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Remarks on 'Marxian Literary debates and discourses' by Shuabhoranjan Dasgupta, MCRG Workshop, 20.09.2016

Let me start by thanking MCRG, Women's Studies, RS, SS, AS - timely WRKshop.

Let me quickly admit something before I begin. I practically asked MCRG to let me discuss this paper, despite there being perfectly fine discussants already, because it deals with an immediate ground I have written about elsewhere, and because this period is close to my heart like many of us here. Also, having followed the drift of works in this area as well as Shubhoranjan's other works, I wanted to call his attention to a few things. Let us first thank him for creating a theoretical scheme for looking at the literary discourses, focusing on Bengal renaissance, assessment of Tagore and debates in the progressive movement on what is bourgeois art in the negative sense. These three moments allow an elegant and eclectic discussion, going back and forth into the themes of universal humanism, aesthetic practice and political commitment in the early mid-twentieth century Bengal. We are grateful to the author for setting up a vibrant account of the artistic and literary activism, especially by communists under the leadership of PC Joshi. It is a much necessary account and along with that of Anuradha Ray will go a long way in helping us to engage this past, which certainly produced some of the most creative minds in the communist movement. I have however some nagging complaints about this scholarship. More often than not such accounts stop with only a collection of eccentric fragments of arguments and contrary views on various matters, which does not explain what is the deeper significance of such arguments and what is the underlying process of which these debates are manifestations.

A part of this process is of course as Shubhoranjan mentions, the publication of a host of experimental and non-commercial journals and associations that started as part of the literary modernism of the early twenties. This was, so to speak, the material basis of the ideas that flourished in the literary discourse. The circulation of these journals created a reading public in the interwar years that provided the intellectual ground for the literary debates. To put it simply, a new culture of thinking and writing, of reflecting, theorizing and experimenting with writing, and putting into place a model of progressive and class criticism of existing literary traditions - all of this was taking place in the backdrop of the debates on renaissance and Tagore. This is what the PWA managed to build upon in the thirties and forties under Sajjad Zaheer with the likes of Premchand and Phanishwarnath Renu. It is where the role of PC Joshi and his creation of a

cultural squad in Bombay with the likes of Chittaprosad, Balraj Sahani and Udayshankar became instrumental. And this is the big picture which goes a little missing in the immediate urgency of the arguments for and against Bishnu Dey or the renaissance or Zhdanovism.

Though I beg to differ from the author's handling of the two types of political poetry – the Gurudal Pal type and Bishnu Dey type, I must admit that I found the discussion highly exciting and extremely insightful. However, what excited me there is not something the author seemd to have noticed or paid sufficient attention – so let me point this out. I feel the whole discussion hits a dead end if we get trapped into making our minds up about which one is genuinely radical poetry – is it Dey or Pal, or which one scores higher on aesthetics and low on radicalism. Interesting as these issues are, their discussion seems a little familiar and redundant today. I think the same moment of conflict between Pal and Dey can be read differently to ask new and different set of questions. For example, one could ask how the progressive movement thought about the relation between the social location of the poet and his utterance, between his political statement and his creative articulation, and what are the discursive factors that complicated quick and easy reductions. One could also ask what is a piece of verse supposed to do in the radical perspective – is it supposed to emulate an exhorting catechism, should it have a confessional tone, is it obliged to be always inspiring? Why must we not allow it to express loneliness or despair, why is despair seen as a bourgeois emotion when it marks so much of working class reality? Thirdly, we could ask, reconstructing the frame, if the moment of Prodyot Guha's example of Gurudas Pal should not be seen as a moment of differently understanding what makes an utterance poetic – especially when the historical truth is found absent in what is beautiful, when it finds shelter in the ugly. It then becomes a moment when the *sine qua non* of what is poetry breaks down. And is that not what radical criticism is supposed to do?

Indeed, if such *sine qua non* could be formulated for even what is radical aesthetics, the debates would have been barren like after forties. The past figures could have been reduced to a sum of their class positions, and as Shubhoranjan has pointed out, Tagore is the best example where such reductions failed time and again as former critics had to later come around. The aesthetic value of Tagore's work could not be dismissed by simply calling him feudal and mystic – indeed, right after denouncing him one felt like singing a Rabindrasangeet, as Sehanabish told the author. It might be extremely

hypocritical a gesture but I found this anecdote particularly telling. I think it shows the Bengali radical's inner struggle with his larger colonial intellectual traditions – something Ashis Nandy, Partha Chatterjee and others have written about at length, which he wants to denounce, but at once meets the rule of exception in Tagore. The question I find interesting to ask and want the author to give a thought is this: what does Rabindranath Tagore has to offer to radical politics, especially communist politics? We know very well how IPTA functions would regularly feature Suchitra Mitra and Debabrata Biswas, among others, who would find songs appropriate in Tagore to be sung along the *ganasangeet* , interpreting them in new ways. A critical assessment of Tagore's place in the Left sensibility cannot afford to leave this out.

One last and humble note of dissent.

I find it particularly difficult to believe, despite what the author claims on the basis of his conversation with eminent scholars, that there was no debate among the theatre activists of IPTA. They may not have debated on record about Tagore or the renaissance but the signs of similar churning and contesting interpretations are quite palpable in Bijan Bhattacharyta's *Devigarjan* or Shambhu Mitra's *Raktakarabi* or Utpal Dutt's later *Tiner Talowar*. Perhaps the reason why these contestations are not easy to locate is due to the highly censored character of the archive maintained primarily by Sudhi Pradhan on the IPTA. It is also likely that the censorship was partly due to the ultra-Left phase of late forties. But it is equally likely that such debates were muffled by party apparatchiks who saw the creative practices in purely propagandist and utilitarian terms, especially after Joshi was removed from the leadership in the late forties. Ritwik Ghatak's document titled the cultural thesis should be of immense value in this regard, along with the history of its being consigned to oblivion for long. But to mistake a silence born out of self-censorship for an absence of critical discourse may prove too costly today.