

# An Untouchable Kīrtan

## *Sonic Liberation on the Andaman Islands*

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*Music is such a thing: it can rescue from death, or it can kill you.*

—BHUBON CHANDRA BISWAS

That's how Bhubon Chandra Biswas started to tell a story the first time that I had finally managed to meet him. The jolly seventy-five-year-old uncle was regularly hopping from one all-night kirtan (*kīrtan*) to the next, and it had been a truly hard task to find him at home.<sup>1</sup> He moved to the Andamans in 1958, when he was sixteen. After migrating to India as refugees, his family, originally from East Bengal (what is now called Bangladesh) had lived on railway platforms for six months. Then they enlisted for the possibility of resettling on the islands. While earning a living as a fisherman for over thirty years, Bhubon Biswas cultivated a strong passion for music and singing and regularly played in local religious festivals. This story was passed down to him from his guru. It is a tale of the centrality of kirtan, but also an indication that there is strong and cohesive community assessment about how the music should sound, and what are the repercussions on the listeners' body and sanity, if these criteria are disrespected.

Songs and music were playing during one kirtan. At the time of giving the *cālāni* [final acceleration of rhythm and intensity] the drummer struck the drum out of beat (*betāl*). It is such a painful thing to hear that everybody was physically suffering from it. Then the leader of the musicians took a stick and beat him so hard that the guy accidentally died. Then the police came, . . . the leader of the group of musicians was found responsible for the drummer's death. He was then arrested and sentenced to death. . . .

Before the death penalty, the magistrate asked if he had a last wish. The musician said: "Magistrate Sir, I want to play music in one last kirtan. Please organize one

gathering, celebrate and enjoy all together, and I will just quietly sit in the back and play music for the main singers.”

The Magistrate fulfilled his last wish: he sent invitations, . . . invited some singers and musicians, and in the evening they sat for the singing session. The main singer was singing his song and then finally, at the time of giving the *cālāni*, the convict struck the drum off-beat (*betāl*). Everybody started feeling so sick for [hearing] that! The Magistrate exclaimed: “For God’s sake, why would you play like that, you are killing us!”

The musician explained: “Sir, this is exactly why I had to beat that drummer with a stick! I did not mean to kill him. It was a big disgrace that he accidentally died. But now you understand why I had to beat him?”

The Magistrate stood silent. He reflected for a while, and then he said: “You are graced!”

If we consider stories as embodying a community’s ethos and as ways to understand the self and the world, then what this story can tell is certainly that music is not a matter to be taken lightheartedly. Drumming in particular has been described in several societies as closely connected with the cult of the dead and communication with the spirits, while in South Asia, where several low-caste communities ritually perform as drummers for funerary rites, it is also widely associated with notions of ritual pollution and untouchability. Kirtan music can transport the listeners from one realm to the other, and vice versa, navigating multiple liminal zones.

Among Bengali low-caste practitioners on the Andaman Islands, kirtan can be quite literally a matter of life and death. During the ecstatic sacred dance at Matua kirtan sessions (*mātām*), it is common for the most dedicated dancers to fall unconscious, lie on the ground, and roll on the dusty floor completely absorbed and overwhelmed by the sound of the *ḍaṅkā* drums and the repetition of the Hari mantra, *haribal*.<sup>2</sup> As my interlocutors have witnessed, at times the entranced devotees do not come back from that condition and never stand up again, a cause of death that is known as *bhāb’samādhi*, equated with the deepest state of meditation. Apart from these rare lethal occasions, the sacred dance of Matua kirtan is more commonly described as a healing and salvific practice. Playing the *ḍaṅkā* is itself supposed to regulate inhalation and exhalation, accomplishing the same results as the yogic techniques of breath control (referred to as *śvās praśvāser kāj* in the vernacular, or *prāṇāyāma* in classic yoga). Women devotees told me that a number of madmen and drunkards regained sanity after practicing the *ḍaṅkā* drum. Some reported that a paralyzed person got healed during one such festival, ending up jumping and dancing at the sound of the *mātām*. These are just a few among the innumerable stories of the miraculous healing potency of kirtan. When somebody falls seriously ill or is in critical conditions, it is common practice in the Bengali villages of the Andaman Islands to organize a kirtan.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, elderly people wish to pass to a better life while attending kirtan. Dying in such circumstances would be considered a great fortune, since kirtan soundwaves can literally wash the sins away.

Enveloping the village with the resonance of its salvific sound, congregational singing is seen as a valid instrument to restore normality and order, and to renew

social relationships of trust and reciprocity after disruptions, such as natural adversities, illnesses, a long separation, or even a political Partition and the subsequent displacement across the Bay of Bengal. With an analysis of Matua kirtan on the Andaman Islands, this chapter shows how sounds can contribute to research on island societies, and how islands, in turn, can contribute to the study of the soundscapes of religion, caste, and displacement.

#### ISLANDNESS AND MATUA KIRTAN

What is the importance of islandness to understanding sonic practices? Edward Alpers brought attention to the “island factor,” proposing to integrate the role and the history of islands in our otherwise continental-centric understanding of the Indian Ocean. Recent literature on small islands has proposed to turn “islandness” into an explicit empirical and methodological issue (Alpers and Schnepers 2018, xix). Scholars interested in songs and sound cultures have often based their research on islands (e.g., Barney, Mackinlay, and Bartleet 2009), but without necessarily taking “islandness” forward as an analytical category.<sup>4</sup> Anthropologists of the old days have often worked on islands as epitomes of exotic societies removed from outer influences.<sup>5</sup> More recently, scholars interested in processes of creolization and hybridity have explored the sonic productions of islands as the sites of fusion, contamination, and the *mélange* of genres and identities.<sup>6</sup> Often a product of displacement, slavery, indentured labor, or diaspora, island musics have figured as eloquent examples of resiliency and cultural change, be it the *jahaji* music of the Caribbean (Sharma 2007), the Indian devotional songs performed in Fiji (Manuel 2009), the sounds of Moharram celebrations on Trinidad (Korom 2003), the sonic dimension of Islam on Mauritius (Eisenlohr 2018a), or the “disconnected connections” of Puerto Rican *jíbaro* music on Hawai‘i (Solis 2011). The music and dance complex has come to represent, for several of these people, a “performance of homeland” (Lorea 2017), or a “surrogate ancestor” (Solis 2011). This essay contributes to this scholarship by discussing the relations between islandness and sound cultures as a fertile terrain of possibilities, nurtured by a constant tension between retaining and adapting, between separating and connecting multiple traditions, shores, and subjectivities.

