



Issues and Cultural Identity of Folk Song in Digital Platform: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

In the last decade we have witnessed a sea change in the production and presentation of folk songs due to the introduction of digital technologies based on the internet. Be it through YouTube or through app-based communication networks, folk songs are now being perceived by the communities in different parts of India. One of the important features of folk music in its presentation is its rigidity or semi-flexibility which is due to its use of culture-centric rhetoric. Folk media, usually a community-based media, mainly reflects diversified vernacular expression. Now, in the digital era, it has been argued that the new media have the potential of disseminating the traditional form of vernacular culture through folk songs. This research has tried to bring a comparative analysis between the presentation of folk songs through traditional and digital platforms in pre-pandemic, during pandemic and post covid-19 pandemic scenario through content analysis and expert interviews.

Keywords: Folk music, Covid-19, vernacular culture, Digital media and Information Superhighway

Introduction

We, the people, have to live in a society with civility, peace and behaviour and manners. These components have been transmitted by the people towards their next generation. This attribute constructs a social heritage, or 'culture'. Culture is a colourful manifestation of arts and aesthetics. These activities are collective achievements of human intellectual thinking and perceptions that are derived from bio-cultural ancestry (Eliot, 2010). So, culture defines a community and a State too and it helps to architect a sense of community with proper communication, feelings and ideation. On the other hand, required and meaningful

information is a major catalyst to reach an integrated development (Figueroa et al, 2003). Through this stated trio, 'community-culture- communication' it would help us to reach a desired aim and that is social change. Social change is not a linear process; rather it's a complex system (Lin, 2007). Social, cultural and individual behaviours facilitate the system more strongly and multistage behaviour is the product of symmetrical interaction between different components in any complex arrangement. After the school of communication, 'feedback- process', is the key driver that designs an effective conceptual phenomenon in any complex socio- cultural dynamics. Considering in a community this nature of dynamics is a vis-à-vis process, based on some factors like, dialogue and debate, action and reflection, social learning and self and community efficacy. This ecology supports a community-based interaction, more specifically through an indigenous form of culture.

Traditional folk lore, folk dance or folk songs are such forms of communication that retains dialogic action, dialogic immediacy and cultural proximity with people and its society (Das, 2019). These folk songs and / or folk lore are the valuable documentation for oral history and culture that have been preserved by the people. These documentations are the traditional belonging consisting of their 'own culture' to a specific culture. The most important things in these forms of indigenous traditional forms like folk songs, are passed down from generation to generation and are kept active and in action mode by that particular community of people. Based on different historical, sociological and demographic phenomena, folk songs are well varied from one community to another (Das, 2019). These kinds of cultural rigidity help to retain a vast and multifaceted plurality of culture as well as mode of communication.

After the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic this folk song industry has undergone many challenging situations leading to an obvious transformation towards a more digitised platform to promote these folk songs. These challenges were from various factors including the participation of the audience following the pandemic norms. This situation had further raised a question on the existence of folk songs during the pandemic scenario. In this regard digitised platforms acted as an alternative support-system for the folk song performers and the audience too. With the ever-changing digital transformation, the present article will try to explore the structure of the emerging pattern of vernacular expression of folk music in digital form. The present research will criticise the changes in narrative of audience's expression and participation while enjoying folk music through digital platforms.

This research has further investigated if this new form of presentation is being equally applicable or not in comparison to the offline presentation of folk songs. This is because in the case of folk music, proximity of audience is directly related to proximity of culture (rhetoric, tune and tempo and body language of the performers). Further, the research will try to find out if the digitised representation will sustain in the long run coping up with proximity issues and lack of real time audience versus media time audience considering the performer's perceptions. The present study has followed an interpretivist philosophy where qualitative content analysis of selected folk music and in-depth interviews with experts would be conducted. This research will further follow an exploratory research design with the help of an inductive approach so that the findings from this research can lead towards development of new policies and strategies to enhance the popularity of folk media. A qualitative In-Depth Interview will help to justify the research question and

thereby enhance the credibility of the research work. The structural transformation of the contents of folk music will be explored using the Dialectical theory proposed by Hegel. Then the theories of per-modernism and modernism will be highlighted to ascertain the criticism of the Innovation concept (EM Rogers, 1962). This will further help in exploring the potential of digital media based on the dimension of Information Superhighway concept proposed by Manuel Castles, 2009.

