

# BOLAN AND ALKAP MUSIC: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO FOLK SONGS OF BENGAL

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## ABSTRACT

*Murshidabad is an ancient district in the Indian state of West Bengal. Two once-popular folk genres of the Murshidabad district are Bolan and Alkap. Although there are various performances of this folk song in different parts of the district even today, this genre is currently on the verge of extinction. The influence of folk music on human life is immense. Folk music bears witness to various events in society, nature, and human life and their impact. The folk songs of both Bolan and Alkap are no exceptions. Bolan is mainly sung for lord Shiva. This tradition portrays the social life of ancient Bengal. On the other hand, religious themes are not seen much in Alkap, it is a form of folk theatre where various social conflicts and realities are portrayed through satirical laughter. Both these musical forms are closely associated with the lower-income, impoverished sections of society and reflect their way of life.*

*Research Methodology: This research is fully descriptive. It is based on data collected from previous studies conducted by other researchers. All information has been gathered from secondary sources, including magazines, books, and various e-resources*

**Keywords:** Folk song, Bengali song, Bolan, Alkap, Rural-Music,

## History of the Bolan song

Gajan festival is an ancient Hindu festival of Bengal, which is imagined as the marriage festival of lord Shiva. Folk songs sung for lord Shiva, during the Gajan festival, are called Bolan. There are various types of Bolan songs. There are several theories about the origin of the word 'Bolan'. The word Bolan is believed to have originated from the word Bol, which means speech. According to some, the characteristic method of this song is Bolkata (rhyming), hence the name Bolan. Linguist Sukumar Sen has reported that on the occasion of Shiva's Gajan, an original ascetic recited a tarja (rhyme) called Bola.

## Characteristics of Bolan

Bolan singing groups were formed in the farmers' leisure time after the harvest in late spring. Each year, a new group of Bolan songs is formed and disbanded at the end of the festival, as there is no continuing Bolan group. Bolan is a mobile team. They voluntarily travel to different villages to perform, and the villagers voluntarily arrange their meals. In Bolan, men perform as women. The main affection of this music is the lyrical dialogue between female and male duets.

Although the subject of Bolan-music is based on various mythological stories, there have been many changes over time. Similar to many other folk genres, we can see in Bolan songs various mythological characters transformed from the form of gods and goddesses into symbols representing rural characters and life. For example, we see Sita in Bolan songs as a helpless, poor bride, abandoned by her husband, not as a goddess. Instruments such as Harmonium, Dugi-Tabla, Dhol, Khanjani, and Flute are played in Bolan. Nowadays, a Cassio is also sometimes used instead of a harmonium.

## Types of Bolan Songs

Bolan songs can be divided into four categories. Shamsan (Crematory) Bolan, Pala Bolan, Chhal Bolan, Daak Bolan.

**Shamshan (Crematory) Bolan** – Another name for this is Poro Bolan. Few people dance in various poses and make multiple noises as cremation ghosts with the skulls of the unburnt corpses. They are all intoxicated.

**Pala Bolan** - Currently, Pala Bolan is the most popular. This Pala Bolan is structured in several layers.

- **First Level** - The entire group dances to the music and makes various sounds like tabla bowls. Waving handkerchiefs during the dance performance is a special feature of Bolan.
- **Second Level** - The deities, such as Shiv, Ganesh, and Saraswati, are worshipped, either kneeling or standing.
- **Third Level** - 'Panchali' is recited, which is the main part of Bolan. All the performers stand in a circle with the instrumentalists positioned in between.
- **Fourth Level** - This is similar to Yatra Pala. It involves acting.
- **Final Level** - The last layer is known as rangpanchali. It is filled with humour, but sometimes social issues are brought up through laughter.

**Chhal Bolan** - Chhal Bolan is a reservoir of protest against various social injustices. Protests against various social discriminations and oppressions are expressed through songs. Groups of about 20 people dance in circles wearing torn clothes, accompanied by the sounds of drums and khanjani (a folk instrument). Unfortunately, Chhal Bolan is now almost extinct.

**Daak Bolan** - Daak Bolan and Pala Bolan are quite similar in some ways. Artists performing Daak Bolan wear traditional costumes and perform various mythological stories.

### History of Alkap Songs

Many people think that the word 'Alkap' comes from North Bengal. If we divide the word Alkap into two parts, there will be two words, Al and Kap. Al means Sting, and Kap implies sarcasm. The word Alkap is derived from the meaning of stabbing through satirical songs. In other words, the true meaning of Alkap music is the compositions of satirical music songs.

According to many, Alkap was once known as 'Chhyaachhar' in various parts of Birbhum and Murshidabad districts. Many have also compared Alkap to the popular folk music of Bengal, the Gambhira song. Gambhira is primarily a tradition of folk music of the farming community, where songs are sung in the name of the lord Shiva. But on the other hand, Alkap is not a religious form of music.

