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# FROM CALCUTTA TO THE BENGAL TIGER: INDIAN MUSICIANS, AMERICAN ORIENTALISM, AND COSMOPOLITAN MODERNISM PRE-1947

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

MUSIC

by

**Samuel B. Cushman**

December 2023

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Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2023

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**Abstract**
*From Calcutta to the Bengal Tiger:*
*Indian Musicians, American Orientalism, and Cosmopolitan Modernism Pre-1947*
Samuel B. Cushman

This dissertation excavates a forgotten history of *Hindustani* (North Indian) art music in the United States beginning with Bengali musician and restaurateur Sarat Lahiri (c. 1897-1941), whose name surfaces peripherally in the academic literature on American composer Henry Cowell (1897-1965), the New School for Social Research, and the 1930s Manhattan restaurant trade. By tracing scattered archival references to Lahiri and reconstructing a network of his collaborators, my research centers the migrations and activities of musicians from colonial India in the decades preceding Indian independence in 1947. These early-twentieth-century migrants navigated a world shaped by European colonialism, global anticolonial movements, nativist racism and legal exclusion in the United States, and the exoticist fantasies and commercial pressures of American Orientalism. They traversed social and economic landscapes characterized by sweeping change, unexpected encounters, and unforeseen hardships. Lahiri's career in New York between 1923 and 1941 provides a means of engaging the Orientalism of the era, including its expressions in modernist movements in music and dance, and considering how this dynamic milieu shaped the everyday lives of working immigrant musicians. As I situate Lahiri and his contemporaries in contexts ranging from the local to the global, I discuss the involvement of artists, activists, and intellectuals from the Indian subcontinent across multiple domains of American cultural production in the early twentieth century.

*In loving memory of my grandfather, Bigelow,*
*gone twenty years but not forgotten.*

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It takes something considerably larger and more dispersed than a village to inspire and sustain a project of this magnitude, which—in the form of a single document—represents a lifetime of experiences. I want to start by acknowledging all my teachers, musical and otherwise. Without their inspiration and guidance, this journey would have been inconceivable. I cannot possibly name them all, but there are a few who deserve special recognition for their impact. First, thank you to Kevin Murphy, who during my tumultuous high-school years fostered a love for music and drumming that has provided a throughline amidst all the ebbing and flowing of life. Thanks to Loren Oppenheimer for enabling my adult *tabla* pursuits and helping me navigate the inevitable bumps in the road. Thanks also to my teachers and interlocutors in New Delhi—foremost Mohan Shyam Sharma, Shashi Kant Pathak, Ashish Gangani, and Utpal Ghoshal—who continue to inspire me to new musical heights, even from a distance. And a special thank you to Professor Dard Neuman, my academic supervisor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who has guided my graduate pursuits with optimistic irreverence, camaraderie, and an appropriate amount of affirmation. Dard oversaw this project from its first kernels of potential to its present state of completion.

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Several institutions and organizations provided financial resources and other assistance that made this project possible. In 2019, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts awarded a research fellowship that jumpstarted this project in earnest. Thanks to Jessica Wood and all the staff at the Music and Recorded Sound Division for helping me make the most of my time in New York and for providing tools and research training that sustained this project through a long, uncertain pandemic. Hiroko Sakurazawa and the David and Sylvia Teitelbaum Fund, Inc. demonstrated patience in fielding my numerous emails regarding photo permissions

for the Henry Cowell Collection between 2019 and 2023 and generously permitted me to include key documents in this dissertation. Without their assistance, my research never would have reached exit velocity. The Arts Dean's Fund for Excellence and Equity, the Music Department, and the Graduate Division at the University of California, Santa Cruz all provided financial assistance in the form of fellowships, large and small, to support this research and bring it to its timely completion. Lastly, thanks to Samip Mallick at the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), who approved my request to reproduce images from their collection, and to the Estate of Edward Steichen, represented by the Artists Rights Society, for generously granting permission to include select Steichen photographs in this project.

The United States-India Educational Foundation and all the staff at the Fulbright Commission in New Delhi also deserve recognition for their patience in welcoming our Fulbright cohort to India in early 2022, following two years of pandemic-related delays. COVID dictated an alternate trajectory for this dissertation during those two years, but the resources and support I received while living in New Delhi kept the project moving and broadened the geographical, historical, and cultural context for my ongoing work on North Indian drumming and dance accompaniment. Along similar lines, I would like to thank Dr. Shubha Chaudhuri and the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS) Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology (ARCE) in Gurugram, Haryana, for their generous support throughout my nine months in India. Although Anirban Bhattacharyya no longer

works at the ARCE, he came to me through Dr. Chaudhuri. His feedback, camaraderie, and Bengali translation assistance have been invaluable. The Sangeet Natak Akademi and the National Archives of India also graciously opened their doors to me during my Fulbright grant period and I am grateful to both.

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# Introduction

This dissertation on early-twentieth-century immigrant musicians from the Indian subcontinent is the fruition of a search for untold musical histories of South Asian America that began while I was completing Ph.D. coursework and preparing for qualifying exams at the University of California, Santa Cruz. As a student of *Hindustani* (North Indian) art music and a practitioner of multiple forms of popular and experimental music in the United States, my interest in South Asian-American cultural exchange is an extension of the musical and intellectual journey that first led me to pursue graduate study in music.[1] My own biography as a musician and scholar is therefore inextricably embedded in the research that spawned this transcultural, interdisciplinary project.

My work presents a partial account of the twentieth-century globalization of Hindustani music while also exploring topics in American music history. I embrace historian Charles Hamm's notion that American musical histories should aspire to present "both a history of music in America and a history of American music," and I

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[1] In contrast with "India," which became a nation-state in 1947, "South Asia" includes, at minimum, modern-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Usage of the term to reference the broader region (beyond the borders of the present-day Indian nation-state) gained traction in the 1980s. From 1857, when the British Raj consolidated its political control over much of the Indian subcontinent until Indian independence in 1947, "British India," "colonial India," and "India" all referred to much of what is now considered South Asia. Throughout this dissertation, I use "Indian" primarily in reference to immigrants from colonial India during the pre-independence period. A generic term like "Indian music," while common, actually refers to cultural practices that extend beyond the present-day borders of the Indian nation-state. My less frequent usage of "South Asia" aims to situate people, communities, and ideas relative to contemporary discourses, such as "South Asian America" or the "South Asian diaspora." For more on the politics of usage, see Vinay Lal, *The Other Indians: A Political and Cultural History of South Asians in America* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Press, 2008), ix-xiv.

approach the history of “music in America”—including musics brought to the United States by foreign-born immigrants—as a vital dimension of American auditory culture.[2] I contend that analysis of early-twentieth-century Hindustani music culture in the United States offers unique opportunities for critical consideration of issues related to immigration, assimilation, racialized difference, exoticism, appropriation, and a range of cultural projects and negotiations. The majority of events chronicled in these pages transpired in New York City throughout the 1920s and 1930s, yet they speak to intersections of cosmopolitan projects and political movements that bridged the Indian subcontinent and the United States through global flows of people and information.

This project began in earnest with one name: Sarat Lahiri (c. 1897-1941). As I scoured academic literature for the earliest evidence of Hindustani musical activity in the United States, I first encountered Lahiri in a 1978 article by Brian Silver on Indian influences in the work of American composers Henry Cowell (1897-1965) and Alan Hovhaness (1911-2000). Silver identifies Lahiri, “a Congress Party exile from Bengal,” as Cowell’s first teacher of Hindustani music in New York starting around 1928.[3] Similarly fleeting references to Lahiri exist in other literature on Cowell, his study of Indian music, and his work at the New School for Social

[2] Charles Hamm, *Music in the New World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), xi.
[3] Brian Silver, “Henry Cowell and Alan Hovhaness: Responses to the Music of India,” in *Contributions to Asian Studies* 12 (1978), 58. Silver could not recall the origin of the “Congress Party exile” reference when we spoke in 2021. His account constitutes the only reference to Lahiri’s party affiliation or status as a nationalist political exile (with the exception of subsequent scholars who cite Silver as their source).

Research.[4] Such references are invariably brief and most often cite Silver as their source. In a 2006 dissertation discussing the history of Hindustani music in the United States, Kaye Leora Lubach articulates what, to date, has been the prevailing scholarly consensus regarding Lahiri and his early-twentieth-century contemporaries from colonial India:

> The Royal Musicians of Hindustan acquired a tabla player in New York as early as 1910, and composer Henry Cowell was introduced to Sarat Lahiri, a "Congress Party exile from Bengal" (Silver 1978:58) living in New York in 1928, but *there is little evidence remaining to attest to any significant interaction between these musicians and the American public*.[5] [emphasis added]

Lubach proceeds to discuss Hazrat Inayat Khan and Ananda Coomaraswamy, two "highly visible emissaries of Indian culture."[6]

Despite this assessment of Lahiri's irrelevance, I had questions that required further research. Certainly, his interactions with Cowell deserved more study. Moreover, how had Sarat Lahiri come to be in New York in 1928? When did he arrive and how did the strict immigration policies of the era affect him? Was he another in a series of visiting cultural ambassadors from colonial India or did he actually live in political exile? Where, and from whom, did he learn his craft? What was the scope of his activities in New York, beyond purportedly teaching Henry Cowell the basics of Hindustani music? Was Lahiri the lone Indian musician in

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[4] For example, Cowell biographer Joel Sachs mentions Lahiri twice but does not add any historical or biographical details. See Joel Sachs, *Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 188, 442.
[5] Kaye Leora Lubach, "Tradition, Ideology, and the History of Hindustani Music in the United States in the 20th Century," Ph.D. diss., (University of California, Los Angeles, 2006), 89.
[6] Ibid.

1920s New York or did he operate within a broader network of musical immigrants, some of whom may have left India because of their anticolonial politics and engaged in cultural and political projects while living abroad?

As I wrestled with these questions, I planned a preliminary research trip to the Henry Cowell Collection at the New York Public Library (NYPL) for the Performing Arts in September 2018. Professor Amy Beal, one of my committee members, suggested I visit the archive based on the Cowell-Lahiri connection and the reservoir of unique materials housed there.[7] I had low expectations for the trip, given Lahiri's peripheral role in Cowell's overall biography, but I hoped to at least glean a few additional details that might begin to paint a more complete picture of Lahiri's life and times in New York.

At the NYPL, I found a range of documents detailing Cowell's engagements with Indian music among sources dedicated to his pursuits in comparative musicology.[8] In a box dedicated to "World and Folk Music," I began to find references to Lahiri.[9] Nestled among the handwritten notes on Indian and other

[7] For details regarding the Henry Cowell Collection, see George Boziwick, "Henry Cowell at the New York Public Library: A Whole World of Music," *Notes* (Music Library Association) 57, no. 1 (September 2000), 46-58.
[8] Comparative musicology was a disciplinary forbear of ethnomusicology. The Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, where Cowell studied "extra-European" musics on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1931-32, housed a unique collection of recordings on wax cylinder collected from around the world and functioned as the nerve center of comparative musicology during its formative years. When Cowell returned to the New School, he brought with him a set of copied recordings from Berlin. Drawing on these recordings (the only collection of their kind in the United States at the time), as well as knowledge acquired while studying under Erich von Hornbostel in Berlin and live demonstrations whenever possible, Cowell introduced courses in comparative musicology at the New School for Social Research in the early 1930s.
[9] Box 162, Henry Cowell Collection, Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York (hereafter HCC, NYPL).

“Oriental” musics, course proposals, drafts of syllabi, and assorted ephemera, I uncovered a worn one-page document entitled “Studies in Comparative Music.” In a handwritten addendum to the faded typewriter script, the document listed Sarat Lahiri—a “Bengali in NY”—among Cowell’s teachers of “different musical systems,” also noting that Cowell had studied South Indian (*Carnatic*) music with Professor P. Sambamoorthy (1901-1973) of the University of Madras while visiting Berlin in 1931-1932. An adjacent folder contained a flier for “Sarat Lahiri and Todi” in a recital of “Music and Songs of India” at the New School for Social Research on November 5, 1934.

But the most unexpected and significant item I found on that first visit to the archive had nothing to do with Cowell or the New School. It was a small, red promotional booklet with the names “Sarat Lahiri and Lota” printed across the cover in stylized black font.[10] This was the first time I had encountered the name “Lota,” who I would discover to be Lahiri’s wife, Lucile. The booklet provided evidence of the duo’s widespread activity and popularity in the 1920s. It included professional portraits attributed to fashion photographer Edward Steichen (1879-1973), superfluous prose introducing the performers and their artistic practices, reviews and testimonials referencing concerts, Broadway appearances, and radio performances, and even a list of well-known patrons for whom the duo had given their “intimate

[10] “Sarat Lahiri and Lota,” Box 162, Folder 3, HCC, NYPL. This booklet contains a quotation from *Vanity Fair* on the cover (and a photo by Edward Steichen that appeared in the June 1928 issue of that magazine) but appears to have been published independently by the office of Catharine A. Bamman, the New York concert manager responsible for promoting the duo at the time.

recitals." This document generated a host of new questions but answered one definitively: Sarat Lahiri had been well established in New York years prior to any formal engagement with Henry Cowell or the New School.

In 2019, I received a research fellowship from the NYPL to build on these preliminary findings. That August, during two weeks in Manhattan, I uncovered additional sources documenting Lahiri's activities, collaborations, and the presence of other Indian musicians in New York during the interwar period. The most crucial breakthroughs came as the research staff trained me to conduct genealogical and historical newspaper searches using online databases. I located vital records for Lahiri, including census data from 1925 and 1930, and even took a trip to the NYC Municipal Archives to obtain a copy of his 1941 death certificate. I also began to track down articles and clippings in the *New York Times* and other regional newspapers chronicling his public activities and linking him to other performers, both Indian and American.

Given the recent nature of widescale newspaper digitization and the improved accuracy of digital text scanners, it does not surprise me that scholars writing as recently as 2006 concluded that there was "little evidence remaining to attest to any significant interaction" between Sarat Lahiri, his Indian contemporaries, and the American public. Without the aid of these tools, locating the scattered references to Lahiri in a smattering of American newspapers printed between 1923 and 1941 would have proved as futile as searching for the proverbial needle in an endless microfilm haystack. With these tools, however, it became clear that Lahiri's

interactions with the American public were both widespread and sustained throughout the 1920s and 1930s across multiple domains of elite and popular culture.

Although this research confirms Sarat Lahiri was not the lone working musician from colonial India living in New York during the interwar period, the amount of press coverage devoted to his public activities appears to have been exceptional. As I discuss in Chapter 3, this visibility was—at least in part—a byproduct of his high-caste, high-class background, a racial ambiguity that allowed him to self-represent as white in a racially stratified society, and a shrewd ability to embody an alterity that satisfied the expectations of American Orientalism without appearing *too* foreign or unfamiliar to American audiences. While Lahiri has been relegated to the footnotes and margins of our musical histories, foremost those dealing with Henry Cowell, he can hardly be considered a subaltern figure in a broader historiographic sense.[11] Hailing from a wealthy family of Calcutta Brahmins, the English-educated Lahiri benefited from social positioning in the United States all but unknown to his less-privileged Indian contemporaries. He embodied high-culture ideals and distanced himself from elements of Indian culture that did not fit the Hindu revivalist lens through which he framed his activities. In a world where Indian

[11] In the introduction to *Terrible Freedom: The Life and Work of Lucia Dlugoszewski* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), Amy C. Beal writes, "Margins and footnotes are where we put things that we allow to be overlooked, secondary to the main story. They are not unlike shadows, where things can hide, or be hidden" (3-4). Beal's scholarship contributes to the broader project of recovering the stories of women artists from the "margins, shadows, and footnotes" of histories from which they have been excluded or forgotten—specifically histories of twentieth-century avant-garde music. My work draws inspiration from Beal's project in its aim to recover the stories of forgotten or excluded immigrant musicians from the margins, shadows, and footnotes of similar, and sometimes intersecting, histories.

music was a relative newcomer—a novel oddity and object of Orientalist fascination—Lahiri carved out a place for himself as an authority. Whereas only oblique print references—often no more than a name—exist for some of his known immigrant collaborators (where references to them exist at all), Lahiri's name appeared in newsprint with regularity between 1923, when it first surfaced in the *New York Times*, and his death in May 1941.

Even accounting for Lahiri's relative celebrity in New York during this period, the archival sources informing this project constitute a fragmentary record of the lives of minor characters involved in major historical transformations. These include the onset—and subsequent restriction—of sustained immigration from colonial India to the United States; the global proliferation of European Orientalist knowledge and ideas, as well as material goods, spiritual teachings, and cultural practices from the subcontinent; and the flowering of avant-garde musical modernism, so-called Oriental and modern dance, and anticolonial political movements during the first half of the twentieth century. Disparate as these contexts may appear, the connections between and among them come into focus in the everyday lives of ordinary people living through a period of extraordinary change. Lahiri and some (though not all) of his Indian contemporaries in New York are intriguing in this regard because they moved from positions of class and caste privilege in colonial India to live as working immigrants in the United States.

In telling these intertwined stories, I forego a top-down approach to historical writing based on elitist conceptions of culture, celebrated figures, and canonical

repertoires in order to foreground the experiences of virtually unknown immigrant musicians. This approach participates in a broader reorientation across disciplines to treat the everyday lives of individuals and the materials of popular culture as viable, robust areas for scholarly inquiry.[12] In this vein, a number of biographical studies have demonstrated that the story of a single "modest individual" seemingly "lacking in significance," and for this reason representative, can provide a microcosm for tracing the characteristics of an entire social stratum in a specific historical period.[13]

As one such individual, Sarat Lahiri offers a unique case study for considering movement, privilege, and agency across a global spectrum of elite and popular cultures. The music he performed was anchored in the cultivated art music of North India—a syncretic blend of Indo-Persian performance practices known commonly as Hindustani music. Lahiri, however, framed these practices within a distinctly nationalist discourse on "Hindu music" rooted in nineteenth-century Bengal. Despite the obvious similarities between the terms *Hindustani* music and *Hindu* music, the former signals the fundamental hybridity of North Indian Indo-Persianate cultural formations.[14] The latter, by contrast, references a specific nineteenth-century musicological project aimed at linking contemporary

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[12] Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, "Introduction: Rethinking Popular Culture" in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1-18.
[13] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans., John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), xx.
[14] See Manan Ahmed Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 14-15, for more on the historical usage of the term *Hindustan*, its pluralistic Indo-Persianate connotations, and "the formative acts of political forgetting" that enabled its gradual erasure within the colonial episteme that gave rise to British India.

performance practices to ancient Sanskrit treatises, and thus attempting to erase, or at least downplay, the centrality of Indo-Persianate syncretism. I discuss this project in more depth later in this introduction and again in Chapter 3.

After arriving in New York in 1919, purportedly as a political exile, Lahiri came to be acclaimed by high society as an Indian music virtuoso. Yet based on two short 78-rpm commercial gramophone recordings, made by Victor Records in 1936 (also discussed in Chapter 3), his musical proficiency can best be described as that of an educated amateur. In the turn-of-the-century Bengali milieu from which Lahiri emerged, members of the *bhadralok* (genteel class) were often enthusiastic patrons and knowledgeable connoisseurs of Hindustani music. But maintaining a sense of musical amateurism distinguished the late-nineteenth-century Bengali elite from the professional musicians they patronized. Despite the extensive efforts of the *bhadralok* to cultivate Hindustani musical culture in colonial Bengal, "practicing music was more problematic," Richard David Williams explains, "as it would be humiliating to be mistaken for a professional musician."[15] Contrary to prevailing Euro-American conceptions of amateurism and professionalism, amateurism conveyed social superiority in the Hindustani context owing to the association of musical professionalism with hereditary specialists from lower class and caste backgrounds (notably Muslim musicians and female courtesans) as well as the absence of manual labor in the lives of the elite.

[15] Richard David Williams, *The Scattered Court: Hindustani Music in Colonial Bengal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 166.

Once in the United States, Sarat Lahiri nonetheless occupied the socio-economic space of (and self-consciously positioned himself as) as a working musician, shedding certain entitlements of his Bengali Brahminism while emphasizing others (often to the point of self-exoticization) in marketing himself to an American public. In short, his colonial education and amateur musical background in Calcutta positioned him to capitalize on a commercial and academic demand for, and relative ignorance of, all things Indian within the flourishing Orientalist economy of 1920s New York. By June 1928, Lahiri had succeeded in this pursuit so deftly that *Vanity Fair* featured a portrait of Sarat Lahiri and Lota.

The domains in which Lahiri presented his music in the United States included private soirées for elite patrons, avant-garde educational spaces such as the New School for Social Research, Broadway theater productions, and mass radio broadcasts that brought his melodies into potentially millions of homes. In the mid-1930s, Lahiri also opened the Bengal Tiger restaurant in the Theater District of Midtown Manhattan, where he offered nightly performances to his clientele. Historical newspaper clippings and other print materials show Lahiri educating his audiences about India and its cultural practices across these domains. In the spaces between official documentation of his performances and slick promotional positioning, we also see Lahiri engaged in the quotidian routines of surviving as a first-generation immigrant, working musician, and restaurateur.

This dissertation follows multiple thematic and theoretical spokes spanning colonial India and the United States, but Lahiri's journey from upper-class Bengali

Brahmin to purported anticolonial political exile, and subsequently to working musician and New York restaurateur, constitutes the hub at the center of these divergent trajectories. Whether Lahiri's experiences as an immigrant were extraordinary or ordinary (I argue they were both in certain respects), his story resonates beyond the limited context of early-twentieth-century South Asian immigration. This study focuses on a relatively small set of historical individuals, centered on Lahiri, yet it draws their stories into conversation with broader issues of the time as well as ongoing political and cultural negotiations.

Lahiri and the other working Indian musicians and dancers living in New York during the 1920s and 1930s engaged in what Urmimala Sarkar Munsi has called *self-orientalizing.* Munsi observes that the emergence and perpetuation of Orientalist stereotypes is not merely a product of colonial actions themselves but also the result of "self-orientalizing processes consolidated by many artists, dancers, and musicians who wanted to secure and hold a special place in the emerging global cultural negotiations."[16] These performers actively participated in the inscription of Orientalist stereotypes on the American cultural landscape even as they negotiated fluid transcultural identities and the complex political realities of their early-modern-cosmopolitan milieu. In most cases, we have been left with only faint traces of these lives, lives spent negotiating "Indianness" and "Americanness" within a society that went to great lengths to maintain distinctions between the two. This dissertation

[16] Urmimala Sarkar Munsi, *Uday Shankar and His Transcultural Experimentations: Dancing Modernity* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 9.

invites readers to question the processes by which some "music in America" remains distinct from "American music," despite observable influences on cultural production in the United States, while other imported musical practices are assimilated into pluralistic conceptions of American folk and popular culture.

**Modes of Musical Ambassadorship: Hindustani Music in the United States**

With few exceptions, scholarship on the presence and influence of Indian, and specifically Hindustani, music in the United States has tended to emphasize the importation of musical practices from the subcontinent by select cultural ambassadors beginning in the 1950s and 1960s. Such narratives focus on the widespread proliferation of interest in Indian music in the domains of art music (both "classical" and "avant-garde"), jazz (modal jazz and the emergence of "Indo-jazz"), and popular music (beginning with the appropriation of sitar, tabla, and other Indian instruments within "the great sitar explosion" of the mid-to-late 1960s). The dramatic infusion of North Indian art music into 1960s counterculture, while unexpected, continues to resonate in popular culture as Hindustani music is deployed (often subliminally) to index New Age spirituality or psychedelic drug use. It should therefore come as no surprise that the period beginning in the mid-1950s, with the arrival of Ali Akbar Khan (1922-2009) and Ravi Shankar (1920-2012) on the global stage, has garnered the majority of attention in scholarship on Hindustani music in the United States.

Yet this attention has, by and large, overshadowed consideration for South Asian-American cultural encounters during the first half of the twentieth century. The 1960s undoubtedly proved transformative in the history of South Asian America; a restructuring of U.S. immigration policy in 1965 led to unprecedented growth in South Asian diasporic populations, and interest in Indian arts, philosophy, and religion rippled through Euro-American popular culture.[17] The sixties brought the bubbling over of what ethnomusicologist David Reck dubs "The Peculiarly Western Magical Mythical Image of India"—a collective fantasy "tinged with unabashed wonder-filled romanticism" for all things Indian—yet this Orientalist mythos had its origins in earlier eras of migration and encounter.[18]

Drawing upon centuries of European Orientalist inquiry, a distinct strain of American Orientalism took shape within the American Transcendentalist literature of the nineteenth century, well ahead of the onset of sustained immigration from the Indian subcontinent.[19] By the turn of the twentieth century, an amalgam of Indian

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[17] Following decades of exclusionary legislation, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, or Hart-Cellar Act, introduced a liberalizing Cold War immigration policy that established the present-day framework for immigration from South Asia based on professional expertise. Although immigration quotas favored specific classes of professional workers, South Asian American populations began to grow dramatically from their pre-1965 levels, most notably in major metropolitan areas.

[18] David Reck, "The Neon Electric Saraswati: Being Reflections on the Influences of Indian Music on the Contemporary Music Scene in America," *Contributions to Asian Studies* 12 (1978): 5.

[19] There is considerable slippage between *Orientalism*/*Orientalist* (referring to specific colonial knowledge projects and one engaged in such projects) and *orientalism*/*orientalist* (referring to biases, stereotypes, and representations rooted in generalizations about "the East." *Orientalism*, in the Saidian sense, accounts for all of the above in detailing the reliance of the former upon the latter; see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978). There is also the small matter of *oriental*, used as an adjective to describe people, cultural practices, rugs, food, etc. Following generations of postcolonial scholars, I am critical of the intellectual assumptions from which all of these terms emerge. Yet, given the subject matter of this dissertation, variations of them appear repeatedly in contexts spanning—and blurring—this spectrum of potential meanings. For the sake of clarity and consistency, I elect to capitalize all instances of *Oriental*, *Orientalism*, *Orientalist*, etc.

images, goods, and ideas flooded the consumer marketplace, and a craze for all things "Oriental" gripped the American public. This turn-of-the-century "Orientalist economy" coincided roughly with the first documented wave of sustained immigration from colonial India, but the dissonances between Orientalist fantasies and the lived experiences of immigrants from the subcontinent proved difficult to reconcile.[20] I discuss these intertwined developments in Chapter 1, which situates this project with respect to relevant historical scholarship and theoretical contributions.

Despite a steady influx of immigrants from colonial India during the first two decades of the twentieth century, none of the histories of Hindustani music and its globalization (or the histories of musical practice in the United States) adequately accounts for the engagement of Indian immigrants in American music culture prior to Indian independence. In most cases, these histories trace the globalization of Hindustani music to the travels of Ali Akbar Khan, Ravi Shankar, and other post-independence cultural ambassadors. These artists surely ushered in a new paradigm of musical exchange, but their visits to the United States were not the first made by Indian musicians. Gerry Farrell's chapter on early-twentieth-century cultural ambassadorship details the journeys of Sufi musician Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882-1927), Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), and dancer Uday Shankar (1900-1977) to Europe and North America.[21] But much like Khan and Shankar, all

[20] I borrow the term "Orientalist economy" from Vivek Bald, "Hands Across the Water: Indian Sailors, Peddlers, and Radicals in the U.S.," Ph.D. diss., (New York University, 2009).
[21] Gerry Farrell, *Indian Music and the West* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 144-167.

three of these artists were well known prior to their "Journeys to the West," and none traveled to the United States with the intention of remaining there.

Priya Srinivasan's accounts of the "Delhi Durbar," staged at Coney Island in 1904, and the ill-fated travels of earlier *nautch* dancers hired to perform in New York City in the 1880s, provide evidence of perhaps the earliest documented travels by performing artists from the Indian subcontinent to North America.[22] Although Srinivasan makes a compelling case for the "kinesthetic traces" these performers left behind—for example, the influence of the Coney Island nautch dancers on Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968), an American "Oriental" dancer and pioneer of modern dance—there is no evidence any of these artists settled in the United States beyond the terms of their employment. St. Denis later toured the United States with Hazrat Inayat Khan and "The Royal Musicians of Hindustan" in 1911, shortly after their arrival from India.[23] Khan was a hereditary Muslim court musician and the grandson of Maula Baksh (1833-1896) of Baroda, who had been invited to perform at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. He used his music to spread the spiritual teachings of Sufism and capitalized on a growing interest in Indic spirituality in the

[22] The term *nautch* is an anglicization of the Hindi-Urdu verb *nachna*, meaning "to dance." In the colonial context, the term came to be applied broadly to various classes of hereditary courtesan performers, often with a derogatory connotation. As I discuss at length in subsequent chapters, "nautch" dances came into fashion in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although the term generally referred to little more than the fanciful renderings of Euro-American "Oriental" dancers. These exoticized representations relied upon, to varying extents, dance forms associated with hereditary female performers from the Indian subcontinent but were frequently choreographed and presented with little to no formal training. Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance As Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 43-66; Priya Srinivasan, "The Bodies Beneath the Smoke or What's Behind the Cigarette Poster: Unearthing Kinesthetic Connections in American Dance History," in *Discourses in Dance* 4, no. 1 (2007), 7-47.
[23] Farrell, *Indian Music and the West*, 150-151.

United States. I discuss St. Denis, Khan, and the confluence of Oriental dance and Hindustani music in Chapter 4.

As Inayat Khan and his troupe made their way westward with St. Denis in 1911, a lesser-known Bengali musician named Satyabala Devi presented New York audiences with a contrasting version of Hindustani music. Devi hailed from a wealthy *zamindar* (landowner) family and performed as an amateur. Recall that in this context amateurism connoted distance between upper-class practitioners and professional musicians from lower social strata who earned their living through music. With the support of the Maharaja of Rewa, Devi traveled to New York in the company of her husband, a physician named Dr. N.L. Desai, and sought to produce phonograph records of the "secret and sacred music of India," of which, one journalist claimed, she was "the last living custodian."[24]

Noble as Devi's cause may have appeared to her early-twentieth-century American audiences, it rested on questionable premises. For one, the Gramophone Company of India had begun making commercial recordings of Hindustani music in 1902 and had subsequently invested in opening the Indian market in the first decade of the twentieth century.[25] By the end of the decade, it offered Indian consumers thousands of local records, representing the linguistic and regional diversity of the subcontinent, pressed at its new factory in Calcutta. Secondly, despite the exclusion of *ustads* (Muslim hereditary musical specialists) from elite nationalist-modernist

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[24] Nixola Greeley-Smith, "New Woman is 2,700-Year-Old Story in India: Hindu Religion Teaches Her Superiority to Man," *New York Evening World*, April 13, 1911.
[25] See Farrell, *Indian Music and the West,* 111-143.

narratives, which commonly situated them as the embodiment of musical decline, this class of professional North Indian musicians continued to adapt and thrive as living custodians of Hindustani music.

Although Devi eventually returned to India following a series of concerts and recording sessions in New York, the tenor of her "early nationalist mission" signaled a new mode of cultural ambassadorship.[26] Rooted in preservationist and propagandist musicological goals, the project of "transmitting the legacy of Hindustani music to Brahmanic control" entailed a rupture between the realities of musical practice in North India and the political agendas of Hindu cultural revivalists. Devi's mission reflected the agendas and biases of a privileged subset of Bengali musicologists, foremost Sourindro Mohun (S.M.) Tagore (1840-1914), a key exponent of "Hindu music," whom Dard Neuman identifies as her musicological mentor. [27] These Bengali musicologists, along with subsequent nationalist-modernist reformers, including V.N. Bhatkhande (1860-1936) and V.D. Paluskar (1872-1931), engaged in projects that reimagined the syncretic Indo-Muslim musical practices of contemporary North India as national, classical traditions by drawing on narratives propagated by European Orientalists.[28] In Chapter 3, we see more clearly how the revivalism of "Hindu music," as articulated by S.M. Tagore, hinged on efforts to link contemporary performance practices to Vedic antiquity while also rendering music

[26] Dard Neuman, "Satyabala Devi—'The Brahman Lady-Musician': Birth and Death of an Invented Tradition" (unpublished manuscript, 2005).
[27] Ibid.
[28] See Janaki Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

scientific and modern. Following Devi's return to the subcontinent, the elite Bengali underpinnings of her nationalist mission would become increasingly familiar in the hands of Sarat Lahiri and other itinerant musicians from colonial India who are the focus of this dissertation. As we retrace the activities of these musicians, we see them participating in the creation of "music in America" that remained ontologically distinct from "American music" even as it proliferated throughout multiple spheres of elite and popular culture in the United States.

**Chapter Overviews**

Following this introduction, Chapter 1 engages with relevant scholarship to map the historical and theoretical foundations of the project and contextualizes early-twentieth-century South Asian immigrant experiences in the United States. Chapter 2 then discusses the impacts of migration, cultural pluralism, and shifting urban landscapes on the development of American music. Drawing on a combination of primary and secondary sources, we follow composer Henry Cowell from his early years in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he encountered multiple immigrant communities from Asia, along with their musics, to New York, where he oversaw musical operations at the New School for Social Research beginning in 1931. Cowell's experiences, including his initiatives as both an avant-garde composer and an educator, open conversations about the involvement of immigrant communities in modernist cultural formations and Depression-era musical nationalism, as well as the inclusions, exclusions, and limitations of these entwined projects. Archival sources

speak to the documented activities and ideological orientations of Cowell and his contemporaries. Amidst these sources, we begin to glimpse the social and musical encounters, cultural negotiations, and creative dynamism that shaped their everyday lives. This chapter continues to grapple with the dialectics of "music in America" and "American music" by focusing on spaces that brought the two into sustained contact and stimulated innovations in musical education.

Chapter 3 focuses on Sarat Lahiri—Bengali working musician, restaurateur, and regular guest of Henry Cowell at the New School—and traces a network of Indian and American performers in interwar New York. From his Bengal Tiger restaurant to the streets, lecture halls, and theaters of Manhattan, we see Lahiri navigating the exoticist expectations and commercial pressures of American Orientalism, and thus weaving nationalist-revivalist discourses on the Indian performing arts into the prevailing modernist ethos of 1920s-1930s New York. I analyze the promotional rhetoric of Lahiri and his partner, Lota, in light of these projects, and trace their performances and reception across cultural domains. Lota eventually disappears from public view around the mid 1930s, but by tracing Lahiri's activities through the remainder of the decade we encounter a vibrant network of Indian performers and their collaborators.

Chapter 4 continues to follow many of the same characters, including Sarat Lahiri and Lota, but examines their activities in the domain of dance. To frame this discussion, I attend to the conjoined histories of *Oriental*, *modern*, *ethnic*, and *Indian classical* dance forms in the first half of the twentieth century. I consider slippages,

resonances, and ruptures in this global landscape of Orientalist exoticism, self-exoticism, cosmopolitanism, avant-garde modernism, and multiple Indian and American cultural nationalisms. Building on Priya Srinivasan's work on Indian dance as transnational labor and her attention to a "bodily archive" that accounts for subtle forms of embodied influence, I treat the Indian musical accompanists who worked with Oriental, modern, and ethnic dancers as indispensable, albeit easily overlooked, laborers and sources of specialized knowledge in the histories of American dance (and dance in America).

Taken together, the four chapters of this dissertation examine music in America *and* American music by attending to the porous boundaries where the two meet and ultimately shape one another. These intersecting conversations bring together a range of people and performance practices, as well as cultural and political projects, that bridge colonial India and the United States. By focusing on the everyday conditions and negotiations of a small number of working musicians in interwar New York, investigations anchored in the specificities of the past expand into discussions about international politics, global diasporas, and cultural pluralism with implications for the present.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Historical and Theoretical Foundations

Following the interventions of Vijay Prashad (2000), recent South Asian Americanists have tended to decenter the primacy of national immigration policy in structuring South Asian experiences in the United States.[1] Their approaches instead emphasize the impacts of colonial imperialism and neoliberal capitalism on South Asian American immigration, community building, political formation, and cultural production. Vivek Bald suggests that histories of South Asian America framed by immigration policy alone misleadingly present "a two-part story," which effectively cleaves the history of early-twentieth-century South Asian migration and political activism in the United States from the history of post-1965 immigration.[2] Such bifurcated histories tend to portray the years following the 1923 Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*—which disqualified South Asian immigrants from U.S. citizenship on racial grounds—as "a period of despair and inactivity" for the communities of South Asian America.[3] Although its critical

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[1] These immigration policies include the Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917, the Asian Exclusion Act and National Origins Act of 1924, and the Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. For examples of scholarly interventions in this vein, see Bald, 2009; Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Bald, Chatterji, Reddy, and Vimalassery, 2013; Harold A. Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies: The India Lobby in the United States, 1900-1946* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006); Anuradha Kumar, *One Man Many Lives: Bhagwan Singh and the Early South Asians in America* (New Delhi: Simon & Schuster India, 2022); Lal, *The Other Indians*; Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk.*

[2] Bald, "Hands Across the Water," 5.

[3] Lal, *The Other Indians*, 46-47.

significance in limiting the scope and nature of immigration cannot be overlooked, national immigration policy tells only part of the story.

For the purposes of this dissertation, these interventions are foundational. For one, they help account for the dearth of scholarship on South Asian musical activity in the United States between the arrivals of Hazrat Inayat Khan, in late 1910, and Ali Akbar Khan, in 1955. The general scholarly neglect of the intervening period of South Asian American history extends, not surprisingly, to the histories of Indian music in diaspora. Discriminatory legislation may have ensured that the demographics of South Asian America remained statistically small between 1917 and 1965, especially relative to those of European immigrant communities, but it never disappeared entirely. As Vivek Bald has so carefully demonstrated, beneath the histories derived from official state records hide multiple "lost histories" of South Asian America comprising undocumented migrations, name changes, and intermarriage within Black and Hispanic communities.[4]

My primary period of focus, the interwar years in which Sarat Lahiri and his contemporaries lived and worked in New York, falls wholly between the restrictive Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 and the liberalizing Hart-Cellar Act of 1965. According to census records, Sarat Lahiri arrived in the United States in 1919, two years after the passage of the Asiatic Barred Zone Act.[5] Lahiri, a documented resident "alien" per the 1930 Census, appears to have benefited from class-based

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[4] See Bald, "Hands Across the Water" and *Bengali Harlem.*

[5] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (hereafter USDC/BC), *U.S. Census, 1930: Population Schedule*, *New York, New York*, Enumeration District 31-*567,* Sheet 10A.

exceptions. Chapter 3 reveals how Lahiri, who Bald identifies by name as a "more elite" Indian immigrant, navigated racist social structures and a hostile legislative environment in pursuing dual careers as a working musician and Manhattan restaurateur.[6] By introducing Lahiri and his collaborators, including both Hindu and Muslim immigrant musicians from colonial India (some of whom remain unnamed in the archive), I attend to this lesser-known, yet vital, period of South Asian American history. The sources may be fragmentary, and the narratives incomplete, but by drawing methodological inspiration from the ways other scholars (including those discussed above) have dealt with gaps and silences in the archive, I reconstruct stories to the extent permitted by the archival record. Where the available sources leave holes, I raise questions—some of which may ultimately be unanswerable.

**South Asian Immigration, Racialization, and Organizing**

As early as the late 1700s, inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent made their way to the United States as workers on British ships that traded between India and New England. Some of these sailors appear to have "jumped ship," married into Black communities, and disappeared from the historical record.[7] Then, beginning around the 1880s, small groups of Bengali Muslim peddlers began to settle in port cities from New York to New Orleans, again often marrying into Black and Hispanic working-class families and putting down roots in their new communities. Although

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[6] Bald, *Bengali Harlem*, 176.
[7] Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk,* 71.

the number of these itinerant sailors and peddlers remained small at the turn of the twentieth century, their activities constitute the earliest phase of South Asian immigration to the United States. Alongside the better-known history of Punjabi immigration to the Pacific Coast of North America, where intermarriage between Punjabi men and Mexican women was common, these early migrations reveal the extent to which immigrant lives became woven into the existing social fabric.[8]

Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, labor shortages in the agricultural industry of California and the lumber industry of the Pacific Northwest prompted an influx of labor immigration from the Punjab to the West Coast of the United States. Facing grim economic realities amidst famine at home, these laborers sought improved economic opportunities in a faraway land. By the turn of the century, the notion of America as the "land of milk and honey" was already circulating in the global imaginary via networks of human migration.[9] But as these laborers gradually migrated south from Vancouver to the lumber mills of the Pacific Northwest and into the Central Valley of California, they encountered racist xenophobia, wage discrimination, and opposition from white labor unions. Newspapers and periodicals along the West Coast warned of the coming "Hindu Invasion" and a rising "Tide of Turbans," and calls for exclusionary legislation targeting "Hindus"—meaning all immigrants from colonial India—resounded by the

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[8] For more on these early-twentieth-century "Mexican-Hindu" families, see Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).
[9] Lal, *The Other Indians*, 16.

end of the decade.[10] Anuradha Kumar explains that racial resentment "fused with class oppression as 'white' workers and others who were then unionizing believed that business owners were deliberately employing Asians at lower salaries."[11]

In September 1907, a violent mob of some 500 targeted a community of Indian laborers in the lumber town of Bellingham, WA, injuring hundreds. The Asiatic Exclusion League, the organization responsible for the attack, claimed that in addition to taking their jobs, the "Hindus" were "a menace to society, owing to their unpleasant habits, lack of hygiene, and 'threatening' presence."[12] Such widespread opposition to "Hindu" migrants, on top of existing anti-Chinese sentiments, prompted a wave of legislative backlash that would culminate in restrictive immigration legislation in 1917 and 1924 that effectively outlawed most immigration from colonial India.[13]

The first decade of the twentieth century also saw the arrival of Indian students at West Coast universities—foremost the University of California, Berkeley—beginning around 1901. These students hailed predominantly from middle- and upper-class Hindu families in Bengal, then the seat of British power in India and the site of a contentious partition at the hands of the imperial regime in 1905. Recipients of colonial education, and thus intimately familiar with the inner

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[10] Ibid., 19-22.
[11] Kumar, *One Man,* 25.
[12] Ibid., 31.
[13] The Immigration Act of 1917 barred all migrants from east of the 50th meridian and west of the 110th from entering the United States while carving out exceptions for students and certain classes of working professionals. The Immigration Act of 1924 then tightened these restrictions by banning immigration from Asia and setting strict quotas for immigration from other countries.

workings and transgressions of empire, a subset of these students emerged amongst the most outspoken and influential voices in a global struggle for Indian political autonomy. Their anticolonial sentiments and revolutionary political ideals fueled the emergence of the *Ghadar* (lit. "revolution" or "mutiny") Party, which formed in San Francisco in 1913 to champion revolutionary tactics in the ongoing campaign for Indian independence. Regarding the influence of the novel American social and political environment on these developments, Vinay Lal suggests, "It is not America which radicalized these students, though for some years it furnished a fertile ground for their activities."[14]

Despite discrimination, many Indian immigrants residing in the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century applied for naturalization, often identifying as "white," a racial identity they attributed to Indo-Aryan ancestry.[15] "Hindus" Kumar notes, "claimed an 'Aryan' descent in terms of the new race science that was becoming popular at the time."[16] Although naturalized citizenship remained the exclusive domain of "white" persons in the United States throughout the early twentieth century, the task of distinguishing between "Aryan" and "Caucasian" caused confusion as early as 1905-1906 when the first immigrants from colonial India applied for citizenship. Writing in 1910, poet and translator Herman Scheffauer (1878-1927) acknowledged a common "ancient Aryan stock" between "Hindus" and Americans, but observed that the latter "find it difficult to accept the

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[14] Lal, *The Other Indians*, 23
[15] Ibid., 31-38.
[16] Kumar, *One Man, Many Lives*, 28.

