

THE IMPACT OF URBANISATION ON BENGALI FOLK MUSIC: ANALYSING LISTENERS' PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of urbanisation on Bengali Folk Music, with special focus on performance practices and listeners' perceptions. Drawing upon responses from 208 participants across different age groups and genders, the research investigates how traditional forms of folk music are being reshaped in urban contexts. The findings indicate that most listeners have noticed noticeable changes in traditional performances, particularly with the increasing use of electronic instruments and the rise of fusion styles. While younger respondents are more open to such changes, older groups often express concern over the loss of authenticity. The study also reveals that urbanisation has helped in spreading folk music through social media and stage platforms, increasing its popularity and creating new financial opportunities, especially for women musicians. At the same time, many listeners feel that traditional values are being eroded, even though preference for traditional forms remains stronger than for urban-influenced versions. Overall, the study suggests that urbanisation acts both as a support and as a challenge to Bengali Folk Music, creating new spaces for growth while also raising concerns about cultural continuity.

Keywords: Bengali Folk Music, Urbanisation, Performance Practices, Listeners' Perceptions, Traditional Values, Electronic Instruments

Introduction

Bengali folk music has long been an integral part of Bengal's cultural heritage, carrying memories and emotions that have been shared across generations. It is closely linked with festivals, rituals, and everyday experiences. With the spread of urbanisation, modernisation, and globalisation, this music has begun to change. Its sound, performance style, and listening habits have shifted from earlier times. Scholars have examined these changes by studying different folk forms, their performance spaces, and the ongoing discussions on authenticity, preservation, and adaptation.

Among the many folk forms, the Baul tradition stands out as one of the most unique. Baul songs are simple but full of spiritual and philosophical meaning. UNESCO has recognised Baul music as a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity', showing its cultural value (M. Roy). Scholars describe these songs as expressing divine love in human terms (Nibedita Shyam). But the Bauls have always lived on the margins of society, and their economic hardships affect the survival of their music (M. D. Mondal). In recent times, Baul songs are still sung, but often treated as light entertainment for younger audiences, which shows how their deeper meaning is slowly being lost (M. D. Mondal).

Other forms of Bengali folk music are also closely linked to people's lives. Bhatiali songs, sung by boatmen, reflect solitude and longing (Bhattacharyya). Bhawaiya songs from north Bengal tell stories of sorrow and separation (M. Roy). Jhumur songs, once tied to farming and tribal life, now often include social or political themes, though modern sound effects have changed their style (Nibedita Shyam). Bhadu and Tusu are tied to seasonal rituals and festivals, while Sari Gan, once sung by boatmen, has also been adapted for urban settings (Bhattacharyya). These forms show how folk music is deeply rooted in everyday life, yet always changing with time.

The question of authenticity has always been important. Many modern performances are not the same as those in their original rural settings. Scholars explain that what we see today is often a reconstruction rather than a continuation of tradition (Uhlíková). This raises doubts about whether staged performances can truly represent folk culture or if they are only imitations (Lorea). In many cases, the music is presented in refined, polished ways that separate it from its original social and cultural role (Uhlíková).

Attempts at revival have also brought both gains and losses. Performers like Bhagaban Sahu revived folk traditions through staged performances, which drew attention but changed their original form (Bhuyan). Festivals such as Poush Mela and Baul Fakir Utsav give visibility to folk culture (R. Mondal). Yet these platforms reshape traditions as they preserve them, creating forms that are different from their village origins. Scholars agree that while keeping folk culture alive is important, adaptation to modern platforms has become unavoidable (Bhuyan).

Urbanisation and modernisation have further reshaped folk music. Gramophone records, clubs, and urban concerts brought wider access but also changed the music (Golubović). In Bengal, scholars see urbanisation and Western influence as reducing the strength of traditional practices (M. D. Mondal). Ritual-based performances are now often staged for entertainment in cities (Lorea). Some describe cities as "sociological laboratories" where tradition mixes with modern influences to create new hybrid

forms (D. S. Roy). This brings a question: does urbanisation destroy authenticity, or does it help folk music survive in new forms?