Alkap is the folk drama of the Murshidabad district of West Bengal. Alkap became primarily popular in Murshidabad. Therefore, this musical genre can be regarded as a unique cultural wealth of the Murshidabad district. According to most historians, the creator of Alkap was Banamali Pramanik, who was more popular as Bonakana. When Banamali was a teenager, a Jhumur team came to his village. He ran away with the Jhumur team and travelled to various parts of Bangladesh and Bihar, collecting music from many regions. A few years later, He returned to his home and formed a singing group named Alkap.

Basant Sarkar was born in a place called Jangipur in the Murshidabad district. He received his training from Bonakana. It was through Basant Sarkar that the Alkap was introduced in the Murshidabad District. Dhananjay Mandal, who later became popularly known as Jhaksu, received his training from Basant Sarkar. Jhaksu is also referred to as the 'Alkap Samrat Jhaksu'. It was Jhaksu who truly brought Alkap to the peak of its popularity.

### Characteristics of Alkap

Although Alkap includes praises of Goddess Saraswati and various masters, it is not a religious form of music like Bolan Sangeet; no religious rituals are observed in this genre. Alkap primarily highlights incidents of social oppression, degradation, and exploitation. Artists from both the Hindu and Muslim

religions are involved in Alkap. For this reason, many have identified Alkap as a confluence of religious cultures.

An Alkap troupe is formed by at least ten or twelve artists. The audience sits all around it, and in the middle, the 'Master', 'Kopay', 'Chhokra', and instrumental musicians perform Alkap together. Like Bolan Sangeet, it is also performed in several stages.

### **First Level**

At the beginning of an Alkap performance, the harmonium is played in a high scale and accompanied by other instruments such as the Tabla, Dugi, Kartal and Flute. Jaydhwani (chants of victory sound) are offered in remembrance of previous masters like Bonakana and Jhaksu, and honour of Hindu deities, especially the name of Goddess Saraswati.

### **Second Level**

In Alkap music, after the invocatory chant (Jaydhwani), a devotional song is performed in praise of Goddess Saraswati. Since Goddess Saraswati is the deity of art, she is primarily worshipped in her name.

### **Third level**

One of the most important characters in Alkap is the 'Chhokra'. In the rural Bengali language, a teenage boy is called to a Chhokra. In Alkap, a teenage boy dresses up like a girl, wearing ornaments and female attire, performing dances and singing. This character is referred to as Chhokra.

### **Fourth level**

'Kopay' is another important character in Alkap. The main part of Alkap is 'Kap', which means a satirical play. The artist who performs satirical songs on various social issues is called 'Kopay'. In this segment, Chhokra and Kopay perform dance and songs together.

### **Fifth level**

This segment is a very important part of the Alkap performance. In this segment, the master of the group, known as the Ustad, recites rhymes. The masters recite, deliver and compose these rhymes on various natural and social issues such as drought, flood, political situations, and so on. There are often competitions between different groups in this rhyming, and the group whose master has the greatest ability in delivering and composing rhymes is considered the winner.

### **Sixth level**

This last segment of the Alkap is the main important part. This is known as the 'kaap'. Many people compare this part with 'Kabi Gaan'.

### **The evolved form of Alkap – 'Pancharas'**

During the 1950s and 60s, the growing influence of Jatra (folk theatre) gradually led to a decline in the popularity of Alkap. To preserve its popularity, it was primarily Jhaksu who transformed Alkap into Pancharas. This new form was a blend of five components: dance, song, rhyme, kaap (comic dialogue), and drama. In the dance segment, competitions based on various mythological events began to emerge, which came to be known as "trailers." Instead of the traditional chhokras (young boys playing female roles), real female performers gradually began to join Pancharas. Over time, Alkap also started incorporating songs and music of lower aesthetic quality, which significantly damaged the legacy of the traditional Alkap.

## Conclusion

Both the musical traditions of Alkap and Bolan are now on the verge of extinction. Although a few troupes have been formed through government initiatives, they are still not sufficient. Some people are trying to preserve this folk heritage through cinema, theatre, and other forms of entertainment. For example, the films 'Bakita Byaktigoto' and 'Mayamridhanga' can be mentioned. In 'Bakita Byaktigoto', a performance of Bolan songs has been portrayed beautifully. We all know that classical ragas gradually evolved from ancient folk music. If you listen to the melody of the Bolan song in this film, it becomes quite evident that it closely resembles Raga Kafi. The film 'Mayamridhanga' is based on the life of the Alkap maestro Jhaksu. The rich tradition of Alkap music has also been beautifully presented in this film.

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