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Melodies of Revolution – Musical Legacy of Bengal in India's Freedom Struggle

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Abstract

The musical heritage of Bengal played a transformative role in mobilising public consciousness during India's freedom struggle. Rooted in the Bengal Renaissance and nourished by poets, composers, and performing artists, patriotic songs became instruments of awakening, unity, and resistance against British colonial rule. This article presents a detailed account of the contributions of prominent Bengali musicians, including Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Dwijendralal Ray, Atul Prasad Sen, Rajanikanta Sen, Charan Kobi Mukund Das and others. Their compositions inspired nationalist sentiment across India. The themes were drawn from classical, folk, vaishnavite, and kirtan traditions, creating a unique musical language of revolution. The discussion also highlights thematic elements of sacrifice, self-reliance, Swadeshi, and cultural pride embedded in their songs. Collectively, these artistic contributions significantly shaped socio-political consciousness and strengthened the national movement.

Keywords: Bengal musicians; Patriotic songs; Swadeshi movement; Rabindra Sangeet; Nazrul Geeti; Indian freedom struggle

1. Introduction

Indeed, the Indian subcontinent is well aware of the significant contribution of people from Bengal to the Freedom Movement of India. Bengal, with its rich cultural heritage and tradition, has always been at the forefront of various movements, including the struggle for independence. The people of Bengal have a deep-rooted connection with art in all its forms. From literature to music, from painting to theatre, Bengal has produced numerous luminaries who have left an indelible mark on the world stage. This innate talent for artistic expression has played a crucial role in shaping the socio-political landscape of the region. The Bengal Renaissance of the 19th and early 20th centuries saw a flowering of ideas and creativity, with visionaries like Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate, Pt. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Sri Dwijendralal Ray, Sri Atul Prasad Sen, Sri Rajanikanto Sen, Kazi Nazrul Islam and many others leading the way in literature, art, education, and social reform.

During the Freedom Movement, Bengal played a pivotal role in mobilizing the masses and raising awareness about the need for independence from British rule. Artists, writers, poets, and musicians from Bengal used their creative platforms to inspire, educate, and unite people in the struggle for freedom. From stirring patriotic songs and poems to thought-provoking literature and powerful visual art, the people of Bengal employed various artistic mediums to convey their aspirations and ideals. Their contributions not only galvanized the people of Bengal but also resonated across the country, fueling the flames of nationalism and paving the way for India's eventual independence in 1947.

Overall, the talent and creativity of the people of Bengal have not only enriched the cultural tapestry of the Indian subcontinent but have also played a crucial role in shaping its history, particularly during the tumultuous period of the Freedom Movement. Their legacy continues to inspire generations, serving as a reminder of the enduring power of art

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in driving social and political change. Certainly, Bengal has been a powerhouse of artistic and musical talent throughout history, especially during the Indian Freedom Movement.

Let us read about some notable musicians from Bengal who contributed significantly to the movement through their compositions and expressions of patriotism

2. The legendary composers and their compositions

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941): The Nobel laureate and bard was an iconic figure in Bengali culture and literature, later internationally acclaimed by poets and authors worldwide. Tagore was also a prolific composer and musician. He is best known for his creation of Rabindra Sangeet, a genre of songs that merges elements of classical music with folk influences. His compositions are still widely revered in Bengal and beyond. One of the most influential figures in Indian history, Tagore's songs and poetry inspired millions during the independence movement. His composition "*Jana Gana Mana*" became the national anthem of India, and "*Amar Shonar Bangla*" is the national anthem of Bangladesh. Tagore's works emphasized the spirit of nationalism and freedom.

Jôdi Tor Dak Shune Keu Na Ashe Tôbe Ekla Chôlo Re ----This Bengali patriotic song written by Rabindranath Tagore in 1905 was originally titled as "Ekla", published in the September 1905 issue of the '*Bhandar*' magazine. Its origins in Vaishnavite tradition and its subsequent incorporation into Tagore's Gitabitan highlight its deep cultural and spiritual roots. It was based and influenced by the compositions in Vaishnavite culture - *Harinaam Diye Jagat Matale* and *Amar Ekla Nitai Re*, influenced by the philosophy of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. The message of perseverance and self-reliance conveyed in the song has resonated with people across generations and has been particularly influential in various sociopolitical movements. Its association with Mahatma Gandhi further emphasizes its importance as a source of inspiration for leaders and activists striving for change."

O aamar desher maati, tomar pare thekai maatha ---This song was written in the support for the 'Banga Bhango Rodh' movement in 1906. It expresses deep reverence and love for the soil of one's country, urging listeners to protect and cherish their homeland.

