

Bangladeshi Folk Songs: A ‘Nation-Thing’

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Abstract: There is no denying the fact that folk music of Bangladesh plays a vital role in representing a diverse cultural hybridization. It is also very closely connected to the emotional phase of the people as it not only stirs emotions but also tells tales of common people. With the accompaniment of the musical instruments, it has a universal appeal. Besides, folk music of Bangladesh is one of the good examples of a ‘Nation-Thing. A ‘Nation-Thing’ is something that belongs to only one particular group or community of people. It represents itself from every aspect of life, art and culture of a nation in front of other countries of the world nationally as well as internationally. Above all, it is connected to a community’s way of life, their traditions and social practices, rituals and myths. In this article my intention is to explore how folk songs play a dynamic role in representing Bangladeshi art and culture in different ways.

Key words: Folk song, memory, emotion, representation, tradition, Bangladesh. Bangladeshi Folk Songs: A ‘Nation-Thing’

I. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has very deep traditional music roots. Music in Bangladesh can be divided into three distinct categories - classical, folk and modern. Among them, Bangladesh has a rich folk music which includes religious, secular and patriotic songs. Folk music is a type of ancient music which springs from the heart of a group of local people, based on their common and natural style of expression and uninfluenced by the rules of conventional music and contemporary songs. Any mode or form created by the combination of tune, voice and dance may be described as music. Thus, the combination of folk song, folk dance and folk tune is known as folk music.

Characteristics

Folk songs may be categorized into seven types; such as love, custom, philosophy of life and dedication, labor, occupation, humor and satire, and finally miscellaneous. Based on these types, folk music has some common characteristics. It is composed by pastoral common people on the foundation of ancient rules. These ancient rules of music have not been influenced by classical or modern music. It is conducted verbally either in groups or individually. Generally, it is composed and performed by illiterate or semi-literate people. Folk music is an impulsive expression with easy and native language, simple tune and natural rhythms. Both words and tune are very much pleasing. It depends upon nature and rustic atmosphere. Above all, folk music is a clear emotional expression of human love and separation, joys and sorrows of daily life. This emotion is expressed basically in the folk songs where lyric and tune use to describe the memory of the common people. As we know that memory plays a vital role

in the folk songs, it is found that the life of the common people is described through memory. Memory is an experience of individual, personal and collective experience which can be shared through writings and songs. In the folk songs of Bangladesh, the folk artists bring memory in their songs which become the main topic of folk song.

Variation

In Bangladesh, folk music has great variety with songs being composed on the culture, festival, images of life, religion, natural beauty, rivers and rural and riverine life. At the same time, these songs are about public discrimination and poverty, about the material world and the supernatural. Folk songs are of different types; such as Baul, Gombhira, Bhatiali, Bhawaiya, Kabigaan, Ghatu, Jhumur, Baramasi, Jatra, Sari, etc. Mystical songs have been composed using the metaphors of rivers and boats. Some folk songs are sung alone while some are sung in chorus. Some songs are local in character, but others are common to both Bangladesh and West Bengal. Some folk songs belong specifically to one religious community like Hindu or Muslim, and others cross religious boundaries. Some folk songs are only for men, others for women, while some are for both men and women. Folk music is also influenced by the culture and the lifestyle of the different tribes like the Saontal, Garo, Hajong, Chakma, Manipuri, Tripura, Marma etc. In these variations, memory is the key point. The act of singing a folk song can focus the importance of remembering both individually and collectively. These folk songs can rather conceal the actual memory when the listeners enjoy the songs in terms of the lyrics, or they can serve as a reminder of the tendency to forget. Therefore, folk songs can be incorporated in memory and thus supplement it.

Religion and festival

Folk song was essential in various religions and cultural festivals during ancient era. Later, its usage expanded in the various sects of social life. Thousand years ago, the Buddhist Sagas expressed their thoughts through songs which were known as Charjapada. These songs were not very clearly written and they were like riddles. Philosophy of folk songs is found in these Charjapada songs. The ancient philosophy of folk music is established through Buddhist meditation. In the folk or Baul songs, there is a great influence of Buddhism, Islamism and Hinduism. In Hindu mythology, many of the folk songs were written praising to their gods and goddesses. (Arefin 2008)

