RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bishnuprasad Rava and the Rural in Assam: Inspiration and Intervention Through Music

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between art and rural life in the context of early and mid-twentieth-century Assam through an analysis of the musical works of Bishnuprasad Rava (1909–1969). Rava was an artist who experimented with a wide range of art forms, including music, dance, literature, drama, film, and painting, from the 1930s to the 1960s.

Assam, like other parts of India, witnessed an intensification of regional nationalism towards the end of the nineteenth century. This regional nationalism merged with the nationalist movement in the 1920s. The nationalists of Assam regarded the Assamese peasant as the foundation of Assamese identity, thus emphasising the importance of rural Assam in defining Assamese identity. Peasant revolts, which had begun in the nineteenth century, intensified in this period. In the 1930s, the Communist Party of India attempted to channelise the resentment of peasants and workers towards socio-economic transformation and an egalitarian society. Cultural organisations such as the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) coordinated the cultural expressions of peasants, workers, and artists. These interventions were influenced by global political events such as the Bolshevik revolution and the fight against fascism. Among artists, there was a re-evaluation of the role of art in society.

Bishnuprasad Rava joined the national movement, and then became a part of the Communist movement. He joined the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) in 1945 and became a founding member of the Assam branch of the IPTA. He participated actively in the sharecroppers' movement of 1948–52 in Assam. Rava's art was largely inspired by his political experiences in rural Assam, and through his art, he attempted to intervene in socio-political changes in rural Assam.

Through an analysis of Rava's music and his theorisation of the role of art in society, this paper seeks to explore how the artist, inspired by rural life and struggles, attempted to intervene in the socio-political transformation of rural Assam during the early and mid-twentieth century.

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Introduction

During the early and mid-twentieth century, many artists in India began to look towards rural life for inspiration. They found a sense of purpose as they attempted to intervene in rural social and political processes. This relationship between the artist and the rural evolved amidst the political and social upheavals that affected India and the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this paper, I attempt to explore the relationship between art and rural life in the context of early and mid-twentieth-century Assam, through an analysis of the musical works of Bishnuprasad Rava (1909–1969).

Rava was an artist who experimented with a wide range of art forms, including music, dance, literature, drama, film, and painting, from the 1930s to the 1960s. During these decades, along with his mentor and artistic collaborator, Jyotiprasad Agarwala (1903–1951), Rava revolutionised art through his engagement with writing and staging plays, choreographing dance performances, and composing and recording music. In the 1940s, he became involved with the Communist movement in Assam. He became an active member of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) in 1945, and one of the founding members of the Assam branch of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in 1947.[1] In this paper, I focus on Rava's music and some of his formulations on the role of art in society. Through an analysis of his music and theorisation on art, I explore how artists were inspired by rural life and struggles, and how they attempted to intervene in the socio-political transformation of rural Assam in the early and mid-twentieth century.

The Political and Cultural Context

As did other parts of the country, Assam witnessed an intensification of regional nationalism towards the end of the nineteenth century. This movement focussed on the question of linguistic identity among the Asamiya-speaking middle class.

The status of Asamiya as a separate language had been a matter of debate since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Assam came under British rule in 1826, through the Treaty of Yandabu. Soon after that, in the mid-1830s, Bangla was introduced as the official language of schools and courts in Assam, a policy that sparked heated debates about the status of Asamiya. The Asamiya-speaking intelligentsia, the American Baptist missionaries, and a few Bangla-speaking

[1] The RCPI, initially called the Communist League, was formed in 1938 by Saumyendranath Tagore (1901–1974), who broke away from the Communist Party of India (CPI) to pursue the goal of socialism and national freedom on a platform independent of the Indian National Congress. In the 1940s, the RCPI played a leading role in the peasant revolts of Assam.

intellectuals argued in favour of the uniqueness of the Asamiya language.[2] The movement around the language marked the beginning of regional nationalism in Assam. After Asamiya was finally restored as the language of schools and the courts in 1873, writers such as Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864–1938), Rajanikanta Bordoloi (1867–1940), and Kanaklal Barua (1872–1940) began to assert the separate linguistic and cultural identity of Assam in literature and art with greater force and confidence. They made efforts to enrich Assamese literature and drama, and to transform Asamiya into one of the "richest and most advanced languages of the world."[3] From 1921 onwards, as the freedom struggle intensified in India with the launch of the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement, Assamese nationalists participated whole-heartedly in the national movement.

The nineteenth century in Assam had been marked by peasant revolts in Assam against the oppressive policies of the British government. The resentment of the peasants found expression in the performing arts too. Udayon Misra (Misra 2011) discusses songs about peasant revolts against increased taxation in nineteenth-century Assam. These include the Battle of Patharughat in 1894 and Phulaguri Dhewa in 1861, which are etched in the collective memory of the Assamese people. He writes of a vibrant tradition of peasant resistance and rebellion manifested in *rāij mels* (public meetings) and *krishak sabhās* (peasant gatherings) and a peasant consciousness that found expression in ballads that provided an often critical and tragic perspective on historical events. The events that they recorded include the Burmese invasion of Assam during the last days of Ahom rule in the 1820s, and early revolts against British policies by the Assamese gentry, such as the revolt led by Maniram Dewan in the 1850s.[4] These were the precursors of the sharecroppers' struggles of the twentieth century. The resentment of the peasants continued to intensify in the early twentieth century as a result of growing landlessness and the proletarianisation of the peasantry.[5]

In the 1920s and 1930s, Assamese leaders of the Indian National Congress mobilised the peasants of Assam and publicised their concerns, seeking government intervention to resolve issues such as landlessness and high land revenue. In the 1930s, they began to mobilise peasants in the Brahmaputra Valley as part of the Ryot Sabha Movement (1933–39). The dominant rhetoric of this movement was the nationality question (who constituted the Assamese nation?) and opposition to the migration of Muslim peasants from East Bengal into Assam. Congress leaders of the movement, such as Harekrishna Das, suggested that the "Assamese peasant was the basis of Assamese

[2] For details about the language debate in Assam, see Downs (1981), Misra (1987), Barman and Chowdhury (1986), and Kar (2008).
[3] Misra (1987).
[4] Misra (2011).
[5] For details of peasant struggles in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Saikia (2014).

nationality," and that Assamese *jāti* and the Assamese peasant are one and the same.[6] Thus, the people of rural Assam were central to the definition of Assamese identity.

