Eben Graves
The Politics of Musical Time: Expanding Songs and Shrinking Markets in Bengali Devotional Performance

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I was once at a music teacher's house in Diglipur, a town in the north of the Andaman Islands, where hundreds of Bengali families displaced from East Pakistan have resettled after Partition. The music teacher explained that the Bengali devotional music corpus known as *padābalī kīrtan* is very technical and has extensive rhythmic cycles. While having lunch, he started chanting the fourteen-*mātrā* (beat, the smallest subunit of *tāl*) pattern of a song by Chandidas, sounding out its solfeggio in linguistic-percussive syllables named *bol*s. He then juxtaposed this elongated and complex pattern to the *tāl* (metric cycle) used in the *kīrtan* of the Dalit religious community that I was studying, declaring that the only rhythmic structures (*ek tāl*) of those uneducated country bumpkins is a short, simple, and repetitive 4/4 (*cār cār chanda*). Despite the short *tāl*, he noted that their songs are exaggeratedly long:

> I told them several times, this style is not for this modern age! Imagine that, every song in their (Matua) *kīrtan* lasts for 40 minutes! Nowadays nobody has that patience. People pay the ticket to sit comfortably in the cinema with air conditioning, and nevertheless after one hour they will stand up and leave! So, I told them (the singers) to shorten their songs. But they won't listen.

After reading Eben Graves's book, I can clearly interpret this exchange now as a conversation about the politics of musical time. The extensive meter and slow tempo of the *padābalī kīrtan* of Chandidas that the music teacher alluded to evoke specific values. It is associated with notions of sophistication, cultural pride, devotional authenticity, and the interwoven dimensions of theological and performative aesthetics. However, extended time frames of musical duration are also interpreted as incompatible with the rhythms of modernity. For a matter of time, then, the *kīrtan* of my Dalit research participants was deemed as both antimodern as well as unsophisticated. Graves's book takes the reader through a journey in the history and the ethnography of expanding songs and shrinking modern markets to precisely reveal these understudied connections between musical time, historical consciousness, and the rhythms of social life.

This book is about a genre of Hindu devotional song called *padābalī kīrtan* that developed in the historical region of greater (undivided) Bengal in the past five centuries, hand in hand with the theological and performative sphere of Gaudiya Vaishnava religiosity. The genre was supported by the patronage of a landed class of wealthy *zamindār* in the early

modern period. In the late nineteenth century, it underwent a process of classicization, as a Western-educated class of urban upper-caste gentlemen (*bhadralok*) elected it as a cultural form that articulated a refined Bengali regional identity.

Padābalī kīrtan is characterized by its large meter (*baṛo-tāl*) and slow tempos. The singers are called *kīrtanīẏā*. The verses of the songs describe divine plays (*līlā*) of the past, immersing the listeners in the sacred episodes and life-stories of gods and saints. The temporal features of this *kīrtan*, including extended duration, large meter, and slow tempo, are perceived as inextricably linked to devotional and meditative practice. They allow the listener to experience absorption and remembrance (*smaraṇ*) of the holy characters. The lyrics are composed after a direct vision of the enlightened meditator-composer (*mahājan padakartā*), thus providing simultaneously a record of, and guidance to, the practice of devotional visualization through musical sound. Nineteenth-century Kolkata-based authors emphasized the relationship between the lyrics and the images it sought to bring to life in contemplation using the term *śabda-citra*, translated as word-pictures (169), although *śabda* entails the double meaning of sound and word simultaneously.

