

TRANSFORMATION OF THE ICH IN BANGLADESH IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

The people of Bangladesh are melomaniac. From time immemorial, they have practiced music despite of varied challenges of natural disasters, economic crises, political impediments, and others. The history is ingrained from the ancient time of *Charyapada* to the modern era of musical texts. In the recent COVID-19 pandemic, we found a new stamina among the traditional music practitioners to continue the culture of music.

Despite facing restrictions and social distance during the Pandemic time, the music practitioners continued their practices staying inside their homes. The disciples also accompanied the master artists by getting together at the guru's home. They also opted to utilize the new digital platform of social media like Facebook and YouTube. Many of them, using their mobile phone, broadcast their performances live or by uploading recorded performances. Besides, such a digital vibe broadened their opportunity to communicate with their fans living in distant locations in the country and abroad. So, it opened a new door to transmit music style, philosophic ideas and theories, and discussions over video conferences. Both the elderly gurus and young practitioners participated in utilizing digital technology for practicing, celebrating, and transmitting music traditions.

Our field research reveals that the people who were even reluctant to be engaged in traditional music practices became interested and involved in the folk culture of music. The folk music practitioners composed new songs on COVID-19, which created greater awareness of health behavior to prevent the pandemic. This trend helped the greater community to newly realize the importance of traditional music culture due to their power to relate to the contemporary challenges of daily life.

During the pandemic time, there was a new rise in the historical revival of the ancient *Charyapada*. Several centers for the revival of *Charyapada* have been

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established in different parts of Bangladesh. Even, there are some instances of conducting training on *Charyapada* singing via online media.

FIELD RESEARCH

In search of situations of the traditional musical culture of Bangladesh in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic period, we conducted research in seven locations across Bangladesh. The geographic areas were selected considering the intensive practice of the specific musical tradition in the respective area. The oral statements and comments of the musical community we encountered were recorded. This article has been developed based on the transcript of the audio-visual records of the field research. The field research continued from August 2022 to January 2023. The research detected the changes in lives of the traditional music practitioners that happened during and after COVID-19. The research was limited to investigating three elements of ICH: the revival of the *Charya* Song, the *Baul* Song, and the *Sufi* Song.

THE REVIVAL OF *CHARYAPADA*

Generally, *Charyapada* was performed prominently by Buddhist priests and the traditional body-centric saints in the ancient Bengal through singing, dancing, and acting from 650 AD to 1100 AD. In 1200 AD, this tradition disappeared encountering the Muslim invasion. However, the manuscripts of this literature were somehow preserved in the Royal Library of Nepal. Haraprasad Shastri, a Bengali scholar, discovered the manuscripts in 1907; and Bangia Sahittya Parishad of Kolkata published the manuscript in 1916.



Figure 1. During COVID-19 Pandemic, Bhabanagara Sadhusanga continued songs of *Charyapada* Revival Activities in limited manner at Suhrawardi Udyan in Dhaka. (Photo: S. Zakaria)



Figure 2. *Charyapada* performers at the Paharhpur Buddhist archeological site. (Photo: S. Zakaria)



Figure 3. Discussion with the artists of Paharhpur Bouddhabihara Charya Practice Center. (Photo: S. S. Tania)

A foundation named Bhābanagara Foundation incepted Bhābanagara Sadhusanga in 2014, a program to revive the ancient *Charya* songs. In the course of around one decade, almost one thousand *sadhaka* singers all over Bangladesh have been practicing the ceaseless initiative to revive *Charya* Songs. Every Wednesday, the traditional singers from different corners of the country get together at the Suhrawardy Udyan and practice *Charya* Songs.

In course of time, renowned scholars and researchers from home and abroad have experienced this Wednesday event. Being impressed, Bangla Academy, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, National Museum, University of Dhaka, Kazi Nazrul Islam University, and Bangladesh Television (BTV) have organized several events of *Charya* Song Performance. Gradually the effort of reviving the *Charyapada* extended across a number of districts of Bangladesh.

