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SATIRE AS CRITIQUE OF CONTEMPORARY VALUES: READING SPATIO-TEMPORALITY IN SELECT LYRICS OF THE BENGALI MUSIC BAND CHANDRABINDU

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Satire in literature, from the time of its origin in ancient Greece, has played an important role as an upholder of human and social values. Satire performs this function by directing the tropes of ridicule and mockery towards those who fail to live up to the standard or those who deviate from the normative ideals either unwittingly or by choice. The lyrics of the songs of 'Chandrabinu', a contemporary Bengali music band, might be said to follow this age-old tradition of satire. Their lyrics stand apart from that of their contemporaries not only by the sheer intensity of satiric tone but also by the range of their intertextuality. The lyrics of 'Chandrabinu' critique contemporary values by employing maneuvered 'shifts' in space and time in the course of their narratives. With unexpected temporal distortions and diverse juxtaposition of physical, mythological and literary spaces, the construction of their lyrics becomes postmodern pastiches. This paper intends to undertake a reading of select lyrics of Chandrabindu to understand how the dynamics of shift in time and space produce a satirical critique of contemporary values.

As Dr. Samuel Johnson in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) defines satire as "A poem in which wickedness or folly is *censured*" [my italics] (Johnson, McAdam, & Milne, 1964, p.156), and Alexander Pope eulogizes it in his *Epilogue to the Satires* (1738) as a "...sacred *weapon* [my italics]! Left for Truth's defence" (Pope, 1848, p. 204), we tend to realize that satire as social corrective has an element of aggression in it. The aggressive intent in satire is directed against folly or human imperfections or some other forms of aberration from the

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normative that the satirist deems fit for his object of attack. “The satirist is thus a kind of self-appointed guardian of standards, ideals and truth; of moral as well as aesthetic values ...who takes it upon himself to correct, censure and ridicule the follies and vices of society and thus to bring contempt and derision upon aberrations from a desirable and civilized norm”(Cuddon, 1994, p.780). The satirist makes use of the comic for purposes of attack, and all elements of the comic are “welded together into the shaping of a weapon” (Berger, 2014, p.146). Judged from this point of view, Chandrabindu’s lyrics ‘construct’ the musical band as ‘satirist’. To put it in another way, Chandrabindu uses satire through their lyrics to attack the moral and social values of the contemporary times. The ‘lack’/ ‘excess’ in modern existence that their lyrics foreground obviously hints at the values and discourses that contemporary society accepts as ideal. There is a scathing irony in Chandrabindu’s lyrics that cuts deep into the Bengali urban middle-class pretense of superiority. Avner Ziv (1984), in his *Personality and Sense of Humor*, has theorized the role and function of the ‘satirist’ as: “The satirist is not content with the world as it is; or, more precisely, he is not content with certain things in it, which to him seem black. In his attack he blackens them yet further, in the hope that after blushing with due shame they will turn white” (p.40). A reading of the lyrics of Chandrabindu position them exactly in this schema of Avner Ziv.



Plate 1

The cover of the first music album entitled ‘চ’ [Cha] of the Bengali Music Band Chandrabindu

The basic trope that Chandrabindu employs in their lyrics is the *shifts* of time and space in the narrative frame to critique the contemporary value indices. With unexpected temporal distortions and diverse juxtaposition of physical,

mythological and literary spaces, the construction of their lyrics becomes an instance of postmodern pastiche. This paper proposes to read the lyrics of two of their well-known songs 'দুনিয়া ডট কম' ['World.com'] and 'ব্রহ্মা জানেন' ['Brahma knows it All!'] to understand how they have merged space and time to foreground their satire on the contradictory *values* of modern contemporaneity.

The first song 'দুনিয়া ডট কম' is from the album 'চ' [*Cha*]. 'Cha' can be the sixth Bengali consonant; or, it can simultaneously be a colloquial Bengali expression for the term 'Let's go'. What Chandrabindu says regarding the title of this particular album is interestingly absurd: "চন্দ্রবিন্দুর চ, যা বেড়ালের তালব্য শ নয়, রুমালের মা-ও নয়, তাই চন্দ্রবিন্দুর চ" ("The 'Cha' of Chandrabindu, which is neither the palatal 'Sha' of a cat, nor the 'Ma' of a handkerchief, is just the 'Cha' of Chandrabindu") (Chandrabindu, 2001, *Cover Jacket*). This statement reminds us of Sukumar Ray's classic 'nonsense' story হ য ব র ল [*Ha Ja Ba Ra La*], where we find the character Cat saying: "চন্দ্রবিন্দুর চ, বেড়ালের তালব্য শ, রুমালের মা –হল চশমা" [The 'Cha' of Chandrabindu, the palatal 'Sha' of a cat, the 'Ma' of a handkerchief – together they make a pair of spectacles"] (Ray, 2001, p.129). Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, counts 'fantasy' as an essential component of satire: "Two things ...are essential to satire; one is wit or humour founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack" (Frye, 1957, p. 224). As Chandrabindu tries to step into Ray's shoes by deliberately representing everyday reality as fantastical, they inevitably point at the paradoxes inherent in our present-day existence. Such an endeavour to situate themselves in the tradition of satiric Bengali literature and culture is seldom found in other contemporary singers and it is this aspect which makes the lyrics of Chandrabindu worthy of critical attention.

