

MANIFOLD CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF FOLK MUSIC OF NORTH BENGAL

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Abstract

This research paper mainly focuses on four kinds of popular genres in respect to folk music of North Bengal which are Bhawaiyya, Chatka/Catka, Gambhira and Dhamail-practiced and performed in few parts of North Bengal (Northern part of West Bengal). All these have many distinctive characteristics similar and dissimilar in many aspects because of regional flavour. Different winds of geographical atmospheres of different regions of North Bengal, daily lifestyle, forms of labour and work, various societal problems faced by people, are reflected in these folk songs. Focus on structural construction of identity of these ethnic communities through ethno-music which have been analyzed under the following traits: song, texts, analysis of the category of their music and musicians and their role in the society.

Key words: Folk Music, Bhawaiyya, Chatka, Gambhira, Dhamail.

INTRODUCTION

A critical analysis of the folk music of North Bengal has led to the understanding of the four main genres that has been discussed in this paper. The four varieties of namely Bhawaiya, and Dhamail presented in the research paper are among the most popular ones prevalent in the region.

BHAWAIYA

Bhawaiya is a genre of Bengali folk song of northern Bengal, more specifically northern west Bengal and north-western Bangladesh. The word Bhawaiya originated from bhav which means emotion in Bengali language. Thematically Bhawaiya songs are love songs in general. Many synonyms are used for bhav like nature, heart, love, character etc. in Bhawaiya songs.

REASONS BEHIND THE NAME OF BHAWAIYA

There are many possible ways of the origin of the name Bhawaiya, among them three should be discussed according to Sukhbilas Burma. Firstly, Bhawaiya - this term originated from the Bhawa named region. The local meaning of Bhawa is riverside grassland specifically Kash grassland. This grassland is a fertile pastoral field where Mahishal with his bull sings the song with Dotara (local string instrument). The sweet melody of the song flows from the Bhawa region

to the adjacent area, so the name of the song is Bhawaiya. Secondly, the sound produced by Dotara and Mahishal singers stay on air and with the flowing air a magical sound effect reaches to the villages thus, air and its flow, which is known in local terminology as Vasa, make a folk song named Bhawaiya. Thirdly, this term Bhawaiya originated from the word Bhab which means emotion and passion. Another opinion is the migratory community named Baudiya that composes the Bhawaiya song. They are like Baul (a minor religious group of Bangladesh and West Bengal) but do not possess a specific spiritual philosophy.¹

Bhawaiya songs speak mostly in a woman's voice, and this has to be seen in the larger context of its social evolution. The form has been practiced by the different communities-Rajbanshis, Koch, Mech, Rava, Khen, Jugi, etc.-who traditionally inhabited this region. But essentially, bhawaiya developed as an integral cultural expression of the Rajbanshis, and these songs are composed in Rajbanshi (or Kamrupi or Kamtapuri), the most widely spoken Bengali dialect across this belt. Despite the influence of Brahminical Hinduism, Islam and Vaishnavism over the preceding centuries, the popular culture of these communities have retained matriarchal influences, evident from the many extant folk rituals and practices.² Bhawaiya is thought to have developed from earlier theatrical musical forms, pala songs that were once the mainstay of rural entertainment and are still performed in these regions today. While some major forms like the dotorapala and kushan songs involve historical, scriptural and mythical themes, other pala forms like bishohora (addressing the goddess Manasha) and ritual songs dedicated to Shaitol, Teestaburi (deifying the river Teesta as a goddess) and Hudumdeo (involving ancient female fertility rites) pay obeisance to local matriarchal deities and associated practices.

CHATKA

Bhawaiya-chatka as a form seems to be an antecedent of the dhuya or the khosha songs that were introduced into the pala forms as lighter musical interludes in order to bring a degree of social realism and humour as relief within their mythical and ritual content. So even in its origin, while being influenced by the pivotal role of women within the social fabric of the community, bhawaiya came

¹ Barma, S. 2011. "Bhawaiyachatka" – Sopan, Kolkata

² Barma, Sukhbilas. Bhawaiya: Ethnomusicological Study. New Delhi: Global Vision, 2004.

to provide a pragmatic counterpoint to explicitly religious concerns, which helped nurture and develop its later vocabulary of passion and lyricism.¹

Another primary source for the lyrical content of bhawaiya is the lush natural splendour cradling the culture and the socioeconomic existence of the people of North Bengal. These districts of North Bengal and Assam are washed by the many rivers and streams, such as the Teesta, Torsha, Jaldhaka, Raidak, Kaljani, Korotoa and Gadadhar, coming down from the Himalayas. They form a distinct terrain of forested but oft-flooded rolling, undulating plains, and these topographical effects of north Bengal on bhawaiya have historically determined the living practices, cultures and livelihoods of the people living there, and has naturally informed their music as well.

