

SECTION ONE

Listeners



“There is no modesty or shame  
in this city”

*What Bengalis Heard  
in Colonial Burma, c. 1900*

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INTRODUCTION: THE UPSIDE-DOWN PAGES

In 1903, a Bengali poet named Najir Ali published a thirteen-page poem called *Reṅguner Kābyakabitā*, which might be (very) loosely translated as “Ballad of Rangoon.”<sup>1</sup> In this lively composition, Najir Ali related his experiences of the Burmese port city (now Yangon), evocatively describing shipyards and sweet shops, and passionately recounting the trials of seductive women and the tribulations of bloody riots. He told his tale in a specific dialect of Bengali, known as Musulmāni or Dobhaṣi Bāṅglā, a form of the language that lent itself to Islamicate allusions and vocabularies drawn from Arabic and Persian (D’Hubert 2018b; Bose 2014). Although it was written in the Bengali script, with letters proceeding left to right, the pages of the book were arranged right to left, as a self-conscious gesture to the conventions of the Islamic book. British colonial officials collected many examples of this kind of book—often called *puthi*—and one copy of Najir Ali’s ballad was bound and archived in the India Office collections and is now in the British Library. At some later stage, a curator who was unfamiliar with *puthi* publishing practices “restored” the book and fixed the central portion of pages upside down.<sup>2</sup>

These upside-down pages serve as a helpful reminder that Najir Ali’s work defies easy categorization. The spellings are flexible, and the language alternates between global, multilingual registers and highly local colloquialisms. The author was a poet and songwriter, but called himself *teṅḍal*, equivalent to “bosun’s mate” in the idiom of the lascars (South Asian seamen; Dixon 1980,

280), as well as *mistri*, meaning “mechanic” or “artisan” and, in the specific context of Rangoon, headman or recruiter for the mills (Andrew 1933). He composed the poem as an original work, yet called it a translation (*ei ketāb āmi nije tarjamā kariyā chāpāilām*) (Ali 1903b, 13). This is puzzling, as there is no evidence of him composing in a different language first; instead, I suggest, Najir Ali saw the larger process of compiling the book, and transforming the oral, recited poem into a printed text, as an act of translation. His recollections of Rangoon had traveled: he had settled in Fatikchhari, just north of Chittagong (in modern Bangladesh, approximately 500 miles from Rangoon, as the crow flies), and his text had been recorded and “corrected” by an editor based at the new Deobandi madrasa in Chittagong,<sup>3</sup> and was then taken to Calcutta to be printed at Islamia Press in the heart of Bengali publishing on Chitpur Road (Ghosh 2002). Few Muslim authors from this network have received serious scholarly attention, let alone working-class poets, let alone Bengalis writing in Burma.<sup>4</sup>

The upside-down pages also serve as a reminder that the *puthi* book challenges assumptions about how books are read or performed. Scholars working with archives are increasingly conscious of the oral life of a printed text and the active participation of both reader and audience in shaping the form, reception, and meanings of words.<sup>5</sup> Far from a self-contained object intended for silent reading, the *puthi* was a receptacle of verses that would be partnered with an embodied performance, demanding gesture, tone, melody, and rhythm. In the bookish archive, these activations of the text are now the silent, invisible partner. Najir Ali’s recollections were recited and heard before they were “corrected,” inscribed in the madrasa, and then typeset and printed in Calcutta. I suggest that the resultant codex contained an oral and aural account of Rangoon, and that Najir Ali’s audience assumed the presence of implied sound rather than silence within these now upside-down pages.<sup>6</sup>

While exploring Najir Ali’s sense of the city through *Reṅguner Kābyakabitā*, I ask how Bengali poets and lyricists sonically engaged with their environment in Rangoon. By anticipating that his audience would listen to, rather than read, his account, Najir Ali was especially attentive to the aural imagination. Firstly, he evoked the auditory experience of the cityscape and the industries of Rangoon; secondly, he described the emotional turmoil of violence and trauma through sonic features; and finally, he focused on musical spectacle to convey the international glamour of the colonial port city. Sound provided a framework for imagining the city, its colonial institutions—particularly its technology, industry, and military presence—and its diverse, multicultural population. Inscribing the sonic sense of Rangoon in his text allowed Ali to circulate and re-sound his experience of Burma through performance, presenting the city intimately and on a human scale.

LISTEN, EVERYONE, ALL MY BROTHERS

*hina nājire kahe2 sabe nahe āche kona jan*  
*lucchā hai barmmā lai chārayā utan*  
*ebe śuna guṇigaṇ2 sarbbajan śuna sabe bhāi*  
*reṅguner kābāya thoṛā kahiṃyā jānāi*

Humble Najir says(2), everything has gone, is there anyone left?  
 the depraved have overtaken Burma, that contemptible land  
 Now listen, virtuous ones(2)! Listen, everyone, all my brothers,  
 I shall tell you a little of Rangoon’s ballad. (Ali 1903b, 3)

Najir Ali composed *Reṅguner Kābāyakitā* in couplets, following a popular Bengali meter called *paṃyār*.<sup>7</sup> This style of verse lent itself to musical recitation and was conventionally performed by a singer (*bayāti* or *mūl-gāyēn*) (Roy 1999, 199). In David Kane’s ethnomusicological study of *puthi-poṛa*, the melodic reading of poetic-narrative texts, he suggested that while there is a distinction in Bengali between *gān* (song) and *poṛa* (reading), from an etic perspective there is little to distinguish this particular performance practice from “singing” (Kane 2008, 277). While there is a set of narrative-based *puthis* that constitutes the core repertoire of *puthi-poṛa*, tunes could be assigned to any *puthi* on the basis of the meter and the abilities of the singer (Kane 2008, 280–82). In Najir Ali’s text, the numeral “2” is scattered throughout the verses: usually (but inconsistently) in the first line of the couplet, by the caesura. The addition of the “2” was a common practice in nineteenth-century Bengali publishing (following earlier manuscript conventions) and usually suggests repetition of the previous word or phrase, sometimes as a plural by doubling. This numeral reflects a trace of live performance and encourages the reader or singer to repeat certain utterances in their recitation. These repetitions would technically render the lines hypermetrical, however. As David Kane notes, *puthi* poets and performers do not usually keep to the ideal *paṃyār* model of fourteen syllables, and readers lengthen or shorten certain syllables “to match the tune they are using” (Kane 2008, 170).

