

“Aamra Dujona Swargo-Khelona Goribo Naa Dharonite...”¹:

Modern Self, Conjuality and *Bhakti* in Tagore Songs

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Abstract:

This paper aims to revisit Tagore songs, a very popular yet contested musical genre among the Bengali speaking population for near about a century, with special reference to some specific attributes of the educated middleclass people of this region. Focusing on devotion and conjugal relationship as two attributes, this paper seeks to understand how Tagore songs provide a space where even an exhibiting secular self could merge into the realm of devotion (*bhakti*) and how the songs themselves could turn into worship of Tagore, a very illustrated cultural and national icon across the border of India and Bangladesh with prolonged international stature. This paper also looks into the ways his devotees guard performance styles, advocate for ‘purity’, that again endorses ‘*bhakti*’ in a defined but ever-changing secular conjugal space, how the songs take on a life of their performance styles changing as does the meaning of the songs dependent on when and where and by whom they are performed.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, modernity, love, middleclass, ‘core’ values

¹ Tagore, R. 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. Kolkata: Visva-bharati. pp. 291. A line of Tagore’s song, categorized as part of the ‘love’ section by Tagore himself. “Not a fake heaven on the earth we’d rear..”. Translated by Anjan Ganguly found on geetabitan. com: <https://www.geetabitan.com/lyrics/rs-a2/aamra-dujona-swargo-khelna-english-translation.html>

aamra chitro oti bichitro

oti bishuddho oti pobitro... [“We are the portraits very amazing we are, very pure and very revered indeed...” *Taser Desh: Tagore*]²

With only a few last months remaining of school, someone mentioned that Sukanta Bhattacharya³ had memorized more than 500 lyrics written by Tagore. Not quite sure whether it was my admiration for Sukanta or Rabindranath himself, I felt the urge to memorize at least 500 of Tagore’s lyrics, if not more. Sure enough, the passion I was driven by made it possible. Fortunately, nobody was there to remind me that the *Shantiniketani* style of singing a Tagore song was absent in my amateur attempts, and hence, I had kept on going. It had been a thrilling experience. It wasn't long before people repeatedly noticed me as I attended any ‘cultural function’ of the small town. A higher secondary boy turns into a singer, that too with a cache of so many songs! The vibes/attention had already touched my parents by then too. Whenever someone used to pay a visit to our house, it was almost routine work to place the harmonium in front of them. Even after about two decades, the memories feel awkward even though almost forgotten. Partly because the hype itself was silly, but mostly because neither I celebrate the status now, nor have any plans to continue it anymore. Tagore, for me, is now a historical phenomenon of critical investigation, and so are his songs. For he was, and still is, such an important figure for the middle-class people of both Kolkata and Dhaka that I aim to engage with his intellectual creations thoroughly. I can perceive that he himself, and his music in particular are at the cultural core of the middle-class identity of both these cities. An identity that I desired to be a part of for years, like many others. And with the change in my perception, it has turned into an identity that must be confronted, as a political act. Thus, it is a huge process of unlearning which might be tough, but indispensable.

Most of those who detest *Rabindrasangeet* [songs by Tagore] defend their choice using a fussy argument saying that the pieces are tedious and uninteresting. The position fairly holds some validity, given the fact that the music industry is moving rapidly towards technological support

² Tagore (1973, p. 807). This is my translation. Many of Tagore’s poems and lyrics have been translated over a very long period of time in addition to his own translations in *Geetanjali* for which he received the Nobel Prize. Still, many of them are yet to be translated, and more importantly not all translations are easy to access in a single directory or collection.

³ Sukanta Bhattacharya (1926–1947) was a poet from Kolkata in British India who died at a very young age, before turning 21. Still he has 7 books of poems and lyrics, all published after his death. He is regarded as one of the most politically conscious writers of Bengali literature for his sharp Marxist position and communist expressions.

and Tagore schools are not usually interested in keeping up with that. But that doesn't necessarily explain the whole situation. Even in contemporary music, one can frequently find songs with repeated compositions from very different schools. Aged songs can be re-configured, re-manufactured using modern technologically advanced audio industries, a transition which is typically seen from 'folk' to 'band' music. Nevertheless, all these songs have a set audience of their own. My point here is, respect for any musical genre is not only subject to the composition, but also to the crucial self of an audience. And *Rabindrasangeet* as a genre, isn't any different. Furthermore, composition should not be dissociated from the very style of its presentation, or even from the words it conveys. Then, how can we make sense of the contempt in which Tagore songs are held? *Gharanas* [schools] will opt for an answer which reveals the ignorance and intellectual incapability of the listeners. The answer is not convincing enough for me because, let alone the complexities and intensities of the '*Baul*'⁴ songs the masses deal with, the middle class audience too, have consumed complex global musical products since the Beatles. I am not defending the shallow tendencies of producing a lot of claptrap songs by the audio industry here, which is a different point. My position here is pretty simple. Although *Rabindrasangeet* played a crucial role for the becoming of a modern self, which is essentially Bengali, it's that 'self' which now contradicts those songs of the late-modern age. For a long period of time, Tagore songs advocated conjugal ideology and *Bhakti* [devotion or piety] altogether. That was, and still is, the project of Tagore songs and the *gharanas*. To my understanding, that is what the present-day urban middle class still continue to espouse.

