People's Music: The Musical Repertoire of The Indian People's Theatre Association

Sumangala Damodaran

The period from the mid-thirties of the twentieth century to the end of the fifties saw the cultural expression of a very wide range of political sentiments and positions around imperialism, fascism, nationalism and social transformation in India. This period, with the years 1936 and 1943 being landmark years that saw the setting up of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) respectively, also happened to coincide with a vibrant radical ethos in many parts of the world where, among numerous political issues, the aesthetics-politics relationship was to be articulated and debated in many unprecedented ways. These organisations, that would formally use literature and culture to express political discontent, came into existence in the crucial transitional phase from colonialism to a post colonial context, when the Leftwing strand of the political movement for national liberation from colonial rule, under the leadership of the Communist Party of India, had taken a position that contrasted it from the mainstream nationalist movement. The gathering momentum towards decolonisation needed to be accelerated, according to the understanding of the CPI, but also recognising the dangers from fascism and the need to arrest its growth. The possibilities for revolutionary transformation in India appeared immense and decolonisation just the precondition for that, even as there was the need for this to happen in an atmosphere of international solidarity of working class movements. The IPTA and the PWA aimed to assimilate and build upon spontaneous cultural responses to political events taking place from the 1930s, to consciously bring aesthetics to bear on politics, in literature, theatre, music, dance, art and photography. This intervention saw the profound relevance of culture in politics and as politics.

The formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association marked a formal adoption of the idea that music dance, theatre and art would be used for the conscious articulation of protest and resistance and this was one of the early, if not the first of such attempts in India. It was the first

attempt, also, to define a national level movement which in turn would also link itself up with anti-fascist and anti-imperialist movements on a world scale, along with the Progressive Writers' Association that was formed in 1936.

The setting up of the IPTA and other such formations was a response to a perceived need for new aesthetic forms that represented the people while distinguishing themselves from the cultural traditions of the mainstream nationalist movement on the one hand and commercial theatre on the other. This 'people's art and theatre' attempted to demonstrate that 'the people' constituted legitimate subjects of art, something that explicitly became a movement from the beginning of the twentieth century.

With the formation of the IPTA, the project for progressive art, as it got articulated, was three fold as it unfolded: to construct an aesthetic of nationalism or cultural expression grounded in the nation within the Left movement; at the same time, to use the complex 'regional' traditions that cannot get subsumed by a notion of 'nationhood'; while being grounded in a notion of the national even while being expressed in diverse local terms, the emphasis on the radical, seeking to foreground exploitation, whether through colonialism or the structure of Indian society.

The IPTA's musical tradition has largely remained undocumented and hardly understood within the radical cultural tradition. Music constituted a significant aspect of the IPTA's intervention, although it has never been studied or documented systematically, either by the Left movement or by cultural historians. As a result, hardly any evidence of the IPTA's vast musical repertoire is publicly available nor is there any analysis of the debates or processes that went into the creation of music in the most vibrant period that lasted from the 1930s to the late 1950s. Although music formed an intrinsic and very important part of most performances, it was rarely discussed except when critiques were made of particular kinds of music. The available work on the IPTA looks quite literally at its theatre tradition whereas a large part of it was beyond theatre in the modern proscenium sense. Even after songs came to acquire an identity and a life that went far beyond the performance, the songs and music were not analysed for their effects, conceptually getting subsumed under the wider umbrella of theatre.

This paper analyses the different types of music that were part of the IPTA tradition's repertoire. The IPTA tradition's music, consisting of hundreds of songs written and performed in different parts of the country during the 1940s and 1950s period, played a crucial role in articulating the role of culture, and specifically music in and as politics in the country in

the historical conjuncture of the transition from colonial to post-colonial rule. 'People's music' was created out of processes of excavation, preservation, transformation and creation of forms that, in the perceptions of those involved, represented the 'people'. The musical representations of the 'people' were propelled by imperatives that were common across regions to the extent of the anti-colonial struggle, decolonisation, fascism and imperialism being overarching realities, but also localised and micro-context driven. In some cases, the debates about the appropriate forms of musical representation were explicit, whereas in others they were not, but were expressed through creative work.

In the following pages, I present a categorisation of the IPTA tradition's music into sub-genres within the overall genre of protest music.

The Folk Music-based Sub-genre: Indigenous Music and the IPTA Tradition

The use of the 'folk' idiom and the need to focus on it was the subject of much discussion within the IPTA tradition. The preoccupation with the 'indigenous' or 'folk' idiom, particularly in terms of its identification as 'truly people's music', was substantial, despite diverse interpretations and the engagement with the indigenous saw a wide variety: ranging from presenting indigenous artists or their music as they were, to using indigenous forms and tunes with political lyrics, to interpreting, mixing and borrowing between different forms, involving substantial aesthetic transformations.

