Salil Chowdhury – His Five Great Bengali Songs And ‘Departure’

Abstract:

In this paper we tend to focus on Salil Chowdhury, one of the greatest musical personalities of Bengali as well as Indian music. We mainly do focus on his ‘departure’. This particular word ‘departure’ does have an unfathomable impact on art. It is of immense significance. Without proper departure a creative artist can never be a trend setter. A true creative artist must depart from fixed notions, set principles, age old conventions, widely used formulations in order to make his own signature. It is one of those major ways by which an artist can propagate his intrinsic ideology. Salil Chowdhury also made several distinctive departures through his extraordinary creations. In his songs, socio-political statements are quite explicit through excellent metaphors. In this paper, we have analyzed five extremely significant Bengali compositions of him to underline both his artistic excellence as well as departure. Undoubtedly, Salil Chowdhury is one of the trend setters in the field of musical experiments. Thus he created his own musical idiom, too.

Key-words:

Salil Chowdhury, Departure, Consciousness, IPTA, Socio-political, Ideology, Metaphorical, Common people, Sufferings, Subjugation, Statement, Objective, Orchestration, Harmony, Chorus, Universal.

Salil Chowdhury – His Five Great Bengali Songs and ‘Departure’

Salil Chowdhury is one of the most significant names in the history of Bengali as well as Indian music. He was a rebel and music had always been his faithful weapon. The maestro did have his own definition and understanding of music. To him, music was never confined in the territory of mere entertainment. In his life Salil had always been utmost loyal to his own socio-political ideology. His musical talent was infinite as was his erudition. His range was enormous as well as versatile. In the words of Lata Mangeshkar: “Salilda himself was an extraordinary musician…a most unique person. His music has an unmistakable stamp which says ‘Salil Chowdhury’! he was born with a fantastic sense of Bengali folk music, Indian classical music, and Regional music and was equally at
home with Western classical music and the works of their composers and their complex chord system. The outcome of the confluence of these thought processes were his magnificent and melodious tunes. The songs he produced evoked different feelings. They were a treat to the ears, but difficult to sing and play on instruments. Before he could compose any type of music, his imaginative intelligence created something else, that is the reason why his songs had that versatility which amazed his listeners.\(^{1}\)

To understand the position of this great musical personality along with his attitude of a rebel, it is essential to have a glance on his background. From his childhood, Salil got a strong nationalistic as well as patriotic feeling. He was deeply influenced by his father, Dr. Gyanendra Chowdhury who was a medical officer at a tea estate near Kaziranga in Assam. Little Salil always observed that his father was deeply moved by the pains and sufferings of the labours in the tea estate.\(^{2}\)

In a conversation with Suman Chattopadhyay (Now known as Kabir Suman), available on YouTube, Salil said that once his father jabbed one British officer as the officer used foul language and as a result of that one tooth of that officer was broken.\(^{3}\) So, from the childhood Salil had been familiar with the word ‘protest’. With the passage of time, Salil witnessed the events like ‘Second World War’ and the horrible ‘Bengal Famine’ and felt a different type of commitment within himself. He had a leftist swing in his mind and he became an active cultural member in ‘Indian People’s Theatre Association’ (IPTA) in the year of 1944.\(^{4}\)

In this regard, it is of utmost necessity to pay our attention to IPTA. IPTA played the most significant role in the transitional period of India. The first two decades of IPTA ought to be analyzed against multidimensional backgrounds of anti-colonial movement, growth and development of leftist swing and so on.

In this connection, let us have a glance on the first bulletin of IPTA, headed by the epigraph which is as following: “People’s theatre stars the people, and it resolved to build a theatre not only of the people but also by them, to build not a movement which is built from above but which has its roots deep down in the cultural awakening of the masses of India…which seeks to revive the lost in that heritage by interpreting, adopting and integrating it with the most significant facts of our people’s lives and aspirations in the present epoch.”\(^{5}\)

Now from the aforementioned portion, let us take the phrase – ‘facts of our people’s lives’. This seems to be the most significant observation. It is a proven fact that music is never confined in the region of mere entertainment.