Aim

This research aims to find out the challenges faced by folk music in the age of digital platforms.

Objectives

The major objectives of this research are:

- To study how folk music can retain its cultural purity and plurality despite the intervention of digital technology and culture
- To identify the scope of potentiality of digital platforms in promotion of folk music

Folk Songs – A Form of Traditional Media

India is a country of rural villages where around 64% of its total population still live in rural villages (more than 6 lakhs villages are in India). It proves that a major portion of social capital and human resources are deposited in village communities (Das, 2019). Traditional forms of communication could be used as a strong weapon to make awareness about 'common people's right' and 'the voice of voiceless' (Basu et al, 2009). Folk songs is not only a traditional form but also a entertain mode of communication to narrate any developmental programme (like POLIO Campaign, Family Planning programme School Dropout or early marriage of Girl child etc) among the audiences (Jain, 2003). So, it helps to form a reservoir of community-based information. Designing messages for any development communication rightly depends on some reagents or stimulants (Mody, 1991). Natural diversity, cultural practices, religious beliefs or social customs are some effective stimulants in any socio –cultural ecological sphere. Noam Chomsky remarked, 'Media is Culture and Culture is Media', to explain interdependence between them (Herman & Chomsky, 2010). High extents of diversity of cultural traits help to disseminate the information in a right time to the right audience in an easy and accessible format. Thus, folk songs or related forms of traditional media, tries to bridge up between cultural proximity and knowledge design to reach a holistic development of society. Through these 'informational mapping' folk songs, its contextual rhetoric could revitalize Indian society, more specifically rural society or subaltern people. Considering its easy access and extent of inclusiveness, folk songs could enhance the 'social capital' to contribute to social ideation. Speaking truly, for their continued existence, a large number of rural populations still depend on traditional arrangement and system of communication - for collection of their food from nature (forest etc), food procurement, build-up shelter and to protect health and hygiene. Due to its cross-cultural understanding and promotional cultural dimension of development, folk forms are an important resource in the development process. In this paradigm traditional forms could share within and across communities without difficulty. Different case

studies showed that the paradigm of 'knowledge for development' is not only restricted to scientific and technical knowledge but also a community-based knowledge system too. In this context, folk media is equally important for both the local and global community as it is based on exchange within a community and expresses human creativity - both individual and collective level. It is stated that indigenous knowledge provides the bottom-line consideration in a local level decision-making about fundamental aspects of everyday life: for example, agriculture, food production, water, health and adaptation to environmental or social change. Folk media provides the basis for problem-solving strategies for local communities, especially the poor ones (Das, 2018). Again, it is also observed that folk communication has a power to disseminate required information in the environment by better knowing, yielding and using knowledge.

Dialectic Narrative of Folk Songs

At the eve of the new millennium, information more than ever is becoming a priceless commodity whose value ever-increasing with time and is becoming a critical resource for development. Today, more than ever, we have the skill to gather, distribute and procedure information of all kinds, thanks, in no small part, to technological progression and improvement (Dasgupta, 2009). Due to their wide application potential, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are having profound and pervasive social, environmental and economic impacts on the world. Indeed, the global society is said to be undergoing a transformation from the industrial, to the "information society", one which the most valuable resource is information, and finally to "knowledge society", thriving on the human intellectual capital or knowledge (Das & Bandyopadhyay, 2013). Knowledge society is a society, in which knowledge has become the dominant source of productivity, wealth, employment and power. In the era of glocalization, the main component in a society is the individual. Here, the individuals have been linked by networks with a heterogeneous component. Obviously due to digitalization, the connectivity and connectedness would be very high in this 'glocal' (global and local) ecology. Here challenging narratives have been observed regarding creation, stimulation, transmission of any form of traditional media, like folk songs, in the forms of binary digit.

