

Singing Their Way Towards a Better World: People's Songs Movement in Late-Colonial and Early-Independence Bengal

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Late colonial Bengal saw a distinctive movement in literary and other art forms – new themes and bold experiments in fiction, poetry, theatre, music and pictorial art – something that had scarcely happened before. What is more, the Movement did not want to remain a mere aesthetic exercise of a handful of middle-class people. It set itself the goal of reaching down to the poor masses – the peasants and workers – and inspire them to fight for a better society. All this happened largely under the auspices of the Communist Party. In fact, the movement has been called the ‘Communist Cultural Movement’. Indeed, their ideology and organisations played an important role in forging the Movement. Since 1935, the Communists were pursuing their United Front policy in the face of the fascist threat, and they tried to forge a very broad-based cultural movement in accordance with this policy. They formed the All-India Progressive Writers’ Association (AIPWA, 1936), the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA, 1943), the Anti-Fascist Writers’ and Artist’ Association (AFWAA, 1942 – this was based in Bengal and got merged with the IPTA when the latter was formed) and other cultural bodies for this purpose. Both Communist and non-Communist writers and artists worked within these organisations in an atmosphere of amity.¹

We may also recall that this cultural movement was shaped and influenced more by the historical situation of the time than by any particular political ideology. The period under discussion was very eventful – witnessing as it did the fascist aggression in different parts of the world, the Second World War, the Japanese air-raids on eastern India, the Quit India Movement, the Bengal Famine, the final collapse of fascism, the popular upsurge after the War, the communal riots, and Independence accompanied by Partition. The cultural efflorescence of the period was primarily a response to all this. Of course, the Communists played a significant role throughout this momentous period by fighting fascism, organising anti-Japanese resistance, providing famine relief and resisting

communalism. The only important event that they kept away from was the Quit India Movement.

In this essay I will talk only about the ‘people’s song movement’,² the musical side of the Communist Cultural Movement in Bengal during those days. The first part of the essay will be a simple narrative of the origin and development of this song movement sponsored by the Communist Party, which, along with theatre, can be regarded as a frontal site of political engagement by the Communists. In the later sections, we will try to analyse the strength and weaknesses of the movement, not so much from a musicological perspective as from a political one. After all, the song movement was born out of the matrix of a politics aiming at a better world and cannot belong to the domain of pure aesthetic contemplation.

A Brief Narrative

The music under discussion was an heir to *swadeshi* music, the songs of nationalism and anti-imperialism. Almost all the composers and singers of this Communist-led song movement found their initial inspiration in *swadeshi* songs and they proudly admitted this. As nationalism broadened into socialism, ‘people’s songs’ succeeded *swadeshi* songs. The urge for freedom was no less powerful in these songs; but the concept of freedom was broader. It now meant emancipation of mankind in every sense – social, economic and political. The transformation had perhaps started from the 1920s with Kazi Nazrul Islam who expressed in his songs an urge for the liberation of peasants and workers, and also paid tribute to the Bolshevik Revolution.

Since the late 1930s, socialistic ideas made themselves felt more markedly in the composition of songs. But even after conversion to the new ideology, the composers carried on some features of the *swadeshi* songs into the new song movement – obeisance to the country as mother, passion for flora and fauna of the motherland, a longing for the golden past, lamenting the present plight, and calls to fight for salvation as well as for unity. Even in language, symbols, imageries and tunes, some of the new songs testified to the powerful influence of the old *swadeshi* songs. We might consider the ‘Song of the Independence Day’ written by Hemanga Biswas; “Wake up, citizens! Wake up/Mother India is crying in her shackles / Longing for emancipation.”³ This song gave a call to fight the terrible famine that, according to the composer, was undoing the century-old freedom movement of Indians. Included in Biswas’ verse-book *Bishan* (*The Bugle*), it was based on Iman *raga*, which had been very popular with the composers of *swadeshi* songs.

It was the Youth Cultural Institute (1939-1942) (YCI), an organisation of some Left-minded Calcutta University students, that for the first time consciously tried to forge a 'people's song movement'. The young members of YCI started with a small stock of patriotic songs by Tagore and Nazrul. Soon they started composing songs themselves. Below is a YCI song composed by Jolly Kaul, which became quite popular:

Mazdoor, mazdoor, mazdoor hai ham
Sari duniaki raja hai ham'
 (We are workers
 We are the monarchs of the whole world.)

The themes of the YCI songs were mostly based on current problems and the tunes were forceful and easy-to-learn. At functions the YCI singers often asked the audience to join in, and the latter invariably obliged.

The YCI died a premature death. But the song movement was carried on by the CPI, and its different mass fronts. Particularly after the Party had been declared legal in 1942 on adopting its People's War policy⁴, there was a spate of cultural activities focusing on anti-fascist propaganda. In all the anti-fascist functions, meetings and processions arranged by the Students' Federation, the women's front, the trade unions, the kisan sabhas and above all the IPTA, songs formed an essential part.

