

The Rose of the Revolution: Songs of Dissent during the Citizenship Amendment Act Protests

Rebanta Gupta, Ex-Postgraduate Student, Department of English, Presidency University (Kolkata).

Address: 51/1J P.G.H. Shah Road, Jadavpur, Kolkata-700032, West Bengal.

Abstract:

The paper tries to discuss the role of songs in the India-wide protest movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019-2020. The paper tries to analyze how different kinds of songs were used by the protesters from different geographical and cultural arenas to articulate their dissent against governmental despotism, and how some of these songs, in a political context, underwent the processes of recontextualization and reinterpretation. Moreover, it also traces the advent of indigenous songs of dissent and tries to answer whether these songs could be regarded as examples of sonic literature, which tries to bridge the gulf between linguistic concreteness and musical abstraction.

Keywords: Citizenship Amendment Act, *Hum Dekhenge*, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Moushumi Bhowmik, Assam.

INTRODUCTION:

Non-conformism is one of the primordial traits of humans; they have always tried to disintegrate the iron fist of hegemony to articulate their voices of dissent. In the arena of power relations, each voice tries to consolidate its position by subverting the power hierarchy through the establishment of new discourses, and the word “protest” encapsulates this spirit of subversion, disavowal, and non-conformism. A man’s consciousness of the denudation of his fundamental rights, along with his spirit of independence and liberty are the ingredients that fuel anti-establishment protests. Literature is an expression of that dissentient voice, which codifies the dissenters’ demands and disgruntlement, and also exposes the contradictions embedded in the fabric of the protest; “literary protest is not one-dimensional, rather it is multi-dimensional in the sense that it upholds certain values in a specific environment and is concerned more with the ironies, contradictions, and paradoxes inherent in the expression of protest” (Mohan 94). Literature manifests itself in different forms, especially in the form of song or lyric, which can express the inexpressible by navigating the gap between linguistic concreteness and musical abstraction. This paper would try to discuss how songs emerged as a literature of protest, during the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests, which sent tremors across India between December 2019 and March 2020. Issues like recontextualization, reinterpretation, reproduction, and germination of a gamut of songs targeted against the

alleged exclusionary politics of the Government of India will be highlighted in this paper.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROTEST:

The Citizen (Amendment) Act, 2019 was passed by the Indian Parliament on December 11, 2019, which amended the Citizenship Act, 1955. It provided the persecuted religious minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan with access to Indian citizenship; Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, Sikhs, and Christians, who arrived in India before December 2014 had access to the CAA provisions, but the Muslims were deemed ineligible. For the first time in independent India, religion had been used as a criterion for citizenship, and the Indian Government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), came under attack by the critics, who feared that CAA, in conjunction with the National Register of Citizens (NRC), would be employed to render the Muslims stateless. The amendment was criticized on the ground of religious discrimination, and protests erupted across the nation, starting in Assam, which feared demographic misbalance and political turmoil’s due to the act. Premier educational institutions of the country, like Jamia Millia Islamia, Aligarh Muslim University, and Jawaharlal Nehru University became the epicentres of protest against the act’s exclusionary provisions. Political rallies, inflammation and destruction of public and private property, and civil unrest triggered thousands of arrests and resulted in nearly twenty-seven deaths before the movement lost momentum due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

HUM DEKHENGE: THE TRANSNATIONAL TUNE

The CAA protests witnessed the explosion of these lines- *Hum Dekhenge, Laazim Hai Ki Hum Bhi Dekhenge* (“We shall see, it is inevitable that we too shall see”). From New Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University to the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, this Urdu *nazm* penned by the legendary Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz ignited the sparks of the anti-establishment movement. The song, a part of Faiz’s anthology *Mere Dil, Mere Musafir*, had garnered a cult following, and eventually emerged as a protest song against the Pakistani President Zia-ul-Haq’s oppressive regime. The legendary songstress Iqbal Bano’s rendition of the song at the Alhamra Arts Council, on 13 February 1986, immortalized Faiz’s creation. It is notable for employing Islamic imagery to subvert the regime’s fundamentalist interpretations of the Islamic dictum, and “*Qayamat*, the