From this context the research has focused on a concept which has been termed as, 'Rhetoric and Culture'. Here rhetorical criticism has been studied on culture and dialectic praxis.

"Rhetorical studies offer a mode of analysis for thinking about how texts are produced (intent), what they are (textuality), and what they do (consumption/ effects.) A more proper "rhetorical cultural studies" recognizes that the perspectives of rhetoric define an approach that holds in suspension text and producer, text and reader, text and society . . . Cultural studies . . . delivers to rhetorical studies a richer and more fully realized model of how discourse is always a product of wider social formations and reflects necessarily the materialization of the ideology that gave birth to it" (Van, 2020).

Folk songs are one of the major forms of traditional communication. Folk songs help to create a source of social understanding and a connection to lifestyles in micro level communities through cultural proximity. So folk songs and its rhetorical typology would be a major topic under cultural studies.

Traditional folk songs are a form of communication whereas rhetoric is the art of persuasion (Chapke & Bhagat, 2002). Through these folk songs when someone presents an issue or idea, he will apply a specific type of strategies to explore that information to his audience. Here rhetorical approach and typology, to express some cultural traits, may differ from verbal to digital platform. The major catalyst in any communication process is degree of persuasion. Folk songs also try to persuade the audiences through its content.

Cultural rhetoric for verbal persuasion may differ in digital rhetoric, when folk songs would be presented in any digital format (Mehta & Kaye, 2021). When the performers/ singers would perform to the audiences they use some words or phrases as a strategy to attract the attention of the audience. In a verbal presentation they may use community based cultural traits to identify the importance of the issue. In any verbal rhetoric it would be nice to explore how a folk -singer strategically speaks to his audiences, using some particular words and or sentences to depict information and at the same time try to draw out a particular response or behaviour.

Methods

This research has followed a philosophy of Interpretivism where the subjective factors associated with the research topic have been critically analysed (Alharahsheh, 2020). In this regard both primary and secondary data has been collected. For primary data in that interview has been conducted with experts from the field of median communications as well as experts from the field of music. Both structured and unstructured interviews have been taken up as per the convenience of the expert. For structured interview a schedule has been sent through email where the experts could share their perspectives through email. Structure interviews were mostly conducted with experts from media and communication background where 5 experts were approached at first out of which 2 experts had willingly shared their opinion.

In case of unstructured interviews telephonic conversation were used to collect the primary data from experts more either musicians or singers or are integral to folk music industry. For this research 5 of such experts were approached out of which 4 experts had shared their views over telephone. In order to maintain confidentiality following research ethics the names and identification details of the experts have been withheld from the finding section of the research paper. In total 6 experts have shared their views through both structured as well as unstructured interviews from which the primary data has been collected.

In order to collect secondary data contents from digital platforms including YouTube and other mobile apps were selected. The content analysis from Spotify, JioSaavn, Coke studio India YouTube channel, Coke studio Bangla YouTube channel and Sony Entertainment Television's YouTube channel has been done. For analysis the contents present in these online platforms were divided into two major categories or time frame namely pre-pandemic and post pandemic. This had been done in order to analyse if the popularity of folk

songs on digital platform during the postpaid mix in audio has increased or not in comparison to that of the pre-pandemic scenario. Following Grounded Theory, the analysis from both the primary and secondary data has been represented in a theme-based format in the present research paper.

