

LYRICAL AND MELODIC CONTENT OF BENGAL'S JIBONMUKHI GAAN: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract

In the early 1990s, a genre called 'Jibonmukhi Gaan' became popular in West Bengal, followed by a controversy over the word 'Jibonmukhi' which meant life oriented. Because of its name the other genres then automatically were turned to be 'Moronmukhi' i.e., death-oriented or 'Jibonbimukh' i.e., anti-life. Whatsoever controversy it raised, the term 'Jibonmukhi Gaan' was readily accepted by the younger generation while the older generation followed silently and slowly, though the established older generation artistes categorically denied its claim to be at all a melodic expression. However, Jibonmukhi Gaan for a while eclipsed all other genres of Bengali Songs and took the young generation by storm in the urban as well as rural areas; and still is, very popular among the Bengalis across the world. Though the lyrics of these songs were in Bengali reflecting the daily concerns of urban society of Bengal, but their melodies were reinterpretations of Anglo-Saxon forms, mixed with the melodies of Bengali classical and folk tradition.

Key words: Jibonmukhi Gaan, Urban Bengali folk songs, Sumon Chattopadhyay, Nachiketa Chakraborty

Introduction

In the 60s of the last century western folk and Rock music took the young generation of educated India by storm. Students in the colleges of cities such as Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Bangalore and the professional institutes such as IITs and Medical colleges were especially very enthusiast about the western music. However, access to the western music was very limited, as, except the 'Western Music' chunk in All India Radio no other source was available for the general listeners. So, personal Long-Playing Records and later cassettes were the only sources for listening to the western Folk and Rock Music. These songs inspired the then young generation to write songs related to the reality of life in colloquial language. Some famous songs were even translated in Bengali. One such song was 'Jamaica Farewell' which has more than one translated version and became very popular among the young intellectuals of Bengal. The plain and straight lyrics of the songs inspired many to write songs related to the contemporary real life, though the traditional style of writing a song was still being followed. One such lyricist and composer was Jatilshwar Mukhopadhyay. In terms of melody and writing style he was traditional but in some of his songs contents and language were very much relating to the life of contemporary Bengal. So, his songs could be considered as a predecessor of the "Jeebanmukhi Gaan".

Social Significance of the Problem

Music, art, drama and all other forms of performing arts have always had a large and indelible impact on society. Moreso in the educated and culturally rich state of Bengal which has always remained active politically and culturally and has always upheld its 'Bengal Asmita'. The strong sense of identity of its people and their belongingness to this state makes it pertinent to study how its traditional music changed under the influence of popular foreign music. The effect on the intelligentsia percolated to the common masses in a much different way that helped its traditional music evolve and be shaped differently. Also, the researcher has not come across much literature that tried to document these changes. Hence this study was conceived.

Objectives

This study focuses on documenting the impact that music has had on Bengal of 1960s which is known to be rich culturally and in performing arts. 1960s is important from the point of view of spread of foreign music by way of Rock and Roll and other styles of Western music which was growing to be popular among the people there. While the elite group liked this kind of music, in what form did it percolate the common masses makes for an interesting read. Hence this paper attempts at looking at the changes in Bengali music under the influence of hip hop and rock and roll.

Methodology

Since the researcher did not come across any work pertaining to the change in music of those times, the best method would be to document the changes in a descriptive manner. Other than using the descriptive method and documentation method, the study made use of the historical method to be able to capture the changes in music in the light of impactful names in poetry in Bengal.

Advent of Rock-Band Music in Bengal

Bengal was totally mesmerized by the power of two great poets and composer Rabindranath Tagore and Najrul Islam in the early twentieth century. But, even during their peak, yet another great poet emerged in Bengal, and he was Jibananda Das. Jibananda suffered financial hardship throughout his life and was also very introvert and loner. During his lifetime he did not get his dues, and neither was widely read. Though he was a prolific writer, he kept his works to himself. After his accidental demise at the age of 55, his works were published by his wife and got tremendous response from the literature lovers of Bengal. In fact, among the post Tagore poets he is often regarded as the first Bengali poet to truly break free from Rabindranath's imposing presence. In the 1970s Bengal's contemporary music saw the advent of its first Rock Band inspired by the poetry of Jibananda Das and western Folk and Rock style of Music. They borrowed a line from one of the poem of Jibananda "Ghoda" literally meaning horse – and named their band 'Mohiner Ghodaguli' literally meaning the 'horses of

Mohin'. This new style of music was inspired by urban folk songs of the American singer Bob Dylan and these songs had sharp comments towards the contemporary society and the hypocrisy in the people.

