

Rhythm as a Mode of Discipline: History of an Idea in Intermedial Scholarship¹

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Abstract: *This article is premised on the interconnectedness of methods and materials of academic research and demonstrates a crucial and unfamiliar method of reading “rhythms” in the context of intermedial scholarship. Departing from usual conventions of reading rhythm in the contexts of poetry and music, this article reads into the construction of the idea to draw out its connections with the management of time, work, territories, and varied modes of disciplining human beings in general. In tracing rhythm as constructed to be a constitutive part of the labouring body, the essay questions a well-established utilitarian mode of understanding relevant performance traditions like work songs. Through invoking the interconnectedness of the registers of the aesthetic, the historical, and the political, this essay calls for a deeper analysis of seemingly formative features of work song practices.*

Questions regarding methods and materials of reading—how we read what we read that is—may seem to be comparatively familiar for an academic in the present times, but what if a well-established method is not intelligible or acceptable, institutionally, the way it is meant to be or the material/matter at hand that is being read within the corpus of a particular research

is something that does not quite fit in within the discursive terrain of institutional ambits? How does a researcher who has made a decision to work on a particular project navigate being in this in-between space of the known-unknown? How does she make sense of her work for herself and thereby present it to her readership within institutional parameters—both in terms of her material and her method? This situation is not a problem of vocabulary alone, but one of mindsets that often govern what many of us over the years have had to accept as disciplinary specificities leading to disciplinary divides. Separated in years and contexts from each other, I would be referring to two instances in a following paragraph that necessitate for me the forging of a connection that lies at the core of this essay. The connection I establish here is premised on the interrelationship between the “how” and “what” of reading methods and strategies in general with reference to a formative feature of a traditional practice—work songs. Positing work songs in general as a productive site of research in intermedial studies, I am writing here on one of its constitutive features—rhythm—an element that is by no means specific to work songs alone but one that has attained a formative stature in the dominant modes of work song scholarship. Through reading a set of literature around this dominant feature of rhythm, I intend to foreground it as a multilayered readable category that is applicable beyond poetry and music—the usual media and genre of representation that we conventionally associate them with. In reading a select set of literature on rhythm via the performative labour-related practice of work song as a comparatist, I am thinking and reading a set of relevant literatures in their historical and sociological nuances.

Tracing how a concept of “rhythm” is employed to constitute an image of the labouring/labourer’s body, I problematise here a well-established utilitarian, and in my reading limiting causal linkage between rhythms and practices like work songs. Following the above trajectory, I arrive at an understanding of rhythm as intimately linked to the

management of time, work, and territories, and to varied modes of disciplining entire communities. Beyond the literature and archival sources, this essay occasionally draws upon references to understandings of work songs as heard through spoken words. These references are from my own experiences as a participant observer/listener, collector, and researcher of work songs in several rural, urban, and peri-urban areas of West Bengal, between the years 2007 to 2014. In terms of nomenclature, I have used work and labour songs interchangeably in this paper since the presence or absence of words denoting work and labour are different across languages. In Bangla for example, *kaaj* would correspond to work and *sram* would be understood as labour. In Dutch for example, two separate words distinguishing labour and work do not exist.² I have also considered “work” and “performance” synonymously in conceptual terms in this article since work cannot be seen in separation from its registers of performativity and performance is better understood alongside its implications of work/labour.

Now coming to the two instances that I mentioned in the introductory paragraph that necessitate the forging of the kind of connections that I make in this essay, at first it was an abstract for an upcoming conference where I had used the word “intermediality” as a method. One of the readers of that abstract among my peer group in those days pointed out to me that I should ideally break such words down, “intermediality” in this context, in terms of their meaning, for the accessibility of a wider readership. That was five years ago when I had moved on to teach in the field of Writing Studies after having taught Comparative Indian Literature for more than five years. The paper I had subsequently presented at the conference had to do with the reimagination of the essay form while looking at some of its documented origins and some seemingly unrelated historical moments in relation to genre studies that might inform the essay form in the present times. Cut to the second instance from about fifteen years ago; I had just presented my Ph.D. project in an open defence session and won a

