



Citybeats

Urban folk music in late-modern Calcutta

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"The literature which concerned itself with the disquieting and the threatening aspects of urban life was to have a great future...", predicted Walter Benjamin, and in this short history, rather geography, of the thriving subculture of urban folk music in the city of Calcutta, I would like you to believe that it is not only the literature but also the music of the city that was to have a great future.

The first fumbling strains of urban folk music in Calcutta can be traced back to 1976, when Moheener Ghoraguli (Moheen's Horses) (naming themselves in an allusion to the prominent *Bangla* modernist poet Jibanananda Das), emerged as a band while the agony more than the ecstasy of the Naxalite Movement (and the nation-wide Emergency) was still fresh in the political unconscious of the Bengali people. Within the short span of five years (1976-1981) that they were around (which can safely be called the New Wave of *Bangla* urban music), the band's repertoire went on to include three records and a dozen odd public performances before it died a premature death. Most of the band members were active during the Movement – so it was not surprising that the politico-cultural beliefs of the 'ultra-left' Naxalites found their expression in many of their lyrics, which were, interestingly, also marked by an increasing awareness of a globalising modernity and its attendant

discomfort, manifest in their vision of everyday life in the city. The bandleader and primary creative force behind their music was a maverick musician Gautam Chattopadhyay – a self-taught musical genius who was equally comfortable with the *ektara* and the saxophone. Reliving their musical beginnings Gautam later wrote in a *Bangla* journal: “With full respect for all that had been accomplished in *Bangla* music till then, we realised that those songs did not articulate our thoughts and emotions. We felt intellectually deprived and underrepresented. It was from such a consciousness of intellectual marginalisation that we had spontaneously embarked on our musical odyssey”.¹

The short but illustrious trajectory of *Bangla* urban music had reached its first formal articulation in the hands of Ramnidhi Gupta in early nineteenth-century *babu*-Calcutta. *Nidhubabur Toppa* (literally Nidhubabu’s *Toppa* where ‘*toppa*’ was a semi-classical musical form), as these songs came to be known, were composed of romantic lyrics set to lighter variations of Hindustani Classical tunes, and to this day retain the strongest association with *Purono Kolkatar Gaan* – the songs of old Calcutta. Urban music thrived in the numerous minor genres like *baiithaki* or *kabigaan*, sung mainly on festive occasions till the later half of the 19th century, which saw the rise of musical geniuses like Rabindranath Tagore and Dwijendralal Roy. While Tagore left behind the vibrant legacy of *Rabindrasangeet*, Roy has been best remembered for his patriotic compositions, but both of them pioneered the use of western musical styles alongside folk elements in *Bangla* songs. The 1930s saw the beginning of the long tradition of *Bangla Adhunik Gaan* (*Bangla* Modern Songs), which continued uninterrupted well into the seventies. While no significant attempts to re/produce the immediate locality of the city – incidentally the place where most of these lyrics were composed, recorded and performed – can be discerned in these *adhunik* urban musical productions, one significant change had taken place, unnoticed, over the years. With the strict division of labour that came into the process of musical production, the performer, unlike Tagore and Roy, no longer remained the lyricist and composer of his/her own songs. This departure from earlier conventions had also significantly altered the Bengali audiences’ notion of musical performance until the rise of urban folk bands sought to displace them in the last quarter of the last century.

In this uninterrupted flow of modern *Bangla* urban music the one notable exception was of course the music of Salil Chowdhury, arguably the single most important influence on later urban folk. Chowdhury’s songs, composed in the wake of the left-wing cultural activism of the IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Association) in the 1940s and ‘50s, constituted a new sub-genre of *Ganasangeet* (Public Songs). But Salil Chowdhury’s achievement lies not only in his brilliant reworking of traditional folk tunes to convey explosive political messages, it was more importantly in his extensive use of the back-up orchestra that set the stage for the emergence of band music. In his work, the “orchestra achieved its much needed liberation” and, along with the innovative use of percussion, he accorded the accompanying instruments the status of voices capable of making statements to qualify or modify those made by the human voice.² The foregrounding of the orchestra was to become the ubiquitous feature of the musical arrangements of band music later.

