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A Rāgamālā for the Empress

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In 1887, Sourindro Mohun Tagore, musicologist and scion of the Pathurighat Tagores, published a lithographic rāgamālā—a series of pictures iconographically representing Indian musical modes—as an offering to the Empress Victoria on the occasion of the jubilee celebrating the first fifty years of her reign (Tagore 1887).¹ The contradiction and compromise involved in being Indian—or at least Bengali—and a British subject was the dynamic that fuelled Sourindro Mohun’s energetic pursuit of musical scholarship (Capwell 1991), and like a number of the other sometimes sumptuous sometimes simple books he published, this one expresses both his nationalistic pride in promoting the greatness and continuity of Indian musical tradition and his loyalty to the British crown. Each of the rāgamālā descriptions includes, in addition to a lithographic illustration and a Sanskrit verse or dhyāna with a translation, a short tune printed in western notation that sets an encomium in Sanskrit written to Victoria by Sourindro Mohun in honor of her jubilee.

This is a fascinating publication not because its tunes are anything more than the most meagre representation of Indian music or because its pictures are anything more than rather clumsy illustrations but because it weaves together numerous threads in the history of Indian culture and of the Indian experience of colonialism.

In his discussion of photography in Image Music Text, Roland Barthes refers to the two messages—the denoted and the connoted—of the imitative arts, in which he includes drawing; and of the connoted message he says that:

...the code of the connoted system is very likely constituted either by a universal symbolic order or by a period rhetoric, in short by a stock of stereotypes (schemes, colours, graphisms, gestures, expressions, arrangements of elements). (Barthes 1977:18)

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It is this code of Sourindro Mohun’s rāgamālā—particularly its period rhetoric—that I should like to uncover, for without it the book’s denoted surface remains a sterile cliché with the thinnest of messages.

Viewed in this way, the book, rather than being a mere curiosity, acquires a significance that will help to fill a lacuna remarked by Tapan Raychaudhuri in the Preface to his book Europe Reconsidered, Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal:

A fact not sufficiently emphasized in the literature on the East-West encounter in modern times is that the Bengali intelligentsia was the first Asian social group of any size whose mental world was transformed through its interactions with the West. . . . The change in their mental world has a relevance to wider themes. It is part of a process described very unsatisfactorily by the two expressions, ‘modernization’ and ‘westernization.’ Without entering into a discussion of the inadequacy of these two terms, one can note that elite groups throughout Asia experienced a revolution in their world-view and expectations from life which crucially influenced much that has happened over the last hundred years or so. . . . The nineteenth-century Bengali experience is thus a part of a global phenomenon. Chronologically, it is perhaps the earliest manifestation of the revolution in the mental world of Asia’s elite groups. . . . The changes occurred, not through any simple transmission of ‘influences’ manifest in the straightforward adoption of cultural artifacts like specific elements in western life-habits or belief systems (though such adoptions were not absent), but through processes which went much deeper. The contact was a catalyst. It induced mutations in the inherited ways of thinking and conduct, both individual and social, and initiated unprecedented departures from established patterns of responses even in the most intimate areas of life. For instance, at one level, western education was simply an equipment which helped one earn one’s living under the colonial regime. At another level, it destabilized established norms and mores of intra-family relationship. . . . The changes in the mental world of the elite are . . . not an isolated historical phenomenon, but a crucial determinant of far-reaching developments. The Bengali experience is of particular interest in the Indian context, for it mediated at least some of the new ideas and influences which shaped modern Indian life. (Raychaudhuri 1988:ix-x)

In looking at Sourindro Mohun’s rāgamālā in this light, we will begin by examining some of the “inherited ways of thinking and conduct” to which Raychaudhuri refers before going on to consider some of the “unprecedented departures from established patterns of responses.”

The Indian habit of creating non-musical representations of musical modes originates in the conception of rāgas as being inspired by or invoking deities who are described in dhyānas or verbal epitomes; the earliest ones recorded are found in the Rāgasāgara of uncertain date and authorship but
apparently written prior to the 9th century (Ebeling 1973:16). In discussing the inspiration for rāgamālā paintings in his book on the subject, Klaus Ebeling says:

These garlands of ragas were devices of memorization and classification for the musician who associated the individual modes with deities to whom the Rāgas were dedicated. Poets then became intrigued with this deification of Rāgas and spun elaborate situations around their characters. In fact, the poetic versions conjure up images that often have a more human than divine quality or combine both in a fashion typical of many religious concepts in India. (1973:14)

In subjecting the devotional epitomes to poetic inspiration, the poets injected into their pious materials an element of secular sensuality borrowed from the classical study of the moods of love, the nāyikābheda. The dramaturgical means for representing these moods (bhāva) by various categories (beda) of hero (nāyaka) and heroine (nāyikā) were carefully set forth in the dramaturgical treatise, the Nāṭyā Śāstra, dating from the early centuries of the Common Era. At the same time, however, the poets resacralized their subject matter by often conceiving of the lovers in the terms of Krishna bhakti, making Krishna the ideal nāyaka and Radha the ideal nāyikā.

The early dhyānas and their elaborations by the poets, along with the traditional iconographic representation in painting and sculpture of various deities, supplied source material for the painters of rāga depictions. Some of the materials used for rāga icons also came from literature and the illustrations that went along with it. Ebeling (1973:31–32) draws attention to a mid-15th-century polyglot work of Gujarat, the Vasantā Vilāsa, which has among its illustrations a dozen that contain iconographic material pertinent to rāgas and a number of verses providing other iconographic elements encountered in the later tradition.

But Ebeling also points out that the earliest collectively grouped painted representations of rāgas is associated with another type of literature from Gujarat, the Kalpasūtra, a hagiography of the Jain Tirthankars. The Kalpasūtra was often copied on palm leaf manuscripts as a devout offering, and the decorative margins of these scriptures sometimes contained illustrations of dancing girls in the particular poses of their art.

