

Generational Friction: An Ethnographic Perspective on *Guru Seva* Within a Lineage of Tabla Players in Kolkata

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Abstract: This article explores a form of generational friction across three generations of Hindu tabla players in 20th century Kolkata. It considers the extent to which a succession of political economies of Hindustani music (from colonial feudal to state to corporate) determined the means and possibilities that each generation had to pass on musical knowledge and performance training to the next. Discussion specifically points to how the ritual and practical aspects of guru-seva (a disciple's obligation, and service, to their guru) was negotiated within a selected musical lineage, in response to these broader challenges.

Résumé : Cet article explore une forme de friction générationnelle entre trois générations de joueurs de tabla hindous à Calcutta au XX^e siècle. Il cherche à évaluer jusqu'à quel point la succession des économies politiques de la musique hindoustani (de la féodalité coloniale à l'étatisme jusqu'au monde de l'entreprise) a déterminé les moyens et les possibilités qu'avait chaque génération de transmettre le savoir musical et la formation à l'interprétation à la génération suivante. La discussion signale en particulier la façon dont les aspects pratiques et rituels de la seva (obligation, pour le disciple, de servir son gourou) ont été négociés au sein d'un lignage musical sélectif, en réponse à ces importants défis.

The first time I met Abhijeet, he was crossing Little Russell Street in downtown Kolkata.¹ The meeting is etched in my mind not least of all because of the almost slapstick scenario that unfolded in the background: a taxi swerving in Abhijeet's direction to avoid a cyclist, who in turn was dodging a perilous pot hole. Fortunately, the papers Abhijeet was clutching, which included flight confirmations, visa applications, and foreign exchange forms for his guru's upcoming European tour, remained firmly in the grip of his well-trained tabla playing hands. It was some time ago, February 1997, and the rigmarole involved in organizing international tours was

still formidable, even for well-established and travelled musicians like Abhijeet's guru. In the metropolitan city of Kolkata, with its 18 million or so people, there are many hundreds of up-and-coming musicians aspiring to establish a successful career in Hindustani music, but there are perhaps only dozens who end up achieving this objective. Yet a well-developed sense of modesty would prevent Abhijeet from taking any pride in his own significant accomplishments. This article draws upon two decades or so of ongoing interaction and enduring friendship with Abhijeet that had their beginnings on that day.²

I highlight Abhijeet in this ethnography because of my ongoing admiration of his adeptness in negotiating a sense of obligation to his guru over the course of establishing himself in the highly competitive professional domain of Hindustani music in Kolkata. My intention in this paper is thus to investigate the issue of generational friction within a community of tabla players in Kolkata by focusing on the ritual obligations and service of *guru seva* (lit. serving the guru), which young, aspiring middle-class Hindu musicians like Abhijeet found themselves compelled to take on in the course of developing their own professional careers.

Guru seva also provides a useful vantage point from which to explore issues of generational friction, class and caste interaction, and ritual obligation. These issues are considered here in the context of the lives of three high-caste Hindu tabla players belonging to three successive generations of a musical lineage based in the urban setting of Kolkata. I begin with a detailed ethnographic account of Abhijeet's daily professional life and the acts of guru seva it entailed. This is followed by general biographical accounts of Abhijeet's guru, Shankar Ghosh, and grand guru, Gyan Prakash Ghosh, in order to illustrate how the practice of guru seva has varied over generations and across classes and castes.³ Finally, I end the paper with an analysis of the influence of broader changes in networks and structures of patronage, social organization, and performance practice of Hindustani music on the practice of guru seva.

Guru Seva

Guru seva is intrinsically woven into the social relationships of almost any Hindu South Asian context in which knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next. Ritual aspects of guru seva can be understood phenomenologically and spiritually as worship, homage, reverence, devotion, servitude, and in practical terms as service, apprenticeship, and submission.

