

Chapter I

**The developments in other forms of cultural expression:
parallel and common issues in theatre, music and literature in
the nineteen forties in Bengal**

The nineteen-forties in Bengal was a moment of significant transformation in all forms of creative expression. Shifts in tendencies in the visual arts have noticeable parallels in the field of theatre and music, and a consideration of the issues and debates in these forms of cultural expression should build up a more comprehensive picture of a period ethos.

The I.P.T.A. and the "*Nabanna*"

In theatre arts, Bijon Bhattacharya's 1944 play *Nabanna*, (New Harvest) holds a significant position in the history of Bengali stage performance. Contemporaneity, on a primary level of the theme of famine of 1943, was but one aspect of its significance; the complementary aspect was that of innovative shifts in form, and the structure of the performance. Samik Bandopadhyay's introductory essay and Dr. Pabitra Sarkar's analytical note to a published edition of the stage-script highlights these significances¹. Through a series of quoted statements, Samik Bandopadhyay has demonstrated how divided the contemporary opinion was regarding the merit of the performance. For a section of the viewer-critic community, *Nabanna*'s uniqueness was a forward step to be hailed as innovation. For others, the very same features were perceived as drawbacks or flaws, in the deviation from established norms. Such a view indicates that the play refused to live up to the expectation-pattern established by the dominant trends.

Unexpected to contemporary taste, the play begins with an intentional abruptness on a high key and heightened emotions. The very first scene of the first act, commences at a pace and with an intensity that was intended to give the feeling

¹ Bijon Bhattacharya, "*Nabanna*", Proma, 1992 reprint (Orig.1944)

that a lot of events in the narrative have already happened before the curtains went up. The excitement, fear and dread expressed in the dialogues of the characters on stage, amplify in intensity when the audience continuously hear the harassed villagers in the play refer to their oppressors, not by name, but through pronouns. Strategically, the tension is increasingly mounted as the play progresses. Amidst the reference in the dialogue to the turn of events in the recent past, one hears Pradhan Samaddar, an old farmer in the play, lament the death of his two sons, (and once again one is left to guess, whether in the hands of the police or the military) and speak of his voluntary torching of three barns of stored grain. The scene unfolds further and the peoples' resistance gains a significant dimension when Panchanani, the old lady, becomes a martyr while leading a large group of villagers against the armed attackers, who are never seen on stage, not once in direct confrontation; the expectancy and the threat persist. Such strategic devices not only successfully build up a tensed apprehensiveness of the plot but also provide clues to a real-life location. One realizes that Bijon Bhattacharya has transformed/ camouflaged the Midnapore of 1942 Quit India resistance into Aminpur village in his play. He not only wanted the play to be a document of the famine of 1943 but had ample farsightedness even in such a close temporal proximity to the disaster, to place the calamity in its proper context of economic and political factors leading to the disaster. Given the political orientation of the anti-fascist movements and the I.P.T.A of which Bijon Bhattacharya was an active participant, such clarity of vision is not too unexpected. Rather one realizes that a specific political perception definitely structured the play. Thus, from the early scene of protest the play builds up to the final act of unified resistance when the gaiety and celebration of a new harvest at the end of the disastrous famine, is symbolically elevated to the sign of collective strength and conviction in renewed united resistance.

One needs to follow the play into its following sections to realize how the narrative if made to unfold. If the first scene was a high-strung out-of-doors confrontation, the second revealed the repercussions of the same as a disruptive force on the life pattern of an individual family. Poverty leads to heated exchange, even physical outburst, only to be followed by remorseful repentance. The helplessness of the

earning male-members of the family manifests in the husband-wife quarrels, and the male-dominated social order tends to crumble under pressure. Economic disaster is revealed in the micro-level of the family-as-unit. In the third scene Pradhan Samaddar has already sold a considerable part of his land, and is contemplating more. His neighbour, Dayal, by then penniless, has come begging for grain at his doorstep. Disease was spreading at an alarming rate. And amidst all this the cyclone and storm wreck havoc on the village — Pradhan loses the thatched roof over his head, the walls come crashing down, but Dayal loses his family and entire belongings to the rising floodwaters. A short fourth scene of the post-cyclone desolation and destruction lead to the climactic fifth, where the moneyed Haru Datta forcibly grabs Pradhan's land while amidst all the chaos, the ailing son of Pradhan's nephew passes away. For the Samaddar family, all emotional ties with the village snap immediately and they lose all logical reason for remaining back in their homeland — exodus to the city becomes unavoidable.

The tumultuous first act therefore traverses a lot of ground in fast strides. The conjunction of disasters is not melodramatic excess, but reflects the reality of a district that inspired the Aminpur of *Nabanna*. But above all, the dramatist introduced the character of Haru Datta as the farthest agent of imperial aggression, with the result that a family of landed cultivators ultimately become land-less beggars in the city.

The second act shifts to the city, introducing the hoarder Kalidhan Dhara as an accomplice of Haru Datta. In the second scene sees Pradhan and his family are indistinguishable from the community of beggars on the city-streets. Two photographers appear on stage, in search of picturesque (!) documents of the calamity so that it can boost the sales of their publication. Exploitation also manifests in the form of touts on the lookout for unsuspecting women as who become victims of lust. Unashamed wastage of food and show of accumulated wealth (with obvious reference to "black money") at a wedding-reception intensifies the contrast with Pradhan's family searching for morsels of food in the street-corner garbage-bins of the city. The fourth and fifth scenes are two parts of the same episode — the

trading of women in the village by Haru Datta who has adopted this new profiteering profession, and the transfer of these victims to the city *sebashram* run by Kalidhan Dhara, ultimately leading to the arrest of the two accomplices.

The third act is a short two-scene interlude. The villagers, who have vaguely heard of a fresh crop back at home, are contemplating return. On the other hand Pradhan Samaddar has partially lost his mental balance, and is found fruitlessly seeking medical attention at a city clinic.

The fourth act returns to Aminpur, to a three-scene reconstruction and reorganization. Collective farming and united strength, songs, celebration and laughter contrast with the tension and the struggle of the earlier acts. Amidst gaiety Pradhan Samadar returns to his village. The characters who had scattered from each other in the turn of events, now come together once again, to pledge a renewed collective resistance to oppression and ill-fate.

As Dr. Pabitra Sarkar points out, following the play closely it can be understood that the dramatist quite obviously conformed neither to the five-act calculated rise-and-fall pattern nor the more compact three-act alternatives then in vogue. *Nabanna* cannot be comprehended by its act-division; it has to be understood rather in terms of a conglomerate of scenes. Each scene is well contained within a self-sufficient pattern of climactic rise-and-fall, and the nature of the play, as Shambhu Mitra, co-director of the play mentioned, is "episodic".

Despite not being a hero in the conventional sense of the term, the character of Pradhan Samaddar is undoubtedly the central figure of the play. Within and through what apparently appears to be personal tragedy — he was a respectable village elder before the cyclone and the famine brought him down to the streets of the city, took away his crop, his land, his sons, and even his grandson — is played out the basic rhythm of a larger social disruption.

That naturalistic consideration was not the concern of the play is revealed in the

fact that despite being modelled on a specific district, the dialogues are not cast in the dialect of Midnapore. A realism of the kind of "Nabanna" did not envisage factual devotedness of that extent. Bijon Bhattacharya wrote the dialogues of the play in a mixed quasi-rural Bengali, irrespective of any regional specificity. The realism in the realm of language and dialogues lay more in the natural contrast of the unselfconscious simple expressions of the villagers against the sophisticated urban language of Judhistira, the political leader in the village. His words of inspiration to the villagers sound quite like pre-calculated propaganda speeches or memorized textbook political diction.

