

A STUDY ON BENGAL FOLK MEDIA DURING COVID-19 AND THE USAGE OF NEW MEDIA IN THEIR SUBSISTENCE

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"I question the premise that digital is necessarily the enemy of traditional media. In many ways, it presents us with enormous opportunities." Scott McDonald

Abstract

The state of West Bengal has inherited numerous rich, effective, popular, and powerful folk media forms, which were shaped over the ages portraying the cultural norms of the populace. But during this pandemic, we have never been in a situation like this in the last 100 years. We are ruttet against one micro-organism named, Covid-19. During this period, the plight of folk media artists across the state of West Bengal was in dire constraints. This paper addresses varied folk art forms of West Bengal which were badly hit. Though it emphasizes *Baul, Pata Chitra* and *Chau* artists. The paper also discusses the varied new media avenues and how this aids the artists and their art forms to survive during this crisis. The Government of West Bengal has also taken a few viable measures to support the folk artists. Thus, the authors of this paper attempt to trace the role of social media during Covid-19 in supporting the folk artists. The authors have taken in-depth interviews of *Baul, Pata Chitra* and *Chau* artists. Including a few researchers and organizations like *Banglanatokdotcom, Sahaje Swadhin* and *Dara Shikoh Centre* who came forward to work closely for these artists and supported during these challenging times.

Keywords: folk media, new media, *Baul, Pata Chitra, Chau, pot Shilpa, patua*, Covid-19

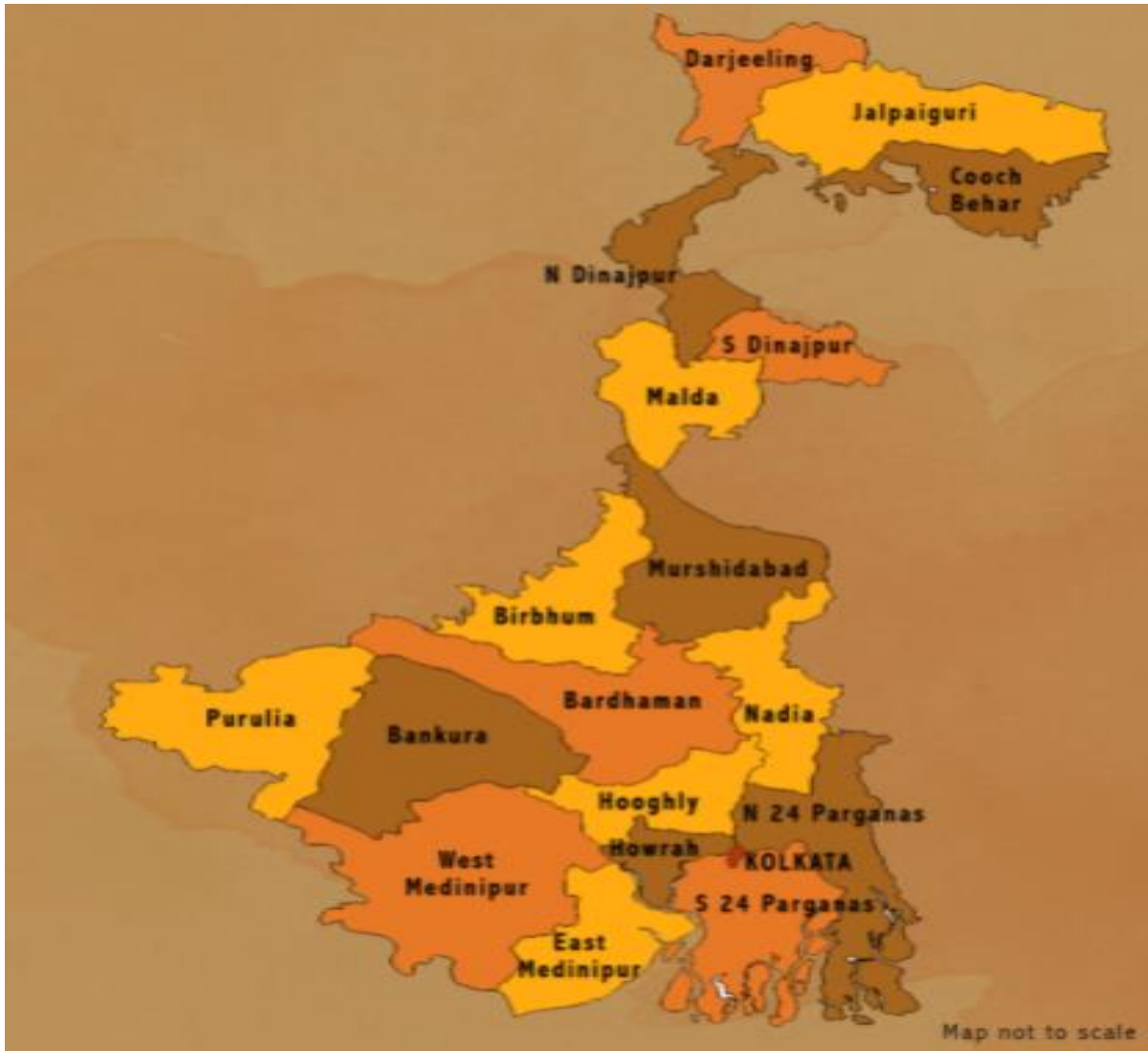
Introduction

The folk media, being the traditional art form, has deep affinity to the heart of the people. Its appeal is universal, and its understanding is unswerving and at an individual level. So, folk media can effectually be used as mass communication among rural and urban areas alike. The folk media have played an integral role in resolving emotional problems and channelizing the destructive forces into constructive ones. In India folk music, folk artforms, folk dances and folk dramas have always played a significant role in combating destructive elements and in harmonizing emotional outbursts relating to caste, creed, religion, and language issues. Several folk forms of entertainment prevalent in various parts of India were powerful media of public instruction and unifying force for emotional integrity. Various organizations, movements and government bodies can effectively make use of these folk arts for developmental activities.

