

‘That Golden Voice’

In Search of Recordings of the Voice of Swami Vivekananda

M.S. NANJUNDIAH

Swamiji’s Voice Recordings

There are many references in the published literature on the life and teachings of Swami Vivekananda to the recordings of his voice. None of these recordings, however, have been available for actual listening. Over the years, the author has made attempts to trace these recordings. In this connection, the author has conducted detailed research over an extended period of time. The following article is an attempt to summarize the results of these efforts.

The sound recording technology available in the 1890s (i.e. the time-span when Swamiji’s voice was recorded) is a relevant consideration. All references to the recordings of Swamiji’s voice refer to some dates within the period 1892 to 1899. All the references in biographies mention ‘phonographic record’. Also in a letter written in June 1895, Swamiji refers to ‘cylinders’ and ‘phonograph’. It should be mentioned at the outset that during this period the wax cylinders in use were called ‘2 minute’ cylinders and each cylinder could record only 2 to 3 minutes at the most (varied speeds account for this).

Recordings in India

The following are mentions made in the *Life of Swami Vivekananda by his Eastern and Western Disciples* [hereafter *Life*], published by Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata.

1. **Recording at the Mysore Palace in November/December 1892** (*Life*, Volume 1, Chapter 17 (Through South India), pp. 324-325). The *Life* says:

The longer the Swami remained with the Maharaja, the greater became the latter’s attachment to him. When the Swami spoke of departing, the Maharaja was visibly distressed and requested him to stay a few days more. He added, ‘Swamiji, I must have something with me as a remembrance of your personality. So, allow me to take a phonographic record of your voice.’ This the Swami consented to, and even now the record is preserved in the palace, though it has long since become indistinct.’

This recording was ‘lent’ in January 1906 to the Ramakrishna Mission on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Swamiji and was returned to the Maharaja (*vide Prabuddha Bharata* February 1906 and *Brahmavadin* February 1906).

It is learnt that some senior Swamis of the Ramakrishna Mission, who were attached to the Study Circle at Mysore, in the early



A long-standing devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri M.S. Nanjundiah from Bangalore worked in the World Bank at Washington D.C., USA for about sixteen years, and held the positions of Financial Advisor and Senior Operations Adviser. His deep association with Ramakrishna Movement led to the publication of *A Spiritual Centre Blossoms*—a large volume chronicling the 100-year history of Ramakrishna Math, Bull Temple Road, Bangalore. □



Chamaraja Wodiyar, Raja of Mysore

nineteen thirties, visited the exhibition in the Mysore Palace (where the record was exhibited), and listened to the demonstration of Swamiji's voice. There was so much noise in the recording that they could not make out the content. The later disposition of the record is not clear.

Several attempts have been made by the author to obtain this old record so that using modern technological advances the voice could be retrieved. These attempts, including contact with the present prince and descendent of the Royal family of Mysore and searching for the 'Palace diaries' and other records relating to the period of Swamiji's stay in Mysore in 1892 have not succeeded in either securing the phonographic record or any more authentic details of this recording. Efforts made even recently, including searching the palace rooms where the antic music records were kept in the past, have not yielded any positive results.

2. Recording in January 1897-Ramnad—on Swamiji's return from America (*Life*, Volume 2 Chapter 32 (Triumphal March through Ceylon & South India), page 182). *Life* says:

During the course of the function he conferred on the Raja the title 'Rajarishi', meaning that the Raja was both a ruler (Raja) and a sage (Rishi). *At the latter's request the Swami gave a short address into a phonograph on the need of Shakti-worship in India.*

Following this visit to the palace on Sunday evening (January 31), the Swami and party set out on their journey northwards at midnight.

Efforts were made through Swami Chidghanananda (now deceased) of the Rama-krishna Math, Madurai, to access this recording. He reported that they were given to understand that the Palace people did not have



Bhaskara Setupati, Raja of Ramnad

the recording with them now. The author also met and talked (in August 1993) to Swami Pranavananda of Swami Vivekananda Kudil, Rameshwaram, who knew the successor of the Raja of Ramnad (who was then surviving) and had helped him. He told the author that he (the Swami) was interested in collecting anything connected with Swami Vivekananda, but could find none. Efforts were also made through others who knew the Raja of Ramnad's family, but nothing was found.