Kolkata, the cultural nerve centre of Bengal, was naturally the meeting place of artistic talents from all over Bengal. Thus this metropolis brought together Benoy Roy from Rangpur, Hemanga Biswas from Sylhet, Jyotindra Moitra from Kusthia and a host of other young exponents of people's songs. The growing intimacy among them stimulated their sense of purpose and creative urge. The young enthusiasts used to sing songs everywhere – on roads and in buses, thus helping to popularise them. Their cultural centre at 46 Dharmatala Street used to vibrate with songs. Apart from the rising young musicians of the IPTA, celebrities like Jnanprakash Ghosh, Sachindev Barman and Sukhendu Goswami used to frequent this place. Harindranath Chatterjee, the gifted brother of Sarojini Naidu, taught many of his own songs here. Others who used to visit 'No 46' were composers Haripada Kusari and Paresh Dhar; singer Suchitra Mukherjee (later Mitra, the famous Rabindra-sangeet exponent) along with her two elder sisters; Debabrata Biswas with his passionate and baritone voice, Hemanta Mukherjee, the rising songster; Salil Chaudhury, a very talented composer, and many others. Music was often accompanied by its sister art, dance. 'Action songs' were specially cultivated.

The song movement mushroomed in mofussil areas as well. There were many zealous composers and singers with their bases outside Kolkata, though some of them migrated to the metropolis later. Special mention must be made of the cultural squad of Sylhet, consisting of Hemanga Biswas, Nirmalendu Chowdhury, Khaled Chowdhury, Gopal Nandi and others.

Gradually the movement spread beyond the confines of a few middle-class Leftist youths to reach the masses. Members of IPTA taught their own songs to workers and peasants by holding training classes and organising music squads. They also spotted musical talents from among the latter and encouraged them to compose songs in their turn. The people of the soil had always had a rich tradition of folk music as an integral part of their life, reflecting their religious quest, mythological traditions, their day-to-day experiences and struggles for existence. Folk music had been pitched to protest against various kinds of injustice and oppression throughout history. Historical events like the Sepoy Mutiny, the Santal Rebellion, the Indigo Revolt, the martyrdom of Khudiram, the mass-awakening in the Gandhian phase of our nationalist movement had all enriched the treasury of Bengali folk songs. Now the Communists came close to the masses and influenced their musical pursuit.

Ramesh Seal, the son of a barber at a Chittagong village, had already composed songs supporting the Assam-Bengal Railway strike in 1921, and the Chittagong Armoury Raid in 1930. He had also experienced a spiritual phase in his composing career, as a devotee of the Pir of Maijhbhandar Sarif. He chanced to read a copy of *Janayuddha* (the organ of the Communist Party in Bengal) during the famine, liked the paper, made friends with the local CPI workers who used to sell it, and in due course came into the fold of the IPTA. Not only Seal but his associate *kavis* too were subject to a similar influence. They had already taken upon themselves the task of refining the locally popular genre of *kavi-gan*⁵, which had already degenerated into a crude vulgar kind of music. The Communists helped them reinvigorate *kavi-gan* by forming the Chittagong District Kavi Samity. Similarly, Gumhani Diwan, a peasant poet of Murshidabad and Nibaran Pandit, a beedi-worker⁶ of Mymensingh, were discovered by the Communists and occupied pride of place in IPTA. Here is a song composed by Pandit mocking at the middle-class *babus* who were misusing the newly introduced systems like 'control' and 'contract' during the War and causing distress to poor people. This was a Ghosa song.

My Manju's mother doesn't understand 'control' -
 Whenever she sits down to cook, she starts crying -
 She can't cook without salt.
 I fell at so many babus' feet,
 I was shoved and pushed so many times.
 (Alas) My broken hut is barely thatched.
 It rains there even without clouds.
 (My) Pitter-patter never ceases.

The workers of industrial Kolkata, mostly from the villages of Bihar and UP, participated in the song movement too. Kajri, Chaiti, Rasia etc. were their favourite mediums, and their language was of course Hindi. The music squad of tramway workers of Kolkata used to boast of talented musicians like Rahman, Chaturali, Haldhar and Dasrathlal. Gifted musicians were found also among jute workers and port workers. Then there was Gurudas Pal, a factory worker at Metiaburuz, who became a prized asset of IPTA. A song by Gurudas Pal ridiculing the blacklegs during an industrial strike is quoted below. This was in the style of Tarja:

Alas, how to save our faces?
 We have got into the clutches of a cheat.
 The crow always caws and never can say Krishna,
 However hard you teach it.
 Can rose-water make a mole smell nice?

These peasant and working-class musicians came to the notice of IPTA which brought them to limelight. But most of this folk talent flourished through kisan sabhas and trade unions, and is now lost in the oblivion of history. However, several folk forms that had been dying out for quite some time were now revived and transformed by hundreds of unknown and little-known composers, enthused by Communist association.

Another achievement of the Squad was to impress the reputed dancer Uday Shankar, resulting in quite a few years of cultural collaboration between the 'Bengal Squad' and Shankar's troupe in the shape of the 'Central Squad' of the IPTA set up in Bombay.