If we are to revisit Tagore songs polemically, we need to pinpoint some methodical questions. Let them be, for example, as follows: What are those factors of the core self that Tagore songs generate? How did the very process of generating meaning emerge to be the heart of a particular juncture, for a specific social group? In what fundamental ways did a particular class iconize Tagore? What are the values, even virtues, of a particular class exemplified in a specific musical genre, like Tagore songs? For me, these questions help to get into the 'adore-abhor' model of appreciating Rabindranath, and especially his songs. It became more important for me to find out

⁴ *Baul* is a generic term used to indicate all and every possible 'non-urban' 'non-Westernized' musical performer. But the people who are called 'baults', by the 'modern' and 'educated' people and mostly by the state agencies, do not always identify themselves with the term, but are obliged to due to state categorization. There are many theological and philosophical trends, all are named distinctively, and they should not be reduced to musical performances only.

why most of the *gharanas*, apart from an appraisal of his works, are reducing Tagore songs to a wretched style of representation. The tendency is similar in both *aangik* [physical] and *baachik* [verbal] aspects. Rather, it could be said that a surgical separation of these two is at the core of the modified style. I would like to suggest that this tendency has something to do with the tension between construction and portrayal of a modern self. To explore the question of the ‘self’, let’s examine the use of pronouns in Tagore songs. Not surprisingly, I encountered a very idiosyncratic use of pronouns in them. ‘You’ is at its center, along with ‘me’. One can well argue that this is a feature of *aadhunik gaan* [modern songs] too. Of course! And who is going to claim *Rabindrasangeet* as non-modern? Rather by looking at the early gramophone history, we can rest assured that except for some Lucknow-*gharana Toppa* and *Thumri*,⁵ it was only *Rabindrasangeet* that captured a large portion of the market of the early gramophone products in India, particularly after *Shantiniketan* was established. I prefer to see ‘modern songs’⁶ as a response to, or a successor of, the Lucknow-inspired musical genres that formed the early generation musical products manufactured by the gramophone companies⁷ in India. And of course, there was the pressure of maintaining the length of a musical piece. ‘Modern songs’, including Tagore songs, came to be the right product for an initial long-player.

We must think sensibly, about the ‘you’s in Tagore songs which are dichotomously conditional to the ‘me’s; that they are likely to be pronounced by a male ‘self’; and that the Kolkata

⁵ *Toppa* and *Thumri* are said to be two classical (or semi-classical according to some scholars) musical genres that emerged from Punjab and other areas of Northern India. I referred to Lucknow in a more casual manner to connote Lucknow as a ‘musical hub’ for colonial India. Bengali *Toppa* and *Thumri* largely are said to be influenced by the classical traditions in Lucknow. In the early years of gramophone products, these two genres were among the appropriated ones.

⁶ ‘Modern songs’ (*aadhunik gaan*) is a genre that largely refers to lyric songs, usually 3 to 6 minutes in length and has some serious connection with technological transformations as well. In Bengal, many major poets started writing and composing songs that were recorded in the studios and came out as gramophone-records. In Bangla everyday usage, people and commentators often refer to songs that started being penned and composed during the 1940s, often as teamwork, for the gramophone companies, and not the ones that were penned and composed by the renowned poets like Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Rajanikanta Sen, Atulprasad Sen, Dwijendralal Roy or the like.

⁷ Initially there was a single company HMV (His Masters’ Voice). A British company named ‘The Gramophone Company Limited’ started its Indian operation in 1902 just a few years after beginning its operations in the UK and US.

*Bhodroloks*⁸ then are journeying towards a nuclearization of relationships. I am well aware of the fact that I may sound crude, but the experts are much interested in the categories Rabindranath himself proposed for his songs – love, worship, patriotism and so on. The devotees of *Rabindrasangeet* are always trying to convince the public of how worship songs can be distinguished from and are different to love songs. Yet ordinary people are happy to find these categories intersect at some point. The finding is supported by a popular secularist idea that Rabindranath has combined worldly with eternal love. Worldly love here, unlike the *Qawwali*⁹ or some other trends, is heterosexist.