3. Recording at Ambala on 16 August 1897 (*Life*, Volume 2, Chapter 36 (in North India-2 page 281.) *Life* says:

At Ambala he had religious talks daily at all hours with many people of different creeds—Muslim, Brahmo, Arya Samajist, and Hindu—on scriptural and other matters. On the *morning of the 16th, at the request of a professor of the Lahore College who wanted a record of the Swami's voice, he gave a short lecture into a phonograph.*

Swami Sastrananda (now deceased) of the Ramakrishna Mission, Chandigarh, indicated to the author that Mr. Panna Lal of Ambala, a long-standing devotee of the Mission, had worked on this matter. The author contacted him. Mr Panna Lal reported (in August 1993) that he had tried all possible sources to find the voice recording but had failed. He had tried the same thing in 1976 also, but had not succeeded.

Two Recordings Sent to India by Swamiji Himself

4. In a letter written on 31 August 1894 to Alasinga Perumal Swamiji wrote (CW, 5.40): '*Now I have sent a phonograph to Khetri Raja*'. Apparently this took some time to reach the Raja. In letters he wrote to Mrs. Hale on 5 September 1894 and 3 November 1894 Swamiji referred to the phonograph as not having reached the Raja. Later in a letter written on 18 November 1894 he mentions that the Raja



Ajit Singh, Raja of Khetri

had received it. In his letter to Mrs Hale on 21 December 1894 Swamiji said '*The Raja was very much pleased with the phonograph, as he writes, and has heard my voice several times. Hope he will bring it into life*'.

Efforts to trace this record were made even in 1963, but had not yielded results. In this connection the following quote from page 226 of a book *Swami Vivekananda—a Forgotten Chapter of His Life* by Benishankar Sharma (1963) is interesting:

In the first letter from Agra, on the 26 December 1894, it is mentioned that a 'phonograph' was sent by Swami Vivekananda as a present to the Maharaja. We also find a mention about it by the Swami in a letter addressed to Sri Alasinga Perumal on 31 August 1894 from USA wherein he says: '*Now I have sent a phonograph to Khetri Raja. . .*' The Swami sent with this phonograph a record of a talk by himself on the duties and

responsibilities of a Raja. On receipt of this phonograph, along with the record, the raja held a special durbar in the famous 'Durbar Hall' where all the leading citizens of the town were invited and the record was played with all ceremony. This I think is another rare honour, besides the presentation of the address on behalf of the Ramakrishna Mission, which the Swami bestowed on the Maharaja. Most unfortunately, the record is no longer in existence and we are deprived of the pleasure of hearing the Swami's sacred and melodious voice because of negligence on the part of the keeper of the State records and documents. I am told that 'the record was sold as part of unserviceable stores to some 'kabadi' [disposable-dealer] a few years ago.

Unfortunately it seems that this record has been lost.

5. It is seen from the letter written by Swamiji to Alasinga Perumal on 30 November 1894 that Perumal had received a phonograph sent to him. Probably Swamiji had sent him also a recording, as he had done in the Khetri case. Efforts were made to trace the phonograph and any recording by contacting the descendents of Perumal. M.C.A Perumal, the grandson of Alasinga Perumal told the author that the family descendents of Perumal do not have the phonograph or recording. He also stated that some of the belongings of Alasinga Perumal had been given to the Ramakrishna Math, Chennai when Perumal passed away many years ago. Further investigation of this did not yield any positive results.

Recordings in U.S.A

Marie Louise Burke, the well-known writer, in her book *Swami Vivekananda in the West—New discoveries* (volume 5, chapter 4, p. 169), says:

It is possible that during this week (Saturday November 25, 1899) Swamiji made some recordings at the McKindleys' Schiller Street flat, as he

very likely had done in April of 1896 at the Walton Place flat, talking into the horn of one of Edison's early phonograph machines. Indeed, we find that a little earlier in New York Mr. Leggett had been ready to buy him some cylinders to be played in Los Angeles on 'Jo's machine.'