The people's songs extolled Marx and Engels; they applauded workers and peasants; they upheld the vision of a better world. Jyotirindra Moitra's 'Eso mukta karo mukta karo andhakarar ei dwar' (Come, open the door of darkness) became very popular and having been adopted as the theme song of the IPTA retained its popularity even much later:

We have raised the Lakshmi of life
By churning the ocean of death.
The new world asks for the artist's assurance
At this auspicious moment of creation.
Come unto the equality and unity of Association.
Come unto the friendship of the masses.
Come piercing the darkness of sorrows,
Destroying the cruel fear of destruction.
Come fill up the citadel of life.

A number of songs paid tribute to the fighting spirit of Russia and China against the fascist powers. Sadhan Dasgupta, a pioneering leader of the Communist Cultural Movement in Dhaka, poked fun at Hitler after the latter's defeat at Stalingrad:

O let go, brother Stalin!
I touch your feet,
Let me go,
I, the Aryan Hitler, am dying of shame.

But the major theme during the War period was resistance to the Japanese. Under the influence of the People's War policy, which involved support for the British and silence about all their misdeeds, the Japanese aggrandisement was described most of the time as a bid to wrest the freedom of an independent country. Sometime the composers went in a roundabout way asking people to win freedom by defeating the Japanese. All Indians who opposed the British (as during the Quit India Movement) were branded as the Fifth Column. Just a couple of examples:

Benoy Roy's anti-Japanese song 'Hoi, hoi hoi' written in the dialect of Rangpur, the first song of the verse-book *Janayuddha Gan*:

Hark, hark hark!
The Japs are coming to our village,
Come out, you young guerrillas ,
Come Rahim, come Rahaman,
Come Jogesh, come Paran,
Come out Hindus and Muslims all.

Its last stanza thus ran:

Let any son of a bitch come
We shall chop him fine.

And we shall be independent
We, kisans all.

Ramesh Seal's song decrying the Fifth Column:

There was a Bibhishan in Treat Yug,
He gave unto Rama the kingdom of Ravana.
He destroyed his own family that had sway all over the world
The Fifth Column is kindred of this Rakshasa.

Death and decay during the Bengal Famine gave birth to numerous songs, the most famous of which is Jyotirindra Moitra's *Nabajibaner Gan* (The song of a new life). This was a grand musical drama of 33 songs, a beautiful blend of folk and classical music, both Indian and Western. While analysing the sufferings of the famine victims, the composers of people's songs spared the British from any responsibility for the famine. However, as the famine songs were based on immediate experience and mourned the death of thousands, they did appeal to people. Haripada Kusari's popular famine song 'Maranshiyare daladali kare kemone banchibi bal', set to a very sad tune, appeared to have a wide appeal:

How do you expect to live by indulging in factionalism
When death is knocking at your door?

The following famine song by Nibaran Pandit was set to the tune of Bhatiali that suited sadness expressed therein:

Oh boatman!
My beloved precious jewel lies under the tree yonder.
I've bid him farewell for want of a handful of rice.
Oh boatman!
Don't bring your boat to the bank.
Keep it at the turn of the river.
I don't want to show my wretched face to anyone.
Oh boatman!
I'll just have a look at my village and take my leave for good.

As the War ended, a great awakening convulsed the country. From the winter of 1945-46, the people of India rose in a last bid to liquidate the British Raj. With the Communists leading many of these protests, the song movement reflected the militancy of the times. The Indian National Army Release Movement, the Royal Indian Navy Munity and other

movements occasioned a number of songs. Hemanga Biswas' composed the following song paying tribute to the martyrs of the INA Release Movement and eulogising the mutinous ratings of the Royal Indian Navy:

There they call –
Rameswar and Monoranjana,
Kadam Rasul and Dhiraranjan –
Don't you forget
The message written with their blood
On the thoroughfares!
The streams of the sailors' blood
Had turned the blue ocean red.
They have heard our call too
And responded!

The name to be written in red letters in this chapter of history is that of Salil Chowdhury whose songs glowed with 'The language of resistance and the fire of protest'. In tonal composition he was matchless. He used different regional musical forms and adapted Western music with great virtuosity. Here is his song 'Dheu uthchhe, kara tutchhe' composed on the occasion of the general strike called by the CPI on 29 July, 1946, in support of the ongoing strike by the employees of the Post and Telegraph Department:

Waves surge, jails break, the morning dawns and souls awaken,
Wheels of oppression will move no more, no more.
Black smoke will emanate from the chimney no more,
The funeral pyre will burn in the boiler no more, no more,
Thousands of hands are clapping strike,
Strike, strike, strike!
Strike today - today the wheels have stopped!

This song exemplifies the extraordinary effect of harmonisation that Chowdhury introduced in Bengali chorus. Along with an excellent orchestration and an amazing control of metre and tempo, Chowdhury's new technique made the song resound with the footfalls of countless marching people.

From August 1946, terrible communal riots disrupted the mass struggle. This produced a number of songs too, trying to evoke good sense. The Communist-led popular struggles continued, though on a much smaller scale than before. The Tebhaga Movement of the sharecroppers was launched in September 1946, and continued beyond independence to inspire many composers. Benoy Roy's call to avenge the

killing of Ahalya, a pregnant peasant woman of Kakdwip (a Sundarban village in south Bengal), who was killed in a clash with the police during the Tebhaga Movement:

Mother Ahalya, your child remained unborn.
 Today every home suffers labour pain for that unborn child.
 On every field there are talks about the child
 That will be born to kill hundreds of Kamsa.

