



Songs of Labour and Silence: Folk Work Songs of Rural Bengali Women

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Abstract

Folk work songs constitute an important yet understudied component of our cultural heritage. Rooted in everyday labour, these songs function not merely as entertainment but as cultural texts that encode collective memory, gendered experience, and social values. This paper reassesses folk work songs with special reference to the work songs of rural Bengali women. Situating Bengali work songs within the broader tradition of Indian and global folk music, the study examines their formal features, performative contexts, and socio-cultural significance. Particular emphasis is placed on women's work songs – especially Dhekir Gān – which emerge from domestic and agricultural labour traditionally performed by women. Through textual analysis and cultural contextualization, the paper argues that these songs articulate women's perspectives on labour, community, and identity while transforming repetitive work into a shared creative and cultural experience.

Key Words: Work Song, Women, Rural Bengal, Dhekir Gān.

Introduction

Folk songs are traditionally sung by the common people of a region and form an integral part of their cultural life. They are not composed for formal performance or commercial recording; rather, they are transmitted orally from generation to generation through communal participation. In rural societies, folk songs reflect everyday realities – work, rituals, relationships, and beliefs – thereby offering valuable insights into the lived experiences of ordinary people. Bengali folk songs are particularly diverse, owing to Bengal's rich

cultural and regional variations. Almost every district in Bengal possesses its own repertoire of folk songs that reflect local customs, occupations, and worldviews. These songs serve not only as a means of entertainment but also as repositories of collective memory, preserving aspects of social life that are often absent from written history. Through folk songs, communities narrate their past, articulate shared values, and pass on cultural knowledge to future generations.

Folk Songs in the Indian Context:

Historical records suggest that Indian folk music has ancient origins, with references found in Vedic literature dating back to around 1500 BCE. Some scholars even argue that folk music in India is as old as civilization itself. While the purpose of folk music—community expression and cultural continuity—remains largely consistent across regions, its styles, themes, and performance practices vary widely according to local cultures. India's vast cultural diversity has resulted in the emergence of numerous folk music traditions, each shaped by the specific social, environmental, and occupational contexts of different regions. Folk songs in India are not merely forms of entertainment; rather, they function as living expressions of community life, reflecting the everyday experiences, beliefs, and labour practices of the people. Through these musical traditions, local histories and collective identities are preserved and transmitted across generations.

In Assam, Bihugeet is performed during the Bihu festival, which marks important phases of the agricultural calendar. These songs celebrate fertility, seasonal change, and social harmony, often accompanied by dance and traditional instruments. Similarly, Uttarakhandi folk music is deeply connected with religious rituals and festive occasions in the hill regions, where songs are sung to invoke deities, narrate myths, and strengthen communal bonds during celebrations and ceremonies.

In southern India, Naatupura Paadalgal of Tamil Nadu is closely associated with agricultural labour. These songs are traditionally sung during farming activities such as sowing and harvesting, helping to coordinate collective effort and alleviate physical strain. In western India, Koli songs reflect the lives of fishing communities in Maharashtra, capturing themes of the sea, weather, livelihood, and the dangers faced by fishermen.

Similarly, in Bengal, Bhatiali songs are sung by boatmen navigating rivers and waterways. Characterized by their flowing melodies, these songs express solitude, longing, and an intimate relationship with nature. Collectively, these traditions illustrate how Indian folk songs are deeply embedded in occupational and environmental contexts, revealing the inseparable link between music, labour, and regional life.

Folk Work Songs: Concept and Features

Work songs constitute a distinct and significant category of folk songs that are performed in direct association with labour. Across cultures and historical periods, work has frequently been accompanied by music, suggesting a universal human impulse to integrate artistic expression into everyday physical activity. These songs are not composed merely for aesthetic pleasure; rather, they emerge organically from the conditions of labour and serve both functional and emotional purposes. By embedding music into work routines, communities transform strenuous or repetitive tasks into meaningful cultural practices. One of the primary practical functions of work songs is to coordinate collective labour. In activities that require synchronized movement—such as rowing, harvesting, grinding, or construction—work songs establish a shared rhythm and timing among workers. This rhythmic structure helps regulate bodily movement, ensuring that individual efforts align with the group's actions, thereby increasing efficiency and reducing the likelihood of physical strain or injury. Beyond coordination, work songs also help relieve the monotony of repetitive tasks. Through melody, repetition, and lyrical variation, they provide mental stimulation and emotional release, making labour more bearable and even socially engaging.

Scholars have long observed that the musical structure of work songs is closely shaped by the nature of the labour they

accompany. As T. C. Brakeley notes, tasks requiring coordinated physical effort are often accompanied by slow, strongly accented rhythms, with each rhythmic stress corresponding to a moment of exertion. In contrast, lighter or more continuous forms of labour may be accompanied by faster tempos and more fluid melodic patterns. This close alignment between musical form and labour process highlights the functional adaptability of work songs to specific occupational demands.

In addition to songs sung during the actual performance of labour, folklorists also identify a broader category known as occupational songs. These songs may be performed outside the immediate work setting and often narrate work-related experiences, describe tools and techniques, express pride in craftsmanship, or warn of occupational dangers. Such songs function as repositories of communal knowledge and professional identity.

It is important to note that many early collections of work songs focused predominantly on male labourers, reflecting historical biases in folklore scholarship. However, women have also created and sustained rich traditions of work songs, particularly in domestic and agricultural contexts. Songs sung during activities such as husking, sowing, grinding, and childcare reveal women's voices, experiences, and emotional worlds, underscoring the need for more inclusive approaches to the study of work songs.