New Media and Folk Music

In India folk music is considered to have a rich culture which is diverse and wearing from one region to the other because of the diversity of landscape and people in the country (Kumar et al, 2011). With the introduction of digital technology and especially new media the production as well as distribution of oral folk music is now changing with the due course of time. In one hand it can be argue that new media is helping the musicians as a potential medium through which they can reach out to a wider number of audiences. On the other hand, there is a lack of audience interaction especially specific to Vernacular cultures which may act as a barrel to the performers. Kumar & Parikh, (2010) further argued that the use of modern technology is like app-based communication can actually lead to an increase in the number of listeners who can appreciate folk music and thereby can carry forward the legacy in a culturally rich country like India. This also enhances the scope of increasing the potential of recognition and remuneration of the folk artists themselves.

In case of a developing country like India a few decades back there was an inclination to follow western culture considering the perspectives of Dominant Paradigm (Mondal, 2015). Since then, westernised forms of musical shows and their presentation through the media have been made quite popular in the country. Concepts like *Baul*, *Bhavaya* and other forms of folk songs were initially only confined to a specific ethnic group of people. Programs like Indian Idol, Sa Re Ga Ma Pa, India's Got Talent and X Factor initially started following the trend of these Western cultures 2005 onwards. Gradually in order to introduce some uniqueness in the continent and in the race of TRP these musical shows started in car racing folk music performers to perform in their own genre. Yet it was observed that in those television shows they were hardly one of two contestants from contestants in the top 10 or even top 20 participants who could make their place among others.

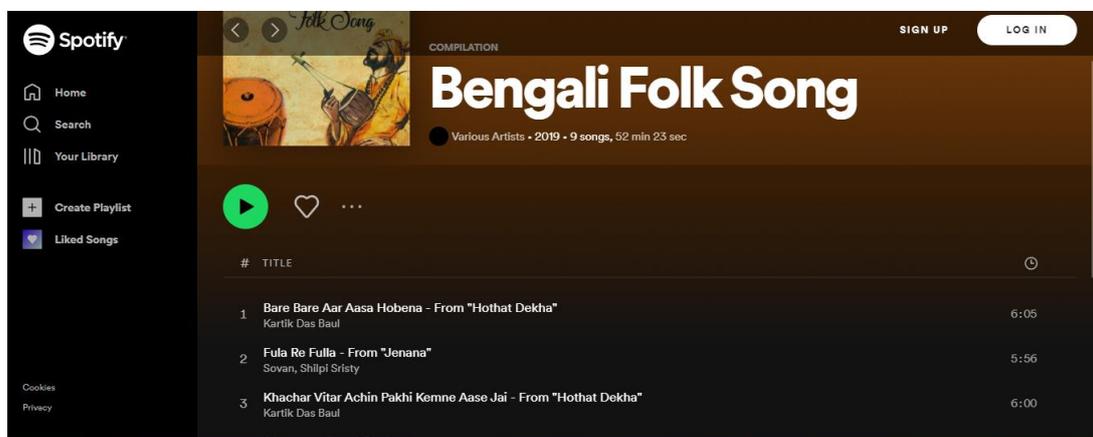


Figure 1: A screenshot from Spotify showing list of Bengali Folk songs

(Source: Spotify, 2022)