Besides these subtle prescriptions, Najir Ali explicitly invited his audience to listen to him during his telling. Throughout the text, the speaker momentarily steps outside of the cityscape of Rangoon and addresses his Muslim brothers directly. These interludes also serve as a moral imperative not to be seduced by the marvels he describes, for this poem is ultimately a cautionary tale about the lurid temptations of Rangoon. Scholars such as Tapti Roy and Francesca Orsini have underlined how printed books were aligned with performative practices and animated modes of “reading” (Orsini 2009; Roy 1995). In 1859, James Long observed in Bengal that “intonation, gesture etc. make a book listened to more telling, than when simply read” (Long 1859, xv; cited in Roy 1995, 46) Roy also cites a report from 1879, which describes:

reading a Tale in Musalmani Bengali, in which the auditors appear to take the most lively interest, whilst the crowd observes the utmost decorum and order, and would resent any approach to interruption; and the reader is looked upon as a prodigy of learning; the only gift perhaps which he has being a ready knowledge of the alphabet and words and fluency of reading, which is always rapid, sonorous, and musical, and must be accompanied with rapid motions of the head and body, without which he could not go on. (Roy 1995, 46–47)

Song lyrics and poems designed for musical recitation were key literary forms in this period and indicate that readers were not passively hearing descriptions of Rangoon but actively singing the city into their own experience. This style of writing on cities through songs continued into the early twentieth century: collections from the 1920s, for example, include Telugu and Tamil songs about Rangoon, and “ballads” (as defined in English-language catalogs) in Tamil on Rangoon and its sea trade.<sup>8</sup>

The proliferation of songs about Burma in different Indian languages, and the circulation of lyrics between publishers, readers, singers, and listeners, gestures to an arena of oceanic listening. Nile Green has discussed “sources that do not qualify as belonging to the Indian Ocean on the mere grounds that they were written somewhere in India or Africa, but instead qualify as oceanic because they actually describe the places and peoples of the ocean itself” and represent “encounters with, and accounts of, oceanic difference” (Green 2018, 847–48). By “oceanic listening,” I suggest that these printed texts, and the embodied recitation or singing of those texts, were a medium for communicating, transducting, and reproducing sounds around the Indian Ocean, between Calcutta, Chittagong, and Rangoon.

#### OCEANIC LISTENERS: THE BENGALIS OF RANGOON

What was the relationship of Bengalis like Najir Ali to the port city of Rangoon? In the early twentieth century, E. J. L. Andrew, the retired Assistant Protector of Immigrants and Emigrants, reflected that “Rangoon of the present day is largely an Indian city and is in no respects typical of the province” (Andrew 1933, 5). Rangoon had been acquired by the British in 1852, who made it the administrative center of their Burmese possessions in 1862. The city was strategically transformed, especially after 1885, when Thibaw Min (1859–1916) was removed from his throne at Mandalay, and upper Burma was integrated into the colonial system (Singer 1995b; Charney 2009). Rangoon became the door to the rest of the country, but also an economic center in its own right, and workers from across India were brought in to meet the demands of the rice, steel, and sawmill industries.<sup>9</sup> Michael Charney has described late nineteenth-century Rangoon as:

a foreign city erected on Burmese soil. . . . Rangoon was a mimeograph of dozens of port cities scattered throughout colonial South and Southeast Asia. A person only had to squint to be confused as to whether he or she was standing in Singapore, Penang, Calcutta, or elsewhere. (Charney 2009, 18)

This characterization recalls Michael Pearson’s observations about littoral societies, which are often more closely connected to other littorals, however far overseas, than to their immediate mainland (Pearson 2006). Martin Stokes has also suggested global cities are those that are detached from their national hinterlands and characterized by their “relations with regions beyond the nation-state” (Stokes 2007). However, Charney’s comments underline how colonial structures strategically rendered Rangoon into a port city with an interregional, global citizenship, which made the city feel more Indian than Burmese.

Najir Ali lived in Rangoon over the 1880s and 1890s and was part of a larger flow of workers who came from Chittagong in that precise period. Bengali Muslims already had a long history of service in Burma, especially in the early modern Buddhist courts of Arakan (Leider 2014; D’Hubert 2018b; D’Hubert and Leider 2011).<sup>10</sup> In the nineteenth century, Bengalis continued to migrate from Chittagong into Rakhine—the coastal province that stretches from modern Bangladesh toward Rangoon/Yangon—especially following the British occupation (1825) and Yandabo treaty (1826) and again from the 1890s (Leider 2014, 226; Leider 2016, 161). New generations of migrants were also encouraged to find work in Rangoon, especially as steamer passage rates became cheaper and demand for Indian laborers increased (Andrew 1933, 12–22). Workers came from across South Asia, from Tamil Nadu to Nepal, from Chittagong to Karachi. Most men from Chittagong were “employed in the sampan and small craft traffic and as engine-room and deck crews on ocean-going and riverine steamers” (Andrew 1933, 17). Beyond Chittagong, Bengalis were largely employed “in Government or railway or local fund service or in mercantile offices mostly in the clerical line, but some [were] shop-keepers or traders. Many [were] mechanics; in fact, Bengalees from the 24 Parganas were originally the principal technical labor employed in factories and workshops in Rangoon” (Andrew 1933, 35). Najir Ali’s composition is very much grounded in a sense of a diverse South Asian city on Burmese soil, shaped by labor flows and industry.