Hindoo as a brother of the blood. Between him and this dark, mystic race lies a pit almost as profound as that which he has dug between himself and the negro."[17]

In referring to a "dark, mystic race"—itself an invention of the colonial imaginary—Scheffauer notably failed to account for racial stratification within South Asian and South Asian American communities, which parallels the phenomenon of *colorism* in Black American communities. Both are examples of how power, privilege, and racial aspiration organize around idealized notions of whiteness. In the modern caste politics of the Indian subcontinent, for example, North Indian Brahminism tends to be associated with lighter skin, while historically subordinated castes, foremost Dalits, tend to be racialized as darker by comparison.[18] Within the racial taxonomy of the 1910 Census, however, all immigrants from colonial India were categorized as "Other," for they did not conform to any of the five existing categories: White, Negro, American Indian, Japanese, and Chinese. The following year, the U.S. Immigration Commission of 1911 ruled, "any native of India was, for immigration purposes, to be viewed as 'Hindu.'"[19] This decision marks an early-twentieth-century conflation of all South Asians as Hindus—regardless of their religious affiliation or place of origin—and the designation of "Hindu" as an ethno-racial, rather than a religious, category.[20] While all immigrants from colonial India

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[17] Herman Scheffauer, "The Tide of Turbans," *Forum* 43 (June 1910), 616.
[18] See Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 2001), especially 48-51, for a discussion of Afro-Dalit political solidarities and the racialization of Dalits relative to dominant caste groups.
[19] Lal, *The Other Indians*, 16.
[20] Here Kumar notes, "All these early Indians entered the American lexicon as 'Hindus/Hindoos,' the North American misnomer for anyone of South Asian descent" (18). The inaugural issue of *Young India*, published by the Indian Home Rule League of America in January 1918, elaborates: "In the

were officially classified as "Hindus," a clear demarcation of their otherness, some passed as "white" in official proceedings, including the census and naturalization courts. Certain immigrants—primarily Brahmins with claims to "Aryan" ancestry—were naturalized on account of their whiteness, while others—often Muslims and those hailing from low-caste backgrounds—suffered disproportionate discrimination and outright exclusion.

In 1923, the U.S. Supreme Court definitively settled lingering ambiguities stemming from the racial categorization and naturalization claims of immigrants from colonial India in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind.* Following the initial approval of Thind's application for citizenship on racial grounds, the Immigration Bureau brought an appeal. In deciding the case, the opinion of Justice George Sutherland proved unequivocal: for the purposes of citizenship, "white" referred exclusively to persons of European descent, not Indians with claims to Aryan ancestry. Sutherland elaborated, "It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable profound differences between them today."[21] With this landmark decision, issued roughly two decades after the onset of sustained immigration from colonial India, the legal status of

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United States, the word Hindu stands for all East Indians regardless of their religion. The word 'Indian' is used for American Indians. So in this magazine we shall frequently use the word 'Hindu' instead of 'Indian' for all the people of India." *Young India*. Published by the India Home Rule League of America, 1465 Broadway, New York City. Vol. I, no. 1. January 1918. South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). Accessed December 9, 2022.

[21] Quoted in Lal, *The Other Indians*, 37.

Indians seeking naturalization became clear: they were not white, and therefore they were not welcome. Harold Gould contends that the efforts of racist societies in Canada and the United States to exclude Indian immigrants on racial grounds galvanized political organizing within these communities. White racism reinforced a "hierarchically structured sense of 'difference' between Indians and whites," in effect limiting possibilities for Indian immigrants to assimilate and consequently prompting their efforts to organize in defense of their civil rights.[22]

Such efforts proved critical to Indian nationalist organizing. For students and revolutionaries in search of political refuge, the United States became a critical geopolitical crossroads an ocean away from both Europe and the Indian subcontinent. Increased immigration beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century precipitated a surge in anticolonial organizing within U.S. borders beginning in the second. Given America's own history of imperial subjugation and its successful revolution against the British, Indian freedom fighters and nationalists looked to the United States for sympathy and solidarity not extended to them under British rule. Yet early immigrants from colonial India confronted dissonances between the United States of their imagination and the realities they encountered. Instead of an egalitarian bastion of freedom and limitless opportunity, they found a rapidly industrializing nation with its own imperial ambitions and a fractious society plagued by racism and class antagonism. Although they garnered limited support for

[22] Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies*, 98-101.

their political causes, Indian immigrants confronted hostile social realities. Even so, early-twentieth-century American cities and universities provided a degree of relative freedom and mobility for immigrants from colonial India to gather, organize, and participate in global campaigns to promote Indian independence. Coalitions galvanized within an emergent "global underground," joining American metropoles with those of the Pacific world and Indian subcontinent, and the United States became a vital testing ground for the global projects of Indian nationalism and anticolonialism.[23]

Escalating political tensions, violent confrontations, and increased prosecution for "seditious" activity formed the backdrop for early-twentieth-century Indian nationalism as it circled the globe. Harold Gould identifies the convergence underlying the formation of the "India Lobby" in the United States as follows:

> Revolutionary doctrines inspired by the emerging radical movements in Europe (which included terrorism) were finding their way into India and entering the minds of the country's youth—especially in those regions, like Bengal, Maharashtra, and Punjab, which had long histories of political unrest….Increasing numbers of these politically restive students, as well as more mature revolutionaries, were finding ways to emigrate to America via England, France, and Japan, ostensibly in search of modern education and occupations but also in search of opportunities to pursue radical nationalism beyond the reach of the British imperial apparatus and its agents. Gradually these nascent activists and revolutionaries connected with the South Asian immigrant peasantry on the Pacific Coast who were struggling for economic survival against racial bigotry and denial of their civil rights.[24]

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[23] See Tim Harper, *Underground Asia*: *Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021).
[24] Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies,* 112-113.

By 1913, a critical mass of Indian students and activists had settled in the San Francisco Bay Area, prompting the formation of the Hindustani Association of the Pacific Coast and the publication of its journal, *Ghadar*, beginning that November.[25] Seasoned globe-trotting revolutionaries, such as Har Dayal (1884-1939), Bhai Parmanand (1876-1947), and Taraknath Das (1884-1958), formed the nucleus of the group, and *Ghadar* publications gained international circulation in multiple languages—Gurumukhi (Punjabi), Hindi, Urdu, and English among them—in its calls for armed confrontation in response to the aggressions of British imperialism.[26]

Dayal, the movement's figurehead, had arrived in California in 1911 and soon after began lecturing at Stanford, working his way into the "radical circles of the San Francisco Bay Area, including that of the writer and socialist Jack London."[27] The author of a short biography of Karl Marx, Dayal used Marxist principles to rally laborers across racial lines to embrace international socialism and anticolonialism. Along with Parmanand, an associate of Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928) and former preacher with the Arya Samaj, Dayal visited workers up and down the West Coast to persuade them with his oratory. Taraknath Das, a Bengali activist who had initially fled to Japan before finding his place within the religious networks of the Vedanta Society, published a bi-monthly journal called *Free Hindustan* in the United States and Canada beginning in 1908. Both Das and Dayal had drawn the attention of international policing efforts orchestrated by the British, and in March

[25] Ibid., 171-187.
[26] Lal, *The Other Indians*, 27-28.
[27] Harper, *Underground Asia*, 180.

1914 Dayal was arrested while delivering a lecture in San Francisco. Two days later, after being released on bail, he fled the country.

*Ghadar* ceased regular publication after four years and although West Coast Ghadarites remained politically active, the founding of the Indian Home Rule League of America and its journal, *Young India*, by Lala Lajpat Rai in 1917 constituted an ideological transition in Indian nationalist efforts in the United States. Although Rai associated with key members of the Ghadar Party, and spent time on the West Coast during 1915-1916, he declined to support openly their efforts to confront the British through armed revolution. An avid nationalist from the Punjab and leading figure of the Arya Samaj, Rai instead chose to deploy his own propaganda campaign to garner support for Indian home rule through intellectual persuasion and alliance-building. Rai chose New York as his base of operations, which put him closer to his publisher and gave him access to networks of fellow Indian travelers, including Rabindranath Tagore, whom he met in New York in 1916, as well as English Liberals and Socialists who came through the city to lecture.[28] The decision to set up operations in New York also put distance between Rai and the Ghadar Party, some members of which continued to attract international surveillance and eventually faced criminal proceedings for their involvement in the so-called "Hindu-German Conspiracy" of 1917.

[28] Rathore, "Indian Nationalist Agitation," 68.

In New York, the anticolonial projects of Indian nationalism found sympathetic allies among Irish nationalists, who shared their anti-British sentiments. Irish American newspapers published in the early 1930s reveal extensive support for Indian independence. Dating to the nineteenth century, New York had served as a locus of Irish political organizing as migrants fled famine in Ireland and formed tight-knit communities in the United States. Following decades of nationalist organizing, much of it linked to these U.S. efforts, the Irish Free State secured independence from Great Britain in 1922. Irish activists in New York saw familiar parallels in the Indian context and worked to raise funds and counter a sweeping British propaganda campaign, which, according to one Irish journalist, subtly informed the views of mainstream U.S. newspapers such as the *New York Times*.[29] An October 1930 entry in the *Fenian News* advertised a joint program of Irish and American dancing, sponsored by the Irish American Friends of India's Independence, featuring songs by both Irish and Indian artists.[30] The fundraiser sought to rally Irish Republicans to the Indian cause.

As their movements grew and evolved, Indian immigrants often assumed the role of de facto cultural ambassadors in their new communities. Political agendas became entangled with cultural campaigns to educate Americans about India and its history. These efforts hinged on nationalist histories of the subcontinent and the revival of a classical Sanskritic past, fragments of which were already circulating in

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[29] James J. Doyle, "India," *Fenian News* 2, no. 107, July 15, 1930.
[30] "Irish to Dance for India's Freedom," *Fenian News* 2, no. 107, October 15, 1930.

the United States through Orientalist scholarship prior to the onset of sustained immigration from colonial India. Nationalist reformulations of Indic history and culture proliferated among the English-educated Indian elite of a burgeoning middle class in colonial centers such as Calcutta (now Kolkata). The epicenter of the "Bengal Renaissance" and capital of the British Raj until 1911, Calcutta became a locus of Orientalist knowledge production and Indian cultural nationalism.

The so-called Bengal Renaissance, an intellectual synthesis sparked by the colonial encounter, concerned itself with the project of conceptualizing an indigenous modernity equal to, but distinct from, that of Europe. The movement emerged from the individual efforts of a small high-caste Hindu middle class in Bengal as well as select Europeans, including Sir William Jones (1746-1794), who founded the Asiatic Society in 1784. In *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance*, David Kopf identifies "unique social, cultural, psychological and intellectual changes" that resulted from sustained contact between the British, including both colonial officials and missionaries, and the Bengali intelligentsia.[31] Partha Chatterjee notes that this "nationalist elite," which he equates with the *bhadralok*, simultaneously occupied a position of subordination in its relation to the British and a position of relative dominance in Bengali society as a whole.[32] In navigating these conditions of "middleness," Bengali intellectuals "looked outward

[31] David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 1.
[32] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 35-36.

to European ideas through the English language, and inward to the Hindu tradition through Sanskrit and Bengali."[33] European ideas and colonial knowledge production thus contributed to social reform initiatives and cultural revivalism rooted in modern Bengali discourses on the Sanskritic past.

The beginnings of the Bengal Renaissance are difficult to pinpoint with accuracy, but Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), the prominent Bengali intellectual and reformer who founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, is commonly identified as the movement's foundational figure and has even been hailed as the "father of modern India."[34] Subrata Dasgupta contends that "in Roy's prolific writings and correspondence we find ideas and thoughts that clearly suggest the presence of both a cross-cultural mentality and a belief in the idea of universalism," two trademarks of Bengal Renaissance thought.[35] This project, which privileged a Sanskrit textual tradition in its formulation of Indic modernity, resulted in a proliferation of ideas and discourses that reached as far as the United States. English translations of Sanskrit texts, as well as the works of Roy and his Bengali contemporaries, found a receptive audience in the Unitarian and Transcendentalist intellectual circles of nineteenth-century New England, and constituted a key channel through which educated Americans first encountered Indic thought.[36]

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[33] Dermot Killingley, "Rammohun Roy and the Bengal Renaissance," in Torkel Brekke, ed., *The Oxford History of Hinduism: Modern Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 36.
[34] Subrata Dasgupta, *The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and Creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), 5.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies*, 71-75.

## Orientalism, American Orientalism, and Afro-Orientalism

In light of the intellectual interventions of Edward Said, *Orientalism* has come to reference both a discrete field of academic inquiry, rooted in the work of colonial-era European scholars, *and* the elaborate amalgam of acts through which the Euro-American world has constructed and maintained discursive and material dominance over remote lands and colonial claims. These projects intersect, of course, and the discursive production of "East" and "West" in order to justify colonial imperialism—a mapping of absolute racial and cultural difference onto geographically hazy notions of otherness—owes a debt to the Orientalist scholarship of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Following Said, however, the term Orientalism has taken on a life quite distinct from the historical, anthropological, and philological efforts of colonial scholarship itself.

Insofar as it indexes a shared set of ideas about "the East" unique to cultural life in the United States, American Orientalism has its roots in the nineteenth century. Vivek Bald observes:

> Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Orientalist ideas about a mysterious, mystical, and alluring East—ideas for the most part rooted in the art, literature, and material spoils of European colonial encounters—had traveled across the Atlantic, circulating among the United States' political, economic, and cultural elites.[37]

As general, romanticized notions of a nebulous "East" circulated, specific ideas about India began to solidify in American public consciousness by the middle of the

[37] Vivek Bald, "American Orientalism," *Dissent* 62 (Spring 2015), 28.

nineteenth century. This trend has been widely attributed to the American Transcendentalists, but its roots actually predate their literary and philosophical engagements with Indian thought. According to Harold Gould, the ship logs of Yankee clippers that sailed from American ports to India in the decades following American independence "chronicle over half a century of maritime commerce from which the earliest American perceptions of India emerged."[38] Susan Bean, who wrote a book on these maritime exchanges, argues, "Besides pioneering the Asia trade for the United States, Yankee mariners also became conduits for the beginnings of distinctively American perspectives on India."[39] In addition to providing first-person accounts, mariners procured religious texts and scholarly treatises, often the works of British Orientalist scholars, which they then brought to the United States. Gould claims the India trade of the early eighteenth century consequently opened an "intercultural communication network through which Indic thought flowed via the Yankee traders into the drawing rooms and on to the campuses of New England society."[40] This maritime network, linking New England to Calcutta at the height of the Bengal Renaissance, provided raw materials for the American Transcendentalists' mid-century engagements with Indian philosophy and literature.

Through the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), and Walt Whitman (1819-1892), an idealized version of India,

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[38] Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies,* 60.
[39] Susan Bean, *Yankee India: American Commercial and Cultural Encounters with India in the Age of Sail: 1784-1860* (Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum, 2001), 40.
[40] Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies*, 68.

devoid of first-hand encounters with life on the subcontinent, consolidated in American literary consciousness. For these Northeastern intellectuals, the Sanskrit translations of William Jones and other prominent Orientalist scholars provided a textual basis for distinctly American notions of Indian spirituality and its utility in modern America. According to Gould, "the Indic world had struck roots in the intellectual, philosophical and theological world of the American literati."[41] Major American universities began offering courses in Sanskrit, and Oriental Studies came into vogue at these elite institutions.[42] English translations of Indic texts resonated with the romanticism, universalism, and liberatory spiritual ideals of the Transcendentalists, who widely popularized a vision of India as a land of ancient wisdom and pure spirit. In the rapidly industrializing United States, perceived to be under threat from materialism and moral decline, Indian thought offered new prospects for spiritual liberation. Vijay Prashad identifies this confluence of spiritual utopianism and utilitarianism, characteristic of the Transcendentalists' engagements with India, as the distinguishing feature of American Orientalism:

> There is an "East" (static and unfree), and there is a "West" (dynamic and free). The European orientalists felt that the twain (of East and West) would never meet; the U.S. orientalists on the other hand, hoped for some transfer of values to benefit their new republic and prevent its decline into the morass of materialism.[43]

Although early American engagements with Indic thought appear to have been animated by specific spiritual and intellectual quests, they also effectively

[41] Ibid., 74.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk*, 13.

refracted the biases of British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance through a uniquely American lens. These projects by and large promoted an elite, Hindu-centric version of India, rooted in the revival of Vedic thought, at the expense of more pluralistic understandings of Indic history and culture—what Prashad calls "the multitudinous realities of India."[44] If the Transcendentalists found such realities "irrelevant" to their utopian visions, as Prashad claims, their ignorance, at least in part, reflected the omissions, blind spots, and biases of the Orientalist source materials they inherited. Spiritual utilitarianism—the belief that "the cultural wealth of India could transform the alienated American into a spiritual and yet material being"—may well constitute a distinguishing feature of American Orientalism, yet the mapping of the spiritual-material binary onto East and West, respectively, is fundamental to Orientalist discourse more broadly.[45]

Harold Gould has argued that these early American engagements "smoothed the transition" when "Bengali and other 'modernity seeking' Indian students and sages" arrived following the turn of the twentieth century.[46] This may have been true in certain elite intellectual contexts, where basic familiarity with Hindu texts and teachings predated the arrival of migrants steeped in the same or similar materials, but we should also note these nineteenth-century engagements perpetuated monolithic views of India, Indians, and "Indianness" that paved the way for

[44] Ibid., 19-20.
[45] Ibid., 18.
[46] Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies*, 70.

dissonances between American Orientalist expectations and Americans' lived encounters with Indian immigrants who did not satisfy those expectations.

The intellectual forays that molded a unique discourse of American Orientalism during its formative decades in the nineteenth century laid the foundation for the turn-of-the-century Orientalist economy. Vivek Bald argues that by the turn of the twentieth century, America's fascination with material goods from "the Orient" as markers of social status for "elite" and "striving elite" classes shifted away from China as "India and the Middle East took center stage."[47] Bald notes that "consumer Orientalism" extended to both elite and popular classes alike:

> If Orientalist ideas and knowledge-production had supported Britain's colonial project in India in the 18th and 19th centuries, these same ideas undergirded, at the turn of the 20th century, a pervasive economy in which fantasies of the "Eastern" or "Oriental" other were bought, sold, performed, and consumed by Americans of all backgrounds.[48]

This economy included everything from imported textiles, curries, and Vedanta (at the more elite end of the cultural spectrum) to performances of nautch dance and the inclusion of "Oriental" curiosities at circuses and vaudeville shows across the country.

Prashad identifies Barnum & Bailey, Christian missionaries, and traveling Indian lecturers—foremost Vikekananda—as the "agents" of a popularized Orientalism, who "created and circulated images of India among the bulk of U.S.

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[47] Bald, "Hands Across the Water," 86-88.
[48] Ibid., 88.

residents" in the years spanning the turn of the twentieth century.[49] Circuses and other exhibitions, which catered mostly to working class audiences, reinforced popular notions of India as a land of exotic curiosities, offering "authentic" representations of India, its people, and its culture filtered through the lens of colonial power. Timothy Mitchell contends that exhibitions and other such public spectacles characteristic of this period indexed power relations within the colonial world order. They reflected "the political certainty of a new age" of colonialism and "were not just reflections of this certainty," but actually "the means of its production."[50] Sharing this certainty, Christian missionaries, in their attempts to "civilize" and "modernize" India, perpetuated assumptions of Euro-American civilizational superiority. Missionary efforts produced tangible material benefits for certain colonial subjects, but often assumed these subjects were unable to fend for themselves and must be actively brought into the fold of Western modernity.

Swami Vikekananda, who travelled to the United States for the 1893 Chicago Exposition, arrived from India with a contrasting missionary agenda of his own. Echoing the Transcendentalists' belief that Indian spiritual teachings could provide an antidote to the rampant materialism of the industrial United States, Vivekananda advanced an agenda of "uniting the materialism of the West with the spiritualism of the East."[51] His efforts paved the way for the popularization of Vedanta and "yogic science" in the elite urban circles of Chicago and New York, inspiring a wave of

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[49] Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk,* 22.
[50] Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 7.
[51] Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk*, 36.

imitators and self-proclaimed gurus, many of them white Americans. The Ramakrishna message spread by Vivekananda also influenced the work of Dhan Gopal Mukerji (1890-1936), an Indian immigrant, author, and intellectual whose *Caste and Outcast* (1923) provided one of the first memoirs written by an Indian living in the United States.[52] While the widespread popularity of such teachings was a testament to their perceived utility, Vivekananda's vision of combining the "best of the East" with the "best of the West" rested upon the ontological split that constitutes the basis of the Orientalist critique. Avanthi Meduri identifies Vivekananda's centrality to an international discourse on Indian art and culture that gained traction in the 1890s and claims his message influenced subsequent travelers who journeyed to India in search of his spiritual promises and shaped the imaginations of Euro-American Oriental dancers including Anna Pavlova and Ruth St. Denis.[53]

The early twentieth century also gave rise to Afro-Orientalism, a "counter-discourse" that emerged in the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois (1863-1963). In the words of Bill Mullen, who coined the term, Afro-Orientalism "at times shares with its dominant namesake certain features but primarily constitutes an independent critical trajectory of thought on the practice and ideological weight of Orientalism in the Western world."[54] Like Orientalism (i.e., "its dominant namesake"), Afro-

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[52] Gordon H. Chang, "Introduction: The Life and Death of Dhan Gopal Mukerji," in Dhan Gopal Mukerji, *Caste and Outcast*, ed. Gordon H. Chang, Purnima Mankekar, and Akhil Gupta (1923; repr., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 16-24.

[53] Avanthi Meduri, "Nation, Woman, Representation: The Sutured History of the Devadasi and Her Dance," Ph.D. diss., (New York University, 1996), xix-xx.

[54] Bill V. Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xv.

Orientalism involves acts of political imagination, but the Afro-Orientalist imaginary aspires to resist, rather than reinscribe, colonial power structures rooted in racial essentialism. Whereas contemporaneous forms of American Orientalism hinged predominantly on white fantasies and stereotypes of India and "the East," Afro-Orientalism emerged from the Black American political imaginary.

From a Black American perspective, Afro-Orientalism recognizes Euro-American capitalist imperialism as a race-based phenomenon and envisions solidarities across continents and amongst oppressed populations. In 1903, Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk,* his landmark account of the social and historical conditions of Black Americans in which he introduced the term "double consciousness."[55] By 1910, when he first published an essay entitled "The Souls of White Folk," later included in *Darkwater* (1920), Du Bois came to situate the plight of Black America within what he identified as a global struggle over "the color line." Du Bois subsequently befriended esteemed Indian nationalist Lala Lajpat Rai, who lived in New York between 1914 and 1919. As his literary career progressed, Du Bois increasingly saw "the status of the American Negro as part and parcel of a larger problem of international economic domination" and championed the causes of Pan-Africanism and Afro-Asian anticolonial solidarity.[56] His novel *Dark Princess*

[55] In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois writes, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (2).
[56] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Black Letters on the Sign," in W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dark Princess: A Romance*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., rev. ed. (1928; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xv.

(1928) explores global solidarities through a fictionalized romance involving a Black American man and an activist Indian princess. Alain Locke, in his 1925 essay, "The New Negro," also recognized the internationalization of racial consciousness among Black Americans. Whether this cosmopolitan racial consciousness would bring cultural exchange and enlightenment, Locke posited, could only be decided "by the dominant races in an era of critical change."[57]

## Orientalism and Modernity

Definitions of modernity are notoriously slippery and prone to manipulation in producing "the break between tradition and modernity," and by extension "traditional and modern societies," that underlies the colonial discourse of Orientalism.[58] Edward Said argues that a "modernized" form of Orientalism, which took shape throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, aimed to "put ideas about the Orient in very close touch with modern realities."[59] In Said's view, as the discourse of Orientalism manufactured ontological difference between East and West, "a certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner's privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape to the great Asiatic mystery."[60] We need look no further than the histories of intercultural musical encounter to find myriad examples of Euro-

[57] Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke, rev. ed. (1925; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1997), 14-15.
[58] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 3.
[59] Said, *Orientalism*, 43-44.
[60] Ibid., 44.

American artists "discovering" music from around the world, learning from it, and reworking aspects of it into their own creative practice. Chapter 3, which focuses on the work of Henry Cowell at the New School for Social Research, discusses the interplay of musical modernism and musical Orientalism. Chapter 4 considers such intersections in the realm of dance. While modernism in music differs in its particularities from modernism in dance, both partake of broad trends characteristic of a modern episteme, including the celebration of innovation, progress, and individual expression within quests for transcendent, universal truths.

To further complicate matters in the Indian diasporic context, the fundamentally modern cultural projects of Indian nationalism asserted autonomy from imperialist regimes—Islamic and European—through the revival of Indic practices framed as ancient and timeless. The projection of essentialized pre-Islamic, pre-colonial conceptions of Indic culture and identity into both the past and the future rejects the mechanisms of imperial control yet internalizes, as its basis, the intellectual paradigms of European Orientalism in formulating and asserting an essential Indic identity. These processes of anticolonial contestation rooted in essentialized notions of culture and identity can be read as deliberate acts of *strategic essentialism*, to borrow a term from postcolonial feminist Gayatri Spivak.[61] Many of the immigrants from the subcontinent who settled in North America in the early

[61] For a concise overview of Spivak's usage and the epistemology of the term, see Raksha Pande, "Strategic Essentialism," in *The International Encyclopedia of Geography*, ed. Douglas Richardson, et al. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2017), 1-6, accessed April 17, 2023 via Wiley Online Library.

twentieth century imported such nationalist cultural formations, and as they negotiated diasporic identities and livelihoods in a new land, they also confronted cultural artifacts of European Orientalism, albeit refracted through a distinctly American lens.

In the Indian context, colonial discourse produced an "unchanging, ancient, passive identity" that is "frozen in time and cloaked in high mysticism."[62] Even as immigrant artists performed this identity for American publics, however, they participated in complex *transnational modernities* that challenged "the notions of borders produced by colonial Orientalist discourse."[63] Dance scholar Prarthana Purkayastha, who introduces this term, contends that moving bodies inherently "complicate any fixed understandings of identity—Indian, European, national or transnational."[64] Here Purkayastha refers to "moving bodies" in the context of Indian modern dance, but her observations extend to other bodies participating in other kinds of motion. Immigrant bodies, dancing or not, inherently challenge "notions of borders"—both national and cultural—and "fixed understandings of identity." This conception of fluid transnational modernities helps situate the activities of immigrant musicians and dancers, including Sarat Lahiri and his counterparts, within global conversations and negotiations rather than the more localized contexts of colonial India and the United States.

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[62] Prarthana Purkayastha, *Indian Modern Dance, Feminism and Transnationalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 18.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 16.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Musical Migrants, American Music, and Music in America

> *What is called the music of America is made up of a combination of influences from foreign countries together with musical practices which have through many generations become identified with this country...America has become the world's greatest musical land, but its people have not yet arrived at a knowledge of the musical styles, traditions and cliches which it harbors.*[1]
>
> *The Art of Music is to me a world-wide art, a single art expressed in many languages, each with its own vocabulary and logical grammatical forms. Of course no man can command them all, but he should be free to appropriate any that he desires. I want to live in the whole world of music.*[2]
>
> —Henry Cowell

At the turn of the twentieth century, U.S. metropoles were in the midst of a period of extraordinary social change. Between 1880 and 1920, roughly twenty-eight million foreign-born immigrants arrived in the United States, and by the early 1920s about half the U.S. population consisted of first- or second-generation immigrants.[3] The proportion was even higher in major cities such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. Surging migration fueled growing xenophobia yet produced unprecedented cultural heterogeneity and facilitated unexpected encounters. Sonic diversity became a defining feature of turn-of-the-century urban environments as

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[1] Henry Cowell, "Creative Music in America: Indigenous Music and the Melting Pot of influences from abroad" (undated), HCC, NYPL, Box 163, Folder 3.
[2] "Quotations from interviews with Henry Cowell," HCC, NYPL, Box 86, Folder 4.
[3] Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 304.

immigrants "brought with them not only their material possessions but also their musical cultures."[4] In San Francisco, migrants from China, Japan, and eventually South Asia increasingly joined the German, Italian, and other European immigrants who populated the city. Despite restrictive immigration legislation, beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, San Francisco became home to the largest Chinese community in the nation by 1900. Among the musical forms brought to "the Paris of the West," Chinese opera flourished in the years preceding the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.[5]

Scholars have long identified the turn-of-the-century San Francisco Bay Area soundscape as a formative element in the upbringing of American composer Henry Cowell (1897-1965). Born in Menlo Park, CA in March 1897, Cowell spent his early years living among migrant communities in the Bay Area. His peers included children from Japan, China, Tahiti, and the Philippines who reportedly taught him songs from their home countries. Cowell came to regard these songs as the musical counterparts of the Ozark Mountain tunes sung by his mother, a midwestern transplant, and the Irish airs sung by his father, a first-generation Irish immigrant.[6] Michael Hicks identifies the California bohemianism of Harry and Clara, Cowell's parents, and their unique Bay Area milieu as a defining feature of their son's musical and intellectual journey.[7] Hicks defines this bohemianism as "an eclectic and often

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[4] Leta Miller, *Music and Politics in San Francisco: From the 1906 Quake to the Second World War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 1.
[5] Miller, *Music and Politics in San Francisco*, 3-4.
[6] Joel Sachs, *Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25.
[7] Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1-30.

elitist subculture that tried to mix leftist politics, mysticism, scientific experimentation, and multiculturalism," and contends, "one cannot begin to understand Henry Cowell's achievements unless one is prepared to savor this cultural stew."[8]

Cowell biographer Joel Sachs informs us that during Henry's childhood, the family was too poor to attend ticketed concerts of European classical music and instead frequented free concerts of various "Oriental" musics, including Chinese opera.[9] Sachs also notes, "the many political refugees in San Francisco included Indian musical virtuosi who sometimes let Henry listen from a corner of their room."[10] In Sachs's view, Cowell consequently came to respect music from around the world and never adopted prevailing notions of European aesthetic superiority.[11] Cowell himself came to recognize the exceptional nature of this eclectic soundscape, stating "it has taken me years to realize how vastly different the sound-world of my childhood in California was from that of any other composer I can think of."[12]

This early eclecticism normalized a plurality of musical experiences and international influences for Cowell as he pursued professional work as a composer and educator. Sidney Robertson Cowell (1903-1995), an accomplished

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[8] Ibid., 3.
[9] In Cowell's usage, the term "Oriental" referenced cultivated art music traditions from China, India, Indonesia, Japan, and parts of the Middle East. Peter Schimpf notes, "The evolutionary relationship between 'Oriental music' and European art music, according to Cowell's view, is vague. At times he suggests that early European music evolved partially from Asian art music, while at other times he recognizes the music of India and Indonesia, for instance, as possessing more advanced musical traits in areas such as rhythm and melody" (Schimpf, "A Transcultural Student," 11).
[10] Sachs, *A Man Made of Music*, 25.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Silver, "Henry Cowell and Alan Hovhaness," 56.

ethnomusicologist and song collector who married Cowell in 1941, recalled that Cowell began presenting musics of other cultures at “Miss Wilson’s settlement house” in the “Oriental district” of San Francisco around 1920.[13] The first of these concerts to be sponsored and introduced by Cowell featured Kitaro Nyohyo Tamada, a Japanese *shakuhachi* player whom Cowell had encountered running a vegetable stand by the side of the highway near Mountain View. According to Robertson Cowell, this successful first concert encouraged Cowell to present other programs featuring immigrant musicians, at least one of which showcased Bengali music from North India. At the time, she recalls, there was “a colony of Indians” who had settled in San Francisco as political exiles.[14] The programs Cowell presented in San Francisco anticipated his activities in New York, where he befriended Sarat Lahiri and other immigrant musicians during his tenure at the New School for Social Research.

Cowell is often remembered as a pioneering American “ultramodernist.” Particularly in his early career, he rubbed against the grain of European art music convention and played a foundational role in formulating and nurturing an ethos of American experimentalism. For all his autodidactic tendencies, Cowell also benefited from the guidance of Charles Seeger (1886-1979), who served as head of

[13] Robertson Cowell, Tape A-18, 13-14, HCC, NYPL, Box 87, Folder 41. George Boziwick notes that until the Cowell Collection opened to the public in 2000, Sidney Robertson Cowell controlled all access to the materials and “guided and guarded” the propagation of Cowell’s image following his death in 1965. See Boziwick, “Henry Cowell at the New York Public Library,” 55. Considering this observation, the role of Robertson Cowell’s first-person recollections in actively shaping Cowell’s legacy warrants scrutiny. Her recollections, however, provide rare insight into otherwise undocumented aspects of Cowell’s daily life and historical circumstances.
[14] Ibid.

the music department at the University of California, Berkeley, where Cowell attended between 1914 and 1916. Seeger claimed to have supervised Cowell's studies until 1919, but Sachs observes that after 1917 they interacted more as colleagues and friends.[15] Seeger came to regard Cowell as his first truly brilliant student and instilled in him the conviction that music must be understood through an intellectual and scientific lens.[16] After excelling in his composition classes, and honing avant-garde methods, including Seeger's *dissonant counterpoint* (which inverts contrapuntal conventions to prioritize dissonant intervals), Cowell developed his own compositional techniques and went on to educate students at major institutions on both coasts of the United States. Cowell was by no means the first American avant-garde composer, but musicologist Charles Hamm has nonetheless called him "the 'godfather' of the avant-garde." Hicks explains:

> Cowell deserves his reputation as an innovator, and indeed as the initiator of the extraordinary regard in which modern musical innovation is now held. Cowell, perhaps more than any other man in the twentieth century, helped shift the criteria for a composer's worth from the elegance of his achievements to the novelty of his techniques.[17]

Many of Cowell's students—including John Cage (1912-1992), Lou Harrison (1917-2003), Johanna Beyer (1888-1944), and George Gershwin (1898-1937)— would also leave indelible marks on twentieth-century American music.[18]

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[15] Sachs, *A Man Made of Music*, 60.
[16] Sally Bick, "In the Tradition of Dissent: Music at the New School for Social Research, 1926-33," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 1 (Spring 2013), 154-165.
[17] Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*, 2. For the original Charles Hamm quotation, see Hamm, *Music in the New World*, 594.
[18] Cowell's tutelage of Gershwin is perhaps lesser known than the other names on this list. Joel Sachs, however, identifies Gershwin as an "important protégé" among Cowell's composition students in the

Cowell traversed diverse musical realms. He studied, taught, and performed globally over the course of decades and has even been credited with anticipating musical trends of the twenty-first century. His determination in challenging the hegemonic standards of European art music and his persistence in devising new compositional techniques have been widely celebrated, but the colonial overtones of his, and subsequent, avant-garde engagements with musics from around the world have also drawn scrutiny. These critiques typically identify the tendency of American avant-garde composers to subsume global practices within their individual creative projects. John Corbett, for instance, contends that by referring to "Oriental" musics in a generalized way, Cowell retained "positional superiority" that enabled him to appropriate at will in order to "dislocate conventional European harmony and rhythm."[19] With regard to the influence of "Eastern" forms, Cowell himself noted that he had "adopted elements from all of these musics" in order to integrate them into an "otherwise Western style."[20]

While Cowell is a central character in this chapter, my primary focuses here are his relationships with migrant musicians and the involvement of these often unnamed, unrecognized figures during a key period in the development of American music. Discourse on Euro-American musical modernism has tended to celebrate the

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1920s and discusses the counterpoint lessons Cowell gave Gershwin in New York beginning around 1927 (Sachs, *A Man Made of Music*, 158-159).

[19] John Corbett, "Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others," in *Western Music and Its Others*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 168.

[20] Henry Cowell, "East-West Music Encounter: The Influence of Eastern on Western Music," 4, HCC, NYPL, Box 149, Folder 10.

cult of the individual (white) genius composer. To counter such narratives, this chapter situates Cowell's relationships with musical migrants in both San Francisco and New York as key factors in his artistic development, and by extension, the development of American musical experimentalism. By focusing on Cowell's engagements with immigrant musicians and the sonic environments they shared, I foreground the unmarked place of immigrant communities—including those whose musical practices were not easily absorbed into prevailing notions of folk and popular culture—in the history of American music.

## New York in the 1930s: Henry Cowell Comes to the New School

In addition to the influx of foreign-born immigrants, the Great Migration (an exodus of Black migrants from the agrarian South) also drastically reshaped the demographics of major northern cities beginning around 1910. In New York, the population doubled between 1910 and 1930 from the confluence of immigration and internal migration. Harlem, originally envisioned as an upper-class white enclave, became a mecca of Black culture in the 1920s and attracted musicians, artists, and intellectuals "eager to escape their hometown."[21] New York became, in the words of author F. Scott Fitzgerald, a "capital of culture," and Harlem became a locus of Black creative energy and cultural revival that spawned the Harlem Renaissance, or New Negro Movement.[22] Writing in 1925, Alain Locke dubbed Harlem "the

[21] Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 16.
[22] Paul Anderson writes, "Alain Locke's introduction to *The New Negro* (1925) recognized the ongoing black migration to 'northern city centers' as a turning point in American history…As editor

laboratory of a great race-welding."[23] As migrants from Africa, the West Indies, and the American South encountered one another in Harlem (along with other immigrant groups, including Bengali Muslims), a fusing of sentiment and experience began to shape a collective consciousness.

Prior to the Harlem Renaissance, many white Americans had only encountered Black creative practices refracted through fictional literature and the caricatures of blackface minstrelsy. Eric Lott identifies "a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling" in the minstrelsy, which thrived as the most popular form of American entertainment in the antebellum decades.[24] While minstrelsy had declined in popularity by the turn of the century, its representations lingered in popular culture. Paul Anderson notes the subsequent turn from "false and externally enforced images of the 'Old Negro' to a 'New Negro' agenda of unlimited opportunity.[25] As "cultural inheritances from the past merged with modernist dreams for a transformed future," Alain Locke and other Harlem Renaissance intellectuals "explored what it meant to be an American Negro reaching for 'the more democratic chance' of individual and collective self-definition."[26] In assessing the historical and

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of the landmark *The New Negro* anthology, Locke optimistically set his sights on a 'new vision of opportunity' appropriate to his sense of the New Negro's demands for equal rights, cultural recognition, and uninhibited social mobility." Paul A. Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 1.

[23] Locke, *The New Negro*, 6-7.

[24] Lott's study on the early minstrelsy documents "the dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterfeit and currency, a pattern at times amounting to no more than the two faces of racism, at others gesturing toward a specific kind of political or sexual danger." Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993), 18.

[25] Anderson, *Deep River*, 2.

[26] Ibid.

cultural significance of 1920s New York, Ann Douglas observes a process of "double empowerment" whereby America at large "was separating itself culturally from England and Europe" while Black America "was recovering its own heritage from the dominant white culture."[27]

The Black artistry and innovation of the Harlem Renaissance proved central to new forms of American music, including jazz, that proliferated via mass media industries based in New York, such as radio, recording, and publishing. Although jazz had roots elsewhere (New Orleans, the West Indies, and Chicago), it was not until Black musicians "converged in New York and blended together" in the early and mid-1920s that it emerged as a mass culture phenomenon. Although Black music and interracial collaborations in New York contributed to conceptions of a more egalitarian popular culture, and to the culture of modern America in general, racist sentiments towards Black Americans and immigrants hindered the development of a truly egalitarian multiracial society.[28] The term *jazz* itself came to conjure a range of cultural meanings and at times was used to racialize and devalue creative vernacular music practices rooted in Black American experience.[29] Nonetheless, these inherently syncretic, expansive musical practices launched jazz to global prominence in the 1920s. In 1936, Alain Locke claimed, "Both detractors and enthusiasts must admit the power and widespread influence of jazz. It is now part Negro, part

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[27] Douglas, *Terrible Honesty,* 5.
[28] Ibid., 6-9.
[29] For more on the complex history of jazz discourse, see Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

American, part modern; a whole period of modern civilization may ultimately be best known and understood as "The Jazz Age."[30]

When Henry Cowell assumed a formal teaching post at the New School for Social Research in 1931, the United States had entered the Great Depression and the "Roaring Twenties" had drawn to a close, but the ascendency of jazz as the quintessential modern American music continued. Cowell appears to have dedicated minimal attention to jazz relative to the many other American and global forms he studied and promoted. Given the prevalence of jazz in New York during Cowell's early tenure at the New School, his relative disinterest stands out as an anomaly. This neglect may have been partially the byproduct of racial factors, as I discuss later in this chapter, but I contend it ultimately had more to do with the dissonances between the perceived commercialism of jazz and the specific goals and projects Cowell espoused as an avant-garde composer and educator. To a considerable extent, these projects resonated with the educational mission and political alignment of the New School itself.