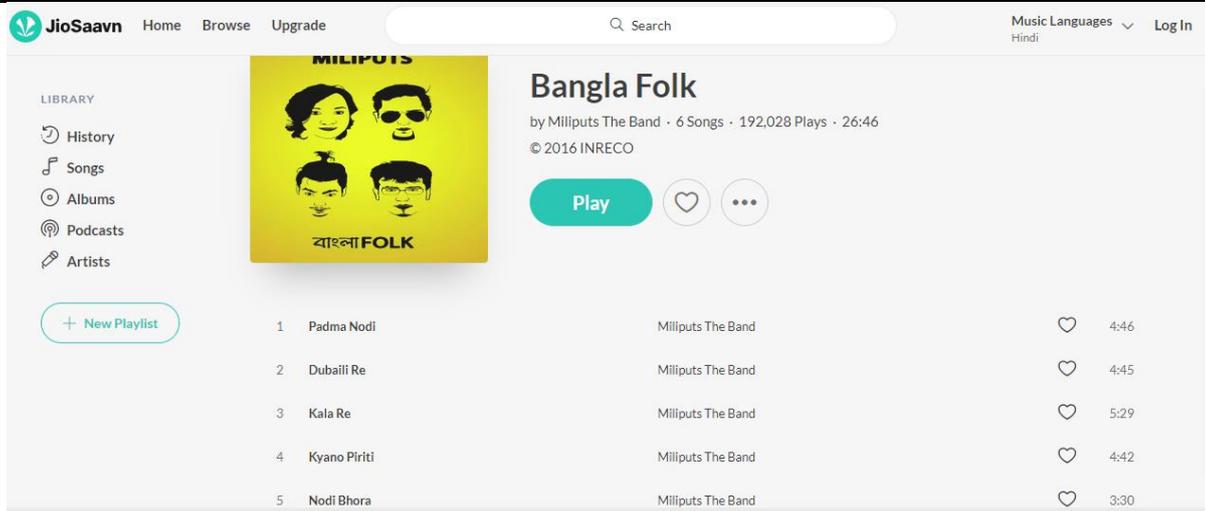


Figure 2: A screenshot from Jio Saavn showing list of Bengali Folk songs

(Source: JioSaavn, 2022)

From figure 1 and figure 2 it has been observed that Spotify and JioSaavn both have separate playlist for Bengali folk songs. It's the number of folk songs in these albums a quite less. in comparison to that of Bollywood songs or other Bengali film songs. Numberless from the screenshot of JioSaavn pro it can be observed that there are 6 folk songs in this album which had more than one lakh ninety two thousand views by its audiences. This shows that these apps do not have many folk songs in their playlist what there are audiences who have keen interest in folk songs making them so popular even if they are quite less in number.

Coke Studio is a format which not only encourages traditional as well as independent music fonts but it also helps to incorporate new musical instruments for making the presentation more interesting (Amarnath, 2012). The concept of Coke studio was first introduced in the year 2007 in Brazil under a project named as Coca-Cola Zero Studio. Gradually this concept was acknowledged by different countries like Pakistan and India that promote folk singers and the traditional music of the country (Ghosh, 2020). In the year 2011 Coke studio was launched by MTV India and it has already completed 4 successful seasons in the country. With music on YouTube becoming popular Coke studio has also introduced a YouTube channel where music lovers can subscribe and listen to this music.

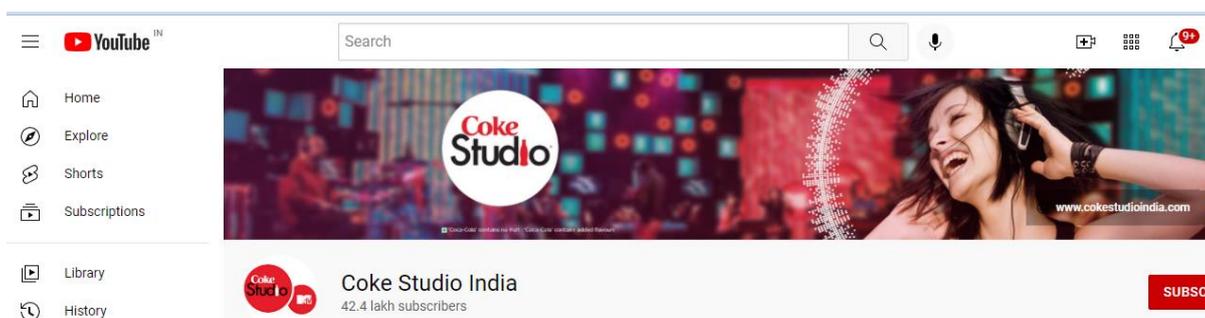


Figure 3: A screenshot from YouTube showing 42.4 Lakh subscriber of Coke Studio India

Source: (Coke Studio India, 2022)

This figure shows that there are 42.4 lakh subscribers of Coke studio India which promotes traditional Indian songs including the folk song genre.

