Songs of Life in Calcutta

Protest and Social Commentary in Contemporary Bengali Popular Music

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Abstract

This article deals with the construction of local identity in Calcutta (Kolkata) through the reappropriation of Western forms of popular music. The focus is on the acculturation process which has taken place in Calcutta, with a particular emphasis on popular music (jazz, rock and pop). The major questions revolve around the dimensions of globalization in the music scene and its effects on a particular setting in South Asia. An ethnographic approach can indeed provide some insights into the ways Anglo-American popular music is received as well as produced among music lovers and both amateur and professional musicians. The article explores the political and social dimensions of contemporary Bengali popular music, with an emphasis on the influence of the Naxalite movement of the 1960s and the 1970s, the circulation of American protest songs tradition in Calcutta and the emergence of the *jibanmukhi*—literally, oriented towards life—folk songs movement of the 1990s in Bengal and the Bangla rock bands movement that followed in the 2000s.

Rock music took over jazz in the 1960s as a musical form that crystallizes around a youth taste culture (Gans 1999[1974]). In West Bengal, while attempts of fusion between jazz and Indian music may have been limited in comparison with what was done in the West, rock has, in turn, undergone pro found changes at its reception. What characterizes it most is the coexistence of two scenes within it: in the first scene, lyrics are in English and stay loyal to British and American rock, whereas in the second, the lyrics are in Bengali and the songs are reinterpretations of Anglo-Saxon forms, mixed with Bengali folk tradition through the prism of the daily concerns of Calcutta (Kolkata since 2001).

If this double phenomenon is to be found in every musical culture in the world, at least where rock has left its mark, as in France, for instance, and is also to be found in other Indian cities, Bangalore, Delhi or Bombay, it is in Calcutta that this dual nature has the clearest outline. Indeed, it is there that emerged a true 'Bangla rock' movement and a new type of songs, called *jibanmukhi gaan*, that is to say, 'life-oriented songs', inspired largely by American folk songs and Latin music. Even if the market for these styles is limited to West Bengal and Bangladesh, Calcutta is indeed a 'laboratory' of the globalization of popular music. The process and challenges of globalization occur with cultural acuity

that is probably greater here than elsewhere. A possible reason for this specificity is undoubtedly the length and depth of the contact with Western culture. We have also to take into account the actual dimensions of protest, due to the turbulent political history of Bengal, which underlie in Calcutta the various emergences in the popular music world since the early 1990s.

The Globalization of Protest Songs:
Suman Chatterjee and the Jibanmukhi Movement

Jibanmukhi literally means 'oriented towards life', which puts stress on the fact that the new generation of Bengali musicians who have come up in the early 1990s, like Suman Chatterjee, followed by Nachiketa and Anjan Dutta, deal with the daily life and strife in Calcutta in their songs: social issues, poverty, frustration and anger experienced by youth. This is supposedly opposed to the 'tradition' of the modern Bengali songs (*adhunik Bangla gaan*), dating back to the seminal oeuvre of Rabindranath Tagore and its romantic themes. This kind of songs is still widely popular, with performers like Hemanta Mukherjee, Shyamal Mitra and many others. But we have to put stress on the improper character of the term 'jibanmukhi' itself, which was coined by journalists and seen as just a roughly inappropriate 'media term' by most of the musicians. Instead of a revolution, it means rather an evolution inside the Bengali modern songs' 'tradition', from romantic lyrics about love and the beauty of nature in Bengal to lyrics telling stories about the urban daily life in Calcutta.

In 1992, Suman Chatterjee, now known as Kabir Suman since his conversion to Islam, cut his first album, released by HMV, also known as the Gramophone Company of India. Its title is *Tomake Chai* (I want you). It was a critical and commercial success from the beginning. He stands up on stage with an acoustic guitar, and a keyboard, and performs songs which deal with socio-political matters. The HMV–RPG label promoted other performers such as Nachiketa, more working-class oriented and less elitist, or Anjan Dutta, more folk oriented and influenced by Bruce Springsteen. Moushumi Bhowmik, a female singer–songwriter, released albums that belong to the same tendency.

