

## BOOK REVIEW

---

---

### **Sastriya Sangita and Music Culture of Bengal Through the Ages**

Chhaya Chatterjee

Sharada Publishing House,  
Delhi, 1996

555 pages, Rs 1500  
(2 vols, hardbound)

---



This book in two volumes by Chhaya Chatterjee studies the history of music in Bengal from the ancient period up to 1947, the year of India's independence.

Following the usual socio-political periodization of Indian history, the first volume discusses the political history as well as the musical culture of Bengal, in the space of three chapters. Chapter I deals with the *Prachina Yuga* (Ancient Period), dividing it in three parts. Part I of this chapter deals with the history of Bengal with particular reference to the general socio-political scenario of *Prachyadesha* or 'Greater Bengal' from the earliest period up to the end of Sena rule in Bengal.

Part II of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of the general musical culture of this long period. After constructing from assumptions a picture of the music of pre-historic Bengal, the author elaborates on Vedic music and music during post-Vedic times. She also briefly discusses the information about music and musical life avail-

able in the *Ramayana*, the *Harivamsha* and the *Jatakas* and other Buddhist literature to reach some general conclusions, followed by a short note on the musical elements found in Kalidasa's works. However, more specific discussion on the music of Bengal is done next with reference to the *Natyashastra* of Bharata, the *Brihaddeshi* of Matanga, the *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana, and Sandhyakarnandin's *Ramacharita*. Referring to the archaeological evidence found in Paharpur-Lalmai and other areas in Bengal, the author reconstructs the history of music and musical instruments in this period.

In Part III the author deals with various musical styles of the time. After a short note on the Nāthagitis the author discusses in detail the Charyāgitis with particular reference to their musical aspects. A chart containing the names of the composers, the numbers of Charyās, and the names of the *ragas* in which they are composed gives a helpful overview. While discussing the musical aspects of the *Gitagovinda* the author excellently analyses the *ragas* and *talas* used by Jayadeva and shows how Jayadeva created his new style by introducing “a number of long *Chandas* divisible by four *matra-ganas*” which was different from the ancient norms of Sanskrit (p. 43).

Chapter II deals with the *Madhyayuga* (Medieval Period) of Bengal’s history. Following the above pattern, the author deals with the period between A.D. 1200 and 1757 in three parts, concentrating on the political history of Bengal (Part I), its general musical culture (Part II), as well as the musical styles of the period and three relevant texts: the *Brihaddharma-purana*, the *Sangita-damodara*, and the *Hastamuktavali* of Subhankara (Part III).

Part I starts with the political history of Bengal from the year of the invasion of Muhammad-bin-Bakhtiyar Khilji (c. A.D. 1203) to the Battle of Plassey (1757). The author points out that though the arrival of the Muslims initially changed the general social scenario of Bengal, causing unrest, anarchy, loot and arson (p. 51) which adversely affected the art and culture of this region, events like Sultan Husein Sharki’s arrival in Bengal and the rise of Chaitanya led to a change in its musical scenario in a positive sense. She also traces briefly the development of Mughal rule in

Bengal and its general impact on the socio-economic and cultural life of the region. Part I ends with a short note on the process of shift of power from the Mughals to the British.

Part II of this chapter deals with the musical culture of this period. With the help of various *Mangala-kavyas*, *Krishna-kirtana*, *Chaitanya-charitamrita*, as well as treatises like the *Brihaddharma-purana*, the *Bhaktiratnakara*, the *Samgitasara-samgraha*, the *Gitachandrodaya* of Narahari Chakravarti (also known as Ghanashyamadasa, cf. Mihir Kamilya Chaudhuri’s *Narahari Chakrabarti: Jibani o Rachanabali*, 1981), the *Samgitadamodara* of Shubhankara and others, the author provides a detailed description of the music and musical styles of the period. She also refers to such texts as the *Gitaprasanga* of the Oriya poet Krishnadasa, the *Samgita-sarani* of Narayanadasa, and the *Ragatarangini* of Mithila’s Lochanakavi as evidences of the state of music in and musical interaction among various parts of Greater Bengal. This part ends with a fairly detailed discussion of Narahari Chakravarti’s works. Some more details of the “accounts of foreigners like Ibn Batuta, Ma-huang and Kuo-chug-li” which, as she has herself said at page 57, provide some information about “Bengal’s prosperity in . . . cultural activities”, would have been most welcome.