Meanwhile, many changes had taken place. India achieved independence on August 15, 1947, accompanied by the grave human tragedy caused by Partition. At the Second Party Congress in 1948, the CPI rejected this independence as a deal with imperialism, and was banned by the government. Songs now registered disenchantment with independence. For example, Hemanga Biswas' song 'Mountbatten Mangalkabya', expressing disenchantment with independence:

Oh Mountbatten Saheb
 To whom did you leave your precious baton?
 Where have you gone, darkening your golden palace?
 Our Sardar weeps, so do Pandit and Maulana, (Alack)
 Delhi is submerged in tears
 Away drifts the broken Bengal.

This was a parody of a folk song sarcastically expressing the joy of poor villagers at the death of their *zamindar*. This long song with *Panchali*, *Kirtan*, the satirical use of *Ramdhun* and many other tunes proved very catchy, and was banned by the government. Sardar here stands for Vallabhbhai Patel, Pandit for Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana for Abul Kalam Azad.

Gradually, as the post-War militancy cooled, the songs became subdued in their mood. A worldwide peace movement started, in which the Communists played a leading role. This led to the composition of peace songs. Later on, the Communists participated in the general elections of 1952, and a number of election songs were composed. Missing was the earlier political fervour, and the song movement was then on the decline.

As a student of history one could simply contend that the music movement in particular and the Communist cultural movement in general well served the need of the times, particularly for the middle-class. The sufferings of humanity all around during those hard times could have made this class utterly insensitive. Instead the cultural movement helped sensitise them to the current problems and indeed made them address

some of those problems, albeit in a small way. It also helped the middle-class cultural activists forge links with the masses, even though temporarily and on a limited scale. But because this movement had an ideological basis – an ideology that cannot rest valorising the historical past but must look forward to a better future – considering this perspective, we are going to probe the movement more critically in the following sections.

Limitations as a Mass Movement

The mass contact programme of the Communist cultural activists who organised this cultural movement was most successful in the field of music – even more so than in theatre, the mass aspect of which was proclaimed with much fanfare. People's Theatre could not really become a people's movement. The drama *Nabanna*, its most famous contribution in Bengal, which is regarded as having revolutionised the Bengali theatre in content and form, could reach an urban middle-class audience in the main and the rural poor – even though they were central to the play – did not have much chance of watching it. Songs being a simple oral medium appealed to people more easily and were able to get transmitted more widely.

There developed a healthy give-and-take relationship between the middle-class proponents of the song movement, and the poor masses. The former not only organised training classes and music squads to spread the movement; in their urge to 'connect life with life' they adapted their own music to folk elements, both tonal and linguistic. Composers born in the rural areas could, because of their nearness to rural folks, imbibe folk traditions to a great depth. We may cite the example of Hemanga Biswas, son of a *zamindar* of a Sylhet village. He had been initiated into the world of music by his mother's Parban and Brata songs, by the annual Manasa Mangal festival where the lead singer was the local hut builder Mirdha. Biswas' own songs spoke the language of peasants and were set to their tunes to express their sufferings and struggles. His verse-book *Bishan* was based on Sari, Jari, Baul, Bhatiali, Santali, Dhamail, and other folk tunes, and popularised among peasants over a wide area of Sylhet, thanks to the dedicated efforts of the Sylhet Cultural Squad of IPTA. In many cases, the tunes of particular folk songs were kept intact and changes were made only in thematic content.

The same strategy was to be found in the most widely circulated song-book of the period: *Janayuddher Gan*, which ran into three editions between July and September 1942. In the first edition, most of the songs, composed by urban gentlemen borrowed folk-forms only marginally. In

the next editions, the number of songs based on folk-forms increased. A whole Hindi section was added to the third edition, keeping in mind the Hindi-speaking labourers of Calcutta.

However, Khaled Chowdhury, a talented member of the Sylhet cultural squad, who spent the remaining years of his life in search of the folk culture of Bengal, later came to believe that mere use of folk dictions and tunes cannot bridge the gap between middle-class and folk cultures.⁷ He argues that though the song by Hemanga Biswas 'O chashibhai, tor sonar dhane bargi naame' (O peasant brother, dacoits are descending on your golden paddy) was based on a folk form, the problem was that a real peasant would never address another as 'peasant brother'. This definitely sounded artificial. Moreover, the real folk composers usually accept poverty quite philosophically and even make fun of it, whereas in the People's Songs of the 1940s there were crude complaints about poverty. Thus, according to Chowdhury, despite their utmost sincerity, the middle-class composers and singers of the people's songs could not bridge the gap between the peasants and themselves.