fellowship that would subsequently fund my doctoral research, and was to defend my project in a follow up interview that would test the suitability of the project vis-à-vis the disciplinary terrain of Comparative Literature. In that follow up interview mostly around the practice of work songs, a senior comparatist had asked me to explain what it was that I was exactly “reading” in my Ph.D. work.³ Whereas the first instance could be read as a query or a lack of familiarity concerning method, the second instance was a question regarding the matter or material at hand. If in the first instance “intermediality” was unfamiliar if not intelligible for a particular reader within the Humanities and Social Sciences, the second instance meant that the practice of ‘reading’ was assumed to be applicable predominantly to “literary” texts alone. The idea of a sonic text, that too read in a particular way—in its historical, sociological, and political nuances that is—out of the more familiar registers like that of performativity, orature, lyric analysis and so on—seemed unacceptable within a particular scholar’s understanding of the codes and conventions that govern the discipline of Comparative Literature. Years later I am surprised to find that intermediality still remains a concept that I have to continue to engage with in my classroom and collegial interactions within a largely social science governed universe of academic writing in the Humanities. I therefore feel it is time for me to first unapologetically and without a single disclaimer bring to fore “rhythms” via work songs in its relation not only to intermedial and therein Comparative Literary Studies, but also to demonstrate a reading of “rhythm” from the vantage of a close reader of literature that makes possible a way of analysis that can inform the Social Sciences. This is the singular connection that I hope to establish then—that a seemingly unfamiliar material has the potential to call for or connect with a seemingly unfamiliar method—and in that there is tremendous scope to broaden disciplinary parameters including re-energising the conventions of research writing associated with specific disciplines in the name of disciplinary methods. While reading rhythms via work songs here I have only sporadically taken the familiar route of literary

studies alongside reading their historical and social nuances keeping the idea of labour and time as central to that exploration. Additionally, in my very choice of reading rhythm this way, I have invoked an unfamiliar material of reading within the Social Sciences.

Beginning with the crucial question of “what” this practice which is set as a cornerstone in this paper—what are work songs that is—one could simply say that these are traditional performance practices linked to manual labour that are now almost on the verge of extinction and are already extinct in a few specific contexts across the world, especially in highly mechanised societies. This is the most general understanding of it that one would come across in the literature around these forms. Research on these forms from this mode of understanding would seem justified primarily from a perspective of archival preservation. My initial interest towards work songs was driven by a totally different impulse though—I was in search of an art form that had not yet occupied centrality in academic and artistic discourse. I began working on this form as a documentary filmmaker who was only incidentally delighted to “find” and “preserve” our “intangible cultural heritage” of songs accompanying the husking of rice on a husking pedal to begin with.⁴ In little time I had realised that my choice of this practice as a material for research would lead me beyond almost every given categorisation and mode of understanding these forms. These songs existed but, in the words of the performers and in much of the existing literature, they were indeed already on their way towards extinction. And yet, surprisingly, the moment I opened my ears to the endless construction work going on in the city space of Kolkata in the early 2000s, I kept hearing sounds that were nothing but what I had read or heard about as work songs. This awareness gained through a simple act of listening alongside walking through the city space was soon to draw me into the terrain of problematising theoretical approaches that have guided research on these forms, and once energised with one’s actual experiences of listening in the

contemporary and freed from the overwhelming concern regarding extinction of traditional forms, it was natural for me to begin interrogating that one feature that seemed almost omnipresent in all their discussions—rhythm.

In the theoretical terrains of labour/work song scholarship, one finds a reliance on repetitive rhythmical movements along with lyrical smatterings that are often made to shape conventional standards of rhythmicity. This reliance is also evident in the preferences of workers/performers as I have often noted in my conversations with them. Despite the lyrics having their contextual specificities, the emphasis on the rhythms of work is noteworthy. Beyond the diversities of forms, contents, language cultures, and work contexts, across archival documentations and contemporary realities of work songs, it is the feature of rhythm that seems to have remained uniformly constant.

There has been some amount of research around work music in Bengal and it is necessary at this point to touch upon a few of them just in order to understand the usual routes of exploration of these forms in popular academic discourses. I lay out a few of those routes below:

1. How the structure, rhythms, and lyrical contents vary from one work song to the other:

As in Shaktinath Jha's work, the work forms associated with work songs have been roughly divided into two types. The forms of work among the first type involve a greater degree of physical exertion. This includes deep tube-well plumbing, pedal husking, piling, hauling of heavy loads etc. Among the second type are forms like roof mending, grindstone cutting, etc. where the degree of physical exertion is comparatively less. The differences in the degree of laboriousness have been thought to give rise to significant differences in the rhythm and

refrain of these songs. Whether the task is performed individually, like that in cases of grindstone cutting and occasionally boat lifting and boat peddling,⁵ or collectively, like that in the case of roof mending, pedal husking, and piling, is another factor that is taken to affect the lyrics, rhythm, structure, and refrain of the songs. In the studies focusing on content analysis, the gender of the workers/performers, their class positions, and perceptions of the communities to which they belong to have been thought to have decisive influences on the work song practices (Ramaswamy).

