A Post-correlation Beamformer for Time-domain Studies of Pulsars and Transients

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Abstract

We present a detailed analysis of post-correlation (PC) beamforming (i.e., beamforming which involves only phased sums of the correlation of the voltages of different antennas in an array), and compare it with the traditionally used incoherent and phased beamforming techniques. Using data from the GMRT, we show that PC beam formation results in a manifold increase in the signal-to-noise for periodic signals from pulsars and reductions, of several orders of magnitude, in the number of false triggers from single-pulse events like fast radio bursts (FRBs). This difference arises primarily because the PC beam contains less red noise, as well as less radio frequency interference. The PC beam can also be more easily calibrated than the incoherent or phased array beams.

We also discuss two different modes of PC beam formation: (1) by subtracting the incoherent beam from the coherent beam and (2) by phased addition of the visibilities. The computational costs for both these beam formation techniques, as well as their suitability for studies of pulsars and FRBs, are discussed. The techniques discussed here should be of interest for all upcoming surveys with interferometric arrays. Finally, we describe a time-domain survey with the GMRT using the PC beam formation as a case study. We find that PC beamforming will improve the current GMRT time-domain survey sensitivity by ~2 times for pulsars with periods of 80 ms to 10 s that graze the theoretical death-line.

Some of the detections will be of ultra-slow pulsars (i.e., pulsars with period $P > 30$ ms), which will increase the number of known pulsars that are ultracool, containing many interesting objects. For example, even though the population of known Galactic field millisecond pulsars (MSPs) has increased approximately fourfold over the last decade,7 there has been a ~40% increase in the number of known slow pulsars (i.e., pulsars with period $P > 30$ ms). This very modest increase in the number of known slow pulsars is particularly unfortunate, since the already known population of relatively slow pulsars contains several interesting objects, such as magnetars with extraordinary high magnetic fields (~29 known8), and ultra-slow pulsars (only 2 known) with periods $> 10$ s that graze the theoretical death-line. One of the major reasons for the slow increase in the number of such known pulsars is that the detection of these objects via periodicity searches can be severely affected by both instrumental red noise and radio frequency interference (RFI). Both of these phenomena particularly reduce the search sensitivity at the low-frequency end of the power spectrum of the detected time-series, which is where the signal from these objects is strongest.

In addition to pulsars, the population of time-domain radio transients consists of rotating radio transients (RRATs; McLaughlin et al. 2006; 112 known9) and fast radio bursts (FRBs) (Lorimer et al. 2007, Thornton et al. 2013; 33 known10). All the FRBs discovered to date are single events (except for one repeating FRB) of millisecond duration with dispersion measure (DM) values generally higher than the possible Galactic contribution. The non-repeating nature of these sources warrants real-time time-domain detections aided by simultaneous millisecond timescale imaging to localize these events in order to maximize the science returns. RRATs show occasional flashes of dispersed radio bursts of typically a few milliseconds duration. The cause of their sporadic emission as well as their connection to other neutron star populations are not fully understood. Detection of a large number of FRBs and RRATs is essential in order for us to gain a better understanding of the nature of these sources. However, detection of such single-pulse events with millisecond duration in dedispersed time-series data is severely hindered by the presence of RFI.