Digital platforms have changed how folk music reaches people. Radio, television, and the internet spread folk songs, but often in shorter or adapted formats (Lorea). Today, digital media and smartphones make folk music more visible, but also encourage fusions to suit popular taste (Nath). This makes digitalisation both a threat to authenticity and a tool for revival.

Fusion has also become common. Rabindranath Tagore's use of Baul elements was an early example (R. Mondal). Now, Bengali pop and world music often mix folk with Western and global sounds (Md. Anwar Hossain Mridha). Some feel this weakens tradition, but others see it as a way to keep folk music alive in changing times (Uhlíková). Scholars note that modern urban folk often combine different genres, creating new forms while borrowing from old ones (Uhlíková).

Listeners' views, especially among the youth, are important here. Research shows that younger audiences often prefer remixed or modernised versions, while older people value traditional styles (Lorea). Too many changes in rhythm and style may reduce the importance of folk culture (Nath). Fewer young people are now taking up folk traditions, as many prefer modern music and dance, raising concern about the future of folk heritage (M. D. Mondal).

These debates between tradition and modernity reflect Bengal's history of cultural mixing. For centuries, Bengal has balanced traditional ethos with liberal and global influences, creating hybrid forms in literature, music, and performance (Kapuria). This balance shows both the strength and the fragility of folk traditions.

Issues of identity and status are also part of this story. Folk traditions create community bonds and give people a sense of belonging (R. Mondal). At the same time, access to technology and performance platforms has often been linked with prestige and class, as seen in parallels from Yugoslavia, where radios and gramophones symbolised status (Golubović). In Bengal too, the spread of urbanisation and media reflects not just musical change but also struggles over cultural identity, memory, and modernity.

Background of the Study

Bengali Folk Music has grown from rural traditions, where it was performed in village festivals, rituals, and community gatherings. It carried memories and values through simple tunes passed down orally. With the spread of urbanisation, the music entered new spaces shaped by cities, technology, and modern lifestyles. Performance styles changed as electronic instruments and fusion forms became common, and younger learners began preferring quicker methods of training. Listening habits also shifted as social media widened access but reduced the traditional charm. These changes show how the music now stands between its rural roots and urban influences.

Research Problem

Urbanisation has altered how Bengali Folk Music is performed, taught, and heard. These changes offer creative possibilities but also raise concerns about the loss of traditional essence. Electronic instruments, fusion styles, and modern teaching methods are replacing older practices. Digital platforms have increased popularity and visibility, yet the long-term cultural impact remains uncertain. Listener responses vary across age and gender, making it necessary to understand how different groups value the music in the present context.

Research Objective

The study aims to examine changes in performance practices and to understand listeners' perceptions in an urban setting. It explores how traditional styles, instruments, and transmission methods are shifting, and how people respond to these developments. It also considers listening patterns, the role of social media, financial opportunities for musicians, and opinions on traditional values. By comparing responses across age and gender, the study provides a balanced view of how urbanisation is shaping both practice and audience experience.

Hypothesis

The study assumes that urbanisation has led to clear changes in Bengali Folk Music. It proposes that listeners notice new performance styles, increased use of electronic instruments, and the growth of fusion forms. It also expects generational and gender-based differences, with younger listeners engaging more with digital platforms and older listeners feeling a loss of tradition. Women may show greater concern about fading values, even as they gain new opportunities. The overall impact is expected to be mixed, offering both growth and challenges.

Relevance of the Study

This study is important for understanding how urbanisation is reshaping the practice and perception of Bengali Folk Music. It helps explain how performance methods, teaching systems, and listening habits are changing, and how people respond to these

shifts. The findings are useful for scholars, performers, and policymakers. They highlight differences across age and gender and guide efforts to support traditional teaching, create fair opportunities, and address audience expectations. At a time when folk traditions face global pressure, the study shows how urbanisation can both support and challenge cultural survival.

Research Methodology

The methodology adopted for investigating the impact of urbanisation on Bengali Folk Music, with a focus on analysing listeners' perceptions, involved a systematic process of literature review, survey design, data collection, and analysis. The study was guided by the two central research questions: first, how urbanisation has changed the traditional ways of performing and practising Bengali Folk Music; and second, how listeners perceive these changes in terms of popularity, values, and opportunities.

