

REVIEW

ART //

(CHANDRABATI ROY BARMAN AND
SUSHOMA DAS: FIELD RECORDINGS FROM SYLHET)



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Sound Travels

SUMANA ROY //

A NEW ALBUM CAPTURES THE STYLE AND
SUBSTANCE OF SYLHETI FOLK SONG

FIRST HEARD OF THE SINGER Moushumi Bhowmik at the house of the late Naxalite leader Charu Majumdar. It was 1996, and Charu's son Abhijit Majumdar, a popular professor at my provincial college in Siliguri, had been coaxed into singing at a farewell party for our batch. Majumdar—who taught *A Passage to India* in the classroom but also pointed me towards Gramsci, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg outside of it—chose a Jagjit Singh ghazal that likens a girl's life to a paper boat in a rain puddle. Later, he told me he ought to have sung Moushumi Bhowmik's '*Chhele Bela*' (Childhood). The next time I met him, in his austere apartment in Siliguri's old Mahanadapara neighbourhood, he put on a recording of Bhowmik's first album, *Tumio Cheel Hao* (You also become an eagle), released in 1994. Though the album didn't particularly stand out in terms of craft or originality, Bhowmik's voice was compelling; it was the kind of voice you might hear at a *michhil* (political rally), coming from a woman walking beside you, her fist raised to the sky, who becomes your hero for the moment. It was unmistakably the voice of a comrade.

The words of '*Chhele Bela*', which appears on *Tumio Cheel Hao*, struck a chord with me immediately. I had lived most of my life near the eastern Himalayas, and Bhowmik's song of mountains, bamboo groves, cold air and the smell of lime evoked a familiar image of childhood as it turned the everyday into recognisable tropes. In the years after the release of Bhowmik's album, this idiom came to be used by a whole generation of Bengali artists, fostering a regional tradition of writing songs that fetishised nature almost to the point of making it pornographic. Eventually, the lyrics and imagery of such songs would lose much of their effect; the flowers (*palash* and *shimool*, *shiuli* and *kash phool*), the fruit (mango and *gondhoraj lebu*) and much else, would come to convey postcard nostalgia and an acutely anachronistic romanticism. It seemed that as long as such idyllic tropes appeared in the *adhunik* (modern) song, all was well in Bengal. Bhowmik, who began her career in the early 1990s singing about some of these same things, would eventually go looking for a grittier authenticity in the folk songs of the villages and small towns of Bangladesh, West Bengal and Assam.

When Majumdar asked me that afternoon what I made of Moushumi (he referred to Bhowmik by first name), I distinctly remember calling her a traveller. At the time, aged twenty-one, everyone seemed better travelled than me. In '*Chhele Bela*', Bhowmik sang:

*Aami khujchhi khujchhi tomar thikana
Bonay bonay ghurey klanto
Tobu tomakay pachhina*

(I've looked, I've looked for your address
I'm tired of roaming the forests
But I can't find your address)

Two decades after *Tumio Cheel Hao*, Bhowmik is still a wanderer. She and her collaborator, the sound designer Sukanta Majumdar, have for the past ten years been working on a project called The Travelling Archive, recording folk artists in and around Bengal. This February, they released an album titled *Chandrabati Roy Barman and Sushoma Das: Field Recordings from Sylhet* under the Travelling Archive Records label. The album is the first in a planned series of folk song recordings, and it presents two octogenarian singers, Roy Barman and Das, both from the Sylhet region in north-eastern Bangladesh's Surma valley—home to mosques, mausoleums and a celebrated Sufi culture.

But rather than championing the romantic ideal of solo travel, famously expressed in Rabindranath Tagore's song '*Ekla Chalo Re*' (Walk Alone), *Field Recordings* celebrates the acts of travelling together and sharing marches. On the Facebook page for the Travelling Archive, Bhowmik and Majumdar capture this spirit of camaraderie in a kind of manifesto: "*Shawbder shawndhaney, pawthey ghathey, amader shawngey aapni o?* (In a quest for words, on roads and riverbanks, won't you join us in our search?)"

Travel is a recurrent theme in folk music, and also the very means by which such music is disseminated. Another project that explores the links between folk music and travel, one mentioned on the Travelling Archive website, is the writer and filmmaker Ruchir Joshi's documentary *Egaro Mile* (Eleven Miles), which focuses on Bengal's troubadours, the Bauls. The film, which is subtitled "*Bhromon Diary*" (Travel Diary), opens with a text scrolling down the screen:

An Old Story:

A man walks down a path under a blazing sun.
His stomach is bloated, taut as a drum. He feels someone is playing a joke on him and he laughs out loud. He slaps his stomach.
The sound that bounces out makes the birds fly out trees.
His laughter turns into song and he drums on his belly to the beat of his own walk.