Our field works concentrated on *Bhabanagara Sadhusanga* (Figure 1) in Dhaka, the Charya Practice Center of *Paharhpur Bouddhabihara* (Figure 2) in Naogaon, *Bangladesh Folk Culture Protection and Charya Charcha Kendra*, Jhinaidaha, and the Charya Practice Center of Pabna, Kushtia, Chuadanga, Cumilla and Kishoreganj district. We also have had interactive dialogue with the individual *Charyapada* practitioners of Manikganj district.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, the enthusiastic *Charya* practitioners continued practicing *Charya* songs at home. They also started to use digital social media (Facebook and YouTube) for networking with the interested audience. Some capable people extended their helping hands to the poor *Charya* performers. Several local young persons captured their videos to share over social media. A YouTube channel² broadcasted an elaborate feature on them. The *Charya* practitioners of *Paharhpur* (Figure 3) opined that the works of elderly performers should be preserved digitally as resources for young practitioners and researchers.

Kishoreganj district is representative zone of *Sufi* music in Bangladesh. In this district, Sufi Zakir Chisti, a follower of Sufi Muhammad Fakir (Figure 4), founded a Charya Revival Centre in his village Koshakhali in the time of COVID-19 pandemic. In the lockdown situation, the local artists, who had been living in Dhaka for their livelihood, returned to villages. *Sufi* Zakir Chisti organized a *Charya* Training Workshop and invited these artists to participate. Thus, a group of local folk performers started practicing and performing *Charya* songs regularly. *Sufi* Zakir Chisti brought this new group of *Charya* revival actors under the umbrella of Kishoreganj Shantidham Charya Practice Centre (Figure 5).

Similar initiative in the Fatehpur village of Jhineda district became successful. It is unique that a group of young Bauls who had become confined within the village established Folk Culture Protection and Charyapada Practice Center in the village. They additionally opened a YouTube channel to broadcast their activities with wider YouTube users. In the after-COVID-19 time, this group also started using Facebook to connect with digital technology users. Due to their online activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, they had become so popular that they were invited by Bangla Academy to perform in Dhaka. However, it revealed that the high internet charge and the cost of the internet-friendly mobile phone set are challenges for the poor artists to use the digital platforms.

² Rnewsbd24. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_RNATxtynY4



Figure 4. Interview with Mohammad Fakir at the Shantidham Bhabdarshan Charya Center, Kishoreganj. (Photo: S. S. Tania)



Figure 5. In the Annual Gathering of the *Sufi* devotees, they discuss the *Sufi* theories, Pray and perform *Sufi* songs, Shantidham Bhabdarshan Charya Center, Kishoreganj. (Photo: S. S. Tania and S. Zakaria)

BAUL SONG, BAUL SADHANA AND SADHUSANGA

Baul song is an ancient tradition of Bangladeshi intangible culture. It is inscribed in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The *Baul* beliefs, lifestyle, and songs are transmitted downward generations through *guru-shishya* tradition at *Baul Ashram*. The *Baul* never discriminate from religion to religion. They feel the omnipotent power within the human body. So, they believe in the *manush guru*, a human guru in the image of God. Sharing spiritual ideas through songs and *sadhusanga*, that is, union among humans is part and parcel of the *sadhana*. To investigate the situation of the *Baul* songs in context of the COVID-19, the research team conducted fieldwork in districts of Kushtia, Chuadanga, and Jhenaidah.

In COVID-19, the *Baul* became confined within the home or *Ashram*. However, facing limited mobility and restriction on social gatherings, the traditional *Baul* also started using virtual platforms for their performances, preaching, and teaching for the first time. While investigating at the *Hem-Ashram* founded by *Baul* Guru Nahir Shah (Figure 6 and 7) in the village of Pragpur in Kushtia district, we found a positive vibe of practicing *Baul* song and *Baul* philosophy on digital platform in and after COVID-19. Guru Nahir Shah used and has been using digital media to communicate with his local and expatriate disciples. He put special emphasis on interaction with the young *Baul*. The youth social media users have shown much more interest in the deeper knowledge of the *Baul* doctrine. COVID-19 thus has pushed the unique possibility of the transmission of the *Baul* culture.

