



BOND BEYOND BARRIERS: A SOCIO-CULTURAL UNITY IN MUSIC

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Introduction

Music has been an integral part of any society – be it primitive or modern. It is a representative of everyday society – its values, beliefs as well as its crisis. And popular music does so more. The present research has focussed on an understanding of how Bengali young people have negotiated with the existing every day socio-cultural set up in order to create a new genre of music namely *Bangla Band*. In the process they had to undergo personal struggles and hardships which had shattered them only to give a renewed sense of courage and determination to pursue their dream of creating something novel and inspirational for the future generations to come. Here, in the paper, case studies of two popular musicians namely Gautam Chattopadhyay (popularly known as *Moni da*) and Maqsood-ul-Haque (lovingly known as Mac) have been undertaken. The paper does not intend to be a biography of these two musicians. Rather it aims at exploring and understanding the underlying social milieu of both the countries (largely reflected through the personal experiences of both the musicians) and how their similar social experiences at the hands of the authority (state) has given birth to a different genre of music named Bangla Bands. The study of issues of concern to both countries namely India (represented through West Bengal) and Bangladesh is important in order to understand the larger socio-political issues that pervade and construct the everyday reality of Bengali society irrespective of international political borders.

The paper is in a form of historical analysis. The data have been collected mainly through oral history and narratives based on detailed interviews of the acquaintances of the musicians as well as through published content on different web sites. A sample of approximately forty songs from the bands *Moheener Ghoraguli* (Moheen's Horses) and *Maqsood O' Dhaka* (Maqsood and Dhaka) have been selected randomly which have been analysed. Out of these a few have been cited to act as a point of reference for the present paper. The negotiation of the youth with the state in their everyday has been the main focus of the content of this paper.



Before I go on to understand it, the everyday experiences of two band musicians from India and Bangladesh *Moni da* and Mac respectively) have been discussed.

Gautam Chattopadhyay (Moni Da)

Majority, if not all, members of the established and popular Bangla bands in West Bengal (India) like *Chandrabinoo* (the last letter of the Bengali alphabet), *Paras Pathar* (Touchstone), *Lakkhichhara* (Juvenile Delinquents) and Krosswindz, to name a few have named Gautam Chattopadhyay or *Moni da* as he was popularly known, as one of their major influences in coming to this genre of music. These musicians had been fascinated by the former and owe an allegiance to him in shaping their careers in music. The comparatively new bands perform the songs of *Moheener Ghoraguli* (Moheen's Horses), the Band formed by *Moni da* in the late 1970s in Kolkata, on stage or on television. It is due to the overwhelming fascination by this towering personality that the exploration of *Moni da's* life becomes essential.

Gautam Chattopadhyay was a student of Presidency College, Kolkata during the 1960s. According to Kankar Bhattacharya, one of *Moni da's* close friends, the sixties were a decade of protest in the West and its impact came in the east during the 1970s. It was also a time of social disturbance in Bengal due to the Naxalite movement. Chattopadhyay became highly influenced by the Naxalbari movement which was already gaining ground in West Bengal. Moni, along with his Anglo Indian friends started a band called *Urge* that would play in *Moulin Rouge* and *Trincas* in Park Street. He got so actively involved in the Naxalbari movement that he had been arrested in 1969-70 by the authorities and tortured mercilessly by the police in order to obtain information. He was kept in police custody till 1970-71. On his release he was forced to leave the state and went to Jabalpur and Bhopal respectively. In Bhopal he again formed a band; therefore music can be said to be an integral part of his life and probably provided inspiration throughout. On his return to Kolkata, Chattopadhyay, along with his brothers Ranjan Ghoshal and friends Abraham Mazumdar, Tapesh Banerjee and Tapas Das formed a band *Moheener Ghoraguli* in 1975. Chattopadhyay was highly influenced by the 'Beatles' because they showed how ordinary things can be converted into themes of music. Both their sound and lyrics were revolutionary in the sense that their lyrics were down to earth and they used no other instruments apart from guitar. Gautam found no novelty in the contemporary *Bangla aadhunik Gaan* (Modern Bengali songs) (Ganguly 2002:



52). Hence the band was formed to connect Bengali songs to the contemporary society. The band disbanded in 1981.

