

How do We Bring India's Voices Home?

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Our task is not merely preserving old recordings, but to make sure that the voices of India—wherever they survive—remain part of our living memory

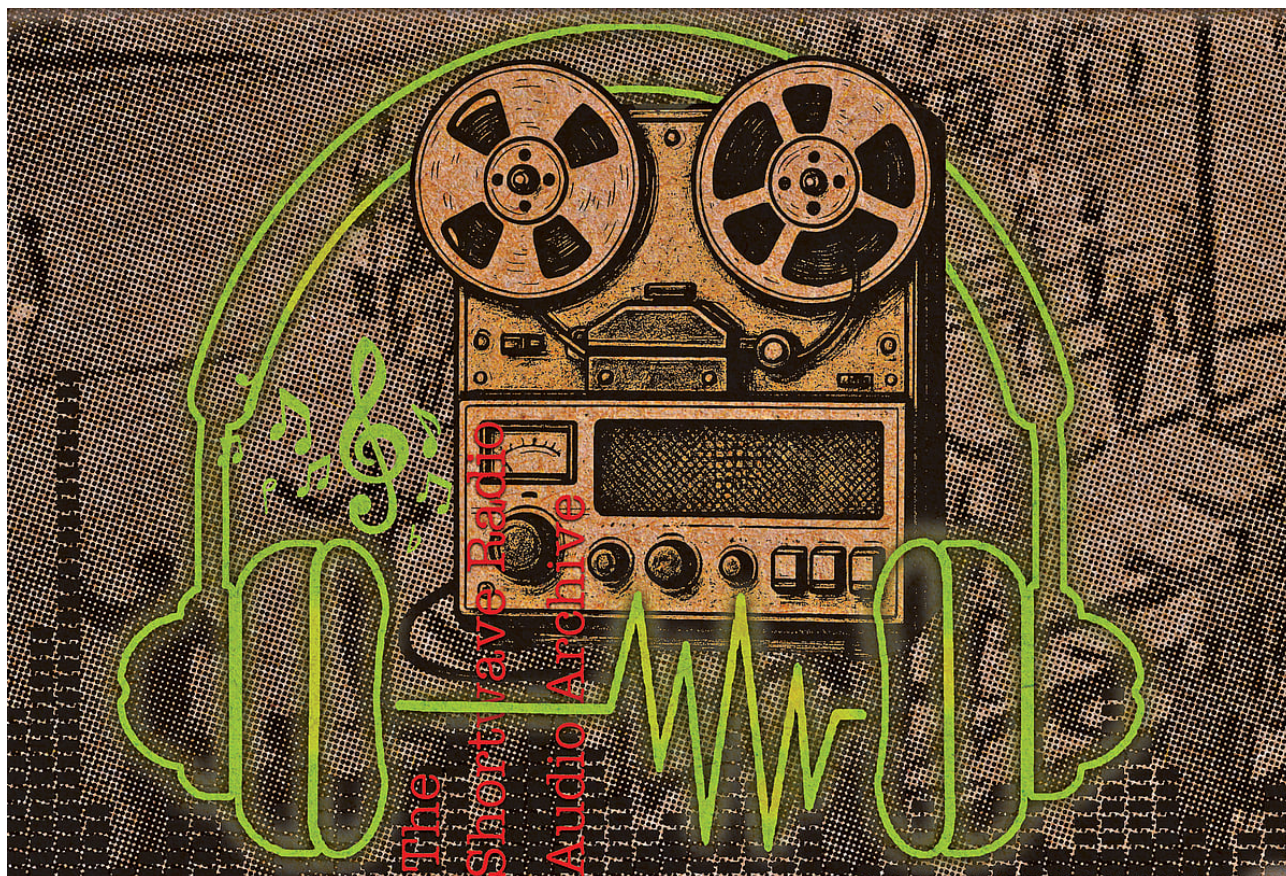


Illustration for representation

On a frosty, winter afternoon in 2010, I found myself inside an archive in Berlin, surrounded by boxes and cabinets containing shellac discs more than a century old. As a visiting Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg, my research on the early history of Indian gramophone recordings led me to the Humboldt University's Lautarchiv. I encountered something quite unexpected: Indian voices, preserved thousands of kilometers from the country of their origin.

