

The Folk Music of Bengal

By
Suresh Chandra
Chakravarty



Performance of a Pala Kirtan

THE history of the folk music of Bengal as of any other country is obscure and it is not my purpose to try to trace it here. Casually however, I may have to say a word or two at times regarding the development or influence of the folk music of Bengal in particular periods on our rural life or its having been influenced by particular incidents or circumstances.

According to many masters of music, some of the finest types of folk songs of Europe are no more sung and peculiarly enough, can be traced with difficulty in the towns and not in the villages. Fortunately for this country such songs are still as much alive in our villages as they were, perhaps, hundreds of years ago. In towns like Calcutta, people sometimes try to imitate these songs with the result that the spirit of folk songs is adulterated by the touch of sophistication.

In fact, if you want to enjoy a 'Bhatiali', for instance, in its pristine beauty, you must go to the remote village on the banks of the 'Meghna' or the 'Surma'. It is a widely known fact that ninety per cent. of the people of Bengal lead a thorough village life and the rest ten per cent. also are inseparably connected with the village. The change of conditions of life due to modernisation or rather industrialisation has very little effect on the life of the Bengalee because of the fact that the huge majority of workers in the industrial sphere of Bengal are non-Bengalees.

Of late, there has been a growing demand of folk-songs among the urban people and for that reason we now hear plenty of such songs in gramophone records as well as in the cinema. But they are mostly sung by those who cannot do real justice to them. Moreover, the studios provide them with such atmosphere and accompaniments as are wholly unknown in the village. But, as I said, these attempts

of Studio trainers have, so far, failed to spread their influence of mechanisation outside the urban areas.

Folk music can be studied from two view points: 1. Literary and 2. Musical. I do not intend to dwell on the literary side of it here, because enough has been written and published in the shape of books and articles including few heavy volumes published by the Calcutta University such as, Mymensingh Gitika, Purba Benga Gitika, etc.

With regard to the musical side of folk songs again, I can not but feel some hesitation to lay down the principles, as such principles are very widely believed to be totally absent in folk music. Folk music is believed to be a spontaneous growth absolutely untouched by the grammarians of music. But I think this version has its own defects for, as we shall see later on, principles do lie in our folk songs as a matter of course, although perhaps they were never thrust in by experts. I think it will be unjust to deny such principles in the folk songs of Bengal at least, simply because they are not apparent and it will be my endeavour to find such of them here as will explain the peculiarities of different types of them.

Before I actually take up this task I think it will be convenient to enumerate here with short explanations the different types of music that have actually grown and developed in the villages of Bengal.

Classification of Types

All these types may be brought under two broad categories:

- (a) Those that are meant for parlours, for courtyards, and
- (b) Those that are heard in the open fields, on rivers, hillsides etc.

Class (A)

Under the first classification will fall—

KIRTAN

These are songs or rather intonated recitations with an immense variety of rhythmic order and Talas peculiar to them. These songs deal with the Leela or the heavenly deeds of Sreekrishna and Sree Radha. The usual accompaniment is Khole, a kind of drum, and cymbals. Though originated in the village, Kirtan is a highly developed and systematized type, so much so that its tempo and the Tala system is often found to be more complicated and difficult than those of the classical Hindusthani music. There are generally four kinds of Kirtan, namely,—(1) Garanhati, (2) Manoharsahi, (3) Mandarini, and (4) Reneti.

In course of its development Kirtan has introduced in itself quite an amount of folk music. But as this is hardly regarded as a type of folk songs, I mean to record my reflections on it in a separate Note at the end of this article.

JATRA

This is more or less an open-air opera or musical play with dialogues introducing more characters than is generally found in stage plays and containing very many songs often in season and out of season, interluding the dialogues. The subject matter is mostly mythological. The duration of a play is generally six to eight hours. The tunes of the songs are more or less based on classical music though the Jatra way of presentation is nowhere impaired. As accompanying instruments the Dholak, Violins, Cymbals and of late the harmonium and a few blowing instruments of Europe are more prominent. The Jatra has afforded in a way a good opportunity to villagers to appreciate, learn and cultivate Raga—music in so many forms as solo, duet and community singing.

