout my entire life, and was nurtured." Mitra internalized Tagore's songs in such a way that they provided a spiritual guide throughout her life. Through happy times and particularly difficult times, she anchored on to Rabindrasangeet and used it to weather the storm at hand. Even her way of speaking echoes Tagore's eloquence and depth.

Suchitra Mitra played a central role in protests, marches, and independence activism. Through her involvement with the IPTA, she sang Rabindrasangeet for thousands of people, spreading Tagore's message of peace to all. She also sang and acted in dance-dramas, furthering her deep relationship to Rabindrasangeet. Alongside Hemanta Mukherjee, Debabrata Biswas, and Kanika Bandopadhyay, Mitra was among the few who began spreading Rabindrasangeet to

the masses through live performances. “I’ve known George (Debabrata Biswas) and Hemanta since I was fifteen years old. I was in awe of them at that tender age, and I continue to be to this day,” she says in Sen’s documentary.

### **Debabrata Biswas (1911-1980)**

Debabrata Biswas was born in Barisal (in present-day Bangladesh), and lived in Calcutta for most of his life. His booming baritone voice, and depth of expression when singing Rabindrasangeet was what distinguished him from his musical peers. Biswas had a turbulent past with the music board at Viswa Bharati University in Shantiniketan, West Bengal. After Tagore’s death in 1941, the Viswa Bharati music board acquired full copyright over his literary work, including his songs. The accepted copyright rule was that after the author’s death, copyright remains with the family for 50 years. During this said period, any use of the works has to be sanctioned by the families first. Rabindranath directed Viswa Bharati to maintain all of his works. The University board began to grant permission to Rabindrasangeet recordings that only used the approved notation system. Without the copyright, they argued, the purity of Tagore’s works would be in jeopardy. The government in power extended this copyright ten more years until 2001. This ignored the adaptability that Tagore so prided his compositions with. Singers like Debabrata Biswas, who sang Tagore’s songs with a rare spontaneity and feeling, failed to pass Viswa Bharati’s test. Many of Biswas’ recordings therefore remained unreleased (Som 2009). He was prevented from releasing several songs for his album as he was faulted for not adhering to the grammar of the songs.

Here, I quote at length Biswas reading bits of the English circular that was distributed in 1974:

“It has been noticed for some time past, that there is a growing tendency amongst the artists who make use of interlude music at the time of recording Rabindrasangeet by taking help of various types of musical instruments and also foreign tunes during the recital of songs which sound discordant to the ear and...is against the true spirit of the songs. By doing so, sometimes it

so happens that the interlude music gains precedence over the original tunes of Rabindrasangeet, thereby subduing the real flavor of the rendering of the songs...It has already been impressed upon you the importance of making use of subdued music in order to maintain this style and mode of Rabindrasangeet. But in the absence of any method for eliminating the influence of Western style of music in the recorded songs by determining the basic requirements of musical accompaniments, no suitable arrangements could be made so far in the matter. As already communicated to you that the basic requirements as indicated in the attached sheet to be strictly adhered to at the time of recording of Rabindrasangeet in the future. [Now in Bengali] On the attached sheet, the instruments allowed are indicated. Number one is Esraj, Banshi, Sitar or Sarangi, Tanpura, Behala (violin), Dotara, Ektara, bas behala, ba organ. Two: Pakhawaj, Tabla, Khol, Dhol, Mandira. It is indicated that the sound of the instruments must never surpass that of the singer's voice."

The copyright on Tagore's works came to an end in 2005. Since then, there have been countless re-productions of his songs. As I will elaborate below, the newfound freedom of musical expression came with heated debate.

All four of these singers built an atmosphere of belonging for Bengalis and reverence toward Rabindranath Tagore. They contributed to Rabindranath Tagore's intention of reshaping modern Bengali society through music and language, to love his India by "piercing the veil" of the real through poetry. The particular Bengali adjective to describe the emotional world that Rabindranath built is *Rabindrik*. It is derived from Tagore's first name, and used to encompass not a literary style (for example as opposed to *Wordsworthian*), but an entire generation, an outlook, that came into being with Tagore's work. The works of Rabindranath Tagore and the cultural realm that has been created around them are central to the maintenance of this ethos. Tagore's poetry, songs, ways of describing the particular season or time of day, all weave in and out everyday conversations in Bengali households. The soulful nature of this *Rabindrik* atmosphere parallels the deep and meaningful *saudade* that Ellen Gray's (2013) work on fado engenders. I argue that this concept of *Rabindrik* brings up emotions of intimacy and belonging, or creates what Lauren Berlant calls "an intimate public" (Berlant 2008:5).



These four singers carried with them their respective gendered vocalities. The original group of singers who first disseminated Rabindranath's songs through live performances and radio programming consisted of mostly men – Mallik, Mukherjee, and Biswas among them. They harbored in their male voices, a nostalgia of the Bengali *bhadralok*. Bengali middle-class society in the mid-1900s was still not conducive to women, particularly mothers and wives, traveling and singing publicly. Suchitra Mitra – along with a few other female singers such as Kanika Bandopadhyay, Sumitra Sen, and Nilima Sen – began performing on the radio first and then in live concerts alongside their male colleagues.

I argue that media such as radio, YouTube, and television are extensions of and interpenetrations of the home and the private sphere.

### **YouTube: Voice as Memory**

Rabindranath used modern technology as a symbol of objective knowledge and also as a disruption, incongruous with the private and domestic. In Rabindranath's 1916 novel, *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World), Nikhil says about Bimala, "I could see everything relating to Bimala as if vividly pictured on a camera screen...and an anthem, inexpressibly sweet, seemed to peal forth from this world, where I, in my freedom, live in the freedom of all else" (142-43). David Novak (2010) writes, "Contemporary subjects live much of their lives through media. They reappropriate received materials for widely divergent personal goals, and construct social relations through an intertextual discourse of mediated references" (41). The two quotes, written almost one hundred years apart, echo this omnipresence of media and its ability to re-present multiple senses of self. Whether it's Bimala through a camera, or Sarita on Facebook, new media provides a site for "imagined community" (Anderson 1983), aesthetic judgements (Meintjes 2003), negotiating social identities, and also enforcing dominant social categories.

I begin by exploring the world of YouTube. By closely reading the comments sections of two different Rabindrasangeets, their videos, and their iterations by singers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I see that the circulation of songs, combined with their unique histories – and a person’s individual relationship to them – turn the comments section into a hotbed of deep feelings and passionate reactions. I chose to start with YouTube because of its rapid influx and universal access with the internet. YouTube was founded in 2005, and its viewership increased from 20 million per month in 2007 to three billion per day in May 2011 (Richmond 2011). The idea behind the conception of YouTube was that ordinary people would enjoy sharing their home videos. The “ordinariness” of this platform, its contents ranging from highly curated and edited videos to shaky pixelated ones, and its accessibility to anyone with working internet, is ideal for studying the impact of any genre and its impact in society. It is a constant presence in many of my interlocutors’ lives, like Mukti’s. Rabindrasangeet playlists are the soundtrack to her afternoon walks around her Brooklyn neighborhood, and Bengali audiobooks on YouTube provide her a soothing way to fall asleep. She does not always use YouTube for its video content. It is a simple application to use on her phone, and she feels comfortable using it for mostly audio.

*It’s the weekend and I am on the Q train going to my parents’ house in Brooklyn. I unlock the front door and am immediately greeted by the smell of toasted cumin and coriander. I take off my shoes and put down my bag. My mother is in the kitchen and has not heard me come in over the sounds of splattering oil. After a hug and kiss, I sit at the dining table and watch her. I hear a YouTube playlist of Jayati Chakrabarty’s Rabindrasangeet emanating from her iPhone that sits on the kitchen counter. Accompanying this are the sounds of the metal spatula scraping the sides of her cast-iron kadai<sup>47</sup>, the intermittent sounds of her chopping vegetables on a cutting*

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<sup>47</sup> A cooking vessel similar in shape to a wok.

*board, and the soft sound of her falsetto voice singing along with Jayati. My mom cannot hit all the notes and sometimes fluctuates between octaves. She sings loud and then soft. She stirs and sings, chops and sways, washes and hums. This flow is her embodied way of intimately engaging with her sonic environment. It is her way of being a Bengali woman in America.*

Now I describe two case studies – performances of the songs, *Megh Boleche Jabo Jabo* (“The cloud says, ‘I’ll take my leave’”), and *Majhe Majhe Tobo Dekha Pai* (“I catch a glimpse of you at times”), and their respective remediations on YouTube – to demonstrate how transnational circulation and the politics of voice constitute and interpellate Bengali identities around the world. I follow scholars Judith Butler (1997) and Laura Kunreuther (2006) in my definition of interpellation. Kunreuther quotes Judith Butler in her ethnography. “The mark interpellation makes is not descriptive, but inaugurative. It seeks *to introduce a reality* rather than report an existing one; it accomplishes this introduction through citation of existing convention” (Butler 1997:33; emphasis Kunreuther’s). As Althusser (1971) implied, the numerous ways in which subjects are interpellated can come not only from direct identification by a voice, but also from the affective qualities of the voice itself. I use these two songs to portray the “stickiness” (Ahmed 2004:11) of Rabindrasangeet, and track the ways by which these songs have become sites for personal and social tension.

I take inspiration from David Novak (2010) to show that remediation makes contemporary cosmopolitan subjects. As Novak writes, “Contemporary subjects live much of their lives through media. They reappropriate received materials for widely divergent personal goals, and construct social relations through an intertextual discourse of mediated references” (41). I follow existing scholarship the impact of new media (Schieffelin and Jones 2009, Chun 2013, Sharma 2014) and scrutinize the comments section of the following YouTube videos to

show the commenters' reproductions and critiques of hegemonic ideologies of language, musical composition, and aesthetics. I propose that it is through the global and deterritorialized platform of the comments section that individuals in the diaspora can feel connected, establish a community, and more critically take a stance about Rabindrasangeet.

### **Megh Boleche 'Jabo Jabo'**

*Megh boleche 'jabo jabo,' raat boleche, 'jai'*  
*Sagor bole 'kul mileche – ami to ar nai'*  
*Dukkho bole 'roinu chupey tahar payer chinchorupey'*  
*Ami bole 'milai ami ar kichu na chai'*  
*Bhubon bole 'tomar tore achhe boronmala'*  
*Gagan bole 'tomar tore lokkho pradip jwala'*  
*Prem bole je 'juge juge tomar lagi achhi jege'*  
*Maron bole 'ami tomar jibontori bai'*

The cloud says, "I'll take my leave," the night says "I'm on my way."  
The oceans says, "I have met the shore, and I am no more."  
Sorrow says, "I will remain as quiet as His footprint,"  
I say, "I have no desires, let me dissolve away."  
The world says, "I have welcoming garlands for you."  
The sky says, "A million stars twinkle for you."  
Love says, "I have waited for you, awake for ages."  
Death says, "I row your life boat."<sup>48</sup>

This Rabindrasangeet composition was made popular by Debabrata Biswas in the 1940s. Biswas's slow tempo-ed and barely-accompanied performance harkens back to Rabindranath Tagore's advice of having an accompanying *tabla*<sup>49</sup> play softly so as not to drown the lyrics (Som 2009:141). The timbre of Biswas's voice has a visceral feeling. His pronunciation of the Bengali words is deep and almost coarse, evoking something akin to Barthes's "grain of the voice" (1991). I use this particular song as my entry into the exploration of voice and media because of Debabrata Biswas's own complex relationship with Rabindrasangeet, which I have

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<sup>48</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.

<sup>49</sup> The tabla is a pair of single-headed drums, played by hand using the fingers and palms. One of the pair is played with the dominant hand.

elaborated above. The comments section on a YouTube recording of Biswas' rendition is filled with praise for his voice, often comparing him to a deity.

Snehamoy Roy writes, "this song is perhaps absolutely for George da [Biswas's nickname]," and Himadri Mukhopadhyay writes, "be still. God is singing." Pallab Ghoshal says, "This is called the voice of great George Da. It appears the voices comes from another planet." Gopa Roy speaks of feelings this song ignites for her, "Songs sung by him [Biswas] were my father's absolute favorite. I listen to his and Mohor Di's [Kanika Bandopadhyay] songs when I have called out for my father a thousand times to no avail..." The comments of pathos continue. Arijit Maitra writes, "Rabindranath's songs are the companion of loneliness," and Kanisko Sen writes, "This song brings peace when our heart feels like crying."

The comments also bitterly mention Viswa Bharati's copyright laws. One user writes, "Oh, if only Viswa Bharati's board understood the weight of his voice!" (Partha S Mukherjee, July 2016) another, "The Viswa Bharati board said this song was apparently sung in a 'vulgar' way, so I can only consider them jokers, clown, etc" (Sayantan Dutta). Sumit Mukherji writes, "Do you know why this song was banned in the first place? Because of melodramatic voice production! Oh, what experts (*bisesaggya*)! And they call themselves the judges (*bicharok*) of Rabindrasangeet!"

