

BEYOND APPROPRIATION AND COMMODIFICATION

The making of Coke Studio Bangla's complex subjects



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I am neither a musician nor a music critic. Nor am I trained in assessing the technicality of a music performance. However, as a trained feminist anthropologist, I love to follow—borrowing Arjun Appadurai's phrase—the social life of things. Since Coke Studio Bangla launched in Bangladesh in 2022, it has been fascinating to follow its social life. There are some interesting and complex dynamics of how people—both in Bangladesh and abroad—have consumed, cherished, and criticised its productions.

Critiques coming from the leftist and progressive sides have been debating the politics of imperial appropriation and commodification of folk music by Coke Studio Bangla. Questions have been raised as to who has the authority to curate music, what kind of agency local, grassroots artists performing in Coke Studio Bangla have (or don't have), whether Coke Studio Bangla is creating a hegemony in Bangladesh's music tradition, and whether folk music cultures and traditions can be effectively revived through profit-driven corporate sponsorships.

We must keep discussing, debating, and exploring all these questions in detail to understand how Coke Studio is shaping the landscape of music in Bangladesh. However, the avid critiques, which tackle critical questions of appropriation and commodification of folk music by Coke Studio Bangla or the way Coke Studio Bangla promotes a middle-class neo-imperialist imagination of "folk" and "fusion," often miss an empathetic understanding of individual actors within the Coke Studio landscape—actors that include both the audiences and the performers. The critiques sometimes miss a vital point that these actors are not mere puppets of an imperialist-corporate-capitalist machine. They live complex lives within the landscape of Coke Studio Bangla and beyond, and they go through complicated, multi-layered decision-making processes regarding their engagement with Coke Studio Bangla.

Let's think about the generation hooked on Coke Studio Bangla's magic. People who write on social media about how they were touched by the latest releases or who post reaction videos or dance covers mostly come from educated, urban or semi-urban, and middle- and upper-middle-class



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRIYAR

backgrounds. They have smartphones, know how to navigate social media, and have a working knowledge of English.

Most of them heard about the Dewan dynasty and its tremendous contribution to Bangla folk music for the first time from Coke Studio Bangla. They did not grow up listening to Gonjer Ali's Taat songs or reading Ali's book on the collection of local Taat songs from North Bengal. They got introduced to Hason Raja's music through Humayun Ahmed's dramas and cinemas, but most of them were not familiar with the incredible work of Hason Raja devotee Hamida Banu, who was featured in the last song in season two of Coke Studio Bangla, titled "Dilaram."

How many of us know that Hamida Banu lost her father at the age of 15, faced backlash from the local community for singing as a young woman, had to endure a child marriage, and migrated to India as an undocumented immigrant? How many of us know that Banu was in prison in India for three years for crossing the

border without proper documents, and also worked as a housekeeper in the Hason Raja Bari? Jahura Baul from "Bonobibi" or Islam Uddin Palakar and Fajlu Majhi from "Deora" also have intriguing stories, which were largely unheard of before this hooked-on-Coke-Studio generation got introduced to their work through this platform. Suddenly, previously uploaded videos of the performers on YouTube saw a massive hike

In a country where a journalist was jailed for pointing out the necessity of "machh, mangsho ar chailer shadhinota," the song "Bazar Gorom" can be interpreted as a strong critique of the Bangladesh government's failure to address inflation, the government taking loans from the central bank, the central bank printing a considerable amount of currency for the government, or the devaluation of the Bangladeshi taka against

means for ensuring a sustainable livelihood.

It is important to dive deeper into Coke Studio Bangla's involvement with "supply chain capitalism," a term borrowed from Anna Tsing (2009), which examines both the massive border-crossing scale and the diversity of global capitalism. I would argue it is inadequate to develop an oversimplified criticism of Coke Studio Bangla, exclusively focusing on the appropriation of Bangla folk songs or the commodification of the performances of folk singers. The debates around the authenticity of local music also become futile without paying attention to the complex landscape of Coke Studio Bangla's various structures that uniquely mobilise capital, labour, bodies, and resources.