Folk or indigenous music-based songs that were used extensively in the IPTA tradition can be classified into three types: first, a large number of songs where folk or indigenous forms have been directly used, as they are; second, another category of songs, where very little of the original song is retained except the tune and where direct protest themes are inserted into these commonly used tunes that can be used flexibly and satirically; and a third category of folk songs as part of composite performance, where singing and dancing or singing, dancing, storytelling and theatre go together. In fact, different uses of the folk idiom, ranging from direct use of existing and commonly used folk forms, discovering forms that were relatively unknown or had become obscure and crafting new ways of using the folk idiom were seen with different emphasis in different parts of the country.

The first category, where folk tunes were used as they were, often depicted the conditions of life of ordinary people which, in some cases like the *Bhatiali* from Bengal or the *Heer* from Punjab, needed to be sung

by expert singers often from indigenous backgrounds. In many cases, the songs were not overtly political, but were effective and popular due to the expressiveness of the forms as well as the fact that the singers were well known. In fact, it was often the Left cultural movement that brought these singers into the limelight by having them perform at political events and the songs acquired political connotations over time. In many parts of the country, there was an active effort to bring forgotten traditions back, to support dying forms, especially musical forms that belonged to marginalised sections of society like the lower castes. In fact, this was often a conscious endeavour, as we saw in the case of Andhra, Assam and Bengal, resulting from an understanding that colonialism had destroyed indigenous folk forms and suppressed spontaneous expression by people and that it was the Left's responsibility to revive this people's music, to 'be a phonograph', to use Chinese musician Guo Moro's expressive phrase.

'Selam Chacha', a *Bhatiali* song recovered and sung by Hemanga Biswas, is an example of what represents this 'documentary aesthetic'. It goes as follows:

Selam chacha selam tomar paaye
Bodo naaer maajhe banaise allah
(I salute you, chacha (uncle)
Allah has given me my big boat)

Koio giya chachir kaache
Allai more deen deeyache
Oi taanataan ghuicha gaiche
Boishe aachi paataye
(Tell chachi that allah has bestowed blessings on me
My miseries have abated
I am seated at the stern of my boat)

Jokhon aamaar kudin chilo
Chachi more shaitha lilo
Koio giya chachir kaache
Allai more deen deeyache
(When I had fallen upon bad days
Chachi made me feel welcome
My miseries have abated
I am seated at the stern of my boat)

The second category of songs that were satirical, theatrical and simple in terms of tunes, involved those that came from traditions of singing

praise and depicting glory, mostly of Hindu gods, like the *kirtan*, or imagined dialogues between mythological characters often involving discourses about 'good and bad' deeds, or were laments about calamities and times gone bad. These came from devotional song repertoires, which were different, however, from more elaborate and raga-based devotional music, from satirical folk forms, and so on. The song 'Mountbatten Mangal Kavya' (In Praise of Mountbatten) by Hemanga Biswas will demonstrate this.

Mountbatten mongol kaabyo
Hethaai shaango holo
Premaanonde baahutule raamo raamo bolo
(Here begins the Mountbatten praise song
Raise your arms in salutation and chant raama raama!!!)

Deshobaashi gaan gao shoraajo bhojon
Raghupati raaghava mountbatten
Tata birla tero naam
Jai vallabh gopaal raajaram
Jai jai raghupati raaghava mountbatten
Raghupati raaghava mountbatten
(Countrymen, sing the swaraj bhajan
Raghupati raaghava mountbatten
Your name is Tata, your name is Birla
Praise be it to Krishna and lord ram)

Another example is 'Are Bhaago London Bhaago' (Hey, run back to London) by Prem Dhawan, referring to the Cripps Mission's representatives, who were satirically referred to as evil magicians who have been sent to fool Indians.

The tunes of songs in these forms are usually repetitive, and monotonous, and their popularity is based on familiarity, easy identification and reproducibility. These kinds of songs were written in very large numbers all over the country and because they are able to accommodate all kinds of lyrics, became the type of songs most often associated with Left-wing cultural groups. This form of music can be easily sung by large groups of people in demonstrations, does not require those singing it to be trained and therefore constituted a significant part of the repertoire of political groups attempting to convey a political message.

