

The artist, the audience and the cultural 'new': a study of the evolving Bengali song-culture at the turn of the 21st century

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Abstract

The economic liberalization and privatization, boom of media houses, advances in technologies have collectively had a huge impact on Indian cultural sphere. Instances of many unprecedented phenomena crop up when we look at the music culture of West Bengal by the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. In this paper I shall concentrate on Bengali music's changing face in the context of above mentioned factors. Here I shall try to bring out or understand the why-how aspects of the new song culture of Bengal and also to figure out the position of the traditional Bengali music in contemporary Bengal. It would also be important to consider the change¹ in socio-economical sphere in India while studying the 'new'² in Bengali music culture. I would like to study the 'new' in Bengali music practice being a consequence of the workings of the socio-economical and cultural ideologies post economic liberalization in India. Also the consequence of the 'new' might need to be observed a little.

Keywords: music culture, globalization, Bengali music, market, hybrid

Introduction

Today almost all of us have tape recorders, cell-phones, CD players and televisions with numerous music channels or internet access and we listen to music, watch music videos. Right from our drawing room television- set to tea stalls, clubs, parties, college-fests, religious ceremonies, films, theatres and cell-phones evidently carry a great deal of importance to study for a better understanding of the prevailing song-culture. They give us many ideas about the popular or preferred music in the contemporary time for Bengali audience³ too. A simple observation will lead us to see Hindi film music, English loud music and new Bengali band music topping the list of popularity⁴. What I am trying to suggest is that now the audiences' ears or eyes are cultured in listening or watching Hindi film music most and a little bit of English songs too (which owes much to the wide circulation of distinct cultural products made possible by the growth of mass media). This is something we just cannot deny. So, in this sort of a context if I am buying a ticket to attend a Bengali band/ an individual performance, why is that so? Or, if the audience is starting to keep some space for a Bengali song in computer,

CD-collections or cell-phones, what kind of Bengali song is to be found there?

I am not looking to do a quality oriented evaluation⁵ here. While studying this phenomenon I would rather like to see the audience as consumers of musical product. The consumers here might include people with no knowledge of music as such but with collection of songs in their room.

The “new” context

It is impossible to discuss contemporary Bengali songs without referring to the aspect of technological advancements related to song recording, electronic communications (cell phone, internet etc.) and mass media (FM radio, especially audio- visual media). This is not certainly anything new in relation to Kabir Suman's observation of how the coming in of gramophone and radio in the city of Kolkata in the early 20th century initiates the need for more new songs and artists. So, a sense of keeping up with the demands of time has been there for a long time. Similarly a more elaborate, larger space is again created for music in West Bengal when even more modern technologies like television, FM radio and internet come into play in late 20th century.

The post 1990 economic reforms in India involve liberalization and privatization of broadcasting media. The monopoly of Doordarshan over Indian broadcasting space is compromised by the advent of Cable television. Cable television opens the gate for foreign broadcasters like MTV and Star TV Network to come in India. This is followed by the introduction of a good number of new channels (including new music channels) such as Star Movies, Star Plus, Channel V, VH1, 9XM etc. to Indian television till now. Similarly, the mid-nineties India experiences the change in radio broadcast too. The privatization of radio broadcasting sector that starts in 1993 leads to the emergence of numerous FM radio channels⁶ apart from All India Radio. The entry of cable television, privatized FM radio channels and internet may be regarded as most influential social and technological developments. These technological innovations have offered Bengalis access to many more cultures apart from their own. So, it can be stated that the foreign⁷ cultures now have a new audience which includes the Bengalis too.

The urban Bengali population cannot be thought to remain unaffected by the contemporary cultural condition (the “McDonaldization” as used by George Ritzer in the context of fast-food culture). What they like to wear, eat, see/ listen to, play and how they interact all of these indicate a Westernized or globalised sense of identity. This seems to have definite correspondence with the wide circulation of ‘foreign’ cultural products and the technological evolution that I have been talking about.

Now, if we look at the Bengali audience turning into consumers of varied cultural products (including music), the Bengali cultural industry ought to feel a state of threat regarding a possible recess in its customer number. So a reboot for the Bengali song itself becomes essential. The 1990 onwards period exhibits a remarkable growth in the numbers of new music recording companies⁸ too.

