

Early Indian Talkies: Voice, Performance and Aura

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This paper studies the 'coming of sound' in Indian cinema, in relation to the debates such technical change generated in the Indian context, and the ways in which sound and music were negotiated within popular cinematic forms. In connection with this, I would also like to address the question of a 'gendered' voice and performance in early talkies to illustrate how various representations of sound and music were produced through a cultural politics. In my attempt to study the deployment of music in popular cinemas, I examine the subject of classical music (and songs), and its varied articulations in the pre-play back era. I wish to read how the 'aura' of performances, which is apparently lost through mechanical reproductions, may be reinstated through certain kinds of performances within specific contexts. I use a New Theatres Ltd.^[1] film, *Street Singer* (1938), and K.L. Saigal's enunciations of the ragas in the film, to elucidate my point.

I

100% talkies: A historical overview

The first Indian talkie *Alam Ara*, based on a popular stage play, produced by the Imperial Film Company^[2] and directed by A. Irani was released on 14th March, 1931^[3]. Irani had seen Hollywood's 40% Sound film *Showboat* and decided to bring 100% sound to India. The Madan Theatres^[4] narrowly missed the opportunity to make this 'history' and followed up Irani's first film with six more talkies in the same year. Madan's second film *Shirin Farad*, based on a Persian love story and featuring Jehan Ara Kajjan, Nissar and 42 songs, was a booming success. Silent cinema in India for all practical purposes was 'dead' although 30% or 40% talkies continued to be made until the mid thirties.

In 1930 Madans reorganized themselves rapidly. Earlier on, in the late nineteen twenties, J. J. Madan (son of J. F., the Madan chief) visited New York and saw *Jazz Singer* (1927), and also the new enthusiasm around the singing stars. He also got a hint of the changing production relations and technical conditions in the business. To quote Barnouw and Krishnaswamy (1980, p.65) "J. J. Madan caught the fever". The Madans imported R.C.A. sound machines, built sound compatible studios and recorded scenes from popular theatre like *Alamgir*, *Shajahan*, *Iraner Rani* and *Mrinalini*. They were prompt in conducting voice tests in their attempt to re-invent themselves for the sound era. Eminent theatre personalities like Ahindra Chowdhury, Durgadas Bandyopadhyay, the singer K.C. Dey, actresses like Patience Cooper, Violet Cooper, Sita Devi and others, stood before the microphone to pass the test of survival. On 13th March 1931, Madans screened about thirty short films at the Crown Theatre, Calcutta. The Imperial Film Company, Bombay, however, released *Alam Ara*, the first full-length-sound feature film, on the very next day. In 1932, the Madans did a fairly good business, but in 1933 they produced only two films^[5]. The transition from the twenties to the thirties in terms of technical changes and economic and political shifts were marked with rapid disintegration of individual enterprises and the steady growth of big-scale studios.

The Madan Theatres had started film production at the beginning of the century. They built Calcutta's first theatre^[6] and dominated the scene for about thirty years. In 1925 and 1926^[7] all Bengali films made were Madans productions, and by 1927, Madans' distribution chain controlled half of India's theatres. They owned about one hundred and seventy two theatres and garnered half of the national profits from exhibition. Their exhibition chain extended from Burma to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Nevertheless, by the nineteen thirties, this massive production-distribution-exhibition company was already losing much of its control. "Cinema was no longer bioscope", wrote Gouranga Prasad Ghosh (1982, p.155). The era of 'all talking, all singing, all dancing, all laughing' films had arrived. It was a moment of change. The cinematic idiom along with the production system rapidly changed to cope with the emergent situation. The emphasis shifted from action to dialogue and from iconic to narrative address. Though the silent era in Bengali films continued technically up to 1934^[8], the 'coming of sound' in 1931 presented a challenge to the filmmakers in Bengal. The change in the medium transformed production relations and profit equations^[9].

Such changes produced intriguing debates and narratives. Sound engineer Wilford Demming Jr. described the ways in which the technology of sound was received in 1931. He was surprised by the "complete indifference" (Burra, 1981, p.38) with which the microphone was addressed, as some actors continued to perform in their own ways irrespective of the changes in the technical conditions. In fact, the early sound engineers came from

diverse backgrounds. While Mukul Bose of New Theatres Ltd., was a research student in Electronics and was trained by Demming, Damle, the sound recordist for Prabhat Film Company had been running a single projector 'touring cinema'. His experience amounted to being simultaneously the driver (of the equipment van), the mechanic, the operator and the proprietor of the set-up. Though exactly not 'archaic', the equipment was cumbersome, unpredictable, and even under ideal state of affairs, not very efficient. The cine-motor generated a lot of noise during the recording, and the microphone would unerringly pick up the motor noise. At times despite the precautions, the recording system would suddenly develop crackling noise during the shoot. By and large, new technologies produced unprecedented production problems.

While Madans earlier employed 'non-Bengali' actors and technicians, the 'coming of the sound' forced many of these personnel to quit. In Calcutta and Bombay the structure of the studios underwent a drastic change. After 1931 large scale, well equipped studios like the New Theatres, Prabhat Film Company and others emerged with a crew of trained technicians, writers, musicians, and actors^[10] (who had a theatre background). A number of successful actors disappeared because of their inability to handle Hindi and other languages.^[11] Sound also put an end to the practice of casting men in female roles^[12], though a reverse tendency (generated by the popularity of songs and music) encouraged the casting of female actors in male roles.^[13] In most cases popular theatre actors were hired for their abilities to sing and perform.

With sound, music acquired a central importance, though experiments with sound varied from complete avoidance of music to elaborate musical arrangements/ orchestrations. By the mid-thirties music was serious business in the industry. Experienced musicians and lyricists were lured away from the professional stage. Many famous classical musicians including composers like RC Boral^[14] and Timir Baran^[15] were brought into film

production to compose music. Music directors borrowed not only from the tradition of theatre but from classical and folk music as well. While film songs served multiple purposes (including narration and establishment of the mood) the background score was used mostly to highlight a situation. In the early films, the background music was mostly simple metric patterns derived from the set practices of generic and other conventions. However, the film song soon became an autonomous spectacular 'song and dance' unit. The use of large orchestra, the mixing of folk, classical, and/or Western musical arrangements and instruments produced an ambiguous notion of 'film music' (which the All India Radio refused to broadcast for several years to follow). By the mid-thirties, an actor had to be singer to be in films. The first decade of the talkies was dominated by singing stars like Kanan Devi, K.L.Saigal, Pankaj Mullick and others.