However, the problems of the peasants took on a different dimension in the mid-1930s, when the stratified nature of Assam's peasant community came to the fore and tenants and sharecroppers began to express their discontent towards landlords.[7] The Communist parties attempted to channelise the resentment of the peasants and workers towards socio-economic transformation aimed at an egalitarian society. By the 1940s, cultural organisations such as the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) began to coordinate the cultural expressions of peasants, workers, and artists. In Assam, socialist and communist ideas began to circulate through literature, in the form of sympathetic accounts of the lives of peasants. Literary journals such as *Jayantī* (1938–46), *Āwāhan* (1929–47), and *Abhijān* (1942) encouraged the circulation and exchange of these ideas. Around the same time, popular communist literature that attracted the attention of educated Assamese youth began to circulate in Guwahati. These youth included students of Cotton College, who formed study circles among themselves.[8] Gradually, parties such as the Congress Socialist Party, the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Forward Bloc, and the Communist League (later renamed as the Revolutionary Communist Party of India, RCPI) began to emerge in Assam.[9] The Assam branch of the IPTA began under the leadership of Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnuprasad Rava, and Hemango Biswas in 1947. These interventions were in turn influenced by global political events such as the Bolshevik revolution and the fight against fascism in the early twentieth century, and the communist revolution in China in the mid-twentieth century. Among artists, these political upheavals led to a re-evaluation of the role of art in society.

The early twentieth century was also a transformative period in the evolution of Assamese music. Musicians who were exposed to a wide variety of musical forms from different parts of the world began to experiment with new forms that they encountered. This revolution in music can also be traced back to the regional nationalism of the late nineteenth century, when Lakshminath Bezbaroa and other musicians such as Ambikagiri Raichowdhury (1885–1967) and Lakshmiram Barua (1865–1914) made efforts to create new music in the Assamese language. They began writing songs that reflected the contemporary political and social milieu, and experimented with different forms of music.

These efforts gained momentum in the 1920s and 1930s, when artists like Rava, Agarwala, and Parvati Prasad Baruva (1904–1964) started to experiment with musical forms of the region. A major influence on their experimentation was the

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 83.
[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 81–87.
[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 131–33.
[9] Guha (1977), p. 249.

music of Rabindranath Tagore. Although they began by imitating Tagore's melodies, they gradually began to adopt his method of composition, i.e. the blending of local melodies with classical Indian and western music. At the same time, these musicians were exposed to western music through Hollywood films screened in Calcutta (now Kolkata), visiting artists, and gramophone records. The availability of recording technology gave further impetus to their experimentation. In the mid-1930s, many musicians of the region began to use recording technology that was available in Calcutta to record the traditional music of the region as well as the music they composed themselves. The songs written in this period came to be known as the beginning of *ādhunik saṅgīt* (modern music) in Assam.

Artists based in Assam gained access to recording technology only in the 1930s – much later than those located in metropolitan centres of the country like Calcutta and Bombay (now Mumbai). The technology arrived in India in the late nineteenth century, when music dealers began to import phonographs and cylinders from Europe and the United States of America.[10] By 1900, enthusiastic music lovers such as Hemendra Mohan Bose had begun recording local talent, first in cylinders and later in records. By the end of the 1910s, several European and American gramophone companies had established branches in India in order to meet the rising interest in recorded music. Although these record companies recorded music in several languages across the country, many regions did not have access to these facilities till around the 1930s. Moreover, in the early years, prominent companies like the Gramophone Record Company wanted to record "renowned classical and theatrical vocalists and instrumentalists of the time."[11] Ironically, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as an intricate hierarchy of forms came into being, the category of "classical" itself was being constructed and contested.[12]

In the 1930s, several Indian recording companies such as Megaphone Co., Hindustan Records and Musical Varieties Syndicate, and Senola Recording Co., were established, partly in response to an intensification of the freedom struggle.[13] The growth of the recording industry in India in the early twentieth century was influenced by the national movement. For instance, during the Swadeshi Movement of 1903–08, when songs like "Vande Mātaram" and "Āmār Desh" became popular, and were sung in processions, meetings, *jātrās* and proscenium theatres, the recording companies responded by recording and distributing these songs widely. By the 1930s, the rising demand for patriotic songs and plays could only be met by the establishment of new recording companies that reached out to far-flung corners of the country.[14] Thus, it was only in the 1930s that music in languages such as

[10] Kinnear (1994), p. 8.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 22.
[12] Gupta (2007), p. 240.
[13] These companies were "private recorders" who did not have their own record pressing factories, but were encouraged to use the facilities of the Gramophone Record Company's factories to manufacture records.
[14] Kinnear (1994), pp. 67–68.

Nepali and Asamiya began to be heard on gramophone records, and this exposure to technology, together with the complex political events of the early and mid-twentieth century, led to a dynamic interaction between the artist and rural culture and life-struggles. It is this interaction that I attempt to explore in the following sections.

Bishnuprasad Rava: A Brief Introduction

Bishnuprasad Rava was an artist who had a deep insight into the culture of rural Assam, which enabled him to communicate in dynamic ways with the rural population of the region. Among his comrades in the RCPI and the CPI, he was also known as someone who could communicate and interact freely with the tribal population of the region.[15] In order to understand how and why he came to have this unique ability, it is important to trace his subject position within Assamese society.