Different Types of Work Songs in Rural Bengal

In rural Bengal, work songs form an integral part of everyday life and are closely intertwined with the rhythms of manual labour. These songs not only provide musical expression but also function as cultural tools that help workers endure physical exertion, reduce fatigue, and create a sense of collective identity. Broadly, Bengali work songs can be classified into two major categories: Bhatiyali

and Sari songs, each associated with specific types of labour and social contexts.

Bhatiyali songs are predominantly solo performances and are most commonly sung by boatmen navigating rivers and canals. Characterized by a high pitch, elongated notes, and a free, flowing rhythm, these songs mirror the expansive and fluid nature of riverine life. Thematically, Bhatiyali songs often express longing, emotional solitude, love, separation, and the hardships of labour. Nature plays a significant role in these compositions, with rivers, boats, the sky, and distant shores serving as recurring metaphors. The free rhythm of Bhatiyali allows the singer to improvise, reflecting both personal emotion and the unpredictable movement of water. In contrast, Sari songs are collective or chorus-based work songs performed during group labour such as rowing, harvesting, or construction work. Unlike Bhatiyali, rhythm occupies a central position in Sari songs. The repetitive beats and coordinated singing help synchronize physical movements, enabling workers to perform strenuous tasks efficiently. The call-and-response structure often found in Sari songs fosters cooperation and strengthens communal bonds among participants.

The rhythmic and performative features of these work songs clearly demonstrate the close relationship between music, the human body, and labour. By aligning musical tempo with physical activity, these songs transform labour into a shared cultural experience, highlighting how oral traditions function as both artistic expression and practical support systems within rural Bengali society.

Folk Work Songs by Rural Bengali Women

Traditionally, work songs have been associated with male-dominated labour, but women have produced their own work song traditions in contexts where labour is primarily performed by women. As is seen in many studies, women's work songs are far more than simple musical accompaniments to labor. I.

Srivastava, a researcher, found that these songs express women's unexpressed emotions, unfulfilled desires, hopes, and disappointments beyond conventional stereotypes. According to Andromache Karanika, even in ancient Greece women used to sing while working. Calypso and Circe sing while working at their looms; in Odyssey 6 a washing scene captures female performances. Both of these instances are examples of the female voices filtered into the fabric of the epic. Karnika brings to the surface the words of women who informed the oral tradition from Greek epic poetry emerged. One significant example of such songs in Bengal is *Dhekir Gān*, sung while operating the *dheki*, a traditional wooden mortar and pestle used for husking rice.

The *dheki* was once central to village life in West Bengal and other parts of eastern India, including Assam and Chhattisgarh. Operated usually by two or three women, it required rhythmic coordination, making the song an essential accompaniment. *Dhekir Gān* is composed and sung by women and typically follows a call-and-response or refrain-based structure: a lead singer sings the main lines, while others join in the refrain. Smita Tewari Jassal opines that folk work songs by women reflect and reinforce gender identity and social control, particularly in terms of patriarchal anxieties and female subordination, suggesting complicity in their own oppression. But in the context of Bengali *Dhekir Gān*, where it is a group activity, these songs allow emotional release but within limits that do not threaten social order. Thus, solidarity coexists with subordination—women support one another emotionally without challenging structural inequalities.

These songs are notable for transcending specific community or tribal boundaries. Before the advent of mechanized rice mills, *Dhekir Gān* was widely sung across eastern India and Bangladesh, reflecting a shared cultural practice rooted in women's labour.

Example of *Dhekir Gān* Collected from Rangpur, North Bengal-

*Dhan bahano dhan bahano ore Narad-muni,
Vrindabane dhan bahane Radhe goyalini.
A dhan bahano re sonar kamini,
A dhan bahano ree.(Chorus)
Dhekite uthiya bole,- ami sare chari hater
kath Sonar kamini dhan bahane....,*

Translation:

Husk the paddy, Husk the paddy, O
sage Narada,
In Vrindavan, Radha, the cow-herdess
husks the paddy.
O husk the paddy, golden maiden,
O husk the paddy.
Upon rising the Dheki says, -I am four
and a half cubits of wood
The golden maiden is husking the
paddy ...

The following *Dhekir Gān* is collected from a village in West Medinepur district-

*O nabo dhekiyare samle kuto dhan.
Dhekitai bole ami Naroder e nati
Astanga thakite mor lage mare lathi
O nabo dhekiyare samle kuto dhan.*

Translation:

O new pounding lever, be careful while
husking paddy.
The lever itself seems to say: I am
Narad's granddaughter.
Despite having eight limbs, why are
you kicking my tail
O new pounding lever, be careful while
husking paddy.(chorus)

These songs blend everyday labour with mythological imagery, elevating mundane work into a culturally meaningful act. Such songs reveal how women integrate devotion, creativity, and social bonding into their labour. Thus work songs across regions, invoking the same mythic figures helps sanctify women's physical labour. By associating pounding rice or

carrying paddy with Radha, Sage Narad or other divine figures, women's work gains moral and spiritual value, even when socially undervalued. This pattern is apparent in all Bengali *Dhekir Gān* sung by women.

Conclusion

The work songs of rural Bengali women demonstrate how music transforms labour into a collective cultural experience. Through songs like *Dhekir Gān*, women articulate respect for hard work, reduce the monotony of repetitive tasks, and foster a sense of community and shared identity. These songs also reflect women's worldviews, embedding labour within broader cultural, religious, and social frameworks. Reassessing folk work songs thus allows us to recover marginalized voices and recognize women's contributions to cultural heritage. Folk songs, dance, and music have always been inseparable from social and religious life in traditional societies, accompanying rituals, festivals, and everyday work. By studying women's work songs, we gain insight into how culture is sustained not only through grand narratives but through the rhythms of daily labour.

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