In this connection, we are reminded of an epoch making song i.e. ‘We shall overcome’. Its root can be traced out long way back and it was related to two European songs from the 1700s – “Prayer of the Sicilian Mariners” and “O Sanctissima”. After 1900, it seems another gospel song “I’ll overcome someday” by Reverend Dr. Charles Tindley was added to the musical mix though the music was different to a great extent. Around 1945, gospel arrangers Atron Twig and Kenneth Morris added the essential pieces of the now famous lyric as well as melody line. In 1945-46, during the labour strike against American Tobacco in Charleston, South Carolina, “We shall overcome” first appeared as a protest song. African American women strikers were seeking a pay hike to 30 cents an hour. Lucille Simmons was one of the strikers and her favourite song was ‘I shall overcome”. But a powerful sense of solidarity was added to the song when she changed the ‘I’ into ‘We’ and all strikers sang together. In 1947, Lucille Simmons brought this song to Highlander Folk school and shared it with another labour activist. The cultural head of the school Zilphia Horton also learned the song and taught it to Pete Seeger. The legendary folk singer revised the beginning of the song and started to utter “We shall overcome”.\(^{6}\) It was actually the beginning of a new history.

So, it can be said that music has been bearing the testimony of the facts of people’s lives since long. Salil Chowdhury was the man who as a creative artist, always paid utmost importance to facts of people’s lives and herein lies the point of departure. In creative art, departure seems to be one of the most important approaches. Now, let us concentrate on the very word – ‘departure’. In any branches of creative art the word ‘departure’ does
signify the conscious deviation from the conventional approaches to reach an elevation. Here we should refer to the assertion of Max Carl Friedrich Beckmann, noted German painter, sculptor as well as writer – “Departure, yes departure from the illusion of life toward the essential things that wait behind appearance…We must insist that departure is not bound to a political trend, but is symbolic for all times.”7 From this perspective it can be said that Salil Chowdhury in his music made departure, though political but obviously away from the illusion of life. Kabir Suman said about Salil Chowdhury – “the genetics and the soul of Salil Chowdhury had the creation of an epoch.”8

Salil, through his music, constituted distinctive idiom and made conscious socio-political statements. Throughout the first phase of his career Salil composed numerous songs with strong political messages. The great composer himself termed those compositions as ‘Songs of Consciousness’. Some of those songs were recorded and released and those became immensely popular. But there were many songs those remained unreleased. Most of those songs were banned.9 Salil made departures from illusion of life, from so called romantic approach, from conventional love theme, from the beauty of nature and so on. In the Bengali songs, Salil Chowdhury was perhaps the first person to establish the equation between music and politics. As a creative artist Salil’s objective was always clear and he created music ‘for the people’.

In the first phase of his musical journey Salil had been extremely active in association with IPTA and made complete departure from the existing music, even that which existed in India’s ‘westernized’ tradition.10 Salil was experimental in nature in the truest sense of the word and he was instinctively so. He formed his own musical language that was absolutely suitable for propagating his own ideology. He focused on orchestration and harmonization became a signature part of it. Salil created a tremendous balance between the indigenous elements as well as western discipline in his compositions. Salil used various harmony lines in respect to the main melody and applied chorus in a beautiful way. He also went on experimenting by creating silence or pause, making variations in tempo and also creating transposition. We can say that all these features of Salil became distinct musical signatures even in the tradition of Indian choir music. From this perspective also the point of departure can be termed as remarkable.

Now, we are to analyze five great Bengali compositions of Salil Chowdhury to explain his departure in much more detail.

**O Alor Pothojatri(1949):**

This song was released for the first time in the year of 1949. It was sung by Priti Sarkar and Debabrata Biswas on behalf of IPTA(GE 7547). The song was released for the second time in 1971 and the artists were Manna Dey, Sabita Chowdhury and chorus. The name of the album was “Bangla Amar Bangla”(S/7EPE 1158). After that, in the year of 1981, this song was again recorded by chorus, led by Mantu Ghoah and Sabita Chowdhury and was released. The album was “Ghum Bhangar Gaan”(ECSD 2633).11

