

26H East Road
Jadavpur
Kolkata 700 032

20 March 2007

Mr Anmol Vellani
Executive Director
India Foundation for the Arts
Bangalore

Dear Mr Vellani:

As a follow-up to my IFA-supported 2004-06 Arts Research and Documentation project on separation songs of Bengal ('Songs of Love, Loneliness and Longing'), I would like to apply for a two-year dissemination of the material and knowledge derived from that ARD project. I want to collaborate with sound recordist Sukanta Majumdar, who was the field recordist of the previous project, on this dissemination.

Please find enclosed the new project proposal, 'Moving with the Song'. I shall be grateful if you consider it for an IFA grant.

Thank you.

With best regards,

Moushumi Bhowmik

Moushumi Bhowmik

MOVING WITH THE SONG: Dissemination proposal in continuation of previous Arts Research and Documentation project, 'Songs of Love, Loneliness and Longing'

MOUSHUMI BHOWMIK, in collaboration with SUKANTA MAJUMDAR

'You come and take but never bring back or send anything. We want to know too. And teach our children.'

—Sarwar Kamal Robin, member of 'Udichi' cultural organisation in Mymensing, Bangladesh, during an interview on 25.04.2006.

Many promises to return have been made, but not kept, during my travels across West Bengal, Assam and Bangladesh in search of songs of *biraha* (longing for union while in separation). I received an IFA Arts Research and Documentation Grant from 2004-06 to collect separation songs from the folk repertoire of Bengal and the result has been over 75 hours of field recording of songs and interviews, being archived now phase by phase at the Archive and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology (ARCE), Gurgaon and the World and Traditional Music section of British Library, London. There was also the promise to write a musician's travelogue at the end of the project, towards which I have been moving, but rather slowly. I feel I am not yet ready for the book; I have presented a few papers at seminars and conferences; they are merely work in progress, by no means finished chapters of the proposed book.

I strongly feel that this project is yet unfinished. I suppose most researchers feel this way; they also have their own reasons for it. I personally think that among other factors, the fact that I have mostly not been able to keep my promise to go back to the source is what makes my journey incomplete. As I am writing this proposal I have the news that one of my most celebrated interviewees (about whom I said during a presentation—at Jadavpur University in June 2006—that even though he does not know this, I have taken Ruhi Thakur of Sylhet as my guru), is gravely ill with cancer. It fills me with pain to think that we have not been able to take to him his recordings. I only hope it will not be too late by the time I return to Sylhet.

In continuation of my research and documentation project, I therefore propose to undertake a project in dissemination with my partner from the previous journey, field recordist Sukanta Majumdar. After almost every recording session Sukanta had to pass his headphones from singer to storyteller to onlooker; we stood watching their faces light up as they listened 'in tranquillity [to] how beautiful their music sounded.' The dissemination project will, among other things, allow us to take back the songs (and more) to those who gave them to us.

RETURN TO THE SOURCE

'In a 1990 interview with Charles Kuralt, Alan Lomax defined "cultural equity" as the principle of equal time for all cultures in the media and the classroom . . . Lomax coined the term "cultural feedback," which to him meant returning documentation of traditional performance and expression to the places from whence they came,' said Nathan Salsburg in a talk titled "In Digital Pursuit of Cultural Equity," which he presented with Bertram Lyons at the American Folklife Center symposium, The Lomax Legacy: Folklore in a Globalizing Century, Library of Congress

on January 18–20, 2006.

Lomax, the legendary folklorist from Texas, was not necessarily received well by everyone. His worst critics have even called him the 'white song hunter', milder ones have seen him as some sort of a *dada* of the folklore research and documentation world, dictating terms for other lesser beings. Perhaps the flaw is inherent in the role of the collector, the obvious outsider whose purpose for recording and dissemination can easily be questioned. So it seems the collector must always be on guard, apologetic as if, for the work they do.

While thinking of dissemination I have therefore been worried: who was I to have recorded this material, who am I to decide now how it should be archived, who am I to go and tell people what their music is all about and how it compares with other kinds of music and so on? Then I remember Robinbhai's 'we want to know too; and teach our children.' Or the frail Ghulam Shah of Birbhum during his life's last recording (we went to meet Ghulam Shah in January 2005; he died in May that year), headphones on, gently shaking his head and smiling as he listened to his own voice. 'Super fine,' he said, returning the headphones to Sukanta. 'Full pass mark,' he added.