2. How the songs change across varying locations, work contexts, and changing natures of work processes:

Regional specificities can be seen to bring about significant changes in songs in terms of content, texture of voice, tunes, tonal qualities, etc. From such a perspective, a roof mending song of Murshidabad district in West Bengal can be seen to be markedly different from one that is sung in Kolkata. These songs can also be seen to keep changing with the changes in the nature of work and its environments. From my conversations with performers in Bardhaman and works of scholars like Shaktinath Jha, one finds that the songs of pedal husking exist mostly as ritual in marriages in most villages of West Bengal. This aspect of ritual that was prevalent earlier for some of these communities is supposedly the remnant that has stayed on. The manual process of work which was an everyday reality is fast dwindling with the mechanisation of the process of husking and grinding rice. Many of these performers are often paid for performing these songs on social occasions. In case of roof mending in Kolkata, one finds that the songs are often no longer sung along with the work. In my interactions with roof mending workers in Salt Lake, Kolkata, they had sung at my repeated requests. On the other hand, in piling, hauling and pipe fitting work in Kolkata and adjacent districts, we will see that the songs almost always accompany the work. In fact, it is difficult

for the labourers to work without the utterances, in the extremely laborious process, they say. As for the songs of palanquin bearers, the work was almost extinct in parts of India with the introduction of other means of transportation in the early years of the twentieth century, as noted by scholars like Coldstream. It still continues to be a part of occasional rituals in Bengal, such as marriage ceremonies or as exhibits or artefacts.

3. How the songs change in their forms when occasionally they are sung without the work: From such a perspective, one could consider the case of *saari* and *bhaatiyaali*. Both these genres of music are associated with boat peddling. Structural analysis of rhythms can show them as different rhythmically by virtue of their nature of work. A *saari gaan* usually took place amidst a collective work process. On the other hand, *bhaatiyaali* was often performed singularly. At present, these songs, especially *bhaatiyaali* are performed without any connection as such with work processes. The focus of studies in that regard hence can mostly become reliant on a plane of “aesthetic” appreciation and structural specificities.

4. How the songs change when they become part of a different location from where they seem to have originated and when performed in the commercial music industry:

Noting changes taking into account their market dynamics and processes of “refinement” in terms of rhythm, tunes, and lyrics of the songs can be central to this mode of research. The processes of selection of songs can also be seen to lend important insights into the politics of such assimilations and absorptions.

In analysing a “typical” work song context of manual labour, one can observe the following crucial elements:

(a) Chants along with the work process:

Chanting while chopping wood, for example, having more or less similar kinds of continuities, gaps, and intervals as the actual physical process of chopping. There could be forms where the pattern of exact correlation may not exist. In that case, the songs come with the work in a different sort of association—linear, cyclical, or otherwise. One could cite instances of agricultural songs of reaping and harvesting crops as examples of this latter pattern.

(b) The tempo or pace of the work:

In a comparative scale, a work could be fast-paced or slow. The field hollers, herding calls for animals, or hauling sounding distinctly different from say a song at piling, or roof mending. It is however not a question of pace alone, but also a qualitative aspect which lends these performances their distinctiveness.

(c) The sounds of work, voices, and ambient sound patterns other than work utterances in the context of work:

There are accompanying sounds of work like that of the tools of work, communication sounds among the work groups, ambient sounds patterns including machine sounds that are part of many of these work forms in at present.

(d) The workers/performers in their physical associations with the tools of their work and the activity of the work-song:

These associations keep varying from one work process and context with another. From the point of view of a participant observer, they could reach in terms of experiences shared verbally by the people enacting them. Or, one could experience them in one's own terms from

one's position amidst the entangled sensuous mesh of activities; detached physically from the actual activity of labouring/working, and yet attempting to engage with, rather than to decipher or interpret them, that too as per given conventional terms. Undoubtedly the elements produced from the vantage of a close reader of these performances as texts are separable only in terms of their modes of dissection. In terms of experience, they reach us together, enmeshed.

