

Influence of Islam in the Traditional Music of Bangladesh

by Mridul Kanti Chakrobarty* (Dhaka, Bangladesh)

Bangladesh, our motherland is criss-crossed by innumerable rivers and rivulets. These rivers with their might and whims continue to shape the Land mass of the country, the largest delta on earth. The vast expanses of water in tranquility or in fury also shape the mindset of its people. Bangladesh, basically is a riverine country. Therefore, its basic folk tunes have also evolved out of her riverine character. People in some parts of Bangladesh live on the banks of rivers or vast sheets of water deposited by incessant rainfall and constant flow of waters from the neighbouring hills. The rivers and the vast sheets of water over here remain steady and without any appreciable flow or movement for a long time.

The local folk music has derived its character from this state of nature. *bhatiyali* expresses the joy and sorrow, hopes and despair of the people living in this area, attuned to the nature around them. It expresses the sentiments of the cultivators isolated in small island-like villages, of the lonely boatmen floating lazily on the smooth surface of the vast sheet of steady water. In such environments people do not meditate upon the philosophy of life but express what they really feel about the realities of life.

Basically Bangla folk music is divided into two broad divisions – rhythmic and arrhythmic commonly known as *sari* and *bhatiyali*, respectively. They have also been termed as ‘indoor’ and ‘outdoor’ music. But these epithets do not reveal their real inner character. Rhythmic songs are generally group songs represented mostly by work songs though there are rare cases of arrhythmic group songs also.



Audio example 1.
Chorus male song (sung by M. K. Chakrobarty)

The marriage songs sung by women in groups are arrhythmic. Songs integrated into dance or some manual work are always rhythmic. Even songs sung solo or individually but accompanying dance are rhythmic, which generally speaking, folk songs sung solo or individually without dance, without any manual work integrated into or without any musical instrument in the hand of the musician or any of his associates, are arrhythmic in the real sense of the term. Unlike ‘outdoor’ songs which are sung in groups, *bhatiyali*, which is considered to be in the ‘indoor’ category of songs, is sung individually in loneliness. It reveals the inner self most faithfully with warmth and fidelity and as such has not only been the very best specimen of Bangla folk song, but also the very basis of it. It expresses the intensity of emotions like love and devotion and its love song were the feelings of frustration in love, rather than joy in it, have been expressed. It also covers religious folk-songs which are more or less deeply devotional in character. It is the song absolute mental and physical relaxation for the villagers, specially of the

* Professor at the Department of Theatre and Music at Dhaka University.

boatmen on the river holding the helm straight without any effort which going downstream. The word *bhatiyali* literally means going down the tide.

Rhythmic song in Bangla is known as *sari* which is generally group song and is integrated into some sort of manual work or rhythmic dance. *sari* is an action song. *bhatiyali* is slow and without any action but *sari* is fast. The best specimen of *sari* is that which is song during boat-races by those who pull the oars, keeping time (Tala) by beating at the raised edges of the racing boats. *bhatiyali* is the solo and *sari* the group song of boats.



Audio example 2.
Bhatiyali (sung by M. K. C.)



Audio example 3.
Sari (sung by M. K. C.)

The music of the *baul* of Bangladesh has reached far and wide. The musical character of Poet Rabindranath Tagore songs and Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam songs in modern times has been greatly influenced by the *baul* both in idea and in form. *Baul* is a local religious sect of Bangladesh. It has borrowed its religious ideas from different sources – later Buddhism, Yoga, Hinduism and also Islam. It is the product of the medieval ages when mystic poets like Dadu, Nanak, Kabir and others appeared in different parts of northern India. During this time a great religious reformer also appeared in Bengal with the same mystic ideas. He was Chaitanya Deva (1486-1533). The followers of the *baul* sect claim that chaitanya is their Guru or preceptor, though there is a fundamental difference between the ideas of religion preached by Chaitanya and those of the *baul*. Chaitanya believed in the outward form of godhead in the idol of Lord Krishna though he laid special emphasis on meditation, recitation and inner realization within oneself. The *baul* do not worship any idol of any god or goddess. They are believers in one Universal God whom they realize within their inner soul only. They express the ecstasy of their instance joy of union with god whom they call Sain, the meaning the Lord or the Beloved in songs accompanied with dance. They do not observe any formal ritual in their approach to God; they discard temples as abodes of god. According to them, god has no outer manifestation. He is to be realized within the inner soul only by individual meditation and deep spiritual concentration of the mind. The *baul* do not believe in any written scriptures and they have nothing of this nature. They preserve their own scriptures in the form of orally sung lyrics only which they transmit to the followers of their own sect; the guru or the preceptor transmitting them to his own disciples only.