The New School, which formed amid a controversy over free speech at Columbia University in 1919, had developed a reputation for its subversive and radical intellectual environment by the time Cowell arrived in 1931.[31] Primarily a center for adult education, the institution aimed to foster lifelong intellectual pursuits and stimulate social change. Under President Alvin Johnson, it embraced ideological

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[30] Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington D.C.: The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 90.
[31] Bick, "In the Tradition of Dissent," 129-130.

heterodoxies, including a commitment to modern art, and eventually became a bastion of communist political activity.[32] The New School first introduced music courses in 1926 to augment its initial social sciences, philosophy, and economics curriculum. In 1931, it moved to 66 West 12th Street and expanded its musical offerings to include additional courses and regular concerts in its 650-person auditorium. Johnson needed someone to oversee musical activities at the new location and chose Cowell over Aaron Copland (1900-1990), an American composer whose vision for American music hinged more explicitly on European aesthetics—a product of Copland's training under Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979) in Paris. By contrast, Cowell's lack of formal education in European art music and renegade impulses appealed to Johnson, who believed the New School's emphasis on innovation over tradition should extend to its arts curriculum as well.

Cowell, who continued to teach in the Bay Area for part of the year, emphasized two educational priorities upon assuming his post in New York. First, the New School would promote contemporary American music by showcasing the work of living American composers and train aspiring composers in contemporary avant-garde techniques. Second, offerings in comparative musicology would introduce students and audiences to a range of musical practices from around the world. Despite their superficial differences, these priorities proved intimately related, as avant-garde composers were inclined to search for untapped sources of inspiration

[32] Ibid., 133-141.

and bypass the tired pathways of European classicism. Sally Bick, author of an article on music at the New School during this period, claims the dual agenda of promoting the contemporary American avant-garde alongside global musics fulfilled Cowell's original proposal to Johnson that the New School should foster musical activities not supported elsewhere while also according with the overall progressive and communal aims of the institution.[33] In his dissertation on Cowell's globalist pursuits, Peter Schimpf notes, "the New School provided a forum to explore musical topics that were both politically progressive and uncommon in the classroom."[34]

Under Cowell, musical offerings at the New School expanded to reflect these synergistic projects. The Winter 1931 program for a "Series of Nine Concerts" lists Sri Ragini (Ragini Devi) presenting "East Indian music" in a concert that also featured music from China and Japan (with the possible addition of music from Java and Siam).[35] On February 7, the Chamber Orchestra of Boston, conducted by Nicolas Slonimsky, performed a program that included works by Americans Carl Ruggles (1876-1971), Charles Ives (1874-1954), and Cowell, along with Mozart's *Musical Joke*, Schoenberg's *Kammersinfonie*, and *Cuban Dances* by Cuban composer Alejandro Caturla (1906-1940). The next concert in the series featured Leon Theremin demonstrating his electronic musical inventions.

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[33] Ibid., 156.
[34] Peter J. Schimpf, "A Transcultural Student, Teacher, and Composer: Henry Cowell and the Music of the World's Peoples," Ph.D. diss., (Indiana University, 2006), 74.
[35] "The New School for Social Research: Winter Term 1931," HCC, NYPL, Box 66, Folder 21. By January 20, 1931, the date scheduled for the concert, however, Ragini Devi had eloped to India with her lover, the nationalist poet and musician Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, and did not perform.

In January 1932, Cowell offered two new courses: a survey of contemporary music entitled "Appreciation of Modern Music" and "Comparison of the Musical Systems of the World," his first attempt to teach comparative musicology and the first course of its kind in the United States.[36] With the assistance of Charles Seeger, the friend and mentor Cowell had recruited to teach at the New School, Cowell presented "native music from many countries which have distinctive musical systems."[37] The course began shortly after Cowell returned from his first trip to Berlin to study comparative musicology with Erich Von Hornbostel (1877-1935) at the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv—the nerve center of the discipline at the time.[38] In Berlin, Cowell accessed a unique collection of wax cylinder recordings of musics from around the world, 120 of which he had copied with $100 procured from Alvin Johnson to purchase a demonstration collection for the New School.

These first ventures into comparative musicology at the New School preceded the emergence of the Society for Ethnomusicology by over two decades, yet Cowell and Seeger's pioneering efforts have been widely overlooked in disciplinary histories of ethnomusicology in the United States. One possible explanation involves the critiques leveled against comparative musicology as early

[36] Schimpf, "A Transcultural Student, Teacher, and Composer, 77.
[37] "Comparison of the Musical Systems of the World," *New School for Social Research, Inc.* (Fall 1931), HCC, NYPL, Box 166.
[38] In 1931-32, Cowell travelled to Berlin to study comparative musicology with the support of a Guggenheim Fellowship. The Guggenheim Foundation allowed him to make two separate trips to accommodate his teaching schedule at the New School. The first ran October-December 1931 and the second September-December 1932. While in Berlin, Cowell also trained with specialists in multiple non-European styles, including Balinese and Javanese gamelan and South Indian (Carnatic) music (Bick, "In the Tradition of Dissent," 166-170).

ethnomusicologists took issue with its Eurocentric assumptions and methodologies. These included, on the one hand, the tendency of “armchair musicologists” in Berlin to study recordings extracted from far-off lands without any direct engagement with the musical communities from which the recordings originated. On the other hand, evolutionary models regarded certain musics as “primitive” and measured sophistication by European aesthetic standards, which were assumed to be the natural culmination of musical development. Some comparative musicologists conducted field work, including Hornbostel himself. Yet at the time, the limited conception of fieldwork in comparative musicology involved collecting data for laboratory analysis and use in universal schemes, such as tracing the evolutionary origins of music or mapping global culture regions.[39] This type of approach to field recording and analysis also informed the *cantometrics* project of Alan Lomax (1915-2002), an ethnomusicologist and song collector known for his extensive documentation of folk music practices in the United States and United Kingdom.

From the beginning, nomenclature for global musics challenged Cowell, much as it continues to challenge present-day scholars and educators. For the most part, Cowell’s terminology fit within the broader evolutionary framework espoused by Hornbostel and the Berlin school.[40] Cowell relied primarily on terms such as “non-European” and “extra-European” to reference musical practices originating

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[39] Timothy J. Cooley and Gregory Barz, “Casting Shadows: Fieldwork is Dead! Long Live Fieldwork!,” in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.
[40]Schimpf, “A Transcultural Student,” 7-15.

outside the European art music canon and used terms such as “folk” and “primitive” to mark non-elite practices in his courses and writings. This terminology, whether consciously or not, perpetuated elite Eurocentric paradigms, effectively homogenizing and “Othering” a vast array of musical practices.[41] Cowell eventually settled on the name “Music of the World’s Peoples” for his comparative musicology courses, which stuck through the remainder of his career.[42]

Although Cowell inherited certain conceptual and taxonomic biases from Berlin, he moved well beyond the standards of “armchair” musicology in his first-person engagements with immigrant musicians in San Francisco and New York. In addition to utilizing his set of demonstration recordings at the New School, he frequently arranged for live demonstrations by “native players on their own instruments.”[43] According to Bick, Cowell “often featured local immigrant musicians who performed music from their representative communities.”[44] The Fall 1931 New School catalogue suggests that ten of the twelve sessions in Cowell and Seeger’s initial comparative musicology course featured live demonstrations of the topics

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[41] The term *world music* would later gain traction as a marketing catchall for diverse musical practices from around the globe. The term continues to be used by the music industry and university music departments. For more on the discourse and commodification of “world music,” see Steven Feld, “From Schizophonia to Schismogenesis: On the Discourse and Commodification Practices of ‘World Music’ and ‘World Beat,’” in Charles Keil and Steven Feld, *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 257-289.
[42] Whether or not it was Cowell’s explicit intention, this name signals a decentered, pluralistic approach. In course offering directories today, university music departments will sometimes change the singular “world music,” which appears monolithic, to “world musics,” or “global musics,” which suggest plurality.
[43] “Comparison of the Musical Systems of the World,” *New School for Social Research, Inc.* (Fall 1931), HCC, NYPL, Box 166.
[44] Bick, “In the Tradition of Dissent,” 170.

under consideration. The planned topics listed in the course directory include music from Mexico, the Balkans, Ireland, Scotland, Arabia, Russia, East India, China, Japan, Cuba, Hebrew music, and the music of American Indians. Only one session—on the music of Java, Bali, and "other Oriental countries"—appears to have relied exclusively on phonograph recordings.

The courses devised by Cowell and Seeger at the New School reflected the changing social fabric of the city and signaled a shifting paradigm in cross-cultural musical education in the United States. In the early 1930s, both men were among the founding members of the New York Musicological Society (a predecessor of the American Musicological Society) and the short-lived American Society for Comparative Musicology.[45] Cowell had returned from Berlin with state-of-the-art training in comparative musicology and a unique collection of demonstration recordings. Seeger, by contrast, provided anthropological frameworks for considering the embeddedness of music in society. The two learned from one another, and reciprocal influence informed their collaborative endeavors. Drawing on the prevailing frameworks of comparative musicology and anthropology, their courses asked new types of questions and anticipated methods that would later become central to ethnomusicological inquiry.

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[45] With regard to the New York Musicological Society, in particular, Judith Tick documents the exclusion of women from the group, foremost Seeger's own wife, Ruth Crawford Seeger. Tick writes, "For Seeger it was out of the question that Crawford be invited to join, or even be allowed in the room when the second meeting took place on February 22, 1930….Crucial to Seeger's ambitions was that the society 'not be confused with a Women's Club,' 'because only women's clubs talked about music in the United States at that time, and we wanted to make it perfectly clear that we were men, and that we had to talk about music and women weren't in on it.'" Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 121-122.

Cowell's early encounters with immigrant communities in the Bay Area had prepared him to experiment with ethnographic methodologies in the American context. Expanding upon the model he had devised on the West Coast, Cowell actively recruited musicians from around New York for concerts and lecture-demonstrations. According to Robertson Cowell, he made a habit of scouring immigrant neighborhoods for skilled musicians, whom he often found performing at ethnic restaurants.[46] Cowell may not have considered this ethnographic methodology radical—he may not have considered it an ethnographic methodology at all—but by walking the streets of New York and finding foreign-born musicians where they lived, ate, shopped, and performed, he departed from the "armchair" methods of the Berlin school and participated in the unique social and sonic environments of 1930s New York. Like the immigrants he met, Cowell was a newcomer to the city. Although these newcomers forged communities within their ethnic enclaves, they all shared, in some sense, what Michel de Certeau identifies as "the immense social experience of lacking a place" that moving about the city amplified.[47] One can picture Cowell involved in the quotidian acts of walking, listening, and conversing—immersing himself in the sensorium of the cityscape—in order to find musicians and unfamiliar musics. By bringing immigrant musicians out of their enclaves to perform and teach at the New School, Cowell became an agent of cultural syncretism.

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[46] Robertson Cowell, Tape B-31, 16-17, HCC, NYPL, Box 87, Folder 34.
[47] Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 103.

**Henry Cowell and Sarat Lahiri**

Details of the initial Cowell-Lahiri encounter, which Brian Silver dates to 1928, remain unclear. The date given precedes both Cowell's arrival at the New School and Lahiri's ventures as a Midtown restaurateur. Although Lahiri had not yet opened his Bengal Tiger restaurant and Cowell had not assumed his academic position in New York, Cowell may simply have met Lahiri while walking the city. Cowell's connections with Indian political exiles in San Francisco provide another plausible line of introduction. Robertson Cowell recalled Henry's recruitment of Indian musicians in New York as follows:

> He also found a little nest of Indian political refugees among whom were some fine musicians in San Francisco. They sent him to some other Indian musicians in New York. Eventually came along his New School courses, and he began presenting these people either in individual concerts or a concert devoted to one culture or as part of his course. Eventually it settled into what he called "Music of the World's Peoples."[48]

We cannot be certain these New York musicians included Lahiri, but the unnamed San Francisco musicians—identified by Robertson Cowell as part of a broader community of political refugees—may have introduced Cowell to Lahiri, a Bengali political refugee and an established performer in New York.

Roughly three years elapsed between Cowell and Lahiri's initial encounter in New York and Lahiri's first appearance at the New School. On November 10, 1931, while Cowell was in Berlin, Sarat Lahiri and Lota presented a recital of "East Indian

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[48] Robertson Cowell, Tape B-30, 22.

music on native instruments" and "nautch dances" in the New School auditorium. The duo later returned to Cowell and Seeger's class on February 15, 1932. John Martin of the *New York Times* announced the November concert in his column, "The Dance," noting, "Lota will present dances which are characteristic of India, Arabia, Algeria and Polynesia. Mr. Lahiri will explain the dances and the rhythms."[49] The day after the performance, the *New York Herald Tribune* recounted, "the music offered consisted largely of folk songs and ragas…an audience of good size attended."[50] A month later, Lahiri gave a presentation on Indian rhythm for the New York Musicological Society at Cowell's invitation.[51]

Beginning with these appearances, Sarat Lahiri and Lota became mainstays of the New School's concert series and comparative musicology courses throughout the early 1930s. Schimpf identifies Lahiri as "one of Cowell's favorite performers, whom he brought into the New School for concerts on many occasions throughout his career."[52] Lahiri and Lota also captured the attention of Alvin Johnson, the New School's president. Following one performance, Johnson wrote to Lahiri:

> I will not dwell upon my delight in the sincerity and beauty of your art, which I appreciate like everyone else. What has most impressed me is its educational value. You conveyed to your audience a sense of the life and artistic interests of the Orient, more effectively than could have been conveyed through any other medium I know. The time will come, I am sure, when every serious educational institution will give a warm welcome to you.[53]

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[49] John Martin, "The Dance: An Era of Great Growth," *New York Times*, November 8, 1931.
[50] "Lahiris Give Oriental Program," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 11, 1931.
[51] Bick, "In the Tradition of Dissent," 178.
[52] Schimpf, "A Transcultural Student," 80.
[53] "Lota and Sarat Lahiri: Authentic Presentation of the Ancient Music of India" (1933), HCC, NYPL, Box 162, Folder 14.

In addition to whatever aesthetic and emotional resonances may have moved Sarat Lahiri and Lota's audiences at the New School, Lahiri's ability to introduce the programs, explain the rhythmic, melodic, and theoretical basis of the music and dances, and translate poems and song texts in "lucid and not too complicated English," as one New York journalist noted, undoubtedly helped audiences derive educational value from the recitals.[54] Robertson Cowell confirms:

> He spoke very good English, and Henry was able to go over with him a good deal about the theory of Indian music and learned a great deal of folklore about it, such as that it is eight thousand years old and that there are fifty thousand ragas defined in the dictionaries. I think both those numbers are far too large, but in essence these facts were true except you had to trim them down.[55]

Hyperbole aside, Lahiri's command of formal English as a lecturer and scholar was, if not a testament to his degree of Americanization over the previous decade, certainly a byproduct of his upper-class upbringing in Calcutta. Even if contemporaneous Indian musicians in New York possessed comparable skills, as seems to be the case, Lahiri's elite educational background, lucid spoken and written English, and high degree of racial ambiguity appear to have given him unique access to privileged cultural spaces and contributed to his status as New York's premiere "virtuoso" of Hindustani music.

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[54] Ibid.
[55] Sidney Robertson Cowell, Tape B-30, 25, HCC, NYPL, Box 87, Folder 33.

With regard to the broader context of "ethnic" concerts at the New School, Sidney Robertson Cowell notes that extant archival sources account for only a fraction of the musical programming during those early years:

> Nobody in the New School seems to have kept copies of the programs of performances at the New School and Henry's file on this seems to be very spotty. I remember a number of concerts or lectures or whatever that I attended for which there don't seem to be any programs. I'm sure they didn't print programs every time for that matter. So, how anybody is going to get this record straight, I don't know, but I think it is important to know *something* [emphasis in original] more about it because these were, in many cases, really the first concerts of what is now casually referred to as ethnic music—the first concerts open to the public given in New York. Indians would come and play for a small group of other Indian friends in somebody's house, but there was no public concert of fine Indian performers such as Henry arranged for the Bengali virtuoso Lahiri, who was his first teacher of Indian music.[56]

In addition to suggesting that many programs from that period went altogether undocumented, which she deems a great loss considering their historical significance, Robertson Cowell asserts that prior to Lahiri's appearances at the New School, Indians in New York would gather for intimate performances in private residences (*mehfils* in the Hindustani context). On the one hand, these seemingly routine occurrences reflect the embeddedness of immigrant musicians and their cultural practices in New York at the time; on the other hand, the quotidian nature of these small gatherings—be they living-room performances or ambient music at a restaurant—speaks to why these musical practices are barely legible in the archive.

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[56] Robertson Cowell, Tape 41-A, 11, HCC, NYPL, Box 87, Folder 45. This excerpt reflects my most faithful attempt to transcribe the original, which includes a number of handwritten edits and addendums.

Even at the New School, where programs were often printed and retained, Robertson Cowell alerts us that a significant percentage of musical events went undocumented during the period in question.

We can infer from Robertson Cowell's observations that a critical mass of Indian musicians and Indian music enthusiasts had coalesced in New York prior to Cowell's tenure at the New School. It seems Henry Cowell was aware of, if not involved in, these small gatherings of Indian musicians and their friends. Under Cowell's direction, the New School subsequently brought these types of events into the public sphere, enabling Indian artists to perform for large, progressive audiences while also luring Indian music enthusiasts to the New School. Lahiri, it seems, provided Cowell with a link to the Indian musical community in New York while Cowell provided Lahiri with a new platform to promote his music. An undated letter from Lahiri to Cowell indicates that Lahiri actively sold tickets for his performances at the New School auditorium and hints at competition and factional tensions between groups of immigrant musicians living in the city.[57]

> *342 West 58th*
> *Thursday-*
>
> *Dear Henry-*
> *Here is the program. I'm hoping you may not be able to secure the Chinese artists. To tell you the truth, a great many friends of ours will buy seats for the recital, if they know it is an evening of only Hindu music.*
> *As soon as you can have the programs printed, be sure to send me quite a few, so that I can also sell as many seats as possible.*

[57] Letter from Sarat Lahiri to Henry Cowell, undated, HCC, NYPL, Box 11, Folder 10.

*Thanking you very much,*

*Sincerely,*

*Sarat Lahiri*

We have no way of knowing who Lahiri's "great many friends" were, but they likely included Indians living in New York who otherwise would not have attended events at the New School. Who, other than a prospective Indian audience, would buy tickets only if they could be assured the evening would consist exclusively of Indian music? It is possible Lahiri articulates his hope that Cowell will not secure the Chinese artists for selfish reasons, but it appears the inclusion of Chinese music on the program would have hindered his ability to promote the concert among the Indian expat community. Lahiri no doubt benefited from the publicity associated with his appearances at the New School, but his concerts also seem to have drawn international audiences and lent prestige to the young venue. We are fortunate to have records of some of these performances, but as Robertson Cowell notes, the full scope of concert programming at the New School in those formative years may never be known.

**Multiculturalism and American Music**

As we have seen, Henry Cowell's conception of American music as a pluralistic combination of foreign influences differentiated him from many of his contemporaries and helped him secure his position at the New School for Social

Research. Cowell did not take issue with European art music so much as he intuitively situated American music at the intersections of a more expansive set of global practices imported to North America by foreign-born immigrants. In a proposal for a course entitled "America, Musical Melting Pot," Cowell recognized that an array of foreign influences had "become potent factors in building up American music."[58] His propensity to look beyond European conventions and embrace global musical diversity is commendable, but the "melting pot" metaphor also raises questions regarding assimilation, hybridity, and cultural nationalism.

Vijay Prashad contends that the general attitude towards difference in the United States "has been that it must be melted and remolded into the identity of the mythic universal American." Here Prashad draws attention to the assimilationist pressures that confront U.S. immigrants and the "melting pot" ideals of American cultural nationalism. Prashad follows Angela Davis in arguing that multiculturalism, as a strategy for managing difference, can easily become a way to ensure that differences and diversities are retained superficially while becoming homogenized and harmonized politically through assimilation.[59] In retaining superficial diversity, American multiculturalism honors and preserves cultural practices marked as Other, rendering these practices as "pure" cultural artifacts to be replicated through tradition. Embracing Robin Kelley's notion of *polyculturalism*, which "uncouples notions of origins and authenticity from that of culture," Prashad pushes back against

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[58] Henry Cowell, "Proposed Course: America, Musical Melting Pot," HCC, NYPL, Box 164, Folder 10.

[59] Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting,* 61.

a multiculturalism rooted in static notions of discrete ethno-national cultures—sets of "authentic" practices to be enshrined, performed, and consumed rather than engaged, contested, and negotiated at the intersections of multiple heritages.[60]

The propensity to subsume a range of foreign practices in the spirit of universalist creative pursuit has long been a hallmark of (and source of criticism for) Euro-American modernity. Edward Said identifies "a certain freedom of intercourse" that has always been the Westerner's privilege owing to the cultural dominance of the West.[61] Henry Cowell, as both a composer and educator, took the types of transculturalist liberties that have become characteristic of Euro-American modernity and American cultural nationalism. Cowell's expansive conception of American music was exceptional for its time in that it made space for the cultural practices of immigrants deemed "un-American" by powerful voices of the era—including white labor unions, immigration authorities, and the Supreme Court of the United States. These notably included cultivated musics from China, India, and Japan. As an educator, Cowell introduced students and audiences to musical diversity they might not otherwise have heard—in effect, giving immigrant musicians a platform for presenting their music to the American public in celebrated avant-garde spaces. As a composer, Cowell viewed these practices as a set of "new musical resources"—to borrow a phrase from the title of his 1930 manual for musical experimentalism—an untapped reservoir of raw materials for American creative pursuits.

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[60] Ibid., 58.
[61] Said, *Orientalism*, 43-44.

The 1930s were a critical period in the formation of American musical consciousness. Following the onset of the Great Depression, the tide of public opinion turned against the excesses and rugged individualism of the 1920s avant-garde, and the public sought new, accessible expressions of distinctly American aesthetics.[62] Musical nationalism and populism were on the rise. Radio, recorded music, and print media allowed audiences separated by hundreds, if not thousands, of miles to share experiences and imagine themselves as part of a larger national community. Amidst this proliferation of mass consumer culture, interest in preserving and promoting American folk heritage emerged as a priority of New Deal cultural policy. Even dedicated avant-gardists, including Cowell and Seeger, increasingly emphasized the beauty and compositional utility of traditional American music.[63] By the late 1930s, Seeger served as assistant director of the Federal Music Project—an influential position from which to advocate such views.

The "national fabric" metaphor embraced by President Roosevelt recognized, to an extent, the pluralistic diversity of cultural practices found in the United States, and the U.S. government prioritized the preservation of "authentic" folk traditions through events such as the National Folk Festival and various song collection projects.[64] On May 7, 1938, prominent folklorists from across the nation gathered for a roundtable at the National Folk Festival in Washington, D.C. Among others, these

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[62] Nicholas E. Tawa. *Serenading the Reluctant Eagle: American Musical Life, 1925-1945* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984), 22-28.
[63] Ibid., 28.
[64] See Mark A Davidson, "Recording the Nation: Folk Music and the Government in Roosevelt's New Deal, 1936-1941," Ph.D. Diss. (University of California, Santa Cruz, 2015).

included "Father of the Blues" W.C. Handy, Harlem Renaissance intellectual Alaine Locke, author and folk song collector Zora Neale Hurston (another leading voice of the Harlem Renaissance), and Charles Seeger.[65] Mark Davidson identifies the 1938 National Folk Festival as a pivotal moment that foregrounded debates over what constituted "authentic" folk music in the U.S. context, the role of folk music as an expression of democratic society, and the need to preserve folk culture from the corrupting influences of modern society.[66]

In the early decades of the twentieth century, it had been widely assumed that as a "mongrel" nation of immigrants, the United States had no genuine folk culture of its own.[67] During the 1920s and 1930s, the proliferation of "race" and "hillbilly" records (the precursors of rhythm and blues and country music, respectively), as well as new folk song anthologies, including *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934) by John and Alan Lomax, began to disrupt this view. What Judith Tick dubs "the ethnic styles of the rural poor" began their journey from the margins to the center of American musical identity.[68] Scholarly dismissals of these forms as "primitive," and therefore unworthy of academic study, receded as folk music gained elevated status as an artistic expression of democratic ideals. Although interest in American folk culture predated the 1930s, the confluence of popular front and New Deal interest in

[65] Ibid., 6-7.
[66] Ibid., 7-8.
[67] Judith Tick, "Historical Introduction: The Salvation of Writing Things Down," in Ruth Crawford Seeger, *The Music of American Folk Song*, ed. Larry Polansky and Judith Tick (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001), xxiv.
[68] Ibid.

American folk heritage in the latter half of the 1930s led to the embrace of folk music by the political left as an accessible vehicle for revolutionary ideas.[69]

New Deal programs to cultivate folk music actively sought to spread feelings of cultural belonging among geographically distant and ethnically diverse communities.[70] Prominent figures including the Lomaxes, Charles Seeger, Ruth Crawford Seeger, and Benjamin Botkin helped centralize collection and documentation efforts and were effectively the "creators as much as caretakers of a tradition."[71] Their decisions regarding who and what to record, how to document and transcribe recordings, and how to promote artists and song collections created a new canon of American folk songs that would underpin folk revivalism in the United States for decades to come. Beyond the U.S. context, in fact, a boom in electrical recording technology in the 1930s resulted in the proliferation of countless regionally distinct recordings that would provide the raw musical materials for national cultural revivals and anticolonial movements around the globe.[72]

The outcomes of these coordinated efforts to canonize American folk music and foster a sense of national community were inevitably defined by their exclusions as much as by their inclusions. For all the pluralism, multiculturalism, and inclusive leftist politics that fueled New Deal cultural policies, many performance practices

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[69] Robbie Lieberman, *"My Song is My Weapon": People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 31.
[70] Tick, "Historical Introduction," xxiv-xxv.
[71] Benjamin Filene, "'Our Singing Country': John and Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past," *American Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (December 1991), 604.
[72] See Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2015).

and musical repertoires practiced by immigrant communities in the United States remained outside the purview of American national culture. Some of these, including the cultivated Asian music practices encountered by Henry Cowell in San Francisco and New York, nonetheless proved influential in avant-garde spaces and educational institutions. Cowell, for one, situated "Oriental" practices within the broader cultural inheritance of American music. But the prevailing sentiment towards the musics of immigrant communities from China, India, Japan was that they remained ontologically distinct, and therefore unassimilable into pluralistic conceptions of American music. Certain cultivated "traditions" (such as Hindustani music) could be showcased and appreciated for their distinct aesthetic qualities, and even for their potential value to modernist creative projects. At the same time, the vernacular music practices of immigrant communities deemed undesirable by U.S. immigration authorities (Punjabi laborers in the Central Valley of California, for instance) could not easily be synthesized into the "national fabric" of American folk heritage.

**Traditional Music, Modernism, and Hybridity**

At the New School, the broader societal concern that commercialism would corrupt "authentic" folk traditions extended to the traditional music practices of Cowell's immigrant guests as well. An anecdote told by Sidney Robertson Cowell conveys Cowell's disappointment when a group of African musicians led by Asadata

Dafora changed their performance practices in response to commercial pressures.[73] Dafora, a native of Freetown, Sierra Leone, had first come to the United States in 1929 and remained in New York to educate Americans about the performance traditions of West Africa.[74] He and his troupe made a name for themselves in the early 1930s by presenting African "ballets," and Robertson Cowell remembers them being "quite wonderful" when they visited the New School in 1936. Robertson Cowell then recalls, however, that when Henry (who had just returned from his incarceration at San Quentin) once again brought the group down from Harlem in 1940, "it was a great disappointment because their rhythms had ironed out" and lacked the variety and complexity attributed to their earlier performance.[75] On the way to the car afterwards, Cowell mentioned to Dafora that "his music sounded much more like other music in New York than it had earlier" and wondered how this had happened. Dafora told Cowell, "Nobody wants to hear that old African music," noting the group had "to earn a living." He explained that they played with jazz groups all the time and had to "do what Americans want to hear." Dafora had assumed that Cowell, like other Americans, would want the same. Cowell replied that he could have that music "any day of the week," and had instead hoped his

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[73] Robertson Cowell, Tape B-31, 17-18.

[74] Margaret Lloyd, "Dancer From the Gold Coast," n.d., newspaper clipping, Asadata Dafora Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Harlem, New York, Box 1, Folder 8.

[75] Cowell was arrested on May 21, 1936, in Menlo Park for sexual offences involving a seventeen-year-old. He was sentenced to fifteen years at San Quentin Prison in Marin County, where he was sent on July 8, 1936, but only served four (Miller, *Music and Politics in San Francisco*, 200). For more on Cowell's imprisonment, see Michael Hicks, "The Imprisonment of Henry Cowell," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1991), 92-119.

students would hear "the real sound of African music" that only Dafora and his group could provide. Robertson Cowell concludes her narration by speculating, "It may have been that Asadata Dafora took this to heart, because there was in Harlem a resurgence of African music, and a lot of it came from his group after that."[76]

Cowell's primary objection to Dafora's 1940 performance appears to hinge on the perceived corruption of "the real sound" (i.e., authenticity) of his African music by the prevailing commercial music practices of 1930s New York. From Robertson Cowell's narrative, we can infer that between trips to the New School in 1936 and 1940, Dafora and his group embraced elements of the jazz performance practices they encountered in Harlem in order to increase their appeal to New York audiences. Given the prevalence of jazz in 1930s New York, it is difficult to imagine a group of musicians based in Harlem not being influenced by the music in some way—it had already proven itself among the most expansive, influential, and inherently modern forms of twentieth-century American music.

Years earlier, Cowell himself had recognized jazz as "the first distinctive music America had to offer to the world," yet downplayed its Black origins in identifying its significance:

> Nearly everyone will assure you wisely that it comes from the South, from negro syncopation. But after a glance into the negro melodies it seems to me jazz sprang direct from the heart of America, from the people themselves, from everywhere. Just as folk songs come from the people, Irving Berlin, not an ordinary musician in the common sense, but master of his jazz art, accepts melodies from everywhere—from the people.[77]

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[76] Robertson Cowell, Tape B-31, 17-18.
[77] Sachs, *A Man Made of Music*, 103.

By dismissing the racial specificity of these performance practices, Cowell situates jazz as an expression of the "heart of America," comparing it to folk songs, which he viewed as a musical corollary to American democracy itself.[78] Elsewhere Cowell distinguishes jazz and other forms of "plugged" music from folk idioms, claiming they were "composed by professionals in order to make money" and therefore "intellectually calculated to be popular." This view of jazz is narrow by our contemporary standards but was not so unusual—particularly within avant-garde circles—as big band swing proliferated in the 1930s. As a champion of folk and traditional forms, Cowell took issue not so much with musical populism, or even hybridity, as with the power of the mass market. To the extent that music could constitute a "direct expression of a larger group of people," Cowell venerated and idealized the popular. In recognizing the work of Irving Berlin (a Jewish American composer who flourished in the mass market of Tin Pan Alley songwriting) for incorporating melodies "from the people" into his original compositions, it seems Cowell appreciated Berlin's music in spite of its commercial success rather than because of it.

But reifying folk idioms as authentic expressions of democratic ideals while denigrating commercial music as a threat to traditional music presents issues of its own. German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), an early proponent of folk culture, famously inspired generations of scholars to focus on a

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[78] Henry Cowell, "Folk Music in a Democracy," undated, HCC, NYPL, Box 164, Folder 21.

plurality of folk cultures as a means of countering the narrow aesthetic ideals of the European aristocracy. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson note, however, that focus on exotic and traditional cultures blinded anthropologists—and here I include Cowell— to the contemporary popular culture of the groups they studied as these groups encountered "modernizing" influences." According to Mukerji and Schudson:

> As evidence grows that "authentic" folk traditions often have metropolitan or elite roots and that mass culture often is "authentically" incorporated into ordinary people's everyday lives, it has become hazardous to make an invidious distinction between popular culture and high culture or a rigid separation of authentic, people-generated "folk" culture from unauthentic and degraded, commercially borne 'mass' culture.[79]

Cowell's thinking on such topics, as it manifests in the Dafora example, seems to reflect a categorical separation of "authentic, people-generated 'folk' culture" from "unauthentic and degraded, commercially borne 'mass' culture."

The racial implications of Cowell's assessments of jazz and jazz influence are somewhat troublesome, but his ambivalence appears to be more than a byproduct of racial bias. In addition to including a week on "Negro music in America" in his proposed "melting pot" course, Cowell featured both African and Black American artists at the New School, including the multiple programs featuring Dafora as well as a program of "Negro sacred and secular music" presented by the Hall Johnson Negro Choir in late 1931. Cowell was likely somewhat isolated from contemporary Black expressive culture, and his objections to jazz (as he understood it) appear

[79] Mukerji and Schudson, *Rethinking Popular Culture,* 3.

grounded in a critique of what he perceived to be its commercialism rather than a distaste for the performance practices of Black America. Cowell's disappointment with Dafora and his group in 1940, it stands to reason, had more to do with the audible influences of commercial popular music in general than the specific influences of Harlem jazz. Nonetheless, as Cowell championed modernist experimentalism and transcultural hybridity on behalf of American composers, he prioritized "authentic" demonstrations of traditional musics by his immigrant guests at the New School.

There is little doubt Cowell's early engagements with global musics shaped his own experimentalist tendencies. David Nicholls observes that the *United Quartet* (1936) reveals experimentations with Hindustani music, among other idioms, identifying the presence of *bhairavi*, a common Hindustani raga, in the context of a deliberately transcultural composition.[80] Although the specific melodic itineraries of *bhairavi* are unique in the Hindustani context, the intervals of the raga are equivalent to those of the Phrygian church mode, and therefore not unique to Hindustani music. Cowell's own preface to the *United Quartet* asserts, "the Oriental is represented by modes which are constructed as Oriental modes without being actual modes used in particular cultures."[81] Over two decades later, Cowell's most overt compositional use of Indian elements would emerge during a late-career neoclassical turn when a trip to India inspired his *Madras Symphony*, which he dedicated to the Madras Music

[80] David Nicholls, "Henry Cowell's United Quartet," *American Music* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1995), 202.
[81] Quoted in Silver, "Henry Cowell and Alan Hovhaness," 60.

Academy and premiered in Madras in 1959 with Thomas Scherman and the Little Symphony Orchestra of New York. Several Indian musicians joined the ensemble for the premiere, performing on *tablatarang* (a series of tuned tabla drums), *jalatarang* (a circle of porcelain bowls tuned with water), and two additional tabla. Brian Silver claims that unlike Cowell's earlier works, the *Madras Symphony*, along with several other pieces composed following the 1956 tour, were "explicitly oriental in tone and effect."[82]

Nicholls points to a *transethnicism* in Cowell's work that encompasses the totality of his cross-cultural engagements—including vague Orientalism as well as more specific transculturalist endeavors. Nicholls credits Lou Harrison with the term, which he defines simply as "the employment or evocation of musical styles and techniques from cultures other than the composer's own."[83] Harrison formed a lifelong bond with Cowell beginning in 1935 when Harrison enrolled in Cowell's comparative musicology course at the University of California Extension. According to Leta Miller and Fredric Lieberman, "Cowell's embrace of world music traditions struck a sympathetic chord in Harrison," who would go on to experiment with multiple global musics, foremost Indonesian gamelan.[84] Nicholls traces a transethnicist lineage in American experimentalism back to Cowell and includes

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[82] Ibid., 59.
[83] David Nicholls, "Transethnicism and the American Experimental Tradition," *Musical Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (Winter 1996), 570.
[84] Leta E. Miller and Fredric Lieberman, *Lou Harrison* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 12-13.

Harry Partch, John Cage, and Harrison in the first generation of American experimental composers to overtly espouse transethnicism.[85] He contends:

> It should be clear that transethnicism has played an important part in the development of the American experimental tradition and that, accordingly contemporary manifestations of multiculturalism can indeed be placed in a much broader historical context than might otherwise be acknowledged.[86]

**Conclusions**

Beginning in his childhood years in the San Francisco Bay Area, Henry Cowell encountered a musical world in flux—a world in which the performance practices of immigrant communities from Asia resounded alongside more established Euro-American practices. Dating to those early years, Cowell's engagements with migrant musicians articulated a paradigm of multiculturalism that recognized the importance of foreign influences in the development of American music while simultaneously reinforcing boundaries between those forms and American music itself. Cowell widened the aperture through which American students and composers understood international influences. He helped disrupt the hegemonic conventions of European art music and introduced musics from Asia and Africa, as well as a range of folk and vernacular idioms from around the globe. In doing so, he established a foundation for the cross-cultural pursuits of subsequent generations of American experimentalists, beginning with his students John Cage and Lou Harrison. After nearly a century, it is fair to appreciate Cowell for his visionary innovations and also

[85] Nicholls, "Transethnicism," 571.
[86] Ibid., 586.

identify ways in which his transcultural engagements perpetuated power differentials and cultural assumptions that have proven persistent in American experimental music.

We need look no further than familiar postcolonial critiques, beginning with Edward Said, and critiques of American multiculturalism to consider the ways in which—knowingly or unknowingly—Cowell perpetuated and refigured certain colonial paradigms while engaging in earnest attempts to open modernist transcultural dialogues. But at a time when few American composers engaged with global musics in any substantive way, Cowell dedicated a lifetime to exploring, teaching, and elevating awareness about music from around the world. Reflecting on the influence of Asian musics in particular, he reveals the high regard in which he held them:

> The great new aspect of the influence of Eastern music on that of the West is that now Western composers know that in order to utilize Eastern materials, they must know something of the great Eastern traditions, either in feeling or intellectual study or both. A bit of exotic color is not enough. East and West meet on equal terms.[87]

These views were not merely an expression of American multiculturalist ideals or Orientalist fetishism; they were directly informed by the dynamic early-twentieth-century urban environments in which Cowell lived, learned, and worked. For our purposes, the life and times of Henry Cowell help illuminate latent connections between immigrant musicians and American

[87] Cowell, "East-West Music Encounter," 4.

musical formations across a spectrum of elite and popular culture in the early decades of the twentieth century. The following chapter takes us into the streets of 1930s New York and traces a network of working Indian musicians, beginning with Sarat Lahiri, whose stories illustrate the entwinement of American Orientalism, multiple cultural nationalisms, and modernist movements in music and dance.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Indian Musicians in Interwar New York

Restaurants

ENJOY HINDU MUSIC—AUTHENTIC atmosphere while partaking of delicious Hindu luncheons-dinners.
BENGAL TIGER.
336 West 58th. COlumbus 5-8724.

**Figure 3.1 Advertisement for the Bengal Tiger restaurant, *New York Times*, March 5, 1939.**

***Theater District, Midtown Manhattan. November 1936.***

After a benefit performance of Kurt Weill's *Johnny Johnson*, American composer Johanna Beyer (1888-1944) and her companions leave the theater and make their way to the Bengal Tiger on West 58th Street. The restaurant is one of several immigrant-run establishments near Broadway catering to a "growing desire for Indian food among the more adventurous members of New York's theatergoing crowd."[1] At the Bengal Tiger, however, Beyer has "friends in common" with the proprietor and his wife, a musician and dancer.[2] Before leaving, a member of Beyer's party purchases recordings of Indian music from them.

[1] Bald, *Bengali Harlem*, 176.
[2] Amy C. Beal, *Johanna Beyer: American Composer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 24.

The proprietor of the Bengal Tiger was none other than Sarat Lahiri—musician, lecturer, and restaurateur from Calcutta.[3] After arriving in the United States in 1919, Lahiri established himself in Manhattan through public performances, beginning in the early 1920s, and his subsequent work in the Midtown restaurant business. By January 1935, he had opened the Bengal Tiger and he continued to offer patrons a memorable combination of curries and live musical entertainment until giving up ownership and departing for the Rajah Restaurant in 1940.[4] One journalist described the Bengal Tiger as "an unusual place" in the basement of 342 West 58th where one could try "good Hindu food, accompanied by real Hindu music," noting that "eminent musicians" liked to drop in and listen to "old Hindu songs played on the esraj and sitar."[5] Apart from the restaurant business, Lahiri's professional engagements throughout the 1920s and 1930s included Broadway shows, local and national radio broadcasts, ticketed concerts and recitals, more intimate performances for influential patrons, and lecture-demonstrations on North Indian music and its rhythmic system.

Johanna Beyer may have shared multiple friends with Lahiri and his wife, Lota, but ultramodernist composer Henry Cowell was perhaps their most notable

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[3] In his "Digression on Oriental Music," published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (March 24, 1935), Winthrop Sargeant recounts dropping in on "a certain Sarat Lahiri," an old friend "who happens to be a Hindu musician of distinguished abilities." Sargeant notes, "inasmuch as it is difficult to make a living as a 'sitar' or 'esraj' virtuoso in New York, he has opened a restaurant called the 'Bengal Tiger' at 342 W. 58th St., where he supplements the virtues of his music with the more widely appreciated qualities of his cooking."

[4] Lahiri's *New York Times* obituary claims he had given up ownership of the Bengal Tiger a year prior to his death and associated himself with the Rajah. "Sarat Lahiri: Hindu Musician Was Actor and Proprietor of Restaurant," *New York Times*, May 6, 1941.

[5] Don O'Malley, "New York Inside Out," *Quad-City Times* (Davenport, IA), January 4, 1935.

mutual acquaintance. In the years preceding Beyer's visit to the Bengal Tiger, Cowell had mentored her in composition. As discussed in Chapter 2, Cowell also studied the fundamentals of Hindustani music with Sarat Lahiri during this period and frequently brought Lahiri and Lota to the New School for lecture-demonstrations and recitals.

While most existing references to Sarat Lahiri hinge on his involvement with Cowell, this chapter presents archival evidence of his public engagements independent of the American composer. Newspapers from New York to Los Angeles chronicled Lahiri's public performances beginning with tours alongside American dancer Ragini Devi and her Trio Ragini and culminating in collaborations with assorted musicians and dancers from the Indian subcontinent as well as the United States. Lahiri had established himself in New York by the time he met Cowell in the late 1920s, and he remained active there until his death in 1941. His tours with Lota took him as far west as Banff, Alberta, and his radio broadcasts may have reached even farther. Rather than representing Lahiri and his Indian contemporaries as forgotten figures worthy of canonization, this chapter situates them at the intersections of the social and historical currents that animated their lives and work.

Primary sources reveal Lahiri's embeddedness within an extensive network of performers and patrons. After introducing Sarat Lahiri and his wife, Lota, I move chronologically through Lahiri's career, focusing on key collaborators and discussing the scope of their professional activities. In doing so, I devote considerable attention to the duo career of Sarat Lahiri and Lota and analyze their

promotional materials. These materials speak to the entanglement of Orientalist and modernist aesthetics, the global resonances of Indian cultural nationalism, and the intersections of all of these projects in interwar New York.

