

TRADITION OF FOLK SONGS OF BENGAL: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO ITS REGIONAL VARIETY

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Abstract

Folk Songs are considered as a part of the folklore which are said to be validate and express the culture more. Bengal, the adobe of culture bears an incessant rich tradition of folk music in its different regions. The distinctive charm of these songs with their naturalistic imagery, mysticism, emotionality, divinity, the struggles of daily life, etc. is an unique delineation of the whole human conduct. Life, with all its movement, gets its expression in all varied folk songs in accordance with its place and time of diverse origin. The geological variety of Bengal with its hills, rivers, forests, plains, rocky heaths has been quite remarkable which resulted in an enriched form of the folk songs of Bengal. This paper aims to explore the tradition of different folk songs of Bengal along with their geographical locations, and their thematic descriptions. The paper has been reviewed and explained with the help of various secondary sources available through Journals, various research papers, etc. The nature of the research is purely descriptive.

Keywords: Folklore, Bengal, mysticism, emotionality, geology.

INTRODUCTION

The rich labyrinth of melodies and culture, Bengali folk songs reflect the cultural heterogeneity that Bengal possess. The term “folk” (n.) originally means “common peoples or laity¹.” and can be track down to old Norse/English/Germanic and used to refer to group of peoples, army, or clan. The word ‘folk’ presents to us an image of traditional costumes, dances, and music. Folk culture is the manifestation of the important religious, philosophical, behavioral, and societal reflections of the human beings living in a particular community with their own social beliefs, own patterns of life, maintaining the past-present continuum of their traditions. This is manifested in songs, everyday artifacts, clothing, mythology, buildings, etc. The folk culture or “Loko Songoshkriti” and tradition of Bengal is a very wide aspect with its diverse nature. It is important to make a clear distinction between the word tradition and culture for tradition is the belief or behavior that has been passed throughout the ages while culture refers to the shared characteristics of the group. Any tradition can be seen as the manifestation of their culture. Culture defines the tradition. Bengal being the abode of culture, consists of a rich tradition of its folk songs. The geological environment serves as a background of its psychological construction. The varying lifestyles and the struggles of daily life gets manifested in the culture through songs, dances etc. The Folk songs are manifestation of the ‘life’ of rural people whose economy is based on agriculture, socially backward by status and rustic culturally yet have a profound heart. It has been developed by ‘oral’ traditions, daily life activities and thoughts.

OBJECTIVES

The study covers the objectives which are listed as:

- To study the geographical regions of different folk songs of Bengal
- To study the varied folk songs and the thematic descriptions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study aims to explore the varied folk songs of different regions of Bengal. It aims to attempt a qualitative analysis of the folk songs, their regions with different descriptive tables and images. The nature of the Research is conceptual. All the relevant data has been collected from different secondary sources such as Journals, Government Publications, other research papers, articles, and various e-resources.

AREA OF STUDY

The study area covers the folk songs of different regions of Bengal. Bengal can be divided into four parts of regions according to its wide variety of folk songs e.g., Rarh region, North Bengal, West Bengal, East Bengal. Six Northern districts of Bengal: Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Cooch Behar, , Dakshin Dinajpur, Uttar Dinajpur, Malda and Kalimpong (a recently added district in the northern Bengal).

Rarh region districts: Bankura, Birbhum, Hooghly, Nadia, Murshidabad, North 24 Pargana, South 24 Pargana, Paschim Bardhaman, Purba Bardhaman, Paschim Medinipur, Purba Medinipur.

East Bengal: East Bengal, today is an area of Bangladesh. Geographically, it was a part of the Bengal, it existed from 1947 to 1955. Later, it become separated as Bangladesh. The province includes, administrative divisions like Assam valley divisions, Chittagong division, Dhaka division, Surma valley divisions.

West Bengal: Purulia, Bankura, Medinipur.

The Folk Songs of different regions are given in the table below:

Table 1: (representing folk songs of different districts of Bengal)

SN	FOLK SONGS	DISTRICT PRACTICES
1.	Baul	Parts of West Bengal, Birbhum, Nadia, Murshidabad, Bardhaman.
2.	Bhawaiya	Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling.
3.	Jhumur	Bankura, Purulia, Bardhaman.
4.	Bhadu And Tusu	Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bardhaman, Purulia. Bankura
5.	Bhatiyali	Eastern part of Bengal mainly Bangladesh.

FOLK SONGS

1. BHAWAIYA FOLK SONG

This folk musical form is generally sung in the Northern side of Bengal like Assam, Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri and in Rongpur-dinajpur in Bangladesh.

