

# Songs for the Empress: Queen Victoria in the Music History of Colonial Bengal

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IN the final decades of the nineteenth century, music significantly occupied the cultural and social life of the Bengali people. As the epicenter of British political and economic influence in the subcontinent, Calcutta witnessed the emergence of schools offering instruction in Indian and Western art music. The flourishing city housed private and public printing presses, which ensured the circulation and distribution of large numbers of songbooks, manuals, and theoretical treatises on music. The city was also home to a diverse assortment of hereditary music practitioners and occupational specialists illustrative of a variety of musical traditions spread across Bengal and North India. Around the 1870s, Bengali musicians, patrons, and connoisseurs began to take up music as an intellectual activity, examine its history as a source for social and political substance, and view musical instruments as material objects for disciplinary study. This emerging interest in musicology, broadly conceived, coincided with the proclamation of Victoria as queen and empress of India, considerably transforming Bengal's political fabric and cultural worldview. The pioneering musicologist Sourindro Mohun Tagore (1840–1914) was among the many authors who published works celebrating Queen Victoria's ascension as empress of India. In this article, I examine Tagore's songbooks dedicated to the queen, reading them as cultural artifacts representing a richly nuanced historical and musical legacy: a textual and aural archive demonstrating how Bengali musicians used sound to mediate the effects of colonization.

Between 1875 and 1898, Tagore published four books that focused on the life of the queen empress and her accomplishments. These works included bilingual and, at times, trilingual illustrations of songs and

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*Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 61–83.

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doi:10.1017/S1060150323000827

poetry set to music. In the process, they also provided precious insight into the crucial role played by translation in these contexts. In showing how music writing enters the domain of translation and cultural synthesis, I argue that songbooks dedicated to the queen served a dual function. On one hand, they facilitated the incorporation of the monarch into a newly emergent colonial modern sonic aesthetic in the subcontinent; on the other, they positioned music as a medium of disciplinary instruction for young adults and a vehicle for the intellectual study of English political history and civilization. The depiction of the empress's life through song, the accomplishments of the royal families of England and Scotland through melody, and the praise of British rule set to the beats of Indian *ragas* and *talas* appeared to British commentators as essential tools in evoking feelings of trust and loyalty (*rajbhakti*) among native subjects. I refer to this process as sonic incorporation—a means by which the ideology of the Raj could be incorporated into the colony's intellectual and aural fabric. While this process is discernibly heard against the backdrop of a rapidly metamorphosing public domain—as music progressively entered the realm of discourse—for writers like Tagore, it also engendered feelings of imperial belonging.

#### 1. SOURINDRO MOHUN TAGORE: THE MAKING OF A COLONIAL-ERA MUSICOLOGIST

In his essay “The Beginnings of Organology and Ethnomusicology in the West,” Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy demonstrated that the pioneering work of Sourindro Mohun Tagore was vital to the development of ideas linked to the early emergence of the field of ethnomusicology in the late nineteenth century. Works such as Victor Mahillon's *Catalogue descriptif et analytique du Musée instrumental du conservatoire Royal de Bruxelles* (1880), one that profoundly influenced the four-category classification system of musical instruments in the field of organology, and Alexander Ellis's essay, *On the Musical Scales of Various Nations* (1885), which effectively framed the *cent* interval classification system of music are two examples.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it was Tagore's efforts to circulate musical instruments and books on Indian music to institutions and museums across Europe that led to the acquisition of one such collection by the Royal Academy of Belgium. Mahillon, a specialist in instrument classification, studied this collection, which helped him mold his own framework for classifying musical instruments, later implemented in framing a catalog produced for the Royal Academy of Belgium. This episode opens our eyes to the prominence of Tagore as a music scholar with a global influence in

the 1870s and '80s, illuminating the richness of his involvement in areas like print culture, the materiality of music, and the ability of sound to help bridge cultural borders. Since then, scholars have explored Tagore's worldview and absorbent approach to Indian music through the lens of his social position as a Bengali writer operating within the bounds of a progressively global world order curated by the structures and contexts of late nineteenth-century colonialism.<sup>2</sup>

Sourindro Mohun Tagore was born into an aristocratic, land-owning family in North Calcutta—indeed, a distinguished one (he was uncle to the Nobel Prize-winning poet, Rabindranath). From an early age, Tagore was bimusically trained. He received instruction in North Indian and Bengali music from his teacher, Kshetramohan Goswami, and later learned the piano from a German professor employed in the Tagore household. His enrollment in Calcutta's Hindoo College, a renowned center of scholarship, where his grandfather Gopi Mohan Tagore had been a trustee, ensured that he was familiar with a curriculum which included the study of Indian as well as European literatures, languages, and cultures.<sup>3</sup> In this institution, Tagore was also introduced to radical reformist ideas circulating across Calcutta's intellectual and social circles at the time. Demonstrating a distinctive aptitude for intellectual inquiry, in 1877 he wrote his first book, *Bhugal-o-Itihas Ghatia Brittanta* (An Outline of History and Geography [of Europe]),<sup>4</sup> when he was just sixteen. His intellectual and artistic imagination was then reinforced by his elder brother, Jatindra Mohun (1831–1908), a poet, theater aficionado, and philanthropist. Together, the brothers attended productions in new Bengali theaters and social establishments that were progressively becoming commonplace in the city, all while recruiting young actors, playwrights, and musicians to add to their residential playhouse, the Pathuriaghata Banga Natyalaya (Bengali theater of Pathuriaghata). They arranged elaborate events and private gatherings, entertaining guests from both elite native society and European residents of the city. The brothers were inseparable in one activity in particular—that is, their love for collecting rare books and manuscripts on topics ranging from world history, philosophy, and religion to culture and social life. Among the materials they accumulated from libraries and archival repositories across the subcontinent were manuscripts on the origins, theory, and practice of music, which added significant value to their swelling residential library in Pathuriaghata.<sup>5</sup>