Part III of this chapter is devoted to various musical styles of the period. The author begins with the historical evolution of *Mangala-giti* and *Panchali* as musical genres as well as the distinctive traits of *Mangala-kavyas* as such. Referring to different *Mangala-kavyas* like the *Dharmamangala* of Ruparama, *Manikarama* and

Mayurabhatta, the *Padmapurana* of Vijayagupta, as well as the *Manasa-mangala* of Vipradasa, the *Padmapurana-Baiskavi*, the *Chandi-mangala* and the *Chaitanya-mangala*, the author traces the *ragas* used in singing these *gitis* and provides a detailed description of musical instruments available in these texts. The author separately deals with other *mangala-kavyas* such as *Manasa-mangala*, *Siva-mangala* (with particular references to Gajan-gita and Mrigalubdha), *Chandi-mangala*, *Abhaya-mangala*, *Annada-mangala*, *Kalika-mangala*, *Sitala-mangala*, *Sashthi-mangala* and so on along with a brief review of Bharatchandra's (c.1712–1769) life and works. The notated examples of *Mangala-giti* give the reader an idea of this style.

In a separate section the author discusses Badu Chandidas's *Shrikrishna-kirtana* which is the earliest available *gitinatya* of Bengal. Referring to the controversy related to the date of this text she carefully analyses its thematic content, lyrical compositions, as well as the *ragas* and *talas* used in this text. Her discussion of the identity of different composers bearing the same name, Chandidasa, provides useful information in this regard.

In the next section, the author elaborately discusses various aspects of Kirtana as a distinctive musical style of Bengal. In tracing its evolution the author briefly analyses its origin tracing its connection with the *Charyāpada*, *Gitagovinda*, the *padas* of Vidyapati and those of the "poet-composers of early 15th century A.D.". She then shows its development from the simple forms of Nama-kirtana and Nagara-kirtana to more musically complex forms which ultimately gave rise to the need for forming

trained groups of *kirtaniyas*. Referring to the development of Kirtana during the time of Chaitanyadeva, she discusses in great detail the historic *kirtana mahotsava* at Kheturi organized by Narottamadas Thakur some time in the eighties of the sixteenth century. The author then analyses two varieties of Kirtana—Nagara-kirtana/Samkirtana and Lila/Rasa-kirtana along with a brief review of the Vaishnava theory of *rasa* (*rasa-tattva*). This is followed by her elaboration of different styles of Kirtana: Garanhati, Manoharshahi, Reneti, Mandarini, Jharkhandi, and the style propagated by the Mitra Thakur family of the village called Maynadal in the district of Birbhum. She next briefly explains Pala-kirtana, Uddanda-kirtana, Suchaka-kirtana, Dhulot, and Dagi/jat-gana. Her discussion of the procedure and techniques which are followed in this musical genre is highly commendable. In the course of her discussion she clearly explicates the different *angas* of Kirtana—*akhar*, *katha*, *doha*, *tuk*, *chut* and *jhumur/jhumari*—and underlines how, due to the growing rigidity in religious and musical norms, an elaborate system of teaching this particular art-form developed. She also gives a list containing the names of some leading *gurus* of Kirtana, *kirtaniyas*, dance experts, and *padakartas* of the time. The author concludes her discussion on Kirtana by an extensive analysis of the *ragas*, *talas* and musical instruments used in Kirtana as well as of the system of instrumental accompaniment. Short lists of renowned Khol and Kartala players of the time, *pada-samkalana granthas*, the *thekas* of a few *talas* of Kirtana as well as notations of a Kirtana composed by Inanadasa set to *raga* Desh are indeed helpful.