This trend is commonly regarded as 'protest songs'. Indeed, Suman criticizes religious fanaticism, Nachiketa mocks the corrupted politicians and Moushumi deals with women condition. It is quite obvious that this trend draws inspiration from Bob Dylan's, Pete Seeger's or Joan Baez' songs. However, this view is a simplistic bypass—as in 1997, in a French newspaper, *Libération*, a journalist called Suman 'the Bengali Bob Dylan'—because there is already a tradition of politically committed songs in Calcutta. On the one hand, there are nationalist songs, by Nazrul Islam, for instance, and on the other hand, there are communist songs, by Ajit Pandey, for instance, even if it is not as popular in contemporary Calcutta as it used to be.

Music and Politics in Calcutta

In this respect, we have to take into account the links between music and politics in Calcutta. The post-independence years have seen the increasing role of music in the communist movement with the development of specific Marxist songs dealing with the social condition of workers, partly inspired from the American folk movement,[1] with performers like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger—the latter has been

invited in Calcutta twice, and in 1999, a set of two cassettes was released in Calcutta by the Chintan label under a licence from Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, USA, with a booklet dedicated 'To All Singers of Hope, Protest and Struggle for Life' and a foreword by the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, a member of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M).

The turning point in the history of the links between songs and political commitment in Calcutta lies in the Naxalite movement in the late 1960s. The student unrest in those days and the violent police repression youth endured transformed the relationship of youth to political songs. The 1970s saw the emergence of an urban educated middle class and the category of youth, with its own status and subculture, but with a lesser interest in politics. Thus, music was considered as a means of self-expression and entertainment, even if it was too early for a development of popular music genres, besides the realm of film music of course. We have to mention yet a real pioneer in this trend, Gautam Chatterjee, who was involved in the Naxalite movement and tried to develop a new kind of band music in India, singing in Bengali and thus constructing a genuinely Bengali version of rock. To be more specific, he called it 'Baul jazz'. He set up a band in the 1970s, called Mohiner Ghoraguli, from the incipit of a poem by Jibanananda Das. This was the very beginning of the Bangla rock band movement.

At the same time, rock music, as well as pop and jazz, was played in Calcutta, but in the foreign residents and upper classes-oriented scene of Park Street restaurants, such as Mocambo, Magnolia or the Blue Fox. This was a traditional scene of live music and dance since the late 1950s in Calcutta, and Anglo-Indian musicians almost exclusively played this music. Gautam Chatterjee tried to promote a Bengali popular music genre at that time, but without achieving recognition from the Park Street scene.

This paved the way for the late 1980s' emergence of band music with bands like High with Nandan Bagchi and Dilip Balakhrishnan, even though they sung exclusively in English and could be considered as the founding fathers of the English rock scene. During the 1980s, we can also mention a Bengali band called Nagar Philomel, featuring Indranil Sen, who became popular by singing Rabindrasangeet (Rabindranath Tagore's songs). However, they didn't achieve a bigger success than Mohiner Ghoraguli. The triumph of Suman in 1992 may be considered as the convergence of these trends. In their turn, Suman and his following solo performers paved the way for the success of rock bands in the 1990s and the 2000s, even if their commercial performance and media visibility are closely linked to a movement of depoliticization and neutralization.

Suman Chatterjee's Early Years in Exile: Towards a Bengali Modern Folk Music

Suman Chatterjee, born in 1949, took his first steps into the world of music in 1966 at the age of 17. Trained to the interpretation of Tagore's songs, but also to the vocal classical music of north India, he began performing live and recording sessions for All India Radio. His first album as a performer was released in 1972, thanks to HMV. The political and social unrest of the time, then marked by the Naxalite movement, deeply left its mark on him. It is from these years that Suman recognized the discrepancy between his musical practice and the social and political reality of the times: the lyrics of Tagore's songs he sang aroused nothing in him because they said nothing about his daily work or his relationships with the police.

A first trip to France in autumn 1973, in order to learn Gregorian chant and, in exchange, to teach Indian vocal music, made him discover Edith Piaf, Charles Aznavour, but also Bob Dylan. It was then

that he became aware of his vocation: he wanted to become a songwriter. Back in Calcutta, he broke the contract that bound him to All India Radio to devote time to writing and composing. The state of emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in June 1975 encouraged him to leave his country again. This time, it was for Germany, where he worked as a radio journalist. But the idea of songwriting was still there. He describes his departure for Germany as an 'escape', in which a 'shock' redirected his career: he met the East German singer Wolf Biermann. Born in 1936, son of a member of communist resistant, the latter began his career as a singer–songwriter, in 1960, in the German Democratic Republic (GDR or East Germany). His texts, highly critical against the Democratic Republic, led to his being expelled to Federal Republic of Germany (FRG or West Germany) in 1976. His trajectory highly resonated with that of Suman Chatterjee, who quickly identified himself with Biermann. At one of his concerts in Cologne, Suman realized that one could, as Biermann did, use the guitar and songs to engage the audience. He understood how he should do it by watching this middle-aged man, wearing short-sleeve shirts, very simply dressed, who was singing to his classical guitar and nothing else. But Biermann also read texts, interacted with the audience, and then he sang, answered questions again or he told a funny story. Suman Chatterjee learned all that from him.