#### SOUND AND THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

Laura Victoir and Victor Zatsépine have interrogated the processes of creating “the colonial built environment” in Asian port cities and have considered how colonialization “was expressed in stone, iron, and concrete” (Victoir and Zatsépine 2013, 2) We might also ask, what was the role of sound in the production of colonial space and how was “aural architecture” (Blessner and Salter 2007) inscribed and archived in Bengali speech and writing? Specifically, I am interested in how Bengali Muslim workers listened to Rangoon, reflected on the sounds they heard, and re-sounded the city through poems, songs, oral performance, and print. The sounds Bengalis both heard and produced themselves provided the framework for experiencing and engaging with the city. Migrants from Chittagong competed in a very mixed,

transregional urban arena, and sound provided a resource to map Rangoon, make the city meaningful, and even make territorial claims (LaBelle 2010). Transducting the auditory experience of Rangoon into literature and performance allowed Bengali writers to articulate an echo of the city, which could then be reimagined and re-sounded back in Bengal (cf. Eisenlohr 2018; Dillon 2012, 51–91).

Najir Ali explored the spatial arrangements of Rangoon through the sounds they produced, and his portrayal of the colonial port city is very particular to his own position as a Bengali worker and lascar, and quite different from colonial depictions of the city as a self-confident monument of empire (Victoir and Zatssepine 2013, 3). Najir Ali underlined the vulnerability and violence of Rangoon and the moral ambivalence of its marvels. He described the different quarters of the city, including the high court, hospital, mosque, zoo, bazaars, Chinese shops, jail, and factories. At Dala, he overheard the extensive shipbuilding yards of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company (see Andrew 1933, 6).

*āche kal beśumār2 lok tāy hājāre hājār  
kaler śabda śunite jena bijali ṭhāḍār  
dekhilām camatkār2 ḍālā pār lohāri kārkhānā  
dibāniśi śabda uṭhe jena parir bājanā  
lokjan lakṣa koṭi2 lohā kāṭi bānāy jāhāj  
inḡrāj hekamati barā bhāsāy jaler māj  
tāte loke khām śikhila2 nām jānāila chukhāni ṭeṅḍal  
chārāṅg-mistri kata ṭākār kare bal*

There are countless mills, and thousands upon thousands of people:  
hearing the sound of the mill is like lightning and thunder.  
I saw—astonishing!—the ironworks factory on the shore of Dala:  
day and night the sound rises up, like angels playing music.  
Thousands, millions of people cut up the iron to make ships  
following English instructions: huge, they float in the water.  
The people who climb to the top of the masts, they are called *ṭeṅḍal* there,  
how many *serangs* and foremen earn money by their strength. (Ali 1903b, 3–4)

Intriguingly, Najir Ali likened the sound of the metalworking to angels (*pari*) playing music. This recalls Mark Smith's observation that soldiers in the American Civil War compared bullets to buzzing bees and swarming insects, a reminder that the experience and meaning of sounds are always historically conditioned (Smith 2014). The impression of industrial sound—including water turbines—could also have a disturbing effect, as at the works at Botahtaung:

*śuna ār guṇigāna2 sarbbajan kariyā ādar  
botātaṅg dekhilām kācārā kalaghar  
āche kācārā jata2 abirata soṃśete ṭāne  
abiśram nāi dam cale rātra dine  
calite ābāj śuni2 dare prāṇi bhay kampbān  
camatkār śabda tār inḡjiler tuphān*



*ānila kokāir pāni<sup>2</sup> kale tāni dila ghare ghar  
iñjiler jore uṭhe tin tālā upar*

Listen more, virtuous ones, I pay my respects to all:  
In Botahtaung I saw the washer mills,  
There are so many washers, incessant, without rest,  
unceasing, breathless, all day and night.

When you pass and hear that noise, you fear for your life, shaking in terror:  
an astonishing sound of the typhoon of the engines.

Water brought from Kokaing, from the works pushed house to house,  
The engines together rise up three storeys high! (Ali 1903b, 4)

Najir Ali asked his audience to listen in to the wharfs, mills, and factories along the riverside and down the streets of Botahtaung. The “typhoon” (*tuphān*) produced by the engines<sup>11</sup> can be located from his references to the Kokaing waterworks, which supplied Rangoon with water from the 1880s. Here, he was probably referring to the Compressor Station on Dalhousie Street (now Mahabandoola Road), opened in 1889, which coordinated the city’s state of the art pneumatic pump-based sewerage system (Anon. 1889; Htoon 2018). The coal-fired, triple extension steam engines that powered the station evidently produced a terrifying, yet also marvelous or astonishing (*camatkār*) sound (*śabda*). Najir Ali’s was a highly contemporary and mechanized sonic geography, where districts were dominated by resounding colonial installations. This sense of the city contrasted with older acoustic imaginaries, from inscribed pagoda bells to Mon songs describing the atmospheric sounds of the changing seasons (Nyunt 2016; Stewart 1932). It also differed from the interests of French listeners, such as André Chevrillon (1905), who noted the cawing of crows, the bells tied to ox-drawn carts, Chinese music, and Tamil temple ensembles, but not the stormy sewerage system (Chevrillon 2014, 11–14).