This book is a meticulously contextualized study of *padābalī kīrtan* through historical and ethnographic research, enriched by embodied practice and long-term connections with the region, the musicians, and their cultural landscape. Not unlike the songs of this very style of *kīrtan*, the book is expanded in multisensory and multimodal ways: by numerous audio and video samples, transcriptions, translations of multiple songs of the corpus, musical notations, and transcriptions of the rhythmic structures that characterize this repertoire. The holy drum named *khol*, the percussion instrument that is central to *kīrtan* sessions, plays the role of implicit protagonist in the book. While focusing on the music genre, the author also gives space to ritual significance and concerns for auspiciousness, actions and gestures that are not directly musical but are indeed inextricably part of *kīrtan*, like the offering of flower garlands and sandalwood paste to worship the *khol* at the onset of any performance. Despite my personal disinclination toward the transliteration system, and the less-than-ideal translation choices of some Bengali terms and verses, this work fills a tremendous gap in the extant English-language academic literature on *kīrtan*, and it will be of great interest to any researcher concerned with the religious and musical history of Bengal, the cultural economies of *bhakti*, the temporal features of sacred music, and the modern transformations of musical careers in South Asia.

Graves's book debunks (1) the assumption that religious sounds following conventions of a traditional music genre are recalcitrant to change and adaptation to new technologies, and (2) the assumption that *kīrtan* is a form of popular devotional music for the non-erudite that allows the masses who are uneducated in classical music to participate in devotional singing. *Padābalī kīrtan* emerges here as an extremely complex and highly theorized repertoire that has evolved over the centuries through the lives and livelihoods of theologians, playwrights, devotees, percussionists, composers, and meditators. One individual song may use as many as five or six *tāl*s in performance. It may take one hour to go through the sequence of meter structures that dictate the duration of one single (*gaur-candrikā*) song. Furthermore, melodies used in song performance are determined by the specific *tāl* being used (and not informed by the concept of *rāga*). These features present *padābalī kīrtan* as a rhythm-forward and music-dominated genre. Far from being stagnant remnants of a glorious past, however, these features are constantly negotiated by practitioners as they interface with changing social time, constraints of the market, and affordances of various media formats.

The overarching frame of analysis is the generative concept of musical time. Time does not only refer to temporal aspects of performance—rhythmic form, tempo, meter—but to multilayered meanings of temporality. The expansive musical aesthetic of *kīrtan* is explained through a combination of characteristics: *baṛo-tāl* (composed of twelve or more *mātrā*s); the use of interstitial lines and quasi-improvised verses that lengthen and clarify the song; and storytelling and didactic speech, employed by the main singer-narrator to provide interpretations and moral guidance, actualizing the song's message for contemporary times. On a broader level, expansion is provided through the aesthetic theology of the devotional-performative *rasa*, as formulated by sixteenth-century Gaudiya Vaishnava authors like Rupa Goswami.

This musical time immerses and transports the listeners in a meditative time-traveling machine that connects the performative present to a double sacred past: the mythical time of the amorous *līlā* of Radha and Krishna; and the medieval time of the saint Chaitanya's ecstatic identification with the divine characters of Vrindavan in fifteenth-century Bengal. On yet another level of musical temporality, the slow tempo of *padābalī kīrtan* is evocative of an idyllic and nostalgic past of cultural authenticity. Far from the urban present of colonial subjugation in nineteenth-century Calcutta, the expansive *tāl* became associated with the chronotope of the nation's uncontaminated past. Through processes of synchronization (22), the musical time of *kīrtan* recalls simultaneous temporalities, evoking divine pastimes and mythical tempo-spaces, remembering past events, and recovering times that are perceived to be lost.

However, for musicians who are also active participants of neoliberal capitalist music markets, time is money, and making time for lengthy performances of *padābalī kīrtan* is not remunerative. Paying attention to the dimensions of labor and cultural economies, Graves examines the ways in which musicians had to transform this *kīrtan* form due to shortage of stage time allowances in music festivals and the format constraints of digital media. As an example of the first case, the author discusses how *kīrtan* troupes modify the sequence of sections from the traditional repertoire, and even complement it with popular devotional tunes in Hindi, to fit into the competitive scene of Jaydeb Mela, where *kīrtan* ensembles are offered but a one-hour stage time. To illustrate the second case, the author examines how *padābalī kīrtan* is represented in VCDs (video compact discs), an audiovisual format that was extremely popular in the 2010s for regional and rural music markets. The eclectic combination of pictures, visual effects, and devotional images in these VCDs are interpreted by urban and middle-class sensitivities as cheesy, cheap, and unprofessional. As short lived as they were ubiquitous, VCDs came to represent a low-class and subaltern devotional aesthetics (349).

