

## DOES REAL ESTATE EVER LISTEN TO MEGH-MALHAR? : REFLECTIONS OF ECO-SOCIOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT OF KOLKATA IN SELECTED SONGS OF KABIR SUMAN

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### Abstract

*National Award winning composer-lyricist-artiste Kabir Suman carries the city of Kolkata in him – in the changing faces of physical environment of the known lanes and localities, the language of protests against the socio-political issues of the city, and the malignance of encroaching urbanization that destroys the unadulterated existence of its inhabitants. Suman's songs reverberate consistently the very urbane environment, providing mirror images of the times and the space he and his audience are in. On one hand, his songs relay a lifeless Kolkata, lying degenerated in filth across its streets and alleys, rivers, skyline and individual existences, and ventilate his helpless angst at the plight of his beloved city. On the other hand, he raises his voice against the ideological, cultural and socio-economic-political environment of this metropolis that continuously enmesh its inhabitants in the urban evils like destruction of Nature, lack of physical space, loss of idyllic childhood, stratification of the society in different economic classes, or even an upsurge of crimes against women. In all this, however, Suman never gives up, as he keeps giving his audience a jolt so that they come out of their post-modern passivity and indifference, and react against the issues that determine the domain of their sustenance. My paper proposes to investigate the eco-sociological elements that define the environment of Kolkata as found in innumerable songs of Kabir Suman, and reflect on the problematic construct of urbanity and urbanization that play decisive roles in delineating the ambit and nature of the contemporary urban space.*

**KeyWords:** Natural Environment, Sociological Environment, Protest Songs, Urban Space, Urbanization, Kolkata.

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Listen, O friend, listen  
To the fables of this lifeless city  
Where each brick and iron cage  
Hide heart-rending tales... [My Translation]  
- Bimalchandra Ghosh.

The angst and pain that urban life gives birth to – its materialism and lifelessness – were penned by lyricists of Bengali modern songs since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bengali songs had started reflecting the portraits of the city-in-making – Kolkata (then, Calcutta), from all its possible perspectives – not only its ‘charming chaos’, but its addiction and hypnotic attraction for its inhabitants, too: Bhupen Hazarika’s ‘*E shohor pranto*’ (The margins of this city – My Translation) calls Calcutta a ‘*mrito nagari*’ – a lifeless city, while simultaneously admitting its beauty and its capacity to generate smiles in its citizens. It is in continuum of this journey from the new found urbane existence of the Calcuttans, to the post-modern acceptance of the consequences of urbanisation that Kabir Suman’s (then, Suman Chattopadhyay) songs gained popularity in Kolkata since the early 1990s. The reason why Suman’s songs grew to be a lyrical portrait of the environment of Kolkata is that, Suman captures contemporaneity – an element that his predecessors had failed to do in their creations continuously throughout the last few decades. And this he does by talking of Kolkata and talking with Kolkata of our times – the metropolis which has lost its poetry in its being, perhaps, and projects the city as it is – in all its sunshine and shadows. The pulse of Kolkata – its natural and constructed physical space, its stratification of economy as reflected among its inhabitants, its political slogans that reverberate in the air of the city – Suman

conceives it all and sets tune to this lifelike yet lifeless Kolkata whom he calls his beloved.

French critic and historian Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893) in his *Histoire De La Litterature Anglaise* (1863) posited the triad concepts of Race, Milieu and Moment wherein every reality – psychological, historical or esthetic and any work of art would be governed by these three conditioning factors. ‘Race’ connotes the inherited temperament or the collective cultural dispositions that rule an individual consciously or unconsciously; ‘Milieu’ refers to the individual circumstances or the environment that modify the inherited cultural temperament of the race; and ‘Moment’ addresses the accumulated experiences which draws the writer’s work together. This theory of Taine hence talks about a contextual study of a work of art and aims to establish a scientific approach towards the study of literature through the investigations of what goes into the ‘making’ of the individual who creates a particular piece of art. Suman’s songs are a reflection of his times, his environment – both physical and psychological – and an accumulation of his experiences past and present that defines his songs. Metropolitan life has this peculiar habit of creating a bubble around itself and thriving in that illusory existence as if nothing bleak exists; Suman wanted to burst this bubble with his jolt of reality through his songs. Suman’s arrival in the space of Bengali music in 1992 is co-incidentally marked by perhaps the greatest incident of the decade – the fall of the Soviet Union on 26 December 1991. His political orientation though talks of Communism, yet he displays a distrust and disgust with the institutionalized tradition and structure of the left wing political party – the then ruling party in Bengal which continued its regime for 34 years. Even amidst a strong critique and rejection of the ways music has been used by the dominant left wing, Suman’s songs are replete with references to the ‘universal dream of Communism’. His songs like “All are for us” or his desire to see a global collective farm – ‘joutho khamar’ – in the degenerated socio-political context of Kolkata are instances of his attempt at an egalitarian society. The play of events in the socio-political ambit of Bengal due to the political construct that we are in – all commitments made by the leaders to the citizens – mainly the middle and the lower middle classes who wait for ‘Godot’ every time they hear the manifestoes which ultimately remain undelivered, is evident from his number of compositions that portray the falsehood of good intentions in the political parties and how each time it is only a game of broken dreams and skies. In his song ‘Brigade Meeting’ Suman points out at how the parties gather thousands of people at the political meetings in the prime meeting site of Kolkata – the Brigade Parade Ground; the number of heads present in the meeting denote the popularity of the meeting and consequently of the party. The gathering at the Brigade in such meetings is ensured by bringing (read ‘hiring’) people from rural areas, with an incentive to give a meal and sometimes a paltry amount