The local youth developed a trend of developing video documentaries of the *Baul* performers and their performances and sharing them over Facebook and YouTube. Nahir Shah opined that the digital platforms made the young *Baul* understand the deeper meanings of *Baul* songs. At the beginning of COVID-19, *Guru-Shishya* tradition was affected due to restrictions on physical contact. However, the opportunity of using digital technology has opened new doors for the *Baul* community to remain vibrant in their living *Baul* life. The *Baul* who are utilizing social media are receiving very positive feedback from their followers and the co-practitioners. In the pre-COVID-19 time, the *Baul* would consider social gatherings as the only method of *Baul* song practice and *sadhana*-related interaction, but the pandemic has changed their mindset. The young generation is better familiar with digital technology. They taught the senior *Baul* how to use digital media.

However, it is noteworthy that the youth are found to use unmatched modern musical instruments that divert the actual facets of the *Baul* song. The senior



Figure 6. Saymon Zakaria with *Baul*-Guru Fakir Nahir Shah. (Photo: S. S. Tania)



Figure 7. *Baul*-Guru Fakir Nahir with his followers. (Photo: Nidhi)

Bauls consider this trend alarming for the tradition of the unique nature of the *Baul* song and the *Baul sadhana*. On the other hand, the youth opt to use Western instruments to attract viewers of the digital social media. This scenario means that the *Baul* tradition, which connects the Guru and the disciples, got a significant transition in the situation during COVID-19. Interestingly, the common people who love *Baul* songs and love to gain *Baul* knowledge are actually much more interested in physical interactions through participating in the interactive *Baul* song performances.

It was a remarkable finding that a *Baul* Practitioner who had come from France before the COVID-19 pandemic and taken the doctrine of the *Baul* Guru Lalan Sain established her own *Ashram* in the Pragpur village of Kushtia during the Pandemic period. At her *Ashram*, she introduced a digital channel on Facebook and YouTube to share her *Baul* experiences and Yoga practices virtually.³ Besides, several children have started living at her *Ashram* as her disciples to adapt *Baul* practices and learn *Baul* songs. During the times after-COVID-19 period, the *Baul* songs have been being practiced in both digital platforms and the traditional interactive social gathering.

THE TRADITIONAL SUFI SONGS

There are several schools of *Sufi* songs in Bangladesh. This element represents the diversity of *Baul-Fakir* songs in Bangladesh. The Bangla *Sufi* songs adapted a lot of features of *Baul* songs and thus created a different school of *Baul-Fakir* songs that are very popular among both rural and urban communities. This school follows Islamic ideas in *Sufi* manner. In the background of COVID-19 pandemic, we selected our field at Hasli village of Manikganj district to understand the *Sufi* song practices in and after the COVID-19 time.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mm15Bhc7HBI>, <https://www.youtube.com/@DeboYoga>

Sufi songs are practiced almost everywhere in Bangladesh. We had very close observation of the team of the famous *Sufi* Saidur Rahman Boyati. We visited Saidur's home considering their ages-old family tradition of these school of *Sufi* songs. After being introduced to Saidur Rahman Boyati and his group members, we observed their daily lives and activities and had elaborate discussions with his group members.

The COVID-19 pandemic encountered the humanity of the world, scaring and killing the mass with no resistance. Bangladesh too has lost countless lives. The government alerted the people to maintain social distance, even to remain afar during prayer in congregation. People did not dare to shake hands. Everybody started washing hands from time to time. All restrained themselves from physical contact and used facial masks in public places. The *Sufi* song artists took a spontaneous initiative of raising social awareness to follow the government's instructions. They interpreted the use of masks in a creative manner. They started to announce that wearing a mask means keeping breath and speech controlled which is alike religious rules. They also explained that Bengali people were used to masking their cattle to restrain them from harming the growing crops. This means that people must remain careful and controlled so that no other persons get hurt by anybody's words as well as communicable diseases. In their new songs, they narrated the mask as a symbol of protecting others from the harm of communicable diseases.