I was often reminded of *Egaro Mile* while listening to *Field Recordings*. The album comes accompanied by a seventy-four-page booklet, one part of which is in English and the other in Bengali. In it, Bhowmik and Majumdar say that "sound is our means to learn about matters such as ... the flow of musical knowledge down generations in an oral culture ... about the end and birth of traditions and genres. In the course of our journey we have learned that the more acutely we listen, the more we hear." Considered together, the film and the album suggest an interplay in folk music

OPPOSITE PAGE: Visitors walking to the Joydev Kenduli mela in Birbhum, West Bengal, where hundreds of Bauls, fakirs and kirtanias perform for a week every year at various ashrams.



COURTESY THE TRAVELLING ARCHIVE

Folk singers Chandrabati Roy Barman (left) and Sushoma Das in Topkhana, Sylhet. As part of the Travelling Archive project, Moushumi Bhowmik and Sukanta Majumdar recorded several sessions with them between 2006 and 2012.

between rootedness and wandering. The film, with its recurrent images of feet moving across the screen, offers a good counterpoint to the music of Roy Barman and Das. The lives of the travelling Bauls contrast with the home-bound lives of these two female singers in Sylhet, and yet they are all engaged in a common endeavour—that of keeping alive folk music traditions.

SUSHOMA DAS AND CHANDRABATI ROY BARMAN were born within a year of each other in Sunamganj district in Sylhet. Das was born in 1930, to a family of musicians in Perua village. The booklet that accompanies *Field Recordings* tells us that she “has hardly ever gone anywhere outside Sylhet, and even when she left her village many years after marriage to come to live in Sylhet town in 1973 ... she continued to live the same life and sing in the same style as she did in the village.” By contrast, Roy Barman, who was born in 1931 in Jagannathpur village, uses “an interesting combination of styles and musical motifs ... she might be singing a purely traditional song sung by many in the village, [when] suddenly you will hear a phrase or movement that could only be plucked from the commercial recordings of that time [the 1950s and 1960s].” On one track in *Field Recordings*, Roy Barman tells us that she learned to sing as a child by listening to her grandmother, to other

We hear the women singing, forgetting lines, prodding one another, completely indifferent to the wrinkles in their voices.

women singers around her, and also to gramophone records. This last influence ensures that “Chandrabati’s style no longer remains confined to her village or community,” the archivists conclude.

Bhowmik and Majumdar first met Das through Roy Barman, in Sylhet town in 2006. At the time, Das was seventy-seven years old. Over the next six years, Bhowmik and Majumdar held several recording sessions with the two singers. On *Field Recordings*, these are presented as “audio essays,” which include singing from Roy Barman and Das, narration from Bhowmik and Majumdar, and conversations between the four of them.

The tenderness of the relationship between the archivists and the singers is revealed from time to time, as when Bhowmik and Majumdar, allowing breaks in the tracks, nudge Das and Roy Barman to chat while they rest and chew paan. The archivists have even presented recordings where the singers, whom they fondly address on the

album as *mashima* (maternal aunt), pause after forgetting particular lyrics, or break songs off mid-track to catch their breath. These audio essays, then, are not just a music historian's archive of folk songs, but something far more delightful. More than an anthology of Sylheti folk music, the album is a conversation, a history of singing; it brings us the noises of machines and men, people and prayer, all of which combine to evoke the sound of Sylhet.

The album is also a historical chronicle of styles and songs from the singers' youth. Track 14, for example, presents the differences between Roy Barman and Das with great sensitivity, and shows us the effects of time on the singers and their music. Majumdar says, "Sushoma *mashima's* voice is timeless. Chandrabati *mashima*, whom we are recording only at the outset of the twenty-first century, sings like the female artists of the 1940s and 1950s, such as Kamala Jharia, Angurbala, Indubala or Uttara Devi." This narration is complemented by a snippet of Jharia, a renowned singer, singing 'Chhi Chhi Maharaj'—a kirtan that she recorded in 1950, early in her career.

