

ODE TO MOTHERLAND

The heritage of Bangla patriotic songs

KARIM WAHEED

"Music and rhythm find their way into the secret places of the soul..."
-- Plato

THE impact of music on human psyche may never be fully comprehended. Music has the power to inspire, ability to change moods and bring about social revolution. It's everywhere in nature. Hence the idea that music may predate language is not shocking.

A culture's music highlights its every aspect, Bangladesh has an opulent musical heritage. As many scholars and exponent believe, music in this part of the world was perhaps formed as an expression of devotion. Most songs glorified some deity, mythological accounts while some narrated lifestyles of different classes. However, all that changed in last two hundred years.

The 19th century saw a revolution in the realm of Bangla music. Thanks to a

breed of immensely talented poets, composers, artists and musicians, Bangla music outshined its contemporaries in the region during what was considered its golden age.

Interestingly enough, the idea that music can spark nationalistic sentiments among masses was also realised in the 19th century Bengal. These songs can be categorised as patriotic songs (glorifying the land) and people's songs or Gano Sangeet (themed on struggles of the people).

Bangla patriotic songs are believed to have appeared first at the beginning of the 19th century through the songs of Ishwar Chandra Gupta and his followers. High on nationalism, Gupta started a movement for the improvement of Bangla and also created a positive atmosphere for writers like B a n k i m c h a n d r a C h a t t y o p a d h y a y and Dinabandhu Mitra.

Bangla patriotic songs attained wide recognition during the 'Swadeshi Movement' (part of the Indian independence movement against the British

Raj, encouraging use of everything local and discouraging British goods). These songs became even more popular during the 1905 movement against the partition of Bengal; usual themes were loyalty towards the land and valour of the freedom fighters and martyrs. Case in point: Ekbar bidaye de ma ghurey ashi...on the teenage martyr Khudiram Bose.

This period in Bangla music saw the emergence of creative titans -- Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Dwijendralal Roy, Rajanikanta Sen and Atulprasad Sen.

Motivated by the nationalistic senses, Dwijendralal Roy composed several patriotic songs, which went on to achieve classic status. Familiar patriotic songs by Roy include Bango amar janani amar and Dhanodhanya pushpobhora amader ei boshundhora. His passion for the motherland combined with his musical talent is reflected in these songs. Roy, however, did not reject western musical traits. Dhanodhanya pushpobhora... for instance is based on raga Kedara but the line Shey je amar jonmohumi, with three types of musical tempo, follows the English music pattern. This trend of incorporating western styles in Bangla songs was soon catching on.

Rabindranath Tagore is perhaps the only person to have written the national anthems of two nations. Amar shonar Bangla, ami tomaye bhalobashi gained popularity during the 'Swadeshi Movement'. Swadeshi activists, revolutionaries and those opposing the partition of Bengal (1905) used this song to ignite the spirit of nationalism among the masses. The song again emerged in mainstream when it was deftly used in Zahir Raihan's feature film Jibon Thekey Ney (1970). The March 7 1971 address of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the then Racecourse Maidan (now Suhrawardy Udyan) was preceded by the song. It was also used by Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra throughout the Liberation War.

Though Tagore was never actively involved in politics, he was not alienated from the socio-political scene either. He had his unique attitude towards nationalism. A staunch critic of the partition of Bengal, Tagore conveyed his views in the song *Banglar mati Banglar jol*... Among other patriotic classics by Tagore are: *Jodi tor daak shuney keu na ashey* (one of Mahatma Gandhi's favourites), *Chitto jetha bhoysunno* and *O amar desher mati*.

Rajanikanta Sen, influenced by Tagore, composed a number of patriotic songs. Mayer deya mota kapor mathaye tuley nerye bhai was hummed by the youth during the movement against the Raj; the nationalistic appeal of the song remains undiminished.