The *Sufi Boyatis* live basically on singing. In the lockdown situation, they became quite helpless. For restrictions on social gathering and music events, their earning stopped. They did not have minimum savings for survival in off time. The *Sufi* performers were in a puzzling situation about how to manage daily life. In such hard time, the traditional *Sufi* song practitioners composed new songs reflecting the serious features of the pandemic and the required safeguarding of lives. They voluntarily performed those songs roaming around the villages keeping social distance. Their purpose was to make people feel that by maintaining COVID-19 protective behavior, people may secure *Allah's* bliss to exist safely in the pandemic. The *Sufi* artists have preserved their new songs in the written form.

However, after COVID-19, the revitalization of the performance-based *Sufi* song has come across social challenges in the changed context. The society seemed to be reluctant to support their long-practiced traditional culture. Patronization to organize *Sufi* song performances drastically became discouraging. In this situation, the *Sufi* artists have had a feeling of despair. The *Sufi* believes, 'if you want to outdo a nation, hit the culture of that nation'. They think that the nation is turning into a mechanical institute detached from their cultural roots – the varied elements of their intangible cultural heritage. COVID-19 has made every person much more self-centered, which is not matched with the traditional culture of

Bangladesh. The after-COVID-19 trend of musical performances is leading Bangladesh society backward, neglecting the traditions. The contemporary lyrics of different songs have become vulgar, the instruments are not the local ones, and the musical behaviors of the young singers are not linked with the traditional mode. It is not only COVID-19 but also the impact of social media that misguides the young generation to be derailed from traditional culture and behavior.

This is why it has been possible for the *Sufi* singers of Manikganj (Figure 8) to guide people in their protection from coronavirus. Through their performances, they delivered the key messages on Dos and Don'ts to prevent Corona. Thus, some people, who never liked *Sufi* songs, became interested in this form of performance. The common villagers became convinced to admit that songs are knowledge. Songs have the power to direct the path of overcoming the pandemic. People understood that if we followed the health rules, they could be safe in the pandemic situation. They feel that if they become impure, unclean, dirty, and without protective measures, they may be affected. The villagers came to their understanding that the songs have a deep connection with practical life.

However, the *Sufi* song practitioners encountered extreme want in the pandemic period. There was no external financial or food assistance for them except a little incentive from Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy.

In terms of using mobile phone technology, the *Sufi* performers of Manikganj district are adaptive enough. However, they do not think that digital platforms can be an alternative the direct interactive performances. Mentioning the young generation's trend of passing a long time with social media, Saidur Rahman Boyati opined that this new digital culture is taking the new generation away from the traditional culture. They have become so addicted to mobile phone-



Figure 8. Informal session of the *Sufi* song by Abul Basar Abbasi at Manikganj. (Photo: S. Zakaria)

based social media that they often get involved in anti-social acts. They are coming across many different digital elements that are considered vulgar in our culture. The new generation is listening to different languages, rhythms, and tones, all of which are unmatched by the traditional features of Bangladesh. The young singers do not like the local musical instruments like *dhol*, *ektara*, flute, *totara*, or *sarinda*, etc, they opt for western instruments. The local musical instruments are under the threat of extinction.

The *Sufi* singers think that the school curriculum should include lessons on the proper manner of using digital media and awareness of internet security. The mainstream media – Television channels and newspapers – also should come forward to spread common awareness of the good uses of social media.

During the Corona pandemic, the *Sufi* Song Group members– harmonium master, *dhuli* (*dhol* player), flute artist, *dotara* player, violin artist, etc. went scattered. When they were not together, the performance became impossible. To secure daily expenses, many of them became engaged in different non-music activities for survival. Even after COVID-19, it seemed difficult for them to get back to musical performance. In the after-COVID-19 context, they started demanding more and more money for performance. But the situation was the opposite before COVID-19. They had been coming spontaneously without being concerned about how much they would receive. It means Corona pandemic caused a lot of harm to *Sufi* song practices. The patrons and event organizers have also become reluctant to spend money on organizing *Sufi* performances. Only one or two old patrons continued supporting, though on a small scale.

