



Research Article

SONGS AND SOCIAL CHANGE: A STUDY ON MANIPURI STUDENTS IN DELHI

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 10th December, 2018

Received in revised form 2nd

January, 2019

Accepted 26th February, 2019

Published online 28th March, 2019

Key words:

Audience, Band, Delhi, Movement, Music, Popular Culture, Protest, Songs and Social Change, Students, Youth,

ABSTRACT

This paper is an outcome of the study which was carried out to examine the role played by the Alternative folk music band, Imphal Talkies and the Howlers on the Manipuri youth audiences of Delhi through its songs addressing the social significance of the messages in the contemporary Manipuri society. It aimed to assess the behavior and perception of the youth audiences towards their home-state. It also attempts to do an in-depth analysis of selected song lyrics from the first two albums and independent track list. It is recommended that, there is a great need to expand the reach of the songs for social change not just among the youth but people as a whole in order to bring a society with active citizens rather than just being passive. This will directly or indirectly aid in fastening the process of bringing a society to social justice. It further recommended that the songs of protest or social justice should not be taken as mere music but also a tool to enhance the rational thinking of audiences towards their society.

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INTRODUCTION

Music has been perceived as an effective instrument used by different movements seeking social change. In the mid twentieth century successful musicians from all over the world openly voiced their discontent and issues of the different societies of contemporary world. During the 1960s-70s there were popular musicians such as Bob Dylan, Jony Mitchell and Joan Baez who have contributed a successful portion of their musical talent to the different ongoing Civil Rights movement. If one listens to their songs one can have a deeper understanding of how music or any form of art as such can articulate social change and bring in progress in the society. Music, in fact had been a long effective phenomenon in assisting those who worked to win the civil rights for the Afro-Americans. Overtly talented musicians have collectedly bonded over various vulnerable social issues such as HIV/AIDS, gender and racial discrimination, poverty, unemployment and other such social issues that have affected millions and millions of population across the globe. Music has also proved to be an effective weapon in various political rebellions and revolutions in different civilizations. Different genres of music such as freedom songs and patriotic songs often adapted from the music of the Black Church, played a very important role in spreading courage, inspiring participation from different strata of the society and fostering within the mind a deep sense of unity and community. In a process of social-change the musicians themselves, along with the other ordinary members of the society becomes the main

agents of social change. Music can also be proved to be a very useful and easy tool to reach out to people because each and every member in the society indulges themselves in listening to any genre of good music. Hence, it would be apt to cite Allen Navarro. He says:

“Art in music comes like a bolt of lightning in the midnight sky. But when it does happen it can light up the whole sky, even if it lasts not even for a second. This power is the same for music and the way it ignites social change.”

In India too, music has played a very important role in different social and political movements. We can see relevant protest songs and music playing an important role during the different social movement in India. Apparently, India has had the longest and the most diversified freedom struggles, music has always been an essential pillar of the freedom movement, and poets and musicians had been the backbone of the struggle. Poets and musicians from different states of India have contributed effectively with the strength of their pens and valor in their voice towards the independence movement in India. Various independent revolutionaries from Manipur especially the communist leaders like Hijam Irawat intensely participated in the independence movement by patronizing progressive writers, eminent theatre personalities and musicians who composed music in a way that would bring together the masses of Manipur, Sylhet and Cachar together.

Role of Manipuri Music in Indian Freedom Movement

Irawat had built up cultural groups in towns and villages which went about in singing songs about peasants struggle for land and other fundamental rights. He was famous for composing songs, especially in the Manipuri language using narratives which spoke about people’s struggle for independence from

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the perspective of British domination and for resistance against the fascist invaders. (Singh, 2016) These groups were mostly comprised of Bengali and Manipuri boys and girls, who mostly sang patriotic and democratic songs. The songs that were sung were mainly in Manipuri and Bengali spoken dialects of the ex-tea garden labourers and other lower rungs of the society. The subject matter of the songs was seeking liberation from the shackles of feudal and British operations. These groups were commonly known as "Swadeshi Gaaner Dal". These groups were led by another freedom fighter named Hemango Biswas, under whose guidance such successful class-based songs were organized. Manipur's role in the freedom movement was more strengthened by the emergence of such groups. Initially, protest music in India were seen as an alternative wing of the communist party and their cultural wing was the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). It was also the reservoir for protest music in India but over the years it has lost its shine and glory. But during the recent years a band of independent musicians have come up who are trying to fill up the vacuum created.