In separate sections under Part III of the second chapter the author briefly discusses the lives of Chaitanyadeva, Vidyapati of Mithila, the Bengali *padakarta* named Kaviranjana Vidyapati of the later post-Chaitanya period, and Narottama Thakur. The author then concentrates on two particular forms of Kirtana—Dhap and Bhanga-kirtana. She elaborates Dhap-kirtana with particular reference to two personalities: Rupchand Adhikari (1722–1792) and Madhusudan Kinnar (c. 1818–1868), popularly known as Madhu Kan. It is difficult to understand why the author has included Madhu Kan in the medieval period; his date of birth clearly places him in the modern period of Bengal's history. This is followed by her discussion of the three broad categories of Sakta Padabali—Agamani-Bijaya, Shyama-samgita and Kali-kirtana. Notated song-texts included by the author help us to understand the musical distinctiveness of these styles. The author concludes her discussion of the musical styles of medieval Bengal with short biographies of Ramprasad Sen and Kamalakanta as well as a brief note on the Baul-gana of Bengal. A more detailed discussion of Baul-gana would have been useful.

Chapter III concentrates on the political and musical history of the *Adhunikayuga* (Modern Period) of Bengal's history. Following the pattern of the previous two chapters the author, in the first part, briefly narrates the political history of Bengal from 1757, the date of the Battle of Plassey, to 1947, the year of our independence. At the very outset the author has clearly stated that she would be dealing in this chapter with those "first few officers of the East India Company" who had "played the key roles" in "shaping the fate of

Bengal . . . along with others who mattered" (p. 190). While tracing the growth of Calcutta the author mentions the earlier references to the place-name Kalikata in the *Manasa-mangala* of Vipradas (A.D. 15th century), the *Chandikavya* of Kavikankan Mukundaram (A.D. 16th century), and the *Ain-i-Akbari* (A.D. 1596) of Abul Fazal, and discusses briefly the role of Job Charnock in this process. She then narrates the political developments in Bengal during this period from the days of Lord Clive up to 1947. She ends this part with a few lines on the post-1947 scenario in Bengal which, being beyond the stated time-limit of the chapter, is rather confusing. It is difficult to understand such simplistic statements as the following.

The influx and unemployment amongst the refugees gave rise to crime, communism and Naxalite movement, creating an atmosphere of terrorism and violence. [p. 199]

One appreciates the difficulties of dealing with such a complex period in our history, when Bengal first confronted the forces of colonialism and, in course of time, those of modernity, in the short space permitted by the theme of this book. But, in recent years, quite a few excellent studies have been made by scholars from India and abroad in this area, particularly on the impact of these forces on Bengal's life and culture. The history of this period as told here by the present author suffers, I am afraid, from oversimplifications which could have been easily avoided had she consulted studies published after the books of Percival Spear and/or Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, mentioned in the bibliography to this part.

Part II of this chapter deals with the

musical culture of Bengal after 1757. Here the author points out that the important musical styles of 18th-century Bengal were replaced by "more raga-oriented" music with the migration of renowned Ustads to Bengal after the decline of Delhi and Lucknow, the two main centres of music, in search of fresh patronage. After providing an overview of the musical scenario of the time as well as a brief account of the development of theatre in Calcutta, the author describes in fair detail twenty important centres of music in Bengal such as Krishnanagar, Natore, Bishnupur, Calcutta, Gauripur, Murshidabad and so on. Her discussion of the importance of the "Metiaburuj music *darbar*" of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah in the context of Bengal's musical culture is quite interesting, and so is her discussion of the role of the various *badis* (houses) of Calcutta like those of the Seths and Basaks, the *rajbadi* of Sobhabazar, the Deb family of Shimulia, the Boral family, the Ghoshes of Pathuriaghata and others. Though, as we all know, there is no exact correspondence between a society and its artistic culture, there is no denying the necessity of analysing the latter with reference to the socio-political context of a society at a given time.

The next section of this part begins with a detailed genealogical tree of the Jorasanko Thakur family, followed by an account of the lives and musical activities of its members like Debendranath Thakur, Dwijendranath Thakur, Satyendranath Thakur, Hemendranath Thakur, Jyotirindranath Thakur and others. This is supported by notated illustrations of the songs composed by many of them. In this manner, beginning with a genealogical tree

of the Pathuriaghata Thakur family, the author deals, rather briefly, with the significance of the artistic-musical activities of Raja Jyotindramohan and Raja Sourindramohan Tagore.

