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The Music of the IPTA: An Exercise in Soviet Cosmopolitanism

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ABSTRACT

There has been no dearth of interest in the politics of IPTA in Indian intellectual circles. Moreover, in Indian Bengal, shaped by thirty-four years of communist party rule, the IPTA movement has been romanticised as an urban elite's excursion (declassing oneself) into the lives of the rural peasantry and the urban working class. Within the communist party circles, where some of the organisational attributes of the IPTA are still maintained, the movement serves as a memory of a just cause, torn apart by party directives, internal feuds, and so on. With Marxism on the wane after the 90s, in India's post-colonial moment, informed by critical theory (moulded in the post-colonial guise), IPTA served as a perfect milk-cow for Indian academics to churn out paper after paper exploring whether the movement was hijacked by middle-class men leading the communist party, or whether the voices of the 'marginalised' could truly be represented by university educated party workers.

IPTA, as a movement, took over almost all aspects of the arts (music, theatre, literature, and film) during its heyday in the 1940s and 1950s. The movement would splinter following the 1947 partition, but would continue to grow independently in both East and West Pakistan. The course requirements facilitate the isolation of specific characters within the movement; hence, the focus will be on two Bengali composers—Hemango Biswas and Salil Choudhury —who defined Bengali music of the IPTA.

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how closely their music was being informed by the debates occurring in the USSR's literary circles. Hemango Biswas and Salil Choudhury would demonstrate two very different aspects of socialist music-making, reworking the formalist and anti-formalist modes of Soviet literary conventions for a Bengali audience they believed would take part in an imminent revolution.

Introduction

In the winter of 1926-1927, when Walter Benjamin visited Moscow, he demonstrated a strange ambivalence towards the socialist reconstruction underway in the newly established USSR. Moscow was still a peasant city, with the 'provincial air' of an 'improvised metropolis that had fallen into place overnight'.[1] Moscow would not appear radically different to Rabindranath Tagore when he visited the city in the fall of 1930. His ruminations on Moscow's not-so-gilded appearance, when contrasted to other European capitals, would take his Indian audience by storm. In the opening pages of his account of Moscow, he notes, "Not just for white Russians, but even for the 'semi-civilised' Central Asian nationalities, they (the Soviets) are extending education like a flood. No one is leaving a stone unturned to ensure that they, too, get the very last fruits of science. Theatre is a big thing over here, but those who come to the theatres are all peasants and workers. No one insults them… I have witnessed their 'enlightenment' and the happiness that they derive from their sense of self. There is no point comparing them to our country folks, but even if compared to the working classes of England, there's a hell and heaven difference. What we had tried to achieve in Sriniketan[2], they (the Soviets) are demonstrating the same across their whole country".[3]

It can be said with some certainty that Tagore crossed paths with Communists for the first time in China. His visit to China in 1923 had to be cut short after he was denounced as a supporter of Buddhism and Confucianism by the to-be-Chinese Marxist literary authorities, including Lu Xun and Mao Dun. Similar scepticism was also expressed by Lukacs (still in Berlin), who had denounced Tagore in 1922 as a supporter of an "ideology of the eternal subjection of India". However, the zeal for harnessing 'World literature' that swept the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s meant that Tagore was no longer a harbinger of Indian spirituality but a participant in the anti-imperialist movement. Lunacharsky promoted Tagore explicitly in these terms. In Soviet translations of Tagore (from English in the 1920s), his prose (short stories and his two early novels, *Gora* and *Home and the World*) was privileged over his poetry, which was regarded as more realist and modernist.[4] The plight of women striving for liberation dovetailed exceedingly nicely with the sexual politics of the early Soviet society. The Soviet VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) arranged Tagore's visit to the USSR in exchange for the dispatch of two Professors of Russian literature and language to Visva-Bharati (the university Tagore had established in Shantiniketan). Tagore would occupy a small yet significant moment in the Soviet attempt to forge a Leftist Literary Common, which, in its failure in India, would turn its attention to China.[5]

Katerina Clark's two monographs, *Eurasia Without Borders: The Dream of a Leftist Literary Commons* and *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism and the Evolution of Soviet*