During the fifteenth century, Jain merchants introduced paper from Persia and thereby introduced a format for texts and illustrations different from that of long, narrow palm leaves as well as a new medium for tempera and ink that had a profound influence on miniature painting; the copy of the Kalpasūtra containing the first set of rāga paintings is on the reverse side of just such a paper manuscript (Ebeling:32; paintings on p.121). These
paintings—dating ca. 1475—represent a kind of false dawn in the west of India for the tradition whose twilight in the east of India is the ultimate subject of this article.

It is a false dawn because while the paintings set the precedent for a set of rāga images, the iconographies have less to do with the long tradition to come than do those of the individual illustrations and textual passages from the Vasanta Vilāsa. The rāgas in these pictures are all depicted in the manner of deities whose identity is revealed by their particular regalia, their mudrās or hand gestures, and their vābanas or animal vehicles. Hieratic and aloof, these paintings are suited to the religious literature they accompany, whereas a more earthy and romantic mood is to be expected from the Vasanta Vilāsa which is concerned with the erotic sentiment.

Another reason for viewing these paintings as a false dawn is the particular set of rāgas they depict. As was to be typical, the modes are arranged according to a hierarchy of six predominant male rāgas (Śrī, Vasanta, Bhairava, Pañcama, Megha, Naṭṭanārāyana) and their subordinate females or rāginīs, sometimes called bhāsās. But as Ebeling observes: “Many Ragini names will never be heard of subsequently in Ragamala Painting; the six rāgas, as a group, will never again preside over a Ragamala.” (151) The set of names is very similar to one organized by Kallinatha, a commentator on the musical treatise Saṅgītaratnākara, in 1460. At the time Ebeling was writing at the beginning of the 1970s, the whereabouts of this particular ragamālā was no longer known, having disappeared after the death of a Jainacarya who was the last known owner.

In another example of a painted ragamālā from Gujarat dating about a hundred years later than that of the Kalpasūtra the more familiar iconographical style is evident, for example, in the characteristic postures of a pair of lovers associated with rāga rāmakali (Figure 1); that is, a woman seated on a stool turns her face from her imploring suitor (Ebeling:53). In the terms of nāyikābheda, this illustrates the kbanditā nāyikā, the woman whose wrath is caused by her lover’s having spent the night with another woman. Despite its recognizable and common iconographical elements, the style, which distinctly links it with the Gujarati Jain tradition, lacks the Mughalized elements that the majority of later rāgamālās acquire.

For the next four hundred years following the Kalpasūtra rāgamālā, painters in various regions continued to create sets of rāga paintings employing common iconographical features and organized according to a few repeated families each headed by a dominant male rāga. While other family types are described in music literature, Ebeling’s survey shows that only one type of rāga/rāginī grouping prevailed in rāgamālā paintings, that is, a set of six male rāgas each heading a group of five female rāginīs so that
rāgamālās commonly have depictions of thirty-six modes. Of four thousand paintings viewed by Ebeling (1973:18), about half used the modes and organization of what he calls the Painters’ System for which the paintings themselves and their inscriptions are the only source. Others followed a system of modes and their ranking attributed to the musical theorist Hanuman that is recorded by a much later author, Damodara, in his Saṅgītadarpana written probably in the early seventeenth century. A third system, of particular importance for the Pahari tradition of painting, derives from the rāgamālā of Mesakarna, dated 1570, in which the families of rāgas are enlarged by the addition of eight putras, sons, to each rāgamālā. This generative idea eventually produced some exceptional sets of rāgamālā paintings in which the rāgamālās’ sons acquire wives and sisters.

Regarding the patrons of this art form, Ebeling several times makes suggestive, if unsupported, observations such as the following:

For the wide, mainly female clientele, for which Ragamala Painting was designed, the subtle, rather than the overtly sexual illustrations and symbols, were adopted in order to reconcile the tightening moral standards of those centuries with the unfulfilled love longing of the women in the polygamous... households. (32) . . . The predominant settings in Ragamala paintings reflect the life style and principal environment of the major consumer, the female members of ruling or wealthy families in Rajasthan, Central India, and the Hills. Their idle and secluded life, well tended by servants, but largely unfulfilled in sexual matters, found an emotional and para-religious compensation in these paintings. (52)

The wide patronage and the iconographical redundancy of these paintings no doubt encouraged the desire for some kind of mass production, and

Figure 1: Rāga Rāmakali, Gujarati Jain style (reproduced from Ebeling:53).
there is evidence for this in a set of late-eighteenth-century monochrome sketches and pounce tracings now in the India Office Library, which also contain some directions for the application of color. A fully realized set of paintings for which these sketches provide raw material exists in the Berlin Museum of Oriental Art and is discussed in Waldschmidt 1975.

True mass production of art works of course required technologies and their products that were slow to be established in India, and one of the chief means to mass reproduction of graphic art, lithography, was not invented in Europe until the end of the eighteenth century. Alois Senefelder, the son of a court actor in Munich, devised the lithographic printing process in the endeavor to find a means of printing and selling his plays and thereby keeping the profits which were otherwise eaten up by the expense of having them printed. Having devised an experimental press, he remained short of the means to fund himself and so, coincidentally for us, it happened that the first commercial product from his lithographic presses was musical—a set of twelve songs with piano accompaniment composed by Franz Gleisner, a musician whom Senefelder knew from his work in the theater and who was to become Senefelder’s partner in the establishment of lithographic printing. Shortly after the success of this enterprise, he secured aristocratic patronage to print a cantata by the court Music Director, Cannabich, on the recent death of Mozart; this overly ambitious project, requiring the development of new machinery, nearly put an end to lithography as Senefelder was unable to meet the deadline of the commission and suffered thereby a considerable financial loss (Senefelder 1911:1–12).