Dialogue acquired a special place in Indian film practices^[16]. Often popular playwrights, novelist, poets^[17] were called upon to write elaborate dialogues and verses, establishing an early connection between word, image and literature. In Bengal, many filmmakers borrowed from and transformed the plots of popular novels. While this was a practice that was introduced by the Madans, with studios like the New Theatres this emerged as part of a distinct *literary* tendency^[18] of Bengali cinema. Before this a 'regional' cinema with title cards in vernacular languages did exist, and in small towns and villages a 'reader' or 'narrator' often translated the titles in local languages. In short, the popularity of narration, speech and dialogue has a long history in the Indian context. Thus the producers tried to attract new audiences with advertisements like 'hear your Gods and Goddesses talk in your own language'. This was also the period when a 'dialogue cutting point' emerged in editing parlance.

By the late thirties it was evident that the 'singing-star' qualification was not adequate for the performer. Moreover, by then European and American production units were already using more sophisticated apparatus about

which our filmmakers became more or less aware. Therefore, it became pertinent to introduce the 'playback' system by either importing technologies or by indigenously 'inventing' the same. Many of the biographies (including that of director Tapan Sinha^[19]) include interesting details of their inventions. Arguably, Nitin and Mukul Bose invented the play-back system^[20] in India while shooting for the film *Bhagyachakra/Dhoop Chhaon* (1935). By and large the 'coming of sound' in India was seen as a 'positive' change despite the problems and debates on technologies, cultures and language.

Debates on Indian talkies

With the 'coming of sound' a major part of the film discourse in different languages shifted to problems of dialogue writing, the 'purity'/authenticity of the language, use of songs, the representation of 'Indian culture', the sheer technical quality of the sound film and its know-how, etc. Issues of technology and modernity were connected with question of nation and language^[21]. The Delhi-based cultural journal *Rang Bhumi* was particularly critical about the use of Hindi and Urdu in films. In an article Shri Prakashji (*Rang Bhumi*, 1933, December) wrote how the Hindu gods and goddesses were made to speak Persian and sing Urdu Gazals. Evidently, concerns of Hindu-Hindi nationalism were expressed through such cinematic discourse as another author, Phulchandra Visharadh (*Rang Bhumi*, 1933, December), rejected the 'talkies' as a 'joke'. Nevertheless, he perceived cinema as a unique form through which the 'national language' could evolve and become popular. The article ends with an appeal to the filmmakers to not simply make money, but to help the 'culture' and the nation 'progress'.

Within the history of national political thought and film discourse, signs of aggressive Hindu nationalism were sometimes quite evident. Though Hindi and Hindu are *not* same thing they are nevertheless correlated, particularly when, as Alok Rai, (2000, p.5) puts it, "Hindi has been understood, defined

and projected through a series of antitheses: with Urdu; with its “dialects”, notably Braj; with provincial languages; with English”.

Cinema, being a popular medium, was somewhat more susceptible to such polemical discourse. The politics of linguistic nationalism and the efforts to reclaim a new form of communication become pronounced with sound films. With the coming of talkies, a huge body of writings on film produced in English and in mainstream vernacular languages dealt with the subjects of nation and language. Along with deliberations on language, *Rang Bhumi* expressed concern over aesthetics and was cynical about the use of songs (epitomized as an index of national culture). Other journals questioned the validity of ‘talkies’^[22], and *New Cinema Sansar*, (1933, August) stated, “whatever the language it should be simple and pure, which may be understood by the common people”.

Ajit kumar Mukhopadhyay (*Chitrlekha*. n.d.), wrote that the problems of sound film in India stem from the existence of various communities and languages. He suggests, “Hindi, Gujarati or Urdu are being considered as the language for sound films. However, whatever the language, it should be simple and clear...” Language itself was often conceived as a hindrance to communication. B K Boral (*Chitrlekha*. 1931, January), argued how language is self-limiting and even Chaplin may lose his worldwide popularity with the coming of sound.

An anonymous article in *Chitrlekha* (1930, January), in fact, retold the myth of Garbo’s voice failing her, and discussed the problems of the coming of sound - how it can actually become an obstacle in communication. The article says, “India has 197 languages, 544 sub-languages, therefore, Bengalis will not like Tamil films, and the audience in Peshawar will not [like] Bengali films....” Certainly, what appears as scepticism about the ‘talkies’, as concern over the use of language in cinema and the development of the cinematic language, also presents an image of the idealized talkie.

In fact, these articles reveal the fear and anxiety of filmmakers all over the world. The dilemma with sound is visible in Chaplin's films as he negotiates a new form and technology. It resonates in the speech of the Boss or in the gibberish song of the Tramp in *Modern Times and City Lights*. The history of Indian cinema is dotted with anecdotes of immensely popular 'stars' of the silent era who lost their jobs as the bodies on the screen acquired a voice^[23]. During the same period Rudolph Arnheim was writing on 'Film as Art'^[24] that questioned the coming of sound and expressed his apprehensions about its effects on films. Apparently, Indian critics were participating in the worldwide debate on the coming of sound and the changes in the film aesthetics – the shifts in the narrative progression – from being action - based to word - based. For instance, much of the narrative information was now transferred to dialogues, while a dialogue cutting point became decisive.

The question of the aesthetics of sound film was addressed by Banwari Lal Bedam. He writes in *Filmiland*:

It is therefore necessary that only selected words, phrases and sentences be used so that they can be understood by the learned and unlearned alike and convey the same message to all....A really good talking picture must not have more than 350 words per reel....The dialogue writer must use simple Hindi Then comes pronunciation....

(*Filmiland*, 1932, August)

BR Oberoi writes in *Filmiland*:

Now the time has come when the novelty of the talking film is over and people want something substantial in the Talking pictures. They are demanding now good photography, good recording, good acting, good songs, good dialogues, and good plots...they want a good logical plot, psychologically right situations for songs and good acting....at

present the people want songs , but the maximum should be 20 songs and the minimum 10 songs in a picture of 11, 000 to 13, 000 feet....