8 http://www.atnf.csiro.au/people/pulsar/psrcat/
7 http://astro.phys.wvu.edu/GalacticMSPs/GalacticMSPs.txt
8 http://www.physics.mcgill.ca/~pulsar/magnetar/main.html
9 http://astro.phys.wvu.edu/rratalog/
10 http://www.frbcatalog.org/
Time-domain surveys are generally sensitivity-limited, hence surveys with more sensitive instruments should lead to a higher discovery rate. Many of the existing as well as future high sensitivity radio telescopes are interferometric arrays. Planned surveys with telescopes, like MeerKAT (e.g., TRAPUM\textsuperscript{11}) and SKA Phase1 (e.g., Levin et al. 2017), also need to optimally combine signals from many small telescopes (i.e., do “beam formation”). The GMRT was one of the first interferometric instruments to be systematically used for pulsar searches. The high discovery rate of the GMRT High Resolution Southern Sky (GHRSS\textsuperscript{12}; Bhattacharyya et al. 2016; Bhattacharyya 2017), as well as the Fermi-directed survey (Bhattacharyya et al. 2013), demonstrate the capabilities of the GMRT for low-frequency pulsar searches. The recent upgrade of the GMRT allowing much larger instantaneous bandwidths (uGMRT; Gupta et al. 2017) brings a significant increase in its theoretical survey sensitivity for pulsars and FRBs at low and mid radio frequencies. With the uGMRT, Phase2 of the GHRSS survey (Roy 2018) is expected to achieve a sensitivity better than all existing and ongoing off-galactic plane surveys. Most of the existing and planned surveys, however, use one of the two traditionally used methods of beam formation, incoherent array (IA) or phased array (PA) beams, which are described in more detail below. In this paper we explore the possibility of significantly improving the observed time-domain sensitivity using yet another kind of beam formation, post-correlation (PC) beamforming. We show that in this kind of beamforming, the contribution of instrumental red noise to the power spectrum is significantly reduced, thus greatly improving the sensitivity toward low and mid spin frequency pulsars. We also show that PC beam formation can be used to significantly reduce the effect of RFI, thus improving the time-domain sensitivity for periodicity and single-pulse search. Both of these factors lead to reduction of the number of false detections by several orders of magnitude. This not only allows one to lower the candidate detection threshold (i.e., probe fainter flux levels) but also greatly eases the problem of carrying out on-the-fly imaging and other follow-up of these events to maximize the science returns.

2. Beam Formation with Antenna Arrays

2.1. IA and PA Beam Formation

Two commonly used beam formation techniques for antenna arrays are IA beam formation and PA beam formation. For example, the GMRT backends (GSB; Roy et al. 2010 or GWB; Reddy et al. 2017) allow one to form both these type of beams by making per spectral channel combinations of the delay- and fringe-corrected signals from different antennas. The IA beam is formed by summing together the squares of the individual antenna voltages, i.e., it adds together the signal powers. Mathematically

\[ P_{IA} = \sum_{i=0}^{N-1} |V_i|^2, \]

where \( P_{IA} \) is the IA beam signal and \( V_i \) are the voltages from the individual antennas. This kind of combination leads to a wide field of view (but at reduced sensitivity compared to a phased combination) and is useful for blind searches (such as, for e.g., the GHRSS survey). The coherent or PA beam is produced by summing together the voltages (after phasing them appropriately so that the beam points to the direction of interest) and then squaring the resultant sum. Mathematically,

\[ P_{PA} = \left| \sum_{i=0}^{N-1} V_i e^{-i\phi_i} \right|^2, \]

where \( P_{PA} \) is the PA beam signal and \( V_i \) are the delay- and fringe-corrected voltages from the individual antennas, and \( \phi_i \) is the phase introduced in antenna \( i \) in order to steer the beam toward the desired direction. The PA beam has higher sensitivity than the IA beam. The signal-to-noise ratios (S/Ns) for observations of a single pulse of flux density \( S \) located at the pointing center of a dual polarized array for the IA and PA beam are

\[ (S/N)_{IA} = \frac{GS\sqrt{2N_s}}{T_{sys}}, \]

\[ (S/N)_{PA} = \frac{GSN_s\sqrt{2}}{T_{sys}}, \]

where \( G \) is the gain of a single telescope, \( N_s \) is the number of antennas used for beam formation, \( \Delta f \) is the instantaneous observing bandwidth, \( \tau \) is the integration time, and \( T_{sys} \) is the total system noise. These expressions assume that the sky noise is small compared to the receiver noise of the antennas. The sensitivities of the IA and PA beams under different scenarios are discussed in detail in Kudale & Chengalur (2017).