The corpus of *Bangla* urban folk music has been subsequently expanded with many interesting compositions from numerous other bands and performers in the nineties and

beyond, namely Suman Chattopadhyay, Anjan Dutta, Nachiketa, Cactus, *Porospathor* (Touchstone), *Chondrobindu* (after the last letter of the *Bangla* alphabet), *Bhoomi* (Grounds) et al. But since a detailed study of all their musics falls beyond the scope of my present enterprise, I will limit my discussion only to Moheener Ghoraguli, since theirs was a pioneering effort towards a radical redrawing of the cartography of Bengali urban music. The release of their first record *Sangbigna Pakhikul o Kolkata Bishayak* (*Anxious Feathers and Of Calcutta*) in 1977 was accompanied by an introductory pamphlet that stated in a half-ironic, self-mocking fashion, the who, what and how of Moheener Ghoraguli. I would like to quote at length from it, if only to illustrate the sheer novelty that these acts imparted to the ossified notions of *Bangla* musical performances:

Moheen's horses graze in the moonlit steppes of autumn. And sing. Wingless though, at the sound of their wings being spread out, breaks the dawn of skylarks and the ebbing streams. Where dwell domestic emotions and moonless hurdles of human existence...

The neigh of Moheen's horses, or is it music?

Their ballet of swaying gallops glide beyond the cosmic horizons through drapes of moonlit fog, roving away from the homely nooks of filter-tips or palm-leaf-fans in noiseless bounds, for it is known that Moheen's horses wear no shoes.³

The songs themselves were exquisite pieces of lyrical innovation that attempted to reproduce the immediate locality of the city through an evocation of its familiar spaces. While *Songbigno Pakhikul* lends a deathly desolation to the unmistakably urban space of a runway, evoking the image of a necropolis waiting for some imminent yet unknown upheaval:

*An eerie nothingness lies
Stretched across the desolate runway,
Ominous clouds gather on the horizon
The frightened torpor of the radar,
Long out of use.
Ruffling of anxious feathers nearby...*

Bheshe Ashe Kolkata (*Drifting images of Calcutta*) speaks of a nostalgic urban reality, the experience of the first light of dawn on the city's broad, tram-lined thoroughfares:

*Drifting images of a suburban dawn
Toss upto me
On a misty Kolkata morning
A canopied childhood of kaathchanpa and krishnachura
The muffled sounds of the first tram car
Stirs within
Strains of a familiar solitude.*

Not only are the urban commonplaces inscribed with a dreamy quality that overrides their mundane presence, but the shifting boundaries between the city and its suburbs are also subsumed in a straddling together of differential spaces in the lyrical imagination of the singer. The evocation of "a kinky mess-room, semi-lit" – a familiar sight in '70s Calcutta – in the lyrics of *Ajana Uronto Bostu* (*Unidentified Flying Object*), for instance, reproduces the

immediate flavour of an urban locality but lends a surreal colour to the prosaic existence of the inmates – “four of us, airy clerks” – embodied in a dialectic of belonging and displacement in a city that seems to offer them little more than a monotonous routine of office work.⁴ In fact, what Lipsitz observed about rock music worldwide could now be said about Calcutta’s urban folk as well:

“[a] poetics of place permeates popular music, shaping significantly its contexts of production, distribution, and reception... through music we learn about place and displacement. Lament for lost places and narratives of exile and return often inform, inspire and incite the production of music. Songs build engagement among audiences at least in part through references that tap memories and hopes about particular places. Intentionally and un-intentionally, musicians use lyrics, musical forms and specific styles of performance that evokes attachment to or alienation from particular places”.⁵

And nowhere is this sense of “attachment to and alienation from” particular places expressed better than in the immensely popular lyrics of the song *Hai Bhalobashi* (*Alas, We love it all*). One of the most evocative stanzas runs like this:

*Picasso, Bunuel and the verses of Dante,
The sounds of Beatles, Dylan and Beethoven.
To walk back on a misty morning
After a nightly concert of Ravi Shankar or Ali Akbar
Is what we know we love most –
A lingering sadness, yet,
Somewhere in the deepest recesses of the mind
Unhinges the heart.*