Shifts in time and space are employed from the very beginning of this lyric "দুনিয়া ডট কম":

“যা বেবি দৌড়ে যাবি শিখবি মাল্টিমীডিয়া
গুবলু গাবলু স্বপ্নে পেল ডব্লু ডব্লু আইডিয়া
ই-মেলে যুক্ত হল হনলুলু হলদিয়া
দুনিয়া ডট কম, দুনিয়া ডট কম, দুনিয়া ডট কম, নম নমহঃ ”

C'mon baby, you've got to rush to learn Multimedia,
the privileged ones have already dreamt of the idea,
e-mail now connects Honolulu to Haldia,
world.com we salute you!

Shifts in space – from a physical rushing towards computer literacy (“যা বেবি দৌড়ে যাবি শিখবি মাল্টিমীডিয়া”) to dreams (“গুবলু গাবলু স্বপ্নে পেল ডব্লু ডব্লু আইডিয়া”) and to the virtual space of the Internet (“ই-মেলে যুক্ত হল হনলুলু হলদিয়া”) – posit this lyric in the modernist

(as well as the postmodernist) literary landscape. The entire line: “দুনিয়া ডট কম, দুনিয়া ডট কম, দুনিয়া ডট কম, নম নমহঃ”, the refrain in this lyric in the form of a mechanical intonation: works as a satiric signifier. A hallelujah of sorts, it mocks at the convergence of the entire world’s diversity to a singular signifier – “দুনিয়া ডট কম” [‘world.com’]. The next line: “অরুণ প্রাতে ফ্লপি হাতে জলদি চল [“Make hurry this new dawn, and march with a floppy disc of your own”] is a parody of the rejuvenating clarion call of Kazi Nazrul Islam’s:

“চল চল চল,
উর্ধ্ব গগনে বাজে মাদল,
নিম্নে উতলা ধরণী-তল,
অরুণ প্রাতের তরুণ দল,
চল রে চল রে চল”

March, March, March
By a drum beat to a heavenly height
From earth beneath and soil’s blight
Youth rise in the dawn’s light,
Left, now, now, right!
March, March, March (Wikipedia, 2019, December 3)

This is a fine example of temporal and spatial distortion that foregrounds Chandrabindu’s critique of the computer savvy generation with different priorities and agendas. ‘Floppy disc’ acts as a signifier of changed times and priorities (though not always for the better, as the tone of the line suggests). A floppy disc, presently, is an outdated form of storage device—the album *Cha* was released back in 2001. Hence, ‘floppy disc’ can be said to represent the first decade of the 21st century when Bengal was going through a paradigm shift in terms of technological advancement.

“বাউডুলে ছেলেপুলে মাউস ছুঁলে ফাস্টেক্লাস
বকলে বাবা শিখবি জাভা, সুমাত্রা বা সি প্লাস প্লাস
রণে বনে ব্রেনে ড্রেনে যদি প্রাণে বাঁচতে চাস
দুনিয়া ডট কম, দুনিয়া ডট কম, দুনিয়া ডট কম নম নমহঃ”

The care-free youths now enjoy a first-class life, courtesy the mouse-pad’s magic touch.
Due to family pressure the boys get trained in Java, Sumatra or C ++.
Learning computers is the only way to save one’s life in war, in jungle, or in brain drain,
World.com we salute you!

The signifiers “বাউডুলে ছেলেপুলে” [“the care-free youths”] and “মাউস ছুঁলে ফাস্টেক্লাস” [“this first-class life is a gift from mouse-pad’s magic touch”] are noteworthy as

they foreground the middle class proclivity to make their children computer literate to take advantage of the newly-created professional opportunities offered by the IT industry during the first decade of the 21st century. The shift in ‘space’ proffered by the signifiers “শিখবি জাভা, সুমাত্রা বা সি++”, only makes the satire more concentrated. The very next line “রণে বনে ব্রেনে ড্রেনে যদি প্রাণে বাঁচতে চাস”, is a parody of the popular saying of a prominent Bengali religious preacher: “রণে বনে জঙ্গলে যেখানেই বিপদে পড়িবে, আমাকে স্মরণ করিও, আমিই রক্ষা করিব” [“Whether in battlefield, or in wilderness, wherever you’re in danger, call me, I’d save you”]. This again is a shift in space and time, foregrounding in the process a mockery of the Bengali middle-class that has given technology the place of religion for fulfilment of newer ambitions. The signifiers “ব্রেনে ড্রেনে” also mediate the vision of the readers/listeners to the contentious issue of ‘brain drain’ from third world countries like India to the countries of the first world. These signifiers are closely related to the market-driven cultural and social constructs of ‘status’ and ‘respectability’ that an NRI status provides to the Bengali middle class: “ডলার পেন্স ব্যাঙ্ক ব্যালান্স বড্ড ডাঁট” [“dollar and pence, bank balance – arrogance!”]. More intense in satiric tone are the next two lines of the lyric:

“ছুটবে ঘোড়া ল্যাংড়া খোঁড়া
কিনবি তোরা এক্সট্রা ঠ্যাং
গেল ভেসে কম্পু রোগে জেনারেশন উতপটাং

The lame horse will run with a limp,
Buy him an extra leg,
what if this weird generation
gets carried away in computer craze?

The image is potent – of a three-legged horse rushing on, a symbol of time and shifting spaces. It is the story of our generation – our pathetic efforts to make the best out of any context that is foregrounded by the absurd proposition of buying an extra leg for the horse. The next line: “গেল ভেসে কম্পু রোগে জেনারেশন উতপটাং”, by its fine use of the image “গেল ভেসে” [“getting carried away”] directs the attention of the readers/listeners to the flux of space and time; hinting at the nihilism latent in postmodern psyche. This nihilism is corroborated by the final words of the lyric “মা দেখা দে, নয়তো টাকা দে” [“Mother goddess either descend on earth, or make me rich”] which is followed by a phantom laughter. This laughter again acts as the narratorial signifier of the satire directed towards the entire gamut of Bengali middle-class aspiration, the line being a parody of the words of the Bengali religious visionary Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

The next lyric taken up for reading in this paper is ‘ব্রহ্মা জানেনা!’ [‘Brahma Knows it All!'] from the album ডাকনাম [Nickname] which was released in the year 2002. The title of the lyric, which is also the refrain in this lyric, expands *time* to a cosmic

proportion by referring to Brahma, the creator of the universe in Hindu mythology. Significantly too, the first line of this lyric: “ব্রহ্মা জানেন গোপন কন্মটি” [“The secret act itself, Brahma knows it all!”], acts as a signifier of the latent sexuality in Bengali middle-class psyche. The tone of satire is all but pre-eminent. The lyric of this song “ব্রহ্মা জানেন” stands apart in Chandrabindu’s oeuvre by the sheer range of its intertextuality. The very first words: “আষাঢ় মাসে প্রথম দিনে” [“on the first day of ‘Ashadha’ (the first month of the Bengali rainy season)”] connect Chandrabindu’s song to Verse no. 2 of the great Sanskrit classic *মেঘদূতম্* [*Meghadūtam* or *The Cloud Messenger*] of Kālidāsa:

“आषाढस्य प्र(श)थमदिवसे मेघमाश्लिष्टसानुं
वप्रक्रीडापरिणतगजप्रेक्षणीयं ददर्श ॥२॥”
“āṣāḍhasya prathamadivase meghamāśliṣṭa-sānuṃ
vaprakrīḍāpariṇatagajapreṣaṇīyaṃ dadarśa” ॥2॥
 (“Introductory Sanskrit” n.d.)

But then, on the first day of the month of Ashadha
he saw a cloud embracing
The mountaintop, like an elephant bent down low,
playfully butting his brow. (Kalidasa & Reddy, 2017, p.2)

The shift in space and time is significant – the readers/listeners are transported from a common day in the month of ‘Ashadha’ in Bengal to the medieval world of Kālidāsa’s Ujjain and from there to the imaginary landscapes of the “holy forest ashrams/ On Rama’s Mountain” (Kalidasa & Reddy, 2017, p. 2) where a lovelorn Yaksha (a Servant of Lord Kubera) is serving his banishment. Time and space shifts again in the very next words, “অ্যাডাম আর ইভ” referring to the Christian mythological time-space of Adam and Eve. We find the brilliant convergence of the mythical with the contemporary where the mythical Garden of Eden merges with the ‘Eden Gardens’ in Kolkata, one of the few spaces in the city where the lovers are left to themselves: “ইভ এনেছে আপেল কিনে / অ্যাডাম গপ গপ খেল টিফিনে” [“Eve’s bought an apple and Adam starts to gobble”]. This tone of demythification continues in the next two lines of the lyric:

“নীল রঙা শাড়ি চলেছে নিঙাড়ি, কে অভিসারী ব্রহ্মা জানেন,
কুঞ্জ দ্যাখে ঘড়ি টেনশনে শ্রী হরি, তেড়ে আসে নেড়ী, ব্রহ্মা জানেন”

who’s there by the river in wet blue saree,
who’s the secret lover in bower – Sri Hari, Brahma knows it all!
who’s facing street dogs at an odd hour,
who looks on at his watch, tense as he’s, Brahma knows it all!