The last section of the first volume deals with *gharanas*, beginning with a list of the vocal and instrumental *gharanas* which have considerable influence on the music of Bengal. She then briefly discusses the Bishnupur *gharana* of Bengal with biographical and musical details of musicians belonging to this *gharana* as well as its distinctive traits. Though the author thinks that the Bishnupur *gharana* began "as early as 7th century A.D." (p. 248), she has not presented any evidence in favour of her argument. Bishnupur becoming a seat of music and the beginning of the Bishnupur *gharana*, it would be readily agreed, are two different matters, because *gharana* as a concept implies certain social and musical specificities (cf. Daniel M Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition*, 1990; University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London). It would have been interesting had she examined whether these are noticeable in this particular case as early as the 7th Century A.D. However, her discussion about various persons who were trained in different areas of our 'classical' music by musicians belonging to different *gharanas* is quite informative. The "chart of *Guru-Shishya Parampara* of Tabla and Pakhavaj" as well as the *thekas* of ten *talas* which were in use specially in Bengal would prove helpful for students of music history.

The second volume is entirely Part III of the third chapter. This part deals with various musical styles of Bengal during

the period. In section 1 of this part, the author discusses in detail Kavigan, Panchali, Tappa, Akhdai, Half-Akhdai, Pakshir-gan, Dhrupad, Khayal, Thumri, Brahmo-sangit, Jatra and Natya-sangit, Rabindrasangit, Kavyasangit, Ragapradhan-gan and Swadeshi-sangit with particular reference to the leading composers and musicians in these areas. Quite a few notated musical illustrations of some of these forms support the discussion.

In section 2 of this part the author systematically traces the evolution of notation in Bengal. She places the discussion in a comparative framework with particular reference to the evolution of Indian notation down the ages. A reference in this context to the letters written by Krishnadhan Bandyopadhyay to Jyotirindranath Tagore in 1897 would have been very interesting. However, one should congratulate the author for the useful details provided by her in this regard.

Although it is interesting to know about the *Pratik Swaralipi* (published in 1955) of Dr Bimal Roy which she has dealt with in fair detail, and about the Major-minor Consonantal System of Nikhil Ghosh (published in 1968 in his book *Fundamentals of Raga and Tala—with a New System of Notation*), reference to these takes us beyond the time-frame fixed by the author.

The final section of this part deals with the 'Treatises of Bengal'. After briefly mentioning some treatises from the 10th century onwards as evidence of the "depth of traditional music practised in *Prachyadesha* or Greater Bengal" (p. 504), the author gives a list of books with their authors and the periods in which these were written. She then provides descriptive accounts of the following treatises:

*Gitapradakasha* by Krishnadasa Badajena Mahapatra (A.D. 16th century); *Panchamasara-samgraha* of Narada (c. A.D. 1570/72–1630/32), *Samgita Damodara* by Damodara Sen (late 16th and early 17th century); *Ragatarangini* of Lochanakavi (end-17th and early 18th century); *Bhakti-ratnakara*, *Samgitasara-samgraha* and *Gitachandradaya* by Narahari Chakrabarty (18th century); *Raga-ratnakara* by Narahari Chakrabarty/Ghanashyamadasa; *Annada-mangala* by Bharatchandra Rayagunakara (1752); *Sangita-taranga* by Radhamohan Sen Das (1818); *Sangita Raga Kalpadruma* by Krishnanda Vyasa Deva Ragasagara (first published in 1842); *Gitasutrasara* by Krishnadhan Banerjee (1885); and *Samgita-Praveshika* by Murarimohan Gupta (19th century).

Since this section is included under *Adhunikayuga*, the author should have confined herself to treatises belonging to that specific period. The treatises mentioned above should have been included in the first volume under *Madhyayuga*, where there is a separate section on treatises. The discussion about a significant work like the *Gitasutrasara* of Krishnadhan Bandyopadhyay is rather descriptive. Publications of this period, apart from the few mentioned above, should have been critically analysed because they exhibit some new trends which influenced later developments in music and musicology in Bengal.

It is also difficult to understand why the list of books in this section includes titles published after 1947, the limit of her study. If the author wanted to include contemporary works, she should have given an exhaustive list of books of music published in the post-independence years. The pre-



sent list creates an impression of random selection.