Rava was born in 1909 to Sardar Bahadur Gopal Chandra Rava and Gethi Rava at Dhaka Cantonment, at a time (from 1905 to 1912) when East Bengal and Assam formed a single province with its capital at Dhaka. His father was a Subadar Major in the Second Eastern Frontier Rifles Battalion of the British Indian Army. Rava belonged to the third generation of a small but rising middle class among the *janajātis* or tribes of Assam, which had begun forging new class alliances beyond the confines of ethnic community.[16] Till 1921, the family lived in the cosmopolitan environment of Dhaka, where Rava was exposed to a wide range of performance forms such as Kathak and Parsi theatre.

In the 1920s, when he was still a student of Ripon College, Calcutta, Rava actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement. By the 1930s, he had become involved in the cultural activities of Calcutta's Assamese intelligentsia. He began by taking up the job of managing the art and culture section of the Asamiya journal *Bānhi*, but soon made his way into film-making, dance, and music. While in Calcutta, Rava was exposed to a wide range of traditional and experimental art forms, and came into contact with cultural practitioners such as Sisir Kumar Bhaduri and the Tagore family.

The early twentieth century was also a period of fertile interaction between Indian artists and artists from different parts of the world. For instance, artists such as the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova (1881–1931) and the American modern dancers Ruth St Denis (1879–1968) and Ted Shawn (1891–1972) travelled to India to explore its culture, and drew inspiration for their own performances from the dance forms and myths of India.[17] Indian artists like Uday Shankar (1900–1977) and Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904–1986) collaborated with them and, in turn, were inspired to revive and experiment with Indian performance forms. This interaction not only

[15] Anil Raichowdhury, personal interview, January 24, 2012.
[16] Dewri (2009), p. 19.
[17] For details, see Harp (1997), pp. 63–100.

exposed Indian artists to new forms of art, but also made them look at the local arts of their region from a new perspective. For instance, on many occasions Rava acknowledged that it was Anna Pavlova who inspired him to travel the length and breadth of Assam to explore the performance forms of the region. According to him, the turning point in his artistic journey was his meeting with Anna Pavlova when she came to perform in Calcutta in 1929. After her performance, Rava met her backstage, and expressed his wish to learn ballet and perform with her. She, however, advised him to go back to Assam, and to study the traditional music and dance forms of the region by visiting ancient temples and other religious centres.[18]

In the early 1930s, Rava returned to Assam. He followed Pavlova's advice and explored the performance forms of the *satras* (neo-Vaishnavite monasteries), playing a leading role in bringing the performance form now known as Sattriyā Nritya out of the confines of religious spaces to the proscenium stage. However, Rava was a versatile artist who tried his hand at multiple art forms. His return to Assam also allowed him to explore the cultures of the many ethnic communities living in the region, which he absorbed, internalised and used as inspiration to create new art, be it dance, music, drama, or painting.

In 1933, Rava began to collaborate with his mentor Jyotiprasad Agarwala in film-making, play-writing, music collection, musical experimentation, and music recording. Their collaboration began when Rava assisted Agarwala in the making of the first Asamiya film, *Jaymati* (1935). In 1935, Senola Recording Co. invited both of them to Calcutta, to record music for *Jaymati*. This was the beginning of Rava's adventure with music recording. Following the recording of music for *Jaymati*, he travelled to Calcutta several times in the 1930s and 1940s to record music and audio-plays. In the course of these two decades, Rava recorded musical plays written specially for 78 rpms (known as *pālā*),[19] traditional plays such as the *ojā-pāli*, traditional music such as *bargīt*[20] and *bihu gīt*,[21] and his own composition.

Perhaps the impulse behind recording traditional music and performance forms was to revive and preserve the traditional art forms of Assam. Most of these traditional forms had their roots in the everyday life of rural Assam. This immersion in rural art forms greatly influenced Rava's musical compositions as he developed his own unique style, in which he blended the music of different ethnic communities of the region with his knowledge of Hindustani classical music and western music. This kind of wide

[18] Rava (2008), vol. 2, p. 1093.

[19] Artists in Assam usually refer to audio-plays in gramophone records as *pālā*, a term that might have been derived from the Bangla *pālā-gān*. According to Sujit Mandal, who has been collecting Bangla *pālā-gān*, *pālā* means "any performance or play that is divided into parts." Gramophone plays on 78 rpm records might have been called *pālā* as these had to be divided into parts because of the limited length of a record. Each audio-*pālā* usually consisted of four or five 78 rpm records, and was divided into short three-minute sections.

[20] *Bargīt* are songs composed by the Vaishnav saint Sankaradeva and his favourite disciple Madhavadeva.

[21] *Bihu gīt* are songs sung during the spring festival in Assam, Bahāg Bihu or Rangāli Bihu.

exposure to the musical forms of different parts of the country and of the world also influenced other musicians of the region, such as Rava's mentors Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Parvati Prasad Baruva, leading to the creation of a new genre of music that is known among Assamese musicians as "*ādhunik*." In this paper, I have focused on Rava's music specifically because of his deeper involvement with the music of rural Assam and of the multiple ethnic communities of the region, and also because of his political interventions. However, his engagement with rural music and his political interventions must be studied keeping in mind the political and cultural context.

Rava's experiments with music were informed by political ideas that resonated in the early twentieth century. Like litterateurs and musicians of the late nineteenth century such as Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Lakshmiram Barua, Rava was influenced by regional nationalism and sought to create music that was uniquely Assamese but also contemporary. This unique and contemporary music could only be created by blending the traditional music of Assam with that of the rest of the world, and by attempting to address contemporary concerns. Rava's music addressed contemporary concerns and made subtle political interventions in the lives of his listeners and collaborators. I discuss these interventions in the next section.