By the 1870s, Tagore's attention was almost entirely absorbed in establishing a discursive framework for a sociological and cultural study

of Indian music. His 1870 lecture, “Jatiya Sangit Boshoyak Prostava” (A Discourse on National Music), is commonly taken to be the first notable public address of its kind on the topic of music and society in Calcutta.<sup>6</sup> This was a passionate address on the need to induct music as a focal point of public education. Inspired by the work of the German musicologist Carl Engel (1818–1882), Tagore situated music as a high art form commanding national importance—one with close ties to individual and collective notions of identity. For Tagore, hidden within the seemingly simple strains of Bengali music was the story and progress of its people. He found it crucial for Bengali society—resistant as it was at the time to music education—to appreciate the shades and nuances of Bengali music not only as an aesthetically pleasing activity, but also toward recognizing the link between music and concepts being discussed in the public domain, such as *jaati* (caste, tribe) and nation.<sup>7</sup> Achieving this goal, however, was not straightforward. Tagore would develop a twofold approach consisting of, on one hand, the circulation of musical instruments, treatises, and theoretical works in print and, on the other, the inauguration of institutions for the practical study of music, where his viewpoints on music education could be put into practice. The hallmark of this model was to establish a visual aid for the technical and aesthetic study of music, and for Tagore, that aid was to be musical notation. Notation became a core component of Tagore’s pedagogical and aesthetic model, owing to the influence of his teacher and *guru*, Kshetramohan Goswami (1813–1893).

Goswami was an important name in colonial Calcutta’s budding music circles. In the years after the Sepoy Rebellion, he pioneered a new form of native orchestral composition that was played as the background score to Ram Narayan Tarakaratra’s play *Ratnavali* (Precious Garland) at the city’s well-known Belgachia Natyashala (Belgachia Theater).<sup>8</sup> Music from *Ratnavali* was later published in the 1868 collection *Aikatanik Swaralipi* (Concert Notation), where out of the forty-eight scores in the play, Goswami transcribed twenty-nine, and Sourindro Mohun transcribed nineteen.<sup>9</sup> In the following year, 1869, Goswami published what is widely regarded as his magnum opus, the *Sangeeta Sara* (The Essence of Music), a monumental book-length discourse recording several interventions in the field of Bengali and Hindustani music practice. Not only was this the first modern Bengali treatise on music to be written entirely in prose, but it also announced the arrival of public discussions on topics such as the theoretical origins of music, time, and cultural identity.<sup>10</sup> The text is likewise remarkable for initiating a new

method for the study of music—that is, through the novel form of Bengali notation invented by Goswami, later referred to as the *dandamatrik-swaralipi* (Dandamatrik Notation) system. For Tagore, then, the work of his teacher, Kshetramohan, turned out to be the substance for his own discursive engagements with music.

In 1871 Tagore founded the Bengal Music School, where he advocated the use of pedagogic models for training in Hindustani and Bengali music based on Goswami's pioneering interventions (Fig. 1). In its early years, the institution garnered significant support from Western intellectuals, music practitioners, and European donors. A decade later, in 1881, Tagore founded the Bengal Music Academy, another music-focused institution where Goswami served as principal for a few years. The study of music's ideological and discursive features found a place in both establishments alongside its practical instruction. Take, for example, an excerpt from a report published in *The Englishman* (October 13, 1871):

The second monthly examination of the Bengalee Musical School took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> instant . . . at the Normal School, when the students were examined by the President, Baboo Sourendro Mohun Tagore, and by Baboo K.M. Gosswamee. . . . The boys of both departments (vocal and instrumental) gave satisfaction both in the theoretical and practical examinations. . . . The President of the school. . . . requested Baboo Kally Puddo Mookerjee to deliver a verbal lecture on *Music*. The lecturer, in the beginning, dwelt upon what music is and gave sufficient proofs of its being "sacred," referring to great men such as Milton, Shakespeare, and others.<sup>11</sup>

In this way new modes of music education made their way into urban Calcutta in the late nineteenth century. The Normal School, which provided the physical setting for the examination of the Bengal Music School, was itself a recent colonial formation. The examination was compartmentalized into discrete segments, such as "theoretical" and "practical," ideas spilling into music's discursive study. Crucially, the Bengal Music School offered public lectures that sought to preserve a religious framework for the analysis of music on the grounds of its sacred nature, thereby motivating trainees to value and cherish the education they received. It set up a pantheon of English literary masters from whom Bengali youth could learn accurate manners of approaching music as a topic of discourse. Over time, Tagore's publications, such as the compilation *Hindu Music from Various Authors* (1874, 1882) and the encyclopedic compendium *Universal History of Music* (1896), helped start a comparative discussion between music from India and that of the

world within which music education could unfold. His schools were, therefore, interwoven spaces where students experimented with and analyzed new philosophies of music.

Around the same time, Tagore's published comprehensive accounts of musical instruments with notes on their origins and guidelines for their use. Works such as *Yantra Kshetra Dipika* (A Treatise on the Sitar, 1872), *Mridangamanjari* (A Manual on the Mridangam, 1873), *Harmonium Sutra* (A Treatise on the Harmonium, 1874), and *Yantra Kosha* (A Treasury of Musical Instruments, 1875) demonstrate his ideological investment in the materiality and material history of music. They equally complement his curiosity about music's discursive poetics and politics and reveal an intent to approach musical instruments as vital artifacts in framing sonic groups. Indian vocal music, for example, had well-known sociocultural implications, especially in court and temple performance traditions. Music treatises from the Mughal period often depicted vocalists occupying and commanding higher social status and respect at court. It could be argued that Tagore recognized the critical role instruments played in the evolution of music in the subcontinent, and acknowledged that established hierarchies largely ostracized the importance of musical instruments and the contributions of their practitioners in the history of music in South Asia. Another reason could be that a large cross-section of musicians who traveled from Delhi and Lucknow to Calcutta were significantly well versed in instrumental music, making them more visible to Tagore's public concerns. Combined with Bengali curiosity toward training in and studying musical instruments, Tagore's treatises introduced a new genre to Bengal music writing: organology, which involves examining musical instruments and their classification. It is an aspect of his work that scholars rarely discuss.