In this discussion, I am looking at rhythmicity and repetition in terms of their connections with regularised discipline.⁶ It goes without saying that most of the work forms associated with work song performances are repetitive in nature. Beating the roof with a tool at hand takes days and days of working at it. This repetitive nature with possibly an element of monotony despite being common in these practices is however nothing that is specific to these practices alone. For example, the element of repetition is true even for work forms which have ceased to become manual processes alone. It is a question of how much time and energy a particular work requires for its completion in a given setup, resources and infrastructure. The building of a sprawling residential or commercial site might require days of work, with the work sites abuzz with the droning sound of machines continually running. Theoretically speaking, there is no less monotony in association with that kind of repetitive pattern. An idea of monotony has often been associated with manual work leading to a necessity-oriented understanding of work songs.

The engagements with work music practices lead us to a coexistence of rhymed and rhythmic movements, repetitions, correlations of chants with work processes on the one hand and stops, gaps, irregularities, and intervals, with sometimes the contingency of the correlation between the chants and the work on the other. It seems incumbent to interrogate

the primacy of rhythm in relation to these performances or their descriptions in terms of the standardised features of musicality. In talking about varied kinds of rhythms and their related patterns, one is talking about the various economies of measure and repetition. This is done in order to figure out how a certain kind of work is made to repeat itself or in what ways and how the work and song are performed together. Despite being a formative element behind narrowing down the terrain of work song scholarship, rhythms help in grappling with the different kinds of work-worker association in these performances. From the predominance of song in analysis of these multilayered practices, rhythm leads one to the nuances of movements and utterances beyond the search for and centrality of the meaningfulness of words alone. It will be relevant to mention here that it would take me many years to face this concern myself as I went into a music archive to engage with a rich collection of Indian music of India including work songs where I was unable to understand the meanings of most of these songs because of the lack of familiarity with these languages. Rhythms were the only way I could ‘recognise’ them, sonically, as work songs. With that liberatory prospect, rhythm connects one to the register of the aural as well as that of materiality of the labouring process and context.

In my interactions with work song performers in Kolkata and adjacent districts working in piling in the construction sector reveal that they find it difficult if not impossible to sing without the work and vice versa. This seems to be the case in these and other laborious work processes like hauling and lifting of heavy loads, fitting pipes and so on. According to the workers/performers, the *taal* (rhythm) of the chants help in coordinating the actions of their collective labour. Even the contractors or *thikaadaar* who often supervise these projects are of a similar opinion. To speed up the work, they often find these *bol* (utterances) helpful and come up with their own smatterings from the available repertoire of

situational improvisations. They also put in a lyric or two at times with the aim of maximising productivity and that is one of the ways in which work songs grow, as a practice, as a genre.

There have been debates as to whether to call these practices songs or not. Shaktinath Jha's project has a continuous implicit critique of scholars like Ashutosh Bhattacharya who do not see any aesthetic qualities in most work songs. For Bhattacharya, they are mere uncontrolled emotional excesses and are mostly about rhythms with nothing else worth as such about them. Rhythm here occupies a position secondary to the notion of music at large, the rhythmicity of work songs situating them in the lower rungs of the aesthetic plane of analysis. Emotion too occupies a secondary stature to rationality, it seems, as this 'music' is taken to be beyond the control of the human beings who produce them, becoming an uncontrolled, excessive artistry of sorts. This strand of work song scholarship sees these forms as primal grunts of labour, belonging to an earlier stage in the developmental frame of music. This approach seems to be an oversimplification for Jha who through a detailed structural form and content analysis arrives at why work songs are worthy of attention. He agrees to a functional definition of work songs which sees the human body as a machine and work songs acting as a kind of lubricant consciously used to provide maximum efficacy and synchronisation in a communal work process. Each part of such a song can therefore be explained in terms of its content and surely in terms of its rhythm. Rhythm then is a crucial part of its musicality as well as its utility.

Imbricated in a dense sensuous matrix of activities and sounds, it is important to also figure where a mere lyric analysis (another standard way of engaging with these practices) leads to. How does one begin to engage with the notion of movements of the human body

along with these varying natures of work performances avoiding the rarefication of these practices into abstract forms? How does a register of rhythmicity connect to the materiality of these forms?