The revitalization of Bengali music doesn't stop at recreating a pure Bengali essence. It

goes on further involving instances of borrowing, appropriating, improvising and shaping anew the music of Bengal. For an example, when Suman Chattopadhyay writes and sings “Uttar o to jana”, he borrows the music from Bob Dylan’s song “Blowing in the Wind”, appropriates it, improvises language and gives it a shape that can be liked or consumed by the contemporary Bengali audience. Suman Chattopadhyay’s efforts at giving new life to Bengali songs with his creative ideas concerning lyric, tone and tune seem to be very much conscious. But in this process he does not go against the West. Rather he incorporates foreign/ Western elements in his song. This is something that he himself writes about in his book on the evolution of Bengali music *Kon Pothe Gelo Gaan*. When he writes “But our people, artists have offered the European instruments a place just beside their own instruments [...] the people of this land are far more wealthy and generous in music than the West” (Suman; Trans mine), he evaluates the adoptions and appropriations as acts of being generous on the part of Bengali artists.

The psychology and economy of the “new”

Along with the emergence of ‘new’ technology and cultural attitude of the people, the idea of the ‘new’ itself turns into a driving element that can be useful while assessing the contemporary culture of Bengali music. The idea of the ‘new’ happens to adopt multiple dimensions that involve the artist’s attempt at creating the ‘new’ (Artists’ ‘new’) and the audience reception of the ‘new’ (Audience’s ‘new’). The ideology of the new would be vital to consider the connection between the global cultural consumption and Bengali songs.

On the artist’s part it must be some sort of an anxiety; that inspires him to find a new way for Bengali song. Suman Chattopadhyay would be an illustrative example for it. He is a man who has listened to, experienced, studied and admired a good deal of songs from the early to the middle of 20th century Bengal. But when his first album releases in 1992, he seems to come up with individual and new style. He neither copies nor blindly follows the artists he admires. He had already tried once, in the year 1971, to re-record Himangshu Dutta’s songs. But his proposal was rejected by the HMV music company. Almost twenty years after the rejection, this very company (HMV) releases Suman’s first album *Tomake Chai*. Only this time there are songs of a new flavour with use of colloquial Bengali, soft guitar-playing and catchy presentation. Suman also receives the Gold Disc for “outstanding sale of his first HMV cassette” (Suman) in 1992. Therefore, we can relate the anxiety in the artist to produce ‘new’ songs to the expectation of the industry and the reception of the audience.

We took a very bold step to establish contemporary music and so happened ‘Mohiner Ghoraguli’ & ‘Paraspathar’ in 1995/ 96; which was followed by ‘Chandrabindoo, Miles, Fossils & Lakkhichhara’. A new era was established in the form of ‘Band Music’ [...] (Ashaaudio.net).

These lines occur in the website of the music recording and production company Asha Audio, established in 1995. It exemplifies the industry's attitude towards the 'new' music in Bengal. It indicates the supporting stand taken up by the industry keeping the financial prospect rather risk in mind.

Abdush Shakur in his book *Sangeet Samvit* writes “Although being a third phase, after lyricist and music composer, in music the singer is the supreme and ultimate artist” (Shakur;

Trans mine). With the ideas of 'being different' and uniqueness influencing the music of the early 90's, Abdush Shakur's notion of the "third phase in music" seems to acquire another level of connotation. The third element in music eventually becomes the most important one. It is the 'singing'. In Shakur the idea of singing involves the presentation of the lyric-composition that gives it the reason to be loved and accepted. But in this changed social and cultural context we are not dealing with songs as mere aural phenomenon. With emergence of band performances, live concerts available on the internet and many other public performances- the presentation or the expression doesn't limit itself to voice anymore. "[...] anything can be reproduced or synthesized on tape except the act of performance itself" (Shakur). As it enters the realm of audio-visual, the presentation becomes more of enactment/ performance on both vocal and physical levels.

Fossils, the Bengali rock band looks to be very particular in their styling and appearance. The lead vocalist Rupam Islam has a unique voice (which makes him sound a little not Bengali sometimes in a song). Along with the particular hair-styles the members are almost all the time seen dressed in black clothes (while performing). The album covers too consist of extensive use of this colour. As if the colour black is the colour of the band. So it makes the band a brand, with the added elements to carry a rock vive, of what we may call the Bengali Rock music. This phenomenon corresponds to an account of Suman's learning music in his book *Hoye Otha Gaan* where he seems to adapt and appreciate the need to perform a song properly in relation to his experience of participating in a musical theatre.