#### ECHOES OF VIOLENCE

Nile Green has challenged the increasingly popular notion of a utopian Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism, and has suggested instead that

the ocean was a region of vividly perceptible difference: not only did its complex encounters generate the abstract ideologies of cosmopolitan universalism, the waves of heterotopia also produced plainer testimonies of difference, as well as sometimes of superiority. (Green 2018, 866)

Najir Ali described the varieties of different South Asian merchants he found in Rangoon: Mughals, Pathans, Maghs, Chulias, and Suratis. He commented on the wealth they amassed there, but he also told the story of the Hindu-Muslim riots that raged June 23–24, 1893, underlining the dangers as well as the multiculturalism of Rangoon. He singled out Bhugwan Dass Bagla, the prosperous Rajasthani timber merchant and banker who had made his career in Burma. Bagla had erected a temple on

Twenty-Ninth Street (Shri Satyanarayan Temple), a short walk from a large mosque (Mogul Shiah Masjid) on Thirtieth.<sup>12</sup> This set of streets became the center of a violent riot around Eid al-Adha, which erupted following a conflict between Hindu cow protection movements and Muslim societies who rejected the legal circumscription of cattle slaughter. This was, in fact, a local manifestation of a much larger tension that simultaneously erupted in riots across western India, the North-Western Provinces, Oudh, Bihar, as well as Rangoon (Metcalf and Metcalf 2002, 151–52).

*juddha ārambhila2 śabda haila eki camatkār  
 ācambite saharete haila samācār  
 śuniyā mochalmanē2 ek sthāne jamā haila sabe  
 jāna diba nā chāriba garu kara jabe  
 sokhā [sāthe?] āche khodā2 hārām jādā ki karite pāre  
 jukti kari prabhu svari lāṭi choṭā māre  
 mārila jhāṭā jotā2 phāṭi mātā marila kufar  
 jāṅga chāri bhāgilek kufar laskar  
 pāche āsiyā duṣṭa2 dila kaṣṭa iṅgrājer phauj  
 dariyā uthalila jena uthila mauj  
 bāje bāhūrī danḱā2 nāi saṅkā kebā kāre māre  
 hujuri ṭāḍārer mata astra guli pare*

the battle began(2), there was a singular noise, astonishing  
 suddenly, news went about the city  
 hearing it, the Muslims(2) all assembled together in one place  
 “We may give up our lives, but we won’t give up sacrificing cows!”  
 God is with us(2), what can those bastards do?  
 joining together, calling to the Lord, they were hurling sticks  
 they struck them with brooms and shoes(2), the kafirs’ heads split open.  
 Kafir and lascar, as one they fled, abandoning the fight  
 Sneaking up on them(2), the Englishers’ army gave them trouble  
 The river surged, as though bursting with joy,  
 Their many kettledrums sounded(2), no more terror, who would strike?  
 Their lordships’ bullets fell like thunder. (Ali 1903b, 8)

Najir Ali described the riots in a series of sonic vignettes: they began with a sound (*śabda*), which rippled through the city as word spread; the Muslims heard the sound and responded; in the course of fighting, the combatants called out—literally “voiced”—the name of the Lord (*prabhu svari*); and the riots only ended with the thundering of the British army’s drums and bullets.<sup>13</sup> Over the following weeks, the *Rangoon Gazette* published an exchange of letters that took different perspectives on which community was most accountable (including a report of one Muslim servant’s analysis of events [Anon. 1893]) and considered in some detail how the disturbances unfolded. Ten years on, Najir Ali’s recollection compressed the sequence of days into a stirring set of verses, applying a rolling set of doublings over the beginning of each couplet to maximize the rhythmic intensity. His

attention to sound paints the riots on a human scale but also amplifies the drama: the “joy” (*mauj*) of the surging river rhyming with the British “army” (*fauj*).

Several recent studies based on Indian Ocean contexts have triggered us to have a growing appreciation of the role of sound—especially from processions and religious institutions—in negotiations and conflicts between communities over urban space in colonial ports (McCallum 2017; Sykes 2017; Lunn and Byl 2017; Byl et al. 2017). Similar concerns emerge in the contemporary English-language newspapers of Rangoon: in July 1899, there was a disturbance when a collective of Chulia Muslims refused to allow a child to be buried in their graveyard, because his father had sent him to study at a Burmese monastery, but also because “they strongly objected to the intermingling of Burmese music and Mahomedan funeral rights” (Anon. 1899). This particular case gestures to exchanges between the citizens of Rangoon that crossed confessional and ritual boundaries but also to the policing of those boundaries through the marking of ethnic and sonic distinctions.

