

Towards an Aural Archive: Sonic Impressions of Goa and Shillong

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It started as a simple query. How does one pin down the category of Western Classical Music in India? In a land all too familiar with ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural distinctions, it was necessary to narrow down my research question. I decided to work with communities that had a direct connection with Western Classical Music. To make it further grounded, I chose institutions and practitioners of voice.

In the continuation with the colonial past, establishment of an Empire was the starting point. The Portuguese found that the arts and music appealed to the aesthetics of the people residing in Goa. Faith was easily communicated thereafter. Shillong was still a part of Assam when the Welsh Calvinists approached the Khasi Hills. Music and faith travelled to the Khasi Hills at the same time. However, before everything else, Rev. Thomas Jones is remembered primarily for giving the people of Shillong [Meghalaya], Khasi dialect, the written form of the language.

The colonial impressions were rooted during different epochs in Goa and Shillong, namely, the 16th and the 19th century respectively. Clearly, the project does not entail a linear social history. Rather, it hopes to engage with a historical episteme that is relevant to the ongoing ethnography on choral traditions of Goa (a west coast state) and Shillong (a north eastern hill state).

Missionary Records: Personal Letters and Religious Documents

During the span of two months, I found the Calvinist Methodist Archive to be particularly useful. I was in Wales for two weeks. The idea was to trace the tradition of hymn singing as had been introduced by the Welsh in the Khasi Hills. I am grateful to Prof. Aled Jones from Panteion University of Political Science (Athens, Greece) and Northwest University, (Xian, People's Republic of China) and Prof. Blatei Nongbri from John Roberts Theological College, Shillong for introducing me to some of the relevant people working on similar themes.

I found two Khasi hymns in the documents of Mrs. John Roberts: Ki paila [Jewels] and Butom Ia U Jisu (1714-1773). The letters of Miss Marian Pritchard, who worked at the Missionary Hospital in Shillong, not only helped gauge the social and political scenario, it even helped in identifying certain hymns that were sung in the parishes during her time. She also taught some of the songs to the natives. One particular letter written in the year 1945, four hymns which are part of the Hymn book were clearly mentioned as a part of singing tradition in Jaiwau. They were- Hart 290, Bethel 222, Morgannwg 117 and Diolch iti 38.

I also got a chance to interact with Prof. Lisa Lewis from University of South Wales in Cardiff, who is currently working on Welsh and Khasi Cultural Dialogues project.

In the sound archive of the National Library of Wales, I found a recording of Hallelujah by a choir in Shillong from one of their visits to Wales in the 1980's. I also listened to some classical music and hymns by renowned Welsh musicians. The book and lecture by Nigel Jenkins helped in forming a general idea about the people of Shillong and their landscape. Story of Ca Nabon, the first Khasi convert was used as a screenplay staged for children. There were some game ideas too. These were part of a study material compiled by one of the Missionaries, Miss Gwen C Evans.

Then, interacting with one of the former librarians and expert on history of Welsh hymns, Rhidian Griffiths, helped me trace certain hymns that gained momentum in the Khasi hymn singing and worship repertoire.

Initially after reaching London, I spent about a week at the British Library laying out my key research queries. After browsing through the online catalogue, meeting my supervisor at RHUL, I decided to focus on missionary documents.

I had hoped to discover a wealth of materials in the British Library sound archive. Upon arrival, I realized that it is a fairly new division and is still in the process of building its collection. The India Office Records maintains records that are 19th century onwards. For Goa, I needed documents from earlier centuries. It was further difficult for me to access the few that were there. This was because some of the records were in Portuguese and I do not have the linguistic expertise yet. Also, there were no specific patterns of Gregorian chant which could be immediately connected to Goa. Much later, talking to my supervisor, Tina K. Ramnarine, I decided to explore the Mediterranean and South West Connection between

Europe and India. During the course of my research, John O'Brien and Janet Topp Fargion from the British Library have been extremely helpful.

In the British Library sound archive, I discovered the BBC 3- Neil Nongkynrih [founder of the Shillong Chamber Choir] interview conducted by Aled Jones. It is a very important document for my dissertation. I also found some folk songs of Goa.

I spent about a week at the Trinity College examination archive. It exposed me to the records maintained in the bi-annual magazines, bulletins, and annual calendars. There were many articles that talked about the experience of the examiners, overseas. It proved useful to locate the examination centres and the instruments that had the maximum number of participants from India. I also made note of some of the early syllabus. The structure has more or less remained the same. With the recent merger of the music conservatory with the Laban Dance Academy, some of the courses concentrate on aspects essential to both the art forms. The recently introduced Great India Scholarship programme (2015), allows some of the students from India to pursue higher studies in Music at Trinity Laban Conservatory. I am also in touch with few of the recipients of the scholarship. I am thankful to Claire Kidwell, Mark Hunter and Jackie Rosewell who guided me through the process.

The SOAS archive brought to light some translated Kanarese hymns by Miss Butler [presumably a member of the London Missionary Society] originally intended for publication between the years 1922-1923. I also got the manuscript of Thomas Stephens. I found his Konkani grammar book in Portuguese along with Christian doctrines and Konkani prayers written between the years 1615-1724. His Indian interpretation of the Bible, *Krista Purana* has been adopted by a parish priest, Fr. Glen D Silva in Goa. Currently, he is continuing work on this framework.

Delving into Ethnomusicology

Discussion with my supervisor and other experts helped me work on my theoretical framework. I also got an opportunity to interact with some of the MMus students of Tina K Ramnarine at RHUL, when she invited me for a talk. I spoke to the students about my own fieldwork experiences and the research questions that emerged from my disciplinary background. Since they were students of music, the eclectic repertoire fascinated them. The medley clip of one of the choirs in Shillong made them really intrigued about the western

music scene in one of the lesser known States of India, Meghalaya. Issues that interested them to a great extent were labour and economy and the historical significance of a genre.

I also attended a conference on radio and ethnomusicology. I was informed about this conference by Tom Wagner. Although, the theme of the conference did not connect directly with my dissertation topic, it allowed me to posit institutions vis-à-vis art forms. I discussed few research ideas for my chapter on formation of repertoires with Tom Wagner. The notion of 'branding' fitted well for some of the aspects.

Documenting about certain communities and their practices shed light on very specific traditions and socio-cultural ramifications. In one of the workshops organized by Tina K. Ramnarine at RHUL, there was a session by few Gamelan musicians. I, along with few other ethnomusicologists and visiting scholars witnessed their performance. This was followed by a focused group discussion where we all participated. There, questions regarding the art form, significance of the use of certain percussion instruments, the religious and social implication, and commentaries on history and culture were brought alive.