Debabrata Biswas's rendition of *Megh Boleche Jabo Jabo* displays the entanglement of music and voice and the layers that are present within each act of listening. Despite, and perhaps because of, his tested relationship with the copyright board, Biswas's valence as an exceptional singer and a true connoisseur of Rabindrasangeet increases. His role as a man in Bengali society, I believe, also immunized him from harsh criticism despite his unorthodoxy.

The next performance of *Megh Boleche Jabo Jabo* that I chose was sung by Bengali singer Soumyajit Das in 2013 on the album *Tagore & We*, and also features Bollywood playback singer and New Delhi native Sunidhi Chauhan. The song was uploaded to YouTube in 2015. Vocalist Soumyojit Das and pianist Sourendro Mullick – both men – created a music duo<sup>50</sup> that performs Rabindrasangeet, Bollywood, pop, folk tunes, Indian classical, and also Broadway-style musicals. They have performed Rabindrasangeet songs combined with Sufi music, getting a comment from noted lyricist and poet Gulzar, “Just superb, Tagore is a real Sufi and rightly interpreted Sourendro and Soumyojit.” The year 2016 marked a decade since they have entered into the public performance scene.

The first few seconds on the track start with guitar and piano riffs, and then a Hindustani *taan*<sup>51</sup> by Sunidhi Chauhan in Raga Behag. Her voice is light and smooth, a stark difference from Debabrata Biswas’ deep and grainy voice. It carries with it a feminine vocality, one that is revoicing generations of ragas that have been sung by both men and women. It represents much more than a feminine raga-based addition to Soumyojit’s rendition. I argue that there is not one single mode of hearing Chauhan’s voice as a unified sign. Her popularity in Bollywood playback singing brings with it a diverse audience of listeners – some of whom may not have been exposed to Rabindrasangeet before, and still some who may not understand the Bengali

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<sup>50</sup> The late 1980s in Calcutta, India saw an emergence of rock band music. The first bands sang exclusively in English, paving the way for an English rock scene, and the second half of the 1990s saw an emergence of the “Bangla Band” movement (Dorin 2012). The individual musician in this movement vanishes behind the band, revolutionizing much of the accepted ways of singing Bengali music. Singer Suman Chatterjee, known by some as the “Bengali Bob Dylan” (Dorin 2012), released his first album in 1992, and his following of solo performers paved the way for the success of Bengali rock bands in the 1990s and 2000s. Media outlets such as YouTube have provided a space that allows for much more creative control. Bangla bands, like Soumyajit’s band, continue to exercise their improvisatory skills, many times through popular Rabindrasangeets.

<sup>51</sup> The improvisation of very rapid melodic passages using vowels, often the long “a” sound.

language. Thus, this rendition of “Megh boleche ‘jabo jabo’” can and has reached a wider audience than Biswas’s. To further complicate Chauhan’s voice, I argue that utilization of a Hindustani raga-based taan emphasizes a hegemonic presence of Hindustani classical music in regional genres. Sure, it’s beautiful, and it adds texture. But the dominance of Hindustani classical music and the Hindi language around India, and its subtle representation as a national genre (Bakhle 2005) shows itself here.

Soumyajit’s voice enters at 0:50 and starts the Bengali lyrics (also composed in Raga Behag by Tagore), only to be interspersed with Hindi lyrics from a *Thumri* sung by Chauhan. Social media exposure has provided access for and stimulated comments from those who either praise Soumyajit and his band, or those who abhor new and innovative improvisations of Rabindranath Tagore’s music – particularly Chauhan’s Hindi renditions. Jayanta Debnath writes, “Cinemaye gaan korlei je Rabindrasangeet shilpi howa jayena eita shobcheye boro proman, Sunidhi’r aro practice o research kora uchit chilo.” (One can’t become a Rabindrasangeet singer just because they sing in movies, and this is the biggest proof. Sunidhi needed more practice and research). Heated comments respond: “Your thoughts are so disgusting...she is a renowned singer. She sang it too well even she is a non-Bengali person. Shame on your thoughts and thinking.” “You are an animal, you shouldn’t be talking about Rabindranath either.”

The comments section on this particular YouTube video, and many like it, have instilled heated discussion among music enthusiasts around the world. Some say this rendition is a “mesmerizing fusion of Rabindrasangeet” (Food Street August 2016), while others aren’t so keen on Soumyajit’s creative license. “Soumyajeet sir...all this flair was not necessary for a Rabindrasangeet...There are other songs in which to show off your skills...” (Aritra Panda July 2016), to which Ashok Dutta responds with “This is a unique rendition...something that you

cannot do” (July 2016). What is at stake here is a connection to perceived authenticity. Who is allowed to sing Rabindrasangeet? Some commenters praise Sunidhi’s voice and Bengali pronunciation, while others think she has no right to even be on the track. Structural criticisms include ones about the fast tempo, and diverse instrumentation. The “original” instrumentation has changed, but what was the original in the first place? Was it the rendition by Biswas? Or, was it how Rabindranath himself performed it when he composed the song in 1914? I go further in the next section, of how global circulation and remediation – and critically, the contention surrounding it – functions to keep this genre alive.

### **Majhe Majhe Tobo Dekha Pai**

The next example of a Rabindrasangeet that has captured my attention with its forms of re-presentation, is *Majhe majhe tobo dekha pai* (“I catch a glimpse of you at times”). This song was written in 1885 by Rabindranath Tagore in his Puja chapter, and popularized by Suchitra Mitra, who first sang it in the year 1951.

*Majhe majhe tobo dekha pai  
Chirodin keno paina?  
Keno megh ashe hridayo akashe?  
Tomare dekhite dayena.  
Khoniko aloke ankhiro paloke  
Tomaye jabe pai dekhite  
Haraye harayi shoda hoye bhoye  
Haraina pheli chokite  
Ki korile balo paibo tomare  
Rakhibo ankhite ankhite  
Eto prem ami kotha pabona  
Tomare hridoye rakhite  
Ar karo paane chahibo na ar  
Koribo he ami prano padh  
Tumi Jodi balo ekhoni koribo  
Bishayo bashona biswarjan.*

I catch a glimpse of you at times  
But why not always?  
Why do clouds come over my heart



And cover your face from me?  
When I do catch flashes of a glance  
The fear of losing you remains,  
Instantly you are gone.  
Tell me how I can find you  
So I can set my eyes on you forever  
I will never find such love  
To keep you in my heart  
I will not glance at anyone else  
If, when you summon me, I will be free  
To surrender to you all my earthly bonds.<sup>52</sup>

The version of this song sung by Suchitra Mitra incorporates minimal accompaniment – an *esraj*<sup>53</sup> mimicking her voice, a soft harmonium, a *bansuri*<sup>54</sup> coming in and out periodically between phrases, and no percussion. Her voice, with its characteristic depth and fullness, is the focus of this song. It is slow, full of melisma and pathos, as Mitra sings of the ephemerality of love, and considers the ways by which it can be eternal. Her voice is not a typically feminine light and airy voice. It is somewhat deep, even a little husky, and parallels the depth of the lyrics. The atypical timbre of her voice does not carry familial or kinship tropes of “mother,” or “wife,” but rather that of Rabindranath Tagore himself. She prides herself on maintaining “authentic” melodies and Bengali pronunciations, and carries in her Rabindranath’s “true” affect.

“Speechless,” Arun Sen writes in the comments. “The golden and heavy voice of Suchitra Mitra. Marvelous performance,” says shovan sengupta. However, some commenters have a different opinion. Saiful Islam Rubel writes, “The sleeper’s version. Well sung a classic one but somehow later versions are more liked.”

A recent performance of this song by Debojit Saha and Kushal Paul – both men – has ignited heated debate in the YouTube comments section. It was uploaded in 2018 by Strumm

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<sup>52</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.

<sup>53</sup> An Esraj is a string instrument played with a bow, and has the combined characteristics of the sitar and sarangi.

<sup>54</sup> A Bansuri is a side-blown bamboo flute.

Sound, a YouTube channel that prides itself on broadcasting new works from “some of India’s best musicians.” Unlike Suchitra Mitra’s rendition of *Megh boleche jabo jabo* which was just audio, this one is a music video featuring singers Debojit Saha and Kushal Paul. There is a lengthy list of credits in the description of the video, from the singers to the producers, hair stylists to editors. What is at stake in the comments section is the visual performance as well as its sound. Despite many positive comments praising the singers and their voice, many commenters are concerned about the physical performance of the song in the music video. They are analyzing the mood of the singers and of the song itself, concerned that it has been altered, and in essence making Rabindranath’s lyrics insignificant. Saha and Paul’s wide smiles and physicality take center stage and seem to diminish the weight of the words, the upbeat tempo does not match with the lyrics that exude heartache, and this does not sit well with many of the commenters.

Arnab Babuli writes “It’s not a comic song, nice voice is not everything, but realization which you don’t have. It’s just a singing, nothing else. Your voice is nice and flawless. But to sing Tagore, you are not prepared and polished.” DC THE WARRIOR writes, “With due respect to the singers, I want to convey that there is something missing. The song is actually a sad song. Singing is not only about having a good voice, the feel is also important. Tagore’s songs are different and difficult. To sing such songs, one first of all needs to understand that actual feel. It’s not so easy...the feel is lost.”

Some commenters get right to their point with a simple, “Many thanks for beautifully ruining this song,” or “Terrible. If Rabindranath was alive, he’d cry.” Others have given their criticisms a great deal of thought. I quote Mohore Mallick at length.

“Very difficult to explain what is missing in this song, with all due respect to the voice of the artists. However, let me add, the above song is not set in a happy note, thus doesn’t call for ‘joyful

singing'. It is a song soaked in pathos and loneliness their smiling faces is entailing a very contradictory meaning/feeling to the song which is quite upsetting. They need not be crying, of course, but such a vivid smile is definitely odd. One does not sing a happy song with a sad face, isn't it? It's the same thing...one doesn't sing a song set in pathos with a broad grin, either...If possible, try to read Rabi Thakur's various writings on how to interpret and sing his songs. It gives one a very clear picture of how the writer and composer of these songs wants us to render his songs – and I personally believe, following his words, is like showing him the due respect and it has got nothing to do with the so called 'copyright.'”

The depth of Mohore's comment points to her intimate relationship with this song, and with Rabindranath Tagore (as evidenced by her calling him “Rabi Thakur”). She has spent time thinking about Tagore's intentions, the song's history, this performance, and the ways in which it all connects for her. She has heard *Majhe majhe tobo dekha pai* before, and has had time to deliberate on its intimate experience for her as a listener versus its public acceptance as part of the copyright lifting. We see through these comments how, as Novak (2010) writes, “...ambivalence, distance, confusion, and the contingencies of globalism are part of what mobilize diverse and separated groups, even as they spiral away from a singular politics of cultural identity” (42). These commenters live far away from each other, all part of a global community that listens to Rabindrasangeet. They are mobilized by their complicated feelings about the future of this genre, which in turn gives life to that very future. Novak writes further, “...conflicts of appropriation are *already* (emphasis mine) involved in processes meant to reveal, rather than obscure, the variable trajectories of cultural mimesis” (62).

### **Television: Voice as Identity**

I explored above how the mediated voice can ignite differing emotions in listening publics and ultimately create rifts in musical communities. I now turn to an example of how another form of the mediated voice, the televised voice, can be generative of publics, and shape different subjectivities, particularly through ordinary talk. My methodology in this section draws

inspiration from Laura Kunreuther's (2006) ethnography on the shared temporality and affect experienced through Nepal's FM radio's live call-in show *Rumpum Connection*. Kunreuther examines the ways in which this show presents the voice itself as an important node in the production of subjectivities and genres in the Nepali diaspora.

*Aaj Shokaler Amontrone*, or An Invitation to This Morning (from here on, referred to as ASA), is a television show that I watched with my parents almost every evening from 2011-2015. ASA is a daily live call-in show that is centered on Bengali music and poetry. Each morning, from 7:00-8:30am (9:30pm Eastern Standard Time) from the Tara TV studio in Kolkata, India, a host welcomes onto set a musical guest. For the next hour and a half, the invited guest performs a repertoire of songs, and participates in conversation with both the host and with viewers from around the world who call in to the show. The week's forthcoming guests are announced on the channel during commercial breaks, so television viewers can choose to tune in accordingly, and its episodes are archived onto YouTube as well – garnering anywhere from a few hundred to 80,000 hits.

These callers – all of whom are Bengali speakers – live in urban and rural parts of West Bengal, different states in India, Bangladesh, the United States, Europe, or Australia, among other parts of the world. They range from music enthusiasts, to famous musicians, to friends and relatives of the performer. While most calls come in with a song request, others will call in with the intention of sparking conversation and building a connection. Some want to share an anecdote from their own lives or sing a couple lines from a song they recalled after hearing the performer sing. Still, other calls come in with just praise and encouragement for the performer.

International viewers of ASA can access this channel by buying an appropriate cable package, or even a separate application for their televisions or mobile devices. In addition to

Tara TV, these packages include Bengali news channels that provide the local news of West Bengal, and other Bengali entertainment channels that broadcast serials, competitions, and lifestyle shows.