Chowdhury tells us a funny story in this connection in a mood of self-criticism. Once he and his colleagues arranged a session of People's Songs at the house of their friend Nirmalendu Chowdhury (later to become a famous singer of folk songs), whose father was one of the *zamindars* of Sylhet. The peasants of the village were present there as audience. Khaled was singing a famine song – 'Bhukha hai Bangal' (Bengal is hungry). He had made a tableau by dabbing black smut on the body of a little girl and by making her ribs prominent by brushing them with lime. He was so carried away with emotion that tears were flowing down his cheeks. And naturally he thought that he was arousing a similar kind of emotion in the hearts of the audience. Suddenly, however, Nirmalendu came running and asked him to stop. Khaled was flabbergasted. Nirmalendu explained that he had heard the following conversation among the peasant audience. One peasant asked another – 'Do you understand the song?' The reply was – 'No. How can I? It is in Hindi!' 'Oh, the language is Hindi. But what is the content? The content is – "Muslims are *boka* (fools)."' It was a Muslim-majority locality and communal hatred was on the rise those days. The conversation had naturally alarmed Nirmalendu. This misinterpretation of the song is, however, easily explicable. In Sylhet Muslims are called *Bangal* and the word *boka* is pronounced as *bhukha*. The IPTA artists tried to move the peasants with their famine song, but did not pause to think whether they would understand its meaning.

Chowdhury's criticism needs to be considered seriously. He identifies in the people's song movement a problem that has been called 'ideology-culture dichotomy' by Dipesh Chakrabarty in a different context.⁸ Extending Chowdhury's criticism in theoretical terms with some help from Chakrabarty one can perhaps argue as follows. Ideologically the Bengali Left – at least a substantial section of them – was committed to getting declassed and struggling along with the poor masses on a basis of equality, trying to reach out to the latter with all sincerity. In the culture of everyday life, however, they as *babus* remained distant from the masses and related to them through a hierarchy of status. Their affluence, their education, their pronunciation and their very appearance were indicators of their huge difference from and also superiority over the masses. The gap between the *babus* and the peasants could not be bridged.

But we also know that a number of folk poets contributed to the People's Song Movement too. Would Chowdhury's criticism apply to them? In their case, the problem seems to be that the middle-class exponents of the song movement in trying to communicate the message of their own politics through songs moulded the folk poets according to their own ideas. And in some cases, this was likely to create tensions; the Communist endeavour to secularise folk culture, for example. Folk music always had a strong element of religiosity; and perhaps for the first time they tried to write non-religious protest songs under Communist influence. But this was not necessarily a natural and easy transition for all. As Ramesh Seal later confessed to Hemanga Biswas, his touching Maijbhandari spiritual lyrics were written from an 'inner urge' and Communist songs were composed for an 'outer movement', and hence his own preference was for the former and not the latter.

Haldharji, a tramway worker of Calcutta, composed a very catchy song – 'Kekra kekra nam baun, is jagme barha luteroya ho' in which he marked off scores of enemies of the people: mill-owners, hoarders, money-landers, Germany, Japan, Italy. But he kept completely silent about the British, a foreign power ruling and exploiting India in its own interests. Did all the folk poets, however, really like toeing the Party line mechanically?

On the other hand, we should also try and understand that apart from ideology and culture, there was another factor at work in the Communist cultural movement and that is emotion. Emotion can largely bridge the gap between ideology and culture, between *babus* and the poor masses. As the socio-political crisis intensified during that crucial 1940s and the struggle sharpened, emotion deepened too, bringing the *babus* closer to the peasants. Such emotional moments saw a strong urge on the part of

the *babu* 'outsiders' to be part of the life of the peasants and to move along with the latter to a better and equitable future, and also an urge on the part of the peasants to believe in the *babus'* intention and respond positively to the movement sponsored by the latter. The Tebhaga Movement was the high-watermark of this *babu*-peasant camaraderie. The superiority of the *babus* no longer held good. At many places the leadership was in the hands of the peasants. Somnath Hore's *Tebhagar Diary* brilliantly recorded the comradeship between the *babus* and the peasants in a Rangpur village during the Tebhaga Movement.⁹ The *babus* and the peasants were fighting shoulder to shoulder. The peasants addressed the *babus* not as 'Babu', but as 'Comrade'. Somnath Hore, an urban *babu* and an artist who was quite young at that time, used to call a local peasant leader 'Rupkantada', just as he would address any respected older member of his own middle-class society. 'Dineshda', a middle-class leader, lectured in the language of the peasants and the latter were thrilled. In the morning, while going to the field to harvest paddy, the peasants would sing "Chasi, de tor lal selam lal nisanre" (Peasant, give your red salute to the Red Flag), a song composed by Benoy Roy, a middle-class composer. At night Somnath returned to the camp (the house of the Kisan Sabha) and sat down to write about his day's experience. 'But I could not write. The *adhiyars* (share-croppers) started coming one by one. There was no serious purpose behind their coming. They just wanted to chat with us', writes Hore – a spectacle of perfect amity! Hore also writes that at such gatherings during those critical days the peasants preferred listening to the newly composed people's songs of the *babus* rather than their own traditional folk songs.