[1] Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, Harvard University Press, 1986, 31.
[2] Sriniketan constituted Tagore's own experiment at rural reconstruction. Even in the USSR, visiting agricultural institutes was the most essential aspect of his trip.
[3] Rabindranath Tagore, *Russia r chithi (Letters from Russia)*, Viswabharati Press, 1961, 3. (translation mine)
[4] The Soviets were not wrong in such a reception of Tagore in the late 1920s. Tagore's own ideas of modernity and nationalism undergo a sea change following his highly fruitful partnership with Romain Rolland after the First World War.
(For the correspondences between Rolland and Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore and Romain Rolland, *Bridging East and West: Rabindranath Tagore and Romain Rolland (1919-1940)*, ed. Chinmoy Guha, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019)
[5] Katerina Clark, *Eurasia Without Borders: The Dream of a Leftist Literary Commons, 1919-1943*, Harvard University Press, 2021, 189-193.

Culture, 1931-1941, can be read as two dialectically opposed impulses in Soviet cultural ambitions— one that attempted to forge a Third Worldish agenda, while not abandoning Moscow's own place in the European heritage. However, if one interprets these two impulses not as being dialectically opposed but as two aspects of a singular drive towards an internationally informed 'cosmopolitanism' (to use her own term), then it might explain how the IPTA movement became culturally rooted in Bengal in the 1940s, long after India had ceased to play the pivotal role it once did in the Soviet visions of world revolution in the 1920s and early 1930s.

The IPTA and its precursor, the PWA

To cut a long story short, the IPTA or the Indian People's Theatre Association was founded in 1943. The then general secretary of the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI), P.C. Joshi, identified two main agendas for such a cultural organisation— first, to incorporate Indian cultural workers in the international struggle against fascism (in the backdrop of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union), and second, to document the plight of the rural countryside in the backdrop of the famine of 1943 (deemed to be a man-made imperialist one) that was readily spreading its tentacles beyond the state borders of undivided Bengal. The IPTA was to be the successor to the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), founded in 1936, in the aftermath of the antifascist Congress for the Defence of Culture, held in Paris in 1935 (an event bankrolled by the Soviets).

The foundation of the PWA in Calcutta the following year has been regarded by Clark as a moment when the Eurasian literary common was within sight, albeit constrained by the rigours of socialist realism codified at the Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934.[6] Nonetheless, Clark has treated the Paris conference as the closest the USSR ever came to securing prominent non-Marxist writers, such as Hemingway and Malraux, to adopt the conventions of socialist realism. In other words, it was the closest Soviet Moscow ever got to being a cultural "Fourth Rome".[7]

It has never been very clear to me as to why the CPI felt the need to create a separate People's Theatre Association as an organisation distinct from the earlier Progressive Writers' Association. If Clark's assessment is to be followed, who has a chapter on the PWA, but leaves out the IPTA, the PWA was a product of the 1928 Comintern diktat that had placed the CPI under the supervision of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). It meant that Indians stationed in London, rather than those previously stationed in Berlin, Moscow, and Tashkent, became the key players in the international literary sphere. Consequently, this meant that the PWA members were not confined to a silo of socialist realism but were part of a literary scene with diverse influences.[8] It is valid to a certain extent that, despite their socialist realism, PWA workers remained aesthetes in ways that would never translate into meaningful political work. If this mode of reasoning is followed, the establishment of the Indian People's Theatre Association in 1943 becomes understandable, whose primary goal would be to forge cultural hegemony through relentless political work in the hinterlands of India.

[6] Clark, *Eurasia without borders*, 277-311.
[7] Clark, *Moscow: The Fourth Rome*, 242.
[8] Clark, *Eurasia without Borders*, 283-284.