But whether or not Swamiji lectured into a horn during this particular visit to Chicago, we learn that on Monday afternoon, November 27, he lectured at the Hales' to a live audience. Unfortunately, we have no information at present of what he said, of what his subject was, of how long he spoke, of how many people attended. One does know, however, that this was an invitational parlor talk, for one finds Sister Nivedita pleading with 'Aunt Mary' for a certain Miss Starr, who evidently was in disrepute.

Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana, in her book, *Tantine—the Life of Josephine MacLeod*, (first edition, 1990, p.29), refers to a recording at the Hale's house:



Josephine Macleod

In March, Joe was in Chicago with the Leggetts, as Mr. Leggett had some business there, She wrote to Mrs. Bull on March 7, 1897:

Your letter and Mr. Goodwin's have warmed our hearts . . .

Two days later Joe writes again to Mrs. Bull,

I enclose your Mr. Goodwin's letter which I read out to the Hale girls yesterday . . . *Did you know that Swami had chanted and told some of his most eloquent stories and thoughts into a phonograph at the Hales? We heard the same deep, penetrating tones and inspiring thoughts, as if the Swami was in our very midst.*

Efforts were made to get the recordings/ s at the Hale's house through friends/ descendents of the Hale family. Swami Chidananda of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society, Chicago, who made attempts at getting any available recordings of Swamiji's voice, reported (in July 1993) that the attempts were not successful.

Swami Chetanananda of the Vedanta Society of St Louis also said that he had also made efforts which yielded no positive results and that no descendents could now be contacted. The author reported this to Swami Prabhananda, the present General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, who discussed this matter with Marie Louise Burke in January 1994 when she visited the Belur Math. She said that she had tried all possible sources and come to the conclusion that we cannot expect to get anything now through any survivors of the Hale family group.

The author contacted several antique phonograph dealers/collectors in USA in 1997-98 and later to trace these US recordings, if by chance they had been got by some dealer/ collector. The request in this regard (to contact the author in case they had any material) was made in 1997-98 to a group of collectors called

Pronoatics who posted it on their website; but there was no response for a year.

Another request to a Yahoo group called Phonolist was posted on their (collector's) group website in 2001 for three months; there was no response. In 2001 the request was also posted by a collector, Mr Norman Bruderhofer, on his website. Here again there was no response.

Hence it appears that none of these recordings are now available.

What is Available

There is, however, a cassette tape which came into the author's possession and which was indicated as a *likely* recording of the voice of Swamiji, apparently made from one of the phonographic records. Swami Muktidananda and Swami Sureshananda of Ramakrishna Ashrama, Mysore, provided the contacts and help in securing this recording. This was traced to Dr. B.M. Deb Sikdar, Director, Kripamayee Institute for Mental Health, Miraj in Maharashtra, whom I also met in 1997 and discussed the matter. Dr Sikdar indicated to me that he had obtained this in 1969-1970 from a friend who had given it, saying it was Swamiji's Voice. This friend had passed away in the meantime.

This cassette tape had considerable noise and one could barely make out the words or content. My brother in USA (Radha Krishna) and I got the well-equipped Studios in USA to do some restoration work and retrieve the recording. It was found that it was a 2 min 43 seconds recording of the song *Mon Chalo Nijo Niketane* ['O my mind, let us go back to our own abode']. This was a song sung by Swamiji before Sri Ramakrishna.

Since this song has also been sung by Mr. Dhananjay Bhattacharya in later years, the 'restored' song we had was compared with a



Edison Home Phonograph

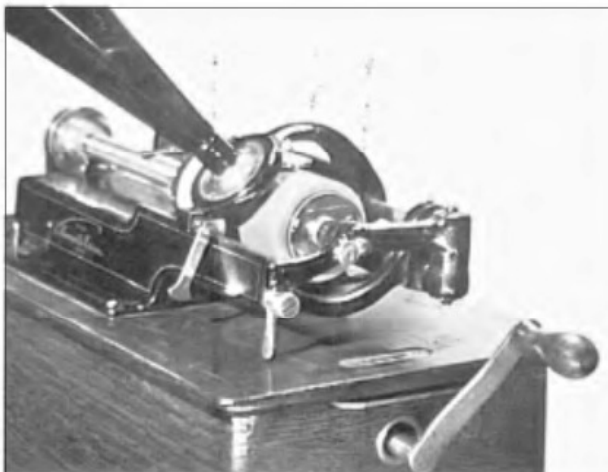
recording of Mr. Bhattacharya, in a studio in North Hollywood, USA which has the state-of-the-art equipment. The opinion of the Studio expert who analyzed the two was that the two were indeed different and had significant differences. For example in the old recording at about 1 min 3 second the person goes high with strength like a 'Baritone' voice and descent is at about 1 min 6 seconds, which differs from the other recording (Bhattacharya's). The voice in the old recording is a much stronger powerful voice while the other (Bhattacharya's) is a more soft voice. There is no 'accompanying instrument' in the old recording.