Throughout the decade of eighties, Chattopadhyay made feature films and documentaries but never left his passion for music. *Nagmoti* (Snakepearl) and *Samay* (Time), the former being the National Award winner, were the films directed by him. He was immensely influenced by the *baul* songs (Bards') and came in close contact with some of them. Although he moved into films, his house provided a platform to many young singers and musicians to discuss and experiment with different genres of music. He always encouraged them to make new music in Bengali language. According to his close associates, *Moni da* always wanted to promote new singers and tried to provide a platform to them. In between the years 1995 to 1999 he had composed four albums, all brought out by Asha Audio. What is noticeable in these albums is that *Moni da* did not sing them although he had written them. Rather he made other singers especially young ones sing the songs for the above mentioned albums. *Moni da* was a man who would like to move with all. This was his romanticism (probably derived from the communist ideology) and possibly the quality which attracted the youth towards him. In the year 1995 he had recorded the songs of their bands in an album named *Abar Bochchor Kuri Pore* (Again After Twenty Years). In the same year he had sold the album in the Kolkata International Bookfair. In the song *Akashey Chharano Megher Kachhakachhi Dekha Jaye Tomader Bari* (Your House is in the sky near the scattered clouds), *Moni Da* criticises the detachment of the privileged or the elite class from the reality of the ground level people. Basically the song questions the class differences between people. The song *Pakhider Surey Gaan* (Singing to the tune of Birds) from the same album narrates the tiredness of the youth in routine everyday life and roots the cause of this monotony in the daily 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. job schedules (mostly government jobs) that they have to follow. Besides these, *Moni da* had also brought the issue of gender and religion in his songs of every day. For instance in the song *Sei Phooler Dol* (Those Group of Flowers) in the album *Jhora Somoyer Gaan* (Songs of Withered Times), he had sensitively portrayed the story of two young village girls one from Bangladesh being a Muslim and the other from India being a Hindu. The commonality that these two girls shared was that both of them had been lost in the city of Kolkata. Perhaps both of them have been cheated by their lovers who have taken advantage of their socio-economic situation and forcibly made them sex workers. What is significant in the song is that in spite of belonging to two different nations and religions, the girls have faced the same fate. Transcending their religious and national identities is their identity of being a woman.



Chattopadhyay died in June 1999, yet his songs are still popular among different generations of Bangla Band music members.

Maqsood-ul-Haque (Mac)

Rupam Islam, the frontman of the Bangla band Fossils (India) has mentioned the influence of the poet musician from Bangladesh Maqsood-ul-Haq (more popularly known as Mac) on him while composing the songs for his band. Mac had been the lead singer of the band Feedback in Bangladesh from 1976. He had spent the next eleven years in singing English songs for the band which used to perform live in the night club of the Intercontinental Hotel (at present known as the Sheraton Hotel). Deep in his heart Mac had always wished to do something for the youth of Bangladesh and he had dedicated his life to that effect. In 1987, due to Mac's insistence the band had decided to enter into the realm of Bengali rock music. Bengali Rock music or Bangla band music (the two have become almost synonymous) had been established in Bangladesh largely due to the efforts of Mac. Till 1996 Feedback had released albums named *Bangabda 1400* (Year 1400), *Dehagori* (Body Watch) and *Bauliana* (Lunaticism). *Bongabdo 1400* commemorated the 1400th year of the Bengali calendar and in this album Mac charged the Bangladeshi government of being a false set up with unreal promises. The song *Uchchopodostho Todonto Committee* (High Powered Probe Committee) attacked the committees formed by the then government and alleged that the creation of such organisations were merely strategic moves to pacify the public. In 1997 Mac had parted ways with Feedback due to ideological reasons. The former had wanted to use his songs as weapons to bring a cultural revolution in Bangladesh which the other members of Feedback had opposed to. Having parted ways with Feedback, Mac had formed his own band *Maqsood O Dhaka* in the year 1997. The band from its very inception had focussed on social and political issues of Bangladesh as themes of its songs. In the same year the band had released its first album *Prapto Boyoshker Nishiddho* (Banned for Adults) which contained songs that were direct attacks on the political system of Bangladesh. He had pointed out the hollowness of the political system in Bangladesh (Islam 2009: 140). With his new band Haque continued to write songs for socio-political issues. For instance the song *Parwardikar* (God) was aimed at religious fundamentalists and accused them of enforcing their blind belief upon society. *Giti Michchil Gonotontro* was a musical ballad that mocked the country's democratic administration. In another song *Abar Juddhe Jete Hobe* (We Have to go to War Again),