Copeman and Ikegame draw attention to an asymmetry in an idealized *guru shishya* (master-disciple) relationship in which the guru is always understood to be giving more to the disciple than the latter could possibly ever reciprocate: “A critical way in which devotees seek to repay their indebtedness is through acts of guru seva as a kind of counter-gift that can never measure up (hence its repetition)” (2012: 34). The contemplation of devotion is a prominent theme in Hindu texts such as *Narada’s Bhakti Sutras*, where selfless acts of guru seva are declared to provide unseen benefits to the devotee. In a series of aphorisms accredited to the ancient sage Narada, devotion is intrinsically linked to *seva* and the path of realization: “Now this devotion is superior to action, knowledge or yogic contemplation, for devotion is itself its fruit” (1938: 8). Such a sensibility is deeply embedded in Hindu ritual thought and practice in diverse spiritual and philosophical contexts, including of course Hindustani music. It is also embraced within Abhijeet’s understanding of guru seva, although it is very hard to describe how.

This symbolic, ritual aspect of guru seva also has a practical, lived side. Oral narratives of Hindustani music from various parts of the country are populated with anecdotes of heroic acts of devotion, selfless acts of generosity, and profound insights experienced in the service of a guru or Ustad. Examples of these are available in autobiographies, biographical anecdotes, and reminiscences by Mukhopadhyay (1977), Garg (1978), Khan (1982), Bhagwat (1993), Marjit (1995), Pukhraj (2007), Khan (2012), and others. Ethnomusicological scholarship has added further depth to this understanding of the social and ritual relationships that are at the core of Hindustani music. Daniel Neuman’s seminal work on the social organization of Hindustani music (1977a, 1977b, 1980) opened up a field of study on hereditary communities, the social institutions of Hindustani music and generational issues, subsequently enlarged and further deepened by Kippen (1988), Qureshi (2002, 2007), McNeil (2004, 2007a, 2007b), Dard Neuman (2004), Butler Brown (2010), Pradhan (2014), Williams (2014), and many others. From these studies, we learn about generational issues in various contexts including hereditary Muslim lineages and communities of musicians in areas such as Pakistan, Delhi, and Lucknow. Virtually every account provides a unique insight into human experiences of the ritual and practical relationships in traditional music contexts of Hindustani music, be that in the Muslim *ustad-shagird silsila* or Hindu *guru-shishya parampara*, or in the many cases where Hindu and Muslim musicians learnt from each other.⁴

Abhijeet's Early Career

Abhijeet had been out of his house since early that morning, accompanying classes at the private music institution of a well-known classical vocalist. When I first encountered him later that morning, he had picked up the documents from the travel agent and was on his way to the Sangeet Research Akademi (SRA) in Tollygunj, South Kolkata, for afternoon rehearsals. Later, he would travel further to the city's south side by public bus and auto-rickshaw to drop off the paperwork at his guru's house. After returning home at around seven o'clock at night in an old part of the city in the east, he would teach his own students and do his own *riyaz* (practice). Based on the close friendship we developed, I can attest that this was pretty much a typical day for this talented musician in his mid-twenties.

Abhijeet's family was not really surprised when he chose to pursue a career as a musician. His father had formally studied and performed *kathak* (dance) and was the dance and music teacher in a local secondary school for girls, a position he had taken many years previously after getting married. His mother had learnt classical vocal and dance also, and as it commonly happens with many talented, creative women in India, she gave them up when her first child came along. From an early age, Abhijeet heard the sounds of tabla and other instruments, the tinkle of the *ghungroo* (ankle bells) of dancers, and experienced daily interactions with a shared community of musicians, dancers, and painters. One room of his family's three-room house had been assigned for dance and music practice, and was more often than not occupied by rehearsals, practice sessions, and *addas* (a Bengali social practice of intensive collective discussion)⁵ about performance and culture.

This struggling, middle-class Bengali Hindu Brahmin⁶ family earned enough income to support a family of four modestly, but there was little room for indulgences such as taxi fares. Abhijeet had first begun lessons at the age of five with his father. As a young teenager, he began his training with perhaps the most well-known, and by far the most prolific, tabla teacher in Kolkata. As one of hundreds of young musicians who learnt from Shankar Ghosh, Abhijeet's training took the form of formal, individual half-hour weekly classes, occasional workshops, and informal sittings when time and circumstances permitted. A moderate fee was charged for these lessons. The lessons themselves commonly took the form of playing for the guru what had been learnt in the previous lesson and subsequently practiced after which a student would copy down the next lesson from an almost oracle-like tome containing his teacher's collection of notations of traditional compositions and their variations. In private, some students would half-jokingly refer to

this somewhat alienating experience of learning as a factory production. Shankar Ghosh would occasionally ask Abhijeet, once he was old enough, to run an errand or perform a minor chore. Within a few years, Abhijeet started to accompany his guru to local performances and to assist him in transporting, packing, and caring for the tabla. Over time, Abhijeet found himself entrusted with arranging many activities in his guru's professional life, including the formalities for his guru's overseas tours, which is what he was doing the day we met.

