

# Traditional Sari and Bhatiali Songs of Bengal

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## **Abstract:**

India's vast culture and traditions have led to a diversity of Indian folk songs. All around the nation it is sung in many different dialects and languages. Folk songs of Bengal are an enthralling fusion of tradition, emotion, culture and artistic expression. A tangible depiction of Bengal's everyday life, struggles, beliefs and joy is painted with every song. These folk songs are more than just catchy melodies, it represents the heartfelt manifestation of a rich and diverse cultural legacy. Every song has its own story. Every rhythm narrates a story about the land and its inhabitants, weaving a melodious tapestry that embodies the actual essence of Bengal. These folk songs be it the spiritual baul or be it the reflective Bhatiali or Sari song, carry the significance of the cultural identity of Bengal and still continue to influence contemporary music and art form. The understanding of the socio-cultural landscape of the terrain is improved by the folk songs of Bengal which provide an insight into the cultural aspects of the area. Bhatiali and Sari songs, mostly performed by boatmen, and through these songs the image of Bengal's riverine life is revealed. The songs are harmonic and catchy in tone and often revolved around nature, rivers and the fishermen's lives. Nevertheless, as time has gone on, globalization, urbanization, modernization and westernization have made this kind of Bengali folk music confront the difficulties of the modern era. The purpose of this paper is to explore an in-depth analysis of Bengali Sari and Bhatiali songs, their cultural relevance and their impact on modern music.

**Keywords:** Folk culture, Riverine life, Sari song, Bhatiali song, History, Mythology, Tradition.

## **Introduction:**

The term 'folk' refers to people or 'lok'. Therefore, the illiterate common people of rural India are primarily responsible for maintaining, developing and enriching India's folk culture. Folk song is one of the most important elements of this folk culture. Music is the presentation of people's thoughts being expressed in harmony with words. These songs are usually written in verse. Basically, folk is a traditional song that has its roots in a certain community or area. Indian folk music is diverse due to India's immense cultural and traditional diversity. Folk song is sung in different languages and dialects all over India. Like Lavani songs originated in Maharashtra, Manganiars and Langas originated in Rajasthan and Baul song emerged in Bengal. Each of them has evolved in their own unique styles. These songs are aurally transmitted from one vocalist to another or from one generation to the next. Like other folk song Bengali folk music also has its own genre. It is basically Bengal's own song. The life of the people of rural Bengal, their happiness and sorrow, the ups and downs of daily life are revealed in the rhythm of this song. The folk song continues to carry its popularity as "Baulgan" in Bengal. There are many genres of this song, which express the culture of different regions of Bengal. Like Gambhira or Gamvira, Bhawali, Polli Geeti, Bhatiali and Sari Gan.

Rhythmic and arrhythmic are the two main genres into which river songs fall. Rhythmic songs are usually performed in groups and are often accompanied by manual labor or group dancing. Whereas, arrhythmic are generally performed alone, without any dancing or musical accompaniment. “Sari Gan” falls under the group of rhythmic, over against Bhatiali belongs to arrhythmic group. Notwithstanding a lot of distinctions, Bhatiali and Sari Gan share a deep mythological connection, which gives this traditional folk song more depth and more significance.

“Bhatiali is a river song mostly sung by boatmen while going down streams of the river” (Wikipedia). The word Bhatiali comes from the word “Bhata” which means “ebb” or downstream. More specifically Bhatiali is a popular traditional Bengali folk song, which deals with the domestic life of the boatmen, the rivers of Bengal, and about the aquatic life of the aquatic boatmen. Again, at the same time these songs reflect the life, struggles and emotions of boatmen.

A unique kind of work song that is connected to boats and water called Sari Gan. It strengthens the oarsmen’s morale and foster, a sense of camaraderie while enabling the boat to go swiftly through the water. Its rhythm is energetic and vibrant. This song, which is primarily sung by males, contains explicit content that helps to arouse energy and enthusiasm during activity. On the other hand, Sari Gan has now become the element of competitive sports for the entertainment of people. Various musical elements including drum (dhol), mandira, cymbals are used when Sari Gan is sung during regatta. At that time oarsmen were generally illiterate, and they had no written scriptures of all these songs. They exclusively convey their own scriptures to their respective sectors adherents, which are preserved in the form of lyrics, sung orally.

