

Colonial Concentration: attention in Bengali music scholarship in 1885

Richard David Williams

In 1885, Krishnadhan Bandyopadhyay (1846-1904) published a colossal study of music in Bengali, the *Gītasūtrasār* ('Quintessence of Music'). A voracious reader, Bandyopadhyay drew together elements from Indian and European scholarship, from medieval treatises on music theory written in Sanskrit to Darwin's treatment of the evolution of birdsong. His own study examined a range of issues in north Indian art music, situating performance practices in a broader context of aesthetics, physics, and physiology. Within this range, he examined the possibilities of notation, new techniques of analysis, and future prospects for critical engagements with music and sound.

These possibilities were informed by global trends in musical thought, curated by colonial forms of knowledge circulation and enquiry. In this paper, I ask how far Bandyopadhyay engaged with European ideas relating to auditory perception and cognition, and whether we might read attention in music as one of his primary concerns in the *Gītasūtrasār*. While there was a longer history of attending and concentrated listening in South Asia—especially in religious contexts, such as Sufi aesthetics—this was not an explicit priority in the intellectual discipline of musicology (Sanskrit *saṅgīta-śāstra* and Persian *'ilm-i-mūsīqī*). That said, from at least the fourteenth century, music scholars had explored the practice of *dhyāna*, a mode of cognition corresponding to concentration, meditation, and visualisation, whereby the listener might imaginatively attend to a musical entity and the components of sound. However, it is not wholly evident how far this theory corresponded to lived listening practices, or how far it intersected with the concerns of attention as formulated in studies on Europe. Bandyopadhyay had inherited the *dhyana* system, yet also developed a more modern vocabulary for "concentration", including *manoyogi* and *manaḥsaṅgyog* (literally "connecting with the mind"). In this paper I explore how such terms bridge epistemologies of listening, and the place of attention in colonial Indian scholarship on music.