(Filmland, 1932, June)

In the Indian context, however, the coming of sound was also related to problems of nationalism and language, therefore, issues of 'purity' of the language and 'authenticity' of the music became imperative, along with the aesthetic meaning of sound and music discussed above.



Chandidas, Umashashi

When women speak: The question of the bhadramahila

The films of the thirties are generally remembered as texts in which characters deliver dialogues or sing with a 'funny' nasal quality. A closer reading of these films illustrates that such renditions were nuanced and variable. Barry Salt (1983) has observed how 'either dialogue or music' would be recorded, 'never both together unless they had been recorded simultaneously', which the filmmakers sometimes did.^[25] It, however, was not an easy task to conduct as dialogue and music required different reverberations and amplification and thus was difficult to record with the same microphone.^[26] Moreover, in 'addition to direct sound, there was also a great deal of reflected sound or reverberation ...', and 'reverb' produced a metallic sound. ^[27]

Evidently, there were technical problems like that of the recording machines, mikes as well as questions of skill^[28] or the ability to use the technology. Nevertheless, ways of speaking, performance and choice of words, voice and tonal qualities became significant for Indian films. In short, there were multiple issues at stake. First, the problem of technology, and secondly, cultures of performance. Forms of expression, speech pattern, choice of words, structure of language (besides the question of 'which' language to deploy) became significant. For instance, the nasal quality of the voice with which we identify the soundtrack of *Chandidas* (Debaki Bose, 1932), appears like a presentation/performance, which is considered apt for 'respectable' women, while the 'quarrelsome' working class women speak in an unaffected tone^[29] (which is true for all early New Theatres films including *Mukti*, 1937 and *Adhikar*, 1938). Questions of respectability, voice, sound quality, and technologies merged to create a specific sound aesthetics.^[30]

Along with imposing matters like modernity, technology and culture, the 'women's question' was truly one of the fundamental subjects of debate since the nineteenth century. Numerous articles, essays produced during nineteenth and early twentieth century reflected concerns about women's education^[31]. The objective of a homogenized middle class culture was a part of the new class and cultural consciousness; and there were attempts to give fixity to it, particularly because class, caste, regional, vernacular were in actuality so sharply divided. The ambiguities demanded more defined descriptions, and these were inevitably played out by imposing new kinds of norms on the women, whose identity was to be worked in opposition to women from 'uncultured' lower classes (*chotolok*), as well as the westernized woman (*memsahib*). Eventually, many women of the working class /castes who were in reality 'working women' for centuries, were pushed into the domestic sphere, replaying to some degree the demarcations of the 'private' and 'public' of middle class domains. The middle class reform movements for the women were connected with the self-definition of class. Women of

different classes and 'traditional' women were rolled into one idea of 'emancipated' women.

The language, in which women spoke and wrote, became decisive, just as clothes and appearance, and manners, behaviour, conduct did. In the case of cinema 'ways of speaking' became crucial as the lower caste/working women would often have a more straightforward, direct, loud manner of speaking as opposed to the *bhadramahila*, who would speak in softer and almost nasal tone, the ways in which we identify them in the films of the thirties. A closer reading shows how, it was not necessarily a question of technical inadequacies^[32] but also of culture, since within the same film the *bhadramahila* speaks in an affected tone while the working woman sounds 'normal' (as in Adhikar and Chandidas)^[33].

Subjects of caste, class, and ideal language; etiquette and habits of women, merchants, fishermen, beggars, labourers and so on, have been addressed in films and literature. Moreover, there have been attempts to 'reproduce' idealised speech patterns. Linguistic refinement was associated with social respectability. The low class/caste women were differentiated from the *bhadramahila* by the 'vulgarity' of 'their' speech, while the vocabulary of higher *caste* women was supposed to be a mix between 'refinement and vulgarity'. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of twentieth Century the difference between vernacular and genteel Bengali were worked out not simply on the basis of different classes but also between men and women in the same household. Thus, women from the marginalized caste or class appeared threatening as they highlighted issues of social mobility and change. While the *bhadralok* public sphere had to be brought into existence in some way or the other, the monitoring of the *bhadralok* cultural forms became crucial. Formal education was thought to be a requirement for the *bhadramahila* and became acceptable only when it was demonstrated that it was possible for a woman to acquire the cultural refinements offered by modern education without jeopardizing her place at home, that is, without becoming a *mamsaheb*.^[34] Partha Chatterjee (1993, p.127) writes:

[T]he “new” woman was quite the reverse of the “common” woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. Alongside the parody of the Westernized woman, this other construct is repeatedly emphasized in the literature of the nineteenth century through a host of lower-class female characters who make their appearance in the social milieu of the new middle class – maidservants, washerwomen, barbers, peddlers, procuresses, prostitutes. It was precisely this degenerated condition of women that nationalism claimed it would reform....

For instance, in *Chandidas*, when Rami and Chandidas are introduced in the establishing sequence, the problem of the film is also established. Chandidas is an upper caste priest who is attracted to Rami, a lower caste, widowed washerwoman who also works as the sweeper in the temple. Rami thus appear to be displaced from the position of power because of class, caste and gender. Such a relationship is unacceptable within the established social structures, and yet it is through his associations with Rami that Chandidas finally discovers the new religion of love. Therefore, in the first sequence, Rami not only interrogates the ‘look’ (of the camera and the characters) by looking back, she also creates a space for female aspiration and questioning, which the narrative may not be otherwise equipped to address and acknowledge. A pan reveals that both Rami and Chandidas are being watched by Kakanmala, Rami’s sister-in-law, who is also her friend, and they are also being watched by the village chief, and the audience. This intrusive gaze of the King/village chief situates him and his cronies as moral watchdogs who represent the patriarchy. The King and his men are aware that Chandidas is not merely fishing, and they suggest that he is ‘fishing for something else’. However, Rami is also conspicuously aware that they are being ‘looked at’. Hence, as Rami looks intently at Chandidas, and also at the audience, Kakanmala, her sister-in-law, enters the frame. Kakan voices obvious social concerns.

Kakan : Do you know, you are a widow?

