

# RECORDING ARTISTS OF ALL CASTES IN INDIA (1)

Calcutta, Madras and Bombay – A Recording Expedition of Over 12,000 Miles, Recording Only Oriental Artists – A Most Interesting Experience in Far Off Lands.

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Whilst in Turkestan (Central Asia) I received cables to the effect, "*Will you oblige the company in going from Tashkend to Calcutta? It is important that you reach Calcutta in time to record for this season's market. Book from Tashkend directly to Calcutta; it is better than returning to Europe to embark only at Marseilles or London.*"

The emphasis is mine for one only had to consult a map (physical) of Asia to see how impossible and ridiculous such a suggestion was.

I replied to the sender (an American, strange to say), "*Send along a Zeppelin and I'll risk it,*" and followed that up with another saying I was returning to Moscow, there to enjoy a rest after recording in a territory such as Turkestan, where they have not yet even the rude forms of civilization such as are found in West Africa.

On arriving in Moscow I received cables from Monsieur "P.", entreating me to oblige him by leaving for India, as this was to decide definitely whether he would continue or not with his business in that country. I decided to waive my holiday and I looked up the most expedient route for Calcutta.

It will perhaps interest my readers to consult a map of Europe and Asia and follow my peregrinations, which commenced three months previous to my departure for India. Leaving Moscow, my first call was Rostoff on the Don, then in the following order: Armavir, Vladikavkaz, across the Caucasian Mountains by automobile, Tiflis, Baku, across the Caspian Sea, Krasnovodsk, Askabad, Merv, Bokhara, Samarkand, Khokand and Tashkend, thence returning to Moscow via Kazalinsk, Orenburg, Samara, Kazan. One day in Moscow, off to Warsaw, Vienna, Venice, Bologna, Brindisi on to the steamer Port Said, transshipped onto another steamer for Bombay, calling at Aden.

At Bombay, entrained for Calcutta. Arriving in Calcutta I figured that I had covered so far 12,000 miles. After the unenviable existence in Turkestan and the constant traveling and changing I was not sorry to step on board the steamer at Brindisi; it was a mail boat and I intermingled with men (mostly army officers) who spoke my own language. We arrived after a most enjoyable trip at Port Said

at 2 o'clock in the morning and I transshipped on to the British mail steamer S.S. Arabia, bound for Bombay. Once again I was with and amongst my own language and people and the voyage was therefore most pleasant.

Along the banks of the Suez Canal I had my first glimpse of the Arabs. I was immediately struck with their sensual, deceitful and almost fiendish faces. After twelve days from Brindisi we arrived outside Bombay on the first of July <sup>1</sup>. It was pouring with rain (monsoon) and there was a heavy swell on, which certainly did not improve matters, and my first impression of Bombay was vague.

Of Bombay I shall have more to say later, for my immediate departure for Calcutta prevented me seeing the town. I did, however, notice the Victoria Railway terminus, a magnificent structure voted to be the finest, architecturally, in the world.

The traveling to Calcutta was comparatively fast, and the carriages extremely comfortable. The land is cultivated and fertile, and as the train passes the fields with the various natives of all castes working, presents a moving kaleidoscope of colors.

My first impression of Calcutta was one of surprise at its enormity. Fine buildings, shops, roads, etc., all exceedingly clean.

It was not my intention to stay in India very long, and of that I instructed our people whom I asked to hurry things up. I was informed, however, that the word "hurry" is not in the native vocabulary. I therefore had a rumor circulated that I should only stay a few days in each town; this had the necessary effect of stimulating them to movement and hustle.

My first artist was **an amateur**, who called at the recording room to fix a date. He stated that he preferred me to bring the machine and record to his own residence and as he sang better at night, the most convenient hour would be 10 o'clock. To this the manager for our agent, who was present, immediately acquiesced much to my surprise. On remonstrating with him over the matter, he informed me that it was customary to record at the house of a "gentleman" and usual, too, at night. I peremptorily informed both the manager and artist that I maintained a principle of never visiting the house of an artist to record unless the exigencies of the case made it absolutely imperative. Furthermore, during my stay in India, I should hold to that principle; and I did. The following day I commenced adjusting my diaphragms to the room and the Indian climate.

My first artist was **the [aforementioned] amateur**. He accompanied himself upon a diminutive harmonium; the left hand moving the bellows, the right hand playing the melody. There was a conspicuous absence of harmony in all the selections he sang and I afterwards learned that harmony is unknown in India. All the accompaniment is with one hand playing of the harmonium and chords are never used or understood.

