

Rabindrasangeet Today: a Sociological Approach

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Abstract

Through a cursory discussion of the history of production, dissemination and reception of Rabindrasangeet since the early twentieth century till date, this article tries to question the dominant (middle class) notion of traditional wide Bengali “popularity” of Rabindrasangeet and a gradual “decline” in its culture in recent times. In the process it attempts a brief exploration of the complex relationship of Tagore’s music with the tradition of north Indian classical music and local “folk” musical traditions on the one hand and the larger logic of aggressive, Eurocentric, hegemonic and homogenising colonial modernity on the other. The dual role of technological modernity in strengthening as well as weakening the tradition of rendition and reception of Rabindrasangeet in this context makes any simplistic perception of the relationship of music and modernity banal. Tagore’s music, thus, the article argues, constructs a space of “alternative modernity” that has conspicuous affinity with his “non-modern” ideas of education and social development. So far as Rabindrasangeet holds an element of critique of and “protest” against the cultural logic of capitalism, despite its unavoidable participation in the market-dynamics today, it will remain close to the heart of those still on the lookout for a cultural space outside the Hollywood-spawned “culture industry.”

[**Keywords:** music, technology, popularity, culture, capitalism, alternative modernity.]

The history of anxiety in the Bengali intelligentsia over the “future” of Rabindrasangeet, especially in terms of dissemination—the “purity” of the style of its rendition by individual artists—and reception, its “popularity,” is rather long. The tradition has to be seen in the light of the historical aesthetic duality of “pleasure” and “happiness” that has marked the production, dissemination and reception of all musical traditions, including that of Rabindrasangeet, over time. As Theodor W. Adorno reminds us in his article “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” “Complaints about the decline of musical taste begin only a little later than mankind’s twofold discovery, on the threshold of historical time, that music represents at once the immediate manifestation of impulse and the locus of its taming” (Adorno 2007:29). The history of “complaints” about the decline of the culture of Rabindrasangeet is at least as old as the late years of the bard’s life itself, when he was growing increasingly cynical about the ability of singers to live up to the huge responsibility of empathetic interpretation and suitable rendition of his songs. In a discussion with Dilip Kumar Roy, the renowned musician and musicologist, on 29th March, 1929 Tagore was particularly rueful not just about the contemporary “distortions” in the singing of his songs, but also about the nature of music as an art-form which makes the singer—apart from the song-writer and composer—an indispensable

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“evil” entity: “I have been hearing so much of distortion in my songs day in and day out that I also fear that it will perhaps turn impossible to keep their own flavour (*rasa*) intact. The peculiarities of the strengths and weaknesses of the singer cannot but affect music at least to an extent simply because of the fact that music flows through the voices of many. It is easy to save painting and poetry from this misery” (Tagore Bangla 1399: 98). It is not that Tagore was against the idea of the artistic freedom of improvisation, provided the structure of his musical composition for a particular song remained unimpaired, and the artist was powerful enough. But he had a very selective—to put it mildly—idea of a “powerful artist.” As late as 1938 he claimed in a conversation with Roy to have ever heard only one artist who could successfully render his songs—Sahana Devi: “I never saw embodied in a voice the spirit I want to capture in my songs. Had I had good voice perhaps I could have shown what gem I have in my mind. A lot of people sing my songs, but they always disappoint me. I knew only one girl who could catch the spirit of my music—Jhunu, Sahana” (Tagore: 118). Similar concerns and Tagore’s perceptions of the gradual decline in the Bengali culture of listening can be found several times elsewhere in Tagore’s writings on music. And yet he was supremely confident and optimistic not just of the survival but also of wide popular acceptance of his songs.