A notion of regularity is linked to a notion of the irregular. Experiencing the missing of a beat becomes possible in a situation of being habitually tuned to a series of timed beats. Patterns of regularities and irregularities repeat themselves in our quotidian existences. Irregularities easily fall prey to the domain of the irregular, regularities often leading to smooth regulations. Manifest diversely in cosmic movements, changes of days and nights to human realities of flesh and blood like the circadian body clock, their sheer variety often finds a locus from where they could be put to use. William McNeill in *Keeping Together in Time Dance and Drill in Human History* while narrating his experiences of being part of the United States Army in 1941 mentions having undergone military training along with many other young men in Texas. In describing the nature of equipment their unit possessed, he shares that they only had one inoperative anti-aircraft gun for the entire battalion. It was therefore not possible for the authorities to impart any practical training to the soldiers. As a result, the officers many a time made them march on dusty gravelled paths in order to put the available time to use. According to McNeill (1), there could not be a more useless exercise and a more useless way of spending time than this. Everybody concerned realised that in that context of warfare, troop movement in the rear involved trucks and railroads. So, a close-order marching within the range of machine guns was virtually suicidal for them. Yet they were made to drill away their time. They moved in unison, in numbers, marching and responding to commanding shouts “sweating in the hot sun, and, ever so often, counting out the cadence...Hut! Hup! Hip! Four!”

The above description reveals the management of time and human bodies. These are attempts at making people keep up to an order, geared towards productivity, via rhythmic close order drill. The soldiers had nothing better to do than to be involved in these activities of “work” in tune with the then military ethos of the United States of America. They were made to sweat over the drilling exercises, which apparently were considered productive, under the command of a leader. All the soldiers were expected to perform the drill in a way that was assumed to constitute military group solidarity, the rhythmic verbal utterances like “hup,” “hip” corresponding to the physical activity of the marching exercise. But how and why do human beings enact such rule-driven performances?

In McNeill’s enunciation the tradition of army held the view that drill had the potential for transforming “raw recruits” into soldiers, no matter how useless the exercise seemed. Years later when he remembered enacting them, all that he could recollect was that he “rather liked the strutting around.” He says that words are not adequate to describe the emotions that were aroused by the drill. Prolonged movements in unison constituted the military drill resulting in an arousal of emotions. McNeill recollects a sense of well-being that he felt resulted from that drill, “a strange sense of personal enlargement, a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life.” He attributes this sense to the act of participation in collective ritual. It was a matter of feeling, inadequately represented through words. In these practices marching seemed to be an end in itself. The brisk movements and “keeping in time” made the people feel good about themselves and the world. In McNeill’s (2) words, the drill generated a satisfaction among the soldiers making them “vaguely pleased with the world at large.”

He expresses his certainty that there is something “visceral” about this exercise. Something is present in such things that cause the arousal of emotions in human beings to

make them cohere socially and keep together in time, “moving big muscles together and chanting, singing, or shouting rhythmically.” He labels this phenomenon as “muscular bonding”. He then moves on to discuss his conclusions in his other work *The Pursuit of Power* where he links the modern superiority of the European armies with the psychological impact of close-order drill. Introduced in the late sixteenth century in Holland, close order drill spread across Europe. For him, one reason was that it generated some efficiency. But there was an additional advantage to it as well in terms of discipline. According to McNeill, it generated safety as well. The poorest classes could be armed without infringing on the security of their obedience to the authorities. The poverty stricken and outcast recruits experienced the fading away of their other social ties amidst this apparent connectivity. In that, new ties were forged. Aware as he is about the functional aspect of rhythm, for McNeill (4), the emotional response to drill is primary, and an inheritance from prehistoric times of hunters and gatherers. Reading his own hypothesis based partly on personal memory and partly on remembered knowledge, he mentions that in the documented history of human beings, movement and singing in unison have evidently made tasks easier and more efficient. He is convinced that long before the beginning of documentation, “keeping together in time” has been crucial in human evolution. It aided early human groups to increase in numbers and improve the levels of cohesion; it enhanced their success in protecting their territories therein assuring greater rates of survival. These functions contributed in securing food and taking care of their children.

