

# Coke Studio Bangla and the cost of Indigenous representation



Myat Moe Khaing is a graduate student of social work in Australia. She can be reached at 145michelle@gmail.com.

MYAT MOE KHAING

I pressed play on Coke Studio Bangla’s latest release, *Baaji*. The first notes of Marma music filled me with pride. Here was a piece of my heritage on a prominent stage! But as the video unravelled, a familiar unease set in.

Written by Bangalee artist Hashim Mahmud, *Baaji* tells a love story. It follows a man journeying into the hills and the sea, seemingly in pursuit of an Indigenous woman, singing “I know I can get you! I bet you!” Even if playful, this line echoes a troubling trope often sold in the tourism industry: go to the hills, find the elusive *pahari meye*. The storyline casts her as so mysterious that even her tears are questioned: “Are they a trick, a tease, or true?” Or does this framing teach us that Indigenous women’s pain is performance, and they send mixed signals?

Even more surprising, though the song romanticises an Indigenous woman, the video casts a Bangalee theatre artist. Listening with your eyes closed, you may imagine an Indigenous woman; open them and you see a masterclass of erasure!

Could this not have been an exception to the recurring trope in Bangladeshi storytelling where the man seeks and the woman is the reward? I’m not asking for a simple gender reversal, but for a rethinking of the patriarchal framework where one gender acts and the other remains static. This trope becomes far more troubling when applied to Indigenous women, who already navigate a brutal reality often shaped by fetishisation, violence, and erasure.

In May 2025, the body of a 29-year-old Khyang woman was found in a ditch near the under-construction Thanchi-Likri border road. Locals and Indigenous activists claim she was gang-raped and murdered. A 2022 International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) report shows that around 43 percent of gender-based violence cases involving Indigenous women occurred in the plains. In 2018, Amnesty International called for investigation into the rape of two Marma sisters. These are not isolated incidents, but part of a systemic pattern shaped largely by the male gaze.

Indigenous scholar Chandra K Roy notes how dominant narratives often exoticise Indigenous women while silencing them. Feminist scholar Anne McClintock describes this as the “colonial fantasy”,



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PHOTO: RAW XPOSURE

reducing women to passive, hyper-sexualised figures. Professor Jasbir Puar, an American academic and author, argues that racialised desire becomes a form of symbolic conquest, sustaining structures of domination.

This is the context in which *Baaji* lands.

Yes, music invites multiple readings. While some see just a love story, I see this through the lens of an Indigenous woman living with these patterns. Both views

matter. However, Coke Studio isn’t fringe. It is a global, corporately-funded platform. In Bangladesh, where many know little about Indigenous struggles, its visuals, lyrics, and casting have the power to shape how millions see us. And when such a platform enters stories rooted in colonisation and gendered violence, it cannot separate the storytelling from the history it carries.

But how is it that all our advocacy around

and corporate marketers. So is it a systemic exclusion or just an oversight?

The “bamboo dance” has become a convenient media shorthand to signal “Indigenous culture.” The video features a Marma elder singing, an oral tradition my grandmother also carried. But the origin of the melody goes unexplained. These details matter. They make the difference between respectful homage and cultural reduction.

a video about Rangamati. She didn’t romanticise Kaptai Lake. She acknowledged its violent history and the displacement of Indigenous communities. She wore a traditional Chakma *pinon hadi*, explained its meaning, highlighted an Indigenous artisan and shared the spotlight with Indigenous creator Tiya Chakma. She even spoke Chakma to express a desire for connection.

So, can an Indigenous woman and a Bangalee man not fall in love? Of course, they can. But love doesn’t float in a vacuum, especially when Indigenous women are often silenced, displaced, and disappeared. Hence, when a powerful platform tells a story of a Bangalee man searching for an Indigenous woman who doesn’t speak, sing, or choose, is that really romance?

I name Bangalee cultural workers not out of malice, but to ask the dominant group holding the capital in Bangladesh to tell stories with accountability. Politics exists whether the video acknowledges it or not. If your story unfolds on colonised space, features Indigenous bodies, and borrows cultural symbols, it’s already political. From Lalon’s spiritual songs to Bob Dylan’s protest anthems, music has the power to speak the truth. So why should Coke Studio borrow political aesthetics without any responsibility for how it represents them?

Then how do we know if a collaboration is meaningful? Ask the represented community: *Do you feel seen?* For me, the answer is no. Despite the production value, it lacked the depth that makes a cultural exchange authentic. What could they have done differently? Collaborated with Indigenous artists and historians as co-creators, researched social and historical contexts, and challenged imagery tying land and femininity to silence.

As a marginalised community, we’re often made to feel grateful for scraps of visibility. Yes, being featured matters. It sparks curiosity and recognises us as part of this land’s cultural fabric. But gratitude doesn’t erase the need for critique. And this critique doesn’t come from bitterness. It comes from love—for our truth and the Indigenous women being objectified for generations.