It was after that initial encounter on the corner of Little Russell and Ho Chi Minh Sarani that I arranged to go with Abhijeet to the Sangeet Research Akademi in Tollygunj, in the south of the city. He had a meeting lined up there, and I had some of my own work to do. We headed towards Chowringhee, down Ho Chi Minh Sarani, the street whose name highlights the city's recent political past. The street name was famously changed by the Left Front Government from Harrington Street to Ho Chi Minh Sarani after the Vietnam war to voice fierce opposition to the US involvement in what was regarded as an unjust war. Political expressions like this are not uncommon in this city, and they draw upon the widespread, vigorous intellectual and performance culture that has shaped political discourse in the city's public sphere.

This bold effrontery towards what was clearly regarded as US imperialism fascinated me. Abhijeet thought it a bit anachronistic and would have preferred if the same effort had gone into filling the potholes in lanes like the one in which he nearly got run over. The political culture of the city started to move away from a left-leaning radical stance over the course of the 1990s, in the wake of the "liberalization" of the Indian economy in 1990. This latter shift towards free-market neoliberalism had an enormous impact on the political and cultural life of Kolkata, and by 2011 had eventually gathered enough momentum to remove the Left Front CPI-M (Communist Party of India – Marxist) State Government after 34 continuous years of democratic rule.⁷ Abhijeet's disarming directness at that time suggested that he hoped for a change in political culture, and he welcomed it when it came. Abhijeet's career began at a time when State patronage of networks and structures (which his guru and grand guru had experienced) had become increasingly marginalized by corporatized networks and structures of patronage for Hindustani music.

There is another point of difference between Abhijeet's background and those of his guru and grand guru: Abhijeet was not able to receive his school education in an English medium school. In the 1970s and 80s, the Left Front (CPI-Marxist) State Government of West Bengal made it

compulsory that Government-run schools provide instruction only in *Bangla* (Bengali). It was an ideologically driven initiative that was arguably intended to promote Bengali language and nationalism, and to reclaim cultural pride diminished by the legacy of British colonial rule. In Kolkata, proficiency in English, in addition to Bengali and Hindi, was, and still is, an important social marker on many levels because it rather starkly reveals through conversation class background and position within Abhijeet's generation.

This English language policy in State-run schools was eventually abandoned after a decade or so, but its effects were deeply felt by a generation across West Bengal and its consequences have endured until recent times. One of the unintended consequences of the policy was that it ended up defining and marking a social divide between communities and castes in Kolkata based on English proficiency. This significant distinction directly affected Abhijeet and his generation, especially in his early career, as well as many others from similar class backgrounds educated in Government schools, because it set them apart linguistically from those educated in private schools, where instruction was always through the medium of English.

English functions (and continues to function) as a *lingua franca* of privilege at social gatherings, where professional opportunities are articulated and negotiated. Those not fluent in English continue to feel a linguistic disadvantage not just in terms of the (in)ability to communicate, but also in the limited access to the intellectual and cultural world view, social networks, and cultural resources of the *bhadralok* (lit. gentle folk, a label for the Bengali Hindu bourgeoisie).⁸ The *bhadralok* culture of the city's past ensures that proficiency in English enhances one's position within the social hierarchy of the city and facilitates access to political and cultural capital. English proficiency can play a role in determining a musician's inclusion or exclusion from various networks and other professional opportunities.

Notwithstanding expressions of Kolkata's political outrage against the US in the early 1970s, many Americans, and indeed what seems like hundreds of foreigners from around the world, have been coming to Kolkata to attend concerts and learn music and dance. December to early March is the concert season in Kolkata, and major music festivals and performances of Hindustani music abound across the city. The dimensions, modes, and consequences of the engagement between local Hindustani musicians and the legions of foreigners who study, or in some other way collaborate, with them is a fascinating and complex one. The dynamics of this exchange are

themselves worthy of separate study, especially as Hindustani musicians in Kolkata constantly comment on how the number of foreigners arriving every year appears to continue to increase. In Abhijeet's case, his own engagement with foreigners was not a strictly utilitarian affair, but rather one informally and consciously cultivated over years of sincere, sustained, and informal interaction with the many international musicians and well-wishers with whom he also became friends.

