

Folk Songs of Pagla Kanai: A Critique of Non-Sectarianism

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Figure 1: Pagla Kanai's memorial sculpture

Courtesy: www.newagebd.com

Abstract

The focus of this paper is to investigate the Non-Sectarian philosophy reflected in the folk songs of the Bengali poet Pagla Kanai. This paper unearths the oral tradition of Kanai's songs, mysticism, influence of his songs and philosophy in relation to the socio-cultural and historical context of contemporary Bangladesh. This study examines the issue based on primary and secondary sources. Finally, this paper reflects a new dimension in the arena of musicology and Bengali folk culture and literary criticism.

Keywords: culture, folklore, non-sectarianism, mystical songs, tradition

Introduction

Bangladesh is a living museum of folklore and traditional culture. That's why; it is lovingly called a country of green paddy fields, melodious songs and innumerable rivers and rivulets. This, though, seems like a poetic exaggeration today, was in fact, a truism yesterday. This wonderful country of ours had and still has a treasure house of rich and varied folksongs and folk poets.

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Amongst the notable folk bards, Kanai deserves a worthy, mentionable position in Bengali folk culture and literature. Bengali folk poetry has largely been oral tradition in the form of musical rendition, and it encompasses the customs, beliefs, traditions, superstitions, aspirations, simple sorrows and joys, contemporary socio-political scenario, occupations in almost every aspect of life of the folks, particularly in a rural setting. The lyrical style and treatment of folksongs has been characterized by directness and simplicity. It reflects the collective community life rather than paying attention to individual life and character.

Folk songs affect the common man largely because it voices the very pulse of the vagaries of the suffering and joy of the downtrodden common folk. Sometimes, the popular folksong is used for political campaign and the common consciousness of public interest. Under the tutelage of such popular perspectives, this paper strives to focus on the unique aspect of Kanai's non-sectarian philosophy of human life reflected in his songs and the captivating spell of "*Jarri gaan*" to the proletariats. Interestingly, this study will underline an epoch making critical activity in the academy of Folklore and Bengali literary criticism.

Kanai's Contribution & Status as a Folk Artiste

Pagla Kanai (1809-1889), a Bengali Muslim folk poet and musician in the nineteenth century during British Empire in India, was born in March 18, 1809 and died in July, 1889 in a peasant family at Lebutala Madhabpur village of Jhenaidah district in Bangladesh. People called him "Pagla Kanai" though his real name was Kanai Sheikh. He lost his parents in early childhood and was brought up by his sister. He did not take institutional schooling. He was famous for his "jarrigaan"- a branch of Bengali folksong as well as his mystic and nonsectarian philosophy of life. His oral folk songs and poems played a vital role in reshaping the socio-cultural aspect of the north-south part of Bangladesh, especially the regions of Jessore, Khulna, Rajshahi, Pabna, Sirajgonj, Mymensingh, Bogra, Faridhpur, Kushtia and Jhenaidah which were the fertile ground for folksongs and folk poets like Lalon shah, Edu shah, Panju shah, Hasan Raja and others. In Bangladesh every year, 9th March is observed as the birth anniversary of this popular folk bard with weeklong folk festival and fair at the Pagla Kanai complex shrine in Jhenidah with the collaboration of Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

Kanai possessed God-gifted poetic genius and could compose songs spontaneously. This itinerant illiterate singer was popular with village people at his musical “ashor” (performance). His songs speak the life and culture of a community that matters but not individual life and character. Actually, the folk poets sing the very pulse of “*All men are our Kindred; the world is our home*” (Naidu, 1993, p. 8). He along with his itinerant group of singers like Kala Chand Bayati, Hakim Shah, Karim Biswas, Indu Biswas and Karamaddi would travel around the areas of Jessore, Kushtia, Pabna, Rajshahi and Bogra singing in chorus. The common pattern of Kanai’s songs can be categorized into ‘jarri’, ‘dhua’, ‘pala gaan’, ‘kobi gaan’, ‘murshidi’, ‘marfati’, Islamic and so on.