After a short return to India in 1979, Suman went away again in 1980 to the United States (US), with a contract at the radio station, Voice of America. He took the job, which he labels 'reactionary', in order to buy musical instruments, mainly keyboards, and continued his quest for his personal style. In the US, he became aware of his need to go back the same way as Tagore did, in order to adapt Bengali music to this new era. In America, he began to listen seriously to jazz and learn the basics. Meanwhile, he made some progress in mastering the art of songwriting. He had the great advantage of having a very good musical education in classical and folk music but also in the art songs of Tagore or Dwijendra Lal Roy. On that basis, he could quickly assimilate all the impulses he received from Europe and America.

A Contemporary Bengali Folk Music for the Middle Class

Suman had a great predecessor in the poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). In the nineteenth century, with the arrival of Europeans, India was awakened from a long sleep. As Tagore said, India was then like a huge python, heavy and immobile. Then came Europe. Upon contact, the snake began to move gradually. According to Suman, one might say that in a way Europe did not colonize but released Indians, and also that India was able to learn from the powers who colonized her. The arrival of electricity and the telegraph in the early twentieth century in Calcutta, then the second city of the Empire, took place before they reached most provincial towns in France. The installation of the Gramophone Company of India in Calcutta in 1902 was part of the technological changes that dramatically transformed Bengali culture.

According to Suman, Tagore's songs could be seen as the fruits of modernity:

> Naturally, when the Gramophone companies first started their business, first they started with old devotional songs and folk songs. But they saw that the middle-class wasn't really buying it. So they quickly shifted to Tagore songs and songs written by modern Bengalis. The main Adhunik Bangla Gaan was not yet there, because it was kavyagiti, meaning lyrical songs. Then came Adhunik Bangla Gaan. And my mother and father used to sing. My father used to do playbacks. He was one of the pioneers who sang Rabindranath's songs and made them

popular in India. In those days they were known as Adhunik Bangla Gaan. Naturally, because Tagore's writings were modern, so his songs were modern.[2]

But these 'modern Bengali songs' were not songs of freedom and life because of the colonial rule and its effects on the Bengali bourgeois psyche:

> Tagore is up there … This is our tradition so to say but it is also alienated from the people. The middle-class want a liberating experience with music but it was alienated from the people and their existence. Because, in your case, in the case of France, or Germany, your middle-class had had a longer period of time to evolve their existence and to gain their independence. Whereas the Indian bourgeoisie they were lackeys of the English. Had Lord Clive been defeated by Dupleix, then we would have been lackeys of the French. You understand. So this is how it had happened. The Indian bourgeoisie did not have any independence of spirit. Liberated expression did not come about in modern songs.

And he favoured the liberated folk expression, from which he draws inspiration, to the 'modern songs' tradition of Tagore.:

> … whereas in folk songs you find real liberated expression. If you hear songs of Lalan Fakir, the great Lalan who lived 200 years ago in Bengal, a Baul who wrote songs, an illiterate man who wrote songs … The way he's looking at religions, Hindus, Muslims, the caste barriers, trying to destroy them and giving free expression to love, love for one's lover and for God … freedom of expression, and the joy of expressing yourself. I'll always remember with fondness a great chansonnier in Val-de-Loire. '*Je chante la grande joie de te chanter*.' I wish I could write a song on this: I sing the great joy of singing you. If having you or not having you … So this great joy of singing you or singing me. This celebration is not there in Bengali songs.