In his 1966 essay 'Srihotter loksangeeter sur-bichar' (An appraisal of Sylheti folk songs), Hemanga Biswas, a singer and collector of folk songs and also an important researcher on Bengali folk music, described how the subject matter of the Sylheti folk song shifted gradually over time, from the literal to the metaphorical. "[Sylheti folk] had a primeval form," he wrote, "the pain and prose of reality, the river and the boat, *prakriti* and *prem* (nature and love). Philosophy came much later: the river became the river of life, the boat became the body."

Track 23 offers us a peek into this evolution; it is an example of how a song about human beings can develop to take on divine and mythological concerns. The liner notes tell us: "The chorus is intriguing. They were singing the song of Manasa and Behula and Lokkhindar"—human characters from Bangla stories—"and suddenly in the middle of it they start singing about 'Sunar' or 'Sonar manush,' or the Golden One, referring to Chaitanya, the fifteenth-century Bhakti saint of Bengal."

Religion and spirituality have a definite place in *Field Recordings*. The various sub-genres of folk song in this album—the *goshtho*, the *hori gaan*, the *panchali*, the *dhamail* and even the *bichched gaan*—are all thematically rooted in religion. Biswas writes in his 1966 essay that "the folk tradition of Sylhet displays two religious traditions—one is Vaishnavism, the other Sufi." The Sufi strain, however, is missing from this album because of the singers' choices and the nature of their oeuvre; most of the sub-genres here invoke Radha and Krishna.

Singing these sub-genres is traditionally a communal affair in Sylhet. On Track 5, as Roy Barman sings "*Nithur nago he banshi bajayo na* (Cruel lover, please don't play the flute)," we can hear other musicians and listeners clapping and sometimes cheering in the background. In their renditions of this and other Radha-Krishna songs, Das and Roy Barman's high notes resonate with the longing of the lovers, while the songs' incantatory refrains indulge the spirit of separation and desire, of *biraha*.



COURTESY THE TRAVELLING ARCHIVE

Singers Chandrabati Roy Barman and Rehana (right) at an informal music session in 2006 in Uposahar, Sylhet.

While all the devotional songs on *Field Recordings* follow discernible structures, there is also evidence here of how spontaneous and improvisatory, how free, folk songs can be. Biswas tells us in his essay that in the *dhamail*, a song form customarily reserved for women, singers usually compose lyrics on the spot. Track 4 is an example, and on it Bhowmik and Majumdar tell us of Roy Barman and Das's special fervour for such songs: "Chandrabati's eldest son, Bhabatosh Roy Barman Rana, says, 'Ma just loves to sing and dance the dhamail through the night, especially at weddings. Even now at this age. I try to hold her back, find all sorts of excuses, but she is simply unstoppable.'"

ONE PARTICULARLY ENDEARING ASPECT of these audio essays, in a culture obsessed with polish and youthfulness, is their unadorned quality—we hear the women singing, forgetting lines, prodding one another, completely indifferent to the wrinkles in their voices. The notes to Track 13, in the album's booklet, tell us, "There is a poignant moment in this recording when Chandrabati forgets her lines and pauses to think ... Sushoma gives the cue and Chandrabati carries on."

The sounds of everyday life seep into the recordings as the interviewers continue to make space for an aleatory richness. In one conversation, Bhowmik asks Das if she has ever made a recording before, and so initiates the following conversation.

Bhowmik: You never recorded any album or cassette, did you?

Das: No.

Bhowmik: Never? So when and where did you both [Das and Roy Barman] meet?

Das: At the radio.

Bhowmik: Must be a long time ago?

Das: From the days of the radio.

Rana (Roy Barman's son): First when?

Das: Which year of the Bengali calendar?

Roy Barman: '78.

Das: I came for the first time to your house in 1978. But before that ...

Rana: When was the first time that you sang for the radio?

Das: In which year of the Bengali calendar did you get into the radio, *didi*?

Roy Barman: I came in, well, before the war of independence [1971].

And so it continues, the questioning and the innocent replies, the answers channelling the meandering quality of a winter afternoon *adda*.