The lithographic process allows the transferral to paper of a text or design written or drawn by hand on a special stone whose surface has been treated in such a way as to allow the text or drawing to absorb ink while the field resists it; consequently numerous impressions can be pulled from the same stone with a single inking, and the same stone can later be polished to be used again for other texts or designs. Lithography caught on quickly throughout Europe and became an inexpensive alternative not just for copperplate engraving of music but for printing with moveable type as well. It also substituted successfully for the woodcut printing and metal engraving processes used for illustrating texts and for producing artistic display prints.

In India, the technologies of printing and graphic illustration came at various times, the printing press arriving first in September, 1556, when it was introduced to Bombay by the Portuguese. The next year, St. Francis Xavier’s text entitled *Doutrina Christa* was printed, and in 1578 a Tamil translation was published which contained a woodcut print depicting the Trinity, and so the illustrated printed book, indigenously produced—albe-
it by foreigners—started its existence in India (Priolkar 1958:4-9; print is reproduced in Das Gupta [1985]:9).

Indians themselves quickly took to the new technology in order to get in on the financial opportunities presented by serving the clerical and administrative needs of the foreigners, but native markets were slow to develop for items such as sacred literature. Printers often had to assure potential customers for such works that they had been printed by Brahmans on infernal machinery only after it had been subjected to purifying ablutions (Pattrea 1983:70).

With the introduction of the British educational system in the nineteenth century a great need for books and illustrated works became evident, and this prompted two further developments. The appetite of the presses for paper could not be met by indigenous mill and cottage industry production or by importation and as a result, in 1820, the first steam engine was introduced into India by the British missionaries of Serampore where it became a great curiosity to the Bengalis as well as to the many colonials who had not yet seen machinery driven by steam power. The great significance of the Bengali mission for printing in India has been noted by A. K. Priolkar in his book on the subject where he says (70), "... although printing activity had started in India earlier at Goa and Tranquebar, when one takes into account the volume and variety of the achievements of the Serampore mission in that field, printing in India could be said to have had its origin at Serampore."

While the impact the steam engine was to have on the intellectual history of India may have been foreseen by its importers, it is unlikely that they could have expected the unfortunate role it and its successors at the factory were to play in India’s political history, for it was the Serampore paper mills which produced the rifle cartridges that triggered the revolt of 1857 (Priolkar 69-70). Being lubricated with beef tallow and/or lard, these cartridges were offensive to Hindu and Muslim soldiers alike.

The credit for introducing lithography into India apparently goes to American missionaries in Bombay, as a Gujarati description of the city published in 1863 records that, "The American missionaries established a printing press in 1813 and began to produce books on Christian religion printed lithographically" (quoted in Priolkar:102). It was not until 1824 that the British government in Bombay received lithographic presses to supply the young School Book Committee with an efficient means to produce the items for which it was named. Shortly after, when a type of stone was discovered in India that surpassed the quality of imported lithographic stones, a major obstacle to the development of native lithography was overcome (Priolkar:99); but rather than Bombay, it was Lucknow that became the
center of native lithographic activity. The appetite of the Avadhi nawabs and aristocracy for European exotica certainly helped to bring about the success of lithography in Lucknow; as Rosie Llewellyn-Jones observes in her book *A Fatal Friendship*:

The nawabi fascination with European artifacts also filtered through to the old city, a good example being the introduction of lithographic presses which were quickly taken up by businessmen in and around the Chauk. In 1831 . . . there were at least seventeen lithographic presses in Lucknow which sent books all over India and employed a considerable number of workers. (Llewellyn-Jones 1985:13)

But it was undoubtedly because lithography avoided the difficulties of producing fonts for Perso-Arabic scripts that it flourished in Lucknow, which eventually became the center for the distribution of books to much of the Islamic world. A short hiatus in the development of lithography in Lucknow occurred for a while after 1848 when there appeared a lithographed history of the royal family that included some portraits of the nawabs and kings done by local artists. Although it had been commissioned by the King of Avadh, Wajid Ali, he disliked the result and banned printing at Lucknow. Ananda Das Gupta has noted the recovery of the industry in the following remark:

It was only in 1858, when Munshi Nawal Kishore opened his press, [that] printing was revived in Lucknow. The press is known for many of its publications in Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Persian, [and] Sanskrit, but not much for pictures, except for some crude caricature drawings of Oudh Punch. (Das Gupta 1985:17)

Thirty years later, the success of this press was noted by T. N. Mukharji in the catalog he wrote to accompany the Glasgow International Exhibit of 1888:

Lithographic printing work is largely done in Upper India, as type printing is not suited to the running Persian character. The lithographic establishment of Munshi Newal Kishore at Lucknow is the largest in India, from which a vast number of Persian and Arabic works are sent to all Muhammadan countries. (Mukharji 1974:30)

In Calcutta, lithography had been successfully introduced in 1822 and was from the beginning allied to graphic art as well as to printing. In this connection both Ananda Das Gupta and Nikhil Sarkar (Das Gupta 16; Sarkar 1983:42–43) have drawn our attention to an article about lithography in *The Calcutta Journal* of September 26, 1822, where the writer states:

We are glad to learn that after various unsuccessful attempts, it has at length been brought to perfection in Calcutta. Mr. Belnos, and Mr. de Savignac, two French artists resident in this City, having united their information and skill,
have produced specimens of Lithographic Engraving and Printing equal to anything we have seen from England.