Socialist Realism, as it would appear to a non-Soviet audience

The Soviet cultural scene would broadly be divided into two camps—the formalist and the anti-formalist. Tretiakov's *faktoviki* (Literature of the Fact)[9] entailed the 'de-individualisation' and 'de-professionalisation' of the writer, who had to overcome the superficial snobbery of high culture. Brecht and Hans Eisler would heed the call in their respective postulations on theatre and music. In short, the audience would have to stop short of a 'sympathetic identification' with the theatre or the musical composition; instead, they would have to engage in a dialectic moment of learning (of both the art and the politics behind it).[10] In another way, 'depersonalisation' would also mean one's withdrawal from one's own 'bell tower'. Logically, the art producer and the consumer would have to move beyond their provincialism.[11] This is the element that Clark identifies as the high point of Soviet cosmopolitanism, one that would mimic the 18th-century *Republic of Letters*. The deliberate posturing of Moscow as the true successor to the 18th-century moment would mean that the literary canon of Goethe and Schiller would very much inform its aesthetic sensibilities (in the mould of being the flagbearers of world literature). In short, this literary tradition would essentially constitute the formalists, who would advocate, after a point, nothing short of classicism (best demonstrated in Meyerhold's 'Shakespeareanise more' moment).[12] Much to the credit of Lukacs, the novel would emerge as the most privileged of all genres.[13]

Later in the 30s, the anti-formalist camp emerged as the more privileged tradition, in this instance, mimicking the sensibilities of Romantic subjectivity (the Stanislavsky moment). Literature, as the great novel, would decline in importance, as poetry, painting, opera, drama and films rose in prominence.[14] In its romantic moment, much like its predecessors in England and Germany, Soviet literary doctrine would obsess over the term 'narodnyi' ('people' or 'the nation'). The Formalists' classicism would be criticised for being inaccessible to both the common man and the Russian tradition.[15] Moliere was to be replaced by the 'lyric' of Byron and Pushkin. Yet the aesthetic canons of Kant, Hegel, and Schiller would be retained, albeit in a romantic mould (Lukacs again being a key mediating figure).[16]

Music of IPTA I: Hemango Biswas

If one has to follow Clark's 'mutability' of Soviet cultural conventions, then Hemango Biswas would be a part of the latter, anti-formalist camp. In his memoirs, recounting his own coming of age as a communist, from his earlier nationalist sensibilities (nothing unique in

[9] Certain parallels between Soviet literary devices and the overall direction of Bengali literature of the 1940s appeared no less surprising to me. I do not know if archival linkages can indeed be established but young university graduates were categorically harnessed and sent to the countryside to report about the famine, working conditions in factories, owing to the war-time contingencies. Just to cite an example, a later to be poet Subhas Mukhopadhyay would be dispatched to prepare journalistic reports from the countryside (throughout the 40s) in a manner that could be considered as literature (*Amar Bangla* or *My Bengal*)— very much mimicking the description of the writings that would appear in *Novyi Lef* (Clark, *Moscow*, 49).
[10] Clark, *Moscow*, 60-61.
[11] Clark, *Moscow*, 141.
[12] Clark, *Moscow*, 218.
[13] Clark, *Moscow*, 165.
[14] Clark, *Moscow*, 219.
[15] Clark, *Moscow*, 311.
[16] Clark, Moscow, 281-285.

this respect), he writes— "That was a time when we had Maurice Hindus' *Humanity Uprooted* in our hands. I managed to paint a new image of Soviet Russia in my **romantic** mind. When Tagore's *Letters from Russia* were published in 1930, we were increasingly being influenced by Russian politics. But that was a call of humanity… Similarly, Sydney and Beatrice Webb's *Soviet Communism* was painting in our minds a seductive picture of a new society. Gorki's *Mother* had just been translated into Bengali. The grandeur of the working mother swayed us towards socialism. But no one back then was analysing the scientific, theoretical, philosophical, political and economic dimensions of Marxism".[17]

Continuing his narrative into his musical career in the 1940s, he adds, "Over the burnt ashes of Goethe and Heine, the Fascist vultures were conquering the skies of the whole world. The most outstanding intellectuals of the time, Gorki, Rolland, and Tagore, called for a cultural movement against the fascists. We witnessed the confrontation of these two cultures during the Spanish Civil War. Several were martyred—Christopher Caudwell, Ralph Fox, and Lorca. In Spain, the grounds for a new culture were prepared, one that could preserve humanity against the fascists."[18]

Reflecting on what caught the attention of his rural audience, he writes, "We joined the Communist Party not to sing, but to take part in the revolution. Back then, we did not know of Mao's theory that, for a revolution, one needs a cultural army, just as one needs an armed militia… The reason that my music could spread amongst the peasantry was that I managed to drink a droplet out of the vast ocean of folk culture, and use it in my music".[19]

