

Kirtan / কীর্তন

Audio loop, 12 min 25 sec

This soundtrack uses Arnold Bake's recordings of Nabadwip Brajobashi and in Mainadal and Kenduli and The Travelling Archive's recordings in Mainadal too. Additional music used: Sukanta Majumdar's Murshidabad kirtan recordings, 2012. Voice-over: Moushumi Bhowmik.

Here is what Arnold Bake wrote to his mother about Mainadal, from the notebook of Jan-Sijmen Zwarts, who is making a study of Bake's letters for the Travelling Archive:

Santiniketan, 16 August 1933 – Bake's Journey to Mainadal

Bake starts the letter by stating that finally, after waiting for two years, he'll have the time to go to Mainadal – a place he has been looking forward to visiting ever after meeting the percussionist and his family at Ilambazar 2 years earlier.

Bake sets out with Ganapati. The journey is arduous, as it turns out that autos are not available. The two travel by bullock cart. The two take a break in Khairasol for a cup of tea. Upon entering the village, Bake describes Mainadal as medium-sized, with signs of decline, but nonetheless charming.

The Thakur he met two years ago was not there, but his younger brother Govinda takes him in and puts him up for the night. Bake describes the room given to him in great detail.

Bake explains the situation in Mainadal. He says there is a temple for Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the Vaishnav reformer from the beginning of the 16th century. The temple belongs to the Mitra Thakur family, who also play the kirtan to perfection. They have done so continuously since the beginning of their order. Bake says that the family are no Brahmins, but, he adds, for Chaitanya's followers, being a Brahmin or not is irrelevant. According to Bake, they don't see themselves as anything less than Brahmins, and follow the laws on food etc. strictly.

Bake mentions that the small houses around the temple courtyard are dilapidated.

The attic of the house where Bake stays is anything but quiet. Curious villagers visit him continuously, and downstairs, the students practise their music loudly.

The celebrations take place in the evening, not the entire day. This means that Bake has time to talk to people during the day. He meets an old man, Haridas Mitra Thakur, who plays the drums very well and as such is able to provide Bake with an overview of some of the incredibly complex beats that are used in the kirtan. Bake mentions that the rhythm is very complex and very important, so he is pleased that he has been able to write it down and record it on the cylinders. He states that the voice is considered the male and the drum the female, and the unity of both is what the music strives for. He says the recording session was difficult because of time constraints, but in the end he managed to record all 18 or 19 rhythms.

Three drum songs that Bake considers his personal favourites are supposedly composed by Chaitanya himself and inspired by the creaking of Jagannath's chariot in Puri.

Bake is taken for a walk by Govinda M. Th. He gets a tour of the village and its environs. He comments that everything looks so neglected, mainly because there is mud everywhere, including the temple courtyard. Bake is told the legend of the first M. Th., who performs a miracle and in reward is granted a large piece of land by the Muslim raja.

Bake then describes the celebration of Krishna's birthday in detail – both the ceremony and the partying in the mud the day after.