These themes are especially pronounced in another short tract (7 pages) published by one of Najir Ali’s contemporaries, Ahmad Kabir “Islamabadi” (i.e., of Chittagong), in 1896: “If you marry in Rangoon city, the Muslim religion is drowned” (*Reṅgun sahare kalbe biye / Muśalmān dharmma jāy ḍubiye*). This succinct work was also composed in Bengali rhyming couplets, appended with an Urdu *ghazal* lyric. Ahmad Kabir’s intention was to condemn a marriage celebration in Rangoon, where a Bengali Muslim man had fallen in love with a Burmese temptress:

*sa icchāte barmmā deśe daibāt āsiyā  
ki kariba kothā jāba nā pāi cintiyā  
jāter bicār nāi ki likhiba ār  
barmmā hindū muśalmān ār rājya yār  
culiyā kiñcit bhāla bājār matan  
jerabād jāter kathā nā jāy barṇan  
sāmānyete ki likhiba āche nānā jāti  
ihūdi kaurāṅgi kata bombāir churati  
nānā jāti ei khāne kari āgaman  
bibāh kariyā thāke pulakita man*

By the divine will, I came to the land of Burma.  
What to do? I shall say the unthinkable.  
There is no thought of tribe, what else can I write?  
In Burma, there are Hindus, Muslims, and people from other kingdoms,  
Chulias thinking of some good markets,  
But there is no description for the “Zairbadi” tribe.  
Generally, what can I write? There are many tribes there.  
So many Jews, Coringhis, and Suratis from Bombay,  
Diverse tribes have migrated here.  
They get married and the heart is thrilled. (Kabir 1896, 1)

Ahmad Kabir was strictly opposed to interracial marriages and what he considered miscegenation: Rangoon had a diverse population, but he expected the different *jātīs* (which had a range of meanings, including castes, tribes, or races) to be preserved intact. Here, he was especially scathing toward Zairbadis, a local derogatory term for the children of South Asian men and Burmese women. Zairbadis were also discriminated against by the Burmese, who called them *Kābyā*, or “half-breeds,” and by the British. In 1901, John Nisbet declared that, as children, Zairbadis “are often of remarkable beauty, with lovely eyes, but as they grow up they are apt to develop traits of character of a very displeasing nature” (Nisbet 1901, 250). Ahmad Kabir’s clear demarcation of different communities was widely held in this period: the different South Asian communities presented themselves as distinct social groups in the public spaces of the city,<sup>14</sup> and there were points of tension between the local Burmese population and the migrants who dominated the city’s industries (Charney 2009, 18). In their descriptions of the different communities of Rangoon, British writers could be essentializing and prejudiced. Nisbet thought that the Burmese were “not habitual liars by centuries of heredity like their near neighbours, the Bengalis of Chittagong” (Nisbet 1901, 222). However, these voices only represent one side of the story and might be heard as hostile responses to a more complicated history of sexual relationships and marriages between European men and Burmese women, South Asian men and Burmese women, and European women and South Asian men (Singer 1995b, 53, 108–10, 162).

Ahmad Kabir lamented how Muslims were abandoning the principles of their religion by pursuing beautiful—but Buddhist—Burmese women:

*renguñete nānā sthāne dekhibāre pāi*  
*bhāla manda tikta miṣṭa bibecana nāi*  
*sūndar barmmiṇi yadi dekhe rāstā ghāte*  
*prema karibār āse pichepiche choṭe*

You can see this in various places around Rangoon:

There is no discernment between good and bad, bitter and sweet.

If they spy a beautiful Burmese woman in the street or on the ghat

In the hope of loving her, they’ll follow a little behind. (Kabir 1896, 3)

Ahmad Kabir warned that in his absolute devotion to a Burmese woman, a Muslim brother would hand over all his hard-earned savings and then marry her to great fanfare, but this was not a legitimate option, and it would be better to go to a “bazaar whore” (*bājārer beśyā bhāla tathodhik tār*) (Kabir 1896, 3). Over the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it appears that most male migrants from Chittagong left their families and wives at home.<sup>15</sup> Writing in the 1930s, Andrew cryptically noted that “Chittagonians rarely have recourse to brothels but are stated to be addicted to an evil the knowledge of the practice of which would bring them within the pale of the law” (Andrew 1933, 187). While it is not entirely clear

what this meant, it does seem that writers like Ahmad Kabir and Najir Ali were very conscious of their Bengali brothers’ weaknesses and liabilities.<sup>16</sup>

The pamphlet concluded with a *ghazal* lyric—in Urdu but in Bengali script—that condenses the overall message: “There is no modesty or shame in this city” (*hāyā o śarmma kuc nehi hāy ich śaharme*) (Kabir 1896, 8). This lyric was set in *khemṭā*, which was a highly popular musical form in the late nineteenth century. Although it was a versatile setting (sometimes considered a *tāl*, but not always across all songbooks), it was commonly associated with the rhythmic hips of a dancer, so it often had a scintillating flavor. The use of this form in a pious diatribe against Burmese women and mixed marriages, and the switch between Bengali and Urdu, indicates the complexities of Rangoon as a “multilingual local” (Orsini 2015), the intersection of entertainment and preaching, and how musical or recited texts provided the tools to police racial and confessional boundaries in a multicultural city.

#### INDIAN MUSIC AND THEATER IN RANGOON

This Urdu *ghazal* in *khemṭā* was part of a larger constellation of South Asian musical practices in Rangoon. Very few of these practices were recorded in colonial sources, since Europeans in the city were primarily interested in discussing indigenous Burmese music and dance.<sup>17</sup> Indian music was seen as a point of comparison or contrast. *Pwe* dances were casually translated as “nautches,” assuming familiarity with the Anglo-Indian term (derived from Hindustani *nāc*, “dance”); sometimes a military regiment would host a “Burmese nautch,” and it is unclear whether this implied Burmese or Indian dancers and musicians (Anon. 1854; Singer 1995b, 62). British commentators noted significant cultural differences around music and dance, and factored these into their racialized accounts of the Burmese, for example:

The Burmese have sweet voices and a considerable knowledge of music, far in advance of other Orientals. In India, a nautch-girl, or one who dances in public, is, by profession, one of the outcasts of society; not so in Burmah, where no stigma is attached to either actor or actress. (Anon. 1885, 279)

