

**Film presentation
with discussion**

by Somjit Dasgupta

**“Musical Instruments
across the
Bengal Borderlands”**



Somjit Dasgupta, musician and scholar, collector and restorer of musical instruments, will show five short films with footage that traces instruments crafted in the traditional way from raw materials in villages.

Some of the films are closer to art films for they do not methodically follow and describe the various stages and factual context of instrument making. They are content with evoking the ambience within which the craftsmen labor. Four types of sound were used in the films: live and natural sounds to capture the village ambience, the actual sounds of woodworking, non-diegetic background music, and finally Dasgupta’s playing the finished instrument onscreen. Sub-stories are shown against and integrated into a larger canvas. The storylines emerged while editing down the many hours of raw footage into these short videos. The intended audience of this award-winning “diary” format is not only the scholar, but also the music lover.

Monday, October 6, 2014, 17:00,
Seminarraum 1, Bereich Tibet- und Buddhismuskunde
(Universitätscampus, Spitalgasse 2, Hof 2.7, 1090 Wien)

In **“Parampara”** (tradition), the family preserving the sarod-making craft claims the instruments are 340 years old, their music being much older. The playing technique goes back through Dasgupta’s guru Radhikamohan Maitra and Mohammad Amir Khan to Abdullah Khan. Dasgupta describes how Maitra “taught me to touch the strings until it came naturally like a riding a bicycle,” emphasizing the triangular coordination: “The brain should be extended to the finger tips on both sides.” “Teachers are many but students are few” to continue the tradition.

“Sur Shringar: a Journey” focuses on this larger predecessor of the fretless wooden sarod. The Sur Shringar was derived from the Dhrupad Rabab with a wooden top and flat bridge in the 1820s or 1830s by Jaffar Khan who came to Calcutta with Wajid Ali Shah from Lucknow. Dasgupta is seen playing Maitra’s Sur Shringar.

“Mrit Shankha: an Earthen Conch” shows how this sole extant earthen wind instrument reproduces the form and sound of the natural conch. Used primarily in worship, it is not a musical instrument properly speaking. Dasgupta recorded its production at the urging of the ethnomusicologist Lars Christian Koch (Berlin). Natural conches are shaped and polished at Bishnupur, while at Panchmura earthen conches are assembled from parts, molded together with clay, and baked in a furnace.

“On That Night” (‘Je Raate’) in Bengali is coproduced by Satyajit Ray. A Hindu landlord in East Bengal decides to move to India at Partition, while Muslim tenants are impatient to take possession of his palatial mansion. The credits start to roll as Nehru is heard over the radio declaring independence at midnight. Scenes, décor, and mood are reminiscent of Ray’s Jalsagar (Music Room) though the subject is different. Shot in Maitra’s old palace-home where renowned musicians used to perform, the storyline evokes Dasgupta’s own ancestral home in East Bengal that housed his grandfather’s rich collection of musical instruments.

“Beyond the Songlines” follows the making of a Veena. Intricate designs are sketched then etched out on its trunk, premade tuning pegs are fitted, the finished whole polished with lacquer, before floral designs are added.