DHAP

Dhap is similar to Jatra. While in the latter all the characters, male and female, are played by male artists, in the former they are played by females only. For a subject matter a Dhap party often takes a dramatic version of a kirtan subject. It is then called a Dhap Kirtan. While it takes up a well-known Jatra subject, it is often known as Meye-Jatra or female-Jatra.

KABI

The Kabis or Kabiwallas are rural composers endowed with more or less education in Indian Mythology. In a soiree, two such Kabiwallas meet together and enter into a debate regarding a knotty and brain-teasing problem chosen from mythology and each of them pours out his arguments in verse improvised then and there. Though in a sense this is a substitute for what is known as Mushaira in Hindusthani, the superiority of the talent of a Kabiwalla will be easily understood if one considers the

very difficult circumstances under which he has to perform. The success of a member of a Mushaira depends perhaps on the excellence of his composition, but a Kabiwalla must be a good poet and at the same time very clever and resourceful in order to prove his success. Some of the Kabiwallas have been immortalized in the history of Bengali literature and music.

TARJA

Tarja is akin to Kabi, though inferior in quality and show. Besides the two debators, Tarja has no other interest, while in a Kabi party the musicians, apart from the composers, who are also known as Sirkars, have their own peculiar technique. The chief accompanying instruments in both these types are the Dhole and cymbals.

PURAN GANS

This heading includes more than one type:

(1) **Manasar Gan:** Though strictly speaking, a kind of Puran Gan, this particular type has been cultivated in different districts in different techniques, as a result of which the form which is heard in Barisal is quite different from the form current in Sylhet or Mymensingh. This is mostly sung in the month of Sravana, though its tunes have nothing to do with the spirit of the rainy season.

(2) **Ramayan Gan:** While Manasar Gan is based on the incidents described in the



A scene from a Jatra on Ramaprosad performed at Chanditola which was attended by the Secretary of the Akadami

Padma Puran, the Ramayan Gan provides for musical narrations of the incidents of Sita and Rama.

(3) **Durga Puran Gan**

(4) **Kalika Puran Gan**

These two types are based on the Shakti cult just as Kirtan is based on the Vaishnava cult and are similar to items (1) and (2) though each of them has its own peculiar technique. The common name for all such types is Mangal Geet.

JARI AND GAZIR GAN

Like that of the Puran Gans the object of these songs is to instil a religious fervour in the listeners' mind. These are sung by Muhammedan villagers just as Puranas are sung by the Hindus. JARI AND GAZIR GAN are so very attractive that thousands of villagers irrespective of caste and creed may be seen listening to them for hours together.

GHATU GAN

Ghatu is a kind of dance music in which the Ghatu or the leading singer, usually a boy attired as a girl takes his stand in the middle and is followed by a number of people who sit in a circle around him. It is very popular in the northern districts of East Bengal and is held both in courtyards and in big boats. The Ghatu is perhaps one of the few types of rural songs which though introducing subject matters related to religious incidents, are meant for entertainment, pure and simple. Ghatu present some indigenous Mudras which even Rabindranath introduced in the Santiniketan style of Dance.