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 storytelling, dancing, singing, festivities, and ceremonies along with processions and social gatherings were universally prevalent.

This paper will address varied folk-art forms of West Bengal which were badly hit. Though it will especially emphasis on *Baul*, *Pata Chitra* and *Chau* artists. The paper will also discuss the varied new media avenues and how this aids the artists and their art forms to survive during this crisis. The Government of West Bengal has also taken a few viable measures to support the folk artists. Thus, the researchers of this paper to trace the role of social media during Covid-19 will take in-depth interviews of *Baul*, *Pata Chitra* and *Chau* artists. Including a few researchers and organizations like Banglanatokdotcom, Sahaje Swadhin and Dara Shikoh Centre who came forward to work closely for these artists and supported during these challenging times.

West Bengal and its folk-art forms



Pic Credit: Daricha Foundation

West Bengal was once part of a greater Bengal which included all of Bangladesh and parts of Assam and Tripura in the east and parts of Odisha, Bihar, and Jharkhand in the west. Undeterred by man-made borders, the traditional heritage of undivided Bengal continued to exist in West Bengal within ethnic boundaries. Thus, most folk forms in the North and East of West Bengal have their roots in present day Bangladesh, while in the west, the tribal-centric

region once known as Rarh and the eastern part of the Chhota Nagpur plateau share part of its culture with its neighboring states.

With partition and the advent of modernization however, indigenous arts and crafts fell into neglect and artisans began to migrate to cities in search of employment. Many forms died because there was no longer any use of them. For instance, occupational songs that once accompanied manual labour like *Chaad Petaano Gaan* or *Dhaan Kaataar gaan* were no longer sung because that occupation died out thanks to mechanization. But that is not to say that the entire gamut of folk arts has died. While some have evolved others have managed to cling on to age-old traditions. Where adaptation and evolution have taken place, it has been either due to acculturation or in response to globalization, and the changing socio-cultural scene – a phenomenon abhorred by cultural purists. But evolution is no stranger to our folk arts – for example, Gambhira still maintains this flexibility of form. The Patuas of Medinipur, reacting to events around them the Jhumur - expressed their trials, tribulations, and misplaced hopes. The survival of our folk arts hinges on its ability to cope with and adapt to change to contemporariness. It is this that will keep it vibrant and alive.

Another kind of change has been the result of rural artists being recruited to popularize developmental programmes imposed by the government. By the theme of birth control, literacy, AIDS prevention.

FOLK CRAFTS

West Bengal's rich and living traditions of rural crafts often transcend the political boundaries that divide the people of Bengal today. These craft traditions are related closely to the area's geographic conditions and manifest in them are centuries of history and culture, with the cultural expression often based on religion, rituals and frequently caste. Like Chho Masks, Clay Art, Doshabotar, Gohona Bori, Gomira Masks, Hinghli dolls, Kantha, Lac Dolls, Leaf Ornaments, Madur, Sherpai, Shitalpati, Shola, Wooden Dolls.

FOLK SONGS

The most important feature of folk music in Bengal is that it is not confined to any cultural group but to cultural areas, where it is practiced by diverse groups of people. Thus, the cultural areas of Bengal may be broadly classified as: Bhatiali of the then East Bengal (present day Bangladesh); Bhaoaiya of North Bengal and adjacent districts of Assam; Jhumur, Tusu and Bhadu in the western part of Bengal (tribal areas of Bardhaman, Bankura, Purulia, Medinipur and Birbhum districts) and Baul-Fakir of some East Bengal districts and Birbhum, Nadia, Murshidabad.

FOLK VISUAL ART

Traditionally, the visual art of rural Bengal, being contributed by the women, was non-commercial unlike the art produced by the rural men. However, today folk-art forms like Pata Chitra have become visual art forms and offer commercial sustenance to their makers, both men and women. Like Chaku Pura, Deoal Chitra, Alpona, Kalighat Pata, Pata Chitra, Sohrai Wall Art.

PERFORMING ARTS:

These consist of traditional music, masquerades, dance, and drama. Among these, the oral tradition and the performing arts are the main media of communication. Storytellers, singers, and other kinds of folk entertainers have acted for centuries as sources for the transmission and dissemination of news and information through face-to-face live communication. The values, attitudes, beliefs, and culture are depicted in the form of satire by the folk artists for curing societal evils. In recent years educationists, media experts and development practitioners have realized the tremendous potential of folk-art forms as a means of communication with people. Folk media are primarily concerned with appealing to emotions and include strong dimension of communication of message. They constitute an integral part of the culture and tradition of the people, and they have instant mass appeal. They function within the cultural framework of society, which appeals to the audience and thus folk media acquire credibility among masses. Folk media provide face-to-face communication. Thus, they

envisage an audio-visual impact as well as maximum audience participation and instant feedback. These media have three major objectives.

1. Aesthetic expression
2. Expressional
3. Communicational

These objectives are realized during performance with simultaneous audience involvement creating a live and direct dialogue with the audience. Folk media convey developmental and educational messages through entertainment, color, costume, dance, and music remain the heart of the folk theatre. Thus, on one hand it gives expression to the lifestyle and values of the people in spoken word and song, rhythm, and spontaneous choreography, on the other hand it acts as a most persuasive communicator and an effective corrective force.