## Music and Nationalism in Colonial India

Sarat Lahiri, a Calcutta Brahmin and nationalist political exile, deployed what were by the 1920s familiar tropes of a Bengali discourse on “Hindu music.” In the spirit of the Bengal Renaissance, S.M. Tagore, the influential Bengali musicologist, had relied on Orientalist discourses to validate a nineteenth-century reimagining of Hindustani music as a classical, national tradition (which is to say, rooted in a Sanskrit textual tradition as opposed to contemporary Indo-Muslim performance practice).[6] With regard to Tagore’s Bengal Music School, which opened in August 1871, Richard David Williams argues, “it cannot be overstated how revolutionary this institution was for Hindustani music.”[7] With the Bengal Music School, Tagore and his brother Jatindra Mohan (1831-1908) established an academy that “represented an entirely different set of social expectations and connotations” by staging public concerts featuring middle- and upper-class amateurs rather than private performances by hereditary professional musicians.[8] Williams notes, however, that although scholars have widely recognized Tagore as a key

[6] Richard David Williams, “Hindustani music between Awadh and Bengal, c. 1758-1905,” Ph.D. diss., (King’s College London, 2014), 30.
[7] Williams, *The Scattered Court*, 167.
[8] Ibid, 166-167.

architect of musical modernity in India, his interventions were ultimately peripheral to the dominant trajectory of Hindustani musical practice.[9]

Tagore's was a nationalist, though not an anticolonial, project. He argued for the use of Indian notational systems in place of the European staff, anticipating the linkage of notation and nationalism that would come to characterize later musicological efforts. His work embraced a prevailing Orientalist discourse that viewed classical music systems as emerging from the Vedic ages and envisioned "Hindu music" as a distinctly modern, yet necessarily ancient, emblem of national culture—proof that India could engage European modernity on a level playing field and yet remain civilizationally distinct.[10] Tagore's vision reframed Indic musical practices with respect to cosmopolitan modernist discourses without contesting British political control of the subcontinent. Williams claims, "Tagore made Hindustani music a vehicle for native loyalty. His music schools served as an arena of politicizing and hence enabling music in an elite yet public setting."[11] In doing so, Tagore served as a key intermediary in reframing Indian music for the Euro-American world.

These and subsequent musicological reform efforts, including those of V.N. Bhatkhande, who convened the first All-India Music Conference in Baroda in 1916,

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[9] Williams, *The Scattered Court*, 7.
[10] For more on S.M. Tagore's project, see Charles Capwell, "Representing 'Hindu' Music to the Colonial and Native Elite of Calcutta," in *Hindustani Music: Thirteenth to Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Joep Bor, Francoise Nalani Delvoye, Jane Harvey, and Emmie te Nijenhuis (New Delhi, Manohar, 2010), 285-312. For more on classicization and the reinvention of musical tradition in North India, see Bakhle, *Two Men and Music.*
[11] Williams, *The Scattered Court*, 167.

were predicated on shared beliefs about Hindustani music's state of decline. Revivalist projects, informed as they were by a century of European scholarship on Indian music, produced what Janaki Bakhle identifies as "a canonic understanding of what Indian music needed in order to become genuinely classical."[12] Namely, it needed to be systematized (i.e., notated and rendered scientific) and made accessible outside the purview of a small class of professional Muslim musicians, known as *ustads*, and hereditary courtesans, known as *tawaif*s. A predilection towards the authority of Sanskrit music treatises, which provided aspirational standards for musical reform and purported evidence of musical decline, fused with widespread anti-Muslim biases in the pursuit of national, classical forms. With regard to South Indian (*Carnatic*) music, Amanda Weidman notes, "the discourse of social reform that arose in the late nineteenth century, associated with elite nationalist thought, was central to notions of what made music and dance 'classical' and ideas of their place in a new, urban, bourgeois order of things."[13]

Such nationalist revivalism underpinned the *anti-nautch movement*, overlapping projects aimed at "rescuing" and "rehabilitating" hereditary female courtesan performers throughout North and South India.[14] In South India, the

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[12] Bakhle, *Two Men and Music*, 10.
[13] Weidman, *Singing the Classical*, 18.
[14] For thorough discussions of nationalist reform projects in both North and South Indian contexts, see, among others, Meduri, "Nation, Woman, Representation" (1996); Bakhle, *Two Men and Music* (2005); Lakshmi Subramanian, *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in Modern South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); Amanda Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Pallabi Chakravorty, *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2008); Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Davesh Soneji, eds., *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India* (New Delhi:

practice of dedicating young women, commonly referred to as *devadasis*, to temples had endured for centuries. According to Davesh Soneji, the term itself collapsed a range of distinct regional practices as the mechanisms of colonial control (ethnography, moral surveillance, and disciplining of sexualized bodies) rendered the cultural practices of devadasis akin to mere prostitution.[15] Avanthi Meduri observes that the anti-nautch movement emerged within a complex of reforms articulated by educated nationalists, colonial officials, and Christian missionaries that addressed the role of women in India.[16] In discussing the centrality of "the women's question" in nineteenth-century social reform movements, Partha Chatterjee has observed how the nationalist movement mapped notions of national culture and spirituality—the "inner domain" of Indian life—as innately female.[17] The "new woman" of Indian nationalism, and by extension national culture itself, had to "remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world" in order for the idealized Indian woman to become the de facto culture-bearer of the "new patriarchy" of the emerging secular state.[18]

Within the middle-class public sphere, music and dance were marked as an apex of classical culture, and yet the activities themselves were deemed

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Oxford University Press, 2008); Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Margaret Walker, *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014).

[15] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 6-18. Soneji claims that, "At the core of *devadasi* reform lies the pervasive class-inflected irony of Indian nationalism and early Indian feminism. *Devadasi* reform was necessarily an altruistic act, and in the discourse of 'rescue,' *devadasis* could only be marked as 'victims'" (19).

[16] Meduri, "Nation, Woman, Representation," xxi.

[17] Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 116-134.

[18] Ibid., 120.

unrespectable pursuits so long as they remained the domain of Muslim musicians and courtesans. Such sentiments coalesced amidst an amalgam of imported Victorian morality, intellectual paradigms inherited from Orientalist scholarship, indigenous caste hierarchies, and notions of respectability. Narratives of nationalist-era cultural revivalism and reform are now familiar terrain in the histories of Hindustani music, but Williams has argued that while these histories have privileged the middle-class public sphere as "the only space of colonial culture," it was, in reality, a single facet of a more pluralistic cultural landscape—its initiatives did not represent the broader experience of colonial India.[19]

Even so, we can trace a line from the activities of Sarat Lahiri in New York to the nationalist-reformist initiatives of S.M. Tagore and the Bengali *bhadralok*. While these projects ultimately proved only tangential to the dominant global trajectories of Hindustani music in the twentieth century, they were central to Lahiri's efforts to represent India and its cultural practices in the United States. By extension, Lahiri's widespread activity and influence in New York infused American conceptions of India and "the Orient" with elements of specific revivalist projects rooted in the landed gentry of nineteenth-century Bengal. These ideas resonated with a public whose imaginations, expectations, and habits of consumption had been primed by its familiarity with intellectual and material artifacts of European colonialism and Orientalist knowledge production.

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[19] Williams, *The Scattered Court*, 13.

**Figure 3.2 Sarat Lahiri playing the *esraj*, photo by Edward Steichen.**
**© 2023 The Estate of Edward Steichen / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York**

## Into the Archive with Sarat Lahiri

Although multiple sources reference his 1919 arrival in New York, Sarat Lahiri first appears in U.S. public records with the 1925 New York State Census, which shows him residing at 1703 Washington Avenue in the Bronx.[20] The other residents at that address consisted primarily of Russian immigrants, Hungarians, U.S. citizens, and Austrians. Lahiri, the only Indian among them, is listed as a "boarder" with "musician" given as his occupation. The "Color or Race" field on the form contains a "W" for "white" scribbled next to his name. Five years later, the 1930

[20] New York State Archives, Albany, New York, *State Population Census Schedules, 1925*, Election District *77*, Assembly District *2*, Bronx, *New York,* Page *21.*

U.S. Census shows Lahiri living with his wife Lucile (Lota) at 106 West 57th Street in Manhattan.[21] His stated occupation is now "proprietor" of an "importing rug store." According to the 1930 data, the 33-year-old Lahiri had married eight years prior (in 1922), but the 1925 N.Y. Census makes no mention of Lucile Lahiri. It appears the couple never filed a marriage license with New York State or New York City, though press releases and promotional materials referred to them as husband and wife beginning in the 1920s.

A black-and-white photograph taken by photographer Edward Steichen shows Sarat Lahiri playing his *esraj* (figure 3.2). The body of the instrument sits between his thighs, which are clothed in flowing light-colored Indian pajamas. From his lap, the fingerboard of the instrument extends upward towards his left shoulder and rests upon the ornate shawl covering the upper half of his body. A turban adorns his head as he gazes to his right. Careful studio lighting projects an enlarged shadow of musician and instrument onto the back wall. The lighting illuminates the contours of Lahiri's profile and, while obscuring the features of his face, emphasizes the lightness of his skin. The combination of lighting effects and shot composition accentuate an air of mystery and quiet authority, rendering Lahiri exotic and yet racially familiar to white Americans.

Details regarding Sarat Lahiri's life in Calcutta, the circumstances of his departure from India, and his journey to the United States are scant. A promotional

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[21] USDC/BC, *U.S. Census, 1930: Population Schedule*, *New York, New York*, Enumeration District 31-*567*, Sheet 10A.

booklet entitled "Sarat Lahiri and Lota"—which constitutes the most detailed extant document related to the duo—describes Lahiri, "a young Hindu of the highest caste, who comes from a wealthy Brahmin family, and is a graduate of the University of Calcutta." According to the document, Lahiri had "left his native country a few years ago to come to America where he took a post-graduate course in one of our universities."[22] There is no mention of which university. Beyond Brian Silver's lone reference to Lahiri being a Bengali Congress Party exile, I have found no other sources referencing his party affiliation or status as a political refugee.

The English-language sources from Lahiri's career do not discuss his musical background with specificity. An article published in *The Musical Quarterly* (1931) by Lahiri and music critic Winthrop Sargeant (1903-1986), entitled "A Study in East Indian Rhythm," presents analysis of a *gat* (instrumental composition) performed on *vina* (an Indian chordophone) by Lakshmi Prasad Misra.[23] The article includes

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[22] "Sarat Lahiri and Lota," HCC, NYPL, Box 162, Folder 3.

[23] Winthrop Sargeant and Sarat Lahiri, "A Study in East Indian Rhythm," *Musical Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (October 1931): 427-438. In the article, the name in question is spelled "Lachmi Pershad Misra." Lakshmi Prasad Misra, the son of vocalist Ram Kumar Misra and brother of Gopal Prasad Misra, belonged to a *Kathak* family from Banaras (now Varanasi). Regarding distinctions between *kathak*, the dance, and *Kathaks*, the people, see Walker, *Kathak Dance*, 17-33. After working as a court musician in Jaunpur and Purnia, Misra moved to Calcutta where he taught at *Bhavanipur Sangeet Sammilani* and *Bangiya Sangeet Parishad*, two local music institutions. Misra, who Williams identifies as Lakshmi Narayan, is believed to have taught sitar to S.M. Tagore (the prominent Bengali musicologist and proponent of "Hindu music"), his brother Jatindra Mohan, and Kshetramohan Goswami, their chief musician at the Bengal Music School (*The Scattered Court*, 164). Misra also served as an expert advisor for *Sangita Bigyan Prabeshika*, a journal published and edited by Gopeshwar Bandyopadhyay of the Bishnupur Gharana, and Ramsharan Music College. See Dilipkumar Mukherjee, *Bharater Sangita Guni, Volume 1* (Calcutta: A. Mukherjee & Co. Private Ltd., 1961), 209-243. Translation from the original Bengali provided by Anirban Bhattacharyya, Shiv Nadar University, Greater Noida, India. Some discrepancy remains regarding Lakshmi Prasad Misra's dates. Based on his translation of the Mukherjee text, Bhattacharya has Misra living from 1860 to 1929. Williams, by contrast, claims he died prior to 1879.

transcriptions "recorded in modern Bengali notation by his disciples." There is no evidence Lahiri himself ever studied with Misra—in fact, he never mentions his musical pedigree or links to any *ustad* or *guru.*[24] If Misra passed away before 1879 as Williams claims, there is no way Lahiri, born circa 1897, could have encountered Misra. Lahiri's decision to analyze Misra's works in his 1931 article, however, constitutes a direct link to what Williams dubs "the networked sphere" that facilitated relationships of patronage and musical education between professional Hindustani musicians and the elite of colonial Bengal.[25]

Lahiri's 1941 death certificate reveals the names of his mother and father, Kamala Devi and Bholanath, respectively, and claims he had resided in the United States for twenty-two years at the time of his death following a cerebral hemorrhage on May 2, 1941.[26] This data corroborates the 1919 arrival date provided on the 1930 Census. It appears Lahiri—a high-caste, elite immigrant—benefited from policies that permitted the entry of "professional actors, artists, lecturers, or singers," as well as students and merchants, while restricting labor immigration from the Indian subcontinent.[27] If Lahiri enrolled in a U.S. university for post-graduate studies as claimed, he would have satisfied such exemptions on multiple fronts.

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[24] This absence is noteworthy considering the centrality of lineage and *gharana* pedigree to musical identity in Hindustani musical culture. It can be read to signal Lahiri's allegiance to an alternate pedagogical model. For more on the politics of musical pedigree in North India, see Daniel Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, first published 1980 by Wayne State Press), 145-167.
[25] Williams, *The Scattered Court*, 156-191.
[26] Department of Health, Borough of Manhattan, *Extracted Death Index 1862-1948*. "Certificate of Death—Certificate No. 10035," May 5, 1941.
[27] Vivek Bald, "American Orientalism," 23-34.

Photo by Nishiyama.
Lota, East Indian Dancer, in Joint Recital With Sarat Lahiri at the New School Auditorium on Tuesday.

**Figure 3.3 "Lota, East Indian Dancer," *New York Times*, November 8, 1931, photo by Nishiyama.**

The 1930 Census identifies Lahiri's wife Lucile, or Lota, as twenty-nine years old, born in California to a French mother and a father from New York. This entry constitutes the only public record for Lucile Lahiri on file with New York State or the United States of America. Although the "Sarat Lahiri and Lota" promotional booklet introduces Lota as "the charming wife of Sarat Lahiri," a claim echoed in newspaper articles and press releases, Lahiri's 1941 death certificate shows him "single" at the time of death rather than married, widowed, or divorced. The name Lucile Lahiri does not appear on the document. This gap in the archival record precludes certain lines of inquiry into Lota's biography, including searches using her given surname.

Henry Cowell's late widow, Sidney Robertson Cowell (1903-1995), recalls additional details that offer glimpses of a complex, transnational backstory:

> Henry studied with [Lahiri] and with his wife Lota, who was half Hawaiian. Anyway, she came from one of the Pacific islands. She had lived in North Africa and had learned the drumming of the area that she had been in—Algeria I think it was. She was a very good musician. She wasn't an authentic North Indian musician, but she had learned to play the backgrounds for Lahiri's drumming on the tambura. She was a lovely person, and Henry used her many times in his classes at the New School. She was almost the only really good person to whom he could confide a class when he had to be away giving a concert somewhere else. She got all the students up and doing something, drumming and dancing. She was a friend of both of us for many years.[28]

Handwritten notes scribbled on the back of a professional portrait of Lahiri holding his esraj (presumably also penned by Robertson Cowell) offer complementary details. The document identifies Lota as Sarat Lahiri's "half Polynesian" wife, claims she grew up in Algeria and was a "famous drummer," and states "Henry learned much from her about the hand drum" in addition to learning about the Indian tabla from Lahiri.[29] Despite Lota's enduring friendship with the Cowells following Sarat Lahiri's death, and regular guest appearances at the New School, little biographical data remains beyond the 1930 U.S. Census and the recollections of Robertson Cowell. The New School Archives hold records of Lota's appearances alongside

[28] Sidney Robertson Cowell, Tape B-30, 25, HCC, NYPL, Box 87, Folder 33.
[29] Portrait of Sarat Lahiri holding Esraj, HCC, NYPL, Box 174, Folder 9.

Sarat Lahiri in the early 1930s but no documentation of her visits to Cowell's courses on her own.[30]

Lota and Sarat Lahiri.
The instruments are, from left to right, a Sitar, a Banya, an Esraj and a Tabla.

**Figure 3.4 "Lota and Sarat Lahiri,"** ***Musical Quarterly*****, 1931.**

What little testimony we have suggests Lota's background allowed her to synthesize aspects of multiple performance practices in crafting a unique, hybrid style of her own. Her ambiguous racial and ethnic identity allowed her to pass as a North Indian Brahmin alongside Lahiri, another claim reinforced through press releases and promotional documents. For example, the *New York Times* photo above identifies Lota as an "East Indian Dancer" (figure 3.3). Other sources from this

[30] I contacted the New School Archives in August 2019 while working at the NYPL. They had no record of Lota appearing at the institution apart from course offering directories and concert announcements that are also held in the Cowell Collection.

period refer to her variably as a “native Brahmin,” a “Hindu musician,” and a “modern Indian.” None appears to have questioned her professed status as a native practitioner. Despite dissonances between what we know of Lota’s backstory and her claims to be a native of the Indian subcontinent, she was not the first New Yorker to dabble in such misrepresentation. Years earlier when Sarat Lahiri first appeared on the scene in New York, he accompanied an “Oriental” dancer named Ragini Devi—a true master of ethnic deception.

**Ragini Devi and the Trio Ragini of India**

“Sri Ragini, Hindu Dancer, Seeks to Show Soul of Race,” read a headline in the *Brooklyn Times Union* on October 14, 1928. “A daughter of the Vale of Kashmir, garden spot of India, Sri Ragini, Hindu dancer and singer, lives at 209 Sullivan St. For six years she has been in this country working to bring to America an interpretation of the soul of her people,” the article began.[31] “Professors and leaders of the Hindu people here say the Hindu dancer represents the soul of India,” it later claimed. An article published in the *Atlanta Constitution* several years earlier attests:

> Ragini Devi has come to this country at the suggestion of Tagore to sing the Hindu songs and dance its festal dances….There is but one Ragini—Devi—and she is the only actual Hindu now in this country who is both a dancer, a singer and an instrumentalist…Her programs have not only the variety so indispensable in any music which is foreign to our conceptions but the value of complete authenticity.[32]

[31] “Sri Ragini, Hindu Dancer, Seeks to Show Soul of Race,” *Brooklyn Times Union,* October 14, 1928.
[32] “Noted India Artists Will Give Concert at Woman’s Club,” *Atlanta Constitution,* January 6, 1924.

Weeks prior, in December 1923, the *New York Tribune* had announced the arrival of "The Trio Ragini," an "all-Hindu organization" led by Ragini Devi, "who both sings the songs of India and dances its dances."[33] The *Brooklyn Citizen* echoed, "the Trio is composed entirely of Hindus and is headed by beautiful Ragini Devi."[34] Following the performance at the Anderson Galleries in New York, the "interesting oriental attraction" was "to make a lengthy tour of the South, Middlewest, and New England" before embarking on a transcontinental tour in 1924-25 under the direction of manager and concert promoter Catharine A. Bamman.[35]

In reality, Ragini Devi was not a native of Kashmir or anywhere else on the Indian subcontinent. She was born in Petoskey, Michigan and grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Although Devi would go on to meet Rabindranath Tagore and play an active role in the Indian classical dance revivals of the 1930s and 1940s, she had not so much as travelled to India when she published *Nritanjali: An Introduction to Hindu Dancing* in 1928. Born Esther Luella Sherman in 1893, she showed an interest in dance and theatrics throughout her childhood. Esther later "attached herself to the small community of young expatriates from India at the University of Minnesota Saint Paul, soaking up everything they knew of their literature, music and dance."[36] One of her instructors at the university, a Sanskrit scholar, translated two Indic texts on dance for her: the *Natya Shastra* and *Abhinaya*

[33] "All-Hindu Trio to Perform Music and Dance Friday," *New York Tribune*, December 23, 1923.
[34] "Concert by Hindus," *Brooklyn Citizen*, December 23, 1923.
[35] "Trio Ragini of India to Tour," *Musical Courier*, November 15, 1923.
[36] Sukanya Rahman, *Dancing in the Family* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2019), 13-14.

*Darpana.* Immersing herself in these resources, Esther "began to create her own 'Indian' dance movements."[37]

During this period she became involved with Ramlal Balaram Bajpai, a "Hindu Brahmin political refugee wanted by the ruling British for sedition."[38] According to the record of his border crossing from Mexico in July 1915, Bajpai was a native of Nagpur, Maharashtra, where he was born in 1883.[39] A chemist by trade, he registered as a resident alien in Minneapolis in 1918.[40] After meeting Esther Sherman, Bajpai moved to New York to work for Lala Lajpat Rai and the Indian Home Rule League of America. Esther followed him there, and the two were married in Wilmington, DE, in May 1921.[41] Recognizing the professional opportunities afforded by the burgeoning Orientalist economy of the New York twenties, Esther reinvented herself as Ragini Devi, publicly embraced Hinduism, and presented herself as a native of Kashmir. According to Rachel Mattson, author of a dissertation on Devi, "she created a new identity for herself out of the cultural scraps that circulated into her orbit in the first two decades of the twentieth century: bits of stereotypes, fragments of historical information, spiritual notions—and sheer, exotic

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[37] Ibid., 15.
[38] Ibid.
[39] "Application for Resident Alien's Border Crossing Identification Card," *Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787-2004,* Record Group Number: *85*, Microfilm Roll Number: *76.*
[40] Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, Minnesota, "Ramlal Balaram Bajpai," *U.S., Alien Registration Index, 1918*.
[41] State of Delaware, "Certificate of Marriage—Registered No. 478," *U.S., Marriage Records, 1750-1954*.

fantasy."[42] Surely, arming herself with an Indian husband also aided her pursuits in "ethnic impersonation."[43]

**Figure 3.5 Trio Ragini, *Atlanta Constitution*, May 20, 1923. Sarat Lahiri with esraj (left), Ragini Devi (center), and tabla player—presumably Vishnu Nimbker (right).**

Bajpai reportedly had little fondness for the arts and even less for his wife dancing in public, but his connections to the Indian Home Rule League of America and the nationalist movement in New York brought Devi into contact with artists and musicians. Sukanya Rahman, Devi's granddaughter and author of a recent "inter-generational memoir" on her family of dancers, credits Bajpai with providing Devi "a passport to the Indian community in New York." His social and political

[42] Rachel Mattson, "The Seductions of Dissonance: Ragini Devi and the Idea of India in the U.S., 1893-1965," Ph.D. diss., (New York University, 2004), 3-4.
[43] Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

connections brought her “into close association with Indian artists and musicians living in New York or passing through the city.”[44] The couple did, in fact, reside at 209 Sullivan Place in Brooklyn, which Rahman claims “became a gathering place for Indian émigrés and their nationalist and political activities—a hotbed for the Independence Movement.”[45] Rahman notes that during this period, Devi “toured the country with two colorfully costumed North Indian musicians who accompanied her dances” but gives no names.[46]

Period newspapers, however, include the names of three Indian musicians who toured with Ragini Devi and the Trio Ragini in the early 1920s: Sarat Lahiri, Vishnu Nimbker, and Arjun Govind. Lahiri accompanied Devi on esraj (referred to by one American newspaper as “an instrument of hoary antiquity, which tonally is a cross between a violin and a zither)” and was a mainstay of the ensemble beginning in 1923, when it kicked off its tour with the performance at the Anderson Galleries in New York (figure 3.6).[47] He also acted as raconteur—“explaining the intricacies of the program.”[48] Two tabla players appeared with Devi and Lahiri during this period. Vishnu Nimbker, the original tabla player mentioned in press releases for the 1923-1924 tour, had been replaced by Arjun Govind by December 1923. Nimbker’s name surfaced occasionally in recycled publicity into 1924, but all new press for the

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[44] Rahman, *Dancing in the Family*, 16.
[45] Ibid., 20.
[46] Ibid., 22.
[47] “Music of the Far East of Interest to Clubs,” *Huntsville Daily Times* (Huntsville, AL), June 19, 1923.
[48] “Hindu Music and Dances,” *Brooklyn Citizen*, April 20, 1924.

ensemble listed Govind on tabla. These sources also establish Govind as "a virtuoso on the sitar." [49]

Hindu Music and Dancing
Trio Ragini of India
Anderson Galleries, Inc., Fri. Eve., Dec. 28.
Seats on sale only at Management,
CATHARINE A. BAMMAN, 53 W. 39th St.

**Figure 3.6 Trio Ragini of India at Anderson Galleries, *New York Times*, December 23, 1923.**

Arjun Govind Thaker Dass and his sitar made headlines without the Trio Ragini when he attempted to charm a giant cobra at the Bronx Zoo in 1924. The *New York Times* identified the young sitarist as a "Hindu student at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary," noting "the tall figure of Dass, clad in a reddish brown business suit, swayed under a huge and ill-laundered turban as his fingers flickered with greater and greater speed through the seventeen strings."[50] The experiment, allegedly his third attempt to charm the large reptile, constituted part of Dass's research for a Ph.D. thesis on "The Psychological Power of Music." At one point, Ragini Devi—"a Hindu dancer in purple and yellow robes, who had accompanied Dass"—cried out, "He moved! I saw him!" Assessing the lackluster impact of the performance, the *Times* observed:

> Dass attacked the strings with still greater fury, repeating ceaselessly a mournful and monotonous strain which in India is said to be the snake's national air. All well-affected Indian reptiles are alleged to

[49] Ibid.
[50] "Giant Cobra at Zoo Has a Music Lesson," *New York Times*, April 18, 1924.

> stand at attention when they hear it. But this king cobra either considered itself naturalized or else had joined the Gandhi movement. For twenty minutes the cobra remained stonily indifferent.[51]

Speculations on reptilian musical nationalism aside, the incident ended in disappointment for Dass, a fact that made newspapers as far away as Pittsburgh, where a headline read "Hindu Unable to Charm Cobra in New York Zoo."[52]

GIANT COBRA AT ZOO HAS A MUSIC LESSON

Hindu Charmer Plays His Sitar an Hour and a Half, but Reptile Turns Deaf Ear.

**Figure 3.7 "Giant Cobra at Zoo Has a Music Lesson,"** ***New York Times*****, April 18, 1924.**

Undeterred, Dass made another attempt in early June. This time,

> the snake appeared to respond: first shivering slightly and then shaking through more than half its length. Then as the music following the notes of the melody became subdued the snake appeared to collapse, falling to the pebbled floor of the cage. Again the student increased his pace on the sitar and again the cobra slowly rose from the centre of its coil and as the music died away the snake shivered convulsively and fell again.[53]

To verify the positive result, Raymond Ditmars, the curator of the New York Zoological Gardens, proceeded to play various phonograph records for the creature,

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[51] Ibid.
[52] "Hindu Unable to Charm Cobra in New York Zoo," *Pittsburgh Press*, April 23, 1924.
[53] "Columbia Student Charms Snake with Strains from Grand Opera," *Tampa Bay Times*, June 15, 1924.

including piano music, jazz, and finally a "Wagnerian" grand opera. According to Ditmars, the piano had no effect, the jazz records—"where notes wailed and sustained themselves"—elicited a greater effect than the stringed instruments, and in the end the snake seemed "almost appreciative" in response to the opera finale, extending "to a height of seven feet for the longest period so far in any of the experiments."[54] The results again made newspapers hundreds of miles from New York. The *Tampa Bay Times* proclaimed Dass "justified in declaring in his thesis on 'The Psychological Power of Music' that the cobra is subject to tone influence." Sensationalist headlines continued to circulate around the country, appearing in regional newspapers into early 1925.

Like Lahiri, Dass would have qualified for immigration exemptions as a post-graduate student. It is unclear when he stopped performing with the Trio Ragini, and he disappears from newsprint entirely following an article in the *New York Daily News* announcing that "two East Indian musicians"—Arjun Govind and Sarat Lahiri—would provide "songs and incidental music" for a Broadway production of *The Little Clay Cart* at the Neighborhood Playhouse Theatre in late 1924 (more on this production later in the chapter).[55] Devi herself would go on to have a long and ultimately illustrious career as a dancer, but newspaper references to her Trio fizzle by 1926. Later in this chapter, and again in the following chapter on dance, we return to the enigmatic Devi, who fled Brooklyn in 1930 to travel to India with

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[54] Ibid.
[55] "Native Indians in Neighborhood Bill," *New York Daily News*, November 30, 1924.

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (1898-1990), a nationalist poet and musician with whom she fell in love. I now discuss the duo career of Sarat Lahiri and Lota, which benefited from Lahiri's experience with Ragini Devi and aimed to capitalize on the same Orientalist fervor that drove her success. Through his work with the Trio Ragini, Lahiri had gained insights into the tastes and preferences of American audiences. He had seen firsthand that conveying truths about India, its history, and its cultural practices was immaterial when it came to fulfilling the expectations of American Orientalism.

Hindu Marriage Rites Tie Greenwich Villagers

(By Pacific & Atlantic)

After having been wed in Little Church Around the Corner, in New York, Philip Shelton and Doreen Stewart, both believers in reincarnation, were married according to Hindu rites. Left to right: Maha Bira, Hindu high priest; Sarat Lahiri, musician; Shelton and his bride. Faith does not permit divorce.

**Figure 3. 8 "Hindu Marriage Rites Tie Greenwich Villagers," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette,* September 15, 1927**

## Sarat Lahiri and Lota: Hindu Music as Ancient and Modern

The duo activities of Sarat Lahiri and Lota, and how these artists represented themselves, illuminate ethnic, racial, and gendered convergences of Orientalism that

locate authenticity predominately in the imagination of the consumer. By mid-1926, the *New York Times* began announcing duo appearances by Sarat Lahiri and Lota—referred to as "Mlle. Lucile de Lota" in the earliest references. In late July of that year, the pair featured in the "Hindu" wedding of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph L Baldwin in Southampton, Long Island, where Lahiri "played throughout the ceremony on a Hindu guitar, given to him by Rabindranath Tagore" while Lota served as "water carrier." Both "were dressed in authentic Hindu costumes."[56] Within the week, the *Times* announced "Mlle. Lucile de Lota" in "a series of interpretative Polynesian, Arabian, Balinese, and Hindu dances" at the Garden Theatre with the assistance of "Hindu musician and singer" Sarat Lahiri.[57] The entry includes the names of numerous New York "patronesses" associated with the event. The following year, Lahiri—sitar in hand—again featured in "Hindu marriage rites," this time for a Greenwich Village couple (figure 3.8).[58]

Soon after, the duo sat for a professional photo shoot with Edward Steichen for *Vanity Fair*. Steichen captured several images Lahiri would reuse through the end of his career, including the photo of him playing the esraj discussed earlier (figure 3.2). These photographs appeared in the red "Sarat Lahiri and Lota" booklet, which provides a detailed snapshot of the duo's activities and promotional strategy during their period of peak activity.[59] The document chronicles a range of public

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[56] "'Cheerio, Second' A Bright Revue," *New York Times*, July 31, 1926.
[57] "Social Notes," *New York Times*, August 5, 1926.
[58] "Hindu Marriage Rites Tie Greenwich Villagers," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette,* September 15, 1927.
[59] "Sarat Lahiri and Lota," HCC, NYPL, Box 162, Folder 3. The words "*Vanity Fair*—June, 1928" are printed above the first of several Steichen portraits in the booklet. This photo appeared with the

performances (including Broadway musicals, concerts, radio broadcasts, and private recitals), attests to their critical acclaim and widespread popularity in New York, and appeals to an audience steeped in the aesthetics of American Orientalism and avant-garde modernism. The front cover (figure 3.9) declares Sarat Lahiri and Lota "more modern…. than the most determined futurists," even as the pages that follow reference the timeless antiquity and emotive spirituality of their art.

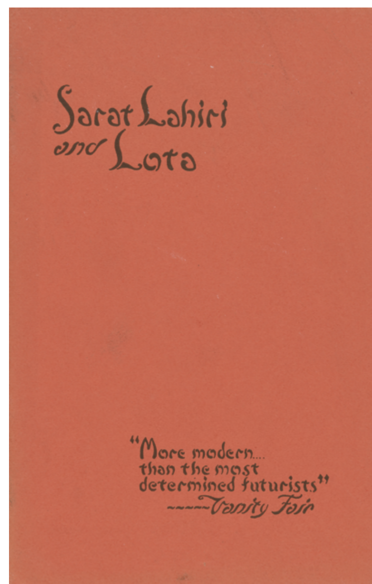


**Figure 3.9 Cover of the promotional booklet, "Sarat Lahiri and Lota" (see Appendix A).**

The back cover of the booklet bears the ink stamp of Catharine A. Bamman (figure 3.10), the New York manager responsible for promoting the Trio Ragini and

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caption "*Chanson Indoue* (Hindu song)—Sarat Lahiri and Lota" and a brief writeup in the June 1928 issue of *Vanity Fair* (p. 71). The cover of the booklet contains no date, but the ink stamp of Catharine A. Bamman on the back cover lists her office at the Barbizon-Plaza, which opened at 106 Central Park South in 1930.

organizing its tours in the 1920s. After leaving that ensemble, Lahiri maintained professional ties to Bamman, who was hailed by *Musical America* as "one of the eminently successful concert managers of this country" in 1919.[60] The stamp places Bamman's office at the Barbizon-Plaza, a counterpart to the famous women-only Barbizon Hotel on East 63rd Street.[61] The Barbizon-Plaza, a co-ed establishment and first-of-its-kind residential hotel equipped as a music and arts center, opened its doors at 106 Central Park South in 1930.[62] In addition to running a successful management business, Bamman served as musical director for the new hotel.[63] Throughout the early 1930s, she oversaw the series "Sunday Nights at Nine"—which the *New York Times* called "pleasant, unpretentious affairs, half concert, half show"— at the Barbizon-Plaza's "intimate" 600-person concert hall.[64] The venue stood a mere three blocks from Lahiri's Bengal Tiger on West 58th.

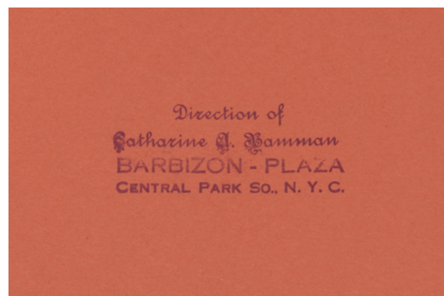


**Figure 3.10 Stamp of Catharine A. Bamman, New York manager and concert promoter.**

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60 "Concert-Managing as Catharine Bamman Sees It," *Musical America*, September 20, 1919.
61 For more on the history of Barbizon Hotel, see Casey Cep, "When the Barbizon Gave Women Rooms of Their Own," *New Yorker* (March 8, 2021).
62 "Barbizon-Plaza Hotel," NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, accessed January 27, 2023, https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/barbizon-plaza-hotel/.
63 "Plainfielder In Charge of New New York Hall, *Plainfield N.J., Courier-News,* March 14, 1930.
64 "The Play: One Evening Well Killed," *New York Times*, November 11, 1935.

Inside the promotional booklet, we find assertions of the artists' authenticity and the purity of their performance practices—"music, songs, and dances of the East…hailed as the supreme expression of its *authentic* art" [emphasis in original]. Sarat Lahiri and Lota are hailed as "outstanding interpreters of the *real* [emphasis in original] soul of India and the Orient, as revealed in its music and dance rhythms." It continues:

> Sarat Lahiri and Lota may well be named High Priest and Priestess in America, of that most elusive of all cadences—the undefinable rhythm that constitutes the genuine music of India. Such music is as far removed from the "nautch dancer" type as the East is from the West. To produce authentic Eastern music, requires the true musician's soul as cast in the Indian mould—steeped in the rhythmic melodies which have for ages been the racial expression of India and the Orient.

This description is replete with signifiers of class- and caste-based discursive biases that attest to the normalization of ethno-racial essentialism produced by Orientalist discourse. It explicitly binds notions of cultural authenticity to notions of race, deeming the "rhythmic melodies" of Indian music "the racial expression of India and the Orient." Images of "the true musician's soul cast in the Indian mould" reinscribe the spiritual-material dichotomy mapped onto the East-West binary by centuries of Orientalism.

The deliberate distancing of the "genuine music of India"—as presented by Sarat Lahiri and Lota—from the "nautch dancer type," gestures to the broader projects of nationalist cultural reform and revival discussed earlier in this chapter. The term *nautch* (an anglicization derived from the Hindi-Urdu verb *nachna,*

meaning to dance) emerged in the colonial *lingua franca* to reference distinct classes of hereditary performers the British encountered in India. These hereditary performers constitute vital, albeit systematically denigrated, influences on the elite music and dance revivals of the subcontinent and inspired the work of early-twentieth-century Euro-American dancers, including Ruth St. Denis, a phenomenon I discuss more in Chapter 4. Although Lahiri and Lota attempt to distance themselves from nautch dances in this instance, on other occasions they claimed to present "authentic" nautch renditions.

Claims to purity, authenticity, and romantic mysticism come juxtaposed with deliberate attempts to link Indian arts to the modernist ethos of 1920s New York. These appeals to twentieth-century modernism reach a rhetorical climax with the claim that "in reality, the most 'modern' music is authentic Indian music!" The booklet explains:

> Because of its absence of harmony as we know it, and notation, Hindu music evolves a form quite similar to some of our most advanced "futurist" stylists—but incomparably more striking, original, and dynamic in the emotional effects.

This standard for musical modernism conflates the modal melodic framework of Hindustani music and its lack of formal notation with the atonal and improvisational approaches developed by contemporaneous avant-garde composers. From there, the text renews its focus on the ancient and the metaphysical, weaving a nationalist discourse on Hindu music into the fabric of the American modern:

> Yet, its melodies "expressive of the soul of the cosmos, the universe singing its way toward perfection," must have had their original

> conception in the beginning of the world. Such rhythm only could be created through the ages, each generation of native musicians putting something more into the compositions.

Following a short, relatively unembellished explanation of *raga*, the focus pivots to the instruments used by Sarat Lahiri and Lota. Fragmentary facts again come buried amongst grandiose claims. The organological descriptions of the esraj, sitar, and *surbahar* (bass sitar)—all stringed instruments used by the duo—are generally accurate, but the notion that "all of these instruments have hardly changed in form for the past two thousand years" is indicative of a historical sensibility framed through mythologized oral histories and Orientalist narratives.[65] Although the sitar and other modern North Indian lutes had Indic ancestors—foremost the *vina* in its multiple forms—their syncretic family tree includes instruments and instrument technology brought to the subcontinent during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Age, both of which led to infusions of Timurid, Central Asian, and Persian culture. Innovations in North Indian instrument design and instrumental music under Mughal patronage during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attest to the dynamism, syncretism, and relatively recent evolution of these instruments as we know them.[66]

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[65] Allyn Miner writes, "Despite the prominence of the *sitar* and *sarod* in North Indian music and their renown throughout the world, little written information is available on the pre-20th-century history of these instruments. Accounts of early players and their music lie hidden in the oral histories of professional family lines, and in 19th-century books, largely inaccessible even to serious students." Her study aims to fill gaps in the early histories of these instruments and their players by synthesizing oral, written, and pictorial sources. Miner, *Sitar and Sarod in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997), 7.
[66] See Miner, *Sitar and Sarod,* especially "Part One: The Instruments," for histories of the *sitar*, *surbahar*, and *esraj*.

Lahiri's primary instrument, the *esraj* (also spelled *esrar*, *israj,* and *israr*), was in reality "a very recent instrument" according to S.M. Tagore.[67] By combining aspects of both the sitar and *sarangi*—a bowed fiddle whose reputation had been tarnished by its associations with courtesan performers—the esraj became a popular alternative to the latter. In Bengal, the esraj gained traction in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries within the Bishnupur Gharana. Ramkeshav Bhattacharya, son of Ramsankar Bhattacharya of Bishnupur (c. 1761-1853), the founding figure of the Bishnupur Gharana, played the esraj in Bengal as early as the first half of the nineteenth century.[68] Asheshchandra Bandyopadhyay, nephew of Bishnupur Gharana exponents Gopeshwar and Surendranath Bandyopadhay, is believed to have brought the instrument to Shantiniketan in 1937 at the request of Rabindranath Tagore.[69] He is credited with changes to instrument design and playing technique that established the esraj as a viable solo instrument. Easier to play than the sarangi and less marked by social stigma, it was also widely used to accompany the songs of Rabindranath Tagore (*Rabindra Sangeet*), and it lent itself particularly well to accompanying softer voices.[70] Its prevalence in New York during the early twentieth century was an extension of the influence of the Bishnupur Gharana. Whether or not Lahiri learned from Gopeshwar or Surendranath Bandyopadhyay directly, his training in esraj can be traced to a Bengali musical culture shaped by their pedagogical efforts.

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[67] Miner, *Sitar and Sarod*, 58-59.
[68] Williams, "Hindustani music between Awadh and Bengal," 309.
[69] Romit Roy, "Ranadhir Roy, his esraj, and his music" (unpublished article, n.d.), https://www.academia.edu/37776865/Ranadhir_Roy_his_esraj_and_his_music.
[70] Miner, *Sitar and Sarod*, 58-59.

In reference to Lahiri's drums, the *tabla* and *baya* (often transliterated *banya* in the references from 1920s-30s New York) are similarly described as "ancient" and "Hindu" in origin. Rebecca Stewart's 1974 dissertation, "The Tabla in Perspective," however, dates the first depictions of "hand-played drum pairs in contiguous areas of northwestern India" to the middle of the eighteenth century—firmly within the Mughal period—noting the "first absolutely clear iconographic depiction of an instrument which closely resembles the present-day tabla" appeared in 1808.[71] The drums belonging to Lahiri, claimed to be "the only set actually in use throughout the Western Hemisphere" were likely not even the only set in New York. We know Hazrat Inayat Khan and the Royal Musicians of Hindustan had employed a tabla player in New York in 1910 and we also have evidence Lahiri worked with multiple tabla players during his stint with the Trio Ragini in the early 1920s. Beyond that, any communities of Indian immigrant musicians to settle elsewhere in the country—for instance, those in the San Francisco Bay Area referenced in literature on Henry Cowell's childhood—would likely have had access to tabla (referring to the set of *tabla* and *baya*), which are musically indispensable and relatively easy to transport.