Such small details accumulate over the course of *Field Recordings* to give listeners a holistic understanding of the lives of Roy Barman and Das. Listening to them, I was reminded of another singer from Sylhet, Bijoya Chaudhuri, and her memoir, *Sylhet Konyar Atmokatha* (2004). In his foreword to the book her son, the writer Amit Chaudhuri, says, “She didn’t sit down to tell me these stories; telling us about her life was never her intention; but some incident or remark made at the time would spark off a connection or a memory, and she would recount it to my father ... in the midst of other things, [with] shorthand, off-hand, improvisatory retellings of the past.” Chaudhuri’s observations about his mother, about her refusal to “recognise the usual distinctions we make between what is important and unimportant, what is peripheral and significant,” echo in Bhowmik and Majumdar’s affectionate questioning of the two singers from Sylhet. The matter-of-factness with which these women see themselves and their status as artists is inescapable.

Das: Let me tell you something. I was an artist once, but I am no longer an artist. Also, my time is over. I don’t have that kind of energy anymore. You need strength to sing.

Roy Barman: Need strength.

Das: Can’t bring the breath back. Is that what you call an artist? Now when we sing for the radio, we sing with the help of instruments. The instruments prop us up.

Chaudhuri, Das and Roy Barman all lack a censoring filter in their sharing of information about themselves, their families and the tradition of music they belong to. They also share a refusal to claim to be extraordinary. Chaudhuri writes in the first paragraph of her memoir simply that she hopes “These details of my insignificant life might become valuable to [my family].” Listening to Roy Barman and Das, and reading Chaudhuri’s memoir, we become aware that their selfhood is a room open to a corridor, always on the verge of spilling over to include a larger collective—their “I” is closer to an “us.”

THE DOMESTIC, unadorned quality of the recordings on *Field Recordings* can make us forget that there is an agenda behind the way they are presented. In a conversation with the scholar and academic Prasanta Chakravarty, published in the journal *Humanities Underground* in 2013, Bhowmik said about her work, “I am not for a moment saying that I have no presence or no sense of presentation. See, the way I was brought up—in the climate of



COURTESY AMIT CHAUDHURI

Bijoya Chaudhuri, another singer from Sylhet, wrote a memoir, *Sylhet Konyar Atmokatha*, that, like Das and Roy Barman’s stories, is marked by a lack of censoring filter.

Naxalite politics and early feminism—styling oneself spare and stark came naturally. To remain austere—*nirabharan*—was very natural. That streak has remained.”

Bhowmik’s mention of “the climate of Naxalite politics” is no coincidence. Archiving folk songs in West Bengal, Bangladesh, Tripura and adjacent regions has primarily been a leftist enterprise. Many archivists, as well as many folk artists themselves, sometimes view with suspicion the projects of professional music composers like Salil Choudhury and Sachin Dev Burman, who both collected folk songs from India’s north-east and brought influences from those traditions into popular Indian music. Critics have accused such composers of misguidedly “civilising” or “cleaning up” the folk song, and thus creating, in the areas where folk music traditions still survive, an underlying fear of the outsider, and of the song collector as missionary.

In his 2009 essay ‘Paper-aesthetics and Politics,’ the singer and researcher Subha Prasad Nandi Majumdar describes an argument that occurred at a conference organised by the Indian People’s Theatre Association in Mumbai in 1948. That argument between Hemanga Biswas and Salil Choudhury held in it some of the aesthetic tensions at the heart of the journey of the “people’s music”—out of the village and onto the screen, into the city, and into the mainstream. Biswas and Choudhury took opposing views of how “people’s culture” should be preserved in popular music. Biswas “was in favour of relying only on folk tunes for mass songs with an eye to take it to the peasant masses.” Choudhury, who had begun scoring music for films in Kolkata and Mumbai, disagreed—he wanted to “blend folk tunes with the harmony of Western music.” Choudhury criticised Biswas’s near-complete rejection of the West, while Biswas accused Choudhury of “propounding formalism in people’s art.”

In Shyamal Chakraborty’s Bangla book on the work of Dev Burman, *Shawtobawrshey Sachin Dev Burman* (2006), the suspicion of outside influences in folk music resurfaces,

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sometimes with enough strength to border on xenophobia. Chakraborty quotes an essay by Khaled Chowdhury, a reputed authority on folk songs: “The caricature of folk songs really began when the bhadralok song collector decided to make these folk songs acceptable to the educated classes. And yet there are numerous examples of folk songs that have not been manicured, those that were produced by Abbasudin, Keshab Burman, Pratima Barua, Sachin Dev Burman.” Overlooking the criticism Dev Burman had faced for employing folk influences in popular music, Chowdhury instead praised the composer for staying true to the original tone and temper of folk music even when he moved on to composing light, raag-based pieces in Bangla and Hindi for mainstream audiences.