However, I find the latter idea to be much more sensible. I mean, the pair of ‘you’ and ‘me’ in the genre match with a conjugal desire, whether it is the case of love songs or of worship songs. Of course conjugal desire is not constant. It is ever-changing over the course of time; it is ever-varying amongst social groups. But the urge expressed in those songs has something to do with an imagined pair – a pair that is pleasant, soothing and pure. Even in the patriotic songs Rabindranath usually personified the ‘homeland’ as the mother or as a *Devi* [Goddess], which makes him consistent in his project. For the subjects linked to the mother or *Devi*, it may well be a case of true and ‘pure’ emotions. And following this line, I am also arguing that the ‘self’ in *Rabindrasangeet* is pretty modern. It is because of its [self] integrity, its familial emotions, that its unique nature of being alone and ‘a part of the pair’ altogether comes about.

Yet then, what about *bhakti*¹⁰ in this verse? How do I see it as a crucial element of *Rabindrasangeet*? *Bhakti*, for me, should also be seen in terms of the self. It is the perfect fusion of incessant passivity and self-assured authority, as it appeared to be the case in Tagore songs. I

⁸ ‘*Bhodrolok*’ is a translation of ‘gentlemen’, but connotes a particular social class emergent in the wake of colonial Bengal with the virtues of education, Western taste etc. While this term has long been a praiseworthy adjective for the people belonging to this class, many critics use it to refer to a hegemonic group of people with a colonial mindset.

⁹ Qawwali is a musical form derived from the Sufi tradition of Islam and originated in the Indian subcontinent. For some complicated cultural-political reasons, this form is often popularly perceived as a ‘Pakistani’ genre.

¹⁰ ‘*Bhakti*’ is a Bengali word that can be translated as devotion or reverence or piety, mostly used in religious context. Though not much used in the present day, or used as synonymous to ‘respect’ in social context, yet with an overt sense of status-quo. However, during the formation of the middle-class in undivided Bengal, not only was ‘bhakti’ a regularly used term, but also expressed the grave concerns over its use, as the social and intellectual formation was believed to challenge the older forms of religiosity. Further, with the advent of the gramophone company, ‘devotional songs’ (*bhaktimulok gaan*) were a genre that regularly released albums. Rabindranath Tagore, an icon of the ‘secular’, seems to remain idiosyncratic in this regard. He perhaps was the sole ‘modern’ author whose manifestation of ‘bhakti’ has long been accepted by the modernist-secularist educated middleclass people.

found scrutinizing fusion particularly in the context of the secular age to be the most exciting, because no other ‘modern’ poet of his era enjoyed an open pass, definitely from the urban newly-formed middleclass population, for illuminating *bhakti*. Eventually, I came to be convinced, *Rabindrik bhakti* [devotion as it is implied in Tagore’s pieces] doesn’t contradict the secular self, not even the male-self. A fascinating move would be to notice what I called incessant passivity, about how activities are being organized in the words of those songs. That is to say, the tangible actions taking place and the actors who have performed those are of my concern. We can find numerous events where the material objects, sometimes personified though, are moving about and acting around. In contrast to this, people are waiting, desiring, thinking, feeling and sometimes singing, especially people who are presented in the ‘I’ or ‘me’ form. For example, non-humans are accountable for actions in these lines: “*alokh pother pakhi gelo daki...*” (Birds of invisible route flew past chirping...)¹¹; “*kotha hote samirana, ane nobo jagorono...*” (Unfamiliar gust of wind rejuvenating...)¹²; “*jemon oi ek nimeshe bonya ese. Bhasiye ne jay...*” (...like a sudden flood that runs with its offerings..)¹³; “*kon rater pakhi gai ekaki...*” (Lonesome nocturnal birds sing along...)¹⁴; “*se namkhani neme elo bhuye, kokhon amar lolat dilo chhuye...*” (Then the name came down to earth, and touched me on the forehead...¹⁵). In contrast, humans are accountable for actions in these lines found in the same lyric/poem: “*amar mon kemon kore, ke jane kahar tore...*” (Anguished is my heart – Who is it for – who knows...)¹⁶; “*lage buke sukhe dukhe koto je byatha...*” (Emotions galore for joy misery pain...)¹⁷; “*amare ke nibi bhair sopite chai aponare...*” (Come

¹¹ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 356. Love section, song serial 214. Translated by Anjan Ganguly, found in Geetabitan.com.

¹² Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 281. Love section, song serial 29. Translated by Anjan Ganguly, found in Geetabitan.com.

¹³ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 219. Devotion (*puja*) section, song serial 558. Translated by Tagore himself, found in Geetabitan.com.

¹⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 215. Devotion (*puja*) section, song serial 546. Translated by Anjan Ganguly, found in Geetabitan.com.

¹⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 145. Devotion (*puja*) section, song serial 350. Translated by myself.

¹⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 356.