But the Tebhaga Movement did not last long. So this amity was short-lived. Ultimately the *babus* remained *babus* and the peasants remained peasants. Emotion in moments of intense struggle helped the gentlemen to largely overcome the distance between themselves and the masses. But the Tebhaga Movement failed due to a sort of purposelessness at the level of planning and decision-making that strangely coexisted with the commitment of some zealous Communists at the micro-level and not so much due to any ideology-culture dichotomy.¹⁰

We know that the Left movement did go beyond its original elite confines, albeit not very far. There remained a big gulf between the middle-class *babus* and the masses of people. This was quite natural, given the *babus'* English education and relative prosperity; and they cannot really be faulted on this ground. Rather it goes to their credit that at least some individual *babus* tried temporarily to close off this gulf. But what was really damaging for the Communist movement was that they never took

up a purposeful and practical programme with a view to changing the society. After all, the objective of the Communists was to move towards a better world and not just sponsor music, theatre etc., among the masses. If an ideology-culture dichotomy was generally true of the movement, should we not attribute this failure to the fact that something was more fundamentally wrong with their project?

Political Failure

Perhaps more vital than the cultural gap was the political failure identified by Hemanga Biswas, causing discomfort and rifts even within the middle-class stratum of the song movement.¹¹ The Communist Party during the period of our study alternated between passivity and impractical revolutionism. Concern and sympathy for the Soviet Russia was natural for the Communists. But the way they implemented the People's War policy made them, in the words of Hemanga Biswas, 'a tail affixed to the British war efforts'. Apart from the lapses of the People's War policy, there was also their bitter opposition to the all-out anti-imperialist struggle of a large number of Indians in 1942, and to a popular patriot like Subhas Chandra Bose. All this limited the popularity of People's Songs during the People's War period.

Once Hemanga Biswas ended a song with the following lines, angrily pointing his finger to both the Japanese and the British as oppressors –

The peasants of this country are starving to death
On the top of it have come the Japanese to undo us
And still the foreign government denies us freedom of action.

However, the Party leaders did not quite like this. They made Biswas add a few more lines to it – 'Organise people's Relief Committee' etc., thus changing the emphasis of the song.

The post-War popular upsurge suffused the song movement with a spirit of militancy. But this upsurge was not part of any well-formulated programme of the Communists, who could not sustain the militancy for long. Moreover, this phase of militancy soon took an unfortunate turn. The curious slogan '*ye azadi jhuta hai*' raised at the Second Party Congress in 1948 made the Communists lose the popular support that had been their mainstay. The United Front policy that has paid rich dividends for over a decade was abandoned.

This revolutionary policy of the Party, however, was not based on a concrete study of the concrete situation. It was based on quotations from Lenin, Stalin and later Mao Zedong. It was a 'revolution on Paper', so to

say. And very soon the Party abandoned its ultra-Leftist line and went to the general election of 1952 through a peace movement.

Just before the elections of 1952, the Party organ *Swadhinata* published some election songs. On reading these, Hadi Harish Barman, a folk poet from Jalpaiguri, wrote to the editor a letter entitled 'O poet, why doesn't your verse show the way to liberation?'¹² He questioned the relevance of just criticising the Congress and glorifying 'sickle and corn' (the new symbol of the Communist Party designed by Somnath Hore). He quoted in this letter a commonplace rhyme of his region:

Fluke is your name—
You have cast your net on the land;
Do you expect the fish to jump onto the land?
First of all, you will have to stir the water of the lake.

And then exhorted the Communist leaders: 'You will have to explain to the rural people in a simple way, but not in a one-sided and imperfect manner. They are simple, but not simpletons. If you try to deceive them, you will be deceived yourself.'

G P Deshpande, who was an activist himself in the Communist cultural tradition in Maharashtra, argues that the exercise of reducing the political in art to mere 'reacting and responding' rather than to 'think the political culturally' just produced simplistic slogans and posters at the hands of the lesser artists within the movement.¹³ The song movement under discussion is an example of this. The composers of people's songs mostly responded to the narrow and mechanical political line of the Communist Party and did not think the political musically.

Formalism as well as Culturalism

It is the political failure that led to an excessive obsession with aesthetic form in the Communist cultural movement of that period. All experimentation leading to advanced and complex aesthetic styles were cried down as 'formalism' which, in the field of music and theatre, meant any deviation from folk forms. For reaching out to the masses, the Communist cultural leaders stressed the revival of folk forms as the only way. Though the composers of people's songs did undertake a laudable venture in revival of such forms and quite a few folk poets themselves came up with their own creation to enrich the people's song movement, yet the movement's limitations as a mass movement as well as its decline were often attributed by the Party's aesthetic theorists to its negligence of folk forms. What one needs to realise, however, is that because folk music has

emerged from common people's life and because they are familiar with and appreciative of it, it does not automatically follow that it will inevitably inspire them in an ideological struggle. Even while recognising the simplicity and directness of the folk idiom, both in form and content, and its possible appeal to the people, one may need to consciously work on the structure of folk music to use it for popular struggles. Folk-music needs to be perfected and cannot just be reproduced in the raw. Sumangala Damodaran tells us that in Kerala, the activists of KPAC (Kerala People's Art Club aligned with the IPTA) had to mould folk tunes and craft a 'new folk' idiom, for it was felt that the Malayalam folk tradition consisted of forms that were rather monotonous and repetitive.¹⁴ Here in Bengal the idea was to keep the folk tunes intact, just inserting new words in them. Musicians like Salil Chowdhury were rare exceptions in this respect. Chowdhury dared to experiment with folk tunes in most innovative ways to enhance their appeal. And on the other hand, the fact that he used the tune of a peasants' song from Andhra Pradesh for one of his popular songs 'We won't accept this bondage' shows the universality of the appeal of folk forms that can reach out even to people of other lands.