The author did the bulk of his fieldwork between 2010 and 2012. While several transformations in the technological remediation of *kīrtan* have occurred since then, this time span gives us the opportunity to engage with his ethnography of a format that quickly fell into obsolescence and is now almost extinct. The VCD then worked as a sort of business card (159) for the entrepreneurial *kīrtan* singer; the profit from the sale of VCDs was negligible, but they enhanced the chances of finding paid gigs and live events. Graves's ethnography presents two settings in the local cultural economy of *kīrtan*. One is the instructional cultural economy located in university settings and private lesson contexts. Here, teachers can afford the privilege of time to go through the transmission of the complex and large rhythmic structures. In exchange, they receive a *dakṣinā*, a nonspecific amount given as a form of reciprocation for the knowledge

received. The second one is the professional cultural economy where musicians depend on paid live-music performances. The amount they receive is fixed and exact. The study of transformations at the intersection of *kīrtan* and musical time pertains to this second domain. That is, while the book closely examines the strategies musicians adopt to represent this genre in the short time allotted by festival organizers and digital media in the age of global capitalism, we do not know if these transformations affect the pedagogical sphere of transmitting musical knowledge. After learning *padābalī kīrtan* songs and *khol* with masters like Pandit Nimai Mitra and Kankana Mitra, in both domestic and institutional settings, Graves feels that the abundance of time in these pedagogical environments (138) was conducive to learning features of the large-meter style. This does not sound like a universal feature of pedagogical settings. In most busy cities of the global north today, and in Kolkata too, corporate-style music schools have mushroomed, where parents send their kids for exorbitant forty-five-minute classes. This contrast helps to frame the pedagogical setting of the *kīrtan* teachers' homes as a different educational ecology, where a different idea of sharing time is enacted, together with other epistemic and ethical values around knowledge, profit made from it, lineage legacy, and responsibility of the teacher-*kīrtanīẏā*.

Highlights of the book comprise delightfully micro-level descriptions and analyses of meter, verses, song taxonomies, and full multi-hour performances of *līlā-kīrtan*, as well as thick historical texture in dissecting the modern construction of *padābalī kīrtan*. The author emphasizes that the cultural recovery of *padābalī kīrtan* privileged noncosmopolitan male performers of rural lineages at the cost of marginalizing female performers. The story is unsurprising; in the search for modernity and respectability, female performers have been removed from the stages of several genres of traditional performance, once appropriated by upwardly mobile classes of cultural reformers moved by nationalist sentiments (see Paik 2022 for modern Tamasha in Maharashtra). Women performers of short-meter *kīrtan* in early twentieth-century Calcutta were thus denied ritual and musical expertise, and pejoratively called *kīrtan-wālī*s (someone who sells *kīrtan* as a commodity). Concomitantly, noncosmopolitan male musicians of rural lineages became the template to develop the new image of the pious *sādhak kīrtanīẏā*. The *sādhak* singer, not unlike the *sādhak* Baul, so often contrasted with the mere musician Baul (*śilpī* or *gāẏak bāul*; see Lorea 2016, 209–25) is ideally proficient in music, religiously pious, adept in meditative techniques, and inclined toward religious worship. The romantic *bhadralok* construction of the *sādhak* singer contributed to the notion that *kīrtan* is incompatible with commodification and show-business.The final part of the book, "Shrinking Markets for Expanding Songs," describes promotional music events and media production, both crucial for the livelihoods of professional *kīrtan* ensembles, and yet detrimental for the continuity of large-meter *kīrtan*. From cassettes to YouTube channels, the large meter (*baṛo-tāl*) of lengthy *kīrtan*s is conspicuous for its total absence. The accelerated time of communicative capitalism, in its technologically mediated search for simultaneity and instantaneity, is blamed for these truncated versions of *padābalī kīrtan*. One might wonder whether the demand and expectations of new publics are in part responsible too. Shortened performances would satisfy the shortened attention span of the audiences. The cognitively entrained capacity of the listeners to concentrate on sonic contemplations for an extended period might have radically changed. As the music teacher in my opening quote emphasized, people today do not have the same patience; or in the words of art theorists, histories of media use cannot be separated from