In 1970s, concept of these independent songs was too new to the Bengali audience who were immersed in the songs of Tagore, Najrul and other song writers independent of film music. Their uninitiated ears for rock music totally discarded these songs and the songs of Mohiner Ghoraguli were confined to the student communities only. But this movement very slowly and steadily started creating a new generation of listeners who could understand and appreciate the songs. After almost two decades of its existence this band re-published their old songs in the nineties and the songs became instant hit in both West Bengal and Bangladesh securing huge popularity and recognition not only to the band but also this style of music. However, despite being close to the contemporary life the songs were not designated as 'Jibonmukhi Gaan', rather, they were known as Bangla Rock or Band Music. This may be because of the fact that these songs were not one man show. Mohiner Ghoraguli was indeed a group of music makers having a song writer, singer, guitarist, percussionist etc.

Emergence of the new genre: the Jibonmukhi Gaan

After Mohiner Ghoraguli many new style musicians emerged in the music scene of Bengal. Poetries of iconic poets such as Jibonanada Das, Shakti Chattopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Sukanta Bhattacharya were composed and commercially published by new singers namely Lopamudra Mitra, Swagatalakshmi, Shrikanta Acharya etc. But when Suman Chattopadhyay entered the arena, he won the entire Bengal's audience with his music.

Suman Chatterjee had a solid background in musical training. He had very good exposure to the Indian Classical Music as well as various genres of Bengali regional Music. He started his career as a performer of Rabindra Sangeet in his early days. But soon he realized the world around him was not that to which these songs belonged. The Political unrest in Bengal, the Naxalite movement, the atrocities of the police towards the general public during his early youth compelled him to have a look towards the reality of life. However, his own music started appearing in the musical arena in Bengal much later in 1990s when he started publishing the songs written and composed by himself. By then he gained experience of varied cultures and music of the western world which enriched his mental scape which reflected in his songs. The content of these songs was based on the contemporary life and strife in urban Bengal, namely the city, Kolkata. Though these songs reflected the social issues, attitude of the people towards their fellow citizens, political issues, frustrations of people of different generations, Suman Chatterjee chose to translate these in simple melody and rich poetic language. Simplicity of the songs using only two or three acoustic instruments attracted listeners towards the narratives of the songs.

From the literature point of view Suman's songs were scholastic in nature. His writings reflecting the daily drudgery of life did not compel him to use abusive and slang language, which is why Bengali audience since long fed with the sophisticated and romantic language did not alienate Suman's song which happened in the case of 'Mohiner Ghoraguli'. It showed Suman's understanding about the aesthetic sensitivity of the Bengali listeners. Melodically Suman's songs were very much akin to the American and Anglo-Saxon folk songs which was simple and soft to the ears of the listeners. It is now a well-known fact that Suman was highly under the influence of Bob Dylan's songs of 1960s. Dylan's songs were anti-establishment songs but not as clamant as the protest songs are meant to be. Suman very wisely adopted this style which proved to be very effective. He interpreted four of Bob Dylans famous songs with the background of his own surroundings; these were 'O Gaanwala' inspired by 'Tamborine Man', 'Prashna gulo sahaj' inspired by 'Blown in the wind', 'Tomake Abhibadan' inspired by 'Farewell Angelina' and 'Chaichhi Tomar Bondhuta' inspired by the song 'All I really want to do'.

Suman's songs were successful in striking the chord among the Bengali listeners. Even the listeners who could not appreciate the Rock Band Music were enchanted by the music of Suman Chattopadhyay. Tired with the love songs from films or other traditional poetic genres, music lovers were excited with the new lyrical content and melody of Suman's songs with contemporary lingo. Apart from the lyrical content and style of music Suman also adopted soliloquy nature of expression and the guitar as an accompanying instrument with his songs which resemble the nature of rendition of western folk. However, Suman's songs were not merely copy of the western folk. He blended Folk melodies of Bengal, traditional melodies of Keertans and the Ragas of Indian Classical Music matching to the references in his songs which reflects his deep penetration in the art of music making. In the interludes he used the Indian classical instruments as well as western electronic instruments according to the narrative and nature of the song. Among the Indian instruments he has extensively used Flute, Tabla, Santoor and Sarod. The mellowed sound of santoor and sarod gave a distinct character to his songs.

Greater Mix in Rock, Folk and Raga based music

After Sumon, close on heels, Nachiketa Chakraborty appeared in the musical scene of Bengal. His songs reflected dehumanized society, religious bigotry, deceitful attitude of close relations, betrayals at various levels depleting values in the society. He entered the frame with Ei Besh Bhalo Achhi, a depiction of harassment in and around society. As per his recent interview in Telegraph India he always had the desire of bringing change in the society, to raise awareness among the people and for that he chose music as the medium. He had immense talent of picking up musical melodies and execute them tunefully. Owing to his upbringing in Kolkata he had exposure to all kind of music be it folk, Ghazals, Classical or Bengal's various regional genres. His creativity started showing up during his early college

days when he started writing and composing his own songs. He has a rich melodious voice which is equally adept in singing rock, folk or Raga based songs. Soon he became a rage in his college days among the younger generation. In college With his debut album 'Ei Besh Bhalo Achhi' his popularity rose to peak.

