

The colonial, capitalist curation of 'Bangla' culture



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THE collective and national memories of the struggle for Bangla is dense in the air, given that February just went by, inviting people to recognise the need to preserve and protect their languages—be it either by publishing the first Mro language grammar book in Bangladesh or by making nostalgic throwbacks to the precedence that Bengali nationalism takes over all else here for the formation of the nation state. But read the previous sentence again, and understand how these two different scenarios don't sit well with each other. This is relevant when discussing Coke Studio Bangla, because Syed Gousul Alam Shaon—the creative producer of the project and managing director of the production agency, Grey Advertising Ltd—defended the decision to use "Bangla" instead of "Bangladesh" in the name of the project so as to "go back to the roots."

But I wonder whose roots he is referring to. His reference is the 1971 poster that wanted the citizens of the newly formed Bangladesh to forego religious identities to forge an ethnolinguistic national identity. This is a national identity where being a Bengali, or a Bangla-speaking citizen, would hold this new nation state together, rather than the legacy of Muslim nationhood that created East and West Pakistan. In fact, Shaon's reference to this sense of Bengali nationalism is so strong that his advertising company used the same font to design the title of the project. But maybe he has little cognisance of the repercussions that such colonial projects of modern nation state-making had on the people who were neither Muslim nor Bengali, and could not fit into either of these categories in 1947 or 1971. MN Larma summed it up well when he reiterated in 1972 that he was not Bengali, but a Chakma and a Bangladeshi citizen.

So, here we have a project that relies on that same erasure of identities, languages, culture and music to reconfigure "roots." And if it spoke only for the Bengali people and culture, that would perhaps make sense. It would especially make sense because one cannot deny that the curator and producer of Coke Studio Bangla, Shayan Chowdhury Arnob—who spent a significant period of his formative years in West Bengal, studied in Visva Bharati University and is well-known for his renditions of Rabindra Sangeet—does embody the legacy of a united Bengal and hegemonic *bhadralok* Bengali culture. However, the first episode of Coke Studio Bangla tried to answer the critics and make waves with a fusion rendition of the Hajong song "Nasek Nasek," with a Bangla excerpt of Abdul Latif's folk song "Dol Dol Doloni." While one can easily say that Hajong—the language of a minority ethnic group of the same name inhabiting parts of northeast India and different parts of Bangladesh—is not Bangla, I also wonder out loud the cultural politics of embedding Bangla verses within a mainstream production of a Hajong song that will perhaps be the first introduction to any Hajong music at all for many in Bangladesh. Let's ask: Why is it that a Hajong song cannot stand on its own in a mainstream entertain platform in Bangladesh?

When curated, hosted, composed, arranged, produced and instrumentalised by people who are not Hajong, what happens to a Hajong song when the

vocalist is the only one bearing the history, language and representation of the song? But when especially keeping in mind how ethnic minorities have to assimilate into the languages and cultural identities of the powerful, model majorities, does Animes Roy—the brilliant Hajong singer—not become minoritised and tokenised on stage in the production of a song he should claim as his own and his people's? One must

of the Bauls and *fakirs*, for whom these songs have historically been not just cultural commodities or products, but embodiments of collective history as well as religious and spiritual practice. Such tokenisation reduces the vastness of what has now become a mere commodity in the name of "folk" for projects like Coke Studio Bangla, because the intricacies with which they are related to life, religion, politics and society would shatter the secular imaginary of the "Bengali." Such

this country. In fact, Coca Cola is only one among several companies, such as Unilever and British American Tobacco, who play this role often. For now, we can ignore the environmental damage that the brand causes, and acknowledge that it is fitting for urban musicians—who have to fend for themselves often—to celebrate such financial support that allow them larger stages with global audiences. After all, what is an artiste without their audience?