Although the day's guest on ASA is usually a singer, there are times when they will be accompanied by someone who recites poetry, still a lauded talent in Bengal. The songs and poetry that are performed are mostly those written by Rabindranath. In 1912, Ezra Pound excitedly wrote to Harriet Monroe, the editor of the new American magazine, *Poetry*, "Reserve space in the next number for Tagore...He has sung Bengal into a nation...[W.B.] Yeats greeted me with 'someone greater than any of us – I read these things and wonder why one should go on trying to write'" (Pound quoted in Harriet Monroe's *A Poet's Life*, 1938). Pound prophesied in 1912 that Tagore would come to be the voice of Bengal. As I attempt to elucidate through this paper, this prophecy has been fulfilled, but in a variety of ways. And the function of this voice remains at the center.

Through ASA, which is aired from West Bengal, there is a conscious effort to create and maintain a particular Rabindra-centric ethos amongst its viewers, thousands of whom reside in the diaspora. The particular Bengali adjective to describe this ethos, *Rabindrik*, derived from Tagore's first name, is used to encompass not a literary style, but an entire generation, an outlook, that came into being with the poet's work. The works of Rabindranath Tagore and the cultural realm that has been created around them is central on this show. Tagore's poetry, songs, ways of describing the particular season or time of day, all weave in and out of the conversations that take place. There is a "formal redundancy and auto-referentiality" that create a "musical metalanguage" (Feld, Fox 27). The repetition of this *Rabindrik* metalanguage helps bring into

being a specific subject position – that which praises Tagore, and argues for his influence within the Bengali culture.

Through ASA, the voice assumes an agency that has an undeniable effect on the creation of a particular Bengali subjectivity. It projects a fantasy of presence and immediacy for viewers and callers from the diaspora. I show how voice becomes an embodiment of not only sung performance, but spoken performance as well.



On TV, singer Jayati Chakraborty (on harmonium) and her accompanists, along with host Mallika (in white).

I use careful ethnography and listening to centrally locate the voice and conceive the value and efficacy of vocal practice through ASA. The sense of complementariness that accompanies this show contributes to the imaginative and affective publics that are fostered in immigrant communities. Viewers in the United States are watching it at night, just as the day begins in Kolkata. The juxtaposition of winding down at the end of the day but simultaneously taking part in the start of a new one brings with it the very core of the immigrant's imagination.

Furthermore, I contribute to existing mobility and media scholarship by providing a gendered focus in my discussion. I will focus on the prominent, but unspoken, role that gender plays in ASA and in building a specific Bengali national and cultural identity throughout the world.

The live call-in feature on ASA produces an immediacy and room for articulation that other forms of television or radio programming cannot. I continue Kunreuther's argument that the directness and transparency given to live call-in programming "presumes the voice to be the natural indicator of presence, consciousness, and agency" (Kunreuther 2006, 327). Below is an excerpt of a call-in.

**Host (Mallika, Kolkata):** [Looking out at the audience] And now, we have a call from a friend in New York. Hello friend! Who, may I ask, is speaking?

**Caller (Uma, New York):** Hello, this is Uma. May I speak to Shreya please?

**Mallika:** Yes, of course! She's sitting right here.

**Uma:** Hello, Shreya! Great to see you and speak with you after a while. Remember you stayed with us five years ago?

**Guest Performer (Shreya, Kolkata):** [unsure, but polite] Yes, yes I do.

**Uma:** Your voice is, as always, sweet as honey. We still talk about the evenings in our [New York] home in 2009 when we all sang together. Remember that?

**Shreya:** [smiles and politely nods]

**Uma:** If you could sing that song you sang in our home, *Ogo tora ke jabi pare* ("Who wants to go to the other shore")? It reminds me of that wonderful time.

**Shreya:** Yes, of course. Thank you for the kind words.

**Mallika:** Thank you for the call, goodnight to you!

This conversation between three women animates voice as a sonic and material phenomenon and shows how different voices are produced, felt, and heard. Mallika, who I propose is the gatekeeper in this conversation and for all verbal exchanges that occur on ASA, frequently takes international calls from the Bengali diaspora. As a call comes in, a member of the production team prompts Mallika about the location of the caller so that she can issue the appropriate phatic greetings. Her voice sounds excited, her body language is animated, and her eyes are bright. I posit Mallika's voice as a collective production. She represents not only the television network and its strategic and culturally charged narrative, but also her own identity as a burgeoning actress. She intersperses *Rabindrik* phrases in her phatic greetings, assuming a voicing practice that associates her identity and that of ASA and its network with a commodification of tradition.

Uma's (the caller's) voice carries with it far less of a politically-charged and institutionally-backed narrative. The volume of her voice sounds distant even though she speaks the most in this exchange. We cannot physically see her, and so the timbre of her voice and her actual words are what we have to gauge her emotional state, which sounds eager. I find particular interest in Shreya's role in this conversation. Despite her immense popularity, and Uma's consequent excitement about her, we hear from her minimally. Shreya's gazes and soft smiles are all we get for the majority of the exchange. How does her demure reaction become a gendered expression of not only her own televised emotions, but also of her role as a Rabindrasangeet performer? Shreya's singing voice, although high-pitched and subtle, is deep, melismatic, open, and unhindered. Amanda Weidman's work comes up again here, as I take inspiration from her analysis of female playback singers in India. I relate her analysis to Shreya's vocal practices as a mode of discipline where she produces herself as a respectable female performer who sings but does not act. Weidman writes, "By emphasizing their difference from actresses, female playback singers inserted themselves into an ideology in which the female voice was identified as a site of purity, in contrast to the female body, which was subject to fashion and the consuming gaze of audiences" (*Keywords*, Weidman:239). Shreya's words, or rather her evocation of Tagore's words, are where her emotion lies. I contrast this to the host Mallika's body language, which is visible and forthright, and thus matches the volume and emotion in her voice. All three women represent the genre of Rabindrasangeet in their own ways – Mallika as an agent for Tara TV and its sponsors, Uma as a manifestation of the ordinary and the nostalgic, and Shreya as a highly gendered and curated performer with great affective value.

Furthermore, I show how this publicized conversation between Mallika, Uma, and Shreya makes present the Bengali-American diaspora, and incorporates a particular Rabindrasangeet, *Ke*



*jabi pare*, to create a depth in its interpellation. Although we hear that Shreya has met Uma before and thus knows of the Bengali-American diaspora, Mallika and all of the viewers watching ASA may not have known of Uma's existence prior to this televised conversation. One of the persuasive effects of this call then, is that it produces the idea that a Bengali-American diaspora exists, and is intimately associated with the musical public of Kolkata. It gives this particular diaspora an individualized identity, replete with specific memories and place naming. Hearing Uma's voice from New York, and her feelingful memories about her own home, Shreya, and this song, harbors the potential of awakening memories for other viewers – a process that forms myriad other domains of experience.

The musical focus of ASA brings to life one particular aspect of Kolkata's cultural realm. There are tribute programs on days when a famous singer passes away, and that day's guest specializes in songs specific to the late singer. Although ASA invites guests that are proficient in different genres – there are performers who are versed in the songs of the *Pancha Kobi* (the five canonized poets of Bengal): Dwijendralal Roy, Rajanikanta Sen, Atulprashad Sen, Kazi Nazrul Islam, and Rabindranath Tagore; Baul songs, the rural genres of Purulia and Medinipur such as *Bhatiyali*, *Jhummur*, *Saari*, and *Bhaowaiyya*, modern Bengali songs, and Hindustani classical genres to name a few – Rabindrasangeet performers are the most common.

As Svetlana Boym states, "...Nostalgia and modernity are Jekyll and Hyde, part and parcel. [They are] interconnected because nostalgia emerges as a distinctly modern disease...[It is] specifically a modern symptom, a reaction of modern experience of time. Nostalgia is often perceived as longing for home, longing for space, but it's really longing for another *time* or different rhythm of time. So, it's important to think what is the antidote of modernity. Do we want to go back somewhere, to some golden utopian age, to the other space?" (2011). I relate

Boym's discussion of nostalgia and temporality to the time difference between India and the United States. After a tiring day of work, whether fulfilling or not, the longing to be a part of a bright and sunny morning in the city in which they grew up, speaking their mother tongue, seems to be a material way to relate to Boym's definition of nostalgia – the longing for a different rhythm of time. I posit that this physical time difference is manifested into an imaginative longing, and one for a truly utopian time. The staging of ASA, the camera angles, the particular language used on the show, all contribute to the creation of this utopian morning.

In this commodification of tradition, I argue that government sponsored shows like ASA create a hegemonic homogeneity that is almost impenetrable. My elaboration on the social poetics of Bengali families in both West Bengal and the United States uses Herzfeld's definition of social poetics as "the analysis of essentialism in everyday life" (2005:32). Those who lament the loss of "tradition," and blame younger generations for not valuing the works of Rabindranath Tagore or Satyajit Ray perpetuate the nationalist structure that the government sells: the stereotype of the ever-romantic Bengali who looks down upon any genre that did not come from a Tagore or a Ray. To further the irony, it is these very folks that are the first to identify and criticize professional artists who are explicitly employed or patronized by the government in power. The constant suspicion and anxiety materializes at a local level when the Tagore and Ray families serve as icons of what it means to be Bengali. This particular stiff definition of what it means to be Bengali is simultaneously challenged and upheld. As Herzfeld puts it, "Such is the provisionality inherent in all official forms of permanence: because national ideologies are grounded in images of intimacy, they can be subtly but radically restructured by the changes occurring in the intimate reaches of everyday life – by shifts of meaning that may not be registered at all in external cultural form" (2005:31).

## Ajoy

I now shift to a story of Ajoy – a professional singer from Kolkata, India. In addition to running a music school in the city, Ajoy is invited to perform in the United States on an average of three times each year – especially during Bengali New Year in mid-April, *Durga Puja* in September or October, and the annual North American Bengali Conference in July. A particular cultural organization typically finances Ajoy’s plane fare, and he stays either at his sponsor’s house or a friend’s house (think back to Shreya and Uma’s relationship). He makes his money from show ticket sales. Ajoy specializes in many forms of Bengali song, including those by the 5 canonized poets. He is also a frequent guest on ASA. “The program didn’t call me on as a guest right at the very beginning,” he says. “But as it grew and gained popularity, five or six years ago, they called me in. After that I have been on the show over 30 times.”

Ajoy attests to the increased mobility that ASA engenders for both its guest performers and for the callers themselves. “You can read newspapers to get to know about artists in India, or e-papers, or listen to recently released CDs or downloadable tracks. But here [on ASA], you’re able to know then and there what an artist is thinking or not thinking. And vice versa. Somewhere in some village in the United States, a man loves my songs. That is an incredible thing to hear! And I wouldn’t know otherwise. It is in this way that my popularity increases, and I get to know people. I get to know my audience and they become my friends...Back in the day the audience would scream at live shows – ‘sing this song!’ or ‘sing that song!’, but words didn’t reach as seamlessly as they do here [at the television studio].”

Ajoy continues on to speak about his experience through ASA as not just striving for liveness, but layered with interpersonal connections. He recalls, “...A man from New York who had watched my program on ASA a while back called the [television] station and got my number

from them. He called my house in Kolkata a few days later and found out that I was staying in New York for a week at the time. He got the number of the house where I was staying and called here and was so excited to talk to me. He goes, ‘get over here immediately! We are such big fans of your singing,’ this and that. And it became such that I’ve stayed at his family’s New York house three or four times after that incident.” Ajoy’s experience uses music for very lived dimensions. His voice that was projected through technological mediation not only shaped what Kunreuther labeled as [quote] “fantasies of presence,” but his voice and presence on ASA facilitated a series of actions that resulted in a lasting friendship and transnational mobility for Ajoy.

The dialectics of Ajoy and Shreya’s dynamic musical careers are irrefutably shaped through gender, and through their gendered voices. They are both parents, yet Shreya’s assumed responsibility in her child’s life is far greater than Ajoy’s. Ajoy is able to seamlessly travel multiple times a year, with little familial or societal disapproval. Shreya’s voice symbolizes delicate beauty, a sense of “home,” a maternal pull to the homeland. However, her physical mobility is limited by these very characteristics. Her role as a mother is used against her – limiting her mobility.

Although Ajoy travels abroad more than Shreya, Shreya’s voice carries a different valence. Through shows like ASA – specifically the camera angles, stage production, and hosts – the feminine form is transnationally shot and “in dialogue with other forms and their attendant labors in their metacultural circulations” (Gray 177). The female voice is associated with forms such as the nation, the sentimental, the nostalgic, the maternal, the female warrior, the goddess, and more easily translatable internationally. This is due to its implicit associations to multiple metacultural forms that perform labors that are often perceived as feminine.

The aforementioned song, *Ogo tora ke jabi pare*, has been performed by many singers – Ajoy included. After a close listening, we can identify subtle differences between a female and male revoicing of this particular Rabindrasangeet.