People's ways of living and their natural contexts find frequent description in Bengali folk music, but often as metaphors for the actual subjects of the songs, which is evident from the many Baul songs that use forests, rivers, hunting, fishing, etc., to speak in codes about spiritual and bodily praxes. In bhawaiya, however, nature seems not only to provide metaphors for expression, but is allowed to come into its own and become an inextricable part of the discourse. The meager livelihoods of these men depended on the existence of a class of extensively landed, propertied employers who needed to keep large stables of domesticated animals or had use for teams of carts to ferry their goods to distant markets. While the society's functioning has changed, bhawaiya songs, telling their tales of love and loss, carry traces of that earlier way of life in these northern plains. In fact, one theory regarding the origin of the term bhawaiya refers to bhawa as fallow, riverside tracts left behind by the changing course of a river, overgrown with shrubs and kashiya (kash) grass that used to be ideal grazing lands for buffaloes.²

Another theory traces the term back to baudiya or a vagabond minstrel³ who could often be a moishal or a gariyal, singing as he travels or rests, writing songs where the woman he had loved thinks of him and tries to find expression for her

¹ Wajeb, J. 2013. "Uttarbanger Bhawaiya Sangeet Samikhhka" –Chhaya Publication, Kolkata.

² Barman, P. 2007. "BhawaiyaSangeetItikatha" – Sri Upasu Publisher, Mathabhanga, Coochbehar.

³ Barman, Shyamapada. Bhawaiya Geetisangraha Swaralipi. Kolkata: Loksanskriti Adibashi Sanskriti Kendra, 2000.

loss and unfulfilled longings. His sole possession is his dotara, a four-stringed lute whose cadences form the structural basis of bhawaiya.

GAMBHIRA

Gambhira is a type of song originating in the Bengal region in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, what is today northwestern Bangladesh and northeastern West Bengal, India. Chapai Nawabganj District is the main centre of Gambhira performances in Bangladesh. The tradition is also popular in the nearby districts of Rajshahi and Naogaon. In West Bengal, Gambhira performances are centre around the Malda District. It is performed with a particularly distinctive rhythm and dance with two performers, always personifying a man and his maternal grandfather, discussing a topic to raise social awareness.

Mr. Haridas Palit has commented in a book, named, "Addyer Gambhira"-ancient days the house which looked like chandimandap¹ was used to call gambhiri or gambhira. During the period of second Dharmapal Deb and Gabinda Chandra, gambhira used to be that kind of house in some provinces like Gour, Rangpur and Dinajpur. So, it means the word gambhira is a "house of God", where religious activities used to perform. The "Gajan Utsav" of Rarh area becomes "Addyer Gambhira" in Malda district. But these days it is known as "Gambhira", which means utsav of "Lord Shiva". The festival gambhira is basically famous within Rajbanshi, Chnai, Koch, Mahali community. In gambhira festival there is no traditional play. Though there is no particular myth in Gambhira but the character of Lord Shiva is always there and he is known as "nana".

As the people of Malda are proud of Gambhira, so there are many who have no respect for Gambhira. The Duet song is a presentation of this conflict.² Many popular songs of today are influenced by folk songs-this truth is not understood by many learned fools of today. During the time of freedom fight of India gambhira songs have left their mark.

¹ Addyer Gambhira : Shri Horidas Palit.