for their day. These people are mostly from villages of Bengal – often needy, uneducated, and do not have an idea about the good and the bad that are taking place around them. They are just the ‘count’ – figures or statistics that would mark a ‘successful’ meeting and denote the extent of power of the political party conducting the meeting. Their lives revolve around gathering two square meals a day; they are remotely not connected with the complex problems that find no solutions with the rosy promises of the leaders in the meetings and gatherings...What remains constant even after such meetings with hue and cry is the perpetual poverty and crisis of the people who are ‘brought’ and ‘bought’ to make these political rallies ‘successful’. Suman gives an overview of Kolkata during such days of meetings at Brigade, ultimately pointing at the futility and hollowness of such power grandeur:

The meeting will be at Brigade

Uncountable heads

The meeting gets over at Brigade

Calcutata exhausts and pants. ...

The meeting gets over at Brigade

In the empty Maidan

Shadowy figures come

In search of a living.

[My Translation]

Suman clings on to his dream of an egalitarian society and hence, his crisis of the subject is largely an ideological crisis, even though he himself is a member of the privileged upper caste and upper class of the society. What he takes up as his subjects, hence, are issues that do not directly affect him perhaps, but stirs his ideological space because those affect the socio-political-economic environment of his metropolis. Consequently, Suman’s subjects evolve from a contradiction between the codified social role and the perceived self – the shadow that falls between what he can be and who he wants to be. The Kanoria Jute Mill workers’ agitation during 1993-94 created an unprecedented cultural struggle and an environment of immense expectation, in the recent past of the region of Bengal, apart from having a complex political background. Suman took an active role in this – one of the most significant political movements of the period during which he was singing

his songs of protest and those were spreading amongst his audience in Kolkata mainly. Many cultural activists from Kolkata rallied with the workers and Suman became the pivotal cultural symbol of the movement as he actively started singing at the rallies organized by the workers, led agitations and raised funds for the continuation of the movement. His song 'Haal chheRo na Bondhu' (Don't give up, friend – My Translation) became a major hit amongst the activists and his other audience during this period. Rather than succumbing to the political and sociological pressure, he continuously hammers at the injustice and the conscience of his urban listeners, with a conviction which gives a jolt to his audience, shows a new dawn in which 'we shall overcome' all the darkness:

Don't give up, friend  
Just raise your voices loud  
We'll meet each other  
In a new dawn of a new song.

[My Translation]

A similar tone of an empathetic compatriot even though far removed from its physical reality is also found in the song 'Papri De' where Suman narrates the reality of a little girl Papri, who choked to death on 24 February, 1991, after she accidentally swallowed a pen-cap and was thoroughly a victim of the negligence of state hospitals. The child was taken to Calcutta Medical College first, then to SSKM hospital and finally to Calcutta Medical Research Institute. He points out at the triviality and insecurity of human life in the callous system of the state machinery:

Papri is so stupid  
The instruments in the hospital  
Are out of order, let those be  
Democracy will definitely survive. [My Translation]

In Sudipto Chatterjee's documentary titled Free To Sing, Suman himself talks about this appalling state of affairs in the hospitals of Kolkata where the environment of protecting and assuring the minimal human rights of hygiene and health is in ruins:



Go into the hospitals and see what's happening to the hospitals. Filth, lack of treatment. I am not saying that the doctors don't work, no, they do. But everything is crumbling. ... Filth...filth...filth...everywhere...

And this was not the only instance, certainly, when violation of human rights, safety and security was taking place in Kolkata. On May 30,1990, Kolkata was oozing blood – three health officers, two from the Health Department of Bengal and one from UNICEF were brutally raped by a group of political goons in Bantala Road when they were returning from their assignment in Gosaba Rangabelia: Anita Dewan, the Deputy District Extension Media Officer of the West Bengal Health Department, was murdered after a brutal rape and her mutilated body recovered by the police from a nearby paddy field. The extent of brutality was such that a metallic torch was discovered in her vagina by the lady doctor who examined her. It is rumored that the plausible cause of the incident could be that Anita Dewan had come to know 'too much' about certain fraudulent activities of the Health Department of the then government in power. Suman's song 'Anita Dewan khoma koro' (Anita Dewan, forgive us – My Translation) is an open letter of shame against this gory atrocity and an apology for being a resident of Kolkata that falsely boasts of its heritage and rich culture when such filth is hidden in its lanes.