In India, dancing was a form of paid service, and it was not considered socially acceptable for women unless they were professional dancing girls, from hereditary families of musicians, or courtesans (Schofield 2012). This contrasted with what the British found in Burma, where the sons and dancers of officials could perform in group dances without being considered *thabin-the* (belonging to the theatrical profession) (Singer 1995a, 37).<sup>18</sup> (Burmese scholars, writing in the 1920s, had a different emphasis and suggested that anyone engaging professionally with music—whatever their background—would be “counted among the depressed classes” [Kin 1923].) In some cases, Burmese music compared favorably to Indian:

The musical taste of the Burmese contrasts strongly with that of the natives of Hindostan, for, whilst the latter is characterised by ear-piercing shrillness and deafening loudness, the effect of the former is soft, plaintive, and melodious; indeed, Burmese music is by no means unpleasant to a European ear, and the mode of its employment in processions, as shown in our Illustration, is at once novel and ingenious. (Anon. 1860)

This preference perhaps explains why, although Rangoon increasingly became an Indian city over the late 1800s, the British in Burma paid little attention to South Asian music-making there.<sup>19</sup> The situation differed elsewhere in Southeast Asia: over the same period, dancers and ensembles from southern and central India—often called “Kling”—in Singapore and colonial Malaya were relatively well documented through photographs and postcards (Soneji 2017).

In the realm of Indian musicology, the distinction between Burma and South Asian music was conceptually maintained; thus, in S. M. Tagore’s (1840–1914) *Universal History of Music* (1896), which is arranged by nation, Burma is given its own section, and although Tagore notes the presence of Indian instruments in Burmese organology, in his short entry he did not discuss the intellectual connections between Sanskrit and Burmese musicology, or the presence of South Asian musicians on Burmese soil (Tagore 1896, 44–49).<sup>20</sup> Tagore’s discussion drew on English scholarship, but also his own collection of musical instruments, which he said contained three items gifted to him by King Theebaw (r. 1878–85), in 1878, the year of his accession (Tagore 1896, 47).

However, following in the wake of South Asian soldiers and workers from the subcontinent, by the 1880s, singers, nautch girls, and theater companies from the subcontinent were routinely visiting Rangoon to perform in temporary theaters or the compounds of wealthy merchants (Singer 1995b, 121–23). Dancing girls and courtesans from northern India also settled in the city for longer periods of time, and while the anti-nautch campaign stormed in South Asia (Williams 2017; Morcom 2013), British administrators in Rangoon continued to assess the blurred lines between sex work and musical labor: writing about the 1920s, Andrew noted many South Asian women would

pose as dancing girls or singers but are really prostitutes. There is another class who are really dancers and singers. They are also prostitutes but they do not ply their profession openly. Their services are in great demand with well-to-do Indians, particularly Muhammadans, for parties or picnics, fairly large sums being paid for their services. It is an unwritten law that for the time being they belong exclusively to the hirer or host. But sometimes they are permitted to distribute their favours among some of the more important guests. (Andrew 1933, 187–88)

Soldiers also brought their own musical practices with them: a drawing published in the *Illustrated London News* from 1891 depicts three soldiers from regiments “composed partly of Sikhs and men of the hill-tribes of the North-west Frontier of India,” informally performing on the rabab and dholak, “amusing themselves with instrumental music after the duties of the day” (Anon. 1891).

Najir Ali barely discussed Burmese music in his poetry but gestures to the larger transregional and oceanic flows around him. In the same year as *Reṅguner Kābyākabitā*, Najir Ali published a collection of poems and songs, *Man Mahinīr Kabitā* (“Poem of the Heart’s Bewitcher”), out of Rangoon.<sup>21</sup> This composition threads together versified narratives—in *payār* couplets and songs (*gīt*)—that recollect his early experiences in Burma. On the very first page, he discusses the heavenly beauty of Burmese women, especially two dancers he encountered in Mandalay and Rangoon, both of whom he named *Man Mahinī* (Heart’s Bewitcher) (Ali 1903a, 1–2). He described the sensation of being “rapt by the tempo of the instruments” (*jantratāle ābeś*), and their sweet singing, but the main focus is on their extreme beauty. The beauties of Burma are a consistent topic in our core text, *Reṅguner Kābyākabitā*, where Najir Ali warns his audience about the divine women, Persian boys (*lāundā phārachi*), and brothels (*kachabir dokān*) of Rangoon that rob men of their Muslim faith (*mochalmāni dine hāni*) (Ali 1903b, 5).

The colonial port city was a palimpsest of global and local sounds. In the final section of *Reṅguner Kābyākabitā*, Najir Ali related the spectacle of a Parsi Theatre production of the popular Urdu drama “Indar Sabha.” Kathryn Hansen and Rashna Darius Nicholson have recently traced the tours of Parsi Theatre companies (which began in India from 1853) around Burma, most notably the Victoria Nāṭak Maṅḍali’s (Victoria Theatrical Company) season in Mandalay in 1881 (Hansen 2018; Nicholson 2017). Parsi theater had a hybrid style, incorporating elements from European, West Asian, and South Asian theater. At the end of the nineteenth century, Hindustani served as a lingua franca in Burma, but even when the Gujarati or Urdu dialogues were unfamiliar, the north Indian songs and dances continued to delight the audiences (Charney 2009, 24).<sup>22</sup>

Najir Ali was not describing a play he had seen himself, but rather incorporated the memory of his friend, Sadar Ali:

*ār ek apurbba kathā2 mane byāthā kariyā khāyas*  
*ek dostā kaila more racite subheś*  
*śuna nām tān2 jñānbān buddhir sāygar*  
*chadar āli nām buli hāikoṭer kiṅkar*  
*bāp tān korbbān āli2 gela cali kari nekkām*  
*janma sthal phateyābād jile caṭygrām*

There is one more unprecedented tale(2), a heartache, I shall tell its qualities:  
 a friend told me to compose upon it in a good style.  
 Hear his name(2), erudite, an ocean of understanding:  
 I call his name Sadar Ali, a servant of the High Court.  
 His father was Korban Ali(2), he had gone to do good work.  
 His birthplace is Fatehabad in Chittagong district. (Ali 1903b, 9)

Najir Ali describes the musical theater in some detail.<sup>23</sup>

*nāmete indra sobā2 mane lobhā dekhite camatkār*  
*phārachigaṇe ei nāc kariche taiyār*

“Indar Sabha” by name: you crave to see it, astonishing!  
The Parsis have prepared this dance.

The early portion of the play sees Indra reclining in his heavenly palace, his movements choreographed to a set of bells:

*tāte ghaṇṭā paṛila2 parddā paila bijali chanacār  
ādā ghaṇṭā chuṭyī pāy hābā khāibār  
ghaṇṭā śuni āila puni2 basila āsane  
raṅga biraṅga nāc dekhe sarbbajane*

Then there was a bell, a curtain dropped like a bolt of lightning,  
the bell finished and he got up to smoke.  
Hearing a bell, he then comes to sit on the throne,  
and everyone beheld a colourful, dazzling dance.

Paying attention to the sonic cues in the performance gives a certain immediacy to Najir Ali’s reconstruction. The play continues and the fairies start fighting while singing:

*juddhete nāṭak sundar2 gīt manuhar śunite svar  
phārachi śure gāy gīt bujhan duskar  
bujhite nāi pāri2 man kāri bahe nityā dam  
mane kahe bairāgī hai saṅge jān  
mane iccha kari2 nāi pāri paṅsār kāraṅ  
debana haiyā keha bhramay reṅgun  
churati magal ādi2 nānān jāti tāmasā dekhiyā  
masta hai geche tār larjjāt pāiyā  
āise kata sāheberā2 ghorā joṛā kariyā sājan  
āścaryā dekhiyā sabe pulakita man  
dekhe dui cār dhākā diyā2 ṭikaṭ liyā jata sadhugan  
nāṭ gīt dekhi śuni pulakita man  
dekhiyā garib loke2 man soke tāmasār kāraṅ  
dhākā āṭ ānār ṭikiṭ laṅ sarbbajan  
purite man ārati2 nirtti prati jāite nā pāriyā  
ghare basi kare kāndan ṭākār lāgiyā*

A beautiful drama over the battle, they raised their voices in a charming song  
They sang a song in a Persian tune—it was hard to understand.  
[Though] not understanding the fairies, your mind holds on through every moment,  
within three hours, your heart tells you to renounce the world,  
but you cannot follow your heart’s desire—because of money.  
The gods would say Rangoon is a trap.  
Suratis, Mughals, and so on, different communities watched the drama,  
they became intoxicated and then ashamed.  
How many gentlemen, with their horses saddled,  
Marvellous—they all watched and their hearts were thrilled.



So many virtuous ones gave 2 to 4 rupees for a ticket to watch:  
 watching and hearing the entertainment and song, their hearts were thrilled.  
 Poor people watched, their hearts grieving because of the drama,  
 everyone took a ticket for 1 rupee 8 annas.  
 In the city, not every heart could go to the lamp-ritual and the dance,  
 needing the money, they sat at home and wept. (Ali 1903b, 10–11)

His description of the dazzlingly beautiful dancers is ambivalent: just as he simultaneously praised and warned against the angelic temptresses of Burma elsewhere in the poem, here he comments on how the performers were captivating but mercenary:

*gīt gāy bāṅgālā bhāse2 payāsār āse mane hai khusi*  
*cakṣe thāre gāy git macaki2 hānsi*

...

*dekhi dhākār bal2 nāri kala basāila bhāi*  
*mṛdu hānsi kahe kathā mukher kāche jāi*  
*adhare amiṃyā śrabe2 kahe sabe āsak haiṃyā*  
*atra pṃyāri prāṅ harili ki jādu kariṃyā*

She sings a song in the Bengali language and collects the money, feeling glad,  
 her eyes are fixed as she sings the song, and then she breaks out in a smile.

...

See, by the power of rupees, a woman sits down to warbling, brother  
 she speaks with a sweet smile, brings her face close:  
 hearing her honeyed lips speak, everyone becomes a lover (*‘āshiq*).  
 Here the beloved robs them of their life—what magic this is! (Ali 1903b, 12)

Misogyny aside, it is striking how Najir Ali associates a woman’s seductive power with her singing voice, a motif that circulated in Bengal and north India in the same period in discussions about courtesans and their techniques (Williams 2017). This verse also indicates how Parsi Theatre performers performed a multilingual repertoire: perhaps that evening they had noted the number of Bengalis in attendance, and had specifically chosen to sing in Bengali to appeal to the “local” audience from faraway Chittagong.

## CONCLUSION

Colonial Rangoon was often called an Indian city on Burmese soil, and that is certainly the impression in Najir Ali’s poem. He discussed the solidarities and conflicts between South Asian migrants, and although he praised and cautioned against Burmese women, Rangoon itself was characterized primarily by its British institutions and Indian workers. Hence, Bengalis like Najir Ali described hearing the Parsi Theatre company from Bombay, but not the *zat pwe* (musical-dance drama) or *yokthe pwe* (puppet theater) of Burma.