The third category, of folk forms as part of composite performance, meant that they were not spontaneous, needed to be formally 'performed', with the performer being a singer–dancer–actor or singer–storyteller and

the success of the performance depending upon the effectiveness of the performer. Such songs by themselves rarely work on their own without the performance and they have to be powerfully delivered through theatrics. Thus, what is remembered, where the traditions survived, are the actors–singers–dancers without whom the compositions tend to fall flat. Some of the songs in the previous category were performed in this way, for example, Amar Sheikh was known not just as a powerful singer, but also as someone who showed powerful histrionics while performing. Often the theatrics would involve call-and-response mechanisms where the audience would be drawn into the performance, and often the nature of the performance would change depending upon the audience's response. This reciprocal relationship, even while there is a separation between the performers and the audience, also played a major role in the evolution of political plays, like in Malabar in Kerala, especially in the earlier period of the cultural movement. *Neram Poi, Neram Poi* (The time is up, time is up) by O.N.V. Kurup from the play *Nigalenne Communistakki* (You made me a Communist) and *Aapni Banchle* To from *Nabanna* (New Harvest) are examples of this.

As much as there was variety, as above, there were varying interpretations of how the folk idiom needed to be used. Some saw the need for the progressive cultural movement to uncover the true music of the people in order to provide the context for ordinary people to express themselves, and to preserve it in precisely that form as a celebration of the 'indigenous'. For them, it was only 'authentic' traditional folk songs that could represent the voice of the people and merely using the folk form to express political concerns not only 'distorted' indigenous culture, it was unappealing to the people. This point was made extensively by Khaled Chowdhury, the well-known stage set designer who was part of the early IPTA in Calcutta and was one of the people interviewed for this research. A large number of activists, however, saw the relevance of the folk idiom as extending beyond its own space, to be performed before national audiences and people for whom the music was not native, especially urban audiences. These questions are explored in depth later in this chapter, when questions of authenticity in the IPTA tradition's music are considered.

There were those who went still further and used the simplicity and directness of the folk idiom (both in form and content) to express something completely modern and possibly 'displaced' from the original. In Kerala, for example, we saw that activists of the KPAC decided to 'mould' folk tunes and craft a 'new folk' idiom that used simple lyrics and lilting tunes that were soon accepted as the voice of the people. This new idiom

consciously worked on the structure of folk music by introducing greater melodic content as it was felt that the Malayalam folk tradition consisted of forms that were monotonous and repetitive and that a message to change the world needed to be packaged within a new, more appealing aesthetic. A significant segment of the Kerala song tradition, therefore, used fewer 'authentic' and 'original' traditional songs in their protest song repertoire and through this also sought to define an identity of 'Malayaliness' through music and theatre. The song 'Pachhapanamtatte' (Oh Green Parakeet) by Ponkunnam Damodaran demonstrates this.

Pachhapanamtatte punnara poomutte
Poonellin Poonkarale
Uchhakku neeyente kochhuvaazha toppil
Onnuvaa ponnazhake
Pachhapanamtatte
(My dear green parakeet, my beloved parakeet
Will you come in the afternoon to my banana grove, my love)

Teyyannam teyyannam paatana paatattu
Neeyonnu paatazhake (2)
Koyyunna Koittarivalinnu kikkili
Kollunna paatupaadu, Kollunna paatupaadu
Pachhapanamtatte
(Will you come and sing in the dancing fields
Will you come and sing a sing a song
That tickles the sickle I hold in my hand)

Akkaanum maamala vettivayalaakki
Aariyan vitterinju
Akkaryam kunhinte anandappattinte
Eenamaanen kiliye, Eenamaanen kiliye
Pachhapanamtatte
(The hills yonder were flattened
To make fields which we sow
Did you know that every child here
Sings such songs)

The Indian Classical Music-Based Sub-Genre

It was in Bengal and Bombay that the IPTA repertoire saw the significant emergence of Hindustani classical music-based songs as a conscious contribution to the cultural movement. By using the term classical music-based in the Indian context, I mean the adoption of an idiom often in-

volving raga-based melodies, intricate vocal acrobatics or runs (tans) and also some improvisation. In fact, by the 1930s or so, what are referred to as semi-classical forms like the ghazal or thumri had already 'lightened' the strict rules of rendering and allowed for some meanderings around strictly modal ragas and a fixed set of notes, but what remained as an essential feature was the notion of rigour, the need for strong training and an association with tradition. With classically trained musicians such as Ravi Shankar and Jyotirindra Moitra as important members of the IPTA Central Squad, many songs of the Squad had classical raga-based tunes and because many of the members were trained musicians, they were performed extensively. These songs, mostly chorus songs with solo voices singing small parts, involved intricate tunes, modes of rendering and orchestration.

These kinds of songs were written and composed with the explicit recognition that alternative music that attempts to convey a message should not be inferior or less rigorous in form to those from the mainstream tradition and that artistes performing under the alternative tradition should be as accomplished as mainstream and commercial singers. Here, we see a move away from the emphasis on indigenous traditions that allowed for spontaneity, simplicity or reproducibilty to emphasising a different type of tradition, of India's classical music heritage and its associated rigour.

In the IPTA tradition's case, the engagement with the Indian classical idiom was because of the involvement of serious classical musicians like Ravi Shankar and Jyotirindra Moitra with the Left's cultural project.