GAMBHIRA GAN

Gambhira songs are connected with Shaivite ideas and are performed in the second month of the Bengali year. These are very popular in Malda and neighbouring districts. Many of the songs are humorous criticisms of social and political incidents of the year just terminating. It is a treat to be acquainted with the critical views of villagers presented under the garb of Gambhira songs. The performance of these songs serves two purposes, first, as far as this critical side is concerned Gambhira is a good entertainment, and second, in its relation to the Charak festival, it is a type of ceremonial song. In this latter aspect, Gambhira may be regarded as akin to BIHU songs of Assam. The Siva of Gambhira is not the great God of the Hindu Trinity but is just an old cultivator and regarded by villagers almost as one of themselves.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND MYSTICAL SONGS

There is a large variety of such songs. The more important types are mentioned here:

(1) **Baul:** The Bauls of Bengal are more or less mystics. They have composed songs containing very deep spiritual meanings covered under very ordinary and common place words and phrases. Often the songs have double meanings, firstly, the

meaning which one would directly accept from the language as it is, and secondly, the underlying meaning or truth sought to be hidden behind and only to be appreciated by those who possess an instinctive spiritual insight. Baul songs have perhaps played an important part in shaping the Bengali mind. There have been Bauls both Hindu and Muhammedan (Sufi Bauls) whose compositions have been equally accepted. The Baul is said to have his origin in the Sahajiya—a mystic cult emerging from the downfall of Buddhism.

Generally Bauls sing in a group while they dance to the rhythm of the songs.

(2) **Dehatattwa:** The wording of Dehatattwa is similar to that of Baul, but there is no dance in it. Both Baul and Dehatattwa songs lay down principles of spiritual Sadhana or practice. In this sense these songs may be regarded as songs of practical philosophy. It is however difficult at times to differentiate between a Baul song and a Dehatattwa song due to their similarity in wording and rhythmic arrangement. Sometimes there is a story in the song quite like a parable.

(3) **Hakiati**

(4) **Shariati**

(5) **Marfati**

These songs are just like Dehatattwa or Baul songs and are composed by Muhammedan Fakirs laying down in them the principles of spiritual Sadhana or practice according to sufistic theories.

There have been Fakirs who introduced particular tunes in which their songs were to be sung and these tunes were named after them, such as Fakirchandi Sur or the tune of Fakirchand Fakir. These tunes have been as popular as those of Ramprosad, Kamalakanta and others who gave new tunes in Shyama Sangit.

One such other type is:

(6) **Maijh-Bhandari:** A very popular type which had its origin at Maijh-Bhandar, a village in Chittagong. This village was once a seat of Muhammedan Fakirs whose influence has left the village as a place of pilgrimage even to this day. The type of songs apparently had its name derived from that of the place. The songs are generally in praise of Pirs.

(7) **Ramprosadi:** As mentioned above Ramprosad, a great mystic who lived about two centuries ago composed songs both devotional and philosophical and gave his own tunes to them. These are a variety of Shyama Sangit or songs concerning the Shakti cult. The tunes are known as Ramprosadi, in which a little Tappa has been very ably mixed with folk tunes without impairing the spirit of the latter.

BAITHAKI

A Baithak means a sitting. Baithaki songs are those that are sung in a Baithak-khana or sitting-room. Villagers have hardly any drawing rooms as they are understood an urban areas, but the villagers have their unfurnished Baithak-khanas or even

verandahs where small musical soirees are not a rare phenomenon. The illiterate villager has his own way of entertainment and when he feels like having some music, which is not purely devotional or spiritual, he arranges for such music as Baithaki or rather Baith-khari. Traces of art music can be some times found in these songs, yet the stamp of folk tunes can hardly be hidden.

ULTA-BAUL

Ulta Baul literally means anti-Baul. The term is evidently derisive to Baul. These are humorous songs and the person who invented the term must have borne in his mind the comparison between the lightness of these songs and the grave and serious meaning of Baul compositions. Several Ulta Baul songs, which I collected in Chittagong struck me with the quality of their humour, which compare quite favourably with some of the compositions even of cultured poets. The tunes of these songs are mostly the same as those of Baul songs and therefore when sung help to justify the name Ulta Baul in a humorous way.

BHATTA OR BHATER GAN

A Bhatta is something like a Ballad poet of Europe or similar to a Charan poet as described in Todd's Rajasthan. He composes poems on important incidents political and social, and recites them in tunes from house to house. Very few of them are available except perhaps in some places of Sylhet. Whatever the length of the poem be the same tune is repeated in all the stanzas. The catchword, if it might be called, of every line, is necessarily the last phrase of the preceding line. This peculiarity easily distinguishes such a song. The Bhats are a distinct class of Brahmins who compose and sing these poems professionally.