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<sup>1</sup> Year?

There is also in Hindustani songs an absence of what is known and appreciated as melody in America. The singers appear to run up and down the harmonium ad lib, occasionally taking good notes and hitting a few notes giving spasmodic glimpses of real melody. I experienced greater difficulty in following the rhythm of these Hindu songs than even the Cossack chantings.

My next recording was **another amateur** who was accompanied by the harmonium and the proverbial tum-tum. These instruments are very curious for, although the playing of them appears to be perfectly simple, they are in reality extremely difficult. Before deciding definitely on a tum-tumist, our agent heard eight of the accredited players. It was many days before I could follow— even to a small extent—how the tum-tum was supposed to accompany the singer, and I do confess that to this day I cannot fathom how it is possible to accurately accompany an Indian song on such an instrument.

The artist sings up and down the keyboard, and to my mind there are no bars, rhythm or tempo, yet the tum-tumist crescendos, stops, commences and synchronizes perfectly with the singing. It was and still is an enigma to me.

I can best describe the singing as a continual series of cadenzas which the harmonium synchronizes with, whilst the tum-tum is giving out a continuous series of tappings, rising and sinking with the artist in a most mystifying manner.

At first I found it unmusical and weird, but eventually began to follow the songs with keen enjoyment and appreciation.

My next artist was **a woman**; of pretty face and features, small of stature with a slender and well-shaped figure, timid and strangely childish in her mannerisms. She wore a small gold ring in her nostrils. She was, in short, the quintessence of daintiness.

Her singing was similar to the previous artist, but very much lighter, prettier and sweeter; she was singing in Bengalee [*Bengali or Bengalese*], and the continuous series of cadenzas were most exhilarating and not too intricate to follow. She played the harmonium and was also accompanied by a tum-tum and jooa <sup>2</sup>.

The artist, unfortunately spoke no English, which was a pity for our language from her lips must have been a pleasure.

A few days later I recorded the most expensive artist in India, **Miss Cohar** [= *Gauhar*] **Jan** of Calcutta <sup>3</sup>; we were compelled to pay the sum of £400 (\$2,000), for sixteen songs. She was able to sing in several languages, it was for that reason

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps what is meant here is a tamboora/tambura. (a “cura” is a Turkish stringed instrument; in Greek: τζουρας)

<sup>3</sup> Her real name was Angelina Yeoward. Born in 1873 in Patna to William Yeoward, an Armenian Jew working as an engineer in dry ice factory at Azamgarh, near Benares, who married a Jewish Armenian lady, Allen Victoria Hemming around 1870. Victoria was born and brought up in India, and trained in music and dance. She died in 1930 (source: internet)

we paid her big money. Although in no way comparing with the charming artist who I had previously recorded, she was the most popular, and therefore the difference in fees was justified. The first and best voice, I had paid but £40 for eight titles, sung in Bengalee. Miss Cohar Jan had sung in Hindustani, Telugu and Persian.

Miss Jan was in the habit of singing for the rich Indian Princes, and at the weddings of rich merchants, and her fees averaged \$1,000 to \$2,000 per diem.

She is also the recipient of various kinds of jewels from her admirers, who lavish money and presents on her to an amazing degree. She was accompanied by her own men on the tum-tum, harmonium and violin. The latter instrument is played in the same manner a carpenter saws.

She was everlastingly chewing the proverbial Indian betal-nut\*, and it was the duty of one of her numerous retinue to carry around a large brass "spittoon" into which, before commencing to sing, she would expectorate. This was a nauseous procedure, but one that was consistently followed by all other artists in India. Miss Jan had an extraordinary control over her toes, and for our amusement would often beat time with them, needless to add the toes were all bejeweled with various trinkets. We were informed by her manager that the jewels which she was wearing possessed an intrinsic value of a lakh<sup>4</sup> and a half of rupees (nearly fifty thousand dollars). During the recording of the female artists the important caste question arose and for awhile delayed us in recording. As in Turkestan, all female artists are looked upon as prostitutes, and are therefore casteless. The curious position arises that it is against the religion for a respectable man to touch, talk or do business with one of these so-called casteless women. Our broker, Mr. [Hemendra Mohan] Bose, a man held in great respect in Calcutta, informed us that he could not be present, so also did his manager, with the result that we were in a quandary how to proceed, for neither our representative nor myself were able to criticize the singing, it was therefore absolutely imperative that some so-termed "respectable" man was present. After a day's delay it was discovered that so long as no outside person was aware of the meeting, and that the respectable one was merely interpreting, all would be well. I may add that several "respectable Indians" took advantage of this and were present at the invitation of the manager. So much so that I was compelled to offend the manager by telling him I did not allow friends into the recording room.