The social imaginaries of islands as finite, virgin places, sparsely populated and easily controllable (Alpers and Schnepers 2018, 124), has made islands the ideal locale and the social laboratory “in which to materialize the colonial will” (McCusker and Soares 2011, xi) as well as postcolonial plans of exploitation (see Sen 2017), colonization, militarization, social engineering, and human “garbage dumping” policies (Zehmisch 2012, 9). This reminds us that, despite recent roman-ticizations of island hubs in the Indian Ocean as places of mobility and cosmopolitanism, and as meeting points for transnational flows of people, items, and ideas, islands also remain critical zones of confinement, restriction of movement, and forced isolation (for example, as places of detention, indentured labor, quarantine, waste disposal, and so on).

The Andaman Islands reflect precisely this double profile: they are places of connections and disconnections. The Bengali diaspora on the Andamans has articulated itself through oral narratives, rituals, and cultural practices inscribed into the interstices of this polarity. Such interstices are the very attribute of what I mean by islandness: the ambiguity between insularity, intended as produced isolation, and liminality, resulting from the conflation of both or many shores of the surrounding ocean. In this sense, the islandness of the Andamans is at the same time the terrain of cultural encounter at the confluence of multiple seascapes and soundscapes, and also the feeling of insularity that is culturally and politically produced rather than “naturally,” geographically, or physically given. The configuration of Bengali religious and cultural expressions on the islands has taken the shape—and the sound—of the polarity between resilience and innovation, between tenacious loyalty to traditional forms, perceived to come “from back home” and from “back then,” and continuous adaptation to new ecologies and social surroundings. This is the main point that my essay illustrates through a discussion of the meaning of kirtan sessions among the Matua community of Bengali devotees on the Andaman Islands.

In South Asia, kirtan is a large umbrella name for devotional music that normally involves singing the name and the praises of god within participatory and congregational sessions (Beck 2018). In Bengal, kirtan is associated with the sixteenth-century Vaishnava devotionism diffused by the saints Caitanya and Nityananda (Chakravarti 1985; Sanyal 2012; Graves 2017a, 2017b), who popularized it and turned it into a weapon of mass religious movement (Bandyopadhyay 2004, 80). The Matua movement<sup>7</sup> continued and renewed this tradition, creating a distinctive ramification of kirtan, with new song texts, music instruments, and performance style (Bairagya 1999, 307). The Matua religion emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century in the Faridpur district of East Bengal. Its founding prophets, Harichand Thakur (1812–1878) and his son Guruchand Thakur (1847–1937), rebelled against Hindu casteist norms and created a separate religious identity to mobilize the Namashudra caste (*namahśūdra*), whose members were stigmatized as polluting and “untouchable.”<sup>8</sup> At present, the community counts numerous followers (fifty million according to the leaders of the organization Matua Mahasangha). Imbued with ecstatic devotionism, the Matua community originated as a caste-based movement of the Namashudra people, combining a theology of egalitarian devotional love (*prem bhakti*) drawn from popular Bengali Vaishnavism, with the emphasis on remunerative work, disciplined conjugality, and social upliftment (see Bandyopadhyay 1997; Lorea 2020). The earlier territorial unity of Matua leaders and devotees has been severely disrupted by the Partition of India (1947). Matua followers are now found both in southern Bangladesh and, to a greater extent, in several Indian states, islands, and borderland areas.

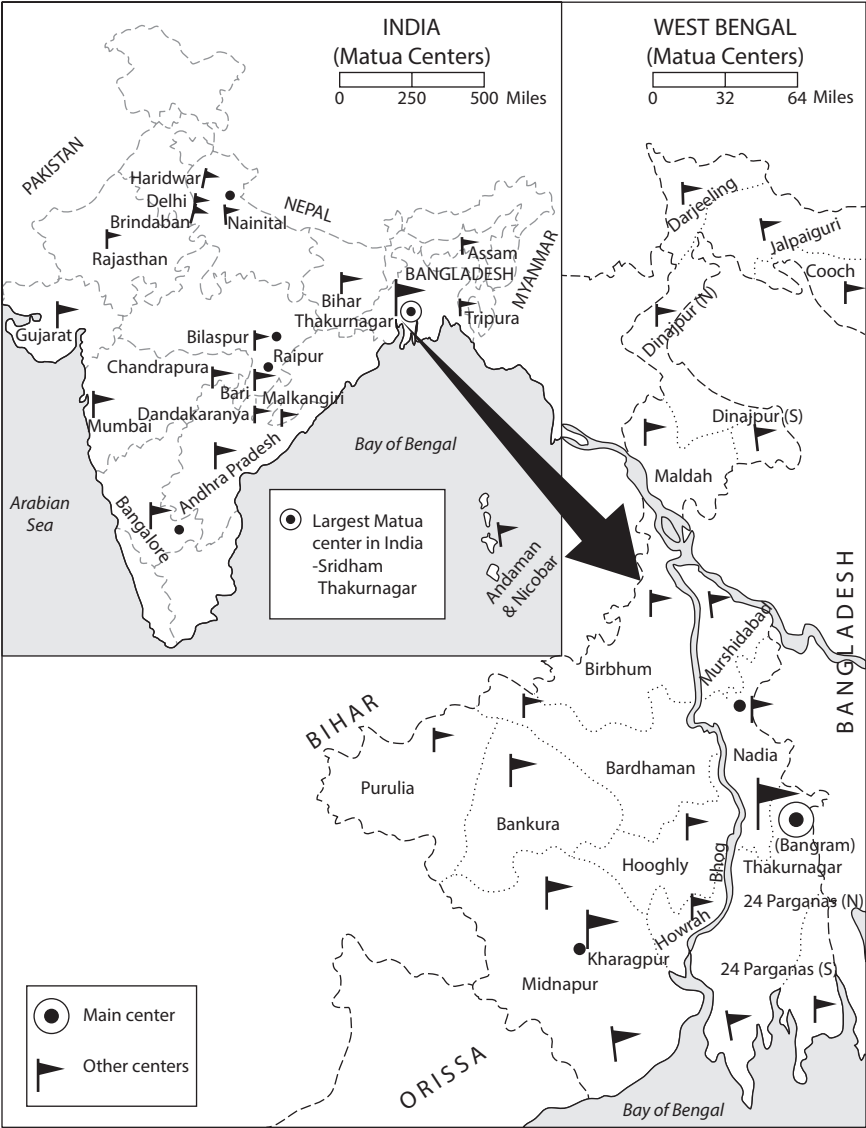
Just like island societies porously conflate both or many shores of the surrounding ocean, religious sounds envelop participating bodies and blur their individual confines. Sharing a sounded experience of devotion entails the weakening of boundaries between bodies, as sound envelops and often enters, reverberates in,

