

Nyastaranga: The ‘Curious’ Instrument of ‘Hindu’ Music

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Figure 1 | Kaliprasanna Bandyopadhyay holding the *Nyastaranga*. Courtesy: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution. Reproduced from Williams, *Hindustani Music*, 226.

In October 1875, Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales, began an extensive tour of the Indian subcontinent, which lasted over eight months before he returned to England in May 1876. The Prince and his entourage were scheduled to stay in Calcutta for eleven days.¹ On the second evening after his arrival, Jotindro Mohun Tagore, a key member of the Prince’s Welcome Committee and the elder brother of Sourindro Mohun Tagore, organised an elaborate musical welcome that featured a variety of musical entertainments specially curated for the Prince. The Belgachia Villa, an Italian-style garden house owned by the Rajas of Paikpara, had been well known as a theatrical venue in Calcutta since the 1850s and was chosen for the Victorian-style garden party.

The entertainment itinerary of the evening included welcoming rituals and the chanting of Vedic hymns by a ‘well-known pundit,’ the British National Anthem ‘God Save the Gracious Queen’ performed

by a ‘native’ band specially put together for the occasion, two different ‘Welcome Songs’ in English and Bengali penned by Jotindro Mohun Tagore and composed by Sourindro Mohun Tagore,² along with many other musical pieces. Seventeen years earlier, it was at this same venue that a classical play *Ratnaboli* was staged, featuring for the ‘first time’ the Belgachia Amateur Band – a ‘native’ orchestra assembled by Sourindro Mohun Tagore’s mentor Khetramohan Goswami at the request of Raja Pratapchandra Sinha of Paikpara, owner of the Belgachia Villa. It was during this performance of *Ratnaboli* that Tagore spotted the musical talent of the young actor, Kaliprasanna Bandyopadhyay, and placed him under the tutelage of his mentor, Goswami. Later, Kaliprasanna flourished as a fine

¹ The Prince of Wales stayed in Calcutta from 23rd December 1875 to 2nd January 1876 and Left for Hyderabad on 3rd January 1876 morning. See, Wheeler, *India in 1875-76*, 181, 218.

² See, Campbell, *Glimpses of Bengal*, 64.

sitar player and became the secretary of the Bengal Music School, established by Tagore in August 1871, four years before the Prince's visit.



Figure 2 | Tagore's *Aikatan* ensemble with Kaliprasanna at the centre, Calcutta, between 1875 and 1882, photographic print held at the Museum für Völkerkunde, Dresden (Inv. F 2016-5/2.38). Gift of Sourndro Mohun Tagore. © Museum für Völkerkunde, Dresden

On 24 December 1875, the centre of attraction of the musical entertainment curated for the Prince was a *Nyastaranga* recital by the same Kaliprasanna Bandyopadhyay, which had already become a permanent feature of many of S.M. Tagore's international parties. *Nyastaranga* was extremely difficult to play: it was claimed to be an instrument of 'classic origin' and, at the same time, an object of wonder and curiosity for European elites. It was well known that Kaliprasanna performed steadfast *sadhna* and self-restraint to prepare himself holistically for the performance, but he fell ill every time afterwards. In his lifetime, Kaliprasanna had given fewer than a dozen performances on his *Nyastaranga* and had developed serious bronchial problems.³

Nyastaranga had created no little wonder or curiosity amongst the public and especially in the print media: while it "looks like a wind instrument, but is never blown. . . It was believed that *an instrument of this description is scarcely to be met with in other parts of the globe.*"⁴ The curiosity about this novel instrument was such that gentlemen, after the concerts, would come and try the instrument only to realise that it required a 'good deal of practice' and was 'sufficiently strong and loud to keep up with an air played by an amateur on a string instrument.' In one of his last performances in 1879 at the Emerald Bower Estate of the Tagores, General Ulysses S. Grant took

³ See, Capwell, "Musical Life", 144.