However, it is surprising to see him take a populist move on the issue of Operation Sunshine – the mass hawker eviction movement by the Government of West Bengal on the night of 24th November, 1996. Suman perhaps could feel the pulse of the middle class who were unempathetic towards this eviction of hawkers because they were the source of some genuine inconvenience for the urban middle class as the hawkers occupied the footpaths of busy streets, leaving practically no space for the pedestrians to use the footpaths. He is largely silent about it, though the movement meant the unemployment of hundreds of hawkers all over Kolkata, and creates only one song on an issue of such importance:

Where will so many people go

Where will they be rehabilitated

Elections are not in the vicinity

That is of advantage

It is midnight by the police-watch

hawkers are evicted and there is eviction of their livelihood.

[My Translation]

Suman has always been much concerned about the physical environment as well as the metaphorical soul of the city which he sees as his motherland and his first love that he cannot leave despite its ugly faces, all at once. Interestingly, during this same period of Operation Sunshine, one of Suman's songs was used as the background score of a television program produced for Calcutta Environment and Management Strategy and Action Plan (CEMSAP), Department of Environment, Government of West Bengal, assisted by the UK Overseas Development Administration (ODA, now known as DIFID). The song condemned the filth and degeneration of the city and Suman arouses in his listeners the same sense of nausea that he himself suffers from in his beloved city:

I can see the city drown  
 Filth is threatening me  
 Leftovers are piling in Calcutta  
 The city is overflowing with urine  
 People are coughing from diesel fumes  
 Tuberculosis is threatening me

Calcutta.

[My Translation]

But Suman has no intentions of leaving his city with who he shares an inexplicable all-dimensional bonding, an umbilical bond and simultaneously almost a marital one. Kolkata's panoramic history, heritage, culture and vulgarity alike appeals to him and binds him as if eternally with the city:

City of 300 years

A great gigantic maze

I find myself here

Married to the place ...

Tethered to the place.

[My Translation]

However, Suman is aware of the changes that the city has undergone in the last few decades – a metamorphosis of lifestyle from the essentially laid-back to a fast paced urbane one, a slow disappearance of mundane traditional practices and consequent substitution by an illusory ‘modernity’, and a paradigm shift in the skyline of Kolkata with emerging skyscrapers and vanishing greens. Suman intensely tries to cling on to the nostalgia of his familiar space for which he had left his lucrative job with the Voice of America and returned to his city of love. Globalization had completely touched the metropolis by the time Suman was writing, and Suman was all conscious of the effects of globalization on the city life, on his surroundings. The natural space of Kolkata – its little presence and major absence – has an inevitable effect on him, and combines with his eco-sociological consciousness to give birth to songs that clearly delineate the physical environment of Kolkata and Suman’s emotional associations with it. Suman’s melancholia more often than not comes with the imagery of clouds and rains. However, Suman’s emotions too have their source in his urban physical space; they bring back the references of problems that the composer sees around him and of which he is an inevitable part despite his different class position. In his “Kokhono megh ghungur pore nachbe bole” (Sometimes the cloud wears anklets to dance – My Translation), he personifies the various activities of the clouds over the the grand city of Kolkata, only to take the theme of the song to the lives of the pavement dwellers to whom the romanticism of the dance of clouds do not mean anything; clouds, to them, are the discordant notes of pain (‘besur tola jontrona’) that make their lives further miserable in their daily struggles with an absence of even the basic civic amenities of a safe shelter during rains. This excruciating pain of existence in city life, its increasing urbanization and consequent manifestation of civic problems are also seen in ‘Shohore Brishti’:

Last monsoon in the neighborhood field

I’d seen greenery

This monsoon a high-rise is being constructed there. [My Translation]



This continuous increase in the problem of urbanization monstrously claims not only natural spaces physically, but also devours all that constitute the 'songs of innocence' – in "PaRar chhotto park / Ghash nei, ache dhulo" (The small park of the locality is bereft of grass, there's only dirt – My Translation) the children protest in their own way against this arid-scape by continuing their playful activities in that little barren space only. Moreover, in connection to this in "BaRi uthchhe dekho saatmohola...Bohutoler rajyopat / Khnujbo kothay? / Khelar MaaTh" (The skyscrapers are rising high / Empire of high-rises / Where do I look for playgrounds? – My Translation) where again a claustrophobia in the artificially erected ambience is conveyed – the subtle rhetorical questions that come up are that, who wins? Is it the hard-handed urbanization or is it the unbothered bunch of children who continue their claim to play freely in an apparently lost space, as Suman talks of Communism of Children in his song? Or is it a compromise that the citizens are getting accustomed to in their habitual urban environment of Kolkata?

Like his songs that take abundantly from the folk traditions of Bengal, Suman perceives Kolkata as an offshoot of its rural roots and wishes that the city must not lose its soul and innocence in the face of increasing tide of globalization. He is aware that Kolkata is a living degeneration in the hands of commercial civilization ('kobira swopno dekhale / ki ba jay ase / e bonik sobhyotar / obokkhoy tumi'), but still his Kolkata-love binds him to this place without an alternative: 'palabo tar kono upay nei / ami bondi e-shohor bhalobasay' (There's no way I can escape / I am imprisoned in the love for this city – My Translation).

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