² Gambhira : Lokosangeet O Utsav. Ekal O Sekal : Dr. Proddyot Ghosh

GAMBHIRA AT SOCIAL CONTEXT

Gambhira Gan is a type of folk song popular in the northwestern region of Bangladesh. Gambhira songs are assumed to have originated from the worship of the god Shiva, who is also known as 'Gambhir'. In ancient times, Gambhira used to be celebrated as puja (worship) only. In the medieval period, most Hindu communities celebrated the puja of dharma thakur (a popular god of the Hindus) on the last three days of the Bengali year; this came to be known as the gajan of Shiva later on. In the past Shiva was imagined to be present at the performance.

Initially, Gambhira was of two kinds: the primary Gambhira and the narrative Gambhira. The primary Gambhira would address gods and goddesses and describe human joys and sorrows, and, sometimes, important events of the year. In the narrative Gambhira, every character would represent a social problem.¹ Gambhira songs originated among the Hindu community of Malda in West Bengal. After the creation of Pakistan, Chapai Nawabganj in Rajshahi became the main centre of gambhira songs, which underwent major changes in theme and mode of presentation. Muslims became the custodians of this song and made it an integral part of their social life and their culture. Apart from Rajshahi, Gambhira songs are also popular in Nawabganj and Naogaon.

At present the main characters of a Gambhira are a maternal grandfather and his grandson. The performance is structured as a dialogue, interspersed with songs. Both prose and verse are used for the dialogue.

FEATURES OF GAMBHIRA

The Gambhira reflects contemporary social problems through witty dialogue, songs, dances and jokes. Both the actors wear lubgi. The grey-bearded grandfather wears a mathal (straw hat) on his head and holds a stick in his hand. The grandson wears a torn jersey and has a gamchha (local checked towel) tied around his waist.

In the past gambhira songs were sung in the measures of ektal, trital, dadra, khemta, kaharba etc. Today the tunes are influenced by songs from popular Bangla and Hindi movies. Kutubul Alam, Rakibuddin, Biren Ghosh and Mahbubul

¹ Communication through Folk Theatre: A Study on Gambhira: Biplab Chakrabarty.

Alam of Nawabganj have made the Gambhira song popular in Bangladesh by introducing new subjects and characters and interesting and witty dialogue.¹

DHAMAIL

Dhamail is a form of folk music and dance originated in Sylhet, Bangladesh. Social Dhamail song narrating events of North Bengal, conversations between brides and bridegrooms and containing proverbs are still prevalent. Dhamail is folk song of the ancient tradition. Scholars believe that fourteenth-century poet Chandi Das wrote Srikrishvakirtan² after being inspired by Dhamail and Jhumursongs.

It accompanies the use of Mridanga, Kartals and many other musical instruments which are usually played by the males while the dance is being performed.

Dhamail songs combined with dances are performed even today during various cultural functions and marriage ceremonies by both Hindus and Muslims. They are performed in the yards of households, marriage pavilions and sometimes in the open places. Normally groups of five, ten, fifteen or more number of people, mostly women, participate in the Dhamail who sing and dance in a circular way and clap their hands. In most Dhamails, where the performers are Hindu women, the subject of the songs is Radha and Krishna.

Although it has similarity with Bhatiali³ in tone, it does not have the stretched-out intonation or the sweet or pleasant rolling from one note to another. And the musical measure is maintained by the clapping of the hands; hence, no musical instruments are needed.

CONCLUSION

In the course of time each and every genres of Folk Music discussed above are losing gradually their originalities, purities but modern improvisations and admixtures are also important to be incorporated into these genres for their time bound and contemporary advancements and upgradations still their originality structurally must be retained with their pure essence for true justifications of such experiments. This nature of creative procreations to augment such folk

¹ Gambhira : Dr. Pushpajit Roy

² Banglapedia National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh: Dhamail Gan

³ Bhattacharya, Ashutosh. Bangiya Lok-Sangeet Ratnakar. Kolkata: A. Mukherjee, 1960.

songs into the culture of the modern generation tends these songs to become more popular and closer to our modern times. Though governments are taking many active measures to nurture, preserve these folk songs giving many opportunities to their practitioners from interior most places of North Bengal by organising seminars, workshops, cultural fests but still there are more to be done to boost their music to allow them to come in front with many hidden yet brilliant aspects of their music. Their modern generations should also be made aware of their cultural heritage which their previous generations have been practicing since ages by providing them with proper resource materials along with scholarships to get involved in many cultural studies institutions across our country.

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