The first works produced from the new machines dealt with subjects such as illustrations of the Anglo-Burmese war or the siege of Bharatpore. Another work, entitled *Asiatic Museum Illustrated* depicted the collection of the Asiatic Society, but in 1829 the first Bengali owned and operated lithographic press began to print material—in the form of images of Hindu deities—aimed at the native population (Das Gupta 17-18). Devotional-cum-decorative paintings of this sort had for some time been a craft industry carried on by *paṭuyās*, the traditional rural painters of Bengal, who had moved to south Calcutta and set up shop in the environs of the famous Kali temple. Pilgrims who came to the temple bought the paintings to decorate their village homes; and Mrs. Belnos, wife of one of the French lithographers mentioned in *The Calcutta Journal*, recorded this habit in a drawing reproduced by William Archer in his *Bazaar Paintings of Calcutta* (1953:76).

An abundant supply of cheap paper became available to these artists after the introduction of the steam engine in 1820, and this encouraged the rapid reproduction of paintings that resulted in a spontaneous style paradoxically based on the repeated gestures used for reproducing the same images again and again. Perhaps one of the most familiar of these is the so-called *Golāp Sundarī* or Rose Beauty as seen in Figure 2 which is reproduced from the cover of Archer’s *Bazaar Paintings of Calcutta*.

To the tools of their trade, the Kalighat patuyās added not only the very thin and inexpensive paper produced with the new western technology, but western style water colors as well, producing paintings with a soft, feathered look featuring dilute colors rather than the traditional thick and strong colors of tempera. While the large eyes of Golāp Sundarī betray the indigenous artistic tradition, her invitingly pneumatic figure reveals that, technology aside, the Kalighat painters also adopted the western painterly convention of using shading to indicate volume, although the shading here is used more to outline the figure than to suggest light falling from a single direction. As forerunner of the pin-up girl, Golāp Sundarī herself, of course, reveals developments in art indicative of the new urbanizing social situation of mid-nineteenth-century Calcutta, which was both exploited in paintings like this one and criticized in others.

Another common theme of the Kalighat painters of the midcentury was the hen-pecked and dandyish husband with his western shoes who serves as beast-of-burden to his imperious wife while dragging his mother along by a leash around her neck like a domestic animal (Figure 3). The fact that the mother-in-law is herself sporting a western lady’s handbag may be meant to indicate that she is not blameless for this moral degradation.
Figure 2: Golāp Sundarī.

Figure 3: Calcutta woodblock print, Henpecked Husband. Reproduced from Sarkar 1983:32.
The inversion of proper relations within the family criticized in such pictures as this was thought attributable to an acquaintance with the intimate relations between husband and wife in western families. A charming pair of woodcuts of the period illustrates the musical amusements of both a western and an Indian couple, the former involving a female violinist, the latter a male sitarist (Sarkar 1983:38-39). Both couples are shown seated on chairs at a small tea table innocently enjoying one another’s company (Figure 4 and 5). Intimacy between men and women had of course been part of traditional Indian pictorial art, but in different surroundings, not as often appears in these pictures, in what seems to be the sitting room of a colonial style house.

Another Kalighat pat illustrates a solo musical performance in which the complex cultural situation of Calcutta at that time is revealed not only by the sitarist’s playing while seated on a chair, but also by the mixture of his dress and grooming—elegantly clad in punjabi and dhoti, he is also fashionably shod in European shoes and coiffed with the fashionable hair style named for Prince Albert (Figure 6; see Banerjee 1989: passim on Albert haircut).

The tradition of woodcut printing in Bengal started with the first book printed in Bengali in 1817 which contained four engravings and two woodcuts. Three years later, the same artist provided engraved illustrations for a Bengali work on music, the Sangitatarana (damaged copies of this work exist in the collections of the National Library of India and the Bangiya Sahitya Akademi, both in Calcutta; see Figure 7); these are ragamalā icons depicting the six male ragas.

The area of the native town in north Calcutta where the Bengali presses were located came to be known as batatala and the style of woodcut prints made there, as well as the literature printed there, were named after the area just as the paintings of the Kali temple area have come to be named for that region at the opposite end of town.

Although the so-called batatala prints started out as book illustrations, Ananda Das Gupta notes that:

... by the 1860s, we find single sheet display prints were turned out from this district in massive numbers. ... It is interesting to note the way the Bat-tala artists delineated the image of the gods and goddesses. They were no more the traditional iconic images, on the contrary they were often set in a European architectural setting with gothic pillars and arches, fairies and unicorns. (14)

Splashes of color were added to these prints to make them more appealing and perhaps to compete with the Kalighat paintings, but to no avail since colored lithographic pictures supplanted them by the end of the century.
Figure 6: Sitar player, Kalighat painting. Reproduced from Archer 1953:39.

Figure 7: Rāga Hindola from Sangītātarāṅga. Picture from copy in possession of National Library of India, Calcutta.
The Kalighat painters, on the other hand, made an ally of lithography almost from the beginning, and Das Gupta believes that the first Bengali lithographic press set up in 1829 employed Kalighat painters to produce its prints. He further notes that (18), "There are specimens of Kalighat paintings where the key drawing has been printed by the lithographic process and then coloured by hand."