*Ogo, tora ke jaabi pare  
Ami tori niye boshe achhi nodi kinaare.  
Opaarete upobone  
Kato Khela kato jane,  
E paarete **dhudhu moru** baari binaare.  
Ei bela bela aachhe, aye ke jaabi.  
Micche keno kaate kaal kato ki bhaabi.  
Surjo paate jaabe neme,  
Subatash jaabe theme,  
Kheya bandho joye jaabe sondhya-aandhare.*

Who wants to go to the other shore  
I sit ready at the riverbank with my boat.  
In the lush gardens on the other side  
So many people are frolicking  
This side is a dreary desert, thirsting for rain.  
The day is not over yet, come those who wish  
Why waste your time deliberating.  
The sun will set soon  
The ideal wind will soon stop  
The pier will soon close at dusk.<sup>55</sup>

In terms of pronunciation, both Shreya and Ajoy’s renditions are similar – very standardized and *Rabindrik*. Their *O*’s are rounded, the *S*’s (pronounced *sh*) are enunciated. In Shreya’s rendition, she incorporates an audible pause after *kinaare* and *binaare*, during which the tabla stops playing for a pulse as well. Ajoy keeps the tempo going and there is no audible pause in his rendition. A particular phrase where I detected an affective difference was “*dhudhu moru*.” The “dreary desert” is sung by Shreya with an almost lamenting affect, haunting and sad. She extends the *moru* for a pulse longer before continuing with *baari*. Ajoy does not halt during that phrase but rather sings straight through. He does however incorporate more vocal melisma during

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<sup>55</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.

“*jaabi*,” and “*aandhare*.” Shreya’s rendition seems to stray away from vocal melisma. She extends some phrases, and uses her vocal timbre to instill affect into her performance.

I use Ajoy and Shreya’s stories to highlight two aspects of performance. The gendered dialectics of Ajoy and Shreya’s professional careers are deep and varied, but their creation of culture through labor – is comparable. How does their particular brand of border crossing maintain tradition and create a flow of cultural economy? Do consumers of their art understand and value the physical labor that goes into this flow? Whether on television, at a live performance venue, or in the living room of a Bengali-American immigrant, Ajoy and Shreya’s art is in demand for pleasure, and for a survival tool. Song requests from viewers, audience members, or friends carry with them the burden of being the solution (however temporary) for alienation, isolation, and nostalgia, and overseas performers like Ajoy and Shreya contribute to the fabric of social and cultural life in the United States by providing that solution. Alex Chávez writes on the unnoticed artistic labor of Mexican migrants in Texas: “...Musicians play at family gatherings and celebrations – weddings birthdays, and baptisms – ...Still, in what is supposedly the live-music capital of the world, much of their artistic labor goes unnoticed...save for the sake of consumption” (208). The labor of traveling across the world, jetlag, the temporary separation from family, extreme difference in climate, and staying for days at a time in a new house, only to return back across the world a few days later remains invisible.

The second aspect of performance that I wish to highlight is the relationship between the materiality of sound and the body. When Ajoy stays at a friend’s house in the United States, his free evenings inevitably consist of impromptu performances and idle chats in the living room. His host will bring his harmonium up from the basement, and put water on the stove for tea. Gossip is a large part of these evenings. How a certain elderly singer behaved at her latest

concert, or which sweetshop in Kolkata closed down for good. For Ajoy's host, these evenings serve as an elixir, tangible moments which he can call upon in the future when pangs of nostalgia and melancholy hit. I quote Chávez at length on this notion:

“The self is both emplaced and embodied, and the two are bound through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1968) notion of reversibility. In this way, the primary somatic medium of being in place is the body. But the body not only reaches places but also bears the traces of the places it has known – these residues are laid down and emplotted within the body, and this incorporation ultimately shapes both body and place, for places are themselves altered by our having been in them. At last, these embodied memories of place ring out, especially during commemorative and performative moments. Thus, places move physically, which is to say that they travel over distances (with the body), and they move emotionally, which is to say that they affect us deeply...so that we are bodily aware, changed, and reconfigured” (234-35).

Shreya and Ajoy's physical presence in a Bengali immigrant's home carries with it “an embodied archive of crossing” (Chávez 235). The sounds of their voice and the words of their songs seem to pull forward imagined places and forgotten pasts. Their bodies have crossed borders, and with them the sounds of their voices. Their voices carry melodies of memory through songs and talk.



Ajoy at a performance in a basement in Queens, NY



Ajoy singing one evening in a living room in Brooklyn, NY

The performances on ASA allow Bengali immigrants to be a part of the cultural realm of Bengal, however briefly. The conversations that take place between the performer and the host, or between the accompanying instrumentalists and the host, contribute to an imagined world in which the viewer can place herself. Furthermore, not only does ASA build a bridge between the television studio and the viewer, it formulates a network amongst its viewers as well. The mere act of listening to a live viewer from Kolkata or Dhaka becomes an intimate experience for Bengalis living in the diaspora. The caller's neighborhood, colloquial language and familiar anecdotes are among some of the attractions for viewers in the diaspora.

**Caller (Medinipur, West Bengal):** Hello Mallika! I watch this show every morning, and it is with your beautiful face that I can start my day.

**Host (Mallika):** Thank you, thank you! And good morning!

**Viewer (living room, New York):** [talking to her spouse in the living room] Oh his accent! He is definitely from Medinipur. Or could he be from Purulia? Nope, they just put it on the screen. Medinipur. He sounds exactly like our neighbor back in Behala. Remember him?



When a caller's voice comes through the television, his or her name is projected on the screen along with the place they're calling from. When the callers are from Kolkata, their respective neighborhoods are mentioned. When they call from other states in India, the city is named. When they call from the United States, the state is named. Again, we see this process of place-naming and place making. The familiarity of specific accents in Kolkata and its surrounding townships, helps build immigrant identities that are saturated with memories, and imagined places (even if these townships are real) come to occupy and help organize the space in which these Bengalis construct and maintain their identities. I argue that interpellation occurs through the act of ordinary talk in the living rooms of Bengali immigrants. Through discussing the actual performances on ASA, and also the conversations that ensue between the host and the performer, the host and the caller, or the performer and the caller, ordinary talk becomes a crucial layer of sociality. As Fox states, "Deeply naturalized as practice, talk... frequently produces critical reflexivity into the textuality of social life" (44). "The music of language and languages of and about music are equally salient in processes of poeticization, entextualization, de- and renaturalization, and in the modeling of social conflict and solidarity through talk's sociability" (45).

Tropes of home, nation, and country were complicated for Tagore. He distinguished the terms *des* and *swades* as country and my own country, locating the imaginative power in the Sanskrit reflexive pronoun *swa*. In Tagore's eyes, the reflexivity of self-making itself becomes country-making. "...The relation of every inhabitant of the country with the *swades* must be personal and quotidian," states Chatterjee (2011, 104). *Swadeshi*, or that which is of the country of one's own, is therefore a kind of imaginative practice that is at once deeply personal and inherently dependent on collective will, on society. Rabindranath Tagore's poetry, particularly its

presence within diasporic Bengali communities, thus becomes the representative of an entire culture in which spirituality and rationality do not need to be juxtaposed, where “learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion” (Yeats 1913 Intro of *Gitanjali*) enable the masses to access the knowledge and faith of the scholar. This personal, but also collective, connection to home is what shows like ASA and other transnational mass media facilitate and build upon.

### **Sriparna’s Home**

*After driving an hour to Edison, New Jersey, I was able to identify her house by the slew of cars parked in and around her driveway. I opened the unlocked front door, took my sandals off, and put them by the cluster of shoes in the hallway. As I turned and headed down the carpeted staircase into the basement, the first thing that caught my eye was a large framed picture collage hanging on the wall. It was made of photographs of Rabindranath Tagore’s face at various ages, along with clippings of his handwriting. I walked further and heard the delicate sounds of someone tuning a harmonium in the large room at the end of the hall. I entered the room and noticed an old treadmill in one corner, and a papier-Mache hut occupying another. The hut was decorated with cardboard cutouts of village women, adorned in the style of Bengali painter Jamini Roy (1887-1972). The plump sari-clad women with Roy’s characteristic large almond-shaped eyes gave the otherwise American basement a particular Bengali identity; that, and the fourteen Bengalis gathered there, all rehearsing for their upcoming performance at the North American Bengali Conference, or NABC, in Atlantic City, New Jersey.*

These Hindu Bengali immigrants from Kolkata and its surrounding townships gathered in Sriparna’s home for an afternoon rehearsal. They have settled in the tristate area, and have gotten to know one another through their mutual love for Bengali music. The conductor of this group was Ananya, a forty-something year old woman who has been learning Rabindrasangeet from

Rezwana Choudhury Bannya for the last ten years. Bannya comes to New Jersey from Kolkata twice a year to hold classes in person, and for the rest of the year she conducts classes online. Her more advanced students hold classes of their own, passing along Bannya's specific pedagogical techniques.

Throughout the entire rehearsal, I mostly watched Juhi. She was sitting off to the side with her three-year-old son Neil. Her husband Roy was in the singing group. Roy and Juhi came to the United States from Kolkata in 2002 and 2004 respectively. Juhi talks to me about their son. "He doesn't sing yet, but knows so many songs by heart. He'll request songs to his father. His father bathes him every night and sings to him as he massages his arms and legs with oil." Neil's first exposure to Rabindrasangeet has been during bath time. Roy says, "As a first-time father, I don't really know what I'm doing. I sing Neil songs that I like, and repeat a certain few every day. I don't know, maybe they'll stick? People ask me why I don't sing Neil more 'simple' Rabindrasangeets, but I sing him songs that I like. *Ei monihar amay nahi saaje* ("This bejeweled chain is no match for me"), *Ami srabono akashe oi* ("In the monsoon sky"). And when I'm massaging his little limbs, I sing *Hridoy mandrilo domoro guru guru* ("In my heart beats the sonorous roll of drums"). The beats to the song go nicely with what we are doing!"

I elaborate on parenting in the Bengali diaspora in the following chapter, specifically the anxieties that accompany musical education and language retention at home.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has made clear that tradition is created and maintained through multivariate ways of living and engaging with Rabindrasangeet. The communities described here are dynamic and constantly morphing, and each manifestation of voice they use raises specific questions about modes of presence. Modes of consciousness and power are presented through the use of

YouTube and simulcast television, as well as face to face interactions. From Biswas's live concerts and Mallik's pedagogical radio class in India, to Shreya and Ajoy's physical presence in the United States, voice remains constant. And it is this voice, through its multiple manifestations, that keeps tradition alive.

### **Chapter 3. *What's in a Name? Ambivalence and Friction in "Second-Generation" Bengali America***

*"While in some ways my name is one of the smallest kernels of who I am, I now know that something far more furtive is at play when one's name is misheard. The act of mishearing is not benign but ultimately silencing. A quash so subtle that – and here's what I'm still working out – it develops into a feeling of invalidation."* – Durga Chew Bose, "Too Much and Not the Mood"

I am named after Nandini, the heroine in Rabindranath Tagore's 1923 play *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleander). In the tale, Nandini is a symbol of love and beauty, the universal woman who is born free, and a metaphor for freedom and revolutionary zeal. She seeks to tear down the barrier behind which the stubborn and greedy king of Yaksapuri has secluded himself. With a furious love for mankind, she tries to beckon everybody in Yaksapuri – from the king to the pundit – in an attempt to rip them away from their mechanical lives. In the end, alongside heartbreak as Nandini's lover is sacrificed at the foot of a machine, she defeats the mindless cycle of the lifeless kingdom. *Raktakarabi* is Tagore's protest against totalitarianism. His depiction of the material greedy king who is afraid to come out of his dark chamber, and the reduction of the king's subjects to cogs in his wheel of exploitation, in many ways prophesized what was to come during World War II.

I feature my own lived experience in this chapter. I begin by writing about my unique upbringing in America – my cultural associations and the joys and friction that came with them. My journey of weaving my interior and exterior worlds together – from what anxieties and tensions triggered it, to how I have attempted to navigate through it – builds the crux of this chapter. My ethnography intentionally jumps from America to Kolkata and back again, in order to animate my mobility between my two worlds. I write about my travels to Kolkata, and my own relationship with Rabindrasangeet and Bengali culture when I live in my parents' homeland

for weeks at a time. My experiences of border-crossing shape my identity as a second-generation Bengali-American, and strengthen my affective ties with Rabindrasangeet.

I have contemplated my associations to the two places where I have spent most of my childhood and adolescence, piecing together my identity, and constructing affect theory of my own. The affect I write about has an energetic dimension. It can enhance or deplete, it can be projected or absorbed. Theresa Brennan (2004) writes on the thingness of affect. "...Even if I am picking up on your affect, the linguistic and visual content, meaning the thoughts I attach to that affect, remain my own: they remain the product of the particular historical conjunction of words and experiences I represent" (7). The affect that permeates this chapter in particular is transmitted through travel, through gift giving, through marriage, and through loss.

In this chapter I draw on the stories of other second generation immigrants such as myself who have had to navigate similar tensions in identity building and relationship making. I ultimately argue that the new worlds that are created through friction are evocations *of* tradition. Kevin Fellezs (2019) writes intimately on Hawaiian belonging and the concept of tradition, and the commodification and mobility of Hawaiian music, specifically slack key guitar, in relationship to social concerns and political aspirations. What specifically resonates with my work is his analysis of diasporic identity and where it fits into discussions of indigeneity and cultural performance and performativity. He asks, "How can one 'touch the 'áina' if born, raised, and living 'off-island'?" (3). Fellezs continues, "I am interested in unraveling how 'insiders' are produced in contemporary slack key around the transPacific. How are various boundaries articulated, mapped, negotiated, trespassed, made inclusive or exclusive, or otherwise constructed?" (6).