Folk media can play a vital role in communicating to and with the people, particularly in rural areas, including modern messages. They can be effective mass media for preventing the tribals and the illiterates from continuous exploitation, as they do not understand, the language of modern communication. In India folk forms have special significance as mass media. People in remote rural and tribal areas do not have access to modern media and do not reach these target groups. Here folk forms of communication can help immensely in dissemination of the messages emitted by the electronic media.

Folk Culture versus Popular Culture

Contrary to folk culture, the popular culture (material culture), also known as international culture, is found in large, heterogeneous societies that share certain habits despite differences in other personal characteristics. The folk culture develops because of physical, social, and economic characteristics experienced by the group, while the popular culture is based on the ease of interaction in the world, because of rapid means of communications and transportation. With the increasing trend of urbanization and

development of satellite communication, the folk culture is threatened, and their survival is in danger. Moreover, popular culture may be less likely to reflect specific physical landscape yet more likely to modify physical landscape in accordance with international values. Popular culture is widely distributed, while folk cultures remain confined to a narrow territory. Folk culture originates from an 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.

Folk Media and Indian Culture

Traditional / Folk mediums are those that were in vogue during the prehistoric and historic times in India. They are still thriving, although they lack the sheen in the wake of the domination of the modern and electronic media of today. Nevertheless, they are held valuable, socially relevant, soothing, and superior by the art connoisseurs of today.

PC Joshi avers that India's rich folk arts and cultural forms should be used to regenerate our old culture. There are three features of our folk traditions, opines Joshi.

These are as follows:

1. In the folk tradition, the entertainer, entertained, creative artists and community are rolled into one.
2. Art and cultural forms arise as a response to the struggle for social existence against the hostile forces of nature and society.
3. It has constituted the fountainhead of themes, legends, myths, imagery, and symbolism that classical art and culture has drawn upon in abundant measures. The periods of literacy and cultural rebirth have been the periods of cross-fertilization between folk and classical traditions. The periods of literacy and cultural poverty and decay have been the periods of alienation of sophisticated art from folk roots and moorings. In a folk tradition there is no distinction between classes and masses. This lack of distinction is the source of power in folk arts and cultural forms. The class society creates a cleavage between material and

cultural spheres and between the producer's material goods and creators of artistic forms and cultural values. These revolutions derived their energy and legitimacy by installing people, the producers of material values, in the center of the process of cultural values and vice versa. Today, we can again see the conflict between these two tendencies:

One of these tends to preserve and heighten the cleavage between classes and masses and the other tends to bridge the gap or reduce it. Hence the country like India has the challenge to design the utilization of the communication technology that bridges this apportioned gap and between producers of material values and creator of the cultural values because in these countries folk media is a part of their heritage. The modern communication technologies are based on electronics engineering, computer operations, satellite operations etc. they can be used with wisdom to:

1. Create diversity and not homogeneity
2. Ensure participation and not exclusion
3. Integrate the masses and not polarize them
4. Help in dispassion and not in connection

Objectives of study

- To study the relevance of traditional folk media in West Bengal
- To study how these folk media were badly hit during the pandemic in the state of WB.
- To study the efforts of promotion and revival of folk forms through the usages of social media

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical premise is through Marshal McLuhan's concept of 'global village.' He also stated that specialist technologies Detribalize, and non-specialist electronic technologies

retribalize. The electronics technologies would resume person-to-person relations in the smallest village scale. Organic would supplant the mechanical. The dialogue would supersede the lecture. Hence, according to McLuhan, the electronic age is one of illumination. In practical terms, three kinds of activity connected with folk media can be identified in India.

1. The preservation of folk media and the presentation of these forms through mass media agencies.
2. The use of folk media to convey development messages through live performances,
3. The use of folk media to convey development messages through mass media agencies.

The folk or traditional arts of India have from ancient times been used for moral, religious, and socio-political purposes. Rarely have they been resorted to for pure entertainment alone, though they are often packed with spontaneity, boisterousness, and humor. Indeed, they have been, down the ages, schools of learning, courts of justice, and discussion for a representative of the public sphere. In contrast to the modern mass media, the traditional media are personal, familiar, and more credible forms, with the majority of literate and illiterate identifying with their formats, genres, and contents. However, these forms need to be used with understanding and sensitivity.

Theoretical Framework II

The three primary factors in a goal-set communication project are the message, the medium and the masses. To identify the message needed, and the medium relished, the "field" where the identified masses reside needs to be studied in the first instance, the "field" is the 'action-group' for the communicator to implant the 'message-integrated-folk medium' for effective communication to inspire change. 'Field' simply means an area, a locality of a community base, where the folk performance of message would be presented. The 'field', however, could be intriguing, for two areas of the same 'field', may be different in community structure, value system and the measure of and understanding which would demand different

messages, different approaches, and even different performances in the media. A study of the 'field', therefore, is most essential to understand the messages needed and the preferred folk medium.

Review of Literature

Shyam Parmar in his book "Traditional FOLK MEDIA in India" says that traditional folk media has no grammar or literature and since years has passed down from one generation to another, orally through various sources. Discussing the significance of use of traditional folk media in times when mass mediums' reach and availability have proliferated, he says: - "so long as the contents satisfy the psychological and social needs of a society, they are carried forward by people themselves. If they are not found to be vital enough to survive against the onslaught of the modern age, people, on their own, make provisions to input fresh contents into them. The more the folk forms prove their susceptibility as channels of expression, the more they are regarded worthy of their use in society".