¹⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 281.

friend, who can free me from bonds of toil...)¹⁸; “*ami kan pete roi, o amar apon hridayhohon dware...*” (I press my ears deep into my own heart...)¹⁹; “*akash jure shuninu oi baje tomari nam sokol tarar majhe...*” (I heard the song of your name, among all the stars of night...)²⁰. The examples are random selections from my end as my target is not to simplify the reading of Rabindranath, but to provide some explanations. ‘Self’ is reduced to a thinker, very sacred and pure, longing for a union of essence. And for sure physic is not there, thus self is predominantly asexual. Passivity here lies in the foundation of the regime of beauty, and is illustrated through non-activities. Whereas, authority lies upon the fact that ‘self’ is prudent in defining beauty, and divinity, and also an architect of that very union ‘he’ is longing for. This very essence of self is at the core of *Bhakti* in *Rabindrasangeet*. So, there is no reason for me to differentiate love songs from other songs.

One may pose the question as to why *Bhakti* is so crucial. As I have already mentioned that it tends towards asexuality and purity, one may very well raise the question about how conjugality ties in with this. Encountering the question, we can make an assumption which is, conjugality contradicts *bhakti*. But I strongly oppose that assumption myself. Rather, I believe that one must concentrate on what is being said about conjugal love in the public discourses. And, also remember the times during which Tagore was writing, which marked the beginning of a new order in relationships.

However, purity and selfhood do matter at the end in these songs. Negating the physical entity constantly, *bhakti* not only suggests the ways of how a newly constructed self should relate to the universe, but also form the ‘core’ of a pair, a heterosexist conjugation of two pure selves. Earlier, I mentioned a possible ‘male’ self in *Rabindrasangeet* because the ‘you’s do have a particular set of meanings. Composition could be seen as a supplementary venture in this path. No wonder that I, an illiterate person in the field of music, find no inconsistency in those. It’s a bit ironic that *bhakti* now, is a style for Tagore himself to be cherished by the people involved in

¹⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 219.

¹⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 215.

²⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 356.

Rabindrasangeet. Since Debabrata Bishwas²¹, the myth of grammar and ‘purity’ is a story told throughout. Performing style is an amusing aspect to look at. Not only *Shantiniketan*, but a number of institutes in Bangladesh and in West Bengal are also preserving what they see as the ‘originality’ of the style. It reminds me of an acute musical drama by Tagore, *Taser Desh*, once again. But that is a different tale.

It is indeed burdensome work to find a similarity between *Taser Desh*²² and Bangladesh, yet not unworthy. Rabindranath was a central motivating force for the nationalists, in West Bengal and in Bangladesh, though, ironically, he himself was a critic of nationalism. In the later years, his songs were turned into the subject of many more social emotional outlets: superior taste, stylistic purity, higher artistic nature, heterosexual yet almost asexual playground etc. He himself became a monument of worship (*bhakti*, again). The ironic part is, he himself was critical, though inconsistent, of reducing a performance into a fossilized type. This is important for me, because, even after a critical engagement with his lyrics, I think there could be some newer interesting explorations to be made in Tagore songs as a musical genre. But the core of *bhakti* makes it dubiously impossible. For example: *bhakti* as a form of regulation of the self that requires one to achieve an idealized level of ‘purity’, and as a mode of adoring Tagore eternally. Hence, if one feels stimulated to do something with these songs, I believe, one would face a serious assault by the *gharanas*. But that hypothesis is not of the utmost priority for me. What makes me curious at this point is: why did some of the middle-class population, being ever regulated, secular and conjugal, have a dislike for these songs? The answer to this question might be pretty simple. *Rabindrik bhakti* comprises a purity unfashionable in an age of fusion-products. It is an age for a more active ‘me’. Otherwise, the project remaining is similar; it might even be the same.

²¹ Debabrata Bishwas (1911 – 1980) was a prominent Tagore singer who was born in then East Bengal, and later spent his professional life mostly in Kolkata. He was an active member of Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), a left-leaning organization that worked for Indian freedom. But he was mostly known for his musical talent. Though he reached unparalleled popularity for his Tagore songs, he was labelled as a ‘non-grammatical’ by the Tagore gurus. In my boyhood, I was often confused as to whether I should follow his performance style or that of Ashoketaru Banerjee, another maestro Tagore singer.

²² Tagore, R. 1933. *Taser Desh*. Kolkata: Visva-bharati.

A musical play by Rabindranath Tagore. Here I refer to its acute satirical nature to the governance structure of an imagined land ruled by the playing cards.

Notes

I would like to thank Carmen Blyth for her continuous encouragement and editorial advices since we got to know each other on cyberspace one year back. This piece was written long back. I would have never looked for this in my computer had she not been there. I also would like to thank to Tanmoy Pal Antu, an undergrad student, who made it readable after I had found it on my computer and sent it to Carmen.

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