Historical and organological details illuminated by ethnomusicological research in the second half of the twentieth century may well have been unknown to Lahiri and his contemporaries; their ignorance does not necessarily reflect an intention to deceive audiences regarding the evolution of Hindustani music or the

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[71] Rebecca Stewart, "The Tabla in Perspective," Ph.D. diss., (University of California, Los Angeles, 1974) 6-7.

instruments used to perform it. But as both a recipient and propagator of nationalist narratives circulating in Bengal during his youth, Lahiri's conceptions of "Hindu Music" made little room for musical innovation under Mughal patronage. Muslim influences on North Indian music tended to be viewed by European Orientalists—and consequently by the Indian cultural nationalists who inherited and refigured their ideas—as deviations from the unadulterated forms of Hindu antiquity. This framework allowed nationalist reformers to venerate what they deemed worthy of preservation and revival as "pure," "ancient," and "Hindu," while the inconvenient realities of the musical present could be dismissed as symptoms of centuries of corrupting Islamic influence.

For readers unconvinced by rhetoric alone, the booklet concludes with critical testimonials and a list of "patrons for whom Sarat Lahiri and Lota have given their intimate recitals" (figure 3.11). These concluding sections are offered as proof of the "universal endorsement" and "spontaneous and enthusiastic approval" bestowed upon Sarat Lahiri and Lota by "the world of society." The list of patrons includes numerous public figures: composers Edgard Varèse (1883-1965) and George Gershwin (1898-1937), conductor Leopold Stokowski (1882-1977), photographer Edward Steichen (1879-1973), and Irene Lewisohn (1886-1944), founder of both the Neighborhood Playhouse Theatre and the Museum of Costume Art. Nationalist poet and Gandhi associate Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) is the lone Indian on the list. Naidu—the sister of Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Ragini Devi's love interest —traveled to New York on occasion but remained mostly in India.

S A R A T   L A H I R I   A N D   L O T A

PATRONS FOR WHOM SARAT LAHIRI AND LOTA HAVE GIVEN THEIR INTIMATE RECITALS INCLUDE

M. Edgar Varése
Mr. Leopold Stokowski
Miss Natchiva Rhambowa
Mrs. Cyril Francklyn
Prof. Chas. Farnsworth
Miss Lila Agnew Stewart
Miss Carolyn Widman
Mr. Rouben Mamoulian
Miss Anne Morgan
Dr. William Beebe
Mr. Ezra Winter
Miss Irene Lewisohn
Mr. William M. Leslie
Mr. E. F. Hutton
Mr. George Gershwin
Miss Alice Laughlin
Miss Malvina Hoffman
Mr. Edward Steichen
Mr. J. Lawrence Erb
Mme. Alla Nazimova
Mme. Sarojini Naidu
Dr. Nicolai Sokoloff
M. Alexander Kerensky

**Figure 3.11 "Patrons for whom Sarat Lahiri and Lota have given their intimate recitals" (1928).**

**Figure 3.12 Sarat Lahiri and Lota, photo by Arnold Genthe (1932), *Genthe Collection*, Library of Congress.**

The promotional savviness of Sarat Lahiri and Lota, paired with the racial ambiguity associated with Lahiri's Brahmin caste identity and Lota's transnational origins, allowed the duo to capitalize on the relative ignorance and abundant enthusiasm of their American patrons. The legitimacy of Lahiri's status as "America's premier specialist and sponsor—of *authentic* Indian music" and Lota's hodgepodge of "dances of the Orient—India, Arabia, Algeria, and Polynesia" went unchallenged in the press at a time when most Americans remained unfamiliar with cultural practices from the subcontinent beyond those circulating via Orientalist representations and media stereotypes. The duo combined elements of Hindustani

music—repackaged as an ancient Hindu tradition—with contemporary renditions of Oriental dance to satisfy the intersecting modernist and Orientalist expectations of their elite New York audiences. They sought to embody the pre-modern "Other" while consciously framing their presentations through the discourse of the modern.

**Music of India to Go on Air**

RADIO listeners, July 17, will hear the expressive music of India, played by Sarat Lahiri and Lota, Hindu musicians. The Indian music will go on the air over the NBC system. The picture shows Lahiri playing a sitar, a seven-stringed instrument more than 100 years old. Leta is shown in an Indian dance pose. An esraj, an instrument first played more than 1,000 years ago, and having 17 strings, also is used by the Hindu musicians.

**Figure 3.13 "Music of India to Go on Air," *Border Cities Star*, July 14, 1928.**

## Radio, Broadway, and Beyond

With the managerial assistance of Catharine Bamman, Sarat Lahiri and Lota kept busy throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s. In April 1928, the duo presented the tenth installment of "Music Map of the World" for the New York

Edison Hour on WRNY. As guests of the Edison Ensemble, they gave “vocal and instrumental selections of temple chants, snake charmers’ weird melodies, plaintive evening songs, dances and folk songs.”[72] The ensemble itself performed numbers “selected to depict both Indian music as understood by foreign composers and the music of Hindu composers.” In June, they performed over a network of thirty-two radio stations, and in July they were featured on “Musical Miniatures,” another radio program aired across multiple networks. These 1928 broadcasts continued a period of regular radio appearances featured across major networks and publicized in regional and national newspapers.[73] The following year, one of their radio performances even aired in Vancouver, British Columbia.[74]

Lahiri also appeared in at least seven Broadway productions between 1922 and 1934. These included two seasons of *The Little Clay Cart* (which also featured Arjun Govind of the Trio Ragini) at the Neighborhood Playhouse, where it ran for over 100 shows between December 1924 and December 1926. The Sanskrit drama, attributed to the Indian playwright King Shudraka, was translated into English in 1905 by Arthur William Ryder, an instructor of Sanskrit at Harvard University.[75] Set in the mythical Indian city of *Ujjayini*, the play tells the tale of a generous but poor

[72] “Esraj and Sitar Played Over WRNY,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, April 15, 1928.
[73] Reference to the June 18, 1928, broadcast “over a network of thirty-two stations” appeared in “The Microphone Will Present,” *New York Times*, June 17, 1928. The July 17, 1928, “Musical Miniatures” performance appeared in “The Microphone Will Present,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1928. The July 17 performance was documented by other newspapers including the *Evening News* (Harrisburg, PA), the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* and the *Border Cities Star* (Windsor, Ontario).
[74] “Today’s Features,” *Vancouver Sun*, July 27, 1929.
[75] Arthur William Ryder, trans., *The Little Clay Cart (Mrcchakatika): A Hindu Drama* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1905). Available through Project Gutenberg, accessed May 25, 2023, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21020/21020-h/21020-h.htm.

Brahmin, Charudatta, as he navigates poverty, caste hierarchies, and his love for the illustrious courtesan Vasantasena.[76] At the Neighborhood Playhouse, Lahiri fittingly played "The Musician with the Esraj," presumably a twentieth-century Broadway addition to the Sanskrit drama.[77] Nonetheless, according to *Vanity Fair*, "by his arrangement and playing of the incidental music, Sarat Lahiri contributed much to its success."[78] By that time, Lahiri had already toured extensively with Ragini Devi and the Trio Ragini, but his musical role in the production garnered him attention as more than a dance accompanist.

Lahiri and Lota later appeared together in a Broadway production of *Soldiers and Women*, an "Oriental drama," which ran at the Ritz Theatre from September through October 1929. Lew Cantor's production featured incidental music by the duo, "who were also cast as the native principals, taking the parts of Khitmagar and Kiroth, with great distinction and histrionic ability."[79] Sarat Lahiri and Lota similarly provided incidental music for *Congai*, a Broadway drama set in French Indochina, directed by Rouben Mamoulian, which opened at the Harris Theatre in November 1928. Lahiri then played the role of Hamid in *Virtue's Bed*, which ran at the Hudson Theatre April through June 1930. Although the Internet Broadway Database does not recognize Lota's role in the production, an April 1930 advertisement printed in the

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[76] For more on the play and the cultural significance of Vasantasena, see Madhur Gupta, *Courting Hindustan: The Consuming Passions of Iconic Women Performers of India* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2023), 33-44.
[77] "Sarat Lahiri," *Internet Broadway Database*, accessed January 20, 2022, https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-cast-staff/sarat-lahiri-48730.
[78] "Sarat Lahiri and Lota," HCC, NYPL, Box 162, Folder 3.
[79] Ibid.

*Hartford Courant* shows the duo appearing together.[80] Both with and without Lota, Lahiri's Broadway career primarily entailed providing exotic soundtracks for "Oriental" productions set in far-off lands, while occasionally taking on small acting roles as "native" characters. According to his old friend Winthrop Sargeant, "he appeared in countless Broadway productions as a piece of exotic background for everything from the French Foreign Legion to Chinese mystery plays."[81] With Orientalism in vogue in 1920s New York, these services were in high demand.

These stage and radio performances, as well as the "intimate recitals" documented in the promotional booklet, all preceded Sarat Lahiri and Lota's appearances at the New School for Social Research beginning in 1931 (discussed in the previous chapter). That same year, their touring schedule took them to Banff, Alberta, where they gave a series of performances at the Banff Springs Hotel after passing through Montreal in July (figure 3.14).[82] A February 1933 article shows the duo again "engaged in a tour of the United States," having just performed "an interesting program of music and dances of ancient India, with the use of native instruments and costumes" at the Wilson Theater in Detroit.[83]

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[80] "Display Ad 142—No Title," *Hartford Courant*, April 6, 1930.
[81] Winthrop Sargeant, "A Digression on Oriental Music," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 24, 1935.
[82] "Hindu Musicians on Art in India," *Montreal Gazette*, July 8, 1931.
[83] "Indian Program Given at Wilson," *Detroit Free Press*, February 23, 1933.

HINDU MUSICIANS
ON ART IN INDIA

Sarat Lahiri and Lota Pass
Through City on Way
to Banff

GIVE DEMONSTRATION

Prove Art as Sophisticated
as European Despite Con-
trast of East and
West

**Figure 3.14 "Hindu Musicians on Art in India," *Montreal Gazette*, July 8, 1931.**

There do not appear to be extant audio or video recordings of Sarat Lahiri and Lota performing as a duo. In January 1936, however, Lahiri made two short recordings for Victor Records with tabla accompaniment by Todi (figure 3.15).[84] Side A features an instrumental rendition of "Raga Behag" on sitar, set to the common sixteen-beat rhythmic cycle of *tintaal*. Side B contains a vocal rendition of "Raga Malkaus" in *chautaal*, a twelve-beat cycle associated with North Indian *dhrupad*—widely considered the oldest Hindustani vocal genre. Lahiri accompanies

[84] Two short studio recordings Lahiri made for Victor in January 1936 have been digitized. *Discography of American Historical Recordings*, "Lahiri, Sarat," accessed November 11, 2021, https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/names/101658. These are the only surviving recordings of Lahiri of which I am aware.

the vocal performance on the esraj.[85] The performers recorded both tracks at Studio 2 in New York on January 17. The resulting ten-inch 78-rpm gramophone record—the combined runtime of the sides totaling just over seven minutes—constitutes the only surviving sonic trace of Lahiri. The recordings indicate formal training in common Hindustani forms but do not suggest mastery or virtuosity commensurate with top *gharana* musicians in India at that time.[86]

**Figure 3.15 Sarat Lahiri and Todi, "Hindu Instrumental Music" and "Hindu Vocal Music."**

Lota becomes progressively absent from press releases and other printed materials that continued to chronicle Sarat Lahiri's career throughout the 1930s. I

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[85] Upon listening to this vocal performance, Anirban Bhattacharyya, a friend and native Bengali speaker, noted that the accent and pronunciation suggested that an American, rather than Lahiri himself, was singing the Bengali song. No performers besides Lahiri and Todi are listed, but it is possible Lahiri could have brought an American student along for the session without crediting him in the liner notes. If Lahiri is in fact the vocalist here, it raises questions about his spoken Bengali.

[86] Being an "amateur" musician would not have been considered a pejorative from an elite Hindu perspective. Professional musicianship was primarily the domain of Muslim hereditary specialists and courtesan performers into the early twentieth century and therefore connoted inferior class standing. During this period, professionalism in music and dance would not have been an appropriate pursuit for middle- and upper-class Hindu practitioners.

have found no evidence that the duo performed together after their guest appearances in Ryllis Hasoutra's dance recital at the Guild Theatre in New York on December 2, 1934.[87] Lahiri, however, remained an active performer and lecturer until his death in 1941. I turn now to his later performances and collaborations without Lota, who disappeared from the limelight by the mid-1930s. In fact, Johanna Beyer's November 1936 encounter with "the proprietor and his wife" at the Bengal Tiger constitutes the last known reference to the pair.

**Life after Lota: Lahiri with Other Musicians**

Following Lota's disappearance from the historical record, we see Sarat Lahiri partaking in a series of new collaborations with assorted musicians and dancers. This final phase of his career lasted until his sudden death in May 1941. The trend of Indian immigrant musicians supporting American dancers continued into the 1940s, but dancers from the subcontinent also began to enter the picture in the 1930s. In addition to the new personnel who performed alongside Lahiri, we see other Indian musicians establishing themselves as dance accompanists in New York. Wasantha Wana Singh, one such musician, accompanied both Ruth St. Denis and Ragini Devi during this period. Although Lahiri and Singh shared some social contacts, we have no evidence they ever performed together. Before discussing Singh, who like Lahiri played the esraj, I introduce this new set of collaborators.

[87] John Martin, "The Dance: Organization: Efforts at Cooperation for Economic and Artistic Ends," *New York Times*, November 18, 1934.

In March 1936, the *New York Times* shows Sarat Lahiri appearing with a larger ensemble of Indian musicians in support of dancer Mona Rani at Town Hall. Rani had appeared there with "her troupe of Hindu musicians" the previous year, but Lahiri was not among the personnel.[88] That 1935 ensemble had included Satyen Ghose, Nirmal Das, Mirza Jaffer, and Amar Ghose. Winthrop Sargeant, who reviewed the performance, claimed the music "lacked the spectacular elements of the Shankar group"—referring to Indian dancer Uday Shankar's ensemble—but "was on that very account more authentic" (I discuss Shankar and his troupe in Chapter 4). Sargeant credited Rani's troupe with "taste and effectiveness" in staging music not ideally suited to the concert hall. The performance earned Rani a second booking at Town Hall in 1936, when her ensemble comprised Lahiri, Jaffer, Bhupesh Guha, Dost Muhammed, Todi, and Tara.[89]

These two recitals at Town Hall bring several new performers into the mix. Judging by their names alone, both Mirza Jaffer and Dost Muhammed appear to have been Muslim musicians. Jaffer—a native of Allahabad in present-day Uttar Pradesh—worked at the Rajah restaurant, where Lahiri would end his culinary career after leaving the Bengal Tiger.[90] Nirmal Ananda Das was born in Bhagalpur, in present-day Bihar, in 1897. He arrived from Glasgow on the *S.S. Cameronia* in 1924,

[88] Winthrop Sargeant, "Mona Rani," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 4, 1935.
[89] "Hindu Dances Given by Rani in Town Hall," *New York Times*, March 22, 1936.
[90] United States Selective Service System, "Mirza Jaffer—Registration Card," *Selective Service Registration Cards, World War II: Fourth Registration.* Records of the Selective Service System, Record Group Number 147.

likely qualifying for immigration exemptions as a student.[91] Prior to his stint with Mona Rani and company, Das had appeared in "A Cultural Evening" at Roerich Hall in 1932.[92] He then presented a radio broadcast entitled "Heart Beats of India" on WBNX New York in 1933.[93] Around that time, Satyen Ghose was employed as a "Hindu" interpreter,[94] and appeared in one theatrical production in 1932 that included a play based on the *Ramayana* and another depicting the life of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan.[95] The program featured three concerts by Indian musicians, including an esraj duet performed by Ghose and Bhupesh Guha with tabla provided by Mohammed Yusuf. In reality, Mohammed Yusuf and Dost Muhammed may have been two names circulating for one person in the New York press. *Dost* merely means "friend" in Hindi-Urdu, and no references place Mohammad Yusuf and Dost Muhammed at the same events. It is also possible, though seemingly less likely, that two Muslim musicians alternated public appearances within this small network of immigrant performers. The final member of Rani's 1935 ensemble, Amar Kumar

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[91] "List or Manifest of Alien Passengers," *New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists (including Caste Garden and Ellis Island), 1820-1957*, Microfilm Serial: T715, 1897-1957; Line 6, Page 17.

[92] "A Cultural Evening," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 27, 1932. The Nicholas Roerich Museum, which houses the works of Russian-born artist Nicholas Roerich, who specialized in nature scenes from the Himalayas, opened at 310 Riverside Drive (the location given in the newspaper article) in 1929.

[93] "Radio Programs," *Brooklyn Times Union*, December 15, 1933.

[94] New York State Dept. of Civil Service, "Ghose, Satyen," *New York State Employee History Cards, 1894-1954,* Series: 15029.

[95] "Mysticism and Charm of India Pervade Atmosphere for Meeting of Cosmopolitan Club," *Montclair Times* (Montclair, NJ), April 12, 1932.

Ghose, was a native of Calcutta. Sometime after arriving in New York, he married Opal Bridges of Tennessee, and they had two children, Tara and Ronen.[96]

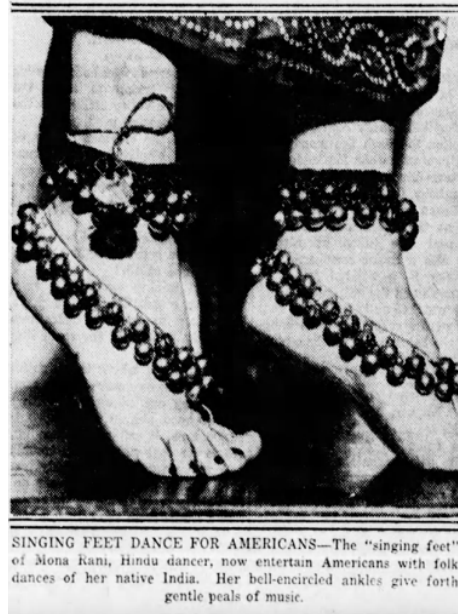


**Figure 3.16 "Singing Feet Dance for Americans," *Standard-Sentinel* (Hazleton, PA), April 8, 1935.**

Nirmal Das, Satyen Ghose, and Amar Ghose are absent from the 1936 reference, but we see Todi and Tara join the ensemble. These may have been stage names for Satyen Ghose and Amar Ghose, unless Amar Ghose's then four-year-old child Tara performed in his absence. Perhaps these names were devised to differentiate Ghose from Ghose. Such a solution would also explain the mystery of Todi's identity. In support of this theory, a 1938 article in the *Times* lists Rani's

[96] USDC/BC, *U.S. Census, 1940: Population Schedule*, New York, New York, Enumeration District 31-1151B, Page 4A.

musical assistants as Mirza Jaffer, Nirmal Das, Sarat Lahiri, Bhupesh Guha, Todi, Tara, Shriram, and Dost Muhommed (yet a third spelling of the prophet's name).[97] If Todi and Tara indeed turn out to be Satyen and Amar Ghose, then this lineup accounts for the sum of musicians who joined Rani in 1935 and 1936 with the addition of someone known as "Shriram." Apart from Mona Rani's troupe, Todi appeared with Lahiri regularly throughout this period at the New School, on the Victor record discussed earlier, and eventually at the Rajah restaurant, where the duo performed nightly. Todi was almost certainly a stage name derived from a family of North Indian ragas, but we are left to theorize about the identity of this performer.

**Figure 3.17 (left): Mrs. John A.P. Millet, *Buffalo Evening News*, April 14, 1923.**
**Figure 3.18 (right): Mona Rani plays the *vina*, *Sunday Journal and Star*, May 12, 1935.**

[97] John Martin, "The Dance," *New York Times*, January 17, 1938.

At first glance, Mona Rani appears to be the first “Hindu dancer” discussed in this work to actually hail from India. A 1935 article by Carol Bird, which circulated in magazine sections around the United States, declares, “Mona Rani is a native of Southern India and of Rajput descent…a Hindu dancer, in America at present interpreting the pure native folk music and folk dances of India.”[98] Bird credits Rani with singing in both Hindustani and Marathi, which she calls “the Indian language that most nearly resembles the ancient Sanskrit mother tongue,” and identifies several of her Indian ancestors by name. Bird’s references to Rani’s South Indian origins and Rajput descent raise questions; Rajput lineages typically trace their roots to Rajasthan, a northern region. But the inclusion of named relatives in India, along with their places of residence, helps dispel concerns about the veracity of Rani’s backstory.

The reality of Rani’s story, however, is somewhat more complex. A March 1935 announcement for her first recital at Town Hall notes, “Mona Rani is Mrs. John A.P. Millet of New York, with whom Mrs. Handley went to India last year.”[99] Hester Merwin Handley turns out to be the artist behind an exhibition of portraits from Afghanistan then on display in Los Angeles. An article in the *Decatur Herald* explains, “she went to the Orient with Mrs. John A. P. Millet of New York, exponent of Indian folk and classical dances, on a commission to study costumes and ancient art of India for adaptation to theatrical production in this country. When her

[98] Carol Bird, “Is Fate Cruel to Hindu Women?,” *Sunday Journal and Star* (Lincoln, NE), May 12, 1935.
[99] “Hester Handley Aids N.Y. Show,” *Pantagraph* (Bloomington, IL), March 31, 1935.

commission in India was completed, Mrs. Handley went on into Afghanistan alone."[100] As for Mrs. John A. P. Millet, she was born Alice Morrill (spelled Murrell in some immigration records). We learn from the *Washington Herald* that her marriage to John A.P. Millet in 1913 "brought to a culmination a romance which is said to have started in India several years ago."[101] The 1920 U.S. Census shows John Millet—born in England to two parents from Maine—and Alice Millett—born in "East India" to two British parents—residing with their daughter Jeanne, son Bradford, and one servant in Buffalo, N.Y.[102] The document gives 1895 for her year of immigration to the United States and 1910 for her naturalization. Records of Morrill's September 1911 arrival from Southampton, England (she traveled to and from the United States repeatedly), corroborate that she was born in British India circa 1889.[103]

It is unclear when Mrs. John A.P. Millet of Buffalo decided to pursue a career in dance under the stage name Mona Rani, but by 1935—at the age of 46—she gave her first publicized recital in New York City with the assistance of the Indian musicians discussed above. Mrs. Millet appears to have been a woman of society, graced with the financial means and social connections to hire musicians and book recitals at prestigious New York venues as well as the racial privilege to move freely

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[100] "Headhunting With Pencil and Crayon," *Decatur Herald*, January 20, 1935.
[101] "Doings of Society In and Around Washington," *Washington Herald*, May 18, 1913.
[102] USDC/BC, *U.S. Census, 1920: Population Schedule*, Buffalo Ward 25, Erie County, New York, Enumeration District: 251, Page 12A.
[103] "List of Manifest of Alien Passengers, *S.S. St. Paul*, September 9, 1911," *New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island, 1820-1957*, Line 16, Page 176.

between the United States and colonial India. Considering her parents were both British, it is hard to imagine she had Rajput ancestors even if she was technically a native of India by birth. After arriving in the United States at age six and becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen at age twenty-one, Mrs. Millet (i.e., Mona Rani) continued to travel to India, where she also allegedly met her husband, well into her forties. Regardless of what we make of the discrepancies between her racial and class background and her engagements with Indian music and dance as a purported native practitioner, there appears to be little doubt that her presentations were rooted in firsthand encounters with these art forms. Like Ragini Devi, Rani surrounded herself with immigrant musicians in New York and claimed to present American audiences and critics with authentic renditions of “Hindu” music and dance. Unlike Ragini Devi, however, she actually appears to have studied these dance forms prior to performing them before the American public. We return to Mona Rani in the following chapter within a broader conversation about Oriental dance.

**Bhupesh Guha and Sushila**

Beginning in 1937, Sarat Lahiri also appeared with Bhupesh Guha of Mona Rani’s troupe and his partner Sushila Shikari (Janadas). On December 19, dance critic John Martin (1893-1985) of the *New York Times* announced “Sarat Lahiri, Todi, Sushila Shikari, and Bhupesh Guha in dances and music of India” at the Dance International, a New York festival featuring performers from around the world. Indian dancer Uday Shankar and his company of “Hindu dancers and musicians”

performed at the event, as did Anna Pavlova, the Russian ballerina with whom he had collaborated. American modern dancer Martha Graham and her group presented two new solo dances featuring music by Henry Cowell.[104]

**Figure 3.19 "Hindu Dancers—Bhupesh Guha and Sushila Janadas," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, March 11, 1947.**

Bhupesh Chandra Guha was born in Bengal in 1902 and arrived in New York in 1924 aboard the *S.S. Deutschland*.[105] His father, "a district mayor and judge in India," had urged him to pursue an engineering degree in Germany, but once in the

[104] John Martin, "The Dance: Busy Times," *New York Times*, December 19, 1937.
[105] National Archives at Riverside, Riverside, CA, "Bhupesh Chandra Guha, Petition for Naturalization, March 31, 1954," *Petitions for Naturalization, U.S. District Court for the Central District of California (Los Angeles), 1940-1991*, NAI Number: 594890, *Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685-2009*, Record Group Number 21.

United States, Guha turned his attention to dance. He met Sushila Shikari, who was studying journalism at Columbia University, and the two became partners around 1935. While we have evidence Guha was born in Calcutta and later immigrated to the United States, records indicate Sushila—who often went by only her first name—was born in New York in May 1905.[106] Promotional materials, however, refer to the duo as two dancers "from the Bengal province."[107] In 1942, one critic observed:

> Many Westerners have made the long journey to India to study the mysteries of *natya* (ancient laws and rules of Hindu drama and dance). Dancers Guha and Sushila did the opposite. Hindus themselves, they were both in the U.S. when they decided to devote themselves to the infinite hours of study that natya demands.[108]

In 1939, Jane Corby of the *Brooklyn Eagle* claimed, "this fellow Bhupesh Guha…is the only teacher of Hindu arts in New York City. He has a school of dancing at 110 E. 59th St., Manhattan. His aim is to bring eastern dances, especially the Hindu dances, to America."[109] According to Guha's World War II draft card, he resided at the 59th Street address.[110] Corby's article, which includes detailed descriptions of costumes and instruments, notes that Guha's troupe comprised four musicians and seven "dancing girls." Only tabla player Mohammed Yusuf (spelled Yousiff in the article) is identified by name. The article credits Yusuf with playing rhythms "so

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[106] "Sushila Janadas," *California, U.S., Death Index, 1940-1997*, Los Angeles, December 24, 1989.
[107] "Exotic Presentation of Hindu Dances with Native Accompaniment," Papers of Godha Ram Channon, South Asian American Digital Archive, accessed June 22, 2021, saada.org/browse/collection/godha-ram-channon-papers.
[108] "Music: Dances of Hindustan," *TIME*, March 16, 1942.
[109] Jane Corby, "Impresario…at Twenty-One," *Brooklyn Eagle*, February 23, 1939.
[110] United States, Selective Service System "Registration Card—Bhupesh Chandra Guha," *U.S., WWII Draft Registration Cards for New York City, 1940 – 1947. Records of the Selective Service System, Record Group Number 147.*

complicated that even [jazz drummer] Gene Krupa couldn't keep up with him"—a claim that appears to have originated with the tabla player himself. After introducing Yusuf, Corby contends, "All of the troupe, incidentally, are high-caste society. Guha himself belongs to the warrior caste, very close to the highest in India."[111] Here Guha, like Lahiri before him, appears to flaunt high-caste status as a means of authenticating the artistic practices he presented to the American public.

FEATURES
SPORTS
BROOKLYN EAGLE
CLASSIFIED
COMICS
W
BROOKLYN, N. Y., THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 1939
Entered in the Brooklyn Postoffice as 2d Class Mail Matter
Bhupesh Guha and two of his dancing girls in characteristic pose
Hindu musicians who will furnish music for Hindu dancers.
Impresario . . .
. . at Twenty-One

**Figure 3.20 Front page, *Brooklyn Eagle*, February 23, 1939.**

By 1944, Bhupesh Guha and Sushila—who around this time started using the surname Janadas (which vital records suggest was her real name)—had moved to Los Angeles, where they continued to perform and teach dance. Their new ensemble

[111] South Asian Muslims, while not impervious to social hierarchy, are generally regarded as outside of the Hindu caste system.

of “native musicians” on the West Coast included Kalu Shankar, Mohammed Tahir, Kamelesh Ray, and Prabhat Bhattacharya.[112] Guha eventually became involved in the Hollywood film industry, appearing in such films as *Bwana Devil* (1952) and *The Rains of Ranchipur* (1955), which was nominated for an Oscar for special effects.[113] He later completed a film on Hindu dancing entitled *Dance of Creation* and went on to work in television into the 1960s.

Following a decade-long run that spanned both coasts, Sushila Janadas and Bhupesh Guha appeared together less often once Guha married his “star pupil,” Ananka Z. Rameses, in 1947. Miss Rameses, a nineteen-year-old native of California, “descended from Hindu and Egyptian parents,” according to the *Los Angeles Times*.[114] The couple hosted two weddings, one “American style” and one “Hindu.” Janadas, like Guha, remained in Los Angeles, and by the mid-1950s became one of two directors of the “Ethnic Dance Theater,” which opened its third season at the Wilshire Ebells Theater in 1955.[115] She also dabbled in the Hollywood film industry in the 1950s.[116] Guha and Janadas would live in California until both died in 1989. Janadas’s brief *Los Angeles Times* obituary reads, “Janadas, Sushila of

[112] “To Present Dances,” *Pasadena Star-News*, May 17, 1946.
[113] “Bhupesh Guha (1902-1989),” *IMDb*, accessed February 2, 2023, IMDb.com.
[114] “Hindu Couple to Wed With Two Rituals,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 1947.
[115] “Wilshire Ebell Bills Ethnic Dance Theater,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1955.
[116] “Freedom Is Observed,” *Arizona Republic*, January 20, 1952. In reference to Sushila’s activities, the article reads, “Sushila, now working in an MGM picture, will perform ‘The Garland Dance,’ and ‘Dance of Tilanga.’ She has concertized in America and Europe, was invited by the governments of Japan and Mexico to perform and to work with government education departments in their countries. During World War II she danced for the Dutch government to raise funds for ravaged areas.”

Los Angeles and New York passed away December 24, 1989. Memorial service will be 4 pm Saturday, March 3 at the Vedanta Center, Hollywood."[117]

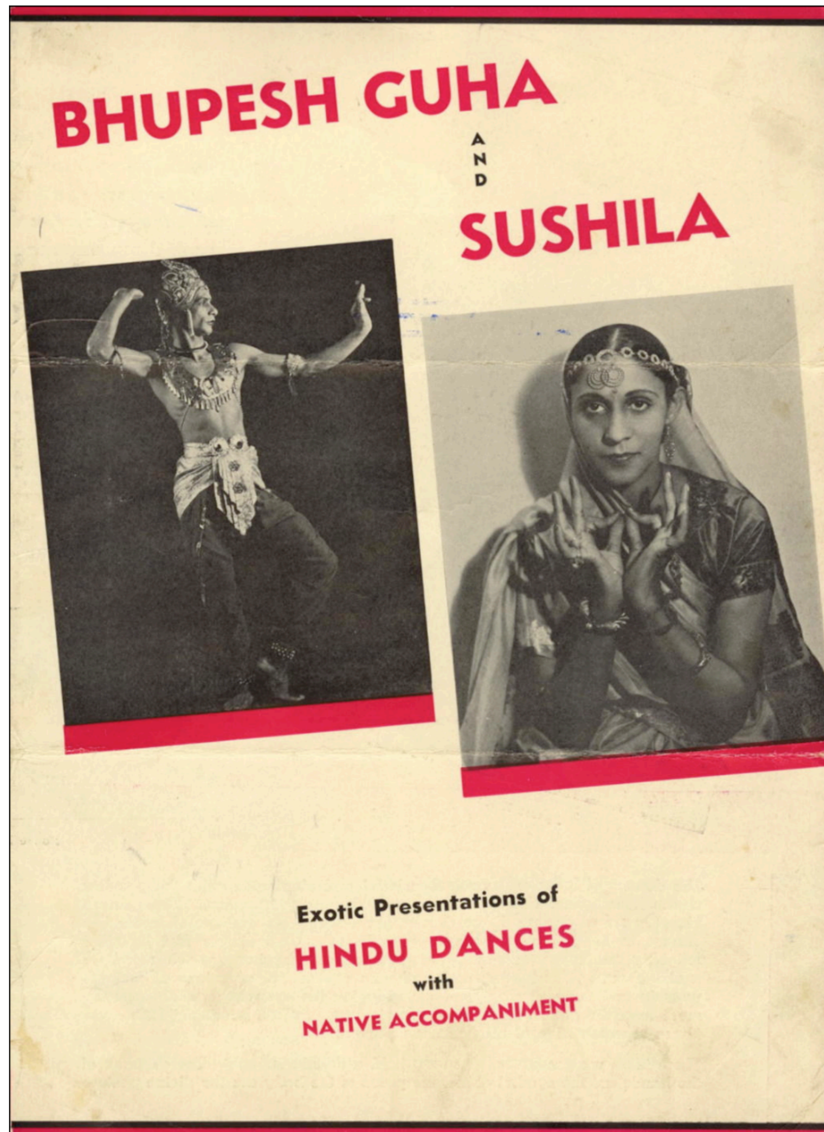


**Figure 3.21 Bhupesh Guha and Sushila:**
**Exotic Presentations of Hindu Dances with Native Accompaniment,**
**Papers of Godha Ram Channon, South Asian American Digital Archive.**

[117] "Death Notices/Funeral Announcements," *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 1990.

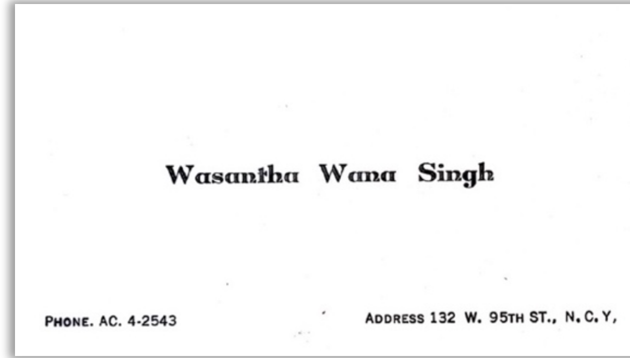


**Figure 3.22 Wasantha Wana Singh business card, Henry Cowell Collection, New York Public Library.[118]**

## Wasantha Wana Singh

Although there is no record he ever appeared with Sarat Lahiri, a Ceylonese musician named Wasantha Wana Singh kept intersecting social circles in 1930s New York.[119] Like Lahiri, he played the esraj, though Singh long outlived Lahiri and went on to teach numerous American students in the 1960s and 1970s.[120] In 1975, he also published a book, entitled *Musical India: An Advanced Treatise on the History, Theory, and Practice of India's Music*, which aimed to "elucidate the philosophical and idealistic aspects" of Indian music and rebut what he perceived to be musicological biases against the art.[121]

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[118] HCC, NYPL, Box 162, Folder 1. It is unclear when Cowell received this card, but we know Singh performed at the New School with a group of Indian musicians in 1948. See Schimpf, "A Transcultural Student," 99-100.

[119] Brian Silver notes, "the *sarod* player, Vasantha Wanna [sic] Singh" also befriended American Armenian composer Alan Hovhaness in New York in 1944 (Silver, "Henry Cowell and Alan Hovhaness," 70).

[120] Andre Fludd, "Indian Classical Music in the New York Metropolitan Area: The Development of a Transnational Ecosystem," Ph.D. diss., (City University of New York, 2021), 54-55.

[121] Wasantha Wana Singh, *Musical India: An Advanced Treatise on the History, Theory, and Practice of India's Music* (New York: Pageant-Poseidon, 1975), ix.

Although Singh is briefly featured in a 2021 dissertation by Andre Fludd on Indian classical music in the New York Metropolitan area, I first discovered his name on an undated business card tucked away in the Cowell Collection at the NYPL (figure 3.22). According to my research, Singh was born on the island of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1894 and claimed to have arrived New York in 1909.[122] In September 1929, he married Gertrude Heller—a Jewish Brooklyn native—in Manhattan. 1940 Census records show the couple living with their eight-year-old daughter, Louise, at 132 West 95th Street—the address listed on Singh's business card.[123] The Census identifies Singh as a "concert musician" in the "theater" industry.

Six years earlier, in December 1934, Wasantha Wana Singh had first appeared in U.S. newspapers as the conductor of "a native string ensemble" that supplied "the Hindoo music" for a "Night in India"—a theatrical journey to the East featuring dances by Ruth St. Denis and commentary by "world traveler" Lowell Thomas.[124] The production, staged by the Geographic Players under the patronage of Sir Gerald Campbell, the British consul-general in New York, honored the "hundredth anniversary of the discovery of tea" in India. Newspapers around the nation publicized the event.

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[122] Southern District of New York, "Petition for Naturalization—Wasantha Wana Singh" *New York, U.S., State and Federal Naturalization Records, 1794-1943.*

[123] USDC/BC, *U.S. Census, 1940: Population Schedule*, New York, New York, Enumeration District 31-762, Page 61B.

[124] "Exotic 'Night in India' Marks Its 100th Anniversary of Tea," *Edinburg Daily Courier* (Edinburg, IN), December 18, 1934.

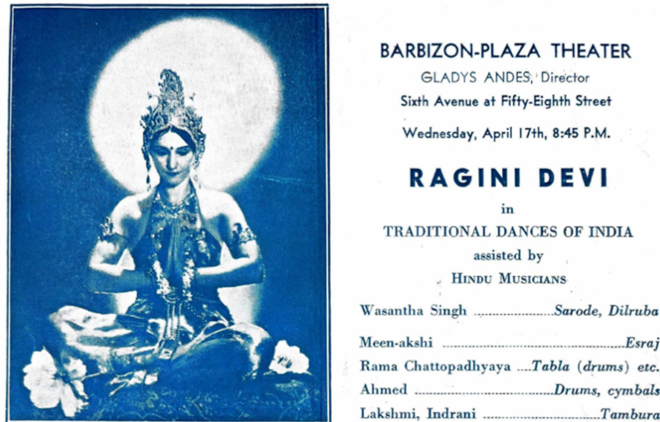


**Figure 3.23 Program for Ragini Devi at Barbizon-Plaza Theater, April 17, 1940 (see Appendix B).**

The 1930s proved relatively quiet for Singh in terms of press coverage, but by the early 1940s his name circulated in newsprint with more regularity. In 1940, Singh, Meenakshi (a student of Singh's), and Rama Chattopadhyaya (the son of Devi's former lover, the activist, poet, and musician Harindranath Chattopadhyaya) all accompanied Ragini Devi, who had recently returned from nearly a decade in India dating to her elopement with Rama's father. A 1940 program for a recital at Barbizon-Plaza Theater (figure 3.23) lists the complete personnel of the new ensemble, which featured Singh on sarod and *dilruba*, Meenakshi on esraj, and the young Chattopadhyaya on tabla.[125] An additional performer, Ahmed, played "drums and cymbals," while Lakshmi, elsewhere identified as Singh's daughter, and Indrani,

[125] "Ragini Devi: Traditional Dances of India," Hadassah Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, NYPL, Box 4, Folder 7.

likely the daughter Ragini Devi bore shortly after her 1930 arrival in Chennai, supplied the *tanpura* (here referred to as *tambura*) drone.

In 1942, Singh made newspaper headlines as far west as Great Falls, MT for an incident involving his misplaced esraj. After Singh forgot his instrument in a New York taxi, a befuddled cabbie—Harry Oches—took it to the police station. "I think it must be some kind of banjo," he told the police.[126] Oches then recalled that "one of his passengers had been an Indian music teacher named Singh." Wasantha Singh later "claimed the instrument and departed in as happy a mood as were the enlightened cops." Case closed. Why this seemingly insignificant incident garnered attention in newspapers around the country can likely only be contextualized by the Orientalism of the era. It was nonetheless the most widely publicized moment of Singh's long career.

In 1943, a journalist announced, "Mahatma Gandhi's nephew, Wasantha Wana Singh, will lead the Indian musicians at the Cafe Society Concert at Carnegie on Sunday."[127] Although this genetic link to India's most famous nationalist appears tenuous, Singh did openly support nationalist political causes in New York. That November, Singh—the "director of the India School of Music, Manhattan"—offered a musical program following a lecture by Bengali revolutionary Taraknath Das (of Ghadar fame) that condemned British actions in India and implored Americans to support the independence movement.[128] Other performers at the "colorful exhibition

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[126] Singh Recovers His Missing Israj," *Great Falls Tribune* (Great Falls, MT), May 15, 1942.
[127] Leonard Lyons, "The Lyons Den," *Montgomery Advertiser*, April 13, 1943.
[128] "100,000 Dying in India Weekly, Says Lecturer," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 4, 1943.

of Eastern music and dancing" included Lakshmi Singh, Sant Ram Mandal, Meenakshi, and Hadassah (a Palestinian-American Oriental dancer).[129]

The previous year, Singh had appeared at the Golden Gate Ballroom in Harlem alongside Meenakshi (here spelled Minakshi) and Rama Chattopadhyaya for a large solidarity event called The People's Rally and Drama on the Four Freedoms. In addition to prominent American guests from across the racial spectrum, the Harlem concert—which was sponsored by Orson Welles, the *Negro Quarterly*, and the Negro Labor Victory Committee—featured performers and speakers from various colonized territories. Following the brutal lynching of three Black Americans in Mississippi, a coalition of activists from Africa, India, China, the West Indies, and Latin America joined Black activists to "pledge anew their determination to defeat Nazism and Fascism" at home and abroad.[130] An advertisement in the *New York Age* detailed the scope of the event's global aims:

> To Beat the Axis!
> Give equality and freedom to Negroes!
> Put lynchers to death as traitors!
> End all colonial oppression in Africa Now!
> Self-government for the West Indies!
> Independence for India!
> Free Gandhi, Nehru, etc.[131]

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[129] Fludd notes that although "Singh's early performances were mostly music, later performances were listed as dance and featured his daughter, Lakshmi Wana Singh." According to Fludd, both Mandal and Meenakshi were students of Singh. Upon his death in 1962, Mandal was remembered as "Broadway's Hindu Astrologer," and a 1942 article in the *Washington Post* identified Meenakshi as both "a student of Singh" and "an American girl" ("Indian Classical Music," 56-57).
[130] "People's Rally and Drama of Four Freedoms to be Held at Golden Gate Ballroom, Nov. 15," *New York Age*, October 31, 1942.
[131] "People's Rally and Drama on the Four Freedoms," *New York Age*, November 7, 1942.