Patriotic Folk Songs

Patriotic folk songs have a very influential and inspirational role from the Liberation war of Bangladesh, 1971 to till today. The post-massacre songs are some of the most politically conscious and influential tracks in Bangla language. Apart from the political struggle and the war waged by the Mukti Bahini, music served as a great tool of memory and motivation for the nation as a whole. Powerful lyrics turned into deadly weapons. Many lyricists composed vibrant folk songs to inspire the people. The lyrics, music, composition were used in such a way that people from all ages and different professions became passionate about their motherland where memory was related in every sect of life. They became very much crazy and inspired to fight for their right and freedom. Social media like radio, television, cinema, theater and stage were those places where these folk songs were sung continuously. Great singers like Apel Mahmood, Azam Khan, Fakir Alamgir, Mahmud-Un-Nabi, Shaheen Samad, Ferdousi Rahman, Linu Billah and many singers used to sing patriotic folk songs taking risks of their lives. Swadhin Bangla Betar (Radio) Kendro played a major role in helping to diffuse these revolutionary tunes and lyrics into the minds of every Bengali listening to them. One popular patriotic folk song's lines are given below:

Mora Ekti Phulke Bachabo Bole Juddho Kori, More ekti mukher hashir jonno ostro dhor (We fight to give life to a flower, that is our nation We take the gun, as we are promised to get back our smile).

With Gobindo Haldar's lyrics and Apel Mahmood's composition, this track is one of the most influential songs of the Liberation War of Bangladesh which narrates how the fighters of this nation were ready to sacrifice themselves to save their motherland by remembering their country which was once like a flower to them.

Bhatiyali

Bhatiyali is a type of ancient folk music which springs from the heart of a group of local and professional people. It is based on their common and natural style of expression and uninfluenced by the rules of conventional music and contemporary songs. This song expresses not only loss, pain and memory but also the human understanding of nature. In Bangladesh, Bhatiyali songs are about longing, about emotions like pain, sorrow, joy and moreover, the supernatural. Since the country is basically a riverine one, Bhatiyali forms a significant variety of folk song. Both in Bangladesh and West Bengal, it is a form of folk music. Bhatiyali is a river song mostly sung by boatmen while going down streams of the river. This word comes from bhata meaning 'ebb' or downstream. Mymensingh district along the river Brahmaputra and the lower region of the riverside areas are the place of its origin. This song is sung alone. There are fourteen subjects of folk song in Bangladesh like Deha-tatva (about the body) and Murshid-tatva (about the guru). Bhatiyali song deals with Prakriti-tatva (about

nature). The lyrics of Bhatiyali usually consist of symbolic and emotional verses. Waters and the situation of boatmen and fishermen are the most important subjects to this song. At the same time, this song conveys descriptions of the beauty of nature, the rivers and their wonders. The boatmen and the fishermen of the East of Bengal compose much of the traditional Bhatiyali folk songs. The reason of composing this traditional song is that they have to spend a couple of days, weeks or months in their boats on the rivers for working purpose. There is no fixed timing of completing their work and thus returning their living place. Through this song, longing for their families and finding inspiration on the waterways of Bangladesh are described wonderfully. Many communities live in boathouses on the rivers and also use the rivers as transportation, thus the waterways are an integral feature of their lives.

Generally the boatmen compose songs based upon their lives on the water and the daily struggles of their families. These songs describe the supernatural and natural beauty of the riverside area. In some songs, situations of love and loss have been hidden in the descriptions of the lonely boatmen, their fishing boats, weather and water of the rivers. But as new boatmen take to the waters, new songs are added and compositions change, but the form of Bhatiyali song remains the same. Bhatiyali song brings the rivers and their communities to life. It is a part of the Bengali tradition, culture and life that opens windows to the past and present, and inspires people through song and music.

In Bangladesh, the golden age of Bhatiyali lies between the 1930s and 1950s when most of the prominent composers, collectors, writers and singers like Shah Abdul Karim, Miraz Ali, Ukil Munshi, Rashid Uddin, Jalal Khan, Jang Bahadur and Umed Ali contribute a lot to the genre. Singer Abbas Uddin made the genre popular singing "Amay bhashaili re, amay dubaili re" (You give me life, you take my life) and other popular numbers. More recently, singers Bari Siddiqui and Malay Ganguly brought Bhatiyali to the modern population, as did Abbas Uddin, by popularizing some of his songs.

I try my best to translate two of the famous Bhatiyali songs, sung by two very renowned singers of Bangladesh. These songs are full of memory and longing for their near and dear ones.

1. Song: Amar shonar moyna paakhi (My dearest priceless Moyna*)

Lyric and music: Mohammad Osman Khan

Original Singer- Abdul Alim

Amar shonar moyna paakhi

Kon deshete gela uira-re ,diya more phanki

Amar shonar moyna paakhi.