By the late 1930s, Rava was deeply influenced by the communist literature that had begun to circulate in parts of Assam, and began to address the concerns of peasants, workers, tribal people, and oppressed castes through his art. In 1939, he became closely associated with the Radical Institute, a study circle established by the RCPI, and in 1945, he became a member of the RCPI. The RCPI laid a lot of emphasis on mobilising peasants because its leaders, such as Saumyendranath Tagore, believed that India was primarily an agrarian society. Like many artists of his time who were inspired by the Bolshevik revolution and the anti-fascist struggle, Rava too began to re-evaluate and analyse the relationship between art and society after becoming a member of the RCPI. Soon after joining the RCPI in 1945, he delivered a speech titled "*Asamiya Kristir Samu Abhas*" (A Brief Glimpse of Assamese Culture), in which he tried to theorise the role of art in society. He attempted to answer questions such as: for whom is art meant? to whom does it belong? He emphasised the dynamic relationship between art and the everyday lives of the people. From this speech it is possible to deduce that the people of rural Assam played an important role in Rava's understanding of art and culture. In the 1940s, his engagement with rural life and culture became much more self-reflexive and overtly political.

When the Assam branch of the IPTA was established in 1947, Rava became its vice president. However, in late 1947, the Indian government banned the Communist parties of India, and started suppressing communist activities and arresting communists all over the country. Rava went underground, and from 1948 to 1952, he moved from place to place mobilising armed struggles of the peasants and

inspiring the people with his creations. This was when Bishnu Rava became a legend. Among Bodos he came to be known by the nickname "*Phereṅgādāo*" (black drongo)[22] because of his elusive and bold personality, and several poems and novels were written about him.[23]

Rava was arrested in 1953, the year the sharecroppers' struggle was suppressed by the government. After he was released from prison he left the RCPI along with a few like-minded comrades; he joined the CPI in 1955 and began to participate in parliamentary politics. In 1967, Rava stood for elections once again, this time as an independent candidate. He was elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Tezpur constituency. His protégé Bhupen Hazarika was also elected as MLA from Naobaisa constituency in the same election. Together, they raised issues pertaining to the art and culture of the region, such as the establishment of a National Theatre at Rabindra Bhawan in Guwahati, a fully equipped film studio in Assam (Jyoti Chitraban), and the provision of adequate opportunities for artists to present their art to wider audiences.[24]

Echoes and Vignettes of Rural Assam, 1930s to 1940s

From 1935, when the music of *Jaymati* was recorded, to 1947, Rava was one of the most prolific creators of gramophone records among Assamese musicians. There appear to have been two impulses that drove Assamese musicians to record their music in the 1930s and 1940s – to revive and preserve traditional forms of music and make them accessible to wider audiences, and to create new music which responded to the contemporary world. Both these impulses together changed the way music was experienced in the early twentieth century. Rava, too, was driven by these impulses.

However, Rava's musical endeavours were also shaped by the dynamic relationship he shared with the people of Assam, who were the fountain of the musical forms that inspired him. Although he theorised the relationship between the artist and the people only in the 1940s, after his encounter with communist ideas, his artistic endeavours even in the 1930s were unconsciously based on this relationship. Not only was he inspired by the musical forms of rural Assam, he also intervened in the social and political processes of rural Assam through his diverse audiences.

A large number of the gramophone recordings of Assamese musicians in the early twentieth century consisted of traditional forms of music such as *bargīt*, *bihu gīt*

[22] The black drongo is a bird found in tropical regions. Its scientific name is Dicrirus macrocerus. It is known by the name *kotwāl* in Hindi, *phesulukā* in Assamese and *pherengādāo* in Bodo. The black drongo is an aggressive bird, which attacks bigger birds and protects smaller birds. It is also very elusive. Perhaps this is why Rava was compared to a black drongo.

[23] In 1982, Medini Chaudhury wrote a biographical novel about Rava, titled *Phereṅgādāo*. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya wrote the famous and oft-recited Asamiya poem, "*Bishnu Rava Etiā Kimān Rāti*" ("Bishnu Rava, How Old is the Night?") in 1953. Arati Thakur wrote the Bangla novel *Rāvār Ābhā* in 1972.

[24] See Deka (2007) and Assam Legislative Assembly Debates (1967).

and *zikir*.[25] The earliest of such recordings was the Vaishnava saint Sankaradeva's *bargīt* "*Śuna Śuna re Sura*" by Prasannalal Choudhury (1898–1986).[26] Rava too recorded many of the traditional musical forms, but in his recordings, he always emphasised the rural origins of these forms. He rarely recorded these traditional songs as isolated pieces, but instead embedded them within his audio-plays that were mostly set in rural Assam. For Rava, these traditional songs were living musical forms which had an intrinsic connection with the lives of the people who performed them. Yet, gramophone records made these traditional and largely rural musical forms available to wider audiences in new contexts. As they travelled and acquired new audiences, the songs acquired new meanings. Questions of nationalism, regional identity, gender, ethnicity, caste, and class imbued the songs with new meanings, and the songs in turn impacted these discussions.

According to Geeta Kapur, the term "tradition" as we use it today may be read as "what is invented by a society's cultural vanguard in the course of a struggle. It marks off territories/identities of a named people as for example Indians." In India, what is now evoked as tradition was invented by nineteenth-century nationalists and was interpreted by them in various contrasting ways. Kapur speaks of the "conservative" and the "romantic" interpretations of the term, in the hands of Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), respectively. In its conservative interpretation, tradition is an excavation of the past to provide the present with "perennial life-symbols" within the context of anti-imperialist struggle. The past also provided Coomaraswamy with codes and a canon where art forms were placed in an intricate hierarchy. On the other hand, Tagore's romantic interpretation dismantled the code. For him, tradition was "a notional category allowing an infinite extension of its own nurturing body through poetic allusion and metaphor." It was an inexhaustible source of creative energy, where material resources or forms within and beyond the culture could be constantly transfigured.[27] Rava's notion of tradition seems to be closer to Tagore's romantic interpretation. In his writings and speeches, Rava uses the word *kṛṣṭi* (culture) to refer to the unending resource of everyday practices and cultural forms that the artist can tap into. According to him, this *kṛṣṭi* belongs to the people. The artist collects it like a honeybee collecting nectar from the flowers, and gives it back to them through his or her art.[28]

Thus, when Rava recorded the traditional music of rural Assam, he brought alive the context in which these musical forms were practised in everyday life, and emphasised

[25] *Zikir* are religious songs sung by indigenous Assamese Muslims in the Asamiya language. Seventeenth century Sufi saint Saiyad Shah Miran, who is also popularly known as Azan Fakir, is said to have composed the *Zikir*, numbering 160.