Interestingly Tagore referred to two inventions of modern technology of artistic/musical dissemination in this context. One of them—the gramophone — was considered by him to have contributed to the deterioration of the general culture of Rabindrasangeet through largely distorted rampant mechanical reproduction of his songs since the early twentieth century.¹ In the initial phase of the recording of Tagore’s songs professional singers “usually did not care for any faithful reproduction in them of the prescribed notations (*swaralipi*). Almost all of them sang in their own style and notation” (Ghosh: 103). And the means the bard had in his mind to stem the rot was a wide dissemination of his *swaralipi* through the second technological tool, the printing press, apparently having no connection with music, but extremely useful in leaving the authorial signature on the work of art, including music, for use of posterity. It is well known that Tagore was immensely sensitive and possessive about his musical compositions of all his creations. And he sought to make the best use of the available technological tools to “protect” it from being lost in wilderness, by leaving the mark of his “aura”/ “authority” permanently on a work of art which otherwise held no scope for any direct authorial interface with the audience. Unlike literature, sculpture, painting and other forms of “high” art, music, as Tagore himself noted, is not an “author”/ composer-centric art, but a singer/performer-centric one, which also has traditionally sought and enriched itself through the assistance of the accompaniment of musicians/ instrument-artists. And Tagore had little faith on the ability of singers as well as the majority of the contemporary listeners to perceive and render the beauty of his songs, which singularly bore the clearest mark of his greatness as an individual artist. The conflict of the essentially

collective nature of Tagore's musical art and his desire for an almost exclusive "authority" over them, the authority which continuously slips out of his disposal, has remained a central problem in the tradition of Rabindrasangeet. It is precisely this conflict which leads him to helplessly lament about his not having the suitable voice to show the world the "right" spirit of his music. He comments on the utility of modern technology in addressing the problem partially by individuating the artwork:

The laws of fine arts hold that the *complete* right to an artwork goes *exclusively* to the individual creator *alone*. There was a time in literature and music when it was difficult to attribute exclusive right to a work of art to the individual creator. All and sundry would dare to intervene according to their individual tastes... Today it is possible to settle the mark of the individual artist on the artwork through means like the printing press and musical notations (*swaralipi*). It is therefore easy, and advisable, to prevent public anarchy in the world of artistic creation (Tagore 1399: 116, emphasis mine).

And yet, notation is no music, and thus, the problem of individual authorial intention in an essentially collective performing art continues to figure in any discussion of Rabindrasangeet till date, though it has somewhat lost its formal significance with the lift of copyright of Tagore's art.

In spite of Tagore's, and subsequently Visva-Bharati's, best attempts to prevent his music from going haywire, the tradition of anxiety has shown no sign of weakening.² Far less critical attention has been devoted to the virtual or actual death of several other musical traditions in Bengal—for example Nazrulgeeti, Atulprasadi and Dwijendrageeti and "folk" forms like Baul, Bhatiyali, Kirtan and so on—in spite of the fact that there are several common sociological factors leading to the decadence and even disappearance of these traditions and that of Rabindrasangeet. The long history of almost paranoiac possessive anxiety over Rabindrasangeet on the one hand reflects the Bengali urban middle class poverty in definitive cultural productions after Tagore, and their resultant insecurity vis-à-vis self-fashioning. And yet it shows, on the other hand, perhaps paradoxically, that there is little reason to break one's head about the future of Rabindrasangeet right now, which is still strong and relevant enough to secure an important place in the process of the identity formation of this otherwise decadent body of people.

Were Rabindranath's songs ever "popular" in the literal sense of the term? Like most of the products of the Bengal Renaissance and its residual impulse in the nineteenth and the early-twentieth century, Rabindrasangeet was almost exclusively appropriated by the culturally hegemonic Kolkata middle class. The most notable exceptions in this respect probably are the contributions of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and to an extent Raja Rammohun Roy, which, because of their thrust on wider social reformation, had some immediate impact on the larger Bengali life and culture outside Kolkata. Rabindrasangeet has always been a largely urban educated middle class phenomenon with little appeal—other than