I build on the stories of women and men, but put emphasis on the multifaceted bonds between women – mothers and daughters, aunts and nieces, friends, and cousins – and the diverse roles that women play in society. Womanhood and motherhood are constantly used as indexes of nationalism, patriotism, and love, and a benchmark for propriety. The phrases “mother tongue,” and “motherland” symbolize much more than the importance of a mother. They place a woman’s body at the forefront of every conversation, and involve “the commoditization of women and the troping of the feminine” (Guha-Thakurta 1991). Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes about the all-pervasiveness of the woman’s image particularly in South Asian calendar art. She argues that the “central” role of women as icons result in the reduction of women to passive objects of display and appropriation and to signifiers of broader notions of culture, tradition, and nation. It is these last three tropes that I expand upon. Veena Das (2006) and Nayanika Mookherjee (2015), through their writings on The Partition, elaborate on the firm entrenchment of a woman’s body and its commodification within a dominant patriarchal discourse. Das writes that, “The rhetoric strategy of focusing on abducted and raped women to the exclusion of the sexual violation of men allowed the nation to construct itself as a masculine nation” (13). The protection of women – essentially as sexual and reproductive beings, and not as citizens – resulted in no room for women to act autonomously (Chatterjee 1989).

The women in the following stories have layers to their identities. They embody different voices and roles in their lives. The weight of tradition that falls on them is not insubstantial. It results from the dominant patriarchal discourse that has upheld women as the beacon of tradition, but kept their roles passive. I continue the scholarship that challenges this by centering stories of women told by women, and emphasizing their roles as active and complex.

### **Growing Up in Bengali-America**

My upbringing as an American-born, second-generation Bengali immigrant was separated into two identities: my Bengali identity, replete with Satyajit Ray films and their dialogue references, rice and fish curry that I ate with my hands licked clean, and a vast knowledge of Bengali songs absorbed from my musical parents – and my American identity. I devoured every Roald Dahl book, crooned to 112’s *Peaches and Cream*, choreographed dances with my Filipina neighbors to Ace of Base’s *The Sign*, and was an avid offensive striker on my school and travel soccer teams. I learned to live in both worlds simultaneously, but separately. I did not speak a single word of English as soon as I stepped into my house. I only spoke in English to my mom on the phone in front of my friends, resorting to Bengali when I needed to negotiate a later curfew or express my frustration at her rules. I looked forward to the weekends when my parents or I had rehearsals for our local Bengali association’s cultural functions. I loved being in the room when my parents and their friends practiced their repertoire of season-appropriate songs for the upcoming show, and sometimes even joined in. At home, I re-watched the 1953 knee-slapping Bengali comedy film *Sharey Chuattor* with my parents. I requested my mom to cook particular Bengali delicacies that I loved, I played Bengali vocabulary-building games with my dad, and had dreams where I was being serenaded by Bengali singer Nachiketa. My school friends and neighbors were never privy to any of these activities.

In high school, I made more South Asian friends. They were mostly Punjabi and Gujarati, and had come from middle schools where they had South Asian friends of their own. The way my name was pronounced in school changed from my American, and notably non-South Asian, childhood’s “Nan-dee-knee” to my adolescent self’s very *desi* Bollywood-ized “Nun-di-knee.” The hegemony of the Hindi language and Bollywood assumed a prominent presence in my social life, and thus pronunciations and vocabulary shifted accordingly. I learned about Jaya



Bachchan's character named Nandini in the 2001 movie *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, and I interspersed Hindi words that I had never heard before into my English slang. Hindi films offered me a hip resource from popular culture that helped me create a symbolic ethnic identity. It was "used as a boundary marker in the politics of authenticity" (Maira 122). This version of authenticity was completely different than what I experienced in my home. Prior to high school, I had watched all of two Bollywood movies. In my household, the word "Bollywood" was associated with the frivolity of Indian culture, and the problematic stronghold that the industry had on the South Asian arts. I never immersed myself in Bollywood films, mostly because I never genuinely found a penchant for them. However, I kept performing for my friends in school. I quickly learned the names of specific popular movies, observed my friends and followed their lead in conversations. These Bollywood films served as "repositories of [an] ethnic authenticity" to me not "because they represent[ed] 'illusions' of pure, discrete cultural traditions" (Maira 125), but because I could blend in with a popular version of ethnic authenticity. I had friends whom I could share jokes with on another level, while retaining an ethnic difference from my non-South Asian friends.

I recognize now that having the opportunity to discern between valences of Indian pronunciation outside of my home is indeed a privilege because I live in the metropolis of New York City. I have the exposure and freedom to identify with different groups of South Asians, and I have the luxury of differentiating my Bengali pronunciation at home from my *desi* pronunciation in public. My life outside my home does not have to be dominated by only a Caucasian or Euro-centric narrative, but rather I encounter levels of South Asian linguistic and cultural hegemony.

As Sunaina Maira states in her work on Indian American youth culture, "...ethnic identity is often highlighted in adolescence due to transitions into new social contexts that prompt new, or refined, questions regarding one's position in social structures and relationships" (2002, 25). I owned my brownness outside of my home beginning in high school – I proudly wore saris during our high school's "culture day," and choreographed Bhangra routines for our annual SING! performance. I told my friends about Durga Puja, and how I was going to be busy every evening for an entire week in October because of it. I even remember proudly touching a book to my head in prayer after I mistakenly stepped on it. These instances of *displaying* my Indianness became moments of pride and solidarity with my new friends. Maira writes about cultural shows, and performances that incorporate instances of cultural nostalgia. "These shows are a site for packaging and performing cultural nostalgia," she says. "...but in performing the dialectic of closeness and distanciation, they also highlight some of the contradictions of the ideology of ethnic authenticity, especially when situated in the context of ethnic student organizations and the Indian American youth subculture at large" (120-121).

Still, my deep love for all things Bengali – my family's particular brand of Bengali – was not fully shared with these friends. The pathos-filled Rabindrasangeet, the art films of Ray and Ghatak, and the hot and sticky non-air conditioned months visiting Kolkata were reserved for only me and my parents. Furthermore, no one outside of my Bengali family called me "Non-diknee," the pronunciation that was intended for my name. Tagore's intention.

It was only after I got married that my interior world of Bengali film, food, music, and language began mixing with my kin. I found a renewed, and a more public, pride in my Bengaliness, which I learned came from a place of anxiety. It was not superficial pride, but rather one that resulted from the fear that my non-Bengali husband would not fully know who I

was and what I valued, or that my future children would not have the deep love for the Bengali language that I grew up with.

### **Traveling to Kolkata**

As I mentioned in chapter one, my identity as an American-born Bengali is accompanied by a particular brand of mobility. I travel to Kolkata almost every year to visit my extended family, and am able to bring my American experiences into those few weeks in Kolkata. Consequently, I also bring back my experiences in Kolkata to my life in America. My own sense of self, my sense of Bengaliness, is shaped not only by the hybridity of my life in America, but also by these trips, and the particular way in which I am able to nurture my culture.

In Kolkata, my mom and I laugh when a shopkeeper sings, "*Oi malatilata dolay*" ("There is the swaying honeysuckle") to us as we walk by his flower stall, and we groan when "*Je chhilo amar swapanacharini*" ("The one who was in my dreams") blasts on static-filled speakers at midnight. We smile when the Uber we clamber into on a rainy day has on radio station Mirchi 98.3 which plays "*Aji godhuli lagane, ei badal gagane*" ("In the twilight of a drizzling sky") and we roll our eyes when the political party in office uses "*Oh amar desher mati*" ("Oh, the soil of my country") to promote their version of nationalism on every television channel. My affective ties with each Rabindrasangeet is particular to my experience as a Bengali-American, and particular to my experiences of maneuvering in this world. My relationship to public speakers, the acoustic scaffolding (Hirschkind 2006) of Kolkata, and even to the weather in Kolkata have been shaped by my American upbringing. My urge to sing "Rain, rain go away, come again another day," as opposed to "*Pagla hawar badal dine, pagal amar mon jege othe*" ("On this wild, windy cloudy day, my own wild mind awakes"), is not lost on me. Something as ordinary

as rain is regarded as a nuisance in America, a hurdle that has interrupted the fun, whereas Rabindranath's words highlight the blessings of rain, the new possibilities that it heralds.

I begin the following section by writing in depth about the Kenduli Mela on the outskirts of Shantiniketan, West Bengal, and the Bengali middle class gaze.



A typical living room setup in West Bengal – Sri Ramakrishna on the left, and a dear ancestor on the right, as Rabindranath Tagore takes the center.

### **Kenduli and the Idyllic Past**

The Kenduli Mela (also called the Joydev Mela) occurs annually in the township of Kenduli, an almost three-hour train ride from Kolkata, and a short taxi ride from Shantiniketan. Usually in mid-January, it is an outdoor music festival that attracts Baul musicians and enthusiasts from all over the world. Oxford Music Online writes about the Joydev Mela at Kenduli as one of the most popular religious fairs in Bengal. Indianholiday.com describes it as “most well-known for gathering the Bauls, a group of mystic minstrels...The Kenduli Mela in Birbhum gives you the wonderful opportunity to hear the music of these wandering minstrels who believe in the

simplicity of love and life. You are sure to be impressed by their magnetic performances.”<sup>56</sup> The website consolidates travel and boarding options, so tourists can plan their entire trip on the same website. It also mentions the Poush Mela, held at Tagore’s school in Shantiniketan, which provides a slightly different environment than the one at Kenduli. “The performances at this event [in Shantiniketan] tend to be folklorized, with scheduled times, a performance platform and a largely educated and middle-class audience,” the website adds.

In the winter of 2007, on our annual trip to Kolkata, my family and I attended the Kenduli Mela. We were traveling on the Shantiniketan Express train from Howrah Station to Bolpur, West Bengal. My mother and I were accompanied by her older brother, his wife, and my mother’s older sister, all of whom live permanently in Kolkata, and have children that live in America. We did not plan our trip through a travel website, because we planned to stay in my aunt’s summer home in Shantiniketan. My uncle booked our train tickets, and also arranged for a private car to pick us up from the train station, and take us to and from the actual festival grounds from the house. During the two-and-a-half-hour train journey, we snacked on *jhal muri*, drank tea from small paper cups, and bought trinkets from hawkers that we would surely never use. My mother and I silently waited for the main attractions – traveling Bauls who sang on the train. We saw a total of four performances. The performing Bauls depend on leisure travelers such as ourselves for alms to survive. They capitalize on train journeys during this time of the year, when Shantiniketan and its surrounding villages turn into more of a tourist attraction, and affluent Bengalis from urban centers like Kolkata come to gain a deeper understanding of their Bengali roots.

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<sup>56</sup> <https://www.indianholiday.com/fairs-and-festivals/west-bengal/kenduli-mela.html>

Baul music has been incorporated into an officialized discourse aimed at constructing “The” cultural symbol of Bengali identity. Particularly, Rabindranath Tagore’s deep involvement with the genre (as mentioned above) has helped it fall into place as a cultural marker. Baul music and Rabindrasangeet express a nostalgia for a provincial lifestyle, projecting a romanticized idyllic vision of the past. From the 1880s onward, Rabindranath in his essays on *Lok-sahitya* (Folk literature) in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, called the Bengali village “the Bengali heart” (663-734). This was a land of arcadian and pastoral beauty overflowing with the affective sentiments of the soul. Middle-class tourists chase this feeling, this nostalgic vision, to the countryside. Philip Bohlman (1988) refers to an ideologization of folk music, the mobilization of tradition in the service of nation building. He writes about 18<sup>th</sup> century European anti-modernist Romantics that were in serve of newly forming nationalist modernities. “Both Enlightenment and early Romantic writers often portrayed folk music as a bridge between the natural and the civilized worlds...For Herder and the subsequent generations of writers on folk music, it was the language of the soul or the heart; folk music encapsulated the cultural core before society complicated it” (54).

I argue that middle and upper-middle class Bengalis who travel to the countryside in order to get a taste of their cultural roots act as gatekeepers for the expression of what they consider authentic Bengali culture. Raymond Williams, in *Marxism and Literature* (1977), writes on selective tradition as an expressively embodied and deliberate process of legitimating the hegemonic order. Baul music and Rabindrasangeet serve as markers that can and have been used by affluent Bengalis to symbolically mediate and reconstitute subjectivities. The interplay that exists here between tradition and modernity poses some problems. Who is allowed to use Rabindrasangeet and Baul music as symbols of their cultural memory? Does it remain in the

hands of the families that are able to travel “back” to where it all began? Those who gaze at the music of the past, but then return back to their modern lives? Or are these genres representative of a subaltern subjectivity that is key in self-making, always present, always evolving?