The song starts with a case of address – ‘O alor pothojatri’(o the men with light) and creates an altogether different mood. Salil does request the ‘men with light’ not to stop here in the midst of the darkness of the night. Salil, from the very beginning of the song conjures up beautiful metaphors. He goes on saying that they should not anchor their boat of hope here. The third line of the song is written in first person narration and it does express extreme tiring despair. Now, what is the cause of this despair – it seems to be the most pertinent question. The horrible ‘Bengal Famine’ in 1943 has left a deep scar on socio-economic-political context. The fundamental rights of common people have not been properly protected. Salil goes on documenting the facts in a metaphorical way. In this song, Salil himself is supposed to be the representative of the common people and he longs for a ‘saviour’.
In the second stanza of the song we are reminded of all those who sacrificed their lives for the sake of human civilization or fought for the freedom of their motherland. They never thought of their individualistic welfare. They toiled for the mass welfare. In this section of the song Salil seems to be extremely metaphorical. Salil goes on remembering all those who paved the way for civilization at the cost of their own sweat and blood. The last two lines of the second stanza are extremely significant. Salil compares the present context to an island and he terms the island as ‘Banchana Dweep’ i.e. the island of subjugation. The objective is to cross that island and to reach the coveted destination.

In the final section of the song as a composer Salil creates an artistic contrast. Salil pinpoints a call. The call seems to be approaching like a flood, sweeping away all the impediments. That is the most coveted call for freedom all the odds as well as subjugation. Age old stagnation is about to be melted away. Now, Salil goes on signifying the advent of a new age. The nation is just on the threshold of a new sunrise. In the fifth and sixth line of the last stanza, Salil uses two metaphors of a forceful river and a violent dance artist respectively. These two metaphors uphold the fight of common people to attain and protect their fundamental rights. In the last line of the song Salil creates the highest objective when he writes the phrase – ‘adhikar orjone’ i.e. the acquiring rights.

In the first section of the song, the composer designs a slow tune. We get one kind of lethargic flavor in the note combinations. The rhythm pattern is slow. This particular design matches the content of this particular section. The despair and the anguish of the first section of the song is properly projected through the tune. The contrast comes in the concluding section where Salil creates a comparatively fast tune. As a composer Salil experiments with the speed and injects fastness in the final section. This section provides us with the flavour of a marching song. Again the tune matches the content of this particular section. The section upholds a new hope and it speaks of the battle to acquire the basic rights. It projects a mass movement. Matching this particular spirit, in this section Salil designs musical contrast.

Now, if the question of departure comes, this song is an ideal example. Salil makes a departure here from the conventions by all possible respects. The political statement is clear and the message is explicit. If an administration fails to provide common mass with proper governance, mass movement is the only remedy. Man has to fight to protect his fundamental right and also to fulfill his rudimental needs. So, from the perspective of context, the departure is very much clear. Very naturally, as an extremely intelligent composer, Salil also departs from the conventional then Bengali pattern of tune to justify his own objective.

This particular song is still immensely popular and is also sung by various artists in numerous occasions. The relevance of this signature song of great Salil Chowdhury will never be lost.

**Kono EK Ganyer Bodhur(1949):**

Now, let us pay our attention to another epoch making song that literally created history in the then Bengal and amazed the Bengali audience, too. This song was released in the year of 1949 and it was sung by Hemanta Mukhopadhyay(GE 7533/SEDE 3048). About this song Salil chowdhury himself noted: “The success of *Ganyer Bodhu* did a very wonderful thing. It heralded a new era in Bengali contemporary music. It was a completely unconventional song having no traditional ‘asthayee’(refrain) and ‘antara’(verse), and its movement from phrase to phrase was symphonic in from, with two distinct movements.” So, it can well be said that in this remark Salil himself pinpointed his departure as a creative artist as he termed the song as ‘completely unconventional’.

Let us focus on the content of the song. The song is set on the backdrop of deadly ‘Bengal Famine’ of 1943 that took place in the Bengal province of British India(present-day Bangladesh, West Bengal, Odisha and eastern India) during second World War. An estimated 800,000 to 3.8 million Bengalis perished out of a population of 60.3 million from starvation etc. The song is like a ballad that unfolds the saga of a village bride. The song is written
with pictorial vividness. We get the picture of a peaceful rural life. The natural beauty has been presented meticulously as Salil designs the lyric with pictorial phrases. In the midst of peace and harmony the bride leads a simple life that is impregnated with simplicity and mental bliss. Salil creates a mesmeric progression of tune. The chordal application, the phrases evoke a mellow as well as tender spirit. In the beautiful voice of Hemanta Mukhopadhyay the song progresses and the audience listens to the story. Through both lyric and tune, in this section of the song, Salil creates a mesmeric tranquility.