## 2. TAGORE'S ENCOMIUMS TO THE QUEEN: SONIC INCORPORATION OF THE EMPRESS

Between 1875 and 1898, Tagore published four songbooks dedicated to Queen Victoria. These elaborate collections of song lyrics were titled *Victoria Gitika* (Ballad of Victoria, 1875), *Victoria Samrajyan* (Empire of Victoria, 1876), *Victoria Giti-Mala* (Garland of Songs for Victoria, 1877), and *Srimad-Victoria-Mahatmyam* (The Greatness of Victoria, 1898). Composed to celebrate events in the life of the queen, such as her adoption of the title of empress of India or her diamond jubilee, these works share a similar structure. The collections do not necessarily signal entirely novel generic departures in music writing—similar songbooks and lyrical compilations in Bangla were also being published in the



**Figure 1.** Sourindro Mohun Tagore's native orchestra. Seated at the center as the concertmaster is Kshetramohan Goswami, Calcutta, circa 1875. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Crosby Brown Collection<sup>12</sup>.

same period. Having said that, three specific features distinguish Tagore's approach. First, he used translation as a means of appealing to multiple constituencies of readership and practitioners. Second, he deployed both Indian and Western notation systems for the representation of Indian ragas and talas. Finally, he sought to integrate Queen Victoria into the Bengali aural fabric, opening up the possibility of intercultural dialogue with the English. Let us begin with a discussion of the last aspect.

A colonial power's strategic use of sound as an ideological tool to engender loyalty and allegiance among native communities is usually viewed with suspicion. And yet it is also true that when sounds are introduced from the metropolitan world into the colony, native listeners may respond to them in a variety of ways: the state is not in full control of the process. Certainly, in some instances, the colonized may, over time, come to accept foreign sounds as markers of new social and cultural standards. In other instances, however, they may generate resentment and resistance against these foreign sounds. More often than not, the colonized subject may also undertake experiments in intercultural dialogue. This

last process involves the translation of unfamiliar metropolitan tunes into native idioms or of metropolitan lyrics into native melodies. The process also embraces the construction of new modes of aesthetic articulation in the vernacular, so as to represent the culture of the metropolitan society. The songs written, translated, and notated by Sourindro Mohun for the queen are indicative of this type of intercultural dialogue. Tagore established Victoria as a legitimate subject of songwriting in Sanskrit and Bangla, and incorporated the monarch into the sonic architecture of the colonial territory. A key component of this type of incorporation is the dynamic use of sounds and rhythms from native traditions, so as to create a vernacular aesthetic experience of the British queen. Such experiments are best understood as a means to facilitate intercultural communication in colonial Bengal.

Gerry Farrell has noted how the interface between Indian and Western musical traditions poses questions of representation.<sup>13</sup> For instance, what are the optimal ways of representing music on the printed page? And is there a concern that a particular form of representation might be construed as patriotic or nationalist? With the emergence of musical modernity in colonial Bengal, notation was identified as a key area of critical investigation leading to the emergence of two broad perspectives. On one polar end of the spectrum stood those practitioners who chose to transcribe music in Bengali or Indian notation systems, such as those invented by Kshetramohan and modified by Tagore. On the other hand, musicologists such as Krishnadhan Bandopadhyay and European interlocutors like Charles Baron Clarke advocated using European staff notation for reading Indian music off the printed page. Music historian Charles Capwell has observed that accepting a particular type of notation format for transcription or composition of music came to acquire an ideological dimension—support for indigenous systems, for example, could be read as leaning toward a nationalist standpoint.<sup>14</sup> This nationalist-notation interpretation needs, however, to be reviewed: undoubtedly, the importance of nationalism in this regard cannot be overlooked, and yet it must also not be overstated. After all, the notation dispute also represented struggles between local music groups to consolidate power along multiple axes of class and caste relations. Therefore, nationalism, while important, was only one aspect of a more extensive debate in a competitive colonial environment. Still, choosing one form of notation over another was no simple conclusion: it entailed several considerations, including notions of social and political identity.



Remarkably, Tagore often used more than one notation system to compose music. The use of multiple notation systems represented a particular stage in the sonic integration process through which the complex layers of Indian music systems gradually came to form a dialogue with Western models. Multiple notations offered Tagore the means to assimilate Queen Victoria into a new aesthetic paradigm, to integrate her into the aural architecture of the subcontinent. In *Victoria Gitika*, one can find illustrations demonstrating the parallel use of Indian and Western notation.

The verso page features a Sanskrit stanza written in Devanagari script—it offers a salutation and prayer for the protection of the queen. The same verse is set to the tune of the evening melody, Ragini Kalyani. On the recto page is a translation in English of the stanza: “Herself protected by that Being who is the object of contemplation of peaceful unimpassioned suppliants—who dwells in the heart of the honest and the wise, may our Gracious Queen Victoria mercifully protect us” (3). The verse section is then transcribed and set to music in Western

Figure 2 shows two pages from *Victoria Gitika* (1875). The left page (verso) is titled "भिक्षुटोरिया-मौतिका ।" and contains a Sanskrit stanza in Devanagari script. Below the text is a musical notation in Indian style (Sargam) with lyrics underneath. The right page (recto) is titled "SALUTATION." and contains an English translation of the stanza. Below the text is a musical notation in Western style (treble clef, 4/4 time) with lyrics underneath. The title "RAGINÍ KALYÁNÍ." is centered on the right page.