Malini Bhattacharya², writing about the I.P.T.A. in Bengal, maintained that the theatre movement in Bengal, which struggled to establish the performing arts on an alternative economic basis from the thriving commercial theatre, is a legacy of the I.P.T.A. of the nineteen-forties. The decline and fragmentation of the People's theatre movement in the late 1940s led to the "Group theatre movement" of later decades.

According to her, the People's theatre movement defined by the I.P.T.A. in its bulletin had its twin tasks of coordinating (a) new experimentation of dramatic forms not allowed by the naturalistic conventions of 19th century European stage performance norms and, (b) presenting in dramatic performance a contemporary reality emerging out of a world-wide democratic people's struggle against imperialism and fascism. The name of the cultural front thus becomes significant, where the term "people" was intended to imply an alternative to bourgeois taste, not only in terms of a theatrical performance *for* the people but also *of* and *by* them. Much of the dynamics of the new stage-performance of the forties under the aegis of the I.P.T.A. therefore lay in the way it defined "people" and actually put it into practice. The 1943 first bulletin of the I.P.T.A. mentioned that the people's movement in theatre was "not a movement which is imposed from above but one which has its roots deep down in the cultural awakening of the masses of India which seeks to receive the lost in the heritage by integrating it with the most significant facts of our people's lives

² Malini Bhattacharya, "The I.P.T.A. in Bengal", *Creative Arts in Modern India: Essays in Comparative Criticism*, Vols. I & II, Ed. By Ratan Parimoo and I. Sharma, Books and Books, New Delhi 1995 (originally published in the *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, No. 2, New Delhi January-March 1983).

and aspirations in the present epoch"³. With the ideal of a new conception of relation with the "consumers of culture"⁴, Prof. Hiren Mukherjee at the 1943 conference of the I.P.T.A., spoke of the battle against commercialisation of the performing arts. Professional theatre run on non-commercial basis was understood as a struggle that required the simultaneous structural change of Indian society's economic structure to be successfully complete. But at least its proposition implied that "people" no longer remained a faceless mask in the cosy darkness of the auditorium but called for a continuous active exchange from people as owners of the product, material as well as cultural. People's theatre therefore, is necessarily a political concept. At least that was what it had theoretically proposed. However, in practice the I.P.T.A. did not exclude the urban middle class in Bengal:

"The call to resuscitate folk culture was not a purely revivalist slogan, but embodied the strategy of promoting a vigorous exchange between different existing forms of entertainment, and of being the cultural forum where urban and rural sections of the struggling people might communicate

To wean the urban middle-class away, to some extent, from the commercial theatre and to provide the rural masses with entertainment which would have some echoes of contemporary reality, a new drama was immediately required reflecting the contradiction between existing reality of Bengali theatre and the historical need for change."⁵

Nor did the I.P.T.A. discard the proscenium stage. In fact, the "experimentation of dramatic form" so influenced production that Shambhu Mitra "refused to allow the play to be taken to the countryside on the ground that the high quality of the

³ Malini Bhattacharya, *ibid*, p. 248

⁴ Malini Bhattacharya, *ibid*, p. 248.

⁵ Malini Bhattacharya, *ibid*, p. 244-250.

performance could not be maintained except on a revolving stage"⁶.

Malini Bhattacharya therefore asked a relevant question at that point: "What then did 'Nabanna' do? For it did bring about a great change in the Bengali theatre, with all its limitations"⁷. And she answered the question by pointing out that, in *Nabanna* naturalism was used for a totally new purpose going beyond prescribed limits. *Nabanna* performed in the trail of meetings and conferences, of the Communist Party (as well as its mass fronts like the Kisan Sabha) conveyed the message of political struggle in front of active participants of the same. And yet, the play differed significantly from the thumbnail sketches on "burning social issues" that usually preceded the performance of *Nabanna* — these sketches in fact turned out to be loud dramatic translations of political slogans. *Nabanna*'s realism operated on a broader scale, with a political thesis that was subtly indirect. Pradhan Samaddar, the central character, unconsciously — unselfconsciously as well — represented an analytical outlook on the 1942-1943 crisis in peasant life. To an urban audience his personal tragedy and misery offered a point of entry through appeal to the sentiments to an understanding of the situation, rather than the more difficult (and perhaps less immediately successful) alternative of trying to drive the point home by appealing to the critical faculty of the audience. Malini Bhattacharya therefore pointed out a "misunderstanding" in Hirankumar Sanyal's objection that it is "highly improbable for one single family to go through the vast range of disasters that the Samaddar family did"⁸.

The production of *Nabanna* with its emphasis on the episodic character, took full advantage of the quick shifts of the revolving stage, breaking the single track movement of the narrative to flexible transfers from one social aspect to another. This multi-layered approach was one tool to harness the possible slip into sensationalism of the individual climactic scenes. On the other hand the opposite

⁶ Malini Bhattacharya, *ibid*, p. 250.

⁷ Malini Bhattacharya, *ibid*, p. 250.

⁸ Malini Bhattacharya, *ibid*, p. 251.

end of the transcending of naturalism was in the use of a bare simple canvas backdrop and props. Therefore the play was attempting to negotiate and reconcile its concerns of a high production standard on the one hand (the revolving stage, for instance) with the simplicity of means on the other. *Nabanna* therefore was no resolved statement but marked a moment of change, and a significant one at that.

In his "Rehearsals for Revolution"⁹, Rustom Bharucha has outlined a chronological build-up culminating in the *Nabanna*, which provides a historical perspective to the importance of the play, as a shift from erstwhile performances. In the first chapter of the book titled "Toward a Political Theater", he begins with the mythic origin of drama, with the "riot in heaven" and its resolution as a neatly contrived narrative to reiterate the Brahmanical authority over the others (Brahma as the creator of the universe, plays the role of the creator of drama as well). Yet there is reason to believe, as Sylvain Levi did, that that "before Bhasa and Kalidasa there must have flourished a Prakrit drama, already literary, yet closer to popular dialects than the classic Sanskrit drama"¹⁰. In comparison with the "theater of the ruling class" this drama could be termed as the "theater of the people". Such operatic performances were linked with the Bhakti movement in its original phase, and in theme and content proved to be immensely popular among the people.

The colonial background that led to the adaptation and the translation of texts for the stage, simultaneously saw the examples of original plays like the 1853 *Kulin Kulasarvasya* ("The top-ranking-Brahmin all-for-prestige", first performed in 1857), and the 1867 *Naba Natak* ("New Drama") by Ram Narayan Tarkaratna, which addressed contemporary social issues like caste and polygamy. Despite addressing issues of social evil, the plays however did not attempt to deal with a more daring theme of the political turnover that lead to the first military uprising and revolt in the colonially repressed country.

⁹ Rustom Bharucha, "Rehearsals for Revolution", Seagull, 1983.

¹⁰ Rustom Bharucha, *ibid*, p. 6.

"Had a playwright been emotionally roused by the Mutiny, it is unlikely that he could have written a play about its exigencies and its impact on the lives of the people. The Bengali theater was simply not equipped to deal with the magnitude of the event. It was only beginning to confront its immaturity when the colonial exploitation of the British provoked mass opposition and unrest."¹¹

Bengali theatre had to first shed its old strictures of Sanskrit dramaturgy, and in the person of Michael Madhusudan Dutt came about the defiance of the sacrosanct canons of the *Natyasastra*.¹² After initial attempts like *Ratnavali* and *Sarmistha*, his contempt for the contemporary *babu* pretensions expressed itself through plays like *Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata* ("Is this what you call civilization?") and *Buro Shaliker Gharey Rom* ("New feathers on the neck of an old bird"). The first has an ambivalent approach of the playwright towards the pompous anglophile central character of Naba Kumar, exposing his vacuity and yet enjoying the failings of the hero. The second satire went further in provocation of orthodox Hindu norms, involving on stage the episode of an attempted seduction of a Muslim woman by a Brahmin and his subsequent humiliation in the hands of her husband — an event scandalous enough for the day.