# Harlem's Biggest Event

AT

## GOLDEN GATE BALLROOM

Lenox Avenue and 142nd Street

## Sunday 3 p. m. Nov. 15th

**MUSIC SONGS DANCES**

## The Four Freedoms In Action

FOR

AFRICA, C. E. Odok

INDIA, Wasantha Wana Singh, Kumar Goshal, Rama Chattopadhyay, Miss Minakshi

WEST INDIES, Belle Rosette

LATIN AMERICA, Juan Antonio Corretjer, Daniel Santos

CHINA, Liu Liang-Mo

AMERICA, A. C. Powell, Jr., Earl Robinson, Angelo Herndon, Josh White, Sam Gary

Sponsored by: Orson Welles, The Negro Quarterly, Negro Labor Victory Committee

**500 SEATS AT 55 CENTS, RESERVED**

**BUY YOURS NOW!**

Other Prices: 83c, $1-10, $1.65. Boxes seating 6, $4.40

On sale at: The Negro Quarterly, 67 W. [illegible] St., SA. [illegible]; Negro Labor Victory Committee, 67 W. [illegible] St., AT. [illegible]; Bookshop, [illegible] E. [illegible] St., AL. [illegible]; [illegible] Music Room, [illegible] W. [illegible] St., LO. [illegible];

**Figure 3.24 "Harlem's Biggest Event," *New York Age*, November 14, 1942.**

Each cultural delegation included both speakers and musical performances (see figure 3.24). Before Singh, Meenakshi, and Chattopadhyaya performed, Indian writer and lecturer Kumar Ghoshal presented the case for Indian independence to the assembled company. Just over two months earlier, Ghoshal had addressed a crowd of more than four thousand at a free-India rally sponsored by the Council on African American Affairs.[132] Joining him on that occasion, artist and activist Paul Robeson (1898-1976) and other notable speakers, comprising mainly labor leaders and Black organizers, advocated for an Indian national government that could stand as an ally of the United Nations in the war effort against the Axis powers.

One Chicago newspaper deemed the November 1942 Harlem event "one of the greatest demonstrations ever held in the community."[133] The *New York Age* proclaimed, "Encouraged by the tremendous response to the November 15th meeting at the Golden Gate Ballroom, on 'The Meaning of the Four Freedoms to the Negro and the Colonial People of the World'….American Negroes and all the common people everywhere are ready now to deal a mighty death blow to fascism."[134] Recognizing the links between racial oppression in the United States, colonial imperialism, and the spread of fascism in Europe, the event provided a resonant expression of the Afro-Asian solidarity politics articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois and enshrined at the Bandung Conference in 1955.

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[132] "Throngs Roar Approval: 4000 Applaud Demand for Indian National Government," *California Eagle* (Los Angeles, CA), September 10, 1942.
[133] "Harlem to See People's Drama on Four Freedoms," *Chicago Defender* (National edition), November 7, 1942.
[134] "Committee Finds Response for 'Four Freedoms' Rally Good," *New York Age*, November 7, 1942.

Romantic

Hindu Music

by

Sarat Lahiri

& Todi

—•—

every night

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235 WEST 48th STREET

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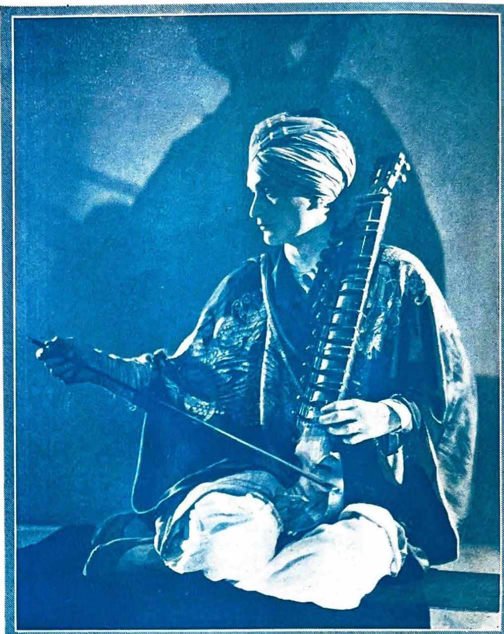

Steichen

"India's age-old musical art offers much from which the modern Western musician may learn. Sarat Lahiri is known among savants as a leading authority on everything pertaining to the theory and practice of Indian music."

— Winthrop Sargeant
Contributing Editor, Time Magazine.

Instruction in Hindu Music - the Ragas (Modes) and the Rhythms - offered to interested students by Sarat Lahiri.

COlumbus 5-8922

**Figure 3.25 "Romantic Hindu Music by Sarat Lahiri and Todi—Every Night at The Rajah." (see Appendix B).**

## Lahiri at the Rajah

By the time Ragini Devi and her new ensemble performed at Barbizon-Plaza in 1940, Sarat Lahiri had left the Bengal Tiger and associated himself with the Rajah, another Indian restaurant in the Theater District run by Rustom Wadia, a Parsi from Bombay.[135] Although Lahiri did not perform at Devi's 1940 recital, the printed program for the event included a full-page ad for the Rajah (figure 3.25), where Lahiri gave nightly performances of "romantic Hindu music" accompanied by Todi on tabla. Lahiri also offered "instruction in Hindu music" to "interested students."[136] The advertisement contains a testimonial penned by Winthrop Sargeant, New York music critic and coauthor of Lahiri's 1931 article in *Musical Quarterly*. It reads, "India's age-old musical art offers much from which the modern Western musician may learn. Sarat Lahiri is known among savants as a leading authority on everything pertaining to the theory and practice of Indian music."

In his last publicized appearance on June 13, 1940, Sarat Lahiri performed with Todi at a benefit concert for "refugee victims of fascism" a fundraiser sponsored by The International Relief Association and the New World Resettlement Fund at Barbizon-Plaza Concert Hall. This event preceded the "Four Freedoms" rally in Harlem by over two years and also shows Indian musicians in New York engaging in wartime causes. Less than a year later, Lahiri would be dead. On May 2, 1941, at the age of 44, he suffered a "spontaneous hemorrhage" into his cerebrum and died at

[135] Krishnendu Rai, *The Ethnic Restaurateur* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 42.
[136] "Ragini Devi: Traditional Dances of India," Hadassah Papers, NYPL, Box 4, Folder 7.

Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan.[137] The "occupation" field on the death certificate reads:

*A. Trade, Profession, or particular kind of work done… Musician.*

*B. Industry or business in which work was done… Restaurant.*

Rustom Wadia of the Rajah signed the form:

*Relationship to Deceased: Friend. Address: 235 W-48th St. N.Y.C.*

Several days later, a short article in the *New York Herald Tribune* announced, "Sarat Lahiri Funeral: Hindu Musician and Lecturer Dead at 46; Owned Restaurant Here."[138] The article (which misstates Lahiri's age) continues:

> Funeral services for Sarat Lahiri, Hindu musician, composer and lecturer on the art and history of Hindu music, will be held at 2:30 p.m. today at the Devlin Funeral Parlor, 404 West Fifty-first Street.
> Mr. Lahiri who was forty-six years old, died of a paralytic stroke in a hospital here on Friday. He lived at 862 Eighth Avenue.
> Mr. Lahiri arranged the musical scores for "The Little Clay Cart" and had appeared at many colleges including Bryn Mawr, Vassar, The University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, and Sarah Lawrence. He formerly was owner of the Bengal Tiger Restaurant and for more than a year had been with the Rajah Restaurant, 235 West Forty-eighth Street.

Thus ended the career of Sarat Lahiri, Bengali Brahmin, who at the time of his death had resided in the United States for some twenty-two years.

In emphasizing Lahiri's relative class and caste privilege—arguably the primary reasons we know anything about him at all—it is easy to overlook the

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[137] Department of Health, Borough of Manhattan, *Extracted Death Index 1862-1948*. "Certificate of Death—Certificate No. 10035," May 5, 1941.
[138] "Sarat Lahiri Funeral: Hindu Musician and Lecturer Dead at 46; Owned Restaurant Here," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 6, 1941.

hardships he undoubtedly faced. Even if Lahiri benefited from exemptions to the restrictive immigration codes of 1917 and 1924, he lived for over two decades as a first-generation immigrant in a land that offered him no path to citizenship. Even as he self-represented as white to access cultural spaces that may have been foreclosed to his darker or less literate contemporaries, he had to hustle as a working musician and restaurateur to survive in New York at the height of the Great Depression. His rhetorical positioning reflects the biases and cultural initiatives of his native Bengali *bhadralok* milieu yet conveys an acute awareness of the tastes and preferences dictated by American Orientalism and modernist discourses in the arts. Alas, we know little of the gaps in the archival record, the contours of everyday life where Lahiri busied himself with survival rather than posing for the camera.

This chapter begins and ends with Sarat Lahiri but outlines a broader network of performing artists from colonial India who lived and worked in New York between the early 1920s and the early 1940s. Lahiri provides our pathway into this history, and tracing his career through the intervening period introduces a motley crew of characters: first-generation immigrants, Americans pretending to be Indian dancers, multiracial children born of love marriages and intimacies that crossed racial and ethnic lines, and everything in between. Without any claim to comprehensiveness, my work here documents the lives of immigrant performers previously overlooked by the global histories of Hindustani music and histories of musical practice in the United States. Their stories in no way supplant those of well-known Indian musicians who came later but rather serve to contextualize them.

Moreover, this history sheds light on relationships and expectations forged between American audiences and Indian performers across elite and popular cultural domains throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## Exoticism, Cosmopolitanism, and Dance Modernism

> *Those of us belonging to Northern India who have lost the memory of the pure Indian classical dance have experienced a thrill of delight at the exhibition of dancing given by Ragini Devi. I feel grateful at the assurance it has brought to us that the ancient art is still a living tradition in India with its varied grace and vigour and subtleties of dramatic expression.*[1]
>
> —Rabindranath Tagore, 1934

In 1928, before ever traveling to India or formally studying any Indian dance form, Ragini Devi published *Nritanjali: An Introduction to Hindu Dancing*. Based on her independent research into Indian dances, the small volume nonetheless garnered critical acclaim in both India and the United States for its contributions to a field otherwise neglected by contemporary English-language literature. Then in 1930, something unexpected happened. Bajpai, who had left a job in the pharmaceutical sector to join Indian nationalist Lala Lajpat Rai and the freedom movement, invited fellow activist Harindranath Chattopadhyaya to stay with the couple in Brooklyn. Chattopadhyaya— "a handsome, youthful Indian Marxist," poet, musician, and dramatist—was the younger brother of Sarojini Naidu (an assistant to Mahatma Gandhi) and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (an Indian revolutionary who had allied himself with the Germans during World War I). Harindranath's wife,

[1] "Ragini Devi: Traditional Dances of India," Hadassah Papers, NYPL, Box 4, Folder 7.

Kamaladevi, was a leading nationalist, feminist, and early champion of India's cottage industries.[2]

According to family accounts, Devi fell hard for Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. She had long dreamt of traveling to India to seek knowledge from masters of Indian dance, and Harindranath promised to make those dreams a reality. In April 1930, the India Society of America gathered at the Town Hall Club and honored Chattopadhyaya with a gift of $1,000 for his New Theatre Movement, which aimed to establish a strong cultural link between India and the United States. Then in May, while Bajpai was off soliciting contributions to the freedom movement from members of the Ghadar Party in California, the young lovers sold the furniture in the Brooklyn apartment, gathered the money, and departed for India via Paris.[3] From there, Chattopadhyaya sailed ahead and Devi followed on a French ship from Marseilles bound for Colombo. Her Indian adventure started poorly when British officers boarded the ship and confiscated her passport (which they later returned). The agonized Bajpai had tipped off immigration authorities as to her "dubious" political connections and immigration status. At the time an American national who married an Indian automatically forfeited U.S. citizenship.[4]

It took some time before her situation improved. By the end of May, newspapers in both New York and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) were reporting on the "simultaneous disappearance" of "the beautiful dancer Sri Ragini" and "the young

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[2] Rahman, *Dancing in the Family*, 23-26.
[3] Ibid., 27.
[4] Ibid., 28.

Hindu poet Harindranath Chattopadhyaya."[5] Then on September 19, as the ship sailed from Colombo to Pondicherry, a small French enclave in South India, Devi gave birth to a baby girl, whom she named Indrani after the consort of the god Indra. The Devi-Chattopadhyaya romance soon dissolved amidst scandal, stoked by the enraged Bajpai, who "mounted a campaign to make his wife's arrival in South Asia as unpleasant as possible."[6] Harindranath subsequently fled to Bombay (now Mumbai), where he was arrested and sentenced to a year in prison for his nationalist activities.

But with the assistance of Harindranath's wife, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, who was also in jail at the time for her participation in the *Salt Satyagraha* (the famous act of nonviolent civil disobedience led by Mahatma Gandhi in protest of the British salt tax), Devi gradually found her footing in South India. She had befriended Kamaladevi years earlier while the latter was on a lecture tour in the United States; Kamaladevi then arranged a deal from prison to facilitate Ragini Devi's entrance into British India.[7] Of Kamaladevi, Sukanya Rahman, Devi's granddaughter, writes:

> Motivated by her respect and admiration for Ragini as an artist, and perhaps by her feminist ideology, this remarkable woman rose above any ill-feelings or jealousy, and from her prison cell directed her network of friends, relatives, colleagues, theosophists like Annie Besant, to assist Ragini and her baby in every way possible.[8]

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[5] Mattson, "Seductions," 115.
[6] Ibid., 116.
[7] Reena Nanda, *Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya: A Biography* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002) 56-57. Here Mattson notes, "Nanda suggests that Kamaladevi didn't know about Devi's affair with her husband until after her release from prison—but that even when she did find out, she continued to offer Devi financial and other assistance," Mattson, "Seductions," 120.
[8] Rahman, *Dancing in the Family*, 32.

Devi then befriended Venkatachalam, an art critic and friend of the Chattopadhyayas, who lived in Bangalore with Fred Harvey, a Brit who ran a Theosophical Center on the property. Aided by Venkatachalam and his contacts in literary, artistic, and Theosophical circles, Devi arranged to study with Jetti Tayamma, a leading exponent of the Mysore school of Bharatanatyam. She and Indrani departed for Mysore and her journey into Indian dance began in earnest.

By the time Ragini Devi performed at Shantiniketan at the request of Rabindranath Tagore in 1934, and garnered the praise contained in the epigraph of this chapter, she had also begun to study *Kathakali*, a theatrical dance from the South Indian state of Kerala, which, like Bharatanatyam, was entering a period of classicization fueled by nationalist revivalism. Rahman claims that when Devi began training at the Kerala Kalamandalam in 1933, she was both "the first female and the first foreigner to study Kathakali."[9] Devi would stay in India and devote herself to intensive training in Bharatanatyam and Kathakali through most of the 1930s. She toured extensively with her partner, Gopinath, presenting "Indian classical dances" to accompaniment provided by an Indian orchestra that featured a combination of North and South Indian instruments.[10] She purportedly even shared stages with the likes of Adbul Karim Khan (1893-1937) and Bismillah Khan (1916-2006), two renowned Hindustani musicians.[11] Despite some personal frictions, and a reputedly

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[9] Ibid., 44.
[10] "Classical and Traditional Indian Dances and Songs: Ragini Devi with Gopinath" (1934), Indrani Rahman Papers, NYPL, Box 3, Folder 17.
[11] Rahman, *Dancing in the Family*, 41.

brash personality, Devi emerged as an important figure in the Indian classical dance revivals of the 1930s. When she returned to New York at the end of the decade, Devi had transformed from an American posing as a native practitioner into one of the only Americans who had engaged in rigorous training in Indian dance forms. Furthermore, she did so at a critical moment when Indian performance traditions were undergoing a dynamic process of reinvention as the emerging nation contested its cultural and political sovereignty.

The remainder of this chapter contextualizes the improbable transformation of Ragini Devi as it relates to intersecting dance discourses in the decades before and after Indian independence. Building on recent contributions to scholarship on Indian dance in the transnational sphere, this chapter approaches Euro-American Oriental dance, modern dance movements in India and the United States, the discursive split of modern and ethnic dance during the 1930s, and the nationalist revival of multiple Indian classical dance forms as contemporaneous negotiations of nationality, culture, and identity. In detailing the connections between and among these dance forms at the level of individual performers, I situate the Indian musicians who served as dance accompanists as transnational laborers and active participants in global conversations staged by moving bodies across a spectrum of Orientalist exoticism, cultural appropriation, and transcultural negotiation. Familiar characters, including Sarat Lahiri and Lota, resurface later in this chapter, but their dance-related activities constitute a single facet of a broader conversation about Indian dance in the transnational sphere.

Following Srinivasan (2012), I position the labor and specialized knowledge of musical migrants from the subcontinent as influences on early-twentieth-century American dancers—even in some instances where it might be tempting to dismiss the dancers as ethnic impersonators, or the dances themselves as exoticist representations. I argue that these musicians, while easily overlooked in the archive, interacted with Euro-American dancers in resonant ways that shaped both their performance practices and conceptions of Indian arts and culture. By attending to the activities of working Indian musicians in this transcultural sphere, I focus on historical connections binding *Oriental*, *ethnic*, *modern*, and ultimately *Indian classical* dance during the pre-independence period. After *Oriental* dance gradually fell out of favor in Europe and the United States following the arrival of celebrated Indian dancers, such as Uday Shankar, in the 1930s, its constituent elements continued within the dual streams of *modern* and *ethnic* dance.[12] Within this binary framework, modern dance emphasized progressive individualism and spontaneous expression while ethnic dance embraced the study of specific dance forms envisioned as local and traditional, and thus "resuscitated and transformed into products of various cultures from around the world."[13]

Srinivasan's compelling argument for examining the kinesthetic contact between Ruth St. Denis and Indian nautch dancers situates the performing body as its own archive in order to reveal alternate understandings of dance histories in North

[12] Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 108-109.
[13] Susan Leigh Foster, "Worlding Dance—An Introduction," in *Worlding Dance*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.

America.[14] Drawing on Susan Leigh Foster, Srinivasan suggests, "an examination of discourses by, and through the body by focusing on its corpo-realities" where bodily reality is understood as a "tangible and substantial category of cultural experience." Along these lines, I contend that the Indian musical laborers with whom select early-twentieth-century dancers traveled, rehearsed, and performed constitute a critical presence in the intertwined bodily archives of Oriental, ethnic, modern, and Indian classical dance.

**Oriental Dance**

Oriental dance entered early-twentieth-century discourse and performance spaces as a distinctly modern, occidental invention.[15] From its inception, American and European Oriental dancers presented stylized representations of "eastern" themes and aesthetics, interpreted through a modernist lens. These stylized representations relied predominantly on reductive imaginings of "Eastern" aesthetics (often bordering on caricature) rather than careful, dedicated study of specific Asian and North African dance forms. As early as 1906, when Ruth St. Denis first presented *Radha*, a piece named for the consort of the Hindu deity Krishna, an amalgamation of exoticist and modernist sensibilities defined Oriental dance. In addition to independent research, which informed her costume and movement decisions for *Radha*, St. Denis observed North Indian nautch dancers at the "Delhi

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[14] Srinivasan, "The Bodies Beneath the Smoke," 9.
[15] Joan Erdman, "Dance Discourses: Rethinking the History of 'Oriental Dance,'" in *Moving Words: re-writing dance,* ed. Gay Morris (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 288-305.

Durbar," a living recreation of the present-day Indian capital staged by Thompson and Dundy at Coney Island in 1904. According to Srinivasan, these dancers, who traveled from colonial India to perform at Coney Island, provided St. Denis with kinesthetic examples of Indian dance from which she culled elements for her portrayal of Radha.[16]

Nautch dancers, including both actual labor migrants from the Indian subcontinent and exoticized representations of them, had become common features of popular Orientalism in the United States well prior to 1904. From the vaudeville circuit to New York theater stages, the figure of the nautch had become a fixture of the American Orientalist imagination across the spectrum of elite and popular culture.[17] St. Denis's *Radha,* however, marked a paradigmatic shift in narratives of Indian influence in the development of Euro-American modern dance. Srinivasan argues that the popular notion that St. Denis derived her inspiration from a cigarette poster erases the kinesthetic influence of the nautch dancers she saw at Coney Island. While wholly exoticist, her choreography was based, at least in part, on professional Indian dancers (who Srinivasan positions as transnational laborers) performing actual Indian dances. Beginning with St. Denis, a feedback loop of exoticist representation and modernist self-expression came to characterize early-twentieth-century Oriental dance.

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[16] See Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 67-82; Srinivasan, "The Bodies Beneath the Smoke."
[17] Bald, "Hands Across the Water," 87-88.

Exoticized representations of Oriental alterity were by no means limited to the United States. Following a journey to India in 1922-1923, Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova became intent on incorporating Oriental themes and costumes into her programs. Through "a series of aristocratic introductions" she made the acquaintance of Uday Shankar, a young painter from a village near Banaras (now Varanasi) who had traveled to London to study at the Royal College of Art.[18] In search of authentication, Pavlova asked Shankar to help her choreograph two ballets with Indian themes. He accepted. At the time he had minimal training in Indian dance, but his ethnic heritage, enthusiasm, and artistic background provided the validation Pavlova sought. In 1923, Shankar choreographed *A Hindu Wedding* and *Radha-Krishna* for Pavlova, his first formal experiments with dance choreography. According to Urmimala Sarkar Munsi, author of a recent book on Shankar and his transcultural experiments, these initial choreographic efforts served primarily to reaffirm "the idea of the Orient for the Western audience" and were in reality "more of a tableau than a dance."[19] Nonetheless, Munsi argues that given Pavlova's international stature and the visual impact of Shankar's contributions, even these "somewhat untrained ideas of choreography" effectively "consolidated his place in the history of modernist negotiations within the world of art in general and dance in particular."

[18] Joan Erdman, "Performance as Translation: Uday Shankar in the West," *Drama Review* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1987), 71.
[19] Munsi, *Transcultural Experiments*, 8.

The modernist negotiations enacted by Uday Shankar as a choreographer and performer continued from there. Prarthana Purkayastha notes his "meteoric rise to fame from being Anna Pavlova's little-known dance partner in Britain to one of Europe and America's most successful Oriental dancers."[20] Indeed, by the mid 1930s Shankar had achieved a rare degree of international celebrity in the dance world, but for our purposes positioning Shankar as an "Oriental" dancer requires explanation. Thus far our usage of the term has pertained solely to the performance practices of white Euro-American women and their staged representations of Oriental alterity. Shankar, as an Indian male, complicates this definition.

Especially early in his career, however, Uday Shankar's choreographic approach, much like that of his Euro-American female counterparts, represented "Indianness" through creative dance movements rooted in minimal formal training in Indian dance. For instance, Joan Erdman notes that Shankar's choreography for Pavlova's *A Hindu Wedding* (1923) drew primarily from childhood memories of a wedding he witnessed in Rajasthan.[21] He also relied on his familiarity with Indic iconography and visual aesthetics from his training as a painter. On the one hand, mobilizing visual and kinesthetic memories, images, and imaginings as the raw materials for creative embodied representation is the defining hallmark of Oriental dance. In this regard at least, there appears to be a high degree of continuity between Shankar and St. Denis—whose archival "research" and kinesthetic memories of

[20] Purkayastha, *Indian Modern Dance*, 50.
[21] Erdman, "Performance as Translation," 71-72.

Indian dancers at Coney Island informed her original choreography for *Radha* (1906). But just as ethnic and national identities should not be conflated with cultural authenticity, neither should they be overlooked entirely. Erdman acknowledges that Shankar's productions were "like the Oriental dances of westerners," in that they were not presentations of Indian "classical" dances, but argues:

> What distinguishes Shankar from every western interpreter is that he spent his childhood in India, where he learned dance from folk dancers in Uttar Pradesh (then the United Provinces) near Varanasi (Banaras) and from court dancers in Rajasthan (Rajputana).

Erdman proceeds to elaborate on the distinction while also situating Shankar's early work with Pavlova alongside that of "his western predecessors":

> The difference between Shankar's dance programs and the "Oriental dances" of his western predecessors (and his 1923 choreography for Pavlova) can be understood by recognizing two languages of production—one European and American, the other Indian, for which Shankar provided translations.[22]

More than race or ethnicity, this notion of a process of translation between "two languages of production"—not unrelated to the "modernist negotiations" identified by Munsi—provides the critical framework for the contrast Erdman draws between Shankar and his Euro-American contemporaries.

Racialized power differentials inscribed by colonial imperialism complicate transcultural legibility, but the linguistic metaphor of translation between "languages of production" allows for some negotiation of a "multilingual" early-modern cosmopolitanism. Shankar's choreography, especially in its earlier incarnations,

[22] Ibid., 67.

relied on a degree of “self-orientalizing” or “auto-exoticism” to cater to the expectations of Euro-American audiences steeped in the stereotypes and cliches of twentieth-century Orientalism. But based on Shankar’s own experiences as a migrant living in the United Kingdom, these efforts also conveyed a degree of fluency in Euro-American stagecraft that allowed Shankar to inhabit a unique role as cultural “translator” by staging “dances similar to but definitely not western dances—to bring Indian dance to the western stage.”[23] Erdman argues that Shankar’s ability to strike a “sophisticated balance” between interpretation and translation, and thus appeal to both connoisseurs and naïve viewers alike, provided a resonant example for his younger brother, Ravi (born Robindro Shaunkor Chowdhury), who would prove arguably the most influential (and certainly the most recognizable) musical ambassador of post-independence India.[24]

Intent on refining his presentations of “Indianness” within this modern cosmopolitan space, Shankar returned to India in 1930 and started his own dance troupe. The flowering of his transnational dance career in the 1930s, and subsequent pedagogical endeavors, coincided with Indian revivals of national cultural practices. Dance emerged at the forefront of these projects, beginning with the reimagining of *sadir*, the temple dance attributed to South Indian devadasis, as classical Bharatanatyam (the dance of India). Shankar had a complex, uneasy relationship with these nationalist cultural revivals. When he opened his Almora Center in 1938

[23] Erdman, “Performance as Translation,” 69.
[24] Ibid.

(a modernist experiment in alternative arts education) he offered classes in several classical dance forms, including Bharatanatyam. His overall curricular framework, however, positioned these classes alongside daily courses in improvisation that emphasized free and interpretative movement. Shankar's institutional rhetoric engaged the prevailing tropes of Indian cultural nationalism, emphasizing notions such as diversity and national unity, but he ultimately distanced himself from rigid notions of classicism that viewed authenticity and authority through the prescriptive lens of embodied tradition.

In this regard, we can read Shankar's vision for the Almora Center as an articulation of an alternative cultural nationalism that blended education about a traditional past with the modernist goals of innovation, expressive freedom, and cosmopolitan transcultural engagement. As performer and pedagogue, Purkayastha situates Shankar as "an internationally mobile artist whose movements between continents and the embodied responses they produced could not be contained or located within any easily conceivable definition of nationalist culture in India.[25] Purkayastha contends, "Indian nationalism's resistance to transcultural processes of identity construction in the dance arts"—and the nationalist identification of classical dances such as Bharatanatyam with "pure" and "authentic" Indian culture—"left no space for Shankar's 'impure' and 'inauthentic' dance renaissance."[26] Shankar continued to be lauded for his authenticity in Europe and America, where his lack of

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[25] Purkayastha, *Indian Modern Dance*, 57.
[26] Ibid., 56.

formal training in Indian classical dance forms was "irrelevant to audiences entranced by his exoticism," but in India he was widely criticized for failing to "conform to the normative category of the Indian classical dancing body that was being produced by a dominant nationalist discourse."[27] Perhaps no twentieth-century dancer illuminates the cultural relativity of authenticity and its discursive stakes more vividly than Shankar.

Uday Shankar was not the only Indian whose views on dance diverged from the elite classicist-revivalist discourse. Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali Nobel laureate, encouraged Shankar's transcultural experimentations and shared his pedagogical inclinations towards a hybrid cosmopolitanism. Tagore garnered international acclaim as a poet—becoming the first Indian (and first non-European) to win the Nobel Prize in Literature for *Gitanjali* in 1913, but his eclectic pursuits ranged from composing poetry and prose to songs and dance dramas. A Bengali Brahmin and the youngest son of Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), who is credited with reviving the Brahmo Samaj after a period of decline,[28] Rabindranath championed a nationalist ideology that united the revival of Sanskritic source materials and aspects of a cosmopolitan modernity within a pluralistic conception of national culture. For Tagore, such a pluralistic view reflected the diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic fabric of the subcontinent itself and had been articulated by *bhakti* singer-saints through the ages. According to Asish Nandy, Tagore

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[27] Ibid., 58.
[28] Killingley, "Bengal Renaissance," 51.

> looks back to what he sees as the real tradition of India, which is to work for "an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them, and yet seek some basis of unity." The basis for this tradition has been built in India at the social level, not the political, through saints like Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya, and others. It is this solution—unity through acknowledgement of differences—that India has to offer to the world.[29]

At Shantiniketan, Tagore's educational institution in Bengal and home to Visva Bharati University after 1921, Tagore fostered his cosmopolitan pedagogical vision. He aimed to promote international unity and understanding, and his notions of a universal culture in which India played a critical part both overlapped with, and diverged from, the universalism of Annie Besant and the Theosophists.[30] Tagore presented numerous plays and dance dramas at Shantiniketan that brought this pluralistic, intercultural vision to life. "By the 1930s," Purkayastha notes, "Visva Bharati University in Shantiniketan had turned into a creative laboratory for the experimental arts, which included music, dance, and fine art." She contends that Tagore's dance dramas, which in addition to exploring the synthesis of Indian and European elements found inspiration in Indonesia and the broader Indian Ocean world, "led to the evolution of a dance style that would look more towards the assimilation and synthesis of diverse movement genres than towards creating a single codified 'classical' dance vocabulary."[31] Like Shankar, Tagore's modernist sensibility and "preference for addressing and reflecting the changing social, cultural and political milieu of his time" dictated an approach to dance that blended the study

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[29] Nandy, *Illegitimacy of Nationalism,* 6.
[30] Meduri, "Nation, Woman, Representation," 142-145.
[31] Purkayastha, *Indian Modern Dance*, 37-38.

of Indian forms with transcultural experimentation and explorations of bodily possibility.[32] As with Shankar, the prevailing nationalist-revivalist discourse "had no place for Tagore's hybridity and eclecticism in its canon of 'pure' Indian dance tradition."[33]

## Classical Dance Revivals

Given the rhetoric of Indian classicism (i.e., ancient, pure, spiritual, timeless, traditional) it is easy to forget that Indian classical dances are themselves modern phenomena. As such, it is critical that we situate them within the broader cultural negotiations of pre-independence India—as projects contemporaneous with the modernist configurations of Uday Shankar and Rabindranath Tagore. Ketu Katrak summarizes the modern origins of Indian classical dance revivals as follows:

> In recuperating traditional dance, revivalist zeal was fueled by the prevalent British colonial climate of the late nineteenth century that judged most aspects of Indian culture and religion as backward, driven by superstition and blind faith. This partly influenced social reformers to counter colonizers' ignorance by demonstrating a new form of Indian modernity rooted in ancient, even timeless Indian culture distinct from Western modernity. This endeavor to invent, even "culturally engineer" an Indian past within which classical Indian dance belonged was part of a complex process undertaken mostly by upper-caste Brahmins and other educated elites.[34]

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[32] Ibid., 38.
[33] Ibid., 25.
[34] Ketu H. Katrak, *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 27.

These modern revivals gained traction through the efforts of individuals and reform societies invested in "recovering" indigenous dance forms, reimagining their performance practices, reframing issues of respectability and accessibility, and restaging them on secular stages. This formulation of dance modernism negated its own modernity in staging twentieth-century innovations and reinventions as ancient classical dances.

Classical dance revivals unfolded asymmetrically over the course of decades, but the South Indian reimagining of sadir as Bharatanatyam in the 1930s paved the way for subsequent revivals. As discussed in Chapter 3, the project hinged on efforts to separate the artform itself from its hereditary devadasi practitioners. A similar phenomenon would unfold in North India as the performance practices of hereditary tawaifs came to be reimagined as classical kathak.[35] Beginning in South India, the anti-nautch movement deployed the rhetoric of social uplift, rescue, and rehabilitation for devadasis as grounds for prohibition of their performance practices. These practices were, in turn, refigured and brought to proscenium stages as Bharatanatyam in the hands of new demographics of practitioners, primarily middle-class women.[36] In effect, social reformers and revivalists engaged in the simultaneous prohibition and rescue of the same art form.

[35] See Chakravorty, *Bells of Change* (2008); Walker, *Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective* (2014).
[36] The disenfranchisement of the devadasi and reinvention of *sadir* as *Bharatanatyam* is the subject of extensive scholarship. For examples, see Uttara Asha Coorlawala, "Classical and Contemporary Indian Dance: Overview, Criteria, and a Choreographic Analysis," Ph.D. diss., (New York University, 1994); Meduri, "Nation, Woman, Representation" (1996); Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures* (2012).

Arguably no figure played a more central role in the Bharatanatyam revival than Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904-1986). A Brahmin from Madurai, her family had close ties to the Theosophical Society in South India. When she was just sixteen, Devi married George Arundale (1878-1945), a British Theosophist and associate of Annie Besant (1847-1933). Formed in New York in 1875, the Theosophical Society espoused a cosmopolitan universalism rooted in comparative religious study and non-sectarian identity. In 1882, founding Theosophists Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) had moved the global headquarters to Adyar, in present-day Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The Society, which opposed discrimination on the basis of race, caste, or sex, subsequently became a major force for social reform in South India.[37]

Within both the political context of Indian nationalism and the transnational worldview of the Theosophical Society, Rukmini Devi "negotiated the global and local flows of modernity" to become a leading figure in the Bharatanatyam revival.[38] As fate would have it, Devi first became interested in learning Indian dance after meeting Anna Pavlova in the late 1920s. On Pavlova's suggestion, she resolved to study sadir, which had fallen into a state of disrepute due to its association with devadasis. Following the death of Annie Besant in 1933, Devi returned to India from

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[37] Meduri notes Besant's engagement in debates over the devadasi. In trying to counter misperceptions of anti-nautch lobbyists with regard to devadasi sexuality, Besant idealized the cultural and social history of the devadasi as a pure child bride ("Nation, Woman, Representation," 67-72).

[38] Avanthi Meduri, "Introduction: A Critical Overview," in *Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904-1986): A Visionary Architect of Indian Culture and Performing Arts*, ed. Avanthi Meduri (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2005), ix-x.

traversing the global networks of the Theosophical Society and embarked on her journey as a dancer. Despite opposition from her family and resistance from the world of Madras society (the locus of South Indian anti-nautch reform dating to the late nineteenth century), Devi learned sadir from hereditary devadasi practitioners and articulated a new aesthetic for the dance in her debut performance at the Theosophical Society's Diamond Jubilee in 1935.[39] According to Meduri:

> The performance began with a few introductory remarks by Dr. Arundale, who underscored the importance of reviving *sadir* as *Bharatnatya*, the spiritual dance of India. The new name was prophetic in that it associated *sadir* with Bharat's *Natyasastra*, and with *Siva/Nataraja*, the presiding deity of the *Natyasastra*. To imprint this multidisciplinary history in the imagination of the spectator, Rukmini Devi staged the dance within three large cultural symbols of god, guru and temple stage simultaneously.

Through extensive touring and pedagogical efforts, both of which were bolstered by her position within the Theosophical Society, Devi helped transform the temple dance of hereditary devadasis into a reinvigorated emblem of national pride. The spiritualized, sanitized, and classicized version of Bharatanatyam embodied by Devi asserted an ostensibly "pure" Indic identity that, at least on its surface, appeared devoid of the hybrid experimentation and individualized expression nationalist reformers found so troublesome in the modernist creations of Uday Shankar and Rabindranath Tagore. Devi would go on to choreograph numerous original dance dramas within this new classical paradigm, but these efforts would not offend conservative sensibilities in the manner of Shankar and Tagore's experiments with

[39] Ibid., 11-12.

Indian "modern" dance. In Rukmini Devi, Indian nationalism had found the embodiment of its idealized "new woman"—the "'resuscitator' of all that is best in India's traditional art and culture."[40]

## Modern and Ethnic Dance

Global negotiations of Orientalist exoticism, modernist experimentation, and studied engagements with traditional Indian dance forms provided the backdrop against which the discursive borders between Oriental, ethnic, modern, and Indian classical dance came to be defined, and increasingly policed, throughout the 1930s. As "authentic" Indian dances (including both the modernist choreographies of Uday Shankar and revived classical dances such as Bharatanatyam) found their way to Euro-American stages with more regularity, so-called Oriental dance came to be perceived as "inauthentic" (to say nothing of its demeaning stereotyping of otherness) and gradually fell out of favor in the United States.[41]

Srinivasan (2011) examines a rhetoric of modernity that took shape beginning in the 1930s as it relates to the transformation of Oriental dance into modern dance in the United States. This rhetoric constructed binaries that reflected the changing terms of citizenship and facilitated a discursive rupture as "American modern dance severed its ties to Indian dance."[42] Srinivasan explains:

> The narrative of American modern dance choreographers and writers that espoused an epistemic break was in effect only arbitrary. It

[40] Ibid., 10.
[41] Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 108.
[42] Ibid., 103.

> served to construct several binaries: modern dance and traditional or ethnic dance, Americanness and foreignness, white and nonwhite. In effect, this was the most powerful orientalist maneuver: to classify all other practices, particularly Asian ones—including St. Denis and Denishawn—as backward in time, traditional, repetitive, and old, while simultaneously rendering the white "self" as brilliant, new, and modern, thereby setting up a problematic schism between modernity and tradition.[43]

The rhetorical positioning of self-proclaimed modern dancers including Martha Graham (1894-1991) and Doris Humphrey (1895-1958)—both of whom broke away from St. Denis, Ted Shawn (1891-1972), and their Denishawn School—effectively erased acknowledgements of hybrid global influences from the discourse of modernist innovation in attempting to perform what Srinivasan calls "their purist versions of what Americanness might be."[44] Indian dance consequently became the domain of *ethnic*, not modern, dancers. Srinivasan credits dance critic John Martin with coining the term "ethnic dance" in 1939, and notes that the emergence of "authentic" Indian dancers such as Uday Shankar helped create the divide.[45]

In the United States, ethnic dance then encompassed everything from Shankar's presentations of Indic modernism to the Bharatanatyam of Rukmini Devi. It also made space for the likes of Ragini Devi, who, following her return from India, presented programs rooted in her extensive study of Kathakali and Bharatanatyam and taught these dance forms in New York. Despite, or perhaps because of, her eccentric character traits, Devi provides an intriguing case study for considering the

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[43] Ibid., 105.
[44] Ibid., 104.
[45] Ibid., 108.

slippages between Oriental dance as it existed through the 1920s; ethnic dance, as it came to be understood in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s; and the contemporaneous classical dance revivals of the Indian subcontinent. Modernist rhetoric may have fueled categorical distinctions between modern and ethnic dance, but physical realities hinder any attempt to accept this schism in absolute terms. Try as they may, proponents of American modern dance could never fully erase the kinesthetic traces of its formative encounters with Indian dance in the early decades of the twentieth century.

**Hindustani Musicians in American Dance Historiography**

If we take notions of embodied (i.e., not textual) influence seriously, then any conversation regarding the impact of Indian performers on histories of American dance during this period must extend to the musicians with whom these dancers worked. We can trace the formation of professional relationships between American Oriental dancers and Indian musicians to St. Denis's engagement with Hazrat Inayat Khan and the Royal Musicians of Hindustan in 1911. This "collaboration" provides a starting point for considering the possibilities for, and limitations of, early-twentieth-century transcultural dialogues involving Hindustani music and Oriental dance.

Khan and his troupe traveled to the United States in late 1910 with the intention of spreading the teachings of Sufism (a mystical branch of Islam) through music. Upon arriving in New York, the group gave its first performances at

Columbia University, where Khan had personal connections.[46] In February 1911, the *Columbia Spectator* reported that a "most enthusiastic and appreciative audience" welcomed the group of Indians to Teachers College, where their vocal and instrumental presentations reportedly conjured an "Oriental atmosphere which was both bewitching and fascinating."[47] St. Denis, already known in New York circles for *Radha* (1906) and subsequent Orientalist choreographies, saw Khan and the Royal Musicians at Columbia and recruited them to accompany her on a national tour. No stranger to enlisting Indians to lend an air of authenticity to her imitative renditions, St. Denis had recruited supporting performers from nearby shops and universities and had once even "carried off some members of a ship's crew."[48] According to Khan biographer Elisabeth de Jong-Keesing, "for a determined and self-centered lady of her caliber it was a matter of course to buttonhole the Indian musicians after their concert at Columbia University and engage them for her tour."[49]

The tour went poorly. The musicians struggled to adapt to touring life in an unfamiliar land with a dancer who expected them to add only dashes of exotic flavoring to her self-indulgent renderings of Oriental alterity. Khan appreciated the attention St. Denis brought to Indian art and culture but he recalls that she

> invented Indian dances of her own…for which our music became as a color or fragrance to an imitation flower…. For the public it was only

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[46] Farrell, *Indian Music and the West*, 149-150.
[47] "An East Indian Evening at T.C.," *Columbia Spectator*, February 17, 1911.
[48] Elisabeth de Jong-Keesing, *Inayat Khan: A Biography* (The Hague: East-West Publications Fonds B.V./London: Luzac & Co. LTD., 1974) 92.
[49] Ibid.