The IA beam is not only less sensitive that the PA beam, it is also more vulnerable to instrumental gain fluctuations and RFI. This is because the IA beam is the sum of the auto-correlations of the individual antennas. Since most of the terms in the PA beam correspond to cross correlations between antennas, it has some immunity to RFI (which gets decorrelated by the delay tracking/fringe rotation operations), as well as to fluctuations in the instrumental gains. We illustrate this by showing in Figure 1 the dedispersed time-series for PSR J2144–3933 from simultaneous IA and PA observations using the GMRT. As can be seen, fewer RFI bursts are seen in the PA beam as compared to the IA beam. The PA beam noise properties in general appear better to be than those of the IA beam; one can see individual single pulses in the dedispersed PRESTO (Ransom et al. 2002) output, while these pulses are lost in the noise of the IA beam. Still, further improvement in the noise properties can be seen in the PC beam output (the lowest panel in the figure). We discuss this in more detail below.

2.2. Post-correlation Beam Formation

Post-correlation (PC) beam formation (e.g., Kudale & Chengalur 2017), conceptually consists of forming the desired beam not by combining the individual antenna voltages, but rather by combining the (suitably phased) visibilities from the different baselines in the array. Effectively, this eliminates the auto-correlation terms from the PA beam. According to the radiometer Equation (3) and (4), for an array with \( N_s \) elements, in situations where sky noise is negligible (i.e., \( T_{sky} \ll T_{rec} \)), the IA beam sensitivity

\textsuperscript{11} http://www.trapum.org/

\textsuperscript{12} http://www.ncra.tifr.res.in/ncra/research/research-at-ncra-tifr/research-areas/pulsarSurveys/GHRSS
Simulated pulsar signals were injected into the IA and PA filterbank data files using the inject_pulsar routine of the SIGPROC pulsar package. A total of 12 data sets (each for IA, PA, and PA–IA) were generated in this way, where the difference between the data sets is the period of the injected pulsar signal, this varies from 25 ms to 128 s. The original data also of course contains the signal for PSR J2144–3933, making for a total of 13 data sets from the uGMRT data. In addition we also used data from GMRT GSB backend observations at 607 MHz of PSR J2144–3933. The Nyquist-sampled antenna voltages were recorded on disk, and all beam formation as well as correlation was done offline. These data sets allow us to compare the performance of the different beamforming schemes with the exact same input data. The GSB data set also allows us to compare the two different ways of PC beam formation discussed above.

In Figure 3 we show the low-frequency end of the power spectra after de-dispersion for the three different beamforming modes using the uGMRT data. As can be seen, the power spectra for the PA and IA beams are essentially the same, since, as mentioned above, this part of the power spectrum is dominated by the instrumental red noise and the RFI that is contained in the auto-correlation spectra. Consistent with this, the PC beam, which does not contain auto-correlation data, has significantly lower noise. This “de-reddening” of the power spectrum should greatly ease the problem of detecting slow pulsars. Indeed, one can see that in the PC beam, the signal from the 8.5 s pulsar is detectable from the first harmonic onward. For the IA or PA beam on the other hand, only harmonics beyond the ~60th harmonic are visible in the power spectrum. Figure 4 shows the folded profiles of PSR J2144–3933 for these IA, PA, and PC beam data. A systematic and significant improvement in the S/N is clearly visible even to the eye as one goes from the IA beam to the PA beam and PC beam. The PC beam’s S/N is ~5–6 times better than that of the PA beam. This clearly shows the dramatic improvement in the detectability of slow pulsars when the noise and systematics contained in the auto-correlation spectra are eliminated. We note that the beams were formed using all of the input data, i.e., there has been no effort at RFI mitigation. We discuss below specific advantages that the PC beam offers as far as targeted removal of RFI is concerned.

In Figure 5 we show the ratio of the S/Ns of the PC and PA beams as a function of the pulse period. This plot was generated using the data for the simulated pulsars as well as the data for PSR J2144–3933. In all cases the PC beam has a higher S/N than the PA beam. The PC beam S/N is about 10% better than that of the PA beam for a spin period of 25 ms; this difference reaches factors of 5–6 for spin periods of ~10 s. Beyond spin periods of ~10 s, the increase in the S/N is not as large, but it is still as much as a factor of ~3 for spin periods as long as 100 s, (i.e., spin frequency ~0.01 Hz). This is due to the fact that red noise in the PC beam also goes up below 0.1 Hz, as can be seen in Figure 3.