### **Origin and History of River Songs of Bengal:**

The history of Bhatiali and Sari Gan of Bengal is very old. There is no definite evidence yet as to when the Sari Gan became part of Bengali folk song or when and where the boatmen first used this song to ease their labor on water journeys. However, there is a reference to Sari Gan in the Buddhist text “Charyapada” written in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, which has unique melodic and lyrical frameworks. These songs depict the experiences of the people who lived in ancient Bengal and deal with topics of love, longing and daily life. Later in the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, there is a reference to Sari Gan in the “Padma Purana” by the medieval poet Vijay Gupta. There the word “Sari” has been used as a synonym for song. Later, when regatta was introduced by the naval forces of the Mughal emperors, it was widely spread and promoted. Also, between the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries CE with the growth of Bengal’s riverine trade, Sari Gan expanded around the waterways, assimilating elements of other local cultures. These songs, which told the tale of everyday life, were carried by the traders, fishermen and boatmen. Subsequently, during the Bengali Renaissance in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century CE, these songs had a resurgence, and researchers and collectors documented and promoted these old folk melodies. As a result, Sari Gan gained popularity again among urban audiences and kept developing by embracing modern themes, instruments and production methods. Sari Gan continued to be an integral part of Bengali cultural heritage even today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with numerous bands and musicians fusing traditional Sari Gan with contemporary styles like pop, rock and electronic music. While ‘Baul Gan’ and ‘Sari Gan’ originated in contemporary times, Bhatiali song originated much later. When Bengal was a single region, it stretched from the Subarnarekha River on the west to the Chittagong Hills, ranges of Tripura, and the Khasi-Jayanti Hills in Meghalaya on the East, and from the Terai regions of the Himalayan foothills in the North of the delta lands of the Bay of Bengal in the South. Despite the fact that this region is home to

an endless number of dialects, Bengali was the language most easily identified with all these people. The abundance of rivers in the area is the most important topographical characteristic supporting the Bengali race and culture. The riverine terrain of Bengal is the source of the ethos of the folk tradition. In this context, the creation and practice of Bhatiali songs is mainly in the north-east side of the Brahmaputra river in the river-rich Mymensingh region of present Bangladesh, and this folk music has a great influence there. Probably sometime after 16<sup>th</sup> century CE during Mughal rule, some cultured Hindu families from northern India began to settle in those lands of present Bangladesh (then India). It is thought that Bhatiali, an offshoot of Baul Gan, became part of Bengali folk culture at that period. This song is mainly composed around river, boat, oar, helm, sail, boatmen etc. Later in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century CE rural life, rural women's love, sorrow, longing and spirituality have been expressed in this song. At that time, fishermen and boatmen used their songs to share myths, legends and stories during lengthy river voyage. The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were the golden time of Bhatiali songs. A number of renowned Bhatiali singers rose to fame at this time, and these songs became extremely popular. These songs turned into an essential part of folk song in Bengal. The division of India and Pakistan in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to a fall in the Bhatialisong tradition. Nevertheless, the distinctive folk song legacy has been preserved and revived because of the work of folk preformers, researchers and cultural organizations. Nowadays Bhatiali songs remain an integral part of Bengali folk music reared by the listeners in West Bengal, Bangladesh and further.

### **Mythology of River Songs:**

Bengali folklore, Bengali mythology, in particular, is a rich source of Sari Gan. Through these songs, the blessings of various regional Gods and Goddesses (like Ganga) associated with the rivers of Bengal have been invoked. Considering Hindu mythology, Ganga, one of the main rivers of Bengal, originated in heaven and then made its way down to Earth. This mythological story is frequently described in Sari Gans, the journey of Ganga and her encounters with several Gods and mankind. Ganga is portrayed as a kind and compassionate Goddess who longs to establish a connection with the realm of mortals in certain Sari melodies. These songs frequently convey Ganga's desire for human love and company. Additionally, these songs incorporate folklore from the fishing communities, which includes miraculous nets, mythological fish and unearthly being. Mythical animals like the "Macch Bhoot" (Fish Spirit) and "Jal Kanya" (Water Nymph), which are believed to live in the rivers and waterways are mentioned in several Sari melodies. Ancient Indian mythology, especially the stories of God Krishna and his passion for Radha, are the main sources of Bhatiali songs. The mythical romance between Krishna and Radha is often the source of inspiration for these songs. The two lovers' desire, separation and eventual reconciliation are all depicted in these songs. Bhatiali songs sometimes call upon the blessings of Goddess Manasa, the Goddess of serpent, who is worshipped by the sailor and boatmen for safe travel and protection. The ancient Indian yogic tradition is closely linked to Bhatiali songs. Yoga techniques like meditation and breath control are often mentioned in these songs as ways to achieve spiritual oneness with the divine. Bhatiali songs frequently employ nature as a metaphor for the human condition. The cyclical nature of life and death, the beauty of the natural world, and the changing seasons may all be discussed in the songs. It is indisputable that Sari and Bhatiali melodies have ties to both yogic traditions and Hindu mythology. These songs, which provide a window into the rich spiritual legacy of the area, remain an essential component of Bengali folk culture.