Imphal Talkies and the Howlers

The band 'Imphal Talkies and the Howlers' was formed by Akhu Chingangbam (Vocal and Guitar) with Sachidananda Angom (Guitar) in 2008. It is an Alternative folk band which sings in both Manipuri and English. 'Tiddim Road' was released in 2009 as their debut album and since then has been followed by two more albums namely 'When the Home is Burning' and 'Maria and the Flower Child'. The band is famous for voicing their discontent against unfair politics, insurgency, human rights issues, racial attacks in Manipur and across the North East States of India, through their 'protest songs' and rebellious lyrics. Their music comes as a protest and resentment against the violent acts of AFSPA of 1958 that was granted special powers to the Indian Armed forces in some parts of India. They were titled as a 'voice' of India in an album review by the Rolling Stone Magazine. On being inspired by the music and environmental activism of the late American folk singer Pete Seeger who passed away in January 2014, this band have organized music festival named, 'Where have the flowers gone?' (a song by Pete Seeger), the first of its kind in Manipur. The major objective of this festival was to respect, honor and protect our environment by highlighting environmental issues, and spreading awareness to the people of Manipur. The band is led by its vocalist and lyricist Ronid Chingambam popularly known as Akhu, who had finished his Doctorate of Philosophy in Physics from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. He had also done his Post Doctorate from Thailand in the same field. He has involved sixty working children as a part of a music project named "A Native Tongue Called Peace" where an attempt is being made to bring peace between various ethnic tribes and communities in Manipur.

The first album *Tiddim Road* was released in 2009, has eight songs which include Manglan, Mamagi Macha, Leisabi, Nangbu Kanano, Tiddim Road, Imphal Sahar, Thainagi Leirang and Pirang (Tears). Their second album *When The Home Is Burning* (2014) comes with thirteen songs, which include, When The Home Is Burning, Napa Thorai Macha, Ode to The Loktak, I Wanna Go To Moscow, Ei Seeragey, Radha Leela, India, I See Blood In Your Hands, Sarkar Gi Thabak, Mr. President Is Coming, Eise Eini Kaoreuy, Nostalgia, Nungshi Hidak, and Eegee Nong. Their Single Track Lists include Eche, In The Fight, Rise, Hey Juliet,

Haikhokat Samte! Their Bullets Are Melting in Your Father's Tear, Tomba Gi Esei, AFSPA Why Don't You Go Fuck Yourself? Local Hero ft. Bonbon, Ho Ya Ya, Qutub Minar, Lullaby, Hattouba moina, Chinky boy, Electric post and Song for Bangladesh. (INDIAN BANDS HUB)

Musical style and Influences in Popular Culture

Since the release of their debut album *Tiddim Road* in 2009, Imphal Talkies and The Howlers have been extremely open about the ongoing political and social issues around them. They have addressed the societal issues and needs through the medium of their songs and music, and till date their internationally acclaimed single, *Lullaby*, released in late 2013, shows the poor plight living situation of the children of Manipur, under political and insurgency tyranny. The band has been called as 'the new voice of Manipur and the new voice of the Northeast' by Rolling Stone magazine. The album *When the Home Is Burning* has made the band reach its epitome of popularity not only Manipur but also in India and worldwide. Released in 2014, the album is a journey into the past. It is a collection of old songs from concerts that Imphal Talkies and the Howlers used to perform in the streets of New Delhi over the last six or seven years. Songs in this album worded way back in 2007 and 2008 like, India, I See Blood in Your Hands and When the Home Is Burning, have had great impacts on audiences, during street protests. Other prominent songs in this album such as 'Ei Seeragey', was originally inspired by the poet's (Ibopishak, 1969) 'Charamnaraba Keithel Hui' from his first poetry book 'Apaiba Thawai' published in 1969. Most of the songs are known for voicing out the state political system and they are considered as an instrument to resist against political injustice and human rights violation across Manipur and other states in India.

Literature Review

This literature review discusses on the impact of the audience or the listeners of songs of social change or say, social justice or protest. Less work has been done in this area in the Asian or Indian context but more in the western context especially that of Euro-American.