⁴ Quoted from *The Friend of India*, 19 February 1876. See, *Public Opinion*, 32.

special interest in examining the instrument: *Indian Daily News* reported that Grant ‘took a seat near the performer and placed his ear near the bell-shaped mouth of the instrument, which he afterwards examined most critically.’⁵

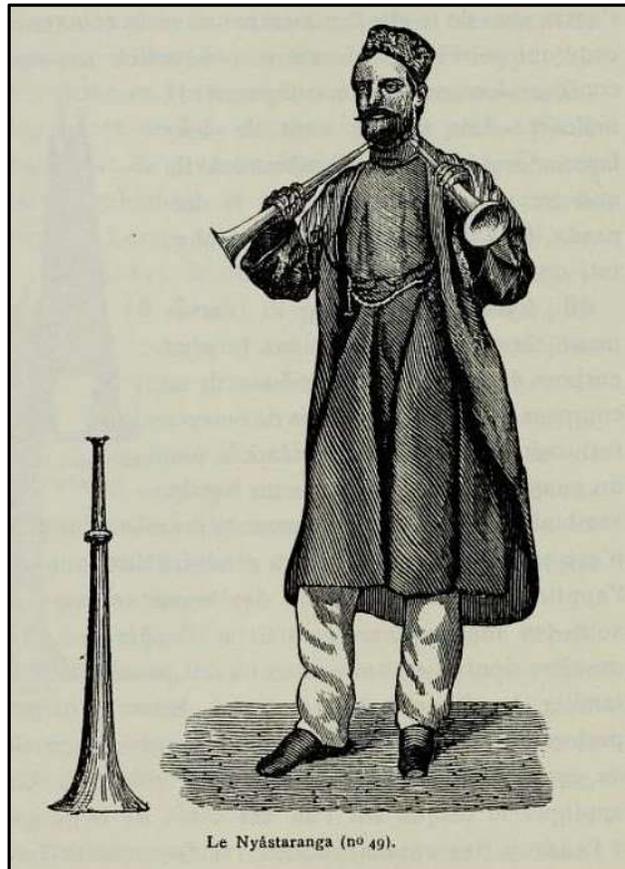


Figure 3 | Drawings of *Nyastaranga* and its performer. Reproduced for *Catalogue Descriptif*, 118.

the modern discipline of Organology. When Mahillon chanced upon the *Nyastaranga*, he understood it as a kind of *Kazoo* or *Mirliton* (implying a membranophone), employing a spider's cocoon as the transmitter of the performer's vocalization. It would be interesting to note Mahillon's definition of *Nyastaranga* in its entirety as published in the *Catalogue descriptif* (1880), where he finally placed it in the category of wind instruments:

Nyastaranga (Beng.). Classical instrument, certainly the most curious in the Hindu collection. It consists of a conical copper tube, ending at one end with a double bell, and at the other with a reed pipe (n° 4H) similar to that of mouthpiece instruments. It is not, however, intended to produce sounds by the application and vibration of the lips, as are the instruments it resembles. The way it resonates has led us to place it in the family of reed instruments. Under the perforated disc at the upper end, a very finely cut piece of spider

⁵ See, *Public Opinion*, 218.

cocoon is placed. The disc is applied to one side of the throat, over the vocal cords; if one breathes deeply or hums a tune, a clear sound is produced, which reproduces the intonations made by the performer and, it is said, perfectly resembles the sound of a reed instrument. The same player sometimes uses two pipes; in this case, he places one on each side of the throat. The sound also appears to be produced when the instrument is placed on the cheeks or nostrils.



Figure 4 | *Nyastaranga* at the Met Museum, New York. Object No: 89.4.198 a,b

Despite minutely examining the instrument, Mahillon was unable to play it. Sourindro Mohun Tagore had deliberately sent spare ‘spider cocoons’ to be used if required to replace those worn out by wear and tear. Still, Mahillon, due to ‘incomplete explanation’, could not grasp the mechanism of sound production. Nevertheless, he understood the mechanism right – that the ‘spider cocoon vibrates sympathetically with the vocal cords shaken by the singing instrumentalist, and that the resulting vibrations are reinforced by the capacity of the tube, acting here as a simple resonator.’⁶ In another similar collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Tagore’s *Nyastaranga*⁷ was part of the Indian instruments sub-section of The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889. The *Catalogue of the Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments* classifies the instrument as a Membranophone-Mirliton: a pair of metal trumpets, about 20½ inches long, consisting of a pair of conical tubes flaring at the lower edge. Most

importantly, it also similarly describes its playing technique that ‘The vibration of the vocal cords sets in motion a small film of spider web inserted in the tube, by which the tone is produced.’⁸