**Some Popular Sari and Bhatiali Songs:**

Sari and Bhatiali songs are timeless treasures of many cultures. Through this song, the close relationship of rural life with nature, river and soil has become embodied. All these songs have crossed the boundaries of the country and made a place in the minds of the listeners of different countries.

**The Sari Song:** The sari song popularly known as Sari Gan. The employment of a unique approach in Sari Gan gives this song a distinct flavor. These songs typically have a call-and response structure, in which the lead vocalist sing a line and the other members of the group reply them with a repeated harmony or phrase. Khanjanies are occasionally employed as musical instruments to accompany sari gan, particularly during regatta, and this instrument provide the song a vibrant, rhythmic accompaniment. 'Falsetto' is another instrument used by some sari singers to produce a unique, soaring sound.

“Babla baner dhare dhare bansi bajay ke  
(Who plays the flute on the edge of the acacia forest)  
Ore bansi bajay ke re sakhi bansi bajay ke  
(Oh, who plays the flute my sweetheart, who plays the flute)  
Are oh oh oh  
(Are oh oh oh)  
Amar mon diyechi pran diyechi bhalobasi tare  
(I gave my mind, I gave my life, I love him)  
Prana sakhi re  
(Oh my sweetheart)  
Babla baner dhare dhare bansi bajay ke  
(Who plays the flute on the edge of the acacia forest)  
Bansi bajay ke re sakhi bansi bajay ke  
(Who plays the flute my sweetheart, who plays the flute)  
Are oh oh oh  
(Are oh oh oh)  
Amar mon diyechi pran diyechi bhalobasi tare  
(I gave my mind, I gave my life, I love him)  
Prana sakhi re  
(Oh my sweetheart)  
Babla baner dhare dhare bansi bajay ke  
(Who plays the flute on the edge of the acacia forest)  
O tar bansi eman se ba kaman Janis yadi bol  
(If his flute is like that and how is he, tell me if you know)  
Are oh oh oh  
(Are oh oh oh)  
O tar bansi eman se ba kaman Janis yadi bol  
(If his flute is like that and how is he, tell me if you know)  
Are oh oh oh  
(Are oh oh oh)  
O tar bansir sure mon keno mor haye gelo canchal  
(And why did my mind become restless with the sound of his flute)  
Prana sakhi re

(Oh my sweetheart)  
Babla baner dhare dhare bansi bajay ke  
(Who plays the flute on the edge of the acacia forest)  
Prana sakhi re  
(Oh my sweetheart)  
Babla baner dhare dhare bansi bajay ke  
(Who plays the flute on the edge of the acacia forest)  
Ore konba dese ya'ore bandhu amay niye yao  
(Hey friend, take me wherever you go)  
Are oh oh oh  
(Are oh oh oh)  
Tomar sanger sathi hairy sei na dese yaba re  
(I will go to that country as your companion)  
Prana sakhi re  
(Oh my sweetheart)  
Babla baner dhare dhare bansi bajay ke  
(Who plays the flute on the edge of the acacia forest)  
Prana sakhi re  
(Oh my sweetheart)  
Babla baner dhare dhare bansi bajay ke  
(Who plays the flute on the edge of the acacia forest)"

**The Bhatiali Song:** For many years, boats and rivers have been widely used as symbols of spiritual overtones. These Bengali melodies are prevalent in places, particularly in Bengal, where rivers are an essential feature of the landscape. The concept of a "Majhi" is not limited to a boatman; he is also portrayed as a guide who gives someone a fresh outlook on life. The simplicity and profundity of these songs are what really set them unique.