Following the satires of Madhusudan, there appeared a play by Dinabandhu Mitra written in 1860, but performed twelve years later — *Neel Darpan* ("The indigo mirror") — which sketched the total devastation of an Indian landowner and his family, victims of malevolent planters. *Neel Darpan*'s first performance cannot be said to have had direct interventional implication because of the gap in time by which the controversy had already been exposed and the facts assimilated. But the significance of the play is more generally viewed as a phenomenon, of theatre as a political force attempting to confront and resist oppression.

¹¹ Rustom Bharucha, *ibid*, p. 11.

¹² Michael Madhusudan Dutt's defiance in theatre was a part of his larger rebellion against the bourgeois values in Bengali society. Infatuated by the English language he proceeded systematically by first converting to Christian faith and then going on to master a number of languages including French, Greek, Hebrew, Latin and Sanskrit. It was Madhusudan who introduced the sonnet to Bengali poetry thereby bringing in a modern form of expression till then alien to the language.

Following a series of farcical plays¹³, the Dramatic Performances Control Act was instituted as a censorship. Lacking in necessary rigors to confront censorship the professional theatre of Bengal fell back on musicals, comedies and mythological stories. It was specifically at such a time that even a prolific playwright like Girish Chandra Ghosh produced historic plays in no essence different from his mythologicals. "Ghosh deified the heroic deeds of his historical characters in narratives that celebrated the remoteness and grandeur of the past. Instead of questioning Indian history, Ghosh chose to idealize it."¹⁴ Yet Ghosh mastered the commercial theatre's techniques — the building of the climax, the momentum of action, the bravura of the characters, and the boldness of the gestures — which are not merely virtuosic techniques but could have been strategically used to enhance the political awareness of the people. Also exceptional would be an example like D.L. Roy's "Rana Pratap" of 1905. In the backdrop of the nationalistic upsurge, his characters significantly utter self-critical dialogues. copy

"Instead of eulogizing the heroes of Indian history and indulging in patriotic songs and emotional diatribes against the British, Roy questioned the possibilities of Indian nationalism."¹⁵

On the other hand, the legendary Shishir Bhaduri introduced a number of formal Tech innovations in the Bengali stage performance — the exploration of spatial levels, the rejection of footlights for directional lighting from the wings, as well as unconventional entrances for the characters, for instance from the aisle. In 1927 he had criticized the limitations of the "picture frame" stage, and had expressed the need to go back to indigenous forms like the "jatra". But he did not pursue this ideal any further. /

In the period of transition of the thirties, the requirement was that Bengali theatre ought to shed its middle-class proclivities and address the working-class in theme and treatment, abandon insularity and fear of censorship. Manmatha Roy's

¹ For instance, the 1876 play titled *Gajadananda O Yuvraj* which was a directly irreverent commentary on the visit of the Prince of Wales to a Bengali lawyer's residence

² Rustom Bharucha, *ibid*, p.23

³ Rustom Bharucha, *ibid*, p. 30.

"Karagar" ("Prison") of 1930 dramatized the Puranic story of the birth of Krishna, but the allegorical implications, referring discreetly to the prisoners in the British jails, and the implied message of an uprising against oppression, brought about a Government ban for its performance.

The Communist party of India initiated a political shift in attitude in India. The Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists Association (A.F.W.A.A.) formed in Calcutta, had among its members the artist Jamini Roy, and literary personalities like Manik Bandopadhyay, Buddhadeb Bose, and Bishnu Dey. Without a prominent theatre personality among them, the Union nevertheless performed Rabindranath Tagore's *Rather Rashi* ("The rope of the chariot")¹⁶. The A.F.W.A.A. also organized song recitals in working class districts of Bengal. Fraught with rhetoric, the stirring songs of the day nevertheless appear to present audiences to be loaded with "metaphors that reduce calamities and states of emergency to banalities and the crudest of clichés"¹⁷.

Closely following the 1942 A.F.W.A.A., the Indian People's Theatre Association (I.P.T.A.) was formed in Bombay on May 25, 1943. The I.P.T.A. is a significant organization as the "first concerted attempt on the part of Indian theatre practitioners to collaborate in an anti-fascist and anti-imperialist theater, and the first significant reaction to the 'cheap commercial glamour', 'pseudo-aesthetic posturing' and sobstuff of the contemporary theater"¹⁸. Confronting their insularity as middle-class intellectuals, they had to increase their awareness of the rural life and the language of the people, the dialects of the peasants.

However unlike the Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra units, the Bengal branch of the I.P.T.A. failed to exploit the indigenous theater forms like the *jatra*. Its landmark production was *Nabanna*, "radical in form and content, terrifyingly honest in its

¹⁶ In the play, while the Brahmins and upper castes fail to dislodge the wheels of a chariot the Shudras succeed effortlessly.

¹⁷ Rustom Bharucha, *ibid*, p. 39.

¹⁸ Rustom Bharucha, *ibid*, p. 40.

depiction of suffering, and daringly innovative in its use of language and stagecraft"¹⁹.

Rustom Bharucha, analysing Bijon Bhattacharya's approach, has mentioned that the latter "was very honest about his resistance to Marxist dogma as well as to European theories of political theater. Despite his admiration for Brecht, for instance he was aware that, as an Indian, who had never seen a performance of the Berliner Ensemble, his knowledge of 'epic theater' was purely theoretical"²⁰. Bijon Bhattacharya's reluctance to teach people how to live their lives according to the principles and standards alien to them, works through the questioning of taboos and beliefs from within their social framework, exposing inner contradiction and limitations. In *Nabanna* the characters do so with quiet strength, and realize that their only resilience to suffering lies in collective strength.

"What saves the play from tendentiousness is the vibrant quality of its life. Enacted with fierce commitment and a burning sense of injustice by young members of the Bengal I.P.T.A. (including six Communist party organizers with no theatrical experience) the first performances were revelation for Bengali theater audiences [the audience] discovered for the first time in *Nabanna* the extraordinary impact of realism in the dialects and street cries of the actors, the minutiae of their gestures, movements, and responses, and the stark simplicity of the set and the costumes *Nabanna* proved that it was possible for the Bengali theater to address the devastation of the famine without minimizing its extremity or trivializing its terrifying impact."²¹

¹⁹ Rustom Bharucha, *ibid*, p. 44.

²⁰ Rustom Bharucha, *ibid*, p. 47.

²¹ Rustom Bharucha, *ibid*, p. 49.

Aspects of a "post-Tagorean" modernism in Bengali literature

In an essay titled "'Towards a new beginning' / the literary world of modern Calcutta, 1941-1980"²², poet and literary analyst Sankho Ghosh had sketched the salient features and the major figures on the path to a modern literary expression in the city. He traced it not only through the texts and their authors but also in the phenomenon of new literary journals — publications which drew around them groups of authors and the contested debates regarding the aims and choices in the new literature of the day.

In a symbolic manner, Sankho Ghosh began his account with the passing away of Rabindranath Tagore, and the incident as it was reflected in Buddhadeb Basu's novel "Tithidore". There, on the one hand was the city rocked by the chaos and upsurge of grief, bewildered in bereavement. And on the other hand, Buddhadeb Basu painted the word picture of his imagined character of Dhruva Datta, a poet of the younger generation, who amidst all this chaos, sat alone drinking in a bar, unable to stand the craze in the streets, full of disdain for the multitude. Although at times the tone of the novel does appear to be critically positioned with respect to the attitude of Dhruva Datta, this imagined character is also to a large extent a projection of the author *himself*, who once upon a time shared such disdain in the past. Beyond such a self-critical gesture in a novel, what evolved from the above is that the poets and novelists of the younger generation recognised the passing away of a colossal figure like Rabindranath as a signal of the moment for a new period in Bengali literature. Post-Tagorean modernity will attempt to redefine itself against the overpowering and almost all-encompassing presence of the multifaceted persona of the deceased poet.

