

Moni Da and Kabir Suman: Icons in Contemporary Popular Youth Music in Bengal

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Abstract

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, two case studies of popular musicians namely Gautam Chattopadhyay (popularly known as Moni da) and Suman Chattopadhyay, now Kabir Suman have been undertaken. The impact of these two musicians on Bangla Band music has been explored, understood and analysed.

Introduction

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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 musician as well as through published

content on different web sites as well as books written by the Bangla band members. Several interviews of the musicians have also been of great worth. A sample of a few songs from the band *Moheener Ghoraguli* (Moheen's Horses) has 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 *Moni da* in his initial years and the impact of Kabir Suman on band members have been discussed.

Gautam Chattopadhyay (Moni Da)

Majority, if not all, members of the established and popular Bangla bands in West Bengal (India) like *Chandrabindee* (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 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, Tapes 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.

Suman Chattopadhyay

Suman Chattopadhyay, at present known as Kabir Suman, has been another major inspiration behind the evolution and popularity of the genre of Bangla band music in the decade of 1990s. He has been a songwriter and singer himself. Most of the Bangla band members admit that Suman's lyrics in his songs had paved the way for the consumers of Bengali songs to accept something different from the songs of the then Bengali film music. This was also the time when there had been a vacuum in the Bengali music industry because contemporary film music had completely failed to appeal to the mass audiences, especially the educated middle class. In the year 1992, Suman's album, *Tomake Chai* (Want You) was released and became a major milestone in the Bengali music industry. This was the time when the revolution in the communication industry had not fully arrived. Mobile phones had not yet been a common feature of social life, STD calls were not as cheap as the local ones, the concepts of DVD, download, Facebook and X handle had been unheard of. Set top box, CD, MP3 as well as FM channels were also not in existence. The song *Tomake Chai* from the above named album became widely popular through the medium of radio and tape recorder (Patrika 2012). This song by Suman had provided many of the Bangla band members with the courage to compose songs in their own lyrics and tunes. Kabir Suman is said to have been successful in revolutionizing the taste of the Bengali audience as far as Bengali music was concerned. But an interesting fact is that Suman stated in an interview that rock music cannot be done in Bengali (The Times of India, 2011). This is quite ironical because many band members stated that they are doing rock music in Bengali. Rupam Islam, the lead singer of the band *Fossils* in his book *Ei to Ami* (Here I am, 2012) has discussed how Suman's presentation of his own songs on stage had shocked the Bengali audience many of whom had included today's band members. Rupam was quite surprised to see

how Suman alone handled the musical instruments like keyboard and guitar on stage. Besides he also expressed his anger, sorrow, frustration as well as love towards the system, sometimes even cursing it. Rupam stated that he realised the power of a single person on stage and was therefore attracted by the novelty and uniqueness of Suman's presentation. In his book he admits that Suman had instilled courage and confidence in all those young musicians who had dreamt to write their own songs and present it before the Bengali audience. In Rupam's expression Suman had achieved the status of God to all the contemporary modern music lovers of his time (Islam: 2012).

Impact of *Moni da* and *Kabir Suman* on Bangla Band Members

A brief examination of the life history of *Moni da* (an institution in Bangla Band music even today), a young musician from Kolkata shows how youth popular music is rooted in their everyday experiences. *Moni da*'s music has been derived from the conflicts in his everyday life with the authorities such as the state and therefore he has been an icon of youth who are always questioning the status quo. *Kabir Suman* had also been quite radical in his music protesting against the system and its patterns of disparities. The social anomalies like poverty, religious fundamentalism, political corruption and class differentiation have been plaguing the West Bengal in the three decades of 1970s-80s and 90s. Quite interestingly, the young musicians of West Bengal during the entire span have used music as a medium to show their dissatisfaction and discontent towards the authority (state). Music also became a weapon in their hands to voice their protest, raise awareness among common people and revolt if necessary. They were and are 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 has been a marker of identity formation for the young people in West Bengal. At the larger level the importance of the western influence on the band members (in their style of dressing and the instruments with which they perform, mainly guitar, drums, bass guitar etc.) cannot be overlooked. They have opened a new horizon for the youth to reclaim their space in the cultural realm but also hints towards the remnants of the colonial hangover which West Bengal specifically and India in general suffer from till today. Globalization and capitalist market have also 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 Bengali middle class youth have always been pioneers of social change whether that be during nationalist movement or even today. Bengal has always been a breeding ground for middle class young people with questioning minds. This is true in all spheres of social life and specially for music as well. *Moni da* and *Kabir Suman* are apt instances influencing a group of young people to be harbingers of musical change in Bengal during the decade of 1990s. In this way an exposure to existing cultural context can give birth to young minds rooted in their own society able to fight against its own social discrepancies. Our everyday crisis and our process of negotiation with it make us a single entity of being 'human' cutting across all religions, age groups, nations, race, caste and creed. We thereby can transcend our local borders and become global citizens making the world a better and safer place for our future generations.

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