Rami : The day I realized I was a woman, I also realized I was a widow....

Kakan : Do you know you are beautiful? And young?

Rami : ...even the filthy black waters of the lake reflect my beauty....
And, what else... what else did you ask sakhi...?

Rami's honest declarations reduce Kakan's retreat into a comic gesture, and the 'standardized' background music only adds on to it.

In *Chandidas*, certain intriguing subversions take place. Here Rami who is the 'washerwoman' is supposedly 'coarse, loud, quarrelsome' and devoid of 'superior moral sense'. Yet she threatens to reform social conditions even as she represents her class and caste conditions. Initially, it is apparent that Rami the heroine, does not actually speak like a 'washerwoman', instead, she talks like a bhadramahila with affected tone; while Kakan becomes her working class other and therefore is 'coarse and loud'. While this may be studied as an attempt to refine working class women's speech and language and appropriate various kinds of lower class/castes discontents, Rami does not seem to be appropriated since she remains extremely critical about gender, class and caste issues in several scenes, and in fact, uses her 'voice' to speak against social conditioning.

The social reform movements were connected to the larger processes of defining class, differentiating public private to ideas of nationalism. And, in such endeavours women often internalized the offered models and re-constituted themselves with varying degrees of conformity.^[35] Nevertheless, in popular films like *Chandidas* the 'common woman' often 'threatens' to represent her entire class and reformulate class positioning, with her aggressive atypical body language (with hand on her waist and a slight twist, that accentuates her body), sexuality (as opposed to female subjectivity), mocking smirk and glance.



Washer-woman returns the look

II

Other debates on sound and film

The Yale French Studies issue on *Cinema/Sound* (1980) was one of the earliest anthologies in English that dealt with film sound in the context of modern film theory. This collection included important essays by Christian Metz, Daniel Peherson, David Bordwell, Philip Rosen, Mary Ann Doane and others, which helped create new perspectives on sound technologies and cultures. Subsequently, some of the authors such as Rick Altman revisited their own theses in more recent work.^[36]

The culture of film music had interesting overlaps with other immensely popular practices like gramophone records, and the ways in which listeners acquire albums and listen to the 'disembodied' floating voices and music in disparate spaces, under varying conditions. What is arguably lost in such practices is the 'aura of performance'. Authors like Roland Barthes argued that with mechanical reproduction the 'grain' of the singing voice is lost. He says, "[t]he 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs..." (1977, p.185). According to Barthes, the body of the performer that is "the body that controls, conducts, coordinates" become absent when we listen to the mechanical reproductions in disparate spaces (1977, p. 149). He writes about loss of 'musica practica', as we learn to appreciate music through absences, that is through records/recorded

music.^[37] These practices have removed the musical existence of the 'auratic' quality of live performance and have significantly changed the cultures of *musica practica* for both musicians and audiences. Recorded music is separated from its own time and space, or its very special existence at the place where it has been performed. However, I wish to argue that this (temporary) displacement of the 'aura' is an effect and a necessary condition to engage in new forms of performance and participation.

When Saigal sang: The aura of performance

Street Singer (Phani Mazumdar, 1938) is the story of Bhulua (Saigal) who wishes to be a performer and is a musician par excellence, and Manju (Kanan Devi) who is a dancer and a singer. As a wandering child, Bhulua rescues Manju from the orphanage and gives her shelter (on the streets). They grow up together on the streets on the fringes of the city, supporting each other and nurturing big dreams.

The film, working within the popular mode in terms of plot, narrative style and theme, juxtaposition of images and use of music and stars, addresses the question of migration to the city. Bhulua and Manju arrive in the city as grown ups, and in due course Manju becomes successful as a singer. The city is full of impostors. But it also encourages class mobility. Bhulua's talent is recognized and appreciated, while the beautiful Manju quickly becomes a popular singer and actress. The question of market and popular forms, city and urbanization, are addressed here. *Street Singer* negotiates new cultural forms and forces; the emergent working class and its consolidation, and the entry of new labour forces into the city.

The remarkable song 'babul mora', sung in two musical variations, is the 'climax' of the film where these issues merge. Bhulua is Manju's constant companion through her entire journey from orphanage to streets to theatres to big houses. Despite his love for Manju (which is not exactly unrequited but remains unaddressed) Bhulua remains an outsider to Manju's new world. The

film ends with an elaborate rain-sequence, where Bhulua walks away from the city, and Manju, finally realizing that Bhulua is her true love, runs after him. Eventually, the aspiring proletariat are sent back to the fringes, into obscurity and anonymity. Nevertheless, *Street Singer* is more than a story of good poor people remaining poor. It popularized certain codes of narrative, subaltern characters prototypes, codes of music and performance through one of the early cult figures of the Indian Cinema, K L Saigal, whose voice singularly influenced the evolution of the character of music in films.

K L Saigal's first song 'Jhulano jhulao', sung in *asavari gandhari* created history^[38]. He introduced the 'recitative' mode in film song and performances. Saigal rarely used any orchestra, especially for 'Babul mora', which is performed in pure *bhairavi* in the outdoors. He became the first truly 'pan-Indian male star',^[39] whose renditions of the *ragas yaman* and *sindura* were widely admired, while his accompaniments were mostly restrained and evocative rather than loud and assertive. A *tanpura*, a harmonium, and a *tabla* would often accompany his songs. Even when there was an orchestra, it was used with restraint. For instance, while singing *kafi*, *khamaj* or *desh*, he would perform a line of *alaap*, and then break into speech or change the tempo (*laye*) and the emphasis (*tal*), and surprise the audience as in *President* (Nitin Bose, 1936) or *Devdas* (P C Barua, 1935). Associating speech with music became a feature of his star persona, along with his comic sense. There was indeed not much singing in songs like 'Sukh ke dukh ke ab din bitat nahi', or 'Ek bangla bane nyara' where he included rhymes. While the constant shift from music to speech was a remarkable recording achievement in 1935, his powerful voice and 'nasal' rendition with a tragic grandeur had its own appeal. The poignancy of the narrative of *Devdas*, the way Saigal as the hero approaches despair and death is attained through his singing.

