



# Dying Folk Music of West-Bengal

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## Abstract

West-Bengal is the hotspot of folk culture. This state has traditionally been the abode of folk culture in India. Like other parts of the world, with varied form of music, drama and painting, folk culture represents the rustic inheritance of West-Bengal. The term folk culture is concern 'folk' means 'lok' or the 'people in general. Folk culture is thus developed, maintained and nurtured mainly by uneducated common people of rural Bengal. The origin of folk culture is deeply embedded in the religion, festival, education, health, emotion, love, marriage, entertainment, loneliness and in the various range of human sentiments. Unfortunately, with passage of time, influx of urbanization and westernization have forced Bengal folk culture to confront a tremendous challenge at present day. In this paper, I have tried to explore the dying folk music of West-Bengal. In doing so, I have chosen the Baul, Bolan, Jhumur and Bhadu songs.

**Key words:** Folk, Culture, Music, Bengal, Festival

## Introduction:

For centuries together, folk arts and crafts occupied a conspicuous position in the life of the rural people of Bengal. Though customs, beliefs and rituals varied widely, traditional story-telling, dancing, singing, festivities and ceremonies along with processions and social gatherings were universally prevalent, Folk culture refers to a culture traditionally practiced by a small, homogenous, rural group living in relative isolation from other groups. Historically, handed down through oral tradition, it demonstrates the old 'ways' over novelty and relates to a sense of community. Folk culture is quite often imbued with a sense of place. If elements of a folk culture are copied by, or moved to, a foreign locale, they will still carry strong connotations of their original place of creation.

## Differences between Folk Culture and Popular Culture:

Popular culture is a term that comprised of the means through which large and heterogenous masses of individuals identify themselves as with regards to their conformity in music preferences, behavioral manner of speaking, greeting rituals, or even specific dress codes. Folk culture as a concept that represents the simpler lifestyle that is not only conservative and largely self-sufficient but also one that is characterized or revolves around rural life. Folk culture originates from anonymous source, with the date of origin, as well as the originator, unknown but the popular culture is the product of industrialization from both West and East.

*Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang*

*as if her song could have no ending;*

*I saw her singing at her work,*

*and o'er the sickle bending,*

*I listened, motionless and still*

*and, as I mounted up the hill,*

*the music in my heart I bore,*

*long after it was heard no more*

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) in his poem, *The Solitary Reaper*, explains that the music he bore in his heart had no end and continued even though it was heard no more. Folk music transmitted through oral traditions. It originated practiced and nurtured mainly by the rural uneducated farmers, daily wage labours and some backward class people. Since the performers are not professional and

they don't get much time for rehearsal out of their busy and hectic day today work, folk music remain original as the song of mother earth. Present paper attempts to trace back some of the dying folk music forms. Such as Baul, Bolan, Jhumur and Bhadu.

**Baul Songs:** The deep intensity of love and devotion have given the birth to the cult of *Baul* in Bengal. The word, *Baul* refers to a category of wandering minstrels, mystical seers, and preach it through their songs. Most of the Bauls emerged from village laboring classes, who may profess either Hindu or Muslim belief. Only the solitary life, far from home and conventional religion, gives to the Baul the freedom of living entirely in accordance with his own feelings. He understands himself as being *madly in love with the Divine self*, and indeed the Baul denotes *mad* or *crazy*. This *Divine spirit* is called, by the Bauls, *the man of the heart, the man of the mind, or the unattainable man*.

Their devotional songs can be traced back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century when they first appeared in Bengali literature. Baul music represents a particular type of folk music, carrying influences of Hindu Bhakti movements as well as the Sufi. Songs are also used by the spiritual leader to instruct disciples in Baul philosophy, and are transmitted orally. The language of the songs is continuously modernized thus endowing it with contemporary relevance.

The preservation of the Baul songs and the general context in which they are performed depend mainly on the social and economic situation of their practitioners, the Bauls, who have always been a relatively marginalized group. Moreover, their situation has worsened in recent decades due to the general impoverishment of rural Bangladesh.

Music Baul songs are still a popular form of folk ballads but somewhere in the mists of modern day crowd, Bauls have lost their age old charm. The present generation chances across Bauls in trains or buses in many parts of Bengal and for them it is more of a street amusement.

**Bolan:** Of the many folk forms existing in the country, one is called *Bolan*. Native to West-Bengal, it is one of the oldest folk cultures in the state which, in the era of smartphones and other such tech distractions, is dying a slow death.