After the mid-nineteenth-century, concern was voiced in Britain over what was perceived to be the deleterious effect of competition from European manufactures on the traditional arts and crafts of India. To quote William Archer (1959:23), "The solution was ludicrous. It was nothing less than the establishment of a college of art." In 1854 such a college of art was established in Calcutta:

... besides holding classes in industrial techniques, it included a course for training general draughtsmen, elementary drawing masters, industrial art workmen, and designers in perspective and architectural drawing, painting and lithography, and another for painters of various classes and for sculptors. (Archer 1959:24)

In attempting to encourage the competitiveness of Indian artists, the British naturally relied upon conveying western technique, sometimes with amusing consequences as Archer points out:

In Madras, art instruction had focused on Western models and, with a view to showing the correct approach to human form, copies of old masters had been brought out from England—among them various studies of the nude. Their influence, however, was brief, for, far from displaying a coldly academic interest, the students regarded them as ‘naked English ladies’ kindly provided for their delectation by an understanding government. It is doubtful if the school authorities ever quite recovered from the shock which attended this discovery, and by 1876 Robert Chisholm considered that the institution ‘was doing much more harm than good’ and urged its immediate closure. ... But it was in Calcutta itself that the situation reached its nadir. Here also instruction had closely followed British models, and, as a result, various artists had passed from the school after being trained in Western techniques. No immediate employment awaited them and in despair an association known as the Calcutta Art Studio had then been formed, ‘the passed students uniting their skill and labour for the common benefit.’ Flamboyant lithographs depicting Hindu deities had been produced, and for a while the ex-students had contrived to earn a living. Even this venture, however, collapsed, for the drawings were soon copied in England, and when chromolithographs arrived in Calcutta, the Studio succumbed. (1959:26-27)

Regarding this final collapse of the graphic and fine arts in India before the revival of the new Bengal School in the 20th century, we have a contemporary account in the book prepared by Trailokyonath Mukharji for the 1888 Glasgow Exhibition. Under the heading “Lithographs” he reports as follows:
A large number of lithographic pictures are every year turned out by an Art Studio established in Calcutta by a number of ex-students of the School of Art. These pictures have no artistic merit, most of them being done in imitation of the European style. They have, however, become very popular and are largely purchased by the people all over the country. Until recently colouring was all executed by hand, and not by the latest chromolithographic process, and the prices were therefore rather high. Some English chromo-lithographer took advantage of this, and made exact copies of the Calcutta Art Studio pictures in colours, and sent a large consignment for sale in India at one tenth the usual prices. The sale of these English-made pictures of Hindu Gods and Goddesses has now been stopped. (30)

Only a resort to protectionism was able to help this branch of native manufactures after the attempt to invigorate it with a dose of school training had only produced an effect opposite to what was desired. Perhaps we can see in this an early warning of the later Swadeshi nationalist movement, when Bengalis boycotted English cloth in favor of native manufactures. Such protectionism as had been exercised by concerned Britishers on behalf of an insignificant industry like the manufacture of lithographic prints was to be out of the question when Bengali cloth succumbed to competition from that produced in the Satanic mills darkening England’s once green and pleasant land.

It was just a year prior to the 1888 Glasgow International Exhibition for which Mukharji wrote his pessimistic report on lithography in Calcutta that Sourindro Mohun Tagore published his lithographic rāgamālā, the crepuscular expression of the tradition whose false dawn four hundred years earlier in Gujarat we have already examined. Sourindro Mohun, was from one of the wealthiest Bengali families, a family that also followed a conservatively orthodox Hinduism; despite this they lived in the most up-to-date circumstances in Calcutta. The main family home in the Pathuriaghat neighborhood of North Calcutta was of the Euro-classically inspired architectural style that gave Calcutta the name “City of Palaces;” another, situated across the street, was a kind of folly in imitation of a Scottish castle. These buildings were filled with European furniture, statuary, paintings, and other objets d’art, and they housed a vast library that included what Sourindro Mohun proudly and probably rightly asserted was the largest collection of books on music—Indian and foreign—in the country. He and his elder brother Jotindro Mohun, were the cultural leaders of their day and regularly presented theatrical and musical performances in their houses that were attended by both the native and colonial elite. There was, of course, an intense rivalry with the junior branch of the Tagore family in the Jorasanko area of North Calcutta, which was not only a center for reformist Hindu activity but also one for artistic creativity.

The rivalry between the two branches of the Tagore family sometimes
found expression in the bitingly satirical plays they mounted in their homes for their own enjoyment and that of their clients, retainers, allies, and friends. Often the fun-poking in such plays was aimed at the contradictions and compromises the new urban aristocracy had to face when living in familiar proximity to the colonial presence, what Ashis Nandy (1983) has tellingly named “the Intimate Enemy.” Such a relationship naturally brings to mind the popular expression of the resultant tensions in the satirical Kalighat paintings and their woodcut counterparts.

Until now we have been concerned with assembling the foundation for comprehending a “period rhetoric,” to use Barthes’s phrase, that includes not just elements of graphic art and of social expression as he suggests but also technological components as well. Now let us examine some of the rāgamālā icons in Sourindro Mohun’s book to see how they rest on this foundation, how they combine, in Tapan Raychaudhuri’s terms, “inherited ways of thinking and conduct” with “unprecedented departures from established patterns of responses.”

Although produced at the time chromolithography was making its mark in Calcutta as we have learned from T. N. Mukharji, these rāgamālā icons were colored by the more costly hand process, perhaps in order to produce an appropriately imperial volume. The first copy of the work that I consulted, now in the library of the University of Wisconsin, has inscribed on its flyleaf a notice declaring that it had been presented by Her Majesty Queen Mary to the Red Cross and St. John Book Company, and thus it may be the copy originally presented to Victoria. Another copy I examined, now at the Newberry Library, is like this one in virtually every respect except that it has not been colored; this would suggest that only special presentation copies, or perhaps only the copy presented to the Empress, had been so treated.