KAVITA

A Kavita means a poem and its singing is almost like Bhat Gan, the only important difference being that its composition or singing is not confined to any particular class of people.

HISTORICAL SONGS

Bengal villagers have provided themselves with information about historical incidents through the medium of these songs. To quote one instance I personally heard a lot of songs in Chittagong which gave me such informations as incidents of piracy by the Portugese pirates two centuries ago, the onslaught of the King of Arakan, the death of Sujah, a brother of Emperor Aurangzeb, the story of the imprisonment of Sujah's consort in the harem of Arakan King etc., etc. Even historians can have valuable information out of these songs, which have been handed down from generation to generation. The songs about the Portugese pirates have become a class by themselves in the rural music of Chittagong and assumed the title *Mag-Firingir-Gan*.

PADMAVATIR GAN

Although this particular song or rather collection of many songs naturally fall within the type just mentioned, it has a distinct value and position of its own, due to the fact that Padmavati is a big book written by the great saint and poet Alaol, who besides narrating the historical incident of Padmini of Chitore and Emperor Allauddin of Delhi, cleverly inserted a very deep mystical meaning into the poems. Consequently when this book is sung interpreters are requisitioned to explain and clarify its mystical side. These interpreters though exclusively Muhammedans call themselves Pundits.

BALLAD SONGS OR BADYAR GAN

These songs have developed mostly in Mymensingh, Tipperah and Sylhet districts. Besides their musical value, these compositions have clearly proved the genius of rural poets in giving very true and lively pictures of men and women of different occupations so much so that some of them have been readily accepted in urban areas as perfect pieces of drama. The most notable pieces are Mahua, Malua, Kamala, etc. The Badyas are similar to the gypsies of other lands and there was a time when they used to perform these musical plays professionally. This type of performance became almost obsolete during the last fifty years. Recently Calcutta University has collected and published a good number of such compositions and there has been signs of revival of these ballads. It is reported that already parties have been formed not of the gypsies but of illiterate villagers to perform them and the type of singing has been re-named as Chhanger Gan.

JHUMUR

Jhumur is intensively sung in the westernmost districts of Bengal bordering Chhotanagpur such as, Birbhum, Bankura and Burdwan. Evidently this type has been inspired by the music of the Santals with which it has a number of similarities. The music is attended with dance and the usual accompanying drum is the Madal. The tempo is generally quick and arresting. Consequently in many other types of songs those portions in which there is a sudden rush of quick tempo and louder beating of drums are known as Jhumur effects. Jhumur is a happy combination of the music of the plane and that of the hill and stands in bold relief in the seeming monotony of our folk songs.

HANOLA

This is very rare except in Chittagong and neighbouring districts and is equivalent to what is known as SAHELIA in Hindustan, from which this word Hanola is derived.

FULPAT

This is a kind of musical drama in its rudimentary form performed by peasants. The story is generally that of Brishaketu of Hindu Mythology. Its per-

formance is supposed to be auspicious to expectant mothers.

BAROMASHI

The word signifies a cycle of twelve months of the year. Big incidents including long stories of the epic compositions are condensed into twelve short songs or stanzas, each describing a part of the story in succession and without any break in its sequence and associating at the same time the seasonal influence of the twelve months of the year in cycle. Baromashi is one of the most important types of our folk songs.

CEREMONIAL SONGS

Almost all social ceremonies, such as marriage, and religious ones, such as pujas of different deities are attended with songs almost invariably sung by village women. Some of these songs are very good specimens which are absolutely untouched by art music. From time to time the Calcutta Station of the All-India Radio broadcast a number of such songs related to marriage ceremony and were widely appreciated. A few of such songs have been recorded by one of the gramophone companies.