After this, a similar analysis was done (in the presence of Swami Prabhananda) at the HMV studios in Kolkata of four other recordings of this song. These also were found different from the 'restored' old recording of this song. It is clear that the 'restored' song is a unique one.

It is relevant to note that some western devotees of Swamiji had commented on Swamiji's voice being of exceptional quality; some had used the term 'Baritone'; Madam Calve called it 'a voice like a cello.. that one cannot forget'.

The following points suggest that the restored version of the recording is probably a recording of Swamiji's voice:

1. This was a song sung by Swamiji and of which he seemed fond.
2. Prior to 1900, when '2 minute' (nominal) cylinders were used, the speed of playing was not standardized and they were played at varying speeds—thus they could play for a somewhat longer time than 2 minutes, (especially on hand cranked equipment). The restored recording plays for 2 minutes and 43 seconds and there is clear evidence of speed variation within it.
3. The type of noise that is found in the recording is 'an accumulated' noise due to the



Cylinder recorder



Edison Recording Cylinder

aging and deterioration of cylinders. It is not feasible to eliminate this completely without affecting the voice itself. The EDISON National Historic Site in USA who have done re-recording of cylinders of that vintage, using modern custom made electrical cylinder playback equipment in a sound laboratory have been consulted; they state:

The level of 'noise' evident in the transferred recording is caused in part at least by the deterioration of the old wax and dust embedded in the cylinder grooves. In my opinion it would be impossible to determine exactly what the 'original' noise level on any particular historic cylinder because of this aging process.

This is also the view of another expert (Mr. Jack Stanley) who has been working on such old recordings. Further it is extremely difficult (and generally not feasible) to 'introduce' such noise as is on this tape by manipulating a copy of a recording such as that of Mr. Dhananjay Bhattacharya.

4. In the opinion of some (senior monks of the Ramakrishna Order), who have knowledge of the style of singing prevalent in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, the manner of rendering the song conforms to the 'old style'.

As against this one can say there is no clear evidence available regarding the source of the original recording. Since nothing else

has so far come to light, a comparison with others is not feasible now.

Thus, circumstantial evidence suggests that what is now available is, in all probability, a recording of Swamiji's voice, The 'noise' heard in the restored recording cannot be fully eliminated, due to limitations of the recording technology of the late nineteenth century and the long time that has elapsed from the time of the original recording, but the powerful voice of Swamiji is heard.

This restored recording has been released in April 2012 (and can be procured from the Bangalore, Mysore and Belgaum centres of the Ramakrishna Mission) keeping in view three factors:

First, we would like to make available whatever is now with us after several years of sustained effort;

Second, such release may promote further research into the question of Swamiji's voice and,

Third, it may help in making possible comparisons with anything else that may come to light in the future.

Our sincere efforts, we hope, in documenting these facts will help the future researches in finding more about the availability of the recorded voice of Swami Vivekananda. Whatever has been found is valuable in terms of records but much remains to be done. □

On the twenty-ninth of January 1895, I went with my sister to 54 West 33rd Street, New York, and heard the Swami Vivekananda in his sitting room where were assembled fifteen or twenty ladies and two or three gentlemen. The room was crowded. All the arm-chairs were taken; so I sat on the floor in the front row. Swami stood in the corner. He said something, the particular words of which I do not remember, but instantly to me that was truth, and the second sentence he spoke was truth, and the third sentence was truth. And I listened to him for seven years and whatever he uttered was to me truth. From that moment life had a different import. It was as if he made you realize that you were in eternity. It never altered. it never grew. It was like the sun that you will never forget once you have seen. —Josephine Macleod