The artist of this work has been identified by Tapati Guha Thakurta in her excellent discussion of nationalism in Bengali art of this period, The Making of a New “Indian” Art:

The Tagores of Pathuriaghata and Jorasanko provided a substantial source of demand for lithographed illustrations. All of Raja Sourindro Mohun Tagore’s books on classical Hindu music and mythology carried illustrations by Krishnahari Das, an ex-student of the School of Art under Principal Locke. While working on Sourindro Mohun Tagore’s books, he was also commissioned to illustrate some publications of the Geological Survey of India and Sir George King’s multi-volume work, Annals of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Calcutta (1887). For Krishnahari Das, the illustrations for Raja Sourindro Mohun Tagore’s books must have carried the same weight, prestige and publicity as these other commissions. But, while the one involved mainly the art-school derived skills of
accurate and painstaking draughtsmanship and refined printing, the visualisation of Hindu Avatars, Ragas and Raginis meant working out a new set of Indian iconographic imagery. In these, the artist’s training in life study, shading and anatomy drawing combined with his careful adherence to traditional costumes and iconographic prescripts. These expensive publications in English were clearly intended for an exclusive readership; but the illustrations matched the tune of the more popular, commercial varieties of Indian art that had captured the market. (88–89)

Guha Thakurta’s perceptive comments on Krishnahari’s work for S. M. Tagore draw attention to the way in which elements of traditional iconography and techniques have been melded with the professional training he had acquired in the Art School to allow him to work out a new iconographic imagery in the current, commercially popular style, and it is that we shall now set about to examine.

The first raga of the series is Vasanta, depicted in a verdant forest emerging from some type of cave-like bower with flowers in his hands that he has culled from among those at his feet which are blooming no doubt in the season suggested by his name, Spring (Figure 8). This is in fact a recycled lithograph that first appeared a decade earlier in Sourindro Mohun’s Six Principal Ragas (Tagore 1877). The rigidity of the figure, the gesture of the flower held in the right hand, the luxuriant vegetation, and the wildlife might be seen as inheritances from earlier Indian styles of painting, but the frontal posture of the figure, the shading, and the perspective are derived from acquaintance with western conventions. The amalgam perhaps does justice to none of its constituent elements, but it is revelatory of the state of Calcutta at this time when European art school training was attempting to help native tradition become competitive in a new market. The attempt at perspective, for example, is thwarted by the lack of proportion between the figure representing Vasanta and the crow in the treetop. They appear to be in the same plane but are in fact separated by a stream, Vasanta standing on the near bank and the crow perched in the peak of a tree on the distant bank. While the color adds a little dazzle to the lithograph, its opaque overlay obliterates the more delicate features of drawing in the black and white version. Similar problems with the other pictures recall T. N. Mukharji’s judgment about the numerous colored lithographs being produced in Calcutta at this time as having no artistic merit, but of course it is not for their artistic merit that they are still of interest.

Although the flowers in the picture may be taken as a sign of spring, the common iconography for this raga—a male dancing and playing a drum to musical accompaniment provided by women—is missing. Vasanta, for example, is sometimes represented by Krishna dancing exuberantly to music played by a band of milkmaids. In the traditional iconography of
rāgamālās, many modes are represented by such commonly recurring features and these are in some instances quite fixed; but sometimes subtle distinctions need to be observed in order to avoid confusing them—something the painters did not always do themselves. One painting, for example, that appears quite similar to the traditional representation of Vasanta just described has the slight difference of a lightning-pierced rain cloud in the upper left corner, an element that helps to justify the painting as representing, instead of Vasanta, the rāga Megha, "Cloud."

In the lithographic representation of Megha in Sourindro Mohun’s book (Figure 9), the obligatory dark rain clouds are overwhelmingly evident and their use as a traditional metaphor for Krishna, the dark-skinned god, calls forth his only appearance in this rāgamālā, but his companion, dressed in a blouseless sari, is a Bengali woman and not Radha or one of the upcountry milkmaids who wear the ghaghra skirt, colī blouse, and opni scarf. Their mount must have carried them to still more alien lands since the sky that threatens them does so with European, zig-zag lightning rather than the curlicue Indian kind with which Radha and Krishna would have been familiar in traditional rāga paintings.

Both Vasanta and Megha are rāgas—masculine—in Sourindro Mohun’s rāgamālā scheme; the other four rāgas are Bhairava, Śrī, Pañcama, and Naṭṭanārāyaṇa. Together they constitute the same group that also presides over the first rāgamālā in the fifteenth-century copy of the Kalpasūtra we discussed earlier and that Ebeling believed never again presided as a group over a rāgamālā. Thus this unique repetition of a set of rāgas coincidentally links the tail end of the rāgamālā tradition with its very beginning.

Another of these males, Bhairava (Figure 10), is seen in this rāgamālā presented in the traditional guise of Lord Siva, with the iconographical elements of an ash-smereared body, coiled hair, a trīśula in his hand, a cobra—peering rather coyly over his right shoulder—and the Ganges descending in the background. Unlike the lithograph of Vasanta which had been used in the previous publication Six Principal Ragas, this Bhairava is quite different from the one used there. In the lithograph of Bhairava in Six Principal Ragas, the same iconographical elements are included but with the fundamental addition of Siva’s vāhana, the bull Nandy. The deity, also, is seated properly in a yogic posture, and on the whole, the ensemble conforms to the traditional pattern that was also reproduced by the woodcut artisans of Bāṭalā for almanacs and other illustrated literature. The Siva who impersonates the rāga Bhairava in the Empress’s rāgamālā may have many of the necessary accoutrements, but he somehow manages, despite being a supposedly disheveled and unpredictable ganja smoker in Bengali folklore, to affect the air of a dignified gentleman. Standing upright as he does with one foot forward, rather than sitting in the yoga posture padmāsana, and with
Figure 10: Rāga Bhairava.

Figure 11: Rāga Naijanārāyaṇa.
a toga-like drapery over the arm he crosses in front of his chest to hold the triśula—or is it a trident?—he seems to have confused the Indian deity who rules Mt. Kailasa with the Greek one who rules the briny deep.