OBSERVATION OF THE ICH IN BANGLADESH

The research team worked on the ICH of Bangladesh from November 2022 to January 2023, which mainly observed the diverse musical elements of the ICH of Bangladesh. The team stayed with the traditional music community and learned their reality in and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides the above-mentioned fieldwork, the research team also joined a *Baul Sadhusanga* at *Khoda Boks Sain Sangeet Niketan* in Jahanpur Village of Chuadanga district on the 15th and 16th of January 2023. This post-COVID-19 *Baul* Gathering was lively with the enthusiastic participation of both elderly *gurus* and young disciples as well as several observers. The same new enthusiasm was marked in the performance of *Padmar Nachon* (The Dance of the goddess Padma) at the District Literary Fest in Kushtia, jointly organized by Bangla Academy and the District Admin of Kushtia. The participation of the new generation performers in *Padmar Nachon* was remarkable. From 28th to 31st December 2022, we observed the traditional musical performance of the indigenous groups in Khagrachhari Hill Tract District. We also observed the *Buddhist Pindadaan* (offering funeral foods to the deceased ances-

tors) fest, a ritual-based festival in which more than a thousand *Buddha Bhanteys* participated. There we participated in the performance of *Buddhist Kirtana*, a performance of religious music of the Buddhist community. The performers informed us that the frequency of performing *Buddhist Kirtana* increased in different *Buddhist* dwelling zones of Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Bangladesh. The folk artists of Bangladesh, *Baul* and *Sufi* performers, started composing and performing songs for people's awareness to prevent the pandemic. At the same time, they took the initiative to spread their initiatives over social media. Thus, two positive aspects of the music culture of Bangladesh appeared. One, new types of music during the pandemic appeared; Two, folk artists began to experience technology. The golden era of virtual performance of *Baul* song and the *Baul* discussion started. Many of them started Facebook and YouTube Live. The participation of the youth and children as well as women in practicing ICH increased because of the digital platforms. Apart from Facebook and YouTube Live, video conferences using Messenger, WhatsApp, IMO, etc. became very popular among Bangladeshi ICH practitioners.

The impact of COVID-19 on the ICH of Bangladesh exposes the following trends:

- i. The performers of the folk music groups have become scattered due to restrictions on social gatherings;
- ii. The traditional music performers continued their practices during their stay-home time within the family atmosphere;
- iii. Many artists, especially the youth, started using mobile phone-based social media;
- iv. The traditional performers have massively entered the digital platform for their performance as well as interaction with the followers and the common audience;
- v. Due to the social media activities, many younger *Baul* got engaged in ICH;
- vi. The enthusiastic youth group's established new organizations for their ICH practices and transmission;
- vii. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the ICH of Bangladesh got a new shape by adapting specifically the digital media. However, the extremely poor ICH practitioners remain out of technology-based opportunities. The government support did not reach the majority of the poor folk artists and performers, basically because of the lack of a complete ICH Inventory. Considering the need, the Bhābanagara Foundation developed a living list of folk singers and musicians. Including their address, ICH element, and mobile phone number, from all of the districts of Bangladesh and published *Bangladesher Lokoshilpi Talika* (Folk Artists of Bangladesh: an encyclopedic Dictionary) The List has been helpful for many small patronizers to support the poor artists.

The elements of ICH in Bangladesh have overcome different adverse contexts in the course of history. They faced challenges of natural disasters and other