The emphasis on presentation is not contained/ confined within the performance during consumption only. But, has its pre-consumption and post-consumption phases too. This is perceptible in the way music albums are released ceremoniously with great media- hype and the way in which songs are promoted and advertised on TV channels, internet and on FM radio. Even in Bengal these days, TV channels like *Sangeet Bangla* (launched in 2004) and *Dhoom Music* (2010); FM channels like *Amar FM* (106.2), *Friends 91.9 FM* and even *Radio Mirchi* are proving handy in promoting Bengali songs (mostly film and band songs). *Sangeet Bangla* hosted "Band a maa taram", a platform for bands in Bengal to perform and compete.

The worldwide Media play an important role in manufacturing consumers for specific products by offering them a set of 'desires' or desirables (Berger). This can have a definite relation to the evolution of the music too. For example, we often see now songs being sold with catchy taglines like- "Get the party started" or "Everybody on dance floor" either in their lyrics or on the covers of CD cassettes. These taglines at once target the population that is engaged with and those who wish to be on the 'happening' dance floor of a culture of clubs, pubs and parties. This kind of strategy of selling music builds upon both the habits and desires of the young population. So, when in a Bengali film like *Challenge*, directed by Raj Chakraborty and starring Dev suddenly a DJ starts playing a Bengali song with loud music and rap in it, this can be read both as a cultural influence of the West and as an attempt at becoming competent in today's business- world by incorporating currently dominant and desired global cultural elements. It is probably the first time that a rap is introduced in a Bengali film song. So, this is actually something new for the Bengali audience. This also suggests that this 'new' in music doesn't evolve in seclusion but happens within the reach of what is economically, socially and culturally dominant.

Anjan Dutt, a singer-composer and film director of our time, in some of his films

portrays the cultural, musical dimensions of modern day Bengali youth. He also deals with the relationship between the artist and the industry during the process of song-production in Kolkata in his film. In his directorial venture *Madly Bangalee* we come across a bunch of city-teenagers who practice rock- music and aspire to form a successful band. In *Ranjana Ami Ar Asbo na* we get to see a pop-legend at his last days helping a young female singer to achieve her goal of becoming a pop-star. The first of the above- mentioned films offer us an elaborate understanding of the city based youth; their life style, aspirations and cultural practices. The other film projects the emphasis on something new in music that is seen being regarded as essential to achieve success in the world of Bengali music. It is the “next big thing” that the music industry and the audience are looking for in this time. Therefore, if this is the overall scenario, all the experimental works going on in the world of Bengali music seem very much logical in terms of survival through adaptation. This eventually becomes more prominent with the birth of a kind of hybrid and not so ‘pure’ song-culture in Bengal.

The “new” and “old”⁹ in practice

“The seemingly contracting world, in hands of satellite and cable, is confined in the idiot-box kept in the drawing room” (“Prithibita naki”, *Abar Bachhor Kuri Pore*; Trans mine) and “I do not stay on the right side, I do not stay on the left side, I stay on both sides” (“Ami dan dike roina”, *Abar Bachhor Kuri Pore*; Trans mine) these two songs are indicative of the time we are experiencing and the cultural position that the Bengali songs hold right now. The contraction of the world generated by emerging technology, indicated in the first song of the above mentioned two, has the potential to lead to effusive cultural flux. Whether the cultural change is a conscious one or not that is a matter of debate. But there are some examples in the lyrics of some songs that carry this notion of a cultural evolution and question the possibility of a solid Bengali identity. This is what happens in Chandrabindoo song “Amra Bangali jati” where “Ami Banglai gaan gai, ami Banglar gaan gai [...] Bangla amar Jibanananda, Bangla gaaner sur”, kind of an ideal Bengali identity is parodied and challenged.

