

PRACTICE OF CLASSICAL MUSIC IN BANGLADESH: THE IMPACT OF THE 1947 PARTITION & PRESENT SITUATION

SHARIF MUHAMMAD AREFIN RONY¹, DR. RAJESH SHAH²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Instrumental Music, Faculty of Performing Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

²Professor, Department of Instrumental Music, Faculty of Performing Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

Abstract

Bangla literature, music, and dance have long enhanced other Indian cultural practices. Bengal has a long history of cultivating classical music. Both Bharata Muni's "Natya Shastra" the basic text on Indian theatre, music and dance/performing arts (between 200 BCE and 200 CE) and Mātanga Muni's "Brihaddeshi" (6th to 8th century CE) make references to Bengali music and ragas. Ragas have been employed in Bengali music since Charyagiti part of ancient Bengali literature Charyapad (9th century). Bengal has been a longtime supporter of classical music and has gained the admiration of astute listeners throughout India. After the Indian subcontinent was divided on the two-nation theory, the appeal of classical music in East Bengal (modern day Bangladesh) was abruptly lost although it was loved and created by Bengali musicians and went on to win hearts around the globe. Classical music suffered greatly as a result of the 1947 partition. Almost all of the eminent music practitioners and patrons settled permanently in India. The few who remained in East Bengal were not able to develop classical music for the prevalence of a hostile social and political environment under Pakistani rule. Bangladesh is still working to overcome the political instability and unfavorable atmosphere for cultural practices that have caused the country's hubs for the practice of classical music to close down one by one since the partition. However, times are changing; nowadays there is a large number of young people who are passionate about classical music and are excelling in it. The shift in Bangladesh's classical music scene following the partition is the subject of this essay.

Keywords: Partition 1947, Classical music, Culture, Political, patronization.

INTRODUCTION

"The area commonly referred to as West Bengal and Bangladesh is associated with numerous negative connotations stemming from natural calamities including floods, cyclones, and famines. However, in terms of culture, it is among the richest and most vibrant areas of the subcontinent for classical, folk, cinema, and devotional music." (Ken Hunt 2021).

Following the 1947 partition and granting of self-rule, Bengal was partitioned into provinces based on arbitrary but pragmatic religion lines. India received the western portion, while East Bengal—later renamed East Pakistan—joined Pakistan in the east as a province. For the people of Bangladesh, the common faith of Islam proved to be an insufficient unifying force. A nine-month Liberation War culminated in the formal establishment of a much ravaged yet independent Bangladesh in late 1971.

This densely populated region is one of the most linguistically, religiously, and ethnically diverse places on Earth, which is reflected in innumerable waves of colonization since prehistoric times. West Bengal and Bangladesh share a mainstream culture that goes beyond the religious divide between their predominant Hindu and Muslim religions and centers around Bengali, or Bangla, as it is known in the region (Ken Hunt 2021).

East Bengal is home to the majority of well-known Indian classical musicians who are well-known throughout the globe. Nevertheless, the area cannot lay claim to have enabled the rise of a single internationally known classical music performer over the past 76 years. Even so, this is the birthplace of renowned classical music maestros such as Ustad Allauddin Khan, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Annapurna Devi, Ustad Ayat Ali Khan, Sachin Dev Burman and Ustad Bahadur Khan. East Bengal is the home of Pandit Ravi Shankar's family as well. East Bengal, or Bangladesh, is where family roots lie of numerous well-known artists of India, including Pandit Swapan Chowdhury, Pandit Ajoy Chakraborty, Pandit Kumar Bose, and Pandit Tejendra Narayan Majumdar. However, the exchange of popular music between the two Bengals was not that much affected by the partition. In spite of restrictions and migration of artists, the music of the two Bengals persisted and spread

amongst both sides. As time goes on, people of the regions continue to listen to, practice, influence, and use popular music of each other through various media. Some gifted artists of West Bengal also moved to East Bengal after 1947 while many musicians of East Bengal settled in India. But while discussions over the matter continue in popular music, classical music suffers greatly.