In an interview Saigal said:

I am not a singer, not really. I can only be called a phraser. I have no true classical training except what I have heard and remembered....I have a certain feeling how the *dhaivat* should feel in *maulkaus*, and the *madhyama* and also the nature of the *nishad*....this changes from Raga to Raga....My favourite Raga is *bhairavi*. To know *bhairavi* is to know all the Ragas....

When he sang the famous *Thumri*, 'Babul mora' (in the third white note of the harmonium) it created unique resonances. The two variations of 'Babul mora' in *Street Singer* interestingly displayed disparate musical traditions in cinema and, more widely, in culture, as the film borrowed certain set practices of classical music to cinema.



Kanan Devi's version of 'Babul Mora'

The song has a long history of several eminent classical vocalists singing it.^[40] Therefore, when this is brought up in the film, it has a lengthy build up. After Manju becomes famous and successful, (while Bhulua, is seeking recognition through radio),^[41] some 'Khan Saheb' chooses to modify the tune of the song. Though Manju says, "Bhulua insists there is no other way one can sing the song", yet, to tease Bhulua she agrees to do the new tune. This tune is sung like a *chaiti* which is a faster as well more vulgar variation of the *thumri*, practised within the Benaras *gharana*^[42]. Bhulua is offended by the new melody (which is not in pure *bhairavi*) and leaves the city, its theatres, and Manju as well. On his way to nowhere, clutching the

harmonium close to his chest, Saigal sings the purest form of 'Babul mora' in *bhairavi*.^[43] This performance of 'Babul mora', by an untrained actor working within a popular form on the streets creates new meanings.^[44] The fact that the nuanced variations of *gharanas* within the classical tradition are used in this film, and that such signification was appreciated by the 'masses' is an interesting case in point. By and large, it is remarkable the manner in which classical musical forms were included in popular films, thereby blurring the distinctions of 'high literature and low culture'.^[45]

Interestingly, Kanan Devi, who was also a national 'star', writes in her autobiography (*Sabare Ami Nomi*, 1973) how she did not like *yaman* initially; her favourite ragas were *purvi* and *bihag*. And, though Kanan Devi retells how supportive Saigal was during the shooting of *Street Singer* she also admits that she felt 'nervous' to perform with the eminent singer. Surely, films like *Street Singer* (and *Lagan*, 1941 etc.,) were meant to juxtapose the singing skills of the two singers. And the two variations of 'Babul mora' (one by Saigal and the other 'populist' version by Kanan Devi) evidently draw from such extra-diegetic facts.

Within popular modes, certain tendencies emerge that both contradict and correspond to the *literary* tendency of Bengali cinema. Rabindranath Tagore, R.C. Boral, Timir Baran and Punkaj Mullik had their own reputation within the musical culture, and using them in films produced different resonances from the dominant culture of *literariness* in Bengali cinema. The *bhadralok's* concerns with 'respectability',^[46] I wish to argue, is played out with a difference here. Instead of progressing from literature to cinema, we move from cinema to music to exemplify how popular forms incorporated classical traditions. Even when the face of the star singer Saigal is projected in standardized ways, for instance through close-up and with back light, the use of classical music entirely shifts the focus of the film from the popular to the 'classical' (as distinct from the *literary*). Somewhere the issues of imagined (literary) cinema and imagined (*bhadralok*) audiences become fuzzy as the

'popular' negotiates the 'classical', if not the modern and the *literary*. It shows an awareness of the new kinds of musical forms, structures and possibilities, which were being created for popular consumption^[47]. One may argue that this grows from the use of music in popular theatre (a culture to which K C Dey belonged); deployment of different musical patterns, use of various instruments, and even the disparate voice/tonal qualities, which were extremely popular within cultures of theatre.

Another popular tendency from which film music was borrowing was the Band music (for instance the Maihar Band) created by eminent musicians like Alauddin Khan and others.^[48] Certainly, there was an emergent economy of music and perception of modern urban musical tropes.^[49] In these new styles of musical compositions one can easily locate multiple musical cultures, which were competing with established practices, both evaluating and representing the 'classical' as an idealized style (as in 'Babul mora'), as well as challenging the hierarchy of classical music. A popular form emerged through new forms of mechanical reproductions (records, film music etc.), producing new identities for musicians, new spheres for musical transaction and new voice quality.^[50] In such films, music is composite and contemporary,^[51] as popular melodies (Dhun, Geet) merge with classical structures producing the 'sound of modernity' or emergent urbanity.^[52]

I wish to argue that in early talkies, where sound is in sync, on screen, and mostly diegetic, the resonances and meanings are somewhat different from the theories of 'disembodied' sound and music destroying the 'aura' of performances we mentioned earlier. Certainly, these are mechanically recorded images and sound, which have been recorded from multiple positions and camera angles, in multiple spaces, and thereafter have been edited and restructured. Moreover, as we listen (and see) we first hear a mechanical sound, then a voice, words, rendition, and the sound of music. Nevertheless, it can recreate the 'aura of performance' in its own terms as the star /actor (who is also a singer) sings in a time which is real, where the

real and reel time become one. In many cases the mechanical rendition of the song is a continuous take, and has a strong 'here and now' effect. This is particularly true in the case of the blind singer K C Dey, who entirely disregards the camera 'eye', through his bodily gestures, blindness, and overall performance. His performance, "creates its own sense of space and volume" (Chanan, 1994), and its own soundscape.

For film performers, the vocal training (as in the case of classical singers) or the ability to play an instrument did not have much significance, though many of them were trained in classical music, like Kanan Devi who was formally trained in North Indian classical music and Pahari Sanyal, who was trained under Pandit Vishnunarayan Bhatkhande and others. Kanan Devi writes in her autobiography how 'Raibabu' rehearsed her tirelessly for his films. Therefore, Indian film music carries a variety of sub-textual meanings, which are connected to both popular as well as classical practices. Therefore, modes of appreciation are distinct from the cultures of classical music. Certainly, this singing body is not a real body; its is a 'fantasmatic' body reconstituted by technology, which functions in a different time and space removed from the 'original' time and space (that is, when and where it was enacted). Moreover, as many argue, even when the 'aura' re-emerges, it's connected with the demands of the star system. It is a 'degenerated aura', according to Adorno, that attempts to suppress the fact that it has been mechanically reproduced. However, in the case of early talkies, since the question of mechanical reproduction is wedged between issues of nationalism and modernity, technology is understood in very different terms. The technical aspects are rarely 'suppressed' and rarely are songs segregated from the narrative as 'spectacle- performance' as in the case Broadway and Hollywood musicals. Technology as a matter of fact is often foregrounded in many films, constantly drawing attention to itself, through camera movements,^[53] and by other devices, or even at times through actual verbal references.