[26] It is unclear which year this was recorded, but according to Rava's biographer Tilak Das, this recording existed before Rava and Agarwala ventured forth to record their music. My conjecture is that it could have been recorded in the late 1920s, for Choudhury obtained his B.A. degree from a Calcutta college in 1928.

[27] Kapur (1990), pp. 109–16.

[28] Rava (2008), Introduction to *Sonpahi*, vol. 1, p. 569.

the relation between art and everyday life. This relationship comes alive beautifully in his audio-plays or *pālās*, where he dramatised the lives of people in the villages (*Bihuwati* and *Bardaicilā*) and tea gardens (*Ratani*). These audio-plays did not merely portray rural musical forms and rural life in a static manner, transforming them into museum pieces. As they were distributed and made available to wider audiences, including the urban population, they began to play a dynamic role in the public sphere, and added to the contemporary debates about national and regional identity, gender, class and caste.

One such audio-play was *Bihuwati*, recorded in 1937 and released in 1938. *Bihuwati* is a dramatisation of the week-long spring festival of Bahāg Bihu or Rangāli Bihu.[29] It depicts the budding romance between a young man Nenā/Nenāi, played by Rava, and Rangdoi, played by Priyabala Datta (1920–1937), during the seven days of Bihu.[30] It is an ordinary love story, common during the Bihu season when young men and women express their love for each other through songs known as *bihu gīt* or *bihu nām*, and gifts of hand-woven *bihuwān*.[31] Rava depicts this love story unfolding amidst the fanfare and rituals of the Bihu festival, thus bringing out the richness of Assamese culture as well as its roots in ordinary lives of the people. The dialogues of the play are interspersed with couplets of *bihu* songs. The play presents these *bihu* songs as they were sung by people in their homes and in the fields during each day of the festival. Some of the songs are hummed to minimal accompaniment by the characters in the play as they engage in their daily activities. For instance, the play begins with Rangdoi singing a *bihu gīt* as she collects water from the river. The song heralds the change of season and the arrival of Bihu:

Kapau carāiye bināi bihu bihu bihu bihu
Bihukai
Malayāi binanit kapāi ban banani
O mor Bihuti O
O mor Bihuti O

The dove cries bihu bihu bihu bihu
The soft breeze stirs the leaves of the forest
Oh my dear Bihu
Oh my dear Bihu

[29] Bihu refers to three seasonal festivals in Assam. The first is Bahāg Bihu or Rangāli Bihu, held in the month of April or Baiśākh to celebrate the beginning of the agricultural year. Since it celebrates the new year and is the most important festival of the year, it is often referred to simply as "Bihu." The next Bihu is Kāti Bihu, held in the month of *Kārtik*. It is often called Kangāli Bihu because the granaries usually run out of grain at this time of the year. The third Bihu is Māgh Bihu. This is the harvest festival held during the month of Māgh (mid-January). It is also called Bhogāli Bihu because people organise feasts to celebrate the harvest.

[30] Priyabala Datta was Prafullabala Barua's sister. She married Rava soon after the recording of *Bihuwati*, on November 24, 1937. Unfortunately, she contracted typhoid four days after their marriage and passed away on December 22, 1937.

[31] *Bihuwān* or *bihu gāmocā* is a hand-woven towel that is woven especially for Bihu. It is gifted to elders in the family and loved ones.

The more elaborate ritualistic songs such as the *hucari* are accompanied by traditional instruments such as the *dhol* (drum) and *pepā* (horn-pipe) as they are performed traditionally during the Rangāli Bihu festival.

Through plays like *Bihuwati*, Rava helped to establish *bihu*, a folk form, as one of the defining symbols of Assamese culture in the twentieth century. In the early nineteenth century, the Assamese urban middle-class intelligentsia, judging itself against the norms of Bengali *bhadralok* culture, had dismissed *bihu* as a vulgar and licentious rural dance form, of people of lower class and caste. In 1829, Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan, in his *Asam Buranji* (Assam chronicles) written in Bangla, had remarked that "women from ordinary family and men of loose character used to partake in obscene dance and songs exhibiting lustful feelings."[32] Gunabhiram Barua referred to *bihu* dancers as *itar lok*, "lowly people." Similar views were also expressed by western scholars of the nineteenth century, like W. Robinson in his *A Descriptive Account of Assam* (1941).[33] However, by the late nineteenth century, Assamese nationalists had begun to feel the need to create a distinct regional identity, and intellectuals like Lakshminath Bezbaroa found such a symbol in *bihu*. As a result, they began to express their approval of a reformed version of *bihu*. However, efforts to revive *bihu* faced a lot of opposition from the middle class and gained momentum only in the early twentieth century.[34] When *Bihuwati* was released, it became extremely popular and was played widely in households that owned a gramophone. The *bihu* songs in the play became hummable tunes in urban households. According to Dilip Kumar Datta, "it gave the urban Assamese people the courage to embrace *Bihu*."[35]

Apart from audio-plays, Rava also recorded his song compositions. Like his contemporaries, Rava tried to bring about a confluence of local musical forms with Hindustani classical music and elements of western music. The local music he drew from was extremely diverse, as he had travelled extensively all over rural Assam and studied the performance forms of the numerous ethnic communities of the region. As mentioned earlier, it was experiments like these that led to the creation of a new genre of music called *ādhunik* or modern. In the songs he composed, Rava dealt with a wide range of subjects, including personal emotions such as love and loss, the role of the artist in society, patriotism, and everyday lives of the people. A large number of his songs created vignettes of everyday life in rural Assam.