Books in their scores have already been written on the caste question, and therefore I do not propose to write on its obscurities, other than give a few of my

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<sup>4</sup> A lakh or lac is a unit in the Indian numbering system equal to one hundred thousand (100,000; 10<sup>5</sup>). It is widely used both in official and other contexts in Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Pakistan, and is often used in Indian English. In English the word is used both as an attributive and non-attributive noun, and with either a marked ("-s") or unmarked plural: "1 lakh people" or "1 lakh of people", "5 lakh rupees", "5 lakh of rupees", "5 lakhs rupees", "5 lakhs of rupees" are all to be found. (source: Wikipedia)

personal experiences encountered in recording the different castes.

About this time I recorded a **man**, who played two instruments like diminutive clarionets, "with his throat". They were placed one on either side of the throat and the music that emanated from them was comparatively loud. The man evidently had complete control of the muscles of his throat, these muscles acting as a reproducing diaphragm. Placing the instruments over the particular part which he was able to control in some mysterious manner, he produced the music. The performance was uncanny, strangely "Indian". The singing of the women was much more interesting than the men, without exception. Strange to say, amateurs were the best of the men, and the professionals best of the women.

The "real" ladies, I was informed, sing only in the precincts of their own homes. I was to have recorded a "real lady", but absolutely refused to travel to do so; further, it would have been necessitous to dismantle the machine and fix it up again for a couple of hours, again dismantling and fixing it for the regular recording in Calcutta. This to please the whim of a native "lady" and to acknowledge the rule of a ridiculous and prehistoric caste idiosyncrasy. I have mentioned that diaphragms are affected by the different climates and atmospheric[al] conditions. I began recording with the diaphragms constructed for Turkestan, but found them too sensitive for use in Calcutta, I tried my European diaphragms, these were too hard, I accordingly constructed a number to meet the exigencies of the Indian climate.

All the Indian artists preferred to sit whilst singing, and therefore caused a certain amount of difficulty in bunching around the horns in focus.

After recording 420 titles in Calcutta, I left for Madras, to record Canarese artists. Of Madras at this point, I shall have little to write, for immediately on arriving I was stricken down with malaria fever, and was in bed for three weeks, afterwards proceeding to the town of Bangalore to recuperate and incidentally take a few records.

When I was convalescent we experienced considerable difficulty in obtaining a recording room, for the hotel was full and there were no other buildings in the vicinity with spare rooms. We eventually were compelled to record in a large building, which was a home of rest for the native paupers. A stone building full of unfurnished stone rooms—fortunately there were few natives staying at the place.

The Canarese singing and songs was very much easier to follow than the Hindu, and there was a more pronounced rhythm. It was here I recorded my only duettists, **two sisters**, whose singing was very pleasing and the melodies were easy to follow. They kept time by beating with their hands on their knees. They were accompanied as usual with the harmonium and tum-tum. The girls were quite young and were protected by their parents; they never allowed the girls out of their sight, for they will make a living out of them both by singing and

prostitution. The girls were, I was informed, aware of the existence before them and appeared resigned to their fate. I was fortunate in securing a photograph of the girls together with the parents and the accompanist, in position in front of the horns.

We were fortunate in securing another **Indian woman who sung in Canarese**, and although we dallied over the price for a couple of days, we secured her. Of her there is little to say other than she possessed a voice as large and as powerful as herself; standing five feet ten inches, with a splendid figure, the tallest Indian woman I had met. In the photograph can be seen the little pet dog which she is holding in her arms. I found the Canarese singing simple to record and was not sorry, for I was still very weak from the fever. We left for Madras after having recorded 40 titles in Bangalore.

\* The betal-nut is chewed together with a powder which causes a crimson stain to appear in the mouth making a particularly offensive to the teeth and lips.

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**Original illustrations:**

- *Recording in Pyjamas, Madras (p. 32)*
- *Recording in Calcutta (p. 32)*
- *A Canarese Artist (p. 32)*
- *Girl Duettists in Bengalee (p. 32)*