ritualistic—in the popular Bengali cultural life. The early history of composition and dissemination of Rabindrasangeet would show that it was more or less limited within certain particular culturally progressive groups in Kolkata and Santiniketan, mainly the Brahmasamaj. The audience for the songs composed for the dance-dramas and the musicals were confined largely to the family-circle in Kolkata and the Ashramites in the culturally insular space of Santiniketan. The early Santiniketan had little cultural connections with and influence on the surrounding villages, an uncomfortable reality that Tagore tried to address later through his Sriniketan project of socio-economic reformation of the villages. Santiniketan, not Sriniketan, was—and still substantially is—an extension/ ‘colony’ of the Kolkata middle class, especially since its gradual institutionalisation as a heterotopic space for the cultural self-fashioning of this class beleaguered first by the colonial cultural onslaught and then by a history of socio-economic setbacks starting with the post-Independence Partition. It was only during the frenzied historical phase of the “swadeshi” movement at the turn of the century that a possibility was created for a wider public dissemination of and participation in the specifically rich culture of Rabindrasangeet. Then again, it was an extension from certain groups to the educated, patriotic middle classes, mainly based in Kolkata. Sandip belting out “Bidhir bandhon katbe tumi . . .” in Satyajit Ray’s adaptation of the Tagore classic *Ghare Baire* is a typical example of the only partially democratising impact that “swadeshi” had on the tradition of reception of Rabindrasangeet. Shantidev Ghosh provides us with a list of seventy four singers who performed on the occasion of the celebration of Tagore’s seventieth birthday in 1931 in Kolkata, of whom “twenty-odd were from Santiniketan, and the rest from Kolkata.” (106-07) In fact, the robustly sophisticated literary/ poetic nature of Rabindrasangeet, which makes it very much a part of our literary history, subjects it to the limitation that written literature—as opposed to the popular traditions of orature—has never been able to overcome as an institution. Literature has traditionally been a middle class institution, and Tagore’s songs, with their greater refinement, subtlety of emotions, expressions and introspection, a stupendous range of thematic, stylistic and formal experimentations have crafted an aura of urbanity (in mood and temper) around themselves that was never really meant to be “popular.”

It is worth taking note of Shankha Ghosh’s cautionary prediction before participating in the mythical and euphoric Bengali middle class discourse of the gradual decline in the “popularity” of Rabindrasangeet:

There will always remain a difference in expansion between Rabindrasangeet on the one hand and Ramprasadi, Baul music, Padavali songs and Palligeeti on the other. There is absolutely no possibility of the realisation of Yeats’s prediction made eighty seven years back that within a few generations’ time the songs of *Gitanjali* would reach even the beggar on the street (Sudhir Chakravarti ed. 2007: 222).

Ghosh of course would have been less optimistic about the popular appeal of the local “folk” musical genres, which have been more or less extinct today with the marauding onslaught of the global “culture industry,” had he made the comment a few years after he does.

The essentially urbane spirit and its limitations vis-à-vis the popularity of Rabindrasangeet has to be seen against the larger context of Tagore’s interaction with the Indian musical traditions on the one hand and his approach to colonial modernity on the other. Tagore successfully assimilated in his music some of the seminal features of the north Indian classical musical tradition and those of the “local” popular/ “folk” traditions, both urban (like *tappa*, *tarja*, *kabigan* and so on) and rural (*panchali*, *jatra*, *baul*, *bhatiyali*, *kirtan* etc). While the former, marked by a rigorous loyalty to technical craftsmanship and to the idea of *gharana* and tutelage in the dissemination of “pure music,” thrived largely under the patronage of the feudal culture of the court, the latter, no less rich and pluralistic, was much closer to the soil, flexible in idiom and practice within the broader parameters of a particular genre (say *kirtan*), and hardly sophisticated, even at times gross, in vocabulary, though often containing glimpses of the gravest traditional/ collective wisdom. Tagore’s attitude to the former—which he conceived more or less as a static institution with little scope of evolution, though bearing the rich Indian tradition of *ragas* that marks man’s fundamental relationship with nature and the universe—was, as Satyajit Ray points out, one of “rebellion,” rebellion against an institutionalised tradition, and of a “non-academic” reliance on the “instinctive” (Ahad and Khatun eds.: 160-62). Tagore’s assimilation and innovative and generous adaptation of some aspects of the north Indian classical music, which started as early as his childhood in the rich (in all possible senses) culture of his family, had important bearings on the Bengali urban middle class musical culture at large. He effected a sort of democratisation of what I would call “high music,” which, though in origin had strong connections with popular music, came to be gradually identified with the elitist culture of the court and the drawing room of the rich patron since the late eighteenth century. And yet, the classical was never to be “simple” enough to reach the masses at large.³ Through mainly Rabindrasangeet, and other forms of “light” classical music, it grew into a part of the identity of a particular “middlebrow” section of the twentieth century Bengali urban middle class.