From this observation, Suman Chatterjee realized that the Bengali middle class had never had songs that talk about its life experience and world view. Even the latest lyrics of the film industry, including those written by the great post-independence composers—most of them are Bengalis—are considered to be too neutral. According to Suman, the detour that his stay in Europe and the US forced him to make, musically speaking, paradoxically allowed him to return to the genuine Bengali 'folk texts':

> [Under the Raj], we could see that our people were under us and we were happy that we were kind of the lackeys of the rulers and we were ruling over our common people. This political tension was there and even Rabindranath could not really relate to the common man on the street and he regretted it. The man on the street, what songs was he or she singing? No one knew. But the woman and the man in the villages, they knew. And very rapidly, the gulf increased between the folk spirit of Bengali music and the urban spirit of Bengali music. When I, although I was brought up in the urban Bengali tradition, I heard Dylan, I heard the common accordion playing chanson singers on the streets. And the great Biermann … Strange, the way they played the guitar catapulted me to my folk roots. Funny that I had to go to Europe to hear songs that pushed me back to my folk roots.

He explained thus that Western folk music helped him to get rid of his stiff education and get in touch with his own folk inclination:

> Because I was brought up in the urban Bengali tradition … very proud, sophisticated … well-dressed etc. singing art songs. Alienated from my own existence, let alone the people. Even my existence. The way I make love, the

way I say I love you, the way I talk to a friend, the way I look at the sky, the way I think of my child, the way I think of failures, my little successes, my fears, my anxieties. Bengalis never wrote songs about that, in Adhunik Bangla Gaan [Bengali modern songs]. But in Bengali folk music you do find such things.

The great advantage of having modern Bengali songs was the western influence. So it was a global music. It was better to have that than not to have it. Because, that way, we could have much more variety. Brilliant varieties. Many Europeans have always wondered why are you so Europeanised? I tell them: when today you use certain spices, do you think that they are from India? You don't. So what is so European? It is humanity! Michael Faraday discovered electricity. Should we call it English? What the hell is this?

Suman realized that he had to free himself from this sense of alienation, by building up his own modern folk way of making music and making songs. That is why he chose the guitar as the best instrument to convey this conception of singing and songwriting:

Now I tried to bridge over this alienating factor by picking up the guitar at 37 almost. I was almost 37 years old when I went to Germany again with a very interesting job, as a senior editor of a Bengali department in a radio [Deutsche Welle]. So I went to a school and started learning the guitar at 37. My teacher was ten years younger than I was. He was an Italian. He said I'd never be able to play the guitar. I said I don't want to become an Al di Meola or a Julian Bream. I just want to play and sing. So he taught me the rudiments of classical music, classical guitar.

In a way, the guitar was the key factor that released his ability to write songs, from the hidden reservoir of folk melodies:

I thought that only the guitar could liberate me. Because we play the harmonium, or the piano or whatever. But I can't really pick up an instrument and go among the people. Our folk musicians do have such instruments: Dotara, etc. Beautiful instruments. Although underdeveloped because you cannot play chords on them. I have to play chords. The guitar I started with arthritic positions at 37. And when I started learning the guitar and finger picking them it was wonderful because at once the old folk melodies of Bengal came back to my mind. The hidden reservoir of melody was … Music is the only thing I've been faithful to. I have never been faithful to my wives, never been faithful to the women I love. They know it very well that I am not faithful. I have not been faithful to ideologies. I have been faithful to my friends and to music, nothing else. I give a damn. You understand? So the guitar again brought our lively Bengali folk music back to me: Baul, Kirtan, Bhawwaiya … Especially Baul and Kirtan.

Thanks to this apprenticeship, Suman could write and compose on the guitar now. He returned to Calcutta in 1989 and, at age 40, began to draw inspiration from everyday life in Calcutta, which had changed a lot since his departure. He honed his style by adapting the American folk song tradition in Bengali. In other words, he built an urban contemporary version the way Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger have urbanized and politicized folk tradition in the 1930s and the 1940s. Suman indeed met Pete Seeger the first time in 1983, and then in 1996 in Calcutta, where he was invited for a second time by the Vishwabharati University to receive a doctorate *honoris causa*. They also sang together on this occasion.

Suman's approach, which he says has taken years to develop and refine, consisted, in the beginning, in the resumption of topics from the American folk song he adapted in Bengali, changing sometimes the rhythm or the lyrics, sometimes adding a stanza. Thus, Suman made a cover of 'Where Have

All the Flowers Gone' by Pete Seeger: he added a final verse and the song became, in Bengali, the equivalent of 'Where have they Gone.' He told Pete Seeger what he had done, and the latter replied that this is how Woody Guthrie and himself proceeded, from traditional themes or existing songs. Suman has also adapted 'Blowin' in the Wind' by Bob Dylan, transforming the initial rhythm in 4/4, very common in rock music, into a less common 5/4, although it is to be found in jazz with the famous 'Take Five' by Dave Brubeck, and goes together well with the pace of some Bengali folk songs.

