

JH: Welcome to CALLIOPE speaks, where we invite the muse of eloquence down from mount Olympus to sit down with us for a cup of tea. In this episode, we are talking to Esha Sil, who was a post-doctoral researcher on the CALLIOPE project from 2018 to 2021. She conducted research on creolization, language and speech in nineteenth century Bengal, and particularly on Anthony Firingi, a Portuguese-Bengali poet, and a slightly mysterious figure

ES: There are different legends around him. So one legend says that he was born in Portugal. Then he landed in Bengal. The other one says that, you know, he, well, he had a Portuguese father. He was born in the French colony of Chandernagore. He had possibly a native mother, but nobody, I mean, there have been no historical sort of sources establishing that.

So anyway, Anthony Firingi over the years, came to assume – I mean, both through sparse historical accounts of him and through his subsequent folklorization through literature – came to assume a Portuguese Bengali identity, and here we find a case of reverse creolization because Anthony is sort of a Portuguese, in French Chandernagore, who wants to become a Bengali. So he goes on to compose lyrical debates, you know, really song contests, which were called kobigaan. So kobi essentially means poet and gaan means song. Priyanka Basu has very helpfully defined these sort of verse musical duellings, which go on to constitute a cultural context where you could not only apply creole theory to think beyond terra-centric India, but you could also apply creole theory to demonstrate the processes in which 19th century Bengal was remembering creolization.

And here I'm using 'remembering' in both senses of the word. 'Remember' as in to recall something, and 're-member' as reassembling. So you are reassembling what early modern Portuguese Bengal left for you as a creole legacy, and people like Anthony Firingi, and Henry Derozio, another Eurasian poet on whom I've been working, were essentially trying to reinvent the 19th century – and unwittingly so I would say – were essentially trying to reinvent the 19th century unwittingly as something beyond Anglophone Bengal.

JH: Applying creole theory to these Eurasian poets, Esha has not only been studying their intricate linguistic performances, but also the very sensuous practices that went into 'voicing' Bengal identities in the 19th century

ES: One of the things that was happening in 19th century Bengal was, you know, the vocal axis was being experimented with in a number of ways. So say, if we go back to the case study of Anthony Firingi, one of the things that he was trying to do was perform these devotional songs in secular places, which sort of went on to give the songs radical political agency, because here, for example, he was talking about a kind of world in which '[t]here is no difference between Christ and Krishna'. So he was basically talking of this syncretic sort of world, which was also being imagined by people like Lalon Fakir in east Bengal in the 19th century, who was also another mystic figure, a poet singer; he was a baul, and the baul cult sort of intermeshed Islamic Sufism with Vaishnava Hinduism.

I would say that this sort of cultural context was essentially activated by the heterogeneous nature of modernity in 19th century Bengal. Because if we look at Bengal on the one hand, a figure like, say Anthony Firingi, was going against the tide of what you understand by modernity. And on the other hand, you have somebody like Derozio.

So Derozio – he was a Eurasian poet. So he had a Portuguese father and Portuguese grandfather and an English mother. Derozio, however, was raised in a very anglicized setting in 19th century Calcutta. That however did not prevent him from imbibing all these creole influences, which I argue in his work figure subliminally. You would not find of course, a Lusophone identity overtly expressed in Derozio's work, but however, you know, deploying, for example, the methodological sort of approach of close reading and Derozio's poetic and historical context, I have tried to, for example, examine the ways in which, you know, the Lusophone voice recurs as a sort of a spectral voice through his poetry.

So because, you know, one of the things that we are trying to do through Calliope is also, you know, talk about the ways in which we could attune our ears to hear the unvoiced. One of the things that Derozio's poetry has opened up for me at least, is this reverberation of his unvoiced Lusophone identity through his texts.