and is sensed by the entire body and the collective body of participants (Eisenlohr 2018a, 39). In Matua congregations, the most important instrument, considered to be a Matua cultural icon and the revolutionary legacy of the founding gurus, is the big bass drum named *ḍankā*, appreciated for its loud sound and for the power of its intense vibrations, which enter the body, make the earth tremble, cause heart patients to get healed and the local network towers to stop working.<sup>9</sup> These local understandings of the power of sacred sound remind us that vibrations are felt on and under the skin, closely relating the sensory experiences of sound and touch, two overlapping zones of perception (Herbig 2018; Yau 2018) that have a prominent and synesthetic place in Matua kirtan performance.

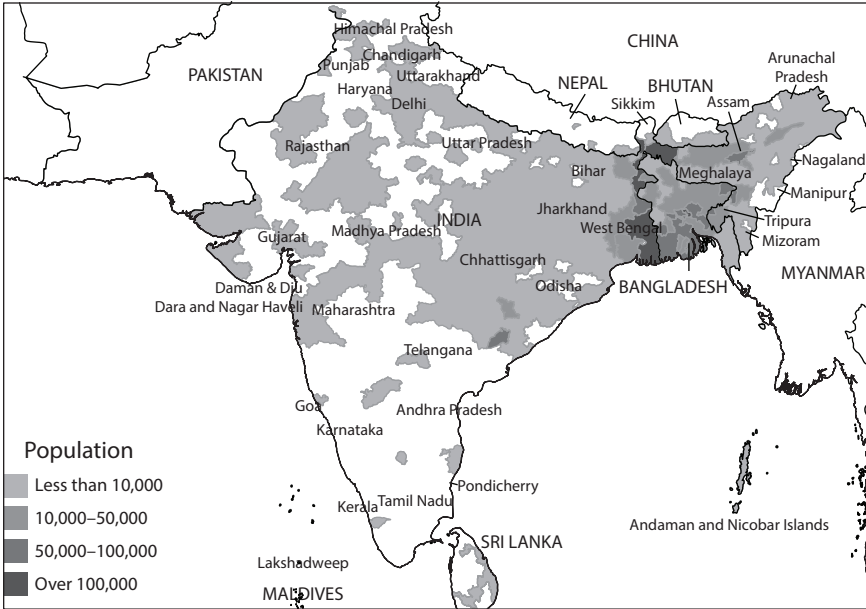
A distinctive trait of the Matua style of kirtan is that it always starts and ends with a drumming session led by *ḍankā*, *kāmśi* (gong), *siṅgā* (buffalo horn), and the incessant repetition of the sacred name (*haribal*), accompanied by a vigorous and ecstatic dance (*mātām*). Matua kirtan is also distinctive for collective weeping and what I term a ritual display of “touchability,” the sensorial experience of mutual touch as displayed on the kirtan arena. Participants hug each other in particular moments of the congregational singing session. They touch each other’s feet. They shed tears together. The devotees revere one another by exchanging garlands of flowers, and the hosting party welcomes the other participants by marking their foreheads with a flower dipped in fragrant sandalwood paste. Reciprocating embrace and shedding tears together have long been interpreted as an affirmation of a bond of social solidarity between those taking part in it (the first comprehensive discussion on these themes being based, of all places, on the Andamans islanders; Radcliff-Brown 1964, 245). Sounded and tuneful weeping like the one enacted in the kirtan mode of communication portrays social relations of obligation and reciprocity, which cannot be underestimated in a context of insularity and displacement.

I suggest that kirtan in this archipelagic context is an act of community building for displaced people who wish to assert their territorial presence, affirm their religious identity, and heal a profound sense of isolation through a shared experience of sound. I build on a growing corpus of literature on music and identity-making in diasporic contexts (e.g., Purewal and Lallie 2013; Mooney 2008; Poole 2004; Ramnarine 2007; Tewari 2011; Townsend 2014), on congregational singing (e.g., Nekola and Wagner 2017; Ingalls Sherinian, and Reigersberg 2018), and on the relationship between religious soundscapes and place-making (e.g., Tamimi Arab 2017; Weiner 2013) to articulate the theoretical liaison between sound, people, places, and identities. These conceptual frameworks are frequently based on urban, mainland-centric, and North Atlantic contexts. This contribution attempts to bring islandness and local voices of archipelagic singers-practitioners to the forefront, emphasizing a local discourse on congregational singing and dancing in a nonurban, non-Western, and oceanic context, and it does so by building on the narratives collected from displaced Bengali performers, who are often simultaneously spiritual gurus for their community.