In Indian musicology, the word *nyas* refers to the note in any *raga* that is used as a resting note, a landing note or a crucial point of repose. Etymologically, then, one can conjecture that the *Nyastaranga* was probably the instrument designed to send out waves (Taranga) of a holding/landing note, much like a drone. The only archival photo of Tagore’s instrumental ensemble clearly portrays Kaliprasanna flaunting his *Nyastaranga* at the centre of the frame: Tagore never missed an opportunity to showcase his solo performance, most likely as an object of wonder and curiosity, to draw the European attention to the antiquity of Hindu music. James Aldis, the Principal of La Martiniere School in Calcutta, himself a vocal music teacher, a sitar-student of Tagore’s mentor Khetrāmohan Goswami, and actively engaged in studying the vibrations of air in

⁶ *Catalogue descriptif et analytique du Musée Instrumental du Conservatoire Royal de Musique de Bruxelles*, 117-19.

⁷ For detailed catalogue record of *Nyastaranga* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, See, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/500767>

⁸ See, *Catalogue of the Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments*: Vol. II, p. 58.

organ pipes of unusual shapes, examined the instrument with acute interest and described Kaliprasanna's playing technique of the instrument:

“The *Nyas Tarango* is closed at the narrow end with perforated metal discs. Pressing those discs firmly against two sides of the throat, close to the vocal cords, by breathing heavily, he produced a clear, reed-like note from the trumpets. By placing my ear close to his mouth, I ascertained that the sound came from the trumpets and not from the vocal cords.”⁹

On 24 December, 1875, Kaliprasanna ‘Baboo,’ clad in his shiny robe, resembling ‘the garb of Cardinal Richelieu,’ walked up to the Prince and stood at a few feet’s distance to present his special recital. A journalist from the Prince’s entourage observes:

“Here he plays a tune on two tin flutes, and the odd part of the performance is that the man places the mouths of the instruments against his neck, and the gods are understood to have endowed him with the power of blowing through his skin instead of from his lips. Many of the spectators, including the Prince, have a suspicion that the player is deceiving them, that the juxtaposition of the pipe to the neck is simply a blind, and that the slow musical hum proceeds from the mouth. Scrutiny failed to unravel the mystery, and I am bound to add that after a private *séance* given for the special amusement of the correspondents, we were obliged to let *Nasataranga* depart with a more solid claim than ever to the *prestige of being the cleverest blower of a pipe in all India.*”¹⁰

In the absence of any available history of the instrument, the claim to its antiquity was made by Tagore when he underscored its ‘classic origin.’ Owing to his peculiar and curious playing technique, Kaliprasanna Bandyopadhyay became quite renowned for his *Nyastaranga* – the rarity of any performer on this instrument, and Kaliprasanna’s performance on it, undoubtedly created waves of curiosity and ripples of excitement amongst its audience. While in most of the cases, a closer ‘scrutiny’ satisfactorily revealed the ‘truth’ of its playing-technique and its novelty, and obliged the media about the ‘prestige’ of this instrument, on the other hand, for the official chronicler of the Prince on his India tour, it never cleared the web of suspicion surrounding *Nyastaranga* – as a hoax, as dubious, and as ‘an eccentricity quite out of place in a school of music, and more suitable for a professional mountebank than for a scientific musician.’¹¹

Little is known about what happened to the ‘curious’ *Nyastaranga* after Tagore!

⁹ See, Capwell, “Musical Life”, 145.

¹⁰ See, Wheeler, *India in 1875-76*, 198. (Emphasis Mine)

¹¹ See, *Ibid.*, 200.

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