

Bangla Band: An Image of Contemporary Bengali Urban Society

Dr. Udit Mitra

Assistant Professor, Sociology, Shri Shikshayatan College, Kolkata

E-mail: udita2009mitra@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The paper tries to explore and understand the concept of band in the context of Bangla Band music, an element of culture in contemporary West Bengal. In the process of such explanation many other larger issues of the society get addressed to like youth, popular music, relation between culture and technology, and aesthetics and commerce. The contemporary social cultural milieu of West Bengal is also unearthed in the process.

Introduction

The current paper tries to explore and understand the concept of *band* in Bangla band music or Band music in Bengali language. Band music is a very popular cultural trait in Bengal both West Bengal and Bangladesh and it is one of the variants of popular music today. Though the field work in this study is limited to the cultural scape of Bengal, yet the concept of band as has been constructed in the present study is perhaps true for both the sides of Bengal. Music like any other popular ‘art’ form is an embodiment of culture and it is no exception in case of Bangla bands. These bands perform solely or predominantly in the Bengali language, using modern western principles of music, as claimed by their members. Even the traditional Bengali folk music plays a significant role in its composition. Such a fusion between the east and the west is representative of the composite culture of contemporary urban Bengal. Music has always had a very special relationship with youth, who have been and are still the fans of one or the other genre of music. Like popular music in other countries, the Bangla band music is

very popular among Bengali young people who constitute not only its audience but also its performers. A majority of the Bangla Band members are in their youth or started their musical journey when they were young. They assert their status of being ‘different’ from the adult society through their cultural activities in this case the Bangla bands. Youth is therefore the point where the dominant culture loosens the control of its young and youth culture is the result (Garratt 2004: 146). This culture referred to as *sub culture* translates whatever is going on around them into the music, fashion and behaviour they use to identify themselves (Garratt 2004). Producing this form of a music has not been revolutionary on the part of youth in terms of creating a new cultural element in the history of West Bengal, but they have also taken it as a means of earning their livelihood in contemporary Bengal making them modern day entrepreneurs. The present research is mostly of an exploratory nature and the data have been collected through interviews not only of the present day band members but also of classical musicians, music critiques, fashion designers and others associated with this genre of music in Bengal. Data have also been collected from popular Bengali youth magazines containing interviews of the popular band members, newspaper articles, popular television shows, bands’ websites and other relevant write ups and articles. The beginning of Bangla Band music in West Bengal can be dated back to the 1970s with *Moheener Ghoraguli* (Moheen’s Horses), a group of young men doing music which was very different from the predominant Bengali mainstream film music. Some of the popular Bangla bands formed in the 1990s and continues till today are *Chandrabindoo* (the last letter in the Bengali alphabet), Cactus, Fossils, *Dohar* (Repeater) to name a few.

Band has been loosely defined as a harmonious collective unit of musicians involved in the production of music. The makers of this genre of music are tied by common processes of thought. They also share a common ideology and approach of making music. The band members of the bangla bands begin their musical journey when they are students of college or university. The other specific elements/dimensions of musical bands would include

- An involvement of a collectivity
- Building up a harmony
- An emphasis on common ideology
- Unit and
- A specific language (in this case Bengali)

A thorough examination and analysis of the above features would reveal many other interesting facts about this specific genre of music and about music in general. The process of conceptualisation of a band begins with an emphasis on making music collectively by a group of bright young educated people.

Collectivity

The dictionary meaning of band would be a group or collectivity. In terms of Bangla band music, it would mean doing music collectively. In the process of interview during the present research, Kaaji Kamal Naser, a musician and expert on music stated that in the realm of music the English word 'band' would mean a collectivity of people playing musical instruments. Rooting the history of the *band* in the west especially in America, Naser stated that both *white* and *black* bands of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had deeply influenced the lives of the Americans. Every American village had its own band that would regularly perform during picnic, political gatherings, dance parties and carnivals. The instruments which were used in these marching bands were trumpet, cornet, trombone, tuba, clarinet and drums. Compared to the situation in the west, in India the name of Maihar band can be mentioned which was an instrumental band. The band was a first of its kind formed in Maihar in Madhya Pradesh, India, by classical musician Acharya Allauddin Khan. This band was set up under the patronage of Maharaja Brijnath Singh, who then ruled the erstwhile princely state of Maihar. Among the early mentors from whom the Acharya sought guidance was Charles Lobo who was the conductor of Eden Garden Orchestra in Kolkata. Lobo and his wife taught Allauddin Khan western classical music, including the technique of violin playing. And this grounding in the western idiom inspired him to set about the task of constituting what came to be known as the Maihar Band. By all accounts this was the first ever attempt at orchestration of Indian music. During the closing years of World War I, a pernicious epidemic of the influenza swept the whole of India including Maihar. This scourge left many children orphaned. Allauddin found several such boys from peasant and worker families who were ill fed, ill clad and illiterate and shaped them into instrumental musicians for the Maihar Band. It is on record that the Maihar band shot to fame in the early 1920s after it debut in the Lucknow Music Conference (Nadkarni 2002). According to Naser, later on (he could not specify when), the definition of *band* was widened to include the vocalists. As far as the question of performing music collectively in Bengal is concerned, *Nagar sangkirtan* (or *kirtan* as it is now known) initiated by the proponent of Vaishnavite cult Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, was one of the first of its kind. Here the singers and musicians collectively performed the songs while moving around in the streets. The *Kabiyal* songs (songs by the poets) have