The process began with a preliminary review of literature related to folk traditions, urbanisation, cultural shifts, and the role of media and technology in music. Academic works, articles, and online resources were consulted and categorised to identify the gaps in existing knowledge. This review helped refine the scope of the research and frame the sub-questions under the two major research questions.

Based on this framework, a structured questionnaire was prepared using Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of a set of carefully designed questions, each directly mapped to the sub-questions of the study. The first part (RQ1) focused on the impact of urbanisation on performance and practice, covering changes in traditional performance, the rise of electronic instruments, the creation of fusion genres, and shifts in teaching and transmission. The second part (RQ2) dealt with listeners' perceptions, exploring listening habits, the effect of urbanisation on popularity, the role of social media, financial opportunities, generational interest, cultural values, personal preferences, and the impact of financial incentives.

The target population for the study comprised listeners of Bengali Folk Music across different age groups and genders. The questionnaire link was circulated through WhatsApp, Email, and Messenger to ensure participation from a wide group of respondents. Participation was voluntary, and care was taken to secure responses from both men and women, as well as from younger and older participants. This ensured diversity in the data and provided a balanced representation of views.

After the responses were collected, the data were cleaned, compiled, and organised for analysis. In total, 208 valid responses were selected for the study. Microsoft Excel was used as the primary tool for analysis. Pivot tables were created to summarise the data and to highlight patterns across age and gender. Pivot charts were generated to present the results visually, making it easier to interpret key findings and to identify trends and variations among different groups.

The methodology thus combined a solid review of existing literature with an empirical survey-based approach. By linking every question of the survey directly to the research questions, the study maintained a clear focus throughout. The use of Excel pivot tables and charts ensured both accuracy and clarity in presenting the results. This structured approach allowed the study to provide a comprehensive picture of how urbanisation is reshaping Bengali Folk Music, both in performance practices and in the minds of its listeners.

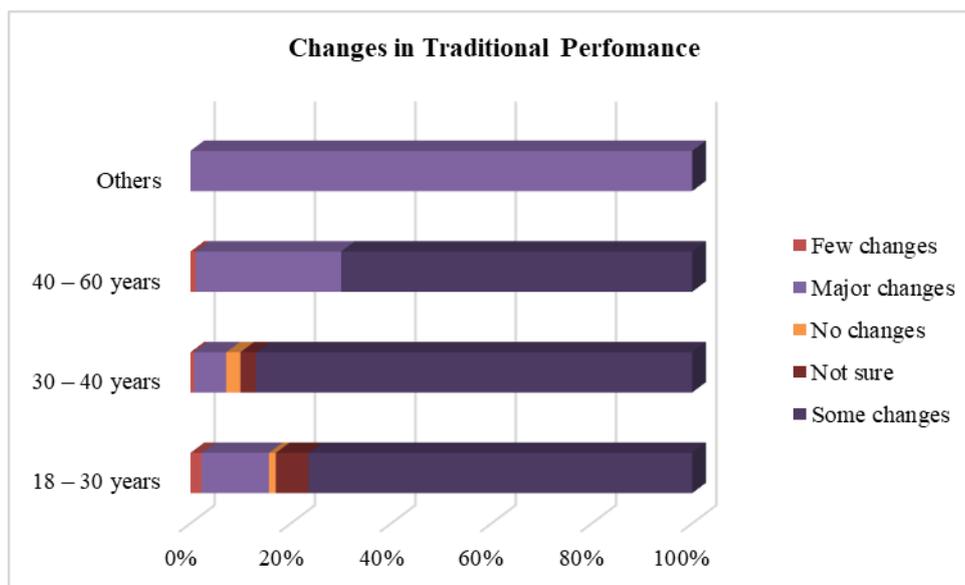
Result and Discussion

This study is based on the views of 208 respondents. The findings show how people of different ages and genders see the impact of urbanisation on Bengali Folk Music.