Sloan et-al (1995:291) and Okunna (1994:24) have stressed that modern, mainstream mass media of communication like newspapers, radio, television, and magazines many a times fail to understand and take up issues affecting tribal or rural areas thereby leading the traditional media to take over information dissemination to the rural areas.

Jaahnavee Sarmah, reporter at Dainik Agra Doot, while writing for Eastern Panorama, a reputed news magazine of the Northeast, highlights the benefits of juxtaposing Folk and electronic medium .She says that while on the one hand the Folk forms are easy to comprehend and connect with ,are flexible and repeatable, give a personal touch to the audiences, in an electronic medium like Television, on the other hand, messages come out of an impersonal electronic box and reiterating messages on it is an expensive phenomenon. Electronic media has an advantage in that it can reach large numbers at the same time whereas in folk media, it takes a long time to reach a larger audience. The reach, in terms of numbers, is greater in electronic media but effective reach is far greater through folk media.

By Juxtaposing folk and electronic media, a large audience can be catered to with greater effectiveness in a single effort. She also quotes certain instances of how nowadays, various advertising agencies and companies use folk songs, dance, and drama to convey information among the rural people.

Pandemic Effect

Covid-19 has altered the dynamics of every kind of art expression globally. In West Bengal too artists were affected tremendously. Mostly they had to rely on Government aid. Some NGOs too came forward to help them in these dire constraints. The authors of the paper conducted interviews of the experts who are involved directly and the artists whose lives were affected directly. Amitabha Bhattacharya, founder, banglantok.com shared his views on the Covid times. Bhattacharya said, “Yes, artists lives were hugely affected during this phase due to lack of live programmes. Like all kinds of Government fairs or events were cancelled. The Government of West Bengal provided Rs1000 and ration for essential commodities as aid to the artists who registered. Though handicraft industry was hampered during pandemic, but a few also successfully connected to international community and now gradually it will be back to normalcy.” He further added that there had been increased demand for new media devices and forms to reach out to larger audiences beyond the boundaries. “Another positive impact of this usage of new media has been that people from urban centers in Kolkata and from other states and the countries are now aware of the varied folk-art forms and the artists alike. This phenomenon has accelerated the process of civil society involvement and has witnessed more people visiting the rural areas. This progression overall will help in the aim of banglanatok.com. Our **Art for Life** is our flagship initiative addressing social inclusion and poverty alleviation through development of grassroots creative enterprise based on traditional art and craft. This promotes Village, Artists, and Art together,” signs off Amitabh Bhattacharya.

Banglanatok.com referred to contemporary themes in traditional art, ‘Pata Chitra’ on COVID-19. Traditionally Pata Chitra was painted on mythological themes. With the pandemic

affecting the entire world, Swarna Chitrakar, an experienced artist who is already known for her expertise in painting on traditional themes as well as social issues, has developed a 7-frame Pata Chitra and a song on COVID-19. The detailed narrative has vividly captured the mayhem caused by the virus outbreak. Swarna has represented the virus as a bright red monster in her painting. The Pata Chitra has highlighted the virus's origin, health professionals in PPE suits and people in masks. In her vibrant and informative artwork Swarna also talks about the precautionary measures one can take to fight the virus. The entire painting has been done with natural colors derived from flowers and plants, one of the specific features of Pata Chitra.



When asked about the inspiration behind her work, Swarna said that world issues have always found a place in her work. She has earlier painted and composed songs on 9/11, and the Tsunami. Continuous discussion about the pandemic, news about it on television, newspaper made Swarna take up her paintbrush to capture it and use her art as a medium to raise awareness.

Central Government initiative

Amid COVID-19 lockdown, India set to showcase its folk arts, cultural music online, through VirasatSetu launched to commemorate the World Heritage Day, the Ministry had

roped in top artistes from numerous fields to revive the love for folk arts and tradition for the benefit of those restricted in their homes due to COVID-19 lockdown.

The ministry has decided to showcase the traditional dance, food, clothes, popular art, folk music (/topic/folk-music) and lessons and performances by the experts in these fields on social media. The ministry is showcasing these performances through its YouTube channel, Facebook page, and Twitter handle. They also added clippings sent by artistes of the folk theatre of West Bengal.

Government of West Bengal

The folk artists have welcomed the state government's decision to provide Rs 1,000 as Covid-19 relief to them. According to data, a total of 1,999 artists have been registered with the welfare board of folk artists. Once the enumeration process is completed, the financial assistance will be credited to the bank accounts of respective members.

Mohammed Masthan, general secretary of Trichy district drama artists association, expressed happiness over the announcement of cash assistance by the government. However, they also expressed certain grievances regarding filing their documents.

In-depth Interviews of the folk artists from West Bengal by the authors

- **Joldhor Karmakar - Chau (folk dance form) Researcher "Chau" dance from district Purulia, West Bengal**

One of the most essential elements that has put Purulia on the map is 'Chau' dance.

It is one of the most strenuous dance forms, as it uses all six joints in the human body. There are three different schools of Chau in Purulia, and all of them use masks, lighting effects and rhythmic music to create the ambience and the performance. Veteran dancers are trained to the point that they can tap out their own rhythm by timing their steps perfectly, and for that they need to have strong feet. Chau portrays the stories of Ramayana or Mahabharata and

other historical tales through their dance. The Chau is a traditionalist dance form, there are songs for every different scenario. A performance is not complete without songs like '*Pita Maheswara*,' '*Parvati Nandini*' sung. This is how this dance form keeps the old traditions alive.