This essay employs ethnographic sources like oral narratives, life stories, and oral exegeses provided by Bengali devotees, gurus, musicians, and listeners who



MAP 4.1. Map showing the main Matua centers in India according to the information provided by Matua leaders of institutionalized branches. Reproduced with permission from Birat Bairagya (1999).



MAP 4.2. Approximate distribution of Namashudra communities according to the data of the Joshua Project, a Christian organization that organizes the data of missionary groups. Source: [https://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups/print/17756/IN](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/print/17756/IN).

kindly shared their time and knowledge during my fieldwork on the Andaman Islands between 2017 and 2019. Having conducted fieldwork with the Matua community also in West Bengal and southern Bangladesh, my statements in regard to Matua practices on the Andaman Islands are often informed by comparative views.

This multisited fieldwork has allowed me to look at the “island factor” in a larger sense. In my broader research I argue that the Matua community has experienced islandness and a sense of displacement on the mainland as much as in the Andamans. Resettled in sparsely populated areas unfit for cultivation, such as Dandakaranya, and in remote refugee colonies and camps on the borderlands of West Bengal, Namashudra settlers have experienced marginalization and forced isolation not only in archipelagic and littoral contexts but also in landlocked sites of resettlement around the Indian Ocean (Kudaisya 1996; Mandal 2011; Sen 2018; see map 4.1 and map 4.2).<sup>10</sup> In this sense, islandness—and the affective sounds it produces—is only partially related to the natural geography of a circumscribed place surrounded by the sea, and it has more to do with the politics of unequal distribution of power operating along discriminatory lines of caste, gender, religious identities, and geographies of displacement.

## A PAIR OF DRUMS AND CYMBALS

All the residents are peasants. 80% of them cannot write their names, they sign with their thumb. But they are all the owners of ten acres of land. . . . There is Durga Puja, there are singing sessions of Kirtan with drums (*khol*) and cymbals (*kartāl*), there are rural folk songs. . . . What else could one need? (Cakrabarti 2012, 86)

These words from the diary of a government officer appointed as “Colonisation Assistant” in charge of supervising the rehabilitation of some thousands of refugee families from East Pakistan on the Andaman Islands, struck me for the centrality accorded to congregational singing in the local life of the early Bengali settlers. Following the Independence and Partition of India in 1947, a massive flow of refugees from East Bengal (by that time, East Pakistan) entered the new and hastily drawn Indian borders. Displacement continued in steady waves and intermittent peaks for several decades, followed by another major stream during and after the 1971 Bangladesh war of liberation. Particularly from 1950 onward, low-caste refugees from rural East Bengal came to occupy pavements and railway platforms and sought shelter in government camps (Mallick 1999, 106; Sen 2014, 45–72), often enduring abominable conditions (Mandal 2011, 211). Most of them were sent, through government rehabilitation schemes, to far regions and sparsely populated areas. One such plan, disturbingly named the “Colonisation Scheme,” directed the relocation of several thousands of refugee families—officially 3,695, probably about 18,000 people (Biswas 2009, 21)—on the Andaman Islands, an archipelago in the Bay of Bengal located at 1,300 kilometers from the Indian mainland.<sup>11</sup> As the officer’s diary implies, displaced people from East Bengal were selected from the refugee camps almost exclusively among low-caste peasants with very little or no formal education (Sen 2018, 133). The need to promptly put jungle-covered areas of the Andaman Islands under cultivation after independence to exploit the profitable timber resources and enhance the supply of food for the growing local demand motivated the selection: almost exclusively Namashudra and other low-caste refugees. Families with young, strong, able-bodied working males were prioritized. Candidates’ calluses, hands, and arms were examined to assess their familiarity with manual work. Namashudra people were preferable, given the higher classes’ stereotype that sees them as hard-working, strong, resilient, capable of adapting to new environments, and used to struggle against natural hindrances, coupled with a supposed propensity to be requiring less and very united.<sup>12</sup>

Embarking from Kolkata on the SS *Maharaja* vessel for a four-day-long journey across the Bay of Bengal, the refugee families crossed the black waters (*kālāpāni*) that used to be traversed by the prisoners sent to the penal settlement of Port Blair under the British regime, never to return. Before the journey, the first batches of refugees were given by the government of West Bengal an assortment of useful items and utensils to travel with: agricultural tools, home building tools, manure, seeds of familiar vegetables, some clothes, some pairs of Bata shoes to protect their



feet from thorns, leeches, and earth crabs, and also, some drums (*khol*) and cymbals (*kartāl*) to play kirtan and practice folk songs (*lok-saṅgīt*) in order to “increase mental strength and keep away the sense of desolation” (Raychaudhury 2004, 101, 143). It was clearly understood that kirtan has a special place in the everyday life of low-caste people from rural East Bengal.

Since their first arrival in March 1949, the Bengali settlers on the Andaman Islands had to endure physical hardship and desolating isolation. In the place where I have conducted most of my fieldwork, on North Andaman, the ship used to come once per month, leaving the feeling, for the remaining twenty-nine days, of being “outside of the world map” (Cattopadhyay 2006, 148). Apart from a few families from Kerala, there were only East Bengali people around the Diglipur settlement of North Andaman, which soon came to be known as “Mini-Bengal” (Cakrabarti 2012, 40). Villages were set up at a great distance from one another, and even mundane needs such as purchasing salt, visiting a doctor, or reaching a primary school entailed a day-long trek in knee-deep mud. To make sure that the purpose for which they had been relocated to the islands was exploited fully, the administrators suggested a policy preventing the refugees from traveling to the mainland.<sup>13</sup> Hostages in their new home, they upgraded from landless peasants to landed farmers but lacked the manpower to take care of extensive and scattered plots of land. The families resettled through governmental schemes were soon reached by relatives, by disciples of the same gurus, by acquaintances from the same caste, neighborhood or village; in sum, by numerous migrants from East Bengal, connected by diverse networks and inspired by various motivations. Independent migrants moved to the islands outside of governmental schemes, at times buying property, other times encroaching on forest land or occupying revenue land, according to their means and connections.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the Bengali-speaking population on the Andaman Islands represents at present the biggest community of residents.<sup>15</sup> This numerical advantage did not translate into a significant political agency or representation. Unlike other states of India, with their own elected governments, chief ministers, and members of parliament, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands constitute a Union Territory, governed directly by the central government.