Figure 2. An opening salutation set to Ragini Kalyani in *Victoria Gitika* (1875)<sup>15</sup>.

staff notation (Fig. 2). The page looks visually complex. It helps us trace the formation of a complex modern musical subject. First, the phrases “peaceful unimpassioned suppliants” and “the honest and the wise” may be read as alluding to the conduct of an ideal colonized subject, of the quintessential upper-class, urbane *bhadralok* (lit. gentlemen, gentlefolk class). The colonized subject is positioned in an economy of protection. Under the protection of the “Being,” the “Gracious Queen” is expected to extend her protection to this ideal colonized subject. Second, the peaceful colonized subject who seeks both transcendental and temporal protection is constructed here as a musical subject, one who is familiar with both Indian and Western notation systems. He or she not only translates Victoria into Ragini Kalyani but goes a step further toward inviting the Western reader to recognize and appreciate Victoria as she appears through the Indian melody.

The formation of this modern, colonized musical subject acquires more clarity when paying attention to the reception history of such songs dedicated to the queen. For instance, where might these songs have been sung? It may be possible to find such answers in contemporary newspaper reports and paratextual materials. In a report from the *Indian Daily News* (June 6, 1873), we learn that Kshetramohan Goswami, Tagore’s tutor, also composed Sanskrit songs in honor of the queen. Goswami’s songs are now probably lost. But what we can gather from the report is that they were being sung at the Bengal Music School at least two years prior to the publication of Tagore’s first book dedicated to Victoria (*Victoria Gitika*, 1875): “The first distribution of prizes of the Bengal Music School was held in the premises of the Calcutta Normal School on Saturday last. . . . Some of the students who obtained prizes then played on the sitar, and sung several songs which seemed to please the audience very much. A few Sanskrit songs, which were composed by Professor Khetter Mohun Goswamee (*sic*) for the welfare of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, were sung by the honorary teachers, Baboos Udoy Chunder Goswamee and Gunga Bistoo Chuckerbutty. Baboo Sourendro Mohun Tagore (*sic*) then rose and spoke much of musical notation.”<sup>16</sup> Around the same time, Tagore began to compile his own work toward cultivating a broader interest in music notation. The report goes on to say that Tagore made two arguments for the adoption of a native notation system. Drawing upon research published in journals including *Asiatic Researches*, he argued, on one hand, that there is evidence to suggest that systems of writing down music on paper existed in India during the ancient period but may have since been lost. On

the other, drawing upon his reading of works by Carl Engel and other writers, he suggests that “different nations have different languages, [and so] the musical notations cannot be equal to each other, and hence one particular kind of notation cannot be universal” (*Public Opinion*, 2). A system of dual notation allowed Tagore not only to incorporate Victoria into an Indian acoustic fabric but also to make this sonic vernacularization of the queen audible to a Western audience. In the preface to *Victoria Gitika*, he declares his aim to “impart Englishmen an insight into the nature of our *Ragas* and *Raginis*” (Preface, n.p.). Even though, in his own estimation, the compositions in the volume are riddled with imperfections owing to the constraints in rendering Indian music in English notation, Tagore draws satisfaction from the fact that the general character of “Hindu Music,” a phrase he borrowed from William Jones’s “On the Musical Modes of the Hindoos” in *Asiatic Researches* (1792), “is all but completely represented” in *Victoria Gitika* (Preface, n.p.). Thus Tagore’s emphasis on Indian notation systems was accompanied by an intense aspiration for intercultural dialogue with the British. The Bengal Music School provided the institutional space in which this dialogue acquired meaning.

Proceeding further into the reception history of these songs for and about Victoria, we learn more about the process of sonic incorporation. In the preface to the second edition of the *Victoria Samrajyan*, Tagore notes: “In the concluding portion of this edition, he has put in an English translation of a song entitled, ‘The Loyal Song of Bengal,’ which was sung in connection with a representation of the Tableaux Vivants of the different nations of the British Dependencies in the East, given in his house, in January 1877, in commemoration of the assumption of the Imperial title by HER MOST GRACIOUS MAJESTY THE QUEEN VICTORIA” (emphasis in original).<sup>17</sup> If the Bengal Music School and Bengal Music Academy provided a formal spatial setting for the sonic incorporation of Victoria into the aural architecture of Bengal, the houses of the wealthy *bhadralok* provided a more informal space for intercultural dialogue to unfold. A reviewer from *The Englishman* (February 23, 1876) has this dialogue in mind when he reflects on Tagore’s dual notation arrangements: “At all events, anyone who reads or plays these melodies should be able to form a tolerably correct notion of the typical characteristics of Indian music. To a European ear, they sound monotonous; but this may be partly owing to the omission of the *murchanas*, quarter-tones, and ‘other Indian graces,’ which

cannot be represented by the European notation. In the English songs, set to music, the theme is, according to European notions, more congenial, and the melodies, in many cases, possess more tunefulness judged from the same standpoint" (*Public Opinion*, 42).

Written to be performed for the stage, these works served as visual aids for orchestration. If the dual notation system enabled European listeners to form a "tolerably correct notion of the typical characteristics of Indian music," translation facilitated wider dissemination of the songs. A cursory glance at contemporary newspaper reports, as well as facsimiles reproduced in *Public Opinion and Official Communications of the Bengal Music School* (1875), indicates that works such as *Victoria Gitika* were distributed widely in domestic and international circles. Within India, they were available at esteemed institutions like the Indian Museum and for private consumption. Abroad, they were made available to elite societies, exhibitions, museums, and cultural organizations across Europe, Asia, the United States, and Australia, together with additional texts on music authored by Tagore, and complemented by collections of musical instruments.<sup>18</sup> Another report from *The Englishman* (May 26, 1877), for example, paid attention to the value of the English translations Tagore provided of the original compositions in Sanskrit: "The English translations, too, that are appended show considerable tact and good taste on the part of the author [Tagore], for they are written in such matter-of-fact language and are so obviously literal translations and nothing more" (Tagore, *Public Opinion*, 55).