Day of Reckoning is transformed into the Day of Revolution, wherein Zia's military government will be ousted by the people and democracy will be re-installed" (Wikipedia). India, Pakistan's arch-nemesis, used this song to articulate dissent during the CAA protests quite ironically; the citizens challenged the democratic backsliding initiated by the Narendra Modi Government through this song. Despite hostility on diplomatic levels between the two countries, the protracted use of *Hum Dekhenge* as a political weapon underscored its transnational appeal; it is reminiscent of the fact that art transgresses politico-geographical boundaries to encapsulate the unheard voices. The song soon invited controversy for its "anti-Hindu" sentiments and its lavish use of Islamic imagery, even IIT Kanpur instituted a probe to scan the song's language after it was alleged that it fostered anti-India sentiments. Despite this, its popularity increased manifold, and it was translated into several Indian languages. The Islamic *qayamat*, in the Indian context, became the day of the revolution, as the students across the country raised the slogan of *Azadi* or freedom from governmental despotism. Zia's regime had subverted Islamic ideology for gaining political mileage, and the BJP-led government allegedly mirrored the same tendency, through its use of the pernicious Hindutva politics of exclusion and jingoism, and *Hum Dekhenge* lambasted both of these regimes. This transnational song underwent the process of recontextualization and emerged as the signifier for the students' protests. When the police spearheaded a crackdown on the students of New Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia, protesters recited lines from this song as a symbolic move against oppression. Faiz's daughter Saleema Hashmi termed the controversy around the song as "funny" and "irrelevant," and underscored its revolutionary aspects, "Faiz's poetry gave voice and words to those who hated him. I believe poetry serves its purpose when it becomes the voice of those who cannot find for themselves" (qtd. in Ameer).

After the communal tensions had reached the zenith following the Babri Masjid destruction in 1992, musicians and artists started exploring different musical forms which were capable of addressing the hostile Indian political climate. Investigations into the matters of heritage, tradition, religion, and nationalism, helped them return to the erstwhile musical repertoires and revisit the literary legacy of the Indian and Pakistani poets like Rabindranath Tagore and Faiz Ahmed Faiz: "A vast corpus of such music came to address and re-constellate questions of nation, identity, and politics in a refreshing manner, challenging right-wing cultural assertions frontally, and also shaping popular music-listening cultures in the three countries of the subcontinent through providing contemporary interpretations" (Damodaran). *Hum Dekhenge*'s resurgence in a new context seems to be a continuation of that praxis, as it heralded the end of authoritarianism-*Sab Taaj Uchhale Jaayenge, Sab Takht*

Giraaye Jaayenge ("The crowns will be tossed/the thrones will be toppled").

RECONTEXTUALIZATION AND REINTERPRETATION OF SONGS:

The CAA protests witnessed changes in the semantic dimensions of some songs, as they were recontextualized and reinterpreted in a new light, even songs without any political connotations were interpreted from the inside of the political paradigms. From New Delhi's Shaheen Baghto Kolkata's Park Circus Ground, the nerve centers of the protest witnessed artistic mutations of traditional songs, as Monobina Gupta writes for *The Wire*:

"At the ongoing Park Circus protest in Kolkata, a young girl was working on a poster with the line-*Amaar ei deshetei jonmo jaano ei deshetei mori* written on it. It means 'this is the land where I was born, let this be the land where I will die'. The lines are from Dwijendralal Roy's famous song *Dhano dhanyo pushpo bhora*...It is an extraordinary moment when nationalistic or devotional songs – as they are usually defined – have mutated into the music of resistance"

Gupta also talks about Moushumi Bhowmik, the celebrated Bengali musician, describing the ways through which songs have coalesced for ages in the collective unconscious of the public before they resurface organically after aural memories are triggered by certain situations. Almost three decades ago, she had written the song -*Amar Maayer Mukhe Chhaya Ghaniyechhe* ("Shadow has gathered on my mother's face"), which was a Bengali transcreation of the classic Phillip More song- "All the weary mothers of the earth shall finally rest." Though the song's context had been different, Moushumi reinterpreted it, thinking about the women protesters of the movement- "I thought of all the mothers sitting out there. And how we think of the land as the mother. The sense of belonging we have with the land" (qt. in Gupta).

Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram, the devotional *bhajan* popularized by Mahatma Gandhi, was translated into a song of resistance by the Park Circus dissenters. Though its Hindu undertone had been panned by some, the song embodied the spirit of secularism and multiculturalism that the Indian constitution celebrates, which is reflected by the line *Ishwar Allah Tero Naam Sabko Sanmati De Bhagwan* ("God Almighty, whose names are *Ishwar* and *Allah*, give everyone good sense"). Hinduism here mingles with Islam and provides resistance against discriminatory politics. The recontextualization process was also colored with satire, when the New Delhi protesters turned the famous Bollywood song *Woh Chali* into *Modi Ji, Modi Ji, Dekho Democracy Ki Tumne, Aisi-Taisi Kardi* ("See, Mr. Modi, you've jeopardized our democracy"). This jibe at Prime Minister Narendra Modi was charged with both ludicrousness and anguish of non-

conformism. Moreover, with their perennial freshness and universal appeal, “We Shall Overcome” and “Bella Ciao” emerged as anthems of anti-Fascism and revolution during the CAA protests, and connected the movement to the larger network of global anti-establishment movements.