The tangible musical instruments that the refugees carried along on their journeys, together with their intangible repertoires of songs, tunes, rhythms, religious knowledge, and oral traditions from East Bengal, were promptly deployed in the new home space of diasporic resettlement. Other instruments were newly made, substituting traditional kinds of woods with the new materials found in the local forests. The precious *pedauk* tree (*Pterocarpus dalbergioides*) was found to be very appropriate to carve out of its gigantic trunk the mandatory *ḍankā* drum, a cultural symbol of the Matua community. The goat skin, typically used for the drums, was replaced by the skin of the ubiquitous deer whose proliferation was regularly threatening the crops. When transportation improved to connect the remote

archipelago to the mainland, new instruments were shipped, harmoniums were ordered, booklets of songs were purchased, and a transregional and transnational network of items, singers, and preachers started to circulate between the shores of the eastern Indian Ocean. The Radio Centre, which opened in 1962 in the capital city of Port Blair, started to hire Matua singers to perform folk songs (*lok-saṅgīt*). Whether they sung the religious songs of the gurus from their homeland or the more popular repertoire of folk songs that was commodified in mainland Bengal at the time, remains uncertain, as most of the tapes in the Radio Centre's archives dating prior to the 1990s were damaged or lost during the 2004 tsunami. However, what we can surely assess through literary, oral, and ethnographic sources is that congregational singing sessions were and remained paramount events of social life, religious learning, emotional expression, and somatic healing.

The biggest festivals on the Andaman Islands up to now are represented by the annual congregations of the Matua devotees in Tugapur, Havelock, and Pahargaon, where thousands of people assemble to play and listen to kirtan, and to dance energetically at the rhythm of countless *ḍaṅkā* drums (Andaman Sheekha 2017). Madhumita Mazumdar studied the religious experience of the Matua followers of the Andaman Islands. One respondent “categorically stated that had it not been for the weekly kirtans in the small Matua temple . . . life would have been truly hard to sustain” (Mazumdar 2016, 188). The shared experience of devotion embodied through participation in congregational singing and dancing created togetherness, belonging, and networks of emotional support. These helped the Matua devotees face the experience of loss, displacement, traumatic memories, tremendous isolation, and physical exhaustion, which figure prominently in the memories of the first decades after resettlement. Music was then much more than a relief from the boredom of dark village nights: as eloquently related in the opening narrative, it was rather a matter of life or death.

#### HUGS, TEARS, AND DISPLAYS OF TOUCHABILITY

What is it that kirtan *does* to those who listen? What is it that kirtan does to those who sing it (the *kīrtanīyās*)? What are the sonic, haptic, and synesthetic interactions between singers and listeners? Mr. Boral, a retired forest guard and passionate Matua singer living in the outskirts of Port Blair, replied without a hint of hesitation:

First of all the *bhāb* needs to be there. A greater amount of *bhāb*. In the course of singing s/he [the *kīrtanīyā*] will get entranced by *bhāb*. . . . Getting into *bhāb* then the listeners get tears in their eyes. Listening to those words, they will start crying.

In this Kali Yuga, people's minds are restless, they cannot stay focused. For this reason our Harichand Thakur has created the instrument called *ḍaṅkā*. It has a terrifically loud sound. . . . As far as the sound reaches, there will be no danger. . . . Excluding exterior thoughts and worries and just repeating *haribal*, ultimately a person is

not able to hear any [exterior] sound any longer, but only the sound of *haribal*. If someone calls her, s/he won't hear, s/he won't notice. Moreover, s/he gets to exercise, inhale-exhale, breathe in-breathe out. We don't call Harichand Thakur in the right manner nowadays. If we were calling him in the right way, we would not grow a big stomach. When your body stays healthy then your heart-mind also stays healthy. And in our path, without playing the *ḍaṅkā* drum, there is no possible kirtan.

To be a good kirtan singer has less to do with musical formation and competencies and more to do with emotional characteristics as well as moral ones. Of course, one should know the melodies and the rhythmic patterns, the conventions of the genre, and the emic taxonomies of songs. One should master the sophisticated norms that establish which songs are suitable for which time of the day, and the complex subtleties that regulate the sequence of which song should be performed next and why. But all this, my respondents would unanimously assert, is secondary. What really matters is *bhāb*, an emotional characteristic that is referred to as measurable and palpable. The *bhāb*-filled voice of the *kīrtanīyā*, conducted through the sound waves of congregational singing, provokes a high tide of *bhāb* (*bhāboday*) in the listeners' hearts. This surging of *bhāb*, moving like a swollen river, will cause an overflow that translates into the outpouring of tears from the devotees' eyes. Like the qualities of the voice of a good *na't khwan* discussed by Patrick Eisenlohr (2018b), a *kīrtanīyā*'s singing is appreciated when it stirs this ecstatic feeling, moving the participants to tears.

Mr. Boral provided an understanding of the role of sacred sound in Matua congregations that masterfully condensed the various exegeses that I encountered throughout my fieldwork in several "islands," terrestrial as well as maritime, inhabited by displaced Matuas. This role is apparently paradoxical. Sound works as a shield ("It has a terrifically loud sound. . . . As far as the sound reaches, there will be no danger"): it builds a barrier to block everything exterior in order for the devotee to focus intimately and solely on their inner life. At the same time sound spreads and envelops the space, diffusing and claiming spiritual sovereignty over a place. Shared and felt collectively, the vibrations create community, as they make individual barriers fade away. The islands inhabited by Matua devotees in postcolonial South Asia are surrounded by a separating ocean, while allowing flows of intercultural and intersubjective connectivity to take place. In a similar way, sacred sounds enclose the devotee, protecting them from external influences while embracing space and reducing differences between individual members of the devotional collectivity.