DANCE SONGS

Some of these are festivity songs performed by men while others are confined to women. A few types of folk dance have been adapted and cultured recently through the efforts of Mr. G. S. Dutt. The song-value of these are definitely inferior to their dance-value. A few other types performed by females which I myself witnessed in my boyhood, *viz.*, NAGINI KHELA, GOPINI KHELA, etc., are fast disappearing.

RHYMES

Rhymes are more intonated recitations than songs. Nevertheless, they have been accepted as folk songs in every country. The Bengal rhymes may be classed as follows:

- (1) **Nursery Rhymes:** Commonly known in Bengal as Chhadas. These are mostly nonsense rhymes.
- (2) **Lullaby:** There is a great variety in this, each district or geographical unit having its own peculiar and traditional lullaby songs.
- (3) **Religious Rhymes:** These are chanted on particular occasions in solo or in chorus. There are several kinds of these, for instance, (a) 'Gorak Sevar Gan', sung in front of the cowshed on the 21st day from the birth of a calf so that Gorakhnath, the protector of cows may be pleased, (b) 'Bagh-Bandir Gan', intended to please the deity controlling tigers so that the villagers might not be molested by his jungle followers etc.
- (4) **Rhymes of Social Instruction:** These are fast vanishing. Even now one or two beggars are found in Calcutta chanting Lakshmir Gan, instructive of hygienic,

domestic, and social etiquette for ladies. 'Pater Gan' was once a very fine way of instructing illiterate villagers but unfortunately it is no more heard. 'Pat' means a picture. On a big sheet like a wall map a mythological or historical incident was painted in small blocks showing its successive stages and the singer while chanting his narrative rhyme used to mark those pictures with the help of an indicator, usually a long stick.

PANCHALI

Panchalis are serious compositions but chanted like rhymes. There may be Panchali portions in Kaviwalar Gan or other types of songs, or there may be independent Panchalis composed or improvised on particular social or religious subject-matters. Many poets of Bengal both cultured and illiterate, have become famous by their Panchali compositions. Dasarathi has secured an unrivalled position among Panchali composers of the last century. Panchali is supposed to have been derived from Panchalika or puppet dance in which music is an integral part.

Class (B)

Under Class (B) we generally have the following main types:

BHATIALI

The word Bhatiali is often confused with Bhatiar or Bhatiar, a Raga name with which it has nothing to do. It literally means a flow or motion downward. It may mean the downward flow of the river or the downward motion of the sun towards the western horizon. In fact these two natural phenomena are the most helping factors in creating the true atmosphere for Bhatiali songs. It is perhaps for this reason that Bhatiali has flourished in those parts of Bengal where both these elements are abundant. It is generally a cowherd on the pasture land or a boatman sitting on his boat with an idle look who sings a Bhatiali. Bhatiali is a solo song in the truest sense of the term, for it requires no accompaniment not even a drummer. A special feature of true Bhatiali is its complete freedom from rhythmic timing. This corresponds with the non-rhythmic occupation of the singer in contrast to the action of Sari singers which is perfectly rhythmic.

BHAWAIA

This is akin to Bhatiali and is current in the district of Rangpur and its immediate neighbourhood. Due to the peculiar conditions of that district Bhawaia is heard mostly in open fields and not in rivers which are comparatively few. The spirit of the compositions also is a bit different for the same reason. The absence of rhythm is also not there.

SARI

Sari means things arranged in a line and the term is well used in these songs because they are sung by

oarsmen sitting in rows on the two sides of a boat. The rhythm is in accord with the actual action of rowing and hence very well-marked. These songs in a sense may be regarded as action songs—though not like those taught in infant classes according to the Kindergarten system. Similar to the Sari is the Chhatpetar Gan.

CHHATPETAR GAN

In this a man accompanied usually by a violinist leads a song and is followed by labourers singing and beating in rhythm mortar on the terrace. The strenuous work on the terrace of a new building is thus lightened, and music helps the employer in exacting more work from the labourers, who otherwise might not be so willing.