The anti-institutional and non-academic instinctive spirit of Tagore’s music vis-à-vis its interface with the north Indian classical tradition can be seen as parallel to his anti-institutional response to the homogenising aspects of the aggressive brand of colonial modernity, which he sought to counter in praxis through his idea of “alternative” education in Santiniketan and “alternative” social development in Sriniketan. Unlike Gandhi, Tagore was never apathetic to colonial modernity per se. Indeed, as is well known, his was a universalist spirit, and not a narrow nationalist one, an attitude well reflected in the project of Visva-Bharati, and in his innumerable fictional and non-fictional writings on the

necessity of fruitful assimilation of Western science, machine and the technological spirit. And yet, he never failed to challenge the essentially hierarchical, marginalising, exclusive and hegemonic impulse of the binary offshoots of the enlightenment discourse of modernity and knowledge that acted as the cornerstone of imperialist ideologies: Culture/nature, science/religion, industrial/ agrarian, urban/rural, rational/ mythical and so on. A nature-centric, non-formal, non-institutional, more inclusive and holistic system of education with proper places assigned to finer arts like music and dance in Santiniketan and a village-centric agrarian development project in Sriniketan with adequate appropriation of available scientific and technological resources, marked the educational, cultural and social alternatives Tagore devised to counter the all-round hegemony of the homogenising colonial modernity. In music he draws a lot on both the indigenous “establishment” of the classical tradition and the European tradition of music based on notational uniqueness, an idea that never existed earlier in the Indian musical tradition.⁴ Yet the centrality in his music of nature, of man’s empathetic bonding with his immediate natural surroundings, his primal, biological relationship with nature at large and the spiritual connection of his being with the temporal and the spatial universe (the three are combined together, for one example, in “Akash bhora surya tara biswabhora pran”) and of the astoundingly various invocations of the divine/ magical/ mystical/ non-rational/ “non-modern” accounts for its specific critique of this version of modernity. One takes up the category of the “non-modern” here to represent, perhaps inadequately, a paradigm of consciousness that on the one hand ceaselessly spills over the binary of the “modern” and the “pre-modern”/ “anti-modern,” and on the other combines in one simple set of pronouns (I/ you) a whole array of suggestions ranging from the amorous through the essentially devotional to a complex economy of sado-masochistic interrelationships between the id, the ego and the superego.⁵

The critical and anti-hegemonic impulse of Tagore’s music can be theorised by invoking Adorno’s idea that music as an art-genre is fundamentally anti-establishment:

Ever since music has existed, it has always been a protest, however ineffectual, against myth, against a fate which was always the same, and even death...Freedom is an intrinsic necessity for music. That is its dialectical nature (Adorno 1992:151).

The “non-modern” spirit of “freedom” and of “protest” reflected in Tagore’s music as well as in his project of Santiniketan and Sriniketan, is a feature of an “alternative modernity” which stands in conspicuous contrast with the appropriating, tendency of the Eurocentric, urban, industrial, colonial modernity. His philosophy of Indian music, which also is the philosophy of his own music, is thus recounted in various ways in a language which clearly puts it in a position of antinomy with the “masculine,” centrifugal logic of colonial modernity. He describes Indian music as the music of pathos, of melancholy, of the

estrangement of man, of the one craving for unification with the One. In “Sangeet” for instance, he says: “Our music is the music of one [*aker gan*], of the lonely [*ekla*]—but this one is not the isolated one, but the worldwide one” (Tagore: 34). Again in “Sangeeter Mukti:”

...Our classical music is not really the music of man alone, it is as if the music of the universe... Indian music invokes particularly this universal ethos [*biswaras*] in the mind of man. It is not its goal to express emphatically the specific experiences of sorrow of specific human beings. This is why the raga of *sahana*, which is calm and quiet and profound, which has little to do with the restless joviality of merriment and festivity, is the music of our weddings... It spreads over the marriage-ceremony of a particular individual the majestic melancholy of the primal duality active in the creation of beings (Tagore: 49).