Before the start of any kirtan session of the Matua community, during congregational singing, as well as after the end of each *mātām*, the devotees, regardless of their age, gender, or the role they played during the ritual gathering, hug each other for three consecutive times, or bend toward each other's feet, gently touching them, and reverentially bow while on their knees, leaning with their foreheads toward the ground. Hugging dissipates the social hierarchies at play outside of the kirtan



FIGURE 4.1. Frame from a video of *mātām* taken by the author during a Matua gathering in Wandoor, South Andaman, organized by late Matua guru Manik Gosain (2018). Devotees dance, drum, pray, and clap hands in the dimly lit temple full of sweet incense smoke.

arena. As often reiterated by participants, during kirtan everybody is equal, men and women, elders and children, wealthy and poor. Mutually hugging and taking blessings by touching each other's feet reinforces the fundamental belief in equality among humans that is central to the anti-casteist Matua ethos. More broadly, it reinforces the bonding of mutual obligation and care, which underlies the constitution of the sense of community and solidarity. Infringing bodily barriers through affective touch, by sharing a sounded experience of devotion through intense vibrations partaken by every individual body, and by overflowing with tears in the collective, riverine ecstasy of *bhāb*, kirtan participation transforms individual members into one collective body of devotion (Csordas 1997, 109).

Tears and hugs as gestures symbolizing reciprocity and social bonds constitute an aesthetic code of the kirtan genre. As part of its unwritten conventions, a kirtan gathering is interpreted as particularly successful if more people were moved to tears and hugging. If lots of people cried, you know it's been a good party. At the same time, if some of the listeners draw aside and fail to merge among the devotees by hugging and tearing, this behavior is interpreted as elitist and snobby. It was often commented on with contempt when audience members from a higher class, the urban educated, or the nouveau riche among the villagers, whose social status improved thanks to the remunerative cash crop of the betel nut, did not cry and did not wish to mix with the crowd of hugging and bowing devotees. Likewise, Namashudra refugees resettled in borderland areas of West Bengal felt compelled to organize a separate kirtan festival, different from the one collectively

organized by the dominant caste (*māhiṣya*), because people did not like hugging and weeping: once they even “obstructed our senior member to hug,” enough of an outrage to start their own kirtan event, as Tetsuya Nakatani’s research revealed (2011, 79). This clearly shows that hugs and tears during congregational singing tighten communal bonds also by excluding and othering those who fail to take them as fundamental conventions of the genre, breaking the formalities of proper behavior during kirtan.

#### CONNECTIONS AND DISCONNECTIONS: ISLANDS OF SOUND BETWEEN CONSERVATISM AND HYBRIDITY

Seventy years have now passed since the first ship loaded with agriculturist refugee families reached South Andaman. When the issuing of passports and visas became necessary in order to visit the ancestral villages in the “imaginary homeland” (Rushdie 1992) of Bangladesh, now a predominantly Muslim country, East Bengal became more imaginary and less of a homeland: a place of memory and affect rather than a place of pilgrimage, contact, or return. Yet those who can afford it would visit at least once the annual Matua festival in Orakandi (Bangladesh), the ancestral home of the founding prophets. More commonly, devotees would regularly visit the annual Matua fair in Thakurnagar, West Bengal, where descendants of the founding gurus have resettled. All the singers whose narratives have been included in this paper have been once or multiple times to these and other sacred places that represent diasporic “hearts” (Falzon 2003) of the Matua community on the mainland. At the same time, Matua preachers and singers from the mainland regularly visit the Andaman Islands to initiate new disciples and maintain the connection with the old ones. Huge crowds gather to pay homage to renowned gurus from the mainland (Andaman Sheekha 2012), themselves displaced gurus, resettled in other new homes far away from southern Bangladesh.

Despite and together with the feeling of isolation, on some parts of the Andaman Islands the Bengali community lived side by side with the Local Born (descendants of the convicts of the penal settlement of the British era), and with communities of displaced Sri Lankan Tamils, Burmese, Karen, South Indian migrants, contracted laborers from North Indian tribes (locally known as Ranchi; see Zehmisch 2017), aboriginal groups (especially the Onge, on Little Andaman, and the Jarawas in South and Middle Andaman), nurturing with each of these a different amount of otherness, interaction, and competition for resources. From the Burmese, many Bengali settlers learned the art of hunting with dogs (Sen 2018, 150); from the Onge they borrowed construction techniques (Som 1994); from the Ranchis they learned to make alcohol with herbs collected from the forest (*janḡli mad*); from the South Indian Tamil community Bengali women adopted jewelry fashion, hairstyle, and food such as *idiyappam* and *dosa*. In this respect, the singers

and the musicians that I have interacted with respond to the imagination of islanders' lives as "messy, cosmopolitan, multifaceted, and mobile" (Alpers and Schnepel 2018, xviii).

Islands have been romanticized as quintessential hubs of encounter and hybridity. These encounters and intercultural exchanges, though, have seldom operated in a power vacuum and in apolitical manners. Bengali lives on the Andaman Islands have been marked, and still are marked, by unequal access to the privilege of being "connected." Mobile networks are almost nonexistent in the places where I have conducted fieldwork. One phone call out of ten would go through, on a lucky day.<sup>16</sup> Roads are in atrocious conditions, and instead of taking a back-breaking twelve-hour bus ride to the capital city of Port Blair that goes through two ferries and a convoy crossing the protected (so to speak) tribal forest, one would rather embark on the eighteen-hour ship journey that leaves twice per week—but no fortune teller can ever say when the ship will actually depart.<sup>17</sup> It comes as no surprise that Matua participants on the Andaman Islands refer to themselves as "frogs in a well." A profound sense of isolation and disconnection separates them from the cultural hubs of the Matua community, and from their gurus—most of them residing in southern Bangladesh, in West Bengal, or in Uttarakhand.