Tagore's songbooks, then, are remarkable in responding to diverse readerships through their thoughtful use of translation, the deployment of a dual notation system, and the incorporation of the monarch within both the sonic architecture of Bengali music and the cultural and pedagogic landscape of music education. The process of sonic incorporation unfolded in the context of an intercultural dialogue that the colonial literati and their European interlocutors sought to construct in urban Calcutta in the late nineteenth century. It is not bereft of local ideological, political, and cultural capital either. Now, it is possible to ask why the sonic incorporation of the queen was a factor of necessity, not just as verse-lyrics in a book, but within paradigms of deeply personal musical experiences. Is it possible that Tagore's investment in generating an aural space for the queen through music is more than colonial propaganda? Is it conceivable to argue that the answer lies in the personal experience of belonging in a profoundly changing colonial world?

## 3. SONGS FOR THE EMPRESS: SONIC INCORPORATION AND IMPERIAL BELONGING

For Tagore, music in colonial Bengal played a relatively small role in high cultural production. He argued that the reason for music's absence from public education, for instance, was owing to its derogatory links to ideas of impurity. He espoused a project to provide young adults with what he understood as a "pure" education in Indian music, for which his songbooks for Victoria could be used as a model. Dedicating *Victoria Giti-Mala* to the governor of Bombay presidency, Sir Richard Temple, in the preface to this work, Tagore wrote: "today, most songs written in the Bengali language are obscene and overtly emotional."<sup>19</sup> He observed that modern Bengali songs could not impart core familial values, including ideas such as love for one's family and engendering respect for elders. He then connects these core values with the political idea of a love shared for the monarch, in this case Queen Victoria.<sup>20</sup> Tagore's texts would simultaneously intervene not only in public education but also in the field of Bengali songwriting, a highly contested field. He hoped his compositions could similarly find their way into the curricula of local schools to aid the education of young adults. In many ways, then, he envisioned his songbooks as an extension and a constituent of the modern, refined music education he sought to introduce in Calcutta.

However, Tagore's drive for reform in music education was not an isolated one. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the urban upper caste and upper-class colonial literati in Bengal led a broader reformist movement. They worked to civilize and refine Bengali literature and culture. Anindita Ghosh, for instance, has studied how the colonial literati positioned the Bengali language as a medium for self-expression and strove to create a new literary prose style as part of a civilizing drive to "distinguish it from what [they] saw as earlier loose colloquial forms, allegedly polluted by rusticity and an abundant sexuality."<sup>21</sup> Ghosh's core argument concerns the difference between rural and urban literary forms, and the construction of concepts such as purity and pollution. She argues that the difference between the obscene and the genteel was never a clear-cut binary, and that upper intellectual classes would largely transfer notions of pollution onto a diverse group of socially subjugated and marginalized communities, including women, *chhotoloks* (lower classes), and poor Muslims, whose inferior status was marked by allegedly coarse colloquial speech patterns and vulgar rustic literary forms. Sumanta Banerjee draws a similar distinction between elite and popular forms of entertainment in early colonial Bengal. He argues that music

patronage in upper-class households before the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857–58 embraced both high and low forms of entertainment and attracted the participation of performers from both upper- and lower-class backgrounds. The music performed in these households encompassed a variety of genres, many of which were ignored by the new Bengali *bhadralok* elite after the rebellion and the appearance of new reformist agendas. In Banerjee's view, this transition closely shadowed a generational gap when the older *babu* class of writers, patrons, and performers was slowly replaced by a new gentrified *bhadralok* class wielding new reformist ideas toward music.<sup>22</sup>

Given this background, it isn't hard to see why in Victoria, the empress of India, reformist *bhadralok* classes of the post-Mutiny generation found a symbol of the values they most cherished: purity and power. In Tagore's encomiums, one can find the boundless use of Indian ragas and other melodic tunes to portray Victoria's life and achievements. In choosing the ragas and raginis, care has been taken to select music that evokes a similar sense of purity. Situated at the intersection of art, sound, and poetry, Indian ragas are acknowledged to represent specific moods, feelings, and experiences. In Indian aesthetic theory, some ragas were deemed to be symbolically pure while others displayed mixed patterns, though not necessarily amounting to impurity. A number of melodies and genres had associations or were linked with the aesthetic idea of purity owing to their structure, semantic context, cleanliness, and links to the divine. For instance, in *Six Principal Ragas with a Brief View of Hindu Music* (1875), the six principal ragas that inform Tagore's views on aesthetic imagination were *Shri*, *Basanta*, *Bhairava*, *Panchama*, *Megha*, and *Nat-Narayan*. It was from the work of medieval music theorists known for producing *Sangeet Sastras* that Tagore developed his own theoretical model, an endeavor also undertaken by other writers at the time.<sup>23</sup> Based on the nature of notes, scales, and moods, Indian melodies were classified either as male ragas or female raginis, in a system that almost always exhibited the latter as companion melodies to the principal ones, of which there were only six.<sup>24</sup> Ragas evoking unblemished moods and feelings could be symbolically deployed to represent the queen, both in her role as a mother whose love is pure or as a goddess whose purity rests on spiritual devotion. Indeed, the arrangement of ragas as symbols or icons of specific sentiments or sensibilities was somewhat arbitrary.