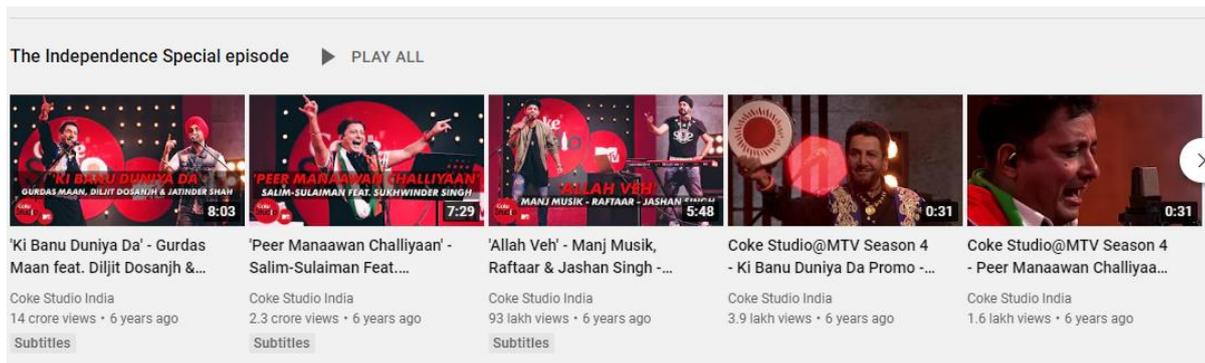


Figure 4: The highest number of views on a folk song on Coke Studio

Source: (Coke Studio India, 2022)

Figure 4 shows a song which has the highest number of views on Coke Studio India's YouTube channel. This song was sung by Gurdas Maan and Diljit Dosanjh 6 years ago which was a Punjabi folk song. It can be interestingly stated that the highest number of views till date is still on this song so perhaps it is in the preparing scenario where Coke Studio India had more engaged viewers then it has for the contents promoted in the post pandemic scenario.