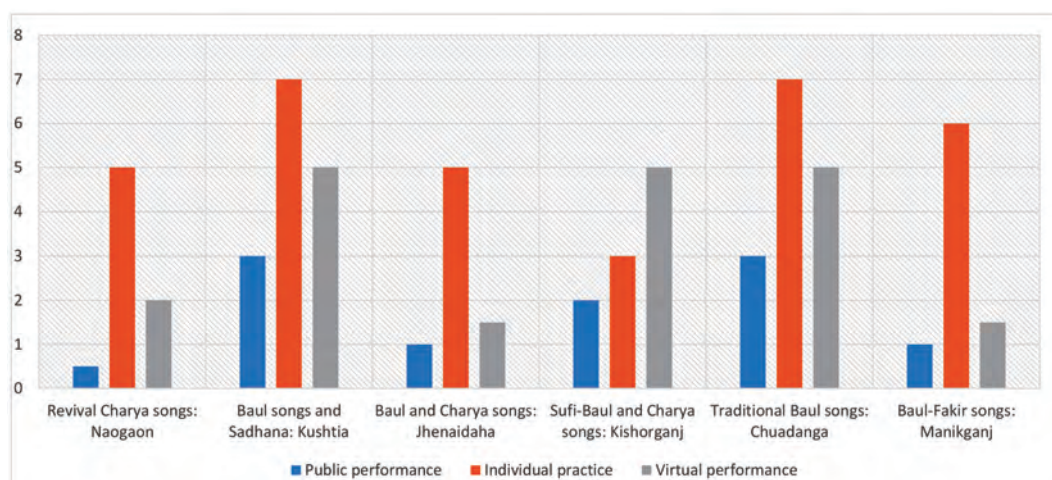
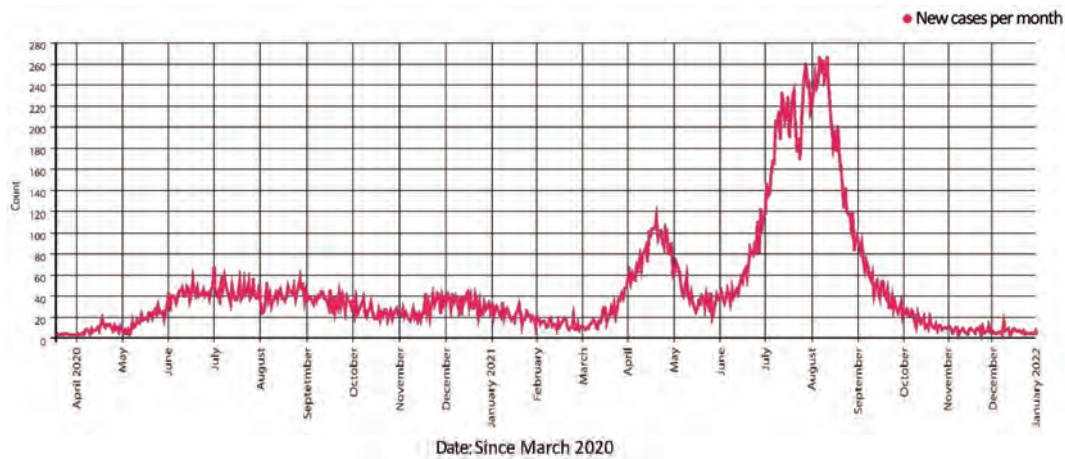


Figure 9. The transition of COVID-19 pandemic situation. (Source: Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research, Bangladesh)

climatic hazards as well as socio-political hindrances, conflicts, and war and made their headway through necessary transformation. A few of the extinct traditional cultural elements, such as *Charyapada*, are reviving with new facets.

COVID-19 hit Bangladesh in March 2020 (Figure 9). From April 2020 to April 2021, the rate of COVID-19 cases and deaths remained almost stable. But from May to September 2021, the rate increased drastically. However, from October 2021, the rate of COVID-19 cases and deaths started to decrease. In this situation, the government imposed various restrictions on the movement of people and banned all kinds of mass gatherings. As a result, the tradition of public performance stopped though a few ritual-oriented public performances took place in a limited manner. On the other hand, the practice of individualistic music culture on digital platforms increased significantly.

Before COVID-19, there were few opportunities for individual artists. During COVID-19, the artists found new opportunities to improve their skills in digital

media. Confident, folk artists have gained fame at the national and international level due to technological support. Now it is possible to find the songs of almost every artist of Bangladesh in one way or another on various digital platforms including Facebook and YouTube.

[Translated by Nurunnabi Shanto]