Then Salil creates the extremely shocking contrast. A small musical bridge releases an uncanny flavor and Salil again plays with the spirit. In this section Salil creates a comparatively fast movement. Through the appropriate metaphors, Salil projects the deadly picture of famine. All the pictures of peace and harmony is completely lost in no time. The tranquil peaceful harmonious rural life is replaced by utter devastation.

In the final section of the song, Salil again brings a change in the pattern and the part is rendered by the singer in an almost ‘ad-libitum’ style. Here, the tune is impregnated with deep pathos. The words are heart touching. Salil says that even today, if someone witnesses successive devastated huts or rural houses, the message is clear – it can be considered as the same saga of a village bride whose all dreams have been completely shattered.

The song was released in 1949 and the horrible pictures of the deadly famine of 1943 still loomed large in the memory of common people. The audience got a tremendous shock as the first part of the song gave them an absolutely mellow romantic flavor and the following part projected the picture of utter devastation. The listeners were simply amazed to listen to such a song perhaps for the first time. They also experienced a complete departure from the convention. Still, it is one of the most popular songs of Salil-Hemanta combination.

**Hoyto Take Dekheni Keu(1950):**

This particular song created history in the truest sense of the word. Before entering into the analysis we must refer to an incident that surely deserves special mention. A peace conference took place in Kolkata in the year of 1952. So many artists were there and the canvas was really large. Iconic singer of Tagore’s songs Suchitra Mitra and Salil Chowdhury, both on stage with two harmoniums sang two songs one after another. Suchitra Mitra sang the remarkable composition of Tagore – ‘Krishnakali ami tarei boli’(I call her Krishnakali). In this context, we must remember that ‘Krishnakali’ became extremely popular in the voice of Suchitra Mitra to the Bengali audience. She had to sing it regularly in almost all her shows. On that day, just after the completion of her rendition of ‘Krishnakali’, Salil Chowdhury started to sing ‘Hoyto tare dekheni keu’ (perhaps nobody has seen her). Salil’s composition was just like an extension of Tagore’s ‘Krishnakali’. Salil composed the song again on the backdrop of ‘Bengal Famine’ of 1943. The juxtaposition of an image from Tagore with a contemporary image reportedly electrified the large audience, who were witnessing something like this for the first time.15

Now, let us directly concentrate on Salil’s song. In the beginning of the song we get a theory of probability. Salil starts the song by asserting – ‘Hoyto take dekheni keu/kingba dekhe chhile’(perhaps nobody has seen her or someone might have seen). Salil portrays a black complexioned thin as well as pale girl who is literally begging for rice. The girl is seen to render helpless appeal for a handful of rice. The suggestion is absolutely clear. The portrayal of this girl reminds us of the horrible ‘Bengal Famine’ of 1943. In this section of the song, the identity of the girl is not revealed or we do not get any kind of suggestion about her identity, too. She seems to be ‘any common girl’.
In the first line of the second stanza the audience gets the shock when lyricist-composer Salil Chowdhury refers to ‘Moynapara’. The probility is highlighted that the girl might have come from ‘Moynapara’ and we get the tremendous parallelism. In this context, quite naturally we are reminded of Tagore’s beloved ‘Krishnakali’ and the contrast is vivid. Salil sticks to the theory of probability in the second stanza. He goes on saying – ‘Hoyto takei Krishnakali bole kabiguru tumi chinechhile’(perhaps that particular girl was identified and addressed as Krishnakali by Rabindranath Tagore). The reference becomes much clearer.

In the third stanza of the song, Salil again creates an artistic parallelism and refers to ‘deer like black beautiful eyes’ of the girl. The parallelism in fact broadens the scope and theory of probability now tends to confirmation. The context is intensified as well as the song approaches its culmination.