A group typically includes thirty to thirty-five members, and during the season, none of them have time for taking a breather, that is how high its popularity is. This is good for the artists as it is their sole source of income and a way of supporting their families. One does not have to learn *Chau*, along with keeping the heritage alive, chow is just like walking on soil and breathing, its being in harmony with everything in creation. This what has always attracted me to "*Chau*"

Challenges during Covid

The Chau artist community was severely affected during the lockdown. There are about 300 artisans who make and sell these masks, during the lockdown they lost all their customer base, as functions and such were suspended due to covid-19. I authored a book detailing the economic and other losses incurred by this community during this lockdown period. Because as I said earlier, around 300 families are dependent on this industry.

How is tourism affected?

The tourism industry around here is chiefly homestays, with numerous families depending on them as their only source of income. Due to the lockdown which lasted more than 2 years, business has suffered, and regrettably no type of aid has been provided even by the Government.

'Artisan's allowance' by the Government

A small number of people get that allowance, which was only Rs 1000 (though it has increased slightly now), but still, most of the artisans do not get any aid or support from the Government. We even had a protest rally, so that true artists received the aid and opportunities they deserve. We will keep agitating until a fair judgment is taken by the leaders in the

government. Let us face facts that even the people who get the aid, it impossible to survive on one thousand rupees each month.it is ridiculously low

Political aid

To tap into the pulse of the locals, the BJP has been eager to showcase Chau at its election roadshows. The Trinamool Congress, however, has regularly used Chau artists to spread their flagship welfare schemes like Kanyashree and Swasthya Sathi in the belt. During pandemic, the government deployed Chau artists to spread awareness about coronavirus in the villages. All Chau artists registered with the district information and culture office also receive a monthly allowance of Rs 1000. All members of Maa Bashuli Chau Nritya Party of Mohada village in Purulia, performed at Trinamool Congress rallies. Some were working as masons in Kolkata but came back to the village earlier this month to do what they love — perform Chau. . There are very few newcomers. Hence, the government should focus on the needs of the few of them who are striving to preserve our heritage.

Any support from any N.G. O's?

Not as such. There is a local N.G.O named banglanatokdotcom. They do provide some types of assistance, but again the help given is not enough. We also are members of the Kolkata Folk Music Association. This is not technically a N.G.O but more like an organization. Mostly we get our contracts from there as we experiment with assorted styles. Nowadays the performers rely more on the use of modern technology for the required reasons, especially on YouTube and Facebook.

- **Madhu Chitrakar (*Pot Shilpi* from district Pashchim Medinipur, West Bengal)**



I am Madhu Chitrakar from Pashchim Medinipur. I learned this skill from my father when I was 7. It is our family tradition. I used to accompany my father when he used to visit villages to showcase his pots. Earlier the pots were based on mythological themes, later it started adapting cinema, bioscope culture. I started selling clay dolls and other things made of clay in fair. We then started receiving Government aid. My father got a prize for his artwork. I made my decision to continue with this tradition and passed on this legacy to my daughters and granddaughters.

Covid challenges

We were in distress during the Covid. My family stood like rock solid. I consoled them saying, "God will look after us. We will be good". That time I concentrated more on my work; I wanted to keep myself away from thinking about difficulties. My family started helping me. We made some incredible pots. We reached out for help to some of the organizers, who used to organize events for us. We received aid from the Government of West Bengal and local clubs. The most significant was the Emami Art Gallery and Rajeev Shetty from Delhi, they bought pots from us visiting all houses, which really helped us in those dire situations. Currently I have worked on the theme of Russia-Ukrainian war, which I have portrayed on my pot.

New Media

We have connections with people who have businesses on social media like Facebook. I sell them whenever there is demand. We got recognition for our work and many

television channels covered us. Banglanatokdotcom came forward to aid us and arranged tuition for our children including that of co-curricular activities too. I wish our government to arrange more events and fairs for us, which is our only source of income.

- **Bhojo Gopal Goswami (Baul Singer from district Bankura, West Bengal)**



I am Bhojo Gopal Goswami of Bhagawanpur in Bankura district. My entire family used to sing folk songs. I learnt from them. I started singing at the age of 6-7years. Right now, I am an international artist. I also have my own ashram.

Covid challenges

During Covid we faced dire situations. From the government we received the monthly 'Bhata' /allowances. I oversee the folk community of a district and charge of a local club, "Mamata Moyi Shilpi Sangha". We received aid from the government and ration to 200-250 people.

New media

YouTube helped me a lot. I have a YouTube channel. Many people came to know me through YouTube. Earlier when I used to visit Kolkata, very few people used to show interest

in listening to us. But now many colleges and University students visit to listen to us. It feels good to see the new generation's growing interest towards this culture through social media.

- **Manas Mohanta (Baul singer from Arambagh, district Hooghly, West Bengal)**



I am Manas Mohanta from Arambagh of Hooghly district. In my early life, I used to sing Classical and Rabindra Sangeet. Later, since 2007, I set off as a folk singer.

Covid challenges

We faced many financial difficulties during Covid. Many people tried to help us though. From the government we received the monthly "Shilpi Bhata/allowance" of rupees one thousand, which falls under State Government's Lokprasar Prakalpa. From NGOs we did not receive any help.

New Media

Facebook and YouTube were not of much help during this time. Many of us still do not know how to operate these new avenues. As Covid affected everyone's life, I do not have to complain regarding the fact that we did not receive much help. It took us a long time to get

recovered from the pandemic situation. Events were shut down. When the restrictions were less, the government limited the number of audiences. With all these factors, it was really a tough time for us.