While Buddhadeb Basu's residence turned into the *Kabita Bhavan* (house of poetry) from where he edited the poetry journal *Kabita* from the mid-thirties onwards, a

²² Sankho Ghosh, "'Towards a new beginning' / the literary world of modern Calcutta, 1941-1980", *Calcutta the Living City*, ed. by Sukanta Choudhury, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1990, Vol. II (The Present), pp. 232-244.

different gathering at the residence of poet Bishnu Dey, not very far away, culminated thirteen years later in the *Sahityapatra* journal of 1948. *Kabita* had a preference for pure poetry, something that can “only be experienced by the pure soul in a peaceful setting”²³. *Sahityapatra* on the other extreme, was pledged to literature in the cause of society and humanity, and determined to resist detachment and decadence. These two polar tendencies — which recall similar polar debates in the visual arts — were to form the dynamics of the literary developments in the decade of the forties.

Sankho Ghosh went on to narrate how the erstwhile Progressive Writers Association's decided to dispense with the “Progressive” in its name and to include artists among their fold for a cause of much wider concern, thereby transforming into the A.F.W.A.A. Sankho Ghosh points out that the A.F.W.A.A. not only had committed leftists but even vehement anti-leftist like Pramathanath Bishi and Sajanikanta Das among its active participants. When Buddhadeb Basu said that politics was never a part of his life but that “we must stand up against brute force if we are not to lose our very beings”²⁴ one can sense the common unifying agenda that served as the factor behind this formation. Besides a spate of anti-fascist anthologies a collection titled *Keno Likhi* (“Why I write”) also came up as a spontaneous collection of statements to the effect.

Sankho Ghosh mentioned how at one point of time the city-dwellers had been fleeing to the village to evade the threat of Japanese bombing and then, the turn of events saw a paradoxical twist as the famine brought in a reverse flow of destitute influx from the villages to Calcutta, carrying with them the faint hope of a possible survival in the city. Although poetry and prose responding to this calamity came up, but not all could accept the concomitant political outlook of the Progressives, the anti-fascists and the I.P.T.A. Subtle differences of opinion marked out diametrically opposite fronts in reality. Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, initially enthusiastic about the A.F.W.A.A., later wrote back to the Communist Party Secretary P.C. Joshi: “As

²³ Sankho Ghosh, *ibid*, p. 233

²⁴ Sankho Ghosh, *ibid*, p. 233

regards your party politics, I disagree with you on many points My creed is *Ahimsa* and Truth"²⁵. Non-violence and truth had been categories that were the professed ideals of the Congress Sahitya Sabha, obviously the opposite camp as far as political conviction was concerned. As Sankho Ghosh put it, this shift in faith was the outcome of the anti-fascist movement's evasion of national issues in favour of the worldwide concern for a resistance to fascism. Their political guideline allowed no scope for an interest in the Quit India movement of 1942 or the necessity to voice protest against the atrocities in their own colonially dominated country.

Amidst all this the urge to judge literature by political standards seemed to be a pressing issue. At one extreme a literary session under the chairmanship of Manik Bandopadhyay criticised Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's *Hansulibanker Upakatha* as "not literature at all, simply adventurous romanticism or romantic adventurism"²⁶. At the other extreme, the same author's *Manwantar* was "castigated by the opposite camp for its mild praise of communism"²⁷. Sankho Ghosh quoted Buddhadeb Basu writing to the ailing, dying Sukanta Bhattacharya: "You have dissipated your powers in political verses. I feel sorry for you."²⁸

Dissipation or otherwise, as one views the issue, the social realities all around transformed even a poet like Jibanananda Das in whose stirring verses one finds the echo of the melancholy of communal split around the riots of 1946. So too the "sighs born of partition" run through the verses of Bishnu Dey's *Jal dao* ("Give [me] water").

The early fifties, however, saw a change, with the post-war peace movement gaining momentum. The optimism, albeit its simplistic nature, had a role to play for literature. At the All-India Peace Conference in Calcutta (April 1952) the glittering array of

²⁵ Sankho Ghosh, *ibid*, p. 235

²⁶ Sankho Ghosh, *ibid*, p. 235.

²⁷ Sankho Ghosh, *ibid*, p. 235.

²⁸ Sankho Ghosh, *ibid*, p. 235.

convenors from all streams of creative expression spoke of striving for peace, the dignity of man and equality of nations. Peace movement optimism had its political follow-up in the Indo-China pact and the Bulganin and Krushchev visit to India. Sankho Ghosh calls this optimism the "great homecoming" and sees this leading to the happier times of the annual cultural meet in Calcutta called the *Banga Sanskriti Sammelan* since 1955 onwards. Poetry reading sessions were a regular feature at the meet and brought the poet closer in contact with the audience. This bridging of the gap also took place through occasional spontaneous roadside poetry reading sessions as well as more organised events like the Senate Hall meeting (28th and 29th January 1954).

While *Kabita* and *Purbasha* kept up the rightist leaning in literary journals, *Parichay*, *Agrani* and *Sahityapatra* followed close with their leftist slant. Amidst such polarization evolved *Krittibas* as a neutral journal and a platform for young poets. It would be of sufficient interest that the first editorial declared that all young poets should form a group since "the *adda* of the assembled company keeps poets in good health; the stronger the friendships, the greater in fact their independence of composition"²⁹. While *Krittibas* was a north-centred group, in the south of the city came up the journal *Shatabhisha*, keeping up a lively north-south healthy competitive atmosphere.

The period between nineteen-fifty and nineteen sixty saw the passing away of two major novelists and two poets — Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay (d. 1950) and Manik Bandopadhyay (d. 1956) in prose, with Jibanananda Das (d. 1954) and Sudhindranath Datta (d. 1960) in poetry. Henceforth, claimed Sankho Ghosh, Jibanananda Das and Manik Bandopadhyay would continue to be the models for the following generation. Other changes were also imminent in the air, as the old Senate Hall in Calcutta was pulled down, almost physically signifying the passing of a bygone era. Purnendu Pattrea captured it on camera while Shakti Chattopadhyay relinquished his initial love of prose for the new love of poetry stirred to the occasion in *Senate 1960*.

²⁹ Sankho Ghosh, *ibid*, p. 238.