The word ‘bhawaiya’ generally indicates “bhava” which refers to emotions. This song mostly speaks of mortal love and loss. It is mostly written from the perspective of a women, and it speaks of a love that has not been socially recognized but, has arises within men and women thrown by the vagaries of a marginalized socioeconomic existence². *Bhawaiya* is of two types: one which is melancholic and the other is *chatka* or skipping tone. The first one is emotional and generally consists of loner, young women or a youth who is in search of a husband or speaks about the tender feelings of love and separation. The male leading character is called as “*baudiya*” i.e., cart-drivers, buffalo-keepers who basically travels most of the time. Some popular songs include, ‘*oki gariyal bhai*’ (Hey, cart-driver), ‘*kon dyashe jan maishal bandure*’ (Oh buffalo rider, my friend, Which country are you heading to?), ‘*nauton piritir baro jwala*’ (The pain of new love is immense) etc³.

The *chatka* is fast paced and it themes include the daily human conflicts between husband and wife, the ups and downs of a family, etc. Some popular songs include, “*ore patidhan bari chariyaa na jan*” (please don’t

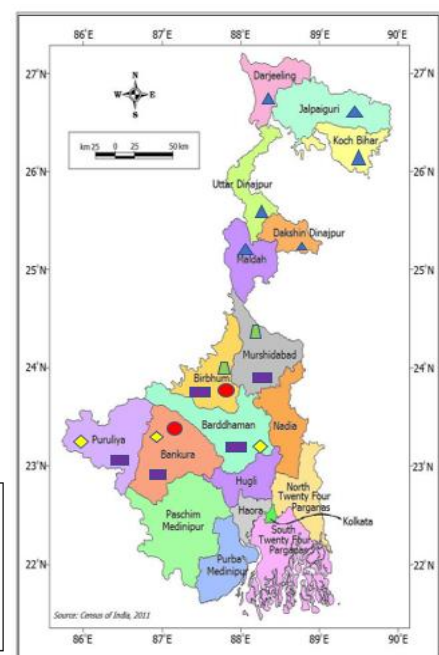


Fig 1. Regional distribution of different types of folk cultures of Bengal

leave home, o dear Husband,), “*ore kainer myayar thasak beshi/byaray shali tari tari*” (The girl who wanders around with an impeccable gait).

Dotara is one of the main instruments of *Bhawaiya* folk songs.

2. TUSU AND BHADU FOLK SONG

‘*Tusu*’ is basically a festival that is held in South west of Bengal mostly in Jharkhand area of Bengal and Bihar⁴. Primarily, Women sing these songs and it themes includes family life, War, politics, starvation, economic inequality, and romance. It is mainly celebrated on the last of Bengali month *Agrahayana* (mid-december) and continues till *Poush* (mid-january). Celebrations mark the conclusion of harvest season, and rest follows laborious toil. The Virgin (unplanted) Earth is represented by *Tusu*, the goddess of fertility. Songs are sung and rural festivals are arranged primarily to appease and awaken her, ensuring that the crops grown the next year would be bountiful. The thematic description of the older *tusu* songs includes the daily life a villager, women’s rituals, property disputes, love affair, dominance of in-laws and men, etc and in the modern times it includes themes used for political parties, corruption, immortality, protests unethical practices, etc. Sometimes themes also includes muted criticism like, the lyrics could not be about a spouse enjoying alcohol with his friends late into the night, but rather about Sita waiting for her husband to come back and blaming Rama for leaving her.

BHADU FOLK SONG

The geographical extension of *Bhadu* festival is South Bengal. This festival is celebrated in the month of *Bhadro*, which is the fifth month in the Bengali Calender. This is celebrated regarding the legend pricess *bhadu*, who is considered as an embodiment of goddess Lakshmi. It is been said that *Bhadu* was the princess of *Panchkote* who magically disappeared and is said to have faded away and merged with the sky. We know from medieval literature that married women in rural areas typically received poor treatment from their mothers-in-law, and they complained to the *Bhadu* deity⁵ about this. The song typically features eulogies for brothers and parents; married women talk about their father-in-laws, and single women praise their own family members.

3. BAUL/FAKIRI SONGS

The *baul* is one of the most celebrated folk songs of West Bengal. The origination of baul songs is quite difficult to state but as far evidences are there the word “Baul” appeared in Bengali texts in the 15th century. The music of the baul songs represents celestial love but in an earthly form. The adherents of the mystical sect, *Bauls* expresses the religious beliefs and experience, view of life and world and their thoughts and emotions. The lifestyle of ‘*baul*’ is a very simple one though the thoughts are deep in nature. He has the appearance of a traveling minstrel, dressed in a cloak-like garment the color of saffron, with long hair wrapped in a characteristic knot at the top of his head, a long beard, and long hair. His songs are his source of income, and he performs them for anyone who would listen.⁶ The theme of the baul songs mainly include “oneness with the divine”. “*Deha Tattwa*” (human body) includes an important part of their philosophy. A consistent part of the lyrics of baul songs deals with body-centered practices that. They believe that divinity lies within a human being. In remaining unattached with the wordly pleasures of life, lies the baul. There are some main features of the baul’s religious practices which are:

- i) Guru-vada- The preceptor
- ii) Rejection of all castes, creed, religions,
- iii) Moner Manus (Man of the heart) i.e., the divine
- iv) Human as the sacred dwelling and a microcosm
- v) Sadhana(discipline), physical and psychological for the attainment of spirituality.