The two methods of PC beam formation presented in Section 2.2 are mathematically equivalent. One might imagine then that all that distinguishes these two methods is their respective computational costs. We discuss this issue in Section 4 below. However, there is one further way in which these two methods are different: in the possibilities that they offer for identifying and removing RFI. When the PC beam is formed as the PA–IA beam, one can only flag out data at the

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13 https://github.com/SixByNine/sigproc/
granularity of an antenna. When forming the PC beam from the visibilities, one can flag out data at the granularity of baselines. This is particularly useful in arrays that contain antennas at a range of separations. Often data from the short baselines contain significantly more RFI than the data from long baselines. Since nearby antennas also have baselines with more distant antennas, this could allow one to greatly eliminate the RFI while retaining much of the raw sensitivity. We show in Figure 6 that short timescale (i.e., few seconds) RFI bursts present in the PC (visibility based) beam can be removed by flagging the data from all the baselines shorter than \( \sim 450 \) meters (i.e., 3\%–4\% of the total GMRT baselines). As shown in the figure, these RFI bursts generate pseudo pulse-like features in the folded profile of PSR J2144−3933; flagging the short baseline very effectively mitigates the problem. We note that the flagging done here was “blind,” i.e., short baselines were flagged, without looking at the data quality on these baselines. In principle one could use flagging algorithms (such as FLAGCAL, Prasad & Chengalur 2012) to automatically identify and flag only those baselines that actually do have RFI.

So far we have been comparing the characteristics of the IA, PA, and PC beams in relation to detecting pulsars. Another class of pulsed signals that is of great interest currently are transients such as FRBs, which emit single pulses. While observing with an interferometric array, one can save the visibilities for candidate events, so that one can also image the field in order to localize any confirmed sources (see, e.g., Bhat et al. 2013). As discussed in detail in Bhat et al. (2013), in such searches, it is important to reduce false positives as much as possible, in order to minimize the amount of data that have to be saved and processed. Since the PC beam contains far less RFI than the IA and PA beam, one would expect that the number of false positives in the PC beam would also be less than that for the other beamforming modes. Figure 7 shows the

Figure 1. Dedispersed time-series for PSR J2144−3933 from simultaneous observations of the (a) IA beam and (b) PA beam are shown here. The plots were generated using the PRESTO software tools. The plot shows the mean value computed using moving average of 8 time samples. The y-axis scale is different for the different panels. Fewer RFI bursts are seen in the PA beam compared to the IA beam. Also, individual single pulses (as marked in the plot) are visible for the PA beam while these pulses are lost in the noise of the IA beam. (c) Dedispersed time-series for PSR J2144−3933 from the post-correlation beam. As can be seen, there is a significant improvement in the immunity against RFI, and the individual pulses can be clearly seen.

Figure 2. Schematic block diagram for post-correlation beam formation. The left branch shows PA–IA beam formation and the right branch shows beam formation using visibilities. Note that in PA–IA beam formation the beam steering has to be done at the FFT block level, while in visibility-based beam formation the beam steering is done after accumulation.
number of candidates detected from IA, PA, and PC beams for simulated FRB events with various DMs injected in the same \( \text{uGMRT 300–500 MHz} \) band data as discussed above. The signals were injected using the same \texttt{inject_pulsar} routine, but with the pulse period being much larger than the duration of the data (i.e., 60 s). The PC beam is formed as PA–IA. There are 8 FRB events simulated at DMs of 10, 20, 50, 100, 200, 500, 1000 and 2000 pc cm\(^{-3}\). \texttt{PRESTO}-based single-pulse searches were performed for all three beams over a range of DMs (indicated by the error bars). As can be seen from the figure, the number of triggers from the PC beam is almost two orders of magnitude lower than that of the IA beam, even at a DM as high as 2000 pc cm\(^{-3}\). The number of false positives in the PC beam data is also a factor of \( \sim 5 \) less than that found in the PA beam data. Interestingly, over the full FRB DM search space (i.e., 250–2600 pc cm\(^{-3}\)), the candidate detection rate is almost constant for the PC beam. The percentage of true positives at the highest (2000 pc cm\(^{-3}\)) DM values of the simulations for IA, PA, and PC beams are 0.0004, 0.8, and 5, respectively. We note that this plot was generated for candidates detected above a threshold of 5\( \sigma \) in order to make the \text{uGMRT 300–500 MHz} beam sensitive enough to detect all the known FRBs (ignoring frequency dependent scattering and spectral steepening). At this threshold the \text{uGMRT IA} beam detects only 30\% of the known FRBs. Raising the threshold to 10\( \sigma \) generates very few triggers from the PC beam for this data, whereas the IA beam continues to be equally corrupted. The recently detected FRBs are all at the lower end of the FRB flux distribution; all of these will be completely missed at the sensitivity offered by the IA beam. As is the case for FRBs, the PC beam data would also contain far fewer false positives in searches for other transients such as RRATs (most of which have DM < 300 pc cm\(^{-3}\)). Both manual as well as automated searches for RRATs in the IA beam data would be swamped by the large number of false positives. Ways of overcoming this problem by forming multiple incoherent sub-array beams and using coincidence filtering are discussed in Bhat et al. (2013). However, splitting antennas in sub-arrays significantly reduces the survey sensitivity. Another major difference between the IA and PC beam is of course the field of view. In blind surveys one would like to have as large a field of view as possible, in which case PC beam formation is not competitive, unless one is able to form multiple beams. In the next section we detail the computational cost involved in forming multiple PC beams.