Mystical and Spiritual Songs

Pagla Kanai used to compose mystical and spiritual songs. His songs express his heart felt thoughts of spiritual quest that establishes the tradition of his works. Most of his songs explore the themes of love, equity, humanity, equality, compassion, generosity, fraternity, anatomical Ideology (the human body), the impermanence of the world, and the mystery of life. He composed songs about the Prophet Muhammad (S.M) as well as hymns to Krishna (Hindu god). Dr Mazharul Islam, scholar and researcher in Folklore, included 240 of these songs in his book, *Kavi Pagla Kanai (1959)*.

Kanai became renowned for his folk songs, especially ‘*dhua-jarri*’. He composed a good number of devotional songs. His passion and intense spirituality was evident at an early age since the locals started calling him “pagla” (crazy). People from all walks of life used to throng his musical ‘ashor’ (performance) and listened to his songs for hours and hours. Afterwards, his fame escalated gradually across the country. Thus, his name and fame appeared in the arena of Bengali folksongs and culture.

Non-sectarian

Folksongs play a vital role in developing popular consciousness among the common folks. Kanai’s non-sectarian songs are the epitome of such example. He was the most radical voice during the British Raj in India against colonial oppression. He is opposed to casteism, sectarianism and colonialism. He voiced against the colonial oppression through singing his ‘*jarri*’ songs along with the wandering minstrels which brought consciousness among the

poor peasants against trauma of colonization. The authorities under the British Raj compelled the peasants by force to cultivate indigo instead of other easily productive and profitable crops. His folk songs, ballads and folktales remind us of the historical crisis and anxiety of the Bengali peasants and rural folks who died of starvation and famine. The following song depicts the predicament of the suppressed and repressed farmer:

*“This year, the dreadful rain is over flooded all jute and paddy
How the tax of Raja, the debt of Mahajan pay...”*

Kanai left his village to evade the oppression of the British Raj. Dirt-poor Kanai became a drifter after his father’s death. He became a cowherd in his neighbouring village. Many were taken aback by his eclectic spiritual songs and ‘*dhua jaari*’. His spiritual inclination put him in touch with the bauls (defined by www.dictionary.com as “a member of a nonconformist Bengalese sect having gurus but nodogmas, rituals, religious institutions, or scriptures”) and fakirs of the regions around him.

Tradition of Kanai’s Songs and Philosophy

Kanai’s songs were oral tradition transmitted from generation to generation. He along with his disciples used to roam with bands from one village to another with a view to singing songs before an assemblage in a rural setting. This tradition was very popular to his people and community. Vansina, in this regard, adds that “*All oral traditions are to a greater or lesser extent linked with the society and the culture which produces them, therefore, all are influenced by the culture and society concerned upon which their very existence depends*” (Vansina, 1965).

Folk songs and poetry, in particular, have largely been oral tradition, and it reflects the common interest of the common folks and the ethnic socio-political scenario especially the rural surrounding. Its diction is very simple and common language of the common people. It represents the public life rather than any particular person. Folk poetry was usually nurtured by wandering minstrels, and it was recitative to the village folk. This tradition is still continuing in the voice of rural peasants who sing songs while working in the field.

Kanai is able to capture all the qualities of traditional folk poetry. His songs capture the common diction of the common mass. His folk lyrics do not make excessive demands upon the reader because of their simplicity of vocabulary and imagery drawn from everyday scenes and sights which are the redeeming features of folk life and tradition. It helps him achieve an artistic identity with the life of his community, folk culture and the common fountain of feelings of the rustics.

Kanai's Place among Bangladeshi Poets

Kanai's songs are predominantly characterized by the philosophy of mysticism and non-sectarianism. His mystical songs articulate the very pulse of non-sectarian incantation. Like Kanai's non-sectarian societal vision, the national poet of Bangladesh, Kazi Nazrul Islam and the rural poet of Bengal, Kobi Jasimuddin spell out a secular and non-communal humanist vision in a diction that is earth-shattering and elegant. Kazi Nazrul's poetry and prose writings are exuberant with a certain force and energy denouncing all social and religious bigotry and oppression. Similarly, Kobi Jasimuddin's poems and popular folk songs are replete with the vision of a non-communal cultural society.