Distance and disconnection is also translated with the anxiety of losing consistency in ritual practice, compared to the mainland Matua community. As a product of familiarization and adaptation to new ecologies, Matua performances on the Andaman Islands use locally produced instruments that slightly differ in material and therefore sound qualities from those in use on the mainland. The earthen *khol* has been widely substituted by the wooden *ḍhol*, also because the former is associated with the music sessions of the competing *Kṛṣṇa panthis*, or orthodox Vaishnavas. The abundance of saltwater fish, introduced as part of the daily diet, justified its glorious entry in the field of religious offerings on the gods' altar (*bhog*)—this is seen as an aberration in the temples of mainland Bengal and by the other Hindu communities on the islands. In several Matua congregations on the islands a different *guru bandanā* (invocation, the first song that opens a kirtan session) is used. These are just a few examples of cultural dynamism and ritual change that islanders-devotees justify with creative narratives, showing that islandness coproduces meanings and shapes sensory engagements with, and experiences of, sacred sounds.

However, at least in their perspective, the Bengali community has responded to displacement with tenacious attachment to the traditions perceived as old, authentic, belonging to a common past. Like many subaltern diasporic identities, Bengali devotees on the Andaman Islands have felt the urge to maintain musical and performative traditions as an indispensable tool of rootedness, a practice of identity (Mooney 2008; Poole 2004). This quality of traditional music in contexts of displacement is intensified by the islandness of the Matua practitioners. Isolation produced a desire to vigorously retain traditions associated with the temporality



of a past unity in undivided Bengal and the spatiality of the lost sacred homeland that gave birth to the founding gurus. Compared to the development of the kirtan genre in other sites of the Matua community on the mainland, practitioners on the Andamans resolutely preserve a style that is interpreted as ancient (*paurāṇik*). Whereas in many other areas of the Matua diaspora on the mainland the repertoire of kirtan songs has been constantly expanded by new compositions (see Bairagya 1999), on the Andaman Islands, apart from very few exceptions, the songs performed are mostly those composed by the earliest saint-composers, Tarak Gosain and Aswini Gosain.<sup>18</sup> This recalcitrant attitude to change has aroused a certain criticism on the part of the higher-caste, urban-educated Bengalis. According to a retired music teacher, himself a displaced person of East Bengali origin, resettled in North Andaman, the Matua practitioners have preserved a “very ancient style” that “does not work for the modern age,” but despite his attempts to promote modernized and shortened versions of the devotional songs, he failed to change the musicians’ mind, because they are “very rigid in their conservative opinion” as a result of their “lack of education.”<sup>19</sup>

The portrait of Matua practitioners and their music as unsophisticated, rustic, conservative, superstitious, and narrow-minded reflects a matter of class and caste status rather than musical taste (Chandola 2012), and it is often presented by wealthier Bengalis residing in the capital city of Port Blair, revealing how ocean sound cultures can be contested territories of social tensions and hierarchies (see Williams, this volume). Oscillating between faithful preservation of the old songs and the dynamic adaptation to new material and acoustic ecologies, the performance of kirtan on the Andaman Islands is a powerful stage on which islandness shapes sensibilities and identities. As with many diasporic identities (see Korom 2000), they emerge as fluid, multiple, and situational, reminding us, from the middle of the Bay of Bengal, of the unsettling and liquid nature of tradition.

## CONCLUSIONS

Introducing islandness in the research on music and soundscapes can offer a new angle to understanding the sensorial and aesthetic experience of religious sound in a context of isolation, displacement, and also multiculturalism and hybridity. This essay has explored how the diasporic sound culture of Matua devotees and their migrated repertoires of songs and sacred dance operate in a place experienced as insular, distant, remote, and also vernacularly cosmopolitan (Werbner 2011). I showed how islandness is characterized by ambiguity between connection and disconnection, and by an underlying tension between fidelity and innovation. Furthermore, Matua kirtan events are themselves islands of sound. Like a detached land surrounded by water, the devotee’s body is shielded by sacred sound, which filters external distractions and allows them to focus on spiritual accomplishments.

At the same time, just like islands are the laboratory of cultural mingling and social fusion from various shores of the surrounding ocean, sound pervades the space and is shared by participants, weakening interpersonal barriers, suspending hierarchies, and wrapping the community into a single body of devotion.

During “Colonization Schemes” based on discriminatory caste lines and aimed to exploit untouchable refugees’ labor for the higher goal of socioeconomic development, kirtan’s displays of touchability valorized and dignified low-caste practitioners as mutual recipients of devotion and care. Traveling back and forth between the shores of the eastern Indian Ocean, Matua songs, which were already perceived as “songs of self-assertion” with a “levelling impact” back in East Bengal (Bandyopadhyay 1997, 39–41), acquired revived significance, transplanted their meaning, and renewed their promise of entertainment, ecstatic bliss, and a sonic theology of liberation. Singing and dancing in the Kali Yuga is seen as the most simple, direct (Sanyal 2012, 445), and time-effective method (*sādhana*) to achieve liberation. As my participants would highlight, it is the path of working men, and women, who cannot sit in meditation for twelve years like the old sages of Hindu mythology, practicing austerities and restraining from productive work and reproductive conjugal life. Because it does not need expensive offerings or elaborate ceremonies—like those celebrated by high-caste Brahmins—it is the ideal path of low-caste individuals who endure the dehumanizing stigma of untouchability. Kirtan conventions such as collective crying, mutual hugging, and the ritual display of touchability, in this context, can be seen as more than a functional reiteration of social bonds. Together with the songtexts’ teachings, melodies, and rhythms, Matua kirtan is an anthropopoietic performance that shapes identities and sensibilities, asserting the participants’ dignity and conception of equality while pursuing the thorny path toward liberation—intended as freedom from sins, diseases, and from social injustice.