And the way that this happens is through the sonic axis of the transoceanic imaginary that his poems activate. For example, in this poem called 'Song of the Indian Girl', he talks about the Ganga's water and how the song of the Indian girls flows with, you know, along the rhythmic axes of the Ganga. Here you clearly get a sense of not only how vocality was being experimented in that sort of a context, but also how, you know, the song of the Indian girl sort of gives you the clues to an alternative Lusophone identity via the revocation of the Ganga's rhythms along the Hooghly, and Hooghly, like, if you just go sort of upwards towards there, you know, you have that whole history of Portuguese Bandel. And even before that, like 16th and 17th century Hooghly, where the Portuguese had first established themselves, they were sort of driven out of there by the Mughals in 1692, but then Hooghly as such, the town itself remained the nerve centre of international mercantile activity in 16th and 17th century Bengal.

In the 19th century, Derozio from the vantage point of the Eurasian 'other', you know, given his hybrid colonial status there, was trying to think of a way in which, you know, these creole identities could be remembered and re-creolized in the process.

JH: What these creolized figures of Bengali literature and sounds also show, is that South-Asian histories of sound are a rich field of enquiry, and one that researchers – or perhaps rather, Western researchers – know precious little about. As she was delving into the histories of poetry, argument and language of a creolized Bengal, Esha also came across the idea of 'rasa', which could roughly be translated as 'taste', a way to express ideas about what is pleasant, or beautiful, or proper...and that could also be applied to sound.

ES: I mean, I had dealt with rasa before in the course of my work on Bengali nursery rhymes and fairy tales. But here, you know rasa in the sense of taste and sound was something that became particularly helpful for me in rethinking how we could expand, you know, the conceptual scope of sound studies. So for example, one of the things that I have tried to do is rethink how classical sort of musical paradigms like the Apollonian and the Dionysian, for example, could be rethought from the perspective of rasa, because there were a lot of intercultural experimentations, which were going on in 19th century Bengal intermeshing Western classical paradigms and Indian registers of music was one of the experimentations that were on.

What is rasa? So rasa sort of translates as taste which means aesthetic taste or flavor. Rasa also translates as an, as Sheldon Pollock explains it in his work, translates as a way in which literary texts gradually sort of generated a process in which rasa was taken out of its dramaturgical model in which rasa or, you know, enactments of aesthetic taste, for example, anger or sadness or fear could be seen into rasa within the space of a literary text, as a voice which could be heard. So how do you hear the voice of anger or disappointment, for example, through the voice of a text. So then, rasa in the sense in which it could be heard also necessitated the deployment of a new linguistic modality, which was proposed by Anandavardhana and it was called, I mean, it translates as implicature, but it was called dhvani. So dhvani is - so for our purposes, we may describe dhvani as implied sound, you know, sound manifested in the way, for example, as Anandavardhana describes it, the way a lamp in a dark room sort of showcases an object, but you don't see the object directly, you're guided to the object via the light of the lamp. So rasa is something like that. So you're sonically manifesting the emotive core of a text via the rasa. So rasa thereby becomes an aesthetic modality, which in the space of a literary text ranged from the allusive voice to the voice that was unheard.

So how could you interpret, say *rasa* in a creolized 19th century context? One of the things that I was trying to think about was how the Apollonian and the Dionysian were creolized, albeit unwittingly, via the modality of the *rasa* in, uh, in his poems. An example might be a poem called 'Song of the Hindoostanee Minstrel'.

You have Derozio grafting on to his text, the voice of a Hindustani minstrel, as he has maybe heard it, or as he imagines it. One of the things that was happening is, you do sort of find demonstrations in the way in which the 19th century Bengali context understood hybridity, both manifestations of the Apollonian harmony and the Dionysian dissonance. What became interesting for me in the context of that, you know, of the space that I am defining as a 19th century creole Bengal sonic space is the role that *rasa* came to unwittingly play in Derozio's poetry that enabled us to envisage a vision in which the Apollonian and Dionysian were creolized by him. So for example, in the song you have the first, you know, sort of quatrain of the song in which you have the Hindustani minstrel, who's positioned as a sort of nodal central point connecting various geographical places from the Bay of Bengal to the Gulf of Oman, to the northernmost region of the Indian sub-continent, Kashmir. And there, she sort of occupies a kind of Apollonian centrality, but subsequently the text itself undoes that role by endowing her voice with a Dionysian passion, where she sort of starts traveling with her imagined lover from land to land. However, that land is never divested of the imaginary of the sea, because it's a land that yields to the sea, and then via doing that, the Dionysian, you know, passion of the Dildar's song is activated, and then *rasa* essentially becomes a modality for decoding how that passion is sonically transmuted by the text into a mode of listening which is creolized. So *rasa*, essentially functioning, thereby as a catalyst to creolization. So as a catalyst to rerouting the Apollonian and Dionysian axes to a creolized Bengali register.