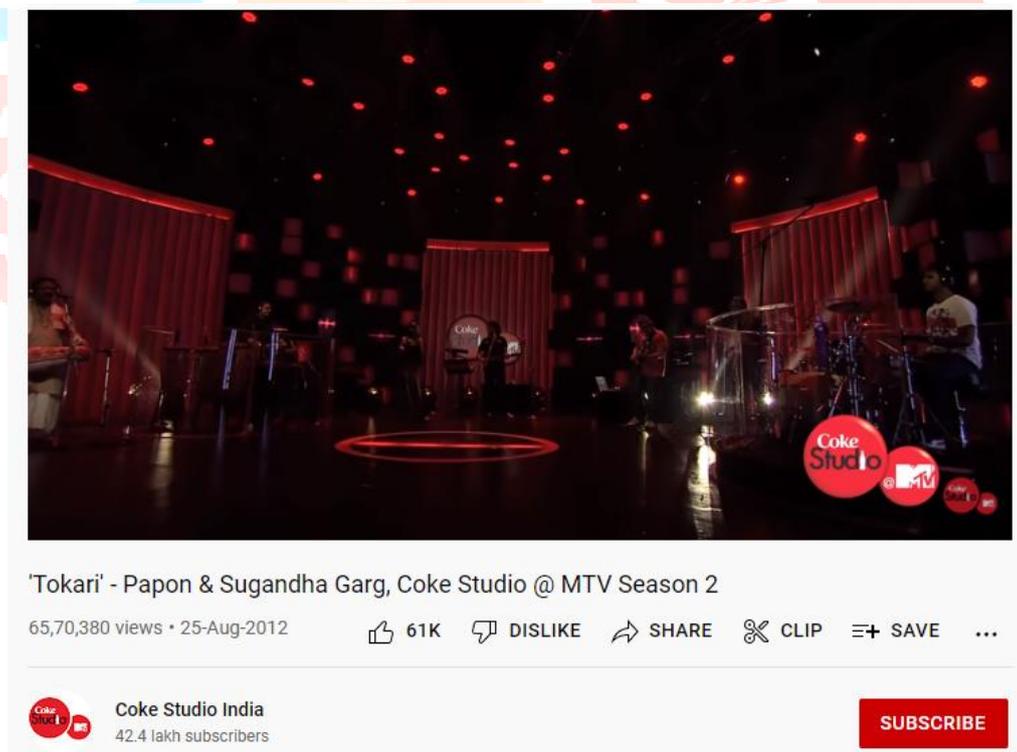


Figure 5: 'Tokari' a folk song sung at Coke Studio

Source: (Coke Studio India, 2022)

Figure 5 shows a glimpse of a performance done by Papon on a Bengali Folk song called Tokari. It can also be observed that when it comes to the presentation of folk songs through digital platforms there are in most cases common faces or popular singers associated with the presentations. Most of the folk songs in case of

Coke Studio India had popular faces like Amit Trivedi, Gurdas Maan, Papon or Vishal Shekhar among many others. They are usually accompanied by other folk singers or folk music performers would you get their position on screen but the team is usually led by the other celebrity performers. This brings to a question about the role of digital medium in promoting performers who have indigenously been playing or singing folk songs. This is because programs like Coke Studio India there are private organisations that have a corporate or a business motto which can be achieved if there are popular faces representing those contents.



Figure 6: Folk song on Indian Idol

Source: (SET India. 2022)

Baul is one of the most popular and cultural reached form of Bengali folk songs we have till date. Figure 6 shows a glimpse of a performance from 7th November 2020 where one of the contestants was accompanied by a famous *Baul* for a duet. Surprisingly, the song was not purely a *Baul* song, rather it was a Hindi Bollywood retro song where a small piece of folk song was sung by the professional *Baul* singer. From this analysis it can be argued that there is a reflection of cultural hybridization where folk songs are not just being represented in a corporate format what are also used as a remix addition to existing popular film songs.

