INTRODUCTION

Introduction: Situating the Rural in Musical Imaginaries of Nation, Region, and Identity

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Aar Koto Kaal
Bolo Koto Kaal
Shoibo ei mrityur aupomaan
Shohor bondore chasheer pukure
Noro khadok doler obhijaan
Ei aar shohena

How much more time
Say, for how many more years
Shall we suffer the indignity of death
In towns and ports, in village ponds
The man-eaters are on the prowl
We cannot bear this anymore![1]

Reba Roychowdhuri, a singer-actress from Bengal, sang this song from the Tebhaga peasant movement that raged in Bengal over the years 1946–48, the song having been written and composed just after the brutal killing of Ahalya, a peasant activist from Chandanpur, along with several others in November 1948.

The demands of the Tebhaga peasant movement were brilliantly articulated in another famous song, "Hey Samalo," written and composed by Salil Chowdhury, the poet Sukanta Bhattacharya, and others, many of whom were members of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).

Mora tulbona dhan parer golay
Morbo na ar khudhar jalay morbona

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[1] Translated by the author.

Tar jomi je langol chalay
Dher soyechhi ar to mora soibo na

We will not take paddy to others' granaries
We will not die of starvation any more
We who own the plough and till their land
Have tolerated enough, we'll tolerate no more

. . . went the song.

These are two examples of songs written around a major agrarian event that took place in the last year of British colonial rule in India, 1946–47, the Tebhaga peasant rebellion in Bengal. The Tebhaga movement's main demand was that sharecroppers keep two-thirds of the grain they produced and that landlords take one-third, whereas the practice was the reverse. The first song was written by Benoy Roy, a songwriter-composer, as part of a cultural movement that gathered strength from the early 1940s in different parts of India and was led by the IPTA. Ahalya, along with seven other peasant activists, were killed when policemen opened fire upon villagers who refused to part with the grain they had harvested, and which the local landlords were trying to seize with the help of hired goons and the police. The killing of Ahalya, who was eight months pregnant, became a rallying point for the movement, which gathered momentum subsequently; and the slow-paced, emotive song was an immediate response to the incident. The second song, more fast-paced than the first, became an important one for mobilisation around agrarian issues and remains popular even today. While the first song is set to a folk tune from rural Bengal, the second is a stylised, consciously crafted song, typical of the style musician-composer Salil Chowdhury created as part of his repertoire of protest songs.

Memories of major historical movements are often carried forward through songs, poetry, and visual art forms that can be transmitted to future generations orally and through performance. The songs mentioned above were written, set to music, and sung by persons who belonged to the cultural political formation called the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), which came into existence with the conscious objective of using culture to articulate politics in the last few years before India's Independence. The setting up of IPTA and other such formations was a response to a perceived need for new aesthetic forms that represented the people, distinct from the cultural traditions of the mainstream nationalist movement as well as commercial theatre. This "people's art and theatre" attempted to reflect and respond to the general travails of a colonised nation on the one hand, and the specifics of the multilayered oppression of the common people in both the colonial and immediate post-colonial contexts, on the other hand.

The IPTA aimed to assimilate and build upon spontaneous cultural responses to political events, to consciously bring aesthetics to bear on politics, in theatre,

music, dance, art, and photography. Apart from responding to political events that occurred in the agrarian economy of India – notably the Telangana peasant movement in Andhra in 1948, the Kayyur peasant revolt in Malabar in 1940, the Hajong Tanka Adivasi rebellion in Assam in 1942, and the Tebhaga peasant revolt of 1946–47 in Bengal, to name a few – musicians of the IPTA also undertook the major task of retrieving and documenting the "true music of the people of India," especially forms that had been marginalised or that were sung or performed by groups of people who had been marginalised under colonialism as well as by the exploitative class and caste relations prevalent in the countryside.

The rural context thus provided the ground on which various kinds of "people" of the nation came to be identified. The need to listen to, understand, and represent their music also became an important aspect of understanding the nation. The need arose not only because this music or the people who produced it were subject to exploitation or marginalisation, but also because it was understood, perhaps only from the late nineteenth century onwards, that such music spoke both directly and indirectly about the conditions of ordinary people's lives. Further, the musical forms that were available reflected the aesthetic variety that was often handed down from earlier centuries, contributing to a varied understanding of the term "tradition."