4. Computational Requirements

As discussed above, there are two different ways of forming the PC beam. The first is via the difference of the PA and IA beams, while the second is via a phased addition of the visibilities. While the PC beams formed in these two ways is mathematically equivalent, we also saw that operationally the visibility route might have some advantage because of the better opportunities it provides for flagging data affected by RFI. Here, we take a look at the difference in the amount of computation required to make the PC beam in these two ways. To start with, we note that correlators require a fan-out of the data, i.e., in order to correlate the data from one antenna with all other antennas, one needs multiple copies of the data stream. On the other hand beam formation operates on the data stream from each antenna independently, except in the final addition stage. This would lead to differences in architecture. Here, we do not look at this in detail, but instead focus only on the number of computations required to make the PC beam in these two different ways.

We start by defining the parameters needed to determine the required computation, with the assumed value of the parameter for the GMRT (where relevant) given in parenthesis. Let the total number of beams to be formed (each with an independent phase center) be \( N_B \). The total number of antennas is \( N_a (30) \), the bandwidth of operation is \( B \) (200 MHz), the number of time samples in a given FFT block is \( N_f \) (4096 for 2048 spectral channels), and the number of FFT blocks per integration is \( N_{ff} \). In terms of these parameters the channel resolution is \( \Delta \nu = \frac{B}{N_{ff}} \) and the integration time \( \Delta t = \frac{N_a N_f}{N_B N_{ff}} \).

The total computational load (in number of operations per second) for PA–IA beam formation for one integration is

\[
5N_a N_B N_f \log N_f + N_B N_a N_f + N_B N_f (N_a N_B + N_B - 1) + N_B N_f + (N_a - 1)(N_B - 1)N_f + N_B N_f,
\]

and consists of the following components:

1. \( 5N_a N_B N_f \log N_f \) for FFT.
2. \( N_B N_a N_f \) for fringe and fractional-delay corrections, as well as beam steering.
3. \( N_B N_f (N_a N_B + N_B - 1) \) for PA beam formation, including addition, squaring, and integration.
4. \( N_B N_a N_f + (N_a - 1)(N_B - 1)N_f \) for IA beam formation, including squaring, addition, and integration.
5. \( N_B N_f \) for the PA–IA operation.

We note that for PA–IA beam formation the phase corrections for beam steering need to done before antenna addition, which requires working at the FFT resolution. However, since the maximum fringe rate of the GMRT is \( \pm 5 \text{ Hz} \) (Chengalur 1998), the maximum possible delay change even over a period as large as 1 ms is much smaller.
than the Nyquist-sampling resolution. This means that for PC beam formation from the visibilities, we can perform the differential beam steering after the visibilities have been computed. The total computation load (in number of operations per second) for visibility-based PC beam formation for one integration is

\[
5N_aN_bN_f \log N_f + N_aN_bN_f + N_bN_f \frac{N_a(N_a - 1)}{2} \\
+ (N_b - 1)N_f \frac{N_a(N_a - 1)}{2} \\
+ N_bN_f \frac{N_a(N_a - 1)}{2} + N_bN_f \left[ \frac{N_a(N_a - 1)}{2} - 1 \right]
\]