While the cultural ambivalence of this icon may be heavily encrypted, the illustration of another male rāga, Naṭṭanārāyana (Figure 11), makes more obvious use of a similarity in iconographic conventions between European and Indian art. The conquering hero on horseback is the common icon of this rāga and is, of course, also an icon of western painting and sculpture that is used to glorify military and political leaders; but it would not be surprising to discover that the famous painting of Napoleon on horseback by David (Figure 12) had been studied in the curriculum of the Calcutta College of Art by the artist who drew Naṭṭanārāyana for Sourindro Mohun, for the two pictures have more in common than the sharing of equestrian subjects.

As has been pointed out above, the six males in this rāgamālā correspond to those of the Kalpasūtra rāgamālā that Ebeling thought was unique in this regard. The rāginiś, however, do not correspond to those in the Kalpasūtra, and instead are those to be found in the system attributed to Somesvara in Damodara’s early seventeenth-century treatise, the Sāgīṭa Darpana. Among the other musical works in Sourindro Mohun’s list of publications, is his own annotated edition of this work with which, accordingly, he was quite familiar; it also figures in the compendium he made from musical treatises, the Sāgītasārasaṅgahā (1875). Apparently there had been a considerable amount of wife-swapping among the rāgas after Damodara’s time since the rāginiś in Sourindro Mohun’s work are often tied to different lords. Sourindro Mohun lists the original alliances in his preface, and with the aid of this it is possible to pinpoint his original, unnamed source; but then he goes on to say:

... when we take into consideration the forms of these Rāginis in vogue at the present day, every sound musician must confess that the above pairing of the Rāgas and the Rāginis can hardly be called reasonable. Without venturing, however, to find fault with the Sāmkrit writers, I can say this much that time has been instrumental in changing the original shapes of many Rāginis, and in confounding their respective characteristics... We have, therefore, made an endeavor to remove the above-mentioned defect in Hindu Music, by classing the Rāginis under those Rāgas respectively to which they seemed to belong most naturally...

Just as the pictures in his book represent the product of historical change in a longstanding tradition, the musical component, too, illustrates the ability of musical culture to vary both over time and regionally; there is a difference, however, in that the identifiable influence of colonial culture upon the pictures is absent from the musical component in its expressive
element, or is at least not so evident. It is plain enough, of course, in the way the sound is graphically represented by the use of European musical notation printed with type on paper.

The actual sonic element of Indian music had undergone change, as Sourindro Mohun found it necessary to acknowledge, because of the evolution that had taken place in the structures of the rāgas and rāginīs. This evolution had little to do with British colonialism, but the earlier imperial impact of Persianized culture had certainly made its influence apparent in the sound of Indian music, not to mention its impact on the tradition of rāgamālā painting. Despite this, Sourindro Mohun's presentation to his Empress was entitled *Six Ragas and Thirty-Six Rāginīs of the Hindus*, as though Muslim contributions to the Indian fine and performing arts were inconsequential. Sourindro Mohun, like many others of his time, had internalized this chauvinistically Hindu posture in regard to the arts as a result, in part, of having imbibed the British colonial view that sought to establish the concept of a great, classical Hindu past now corrupted by contamination with an imperialistic Islam (Capwell 1991:238-39).

Let us now return to the icons, themselves, and consider one that will seem gratifyingly familiar. Figure 13, illustrating rāginī *Rāmakari*, incorporates iconographical features of what Ebeling calls the Rajasthani Tradition, by far the most common; that is, an errant lover pleads with his mistress who disdains him, just has she had done more than three centuries earlier in the Gujarati style rāgamālā painting described early on in this article. In the lithograph, the lover seems to have gone to the length of practicing ascetic discipline to regain favor with his lady—perhaps he was really desperate to be forgiven after all that time—but apparently to no avail; she sits, apparently unmoved, on some kind of chaise or couch and is luxuriantly framed by draperies recalling the stage curtains that give a theatrical reference to many contemporary woodcuts. Those, for example, illustrating the infamous incident of the seduction of Elokeshi by the chief priest of the Tarakesvar temple in Bengal and her subsequent murder at the hands of her husband, often include such draperies as the reference is not just to the incident but to the numerous contemporary plays based on it that were presented in Calcutta theaters (Sarkar:42-43 for illustrations; on stage references in Bengali illustrations see Pattrea 1983:74-76).

Even woodcut images of Mahadeva of the kind that might be found in popular almanacs and that could easily be used to represent rāga Bhairava are often framed by draperies along the top border of the print. Another source for these framing draperies might also be found in those used by contemporary photographers for formal studio portraits.

Since Cary Welch (1975:85,105) has pointed out that only harlots or courtesans would be depicted full faced in Mughal style painting, it is per-
haps worth noting that in this rāgamālā, very few of the figures, male or female are in profile which, for whatever reason, was the usual mode of showing figures in styles of painting not influenced by western practice. Courtesans or not, the ladies in these musical icons often have a pin-up quality that may recall some of the Kalighat beauties. Rāgini Mālavaśrī, for example (Figure 14), distinctly echoes one of the more fixed icons of the tradition by grasping a lotus in her hand, but she certainly recalls just as strongly the Golāp Sundari of the Kalighat tradition by her posture and the distinctly pneumatic quality of her Bengali femininity.

The erotic sentiment that pervades the rāgamālā tradition from the beginning, as Ebeling points out, depicts not only the scornful or the lonely nāyikā but also the one who enjoys union with the nāyaka. In Tagore’s rāgamālā, for example, Rāgini Desi, is described in her accompanying dhyāna thus:

Her mind filled with love, the fair-complexioned and captivating Desi, attired in parrot’s plumage, desirous of dalliance, indirectly awakeneth her lover, heavy with slumber.

Here is another dhyāna for this rather rarely represented rāgini; it describes a similar situation and accompanies, like the former, an illustration that appropriately fits the description.