Ebaar tor mora gaange baan esechhe joy maa bole bhaasa tori.
Ore re ore maajhi kothay maajhi praanpane bhaai daak de aaji

This song was published in 1905 in the magazine *Bhandar*. The song has its roots in Saari gaan (a native song of Bengal) '*Mon Maajhi Samal Samal*'. The metaphor of sailing boats in the dead flow of the river, despite the demotivation and oppression caused by British colonial rule, vividly captures the spirit of perseverance and determination encouraged by Tagore in the song. By calling upon the boatman to take the oars and move forward with confidence, Tagore effectively urges individuals to overcome their fears and obstacles, symbolically navigating through the challenges of their time.

Maa ki tui parer dwaare paatthabi tor gharer chele?
Taara je kaure hela, maare dhela, bhikkha jhuli dekhte pele.
Korechhi maatha nichu, cholechhi jaahar pichhu, Jodi ba dey se kichhu abohele

This composition gives a very important message of dignity. It is asking the mother "Will you send your children to the doors of invaders and foreigners to beg? This composition seems to convey a poignant message about the indignities that people of the country had to face under the British regime. The lines depict a scenario where children are subjected to humiliation, violence, and exploitation while begging. The narrator expresses concern about the physical and emotional toll this takes on the children, subjecting them to harmful situations and undignified circumstances.

There are numerous such compositions in *Gitabitan* – The songs that he composed are sung as Rabindra Sangeet. There are 2232 songs compiled in this book of songs 'Gitabitan' The poet has divided the songs he wrote in sections / Parjaye

The six major sections are

- Puja (worship),
- Prem (love),
- Prakriti (seasons),
- Swadesh (patriotism),

- Aanushthanik (occasion-specific),
- Bichitro (miscellaneous)

The *Swadesh* section entirely based on patriotism has around 44 songs. Tagore's ability to encapsulate complex socio-political sentiments within his lyrical compositions, makes his work both timeless and deeply resonant with the struggles of the people.

Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976): Often referred to as the "Rebel Poet" of Bengal, Nazrul Islam was a versatile musician, poet, and composer. He is known for his fiery poetry and revolutionary songs that addressed social and political issues. His compositions encompass various genres, including classical, folk, and modern music. His poems and songs celebrated the spirit of rebellion and inspired the freedom fighters. Nazrul's compositions like "*Bidrohi*" (The Rebel) and "*Durgomo Giri Kantar Moru*" became anthems of resistance. These are poems which have been sung in rhythm. Between 1928 and 1935, he published 10 volumes of Nazrul Geeti containing 800 songs, of which more than 600 were based on classical ragas. Almost 100 were folk tunes based on kirtans, and some 30 were patriotic songs. Until he fell ill in 1941, Nazrul Islam composed more than 2,600 songs. *Karar oi lauhokapat bhenge fail karrey lopat* was composed in 1921 when Desh Bandhu Chittaranjan das was arrested by the Britishers. The song says that these iron pillars of prison, Break them from the stains of blood.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) was a renowned Bengali novelist, poet, and composer who played a pivotal role in shaping Bengali literature and culture during the 19th century. While Bankim Chandra is best known for his literary works, particularly his novels such as "Anandamath" and "Durgeshnandini," he also contributed to the realm of music. He composed several devotional songs and hymns, some of which are still popular in Bengal. One of his most famous compositions is "Vande Mataram," written in 1875 in the Sanskrit language. This was included in his novel *Anandamath* in 1882." The music was composed by Rabindranath Thakur. The song later became a rallying cry for the Indian independence movement and was eventually adopted as the national song of India. Though his primary focus was on literature, his musical contributions, particularly through "*Vande Mataram*," hold immense cultural and historical significance in Bengal and beyond. The Government of India is celebrating 150 years of this composition nationwide.

Dwijendra Lal Ray (1863-1913): A renowned composer, poet, and playwright, D.L.Ray was instrumental in popularizing nationalist sentiments through his compositions. He is credited with creating around 500 compositions. A knowledgeable musician indeed, his compositions have a flair of Classical Khyal and Dhrupad along with the western style. Among them the patriotic songs that inspired the freedom movement in Bengal were very popular and are sung even in the present times. He was a poet, playwright, and musician and his songs are compiled in *Dwijendrageeti samagra*. Some of his compositions are;

Dhonno Dhanye Pushpe Bhara is a famous Bengali patriotic song composed by Dwijendralal Ray. It is indeed a celebration of the motherland, extolling the beauty and uniqueness of various natural elements like the sun, moon, flowers, birds, water, and earth. The song also emphasizes the unparalleled relationships found within families, such as the bond between mother and child, siblings, and other family ties, portraying them as extraordinary and unparalleled, not found anywhere else in the world. Overall, "Dhonno Dhanye Pushpe Bhara" serves as a powerful tribute to the beauty of nature and the special bonds within families, encapsulating a deep sense of patriotism and love for the motherland.