In a critique of the film music of Debaki Bose's *Chandidas*, SD Burman^[54] describes Rami as 'off tune' which he insists, is nonetheless compensated for by her 'expressions' or 'performance'. Evidently, two different forms of performance are being referred to here. The film draws on Chandidas's legend and poems, RC Boral's experience of Hindustani classical music, traditions of *kirtan*, cultures of theatre, K C Dey's unique performance style and popularity, etc. The last sequence of *Chandidas* is remarkable in the manner in which it deploys 'Chol phire apon ghore' in *malkauns*, sung by K C Dey, where the camera observes patiently as the blind singer performs. This sequence is the trickiest, as this magical performance is followed by 'concert' music / or a standard musical pattern used in the jatra and other popular theatre. Certainly, there are multiple meanings and cultural sources as both Bose and R C Boral address the new technologies of sound.

Michel Chion's *Audio-Vision*(1994) is a nuanced historical study of the development of sound aesthetics. Walter Murch in the foreword to the book writes how there is a 'metaphoric distance between sound and image' and that 'greater the differences, the greater the depth' of the scene.^[55] I wish to argue that, in popular Indian films even when the song and dance sequences are extra-diegetic or are para-narrative elements such 'excesses' in actuality can function like a 'metaphor' that reflects the disposition and the meaning of the scene. Certainly, with such performances one can produce a new 'dimensionality' as "we see something that exists only in our minds" (Walter Murch, 1994).



Saigal singing 'Babul Mora'

Sound in cinema means many things at the same point in time. It can mean the sound of ambience/the space in which the film is screened, the sound of the machine, voice and speech, music and noise. Such sounds could be diegetic or non-diegetic; sync or non-sync; on-screen or off-screen, with denotative and connotative meanings and so on. Hence, when Saigal sings the purest form of 'Babul Mora' in bhairavi, walking on the streets and clutching his harmonium, this unusual musical journey reopens the questions of 'aura' and performance, which is apparently 'lost' in mechanical reproductions. An 'auratic performance' requires a physical presence and engagement on the part of both listeners and performers, which is arguably lost during recorded performances. Nevertheless, Indian cinema invents new ways of performance, and engagement through its tableaux-like presentations of situations, frontality, direct address, and 'darsanic' visual investment. A new practice of Srvan or listening is established. If there has been a 'de-auraticization' of sounds of music, popular cinema performs a 're-auraticization', and 'creates its own sense of space and volume.' To quote Paul Filmer it is, "an image of what might be termed 'lived' or experienced time...measurable only in terms of sensibilities, tensions, and emotions; ..."[56] Somehow, the 'aura' of Saigal's voice in a more general as well as particular sense, and the tonal quality and physicality of his performance, reclaim- with a difference - what is perhaps 'lost' in representations. To quote Mary Ann Doane: "even when asynchronous or 'wild' sound is utilized, the

fantasmatic body's attribute of unity is not lost. It is simply displaced – the body in the film becomes the body of the film.” (Doane, 1980, p. 35)

Afterword: And then there was playback

Bhagyachakra (Nitin Bose, 1935, *Dhoop Chhaon* in Hindi) is a film that is marked with the technical inventiveness of the brothers Nitin and Mukul Bose. Reportedly, they 'invented' the playback system while shooting this film, which allowed them to inter-cut between shots of K.C. Dey's performance and other actions. Playback also allowed interesting sound and visual overlaps in several sequences. Nitin Bose made considerable innovations in terms of shot-taking (low angle close ups of Dey, high-key lighting, etc.) the film emerges as an interesting aural-visual work of art. Some of the songs used in the Hindi version of the film, like 'Baba ma ke ankhe khol' or 'Teri gathri me laaga chor' have become part of our contemporary pastiche.

K C Dey plays a character in the film who is called Surdas and who is a blind theatre singer. Thus in a way Dey plays himself. The film dealing with the archetypal theme of lost and found, and memory loss uses K C Dey in a fascinating way. Within the film his name is Surdas, and he also enacts Surdas's narratives (the legendary *Bhakti* poet who was blind) as he awaits reunion with his lost foster son. In effect, there is a plot within a plot, as the popular blind singer not only plays a popular theatre actor but the role he that he plays within the play is that of Surdas. Evidently, the film is a tribute to the great artist who, through the tonal quality of his voice, very distinctive style of rendition of the *ragas*, gestures, and display of his own blindness, rewrote the norms of a popular visual medium. Ray's *Inner Eye*, a documentary on the great artist Binode Bihari Mukhopadhyay, is another instance where cinema shows the ways in which an artist addresses his own blindness. For instance, Binode Bihari's expression "Blindness is a new feeling, a new experience, a new state of being", has a strong parallel with K C Dey's approach to blindness. Thus we see the paradox of blindness and

insight that characterizes pre-modern literature^[57], being played out in the modern Bengali trajectory of cinema. Through his blindness and *abhinaya*, Dey negates set patterns of expressions, and the recording systems. Certainly, popular performances and imagery in these films compel us to re-read notions 'dis-embodied' voices. Dey embodies an 'aura' and dynamism that problematizes notions of 'de-auraticization' and mechanical reproduction of sound.

References:

[1](#) Also, New Theatres or NT.

[2](#) Also, Imperial Movietone.

[3](#) *Alam Ara* took four months to complete because of the difficult conditions in which it was shot. The studio was close to railway tracks and therefore the film could only be shot when there were no trains passing.

[4](#) Also, Madans.

[5](#) *Joydeb*, director: Jyotish Bandyopadhyay; *Radha Krishna*, director: Amar Chowdhury; and in 1935 came their last two ventures- *Phantom of Calcutta*, director: Ananda Mohan Roy; *Satya Pathe*, director: Amar Chowdhury.