Most of Tagore’s songs evoke a mood of solitary contemplation of a universal pathos and seek the resolution of the problem of human estrangement in a philosophical/ spiritual fulfilment through a process of journey from sound to silence, from loneliness to harmony, from restlessness to peace, from oneness to being one with. In fact it is precisely this sense of primal and essential human loneliness that acts as the central motif of innumerable songs of Tagore on song/ music. Think, for only a few instances, of “Tomar surer dhara jhare jethay tari pare,” “Tumi kemon kore gan karo he guni,” “Amar bela je jay sanjhbelate,” “Gane gane tabo bandhano jak tute,” “Tomari jharnatar nirjane,” “Tomar kachhe e bor magi,” “Danriye achho tumi amar ganer opare,” “Ami hethay thaki shudhu,” “Jatokhon tumi amay basiye rakho,” “Amar dhala ganer dhara,” “Kabe ami bahir holem tomari gan geye,” “Mor hridoyer gopano bijano ghare” and so on. While the fundamental distinction of the aggressive universalism of the discourse of colonial modernity and Tagore’s humane universalism is quite evident, the spirit of this “alternative modernity” in music stands the risk of being dubbed as “feminine” by the gendering impulse of the hegemonic imperial discourse of modernity which considers itself as virile and “masculine,” exploring and penetrating virgin lands waiting to be rescued in the margins of civilisation.⁶ And interestingly, both Santiniketan and Rabindrasangeet, till date, are often derisively referred to as “feminine” by sections of the urban middle class, fed by sumptuous doses of the aggressively homogenising “masculine” “culture industry,” that carries in the dominant form the apparently residual cultural ideology of colonialism.

While Rabindrasangeet is strongly rooted in the indigenous musical tradition and the “local” cultural ambience—as opposed to the universalist confidence of this modernity—in more ways than one, it is marked by the element of “freedom,” the unmistakable imprint of the individual talent of the poet-composer. In many of his compositions on music and his discussions with Dilip Kumar Roy and the redoubtable Dhurjati Prasad Mukhopadhyay, Tagore repeatedly emphasised what he considered as the fundamental duality of his music and north Indian classical forms—the essential “locality” of their origin,

one's "Bengaliness" as opposed to the other's north-west Indian growth. In fact, the language he uses in commenting confidently on the possibility of a wide future popularity of his songs, puts specific emphasis on the Bengali people as his target audience: "The Bengali race has to love my songs, each and every one of them must sing my songs, in every household, every valley, every riverbank" (Ghosh: 108). In a letter to Edward Thompson Tagore wrote:

It is nonsense to say that music is a universal language. I should like my music to find acceptance, but I know this cannot be, at least not till the West has had time to study and learn to appreciate our music (Tagore: 323).

Satyajit Ray also talks about this essential Bengaliness of Tagore's songs. And yet, he makes a very useful distinction that might help us understand the real nature of the "Bengaliness" of Rabindra-sangeet: "But this Bengaliness is not the one evident in Bengali classical music, *kirtan*, *Ramprasadi*, folk music or Nidhubabu's *tappa*. This is the musical expression of a particular kind of Bengaliness peculiar to Tagore alone. His taste, his culture, his environment, training and education, aesthetic sense and literary sensibility—that is, the whole of his being is reflected in this music" (Ahad and Khatun eds.: 157). There are, thus, at least two kinds of Bengaliness that come into play in the composition of Rabindrasangeet, one traditional and collective and the other very powerfully individual, nevertheless rooted in the traditional. Perhaps no other musical tradition in India effects a more intimidating dialectic of the tradition and the individual talent in the act of composition alone, resulting in the creation of an altogether new tradition. The collective/ conventional notion of Bengaliness in this context can provide us only with the locally embedded semantic horizon of Tagore's music, or what Adorno calls the "meaning" of music, while the real objective of artworks, Adorno argues, is not meaning, but its "truth content": "The spirit of artworks is not their meaning and not their intention, but rather their truth content, or, in other words, the truth that is revealed through them" (Adorno 1998: 171). The history of that "truth content," an abstract entity, has to be traced mainly in the dialectic of the "meaning" and the individual Bengaliness that is Tagore's own, and yet that must not be equated with the express intention of Tagore the individual composer. Adorno further warns us that the truth content is the final effect of a musical performance that is a collective endeavour of the composer and the performer(s): "The truth content is mediated by way of, not outside of, the configuration, but it is not immanent to the configuration and its elements" (Adorno 1998: 172). And may we add the individual listener in what is essentially a triadic activity in the process of the production of the truth content.