But forms are just forms and can never compensate for weak contents. Folk forms are sites on which political and cultural struggles are forged. They can be good or bad, imprisoning or liberating, retrogressive or progressive. G.P. Deshpande has criticised the IPTA for posing a false and irreconcilable contradiction between the classical and the folk. For one thing, says he, in celebrating folk forms, it never worked out its relationship with the classical languages and traditions and thus handed them over to the orthodoxy (e.g. the error of identifying Sanskrit with Brahmin priests or Urdu with Muslims). Also, according to Deshpande, in promoting the folk, the 'progressives' of the Communist inspired cultural movement actually nurtured a kind of populism, which gradually permeated even the non-Leftist section of the middle-class. The city-bred exclusivist middle-class started nurturing an interest and pride in folk culture and thus sought to escape the boredom of the urban life.

What turned out to be most unfortunate is that when within the IPTA the question of form came to preoccupy the cultural activists, there was no constructive criticism, but just personal attacks. Many IPTA composers were accused of 'formalism' for experimentation outside the area of pure folk-forms. Salil Chowdhury, who was too talented to fit in the straightjacket of Party aesthetics, was attacked for disregarding folk-forms. Hemanga Biswas was one of those Communists who criticized Chowdhury for this reason. Here is a piece of candid self-criticism penned

by Biswas many years later¹⁶: 'To argue exclusively on folk form without giving the first consideration to content is another kind of formalism and trying to criticize Salil's formalism I myself fell a victim to the latter kind of formalism. The battle took place on the issue of forms. While criticising Salil's "Oh brother boatmen" I argued that a rebel boatman never sings this "boatman song". This song used to be sung in a "harmonised" form those days. I missed the real difference between this one and the chorus Salil had composed earlier - "Waves surging, jails breaking down", a striking example of successful harmony. Under Salil's able direction the latter song, a harmonised chorus, could successfully reflect the multifarious dimension of the consciousness of revolutionary masses on the move. But the song "Oh boatman brother" contained nothing but an abstract musical escapism. I failed to approach the question in this way. So the debate just got centred around the question – folk-form or urban-form'.

Biswas added: 'And, after all, folk-tradition and folk-music are not the same thing. A band party was introduced in our village life many years ago. Gagan Dhuli of our village formed a band party. Trumpets, trombones and clarinets were introduced in our Jatra concert. So in the present age, even if we accept the predominance of *ektara* and *dotara*, we need not be shocked to see Spanish guitars or accordions alongside them in a revolutionary chorus. But the fact remains that while we stay away from the masses and their struggle, all debates and experimentations are sure to go astray.' So according to Biswas, ultimately it was the failure of Communist politics that led to the failure of the people's song movement. He argues that the adoption of folk-forms, even in highly successful cases, is bound to be futile, if the Party fails to provide leadership to the struggling masses. Biswas once took up the tune of a popular love-song of his region – 'Ailo Shyam Kalia / Kunja sajao giya' (Shyam has come / Go, decorate the bower) and put in it the new theme of anti-Japanese resistance. This Dhamail song became very popular and used to be sung by rural people over a wide area. But then the people forgot the Japanese and 'Shyam has come' came back stealthily.

The Communists just alienated some talented artists through their aesthetic imposition and thus destroyed the vital cultural movement that was largely their own creation with the ostensible aim of bringing it closer to the people. Even during the United Front period, they had nurtured a bigoted aesthetic theory. There was a tendency to indiscriminately distribute labels like 'bourgeois' and 'feudal' for most writers of the past and present. This was due to aesthetics influenced by class-based economic determinism. Though strangely, the Communist theorists themselves remained 'invisible intelligentsia' and never theorised themselves in

their theory of class and revolution. The United Front policy, however, prevented the Communist aesthetics from becoming too aggressive and repressive. After the end of the War and the defeat of fascism, the United Front policy seemed unnecessary and the Marxist aesthetic theorists seemed more keen on removing all differences within the united cultural front to make it a veritable Party organisation than attacking real reactionary forces. On the one hand, the vision of a revolution round the corner led to extreme valour and sacrifices by a number of Communists charged by the vision of a big revolution. On the other hand, this intensified the process of alienation of writers and artists.

It may be mentioned here that another aspect of the Communist aesthetics was related to contents of arts. Artists and writers were never to express despair and despondency and on the whole expected to follow the Party line. Salil Chowdhury was a favourite target of attack for this as well. His very popular song 'Ganyer Badhu' (The village housewife) was denounced as reactionary in content, for it describes how the housewife's dreams are shattered and not how she struggles. Salil Chowdhury told me later that the song was actually a description of the helpless plight of the villagers during the Bengal Famine.¹⁷ Anyway, the Party aesthetics being incompatible with the self-respect and autonomy of the artists, soon turned the Communist cultural front into a shadow of its former self.