[6](#) Elphinstone Picture Palace, now known as Chaplin.

[7](#) *Mishar Rani*, 1925; *Sati Lakshmi*, 1925, both directed by Jyotish Bandyopadhyay, and in 1926 *Dharma Patni*, *Joydeb*, *Prafulla*, *Jeler Meye*, all directed by Jyotish Bandyopadhyay and *Krishnakanter Will* directed by Priyanath Gangopadhyay.

[8](#) *Niyoti*, produced by Aurora Film Corporation, directed by Jogesh Chowdhury, was the last silent Bengali film.

[9](#) Talkies were an instant success. For instance in Kumbakonam (South India), a showman tried to beat the talkie shows (and cheat the audiences) by producing his own 'talkie'. He hid an interpreter, a singer, and musical instruments 'behind the screen'. But when this trick was exposed the screen was pulled down. Therefore, a suspicious audience paid for an *Alam Ara* screening only after the party showed them the film.

[10](#) In case of New Theatres actors like K C Dey, Uma Sashi, Durgadas Bandopadhyay joined the studio.

[11](#) The popularity of actors like Sulochana and Nadia waned because their pronunciation was 'faulty'.

[12](#) Nissar (of *Shirin Farad*) got his first 'male role' in the film.

[13](#) For instance, M S Subhalakshmi played the role of heavenly singer *Narada*.

[14](#) Rai Chand or R C Boral was the son of a musician (Lal Chand Boral), and before he came to NT he already had a career in music with the Indian Broadcasting Company. RC Boral was trained in Hindustani style and worked with both Hindustani classical structures as well as Bengali folk music and *kirtans* with ease and elan. He introduced the *ghazal* style of singing to the Bengali music scene. His use of string instruments along with *Shehnai* and bamboo flute created the unique music of *Chandidas*. In fact, the first New Theatres big hit was *Chandidas*, while its first national success was *Puran Bhakt* (1933). R C Boral and the director Debaki Bose together made several films, which used music and poems for narration.

[15](#) Timir Baran Bhattacharya was a professional sarod player trained under Radhikaprasad Goswami and Ustad Allauddin Khan. He became a member of Uday Shankar's dance troupe, and worked with Madhu Bose. He did music for Bose's plays and created music which heavily borrowed from the eclectic musical traditions of the Maihar Band. In the post-independence era he joined Tagore's Santiniketan as faculty.

[16](#) *Udayer Pathe*, 1944, proved to be a great success particularly because of its dialogue. A 78 rpm record reproducing the dialogue track was eventually released.

[17](#) Besides adapting from popular novels of authors like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, writers like Premankur Athorothy, Nazrul Islam, Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay, Premendra Mitra were involved in writing plots and screenplays for films. Most of them eventually emerged as directors.

[18](#) In my doctoral thesis, *The New Theatres Ltd.: 'The Cathedral of Culture' and the House of the Popular* (submitted to Jadavpur University, Sept. 2007), I have examined the role of the 'author' in Bengali cinema, and explored issues of literature, *literariness* and the *literary* connections in cinema by examining films like *Daktar* (1940), *Udayer Pathe*, etc. One of the chapters deals with the questions of realism (in novels), notions of *literariness*, and how it was reworked in Bengali cinema.

[19](#) Even when the studios knew about play-back systems most could not afford to import one. Tapan Sinha in his autobiography *Mone Pore* (Calcutta: ABP Pvt. Ltd., 1995) narrates how they recreated one by converting the editing equipment into a playback machine.

[20](#) Alternately, by the Prabhat Film Company during the shooting of *Sant Tukaram* (1936).

[21](#) See Rai, Alok. (2000).

[22](#) In an article Achchyt Chattopadhyay (*Bioscope*, May, 1930) wrote about the "Business" of talkies as opposed to "Art". He was critical about the technical quality and the 'hissing' noise of the sound machines and suggested that talkies will 'always' remain handicapped because of their technology. More importantly though, he discusses the purpose of plot in talkies and its

relation to theatre, making a comparative analysis of Indian films with British and American films.

[23](#) For instance, a very big star like Sulochona (Ruby Meyers) who apparently earned more than the Governor, lost her ground almost immediately with the coming of sound, while the legendary action queen Nadia, in an interview in the 1980s, described how her “problem was language”. As a matter of fact, history of Bengali cinema is dotted with dismal stories of actresses who rose to the top rather quickly and lost their popularities even more quickly with the shifting production systems and technical changes. In a way, these stories are indicative of the unevenness of the development of film industry in India.

[24](#) ‘A New Laocoon: Artistic Composites and the Talking Film’ (1938) in Arnheim, *Film Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983)

[25](#) See Barry Salt, ‘Film Style and Technology in the Thirties: Sound’, in Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (Eds.), *Film Sound, Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

[26](#) See Rick Altman, ‘The Evolution of Sound Technology’ in Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (Eds.), *Film Sound, Theory and Practice*

[27](#) See Rick Altman ‘The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound’ in Rick Altman (Ed.), *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, (NY/ London: Routledge, 1992).

[28](#) Rick Altman writes:

In order to maintain intelligibility of dialogue, ... [Hollywood] studios were resorting to the use of multiple microphones.... [t]he resultant blend of sound... may not be said to represent any given point in audition, but is sound which would be heard by a man with five or six very long ears, said ears extending in various directions.... (‘Sound Space’ op cit, p.49.)

[29](#) Also see Amy Lawrence ‘Women’s Voices in Third World Cinema’, in Rick Altman (Ed), *Sound Theory Sound Practice*.

[30](#) Sukanto Majumdar (sound recordist) pointed out to me how the voice quality has changed over the years, and the ‘roughness’/simplicity of the singers have now become more and more ‘refined’/affected. Nevertheless, in everyday situations the ‘voice quality’ (amongst women particularly) still varies accordingly to class, locations (rural/urban), etc.

[31](#) It is interesting to revisit the seminal nineteenth century essay, Bankim Chandra’s *Prachina ebam Nabina*, initially published in *Bangadarshan*, as it brings up the question of how the ordinary woman like - Pachi, Rami, Madhi - were being educated in English and therefore were getting detached from their own cultural roots and becoming lazy, uncaring, self-indulgent, disrespectful and even transgressing ‘their limits’. *Nabina* is like a *babu* ... writes Bankim Chandra. Not that he was totally against women’s liberation (he reminds us of the role of

women in French Revolution in this article. The female characters of his novels were very powerful indeed), he is critical about 'English education'.