> amusement and therefore painful to us. Also it was not satisfactory to combine real and imitation.[50]

As the motley crew toured westward, however, some knowledge exchange transpired:

> During the long train journeys St. Denis shared with them her schoolbook knowledge of [Abraham] Lincoln and American ideas. On the bare stage of one provincial theatre after another, before or after rehearsals, the Indians taught her something about the genuine movements and meaning of Hindu dances.[51]

Even so, the programs themselves forced Khan and his troupe to truncate their usual performance practices to fit an unfamiliar theater format staged for audiences altogether unfamiliar with Indian music and dance. A critic for the *San Francisco Examiner* noted the presence of the Indian musicians with little regard for their contributions to the "Hindoo" portion of St. Denis's program:

> Another long wait and she transports you to the dancing hall of a rajah's palace and dazzles with "The Nautch Dance." Here, for the first and only time, she dances with her legs and her entire body…
>
> None the less it is a voluptuous dance this, the nearest approach to the sensual of all her dances. And it is in this that the great Inayat Khan, laboriously identified in the programme as one of the elect among Hindoo musicians, takes a part.
>
> Just what is Inayat Khan you won't know and you won't care, for the exception of sundry beards and rolls of fat, the Hindoos are all plain Hindoo and only interesting for the color they lend to the scenes.[52]

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[50] Inayat Khan quoted in de Jong-Keesing, *Inayat Khan*, 94.
[51] Ibid., 95.
[52] J. Lawrence Toole, "Dazzle of Color Aids Ruth St. Denis," *San Francisco Examiner*, April 4, 1911.

This particular observer appears to have been far more interested in St. Denis's dance, and the delayed emergence of her legs, than the activities of her accompanying "Hindoo" musicians.

Within a week, however, the *Examiner* ran two articles on Khan and his mission of musical ambassadorship. The articles show Khan engaged in lecturing at a local Hindu Temple and the University of California, Berkeley, even as his group continued to provide little more than musical interludes for the popular Oriental dancer. Of his mission, Khan stated:

> The real object of my travelling through this country, although temporarily connected with a theatrical organization, is to lecture for the American people at the universities and to place before them the hidden treasures of our Oriental music.[53]

Soon after, the musicians parted ways with St. Denis while still on the West Coast. Keesing attributes the split to Khan's refusal to grant St. Denis a "certificate of proficiency" in Hindu dances upon request.[54] Khan and the Royal Musicians continued to perform and spread the teachings of Sufism, but the frictions over cultural fluency and representation with St. Denis had proven insurmountable. St. Denis gained valuable firsthand knowledge about Indian performing arts from the musicians, but her mode of engagement ultimately produced more dissonance than resonant cultural exchange.

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[53] "Harmonies Too Subtle For Our Ears: Inayat Khan Tells About the Complicated Music of the Hindus," *San Francisco Examiner*, April 9, 1911. On April 10, the *Examiner* ran a short follow-up article entitled "St. Denis Hindu on Music" that recounts Khan's lecture at the Hindu Temple at 2963 Webster Street.

[54] Keesing, *Inayat Khan*, 95.

The inability of Inayat Khan and Ruth St. Denis to bridge cultural differences and achieve an equitable transcultural collaboration provides context for the activities of Ragini Devi and the Trio Ragini in the 1920s. On the surface, Devi's early "Indian" dances do not look so different from St. Denis's; without training, both enacted imitative, interpretive dances to cater to the Orientalist tastes of the era. On the one hand, Devi's inventions feel more transgressive than St. Denis's because they involved a complete fabrication of her identity and deceptive efforts to market herself as a native practitioner. On the other hand, however, Devi devoted herself to learning and interpreting Indian dance forms with singular focus. Whereas Indian dances and aesthetics constituted a single facet of St. Denis's Orientalist-modernist miscellany, Devi embarked on a lifelong journey to study and promote Indian dance even with minimal resources or proper instruction available. This fact does not excuse her ethnic impersonations, blatant fabrications, and tendency towards self-aggrandizement, but it does help contextualize them.

I have already discussed Devi's exploits at length, including her early career and subsequent journey to India, but the influence of her Indian accompanists during the Trio Ragini period warrants additional attention. Recall from Chapter 3 that while living in Minneapolis, Devi (at that time still Esther Sherman) had sought out whatever resources on Indian dance she could find, including translations of Sanskrit treatises. Upon moving to New York, her husband connected her to the Indian musicians with whom she formed her Trio Ragini. Based on my research, we know these musicians to be Sarat Lahiri, Vishnu Nimbker, and Arjun Govind Thaker Dass

(Dass replaced Nimbker on tabla by the end of 1923). The Trio comprising Devi, Lahiri, and Dass (referred to simply as Arjun Govind in press releases) then toured together extensively in 1924-1925.

Here I can only offer speculations as to the labor practices and professional relationships that take place "off script" in the archive, so to speak. As any performing artist with touring experience can attest, for every hour spent on stage, tours include countless hours of travel and rehearsal. If Ruth St. Denis gleaned useful information about Indian dances during her brief, ill-fated stint with Inayat Khan and the Royal Musicians of Hindustan, it is reasonable to suspect that Devi relied on her regular accompanists for specialized knowledge relating to Indian music and dance. Years later, Devi herself recalled:

> When I married Sri Ramlal Bajpai and settled in New York City I was often requested to sing songs and dance at social functions of the Indian community. I accompanied my songs on the tambura, a four-stringed instrument that provided the pedal point for the song. There were Indian musicians, some of them students, to accompany my dances and gesture songs on Indian musical instruments. One of them was an accomplished sitar player, vocalist, and tabla player (tabla is a pair of drums). He was the maestro who directed and rehearsed the musicians.[55]

The introduction to *Nritanjali* (1928) credits Devi not only with being "an accomplished singer and dancer" but also playing the sitar and tambura "exquisitely."[56] Given what we know about her, and the general ignorance of American audiences towards Indian performing arts at the time, these claims are

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[55] Ragini Devi, *Dance Dialects of India* (Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1972), 15.
[56] Mary K. Das, "Introduction: Hindu Music and Dancing in America," in Ragini Devi, *Nritanjali: An Introduction to Indian Dancing* (1928; repr., Delhi: Sumit Publications, 1982), 18.

almost certainly hyperbolic. But what if her purported proficiency as a singer and sitarist are grounded in a kernel of truth? Indian accompanists such as Lahiri and Dass present the most plausible explanation for whatever firsthand knowledge Devi had acquired of Indian songs and instrumental techniques. Based on my research we know both played sitar as well as tabla, and therefore either could have been the "maestro" Devi refers to above. Even if these musicians were not dancers themselves, their baseline grounding in Indian performance practices would have provided Devi with an invaluable resource in her attempts to pass as a native practitioner.

The fragmentary nature of the archive precludes definitive insight into what actually transpired between Devi and her accompanying musicians in rehearsals or on the long train journeys from city to city. Devi's fixation with the Indian performing arts, which ultimately drove her to flee New York for India and seek out masters of classical dance forms, suggests that even while presenting herself to audiences as "the only actual Hindu now in this country who is both a dancer, a singer and an instrumentalist,"[57] she would have absorbed all she could from her accompanying musicians. Until 1930, when Devi finally reached India and began her training, these musicians constituted her only consistent firsthand link to the performance practices of the subcontinent.

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[57] "Noted India Artists Will Give Concert at Woman's Club," *Atlanta Constitution,* January 6, 1924.

It is easy to imagine Sarat Lahiri playing a similarly instructive role for Lota, although she never embraced Indian dance with anything resembling the singular dedication of Ragini Devi. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Lota presented herself as a native "East Indian dancer" in her duo performances with Lahiri. But in general, these performances comprised a hodgepodge of world dance forms—or at least her renditions of them. It seems unlikely that Lota possessed extensive training in all of the "dances of the Orient" she claimed to present, which John Martin of the *New York Times* identifies as hailing from India, Arabia, Algeria, and Polynesia.[58] Upon first glance, this amalgamation of Oriental dance practices recalls the modernist eclecticism of St. Denis, who borrowed freely from multiple "ethnic" dances in order to transport audiences to a vague, mythic East. Put another way, Lota appears to be merely another in a lineage of white American dancers who embodied the Orient through imaginative imitations and exotic costuming rather than careful study of specific dance forms.

In situating Lota's performance practices, however, we must consider the fragments of biographical information discussed in Chapter 3. According to the 1930 U.S. Census, Lota was born in California around 1901 to a French mother and a father from New York. Sidney Robertson Cowell later calls her both "half Polynesian" and "half Hawaiian" before hedging with "…anyway, she came from one of the Pacific islands."[59] Given Robertson Cowell's recollections, it stands to

[58] John Martin, "The Dance: An Era of Great Growth," *New York Times*, November 11, 1931.
[59] Sidney Robertson Cowell, Tape B-30, 25, HCC, NYPL, Box 87, Folder 33.

reason that her French mother was in fact French Polynesian. Did her mother dance? Did Lota learn Polynesian dances from her? Alas, we will never know for certain. But this biographical tie to the Pacific islands grounds her presentations of Polynesian dance in the possibility of kinesthetic experience.

Robertson Cowell also informs us that Lota purportedly "grew up in Algeria"— another French colonial territory.[60] She then identifies her as a "famous drummer," noting that Lota taught Henry Cowell about the (presumably Algerian) hand drum. If we take Robertson Cowell at her word, Lota appears to have spent considerable time in Algeria studying the music and dance of the region. We get no precise sense of how long she lived there, but even after moving to the United States and beginning a career as a working performer she appears to have remained connected to the cultural channels of French colonialism. A magazine clipping from the Cowell Collection, which includes a large portrait of Lota pensively holding a sitar and wearing an elaborate flowing dress with head covering, claims she had

> just returned from Paris where a series of concerts given by her so interested the French Government that she was officially invited to broadcast a programme from the Tour Eiffel which was heard throughout Morocco, Algiers, Tunis and India.[61]

The Algerian connection seemingly provided Lota access to the broader cultural world of colonial North Africa and potentially accounts for whatever training in Algerian and Arabian dance Lota possessed.

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[60] Portrait of Sarat Lahiri holding Esraj, HCC, NYPL, Box 174, Folder 9 (biographical information on back of photograph).
[61] "Talk of the Town: Lota," HCC, NYPL, Box 162, Folder 14 (1935).

Of the four ethnic styles Lota claimed to present, that leaves only Indian dance unaccounted for in her backstory. I propose that it was precisely here that she benefited from her relationship with Lahiri. Alongside Sarat Lahiri, press releases and other promotional documents often position Lota as a native practitioner, but Robertson Cowell confirms she was not "an authentic North Indian musician," which I take merely to mean that she, unlike Lahiri, was not actually from North India.[62] Robertson Cowell also tells us, however, that Lota learned to accompany Lahiri's drumming on the tambura (not that this feat would involve extensive knowledge or skill) and we know the duo performed renditions of Hindustani music together on numerous radio programs.

Even as an outsider to the idiom, Lota's musical background enabled her to learn enough about Indian music and confidently perform it with Lahiri. Lahiri similarly could have introduced Lota to Indian dance fundamentals, which she was able to incorporate into her recitals because of her grounding in other dance forms. Another, less generous, explanation is that Lota simply invented Indian dances by drawing on the prevailing idioms of Oriental dance and inserted these items into her programs along with dances she had actually studied. We should not rule out the possibility that, in the spirit of St. Denis, some of Lota's Oriental dances emerged from her imagination rather than from firsthand training. But her complex transcultural backstory and lengthy personal and professional relationship with

[62] Sidney Robertson Cowell, Tape B-30, 25, HCC, NYPL, Box 87, Folder 33.

Lahiri complicate the narrative of white exoticist invention that has come to shape our understanding of early-twentieth-century Oriental dance. Intimacies and love marriages across the color line blur ethno-racial conceptions of cultural purity.

Once Lota disappeared from public records in the early 1930s, Lahiri went on to work with a range of international dancers in performance contexts across the spectrum of Oriental, modern, and ethnic (i.e., Indian) dance. Some of these performances were documented by John Martin in his *New York Times* column, "The Dance." Others appeared in newspapers as far away as Los Angeles. These collaborations highlight the intersections of North Indian performance practices marked as traditional, stylized representations of ethnic dance forms, and avant-garde modernist choreography. In early January 1934, within two weeks of giving a free lecture on Indian music at the Carnegie Hall Contemporary Dance Studios, Lahiri accompanied Dutch-Javanese dancer Fred Coolemans in his American debut at the Forrest Theatre. Martin refers to Coolemans, who was half Dutch and half Javanese by birth, as "another of many foreign dancers to elect to appear in America" that season.[63] The program featured six dances, including "Javanese dances as well as composed numbers in other styles," with several pieces set to music by Lahiri and several others to piano works by European composers Mussorgsky, Bartók, Liszt, Debussy, and Satie.[64] Lahiri supplied "Javanese Music"—in which he almost certainly possessed no formal training—for the

[63] John Martin, "Fred Coolemans Makes Debut Here," *New York Times*, January 6, 1934.
[64] John Martin, "The Dance: Ballet Russe," *New York Times*, December 31, 1933.

Javanese dances with the assistance of two percussionists, Winifred Widener and Harriett Peck.

Eclectic dance programming of this nature raises multiple points that warrant additional consideration, and without recordings we can only speculate regarding what this specific program looked and sounded like. In Coolemans, we again appear to be dealing with a multiethnic dancer who choreographed across idioms under the banner of what could still broadly be considered Oriental dance. Within this single program, however, we see multiple strands of performance practice that would eventually splinter into modern and ethnic dance: original choreographies set to the works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art music composers and "native" Javanese dances set to presentations of ostensibly "ethnic" music. As for this music itself, it does not appear to be merely Lahiri's usual concoction of "Hindu music" repackaged as "Javanese" to suit the needs of a half-Javanese dancer. Martin's column from the week before the Coolemans debut suggests Lahiri, Widener, and Peck would all be playing percussion instruments. His review from the day following the performance claims Lahiri was the principal performer for the Javanese portion of the program, assisted by Widener and Peck. Without speculating as to the sonic nature or instrumentation of this "Javanese" accompaniment, it appears to have been some sort of hybrid percussive experiment.

Such experimentation and transcultural instrumentation came to be commonplace during the 1930s in accompanying dances that blurred the lines between Oriental, modern, and ethnic dance. Uday Shankar, for instance, was known

for employing masters of Hindustani music, including Allauddin Khan, in his company of musicians. But if you listen to recordings or look at pictures of the instrumentation used by his ensembles, the music was decidedly *not* consistent with prevailing Hindustani performance practices. Dance orchestras combined Indian instrumentation—sarod, sitar, esraj, tabla, and so on—with eclectic percussion ranging from gongs and Indonesian *gamelan* instruments to concert bass drums.[65] While the orchestra drew on the Hindustani idioms with which they were most familiar, individual compositions regularly abandoned the rhythmic framework of *tāla* (the cyclical structuring of time characteristic of Hindustani music) in favor of linear, through-composed metrical structures.[66] These compositions, consequently, had to be scored in staff notation to facilitate rhythmic coordination within the ensemble. Joan Erdman notes that such hybrid dance music played a critical role in Shankar's efforts to translate between Indian and Euro-American idioms.[67]

It seems unlikely that the "Javanese music" Lahiri, Peck, and Widener provided for the American debut of Fred Coolemans involved such extensive translational efforts. Nonetheless, combining Indian instruments—percussive or otherwise—with gongs or other eclectic percussion, then passing the result off as Javanese, fit squarely within the hybrid dance music practices of the era. Lahiri, as a working accompanist for assorted Oriental dancers of varied racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds was undoubtedly aware of the hybrid dance orchestras of Uday

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[65] "The Uday Shankar Hindu Dancers & Musicians," Hadassah Papers, NYPL, Box 4, Folder 5.
[66] Erdman, "Uday Shankar in the West," 80-83.
[67] Ibid., 80.

Shankar and others. In 1937, the *Los Angeles Times* credited Lahiri with composing music for Shankar and Madame Menaka (1899-1947), an Indian-born, international dancer known for her role in revival of classical kathak.[68] Menaka, incidentally, is also remembered as a pioneer of Indian modern dance and spent three years touring Europe with her "Indian Ballet" from 1936 to 1938.[69] Photos and video footage from this period show her orchestra utilizing a combination of North Indian instrumentation, gongs, and metallic percussion instruments akin to those found in an Indonesian gamelan ensemble.

Leaving the realm of transcultural cosmopolitan dance orchestras and returning to presentations of Indian dance in 1930s New York, we return to Mona Rani. Following Lahiri's 1934 appearance with Fred Coolemans, he next surfaces in Martin's column in March 1936 within the "company of Hindu musicians" that accompanied Rani's well-received recital at Town Hall.[70] Alongside Lahiri, Mirza Jaffer, Bhupesh Guha, Dost Muhammed, Todi, and Tara rounded out the entirely Indian ensemble (see Chapter 3). Born in India to British parents, and purportedly trained in Indian dance forms, Rani (i.e., Alice Morrill/Mrs. John A. P. Millet), presents yet another case study that obfuscates categorical distinctions between "Oriental" and Indian "ethnic" dance.

In the course of my research, months elapsed between my first encounter with Mona Rani in historical newspaper clippings and my discovery that she was in

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[68] "Koner Seen in Indian Dance, *Los Angeles Daily News,* March 16, 1937.
[69] Menaka Digital Archive, https://menaka-archive.org/en/.
[70] "Hindu Dances Given By Rani in Town Hall," *New York Times,* March 22, 1936.

fact the daughter of two British parents. Like Ragini Devi, Rani appears to have adopted an Indian pseudonym and stage persona, invented a backstory to explain her hereditary ties to the subcontinent, and surrounded herself with Indian musicians to authenticate her presentations for the American public. Unlike Devi, however, Rani actually spent a portion of her upbringing in colonial India, where she was born. The responses of one New York critic indicate her presentations were perhaps "too Indian" for the tastes of American audiences. The 1935 review reads as follows:

> The most outstanding item of the program was the vividness and elaborateness of Miss Rani's costumes… The native songs showed very little melody, being fundamentally scale arrangements always returning to a root note. The instruments, while very picturesque in appearance, had none of the tonal qualities and resonance that we of the western world are accustomed to hear…The result is very delicate, with many overtones, and very unconvincing of any musical spirit among the Hindus. The dances by Miss Rani were also fundamentally the same, being based on a set of rhythmic foot movement [*sic*]. As she wore bells on her ankles which accorded with her steps, the entire result was rather monotonous after half the program was over. Rhythmic drum beatings accompanied the dances, and the only changes were in her hand positions and slight pantomime…Surely there is a charm and mystery about the Hindu people, but not when coupled so closely with the cold reality of our world.[71]

It is impossible to conclude exactly which dance form(s) Rani presented that evening, as the references to ankle bells and rhythmic footwork accompanied by drumming could describe any number of styles. The musical "monotony" noted by the reviewer reveals a gulf between "Hindu" aesthetic sensibilities and those of modern America, suggesting the music and dance on display were more consistent

[71] "Dance: Mona Rani," *Barnard Bulletin,* April 9, 1935.

with actual Indian performance practices than with the more familiar antics of contemporaneous Oriental dancers. In a more generous review, Winthrop Sargeant, the American coauthor of Lahiri's 1931 article on Indian rhythm, claimed the 1936 Town Hall program staged by Rani and her troupe "lacked the spectacular elements" of Uday Shankar's group, but noted it was "on that very account more authentic."[72] Here we see an American critic—one versed in the fundamentals of Hindustani music—identifying Rani's programs as "more authentic" (i.e., more Indian), on account of their musical accompaniment, than the presentations of Indian dancer Uday Shankar.

Other American journalists explicitly racialized Mona Rani as non-white. A 1935 special feature on womanhood in India versus the United States, written by Carol Bird and printed in newspaper magazine sections nationwide, identifies Rani as "a native of Southern India and of Rajput descent."[73] Before launching into a conversation regarding the relative happiness and values of Indian and American women, Bird draws attention to Rani's skin tone and dress, stating, "she wore Western costume" which was "not as becoming to her dark coloring as the richly ornamented silk and satin sari." The photo of Rani printed with the article shows her dressed in full Indian regalia and playing the vina (see figure 3.18).

All sources point to Mona Rani performing solo dances with accompaniment provided by a relatively large ensemble of Indian musicians, among them Bhupesh

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[72] Winthrop Sargeant, "Mona Rani," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 4, 1935.
[73] Carol Bird, "Is Fate Cruel to Hindu Women?," *The Nebraska State Journal,* May 12, 1935.

Guha, who also embarked on a dance career in New York in the late 1930s. Lahiri, incidentally, appears to have jumped from accompanying Rani to supporting Guha and his partner Sushila Shikari (Janadas). On December 19, 1937, Martin outlined the schedule for the upcoming Dance International, a series of dispersed events staged throughout New York. The column shows multiple threads of cosmopolitan dance modernism, Oriental dance, and "ethnic" performance practices intersecting at a precise location in time and space.[74] At the Rainbow Room, Lahiri performed a program of "dances and music of India" with Sushila Shikari, Bhupesh Guha, and Todi (the tabla player who had accompanied Lahiri at the New School and played on his 1936 Victor recordings). Meanwhile at the Guild Theatre, modern dancer Martha Graham and her group debuted two solo pieces set to original music composed by Henry Cowell. At the International Building, the festival's "main attraction" featured daily screenings of a thirty-minute film featuring Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova, and Uday Shankar performed with his troupe throughout the week at the St. James Theatre.

Based on the research presented in Chapter 3, we know Bhupesh Guha was born in Bengal in 1902 and emigrated to the U.S. via Germany in 1924. Sushila Shikari, identified as a fellow Bengali in promotional materials, appears to have actually been born in the United States to Indian parents. According to a 1939 article in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, Guha had opened a school of Indian dance in New York by

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[74] John Martin, "The Dance: Busy Times," *New York Times,* December 19, 1937.

1939, where he sought to "bring eastern dances, especially the Hindu dances, to America."[75] The article includes two photos: an action shot of Guha with two of his "dancing girls" (at least one of whom appears to be white) and a similarly candid photo of the musicians who "furnish music for the Hindu dancers" (figure 3.20). The photos are dark, and the faces of the musicians difficult to discern, but the esraj player resembles Lahiri. We know from other sources that Guha himself also played esraj, and he is identified as a musician rather than a dancer in his appearances supporting Mona Rani.

The apparent continuity between Mona Rani's troupe and that of Bhupesh Guha and Sushila Shikari, both in terms of personnel and performance practices, further complicates any attempt to approach discourses of cultural authenticity using ethno-national metrics. If we trust the primary sources, Mona Rani was a white woman born in India and Sushila Shikari an ostensibly South Asian American born in the United States. These dancers all lived and worked in New York at a time when, according to Srinivasan's account of the dissolution of Oriental dance into ethnic and modern dance, public perceptions of authenticity in Euro-American Oriental dance diminished following the visits of touring Indian artists, such as Uday Shankar and Rukmini Devi. This observation is worth taking seriously, but we must also consider that Indian performers—both musicians and dancers—lived in New York throughout this period and interacted with white Oriental dancers in

[75] Jane Corby, "Impresario…at Twenty-One," *Brooklyn Eagle*, February 23, 1939.

substantive, formative ways in the course of their everyday lives. Some of these Indians were, in fact, early South Asian Americans, and the transnational dance journeys of some of the white dancers discussed in this chapter were far more complex than merely imagining, inventing, and embodying Oriental alterity, even if—as in the case of Ragini Devi—problematic ethnic impersonations sometimes provided a point of departure.

The image Priya Srinivasan paints of early-twentieth-century Oriental dance in the United States is one in which Ruth St. Denis becomes inspired by nautch dancers at Coney Island in 1904, draws on these experiences to enact her own representations for *Radha* (1906), then inspires other white American dancers to carry on in roughly the same vein without having to negotiate cultural authenticity through any sustained dialogue with Indian performers. In the absence of brown bodies, Srinivasan argues, the authenticity of white Oriental dancers went virtually uncontested; then, following the arrival of Uday Shankar and other Indian dancers in the 1930s, Euro-American Oriental dance came to be viewed as inauthentic. This argument emphasizes indisputable racialized dynamics central to the formation of discursive boundaries delineating Oriental, modern, and ethnic dance. Srinivasan's analysis of previously overlooked nautch influences on the work of St. Denis and her subsequent impact on other white Oriental dancers is astute, but her account proves incomplete in its approach to ethno-racial cultural formations and questions of kinesthetic influence.

Srinivasan bases her analysis on categorical distinctions between whiteness and Indianness that are never critically fleshed out. She refers to Madame Menaka, born and raised in India to an Indian mother and British father (and who later emerged as a global exponent of the kathak revival), as a white dancer. In a single footnote, she lumps Menaka alongside Ragini Devi, born in Michigan to white American parents and later married to an Indian expat in 1920s New York (where she reinvented herself as Ragini Devi, native of Kashmir). As we know, Devi then fled the United States with a communist Bengali poet and spent most of the 1930s studying Kathakali and Bharatanatyam and touring India. When she returned to New York at the end of the decade, she opened a studio called The Indian Dance Theatre, which she rented from Carnegie Hall, and "began to attract lovers of India and Indian dance," many of whom had previously studied with Oriental dancers, including St. Denis.[76] In Srinivasan's treatment, the complexity of Madame Menaka and Ragini Devi's stories merely adds up to two "white woman" who spent time in India learning traditional dances.[77] This reductive notion of whiteness encompasses performers of mixed racial parentage (even those born and raised in India) and assumes racialized equivalency across a remarkably divergent biographical spectrum.

Given such racialized metrics of culture and identity, what are we to make of Ragini Devi's daughter, Indrani, who was born in India shortly after Devi's arrival in

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[76] Rahman, *Dancing in the Family*, 63.
[77] Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 193.

1930 and later deemed to be the daughter of Devi's Indian husband, Ramlal Bajpai, rather than her Indian lover, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya? When Devi brought Indrani back to the United States in 1939, she had to smuggle her daughter into the country in a laundry bag at Niagara Falls because, having been born in India, she had no U.S. birth certificate or valid immigration documents.[78] Like her mother, Indrani became a working dancer, performing with Devi's troupes in New York and beyond. Through Rama Chattopadhyaya, the only son of Harindranath and his wife Kamaladevi, Ragini and Indrani met Rama's roommate from Boston, a twenty-nine-year-old Bengali Muslim MIT graduate from Calcutta named Habib Rahman.[79] Devi hired Rahman in New York for a leading role in an original choreography based on Tagore's *The Cycle of Spring*, in which he "balanced on one foot, and waved his arms about like the famous Indian dancer, Uday Shankar."[80] Then in May 1946, Rahman and Indrani married in New York and the young couple returned to India after securing a British Indian passport for Indrani through Rahman's brother, who worked in Washington.[81]

Back in India, Indrani dabbled in both kathak and Manipuri dance styles before immersing herself in Bharatanatyam and developing into an acclaimed dancer in her own right. In 1952, she was crowned the winner of the first Miss India pageant. Is Indrani Rahman understood to be white because her mother was a white

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[78] Rahman, *Dancing in the Family*, 59.
[79] Ibid., 70.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid., 82.

Oriental-turned-ethnic dancer? Is she understood to be Indian because her father was Indian? Or because she was born in India before returning there years later with her Indian husband, studying Indian dance, and becoming Miss India in 1952? Or should we see her as something else—a living contestation of essentialist conceptions of race, nationality, and cultural belonging? Srinivasan gives us no framework for approaching this type of hybridity in the world of pre-independence Indian dance and thus leaves us with only white-brown/Indian-American binaries.

I do not reframe this history and critique this argument as a denial of the pervasive legal, spatial, and cultural transgressions of early-twentieth-century white supremacy, but rather as a tempering of the inclination to counter those transgressions by framing ethno-national identities as markers of cultural authenticity, purity, and belonging. Srinivasan is correct to emphasize the racialized exclusions embedded in early-twentieth-century notions of American citizenship and the subsequent whitewashing of American modern dance by cleansing it of global influences. But for all the commendable attention Srinivasan pays to issues of citizenship, transnational labor, and racialization, her analysis leaves little room for anyone or anything that did not adhere to prevailing racialized constructions of "Americanness" (i.e., whiteness) and "Indianness" (i.e., brownness). Her treatment of these intertwined dance histories seems to preclude nuanced negotiation of hybrid cosmopolitan identities during the pre-independence period in favor of situating those negotiations in post-1965 South Asian America.

Such analysis falls prey to reinforcing the type of "two-part story" of South Asian America, discussed by Vivek Bald, that cleaves the history of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century migrations from that of the post-1965 South Asian American diaspora. This view presupposes that racist immigration policies enacted in 1917 and 1924, and the 1923 decision in *U.S. vs. Bhagat Singh Thind*, constituted an absolute rupture that denied South Asians living in the United States any possibilities for self-representation or viable community building. Based on the contents of this dissertation, however, we know this view to be incomplete. These policies were real, and their consequences dire for South Asian America, but to accept such a narrative fully robs agency from the individuals and communities who remained in the United States, navigated discriminatory circumstances, and found ways to persevere.

## Conclusions

*America at last! The seventeen days of Asiatic steerage seemed like the experience of another man the very moment the immigration authorities gave me permission to enter the United States. The reverence that I felt for this country was so great that nothing short of falling on my knees and kissing its soil would have sufficed to express my feelings. But Americans are a strange people! No sooner did they see that I had such feelings for their country than they began to knock it out of me in a very unceremonious fashion.* [1]

—Dhan Gopal Mukerji, 1923

*To sum up: the United States stands today with the promise (or curse) of imperialism ahead of her, with the tremendous problems of government ownerships of public utilities, with an imminent war between capitalism and labor, with race problems, and with the question of woman suffrage….It is truly "the melting pot" of the different nations of the world, and of its social, political, and economic problems, and its past and future history is well worth the watching.*[2]

—Lala Lajpat Rai, 1916

This dissertation has emphasized complexities and contradictions of cultural exchange between colonial India and the United States in the decades preceding Indian independence in 1947. At the dawn of the twentieth century, India existed for most Americans merely as an idea, or set of ideas, shaped by maritime trade, European Orientalist scholarship, the writings of American Transcendentalists, and the vague, essentializing representations of a vogueish popular Orientalism. As the epigraphs above suggest, ideas about America and its global significance

[1] Mukerji, *Caste and Outcast*, 141.

[2] Lala Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America: A Hindu's Impressions and a Study* (Calcutta: R. Chatterjee, 1916), 33.

simultaneously circulated among Indian activists, artists, and intellectuals—some of whom traveled to the United States. Although the nineteenth century had seen limited first-person contact between Indians and Americans, fantasies and realities collided more intensely, and with increasing frequency, in the early twentieth century as labor migrants, political activists, and students from the subcontinent began to arrive in greater number.

The racism and discrimination these immigrants encountered primarily targeted wage laborers, notably those working in the lumber and agricultural industries along the West Coast, but even relatively privileged students and professionals, including Dhan Gopal Mukerji (who penned the first epigraph above in 1923), found that social realities in the United States diverged from idealized notions of egalitarianism and opportunity for all.[3] As consumer Orientalism flourished, and romanticized notions of India and the exotic "East" saturated elite and popular culture alike, the onset of sustained immigration from the subcontinent prompted xenophobic backlash—often amplified by white labor organizers—that culminated in the passage of restrictive legislation, all but outlawing immigration from colonial India and other countries in the so-called Asiatic Barred Zone by 1917. These exclusions, and their devastating impact on South Asian American

[3] Mukerji, an English-educated Bengali Brahmin, arrived in the California via Japan and began his studies at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1910. He then attended Stanford University, where he received a bachelor's degree in history in 1914. He went on to become a leading authority on India and promoter of Vedanta. Mukerji published extensively. His memoir, *Caste and Outcast* (1923), which in addition to commenting on life in India conveyed his experiences as an immigrant, was read widely in the United States. See Chang, "Introduction," in Mukerji, *Caste and Outcast.*

communities in the United States are largely responsible for a longstanding historiographic neglect of South Asian America and South Asian Americans who lived prior to the enactment of liberalizing immigration policies in 1965.

In recent decades, this trend has begun to reverse, and this dissertation contributes to an ongoing shift in research focus across disciplines in the humanities and arts to reassess the activities of South Asian Americans, their communities, and their public engagements in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Despite intense cultural biases, overt racism, and exclusionary policies, the early twentieth century was also a time of accelerated change and immense possibility. And despite proportionally small demographics, South Asian Americans were active participants in early-twentieth-century U.S. urban landscapes, creative practices, and intellectual discourses. Accounting for the persistence of moral and cultural conservatism and Anglo-Saxon chauvinism in the United States, Gordon Chang argues:

> The years from just before World War I through the 1920s witnessed an extraordinary openness and creativity in American arts and intellectual life. It is true that these were years of official white supremacy, xenophobia, religious dogmatism, and Red Scares, but they were also the years of the Harlem Renaissance, cultural cosmopolitanism, and the flourishing of social and political activism of all sorts, from feminism to socialism…there was a receptivity to new ideas and hitherto neglected or even disdained sources of inspiration and learning, whether it was African-American music, the psychological "unconscious," or Asian civilizations. A "modern intellectual" in America emerged, independent, critical of stagnant and repressive Puritanism and narrowness, and eager to engage in what has been called a political and aesthetic revolt.[4]

[4] Ibid., 13-14.

The timespan covered by this dissertation extends more than a decade beyond the period identified by Chang, but the openness, creativity, and cosmopolitanism in arts and intellectual life he identifies (alongside the familiar ruptures associated with white supremacy, xenophobia, cultural conservatism, and just plain ignorance) are at the core of this project. Chang situates the emergence of his "modern intellectual" in America, but this dissertation has argued that modernist projects of the era were both cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse. Their particulars, however, differed according to culture and geography—in no small part tied to colonial imperialism and the varied responses it provoked—and were actively negotiated through global networks of migration, information, representation, encounter, and exchange.

English-educated Indian immigrants such as Dhan Gopal Mukerji and Sarat Lahiri—both graduates of the University of Calcutta with roots in the Bengali *bhadralok*—recognized the burgeoning interest in Indian spirituality, arts, literature, and music in the United States and set out to educate Americans and bridge perceived cultural divides.[5] Their public activities constituted a form of informal cultural ambassadorship rooted in immigrant lives rather than state-sanctioned visits and official diplomatic policies. Not insignificantly, such activities (writing for Mukerji and music for Lahiri) also provided these individuals with a means of

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[5] Richard David Williams discusses Mukerji at length with specific regard to Mukerji's recollections of Murad Ali Khan, a Hindustani musician who had been welcomed into the Bengali *bhadralok* household of his upbringing to instruct Mukerji and his brother, Jadugopal, who was later imprisoned for his revolutionary activities. Williams draws on Mukerji's literary accounts to illustrate the *bhadralok* embrace of Hindustani culture and specifically the relationships forged between North Indian Muslim musicians and their Bengali patrons-cum-disciples (*The Scattered Court*, 185-189).

economic survival amidst unfamiliar, and sometimes hostile, social and legislative environments. Considerably more is known today about Mukerji than Lahiri—he published widely about his experiences in the United States and even won the Newberry Medal for his children's book *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon* (1927)—but both were recognizable cultural figures in the United States during their lifetimes. Both also partnered with white American women. Mukerji married his wife, Patty (Ethel Ray Dugan Mukerji), in 1918. Although no official record of Lahiri's marriage remains, he purportedly married Lota (identified in Census records as a native of California) around 1922.

Ultimately, and unfortunately, both men died young. In 1936, Mukerji took his own life in New York, a casualty of existential despair at the age of forty-six. Lahiri, as we know, passed away following a stroke in 1941 at age forty-four. The lives of Mukerji and Lahiri may not be representative of their South Asian American contemporaries—after all, both hailed from privileged backgrounds and remained professionally active in the United States at a time when most South Asians were altogether barred from entry. Both men were also disproportionately successful in their professional lives relative to many of their peers. Archival sources indicate that the works of both were appreciated by American audiences, particularly educated urban audiences with an interest in Indian culture. Even so, life as first-generation immigrants nonetheless took its toll. The untimely demise of both Mukerji and Lahiri reflects the difficulties faced by even the more elite South Asian Americans who remained in the United States following the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924.

Lahiri, specifically, presents a compelling case study precisely because we know so little about his private thoughts and experiences. Newspapers documented his public appearances over nearly two decades, but we know almost nothing of his life beyond what we can glean from a fragmentary archive. Filling in the gaps in his story requires us, the readers, to move beyond the limitations of this archive and imagine ourselves in his everyday life, walking the streets of Midtown Manhattan in the 1920s and 1930s. At first, his purported status as a Congress Party exile, which suggests his activist-nationalist political orientation caught the attention of British colonial authorities in India, struck me as incongruous with the nature of his activities as a working musician in the United States, which seem deliberately apolitical, rooted in the tropes of Orientalism, and convey a tendency towards self-exoticism. The more I wrestled with his story, however, the more I came to situate his presence in the United States—and by extension his activities as a working musician, lecturer, and restaurateur—within the global networks of migration, culture, and politics in which he took part.

In four years of archival research on Lahiri, I found no definitive references linking him to the contemporaneous political projects of Indian nationalist activism, yet potential connections clearly emerge. Henry Cowell, the American avant-garde composer and Lahiri associate who provided my initial pathway into this research, was purportedly introduced to Indian musicians in New York by a group of Bengali political refugees he knew in San Francisco. According to my research, Lahiri was the only Indian musician named in Cowell's New York orbit during the late 1920s

and 1930s, although Cowell would later bring Wasantha Wana Singh (an immigrant from Ceylon known to support anticolonial causes) to the New School in the 1940s.

Before ever meeting Cowell, Lahiri toured with Ragini Devi and the Trio Ragini beginning in 1923, soon after Devi and her husband Ramlal Balaram Bajpai moved to New York so Bajpai could work for Lala Lajpat Rai and the Indian Home Rule League of America. The Bajpai apartment at 209 Sullivan Place in Brooklyn consequently became a "hotbed" for the Indian independence movement, and through his network of social and political connections, Bajpai introduced Devi to artists and musicians in New York.[6] Lahiri, again, was one of the only named Indian musicians to work with Devi during the early 1920s. This Indian nationalist milieu also included Harindranath and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, whose son Rama would later perform with Ragini Devi, Wasantha Wana Singh, and other Indian musicians who surface in this research. Although the elder Chattopadhyayas were not immigrants themselves, both stayed with the Bajpais on occasion (Harindranath and Devi would eventually fall in love and flee to India together in 1930). Both were dedicated to the arts and played well-documented roles in Indian nationalist movements.

The intermingling of artists and activists (and artist-activists) in these small circles points to two key observations regarding the networks of Indian anticolonial nationalism that coalesced during this era. Firstly, artistic practices such as music,

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[6] Rahman, *Dancing in the Family*, 20-23.

dance, poetry, theater, and literature were central aspects of the anticolonial nationalist intellectual ecosystem. And secondly, this ecosystem was in the process of becoming increasingly global in scope throughout the early decades of the twentieth century via emergent networks of migration and information. A working musician, lecturer, and restaurateur such as Lahiri may not have been a dedicated political activist on par with Lala Lajpat Rai, or even the Chattopadhyayas, but his activities in New York during the 1920s and 1930s attest to the global proliferation of Indian nationalist thought, and specifically its cultural dimensions, in the decades preceding Indian independence.

By the time Lahiri reached New York in 1919, the West Coast Ghadar Party had lost political momentum following the so-called Hindu-German Conspiracy and the Home Rule movement had gained traction in the United States. Early in World War I, key members of the Ghadar Party had participated in an international scheme to provide the subcontinent with resources for armed revolution against the British. Even as the United States government claimed neutrality in the matter, the Indian nationalists became targets of British surveillance efforts, resulting in their eventual arrest and a publicized trial in San Francisco beginning November 1917. From New York, Lala Lajpat Rai and the Indian Home Rule League of America subsequently embarked on an extensive propaganda campaign to convince the United States Government, as well as ordinary Americans, to rally to the cause of Indian independence. The inaugural January 1918 issue of *Young India,* the League's journal, featured a letter to President Wilson that made the case for Indian political

sovereignty and tied the fate of India to global humanitarian and democratic concerns.[7] By and large, Rai and the Indian Home Rule League eschewed the militant revolutionary tactics of the Ghadar Party in favor of intellectual appeals and cultural education. They were not interested in overthrowing the British so much as winning Indian sovereignty within the Commonwealth of Nations.

Although we cannot explicitly tie Lahiri to this project, it was without question the dominant Indian nationalist ideology of his New York milieu. Viewed in this light, Lahiri's efforts to promote Indian music and culture in the United States become imbued with political significance. His activities suggest that like his Bengali intellectual forebears, he viewed Hindu cultural revivalism, and specifically music and dance, as key facets of the Indian national project and situated them within a cosmopolitan modernist cultural ecosystem. Lahiri's promotional positioning conveys an intimacy with prevailing Orientalist and Bengali discourses consistent with his *bhadralok* roots, as well as a desire to position India as a viable presence—distinct from, but on par with the Euro-American world—in the cosmopolitan negotiations of the early twentieth century. Lahiri kept whatever political views he may have harbored out of the press, but his commitment to specific nationalist-revivalist conceptions of Indian arts and culture suffused every aspect of his public image and persona. Through his actions, and those of his contemporaries and collaborators, these ideas and representations seeped into the

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[7] *Young India* 1, no. 1. (January 1918). Published by the India Home Rule League of America, 1465 Broadway, New York City. (Accessed through SAADA, December 9, 2022)

artistic culture of interwar New York and found receptive audiences primed by the inescapable cliches and stereotypes of American Orientalism.