Table -I

Row Labels	Few changes	Major changes	No changes	Not sure	Some changes	Grand Total
18 – 30 years	1.37%	8.19%	0.83%	3.99%	46.74%	61.13%
30 – 40 years	0.11%	0.92%	0.41%	0.45%	12.61%	14.50%
40 – 60 years	0.26%	7.03%	0.00%	0.00%	16.96%	24.24%
Others	0.00%	0.13%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.13%
Grand Total	1.74%	16.28%	1.24%	4.44%	76.30%	100.00%

Chart - I

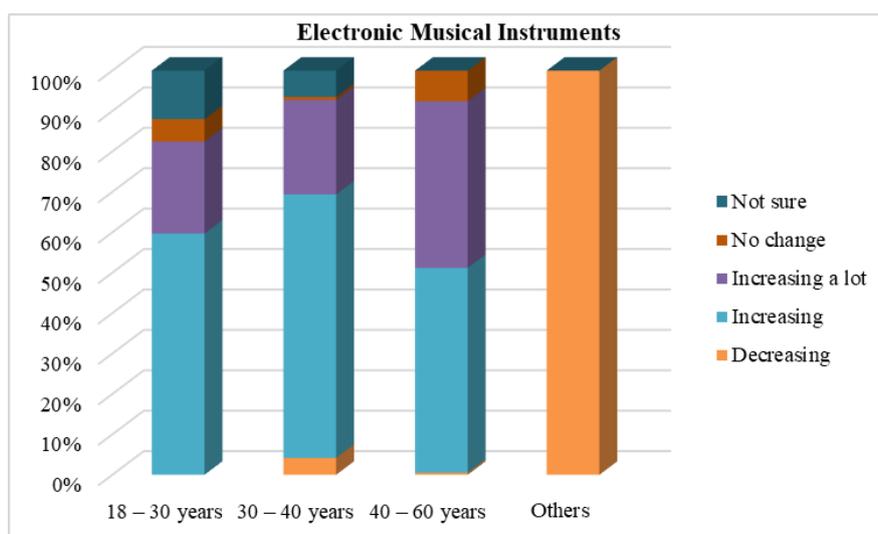


The responses indicate that the majority of listeners have noticed a change. About 76% of respondents confirmed that traditional performances have undergone some degree of transformation. The 18–30 age group was the most sensitive to this shift, with nearly 47% reporting “some changes” and 8% pointing to “major changes.” Among the 30–40 years group, 13% reported changes, while the 40–60 years group also showed awareness, with about 17% confirming change. This suggests that both younger and older respondents are conscious of transformation, though the nature of what they observe may differ. [Table - I / Chart - I]

Table - II

Row Labels	Decreasing	Increasing	Increasing a lot	No change	Not sure	Grand Total
18 – 30 years	0.00%	36.49%	13.92%	3.38%	7.34%	61.13%
30 – 40 years	0.61%	9.45%	3.39%	0.11%	0.94%	14.50%
40 – 60 years	0.13%	12.28%	9.99%	1.84%	0.00%	24.24%
Others	0.13%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.13%
Grand Total	0.87%	58.23%	27.30%	5.32%	8.28%	100.00%