Here again, like the category of folk, I have used the term classical music-based songs to cover at least three specific types: one, songs in the Indian nationalist tradition; two, a certain kind of music that evolved from the rapidly changing proscenium stage and in turn influenced it; and three, very close to the nationalist tradition, the heroic in the socialist tradition.

The nationalist music tradition was a reasonably well-established one by the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, its hallmark being its upbeat and heroic quality, both of lyrics and the structure and orchestration of the tunes. In fact, it had become quite common for classical musicians to include a patriotic song or two in their performances, often composed in ragas that conveyed war, valour or victory and often it was based on poetry by nationalist poets, or on poetry describing the courage of kings and queens who had fought the British, for example Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, or on a grand notion of India. In fact, as Ranade

argues, in the 'modern' format of Hindustani and Carnatic performances, it had become customary for the second half of a classical music concert to have space for 'folk' and 'devotional' compositions, the latter consisting of characteristics of classical music. Patriotic songs, often composed in ragas like Desh or Durbari that were amenable to dramatic crescendos and wide ranges of expression, thus had legitimately become 'serious' music, something that classical musicians engaged with without compromising rigour or purity. The patriotic song, two examples of which are 'Jaaga Desh Hamaara' by Ravi Shankar and 'Janani Janmabhoomi' by Amar Sheikh, was brought into the Left's protest music repertoire by the IPTA, positioned as it was at the peak of the anti-colonial struggle.

Jaaga desh hamaara jaaga jaaga desh hamaara
Goonj utha hai hark one se azaadi ka naara
Yeh sadiyon ka behta paani phoota jal ki dhaara, phoota jal ki dhaara
Jaaga desh hamaara jaaga jaaga desh hamaara
(Our country has awakened at last
The call of freedom resounds in every corner
The waters that have been flowing quietly
Have burst into strong streams
Our country has awakened at last)

Maidanon mein jhoom ke nikle laakhon hi mastaane
Talwaaron ko choom ke nikle laakhon seens taane
Har baghairat peshani pe khoon se yeh likkha hai
Who jeena hi kya jaanega jo na marna jaane, jo na marna jaane
Jaaga desh hamaara jaaga jaaga desh hamaara
(Lakhs of strong youth throng the battlefield
Lakhs of people kiss their swords and surge forth resolutely
Every martyrdom is marked in blood
Who can know about life if he doesent know how to die?
Our country has awakened at last)

What I am arguing here is that the musical complexity that came from the classical music tradition, which was first manifest in consciously political music as 'nationalist music' of the kind that I have described above, saw a significant use in Left-wing political music represented by the IPTA tradition as well, with nationalist songs on the one hand and two offshoots on the other, rousing music for the proscenium stage and the tradition of socialist heroic music. In form, the nationalist songs typically had uplifting tunes, were sung at high scales and tempos to the ac-

companiment of large orchestras using instruments like the sitar, veena, violin, tabla and the bugle. Most of these songs were openly mobilisational, exhorting people to rise up against colonialism and oppression.

The use of the classical idiom for the proscenium with substantial singing by trained singers on stage was common in Bengal, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu by the early part of the twentieth century. In fact, interesting features of traditional Indian classical and folk drama had been combined with European dramaturgy such that even when formal scripts, characterisation and dialogue delivery reflected the structure of European proscenium conventions, song and dance formed an integral part of performances. In classical Sanskrit drama as well as theatre, drawing from local traditions all over the country, songs would punctuate plays substantially. The idea of the composite performance continued to be relevant even after more 'modern', realist formats had been adopted in theatre and later in films. Within such music, there were song formats that were highly structured, based on ragas that were considered appropriate by the classical system to suit moods and situations in the plays. This was a feature of Natakasangeetham in Tamil Nadu and Natya Sangeet in Maharashtra (both meaning theatre music). In Bengal, the raga-based music of the proscenium had become more hybrid. Tagore had evolved a complex musical repertoire that was substantially raga based, but also used singing styles of church choirs as well as popular western melodies and this was used extensively in the performances of his plays.

This stylised or hybridised Indian classical music format was adapted by Ravi Shankar for the IPTA's film *Dharti Ke Lal* in the 1940s and also by Jyotirindra Moitra in 'Nabajeebaner Gaan', both about the Bengal famine. In the 1940s, the IPTA in Bombay produced several dance dramas, or ballets as they were known (Spirit of India, Kashmir, Immortal India, etc). These ballets combined narrative, songs, movement and mime, again interpreting the composite performance traditions in a new way. This was also put to good use in order to imagine a new nation, to depict variety and syncreticism, one of the chief aims of the 1940s IPTA tradition. The classical idiom, although stylised differently for different theatrical formats, was worked upon extensively in Bengal and Maharashtra. Again, the classical heroic form was used to showcase a diverse India, an imagining of the national, in opposition to imperialism. On stage, the stylised classical form was convenient, facilitating dramatic entries and exits, signifying the curtain call, being able to project a message dramatically. In fact, as noted towards the beginning of this chapter, the structure of traditional theatre performances, where music facilitated the entries

and exits of characters, as incidental fillers and to give relief to actors, was used in music effectively through the classical idiom.