also been a tradition of performing songs collectively. The tradition of *Gonosangeet* (collective singing) during the Indian People's Theatre Association movement in Bengal is another form of collective presentation of songs. Bengal, therefore has had a long tradition of making and performing music collectively. Bangla band is just a contemporary variation in form in the process of collective music making.

In the contemporary Bangla bands there have been a major usage of western instruments like guitar, bass guitar, key board, synthesizer, percussion, mandolin, and drums. All of these instruments can be said to be western and not Indian in origin. Besides indigenous instruments like *Madol*, *Ektara* (folk instruments) are also used by bands like *Dohar* in their performance. It can therefore be inferred that the concept of the bands as it is understood today in Bengal is borrowed from the west. Professional training is required to play these instruments as stated by the band members like Rupam Islam who has learnt to play guitar. Bangla band music, like classical music tries to build up a harmony between the east and the west.

Harmony

Band is simply not doing music collectively. In percussionist Pandit Tanmoy Bose's views, band implies a perfect harmony. To put simply, a band is a harmonious collectivity. This he stated in the context of the programme *Rock'e Rupam Taal'e Tanmoy* (Rupam on the Rock and Tanmoy on Rhythm, telecast on Rupashi Bangla, in 2011). According to him if during a public performance there is any lapse or limitations on the part of individual musician, then it is the duty of the other band members to cover it up. Rupam Islam of the band *Fossils* echoes the same point stating that band should be a union between different musicians. A band is a process of moving from being an individual to a collectivity. Talking of the beginning of any band, Islam points out that friendship in the college days can act as a starting point of a band. As friendship calls for strengthening the co-ordination between those who are friends, so is band a combination and unity between different musicians. According to one of the contemporary leading sound engineers of Bengal, Subhayun, doing music together for a long time is important for the creation of a band. All the musicians repeatedly focussed on harmonious collectivity being a predominant feature of the band.

In spite of the fact that the value of collectivity reigns supreme in a band, there is an underlying dilemma involved in the above features as it has been noticed that 'individual' has also been important in the Bangla bands. This is so because it has been noticed that at times of live onstage performances of the

bands, the vocalists of the bands become most prominent. This is true of established bands like *Chandrabindoo* (the last letter in the Bengali alphabet), Fossils, Cactus, *Bhoomi* (Ground) to name a few. The vocalists do most of the interactions with the audiences. They are also more common public figures appearing as page three celebrities in newspapers or on television commercials and other programmes like debates and discussions. Anindya Bose, the front man of the band *Shohor* (City) clarifies the fact by stating that the vocalist is the ‘face’ of a band but at the same time does not forget to mention that the other band members are important as well. Rupam Islam shares the same point in a different way by stating that the vocalist of the band has to take the pressure of the allegation that he becomes the most prominent in the band. These kinds of pressures can perhaps be withstood by the band members by resorting to a common ideology.

Common Ideology

A band is also required to have a shared or common ideology. The ideology is to create something new and unique. The statement finds support in the views of Pandit Tanmoy Bose who states that the element of innovativeness is an essential quality of any band. Anindya Bose of the band *Shohor* (City) echoes the same voice when he says that the journey of the band will create something new.

Band, according to the above respondents is a revolution and the medium of such revolution is the songs. Here perhaps the respondents hint at the lyrics and the tunes of the songs of such bands which differ in a significant way from those of the songs of the Bengali cinema. In this context it is useful to mention that Bangla bands emerged as a form of protest against the songs of Bengali cinema in the decade of eighties. Taking up music as a profession has also been quite a radical decision taken by the band members. It cannot be denied that the innovativeness and radicalism have also been evident in the live performances of the bangla bands where the members’ attire, body language, stage décor etc. all become essential components making up the totality of performances. One of the contemporary leading fashion designers of Bengal, Agnimitra Paul has stated that the band members need to be cool in their appearances. She perhaps meant that band members have to be casual and relaxed while they perform on stage. This ‘coolness’ in their attire as well as attitude, she feels would help the band members to easily relate to their audiences. She also feels that the band members should be both individually as well as a band be fashion icons. They should create their own style and not simply imitate anyone in terms of fashion. In this respect they are radical from other performers as well. In this context it would not be wrong to state that the term *band* gets expanded beyond musical reality and becomes a mode of

representation of the contemporary society which emphasises on one's looks and outer appearances. At a deeper analytical level, it hints at the phenomenon of the interrelation between aesthetics and commerce. The band members are youth fashion icons selling their image among their audiences who are also potential consumers. This embeddedness between music and market makes the bands a complete unit.