From this process of appropriation and re-creation, which is, in reality, common to all folk music styles and, by extension, to any popular music derived from it, Suman has gradually established a repertoire, which he presented for the first time in Calcutta in 1991. Seventeen years after his departure, he sang again, in that megalopolis, before 5,000 people who had never heard of him. The day after this concert, the *Business Standard* headlined: 'The city finds its *chansonnier*'. He said this success has proved that he could resonate with the concerns of the Bengali middle class:

> I am not a peasant, I am not a weaver, I am not a carpenter, I am a Bengali middle-class man. So I have to talk about my experiences, my problems, my life, my dreams, my bad dreams, my failures, my cowardice, my little acts of courage, my fancies, my imagination, my love, my hatred, my anger, of course my dreams for a better tomorrow.

How Music Does Politics: From the Stage to the Assembly

Music as Political Expression: Suman's Relations to the Authorities

Given his popular success, the authorities of the CPI-M (in power in Bengal from 1977 to 2011) have tried to enlist Suman Chatterjee, but without success. The West Bengal authorities' attitude towards this chansonnier with a strong social and political consciousness, contender of cultural conventions, has always been defiant, ranging from outright hostility to circumspection. The interpretation of Tagore's songs is subject to a set of rules, issued by the 'Music Board' of the Vishwabharati University. But Suman succeeded in singing Tagore's songs in 1996 with a guitar, an instrument that was not authorized by the Music Board so far. He then became one of the most popular modern performers in Bengal.

Suman said, however, that his pronouncements, when he argued, for instance, for the strikers of Kanoria jute mill in December 1993, singing for them to raise funds, have earned him numerous death threats and two murder attempts (Chatterjee 1998). The friendships forged in the US, in particular with artists and intellectuals such as Pete Seeger, Noam Chomsky or Maya Angelou, serve to protect him and allow him to make statements without fear of reprisal. He developed then a personal understanding of the relationship between music and politics:

> I have always thought that music is a political expression, just as literature is a political expression. I am consciously political in my work. It doesn't mean that I am a revolutionary. I am not a revolutionary person. I am a very common petit bourgeois individual who loves music and who loves to express himself in music. To try to see if I could write a song on this tape-recorder, on these specs; write a convincing song on

these specs, around you, around this morning. And sing convincingly to a small audience and see if they enjoy it. That's how I look at music. I remember Tchaikovski's great statement that Tchaikovski, just as a shoemaker makes shoes everyday, he wrote that he makes music everyday. I do too. I am not an artist, I am an artisan who happens to write music, who happens to write songs and who tries to play them and sing them, and get some money, that's all.

Social Commentary in Suman's Songs: Middle-class Consciousness and Performances

One of Suman's songs begins this way: 'I will make you think, I'll do/Whatever you may say/I'll bring you down in the street, I'll do'. His concerts are always accompanied by violent harangues and controversy in which he would speak out against the Government of West Bengal as well as of India, and bang on the communists as well as on the Hindu fundamentalist, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He would also occasionally make fun of his audience, who came to listen to relieve its guilty conscience. He knows that he speaks to the more affluent portions of the middle class, those who have access to political, social and cultural references he uses in his songs. His goal is to raise awareness to the plight of ordinary people, who are crowded into slums, as in the song 'Dosh Feet by Dosh Feet' ('Ten feet by ten feet', referring to the size of huts in a shantytown).

His albums are social chronicles of Calcutta, but also of India in general. One of his songs is thus dedicated to Bhopal, the city where a chemical plant, owned by Union Carbide, exploded in 1984 causing thousands of deaths and serious injuries—one of the most dramatic industrial disasters in India. While some songs are lighter, like 'Tomake Chai' ('I want you'), one of his earliest successes, others are devoted to violence against women. 'Papri De' thus bears the name of a little girl who died in hospital because of lack of care, for having swallowed a pen cap, reminding the audiences that India has one of the worst sex ratios for girls in the world, along with China. 'Anita Devan' pays tribute to this Red Cross volunteer, who was raped and murdered in Bantala, in the suburbs of Calcutta.