In her work on nostalgia, Svetlana Boym (2001) is concerned with the interrelationship between the inner space of an individual’s psyche and collective remembrance. She categorizes two forms of nostalgia, tendencies or ways of giving shape and meaning to longing: Restorative and Reflective.<sup>57</sup> Restorative nostalgia, Boym writes, proposes to rebuild the lost home. It characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, manifesting itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past. Reflective nostalgia dwells in longing or loss, “the imperfect process of remembrance” (4). It lingers on ruins, and in the dreams of another place and time. Above, I have explored two modes of travel. One from the United States to Kolkata, and the other from Kolkata to Shantiniketan. Both instances of mobility carry with them modes of restorative and reflective nostalgia. Kolkata and Shantiniketan serve as reconstructions of monuments of the past, evoking a national past and future. They also carry the patina of time and history, and Boym’s dreams of another place and another time.

### **A Gift of Rabindrasangeet**

Throughout my life, I have used Rabindrasangeet as a way to retain a connection with my elders. It has served as an inter-generational tool through which to convey unspoken messages, and ephemeral feelings. Specifically, Rabindrasangeet has helped me maintain relationships with relatives who live in India, even when I cannot physically travel there. I recall a certain experience. It was my aunt’s birthday in India, and we had a close relationship. I wanted to send

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<sup>57</sup> Modes of nostalgia have been analyzed at length by South Asian female scholars such as Veena Das, Nayanika Mookherjee, and Anasua Basu Raychaudhury to name a few.

her something special. Something to prove that we still shared the same deep connection we had when I was younger, when I would live with her for weeks at a time in Kolkata, and passersby would ask if I was her elder daughter. My own mother was not with me in India at the time, as she did not have enough vacation days to travel. I felt a connection to my aunt, one that was strengthened through our love for music.

My aunt's entire life revolves around Rabindrasangeet. She was a part of Kanika Bandopadhyay, Maya Sen, and Subinoy Roy's lineages, and teaches students of her own. She received her Ph.D. from Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata, where she studied the history of Brahmosangeet and Rabindrasangeet. Our bond revolved around our love for music. During my stays with her family, I would sift through her cassette tape collection and be the DJ for the afternoon. I would play song after song for her, paying close attention to her reactions. I would look for a hint of joy in her eyes, if she looked up from what she was doing to smile at me, or if she started singing the song quietly to herself. Many of the original cassette tapes in her collection were copied onto blank tapes for our home in New York, the very tapes that are mentioned above. We played a game where the goal was to guess which song was about to play based on the first couple seconds of intro music. Some evenings when she taught her singing classes, she would ask me to join. When I sang in front of her and her students, I saw her swell with pride. "Your voice is so pure," she would say. "I love listening to it."

In my Brooklyn home, I considered possible gifts for her and came up with an idea – I would record myself singing my aunt's favorite songs. My voice could carry the words and melodies that connected us, and she would have a tangible piece of technology to access my voice – and thus our memories – whenever she wanted. I knew my aunt's sound system in Kolkata had a cassette player, and so I bought some blank cassette tapes and planned to record myself singing



three Rabindrasangeets for her. My father’s friend and performer, Ajoy, would be coming to New York during Durga Puja that year, and I could send the cassette tapes back to Kolkata with him. The problem was, we no longer owned a cassette player. My father called one of his friends, Shafiqul Islam, a Bangladeshi man who was an avid singer in the New York Bangladeshi community, and asked if he could help us. Shafiqul said his karaoke machine would do the trick. “Come over tomorrow night and we can record it,” he said over the phone.

What began as a gracious favor turned into a social gathering. When my parents and I arrived at Shafiqul’s house the next evening, two other families we knew were also there. The microphone and karaoke machine were ready for me in the living room, but I was too nervous to sing in front of everybody. I asked to bring the microphone into the bedroom. There, alone with the microphone, its chord snaking under the closed door, and my father’s copy of the *Gitabitan*, I sang three songs for my aunt.

### **Adhara madhuri**

Adhara madhuri dhorechi chhandabandhane. An evasive beauty is caught in my lyrical beats.

O je shudhur prater pakhi

Like a bird from a faraway dawn,

**Gahe shudhur raater gaan.**

**That sings of only of night.**

Bigoto basanter ashokraktarage

Red from the Ashoka flowers of the bygone spring

or rangin pakha,

Tinge her colored wings.

Tari jhara phuler gandho or antare dhaka.

Her heart is filled with the fragrance of shedding flowers

Ogo bideshini,

Oh foreign dame,

Tumi dako orey naam dhore,

Summon her by her true name,

O je tomari chena.

For you know her.

Tomari desher akash o je jani,

She is familiar with your skies,

Tomar raater tara,

Your night stars,

Tomari bokulboner gaane o daye shara –

She answers to the tune of your fragrant woods

Naache tomari konkoneri taale.

And dances to the rhythm of your bells.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.

## Hridoyer e kul

Hridoyer e kul o kul, du kul bheshe jaye  
Haye sajani  
Uthale nayanbari.

Both banks of my heart are flooded  
Oh dear friend  
My tears are overflowing.

Je dike cheye dekhi ogo sakhi,  
**Kichu ar chinite na pari.**

Whichever way I look, my friend,  
**I cannot recognize a thing.**

Parane porieache taan,  
Bharu nadite ashe baan,  
Ajike ki ghor tufan sajani go,  
Bandho ar bandhite nari.

There is a tug at my heart,  
The river swells in high tide,  
There is such a tempest today my friend,  
The dams cannot contain it.<sup>59</sup>

## Nai ba ele

Nai ba ele jodi samay nai,  
**Khanek eshe bolo na go “jai jai jai.”**

You may as well not come if you haven't the time  
**Rather than stay for brief and say “I must leave.”**

Amar prane ache jani  
Seemabiheen gabher baani,

I have deep inside my soul  
A limitless abyss of words that grow,

Tomar chirondiner kathakhani bolte  
Bolte jeno pai.

Eternal are those conversations  
With you I wish to share.<sup>60</sup>

I chose to sing these three songs because they were the first ones that came to my mind. My father introduced each of the songs to me throughout my childhood, and he loved them. His familiarity and love influenced mine. I was introduced to the first and third songs through renditions by Shantideb Ghosh (1910-1999), and the second song through Suchitra Mitra's rendition. Ghosh and Mitra's voices carried the melodies in my mind – melodies that were bright, mellifluous, and full of affect. Despite the overall joyous emotions that the songs bring to me, there are particular lines (highlighted in the above transcriptions) that stand out to me in a

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<sup>59</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.

<sup>60</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.

more melancholic way. Hearing them sung, and singing them myself, brings a lump in my throat. Though the lines are all different in meaning, they are each performed with a similar melisma.

I chose each song primarily based on its attractive melody, but the third song's lyrics explicitly portray my feelings toward my aunt. "I have deep inside my soul a limitless abyss of words that grow." That is exactly what I wished to gift my aunt – eternal conversations encased in a cassette tape.

I knew almost all the words by heart, but felt comforted by the physical weight of the *Gitabitan* in my lap. I felt emotional and excited because my wish, my idea, was becoming reality. In my act of singing these songs, alone in a bedroom that was not mine, I felt as if I was speaking in a secret language to my aunt. In that moment, Rabindranath's words were my own. I used his lyrics to signify a specifically generational – and also gendered – position: that of a niece expressing her love to her aunt. Sung in my own voice, the lyrics outlined the ambiguity of my position. As an American-born Bengali, I was drawing from my ancestors' experiences with song and language. I was drawing most immediately from my father's love of Rabindrasangeet, Shantideb Ghosh, and Suchitra Mitra. My experiences of listening to these songs for the first time with him played in my mind. At the same time, I had my own relationships to these songs, and autonomously chose them for their impact on my own lived experience. The specific lines in each song that hit me with melancholy do not affect my father in the same way, and thus I came to regard these songs as my *own* favorite songs.

I now turn to write about Kamala, Konya, and Neil – three second-generation immigrants like me who have been surrounded by Rabindranath Tagore's influence. I write about their own experiences with Bengali music, and with Rabindranath, and how their voices reflect ways of living in the United States.



Images of Rabindranath Tagore abound in Kolkata. Clockwise from top left: living room, Presidency College hallway, living room, living room.

## **Kamala**

My cousin Kamala was born in Kolkata and moved to the United States in 2012 after completing her Master's degree in International Relations at Jadavpur University. She worked for an information technology company in Orlando, Florida for four years before moving to New Jersey. Kamala is five years older than me. We saw each other before she moved to the United States on my annual trips to Kolkata, but our relationship blossomed after she moved closer to me. She is only one of two cousins I have in the United States. Kamala and I talk to each other in Bengali, but send text messages in a mix of Bengali and English.

Music has always been a central part of Kamala's life. In Kolkata, she was part of an all-women band called *Maadal Lokganer Dol*, along with her mother, younger sister, and four other Bengali women. This band is still active in West Bengal. They sing rural Bengali songs and perform all over the country, traveling to remote villages to sing at outdoor festivals and

makeshift indoor auditoriums. Kamala continues to sing in America. She specializes in the musical genres of rural Bengal such as Bhaowaiyya, Baul, and Bhatiali, but also sings Rabindrasangeet, Nazrulgeeti, and *Adhunik*. Kamala made it a point to join singing groups as soon as she moved to the United States. First in Florida and now in New Jersey, she believes that being an active member in these groups provides her with the emotional support and happiness she needs to thrive as a Bengali woman in the United States. She elaborates, “Without this outlet [of singing in a group], I don’t think I would be alive. Singing and performing is familiar to me. It gives me comfort, and helps me feel connected to my mom and sister even when I live so far away. I would not have survived a lot of personal hurdles after my move to the United States if I didn’t have music to turn to.”

Not only has music served as a connection to her family, it has given Kamala an identity to be proud of in the United States. She periodically posts audio tracks on Facebook, where she sings Bengali songs that are either appropriate for the season – for example, songs of monsoon on rainy days, or devotional songs during Durga Puja – or songs that she has written herself. Her family in India are able to listen to her singing voice through these Facebook posts and comment immediately. Her friends all over the United States are also able to identify Kamala’s voice and appreciate her talent.

Kamala has no intention of moving back to India. She has created a new home in the United States – a complicated one through joy and sorrow – that is more than just an imaginary of her homeland. Kamala’s notion of “home” is sonorously imagined and sustained through singing groups and through social media. The rehearsals, the post-performance get-togethers, her online presence through Facebook and the comments she receives, are all examples of her diasporic experience from the micro-level.

## Konya

I met Konya in 2018 through my cousin Kamala. At age 22, Konya was the youngest participant in Kamala's singing group in New Jersey. Although Konya did not have any solo parts, she was an important and enthusiastic member of the ensemble. The first time I saw her was during their singing group's rehearsal. She was sitting on the floor with the others toward the side of the group, and keeping steady rhythm with her hand on thigh. Her eyes did not waver from their group's leader, and she occasionally glanced at the lyric sheet on the floor in front of her. It was evident that Konya was not only a diligent performer, but enjoyed it as well. Her body language, the rhythm she kept with her hand and knee, the periodic swaying of her upper body, signified her embodiment of the art she was practicing.

Konya has been learning Rabindrasangeet from Pinky Ghoshal since she was six years old, and additionally takes Hindustani classical voice lessons from Partha Mukherjee. She learns from both teachers in-person, as they both hold classes in New Jersey or New York. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, she continued her classes virtually. Konya told me that she is on track to getting her fifth-year graduation from the *Bangiya Sangeet Academy* (The Bengali Music Academy). Her pride in her Bengali musical education is palpable through our conversations. She is invested in this part of her life. "When I was younger," she says, "conflicts would arise surrounding my music lessons. I was in chorus in school while simultaneously taking Rabindrasangeet lessons from Pinky Auntie. My parents would ask me why I was practicing my *a cappellas* so much, and not practicing for Pinky. I liked the fact that I could use my falsetto voice as a first soprano in chorus." Konya learned about different roles her voice could play in the different versions of her identity. I draw on Amanda Weidman's (2006) work on voice and gender here. Rather than considering the voice as a natural means of self-

expression, Weidman asks “how voices are constructed through practice and how music entails particular ideologies of voice” (12). Konya used the mechanics of her voice – her falsetto and her head voice – to portray her American identity and her Bengali identity respectively.

Konya told me about an upcoming performance she had with her singing group in Partha Mukherjee’s class. “Partha Kaku (uncle) uses Hindustani classical ragas to teach us Rabindrasangeet and Nazrulgeeti as well. We have our *Rabindrajayanti* concert on Saturday,” she says. “And Partha Kaku only just gave us the song list! I’ve heard all of the Rabindrasangeets before and I think most of our group has too, so we can manage. But Nazrulgeeti is so intricate! How do we sing *Bagichaay Bulbuli* as a group? I guess we’ll see on Saturday!” The way Konya speaks about her responsibilities for her singing classes shows me that she considers them an exciting endeavor. Her parents may have signed her up for classes when she was young, but she continues to devote her time and energy to them because she enjoys it.