Listening to this chap book in its own terms, I have suggested that at the turn of the twentieth century, Bengali *puthis* were understood as a form of inscribed orality designed to facilitate what I have termed “oceanic listening.” Najir Ali’s text had a complex history of circulation, editorial, and (re-)production between port cities—Rangoon, Chittagong, and Calcutta—and, curiously, was considered a “translation” by its author. I suggest that Najir Ali did not intend translation here as between languages, but rather as between modes of performed, read, and recited sound and speech. His work reverberates on several levels. Firstly, as a text that invites the audience to listen, the reader of *Reṅguner Kābyākabitā* was expected to consider how best to excavate rhythm and sound from behind the printed script, through repetition, gesture, and melody. Secondly, Najir Ali evoked the urban environment through its sounds and the emotional responses he had to those sounds. Thirdly, the poet compressed and narrated the trauma of the 1893 riots through episodes of noise, voice, and drums, gesturing to larger tensions over territory and communal boundaries in South Asian Rangoon. Finally, by describing a musical theater production from India, Najir Ali demonstrated the multilingual, ethnically mixed, and international flavor of Rangoon while explicitly underlining the role of class and gender in audition and highlighting the emotionally enticing and financially ruinous properties of music.

## NOTES

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1. *Kābyā* refers to “poetry,” specifically of high literary value, and *kabitā* entails both “poetry” and a specific metrical form. From the form of the text, it seems Najir Ali did not mean these terms in a technical sense, and I have opted for “ballad,” which seems more appropriate given the style and content of his composition.

2. The page sequence thus proceeds (right to left): 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 7, 6, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13.

3. Hathazari or Darul Uloom Muinul Madrassah (established 1897, relocated to Chittagong 1901). See Riaz 2008, 117.

4. Recent and significant exceptions include Khatun (2018); Ali (2017); Haider (2018). On South Asian literary engagements with Burma, see Green (2015); Green (2018, 861–64); Sevea (2022).

5. Christopher Marsh’s discussion of Broadside Ballads is especially ear-opening. See Marsh (2004).

6. By contrast, Jitendra Narayan Ray’s prose account of Rangoon in the 1930s was presumably intended for silent reading (Ray 1938).

7. Fourteen *mātrās* (syllables with a pronounced vowel) per line, in seven feet, arranged in rhyming couplets. On *paṅār* in performance, see Kane (2008, 169–72).

8. Two of these were published in Rangoon itself (Viranna 1921; Pulavar 1926), while one was printed in Madurai (Pillai 1924).

9. For the social history of Rangoon in this period, see Kumar (2006); Noriyuki (2016); Mazumder (2013); Chakravarti (1971).

10. Arakan is also known as Rakhine, the etymology of the ethnic term “Rohingya.” I do not call Najir Ali “Rohingya,” as he does not use this term in his own texts, and he seems to have returned to Chittagong after his career in Burma. According to Jacques Leider, “Rohingya” is a relatively recent

political category, emerging over the 1950s–60s and supplanting an older spectrum of identities developed by those Muslims in Arakan who had family roots in Chittagong (Leider 2014, 216–30). On contemporary Rohingya music and memory, see Farzana (2017, 191–232). On the fluidity of ethnic categories in the longer history of Burma, see Lieberman (1978).

11. Notably, there are several unusual spellings in this composition: here the English word “engine,” which is usually written *iñjin* in Bengali, has been misspelled as *iñjil*, meaning “Gospels.”

12. The current building of Mogul Shia Mosque was built between 1914 and 1918, but there was a mosque on that site from the mid-nineteenth century.

13. It was noted in the English newspapers that, “Many respectable Mahomedans” had begged for the “Gora pultun” (white troops) to go in, for “they are a law-abiding race, and trust to the Government to protect them. But the latter [had initially] apparently thrown them over and left them to the merciless batons of a Hindu police” (Garnet-Man 1899).

14. In February 1886, to mark the visit of the Viceroy, the Marquis of Dufferin, the different societies of the city erected twenty triumphal marches branded with their community names (Singer 1995b: 131).

15. In 1927, for example, 31,274 men were registered as arriving from Chittagong, compared to only 162 women (Andrew 1933, 11, 17, 182–89).

16. Najir Ali also mentions homesickness and missing one’s parents (Ali 1903b, 7).

17. The first set of Burmese musical instruments to be sent to London were spoils of the First Anglo-Burmese War, 1824–26. They were exhibited at the Egyptian hall in Piccadilly (Singer 1995b, 49).

18. See a contemporary account of women from elite Burmese families dancing on the Viceroy of India’s visit to Rangoon in 1882 (Singer 1995b, 114).

19. On Western music and Burma, see Selth (2017).

20. On Tagore in context, see Williams (2016). The pioneering nineteenth-century Burmese music scholar, Myawadi Wungyi U Sa (1766–1853) revised and expanded the *Naralekha*, a seventeenth-century music treatise that digested the principles of classical Sanskrit musicology. See Zaw (1941).

21. This work is dated 1264 Myanmar Era, which equates to 1903–4 CE.

22. Hansen suggests that Parsi theater was less influential in Burma than in Penang and Singapore, where it had a penetrating effect on local theater practice (Hansen 2018, 31).

23. It is unclear which specific production Sadar Ali had seen. Parsi theater companies sometimes shared their stages with *zat pwe*, like the ‘large iron shed’ rented by the famous actor-manager Po Sein (1880–1952) in 1899 (Hansen 2018, 29).

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