Though I have been greatly impressed by Shrimati Chhaya Chatterjee's work, I think it is necessary to point out a few things which I hope she would consider while preparing a future edition of this book. Firstly, it would be agreed that in any kind of historical writing, like the present study, specific references to sources either in footnotes or endnotes are essential. While going through the book, I have always felt the lack of such references. For example, it would have been interesting if the author had mentioned specific sources to reach such conclusions as that the pre-historic age "stretched from 15000 BC" (p. 2), or that the Bengalis as a distinct people evolved "probably by 15th-16th century BC" (p. 3), or that "the Vedas were written between c. 9500 BC or even earlier" (p. 3, fn. 1a). And there are many such instances.

Secondly, although I do not claim an exact correspondence between a society and its artistic culture, it is difficult to overlook the importance of analysing an artistic culture in the socio-cultural context in which it has flourished. Take, for example, the scope of analysing the musical development of the time in relation to the Bhakti movement of sixteenth-century Bengal. The study in this area by Professor Ramakanta Chakrabarty (*Vaisnavism In Bengal: 1486-1900*, Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, Calcutta, 1985), which has excellently analysed the socio-religious background of the Chaitanya movement as well as the social implications of the Bhakti movement, may be mentioned here. The author has left out this discussion.

Similarly, the author's silence about the impact of the Bengal Renaissance of the

nineteenth century in the domain of music is a bit surprising. No history of nineteenth-century Bengal can ignore such a vital question because in the activities of our 'Renaissance heroes', even in the field of music, we can see the inherent contradictions of the Bengal Renaissance. For example one such hero, Raja Sourindra Mohun Tagore, whose life and contributions have been very briefly treated in this book, reflects these contradictions clearly. On the one hand we see him establishing the Bengal Music School, the first of its kind, in the Chitpur area of Calcutta as early as 1881, writing books on music, patronizing musicians and music scholars, and sending large consignments of Indian musical instruments and books as gifts to the rulers and dignitaries of different countries all over the world—which is all in keeping with one face of the Bengal Renaissance; on the other, we see his extreme loyalty to the British rulers—the other face of our Renaissance. Witness his various publications like *Victoria Gitika* (Stanhope Press, 1875), *Fifty Stanzas in Sanskrit in Honour of HRH The Prince of Wales* (Stanhope Press, 1875), *English Verses Set to Hindoo Music in Honor of H.R.H. The Prince of Wales* (Presidency Press, 1875), and his book of 1880 called *Indian Music's Address to Lord Lytton*. What could be more telling than the concluding lines of his *Victoria Gitika*:

Descended from the Tagore family  
The Suppliant Sourindra Mohun  
Implores a little spark of thy mercy  
Hardly attainable, O thou merciful Empress of India.

[*Public Opinions and Official Communications About the Bengal Music School and Its President*, 1876, Stanhope Press, Calcutta, p. 16]

Things become more interesting when we consider his writings on history such as *Hindu Loyalty* (1883), in which he underlines with historical-scriptural references the tradition of loyalty and obedience of Indians to their kings and rulers.

It is true that the appearance of this man at a critical juncture in our history has generated some interest among a few ethnomusicologists (cf. Charles Capwell, 'Musical Life in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta as a Component in the History of a Secondary Urban Centre' in *Journal of the Society for Asian Music*, Vol. XVII-1, Fall/Winter, 1986; 'Sourindra Mohun Tagore and the National Anthem Project' in *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Fall 1987, Society for Ethnomusicology, Ann Arbor, Michigan; 'Marginality and Musicology in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta: The Case of Sourindra Mohun Tagore' in *Comparative Musicology and the Anthropology of Music: Essays in History and Ethnomusicology*, University of Chicago Press; Jonathan Katz, 'Raja Sourindra Mohun Tagore (1840-1914)' in *Popular Music in India*, 1988, Manohar, Delhi; and Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy, 'The Beginnings of Organology: Victor Mahillon and S.M. Tagore', unpublished manuscript). But there remains ample scope for making a critical-analytical study of Sourindra Mohun, the typical 'Renaissance hero' in the field of our music, in whom we can clearly see the Janus face of the Bengal Renaissance.