We need to dive deeper into how and why folk artistes, such as the Chhad Petano team, Hamida Banu, Islam Uddin Palakar or Aleya Begum, decided to comply with the hegemonic terms and conditions of Coke Studio Bangla. Are there any viable means to produce and circulate folk music that can operate without powerful corporate sponsorship, gain significant circulation, and ensure sustainable living for the local artistes and performers?

How do emerging artistes from marginalised and minoritised communities, such as Animes Roy or Daughter of Coastal, negotiate their complex positionalities within Coke Studio Bangla and beyond? What does it mean for many of these artistes to openly express their deepest gratitude for inclusion in Coke Studio Bangla in the "Behind the Magic" interviews? How do they navigate mainstream, male-stream, and nationalist expectations of an audience who would appreciate the performances only if these are packaged in a way that appeals to their taste?

Why do we see that the composers and producers are not bringing major changes in the structure and format of Rabindra Sangeet and Nazrul Sangeet, but they feel comfortable enough to modify tunes, words or formats of folk songs? Why do we see women performing on stage and following instructions of the music directors, but they are almost totally absent in music production? What does it mean for the liberal-progressive audience to cherish Coke Studio Bangla productions, but then call for a boycott of Coca Cola to express solidarity with Palestine?

Oversimplified critiques of authenticity, appropriation, and commodification of Coke Studio Bangla, which do not dive deeper into the complex decision-making processes of its audiences as well as performers, would only construe these subjects as passive, voiceless, compliant victims. A holistic critique needs to examine how Coke Studio Bangla operates within diverse structures of supply chain capitalism, making it almost inevitable for its actors to comply with the hegemonic norms.

in the number of views.

Many of this generation appreciate Coke Studio Bangla because they love the "feel-good" story of this platform amplifying the voice of grassroots—and often marginalised—artistes and giving them a powerful platform. Little do they think about how these actors negotiate their everyday lives. Take rapper Aly Hasan, for example. Hasan does not come from any Chhayanaut-trained, educated, culturally elite background. In his quest for performers from the margin, Coke Studio Bangla recognised Hasan's work and gave him a spotlight in the latest song "Ma Lo Ma."

Hasan spent three years of his life as a migrant worker. After returning to Bangladesh, he took over the small business of his father, who got sick. Hasan's small hardware shop failed to generate profit in the current economic situation, and he had to close it down due to financial losses. His "Bebshar Poristhiti" is a rap based on his everyday struggles. Similarly, his "Bazar Gorom" is a bold statement against the extreme price hike of everyday necessities.

the US dollars, further exacerbating the situation.

But hold on. No, Aly Hasan—even though his work represents working-class struggles—is not your dream-leftist-working-class staunch critic of the establishment. Right before the election, he worked as part of a team that released a music video called "Unnoyoner Shopnojatra" ("The Dream Journey to Development"). Aly Hasan was one of the people who wrote the lyrics and composed and sang it. The video talks about how "Gram hochchhe shohor aar egjye jacche desh" ("Villages are turning into cities, and the country is moving forward"). It uncritically provided an extensive list of all the major development projects undertaken by the ruling government despite some of their negative impacts on the environment and the community. In the song, Hasan repeatedly urged people to vote for the ruling party that has been in power since 2009. Hasan also had to sell his music productions to G Series as the commercial distribution of his production was probably the only viable

THE AURORA ENIGMA

What we understand and what remains a mystery



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

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Last week, our Facebook walls got painted purple, crimson and green. Netizens looked up and saw the colourful sky through their camera lenses. Those close to the North Pole started sharing images of the Northern Lights (aurora borealis) that they captured during their nightly adventures. Our friends from the Southern Hemisphere followed suit, sharing their experiences of the Southern Lights (aurora australis). These images were much more intense than the typical Northern Lights seen in polar proximity.

The timing aligned with a solar storm that resulted from the reversal of the Sun's magnetic poles during its 11-year cycle. The coronal mass ejections caused magnetic waves that leapt through space at a speed of one million miles per hour. People near the two poles witnessed a surreal, ethereal light show as charged particles clashed with air molecules in the atmosphere as our own magnetic force fields deflected most of the solar wind. The burnt-out oxygen molecules emit green or yellow lights, while the nitrogen is responsible for the purple or crimson lights. For millennia, these unearthly images from outer space have ignited human imaginations as they tried to come up with an explanation of the supernatural activity.