The developments in other forms of cultural expression



Satyendranath Ray has addressed the problem of a "post-Tagorean modernism" in Bengali literature in his article in the Bengali journal *Bibhav*³⁰. He began with the fact that the literary career of Rabindranath Tagore had been unusually long, and that the poet's perceptibility had allowed him to comment upon the younger generation's impatience with him through the voice of Amit Ray in his novel *Shesher Kabita* ("The Last Poem"). Krishna Kripalani has written eloquently on this 1929 publication³¹. "This novel", he wrote, "..... is almost half poetry Its modern setting, its playful mocking tone, its challenging style, the author's trick of introducing himself as the butt of the hero's merciless criticism, the scintillating wit of the dialogue and the final tragic note voiced in the beautiful poem at the end which gives the book its title — all these won for the novel an immediate popularity".³² At the literary gathering in the narrative, Amit Ray in the capacity of the chairperson delivered his fiery denial of Rabindranath Tagore, thus:

"The strongest objection against Rabindranath Tagore is that this gentleman, imitating Wordsworth, insists most perversely on continuing. Many a time the messenger of Death has called to switch off the light, but even as the old man rises from his throne, he still clings to its arms. If he doesn't quit of his own accord, it becomes our duty to quit his court in a body. The one who succeeds him will also enter in triumph, thundering and bragging that there shall be no end to his rule, that the very heavens shall be chained to his mortal abode. For a time his devotees will feed him and fête him and adore him, until the auspicious hour of sacrifice arrives, when the devotees will clamour for liberation from the bondage of devotion. Such is the way the four-footed god is worshipped in Africa. Such is also the way the two-footed, three-footed, four-footed and fourteen-footed

³⁰ Satyendranath Ray, *Bangla sahithye "Rabindrottar adhunikata"-r suchana* (The inception of 'post Tagorean' modernism in Bengali literature), *Bibhav* Special Book-fair issue, Calcutta, 1407 Bangabda

³¹ Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore — A Biography*, (orig. O.U.P., London, 1962) Visva Bharati revised reprint, 1980

³² Krishna Kripalani, *ibid*, p. 351.

gods of metre may be worshipped. No desecration can compare with the profanation of dragging out devotion till it is hackneyed The cult of literary dictatorship is fast becoming obsolete.

My second contention against Rabindranath Tagore is that his literary creations are rounded or wave-like, like his hand-writing, reminding one of roses and moons and female faces. Primitive, so to copy nature's hand. From the new dictator we expect creations straight and sharp like thorns, like arrows, like spear-heads. Not like flowers, but like a flash of lightning, like the pain of neuralgia Poets who are not ashamed to stick on for sixty or seventy years cheapen themselves and must suffer the consequences. In the end they are ringed round by their imitators who make faces at them. Their writing lose all character and, pilfering from their own past, they degenerate into mere receivers of stolen property " ³³

We shall pause for a moment to read Krishna Kripalani's analysis of the character of Amit Ray, for it possibly reveals the way in which Rabindranath saw his younger contemporaries who were impatient to put an end to the Tagorean era for a post-Tagorean modernism. Amit Ray is "an amusing specimen of an ultra-modern Bengali intellectual whose Oxford education has not only given him a superiority complex but induced in him a craze for conscious originality which results in a deliberate and frivolous contrariness to all accepted opinion and convention. His aggressive self-complacence, however, receives a shock when he accidentally encounters and falls in love with a quite different product of modern education — a highly intellectual girl of fine sensibility and deep feelings. This experience is so utterly different from his previous excursions in flirting that it comes as a shock, releasing submerged depth of sincerity which he finds hard to adjust to the habits

³³ Krishna Kripalani, *ibid*, p. 352.

of sophistry and pose practised so long."³⁴ Although Krishna Kripalani would not put *Shesher Kabita* at par with Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* or *Gharey-Bairey* because it would amount to a preference of cleverness to genius, nevertheless he is full of appreciation of "the form of its presentation, the artistry of style, the exquisite poetry interwoven with sophisticated prose sparkling with wit, the half-lyrical half-mocking tone of the narrative which startle the reader and give the novel its peculiar distinction."³⁵

While the *Shesher Kabita* literary gathering was a fictional imagination, Satyendranath Ray referred to a real-life occasion at the Rabindranath Tagore's residence in Jorasanko (1927) — only this time Rabindranath Tagore himself was the chairperson. Called upon to judge a group of young poets accused by the orthodoxy of indecency and shameless imitation of the West, the poet stressed in his speech the deeper qualities of ageless and eternal values that true literature should possess. However, in 1930, he made a significantly different remark in an essay titled *Panchashordhyam* ("Above fifty"), where he mentioned the fluid shift

³⁴ "In the long process he manages to strike a new romantic attitude. The struggle makes him a curiously pathetic figure — one who is being worked against his grain. The idol-breaker has become a worshipper so ardent that the girl understands that what he is in love with is not herself but an idealized image of her to which she can never correspond. Sensing the tragedy she releases him from his troth and disappears from his life. The last poem in which she takes farewell of her lover is her testament of the depth of feeling of which she was capable.

No loss is yours in losing me,
 An image of clay.
 If of that mortal dust
 you have fashioned a goddess,
 let the goddess remain for you to adore
 with the evening star.
 No gross touch to the actual me
 shall disturb the play of your worship,
 no hot breath of ardour passion-lit
 sully its flowers, sacred, fragile ...
 What I gave you
 is yours by right everlasting.
 What others receive
 are the daily dribblets the heart yields
 to tender importunity.
 O my princely, my peerless friend,
 what I gave to you was your own gift —
 fuller your acceptance, deeper my debt,
 my friend, farewell!" (Krishna Kripalani, *ibid*, pp. 353-354.)

³⁵ Krishna Kripalani, *ibid*, p. 354.

of a constantly changing time, which ever relinquishes old residency for new. In keeping with the pace of such a change, literature transforms its forms, he wrote. Thereby, Rabindranath Tagore was actually laying stress on the demands of a particular age, and the current, period characteristics that evolve thereby.

It is in this light of a multifaceted Rabindranath Tagore, a person who constantly rebuilt himself that one has to comprehend the term "post-Tagorean" as it arose between the two world wars. On the one hand it implies a temporal factor — of something coming *after* him. On the other, carrying a shade of egotist vanity nevertheless, is the second implication of being *superior* or *more than* Rabindranath Tagore. Taken together, it is therefore a claim to being more in tune with the times, a time in which apparently therefore Rabindranath Tagore was less relevant. But that is a tricky proposition, according to Satyendranath Ray pointed out, for can one say for certain that the multi-faceted Rabindranath Tagore with his revolutionary concepts of education, social reconstruction and his ideas of the nation, lose all validity in a new age? More importantly, where in the long trajectory of the personality should one pin down the moment for a break-off point towards the "post-Tagorean" shift? And wasn't Rabindranath Tagore himself, with his constant breaking off from old moulds "modern", and "post-Tagorean", at the same time?

Initiated in 1923, the poetry journal *Kallol* virtually lent its name to a generation signifying the youthful contemporary. But the pre-history of the so-called "new", Satyendranath Ray claimed, should be rightfully traced back to its predecessor, the *Sabujpatra* of 1914, and in the process, the differences and the similarities would be apparent between the two periods that they represent. The very first issue of the *Sabujpatra* carried Rabindranath Tagore's first poem from his collection *Balaka* titled *Sabujer abhijan* ("The mission of the green"). In the poem, the poet calls upon the "young", the "as-yet-unripe", to revive the half-dead by striking out at them. Characterizing the old as the caged ones with eyes and ears carefully hid under wings that shield off outside impulses, Rabindranath Tagore was inviting the life-enhancing youth against the rooted and anchored immovable.

This invitation to open up, however was to reach a climactic point during the Second World War, when the war would throw open the doors bursting out western influence upon us. And yet the same war was to prove to be amply disappointing and despairing due to failure of promises. This disappointment and despair characterised the difference of the *Kallol* period from that of the earlier times. In contrast, *Sabujpatra*-s modernity was akin to renaissance ideals — rational, with a faith in human liberation, and a humanist ideal based on the belief in individuality.