Definition of Protest Song

A protest song is a song that identifies a social problem and/or calls for action in response to a social or political problem. According to Stewart, Smith, and Denton (2001) protest songs serve six major persuasive functions of i) informing audiences ii) establishing self-identity iii) establishing legitimacy iv) prescribe or demand solutions of a social problem v) promoting solidarity among the movement members vi) urge specific actions.

Perception by the Audience

The 'hypodermic needle theory' has been opposed by the argument of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) and others that meaning of a message or information is perceived differently by each receiver. Performers treat lyrics as a different component of the song and hence the listener needs to put a special effort in detaching the words from the musical instruments and vocals. The meanings may change if lyrics are read differently. Likewise, teenagers may not understand the true meaning to a song's words as do social researchers and critics. Generally, popular records, music, beats, performers or band are taken more into consideration rather than messages

given by lyrics. Hence the verbal content is neglected (Robinson and Hirsch, 1969a, 1969b).

Audience Behaviour Towards Protest Songs

According to 'Sociological Approaches to the Pop Music Phenomenon' by Paul M (1971), evidence which affects the behavior of the young listeners by popular songs is not seen nor are they aware of the interpretation of such messages from the hit protest songs. On the other hand, in an experiment, the combined media experience of songs aid to the attitudinal change significantly after being exposed to songs if not solely by the speech or song. Hence songs can initiate a social action. (Kosokoff & Carmichael, 1970)

Music and Persuasion

Scholars have discovered three persuasive components that distinguish music from other forms of communication. i) Music is repetitive in nature. The persuasive elements of music are created through redundancy (Booth, 1976). ii) music emphasizes the non-discursive because it operates on a physiological mode which affects the human body: music literally touches our body intimately in a greater variety and succession of different ways than the spoken word, employing a broader range and a larger variety of different melodies, rhythms, chord progressions, and instrumentations than are possible with only the spoken word (Chesebro, 1985). iii) music is an experiential form of communication. Music as an art deals with personal experiences through collections and patterns. Hence it is connotative in nature (Chesebro, 1985; King & Jensen, 1995).

Songs as the Voice of People

Songs of dissent becomes the voice of many people if it serves the larger consensus of discontent rather than just representing the feeling of a sole lyricist. This leads the song being a collective cry for change and composer become secondary in some instances the identity of the composer then becomes secondary importance, and the song is a collective voice for change. The originator or message source tends to be forgotten to some extent as the protest songs evolves as a cultural message. No longer is the protest viewed as an individual's message but as a part of a larger, cultural or social one. (Kizer, 1983)

Music in Societal Change

Examining from the historical perspective, all forms of media as a popular culture is a reflection of that time and also affected and played as a catalyst for critical social inquiry and societal change. Therefore, music can serve as an important theme to understand issues such as ethnicity, equality, population growth, economics, technology, business and industry, efficacy and empowerment can also in terms of its social history (Szatmary 2000). Also, music serves to support and promote peace and unity, a powerful tool of learning so as to connect issues and times in the history. Music illustrates a cultural identity (Cameron White, 2006). Music and song can lead to a movement regardless of having an organization or a formal presence of members or leaders (Ayerman and Jamison, 1998).

Protest songs are not filtered nor repressed by the mainstream media so it is creative and clear in expressing its message. Popular music targets the public and values in a society so it needs a deeper study in its persuasive role on the audience and

the social movement it can lead to because it hits the audience on a visceral level. (Cort, 2013)

The persuasive nature of music is believed to have a large influence on society as a whole ever since the time of Plato (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001). Music shapes the opinion and attitude of the public and also influences government policy (Bostrom, Lane & Harrington, 2002). The connotative nature of music makes the listeners interpret songs differently and hence the experience is a personal one which creates new perspectives (Quirk Cort, 2013).

The Indian Context

Sumangala Damodaran states that the role of music in societal change is quite distinct from the Euro-American cases. She accepts the earlier arguments that history and social context have influenced both representational and functional aspects of music. Thus, different kinds of music, performed or conceptualized in different contexts, have engaged politics in different ways. The functions and meanings of different types of music are employed variously, making the protest music genre complex and highly evolved. (Damodaran, 2016). Music critics might object but mixed genres must be analysed linking popular songs with socio-political messages as so in the context of Tapta's songs though he is a solo singer but sings mixed genre. (Rojio, 2009). Damodaran has studied the existing broad genres of protest music in the context of IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) and classified as (i) the folk genre; (ii) the classical music based genre; (iii) translations/adaptations of songs from the international communist and anti-fascist movements; and (iv) the western harmonic tradition. The folk genre or the traditional folk songs not only get connected to the indigenous and remains authentic but also seen by activists as extending beyond its own space, to be performed before national audiences and people for whom the music was not native, especially urban audiences.