An anecdote in a 2001 essay by the musician and writer Brajen Biswas illustrates how Dev Burman managed to strike this balance between the two worlds. “Sachin-karta [Dev Burman] has come down to Calcutta from Bombay,” Biswas writes. “An adda is on at his South End Park house. There are lots of people from the music industry. Sachin-karta is playing the harmonium while speaking to his guests. Suddenly he stops everyone and says, ‘Shakti [the film director Shakti Samanta] is making a film. He asked me to compose the music. He also added that I will have to score the music for a ‘sex-song.’” Biswas then describes Dev Burman’s recollection of the story behind that song. Many years ago, Dev Burman says, he had gone to visit a man in a village. He stood outside the man’s house and called his name many times, but there was no response. Finally, the man came out and begged Dev Burman’s forgiveness. His son was getting married that day, he said, and he was helping him put on his wedding attire. The groom, Dev Burman shortly discovered, was a little boy. A young girl who was playing *ekka-dokka*—hopsotch—nearby began taunting the little boy-groom with a tune:

*Kalkay jaabey shoshur bari
Ahladey khaaye gawragori
Dekhbo toray praanbhorey shundori*

(She’ll go to her in-laws’ place tomorrow
Even the thought of that makes her happy
I’ll watch your beauty to my heart’s content)

For his “sex-song,” Burman decreased the speed of that tune, and Biswas remembers him saying, “I’ll ask Kishore [the playback singer Kishore Kumar] to sing it slowly. And to breathe heavily.” That’s how a folk song from a village in Tripura became the classic ‘*Roop tera mastana*’ in the film *Aradhana* (1969).

We hear echoes of the debate over the contradictory approaches to folk music on Track 19 of *Field Recordings*, when Das and a male singer named Anjan Dutta, who, the notes mention, was once attached to the left-leaning cultural organisation Udichi, sing different versions of ‘*Amar bondhu re koi pabo shokhi go*,’ a *bichched gaan* about parting and separation by the fêted Baul musician Shah Abdul Karim. Dutta sings Karim’s song first, incorporating the many different ways it has been sung over time by the many Bangla artists who have covered it. Das lashes out against Dutta’s rendition, saying that isn’t how the song “used to be sung.” Then she sings it her way, in what she believes is the song’s original style, and says, “Now they sing this song in *Ingraji shur* [English style].” Implicit in this statement is a criticism of the manner in which urban Bangla bands have appropriated Karim’s classic. Das then proposes a punishment for them: “They should be whacked with the broom. What do they know of music?”

And yet, despite such disagreements, a lack of artistic egotism, together with a belief in the collective ownership of songs, allows Das, Dutta and Roy Barman to coexist in the same artistic tradition. Those attitudes have allowed folk music to travel to new audiences and to return, in changed form, to old listeners and singers.

AS AN URBANITE VERY FAR removed from the rural context of folk music—my listening experience was punctuated by ambulance sirens, car horns and telephone ringtones—I wonder who constitutes the audience of the “authentic” folk song today? The metropolitan’s appreciation for folk songs is perhaps a variation of the armchair adventurer’s desire to reconnect with nature. It is a bit like our affair with the ethnic. In a culture where shopping for folk songs is analogous to buying a handloom sari—a feel-good activism that benefits only the buyer’s conscience—what is the role of a project like Travelling Archive Records? Is the Travelling Archive essentially a bhadralok project? Is this another turn towards the domestication of the folk song, the creating of a museum of sounds, as it were?

The purpose of the Travelling Archive is, in fact, simple: to collect folk songs and then return them to the people—a seemingly tautological enterprise, but one so necessary that I wonder why it hasn’t ever been done before. For what is the folk song if it does not live among its people?

One afternoon in March, I found myself standing beside an aged, dhoti-clad man in Dhyandbindu, a bookstore in Kolkata’s College Square where *Field Recordings* is available for purchase. He pointed to the album and said something in Sylheti, a language that the sales assistant perhaps did not understand. He was asking for the price, and when I answered on behalf of the sales assistant, he smiled at me and said, “I’ll carry it for my wife in Silchar. The Sylheti folk song should also go back to the Sylhetis.” I smiled, took the liner notes from the album and showed him the last line: “After a while,” the notes said, narrating an incident from the end of the recording project, “Sushoma mashima asked if it was possible to listen to the recordings. “Of course,” Sukanta Majumdar replied, ‘I’ll play it for you.’” ■