Haque talks about the need for another Liberation war in Bangladesh, this time to liberate the people of the country from corrupt politicians. He ends the album with an explosive eight minute song entitled *Giti Bhason: Mrityudanda* (Musical Death Sentence) where he demands the closure of the entire political system and then orders a death sentence upon himself, for being a member of the current social environment (Karim 2016). In all of his songs Mac had addressed the everyday issues of political corruption, religious fundamentalism and violence as well as the state's hollow democratic system. Though the songs were strongly detested by the authorities, yet they had gained immense popularity amongst the youth of Bangladesh. Mac had become the representative of the young people of the nation who voiced their discontent against the social anomalies of the society. He had to face severe threats, even life threatening ones, from the mainstream political parties as well as religious fundamentalists. As a result the number of his public performances had to be curtailed and Mac had retreated from the mainstream cultural activities and performed in underground shows. In the year 1999, the band had brought out its second album *Ogo Bhalobasha* (Oh Love!) where in Mac had experimented on a *Rabindrasangeet* by fusing it with jazz. He had to face the angst of the mainstream *Rabindrasangeet* singers who vehemently demanded his punishment in the form of ban from public life. As a consequence Mac had been arrested from his home on the charges of being a terrorist leader, keeping illegal weapons and trying to avoid arrest. He had to face the brunt of brutal mental and physical torture by the police. The media gave a colour of domestic violence to the whole issue. However Mac had been released of all the charges in the year 2000 but he had been completely shaken by the whole incident that it took him nearly six months to recover from his trauma. At present he has retreated from active public life and his band has concentrated mostly on recording albums. The number of his public performances has also become minimal (Islam 2009: 138). Nevertheless it can be said that he had been largely influenced by the everyday situation in Bangladesh and derived his music from it. He was not afraid to reflect the contemporary issues of the country in his songs, for which he was threatened or ill-treated by the state.

A brief examination of the life histories of these two young musicians from two different countries shows the similarity in their everyday experiences at the hands of the state. Their music has been derived from the conflicts rooted their everyday living and both of them have acted as sources of anti-establishment. The social anomalies like poverty, religious fundamentalism, political corruption and class differentiation have been plaguing the history of both the parts of Bengal in the three decades of 1970s-80s and 90s. Quite interestingly, the



young people of both the countries have used music as a medium to show their dissatisfaction and discontent towards the state. Music also became a weapon in their hands to voice their protest, raise awareness among common people and revolt if necessary. They were undeterred by the consequences they might face at the hands of the state. Another important feature is that in the process of their struggle the young people have been successful in creating their own space and culture with their own style of dressing and mannerisms and life styles (Mitra 2012: 50). Culture truly cuts across nations and their political boundaries. At the larger level the western influence (in their style of dressing and the instruments with which they perform, mainly guitar, drums, bass guitar etc.) has also been visible. These are probably remnants of the colonial hangover which these countries suffer from till today. Market also has played a major role in popularising these songs of everyday life. Had it not been for the popular media and for market, these songs of the youth would not have reached a wider audience and gained enough popularity to have influenced the next generation of Bangla band singers.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that politically it is probably possible by the nation states to control human migration and divide and protect the boundaries of their respective zones. But it is difficult if not impossible, to prevent the inflow of culture between nations. Our crisis and our problems make us a single entity of being 'human' cutting across all religions, age groups, nations, race, caste and creed.

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