In Tagore's music, stupendously rich in its semantic baggage, it is difficult to undervalue the role of "meaning" in the production of "truth content." Adorno's comment on this aspect of art may have greater relevance vis-à-vis classical music, both Indian and Western, traditions which are often referred to as championing "pure music." One has also to posit this comment against the larger conceptual backdrop of Adorno's general valorisation of the passion for the

subjugation of semantic content for the sake of “formal autonomy” and the resultant fluidity in the process of signification in the European modernist tradition in the first half of the last century. Indeed, in the post-Hitler Germany, he found meaning or “message” necessarily “oppressive” and “totalitarian” and desired instead for a free play of form, a position which led several later critics to bring an allegation of “formal fetishism” against him.⁷ The two kinds of Bengaliness active in Tagore’s music—the basic premises on which the edifice of meaning and truth content of his music are built—are almost completely alien to a non-Bengali performer or listener. This is why it is impossible for Tagore’s music to be popular through translation, unless in the form of literary text alone, as in the case of *Gitanjali*. Even that would be no mean achievement in the process of dissemination of the texts of Rabindrasangeet, and it is high time we started working towards translation of *Gitabitan* to ensure greater familiarity of the texts in the outside world. And it is a huge challenge for the Bengali performer or listener, to be able to interpret, render and appreciate many songs of Tagore in their totality at the crossroads of meaning and truth content. The individual singer or listener needs the enabling tutelage of traditions of performance and reception, marked by an investment in the form of some rigorous and austere training, to be able to capture this totality. There is still a tradition of teaching and learning of performance alive, however “decadent” and weak in fibre. But unfortunately, unlike in the tradition of dissemination of the “highbrow” and “elitist” north Indian classical music, the necessity of the construction of a “culture of reception” has never been given a serious thought in the “middlebrow” tradition of Rabindrasangeet. In other words, and somewhat paradoxically, the apparent difficulty in the penetrability and “enjoyability” of the classical idiom, or its “aura,” has ensured the investment of an amount of rigour on the part of the prospective listener which has been instrumental in the emergence of a culture of listening in this tradition. And the apparently easy accessibility of the “meaning” of Rabindrasangeet, its deceptive “availability,” has ended up in the actual “alienation” (in the Brechtian sense) of many a middle class prospective listener from both the meaning and the truth content of the subject. The result has been not just a deferral of the emergence of a culture of listening proper in this sphere, but, more frightfully, the emergence of a culture of shallow, ritual listening. The situation has been aptly captured by none other than the bard himself: “Tomar puja chhole tomay bhulei thaki/ Bujhte nari kakhon tumi dao je phanki/. . . Staber banir adal tani tomay dhaki . . .” With the gradual institutionalisation of Rabindrasangeet, and its rise as a status symbol and ensemble of identity formation for a large section of the middlebrow middle class people, this culture of ritual listening has struck its roots more powerfully, and this has often been misconstrued as the “popularity” of Rabindrasangeet, at least in the middle classes.

Rabindrasangeet dabbled with the possibility of becoming much more “popular” only with the end of what I would call its “pre-technological era,” mainly

in the second decade of the last century and after, with the technological aids of the gramophone, the radio and still later, the film. “Mainly” because there are evidences of earlier private recordings of Tagore, which now came to be supplanted with new commercial ventures.⁸ This process of “democratisation” was still confined to the middle and lower middle classes, for the lower classes—the working class and the majority of the peasantry—had neither access nor the economic means to enjoy them, especially the gramophone and the radio. A lot of Bangla films before and after Independence, almost till the 1960s, would bear testimony to the fact of gramophone record players (popularly known as “*kaler gan*”) and the radio acting as middle class status symbols and drawing room decor. And the price for this democratisation—the freedom and empowerment of the serious listener to listen at will, and outside the earlier space of familial or group patronage—was one further inevitable blow in the culture of reception of Rabindrasangeet, for it marked the gradual emergence of the phenomenon of Rabindrasangeet as a commodity, and a private property, and the subsequent replacement of the figure of the listener by that of the consumer. This is the phenomenon which Adorno considers as symptomatic of the “fetish character of music.” In “On the Fetish Character in Music...” Adorno invokes Marx’s definition of “...the fetish character of commodity as the veneration of the thing made by oneself which, as exchange-value, simultaneously alienates itself from producer to consumer” (Adorno 2007: 33). The process is robustly active till date, with the latest technologies of digital encryption and “unlimited free downloading” leading to the emergence of the figure of the hoarder, who consumes, and is consumed by, only the pleasure of procuring. The phenomenon of ritual listening and hoarding, processes which cannot be altogether separated from an uncritical assimilation into the logic of technological modernity, took the deceptive “availability” of Rabindrasangeet one step further, by making it literal apart from metaphorical. As Rajeev S. Patke comments in a different context with reference to classical music, in his article “Thinking Dialectically of North Indian Classical Music,” “music was ever a commodity, but its value was in direct proportion to its scarcity” (Das Gupta ed.: 53). It is this air (or aura) of scarcity which was lost with its rampant mechanical reproduction. The fate of Rabindrasangeet is thus largely sealed by the larger material logic of this modernity, which reduces Rabindrasangeet—and all other local musical traditions—to its state of deceptive “availability,” “simplicity,” “lightness,” pleasure-producing capacity, enjoyability and marketability. The postmodern legacy of this modernity, which Fredric Jameson famously described as the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” only strengthens this principle of “pleasure” that smothers “protest” through the creation of “false consciousness.” As Adorno pointed out: “The illusion of a social preference for light music as against serious is based on that passivity of the masses which makes the consumption of light music contradict the objective interest of those who consume it” (Adorno 2007: 34). Tagore’s music, based on the principle of “happiness” as opposed to “pleasure,” is a locus of alternative modernity that fosters protest and the spirit of freedom.