Shona boron pakhire amar kajol boron ankh

Diba-nishi mon chayre baidha tore rakhi, amar shonar moyna paakhi.

Deho dichi pranore dichi aar nai kichu baaki

Shoto phooler bhushon diyare onge dichi makhi,

Amar shonar moyna paakhi.

Jaiba Jodi nithur pakhi bhashaiya more ankhi
 E jibon jabar kaalere ekbar jeno dekhi
 Re amar shonar moyna paakhi.
 (My dearest priceless Moyna)

Please tell me which country have you gone flying,
 evading my notice,

O my dearest Moyna.
 My bird is golden colored with dark black eyes
 I wish I could hold you tightly whole day and night
 O my dearest Moyna.
 I have given you both my body and soul, there nothing left
 to me
 I have adorned your body with hundred flowers, my
 dearest Moyna.
 You know that you will let me cry after your leave
 I want to meet you only once at least before I die
 O my dearest Moyna.)

In this song, the lover is missing his beloved so much. He is remembering his beloved and wants to meet her once before his death. In our Bengali culture, the word 'Moyna'* is a form of address to the beloved. Moyna is also a song-bird, a pet which is kept in the household and almost adored by its keeper.

2. Song: Majhi baiya jao re. Lyric and artist: Abbas Uddin Ahmed Majhi baiya jao re, Okul doriyar majhe Amar vanga nao re. Venna kashther nouka khani, majhkhane tar bura Noukar agar thaika pashay gele, golui jabe khoiya re. Dikkha shikkha na hoite aage korso biya. Tumi bine khote golam hoile gaiter taka diya re. Bideshe bipake jaro beta mara jay.

Para-porshi na janiye, jane taro may o re.
 (O Boatman, you sail and pass The ocean is so deep, but you are sailing with your 'torn-apart' boat. The boat is made of bhenna wood, with sore plank in the middle If you row the boat, it swings, untidy Before learning enough about life, you got married. And you purchase your own servitude with your own money. Sailing far from family, when you die The newscast on all, and to your mom, comes suddenly). This is a lamentation from a boatman who is a poor fellow. He struggles for living purpose with his small boat. He marries early, leaves his family far from him and he has to stay far for working purpose. He thinks that because of staying far, the news of his death may fail to reach to his family on time. So staying far from family, he is lamenting for his family very much.

Bhawaiya

According to a survey conducted by the Folk cultural and tribal cultural center, Bhawaiya means a deep feeling of love and melancholy. This is a musical form or a popular folk music in Northern Bangladesh. The meaning of Bhawaiya is different in different places. Low-lying land with shrub and other vegetable are called Bhawa. Buffalo keepers used to sing this song during their work. Hence this name came to

exist. According to some other researcher, Bhawaiya is derived from the word Bawaiya which is later derived from the word bao, a Bangla word which means breeze. The derivative of the word Bhawaiya is Bhav > Bhao + Iya = Bhawaiya. Bhawaiya song is sung traditionally both solo and by chorus. Abbas Uddin, a famous singer and composer of Bhawaiya song, sung both by solo and chorus in a higher pitch. According to him, this song is like the random and pleasant wind blowing of North Bengal and it is named as Bhawaiya.

The Bhawaiya singers maintain a technique while singing song. When a cart driver starts his Bhawaiya song with high pitch voice sitting at his cart, because of the ups and downs of the way his voice breaks and it becomes the main style of this song. A few lines of Bhawaiya song are given below:

Oh my black eyed beloved,
 Tell me before you depart,
 The day you come back to me.
 Oh my beloved,
 If you like to go, leave behind your neck- scarf.
 For me to remember.

In this song, the lover is requesting to his black eyed beloved not to leave him. He is requesting her to leave her scarf so that he can remember her always through this scarf. Each line of this song bears memory.

A New thinking

In folk songs, new ideas and thinking are used in such a way that folk singers become unique. There are some folk songs only for the males, some are only for females and some are for both male and female. But sometimes we get a different touch when a song of a female is sung by a male artist or vice versa by making it a signature song. For example, one of the famous folk songs of Sachin Dev Barman, the legendary folk musician is like this:

Who is that person crossing the river
 Please tell him to inform my brother to take me home
 As I want to go for naylor .

According to this song, it is a request from a newly married woman who is sending her message to her brother through the boatman about her desire to return home as she is missing her parents. In this song, memory plays a great role as the singer memorizes the past through this song. But the song is sung by a male singer which brings a great diversion. There are many folk songs like this in which these types of new ideas are found.

