

COKE STUDIO BANGLA’S ‘PRARTHONA’

Caught between subversion and co-option?



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THE second song of Coke Studio Bangla, titled “*Prarthona*” (Prayer), was released on the eve of Ramadan this year. It was the same time when both the mainstream and social media flooded with updates, news, and views on the harassment of a Hindu female college teacher by a Muslim male police constable for wearing a teep on her forehead. Feminists and social justice activists started protesting the incident by updating their Facebook profiles with photos of themselves wearing teeps and demonstrating on the streets. It was also the same time when social media was taken over by sexist, masochistic comments about the killing of a 21-year-old student of North South University (NSU), who was riding her scooter, by a covered van in a road accident. Many blamed the victim for her “transgression,” criticising her attire and her parents’ decision to get her a scooter. My Facebook newsfeed was swamped by comments and discussions on all of these events.

Perhaps these juxtapositions—where people either produce or criticise orthodox, fundamentalist narratives and practices that exploit women and other minoritised communities, while cherishing the release of a spiritual and subversive music composition that celebrates an egalitarian divinity—are reflective of the unique realities of a postcolonial, neoliberal Bangladesh that is shaped by myriad forces of globalisation.

On the one hand, globalisation has opened doors for foreign direct investment (FDI) and invited The Coca-Cola Company to tap into a growing beverage market worth Tk 2,500-3,000-crore in Bangladesh. Many Bangladeshis are taking pride in the fact that Coke Studio, which sponsored music production in Pakistan, India, Brazil, and other countries, has made a grand entrance into their country and opened doors for supporting local musicians and promoting local musical traditions. Forgotten here is Coca-Cola’s long problematic history of lawsuits for racial discrimination against African-American employees and polluting air in



ILLUSTRATION: AFIA JAHIN

Coke Studio Bangla and its latest release of “*Prarthona*”—a celebration of, as Coke Studio Bangla describes, “the eternity of virtue and how the real magic of devotion can withstand the test of time, connecting generations, old and new”—are parts of Coca-Cola’s massive portfolio building initiative in Bangladesh.

the US, aggravating groundwater depletion in India, conducting cruel animal testing, monopolising markets in the US, Europe, and Mexico, and being the single largest plastic polluter in the world—to name just a few. Coca-Cola recently invested USD 74 million to establish a plant in Bhaluka, Mymensingh, and promised to expand not only the plant and infrastructure, but also its market and portfolio in Bangladesh. Coke Studio Bangla and its latest release of “*Prarthona*”—a celebration of, as Coke Studio Bangla describes, “the eternity of virtue and how the real magic of devotion can withstand the test of time, connecting generations, old and new”—are parts of Coca-Cola’s massive portfolio building initiative in Bangladesh.

On the other hand, the same globalisation has been strengthening the ultra-orthodox Wahhabi-Faraizi-Deobandi-Salafi versions of Islam in this region that originally embraced Islam through more egalitarian and Persianised conquerors, traders, and Sufis. The free flow of Saudi petrodollars, as well as locally sponsored orthodox religious educational and other charity programmes, filled the vacuum in a country that failed to provide social safety to its working-class and most vulnerable communities. The influence of missionary-style religious charity, widespread circulation of orthodox narratives on social media, the government’s need to appeal to conservative voters and its strategic softer stance towards certain fundamentalist groups to secure an endorsement, as well as the globalised political consciousness of

the returned Bangladeshi (mostly male) labour migrants—who are aware of global and class inequities, but reject democratic politics in favour of authoritarian Islamic regimes as a way to achieve prosperity that they have witnessed in the Middle East—have been widely influencing everyday vocabularies, gendered norms and practices, and other expectations in Bangladesh.