While 'equal time for all cultures in the media and the classroom' might be like a romantic dream, the notion of 'cultural feedback', of returning to the source with the songs strongly appeals to me. And I see Sukanta and me trying to disseminate work in two distinctly different ways. One we can call 'The Camp', the other 'Performance'.

The Camp: The idea is to return to the field with not just the songs of the place but with other songs too. When we would go to the field often the distinction between interviewee and the interviewer would get blurred. We would go to take, but we also had things to give. There was sharing in the whole experience, which was more than asking questions, taking field notes and making recordings, for just as the people in the field are a repository of knowledge, so do we take with us stories and experiences from another world. The idea now is to take this sharing one step further. We want to go from place to place with a travelling archive, play back songs and interviews and tell people our own stories of the road and listen to their reactions and responses, thus teaching and learning at the same time. The idea, for example, is to play to the wild and ecstatic Gholam Fakir of Gorbhanga in Nadia his own and another rendition of 'Manush thuiya khoda bhojo' (Who has asked you worship the Creator instead of the Created?), a softer prayer from the blind singer of Mymensing, Sunil Karmakar, , and make that the starting point of a presentation and discussion on people, places and songs.

The idea is to go to a certain place, let old friends and acquaintances know; pitch camp as it were. We want to go with not just our recordings but other recordings too; released albums, films, footage, photographs, relevant books and so on—in short, with our travelling archive, which must be moulded and shaped and reshaped, according to the needs of a place. Sukanta and I must together plan and prepare this archive, because it will involve audio archiving, which will mainly be the domain of Sukanta as the recordist, and other forms of documentation which I must take care of (for example, compiling texts of songs, selecting songs from other recordings, choosing photographs and so on).

We must have a portable playback system now. The old minidisc recorder from the previous project will have to be there of course for any additional recording that we choose to do at the camps. We have to have the means of showing visuals too, a laptop perhaps will be the best option and then we can hire an additional monitor for projection.

The idea is to stay in a certain place for a couple of days or more, depending on the response to the 'camp', and costs. Maybe on the first evening I can talk about my experience of this particular place as a singer-composer-researcher. Then we can interact, those gathered can talk about their

music and respond to my presentation and tell me whether or not I have understood things correctly. We should make full recordings of these interactive sessions (and this will have to be Sukanta's task), because we are likely to get rare songs and stories from these sessions too, such as we would not otherwise get. For example, I was once talking with two of my interviewees, Naren and Chapalabala Hansda of Jahajpur village in Purulia, about songs I had collected from a tea garden in Srimangal, Sylhet. I said the songs sounded like their songs, which they sang in their Santhali language. At this Naren began to sing a song about indentured labour, about how the community grieved for those who went away to work as coolies—it was a rare song and it arose out of that special moment of interaction.

After the first day's presentation, for the next day or two we as the dissemination team can meet people in smaller groups, sharing songs and stories, continuing the *adda* so to speak; meanwhile, the 'archive' can remain open.

In a collaboration project between a music researcher/writer and a sound recordist, it is perhaps not too farfetched to think also in terms of a travelling studio and a record label of the road. Therefore, extending further the idea of the camp, it might even be possible to do a fresh set of recordings of certain artistes with a view to launching such a label. And sale might be possible through a website on the travels, which is proposed as part of the dissemination programme (about which there is more discussion later), while the artiste can be given a master copy of the recording to organise their own copy, distribution and sale in their own local market.

I have thought of 10 main centres to set up camp. Sometimes it might be possible and worthwhile to base myself in a certain place and take the archive and presentation to other nearby places. And for each place I have thought of a certain theme on which to design the archive and the presentation.