Baul

Generally, the word Baul means absent mind without being crazy for property, fame, money and jealousy. Some people believed that this word came from the Hindi word Baur meaning a mad fellow. The main work of Baul is to be very close with God through prayer. This devotion was very present in the singers of middle era of India where many great

and famous Sufis arose. Among them, Chaitanya Dev from Bangla was very popular. He played a great role to create and expand the society of Baul. Maximum bauls came from very poor class where they became a great sufferer of society, cast and culture. (Sen 1993). Upendranath Bhattacharya assumes that from 1650 to 1925, around three hundred years are the approximate timing of rising and establishing folk songs. It is also true that before Fakir Lalon Shah, no established folk song was found. Dr. Ahmed Sherif, a scholar in this field comments that Baul and Lalon are somewhere interrelated to each other. During 19th century, through Lalon Fakir, folk music gets a complete shape and for this reason, Lalon is called the father of folk song. (Arefin 2008).

Fakir Lalon Shah

Fakir Lalon Shah was born when the society was suffering from blind religion. Through his songs, he established the equality of human being avoiding religion and cast. Among the folk singers or Bauls, Lalon is the greatest ambassador through his songs, meditations and philosophical words. Kangal Harinath Majumder, one of the renowned bauls of 19th century from Kumarkhali was inspired by Lalon Shah himself and his songs became very popular during his period. His famous song 'Ohe Din Je Gelo, Shondha Holo, Paar Koro Amare' (Hello! The day is gone, it is almost dark, please help me to return) was used by the well-known film director and writer Satyajit Roy in his popular Bengali movie *Pother Panchali*. In the society during Lalon's time, songs were given the first priority. He lost his one eye-sight because of measles and his full face was covered with dark spots. He left his home during his young age and made Siraj Sai as his mentor. At the time of learning the philosophies of baul from Siraj Sai, Lalon completely lost his interest from family and society. Later he selected a mango tree in the dark jungle of the village Cheuria and sat under that tree for meditation for a long time. Very soon his name and fame reached everywhere with the help of village people who always encouraged Lalon to make his way easy. His disciples noted the lines whatever Lalon told to them orally. Most of the notes were written by Fakir Mainuddin Shah. Two of the copies were taken by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Influenced by Lalon's philosophical songs, Rabindranath Tagore composed many folk songs the meanings and tunes of which are almost same with Lalon's. For this reason Rabindranath Tagore was also known as Rabindra-Baul. (Hasan 2013). Lalon Shah composed and tuned numerous songs. He had more than ten thousand disciples. Some quoted lines from one of his famous songs describe his philosophy about human soul:

The unknown Bird in the cage...
 How does it fly in and out?
 Catch it, I would, if I could...
 And put my mind's chains on its feet.
 Not once could I catch a glimpse of him,
 This neighbour of mine, who lives in the mirror town
 Right across my home.
 Boundless water surrounds the town,

One can't see the limits;
 There is no ferry -boat to take me there ,
 O, how I yearn to meet him?(Dasgupta 2016).

Hason-Raja

Like Fakir Lalon Shah, Hason Raja was a mystic philosopher, poet and a folk singer from Sunamgonj, Sylhet in Bangladesh. In his songs, he preached a philosophical doctrine that the universe has its reality and it has a good connection with man. Because of his philosophy he gained international recognition after his death. A few lines from Hason Raja's song are given below:

People say my house is not good,
 What house shall I build in the air?
 People say my house is not good.
 Building a strong house,
 How long can I stay there!

Shah Abdul Karim

Another famous folk singer and composer of Bangladesh is Shah Abdul Karim(1916-2009).In his writings, we get the philosophy of modern life. Inspired by Lalon, Abdul Karim composed several folk songs. The difference between Lalon Shah and Shah Abdul Karim is that Lalon Shah used pure Bangla words in his writings whereas Abdul Karim used both modern Bangla and English words; such as petrol, driver, passenger, engine, purse, condition, etc. From his writings, it becomes clear that Shah Abdul Karim has successfully developed the standard of Baul. In his last fifty years writing, he has developed describing the demands of common people during the political stressful hours. Another difference between Fakir Lalon Shah and Shah Abdul Karim is that religion gets a very important role in Lalon's folk songs as he himself was a very religious man. But Shah Abdul Karim gives priority to the soul of human being more than religion. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of our nation was so impressed by the folk songs of Shah Abdul Karim that once he declared in a seminar of Sunamganj, Sylhet that where there was Karim, there was Mujib. Prominent political leaders like Hossain Shahid Sohrwardi and Moulana Abdul Hamid Vashani were also impressed and inspired by the lyrics and songs of Shah Abdul Karim. Once Vashani told Karim, 'Never look back and lose hope. You must become an artist of common people.' (Kumar 2013). Some lines are collected from Shah Abdul Karim:

There is dust in engine, the parts are almost junk
 Dynamo becomes useless, two headlights are fused
 The car is not moving, not moving at all.

