## Radio Kotina

Thirty seven year-old Akhtar Ali worked as a radio technician, in a local radio manufacturing unit, all his life. Here, a team of self-trained technicians purchased the latest Phillips and Murphy radio models available in the market, copied and mastered their circuitry, innovated on it and made low cost Radio Kotina models using locally available parts. These radio sets flooded the market and became popular both for their design and affordability.

His first memory of the city begins with a moment narrated to him many times over by his mother:

"The government made us roofless with promises of a 22 sq.ft. plot. We had not been able to gather our things, even take down the boards for keeping the household utensils when they brought everything down. And we were transported to an open ground out of the city. We reached here in the evening."

What must the future have looked like to Akhtar's mother, as the sun set in the horizon of the expanse of nothingness that surrounded them? This was the late 1970s. Akhtar was one year old at the time. Over the next 35 years, they built their life, and that of the family. Today they have a two-storied house, where Akhtar lives with his mother, his wife and young daughter, his brother and his brother's family.

They lived through many realities and many changes, but possibly one among them has been the fulcrum of their life – the popularity of radio. Television and video had not yet arrived in India, and there was a wide scope for radio marketing from villages to towns. During the 80s, local manufacturing played a decisive role in taking radio to all classes of people.

Radio Kotina also grew in this context. Akhtar learnt this work with an *ustad,* another self-taught technician, in the neighbourhood, in the early 80s and they entered local manufacturing with Radio Kotina together. Akhtar worked under this *ustad.* There was a fine heirarchy and division of labour in the workshop from the beginning. At the top would be the 'Engineer No. 1' – the person responsible for copying from the sets available in the market and designing a new circuitry, and possibly a new casing for the set.

"Most of the technicians work on a piece-rate basis. The wireman who undertakes the wiring and soldering of plates can turn out only 25 to 30 plates daily. In comparison, the fitter fits out 50 sets on an average per day. An engineer can easily carry out the tuning and checking of 100 sets. Thus their daily income varies from Rs. 75, Rs.150 and Rs.300. The wireman's work is the most strenuous. Sitting steady for hours with concentration can be the most tiring but fetches the lowest income." The work of a wireman is what Akhtar's wife had to learn when Akhtar suffered from a heart attack at the age of 35. She recalls:

"The long treatment as well as household expenses led to mounting debts. It was very difficult to carry on. Akhtar joined work, but his working hours were considerably reduced. So he taught me the technique to assemble a radio unit, and would bring work home. I picked up the wiring work quite nicely. I would attend to the domestic work and also bring in some income from this work."

After the heart attack, Akhtar's imminent rise to the level of Engineer No. 1 was truncated. But that did not remain the only problem. The site of the workshop was itself contentious. Workshops like these run through having negotiated for themselves certain basic amenities through a protracted negotiation with administration, and through making gradual maneuvers to obtain administrative orders from state authorities, a few guarantees of infrastructure which could be taken away any time. Akhtar explains:

"After 2000 quite a change has come over the atmosphere of the city. An exercise to make Delhi into Paris was under way. There was a drive to demolish non-legal colonies. After the 1996 orders of the Supreme Court closing down 168 bigger factories, the small-scale industries were next in queue. There was an unsuccessful attempt in 2001 to shift the small-scale units to conforming zones. The legal action for relocation had begun, and Kotina closed down."

Akhtar had devoted the best years of his life to learning and innovating in techniques around radio. He now insists on earning his livelihood for the time being from running a fruit juice handcart in the neighbourhood.

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## *Vani* / Voice

With the coming of the gramophone records in the market from 1902 onwards, a new music seems to have been introduced in Maharashtra. The *Sangeet Natak* (Musical Theatre), a specific genre in the tradition of commercial theatre in Maharashtra of touring repertory theatrical troupes which nurtured the practice of female impersonation (men playing female roles), immediately accessed this music. From the beginning of this theatre music came from 'outside' sources; in the context of the *Sangeet Natak,* eclecticism can be seen in the form of deploying tunes from a vast variety of musical genres and traditions.

The music genres popularised through the gramophone records – *thumri* and allied forms – were not entirely unknown to musicians and music listeners in Maharashtra, but with the gramophone records they were out in the public space in the voice of women. In the specific case of Maharashtrian theatre, the availability of new music meant an expansion of its cultural sources.