Konya was born and raised in New Jersey and has a sister who is four years younger than her. At home, she speaks to her parents in Bengali, but tends to speak to her sister in English – with a smattering of Bengali words when needed. Konya tells me that she has friends from different ethnicities but tends to gravitate toward and befriend mostly South Asians. During her college years at Emory University, she was a board member of her Bengali Cultural Association. I turn to Maira’s (2002) work to discover “why the turn to ethnic identity and the emphasis on certain ideologies of Indianness become a common strategy for Indian American youth in the context of American college life” (14). When I asked Konya how she felt about her identity as a Bengali-American, in a sea of her other Indian-American classmates in college and friends in her professional life, her response was straightforward. Her own notion of cultural authenticity

resided in her relationship to the Bengali language. The South Asian friends she felt closest to were Bengali – Indian and Bangladeshi. They were able to share jokes on a more intimate level, and were drawn to each other’s similar upbringings. Her purposeful participation in all Bengali cultural functions – from *Rabindrajayanti* to *Pohela Falgun*<sup>61</sup> – point to her pride in Bengali as a language and as a culture as opposed to a national homeland.

Konya and I talked a little about her recent graduation from Emory University, her new job in Manhattan as a data analyst for Aetna, and the daunting process of finding a good roommate in the city. She echoed my concerns of name pronunciation, wishing that she started introducing herself as “Kohn-na” as opposed to the anglicized “Kon-ya”. But our conversations kept turning to music. We found joy in talking about movies we watched with our parents growing up, especially the ones with memorable soundtracks. She tells me, “I grew up watching the movie *Dadar Kirti* (1980), and ever since then I loved the song *Bodhu Kon Alo Laglo Chokhe* (What is this radiance touching your eyes, oh bride).” The song was written by Rabindranath Tagore, as a part of his 1892 dance-drama *Chitrangada*<sup>62</sup>. In Tagore’s original play, *Bodhu Kon Alo* was sung by Suchitra Mitra. Her unique voice – deep in timbre and full of melisma – carries the melodic and rhythmic range of the song. The frequent changes in tempo throughout the song attracted Konya to it, and she saw it as a worthy challenge to learn and love. Konya continues to tell me about other songs she enjoys. “My favorite Rabindrasangeet would

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<sup>61</sup> Pohela Falgun is the first day of Spring in the Bengali month of Falgun (around February 13). It is a festival celebrated in Bangladesh, and was started in 1991 by students of Dhaka University’s Faculty of Fine Arts.

<sup>62</sup> Tagore’s dance-drama is based on “Chitrangada” in the Hindu epic Mahabharata. The story in the Mahabharata is of a warrior princess from the kingdom of Manipur. Arjun, the third Pandava, meets Chitrangada during his exile and wants to marry her. Chitrangada’s father, the King of Manipur, initially disapproves. However, Arjun marries her under certain conditions that eventually leave Chitrangada alone with their child. Tagore’s rendition reflects his humanist and strong feminist outlook. Chitrangada, as a *Tagorean* heroine, chooses to establish her identity risking losing the man she desires. She was raised as a prince, but eventually breaks free of this bondage and asserts femininity.



have to be *Aha Tomar Shonge Praner Khela*. This song has a lot of vocal embellishment and I find myself singing it often to practice the particular ragas my teacher has introduced to me.” It’s a slower song, sung in Raga Piloo, and frequently performed with no rhythmic accompaniment. The vocal melismas in this song are drawn out, which is characteristic of Tagore’s *Tappa*-influenced songs. To me, this is an interesting choice for a favorite Rabindrasangeet. I tend to gravitate toward songs with a spritely tempo. Konya’s years of vocal training, her own interest in her voice, testing the limits at which it resides, and her own life experiences, influence her song choices.

Konya and I went to a Brooklyn Raga Massive show together where she also invited a Bengali coworker of hers to join. Her colleague, Arnav, moved to the United States from India two years ago. The musical experience was great, the food after was even better – we went to a Cuban sports bar located right under the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway for some Pernil sandwiches. A day later, I got a text from Konya. “...thank you for the food! I didn’t hear my colleague say thank you on his behalf too – so sorry for his lack of social etiquette on these things.” This short exchange between Konya and I strengthened our own relationship, but also set us apart from Arnav. Konya later explained to me how Arnav seemed to excuse himself from social niceties especially if he was hanging out with women. Her need to apologize on her male co-worker’s behalf displayed an affection toward me, and also a responsibility she had ingrained in her as a woman – she made sure my feelings weren’t hurt, and that Arnav’s behavior did not reflect poorly on her.

My conversations with Konya about Bengali movies and songs, about roommates, about a boy’s lack of etiquette, developed a “diasporic intimacy” between us. Svetlana Boym writes that diasporic intimacy is “not limited to the private sphere but reflects collective frameworks of

memory that encapsulate even the most personal of dreams” (1998, 500). She assigns an ephemeral quality to diasporic intimacy, a fleeting mutual understanding predicated on the faltering of normalized forms of diasporic longings. Her work critiques the kind of life a diasporic subject is supposed to have: one that revolves solely around homelands and origins. Rather, it opens new possibilities of relating to one another – like Konya and I.

## **Neil**

I spoke with Juhi and Roy almost two years after our first encounter at Sirparna’s New Jersey house, mostly to talk about their son Neil. Neil *Babu*, as they refer to him, sings so many songs now. Roy makes it a practice to sit at the harmonium with Neil, while they sing a few songs that they have practiced together many times. A video Juhi recently posted on her Facebook page shows Neil singing *Sunil Sagarer Shyamal Kinare* (“On the vivid shore of the blue ocean”) from memory. Roy is sitting with him on their bedroom floor in New Jersey and playing the harmonium while Neil sings. He helps Neil through the lyrics when he falters, and enthusiastically praises him throughout his performance. Neil’s four-year-old voice is excited and he loses his breath sometimes. Some of the words are difficult for him to enunciate, but he is able to carry the intricate melody throughout the entire song. The song itself is not sung at a fast tempo, and is quite a long song, but Neil does not lose focus. He has no distractions by his side – no toys, games, or technology. He repeats stanzas that are meant to be repeated, and sings them each with the same enthusiasm. Roy’s gaze travels only from the harmonium’s keys to Neil’s face. He is proud of his son, and enjoying his beautiful singing. This relationship is but another example of “...how ethnicity is imagined, practiced, continued...is worked out as much between ourselves and our communities as it is transmitted from one generation to another” (Lowe 1991).

Roy sings Rabindrasangeet and teaches his son because the songs exude magic for him. He puts it this way, “depending on how at peace you are with yourself, I think the ability of the song to create the same type of magic remains the same.” He hopes that his son feels this magic as well. I argue that Roy practices reflective nostalgia. He is flexible in his future with family and small son in the United States. As Boym (2001) writes, the focus of reflective nostalgia “is not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the mediation on history and passage of time” (49). Roy, like Kamala, is not vying to go back home to Kolkata. He savors the details and memorial signs of his childhood, he “cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space” (49). The ordinary and nuanced ways in which my interlocutors, Kamala, Konya, Neil (through Roy), and I incorporate Rabindrasangeet and Bengali music in their lives are all examples of reflective nostalgia. We are not trying to restore our past, nor are we defending our home against the onslaught of modernism. We embrace the cracks in history, the learning curves of new media, and the imperfections of translation that build our identities as Bengali-Americans.

All of us are impacted by the relationships we have fostered within our communities. Whether with our parents, our singing instructors, or extended family and friends, the networks we build as Bengali-Americans strengthen and complicate our senses of self. Marriage has played a large role in shaping and reshaping my personal identity. It is a path I have chosen, and one that has come with friction and deep joy.

### **Marriage and Motherhood**

Maurice Bloch (1989), in his work on ritual, history and power, emphasizes that kinship is a system of signs that not only organizes “production and reproduction...[as well as] the transfer of surplus from one category of person to another,” but is also “used for...mystification”

(137). His theory was in opposition to Kant's emphasis on the unity and consistency of cognitive systems. Bloch continued, "...so in different situations...[kinship] is called on to perform different tasks" (144). Bloch argues for systems of ideas existing independently of political economy, "evolving with their own mystical rationality and creating further disconnections with the base" (88).

Margaret Trawick, in her book *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* (1990), argues that kinship is less "a stable architectural framework through which all generations pass" than "a form of poetics,...a web of deep-seated longings" characterized by "protean variability in form" (7). In her view, kinship is best understood "as a web maintained by unrelieved tensions, an architecture of conflicting desires, its symmetry a symmetry of imbalance, its cyclicity that of a hunter following its own tracks" (152).

The presence of bemusement, of unrequited closure, has also been present in my own lived experience. My marriage has served to create kinship connections of exchange and alliance. My husband is Punjabi-American, and thus my Bengali family is now connected to my Punjabi in-laws. At every family gathering, both sets of our parents exchange stories from their respective cities in India, and frequently learn new words in each other's languages. My husband and I, like most kin, exchange our values with which we were raised. We have made a home, and our kinship has opened up new ways of being in the world. It has also created space for anxieties for the unknown. I have felt that my identity, particularly my relationship to the Bengali language, has been something that I clung onto much harder than I ever have before. The Bengali language and Rabindranath's songs became my sense of home – something that I wished to share with my husband, but also something that I wanted to keep as only mine.

From the beginning of our relationship, music served as an important resource that we exchanged. I was already familiar with a lot of Punjabi music through my South Asian friends in high school and college, and also because it was played at most clubs and parties throughout my college years (see Maira 2002 and Bakrania 2013). Bengali music, and specifically Rabindrasangeet, is never played at clubs. I began to play some of my favorite songs for my husband, introducing him to the serene and meditative vibe that Rabindrasangeet exuded for me. On our first trip together to India, we traveled to Shantiniketan. There we saw Basudeb Baul singing at the Kopai market (image above in Introduction). My husband was enamored. The timbre of Basudeb's voice, the rhythm of the bells tied to his feet, and the groove of the song reeled him in. On our way back to the house, my husband tried to find the name of the song on his phone. From there, he started listening to more Baul songs. Our new shared home, formed with help from sharing these new musical connections, became stronger. We developed a mutual care and respect for each other's musical cultures, which to me erased some of my marital anxiety.

I continue to feel a sense of friction when speaking to my daughter Leela. I only speak to Leela in Bengali, and she responds back in Bengali. She speaks to me in English on our car ride home from school, but switches to Bengali soon after. The anxiety I feel of her not remembering Bengali is ever-present. Will I, as her mother, be able to raise her the same way my parents raised me? Will she have a deep love for her mother tongue, as I do for mine? Will I be able to take her to Kolkata for weeks at a time, and will she embrace the different climate as her own? My husband does not speak fluent Bengali, although he understands and attempts to speak a few sentences here and there. The responsibility of passing down the language of my ancestors falls

on me. It is a big part of my experience of what it means to be Bengali-American, to be a Bengali-American woman, and to be a Bengali-American mother.

## **Dadu**

I end this chapter with the story of my grandfather's passing. And Rabindranath's presence through it all.

My last living grandparent, my paternal grandfather, passed away in the summer of 2017 at the age of 93. My parents and I were privileged enough to travel to Kolkata in order to spend my grandfather's last few days with him, and engage in all of the rituals and commemorations that accompany death in an observing Hindu family. During our numerous trips to the hospital in the last days leading up to my grandfather's death, we played him specific Rabindrasangeets from my iPhone in hopes that he might find some peace through his suffering. We held my phone close to his ear, and kept our eyes peeled for any movement from him.

On August 5, my dad's sister and her neighborhood singing group put on their annual *Baishe Srabon* show in a community center down the road from their apartment in Kolkata. We were somber. We had all just returned from the hospital for the day, and were not allowed to stay there throughout the night. Despite their sadness and unease, my aunt and father made the decision to attend and partake in the function. The beautiful irony in this particular year's celebration was that the commemoration of Rabindranath Tagore's death anniversary coincided with a final celebration of my grandfather's life – my grandfather who was an ardent admirer of Rabindranath.



Walking to the community center down the road.

On one side of the apartment building, there is a small Shiva shrine. Inside the shrine is a beat up old speaker that blasts loud remixed techno beats with Hindi and Bhojpuri lyrics. No one knows what the songs are saying, and the sound is static-filled and deafening. Our apartment vibrates to the techno beats that are allegedly being played in celebration of pilgrims, all boys ranging from ages 15-35, traveling to Tarakeswar (a pilgrimage site in West Bengal). No one knows what these songs have to do with their pilgrimage, but whenever someone from the neighborhood turns down the volume on the speakers, one of the devotees from the pilgrim group turns it back up. We walk toward the back of the apartment building to the community center down the road. The beats from the cacophonous speaker are still vibrating at our feet, but grow softer as we walk further away and toward our destination. There is an air of sadness as we all think about my grandfather at that very moment in a coma. Everyone in the neighborhood is thinking of him. We kept the show on that night because it was what my grandfather would have wanted. He was a practical man, and also a man whose life revolved around his love for Tagore. Excess emotion had no place in his life, which to me, displays not only a deep irony, but makes

sense. Rabindrasangeet, one could argue, is overflowing with emotion. Each of his sentences carry the weight of philosophies that have spanned generations. Tears and memories index private emotional and aesthetic experiences and also moments of shared sociality (Feld 1982, Urban 1991, Gray 2013). Commemorating Rabindranath's death and continuing our annual tradition rather than sitting at the foot of his bed, would have been exactly what my grandfather wanted. The last song was a chorus, and many audience members joined in as well. Gray (2013) writes about amateur fado practice. "...the singing of refrains, the silent incantation of lyrics and the voicing of exclamations, the evaluative silence of listening, and tearfulness or talk of crying shape and frame an aesthetic of soulful listening and singing" (43). In similar ways, the sincerity in this group performance, the singing, listening, and feeling, helped everyone contend with my grandfather's declining health.