Local Folk Singers

Apart from renowned folk singers of Bangladesh, there are innumerable local folk singers who are familiar mostly in those places where they born and stay. Shah Abdul Jalil, Ator Ali, Askar Ali, Abdul Atikullah, Abdul Aziz Pandit, Abdul Gafur Hali, Abul Khair Nakshbandi and many folk singers of

19th century have composed so many folk songs in their local language. Though these singers are not well educated, through their songs philosophy, religion and humanism are described very seriously. Inspired by the songs and personal lifestyle of Abdul Gafur Hali, a famous folk singer of Chattogram, Dr. Hans Harder, Professor of Philosophy department from Halle University of East Germany worked on the songs of Hali. He selected some songs of Hali, translated them in German language and made them famous in his own country. In his thesis paper, with translated songs, he described personal life of Hali. Thus, local folk singers like Abdul Gafur Hali become very famous because of the curious and learned people like Dr. Harder who show their interest to work on these types of folk singers. (Arefin2008).

Musical-instrument

The folk songs of Bangladesh are mostly lyrics-based with least instrumental accompaniment. Bangladesh has a good number of original musical instruments of her own which are used in Bangladeshi folk songs. Such as, Dhole (wooden drums of different shapes and sound), Ektara (a single stringed instrument), Dotara (an instrument with four strings), Banshi (bamboo flute), Mandira (a pair of metal bawls used as rhythm instrument), Khanjani, Sharinda etc. Now-a-days western instruments such as Guitar, Drums, Saxophone and Ukulele are used with local instruments. Thus, present listeners are enjoying folk songs in modern style.

Fusion

Fusion is itself an 'always-in' feature of music which eventually helps the newer generations to get interested in the original folk songs. During the last couple of years their tastes in music have changed greatly. They will be inspired not only as listeners, but as performers and connoisseurs. To do that, they need to be interested first, and this is where fusion plays the important role. An artist can take local lyrics to a western ensemble or take western lyrics to mix it with local musical style to create fusion. Folk songs left by the masters like Fakir Lalon Shah, Hason Raza and others are actually spines that need the flesh of fusion to carry them through the ages. If the true tune is preserved, then no matter the fusion, generation after generation can enjoy the best of the art. Because of using too much or unnecessary fusion, sometimes the real taste of any specific song may miss. We need to be alert on this issue.

II. CONCLUSION

The term 'folk song' itself was coined much later in the nineteenth century, but that does not mean that the folk songs themselves did not exist before the term. No matter how urbanized and modernized a country becomes, the folk songs have the singular appeal that can, without losing a beat, make the soul weep or draw it into pure ecstasy. The characteristics of the Bangladeshi culture and art world are studied in a developing way as it is expanding towards the worldwide. At present Bangladeshi singers are working hard to represent the

folk songs to make it familiar and universal. With the use of several types of modern instruments, folk songs are sung by the singers. Earlier folk singers hardly have thought of preserving their songs for the next generation. Many folk songs lost their identity from the world of music because they were never preserved at all. But now our musicians and singers take attempt to recollect the folk songs. Different television channels arrange programs where they introduce the familiar and unfamiliar, old and modern folk singers with their past, present and future knowledge about folk music. There the folk singers comment and sing according to the choice of the listeners. These programs also help the folk singers to be familiar to the present world. Western music already takes a large space among the present singers and listeners, but folk music is still widely popular. Not only this, the young singers and musicians are now showing their interest to follow the famous folk singers and perform the folk songs in their own way keeping respect to the real folk singers. Once, People felt bore to listen those songs. But now people become interested to listen the same song. Moreover, popularity of band songs that make a fusion of modern and old musical instruments to project Bengali folk songs of Lalon Shah and the others, and the fusion which has now found a strong fascination in the current younger generation in particular, can be a vital means to uphold and revive the Bengali folk music to a sustainable platform.

Footnote: Some of the lines of folk songs used in the paper are translated into English by the writer herself.

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