Naa,naa,naa,maanbo naa maanbo naa
Koti bik kore kine nebo praan pone
Bhoyer rajye thaakbo na
(No, no, never will we accept this
We wont inhabit the land of fear)

Obhoy peyechhi nuton diner kaachhe
Dike dike taai aashaar potaaka naache
Peshite peshite rokter laal aalo
Dhue debe omaabaashyar joto kaalo
Bhoyer rajye dhukboi more thaambo na
(We found fearlessness in the new dawn
The flag of hope flutters all around us
Hues of Red blood colour our sinews
They will wash away the darkness of the moonless night
We wil fearlessly enter the land of darkness
We cannot be stopped)

Songs celebrating the socialist heroes, the common people who gave up their lives in fighting for freedom against the British and against exploitation as well, songs that called for liberation against an unjust order, also used the classical tradition being discussed here. The songs would typically talk about 'fighting to be led out of darkness into light' ('Esho Mukto Karo' in Bengali, the IPTA's anthem), the 'Red flag showing the way to freedom, the Himalayas and the oceans celebrating peoples' victories' and so on ('Balikudeerangale' in Malayalam) and would be sung by large choirs at political rallies and meetings. The celebration of heroism in the socialist tradition had a lot in common with the idioms of nationalism in many countries, following from the discussions on music aesthetics in the Soviet Union and this was seen in Indian music as well.

Balikudeerangale, balikudeerangale
Smaranakalirambam ranasmaarakangale
Ivide janakotikal chaarttunnu ningalil
Samara pulakangaltan sindooramalakal
Balikudeerangale
(O memorials for martyrs
Those which evoke memories of battles
Countless people honour those who gave up their lives

They adorn you will red garlands)

Himagirimutikal kotikaluyartti
Katalukal patahamuyartti
Yugangal neendi nadakkum gangayil
Virinju taamara mukulangal
Bhoopatangalilorindia nivarnnu
Jeevitangal tutalooriyerinju
Choondu gaana tarangangalil
Poochendukal putiya pauranunarnnu
Balikudeerangale
(The himalayas raise flags high
The oceans raise banners
Lotus flowers bloom
In the ganga where epochs swim
India had emerged tall on the world map
Shackled lives have been freed
These Song-waves signal
A new Indian is born)

At a basic level, the difference between these three types lay in whether they were responding to certain kinds of audience or were attempting to shape audiences, although structurally they might have had similarities with each other. The 'typical patriotic nationalistic song' like *Jaaga Desh Hamaara* was part of the IPTA's performances, but was a response to a certain idiom that didn't necessarily project a political stance that was any more radical than the mainstream nationalist one. The classical music-based theatre song or composition was engaging directly with a discourse that was of the Left, of focusing on exploitation, as the example of 'Nabajeebaner Gaan' demonstrates. The classical music-based 'socialist' songs went further, addressing an audience that was of the Left and that it desired to expand and hoped to see grow. All these engagements with the classical discourse involved discussions around the relevance of the classical heritage of India and the Left's assessment of it, and also the idea of imagining the national in the IPTA tradition's music.

However, from the mid-1950s the production of such protest songs, based strongly in the Indian classical tradition in India ceased, possibly because it was difficult for non-classically trained singers to sing them. With independence, relevance of the nationalist song ebbed for the Left-wing, freedom was no longer about celebrating a new nation and the

nationalist, bugle-blowing musical idiom no longer appropriate. The heroic in the socialist tradition would be addressed more through the now established genre of western compositions, to which I turn below.

The Western Idiom-based Music in the IPTA Tradition

The engagement with the western musical idiom in India and its incorporation into Indian music by the early to mid twentieth century consisted of several distinct features, relating to the stylisations that arose with the song format. First, popular western melodies were used with lyrics in Indian languages, particularly in Bengali. Often, it was in the nature of imitation of exact melodies, and later in the form of songs written that sounded 'western'. Second, the primacy of lyrics, a feature borrowed from the European song format, constituted a significant feature of these songs. Third, chordal harmony was introduced in instrumental accompaniments for songs along with the use of European instruments.

