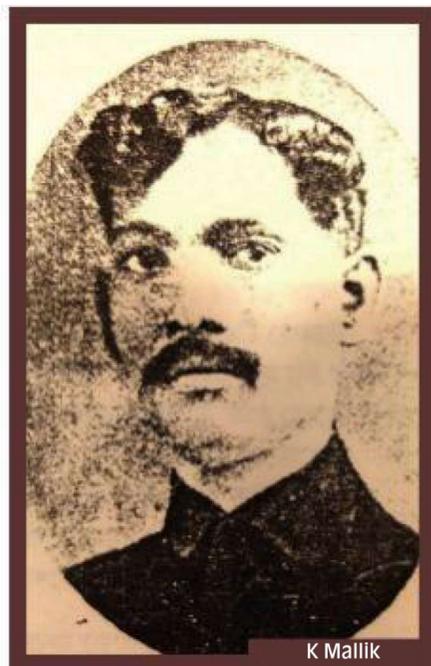


## HARBINGER OF A CULT

During World War I, the Gramophone Company came up with the 'Pujor Gaan' category to serve Bengali music lovers



K Mallik



Manada Sundari Dasi



HMV poster



Record catalogue of September 1914

### SOMEN SENGUPTA

In Bengal, Durga Puja has always been much more than mere religious razzmatazz. Music was always a part of India's festivals, but once phonograph and gramophone entered the country in the late 20th century, it reached new heights. Overnight, records became a common mode of entertainment, owing to the role of a British company that was established in 1901.

The Gramophone Company, which owned international labels like His Master's Voice, was the first to explore the market potential of music in the festive season. When importing records from Europe became uncertain during World War I, the company came up with the "Pujor Gaan" or "Sharodia Arghya" category to serve Bengali music lovers. With that, an everlasting cult was created.

Though many are lost, the earliest available records show that it was in 1914 when the company released 17 titles by various artists. An old catalogue of HMV shows that "Pujor Gaan" never had any exclusive business with religion, although some records contain devotional songs which were always in demand.

Launched right before Durga Puja, the titles

were divided into two categories. One was a 10-inch, double-sided violet label, each priced Rs 3.12, while the other was a black label record, each priced Rs 3. The records of noted singers like Manada Sundari Dasi and K Mallik were released at premium album cover price.

Mallik was an outstanding singer, who hailed from Kusum, a village in Burdwan. A Muslim by birth, his original name was Munsu Muhammad Kasem. Initially, he had recorded a few pieces of "Agamani Sangeet" in Calcutta. The talented singer was soon spotted by an HMV official, and his record of festive songs came out with their label, under the name K Mallik. It is believed that the company's officials were apprehensive of whether a Muslim singing "Agamani Sangeet" would be accepted by Hindu listeners, and hence, his name was changed.

Mallik created a sensation with his rendition of two devotional songs, one based on *raga Mishra Kafi*, and the other on *Bhairavi*. One of his songs, *Ki Hobey Uma Choley Jabe*, based on the immersion of Goddess Durga, was a smash hit at the time. In the same disc was another number sung by him, *Giri a ki Tabo Bibechona*. Mallik continued to remain one of the top-selling artists of the company for many years, but never in his original name.

Sundari Dasi was the other noted singer of the time to lend her voice to the first-ever "Pujor Gaan". One of the two *kirtan* songs she recorded was *Asho Asho Boley Rasik*. Top dancer and singer Krishnabhmani Dasi recorded two semi-classical songs based on *raga Malkauns* and *Poorvi*. One of them was dedicated to Goddess Kali. Like the legendary Gauhar Jaan, she said at the end of every song, "My name is Keshtobhamini."

Two records of Bedana Dasi were also released. One of them included songs on Janmashtami, while the other comprised romantic numbers like *Ami Eshechi Badhu Hey*, based on *raga Mishra Kedar*.

The songs of Rabindranath Tagore, who was yet to become a household name, featured in the company's list of Puja releases. During that time, his songs were referred to as "Bramha Sangeet" or "Robibabur gaan", and not *Rabindra Sangeet*. Amala Das, popularly known as Miss Das, who was the younger sister of Chittaranjan Das and an amateur, recorded two Tagore songs as "Bramha Sangeet". *Hey Mor Debota*, based on *raga Yaman Kalyan* and *Pratidin Ami Hey Jeevan Swami* in *raga Sindhu Kafi* were included in her album. The company officials were far-sighted and quick to tap the commercial potential of Tagore songs, and fully utilised them for many

years thereafter.

It was not only vocals, but also comic items and instrumental pieces that hit the market and did well. Abhayapada Chatterjee cut an album with two comic tracks based on conjugal life – *Strir Proti Swamir Ador* and *Swamir Proti Strir Sohag*. Another comic disc by Chittaranjan Goswami was also released in the same year.

In instrumental music, two records by Tulsi-das Chatterjee and Rajen Chatterjee were released. Others included Saralabai, Shashi Bhushan Dey and Narayan Mukherjee, to name a few.

The year was perhaps ripe for introducing the concept of "Pujor Gaan" in Bengal. It was the time when the gramophone was replacing the cylinder phonograph as the latest tool of home entertainment, which became evident with the rising demand for records that was being met by the newly established HMV at Calcutta's Beliaghata.

The market flourished following nearly 10 years of experimentation, as the magic of gramophone records ushered in a new era of entertainment. Since then, the entry of many new record companies in the "Pujor Gaan" segment has kept adding to the rich cultural heritage of Bengal.

The writer is a freelance contributor

tion for setting up connections years in advance, it is possible that the similarities are intentional.

*Eternals* stars Angelina Jolie, Gemma Chan, Kumail Nanjiani, Kit Harrington, Salma Hayek, Brian Tyree Henry and Richard Madden. The film is slated for a theatrical release on 4 November.

— The Independent

## Under the hammer



A two-part version of Banksy's "Girl with Balloon" painting could fetch up to \$ (United States) 4.75 million when it goes under the hammer for the first time at a Christie's auction in London later this month.

The rare edition, one of 25 created by the elusive British street artist in 2005, features a young girl in one painting and her heart-shaped balloon in another.

"It's a pretty signature image for Banksy in that he did the first iteration of it on the streets," Katharine Arnold, co-head of post-War and contemporary art for Christie's in Europe, told *Reuters* as the artwork went on display at the auction house's London showrooms last week.

"Girl with Balloon" first appeared on the streets of London's Shoreditch neighbourhood in 2002, with Banksy creating versions of the painting on London's South Bank in 2004 and at Israel's barrier at the West Bank in 2005.

— Dawn/ann