These international relationships provided important opportunities for Abhijeet to establish his own career. By the time he was in his late twenties, Abhijeet had formed various genuine, close friendships and reciprocal relationships with musicians and Hindustani music lovers from around the world, especially France. These alliances were often achieved through forms of engagement that emphasized open exchange and mutual benefit, such as helping outsiders locate local resources, tabla shops, or access to other musicians and, later on, organizing small programs and other performances that they attended or in which they participated. It also meant that some were accommodated for short stays in Abhijeet's small family home in an old quarter of the city. Within the linguistically diverse networks of international visitors, any local issues with English were counterbalanced by the wider common struggles of language between locals and outsiders or between different language groups of outsiders themselves. It also meant that performance, workshop, and teaching possibilities, and local hospitality overseas became both possible and normalized in his professional life. The assistance that Abhijeet provided to international musicians in Kolkata took on the countenance of professional networking and socialization and significantly differed from the ritual and cultural obligations of guru seva that his teacher, for example, had experienced.

Abhijeet's Developing Career

While training with his guru, Abhijeet completed a science degree at a state university in Kolkata, an indication, perhaps, of the precariousness that a musical career has in the anxious minds of the middle classes in Kolkata, dictating that an alternate career must also be established as an option, "just in case." Over the course of his Bachelor's degree, his musical practice, learning, teaching, and performance continued.

It was only after finishing his university studies that Abhijeet began to access the informal international networks described above. Most immediately, this began when Abhijeet met the foreign students who came

to Kolkata to learn from his guru. In the ritual and social conventions of the *gharana* (school or style of music) system, they became his *guru bhais* (“guru brothers”), symbolizing an unspecified but socially recognized quasi-familial connection. As the number of his foreign guru bhais expanded and his interaction with them took on increased levels of familiarity, he was provided with new opportunities. Within five or six years, he was able to arrange his own overseas tours in Europe. At first these were informally organized by his guru bhais, as well as by friends and other overseas acquaintances with links to Kolkata. He played in “house concerts,” and ran tabla workshops and other small public programs maybe once every one or two years. These primarily involved accompanying instrumentalists on their own tours, or setting up opportunities for other musicians from Kolkata to tour Europe, whom he would accompany. These tours also quickly began to include collaborations with local musicians in Europe. Abhijeet described, more than once, how these extended networks, which included an engagement with fusion music and exposure to a broad range of other music genres, had broadened his musical horizons, although he maintained his primary focus on Hindustani music. The added performance opportunities and lucrative fees offered by the “world music” domain in Europe significantly enhanced the financial viability of these tours, and provided enough funds to maintain and support the development of his career as a classical musician in Kolkata through the remainder of the year.⁹

Overseas tours also translated into more performance opportunities in Kolkata. When it is known that an accompanist like Abhijeet has a good network overseas, invitations to accompany instrumentalists and vocalists locally seem to be more forthcoming. These overseas tours then work on two levels. Firstly, the tours generate enough income to alleviate many of the financial difficulties often faced by Hindustani musicians in Kolkata and secondly, they generate more work locally. As a result, Abhijeet started to accompany vocal and instrumental music in Kolkata regularly. It was at this time that he married an up-and-coming classical vocalist, one who had trained at the premiere music training institution in Kolkata, the Sangeet Research Akademi that Abhijeet and I had visited together the day of our first meeting. As his career further developed, Abhijeet started to organize small concerts in Kolkata for visiting national and international musicians, opportunities that were reciprocated for him and his wife elsewhere in the country and also overseas. Nowadays, Abhijeet regularly tours internationally, either accompanying his wife or other musicians, and his national touring has also increased significantly.

Abhijeet's Guru and Grand Guru

In contrast to the complexity of professional demands that Abhijeet encountered, his guru Shankar Ghosh's training with Gyan Prakash Ghosh (1909-1997) started when State networks and structures of patronage dominated the local economy of Hindustani music. Patronage provided the principal source of income for many musicians, supplemented with private teaching and occasional opportunities to perform in private music associations and institutions. Nevertheless, this period is often recalled as a time of significant financial struggle for most Hindustani musicians. International touring, which started to become more common from the 1970s onwards, provided some lucrative, and welcome, additional opportunities for many musicians. International networks became increasingly important over the course of Shankar Ghosh's professional life both financially and in terms of reputation. International networks were already a significant part of his professional activities when Abhijeet had started to learn from him. Indeed, it was when Abhijeet was midway through the guru seva of arranging paperwork for a tour to France that I first met him.