However, what do such intermittent financial opportunities mean for the long-term sustenance of the music industry as a whole? Coke Studio Bangla features the best of the best—artists who have already established themselves as national gems with their recurring bands of friends and acquaintances, and some cherry-picked new artistes such as Rubayet Rehman and Masha, who made their own road to fame by managing themselves and making their own content on the internet. While some musicians, instrumentalists and even a team of film-makers and engineers find themselves celebrating such an opportunity, what does this mean for the everyday artiste? Will this trickle down to build sustainable infrastructural support for emerging artistes to learn and build their careers? Several of the recording and sound engineers of the first episode

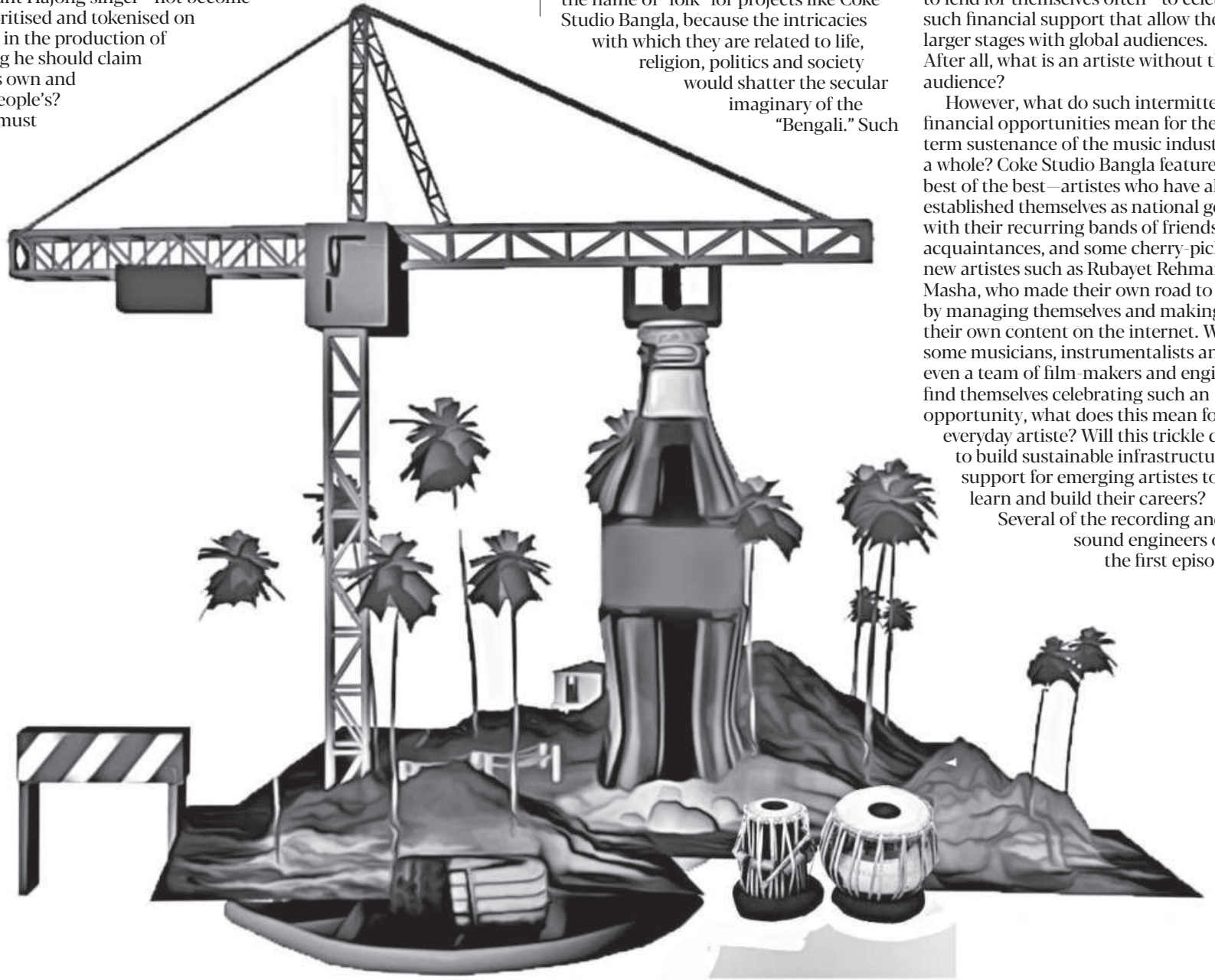


ILLUSTRATION: PRITHI KHALIQUE

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remember that this is not an organic exchange and syncretism of cultures that have taken place over years of co-living or mutual embodiment; this is a staged and curated production of and by a project that claims to embody the "Bengali" identity alone.

