



→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

# SUFI SUTRA

## KOLKATA, INDIA

It's not just Sufi musicians who come together at this annual Kolkatan festival, but traditional musicians from around the world

WORDS &amp; PICTURES SIMON BROUGHTON



For the festival the Mohor Kunja gardens are decorated with coloured lights creating an enchanting environment. It's impossible for everybody to see the stage so there are screens dotted round the park where those on the outside can see something of what's happening.

Last year the 'teams', as they like to call them, included Marouane Skali, a fine Sufi singer from Morocco with his ensemble; the ten-strong El Kawmeya troupe from Egypt; the Orient West Choir, a rather pretentious project from Denmark bringing together Jewish, Christian and Islamic ingredients in their music and poetry; and the Azerbaijan Ensemble for Ancient Instruments, a fascinating group singing old Azeri poetry, much of it religious, accompanied by recreations of instruments pictured in ancient miniature paintings. They're dressed in Hollywood costumes that could only come from a former-Soviet state, but the music is beautiful. Another highlight are *Songlines'* favourites Söndörgö – not Sufi musicians, but great artists playing the decidedly secular music of the Serbs and Croat communities in Hungary (see #77).

There are inevitably spectacular national performers from India: a Kashmiri Sufi group, the Nizamuddin Qawwals from Delhi and, the real highlight, local Bauls and Fakirs from West Bengal. Sufi Sutra is organised by Banglanatak dot com who've done amazing work to transform the lives of local musicians and build up a network of village performers (see #86). Sufi Sutra is one of the main national showcases for these Baul and Fakir musicians with their extraordinary spiritual songs, one of the glories of Bengal.

"I consider myself also a Fakir," says *sarod* player Amjad Ali Khan, the celebrity guest opening the festival. There's a ripple of laughter because Amjad is a superstar trailed by snapping photographers while Fakirs are usually considered little more than beggars. Of course Sufi Sutra is about overturning those stereotypes. "We are fortunate to have so many genres of music in our country and it doesn't matter

whether it's classical or folk," Amjad continues. "Classical music requires a lot of discipline, but I try to learn folk tunes from different parts of the country because it is like a natural music. I wish this festival every success."

Kolkata evenings in February are quite balmy, great for listening to music. But the days are extremely hot. During the afternoons there are workshops and gatherings of musicians in the shade of trees in the gardens and crafts people showing off their creations. West Bengal produces fantastic embroidery, but one of my favourite things was hearing a singer and painter, Swarna Chitrakar, sing her way through one of her paintings (pictured left). These are naively painted narrative scrolls, in this case showing scenes from the life of Rabindranath Tagore. The writer, who lived in Kolkata, is a hugely revered figure in West Bengal. The goddess Durga, who's celebrated in a huge festival in Kolkata, is another popular subject in Chitrakar paintings.

One afternoon I sit on mats under a tree with a group of Nirgun singers from Bihar, a neighbouring state in the north-west. The singers are followers of Kabir, a hugely influential poet, philosopher and social reformer of the 15th century. His verses have an earthy character and they sing them accompanied by harmonium and drum. 'If wealth is lost, nothing is lost. If health is lost, something is lost. But if character is lost, everything is lost.' It's like a sort of folk qawwali as the lead singer sings from a collection of Kabir's poetry and his companions respond. Kabir himself was illiterate and his verses survived in the oral tradition, although these guys now seem to be relying on the written word.

During the afternoon there are workshops on a little stage in the gardens. These work best when they aren't just performances, although it's good to get a more intimate view of the musicians. The best is a spontaneous meeting of Söndörgö with the Baul musicians. Within a few moments people are dancing in circles on the grass, the Baul singer Subadhra holding her *ektara* aloft and Hungarian singer Katya Tompos adding ecstatic vocals. By the end the Moroccans are doing Sufi dancing as well. A man comes up to me and says breathlessly, "I am 60 years old and this is a lifetime experience for me – everyone's coming together with love." It actually a very good description of the Sufi Sutra experience. ■

**DATES** The next Sufi Sutra festival takes place February 1-3 2013

**ONLINE** [www.banglanatak.com](http://www.banglanatak.com)

**PODCAST** Hear music from the Bengali Fakirs, Swarna Chitrakar and the Nirgun singers on this issue's podcast

or a British visitor, Kolkata sometimes seems like home in a distorting mirror. There are Victorian churches, one of them the spitting image of St Martin in the Fields. And right in the centre of the city is the vast Victoria Memorial, a monument to Queen Victoria, completed in 1921 and dubbed 'the Taj of the Raj'. Whatever one's sensitivities about the British Raj, it's a spectacular building.

And it's in beautiful gardens of Mohor Kunja next to the Victoria Memorial that the three-day Sufi Sutra festival takes place. The title suggests it's a festival of Sufi music – and several of the groups fit that bill – but programmer Amitava Bhattacharya also brings in traditional groups from around the world. It's a free event and attracts over 30,000 people each night. "It's got to be free because we want to attract all classes," insists Bhattacharya. "Many people can't afford 500 rupees (£5) for a concert so it's better not to charge at all." This evangelising approach translates into his onstage presentation as he proclaims "Sufi Sutra – Music for peace and music for all!"