The use of chordal harmony in instrumental accompaniment to Indian sung tunes happened around the 1940s, when the IPTA came into existence. A substantial part of this development happened around film music, which was beginning to turn towards sounding western by then. Songs were being written, often based on a particular classical raga or sometimes a song would resemble a raga but contain individual phrases which would be unacceptable in a classical rendition of that raga. Given such songs, singers and composers like Pankaj Mullick used chordal harmony widely, with chordal progressions tending to be simple, generally consisting of primary major and minor triads built on the scale tones of the melody. In other words, the harmony embellished the primary melody through the use of the idea of 'samvad' or natural harmony, even if the notes in the chordal harmony were not present in the main melody.

It is in this overall milieu that the IPTA consciously engaged with the western musical idiom, resulting in a distinct sub-genre that consisted of western music-based songs. The earliest introduction of the western idiom in the IPTA tradition's music was through translations of well-known anti-fascist and socialist anthems. The translation of the Internationale, written in French by Eugène Poitier, happened in many Indian languages. Along with this, there were direct translations and reproductions of French, English and Russian socialist compositions, mostly in the nature of anthems ('The Youth International', La Marseilles, 'Red Army Song', 'We Shall Overcome'). These were in the nature of direct reproduction of the western tunes in Indian languages.

Quite apart from such translations, the influence of the western mu-

sical idiom was seen strongly in Hindi and Bengali. There emerged a distinct category of western songs being adapted to the Indian context, with Indianised inflexions in western tunes, changes in meter or beat patterns to suit Indian tastes. Two examples being presented here are a song by Bhupen Hazarika in Assamese about the river Loi or Brahmaputra and in Bengali about the river Ganga, paralleling Paul Robeson's song 'Ol' Man River' about the Mississippi, and Hemanga Biswas's 'John Henry' (an adaptation of a 1930s union song from the United States).

Bisteerno dopaare aushonkho maanushe
Hahaakaar shuneyo nisshabde neeraube
O ganga tumi ganga boicho kaino
(With innumerable people on both shores
How do you flow silently hearing their cries
Oh Ganga?)

Noitikotaar skholon dekhyo
Maanobotaar poton dekhyo
Nirlojjo aalosh bhaabe boicho kaino
Shohosro boroshaar unmaadonaar
Montrodiye lokkhojonere
Shobol shongraame aarogrograame
Koretolona kaino
Bisteerno Dopaare
(You have seen principles die
You have seen humanity decline
How do you still flow along so shamelessly and lazily
Oh Ganga?)

Gyan biheen nirakkhare
Khaddobiheen naagoriker
Netribiheenotaaye mouno kaino
Unmotto dhoraar kurukkhetre
Lokkho koti bharat bashider jagaalena kaino
Bisteerno Dopaare
(You have seen citizens
Letterless and hungry
Why do you stay silent
To such blindness?
Why don't you rouse millions of Indians?
Oh Ganga?)

John Henry

Naam taar chhilo john henry
Chhilo jaino jeebonto engine
Haathudir taale taale gaan gaaye shilpi
Khushi mone kaaj kore raat din
Ho ho ho ho
Khushi mone kaaj kore raat din
(His name was John Henry
He was like a live engine
He sang to the hammer's rhythm
He sang and worked merrily all day)

Kaalo paathore khodaaye john henry
Jaanaae te kore beshi jholmol
Haathudir gaaye gaaye paathore aagun dhore
Haathudi chalano taar shombol
Ho ho ho ho
Haathudi chalano taar shombol
(he hammered at black rocks, john henry did
Sparks flew from the rock as he hammered away)

Paschim virginiar rail suronge
Pathorer pahaad kete kete
Rail line kaata hobe henrir haathudir
Ghaaye ghaaye raat jaaye kete
Ho ho ho ho
Ghaaye ghaaye raat jaaye kete
(in the rail tunnels in West Virginia
He cuts through rocky mountains
Henry's hammer will lay the railway line
He will work night after night)

In the Indian context, these songs introduced a new idiom for the hard-hitting political song, typically with ominous lyrics that urged people to rise against exploiters, musically conveyed through staccato phrases, melodies that were constructed out of notes that were not close to each other (making for greater drama) and hard drumbeats. This constituted the non-nationalist socialist idiom in Indian music, the Left-wing marching song that is also rendered forcefully and dramatically, an idiom that continued to be used extensively in the decades that followed. However, even this sub-genre maintained the formal structure of the typical song,

i.e. with an established melodic pattern, strict differentiation between refrain and verse components, a constant beat pattern throughout the song, and so on. What had changed was the use of voice, the approach to the notes and the use of newer kinds of melodies. With such songs, this kind of western idiom had become a typical signifier of revolutionary music.

However, it was with Salil Chowdhury and the corpus of work he created in his association with the IPTA, where the idea of the revolutionary song changed completely and where the notion of the composition and a larger soundscape emerged, this being the third kind of song, where the western idiom formed the basis of revolutionary music.