Nachiketa unlike Sumon was rustic in his expressions. His lyrics was not at all sophisticated. He wrote in rustic language protesting the so-called civil society's hypocrisy and dichotomy. Another difference between Sumon and Nachiketa was the style of music. Matching to the language of his songs Nachiketa used melodies based on Indian folk, popular and classical music.

With the consequent emergence of two such prolific composers and singer the music critics were flabbergasted. Until then, none of these two composers claimed their songs to be named Jibonmukhi Gaan. Mostly the songs non-film songs, not written and composed by Rabindra-Najrul or others of their contemporaries, were known as Bangla Adhunik literally meaning Bengali modern songs. Those songs followed the traditional trajectory of romantic expressions depicting nature or love. The songs of Sumon and Nachiketa depicting the concerns of human life forced the journalist give special attention to it. They felt need to give unique recognition to these songs thus the nomenclature 'Jibonmukhi Gaan' was coined by them.

After the enormous success of the duo Suman and Nachiketa many new singers entered this field of Jibonmukhi Gaan such as Anjan Dutta, Pratul Mukhopadhyay, Rupam Islam and many more to follow enriching the repertoire of the genre. However, apart from these soloists some musical band also followed this genre. Though Songs of the 'Mohiner Ghorafuli' are labeled as band music or Bangla Rock Band, some Bands in the later period chose to sing songs of this genre namely Chandrabindu and Bhumi. The song of Bhumi 'Baranday Roddur', a humourous take on urban lifestyle, was an instant hit. The lyrical content of Bhumi songs is not to criticize the contemporary life but simply documentation with a humourous perspective. However, songs of Chandrabindu are not so simple. They chose Satire as their weapon to critique contemporary morally degraded society. The lyrics of their songs scornfully mock the pretentious middle-class society of contemporary Bengal.

The lyrical ploy used by Chandrabindu is the shifting of time and location within the narrative frame. They use the iconic phrases from earlier literature, and songs randomly to depict the references they want to convey through their songs. Their songs in postmodern appropriation, are with amazing chronological distortions and varied appositions of real, mythological, and literary locations. In the postmodern literary landscape due to this intertextual jumble their songs are placed, where the "High" and the "Low" cultural discourses collide on a single narrative frame to offer a criticism of our current ideals.

As the audience fumbles through "times" and "spaces" due to the frequent and random use of references from earlier literature, somewhere they also become aware of the degraded moral value of the society around them. The lyrics are a reflection of the times and places they live in. The audience appears to relate to their experiences and find answers to their woes in these songs, forcing them to confront their anxieties, aspirations, pretences, religious fervour, and, most crucially, their moral convictions.

Conclusion

Music of Bengal has a long tradition over a period of almost a thousand years which comprises of religious as well as secular songs. The earliest songs of Bengal were Charyapadas, written and composed in Pali in the Buddhist era, then came various styles of Keertans. This followed by the era of Shakta Padavali and Shyama Sangeet in the religious music in the 18th century, whereas Kobi Gaan, Akhdai, Tappa were the secular songs. By the end of 19th century the Bengal's Musical repertoire got more enriched with songs written by educated intellectual writers such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Sharat Chandra Pandit popularly known as Dada Thakur etc. But by the 20th century the two brightest star in the musical arena of Bengal, Rabindra Nath Tagore and Kaji Najrul Islam, so mesmerised the audience of Bengal that almost all genres of music, earlier in vogue in Bengal, went almost into oblivion. They chose poetry as the medium to lodge their protest and complaints against the degrading moral values in the society of their times.

However, Mohiner Ghoraguli, Sumon, Nachiketa and music makers of their types in the 90's were not the forerunner of these types of songs. This path was passed through by Lalon Faqir almost a couple of centuries ago. Lalon's songs documented the same observations towards the society but his expressions were matured and philosophical in nature. In fact, many other composers and singers in twentieth century had written such songs before Sumon and Nachiketa. Bhupen Hazarika's songs reflecting the plight of the tea garden workers, hardships of life and predicament of people under oppression; The songs 'Runner' and 'Kono ek Ganyer Bodhur kotha' composed by Salil Chowdhury; All the songs of the Indian People's Theatre Association – IPTA, and some of the songs written by Jatilesar Mukhopadhyay, all these songs were written based on the hardships and plight of contemporary society. What could be more Jibonmukhi than these? However, these were the sporadic songs among the huge repertoire of romantic songs. These songs gained popularity in their time but it was short lived. The way in which the creators of satirical songs against the society emerged in the world of Bengali music one after another in the nineties, they paved way for a new genre of music i.e., Jibonmukhi Gaan, that cannot be denied. The name 'Jibonmukhi Gaan' attributed to the songs of Suman Chattopadhyay was coined by the journalists derived from the lyrical content reflecting the contemporary life and struggles of the common people. Suman became the harbinger of this genera in Bengal with the release of his debut album Tomake Chai in 1992. Nachiketa and post-Nachiketa all other music makers enriched the

repertoire of Jibonmukhi Gaan bringing the lyrical content of the modern Bengali songs more closer to the reality of life than to ponder over the esoteric realms of daily drudgery.

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