Against this backdrop, Coke Studio Bangla’s choice of two songs—“*Allah Megh De*” and “*Baba Maulana*”—and their release on the eve of Ramadan offer an intriguing scope to critically reflect on both the imperialist-capitalist invasion of the global Coke empire, as well as Coke Studio Bangla’s powerful subversion of the dominant, orthodox Wahhabi-Salafi popular rhetoric in Bangladesh. Both the devotional songs were written and composed by authors/composers/singers who did not grow up in Muslim families. “*Allah Megh De*” was written and composed by Girin Chakraborty, who was trained by legendary musicians Allauddin Khan and Aftabuddin Khan. Great folk singer Abbasuddin Ahmed later sang the song and popularised it. “*Baba Maulana*” was written and composed by Ramesh Chandra Shil, who was popularly known as *kobiyal* Ramesh Shil or Ramesh Maizbhandari. Ramesh Shil grew up in a Hindu family in Chattogram. His songs addressed anti-colonial and social justice struggles, including the revolutionary raiding of the Chattogram armoury, the self-sacrifice of Surya Sen, the non-

cooperation and the Khilafat movements, the 1947 Partition, famine, and the Language Movement. He transformed *kobi gaan* from a medium of entertainment into a tool for political and social justice activism. He had a long history of organising with the Communist Party and was a strong supporter of Jukta Front in the provincial election of East Pakistan in 1954. He got arrested after the Jukta Front government was dismissed by the Pakistan central government. He was also a follower of the Maizbhandari Sufi tradition.

Because of the origins of the authors and composers of the “*Prarthona*” songs, we see an intriguing amalgamation of language that incorporates a prayer to “Allah”—the monotheistic God—by saying that the drought is happening because the King of Clouds got angry and so only Allah can now bestow clouds and rescue the suffering community (“*Meghrajai gomraiya roise megh dibo tor keda*”). Similarly, “*Baba Maulana*” describes “Maulana” as a “doll of light” (“*Noor er putula baba maulana*”)—a metaphor that would perhaps be heavily discarded in anti-pagan Abrahamic religious traditions.

The fact that the lyrics, as well as the choice of the two songs, are creatively subversive does not lessen the fact that Coke Studio Bangla is still situated within the political economy of what some scholars have described as “coca-colonisation” to refer to the aggressive production and marketing strategies of Coca-Cola exploiting resources and environment, and privileging global as well as local elites. Through the “*Prarthona*” composition, Coke Studio Bangla challenges the Wahhabi/Salafi dominant narratives of Islam and promotes an indigenous, mystical, egalitarian, and subversive new “Muslim” identity. However, it does so by appropriating indigenous, folk, and Sufi music traditions, which historically took place in dargahs, and placing it in an experimental studio. Within the mediated space of the studio, Mizan Rahman, who was never involved with the Maizbhandari tradition, becomes the chief vocal for “*Baba Maulana*,” and Momtaz Begum’s usual flamboyant self and her non-elite rawness is turned into a sanitised and derivative “mellow, controlled vocalisation.” In this way, Coke Studio resuscitates minoritised musical traditions, but then appropriates as well as commodifies them to produce an indigenised version of “modernity.”

Is repatriation the only way for Rohingya refugees?

HUSSAIN SHAZZAD

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RECENTLY, the US officially recognised the coordinated atrocities against the Rohingya Muslim minority, perpetrated by the Myanmar military through a bloody “clearance operation,” as “genocide,” the gravest of crimes. Within the first three weeks of the deadly military crackdown in August 2017, Bangladesh took in more refugees than the entirety of Europe did during the Syrian crisis. Since then, Bangladesh has been generously sheltering more than 1.2 million Rohingyas on humanitarian grounds. Following this refugee influx—the fastest and largest—Bangladesh and Myanmar signed two bilateral agreements in 2017 and 2019 for the repatriation of these forcibly displaced Rohingyas. But due to the reluctance and non-cooperation on Myanmar’s part, repatriation remains a distant reality. The situation has become further complicated due to the ongoing conflict between the military regime and the pro-democracy front, following the audacious coup on February 1, 2021.

However, Naypyidaw’s recent proposal to take back 700 Rohingyas frustrated Dhaka, as the former compiled the “verified list” in a way that apparently showed its “lack of goodwill” for repatriation. Again, the question arises: Is repatriation the only sustainable solution to end the plight of the stranded Rohingyas?