According to Satyendranath Ray, the war opened up this country to the revolutionary thoughts of Marx, Darwin and Freud. This further ensured a shift towards a more physical reality where man was part of an evolution in the pattern of life on earth, and his struggle for existence was simultaneously the struggle within social hierarchies and the imposed constraints in the name of “civilized” social behaviour. This freedom from the shackles and constraints of sanctioned social behavioural norms is also part of a post-Tagorean worldview and characterises the utterances of the period. Referring to the poets of the so-called “*Kallol* generation” the author discussed Kaji Nazrul Islam, who despite his close friendship with Mujaffar Ahmed was much more emotionally driven to an anarchist and anti-establishment approach. Nazrul Islam’s poem *Bidrohi* of 1921 would be an ideal example where the poet proudly announced that he holds the curved bamboo flute in one hand while in his other is the war-trumpet. Metaphorically, he pointed out two concomitant protests — that of erotic passion simultaneously along with social revolt. Nazrul Islam’s revolt is charged with an excess of life-gee, exuberance. Compared to Rabindranath Tagore, his imagery of nature is intensely physical and forthright about bodily responses. The overt expression of sexuality, unlike the sublimation in Tagore, is an important marker of a post-Tagorean ethos. But that is certainly not all. Consider for example Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay’s *Pather Panchali* (1929) or his *Aranyak* (1938), where the village features in all its pains and sufferings, as it has never done in a Tagore literary composition. And yet, it would be hard to give unquestioned credit to Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay, for his rationality stops short at a certain distance — his inherent idealism makes suffering numb, and eternal, rather than arousing to a stern resistance leading to its eradication.

The thirties and forties consolidated this shift in social consciousness further, and Satyendranath Ray mentioned Manik Bandopadhyay's novel *Padma Nadir Majhi* (1936), and Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's *Kalindi* (1940), *Ganadevata* (1942) and *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* (1947) in this regard.

Satyendranath Ray recalled that Rabindranath Tagore had once remarked that Jibanananda's poetry consists of pictorial imagery. Pictorial imagery abounds in his own poetry, as well, but the two are distinctly different and distinguishable from each other. So too can be said of the poetry of Bishnu Dey. In the realm of content the author points out how Sudhindranath Datta's verses, despite stylistic echoes of rhyme and metre, are distinctly different from that of Rabindranath Tagore. Likewise, an apparently Tagorean poetry on rain and longing-in-isolation from Amiya Chakraborty stands out distinctly from its comparable source once we begin to recognise that in Rabindranath longing-in-isolation has a totality and a completeness of beyond-body spiritual realization, while the verses of the former throb with the warmth of flesh and blood.

Despite all this, Rabindranath Tagore's relevance beyond period significance does not entirely lose its validity. *Muktadhara* and *Raktakarabi* hold pertinent positions that have been re-interpreted in more recent times. *Chitrangada* and *Chaturanga* speak of the free-willed liberated woman, which is even more relevant in the present times. But despite the fact an important distinction remains. The Second World War had transformed responses completely, "it had wiped out the past, rejected all memories the thin veil of humanity has been torn open to reveal man's endless selfishness, craving and desire, and ferocity Man had already lost God and religion, now began lonely man's losing of himself. Do we yet have the days of Tagorean humanism? Theodor Adorno had said, 'No poetry after Auschwitz'. Probably he selected to speak of poetry because it happens to the most sensitive of all forms of literature. What remains when man loses qualities of sensitivity?"³⁶

³⁶ Satyendranath Ray, op. cit, p. 20

This essential distinction between the Tagorean and the post-Tagorean era becomes poignantly evident if we consider Rabindranath Tagore's famous 1941 address titled *Sabhyatar Sankat* (crisis in civilization).

Rabindranath Tagore perceived the then current travails as a crisis in human civilization and his address combines both frustration and faith. As Krishna Kripalani wrote:

"He began by recalling how his faith in modern western civilization had grown with his admiration of its humanistic tradition as revealed mainly through English literature and British liberal institutions 'The large-hearted radical liberalism of those speeches, overflowing all narrow national bounds, made so deep an impression on my mind that something of it lingers even today, in these days of graceless disillusionment.'

He went on to analyse how this 'graceless disillusionment' was the result of the cynical disregard by the British rulers of the very values which were the pride of western civilization. 'The wheels of Fate will one day compel the British to give up their Indian Empire. But what kind of Indian will they leave behind, what stark misery? When the stream of their two centuries' administration runs dry at last, what a waste of mud and filth they will leave behind them!

But even in the darkest gloom Tagore's testament could not end in a note of despair. 'As I look around I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man. I would rather look forward to the opening of a new chapter in his history after the cataclysm is over and the atmosphere rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice.'"³⁷

³⁷ Krishna Kripalani, op. cit., 443-444 (Passages within single quotes in this quotation are Krishna Kripalani's quotations from the "Crisis of Civilization".)

Rabindranath Tagore's faith in the destiny of man is revealed in the song composed for and sung on the same occasion. This song, an answer to an earlier request from his nephew Soumyendranath Tagore for a new song that can be "sung in chorus to hail the advent of the new man, the real man, the free man" sums up Rabindranath Tagore's positive faith in humanity³⁸.

In the introduction to a selection of translated poems of Jibanananda Das³⁹, Sisir Kumar Das began with the poet's contrast to the literary activity of Kaji Nazrul Islam. They were "born within a year of each other" and yet there was "hardly anything in common between them they represent two altogether different faces of Bengali poetry",⁴⁰ he wrote.

Kaji Nazrul Islam had a truly meteoric career, beginning with the brief stint in the army and followed by the enthusiastic response to the national movement. A romantic youth, passionate, loud and prolific, he was full of revolutionary zeal and went to jail for his inflammatory verses and journalistic writing. From the 1922 publication *Agnibeena* ("The lyre of fire"), the book of poems made him an idol of fiery youth as much for his poetry as for his songs. The tragic blow came with the irremediable disease that affected his brain in 1942, paralysing him subsequent to his loss of the voice, till his death in 1976 (in Bangladesh).

Jibanananda Das in sharp contrast, was a quiet and withdrawn personality who maintained a distance from ideological debates as well as literary gatherings. Apart from his death in 1954, eight days after he was hit by a tramcar in Calcutta, there is perhaps hardly anything worth public mention in his life. In fact the two poets not

³⁸ "The Great One comes,
on earth the blades of grass shiver in anticipation,
in the heavens the trumpets sound
the dark night's fortress crumbles into dust,
over the crest of dawn is proclaimed
the assurance of new life: 'Fear not' —
and the great sky resounds with the hymn
of victory to the coming of Man." (Krishna Kripalani, *ibid*, p. 444)

³⁹ Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), "A certain sense/ poems by Jibanananda Das", , Sahitya Akademi, 1998

⁴⁰ Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *ibid*, p. i.

only represent the public and the private spheres but something deeper — “one is the last celebrated figure of a romantic phase of poetry with its spirit of revolt and passion, while the other inducted the tortured sensibilities of modernity into Bengali poetry”.⁴¹

“The modernity that created the real rift in the history of Bengali literary consciousness — whatever be its immediate causes, political, social or aesthetic — appeared in the work of a small group of *avant-garde* writers, thoroughly westernised in their training and thought. They differed from one another in their response to the earlier traditions of Bengali poetry, particularly the Tagorean, and in their regard for Western modernism. They also differed in the strategies for appropriating Western ‘modern’ poetry. Yet they were successful to a considerable degree in presenting an orchestrated voice of challenge to the established norms of literary culture ”⁴²

Born in Barisal, in present day Bangladesh Jibanananda Das hailed from a Brahmo family liberated in their views about social progress. It also had a strong literary culture. Given the background he was naturally attracted to English literature, and pursued a course at the Presidency College followed by a post-graduate degree from the Calcutta University (1921). Dismissed from his teaching post at the City College due to accusations of “obscenity” in his poetry, he continued to teach at various institutions, including one in Delhi, before joining the Barisal Brajamohan College. It was from here that on a vacation to Calcutta in 1946, ill-timed a month before the infamous riots, that he had to postpone his going back — which never happened. Despite managing to secure a job after a long period of unemployment, he was never to be relieved of financial anxieties or the trauma of the partition, his poetry harking back to the land he left behind.