The harmonic tradition of Chowdhury's music marked a complete departure from existing music, even that which already existed in India's 'westernized' tradition. By the 1940s, as noted above, the use of western tunes as well as western orchestration in dominantly Indian melodies was common in Bengal, for instance in Rabindra Sangeet and other music from the Brahmo tradition, compositions by Pankaj Mullick and so on. However, these innovations continued to retain the 'modal' nature of the Indian musical tradition, where a basic melody uses a certain combination of notes, whether raga-based or based on western tunes. When western orchestration was used with the main melody, what made it as pleasing as the original melody was the exploration of chordal harmony in the orchestration, with the instruments exploring notes not contained in the dominant melody, but harmonising with them. As elaborated earlier, this was however limited, with simple triads around the dominant notes of the raga or mode that the melody was based on. It could not be established whether such chordal harmony intended to challenge or disturb the fundamental consonances or dissonances inherent in the melody, or merely served as a kind of embellishment that lent variety and newness. In other words, the change in the grammer was probably merely echoing the need for variety and not fundamentally making an aesthetic point of challenging existing grammers of music, as a symbol of protest. It was probably keeping with the trends in urban popular music where variety allowed transmission to larger audiences.

Salil Chowdhury's compositions for the IPTA, exemplified by 'Dheu Utchhe' on the Naval Mutiny of 1946, moved away from the modal structure of a standard melody, based on a given pattern of notes at a given tonic scale throughout the song. Chowdhury converted the relatively uniform song format into the western classical composition format by using a series of modal melodies, each with its own given combination of notes and accompanied by harmonic orchestration, but such that each of

the pieces of the song sounded very different from the other. What was interesting was that very often, the melodies that were strung together came from folk traditions of Bengal and also other parts of the country. He broke away from the strict refrain–verse–refrain or *sthayi–antara* structure of Indian songwriting, in that sense introducing the notion of the composition and a wider idea of a soundscape using voice and instruments, rather than just voice and musical accompaniment. He also introduced significant silences, varying speeds and scales in the different sub-melodies, harmonies in singing, superimposition of one scale upon another and so on which went on to become the hallmark of the Indian choir tradition, first in Calcutta and later in Bombay and Madras. For him, thus, the creation of the new aesthetic involved innovation not only in the poetic content of the composition, but also in form.

Dheu uthchhe taara tutchhe
Aalo phutchhe praan jaagchhe jaagchhe jaagchhe
(The waves are rising, the stars are
The lights are shining, the soul is awakening)

Guru guru guru guru dam dam pinakir
Bejechhe bejechhe bejechhe
Mora bondore aaj jowar jaagaano aaj
Toraano paataano dheu uthchhe
(We can hear the drums of pinaki
As the tide rises in the harbour)

Shoshoner chaaka aaj ghurbe na ghurbe na
Neche neche dhnuaa aar uthbe na uthbe na
Chita aaj jolbe na jolbe na
Chaaka ghurbe na dhnuaa uthbe na
Chita jolbe na
Aaj hartal, aaj chaaka band
(The wheels of oppression will no longer turn
No funeral pyres will be lit,
No smoke will rise any more
The wheels will not turn, smoke will not rise,
No funeral pyres will be lit
Today we are on strike
Today the wheels will not turn)

To summarise, the western idiom in protest music in India worked with two principles that came from the westernisation imperatives preva-

lent in popular Indian music in the first four decades of the twentieth century. The first of these was the Tagorean kind of attempt at making Indian music more formal and disciplined, open to outside influences and less constrained by classical rules. The second was the introduction of variety by the use of western instruments and principles of chordal harmony that allowed for a different kind of sound from that which was traditionally available or admissible. In both these developments, the modal principles of melody making and songwriting were adhered to as was the structure giving primacy to the conventional verse–refrain structure of the song, with instrumental accompaniment allowing for greater variety, but nevertheless only being accompaniment to embellish the basic melody. These kinds of western influences were to influence the trajectory of popular music in India for decades to come and many of the musicians who took this up seriously were associated with the IPTA. The fundamental departure from existing ways of introducing western elements into Indian popular music came, as seen above, from the music of Salil Chowdhury, which not only established the harmonic tradition, but also fundamentally altered the principles of songwriting, brought in the notion of the western type of multi-modal compositions and the idea of a soundscape involving instruments and voice. This need to break away from structures that might be considered constraining while maintaining a strong connection with indigenous traditions came, I believe, from the idea that the music of protest should also question musical grammer or fundamental structures of music making.