The originator of baul music, Fakir Lalon Shah, expressed disapproval of the superficiality of the baul through his song:

“Sob loke koi lalon ki jaat songsare Lalon bole jater ki roop dekhla na ei nojore.”

Everyone asks: "Lalon, what's your religion in this world?"

Lalon answers: "How does religion look?"

I've never laid eyes on it.

Some wear malas [Hindu rosaries] around their necks,

some tasbis [Muslim rosaries], and so people say

they've got different religions.

But do you bear the sign of your religion when you come or when you go?"

There are a few instruments that are used in baul songs like, *ektara* (one string plucked drone instrument), *khomok* (one headed drum with a string attached to it), Other drums used are the one-headed drum with a string attached, the *dhhol* and *khol*, the little hand-held earthen drum known as the *duggi*, and others.

4. JHUMUR FOLK SONG

The geographical extension of the *Jhumur* songs include the eastern part of the chotta Nagpur plateau comprising the districts such as Purulia, Bankura, Western parts of Paschim Bardhaman, West Birbhum, and west Medinipur districts of West Bengal and later on it spreaded to the border region of Bangladesh. *Jhumur* Songs are generally associated with agriculture. The Word *Jhumur* is associated with “Shifting Cultivation” and it is known as “*jhum*” in all these regions.⁷ In earlier period, while working in the agriculture fields, womens used to shout out their emotions in the form of short lines in their local languages called ‘*hawka*’. Although singing and shouting are two different things, but the main purpose of this kind of *Jhumur* was to express the emotions. This kind of *Jhumur* is called “*Hawka Jhumur*”⁸. Another kind of *Jhumur* that is practised by the rural tribal communities as a form of religious belief is the earthly love of Radha and krishna which is accompanied by dialogues and it gives a dramatic effect to these songs. In the modern period, *Jhumur* has been influenced by *kirtana*, it has shifted its flavour to social problems, political affairs and so on. The typical musical instruments that are used in *Jhumur* Songs are *dhamsa* (Percussion instrument with rich bass sound made of wood) and *madal* (popularly used as a hand drum).

5. BHATIYALI

Bhatiali or *Bhatiyali* is mainly sung in the eastern part of Bengal or particularly in Bangladesh. The word “*bhatiyali*” came from the word “*Bhata*” which in Bengali means downstream or ebb. These are mainly the songs of the boatmen and fishermen. Boatmen while sailing downstream, spent a considerable time in their boats singing these songs. The lyrics of these songs generally consists of emotional and metaphorical verses which speaks about the situation of the boatmen and fishermens and the river. The lonely journey of the boatmen down the river, these songs are born on a living river with all its mood and they are not always full of praise for the river. The river is basically used as a metaphor for life itself. These Songs are not so rhythmic but the notes used are prolonged as to express the feeling of the long tiresome journey of the boatmen. They usually starts from the Taar Saptak and ends in the Madhya or Mandra Saptak. Generally, it is sung with a *dotara* (a double stringed instrument). One of the most famous and popular *bhatiyali* song of the Folk music exponent Jasimuddin is:

“Amay dubaili re
Amay bhaisaili re



akul dariyar bujhi kul nairey
kul nai kinar nai naiko nadir padi
tumi sabdhanetey chalaiyo majhi
amar bhang tari rey”
(You've abandoned me.
You've let me down.

There is no shore in the boundless waters.
The waters are boundless, devoid of borders, and lack banks.
O row with tenderness, my riven boatman.)

CONCLUSION

This research has examined how these regions shaped the folklore of Bengal, exposing a complex interplay among spirituality, nature and social discourse that defines the state's cultural identity. From the riverine plains to the coastal areas dominated by the mangroves, each geographical region has its own distinct flavour to the cultural fabric of Bengal. The geographical diversity of Bengal has significantly influenced the development of the unique folk traditions which in turn have shaped not only the lifestyle of the people but also their artistic expressions, rituals, and narratives. The folklore of Bengal and its customs are witness to its extensive history, varied topography and deeply ingrained social and spiritual values.

The vast thematic descriptions related to nature, spiritual devotions, social commentary are firmly rooted in these customs reflects the everyday lives, struggles and beliefs of peoples. Bengal preserves these traditions as a critical link to its past, even as it continuously adapts its cultural narrative to suit the needs of the present.

In summary, Bengali folk culture captures the essence of the region's topography and the collective experience of its people through an ever-evolving yet timeless legacy. This study emphasizes the significance of comprehending the mutually beneficial relationship between geography and culture by demonstrating how folk traditions reflect the environment, way of life, and feelings of the people who live there.

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