The composition of songs for Balgandharva's roles, a singer-actor with the *Sangeet Natak* and perhaps the most famous 'female impersonator', borrowed heavily from the gramophone recordings of female singers such as Gauhar Jan. A unique actor even in the tradition of the practice of female impersonation because of the length of his career, he was in his times a 'star heroine' and lives on in the memory of theatre lovers for his representation of the 'ideal woman'. As a singer, Balgandharva is recognised as a model for both his musical attributes and performance aesthetic.

With the choice of tunes for Balgandharva's songs for *Manapaman,* a play in the immediate aftermath of the gramophone, the vocal achievements of the heroine's singing are distanced from the heroine's singing in the earlier era, and seem to define a new aesthetic.

Are Balgandharva's songs simply copies of the songs recorded by the women singers?

Such a possibility is preempted in the way voice is used and understood in the 'Indian' traditions of singing. First of all, we have to note that Balgandharva did not sing in the high pitch of the women singers.

Further, his vocal attributes are described differently from the voices of women singers. A contemporary critic describes the subtleties of the voices of singers, whom he heard only on the gramophone records, thus: Gauhar Jan – *mohak* (attractive), *bhardar* (full), *god* (sweet), *nirmal* (clear); Malka Jan – *god, patal* (thin), *lavchik* ( flexible); Janaki Bai – *chadha* (high pitched).

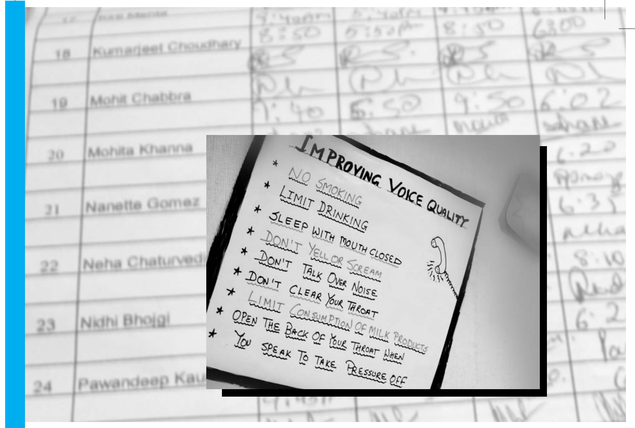
A search for the adjectives that describe Balgandharva's voice in this period produce *madhur* (sweet), *manjul* (melodious), *najuk* (delicate/soft), *zardar/jawaridar* (resonant) and flexible. The earlier models of good voice on stage are associated with *tej* (luminosity) and exceptional throw of voice.

These changes are significant both in terms of the musical style, as well as in fashioning the representation of femininity on stage. If we look at the implications of the transformation of tunes, it is clear that the force and voice throw in the women singers is being moderated considerably. The traditional feature of the voice throw in the women singers, 'call' in the voice, is noticeably absent in Balgandharva's clear and open voice.

On the other hand, the traditional association of *thumri* with the expression of the 'woman's voice' seems meditated by Balgandharva's style, which foregrounds only certain aspects of the women singer's style. Restraint seems to be the key word in understanding Balgandharva's singing in the post-gramaphone era and to understand this singing style as the model for representing femininity in theatre.

Looking at Balgandharva and Goharbai (an actress/singer who later tried to make her place in the *Sangeet Natak*), another understanding of individuality and imitation emerges. Balgandharva's training and a lot of compositions of his songs fall within the practice of imitation. Balgandharva's training depended much on repeating the *bandish* (base tune) many times over. Goharbai's records suggest how she imitated Balgandharva's singing, through repetition. This does not deny individual agency to their singing. What is of interest, however, is the perception of this relationship between imitation and individuality: how the public saw an instance of self-created music in Balgandharva's singing (which itself we have seen is an instance of the transmuted imitation of 'feminine voice') and considers Goharbai as at best derivative (as only imitating). This same 'imitation' was unacceptable in place of the 'original', even in the heat of arguments favouring the 'real' woman enacting female roles.

Excerpted and adapted from 'The Relationship between The Production and Consumption of Thumri and Allied Forms: The Female Impersonator – Balgandharva' by Urmila Bhirdikar, Sarai-CSDS Independent Fellow, 2004-05.