Atulprasad Sen, who wrote relatively few songs compared to his contemporaries, carved a niche for himself in the literary scene dominated by Tagore. The poet and lyricist, originally from Dhaka, wrote a patriotic song underlining communal harmony -- *Dekh ma ebar duwar khuley...tor hindu-musalman dui chheley*. Moder garab moder asha a mori Bangla bhasha, also by him, made its way again among the masses during the Language Movement (1952) and the Liberation War.

The National Poet of Bangladesh, also known as the 'Rebel Poet', Kazi Nazrul Islam soon became an icon for his poems and songs the formed a striking contrast to Tagore's poetry. His songs were not meant to appease the non-violent followers of the anti-British movements; Nazrul was very vocal about his stance against the Raj and the colonial system put him behind bars for that. Armed with an impeccable base in classical music, passion for Persian, Arabic literature and music and knack for incorporating unfamiliar subjects and vocabulary, people's songs by Nazrul were hard hitting. Among them *Karar oi louho kapat, Shikal porar chhal moder, Durgamo giri kantar moru, Amra shakti amar bal, Jai hok satyer jai hok* and more are still rendered with zeal. Nazrul did write some patriotic songs



SCENE FROM MUKTIR GAN

in the conventional form -- Eki aporooop roop-e ma tomar and O bhai khanti shonar cheye khanti amar desher mati, for instance.

During the Language Movement, the mass upsurge in 1969 and the Liberation War, these songs motivated political activists, freedom fighters and the masses that wanted emancipation from repression. Ekushey (21st) February played a key role in making Bengalis conscious of their culture and heritage and the song on 'Shaheed Dibash' that has reached an iconic status is *Amar bhai-er rokter rangani ekushey* February (originally composed by Abdul Latif, the tune was later modified by Altaf Mahmud; the latter, hugely popular version is rendered now). The nationalistic emotions sparked by 'Ekushey' ultimately led to the Liberation War.

Noted artiste Shaheen Samad remembers those turbulent days in 1971; on a truck with fellow members of Bangladesh Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Goshthi -- Lubna Mariam, Naila Zaman, Bipul Bhattacharjee, Mahmudur Rahman Benu, Debu Chowdhury and others -- going from camps to camps, singing to refugees and freedom fighters to boost their morale (featured in the documentary *Muktir Masud*, directed by Tareque Masud and Catherine

Masud).

According to Shaheen, "We used to sing the Tagore song *O pohailo timir raati*, Nazrul song *Karar oi louho kapat*, Mushad Ali's *Shonen shonen bhaishob*, *Barricade bayonet berajal* (written by Abu Bakar Siddiqui and composed by Shadhan Sarkar), *Sarwar Jahan's Jago jago*, *Sheikh Lutfar Rahman's Bisham doirar dheu* and many more.

"This was our contribution to the war. The sight of freedom fighters being moved to tears while listening to these songs is something I'll never forget. That was our achievement."

Popular songs played on Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra during the war were -- *Jai Bangla*, *Purbo digantey shurjo utechhey*, *Mora ekti phoolke banchabo bole judhdho kori* (rendered by Apel Mahmud), *Bicharpati ebar tomar korbey bichar ei jonata*, *Shona shona bole*, *Salam salam hazaar salam* (sung by Abdul Jabbar) and *Ek shagorokter binimoye*.