THE FIERY INCUBATOR

The protests against CAA also gave birth to numerous caustic songs. Varun Grover, the accomplished comedian, and lyricist penned *Hum Kagaaz Nahi Dikhaenge* (“We will not show our papers”) with inspiration from the lyricist Rahat Indori and the Bengali slogans chanted at the rallies. The poem, which was eventually set to tune and rendered by Rahul Ram, was dubbed the anti-CAA anthem by the netizens, and it was lauded by politicians like Shashi Tharoor and Sitaram Yechury. It launched a vitriolic attack against the CAA and articulated Varun's refusal to comply with the act which demanded identity documents during the NRC: “You blind us with tear gas, you poison our waters/ That our love will sweeten, and we'll drink it all in a go” (@varungrover). Varun gave the public *carte blanche* to modify and recreate the song freely. The song marked a paradigm shift in Varun's artistic career; he had hitherto garnered fame as a lyricist of romantic chartbuster songs and received the National Award for Best Lyricist in 2015. But he relinquished his previous persona to launch a scathing attack against the establishment, which highlighted an unexplored side of his literary talent, “He ended the piece by referencing IIT Kanpur's infamous decision to investigate Faiz's poem *Hum Dekhenge*. And then talked about how love and persistence might one day convince the opposers to side with the protesters” (Magan).

While the rest of India protested against the exclusion of the Muslims, Assam condemned CAA on the ground that it might facilitate the influx of foreigners and thereby destabilize the Assamese culture, language, and identity. Creative resistance came in the form of songs and poems. The eminent writer Eli Ahmed observed, “When something touches the heart of creative people it leads them to express it in their way through their medium. Right now due to Centre imposing CAA despite people's protests, Assam is seeing such creative outburst” (qt. in Parashar). Composer Bipin Chawdhary's songs *Nagarikotwo Sangsudhoni Bidheyok Khon Nelage* (“We oppose CAA”) and *Jaatir Maatir Gaan* (“Song of the nation and the soil”) rose to popularity among protesters. Manas Robin's *Badane Anile Mann* compared “the move to provide citizenship to Hindu Bangladeshis (among others) through CAA to the 19th-century invasions of Assam by the Burmese army with the aid of Badan Chandra Barphukan, a leading Ahom chief who betrayed the Ahom kingdom” (Parashar). The act, therefore, emerged as a continuation of an erstwhile historical blunder, and it facilitated a comparative study between the political predicaments of the past and the present.

Rap also emerged as a musical-literary form of protest. Mumbai's hip-hop group Swadeshi's song *Kranti Havi* (“We need a revolution”), featuring the rapper Delhi Sultanate, cheered Chandrasekhar Azad, the Bhim Army chief, who played a pivotal role in resistance during the Delhi protests. After the Delhi riots, the song *Andolan*, released by Naqaab 47 and Shoals, questioned incivility and inhumanity under the overwhelming presence of religious fundamentalism, besides, “their single ‘Insaaniyat’ questions the humanity of the human race, which should be above religious identity but isn't” (Chaudhuri). The CAA protests, therefore, became a fiery incubator for songs of resistance; the hours of turmoil triggered the creative faculty of the dissenters' brains like never before.

CONCLUSION

In his book *Music at Night*, Aldous Huxley observes, “After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music” (16). The modern world, which celebrates fragmentation, dissociation of senses, alienation, and linguistic breakdown, leaves out no space for articulating dissent; the language seems to be inefficient to disseminate the ideas of non-conformity. Silence might reverberate with anti-establishment anguish, but it ultimately symbolizes conformity and obsequiousness. Music, with its larger semantic bandwidth, comes as the last resort, which mingles with lyrics to capture the dissentient mood, and it finally emerges as the sonic literature of protest, which hovers between the abstract and the symbolic levels. Virginia Woolf, in her seminal essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” addresses the crisis of modernity, “...we must reconcile ourselves to a season of failures and fragments. We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth, the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition” (336). Only music can efficiently navigate the space between the fragments of reality, and it can transcend that “exhausted and chaotic condition” to give an unadulterated picture of the reality and the inexpressible emotions of the humans.

The CAA protest songs not only voiced dissent but also upheld the religious pluralism of India and its multicultural fabric. The protesters offered roses to the armed policemen as a symbolic move of non-violence against the state atrocities, as Sheetal Sathe, the *prima donna* of the Kabir Kala Manch of Pune, sang, “referencing the rose mentioned above: Angrezon se lade the hum, kaun yeh desi sahab hai/ Azadi hamaara khwaab hai, yeh gulab nahin inquilaab hai (We had fought against the British, who is this desi White Man/ Azadi is our dream, this rose is the revolution)” (Damodaran). The fight, therefore, was even interpreted as a continuation of the struggle against the erstwhile colonizers, and the songs emerged as the landmarks of the protests. Though the movement against the CAA has

been criticized by different political camps, chiefly for the absence of any solid ideological ground that could legitimize the mass mobilization, and the trail of violence and destruction it left behind, the overwhelming impact of this movement, and the primacy of songs in the ecosystem of the protest cannot be undermined at any cost.

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