Capturing and documenting the music of the countryside and of agrarian life in different parts of the country, or the "documentary aesthetic," as sociologist Michael Denning (Denning 1996) called it, became an exercise in discovering and knowing the Indian nation as part of an alternative kind of nationalism, quite distinct from a mainstream, territorial nationalism. This trend of spreading out into the countryside to document various categories of music of "the people" was seen in different parts of the world, as part of nationalist projects of defining nationhood as well as radical projects of uncovering the music of "the people." In the USSR, Turkey, the USA, China, Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Greece, and India, to name some countries, this project of documentation took place in the first half of the twentieth century. In China, the prominent left-wing writer Guo Moro urged: "Be a phonograph!" – referring to the process of documenting and then "playing back" to the people what was produced by them, in acknowledgement of their contribution to the culture of the country (Damodaran 2017).

Even in countries where industrialisation had advanced substantially by the early part of the twentieth century, it was often the metaphors of rural life that were employed in industrial protest music. Writing about the emergence of the "industrial protest song" in England, Portis (2002) argues that it retained the form and language of the rural folksong, but took on themes and tones corresponding to the changes in work patterns and social relations. Often, even if it was the "idyll of rural life" that was being projected, the realities of life in large parts of the world made focusing on the rural obvious.

Important questions of nation, identity, and tradition have thus been addressed through the prism of the agrarian, the rural, and the people thereof, and the music often allows us an entry point into major debates that animated countries during processes of nation-building. Furthermore, because of the predominantly rural character of many ex-colonial countries across the world, analyses of songs originating in rural settings or about rural life can generate an understanding of the lives of a large part of the population in these countries. Also, where rural–urban migration and/or circulation is an important phenomenon, even when industrialisation has resulted in the creation of a substantial urban proletariat, the rural and its metaphors become important to understand socio-economic processes. This can happen in a significant way through songs.

The articles on music in this issue of *Review of Agrarian Studies*, including the present one, use rural songs and musical forms as a basis to understand conditions in society and social change.

The first half of the twentieth century, as mentioned earlier, was notable for multiple explorations of how art, including music, could be used in the struggle for social change in general, and, more specifically, as part of political movements. In several countries, nationalist movements and projects undertook processes of "classicisation" of the arts and music, which is specifically discussed here, whereby the elevation of particular kinds of music as embodying ancient traditions and representing the superior culture of the people resulted in the creation of national institutions such as conservatories and academies to promote such music. Often, the process involved proscribing forms that were not considered part of the national tradition, as well as censorship of musical forms and artists. Turkey in the first half of the twentieth century is a good example of both these (Degirmenci 2006; Damodaran 2017). After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 under Kemal Ataturk, cultural unification of diverse peoples of different nationalities under a singular Turkish identity was reflected in the quest for a "national music" that represented the "essence" and what was "natural" in the Republic. Given the offensive meaning attributed to the word Turk in the Ottoman Empire, implying uncivilised, nomadic people who belong to a tribe, it involved a process of assessment, negation, unearthing, and reprocessing of "Turkish" music of the countryside, defined as "healthy, genuine music that can be heard among the Anatolian people" (Degirmenci 2006). According to Ziya Gökalp (Degirmenci 2006), an influential theoretician of the new nation, the new music of the Turkish Republic needed to emerge from a synthesis of folk music and Western music, the former being termed the music of the new culture and the latter, the music of the new civilisation. A whole range of institutions emerged to give effect to this "westernisation" of folk music from the countryside. Further, getting rid of Ottoman institutions also involved the closing down of musical institutions such as Sufi lodges and other centres of Sufi music.

In several colonised countries of Latin America, from the early to the middle decades of the twentieth century, the mainstream nationalist position engaged with ideas of the "indigenous" or forms of "folk music," in an attempt to be cognisant and inclusive of various social identities (Turino 2003). The concept of nationalism in the music of these countries was different from the Turkish example, in that it involved more inclusive, culturally based conceptions of the nation, often within the politics of populist movements – especially when efforts to link formerly disenfranchised populations to the state were underway. This involved, in a variation of state-sponsored "nationalism from above," a process of "folklorisation" or a showcasing, exhibiting, and reform of indigenous customary and ritual art forms. "Folklore" festivals and contests involving recognition and celebration of the "indigenista" are examples of this kind of engagement with the indigenous (Turino 2003).