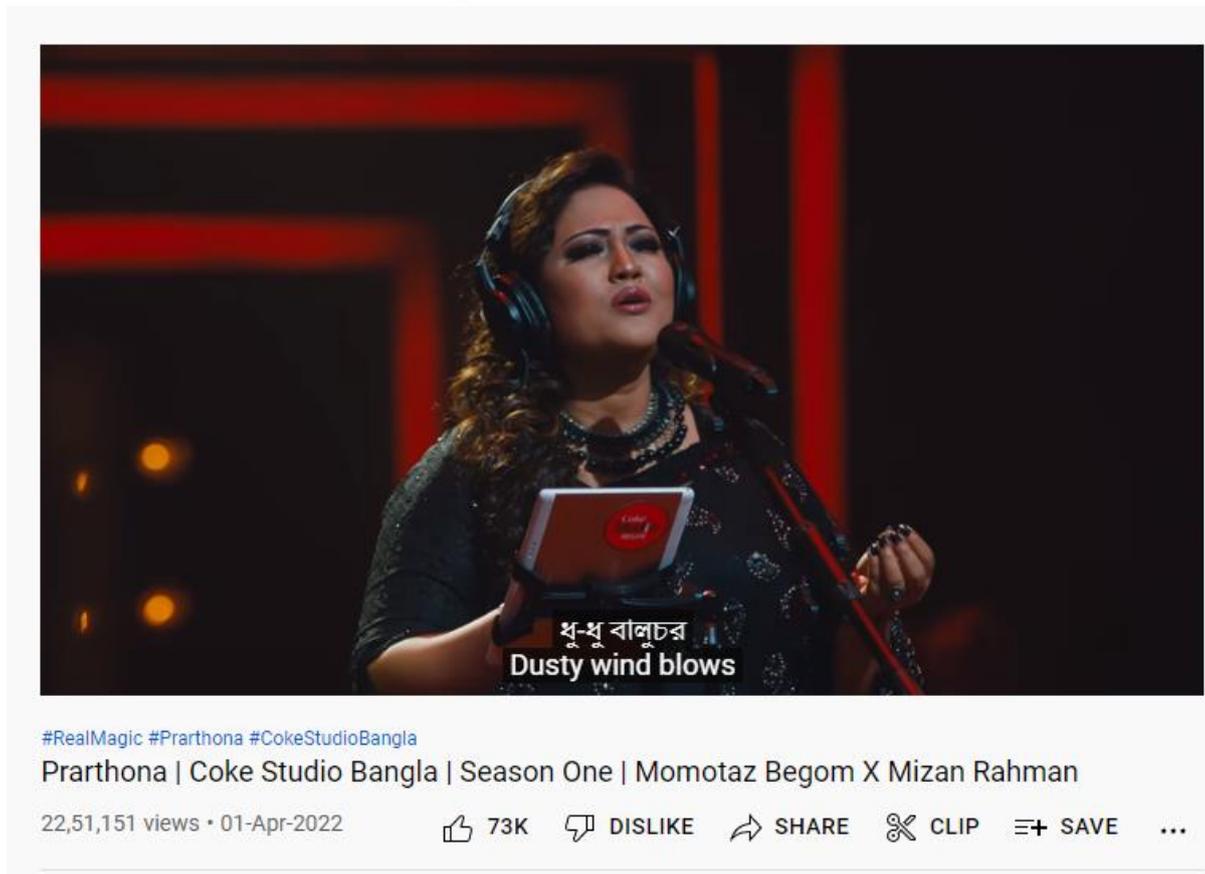


Figure 7: A performance by Momotaz Begom on Coke Studio Bangla

Source: (Coke Studio Bangla, 2022)

Figure 7 shows a screenshot from Coke Studio Bangla, a famous singer performing a folk song April 2022. From this performance it can be observed that it is not just the setup which looks like a corporate show but it is also the get-up of this singer which is quite different from the usual get-ups of folk singers. From makeup to costume and other accessories again reflected a concept of cultural hybridization which is different from the usual folk culture observed in Bengal.

This gives rise to a question on whether this digital platform can help in popular rising folk songs following this hybridized culture or is it taking away the pure cultural concepts from the indigenous in traditional forms of folk songs. This is because a culture is not just the rhetorical representation of the songs but it is also how these songs are being presented to the audience.

The Future of Folk Music on Digital Platforms

From the opinions shared by the experts from the field of Mass Communication it can be said that there are many major challenges in using digital platforms for the promotion of folk songs. Yet with the help of effective strategies these folk songs can be promoted through digital platforms because of already existing issues faced by the offline industry of folk music. The major observations and recommendations of this research are:

- The real challenge of digital platforms for folk music is actually to attract the tech savvy new generation towards 'folk music'. Folk songs like "*Borolokerbeti Go*" are used by Bollywood singers without attributing it to the original artist.
- There are two major concerns, one being the India's digital divide and the other being culture of fast fashion which has made it difficult for folk songs to even gain popularity and sustain in offline mode as well.
- Cultural Hybridisation is now the key element of folk music where from the use of dress code to remix songs the originality of the folk industry is now under question.
- The challenges in production of folk music on digital platforms can be access to the tools that are used by particular ethnic groups. It is possible to produce the music for digital distribution as long as the producers have access to the tools.
- Folk music is beyond the 18 major languages of India. From *Bhawaiya* to *Jhumur* every form is different from one another not just in terms of their rhetoric but also their overall representation. Hence, holding on to these original attributes in digital platform is a challenge.

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