1. Presentation on 'The Bhaoaiya Land'. Being based in Cooch Behar, we can travel with the archive to Agamoni and Gouripur in Assam, also as far as Goalpara. The presentation will slightly change according to the place; for example in Goalpara, for a session with Rahima Kolita and others, it would be interesting to play songs from Gouripur, Jalpaiguri, Siliguri, Changrabanda, even Rangpur, in Bangladesh, and begin a discussion on what 'bhaoaiya' means to each of these places. In Gouripur, on the other hand, it will be interesting to play the Rahima Kolita songs or Nirmala Roy's songs from Siliguri, for Putul Sarkar. In Agomoni, the songwriter and teacher Allauddin Sarkar might be able to give an overview of bhaoaiya, having heard the contents of our archive. My old guide Chandan Pal of Cooch Behar town can perhaps help me set up camp and contact people. Also, it might be interesting to include in the travelling archive copies of the old recordings which Chandan Pal's father, Harish Pal, produced for Columbia Records and HMV in the 1940s and 50's, till the 70s.

2. In Silchar, Cachar, Assam it will be interesting to share with local friends my finds from Sylhet, also from the east of London where large Sylheti communities live. The presentation and archive can be based on the theme of 'Migration, Borders and the Travelling Song'. Cachar has a vibrant urban intellectual scene with their little magazine and theatre movement, and here my own work as a singer-songwriter is also quite well known. So, here the presentations and interactions should take a different form and hopefully in Cachar we will be able to discuss questions of identity and nationhood and language and so on. It will be meaningful to travel also to Karimganj and Badarpur; if possible we should try and get the scholar Sujit Chowdhury to come and see the archive and speak to us about the region, its songs, history and people.

3. The Purulia camp can be organised by those local young men who do the folk festival, Palash Mela, every year in spring. Among them Biswanath Dasgupta, a theatre activist who has been working in this area for a long time and also works closely with the EZCC. I have heard different

kinds of song in this dry and rugged land and the songs always suggest to me a certain kind of landscape. I will want to invite Musura Bala, the 'nachmi' or entertainer woman who sang for us, to our camp, along with Amulya Kumar, the jhumur singer, and his son, Hari, also a singer, and the Santhal singer couple Naren and Chapala Hansda and members of Kurmi Mahal in Kotshila who sing songs in the local Kurmali language, and others. And the presentation can focus on 'Landscape Music'. I need to talk on the question of how a certain voice gets processed, how it acquires the grains and timbres typical of a region and language. I also want to present a subsection on songs from Bihar and Jharkhand and also from the tea gardens in Sylhet that I have recorded, and I want to see what these singers think of the connection between those songs and those that are their own.

4. Dr Debal Deb of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Beliator, Bankura is keen I do a presentation at his centre. So here I could present 'Notes from my Travel Diary' and we can put up our travelling archive, in which we can include old recordings of the master Sanatan Das Baul, who hails from the region. We can ask Satyananda Das Baul and his Japanese partner Haridasi to join us; Satyananda is one of the most sophisticated folk artistes we have recorded and this presentation can perhaps combine my talk with his performance. If I can stay for long enough I want to try to understand better the life of Haridasi, alias Hiroko. This Japanese woman, who has so amazingly adapted to the lifestyle of Nabasan, the asram where she lives, had said to me once that her subject was 'like mine' for she was once a student of cultural anthropology, she said.

5. Over the past year we have befriended a whole community of fakirs from Gorbhanga in Nadia district, during two consecutive Baul Fakir Utsavs organised by Marfat (an NGO) in 2006 and 2007, which were held near where I live in Jadavpur, Kolkata. While Sukanta was engaged in making live recordings of the performances and later edited a compilation released as an MP3, I was assisting him and other Marfat members in their work. It is then we got to know the Gorbhanga fakirs and some of them—mainly Babu, Gholam, Akkas—are interested to organise one of our 'camps' in their village. They are mainly Lalon singers but others visit their village too, among them fakirs from Bangladesh, and they bring with them songs from across the border, the maichbandari songs of Chittagong and compositions of folk poets such as Jalaluddin of Mymensing and Matal Rajjak of Manikganj. I want like to share with the fakirs my thoughts on the 'Trajectory of the Sufi Song in Bengal'—the complex paths songs and poetry have travelled to find their place in people's hearts and in their everyday lives. It will be interesting to play for them songs collected from the shrine of Shah Jalal of Sylhet and performances of the fakirs of Birbhum, Ghulam Shah and his sons.