Events

Recently, in Arambagh we organized a fair, 'Baul Fakir Mela'. We felt overwhelmed witnessing the gathering of youngsters in this fair/Utsav from various states across the country. This Utsav takes place for four days. But seeing these youngsters' interest in folk culture, we are thinking of extending the days of this event in future.

- **TIRTHA, the celebrated folk artist**



West Bengal has a rich folk heritage. I hail from Puru Liya district which has 42 folk art forms. Once I watched an AR Rahman interview where he stated that his musical inspiration was folk music. I get my inspiration from the earthy rustic nature of Puru Liya. It sucks into my soul the rich musical tunes from *dolma Pahar* and *Ajodhya Pahar*, the local festivals of *Chau, tushu, badhu, Baha, Bagh naach, San thali* and many others inculcate a sense of eternal fulfillment. The trees of *palash, Shimul, mahua*, the *Joydev Mela, Gour Bhanga Gram* – which signify the *Sufi* tradition and the true symbol of secularism. Every bit of rural folk art form inspires me in the journey of my musical career.

Covid challenges

Most of the folk artists were badly hit during Covid. This was mostly since the Government had restricted itself in conducting any local festivals, fairs, and events. So, the local artists, including the people who sell during these programmes witnessed terrible times.

The famous festivals like *Joydev Mela*, *Tushu Mela*, *Poush Mela* in Santiniketan and all others were cancelled. Artists and their family members had tough times in coping both economically and mentally. No NGO came forward to aid them as sustainability was a big question. The *Macha* shows were canceled which fetch them the steady money. The government provided a monthly aid that was not enough to sustain them, even though my career was badly hit. Ration is more important. There is a lack of awareness among the local public regarding the ration provisions from both the Central Government and State Government. I am ready to collaborate with the officials regarding the dissemination of such drives

New Media

The usage of new media was in a much disruptive manner. There was no framework and mostly it failed to address the sustainability factor during these tough times. For example, the event organizers were keen to get the artists to perform free of cost. Another factor was the lack of awareness regarding new media devices and platforms. There was an evident digital divide. Though it could have been organized if they had planned it well. Suppose a Facebook/YouTube page group owner creates a closed programme and asks its members to contribute an amount of Rs 10/20 to attend it. Is it too much? Civil society could have contributed in a generous manner during Covid. Though personally, I prefer musical street corner zones where artists can reach out to a larger audience.

- **Sahaj Maa – the Celebrated Folk artist**



Covid Challenges

Artists have been affected badly throughout the state. It was a sad state of affairs with an increased rate of suicides. The aid from either the NGOs or the Government failed to sustain overall. It was never enough to address the impact.

New media

I personally used online platforms like Facebook /YouTube to conduct online classes. If you ask me, is it a proper tool? But Face to face communication is unique. Performers love live performances because the kind of vibrancy they receive from the audience is immense. Online platforms lack that charm. There is no soul connection though I have not enjoyed it but cannot deny the fact that during these tough times, it opened the doors for many, and many were able to sustain through these online shows.

- **Priyanka Chatterjee, professional storyteller from Kolkata,**



Covid challenges

I have been badly hit as an artist. Government help was not adequate. The aid coming from different corners of the country and the world could not even sustain the lives of the artists. Many artists had been forced to migrate to some other works. Many were not enlisted under neither the Government nor the NGOs failed to receive any aid and we lost many of them in the process. Artists lost the space of expression. Especially, people who were still creating new content had been a deep crisis.

New Media

But COVID also opened the doors for many and closed too. Like no international calls, no travelling only online performances. So, the cost of the performances came down tremendously. People even performed free of cost and the organizers too expected free services. The usage of new media was a Market strategy and had a mixed response. Pata Chitra art had been the trendiest folk-art form which had adapted the best in the last decade.

They had evolved best during these tough times and had immense international market value. All are using applied storytelling formats as visual storytellers in independent storytelling platforms

NGO Sahaje Swadhin engagement during pandemic

During the lockdown, the situation had reached such an extent that some of the bauls had to drive e-rickshaws, sell vegetables and lottery tickets to feed their families.

Pronoy Chakraborty is a Kolkata based art historian, who runs Sahaje Swadhin, a collective of young artists and art historians. They started exploring ways to pull them out of the crisis, as Chakraborty told Village Square.in. Through his collective, Chakraborty decided to set up a digital platform for live streaming Baul events. They felt that online concerts would not only provide some financial incentive to bauls but would also help them spread their music globally.

The Members of the collective arranged equipment like tripods, cameras, and others as most of us are art lovers and have such items. They did not charge anything from bauls for organizing the concerts.

The team collected a nominal fee of Rs 150 for the first event that was held on 15 August 2021 where Debdas Baul along with his sons Lakshman Das (48), Gautam Das (40) and Uttam Das (36) performed for 90 minutes.

The response was beyond their expectation, and they gave Rs 50,000 to them from donations and the sale of tickets. Significantly, most of the listeners were from outside Bengal and abroad, proving that Baul music is popular among non-Bengalese too.