As with the audio-plays, these vignettes of rural Assam by Rava were subtle instruments of social change through which, either consciously or unconsciously, he intervened in the social processes of the time. For instance, Rava's songs and musical practices had a dynamic relationship with the assertion of women's rights

[32] Borgohain (2011), p. 223.
[33] *Ibid*., pp. 223–24.
[34] Chowdhury (2007), p. 80.
[35] Datta (2011), p. 38.

in early twentieth-century Assam. Around the same time as Assamese music was beginning to be "modernised," Assamese women were beginning to redefine their role in society. Women had already begun forming *mahilā samitis* in the first two decades of the early twentieth century. In the 1930s, Rava came in contact with several female singers belonging to Asamiya-speaking middle-class households who were pursuing their interest in music. One of them was the singer Prafullabala Barua (1911–1982) in Tezpur. She, with the encouragement of her husband Prabodh Barua, had turned their home into a place where her sisters, cousins, friends, and acquaintances in Tezpur gathered to sing and play music. In 1936, Agarwala decided to organise them into an orchestra. Soon, the Barua family and their friends became the pool of artists which Agarwala and Rava tapped into for their recordings. Thus, a large number of the singers who accompanied Rava in his journeys to the recording studio in Calcutta were women and young girls. They included Prafullabala Barua, Priyabala Datta, Girija Barua (1918–1938), Mamata Barua/Mech (1932–1982), Sadhana Barua (1930–1984), and Sudakshina Sarma.

Rava wrote many songs especially suited to the voices of his female collaborators – songs that explored the subjectivity of women and reflected their aspirations. The most striking instances of the exploration of women's subjectivity can be found in his songs about women in rural Assam. In these songs, Rava created the image of a vibrant and free Asamiya woman, an image he derived from the margins of mainstream Asamiya society – from rural areas and tribal communities. These marginal tropes provided an alternative to the *āideo* (elite, respectable woman) – the model Assamese woman idealised by social reform movements and nationalist movements of the region. They also helped to add a new dimension to the dominant model of the Asamiya woman.

One such trope he derived from the margins of society was that of the *racaki bāi*. '*Racaki*' in Asamiya has wide-ranging meanings – from a stylish, vivacious woman to a flirty, coquettish woman. It is often used as a pejorative term, but Rava saw a lot of potential in this flighty, flirtatious woman. She was a free-spirited, mobile woman who defied the social restrictions imposed on women. The *racaki bāi* played a unique role in Assamese rural society. She was an aberration in society that broke the monotony of village life. She was usually a source of gossip and news because she travelled freely across and beyond the social limits imposed on women. However, her defiance was at the level of the individual and did not disturb the social fabric. Rava attempted to transform the *racaki bāi*, to imbue her with a social revolutionary spirit, the ability to transform society. He also saw her as the spirit that is latent in every woman. Thus, the *racaki bāi* is a recurrent figure in many of his songs. Two of his initial representations of the *racaki bāi* are in the songs "*Kāṣate Kalaci Lai*" (With a Pitcher on Her Waist), recorded in 1935 in Bhupen Hazarika's voice, and "*Rāngdhāli Racaki*" (Joyful Racaki), recorded in 1937 in Mamata Barua's voice. The figure of the *racaki bāi* in these songs celebrates women's sexuality and desire, as in the following lines from "*Kāṣate Kalaci Lai*":

Kāṣate kalaci lai,
Ƒāi oi racaki bāi
Saponar saphurā caku juri lai
Saragar amiyā bharāi oi racaki bāi

With a pitcher on her waist,
There goes our *racaki bāi*
Eyes with a casketful of dreams,
Filled with heavenly nectar, O our *racaki bāi*

Another model of the Asamiya woman derived from the margins of society is the *janajātiya* or tribal woman. Rava's song "*Tilāi Tilāi*" (Hillock to Hillock), recorded in the voice of Prafullabala Barua in 1937, portrays an exuberant girl from the Khāmti community. He celebrates her freedom of movement as he describes the open spaces she roams:

Tilāi tilāi
Ghuri phure ulāhere
Khāmti chowāli
Ghan kaliyā meghare āre āre
Rangmanere kheli phure
Nācani bijuli

Hillock to hillock
She roams around
The lively Khāmti girl
Hidden in dark black clouds
Merrily plays along
The lightning dancer

This song can be read as a stereotypical portrayal of the exotic tribal girl who enjoys the freedom that the middle-class Asamiya woman can only aspire. However, historically, the tribal woman was beginning to lose her freedom in the early twentieth century. The nascent middle classes among the *janajātis* of Assam were beginning to restrict the movement of their women. For example, in the Third Bodo Maha-Sanmilan which was held in 1929 at Roumari, Bongaigaon, women were banned from going to markets and *puja pandals*. It was meant to be a temporary ban that would be effective till such time as women became strong enough to "save their honour."[36] On the other hand, *mahilā samitis* were being formed among the Asamiya-speaking community in places like Tezpur and Guwahati, and they invited Rava to teach them music. Thus, while the doors were closing in on women among the *janajātis*, Rava worked for the freedom of women in spaces where he could intervene. In the song "*Tilāi Tilāi,*" Rava celebrates an image of freedom which was in danger of being erased.

[36] Sarma (1983), pp. 24–25.

By the mid-1940s, Rava's political engagement with rural Assam came to be greatly influenced by his reading of Marxist literature and politics. In 1945, he became involved in the activities of the peasant wing of the RCPI, Krishak Banua Panchayat (KBP). In 1947, the Communist parties in India intensified the struggles of peasants and workers, and called for armed revolution. From 1948 to 1952, Rava was actively involved in mobilising peasants, particularly sharecroppers, to revolt against exploitative *mouzādārs* (tax collectors), big landowners and state power with the battle-cry "*Nāngal jār māti tār*" ("Land to the tillers") and *tin bhāg* (one-third share). This movement was similar in its slogans and demands to the Tebhaga movement of 1946 in neighbouring Bengal.