6. I have recorded several bauls who live around Bolpur in Birbhum, and some further north on the Bolpur-Sainthia line, up to Kanai Baba in Tarapith. But because the bauls are very badly divided amongst themselves, I don't think it will be possible to bring everyone I have met to one camp and make them listen to our recordings of their songs, and respond to the recordings. Our guide in Bolpur has been the affable Debdas Baul and perhaps we should take his advice before deciding on how to return to Birbhum. I am actually interested in the very complex question of 'Ousider Interest in the Baul', so perhaps the Santiniketan campus will be a better place to set up camp, with some institutional support from the university, at least from the students. Then the archive can be set up there for a few days, where we can have simultaneous recording and listening sessions.

7. Across the border, Faridpur has been our favourite place and the beauty of the songs we found there and the people we met fill both Sukanta and me with a longing to return. With help from Salamat Khan, Sayeed Masud, Sanjay and other friends, we can easily set up a number of camps in Faridpur town, and other nearby places like Kushtia, Bhanga, Baotipara and so on, where we

have been before and from where we have collected our songs. We have recorded some of our finest songs in Faridpur, so dissemination here should really be more like a 'Tribute to Our Folk Poets and Singers', including Hajera Bibi, Banikanta, Jasimuddin, Bijoy Sarkar, Khoda Baksha Sain and others. Among the singers who must come and listen to their recordings are Ibrahim Boyati, Nuru Pagla, Hajera Bibi, Gonsai Das, Nepal Das, Sadek Ali, Ali Akbar and others.

8. Dhaka is as big as Kolkata in diversity and range, so I would not know where to begin and where to end in Dhaka. Perhaps I should therefore keep the dissemination very low key and ask to meet only those who have contributed to my work. I can make a presentation in a university department perhaps and then we can talk and the archive can be kept open for a couple of days for people to come and see and listen. I have met some remarkable women in Dhaka and I could actually talk about them—about something like 'Our lives as Women Singer-Songwriters'. Who can help organise this? Well, there are too many potential organisers, which is why it might be better to do this through one or several university departments.

9. Sylhet is such a rich land still, especially in terms of its music. Sylhet is again the place where I can discuss Migration and Music. Ambarish Dutta, our friend from earlier field trips will be able to organise this camp where we will take, among other things, our recordings of Chandrabati Burman, Sushama Das, Ruhi Thakur, Abdul Hamid, Chandan Mian as part of the archive. We can also play for people in Sylhet our field recordings from Cachar and East London.

10. We have of course to return to Mymensing and meet Sarwar Kamal Robin with a selection of our recordings from the travels, which we must give him for the pupils of his music school, Udichi. My friend poet Amitabha Pal, who had helped me with contacts in his hometown Mymensing, can help me organise this Camp and the presentation here can be on the theme of the 'Unfinished Journey', because whenever I think of Mymensing, that is my overwhelming feeling: that there is still so much to do and how little we have done. For example, during our project period of 2004-06, we could not go to Netrakona, near Mymensing town, which was the home of the folk poet Ukil Munshi. Yet, it was with Netrakona on my mind that I had first thought of going to this region, because I had heard the song collector Deben Bhattacharya's recordings of Ukil Munshi's songs. I had also thought of looking at the folklore of region, the Mymensing Gitika, which I have not been able to do as yet. At the same time it was in Mymensing that we learned about Jalaluddin's work, who also hails from the region. This presentation can focus on what we intend to do, what we do and what remains to be done. Sarwar Kamal Robin had complained that researchers do not go back; he had said this in the context of his experience with some folklore researchers from Rajshahi University who had visited them but never returned to keep their promise. Combining my presentation with a performance by the wonderfully sublime singer Sunil Karmakar, it might be possible to show to cultural and political activists such as Robin that the task of the perpetuation of a region's culture lies in the hands of its people; outsiders like us can only come and go. It will be interesting to involve Robin and others in organising a presentation on the Mymensing Gitika at our Camp. The Gitika are musicals written on the theme of love and longing, so that makes them relevant too to the study of songs of *biraha*.

This is just a basic outline of the **Camp** idea. We should be able to do these ten Camps, maybe even a few more, over the proposed two-year period of dissemination, but not necessarily travel back in the above order.