Another example is that of Zimbabwe, where the different stages of national reconstruction, designated as *chimurenga* or wars of liberation, were rooted in dispossession and reclamation of land. C*himurenga* music, accordingly, came into existence as an ongoing form of cultural resistance against colonialism, and land was central to the evolution of the music (Chikowero 2015).

Mainstream nationalism or "nationalism from above," thus, historically, has dealt in different ways with traditions, whether classical or indigenous (folk).

Movements that originated from oppositional politics, especially left and democratic movements, had to contend with questions of nationalism even if their relationship with nationalism was a critical and often tense one (Gopal 2005; Damodaran 2017). The alternative "nationalism from below" required such movements to uncover the "true music" of the people of the nation, and thus engage with the realities and traditions of rural populations of the country, which constituted the significant majority. Documentation of and working with rural music forms, uncovering the variety in them based on region, caste, tribe, religion, and other social categories, was thus a part of this "nationalism from below."

Prachee Dewri's article in this issue, titled "Bishnuprasad Rava and the Rural in Assam: Inspiration and Intervention Through Music," looks at the contribution of Bishnuprasad Rava, a doyen of Assam's cultural movement, in understanding how artists inspired by rural life and struggles attempted to intervene in the socio-political transformation of rural Assam in the early and mid-twentieth century. Rava, along with artists like Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Parvati Prasad Baruva, formed the IPTA in Assam, and their work revolutionised art in the early and mid-twentieth century. They did so by writing and staging plays, choreographing dance performances, and composing and recording music. Rava also became an active member of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) in 1945. Dewri traces the work of progressive artists like Rava in pointing

towards what she refers to as a "regional nationalism," or an Assamese identity nested within an overall national Indian identity, and this Assamese identity as being represented by the peasantry and other sections of people in the rural areas who were part of the exploited classes. She uncovers the different dimensions of documenting, reproducing, and interpreting various rural music forms as they were positioned in a society that was also experiencing exposure to new recording technologies. She looks at Rava's own music and the ways in which diverse rural forms like the *bargit*, *bihu git*, and *zikir* were interpreted by him, together constituting a unique imagining of the region in the backdrop of nationalism. Importantly, Dewri also engages with some of Rava's formulations on the role of art in society, which came about through his intense engagement with understanding the diversity of Assamese rural culture.

The article titled "Agrarian Production and the Archiving of Folksong" by Smita Tewari Jassal takes the focus away from questions of nationalism or direct politics, towards the ways in which rural songs can be used as an archive to understand agrarian production relations in a country like India. Beginning from this larger question, she specifically connects the variety of women's labour in agricultural production with the multiple songs that are sung during agricultural operations, to make the case that cultural forms should be used as a way to understand economic conditions. By analysing two song genres associated with women's work, she argues that women's songs can be seen as collective diaries of women that articulate their life struggles, but also occasionally question the unjust social order. The first genre is the grindmill songs that women sing while grinding grain and spices in the courtyards of their own homes, and the second, the *kajli* or *kajri* genre sung by women as they carry out numerous tasks in the field. Differing from each other in terms of the length and narrative content of the songs, and also in terms of mood, rhythm, melodies, etc., the two genres also stand in contrast in terms of what they achieve. The grindmill songs serve, according to the author, a pedagogical function, whereas the *kajri* songs bring out women's powers of persuasion and bargaining. In some of the songs, there is an interrogative stance vis-à-vis their conditions of existence within a patriarchal system, but often, women's work songs are also vehicles for the construction and reproduction of gender identities. Using Deniz Kandiyoti's notion of "bargaining with patriarchy," Jassal suggests that far from being passive victims of oppressive structures, the songs illustrate how women combine elements of resistance and subversion as well as accommodation and collusion in them.

Put together, these articles show, first, how the rural and the agrarian form the basis on which imaginaries of nation and region have been produced in different contexts through music; and secondly, how the rural and its various dimensions continue to be important in understanding society; and thirdly, how music can be used as a prism to understand societal conditions and social change.

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