

Uncolonizing Early Sound Recordings

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From the earliest days of sound recording, technology shared a fraught relationship with the pre-modern cultures of South Asia, and in particular with traditional music and sounds.

Imperial companies and colonial ethnographers introduced the recording of sound in South Asia in the early 20th century. The recording of musical performances along with other forms of sound (i.e., speeches, comedy shows, theatre, and staged acts) within a studio setting that were then made available publicly as objects for reproduction and as products for sale had far-reaching social and sonic effects. Recording technologies altered the performance aesthetics of sound practices by limiting the duration and scope of improvisation and transformed modes of distribution by transmitting vocals, instrumental music, and local sounds as fixed objects to mass audiences for the first time. Yet there was resistance to recording the voices and sounds of colonized subjects in South Asia on the part of leading musicians and sound practitioners who, for a long time, refused to commit their improvisational sounds to shellac discs. What were the reasons for their protestation?

The advent of sound recording in India was engineered by London's Gramophone and Typewriter Company (GTC) in the early 1900s. Engineer Frederick William Gaisberg and local agent George Dillnutt produced the first recordings after 1902 (Kinnear xvii - xx). These were mostly made on three-minute long shellac discs, as South Asia had an abundance of raw

resin to produce such objects. Therefore, the intention of the imperial company headed by colonial ethnographers like Gaisberg was to exploit local resources for building a global business that would benefit colonial powers. Indeed, the period in which recording expeditions were made was also the peak of Britain's imperial expansion in South Asia and in many other regions of the Global South, through trade and the manipulation of new markets.

As early recordings emerged from the colonial mapping of auditory cultures for exploitation and consumption, with the ultimate goal of making profit, musical forms and intricate vocal renditions like Khayal¹ were adapted, rendered, or compromised to suit the requirements of studio recording, marketing, and sales abroad; in the Global South, no such market had previously existed. As a result, many hybrid and mutated forms emerged, such as Thumri² and Dadra,³ which were flexible, recording-friendly, adapted versions of Khayal without the aural intricacy of free and temperamental improvisation that tended to transcend temporal and durational limitations. Practitioners of Dhrupad,⁴ an ancient sonic form, fell way behind in the race for quick money, as they were least interested to transmute their aesthetics of performance. Those who adapted or conformed to GTC's business model and approach to the colonization of sound were most successful.

¹ Khayal is a major form of Hindustani classical music associated with poetic lyrics and sung words based in a raga. In Khayal, ragas are extensively ornamented, and the style calls for more technical virtuosity than intellectual rigour.

² Thumri is another vocal form in Hindustani classical music that is based on romantic literature. Thumri as a style is derived from Khayal in a shortened form.

³ Dadra is a short and light classical vocal form in Hindustani classical music based on certain simpler rhythm cycles or tala.

⁴ Dhrupad is one of the oldest forms of musical sound practice in India, and Alaap is its introduction, which is an elaborate and free-flowing introduction of the raga. While Dhrupad takes a few hours to present, Alaap takes more than an hour to establish the raga's mood through an intricate building of sound without rhythm accompaniment.

Among these recordings were songs by Gauharjan, a so-called *tawaif* (or courtesan) from Calcutta and an exponent of light classical vocal music, performing popular and abridged versions of ragas. Other early vocalists included Soshi Mukhi, Fanni Bala, Sila Bai, Hari Dasi, and N.C. Chakraborty (Farrell; Kinnear 89), among others. Missing in these recordings were many great voices of the times, including Dhrupad and Khayal singers like Fayaz Khan and Alladiya Khan, who regularly performed for hours on stage, as live performances were abundant in South Asia.

One may ask why serious Dhrupad musicians went unrecorded while an amateur singer like Gauharjan was celebrated as the first historic voice recorded in South Asia. The fact that Gauharjan was not a native Indian cannot be denied given the colonial-racial roots of early sound recording. Both her parents were Europeans, and British colonial officers could likely relate to her more easily because of that racial lineage. She also understood the economic potential of recorded sound as a commercial product, and, within a few years, her income from sound sales skyrocketed. While Gauharjan rode to fame as the prima donna of early sound recording in South Asia, Dhrupad and Khayal performers like Fayaz Khan and Alladiya Khan remained unknown beyond the region, as they were resistant to truncate their improvisations for the sake of adhering to the limits of recording technology; rather, they advocated for live performance over recorded discs. The historical importance of early sound recordings is thus drawn into question, as they registered only a narrow section of sound practices.