At the heart of the varied musical conceptions of the 'people' were the questions of tradition and modernity and the kinds of realism to be undertaken. The extent and kinds of individual-based or collective music created and the degrees of fidelity to existing forms or transformations therein that musicians were grappling with were also foregrounding the question of representing the 'people'. Engagement with tradition came through exploring classical forms as well as in documenting, giving voice to and performing indigenous music. The engagement with the indigenous elements in the IPTA tradition ranged from presenting indigenous artists or their music as they were, to using indigenous forms and tunes with political lyrics, to interpreting, mixing and borrowing between different forms, involving substantial aesthetic transformations. In Bengal, this was exemplified by the debates between Paresh Dhar and Salil Chowdhury on the one hand and Hemanga Biswas and Salil Chowdhury on the other, on the need to and mode of use of indigenous forms and tunes to represent the 'people', based primarily on the supposed dichotomy

between rural and urban audiences, with the former being considered more representative of the 'people' and responding more to 'their own music and art'. In Maharashtra and Andhra, it was indigenous forms that constituted the bulk of the music of the Left and there was a process of revival of subaltern forms, with content adapted to the specific political context. Here, the music was true to form, and did not involve interpretation that changed form, but used politicised lyrics like in the first phase in Kerala. In Kerala, as pointed above the 1950s saw the coming into existence of the 'crafted' folk idiom, or an aestheticised and crafted language of the people, with strong elements from the indigenous. Here, what was being emphasised was the need for a 'new' art which would allow for the imagination of a new life to be born.

In Bengal, Assam and Bombay the IPTA repertoire saw the significant emergence of Hindustani classical music-based songs as a conscious contribution to the cultural movement. The idea of the modern was reflected in music in interesting ways as well. Translations and reproductions of French, English and Russian socialist compositions like the Internationale was one way. Quite apart from the translations, the influence of the western musical idiom was seen strongly in Hindi and Bengali. There emerged a distinct category of western songs being adapted to the Indian context, with Indianised inflexions in western tunes, changes in metre or beat patterns to suit Indian tastes. Further, the harmonic tradition of Salil Chowdhury's music marked a complete departure from existing music, even that which already existed in India's 'westernised' tradition and brought in a completely different notion of the modern.

Conclusion

The music analysed here, that which came from from the IPTA tradition, was created to respond to key political issues of the transitionary period from colonialism to independence and in the process created a landscape of the radical–popular imaginary in different parts of the country. A critical component of the imaginary was the idea of the collective of the 'real' people of the country because the radical cultural project was fundamentally about creating a new 'popular' based on old and newly imagined collectivities or solidarities. Expressed in a variety of ways musically, this popular imaginary involved the questions of the individual in the collective, of authorship in a collective movement and of multiple representations of the collective. These issues became the basis for important debates and fundamental disagreements in the Left movement and outside it, in assessments of the Left movement's cultural project. Also, the multitude

of forms and idioms that were produced naturally had an impact beyond the political space and influenced the popular entertainment forms that emerged in the new nation and its regions. People's music from the various IPTA traditions became one of the key influences on music in cinema, commercial theatre and musical entertainment in the country.

[Some parts of this paper have appeared in papers written by the author -'Singing Resistance – Music in the IPTA Tradition', chapter in Gargi Chakravartty (ed) *People's Warrior* in memory of P C Joshi, Tulika Books and 'Music and Resistance: The tradition of the Indian People's Theatre Association in the 1940s and 1950s', NMML Occasional paper 2014. Many ideas have also been taken from *'The Radical Impulse: Music in the Tradition of the IPTA'*, manuscript submitted to Tulika Books].

Select Bibliography

Dharwadker, Aparna (2009): *Theaters of Independence: Drama, Theory and Urban Performance in India since 1947,* University of Iowa Press, Iowa.

Bardhan, Gul (ed.) (1992): *Rhythm Incarnate: Tribute to Shanti Bardhan*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi.

Bhatia, Nandi (2004): *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, University of Michigan Press, Michigan.

Bhattacharya, Malini (1971): 'The IPTA in Bengal', *Journal of Arts and Ideas 2* (January–March 1983): 5–22.

Ganguly, Avishek (2002): 'Urban Folk Music in Late-Modern Calcutta', *Sarai Reader 2*, SARAI–CSDS, New Delhi.

Gopal, Priyamvada (2005): *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence,* Routledge, New York.

Indian People's Theatre Association (1993): 50th Anniversary Volume of IPTA, Calcutta.

Jain, Rekha (1992): 'Shanti-Da, My Mentor' in Gul Bardhan ed., *Rhythm Incarnate: Tribute to Shanti Bardhan,* Abhinav Publications, New Delhi.

Pradhan, Sudhi (1979–1985): *Marxist Cultural Movement in India:* Chronicles and Documents, Vols. I–III, Calcutta: Sudhi Pradhan.

Van Erven, Eugene (1992): *The Playful Revolution: Theatre and Liberation in Asia,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, USA.