The followers of the *baul* sect are drawn from both the major communities of Bangladesh—Hindus and Muslims. When they enter this sect, they discard their individual religion and are known as *baul*, whose cult preaches universal brotherhood without recognition of any caste or creed. But the Hindu converts are generally known as the Vaisnava *baul* and the Muslim converts are generally known as *fakir* or *darbesh* (dervish). The *baul* renounce worldly life and accept the mendicant's order of life. The mendicant *baul* observes life-long celibacy though they do not discard altogether the company of women who enter the sect. Sometimes they accept them as their spiritual associates. But the domestic *baul* live a normal family life. They marry

and beget children through their wives. In such cases the entire family is initiated into this religious cult and follow the ideals preached by it. The women followers are known as *ksepi* or 'mad' women—mad in the sense of seeking realization of god and not any earthly belongings of life. From the musical point of view, the *baul* are divided into two groups; firstly, the *baul* who are converts from Hinduism and secondly those from Islam. They are known as *baul*, *darbesh* or *fakir* respectively as I mentioned earlier. There are regional divisions also and accordingly they are known firstly as *radhi* and *navadweipi*. The *radhi* group dance as they sing and, therefore, their music is of the arhythmic *bhatiyali* style.

The *baul* in their songs describe their desire for union with the supreme soul whom they consider as their beloved very near to their heart. They realize perfect union with Him without the observance of any established sect of rituals. But they have yet another element of realization which is known to them as "The man of the heart." According to them, it is useless to search for Him in the outer world. He has His abode in the human body and can be realized only by intense meditation within the inner soul. This is indeed a mystic conception of a high order which the illiterate *baul* preach through their songs and dances.

In textual and compositional variety *baul* forms the richest stream of Bangla folk-music. *Baul* is a mystical cult pertaining to a spiritual discipline which relates to philosophical thoughts about a system of its own. *baul* is popularly described as a folk religion where the proponents speak everything in songs. The greatest *baul* poet (Towering Poet) Lalon Shah (1774-1890) of Kushtia in Bangladesh have left behind excellent *baul* songs on his metaphysical thoughts, rich both in textual wealth and music. These have been countless other *baul* all over the different regions of Bangladesh and west Bengal in India, each belonging to his own regional musical style.



Audio example 4.

An excerpt of a *baul* poem by Lalon Shah (sung by M. K. C.)

The aim of life as conceived by the mystic poets and reflected in their songs is to reach god through love and devotion. This has little to do with rituals and ceremonials observed in orthodox society. A mystic is best defined as one who has intimate spiritual experience of the divine being. The mystical element found in their songs may be explained by reference to the influence of Persian sufism. The three types of mystics – *baul*, *marfati* and *murshidi* – have much in common. Towering Poet like Hason Raja (1854-1922) of sunamganj in Bangladesh have left behind excellent mystic songs on his metaphysical thoughts with divine love, rich both in textual wealth and music. Another mystic poet is still alive, he is Poet Sabir Ahmed Choudhury (Born. 1924) who written the book 'The Mystic bard', a collection of his mystic songs.



Audio example 5.

An excerpt of a *baul* poem by Sabir Ahmed Choudhury (sung by M. K. C.)

Their songs are sung to the accompaniment of an *ektara* (one-string folk instrument) or a *dotara* (two string folk instrument; basically 4 strings also included when it accompanied).**

Marfati and *murshidi* are devotional songs of a mystical character. The beginnings of this culture are shrouded in obscurity. It has however maintained a steady flow down the generations continuing until the early nineteenth century when it met with strong opposition from the wahabis. These songs are the only accounts providing us with a glimpse of *marfati* and *murshidi* views on life. They are composed in very lucid, simple language and are marked by great literary qualities. In these songs there is as much wisdom and poetry as devotion. The following is a *marfati* folk song, the composer of which is unknown :

*Allar Ki ajab Karkhana
Ghare Ghare tri songsare ditechhe se khanapina
Adamke srishti Kare janmal raikhyachhe dhore
Khorak ditechhe tare, dudh Khili jalpane
Jaler ghare agni Jwale emni tar Karuna.*

(Translation)

*What a wonderful workshop is this world of god,
Where He gives sustenance to every individual,
Man was created (by him).
His life and property have since been preserved
And man is being served with milk, betal-leaves and other edibles.
God is so King as to kindly fire in the water-tank
One can't recognize one's own Kinsfolk if the latter lives in a dilapidated
house.
How rich and mighty is God!*

In this song the composer takes the world for a wonderful workshop of God, where He is giving sustenance to every individual. How merciful in He ! He is all powerful and rich.