A huge number of Bengali songs use to indicate the city life, technologies and other things/ elements of everyday experience that construct a global cityscape. A good number of songs frequently use the word ‘Shahar’ and often the name ‘Kolkata’. There are actually few bands with such names that make them essentially city players. Bands like *Shahar* and *Calcutta Bluez* are few of them. Image of the city recurs in Anjan Dutt’s songs like “54- A AJC Bose Road”, “Kkhyapate shahar”, “Sabai” and “Kolkata 16” and he keeps mentioning the *neon*-lamps in many of the songs. Another Chandrabindoo song “Amar shahar” concerns with Kolkata city. Talk of city becomes prominent in Bengali film music too, as we see films like *033* and *Bapi Bari Jaa* having songs like “Onnyo Kothao Chol” and “Shahar” respectively. Reference to city-mall occurs in the song “Classroom” by Prithibi. Paraspathar in their song “Bhalobasa” mentions *Archies gallery*. The music video of the “Ke Ki Bole” song by Lakkhichhara uses the cyber-gaming technology as the video involves the characters’ participation in the virtual world of Counter Strike.

Apart from lyrics or the content, even the form (music composition) is going through a great evolution. In this regard a study of the bands and their musical practices is essential. These Bengali Bands (like- Bhoomi, Fossils, Bolpur Bluez, Underground Authority etc.)

formed mostly in the late 90's and the first decade of 21st century seems to provide the mass with a never experienced before kind of a journey. A massive amount of cultural amalgamation can be perceived in the experimental works done by the new age musicians.

Initially Bengali band had a tough time in finding a foothold as Rupam Islam in one of his 2010 interview (Nashville, USA) says while speaking about the origin of the band- *Fossils*. But the new audience seems to have accepted them with open arms. Good percentage of the contemporary culture of Bengali music especially the band culture builds up on mixing up varied cultural elements. The practices mostly involve the act of adoption¹⁰ as well as retaining¹¹.

Fossils practices Rock-n-roll in Bengali music. They use this form of a loud music that is known to be Western. But they keep the language Bengali. Therefore, if we say that *Fossils* is adopting a foreign format of music, they are also retaining the language and content mostly of their own. *Bhoomi* also is famous for their Urban-Folk genre. They in their songs like "pocha kaka" blend a Bengali dialect with Blues music (Western). *Bolpur Bluez* is also remarkable in their attempt at fusing traditional Baul songs with Jazz or other loud music. So, "Hrid majhare", when sung by *Bolpur Bluez*, does not remain only a baul song. It becomes a baul-rock. *Prithibi*, another Bengali band practices hard- rock and can be heard using a kind of vocal distortion usually called growling while uttering a Bengali lyric. *Underground Authority*, a recently-formed Kolkata based rock band performs in English, Bengali and Hindi. They are famous for re-mixing film songs, especially Hindi.

So, it would be somewhat flawed to discuss the contemporary phenomenon in Bengali music as an instance of complete cultural surrender. It can actually be read as an act of mimicry that leads towards some sort of a "hybridized" culture too. The cultural position that the "new" Bengali song seems to occupy is an intermediate one which the song "Ami Dan Dike Roina" is suggestive of; an in-between space. So, on what position does the traditional Bengali music¹² stand in this changed landscape of Bengali music?

In this respect I would like to see how Rabindra Sangeet (i.e. - Tagore song) is proving to be timeless (considering the socio-economic and cultural change). A good number of Rabindra Sangeet albums of various singers are released every year. Even when popular band like *Bhoomi* comes up with "Boro Asha Kore", a popular Tagore song collection or Cozmik Harmony¹³ releases *Kalpurush's* "Robi Rocz", it actually offers a tribute to Tagore's music as they keep the composition intact and improvise instruments only. Kabir Suman in his songs like "Kar Desh", "Dilshad" etc. brings in the names of Rabindranath, Lalon, Abbasuddin, Hemanta, Himangshu Dutta and Bhupen Hajarika. He also records Tagore songs. These can be seen as Kabir Suman's tribute to traditional, folk, bhatiyali and modern music. At this point, I think it would be important to note that the song "Dilshad" portrays the artist's zeal to revive Bengali music.

The question concerning the traditional Bengali music and its permanence (though through mutation) becomes clearer in relation to the next instance I am willing to substantiate. In 2010 a Bengali television series called *Gaaner Opore* comes on Star Jalsha Bangla. Conceptualised by Rituporno Ghosh, Produced by Ideas Creations and directed by Joideep Mukherjee, this soap involves extensive use of Tagore songs. There are use of both the traditional style of Tagore songs and recreated Rabindra Sangeet with innovations. The project

of re-invention and experimentations was helmed by music director Debajyoti Mishra. A primary concern of the soap is Tagore songs¹⁴. So Tagore song here is an element that becomes an integral part of a media production when re-contextualized for a regional entertainment TV channel. Therefore, it can be regarded as this new age industry and artists' collaboration to culturally appropriate Rabindra Sangeet after on the year of his 150th birth anniversary.