But, as per the legal maxim of William E Gladstone, “Justice delayed is justice denied.” As almost five years have elapsed without an enduring solution, it’s high time we rethought a viable way out of this crisis. The 1951 Refugee Convention, a universal treaty on the status and rights of refugees, could be a legal statute to resolve any refugee crisis with three possible solutions: local integration, resettlement in other countries or voluntary repatriation. An in-depth assessment of those options, discerning distinct spectrums of the crisis,

could offer one that would be feasible in resolving the protracted Rohingya crisis.

An impact assessment study, jointly conducted by the UNDP and the Policy Research Institute, unveiled the immense socio-economic pressure and environmental costs of supporting Rohingya refugees for Bangladesh, an already overpopulated country with more than 165 million people. The total geographical area of Bangladesh is 147,570 sq-km, 92nd in terms of country size, and smaller than the US state of Iowa. It is understandable why it is impossible for Bangladesh to accommodate 1.2 million Rohingyas—more than the total population of Bhutan—on its limited land. Moreover, Bangladesh, which has long been struggling with its own unemployment problems, has neither the financial capability to ensure basic needs and life-saving assistance for the Rohingya refugees, nor provide them with employment opportunities.

Arguably, even if Bangladesh started integrating the refugees locally, it would motivate the Tatmadaw not only to continue delaying the repatriation, but also to conduct its brutality on around 600,000 Rohingyas now living in Myanmar, and to make them stateless. Besides, the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights stated point-blank that they did not want Bangladeshi citizenship, and would rather go back to their homeland. So, integrating them locally, against their will, would equate depriving them of fundamental and human rights. This is why the World Bank has been recently hit with extensive criticism for its proposal of local integration—an unacceptable solution on all grounds—of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh.

Apart from Bangladesh, the members of this persecuted minority are now living in 19 other countries. As of today, no other country has expressed interest in granting citizenship to the Rohingya refugees with due economic and social rights. As the countries with the capability to accept Rohingyas are already struggling with the global refugee problem, it is illogical to expect that they would resettle millions of Rohingyas as citizens. According to the UNHCR, around 84 million people worldwide have been forced to flee their

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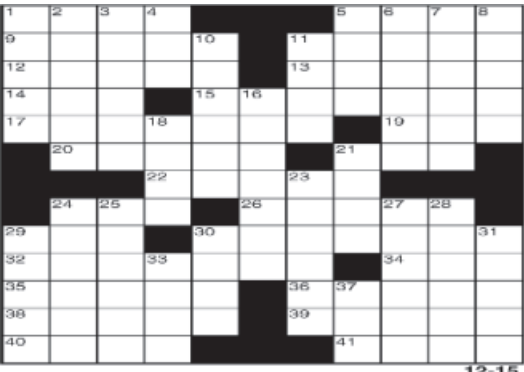
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- 12 Overcharge
- 13 Arkansas’s — Plateau
- 14 “So that’s it!”
- 15 Amateur publication
- 17 Fish in a can
- 19 Silent assent
- 20 Public outcry
- 21 Fellows
- 22 Put a stop to
- 24 Bible vessel
- 26 Harvests
- 29 Verb for you
- 30 Soup cracker
- 32 COVID-19

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- 34 Opposite of oui
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- 36 Presentation aid
- 38 Begets
- 39 Home run, in slang
- 40 Young ones
- 41 Lord’s wife
- 1 Long stories
- 2 Island
- 3 greetings
- 4 Queen Anne’s house
- 5 Crone
- 6 “Seinfeld” character

- 7 Activate
- 8 Inquired
- 10 Purify
- 11 Map region
- 16 From Turkey’s capital
- 18 Actor Powell
- 21 Substance
- 23 Choose
- 24 Mecca’s place
- 25 Athlete’s dream
- 27 Party target
- 28 Was a noisy sleeper
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