⁴¹ Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *ibid*, p. ii.

⁴² Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *ibid*, p. ii.

“..... The tradition minded reader, engrossed in Tagorean splendour, found him different, exotic and imitative of Western poets. His unconventional metaphors and uneven diction, the rawness of his language and his sensuous imagery, became the target of untiring lampoons by several critics including a notorious weekly magazine, *Shanibarar chithi*, which consistently misspelt his name with gleeful malice. The Marxist critics did not lag behind, censuring him for his lack of social awareness and his dark pessimism. Buddhadeba Bose described him as ‘the loneliest’ poet.”⁴³

Although he had started publishing from 1920, it was with his *Dhusar pandulipi* (“The grey manuscript”) of 1936 that he evolved into a poet of maturity with a distinct idiom, and yet was utterly exotic, strange and unknown, compelling and magical. “His success was reflected in the manipulation of diction and prosody, particularly the controlled use of assonance and alliteration and the employment of a slow and gentle rhythm”⁴⁴, wrote the author, adding that his vocabulary is uneven, jarring, conspicuously defiant of the established rules of rhetoric, at times repellent to the canons of taste. Instead of the oft-repeated seasons of *basanta* (spring) and *barsha* (rains) he chose to concentrate on the *hemanta*, “the short-lived interval between *sarat*, known for its bright blue sky, green fields, young paddy and swollen rivers, and *sit* (winter), a season of tender sunshine and ripe crops. *Hemanta* is a season of mist and fog, of melancholy light and fields with ripe crops almost ready to be garnered He creates an altogether different world with exotic geographical features its rivers are languid, its trees mysterious, its leaves grey and yellow. He also privileges the kite, the owl and the vulture, not the koel.”⁴⁵

Jibanananda Das’ stress on the sense of smell and the transition from “smell to touch, touch into taste, sight into sound” heightens the mystery and the magic. Any

⁴³ Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *ibid*, pp. v-vi.

⁴⁴ Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *ibid*, p. vii.

⁴⁵ Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *ibid*, pp. vii-viii.

poetry by Jibanananda would reveal how the fixed world of categories and structured functions crumble. In 1942 with the publication of *Banalata Sen*, he merged the geography of mythical and historical time “only to culminate in the frustration and hope of the modern age the poem connects the narratorial voice with the ever-moving forces of history. The poetic ‘I’ no longer remains an indefinite universal, an outsider to man’s anguished journey Natore, a modern place-name, jars on the ear after Sravasti and Vidisha, embalmed in the serene beauty of the Buddhist world, as does Banalata Sen, a commoner without any mythical or historical halo The contrast is further intensified by juxtaposing the embellished metaphors of classical association (‘Her hair the dark night long ago in Vidisa/ Her face a Sravasti carving’) and the completely baffling image of eyes like bird’s nests, rich and suggestive, yet violating the norms of comparison”⁴⁶ Despite the criticisms of escapism, for poems like *Andhakar* whose narcotic effect supposedly lulled the reader into inaction, pessimism is not the last word in the book in *Suchetana* he wrote:

“Now is the earth gravely, most gravely sick;
Yet to this earth man is indebted still.”

Compared to *Banalata Sen*, *Mahaprithivi* (“The great earth”, 1944) and *Satti Tarar Timir* (“The darkness of seven stars”, 1948) present a radically different world that evolved with the agonising experience of the war, famine, riots and partition. The exotic yield to the torturous and the tormented. Even an increased urban setting predominates. The cacophony of this world leads to the articulation of anger and frustration and also to existential questions.

The issues in the contemporary song-tradition in Bengal

Comparable to the domain of theatrical performance, the new socio-political consciousness of the forties had a transformative impact on the Bengali song-tradition, as well. With respect to the theme, however, from within a specifically

⁴⁶ Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *ibid*, p. x.

left-political domain arose the new genre of the *ganasangeet* ("mass song" or "peoples' song"). Socially responsive in content not only was the *ganasangeet* to be an expression *for* and *of* the people, but it also implied the requisite possibility of rousing collective exposition. We need to trace back the roots of the demand for such a form of cultural expression to be able to situate it contextually, and to be able to realize its potential and drawbacks in the light of the moment of its inception.

Before the genre of *ganasangeet* had come into being, the nineteenth century nationalist upsurge saw the birth of the *swadeshi gaan*, the patriotic songs. In the chapter titled "*Bangla Ganasangeeter Dhara*" (The tradition of Bengali mass-song") in his book "*Bangla Ganer Char Diganta*" ("The four horizons of Bengali songs")⁴⁷, Sudhir Chakraborty began with the example of an immensely stirring and popular song *Ekbar Biday Dey Ma Ghurey Ashi* ("Give me leave for once, O mother, for I shall return"). When Khudiram Bose was sentenced to be hung to death by the British, it gave birth to this simple yet powerful lyric composed by one Pitambar Das of Bankura, and the tune was directly adopted from a *gour-padabali* (devotional songs about Chaitanya) *Ekbar Esho Gour Dinomani* ("Come for once, O Gour, the glory-of-the-day"). Its simplicity has been behind its immense popularity beyond the span of a century, but it is not the form alone that determined its life. The lyrics had expressed the promise of a rebirth of the revolutionary, as the son of a maternal aunt — the identifying marks of the noose would be visible on the neck of the newborn, the song claimed. Loosely speaking one may see in this the affirmation of the theory of re-incarnation, but an even more relevant philosophic speculation can be drawn from the song — for the lyric also implies that revolution never dies, that it is impossible to wipe out the birth-marks of revolution. Given the possibility of this reading, and able to stir the masses with its message, the song should certainly qualifies for the category of *ganasangeet* — barring one factor, that it does not speak of the international dispossessed community and of class struggle. Does not that lead us to rethink the definition for the category of "peoples' song"? Where exactly does *ganasangeet* relate to the indigenous tradition of songs in

⁴⁷ Sudhir Chakraborty, "*Bangla Ganer Char Diganta*", Anushtup, Calcutta, 1992.

Bengal? Is it entirely alien and cast in a foreign mould? Or has it evolved out of its own specific context, a specific time-bound expression? Nationalism has often been claimed as an alien conceptual intrusion, based on the definition of the category of the "nation". Yet it is true that a most prolific and alive tradition of patriotic songs roused by sentiments of nationalism were prevalent before *ganasangeet* came into being. In fact *ganasangeet* owes something to this category of the *swadeshi gaan* as well as defines its distinction from it. The Bengali patriotic song tradition arose from among the circle of English educated liberated elites. Despite the fact that in most of the songs there was the specifically Brahmanical construct of the visualizing the country as the 'divine-mother' (because of which it is said that the Bengali Muslim could not whole-heartedly join in lending their voice to these songs), patriotic songs extended its boundaries beyond the urban milieu into the voice of the bards like Mukunda Das who gave it a mobility and wider popularity. The conflict and doubt between the choice of Indian "raga" traditions and the western tonal projection was resolved at once when in 1905 Rabindranath Tagore adapted his compositions to the structure and patterns of folk tunes of Bengal. Simultaneously, Dwijendranath Roy was equally confident — and equally popular — with his effortless blend of the richness of vocabulary with the strength of foreign tunes, to arrive at the early instances of songs fit for collective singing. Patriotic songs have an appeal that sustains beyond the specificities of the period moment. On the contrary Hemanga Biswas has been extremely apologetic regarding his early *ganasangeet* — the changing political beliefs and thoughts had rendered the songs almost irrelevant and topical. Patriotic songs retain their appeal chiefly because they have more often dealt with the general impulse of nationalistic sentiments rather than actually addressing specific political details of colonial repression, in short they have appealed to more touchingly human faculties.