Drawing from the western musical traditions, there were two clearly discernible trends: a) collective songs, mostly translations and adaptations from the international protest music tradition, but also those inspired by it and b) consisting of songs in the harmonic tradition. A deep internationalism was considered as necessary as identification with local and national traditions. (S Damodaran, 2008)

Many songs (referring to Tapta's album '1958') can be texts of discourse for study of the draconian act called Armed Forces Special Power(s) Act, 1958 (Rojio, 2009). Hence this supports the earlier argument of songs being used to portray historical issues by Szatmary. Lyrics are not the only criteria to define ideology but also by the symbolic aspects of the music of most protest movements that help to shape the ideology as well as develop solidarity. Popular music is seen as an opinion formation device with music itself being a unique and effective force mobilising the oppressed population. (Rojio, 2009).

For Akhu, the vocalist and lyricist of Imphal Talkies and the Howlers finds it hard to trace the dividing line when it comes to his poetry and lyrics. He can always sing his poetry into his own style. Unlike the mainstream songs, he has the freedom to do so. He had even performed impromptu at the spot. He uses song as a medium to pour out his emotion and feelings when tragic incidents of social justice come up. (Chingambam). In reviewing the existing trend and coming to a very specific context of Manipur, the study closely examined the role of the

Alternative folk music band, Imphal Talkies and the Howlers if it creates a social change among the Manipuri youth audiences studying in Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University.

This paper is an outcome of the study which was carried out to examine the role played by the Alternative folk music band, Imphal Talkies and the Howlers on the Manipuri youth audiences of Delhi through its songs addressing the social significance of the messages in the contemporary Manipuri society. It aimed to assess the behavior and perception of the youth audiences towards their home-state. It also attempts to do an in-depth analysis of selected song lyrics from the first two albums and independent track list.

Manipur is one of the North-Eastern states of India with Imphal as its capital. The state is also known as Kangleipak or Sanaleibak and covers an area of 22,327 square kilometers. It has a population of 2,721,756 according to the 2011 census. An aggregate of 58.9% covers the valley population and 41.1% covers that of hill population. It's bordering Indian states are Nagaland, Mizoram and Assam to the north, south and east respectively with Burma (Myanmar) lying in the east. The hills are mostly inhabited by the Kuki, Naga, Zomi and smaller tribal communities while the plains are mostly inhabited by the Meitei population. After the Meiteis, the Nagas come under the largest group in population followed by the Kukis. The various ethnic groups speak different dialects and practice different religions namely, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and others. The literacy rate of Manipur according to 2011 census is 79.21%.

The state of Manipur is in a way disturbed with varied violence and conflict. The conflict can be divided into two namely, i) Internal conflict i.e. the inter-community and intra-community conflict with respect to identity, resource dominance and power, ii) conflict between state and society i.e. the conflict between the state and non-state actors or insurgent groups greater autonomy, secession or sovereignty of Manipur. Both of these types affect the educational environment directly or indirectly. It has also been studied that the conflict does not affect educational growth, but it pushes the children out of the state for their studies. (Singha, 2013)

Analysis of the Select Song Lyrics

Album: Tiddim Road, Song: Tiddim Road, Language: Manipuri

Free translation of the lyrics

Waiting for the bus at Tiddim road
Going to watch the Moirang Lai Haraoba (festival)
Will row a boat on the Loktak lake
Will pluck lily and lotus

The wind blowing from the hills of Nambol
Hitting the window pane of the bus
Which lady's hair is it
Flowing silky straight
(Crazy Nambol wind) X 2

Must have reached, some Thoibis are seen
Dancing in front of the temple god
Blunt hair-cut Thoibi could be seen
Perhaps their time has ended

People say, on the surface of Loktak lake, Khamba-Thoibi's reflection could be seen
I can't see, turned out to be just a poet's story
People say, Sendra is beautiful, place for romantic talks
Didn't know, turned out to be a place for the armies

Waiting for bus at Tiddim road
Came back disheartened.