Inspiring sustenance from Dara Shikoh Centre for the Arts

Sahaje Swadhin held two more ticketed shows in October and December 2021 where people also made donations to the bauls. But poor internet connectivity in rural areas makes

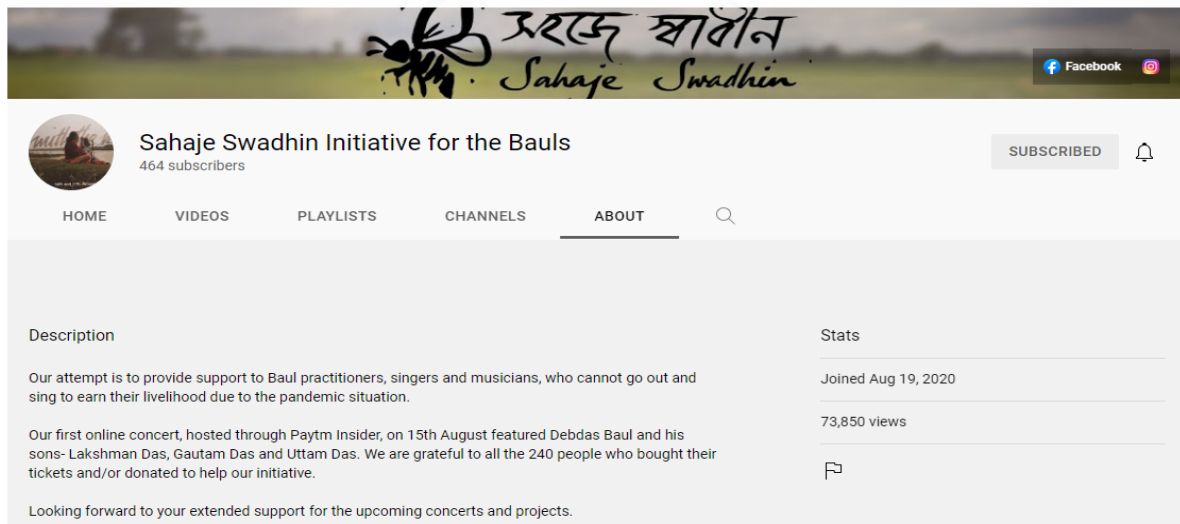
live streaming difficult. So, they recorded the performances and shared the links with those who made payment.

Help also come from Dara Shikoh Centre for the Arts, a Delhi-based organization working for India's syncretic cultures. Jyotsna Singh, the director said, it was sad that the young generation of bauls is not interested in continuing the family tradition and opting for alternative livelihood. It is the duty of Dara Shikoh Centre for the Arts to protect the legacy of the Baul culture which is several centuries old. They also offered some financial help to the bauls and funded the technical support in live streaming and other logistics. Live streaming has helped Baul singers make a living during the pandemic-induced lockdown

New avenues

Rina Das Baulini, wife of Dibakar Das, performed six virtual shows in America and India since the lockdown, felt that the pandemic has opened a new vista for them. They never imagined doing back-to-back shows for international audiences in the span of few months."

Lakshman Das Baul (48), son of Debdas Baul pointed out that a Baul Academy is being established by the state government in Jaydev Kenduli, a small village in Birbhum district and a hub of Baul singers, where existing bauls will train those having keen interest in learning the art and keeping it alive. The initiative would not only offer a livelihood to bauls but would also preserve our culture. The academy will also have a museum where certain artifacts relating to bauls will be kept like etkara, dotara and Dugi for sale.



Patua

Patuas practice the ancient folk art of painting Pata Chitra or scrolls. Based on the painting, the artists also compose a song that accompanies the painting when presented before the audience. Patuas depend on their art for livelihood and the pandemic has snatched it away. 300 artist families in Pingla – once a sought-after tourist destination – are leading precarious lives today. This is the reality of not just Patua artists but lakhs of traditional artists all over India.

To market Pata Chitra better, the enterprising artists of the village formed a Chitrataru Cluster in 2011 and even got a GI tag for the art form in 2018 "Coronavirus Kotha sune, Dhara Bohi Jaye (Listening to the story of Coronavirus, tears start flowing) is how begins the song of Mamoni Chitrakar, posted on YouTube by Banglanatak.com. The song is accompanied by her painting which shows Coronavirus as a demon, people falling sick and wearing masks.

Songs of the Old Madmen (Endangered Archives Programme 1247)

"Songs of the Old Madmen" is a project dedicated to preservation and digitization of personal notebooks belonging to important singers and songwriters of the Baul tradition in Bengal. These manuscripts contain spiritual songs of an indigenous religious tradition at the confluence of Vaishnava devotionalism, Sufism and Tantric cosmology. These compositions are considered sacred knowledge. Today they are valued as a distinctive patrimony of Bengali literature produced by often marginalized and low-caste composers.

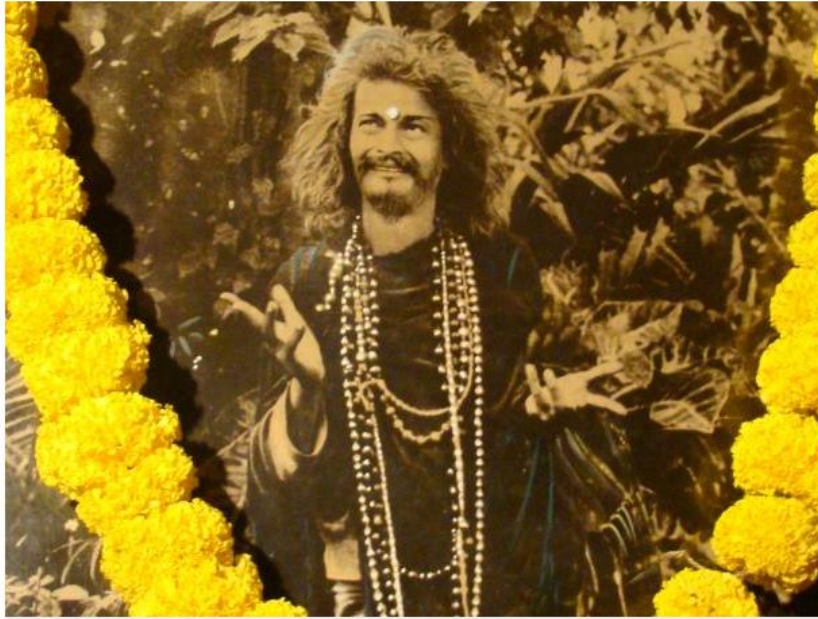
This project has achieved the preservation and digitization of thirteen handwritten notebooks of Baul songs, three albums of correspondence between guru and disciple, various historical documents, and photos of Baul performers and their families.