In the following section, Salil makes an ardent appeal that if someone by chance meets the girl, he or she must tell her to go back to ‘Moynapara’. We get the confirmation that this is the girl whom Tagore once projected as his ‘Krishnakali’ and from this phase we get a change in tone of the song. Salil now, goes on describing the beauty and abundance of ‘Moynapara’ that is evidently of rustic origin. In this section of the song we get the picture of a dreamland where there would be no famine, no food crisis, no discrimination. The lyricist-composer of the song now does lay emphasis on the fact that ‘Krishnakali’ should go back to her native place i.e. ‘Moynapara’.

The song is rarely heard nowadays. We must admit that undoubtedly it is an epoch making creation of the maestro, one and only Salil Chowdhury. It is a superb specimen of the ‘conscious departure’ on the part of a genius.

This song was released in the year of 1950 and it was sung by none other than Suchitra Mitra(N31180/33ESX4257). It was a departure for Sucitra Mitra, too as she was mainly a specialist in Tagore’s songs. This departure was possible only for Salil Chowdhury who chose Suchitra Mitra to render this particular song and the rest was a history.

**Ebar Ami Amar Theke(1961):**

This song is another extremely significant composition of Salil Chowdhury from many respects. This song was sung and recorded by Sachin Gupta and it was released in 1961(JNG 6113/JNLX 1024). The song was again released in 1980 and this time it was Lata Mangeshkar who recorded it(S/45NLP 2037). The second version of the song became immensely popular and it is still one of the most popular Bengali non film songs. So far, many artists, apart from Lataji, sang this song and released it as ‘remake version’.

Now, let us enter into the world of this beautiful song. The opening of the song is quite significant as it sets the tone of the song properly. It also makes the objective of the creator absolutely clear. Salil starts: ‘ebar ami amar theke/amake bad diye, onek kichhu jibone jog dilam/ chhoto joto apon chhilo/ bahir kore die/ bhubantare apon kore nilam’( Now, I subtract me from myself and add so many things in my life/ I subtract all those trivial things that were very dear to me/now I embrace the whole world). In this context we are surely reminded of two incredible lines from Tagore – ‘Apon hote bahir hoye baire dara/buker majhe biswoloker pabi sara’(you come out of yourself/you will feel the pulse of the whole world in your heart). Salil almost echoes Tagore’s assertion.

In the second stanza, Salil goes on sharing what we can say, a universal feeling. The whole song is written in first person narration and Salil says that he gets joy to witness the joy of others and similarly he is pain stricken to experience the pain of others. Salil uses a beautiful phrase like ‘muktir jaal’(meshes of freedom) in this context and it is an oxymoron. Then Salil says that he has got everything by losing everything.
In the following section of the song the same spirit is retained by Salil. He says that he can stay anywhere and the sky might well be the roof over his head. Then comes the most significant sentence of the song where Salil goes on saying that he has got mother, brother and sister in each and every household. We get the culmination and the message is clear. Salil speaks of a ‘world consciousness’. The whole world seems to be one single place that is not divided by any race, religion, language or any political as well as geographical territory.

In this song Salil departs from conventional love theme of the then Bengali songs and becomes truly ‘romantic’. He tends to embrace the whole world that is not fragmented. He departs from individualistic love to a universal one. Apart from this, as a composer Salil experiments with orchestration in this song mainly in the second version. The use of piano in the prelude and interlude is simply outstanding. In the earlier version of 1961, we get a clear structure of waltz in an almost conventional way. In the latter version Salil plays with the rhythm structure and consciously deviated from the conventional waltz pattern. Piano becomes the key instrument in the orchestration of this song. There are harmony lines with the string section. The application of chords is also very significant. Salil uses relative minors as well as added chords. In this regard the observation of Avishek ganguly, noted music researcher, is extremely significant. According to him – Salil chowdhury can be regarded as one of the greatest influences on the later urban folk tradition through his extensive use of the back-up orchestra. In the words of Avishek: “orchestra achieved its much needed liberation” in the hands of Salil who accorded the accompanying instruments the status of voices capable of making statements to qualify or modify those made by the human voice.  

So, it can be said that this song also bears ample testimony of Salil’s all round departure.

**Aj Noy Gungun Gunjan Premer(1977):**

This song was also recorded by Lata Mangeshkar and it was released in the year of 1977(2126-3001). This particular song is immensely popular and so many artists sing it in numerous shows even today. The song has not gone into oblivion even after 46 years since its first release.