Album: (Independent track), Song: Lullaby, Language: English & Manipuri

Lyrics

Blood Soaked streets
That's my ground
That's where I play around
Sound of gunshots
That's my song
That's my lulla- lullaby

(Your revolution has snatched away
my right to education) X 2

Blood soaked body
that's my daddy
you just shot him
you just killed him...
we don't need your guns and bombs
we just need songs of love

(your constitution has nothing for me
all you do is kill my innocence) X 2

Fallen bodies like
fallen leaves of October
but you don't care
you bomb a town
That's my town
That's where I play around

(Don't fill our lives with throes of pain
Share a smile so we can bloom again). X 2

Album: When the Home is Burning, Song- Ei Seeragey, Language- Manipuri

Free Translation of the lyrics

King Bheigy's teardrops have met the elephant wet
On seeing the unsold stuffs lying at the mothers' market
The stooped bridge is no more bent
As the soldiers stood there
Leopard's story has been lost
As the fireplace is no more

A hungry dog loitering in the market is me
(Do not listen to what I say) X 2
I shall die ... I shall die..
I shall die.. I shall die

(let me hang myself in front of the Kangla, let me drown in the vast Loktak lake) X 2

I shall die
I shall die

(let me hang myself in front of the Kangla, let me drown in the vast Loktak lake) X 2

I shall die
I shall die

Album: When the Home is Burning, Song: Sarkargi Thabak, Language: Manipuri

Free Translation of the lyrics

Please do not look for government job
Please do not eat Moreh's fish
Please do not depend on highway
Please do not eat Bengal's phabou fish

Hey hey
What is there left for you
Hey hey
Who is there for you

Let's do gardening, plough the field, sow paddy, come on
Let's dig drain, dig pond, rear fish, come on
Let's rear pig, rear cattle, let's milk, come on

Palm symbol is pissing off
Lotus flag also is pukish
Farmer's sickle is rusted

Hey hey
What is there left for you
Hey hey
Who is there for you

Please do not listen to the government
Please don't light Moreh candle
Please do not depend on highway
Please do not eat Bengal's phabou fish

Hey hey
What is there left for you
Hey hey
Who is there for you

CONCLUSION

The study found that most of the Manipuri youths like the songs of Imphal Talkies and Howlers because their lyrics are unique and original. It is powerful in addressing social, political issues and human rights violation which the audience connects to it. The study also shows that audiences comprehend the messages in songs especially in issues of conflict by both state and non-state actors. Nevertheless, the music and not just the lyrics such as the beats, melody and genre which is of folk and alternative rock is also an important factor of why the audience listen. Hence music is not used just for an entertainment process but also catalyzes the audience's consciousness in bringing peace, harmony and unity to the state.

Although the protest songs are not mainstream, yet it is popular to the youth listeners. Social media has proved to be a major platform to disseminate such parallel songs even though it is dominated by the mainstream media. Such songs also aid in giving voice to the common man and the mass awareness of happenings in the contemporary Manipuri society. The Manipuri youth diaspora is concerned about the happenings in their home-state. The study shows that songs can be used as a tool for behaviour change communication. The study also highlights that the songs are more or less poems being sung with music. The issues and messages are expressed very creatively with the poetic devices. In the short stanzas, the problems of a suppressed society with respect to various issues and justice are raised. Therefore, it can be inferred that protest songs or songs for social change are actually poems where

music is used creatively to add the melody and beats. The music element also helps in gaining attention from the people or the listeners. It is recommended that, there is a great need to expand the reach of the songs for social change not just among the youth but people as a whole in order to bring a society with active citizens rather than just being passive. This will directly or indirectly aid in fastening the process of bringing a society to social justice. It further recommended that the songs of protest or social justice should not be taken as mere music but also a tool to enhance the rational thinking of audiences towards their society.

In depth comparative study can be carried out by taking larger sample with not only the Manipuri youth diaspora but also other adults who are living in the state itself, so that the perceptions and behavior of the audience can be studied in a more detailed manner. Other music bands or singers in the state who sing mainstream songs and also some of the protest songs can also be included in finding their effectiveness or role in social change. With many mainstream media such as films and TV shows being made on social issues, a study can be done in the acceptance or inculcating such parallel songs into them.

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