These were recordings of Indian prisoners of war from the First World War. At the Halfmoon Camp at Wünsdorf, south of Berlin, German scholars had recorded voices of prisoners from across the world, partly for linguistic research. The South Asian collection alone comprises 282 titles on 193 shellac discs. They include Hindi and Hindustani, Punjabi, Bengali and Sylheti, Garhwali, Baluchi, Pashto, Khasi, Tamil, Telugu, Nepali, and

several other languages. There were songs, stories, poems, anecdotes, and spoken passages. In several cases, transcripts, transliterations and translations survive alongside the recordings, including detailed accounts of who the prisoner was, the village in India he hailed from and his ancestry. Those crackling recordings gave me goosebumps. They were fragments of the voices of Indians who had lived a century ago—voices that had somehow survived when so much else about their lives had evanesced.

Interestingly, one recording acquired a second life through the remarkable documentary *The Halfmoon Files* by German filmmaker Philip Scheffner. He traced one of the Indian voices recorded at Wünsdorf, Mall Singh, and began reconstructing the world behind the recording. The Indian man was suddenly no longer merely a catalogue entry, but a real human with a back story.

Then I heard Rabindranath Tagore there. The closing words of a speech Tagore delivered in Berlin in June 1921 are preserved. Interestingly, it was not recorded during the speech itself. Three days later, Tagore repeated the closing passage at the Hotel Esplanade in Berlin for the gramophone.

There is something profoundly different about hearing a historical figure rather than merely reading them. After all, we have all known Tagore from his books, poetry, photographs, and biographies. But when his voice emerges from the crackle of an old recording, history acquires another dimension. You hear the breath, pauses, and cadences. A person who has become a name in a textbook comes alive for a few minutes.

But Berlin was not an isolated case, as I was to discover. The Vienna Phonogrammarchiv, established by Felix Exner in 1899, holds some of the world's earliest sound recordings, including substantial material from India in Malayalam, Telugu, Marathi, Hindustani, and Tamil. Its collection preserves voices of Lala Har Dayal of the Ghadar Party and scholar Umrao Singh Sher-Gil. London has recordings associated with George Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India, made between 1913 and 1929. The collection contains 242 records covering a remarkable range of Indian languages and dialects. Paris has its own collections of Indian music, languages, and oral traditions in the CNRS sound archives—Musée de l'Homme

The pattern across Europe was hard to miss. Institutions thought it important to preserve the sounds of India. I naturally began to wonder where the equivalent archive in India was. The more I looked, the more complicated it became. India did have archives. All India Radio had preserved an enormous broadcast heritage; IGNCA had its own collections; universities and museums held others. National Archives of India and PMML have large treasures of oral histories and interviews. What was missing was not effort, but connection between these efforts. Our archives exist as isolated islands.

What we have not adequately built is a national framework connecting India's sonic heritage—from music and speech, to languages, dialects, oral traditions, and private

recordings—and making it accessible as a common inheritance.

During my own journey with the voice and life story of Gauhar Jaan, India's great gramophone pioneer of 1902, I delved deep into the world of early recordings. It is shattering to know that many of these aural treasures lie rotting with scrap dealers in chor bazaars across India. A small step I took was establishing the Archive of Indian Music in 2011; 15,000 gramophone records have been rescued from shanties, preserved, digitised, and some of them made available freely on SoundCloud.

Technology changes possibilities enormously. A recording that once had to be physically located, played on the right machine and heard by one person can now be digitised, transcribed, searched, and potentially accessed simultaneously by millions. Artificial intelligence could take this further. A researcher could search for every surviving recording of a particular dialect. A young musician could hear a style of singing that disappeared from her village generations ago. A historian could listen to the actual voices behind a political movement rather than relying only on speeches.

In recent years, India has rightly made repatriation of stolen antiquities an important part of its cultural diplomacy. Sculptures and bronzes that had left the country illegally are being traced, authenticated, and brought home. The principle is that objects belonging to India's civilisational heritage should not remain permanently disconnected from the civilisation that created them. Could we not apply a similar principle to sound? The original discs may quite properly remain in the archives that have preserved them. But why should India not seek high-quality digital copies, along with the catalogue information, transcripts and translations, so that these recordings become part of our own national archive as well?

Our task is not merely preserving old recordings, but to make sure that the voices of India—wherever they survive—remain part of our living memory. After all, civilisation is not only what it writes down. It is also what it sings, speaks, recites, remembers—and leaves behind in its own voice.

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