Without doubt, the connotation that specific ragas can evoke specific sentiments or unambiguous moods rests to a large extent on

accepted conventions in Indian music and aesthetic theory connected to ragas and rasas. Tagore may have relied on such accepted conventions and deployed particular types of ragas to evoke desirable sentiments to enshrine the queen in a sphere of pure virtue. A melody set to a specific raga was sometimes used to also emphasize deep pain or pathos. Take, for instance, the opening song in Canto III of *Srimad-Victoria-Mahatmyam* (1898): “O Victoria, in the Christian year 1837, when William IV, the best of Kings, left his earthly tenement and went to heaven, the Parliament and the people of the United Kingdom, with one voice, submitted the Royal Throne to Thee” (46). The following page illustrates, in Western staff notation, the aforementioned song set to the Raga Shri. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that literature about Shri raga reveals its thought-provoking character and association with Shiva, the Hindu God. It is also noted as designating the onset of darkness before the arrival of dawn. The symbolic sorrow of the loss of life (William IV’s passing) may be read in these terms. Tagore’s interpretation of Raga Shri in *Six Principal Ragas* discloses Shri to be a demigod with divine virtues and graceful presence, which can be read as a foreshadowing of the ascension of Victoria. Another song related to the queen’s visits to Scotland is accompanied by a tune based on the ragini Pahari. This ragini is used to draw upon and romanticize a lush landscape adjoining the mountainous regions of the Himalayas. Tagore brings this ragini to bear upon the Scottish Highlands (*Srimad*, 56). Yet another example of sonic vernacularization is the use of the spring raga Bahar to illustrate a description of the prince of Wales’s wedding, a celebration of joy, festivities, and commemoration (*Srimad*, 97–98). More plaintive episodes, such as the illness and recovery of Queen Victoria’s eldest child, Prince Albert Edward, are set to thoughtful raginis like Ramkeli, a mood signifying peace and rejuvenation.

Ragas and raginis not only evoke moral sentiments of purity and peace but have also been invoked in aesthetics to stir emotions of power and valor. In fact, the sentiments of purity and power Tagore evokes for the queen can be read as enabling him to cultivate and consolidate a sense of belonging to the upper caste and upper-class reformist circles of urban colonial Calcutta. A few of his works were unambiguously devoted to representing the expansion of the British Empire during the reign of Queen Victoria. In the preface to the first edition of *Victoria Samarajyan*, for instance, he writes: “Intending to commemorate, in his own humble way, the assumption by HER MOST GRACIOUS MAJESTY of the Diadem, ‘Indiae Imperatrix’ . . . the author [Tagore] has composed the following stanzas on the various lands to which the

sacred rays of HER MAJESTY'S power diverge, and has set each to the respective national music."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in *Srimad-Victoria-Mahatmyam* he portrays the growing geopolitical influence of the British monarchical state both within and outside Europe: "In 1841, our future sovereign, the magnanimous Prince of Wales, was born. . . . In this year too, the prowess of Thy [Victoria's] mighty army won for Thee Hongkong from the Emperor of China" (54). A few pages later, Tagore addresses Victoria in the voice of a devoted son: "O Mother, in 1843, Thou visitedst France and Belgium and receivedst from the sovereigns there of still greater marks of honor. In this year too, the province of Sindh was added to Thy Indian possessions, and the Thames tunnel—a piece of workmanship marvelous beyond conception—was opened" (58). This preoccupation with the geopolitical power of the British Empire was an important facet of Tagore's politics and correspondingly spotted in contemporary news reports. A reviewer in *The Englishman* (May 26, 1877) observed: "And truth to tell, the Doctor's [Tagore's] descriptions are generally neat and appropriate, and might almost serve as *memoria technica* for the geography of the British Empire" (Tagore, *Public Opinion*, 55).

There is also the issue of demonstrating imperial power through the lens of a raga, an idea Tagore must have been aware of, as using a raga to represent the sound of an imperial monarch undeniably has implications for broader uses of power. There was a clear demonstration of imperial power during the skirmishes over British control of the Indian subcontinent, which Tagore notes, "[i]t was this celebrated Governor General [Lord Cornwallis] who reduced the impenetrable fortress of Seringapatam and brought Agra, Coorg and Delhi under British sway" (*Victoria Gitika*, 237). The use of Ragini Malashri in this instance depicts a clear display of power—through dealing death and bringing territory under imperial control using violence as its means—and is demonstrated further, as the song continues: "He [Cornwallis] it was who at the battle of Assaye totally destroyed the power and strength of the Maharatta prince and brought the once prosperous Mogul reign to a close" (*Victoria Gitika*, 238). Other examples include the use of raginis like Pra-Dipika to highlight British control over Burma and Assam. While the nature of the encomium locates such narratives as songs of praise, what is of critical importance is that Tagore thus weaves a sonic narrative around the life and times of Queen Victoria with the help of Indian raga music. As the image and figure of Queen Victoria began gaining momentum in finding a place within the Bengali cultural psyche, it is not entirely surprising that writers like Tagore viewed the queen as a commanding



figure of resilience, purity, and power. The question, then, is if we can read his activities, particularly his drive toward sonic incorporation of the queen, as being motivated by factors beyond the domain of reformist agendas that anyhow sought to incorporate the symbol of the queen in the sphere of late nineteenth-century Indian literature and culture. The answer to this question, I argue, lies in a deeply personal experience of imperial and sonic belonging.