In this context, Prof. Dr Asit Roy (Jun 2016, The Daily Janakantha), a classical vocal artist and Head of The Department of department of 'Music', University of Rajshahi, said, 'Classical music was once centered on kings or landlords. After the division of the country, its patronage fell. That void is yet to be filled. Many had been learning from India but it is no longer ongoing. Although there is some potential among the newcomers, it is not possible for them to retain it due to social and economic reasons.'

The practice of classical music had a shift in tempo following the partition. Some points need to be addressed in order to comprehend the effects of this political split between East Bengal and East Pakistan, and eventually, independent Bangladesh -- 1. The origins of classical music in Bengal; 2. The practice of classical music in East Bengal prior to partition; 3. The status of classical music during the Pakistani era; and 4. The dynamics of classical music practice in Bangladesh after independence.

THE ORIGINS OF CLASSICAL MUSIC IN BENGAL

The antiquity of music and culture in Bengal is demonstrated through its references in Bharata Muni's 'Natyashastra' Furthermore, descriptions of many ragas, such as Gaudaraga, Gaudakaishiki, Gaudapanchama, and Bangal, as well as navaras, plays, and dances can be found in Matanga Muni's 'Brihaddesi'. (Chitrayudh Ghatak, July 2018)

Ragas are the basic modes used in classical music of Bangladesh. These musical pieces are composed using the melodies of north Indian ragas. Ragas are utilized in "Charyagiti", the first documented form of song in Bangla (9th century). Ragas are the inspiration behind many of Jayadeva's songs, including Gita Govinda, **musical genre** Padavali Kirtan, Mangal Giti, Shyama Sangeet, Tappa, Brahma Sangeet, and Tagore songs. In the 18th century, north Indian ragas were first used in Bangla songs. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, this became more widespread. Among the forerunners of this movement were Ramnidhi Gupta, Raghunath Roy, Kali Mirza, and Ramshankar Bhattacharya, who founded the Bishnupur Gharana. This pattern was significantly influenced by Wajid Ali Shah, the Nawab of Lucknow. He was exiled to Metiaburuz, Kolkata, after the British Empire overthrew him in 1856. In particular, he patronized musical genres dhrupad, tappa, thumri, and kheyal during his 30-year banishment. This left a long-lasting influence on classical music of Bangladesh. Many forms of Hindustani classical music serve as the foundation for all traditional music in Bangla. Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam (two famous Bengali poets) effectively introduced ragas with their songs, demonstrating their profound respect for these north Indian melodies.

PRACTICE OF CLASSICAL MUSIC IN EAST BENGAL PRIOR TO PARTITION

'I don't understand why it is called Hindustani or Indian classical music. Because almost 60 percent of the music gurus have their roots in Bangladesh. Even if the country is divided due to political reasons, music cannot be divided. The good thing about Marga Sangeet (music to find path to moksha) is that the ancestors who created it were very secular.' (Pandit Devjyoti Bose Nov2017). Not only the roots of musicians, East Bengal also had a number of prominent hubs for the practice of classical music prior to the partition. A discussion on some notable hubs will help provide a better understanding of the matter.

MUKTAGACHA, MYMENSINGH

The Zamindar Bari of Muktagacha was one of the finest elite music hubs of the subcontinent. The well-known zamindar of Muktagacha, Raja Jagat Kishore Acharya Chowdhury, was renowned for being an excellent

donor. He entertained his court with renowned vocalists from Delhi and Banaras. He also did some music practice. Music experts in Kolkata and other major music-focused cities of then-undivided India talked about Raja Jagat Kishore's sponsorship and love of music.

Raja Jagat Kishore was especially active in preserving Kolkata's Baganbari musical heritage. Among the Hindustani artists whom he praised or provided financial support were renowned tabla master Maulvi Ram Misir of Kashi, sarodist Ahmed Ali Khan, dancer Mohan Prasad of Rajputana, visually impaired tabla player Nannu Sahaiya, Prasannakumar Banik, Ustad Allaiddin Khan and Hafiz Ali Khan.