(8)

and consists of the following components:

1. \(5N_aN_bN_f \log N_f\) for FFT.
2. \(N_aN_bN_f\) for fringe and fractional-delay corrections at the pointing center (common to all beams).
3. \(N_bN_f \frac{N_a(N_a - 1)}{2} + (N_b - 1)N_f \frac{N_a(N_a - 1)}{2}\) for correlation, including multiplications and additions.
4. \(N_bN_f \frac{N_a(N_a - 1)}{2}\) for phase corrections required for steering the individual beams.
5. \(N_bN_f \left[ \frac{N_a(N_a - 1)}{2} - 1 \right]\) for visibility addition for the beam formation.

For the given GMRT configurations with 1600 beams, in PA–IA-based PC beam formation (i.e., Equation (7)), terms 2 (fringe, fractional delay, and beam steering) and 3 (PA) dominate equally and are at least 20 times higher than any other terms. Whereas for visibility-based PC beam formation (i.e., Equation (8)), terms 4 (beam steering) and 5 (visibility addition) dominate, but they are only an order of magnitude higher than the next most dominant term, term 2 (FFT). However, the contributions of terms 4 and 5 of Equation (8) increase manyfold compared to the other terms, as beams are formed at high time resolutions. Considering these, one would expect that PA–IA beam formation is computationally cheaper for a small number of high time resolution beams, while the visibility-based beam formation is computationally cheaper for a large number of beams at low time resolution. The crossover point would depend on the total number of elements. We show in Figure 8 a comparison of these two computational loads as a function of the total number of beams formed, and the time resolution for a GMRT-like array of 30 antennas (upper panel), as well as an SKA Phase1 Mid like array of 256 antennas. For the GMRT array we use 200 MHz instantaneous bandwidth with 2048 spectral channels at 163.84 \(\mu\)s (upper right) and 1.31 ms (upper left) time resolution. For the SKA Phase1 Mid array (Levin et al. 2017) we use 300 MHz instantaneous bandwidth with 4096 spectral channels at 64 \(\mu\)s (lower right).
and 2.048 ms (lower left) time resolution. The figures clearly bring out the broad trends expected for time resolution and number of beams. For the GMRT, visibility beam formation is economical compared to PA–IA beam formation for time resolutions $\geq 2.048$ ms and for $\geq 800$ beams. A configuration with a small number of high-time resolution beams would be useful in searches for pulsars (especially MSPs) via targeted observations of globular clusters (GCs). GCs are the most likely hosts of exotic binary systems, like MSP main-sequence binaries, highly eccentric binaries, MSPs in evolutionary phases like Redback and Black Widow, and MSP black hole binaries, which may not form via normal stellar evolution in the disk. The multiple beams should be sufficient to cover the expected sky area within which MSPs are expelled from the center but that are still within the cluster tidal radius. A moderate number of high time resolution beams offers an opportunity to greatly increase the pulsar timing efficiency in arrays where the individual elements have a large field of view, by allowing simultaneous observations of multiple pulsars (Stappers et al. 2018). A large number of lower time resolution beams (as would be cheaper via the visibility route) would be useful in blind searches for all but the fastest pulsars.

5. Case Study of a Proposed GMRT Survey

The improvements seen in time-domain processing using PC beam formation, aided by the enhanced sensitivity of the uGMRT for the GHRSS Phase2 survey, provide the motivation to develop a time-domain survey with a PC beamformer. We compute here the estimated parameters for such a survey. As a benchmark, we consider the uGMRT 300–500 MHz band with
30 antennas, 200 MHz bandwidth, 2048 spectral channels, and visibility beam formation at a 1 ms time resolution, with about 128 beams covering a ∼10′ field of view. We note that covering the entire field of view with PC beams would require ∼1600 beams. We estimate a survey sensitivity of ∼0.1 mJy at 400 MHz (considering the radiometer Equation (4) with a 2% loss for ignoring the auto-correlation power), for a 10σ detection for a 10% duty cycle, a PC beam gain of 7 K Jy⁻¹ for 200 MHz bandwidth, 10 minutes of dwell time, and a system temperature of 106 K. We also calculate a sensitivity of 0.05 Jy as the 5σ detection limit for 5 ms transient millisecond bursts, which would correspond to weak scattering (Thornton et al. 2013).