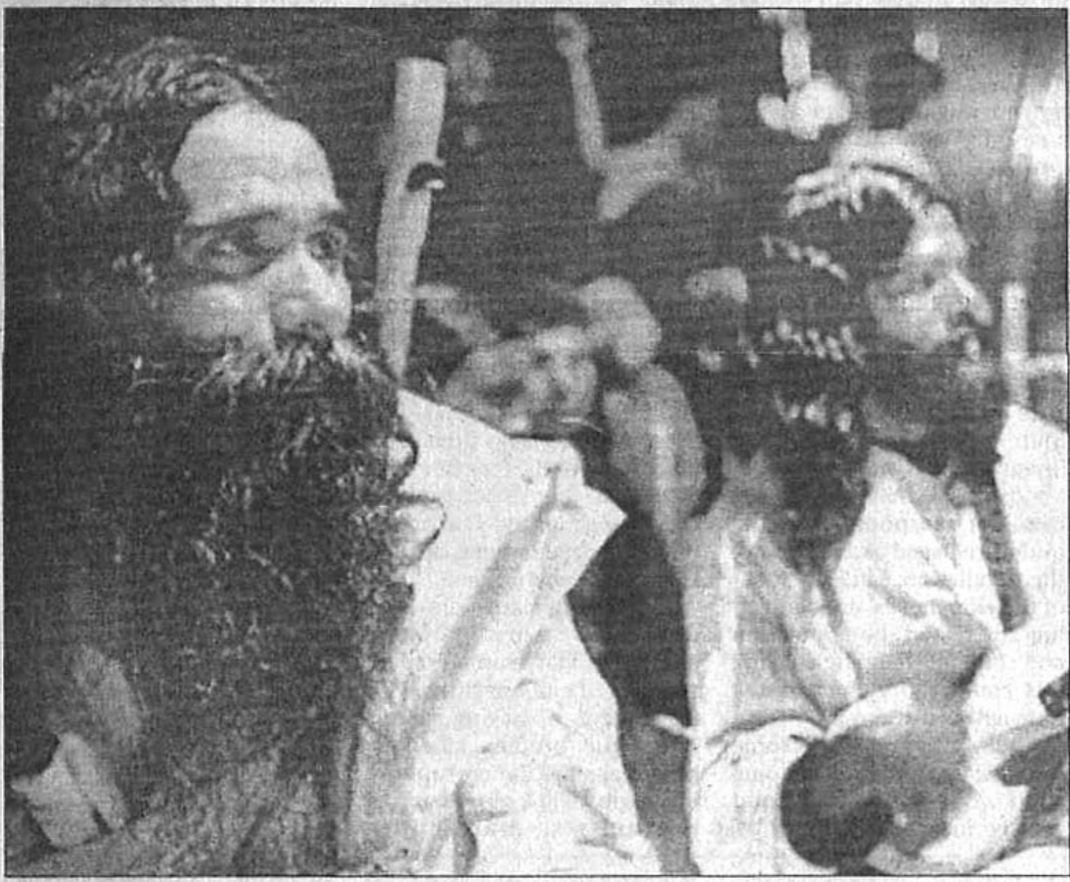
The post-Liberation War period saw a range of patriotic and people's songs. Talented lyricists and music composers introduced diverse issues in these songs; some featured in films became overnight sensation. Undervalued contribution of the youth taking part in the war and their frustrations were brilliantly articulated when Shahnaz Rahmatullah

sang... *Hoytoba itihashy tomader naam lekha robey na... gyanijon gunider ashorey tomader kotha keu kobey na...* Misty-eyed listeners still hum *Shobkoto janala khuley daana* with Sabina Yasmeen or *Amaye gethey daana mago ekta polash phooler mala*.

Though patriotic songs thrived during '70s and '80s, the tradition seemed to wane in the '90s. However, the political turmoil and the current generation losing faith in the system have triggered a new tradition of patriotic and people's songs. These songs do not necessarily rave about the scenic beauty of the country but point out the bitter reality. Many of this generation agree when Hyder Husyn sings... *Swadhinota ki hotel-e-hotel-e grand fashion show?* *Swadhinota ki aunner khojey kishori promodbala?* or *Keuba gorey shonar Bangla, keu swanirbhor Bangladesh... goragorir neiko shesh*.

As long as Bangla music remains, lyricists and poets will express their devotion for the land, musicians will set appealing melodies to those words and artists will breathe life into them. Here's hoping these songs keep our spirits high and nationalistic stance resilient come hell or high water, as they have for over 150 years.