Chart - II

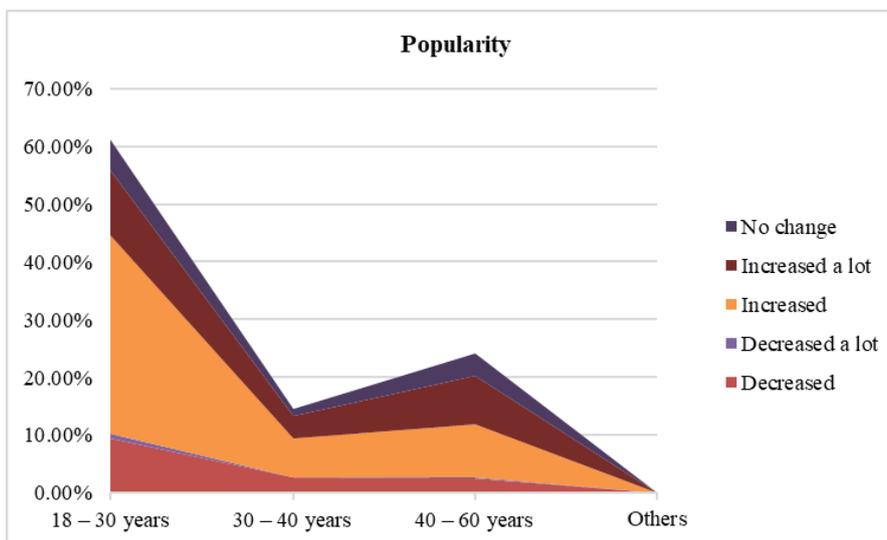


The results are very clear. More than 58% of respondents felt that electronic instruments are increasing in use, while 27% went further to say they are “increasing a lot.” Among the 18–30 age group, more than half recognised this growth, while about 10% of the 40–60 group agreed that use is increasing significantly. Very few respondents reported a decline. The findings suggest that electronic instrumentation has become a stable part of the folk music soundscape and is widely accepted across generations. [Table - II / Chart - II]

Table - III

Row Labels	Decreased	Decreased a lot	Increased	Increased a lot	No change	Grand Total
18 – 30 years	9.47%	0.89%	34.33%	11.23%	5.21%	61.13%
30 – 40 years	2.68%	0.00%	6.82%	3.76%	1.23%	14.50%
40 – 60 years	2.44%	0.27%	9.13%	8.45%	3.95%	24.24%
Others	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.13%	0.00%	0.13%
Grand Total	14.59%	1.16%	50.28%	23.57%	10.40%	100.00%

Chart - III

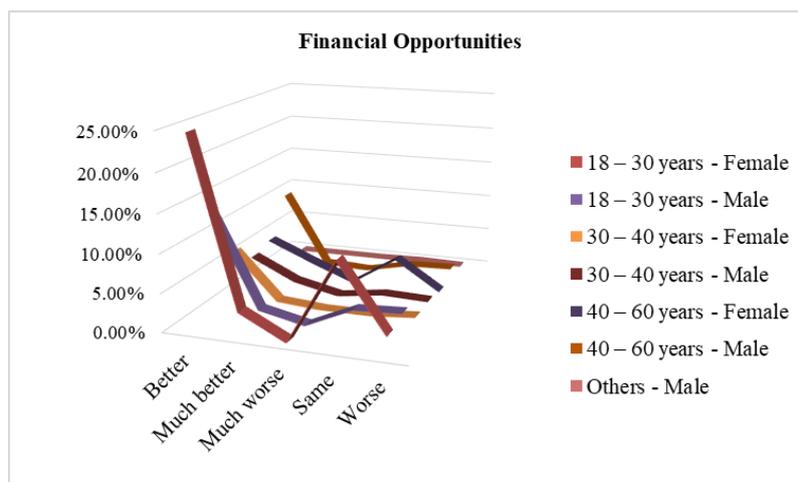


Half of the respondents (about 50%) felt that popularity has increased, while 24% reported it has “increased a lot.” Younger respondents were especially positive, with 34% stating it had increased and another 11% confirming it had increased a lot. Among the 40–60 age group, 9% said popularity had increased, and 8% said it had increased a lot. At the same time, 15% overall felt that popularity had decreased. These results highlight a generational divide, with younger groups perceiving revival, possibly through media exposure, while some older listeners see a decline in traditional appeal. [Table - III / Chart - III]

Table - IV

Row Labels	Better	Much better	Much worse	Same	Worse	Grand Total
18 – 30 years	37.47%	4.41%	0.02%	13.69%	5.53%	61.13%
Female	24.69%	3.08%	0.00%	10.90%	2.42%	41.08%
Male	12.79%	1.32%	0.02%	2.79%	3.12%	20.05%
30 – 40 years	10.75%	1.78%	0.00%	0.83%	1.14%	14.50%
Female	6.61%	0.47%	0.00%	0.00%	0.52%	7.60%
Male	4.14%	1.31%	0.00%	0.83%	0.62%	6.90%
40 – 60 years	14.90%	2.67%	0.00%	5.19%	1.47%	24.24%
Female	4.86%	2.36%	0.00%	3.92%	0.00%	11.14%
Male	10.04%	0.32%	0.00%	1.27%	1.47%	13.10%
Others	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.13%	0.00%	0.13%
Male	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.13%	0.00%	0.13%
Grand Total	63.12%	8.86%	0.02%	19.85%	8.14%	100.00%