Time and space shifts here to another mythical landscape, this time to that of the *Vaishnava Padavali*, in the rendition of the medieval Bengali poet Chandidasa only to merge again with the contemporary:

“চলে নীল শাড়ী নিঙ্গাড়ি নিঙ্গাড়ি
পরান সহিত মোর।”

Oh, how she goes away in her wet blue clothes
dripping onto the ground!
Oh, how she wrings her clothes
and my heart with it! (Yamuna Kinare, n.d.)

The parody of the Radha-Krishna relationship, and by extension on all the lovers, rests on this merger of the mythical and the modern ethos. The ‘কুঞ্জ’ [‘bower’] where Sri Hari is waiting might very well be any obscure street corner infested with street dogs in any town or city. In this lyric we get an almost inventory-like reference to various legendary pairs of lovers. As, in the next two lines, the landscape shifts to Verona in Italy, and to Shakespeare’s rendering of the Romeo-Juliet story:

“ব্যালকনিতে এসে কে স্বচ্ছ রাত্রি বেশে
‘রোমিও জমিও হে’ ডায়লগ ঝাড়ে বাগান যেঁসে, ব্রহ্মা জানেন”

Who leans on the balcony in filmy night dress,
“Darling Romeo! Make the most of it” – makes this address,
Brahma knows it all!

In Chandrabindu’s contemporary retelling of the famous ‘Balcony Scene’ of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet tries to seduce Romeo in a ‘filmy night dress’; and this makes the gibe at the sexual hypocrisy of the Bengali middle-class even more potent. The next lines foreground the sexual fantasies in the middle-class more directly:

“এই শ্রাবণ মাসে অবোর ধারে নার্গিস-রাজ আড্ডা মারে
তাই পলকা ছাতা গেল উড়ে, ডাকবাংলো একটু দূরে
তারপর ব্রহ্মা জানেন”

Nargis romances with Raj in the pouring rain of Shraban,
the light umbrella flies away with a gust of wind,
a bungalow appears at a distance,
what follows– Brahma knows it all!

This contextual shift from Radha-Krishna of *Vaishnava Padavali* to Romeo-Juliet of Shakespeare to Raj Kapoor and Nargis in the film ‘Sree 420’, and then again to the present times in: “তন্ত্রা, সামপ্লেস এলস-এ / কে লীলাখেলা খেলসে [“Who’s busy in love games in ‘Tantra’ or ‘Someplace Else’ ”] is noteworthy, because of the satirical emphasis on ‘লীলাখেলা’ [‘love games’]. Again, from this contemporary time-space of

popular night clubs ('Tantra' and 'Someplace Else') signifying the heady nightlife in Kolkata, Chandrabindu flings us back to the famous Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen starrer *Saptapadi* with the famous motorcycle ride and the equally famous song in a fantastic parody, lashing at the sexual fantasy in Bengali psyche associated with the Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen pair.

“এই পথ যদি না শেষ হয়
তবে কেমন হতো – বলতো?”

What if this road doesn't end?
C'mon, oh, tell me!(Kar, 1961)

The dreamy sensuality of the film song changes into a sharp wink in Chandrabindu's lyric:

“এই পথ যদি না শেষ হয়, তো বাইক চড়লে বেশ হয়
কি জড়িস কেস হয়, ব্রহ্মা জানেন!

What if this road doesn't end, let's ride bike then
what hell then is set loose - Brahma knows it all!”

The return to the present is also constructed through another inter-textual reference: “এই ভুবন জোড়া ফাঁদে কে পার্কে বসে কাঁদে” [“Who cries there in the park when the whole world's entrapped?”] reminding one of Rabindranath Tagore's: “প্রেমের ফাঁদ পাতা ভুবনে, কে কোথা ধরা পড়ে কে জানে? [“Who doesn't surrender to love when the whole world's entrapped?”] (Tagore, 2005, p. 411). This inter-textual hodgepodge situates Chandrabindu's lyrics in the postmodern literary landscape, where the 'High' and the 'Low' cultural discourses converge on a single narrative frame to provide a critique of our contemporary values.

As we tumble through these myriad 'times' and 'spaces', we find Chandrabindu laughing – laughing at us and our times in satiric glee. This satire springs from the rootedness of this musical band in contemporary urban middle-class Bengali ethos. These lyrics come as a response to the times they live in and the spaces they inhabit. We seem to share their experiences and their responses, and in doing so, we come face to face with our own fears, aspirations, pretensions, religiosities and frustrations, and most importantly, with our conception of 'values'.

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