The Bengali folk form, which involves singing dancing and performing, is on the verge of extinction. Traditionally, it is performed during the 'Gajan' festival which is dedicated to Lord Shiva. Performers go from house to house, or lane to lane, depicting episodes from Hindu mythology—most of which involve Lord Shiva and Goddess Sati. The artists cake their faces with loud makeup and put on quite a compelling show.

The root of Bolan song is at Nadia district of south Bengal. However, with time this drama has spread through Bardwan, Birbhum and Murshidabad. The main areas where Bolan is practiced are Kaliganj, Palashipara, Paglachandi, Tehatta, Debogram, Krishnaganj etc., at Nadia district. Lavpur and Nanur in Birbhum, Kandi, Bharatpur at Murshidabad and Katoya, Ketugram in Burdwan are some other places where it is performed.

The subject matter of Bolan songs is of miscellaneous types collected from popular episodes like Radha-Krishna relations, Savitri-Satyaban, Kama, Harischandra, Sita, Lava- Kusha and so on. Music is generally rendered in *panchali* form of narratives with human touches for hours.

However, the themes of these songs have expanded their wings to include social and contemporary issues. Now through performance, it imparts education and presents social awareness among the people as well. The authentic context of it has been changing from rural to urban context. The inspiration for modification primarily comes from modern theatre. So, the folk artists are being compelled to modify themselves to cope with the some optimistic changes in its traditional rules like stage and stage decoration or managements, lighting, costumes, acting, scripts, musical instruments and musical tunes. In this situation original context or authentic context of folk drama is being changed gradually through urbanization. The traditional performance is shifted from folk traditional context to urban context.

**Jhumur:** Now we shall discuss about Jhumur song. It dates back to the Vedic era and predates the Buddhist period. A cultural asset of the Chotonagpur, this subaltern folk song is our cultural property. Jhumur music is a very dubious term. To find the etymology, it is not unnatural for writers and scholars to connect it with Jhombada-Prabandha as mentioned in Sangit-Ratnakar of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Open places used as open theatre, under temporary round shaped straw shed raised of bamboos. Jhumur songs with indigenous orchestra were latent with devotions surrounded by rural people.

Jhumur originated as a type of fertility song of the tribal people usually sung as accompaniment to dance. The songs are rich in emotional depth and varied in range. Jhumur songs of the West-Bengal Highlands in their rich variety strike us as a unique expression of the emotional life of the primitive tribes who inhabited this region and lived close to Nature. Geographical boundaries and the natural environment under which they lived conditioned their way of life, determined their mood and influenced their songs which were natural and spontaneous in expression. The movement of their life was inseparably associated the beauty of Jhumur songs and inseparable associated the beauty of Jhumur songs and to study them in their proper perspective it is necessary to make an enquiry into the geographical characteristics and regional peculiarities of the land where such songs originated.

In tune, rhythm and melody that remote early tradition is still followed. The tribes and schedule castes are one with Nature. By using simple metaphors they identify their lovers with the common and lovely things of nature such as *-jhingey phul, biri(pulses), pial fruit, Mahua buds, Sal-flowers etc.*

In their songs and dances, in their joys and sorrows—in their expression of emotions one can feel the rhythm and melody of the darting water falls, the murmuring of the ripples of hill-fed streams and rivers. In the Jhumur they use only the first three or four swaras (notes)

such as – *sa, re, ga, ma*, out of the seven *swaras*. They do not use *srutis, kodi* or *komal swaras*. But now a days with the use of modern techno sound effect it losses its original colour. To attract the modern society subject matter of *Jhumur* started to extend.

***Bhadu***: *Bhadu* is the social festival of South Bengal. The festival starts from the first day of *Bhadra*, the fifth month in Bengali calender and continues till the end of the month.

It has its original story of a princess called *Bhadravati* of *Panchakote* who magically disappeared. *Bhadravati*'s devotees make an image of her and sing and dance before it throughout the month on the last day of *Bhadra*, they gather on river bank and immerse the image in the water. Songs, mainly focusing on marriage, form the main attraction of the festival in which both professional groups and amatures take part. Celebrations include fairs and cultural programmes.

The ceremony is generally performed by young maidens of *Purulia* district, *West-Burdwan* district, and southern *Birbhum* district in the Indian state of *West-Bengal*. In present era of globalization this festival has lost its glory.

***Conclusion***: After a detailed investigation on folk culture of Bengal it is evident that the rustic, backward class of Bengal are passing on this culture from generation to generation. But new generation artists are not coming up and even not willing to join in the performances of these folk music. Thereby, it poses a question mark on the future of the folk music of Bengal. The economic globalization has made life comfortable but also has eradicated the essence and aesthetics of Bengali folk culture.