Borishodhara majhe shantir bari  
Shushko hriday laye ache dNaraie  
Urdhomukhe naranari

Shower the earth with the rain of peace  
As they stand with a parched heart  
Men and women facing toward the sky

Na thake andhokar, na thake mohopaap  
Na thake shokparitaap  
Hirday bimal hok, praan sabal hok  
Bighno dao apsaari

Let there be no darkness, no illusion  
No mourning  
Let the heart be clean, let the soul be strong  
Let all the obstacles disappear.

Keno e hingsadesh, keno e chhadyobesh  
Keno e maan abhimaan  
Bitor bitor prem paashaanhridaye  
Joy joy hok tomari

Why is there so much envy, so much pretense  
Why all this misunderstanding?  
Pour out your love into the stoic hearts  
And let victory be yours.<sup>63</sup>

The very next day, August 6, 2017, my grandfather Jitendranath Bandopadhyay passed away. Rabindrasangeet played a central role that day. We brought his body back to his home from the hospital in which he passed. We decorated his feet, hands, neck, and head with *rajanigandha*

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<sup>63</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.



(tuberose) flowers and *tulsi* (holy basil) leaves, and laid his body on the daybed in the living room. We sat around him and sang for two hours while visitors came in to pay their respects and touch his feet. Individuals sang songs that came into their hearts, and sometimes others joined in. We then headed to the cremation grounds for the final rites.

I think of one of the last conversations I had with my grandfather. He was 92 years old and, although alert, was losing his memory. He asked if I had recently gotten my nose pierced, even though he had seen it pierced for the past 15 years. We reminisced about visiting Niagara Falls together in 2004, and he asked if I listened to Bengali songs in America. We spoke about specific singers I listened to, and then moved on to talking about concerts he attended in his youth. All of a sudden, he told me about the weeks following his wife's premature death when he took his young daughter to see concerts and meet Debabrata Biswas, in hopes to distract her from their immense loss.

Every single person that I spoke to concerning my dissertation, and concerning Rabindranath, has mentioned loss. As Roy put it, "I think part of [Rabindrasangeet] travels through the ability of the song to carry on the illusion that this person is gone, my mother or my grandmother, they're both gone, but the love that they have for the song has sort of perpetuated and been transferred to me. So, it's almost like a bequest. I wasn't able to give my kids money, I gave them this song. And this phrase in fact is in one of Rabindranath's songs – *Diye genu basanter ei gaankhani*."

Diye genu basanter ei gaankhani  
Barosho phuraye jaabe, bhule jaabe jaani.  
Tobu to phalgunoraate e gaaner bedonate  
Aankhi tabo chalochalo, ei bohu maani.

This song of spring I leave behind  
Years will pass, memories will fade.  
But in an early spring night, this mournful song  
Will bring tears to your eyes, I know.

Chaahi ni rohite bose phuraile bela,  
Takhoni choliya jabo shesh hole khela.

I will not stay until it's time to call it a day  
I'll go as soon as we finish our play.

Ashibe phalguno puno, tokhon abar shuno      Spring will come again, and you will hear then  
Nabo pothikeri gaane nutaner bani.              The songs of a new traveler, with words anew.<sup>64</sup>

The memory of my grandfather's death, the days that preceded it and the few days following, lives in my mind and in my father's. We experienced his passing in Kolkata, in my father's homeland, and thus, the possibility of a restorative nostalgia has become impossible for my father. As Boym writes, "Nostalgic love is rarely reciprocal" (304). My father can no longer feel parental love on his trips back to Kolkata. His homeland is where he was born, but also where he experienced loss. The path now is clear: reflect on the past, and build a transnational future with collective and cultural memories.

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<sup>64</sup> Rabindrasangeet translated by Nandini Banerjee-Datta.

## Conclusion

I began this dissertation by exploring the lives of three generations of women from precolonial Bengal, post-independence Bengal, and the postmodern diaspora, and the types of movement they have experienced. I wrote down stories that were told to me, stories of their lives as Bengalis, swathed in the music of Rabindranath Tagore. Their lived experiences have been full of movement, and the music they love and find familiar has traveled alongside them. My movement has also influenced how I experience and write about Rabindrasangeet. I constantly travel and reminisce between West Bengal and the United States, between Rabindranath Tagore and those who remember him. Through our stories, I identify a rupture between the familiar and the immediate that accompanies our movement, and characterize this rupture as creating space for multiple identities, reflections, and intimacies, and the continuous building, dismantling, and rebuilding of culture. Alex Chavez beautifully words this as such: “There is a performative quality to what is being communicated to me, for the ethnographic encounter itself becomes a site of performance” (2017:495). When my interlocutors – Rabindrasangeet practitioners – actively imagine the “former” poetic world that Rabindranath represents, they are doing so against the backdrop of their own experiences of immigration, identity building, and kinship maintenance. Their relationships with new media constitute and contour their everyday lived experiences, and represent not only their physical movement through time, but a cultural movement with which they have kept up in order to sustain their traditions.

My plan has never been to chart what Rabindrasangeet *is*. Instead, I have written about Rabindrasangeet as social practice: questions about memory and history, affect and belonging, imagined place and physical space. I elaborate on Marilyn Strathern’s (1988) argument that sociality and movement are intertwined, and thus the movement of this tradition is central to my

argument. I write about tradition as a process of interpretation that attributes meaning in the present through making reference to the past. My aim throughout this dissertation has been to read and listen to Rabindranath through the diaspora. This work has attempted to seek an understanding of how Rabindrasangeet exists as a way of being in the world, of performing, of communicating, of giving voice to introspective moments, and everyday struggles.

I am aware that I have chosen to write about a man who has been pondered at length, and been written about to exhaustion. Rabindranath Tagore has been studied and analyzed so much because he was not the average colonial subject. He had the status, money, and class position to move about the world. However, his cosmopolitanism was not self-inflicted. While he was anti-nationalist, he neither identified as cosmopolitan nor did he think such an outlook was the answer to the problems of factionalism and empire. He loved his Bengal too much to be labeled as such. Tagore wrote in *Nationalism*, “Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship is the goal of human history” (1917: 15). He continues, “India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that the idolatry of Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will gain truly their India by fighting that education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity” (127). Essentially, Tagore’s resistance to nationalism preserved a mode of affective attachment that nationalist ideology would extinguish. This affective attachment continues through the diaspora, as evidenced by my ethnography.

This dissertation has interrogated the space between scholarship on Rabindranath Tagore, and scholarship on music in diasporic communities. I connect a lettered man, whose life was full of extraordinariness in a time of anticolonial upheaval, to the ordinary and interior lives of

diasporic individuals. Tracing this trajectory has resulted in rethinking the relationship between poetry and modernity in a more productive manner.

Imperative throughout my work is the reality of a male poetic genre reinterpreted and revoiced by women in order to sustain its life and theirs. The women I write about in this dissertation embody many voices. Each voice contributes to a facet of their lives, shaping their identities and reinforcing their roles in their communities. Ultimately, I propose that the micro-level performances in a woman's life – in other words, the ways in which they use Rabindranath's words and not the words themselves – are tantamount in building and sustaining strong diasporic experiences. Through inter-generational relationships of motherhood and daughterhood, through sisterhood and friendship, and through kinship ties, I write about how women (and the men in their lives) live.

My praxis, in my dissertation and beyond, stems from my lived experience as a second-generation Bengali-American woman. I present my own situated take on the lives of people I have conducted research with and also consider friends and family. It comes from a deep understanding of the politics of voice that arise in every mode of anthropological research. I argue that the voices of individual actors are constructive and are constitutive of their engagements with a larger social horizon. This is central to one of my main theses: that the materiality of the voices of women, myself included, represents the ways social actors move through the world. In the words of Johannes Fabian (2001), "Presence *is*, because before there is representation there must be presence; and in the end the question of ethnographic objectivity still comes down to the question of what makes it possible to have access to another culture, or to be in the presence of another culture – both of which seem to be required if ethnographic

knowledge is to be more than projection or delusion” (23). I candidly treat my own “presence” in this work, and use methods of autobiographic writing as a means of knowledge production.

My path to writing this dissertation has not been linear. Although my entire life has been engulfed by Rabindrasangeet, or perhaps because of this, I found it difficult to extract myself from the chasms of Rabindranath’s music in order to write about it. It took me years to balance the line between my own joy in listening to and singing Rabindrasangeet, and contributing to academic scholarship about it. I grew up revering Rabindranath, never hearing anything negative about his larger-than-life personality. I was taught to embrace his songs like hymns, and I gladly absorbed these instructions. How then, was I to write objectively about the words I so loved? The turn in my scholarship came when I began to write about another genre of music within the South Asian diaspora. For my Masters project, I investigated the world of popular music in South Asian weddings in the United States. I specifically researched the homogenization of musical genres, and the monopolization of Bollywood songs that accompany the majority of South Asian weddings. I explored tropes of authenticity and subject formation through transnational popular cultures. Through this project, I came to regard the stories of my interlocutors as central to my research. Their stories, our stories, would present my theories of tradition, poetics, and feminist ethnography, and not the other way around. Thus, my joy from Rabindrasangeet could be the impetus for my work, but did not need to be the subject.

As I reflect on my processes of translation throughout this dissertation, I realize that my relationship to Rabindrasangeet has slowly altered. The act of translating Bengali for academic scholarship – as opposed to translating for, say, my Hindi-speaking mother-in-law – not only brings with it additional pressure to use a similarly-valenced English word to replace Rabindranath’s Bengali word, but it also reinforces the stronghold that Rabindrasangeet has had

on my life. I have translated all of the songs in this dissertation from Bengali to English. I have used my father's help on specific words and phrases, but then translated his English words into my own English words in order to feel closer to them. This process of interiorizing Rabindranath's words made them my own in yet another way.

As India increasingly becomes a site of religion- and caste-based strife, life abroad appears to offer a promise of escape. Yet the Indian diaspora is also confronted with the extremes of religious animosity and fundamentalist organizations. Restorative nostalgia is at play. Boym describes the situation as such, "Ambivalence, the complexity of history and the specificity of modern circumstances is erased, and modern history is seen as a fulfillment of ancient prophecy" (2001:43). She continues, "'Home' ...is forever under siege, requiring defense against the plotting enemy" (ibid). The predominance Hindu upper caste voices in South Asian diasporic scholarship and in academia is rampant. I want to clearly state that almost all of my interlocutors are Hindu. It is the community I come from, and to which my own experiences relate the most. Most of my interlocutors, although not all of the participants in my ethnographic vignettes, are also upper-caste Hindus. These communities are homogeneous. The topic of caste rarely comes up in discussion – not because it does not exist, but because everyone is part of the upper castes. It is a luxury to not speak about caste, and a harmful and silencing one at that. I do not by any means wish my work to be a part of the systemic and deliberate exclusion and silencing of non-Savarnas in academia, and am constantly trying to figure out ways in which my genuine experiences can complicate and problematize this. I understand that writing this seeming disclaimer does not mean much, but hopefully it is a signal to my readers that these thoughts and constant action are in my work as well.

This monograph will contribute to music, gender, and South Asian studies through its de-colonial interrogation of Rabindrasangeet's impact in the diaspora. My engagement with these varied literatures signifies the network that I am building, one that connects Rabindranath with Kathleen Stewart, that affectionately folds Subaltern Studies in with stories of YouTube in New York. My vision in writing an intimate ethnography such as this is to complicate standardized tropes of study, and highlight instances of micro-level performance that serve to strengthen diasporic experiences.

My next major research project will expand on these themes through the lens of religion and caste. Tentatively titled "Rabindranath Is Not Indian: The Intersectionality of Bengali Musical Pedagogy," I will explore how Bengali music schools are kept alive in the larger diaspora by predominantly Muslim Bangladeshi immigrants. Through ethnography, I will critically analyze why South Asian diasporic scholarship often focuses on Hindu upper caste voices – a reflexive critique of my first monograph, among other scholarship – and expand by bringing in class, caste and religion-based aspects of intersectionality to the gendered interventions I have already made. I plan to utilize the depth of New York City's cultural realm to create a study of the pedagogical worlds that exist and thrive. The impetus for this project is the current political climate of India, where religious strife is rampant. Persecution of women for choosing to wear a hijab or not, violent attacks on those who choose to consume beef, and defacing religious idols inside temples are only some of the latest examples where religious fundamentalism has dictated the safety of human life, and where government silence has made loud reverberations among civilians.

For now, I write about my community. I build connections between Rabindranath as a colonial subject and intimate spaces in diasporic communities in order to broaden the field of



Ethnomusicology. My ethnographic scholarship should not only make a theoretical intervention in the world of ethnomusicology and post-colonial studies, but should hold space in which other immigrants and women of color can recognize themselves.

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