Keeping the intellectual predicament of the urban folk singer in mind, we can see a conscious attempt to coalesce the local with global cultural modernity in these lyrics, but the evocation of the nightly concert in particular reproduces the familiar spatialised locality of the annual Dover Lane Music Conference among other things, a space where the musical preferences of Calcutta are still shaped and nurtured. The juxtaposition of Bob Dylan and Ravi Shankar on the other hand, articulates the eclectic musical choices of the convent-educated Calcutta youth growing up in late-modernity, the youth who co-habits the jazz bar and the *sangeet sammelan* – and who is thus able to relive his/her lived “locality of culture” in the song.⁶

Tomay Dilam (*For you, My Love*), a later composition which was included in *Jhora Somoyer Gaan* (*Songs from a Lost Time*), released in 1978, a collection that was edited by Moheener Ghoraguli, articulates this metropolitan sensibility, for instance of love in the city, through lyrics unprecedented in the history of *Bangla* modern songs:

*I can give you the freshness of the first shower
On the sun-scorched streets of the city,
Little else, but the familiar sights
Of trams stuck in a marching michchil,
Red and white balloons growing on the sidewalks
Rhododendrons in the city,
My gift of love.*

*Neon-lit restaurants on a city-night
The highest terrace of the tallest apartment
My love, I offer you today...
Tonight, I give you all that I could ever give
My verses of the city.*

Emotions are spatialised in this metropolitan love song, and those spaces are reproduced in an effort to bring home the distinctively modern urban flavour of the music. Lovers in the city walk the labyrinthine bylanes, the neon-lit restaurants or the terraces of jostling apartments, and the archaic musical motifs of "the moonlit bower" or the apocryphal 'Garden of Eden' celebrated in mainstream *Bangla* songs perhaps appears remote to them.

If we listen to Moheener Ghoraguli now and think in retrospect, it is not difficult to imagine that Calcutta played host to three successive International Jazz Fests (1978-80) in those heady days of the seventies where, apart from many jazz groups from all over the world, the native *Bauls* of Bengal were also called upon to perform.⁷ Radical experiments in syncretic music had already begun in *Bangla* modern songs, and taking the cue from Salil Chowdhury, Moheener Ghoraguli accomplished some startling feats in this direction, which eventually led them towards evolving their own brand of music. "Baul-Jazz",⁸ as they preferred to call it, thus became one of the fullest expressions of a creative fusion of the local (*Baul*) and the global (Jazz) ever accomplished in the history of modern *Bangla* music.

Moheener Ghoraguli, along with the similar musical endeavours that immediately followed,⁹ had ushered in radical transformations in the cultural production of *Bangla* modern songs. Apart from introducing vocal innovations like 'harmonisation' that deconstructed the sanctity of the lone voice of the singer valorised in contemporary mainstream *Bangla* music (with the exception of the choral renditions in Tagore's dance dramas),¹⁰ their experiments also had far-reaching influences on the musical arrangement and performance of modern *Bangla* music. In a departure from the choir form of singing that Salil Chowdhury had introduced and which still employed a mono-tonal singing, Moheener Ghoraguli made extensive use of harmony in their music. The notion of harmony in musical rendition was inspired in part by their self-professed mission of collective singing, a process that tried to include as many voices as possible, and partly from the desire to experiment with new musical conventions. Harmonisation had already become a common feature in the songs of prominent western groups like the Beatles and, in introducing similar tonal variations along with rustic melodies in their songs, Moheener Ghoraguli set the stage for the emergence of later band music. It is also interesting to note that the practice where the lyricist, the composer and the performer was one and the same person, discontinued in modern *Bangla* music since the 1930s, once again became the norm in the hands of these experimental music bands. Be it the musical arrangements that once even included a seven-piece orchestra – for *Ajana Uronto Bostu (Unidentified Flying Object)*¹¹ – or stage performances that were accompanied by extra-musical histrionics that was not always well received by a passive urban audience, Moheener Ghoraguli had zealously redefined the performative aspect of modern *Bangla*