Tagore certainly expressed his anxiety and displeasure at this new post-technology development in no uncertain terms, and yet it is difficult to surmise whether he could really anticipate the veritable failure of his project of social “protest” and anti-institutionalism in a little more than half a century of his death. Of course in a letter to Dhurjati Prasad Mukhopadhyay on 21st Bhadra, 1338 (1931), at the age of seventy, he recognises this historical limitation with a grain of sadness: “...I will not survive to witness the verdict of history about my songs, you will probably be able to gather some hints, when I will be no more...” (Tagore: 320). Walter Benjamin recognised the ambivalence which is a necessary corollary to the process of democratisation through mechanical and technological reproduction of artworks. In his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (an essay primarily on the art and the new technology of photography, but published almost uncannily in 1936, at a time Tagore must have been going through this intense anxiety about the effect of mechanical reproducibility of his music) he talked about two processes that take place simultaneously, one resulting in “a tremendous shattering of tradition,” and the other in “its destructive, cathartic aspect” (Benjamin 1968: 221). This duality of impact is quite evident in the post-technology predicament of Rabindrasangeet. Rabindrasangeet has definitely grown more “popular” in the literal sense by means of its large-scale dissemination through the media of radio, television, film, cassette, CD, mobile phone, print and electronic media, internet, software, ipod and several other contributions of modern information and communication technology. It has certainly reached corners erstwhile unexplored by the tradition. Rabindrasangeet materially *is* accessible to more people today—both middle class and lower class—than it would be some forty years back. On a lighter note, it is very much possible today to come across a note of Rabindrasangeet rendered by a Kumar Shanu or a Shaan even in a remote Bengal village in the form of a mobile-ringtone. And it is thanks to mechanical reproduction alone that listeners of our generation and many more to come could still afford to have an experience of hearing a Sahana Devi, a Rajeswari Dutta, a Nilima Sen or a Subinoy Roy. The other pole of these benefits of technological modernity is crass commercialism, careerism, and decline into a culture of ritual singing and listening, the gradual and inevitable marginalisation—and surely not demise—of a tradition of rendering and participation in the life of the “truth content” of Rabindrasangeet.

Even in Tagore’s time, we have noted, there were not many artists who could successfully render the truth content of his songs; and today, works of great artists of earlier times will be there for a minority of capable artists to learn from. The sensitive and serious listeners, as opposed to the popular middle class perception, and for various reasons we tried to discuss rather inadequately here, have always been a miniscule minority, since the time of Tagore himself, before and after the rise of the culture industry. And to fear that the minority would further shrink to vanish one fateful day would be a grossly pessimistic disrespect

to the ethos of “protest” and the incredibly rich resourcefulness of Tagore’s musical art itself. As Tagore himself said in the letter to Edward Thompson: “My own countrymen do not understand [my songs]. But they will. They are real songs. . .” (Tagore: 323). But nor will it be judicious and practical to hope that the broad democratising impulse underway would make any large-scale positive impact on the culture of dissemination and reception of Rabindra-sangeet. Adorno commented on the fate of “serious music” in the twentieth century era of the culture industry:

The advanced product has renounced consumption. The rest of serious music is delivered over to consumption for the price of its wages. It succumbs to commodity listening. The differences in the reception of official ‘classical’ music and light music no longer have any real significance. They are only still manipulated for reasons of marketability (Adorno 2007: 35).

