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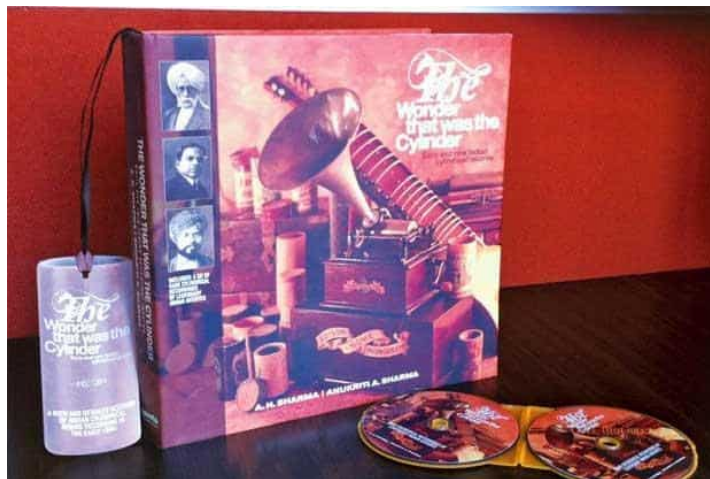
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The Wonder That Was The Cylinder: By A.N. Sharma and Anukriti A. Sharma, Spenta Multimedia, 300 pages, Rs6,000 (including the DVD).

## The age before vinyl

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Narendra Kusnur

A tome on cylinder recordings by Gauhar Jan, Rabindranath Tagore and others

### Topics

The Wonder That Was The Cylinder | Vinyl records  
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It was another era, another technology. Before vinyl records ruled the scene in the early 20th century, the music industry was dominated by wax cylinders. The voices of some of India’s most reputed artistes were recorded on these hollow rolls; sadly, many of them have been lost.

In their book, The Wonder That Was The Cylinder, A.N. Sharma and his daughter Anukriti present a detailed thesis on this fascinating subject. Aiding them in the research is their collection of rare cylinders, which they found lying with scrap dealers. Included are recordings of classical doyens Ustad

Alladiya Khan and Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, Marathi music legends Bhaurao Kolhatkar, Bhaskarbuwa Bakhale and Balgandharva, and the father of Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke.

Throughout, the Sharmas rigorously compile interesting facts and trivia about the musicians whose cylinders they have. With photographs and excellent production qualities, the book looks sleek, though its sheer bulk may make it difficult to carry around. The accompanying DVD contains samples of some of the voices found, but one wishes the pieces used had been much longer.

In his regular profession, Sharma is a commissioner for customs, Central excise and service tax in Mumbai, whereas Anukriti is a writer and blogger. The amount of effort they have put into this project, where the means for gathering information would otherwise seem limited, is commendable. A.N. Sharma has earlier authored *Bajanaama: A Study Of Early Indian Gramophone Records*, and is extremely well-versed in the subject.

Fortune favours the determined. After he had begun working on this project, Sharma came across 200 cylinders in a kabaadi (scrap) shop; its owner thought they were textile-yarn winding accessories, and agreed to sell them at a pittance.

*The Wonder That Was The Cylinder* has a foreword by Hindustani classical vocalist Pandit Jasraj. It begins with a description of the history of phonographs (which preceded gramophones) and recorded cylinders, and makes special reference to the contribution of Thomas Alva Edison. It traces the important dealers of phonographs and cylinders in India, and devotes a chapter to H. Bose, the first Indian to manufacture cylindrical recordings indigenously and commercially trade in them. He recorded many of Rabindranath Tagore's recitations on cylinder.

The rest of the book describes artistes whose cylinders Sharma found. Heading the list is Gauhar Jan, who was actually born Angelina Yeoward to an Armenian Jew family in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh. In an era of nautch girls and mujras, she impressed with her voice, recording in 16 Indian and foreign languages.

The chapter on Allah Bandi also merits mention. Hailing from Jaipur, she specialized in Parsi theatre songs, and became famous for *Bazme-Fani*, a Hindustani adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo And Juliet*.

From the Marathi music world, there is an interesting anecdote of an encounter between Bhaurao Kolhatkar and Bhaskarbuwa Bakhale. While they were with the Kirloskar Natak Mandali, they developed differences.

After an altercation, Bakhale promised to return to the mandali only when people called him Bhaskarbuwa instead of Bhaskar. Many years later, Kolhatkar saw him at a concert and congratulated him on becoming a great singer. "From now on, I shall myself address you as Bhaskarbuwa," he said.

Bakhale, who also made waves in Hindustani classical music, died in 1922 at the age of 52. Though people felt his voice had not been recorded, the Sharmas say they traced one cylindrical recording in the Bhairavi raga.

Another chapter talks of Balgandharva's contribution to Marathi natya sangeet and stage, with Sharma highlighting his penchant for feminine roles after the success of his role as Shakuntala in Sangit Shakuntal. People were unaware of his wax cylindrical recordings; the Sharmas have four of them.

The writers' biggest find was the recordings of Ustad Alladiya Khan, doyen of the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana. When The Gramophone Company approached him, he was almost 70 and did not want to record. His admirers had some of his private recordings, but the wax cylinders would not last long. Though he died in 1946, musicologists believed no recording of his exists. But there is a cylindrical recording, a treasure in itself.

Finally, there is a description of a recording of Dadasaheb Phalke's voice after he completed his epic feature film Raja Harishchandra in 1913.

This book will appeal to archivists and those passionate about old and lost music.

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