## NOTES

1. “Kirtan” is an umbrella name for congregational singing in devotional or ritual settings across South Asia.

2. “Matua” is a religious movement born in nineteenth-century East Bengal among a Dalit group of so-called untouchables (*caṇḍāl*). The condition of the entranced Matua dancer-devotee being completely absorbed as if intoxicated during *mātām* is often called *bhābābeś*: possessed by *bhāb* (Sanskrit *bhāva*), a very dense and complex noun, which in the context of devotion in South Asia can be translated as the emotion of divine ecstasy (McDaniel 1995).

3. For the same practice in West Bengal, see Sanyal (2012, 192). “Kirtan” is a generic category, used (for example) for ISKCON’s “Hare Krishna” chanting as well as for Sikh devotional music. “Matua kirtan” refers to the specific style of kirtan performed by the Matua devotees, which includes singing from the corpus of Matua verses, drumming, weeping, hugging, and trance (*mātām*). Among Bengalis on the Andaman Islands, all forms of gathering for devotional music are called “kirtan.”

4. Some notable exceptions include Dawe (2004) and Baldacchino (2011).

5. Among the “classics” of cultural anthropology, see Malinowski’s seminal work on the Trobriand islanders, Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), or Radcliff-Brown’s *The Andaman Islanders* (1964 [1922]).



6. Social scientists have looked particularly at the islands of the Caribbean and the western Indian Ocean as sites to anchor their reflections on creolization; see Kamau Brathwaite on Jamaica (1971), Thomas Hylland Eriksen on Mauritius (1998), Françoise Vergès on Réunion Island (1999), and Stephan Palmié on Cuba (2006).

7. The term “Matua” means maddened, intoxicated, or drunk. It derives from a derogative appellation, which was then adopted and proudly appropriated as a term of self-assertion. According to the holy book *Śrī Śrī Harilīlāmṛta*, outsiders used to look down on the ecstatic devotees and called them mad, drunk, or lunatic (*matta*, *mātāl*, *mātoyārā*). The founding saints appropriated and reinterpreted the term in a positive light, denoting those who are mad in divine love (Sarkar 1916, 59, 67, 94).

8. Untouchability is a discriminatory practice diffused in South Asia, based on relations between ritual pollution and traditional occupations of marginalized groups. The official category of “Untouchables” has been replaced since 1936 by the administrative term “Scheduled Castes.” Since the 1970s, activists have popularized the term *Dalit* (oppressed) to describe these communities, influenced by the champion of Dalit rights in modern Indian politics, B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956). The terms for self-reference, however, largely vary regionally and historically. Namashudra people, officially termed *Chandal* (a derogative term to address polluting outcaste groups) prior to the 1911 Census, dislike the self-appellation of Dalit because of their views on Ambedkarite politics, but they widely share memories and narratives of untouchability. In literary and oral narratives they refer to their community as *asṛīya* (untouchable), *patita* (fallen), or *pichīye parā mānuṣ* (backward people).

9. Fieldwork notes from Thakurnagar, West Bengal, February 4–5, 2018.

10. Dandakaranya is a region that spans across the contemporary Indian states of Odisha, Andhra, Chhattisgarh, and Maharashtra. In the Ramayana, Dandakaranya is the dark “forest of punishment” inhabited by demonic creatures where Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana spent some years of their exile.

11. For a detailed history of the resettlement of the refugees on the Andaman Islands, see Biswas (2009) and Sen (2018, 115–59). Following a chronological order, Bengali refugees were resettled in several areas of South Andaman, Middle Andaman, North Andaman, Havelock Island, Neil Island, and lastly Little Andaman. The official schemes started in 1949 and continued in several waves and in different modalities until 1971.

12. For example, see how the low-caste refugees appear in Raychaudhury (2004, 168–75) and Kakrabarti (2012, 28–38).

13. From the 1951 office memorandum of the Deputy Commissioner on the Andamans (in Biswas 2009, 5): “These refugees should not be encouraged to leave these islands as it entirely defeats the purpose for which they were sent over here at a great cost to the state. . . . It makes loan recovery difficult. . . . I would suggest that the refugees would not be allowed to leave these islands until such time they clear the entire amount outstanding against them.”

14. These migrants are known in the local political discourse as “people without.” The details of their history of migration are absent from official archives. My collection of oral histories suggests that Namashudra migrants connected by ties of kinship, caste, village, or religious network started to arrive in the 1950s following the first resettlement schemes, but independent migrants started to arrive in increasing numbers after the 1971 Liberation War and its aftermath.

15. According to the last official survey, the Bengali speakers on Andaman and Nicobar Union Territory are 108,432, or 28.49 percent of the population, which makes them the largest ethno-linguistic community (Government of India, Census 2011), followed by native speakers of Hindi (19.29 percent), Tamil (15.20 percent), Telugu (13.24 percent), Nicobarese (7.65 percent), Malayalam (7.22 percent), and other linguistic minorities. Of the total settlers under Colonization and Rehabilitation Schemes operating from 1949 to 1980, 80 percent were Bengali (Biswas 2009, 21).

16. Update since the last version of this essay: The much-awaited Chennai-Andaman & Nicobar (A&N) undersea optical fiber cable was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in August 2020. Contracted by state-run telecom firm Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited, the submarine cable system bolstered voice and data connectivity across the Andamans. Access to such connectivity, especially during a pandemic, remains unequally shared (see Lorea et al. 2021).

17. According to Sen (2018, 129) in North and Middle Andaman by the end of 1956 only one mile of new roads had been built. The situation was so tragic that the chief commissioner decided to convert a captured Chinese pirate boat into a passenger carrier.

18. Tarak Sarkar (1847–1914), a *kabigān* performer, and his disciple Aswini Sarkar (1873–1929; both known with the honorific spiritual title of Gosain) are the oldest composers of songs in praise of Hairichand Thakur. See Sarkar (1900) and Sarkar (1915).

19. Personal collection of fieldwork notes, Mr. Talukdar, Diglipur, December 17, 2018.

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