If similar portrayals featured Palestinian women in Gaza, Kuki women in Northeast India, Yazidi women in Iraq and Syria, or First Nations women in Australia and New Zealand, the harm would be equally serious.

Representation without inclusion is tokenism. With systemic exclusion, it perpetuates structural violence. I am asking platforms like Coke Studio not to tell our stories without us because #RealMagic happens through research, respect, and responsibility.

# A non-inclusive July Charter will be a betrayal



Dr Samina Luthfa is professor at the Department of Sociology in Dhaka University.

SAMINA LUTHEA

In any society, genuine structural change occurs when the material conditions shift, which includes the transformation of the forces of production, the economic structure, the organisation of political elites, and even the cultural elites. The 2024 July-August uprising certainly had revolutionary aspirations. People wanted change in political culture, governance, exclusionary practices, and discrimination in the country. However, while the aspirations existed, the preparations were lacking. Neither the political parties, the civil society, nor any other group was sufficiently prepared to channel the energy that moved the uprising into structural changes in the economy, politics, or other vital areas. As a result, the institutions and settlements remained unchanged.

Since we were not ready to turn the energy of the uprising into something qualitatively different, I would not call the July uprising a revolution. I would call it an uprising, where people from all walks of life came together to stop Sheikh Hasina from killing our children and innocent civilians, who were protesting non-violently. The second catalyst was to dismantle and rebuild the fascist structure of the Awami League, which had been used to destroy key institutions. Yet, after Sheikh Hasina’s overthrow, we are witnessing the return of the same old settlements in culture, politics, governance, and even the judiciary.

Now comes the question of whether the uprising succeeded. If we look at the timeline, it began as a student protest, a movement demanding better opportunities in

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government jobs. Later, because of the regime’s repression and killings, the protest spread. The political and economic repression people suffered from also became a factor. Citizens lacked the right to speak out, the right to a free press, and the freedom of expression, all of which were restricted to a severe degree. People were angry because the economy was failing, and avenues of dissent were closed. While these factors were significant, without the videos of the regime’s brutality circulating on social media, the uprising would not have gained momentum so rapidly.

Although the uprising was successful in overthrowing the

previous regime, after which Sheikh Hasina fled, in the long term, it failed to fulfil people’s aspirations. It did not bring systematic change to the structure of the fascist regime’s apparatus. “Bangladesh 2.0” could not yet build new institutions or establish a process of justice for those who sacrificed their lives hoping for change. There is still no visible path to justice for those who were martyred and wounded. We wanted those who had lost their lives to be remembered, and the wounded to receive rehabilitation and treatment. None of that has been fully achieved yet. These are major failures. However, judging the uprising by its immediate outcome, it can be termed as successful, as it removed the autocrat and made the Awami League politically and culturally vulnerable in ways we had not expected for a long time. It also opened up a window of opportunity to initiate some real changes.

We hope to see the initiation of those changes and the aspiration of a discrimination-free Bangladesh, witnessed in the chants, slogans, and songs of the July uprising, reflected in the much-discussed July Charter. If the charter turns out to be a document that serves only the majority and the powerful, and if it is imposed upon the rest, it will be a huge disappointment. If the charter is not inclusive of minorities, women, Indigenous Peoples, non-Bangalee communities, and non-Muslims, then it will not be my July Charter. It must uphold the dignity and rights of all citizens. In July, people filled the streets because they felt the state no longer respected them as human beings, as citizens. Our votes did not matter, our voices did not matter, and no one was accountable to us. We were treated as if we had no value. We fought to reclaim our dignity as citizens, demanding equal respect and equal rights for all. That equality must be established. Religion, gender, profession, or any other grounds of discrimination cannot remain in the charter. That is our expectation.

We also expect that the Liberation War—the very foundation of our independence—should never be undermined. The moment of a nation’s inception is profoundly important for many reasons, and there is no room to diminish it. The history of Bangladesh’s Liberation War is bloody and genocidal. It cannot be compared to anything else or dismissed as a conspiracy.

There must be no false equivalence between 2024 and 1971, or other events such as the Partition of 1947 or the Language movement of 1952. All these points in history are crucial moments that formed the foundation of our country—enacted in blood. These historical moments cannot be compared. Denial of these events cannot be tolerated. No one has the right to do so.

Our demand from a fundamental human rights perspective is: equal dignity as citizens. We also demand that we do not regress on our achievements. Each achievement has a long and painful history, paid for with blood, sweat, and tears. The sacrifices made to secure our liberty, freedom, and rights cannot be reversed. Any attempt to undo those achievements is unacceptable.

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Smallholder Agricultural Competitiveness Project (SACP)

Department of Agricultural Marketing

Sech Bhaban (Level-06), 22, Manik Miah Avenue, Dhaka-1207

www.dam.gov.bd

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Dr. Mohammed Razu Ahmed

Component Director

Smallholder Agricultural Competitiveness Project (SACP)

Department of Agricultural Marketing

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