The woman is extremely handsome and fair. And she is dressed in green. She arrived where her lover was sleeping for amorous dalliances. She is full of love-passion and is badly afflicted by love. She is full of the juice of youth. (Ebeling: 140)

So in these pictures one is encouraged to see an aroused and unsatisfied woman attempting to waken her, perhaps exhausted, lover—and in the lithograph she does so none too indirectly, either, as she is poking him with her finger. This fits in nicely with the nāyikabheda literary tradition and with the sexual longings Ebeling attributed to the Rajput ladies he thought of as being among the chief patrons of rāgamālā paintings. Despite the dedication of Sourindro Mohun’s book, however, it would seem unlikely that we are to think of the Empress and Prince Albert in this connection! Particularly if we read the lines Sourindro Mohun composed to be set to rāgini Desi:

O Mother, may the seven Oceans of wide expanse, and heaving with billows, become the impassable entrenchment of thy Empire!

This fervently imperial wish is consonant with the rest of the patriotic litany of the rāgamālā and with the erudite apologia for “Hindu Loyalty” which Sourindro Mohun had published in 1883 and republished for the jubilee year (Tagore 1883).
Figure 14: Rāginī Mālavaśrī

Figure 15: Rāginī Vadabāṁsikā (varabāṁsikā).
The most forthright representation of the erotic sentiment in the rāgamālā is shown in this lithograph of rāginī Vadahāṃṣikā (Figure 15), which is perhaps least frequently represented, having only one other existing picture that is unrelated to this one in content although Ebeling links it to the same textual source as Sourindro Mohun’s, that is, Somesvara’s system as quoted in the Sangīta Darpana. While the gentle[man is not a Bengali, to judge from the clothes, his friend—her hair in a bun, wearing a sari in the traditional way without a blouse and with one breast beguilingly revealed—is a pleasantly plump Bengali beauty unlike the svelter figures of traditional paintings with their Hindustani clothes. She gazes up at him in a coy way and intimately drapes her arm over his leg.

Even within Bengal, the earlier woodcut and engraved illustrations followed the painterly conventions of depicting persons in the dress of more westerly regions, something not always remarked by writers on the subject as Nikhil Sarkar has noticed (Sarkar 1983:36). Ashit Paul points out this disparity particularly in connection with women’s dress:

There is an anachronism evident in the dresses worn by women in both the Battala book illustrations and the large woodprints. For Bengali women appearing in these pictures never wear the saree, and seem to prefer the ghagra. (Paul 1983:71)

As we have already noticed in connection with rāga Mehga and rāginī Vadahāṃṣikā, many of the women in Sourindro Mohun’s rāgamālā are clearly Bengali in their manner of dress and grooming and reveal, perhaps, both a regional influence from Kalighat paṭs as well as a westernizing naturalistic sense.

Although rāginī Bibhāṣa is depicted as a woman alone (Figure 16), she nevertheless represents a woman whose desires have been fulfilled according to her accompanying dhyāna. She is shown rising, after a pleasurable night, from the magnificent fourposter one might find in many a North Calcutta palace if not in a Mughal castle. The tune composed by Sourindro Mohun and printed on the facing page towards which she looks records a type of Bibhāṣa as alien to the Hindustani world as the fourposter, but it is a familiar type in Bengal because of its association with the Vishnupur gbarāṇa, the one Bengali musical tradition which, paradoxically, claims a Hindustani heritage (Capwell 1991). It is a hexatonic mode with all degrees natural and thus differs from all three of the other possibilities in the Hindustani tradition.

In his survey of the most significant literature on rāgamālā painting, Harold Powers (1980:474–75) chastises Ebeling for suggesting that there is no historical record to aid in tracing the musical development of rāgas as there is for the other components of the rāgamālā tradition, for, in fact,
as Sourindro Mohun has given us notations in European style in his rāgamālā, other treatises and rāgamālās do contain musical information about the modes given in Indian terms. Powers, however, praises Ebeling for the insight he reveals into the true relation between music and painting in rāgamālā:

There is [writes Ebeling] . . . a curious similarity between the forms of musical and painted Raga versions. The manner in which the iconography of a certain Raga or Ragini is treated in paintings, produced by different painters at different times in different workshops and/or localities, provokes the analogy of the musical performance of a Raga. There it is required that a certain scale and certain rules and embellishments are implemented in an act of creative improvisation. Similarly, a Ragamala painting is composed of compulsory ele-
ments (the iconographic formula) and variable additions, subject to local style, wealth of the patron, skill of the painter and other influences. That makes the result in both music and painting a slightly different and thus unique issue of the theme, each time that it is performed or painted. (Ebeling 1973:16)

The unique issue of the rāgamālā tradition represented in Sourindro Mohun's Six Ragas and Thirty Six Raginis of the Hindus is a compendium of signs whose connoted messages are richly informative of the significance of nineteenth-century Bengal in the history of the East-West encounter. Tapan Raychaudhuri was right to point out that:

The nineteenth-century Bengali experience is . . . part of a global phenomenon . . . it is perhaps the earliest manifestation of the revolution in the mental world of Asia's elite groups.

In trying to uncover some of the deeper significance of Sourindro Mohun's rāgamālā, I hope to have shown how the nineteenth-century Bengali experience of musical culture, too, can be a "manifestation of the revolution in the mental world of Asia's elite groups."

Notes

1. The Nobel Laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore was a member of the junior branch of the family whose principal residence was in the Jorasanko area of the city and is now home to Rabindra Bharati University.

The earliest version of this paper was presented at a conference organized by Prof. Stephen Slawek for the Center for Asian Studies, University of Texas, Austin, in 1988; thereafter, I presented it in various forms in different venues, the last being a conference on the history of Calcutta, sponsored by the American Institute of Indian Studies in cooperation with the Government of West Bengal and held at Jadavpur University in December, 1989, to commemorate the tercentenary of Calcutta.

2. For an easily available set of reproductions from a Rajasthani rāgamālā, see Bor 1999.

References