PEASANT SONGS OR SONGS OF PEASANT LIFE

(1) **Cattle Songs:** There are songs, specially describing the miseries of the cattle, who are the immediate friends and helpers of peasants. Bengal being almost exclusively an agricultural province her people should naturally look to the welfare of the cattle almost as much as to that of themselves. Whatever may be the actual state of things, we find that this spirit has at least unconsciously set the village composers to compose a number of songs, such as Garur Dukker Gan. One such song was collected by me in Chittagong.

(2) **Planting Songs.**

(3) **Reaping Songs.**

These songs are sung at the time of planting tender tufts of rice-plants or at reaping time as the case may be. The songs are sung both as solo and in chorus as required and the action of the labourers regulates the rhythm of the music.

(4) **Tang-Changer Gan:** Tang is a raised platform beyond the reach of wild beasts and covered with thatches looking somewhat like a cottage supported on bamboo poles. Peasants live in it during night to protect their cornfields from animals. The drudgery of living in a lonely place like this during the whole night has been sought to be ameliorated by songs known as TANG-CHANGER GAN. The Tangs are generally constructed near hill sides. Consequently these songs also are sung only in those places. The word Chang is perhaps derived from Burmese and is synonymous with Tang. Both these words are widely used in several districts of East Bengal (Tang or rather Tong—Chang or Machang—a raised wooden or bamboo platform. Chang or Chong also means a ladder used here for climbing to the Tong.)

(5) **Jumer Gan:** This is a kind of peasant song of hill people. These people grow paddy and other corn on the flat portions or slopes of hills and reap them just like the peasants of the plains and like them have their own songs with their own peculiarities and rhythmic order.

HATI KHEDAR GAN

These songs are connected with trapping of

elephants. There are a number of ways in which elephants are trapped along the whole eastern hilly boundary of Bengal and the labourers connected with this work are compelled to live a peculiar life. This peculiarity is responsible for introducing this particular type of songs.

HILL SONGS OR PAHARER GAN

The Himalayas on the north, the Assam and Chittagong hills on the east and the Chhotanagpur hills on the west have provided Bengal with Mongoloid and Dravidian (?) hill tribes as her nearest neighbours. These tribes have their own music quite distinct from one another. But as is well-known the common elements in all tribal music, namely the pentatonic structure and abrupt angular movement hold good everywhere. These elements have always lent colour to the folk songs of Bengal. As a result we have a class of folk songs known as Jhumur which is now regarded as open-air music. There are other kinds of Bengali songs which are purely hill songs and may be heard particularly in the eastern hills sung by travellers, wood-cutters or peasants working on the hills.

BANAGITI

These are jungle songs and are popular among the hunting people and woodcutters. The influence of the tunes of hill tribes and aboriginals is distinctly marked in these songs. One may hear them only in the outskirts of Bengal in the neighbourhood of hills and jungles.

TUSU

Tusu is principally connected with Paus Parban celebrated on the last day of the Bengali month Paus. This occasion is celebrated in a wide variety in different parts of the province and Tusu with its peculiar songs is confined to the western districts of West Bengal.

NETO

Neto or Leto or Netua or better Natua is an open air musical operetta generally performed under a tree or in a similar place. One would have the chance to be present at its performance in Birbhum or Murshidabad and sometimes marvel at the improvisation of the singers or at the excellence of the compositions of a Leto-writer. Kazi Nazrul Islam was once such a composer. The word Natua means an actor and here it means an actor-singer.

N. B.—It may be noted here that there are quite a few types of the folk music of Bengal in which one is likely to perceive a common structural pattern. A close view would easily reveal that this is due to the influence of Bhatiali which has the readiest and the widest appeal to every composer and listener of the village. Bhatiali therefore, may be regarded as the basis of all folk songs of Bengal.