Jedin Sunil Jaladhi hoite – The description evokes a sense of awe and wonder at the birth or emergence of the land from a pristine, crystal-clear water body. The deep emotional connection and reverence felt by its inhabitants implies that from the very moment of its inception, there was a strong sense of purpose, joy, and loyalty directed towards the land, signifying a collective bond and commitment to its prosperity and well-being. Overall, the composition paints a vivid picture of a remarkable and auspicious event, imbued with feelings of admiration and dedication towards the homeland.

Banga aamaar, Janani Aamaar, Dhaatri aamar, aamar desh – is another iconic Bengali patriotic song, also composed by Dwijendralal Ray (D.L. Roy). This song exudes a deep sense of pride and reverence for the motherland, emphasizing its glorious heritage and historical significance. The lyrics highlight the birthplaces of revered figures like Gautam Buddha, Ashoka, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, underscoring the rich cultural and spiritual legacy of the land. It mentions the expansive boundaries of the country, stretching from Gandhara to Sri Lanka and from Mewar to the oceans, portraying the vast and diverse expanse of the nation. Despite any challenges or setbacks faced, the song asserts that such a revered and historically significant motherland cannot remain downtrodden. It expresses the sentiment that the nation must

rise again, buoyed by the collective love and loyalty of its people. Ultimately, it declares the land as not just a geographical entity but as the birthplace and cherished homeland of every citizen.

Atul Prasad Sen – (1871–1934) was a renowned Bengali poet, lyricist, and composer from the Indian subcontinent. He was born in Dhaka, which was then a part of British India and is now the capital of Bangladesh. Atul Prasad Sen was one of the pioneers of modern Bengali music and literature.

"Otho Go Bharat Lakkhi" is a famous patriotic song written by Atul Prasad Sen. It calls upon the people of India (Bharat) to wake up and rise with the blessings of the goddess Lakshmi, the deity of wealth and prosperity. The song is imbued with a sense of national pride and invokes the spirit of unity and strength among the people. It is a call to action, urging the citizens to work towards the progress and prosperity of the nation. The lyrics inspire a sense of duty and responsibility towards the motherland, portraying India as a land of opportunity and abundance.

"O Amar Desher Mati" is another popular patriotic song by Atul Prasad Sen. This song is a heartfelt tribute to the land of Bengal (and by extension, India), expressing deep reverence and love for the soil of the motherland. The lyrics evoke a sense of nostalgia and pride, celebrating the beauty, richness, and cultural heritage of the land. The song also reflects a sense of belonging and attachment to one's homeland, portraying it as a source of inspiration and strength. "O Amar Desher Mati" is often sung on occasions of national significance and is cherished by Bengalis and Indians alike for its patriotic sentiment and emotional resonance.

"Mora Jibon Naukay Dubey Jaye": In this song, Sen laments the plight of the country and calls for unity and struggle against oppression and injustice.

"Bhangar bhangar eshechhe go": This song depicts the struggle of the masses against exploitation and oppression, urging them to rise and fight for their rights.

"Amar Mati Amar Jiban": Sen expresses his attachment to the land of Bengal, declaring it as his life and soul, and calls upon others to protect and cherish their homeland.

"Hao dharamate dheer hao kaurometey beer hao unnatosheer naahi bhay" - These lines reflect a call to courage and righteousness, urging individuals to stand firm against evil and injustice. It has a beautiful line *"nana bhasha nana maut nana poridhaan , bibidher majhe daikho milon mahan"* "Different languages, different customs, different attires, In the midst of diversity, behold the great unity."

This line celebrates the rich cultural tapestry of India, where people from diverse backgrounds coexist harmoniously despite their differences in language, customs, and attire. It highlights the beauty of unity in diversity, suggesting that despite the multitude of languages, traditions, and clothing styles, there is an underlying unity that binds the people of India together.

Baulo baulo baulo shabey satobina benurabey bharat aabar jagat shabhaye shreshto aashon laube – This is a song of optimism where the composer encourages the people of the country to strive for greatness and positive change so that India can regain its past glory and be revered once again for its rich cultural heritage and achievements

While Atul Prasad Sen may not be as widely known for his patriotic compositions as some other poets and lyricists of his time, his contributions to the genre reflect his deep-rooted love for his country and his desire for social and political change. His compositions were deeply influenced by the Bengal Renaissance, a cultural and intellectual movement in Bengal during the 19th and early 20th centuries. He was a contemporary of other luminaries such as Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, both of whom greatly influenced his work.