## Listening and Learning

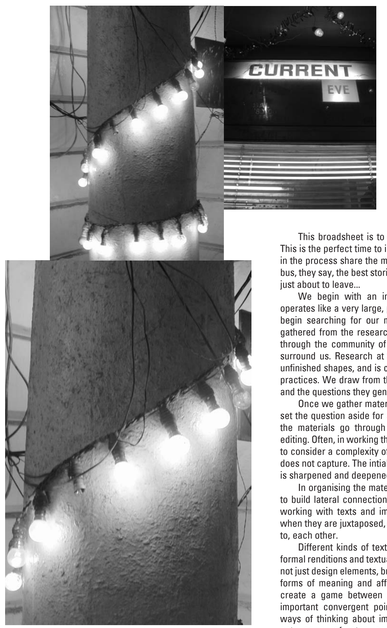
In October 1930 the Calcutta Radio Station began a music lesson programme of Bengali songs. The programme ran for the next 40 years till about 1975.

The greatest advantage of the 'Music Lesson Programme' was that music was taught with notation, i.e., the 'tutor' sang the song and then elucidated the notes in the song structure. Pankaj Kumar Mallick, the first 'teacher', made it a routine to dictate notations and give listeners instructions on how to follow them. In the initial years the *Vetar Jagat,* a fortnightly radio programme publication, also published the songs with the notations in advance. Listeners who could follow the notations, could master the songs without mistake. With an emphasis on non-classical music, the programme became immensely popular amongst its listeners. Especially children with little or no opportunity to learn music from music school or an individual tutor, found an avenue to learn music from a wireless teacher. It also served as the base of learning for prospective artistes.

The programme arranged for musical competitions selected from the songs taught on the radio. Enthusiastic patrons encouraged amateur performers by sponsoring competitions and awarding prizes. A patron or sponsor could be anybody – a *zamindar* (landowner), a writer, or just a pleased listener.

From 1939 onwards, several music lesson programmes began. The music lesson programmes helped popularise Bengali music amongst listeners. New groups of audiences grew up appreciating music through radio. In time, these audiences went on to form the main pool from which 'amateur' artistes for the radio emerged.

Excerpted from 'Mediation Through Radio' by Indira Biswas, Sarai-CSDS Independent Fellow, 2003-04.




This broadsheet is to go to print in the next half-hour! This is the perfect time to initiate a public self-reflection and in the process share the making of the broadsheet. Like in a bus, they say, the best stories are told when the passenger is just about to leave...

We begin with an initial idea, a 'prism'. This prism operates like a very large, porous fish-net through which we begin searching for our materials. Materials are primarily gathered from the research work that occurs in Sarai, and through the community of researchers, seminars, lists that surround us. Research at Sarai itself takes many final and unfinished shapes, and is carried out through diverse sets of practices. We draw from the intersection of these practices and the questions they generate around themselves.

Once we gather material around the initial question, we set the question aside for a while. Through a wiki and a list the materials go through several rounds of revision and editing. Often, in working through them, the materials urge us to consider a complexity of questions which the initial prism does not capture. The intial question acquires new registers, is sharpened and deepened.

In organising the material, we create 'concept clusters' to build lateral connections and associations. This involves working with texts and images, and seeing what happens when they are juxtaposed, or nested, or placed in opposition to, each other.

Different kinds of text-based content demand different formal renditions and textual strategies. Similarly, images are not just design elements, but a context in which to insert new forms of meaning and affect. The poster is an attempt to create a game between us and the reader. It is a very important convergent point between our arguments, and ways of thinking about image and layout. The poster also acts as a refractor, as a detour, as another way of approaching the material. The poster is the broadsheet's public inscription on the surfaces of the city.

## A line, It 'Goes'/ It's *Passé*

Information regarding government notifications about what needs to be done by its people spreads like rumours, even as it is true and verifiable. It is a reality in which everyone must participate – whether it is getting new ration cards or I-cards made, getting a water pipe connected or an electricity cable laid. These are lengthy procedures, and the first step is filling forms. Every form demands that each person revisit and consider afresh their understanding of what constitutes their 'selves'. One watches oneself in new ways, in different avatars in the light of different dates from one's life. As soon as we become comfortable with one way of seeing ourselves, the forms remind us where we belong, what marks we have on our body. One fills the form as required, and prepares this renewable 'self' to be hidden, once again, beneath a stamp with an ink of a different colour from the time before. And so it happens that in this fast paced city with its millions, everyone halts and waits to submit their forms in slow moving lines.