Figure 9 shows the components required for such a time-domain survey, with the PC beamformer as specified above. The required components are shown in four different colors. Visibilities computed in the uGMRT backend (GWB; marked in blue) at 1 ms time resolution are transferred to the PC beamformer nodes (marked in orange) with an aggregate data rate of ∼3 GB s⁻¹. We aim to implement in-field phasing (Kudale & Chengalur 2017) using a sky model derived from

Figure 8. Comparison of compute costs for two ways of forming post-correlation beams for the GMRT (a) and the SKA Phase1 Mid array (b). For the GMRT, a 1.31 ms (left panel) and 163.84 μs (right panel) output time resolution is plotted, while for SKA Phase1 Mid, a 2 ms (left panel) and 64 μs (right panel) output time resolution is plotted. PA–IA beams are marked in red and visibility beams are marked in green. The costs for both beam formation modes are similar: 163.84 μs for the GMRT and 2 ms for the SKA Phase1 Mid.

Figure 9. Proposed multibeam time-domain survey with visibility beam formation. There are four functional modules, each colored differently and running on different compute hardware. Please refer to the text for further details.
the time-averaged visibilities in order to improve the coherence in phasing up to a baseline length of several kilometers. This optimizes the GMRT PA sensitivity beyond a central compact core (most current PA observations use only the antennas in the central square). In addition to deriving the phasing model, a baseline-based flag masking the bad baselines will also be generated in real time from these time-averaged visibilities. Coherent additions of these visibilities will result in 128 such visibility beams. The multi-DM search for single pulses (colored in yellow) on each of these visibility beams would need to be executed on a separate FRB cluster, followed by coincidence filtering to remove spurious events (Bhat et al. 2013). We also propose recording these 128 beams with a 1 ms time resolution, giving a total data rate of 200 MB s$^{-1}$ into a disk for a quasi-real-time search for pulsars using the core in phasing up to a baseline length of several kilometers. This time-averaged visibilities in order to improve the coherence.

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The multi-DM search for single pulses (colored in yellow) on each of these visibility beams would need to be executed on a separate FRB cluster, followed by coincidence filtering to remove spurious events (Bhat et al. 2013). We also propose recording these 128 beams with a 1 ms time resolution, giving a total data rate of 200 MB s$^{-1}$ into a disk for a quasi-real-time search for pulsars using the core in phasing up to a baseline length of several kilometers. This time-averaged visibilities in order to improve the coherence.

6. Summary

In this paper, we demonstrate that use of a PC beamformer for a radio interferometric array results in a manyfold increase of the detection significance of time-domain events, compared to the conventional incoherent and coherent array beamformer. This increase in sensitivity is driven by the lower red noise and RFI contamination of the PC beam. Post-correlation beam formation also allows one to use standard interferometric calibration techniques for calibrating the beam. We compare two different modes of PC beam formation: (1) PA–IA beam formation, which does not require computation of the visibilities; and (2) visibility beam formation, where the beam is formed from the computed visibilities. We also show that the PA–IA beam formation is computationally economical for a small number of high time resolution beams. At low time resolutions, the visibility-based beam formation is computationally cheaper. Visibility-based beam formation also allows for better control in flagging/suppressing RFI. For a multi-element feed system (e.g., Parkes multibeam system) or for a PA feed, the PC beam can also be used to subtract RFIs (correlated within the feed elements) from a feed element response (Kocz et al. 2010). These new beamforming techniques could significantly improve the sensitivity of time-domain studies with both existing (e.g., uGMRT, JVLA) and upcoming (e.g., CHIME, Amiri et al. 2018; OWFA, Subrahmanya et al. 2017) radio interferometric arrays. As a specific example, we have presented a proposed time-domain survey with the uGMRT.

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