The contrast and the link between the two is essential in our understanding of the evolution of the *ganasangeet*. Many exponents of this genre were originally exponents of *Rabindrasangeet* (the songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore) and the *swadeshi gaan*. However the marked difference between the earlier trend

and the *ganasangeet* lay in the latter's conscious addressing of the issues of international class-struggle, and the protest voiced against capitalist hoarding and accumulation. During the Tebhaga movement Salil Chowdhury composed a song in which the sickle is hailed as the tool in the hand of the peasant who will no more give up his hard-earned produce as long as there is life and self-dignity in mind to urge him on. Symbolically, he spoke in the song of the nexus between native exploitation and the foreign repression as "the black *mahout* of the white elephant"; yet the call to sharpen the sickle is left subdued in metaphoric statement. In contrast, Hemanga Biswas wrote on parallel lines but directly announced in one of his lyrics that the use of the sickle was two-fold — to cut the golden rice when it was time for harvest, and should the bullies threaten it could also be employed to take the opponent's life if necessary. The need to be primarily political — and politically correct — had dimmed the effectiveness of the song towards the very end. While nowhere in the entire song does one hear for once about the toilers in the factories, the final lines of the lyric suddenly call for a united resistance from urban-labourers and the peasants that would then immediately liberate the country! Hence, creative cultural expression had slipped into political slogan.

In Bengal, the predominant forms in the tradition of songs, had either been the classical *raga* based compositions or the folk renditions, and thematically they had either addressed the love of man or the worship of God. The stress had been on melody and on improvisation, with lyrics holding an important place in its appeal and appreciation. Apart from some rural forms, the urban expression was individual and no practice of collective rendering had existed before the *Brahmasangeet* (the songs of the Brahmo religion). The *Brahmasangeet* too, was inspired by the collective singing of the church choir of the west, and because of the intricate structure of tune it demanded a skilled rendering, not to speak of the conviction of the particular form of philosophical faith that was implied in its rendition. Arousing patriotic songs of the nationalist period could move beyond this solemnity to quite an extent.

At the beginning of the forties, a large section of the notable composers of the past

years were no more alive — Rajanikanta (d. 1910), Dwijendralal (d. 1913), and Atulprasad (d. 1934). In 1941 Rabindranath Tagore had passed away, followed by Ajoy and Anil Bhattacharya (both d. 1943). Nazrul Islam has been silent since 1942 and Dilipkumar Roy had permanently settled in Pondicherry since 1934. Such was the scene at the beginning of the decade. Added to this gap were the effects of the war and the famine and later the riots, and one can sense that the tide was taking a turn for the demand of a different kind of tune and lyric in the Bengali song-tradition. But initially, for various reasons, there was no proper answer to the demand of the times and the Bengali song was steeped in gloom and repentance, or alternatively escaped into romantic love lyrics bypassing pressing issues of the day. It was with the Youth Cultural Institute of 1940 that a fresh start was seen to emerge, as they started with arousing rendition of Rabindranath Tagore and Kaji Nazrul Islam and gradually ventured into original compositions. The trend took a firmer shape with the Anti-fascist Writers and Artists Association and the I.P.T.A. movement that gradually ushered in the necessary change from within the political consciousness that was motivating the two associations. In 1943 "Janajuddher gaan" published by Subhash Mukhopadhyay under the auspices of the A.F.W.A.A. could be seen as an outcome of this endeavour.

However between 1948 and 1951 there was a period of disaster for the *ganasangeet* movement, due to political confusion. Chinmohan Sehanobis is of the opinion that it was the problem of leadership — political confusion had removed those with organising capabilities from the leading positions of the I.P.T.A. and those who remained were pure artists like Bijon Bhattacharya, Shambhu Mitra, or Jyotirindra Moitra. It shall be of significance to note here that an enterprising organiser like Binoy Roy had collected together under the banner of the cultural front a wide galaxy of creative personalities from both the urban and the rural sectors. It was he who had exhorted Jyotirindra Moitra to remove this orthodox concept of a lyrical and over-sweet rendition of the songs of Rabindranath Tagore and select a number of more forceful compositions, which were then sung, accompanied by the organ. Once again, after a long time since 1905, the songs of Rabindranath Tagore filled the air with enough gusto to be an inspiring force within a wider struggle.

It will be extremely significant in this context to recall a song by Salil Chowdhury titled *Shei Meye* ("That girl") of 1950. It closely followed Rabindranath Tagore's song *Krishnakali* about the dark girl in the fields, but recasts it in a modern context of poverty, hunger and pain. Where Rabindranath Tagore saw the beautiful doe-eyes of his dark girl, Salil Chowdhury stress the thin limbs lifted up begging for food. On the other hand, the tune kept reminding the source and then went into innumerable transmutations of the tune and rhythm ending in the folk. It can only be comprehended if one listens to both the songs simultaneously and their theme and structure are compared. But it is perhaps a unique exception to show how *ganasangeet* could have profitably adapted from Rabindranath Tagore's creations and forged ahead.

The famine gave the much-necessary impetus and the forward thrust. The impact brought the poets and the song-composers down on the street, face-to-face with the harsh realities of the disaster. Jyotirindra Moitra composed his series of songs that came to be popular as the *Nabajibaner Gaan* ("Songs of new life") — the title itself revealing the reaffirmation in life and hope as well as the call to struggle and protest that the anthology combined. The compositions were infused with the harmonic aspects suited to group choral singing and had a distinctly non-indigenous flavour to it; however it served to arouse the response it was targeted for and to that extent its adoption of a foreign structure and form and its combination with more closer-to-home characteristics was a successful endeavour. From the enthusiastic cultural activists of the Communist party the songs spread to the members of the Calcutta tram-way workers union, to the Howrah Maidan railway workers group, and to the Champdani Jute mill workers community.

Besides these extremely sophisticated urban attempts to forge a cultural advancement, there were within the movement members from a more rural background where forms of indigenous song-traditions still retained their intricate life-connections and links. Ramesh Seal, and Gurudas Pal belong to such a branch in whose songs the not-yet-snapped links to the soil make itself clearly felt in their

distinctive choice of vocabulary and forms, and above all the conviction with which they utter their statements.

The crisis and the debates over *ganasangeet* are also worth our concern. On the one hand Salil Chowdhury wrote that when the party banned his *Griyayer Bodhu* ("The village bride") or the *Palki Choley* ("The palanquin moves") it had accused him of continuing with the unacceptable imageries of the crumbling huts and the desolation and destruction, when in reality the women in the villages had already taken up a more direct and constructive step in the confrontation. In defence, Salil Chowdhury said that as an artist he had merely painted the picture of the reality as it had appeared in front of his eyes; to continue the song with rousing call to collective protest would mean surrendering to political slogan, not a statement of a creative expression. Debabrata Biswas, the acclaimed exponent of *Rabindrasangeet* who had initially close contacts with the cultural front of the Communist party, had also opined that even with the "martyr's call" and the subjects matters born of Calcutta and Bombay, the front had not been able to penetrate and inch into the consciousness and the psyche of the mass.⁴⁷

On the other hand, another stalwart like Hemanga Biswas would criticise that fact that in the attempt to be conscious about the quality of the compositions, the party had indirectly encouraged formalism of a dangerous kind. In their attempts to concentrate on the formal aspects of music, the composers failed to identify the fact that the true issue lay in the content of the songs, which determined by the political conviction would itself dictate the necessary form for the composition, in question.

The debate over content and form became the point of difference, and was to coincide with the downward gradient of *ganasangeet*'s journey. The likes of Salil Chowdhury nevertheless evolved into a more wholesome balance between the question of a west-east blend and especially after the fifties created some of the most rewarding pieces of music in the history of modern Bengali song-tradition.