Baul Songs

Baul songs are the specialized branch of Bengali folksongs. Kanai was devoted to songs, especially to kabial song and was reputed as an exceptional singer like Lalon Fakir, one of the greatest baul singers the Indian sub-continent has ever produced. He contributed numerous songs by the way of oral tradition. His songs provided spiritual and political inspiration to the people. People assume baul songs as a way of mystic tradition leading to spiritual elevation and universal love for all men. Popularity of this traditional song goes beyond Bengali culture and society.



Figure 2: Parvathy Baul

Basically an oral tradition, Rabindranath Tagore was the first to bring out the Baul lyrics in print. In 21st century, the new generation sees baul song as a unique tradition with values and respect. Parvathy, an Indian modern baul singer and practitioner, singing soul elevating songs that speak the universal language of love and compassion, “ Today, the world knows her by the name Parvathy Baul and she has enthralled millions across the globe with her mellifluous voice and her mesmerizing role as a story-teller” (Sahu, 2013). In an interview, she adds that

“The beauty of Baul music is that it expresses something so ordinary in an extraordinary way. To convey love in a simple language is very deep... Baul is not just music. It is a way of life. It’s all about connecting with nature” (Sahu, 2013).

Kanai’s Non-sectarian Philosophy

Kanai’s songs divulge his multi-facet experiences and ideas of diverse religious sects and groups like Shariat, Marfat, Sufism, Vedas, Ramayana, Buddhism, Qu’ran and Puranas. For spiritual quest, Kanai sings Islamic ways of devotion to the Supreme Being, following Shariat. Again, his songs disclose the very pulse of mystic mode of enjoining to divine entity addressing the name of Allah, spiritual devotees (Pirr, Maoula), Murshid as well as the names of Narayan, Vishnu, Rama, Ravan of Hinduism and Niranjan in Buddhism. This portraiture of Kanai’s songs goes beyond any shadow of sectarianism because his musical approach does not adhere to any particular sect or belief but all men irrespective of caste, creed, colour and religion.

Thus, his songs are the manifestation of non-sectarianism and equality of men. He, being a nationalist, was opposed to racism, sectarianism and discrimination. Hussain Liton, in this regard, points out:

“Kanai’s songs are mostly rooted in his non-sectarian philosophy which is an exceptional tradition in Bengali folk culture and art. This baul and minstrel had ardently adhered to nationalism and was opposed to casteism, sectarianism and colonialism. He placed humans above all ethnicity, race, discrimination, creed and colour. His songs highlight different communities — Muslims, Hindus, high caste, low caste and Christianity. To him, all people

from different ethnicities are following the same path leading to God. He denounces divisions in man and man. As a result, people saw him as their spokesman. Discarding sectarianism, he voiced, “--- Everyone has the same blood, living in the same house, / They drank on mother’s milk and go to one river/ One says ‘Durgahari’, one concludes with ‘Bismillah;’” which implies the mystery of creation and life” (Liton, 2012).

Actually, the above-stated lyric exerts the indivisibility of mankind in any form of sects or politics.

This rustic baul and minstrel had ardently sung the songs of patriotism and was against prejudice, sectarianism and communalism. His songs highlight different communities: Muslims, Hindu, and Christianity. To him, all people from different ethnicities follow the same path leading to God. He denounces divisions between man and man in any form. He valued human being above all ethnicity, gender, race, discrimination, age, creed and colour. As a result, people saw him as their spokesperson. To him, all men have kindred spirits and all the world is our home. Unquestionably, all human beings are alike made of same stuff, be it Hindu, Muslim or Christian. Similarly, Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* spells out the universality of human relationships discarding divisive fallacy between the races (Jew and Christian) in the voice of Shylock

“If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.” (Shakespeare, 1905, p. 204).

Islamic Roots

In addition, Kanai’s non-sectarian vision can analogously be shared with different religions especially Islam. In Islam, for example, there is no place of sectarianism or for distinction between man and man. In the *Holy Quran*, it is clearly mentioned that *“And hold fast, all of you together, to the Rope of Allah and be not divided among yourselves...”* (Al-Imran, pp. 87, Chapter-3, verse-103).