Chart - IV

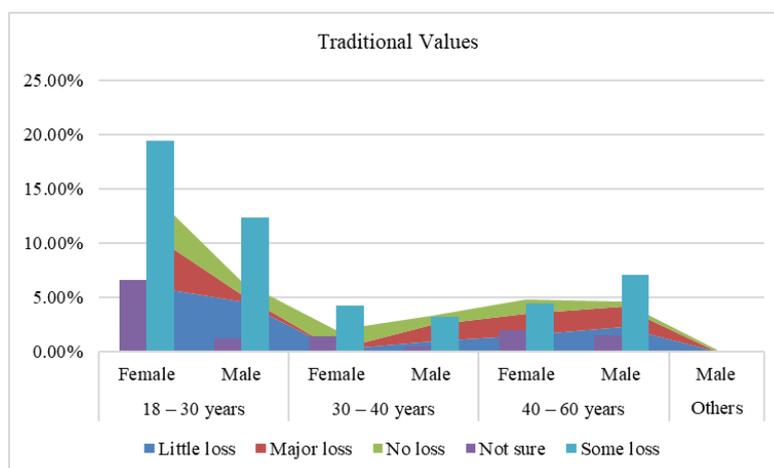


Financial opportunities were largely viewed positively. About 63% of respondents felt opportunities are better or much better. Younger women were especially optimistic, with 25% reporting that opportunities are better, compared with 13% of young men. In both middle and older age groups, women also voiced more optimism than men. These findings suggest that urbanisation has particularly benefitted women musicians, who may now be accessing visibility through concerts, recordings, and digital media. Men recognised the opportunities too, but in lower numbers, perhaps reflecting competition in a field where they traditionally held dominance. [Table - VI / Chart - VI]

Table - V

Row Labels	Little loss	Major loss	No loss	Not sure	Some loss	Grand Total
18 – 30 years	10.57%	5.79%	5.20%	7.80%	31.77%	61.13%
Female	6.00%	5.13%	3.93%	6.62%	19.40%	41.08%
Male	4.56%	0.66%	1.27%	1.18%	12.38%	20.05%
30 – 40 years	1.15%	1.45%	2.61%	1.86%	7.43%	14.50%
Female	0.21%	0.00%	1.72%	1.41%	4.26%	7.60%
Male	0.94%	1.45%	0.90%	0.45%	3.17%	6.90%
40 – 60 years	3.66%	3.88%	1.79%	3.43%	11.48%	24.24%
Female	1.46%	1.99%	1.32%	1.95%	4.43%	11.14%
Male	2.20%	1.89%	0.47%	1.48%	7.06%	13.10%
Others	0.00%	0.00%	0.13%	0.00%	0.00%	0.13%
Male	0.00%	0.00%	0.13%	0.00%	0.00%	0.13%
Grand Total	15.37%	11.12%	9.74%	13.09%	50.69%	100.00%