As Rava became more and more acquainted with communist literature and involved in the activities of the KBP, he began to theorise the role of art and of the artist in society. According to many of his contemporaries and present-day Marxist scholars, the years between 1948 and 1952 were his most creative period.[37] However, I would argue that more than creativity, what Rava gained during this period was a deeper *awareness* of the artist's place in society. It was during his association with the RCPI that Rava formulated his theory of art, in a seminal speech in Kanihā, "*Asamiyā Kṛṣṭir Camu Ābhā*s" (A Brief Glimpse of Assamese Culture), in 1945. It was published as a booklet of the same title in 1946, and was widely read all over Assam.[38] In this not so brief speech (it was about four hours long), Rava formulated his theory of art in terms of whom it is meant for and to whom it belongs. He also redefined art as an integral part of everyday life, as a part of *kṛṣṭi* (culture).

It is politically significant that Rava chose to use the word "*kṛṣṭi*" rather than "*saṅskṛti*" as a translation of the word "culture." According to Bhupendranath Datta, in Vedic times, among the Aryans, the word *kṛṣṭi* meant "people." The root of the word *kṛṣṭi* is *karṣ* (cultivation). Whoever worked in the field was called a *kṛṣi*, and a community of *kṛṣis* was called *kṛṣṭi*.[39] In the early twentieth century, thinkers on Indian culture were engaged in the process of deciding on an ideal translation for the English word "culture." The word *kṛṣṭi* came into use in Bangla in the mid-1920s, introduced by Jogeshchandra Ray Vidyanidhi. According to Niharranjan Ray, the word *kṛṣṭi* was also in use in Hindi in the 1920s; in fact, Vidyanidhi had borrowed the word from Hindi.[40] Rabindranath Tagore is said to have been very troubled by the popularity of the word *kṛṣṭi*. He found it unattractive and crude ("*kūśrī*," "*kuśrāvya*"). In a letter to the editor of the journal *Parichaya* in 1932, Tagore wrote:

[37] See Shashi Sharma's "*Rāvār Mānasik Uttaran*" (Rava's Intellectual Transition) and Hemango Biswas's "*Asamar Śilpi Śainik: Bishnuprasad Rava*" (Soldier Artist of Assam: Bishnuprasad Rava).

[38] It was reprinted in 1961 and again in 1969 on his birthday, January 31, a few months before his death. Around 75,000 copies of this booklet were sold till the third reprint, as stated in the blurb of the 1969 edition.

[39] Datta (1957), p. 66.

[40] Ray (1979), p. 1.

Ingriji bhāṣāe chāṣ ebang sabhyatā ekei śabde cale geche bole ki āmrāo Bānglā bhāṣae phringiyānā karba?[41]

Just because the English language has the same word for cultivation and civilisation, must we ape them in Bangla language as well?

Tagore preferred the word *saṅskṛti*, which was associated with leisure, creativity, and fulfilment of the spiritual needs of man. He associated the word *kṛṣṭi* only with physical labour and the satisfaction of physical needs.

The word *kṛṣṭi* might have been more appealing to Rava because of the primarily agrarian economy of Assam.[42] In a speech delivered at the All Assam Tribal Students' Conference in Khowang, he defined *kṛṣṭi* as "cultivation." However, he took care to widen the word's connotations beyond simple cultivation of the soil to also include spiritual, material, and religious cultivation.[43] Thus, Rava drew a connection between the material and spiritual development of humankind. Similar views were put forward by Marxist thinkers in various parts of the world, the most notable being Raymond Williams in his book *Culture and Society* (1958). In *Asamiya Kṛṣṭir Camu Ābhās*, Rava describes *kṛṣṭi* as being organically connected with the everyday lives of the people. For him, *kṛṣṭi* did not only mean art, literature, music, and dance, but also included weaving, cuisine, and make-up.

During this period, Rava also defined his own relationship to the people, and thus the relationship of an artist to society. In the introduction to *Sonpāhi* (1956), a collection of short stories written during the period 1948–52, Rava says:

. . . Rāijar antar-phulanir phule phule uri pari pari mouguti bhomorār dare ras cuhi cuhi moi mor hridayat mou-koh racanā karo. Sei rāijare mou moi rāijak bilāo. Si mor kono nijaswa nahai. . . . Śilpir i dharma. Moi sei dharmahe pālan karo.[44]

Like a honeybee flying from flower to flower, I collect nectar from each flower in the garden of people's hearts and create a honeycomb within my heart. I serve that very honey among the people. It does not belong to me. . . . This is the duty of the artist. I simply fulfil that duty.

An artist is one who draws from the culture of the people, transforms it by imbuing it with his or her own subjectivity and political awareness, and then distributes it among the very people who had inspired him. It can be argued that Rava became extremely conscious about his duty as an artist to give back the nectar of *kṛṣṭi* that he had

[41] *Ibid.,* p. 2.
[42] For details about the agrarian political economy of Assam, see Das and Saikia (2011). For details about the society and culture of agrarian Assam, see Dewri (2009).
[43] Rava (2008), vol. 2, p. 1089.
[44] Rava (2008), vol. 1, p. 569.

transformed into art (*kalā*), and saw the peasants of Assam as the people among whom he must serve this nectar of art.

Thus, in the 1940s, Rava began to compose music that was explicitly committed to socio-political change. Most of his songs of this period that have survived are directly related to peasant struggles, and come across as slogans. Many of those songs were lost because of state repression in the early 1950s following the peasant revolts. Some of them were kept alive by singers of the IPTA and continue to be sung during peasant movements till this day. A few scattered lyrics have been found and remembered by villagers who had sheltered Rava during his fugitive years. The melodies of these songs were influenced by the local folk melodies, and their content reflected the ongoing struggles of the peasants.