Unit

A similar ideology of the members in a musical band calls for a co-ordination in the thought processes of the members of the band. From merely becoming a collectivity of its members, a band also has to be a unit. This unit usually has a size which can have five to seven members. Rupam Islam stated that a band must have a commonality of thought between its members. This means a similarity in musical tastes and proper co-ordination in their thought process while creating their music. Rupam also mentions that band members have to oblige to a number of rules. There are specific rules regarding rehearsal timings, script for live performances etc. Every decision in the band is taken with the consent of every member (Islam 2012). The members feel that such responsibility and commitment ensure equality and trust among them. The equality is in terms of the contribution they make towards the production of music as well as the distribution of earnings after their live performances (pointed out by band like Black Beats). To the members of the band there is no place for 'solo' performances. Collective existence and solidarity motivate the band members to do good music, as has been pointed out by another band called *Desh* (Country).

A strong unit marked by harmony and common ideology among the band members imply that friendship between its members ensure the formation and longevity of the bands and also their commercial success. Professor D.P. Mukerji has pointed out the psycho-social attitude of young men and women in the universities. He stated that at the university level there is gradual displacement of primary, personal contacts by secondary and tertiary impersonal contacts. In large cities the youth are mainly with new friends and with such impersonal items as newspapers, books, radio and cinema (Mukerji 1945). Borrowing his position, it is not wrong to conclude that the same might have happened with the band members of Bengal. It has often been seen in most of the cases that a good rapport and understanding between the friends have given a band the stability that it requires to persist. The band members who were actually friends might have shared the same feelings, thoughts and musical tastes which led to the formation of bands. This is very true of bands like *Chandrabindoo* (the last letter in the Bengali

alphabet) whose three members namely Upal, Anindya (the lead singers) and Chandril (lyricist) have been friends since the inception of the band.

The aforementioned features might have said to have constituted the objective features of what constitutes a band. But language can contribute to be the subjective factor behind the emergence of the band music in Bengal.

Language

In the present research the entire focus has been on Bangla Bands. The prefix *Bangla* in Bangla band has a particular significance attached to it. Bangla (Bengali) here definitely implies the language in which the lyrics of the songs of the bands are written/have been written. In this context it can be mentioned that not all Bangla Bands have their original lyrics Bands like *Dohar* (Repeater), *Bhoomi* (Ground), *Surma Dohar* (Lovely Repeater) and many others collect Bengali folk songs and present them anew to the audience. There remains an indigenous flavour in this genre of music. A very significant piece of information which has come up repeatedly in the process of interviews of the band members during the research is that in India the phenomenon called band perhaps does not exist in any other language except Bengali. There have been Hindi bands like Euphoria but again Hindi cannot be called a regional language in our country. It enjoys the status of official language along with English in our country. So language definitely provides a measure of uniqueness in bangla bands. Siddhartha, the lead singer of Cactus, pointed out in the interview that when they were in college, they regularly attended the performances of bands like Shiva (performing in English). They as audiences could not fully comprehend the lyrics of the band. The problem had been a shared one and soon the young college and university goers started making music in Bengali. Bengali became a medium through which they rooted themselves in their society and identified with it. English language added a feeling of alienation among the Bengali youth and they felt comfortable making music in their own mother tongue. Language becomes a means of rooting themselves and their thought patterns in their own society. Music critiques like Mr. Swapan Som and Kaaji Kamal Naser also shared the same opinion. Another interesting fact which came out from the interviews is that the band members opined that they want to change the world but cannot do so altogether, therefore they want to begin to change from their own society. Hence the name Bangla band. The members did not specify the areas of change but perhaps in all probability they meant social anomalies and inequalities existing in Bengali society. To them the context of Bengal becomes significant in rooting their music.

The process of conceptualising the band in the context of Bangla band music is extremely sociologically relevant. This is because the dimensions of the band bring out essentiality of social living. All of the above features if analysed deeply reveal the principles underlying the bases of collective existence of humans. The above points highlight the necessity of developing virtues like emotional bond between social beings, submerging of individual ego, as well as developing a unity and brotherhood between different people in today's society. Besides opening up to the global reality, we must also be deeply rooted in our tradition and society through our appreciation of indigenous cultural traits like language. The *Band*, though implying musical bands here, definitely have a universal appeal when it highlights the essential features of community living.

Conclusion

The present research has tried to explore the concept of *band* as applicable in Bangla band music, an element of popular music in Bengal today. But in the process it has touched upon bigger and contemporary issues like youth, youth entrepreneurship and employment, interface between the east and the west (global and local), commodification of music and technological impact on music to name a few. These show how this simple concept of *band* has a larger implication in our daily social lives. Together they have made the concept and its study worthy of sociological attention and analysis.

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