"Man majhi tor Baitha ne re  
(Oh, sailor of my mind, please manage/drive your oar)  
Ami ar baite parlam na  
(I can't sail anymore)  
Baite parlam na  
(Can't sail)  
Mon Majhi tor Baitha ne re  
(Oh, sailor of my mind, please manage/drive your oar)  
Ami ar baite parlam na  
(I can't sail anymore)  
Baite parlam na  
(Can't sail)  
Sara Janam bailam baitha re  
(I have been rowing all my life)  
Tobu tor maner nagal pailam na

(But I did not reach your heart)  
Ami ar baite parlam na  
(I can't sail anymore)  
Bhana damr ar chemra dari re  
(Broken oars and torn ropes)  
Naukar hale jalar mane na  
(Water no longer control by helm of boat)  
Bhana damr ar chemra dari re  
(Broken oars and torn ropes)  
Naukar hale jol ar mane na  
(Water no longer control by helm of boat)  
Ami ar baite parlam na  
(I can't sail anymore)  
Baite parlam na  
(Can't sail)  
Apar belay dharlam pari re  
(I caught the shore on the later-half)  
Nadir kul kinara pailam na  
(I did not find the edge of the river)  
Ga er kul kinara pailam na  
(I did not find the edge of the Ganges)  
Ami ar baite parlam na  
(I can't sail anymore)  
Mon majhi tor baitha ne re  
(Oh sailor of my mind, please manage/drive your oar)  
Ami ar baite parlam na  
(I can't sail anymore)  
Baite parlam na  
(Can't sail)"

The aforementioned song deals with the theme of devotion. This song conveys the fervent prayer of the sailor in the broken body for a long time of life, hoping to gain God's proximity. This is sung by the devotees to surrender themselves to God.

"Kul nai, kinara nei, naiko dariyar pari  
(There is no bank, no edge, no beach limit end of river)  
Kul nai, kinara nei, naiko dariyar pari  
(There is no bank, no edge, no beach limit end of river)  
Sabdhane calaye majhi amar bhana tari re  
(Carefully sail my broken boat)  
Akul dariyar bujhi kul nai re  
(I don't understand the bank of the river)  
Amay bhasaili re, amay dubaili re



(You floated me, you drowned me)  
Akul dariyar bujhi kul nai re  
(I don't understand the bank of the river)  
Amay bhasaili re, amay dubaili re  
(You floated me, you drowned me)  
Akul dariyar bujhi kul nai re  
(I don't understand the bank of the river)  
Pansa jale sai bhasaye sagarero bane  
(Sailing the boat in stale tide water of sea)  
Pansa jale sai bhasaye sagarero bane  
(Sailing the boat in stale tide water of sea)  
Ami jibaner bhela bhasailam, keu na ta jane re  
(I floated the raft of life, no one knows that)  
Akul dariyar bujhi kul nai re  
(I don't understand the bank of the river)  
Amay bhasaili re, amay dubaili re  
(You floated me, you drowned me)  
Akul dariyar bujhi kul nai re  
(I don't understand the bank of the river)"

The abovementioned song has profound significance despite its simple straightforward lyrics. Through the song, the sailor complaint to the river waves that at one point its ups and downs drown him, yet at another it kept him afloat. Although, the coast appears to be far away, the shattered boat shouldn't drown. The coast has to be reached. The hunt for death on the land is the final source of emancipation in a comparable life scenario when the sailor navigates a wild sea.

### Conclusion:

Bhatiali songs are mainly solo songs. The sailors sing this song while they boating in the river. The sailor sings this song in order to pass the time when he is board, to express his pleasures and sorrows, to describe nature, and to surrender himself to the Guru and Almighty God. The oarsmen songs Sari Gan as a group to reduce the physical effort during regatta. Therefore, there is no reality of having any musical instrument to accompany the artists-oarsmen. But nowadays, in various musical events, these songs are performed alone or in chorus. For the entertainment of the audience, the use of various musical instruments is observed to popularize these songs by making them audible to the audience. As a result, this song has maintained its existence even among different types of Bengali songs like Rabindra sangeet, Najrul geeti, Modern songs etc. New folk songs are being created about aquatic life in the tune of Bhatiali, where the life of the boatmen is being reflected. It is hoped, that the creation and exercises of Bhatiali and Sari song will help folk music become even more popular.

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