[32](#) The problems with early sound films were the limitations of the latitudinal scope of the film stock and the limitations of the carbon and the condenser microphones. Certainly, these non-directional microphones were not easy to handle. It was obviously impossible to recreate a complex sound track when microphones recorded sound randomly. Music and dialogue existed simultaneously only when these were recorded in that fashion. But, the amount of (fast) reverberations required for dialogue varies greatly from what is appropriate (slow reverberations) for music. Similarly dialogues required different amplification, thus difficult to record with same microphone. This would eventually encourage the 'playback' system. Until then in the early 'talkies' which were predominantly 'musicals', the sound quality was extremely uneven and at times 'faulty'.

[33](#) Gouri's performance in *Sant Tukaram* (1936) is a case in point.

[34](#) In fact, women wearing blouse or petticoat, shoes and spectacles were also regarded to be 'vulgar'.

[35](#) Partha Chatterjee (1993), in the chapters 'The Nation and its Women' and 'Women and the Nation', brings up issues of the reformed/educated women who also became reformers. There were not only discourses on the 'new woman' but many women emerged as writers themselves (writing *atma-katha/smriti katha* and also on social issues, etc).

[36](#) See Altman, *Sound Theory Sound Practice*.

[37](#) While the culture of records and radio (and later cassettes, CDs, and now iPod or mobile phone, etc.) established the practice of enjoying 'disembodied' music/ sound where the physical presence of the singer/ musician is immaterial. One may argue this produced new sense of spaces particularly within our urban experience as we listen to music in homes, offices, pubs, cars and so on. Recently the popularity of FM radio has produced a new sense of city-space which is fluid, dissolving disparities, and are somewhat 'time-less /space-less', representing the ephemerality of city -spaces.

[38](#) See Raghava R Menon, *KL Saigal: the Pilgrim of the Swara* (New Delhi: Hind Pocket Books (Pvt.) Ltd., 1989).

[39](#) Pran Neville in *K L Saigal, Immortal Singer and Superstar* (New Delhi: Neville Books., 2004), writes about Saigal's performance in Lahore (in an 'NT week'), which was a stupendous success.

[40](#) For instance, Ustad Bade Gulam Ali Khan has his own rendition of 'Babul Mora'.

[41](#) Repeatedly posited as the new mode of address as in *Jiban Maran* (1939).

[42](#) Amlan Dasgupta pointed out this difference to me.

[43](#) Saigal, in his interview mentioned earlier, says “there is no other way to sing it”.

[44](#) *The Tribune* (Lahore, December 23, 1937) published an advertisement of Saigal’s performance with Sidheswari Bai of Benaras from 25th and 28th December in Lahore. Evidently, Saigal, despite the lack of formal training and his connections with popular music, did not altogether avoid the realm of the classical.

[45](#) There are certain discrepancies regarding the information on the recordings of these songs. While it is popularly known that when Saigal performed ‘Babul mora’ the entire orchestra moved with him, and Pran Neville(2004) also mentions how *Street Singer* particularly *did not* use playback, Kanan Devi, mentions in her autobiography how some of the songs for the Bengali version of the same film (*Saathi*, 1938) were pre-recorded. Therefore, presumably a playback technique was deployed for *Saathi*. However, in this essay I am not only concerned with the technicalities, but with various modes of performance within musical cultures, though I think the pre-playback films generated an ‘aura’ of music through the musical renditions.

[46](#) In the nineteenth century the Bengali intelligentsia carefully developed the identity of the middle- class who were below the *zamindars* but above the workers. It modelled itself on the European ‘middle class’, which as it learnt through Western education, had brought about the immense changes from medieval to modern times through movements like Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment and democratic revolutions. Nonetheless, its own social ‘base’ was agriculture, not industry or trade, which the British and their Marwari subordinates controlled. Therefore, the Bengali *Babu* reinstated his self-pride through government service or professions of law, education or medicine. Alternatively, to use Partha Chatterjee’s (1993) comment “they tried to achieve through education what was denied to them in economy”. Within this cultural sphere, ‘writing’ became an instrument of self-projection, a source of knowledge of the times and an attempt to historicize the era.

[47](#) Very short, few minutes versions of the popular *ragas* were done on ‘records’ in the early part of twentieth century. This created debates on structures of classical music and performances.

[48](#) Amlan Dasgupta pointed these out to me.

[49](#) The Parsee involvement in commercialization of ‘art’ (theatre, fine arts, films, music) is an interesting case in point.

[50](#) It was the period when the voice of Hirabai Barodekar became extremely popular, and was perhaps a representative voice of the era.

[51](#) Kanan Devi writes about the orchestration in these films. Her performance in *Bidyapati* was breathtaking.

[52](#) New Theatres for instance, borrowed from various musical traditions and employed music composers like Rai Chand Boral, Pankaj Mullik and Timir Baran who had earned respectability within music cultures. Boral borrowed not only from the poems or *padavali* of *Bidyapati* when he composed for *Bidyapati* he also borrowed from the large repertoire of music - classical

structures and many kinds of instrumental music, including (brass) wind and string instruments; from folk music, myths, ballads, and from theatre as well (where the emphasis was on words and narration). Nevertheless, the background music used in *Chandidas* is borrowed from the popular generic patterns established by classical Hollywood cinema. Evidently, the composer Rai Chand Boral was working with different cultures of sound including *kirtan*, classical music as well as standard popular models.

[53](#) As in the case of *Mukti*, *Jiban Maran*, etc.

[54](#) In an article published in *Filmland*, November, 1932 (n.d.) .

[55](#) Chion himself in the essay 'Projections of Sound on Image' comments on the use of obvious sounds, words, VO etc. See Chion, *Audio-Vision, Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

[56](#) See Paul Filmer's essay 'Songtime, Sound Culture, Rhythm and Sociality', in M. Bull and L. Back (Eds), *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

[57](#) As we have seen from *Oedipus Rex* to *King Lear*.

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