According to McNeill, in ancient societies and rural settings characterised by “undifferentiated” wholeness, where different groups were different from each other by virtue of internal homogeneous bonding, the older forms of muscular bonding continued to hold their sway. There were religious manifestations of the same. In modern times, the political

and military aspects got separated from the social and religious contexts. Callisthenics, parades, and close-order drills became historically relevant in nationalist movements and modern armies. McNeill's theorisation had begun by pointing out the futility of an act, namely drill in military culture. However, the fact that it was still practiced rampantly in his contemporary times perhaps made a utilitarian investigation imperative on his part. If something is used not by choice by a certain set of people but as per instructions of higher authorities, it must have its own benefits. At least, it must have an acceptable degree of utility. And therein lay the value of rhythms and their role in managing bodies that required to be kept together in time. The repetitiveness defines the activity of work as much as the work is assumed to require the repetitiveness.

In a different context and time, Gurusaday Dutta probably had a similar intention of "order" in mind. The *Bratachari Bigyan* (science of *Bratachari*) he propounded was aimed at combining knowledge, labour, truth, unity, joy and the centrality of the "golden" Bengal. According to Dutta there were some people who misjudged this movement as part of regionalism. But he asserted that it was an act of nationalism. *Bratachari* for him was a holistic movement for the complete *sadhana* of human beings. The idea of *Chhanda*⁷ was central to this *sadhana* as a great unifying force. Following this assumption, *Bratachari* involved a series of almost ritual exercises and ways of life subsumed in a larger ethos of attainment of ideals with a focus on sound and words in their usages at an aesthetic plane. Dutta's *Bratachari* project puts forth a holistic ethos of performativity. The sixteen *aali* (a *Bratachari* code meaning a particular act or occasion) combine recitation and utterances of words with a controlled spirit and undivided attention, collective labour and social welfare, song, dance, playing musical instruments, sports (mainly indigenous), exercises, serving human beings and animals alike, practicing art in relation to lived and utilitarian pursuits in

life, farming, travel, humour (in “pure” and “productive” form). All these acts combine a sense of a productive ideal with the importance of movement and repetitive patterns of performances. *Chhanda* becomes crucial to such repetitive exercises. This lifts the “mere” movement to a “meaningful” and “aesthetic” plane and *Bratachari* ceases to become any other act (Ghosh 43-122, 171-400). The lyricism here becomes constitutive of a practice and rhythm is aestheticised here on a plane of rhyme. The ideals and productive assumptions gel here with the aesthetics of regularity. A semblance of beauty is created in movements that aim to create and constitute individuals and social collectives.

In the context of Bangla rhyme schemes, Prabodh Chandra Sen holds that measured and economic speech pertains to *chhanda*. The sound patterns (*dhvani prabaaha*) in our regular ways of talking once framed in well controlled and economic form gives rise to *chhanda* in poetry, he says. The art of poetry, like that of music, is an art of sounds. But music is not reliant on speech alone as instrumental and classical vocal music practices illustrate. Poetic rhythm, unlike music, is dependent on speech, Sen mentions. The patterns of our speech are mainly controlled by its speed and intervals. The spoken words move and stop periodically. Punctuations mark that temporal order creating patterns of sounds in time. The rippling move of speech patterns that are created is the *chhanda* of speech and therein poetry (Sen 7-8). For Tagore, when speech becomes the vehicle for conveying our inward experiences, it has to have a motion. *Chhanda* is an external measure for it, but it is liberatory from within. It is not artificial, rather it is as natural as the movement of the heavenly bodies. Tune itself has a motion. It has a throb, a vibration, a pulsation within. Unlike speech which conveys meaning, tune exists on its own according to him. Certain patterns of tune connect with certain others, creating a collective of sound patterns. *Taal* gives motion to these thrusts of sound patterns. When words are provided with certain patterns, they attain *chhanda*.

Rhymes are needed to give motion to these words (Tagore) and are then essentially connected to movements.

However, according to Lefebvre in *Rhythmanalysis*, rhythm for us is often confused with any kind of movement. We end up attributing to rhythms a “mechanical overtone.” In the process we tend to overlook the “organic” aspects of rhymed movements (6). For him, rhythm cannot be confused with any kind of repetition although repetition in movement is crucial to it. In case of rhythm, strong, weak, long and short times recur in ways that are recognisable. Stops, silences, blanks, resumptions, and intervals repeat themselves with certain regularities amidst movement in general. Rhythm then brings along with it not only a “differentiated time” but also a “qualified duration.”