This sense of belonging assumes a more imperial-global tone. It includes within its ambit the national melodies of European and non-European peoples and thereby constructs a musical experience that is imperial-global. For instance, *Victoria Samrajyan* contains French, Italian, German, Spanish, and African airs that Tagore collected over many years. From the work of English composer and organist William Crotch (1775–1847), Tagore found the Chinese tune “Moo-lee-Chwa,” which he set to a verse paragraph about “Hong Kong.” Similarly, in the case of Natal (South Africa), Tagore mentions a tune he discovered in Joseph Shooter’s *The Kafirs of Natal and the Zulu Country* (1857).<sup>26</sup> Again, a South African melody for Kaffirland, tunes from Thomas Edward Bowdich’s *The Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* (1819), and Lieutenant John Wedderburn Dunbar Moodie’s *Ten Years in South Africa* (1835) are also included. For many Western readers at the time, these illustrations embody perhaps the only types of music of a global scale they would have encountered without having visited these regions in person, and that, too, bound within a single collection of verses accompanied by notation dedicated to the queen empress.<sup>27</sup>

Any exploration of Tagore’s deployment of raga music to generate forms of belonging has to consider that raga connotations are purely symbolic and largely fluid, linked to a deeper understanding of the moods designated in textual models, often in Sanskrit, that Tagore studied. Interpreting ragas is, as we know, a subjective exercise and necessitates a profound understanding of the symbolic significance and interplay between sound, word, poetry, and imagination. Partha Chatterjee, for instance, has studied how anticolonial nationalism in Bengal articulated two opposing but entangled visions of sovereignty. A material sense of economy, statecraft, and science marked the first or *outer* domain, while a spiritual sense of identity and self-protection marked the second or *inner* domain. For Chatterjee, the inner domain was somewhat segregated from the reach of colonial authorities, as nationalists protected it from external pollution. Now, if one takes the symbolic framing of Victoria as a motherly figure, incorporated into a personal space through

the sound and wisdom of a raga, this enables her to traverse beyond the fixed boundaries to a certain degree. Taken together, it would appear that the queen's sonic incorporation into the broader political and aural fabric of the nation was not only a public display of loyalty. In Tagore's view, sonic incorporation held greater value as a means of generating a private space, where new beliefs of imperial *belonging* were implemented through an inner spiritual experience of Indian ragas. These truly personal experiences similarly intersected with a publicly global nexus of texts, objects, and histories circulating across the breadth of an ever-expanding colonial world. Thus if one were to read his role as the queen's *sonic* biographer and agent of Indian music, then, Tagore could be said to have contributed to his own sense of imperial belonging, reinforcing his role as an authoritative composer.

#### 4. THE SOCIAL MISSION OF SONIC INCORPORATION: MOTHERHOOD

The sonic incorporation of Victoria also had a social mission. The primary concern here is Tagore's figuration of Victoria as a mother of her subject people and the social implications of this idea. Tagore's songbooks consistently distinguish Victoria as a mother figure who embodies virtue of several kinds. In *Victoria Gitika*, for example, the monarch is compared to a guardian deity caring for her children: "Oh my mother, Victoria! Who watchest over us like a guardian deity, sprung as thou art from a glorious ancestry, I intend to describe it before I dwell on thy virtues and deeds" (7). In another passage, she is visualized as a maternal provider for a native population, a deity of plenty: "O Mother! As the calm moon illuminates by her rays all objects, whether transparent or dark, so dost thou, under the impulse of thy virtuous inclinations, diffuse thy mercy alike on the noble and ignoble—thy mercy from which flow all our blessings" (233).

The idea of motherhood in colonial Bengal has a rich history that connects the core functions of nationalism with those of gender.<sup>28</sup> Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta has shown how motherhood was linked to the political dimensions of a concept known as "Bharat Mata" or "Mother India," one that came to dominate the public imagination and lent substantial meaning to cultural reform in the late nineteenth century. Bengali upper-class nationalists were keen to pronounce themselves as the mother's children. More so, "the obsessive nationalist concern for motherhood," according to Sengupta, was what enabled the incorporation of Queen Victoria, one who was "seemingly the antithesis

of all that nationalism stood for,” within a nationalist imagination.<sup>29</sup> The historian Jashodhara Bagchi provides another perspective on motherhood. She has argued that the notion of motherhood was linked to a system of signs which created a sense of cultural difference, thereby demonstrating that the colonial intelligentsia accommodated the public image of foreign rulers into an indigenous sign marking the colonial Bengali man as different from the alien rulers. The idea of the “Bengali mother” was just such a sign. For Bagchi, there was significant dissonance between the reverential worship of mother figures and the actual effects of social reform. Reformers in the social sphere would have found nationalist efforts to control the idea of the mother as a celebratory and reverential figure somewhat problematic. Hence, Bagchi’s assessment that the glorification of motherhood was mainly detrimental to women’s actual improvement confirms her fears that motherhood has always been “a privileged concept in Bengal.”<sup>30</sup> In fact, both Bagchi’s and Sengupta’s views on motherhood are consistent on the core issue of the critical distinction between the discursive and the social. They agree that a dissonance exists between the cultural representation of female figures and their lived social realities.

Tagore’s career as a colonial musicologist enables us to add nuance to this argument, helping us locate a closer and more empowering association between discourse (writing about) and social reality (lived experience). Evidence suggests that, along with classifying Victoria as an embodiment of female power and an inspirational figure in the discursive sphere, sonic incorporation also stimulated a decisive social mission: providing access to music education for young women of school-going age. It is possible to argue that it is the very discursive and sonic configuration of Victoria as a benevolent mother figure that influenced Tagore’s social outreach. For instance, a report from *The Englishman* narrates how he arranged for a music teacher at a local girls’ school to enable large-scale education of women students in the musical arts: “Our honored Doctor [Sourindro Mohun] in that department has generally sent a music teacher during the past year, to Miss Chamberlain’s ‘A.U.A Hindu Girls’ School,’ and there was a plaintive melody in their voices, that quite brought us to repentance and a desire to hear more. Bengalee Music is music, after all” (Tagore, *Public Opinion*, 47).