JH: This research, at its heart, is a story of intermeshing, of exchange, of 'creolization' – a process that affects almost every practice or action. Whether it is speaking, composing, singing, or even just listening, the cultural life of nineteenth century Bengal is profoundly creolized. But what was, or what IS creolization?

ES: Creolization in the Caribbean, the Afro-Caribbean context has been sort of initially used to talk about cross-cultural encounters between Europeans and Africans – and the first instance of that was sort of the classic definition of creolization and it was applied to these places like Cape Verde, for example, where the Portuguese sort of established the first creole colony, and then progressively went on to be applied to the Caribbean context and gradually, uh, recent research also applied creole theory to the Indian ocean region. Of course, the French Caribbean also came into the creole equation as did, um, you know, Indian ocean islands, like Mauritius, which had, you know, both British and Francophone colonial legacies. So in this context, creolization was understood essentially as an encounter between Europeans and Africans, Asians as well, but in islands like these, like the Caribbean or like the Indian ocean islands. So basically, the littoral context was sort of confined to the classic understanding of islands in the way we understand the Caribbean or in the way we understand the Indian ocean islands. However, what I have been trying to do via creolization theory is try and think of a framework beyond, you know, this geographical area where it was initially applied. Peninsular India is also being looked at as a very fertile and productive place of creolization. Indian history thus far has been understood through more or less – how would I put it as – through a terra-centric lens, meaning it would be, you know, the peninsular heartland of India via which you sort of understood South Asian colonial history.

JH: But for Esha, the coasts of India, those transient spaces that connect the subcontinent to the ocean and, therefore, to the rest of the world, are exactly the spaces that spark her interest: liminal spaces where different cultures meet in complex colonial settings, where languages intermingle, where

Portuguese and Bengal foodways curdle into each other, and where the British and Bengali taste for classical song meet. In the course of her research, Esha also drew on a collection of sheet music entitled *The Oriental Miscellany*.

ES: It was sort of composed in 1789 by a person called William Hamilton Bird and published in Calcutta. The *Miscellany* was published in Calcutta for the first time, and it was an English or a Western classical rendering of Oriental miscellanies, which were set to the harpsichord. And the whole milieu under which this circulated was also a kind of memorialization of the orient, for example, in the sense that Khanum Jan's melodies experience. So those were sort of also similarly set to Western classical instruments by Sophia Plowden, for example, in 19th century Lucknow. I mean, she sort of lived in Bengal and then travelled between Bengal and Lucknow, Sophia Plowden. And then recorded Khanum Jan's tunes. I mean, recorded in the sense that Calliope understands it. Like you write it down and sort of also in the process, invent, you know, 19th century figural notations of recording Indian classical music, which had not been done before. And so what came out wasn't essentially, I don't know; I mean, for lack of a term, 'hybrid' might be a way of describing it, although I would argue that it was a 'creole' product, you know. What came out of it was a creole product where you were trying to capture these voices. For example, the miscellanies within the space of the voice, as it was grafted on to paper. And within this sort of engraving of the voice, what you actually heard was not the original Khanum Jan or not the original miscellanies as they were sung, but as they were sort of reinvented and rerouted through the creole registers of Bird, for example.

JH: In 2021, as Esha was reading and analyzing Bird's *Oriental Miscellany*, composer and musicologist Sergio Castrillón added the improvisational voice of his cello to the creolized conversations between 19th century South Asian musicians and the imperial re-inventions of their music. The result of *his* interaction with the sheet music became 'The Guts of the Atlas', a comprovisational work of music now published by Art First Records. You're listening to the third movement of that piece now.

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