Within this same New York milieu, Black American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, an associate of Lala Lajpat Rai, detected resonances between Indian anticolonial nationalism and the efforts of Black Americans to secure fundamental freedoms and equal treatment under the law. Du Bois assigned a unique significance to the Indian freedom struggle as he increasingly came to situate the plight of Black Americans as a manifestation of global confrontations between Euro-American imperialist powers and the colonized peoples they sought to subjugate. In a short essay entitled "India," Du Bois links the fate of Black Americans and Indians in the context of racialized oppression at the hands of colonial power:

> The problem of the Negroes thus remains a part of the worldwide clash of color. So, too, the problem of the Indians can never be simply a problem of autonomy in the British commonwealth of nations. They must always stand as representatives of the colored races—of the yellow and black peoples as well as the brown—of the majority of mankind, and together with the Negroes they must face the insistent problem of the assumption of the white peoples of Europe that they have a right to dominate the world and especially so to organize it politically and industrially as to make most men their slaves and servants.[8]

Securing autonomy in the British commonwealth of nations, which Du Bois deemed a partial aspiration for India, was in fact the precise nationalist mission espoused by Rai and the Indian Home Rule League. Du Bois had befriended Rai in New York between 1914 and 1919, and his early conceptions of Indian nationalism were no

[8] W.E.B. Du Bois, "India," in Bill V. Mullen and Cathryn Watson, eds., *W.E.B. Du Bois on Asia: Crossing the World Color Line* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 8.

doubt shaped by this relationship. Rai, for his part, commented on the racial injustices confronting Black Americans during his visits to the United States.[9] On the occasion of Indian independence, Du Bois later wrote:

> The fifteenth of August deserves to be remembered as the greatest historical date of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is saying a great deal, when we remember that in the nineteenth century Napoleon was overthrown, democracy established in England, Negro slaves emancipated in the United States, the German Empire founded, the partition of Africa determined upon, the Russian Revolution carried through, and two world wars fought.[10]

But Du Bois also recognized the temptation of India "to stand apart from the darker peoples and seek her affinities among whites"—"to regard herself as 'Aryan' rather than 'colored.'"[11] The activities of certain early-twentieth-century Indian immigrants in the United States, including Sarat Lahiri, speak directly to this tendency. Upon encountering an unfamiliar racial hierarchy, Lahiri and many of his lighter-skinned high-caste contemporaries identified as white in their attempts to navigate racialized power structures. Lahiri's professional pursuits—including performances in elite and avant-garde spaces, associations with American Oriental dancers, and his restaurant in the Theater District of Midtown Manhattan—all show him ostensibly seeking his "affinities among whites." The archive does not speak to any relationships or professional collaborations between Lahiri and Black Americans in New York. Culturally, his allegiances lay elsewhere. In contemporary terms, the tendency of certain foreign-born immigrants to seek proximity to the dominant white

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[9] See Rai, *The United States of America*, 128-172.
[10] Du Bois, "The Freeing of India," in Mullen and Watson, 145.
[11] Du Bois, "India," in Mullen and Watson, 7.

culture in pursuit of social acceptance and professional opportunity (and hence avoid associations with those perceived as lower in the racialized hierarchy) manifests in the discourse of the "model minority."

By contrast, we see evidence of the Afro-Asian anticolonial solidarities Du Bois envisioned emerging at the Harlem "Four Freedoms" rally in November 1942, where Wasantha Wana Singh, Rama Chattopadhyaya, and Meenakshi performed alongside Black American activists and coalitions from colonized territories around the globe. The absence of earlier records showing Indian immigrants, Black Americans, and immigrant groups coming together for public events of this nature under the banner of shared social and political interest does not preclude the possibility that such allegiances had formed in years prior. Vivek Bald has shown that intermarriage between Black Americans and South Asian immigrants in Harlem preceded this 1942 rally, and many of the Bengali Muslim men discussed in Bald's work married into existing communities of color, started families, and lived out their lives in the United States.[12] The deep integration of these immigrants into Harlem and other Black neighborhoods throughout this period is a testament to the hybrid nature of early-twentieth-century migrant experiences, but can also make it difficult to pinpoint the genesis of public solidarities. In the decades following Indian independence in 1947, such public expressions of Afro-Asian anticolonial solidarity would become increasingly commonplace.[13]

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[12] Bald, *Bengali Harlem*, 48.
[13] For discussions of these types of cultural and political projects, see Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen, eds., *Afro-Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and*

The intersections of music and politics throughout the immigrant subcultures and early-modern cosmopolitan networks identified in this dissertation, from Harlem to Calcutta and everywhere in between, provide an important direction for continued research. As the contours of the present project came into focus, however, it became clear that although political threads run through every chapter of this dissertation, an overtly political framing did not serve the overall narrative structure. The task of covering such varied topical terrain—spanning continents, performance practices, and social movements—required situating Lahiri as the hub at the center of divergent spokes. While this approach proved conducive to stitching together seemingly disparate phenomena and elucidating their connections, it also had limitations. This dissertation comments on the ways Lahiri's activities in New York reflected, refracted, and sometimes outright avoided the political projects of his time. As much as I had initially hoped to uncover a hidden source placing Lahiri in a Harlem drawing room alongside Lala Lajpat Rai and W.E.B. Du Bois, that source never emerged. And yet, such a room was never far away in time or space. Having now followed this particular path to its conclusion, a reorientation away from Lahiri and New York in order to center the manifold musical expressions of the early-twentieth-century South Asian diaspora and their place in the broader cosmopolitan soundscape could add depth to the political implications of this work.

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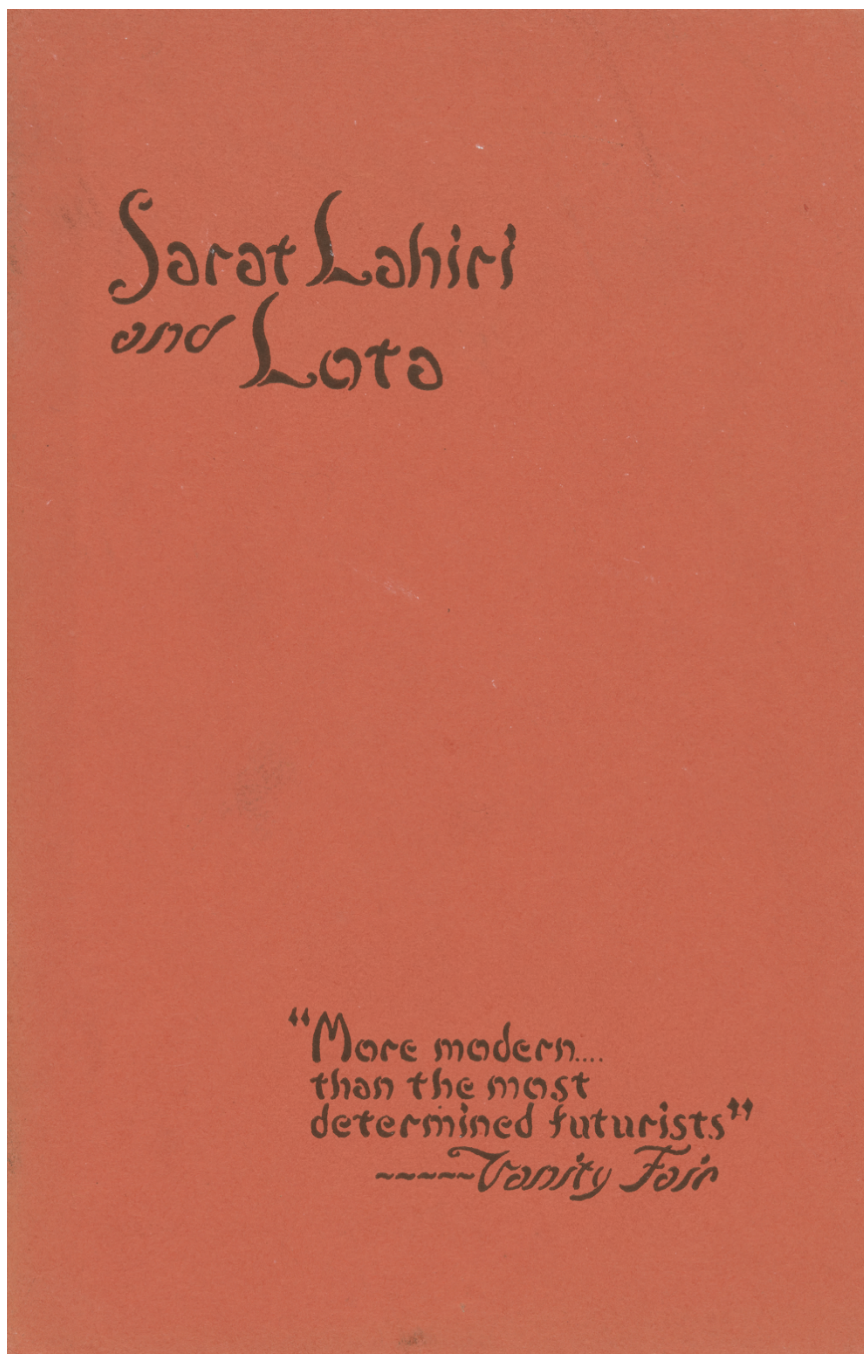
*Asian Americans* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Fred Ho, *Wicked Theory, Naked Practice: A Fred Ho Reader,* ed. Diane C. Fujino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Elliott H. Powell, *Sounds from the Other Side: Afro-South Asian Collaborations in Black Popular Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

**APPENDIX A**
**“Sarat Lahiri and Lota” (1928)**
**(All Edward Steichen photos © 2023 The Estate of Edward Steichen / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)**



VANITY FAIR JUNE, 1928

Steichen

CHANSON INDOUE

# FOREWORD

IT IS THE PURPOSE here to briefly outline *why* the type of entertainment created by Sarat Lahiri and Lota is *more* than an "act."

There are reasons in plentitude to explain *why* their intimate recitals of music, songs, and dances of the East are hailed as the supreme expression of its *authentic* art—so rarely encountered in this highly specialized entertainment field.

From their initial presentations Sarat Lahiri and Lota have been recognized as outstanding interpreters of the *real* soul of India and the Orient, as revealed in its music and dance rhythms.

There must be cause for such universal endorsement—by the musical, theatrical, and radio world. The world of society has given the art of Lahiri and Lota spontaneous and enthusiastic approval, on their numerous appearances at public and private entertainments and affairs. Why? Why is *their* art such a sensational revelation to Western eyes, ears—*emotions?*

# SARAT LAHIRI AND LOTA

may well be named High Priest and Priestess in America, of that most elusive of all cadences—the undefinable rythm that constitutes the genuine music of India.

Such music is as far removed from the "nautch dancer" type as the East is from the West. To produce authentic Eastern music, requires the true musician's soul as cast in the Indian mould—steeped in the rhythmic melodies which have for ages been the racial expression of India and the Orient.

Lahiri explains that the great gulf between Occidental and Oriental musical expression is largely due to the fact that Western music imitates rather than suggests.

Steichen

EVENING RAGA

CHANT
TO
SHIVA

Steichen

He argues that Western music suggests a storm, by imitation that is the roaring of drums, and the swishing of traps for the sound of rain—while the harmony and melody of the music assumes the rising and falling of the elements.

Hindu music imitates not at all, but strives to create to the hearer an emotion similar to that expressed by a human in *viewing* a storm, yet, real Hindu music may be rendered the ultimate in delicacy of effect, and given a fineness and tonal texture unattainable in Occidental melody.

## IN REALITY, THE MOST "MODERN" MUSIC

is authentic Indian music! Because of its absence of harmony as we know it, and notation, Hindu music evolves a form quite similar to some of our

most advanced "futurist" stylists—but incomparably more striking, original, and dynamic in the emotional effects produced.

Yet, its melodies "expressive of the soul of the cosmos, the universe singing its way toward perfection," must have had their original conception in the beginning of the world. Such rhythm only could be created through the ages, each generation of native musicians putting something more into the compositions.

## THE "RAGA"

is the prevailing type into which most Hindu music falls. Each raga has a fixed form of melody and—according to Indian musical ethics—only may be played on certain occasions. The best of tradition is that ragas represent the sublime emotion of the deities.

As Indian music expanded during the centuries, the native composers gradually accumulated varied expressions of the ragas to serve almost every time, occasion, and emotion. This collection is the basis of all authentic Hindu music. Melodies have been handed down—orally—from one generation of composers to the next through the ages, as Hindu music manuscripts are comparatively unknown.

Thus, there are morning and evening ragas, ragas of Spring and of storm, ragas of rituals, ragas fitting all the emotions. There are many folk songs which, strictly speaking, are not classed as ragas, though these are fascinating musical pictures of every day life.

## THE INSTRUMENTS USED BY LAHIRI AND LOTA ARE IRREPLACEABLE

because there are no others like them, save in museums or collections. Imagine a violin with seventeen strings! This unique instrument is the *esraj,* which is played with a bow. One string is used principally, but all except four or five are exceptionally fine, serving only to add reasonance to the music.

These strings vibrate in sympathy with the notes played on the other strings. To get some idea of this instrument's scope, it should be stated that

DANSE DES OULÉD NAÏL

Steichen

the Indian musical scale has no less than twenty-two notes to the octave—the same scale for all these instruments.

The *sitar* with seven strings upon which eight tones as well as quarter tones may be produced, and the *surbahar* with fifteen strings, are both plucked instruments. The latter is an Indian antique of great value, being at least one hundred and fifty years old. All of these instruments have hardly changed in form for the past two thousand years.

The *tabla* and the *banya*—ancient Hindu drums of strange design—also are an indispensible part of the musical program, and complete a set that in itself lends an added note of authenticity. For it is the only set actually in use throughout the Western Hemisphere, and strongly contributes to the bizarre picturesqueness of the presentation.

## THE MARVELOUS MUSIC PRODUCED ON THESE RARE INSTRUMENTS

by Lahiri and Lota, is the best possible argument in support of Lahiri theories. To one hearing this music for the first time, new thrills certainly are in store. And also a new set of emotions, unfolding a chain of impressions which seemingly take the hearer to another world—vague yet beautiful—running the entire gamut of the senses.

## SOME OF THE NUMBERS ARE ORIGINAL COMPOSITIONS BY LAHIRI

who was noted as a composer and singer of Hindu music, as well as an instrumentalist, before coming to America to study our Western culture. Lahiri is thirty years old, a young Hindu of the highest caste, who comes from a wealthy Brahmin family, and is a graduate of the University of Calcutta. He left his native country a few years ago to come to America where he took a post-graduate course in one of our universities.

In America his extraordinary performances on these strange instruments began to attract notice. Soon he was playing before many private audiences in New York, while interspersing most interesting and witty explanatory comments on his art. This continually increasing success inevitably led up to the career which has made him America's premier specialist and sponsor—of *authentic* Indian music.

## THE GORGEOUS LOTA WITH HER EXOTIC DANCE RYTHMS

renders the dances of the Orient—India, Arabia, Algeria, and Polynesia—in a way that captures the spirit of primitive faith—and *makes it real*—through her art and vivid personality. The charming wife of Sarat Lahiri, in addition to her outstanding musical and dancing ability, has a singing voice ideally adapted to songs of the East.

The entertainment achieved by Sarat Lahiri and Lota, is more than an "act." It is a balanced triumph of two brilliant personalities—the essence of the Oriental form of "IT"—in the presentation of "*real*" music, songs, and dances of the East.

# WHAT CRITICS and the PRESS SAY of SARAT LAHIRI and LOTA...and THEIR ART

## STAGE APPEARANCES

When *The Little Clay Cart* was presented at the Neighborhood Playhouse, New York, by Miss Irene Lewisohn it created a furore and ran for two seasons. By his arrangement and playing of the incidental music, Sarat Lahiri contributed much to its success.

> Hindu music is a different experience from our western conception of music, but it none the less brings us a rare aesthetic pleasure that we await from any art. The sublety of its intervals and complex rythms can only be caught when interpreted with the aid of delicate native instruments; or with the special quality of the true Hindu voice. . . .
>
> To those in the West who want to understand and sense the real essence of Eastern art, the ragas and folk songs bring a great illumination, and to those who wish to feel another emotional translation, Hindu music through its vibrating overtones and infinite moods, can move to profound joy or sadness.
>
> IRENE LEWISOHN.

To the enthusiastic adherents of deliberate cacaphony, the music of the Orient, both ancient and modern, comes as a distinct revelation. Sarat Lahiri, a musician from India, first presented the ancient music of his country in *The Little Clay Cart* at the Neighborhood Playhouse. By his playing there and his later recitals, he convinced the critics that the

ancient music of the East was more modern than that of the most determined futurists. . . .

In the past few weeks he has been appearing with Lota, who interprets his music in dance, in the ballet productions at the Manhattan Opera House in New York. Among these were the *Israel* of Ernest Bloch adapted for the stage and presented in setting by Jo Davidson, the first venture of the well-known sculptor in the theatre, and the *Prince Igor* of Borodin.

Sarat Lahiri's playing proved to those again who have heard his recitals, that the instruments and music of the Far East have exerted a great influence on our contemporary music, even though they are just beginning to be known to the public at large.

VANITY FAIR.

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In the presentation by Sam H. Harris, of *Congai*—a Broadway stage hit that ran for thirty-five weeks in New York—the incidental music was arranged and played by Sarat Lahiri and Lota.

There is brilliant color, plenty of pungent philosophy and a girl who plays wild tunes of the jungle on the gosh-dingest banjo or guitar we ever saw.

J. H. W. in THE BROOKLYN DAILY EAGLE.

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. . . Under the magic direction of Rouben Mamoulian, who makes the piece a symphony of whining minor pipes and menancing drums and fantastic shadows rising from the mists of the rice fields. . . .

Allison Smith in the NEW YORK WORLD.

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"Congai," a play directed by Rouben Mamoulian, with incidental music by Sarat Lahiri and Lota. . . . The action takes place against a background so teeming with native life that at times one forgets about the principals. And through it all runs the weird music of drums and reeds in an Oriental symphony of tragedy and impending doom.

NEW YORK WORLD.

"*Soldiers and Women*"—an Oriental drama by Paul Hervey Fox and George Tilton, had a two months successful run at the Ritz Theatre, New York, as presented by Lew Cantor. Its incidental music was by Sarat Lahiri and Lota, who also were cast as the native principals, taking the parts of Khitmagar and Kiroth, with great distinction and histrionic ability.

. . . Aided by the colorful uniforms of Great Britian's far-flung defenders and mystic off-stage East Indian music, the tragedy at the Ritz Theatre should be popular entertainment.

Percy Hammond in the NEW YORK HERALD-TRIBUNE.

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. . . Occasionally weird native music plays off-stage. Native music is always described as "weird," and when off-stage it is usually about as native as chop suey. But the Baluchistan Blues, apparently played on barbed wire fence with the accompaniment of a tenor mosquito really were weird.

I wish we could have more of them. They sounded somehow genuine, and they contrasted strangely with the literal make-believe of the clean cut officers. . . .

Robert Littell in the NEW YORK WORLD.

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## DANCE AND OTHER RECITALS

. . . Lota . . . presented a program of Balinese, Hindu, Arabian and Polynesian dances at the Garden Theatre. This young dancer, who has scored a notable success with her interpretation of the mystic dances of the Far East, was accompanied by Sarat Lahiri on the esraj, a native Hindu instrument. Mrs. Henry H. Rogers, Mrs. Arthur B. Claflin and Mrs. Edward P. Mellon were among the patronesses.

From Southampton (L. I.) special dispatch to "Social News" column of the NEW YORK EVENING POST.

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In the lovely Hori Spring Festival, Lota was the very spirit of youth rejoicing.

SOUTHAMPTON (L. I.) TIMES.

Sarat Lahiri and Lota figure prominently in some of New York society's smartest and most elaborate entertainments. The annual charity entertainments for the Judson Health Center, are given on a vast scale usually at Madison Square Garden, and always include Lahiri and Lota, as principals.

> . . . The ever-mysterious wilderness will be ruled over by a Queen of the Jungle, who will be impersonated by Mrs. H. Gordon Duval. . . . Finally the Queen will hear the "eternal Samoan love solo," sung to the accompaniment of tom-toms by Mlle. Lucille de Lota, assisted by Sarat Lahiri at the drums. . . .
>
> THE NEW YORK TIMES

> . . . The first group represented Arabian Knights and Ladies en route to Bagdad, with Sarat Lahiri in the role of Ala Shar. . . .
>
> NEW YORK EVENING POST.

> . . . Lota specializes in Oriental dances and has been at the Deauville a week, doing one Arabian and one native Samoan dance called the Siva-Siva. Each is practically authentic. . . . She is an artist of the first class. . . .
>
> THE MORNING TELEGRAPH (New York).

> Lota and Sarat Lahiri performing on exotic Oriental instruments and forming a picture that might have been taken from a Hindu romance, lent glamour to a dance recital given last night at the Golden Theatre. . . .
>
> THE NEW YORK WORLD.

## PATRONS FOR WHOM SARAT LAHIRI AND LOTA HAVE GIVEN THEIR INTIMATE RECITALS INCLUDE

M. Edgar Varése
Mr. Leopold Stokowski
Miss Natchiva Rhambowa
Mrs. Cyril Francklyn
Prof. Chas. Farnsworth
Miss Lila Agnew Stewart
Miss Carolyn Widman
Mr. Rouben Mamoulian
Miss Anne Morgan
Dr. William Beebe
Mr. Ezra Winter
Miss Irene Lewisohn
Mr. William M. Leslie
Mr. E. F. Hutton
Mr. George Gershwin
Miss Alice Laughlin
Miss Malvina Hoffman
Mr. Edward Steichen
Mr. J. Lawrence Erb
Mme. Alla Nazimova
Mme. Sarojini Naidu
Dr. Nicolai Sokoloff
M. Alexander Kerensky

# RADIO PRESENTATIONS

Sarat Lahiri and Lota have broadcast their Hindu music with great success, having it featured on local and national programs.

"FROM THE ROAD TO MANDALAY"—

To show the varied phases music plays in the life of the Hindu and other people of India is the aim of the program to be broadcast by the New York Edison Hour over WRNY on Tuesday evening at 8 o'clock. This is the tenth of the present "Map of the World" music series, which covers the music of forty peoples.

Lota and Sarat Lahiri, Hindu musicians, will as guest artists of the Edison Ensemble, give vocal and instrumental selections of temple chants, snake charmers' weird melodies, plaintive evening songs, dances and folk songs. . . .

THE EVENING WORLD (New York).

---

Microphone fans had an opportunity last night to hear over WEAF native instruments of India . . . played by Sarat Lahiri and Lota, natives, as a feature of "Musical Miniatures."

THE NEW YORK AMERICAN.

---

The brooding mysticism of the East was evoked during the Hindu music program, also at WEAF. Two native artists, Sarat Lahiri and Lota, performed on ancient instruments, the sitar and esraj.

THE NEW YORK DAILY NEWS.

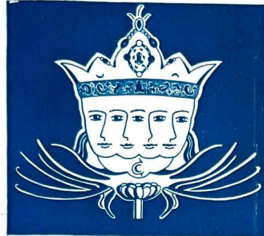
---

A broadcast of Russian and Oriental music features the radio march of "The Cavalcade" over WEAF tonight at 8 o'clock. World-famous composers of Russia and the Orient are represented in the selections, which will be interpreted by radio soloists, including Devora Nadworney, contralto; Nicholas Vasilieff, tenor; Prince Alexis Obolensky, basso; Sarat and Lota Lahiri, Hindu music specialists. . . .

NEW YORN EVENING POST.

Direction of
Catharine A. Bamman
BARBIZON - PLAZA
CENTRAL PARK SO., N. Y. C.

**APPENDIX B**
**"Ragini Devi, Traditional Dances of India" (1940)**



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# RAGINI DEVI

*in*

KALI SAMHARA TANDAVA DANCE

—∘—

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For terms and dates inquire: National Bureau of Club Programs
507 Fifth Avenue, N. Y. C.

# RAGINI DEVI AND THE HINDU DANCE

RAGINI DEVI brings to the West authentic traditions of classical and communal dances of India — enchanting rituals of South Indian temples — dance-modes from *Katha-kali* dance-drama — and ceremonial and festive dances of Northern India.

*Ragini Devi's* career in India has been unique in the annals of art. She was the first to re-discover the present *Katha-kali* dance-drama and other forgotten classical dances in her stage performances throughout India, evoking national interest in ancient dances. She danced and lectured at many universities in India, including Benares, Madras, Andhra, Annamali and at the University of London. She also gave command performances for the ruling Princes of Mysore, Patiala, Bhavnagar, Jind, Travancore, etc. In London, Paris and New York her performances have received wide comment and appreciation.

The secret of Ragini Devi's success is essentially due to her deep devotion and perseverance. She has studied her art at its source, first-hand, from the oldest and best experts, who live in remote areas — old centers of culture — far away from the modern cities of India.

### Living Traditions of The Dance

The *Devadasis* or temple votaries of the Tanjore district in South India possess a reliable traditional technique of the feminine art of solo dance. This art is called *Bharata Natyam* — after the *Natya Sastra* of Bharata — a treatise in Sanskrit on the traditions and form of the dance, attributed to the 3rd century A. D.

Ragini Devi studied *Bharata Natyam* in Tanjore and Mysore, learning the exquisite art of gesture, and the various forms of dance which have been the daily rituals in South Indian temples for many centuries.

But it was the *Katha-kali* dance-drama of Malabar, South India that gave Ragini Devi a more significant medium for the recreation of the ancient Hindu dance.

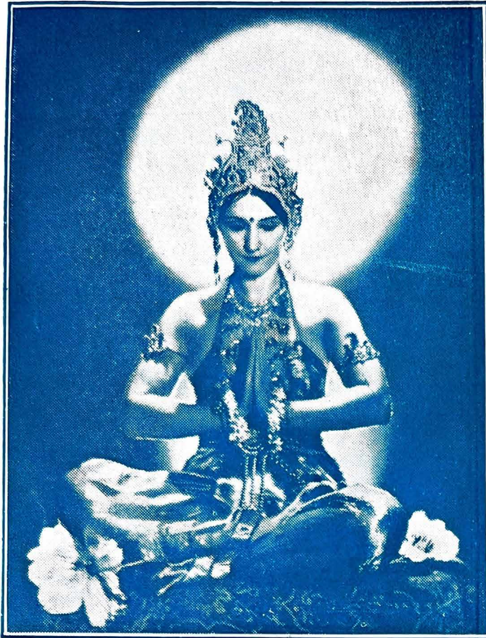
Katha-kali dance-drama employs an elaborate classical gesture language in its sacred dramas, as well as ancient dance modes and rituals found nowhere else in India today.

*Katha-kali* mime is the rhythmic narrative of moods, passions and events rendered in perfectly harmonized gestures and movements. Every kind of action, emotion and imaginative theme is depicted. Gestures of the hands, and changing expressions of the face convey the story with vivid eloquence, the actor being a marvellous adept in mimetic art.

The feminine art of dancing in *Katha-kali* is a portrayal of the ideal woman, expressing the subtle accomplishments of attraction, refined and beautiful. The erotic mood expressed in the shyly averted glance, the delicate movement of the brows and the changing expressions of the eyes is enhanced by fascinating movements of the neck and undulating grace in the various rhythmic gaits and modes of dance.

The entire gamut of human experience and expression can be perfectly rendered in *Katha-kali-* art, hence it has an universal appeal as a Dance Art.

Ragini Devi has received tributes of appreciation from Poet Rabindurett Tagore, O. C. Gangoly — Sir Radhakrishnan and many others — who acknowledge her fundamental contribution to the dance art of India.



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GLADYS ANDES, Director

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Wednesday, April 17th, 8:45 P.M.

# RAGINI DEVI

in

TRADITIONAL DANCES OF INDIA

assisted by

HINDU MUSICIANS

Wasantha Singh ........................ *Sarode, Dilruba*

Meen-akshi ........................ *Esraj*

Rama Chattopadhyaya .... *Tabla (drums) etc.*

Ahmed ........................ *Drums, cymbals*

Lakshmi, Indrani ........................ *Tambura*

## PROGRAM

I. NRIT-ANJALI — Dance Offering ........................ *Ragini Devi*
(Tanjore, South India)
I bow to Satvik Shiva whose body is the universe, whose voice is the entire language, and whose ornaments are the moon and stars.
A *Deva-dasi*, dance-devotee in the temple, dances her invocation. The Mudras or symbolic ritual gestures and form of the dance — are according to the traditional sanskrit code of the Natya Sastra.
Music: *Ananda, Bhairavi, Tala, Rupaka*

II. MOODS AND PASSIONS OF THE DANCE
a. Language of the hands and gesture themes.
b. Language of the emotions — the nine permanent moods.
c. Dance Themes from Katha-kali Mime.
(1) Feminine Mode
(2) Bird Movements
(3) Gait of the Deer
(4) "Fate of a Bee" (an episode)
Drum accompaniments by Rama Chattopadhyaya

III. MUSICAL INTERLUDE ........................ *Wasantha Singh, Meen-akshi*
Music: *Raga Kalyan, Tala, Dadra.*

IV. PARVATI LASYA NRITTAM ........................ *Ragini Devi*
(Dance of the Goddess Parvati)
A *Katha-kali Mode*
Prelude: Salutation to Shiva
O thou God of Gods!
To behold thee is the sunrise of my good fortune.
I am henceforth thy humble devotee.
The *Lasya* is a graceful feminine dance mode created by the Goddess Parvati, consort of the great God Shiva.
Music: *Raga Mukhari, Adi Tala.*

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*by*

## *Sarat Lahiri*

*& Todi*

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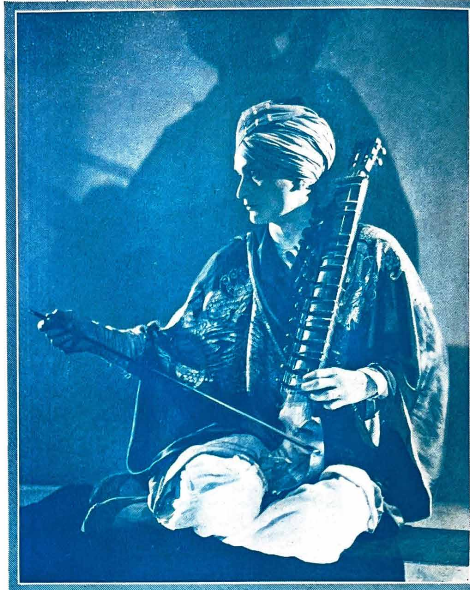

Steichen

"India's age-old musical art offers much from which the modern Western musician may learn. Sarat Lahiri is known among savants as a leading authority on everything pertaining to the theory and practice of Indian music."

— Winthrop Sargeant
Contributing Editor, Time Magazine.

Instruction in Hindu Music - the Ragas (Modes) and the Rhythms - offered to interested students by Sarat Lahiri.
COlumbus 5-8922

V. PATANG — A Kite Dance (South India) ................................ *Ragini Devi*

The mimicry of making and flying a kite is depicted in the gestures and movements of the dance. Allegorically, the kite is the lover, held by the thread of love. When the string breaks, the kite is lost—the maiden weeps and searches for it. At last, she recovers her gay colored kite, and with joyous movements draws it back once more to happy possession.

Music: *Raga Jaijaivanti, Tala Tritala*

VI. MUSICAL INTERLUDE ................................ *Wasantha Singh, Meen-akshi*

Music: *Raga Kalingra, Tala Tritala*

VII. MAYURA NRITTAM (Dance of the Peacock) ........................ *Ragini Devi*

A Katha-kali Dance Mode.

"As the clouds come into view, and the lightning
dazzles in terms of terror,
The peacock is in raptures."

VIII. NAGA-TALA (Cobra Rhythm) .................................................. *Ragini Devi*

(Dance from the Festival of Snakes — Kandy, Ceylon).

Drum accompaniment: Rama Chattopadhyaya, Ahmed Wasantha Singh

IX. KALI SAMHARA TANDAVA (Dance of Death) .................... *Ragini Devi*

The Goddess Kali, consort of Shiva, symbolizing destruction and the annihilation of forms, dances in the burning ground.

Prayer of a Devotee

"I have made a burning ground of my heart
Dance thy eternal dance — O conqueror of death!"

The mystreal purpose of the dance is the release of the soul from the bonds of fear, illusion and desires. The dance is a ritual ceremony in the Kali temples of Malabar — and is also an episode in Katha-kali dance-drama.

X. MUSICAL INTERLUDE ........................................................ *Wasantha Singh*

*Raga Tilakamod, Tala Tritala*

XI. MARWARI DANCE (Festival Dance of Northern India) ...... *Ragini Devi*

'Neath the Kadamba tree I await thee!
My eyes sharp lined with Kajal are seeking thee.
In the full bloom of youth
I have put red lac on my hands and feet,
And adorned my arms with gay bangles to greet thee.

XII. CHARA — GYPSY DANCE (North India) .............................. *Ragini Devi*

Drums accompaniment by Rama Chattopadhyaya and Ahmed


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## . . . Press Reviews . . .

DAILY TELEGRAPH, LONDON: Of the highly specialized art of Indian dancing Ragini Devi proved herself an accomplished exponent . . . . An introductory explanation of the symbolical gestures and movements from which these traditional dances are built up considerably enhanced the appeal of performances of unquestioned authenticity.

The complex movements of fluttering fingers and supple wrists provided a series of patterns of remarkable subtlety and charm, with outstanding examples of plastic design in an attractive essay in the Seductive Mode, and in the picturesque dance of the Goddess Parvati.

O. C. GANGOLY (Amrit Bazar Patrika, CALCUTTA): Our thanks are due to Ragini Devi, an enthusiastic lover of Indian Art and a sympathetic and a very skillful and accurate interpreter of Classical Indian Dancing, for proving to demonstration that the great traditions of the old art of Indian Dancing and Dramatics are still living, foolishly neglected by modern exponents of so-called "Oriental Dancing," and awaiting to be recognized, understood, learnt and interpreted in their true and correct spirit.

TIMES OF INDIA, BOMBAY: The purity and precision which characterized the dances of Ragini Devi and her group reveal the reverence with which she approached her art, and the care with which she has mastered the symbolism of the ancient dance of India. While faithfully representing the classical traditions, she has added to them the charm of her personal interpretation.

NEW YORK TIMES: The dances of Ragini Devi won her audiences with the simple truth of graceful interpretations rare to see in the theater. Several of Ragini's numbers had to be repeated, beautiful plastic poses accompanied by sinuous serpentine movements of the arms and hands.

NEW YORK SUN: The stage settings, lighting effects and the costumes . . . . were of rare exotic effect and the performance of Ragini Devi . . . . was at once artistic and rich in its suggestions of sensuous and spiritual significance. Her attractive numbers were many and she both sang and danced with picturesque and subtle charm.

---

## A Poet's Tribute

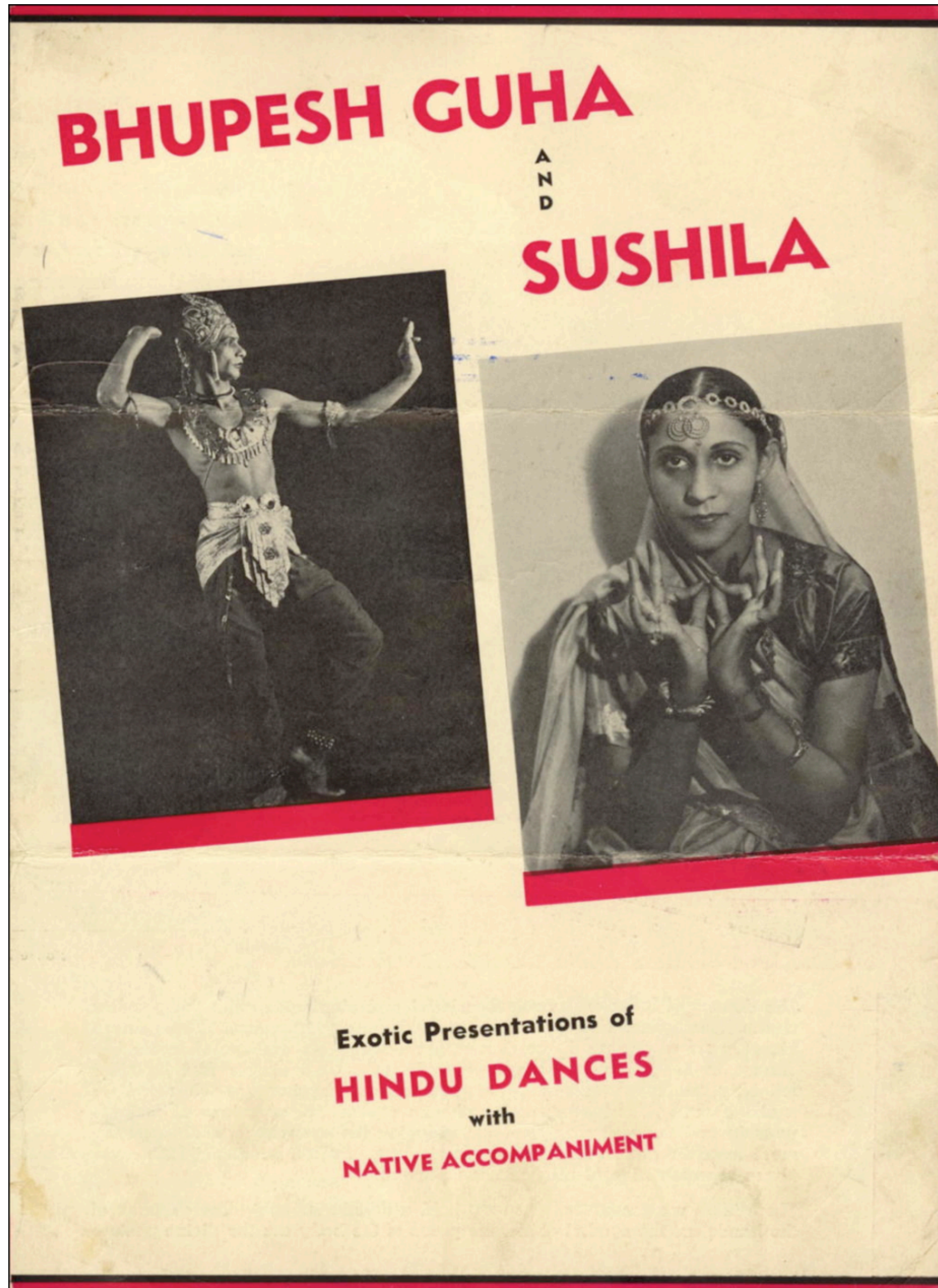
Those of us belonging to the Northern India who have lost the memory of the pure Indian classical dance have experienced a thrill of delight at the exhibition of dancing given by Ragini Devi.

I feel grateful at the assurance it has brought to us that the ancient art is still a living tradition in India with its varied grace and vigour and subtleties of dramatic expression.

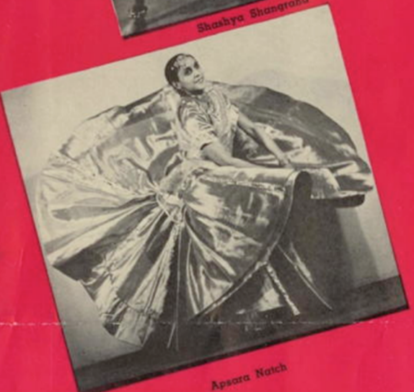
Oct. 1, 1934

Rabindranath Tagore

**APPENDIX C**
**"Bhupesh Guha and Sushila:**
**Exotic Presentations of Hindu Dances with Native Accompaniment"**



Shashya Shangraha



Apsara Natch

## REPERTOIRE

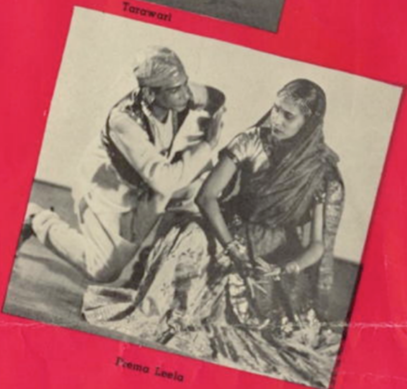
includes

SAPURIA—THE SNAKE CHARMER AND HIS REPTILES
VASANTI—FLOWER GARLANDED GAIETY OF SPRING
DEEPANWITA—THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHT
NILA PUJA—FOLK DANCE OF BENGAL
PUROHIT—THE HIGH PRIEST PERFORMING HIS CEREMONJES
BABU DHOBINI—INTERPRETATION OF A HUMOROUS FOLK SONG
APSARA NATCH—NYMPHS OF THE GODS
RAKHSASA—THE DEMON DANCE
PREMA LEELA—FLIRTATION DANCE OF HUMOROUS CHARACTER
ANJALI—AN OFFERING OF FLOWERS TO THE GOD SIVA
TABLA BANYA—FINGER DRUMS OF INDIA
SHIKARI—THE HUNTER RETURNS WITH HIS PREY
TARAWARI—WARRIORS SWORD DANCE
SHASHYA SHANGRAHA—HARVESTING THE GRAIN

and many others

Native Musicians

Tarawari



Prema Leela

The dances of India are mystical, colorful and glamorous, with the peculiar charm, atmosphere and sensuousness of the mysterious East. They picture vigorous sword dances, fierce demon dances, age old customs of India, folk dances of Bengal, court dances of north India, and simple and beautiful religious rites. Inhabitants of the crowded bazaars stopping to watch a strolling snake charmer, fascinating and authentic replicas of occasions of festival, worship and the everyday incidents of Indian life are portrayed through the medium of the dance, all forming a pageantry of color, with scintillating costumes representative of many Indian provinces.

There is no movement that does not hold a definite thought. The gestures of the hands are the symbol of life, the poses of the body are the divine posture of the gods, intricate rhythms and patterns woven by the beat of the feet combine to portray the Hindu dance in all its soulful and exotic appeal. The folk culture, the basis of the classical and religious lore of India, is depicted in the authentic folk dances, to the throbbing of the finger drums.

Whether it is an offering of flowers to the god Siva, a High Priest performing his worshipful ceremonies, a warrior with his sword play, or a snake charmer with his swaying movements to cajole his venomous reptiles, these dances symbolize the humour, the reverence, the courage, struggles or happiness of the impenetrable Hindu.

# BHUPESH GUHA AND SUSHILA

Raga — Ragini

These outstanding dancers who come from the Bengal province, depict with authentic perfection the gaiety or restraint that the occasion demands, and the dances they present from different parts of India are selected from a wide range of themes, portraying the customs and occurrences of the interesting life of the East.

The accompanying musicians add their exotic charm. Their instruments which are distinguished by beauty of color and design are historically interesting, in particular the drums played in a variety of ways by the fingers and hands which supply the arresting rhythm with a consistently throbbing undertone.

With their fascinating movements, costuming and rhythmic accompaniment of the native instruments, Bhupesh Guha, Sushila and their musicians bring to us the vivid colorful pictures of a land rich in mystic lore and emotional atmosphere.

"Sensitive artists equipped with full technique."
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