In the Tagore household, Sourindro Mohun actively encouraged female music practitioners to participate in private performances, at times challenging their social marginalization. For example, Tagore

aided Jadumoni Dasi (1853–1918), a Bengali courtesan, in continuing her music education by initially recognizing her talent as a vocalist and subsequently apprenticing her to the master Dhrupad singer, Guruprasad Misra, employed at Pathuriaghata.<sup>31</sup> Considering the category of “courtesan,” and how late nineteenth-century Calcutta contained a range of subgroups from different social positions and physical spaces, it might be useful to clarify the term “Bengali courtesan.” Whereas Calcutta’s North Indian or Hindustani courtesans were often based near Bowbazar, in the central districts of the city, Bengali women musicians and dancers of the same class lived closer to the homes of respectable gentlemen in and around Shonagachi, in the northern part of the city. Unlike other courtesans, Jadumoni could access the upper echelons of society both as a performer and teacher, mainly owing to the sponsorship and support she received from Tagore. Taken together, the support for music education for female practitioners, along with examples of personal sponsorship, however minimal, demonstrate how sonic incorporation, while related to discursive frameworks such as motherhood and empowerment, also had a social dimension in the promotion of music for women and young adults. Likewise, it illustrates the social mission of incorporation as one where the queen’s narrative penetrates a broader spectrum of Bengali society than just colonizer-colonized encounters, interactions, and exchanges.

An analysis of sonic incorporation allows one to locate the symbolic and cultural implications of a figurehead like Queen Victoria in the subcontinent’s dynamic social, political, and aural politics. The analysis of sonic incorporation in this article has charted a trilinear narrative, which incorporates the queen within the technical and pedagogical devices of music learning and training (such as in the pedagogical spaces of music schools); to framing incorporation as an act of imperial and personal belonging; and, finally, within the workings of a social mission where it is experienced as a social reality, an act of everyday life, and service. The essay demonstrates that incorporating the queen through music entailed the enmeshment of a variety of discourses concurrently intersecting in colonial Bengal and through a global circulation of texts. As newspaper reports and archival findings tell us, Sourindro Mohun Tagore arranged for many of his writings to travel across borders, both national and worldwide, representing the queen through Indian music, complemented by instrument collections exhibiting the gamut of Indian music performance in the colonial world.

## NOTES

Many thanks to Mandakini Dubey and Miles Taylor for their valuable comments and feedback on this article. Special thanks to Siddharth Satpathy for reviewing multiple drafts of this article and offering critical suggestions that went into the making of this paper.

1. Jairazbhoy, "Beginnings," 67–70.
2. See, for example, Capwell, "Marginality and Musicology"; Capwell, "Musical Life in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta"; Mukhopadhyay, *Bangalir*; Atarhi, "Whither Musicology?"
3. There is no official biography of Sourindro Mohun Tagore to date. In preparing this text, I have mainly referred to Campbell's descriptions of Tagore's life and works in *Glimpses of Bengal*; and Mukhopadhyay's *Bangalir Rag-Sangit Charcha*.
4. The Bangla text of *Bhugal-o-Itihas Ghatiya Brittanta* was ready by 1856. The published translation appeared in 1877.
5. Campbell, *Glimpses of Bengal*, 76.
6. While Nirendranath Bandopadhyay, son of the musicologist Krishnadhan Bandopadhyay, who was Tagore's contemporary, argued that Krishnadhan gave perhaps the first public lecture on music in his introduction to the third edition of *Gitsutrasar* (1885), this claim is, until now, unsubstantiated. Hence, I have mentioned Tagore's lecture as being the first given that was published.
7. Tagore's address was primarily aimed at upper-class society, and terms used in his essay, including *nation* (a people) and *jaati* (tribe, community), are complex terms in the history of Bengali music writing.
8. Mukhopadhyay, *Bangalir*, 470.
9. Begum and Ghosh, "Originator," 1–2.
10. See Williams, "Music, Lyrics, and the Bengali Book," for a list of Bengali works produced between 1818 and 1905. At least eighty-five new works on Bengali music were published in this period. Goswami's text was the first text written entirely in prose and sparked the appearance of "reformist" texts on music in the 1870s.
11. Tagore, *Public Opinion*, 1 (emphasis in original).
12. Tagore's European-style orchestra. See Lindsey and Roda, "Raja Tagore."
13. Farrell, *Indian Music*, 58.
14. The topic of notation is complex and has been written upon extensively. In the case of Bengali music, scholars who have considered this question

- include Capwell, “Musical Life in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta”; and Katz, *Lineage of Loss*.
15. Tagore, *Victoria Gitika*, 2–3. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
  16. Tagore, *Public Opinion*, 2. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
  17. Tagore, preface to the second edition, *Victoria Samrajyan*, n.p. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
  18. For example, see Tagore, *Public Opinion*, 29.
  19. Tagore, preface, *Victoria Giti-Mala*, n.p.
  20. Tagore, preface, *Victoria Giti-Mala*, n.p.
  21. Ghosh, *Power in Print*, 3–4.
  22. Banerjee, *Parlour*, 149.
  23. Tagore, *Six Principal Ragas*, 1–4.
  24. For a longer explanation, see Tagore, *Six Principal Ragas*.
  25. Tagore, preface to first edition, *Victoria Samrajyan*, n.p.
  26. Chowdhury-Sengupta, “Mother India,” 69–73.
  27. Chowdhury-Sengupta, “Mother India,” 81.
  28. Chowdhury-Sengupta, “Mother India,” 20.
  29. Chowdhury-Sengupta, “Mother India,” 20.
  30. Bagchi, “Representing Nationalism,” 65.
  31. See Das Gupta, “Women and Music,” 477; and Mukhopadhyay, *Bangalir* (1976).

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