Bischhed songs or songs of separation also fall within the mystical or religious category. *Bischhed* songs were share certain qualities of the *Murshidi*, the difference being in the approach to life, while *Murshidis* want to establish direct communication with god. Writers of *Bischhed* songs make use of the symbol of the relationship between Radha and Krishna. A few examples are stated here:

*How long shall I be playing on my flute
waiting for Radha to come:
All shepherds go out to the pasture
And I stay back here and keep on piping.
Radha comes and goes this way
Raclining against the branch of the Kadamba tree
Radha comes and goes this way
Drawing water from the rivers, but she*

** See also *Shahjahan Miah, mystical chant of Lalon Shah order* CD INEDIT W260039 (1992)
<http://www.mcm.asso.fr/site02/inedit/cd260039.htm> [note of the editor].

*Never raises her eyes to look at me.
Tell me brother subal, how long
Shall I keep piping.*



Audio example 6 (sung by M. K. C.).

This song is supposed to be sung by Krishna but Radha's reactions are poignant enough:

*O my friends, you all said that
Love is pleasant; now you are all
safe and happy, and I pine away weeping.
One who has loved without weighing consequences.
Has subjected himself to a constant anguish
Consuming him slowly, like a fire fed with rice-husks
And cow-dung. I did not know before,
I have made a pen of my fingers
And ink of my tears
And parchment of my heart which I send to my beloved
Alas, I had not known it before.*

Here Krishna stands for God and Radha for the human soul. There is an eternal yearning in the heart of one for the other, but they hardly ever meet. So the pangs of separation continue for ever.

Jari is a kind of dirge, which owes its origin to the tragic events of Medina and Karbala leading to the death of Hazrat Imam Hassan and Hussain. It is called *jari* from persian *zari* meaning lamentation. The shia communities of the Indo-Pak-Bangladesh sub-continent commemorate the events of Karbala in the month of Muharram by singing *marsiah* or dirges on the deaths of Hassan and Hussain. *Marsiah* are usually sung in Urdu, while the *jari* is the Bangla version sung in Muharram in Bangladesh and parts of West Bengal in India. *Jari* combines the elements of the valour and pathos. It depicts all the liveliness and unparalleled heroism of Hazrat Imam Hussain and his followers on the battle field of Karbala and the heart rending scene connected with their death. *Jari* songs are found today especially in the district of Mymensingh. Where they are sung to the accompaniment of dancing.



Audio example 7.
Jari (sung by M. K. C.).

Since the *jari* song recites only the events of Karbala and is restricted to Muharram it lacks variety. Following are examples of the *jari* song:

*Hanef bole aye mor Kole Zainul bachha dhan
ohe je na pathe dichhire dui bhai jorer gor kafon.
Seina pathe jabore ami, Kaso amar gor kafon.*

(Translation)

Hanifa says : come to me, my son Zainul,

*I would also like to follow in the footsteps of the two illustrious brothers
I have sacrificed my two brothers, prepare my grave and the funeral.*

The following song was composed by the folk poet Pagla Kanai :

*Ore Emam Husain dono bhai
Rosuler nati sunte pai
Behester nisana sono bhai
O' se fanki diya Ejid Golam
Karbalate niya jay*

(Translation in English)

*Oh, the two Imam brothers Hassan and Hussain
Are, I am told, Rasul's grand sons,
They are the emblems of heaven
The slave yazid lured them away to Karbala.*

Now, in conclusion; it may be said that each category of Bangla folk or traditional songs has a peculiar characteristic tune. Nonetheless the tunes of all folk songs ultimately smack of a folk air which is distinct from modern or classical music. The fact of the matter is this, that in different forms of folk music are different. Strands of the tunes find adequate expression. This reminds one of the several kinds of laboratories in which different branches of science are pursued. And just as results of experiments of the several laboratories are eventually brought together and synthesised, so a synthesis occurs in the field of tunes.

Nevertheless, the most typical of all this music should be recorded, as should the folk music all over the world. Such records will be a permanent monument of the individual culture of many lands and an important part of the foundations of world culture.

References :

- Bhattacharyya, Asutosh
1983 *Folk Lore of Bengal*, National Book Trust, India, New Delhi.
- Khan, Shamsuzzaman (ed.)
1987 *Folk Lore of Bangladesh*, volume 1, Bangla Academy, Dhaka.
- Chakrovarti, Surath Chandra
1980 *baul, the spiritual Vikings*, Firma KLM Pvt Ltd. Calcutta-12.
- Stokowski, Leopold
1943 *Music for all of us*, New York, Simon and Schuster, p. 291.