Movement in case of rhythm is then connected to particular kinds of repetitive patterns which influence the flow of time. There is an organic connection, a rule of law at work there. These underlying rules infuse the duration of time with a certain order. Rhythms therefore are as much a product of this order as the causes for creating it. The varieties in the nature of intervals, gaps, stops, and so on get subsumed in repetitive sameness creating regular patterns. Each set of variety, cyclical, linear, and otherwise, gives rise to particular nature of sameness by which they are felt and become recognisable as regular flows. These work in terms of chains of reception; for like any other occurrence, rhythms happen alongside their discernment. Their presence becomes possible through a specific repetitiveness in an ontological connection with rhymed movements as perceived through our senses. This constitutes a sense of the “regular” and the irregular as well. This is not a mere mechanical affair. In the garb of the regular, they are ever creative and productive of newer patterns and flows. According to Lefebvre (9), wherever a particular time, place, and expenditure of

energy interact, there is rhythm. Rhythm in this schema is all pervading then, crucially linked to the concepts of repetition and difference, mechanical and organic, discovery and creation, cyclical and linear, continuous and discontinuous, and quantitative and qualitative.

According to Lefebvre, the first thing a rhythm analyst lends her ear to is the body and to appreciate the rhythms that are “external” to this body, s/he attempts to learn its internal rhythms. The human body in Lefebvre’s schema is composed of a “bundle of rhythms.” They are different from each other, but in tune with each other. Lefebvre (19-20) suggests that a rhythm analyst should attempt to listen to these rhythms “as a whole” in connection with her reference and understanding of her own bodily rhythms. It is in that process that s/he would be integrating the “outside” with the “inside.” Time in rhythm is relative, perceived from the vantage of one’s subjective experiences of one’s own body. The human body is then the ultimate measure of rhythms.

The concept of immobility does not exist in the world of Lefebvre’s rhythm analyst. The time of a particular object is slow, only in relation to her perceptions of time emanating from a sense of belonging to her own body. The act of rhythm analysis is about the integration of things in what Lefebvre (23) calls “a dramatic beginning, in an ensemble full of meaning, transforming them no longer into diverse things, but presences.” In that a rhythm analysis comes close to a poet but whereas the poet concerns herself with the world of the verbal, the rhythm analyst is concerned with temporalities and their relations within wholes. Rhythms therefore differ from rhymes. A rhythm analyst does not have “a declared political position” but “by fully reinstating the sensible in consciousness and in thought, he accomplished “a tiny part of the revolutionary transformation of this world and this society in decline.”

In this design, rhythm occupies an ontological position vis-à-vis a primal notion of the human body, connected to a larger cosmic world. The picture that emerges after the completion of the task of a rhythm analyst is one of order, an improved order. But how is the “primal” human body trained into rhythmicity?

Dissatisfied with scientific investigations regarding the pervasive manifestations of human beings keeping together in time from football, demonstrations, to dance, McNeill (6) had concluded that “The primary seat of bodily responses to rhythmic movement is apparently situated in the sympathetic and para-sympathetic nervous systems.” This attribution of response to rhythms to the primacy of the nervous system does not come without a complicated history of a vision of bodies that are centred on particular organic systems. Musselman (5) writes that for the early British natural philosophers, a well-maintained nervous system represented an ideal scientific and social organisation. These philosophers thought of implementing this model nationwide as well as internationally. They assumed that when the nervous system worked properly it embodied a good scientific method. “Simple sensations” entering the body “at its extremes;” were gradually refined into “facts, generalisations, and laws.” This happened as the information that had entered the body eventually travelled through the nerves, into the brain, and finally entered the human mind. This centrality of seeing the body in terms of the nervous system had implications for bodily governance and for setting the norm for ideal working conditions. It was crucially connected to social organisation.

Golston shows how by 1913, rhythm becomes a deployable category, pointing that “Rhythm ... became the key suture point for issues of the body, identity, history, and poetry.”

He links rhythm thereafter to the concept of race in relation to human bodies in their multiple modes, aspects, and layers of existence; race being used here to understand the basis of multitudes of populations. For him, “unlike ‘race,’ rhythm is a real thing, a scientifically measurable phenomenon.” This however does not help in making it a less vague concept in criticism. He writes (5-7), “The vagueness of the term is compounded by the fact that over the centuries, poetic rhythm has been correlated with everything from the periodic cycles of nature—the change in seasons; the movement of the sun, moon and stars; the tides—to the human stride, the pulse, the breath, and the ‘attention’; and from divinely inspired, cosmic social orders to political democracy and even anarchy.” The real-ness of rhythm along with its productive imprecision as a conceptual category allows its usage and connection to diverse objects also helping in the production of particular bodies of subjects. The racial body is one such example. The labouring body is another.