This place hosted music conferences even after the partition. In 1956, Ustad Allaiddin Khan visited Muktagachha as well to render a performance on sarod. However, with time, its fervor decreased, and at one point, the practice was discontinued (Dr. Nurul Anwar, March 2018, Raag Sangeete Alokito Mymensingh).

GOURIPUR, MYMENSINGH

Another hub of the zamindar of Gouripur played a very significant role in the practice of music in Mymensingh. Sri Brajendra Kishore Roy Chowdhury himself was a musical scholar and spent his entire life practicing and writing classical music notations. Under his patronage, sitar maestro Enayat Khan, who is the father of Indian maestro Bilayet Khan, Rabari Mohammad Ali Khan, who is musician Tansen's last descendant, tabla maestro of Delhi Masid Khan, who is the father of tabla player Ustad Keramatula Khan, Ustad Wazir Khan, who was the guru of maestro Alauddin and Hafiz Ali Khan, Hafiz Ali Khan himself, Dabir Khan and others took up permanent residence in Gouripur to practice music. Brajendra Kishore's son Birendra Kishore received his training in instrumental music from Enayat Khan and Mohammad Ali and became one of the leading musicians, composers, esraj and veena players of his time. Sri Brajendra Kishore and Birendra Kishore have taken special steps to hold music conferences and practice music in various places in Mymensingh and Bengal. (Dr. Nurul Anwar, March 2018, RaagSangeeteAlokito Mymensingh).

In addition to Mymensingh, Jashore, Rajshahi, Cumilla, and Chattogram had substantial hubs for the practice of classical music.

STATUS OF CLASSICAL MUSIC DURING THE PAKISTANI ERA

Only when political order and conducive conditions for cultural practices are preserved can classical music thrive. Both of these were clearly lacking in Bangladesh, or what was then East Bengal, which was renamed East Pakistan, following the 1947 partition. A closer look into the practice of classical music in this region can provide a better understanding.

The political and social climate that came about following the emergence of East Pakistan was not at all conducive to the study of classical music. Most instructors and patrons had left while the practice of music was barred citing religious beliefs as an excuse.

‘The 1947 partition caused the biggest damage. Classical music performers in the past were extremely affluent. But the top musicians moved to India once Pakistan emerged. And thus Islamization and military authority arrived. Those that survived therefore earned a living by making sporadic appearances on radio and television, instructing, and providing background music for films,’ said sitarist Reenat Fauzia, also a professor at Government College of Home Economics, Dhaka, Bangladesh, during a conversation in November 2023.

Among the noteworthy music gurus who attempted to retain the practice of classical music in Bangladesh during this period were Ustad Ayat Ali Khan, Pandit Barin Mazumder, Ustad Khurshid Khan, Ustad Gul Mohammad Khan, Mohammad Hossen Khasru, Ustad Munshi Rais Uddin, Ustad Azizul Islam, Raja Hossain Khan, Kamal Dasgupta, Ustad Fuljhuri Khan, Ustad Afjalur Rahman and Ustad Shahadat Hossain Khan.

Ustad Allaiddin Khan, multi-instrumentalist, composer and one of the most notable music teachers of the 20th century, returned to India during this period on initially trying to settle down in what was the then East Pakistan, where he found an unsuitable atmosphere for pursuing his musical interests. Nevertheless, many of his family members including his younger brother musician Ustad Ayet Ali Khan remained in East Pakistan following the partition. However, when the zamindari system was abolished, they all took the decision to remain in Dhaka without receiving any favors in their Cumilla neighborhood. They relied on film music, tuition and radio and television shows for their income at the time. The Khan family's latter generations have made a substantial contribution to Bangladesh's classical music scene.

EFFORTS AT INSTITUTIONAL EDUCATION DURING PAKISTANI REGIME

BULBUL LALITAKALA ACADEMY

Bulbul Lalitakala Academy, also known as Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts or BAFA, was East Bengal's first institution for music education, sponsored by the United Front government of Pakistan, which was established in 1954 and led by secular politicians from Bengal. Bulbul Chowdhury, a well-known dancer of the subcontinent, was honored through the founding of Bulbul Lalitakala Academy in Dhaka on May 17, 1955. Bulbul Lalitakala Academy offers instruction in dance, theatre, vocal music, instrumental music, arts and crafts, and art-literature-music research.