We should not look over the use of song in the theatre either while determining the situation of traditional Bengali music in contemporary cultural practices. I would like to cite another very recent case of a one-act play performed at Kalyani in the 28th National Youth Festival. Directed by Sandip Mandal and performed by the students of the University of Kalyani, this play consists of dialogues in more than one language including Bengali and English. Though the play is not a complete musical product, it has 10 to 12 minutes of music usage (the stage time of the play being 25-28 minutes). The interesting thing is that- the play starts off with a bhatiyali song "Nao charia de", a song by Abbasuddin (later sung by Swapan Basu). A story that builds up on Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and comprises of lines taken from European and Bengali writers- this would have been sufficient to discuss the multi-cultural aspect of the play. But, there is this bhatiyali song that occurs two times in the play along with some Indian classical vocal and instruments. This gives us another site where experimentation in the field of theatre generates the scope for perpetuating the traditional.

Conclusion

This change is still in process and the birth of 'new' in Bengali culture definitely owes much to the already existing bodies of cultures, both indigenous and foreign. It actually becomes difficult to talk about today's music of Bengal retaining a sense of pure Bengali culture. This change or the incorporation of some new elements evolves out of a conscious effort on the artists' part to revitalize Bengali music and its favourable reception. A music production company established in 2003 in Kolkata writes about them, "Cozmik Harmony also specializes in promoting new talent. It takes utmost care in production and marketing of these albums" (About, Cozmikharmony.com). So, we can see that this process is accompanied by a strong sense of marketing the new product too.

This marks the changed landscape of Bengali songs now a day. It is true that the contemporary phase in Bengali music is adding more and more varieties to the archive of Bengali songs and culture. Be it a Tagore song, a folk song, a film song or a band song, all of them have their audiences now. Now, we can see Rupam Islam being hired to sing Hindi rock in *Jannat*, a Rabindra Sangeet or a Bengali Rock song being incorporated in a Hindi film (*Kahaani*) or see a Baul singer (Saurav Moni) singing "Heiyo re Heiyo" fused with Western music on MTV Coke Studio. So, Bengali song is also getting its fare share of acknowledgement on a national scale today. This may be regarded as the Bengali music's steps towards achieving greater number of audience outside Bengal made possible by the social, economical and technological "new".

Notes

1. Change related to technological development and economic reforms in India following 1991 with Narsimha Rao Govt. Liberalization and privatization of broadcasting media.
2. I shall use new with quotation mark to introduce it as an idea that will carry distinct significance for the artist, audience and industry.
3. The Bengali audience I am mentioning consists mostly of youth city youth.
4. Popular in the sense of frequent played or heard in everyday scenario.
5. Evaluating the quality of the music and categorizing songs under 'good'/ 'bad' columns.
6. Privatised FM radio channels emerging during 90's and onwards. Some of the channels (with years of going operative) played in Kolkata are- Radio Mirchi (1993), 92.7 BIG FM (2006), Friends 91.9 FM (2007), Fever 104 FM (2008).
7. Foreign in the sense 'not Bengali'. It might as well include Indian cultures other than Bengali.
8. Many private music companies (involving recording, production, distribution, and marketing) were established following 1990. Few remarkable companies would be- Raga Music Communications Private Limited (1991), Asha Audio (1995) and Cozmik Harmony (2003).
9. 'Old' to denote previous, preceding or traditional.
10. Act of taking in ideas, music formats, already existing style of presentation from other culture.
11. Keeping some essentially indigenous elements alive in the new composition. So there is a sense of retaining aspects of the inherited/received culture.
12. By traditional Bengali music I understand Rabindra Sangeet, Najrul geeti, Baul songs, Folk, Bhatiyali, Kabigaan, Kirtan etc.
13. Cozmik Harmony is a music production company established in 2003.
14. Around almost fifty Tagore songs have been used in the serial. The serial was dedicated to the celebration of Rabindranath Tagore's 150th birth anniversary. Even the name of the soap is taken from one of the Tagore songs.

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