Chart - V

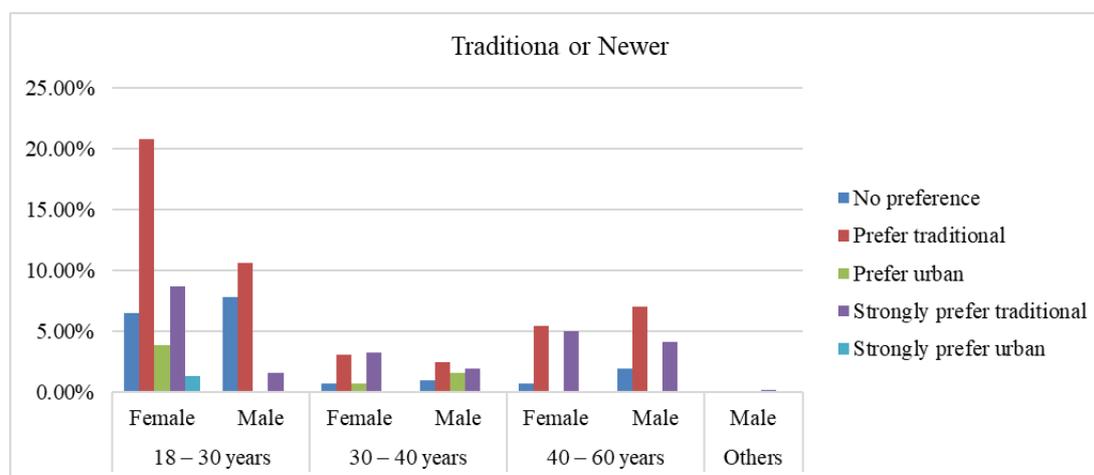


The responses reveal concern about cultural continuity. About 51% of respondents said there has been “some loss” of traditional values, and 11% described the impact as a “major loss.” Among the younger group, 32% agreed there has been some loss and 6% pointed to major loss. Women were more likely than men to perceive erosion of values, which may be linked to their stronger role in preserving cultural practices within households. Older men also expressed concern, with over 7% identifying some loss. Thus, while urbanisation has opened new avenues, it is also viewed as a challenge to traditional cultural identity. [Table - V / Chart - V]

Table - VI

Row Labels	No preference	Prefer traditional	Prefer urban	Strongly prefer traditional	Strongly prefer urban	Grand Total
18 – 30 years	14.24%	31.38%	3.97%	10.27%	1.27%	61.13%
Female	6.46%	20.78%	3.88%	8.69%	1.27%	41.08%
Male	7.78%	10.60%	0.09%	1.58%	0.00%	20.05%
30 – 40 years	1.63%	5.49%	2.24%	5.14%	0.00%	14.50%
Female	0.69%	3.02%	0.67%	3.22%	0.00%	7.60%
Male	0.94%	2.47%	1.56%	1.93%	0.00%	6.90%
40 – 60 years	2.66%	12.42%	0.00%	9.16%	0.00%	24.24%
Female	0.70%	5.40%	0.00%	5.03%	0.00%	11.14%
Male	1.96%	7.02%	0.00%	4.12%	0.00%	13.10%
Others	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.13%	0.00%	0.13%
Male	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.13%	0.00%	0.13%
Grand Total	18.53%	49.29%	6.21%	24.70%	1.27%	100.00%

Chart - VI



The findings clearly show the continuing strength of tradition. About 49% of respondents preferred traditional BFM, with nearly 25% strongly preferring it. Only 6% favoured urban-influenced versions. Among the younger group, 41% leaned towards traditional styles, while only 4% preferred urban ones. Among the 40–60 group, preference for traditional forms was even stronger, with over 21% supporting them. Gender differences were also evident: women across all groups preferred traditional forms more strongly than men, while men were slightly more open to urban-influenced music. This confirms that, despite modern influences, tradition remains the dominant preference among listeners. [Table - VI / Chart - VI]

The findings show that urbanisation has brought clear changes to Bengali Folk Music. Listeners noted shifts in performance style and a growing use of electronic instruments. They also observed that the music has become more popular and has opened new financial opportunities, especially for women. At the same time, many felt that traditional values are slowly weakening, even though people still prefer traditional forms over urbanised versions. Age and gender shaped these views, as younger listeners were more hopeful about growth, while women, despite new opportunities, expressed stronger concern about cultural loss.

Conclusion

The study shows that urbanisation has created both new possibilities and fresh concerns for Bengali Folk Music. Traditional performance practices are changing, with electronic instruments and modern styles becoming more common. Many young listeners welcome these changes and feel that digital platforms have helped renew interest in folk music. Older generations, however, remain cautious and point to the weakening of traditional values and oral learning.

Urban spaces have also expanded financial opportunities. Sponsorships, awards, and concerts now support more musicians, and women, in particular, are gaining greater visibility. Yet, despite this progress, many respondents still worry about cultural loss and the gradual fading of older traditions.

Even with these shifts, the preference for traditional folk music remains strong across age and gender groups. This shows the deep emotional link people maintain with their folk heritage. The findings suggest that the future of Bengali Folk Music lies in balancing the preservation of its traditional identity with the new opportunities offered by urban life.

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