Shankar Ghosh grew up in a middle-class Hindu household belonging to the *Kayasth* caste¹⁰ and was educated in an English-medium school. He began his musical training with his father, continuing with the most prominent tabla player in Kolkata in the mid-20th century, a fellow Bengali Hindu from the Kayasth caste, Gyan Prakash Ghosh. While there was a ritual equivalence in caste, there was a significant class difference between the two, as Shankar Ghosh's guru came from an economically privileged *bhadralok* land-owning family.

Gyan Prakash Ghosh apparently did not charge anyone tuition fees. This in itself is an interesting point because it was unusual during a time when many musicians relied on their teaching income to survive. It also reveals the social differentiation between *bhadralok* privilege and middle-class disciples: his economic privilege meant that he and his family had enough employees to carry out domestic tasks, sparing disciples from the drudgery of the sorts of errands and chores that Abhijeet regularly had to undertake. For Gyan Prakash Ghosh's disciples, the spirit of guru seva was more aligned with ritual behaviour of respect and devotion than with the practicalities of everyday chores. This differed from the pronounced difference in community, class, and privilege between the Muslim hereditary musicians from North India from whom Gyan Prakash Ghosh learnt and that distinguished his experience of "guru seva" from that of subsequent generations considered here.

Apart from his principal musical relationship with Gyan Prakash Ghosh, Shankar Ghosh also learnt tabla and classical vocal music from both non-hereditary Hindu and hereditary Muslim performers over the course of his career. He was a renowned accompanist to many of the foremost musicians in India. He began touring regularly in the early 1960s, and spent a number of years in the US. Perhaps Shankar Ghosh's most enduring legacy in Kolkata continues through the literally hundreds of students he taught over the course of his career. It was only when his international career was well and truly established that Abhijeet began to learn from him and became one of the most devoted students in terms of practical acts of guru seva. Later in his career, Shankar Ghosh made frequent trips to Europe to perform and run workshops, often arranged and facilitated by Abhijeet and his international guru bhais.

Shankar Ghosh's guru, Gyan Prakash Ghosh, was a legendary performer and teacher of tabla in Kolkata, training hundreds of disciples. In addition to learning tabla, his bhadrakolok background also provided the means to undertake vocal training in dhrupad from Mohammad Sagir Khan and Mohammad Dabir Khan (direct blood descendants of the legendary 16th-century musician Miyan Tansen) and khyal from Girija Shankar Chakraborty. He was also a renowned composer, harmonium player, musicologist, and radio station administrator.

His wealthy family made their fortune by providing service to the enterprise of the British colonial state in Calcutta (now Kolkata) around the mid-19th century, a time when Hindustani music and musicians from North India began to arrive there in force. It was also the height of the Bengali renaissance, otherwise referred to less prosaically as early colonial modernity, a period of intercultural intermingling tempered by rising Bengali and Hindu nationalism (McNeil 2018). The bhadrakolok were the drivers of this renaissance.¹¹ In the course of personal communications over a number of years with the respected Kolkata-based sarod player Buddhadev Das Gupta, Gyan Prakash Ghosh has often recalled the desultory attitude towards music he experienced at that time, both from within his family and from the general social milieu of his own privileged background. Such stories are not uncommon, and taken together they reveal the extent of ritual and social conservatism that shaped the public sphere and how serious practical engagement with Hindustani music often was equated with some sort of moral transgression. These same stories also alert us to a type of courage and strength of desire of those amongst the bhadrakolok who took up learning music in the face of virulent opposition.¹²

Gyan Prakash Ghosh received training on tabla from two prominent Muslim Ustads, each belonging to his own distinct hereditary lineage. Because