Similar questions come to my mind when such a reconfiguration of the "roots" translate into "Ekla Cholo," the promotional production of Coke Studio Bangla that was first released as a fusion narrative of Gagan Harkara's Baul song "Ami Kothay Pabo Tare," Rabindranath Tagore's "Ekla Cholo Re," and Shironamhin's "Hashimukh." The video introduces us to many of the musicians and artistes who feature in the maiden season of the programme, but when the piece begins with Harkara's song, the Baul is a nameless, faceless figure in the shadows. A mere iconography of a cultural element of a region as vast as Bengal—a cultural product but not an artiste in their own right, reduced to a trope and unrecognised for their artistry.

Such a representation is reminiscent of the way Tagore himself made his own renditions of Baul songs and modernised them into studio-produced popular music, ultimately appropriating them into his strand of Bengali humanism with his own upper-caste, feudal powers. So much so that now we commonly sing these musical pieces as Rabindra Sangeet, but lost are the names and lives

representations of the Baul remove our gaze from events such as the imprisonment of the Sufi Baul Shariat Boyati in 2019, who was charged under the Digital Security Act for offending religious sentiments when he claimed that the Quran does not forbid music.

But Coke Studio Bangla and its reach for the "roots" had the government's support; in fact, Zunaid Ahmed Palak, the state minister for the ICT Division, was present as a special guest at the official launch event. When the state not only makes permissible but also enables citizens with clout, power and ties to the ruling regime to define correct versions of religion and religious culture, I wonder what kind of cultural secularism it espouses with Coke Studio Bangla. But it wouldn't be fair to pin such repackaging of musical culture on the state alone; after all, the state's stakes in Baul traditions can be identified as borderline negligent, given how there has been little to no support for their communities before and especially during the pandemic. However, government support for musicians in Bangladesh in itself is generally low. Musicians are hardly protected, with a lack of industry support, financial security and infrastructure in the country.

It is not at all strange for Coca Cola, one of the largest and most well-known multinational beverage companies in the world, to come in here and fill a void for the support that music creatives need in

are either self-taught or educated in institutions abroad, and the piece was not even mixed and mastered in Bangladesh, because there is not even a school for audio engineering in this country yet that can train such personnel. Does a project such as this function as an adequate substitute for the kind of educational, financial, social and market interventions that artistes need for support and patronage?

Coke Studio Bangla relies on a semblance of an industry that fends for itself and operates on its own free-market mechanisms without any support or regulation, and it is visible on the first episode when you see that the only women on the stage are the back-up vocals and all the instrumentalists are male-bodied. In a society where masculinity dominates and women need infrastructural support for mobility and access in the urban public sphere, they remain relegated as soft-spoken singers and graceful dancers, but not as bassists or drummers.

This is not a review of the musical performances of Coke Studio Bangla, and I do not negate the hard work and struggles that most of these artistes must have gone through to create their art. Instead, this is a critique that takes into account the everyday politics of being a musical artiste in this country, and the nuances that must be taken into consideration when the artistry differs by language, gender, faith and location.

QUOTABLE Quote



Martin Luther King, Jr.

(1929 - 1968)
American activist

Since we know that the system will not change the rules, we are going to have to change the system.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| ACROSS | 1 Brewing item | 7 Lofty poems | 11 Address of "Dr. No" | 12 Valiant person | 13 Some combo musicians | 15 School paper | 16 Island dance | 18 Washed out | 21 Finished | 22 Refrain from mischief | 24 Stop | 25 Scoundrel | 26 Pod veggie | 27 Clipped item | 29 Easter lead-in | 30 Authentic | 31 Turn to liquid | 32 Winter drink | 34 They're trying to get home | 40 Poet | 41 Store business | 42 Workout sites | 43 Blustery | | | | | | |
| DOWN | 1 Rickety boat | 2 Memorable time | 3 Wagon puller | 4 Hurry | 5 Greek vowel | 6 Strong wind | 7 "You think so?" | 8 Ruby of films | 9 Blunder | 10 Distress signal | 14 Really stoked | 16 Pay tribute to | 17 Excessive | 19 Jacket flap | 20 News item | 21 Last mo. | 22 Prohibit | 23 Pig out | 25 Shade | 28 Indiana team | 29 Crude shed | 31 "Water Lilies" painter | 33 Mongrels | 34 Marshy area | 35 Writer Tan | 36 Friend of Frodo | 37 Lobed organ | 38 Crater part | 39 Willy |



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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