One summer we got intimation that we had to get new ration cards made. We don't really use ration cards for rations, but they are essential as proofs of identity and residence, and serve as 'solid' documents for any government related work. So no one raised an eyebrow when forms were handed out. Of course everyone knew this meant a round of standing in long lines, but the procedure was important. So, it's really ok, it 'goes'.

My mother likes to get government related work done as soon as possible. She sat me down at the table to fill the form that evening. It was a small sheet – not too many questions. Just these: *Name of head of the family, *Number of previous card, *Residential address, *Current address, *Postal address, *Do you want to add any name, *Do you want to remove any name, *Attach a photocopy of previous card, *Attach a photocopy of voter I-card/water bill/electricity bill, *Attach two passport size photographs of head of the family. I filled the form.

Five or six women from the neighbourhood, including my mother, got together and planned that we should leave early to deposit the forms and finish quickly.

Next morning, we reached the office by 4:30 A.M. It is a two-storied building, surrounded by tea and snack stalls. When we arrived we saw there was already a long queue. A sheet still lay spread on one of the benches – people must have slept here the night before. Government offices don't open before 10:00 A.M. Why were so many people here so early? It reflected the experience of feet that have travelled far trying to get government related work done.

Everyone was sitting in queue. I went and stood beside a tea stall, while my mother joined the queue with her companions and they sat down to chat. Almost all present were women. The reason an all-women's group had come from my neighbourhood was that women are attended to first at collection windows.

Everyone sat in different positions – some hugging their knees and rocking on their haunches, some carefully covering their heads with their *sarees.* Time ticked by slowly as the women chatted, and the queue kept growing. A men's queue formed alongside. Tea stalls opened for business. People read each others' forms, compared notes. It seemed as if everyone asked the other to fill the form the way they had, so that in case of error, it would be no one's alone; or everyone, without exception, would have their forms filled correctly.

It was past 10:00 AM. There were around 200 people in the queue by now. A small window opened in the building. Inside, behind a desk, sat two officers, each with two boxes placed besides them. Two juniors stood on the side. They would take the forms and old ration cards from behind the netted iron grill in the window, and pass them to their seniors. The iron door to the building remained bolted.

The seated queue began to rise. Bodies moved in the direction of the window, pushing the line ahead. My mother was standing now. She asked me to stand at the mouth of the queue. I stood near the window and started watching the proceedings.

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## The Making of The Crowd

One of the ADs (Assistant Director) calls up a dubbing artiste coordinator with a list of requirements. For example:

- Ten kids (or classroom and park scenes (mixed))
- General crowd (mixed – 15 to 20 persons)
- Schoolgirl (8-10 yrs)
- Maid (40-45 yrs)
- Salesman (30s)

The most common requirement in feature films is for 'crowd scenes'. Depending on what the crowd picturised is doing in the scene, professional dubbing artistes can provide a wide range of variations – from crowds shrieking in a riot, to the steady murmur of a crowd in an auditorium. Individual lines may or may not be clearly heard in these cases. The aim is to create a particular atmosphere. Then come the individual, distinctly seen and heard, roles where the dubbing artiste has to match the actor's lip movements. These can vary in length from a few words to several scenes.

The AD then describes the kind of voices needed in terms of the age, quality of voice (bass/shrill) and character. Most dubbing artistes are peculiarly malleable, insofar as they can switch in a moment from low-pitched suave executive to an abusive truck driver. And of course the movie business is one that deals heavily in stereotypes, which in turn have spawned an industry of super-specialised talents. "It's not as if you just land up, say a few lines and go home richer. 'Acting' *karna padta hai* (You need to 'act'). You have to understand the character and the scene. Sometimes they make you cry for your dead son, sometimes you have to laugh like a madman…you have to get emotional."

The industry relies heavily on existing networks and personal contacts. Most positions are filled and studios booked on the basis of friendly recommendations or second hand advice. "It's not like you can go to a junior artiste's website and pick the faces and profiles you think most suitable. Someone puts you on to a coordinator for reasons that could pertain to efficiency, price, variety or a small 'cut' on the side. You like his/her work and recommend them to your friends. And so on." Such a system can encourage a particular kind of entrepreneur, such as Surekha.

"After I got over my initial diffidence, I started to try for bigger roles. Simultaneously my contacts grew. I met with a lot of directors, producers, sound engineers and dubbing artistes along the way. I figured that I could easily use this network to start my own thing. After all, I had a dense and ready database of voice artistes, studio contacts and potential clients. *Bombay mein sab kuchh goodwill pe chalta hai* (In Bombay everything runs on goodwill)."