Pagla Kanai himself being a Muslim was non-sectarian which comes to focus in the following song:

*“My name is Pagla Kanai Muslim in race
We would sing in the house of Hindu
We would salute (pronam) finding Brahmin thousands of times
This name is like Narayan”.*

Kanai’s mystical songs reflect his vision of non-sectarianism. He dreamt of a non-communal society full of love and respect among the people of all sects and communities. In this respect, it is important to mention that in Muslim Bengali literature, the presence of the sacred women like Khadiza (RH.), Fatimah (RH.), Ayesha (RH.), etc. of Islam are regarded as manifestations of spiritual power and inspiration. Prophet Muhammad’s (SM.) daughter Hazrat Fatimah has popular image as a mother figure in Bengali folk literature. Pagla Kanai offers his respect to Fatimah in moments of woes and worries here and hereafter as redeemer of the world as well as a savior, which finds expression in the following song.

“O Mother,
Pagla Kanai, who is of no consequence,
Cries for you with every breath;
Please cast a little shadow of your feet on me;
O Mother, take me to your feet.
O Mother Tara, the redeemer of the world,
O Mother Tarini, you shall appear/ as the savior of Muslims
When Israfil will blow his horn,
When everything will be reduced to water,
And when your father’s community
Will sink into water without a boat” (Liton, 2012).

Hazrat Fatimah has ever-ending appeal to the hearts of Bengali Muslims as she is the Prophet’s (S.M.) beloved daughter.

Jarigaan

‘Jarigaan’ is a very popular and unique form of Bengali folksongs and literature. Pagla Kanai, the legendary folk singer, became popular for developing a ‘Jaari’ form and tradition entitled Dhuajari, in which an episode is recited in a rhythmic tone. A Dhuajari session may also take place in between two Jarigaan teams through a question-answer mode. The “Jaari” is a type of rural Bengali songs. This term is explained by modern scholars as in Arabic ‘jaaree’ which means declaration, or in Farsi ‘Jareedan’ meaning ‘elegy’—a song of lamentation. He composed Jarigaan on the story of Karbala in commemoration of the agonies and subsequent death of Hazrat Imam Hossain, the grandson of Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (SM), including other stories of Makkar Janmakatha, Saddader Jari, Shah Jalaler Jari, Sohrab-Rustamer Jari, and Jaharnama.

Kanai’s jari songs also reflect social, religious, political issues as well as natural calamities, riots, violence, and family affairs. He sang:

“In 1280 deadly sun dried/ The corn of fields, and the jute and rice completely damage”

which reflect famine, disaster, and the suffering of the Bengali people. In fact, Kanai gave an aesthetic presentation of Jarigaan, and subsequently achieved name and fame in Bengali history and culture. This popular folk song still continues to exist in the voice of the rural folks and peasants. The origin of Jarigaan in Bangladesh can be traced back to the early 17th century.

It is important to cite here few lines of a song exemplifying Kanai’s sense of non-sectarianism and attitude towards humanity:

“Two sons of the same father are living, neither is dead

Everyone has the same blood, living in the same house.

They drank on mother's milk and go to one river

One says ‘Durgahari’, one concludes with ‘Bismillah’;

But go to the same river to drink water.”

Kanai’s attitude towards caste-system has been beautifully expressed in his above words. He denounces social or religious divisions. He discloses the universal vagaries of human nature and oneness of mankind discarding the sectarianism. Actually, all human beings are equal having same rights and feelings with no class distinction. Referring to this, it

is important to cite that “all men are created equal”. This universal norm of humanism comes to focus in the general principle of UNFPA & ICPD declaration:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the universal Declaration of Human Rights, without distinction of any kind, such as race, creed, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person” (ICPD, Principle 1).

Kanai’s Contemporary Social Picture

The bauls are naturally devoted to nationalism. Like Lalou, Kanai is also a compatriot and nationalist to the core that becomes crystal clear from his songs. The historical scenario in the voice of Kanai is also viewed. The following song described contemporary famine and disaster and the suffering of the common mass:

*“In 1280 deadly sun dries
The corn of fields, and the jute and rice completely damage.”*