Gyan Prakash Ghosh was born into a socially and economically privileged Hindu Bengali *bhadralok* family, the negotiation with the *Ustads* was framed by a number of political, economic, and ritual issues – arguably “frictions” in their own right. Deeply ingrained notions of social and class inequality between Muslim North Indian and Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* communities,¹³ and the modes of ritual exclusion this inequality invoked, framed the relationship between Gyan Prakash Ghosh and the Muslim hereditary *tabla* players who taught him. This raises two issues relevant to this discussion: firstly, that he was able to pay significant amounts of money to these *Ustads* to secure knowledge and training,¹⁴ and secondly, the idea of a privileged member of the *bhadralok* personally running chores for his *Ustad* as *guru seva* would have been a remote one. Class privilege would have meant that if a situation arose in which a chore or some similar form of assistance needed to be done for the *Ustads*, it would have been almost certainly carried out by one of Gyan Prakash Ghosh’s domestic servants, rather than by Gyan Prakash Ghosh himself.

While these wider conditions of hereditary class and privilege determined the dimensions of the relationship between disciple and teacher, the role of personal agency in defining the exchange between the *Ustads* and Gyan Prakash Ghosh cannot be ignored. Anecdotes and informal reminiscences by his students emphasized the degree of respect that *Abhijeet*’s grand *guru* had for these *Ustads*. Yet an understanding of this respect must also be tempered with an understanding of the exclusion and disparity which determined that exchange between these two generations could not be framed or practiced as *guru seva*.

While Gyan Prakash Ghosh’s training was framed by disarming communal, caste, and class exclusions, his professional life was almost entirely engaged with the local economy of *Hindustani* music, augmented by a handful of international tours. This local economy was formed around private associations, institutes, and clubs, and included State networks and structures, which would shortly emerge as the most significant source of patronage. But class and caste privilege meant that his engagement with the local economy could be managed on his own terms. He stopped performing publically at the height of his career for reasons that were never explicitly stated.

In comparing these three musicians from different generations, it becomes apparent that the encounters between the Bengali *bhadralok* and the *Ustads* from the North provided the conditions for the most intense friction of all the generations considered here. Hereditary Muslim musicians at the time faced profound professional and social upheaval, not just in Kolkata but in Mumbai and many other urban centres.¹⁵ Changes created a deep disjuncture in the tradition of *Hindustani* music, with ramifications that we are still only

beginning to understand as the oral histories of hereditary musicians gradually but increasingly find a voice in the public domain.¹⁶

Conclusion: Locating and Defining Generational Friction

As the political economy of Hindustani music evolved over three generations, we see a form of generational friction arising as individuals from each generation negotiate changing ritual and practical aspects of guru seva. A clearer understanding of Gyan Prakash Ghosh's relationship with his two Ustads becomes evident when considered within the wider context of the tensions that surfaced in the entanglement of Muslim hereditary musicians in North India and the bhadralok in late-19th and early-20th-century Calcutta. Their relationship was framed by larger forces of colonial modernity, Hindu Nationalism, and new networks and structures of musical patronage. By the time that Abhijeet's grand guru had begun learning music, the patronage of music in colonial urban centres had been dominated for around a century by wealthy individuals and families with landed or mercantile resources, or institutions in the public domain reliant on subscriptions and donations. Colonization had disrupted the pre-modern networks and structures of patronage of Hindustani music with the creation of new institutionalized social and cultural spaces in Calcutta. Discourse in the public sphere worked to facilitate the transformation and realignment of Hindustani music within the broader enterprise of modernity in Kolkata (Banerjee 1989; McNeil 2018). Meanwhile, rising Hindu nationalism supplied the moral imperative behind the calls for the bhadralok's radical appropriation of cultural knowledge from its traditional practitioners. Hindi/Urdu-speaking hereditary musicians displaced from North India after the 1857 rebellion became entangled in this agenda, and in so doing confronted and were seriously challenged by the economic and class disparity, as well as social and ritual exclusions, that they faced in their dealings with Bengali- and English-speaking bhadralok.