COLLEGE OF MUSIC

During the Pakistani regime, eminent music scholar Pandit Barin Mazumder made the greatest contribution to the dissemination of classical music by founding Government Music College, the sole music college that stands to this day in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He was one of the few classical musicians from Bengal who returned to East Bengal during the partition. But during this period, he faced numerous challenges and even had to serve time in jail despite working in the world of classical music.

On November 10, 1963, Barin Mazumder opened the "College of Music" that was actually set up in a difficult environment with just 11 pupils, 16 teachers, and 87 taka in cash.

CHHAYANAUT SANGEET VIDYAYATAN

Chhayanaaut Sangeet Vidyayatan is one of the most significant cultural institutions of Bangladesh. The founding of this organization took place in 1961. This organization hosts music schools and offers instruction in music, dancing, and other cultural activities in addition to planning festivals and other events.

Rabindra Sangeet (Tagore's Songs) was not allowed to be sung or seen on radio or television in East Pakistan during the 1960s due to a military takeover. Kalim Sharafi, a renowned Rabindra Sangeet performer from Bangladesh, established the music, theatre and dance institute Chhayanaaut Sangeet Vidyayatan with the aid of others. While the ban was in effect, "Chhayanaaut" branches proliferated across the district towns like a clandestine organization.

Chhayanaaut's early activities ran at the English Preparatory School in Dhaka. However, the programmes were moved to the "Agrani Girls' School" because of restrictions imposed by the government. Fearing retaliation from the authorities, Chhayanaaut also placed Salter at the "Lake Circus Girls School". Chhayanaaut continued to run here till 1971.

DYNAMICS OF CLASSICAL MUSIC PRACTICE IN INDEPENDENT BANGLADESH

Bangladesh became an independent nation in 1971 following nine months of brutal warfare and 23 years of cultural and political conflict. Cultural activists were very much engaged in boosting the spirits of the freedom fighters through their songs. Artists of classical music took part in this movement as well. In 1972, Ustad Alaiddin Khan Music Conference was held. At Brahmanbaria, a music academy and a museum named after



Ustad Allaiddin Khan were founded in 1973. However, there was still no state patronization for such initiatives, even in the new nation. Classical musicians too did not appear to have built a significant fan base. Instead, they continued to rely on honorariums from private tuition and appearances on radio and television. The newly independent war-torn nation afterwards experienced another political and economic crisis. In 1975, Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated alongside 17 members of his family, which was followed by the reintroduction of martial law. Pakistani political and religious ideology was reestablished in the state under the long-repressive military rule. Consequently, cultural practices were once more faced with the threat of extinction.

Though state patronization did not come about, repression continued to exist. Pandit Barin Mazumder was imprisoned in 1978 on being accused of embezzling funds from the music college he himself established. His son, National Award-winning music composer, producer and singer Bappa Mazumder comments (November 2022), “My father's forced retirement from college is just one of many upsetting events that have occurred. It was just four years ago that a photograph of my father could be put up in the institution for the very first time. The college administration arranged ‘Pandit Barin Mazumder Music Festival’ for the first time in 2019. It's a matter of shame for the nation...The development of this industry cannot be anticipated if the government ignores the advancement of higher education or fails to place a premium on music.”

Once democracy was reinstated since 1991, the practice of classical music essentially remained the same. Nonetheless, even when this nation was a part of Pakistan, music aficionado families had continued to promote and practice classical music on a small scale within their means in practically every region.

AT PRESENT TIME

In 2001 religious extremists carried out a bombing attack on a traditional flagship event of “Chhayanaut”, which is the nation's largest cultural event welcoming the Bangla new year. At least 10 people were killed in that attack. Investigations later revealed that the attack was carried out by fundamentalist groups to strike at the core of Bangladesh's non-communal spirit.

