

The Street Bands of Calcutta

By Peter R. Moore © MMXIII

A long time ago when I was a young Sergeant in the Calcutta Armed Police, one of the duties that police performed was to provide street-corner picquets to keep the peace and maintain order along sectors of the routes of major events, e.g. Durga Puja (for Hindus) and Mohorrum (for Muslims). The final stage of Durga Puja consisted of carrying the elaborately painted and decorated effigies of the goddess from local



shrines (called *pandals*), in procession, to be immersed in the River Hooghly. The ornateness of the effigies was a competitive point between localities as was the accompanying procession usually led by a street band, called “pooh-pooh” bands locally. As religious events were annual, the main source of street band engagements came from hirings to lead wedding processions which were private affairs - albeit in public places.

The ‘pooh-pooh’ band industry lived along the Calcutta commercial locality of Harrison Road (Mahatma Gandhi Road today). In police circles they were laughingly referred to as the “Harrison Road Pipes & Drums”. Individual street bands followed no conventional musical structure and varied in number according to



the hirer’s capacity to pay and the availability of musical instruments which the musicians had to personally hire. So the ‘band company’ charged both the hirer a fee and earned further revenue from the individual musicians who had to hire musical instruments and uniforms (or costumes) from them. Credit was available for deferred fees - at interest.



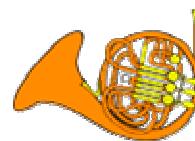
As a general rule, what they lacked in musical talent and ability they compensated for visually by the garishness of their ‘uniforms’ and or other outrageous costumes. A prominent feature of the uniforms was that they were not uniform; the range of kit worn was subject to availability, variations of personal taste and other eccentricities of

dress. Outrageous colours and the indiscriminate wearing of buttons and badges were affected more for chimerical effect than any purpose of group identification. Mismatched trousers and tunics topped off by an exotic variety of head-gear – usually worn at impossible angles – was common. The fastening of tunic buttons appeared to be optional. Footwear, too, being non-issue was



subject to the personal circumstances of the wearers. Rubber sandals (‘flip-flops’ or ‘thongs’ according to view) predominated as did the wearing of Bata’s-manufactured canvas, rubber-soled shoes, commonly called “*keds*”. I remember seeing a representative group of the Harrison Road P’s & D’s consisting

of a dozen bagpipe players wearing highland kilts of the Gordon Highlanders’ regimental tartan (obviously long-discarded souvenirs of the British Army’s presence in India); tartan hose-tops in extremely poor condition hung like loose sausage-skins on skinny legs; partially-fastened regimental spats which were once white cotton-drill and leather Indian *bazaar* sandals (*chappals*) - the wearers’ bared toes peeping out shyly from under the spats. The group was led by a principal musician who played an E-flat clarinet with wild flourishes, rendering an energetic version of a contemporary Bollywood ‘*filmi*’ tune while the pipers struggled with a strange version of “*Cock ‘o the North*’ in the background; all musical conflict in key and tempo being concealed by the thunderous output of the percussion-section which consisted of half of the total band. The band-leader was dressed in an old, scarlet, infantry-pattern tunic with Oxford-blue trousers with the ¼-inch scarlet infantry stripes along the trouser-seams. He, too, wore bazaar sandals and the ensemble was topped, at an impossibly rakish angle, by a battered, infantry-pattern peaked cap in an advanced state of disintegration - the peak was clearly disengaging – and bearing the cap-badge of the East Surrey Regiment.



Musical arrangements were impromptu as no sheet music was ever apparent. Harmony, *per se*, was an abstract concept and musical expression was swept aside in favour of decibel output which appeared to be more essential than melodic content in gaining customer-satisfaction. Blaring out in unison - and all not necessarily in the same key - was



the general practice. Rhythm played an important part in any rendition, dependent as they were upon the percussion section of each band to cover the multitude of musical 'sins'. Aside from a few key, virtuoso, lead players, who usually acted as 'band leader', there were very few real musicians amongst the

lowing herd of individuals carrying instruments who went through the motions of pretending to play just to keep up appearances and numbers. I once saw a Sousaphone player with a unique *embouchure*: he had covered the exterior of the mouthpiece entirely with his lips and was making vocal sounds through the



instrument – rather like a megaphone. Other than 'open' notes, he couldn't have played it fully anyway as the instrument's valves had been removed and the remaining tubing had been crudely joined up by welding. The bell of the instrument had been painted white with the name of the band and its telephone number - for the information of potential hirers – colourfully splashed thereon. A local innovation was the inclusion of hand-bellows operated harmoniums (keyboard organs) carried by a *coolie* on his back by head-straps while the performer walked behind him - and played.