The reality in this part of the world, in the twenty first century, so far as Rabindrasangeet is concerned, I believe, is not that bleak. There is, of course, no way that Rabindrasangeet—like any artwork—can bypass the network of market-economy and commodity consumption in the era of high capitalism. To believe that it can would be a mark of nostalgic romanticism. The work of art has to live—or die— within the larger economic and cultural dynamics, by adapting itself with the changing present. As Tagore himself once wrote in “Sangeetchinta” on what he considered the static, institutional character of Hindustani classical music: “Music must have so much life in it, as to enable it to grow with the growth of society, change with the changes in society, to influence society and to be influenced back by society. . .” (Tagore: 8). And the second part of Adorno’s remark is made from a pessimistic conviction about the finality of the “passivity of the masses which makes the consumption of light music contradict the objective interest of those who consume it.” Such a belief, though perhaps unavoidable in an age when enlightenment modernity is still an incomplete project, is essentially anti-Marxist. And Tagore’s music, I believe, holds such enormous potentials of “protest” against social assimilation, and rich promises for those who still refuse to succumb completely to the Euro-America-centric logic of modernity, that it will continue to live, and help live.

Notes

The translations of all quotations from Bangla originals are mine.

¹ “Gramophone recordings,” Adrian McNeil informs us, “arrived in India not long after they first appeared in Europe. Calcutta witnessed the arrival of the Edison phonogram in 1900...The first recordings of Hindustani music occurred in 1902, and the first record factory was established in Calcutta in 1908” (Das Gupta ed. 2007: 60). According to the renowned exponent of Rabindrasangeet, Shantidev Ghosh, the first recordings of Tagore’s songs appeared around the beginning of the First World War (Shantidev Ghosh 2008: 103).

² Notable among the works of this tradition are “Rabindra-sangeet -er Bhabishyat” (The future of Rabindrasangeet, 1957) by Kalidas Nag in his *Surer Guru Rabindranath*, Satyajit Ray’s “Rabindrasangeet-e Bhabbar Katha” (Things to think about in Rabindrasangeet, 1967), “Rabindrasangeet-er Bhabishyat Bhabna” (Thoughts about the future of Rabindra-sangeet) by Sudhir Chakravarti, “Rabindrasangeet: Shikshon Prasaran” (Rabindrasangeet: teaching and dissemination) by Wahidul Haque (the last two anthologized in Abdul Ahad and Sanjida Khatun eds. 1990), “Gan Niye Byaktigato” (Personal notes on music) by Shankha Ghosh in Sudhir Chakravarti ed. (2007).

³ While making this rather general statement, I am not forgetting the history of fortuitous exchange that the Indian traditions of classical and popular music have gone through. The popular origin of classical forms like *dhamar*, *thumri* and *tappa* is only one example of the fact that the relationship between the two traditions is rather complex and symbiotic. And yet, so far as the more sophisticated and rigorous forms of Indian classical music are concerned, and from the perspective of the cultural position and reception of music since the late nineteenth century, the two traditions gradually developed a yawning gap between themselves.

⁴ I am indebted to Satyajit Ray’s article for my understanding of this European aspect of Tagore’s music.

⁵ See Ranajit Guha’s fascinating account of the various possible interpretations of the I/ you dialectic in Tagore’s songs in *Kabir Nam o Sarbanam*.

⁶ Ashis Nandy’s book *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* explores in detail the politics of such gendering in the Indian social, political and psychological life.

⁷ For a consummate discussion of Adorno’s position on artistic social commitment through the work of art and the dialectic of form and content, see his article “Commitment,” tr. Francis McDonagh, in Fredric Jameson et al (eds.), *Aesthetics and Politics*.

⁸ Suresh Chandvankar informs us in his article “Centenary of Indian Gramophone Records” that “Professor H Bose, the renowned Calcutta businessman, entered this new business of cylinder records, under the banner of ‘H Bose records’ and later ‘Pathe-H Bose records’. His catalogue of 1906 lists a number of cylinder recordings of Rabindranath Tagore.” (Das Gupta ed.: 3) In the same volume Amitabha Ghosh quotes from the Bangla periodical *Paricharika* which reported in May-June 1891 of the recording of songs of (by?) “Babu Rabindranath Thakur” by “Babu Jagadish Chandra Bose” in the phonograph the latter had procured for Presidency College, Kolkata. (23)

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