A few months after that incident, following the return of anti-independence forces to power in Bangladesh in 2001, nearly all cultural events carried out in the name of Islam were discouraged until 2007. Following that, performance stages of many significant cultural events in the nation came under bombing attacks one after another and the death toll rose. For fear of their lives, a lot of artists ceased their performances. No mentionable development of classical music took place during this time.

In the last decade, thanks to political and economic stability, the practice of classical music has gained substantial momentum again. However, during the tenure of the most stable post-independence government, “Ustad Allaiddin Khan Music Academy and Museum” was burnt down by Islamic fundamentalists in 2016.

Currently, among the few organizations engaged in the practice of classical music in Bangladesh, Chhayanaut Sangeet Vidyayatan in Dhaka, Sadarang in Chattogram, Lakshapar in Narayanganj, Hindol Cultural Group in Rajshahi, Ustad Musharraf Hossain Bengal Uchanga Sangeet Sommelson of Jashore and Bengal Classical Music Festival in Dhaka are playing a unique role in promoting and spreading pure music.

Among them, **Bengal Classical Music Festival** has been organized annually on a large scale from 2012 to 2017 and has gained a lot of reputation. It has featured musical performances by well-known international performers. But even here, there are not many musicians of Bangladesh involved; instead, nearly all of the musicians had to be brought over on invitation from India, as this country historically has not produced that many classical musicians.



Even though classical music is being practiced on a modest scale in cities of Bangladesh, Bengal Foundation is spearheading this movement. “Bengal Parampara Sangeetalaya” was founded by Bengal Foundation with the intention of advancing and popularizing classical music. Every single one of this institution's music gurus who come to impart lessons is an Indian.

STATE INITIATIVES

The state did not take an interest in supporting classical music for a very long time. Other than identifying a few artists and presenting national awards, no government took any action; indeed, some governments put in the effort to discourage the art.

The present condition of the sole government music college of the nation demonstrates the type of encouragement the state has given to classical music. The college does not have an adequate number of instructors, classrooms and musical instruments. No cultural building exists. This specialized college for higher education in music does not have any auditorium with modern facilities for students. (*ProthomAlo*, 03 October 2022)

Almost all the public universities in the country have music departments but they have not been able to produce recognized classical music artists in that sense.

Since 2016, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy has introduced a free classical vocal music, instrumental music and dance education system. People of all ages can benefit from it. A space has also been created for teachers. This has led to a notable increase in the practice of this form of music. Furthermore, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy has established classical music instruction programs in every district of Bangladesh.

The belief held by educators and musicians is that classical music education needs government support in order to grow. Asit Dey (2021), a classical voice instructor at Chhayanaut and a professor at the Department of Music at the University of Development Alternative (UODA) in Dhaka, Bangladesh, asserts, “The government of Bangladesh should take some steps, such as offering scholarships or opportunities like educational institutions, programs, and jobs that will allow people to make a living through music. Young people will be inspired to pursue classical music as a result, and their families will encourage them to do so.”

Ali SM Rezwan (June 2016), a classical musician, stated that ‘our nation lacks a forum to distinguish classical music. Even though there are a lot of TV channels in the nation, none of them consistently play classical music. Maintaining classical music is a major responsibility of the government. At minimum, some individuals will become interested in classical music if the government mandates that it be broadcast for two hours every day on all channels. Additionally, newcomers will be encouraged to express their appreciation for this genre of music.’

CONCLUSION

The history of Bangladesh's tradition, culture, and civilization goes back a long way. Its music culture has evolved alongside musical advancements, undergoing ups and downs over time. If the practice of classical music had been supported by more organizations and sincere efforts, this development might have had a greater impact. Actually, the majority of the nation's well-educated, aristocratic, and sophisticated families moved to India as a result of the Partition of India in 1947, for which there was hardly anyone left to enjoy classical music. In the new nation, a new affluent elite was formed, but the knowledge, atmosphere, and taste required to appreciate classical music were not established. For this reason, it has been a long time since this region not produced world-class classical music performers. But right now, a segment of the nation's gifted youths is enthusiastically studying, performing, and pursuing this music as a career. Experts predict that this generation will make a significant contribution to classical music if the political and economic climate remains stable.