Performance: In this part of the dissemination programme, the idea is to present talks/lecture recitals in urban spaces, before academic and non-academic audiences, as I have been doing for the past year and a half. This is in some sense a new form of performance, as well as an extension of the folk arts practices of *kathakata* (narration) and *pat-chitra* (audio visual presentation by

scroll painters), where the arts of narration, singing, story-telling and soundscape design come together in an intricate interweave. We can do these performances in between our Camps and alongside working on the travelling archive and the website (in fact, the travelling archive can feed this website, about which there will be more discussion later in the proposal) throughout the proposed two-year dissemination programme. Of course, this part of the dissemination programme mostly depends on invitations to perform, from conferences and seminars and more general performance spaces within the country and abroad.

In this two-pronged dissemination programme, the voice of the performer cannot be the same voice which makes the presentations at the camps. At the Camps I am more a devotee-student-participant, because I am beholden to those who gave me their songs and stories. As a performer, my task is different, for I must now talk to people about an ongoing journey and try and make them a part of it. My experience as a singer-songwriter and performer of songs who has faced many kinds of audiences and challenges of language is an advantage, for in these urban spaces too there are many variations, as there are between academic and non-academic audiences. In my presentations I can try to address some of the critical questions which have come to my mind during my travels and later: for example, questions concerning the politics of borders and mapping; roots and issues of identity; musicological analyses of forms and genres; the voice of the woman as artiste and subject of art and issues of gender, the changing face of folk; archiving issues and so on.

It is not as though such questions cannot be/are not asked in the field. But they are not posed as questions, instead some of these questions arise from the interactions we have in the field. For example, I travel from Siliguri to Cooch Behar through Agomoni to Gouripur and Goalpara in Assam and later I even cross the border to go to Rangpur in Bangladesh. Everywhere they sing the form of song called bhaoaiya, though in Goalpara they call their songs goalpariya geet. I also notice differences in the use of the voice and accents in these different places. In Goalpara, for example, I try to ask Rahima Kolita how her song is different from the style of Cooch Behar or Gouripur, and she only says, well, there are slight regional variations. She illustrates her answer with: 'See, they will say *bhai tui koti theki ashli* and we will say *ei saoa, tui kor pore ahili re* (hey, where are you coming from)?'

I was however thinking more in terms of intonation and vocal techniques, but to pursue this question further could make my presence intimidating and it was far more important to me that Rahima and I were at ease in each other's company. In my field I have in fact tried to keep my role as researcher-composer as non-intrusive as possible, because that part of me seemed unimportant to the field. All that seemed relevant to this travel was that I was a singer too. And then sometimes I would also be asked to sing, and that usually helped us to come closer. [Deliberate silences can also be intimidating and sometimes when I listen back to the recordings I feel uncomfortable with the way I was during a session; how to interact in the field is something that we continually need to teach ourselves, taking lessons from our own work and the work of others].

Yet we are also an artiste-researcher-recordist team, and it is in these roles that we can emerge in the Performances. Of course there are major variations within urban spaces too and so there will be variations in our performances. For example, I was invited by the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore in 2005 to make a two-part presentation on 'Tracking Creative Boundaries'. On the first day I talked about 'home and the beginning of a sonic experience' and on the second day I talked about 'journeys'. I had kept the presentation mostly anecdotal, so the students who were studying to work in a field quite far from mine, could relate to what I was saying. Besides audio illustration and singing, I also played video clips from two field trips, one in Purulia and another in north Bengal. After the class got over, a student from Delhi came and said the clip from Purulia reminded him of his days in Kharagpur IIT, the train journeys, the landscape. It seemed he was shy to speak up during the question-answer session. Then as we got into a conversation, he said, you talked about learning to listen and I really liked that. Slightly

emboldened as if, he went further and brought up the topic of the unjust Iraq war and how all Other Voices were being suppressed and how no one was willing to listen so on. At this class, during question and answer another student had also asked about listening. She was worried about her training in Karnatic music and asked, if she listened to many kinds of music, then would that not affect her classical singing?

This same Purulia and the question of listening and landscape had featured in a completely different way when I was talking mainly before students and teachers of Film Studies at Jadavpur University, Kolkata. I was talking about how sound can suggest sight and how we can sometimes picture a landscape by listening to a voice. One of the teachers later asked me if, in saying this, I was not caging a voice within a certain territory and not allowing it to travel. For, a voice can have more than one register, it can suggest many more landscapes than a specific one, he said. The comment opened my eyes to other ways of seeing.