The phenomenon is named after Aurora (Eos in Greek mythology), the Roman goddess of dawn. Her travels between her siblings Helios (the Sun) and Selene (the

Moon) were once thought to be the cause of the nightly change of colours. Galileo, in the 17th century, named it *aurora borealis* (literally, sunrise wind). The ancient Chinese called this vista the "five-coloured sky." The Scandinavians thought of it as fox fire, thinking the mythical fox spirits brush their tails against the mountains to cause various sparks to light up the winter sky. The Inuit people in Alaska imagined the event as a dance of the spirits. In 922, the Persian scholar Ahmad Ibn Fadlan accompanied the Vikings in an expedition, fictionalised in the movie *The 13th Warrior*, during which he saw the Northern Lights, only to learn that "they are the believing and the unbelieving Jinn. They fight every evening and have not failed to do so every night since they were first created."

Today, we have the privilege of understanding the science behind the aurora, a phenomenon that has captivated the imagination of various cultures worldwide. In Norse mythology, the aurora is the most prominent. The Vikings interpreted the lights as a manifestation of their chief god, Odin. The light glow comes from the Valkyries—female armed warriors on horseback—who would take the valiant heroes who had fallen during battles to Valhalla. The light celebrates their heroism. The Algonquin tribes in Canada and northern Michigan believed that the creator, Nanabozho, used these lights to signal to

his people that he was thinking about his creation from his faraway abode. The aurora was a reflection of his fire. For the Sámi, the Indigenous people of northern Scandinavia, the lights are far from heroism and bravery. They are the harbinger of bad omens.

Interestingly, historical events such as the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), the American Civil War (1861-1865), the French Revolution (1789-1799), and the Greater

Northern Hemisphere represent an evil omen, a portent of war, or other dangers. This connection underscores the human tendency to find meaning in natural events, especially during times of crisis and uncertainty.

Could it be a coincidence that the aurora sighting coincided with one of the most brutal massacres of innocent people in Gaza? The fear that Israel might use nuclear

confluence of shock and awe that our ancestors felt, later clarified by scientists, inspired me to delve into the realm of the known and the unknown. The images showering our walls are part of a larger story, i.e. history. The nightly sky's beauty and wonder belie the ionic wind that could have swept away our planet. The geomagnetic field that funnels away the jet stream can still damage our electronic signals and GPS systems, causing havoc. We are oblivious to the danger because we remain unaware or half-aware of it. The interplay between myths and scientific explanations of auroras illustrates the broader spectrum of human imagination and its capacity to find meaning in the natural world. By the same token, our complicity in near and far crimes can thus have far-reaching consequences.

Auroras, as a lens on human imagination, serve as a powerful example of how humans use imagination to bridge the gap between the known and the unknown. However, we humans invented a much more effective and powerful lens and sent it across the galaxy to capture images of a time that is not yet here. Earlier, Nasa's James Webb Space Telescope captured distant images of creation pillars where stars are born. Such images give an eerie feeling of our minuscule status in the vast expanse of creation. The chronicle of a foretold galactic death resonates with us. There seems to be some sort of connection between stories and history—between the micro and the macro, the mundane and the divine. Religious zealots, striving to hasten the emergence of a messiah and usher in the apocalypse, are enacting a drama within the crimson curtain, manipulating the events in the sky. The problem is that the forbidden fruit of knowledge corrupts our innocent imagination. There seems to be no escape from reality, even if we pretend not to see it. By not being a party to the inevitable, we can at least limit our damage to the world and its inhabitants.



The aurora borealis, also known as the Northern Lights, are seen over The Roaches near Leek, Staffordshire, Britain on May 10, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Wrath in Finland (1714-1721) witnessed auroras. Their timing and dramatic appearance in the skies led people of that time to interpret them as reflections or omens of the conflicts and bloodshed they were experiencing. For the locals, the crimson streaks of the aurora in the

bombs to solve the Palestine question once and for all adds one more layer to the aurora sighting. An apocalyptic narrative permeates the Zionist project of building the third temple.

Perhaps there is no room for such superstition in science. However, the