Rajani Kanto Sen (1865 -1910) – Rajani Kanto Sen was indeed a prominent figure in the cultural and musical landscape of Bengal during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Born in Pabna (now in Bangladesh), he was deeply immersed in various cultural activities from an early age. His proficiency in Sanskrit and his passion for music, literature, and theater set the stage for his multifaceted artistic endeavours. Apart from his creative pursuits, Rajani Kanto Sen also followed in his father's footsteps by practising law in Rajshahi, which is now part of Bangladesh. However, it was his contributions to music and poetry that left a lasting impact, especially during the freedom movement against British colonial rule.

*Mayer dewa mota kapod mathaye tule nerey bhai
Deen dukhini maa je toder taar beshi aar shaddho nai*

The above song became immensely popular during the struggle for independence. The lyrics resonated deeply with the people, urging them to accept the limitations of their motherland's resources and to unite in their efforts to overcome adversity. The line "Deen dukhini maa je toder taar beshi aar shaddho nai" underscores the idea that the motherland can provide only so much in terms of material wealth, but its true strength lies in the resilience and faith of its people. It was a rallying cry for solidarity and perseverance in the face of challenges. Rajani Kanto Sen's compositions inspired a sense of national identity and unity, galvanizing the masses to strive for freedom and progress.

Aaye chhutey bhai Hindu Musolmaan Oi dekho jhorche mayer du nayan

Aaj ek kore ney sandhya namaz mishiye dey aaj Veda Quran

This song is a message to the people of our country to unite and say prayers by merging the holy books. It says the mother has tears in eyes seeing the unnecessary conflict .

Chaarani Kobi Mukund Das – “The legendary ballad who played a unique role in the freedom movement in Bengal through his songs and plays, Charankavi Mukunda Das, alias Jogeshwar Datta, was born of a shopkeeper father (Gurudayal Dey) in the Banari village of Dhaka; later shifted to Barishal. In 1902, he submitted himself to saint Haribolananda who renamed him Mukundadas. In 1906, the great nationalist leader of Barisal, Aswini Kumar Datta encouraged him to dedicate his life to the service of the motherland. Mukunda Das thus started to preach the objectives of the Swadeshi movement through his songs and plays among the villages. His other metaphoric composition during the non-cooperation movement was that *all the stocks of our paddy were eaten away by white rats*, created so much sensation in rural Bengal that the British administration put him in jail for three years; and imposed heavy penalties on him that cost him his family shop too.

Some of the popular songs of the roaming bard or Charan Kobi Mukund Das are

- *Chere dao reshmi choodi bango naari aar poro na* - His song calling upon the Bengali ladies not to use imported glass bangles and clothes became a universal tune during the boycott agitation; for which he was arrested and later released on bail in 1908.
- *Agnimoyi Mayer cheley aagun niye khelbe tara* – The son of Shakti will play with fire now as is the need of the hour
- *Baan eshechey maura gange khulte haube nao tomra ekhono ghumao* – He awakens the people from their sleep as he says there is flood and the waters are rushing in to engulf you.
- *Bande Mataram – bole nachon shakole kripan loiya haathe*

Pitambar das – His composition "Ekbar Biday De Ma Ghure Ashi" was written to mourn the hanging of Khudiram Bose by the British Government. Khudiram Bose was a young revolutionary who was hanged by the British government for his involvement in the Muzaffarpur Conspiracy of 1908. The song "Ekbar Biday De Ma Ghure Ashi" captures the poignant moment when Khudiram Bose bids farewell to his mother before his execution. It is a deeply emotional and moving composition that reflects the sacrifice and courage of Bose and resonates with the struggles of Bengalis during the colonial era. It also captures the emotions of millions of Bengalis who were displaced during the Partition of Bengal.

Melodies in INA and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945) was a prominent Indian nationalist leader who played a crucial role in India's struggle for independence from British rule. While Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was not primarily known as a composer of songs. But there are several songs associated with him and the Indian National Army (INA), which he founded during World War II to fight against British rule. One of the most famous songs associated with Netaji and the INA is "*Kadam Kadam Badhaye Ja*," composed by Ram Singh Thakuri, with lyrics by Pt. Vanshidhar Shukla. This song served as the marching song of the INA and became synonymous with their spirit of sacrifice and dedication to the cause of Indian independence. Another song similar to Jana Gana Mana Adhinayak Jaya Hey "*Sab Sukh Chayan ki barkha barsey*" was also penned by the officers of INA who dreamt of forming a govt in India and had decided that this song would be the national anthem of India .

The musicians from Bengal used their art to instill a sense of patriotism and defiance against colonial rule, contributing significantly to the cultural fabric of the independence movement in India.

3. Conclusion

The musicians of Bengal played an instrumental role in inspiring nationalist sentiment and strengthening India's freedom struggle. Through patriotic compositions rooted in diverse musical traditions, they awakened a collective

consciousness that fueled the resistance against colonial rule. Their music continues to shape cultural identity and stands as a powerful reminder of the role of art in social and political transformation.

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