The song is immensely significant from the perspective we are analyzing here. In this song, from the very beginning Salil himself announces his departure from the convention. The first two lines of the song uphold Salil’s firm announcement as he says – ‘Aj noy gungun gunjan premer/chand phoool jochhonar gaan ar noy’(It is not the time to sing any love song/neither any song that speaks of moon, flowers or moonlit night). In next two lines Salil appeals to his beloved to make him free from the clutches of love as the whole world awaits him. From the very beginning, the tone of the song is well set and the objective is also absolutely clear.

The song as usual becomes a signature song of Salil Chowdhury as the song speaks of universal love. The song does harp on the string of humanity. In the second stanza Salil makes an appeal to be elevated from the individualistic perspective. He says –‘Khule dao janala asuk/sara biswer bedonar spondon’(Open the window and let the pulse of global sufferings come in). in the next line Salil compares the dust of the earth to the dust of sandal and he again makes an appeal to have a mark of that dust on the forehead.

In the last stanza of the song Salil enquires of those persons who are devoid of the basic needs like food, shelter and so on. Again we find Salil appealing ardently to stand by those subjugated people. The context is, therefore, crystal like clear and the canvas is broadest. The song, obviously written in Bengali, speaks of the whole world and entire humanity. It crosses the barrier of language and certainly does evoke a universal feeling.

The orchestration of this particular song bears the testimony of Salil’s infinite excellence. The guitar piece in the prelude sets the tone of the song and it is properly backed by string section. Just after the completion of the phrase by the guitar, the upward progression by the string section creates one kind of sensation. The string part becomes a little bit softer and the vocal starts. The prelude is beautifully crafted. With the vocal we get excellent counters or
bridges by flute. The first interlude is a shorter one with stroke instruments and it just paves the way for the following stanza. In the second stanza, when the first two lines are repeated in the vocal we get mesmeric harmony lines by the string part. The design of chords is sensational throughout the whole composition. When the vocal artist comes back to the sign line, there is a bridge of four notes that can be regarded as a signature part of this song. The second interlude is too melodious and the tone used surely provides the listeners with a global feeling. There is always an upward tendency in the progression of the musical pieces and it surely justifies the spirit of the song. If we listen to the song with keen attention the beautiful blending of the bass guitar with all the other instruments will be felt.

The song is a superb specimen of the maestro’s excellent musical craftsmanship. It is a treat to the ears and at the same time it gives us again a complete departure from all the conventional fixed concepts as well as ideas.

For an artist the word ‘departure’ seems to be the most important one. Proper departure makes an artist complete in the truest sense of the word. To be a trend setter one needs to have departure from fixed notions, conventions, set of principles, widely used techniques and so on. That is the only way to form an intrinsic ideology along with an artistic idiom. It is never possible to make a comprehensive study on the ‘artistic departure’ of a towering personality like Salil Chowdhury in such a short canvas. Five songs can never reflect his enormous potential as well as wide and versatile range. We just tried to make an overview of the subject. Finally, it can be said that the departure of Salil Chowdhury had never been forced. It was always conscious and at the same time spontaneous. The very name ‘Salil Chowdhury’ always stands for an institution.

Notes:

2. Ibid. p 519.
3. Kathopokothon/Salil Choudhury – Fan of Kabir Suman(YouTube channel) (visited on 08/06/2023 @ 5:54pm)
6. We shall overcome: the story behind the song – [https://www.kennedy.centre.org](https://www.kennedy.centre.org) (visited on 08/06/2023 @ 7:22pm)
7. Max Beckmann quote – [https://quotepark.com](https://quotepark.com) (visited on 08/06/2023 @ 8:20pm)
9. World of Salil Chowdhury – salilda.com (visited on 08/06/2023 @ 9:05pm)
10. Sumangala Damodaran, op.cit. p 120.
12. Ibid. p 30.
14. Bengal Famine of 1943 – [https://en.m.wikipedia.org](https://en.m.wikipedia.org) (visited on 09/06/2023 @ 4:05pm)
15. Sumangala Damodaran, op.cit. p 120.
17. Ibid. p 259.