In the words of Eugene Genovese (286), while writing about the nature of work in the plantations of America—the plantations stood halfway between peasant and factory cultures. The slave economy that was dominated by tobacco and cotton plantations in the United States of America was more of peasant than factory models. In contrast, sugar plantations in the Caribbean resembled the factory model. However, even small slaveholders forced their labourers into modern work discipline. The slaveholders were caught amidst the extremes of the older ways of life they intended to preserve and their opposite that they sought to instil among the slaves. They attempted to instil “factory-like-discipline” among working populations engaged in a rural system. The tendencies of the latter system hovered on the “rhythms of nature” and “traditional” ideas of work, time, and leisure.

For this “working population,” “Nature remained the temporal reference point.” When “time is money” with the advent of clock time and capitalist production, “all time must be consumed, marketed, put to *use*; it is offensive for the labour force merely to pass the time.” (Thomson) The “natural” rhythms of work and leisure gave place to “arbitrary” schedules. According to Genovese (324), “The slaves could not reckon time either according to preindustrial models or according to industrial factory models.” They expressed their attitude in songs. The masters did utilise music for work. Their choice remained “quick-time” singing as slaves slowed down the songs as well as the work. The slaves continued to sing away at work, before work, after work, they sang at “almost any time.”

Rhythm then can be amicably linked to work and the labouring body. Once the myriad functioning of the human body is reduced to labour and the human subject reduced to the labouring one, rhythms come in handy in defining the subjects aimed at nothing but maximising productivity. They can then be deployed for various “useful” purposes, in military cadences for example, as has been earlier discussed.

Golston writes:

The idea that lower classes of people, uncivilised nations, and children are particularly susceptible to the influence of rhythm later plays a role in theories of rhythm as an instrument of pedagogy, as a force of management of labour, and as an indicator of national and ethnic identity. The notion that rhythm stimulates involuntary muscular movement will figure in theories of work, child rearing, military science and state building; and the idea that rhythm can alternately stimulate states of ecstasy or

cataplexy ultimately contributes to the machinery of the fascist propaganda and formulations of social policy regarding music. (18)

Rhythm becomes a unit of a complex matrix of labour, spaces, and populations as we see. In the context of work songs, this provides the basis for a utilitarian strand of reasoning and engaging with these forms. However, from my readings of the literature through the course of this essay “rhythm” also becomes a political category and in that acquires a dimension unfamiliar to the usual studies around it. We have arrived then not only at a different medium of reading in its intersections with the world of the literary but also at a renewed understanding of an idea that has been conventionally used otherwise in academic discourses. In that considering rhythm itself beyond its literary connects as a comparatively new entrant to sonic intermedial studies in comparative literature, we are opening up other registers of this idea, which understandably is bound to have its repercussion on the question of materiality of research in both the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

Notes

¹ I would like to acknowledge the anonymous referee for the insightful comments.

²As a member of the audience of a lecture regarding one of his books, I had asked Jan Lucassen whether the history of work he writes about could as well have been called a history of labour. He had responded to my question with several nuances from which I have noted this information in relation to this essay.

³For the context of the autobiographical references and some key formulations of this essay see Bhattacharyya.

⁴*Dhenkir Gaan*, <https://m.facebook.com/ezckolkata/videos/763999327821903/>, online documentary film resource, last accessed on 21 May 2023.

⁵Boat lifting photos from my personal collection are now available for referencing under the Depositor’s Collection at Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology, American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon.

⁶In the context of intermediality in this essay, “rhythm” becomes a text by itself containing within it the intersections of temporal and social disciplining and management. This as we see has significant ramifications in the context of academic disciplines, both in terms of their methods and materials of study.

⁷My inclusion of *Chhanda* as part of this writing forms a part of an attempt to bring together varied principles across different space-times that largely resonate with the central idea of rhythm, from a comparative perspective. A deeper engagement with the cultural translation of such terminology, though not part of the immediate purview of this work, can be a productive site of engagement in this context, especially if rhythms are looked at from the vantage of literary and performance studies.

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