In the theoretical exegesis of his compositions, he categorically stresses the **provincialism** of folk music: "Classical music is codified. It has to be taught. Folk music has no codified rules. There are no music schools for folk music. **It is defined by its gaze inwards and outwards of its own world, something that we may call provincialism**".[20] Taking a dig at modernist formalisms, he associates the cosmopolitanism of the modernist music arrangements as an attribute of the age of mass production.[21] Building on the character of folk music, he writes that it conveys the narrative of social evolution, preserving the reminiscences of a time of the commons and encapsulating subsequent developments in class contradictions.[22]

However, while identifying his own intellectual antecedents in his excursion into folk music, he goes back to Gorki's postulations in the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress (retained in English)— "I would again draw your attention to the fact that the most profound, striking and artistically perfect types of heroes have been created by folklore, the oral creation of the working people". References to Gorki are followed by a brief excursion into Goethe (again retained in English)— "Folktale is the father of all fiction and folksong is the mother of all poetry". Surprisingly, his subsequent reference is to Glinka, whom he calls the greatest Russian composer of the previous century, "It is the people who create music, we only arrange it". A cosmopolitan tinge is added in his reference to Paul Robeson— "This has been one of the bonds that have drawn me so close to the peoples of the world, bonds through

[17] Hemango Biswas, *Ujaan Gaang Baiya,* 79. (*Across the limitless river*, translation mine).
[18] Hemango Biswas, *Ujaan Gaang Baiya*, 172.
[19] Hemango Biswas, *Ujaan Gaang Baiya*, 95.
[20] Hemango Biswas, *Ganer Bahirana*, 4. (*The provincialism and the outward gaze of music*, translation mine)
[21] Hemango Biswas, *Ganer Bahirana*, 7-8.
[22] Hemango Biswas, *Ganer Bahirana*, 11.

this likeness in music that made me understand the political growth of many peoples, the struggles of many peoples and brought me back to you to fight here in this land as I shall continue to do". Adding a comment after the citation of Robeson, Biswas writes, "This is what I call the consciousness of the masses. Without this consciousness, one can not encapsulate the potentialities of folk music".[23]

It would not be atrocious to conclude that Biswas's references to Goethe, Glinka and Robeson were very much a product of Soviet literary conventions at its romantic moment. Biswas's cosmopolitanism, informed by the events of the Spanish Civil War, is rooted in provincialism, which, in turn, is not grounded in Indian antecedents but in figures integral to the Soviet Romantic Canon. It is worth noting that Glinka made only an appearance in the Soviet cultural scene in 1939, at the height of the romantic moment of Socialist realism. Before that, he was happily consigned to the fate of being an artistic product of Tsarist Russia.[24]

This is not to say that Biswas's musical oeuvre was restricted to composing socialist music along the folk musical traditions of Bengal. He had famously rendered *John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in the grave* and the American ballad, *John Henry* into Bengali and composed the music for the Bengali translation of Langston Hughes' *'Comrade Lenin of Russia'*. Similarly, he rendered the *Varshavianka* into Bengali (most likely from English). He was a firm believer in the Soviet tradition that called for national action in support of internationalism.[25]

The Music of IPTA II: Salil Chaudhuri

Salil Chaudhuri was Biswas's compatriot in the IPTA movement, but unlike Biswas, who remained a lifelong party worker (despite increasing differences), Chaudhuri would pursue a career in the film industry, composing musical scores and directing music for Bengali and Hindi films. About Chaudhuri, Hemango Biswas would write in his autobiography, "In the tryst of critiquing Salil's **formalism** (the word has been retained in English), I too became a victim of another kind of formalism. Our disagreement was over the 'form'. In response to Salil's composition, "Oh! Boatswain", I said that no boatswain of Bengal sings in this way. At that time, this song was sung in harmony. Back in the day, I could not distinguish between this composition and his other composition, "The wave is rising, who all are breaking apart", which was sung as a chorus. Mass theatre introduced the chorus into the repertoire of mass music. Earlier, what was there could only be judged as 'unison'— boys and girls singing at a similar pitch and tone. It is undeniable that when Salil started to harmonise and arrange choral music, it brought a **'cosmopolitan dimension'** to the revolutionary consciousness of the audience. But his "Oh! Boatswain" was nothing but an escapade of a depressed musician". [26]