This is not to suggest that social and ritual exclusions did not also dominate the lives of earlier hereditary musicians in the feudal *jajmani* networks of North India. Ethnomusicologist Regula Qureshi has noted that "as socially devalued hereditary specialists[,] they were exploited within profoundly unequal relations of patronage" (2002: 86). But there was not generally an issue with retaining ownership of their cultural inheritance and thereby ensuring their future security. This changed when they began regularly interacting with the bhadralok. In the earlier feudal economy (*jajmani*) of North India, the Ustad's traditional musical knowledge was his

descendants' cultural and economic inheritance. But in the local economy of colonial Calcutta, the musical knowledge that was once inherited is now paid for in cash. The idea of compensation for a loss of economic inheritance is an expression of political power and differentiates this exchange from the tribute, or *guru-dakshina* (a tribute paid to the guru, usually cash), that might be offered to a guru without expectation of any specific reward. In this situation, the roles of disciple, patron, Ustad, and servant start to blur. Within this framework, direct acts of assistance such as those carried out by Abhijeet sit outside of any ritual context and function when carried out by a patron or the patron's domestic employees.

It is during the late-19th century that the institution of *gharana*, which replaced *biradari* (fraternity) and *khandan* (lineage) as the marker of a musician's professional identity in urban centres, provides a form of social contract to assuage some of the asymmetry between the *bhadralok* and North Indian hereditary musicians. The encounter of hereditary musicians with colonial modernities made the invention of the *gharana* "system" necessary, as pointed out by Neuman, albeit in a different geographical context: "gharanas as we know them did not appear before the middle of the last [19th] century and the term itself probably did not gain currency until after the beginning of the present [20th] century" (1980: 68).

While there was significant class disparity and ritual exclusion between Gyan Prakash Ghosh and his Ustads, Gyan Prakash Ghosh and his disciple, Shankar Ghosh, both belonged to the same caste, although their relationship was mediated by a significant asymmetry in class. This disparity was an inverse of what Gyan Prakash Ghosh had experienced a generation previously. The social relationship between the upper-class *bhadralok* and the middle class easily slipped into the Hindu ritual framework and behavioural expectations of the *guru-shishya* parampara and concomitantly with practices of *guru seva*. Class disparity in this context made the necessity of practical day-to-day acts of *seva* redundant because such assistance could readily be rendered by the guru's domestic employees. Rather, Abhijeet's guru's "obligation" towards Gyan Prakash Ghosh, due to caste differences, was not and could not be carried out through regular chores, such as menial tasks that might be otherwise carried out by household staff, but was instead contained in other less obvious expressions of reverence and devotion. The sense of the disciple's obligation to his guru is, in this instance, intensified by the lack of any fee paid for this training.

Compared to his guru and grand guru, Abhijeet's training was clearly framed by the ritual sensibilities and practical significations of the Hindu *guru-shishya* parampara and the addressing of obligation through *guru seva*.

While some class and caste disparity was present in Abhijeet's relationship with his guru, this relationship was the least socially unequal of the three generations considered here. Points of difference lay more in language facility, but, as lessons were conducted in Bengali, language was not a major factor in their relationship. Nevertheless, the degree of physical service that Abhijeet performed for his guru was far greater than that performed by the preceding two generations.

It would appear that market-driven change to the political economy of Hindustani music in Kolkata has not been without its impact on social relationships. For example, while the functioning of guru seva retains its ritual core, it has acquired an additional shade of meaning and dimension of practice, one that comes closer to a business internship. Consequently, Abhijeet's generation has to ritually and professionally negotiate more spheres of activity and levels of complexity than previous generations of Hindustani musicians did.

For Abhijeet's generation, friction can be located in the challenge of negotiating traditional and ritual obligations to the guru while developing a professional career that demands different responses and sensibilities depending on whether he is engaging with local, corporate, or international political economies of music. Language challenges had made the already daunting task of establishing a successful career even more difficult for Abhijeet, challenges not faced by his guru or grand guru. Social media, Skype, and other manifestations of digital technology created additional challenges, both in terms of time and the scale of activities involved. No doubt this tension between the past and the future, enacted in the changing practices of guru seva, will continue to intensify in the next generation. Whatever the case, the mid-20th century story of there being so many tabla players in Kolkata that one had "a fifty percent chance" of hitting a tabla player with a stone thrown from any window in the city is rarely heard anymore in contemporary Kolkata. Nevertheless, the skills necessary for dodging wayward traffic have never been more relevant. ❀

Notes

1. Abhijeet is not his real name. The reason for using a pseudonym here is to avoid causing any embarrassment or awkwardness for Abhijeet amongst his *guru bhais* (colleagues that share the same teacher) and professional networks in Kolkata and elsewhere. Similarly, sensitivities arising from caste, class, and privilege come to bear on the professional lives of Abhijeet's guru and grand guru, who have also not been identified here. The larger structural basis of these communal, class, and caste

sensitivities, and the nuanced forms of exclusion that they generate, are rarely voiced in discussions of Hindustani musicians in Bengal. It is not the intention to critique here the dominant culture and the caste privilege that sustains it, and the social and ritual exclusion that created this dominance. Rather, the modest aim is to consider what the lives of the three musicians discussed here can reveal about the consequences of such dominance. This ethnography draws upon more than two decades of ongoing friendship and musical exchange with Abhijeet and an equally long-term but more occasional interaction with his *guru*.