Although Suman Chatterjee has managed to give shape to the fears, frustrations and anger of the middle class emerging in the early 1990s, his civic consciousness is associated with an acute sense of Calcutta's vitality and its truly urban poetry. One of his anecdotes illustrates this feeling:

> One young German lady came to India and she had a very interesting comment about India, she said: '*Indien ist arm aber lustig*'. India is poor but funny. I loved it. I seriously mean it because it really is great fun to be here. I think it is not so much fun to be in France (laughter). You are never bored in India. Something is happening all the time.

The Musician Turns Politician

It is then no surprise that his musical views led him to political action. He joined the Trinamool Congress, a political party in West Bengal, founded in the late 1990s by Mamata Banerjee, who left the Indian National Congress. Suman became a Member of Parliament of India in 2009, and after a series of electoral successes, Mamata Banerjee became the Chief Minister of West Bengal in 2011.

From the Naxalite Movement to the Era of Mass Consumption: The Two Births of Bangla Rock

Gautam Chatterjee, founder of the band, Mohiner Ghoraguli, in 1970 that initiated the 'Bangla rock' movement, was one of the pioneers of Bengali youth culture, as he used to belong, in the 1960s and the 1970s, to both the Park Street dance music scene—he was one of the first Bengalis to be a part of it, alongside the Anglo-Indians—and to the highly politicized students of Presidency College. He was involved in the Naxalite movement and ended up in jail for 13 months because of his sympathy for the Maoist movement. But, in the early 1970s, these two social worlds were totally opposed. In the fashionable places on Park Street and Chowringhee Road were all the gaiety and frivolity of the whole city, from movie stars to the jet-set children, through the media crowd. Any mention of the peasant uprising was seen in these circles as the most perfect bad taste, although the term 'Naxalite' was 'endowed with an aura of exoticism and was used to impress in these circles then—ranging from good-natured bohemia to hippy style marijuana sessions' (Banerjee 1984, p. 172).

The Naxalite Uprising and its Musical Expression

The Naxalite uprising has had some success among young Bengalis because it came to crystallize an intense feeling of frustration against the education system inherited from the colonial period. Indeed, it is in the late 1960s that this system closely conformed to the old colonial model, designed to produce a highly educated elite, but with a lower status of technical personnel performing subaltern tasks, while leaving in ignorance the rest of the population. Such an educational context, according to Macaulay's will to form a 'class of interpreters' between India and the West, as mentioned in his 1835 *Minute on Indian Education* (Macaulay 1957), bore in it the seeds of the crisis. Indeed, while massification of higher education had to meet the demands of the middle class, slower economic growth reduced the employment prospects for those coming out of colleges and universities. 'The number of applications filed by unemployed graduates in India made a jump between 1953 and 1966 from 163 000 to 917 000. Thus, in the late 1960s, students were ripe for rebellion' (Banerjee 1984, p. 176).

The student protest took the shape of a kind of iconoclasm, against the educational system, teachers, statues and all the great artistic and intellectual figures from the British colonization. Thus, the young rebels, encouraged by Charu Mazumdar, Maoist leader and founder of the CPI (M-L) (Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)), destroyed portraits and statues of Gandhi, Ram Mohan Roy or Vivekananda. Although Tagore's humanism and his anti-imperialism could have proved to be useful to their cause, they did not separate in their hatred the wheat from the chaff. The choice of a poem of Jibanananda Das (1899–1954) by Gautam Chatterjee for his group—Mohiner Ghoraguli means 'Mohin's horses'—appears to be appropriate, since this name can, to some extent, even if it remains demanding from a literary point of view, refer to a breakdown with the past. In fact, Jibanananda Das began his artistic career by questioning the burden of Tagore's legacy. He personifies, interestingly, the desire for change that inspired the young Naxalites in the early 1970s.

Despite the turbulent years from 1968 to 1971, which brought down to the street a major part of Calcutta's youth, the Park Street scene continued to prosper, almost as if nothing had happened. Thus, bands singing in English, such as the Cavaliers, Cal 16 and Chequered Tricycle or The Great Bear from

1971 onwards, successfully performed in restaurants and cabarets on Park Street and Chowringhee Road, doing top 40, Beatles or Rolling Stones covers during their performances. The economic difficulties in the early 1970s, partly due to the impact of political unrest, led to a decline in this scene, owing to frequent power cuts which hit the city. Social and economic instability encouraged people to go out less often. Calcutta's youth found fewer and fewer opportunities to have fun and express themselves through music during the 1970s and the 1980s. The embryo of youth culture, limited to fractions of the most Westernized Bengali bourgeoisie and to the Anglo-Indians, came, somehow, out of the public sphere of the city or at least remained less visible.