As the Communists could not formulate proper strategies and tactics for their cherished revolution, they perhaps thought that it was only art and literature that was standing in its way, that the revolution would automatically come only if the right kind of art and literature was produced. Though theoretically they considered culture as merely a part of superstructure on the economic base, in practice they put in every effort to monitor and control it. This culturalism could also offset all their political wrongs. Culture, however, can never lead to a big social revolution directly. At best it can help establish a counter-hegemony in society by way of preparing people for that revolution. Needless to say, this is no mean a task. And the more broad-based a cultural movement is, the more effective it can be in its hegemonising drive. The Communists during the 1930s and '40s did try to forge a broad-based cultural movement. But by destroying the movement very early, they left their hegemonic aspirations unfulfilled.

A Vision Without a Mission

A number of Communists of those days sincerely believed that a better new world was in the offing. They did have a vision of such a world, however vague it may have been and were ideologically committed to this

vision, but did not really have a mission; for they did not know what exactly they could do to usher in the new world. Marxism during the period of our study was dominated by Stalinist orthodoxy, which claimed itself to be a science but was actually a sort of religion. It taught them that capitalist order would crumble soon due to its own inherent contradictions and that the cherished socialist order would come as a matter of rule. Indeed, the crisis of capitalism as manifest in the world-wide depression and the War made them believe so. Thus they approached Marxism in the believer's mode and this made any theoretical interpolation of Marxism seem unnecessary. They believed that mere faith in this ideology and some stray struggles as expressions of this faith would be enough. And of course, they put a high premium on cultural activities. Some great works were indeed produced in the cultural sphere. This was due to the emotion based on the artists' humanitarian sensitivity that the Communist ideology served to strengthen. But this ideology did not provide them with weapons in their practical struggle. So the Left here remained a mere aesthetic expression and the Communist movement at its best remained a cultural movement confined within a middle-class circle. The middle-class Leftists did not really get declassed. Years passed and their ideological compulsions progressively weakened.

Notes and References

- 1 As the chapter 'The Music of Politics and the Politics of Music' in my book *Cultural Communism in Bengal 1936-1952* (Primus Books, 2014) deals with the subject with detailed references, in this article I give just a few notes and references by way of clarification of certain points.
- 2 More popularly known as 'ganasangeet andolan' in Bengali.
- 3 The first line of this song is 'Dukher rater ghor tamasa bhedhi swadhinata dibas elo je phire' (Piercing the dark night of sorrows, the Independence Day has come once again). Those days 26 January was observed as Independence Day.
- 4 After Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June, 1941, the Communists of India reversed their initial anti-War and anti-Government stand. They argued that the War had so long been an imperialist one with imperialist powers fighting each other, but now it had turned into a People's War with the patriotic people of the world's only socialist country fighting against fascist aggrandizement. The Communists accordingly decided to back the war efforts of Britain, an ally of the Soviet Russia. They had little resources to help the British, but they stopped opposing the British Indian government and concentrated on anti-fascist propaganda.
- 5 *Kavi* broadly means any poet and in rural Bengal *kavi* and composer-singer are synonymous terms. In a narrower sense *kavi* means *kaviyal*, a particular category of composers specialising in Tarja which is a kind of song-tournament where two parties of singers are engaged in a dialogue of songs composed extempore.

- 6 Beedi is a kind of cigarette made of tree-leaf.
- 7 I interviewed Khaled Chowdhury at his Park Circus residence (Kolkata) sometime towards the end of the 1980s.
- 8 Dipesh Chakrabarty, while writing the history of working class of Bengal's jute industry, has brought about this charge of 'ideology-culture dichotomy' against the middle-class leftist leaders of the jute workers (See his article 'Trade Union in a Hierarchical Culture: The Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1920-1940' in *Subaltern Studies* Vol. III, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1984 and his book entitled *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890 to 1940*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1989). The duality noticed by Khaled Chowdhury in *babu*-peasant relationship reminds us of Chakrabarty's contention regarding the *babu*-coolie relationship.
- 9 Published by Subarnarekha, Kolkata, 1991.
- 10 The Communists went into the Tebhaga Movement without much preparation. They kept it confined to a very narrow demand of only a section of peasants, i.e. the sharecroppers, and did not even include the agricultural labourers, a no less aggrieved group. The way the peasants responded was beyond the imagination of the Communists, who after some time were at a loss about how to tackle the situation. This became crucial when the police launched a brutal offensive from February 1947 onwards.
- 11 Hemanga Biswas, 'Gananatya Andolane Amar Gan', the journal *Prastutiparba*, 1383 BS/1976.
- 12 Published on 18 November, 1951.
- 13 G.P. Deshpande, *Talking the Political and Other Essays*, Thema, Kolkata, 2009., particularly the essay titled 'Of Progress and the Progressive Cultural Movement'.
- 14 'Protest through Music', www.India-seminar.com/2008/588/588_sumangala_damodaran.htm
- 15 *Talking the Political and Other Essays*
- 16 'Gananatya Andolane Amar Gan'
- 17 I interviewed Salil Chowdhury at his Centre of Music Research, Gol Park, Kolkata in November, 1985.