With the institutional support of Jadavpur University, School of Cultural Texts and Records; Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore; and Endangered Archives Programme at the British Library. With the collaboration of artists and notebook holders Mahadev Das Baul, Sanjay Ray Chaudhury, Acharya Gopal Khetry, Debdas Baul, Dinabandhu Boi Ragya and Nakshatra Das Baul.

Principal Investigator

Carola Lorea

Songs of the Old Madmen: Recovering Baul Songs from the Note-Books of 19th and 20th Century Bengali Saint-Composers (EAP1247)



Photograph of Bhaba Pagla, one of the saint-composers

Contribution of BANGLANATOKDOTCOM in reviving the folk art during this pandemic

– Founder, Amitabha Bhattacharya

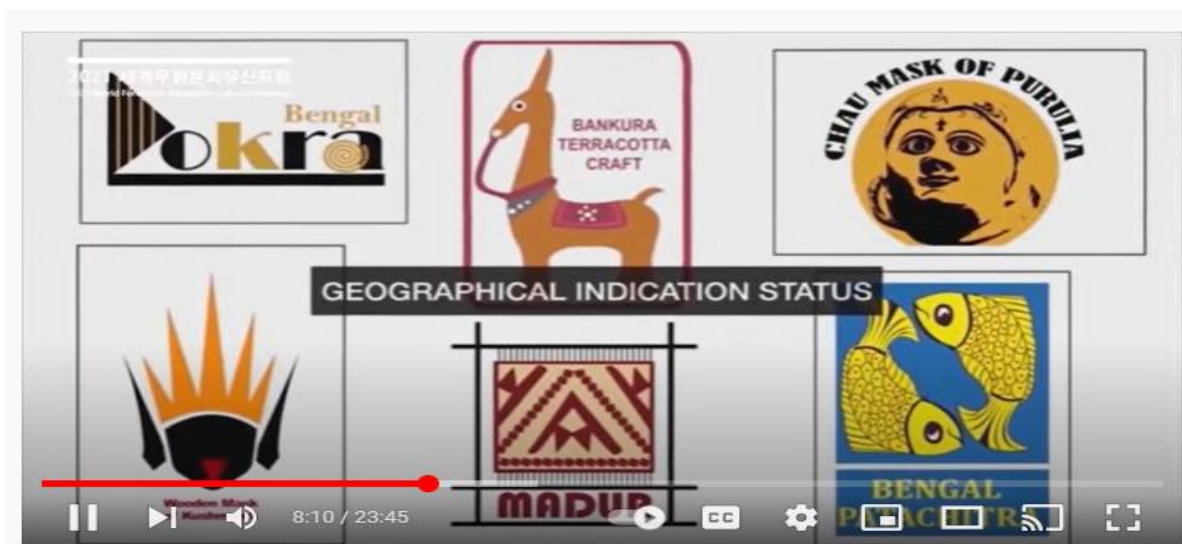


Last year, Bangla Natok dot com to mark its 21st anniversary brought out a short video clip focusing the misery of artist community and measures to overcome the crisis. According

to Amitava Bhattacharya, founder, Bangla Natok shared that they worked for the subsistence of the artist community and made them equipped with COVID-19 safety measures. They operated on digital marketing strategies and capacity building programmes to exert on contemporary designs.

Along with the collaboration of UNESCO, the ministry of MSME and the government of West Bengal, Bangla Natok recorded 294 folk songs, released 12 musical albums in app Safar Tunes, shot short films and worked towards preserving art.

In Goa too, Folk Safar was held with support of Western Zone Cultural Center and in partnership with Sadhana Dell Arte and Jaipur. The Folk Safar was held on Mar 6-8, 2021, and was aimed at opening cultural spaces in the state. Bangla Natok's annual programme in the state includes the Sur Jahan festival that is highly popular, where the rural talent shares the platform with international artists. Banglanatok conducted 18 VILLAGE FESTIVALS keeping traditional heritage alive, which resulted in 20m sales in the villages.



Pic: Dokra, Bankura Terrakota Craft, Chau mask of Purulia, Madur, Bengal Pata Chitra and Wooden Mask received Geographical Indication (GI) status

Conclusion: Online is here to stay

With the lockdown artistes had bowed down to the digital media to live-streaming and online performances. Now, even though offline concerts are back, digital shows are still in rage.

Tabla maestro, Pt Bickram Ghosh, stated that online concerts are here to stay. He believed a certain segment will want to go back to digital because of the cost efficiency and accessibility. Besides, online shows have a good reach. Ghosh has done 15 online shows and has curated 15 online concerts for 'Play Good Music'. He also collaborates with musicians across countries. Even if online shows have not cracked the monetary module as well as they wanted to, he believed it will be done in future as well.

In folk media, awareness is the key factor and addressing the digital divide will surely enhance the curation process online. The authors of the paper successfully highlighted the subsistence methods of folk artists across the states during pandemic

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