Thirdly, another significant omission which I have noticed in this book is the absence of an analytical discussion of significant developments in the domain of Bengal's music which occurred as a result of its interaction with Western colonial cul-

ture. This interaction, in later years, moulded to a large extent the future course of Bengali music. For example, with the emergence of the Orientalist discourse on Indian 'classical' music, there developed in Bengal a musico-literary tradition which, compared to the earlier prescriptive textual tradition of this music, was of a different kind. The process started with the publication of the monograph *On the Musical Modes of the Hindoos* by Sir William Jones in 1784. This tradition greatly influenced the first-generation musicologists of Bengal like Kshetramohan Goswami, Raja Sourindra Mohun Tagore, Krishnadhan Bandyopadhyay and others. As a result, the historical and theoretical studies taken up by such musicologists display the imprint of the Orientalist line of thinking. However, all these developments led to attempts, for the first time, to write a history of Indian 'classical' music. In the area of theoretical studies of our 'classical' music, one notices a shift from the earlier prescriptive tradition. Indian 'classical' music from this time onwards was placed within a comparative framework with the musics of other cultures like the Western, Greek and/or Roman. The period also witnessed the beginning of the application of the analytical tools and methods of the Western musical tradition to understand and explain Indian 'classical' music.

Similarly, in the area of transmission of musical knowledge, we notice the beginning of attempts to teach music formally, in institutions, outside the traditional *gharanas*. The establishment of Sourindra Mohun's Bengal Music School in Calcutta in 1881, "where vocal music and some of the drawing room instruments began to be taught with the aid of books and according



to a system of notation" (Sourindra Mohun Tagore, *Universal History of Music*, 1896, p. 87-88), the beginning of "teaching theoretical music and Vedic chants" with "the sanction of the Government" at Sanskrit College in Calcutta, and the establishment of two music schools at Bankura in 1883 where "elementary music began to be taught by means of a manual of vocal music..." (ibid, p. 85) highlight this trend. We can notice an echo of this trend in the writings of sensitive minds of the period. In 1885, Krishnadhan Bandyopadhyay criticized the system of music-teaching in the traditional *gharanas* and underscored the absence of a scientific music-teaching system in our country. In 1928 Rabindranath Tagore came out with his '*Viswavidyalaye Samgit Shiksha*' ('Music Education at the University', in Bengali, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. XIV, Government of West Bengal, 1961, p. 1009-1013).

This period also witnessed a shift of patronage of music and music education from individuals to the state. This becomes evident with Bengal Music School beginning to receive a "grant-in-aid from the Government of Bengal" (ibid, p. 88), and with the start of broadcasting in Bengal with the establishment of a Radio Club in Calcutta in 1923 (P.C. Chatterji, *Broadcasting in India*, 1987, Sage Publications, India, 1991, p. 39).

Finally, the establishment of the recording industry in Bengal at the beginning of this century, when a branch of the Gramophone Company of England was set up in Calcutta in 1901, marked the entry of

market forces in the domain of music. One major work in this area is the *The Gramophone Company's First Indian Recordings: 1899-1908* by Michael Kinnear (Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1994). References may also be made to such writings as 'A Concise History of the Phonograph Industry in India' by G.N. Joshi in *Popular Music in India* (Manohar, Delhi, 1988) and 'The Saga of Old Gramophone Records' by Vijay Varma in *Sociology of Oriental Music* (ed. O.P. Joshi, Illustrated Book Publisher, Jaipur, 1992).

All this is very much part of Bengal's history, so is the history of film music in Bengal. Since the author intended to extend her area of study from *shastriya sangit* to the musical culture of Bengal in general, as becomes clear from the title of the book, discussions of folk and tribal music as well as the popular music of the region would have been in order.

I should however like to conclude by pointing out that the book adequately reflects the author's competence in the subject and the hard work she has put in to muster such a wide range of information and to gain the insights which we find in this book. Being a student of history, as we gather from the prologue, she has been able to use her skill to put together a lot of valuable information on the music history of Bengal. I feel that this book would be an important addition to the list of recent publications in music history.

JAYASRI BANERJEE