As told by **Surekha Prasad** (voice artiste) to Debashree Mukherjee. Debashree is a researcher with the Publics and Practices in the History of the Present project, Sarai-CSDS.

## Locality DJ

These days, one can hear the boom of a DJ in every nook and corner. Sometimes at weddings, or at birthdays, everywhere one sees the DJ. A few days ago, there was such a programme in our locality, at the centre of which was the DJ.

It was during the Ramlila festival. Walking through the streets one evening, my gaze fell on a poster pasted on the walls of the urinal on the corner. On it was printed DANCE COMPETITION. Along with the names of the organisers and participants, was printed the programme for the evening – the slaying of Ravana, followed by the dance competition.

The dance competition generated great excitement amongst the young people in the locality. The most animated were the music shops, from where young participants were getting their favourite songs recorded for rehearsals.

The wait began for Dusshera.

On Dusshera, in the centre of a large ground, in the middle of the locality, stood a huge puppet of Ravana, and in a corner of the same ground a stage of about 18 ft. by 19 ft. had been erected by joining several wooden tables together. Three sides of the stage were covered to form walls and a ceiling, and the fourth side opened out to the audience. In front of the stage stood rows upon rows of chairs. On the stage sat the DJ, surrounded by his equipment – mixer, amplifier, CD player, and joined to them ten speakers in groups of five, arrayed resplendently along two sides of the stage. Halogen lamps hung from tall wooden poles, bathing the area in a warm yellow light. All in all, the stage looked set for a long evening.

Instead of carpets the stage was covered with a makeshift floor, on which had been laid crooked plastic strips. Perhaps the competitors would dance on these. Behind the stage hung a banner with information about the competition. This banner was flanked by two banners on which were written 'Shiva Gym' and 'Triple Jeans'.

It was 7:30 in the evening. A crowd had begun gathering in the ground. Preparations were on to set Ravana on fire. The DJ started doing his thing. Someone announced the evening's programme on the mike. People began gathering in front of the stage. As soon as the Ravana puppet caught fire, the crowd began to scatter.

The first young man stepped up on stage to prove his mettle. Wearing a black shirt and pants, he began dancing like Salman Khan to '*Lagan Lagi, Lagan Lagi*'.

As he spun, the DJ too would dance from time to time. Despite the many halogen lamps, disco lights had been provided for on the stage, but they were playing on the DJ rather than the dancers. The programme was beginning to pick up. A few spectators began to sway to the music, dancing intermittently. During the programme an announcement was made thanking the organisers and mentioning them by name.

It was now 10:30 at night. All the participants had demonstrated their skill. The judges were called upon to announce the winners. In an instant, the owners of the gym and the jeans company materialised on stage as the presiding judges. I suddenly understood the story behind the two banners alongside the competition banner.

Having announced the winners, they invited all the participants to come up on stage. A crowd formed as everyone began dancing. The scene was comparable to a film show. Seeing the programme draw to a close, people began making their way out. I too made my way home.

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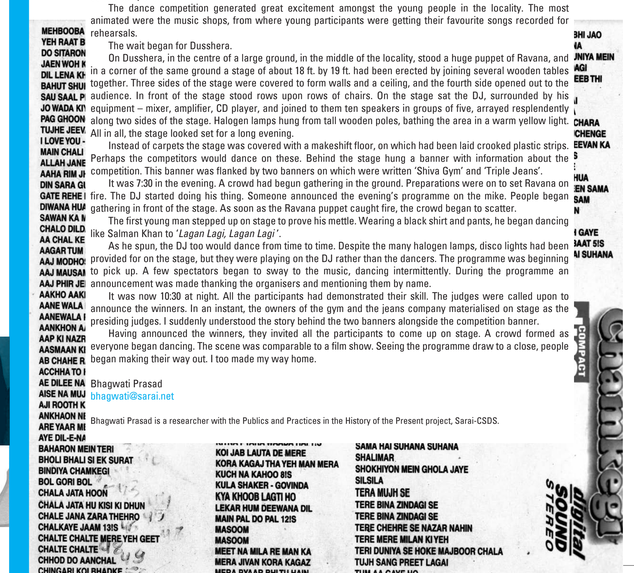
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