Bangla Rock: Globalization and the Commodification of Bengali Popular Music

It was only with the movement of Bangla rock in the second half of the 1990s that it emerged again, this time in a more sustainable way and on a much broader social base. It is the success of the jibanmukhi movement and Suman Chatterjee, from 1992, which allowed the revival of Bengali rock, also known as Bangla rock. If jibanmukhi music is represented by folk singers, Bangla rock is a music genre where the individual musician vanishes behind the band. Drawing inspiration from various popular music genres, and not only rock, it is often coined 'Bangla Bands' movement. This is probably the most visible element that comes directly from rock culture, and which shows the emergence of a new youth culture in the late 1990s.

Indeed, Calcutta's youth in the twenty-first century is only distantly related to that of the 1970s. To a large extent, materialism and consumerism have replaced political consciousness. It should, however, be noted that the track Gautam Chatterjee opened, if it was part of the avant-garde alternative in 1979—at that point Mohiner Ghoraguli was literally booed on stage during one of their last concerts of this period—is now the norm in the Bangla rock scene. All the bands do covers of his songs, and the posthumous success of Gautam Chatterjee's live album (1999) has proved the posterity of his work. His lack of compromise and his political high standards have undoubtedly helped to file his album under 'cult albums' among rock music lovers in India.

Social relations embedded in popular music tend to be commodified into a realm of musical products and services sold in the market, such as CDs, concerts, magazines and musical instruments. This trend, associated with a growing individualistic iPod/iPhone culture, allowed by a more and more intense use of the web and digital tools, tends to make things more difficult for the musical expression of social movements to arise. That is also why the popularity of Gautam Chatterjee has not yet been challenged, for he represents the best articulation so far of a true rock band inclination with a mixture of Bengali folk music and Western harmony on the musical side, and a rebel attitude and political commitment with which none of contemporary Calcutta rock bands can compete.

Conclusion

In order to deepen our understanding of Bengali contemporary folk-rock music and its evolution in the last decades, we have to take into account the historical developments of folk music in Bengal, in relation to the social and political context of the times.

Thus, if we confine ourselves to a historical assessment of the relations between folk-rock style of music in Bengal and political expression, we can distinguish three phases, whereas an approach focusing only on the contemporary stage of globalization does not allow us to realize the historical depth of the phenomenon.

The 1960s were thus the first highlight of this story, because they saw the conjunction, in India and especially in Calcutta, of a global movement, driven by pop music, supported by the media, radio and cultural industries in general, a trend that found expression among Calcutta's Westernized golden youth, and of a regional movement, Naxalism, which spread among the Bengali student body and encouraged them to overthrow idols of the past. From a musical standpoint, the communist-inspired people's songs were not unconnected with Pete Seeger or Bob Dylan's protest folk music. However, the meeting of these two worlds was not yet complete.

The late 1970s and the 1980s, following the state of emergency decreed by Indira Gandhi between 1975 and 1977, were a period of decline, during which rock music almost disappeared from the Bengali music scene.

The third period, which coincided with the economic liberalization of 1991, the arrival of MTV and globalization in general, first saw the emergence of jibanmukhi music led by Suman Chatterjee. This movement was the result of a detour by the West and a return to Bengali singer–songwriter culture, which dealt now with the social and political problems of the day. This innovation in Bengali popular music paved the way for the rock bands of the mid-1990s. Indeed, these new bands claim to be influenced, at the same time, by Western popular music and by the precursors of a local appropriation of western folk and popular music idioms, that is to say Suman Chatterjee and Mohiner Ghoraguli.

This last period is the time when India entered the world cultural scene, Bengali rock ostensibly being part of the global cultural form called 'rock', but also of the difficulty of continuing to reconcile musical expression and political protest statements. This difficulty is not specifically Bengali, but various factors such as the size of the market for this aesthetic, and probably also the burden of the local heritage, make it prominent in Calcutta.

Notes

1. Roy (2010) shows how folk music has been used a tool for the building of efficient collective action, through singing and chanting together, with a strong political sense both from the musicians to the audiences, and the other way around, or how music does politics too.
2. Personal interviews in 1999; quotations from Suman Chatterjee given next come from these interviews.

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