REFERENCES

1. Personal communication: Reenat Fouzia, 24 Nov 2023
2. Dr. Nurul Anwar, M 2018. Raag Sangeete Alokito Mymensingh, 01 March 20 <https://www.uthon.com/3583>
3. My Life. An Autobiography by UstadAllauddin khan. Edited by Anindya Banerjee, Thema, 46 satishMukharji Road, Kolkata 700026. Extended second edition: 2020. ISBN 9789381703-31-1.
4. Chitrayudh Ghatak, 22 July 2018, Bangla Tatha Bangalir Ucchango Sangeet Charchar Itihas: Ekti Onusandhan (in Bengali), SoptoDina, ISSN 2395 6054. <https://shoptodina.wordpress.com/2018/07/22>
5. Ken Hunt, September 26, 2021. The Music of Bangladesh: A Rough Guide, Sunday, SongLines. <https://www.songlines.co.uk/>
6. S M Munna, D 2017. Shstrio Sangeeter Mu lShekor Bangladeshe (in Bengali), Samakal, 28 December, Viewed 27 October 2023, <https://www.samakal.com/todays-print-edition/tp-last-page/article/17125347/>
7. A K M Shahnewaz, J 2021. Juktofront Nirbachoner Purbapar o Bangabondhu (in Bengali), News Bangla, 13 June 13:05, Viewed 29 November 2023, <https://www.newsbangla24.com/analysis/142480>
8. ZahangirAlom, N 2014. New horizons of Bangladeshi classicalmusic, The Daily Star, Wed Nov 26, 12:01 AM. Last update on: Sun Mar 8, 2015, 01:53 AM <https://www.thedailystar.net/new-horizons-of-bangladeshi-classical-music-52005>
9. Mansura Hosain, A 2022, Sarkari Sangeet college e Kebol 'NeiArNei' (in Bengali), ProthomAlo, 03 October, 18:47, <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/capital/6kb6hltkyx> https://bn.wikipedia.org/wiki/sorkari_sangeet_college
10. <https://www.sahapedia.org/bhaaratayia-saasataraiya-samgaitaera-baisanaupaura-gharaanaa>
11. Own reporter, F 2017. Nil Karer Badite BulBul Lalitakala Academy (in Bengali), ProthomAlo, 03 February, <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/capital/6kb6hltkyx>
12. Sadek, J. 2017. Ashtitver Sankate Bulbul Lalitakala Academy (in Bengali), KalerKantha, 17 June, Viewed 30 Nov 2023, <<https://www.kalerkantho.com/print-edition/dhaka-360/2017/06/07/505888>>
13. The untold story of Pt. Barin Mazumder and Govt. Music College, Bangi News, published by: Daily Starago, <https://www.banginews.com/web news? =936fa23872771f266fc4eaa69c66a5de51a4b04c>
14. 13 January 2016, Brahmanbariay Dhangsa Ustad AllauddiKhan'r Smriti (in Bengali), BBC Bangla, https://www.bbc.com/bengali/news/2016/01/160113_bangla_brahmanbaria_violence_photos#
15. Samaj/Bangladesh, 15 April 2022. Ramna Batomule Hamlar Asami RAB er Obhijane Greftar, (in Bengali) DW, <https://www.dw.com/bn/>
16. https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Majumder,_Barin
17. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharata_\(sage\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharata_(sage))
18. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natya_Shastra
19. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brihaddeshi>
20. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charyapada>
21. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barin_Mazumder
22. https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Majumder,_Barin
23. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangladesh/The-artsThe arts of Bangladesh>
24. renade blast in Ramana Batmule, <https://bn.wikipedia.org/wiki>
25. Shastrio Sangeeter Pristhoshokata Nei, 18 Jun 2016 The Daily Janakantha
26. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangladesh/The-artsThe arts of Bangladesh>