Salil Chaudhuri was the 'depersonalised' formalist, who would prefer to have nothing to do with his Bengali 'bell tower'. Unlike Biswas, who would immerse himself in the very content of his music (in a very Stanislavskian fashion), Chaudhuri would want his audience to stop short of a 'sympathetic identification' with the composer. However, unlike Biswas, whose

[23] Hemango Biswas, *Ganer Bahirana*, 15-16.
[24] Clark, *Moscow*, 309.
[25] Hemango Biswas, *Ujaan Gaang Baiya*, 129.
[26] Hemango Biswas, *Ujaan Gaang Baiya*, 126.

introduction to the Communist Party occurred during the cosmopolitan moment of the Spanish Civil War, Chaudhuri became a party member in the more ordinary circumstances of the Second World War in 1940.[27]

Unlike a revolutionary desire that inspired Biswas's music, Chaudhuri's musical inspirations were far more modest. He argues that music has democratic and emancipatory potential, which is why Hitler banned Beethoven. Much like Beethoven, most music is a harbinger of hope—a statement against any form of slavery and oppression.[28] Apart from the more traditional sources, Chaudhuri reflects upon the element of cosmopolitan formalism in his music— "I had to master the essential components of Western classical music. I would listen to Western compositions on repeat and study their musical theories, among other things, beginning with the horizontal chord-to-chord movements of the Baroque, followed by Mozart and Beethoven's vertical-line melodies, dominant and subdominant chords, diatonic scales, and so on. Later, I would study the Romantic compositions of Liszt and Chopin and how they broke most musical norms. Finally, I arrived at Schoenberg and his atonal music, chromatic scales, and related techniques. Lastly, I would have to pay my debts to Debussy, Bartok, and Stravinsky for opening new horizons… I have used some of their techniques in my own music, in my own way."[29]

His cosmopolitan formalism was not left unchecked by organisational feuds. He recalls that two of his most iconic compositions ("The Village Bride" and "The Palanquin moves," both characterised by his fusion of traditional themes with Western musical techniques) were banned by the IPTA. He recalls that, in the 1940s, it was said that when the village women were fighting for their lives amidst the famine, he was simply describing a day in the life of the villagers.[30] This will not appear startling if one considers two instances cited by Katerina Clark. First, an opera adaptation of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, performed in 1938, that replaced the iconic scene of the original's long flight over the Odessa steppe with the ruins of a Gothic monastery, was praised for its 'profound connection with folk creativity'.[31] In the second instance, Meyerhold's theatre adaptation of Ostrovsky's *How the Steel was tempered* was criticised for a hysterical depiction of Pavel Korchagin. Meyerhold's formalism portrayed Pavel's life as a sacrifice rather than a joyous struggle that would have produced the lyric of a working-class hero.[32]

Nonetheless, Chaudhuri is perhaps the best remembered of all IPTA members—partly because of his cosmopolitanism in an otherwise extremely provincial country, and partly because of his later career in the film industry. The previous point was deliberately made to illustrate how closely IPTA's functioning followed Soviet cultural conventions, rather than to make a point about the censorship of Chaudhuri's music.

[27] Salil Chaudhuri, *Rochonaboli*, 377 (Collected Works).
[28] Salil Chaudhuri, *Rochonaboli*, 378.
[29] Salil Chaudhuri, *Rochonaboli*, 432.
[30] Salil Chaudhuri, *Rochonaboli*, 380.
[31] Katerina Clark, *Moscow*, 220.
[32] Katerina Clark, *Moscow*, 249-250.

Conclusion

Salil Chaudhuri and Hemango Biswas exemplify the formalism and anti-formalism of Soviet socialist realism, which had made its mark in a distant land such as Bengal. Just as Goethe and Schiller (both as examples of world literature and later in the romantic mould) appear as reference points in Clark's narrative for both the formalist and anti-formalist camps in the USSR, Tagore will continue to appear as a reference point for both Biswas and Chaudhuri. For Biswas, Tagore exemplified an understanding of Bengal's diverse folk traditions. Similarly, Chaudhuri would inform his music with many of Tagore's own experiments with Western musical and literary conventions. It has been well established how CPI's political positionings were determined by Comintern directives, mediated through the CPGB. It should also be of interest to determine whether such exchanges extended to the cultural sphere.

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