In early 1947, the RCPI began to mobilise peasants and workers to form embryonic soviets known as *panchayats.* In the RCPI's discourse, the two terms – "panchayat" and "soviet" – were synonymous.[45] Rava, along with his party comrades, travelled from village to village forming these *panchayats.* In his songs, Rava refers to this movement as "Panchayat Raj" or "Panchayat Jug." He was seen by his party comrades as someone who could bridge the gap between the caste Hindus and the tribal communities.[46] He was valued for his ability to communicate with different linguistic communities of the region. One can see an instance of this ability in his bilingual songs. One such song is "*Swādhincitiyā Hāluwā*," in Asamiya–Bodo, which urges peasants of the *Panchayat Jug* (panchayat age) to recognise the "true enemy" – the rich, elite class (*kuber*) – that uses differences in ethnicity, caste and creed to exploit the poor. The melody of this song is inspired by popular Bodo melodies, and its rhythm blends the thunderous beat of the Bodo *khām* (drum) with the beat of the tabla playing the *khemta tala.* Rava wrote the lyrics of the song separately in both the languages, but singers usually alternate between the Asamiya and Bodo lines in the following manner:

Asamiya:	*Swādhincitiyā hālowā dekā ranuā*
Bodo:	*Gõnāi gõcõni hāluwā nāṅgrā ceṅgõrā*
Asamiya:	*Panchāyati jugar na-manare manuā*
	Jujiba samarat lagariyā banuā
Bodo:	*Panchāyat jugni gõcõ gõdānni cān grā*
	Jujigõn unāo nāṅnāiyāo māogrā lõgõphrā

Freedom-loving tiller, o young warrior,
Freedom-loving tiller, o young warrior,
Inspired by the new consciousness of the Panchayat Age,
The workers too will be your comrades-in-arms.

[45] Saikia (2014), p. 135.
[46] Anil Raichowdhury, personal interview, January 24, 2012.

The song places the struggles of the peasants in the larger context of the Communist movement where peasants would fight hand-in-hand with workers.

Rava's songs also united the local struggles of sharecroppers in Assam with that of peasants and workers not only across India but all over the world. Some of these songs, while emerging from local struggles, were influenced by revolutionary traditions in other parts of the world. For instance, one notices echoes of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Song – To the Men of England" in a song that urges peasants and workers to rise in revolt, "Bol Bol Bol Bol" (March, March, March Ahead).

Āmi khuwāo biswabāsik
Māti phāli dhān—
Āmi jogāo dhani śreṇik
Astra śaktimān–
Kārkhānā kal āmār srijan
Pathār subahal . . .
Teono kiya āmār ene–
Āloi biloi hol?
O' hālowā o' banuwā
Gā tulibar hol–
Rangā tejar nicānti loi
Āg bārhi jao bol

We till the soil
To feed the world with grains,
We provide the wealthy class
With powerful arms.
Factories, mills are our creations,
So are the wide fields.
Why are we still
In such misery?
O tiller, o worker
It's time to rise
Holding the blood-red banner
Let's march ahead!

This song was composed by Rava for his musical play *Mukti Deul* (Temple of Freedom), in 1947. The play narrates the history of Indian peasants and workers in the mid-twentieth century. However, during the armed uprising of peasants in the years 1948–52, it took on a life of its own. As Sumangala Damodaran points out about songs that were a part of the theatrical performances of the IPTA, "the songs and the music acquired an identity and a life that extended far beyond individual performances."[47] For instance, the songs which served as the clarion call of workers

[47] Damodaran (2014), p. 420.

and peasants in *Mukti Deul*, including "Bol Bol Bol Bol," were sung during the sharecroppers' movement of 1948–52. Although the armed rebellion of peasants was quashed, the songs can still be heard during protest marches of workers, peasants, and even students and other agitators.

Conclusion

Rava's art was shaped by political and cultural movements from not just within the subcontinent, but from all over the world. He drew inspiration for his music from the everyday rhythms and melodies of rural Assam. Like his contemporaries, Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Parvati Prasad Baruva, he made those melodies contemporary by bringing about a confluence of local musical forms with Hindustani classical music and elements of western music. It was this musical experimentation that led to the creation of the unique sound of present-day Assamese popular music. Many musicians continue to collect melodies from the various ethnic communities in the region and experiment with them to create new music. However, Rava was also acutely aware of political and social upheavals at the local, national, and international levels. He drew inspiration from rural society in the struggle to transform the conservative social space of the urban middle class. He infused his songs with revolutionary ideas from all over the world, and sought to unite the local struggles of peasants in Assam with the struggles of workers and peasants all over the world.

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Glossary

ādhunik saṅgīt:	modern music.
ādhunik:	modern.
āideo:	woman of the elite.
bargīt:	songs composed by the fifteenth century Vaisnava saint Sankaradeva and his favourite disciple Madhavadeva.
bihugīt:	songs sung during the springtime festival, Bahāg Bihu or Rangāli Bihu.

bihuwān: a hand-woven towel which is woven especially for Bihu. It is gifted to elders in the family and to loved ones.

dhol: drum.

hucari: during the Bihu festival, groups of young men and women go from house to house, singing and dancing and blessing each household on the occasion of Bihu. This performance practice is called *hucari*.

janajāti: tribe.

jāti: community. Depending on the context, it could indicate caste, ethnicity, or nationality.

jātrās: a popular folk theatre form performed in Bengal, Assam, Orissa, and neighbouring regions.

khām: a drum played by the Bodo community. It is a long drum made of wood and goatskin.

khemtātāla: a beat (*tālā*) that is often played in various forms of Indian folk music.

kṛṣṭi: culture.

mouzādārs: tax-collectors.

ojā-pāli: a narrative performance form involving a chorus of about four or more singers. The leader of the *ojā-pāli* group is called an *ojā*, while the other singers are called *pāli*. There are two forms of *ojā-pāli*. *Sukannāniojā-pāli* is a *Śākta* form that narrates the story of the snake goddess *Manasā*, and *Vyāhagowāojā-pāli* is a Vaisnava form that narrates stories of the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata.

pālā: an audio-play recorded in multiple gramophone records.

panchayat: village assembly. In the context of the activities of the Revolutionary Communist Party, *panchayat* also meant an embryonic soviet.

pepa: horn-pipe.

raij mel: public meeting.

satras: a neo-Vaisnavite monastery.

zikir: religious songs sung by indigenous Assamese Muslims in Asamiya language. Saiyad Shah Miran (c. 1690), who is also popularly known as Azan Fakir, is said to have composed the *zikir*.

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