I have talked about travelling sounds in the context of migration at a sound and anthropology conference in the University of St Andrews, Scotland. There I had met many who call themselves soundartists, who work with environmental sound and recordings and then create soundscapes with such recordings. I then realised that our work too could perhaps be called works in soundart, especially Sukanta's. The work we were doing was a kind of anthropology in sound. Of course we always felt the importance of sonic experiences, but now we also had a name to give to our art. At Jadavpur University, at this above-mentioned talk, I actually talked about the journey from sound to soundart.

I have listened to Lomax's radio programmes, which are available on CD and thought, perhaps this dissemination programme, especially the part called Performance can be extended to include a radio series dedicated to the journey. If any radio station is interested (we can approach World Space Radio) we can prepare and present a series of programmes based on the travels, featuring individual artistes and genres and so on.

WEBSITE

In Lomax's 'cultural equity' programme, the internet revolution can indeed act as the great leveller. Finally, whether the field recordings are archived in Delhi or London or in Berlin, they will only be available to a limited number of people with access to these libraries and archives. The internet on the other hand can make available recordings and knowledge to people across the world, whoever and wherever they may be.

As part of the dissemination programme we also want to set up a website on our travels in search of songs. Here is an idea of the website, but how much we can do with it is subject to the availability of resources. Of course, a part of the material for the website will overlap with the travelling archive. But more material will come from both the Camps and Performances— more travels, encounters and experiences, photographs and other documents as well as additional recording. Besides, there will be papers I will be write—such as a couple I have already written (one to be in a collection of essays on the Convergence of Bhakti and Sufism, forthcoming from Orient Longman, Delhi). To incorporate all of this and work on an elaborate and intricately designed website will take time, effort and money, quite beyond the scope of this proposed dissemination project. So, I am hoping that should the dissemination grant come through, IFA will allow me to apply to others to make the website possible.

I envisage the website as having the following pages, maybe more:

- About the Project—An Anthropology in Sound
- The Journey
- Bengal, a history

- Interactive maps, imagined maps
- Photographs
- Audio streaming
- Video streaming
- Profiles of individual artistes
- Song text in Bengali with English synopsis
- Archives (ARCE, British Library and so on)
- Bengali folk forms and genres
- The folk poets
- The researcher
- The field recordist/Soundart works
- Papers and presentations
- Related Books/Publications/Music/Films
- News and events related to folk festivals, fairs, film shows, concerts
- Bengali pages mirroring part of the website, especially catering to browsers of Bengali
- Featured links

To elaborate on the matter of having a special section of the website designed for the Bengali browser/reader, since this travel concerns Bengal as a geographical, linguistic and cultural entity, it seems only appropriate to have such a section. Moreover, through this we can also address the critical question of what is **Bengali** and what is **of Bengal** and try to cross barriers of race and language, bringing into the folds of 'Bengal' variations such as the Manipuri songs of Sylhet or the Kurmali songs of Purulia or Muharram songs in Urdu from the Murshidabad. To take an example, there is the Sylheti claim that Sylheti is not a dialect, but a language that did not get the chance to assert its independent status owing to the hegemonic positions assumed by Calcutta and Dhaka and the official Bengali written language, which follows more or less the regional variation of Nadia-Shantipur. There was a separate Nagri script that Sylhet had, which could not be developed. There is some work being done only now on this subject (Jadavpur University School of Texts and Documentation has recently published an edited version of a Nagri punthi). I know a journalist in London called Ahmed Moyez, a fine singer and poet himself, who has been looking for his sufi grandfather's (Majiruddin Fakir of Syedpur in Sylhet) texts written in the Nagri script and has till now found three books. Such material can be included in the Bengali pages.

* * *

Once the field recording habit takes hold of you, it is hard to break. One remembers those times when the moment in a field recording situation is just right. There arises an intimacy close to love. The performer gives you his strongest and deepest feeling, and if he is a folk singer, this emotion can reveal the character of his whole community. A practised folk song collector can bring about communication on this level whenever he chooses to set up his machine. Ask him how he does this and he can no more tell you than a minister can tell you how to preach a great sermon. It takes practice and it takes a deep need on the part of the field collector—which the singer can sense and want to fulfil.' --Alan Lomax