2. At that time, I had been living in Kolkata for about a year, undertaking an Australian Research Council post-doctoral fellowship, for which the School of Media, Film and Communications at Jadavpur University were the institutional hosts. After that, I was a visiting fellow at CSSS (Centre for Study in Social Sciences) Kolkata for another year or so. Following that, I received an Australian Council for the Arts grant to study with Professor Sachindranath Roy and Dr. Ashok Ranade in Mumbai for a further year. Since then, other funding sources and long standing projects have allowed me to regularly spend time in the city working, performing, researching, and interacting. This was not my first visit to Kolkata. I had spent some time in the city during an earlier visit, some ten years, previously undertaking doctoral research. This extended the doctoral work that had seen me based in Dehra Dun in North India in the 1980s for around three years, where my own instrumental teacher lived at the time. Through this research and through long-standing involvement with my principal teacher Pt. Ashok Roy, I had by then come into ongoing contact with a large web of musicians.

3. There is considerable biographical material publically available on both of these great musicians. The aim of the accounts of their lives presented later in this article is merely to highlight one aspect of their professional lives: the broader conditions under which they learnt, and the relevance of *guru seva* to them.

4. *Parampara* (Sanskrit for “tradition”) and *silsila* (Urdu for “chain”) both refer to the ritual relationship between preceptor (*Guru/Ustad*) and disciple (*Shishya/Shagird*), which overwhelmingly share the same principles and expected behaviours.

5. See Sen (2011) and Chakrabarty (1999) for further discussion of Bengali *adda*.

6. See Bandyopadhyay (2014), Chaudhuri (2008), Chandra and Nielsen (2007), and Partha Chatterjee (1997), for discussion of peculiarities of caste in the Bengali context.

7. For detailed discussion of the conditions and consequences of this transition in patronage structures, see Gosvami (1996), McNeil (2004) p. 203 ff., (Pradhan 2014)

8. The *bhadralok* was mostly composed of the upper castes, *Baidyas*, *Brahmins*, *Kayasthas*, and *Mahishyas*, see Banerjee (1989), Bhattacharya (2007) and Partha Chatterjee (2006) for further discussion. For discussion of Hindustani music in Bengal see C. Chatterjee (1996), Ray (1973, 1980), and Williams (2014)

9. Neuman has discussed the local conditions of returning foreign musicians in his article, “Journey to the West” (in *Contributions to Asian Studies* 12, 1978).

10. The ritual and social status of the Kayasth caste in Bengal is not entirely clear. Nevertheless, they seemed to be often regarded as members of the highest Hindu castes.

11. On the Bengali renaissance, see Chatterjee (2007), Bhattacharya (2007), and

Banerjee (1989). For discussion of Bengali manifestations of Hindu nationalism, see Chatterjee (1992), Capwell (1986), Rosse (1995), and Tagore (1882).

12. See Capwell (1986), Patke (2007) for other examples of the negative attitudes of the Bengali urban elite towards music.

13. See Banerjee (1989), Chatterjee (2006), Hatcher (2007), Maitra (n.d.), and McNeil (2018) for more on social and class inequalities between Muslim North Indian and Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* communities.

14. As many musicians have recounted, he famously bought traditional tabla compositions from these *Ustads* and others, paying large sums of money for the time – anywhere between 300 and 700 rupees per composition.

15. For further background to and discussion of these changes see: Pradhan (2004, 2014), Qureshi (2002), Ranade (2008) and McNeil (2004, 2018) amongst others.

16. See for example, the mapping of Hindustani music in Kolkata initiative by Sanjoy Bandopadhyay at Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. <http://kolkatamusicmapping.com>, DOI 30 May 30, 2017.

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