the history of attention, because "the ways we intently listen to, look at, or concentrate on anything have a deeply historical character" (Crary 1999, 1).

Besides the transformed social time of neoliberal capitalism, one might wonder whether other and more state-relevant political shifts had significant repercussions on musical time. While the book is already a well of information, it also generated unresolved questions, perhaps for future articles to address. Space and time—as both Graves's and Aniket De's (2021) book on yet another genre of Bengali traditional performance do not fail to recognize—are two inseparable dimensions, and spatial divides do not neatly overlap "with the flows of folklore performance and transmission" (37). With a similar premise, I was expecting to learn more about the ways in which *kīrtan* was broken in half when a new, hastily drawn international border was imposed on the cultural region of Bengal. Since 1947, *kīrtan* institutions, lineages, instrument-makers, festivals, and audiences have been split between two countries. When devotion to Chaitanya became the sonic prism to imagine the Bengali nation in the late nineteenth century, the contours of such a nation certainly did not coincide with the present frontiers of the state of West Bengal. While Graves's research is anchored in institutions and locales of West Bengal, the book is interspersed with references to authoritative figures, festivals, and even influential YouTube channels based in present-day Bangladesh. After massive migration of Hindu devotional performers and their listeners, what happened to the shrinking markets of *kīrtan* in Bangladesh? In West Bengal, with Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool government in place since 2011, could the social welfare scheme Lokprasar Prakalpa (Government of West Bengal 2017), implemented for *kīrtan* musicians alongside other traditional artists, account for the increasing supply of professional *kīrtan* singers? Although occurring only after the author's fieldwork time frame, how is the progressive Hinduization of Indian politics, with its significant effects on the social climate of West Bengal, influencing the musical time, labor, and value of *kīrtan*—for instance, by legitimizing swelling ranks (5) of Gaudiya Vaishnava practitioners to take over the alternative space of Jaydeb Mela?

Jaydeb Mela, a large gathering in the Birbhum district of West Bengal, is portrayed in the book as a promotional music event where an increasing flow of *kīrtan* singers floods the music market and hundreds of thousands of visitors gather to attend all-night *kīrtan* performances. Jaydeb, however, is particularly famous for stage-tents (*akhṛās*) of Baul and Fakir musicians. My research suggests, and Graves confirms (289), that these subaltern groups of heterodox singers-practitioners of antinomian songs feel threatened by the ever-expanding presence of the more powerful and orthodox Gaudiya Vaishnava *kīrtanīẏās* on the Mela ground. For Baul singers and their stages, the blatant loudspeakers of competing groups of *kīrtanīẏā*s are encroaching their territory and transforming the meaning of the gathering. Inhabiting a coevalness of temporal limitations, Baul singers equally complain about the shrinking time of stage performances, which do not allow for the longer and elaborate compositions of the old masters (*mahājan padakartā*). While digitizing the family notebooks of contemporary Baul performers, for example, the singers pointed at compositions of Haure Gosain (1796–1911) with stanzas running across and beyond two pages and lamented that nobody is singing these songs nowadays (EAP 2019). With its engagement with the trope of loss and the lived reality of cultural labor, *The Politics of Musical Time* is a precious work to understand the many ways in which performers mediate temporal disjunctures between their tradition's pasts and their professional futures.

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