While these street bands parodied the military bands of the armed services and police forces of India from whose former members their principal players were often drawn, they emphasised their casual, civilian, nature by generally strolling about in loose formation. Spontaneous street-corner concerts were indulged in at intervals, heavily encouraged by

cheering bystanders who often poured on to the street in outbreaks of Bollywood dance routines necessitating the intervention of police to keep traffic moving.

I recall one particular incident where a band had hired a common *coolie* to carry the bass drum on his back - in the manner in which tea-pickers in Darjeeling carry their baskets (*dhokos*) - while the bass-drummer walked behind performing his calling. The band stopped at a street-crossing, in my picquet's sector and broke into a furious cacophony



which vaguely resembled a musical favourite of the hour. Encouraged by the crowd, the drummer – suspected of being under the influence of a stimulant - broke into a wildly energetic sample of his art in the course of which he enthusiastically, but erratically, missed the drum several times striking the burly Bihari *coolie* severally about the ribs. The enraged *coolie*, hurled down his burden

and in a flurry of wild oaths and savage imprecations (mainly concerning the genitalia of the drummer's female relations) leapt on him in a manner from which a measure of bodily harm to the said drummer could be reasonably apprehended. An assault by manual strangulation was in progress when the constables from my picquet intervened to save the drummer and prevent a further breach of the peace from being occasioned. The attendant crowd were highly entertained by this turn



of events judging by their vocal appreciation. An outbreak of gratuitous violence obviously rated higher in the entertainment scale. Order was restored in the usual Indian police way by a liberal and indiscriminate application of the half-*lathi* (3-foot bamboo batons – the oldest behaviour-modifier known to man) to all in the vicinity which dispersed the crowd, discouraged any resistance and caused the traffic to flow again. In the brief, but violent interlude, the remainder of the band – in the highest traditions of their industry – had decamped while playing and a number of their non-musical, fringe make-weights melted into the crowd – just in case. The usual covey of professional pick-pockets and petty snatch-thieves that were trawling the crowds saw the outbreak of police activity as an evil omen (courting the attention of police invited bad luck) and India is a superstitious country – so their prompt departure from the scene temporarily reduced crime.

Infrequently, as the processions slowed down due to traffic congestion, a number of bands gathered in close proximity to each other, a situation which appeared to invite competition. The ensuing row usually induced cognitive as well as auditory dissonance. After a particularly offensive blast by a passing band, I remarked to the Bihari Head-constable in my picquet, “*Yeh kya hulla hai.*” (Lit: What a row this is.). He replied, with the customary affirmative head-wobble, “*Bahout fust-kilass; burrē jôr sē phookta hai.*” (Lit: Absolutely first-class; they are blowing very hard.)

During the Christmas to New Year week, occasional bands used to forage into the central Anglo-Indian enclaves of Park Street, Elliot Road, Ripon Street, McLeod Street and environs to cash in on any seasonal goodwill. Lesser enclaves such as Park Circus, Entally, Kidderpore and Bow Bazar, amongst others, also received their attentions with raucous blasts of “*When the Saints Go Marching In*” and “*Auld Lang Syne*” featuring prominently and repetitively. I once personally heard a band consisting of one B-flat cornet player with six bagpipers, one bass and one side-drummer - all suitably “uniformed” - determinedly batter their way through an offering in which the cornet player played “*The British Grenadier*” and the pipers laboured away at “*Scotland the Brave*” – all at the same time, as if oblivious to each other. I remember the pipers won as the cornet-player gave in first.

There was no tradition in India of street bands leading funeral processions and as there were few music-readers among them, Western music rarely featured in their *repertoires*. Some ‘band-leaders’ with military band experience produced strange variations of Kenneth Alford’s “*Colonel Bogey*” and I once heard a brave, but unsuccessful, attempt at “*The Middy*” march. I heard an apocryphal tale once that, as a hearse passed an Indian wedding party in the street while on its way to a Christian funeral, as a mark of respect the street band broke into a rousing rendition of the old-time music hall ditty, “*Hold Your Hand Out, You Naughty Boy.*”

Musical and sartorial incongruities aside, “Pooh-pooh” bands were a harmless and colourful feature of Calcutta street life. They spread good cheer and, in a complex multicultural society beset by poverty, intermittently splashed with episodic violence and the grind of daily survival, they had an almost universal appeal. While they may have set sensitive music-lovers’ teeth on edge they provided an inoffensive, neo-opiate diversion for the masses to dull the pains of a hard existence. Long may they flourish!