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Indigenous youth

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

VICTORY Day! It brings us a feeling of pride and rekindles the exhilarating memories of the brightest moment in our history; it brings us ecstasy. This is how most of the post-war generation people like me would try to feel the glorious past, although we didn't witness it. There are, however, small groups of indigenous people having something different to say about all this. The young minds of the indigenous communities have their own way of looking at the whole thing.

Theirs is a story of alienation, of dreams unfulfilled...

Diponkar Tripura, a young active member of the Hill Student Council, shared his views. As a post-1971 generation youth, he inherited the history and emotion. His memory of the war is partially his father's and the rest is adopted from textbooks that, he believes, present a distorted history. Diponkar remembers his father telling him stories of the war, "My father is a freedom fighter. He fought in Sector 1 under Major Rafiqul Islam." A matter of pride, however, according to Diponkar the results of the war

turned out to be different for the ethnic groups living in the Hill Tracts. He feels that his father's dream and contributions were hardly recognised by the state.

Diponkar from Khagrachhari district makes his point, "The constitution of Bangladesh written right after the war does not recognise the rights of the indigenous people. If it does not recognise us in the most important document of the nation then we cannot surely get equal treatment."

He explains how the treatments differ, "The allotment of our land to Bengalees starting from the 1970s was the begin-

ning of a different fate. Most of our land is now occupied by Bengalees. The state policy clearly promoted this mass intrusion."

According to government estimates, there are around 27 indigenous communities in Bangladesh. Displacement from land is a common story for all of these communities and their sentiment strongly revolves around this issue. For the young generation the liberation war does not seem to evoke any special feelings. "Our dreams were ignored right from the beginning," Diponkar stresses.

Subodh M Baskey, from Angra village of Joypurhat district shares similar feelings. "My parents got married in 1971. With the war going on their beginning wasn't very pleasant. My parents fled to Balurghat, India and returned when the war was over. They obviously hoped for a better future."

According to Subodh the return wasn't pleasant either. Before the war, his village Angra at Joypurhat district was mostly inhabited by people of Santal origin. Things started to change after the war. "Most Santals in my village lost their land after the war. It was distributed among the Bengalees as Khas land," he says. Subodh agrees with Diponkar, "Land property rights of the indige-

nous community were not respected by independent Bangladesh."

"We were told how to live every step of the way. Most indigenous communities lost their distinct ethnic character. We don't have any facilities that correspond to our way of life. We don't even read in our own language," Diponkar continues. He also points out, "The root of Bengalee nationalism and the movement for independent Bangladesh lies in the historical Language Movement. A country that has such a glorious history should learn to respect the language of other ethnic origins living in the country."

"When I was in school, from my history books I only read about brave warriors of Bengalee origin. However, it mentioned nothing about selfless contributions of the Santals or Oraons in the war." Subodh points out "Members of Oraon and Santal communities liberated Rangpur Cantonment from Pakistani soldiers. A segment of our past is omitted from the history book. Mainstream people should learn about these events, and what could be better way to do this than including them in the school level textbooks?"

Subodh is all in favour of having primary education system in his own language so that his children can read and write

their mother tongue.

Dipayon Khisha brings out a little magazine named "Mawrum". The outspoken young man from Bandarban addresses some bold issues, "The philosophy of the liberation war was to create a sovereign nation without any discrimination. For us discrimination started right after the war." "Bangladesh is a nation of many ethnic origin, language and cultural diversity. The war in 1971 always seemed like a history for the Bengalees only. Where do we stand in all this is not clear."

Dipayon mentions that ethnic groups living all across Bangladesh dream of what is rightfully theirs-- constitutional rights, forefather's land, cultural diversity respected by others, to be able to read in their mother tongue and equal treatment. "Unless these dreams are fulfilled, the objectives and philosophy of the liberation war remain partially unfulfilled", says Dipayon Khisha.

The indigenous people, having a distinct culture and language of their own, view the Victory in December 1971 from their own angle, which may appear to be a bit abstruse to the overwhelming majority of the people.

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