Choudhury in his book *Pagla Kanai (1995)* points out that Kanai’s ‘Jarigaan’ reflects “the contemporary social condition, draughts and floods as the common scenario of life and society, and additionally, people’s misery, suppression and repression caused by the feudal landlords and Majhans” (Choudhury, 1995). Thus, it depicts the socio and historical milieu of Bangladesh. The above stated song refers to the socio-economic, political and historical affairs of the time 1280 A.D. This period of history reminds us of the crisis and anxiety of the Bengali peasants and rural folks. Many died of starvation and some died of diseases. In this regard, it is vital to note the following song depicting the predicament of the suppressed and repressed farmer:

*“This year, the dreadful rain is over flooded all jute and paddy
How the tax of Raja, the debt of Mahajan pay,
Sitting I am thinking constantly this thought in my mind very much.”*

Here, this song beautifully portrays the miserable and decrepit-outworn condition of the peasant society. Thus, Kanai picks up the socio-cultural and politico-economic scenario of his community and nation. It is the magna-matter issue that folk songs, ballads and folktales reflect the replica of history referring to human life and society.

Kanai's Humanitarian Outlook

Pagla Kanai's humanitarian outlook emanates from his idea of non-sectarian philosophy. He was a humanitarian and against any sectarian approach. He had a very ardent love and sympathy towards fellow human being regardless of caste, creed and color. He aspired to develop communal harmony in the society. The following song is an example of this approach:

*“My name is Pagla Kanai Muslim in race
We would sing in the house of Hindu
We would salute (pronam) finding brahmin thousands of times
This name is like Narayan.”*

The above song enchantingly expresses the communal harmony and rhythm between Hindu and Muslim in Bengali society. Here meets the voice of Hindu and Muslim together. This universal feeling towards human being geared him up as a rare personality in Bengali society as well as in the international arena. This very approach and tradition of Kanai's folk songs developed non-sectarian harmony among the people around him.

Kanai's Mystical vision

Pagla Kanai used to sing basically mystical and spiritual songs. His songs articulate a feeling of spiritual search for truth and beauty. Most of his songs explore the themes of love, humanity, equality, compassion, generosity, fraternity, the impermanence of the world, and the mystery of life. His mystic view and stance reflects the very pulse of his non-sectarianism. He accepts the value of both body and soul because both are necessary for unification with self which finds expression in the following verses:

“Two makers of the single house one a tug of war,

*Who's had what strength?
They both dwell in unison in that house."*

Sometimes, this ascetic folk poet reveals the mystical confusion through rhetorical questioning:

*"Who am I? Where was I? From where I came? Where will I go? What is the purpose of life?
What is the right way of devotion?"*

Similarly, great folksinger and poet Lalon Shah sings,

*"What to do, where to go, I can't decide. I am constantly in a fix.
Someone says; go to Mecca on a pilgrimage
And all your sins will be forgiven".*

Actually, Kanai tends to search the absolute self that lies inside the mind. Mystics from all sects and religions show their distrust of reason and secondary source of knowledge laying emphasis on direct communication with the ultimate reality. He celebrates human body as the physical container of their (psyche & body) unification. Here, he does not speak of just his soul but of the self that is common to all. His anatomical ideology is related to mysticism. Like English romantic poet William Wordsworth, Kanai thinks the transcendental self that pervades everything, everywhere.

Conclusion

Life is for Pagla Kanai not an obsession, but a possession; not an experiment, but an adventure, a graceful movement into things, by means of which we recognize harmony and wonder of life and society as well as the magnificence and splendor of the world. Ostensibly, Kanai's tradition and philosophy transcends any particular social, cultural and communal barrier. As we observe, in his songs, his tradition and philosophy rectify felonies; obliterate cheating, malice and social division. His folk songs represent a non-sectarian societal platform creating an exceptional tradition in folklore and cultural anthropology. Mystic poet Kanai dreamt of a society which will transcend communal barriers and worries. He teaches us love, unity, humanity, and equity. His voice is the remedy for chaos, division and

confusion of this afflicted world. Actually, the poetic message should carry a kernel point for all regardless of caste, creed, and colour but not for a particular sect as in the voice of a great critic, Matthew Arnold,

“The greatness of a poet lies in his powerful application of ideas to life, immutably fixed under the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. Poetry is not an escape from life but an escape into it and the greater a poet, the greater is this involvement in life” (Arnold, 1968, p. 24).

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