The shellac discs produced as sounding objects or commodities for sale as a result of colonial ethnographic expeditions were meant for expanding European markets in South Asia using local materials and exploitative labor. They aimed for maximizing gains and minimizing costs (Parthasarathi 199). There was little to no interest in the cultural practices and aesthetics

of local music, and colonial officers did not appreciate the sophistications that the traditional and pre-modern sound practices in South Asia possessed. For example, GTC's agent in Calcutta was John Watson Hawd, whose interest in Indian music appeared to be squarely focused on business. In June 1902, he wrote "The native music is to me worse than Turkish but as long as it suits them and sells well what do we care?" (Farrell 33). Gaisberg, for his part, noted in his travelogue, "We entered a new world of musical and artistic values . . . The very foundations of my musical training were undermined" (Lubinski and Steen 281). To colonialist sonic ethnographers, Asia was largely a continent to explore and plunder.

This tendency is reflected in the way local sounds were damaged and aesthetics threatened. Performers made unsolicited interruptions during recording expeditions to serve the technological dispositif of sound recording. For example, at the end of her sessions, Gauharjan would state her name. This high-pitched and flirtatious announcement, made toward the end of the recording to register the name of the performer, was common to early recordings of South Asian musical performances. The declaration of the singer seemed to epitomize a proclamation with a European egoism that went against the core essence of surrender to the nature of South Asian traditional sound practices such as Dhrupad. Within the edifice of the recording object on shellac discs, the recorded alter ego would haunt its content, structure, and style of presentation. It is no surprise that many devoted local musicians did not want to record their practices in order to resist the mutating invasion of early recordings.

At the turn of the twentieth century, South Asian sound practitioners found themselves at the cultural intersection of two worlds: the natural improvisational character of music from South Asia, and the modernist technological invasion of imperial recording companies and their business-driven ethnographic expeditions as part of the colonial exploitation of local

resources for profit. Nevertheless, recorded discs opened up a portal for transcultural interactions even though the power hierarchy was heavily unbalanced due to the predominant colonial structures of exploitation, undermining, and control. The early days of GTC's recording industry in South Asia indeed marked a new phase in the interface between South Asia and Europe. For the first time practitioners from the Global South entered the world of Western media in the form of shellac discs. But, as shown above, this exposure was more a commercial initiative than a cultural exchange. The recording industry's main purpose was to put in place a crude capitalistic system within a community of practitioners who were devoted to their craft of embodied sound through devotion to free improvisation.

Ragas, for example, reflected natural temporalities, with each one dedicated to a time of the day. What the recording industry brought to this spatio-temporally free-flowing and natural practice of sound was to transform an emergent auditory situation into a cultural mode of transmission and consumption in the form of shellac discs. In this view, early sound recording was a deeply damaging intrusion. Broadly drawing on Walter Benjamin's notions of the loss of art's "aura" through mechanical reproduction, and on Theodor Adorno's thoughts on aura in relation to the gramophone, one can develop a critical attitude toward recording technology since recorded sound objects "no longer possess their traditional reality" (Adorno 50). Following the castration of a live sound into a commercial object, one can contend that early sound recordings compromised the aura of sound in South Asia, reducing the elaborate, temporally open, and improvisational pre-modern sound practices into deliverable sound objects. This is why musicians, particularly more traditionally oriented Dhrupad musicians, resisted recording, as they feared that the dedicated search for integrity and true voice would be contaminated. This disruption of South Asian sonic worlds was initiated by colonizing

forces and was, in many cases, irreversible, as the changes to cultural forms like Khayal and Thumri, for example, were later accepted as normative.

While many South Asian sound practitioners were reluctant to face the phonograph, there was also an apocryphal apprehension that recording media would exorcise sound from an artist's voice. Musicians' concrete concerns were centered on the sudden public availability of their art and the limitations that recordings imposed on performance time. Over the course of the last century, these concerns have shaped both the practice and the content of post-colonial sounds. However, after India's independence in 1947, musicians gradually reclaimed reproduction technology through long-form recording of live performances as sonic traces, balancing adherence to customary structures with the compulsion to remain relevant. Currently, traditional sound practices like Dhrupad survive in a relatively appropriate form and format, through today's freer digital access and sharing, rather than being muffled by recording's dark beginning.

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